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Telling Stories About Storytelling: The Metacomics of Alan Moore, Neil Gaiman, and Warren Ellis

by

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Abstract

The Revisionist comics of the 1980s to present represent an effort to literally revise the existing conventions of mainstream comics. The most prominent and common device employed by the Revisionists was self-reflexivity; thus, they created metacomics. The Revisionists make a spectacle of critically interrogating the conventions of mainstream comics, but do so using those same conventions: formal, generic, stylistic, etc. At their most practical level, Revisionist metacomics denaturalise the dominant genres of the American mainstream and therefore also denaturalise the ideological underpinnings of those genres. At their most abstract level, they destabilise the concepts of "fiction," "reality," "realism," and "fantasy," and even collapse them into each other.

Chapter 1 explains my methodological approach to metacomics: formal (sequence and hybridity), self-reflexive (metafiction, metapictures, metacomics), and finally denaturalising (articulation and myth). Chapter 2 analyses two metacomic cycles in the mainstream (the *Crisis* and *Squadron Supreme* cycles) and surveys the self-reflexive elements of Underground comix (specifically with regard to gender and feminist concerns). Chapter 3 presents three motifs in Revisionist comics by which they denaturalise the superhero: the dictator-hero, postmodern historiography, and fantasy genres. Finally, Chapter 4 analyses three major Revisionist comic-book series—*Transmetropolitan, Promethea*, and *Sandman*—all of which comment on contemporary culture and the nature of representation using the dominant genres of American comics (science fiction, superhero, and fantasy, respectively).

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Introduction

This dissertation tells the story—or more accurately, it narrativises the historical development—of American comic books' attempt to understand themselves and subsequently revise their own generic and ideological presumptions. I focus on three writers—Alan Moore, Neil Gaiman, and Warren Ellis—who have been instrumental in the generic and formal revision of American comic books; thus, they and many of their contemporaries have been called "Revisionist" creators.[1] These three are by no means the only Revisionists, but they are extremely influential and all three have achieved a great deal of both commercial success and critical recognition among both popular critics and academic scholars. Part of their ability to "revise" American comics comes from their simultaneous insider/outsider status.

Both within their comics and in personal interviews, Moore, Gaiman, and Ellis all express an affection and a respect for what the comics subculture calls *Silver Age* comics, here understood not as an "age" or a period, but as a style within American comics.[2] The Revisionists often reuse and retool Silver-Age conventions—stock characters, narrative structures, visual styles, speech patterns, etc.—and in so doing display their own position *inside* the American comic-book subculture. Moore's *Miracleman* engages directly with its roots as a rip-off of the American hero, Captain Marvel. Ellis' *Planetary* painstakingly traces the pulp, cinematic, and comic-book roots of the contemporary superhero. Even Gaiman, the least likely to write superheroes, adapts Marvel's stable of heroes into Elizabethan rogues, ruffians, and romantics in *1602*. Indeed, Gaiman got his first writing job for DC by pitching a series based on a superheroine called Black Orchid who was so obscure that the editor of the new Vertigo line, under which Gaiman wrote *Sandman,* did not even recognise her (Bender 22). This work with superhero characters, both familiar and obscure, displays the British writers' cultural capital as fans of superhero comics, just like the audience.

However, most of the Revisionists are also British, primarily English. There are American Revisionists of course, Frank Miller among others. Enough of the first few Revisionists were from the U.K., however, that they were identifiable as a group, a British cohort. Gaiman goes so far as to depict the experience of travelling to the U.S. from the U.K. in *The Books of Magic* v1. Through the mouth of John Constantine, he explains that:

> WHEN I WAS A KID, I THOUGHT AMERICA WAS A FANTASY LAND. IT'S SO BIG... AND YOU'D HEAR ALL THIS STUFF ABOUT SUPERHEROES, AND YOU'D **BELIEVE** IT, BECAUSE IT WAS AMERICA. THEY HAD ALL THIS INCREDIBLE STUFF, YOU KNOW, PIZZAS AND FIRE HYDRANTS, AND HOLLYWOOD, AND THE EMPIRE STATE BUILDING. / AND **THEY** HAD SUPER-HEROES, AND MAGIC, AND ALIENS (BOOKS OF MAGIC V1 2.2:1)

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[1] For example, see Hughes, "The Tyranny of the Serial" (548); Pustz *Comic Book Culture* (134); and Klock, *How to Read Superhero Comics and Why* (3). The term "Revisionist" is commonplace among industry journalists, popular scholars, and fans alike. Academics use it as well, as the above examples show, but they are perforce prone to a more sceptical and analytical attitude towards the term. I use it quite literally, as I indicate here, to refer to a *revision* of the dominant storytelling practises of the American comic book.

[2] See 2.1: "Silver Age."

In *The Sandman Companion*, Gaiman repeats this sentiment in his own voice almost verbatim (Bender 20). He also expands on it, though:

> there was a generation in the U.K. who'd grown up reading DC comics from a bizarre perspective. In America, those comics were perceived without irony; in England, they were like postcards from another world. (20)

Whether American audiences actually did perceive superheroes without irony is debatable, but the point, here, is that British audiences perceived them with a particular cultural distance that the Americans did not possess. The British Revisionists all display their connection to the culture and history of the United Kingdom through moments like this one in *Books of Magic* v1. They use their comics, interviews, and other creative work (novels, poetry, spoken word performances, etc.) to talk about Britain's literature, its contemporary politics, and its history, for example Shakespeare in Gaiman et al.'s *Sandman*, Thatcherite dystopia in Moore and Lloyd's *V for Vendetta*, and material history in Ellis and Caceres' *Crécy*, just to name a few. In so doing, the British cohort of Revisionists display that they are *outside* the American comic-book subculture.

This insider/outsider status gives them a particular kind of critical distance to American comics as outsiders as well as the cultural credibility to critique them as insiders. As such, they can and do speak in a language that the American comic-book subculture understands, but they also speak that language from slightly outside of it, looking in. The perception, spurious though it is, that Anglophone cultures are so similar that an Englishman in America does not count as an outsider is precisely what these English writers, and often the artists with whom they work, capitalise on in order to wage their revision of American comic books. My own interest in Revisionist comics comes partially from a similarly split status, as insider by virtue of growing up reading/viewing American comics, but an outsider by virtue of being both a Canadian and an academic. As a child and as an adult, I also see American comics as ever-so-slightly foreign and strange. Instead of depicting my world with a layer of fantasy smeared on top, they depict someone else's world, familiar though it may be because of American media, with an additional layer of strangeness. The Revisionists' active critique of American comics, and often by extension American culture, is partly grounded in their Britishness, but it appeals to anyone who, like me, grew up with the sneaking suspicion that, above and beyond their highly fantastic conventions, there has always been something profoundly odd about the conceptual underpinnings of the superhero.

The core of Revisionist comics is a struggle to introduce elements of conventional realism into a group of genres, primarily the superhero, that are ostensibly too fantastic to ever coherently contain *any* form of realism. Looked at differently, their core is the struggle to reveal what is ostensibly obvious: the superhero, no matter how hard fans and creators might try, can never be "realistic." Rather than abandon the superhero as a result of this revelation, Revisionist comics most often embrace various forms of self-reflexivity with which they can then actively analyse their own fantastic nature and its relationship to conventional realism, which includes the manner in which popular fantasy

actively participates in the construction of what is commonly perceived as "reality." In so doing, Revisionist comics often, so often as to be almost the norm, become *metacomics*. Metacomics allow the Revisionist work to display not just that the superhero comic book cannot ever hope to be "realistic," in the common sense of bearing strong resemblance to reality, but also the struggle within American comics between "fantasy" and "realism," here understood as two different sets of generic conventions and not in terms of alleged resemblance to an always unstable conception of what constitutes the "real" world. These comics thus put their own historical, formal, and generic conventions on display in order to mount an analysis of them.

In sum, then, this dissertation argues that Revisionist metacomics engage with self-reflexive analysis that blurs the common-sense separation between "reality" and "fantasy," and suspends the notion that there is any such thing as "reality" outside of yet more representations: image, text, narrative. In their most material and practical forms, Revisionist metacomics point to the constructed nature of public opinion in modern media, as *Transmetropolitan* does; at their most abstract and conceptual, they collapse "reality" and "fiction" into each other, and in such a way as to undermine both as stable concepts, as *Sandman* does. Revisionist comics thus depict a range of possible interpretations of perception and representation, but that range tends strongly towards a particular spectrum of questions, issues, and problems. As a corollary to this positive thesis, I also argue a negative thesis, that metacomic formal techniques do not guarantee the conclusion that reality is a construct; thus, they cannot guarantee that metacomics contain a subversive message, and we should not expect them to reliably represent a particular political position. The Revisionist creators react to several of the same factors in comics that preceded them, and arriving at a similar set of conclusions. Chapters 2, 3, and 4 detail a set of metacomics that actively discuss the historical and cultural context of those that came before. Below, then, is a brief summary of those chapters. I am arguing, in this dissertation, that Revisionist metacomics engage with self-reflexive analyses of their own dominant genres, and that those analyses tend to blur the common-sense separation between "reality" and "fantasy," suspending the notion that there is any such thing as "reality" outside of yet more representations: image, text, language. At the very least, Revisionist metacomics point to the constructed nature of public opinion in modern media, as *Transmetropolitan* does; at their most extreme, they collapse "reality" and "fiction" into each other in such a way as to undermine both as stable concepts, as *Sandman* does. Revisionist comics therefore depict a range of possible interpretations of perception and representation, but that range tends strongly towards a particular spectrum of questions, issues, and problems. As a corollary to this positive thesis, I also argue a negative thesis, that metacomic formal techniques do not guarantee the conclusion that reality is a construct, and thus cannot guarantee that metacomics contain a subversive message. The Revisionist creators just happen to react to several of the same factors in comics that preceded them, arriving at a similar set of conclusions. Chapters 2, 3, and 4 detail a set of

metacomics that actively discuss the historical and cultural context of those that came before. Below is a brief summary of those chapters.

Chapter Review

Chapter 1 details three sets of theories: comics formalism, meta-level representation, and finally naturalisation/denaturalisation. It details comics formalism on three fronts. First, two theories of sequential narrative construction: Thierry Groensteen's *arthrology* and Scott McCloud's *closure*. Third, W.J.T. Mitchell's theory of word/picture hybridity, a triplicate concept— *imagetext*, *image-text*, and *image/text*—which also encompasses R.C. Harvey's notion of *interdependent blending*. Meta-level representation includes one underlying concept and three theories based in three different art forms. M. Thomas Inge's notion of *suspension of belief* underlies all models of meta-level art and anticipates my separation of the *self-referential* from the *self-reflexive*. This section discusses three different models of meta-level prose: Patricia Waugh's twin "poles of metafiction" (53), the *structural* and the *radical*; Linda Hutcheon's *complicit critique* and *historiographic metafiction*; and finally Mark Currie's definition of metafiction as a "borderline discourse" (2) between fiction and theory. I once again employ Mitchell and his discussion of *formal metapictures*, as well as *multistable images*, a concept that I employ to understand the *analogue hero* in Chapter 2. I then survey three discussions of metacomics, by Matthew Jones, M. Thomas Inge, and Donald Palumbo. Jones' survey effectively encompasses the examples provided in Inge and Palumbo's discussions.

Finally, the last section of Chapter 1 calls upon two theories of naturalisation, which can be reverse-engineered into theories of denaturalisation. Stuart Hall's concept of *articulation* applies primarily to cultures and communities, which are articulated by their time and place, but filtered through Tony Bennett and Janet Woollacott's concept of the *inter-text* it also serves as a model for the meeting between witness (reader, viewer, listener, audience) and art (text, image, performance, recording). Roland Barthes' semiotic *myth* also provides a useful model of how conceptually-laden symbols (words, images, etc.) can be combined in such a way that they self-naturalise; they appear to be unmotivated or "*depoliticized*" (Barthes 143) representations, whereas they are instead ideologically-motivated assertions. I combine these theories—formalism, meta-level representation, and naturalisation/denaturalisation—in order to remain mindful of both form/content and culture/context. In literary research, close "reading" is incomplete without cultural and historical context, as is cultural analysis without an eye towards the "text."

In all cases, I treat theory primarily as a methodological tool, as a way of looking at the object(s) of study. It describes the manner in which I approach and analyse comics, what details I have decided to focus on, and how I relate them to each other so as to identify patterns in the data. Although I use the metaphor of "looking," in this case, I mean it expansively as a way of observing, but the visual metaphor is useful because it readily invokes the concept of perspective, of looking at an object from a particular point of view. Each way of looking directs

attention at certain observable details and deflects it away from others, which means that my theory directly relates to the scope of my argument. The ways of looking at comics that I have chosen—formal theory, meta-level representation, and naturalisation/denaturalisation—reflect the goals of the study: to understand the metacomics produced by a cohort of British creators who rise to prominence in American comics in the early 1980s.

Chapter 2 details the history of metacomics in the American tradition between the early fifties and the present, and organises those comics in terms of their relationship to the Comics Code, a self-censorship body created by several American comic-book publishers in the early 1950s. The chapter effectively contains three sections, the first two of which analyse cycles of comics within the mainstream/superhero tradition (i.e., those that conform to the Code), and the second a survey of Underground comix (i.e., those that do not conform to the Code). The first section details the *Crisis* and *Squadron Supreme* comics, both of which are superhero-centred, ongoing cycles that attempt to introduce a limited and compartmentalised form of verisimilitude that implicitly claims to be more realistic than the standard version of the genre. That is to say that the comics remain highly fantastic, but they include a limited attention to causality, continuity, politics, and even a limited self-reflexivity with regards to the superhero itself. However, they both employ metacomic techniques—*retcon* and the *analogue*, respectively—in order to ultimately legitimise the superhero and its underlying ideologies rather than deconstructing them.

The second section of this chapter examines, first, EC's *Mad* comics as a primary influence on the Underground comix artists, a brief movement that ends in the mid-seventies but effectively transforms into the art-house and alternative comics of the eighties to the present (e.g., Harvey Pekar, Art Spiegelman, Robert Crumb). Where the Code-approved comics allowed discreet elements of verisimilitude, the Underground flooded their comics with sex, violence, drugs, and aesthetic grotesquerie in protest against the mainstream. The common element between *Mad* and the Underground is often what Charles Hatfield identifies as *ironic authentication* (125), a metacomic technique that paradoxically authenticates itself by making a spectacle of its constructed nature. This chapter demonstrates two things. Metacomic techniques, arguably a radical formal construction, simply do not guarantee radical politics, and indeed can be turned to inherently "conservative" narrative construction (i.e., preserving genre/ideology rather than overturning or changing it). Second, there is an area of comics that engages in radical formalism *and* radical politics, and the Revisionist comics do not go that far. They do not include a great many metapictures, mostly performing self-reflexivity through narrative constructions; they only rarely comment directly on the industry that produces them.

Chapter 3 engages directly with Revisionist metacomics by Alan Moore, Neil Gaiman, and Warren Ellis. This chapter, like the others, divides into three sections. The first analyses examples of superhero comics that represent the genre as fundamentally incompatible with conventional literary realism. *Miracleman*

(Moore et al.), *Watchmen* (Moore and Gibbons), and *Black Summer* (Ellis and Ryp) all depict superheroes who extend their generic ethic to its logical extreme, thus appointing themselves as dictator-saviours. This process reveals that the supervillain and the superhero are not diametric opposites, but instead occupy positions on a spectrum based on their degree of intervention in culture/society. The second section analyses postmodern techniques in Revisionist comics. Both *Supreme* (Moore et al.) and *Planetary* (Ellis and Cassaday) engage with playful self-reflection upon their own literary histories, the convoluted continuity and constant retconning of Superman and the literary/cinematic influences on the superhero genre, respectively. The last section of this chapter discusses *Swamp Thing* (Moore et al.) and *Sandman* (Gaiman et al.) as two comics set within superhero universes but which step away from the superhero genre partly in order to obtain a different perspective on it, rather than the *complicit critiques* of the first two sections of the chapter. This chapter displays the Revisionists' inevitable struggle with the superhero, as the current dominant generic figure of American mainstream comics. While Chapter 2 discusses comics that fail to introduce even discreet elements of conventional literary realism to the superhero, Chapter 3 discusses those that go out of their way to display the superhero failing at conventional literary realism.

Last, Chapter 4 addresses commentaries on culture and perception that are levelled by three specific Revisionist comics, Ellis and Robertson's *Transmetropolitan*, Moore and Williams' *Promethea*, and finally Gaiman et al.'s *Sandman*. However, the chapter first picks up a thread left over from Chapter 2, a repeated motif in Revisionist comics that displays *intertextual overkill*, a form of Waugh's radical metafiction, conceptually breaking free from fixity and finally embracing fluidity. In this motif, Revisionist comics depict a universal crossover point from which characters within one comic book can physically travel to other comic book worlds. In its most expansive form, in Moore's *1963*, the universal crossover point connects all comics ever, including newspaper strips, superhero comics, and even non-fiction work such as McCloud's *Understanding Comics*. *Transmetropolitan* employs a series (in Groensteen's sense) of image-texts (in Mitchell's sense) to depict class disparity within a science-fiction technocratic pseudo-democracy. In *Transmetropolitan*, technology that appears to constitute a techno-cornucopia of resources or the perfect vessel for disseminating knowledge is instead used by the dominant classes to cut off the working classes from resources and manipulate public opinion to make this manipulation appear just. *Promethea* presents an essay in comic-book form on Moore's theory of magic, which to an academic literary critic appears very much like a semiotic construction that acknowledges post-structuralism but nevertheless seeks a unified, structuralist approach to the ostensibly textual construction of "reality." *Sandman* presents the most intense moment of radical metafiction, in Waugh's sense, in which the diegetic world and the reader/viewer's world fully collapse into each other. *Sandman* engineers a collapse of apparent reality and supposed

fiction by, paradoxically, making one literally true statement that acknowledges the reader/viewer's presence and participation in the *Sandman* comic book.

Chapter 1: Theory

"Paradox is LOGICRIME. Do not do anything.
Do not fail to do anything. This warn you."

-from *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen: Black Dossier*
(Alan Moore and Kevin O'Neill)

This chapter details three major areas of theory/methodology: comics formalism; theories of self-reflexivity; and finally naturalisation/denaturalisation. The first section focuses on Thierry Groensteen's *The System of Comics* and Scott McCloud's *Understanding Comics*, but also uses theories from Will Eisner and R.C. Harvey, two major popular scholars who have contributed to Anglophone comics theory. This discussion demonstrates that comics theorists largely agree on the fundamental principles of the art form but tend towards different theoretical models to explain them. The second section is on theories of meta-level representation. This section is divided into four subsections, one on *suspension of belief*, an over-arching concept, and then one subsection on metafiction, metapictures, and metacomics, respectively. The goal of this second section is to place metacomics, specifically American metacomics of the eighties to the present, into the larger context of commentary on self-reflexivity. Finally, the last section of this chapter relates two theories of denaturalisation, Roland Barthes' *semiotic myths* and Stewart Hall's *articulation* of culture and "texts." Revisionist metacomics tend strongly towards denaturalisation of American comics, their dominant genres and by extension the conceptual presumptions that underlie those genres.

1.1: Comics and Close "Reading"

This section explains formal analysis in comics, a process that is directly analogous to close reading in text. Formal approaches to comics break down into two schools of thought: *hybridity* and *sequence*. In their original contexts, critics offer hybridity and sequence as formal definitions of the comics medium. In the hybrid definition, comics are combinations of images and words, and in the sequential definition, they are sequences of images arranged spatially. Below, I expand on these two schools of thought as definitions, but I argue that they are more usefully understood as ways of looking at comics and not ways of defining them (i.e., literally making them finite). Hybridity directs attention to the juxtaposition of images and text, and deflects it away from sequence; sequence directs attention to images in spatial relation to each other, and deflects it away from hybridity. Actual critical engagements with comics as a form inevitably invoke both schools of thought, but they nevertheless tend to claim allegiance to only one.

My discussion focuses solely on comic books as opposed to comic strips. Although they are very closely related, the two forms are not exactly identical. Their relation to each other is somewhat analogous to cinema's relationship to television: there are a few major differences between them, but formal theories of one almost always apply to the other, with some caveats. Groensteen's *general*

arthrology, for example, would apply to comic strips to a degree but describes qualities that apply far more readily to comic books. Mitchell's *imagetext*, on the other hand, could easily apply to both and without the need of caveats. For the sake of discussing formalist comics theory, and because I analyse comic books exclusively and not comic strips, I do not differentiate between theories aimed at strips versus books, although I acknowledge that a comparative study would, no doubt, reveal significant differences between them.

The debate within comics scholarship, both popular and academic, about, the definition of the art form goes back to at least the 1940s. Martin Sheridan's *Comics and Their Creators* (1942) addresses only comic strips and does not explicitly define comics at all, either strips or books, but the fact that it does not define them formally is itself a form of implicit definition, as Joseph Witek's "Comics Criticism" points out: "Sheridan's implicit assumption is that the essential elements of comics are their character types, genres, and themes" (5), as opposed to their form. Coulton Waugh's *The Comics* (1947), on the other hand, contains an explicit definition of comics as an art form, and his definition contains both sequential and hybrid elements. It is historically inclusive and has three points: "(1) a continuing character [...]; (2) a sequence of pictures [...]; (3) speech in the drawing, usually in blocks of lettering surrounded by 'balloon lines' " (13-14). Waugh defines comics, both strips and books, by what has come before, but this historical focus leads to a definition that includes "a continuing character," which of course has almost nothing to do with formalism.[3] The second two points, however, contain an explicit acknowledgement of sequence and the beginnings of a notion of hybridity, at least insofar as the addition of speech balloons makes a given comic strip or book a hybrid object. David Kunzle's *The Early Comic Strip* (1973) offers a similarly inclusive definition with similarly historical and/or text-specific elements. His definition includes hybridity and sequence, but also portability and moral themes (Kunzle 2). Like Waugh, Kunzle mixes the historical and the formal for the sake of defining a particular scope. Kunzle's massive, two-volume history of comics (i.e., *The Early Comic Strip* and *The History of the Comic Strip)* goes only as far back as the printing press. We can hardly blame him for not taking on more in those books—I cannot overstate how important they are to comics scholarship—but we can take him to task for offering a definition of comics as if it were objective when half of that definition serves only as a historical cut-off for Kunzle's own study. However, Waugh and Kunzle both avoid the mistake of many comics critics who advocate for either sequence or hybridity as a formal definition of comics, despite almost inevitably integrating the other into their discussions.

Hybridity is the common-sense conception. It defines comics as the combination of pictures and words within the same compositional space (i.e., the frame, the page, the screen, etc.). Maurice Horn' s *The World Encyclopedia of*

[3] Witek argues, quite convincingly, the Waugh includes a continuing character in order to guarantee that *Hogan's Alley*, in which the Yellow Kid first appeared, is by definition the first ever comic strip, and thus exclude earlier Continental European strips so as to define comics as an American invention (9).

Comics (1978) asserts this definition, specifically in opposition to the sequential definition (Horn 9, 47). R.C. Harvey's collected works of comics scholarship all argue for hybridity, beginning with "The Aesthetics of the Comic Strip" (1979), as well as *The Art of the Funnies* (1994) and *The Art of the Comic Book* (1996),[4] and as recently as "Describing and Discarding 'Comics' as an Impotent Act of Philosophical Rigor" (2005).[5] David Carrier's *The Aesthetics of Comics* (2000) simply presumes the hybrid definition without arguing it. W.J.T. Mitchell's *Picture Theory* (1995) provides a framework within which we might analyse what he calls *imagetext* effects.[6] Hybrid-based conceptions of comics tend to be comparative, borrowing heavily from formal theories of painting, prose, and specifically film (i.e., the media from which comics are ostensibly hybridised and the medium they allegedly most closely resemble).[7]

Sequence is a less logocentric definition. It defines the art form as the sequential arrangement of images, hence the term "sequential art," coined by Richard Kyle in 1964 (Chute 453), and later popularised in both Will Eisner's *Comics and Sequential Art* and Scott McCloud's *Understanding Comics*. McCloud inverts chronology by defining all sequential art as comics—his cartoon avatar of himself[8] looks at a copy of the Aztec document *Tiger's Claw* and asks, "IS IT **COMICS**? YOU **BET** IT IS! WE CAN EVEN **READ** SOME!"[9] (McCloud *Understanding* 10)[10]—whereas Harvey calls contemporary comics a particular form of sequential art (Harvey "Aesthetics" 19), despite advocating for the hybrid definition in the very same document. Groensteen's *The System of Comics* (2007) roots itself in linguistic semiotics and thus conceptualises comics' sequential

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4 In fact, *Art of the Funnies* and *Art of the Comic Book* both begin with chapters that appear to be slightly rewritten versions of "Aesthetic of the Comic Strip."

5 This title is potentially misleading. Harvey argues that attempting to rigorously define comics is a fruitless activity, hence it is impotent.

6 See 1.1.b: "Hybridity." Mitchell's book is not a work of comics theory, but it is so often invoked by comics scholars that it has effectively become one, in addition to its other uses.

7 The comparison to film is particularly convenient, because the two art forms do have a lot in common, but also potentially the most misleading, because it makes overlooking the differences far too easy.

8 I call this cartoon representation "Scott," and not "McCloud," because he/it is a constructed character and not an unmediated representation of Scott McCloud, as *Making Comics* makes explicit in its notes on how McCloud has updated Scott for that volume, including the notes "GREYING TEMPLES" and "MAKE FATTER? (or lose weight to match?)" (*Making* 4) both of which signify McCloud's increasing age and thus a resemblance to reality, but also indicate McCloud himself consciously shaping the manner in which he presents that reality. Reality itself becomes potentially plastic when the notes contemplate changing McCloud's body rather than changing Scott's lines.

9 Although I have converted all quotations from comics into Times New Roman font, I have retained the original bold-facing and italicising as much as possible in order to retain the energetic and emphatic qualities of comic-book type.

10 McCloud refers to comics in the singular, to highlight that they constitute one art form and are not just the combination of pictures and words. However, because both dominant definitions of comics are implicitly multiple (as a sequence of images or a combination of text and image), and in deference to the grammar of the English language, I refer to comics in the plural as "them" and "they."

construction as a syntagmatic system.[11] Sequence-based conceptions of comics tend toward narrative analysis, specifically panel sequence, but also *vectorisation* and other features of the comics page as a composition. Of course, Harvey addresses sequence and McCloud discusses hybridity. No critics actually manage to limit themselves to just one of the two options.

Both Waugh and Kunzle demonstrate that the sequential and hybrid definitions are not mutually exclusive, and the history of comics shows that the two definitions are not mutually inclusive either. *The Far Side* and *Family Circus*, single-panel comics, are regularly placed in the same general category as *Batman* and *Dilbert*. Neither of these definitions is complete by itself, then, but neither are both always present in every example. Therefore, instead of continuing to pursue an objective definition of the art form, which many attempts at comics theory have done, I conceive of hybridity and sequence instead as two ways of looking at comics, which is to say two formal theories, neither mutually inclusive nor mutually exclusive, but rather potentially critically useful to any given analysis of a comic book.

When Harvey argues for his hybrid definition of comics, he is in effect advocating a way of looking at them that privileges "verbal-visual interdependence" (Harvey "Aesthetics" 643). Applied to *Watchmen*, hybridity would help us to see how the *Black Freighter* sub-plot interacts with the main plot by borrowing the narrator boxes from the one and placing them over the other (e.g., 3.1-3.2, 5.8-5.9, etc.).[12] Similarly, when McCloud offers a definition of comics as "sequential art" (McCloud *Understanding* 7:5), he in fact privileges a way of looking that focuses on sequence and juxtaposition. Applied to *Watchmen* again, this perspective would direct one's attention at the manner in which the series manipulates chronology to simulate Doctor Manhattan's non-linear sense of time (e.g., *Watchmen* #4, "Watchmaker"). Hybridity and sequence are thus quite emphatically not sealed categories. They heavily overlap and bleed into each other. There are comics that have no words, of course, and thus avoid hybridity entirely, and there are single-panel comics that contain no sequence of images. However, the vast majority of comics, both books and strips, contain elements of both. Therefore, as singular definitions, neither hybridity nor sequence by itself covers all comics, but we also cannot assume that all comics display qualities of both definitions. To avoid this bind, I refrain from attempting to define the medium and instead use these definitions as methodological approaches to analysing comics.

I discuss four critical theories in my explanation of sequence and hybridity. McCloud's closure and Groensteen's *arthrology* are both sequential theories; Harvey's blending and Mitchell's imagetext are both hybrid theories. Groensteen's *restrained arthrology* is essentially a semiotic version of McCloud's

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[11] See 1.1.a: "Sequence."

[12] My citations for comics list issue, page, and panel numbers, preceded, if applicable, by a volume number. This citation indicates whole pages from *Watchmen*: issue three, pages one and two, and issue five, pages eight and nine, respectively. The next citation, for McCloud's *Understanding Comics*, leaves out the issue number because the book is not part of a series.

closure, but Groensteen takes it a step further, proposing a networked model of panel linkage, called *general arthrology*, and not just a sequential one.

1.1.a: Sequence

Scott McCloud's *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art* (1993) explicitly claims to explain how comics work. McCloud is one of a body popular scholars working on and with comics, including Eisner, Harvey, Maurice Horn, and many others. He has no graduate degree and is not affiliated with a university or other academic/research institution; his expertise is instead based on a career as a comics artist, most famously the series *Zot!*. McCloud's cartoon avatar of himself even wears Zot's lightning bolt on his chest, a visual reminder of McCloud's status as creator and cultural insider. *Understanding Comics* is thus not an academic text. It is written/drawn for a popular audience. It uses the form of comics to explain comics, as opposed to the academic practise of rendering all discourse in text, specifically the essay. It does place itself in the context of a pre-existing body of criticism to a degree, specifically citing Will Eisner's *Comics and Sequential Art* (6), but it mostly contextualises its argument by referencing published comics or providing original examples of McCloud's principles in action. *Understanding Comics* thus occupies a middle-ground between how-to books written on comics—like John Buscema and Stan Lee's *How To Draw Comics the Marvel Way* (1984)—and what academics call "theory." It is a work of theory, without doubt, but that theory is written by, and from the perspective of, a creator of comics and not a critic. McCloud's subsequent books, *Reinventing Comics* (2000) and *Making Comics* (2006), both focus increasingly on creating comics rather than critiquing them, and even *Understanding Comics* advocates for them to a great degree, rather than critiquing them. The creator-oriented and popular nature of the book does not, or at least should not, diminish McCloud's contribution, but it does present difficulties for an academic, specifically the absence of rigorous citation. Part of my discussion of *Understanding Comics*, then, involves tracking down some of McCloud's influences from Eisner.

McCloud's central thesis is that comics rely on the participation of the viewer—as opposed to Eisner's implication that comics must control the viewer (Eisner *Sequential* 46-47)—and that that participation happens in the viewer's imagination; hence, comics are an "invisible" art form, as the subtitle of the book attests. This participation is called *closure* and it leads McCloud to a theory of panel transition, as well as a theory of the relationship between image and text . *Closure* is based directly on Eisner's discussion of "visual literacy" and "panelization" (Eisner *Sequential* 42). McCloud names Eisner as a key influence on his own work in several places throughout his critical work (McCloud *Understanding* 6; *Reinventing* 26-7; *Making* 2, 144). Although Eisner himself makes no explicit argument about panel sequence as foundational to comics and McCloud never quotes Eisner directly, McCloud does repeat key concepts and images from Eisner's books. Both use a kneeling human figure as an example of an iconic posture, for example (Eisner *Sequential* 15, McCloud *Making* 105). *Comics and Sequential Art* also includes a diagram of three panels that all depict

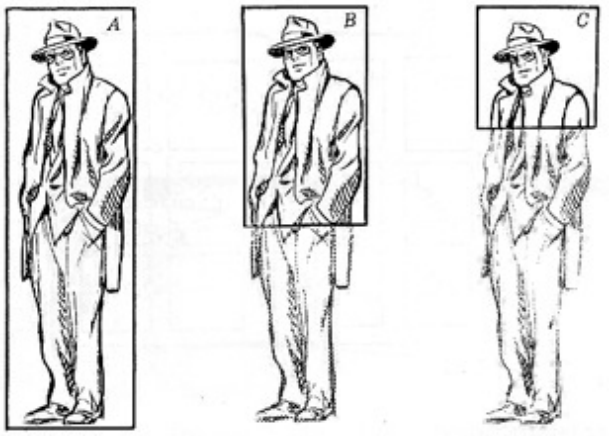

fig. 1.1: Three Spirits (*Comics and Sequential Art* 42)

Eisner's most famous character, the Spirit, first as a full-body image, then cut off at the waist, and finally cut off at the shoulders (fig. 1.1). Eisner explains that the viewer "is expected to assume an entire body exists outside the panel and, based on experience and memory, must supply the rest of the picture" (42). Viewers infer a whole image based partly on the panel's given contents and partly on their own memory and imagination.

McCloud combines Eisner's visual example with René Magritte's *The Treason of Images* (*La trahison des images*), which famously asserts "ceci n'est pas une pipe" directly underneath a photorealistic image of a pipe. McCloud's interpretation of the painting is the common one: "INDEED, THIS IS **NOT** *A* PIPE. / THIS IS *A* **PAINTING** *OF A* PIPE" (24:4).[13] In a similarly pedagogical vein, but using Eisner's cut-off-body effect, McCloud presents Scott in another three-panel sequence but inverts Eisner's example (fig. 1.2). Instead of arguing that the legs are implied by the body and imagined by the viewer, McCloud asserts that they are not literally there at all and have to be inferred by the viewer, much as the image of the pipe in Magritte's painting is not literally a pipe. Thus, both images, *Treason* and Scott's missing legs, are prime examples of Mitchell's formal metapicture, which shows itself to know itself.[14]

Within McCloud's argument, however, this sequence of panels combines Eisner and Magritte to form the base on which he constructs his concept of closure, which he describes as the "PHENOMENON *OF* **OBSERVING THE PARTS** BUT **PERCEIVING THE WHOLE**" (63:1). Eisner's Spirit panels and Scott's missing legs demonstrate that comics viewers automatically fill in the diegetic universe around an isolated image. McCloud even insinuates that closure is an evolutionary trait: "IN AN

fig. 1.2: Scott's Legs (*Understanding Comics* 61.6-8).

[13] Mitchell, working with Wittgensten and Foucault, problematises this common analysis of Magritte's surrealist painting. See 1.2.c: "Metapictures."

[14] See 1.2.c: "Metapictures."

INCOMPLETE WORLD, WE MUST **DEPEND** ON CLOSURE FOR OUR **VERY SURVIVAL**" (63:6). He locates closure between panels; hence, the title of the third chapter is "Blood in the Gutter." The life-blood of comics flows through the space between the panels. As he describes them:

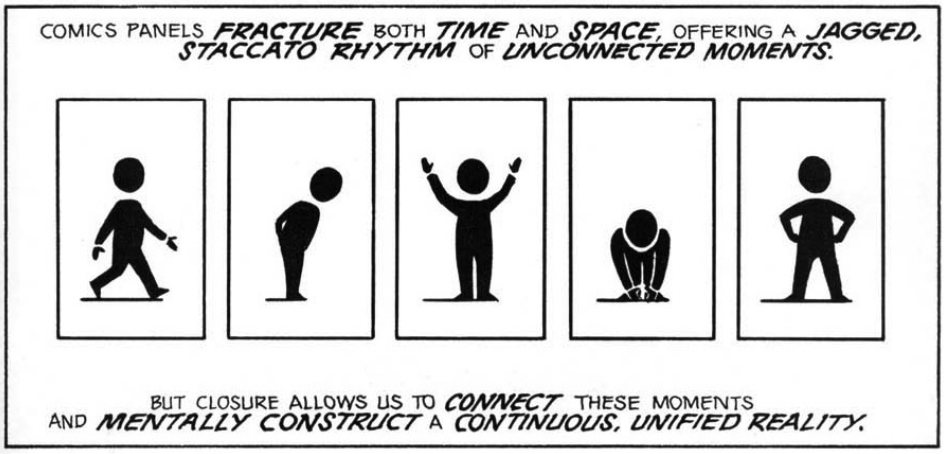

fig. 1.3: Jagged Rhythm (McCloud *Understanding* 67.5-10)

McCloud emphasises the viewer's participation in closure. He argues that while the gutter is the physical space on the page in which closure happens, it also happens in the viewer's imagination, in mental space. Continuing his visceral motif, McCloud creates a murder in two panels (fig. 1.4). Instead of full motion, as in film, and instead of using phrasing that urges a reader to imagine events, as in prose or poetry, comics provide a before-and-after in images and the viewer supplies the movement and causality. Film can achieve this effect as well, of course. The Soviet montage school of filmmaking is built on it (e.g., Eisenstein's *Film Form and The Film Sense*). The difference is one of scale, not kind; film uses montage on a continual basis through cutting, whereas sequential comics—strips and books—use closure on a continuous basis through panel transition. David Lloyd's action sequences in *V for Vendetta*, for example, use closure to imply the title character's frightening speed and efficiency at killing, presenting images of V's knives in one panel, the empty hands of his (implied) victims in the next two, and then their fallen bodies (2.20:5 –

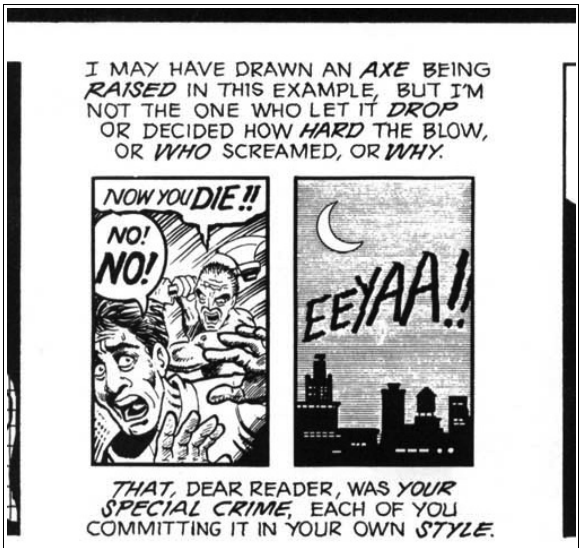

fig. 1.4: Visceral Closure (McCloud *Understanding* 68.7-9)

2.20:9). No image of V actually stabbing the two victims is necessary to communicate the narrative information.

McCloud goes on to create an ostensibly complete catalogue of the various kinds of panel closure available in comics, six in total (McCLoud *Understanding* 70:1 – 74:1), which he summarizes in *Making Comics*:

> 1. MOMENT TO MOMENT / A SINGLE ACTION PORTRAYED IN A SERIES OF MOMENTS. // 2. ACTION TO ACTION / A SINGLE SUBJECT (PERSON, OBJECT, ETC.) IN A SERIES OF ACTIONS. // 3. SUBJECT TO SUBJECT / A SERIES OF CHANGING SUBJECTS WITHIN A SINGLE SCENE. // 4. SCENE TO SCENE / TRANSITIONS ACROSS SIGNIFICANT DISTANCES ACROSS TIME AND/OR SPACE. // 5. ASPECT TO ASPECT / TRANSITIONS FROM ONE ASPECT OF A PLACE, IDEA, OR MOOD TO ANOTHER // 6. NON SEQUITUR / A SERIES OF SEEMINGLY NONSENSICAL, UNRELATED IMAGES AND/OR WORDS. (McCloud *Making* 16:2-7)

Creating a limited list that ostensibly covers all cases is yet more evidence of McCloud's rigidly formalist approach. He jokes about this propensity in *Making Comics*, in which Scott hugs himself and says "MMMMM... / DIAGRAMS" (131:1) and later claims that "AS THE NERDY, ANALYTICAL SON OF AN ENGINEER, I WAS BOUND TO HEAD FOR THE FORMALIST CAMP" (135:3), which attests to his desire to categorise. The vagueness of the last two kinds of transition hints at the flaw in McCloud's system. Once he reaches past the depiction of time (moment, action, and subject) and/or articulation of story (subject and scene), the final two transition types (aspect and non sequitur) seem to exist just to cover all the possibilities that the first four might have missed, and thus they lack the specificity of those first four. Aspect transitions could include practically any two images that depict different elements of anything, and non sequitur accounts for panel transitions that, allegedly, would have no informational value at all. Going by McCloud's division of time/story into three parts (moment, action, subject), however, aspect transitions should be subdivided into several different subtypes as well; going by his theory of closure, there should be no such thing as a non sequitur because the viewer's mind would invent a connection between any two images. If the goal is to have an all-encompassing and precise system of transitions, then McCloud's six do not cover that ground evenly enough. The emphasis on time/story and vagueness in relation to anything else also betrays McCloud's preoccupation with narrative comics. To be clear, there is nothing precisely wrong with this schema, but its unevenness detracts from its utility as an analytical system. The conceptual flaw in McCloud's approach is its apparent desire to cover all possible transitions, despite the highly flexible nature of the form, the capacity of artists to escape or subvert such categorical systems, or cultural contexts that might perceive the art form in radically different ways.

Groensteen, on the other hand, consistently flags his system as preliminary, general rules that artists will inevitably expand upon and break as they see fit: "We must guard ourselves here against dogmatic conclusions. Comics

admit all sorts of narrative strategies, which are all equally modern and legitimate"[15] (Groensteen 117). Groensteen's schema is open-ended, despite being based in the ordered structuralism of European semiology, while McCloud's panel transitions are the perfect example of what Mitchell criticises as those intellectual systems that merely serve to perpetuate themselves by slotting all evidence into preconceived categories[16]. McCloud's panel transition types might serve as a useful place to start for someone just learning how to understand comics, hence the title of his book, but their utility as an analytical tool is limited to identifying approximately how much time or space has passed between two sequential panels.

Thierry Groensteen's *The System of Comics* was originally published in French in 1999 as *Système de la bande dessinée* and subsequently translated into English by Bart Beaty and Nick Nguyen in 2007. *System* attempts to synthesise various linguistic-semiotic approaches to comics, specifically within the Francophone academic tradition. It cites Henri van Lier's key concept of the *multiframe* and Benôit Peeters' theories of panel transition with which Groensteen takes some issue. Groensteen also borrows from Deleuze and Guattari's semiotics of film, specifically the *utterable* sign. Finally, he of course relies heavily on Saussure, although often on such a fundamental level that he does not cite the *Course on General Linguistics* but instead simply uses ideas from it, like articulation, or the concept of language appearing *in praesentia*, which Groensteen also attributes to comics panels. Missing from Groensteen's book is a discussion of a semiotics of the image, and indeed, Groensteen even rejects the validity of such an approach in his Introduction on the grounds that semiotics requires a singular, identifiable *sign* and drawn figures provide no such thing (Groensteen 3). C. F. Peirce's visual semiotics are absent from the book entirely, but given that Groensteen is not interested in a semiotic system for images, Peirce would fall outside his scope in any case. Groensteen instead turns to a conception of panels as the base unit of the art form, the comic-book sign, because they are by nature separated units and they are read in sequence, like words. Groensteen relies on van Lier's conception of comics as one big *multiframe*, and *System*'s first chapter presents a taxonomy of the various frames and borders on the typical comics page, which Groensteen calls the *spatio-topical system*.[17] The significant element of comics as an art form, for Groensteen, is the connection between frames, the study of which he calls *arthrology*, from the Greek word for

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[15] Groensteen does not invoke modernism or the notion of modernity in *System*, so this statement is somewhat ambiguous. The tone of the whole discussion is positive, in the sense that all the techniques Groensteen describes and any new ones that comics artists might invent, should not be ranked against each other. No artist fails, so to speak, to use these techniques properly or enough. In this instance, the word "modern" stands not for modernism but for creativity or even just novelty.

[16] See 1.1.b: "Hybridity."

[17] Literally the *spaces* and *places* of the comics pages, from the Latin "spatium" and "topia." The spatio-topical system is, in essence, a taxonomy of all the frames, borders, and boundaries of the typical comics page. Although useful as a formal lexicon, my argument does not often move down to the granular level of analysis that would employ it; therefore, this chapter does not examine the spatio-topical system in detail.

articulation, "arthron." Articulation has two interanimating denotations here, one linguistic and the other mechanical. The first denotes speech, articulating words, and the second denotes joining two things by mechanical means, like an articulated mechanical arm or an articulated bus. Thus, articulation is both communication and connection, and arthrology is the study of how elements on the comics page construct meaning through their connection(s) to each other. [18] There are two kinds of arthrology, *restrained* and *general*. In restrained arthrology, panel sequence is linear but bidirectional, whereas general arthrology is non-linear and panels are potentially separated by a great deal of space.

The easiest way to explain panel sequence is to use a multiframe as an example. In fig. 1.5, panels 1, 2, and 3 form a sequence, as do panels 4, 5, and 6. Comics, build narrative through space; each panel adds information to the last and thus constructs a story. Groensteen argues, however, that any given panel also "informs [the viewer] a posteriori of the precise signification" (108-9) of the previous panel. He calls this "a retroactive determination" (110) in which knowing the contents of the next panel in a sequence can, and most often does, alter the viewer's interpretation of the current panel. R.C. Harvey notes this feature of panel sequence in "Aesthetics," written in 1979: "The composition of each panel can be evaluated singly, panel by panel, or in the context of that day's entire strip—the arrangement of elements in one panel being influenced by the content of panels coming before and after it" (650). Groensteen calls this retroactively-informed, three-panel construction a *syntagm*, which is what semiotics calls a unit of speech in its linear construction. A succession of comic-book syntagms, in Groensteen's terminology, make a *sequence* of panels. In fig. 1.5, panels 5 and 7 surround panel 6 in a standard viewing sequence,[19] and thus to understand the narrative significance of panel 6, viewers

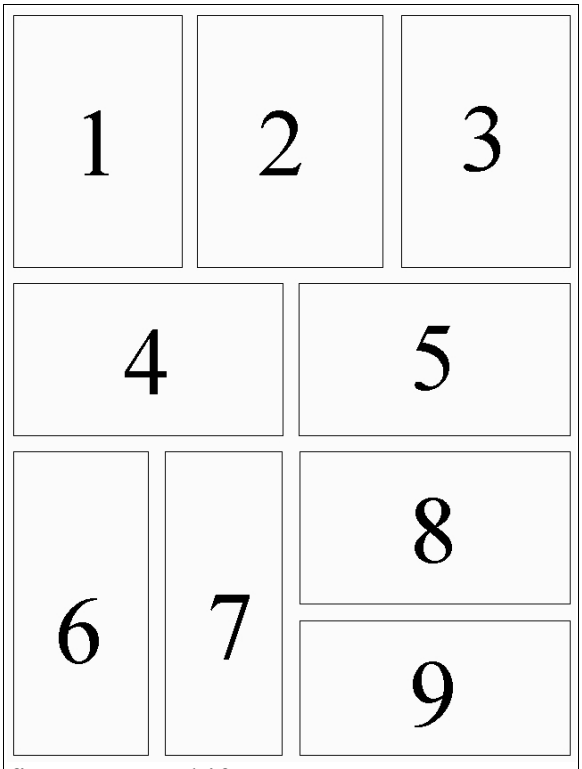

fig. 1.5: A Multiframe

[18] This use of "articulation" is not original to Groensteen, of course. It is a convenient double-meaning that has existed in semiotics for decades and Stuart Hall makes extensive use of it. See 1.3.b: "Comics as Articulations."

[19] Which is to say, a standard Western viewing sequence. In most of Asia and parts of the Middle-East, comics proceed right-to-left instead of left-to-right, although everyone seems to proceed from top to bottom.

must look at 5 and 7 as well, according to Groensteen's theory. Retroactive determination is not unique to comics, of course. The same thing happens when new information is revealed in any narrative, but on the comics page, the present, previous, and next images are all visible at once, or "*in praesentia*" as Groensteen puts it (18, 148), a phrase he borrows from Saussure's *Course in General Linguistics* (975). This spatial narration is different than film, for example, in which the images are all projected in one space and juxtaposed in time, as McCloud points out in *Understanding Comics* (7:6-7). All linear narrative construction in comics happens in this retroactive manner. The exception that proves this rule is the power of the three-panel sequence that is spread across two pages, an effect only achievable in comic books rather than comic strips. In fig. 1.5, a three-panel sequence of 8, 9, and the hypothetical 10, the first panel on the next page, would generate a great deal of tension because 9 and 10 are not simultaneously visible (i.e., visible in praesentia). That heightened suspense is a result of having upset the default viewing practise in which all three panels are simultaneously visible.

There are a couple of potential counter-arguments to this formulation. First, Groensteen is somewhat unclear about what constitutes the base unit of comics and, second, retroactive determination could and should also apply to panels that are not in syntagmatic sequence. Addressing this first objection actually helps to clarify Groensteen's system. He claims that the panel is "the base unit of the comics system" (Groensteen 34) but his model of the syntagm would seem to indicate that three panels are the base, which is further complicated by the fact that he implies that two panels can also make a sequence (106). The way to make sense of this apparent contradiction is to review some of Groensteen's foundational semiotic concepts. He borrows the concept of the *utterable* from Deleuze's film theory and heavily modifies it (16-7). The single panel, going by Groensteen's interpretation of the utterable, cannot speak yet. Instead, it has "imminent significance" (111). It is merely a brief glimpse into the diegesis. It contains no causal or narrative logic. Only by viewing and re-viewing the surrounding panels can the comics viewer attach significance to the contents of a single panel. In short, a panel has little to no meaning without the surrounding panels. Thus, each syntagm allows the viewer to transform the utterable panel into an utterance, a unit of speech. Put differently, viewers derive aesthetic, lyric, narrative, and causal meaning from each panel based on its position in the sequence. This construction does not mean that comics proceed in groups of three panels at once, of course. Each panel is simply informed by its predecessor and successor in an over-lapping progression. These syntagmatic utterances (three-panel constructions) are then strung together into sequences. Therefore, in Groensteen's *System,* the panel is the base unit of comics, the syntagm is the base unit of narration, and the sequence is enough syntagms to add up to what we might colloquially call a scene. The other objection, that comic-book viewers are not restricted to linear sequence, leads to Groensteen's concept of *general arthrology*.

Viewing practises in comics are less neat than Groensteen's syntagm would indicate. If the viewer's eye can look one panel ahead and behind, then looking two or three panels in either direction is also possible, or looking up or down, out of sequence entirely. This viewing out of strict sequence is called *general arthrology* and it comprises the third, and shortest, chapter in *System*. Groensteen asserts that "within the paged multiframe that constitutes a complete comic, every panel exists, potentially if not actually, in relation with each of the others" (Groensteen 146). Put simply, according to Hillary Chute, "in comics, reading can occur in all directions" (460). General arthrology describes the connections that panels can make with each other through their position on the page, a visual motif, or some combination of the two. Groensteen explains panel-to-panel connections that do not exist by virtue of strict, linear sequence in terms of general arthrology. Instead of a sequential chain, as in restricted arthrology and/or McCloud's closure, we have a *braid* or a *network* of panels. "Braiding"[20] is a peculiar term at first, with its connotations of hair and rope, and the more common metaphor of the network initially seems more appropriate. However, a net implies a set of elements that are in non-linear contact with one another, whereas the braid implies threads that largely proceed only in two directions (i.e., forwards and back), even though they weave into each other. Groensteen does say that "every panel exists, potentially if not actually, in relation with each of the others" (145), and not just in the way that links in a chain are all in a relationship, but directly, from one panel straight to another. However, the metaphor of braiding is best applied, at least in its English-language translation, to whole comic books, because they generally proceed either forward or back and only weave back and forth to a limited degree, while the metaphor of the network is more appropriate on a single page or double-page in which the panels can refer to each other in many directions. This separation, between braids and networks, is not categorical, of course. The two terms do not objectively describe the relationships between elements on the comics page; they instead describe subjective ways of looking at the page.

Groensteen also differentiates between the sequence and the *series*. Restricted arthrology creates a sequence; general arthrology creates a series:

> A *series* is a succession of continuous or discontinuous images linked by a system of iconic, plastic or semantic correspondences... A *sequence* is a succession of images where syntagmic linking is determined by a narrative project ("La narration comme supplément" qtd. in Groensteen *System of Comics* 147)

Similarly, instead of sites, defined in the spatio-topical system as a visual element's position on the page relative to the rest of the page (148), elements in general arthrology have *places*. "A place is [...] an activated and over-determined site, a site where a series crosses (or is superimposed on) a sequence" (148). Sequence is, then, the default narrative progression in comics, but when visual

[20] The original French term is *tressage*. The translation is quite literal.

elements (panels, images, poses, text, etc.) refer to each other or call to each other out of sequence, they create a series. There are two ways to braid panels into a series. First, "[c]ertain privileged sites are naturally predisposed to become places" (148). The first and last panels of a page (in fig. 1.5, panels 1 and 9) are often places, as is the centre panel of a given page, if there is one (e.g., panel 5). A column of panels down the page (e.g., panels 5, 8, 9) can also create a series, as can a diagonal. A series can also consist of panels distributed across many pages that happen to occupy the same site, a running gag that always appears at the lower-left, for example.

Second, however, the contents of a panel can repeat, reference, or gesture to the contents of a previous panel, which can be achieved by visual rhyme, the "distant repetition" (148) of a visual element like a symbol, an object, a pose, a certain mise-en-page, etc. It can also be achieved by a particular drawing style, colour code, setting, or character. General arthrology is arguably harder to recognise if the places are significantly far apart in the book or series. Groensteen's term for that distance between places is *amplitude*. Depending on the circumstances, too much amplitude can destroy a series, but a different series might be even more pointed by virtue the distance between its panels or their strategic placement. An image depicted in the first panel of a long series and then poignantly repeated in the final panel can conceivably be quite powerful. Part of the reason that his chapter on general arthrology is short is that the possibilities are so vast that they are difficult to explain in terms of a system. Groensteen states that he does "not attempt to sketch a typology of the specific diverse procedures of braiding here, as they would no doubt be impossible to enumerate" (148). Instead he supplies a few representative examples of general arthrology on a single page and then across a book. Chapter 4 of this dissertation discusses Ellis and Robertson's *Transmetropolitan* at length, including an extended imagetext sequence of linked, full-page images that forms a secondary narrative within Book IV of the series, *The New Scum*.

McCloud's *closure* is in effect a two-panel version of Groensteen's *arthrology*, and Groensteen expands arthrology a great deal further, although McCloud illuminates a lot of potential subtlety within the two-panel transition. Thus closure and arthrology are complimentary systems. However, there is an element of McCloud's system to which Groensteen almost directly objects. McCloud implies that the space between panels, the gutter, is quite literally the site of closure. Scott asserts that "In a very real sense, comics **is** closure!" (McCloud *Understanding* 67:4) and even stands in an over-sized gutter between two panels while explaining the concept (fig. 1.6). Despite his text indicating that the closure occurs in the mind, his art implies that it is located physically in the gutter. Groensteen, however, points out that when "there is no gutter, only a simple line to separate two contiguous images [...], the semantic relations between the images are the same" (Groensteen 112), which is to say that even without a gutter between the panels, their separation still invokes closure, in McCloud's sense. There is also the rare borderless panel, which Will Eisner discusses

fig. 1.6: Scott in the Gutter (*Understanding Comics* 66.4)

extensively in *Graphic Storytelling and Visual Narrative.* In both cases, McCloud's conception of closure most certainly occurs and the physical space that constitutes the gutter is unnecessary to the process.

McCloud is a popular scholar and therefore probably does not feel compelled to provide the kind of precision for which academic scholars aim. It seems likely that he takes for granted that the gutter symbolises the viewer's reconstruction of the events implied by the panels and is not the physical site of it. But, his theory strongly implies a literal reading of the gutter, which is exactly what Groensteen objects to when he asserts that "the gutter in and of itself (that is to say, an empty space) does not merit fetishization" (Groensteen 112). Groensteen speaks specifically to Benôit Peeters' claims in *Case, planche, récit*, but an endnote attached to the comment explains that "McCloud also makes the ellipse (*closure*) a foundational concept in his theory of comics" (Groensteen 175). He describes this model of the gutter as the equivalent of "inventing successive frames (between which it would be permissible to reconstitute the missing moments)" (Groensteen 113). He argues that the sense of the gutter as generative space merely creates a series of imagined panels between the drawn panels. Groensteen does not follow up on the flaw in that reasoning, but creating more frames in the gutter would logically necessitate more closure between those new frames, which would require more frames between the new frames, *ad infinitum*. Perhaps there is a breaking point at which generating frames between frames produces full motion (i.e., twenty-four frames per second), but it is hard to believe that in order to perceive comic-book narration, viewers have to reconstruct the cinema in their minds.

Groensteen argues that "an intermediate state between the two panels does not exist" (113). Instead, he argues that "[f]or the comics reader, the fact of presupposing that there is a meaning [in the sequence of images] necessarily leads him to search for the way that the panel that he 'reads' is linked to the others" (113). The viewer (regardless of gender, presumably) assumes that there will be a coherent narrative in the sequence of images and therefore looks for relationships between the panels (chronological, causal, narrative, lyric, aesthetic, etc.). Going by this reasoning, the sequential theory of comics is quite literally a way of looking. This presupposition on the viewer's part, in concert with the efforts of the creator(s) to construct narrative flow, is what Groensteen calls *iconic solidarity*.

The artist puts it in the comics, but the viewer has to have faith that it is there in order to see it. "The 'gutter' between the two panels is therefore [...] the site of a semantic articulation, a logical conversion [...] of a series of utterables (the panels) into a statement that is unique and coherent (the story)" (114). Viewers do not have to literally reconstruct images of what happens between the panels; they must merely draw a conclusion as to what must have happened if they were to assume that there is something like a coherent narrative at work. McCloud's theory asserts basically the same thing. It is the viewer's "special crime" to infer causality between panels, and therefore logically, the crime happens in the viewer's head. Ultimately, Groensteen and McCloud agree on the basic mechanics of narrative sequence in comics, but they happen to locate it within different theories of reading/viewing: Groensteen's avowedly semiotic, and McCloud's pseudo-evolutionary.

1.1.b: Hybridity

Harvey's *blending* principle posits image and text in seamless harmony, while Mitchell's *imagetext* splits them up into three different kinds of relationships to each other—*imagetext*, *image-text*, and *image/text*—and thus extends "Beyond Comparison" (83) to a multiplicity of relationships between visual elements, not just similarity or difference.

The hybrid model defines comics as the combination of pictures and words in a defined space, usually printed on paper but not necessarily. Any theory of comics attached to this model must, therefore, describe the relationship between pictures and words and adherents to it tend to either imply or declare that a harmony of the two is the ideal form of comics, as Eisner, McCloud, and Harvey all do. Harvey's hybrid theory of comics, in "The Aesthetics of Comics" (1979), is one of the earliest attempts at a general theory of comics for scholarly use. W.J.T. Mitchell's *Picture Theory* (1994) is not explicitly written as comics theory, although it briefly mentions them (89-90), but his *imagetext* concept is highly applicable to comics. The *imagetext* in effect extends the narrow conception of hybridity-as-harmony out to other forms of relation. Mitchell acknowledges harmony but introduces the notion of discord. Mitchell's book is also consistently mindful of not just analysing imagetext combinations formally, but also historically and socially, often in terms of Foucault's conception of knowledge-as-power (e.g., Mitchell 24, 48, 70-71, 80-82, etc.).

Robert C. Harvey is one of a handful of popular scholars who has been writing on comics consistently since the 1970s. His aforementioned article, "The Aesthetics of the Comic Strip," is one of the first attempts to not just define comics as an art form, but to create an applicable, theoretical approach to them for the purposes of academic/scholarly research.[21] "Aesthetics" is a flawed but extremely useful paper that indicates a common mindset in comics scholarship from the seventies through the nineties. It never actually argues for why the hybrid definition ought to trump the sequential, instead asserting its thesis and

[21] Kunzle's *The Early Comic Strip* predates Harvey's "Aesthetics" by six years. I address Kunzle's definition of comics below, in this same section.

carrying on to explain what a hybrid comic strip[22] ought to look like. Similarly, despite championing hybridity, half the paper discusses sequential principles, even offering the three-panel progression as a model for comic-book narration (650). Harvey grounds his hybrid model in what he calls the "verbal-visual blend principle" (642) and claims that it ought to be the basis for evaluating the quality of a given comic strip or book (642), which would seem to be based in a simple misunderstanding of the function of academic literary criticism. Harvey reproduces this same argument in the introductory chapters of his later books, *The Art of the Funnies* (1994) and *The Art of the Comic Book* (1996). However, his recent paper, "Describing and Discarding 'Comics' as an Impotent [sic] Act of Philosophical Rigor" (2005) corrects for most of the flaws in "Aesthetics." In it, Harvey "hasten[s] to note [...] that regardless of emphasis, neither sequence nor blending inherently excludes the other" (Harvey "Describing" 19), that his definition is "not a leak-proof formulation" (20), and that it "conveniently excludes some non-comics artifacts [...]; but it probably permits the inclusion of other non-comics" (20). Thus he characterises definition not as an attempt to accurately describe comics but instead "as a springboard to discussion" (18) and a "mental sleight-of-hand [...] by which we focus our attention on the visual character of the medium as well as the verbal" (23). This assertion implies that his revised hybridity definition exists partly to direct attention to the visual, presumably because of a perceived lack of attention paid to it normally. There is certainly no shortage of critical writing, both academic and popular, that addresses only the character and narrative elements of comics, citing dialogue as the ultimate form of evidence, but there is also no shortage of writing that focuses very much on the visual in comics, on the manner in which images, especially images in sequences, articulate narrative. McCloud's discussion of panel transition, still the best known theory of comics, does exactly this. It is hard, therefore, to see exactly with whom Harvey is arguing. However, his attempt to fashion an open-ended theory of the relationship between image and text, as opposed to an objective definition, meshes quite well with Mitchell's even more open-ended *imagetext* concept.

W.J.T. Mitchell's *Picture Theory* sets out not to create a theory of pictures, although it does so along the way, but instead a way to *picture* theory. He does so because he detects a "pictorial turn" (Mitchell 11) in contemporary culture (in 1994). He adapts the concept of a pictorial turn from Richard Rorty, who "has characterized the history of philosophy as a series of 'turns'," (11). Mitchell quotes Rorty explaining that with each new turn "a new set of problems emerges and the old ones begin to fade away" (Rorty in Mitchell 11). Rorty identifies a turn to "textuality" (11) in the early twentieth century, whereas Mitchell argues that visually-oriented works of criticism—such as Jacques Derrida's *Of Grammatology*, the pop-culture focus of the Frankfurt School, or film studies as a critical field (12)—indicate that the pictorial turn is already well underway.

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[22] In this paper, Harvey discusses comic strips exclusively, and not books, but he freely applies the same theoretical approach to comic books in *The Art of the Comic Book* (1996).

However, he makes clear that it is not ethically better or more rational than the textual turn. It "is not the answer to anything. It is merely a way of stating the question" (24). I would alter this statement slightly, to say that it is a *new* way to answer many of the same questions, as well as a whole new set of questions. Since the picture is the basis for a new dominant discourse—or perhaps instead a new field of depiction—then we ought to be mindful of how we construct it and what its potential consequences are, politically and ethically. Based in no small part on his reading of Foucault, Mitchell is particularly interested in the picture's application as a vessel for representation and knowledge, and thus also power (12). Therefore, scholars who work in the pictorial turn should learn from the past and avoid the mistakes of the textual turn. Pictures are far too important to do otherwise.

Mitchell highlights two mistakes from the textual turn that scholars ought not to repeat. First the "*temptation to science*" (30)—in such theories as semiotics, a science of language extended out to almost all representation, and what Mitchell calls the "interartistic" tradition (86), a rigid model of image-text relations—tends to lead to creating master-narratives and/or totalising systems. These kinds of systems offer closed loops of knowledge, often exhibiting what the social-sciences call *confirmation bias*, in which new examples are merely used to confirm the old system. This kind of approach

> will not make any waves: it will simply provide confirmation and elaboration of the dominant historical and conceptual models that already prevail in the discipline, offering the sort of highly general, watered-down historicism that can be extracted to match up visual art and literature. (86)

Mitchell overstates the point slightly; such systems do not always confirm their own biases, but they do strongly tend toward doing so. Conceptual inertia is a powerful thing and the first duty of most ideological systems—political, theological, economic, moral, academic, etc.—is to legitimise themselves. The second mistake of textuality, then, is that it thinks of the world only in textual terms, including the assumption that we can best, or perhaps even fully, describe the image as a kind of "text" (87). Mitchell does not argue that we ought to abandon systems like semiotics and/or never read pictures in textual terms—*Picture Theory* constantly employs both approaches—but instead that we should, to borrow Brian McHale's phrase, "turn them down" (24) such that they no longer act as master-narratives. This desire to keep, but correct, the old textual systems leads in part to Mitchell's construction of a threefold schema for understanding the relationship between text and image.

The triplicate concept of the imagetext is most emphatically not a master-narrative or a scientistic construction.[23] It is in fact designed to be non-scientific and extremely open-ended, a directive, maybe even just a reminder, to think

[23] "Scientism" here refers to the worship of science, or even pseudo-science, as if it were a religious or spiritual system.

outside of a limited range of options traditionally offered from within the textual perspective. Mitchell is especially critical of the aforementioned interartistic tradition, which insists "that verbal and visual media are to be seen as distinct, separate, and parallel spheres that converge only at some higher level of abstraction (aesthetic philosophy; the humanities; the dean's office)" (85), which is to say that the only available relationship between them is that they share an underlying structure. This quotation also displays Mitchell's awareness that these theories of image and text are embedded in, and instantiated by, institutions such as universities, but also galleries and government funding for the arts. To counter this limiting conception, Mitchell urges scholars to move "beyond comparison" and consider other kinds of relation that are possible between image and text:

> The most important lesson one learns from composite works like Blake's (or from mixed vernacular arts like comic strips, illustrated newspapers, and illuminated manuscripts) is that comparison itself is not a necessary procedure in the study of image-text relations. The necessary subject matter is, rather, the whole ensemble of relations between media, and relations can be many other things besides similarity, resemblance, and analogy. Difference is just as important as similarity, antagonism as crucial as collaboration, dissonance and division of labor as interesting as harmony and blending of function. (89-90)

Comparison is not necessary in "mixed vernacular arts," nor is it central to understanding them, but it is important to note that for Mitchell, comparison is still one of several methodological options. We do not need to abandon it, just compliment it with other approaches. In order to incorporate all of these radically different kinds of relation, he proposes a deliberately open set of approaches to image and text: image/text, imagetext, and image-text. He explains the difference between the three in a footnote:

> I will employ the typographic convention of the slash to designate "image/text" as a problematic gap, cleavage, or rupture in representation. The term "imagetext" designates composite, synthetic works (or concepts) that combine image and text. "Image-text," with a hyphen, designates relations of the visual and verbal. (90)[24]

Mitchell does not significantly elaborate on the basic definition of the three kinds of image-and-text. He largely defines them by using them, putting them into practise. He also explains that they are meant "not to *stop* with formal description" (90), but also prompt questions of how those formalisms come to be and what effects they have. These questions are unavoidably located in specific historical and social contexts, "not predetermined by any universal science of

[24] Mitchell's differentiation between the terms of this triplicate concept is detectable only through punctuation, which makes the term itself an imagetext effect because, as he explains, all text is necessarily visible (95).

signs" (90). The imagetext concept is thus not a scientistic system, unlike McCloud's closure, which he designs to account for all possibilities within a limited list of possible panel transitions (and implicitly links with evolution), or Groensteen's arthrology, which remains open to artistic innovation but treats linguistic semiotics as an unproblematic structure on which to build a theory of comic-book narration. Mitchell himself describes the imagetext as "neither a method nor a guarantee of historical discovery" (104). It is instead a reminder to go "beyond comparison" in terms of the formal image-text relationship, as well as the social analysis of the institutions and social structures in which the comparative method has been fostered.

Mitchell uses two cartoons in his discussion of the *metapicture*,[25] but spends less than a page on multiframe comics. He cites the textual focus of Gary Trudeau's *Doonsbury* and the plastic imagery of Art Spiegelman's *Maus*, and briefly gestures towards intermedia reflexivity in Frank Miller's *The Dark Knight Returns* (89). However, he quickly segues away from "mixed vernacular arts" (89), comics being a prime example, towards an argument that "all arts are 'composite' arts (both text and image); all media are mixed media" (94). This argument is somewhat unconvincing on formal grounds—although all text is a form of image, not all images contain text—but it rings quite true in institutional terms: "The image/text problem is not just something constructed 'between' the arts, the media, or different forms of representation, but an unavoidable issue within the individual arts and media" (94). That is, the institutions and people who work with image-text relationships, and/or work to maintain the image/text as a problem (e.g., professors of English and Art History, critics, art teachers) constantly employ images and texts to explain images and texts. The relationship between the two is bound up with how we, as a culture, have historically attempted to understand that relationship. For the comics scholar, his segue from comics is frustrating, since that art form quite directly exemplifies an image-text relation. Mitchell seems to recognise the potential that comics possess, but overlooks them because they fall outside of the scope he sets for himself in *Picture Theory.* It is also possible that, given the lack of scholarly work on comics at the time, late-eighties/early-nineties, he felt that there was simply nowhere for such critical work to live.

My own research, then, attempts to pick up where Mitchell leaves off, and I am by no means the only person attempting to do so. Mitchell provides a very useful starting point for analysing comics as a visual and/or hybrid form, so useful that *Picture Theory* has become a standard text in comics scholarship. It is the only entry in Heer and Worcester's *Comics Studies Reader* that is not explicitly about comics. The imagetext model provides a way of looking at aesthetic expression in comics as something more than simple harmony. An image-text comic could call attention to the relationship between image and text instead of trying to efface it, as the blending metaphor implies. McCloud's grand, triangular

[25] One is a single-panel humour cartoon, "Egyptian Life Class" (Alain in Mitchell 43) and the other is a succession of images from *Mad Magazine* (Williams in Mitchell 79, 81).

model of representation—which purports to graph language, the picture plane, and reality itself—contains a curious dotted line separating the cartoon from the written word (McCloud *Understanding* 51:1 – 53:1). That line is essentially McCloud's gesture toward what Mitchell calls the image/text split, the sometimes incommensurable relation, perhaps non-relation, between pictures and words. [26] Mitchell also reveals the potential flaw in Groensteen's attempt to fit comics into a pre-existing linguistic model: doing so effaces potential inherent differences between image and text. Imagetext, image/text, and image-text are also extremely useful places to start when analysing a comic book's use of text on the page. Groensteen's visual and verbal zones interact as image/texts. His and McCloud's almost parallel discussions of word balloons as regulators of time and/or vectorisers of reading order are image-text relationships (Groensteen 79-85, McCloud *Understanding* 95:1-97:12). Sound-effect text, on the other hand, is not contained in a verbal zone and typically incorporates far more visual elements than word balloons, taking on the appearance of the sound that it spells out. It is an especially emphatic form of imagetext. I combine Mitchell's imagetext with Groensteen's notion of a restricted arthrological series in order to analyse *The New Scum*, Volume IV of *Transmetropolitan* in Chapter 4.

1.2: Meta-

Much as definitions for comics function as ways of looking at them, not objective descriptions of their nature, definitions of metafiction, metapictures, or metacomics—which I refer to as the "meta-" for sake of brevity—are also ways of looking at them. I derive a way of looking at the meta- from an array of critical texts: M. Thomas Inge's "Form and Function in Metacomics," Patricia Waugh's *Metafiction,* Linda Hutcheon's *A Poetics of Postmodernism*, Mark Currie's *Metafiction* (a different book than Waugh's), and Mitchell's aforementioned *Picture Theory*, as well as a small array of theories of metacomics by Matthew Jones, M. Thomas Inge, Donald Palumbo, and Michael Dunne. In brief, I conceive of the meta- as that which calls attention to its own constructed nature, by whatever means and to whatever ends. This is a deliberately expansive conception. I do not presume why or how the meta- calls attention to its constructed nature, and I do not assert that calling attention to its constructed nature guarantees a particular political tone. The possibilities are in fact many and varied. There is, of course, a formal and political aspect to the meta-, but positing a universal formal practise or a guaranteed politics would be presumptuous. As Currie explains, doing so "might provide some satisfaction for the typological minded critic, but [it] also impose[s] boundaries which have no essential justification" (15). Individual definitions of the meta- function to facilitate individual discussions of them, much like definitions of comics function to facilitate individual discussions about comics. Thus, the more specifically a given critic focuses on a particular body of metafiction, metapictures, or metacomics,

[26] This potential incommensurability is partly a product of employing an alphabetical language rather than a pictographic one. In Chinese, for example, there would probably be no dotted line between word and image.

the more she can meaningfully speak to issues such as form, politics, and social function. Thus, the critics that I discuss in this section can quite coherently and meaningfully discuss Anglo-American metafictional novels (Waugh), imagetext art (Mitchell), or metacomic strips (Inge).

Most conceptions or definitions of the meta- have a two-part structure. They are, of course, more complex than the following paragraph implies, and each one is fashioned to function specifically within a particular argument. For now, however, I quite consciously reduce them to a two-part structure for the purposes of displaying a general tendency among them. These definitions tend to define meta-level expression as (a) self-referential in some way (making plain its constructed nature, making a spectacle of its formal features, revealing the artist behind the work or the audience reading/viewing it, etc.) and (b) perform that revelation to some specific purpose or effect. Waugh's conception of metafiction makes this split plane: "Metafiction is a term given to fictional writing which [a] self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artefact in order to [b] posit questions about the relationship between fiction and reality" (Waugh 2). Currie's conception is similarly bifurcated: "metafiction [is] a borderline discourse, [...] a kind of writing which [a] places itself on the border between fiction and criticism, and which [b] takes that border as its subject" (Currie 2). Mitchell's conception of the metapicture follows the same formula: "Metapictures are pictures that [a] show themselves in order to [b] know themselves: they stage the 'self-knowledge' of pictures" (Mitchell 48). Hutcheon's theory of historiographic metafiction is not quite as clear in its display of this two-part structure, but it is nevertheless there: "Fiction and history are narratives distinguished by their frames [...], frames which [a] historiographic metafiction first establishes and then crosses, [b] positing both the generic contracts of fiction and history" (Hutcheon *Poetics* 109-110). Dunne's less theoretical approach displays this structure as well, defining metafiction the same way that Waugh does, as something that refers to its own constructed nature, but with the result of revealing "the mediated community that is embracing both creator and audience" (Dunne 11).

This two-part approach is, of course, to be expected. It indicates an attempt to not just describe but understand, to derive a conclusion from a formal construction. I am not arguing that there is anything wrong with extrapolating such conclusions. I am arguing, however, that we ought to be careful about asserting that the meta- will necessarily lead to a particular political, aesthetic, or ideological effect. In fact, my discussion of *Squadron Supreme*[27] demonstrates that metacomics can depict a generically conservative narrative[28] just as easily as a

[27] See 2.1.b: "Squadron Supreme."

[28] I do not use the word "conservative" to describe right-wing politics, but instead to imply a narrative that seeks stasis rather than change. Although it is difficult to avoid the political implications of the term "conservative," I merely seek to state that it is somewhat static, and there is nothing inherently wrong with that. To determine the politics of a "conservative" construction, going by my conception of the word, would require investigating what, exactly, that construct seeks to preserve.

politically radical one, such as the feminist Underground comix I discuss in that same chapter.[29] I therefore separate the meta- into two parts. *Self-referentiality* is primarily formal. Self-referential constructions refer to themselves and gesture towards their artificial nature. *Self-reflexivity* is conceptual and rhetorical. Self-reflexive constructions reflect upon their artificial nature and offer an analysis of how they are constructed. The difference between the various definitions of meta- that this subsection describes has to do with, first, what formal shape it takes and, second, what kind of analysis it offers. Their common factor, though, is the assertion, usually implicit within the definition, that the meta- counts only if it leads to a particular kind of politics, ideology, or, in some cases, epistemology and ontology. Thus it is not historiographic metafiction unless it deconstructs the separation of fiction and history (Hutcheon), or it is not a metafictional novel unless it blurs the lines between theory and fiction (Currie), or it is not metapop unless it reveals audience knowledge and implies a conscious creator (Dunne).

All that having been said, practical necessity dictates that we critics must limit our scope somehow, often to a genre, mode, national tradition, industry, or motif, for example. Within such limits, we can find meaningful patterns. We can detect the kind of ideological assertions that our samples tend towards. Hence Waugh can speak quite coherently about her sample of Anglo-American metafictional novels, as Hutcheon can about historiographic metafiction, and I can about American metacomics. In my conception, though, the category "metacomics" includes all self-referential comics; self-reflection is not a necessary element. Certainly, self-referentiality usually leads to self-reflection, but not necessarily, and not self-reflection of any particular kind. I conceive of metacomics as self-referential and I argue that at their most extreme, my particular sample of comics—from America, in the early-eighties to the present, largely made by British artists, which have been called "Revisionist" comics—dissolve the perceived boundary between the comics and their audience. Chapters 2, 3, and 4 of this dissertation detail the span of meanings that metacomics in the American mainstream have achieved, with a particular focus on the Revisionists. Metacomics can legitimise the superhero, condemn it on political grounds, embrace its contradictions, look at it through the lens of a different genre, turn away from it entirely in favour of new genres, and finally turn away from genre itself as a topic of inquiry and address questions of social justice, representation (both in the semiotic and political sense), and ontology. The next subsection describes Inge's *suspension of belief*, Waugh, Hutcheon, and Currie's conceptions of *metafiction*, Mitchell's *metapictures*, and finally surveys several theories of *metacomics*.

1.2.a: Suspension of Belief

The concept of *suspension of belief*, from M. Thomas Inge's "Form and Function in Metacomics" is extremely useful when applied to metafiction, metapictures, and metacomics.[30] Inge states that metafiction can "suspend our

[29] See 2.2.c: "The Underground is Revolting."
[30] I discuss Inge's paper in more depth in 1.2.d: "Metacomics."

belief in the reality of the fiction" (1), by which he means that it prompts the audience not to fall into the habit of suspending its disbelief. This simple and succinct statement has far-reaching implications, much like the origin of the concept of suspending disbelief. Coleridge almost off-handedly remarks, in *Biographica Literaria*, that his poems in the *Lyrical Ballads* would

> transfer from our inward nature a human interest and a semblance of truth sufficient to procure for these shadows of imagination that *willing suspension of disbelief for the moment*, which constitutes poetic faith. (Coleridge XIV, par. 2, italics for emphasis)

Coleridge's phrase implies an unspoken agreement between reader and poet that, for the sake of enjoying Coleridge's fantastic poems, such as *Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, readers set aside their expectations and embrace the world(s) that his poems offer. They acknowledge their disbelief and suspend it for the duration of reading the poems. The same basic idea applies to storytelling and visual representation. Coleridge's way of looking at the audience/art interaction implies that suspension of disbelief is conscious and deliberate, that the audience must in effect turn off their expectations, and that the poetry also must go some distance towards eliciting that effect.

Similar to Inge's characterisation, Matthew T. Jones succinctly describes suspension of belief, although he does not use the phrase, when he characterises metacomic effects as "thwart[ing] the suspension of disbelief by calling attention to the illusion upheld by convention and narrative structure" (Jones 284). Metacomics ruin suspension of disbelief by refusing to conform to conventions of form, mode, and genre, and even go out of their way to expose their often arbitrary elements. The first section of Chapter 2 discusses comics that attempt, with very little success, to both retain the fantastic and ideologically suspect premises of the superhero, but also banish the audience's growing unwillingness to suspend their disbelief in it. Chapter 3 discusses comics that engage openly and honestly with those suspect premises, which results in condemning the genre, or self-reflexively embracing its more ridiculous elements, or stepping outside of it in order to reinterpret it. The next three subsections explain theories of self-reference and self-reflection in fiction, pictures, and comics, respectively.

1.2.b: Metafiction

There is, of course, a large body of criticism on metafiction. This subsection describes three models of metafiction, Waugh's spectrum of metafictional implications, Hutcheon's postmodernist historiographic metafiction, and Currie's conception of metafiction as a "borderline discourse" (2) that combines fiction and theory. All three of these perspectives apply at different points in my dissertation, which I note below when I summarise them. They constitute different ways of looking at metafiction, none of which are mutually exclusive or superior to each other.

Patricia Waugh's *Metafiction: The Theory and Practise of Self-Conscious Fiction* argues that there are many different kinds of metafiction, but that they are

all part-and-parcel to "a greater awareness within contemporary culture [i.e., the West in 1984] of the function of language in constructing and maintaining our sense of everyday 'reality' " (3). Waugh's use of scare-quotes around the word "reality" indicates that metafiction both posits and problematises reality as a concept, without necessarily arriving at a reliable conclusion as to what, exactly, it is. Waugh's thesis, then, is that metafiction, in its most extreme form, indicates that the perceived world—culture, politics, human relations—is constructed out of sign-systems of various kinds, which Waugh characterises as textual. In some cases, such metafictions lead to the conclusion that these systems can only ever ultimately refer to other signs within themselves and therefore cannot speak to anything but themselves. However, the version of Waugh's metafiction that American mainstream metacomics more closely resemble is the kind that "delights" (Waugh 53) in the dissolution of the frames that separate the fictional world from "reality," a dissolution that creates the opportunity to constantly reinvent that perceived reality.

Waugh describes a span of possible metafictional techniques and effects. She conceives of "two poles of metafiction: one that finally accepts a substantial real world whose significance is not entirely composed of relationships within language; and one that suggests there can never be an escape from the prisonhouse of language and either delights or despairs in this" (53). She calls one end of this spectrum *structural* (53) because it invokes and then undermines previously established literary conventions. She calls the other end of the spectrum *radical* (53) because it undermines conventions of language itself. It "experiments even at the level of the *sign* [...] and therefore fundamentally disturb[s] the 'everyday'" (53). Hence the difference, or perhaps to better fit her metaphor, the distance, between these poles is equal to

> the extent to which language *constructs* rather than *reflects* everyday life: the extent to which meaning resides in the relations between signs *within* a literary fictional text, rather than in their reference to objects *outside* that text. (53).

By corollary, then, if any objects exist outside the text, then language is just a human method of approximating the nature of those objects. Alternatively, if text —here understood as any sign system—can refer only to itself, then nothing exists outside of it at all. Her language, again, indicates a span of possibilities, not a difference in kind or category but instead a difference of degrees. The degree to which a metafictional text describes reality as a construction of language indicates where that text is located between her "two poles of metafiction" (i.e., leaning towards the structural or the radical).[31]

[31] Waugh's description of the radical, especially the concept of infinite deference, is strongly reminiscent of Derridean deconstruction, specifically his reinterpretation of Saussurean linguistic theory. I use her term, though, in order to avoid assuming deconstruction, or arguably poststructuralism, in her characterisation of metafiction. If this dissertation were about deconstruction/poststructuralism, I would go into more detail about this implication in Waugh's text, but because it is about metacomics, I leave it to other critics to follow up on the point.

The most extreme forms of metafiction on the radical end of the spectrum cause the stability of the text to collapse, cause reality to collapse into the text, and thus cause reality to transform into just another textual construction. Such metafictions

> have embraced a Wittgensteinian concept of 'language games'. They function through forms of radical decontextualization. They deny the reader access to a centre of orientation such as a narrator or point of view, or a stable tension between 'fiction', 'dream', 'reality', 'vision', 'hallucination', 'truth', 'lies', etc. Naturalized or totalizing interpretation becomes impossible. The logic of the everyday world is replaced by forms of contradiction and discontinuity, radical shifts of context which suggest that 'reality' as well as 'fiction' is merely one more game with words. (136)

However, going by Waugh's model, almost any metafictional content will tacitly indicate that reality is a construction. If narrative resembles reality, most especially realist narrative, and narrative/realism is constructed out of language, then reality is implicitly constructed out of language as well, which transforms it into mere "reality," in scare-quotes once again. She does not characterise this radical end of the metafictional spectrum in either wholly negative or positive terms, though. Metafictions can either delight in or despair of the idea of reality as textual construct. Although she describes it as a "prisonhouse" (53) or something we can be condemned to (54), she also indicates that the recognition that reality is at least partially textual is a powerful tool of denaturalisation. She quotes Barthes' "To Write," which describes realism as "a totalitarian ideology of the referent" (Barthes in Waugh 53), which Barthes stands opposed to. She also cites Burger and Luckmann's *The Social Construction of Reality*, which indicates that conventions, here understood as both personal habits and literary genres, can "become oppressive and rigidifed, completely naturalized [at which point] they need to be re-examined, both in life and in fiction" (52). Radical textual metafiction is therefore a powerful tool of denaturalisation. She mitigates this position again, though: "According to [Burger and Luckmann's] view, the 'meta' levels of fictional and social discourse might shift our notion of reality slightly but can never totally undermine it" (52). So while the radical end of the metafictional spectrum is accessible within literature, it does not necessarily have the power to entirely subvert the manner in which we perceive reality (i.e., as if it were natural or unmediated), and render it into nothing but "reality" (i.e., as if it were textual). Reality as a concept is thus always suspended, held in check, but not totally banished or dispelled.

All of this discussion of what metafiction can and cannot achieve conceptually (i.e., its self-reflexivity) leaves open the question of how it might achieve it (i.e., its formal construction or self-referentiality). The many and various forms of metafiction constitute the bulk of Waugh's *Metafiction*, as she

analyses a remarkably large number of self-conscious novels, short stories, and experimental prose pieces. Central to her model, as well as my own argument, is the self-referential gesture that she calls a *frame-break*, "the construction of an illusion through the imperceptibility of the frame and the shattering of [that] illusion through the constant exposure to the frame" (31). The frame, for Waugh, is simultaneously the window through which readers view fictional worlds and the structure that grants those worlds their coherence and stability (28). Frames constitute the formal and generic literary conventions of fiction (30). Most readers ignore them as a matter of habit. To quickly decipher text, or even just a genre, to some degree requires an internalisation of their formal conventions. The frame is, in part, Waugh's model of suspension of disbelief. It is invisible, by virtue of reading habit, but also vital because it marks the separation between the fiction and reality. However, "metafiction [...] foregrounds 'framing' as a problem, examining frame procedures in the construction of the real world and of novels" (28), so once again, the idea of reality (or even "reality") is always a problem, never a given.

In structural examples of metafiction, frame-breaks ultimately reinforce those boundaries, questioning them, and thus calling attention to them, but leaving them in place, or incorporating minor frame-breaks into larger literary conventions, as in the nineteenth-century practise of intrusive narration (30-31). They are intrusive only by twentieth and twenty-first century standards, of course, but not the standards of the day. Waugh implies here, but does not explicitly state, that self-referentiality has as much to do with convention as it does formal gesture. An audience that is accustomed to a certain kind of self-referentiality as a matter of convention, such as the dramatic soliloquy or the intrusive narrator, will not regard it as frame break *per se*. Radical frame-breaks, as opposed to structural ones, dissolve the frame entirely, rendering meaningless the inside/outside distinction that frames provide (i.e., that the fiction is framed and reality is not). Frame-breaks themselves can include any gestures that highlight the contrived nature of the text, including narratorial intrusions, parody, and breaking the fourth-wall, assuming that those breaks are not already conventional. Radical metafictional frame-breaks subdivide into four broad subtypes. As with structural and radical metafiction, the subtypes of the radical are not mutually exclusive or isolated. Instead, they represent two spectra and thus Waugh presents them as matched pairs: *contradiction/paradox* and *objets trouvés/intertextual overkill*. In *contradiction*, the text offers multiple, alternative events or alternative endings but no certainty as to which of these threads is real within the diegesis. Contradiction thus violates the convention of linear causality as well as any sense that there is a single, reliable narrative (137). The comic-book industry practise called *retcon* creates contradiction by accident.[32] The more extreme form of contradiction is *paradox*, which "offers a finite statement that only infinity can resolve" (141).

[32] The Revisionist comics later invert retcon, creating contradictions on purpose, usually in order to put retcon itself, as an industry practise, display. See 2.1: "Silver Age" and 3.2.a: "Denaturalising the Superhero."

Metafictional forms of infinite regress are paradoxical, including the somewhat common practise of depicting the creators within the text, which thus asks the question of who created whom. A moment of metafictional paradox occurs in Gaiman et al.'s *Sandman*, in which a single narratorial statement is both literally true and preposterously false in the same moment. Its truth bears out its falsity and its falsity bears out its truth.[33] Thus the only resolution, as Waugh suggests, is an infinite loop. In *objets trouvés*, which Waugh also calls *metafictional collage*, bits of other narratives appear in a given narrative and bits of that given narrative float freely within its own frame(s) (143), which reveals the textual construction as a patchwork, the product of a literary rag-bag, and the author not as vector of eternal verities, but as a voice-box that reproduces cleverly rearranged sound-bites. Another comic-book industry practise, the *multiverse*, creates something akin to metafictional collage by combining and recombining what were initially separate fictional universes, but ultimately incorporating them into one ostensibly consistent model of parallel narrative spaces.[34] *Intertextual overkill* is metafictional collage gone wild. In it, random sampling utterly destroys the coherence of the narrative structure (145), but still hints at an underlying structure (148). I expand on intertextual overkill in Chapter 4, in which I discuss how Revisionist metacomics play with the *multiverse* concept using a repeated motif of *fluid narrative spaces*, physical places in the fictional universe from which a theoretically infinite number of other fictional universes are accessible.[35]

Whereas Waugh's theory of metafiction offers an extremely wide span of possibilities, Hutcheon focuses on a particular form of it. *Historiographic metafiction*, which Hutcheon proposes as a mode of postmodern fiction and defines in *A Poetics of Postmodernism*, relies on the concept of *dedoxification*, which she explains in *The Politics of Postmodernism*, the sister-text to *Poetics*. She derives the term "dedoxify" from Roland Barthes' concept of the *doxa* from *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*, in which the doxa, as Hutcheon describes it, is "public opinion or the 'Voice of Nature' and consensus" (Hutcheon *Politics* 3). Hutcheon's metafiction has to first construct that which it then deconstructs (or dedoxifies). "Fiction and history are narratives distinguished by their frames [...], frames which historiographic metafiction first establishes and then crosses" (Hutcheon *Poetics* 109 – 110). "Such novels both install and then blur the line between fiction and history" (113). Historiographic metafiction is therefore always complicit in its critiques. Derrida explains the logical necessity of this in "Structure, Sign and Play," in the context of his poststructuralist reading of Lévi-Strauss' *The Raw and the Cooked*, specifically Lévi-Strauss' conundrum around the incest taboo and whether to categorise it as natural or cultural (357-358). Going by Derrida, Lévi-Strauss' lesson is to become the *bricoleur*, one who uses the methodological tools that are available, but remains mindful of how ideologically laden those tools always are. Simply put, "we cannot give up [...]

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[33] See 4.4.b: "Accepting Fluidity."
[34] See 2.1: "Silver Age."
[35] See 4.1: "Revisionist Fluidity."

complicity without also giving up the critique we are directing against this complicity" (Derrida 355). In *The Politics of Postmodernism*, Hutcheon uses almost the exact same words to describe the phenomenon she calls "a strange kind of critique, one bound up, too, with its own *complicity*" (4). Self-reflexive metafiction, going by Hutcheon, is always complicit in those modes, genres, art forms, ideologies, and institutions upon which it reflects because "it depends upon and draws its power from that which it contests" (Hutcheon *Poetics* 120). Parody and satire are prime examples of complicit critique, which explains why postmodern theorists are preoccupied with them (e.g., Hutcheon, Jameson, McHale, Waugh).

Hutcheon describes self-reflexive postmodernism as "self-conscious, self-contradictory, [and] self-undermining statement[s]" (1) that dedoxify their own discourses and therefore function as a bulwark against totalisation (37). She describes it quite positively, as full of possibility for political expression. However, she also asserts that it does not ignore its own complicity. The quotation above comes from a longer passage that makes this very point:

> it must be admitted from the start that this is a strange kind of critique, one bound up, too, with its own *complicity* with power and domination, one that acknowledges that it cannot escape implication in that which it nevertheless still wants to analyze and maybe even undermine. The ambiguities of this kind of position are translated into both the content and the form of postmodern art, which thus at once purveys and challenges ideology—but always self-consciously. (4)

Thus it is "not truly radical; nor is it truly oppositional. But this does not mean it has no critical clout" (Hutcheon *Poetics* 120). Indeed, postmodern metafiction is precisely that kind of metafiction that maintains constant awareness of its complicity so that it *can* mount its critique. We can, of course, apply Hutcheon's reasoning to metapictures and other forms of visual self-reflection, especially given that she draws heavily on architecture in *A Poetics of Postmodernism* and investigates a great deal of image/text art in *The Politics of Postmodernism*. She even mentions comics in particular, calling them a derivative art form—the "print equivalents of film" (128)—and asserting that they are "particularly interesting from a postmodern perspective" (128) because they have been "used and abused" in postmodern photography, both for their image-text work and their use of sequence (128).[36] Furthermore, her articulation of complicit critique and of metafiction's tendency to build up that which it then breaks down, describes quite accurately the ongoing Revisionist critique of the superhero. Above and beyond the inherent complicity of self-reflexivity, the metacomics I study are also all produced from within the industry that produces that which they attempt to reflect

[36] Hutcheon later takes up comics directly in her short papers on *Maus*, "Literature Meets History" and "Postmodern Provocation," making good on her assertion that comics hold complex representational possibilities, specifically within the postmodernist framework that she constructs in *Politics*.

upon. Chapter 2 describes two sets of comics that mount complicit critiques, one set so complicit that it legitimises the dominant genre of American comics (i.e., Silver-Age metacomics), and the other critical to the point of utterly rejecting the mainstream (i.e., Underground comix). Chapter 3 describes a set of critiques that, more in-line with Hutcheon's model, maintain an awareness of their complicity and use it to alternately condemn mainstream comics and rescue them from themselves.

While both Waugh and Hutcheon's models define metafiction by its self-referentiality, Currie's defines it by its position between fiction and theory. Indeed, his conception of metafiction quite quickly sets aside the idea that metafiction is self-conscious fiction and pursues, instead, a definition that grounds it historically in the development of literary theory. He contends that the dominant definition of it as self-conscious fiction is not tenable, for three not entirely convincing reasons. "First, the idea of self-consciousness is strangely inconsistent with most postmodern literary theory which would attribute neither selfhood nor consciousness to an author, let alone a work of fiction" (Currie 1). Currie does not expand on this point, neither explaining why postmodernist theory as a whole would overrule the concept of self-conscious fiction nor making clear where the author as auteur or Barthean author-God ends and the person who writes a novel might begin. Second, more persuasively, he posits a third-man problem. Logically, a self-conscious text would need to be conscious of its self-consciousness, which would require a second layer of self-consciousness, which would thus require a third layer to be conscious of the second, et cetera. Finally, there is a "gap between a relatively new term and the well-established literary tradition it describes" (1), which is to say that while the idea is new, the practise is not. Currie does not explain why, exactly, this should disqualify the concept. This rejection does not address self-referentiality and/or -reflexivity and he insists on a quite literal understanding of "self-consciousness" as a concept.

Nevertheless, he does clear a space for his argument that metafiction is, rather, "a borderline discourse, [...] a kind of writing which places itself on the border between fiction and criticism, and which takes that border as its subject" (Currie 2), which is an intriguing and useful notion. He traces metafiction historically from modernism and semiotics through poststructuralism, new historicism, and eventually postmodernism. This definition puts metafiction in a position of "central importance in the projects of literary modernity, postmodernity and theory which have taken this borderline as a primary source of energy" (2). Within criticism, this means that critical language must admit that it occupies some of the same territory as fiction, that it is not, and cannot be, outside that which it critiques. Furthermore, critical language shapes a critic's conceptions of his or her objects of study, so no neutral position is ever possible.

Currie traces this development back to Saussure's linguistic master-narrative, semiotics, and Derrida's subsequent *immanence* critique of it.

> Derrida refuses to write criticism as if it were simply outside of its literary object, and equally he refuses

> metalingual status to those discourses like Saussure's which, in order to be about language, seem to separate themselves from their object. (8)

Instead, he "operate[s] within [Saussure's] text, within his own terms" (9) in order to show how they are unstable, internally contradictory, or presume their own ends. Currie notes that this method eventually becomes *deconstruction* (10-11). Currie contends, then, that critical language since Derrida is inherently metatextual because it is ostensibly self-conscious of its position between critical theory and fiction (8). Although this description contradicts his assertion that self-consciousness is impossible, it is nevertheless a useful way of looking at metafiction, and thus metacomics. He also explains that the idea of criticism that refuses to stand outside that which it critiques, for lack of anywhere else to stand, is then taken up by new historicism (11-15) and postmodernism (15-18). Currie does not, however, locate metafiction only within theory, but within fiction as well—specifically the modernist and then postmodernist novel. He notes Tom Wolf's *The Bonfire of the Vanities,* which addresses the textual nature of journalism, and Hutcheon's historiographic metafiction. The former takes the form of metafiction and engages with theory, and the latter is a theory of metafiction. Currie's model of metafiction becomes particularly useful in my discussion of Moore and Williams' *Promethea* because that series performs critical and theoretical work in the form of a narrative comic book, and it does so so pedantically as to almost to become an essay in comic-book form.[37] The next subsection describes Mitchell's conception of the metapicture.

1.2.c: Metapictures

As I describe above,[38] Mitchell's *Picture Theory* is primarily concerned with picturing theory, and not just constructing a theory of pictures. Following this tack, his discussion of metapictures focuses on the idea of pictures that theorise and analyse themselves, pictures that in effect depict theory. He "want[s] to experiment with the notion that pictures might be capable of reflection on themselves, capable of providing a second-order discourse that tells us—or at least shows us—something about pictures" (38). In my terms, then, Mitchell starts with the idea of self-reflexive pictures and works backwards to discover the various techniques of self-referentiality that create that reflection. His aim is to "see if pictures provide their own metalanguage" (37-38). As he freely admits (38), a textual discussion would seem to be at odds with the idea of metapictures that show their theory of pictures instead of telling them, but this apparent contradiction in fact reflects his consistent position that text and image are always already bound up in one another. His chapter on the metapicture moves through five kinds of pictorial self-reference: *formal*, *generic*, *multistable*, *meta-metapictures*, and finally *talking pictures*. The first, second, and fourth type display the same basic principle but to different degrees, so I take them up first and then proceed to *multistable* and *talking* pictures.

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[37] See 4.3: "Magic."

[38] See 1.1.b: "Hybridity."

Mitchell's first type, which he calls the *formal* metapicture (56), is the most basic. It is metapictorial in a

> strict, formal sense [as] a picture about itself, a picture that refers to its own making, yet one that dissolves the boundary between inside and outside, first- and second-order representation, on which the metapictorial structure depends. (42)

Mitchell invokes, here, Barthes' notion of *myth* as a second-order sign. Myth has a connotative meaning that hitchhikes on a first-order sign, which carries a denotative meaning. Myths, second-order signs, thus create what Barthes calls "*depoliticized speech*" (143), representations that masquerade as natural rather than constructed. Metapictures reveal how myths signify things beyond their literal representation, which dissolves their boundaries and does the work of Barthes' mythologist, who denaturalises myths.[39] Mitchell asserts that the "principle use of the metapicture is, obviously, to explain what pictures are—to stage, as it were, the 'self-knowledge' of pictures" (57) and thus create "a referential circle or *mise en abîme*" (56) (i.e., mirrors reflecting mirrors). The metapicture is a lie that tells the truth because its statement is "I am a lie." Charles Hatfield, in the context of autobiographical alternative comics, describes this process as *ironic authentication* (125).[40] The second type of metapicture does effectively the same thing as the first, except that instead of aiming its commentary at itself, it directs commentary at another type of picture, and therefore Mitchell calls it a *generic* metapicture (56). Following this progression from a single picture outwards, the fourth type of metapicture reflects upon metapictures. It specifically examines and puts on display the manner in which metapictures function, and thus it is a *meta-metapicture*.

The third type of metapicture, the *multistable* image, is central to understanding the *analogue* hero, on which I spend a great deal of time in Chapters 2 and 3. Mitchell's description of this type of image leads to a discussion of Wittgenstein's analysis of the Duck-Rabbit, "one of the most famous multistable metapictures in modern psychology" (Mitchell 50) (fig. 1.7). Multistable images "do not refer to themselves [as in formal metapictures], or to a class of pictures [as in generic metapictures], but employ a single gestalt to shift from one reference to another" (48). The Duck-Rabbit is either a duck or a rabbit, depending on how a

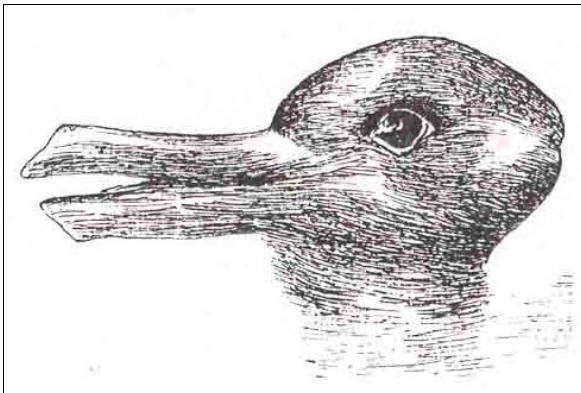

fig. 1.7: The Duck-Rabbit

[39] I discuss this idea at more length below; see 1.3.a: "Comics as Myths."

[40] See 2.2.a: "Tales That Drove Them Mad."

viewer looks at it (i.e., bill facing left or nose facing right, the eye serving double duty). However, Mitchell invokes Wittgenstein's observation that it is in fact neither duck nor rabbit. Mitchell explains: "Anyone who has spent hours looking [...] for the image will know that Wittgenstein is right, that the search is neither for a duck nor a rabbit, but for a curious hybrid that looks like nothing else but itself" (52 – 53). By the same token, Wittgenstein rejects the idea of an inner-decision to regard the Duck-Rabbit as either one or the other, instead arguing that language merely offers us little other choice but to describe it in those terms:

> This doesn't mean that he [Wittgenstein] replaces the model of the inner eye with 'inner speech' or writing. The point is rather to *flatten out* the field of inquiry, to replace the model of deep, inner causes explaining surface effects with a surface description of complex intersections between different codes and conventions. (Mitchell 52)

The Duck-Rabbit is vexing because it represents a clash of conventions, an instance of different pictorial messages appearing in the same space. Mitchell calls it a "mysterious object whose identity seems so mutable and yet so absolutely singular and definite" (48). It is simultaneously a stable image of a duck, a stable image of a rabbit, and a stable image of a duck-rabbit, and it therefore stably represents something that should not, going by realist pictorial convention, even exist to begin with.

Multistable images qualify as self-referential because "the ambiguity of their referentiality produces a kind of secondary effect of auto-reference to the drawing as drawing" (48). The physical shape of the Duck-Rabbit is impossible in three dimensions, but entirely possible in two, as is true of most optical illusions. In order to see the two faces of the Duck-Rabbit, the viewer is practically forced to consider the formal contrivance of pictures themselves, the manner in which pigments on a flat surface trick the eye into perceiving shape and depth. Their "reflexivity depends upon [their] insertion into a reflection on the nature of visual representation" (56). Multistable images are therefore teaching images. They demonstrate that viewers tend to treat pictures as if they depict a coherent and complete world even though those same viewers also know that, logically, those images are merely constructs of colour and line. Thus, the multistable image achieves Inge's *suspension of belief*.[41] It interrupts the habitual tendency to suspend one's disbelief in the constructed nature of the picture.

Mitchell notes that "the 'multistability effect,' [...] seems to be a recurrent feature of the metapicture" (74-75). In fact, multistability is one of the features of most meta-level representation. It creates a doubled sense that the representation itself is both part of an internal world, a narrative world in the cases I discuss, and simultaneously an artefact, a product of human effort built to be witnessed by humans. But then, as Mitchell points out, Wittgenstein argues that such duo-stable constructions are themselves recognisably not mono-stable; therefore, they are not one or the other, but both. They are multi-stable. Therefore, metafiction,

[41] See 1.2.a: "Suspension of Belief."

metacomics, and metapictures are often stable in at least three states at once, and potentially many more depending on what their narratives actually depict. They could easily create even more stable states or worlds within them, especially in fantastic narratives the likes of which this dissertation discusses.

Talking metapictures create the multistable effect not between semiotic orders of the picture, as the other subtypes of the metapicture do, but between image and text, which means that talking metapictures are also image-text constructions because they do not hide the relationship between image and text but instead address it directly. Mitchell's main example of the talking metapicture, the one in which he is clearly the most interested, is Magritte's *Treason of Images*, which McCloud invokes as part of his theory of *closure.*[42] Mitchell employs Michel Foucault's analysis of *Treason* to complicate McCloud's interpretation, the standard analysis of Magritte's painting. Mitchell posits a dialogue. One voice argues for the standard interpretation: "The statement 'this is not a pipe,' is just literally true: if there is a contest here between the statement and the image, it is clear that discourse has the final say" (66). A second voice argues the opposite:

> And yet, what discourse is it that can only use language literally? As Foucault notes [in *The Order of Things*], there also is 'a convention of language,' the custom we have of talking about the images of things as if they were the things themselves. This custom makes the legend 'this is not a pipe' literally true, but figuratively false. (66)

Therefore, *Treason* shows "what cannot be pictured or made readable, the fissure in representation itself, the bands, layers, and fault-lines of discourse, the blank space between the text and the image" (69).

However, Foucault locates a similar blank space in books with labelled illustrations, which contain a "small space running above the words and below the drawings" (Foucault in Mitchell 69). This space sounds remarkably similar to McCloud's characterisation of the gutter as the location of closure; indeed closure represents a similar function. Where closure creates a narrative or conceptual connection between two images, Foucault's blank space between label and illustration coordinates image and text to signal that they ostensibly refer to the same concept, two signifiers with the same signified. *Treason*'s direct contradiction between word and image dramatically displays the separation that that blank space represents, the sundering of words and pictures (i.e., the image/text), but also the space of articulation, to use Groensteen's terms, between image and text that the gutter represents in comics (i.e., the imagetext). Therefore, *Treason* is a multistable image. Like the Duck-Rabbit it is not just either/or, but also both. Image/text combined with imagetext creates image-text, a self-conscious depiction of the relationship between image and text. Revisionist comics, which are after all published within the mainstream, do not tend to challenge very basic formal conventions in the way that Mitchell and Foucault discuss, but they do employ an extremely common device called the *analogue*

[42] See 1.1.a: "Sequence."

which creates multistability in characters. In Chapter 2 I define the analogue and in that chapter, as well as Chapter 3, I discuss Revisionist applications of it.[43]

1.2.d: Metacomics

There have been only a handful of critical engagements with metacomics as a distinct form: Thomas Inge's aforementioned "Form and Function in Metacomics" (1991) and *Anything Can Happen in a Comic Strip* (1995), Michael Dunne's *Metapop* (1992), Donald Palumbo's "Metafiction in Comics" (1997), and finally Matthew T. Jones' "Reflexivity in Comic Art" (2005). Inge's *Anything Can Happen* and Palumbo's "Metafiction in Comics" both consist mostly of close analyses of comic books and strips but without offering a broader methodological and/or theoretical conclusion. Dunne's *Metapop* comes closer to such a construction, and Inge's "Form and Function" comes closer still. The most thorough and critically engaged of these texts, however, is also the most recent, Jones' "Reflexivity," which provides an overview of various metacomic techniques, as Inge's paper does, but also makes clear that these techniques do not comprise a closed field. This subsection therefore focuses primarily on Jones' paper and highlights elements of the other texts when they fill in gaps in Jones' schema and/or provide parallel descriptions of similar metacomic practises. I begin with brief summary of Dunne, Palumbo, and Inge's texts and then proceed to describe Jones' paper in detail.

Palumbo catalogues self-referential gestures, and occasionally self-reflexive ones, in David Byrne's *The Sensational She-Hulk*, a humour comic that is set in the Marvel universe and plays with the conventions of the comic-book page, the American comic-book industry, and the superhero genre. Palumbo delights in Byrne's ingenuity, wit, and genre-themed in-jokes. The protagonist's sidekick, Weezi, explains that superhero characters age only when they are not currently starring in a comic book (Palumbo 319, *Sensational* 4.13:2), a joke that cheekily exposes the neverwhen of American comics.[44] The vivaciously-drawn heroine also reveals that she can never be denuded in mid-fight because her undergarments are protected by the Comics Code (Palumbo 315, *Sensational* 4.27:3-4), which similarly exposes the impractical requirements of American comic-book censorship. The paper does not, however, draw any larger conclusions about metacomics, Marvel's use of self-referentiality as a marketing gesture, or Byrne's oeuvre.

Metapop contains a series of chapters that analyse self-referentiality in film, television, popular music, music videos, and finally comic strips. It attempts to find a middle ground between the by-then familiar poles of cultural criticism: denigration of popular culture in comparison to "high" culture on the one hand, and a "left melancholy" (Tar in Dunne 188) that seeks to rescue the masses from

[43] See 2.1: "Silver Age"; 3.1: "Dysfunctional Realities"; and 3.2: "Postmodern Silver Age."
[44] See 2.1.a: "Crises."

the control of corporate/consumer culture on the other.[45] Dunne attempts to chart a middle course between these options:

> Instead of entertaining utopian or dystopian fantasies about American culture, the goal of contemporary criticism should be an accurate description of the conditions actually constituting the cultural state that I earlier defined as 'what we are all in together.' (Dunne 192)

This assertion is quite appropriate, as far as it goes, but Dunne seems unwilling to engage with those contemporary critical theories that discuss what constitutes culture even when he attempts to debunk them, as he does with Umberto Eco's *Travels in Hyperreality* (Dunne 186) and Jean Baudrillard's "Simulacra and Simulations" (Dunne 185-187). He also stops well short of allowing for intervention or activism as part of cultural criticism, even though his own book has a strong political component.

Metapop's argument is that self-reference in American popular entertainment requires artists who insert insider references into their work—generic, formal, and industrial—but on the assumption that their audiences are informed enough to understand those references, and those references will remind that audience of the presence of the aforementioned artists, whom Dunne consistently treats like *auteurs*, singular creators in possession of rare talent. Commenting on a self-referential joke in *Bloom County*, Dunne asserts "[s]urely there were readers who felt an increased sense of how clever Breathed is" (169). Unfortunately, he never quite explains how self-reference "surely" leads to authorial awareness. It can, of course, but Dunne implies that it always does. His grander point, however, is that American popular culture is not a top-down propaganda machine and its audiences are perfectly capable of telling the difference between fantasy and reality, so critiques like those offered by Eco and Baudrillard are merely a form of snobbery. Dunne's book casts these critiques of popular culture in terms so simplistic that its attempt to refute them is never quite convincing. In effect, Dunne offers a false dilemma: either the American public is fully conscious of how constructed its entertainment is or it is totally unaware of that construction. He does not discuss a compromise between, or combination of, the two.

Inge's paper contains the earliest use of the word "metacomics" and derives its list of metacomic techniques from a sample of newspaper strips from between 1988 and 1991. He does not examine comic books or even note their absence in this paper, but he does reference Eisner's *The Spirit* comic books in *Anything Can Happen in a Comic Strip.* "Form and Function" describes three categories of self-referentiality in comics: *crossover*, in which characters from one strip visit another[46]; "references to other comic strips, either implicitly or explicitly"; and formal play, in which comics "use as a source of humor the

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[45] Histories of cultural studies consistently note these positions as part of the development of the field. See John Storey's *Cultural Studies and the Study of Popular Culture* (4, 132) or Chandra Mukerji and Michael Schudson's *Rethinking Popular Culture* (37-38), for example.

technical conventions of the comic strip" (6). Referencing other comic strips is a form of allusion and/or intertextual gesture, and crossover is effectively one kind of reference to other comic strips. Humour derived from technical conventions is formal play, similar to Mitchell's first type of metapicture.[47] Inge's paper is somewhat limited in scope because it is a first step towards an organised methodological approach to metacomics. His *Anything Can Happen in a Comic Book* contains many interesting discussions of individual comics, mostly strips and one book (Eisner's *The Spirit*), between the 1940s and the 1990s, but it does not offer any theoretical backing.

Neither Palumbo's paper nor Dunne's book are particularly applicable to my study, given their low engagement with either politics or critical theory. Inge and Jones' papers are more applicable because they lay out explicit descriptions of metacomic techniques. Both locate their discussions in the context of other formal theories of self-reference in prose, painting, and film (Jones 270, Inge 1), but they also both speak to an implied void in comics scholarship, as if no such field existed in either 1991 or 2005. That Jones does not cite Inge is particularly perplexing, especially given how thoroughly researched his paper is. However, they do identify and describe many of the same metacomic practises, all of which occur in Revisionist comics. Indeed, Jones' paper encompasses the techniques that Inge describes. Thus the two papers corroborate each other's findings without realising it.

Jones argues that metacomic techniques

> contextualize the narrative act and experience an approximation of intimacy or closeness by making clear the link between the comic text and the outside world in which it was born, and of which it is a part. (284)

Thus self-referentiality does not push the audience away from a comic book by ruining the sense of immersion in its diegesis. Instead, self-referentiality draws the audience in by creating a relationship between that audience and the creators and/or the comic book itself. Jones draws many of his examples from erotica, a genre of comics designed to invoke arousal, and in so doing he highlights the intimacy that he cites, both in the sense of sexual contact and mental connection, a double meaning that harkens back to the euphemism of "knowing" as a sexual act. Jones does not flesh out this connection between self-reflexivity and erotica, but he does briefly discuss the film-studies conception of the *gaze*. He cites James K. Beggan's "Reflexivity in the Pornographic Films of Candida Royalle" to explain that the gaze is all-important in pornography and therefore self-awareness of that gaze is a particularly potent metacomic technique (Jones 279). He also specifically cites instances in which comics creators depict themselves taking part in erotic situations, for example Giovanna Casotto's *Bitch in Heat* and Luca Tarlazzi's *Vixxxen: The Adventures of Selen* (Jones 274-275), and those in which

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[46] The use, and arguably over-use, of crossovers eventually leads to the idea of separate comic-book *universes* and eventually *multiverses* in mainstream American comics. I describe this development in detail in 2.1.a: "Crises."

[47] See 1.2.c: "Metapictures."

the comic book instructs the audience on how comics can achieve an erotic effect, as in Milo Minara's *Die Irae: The African Adventures of Giuseppe Berg* (Jones 277). In both cases, the objects of visual/narrative sexual stimulation—either sexualised women or men with whom the implicitly male audience is expected to identify—gaze back, implying that those characters know about, and enjoy, the audience's gaze. Jones thus implicitly argues that self-reflexive comics create closeness, intimacy, and even simulated sexual contact, rather than refuting immersion in a story or situation.

Jones discusses five metacomic practises, "authorial awareness, demystification, reader awareness, intertextuality, and intermedia reflexivity" (271), but characterises them as "not strict categories with firm boundaries" but rather "an assortment of techniques" (284). This differentiation is important because it asserts that these different kinds of metacomic gestures not only overlap, but bleed into each other, and even occur simultaneously, within the very same construction on the page. *Authorial awareness* is the detectable presence of the creator(s) of a comic book, and this, according to Jones, highlights not the creator as singular auteur who seemingly produces comics without effort and is the ultimate authority on them, but instead the labour that goes into creating comics. The most obvious instance of this practise is when the creator(s) appear in the actual comic books, as in *Promethea*, in which both Moore and Williams are depicted in the act of writing/drawing that same issue of *Promethea* (30.23:3, 30.23:5). Metacomics also often *demystify* this creative labour, "revealing the mechanisms of production" (Jones 276), by which Jones means both the technological process of physically creating comics as well as the formal craft of drawing/writing them. Demystifying the dominant genres of American comics is the primary Revisionist preoccupation, which of course leads to denaturalising those genres as well. Demystification also includes formal self-referentiality, which Inge describes as "reflect[ing] on and us[ing] as a source of humour the technical conventions of the comic strip" (6). Moore and Williams' *Promethea* explicitly shifts between artistic styles, from coloured line drawings, to painted panels, collages, and even photonovella effects. These formal shifts signal different states of perception within the narrative.

Reader awareness "call[s] attention to the reader's complicity in suspending disbelief for the sake of narrative coherence" (279). In Inge's model, calling attention to the habitual act of suspending one's disbelief constitutes the suspension of belief.[48] Reader awareness for Jones includes what he calls *automontage*, the freedom of the comics viewer to "read" the multiframe out of order. Reader awareness leads to automontage because once the reader is aware of herself as an agent in the reading process, she can then consciously assert the freedom to read as she pleases, and not obey the left-to-right, top-to-bottom model that most readers unconsciously follow. Automontage is the corollary of Groensteen's general arthrology in which the reader detects a formal connection between distant panels which are inserted deliberately by the creator(s).

[48] See Chapter 1: "Theory."

Jones argues that art "which is intertextual is [...] reflexive as well, because [...] the multiple texts [...] call attention to one another as texts" (281). This practise includes Inge's first two metacomic techniques: crossovers, in which characters guest-star in each other's comics, and "references to other comic strips, either implicitly or explicitly" (Inge 5). Jones borrows the concept of *intermedia reflexivity* from Peter Szczepanik's "Intermediality and (Inter)media Reflexivity in Contemporary Cinema." In this kind of intertextuality, "the medium of representation is itself [often] represented through another medium, thus calling attention to the particular features of each medium" (283). Frank Miller's *The Dark Knight Returns*, for example, almost continuously presents panels that look like, and in fact appear literally as, television screens, and the figures depicted in those screens offer a running commentary on the events of the series. Chapter 2 discusses the industry practise of the crossover, which then leads to shared universes and eventually *multiverses*, in mainstream American comics,[49] and Chapter 4 examines a Revisionist motif, the universal crossover point, as a kind of radical metafiction, going by Waugh's model.[50]

Finally, in addition to Jones' list, Dunn's *Metapop* highlights one more element of self-referentiality, which Pustz also refers to in *Comic Book Culture*: audience knowledge (Pustz 112, 114-115, 148, etc.). As opposed to informing the audience about the nature of the art form, as Mitchell's conception of formal metapictures implies and Jones' discussion of demystification asserts, Dunne points out that the audience must already know the language of comic strips and the business of popular entertainment, in order for the self-referential jokes to be funny. Discussing Berkley Breathed's *Bloom County*, Dunne asserts: "The range of reference is so broad in these strips that we must assume Breathed's deep immersion in the whole American comic strip milieu, but Breathed makes the same assumptions about his readers" (175). Similarly, the analogue hero, which I discuss in Chapter 2, is a multistable figure, going by Mitchell's conception, but also requires an extremely well-informed audience to achieve that multistability because it relies on recognition and implicit comparison with an original character.[51]

1.3: Naturalisation/Denaturalisation

Metacomics do not necessarily lead to any particular political or ideological assertions, but by virtue of the suspension of belief, they are prone towards denaturalisation.[52] This section describes two critiques of naturalisation, which, as such, serve as tools of denaturalisation as well. I employ Barthes' notion of *semiotic myth* as a model for naturalisation in general, the process of

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[49] See 2.1.a: "Crises."

[50] See 4.1: "Revisionist Fluidity."

[51] See 2.1.b: "Squadron Supreme."

[52] Chapter 2 includes a critique of the Marvel Comics' *Squadron Supreme* cycle, which uses a constant stream of self-referential gestures—primarily analogue heroes—to legitimise and reify the Silver-Age superhero and its attendant conservative politics. Self-reflection does not necessarily lead to denaturalisation. Indeed, it can be used to further naturalise a genre and the ideology that underlies it.

masquerading that which is culturally- and historically-contingent as eternal or universal. Hall's concept of *articulation* serves as a model for the connection and communication between art and audience.

1.3.a: Comics as Myths

Roland Barthes' *Mythologies* is a foundational work of social criticism that combines Marxist critique with semiological analysis. Barthes "treat[s] 'collective representations' as sign-systems" in order to "unmask[...] them and account *in detail* for the mystification which transforms petit-bourgeois culture into a universal nature" (9). This detail he speaks of is not just the individual acts of myth-making that he detects in everyday culture, although he examines those too, but also the mechanics of the process, an analytical effort that bears a great deal of resemblance to a linguist's task of determining the grammar and vocabulary of a new language. Semiology did start, historically, as a linguistic methodology, so that resemblance comes as no surprise. The Marxist side of the methodology leads Barthes to pay special attention to a particular process by which those values and norms that are specific to, and which benefit, the bourgeois are coded as eternal, universal, and natural, and subsequently disseminated into popular culture in many and various forms. *Mythologies* is therefore built upon the foundation of exposing a naturalising process, but as Currie points out with regard to Derrida, Barthes too is quite aware that his theory, Marxist semiology, colours his conclusions. He "cannot countenance the traditional belief which postulates a natural dichotomy between the objectivity of the scientist and the subjectivity of the writer" (12). We all, according to *Mythologies*, live in myth all the time, so pretending that he does not would be at best disingenuous, and as he says, "the reader will easily see where I stand" (12), so while *Mythologies* does constitute its own ideological filter, it at least aspires to not self-naturalise, to speak directly and in unabashedly political terms. Although this dissertation does not subscribe to Marxism or semiotics without reservation, Barthes' myths nevertheless have a great deal of applicable utility in American comics because the superhero genre has traditionally used strategies that very much resemble them.

The bulk of *Mythologies* contains short analyses of "topics suggested by current events" (11) in 1954 through 1956, most of which are items in contemporary French popular culture, such as professional wrestling, detergent boxes, and striptease acts, all of which, the text contends, propagate "*depoliticized speech*" (143), are statements that support and perpetuate capitalist consumer culture, but which masquerade as statements of fact that are ostensibly so self-evident that denying them would make a person look stupid, immoral, or both. There is a complex semiotic explanation for how myths function, which I rehearse here only briefly because my argument is not at base semiotic. Myths are "*a second-order semiological system*" (114); signs are made of a signifier (arbitrary word or image) and a signified (thing/concept to which the signifier refers), but myths are instead made of a sign (complete with signifier and signified) and a new signified. A sign that is already invested with meaning then refers to a new thing or concept, which itself already has meaning. Thus, myths are packed with

twice as much ideological significance as we expect. They are like a semiotic Trojan horse that "transforms history into nature" (129). They naturalise an idea born of history, a constructed concept from a particular time and place, and represent it as universal, eternal, and self-evident. Myths assert ideological concepts by presenting themselves as if they were naturally true. They are "not read as a motive but as a reason" (129); alternatively, they are "read as a factual system, whereas [they are] but a semiological system" (131). Alternatively, myths appear to be "*common sense,*" (154) or take the form of "*tautology*" (152), both of which rely on the listener having a pre-existing, socialised belief in whatever the myth claims. The myth then reminds the listener of that belief. For example, "a man's gotta do what a man's gotta do" reminds us of what our patriarchal culture has already decided that "a man's gotta do." There is no content, just an assertion of a pre-existing social belief, but the myth is presented as a hard fact. Myths are an extremely simple, almost frictionless, application of circular reasoning. This process is Barthes' version of naturalisation.

Barthes acknowledges that the avant-garde, for example, "revolts against" (139) myths but "these revolts are socially limited" (139). The avant-garde, he argues, comes from within the bourgeoisie, from artists and intellectuals, and is aimed back at the bourgeoisie, what Bourdieu describes in *The Field of Cultural Production* as producers producing for other producers (39). The general public has entirely different forms of entertainment and edification, so the avant-garde's message never reaches the audience that would supposedly benefit from it. Revolt happens but in a limited context; thus, it is tolerated as essentially harmless. It might even, going by Bourdieu once again, be encouraged if it heaps praise and status onto those who patronise it: the bourgeoisie themselves (40). Elements of *Mythologies* resemble Antonio Gramsci's conception of *hegemony*, which I discuss briefly below.[53] This resemblance is no accident, of course, since both theories derive from, and attempt to problematise, Marxist notions of class struggle and what has come to be known as *cultural capital*. *Mythologies* does, however, maintain a distinctly oppositional attitude towards "the essential enemy (the bourgeois norm)" (9). This is not to imply that Gramsci, or for that matter Bourdieu, was not also opposed to that same norm, but merely to point out that the primary goal of *Mythologies* is to provide a system by which one can perceive how myths function and unveil them, which should also demystify them at a stroke. However, the mythic function is so simple that explaining its fallacious reasoning can be surprisingly difficult. The mythologist is left in the position of proving a negative, demonstrating that the myth does not, in fact, support its own implied claims, claims to which people are probably already attuned. Myths assert themselves with equal force every time they appear, but the mythologist must demystify them every time, all over again. Thus, while it is possible to demystify the "false Nature" (156) of myth, it is extremely difficult to do so in practise, on a mass scale, or with any lasting effect.

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[53] See 1.3.b: "Comics as Articulations."

The most useful element of *Mythologies* for my purposes is the idea of a form of speech that employs the rhetorical strategy of representing itself as apolitical and ahistorical while delivering a political message, and doing so using pre-existing, politically loaded terms that pretend to be neutral terms. *Mythologies* offers an extremely effective way to identify political speech in popular culture, which routinely uses that very strategy. The vast majority of mainstream American comics are action/adventure narratives, superhero stories, and that genre has to account for and often implicitly legitimise the heroes' use of grievous bodily harm as a method of problem-solving. I have elsewhere written about a recurring phenomenon in superhero comics in which a villain provides a long, complex, usually quite logical explanation for his or her behaviour, [54] only to be countered by a hero who provides little if any explanation, but whose act of violence is effectively a justification for itself. [55] This conventional sequence of events denigrates meaningful discussion of morality in favour of a mythic construction. Similarly, the colour-coded costumes and stylised emblems worn by superhero characters function as visual myths, having been loaded with other first-order signs, such as truth, justice, and the American way, or the notion that criminals are a cowardly and superstitious lot. Chapter 2 investigates the Squadron Supreme, an attempt to demythologise the superhero that ends up legitimising it through mythological means, and Chapter 3 discusses several series that I argue are far more successful at critiquing the superhero.

1.3.b: Comics as Articulations

Stuart Hall is one of the most famous thinkers to have emerged from the Birmingham School, along with Raymond Williams, Paddy Whannel, Dick Hebdige, and Tony Bennett, just to name a few. The Birmingham School popularised the concept of *cultural studies* and established a blue print for it as a field. Hall is associated with *articulation* as a model of cultural interaction. Tony Bennett and Janet Woollacott's concept of *inter-textuality* models the relationship of text and audience in parallel terms. Hall's sense of articulation arises, partly, out of the Birmingham School's interest in Antonio Gramsci's interpretation of Marxist class struggle as *hegemony*. Gramsci argues that instead of a binary struggle between opposing forces, one of which could potentially win—either the labour class or the capitalist class—culture is, to quote Tony Bennett, "a force field of relations shaped, precisely by [...] contradictory pressures and tendencies" (Bennett "Turn" 94), including class struggle, but also frictions between "different regions of culture [...] (class, race, gender)" (97). That list goes on, of course. Thus culture forms "less in the *domination* of the [labour class] by the [capitalist class] than in the struggle for *hegemony* – that is, for moral, cultural, intellectual, and thereby, political leadership over the whole of society" (95). Gramsci himself calls this a "combination of force and consent" which results in "compromise equilibrium" (Gramsci 80-81), the result of which, Bennett explains, is that

[54] Brad Bird's *The Incredibles*, which contains a few structurally self-reflexive elements, refers to this generic act as "monologuing."

[55] "Villainous Soliloquy: Critical Rhetoric in *Lex Luthor: Man of Steel.*" Presented at the Canadian Association of Cultural Studies (CACS) Annual Conference 2005.

"'bourgeois culture' ceases to be purely or entirely bourgeois. It becomes, instead, a mobile combination of cultural and ideological elements [...] but only provisionally and for the duration of a specific historical conjuncture" (Bennett "Turn" 95), and thus "the political and ideological articulations of cultural practises are *movable*" (96). In Gramsci's own words, "Every relationship of 'hegemony' is necessarily an educational relationship" (Gramsci 87) because each group constantly learns about and adapts to the other, either the dominant groups incorporating elements of the subordinate groups in order to maintain consent, or the subordinate groups learning how to survive under the control of the dominant groups. This hegemonic adaptation is not, of course, conceived of as fair or equitable. The dominant groups still dominate, but there is room for mobility, for different groups to rise and fall, and for multiple groups to be dominant and subordinate at any given moment. In addition to simply making more intuitive sense, the hegemonic model also directs critics to think of how their specific area of focus—such as race, class, gender, nationality, religion, sexual orientation, intellectual elitism, or physical disability—interacts with all the others, how they layer onto one another, how poverty lines tend to fall along race lines, for example, or how belonging to multiple oppressed groups results in being pushed further and further into the periphery of society.

Articulation, then, is Hall's model of how all of these groups interact. In *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture*, David Storey explains that articulation is "employed in its double sense to mean both to express and to make a temporary connection" (Story *Cultural Theory* 8). In "On Postmodernism and Articulation," Hall explains that in articulation:

> two parts are connected to each other, but through a specific linkage, that can be broken. An articulation is thus the form of the connection that *can* make a unity of two different elements, under certain conditions. It is a linkage which is not necessary, determined, absolute and essential for all time. (Hall "On Postmodernism" 53)

Acknowledging that social and ideological linkages are not necessarily timeless or universal leads to questioning where they do come from and it denaturalises the idea of "ideology." No longer is it necessarily natural or the result of destiny (i.e., a teleological construction), nor can we assume that it is the result of pure reason or practicality. Ideologies, plural, become nothing more than bundles of ideas. This kind of inquiry leads to an analysis of "how ideological elements come, under certain conditions, to cohere together within a discourse, and a way of asking how they do or do not become articulated, at specific conjectures, to certain political subjects" (53). Why and how certain ideas can cohere together in groups is uncertain. Hall recommends that, to answer these kinds of questions,

> we need to think the contingent, the non-necessary, connection between different practises – between ideology and social forces, and between different elements within

> ideology, and between different social groups composing a social movement, etc. (53)

Articulation, then, is also how social groups form and connect through discourses of various kinds, but with the same proviso as with ideology. Social groups, whole cultures, are not necessarily teleological, rational, or eternal. Sometimes they are logical, but they are often distinctly illogical and incoherent, and yet they still function. Determining the articulation or ideology of a social group thus requires contextual knowledge—of class, of ethnicity, of history, of local culture, etc.—because those are more likely to produce a practical answer to the inquiry than a fruitless search for coherent logic.

By corollary, then, articulation is also what happens between texts and their observers. Expression, the communication of ideas, can happen only when an audience encounters a text and enters into a relationship with it. This process involves a negotiation between text and audience. John Storey's *Cultural Studies and the Study of Popular Culture* contends that a text is "not the issuing source of meaning, but a site where the articulation of meaning – variable meaning(s) – can be made" (Storey *Cultural Studies* 4). If hegemony is struggle on a cultural scale, then articulation is, among other things, struggle on a discursive scale. Instead of texts, then, we could call them *articulations,* in the noun form. This shift in terminology would imply that there is no speech in the text before it connects to (i.e., articulates with) the reader, listener, or in the case of visual narrative, the viewer. Thus, two things follow. First, articulations change their meaning depending on the audience's knowledge and cultural/historical context; second, articulations can catalyse multiple meanings for multiple audiences (or indeed, audience members) because those audiences/audience members bring to the "texts" (here understood as articulations) their many and varied perspectives and knowledge bases. The articulation(s) between them can also make connections with other texts, both by virtue of references within the text and the audience's knowledge of those other texts (i.e., the connections that audiences might spontaneously make to secondary texts, but which are not explicitly referenced in the primary text itself). These other "texts" can include items such as literature and entertainment, social codes and morals, or master narratives.

Tony Bennett and Janet Woollacott's *Bond and Beyond* calls the totality of all these connections—text and audience, primary and secondary texts, audience and culture—an *inter-text:*

> [W]hereas Kristeva's concept of intertextuality refers to the system of references to other texts which can be discerned with the internal composition of a specific individual text, we intend the concept of inter-textuality to refer to the social organisation of the relations between texts within specific conditions of reading. (Bennett *Bond* 44)

Articulation and inter-text lead me to conclude that popular entertainment is one of the major sites where the audience meets a text and the two make meaning. Articulations do not simply deliver a message that the audience either understands

or fails to understand, nor are they Rorschach tests, onto which the audience can project anything it wants. They signify a negotiation between text and audience. The text is usually, but not universally, a stable entity, and so the responsible literary critic must take into account both the general character of an audience—we cannot realistically know every member of the audience and attempting to do so would be impractical and not particularly useful—and the inter-texts that surround both the audience and the primary text.

My engagement with the inter-text of mainstream American comics is primarily through the use of terms invented within that subculture, terms that describe the techniques and tropes of American comics as experienced by their creators and audience, including words like *crossover* (an entertainment industry term that is not exclusive to comics), *reboot/retcon*, *multiverse*, and the fan-constructed and industry-supported periodisation of superhero comics into ages (*Golden*, *Silver*, *Modern*, *Dark*, *Revisionist,* etc.). These terms are all ideologically loaded, of course. They are specific to one subculture and they are historically articulated within the whims of American comic-book publishing. As long as I use them with that context in mind, however, they are not necessarily any more dangerous than similarly loaded terms like "the long eighteenth century" or "postmodernism." Rather than throw out all of this useful language, then, I can not only derive a great deal of utility out of it but also gain important insight into the priorities and prejudices of the American comic-book subculture itself.

1.4: Conclusion

This chapter has laid out the various ways of looking at my primary material that the subsequent chapters of this dissertation then employ. Formally, comics are both *sequential* and *hybrid*. Both the spatial and semiotic theoretical models (i.e., closure and arthrology) can explain their narrativising function. As metacomics, they employ *self-referentiality*, which engenders *suspension of belief*, and depending on their content, they can also achieve *self-reflection* through *formal* and *radical frame-breaks* from their own dominant genres and/or industry practises, as well as modelling history and historiography through metafiction (i.e., *historiographic metafiction*). In doing so, they often constitute a *border discourse* between theory and fiction. They can also display *formal metapictures*, but the comics in Chapters 2 and 3 primarily employ the character equivalent of *multistable images* through the *analogue* hero. Comics have a few self-referential techniques that are specific to the art form as produced in the American mainstream, specifically a complex network of gestures towards the creators, the audience, and other comics, as well as the ability to depict other media and art forms within the pages of the comic books themselves. Finally, metacomics have a strong tendency towards *denaturalisation,* especially given the highly naturalised genres in mainstream American comics. Barthes offers a model of naturalisation through semiotic *myths,* which *naturalise* the values of the bourgeois through objects of popular entertainment or consumption. Hall's *articulation* models the relationship between culture and its time and place in

terms of both communication and connection, and thus articulation can equally apply to the relationship between a reader/viewer and a comic book.

I freely mix formalist and cultural theories; indeed my theories of the meta- almost all engage with culture to a degree, because I cannot understand how one could study one without the other. The form of a given comic book is always a product of cultural factors, like the historical development of styles and genres, but also the industrial practises that dominate comic-book publishing in America. By the same token, the community of readers/viewers of comics conglomerates around a distinctly formal artefact, thus no study of that community can be complete without reference to the comics themselves. This dissertation is primarily a formal literary analysis, but its focus on metacomic techniques requires that it remain mindful of the awareness of the audience, of the comic-book fan's knowledge of genre, style, convention, form, and the history of comic books themselves. This chapter's ratio of formal to cultural theory mirrors the rest of the argument: oriented towards the formal but mindful of the cultural.

Chapter 2: History

"This is an IMAGINARY STORY... aren't they all?"

-from *Whatever Happened to the Man of Tomorrow?*
(Alan Moore et al.)

This chapter analyses two cycles of metacomics in the mainstream and performs a survey of metacomics in the underground. It demonstrates that the Revisionist comics creators did not invent metacomics. Instead, in the sixties and seventies, Silver-Age (SA) style comics and Underground comix [56] employed self-referential and self-reflexive devices that, in essence, taught the American comic-book audience how to read/view metacomics; thus by the eighties, Revisionist comics had an audience that was already accustomed to self-reflexivity. The SA and the Underground styles are the result of an attempt to appeal to a new market that demanded more realism from their comics/comix. In response to these demands, the SA and the Underground provided a new kind of verisimilitude, specifically in Tzvetan Todorov's sense of the word: a convincing sense of "reality" that does not necessarily resemble what is commonly perceived as *reality,* but is instead part of a set of familiar generic conventions. I expand on Todorov's model below. The SA and the Underground built their new verisimilitude out of various metacomic techniques (e.g., self-reference, allusion and intertextuality, ironic authentication, biography, parody/analogue characters, etc.). The Silver-Age superhero dominated the mainstream during this period, and those comics tend to arrive at metacomic devices accidentally, but their attempts at realism fall flat in the face of their fantastic content, and so they turn to self-referential and self-reflexive devices. The comix, as a group, tend to employ metacomic devices to parody the mainstream and/or as part of a confessional or autobiographical mode.

Todorov explains his concept of verisimilitude in *The Poetics of Prose*; it is almost the exact opposite of the common sense of the word:

> we speak of a work's verisimilitude insofar as the work tries to convince us it conforms to reality and not to its own laws. In other words, verisimilitude is the mask which is assumed by the laws of the text and which we are meant to take for a relation to reality. (Todorov 83)

He extrapolates this definition from the "most naive sense" of verisimilitude, which refers to "consisten[cy] with reality," and therefore "[c]ertain actions, certain attitudes are said to lack verisimilitude when they seem unable to occur in reality" (Todorov 82). The corollary concept, he argues, is that believability does not derive from resemblance to reality, but instead from conforming to the "particular rules" (82) and even "laws" (80, 87) of a given textual or discursive context. Verisimilitude is, then, "a relation not with reality [...] but with what most people believe to be reality—in other words, with public opinion" (82). He employs the courtroom as a representative example, in which verisimilitude in

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[56] The Underground called their work "comix" to differentiate them from mainstream "comics."

effect refers not to the objective accuracy of witness testimony and legal argument, but to the rhetorical power of testimony and argument. "To win at trial, it is more important to speak well than to have behaved well" (80).[57] The courtroom requires a verisimilitude in which witness testimony compels the judge and/or jury, not necessarily one in which that testimony most accurately represents what actually happened. Every context has its own expectations of verisimilitude which a reader, listener, or audience member will more likely regard as resembling reality, but which in fact only conform to a set of discursive or formal laws long ago established for that context; thus, literary genres are a powerful and familiar kind of verisimilitude and "there are as many verisimilitudes as there are genres" (83). What seems verisimilar in one genre might not in another.

Todorov uses a second example, the murder mystery, as an exception that proves the rule. Murder mysteries, he argues, must construct an "*antiverisimilitude*" (85) in which the "guilty man in a murder mystery is the man who does not seem guilty" (85). Murder mysteries challenge readers with an enjoyably difficult puzzle; therefore, in the generically ideal mystery, the reader solves the puzzle just a few moments before the text reveals the solution. This scenario maximises the suspense, preserving the mystery as long as possible, but also rewards the reader for having solved it. This generic requirement is antithetical to the police procedural, for example, in which the perpetrator of a murder is usually the suspect that is the most likely. Indeed, one of the major differences between the mystery and the police procedural is that foregrounded element of mystery and the presence of that mystery leads to what Todorov calls antiverisimilitude. Therefore, applying logic or analysing evidence are the least efficient ways to discover the murderer in a mystery: "it is not difficult to discover the killer [...] we need merely follow *the verisimilitude of the text* and not the truth of the world evoked" (86). By this reasoning, Todorov argues, escaping verisimilitude is impossible. "By contesting verisimilitude, the murder-mystery writer settles into a verisimilitude on another level, but one no less powerful" (Todorov 87-88). He thus makes the familiar argument that there is no "outside" of ideology (or culture, or politics, or the text, or etc.). To evaluate the accuracy of a verisimilitude would require a second verisimilitude to speak about the first one, and then a third one to speak about the second, etc. (87).

Todorov invokes the familiar third-man problem, but it is only a problem because he treats verisimilitude as a rigid set of laws and intimates his own desire for certainty, for knowing without doubt that a particular verisimilitude is the most accurate, the most real, or the most truthful. If instead, we content ourselves with cogency—making our best guess based on the always-limited information that we have at any given moment and keeping an open mind in the face of new information—then there is no need to lament our entrapment within verisimilitude. We cannot be trapped if there *is* nothing outside. Instead of

[57] Todorov derives this example from Classical commentaries by Plato, but the analysis is quite applicable in the present, perhaps even more so given the popularity of courtroom dramas.

fruitless escape attempts *from* verisimilitude, then, we must content ourselves to shifting the dominants *of* our verisimilitude(s), which is precisely what both the implementation of the Comics Code in the 1950s and the Revisionist shift in the 1980s both demonstrate. The first shifts towards a sexually normative and authoritarian verisimilitude, while the second shifts to one that tends to undermine authority and rigid identities. Given the choice, I would prefer the latter, and indeed this dissertation favours Revisionist comics above those that came before, but my point, in the context of Todorov's conundrum, is that practically speaking, all we can do is choose between verisimilitudes, which includes fashioning new ones. To return to genre, then, instead of Todorov's model in which genres constitute sets of rigid laws and in which certainty is the dominant concept, I choose a different dominant in which genres constitute sets of tendencies, formal constructions that audiences come to expect and creators use as guides, including the commercial codification of genres for marketing purposes. Todorov's rigidity is neither convincing nor particularly useful for my purposes.

However, I do find his inversion of verisimilitude—from alleged resemblance to reality to conventions of perception—highly useful, specifically in the context of fantasy genres. The most obvious application of Todorov's verisimilitude is to the realist genres (historical, psychological, material, etc.) because his model reveals that they are not objectively real, despite what they pretend. The application to fantasy genres is less obvious, though, because they wear their alleged lack of resemblance to reality on their sleeves. Indeed, departure from reality is the common-sense definition of fantasy, so an assertion that they have their own, internal verisimilitude might seem pointless. However, I argue that every fantasy genre contains a subtle set of cues, understood by the dedicated audience and the experienced creator, that indicate which elements should be read as fantastic and which as verisimilar. In current fantasy, the psychological and causal elements of the narrative are most often written as, taken for, and expected to be, verisimilar. Although a science-fiction story can violate the laws of physics, for example, the characters must behave in a manner consistent with a popular conception of psychology and everyday human behaviour, sometimes even if those characters are not human. Similarly, although multiverses and time-travel stories can fold, spindle, and mutilate the common-sense conception of a singular timeline moving in one direction, there is a nigh obsessive preoccupation with making logical sense of those multiple timelines and parallel universes. The first section of this chapter demonstrates this preoccupation with making causal sense out of fantasy narratives.[58]

The ultimate point of Todorov's conception of verisimilitude, for my purposes, is that it neatly demonstrates that realism, understood as a verisimilitude, is not automatically "real." It instead constitutes a set of conventions that audiences in a given socio-historical context associate with "the real"; therefore, realism (as a verisimilitude) is actually just another kind of fantasy. All fiction genres are in fact kinds of fantasy, but they are made up of

[58] See 2.1.a: "Crises"

various conventions that we, audiences and creators alike, *understand* as "realistic" and/or "fantastic," but that separation does not necessarily indicate resemblance to reality because, once again, "realism" is just a set of expectations. In superhero comics, for example, characters can fly, punch through concrete, and run at the speed of light. All of these elements of the narrative are conventionally fantastic. The audience regards them as things that are impossible. However, those same comics also employ many elements of conventional realism, such as a familiar setting (the contemporary United States, and occasionally other countries) and an attempt at reproducing psychologically consistent characters (regardless of how successful or unsuccessful that attempt might be). Realism and fantasy are thus not mutually exclusive categories at all but instead refer to conventional associations that are attached to various discreet literary devices. A certain set of conventions indicates "realism" while a different set indicates "fantasy," but those sets overlap to a great degree. All fiction contains a certain element of "fantasy" because the events depicted did not actually occur,[59] and all fantastic genres contain a certain minimum of "realism" without which the narrative would be unintelligible. For the sake of clarity, then, when I refer to realism as a verisimilitude I call it *conventional realism*, so as to highlight that it constitutes a set of conventions and does not necessarily indicate a resemblance to "reality," however we might define that muddy, complex concept.

The Comics Code, as I mention above, constitutes an attempt to build a new verisimilitude within American comics, and the Code itself is a direct response to accusations and complains made by the American anti-comics movement of the forties and fifties. That movement was, predictably, concerned with depiction of sex and violence, but also criminality and literacy. For example, characters were free to exhibit various fantastic powers, like flight or the like, just as long as nobody betrayed any alternative sexuality (e.g., bondage, domination/submission, homosexuality) and all the characters either deferred to institutions of authority, specifically legal and religious, or were justly punished by them in the end, in the case of villains. I discuss the Comics Code's requirements in more detail below. For now, my point is that Todorov's notion of verisimilitude—relieved of its implications of objective reality—applies particularly well to fantasy genres because it helps us critics to see the elements of the genre that the audience expects to be fantastic, and those that it expects to conform to its sense of reality. This dual expectation is necessarily part of all fantasy genres because they depict both that which is ostensibly impossible (i.e., fantastic) and that which is in some way recognisable, so that the stories can be in some way intelligible (i.e., verisimilar or conventionally realistic). That sense of reality that comes with discreet elements of fantasy genres, even mixed in with fantastic elements, constitutes a projection of a certain set of norms and values

[59] The borders between fiction, memoir, and biography are extremely blurry, of course, but that complex problem does not pertain to my argument because I deal almost exclusively, here, with conventionally fantastic narratives.

onto the world. In the context of the Comics Code, the verisimilar element is normative sexuality and obedience to authority.

The superhero genre, as well as Underground comix, are both highly verisimilar, despite their often fantastic premises. They contain elements that feel realistic by virtue of functioning within established generic conventions. The impulse to inject more conventional realism into both styles comes largely from the shifting demographics of the target audience. In the forties and fifties, the audience for comics was largely children, although their popularity among adults was growing (Pustz 30). However, in the sixties and seventies, the target demographic shifted to youths in their late-teens and adults in their twenties, and those new audiences started to demand more topical commentary and narrative complexity, which is to say they wanted conventional realism, and so the industry's internal verisimilitude shifted accordingly. Essentially, the Baby Boomers were growing up and comics had to grow up with them. At the same time, television replaced comics as the primary form of entertainment for kids, so the consumers of American comics slowly shifted from a popular audience of mostly children to a niche market of young adults. That niche market slowly became a self-identified community of fans (Pustz 30).

In the case of the mainstream, the shift in the target demographic emerged as a marketing tactic. SA comics incorporated a few, discreet elements of conventional realism and thus constructed a new superheroic verisimilitude, but they also retained the genre's fantastic roots and did not radically reform its underlying ideological and political presumptions. Marvel Comics dominated the superhero market by appealing to late-teen and college-aged audiences instead of children, and Marvel has continued to outsell all other comics publishers in the US since then (McAllister et al. qtd. in Gordon 109). The Underground did almost the same thing as the SA, but to a much more extreme degree. Comix originated in college newspapers (Rosenkranz 3) and depicted stories about and for young adults, most of whom were members of the various counter-cultures of the sixties and seventies: hippies/freaks, the gay community, feminists, Marxist/socialists, people of colour, etc. Comix depict all the things that mainstream comics could not because of the Comics Code: sex, drugs, and gore, as well as the anti-authoritarian politics of class consciousness, feminism, gay rights, race politics, and anti-war rhetoric. Comix focus on the local and the mundane, although they often do so through devices like funny animals, parody, and self-reference. Their creators did not set out to capture a target market *per se*, but their comix did appeal to a very different audience than the mainstream ever could because the mainstream's politics were extremely conservative and the counter-cultures' were liberal to say the least.

I use the term "Silver Age" to denote the mainstream comics that were published after the Comics Code and before the Revisionist style, and will later refer to the "Dark Age" of American superhero comics, but I do not use these terms unproblematically. The "Age" model of comics is somewhat contentious within comics scholarship, and rightly so. Fans, publishers, and creators of

superhero comic-books constructed the Ages out of a subjective and self-interested model of literary development and the schema itself is inconsistent. It includes a Golden, Silver, Bronze, and Modern Age, or perhaps Golden, Silver, Bronze, Copper, and Iron, or maybe Golden, Silver, Modern, and Dark. Opinions on the subject vary wildly. There is very little agreement on exactly when the Ages begin, when they end, and why those dates are significant. Going by the dominant model in industry and fan circles, which is based on superhero comics, the Golden Age begins with the creation of modern American comics—saddle-stitched folio books in colour—and most commonly starts in 1938 with the publication of *Action Comics* #1, the first appearance of Superman. That age comes to a close when superheroes wane in popularity in World War II, during which time other genres, specifically crime, war, and horror, come to dominate the market. The Silver Age begins in 1955 (*Detective Comics* #225, which premiers the first new superhero since the Golden Age, the Martian Manhunter), or 1956 (*Showcase* #4, the first revived hero of the Golden Age, Barry Allen/Flash II), or 1961 (*Fantastic Four* #1, the beginning of Marvel Comics' domination of the mainstream market). The subsequent ages, Bronze and Modern, Iron and Dark, are even less clearly demarcated.

Benjamin Woo's "An Age-Old Problem: Problematics of Comic Book Historiography" presents a meticulous critique of the Age-based model, and neatly demonstrates just how badly constructed it is. He argues that "the system seems to imply a value judgement" (270), descending metals or ascending technology; "there is no consensus on how the system is to proceed" (270) and "no consistent criteria" (271), no clear way to name the next "age." The model "only applies to some comics" (270), two publishers in one country, producing just one genre; and it is "simultaneously nostalgic and teleological" (272), looking back to an ostensibly brighter past that supposedly leads inexorably to the present. It is "totalising and essentialising" (273), presuming universality despite its highly specific, historical position. It conceptualises historical change in exclusively "cataclysmic terms" (273), and "it is a reifying mode of representing history" (273). Woo's condemnations are powerful and hard to ignore.

There are a few approaches that critics have taken when attempting to resolve the problems that Woo articulates. A. David Lewis' "One for the Ages" demonstrates the most common solution: propose a new rubric to measure the pre-existing Ages. This solution presupposes that the Ages themselves exist, in some definable way, and we simply lack the proper way to measure them. He summarises the various, conflicting, and internally inconsistent theories of when the ages begin and end, then proposes his own, ostensibly consistent index instead: morality. Thus, *Action Comics* #1 establishes superhero morality, which "demands great power be used for the greater good" (305), and the greater good is understood as "the strong—almost blind—adherence to the agreed-upon morality of the American status quo" (306). The creation of the Comics Code (1954) thus signals the beginning of the Silver Age, the revision of the Code in 1971 signals the beginning of the Bronze Age, and finally the abandonment of the Code in

1992 by the fledgling, upstart creators of Image Comics signals what Lewis calls the Steel Age. Peter Coogan's dissertation, "Secret Origin of a Genre," proposes a slightly different solution. In addition to a new rubric, Coogan attempts to integrate a theory of generic development into the ages: Thomas Schatz's model of genre from *Hollywood Genres*. Coogan's application of Schatz's model yields five stages: experimental (Golden Age), classical (Silver Age), refinement (Bronze Age), baroque (Iron Age), and finally reconstruction (Revisionist). At this last stage, "[t]he conventions of the genre are reestablished and the cycle starts over" (436). Finally, returning to "Age Old Problem," Woo proposes a radically different model that abandons the Ages altogether, and substitutes Bourdieu's "fields," understood as "localized and contextualized" (275), but he renames them "scenes," a term he borrows from "post-subcultural studies of popular music" (275). There are dozens of articles like those of Lewis, Coogan, and Woo on the internet and throughout the history of fan-based criticism of American comics and scholarly sources. The lesson they teach, as a whole, is that the Ages model is so contested that one cannot hope to invoke it unproblematically. It is unreliable, ethnocentric, and teleological.

Yet, it is part of the language of comics culture in America—and of international comics culture as well—and as such it would be inappropriate for scholars to pretend it does not exist. As unspecific and myopic as it is, within my own argument it provides insight into the cultural conception of three styles of comics—Silver Age, Dark Age, and Revisionist. Therefore, instead of proposing yet another falsely-objective rubric (Lewis), or a developmental teleology (Coogan), or attempting to argue the Ages out of existence (Woo), I use them as a way of looking at comics, but an avowedly problematic one. The Ages direct attention at aspects of the comics that are important to my argument, but I redefine them for my own purposes and employ them tentatively, as if they were always in scare quotes. Like any attempt to periodise art history, the Ages are neither concrete nor objective. They serve as a convenient, shared, and very general short-hand, but they have to be redefined for any given argument. I articulate the Ages by a specific measure that I situate historically, but I do not propose that measure as if it were objective or universally applicable. I also do not argue that they stay within their respective historical periods. Rather, they are created and come to dominate the industry at specific times, but they remain "equally available" (McHale 207). The Ages do not cease to exist after their time of dominance passes. Creators and publishers can revive them at any time—indeed, for an industry that is as inward-looking and as obsessed with the appearance of novelty as mainstream comics are, the ability to revive old styles is highly convenient—and the audience might indicate a preference for any one of them at any time, either by buying the comics that they like or communicating directly with the publishers through mail, zines, blogs, official discussion fora, etc. This chapter articulates Silver-Age comics and Underground comix, in Hall's sense of articulation, by their respective relationships with the Comics Code, and I argue that those qualities that are popularly associated with the Silver Age and

Revisionist comics, respectively, are directly tied to the presence and then exorcism of the conventions that the Code inspired.

The Comics Code Authority (or "CCA") was a self-censorship body created by comic-book publishers in the wake of the American Senate Subcommittee on Juvenile Delinquency (1954), which carried with it an implied threat of government censorship. The anti-comics movement[60] of the late-forties/early-fifties had three general concerns: that reading comics would destroy children's ability to read textual literature (Nyberg 9-11), that their content would transform those children into criminals (i.e., "juvenile delinquents") (Nyberg 18-21), and finally, that the comics taught racism, sexism, and other forms of bigotry, a claim most recognisable in Fredric Wertham's *The Seduction of the Innocent* (1954),[61] but which Wertham had been making in mainstream magazines since 1948's "The Comics... Very Funny!" (Beaty 118). Wertham was by no means alone in this attack, though. Sterling North's "A National Disgrace" (1940) began a fresh round of anti-comics articles in American popular magazines, and similar sentiments had been published as early as 1906 (Nyberb 2). After the senate subcommittee hearings, American comics publishers opted for a self-censorship regime in order to avoid government censorship[62] (Nyberg 83-84), much as Hollywood had established the United States Motion Picture Production Code, or "Hays Code," in 1930. The Comics Code Authority, or "CCA," was a third party supposedly at arm's length from the industry, although the Code itself was written by several of the top publishing houses of the day (Nyberg 106-108). No governmental body required that American publishers submit their comics for Code-approval and thus receive the CCA seal (fig. 2.1); as a government document, it would have been a blatant violation of the first amendment to

fig. 2.1: The CCA Seal

[60] The anti-comics movement in general, and the subcommittee hearings in particular, were concerned only with comic *books*, and never the by-then entirely legitimated comic *strips* and political cartoons that had occupied American newspapers for several decades.

[61] Wertham argues this thesis practically throughout *Seduction*, but it is particularly strong in Chapter 2, "'You Always Have to Slug 'Em': What Are Crime Comic Books?" (17-53), and Chapter 7, "'I Want to be a Sex Maniac!': Comics Books and the Psychosexual Development of Children" (173-194).

[62] David Park's "The Kefauver Comic Book Hearings" argues that self-censorship was in fact the foregone conclusion of the subcommittee hearings. It allowed the U.S. senate to appear to protect America's youth from comics while actually maintaining the free-market by allowing the comic-book industry to self-regulate using a code of their own creation (266-267). This kind of self-censorship, "regulation by raised eyebrow" (261), allows for much more severe restrictions than the American constitution would have allowed (273), and for the publishers of the day, self-censorship created an opportunity to consolidate what arguably became an oligopoly of comic-book publishing (278).

the US constitution, but as an industry requirement, it was an entirely legal form of censorship.

A full account of the anti-comics movement, the subcommittee hearings, and the creation of the Comics Code is not pertinent to my discussion. [63] What is important, however, is the Code itself and its ideological underpinnings. It was a highly authoritarian document. Most of its rules enforced normative notions of social behaviour, specifically in relation to sex/gender and the law. It explicitly required reverence for institutions of authority (including police, government, and religions); it required that crime be depicted only if it led to the downfall of the criminal; and it forbade swearing and sexually suggestive images of any kind (Park 287).[64] However, it also forbade prejudice on the basis of race or religion and stated that women should be "drawn realistically without exaggeration" (Park 287), so the Code should not be read merely as a authoritarian document, but instead as the blunt enforcement of a heterogeneous but still highly normative set of social values.

The Code's authority lasted from 1954 through to the mid-nineties with two adjustments of its rules in 1971 and 1989, respectively (Nyberg 170, 175). I argue that these adjustments of the CCA account for the perception that the seventies and late-eighties constitute separate ages, often called Bronze or Modern (see Coogan and Lewis). I do not claim that changing the Code created these ages but instead that the changes indicate new attitudes toward what was acceptable in comics, and that attitude is responsible for shifting the Code's rules. By the same token, though, Code-approved comics did change in the aftermath of the rules changing. The comics were moored to the Code, but the Code was dependent upon the perceptions of the industry, including creators, and increasingly the fans as well. The CCA has only recently been all but replaced by a piecemeal system of ratings and labels that mimics the ratings system already instituted by the Motion Picture Association of America in 1968, much like the Comics Code mimicked the Hays Code. The comics ratings differ significantly from one publishing house to the next, although they all state the intended age of the audience. Marvel and Dark Horse both print actual ages on their covers, for example.[65] Protecting children from harm is, of course, the traditional rationale for such ratings systems, but such systems also allow for manipulation of the marketplace and of course ideologically-motivated censorship. T he Code thus defines SA-style comics not just because they had to obey its rules, but because the authoritarian ideology underneath the Code inscribed itself onto them. The Code's stipulations became intuitive generic expectations, understood by creators and audience alike, rather than a set of imposed requirements; thus, post-Code

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[63] For such a full account, see David Hajdu's *Ten-Cent Plague* (2008), a journalistic presentation that generally sides with the comic-book industry; Amy Nyberg's *Seal of Approval* (1998), an academic study that points out both the virtues and flaws of the anti-comics argument; and finally, Bart Beaty's *Fredric Wertham and the Critique of Mass Culture* (2005), an academic account that unabashedly attempts to rescue Wertham from vilification at the hands of the American comic-book community, including publishers, creators, and fans.

[64] Park's article includes an appendix that reprints the Comics Code in full.

superhero comics, in particular, largely follow the core concepts that underlie the Code's rules: reverence for authority and clear moral divisions between "good" and "evil."

That said, the violence and sexuality to which the anti-comic movement strenuously objected—Wertham's *Seduction* is particularly vocal on these two issues—remained, hidden in plain sight. Violence is still the primary discourse of superhero comics—ideological differences play out as battles—but SA comics hide the violence by portraying it as if it has no lasting consequences (i.e., no blood and no death). SA comics express sexuality through both domestic soap-opera plots and skin-tight costumes that technically hide but actually reveal the body, specifically women's bodies. Finally, the racism and sexism remained almost unchanged, and only slowly receded as American cultural beliefs shifted, although they have by no means disappeared even today. Superhero comics still lag significantly behind even mainstream television and film in their lack of ethnic diversity and their narrow stereotyping of women and people of colour. The SA comics did, however, emphasise reverence for authority to ridiculous proportions, and the most abstract element of the Code, that "good shall triumph over evil and the criminal [shall be] punished for his misdeeds" (90), remains a fundamental part of the genre. Thus, while the Code essentially created the SA style of superheroes, the style itself has outlived the Code. If the goal of the Comics Code was to fundamentally alter the construction and perception of American comics—primarily the action/adventure genres—then it has been partially successful. Sexism and racism remain, long after the institution of the Code, but obedience to authority has been programmed into the superhero genre so deeply that actual censorship is no longer necessary to enforce it.

Underground comix emerged in the 1960s, a decade after the Code, and quite self-consciously defined themselves as the polar opposite of mainstream/superhero comics. Comix were made by independent, small-scale creators, had short print runs, and were "sold in head shops alongside drug paraphernalia and other elements of the hippie subculture" (Pustz 65). The comix' most recognisable element is their propensity to depict the mundane and the grotesque, or the mundane as the grotesque, which differs distinctly from the clean lines and idealised bodies of superhero comics. By virtue of their parodic underpinnings and constant engagement with the local and the contemporary, comix are highly self-referential and often self-reflexive. In parodying the mainstream comic book, comix reflect on the state of the comic-book industry and its dominant modes, genres, and ideologies, as well as making wider gestures

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[65] Ironically, DC Comics' house editorial policies formed the basis of the Code, according to Nyberg (65), but since 2000, their comics have become increasingly violent and sexually suggestive. They have no explicit ratings system and instead indicate the target audience by employing one of their various imprints: "Adventures" (light action/adventure with a cartoony drawing style), "DC" (violent, often gory action with sexuality but no nudity or harsh swearing), and "Vertigo" (horror, sexuality/nudity, and swearing, but also focusing more on character/story and formal experimentation). These imprints are usually understood as age-dependant: Adventures for kids, DC for teens and twenties, and Vertigo for "mature" readers.

towards contemporary politics, for example gender constructions, racial and ethnic concerns, consumerism, the Viet Nam war, and a host of other political issues that rose out of the counter-culture. The Code thus defines the comix because they specifically positioned themselves outside of what the Code allowed. In the next section of this chapter, I analyse two cycles of metacomics that reveal the limits of the SA-style.

2.1: Silver Age

In the sixties and seventies, first Marvel and then DC attempted to appeal to an older audience that demanded more of what it understood as simple realism, but which I would call "conventional realism." Introducing discreet elements of conventional realism into the otherwise highly fantastic superhero genre gave rise to a peculiar juxtaposition of the two in which the realism looks contrived and the fantasy looks ridiculous. This contradiction led the mainstream to metacomics. Silver-Age comics use metacomic devices to try to resolve this contradiction between a blatantly fantastic genre and the conventions of realism that the audience wanted. In Todorov's terms, the comics constructed a new verisimilitude, a set of generic requirements that would both retain the fantasy and create a heightened sense of the "real." Judging by the popularity of the Silver-Age superhero, this new verisimilitude was economically quite successful, but as I demonstrate in this section, in ideological terms it merely legitimised and perpetuated the values implicit within the Comics Code. The subsections below describe two cycles of metacomics in the SA-style, *Crisis* and *Squadron Supreme*, which use self-referential devices—analogues and retcon, respectively—to make up for their putative lack of realism, thus fashioning a new verisimilitude. My analysis of these two cycles of comics demonstrates that there is a history of metacomic practise before the Revisionists, but that it consistently fails to fulfil its own implied promises. *Squadron Supreme* never arrives at a good-faith critique of the politics behind the superhero and *Crisis* never finally arrives at the fixed narrative universe that it explicitly claims to create.

Readers familiar with modernism and postmodernism might see echoes of that dichotomy in the SA/Revisionist dynamic; indeed the development of mainstream comics in America is strikingly similar to the transition between modernism and postmodernism as Brian McHale describes it in *Constructing Postmodernism*. He calls the transition a shifting dominant (8), which is to say that there is no radical break but instead a slow, incremental change. It might be marked by significant moments of self-awareness, and specific events, texts, or works might stand out as touchstones of the new dominant, but these touchstones do not cause one dominant to transform into another and there is no identifiable tipping point. Instead, these touchstones indicate that a transition is taking place from one mode of thought, expression, or representation, what we might call a Zeitgeist, to another. In McHale's words, they are "not progressive stages," but instead "alternative contemporary practises" that are "equally available" (207). The SA and Revisionist styles behave exactly this way. The Revision itself, the alteration of the conventions of American mainstream comics, introduced a set of

practises to the mainstream that have come to dominate it, but the SA practises still exist, especially so because Revisionist comics rely on the SA style as a foundation. Thus both SA and Revisionist narrative elements are simultaneously available as both storytelling techniques (for the creators) and as modes of interpretation (for the audience).

McHale attributes two specific qualities to modernism and postmodernism that parallel the SA/Revisionist shift. To be clear, I do not claim that McHale's scheme is an accurate definition of the modern/postmodern split, and in fact, neither does he. Instead, I argue that it provides a useful point of differentiation between SA and Revisionist comics—a differentiation that I understand in terms of a shifting dominant, not an epochal change. McHale's modernist dominant, which I attribute to the SA-style metacomics, is epistemology (8). It asks questions like, "what is there to know about the world? Who knows it, and how reliably? How is knowledge transmitted, to whom, and how reliably? etc." (246). These questions assume that there is an objective, external world to interpret, and that we need to find a way to accurately perceive it. McHale's postmodernist dominant, which I attribute to Revisionist metacomics, is ontology (8). It asks

> what is a world? How is a world constituted? Are there alternative worlds, and if so, how are they constituted? How do different worlds, and different kinds of world, differ, and what happens when one passes from one world to another? etc. (247).

These latter questions leave open the possibility that there might not be an objective reality, but instead only a collection of subjective perspectives. Silver-Age metacomics tend to question the separation between fictional worlds or flirt with breaking their narrative frame, but they always attempt, with limited success, to return to a coherent and consistent diegetic space after the fact. Thus, they tend to presume and/or enforce a conception of narrative as basically stable, fixed, and comprehensible, although I complicate that alleged fixity below. They often build limited flexibility into their narrative universes in order to maintain overall fixity. Revisionist metacomics, conversely, deconstruct narrative stability and conceive of it as fluid and/or multistable. However, they only occasionally achieve Waugh's sense of radical metafiction, in which narrative loses coherence and consistency, and instead most often attempt to coherently represent the loss of coherence.

It is tempting to graft the modernist/postmodernist shift directly onto the SA/Revisionist shift, but simply equating the two is a thinking error. As Jonathan Culler points out in *Structuralist Poetics,* "one must resist the temptation to use binary oppositions merely to devise elegant structures [...] the formal symmetry of such homologies does not guarantee that they are in any way pertinent" (15). In my case, equating the SA style with modernism and the Revisionist style with postmodernism would obscure the specific details of the development of American comics. There are also many other elements in Revisionist comics, specifically the invocation of mythology in *Promethea* and *Sandman*, that arguably indicate more affiliation with modernism than postmodernism; calling

the SA-style modernist, without significant qualification, would also be misleading given just how formulaic those comics had to be—because of the Code and the stresses of commercial publishing—in comparison to the experimentation of modernist writers like James Joyce, T.S. Eliot, or Ezra Pound. Furthermore, McHale's particular construction is, by his own description, not to be understood as a master narrative, as *the* story of the modern/postmodern shift, but instead as one of many ways of looking at that shift (McHale 8). For my purposes, McHale's epistemology/ontology binary is a particularly useful way of looking at the SA/Revisionist shift, but that is not the same as claiming that the SA style simply is modernist and the Revisionist style simply is postmodernist. That kind of categorical definition is not the aim of my argument.

2.1.a: Crises

DC's *Crisis* cycle employs two closely related narrative devices called retcon and reboot. "Retcon" is a portmanteau of *retroactive continuity*. The term was invented by fans[66] and in its shortened form it functions as both verb and noun; thus the act of *retconning* an event is also *a retcon*. It refers to retroactively changing the history of a character or narrative. In retcon, events occur that indicate that a previous version of the narrative is no longer accurate. Retcon can result from various possible narrative contrivances, but the most common ones either pretend to reveal narrative elements that were ostensibly withheld from the audience, or they actively alter the continuity/history of a given narrative. In either case, the events as they were understood by both creators and audience change retroactively.

Umberto Eco identifies a form of retcon, though he does not name it as such, in "The Myth of Superman." In the retcon that he identifies, comics disingenuously reveal previously unknown events that (ostensibly) had already happened, and as such, alter contemporary continuity. His example is the retcon of Supergirl into Superman comics. She was his secret weapon and had supposedly been working behind the scenes for many issues, even though the audience only comes to learn that after the fact (17). Exactly which issues he refers to is unclear—he does not cite them—and given that his descriptions do not match the original American editions, he probably worked from translations, which at the time were extremely loose in their interpretations of the original material. Regardless, he does identify retcon as American superhero comics employ it. The key element of it is that it is retroactive, a change after the fact, and not a planned plot point. Thus the audience must recognise the retcon as a change in the narrative, not an intentional revelation. Retcon is thus highly subjective. If a retroactive change is suitably deft and imperceptible, then the audience might not take it for a retcon. Reboot, a term borrowed from the language of computers, refers to retcons that occur on a massive scale. Reboots

[66] Roy Thomas used it in print for the first time in the letters column of *All-Star Squadron* #18 in 1983, but explains that he overheard fans use it at a convention. Damian Cuigely reportedly shortened it to "retcon" in a UseNet post in 1988 (see *comicvine.com*, "Comics Misc Faq," *wikipedia*, etc.). Cuigely's original post no longer exists, however, so there is effectively no way to confirm this latter claim.

wipe clean all the events of a narrative continuity, anything from a single character to a whole universe, and restart it from scratch. A corporate-owned publishing house can therefore perform a massive, all-encompassing retcon on all of its characters and events, usually in order to reposition itself in the marketplace by creating an allegedly simple starting point for new readers, or in order to eliminate embarrassing or outdated elements of their comics. *Crisis On Infinite Earths* reboots DC's superhero universe in order to update their comics for the 1980s and represents a corporate rebranding.

The motivation for retcons and reboots is usually that the creators and/or audience feel that a narrative is, as it were, broken in some way. Characters might drift so far from their original premise that the audience and/or the creators no longer find them entertaining (e.g., their personalities shift, their supporting cast is radically altered, they acquire emotional or physical trauma, etc.). Alternatively, the creators and/or publishers might find that the characters are not sufficiently approachable for new audiences. Similarly, the continuity in a narrative might be so inconsistent that no one can keep track of what is or is not officially "real" within the fictional universe, which is another barrier to approach by new audiences. The negative attitude towards perceived lack of continuity and character drift both imply a desire for fixity, in the sense of repairing a perceived break but also in the sense of making the character or narrative static. Generally speaking, superhero comics treat logical inconsistencies as frame breaks and treat character drift as an excess of flexibility, which is a minor kind of fluidity. Some narratives are so inconsistent, contain so many alternate versions or narrative breaks, that the story itself is unstable, multifaceted, and without definite, internal order. Such narratives achieve fluidity in the same sense that a lot of small objects, a bag of marbles for example, can behave like a fluid.

Retcon and reboot are corporate practises as much as they are narrative devices. Publishers employ them as part of elaborate efforts to increase sales. Reboot and retcon indicate a drive toward both narrative and commercial fixity: a desire to create a stable, mass-produced narrative-as-product, a story that the publishers/creators can continuously tell but which will remain essentially unchanged over time. Fredric Jameson, who studies popular culture as consumer culture, describes the "reduction to the present" ("Temporality" 710), a state in which consumer culture effaces the future and the past entirely (713). In essence, a lack of acknowledgement or awareness of history creates a myopic sense of the present. It naturalises the contemporary, "explicitly identifie[s] it [as] eternity, as what is out of time altogether" ("Temporality" 712). The opposite of the reduction of time, for Jameson, is historicity:

> neither a representation of the past nor a representation of the future [but rather] a perception of the present as history; that is, as a relationship to the present which somehow defamiliarizes it and allows us that distance from immediacy which is at length characterized as a historical perspective (*Cultural Logic* 284).

Conceiving of the present as a historical period allows social critics to gain some distance from the unconscious givens of their own socio-historical context and thus counteract the reduction of time. SA-style comics create something very similar to the reduction of time, the sense that superhero adventures are forever in the present. This effect functions slightly differently than the reduction of time. I have written about it elsewhere and labelled it the *neverwhen*.[67]

The neverwhen is not actually static. It undergoes demonstrable change, but only in incremental stages. The characters, traditional plots, and settings-as-backdrop always reflect the "now" of the comics' publication, but the comics always implicitly declare that their values are eternal. Thus, Superman's mission to uphold truth, justice, and the American way was represented as universal and timeless in the fifties, and his dedication to acting as a citizen of the world who happens to live in the United States of America is depicted as universal and timeless in the nineties. Likewise, the characters do in fact change over time, but they do not develop psychologically. Their ethics and politics merely shift to fit the era in which they are published. By making those changes incrementally and always reflecting the dominant beliefs of a given period, the comics implicitly, and paradoxically, claim that they are outside of time, atemporal and ahistorical. [68] The neverwhen is a very subtle form of retcon because, as Eco argues, the end of every comic-book story resets the temporality of the protagonists (Eco 17). The Silver-Age metacomics in this chapter employ self-reflexive devices in order, ostensibly, to maintain the conceptual and narrative fixity offered by the neverwhen. Retcon is one such device; in the case of the *Crisis* cycle, the repeated and spectacular use—and abuse—of that device leads to an increasingly glaring suspension of belief, specifically in the eighties and nineties. These grander and grander retcons have a strong tendency to create more contradictions than they resolve, which calls even more attention to them. This increasing but inadvertent suspension of belief creates a feedback loop, a fixity/fluidity cycle: the more SA comics attempt to maintain the neverwhen, and fixity in general, the more they instantiate fluidity. However, it is still a fluidity that yearns for, and masquerades as, fixity. Therefore it never achieves the good-faith self-reflection that

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[67] See: "Show and Tell: Notes Towards a Theory of Metacomics." *International Journal of Comic Art*, 10.2, Spring 2008.

[68] Jameson identifies the reduction of time as a postmodernist tendency, which he consistently identifies as a facet of late-capitalism, but I read him somewhat against the grain. Instead of identifying contemporary comics as yet more examples of postmodern culture's inability to perceive time, which is what Jameson argues in "The End of Temporality," I argue that Revisionist comics specifically reinsert an awareness of history and the passage of time in ways that the SA-style rarely did. In that sense, the Revisionist comics do what Brian McHale and Linda Hutcheon identify as postmodernist (i.e., they break down master narratives and present knowingly complicit deconstructions), and what Jameson identifies as modernist and implicitly Marxist (i.e., they historicise). However, once again, I do not argue that Revisionist comics *are* postmodernist. There are so many different definitions of that term that, rationally, the can argue only that they exhibit certain qualities that some critics have associated with the postmodern. Which is to say, I am not interested in trying to identify what the postmodern is, as if it were one coherent thing, and instead choose to use the ideas that critics have offered in their discussions of postmodernism as an artistic practise.

Revisionist comics undertake. Instead, it reifies the superhero and the values that underlie it.

The *Crisis* cycle, as I define it, has its roots in some of the earliest practises of the comic-book industry of the 1940s, and lasts until at least 2008. This places it well outside the boundaries of the traditional Silver Age. However, the specific effect that I describe below, the fixity-fluidity cycle, results directly from the narrative innovation that allows for the creation of DC's Silver-Age comics, and is directly informed by the Comics Code. DC's attempts to *fix* their comics—in terms of identity and narrative—parallels the Code's attempts to *fix* all comic books—in terms of morality and relationship to authority. The recent episodes of the *Crisis* cycle grapple with the problems left over from the industry's attempts to both sell their product and conform to the Code. The cycle as a whole is the result of a set of narrative/business practises at DC Comics which, in turn, result in a multi-threaded narrative construction which SF and comic book fan cultures commonly call a *multiverse*. A multiverse is a collection of individual universes that are, in some pseudo-scientific or magical way, connected to each other. The first narrative/business practise in the *Crisis* cycle's history is the crossover, which started in the 1940s.[69] In crossovers, one hero guest-stars in another hero's series. Crossovers tend to sell well and potentially lead audiences to buy two comics where they previously bought only one, but they also imply a shared universe and therefore ostensibly necessitate some kind of continuity between the different comics. The second practise is DC's acquisitive business model, which is to say that they make a habit of purchasing rival publishing houses, like Fawcett or Quality Comics. DC continues to purchase smaller publishers to this day, most recently Wildstorm Comics. DC then incorporates their latest acquisitions into its pre-existing multiverse, which creates more opportunities for lucrative crossovers.[70]

The third practise is DC's self-referential revival of superheroes in the mid-fifties. Superheroes waned in popularity during World War II, but kids in the fifties had not already read/viewed the comics from the forties, so DC recreated several Golden-Age characters to fit the aesthetics and pop-culture expectations of the new, post-war culture (Kupperberg). The first series to revive a Golden Age

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[69] For example, *All-Star Comics* #3 contains the first appearance of a superhero team, the Justice Society of America (cover-dated Winter 1940).

[70] DC's acquisitive behaviour is traceable through the presence of other characters in their multiverse and the various narrative strategies they use to bring those characters into the established DC continuity are part of the fixity-fluidity cycle. For example, the Quality Comics heroes first appeared in *Justice League of America* v1 #107, "Crisis On Earth-X!" as one of a long string of parallel-universe comics in *Justice League* v1 and *Flash* v1 (see note 71, below). The Charlton Comics characters first appeared in DC's comics in *Crisis On Infinite Earths* #1, and were subsequently incorporated into DC's in-house continuity. Likewise, DC incorporated the Wildstorm Comics universe into DC's multiverse using, ironically, a Charlton Comics character to make the initial transition from one universe to the next in *Captain Atom: Armageddon*. They also integrated the Milestone Comics characters into the DC universe in the Summer of 2009 ("Milestone Media," *DC Database*). Milestone is a now-defunct publishing house that specialised in depicting heroes of colour.

fig. 2.2: Barry Allen/Flash II Looks at a Comic Book (*Showcase* 4.2:6).

character portrays that new hero, Barry Allen/Flash II, as a fan of the comics starring his predecessor, Jay Garrick/Flash I (*Showcase* #4) (see fig. 2.2). In short order, DC Comics started depicting parallel universes. At first, there were two, one of which contained the Golden-Age superheroes and another the Silver-Age (*Flash* #123, "Flash of Two Worlds!"), which of course created yet more opportunities for crossovers. DC's multiverse thus constitutes a middle-ground between strict fixity and total fluidity. It is a flexible system, one that can contain creative experimentation, but it still has a stable structure. Indeed, multiverses are the diegetic equivalent of a multistable image. Each universe in a multiverse follows its own causal/logical progression and they are mostly separate from each other, but creative teams can freely invent new ones and characters can travel back and forth between them. Multiverses do not necessarily make better comics, or more self-aware narratives, or more progressive ideologies. They simply represent a compromise position between fixity and fluidity.

By the eighties, however, the multiverse had become so convoluted that DC decided to unify it into a single narrative setting (Kupperberg). To do so, they staged a grand crossover between all of their comics, which culminated in a twelve-part series called *Crisis On Infinite Earths*[71] (1985-86) and rebooted the entire DC line. This attempt to unify their multiverse(s) is their fourth and final practise, which represents a drive toward fixing their narratives so that their comics would be easier to understand, which in turn indicates both artistic and economic goals. *Crisis On Infinite Earths* creates far more continuity breaks than it fixes, however, so DC follows it at regular intervals with other mini-series that do the same thing; they reboot the DC multi/universe in the hope of making sense of it: *Zero Hour* (1994), *The Kingdom* (1999), *Infinite Crisis* (2005), and most recently *Final Crisis* (2008). Some are actual sequels to *Crisis On Infinite Earths,* while some merely duplicate its narrative: a grand cosmic event, usually a battle, that rewrites the history of the DC universe.

The original *Crisis On Infinite Earths* displays an extreme form of fixity. It transforms the multistable multiverse into a single universe that ostensibly has

[71] DC's *Justice League of America* v1 contains a linked series of issues in which the heroes travel to the Golden-Age DC universe or various parallel universes. The titles of these issues all contain the word "crisis" (e.g., "Crisis On Earth-1!" "Crisis On Earth-3!" "Crisis On Earth-A!" etc.). DC thus associated the word "crisis" with parallel-universe stories.

one unified history. This first attempt at fixing the continuity fails, however, and subsequent efforts only exacerbate the problem. Each attempt becomes necessary because each previous attempt employs grand and extremely contrived retcons (i.e., self-referential devices) that suspend the belief, not the disbelief, of DC's audience. Instead of creating a coherent, internally consistent universe that banishes previous discontinuities, every series within the *Crisis* cycle spawns a new, discreet universe within the multiverse. Each episode in the cycle thereby reminds the audience of DC's extensive publishing history, its policy of acquisition, the sheer age of its primary characters, and its tendency to simply retcon discontinuities out of existence, which as often as not creates new discontinuities. DC attempts to patch the holes in its narrative universe with corrosive glue. The more they use, the more they need. The new universes or multiverses that they introduce are increasingly fluid and increasingly blatant in their self-referential gestures until they eventually become explicitly self-reflexive. In *Zero Hour*, the villain of the piece disassembles and then reassembles the comic-book universe, which Dan Jurgens' art depicts as reducing the page to a bare multiframe; the subsequent issue then rebuilds that multiframe (1.23:1-4 and 0.2:1-6; fig. 2.3). In *Infinite Crisis*, a different villain looks the viewer directly in the eye and reaches out of a panel (fig. 2.4)—the index finger of his right hand appearing to poke through the page—in an attempt to wrest control of the viewer's universe.[72] *Final Crisis*, the most recent series in the *Crisis* cycle, presents a blatantly self-reflexive climax in which Superman saves the universe by realising that he is generically predestined to win (*Superman Beyond* 2.23:1).[73]

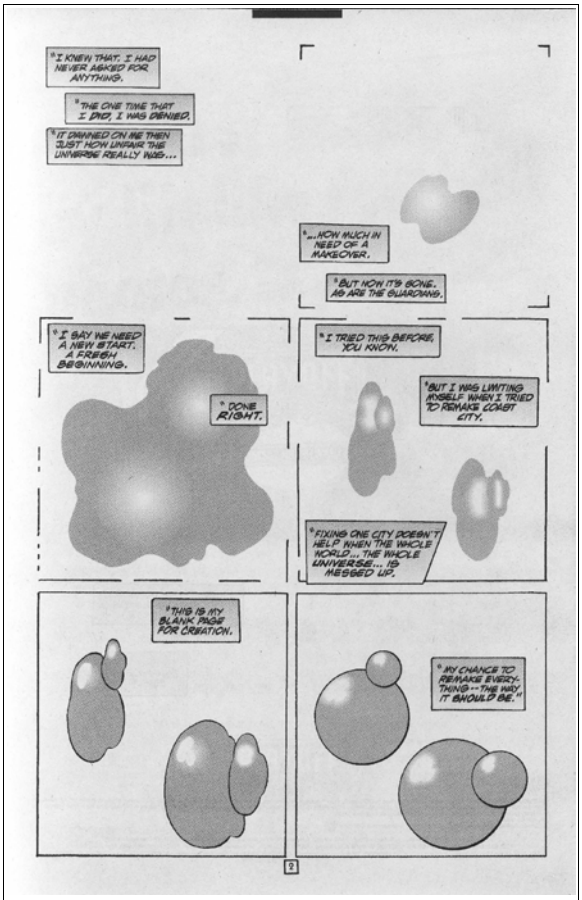

fig. 2.3: Rebuilding the Multiframe (*Zero Hour* 0.2.1-6)

Through this series of narrative and marketing practises—

[72] In both of these cases, a villain character perpetrates these frame-breaks, but both villains are also former heroes who have taken their heroic duties to ostensibly immoral extremes, which makes each one simultaneously the ultimate superhero and the ultimate supervillain. I discuss this phenomenon in depth in Chapter 3. See 3.1.c: "Benevolent Dictators."

fig. 2.4: Reaching Through the Frame (*Infinite Crisis* #6.29:5-8)

crossover, acquisition, revival, and unification—DC creates a fixity/fluidity cycle in which every attempt at fixity leads to an increasingly fluid model of narration, and fluid narratives are self-referential narratives because they display the contrivance of the narrative structure and suspend belief. Every episode within the cycle symbolically reinstates the superheroic ethic—a Silver-Age invention that was based ultimately on the Comics Code—but reinterprets it slightly so that it matches contemporary popular conception. Therefore, instead of using self-reflexivity to explode the neverwhen and becoming more conscious of historical change—even if only the development of just one genre—these comics employ self-reflexivity to further cement the neverwhen and the superhero itself.

2.1.b: Squadron Supreme

Marvel's *Squadron Supreme* cycle makes extensive use of a device called the analogue. Analogues are individuated characters who have their own identities and narratives, but who so strongly resemble pre-existing characters that the audience regards them as commentaries on the originals. They are, in Warren Ellis' words, "about the audience's relationship with old characters" ("I Distrust Your Joy"), which is one half of the analogue function. Matthew Wolf-Meyer's "The World Ozymandias Made" provides the other half. He defines analogues [74] as "characters [who] resemble other established superheroes, both in costuming and abilities" and thus "in their presence they make reference to the original[s]," but

[73] *Final Crisis* was written by Grant Morrison, who has built much of his career on various forms of self-reflexivity. I expand on his, and several others', attempts to depict narrative fluidity, or in Waugh's terms, radical metafiction, in Chapter 4. See 4.1: "Revisionist Fluidity."

[74] Wolf-Meyer uses the term "clone," but it implies that analogues are identical to their originals, which he goes on to explain is not the case. Indeed, difference from the original is central to the concept of an analogue.

they also "have their own lives, their own continuity, and their own costumes" (Wolf-Meyer 504). An analogue therefore "allows the authors to partake of a particular aspect of the discourse of superhero comics, providing their readers with familiar iconography" (504). The two halves of the analogue character are, then, multistability and analogy. Wolf-Meyer also implies that analogues are multistable, the character equivalent of Mitchell's multistable image.[75] Analogues both "have their own lives" and "make reference to" original characters. Therefore, just like the multistable image, analogues represent an either/or as well as a both/and relationship between original and copy. Each half functions separately, but the whole is recognisably a combined construction.

As their name suggests, analogues are rooted in the concept of analogy, which is more complicated than it appears. Analogy is a way to understand an unknown concept by its similarity to a known concept. The physical structure of the atom, for example, is commonly represented as an orbit, as in the solar system, even though that is not in fact how atoms behave. Analogy also requires difference, however, because the unknown and known concepts must be two different things for the comparison to be useful. Comparing the atom to an atom would not aid one's understanding of it. The most useful analogies, therefore, contain the maximum amount of similarity while they still maintain a distinction between the things that they compare. The analogue character works the same way. It must be extremely similar to the original character so that the audience can recognise it as derivative and referential. Alan Moore, who uses analogues on a regular basis, describes the process of altering the Charlton Comics heroes for *Watchmen* as "just taking them a step to the left or right, just twisting them a little bit" (Moore "The Alan Moore Interview" 2). In addition to over-all similarity and recognisability, then, analogues also require specific, equally recognisable differences, and these differences must constitute a critique.

Analogues, like retcons, are highly subjective. The audience's recognition of a character as an analogue is what makes it an analogue. If it is unrecognised or unrecognisable, then it is just another fictional character. Similarly, a character that merely replicates the original—a knock-off—is not an analogue because there is no analogy, no difference on which to base a critique. These replicant characters can at best achieve self-referentiality because they imply an intertextual relationship between themselves and their originals, but without any critique. Analogues, however, are replicants that contain an implied analysis, critique, or commentary on their originals, and thus attain self-reflexivity. The analogue is an extremely common device in Revisionist comics. Therefore, instead of trying to eliminate the subjective aspect of the device through a reductive definition, I choose to acknowledge it and work with it, which means taking the target audience's subjective impressions of an analogue character into account.

Recognising a given analogue requires that an audience identifies its main features as directly derivative of an original character, which means that it invokes the identifiable features of the superhero as a generic figure. Peter Coogan's *From*

[75] See 1.2.c: "Metapictures."

Daniel Boone to Batman establishes a four-point definition for the superhero (358), the first three of which I use to identify analogues.[76] These three points are: the pro-social mission (an ideal, ethic, or specific strategy), powers (either fantastic abilities or just highly-honed physical and mental skills), and identity (origin story and costume that reflects the character's history and potentially his/her/its pro-social mission). These three criteria are the salient features by which audiences recognise superheroes, so by the same token, they are the way that audiences recognise analogues. The criteria match but the analogue's name, setting, and the precise details of their biography are differ ent. For example, the Squadron Supreme, the team of superheroes who star in this comic-book cycle, includes a character called Power Princess who comes from an idealised matriarchy called Utopia Island, is super strong and tough, carries an invisible shield, and wears a revealing costume that resembles a bathing suit. These features clearly match those of Wonder Woman, who comes from Paradise Island, is also super strong, flies in an invisible jet, and wears a costume that resembles a bathing suit.[77] The target audience would have no problem identifying the analogy. Numerous fan-created websites demonstrate just how clear the implied comparison is between the Squadron Supreme and the Justice League by providing tables of exactly who the members of the Squadron are copies of.[78]

The *Squadron Supreme* cycle, like the *Crisis* cycle, lasts well beyond the traditional end of the Silver-Age, but again, I investigate it here because the problems that it addresses originate with Silver-Age superheroes, the ideological basis of which is the Comics Code. The Squadron itself starts in 1968 as an analogue of DC's superhero team called the Justice League of America, and it constitutes a friendly critique of DC's characters by their rival, Marvel Comics. Coming near the end of the traditional Silver Age, as Lewis, Coogan, and many others define it, indicates that this cycle is an early indicator of the shifting dominant in American comics that renders the SA style less and less tenable, and thus its eventual replacement by the Revisionist comics of the early-eighties. For my purposes, the cycle is useful because it initially appears to be an attempt at a serious critique of superheroic ideology but instead constitutes a straw-man attack that ultimately legitimises and reifies the SA-style superhero. Likewise, although it superficially appears to engage with a political analysis of the realistic consequences of a superheroic presence in the real world, it in fact merely reconstructs an only slightly altered verisimilitude in which superheroic actions

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[76] The fourth point, generic specificity, refers to a character's location within a superhero diegesis. If an only nominally superheroic character were surrounded by the trappings of the genre—superpowers, supervillains, a sidekick, superhero physics—that nominal character would appear more typically superheroic by association (366). Analogue characters appear exclusively in superhero comics and as part of superhero narrative worlds, so this last criterion is not pertinent to my discussion.

[77] To be fair, most female superheroes wear costumes that resemble bathing suits. In fact, Wonder Woman/Power Princess' costumes are not at all unusual by the standards of genre in the eighties, and they are remarkably sedate by the mid-nineties, during which time most superheroine's costumes shift from emulating bathing suits to emulating fetish-wear .

[78] Jack Bohn, *The Unofficial Squadron Supreme Page* ; Wikipedia "Squadron Supreme"; etc.

have more destructive consequences than in the standard examples of the genre, but their basic ideological orientation remains the same. The cycle itself, which starts in 1968 and continues to the present, argues by implication that the appropriate superhero ought to be apolitical, which is to say that it ought to support and perpetuate *status-quo* politics.

On this last point, the cycle is factually and historically correct. The SA-style superhero, as shaped by the Comics Code's enforced reverence for authority, is traditionally apolitical in the sense that it does not exhibit a political position that is radically different than the norm. In so doing, superheroes thus support and perpetuate that norm. As Lewis argues, the moral origin of the genre is a " strong —almost blind—adherence to the agreed-upon morality of the American status quo" (306). In *Watchmen*, Captain Metropolis exclaims: "**SOMEBODY** HAS TO SAVE THE **WORLD**" (2.11:7). Changing the world is ostensibly not in the job description. Elizabeth Rosen's "Twenty Years of *Watchmen* Nostalgia" asserts that Silver-Age superheroes display a "ponderous inflexibility" and that their " *raison d'être* [is] to 'fix' things" (89), which echoes my own invocation of the double-meaning of the verb "to fix." Most Marxist-inflected analyses of the superhero point out that they primarily function to protect property rights (i.e., they fight petty thieves and/or repel invaders), therefore maintaining pre-existing power dynamics, specifically along class and wealth lines.[79] Thus the practical element of fixity rears its head. Conversely, Peter Coogan carefully avoids describing exactly what the "pro-social" is in his notion of the "pro-social mission" because what qualifies as such shifts from one era to the next. This combination of stasis (protecting status quo, fixing the world) and change (the historically contingent definition of "pro-social") is part-and-parcel of the neverwhen, which maintains the false appearance of ahistorical and apolitical heroes by constantly updating them so that they stand for the norms and authorities of any given era. Two episodes in the *Squadron Supreme* cycle illustrate this tendency. *Utopia Project* (1985) depicts the Squadron attempting to create an American utopia, but they fail and in so doing their narrative legitimises and even naturalises the apolitical superhero. *New World Order* (1998) depicts the Squadron attempting to overthrow a totalitarian regime, and in so doing, they refute the Dark Age superhero that was popular in the nineties who descended directly from Revisionist comics.

Utopia Project was published in 1985, in the midst of Moore's early Revisionist work: *Miracleman, V for Vendetta*, and *Swamp Thing*. The plot centres around two elements: first, a team of superheroes attempts to forcibly save America from an economic and political collapse that they involuntarily created in a previous series,[80] in the process transforming it into a utopia; second, that team ends up fighting another group of superhumans that objects to their imposed utopia. The Squadron's methods are heavy-handed to say the least and the tragic results are both contrived and predictable. For example, they forcibly transform

[79] See Eco, "The Myth of Superman" (22-23); Dittmer "The Tyranny of the Serial" (253); Wolf-Meyer, "The World Ozymandias Made" (501); and Hughes, "'Who Watches the Watchmen?': Ideology and 'Real World' Superheroes" (554).

[80] See *The Serpent Crown*, in *The Avengers* v1, #141-#149.

supervillains into superheroes by using a mind-control device called the "B-mod machine," but instead of programming the former villains with an independent sense of morality, the heroes simply brainwash the villains such that they are compelled to obey all the heroes' commands. After the climactic battle of the series, in which half the combatants on both sides die violently—still an uncommon event in superhero comics of 1985—the leader of the Squadron, a Superman analogue called Hyperion, acknowledges that their "**NOBLE ENDS**" do not justify their "**IGNOBLE MEANS**" (12.14:3), but then claims that they did, in fact, create a genuine utopia. The ethical fault of it was not in the ends it achieved, but that their society could have become dependent on the superheroes to maintain it (12.14:3). Therefore, the series argues that the proper superhero does not intervene in politics or governance but instead simply lets the world take its course and only saves it when it is directly threatened. This sentiment probably derives from a vague notion of libertarian non-interference and/or American isolationism, but it most directly descends from the authoritarian ideology of the Comics Code. Chapter 3 discusses this superhero-as-dictator trope in more detail, but put simply, the moral of *Utopia Project*—that superheroes should stay out of politics—is how almost every dictator-hero comic book ends. The difference in this case is that these analogues could maintain a dictatorship in their isolated narrative space—as opposed to Marvel's primary universe, which must retain a certain resemblance to the world outside the comics in order to maintain the neverwhen—so their eventual decision to abandon their utopia indicates an ideological belief that the genre ought to remain apolitical and not a practical necessity of publishing comics in America.

New World Order, published in 1998, levels almost the same commentary as *Utopia Project* but actively rejects the Dark-Age superhero, which had become popular after the Revisionist comics established a new verisimilitude in which sexuality and violence are the conventions that signify realism. Dark-Age comics reproduced this sexual/violent content but with little social commentary or self-reflexivity. Moore refers to those Dark-Age comics as his "bastard grandchildren" (Blather.net 1). Indeed, *New World Order* directly references Frank Miller's *Dark Knight Returns* through its depiction of Nighthawk (a Batman analogue) as a dark, violent anti-hero who barks orders at his private army (*New World Order* 1.26:4). It also echoes a visual motif of *Dark Knight Returns* that constitutes Matthew Jones' intermedia reflexivity.[81] *Dark Knight Returns* often presents scenes of violence or destruction, usually as full-page panels or two-page spreads, and superimposed on those images are several panels shaped like television screens in which media pundits comment on the story thus far (*New World Order* 1.30:1-15[82]).

The ideological climax of *New World Order* occurs when Nighthawk renounces his grim and gritty behaviour—a symbolic rejection of the Dark-Age

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[81] See 1.2.d: "Metacomics."

[82] The screens-as-panels device appears throughout *Dark Knight Returns*, beginning on the very first page (1.1.14-16) and reappearing constantly as a chorus, of sorts.

style and the Revisionist comics on which it was based—and instead dedicates himself to a vaguely defined, Silver-Age notion of superheroism: "WE STAND **FOR** WHAT IS **BEST** IN US, AND **AGAINST** THAT WHICH IS **WORST**" (*New World Order* 1.49:4). His team mates then praise the basically empty sentiment as "**WISDOM**" and "A **GOOD** DEFINITION OF WHAT MY **GUT** TELLS ME WE **OUGHT** TO BE ABOUT" (1.50:2). The book thus refutes the Dark-Age style and advocates a return to an implicitly pure version of the superhero (i.e., Silver-Age, Code-approved). Nighthawk's claims even invoke a simple kind of Barthean myth: the heroes assert political values without arguing them or even acknowledging that they are political. This kind of empty assertion is extremely common in action/adventure storytelling, specifically comic books, television, and film. Heroes often deliver heart-felt speeches about doing the "right thing," but they rarely expound any specific ideology or organised ethic. Instead, they appeal to a notion that morality is universal and intuitive, while simultaneously the narrative presents ostensibly good and bad deeds performed by the characters, which thus implicitly defines an ethical verisimilitude that would ostensibly apply to the world outside of the comic book. In the case of American comics, those values derive from the Comics Code, which has lurked just underneath the superhero genre since the early fifties.

New World Order also employs an unrelenting, downright gleeful, string of self-referential gestures and allusions to other superhero comic-books. Thus it advocates for the SA-style superhero but employs the metacomic devices of the Revisionist style to do so. This combination invokes the neverwhen, a claim to timelessness that in fact results from adopting a contemporary narrative technique. The ideal superhero in *New World Order* does not actually remain true to a fundamental ethic, then, but instead adheres to a very contemporary, and changeable, sense of what is good and appropriate for a superhero. It then retroactively calls that ethic fundamental. The *Squadron Supreme* cycle, in both *Utopia Project* and *New World Order*, demonstrates the superhero-publishing industry struggling against its own historical development—the political engagement of Revisionist comics and the violence of the Dark-Age style—and claims that the solution is to return to the ethically fixed Silver-Age style superhero, while it actually chooses the historical mutability of the neverwhen. The superhero verisimilitude thus shifts slightly by incorporating new narrative techniques but does not alter its moral/ideological core.

2.1.c: Variations on Verisimilitude

Silver Age-style metacomics flirt with fluidity and multistability, but in almost every case, they fix it after the fact and thus rescue the narrative from potential self-reflection. The *Crisis* cycle and its early antecedents in parallel-universe stories, follows a pattern of breakage and recovery; a given comic-book commits a narrative break or presents flexibility and a later book attempts to fix the break. However, the cycle usually makes such a spectacle of fixing a previous break (i.e., it suspends belief) that it creates another narrative break, which then requires a new fix, etc. The *Squadron Supreme* cycle employs increasingly explicit self-referential gestures, largely through its analogue cast, but only ever

achieves a superficial version of self-reflection. I derive two conclusions from these case studies.

First, there is clearly a history of metacomics before the Revision in the 1980s. Revisionist metacomics build on a previous familiarity with metacomic devices, on the part of both the audience and the creators, and of course a much longer history of metafictional and metapictorial devices that have always been present in literature, narrative, and visual arts. Revisionist metacomics do not appear fully formed in the mid-eighties. They are not a complete break from the American comic-book tradition. They instead turn pre-existing self-referential devices and traditions to different uses. Second, over the course of the 1960s to the present, SA-style metacomics become bolder with, and closer to, conscious self-reflection, specifically with regard to their own ethical implications and formal construction. Therefore, the transition between the SA and the Revision resembles McHale's shifting dominant, from epistemology to ontology, as well as a move to a new, revised verisimilitude, a new set of generic conventions that indicate "realism." The SA-style superhero comic-book assumes a fixed narrative universe and seeks to make sense of it. When it upsets the coherence of that fixed universe, it attempts, and often fails, to return to fixity in the end. The Revisionist style, however, arrives on the scene in the early 1980s and starts to alter the SA from within, shifting it from failed fixity to coherent flexibility. The most daring Revisionist comics even embrace various degrees of fluidity, which I discuss in Chapter 4.[83]

The shifting dominant, from SA to Revisionist, is not, however, a teleology. It is not an inevitable move, but instead the result of specific historical circumstances that happened to occur around the American superhero comic-book: censorship in the fifties, an audience in the sixties that aged and shrank, and later, an influx of British creators in the eighties who brought a very different perspective on American popular entertainment. As Hall's model of articulation suggests, the shifting dominant is a product of its historical, social, and industrial/economic context, but that does not make it an essential feature of American comics. Under different circumstances, they would have shifted in a different direction. This shifting dominant is also not necessarily an ethical progression. The shallow self-reflection in the *Squadron Supreme* cycle demonstrates an important fact; experimental formalism can be used to argue conservative ethics (e.g., to reify and naturalise the superhero). Revisionist narrative devices and formal features were routinely used in ethically questionable Dark Age comics of the eighties and nineties. *The Dark Knight Returns* is arguably one such book, but it is also clearly a Revisionist work, with its adherence to the new verisimilitude of eighties comics in which violence suddenly has consequences and the comics themselves become tacitly self-conscious of their nature as comics. Revisionist comics are not inherently morally superior to Silver-Age comics any more than comics that suspend belief (i.e., metacomics) are morally superior to those that suspend disbelief. The difference between the two, generally speaking, is that

[83] See 4.1: "Revisionist Fluidity."

Revisionist comics use their self-reflexive elements to actively analyse something, like their own generic structures or a topical political issue, while SA-style self-referentiality seems to perform an analysis that legitimises, reifies, and attempts (but fails) to naturalise the superhero and the (shifting) ideology that it represents. In the next section, I investigate a radically different field of comics, the American Underground, which uses self-reflexivity to launch its satire of the mainstream.

2.2: Underground

This section reviews two examples of self-reflexivity in Underground comix, first the feminist comix of Trina Robbins and Patricia Moodian, then the ambivalently feminist and/or anti-feminist comix of Robert Crumb. Underground comix counteracted what they perceived to be the vapid, vacant comics that DC, Marvel, et al. produced under the Code with comix that reflected the counter-cultures of the sixties and seventies. These comics depicted urban violence, drug use, the anti-war movement, and the sexual revolution. The comix were, to their generation and community, what rap was to young African Americans in the eighties and nineties. To the straight audience, comix appear to explode violence and sexuality out of proportion from what it understands as "reality," [84] but to their target demographic, the comix simply reflect the world that they live in, from their point of view, as opposed to what looked to them like the warped and inaccurate vision projected by mainstream American culture. [85] The comix therefore constitute one of Todorov's verisimilitudes, although not in the form of a singular genre, as in the SA style, but instead as a counter-cultural perspective. The hippies might have wanted to drop out of mainstream culture, but in Todorov's terms, they instead created a new discursive context, and the comix articulated that context, as did protest rock, psychedelic poster art, and a host of rediscovered folk-art traditions. The Underground tradition traces its own roots back to the irreverent work of EC's *Mad* in the fifties, which inspired the artists/writers who would later pioneer the Underground in the sixties and seventies, and eventually developed into the Alternative comics of the eighties. As Hillary Chute puts it, "[i]n the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s, comics reflected the seismic cultural shifts—often produced by war—in American culture of those decades […]" (456). This section focuses on those seismic shifts.

2.2.a: Tales That Drove Them Mad

EC's Mad comics, later Mad Magazine, is the the most cited influence on the Underground comix creators, both by critics and by the creators themselves. [86]

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[84] In the vernacular of the time, "straight" refers to people outside of the counter-culture, not heterosexuals.

[85] Canada and Britain also had their own underground comix, of course, and they reflected their own specific, national circumstances, but my argument focuses on America. For more on the British underground, see Roger Sabin's *Comics, Comix and Graphic Novels*. Patrick Rosenkranz' *Rebel Visions* discusses a few Canadian creators in and among the Americans.

[86] It is by no means the only influence, however. Joseph Witek's "Imagetext" demonstrates a long history of American comics that preceded the Underground, and thus defeats the perception that they either sprang forth fully formed or have only one origin point in *Mad*.

fig. 2.5: Grasping the Frame (*Mad* 1.3:4)

The following subsection details two specific features of Mad, self-referentiality and grotesquerie, that the Underground inherited and executed literally with a vengeance. *Mad* was, and in some ways still is, a highly self-referential comic book; its premise is to grotesquely parody popular genres and the heroic figures that populate them, which invokes intertextuality and allusion. Although not radically metafictional in Waugh's sense, *Mad* exhibits structural self-reflexivity in its critique of major comics genres of the day. In its very first issue, *Mad* satirises horror, westerns, and science fiction comics, among other genres, always with an eye to revealing their inherent irrationality and contradictions. The western parody, "Varmint!", depicts the typical gunslinger as a simpleton who is so single-minded that when he finds out that he shot his own sidekick while sleepwalking, he then shoots himself because he had previously vowed revenge against the killer: "WHEN I MAKES UP MUH MIND TO DO SOMETHING', I DON'T CHANGE EASY!" (1.7:5).[87] Likewise, the horror parody, "HOOHAH!", inverts the traditional presentation of gender in comics such that the man is a coward who attempts to escape his situation—the typical horror premise of running out of gas and going to a haunted house for help—while his girlfriend is brave and level-headed. His cowardice is already generically atypical, but he also breaks the frame when he attempts to escape by grabbing hold of the gutter (fig. 2.5).

As the issue systematically moves through several comic-book genres, it reveals an intimate knowledge of, and a good-natured fondness for, those same genres, which should come as no surprise considering that the creators were all comics creators. Indeed, early issues of *Mad* primarily parodied EC's own specialities: gritty Westerns, war comics, science fiction, and horror. At its inception, *Mad* conspired with its audience to share a joke at everyone's collective expense—*Mad* laughing at what it creates and the audience laughing at what it consumes—and a joke that requires the same intimate knowledge on the part of the audience that the creators used to construct the comic book. Dunne's *Metapop* describes this very relationship between creator and audience as constituting a shared set of insider references, expectations, and knowledge.[88]

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[87] Each story in this issue is separately numbered. Therefore, this citation refers to page seven of "Varmint!" and not page seven of the the whole issue.

[88] See 1.2.c: "Metapictures."

For example, the science-fiction parody, "BLOBS!", is only a hair's breadth away from the kind of melodramatic cautionary tales that were extremely common in EC's science-fiction comics. In the *Mad* parody, technological convenience turns humans into a race of baby-like idiots who revel in food and sex.[89] One member of their society points out that they have lost their ability to fix their machines when they break (1.6:6), at which point the machine that fixes their machines dramatically explodes, on cue of course, and thus destroys their entire culture (1.7:2-9). The narrative contains touches of humour, which separates it from the typically earnest comics that follow this formula, but it is most recognisable as parody because of what Charles Hatfield calls its "package" (4), the commercial, physical, and formal trappings of the series. *Mad* is a comic book that advertises itself as a parody of other comic books. Thus it encourages its audience to read it as parody and to seek out a parodic critique. EC's entire line encourages this kind of ironic reading practise, to a degree. Their comics draw attention to their form and genre by experimenting with form and genre. *Mad* takes that experimentation to its logical extreme, no longer just experimenting with form and genre in order to articulate their stories, but making form and genre the subject of the story. *Mad* inspires an ironic reading/viewing posture, but that very posture both requires and presupposes an intertextual awareness on the part of the audience, which itself is a kind of metacomic effect. Self-mockery and ironic reading/viewing are major elements of Underground comix, and of course, they are now so common in American popular culture that they are almost the norm. Irony is the Zeitgeist of late twentieth-century America, if not most of the Western world, but the specific influence in this case is quite directly from *Mad* to the Underground.

Art Spiegelman describes *Mad*'s particular tone of self-mockery as a paradox:

> MAD WARPED A GENERATION. IN THE BLAND AMERICAN 1950'S IT WAS SAYING SOMETHING NEW! // IT WAS SAYING 'THE MEDIA--THE WHOLE DAMN WORLD--IS LYING TO YOU… AND WE AT MAD ARE PART OF THE MEDIA!' (*Portrait* 1.1:7-8)

Hatfield calls this strategy "authentication through artifice, or more simply ironic authentication: the implicit reinforcement of truth claims through their explicit rejection" (125). Ironic authentication is a paradox, a rhetorical device that convinces the listener specifically by virtue of its illogic. The speaker appears more honest because she admits that she lies. Given an audience already primed for metacomics, ironic authentication functions as both a self-reflexive strategy but also as an indicator of conventional realism. Thus, *Mad* strengthens its authority by admitting that it participates in the alleged grand media conspiracy

[89] The recent animated film *Wall*E* presents almost the exact same allegory of contemporary culture, but with disturbingly current imagery—full-grown adults drinking from containers that are half baby-bottles and half Big Gulp containers, or moving around so absorbed in their personal electronic devices that they do not even perceive their surroundings. In an interesting inversion of something like "Hoohah!" *Wall*E* begins several hundred years after the apocalypse of passive consumption has already destroyed the world.

that it mocks, unlike all those other media voices that supposedly pretend that they speak the truth. Rhetorically speaking, ironic authentication is an ethos claim made through circular reasoning; *Mad* claims that there is a media conspiracy and then holds up its own revelation of that conspiracy as proof that *Mad* is not part of that conspiracy. It does not provide evidence for the existence of the conspiracy of course, and in fact, if the media are lying and *Mad* is part of the media, its claim that the media lies is logically suspect, which is the corollary of the initial piece of circular reason and thus creates a paradox. The evidence for its truth is rooted in the evidence for its falsehood and vice-versa.

Of course, that paradox confounds the audience only if that audience accepts the underlying implication that the media is a monolithic, homogeneous construct, an implication that Spiegelman describes but which *Mad*'s very existence disproves, but, of course, ironic authentication does not have to be accurate to be convincing. In fact, as a practise, it instead displays the path from questioning the conventions of realism to embracing self-reflection, a path that both Underground and the SA metacomics walk. Resemblance to reality is just not necessarily the highest ideal of a self-reflexive sensibility. Revisionist metacomics, which I describe in detail in Chapter 3 and Chapter 4, instead tend strongly to go out of their way to argue that perfect resemblance to reality is inherently impossible. *Mad*'s implied argument also reveals that the form of the argument (i.e., the image/text representation that is *Mad* comics) is vulnerable to logical paradox and therefore not a reliable, stable construction, which arguably constitutes a subtle form of radical metafiction. Like one of the Classical fallacies (begging the question, *ad hominem* attack, false dilemma, etc.), it is not logical, but it is still convincing. From this perspective, as opposed to Waugh's notion of the breakdown of language, the form (a comic book) is perfectly capable of representing a stable paradox, much like two-dimensional drawing can represent an image that is alternatively a duck and a rabbit. Ironic authentication is therefore both self-reflexive and verisimilar.

The other element of *Mad* that the Underground often takes up is its visual depiction of the body. Roger Sabin points out that Crumb employs elements of Harvey Kurtzman's "big foot" drawing style, for example (Sabin 94). On a more abstract level, the Underground took on a tendency towards the grotesque, essentially a comedic kind of body horror. Spiegelman's autobiographical comic, *Portrait of the Artist as a Young %@?*!*, makes this influence clear. The first instalment, entitled "Mad Love," depicts Spiegelman himself as alternately a seven-year-old and a very short fifty-year-old, complete with beard and bald spot. In this web comic, little Art sees a *Mad* comic book for the first time. The cover contains a parody of a *Life Magazine* cover from 18 May 1953 (fig. 2.6). Art describes his reaction:

> I SAW HER AS SOON AS I WALKED IN THE STORE... / IT WAS LOVE AT FIRST SIGHT! // IN ALL MY 7 YEARS I'D **NEVER** SEEN ANYTHING **LIKE** HER... SHE WAS **TINY** – EVEN SMALLER THAN MY 5 FOOT TALL MOM... SHE WAS ABOUT AN INCHE HIGH... // SHE WAS A PAPERBACK COVER GIRL, AND SHE SMELLED OF

> THE ILLICIT. I COULDN'T KEEP MY HANDS OFF HER! // I KNEW MY MOTHER WOULDN'T APPROVE, BUT, BUT I **WANTED** HER BADLY! // […] SHE LOOKED A BIT LIKE MONA LISA AND A BIT LIKE THOSE PICASSO WOMEN I'D LEARN TO LOVE, YEARS LATER… // BUT SHE WAS THE MEATBALLS AND SPAGHETTI VERSION. SHE WAS "POST-MODERNISM" **AVANT LA LETTRE**… / SHE WAS BEAUTIFUL! (*Portrait* 1:1-6)

fig. 2.6: *Mad*'s Woman of the Year (*Mad* #11)

Finding beauty in the radically grotesque, specifically as a form of resistance to mainstream concepts of beauty, is a major element of the Underground. Robert Crumb's ridiculously ugly gendered and racial stereotypes, and alternatively the feminist comix anthology *Wimmen's Comix* (later *Wimmin's Comix*) both employ this grotesquerie in contrast to the clean lines and beautiful bodies that were typical in both superhero and romance comics.[90] This deliberately ugly depiction of the human body is self-referential in so far as it is placed in direct or implied juxtaposition to the mainstream style. The lesson of *Mad*, for the Underground creators, was that self-conscious mockery is a powerful thing and that there is a subversive, rebellious beauty in what mainstream culture might conceive of as ugly or vulgar.

2.2.b: Enter the Comix

Underground comix emerge in America about a decade after the beginning of the Comics Code and just a few years after superheroes had re-taken the mainstream. The Underground comix overtly set out to defy the Code. Hillary Chute describes them as "a reaction to the censorious content code that debilitated the mainstream industry" (456). In their respective texts, Mark James Estren (37) and Roger Sabin both make the same basic argument. In Sabin's words:

> there was an anti-Comics Code reaction, which provided a kind of negative impetus to Underground creators. As children, these were the very people who had been worst hit by the 1950s scare – sometimes having their comics collections torn up by their parents, or thrown on the playground fires. Now it was time for payback. (Sabin 92)

Metacomic sensibilities are thus present in the comix from the start because those comix, and their creators, specifically positioned themselves in opposition to the

[90] The visual similarity is no accident. Romance comics eclipsed superheroes in popularity in the sixties. Many superhero artists moved to romance titles to make a living (e.g., Kirby and Simon's *Young Romance Comics*).

Code. Sabin and Joseph Witek both generate lists of the ways in which the Underground comix were self-consciously oppositional to mainstream comics (Sabin 92). Witek's is particularly exhaustive:

> Underground comix originally were defined by what they were not: comic books approved by the Comics Code Authority. [...] they were not published by any of the traditional comic-book publishers, they were not distributed to newsstands by magazine distributors, and, in general, they did not make very much money. [...] except for their covers, the undergrounds were nearly all printed in black and white. [...] the Code-approved comics observed a rigid set of content guidelines [...] comix appeared to obey a single maxim: anything goes. [...] comix wallowed in sex of the most bizarre kind [...] routinely presented death, dismemberment, and mayhem beyond the wildest fantasies of the gory EC comics [... and] celebrated marijuana and LSD (Witek "Imagetext" par. 8)

The Underground comix deliberately situated themselves in perpetual, implied juxtaposition to Silver-Age, Code-approved comics; they self-consciously mocked *and* mimicked the mainstream, which is a form of metacomic gesture.

This strategy on the part of comix demonstrates two things, one formal and one cultural. First, almost the exact same self-referential/reflexive techniques used by the SA comics to naturalise the superhero and thus reify its underlying values (themselves reified in the Comics Code) were used by the Underground to destabilise the genres and values contained within those mainstream comics. Therefore, self-reflexivity does not indeed guarantee ideology. It tends towards denaturalisation, because it suspends belief and breaks the frame, but it can be put to the work of naturalisation as well. Second, only an audience that knew the mainstream could understand much of the Underground's commentaries because they were often rooted in a resentment towards, and an undermining of, the mainstream itself. Hutcheon's model of metafiction predicts this very behaviour. In her model, metafiction must construct the forms that it wishes to then deconstruct.[91] Feminist Underground comix, a whole field unto themselves, powerfully demonstrate this strategy.

Patricia Moodian's cover for *Wimmen's Comix* #1 (fig. 2.7) directly references and parodies romance comics of the fifties and sixties and it uses the radical grotesqueness that the comix creators learned from *Mad*. She depicts a couple who are typically pretty, going by both the fashion of the day (contemporary hair and make-up) and by the clean lines and solid colours of the romance comics that this cover references. However, the protagonist, at right, is both radically ugly *and* the character whom viewers are encouraged to identify with. The audience can literally read her thoughts while the pretty couple seems to have none. The target audience, then, is ostensibly not those who think of

[91] See 1.2.b: "Metafiction."

fig. 2.7: Self-Conscious Ugliness (*Wimmen's Comix* #1)

themselves as the pretty people, although like the protagonist, they might want to be. Through the protagonist's grotesque ugliness, the cover achieves a kind of beauty, as opposed to a superficial prettiness. It is similar to the beauty that Spiegelman ascribes to *Mad*'s woman of the year.[92] Both figures are wilfully, defiantly, self-consciously ugly, although the *Mad* cover is comically grotesque where Moodian's cover is pathetic, in the Classical sense. This cover, and the personal point of view it implies, extends a hand to those who are on the outside looking in, specifically women who are left behind by the aesthetic norms of the fashion and entertainment industries. The image is also an example of ironic authentication: the unnamed protagonist on this cover knows that she is unattractive, but she resents the blond man choosing the pretty woman anyway. Her feelings of loneliness therefore seem more honest, and the image encourages viewers who are similarly both self-aware and resentful to identify with her.

Not all the female/feminist creators sought out the deliberately grotesque, however. Trina Robbins's work is a notable exception to this tendency and she is even more directly referential; she creates, and advocates, images of beautiful, powerful women that are much closer to the mainstream line style than the typically grotesque Underground. The cover of her *It Ain't Me Babe* contains several female comics characters from mainstream comic books and strips, including Wonder Woman, Mary Marvel, and Little Lulu (fig. 2.8). The book depicts stories of feminist empowerment as those same characters move out from under the thumb of their male counterparts. The power of *Babe* is that Robbins uses popular characters to subvert the ubiquitous sexism of the popular tradition itself, which is very much what the Revisionist comics do, even though they do it from within the mainstream. Robbins herself drew several Wonder Woman comics in the eighties,[93] so she is one of many creators who moves back and forth

[92] See 2.2.a: "Tales That Drove Them Mad."
[93] Cover art, *The Legend of Wonder Woman* #1-#5; pencils, *Wonder Woman Annual* #2 v2.

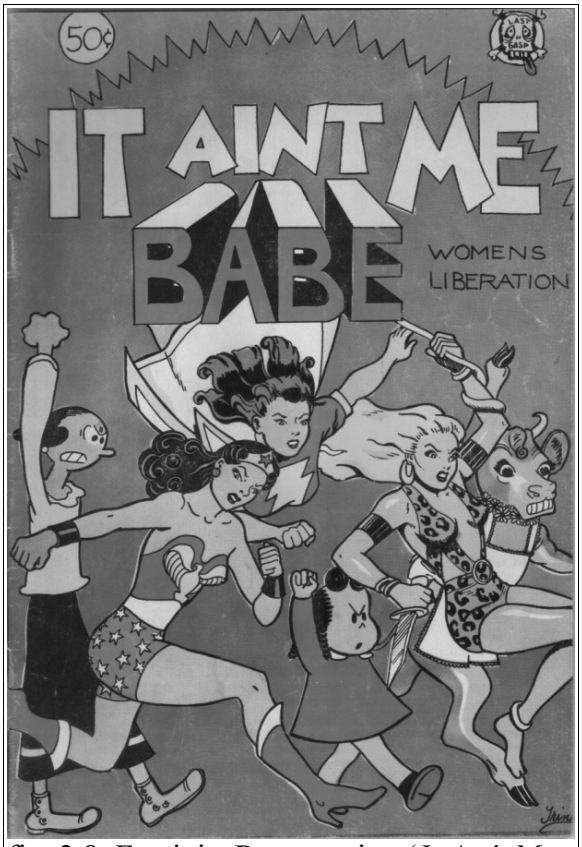

fig. 2.8: Feminist Repurposing (*It Ain't Me Babe*, front cover)

between the Underground/ Alternative scene and the mainstream.[94] Robbins' ironic representations of superheroes are by no means unique to feminist comix. Gilbert Shelton's *Wonder Wart-Hog* directly parodies Superman (Estren 1984) and his *Smiling Sergeant Death and his Merciless Mayhem Patrol* satirises *Sgt. Fury and his Howling Commandos* (Estren 192, Pustz 62), while Spain Rodriguez's *Trashman* performs a Marxist/anarchist satire of another incarnation of the same character, *Nick Fury, Agent of S.H.I.E.L.D.* (Pustz 61-62, Estren 191-192). The feminist comix are a reply to the sexism of male-produced comix; Crumbs' corpus is a particular target.

Robert Crumb, probably the best-known Underground comix creator, displays the ambivalence of the Underground, strong feelings in two directions at once, which metacomic techniques are adept at depicting because of their tendency to undermine and suspend certainty. Crumb's *Zap Comix* #1 (1967) is the touchstone of the Underground movement, not the first of its kind, but definitely the book that grabbed the attention of audiences, according to both Hatfield (11) and Sabin (103). It sets a pattern for quite directly referencing and aping the look of mainstream comics. *Zap Comix* #1 refutes the importance and power of the Comics Code through a fake CCA logo on the cover that reads "APPROVED BY THE GHOST WRITERS IN THE SKY,"[95] which represents Crumb thumbing his nose at the CCA itself. The book is approved by someone, but who that is matters so little that they do not need to exist (i.e., they are fictitious ghosts).[96]

Crumb also makes a practise of representing himself in his comix, a directly self-reflexive gesture. He depicts himself as a parody of his detractors' characterisation of him and/or as an acerbic truth-teller who is on the side of the audience. These are not just self-referential moments, Crumb admitting that he

[94] Robbins has also written several books of popular scholarship, including *The Great Women Superheroes* (1997) and *The Great Women Cartoonists* (2001), and she is a member of the University of Florida's Comix Scholars email forum. She wears many hats.

[95] These citations to Crumb's work reference Mark James Estren's *A History of Underground Comix*, which reproduces many pages in full size.

writes and draws the book, but self-reflexive, too. In *Zap* #1, Crumb's cartoon avatar, "Bob," reveals that he has a closet full of fully-functional pirate-radio equipment (59:1) and a nebulous master plan for world domination. He thus casts himself as a parody of a megalomaniacal supervillain, akin to Lex Luthor or the Kingpin. The drawing style—rounded features and out-of-proportion bodies—and his insistence that he's "ONE OF THE LAST GREAT MEDIEVAL THINKERS" (59:3) casts this monologue as a parody of both the comics on which it is patterned and of those people who might actually see Crumb in those terms. [97]

Big Ass Comics #2 (1971) contains two similar monologues. In the first, Bob is at his drawing table and the line style is more anatomically accurate than the example above. He briefly rants in a paranoid manner until he realises that there is a "PUNGENT ODOR […] COMING FROM [his] INK BOTTLE"" (13:4), which he concludes must be "POISON GAS" (13:5) planted there by a government agent whose identity he knows but cannot reveal. The page ends with Bob screaming "IT DOESN'T MATTER WHAT YOU DO TO ME, YOU SWING! YOU'VE ALREADY SEALED YOUR OWN DOOM. **FREEDOM LIVES ON!!**" (13:7). Hatfield's ironic authentication is once again at work, here. Implicit in this short narrative monologue is the idea that the audience both gets the joke—Bob's paranoia is laughable—but also supports his unspecific revolutionary attitude towards " THOSE ROTTEN MOTHERFUCKERS" (13:7) whom he cannot name except to say that they work for the government.

In that same issue, he depicts himself once again in "And Now, A Word to You Feminist Women, from that ol' Male-Chauvinist Pig, R. Crumb Himself!!" This time, Bob starts by admitting that he has heard and understood the claim that his work is sexist, but he defends himself on three points. First, he asserts that depicting violence against women does not mean he advocates it, which is a moot point if one is concerned with the depiction itself rather than the intent or beliefs of its creator. Second, he characterises any limit to his freedom of speech as "TOTALITARIANISM! DICTATORSHIP! AND SHEER STUPIDITY TO BOOT!! " (128:10), because it would make him a "LIAR" who is "NO LONGER TRUE" to himself (128:13), which invokes the common Underground belief in totally unfiltered creative expression, as opposed to the highly censored and corporate-controlled mainstream comics. Finally, somewhat inconsistent with his first point, he claims that if he stopped "VENTING [his] RAGE ON PAPER" (128:14), he would then have to start raping twelve-year-old girls (128:15). It is hard to imagine that Crumb, the creator, actually means what Bob, the cartoon, says, but Bob's claim that he needs

[96] The logo is also very close to "Ghost Riders In the Sky," a country song from the 1940s. The significance of the reference is unclear, but using song lyrics is a motif in Crumb's oeuvre, an intertextual reference that, ironically, has faded over time. The line "keep on truckin'" is from Blind Boy Fuller's "Truckin' My Blues Away." Because of Crumb, the phrase turned into a hippie mantra, but became so synonymous with him and his comix that it was in effect disconnected from its original context, which, ironically, ruined the intertextual reference.

[97] Warren Ellis, who speaks mostly through one of his many presences on the internet, cultivates a similar persona: would-be supervillain who speaks uncomfortable truths. That same persona carries over to many of his protagonists: Spider Jerusalem, Jenny Sparx, Miranda Zero, Doktor Sleepless, Elijah Snow, etc.

to draw violent acts against women in order to keep from performing them does indeed constitute an implied threat of sexual violence towards women and children, and such a threat, regardless of its material credibility, constitutes an act of violence all by itself. This ironic, inverted, parodic sentiment probably did little to quell the accusation that R. Crumb's work contains a great deal of misogyny and sexism.

Herein lies a metacomic paradox, though. If analysed straight, the strip is a refutation of the feminist critique of Crumb's work. It employs a naturalised conception of free speech coupled with a Romantic notion of "pure" artistic expression—in effect a straw-man defence against a non-existent attempt at censorship—and, of course, an implied threat of sexual violence against women. However, given the self-reflexive nature of this strip and the whole ironic culture of Underground comix, there is good reason to analyse it against the grain. As a parody of irrational anti-feminist sentiment, this monologue would in fact reveal Bob's rhetoric for what it is, a thinly-veiled rationalisation for continuing to speak and act on misogynistic desires in the guise of freedom of speech. The strip even ends with a child-like figure who appears embarrassed about Bob's screaming rant (he smiles and sweats, his eyebrows arch; see fig. 2.9). This final panel indicates a certain awareness on Crumb's part that Bob's sentiment is frightening and inappropriate, much like his paranoia and megalomania in the previous two examples. However, the claim to irony might also be a tactic to avoid the blame for misogyny. Speaking in 1974, Trina Robbins laments: "What *is* upsetting about Crumb's attitude toward women is that he seems unable to escape chauvinism even when he really wants to" (Estren 130). Robbins knew Crumb personally, so this comment is directed at him as well as his comix. She speaks, here, to a contemporary awareness that the comix were a site of struggle, in this case the struggle of men with themselves, men who might have wanted to shed their sexist behaviours but did not know how or could not will themselves to do so. In light of Robbins' comment, the ambiguity in "A Word to You Feminist Women" indicates an ambivalence towards feminism: a strong desire to be part of the solution that is at odds with an equally strong desire to not lose one's male privilege.

fig. 2.9: Crumb's Ambiguous Misogyny (*Zap Comix* #1 in Estren 128:16)

Self-reflexivity fuels the Underground's extremely lively and forceful commentaries on both mainstream comics and mainstream culture. The comix inherit a sense of the parodic and the grotesque from *Mad*, and then explode it out to almost deliberately off-putting proportions. The Underground also assumes a voice that Linda Hutcheon associates with

postmodern culture, one that claims the right to have its cake and eat it, too. Crumb's representations of gender and sexism, as well as race and sexuality in general, are so ambiguous that both his proponents and his detractors seem to have ample evidence to argue their own positions. Moodian presents a protagonist who is quite self-aware, with regards to her extreme ugliness, and she both protests against the cult of beauty and also wants to be part of it. Robbins' message of empowerment is unusually straightforward in comix, but even she expresses an admiration for Crumb's extremely ambiguous work. The comix seem to be an ideal instance of Hutcheon's postmodern, which does not care to resolve contradiction and instead just presents it for inspection, leaving the reader/viewer to decide on its moral implications. Self-reflexivity is the perfect vessel to contain and transmit that postmodern uncertainty because it can depict contradiction and even paradox in a stable form.

2.2.c: The Underground is Revolting

The comix follow a very different path than the mainstream. Conceptually, they come from the pre-Code comics, which is to say, the mainstream comics that America produced before there was censorship. It stands to reason, then, that the comix would display more formal experimentation, as well as more sex, violence, and irreverent social commentary than the mainstream. The Underground quite deliberately produced comix that were self-consciously anti-authoritarian and visually shocking. Indeed, half the time their humour value is simply the degree to which they reject straight culture, often in the absence of a traditional narrative joke. That said, the sense of total artistic freedom that runs through them is a bit of an illusion. Comix, as a verisimilitude, quickly solidified in the mid-sixties and had their own quite confining set of audience/editorial expectations. Spiegelman relates his first experience of submitting a portfolio to the East Village Other in 1965. It was cordially rejected because it did not contain enough sex and drugs (Rosenkranz 60). A Shary Flenniken illustration for the 1973 Berkeley Comics Convention includes an editor or publisher, recognisable by the fact that he is on the phone and giving her instructions, saying: "**REMEMBER** NOW, WE WANT **SEX, SEX, SEX!!**" (Flenniken in Estren 135:1). Estren, in conversation with Trina Robbins, sums up the Underground well: "I don't think the best Underground cartoonists are totally hung up on gross things—rather, they're overreacting to the absence of those things in the sterile comic books we all read when we were kids" (134). As Witek points out:

> although the Underground comix were nowhere near as formulaic and market-driven as were the the Code-approved comics, they still necessarily were caught up in their own system of economic relations and of audience expectations. (Witek "Imagetext" par. 10)

The comix were a reactive, counter-cultural product. They occupied specifically those spaces that the mainstream feared and forbade, and thus they were effectively defined by the mainstream (Witek "Imagetext" par. 8). They lampoon, parody, mimic, satirise, subvert, and viciously mock mainstream comics and the

straight culture that produced them. Which is to say that their self-appointed, revolutionary position meant that metacomic devices were particularly efficacious for them.

2.3: Conclusion

Joseph Witek's "Imagetext, or, Why Art Spiegelman Doesn't Draw 'Comix'" situates the Underground as the product of a rich, full, pre-existing comic-book tradition in the United States. In the course of this argument, he also makes the point that the Underground and the mainstream are not entirely unrelated entities, but instead two facets of the overall development of American comics. Although he does not use this metaphor, the comix are in essence the rebel child of pre-Code comics, whereas the mainstream is the obedient, conformist child. The Underground then grows into the Alternative comics of the 1980s. Indeed, many of the Underground creators literally grew up and joined and/or formed the Alternative scene, specifically Robert Crumb, Art Spiegelman, and Harvey Pekar, among many others, and a few of the pre-Code creators fostered the Underground creators, specifically Harvey Kurtzman (Witek "Imagetext" par 16). The Code's requirements appear to retard the artistic development of mainstream comics, on the other hand, but as is the case with most instances of heavy censorship, artists find creative ways to resist the ideology even while conforming to its rules. In the SA, that resistance takes the form of metacomic self-reflexivity, but the *Squadron Supreme* and *Crisis* cycles unfortunately manage only to register resistance to the ideology behind the code before ultimately legitimising it.

The comix and the SA consciously define each other in the way that the avant garde and the mainstream often do, as polar opposites, in which case neither can ever defeat the other because without the other, each would have no identity of its own. Witek points out that "the underground comix depend on their audience's intimate knowledge of the object of parody" (par. 23), namely the mainstream comics. For Crumb's parody of the CCA seal or Robbin's invocation of superhero characters to make any sense, the audience has to know about the Comics Code and Mary Marvel. Once the comix carved out their generic niche, the overlap between the two fields receded. There were also other traditions that the comix satirised and/or parodied, such as political cartoons/caricatures and rock-music posters. However, many of the late-teens and twenty-something adults who purchased *Zap* were likely the same ones who purchased *The Amazing Spider-Man*. Indeed, they almost have to have been the same people in order for the parodic content to make any sense. Therefore, the comix and the SA are not two opposing forces, battling until one of them wins. Instead, they exhibit precisely the behaviour that British cultural studies describes, in Gramsci's terms, as an ongoing struggle between interanimating discourses.[98] Neither side can ever win this struggle. The very concept of "sides" almost does not apply.

By the eighties, American comics in general no longer occupied the attention of the culture at large, and the anti-comics panic of the fifties looked

[98] See 1.3.a: "Comics as Myths."

naïve, in retrospect. The attention of conservative forces shifted in the eighties to television, pop music, and video games, so the Revisionist comics had the room to express themselves without the kind of resistance that pre-Code comics encountered. The atmosphere of slackened resistance from conservative forces in fact contributed to the rise of Revisionist comics. As censorship relaxed in the mainstream, the Alternative scene no longer had to viciously attack that mainstream in order to define itself. Thus the rebel child and the conformist child make a tentative peace with each other in the eighties and nineties. Many creators move with relative ease back and forth between the two fields, such as Pekar, Robbins, Gaiman, Moore, Dave McKean, Brian Bollard, Kevin O'Neill, and many others. The great chasm that supposedly separates the mainstream from the Alternative proves to be more like a line in the sand, symbolically powerful but easily crossed. In their adulthood, the rebel and the conformist grow up to find out they are not nearly as different as they had insisted.

There is, of course, no end to the story of the twin children of pre-Code American comics, but the 2000s have seen an interesting development that, although not directly pertinent to my overall argument, deserves some attention. By 2008, comics have made a great deal of headway as a commercially and creatively viable art form in their own right. Mainstream book stores regularly carry comics, often under the name "graphic novel," and so-called mainstream comics are mostly sold in speciality stores called "comic shops." The average person still largely associates the art form with one genre, the superhero, but non-superhero comics have made the most headway into the mainstream book trade. "Non-superhero" comics includes Underground and Alternative work, as well as Japanese comics (manga) and a small presence of European work, mostly BD. This shift in position suggests that the "alternative" comics are rapidly becoming the actual mainstream of the art form and that superhero and other high-fantasy work has become a niche market. The Alternative still, to a degree, defines itself as "not the mainstream" (meaning "not superheroes") because doing so grants it a ready-made identity, but given the market penetration and the critical attention that Alternative comics have achieved in the 2000s, that ready-made identity is somewhat less useful. However, Hollywood's recent infatuation with superheroes has put that genre back into public consciousness and superhero films have adapted their source material with such faith that they started with earnest, SA-style superheroes, such as the *Spider-man* and the *X-Men* franchises, and have already arrived at Revisionist superheroes, such as Christopher Nolan's *The Dark Knight* and Zach Ryan/David Hayter's adaptation of *Watchmen*. This very shift, from SA-style to Revisionist-style superheroes, coupled with the many adaptations of Underground/Alternative comics (e.g., *Road to Perdition*, *Ghost World*, *American Splendor,* and *A History of Violence*), further demonstrates that although the mainstream/Underground distinction remains useful as a marketing tool, the two fields continue to converge, even when adapted into an entirely different medium.

Chapter 3: Genre

"I NEVER LIED. I'M AT LEAST AN HONEST FICTION. A TRUE FICTION."

-from *Promethea* (Alan Moore and J.H. Williams III)

This chapter focuses on the commentaries that Moore, Gaiman, and Ellis' Revisionist comics level at the dominant genre in American comic books, the superhero story. Chapter 2 describes the dilemma that American comics faced in the sixties and seventies. The target audience responded favourably to comics that exhibited increased levels of conventional realism, but as a verisimilitude in Todorov's sense of a set of narrative expectations that that audience associated with a socialised conception of "reality." Thus the Underground comix depicted the "reality" of the counter-culture (i.e., the rebellious culture of civil rights, the sexual revolution, and drug use) and the Silver-Age comics depicted the "reality" allowed by the internalised ideology of the Comics Code (i.e., authority figures maintaining the socio-economic order through the allegedly lawful application of violence). The mainstream comics industry responded to this demand by incorporating more and more discreet elements of conventional realism, such as causal consistency, political awareness, and psychologically-consistent characters, as well as increased levels of sex and violence. Once again, by "conventional realism," I understand it as one of Todorov's verisimilitudes. Thus conventional realism is a set of narrative devices that indicate resemblance to reality by virtue of convention, not necessarily actual resemblance. Indeed, Revisionist metacomics almost consistently argue, at least by implication, that what the audience perceives as "reality" is itself a construction, partly social and partly literary. To be clear, I am not asserting that there is no such thing as reality, but instead invoking Waugh's implication that metafiction can and often does suspend our ability to define "reality" separately from fictionality or textuality. [99]

The mainstream's success at incorporating conventional realism in order to construct a convincing verisimilitude was often limited at best, and as its audience aged and kept reading comics for more than a few years at a time, the industry fell back on metacomic devices, specifically analogue characters (copies that comment on their originals through close similarity with a limited number of prominent differences) and retcon (retroactive continuity). [100] Thus, by the eighties, American comics faced a dilemma: either abandon the attempt to incorporate conventional realism, or abandon the fantastic genre on which the industry is based (i.e., the superhero). Revisionist comics seek a third path. They employ a technique similar to what Hutcheon describes in *A Poetics of Postmodernism*. In her model, postmodernism displays a "deliberate refusal to resolve contradictions" between history and self-reflexivity, which are seemingly incompatible opposites (Hutcheon *Poetics* x). Instead it uses historiographic metafiction "to confront the paradoxes of fictive/historical representation" (106). In effect, she argues, postmodernism tries to have its cake and eat it too, *and*

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[99] See 1.2.b: "Metafiction."

[100] See 2.1: "Silver Age" for full definitions of "analogue" and "retcon" in Silver-Age comics.

acknowledge that it is doing so. Similarly, Revisionist comics refuse to choose between conventional realism and fantasy, and use self-reflexivity to present both simultaneously. They admit that their content is constructed and therefore neither ahistorical nor natural. In so doing, they start down the path of placing that content into its context—historical, social, political, and occasionally even industrial. Which is to say that they use self-reflexive devices to articulate themselves, in Hall's sense of the word. This chapter concentrates on how Revisionist comics articulate the superhero, in particular.

Revisionist articulations of the superhero start with a simple, arguably self-evident, premise. As Lance Parkin puts it, "Writers and readers were starting to realise that whatever real-world elements were introduced, superheroes would never be all that 'realistic'" (Parkin 56). 1 do not claim that all attempts to bring realist conventions to superheroes have failed; there have been some successes. [101] However, the basic premise of the genre is extremely fantastic, so the conventions of those two modes of storytelling—fantasy and realism—tend to clash. The comics culture's sense of conventional realism had also drifted by the eighties. Pustz succinctly describes it as the "peculiar realism of superhero comics, where reality is created out of continuity and specific formal rules [and in which] violence, not compassion, is 'realistic'" (Pustz 129). In Todorov's terms, Pustz is saying that they constructed a cynical and violent verisimilitude and this construction resulted from an era of attempts to duplicate comics like *The Dark Knight Returns*, *Watchmen*, and *Swamp Thing*. Fans and creators often call this the era the Grim and Gritty style or the Dark Age of superheroes. [102] Metacomics, however, adopt a different response to the call for conventional reailsm. Instead of trying in vain to suspend the audience's disbelief in an inherently fantastic genre, they admit to, even revel in, their constructed nature—employing Inge's suspension of belief[103]—and thereby create a self-reflexive verisimilitude. Akin to Hatfield's ironic authentication,[104] self-reflexive verisimilitude is a mode in which self-reflexivity itself is that which indicates reality. It becomes a convention of realism. In order to find anything that resonates as the "real" in superhero comics, Revisionist creators often turn inwards, to examine their own fantastic underpinnings, first and foremost. Revisionist comics articulate a struggle between the drive to create conventional realism and the putative impossibility of doing so in the highly fantastic genres of the American mainstream. As a result, many Revisionist comics, so many as to almost be the norm, arrive at self-reflexive verisimilitude, a new set of techniques and practises that are highly self-

[101] Three examples among many: Alex Ross' photo realistic art in *Kingdom Come* and *Marvels* lends a verisimilitude to the fantastic worlds contained within those comics; David Mack's collage-like narrative constructions in "Echo: Vision Quest" (*Daredevil* v2 #51-#55) reveal the inner life of action/superhero characters and thus de-emphasise their fantastic aspects; and Brian Michael Bendis' *Powers* follows in the footsteps of *Watchmen* by extrapolating the social and legal consequences of a superhuman presence in a world like ours (*Powers* v1 and v2).

[102] See the opening section of Chapter 2 for a discussion of comic-book "Ages" and their significance within the fan community as well as within academic discourse.

[103] See 1.2.d: "Metacomics."

[104] See 1.2.b: "Metafiction" and 2.2.a: "Tales That Drove Them Mad."

conscious, but still viable as a storytelling mode as well as being both replicable by the creators and identifiable by the audience.

This chapter analyses three different strategies that Revisionist metacomics use in their struggle with trying to produce a convincing fantasy and then their subsequent embrace of self-reflexive verisimilitude. In the first section, "Dysfunctional Realities," *Miracleman* (Moore et al.), *Watchmen* (Moore and Dave Gibbons), and *Black Summer* (Ellis and Juan Jose Ryp) all present narratives that place superheroes (fantastic literary figures by definition) into conventionally-realistic settings and thus actively demonstrate that the two are ostensibly incompatible. In the second subsection, "Postmodern Silver Age," *Supreme* (Moore et al.) and *Planetary* (Ellis and David Cassaday) denaturalise and historicise the superhero genre using postmodern practises identified by Linda Hutcheon and Frederic Jameson. Finally, in the third section, "Revisionist Fantasy," *Swamp Thing* (Moore, Brian Tottleben, and Rich Veitch) and *Sandman* (Gaiman et al.) reinterpret the superhero according to the "logic" of different fantasy genres, specifically horror and myth.

3.1: Dysfunctional Realities

Silver-Age-style comics respond to the desire for conventional realism with series like *Utopia Project* and *Crisis on Infinite Earths*, but as I argue in Chapter 2,[105] these comics do not achieve what they implicitly promise; neither cycle is particularly successful at creating a convincing verisimilitude, and both ultimately naturalise the superhero. Revisionist comics that respond to that desire for conventional realism often take a very different tack. Instead of trying to depict a superhero that both conforms to its generic constraints and addresses contemporary social issues, these comics implicitly argue that, under the scrutiny of conventional realism, the superhero ideology reveals itself as ethically corrupt and narratively contrived. They insert superhero characters into conventionally-realistic settings in order to demonstrate what is ostensibly obvious: that they are incompatible in practise. However, an audience that has internalised and compartmentalised conventional realism and superheroic fantasy can easily come to associate both separately with "reality." This is not to claim that the audience actually thinks that people can fly or leap tall buildings, but instead to claim that they perceive the underlying political, social, and ideological presumptions of the superhero genre as basically sound: if one had the power to stop alleged injustices, the likes of which perforce consistently appear in superhero comics, one's moral duty to society would compel one to act as a vigilante. Where SA comics fail at presenting a conventionally-realistic superhero, Revisionist comics present the superhero failing to be conventionally realistic. This strategy appears in several recent series: *Supreme Power* (J. Michael Straczynksi and Gary Frank) reboots the Squadron Supreme and attempts to present the dystopian view of superheroes that *Utopia Project* intimates but never quite articulates; *Powers* (Brian Michael Bendis and Michael Avon Oeming) combines the Revisionist superhero with a gritty police procedural; and *The Ultimates*, Volumes I and II

[105] See 2.1.a: "Crises."

(Mark Miller and Bryan Hitch) makes explicit the various subtexts and political as well as moral implications of Marvel's *Avengers* comics.

One of the most interesting failures of morality in superhero comics is the superhero as benevolent dictator. *Watchmen*, *Miracleman*, and *Black Summer* all depict the superhero-dictator and they arrive at an altogether obvious conclusion: the superheroic idiom (i.e., hero fights villain to save innocent bystanders) is simply not complex or flexible enough to solve practical social or political problems. This point may seem self-evident, and indeed it is, but superhero comics for several decades relied on a dim, if fanciful and compartmentalised, belief that superheroic morality is just a fantastic extension of one's moral duty. Just as metafiction points out the obvious, that fiction can never be "real"—no matter how much it might conform to conventional realism—Revisionist dictator-hero stories points out that the superheroic idiom does not work outside of its generic, and therefore ideological, context. Revisionist dictator-hero comics depict superheroes failing to fulfil their basic mission to save the world, a point made by the majority of critics who have worked with the genre (and which I expand upon below).

In *Miracleman*, a group of superhumans who are *de facto* gods assumes control of the world and creates what looks like a utopia, but the narrative leaves gaps that imply that their rule is utopian only for some. In *Watchmen*, Adrian Veidt/Ozymandias fakes an alien invasion in an attempt to engineer world peace, but he has to become both saviour-hero and arch-villain to do so. In *Black Summer*, a lone superhuman executes the president of the United States for his allegedly criminal behaviour. The series presents that hero and his arch-rival as unable to think outside of the generic roles of a superhero comic book. Ellis' most notorious foray into the dictator-saviour superhero is undoubtedly *The Authority*, but I have chosen not to use it in this section because *Miracleman* and *Watchmen* cover most of the same ground, whereas *Black Summer*, a much more recent series, constitutes the same narrative trope but with an unusually direct political angle. This section proceeds in three subsections, each of which analyses how *Miracleman*, *Watchmen*, and *Black Summer* use specific metacomic techniques: the analogue hero, formal self-reflection, and finally the dictator-hero.

3.1.a: Analogues

Miracleman and *Watchmen* use analogues—copies that offer commentaries on their originals through strategic difference [106]—in very similar ways, which should come as no surprise given that Moore wrote them at roughly the same time.[107] Both series resurrect old, forgotten characters and repurpose them in order to mount a narrative dissection of the superhero genre. *Miracleman* repurposes a pre-existing set of characters who started as British knock-offs of the American superhero Captain Marvel. *Watchmen* makes analogues out of the Charlton Comics heroes in order to evoke nostalgia for 1960s superheroes. *Black*

[106] For a full explanation of analogues, see 2.1.a: "Crises."

[107] *Marvelman*/*Miracleman* ran from 1982 to 1989, and *Watchmen* was published over 1986-87.

Summer, however, does not employ analogues as such, instead using much broader genre pastiches, which I discuss below.[108]

The cast of *Miracleman* is based on a British superhero from the 1950s who has an unusually convoluted publishing history, a history that Moore takes great pains to explain in the back-matter of the second American issue, in a piece called "M*****man" to indicate that the character's name was changed between the British and American comics (from "Marvelman" to "Miracleman," for legal reasons), presumably because Americans would not otherwise know the character at all. That history starts with Superman, who was initially so popular that other publishers immediately created direct copies of him, including Fawcett Comics, who created Captain Marvel in 1939, just one year after Superman's début. A British publisher called L. Miller and Sons reprinted Captain Marvel's comics in black and white during the 1950s. However, DC launched a copyright suit against Fawcett for infringing on Superman that they won in 1953, which meant that Fawcett had to stop publishing Captain Marvel. Meanwhile, L. Miller and Sons were left with nothing to reprint, so they hired Mick Anglo, a British comics artist, to invent a replacement. He created Marvelman, a blatantly derivative English version of Captain Marvel. Both characters are boys who speak a magic word and turn into adult superheroes and both have a supporting cast of youthful sidekicks who have their own magic words. Their costume designs and arch nemeses are all extremely similar. Both wear combinations of blue, red, and yellow, and both fight mad scientists with vaguely Latino names: Dr. Sivana and Dr. Gargunza, respectively. L. Miller and Sons published *Marvelman* comics until 1959.

Then in 1982, *Warrior Magazine*, a British comic-book anthology, acquired the rights to *Marvelman* and hired Alan Moore to write his new adventures. Moore took the details of Marvelman's publishing history and extrapolated a metacomic premise:

> [...] realizing that since I hadn't seen any actual Marvelman [comics] since the early sixties and that the title had probably been discontinued. I wondered idly what Marvelman was doing these days. I was struck by the image of the eternally youthful and exuberant hero as a middle-aged man. trudging the streets and trying fruitlessly to remember his magic word. ("M*****man" 2)

Moore's *Marvelman* appeared in *Warrior* until 1985, when they ceased publication due to legal pressure from Marvel Comics (Maçek). However, Moore had by then made a name for himself in American comics, so US publishers began reprinting his British work. Eclipse Comics, a small publisher from California, republished *Marvelman* under the new name *Miracleman*, to avoid more legal trouble. What Moore does not, and of course could not, explain in that afterward is that he would hand his share of the rights of the character to Neil Gaiman following issue #16, Moore's last as writer, and that Gaiman's issues

[108] See 3.1.b: "Formal Self-Reflection."

would directly address the dystopic and fascistic elements that Moore's issues imply. I do not go into detail regarding Gaiman's issues of the series because they are as yet unfinished, due to yet more disputes about who holds the copyright to the character, and they largely elaborate on ideas that Moore had already covered, if indirectly.

While non-British audiences would not necessarily have known *Miracleman*'s history at L. Miller and Sons or in the pages of *Warrior,* the references to Captain Marvel are quite clear. Michael "Mick" Moran, Miracleman's alter ego, retells his origin story in issue #2, a science-fiction version of Billy Batson/Captain Marvel's origin. Mick/Billy travels down into a cave/the subway and meets an astro-physicist/wizard who gives him the ability to transform into an adult superhero if he says the word "shazam"/"kimota." [109] The difference that constitutes the analogue function, however, is that in Moore's version, Mick's wife laughs at the story and calls it stupid. Embarrassed, he agrees: "I SUPPOSE YOU'RE RIGHT. ACTUALLY SAYING IT OUT LOUD LIKE THAT. IT DOES SOUND… WELL… PRETTY UNLIKELY" (*Miracleman* 1.23.2). Miracleman's analogue function leads directly to the book's first prominent self-reflexive assertion: superheroes are rather silly. As obvious as this assertion appears today, at the time, superhero comics were not prone to make it. For the most part, they were, and in some ways remain, remarkably earnest about their own fantastic premises. Moore later complicates the relationship between Miracleman and Captain Marvel,[110] but the analogue function by itself reveals the embarrassment that creators and fans felt in the early days of Revisionist comics about the silliness of SA-style comics. In fact, Revisionist comics often constitute an attempt to dispel those embarrassing old comics and/or update them to the sensibilities of a very different audience.

As if this reminder of Miracleman's connection to Captain Marvel were not enough, in an afterward to the third issue of the American series, Moore meticulously explains how the character was created and later revived, which draws specific attention to its publishing history for the benefit of the American audience, and, thus, articulates the character as the product of market forces at least as much as any other factor. The afterward to issue #3 of *Miracleman* ostensibly constitutes Moore's insistence that the character is not called "Miracleman" at all, but it also effectively informs the audience that Miracleman is an analogue character with a multistable identity. He is Moore's version of Anglo's Marvelman (renamed and soon-to-be radically retconned), who is himself a copy of Captain Marvel, who is a copy of Superman.[111] The fact that Eclipse and/or Moore felt the need to include that back-story in their *Miracleman* comics attests to how much background knowledge the audience needs in order to understand self-referential comics. Knowing the publishing history of the

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[109] "Kimota" is atomic" spells backwards phonetically, a reference to Marvelman's origin in super-science, rather than Captain Marvel's origin in magic and mythology.

[110] See 3.1.b: "Formal Self-Reflection."

[111] Superman's literary and cultural origins extend backwards as well, through pulp adventure novels. See Peter Coogan's *From Daniel Boone to Batman* for a longer discussion of this topic.

character reveals that he is at least a fourth-generation copy. Miracleman does not just have a dual multistable presence, as both a copy of Captain Marvel and a character unto himself, but a many-faceted stability that implies a series of connections to the whole publishing history of superhero comics: Superman's début in 1938, a frenzy of lookalikes in the late thirties and forties, their influence in Britain in the fifties, the Revisionist impulse to re-examine characters that the creators and/or the audience originally read as children, and finally the "British invasion" of American comics in the eighties.

Watchmen's cast, like *Miracleman*'s, is entirely made of analogues of the Charlton Comics stable of heroes, the rights to which DC had purchased in the early eighties (Pustz 147). Moore and Gibbons alter these analogues so that they do not refer only to their originals but instead reference the whole superhero genre. Moore and Gibbons had intended to use the Charlton heroes (Pustz 147), but DC refused so they had to slightly alter the characters in order to use them ("Alan Moore Interview" 1). For example, Dan Dreiberg/Nite Owl II is a direct analogue of Ted Kord/Blue Beetle II. They are both inventor heroes who took on the name of an earlier hero from the Golden Age. However, these analogues also reference other characters. Dreiberg contains shades of Clark Kent (nerdy writer with glasses who is secretly a superhero) and Batman (millionaire playboy turned urban avenger). Similarly, Laurie Juspeczyk/Silk Spectre II is a pastiche of at least three different female superheroes—Nightshade (Charlton Comics), the Phantom Lady (Quality Comics), and Black Canary II (DC Comics)—and so she comes to represent all female superheroes and arguably all women in superhero comics, since she and her mother are the only female cast members. The dedicated comics audience recognises the various intertextual references buried in the *Watchmen* cast, if not consciously then at the very least intuitively. For example, on one of *Newsarama*'s discussion fora, StevenClubb [sic] sums up an informed fan's perspective on *Watchmen*'s cast:

> they really are just common characters in super-hero comics... both real and psychoanalyzed. You have the guy pursuing justice/revenge [Rorschach], you have the adventurer [Ozymandias], you have the sadist [the Comedian], you have the publicity hound [Silk Spectre I], you have the legacy [Silk Spectre II], etc. Pretty much every reason to become a super-hero (either from comics or from comic criticism) is on display in *Watchmen* [...] (StevenClubb post 17).

The analogues in this series thus direct the audience's attention towards the superhero genre as a whole, and it calls upon that audience's awareness of the publishing history of American comics, a history that includes DC having run other publishers out of business and/or purchasing their characters (e.g., both Fawcett and Charlton). Which is to say that *Watchmen* does quite deliberately what the *Crisis* cycle does accidentally. Both *Miracleman* and *Watchmen* use

analogue characters to refer collectively to the history of superhero publishing and its generic character types.

3.1.b: Formal Self-Reflection

Miracleman, Watchmen, and *Black Summer* all contain numerous self-reflexive elements. This subsection selects one representative example from each series: *Miracleman* uses a combination of general arthrology and image-text effects to introduce the character as a specimen of a genre; *Watchmen* uses a comic book within the comic book as an allegory for superheroism itself; and finally *Black Summer*'s cast comprises not a group of analogues, but instead a set of generic superhero types who therefore reference the genre as a whole.

In the first chapter of *Miracleman*,[112] Moore and Leach stage a transition between Anglo's Marvelman and the new version of the character, which would have been primarily for the benefit of the British audience that was more likely to be familiar with the original. This chapter is a period-specific adventure story of the original *Marvelman* comics. The story is set 1956 and includes the titular hero's two sidekicks as well as the Science Gestapo, a group of science-fiction supervillains from the distant future (i.e., 1981, the year that Moore et al.'s *Marvelman* was first published in *Warrior* magazine in the UK). This genre pastiche is eleven pages long, serves as a prologue for the series, and involves a time-travel gag that creates a visible retcon effect. The villains appear in 1956, the "present" of the story, which prompts the heroes to travel to 1981 to defeat them before they left, which in turn causes them to disappear in 1956. The final panel of the penultimate page is a typical group shot of all three heroes as they puzzle through the temporal mechanics of their adventure. The next page, the last of the chapter, depicts the same image of Miracleman but in close up, and then reproduces his face across six panels, each of which moves closer to the page until the last image presents only the light reflecting in his left pupil (fig. 3.1).

The panels do not mimic a cinematic close-up, in which more details of the face would be revealed after each zoom-in, but instead create the impression of moving closer and closer to a printed comic-book page: the character lines in Miracleman's face thicken and an errant dot of ink under his eye grows. This emphasis on ink and paper constitutes a self-referential effect; it reminds the viewer of the artifice of the comic book. The sequence also uses something akin to McCloud's aspect transitions to freeze Miracleman in time. No time appears to pass between the last panel on the previous page (i.e., the group shot) and the final panel on this page because the panels depict the act of looking closely at a page of comic-book panels, which transports the arthrological sequence out of the diegesis and into the moment of reading/viewing. The sequence prompts viewers to suspend their belief in the fantasy and literally take a closer look at this alleged superhero, embedded, as he now clearly is, in the comic-book as a material object.

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[112] *Marvelman* was divided into short chapters when it was published in *Warrior*, an anthology magazine; *Miracleman*, the American reprint, placed several chapters into each issue so that they would add up to twenty-four pages.

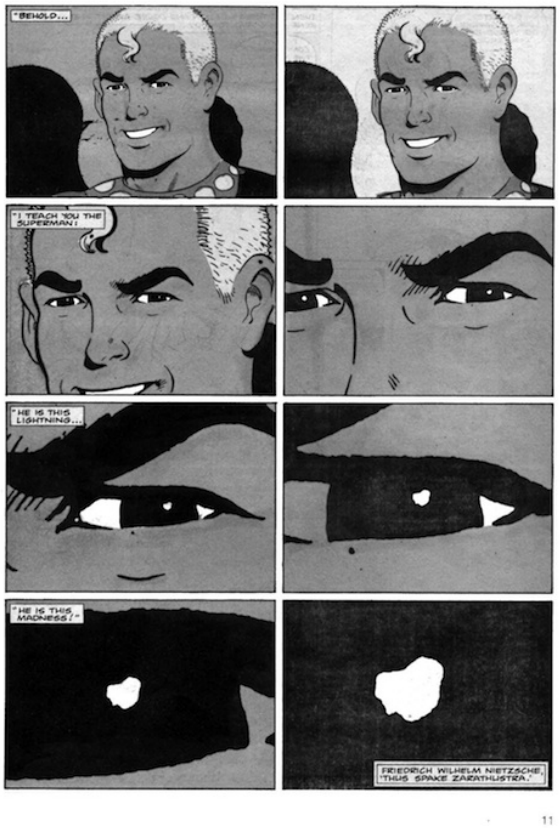

fig. 3.1: Miracleman as *Ubermesch* (*Miracleman* 1.11:1-6)

Simultaneous to this sequential effect, Moore's narration quotes Nietzsche from *Thus Spake Zarathustra* as the speaker dramatically introduces the *Übermensch*, here translated into the English word "superman" in order to make a familiar but still powerful connection between comic-book supermen and Nietzschean *Übermenschen*. This quotation, "HE IS THIS LIGHTNING… / HE IS THIS MADNESS…" (1.11:4, 1.11:6), supplants the camaraderie and adventurism of the preceding ten pages with a sense of impending doom and transforms Miracleman from friendly, paternal saviour into ominous, threatening Other, and it does so by calling attention to his superhumanity, his destructive power, and, as the series will eventually reveal, his estrangement from thinking like a human being. A reader familiar with Nietzche's corpus might also connect the visual sequence of the page to what is undoubtedly his most famous quotation, from *Beyond Good and Evil*: "He who fights with monsters should be careful lest he thereby become a monster. And if thou gaze long into an abyss, the abyss will also gaze into thee" (par. 146). This phrase, usually bastardised and disconnected from Nietzsche, is repeated in popular culture so often that it has become cliché. However, Moore does not quote that famous line. Instead, he and Leach conspire to relate it through the comic-book form. As the panels move ever closer to the dark abyss of Miracleman's eyes, the viewer sees only reflected light, and the abyss does indeed gaze back, even if only symbolically. The quotation also forms a general arthrological series down the left-hand column of the page and constitutes an image-text effect in which the text and the image inform each other without simply representing the same ideas, an effect Moore uses repeatedly throughout his corpus (e.g., in the aforementioned *Swamp Thing*, and also in *Watchmen*, which I discuss below). The combination of a frozen smiling face, representing a closer view of the comics page, and quoting a philosophy associated with fascism, all foreshadow a comic book that will study and dissect the superhero, not just depict it unproblematically.

Watchmen contains a comic book within the comic book, called *Tales of the Black Freighter*, as well as an encyclopaedia entry from a fictitious book, called *The Treasure Island Treasury*, that ostensibly critiques *Black Freighter*. The relationship between *Black Freighter*, *Treasury*, and *Watchmen*'s main plot constitutes the most powerful and complex self-reflexive thread within the series. At its simplest level, *Black Freighter* contains within it elements that match the larger plot and several specific characters. Manhattan's isolation on Mars parallels the mariner's shipwreck on a deserted island. Rorschach's name is misheard as "RAW SHARK" (*Watchmen* 5.22:6), which links him to the shark meat that the mariner eats to survive his ocean voyage. Finally, the mariner literally sacrifices his soul to achieve a heroic end, just as Ozymandias sees himself doing, and Ozymandias briefly indicates that he sees the mariner's experiences in his dreams (12.27.1). At its most formally complex level, however, it employs image-text and arthrological effects that are similar to those that open Moore et al.'s *Miracleman* series (see above), but in this case, those effects extend across *Watchmen* and play double-duty, both articulating the *Black Freighter* narrative and commenting on *Watchmen*'s plot.

Black Freighter first appears in issue #3, "The Judge of All the Earth," in the form of a stylised narrator box drawn to look like a tattered and curled piece of paper. The pirate comic has not appeared in *Watchmen* yet, so the effect is a bit jarring, but even from this first appearance, the narrative function of *Black Freighter* is clear: to offer ironic commentary on *Watchmen*. The narrator box refers to "black sails against the yellow Indies sky" (3.1:1), but hovers over the top triangle of a nuclear-power symbol (fig. 3.2)—a black triangle on top of a yellow background—and is textually juxtaposed with the news vendor's own war-like assertion, "WE OUGHTTA **NUKE RUSSIA** AND LET **GOD** SORT IT OUT" (3.1:1). Next to the mariner's first-hand experience of "THE STENCH OF POWDER AND MEN'S BRAINS" (3.1:1), the news vendor's off-the-cuff statement seems both horrifying and naïve. The news vendor verbalises a provincial kind of nationalism that does not actually know war and, thus, sees it as a convenient, even pious, activity; hence, the news vendor uses "nuke" in the verb form, reducing nuclear war to a single, monosyllabic act. This juxtaposition of the *Black Freighter*'s narration with *Watchmen*'s visuals and dialogue continues throughout the rest of the series, on and off. Sometime it acts as image-text, in which the text contributes to the imagery but on a parallel track as opposed to a coterminous one. At other times, the pirate narration acts as image/text, creating a jarring juxtaposition. The example above is an

fig. 3.2: *Black Freighter* as Image-Text Effect (*Watchmen* 3.1:1)

fig. 3.3: *Black Freighter* as Sequential Effect (Watchmen 3.2:1-9)

image-text effect, the description of war running parallel to the image of nuclear power, but the panel also contains a juxtaposition of two texts, as well, which come together in the concept of war and two very different understandings of it.

The subsequent page of the same issue works *Black Freighter* into the panel sequence, and thus informs the reader/viewer from where exactly these narrator boxes originate. This page contains a much more traditional introduction of the comic book within the comic book. It starts with a long-distance view of the young man who reads/views it, but the panels gradually move closer until the viewer is looking over the young man's shoulder, and they eventually focus on the comic book itself (fig. 3.3). As in the previous example from *Miracleman*, the perspective even hyper-focuses, displaying the thickened character lines of the Mariner's face and revealing the Ben-Day dots that make up his skin tone (3.2:6). Once again, Moore, this time in league with Dave Gibbons, forces the viewers to take a closer look, quite literally, and in so doing, reminds them of the contrived and formal nature of the comic-book page. In this case, that visual reminder contributes to the extended self-reflexive commentary that Black Freighter lends to Watchmen, a commentary that ultimately signals a notion of history as contingent rather than teleological. That commentary comes to the fore through *The Treasure Island Treasury*.

Treasure Island Treasury is a pastiche of popular scholarship on comic books. In it, an unnamed critic briefly summarises a history of American comics in which horror and pirate stories became the dominant genre instead of superhero stories. Originally inspired by superhero comics, actual superheroes operate in *Watchmen*'s world beginning in the 1940s, which is a subtle form of causal loop, or *mise-en-abyme*, in which comic-book characters are causally responsible for creating comic-book characters; thus, in *Watchmen*, the anti-comics movement of the fifties does not result in the creation of the Comics Code because "the government of the day [came] down squarely on the side of comic books in an effort to protect the image of certain comic book-inspired agents in their employ" (*Treasure* 59).[113] Ironically, horror comics then come to dominate the market, specifically pirate-themed horror, instead of superheroes because the Code could not keep publishers from producing them. Positing pirates as the dominant genre

[113] This text appears, with its own pagination, in issue #5 of *Watchmen*.

of American comics, rather than superheroes, reveals that that market domination is a result of historical influence. Superheroes are not an inevitable or natural development of American popular fiction, but instead the genre that happened to survive a particular historical moment: the anti-comics movement and the Comics Code. Either genre could have come to dominate, but they are differently able to articulate the culture in which they were produced.

Black Freighter's horror elements, gory imagery, and a macabre premise reflect its historical and social context very differently than superheroes could or did. Klock asserts: "As a genre, horror is the superhero narrative's diametric opposite: the former portrays the terror of helplessness, while the latter describes a power fantasy par excellence" (Klock 74). This assertion overstates the differences between the two genres. But typically in horror, paranormal or supernormal characters are monsters and function as a source of anxiety. Superheroes are by definition heroic and if not actually supernormal, at the very least exceptional. Their abilities, however, represent the safety that comes with power and they tend to confront and defeat villains who are not unlike the monsters of horror. Thus the two genres offer quite different opportunities to articulate the hopes and/or fears of a cultural moment.

The protagonist in *Black Freighter* goes on a journey during which he finds himself committing exactly the acts of violence that he sets out to stop. At the opening of the story, he is marooned on a desert island after having been attacked by the Black Freighter of the comics' title, a pirate vessel manned by an undead crew who were condemned by their actions in life. Knowing that the Freighter is headed for his home, where his wife and children live, he endures horror after horror to get there in time to evacuate them and the rest of his community. However, his very anxieties about saving his family from the Black Freighter cause him to misperceive his situation and thus he kills his family himself. Rather than enacting a heroic mission, then, he becomes the monster. This ghastly dramatic irony is typical of EC's horror comics, but by placing *Black Freighter*'s horror narrative in implied juxtaposition with the superhero, *Watchmen* also demonstrates that the latter genre cannot operate under the Nietzschean assertion that *Watchmen* quotes: "Battle not with monsters lest ye become a monster, / and if you gaze into the abyss, the abyss gazes also into you" (Nietzsche in *Watchmen* 6.28:9). This idea stands in direct opposition to the superhero's generic mission statement that *Watchmen* articulates: "**SOMEBODY** HAS TO SAVE THE **WORLD**" (2.11:7). Acting like a hero ought not turn one into a monster, within superheroic logic, but introduce a different generic logic and new interpretations become possible. Horror logic reveals that monsters often originate as heroes who simply understand their situations in a different way than their victims; thus *Black Freighter* offers an explanation for Ozymandias, who is at once both hero by virtue of motivation and villain/monster by virtue of action. Going by Coogan's definition, he undertakes a pro-social mission through anti-social means: he engineers peace on Earth by murdering half the population of New York City.

Black Freighter, once *Treasure Island Treasury* places it within its fictitious publishing history, does two things simultaneously. First, it seeks to create a consistent alternative history of America. Alternate histories are an existing subgenre of fantasy/historical fiction that has its own conventional elements, specifically causality and consistency, which makes their invented histories more believable. Second, however, it articulates the superhero genre using the narrative logic of horror, which reveals the circumstances under which superhero logic breaks down. *Black Freighter* constitutes one of Waugh's formal metafictions in which no frame breaks or other fantastic elements violate the sanctity of the fictional universe, but the content of the narrative nevertheless represents a fully-formed self-reflection. In this case, that reflection pertains to how American comics articulate their socio-historical context and how that articulation might change given a different genre.

While *Miracleman*'s analogues extend backwards in a chain of references, and *Watchmen* uses analogues that refer broadly to various iconic hero characters, *Black Summer* simply displays a few of the most generic superhero types. The heroes, "The Seven Guns," all have cybernetic implants that give them super powers. They call these implants "gun" technology, hence the name of their team. This name emphasises something obvious that superhero comics still rarely acknowledge: super powers almost always function as a form of weaponry. They allow so-called heroes to do violence to alleged villains in order to save supposedly powerless bystanders. The protagonists in *Black Summer* design and build the cybernetic implants that grant them their powers and they do so specifically so that they can be superheroes. How the art presents the "gun" implants and how the narrative treats them symbolically associates the Seven Guns with three things: the cyberpunk genre, the Western gunslinger, and contemporary bikers. This association with more overtly violent and/or morally ambiguous genres reveals just how violent and ambiguous the superhero actually is, despite its clean-cut, righteous appearance.

The gun implants turn the Seven Guns into what initially appear to be standard superhero types—the tank, the technician, the flyer, the speedster, and the god-like saviour—which makes them walking representatives of the superhero genre. However, as in cyberpunk narratives, they volunteer for their surgery and suffer dehumanizing side-effects. For example, Zoe Jump can run at super speeds, but the implantation process disfigures her face. John Horus gains genuinely god-like powers, but becomes in effect sociopathic. In cyberpunk, technology that enhances the body usually has a corresponding loss of humanity, but characters nevertheless volunteer for it. They give up being human in order to become posthuman, as in William Gibson's "Johnny Mnemonic" for example, in which the Lo Teks transform themselves into dog-like creatures through genetic manipulation and cybertechnology. Superheroes, however, have generally liberal humanist values. They retain their humanity, usually in the form of a secret identity and despite having god-like abilities, and they defend individual human subjectivity above all else, which in American mainstream comics, amounts to

protecting property rights. The two are not the same, of course, but the superhero genre frequently implicitly equates them. One of the most common generic scenarios in the genre is a fight between the hero and a gang of muggers, an urban fear that threatens both body and property. Thus cyberpunks and superheroes have very different value systems, arguably the exact opposite value systems, one liberal humanist and the other distinctly posthuman.[114] Ellis and Ryp combine the two genres, however, which renders the Seven Guns suspect within the logic of the superhero genre. They never quite look like the superheroes that they are trying to be because they look a little too much like cyberpunks.

They also differ from the Silver-Age superhero in their willingness to commit acts of heinous violence, although this is not nearly as unusual in mainstream comics today as it was as recently as the early 1990s. *Black Summer*, however, presents this extreme violence with a particular commentary on superheroic violence. The Seven Guns all carry pistols that interface with their implants. These guns do not conform to any particular make or model, and instead come straight from Juan Jose Ryp's imagination. They are larger than normal and Ryp often depicts them in close-up and pointed at the viewer, so that they appear even larger (fig. 3.4). His art makes the guns a significant presence in the story. They are practically characters in their own right. He depicts the violence inflicted by the protagonists and their technology in extremely gory, anatomical detail, with bodies being ripped apart and/or blown into identifiable pieces. After significant battles between the superhumans (the CIA sends enhanced soldiers to kill the Seven Guns), their urban space looks quite literally like a war zone (fig. 3.5), imagery familiar to anyone who has witnessed foreign wars on network news. *Black Summer* never allows the characters or the viewers to conceive of violence without

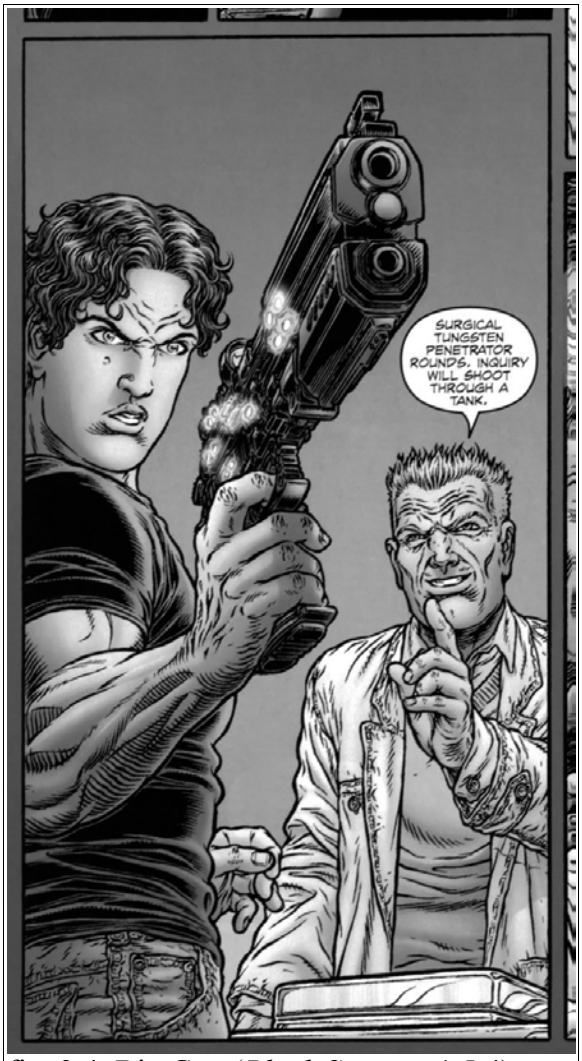

fig. 3.4: Big Gun (*Black Summer* 1.5:4)

[114] For a full explanation of the liberal humanist/posthumanist dichotomy, see N. Katherine Hayles aforementioned *How We Became Posthuman*.

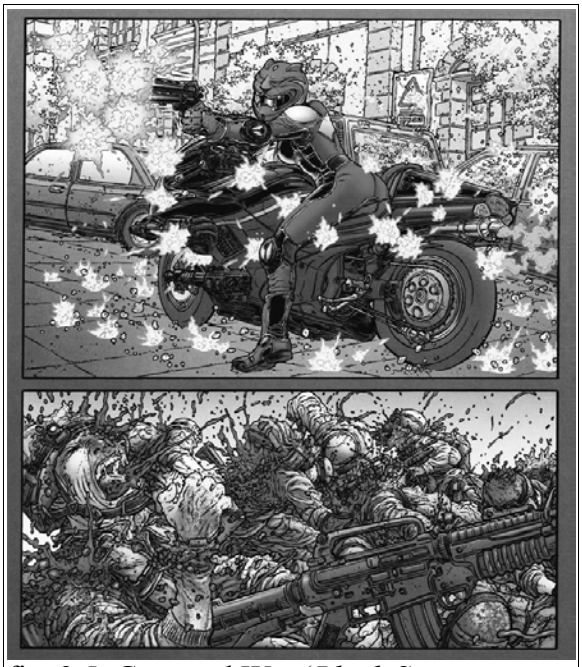

fig. 3.5: Gore and War (*Black Summer* 2.7:2-3)

consequence, unlike the SA-style, which the Comics Code forbade from depicting blood and gore. The art does, however, fetishise this gore and violence to a great degree, revelling in it just as much as the end of the series speaks against it. Nevertheless, the gun technology results in nothing but death and destruction over the course of the series, until the final issue in which the three women of the team put away their phallic firearms and instead use their abilities to rescue bystanders who were endangered by the battling superhumans. *Black Summer* thus emphasises that applying the powers that superheroes display for no better purpose than to inflict violence on one another implies an extremely limited imagination, which is to say that those characters seem unable to think outside of their genre.

3.1.c: Benevolent Dictators

The self-appointed, benevolent dictator appears regularly in superhero comics, usually as a cautionary tale against allowing power to corrupt, but also implicitly as a warning that superheroes ought not to intervene to change society, but instead simply defend its status quo. *Miracleman, Watchmen*, and *Black Summer* all reverse the cliché, though, by arguing that the negative results of the benevolent dictator-hero in fact derive from the superhero genre itself and its narrow set of generic roles (i.e., hero, villain, and bystander). The dictator-hero occupies both the hero and the villain role at once and therefore never breaks out of the limits of the genre. Thus *Miracleman*, *Watchmen*, and *Black Summer* all argue that superheroism simply does not contain within it the capacity to address practical problems. Unlike *Squadron Supreme*, which starts with a similar implication, these Revisionist comics draw the superhero out to its logical extreme and thereby conclude that the genre is inherently problematic. In *Miracleman*, the superhuman dictatorship seems genuinely utopian, but the narrative leaves noticeable gaps where objections to that dictatorship would be. In *Watchmen*, the hypothetical utopia turns out to be merely the peace of mutual fear. Finally, *Black Summer* depicts an aborted attempt to intervene in politics through superheroic violence.

Miracleman, the character, takes over the world in just a few pages in issue #16, "Olympus." His rise to the status of god-king is remarkable for its lack of a substantial discussion of the ethics of doing so. The narrative provides an

almost unequivocally utopian world that feels only a *little* too perfect. One character opts-out of this ostensibly perfect world, Miracleman's estranged wife Liz, and Miracleman himself is nagged by his inability to understand why she might do so, but the series presents only his confusion at her choice, not a fully-formed objection to benevolent dictatorship. The superhumans as a group exhibit little hand-wringing over their decision to seize control of the world. They do not praise democracy or lament its passing. They simply assume control because they can and because humanity is, by their reckoning, far less sophisticated than them. Miraclewoman compares humanity to cows and fish, adding: "WE'RE TAKING NOTHING FROM THEM. WE'LL GIVE THEM MORE FREE WILL THAN THEY EVER DREAMED OF OR WANTED. / WE'RE GOING TO **LOVE** THEM [...] / WE'RE GOING TO MAKE THEM **PERFECT**" (16.9:5). The superhumans thus plan to pull the human race up to their allegedly divine level, literally turning the mundane humans into superhumans just like Miracleman and his cohorts. This transformation would ostensibly grant humanity the privilege of being like Miracleman, rather than making him recognise his own privilege, or the social systems that produce it, systems that he himself built and that naturalise his supposed superiority. In standard superhero comics, as Wolf-Meyer implies (511) and Dittmer asserts: "any attempt to fundamentally alter the social system is what marks a character as a villain" (253); superheroes focus on saving the world, not changing it. Attempts by heroes to actively intervene in politics, economics, or the social order never end well. Either other superheroes stop them or the utopia quickly turns into a dystopia. Miracleman's rule, however, initially appears to be a genuine, functioning utopia. Solutions to social ills—everything from shop-lifting to war—are systemic and generally socialist. Superhuman intervention and alien technology eliminate all shortages of energy and material needs, and the government eliminates money. Thus crime and war miraculously disappear because there is no motivation for them.

The superhumans also create technology with which anyone can be transformed into a superhuman, and this opportunity leads to one of the more telling scenes in the series in which Miracleman offers to transform his estranged wife, Liz, into "MRS. MIRACLE" (16.25:1). He offers it as a solution to their failed marriage: "THIS SOLVES **EVERYTHING**. **YOU** COULD HAVE A SUPERHUMAN BODY TOO" (16.25:1). She refuses, however, and cites his extremely public sexual relationship with Miraclewoman as a reason why she cannot join him.[115] Instead of attempting to understand her perspective, Miracleman barely listens to her complaint, instead asserting that "THERE'S NO NEED TO BE JEALOUS [...]. WE'VE GONE **BEYOND** POSSESSIVENESS [...]. WHEN **YOU'RE** LIKE US YOU'LL **UNDERSTAND**" (16.25.4). He remains blissfully unaware of his privilege and sees his social status

[115] In that same issue, the two superhumans have sex while flying through central London, then experience a simultaneous orgasm that looks distinctly like a fireworks display (16.17-18:1). When Miracleman and Miraclewoman finally dive into the Thames to cuddle, a crowd of on-lookers applauds (16.18:6). This scene parallels Dan and Laurie's first successful sexual encounter in his hover car, Archie, in which Archie's flame-thrower accidentally goes off in the clouds, a far more literal representation of specifically male orgasm.

and physical nature as simply superior. Therefore he assumes everyone would want to be just like him. In essence, he cannot understand why anyone "SHOULD NOT WISH TO BE PERFECT IN A PERFECT WORLD" (16.33-34:2), which is to say, he cannot understand the logic behind any choices but his own. The same issue begins with a short essay, written in his voice: "I dream of a world of heroes in exciting clothes, hoods cut away to show the hair or leotards made of flags" (l6.1:1).[116] He bases his vision of a perfect world almost entirely on his faked memories of Silver-Age comic-book adventures. His inability to see outside of that generic construction indicates a serious deficiency in this supposedly superior man.

Although not a would-be dictator as such, Ozymandias in *Watchmen* takes it upon himself to perform a horrifying act ostensibly on behalf of humanity: engineer the death of half the residents of New York City at a stroke in order to unite all nations of the world against a (fictitious) extra-terrestrial threat. Like Miracleman's choice to rule the world, *Watchmen* presents Ozymandias' choice to manipulate the global political landscape in very ambiguous terms and the series ultimately refuses to resolve the ambiguity. This may seem like a half-measure. If the goal is to fully dismantle the superhero, then presenting them as unequivocally morally corrupt—whether by virtue of poor judgement, genuine malevolence, or just plain stupidity—would seem to be the most expedient route. However, ambiguity is in fact the conceptual opposite of the moral certainty that most superhero comics were required to portray by the Comics Code. Instead of merely inverting the moral hierarchy and condemning superheroes, *Watchmen* deconstructs the hierarchy itself by depicting an intensely ambiguous superheroic mission.

Ozymandias is decidedly less superhuman than Miracleman, but he is also less of a dictator. He concocts a sweeping plan to ensure global stability through xenophobic fear. He is thus both superhero and supervillain and as such exposes the workings of the genre by showing that the respective ideologies of heroism and villainy are in fact two positions on one scale. Jason Dittmer's "The Tyranny of the Serial" argues that superheroes are defined by "their support for the status quo [...] and any attempt to fundamentally alter the social system [...] marks a character as a villain" (253). Of course, the irony of this dichotomy, which Dittmer does not expand on, is that the fundamental superheroic goal is to "SAVE THE **WORLD**" as Captain Metropolis puts it, and it is logically consistent to want to save the world from such threats as poverty, sickness, and environmental destruction. The supervillainous desire to change the world is, by that reasoning, just an extension of the superhero's more conservative desire to save the world from only a specific set of threats (i.e., street crime, invasion, natural disaster, etc.). Ozymandias explains that he began to conceive of his master plan at the first meeting of an aborted team of heroes, at which he realised that even a whole team of them could not possibly fix all of the world's problems (11.19:6). A grander

[116] This essay is produced in standard type, on the inside-front cover of the issue, and therefore I have not rendered it in a comic-book font or in all-capitals.

scheme was necessary. He thus identifies his plan as consistent with the motives that originally made him decide to become a superhero, but he eventually acknowledges his role as a villain of sorts when he claims that he is not a moustache-twirling villain from a black-and-white movie serial (11.27:1). [117] Instead of claiming that he is not a villain at all, he defines himself as a different kind of villain, one who is smart enough not to follow the old script in which he would inevitably fail because he explained his plan to the heroes just in time for them to stop him. Hence the punch-line of issue #11, "I DID IT 35 MINUTES *AGO*" (11.27:1). He defies the standard formula in which the hero(es) save the day at the last minute. The last minute was a half-hour before Ozymandias even explained his master plan. Thus the character does not transcend the superhero genre. He merely occupies the role of arch-villain in order to, in his mind, become the ultimate hero. The dilemma of the series, then, is whether his ends justify his means and whether knowing Ozymandias' plan prompts a moral imperative to expose it, and thus ruin it and the potential utopia it could bring about.

This dilemma is faulty in its practical terms, however. James Hughes' "Ideology and 'Real World' Superheroes" notes that when Ozymandias asks Manhattan. "I DID THE RIGHT THING, DIDN'T I? IT ALL WORKED OUT IN THE END," Manhattan points out the folly of assuming a closed narrative: "'IN THE END'? **NOTHING** ENDS, ADRIAN. NOTHING **EVER** ENDS" (*Watchmen* 12.27:4-5; Hughes 556). Which is to say that the world now has to live with the kind of peace that Ozymandias has forced upon it. Matthew Wolf-Meyer's "The World Ozymandias Made" argues that superhero comics maintain political and economic status quo by perpetually seeking utopia but never achieving it (Wolf-Meyer 501). He offers Ozymandias' master plan as a counter-example, to show how unusual *Watchmen* is compared to the standard superhero story. Like most of the audience, critics and fans alike, Wolf-Meyer takes for granted that Ozymandias' plan *will* produce a utopia. However, I would argue that although it might achieve order and stability, it cannot achieve actual utopia. Even if it works according to plan, the precarious, hypothetical non-aggression that he engineers is a peace based on mutual fear, one that would lead to astronomical military budgets, to consuming massive amounts of natural resources in order to feed a global war machine, to a military-industrial complex on a scale unheard of in human history, and to a society in which nothing is more important than defending the planet. It would be the very definition of fascism.

Watchmen's climactic moral dilemma—to reveal Ozymandias' plan or not—does not function without the promise of a functional utopia, so the falsity of that utopia is, arguably, a major flaw in the narrative. I argue, though, that it reveals how Ozymandias traps himself between superheroic fantasy and conventional realism. Despite his efforts to shed the trappings of the superhero, his version of peace is in fact slavishly devoted to that genre, much like

[117] The exact line is "I'M NOT A REPUBLIC **SERIAL** VILLAIN," which yet again shows just how much knowledge self-referential comics assume in their audience, in this case, knowing that Republic was a film company in the thirties and forties that created action/adventure serials in which villains always behave in specific, generic ways.

Miracleman's is in Moore's final issue of that series. Ozymandias' plan supposedly puts the world on a path to utopia but actually creates never-ending fear of an outside threat, much like the "never-ending battle" that superheroes often claim to be fighting. Thus *Watchmen* implies that the superhero story is a closed system out of which there is no utopian escape. Ozymandias seems to break out of the genre by assuming the position of both hero and villain, but ultimately he merely relocates the genre's central conflict from a never-ending battle against crime, to a never-ending state of military readiness against (fictitious) alien invasion. *Watchmen* thus implies that the superhero genre is impractical and morally suspect, but there is no way to fix it from within. Therefore, we ought to just abandon the superhero. Ironically, the political awareness and narrative sophistication that *Watchmen* introduced into the genre invigorated the American comic-book industry and created a generation of imitators. As an industry, the mainstream publishers have been swayed by sales. Dark, violent, self-deprecating superhero comics sell, so the industry continues to produce them. *Watchmen*'s attempt to kill the superhero via critique had the opposite effect on the American comic-book industry.

In *Black Summer* all other elements of the modern (American) world are conventionally realistic except for the existence of a very small number of superheroes. The argument of the series is almost the same as *Watchmen*'s: if powerful people take on the stock roles of the superhero genre, even if that means combining heroic altruism with a villainous willingness to intervene in world politics, they cannot affect positive change, only play out the superhero story, over and over again. *Black Summer* adds to that argument, however, by explicitly asserting that if and when humanity has access to the kind of technology that could turn humans into superhumans, there are much better uses for it than vigilante heroism. Ellis' writing career, both in his comics and his various prose works, indicates technological optimism. His oeuvre demonstrates, repeatedly, how technology could improve our lives. *Orbiter*, a single-volume comic book, depicts the possible ways that humanity might travel to the stars; his *Bad Signal* posts often describe his newest technological toys, most of which he uses to be fully connected to the internet from his local bar; and his discussion board/wiki, *Grinding.be*, consists of a series of links to stories about the living culture of technological body modification. In fact, the majority of Ellis' science fiction is an exploration of the cyberpunk assertions "information wants to be free" (Brand 49) and "the street finds its own use for things" (Gibson 215). Ellis has one of his characters quote these two lines in the limited series *Mek* (1.11:5), a tale of high-tech body modification and the subculture that forms around it. Ellis' fictional characters, and Ellis himself, seem to find it maddening that powerful technology is so often used for the decidedly mundane purpose of killing people.

A superhero called John Horus—named such for his "gun," a flock of technological eyes that orbit his body—chooses to use his powers to kill the US president,[118] and his reasons for doing so are simplistically generic. Horus

[118] The dialogue all but states that this president is George W. Bush. but never quite names him.

essentially calls the President a supervillain: "THIS ADMINISTRATION STOLE THE LAST TWO ELECTIONS, AND [...] WE ARE LIVING UNDER THE GOVERNANCE OF CRIMINALS // [...] WE ARE LIVING IN A CONDITION OF EVIL" (0.7:2.)[119] He believes that he has to defend American democracy from someone who has subverted it. However, in so doing, Horus also recasts himself as a supervillain, an immensely powerful individual who chooses to intervene in American democracy and remove an elected leader. Most of the series is taken up by grand, gory battles between the Seven Guns, including Horus, and gun-enhanced CIA agents created by the original inventor of gun technology, whose name is Jack Blacksmith. [120] Both Horus and Blacksmith think of themselves as the heroes of their shared narrative, Horus for killing a supervillain (i.e., the President), and Blacksmith for trying to protect America from a supervillain (i.e., Horus). Blacksmith, yelling at Horus, claims:

> ONE MAN WEARING A BUCKET ON HIS HEAD DOES NOT GET TO DECIDE WHAT LAWS ARE. / [...] / I'M THE HERO HERE, JOHN! I'M THE FUCKING HERO BECAUSE I GAVE UP MY LIFE TO PLAN WAYS TO KILL YOU! (7.18.4).

Tom Noir, through whom most of the series is focalised, admonishes Horus:

> YOU COULD NOT THINK OF A SMARTER WAY TO CHANGE THE WAY THE COUNTRY DOES BUSINESS THAN JUST KILLING THE VILLAIN? / YOU CAN WATCH THE WORLD LIKE GOD AND BUILD PALACES OUT OF MUD WITH THOSE DAMNED EYES OF YOUR[S] AND THAT IS THE SMARTEST IDEA YOU HAD? (7.20.1).

Both Horus and Blacksmith stretch the superheroic mission, "**SOMEBODY** HAS TO SAVE THE **WORLD**," out of proportion—Blacksmith's agents raze a city trying to kill the Seven Guns—but they also remain stuck in its stock roles. Both of them think they are heroes and act upon the superheroic principle, but in so doing behave like villains, which is very similar to the manner in which Ozymandias occupies the role of both hero and villain. Tom Noir succinctly summarises their inability to think outside of the superhero genre: "WOW, YOU TWO ARE STUPID" (7.19:1).

There is, however, a glimmer of Ellis' own technological optimism, a hint that technology such as that which he speculates about could improve human life, an option that Moore offers in *Miracleman* and *Watchmen*, but always with a fascistic tang to it, either Manhattan's oblivious support of America's military-industrial complex, or Miracleman's astonishment that not quite everyone wants to be just like him. There is, then, a vague hope in the otherwise quite bleak story of *Black Summer* that the same technologies that armies normally employ to cause unfathomable violence might also have constructive applications. However, unless we stop thinking inside an incredibly simplistic dynamic of heroes and villains, good guys and evil-doers, we will never even conceive of those peaceful, constructive uses. This Manichean dynamic is by no means limited to superhero

[119] This scene occurs in issue #0. Hence the counter-intuitive citation.

[120] All the characters in the series have highly symbolic names, most of which are pseudonyms.

comics, either. It is the central conflict in most action/adventure stories—novels, film, television—and it was a consistent rhetorical motif in President George W. Bush's speeches on the Iraq War and the so-called War on Terror. *Black Summer* juxtaposes a genre known for depicting a simplistic moral divide between good and evil with actual political rhetoric spoken by living politicians and thus associates the two and condemns them at a stroke.

Revisionist attempts to depict superheroes using conventional realism often result in the sense that there is something deeply, morally wrong with the superhero, which is of course a highly self-reflexive kind of narrative. The political ramifications of superheroic presence in the world would, they implicitly argue, merely create dictatorships, benevolent or otherwise, or at the very least the disruption of our political systems by self-appointed saviours. To use a British expression, superheroes do not do what it says on the tin. They would not save the world: they would construct and enforce a particular vision of it. This seam of dictator-heroes running through Revisionist comics parallels SA-style depictions of the same cliché, in which superheroic dictatorships always have destructive or oppressive results. Those SA-style stories reflect on their genre, even though they argue only for status quo. Which is to say, a conservative argument is still an argument. A shallow reflection is still reflection. Revisionist comics differ, though, in that they do not argue that heroes should remain apolitical. Instead, they argue that superheroes are, as it were, always-already political, and therefore the superhero is inherently morally suspect because the very definition of the figure, Coogan's pro-social mission, presumes that they intervene in politics. They just intervene normatively, fixing the world around them in much the same way that superhero comics embody a drive to fix characters and narratives. Series like *Miracleman*, *Watchmen*, and *Black Summer* go out of their way to depict heroes failing morally by succeeding generically. When the superhero finally fulfils its generic destiny, to make the world "safe," he or she has become a supervillain, and thus utterly failed in his or her duty. Once the superhero is no longer viable as a moral paragon, the Revisionist creators start to look for other ways to depict the genre. The second and third sections of this chapter demonstrate alternative perspectives on the superhero: postmodernist and fantastic.

3.2: Postmodern Silver Age

Moore et al.'s *Supreme* and Ellis and Cassaday's *Planetary* both mount an argument, implied in *Supreme* and explicit in *Planetary*, that contemporary American comics ought to preserve the outlandish playfulness of the Silver-Age style. They therefore counter the prevailing practise in the eighties and nineties of effacing and/or retconning that playfulness out of existence. There is a particular history to this development. First, Revisionist comics are a reaction to the Silver-Age style; the Dark-Age style then takes the Revisionist style to extremes. As Lance Parkin puts it in *Alan Moore*, "many of Moore's imitators took realism to mean an adolescent preoccupation with bodily fluids and swear words" (Parkin 13). Which is to say that in response to the allegedly realistic comics of the mid-eighties (e.g., *Swamp Thing* and *Watchmen*), many comics merely depicted sex

and violence with little to none of the critical self-reflection that pervades Moore's work. As the tone of superhero comics shifted, those comics also became increasingly embarrassed by what they characterise as the adolescent and naïve silliness of the SA style in general, the best example of which is the excessively campy Adam West/Burt Ward *Batman* television show of the 1960s.

As characters and themes became darker in the eighties, and even more so in the nineties, their histories had to become darker to match, and thus began a series of reinterpretations and outright retcons that effaced the Silver Age and replaced it with an era of violent and mentally unbalanced anti-heroes. [121] Although the fan community treats them like a separate subgenre, DA-style comics in fact just mimic the Revisionist use of sex, violence, and self-reference, but with less depth or self-consciousness. As Pustz and Parkin both suggest, violence and cruelty are the conventions of realism within Dark-Age comics (Pustz 129, Parkin 13). DA-style comics were very popular in the eighties and nineties, and although their dominance of the field has passed, they continue to exist as one of an array of possibilities within the superhero genre. As McHale says in reference to modernism and postmodernism, all these styles—Silver Age, Dark Age, and Revisionist—remain "equally available" (207) in contemporary comics. However, in the late-nineties, superhero creators began reacting against the ultra-violent DA-style anti-heroes and attempted to revive the trustworthy, often paternal and god-like superheroes of the Silver Age. Unlike SA-style comics that have faced the same dilemma, such as *Utopia Project*, Revisionist comics generally do not attempt to naturalise the god-like heroes. As Parkin puts it, they instead "embrace the absurdities of their own internal logic, rather than trying to rationalise them" (56), which is to say that they delight in their outlandishness for its own sake. These Revisionist reactions take two forms: earnest rejection of the amoral Dark-Age and cheerful but mindful embrace of the playfulness of the Silver Age. These two forms are not mutually exclusive, of course. They often overlap in the same comics but they can also appear separately.

A few examples of comics that depict earnest rejection will suffice to characterise that tactic, before I move on to a more detailed analysis of comics that embrace playfulness. There are three series of note: *Astro City* (Kurt Busiek and Brent Anderson), *Marvels* (Busiek and Alex Ross), and *Kingdom Come* (Mark Waid and Ross). *Astro City* is an anthology series that juxtaposes slice-of-life stories of superheroes' lives with the perspectives of normal people living in a superhero world. *Marvels* retells the history of the Marvel universe from the perspective of a protagonist who starts as a child and idolises superheroes, then

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[121] These comics also displayed a greater level of sexual objectification of women and an even more pervasive mood of general misogyny than American comics had ever seen before. Sexualisation of the female body is nothing new in American comics, of course; it was one of the biggest complaints of the anti-comics movement of the fifties, which inspired the creation of the Comics Code (see the first section of Chapter 2 for a full explanation of the Comics Code). However, in the nineties, several characters, such as Elektra and Witchblade, became very popular based almost entirely on their combination of violence and highly sexualised depictions, including costuming, physical proportions, and poses.

takes on a career as a photojournalist who covers superhero-related stories, which of course parallels the ideal life of a fan who reads/views comics as a kid and grows up to make a career out of them. Finally, *Kingdom Come* posits a dystopian future in which Dark-Age superhumans ignore their generic duty to either perform good deeds or menace society directly and instead merely fight among themselves and thus threaten to bring about a distinctly Biblical Armageddon. All three of these books reject the Dark-Age style by constructing a superhero verisimilitude that comprises the gritty cynicism of the Dark Age as well as the wide-eyed hero worship of the Silver Age. Alex Ross' photorealistic painted artwork, present in all three of these titles,[122] exemplifies this verisimilar approach. Ross works with live models and has a particular talent for drapery and textural detail, but he also renders hero characters in iconic terms, using the faces of known actors for example. He makes his hero characters both more conventionally realistic and more mythic at the same time.

Moore, taking almost the opposite tack from these heartfelt rejections of the Dark-Age style, returned to superhero comics in the mid-nineties after several years of doing avant-garde and politically-oriented work[123] because, in his own words, he wanted to correct for the "pretentious comics [and] miserable comics" ("Alan Moore Interview" 1) that he and his contemporaries had inadvertently inspired. His *Supreme*, as well as Ellis and Cassaday's *Planetary*, both react to the Dark Age by embracing the Silver Age and its playful disregard for conventional realism. They are also far more self-reflexive than *Astro City*, *Marvels*, or *Kingdom Come*. Moore and Ellis/Robertson do not just re-present Silver-Age comics in a positive light or expose the questionable elements of the genre. They analyse the inner workings of the genre and put that process of re-presentation on display. *Supreme* is an extended, self-conscious analogue of Superman comics of the 1950s, and *Planetary* is a sprawling, ostensibly scholarly survey of literary and cinematic influences on superhero comics.

3.2.a: Denaturalising the Superhero

Alan Moore's reinterpretation of the Superman knock-off character "Supreme" uses analogue multistability to reveal and celebrate the ultimately fluid nature of American comic-book narratives. In the process, *Supreme*'s self-reflexive play—and the series is extremely playful—builds and then deconstructs a master narrative of the American comic-book superhero. Hutcheon describes this process—building up in order to tear down—as inherent to postmodern parody and metafiction (Hutcheon *Poetics* 130). No archetype is more canonical in superhero comics than Superman, and *Supreme* directly dissects and critiques that archetype, even going so far as to give it a name inspired by literary history. It

[122] Both *Marvels* and *Kingdom Come* feature Ross' art, both inside and on the covers, while *Astro City* features it only on the covers, but the internal art, by Brent Anderson, is the inverted equivalent of Ross' painted art. Anderson employs unusually thick, almost haphazard character lines and draws asymmetrical faces, which adds visible elements of imperfection to its subjects and clashes with their perfect bodies and brightly-coloured costumes.

[123] For example, *Big Numbers*, *From Hell, Lost Girls*, and his own failed publishing imprint, called "Mad Love."

is called a *Wylie*, "AFTER THIS GUY, **PHIL** WYLIE. WROTE A BOOK CALLED '**GLADIATOR**' SORTA INTRODUCED THE WHOLE SUPERMAN **ARCHETYPE**" (*Supreme: The Return* 6.21:4). The Wylie is a superhero character who possesses god-like physical abilities, including immense strength, flight, invulnerability, and the like. The Wylie is usually male and often an alien of some kind, either from another planet, or from the future, or the product of eugenics/genetic engineering. It includes characters like Superman, Captain Marvel, and the Martian Manhunter. The Wylie is not, of course, a true master narrative. It does not constitute an attempt to explain human history, thought, or social structure in the way that, for example, the master narratives of Marxism or Christianity do. Instead, the Wylie is a master-narrative in miniature; a powerful figure that haunts superhero comics. Long after Moore declared that *Miracleman* and *Watchmen* would be the last word on god-like superheroes,[124] he still engages with the concept, but instead of a dark verisimilitude in which the super-saviour turns into a dictator or a mass-murderer, *Supreme* plays with the concept of the super-saviour, poking fun at it, ultimately celebrating it for its fantastic playfulness, but in the process denaturalising it.

Supreme was an on-going series before Moore took over with issue #4l (August 1996). Previously, the character had been a Dark-Age copy of Superman, but without much, if any, analogue reflexivity. Instead of attempting to efface the shift in tone that inevitably accompanies a change in the creative team, Moore's *Supreme* consciously acknowledges the shift. Supreme himself suddenly has amnesia at the opening of issue #41, but he meets previous incarnations of himself who tell him that he has just experienced a "REVISION" (41.14:2), which happens periodically and for no known reason. In these revisions, Supreme, his world, and all the people he knows change radically and retroactively. Versions of Supreme who have been overwritten go to a literary afterlife called "THE SUPREMACY" (41.4:1), a space where unwanted story elements go, still available but locked outside of the narrative world. The series asserts, through this playful device, that retconned characters do not actually disappear by creative fiat. They still exist as much as any other fiction exists. Moore's foreword to *Whatever Happened to the Man of Tomorrow?*, the last official Silver-Age Superman comic book, proclaims: "This is an IMAGINARY STORY... Aren't they all?" (*Whatever*). That same attitude carries into *Supreme*. All these stories are imaginary, so declaring that some of them are more valid, more "real," than others reflects a fundamental misunderstanding of the notion of fiction. The Supremacy is also a small-scale version of the fluid narrative spaces that several Revisionist creators embed in their comics.[125] This new Supreme's back-story is in flux because—implicitly but not quite explicitly—it does not exist yet. His memories return as he experiences flash-backs (41.15:1), but they are from a life that Moore and his collaborators are making up as they go. The term "revision" invokes the literary process of revising, but also the by-then common practise of referring to Moore and his

[124] See 3.1: "Dysfunctional Realities."
[125] See 4.1: "Revisionist Fluidity."

contemporaries as Revisionists, revising American comics themselves. Making revision an acknowledged part of the narrative universe constitutes a commentary on the neverwhen as well as on American comics as an industrial art form that is driven by the desire to construct corporate-owned characters that take on the false appearance of timelessness, despite being articulated in specific moments within history and culture.

Moore's issues of *Supreme* constantly juxtapose disparate versions of the title character and thus display his changing history, feigned though it may be, and dispel the neverwhen. By feigning a history that parallels Superman's, *Supreme* reveals just how historically embedded that history actually is. Almost every issue contains images of the protagonist's newly-revealed back story and his memories always appear in the drawing style of the era in which they take place, from the simple panel progressions and melodramatic body language of the 1940s (e.g., 42.10:1-2), to the saturated colours and distorted bodies of EC's comics of the 1950s (e.g., 44.20:5-6), then back to the grim-faced, muscle-bound bodies of Rob Lefield's quintessentially Dark-Age style of the 1990s (#47, front cover). Moore could have presented a fixed or closed narrative that proceeded from one definite point and ended at another definite point. He also could have opted for a neverwhen, the illusion of fixity through constant change. Instead, the series offers an abundance of interpretations of the Wylie figure, but remains focused on one particular example of it: a single iteration of Supreme. *Supreme* thus embraces the paradoxes of which it is made.

Speaking with *The Jack Kirby Collector*, Moore describes the traditional development of the American superhero: "Characters pass from one creator to another and it just depends which phase of the character you happen to be familiar with" ("Supreme Writer" 30). In this description, there is no definitive version of a character, but instead an endless parade of interpretations with which a given member of the audience might or might not personally identify. Moore's construction of *Supreme* therefore reflects an industry practise that gives rise to a reading/viewing practise. His version of Supreme is one of many characters to go by that name and exemplify the Wylie figure. Supreme, the character, achieves analogue multistability because he occupies several stable states at once and he is recognisable as a gestalt, a combination of all of those states, even though they might be logically incompatible. The character was always a copy of Superman, but Moore's version of him makes that fact plain. It reveals and revels in Superman's convoluted, retcon-filled history. Supreme's history, on the other hand, is ongoing and stable, but that stability is partly based on the character's participation in the larger cycle (i.e., the many revisions of Supreme/Superman). All of those individual versions of the character are also equally stable. Thus, Supreme cannot be a stable, literary presence without the help of the sprawling, and indeed fluid, miniaturised master-narrative called the Wylie. To fully engage with Supreme as a character, the audience must be aware of the literary referent (i.e., Superman). To make sense out of *Supreme*'s story both requires and results in the audience perceiving the arbitrary nature of the Wylie as master narrative

This particular analogue multistability involves several different metacomic effects. It ruins the suspension of disbelief by reminding the audience of the fictional nature of the character and it invokes the history of American comics and their relationship with science fiction. In Jones' terms, awareness of the Wylie demystifies the creative process by revealing the trail of influences that lead to Superman. It displays the degree to which these characters have changed over time, rather than remaining fixed, and thus it also dispels naturalisation, either reminding the audience of the invented and/or political nature of the sign, to use Barthes' mythic terms, or the arbitrary and contingent nature of the relationship between culture and history, to use Hall's notion of articulation. *Supreme* denaturalises the Wylie, transforms it from a supposedly mythic constant in superhero comics, into the product of a chain of literary influences. *Supreme* thereby undoes sixty years worth of mythologising the superhero, specifically Superman, but leaves the character viable as a "toy" entity, which is what he started as anyway. In this way, Moore et al. revise the Superman archetype, the Wylie, by revealing his articulation within the history of comic-book publishing, but they do not invalidate or unmake the character. True to the Revisionist tendency, they *revise* Superman without destroying him.

fig. 3.6: The Kirby Avatar (*Supreme: The Return* 6.18:1)

Supreme: The Return #6—which is effectively the end of the series because it was cancelled before #7 was published—comes very close to creating a moment of intertextual overkill, which is one of Waugh's radical forms of metafiction.[126] This last issue presents a series of pastiches of Jack Kirby's various comic-book creations, including the New Gods (6.2-3:1), the Newsboy Legion (6.4:1), the Guardian (6.4:3), Dr. Doom (6.6:1), Sgt. Fury and the Howling Commandos (6.8:1), Captain America (6.8:1), Project Cadmus (6.10:1-2), and the dozens of characters who emerge directly from Kirby's skull while his god-like, disembodied head floats over a city of his own imagination (fig. 3.6). The figure never identifies itself as Jack Kirby, of course, but the face, his burning cigar, and that

[126] See 1.2.b: "Metafiction."

particular collection of pastiche characters make the reference clear to anyone who knows the history of superhero comics.

The central conceptual conflict of the issue is the Kirby-avatar's nonchalant references to the literary history of superhero characters set against Supreme's seeming inability to understand exactly what he is hearing, despite the mounting evidence. The other Supremes casually refer to revisions and they know that individual versions of the character exist for units of one month at a time (41.10:2), but they specifically say that they ultimately do not know why their universe works this way (41.19:2). The series displays constant formal metafictional references to superhero comics. Supreme's alter ego, Ethan Crane, works for a publisher called Dazzle Comics and draws a character called "Omniman," who is of course yet another Wylie.[127] Despite all these clues, the characters never quite realise that they are fictitious. The encounter in *Return* #6 does not shatter the narrative frame and/or the linguistic structures of the fiction, which would make it a radical metafiction in Waugh's terminology. Instead, the issue emphatically gestures towards the fictional frame but leaves Supreme himself living in a structural metafictional universe, again leaving him viable as a literary figure. The series thus depicts a stable structure that contains within it many multistable characters and narratives. Instead of a prisonhouse of language, it depicts a fun house. It reinterprets the playfulness of Silver-Age Superman comics so that the nostalgic adult can enjoy them, specifically because the series admits just how silly, self-contradictory, and illogical those old comics were. That confession grants symbolic permission for the audience to enjoy the naïve idealism of the Superman-archetype, without recourse to the Dark-Age verisimilitude of violence, cruelty, and cynicism. *Supreme*'s highly flexible narrative construction—Moore's Supreme as one of many Supremes—attempts to ward off the desire for a fantasy that is shot-through with ostensibly incompatible fragments of conventional realism.

3.2.b: Historicising the Superhero

Planetary re-examines the inner workings of the superhero genre. It is a sprawling, ostensibly scholarly, survey of literary and cinematic influences on American comics, from Victorian adventure novels, to pulp supermen of the 1930s, to Chinese *wuxia* films, and of course the American comic-book's own publishing history. Through its interwoven plots, its characterisations, and its visual pastiches, it in effect argues that the comics community—artists and audiences alike—should embrace the sheer strangeness of the Silver Age, but do so mindfully, problematising its historical and social dimensions, thereby historicising it and turning it into "a perception of the present as history" (284), to use Jameson's language from *The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, while also perceiving the present as a product of history. Thus *Planetary* demonstrates a kind of historical articulation, in Hall's terms: "a linkage which is not necessary,

[127] Omniman also bears a strong resemblance to Miracleman—the same blonde hair, blue-and-red costume, and lack of a cape—which ties in Moore's previous attempt to present a Wylie to the same literary tradition as *Supreme*.

determined, absolute and essential for all time" (Hall in Morely 141). The series mounts its critique from within the mainstream comic-book industry, employing something akin to Hutcheon's complicit critique. *Planetary* exploits the very nostalgia for the superhero within the audience that it seeks to complicate, problematise, and historicise. Although it is highly unlikely that Ellis set out consciously to reproduce these specific cultural and literary theories, he does explain his own intentions, and they bear out those theories:

> *Planetary* is less a superhero book than it is a book about the superhero [...] That's because there was a time where most superhero comics seemed to be about superhero comics, but only in the most superficial ways. I wanted to do something that actually [...] exposed it's [sic] roots and showed it's [sic] branches. ("Profile: Warren Ellis Interview" pt. 1)

While the series is complicit, taking part in a trend in superhero comics, it also explicitly seeks to critique that very trend. Ellis' metaphor describes placing the superhero in its historical position (i.e., as the branches of a tree that grows from a set of roots), rather than effacing that history, which superhero comics have traditionally done via the neverwhen and fixity. *Planetary* thus displays, in Ellis' own words, "why millions of people were interested in that stuff in the first place... and what's been lost" ("Warren Ellis Answers" par. 9). Thus, the series stands in direct opposition to the practise of retconning older comics out of existence, which ostensibly preserves the illusion of fixity in an ever-shifting and always illusory "now" that acknowledges neither the past nor the future.

Planetary does not allow the audience to wallow in unthinking nostalgia for the Silver Age of American superheroes, as some comics of the 2000s have unfortunately done, but instead insists upon an almost scholarly awareness of its dubious morality and historical contingencies, which the characters imply by self-identifying as "ARCHEOLOGISTS OF THE IMPOSSIBLE" (*Planetary* 1, front cover). *Planetary*'s critique of literary/cinematic history also unabashedly depicts the racist-imperialist presumptions behind pulp adventure characters like Tarzan and Fu Manchu, whom Ellis and Cassaday turn into analogues: the racist Englishman "Lord Blackstock" and the Chinese anti-hero "Hark." Analogues and genre homages are in fact the main attraction of *Planetary,* initially far more so than the plot. The first four issues alone contain analogues of pulp science-fiction supermen (Doc Savage "Man of Bronze," Fu Manchu, Tom Swift, Tarzan, the Shadow) and the Justice League of America (#1 "All Over The 'World'); analogues of Mothra and Godzilla and thus the entire Japanese monster-movie genre (#2 "Island"); a genre homage to Hong-Kong-style police drama, which also combines elements from two superhero characters, the Spectre and the Spirit (#3 "Dead Gunfighters"); and finally, an entire issue dedicated to an analogue of Captain Marvel (#4 "Strange Harbours"). An exhaustive list of the allusions and homages in *Planetary*'s cast of characters, its plots and subplots, and its art work,

would fill many pages, but they have a common element. They historicise the superhero's literary and cinematic origins rather than naturalising them.

For example, Cassaday's art deserves particular attention for its ability to articulate the historical influences on the modern superhero comic book, but always steeped in the sense of wonder that pervades the series. His extremely flexible narrative constructions constantly invoke the visual style of whatever media allusion the series takes on. The cover of issue #3, "Dead Gunfighters," mimics an early-nineties movie poster. Issue #11, "Cold World," captures the pop-art feel of Sterenko's *Nick Fury, Agent of S.H.I.E.L.D.* Most striking, issue #16, "Hark," painstakingly replicates the movement and pacing of *wuxia* films, the high-fantasy martial arts subgenre that started in China's pulp novel tradition and was later translated into both film and indigenous comics. In the 1990s, several Hong Kong film makers revived the style after a decade of hard-hitting action (hence the Hong Kong cop in "Dead Gunfighters"), among them Tsui Hark. The title of the issue, "Hark," references not just the content of wuxia film, but the filmmakers themselves, and thus draws on knowledge of the film industry.

fig. 3.7: Sequential Wuxia (*Planetary* 16.8:1-4)

"Hark," in *Planetary*, is the name of a powerful family of Chinese anti-heroes. Wuxia cinema uses wires to grant their performers the ability to leap in long, graceful arcs and perform extremely complex fight choreography. This technique is called *wire work* or *wire fighting*, or even sometimes *wire fu*.[128] Cassaday's panels replicate the movement that is typical of wire fighting. The visual allusion is that specific.

In fig. 3.7, a page from "Hark," Cassaday uses moment-to-moment transitions and unusually thin horizontal gutters to reduce the implied time between frames; panel 1 to panel 2 appear only a fraction of a second apart. Groensteen calls this the rhythmic function of the frames: the ability of the size, shape, and placement of frames to create a sense of narrative time (Groensteen 45-46). Cassaday uses spatial relations between panels to

[128] For more on wire work in Hong-King cinema, see Walter Jon Williams' "Yuen Woo-Ping and the Art of Flying."

replicate the rapid, kinetic pace of a wuxia-style fight scene. He also draws flowing costumes that imply the specific kind of movement that wire work achieves. The effect is particularly elegant in panel 3, which, in a single panel, implies a kind of motion (spinning) that comics traditionally have to depict over the course of several moment-to-moment transitions. The fighting in this issue is decidedly not historically-accurate kung fu; it instead is constructed to resemble wuxia as a cinematic tradition. That Cassaday uses the simple device of fluttering costumes to achieve the aforementioned spinning effect only strengthens the aesthetic connection because such costuming is traditional in that film genre. "Hark" represents just one of dozens of examples of Cassaday's art going out of its way to integrate other visual and narrative styles into his own and thus create a sense of immersion in the allusions that make up the bulk of the series. As the generic or formal allusions shift, so too does the visual presentation. In "Hark," Cassaday translates a very specific combination of cinematic elements—editing, costuming, special effects, and choreography—into the form of a comic book, but in others he reproduces illustrated novels (#5, "The Good Doctor") and picture books (#15 "In the Beginning"), for example, as well as many and various re-presentation of historically-specific comic-book styles.

Ellis and Cassaday's loving attention to detail in *Planetary* reflects the thesis of the series: American comics must recognise their influences, primarily pulp novels and film, in order to know themselves and their peculiar position in the history of American popular entertainment. The comics must recognise how history and culture articulate them, in Hall's sense, and how they articulate history and culture. Furthermore, the comics must also recognise that their influences are, themselves historically contingent, that they too articulate and are articulated within culture. Once comics undergo that process of self-knowledge, they can then shed the illusion of the neverwhen, the spurious attempt to make themselves timeless. They suddenly exist within history. The series achieves this effect through a deft combination of narrative, characterisation, and visual allusion.

The main plot of *Planetary* is quite simple, as befits what amounts to an excuse to write an anthology of analogues. The Planetary Organisation, self-styled "mystery archaeologists," investigates and archives the strange and fantastic parts of their world, which includes the analogues and genre pastiches that fill half the series. They repeatedly declare "It's a strange world," with various slight variations on those exact words (5.7:4, 8.11:5, 9.18:4, etc.). In the first issue, two 1930s pulp heroes chat amiably, celebrating the fact that the West Coast continues to be strange (fig. 3.8). The Planetary agents, many decades later, express a desire to witness and document this strangeness: the pulp, cinematic, and essentially Silver-Age presence in their Revisionist narrative world. The pulp influence is particularly strong and *Planetary* goes out of its way to place it in its historical context. The Doc Savage analogue, called "Doc Brass" (fig. 3.8, at right) operated in the thirties and forties, the same era in which the Doc Savage pulps were published. The series thus presents him in his historical context, instead of attempting to update him and efface what would be an anachronistic persona.

fig. 3.8: Strange West Coast (*Planetary* 1.15:2)

Planetary even contrives a sub-plot in which Doc Brass misses most of the twentieth century and has to reacquaint himself with Western culture, thus further preserving his location in history. Similarly, issue #18 features an analogue version of Jules Verne's novel *From the Earth to the Moon* (Fr. *De la terre, à la lune*) in which four men launch themselves into space using a massive cannon. In the *Planetary* homage, a plaque at the cannon site even reads "FROM THE EARTH TO THE MOON" (18.19:1-2).

Conversely, the antagonists, called "the Four," are a clear analogue of the Fantastic Four. The analogy is so direct that the failed space flight that grants the Four their superhuman abilities happens in June 1961, the cover date of *The Fantastic Four* #1. In this case, the analogue commentary inverts the Fantastic Four's pro-social mission—to explore the universe and invent useful technology—and transforms it into an anti-social mission to conquer the universe and hoard the technology that they find or steal. Cassaday even alters a file-folder that details their activities such that the "4" on the cover looks distinctly like a swastika (fig. 3.9). The ultimate symbol of villainy in American comics, if not the twentieth century, comes to stand for those who would suppress knowledge for their own gains, specifically denying the world access to technology and history. In this series, then, influences on the superhero do not simply appear randomly or in the service of plot. In fact, quite the opposite: the plot is contrived to showcase a set of historically-located literary influences and thus construct a genealogy of American comic books.

fig. 3.9: "4" as Swastika (*Planetary* 6.16.3:4)

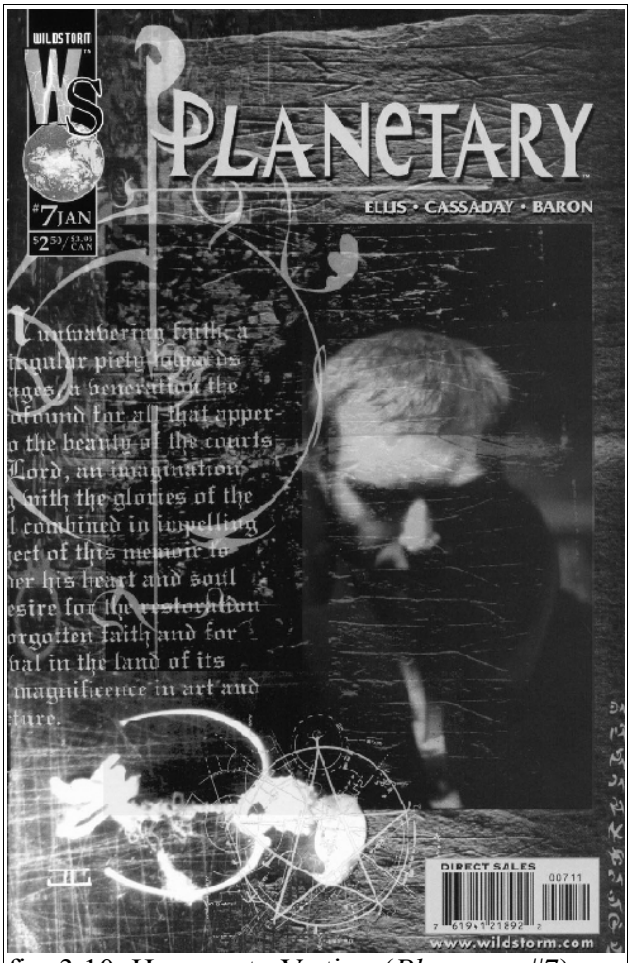

fig. 3.10: Homage to Vertigo (*Planetary* #7)

There is a particular episode within the series that prominently depicts its drive to historically situate itself and this episode links directly to the British influence on American Revisionist comics. It also displays John Cassaday's remarkable talent for visual homage. Issue #7, "To Be In England, In The Summertime," performs an all-encompassing commentary on British-made comics of the 1980s and sports a cover that references the mixed-media imagery that Dave McKean created for Neil Gaiman's *Sandman*. The digitally-altered photography, layered construction, and image/text combinations all quite directly quote McKean's surrealistic renderings (fig. 3.10), which to the knowledgeable fan signals a specific stylistic tone as well as a historical moment in American comics. The issue depicts the funeral of a British mystic named Jack Carter, an analogue of John Constantine whom Alan Moore created as a '"blue collar' magician [...] Constantine was an English working-class lad, and proved very popular, graduating to his own title*, Hellblazer*, in 1987" (Parkin 35). The character has been written or drawn by most of the British Revisionist creators. [129] In *Planetary* #7, Carter (i.e., Constantine) comes to stand for the British contribution to American comics in the 1980s.

Analogues of other characters who were either created, or more often revised, by British writers and artists attend Carter's funeral. Over the course of two pages (7.5-7.6), Cassaday renders a crowd of characters, all perfectly recognisable references to characters created or revised in the 1980s: Dream and Death (*Sandman*, Neil Gaiman and Dave McKean), Black Orchid (*Black Orchid,* Gaiman and McKean), the Swamp Thing (*Swamp Thing*, Alan Moore, Jon Totleben, and Rick Veitch), Animal Man (Grant Morrison), the Demon Etrigan (Alan Moore), Shade the Changing Man (Moore), Robotman (Morrison),

[129] E.g., Alan Moore, Jon Totleben, Rick Veitch, Dave McKean, Mark Buckingham, Charles Vess, Neil Gaiman, Garth Ennis, Warren Ellis, etc.

Arseface (*Preacher*, Garth Ennis), and the list goes on. With one exception, which I expand on below, these characters are not analogues because they do not have their own distinct, stable identities. They are instead meticulously rendered arrows that point directly at their originals, empty signifiers. One of the *Planetary* agents comments that these British characters look "FAINTLY RIDICULOUS" (7.8:4), but another explains their harlequin appearance in terms of British political history, specifically the "GENUINELY MAD" (7.7:3) leadership of Margaret Thatcher[130]:

> SHE WANTED CONCENTRATION CAMPS FOR AIDS VICTIMS, WANTED TO ERADICATE HOMOSEXUALITY EVEN AS AN ABSTRACT CONCEPT, MADE POOR PEOPLE CHOOSE BETWEEN EATING AND KEEPING THEIR VOTE… /// …RAN THE MOST SHAMELESS VOTE-GRABBING SCHEME IN FIFTY YEARS… / ENGLAND WAS A SCARY PLACE. NO WONDER IT PRODUCED SCARY CULTURE. (7.7:5)

"To Be In England, In The Summertime" thus explains British-created comics of the eighties as a specific result of repressive conservative politics. Implicitly then, the fear of atomic power produced fantasies of giant mutated monsters that destroy Tokyo (issue #2, "Island"), and the anti-Asian xenophobia of the thirties in America produced characters like Fu Manchu (issue #5, "The Good Doctor"). *Planetary* presents, here, not just one historical analysis, but an example of historiography at work.

Even more pointedly, however, "To Be In England, In The Summertime" depicts a parody of Moore's Revisionist analogue of Miracleman. No one ever names the character except to call him a "traditionalist" superhero, but he is recognisably analogous to Miracleman by virtue of his costume's colours, red and blue, and a few other personal details. However, this analogue version of Miracleman has unkempt stubble and a baggy costume that is covered in stains left behind by bodily fluids (fig. 3.11). Thus, Cassaday's art marks him as a fallen, degraded, Dark-Age hero. Similarly, he refers to "GETTING [his] POWERS FROM A TRANSCENDENT SCIENTIST-MENTOR" (7.18:3), which was

fig. 3.11: Dark-Age Miracleman (*Planetary* 7.17:4)

[130] Just as *Black Summer* makes perfectly clear that the president is George W. Bush, but never names him, *Planetary* never mentions Thatcher by name, but the historical details make abundantly clear who these characters are talking about.

Marvelman's origin back in the 1950s, but he also describes discovering his "real" origin, which is a hyper-sexualised version of Moore's retcon of the character:

> I DIDN'T WANT TO FIND OUT THAT [...] I WAS GROWN FROM THE DNA OF ARYAN SUPER-ATHLETES AND HITLER'S PERSONAL SEX MIDGETS! [...] // I **LIKED** MY LIFE! THERE WAS **NOTHING WRONG WITH ME!** / I WASN'T HIP, I WASN'T TRENDY, I WASN'T EDGY, AND YOU KNOW WHAT? / **THAT WAS OKAY!** // [...] -- IF YOU DIDN'T WANT ME, YOU SHOULD HAVE JUST BLOODY IGNORED ME! (7.18:3-5).

On the page following this rant, Jack Carter, who in fact faked his death to draw out the Miracleman analogue, kills him with a shotgun blast to the stomach (7.19:1). Through a series of moment-to-moment panel transitions in which Carter changes his coat, reveals a familiar set of tattoos on his torso, and lights a cigarette, he transforms into Spider Jerusalem, the star of Ellis and Robertson's *Transmetropolitan* (fig. 3.12). In Geoff Klock's words, this sequence "exposes the road of influence between the two characters by hinting that they are one and the same" (Klock 160), with Spider as a science-fiction version of Constantine. It demonstrates that we cannot, in the fallen hero's words, just bloody ignore our own histories, even the histories of our most fantastic fictions, and "we" in this case includes scholars, fans, and creators alike. "To Be In England, In The Summertime" thus represents the cynical spirit of British-created comics of the eighties, the extreme Dark-Age comics that followed, the attempt to retcon them out of existence, the necessity to remember them, warts and all, and finally the inevitable fact that we have no choice but to move forward. In order to know where we are going, we have to maintain an awareness of where we have been. Historicising the present, Frederic Jameson's commandment, requires that we pay attention to both the past and the future as well. *Planetary* does so in stark contrast with a literary tradition—the mainstream American comic book—that has typically gone out of its way to ignore both history and futurity in favour of an ever-shifting, spuriously eternal present.

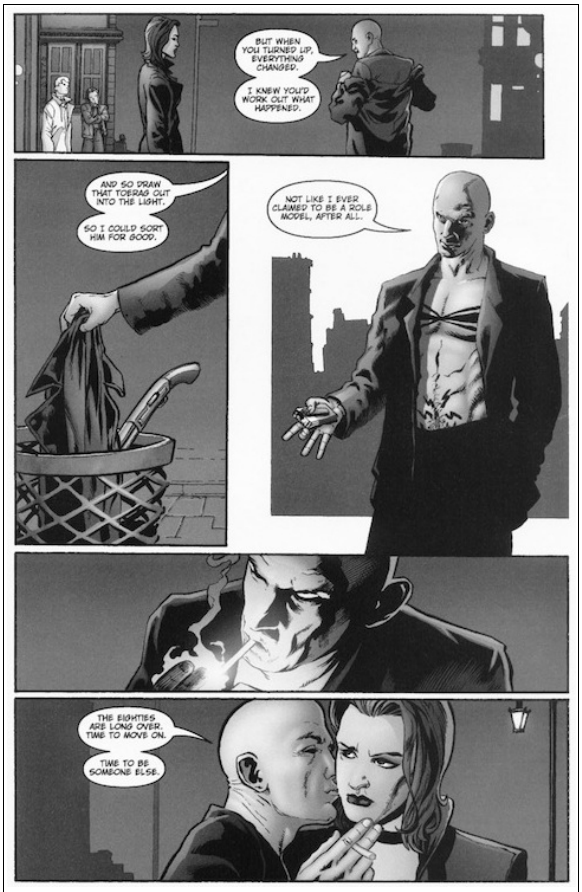

fig. 3.12: From Constantine to Jerusalem (*Planetary* 7.21:1-5)

3.3: Revisionist Fantasy

Moore et al.'s *Swamp Thing* and Gaiman et al.'s *Sandman* are both fantasy comics, but both are also nominally set in a superhero universe. Swamp Thing, the character, interacts with superhero characters on occasion, including Superman (*DC Comics Presents* #8) and Batman (*Saga of the Swamp Thing* #53), and Sandman interacts with several characters who are part of the DC universe, including two previous superheroes called "Sandman" (Wesley Dodds/Sandman I in *The Sandman* #1, and Hector Hall/Sandman III in #11 and #12). Although they do not focus on the superhero, the commentaries they offer of it as a genre are significant. By stepping slightly outside of the superhero genre, they assume a position that is less complicit than the comics that I discuss in the first two sections of this chapter, which all critique the superhero from within the dominant logic of its own genre. Moore and Gaiman's fantasy comics therefore lose their insider voice (i.e., their ability to directly address the ideologies, generic assumptions, and dominant logic of the superhero), but they gain the ability to look at the superhero through the lens of two very different narrative traditions: horror and myth. Hutcheon's notion of complicit critique, found in her *Politics of Postmodernism*, is useful here. Revisionist superhero comics that critique the superhero are obviously very complicit in the presumptions of that genre. Indeed, they gain their power directly from the complicity of their critique. *Watchmen*, *Miracleman*, *Black Summer, Supreme*, and *Planetary* all view the superhero through the lens of their own generic expectations in order to display just how distorted that lens is. Moore and Gaiman's fantasy comics lose that particular power by shifting to a different genre, but they gain the perspective that the new genre affords. They view the superhero through the lens of fantasy; therefore, their critiques are less complicit and can reveal different things. *Swamp Thing* reinterprets the superhero through horror tropes, but inflected with environmentalism, while *Sandman* characterises the superhero as part of a field of intertexts rather than the dominant presence in its own field.

3.3.a: Ecological Morality

Swamp Thing is a major work within the larger Revisionist movement. It influences almost everything that comes after it, most especially *Sandman*. *Miracleman* and *V for Vendetta* were originally published in the UK in *Warrior Magazine* and only later reprinted and published in colour in the US after Moore became famous because of the success of *Swamp Thing*. It was effectively the first American audiences saw of the mature, horror-inflected comics that started to come from British creators in the 1980s. Although the audience had to be ready to receive these new Revisionist comics, it is fair to say that *Swamp Thing* is the touchstone of the style.

The most prominent motif of early issues of *Swamp Thing* is its mixing of horror-genre tropes with social commentaries. Moore explains:

> We did kind of a tour of America where we would take on some of the standard horror tropes—vampires and

> werewolves—and turn them into things that were social problems in America at the time. (Moore in Weiland)

This tour, called "American Gothic," includes commentaries on racism, sexism, nuclear power, alternative sexualities, and gun violence. The sexism issue is particularly unflinching.

Swamp Thing, #40 "The Curse," mixes the werewolf with a bold feminist theme. The lycanthropy in this story results from the repressed feminist rage of an American housewife called "Phoebe." Named after a Classical moon-goddess, her life consists of a series of reminders that women are second-class citizens doomed to domestic servitude. Bissette and Totleben's art communicates Phoebe's rage as especially ferocious through a non-diegetic image of an angry face that forms out of drops of menstrual blood (fig. 3.13). The mise-en-page that surrounds that image contains general arthrological effects that moves in several directions at once. The central panels—sold black frames with sharp splotches of red—form a vertical series in which the menstrual blood transforms into a howling face. The restrained arthrological sequence (the panels in left-to-right/top-to-bottom order) alternates rapidly between the world that drives Phoebe to her primal feminist rage—the advertising behind her displays tampons (40.2:2) and pornography (40.2:4)—and the rage itself, personified. The drops of blood represent the sexist fear of women's reproductive organs and the alleged lack of cleanliness that comes with them.

fig. 3.13: Feminist Rage (*Swamp Thing* 40.2:1-10)

The textual narration is also non-diegetic and alternates with the visual representation. The two thus form an image-text relationship in which both elements articulate feminist rage, but not through equivalent representations. Instead, both take a part of the representational load and combine in the reader/viewer's mind to form an impression of the aforementioned feminist rage. The image of menstrual blood and the story the narrator tells contrive to characterise Phoebe's anger as not just belonging to herself but instead to all women since ancient times: "**... THEIR ANGER IN THE DARKNESS TURNING, UNRELEASED, UNSPOKEN, / ITS MOUTH A RED WOUND, ITS EYES HUNGRY, HUNGRY FOR THE MOON**" (40.2:7). Their anger has a face and a mouth, intimated by the text and shown in

the panels. Phoebe's transformation even depicts the werewolf erupting out of her mouth (40.10:1-4), a physical manifestation of a primal howl of outrage. The title, "The Curse," refers to three things at once: menstruation, systemic sexism, and lycanthropy. The issue does not voice an even-tempered, logical articulation of systemic sexism. It does not attempt to explain feminism to an uninitiated reader/viewer. It instead constitutes the comic-book equivalent of a primal howl against patriarchal dominance. The only escape for Phoebe, at the end of the issue, is suicide: "I AM WOMAN. I SEEK RELEASE FROM THIS STIFLING PLACE THAT HAS BEEN BUILT FOR ME" (40.19:3). She throws herself on a grocery-store display of silver cutlery, which again neatly combines the werewolf legend with feminist concerns. She kills herself on eating utensils, which symbolise domestic duty but are also a consumer product; capitalist imagery in the issue—advertisements for domestic products, feminine hygiene, and pornography—employs gender stereotyping as a crass marketing strategy.

Aside from the particular social issues that "American Gothic" takes on, the overarching political theme of *Swamp Thing* engages is environmentalism, and herein lies its brief but significant critique of superhero ideology. *Swamp Thing*'s environmental focus reorients the series such that it can look at the morality of the superhero genre—which typically makes a clear and uncomplicated distinction between good and evil—from an ecologically-inspired point of view. Issue #50, "The End," presents generic superhero morality in direct juxtaposition with ecological morality. The "American Gothic" story culminates in a crossover with *Crisis On Infinite Earths*, which I discuss in Chapter 2.[131] DC effectively forced Moore et al. to take part in a corporate marketing stunt. Whether because they did not have a choice or out of a desire to undermine the genre, they decided to take *Crisis On Infinite Earths* as an opportunity to comment on the superhero. In #47, "The Parliament of Trees," Swamp Thing meets his spiritual ancestors, a group of plant elementals who put down roots (literally) in Brazil, "South of Concordia... / [at] the source of the Tefé [river]" (47.6:3)."[132] Swamp Thing asks this Parliament of Trees how to fight evil and they answer that there is no such thing in nature, only plants and animals that live off of one another:

> APHID EATS LEAF. LADYBUG EATS APHID. SOIL ABSORBS DEAD LADYBUG. PLANTS FEED UPON SOIL. / IS APHID EVIL? IS LADYBUG EVIL? IS SOIL EVIL? / WHERE IS EVIL IN ALL THE WOOD? (47.18:6)

Their description of nature as a cycle of death and life matches the mythology that Moore invents for the Swamp Thing itself:

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[131] See 2.1.a: "Crises."

[132] This geographic specificity works against the neverwhen as well because it locates the story in a particular place with particular qualities, rather than the common superhero practise of inventing fictitious countries that stand for very broadly-defined and dimly-understood areas of the world. For example, Marvel Comics has Latveria (Eastern-European dictatorship) and Wakanda (high-tech African monarchy), while DC has Qurac, Kahndaq, and Bialya (Middle-Eastern theocracies/dictatorships). Moore's choice of an actual location for the Parliament of Trees is a subtle but significant example of overturning traditional superhero tropes.

> ALL… OUR STORIES… ARE SUBTLY… DIFFERENT… YET THE UNDERLYING… PATTERN… REMAINS CONSTANT… / A MAN… DIES IN FLAMES… A MONSTER [i.e., a plant elemental] RISES FROM THE MIRE… SACRIFICE… AND RESURRECTION… THAT IS ALWAYS… OUR BEGINNING… (47.14:4)[133]

Swamp Thing thus depicts the death-life cycle as a necessary biological process, but also lends it spiritual significance by calling it a "sacrifice."

This marriage of spirituality and ecology is, of course, not unique to Moore. Eighties environmentalism was littered with pseudo-spiritualism, from references to "Mother Earth" to the brief vogue of Wicca and Pagan religions.[134] Environmentalism and spiritualism are a logical pair; the environmentalist element of the Hippie counter-culture of the 1960s made the same connections. Moore takes that pre-existing connection and puts it into the context of a fantasy comic book. The plant elementals themselves, including the Swamp Thing, live and die by a cycle of sacrifice and rebirth. Therefore, from the ecological point of view that the Parliament of Trees imparts to Swamp Thing, generic superheroic morality (i.e., fighting evil and preserving good) has no meaning. Arguably, even the critically-informed understanding of superheroic morality—articulated by critics such as Dittmer, Wolf-Meyer, Hughes, and even Eco—also has no meaning. Class and economy are as immaterial to the Parliament's strictly ecological perspective as morality. The environmentalism in *Swamp Thing* thus presents itself as if it were apolitical, which is to say that it has a politics that purports to occupy an objective position above other kinds of politics, specifically rejecting the simple, binary morality of the superhero genre.

In Issue #50, "The End," Swamp Thing joins a coalition of heroes and demons who attempt to fight a "TERRIBLE PRIMORDIAL SHADOW THAT SLEPT IN THE CHAOS BEYOND HELL" (50.2-3:2). This primordial shadow turns out to be a great, black hand that attacks Hell itself. John Constantine explains that its attack is the spiritual reverberation of the very science-fiction-themed events in *Crisis On Infinite Earths* (*Swamp Thing* 46.14:7).[135] The hand physically absorbs three characters and while they are inside of it, it asks them to define evil, presumably because it wants to understand itself. They respond according to their personalities. Evil is either a "QUAGMIRE OF IGNORANCE" (50.21:3), or the

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[133] Ellipses are original. Moore extends the Swamp Thing's traditional halting speech to all plant elementals. In addition, John Costanza's original lettering has these lines all in italics, with the vertical font indicating stresses.

[134] This is not to claim that these religions are not valid forms of worship in and of themselves, but simply to make the factual claim that they became more popular at the same time as the environmental movement of the eighties.

[135] This hand is recognisable as part of *Crisis On Infinite Earths* because a hand motif runs through that series as well (e.g., *Crisis On Infinite Earths* 7.8.5, 7.14.3, 10.23-24, etc.). Swamp Thing plays a marginal role in the central conflict of *Crisis On Infinite Earths*; Moore instead builds his own story around the mystical/spiritual implications of a cosmic event that threatens to destroy the multiverse, which displays one of the core Revisionist practises. They employ corporate-approved elements of the superhero genre and publishing structure to mount their own criticisms of the superhero and its morality.

absence of God's presence (50.16:4), or something to be destroyed in order to inspire loyalty to God (50.28:4). In all cases, evil has a definite form and is the opposite of good. Swamp Thing, however, places evil within the ecological framework that the Parliament explained to him: "PERHAPS EVIL IS THE HUMUS FORMED BY VIRTUE'S DECAY… / AND PERHAPS […] IT IS FROM THAT DARK, SINISTER LOAM… THAT VIRTUE GROWS STRONGEST?" (50.31:3). The black hand releases him, without harm, and then reaches towards Heaven and grasps a great golden hand that reaches down to meet it. Instead of good and evil in a fight to the death, then, *Swamp Thing*'s ecologically and mythologically-informed morality argues something akin to the yin-yang, an interanimating relationship between life and death in which life sacrifices itself to produce more life. By looking at the superhero from this spiritualist/ecological perspective, *Swamp Thing* offers a moral schema that is much more complex than the hero/villain binary of superhero comics and thus also reveals that that binary was never universal, ahistorical, or natural. Gaiman et al.'s *Sandman* follows directly in *Swamp Thing*'s footsteps, but with an emphasis on mythology rather than horror.

3.3.b: Superheroes and Myth

Sandman picks up many of *Swamp Thing*'s themes and motifs and is even more critically and commercially successful, as well as exhibiting even more influence on later comics. The series presents a mythology that combines elements of several systems: pre-existing/historical myth (Judeo-Christian, Greek, Norse, Egyptian, etc.); the invented deities and cosmic entities of the DC universe (e.g., Destiny, the Lords of Order and Chaos); British folklore and fairy-tale (Robin Goodfellow, the land of Faerie); and finally Gaiman's own supernatural characters (The Endless). The title character is the personification of the human capacity to dream and to imagine, and therefore also to tell stories. He most often goes by the name "Morpheus," but is also known by the names of almost every god of sleep, dreaming, or storytelling; the series strongly implies that every one of those deities is an aspect of him. *Sandman* is fundamentally not a superhero narrative, of course—it adheres much more closely to the conventions of horror, fairy-tale, and myth, three genres that are already closely related—but when it does depict superhero characters, it consistently handles them the same way it handles Ancient and Classical mythology. It employs discreet conventions of realism that function within otherwise highly-fantastic narratives. Specifically, it tends to extrapolate conventionally-realistic psychology from fantastic and/or mythological situations, depicting for example the emotional anguish of Orpheus's failure to retrieve his wife, Eurydice, from Hades in *The Sandman Special: The Song of Orpheus* (45:8-50:6). This subsection analyses two instances of depicting psychological realism—here understood as a genre, of course—with superhero characters: a cheeky dream-analysis that the series performs on Superman, and the lasting emotional trauma of superheroic transformation, using a character called Element Girl.

In issue #71, "In Which A Wake Is Held," Superman reports that in his dreams, he often has an ant's head or a gorilla's body, or he is a TV news anchor

and not a print journalist (71.22:1), all of which occurred in his comics in the fifties and sixties, and which *Crisis On Infinite Earths* retconned out of existence in 1986. Only someone who knows about those Superman comics, as well as DC's attempt to wipe them out of existence, would think to script this panel or could understand it as anything other than a *non sequitur*.[136] Thus the joke both presumes and relies on an informed audience. However, Gaiman's original script called for a very different joke, one that is not nearly as pointed as the self-reflexive comics I discuss in the first section of this chapter, or as outright condemnatory as the academic critiques of the superhero as figure of enforced normativity, status quo, and property rights. Instead, it is a good-natured jab at Superman's most fundamental character obsession, his secret identity.

According to Gaiman,

> the original panel was a much longer shot, further back. It showed Clark Kent with his Superman cape coming out from under his suit, and Clark looking around in an attempt to see it as he's talking. [Laughter.]
> I thought having his costume accidentally exposed is precisely the kind of thing Superman would dream about; but DC's Superman editor said it "showed disrespect to the character" and made us redraw the panel. (Bender 213)

DC's editorial intervention, here, might seem extreme, considering how friendly the joke is, but the nature of the joke has potentially far-reaching implications. Superman's greatest anxiety is not kryptonite, or Lex Luthor's villainy, or even Lois Lane's unwillingness to date him. His greatest anxiety is discovery, the failure to "pass" for human. That fear is so powerful that it prompts him to continuously put human lives at risk every time he has to waste time pretending he is not a superhero. The fan community has taken notice of this moral contradiction. The website *Superdickery.com*, for example, catalogues official images of Superman doing various horribly cruel things, mostly on comic-book covers from the 1950s and 1960s. The cover of *World's Finest* v1 #164, for example, depicts Superman and Batman threatening to kill a woman because she has discovered their secret identities. This image produces a shock, or inspires a laugh, in any viewer who knows how much superheroes work to protect their secret identities. Gaiman's joke indirectly but powerfully speaks to the moral contradiction of a character who implicitly places the value of human life *below* his own secrets.

Issue #20, "Façade," contains *Sandman*'s most sustained engagement with a superhero character: Urania Blackwell/Element Girl. The issue links her to a specific mythological figure, the Egyptian sun-god Ra, in the process mixing the superhero genre with Ancient mythology. As Moore points out with regard to

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[136] In addition to the joke, the panel also displays one of the founding, if not always spoken, principles behind Revisionist metacomics. Superman's dreams of his pre- *Crisis* adventures suggest that those retconned stories still exist and are perhaps still accessible in dreams. If that were the case, it would imply that all stories are equally real/unreal, which is one of the presumptions behind most Revisionist metacomics. See 4.1: "Revisionist Fluidity."

Swamp Thing, if the protagonist ever actually transformed back into a human, the series would end. "Façade" inverts that same situation: it depicts Blackwell as a retired superhero who cannot return to her life. Years earlier, Ra transformed her into a supernatural warrior, one of an army of similar beings called the "METAMORPHAE" (20.19:2) who ostensibly fight a "**NEVER-ENDING BATTLE AGAINST APEP, THE SERPENT THAT NEVER DIES**" (20.21:7).[137] However, Apep did die 3,000 years prior and Blackwell's transformation leaves her severely disfigured (green hair, multi-coloured skin, and the total absence of internal anatomy). "Façade" opens with Blackwell retired from active duty and living off of a CIA disability pension. Locked in her apartment by agoraphobia and acute anxiety, she has become depressed and suicidal, but her body is too resilient for her to commit suicide. Her apartment becomes an inverted and tragic version of Moore's Supremacy: it is a place where superheroes go when they have been written out of existence.

The issue also depicts one of her dreams, in which she imagines her transformation at Ra's hand as very much like a rape: a physical violation after which the sun-god almost literally casts her aside and leaves her to fend for herself. Figure 3.14 displays both body language and language quite typical of a rape narrative. In the first panel, her body is forced into an open position while in the second she lies on the ground naked covering her face and the narrative speaks of futile attempts to resist. Although she did volunteer for the transformation, as part of her CIA duties, she changes her mind part-way through and thus removes her consent. The rape imagery arises, here, partly out of Gaiman's unflinching willingness to depict the more horrifying elements of Ancient and Classical mythology, such as the dismemberment of Orpheus by harpies (*Song of Orpheus* 1.44-46) or a modern version of the Queen of Sheba physically consuming a man with her vulva (*American Gods* 22-25). However, Gaiman

fig. 3.14: Blackwell's Rape (*Sandman* 20.7:2-3)

[137] The metamorphae are not part of the actual Egyptian myth. They were invented by DC Comics in order to rationalise the existence of multiple characters with the same element-manipulating powers, namely Metaphorpho and Element Girl.

also consistently portrays these scenes of mythic horror with touches of psychological realism. Blackwell's rape dream combines both impulses, presenting a metaphor for the trauma of her forced transformation and the futile anger she feels after the fact, but also presenting the casual cruelty of the Ancient and Classical gods. Conversely, the more concrete details of her origin story, her volunteering as part of a CIA operation, reflect a common fairy tale/fantasy trope in which power always comes with a price. "Façade" casts this superhero as almost literally a left-over weapon. She was left over, in the first place, from an Ancient Egyptian war between gods; in the second place, left over from the Cold War, here imagined as the CIA's desire to have super-powered agents; and finally left over from Silver-Age comics, which created her as a convenient female version of an existing male hero and then cast her aside, just as Ra did.

Sandman mixes mythology, contemporary history, psychological realism, and superhero comics without privileging any one of them. By mixing mythologies—Ancient/Classical, Biblical, superheroic—Gaiman et al. flatten the hierarchy of literature, raising the superhero to stand next to the Classics and bringing the Classics to bear on contemporary pop culture. Indeed, the original concept behind Gaiman's *Sandman*, according to his notes, included explicit links between superheroes and mythology. Gaiman connects the character to his "mythological/classical roots [for example, the] Gates of Horn and Gates of Ivory" (Bender 25), which Penelope describes in *The Odyssey* as the entrance to the land of dreams.[138] *Sandman* admits no split between contemporary comic-book superheroes and Classical literature. It freely mixes the two, as well as other mythological traditions, English folklore, Shakespearean drama, and more contemporary literature. In *Sandman*, all literature implicitly contains potentially profound ideas, and the series asserts its right to access to all of it. As Hutcheon points out, postmodern art admits influences from all forms of discourse, including comic books (Hutcheon *Politics* 128), so it seems only fair that Revisionist comics can call upon influences from many different discourses as well, including "high" literature.

The connections that it articulates between superhero comics and mythology might initially seem to resemble the neverwhen, but that phenomenon is distinctly different. It refers to a specific industry practise in which characters remain in apparent stasis over decades by constantly updating the characters to match contemporary sensibilities. The neverwhen does not allow for a significant amount of character development or maturation because it does not, as Eco points out in "The Myth of Superman," allow the characters to actually retain their experiences (17). Instead, the neverwhen changes characters without developing them, swapping out experiences and sensibilities but not allowing them to accrete. *Sandman*'s superhero characters, however, do have psychologies in the present

[138] *The Odyssey*, Book 19, lines 560 to 569. "Stranger, dreams verily are baffling and unclear of meaning, and in no wise do they find fulfillment in all things for men. For two are the gates of shadowy dreams, and one is fashioned of horn and one of ivory. Those dreams that pass through the gate of sawn ivory [565] deceive men, bringing words that find no fulfillment." From the *Perseus Digital Library*, Trans. A. T. Murray.

that derive from the past: Superman's dreams indicate his pre-*Crisis* comics, and Blackwell's depression is the direct result of having been metaphorically raped, literally disfigured, and then abandoned. These psychological states differ from traditional superhero traumas—the deaths of Bruce Wayne's parents or Peter Parker's "Uncle Ben"—in that there exists in *Sandman* some hope of resolving them. Blackwell does indeed make her peace with Ra and although there is no resolution of Superman's dream, in particular, the entire premise of *Sandman* is that Morpheus does eventually find a way to allow himself to develop psychologically, even though he can achieve that effect only through an elaborate form of suicide, as befitting a character who is intensely self-absorbed and melodramatic. *Sandman* does not specifically target the neverwhen for deconstruction, as *Supreme* does, but it depicts its characters using conventions of psychological realism that run counter to the neverwhen.

3.4: Conclusion

This chapter demonstrates a pattern in Revisionist comics. The industry saw its sales diminish because the audience shrank over the course of the seventies and eighties. Its attempts to seek out new audiences through different genres or styles generally failed, so it instead pulled inwards, fostering the dedicated audience that remained. This lead to a preoccupation with internal continuity and comics that rewarded readers/viewers who retained knowledge of all the minute details of the comics themselves. Revisionist creators arrived in American comics at a time when the audience had grown older and fewer. Kaveney calls them the "fan boy writers" (202) because they are former fans, former members of the comics community. Most of them initially are also British, so they look at America from a distinctly different perspective than does the domestic audience. The position of the British Revisionists as audience members is therefore both inside and outside: inside the fan community, outside American culture.[139] This three-part relationship—audience, creators, industry—sets the stage for a self-examination of comics by comics, and specifically an investigation of their capacity to make connections with the world outside of themselves, through social commentary and a growing awareness of history. Thus we arrive at the problem of introducing elements of conventional realism into highly-fantastic comics, to which Revisionist comics respond in three ways.

Many Revisionist comics demonstrate that conventional realism and superheroes do not mix, that the two are incompatible, and the grandest, most dramatic way to depict that is to display superheroes embracing their overriding

[139] In the spirit of full disclosure, I ought to point out that I too hold this insider/outsider status in the American superhero comics community. I too am not American and therefore the nationalism of superhero comics does not strike me the same way it would an American fan, but I am also an academic critic working in popular culture, which makes me distinctly different than most fans and often quite suspect as a result. Academics are not necessarily welcome in fan communities, despite everything that academics and fans have in common. My liminal position in comics is akin to the liminal position of the British Revisionist creators, which is probably why I personally am drawn to their comics, which look at the genres, clichés, and tropes of American comics with a cordially sceptical eye.

generic drive, "**SOMEBODY** HAS TO SAVE THE **WORLD**," to such an extent that they transform into villains, demonstrating that the two are not polar opposites, but two positions on the same scale. A second group of Revisionist comics instead reveals how the Silver-Age style achieves an ahistorical state, the neverwhen, and through that revelation, the Revisionist comics historicise the genre. These comics often use postmodern narrative techniques to denaturalise the superhero, to show how it is a product of a specific historical development, and thus neither natural nor eternal. The last group starts to turn away from the superhero, and instead embraces a different set of fantastic genres, specifically horror, fairy-tale/folklore, and myth. These comics largely leave the superhero behind, but when they do turn their attention to it, they reveal how generically limited superheroic morality and psychology actually is. Of course, the comics that I discuss in these three groups do not remain neatly within the boundaries that I trace in this chapter. For example, *Watchmen*'s fictitious comic book *Black Freighter* does some of the historicising work that *Supreme* and *Planetary* do, and like *Swamp Thing* and *Sandman,* it also looks at the superhero through the lens of a different genre. I separate these comics into groups in order to investigate discreet aspects of what they do and how they work. The comics themselves are not nearly so discreet.

The problem of conventional realism in superhero comics demonstrates a catharsis of sorts, even a purging, in which the American comics community—fans, creators, and publishers—-can make their peace with the superhero and then either return to it refreshed but with a heightened awareness of its normative and naturalising power (i.e., construct a new superheroic verisimilitude), or depart from it and embrace other genres entirely. The American mainstream has, however, stayed almost exclusively with fantastic action/adventure storytelling (science fiction, modern fantasy, superheroes), so it is important not to overstate this purge. Given just how generically homogenous the field became by the late-seventies, the forays into other genres in the eighties and nineties—e.g., Ellis and Robertson's *Transmetropolitan* (science fiction), Bill Willingham et al.'s *Fables* (fairy tale)—constitute a genuine breakthrough. Of course, these examples do not remain typical of their genres either. *Transmetropolitan* is cyberpunk mixed with gonzo journalism; *Fables* is a postmodern meditation on fairy tales. Then, of course, there are the comics that blend so many genres as to be unrecognisable, such as *Girl Genius* (Phil and Kaja Foglio) and *Clockwork Girl* (O'Reilly and Hann), both of which are Victorian steam-punk fairy-tale comics; or *Hellboy* (Mignola et al.), a superhero, horror, alternative-history Bildungsroman. For all the experimentation and overturning of old ideas in Revisionist American comics, their strength has always been not the ability to strike out in radical new directions, but instead their willingness to work with pre-existing modes, genres, and styles, to recombine them in new ways, and most of all, to read/view this supposedly "low culture" art in good faith, to treat it with humour and incredulity when called for, but always give it the respect that it is due. By approaching American comics in this way, Revisionist creators and the comics they produce grant the audience leave to engage with the fantasy rather than turning their noses

up at an alleged lack of "reality." Revisionist metacomics in effect argue that the best way to solve the problem of realism in superhero comics is to simply admit that comics cannot be "real," but instead they can treat realism and fantasy as specialised verisimilitudes, in Todorov's sense. Neither automatically captures "reality" any better than the other and both are constructed out of a great number of discreet conventions. From that point of view, comics are free to mix and match those discreet conventions to create entirely new verisimilitudes.

Chapter 4: Culture

"SO... **WHO** DIED?"
"A **PUH-POINT** OF **VIEW**."
"**SECRET!** YOU TOLD ANOTHER **SECRET!**"

-from *The Sandman* (Neil Gaiman et al.)

This chapter addresses comics that extend their awareness, indeed their self-awareness, beyond the mainstream niche of the American comics community. Whereas Chapter 2 discusses superhero comics that fail to create convincing conventional realism, and Chapter 3 discusses comics that display the superhero failing to be conventionally realistic, Chapter 4 focuses on metacomics that perform social commentaries outside of the superhero genre. Ultimately, the comics in this chapter argue that representation and perception govern reality, although "reality" understood here not as the material, physical world, but instead the manner in which people act in and navigate that world. Metacomics at their most extreme demonstrate something that Chapters 2 and 3 intimate: comics are capable of containing stable representations that radically violate the most fundamental principles of the rational world, including causality and logic. Revisionist comics rarely display the total breakdown of language that Waugh observes in the more extreme forms of radical metafiction, which may very well be because those comics still operate within a mainstream entertainment industry, an environment that is uninterested in that kind of experimental formalism. Moore, Gaiman, and Ellis' work outside the mainstream does indicate a good deal more visual experimentation—the loose line style of *From Hell,* over-sized pages and painted panels in *Signal to Noise*, strict format rules and sallow colours in *Fell*—but none of them indicate a strong motivation to depict the total breakdown of language or structure that Waugh describes. I argue instead that a stable depiction of the capacity for paradox that lies within comics as an art form is potentially more upsetting and has more capacity to change the perceptions of an audience than comics that simply appear to be unstable. The appearance of instability would show that creators can render comics such that they are incoherent, which is not necessarily a difficult task. On the other hand, the stable representation of instability shows how comics can contain incoherence while maintaining the appearance of coherence. That paradox, coherently representing incoherence, is how people can be simultaneously fascinated and unsettled by optical illusions, for example.

In Chapter 1, I use Mitchell's example of the Duck-Rabbit to explain multistability.[140] The Duck-Rabbit is alternately duck or rabbit, but Mitchell argues that it is ultimately both. Neither one nor the other, it is a third thing, a duck-rabbit. Optical illusions often have this either/or-but-actually-both nature, but images like the Devil's Fork (fig. 4.1) display it even more prominently. Mitchell, employing both Wittgenstein and Foucault, argues that the Duck-Rabbit is not either/or but in fact both; the Devil's Fork is simultaneously two- and three-

[140] See 1.2.c: "Metapictures."

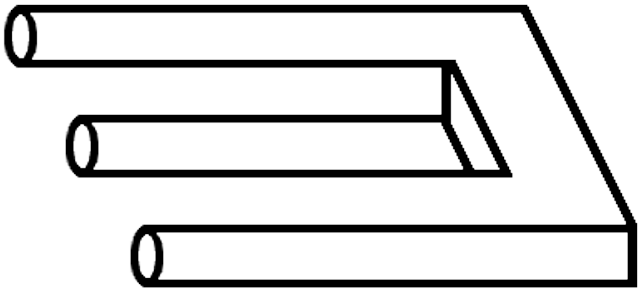
fig. 4.1: The Devil's Fork

pronged. It goes beyond multistability (i.e., maintaining multiple stable states) and instead achieves fluidity, in which those states demonstrably bleed into each other, stably representing instability. There is no way to look at the Devil's Fork such that a viewer's mind can make it stable, make it a singular representation of a physical object that could exist in three dimensions.[141] It fundamentally violates the basic rules of the physical world, which is surely why it is named after the Devil, the Prince of Lies. M.C. Escher's optical illusions rely on this same visual fluidity, most notably for my purposes the image *Drawing Hands* (fig. 4.2) in which two hands draw each other into existence, thus depicting them as both creator and created as well as quite succinctly representing a mise-en-abîme, reflections reflecting each other, the hand of the artist bringing the hand of the artist into life. At their most radical extreme, metacomics can present and/or reveal similarly stable violations of formal or narrative logic. Specifically, they can render the notions of "fiction" and "reality" almost totally unstable by allowing the two to bleed into each other, as Waugh's theories of metafiction argue.[142]

The rest of this chapter contains four sections. The first section briefly discusses a motif that Geoff Klock identifies in which Revisionist comics depict a universal crossover point, which is the logical extreme of the crossover as industry practise, and strongly resembles Waugh's notion of radical metafiction.[143] The second section focuses on Ellis and Robertson's *Transmetropolitan*, a structural metafiction that employs analogue multistability and models how modern electronic media, specifically public-relations and journalism, shape public understanding of the political world. The third section addresses Moore and William's *Promethea*, which explicitly presents a mystical-linguistic system and uses

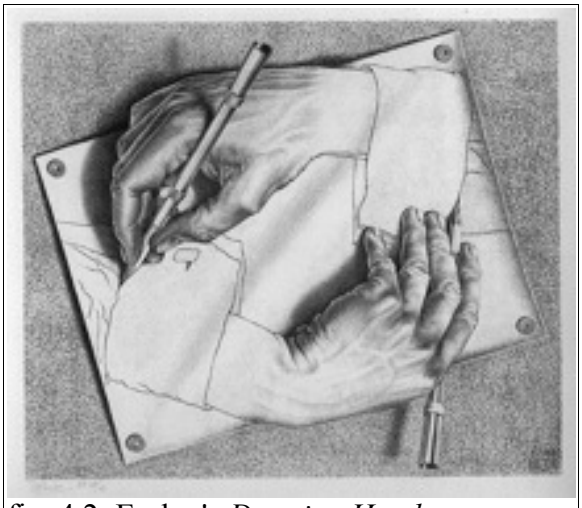
fig. 4.2: Escher's *Drawing Hands*

[141] One can cover half the image, of course, but re-framing in effect changes the image, and doing so would yield little if any useful new information about how it functions and what it means.
[142] See 1.2.b: "Metafiction."
[143] See 2.1.a: "Crises."

it to deliver commentaries on gender and perception. Finally, the fourth and last section discusses two opposite reactions to the idea of a metafictional sense of reality, one that rejects the idea and one that embraces it.

The transition from comics about comics to comics about culture should not be seen as a progression or a teleology. Many Revisionist comics still engage with the American comics industry/subculture itself if for no other reason than because there is still much to say about them both. This dissertation, for example, has focused on self-reflexivity, so it has had little time to address the actual complaints of the Revisionists with regard to systemic sexism/sexual objectification, and almost no time to discuss the ever-present racist overtones, complicity with some of the worst elements of modern corporate practise, perpetuation of genuinely harmful simplifications of world politics, and the list goes on. Similarly, the transition should not be seen as a chronological development within the lives of Revisionist creators. Moore, Gaiman, and Ellis all move quite comfortably back and forth from cultural analysis, to genre work, to art-house comics. All three have written comics about superheroes long after writing series that either condemn that genre or appear to simply leave it behind entirely (e.g., Moore in *Albion,* Gaiman in *1602* and *The Eternals*, and Ellis in *Nextwave* and *Thunderbolts*). As McHale says with regards to modernism and postmodernism, the styles of comics that this dissertation describes are all "equally available" (207) to the comics creators of today.

4.1: Revisionist Fluidity

Fluid narrative spaces, which Chapter 2 hints at as the logical extension of the multiverse concept, fall under one of Waugh's sub-types of radical metafiction, called *intertextual overkill*, in which "texts/writing is explicitly seen to produce texts/writing. Linguistic codifications break down into further linguistic codifications" (145). Superhero comics have done this in extremely literal terms by creating multiverses: theoretically-infinite variations on a given set of narratives/characters. As I argue in Chapter 2, there are economic, aesthetic, and ideological reasons why comics have traditionally tried (usually unsuccessfully) to fix the potential fluidity of the multiverse concept. [144] The Revisionists on the other hand, as Geoff Klock points out, embrace the fluid possibilities of the multiverse. What changed between the SA and Revisionist style "is the perspective that saw unwieldy chaos as a bad thing" (Klock 24). Instead of trying and failing to stave off fluidity, Revisionist comics use it as fodder for storytelling. American comics already take the crossover, an industrial practise driven by profit, to its logical next step, the multiverse. The Revisionists take it to its logical extreme and then push it beyond even that.

Klock identifies a motif in Revisionist comics that depicts a universal crossover point, a physical location within the diegetic space from which characters can access an ostensibly infinite number of other narrative universes (Klock 23-24). The sheer number of incidences of the motif is remarkable. It appears in Moore's *Supreme* (as the Supremacy and the Imagosphere), *Promethea*

[144] See 2.1.a: "Crises."

(as the Immateria), *1963* (as the Aleph), and *Smax* (as the Transworld); Gaiman's *Sandman* (as the Dreaming and Soft Places); in Ellis' *Stormwatch* and *The Authority* (as the Bleed), as well as *Planetary* (as the Snowflake); in Morrison's *Marvel Boy* (as macrospace), and reappears in the DC multiverse in the linked series *Infinite Crisis*, *52*, and *Final Crisis* (as the multiverse); and finally in Mark Waid's *The Kingdom* (as hypertime), which he wrote in consultation with Morrison. If I expand my criteria to encompass structural metafictions as well as these radical examples, the list includes the coexistence of various gods and mythologies in Gaiman et al.'s *Sandman*, the science fantasy, adventure, and horror characters in Moore and O'Neal's *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen*—especially diverse in *Black Dossier*—the British comic-book anti-heroes in *Albion* (Alan Moore, Leah Moore, John Mark Reppion, Shane Ivan Oakley), the profusion of analogues in *Planetary* (Ellis and Cassaday)[145], and the burnt-out science-fiction heroes in *Ignition City* (Ellis and Gianluca), just to name a few.

Klock does not expand on the motif as a self-reflexive device—he is more interested in its psychoanalytic and lyric implications[146]—but he is absolutely right to group them together as an indication of a shifting dominant in American comics, between fixity (stable identities/worlds) and fluidity (radical metafiction or Klock's "unwieldy chaos"). Most instances of the motif at some point depict the protagonists physically arriving at the universal crossover point, which usually appears as a vast space filled with diverse panels that contain recognisable characters from many different and ostensibly separate continuities. Waid's hypertime, from *The Kingdom*, contains panels that reference comics published only by DC but includes those that have ostensibly been retconned out of existence (*Kingdom* 1.33-34:1, 2.35-4), while Moore's Aleph, from *1963* (see fig. 4.3), includes images of characters owned by many different publishing houses, everything from Frank Miller's *Sin City* (middle right), to Scott McCloud's cartoon version of himself from *Understanding Comics* (middle extreme-left) (*1963* 6.22-23:1). Moore's version of the universal crossover point thus implies Mark Currie's definition of metafiction as that writing which blurs the boundary between fiction and criticism, which I discuss in Chapter 1, and below in the

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[145] see 3.2.b: "Historicising the Superhero."

[146] His book employs an Oedipal scheme of development in comics, which in my estimation does not accurately describe how much reverence Revisionist comics pay to their source material and how much delight their creators take in expanding on that source material, even when they are critical of it. For example, Miller's *The Dark Knight Returns* or Morrison's *Dare* both ostensibly expose the fascist and/or imperialist implications of formerly patriotic superheroes (Batman and Dan Dare, respectively) and in the process reveal the ostensibly fascistic and imperial implications of conservative world leaders of the eighties and nineties (Reagan and Thatcher). However, the protagonists are ultimately also the heroes of these comics. Far from killing those heroes to make way for new ones, as an Oedipal model would suggest, Revisionist comics tend instead to revise them such that they are once again viable in a new socio-historical context. Thus, Hutcheon's model of postmodernism, which works *with* its source material while simultaneously exposing its limits and blind spots, is a much better fit for American Revisionist comics.

fig. 4.3: Moore's Aleph (*1963* 6.22-23:1)

context of Moore and Williams' *Promethea*.[147] If all comics are accessible from within all comics, then that includes works of comics criticism, of which McCloud's is probably the most recognisable example.

These universal crossover points reflect a common Revisionist desire to mix and match comics of all kinds, to equate them all on an ontological level. Moore's foreword to *Whatever Happened to the Man of Tomorrow?* , the last official Silver-Age Superman story, reads: "This is an IMAGINARY STORY... aren't they all?" (*Whatever*).[148] In the publicity for *The Kingdom*, Waid and Morrison summarise it with the simple assertion that "It's all true" (Yarbrough). One of Waid's characters quite directly explains narrative fluidity in *The Kingdom*:

> HOW DOES IT **WORK?** / OFF THE CENTRAL TIMELINE [...] EVENTS OF **IMPORTANCE** OFTEN CAUSE DIVERGENT "TRIBUTARIES" TO BRANCH OFF OF THE **MAIN TIMESTREAM**. / BUT [...] / ON OCCASION, THOSE TRIBUTARIES **RETURN**--SOMETIMES FEEDING BACK **INTO** THE CENTRAL TIMELINE, OTHER TIMES **OVERLAPPING** IT

147 See 1.2.b: "Metafiction" and 4.3: "Magic," respectively.

148 The phrase "imaginary story" refers to a Silver-Age practise at DC Comics to explore "what if?" scenarios, such as Superman marrying Lois Lane or Batman retiring. They occur outside of official continuity and thus make space for a certain degree of fluidity without disrupting the larger, proprietary, fixed narrative universe. Moore's rhetorical question hints at the obvious: that all fiction is imaginary and therefore calling any one fiction more imaginary than another is nonsensical.

> BRIEFLY BEFORE CHARTING AN ENTIRELY **NEW** COURSE. / AN OLD FRIEND IS SUDDENLY RECALLED AFTER YEARS OF BEING **FORGOTTEN**. A SCRAP OF HISTORY BECOMES **MISREMEMBERED**, EVEN REINVENTED IN THE COMMON WISDOM. (*The Kingdom* 1.226.1-3[149])

Fluid comics, under this kind of model, are thus not bound by the rules of linear narrative causality. They do not have to maintain continuity. All universes are all "equally available" (McHale 207) and not in fact locked-off in distinct, isolated continuities. By the same reasoning, no story is less or more "real" than any other and thus one story cannot logically retcon another because neither has ontological authority over the other. As Waugh points out, though, intertextual overkill also paradoxically intimates an underlying system, despite its anarchic nature. She argues that it points to:

> total anarchy, and simultaneously to the possible existence of a massive conspiracy, an underlying System or Text or Deep Structure which manically and insidiously proliferates itself through the linguistic diversity of its *surface* manifestations. (Waugh 145-146)

According to Waugh, language is one of the underlying systems at which intertextual overkill can hint, but not necessarily the only one. Her theory applies equally well to many formal representational systems, including images, although her study is firmly focused on fiction. Revisionist comics, however, often represent that underlying system as the multiverse itself, a Deep Structure born of equal parts conventional SF device (i.e., parallel universes) and profit-driven publishing practise (i.e., the crossover). The ostensibly infinite variations presented by fluid narrative spaces in Revisionist comics also hint at the possibility of something akin to a Grand Unifying Theory of narrative.

Intertextual overkill embodies some of the major literary critical innovations of the latter half of the twentieth century. It implies that all literatures are equally valid and therefore destabilises concepts like the canon, the high/low culture split, and privileged voices (i.e., heteronormative, male, Western, Christian, imperialist, wealthy/high-class, able-bodied, etc.). Once all stories are equally imaginary, originality and authority become suspect as well, which opens the door to treating all "texts" (in the broad sense) as collections of related fragments or inter-texts, to use Bennett and Woollacott's construction. [150] Of course, intertextual overkill cannot actually eliminate any of these practises. Indeed, Hutcheon's concept of postmodernism as complicit critique [151] would suggest that they are all but necessary on a practical level. My own discussion of the Revisionist creators and their practises constructs a canon of comics and Moore's theories of magic suggest, if not an author-god, then an author-wizard. [152]

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[149] Page and panel numbers for *The Kingdom* refer to the collected edition as opposed to individual issues because the individual issues are not consistently page-numbered.

[150] See 1.3.b: "Comics as Articulations."

[151] See 1.2.b: "Metafiction."

[152] See 4.3: "Magic."

However, self-reflexive devices can instead expose concepts like the canon or the author-god as arbitrary constructions rooted in the exchange of power and thus, in Barthes' terms, potentially demythologise them.

As Barthes also explains, though, demythologising is an ongoing process, not a single battle to be won at a stroke.[153] Myths are tenacious and prolific. They reassert themselves constantly. Self-reflexivity in general and intertextual overkill in particular thus have to constantly demythologise. As Hutcheon argues, they must build up these dominant ideas—canon, privilege, the author-god—in order to demonstrate the process of deconstructing them.[154] Universal crossover points, a form of intertextual overkill, are one part of a larger Revisionist tendency to perform this kind of demythologising work, although they often slip over the very blurry border between demythologising and just plain mythologising. For all that *Sandman* and *Promethea* preach a certain kind of fluidity, they also construct elaborate mythological systems, often by harmonising pre-existing systems; *Transmetropolitan* dispels the mesmerising power of mainstream media but in the process valorises investigative journalism to epic proportions. The critique is always complicit, but if we were to ignore all critiques because they are complicit, then we would have none left.

The remaining sections of this chapter examine three culturally-oriented comics that consistently build up myths and then attempt to deconstruct them. *Transmetropolitan* depicts the manipulative power of media in modern democracies by demonstrating gonzo journalism's ability to expose that manipulation. *Promethea* offers a theory of magic as manipulation of language and imagery and uses it to launch social commentaries on gender and sexuality as well as perception. Finally, *Sandman* collapses the frames that ostensibly separate "reality" from "fiction" by making a single, disturbingly literal statement.

4.2: Gonzo Cyberpunk

Transmetropolitan is perhaps Warren Ellis' best-known comic-book series and it demonstrates that metacomics—and thus implicitly metafiction or metapictures—do not necessarily inexorably lead to the conclusion that narrative is ultimately fluid, or that reality is inherently "textual." Indeed, as in the tradition of Marxist critics, *Transmetropolitan* focuses on material concerns around the oppression of the lower classes and the manipulation of popular perception by large institutions (church, corporation, and most of all, state). Thus *Transmetropolitan* does not recede into abstractions about language, perception, and representation. This is not to claim that language, perception, and representation do not have real, political implications, and indeed the series depicts that very idea, but it consistently returns to the material and the practical as the most important outcome of the abstract and the conceptual. Thus, the series directly condemns class oppression by state institutions, but mounts that condemnation using an analogue of Hunter S. Thompson's literary persona. Using this analogue, the series creates a self-reflexive commentary on modern media,

[153] See 1.3.a: "Comics as Myths."
[154] See 1.2.b: "Metafiction."

either as propaganda (i.e., marketing and public relations) or information source (i.e., journalism). It does not present a diegetic world that is actually fluid in the sense that it loses coherence and thus slips into ontological uncertainty, as in *Promethea* or *Sandman*. Instead, it displays how popular perception can be manipulated by the media and it characterises that manipulation as crass lies in the face of objective truth. The series therefore implicitly advocates for investigative journalism as the revelation of those lies. This strategy qualifies as metacomic because it "enacts a central position that so-called real events are inseparable from their interpretations" (17), as Mark Currie says with regards to Wolfe's *Bonfire of the Vanities*, itself a work of fiction but derived in large part from Wolfe's highly self-conscious *new journalism*, itself closely related to Hunter S. Thompson's *gonzo* style on which *Transmetropolitan* is based. The self-reflexivity of *Transmetropolitan* constitutes a commentary on the media as a whole and its responsibilities within a democratic political system. That commentary flows from its analogue premise: a cyberpunk retelling of Thompson's *Fear and Loathing: On the Campaign Trail '72*. This section starts with an explanation of that analogue premise and then addresses class commentary in Volume 4 of *Transmetropolitan*, called *The New Scum*.

4.2.a: Hunter/Spider

The most obvious self-referential element of *Transmetropolitan* is that its protagonist, Spider Jerusalem, bears a striking resemblance to Hunter S. Thompson, and the overarching narrative is patterned on *Campaign Trail*. Spider is an investigative journalist in the gonzo tradition. He becomes personally involved in his stories and injects them with his own, emotionally-charged point of view, as in the gonzo journalistic style. For example, Spider's column is titled "I Hate It Here," "here" being the city in which Spider reluctantly lives and works. Like Thompson, he also takes massive amounts of drugs and claims that they are necessary for his job, and like Thompson, Spider's personal fame gradually comes to overshadow his work. *Transmetropolitan* is a long series, running sixty issues, and published serially, like *Campaign Trail*, and it incorporates an episodic structure with many subplots and one-shot stories. Indeed, Ellis and Robertson's series uses the conceit of journalism to create something of an anthology, a guided tour of their cyberpunk city of the future. Both narratives centre on an American presidential election between a monstrous incumbent (Nixon/The Beast) and an ostensibly morally superior contender (McGovern/The Smiler). Both characters, Thompson and Spider, suffer physical, emotional, and psychological trauma in reaction to the election itself. Thompson has a nervous breakdown and Spider slowly succumbs to a degenerative nerve disorder (he is diagnosed in #46, "What I Know"). The audience is fully aware of these similarities. One fan even digitally altered a scan of *Transmetropolitan* #20 in which Spider sits between the fictitious presidential candidates (fig. 4.4). The altered title reads *Fear and Loathing: On the Campaign Trail 2099*. In addition to Thompson's infamous campaign diary, the altered title references Ellis' debut in American comics, Marvel's *2099* stories, which are set 100 years in the future of the Marvel universe. This cover, produced

by a fan for other fans, demonstrates just how much inside references are part of the game of reading Revisionist comics. In this case, the altered cover exposes *Transmetropolitan* as an analogue of an earlier text, and it even embeds a secondary comic-book reference into the joke.

However, Ellis downplays the similarities between Thompson and *Campaign Trail* and Spider and *Transmetropolitan*. On the occasion of Thompson's death, he wrote:

> People keep asking if I'm going to say something about the death of Hunter S Thompson. Hell, a couple of newspapers have asked. This is because I wrote a graphic novel series called TRANSMETROPOLITAN, the creation of whose protagonist was somewhat influenced by Thompson's writing, persona and life. ("Up the Creek")

Ellis' feigned surprise and his underplaying of Thompson's influence both indicate a reluctance to connect *Transmetropolitan* to *Campaign Trail*. That reluctance is somewhat inconsistent with Revisionist sensibilities as I have explained them, as well as Ellis' own writing career. He constantly uses analogues, repurposing old characters in *Stormwatch*, *The Authority*, *Planetary*, and *Nextwave*, just to name a few series. However, by his own description, he treats analogues as a desperation device. In Chapter 2, I quote Ellis' description of the analogue: "they're about the audience's relationship with old characters."[155] He follows these words with a lament, however: "how do you replicate that [relationship] without resorting to a bunch of analogue characters (again)?" ("I Distrust Your Joy"). This quotation demonstrates not only why Ellis might resist the obvious parallels between his and Thompson's narratives but also why he employs analogues in his other comics. He relies on their pre-existing emotional resonance with the audience, presumably so that the audience will care about the characters and the situations in which he places them, which is a

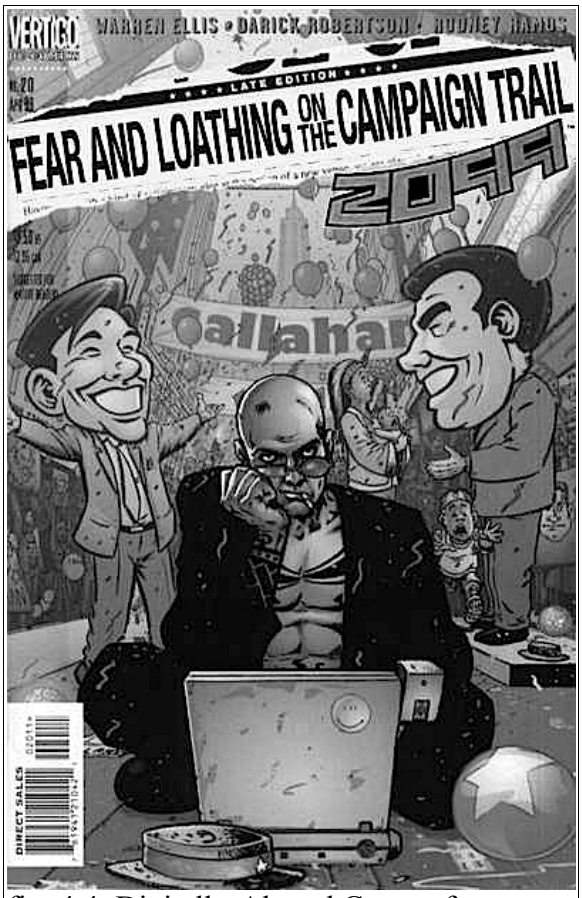

fig. 4.4: Digitally-Altered Cover of *Transmetropolitan* #20.

[155] See 2.1.b: "Squadron Supreme."

clear example of suspension of disbelief, but also relies on a metacomic device, the analogue, which provokes Inge's suspension of belief instead. This contradiction, being tugged in two different fundamental narrative directions, might constitute Ellis' resistance to analogues as a device.

I argue, however, that the analogue is the perfect vehicle for his Revisionist re-presentation of *Campaign Trail* because it offers him a third way, neither crass plagiarism nor the illusion of originality. Instead, analogues implicitly admit that one's artistic creations are, of course, always indebted to what came before—which his later series *Planetary* goes out of its way to demonstrate—but they also display clear divergences from their source material and those divergences often constitute commentaries on the sources. For example, *Transmetropolitan* subverts the nervous breakdown/drug overdose that almost keeps Thompson from finishing *Campaign Trail* by revealing, in the last page of the series, that Spider is in fact faking his neurological disorder so that he can live in his mountain cabin and work his garden in peace (60.20:1-5), which is of course yet another reference to Thompson and his infamous Owl Farm compound. Spider's deception indicates an interpretation of *Campaign Trail* as more fictional than it presents itself, implying that Thompson's breakdown is not necessarily a true account either, but instead the climax of a story that is in part about Thompson's frustration with the American political process.

Transmetropolitan also alters the overarching plot of *Campaign Trail* by having the election occur only one third of the way through the story (in issue #20 of a sixty-issue series) and having Senator Gary "The Smiler" Callahan, the challenger, win but turn out to be an amoral class-bigot, the greater of two evils and not the lesser. Indeed, the Smiler is not an analogue of McGovern at all, but instead a villainous version of former British prime minister Tony Blair combined with elements of the Kennedy family, but with the putative rampant hatred of the poor and the lower classes of the eighties-era Thatcher government and Reagan administration. Spider comments that Callahan has been fashioned out of orchestrated references to other politicians and world leaders (14.20:3). Upon meeting him for the first time, Callahan recites several lines from Tennyson's *Ulysses* and declares that it is his favourite poem, but Spider points out that it was, quite famously in fact, Bobby Kennedy's favourite (14.19:1) and thus implies that the politician is merely aping a beloved would-be president from the past. Callahan's nickname, The Smiler, refers to his ever-present vacant grin, which symbolises his lack of an identity. Spider's column explains: "`His smile dies. / Inch by inch` […] `When` [it] `dies, he is utterly alone`" (14.18:3). Gary Callahan is nothing but a vacant smile without anything underneath, just a collection of signifiers—words, gestures, and superficial personality traits—that are meant to add up to a viable presidential candidate.

These divergences from *Campaign Trail* provide much more fodder for a conflict-based plot of course (i.e., Spider vs. the President), but they also constitute two other layers of commentary. First, Callahan seems like the ideal candidate, but his appearance is in fact the result of extremely carefully-

constructed PR, which supports the basic theme of the series that the media manipulate the political process (among other things). Second, the series carries on past the election, thus shifting the focus away from just getting into office and onto governing, a part of democracy not present in *Campaign Trail* because it ends with the election and Thompson's reaction to it. Ellis and Robertson's series uses the comparative element of the analogue to expand *Campaign Trail* beyond the binary of two candidates, one ostensibly good and the other evil, as well as going beyond the election itself and onto the arguably more important job of actual governing. *Transmetropolitan* also gestures more broadly to an entire social class of marginalised citizens who are victimised and/or ignored by the political process. Once again, this gesture parallels Thompson's relationship with sixties counter-cultures, but also expands outward and takes the focus off of Spider. The most direct commentary on those marginalised people is in *The New Scum*, which I discuss below.[156]

Transmetropolitan contains a running commentary on the process by which the popular media, specifically television, can absorb and re-present almost any image, person, or event such that it becomes an asset, a commodity. Through this process of marketing (aka, public relations or propaganda) the media quite effectively define reality, at the very least in economic and political terms. Alan Moore, who defines magic as using symbols to change consciousness (*Mindscape* 28:00),[157] asserts:

> At the moment, the people who are using [...] magic to shape our culture are advertisers. Rather than try to wake people up, their shamanism is used as an opiate to tranquilize people, to make people more manipulable. (*Mindscape* 29:35)

Transmetropolitan presents this assertion with a relative minimum of fantastic embellishment or overt self-consciousness. Although Ellis and Robertson's series is implicitly self-reflexive, it does not contain the same kinds of direct references to itself as a constructed narrative, as *Promethea* does, or even the very thinly-veiled references in *Sandman*. In Waugh's schema, *Transmetropolitan* is a structural metafiction, one that does not violate its own fictional frame and opts for an extended discussion of the practical implications of representation, specifically journalism in a democracy. *Transmetropolitan* does depict a great deal of highly-advanced technology, such as the makers,[158] but the manner in which media redefines reality in the series is quite mundane and contemporary. In fact, its banality is part of its shock value. The protagonist's greatest foil in the series is not the marketers and crooked politicians who control the political process, or even the fascistic police force that routinely victimises the poor, but instead—in Spider's opinion—the apathetic and lazy populace that does not bother to pay attention to the massive amounts of knowledge to which it has access. His vision

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[156] See 4.2.b: "New Scum."
[157] See 4.3: "Magic."
[158] See 4.2.b: "New Scum."

of popular apathy appears in two issues that present the television programming and/or dreams of Spider himself.

Issue #30, "Nobody Loves Me," consists of re-presentations of Spider Jerusalem in five different genres: "Magical Truthsaying Bastard Spidey!" (educational children's cartoon presented in the Big Eyes/Small Mouth style of Japanese animation), "From the Mountain to the City" (Hollywood action movie), "I Hump It Here" (pornography), "The Heroic Revenge Fantasy" (monster movie), and finally "The Ugly Paranoid Dream" (horror, reminiscent of Mike Mignola's high-contrast art from *Hellboy*).[159] A different artist illustrates each of these vignettes in order to visually reflect the genres that they reference. Bryan Hitch's clean lines contribute to the excessively superficial beauty of the pornographic vignette, for example (31.11:1-4), while Frank Quitely's bulky, hyper-masculine bodies represent Spider's vision of himself in his revenge fantasy, as a powerful, large-chinned, broad-chested giant (31.15:1-5). The first three of these re-presentations appear on television—Spider's likeness rights having been sold by his editor and his assistant—while the last two are drug-induced dreams. The issue thus references Thompson once again and the various appropriations of his image, such as Uncle Duke, the analogue of Thompson who appeared in Gary Trudeau's *Doonsbury* comic strip. Spider occasionally resembles Duke, especially when rendered in silhouetted profile—which invokes the single silhouette panel that has been part of *Doonsbury* since early in its run—but the resemblance is mostly because both Trudeau and Robertson worked with the same original model, Thompson himself.

Like *Sandman* before it, *Transmetropolitan* also links storytelling with dreaming. The cover of the issue indicates that its special-guest artists illustrate "the mind and television set of Spider Jerusalem" (#31, front cover), implicitly equating the two. Unlike *Sandman*, though, Spider's visions, both televisual and dreamed, introduce the problem of commodification, of Spider's political message becoming dulled, drowned out, or even silenced precisely because, by the early issues of the series, he has become a celebrity. In his nightmare, his audience is a crowd of misshapen monsters who speak as one:

> "BUT THIS IS WHAT YOU WANT, ISN'T IT? ALL OF US PAYING ATTENTION TO YOU?"
> "NO! I WANTED YOU TO **HEAR ME**!"
> "**WE DID**. WE JUST DIDN'T **LISTEN**." (31.21:1)

The various re-presentations of Spider—as cartoon character, action star, porn star, vengeful monster, and finally horror victim—display just how easily the entertainment industry can absorb and redeploy a public persona, stripping his political significance and replacing it with formulaic genre conventions.

"Nobody Loves Me" also echoes an earlier issue, "What Spider Watches on TV." The imagery in this issue alternates between the programming on the television and Spider's own progression from advertising-inspired consumption of

[159] Although the issue does not remark on it overtly, these genres are in addition to the two in which the series already participates: gonzo (journalism) and cyberpunk (SF).

fig. 4.5: Spider Becomes the News

commercial goods, to lethargy, as he sinks lower and lower in his chair until he disappears out of the frame (5.10:1-5.11:6), and finally seething rage at everyone and anyone on television who dispenses lies or half-truths, including something as innocuous as a cooking show, thus lowering the public discourse and promoting ignorance and apathy. However, after "terrorizing city call-in shows all afternoon" (5.17:1), Spider becomes the top story of the day. Kneeling half reverentially and half in submission before a wall-sized television screen, he laments " THEY GOT ME […] I **BECAME** THE NEWS" (fig. 4.5). While "Nobody Loves Me" demonstrates a process by which mainstream media can turn anything into a spectacle and remove its substance, "What Spider Watches on TV" reveals that Spider's self-aggrandising gonzo style in fact lends itself quite easily to that very process. In counter-point to this kind of manipulation, Volume 4 of *Transmetropolitan* (#19-24) presents a more respectful, honest, good-faith effort on the part of the media, focalised through Spider's column, to understand the marginalised and downtrodden citizens in the book's democracy.

4.2.b: New Scum

Volume 4 is entitled *The New Scum* and it contains within it a self-reflexive motif that acts as a counterpoint to the main plot, the presidential election, and also models a fluid relationship between text and image. The motif consists of a set of non-narrative, mostly full-page panels that depict the underclasses and social outcasts. Mitchell would call this sleight-of-hand—pictures offered where words were expected—an *imagetext* because it hides the difference between the verbal and the visual; Groensteen would call it a *general arthrological series* because its individual panels are not linked by strict sequence but instead by content. Thus, I call it an *imagetext series*. This imagetext series parallels the main plot of the volume and represents a series of columns that Spider writes for and about the new scum themselves. The individual panels are separated by several pages at a time and distributed across five issues, so they achieve a montage-like effect, save for their distance from each other. Groensteen calls this distance *amplitude* (148) and depending on the context, amplitude can either heighten or dampen the impact of a given series.

The imagetext series in *The New Scum* illustrates the new scum themselves going about their normal lives. It depicts a techno-cornucopia that could ostensibly eliminate all starvation and material need, but in which the larger socio-political order instead uses that technology to oppress and marginalise the

new scum. The working poor have no access to this technology while the artist/fetish community uses it for extreme body modification, usually with erotic overtones. The volume places these groups together because mainstream/straight culture marginalises both of them based on their relationship to technology. The imagetext series consists of just over a dozen images and thus has a relatively high degree of amplitude. It constantly plays counterpoint to the main plot of the volume: a presidential election in which both candidates ignore and revile the new scum. It is also a pictorial representation of Spider Jerusalem's textual column. It depicts the act of writing journalism, and therefore it is structurally metafictional, but it also juxtaposes textual and pictorial representation—Spider's column and Robertson's illustrations—therefore it is also formally metapictorial. [160] The sum total effect of this journalistic, self-referential, imagetext series is that it depicts the new scum as not just victims, although they are that too, but also as a community that contains a great deal of agency, diversity, and sheer beauty.

The actual images in this imagetext series start in a two-page sequence in the first issue of *The New Scum* (*Transmetropolitan* #19). By this point in the narrative, Spider's weekly column, "I Hate It Here," has already made him a hero of the disenfranchised citizens of the city because of his willingness to speak out against instances of police brutality and other state-sponsored oppression. While walking through a somewhat idealised urban marketplace, he encounters a group of "the new scum." The courier typeface in his narrator boxes signal that he reports this experience in his column; the crowd pleads to him, en masse:

> We need a voice, they say. That's all. We're sick of your hate, and we don't need your pity. We need a VOICE. // Just for us. / All of us. / The new scum. (19.04:3-19.05:1-3)

There is a rejection, here, of Spider's "hate" (his column) as well as the patronising pity of institutions like the church, the government, and the news media, all of which have failed the new scum themselves, the community for whom this volume is named. Instead of someone speaking on their behalf, they ask for their own voice, a warts-and-all view of the lives of those who are left out of mainstream society.

Over the course of five panels on two pages, the perspective pulls back and slowly shifts such that the crowd, and not Spider, becomes the central focus. In fig. 4.6, the perspective shifts from looking at Spider to a position behind him, blocking his face so that the viewer can see from his point of view, seeing him look at the diverse faces of the new scum themselves. At the same time, the crowd's colouring changes, from individualised tones for hair, skin, and clothing, to a uniform light blue, visible in this black-and-white reproduction as light grey without shading. They retain a remarkable amount of variety in their body types

[160] This commentary by a secondary, embedded "text" in *The New Scum* is similar to the commentary that *Black Freighter* offers in *Watchmen* (see 3.1: "Dysfunctional Realities"). *Black Freighter* uses direct, self-reflexive gestures (i.e., to the superhero genre, to American comic-book publishing, to fan-scholarship around comics) as well as image/text effects, like the mariner's narration in juxtaposition to the main plot, much like *Transmetropolitan* presents images in place of textual journalism.

fig. 4.6: Spider and the new scum (*Transmetropolitan* 19.04:2-3).

and ethnicity, for example the yin-yang/yarmulke representing religious diversity. These panels invest the new scum with both a sense of solidarity, by virtue of their shading, as well as individual subjectivity, as represented by their sheer visual diversity.

The imagetext series, a visual medium, is where their "voice" rises to the surface of *Transmetropolitan* but not in the form of language. Jerusalem's columns are text-based; the comic book, however, grants a voice to the new scum in the form of pictures; thus, it takes a more observational role. The imagetext series is contemplative, passive, non-narrative, and most of all non-judgemental. It does not have the distinctively high-minded, misanthropic tone of Spider's columns in which he regularly berates the public for their supposed lack of awareness of their own political context. Instead, the imagetext series forces the viewer, and implicitly Spider as well, to watch and learn the culture of the new scum. It alternates between pathos (picaresque grotesquerie) and eros (techno-fetishist sexuality) and within that alternation there are three kinds of images: life-saving technology used to oppress the poor, violation of food taboos, and erotic body modification.

The most striking example of technology used for oppression involves a device called a "maker." In Spider's column, facetiously reproduced in the back-matter of individual issues of *Transmetropolitan,* he explains what a maker is and in accordance with the cyberpunk genre, places an ostensibly wondrous and humanitarian technology into a socio-economic context that leads, seemingly with inevitable force, to exploitation:

> Makers are great. No argument. You turn to your maker and say, "Give me a roast dog leg, tossed salad, a black linen shirt, and a taser," and bang, out it all comes. Makers aren't particularly bulky, nor power-thirsty, and an average middle-class family can afford a good one.
>
> But.
>
> Makers are designed to operate with base blocks—superdense chunks of neutral matter which the maker

> breaks down and recombines into whatever you've requested. And base blocks are horrendously expensive. Out of a middle class family's price range. So the stores sell a converter that allows the maker to use ordinary garbage as the base. Not as efficient, and the mileage stinks, but there you go.
>
> Which leads me to the city's new pest. Middle class families raiding the backyards of the lower classes for garbage—because if you've got a maker, you don't make garbage. Only those without makers buy pre-packaged food and clothing... (*Transmetropolitan* #2 "I Hate It Here")

Issue #19, "New Home," contains two images in the imagetext series that display how the City and its class structure uses the maker technology. The first depicts "city cleaners turning garbage into oxygen with Makerguns" (19.11:1) (see fig. 4.7). This single panel is a two-page spread, exponentially more rare than a full-page panel, which signals that the image is extremely important and the viewer ought to take time with it. In the panel, the new scum are literally at the periphery of the action, pushed to the margins to make way for the makerguns. A technology of plenty removes their very traces from the street on which they live. The makerguns vaporise any evidence that the new scum exist, including what looks like the evidence of a violent altercation (the chalk outline on the street). The horrifying irony is that transforming garbage into oxygen is ostensibly a good thing, but it also erases the lowest rung of the citizenry from public view. As long as the street cleaners are out with makerguns every morning, the new scum barely

fig. 4.7 Makerguns (*Transmetropolitan* 19.11:1)

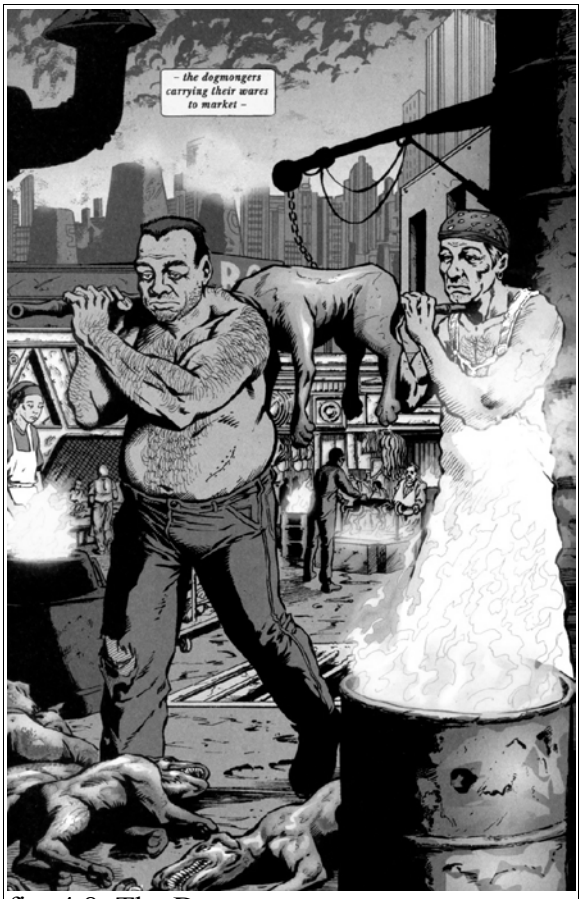

fig. 4.8: The Dogmongers (*Transmetropolitan* 19.6:1)

exist. Just a few pages later, the next image in the imagetext series jumps back in time, "fifteen minutes ahead of the street cleaners" (19.16:1) and depicts the "old scum," the middle-class, collecting garbage to use in their own household makers. The symbolism here is stark. There is nothing that the new scum have that other institutions, in this case the government and the middle-class, will not take away from them. Their lives are harvested to fuel the very technology that the wealthier classes use to provide themselves with luxury.

The next major theme in the imagetext series is consumption. "The Dogmongers" (fig. 4.8) appears on the page following Spider's encounter at the marketplace. Its immediate impact derives from the idea of skinning and eating dogs for food but there is a more meaningful aesthetic at work in this image than just shock-value. It is populated by less-than-superheroic bodies, which counters the dominant visual mode of American comics, perfectly sculpted muscles in colourful costumes. The large gut on the figure on the left and his appendix scar, as well as the squinting eyes of his colleague, give them pathos, but also individuality and the implication of a personal history. Their different bodies indicate different lives. Similarly, the background figures have varying body types, clothing, and ethnicities. The whole image depicts the primary figures as individual characters but also metonyms. In this sense, they are mildly multistable. They stand for all dogmongers, but they have enough internal variety that they implicitly have their own subjectivities. The new scum are thus a great mass with shared experiences but a mass that contains diversity.

In the next issue, another full-page panel displays the eating habits of the new scum. The image bears the caption, "Breakfast time at the docks" (fig. 4.9) and displays a fast-food stand, "Top of the Food Chain," as well as its proud proprietor and satisfied patrons. The stand advertises puss, dolphin, Trenholm (a common Yorkshire family name), French people, roast leg of bastard, and bladders (20.16:1). In defiance of a socialised notion of what is and is not

appropriate to eat, this stand proclaims the right of humans to eat anything they want. This is satire in the Swiftian mode: direct, violent, shocking, and grotesque. There is in fact a litany of horrifying things that people eat in *Transmetropolitan,* including "BRAIN OF WELSHMAN PÂTÉ" (15.4:5), which, taken with French people and Trenholm (in fig. 4.9), indicates a uniquely British form of racism within *Transmetropolitan*'s universe.

This general motif, of characters who ignore traditional values and mores, is very common in cyberpunk, the subgenre of science fiction that Ellis favours and to which the series belongs. Bruce Sterling, the self-appointed spokesman for the movement explains:

> In the moral universe of cyberpunk, we *already* know Things We Were Not Meant To Know. Our *grandparents* knew these things; Robert Oppenheimer at Los Alamos became the Destroyer of Worlds long before we arrived on the scene. In cyberpunk, the idea that there are sacred limits to human action is simply a delusion. There are no sacred boundaries to protect us from ourselves. (Sterling 40)

Transmetropolitan regularly reminds the audience that because all meat is cloned, for example, there is no logical concern for animal cruelty, nor any chance of hunting animals into extinction, nor even any chance of getting sick from raw or unprocessed food because cures are cheap and plentiful. Spider's cigarette addiction will not kill him in this world, for example. In such a context, the practical reasons to avoid cannibalism simply do not apply. No humans were harmed in the roasting of this leg of bastard. Thus, *Transmetropolitan* removes the most obvious objection to various food taboos—that they involve animal cruelty or murder—and forces the audience to question the taboo itself. "The Dogmongers," however, counteracts that sense of release from taboo because it reminds the audience that the poor are those who cannot afford cloned or

fig. 4.9: Breakfast Time at the Docks (*Transmetropolitan* 20.16:1)

replicated meat and therefore retain the stigma of actually killing animals for food.

There is another, more rhetorical element to images like "The Dogmongers" and "Breakfast at the Docks," however. *Transmetropolitan* constantly puts the audience in the position of being horrified by the cultural practices in the City, most often with regard to what the citizens of the City eat and their sexual mores (or apparent total lack thereof). However, the imagetext series in *The New Scum* also reminds that audience of the hypocrisy of sitting in judgement of those practises, which is a more coherent version of the cyberpunk philosophy than Sterling describes. Cyberpunk texts sometimes simply reject traditional ethics, but when they take on a more contemplative mode, they question why those ethics formed to begin with and try to formulate a new worldview in their place. *Transmetropolitan* achieves its dual effect, causing revulsion at the image and then awareness of one's own judgemental attitude, by revealing the beauty that is hidden in this radically revolting world and displaying the humanity, individuality, and tenderness of people who seem initially frightening, threatening, or disgusting. The imagetext series in *The New Scum* abruptly calls viewers to question their own revulsion. Techno-fetishism in *Transmetropolitan* serves this function, using sex instead of food.

In the image "Lovers surfing feedsites on their lunch hour" (20.16:1) a traditionally beautiful, Caucasian, middle-class, heterosexual couple kiss on a park bench. The image is simultaneously erotic, tender, and techno-fetishistic. The lovers wear only bike shorts and therefore appear to the modern viewer to be practically having sex in public, but nudity taboos barely exist in *Transmetropolitan* and the composition of the image, with its warm colours and twirling Autumn leaves, create an almost pastoral mood. However, their bodies are also covered in computer monitors seemingly tattooed on their skin and which they presumably pay some amount of attention to while they kiss, since the caption describes them as "surfing feedsites." This image is risqué and slightly alienating, but also basically non-threatening, a positive portrayal of the new scum and their ability to seamlessly integrate work, technology, and sex into their lives. A more extreme version of this same situation—techno-fetishistic sex in public—occurs two issues later but in much more extreme terms. These lovers are armoured cyborgs who have sex by plugging a web of cords and dongles into each other and they do so in a alley (fig. 4.10) while Spider happens to walk by and witness them. He displays no discomfort at watching them and if the cyborg lovers even notice him, they do not seem to care. The art also codes them as clearly male and female. His metallic chassis is blue while hers is pink. She has high-heeled boots (or perhaps those are her feet) and what looks distinctly like a . Their bodies are superheroic in proportion: his muscled and lean, hers whip thin and buxom. The techno-fetishisation throws a monkey-wrench into normative sexuality and body shape in such a way that their gender coding is doubly ironic. They are technically heterosexual, but their sexuality by no means conforms to the social norm. When they finally speak, after seven panels of love-making, they

fig. 4.10: Cyborg Sex (*Transmetropolitan* 22.10:2)

say "**LOVE** YOU," and "LOVE YOU / **TOO**" (22.10.2). They express love, not just lust, and they speak the way that lovers do: so physically spent that they do not have the energy for whole sentences. The separated word balloon and bold-facing of the words "**LOVE**" and "**TOO**" emphasizes how mutual this love and sexual gratification is. What starts as a highly alienating display of sexuality turns into a scene of tender intimacy. No matter how bizarre the act and incongruent the setting, this is love, just not of a kind with which the viewer might be familiar.

Transmetropolitan displays body modification throughout the series in both genetic and cybernetic forms. The "transients" from *Back on the Streets* are half-human and half-grey alien (1.25:3), a techno-fad for "temping" allows people to spend short periods in half-human/half-animal forms (2.11:4), the transgendered can literally change from male to female (and presumably anything in between) in the blink of an eye (22.5:2-4), and of course there are the true cyborgs like those I discuss above. Body modification is arguably the ultimate form of non-conformity. It constitutes a refusal, even on a very minor level, to sit comfortably in categories like male/female or human/animal/machine. On one level, cyberpunk representations of body-modification are conceits for actual body-modification subcultures, which usually use combinations of tattoo, piercing, and minor surgeries, and often achieve aesthetics that resemble those of the punk and/or S&M subcultures. This kind of body-modification subculture overlaps with a techno-modification subculture that uses electronics in addition to just aesthetic alterations. Many of Ellis's comics have featured techno-body-modification and his interpretation of its subculture, for example in *Mek*, *City of*

Silence, and more recently *Doktor Sleepless*, with its linked website *grinding.be*, which features news articles on the living techno-body-mod subculture of today.

In the context of *The New Scum*, the presence of erotic techno-fetishism constitutes a subversion of technologically-enhanced class oppression. In the world of *Transmetropolitan*, the state and the class system use technology to maintain their dominant position, to fix their cultural power and thereby fix ontology, human identity, gender norms, and the like. The new scum themselves, however, use that same technology to resist domination by seeking physical fluidity and therefore ethnic, gendered, and species fluidity as well. Ellis' descriptions and Robertson's art marry concerns surrounding class with those concerning race, gender/sexuality, and posthumanism by depicting the new scum as alternatively the technological have-nots and the techno-fetishists. Through that self-reflexive structure—reportage within fiction—*Transmetropolitan* also models a form of subversion against state, class, and corporate domination by taking control of one's own body through consumption, sexuality, and physicality. Their lived, material reality also relies to a great degree on how they are perceived by those outside of their community; therefore they use journalism—Spider's column, rendered as a series of imagetexts—to construct an identity for themselves. Their reality is based on perception because how people in positions of power—politicians, corporate executives, the upper classes—perceive them has a direct effect on how those people treat the new scum themselves.

4.3: Magic

Promethea is one of the most blatantly self-referential series in mainstream American comics in the last twenty years, competing with Grant Morrison and Frank Quitely's *Flex Mentallo: Hero of the Beach* and a few similar titles, and it is certainly the most self-referential in my study. The first issue presents a college student in New York researching a literary figure called "Promethea" and the last issue is a direct address to the reader/viewer from the protagonist and the creators on the subject of magic as a linguistic system. In many ways, the series exemplifies Mark Currie's particular conception of metafiction as a blurring of the boundaries between fiction and literary theory. *Promethea* contains an explicit argument and that argument is itself explicitly about representation and perception.

Reality, as we perceive it, is constructed out of perception, and perception is constructed out of language; *Promethea* broadly defines "language" as text, numbers, images, and any other form of symbol or icon (e.g., 15.16-17:1-12). Manipulating language is therefore the most direct route to manipulating perception, and perception governs how we act in, react to, and ultimately define that which we think of as "reality." In *Promethea*, language is therefore magical, in a very literal sense. Writing is the act of making something out of nothing: producing something where there was nothing before: a character, setting, or plot, but also a mood or concept. Casting spells is in fact *spelling* words, while a grimoire is a book of *grammar* (32.9:1). Polytheism becomes something like an alphabet of ideas with which a writer can in effect "spell" new concepts into

being, a dialectical process writ large and in fantastic terms. Moore describes this concept of polytheism explicitly in *The Mindscape of Alan Moore* but only hints at it in *Promethea* (21.12:1). Magic is thus a metalanguage or second-order language, just like literary theory or linguistics, which is exactly how he describes it in the interview "Magic is Afoot." Therefore, perception and reality are not separate spheres within Moore's system. One governs our understanding of the other. Material reality exists, certainly, but our only access to it is via perception, and perception is almost infinitely malleable.

Instead of collapsing fiction and reality, as in Waugh's definition of metafiction, or fiction and history, as in Hutcheon's, Mark Currie defines it as a "borderline discourse" (2) that collapses fiction and theory. Currie describes, at some length, the writer/critic that his model of metafiction implies: "The writer/critic is thus a dialectical figure, embodying both the production and reception of fiction in the roles of author and reader in a way that is paradigmatic for metafiction" (3). As Chapter 1 explains, however,[161] I would seek to problematise Currie's blurring of critic and reader and instead choose to think of them as articulated, in Hall's sense once again. They are not exactly the same thing, but are often combined as a matter of habit or an attempt to elide the academic critic with the popular reader, which can obscure the popular reader entirely. Thus Moore is not just a writer/critic, then, but also a reader/writer/critic because he is a member of the comic-book fan community, a creator of comics himself, and uses his comics to critique both comics and contemporary culture.

The title character of *Promethea* has a distinctly self-referential origin story. A magician in 411 ACE, persecuted and later killed by Christian fanatics, uses his dying breath to convince his gods to turn his daughter, who is named Promethea, into a story so that she can "LIVE **ETERNALLY**, AS STORIES **DO**" (*Promethea* 1.21:5) in a heavenly sphere later identified as the "Immateria," a realm that combines pure imagination with afterlife. Thoth-Hermes, a double-god of language and literature,[162] grants his wish and explains to her that "AS FOR COMING **BACK**, WELL… / SOMETIMES, IF A STORY IS **VERY** SPECIAL, IT CAN QUITE TAKE PEOPLE **OVER**" (*Promethea* 1.21:6). The predictable outcome is, of course, that the human protagonist, Sophie Bangs, merges with Promethea's spirit and they become a superhero-like figure, complete with colourful costume, dual identity, and super-powers.

Sophie, whose name means "wisdom" in Greek, is also a reader/writer/critic herself. She discovers the ability to transform into Promethea as a result of researching her for a college class. The back-matter of that first issue

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[161] See 1.2.b: "Metafiction."

[162] Thoth-Hermes is one example of Moore combining gods like letters in words. In fact, he/they belong to a group of gods and spirits who appear in *Promethea* as something like a club or cohort in issue #15, "Mercury Rising." The group includes Thoth (Egyptian), Hermes (Greek), Mercury (Roman), Wotan (Norse), Hanuman (Hindu), and the implication of the Monkey King (Chinese). This crowd of gods (i.e., letters) overlay their signification and spell out the combined concept of language, art, storytelling, and magic, which implies that they all contain subtle shades of the same basic idea(s).

reprints what is implicitly her essay, entitled "The Promethea Puzzle: An Adventure in Folklore." The essay identifies several appearances of Promethea in the series' fictional history: "IN 18TH CENTURY **POEMS**, EARLY **NEWSPAPER** STRIPS, **PULP** MAGAZINES AND **COMIC** BOOKS" (*Promethea* 1.5:1). All of these texts are analogues of, or indirect references to, actual works of literature: Charlton Sennet's *A Faerie Romance* is a tribute to *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, while the comic strip *Little Margie in Misty Magic Land* is a clear analogue of Windsor McCay's *Little Nemo in Slumberland*. She also freely admits to reading/viewing many of these Promethea stories as entertainment, stating for example: "I READ A COUPLE OF ISSUES [of the *Promethea* comic book] FOR MY COLLEGE **TERM PAPER**. I REALLY **LIKED** THEM" (7.6-7:2). The bold-facing of the words "**TERM PAPER**" and "**LIKED**" emphasise her scholarly interest as as well as her pleasure in reading/viewing a product of popular culture. Sophie's abilities as a scholar also allow her to learn Moore's magical system so well that she can fulfil Promethea's destiny to bring about an apocalypse at the end of the series.[163] Sophie is a poet too, though. She must compose an original ode to Promethea in order to transform into her, which both echoes a common device in superhero comics, the magic word that transforms a protagonist from human to superhuman, and fits into Moore's theories in which language is the basis of magical transformation. Thus *Promethea*, the series, embodies Currie's model of metafiction through its presentation of theory in narrative form and the presence of two reader/writer/critics, Moore and Sophie.

My discussion of *Promethea* concentrates on the social commentaries that the series delivers using self-reflexive devices, themselves embedded in Moore's didactic theory of magic. The first subsection, "Sex and Self-Reflection," analyses gender commentaries in *Promethea*, specifically one feminist and one queer. The feminist element juxtaposes two stories of artists, a writer and an illustrator, who project Promethea onto the objects of their affection, one willingly and the other unwillingly. The queer element presents two stories, one of a lesbian relationship and one of a trans character, that are ostensibly sympathetic but unfortunately recreate familiar homophobic and transphobic narratives. The second subsection, "Apocalyptic Metacomic," addresses two self-reflexive commentaries that the series delivers via its apocalypse narrative. The first inverts the standard action/adventure apocalypse story, both in its sequence and its characterisation of villainy and humanity, and the second dramatically depicts *Promethea*'s apocalypse as revelatory using two metapictorial presentations.

4.3.a: Sex and Self-Reflection

Promethea's basic premise, superheroine as saviour-goddess, indicates a Revisionist treatment of the superhero, specifically Wonder Woman, and a discussion of femininity and sexuality in the superhero genre. The series does contain these elements, to be sure, but it also mounts a feminist critique of the projection of idealised femininity onto women and by men throughout literary history. Unfortunately, Moore's corpus as a whole has a tendency to fetishise

[163] See 4.3.b: "Apocalyptic Metacomic."

feminine sexuality to the point of objectifying it, which undercuts his feminist and pro-queer content. This subsection first presents a pair of subplots that comment on the artistic practise of projecting a male-oriented ideal of femininity onto a female subject. These subplots present one negative example of the practise and one positive example, thus both revealing a sexist practise and offering a better alternative. Second, however, this subsection places the arguably feminist element of *Promethea* into the larger context of Moore's corpus.

By the time of writing *Promethea*, Moore had already done a *Supreme*-style treatment of Wonder Woman in *Glory*, a three-issue series from Rob Lefield's short-lived Awesome Comics, and an ongoing series had also been planned before Awesome went out of business. Going by Moore's notes, the ongoing *Glory* series would have followed *Supreme*'s model by going "back to the 'parent' character [...] and [trying] to analyze all the elements... even the unlikely or absurd ones... that made that initial character tick in the first place" (*Alan Moore's Awesome Universe Handbook*). In the case of *Glory*, this would have meant going back to the combination of mythological imagery and spectacular sexuality of Wonder Woman. After summing up the barely-restrained sexual elements of the original Wonder Woman comics, Moore explains that in his proposed *Glory* series "I don't think we should ever state that the Isle of Thule [Glory's homeland] is a lesbian Pornotopia, but I don't think we should ever state that it isn't, either" (*Handbook*). Moore's description of *Glory* in fact maps out much of what *Promethea* would become, including a journey through the "Kabbalistic 'Tree of Life'" and an attempt to "provide a coherent mythical backbone for the whole gamut of magical and mythological elements that might exist in the Awesome Universe" (*Handbook*). Moore picked up *Promethea* precisely where he left off with *Glory*, much as he picked up *Tom Strong* where he left off with *Supreme*. *Promethea* quickly exceeds the superhero genre and explores related genres, including fantasy, SF, and pulp, and the historical and cultural factors that produced those genres, as well as ancient mythology and his own theory of modern magic. The same excess is present in many other analogues in the series, such as The Five Swell Guys (based on the Fantastic Four) and the Painted Doll (who belongs to the "insane clown" subset of supervillains, which includes the Joker, the Trickster, the Prankster, Green Goblin, and many others). They quickly drop their pretence of analogue juxtaposition and take up roles in Moore's dramatic explanation of magic. More importantly for my purposes, *Promethea* presents a self-reflexive commentary on gender in male-oriented literature. While Sophie is one of Mark Currie's writer/critics, the other incarnations of Promethea are all either artists who take her on as part of their creative process, or the objects of those artist's affections and onto whom the artists project Promethea. Sophie's investigation into the previous Prometheas reveals two parallel instances of this artistic projection: Anna and Barbara.

Issue #4, "A Faerie Romance," relates the story of a fictional American poet, Charlton Sennet, who writes an epic poem set in "some Arcadian backwater" (1.34) as a tribute to *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and its depiction of

fairyland. The poem comes to focus on a minor character called "Promethea" who first appears in Sennet's dreams and strongly resembles his maid, Anna (4.10:4). This dream sequence implies that he had sexual feelings for Anna already and that the coincidence of those feelings and Sennet's use of the name "Promethea" in his poem was enough to call up the Promethea spirit. Sennet accidentally transforms Anna into Promethea by reciting some of his poetry to her and they subsequently becomes lovers. Anna becomes pregnant and dies in childbirth, delivering only a cloud of mystical symbols that disappear almost immediately, all while pleading with Sennet to tell her if he ever loved her as Anna and not just as Promethea (4.14:3). Anna never asks for Sennet to transform her and they have no relationship prior to the transformation. He projects his fantasy woman onto her, obscuring her identity in the process, a symbolic death followed by a literal death in childbirth. This example differs sharply from Steve Shelly, an illustrator who draws a *Promethea* comic book within the comic book. Steve projects Promethea onto his wife Barbara but does so with her willing participation, and she carries on acting as Promethea after Steve dies, although she is less and less able to distinguish between "Barbara" and "Promethea," so she appears as a somewhat overweight, middle-aged woman dressed in a classical-themed superhero costume (e.g., 1.23:3).

Sennet and Anna thus represent the widespread poetic practise of singing the praises of a woman's virtues in the practical absence of any knowledge of the woman in question. Dante's Beatrice, in his *Divine Comedy*, exemplifies this practise, for example, and Cervantes' Dulcinea del Toboso, from *Don Quixote*, beautifully parodies it. Conversely, Barbara willingly receives Steve's projection of strength and beauty, but she possesses a great deal of personal agency nonetheless, the likes of which Anna never has. Barbara is an able fighter and heroine before she dies (1.17:5) and afterward she journeys through the Tree of Life in order to reunite with Steve. To do so, she enters what is in effect the godhead of *Promethea*'s universe, a place where individual identity is lost in communion with the ultimate divine presence. Barbara, however, has a coherent-enough identity that she can enter that godhead, find her dead husband, and leave again of her own free will (fig. 4.11). Williams depicts the total disillusion of identity, interestingly enough, through a sequence of panels that model the traditional production of American comic books, from rough stick-figures with placeholders for word balloons, to pencil sketches, and finally to inked panels with lettered balloons (fig. 4.11). True to Hutcheon's characterisation of metafiction, *Promethea* recreates the literary practise of objectifying women as absent idealised figures in order to mount a commentary on it, and the series then presents a more positive alternative possibility.

However, there are two queer subplots in *Promethea* that undercut this feminist commentary. Queerness and feminism are not inherently linked, of course, but the queerness at issue focuses generally on female sexuality—trans in one case and lesbian in the other—so the inconsistency of presentation is jarring at the very least. The trans subplot involves Bill, a male comic-book illustrator

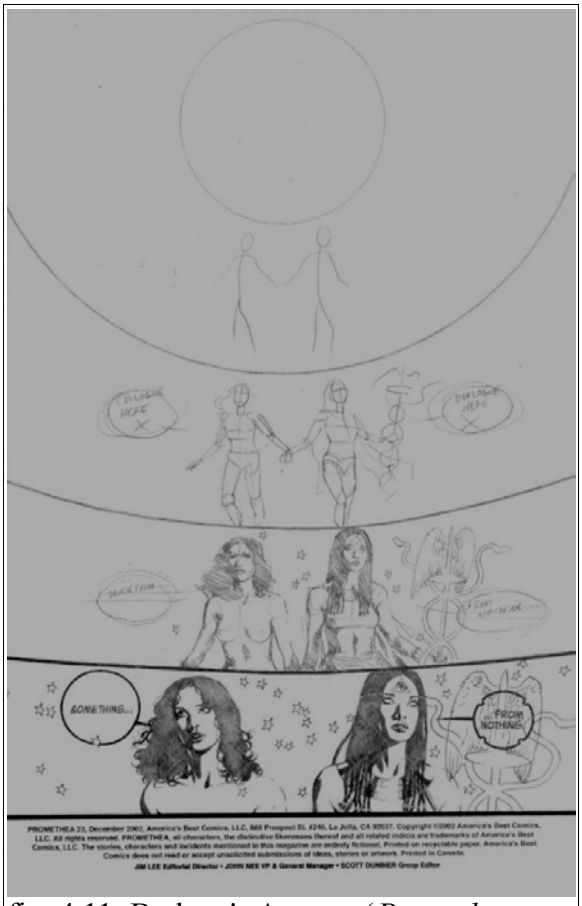

fig. 4.11: Barbara's Agency (*Promethea* 23.1.1-5)

who transforms himself into Promethea (he preceded Steve), and the queer subplot involves another former Promethea host, Grace, who initiates a sexual relationship with Sophie's formerly homophobic best friend, Stacia.

Bill/Promethea describes his male self as "GAY AS A SPRING LAMB" (7.4-5:5) and explains that he "HADN'T NECESSARILY WANTED TO BE A WOMAN, BUT [...] ALWAYS WANTED TO BE A GODDESS" (7.15:1). Bill, in life, therefore has a flexibility of gender. He can, seemingly on a whim, occupy either of two genders: gay man or goddess. This flexibility is unlike what Judith Halberstam identifies as the ironic rigidity of trans characters in mainstream film, like Dil in *The Crying Game*, who cannot "flow back and forth between male and female" and instead "insists on being recognized as female" (Halberstam 81). However, after Bill's death, which I discuss below, Bill lives in the Immateria as Promethea (i.e., Bill/Promethea) and does indeed insist that she and Bill are two different people, even speaking of him in the third person and the past tense, declaring: "I'M NOT A GUY. WILLIAM **WOOLCOTT** WAS A GUY. IF ANYTHING, I'M HIS **IMAGINATION**" (7.2-3:5). In death, then, Bill ends up occupying the fixed gender that he managed to avoid in life.

Bill's full name and his queer/trans identity also obliquely reference Wonder Woman once again, this time through the persona of her creator, William Molten Marsten, who had a polyamorous relationship with his wife and their mutual lover and publicly promoted domination/submission and bondage with women in the dominant role (Daniels *Wonder Woman* 28, 30). Of course, those sexual elements were prominent in Marston's Wonder Woman comics, but they were hidden in plain sight as superhero conceits. Bill/Promethea wears a costume reminiscent of Wonder Woman's, with its high boots and identifying symbol (a scarab with wings) (7.13:1), and describes the Silver-Age silliness that she experienced as Promethea and he drew as Bill thusly: "I DIDN'T THINK IT WAS SILLY. I THOUGHT IT WAS **PLAYFUL**. IT WAS MEANT FOR **CHILDREN**..." (7.6-7:1). She characterises those old comics as innocent fun, but Bill's queerness also indirectly

references a tendency to read superhero comics retrospectively as thinly-veiled homoerotica.[164] The two elements come together as queer camp, the playful performance of homoerotic scenarios.

As Promethea, Bill becomes lovers with a male FBI agent, Dennis Drucker, and writes a version of Dennis into his, Bill's, *Promethea* comics. The romance ends violently, though, because Dennis knows Bill only as the very female Promethea. In a dramatic and gory photographic panel, Dennis shoots Bill in the head after he finds out that his lover is secretly a man (fig. 4.12). Halberstam describes the traditional transphobic narrative that follows from this familiar premise, again using *The Crying Game* as her example. The trans character "fail[s] to pass and threaten[s] to expose a rupture" (Halberstam 77) and so the pre-existing relationship is "now coded as homosexual" (82) in order to place it into a category that is known and familiar within hetero normative values, but those values also code it as monstrous, which conveniently leads to the conclusion that the trans character "must be punished" for his, her, or hir "treacherous deceptions" (82). The straight male character thus transforms into the victim, despite the typically violent resolution in which the trans character is assaulted, raped, and often killed, as in the film *Boys Don't Cry*. *Promethea* mitigates this typical transphobic narrative a little, though. Dennis is so traumatised by his own actions—killing a demi-goddess whom he loved—that he ends up in an insane-asylum in a straight jacket and a padded cell, forever stuck in the moment when he killed Bill. Indeed, the photographic stillness of fig. 4.12, and the fact that Sophie and Bill/Promethea move through it across successive frames (7.17:1-3), make it function like a cinematic freeze-frame that will last forever in Dennis' mind.

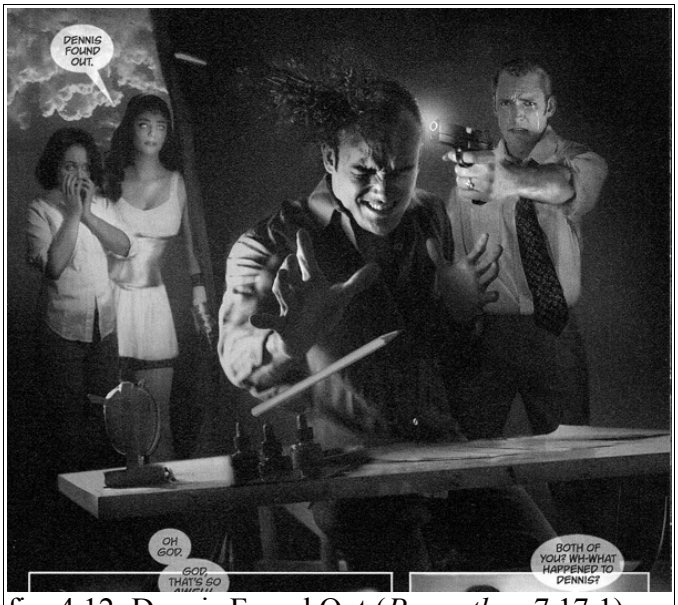

fig. 4.12: Dennis Found Out (*Promethea* 7.17:1)

Halberstam also speaks of a motif of weeping in trans-themed films, foregrounded in the titles of *The Crying Game* and *Boys Don't Cry*, in which "The tragic transgender, indeed, weeps because happiness and satisfaction, according to transphobic narratives, is always just out of reach" (82). However, *Promethea*'s fantastic premise does allow for something of a happy ending for Bill/Promethea and Dennis. After the

[164] See Freya Johnson's "Holy Homosexuality Batman!" or Andy Medhurst's"Batman, Deviance, and Camp."

revelatory apocalypse at the end of the series, living people have access to the Immateria, and so Dennis and Bill/Promethea take up their romantic relationship once again, across dimensions (31.16:4). This ending is explained second-hand, though, and not prominently displayed, as opposed to Bill's graphic and gory murder. Although the series does grant happiness and romantic satisfaction to the trans character, it comes only after symbolic punishment and transformation into a normatively-gendered subject.

The queer romance between Stacia and Grace is less tragic but more violent. It ends in a battle between Sophie/Promethea and a merged version of Stacia and Grace as Promethea. The issue emphasises the destructive potential of the fight by paralleling it with the only other time when two Prometheas fought each other: the Crusades. One Christian and one Muslim incarnation of Promethea meet on the battlefield, just as Sophie/Promethea and Stacia/Grace do, and a dramatic two-page spread depicts both fights simultaneously, with the face of the original Egyptian girl, Promethea, screaming in pain (fig. 4.13). The historical commentary is blunt, but extremely effective. The issue likens Christianity and Islam to two aspects of the same basic idea, monotheism, and thus characterises the wars between them as tragic, pointless, and self destructive. The relationship between Stacia and Grace, however, does not resolve until the end of the series because Stacia is kidnapped and kept drugged by the US government until issue #30. After she recovers, she comes out of the closet and strikes up a relationship

fig. 4.13: Prometheas at War (*Promethea* 24.20-21.1-3)

with a minor character named Lucile. Just like Dennis and Bill/Promethea, however, Stacia carries on her relationship with Grace in the Immateria, but without telling Lucile. In the process of creating an allegory for Christian/Muslim conflict, then, *Promethea* leaves lesbian love with only violence or infidelity as available options.

These feminist and queer/trans narratives have a particular presence in Moore's larger corpus. He has been including queer themes in his comics at least since *V for Vendetta* (1982-1988); he specifically created *AARGH* (*Artists Against Rampant Government Homophobia*; 1988) to protest anti-queer legislation levelled by Thatcher's government; and he co-created *The Mirror of Love*, an illustrated poem that praises the cultural contributions of queer artists, scientists, and thinkers throughout history. Although Moore is not gay himself, he was for several years part of a polyamorous triad and thus has a degree of personal stake in queer rights and social recognition of alternative sexualities. Like many straight male writers who support queer rights, though, he has almost exclusively written female queerness into his work. Bill/Promethea is a rare exception and only a nominal case since her relationship with Dennis is in effect heterosexual, both before and after Bill's death, and although there are several scenes of gay male sex in *Lost Girls*, the overwhelming majority of sex in that book is lesbian or heterosexual, and far more often the former than the latter.

Moore also has a peculiar repeated motif in which he links female bisexuality with enlightenment, which reduces bisexuality to a product of a certain kind of knowledge and experience rather than an innate sexual orientation. *Promethea* consistently portrays Sophie as heterosexual, for example, but she expresses a desire to make love to Barbara when they both enter the heavenly sphere of wisdom (22.13:2). Mina Murray, in *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen*, starts out as cold and even prudish, but by the end of *Black Dossier* she is implicitly bisexual and polyamorous, presumably as a result of the time she spends in the Blazing World, even though Alan Quartermain spends just as much time there and seems interested only in women (18.17:7). Alternatively, *Lost Girls* consistently portrays Alice as a lesbian but after the climactic storytelling/orgy session in which the three protagonists work through their respective traumatic experiences, she suddenly expresses a desire to pursue Monsieur Rougeur, stating "FRANKLY, **ANYTHING** SEEMS POSSIBLE NOW. / WHO KNOWS? WE COULD TAKE TURNS BEING THE LADY" (30.2:6). The implication seems to be that enlightened women automatically become bisexual, that their allegedly narrow sexuality expands to include attraction to both genders. Moore thus undercuts many of his feminist and queer-positive story elements—for example the parallel stories of Anna and Barbara—by fetishising female sexuality, specifically bisexuality, to the point of objectification.

4.3.b: Apocalyptic Metacomic

Elizabeth Rosen asserts, in *Apocalyptic Transformations*, that "there is very little plot [in *Promethea*], and what little there is seems to be there merely as a convenient frame on which to hang the magical lessons" (35). She points out

that the characters repeatedly refer to the known, imminent apocalypse that Promethea herself is destined to bring about (Rosen 35). That apocalypse consists of Promethea herself speaking directly to every individual person on Earth—including the series' creators (30.23:4, 30.23:6) and the reader (30.22:7), ostensibly—and summing up the revelation that the magical lessons offer. Thus, Rosen argues that "the anticipated 'apocalypse' of the series [...] is ultimately [...] anticlimactic" and even "redundant" (35). However, I argue that the plot of Promethea does two important things. First, it subverts the generic "end of the world" action/adventure story; second, it functions as a set-up for the apocalyptic punchline that is the end of the series.

In terms of the superhero genre, Promethea once again fulfils the dictator-hero type. She is similar to Ozymandias in *Watchmen*, for example, in that she simultaneously performs the ultimate act of both supervillainy and superheroism. She makes the world better through revelation (i.e., the Classical/Biblical definition of apocalypse) but she also changes the world rather than just defending it, which Dittmer (511) and Wolf-Meyer (253) both define as elemental to the supervillain's generic function. However, in Promethea's case, the apocalypse is characterised as entirely positive, as opposed to the moral ambiguity at the end of *Watchmen*. *Promethea* also inverts the generic ending of apocalyptic action/adventure stories in which heroes always prevent the actual end of the world just in the nick of time, but of course not before a few explosions or other forms of spectacular destruction. *Promethea* replaces this destruction with revelation.

That revelation is also initially focused on a generically unlikely recipient: a homicidal android called Painted Doll. Doll is a machine, but it refers to its own "INTUITION" (29.21:2) and exclaims, after killing its creator, "I MUST DASH… / …I MUST **DANCE**… / I MUST FOLLOW MY **HEART**! // I WAS **ALWAYS** THE LIVELIEST WIRE IN THE TOASTER. / I ALWAYS KNEW **BEST**" (29.21:2), and thus ascribes to itself both human and machine-like qualities simultaneously and without any apparent psychological contradiction. The revelatory apocalypse at the end of *Promethea* takes the form of a fireside chat between Promethea and a single listener, which paradoxically is everyone. Although this scene happens outside of time and space, Painted Doll is the first to enter Promethea's room and hear her message within the sequence of the story (30.05-05:4), which implies that he possesses a degree of subjectivity and agency that superhero comics normally do not attribute to human-like machines, or for that matter, most villains. Superhero comics have played with the idea of sentient androids for decades, of course, with characters like The Vision in *The Avengers*, or Red Tornado of *The Justice League of America*, but those characters almost always struggle with and lament their putative lack of humanity. If they ever do somehow acquire human bodies or human sensibilities, they almost always lose them by the end of the story, thus ultimately supporting the divide between human and machine. *Promethea* neither conveniently grants Doll an organic human body nor denies it/him access to human experience because of its/his technological body. Indeed, the character

occupies a curiously primary position in the revelation as the first individual through whom the reader/viewer experiences it. Among the many changes to character and setting that the apocalypse catalyses, Doll transforms into a hero and joins the reformed Four Swell Guys[165] (31.21:1). This shift from villain to hero implies, especially within the dominant logic of the superhero genre, that Doll has attained not just sentience, but "humanity" in all its positive connotations, but without the necessity of physical humanity (i.e., a biological human body). *Promethea*'s plot thus subverts the generic apocalypse in a variety of ways.

Second, on a rhetorical level, the apocalypse-as-revelation functions as something akin to repeating a thesis at the end of an essay; thus, once again the series blurs the boundary between fiction and criticism, as Currie's theory of metafiction describes it, by using a specifically essay-like rhetorical device within a narrative structure. In critical discussions, the thesis is repeated at the end and stands in light of what came before. Rosen's anticlimax, then, is actually an element of the critical nature of the series. By the time Promethea herself spells out the series' thesis, it feels literally like a revelation—uncovering something that was already there—because the reader/viewer already knows the argument. Rather than pitting the plot and Moore's magical lessons against each other, as if the presence of the latter cancels out the possibility of the former, I argue that the apocalypse plot bears out Moore's theories of magic, provides a simulated experience of what *Promethea* characterises as magical awareness: the interconnectedness of myth and art and the revelations that those connections afford. For example, during the apocalypse, Promethea's comic-book world becomes a collage of different styles and media—from photonovella, to photorealistic painting, to cut-out images, to traditional comic-book art, and surrealist digital rendering —all of which is on display for three full issues (#28-30) This juxtaposition of differently-rendered visual objects, as well as

fig. 4.14: Breughel in the Third Dimension (*Promethea* 28.10-11:1)

[165] Two of them die during the apocalypse.

disparate settings, represents the characters gaining uncontrolled access to each other's subjectivities.

There are two powerful representations of metacomic revelation here, which the series delivers in two metapictures. The first depicts Karen Breughel, an FBI agent who chases Promethea through most of the series, as she literally falls through the comic-book page and arrives at a shockingly three-dimensional world complete with spherical thought balloons and a field of very flat-looking panels underneath her (see fig. 4.14). Williams uses computer-generated rendering in combination with traditional pen-and-ink line drawing to create what Mitchell might call a generic metapicture,[166] a picture that reveals how comic-book imagery normally works (i.e., as flat panels). This generic metapicture creates a stark juxtaposition between the world to which Breughel is accustomed and the world in which she suddenly finds herself. She even appears in a diaper, symbolising her birth into a new level of consciousness.[167]

Another agent, Hansard, experiences almost the exact opposite effect. While everyone else sees visions of demons and angels during the apocalypse, Hansard's mechanical eyes show him only mundane people going crazy (fig.

fig. 4.15: Hansard's Eyes (*Promethea* 30.2:1-2)

[166] See 1.2.c: "Metapictures."

[167] Agent Breughel's name is also very similar to that of the painter, Pieter Brueghel, and thus potentially consitutes an intertextual reference, but her experience is similar to only a few of Brueghel's paintings. Most of his work depicts the lively chaos of peasant life, such as *The Wedding Dance* (1566) or *Children's Games* (1560), but there are a few that depict mythological scenes, such as *The Tower of Babel* (1563), in which grand landscapes dominate small human figures in the foreground. This composition is somewhat similar to Breughel's experience on the "ROOF" of the world (28.12-13:8). However, the resemblance is not close enough and the composition is not common enough in Brueghel's style, to warrant an in-depth comparison between the two.

4.15). This sequence does not fall neatly into Mitchell's scheme largely because it functions as a metapicture by virtue of the narrative events that take place around it, as opposed to being a singular self-reflexive image. Mitchell does discuss one comic-book sequence, from *Mad Magazine*, but calls it a *talking metapicture* because it specifically employs a contradiction between image and text, which thus makes it an image/text construction. This sequence in *Promethea,* however, does not rely on an image/text effect, but rather a juxtaposition between one visual presentation rendered in black and white with line-drawings, and another on the following page rendered in a brightly-coloured collage of line drawings, sketches, cut-outs, and digitally-created images (30.02:1). Hansard's point-of-view panels are also small and cramped, hemmed in by stylised margins, whereas the collage panel is a two-page spread that bleeds to the edge of the page-frame. The sequence as a whole reveals that the fantastic imagery in these issues represents not the physical reality of the world in *Promethea*, but instead the perceptions of the people who are living in it. The best term for this might then be a narrative metapicture or a sequential metapicture, therefore employing Groensteen's notion of panel sequence in which every panel is informed by that which came before and after.

These revelatory visions alter both characters forever, Breughel and Hansard, and in fundamental psychological and spiritual ways. Breughel turns her experiences into a book, called *Babies on the Slates: The Limits of the 3rd Dimension* (3.17:5)[168] and becomes "LIKE THIS BIG **VISIONARY**" (3.18:2), while Hansard abandons his mechanical eyes and chooses to live as a blind man (31.16:2). He also returns to his father's Baptist faith but he states that in addition, he has started worshipping "THE PAGAN HEARTH-GODDESS HESTIA" (31.17:2). Deciding to abandon his eyes would seem to be an embrace of the human over the machine, which contradicts Painted Doll's implicitly-acknowledged sentience and ability to learn and grow from experience. However, Hansard's new-found spirituality, especially in two faiths that would seem to be inherently incompatible, aligns perfectly with Moore's magical theory in which everyone is free to worship as they please instead of being "tied together on one belief" (32.7:1), which is Moore's characterisation of religion. The revelations that these two characters experience represent the positive potential of apocalypse, of radically altering one's perspective, and that radical alteration is of course a form of magic, as Moore understands it. The apocalypse plot in *Promethea* is therefore not just a convenient hook on which to hang an extended lesson in magic. It is the culmination of that lesson, the punchline to a joke that is thirty-one issues long. Like any joke, that punchline makes sense only in combination with its set-up.

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[168] This title is somewhat akin to the phrase "What is the fourth dimension?" which Moore repeats throughout *From Hell*. The resemblance is probably not accidental; he wrote *Promethea* directly after *From Hell* and the two comics share many narrative elements, including experimental art, direct explanation of occult mysticism, and the assertion that becoming a story—either Jack the Ripper or Promethea—can make a person immortal.

4.4: Dreaming

Sandman is fundamentally metafictional, a collection of stories about storytelling. The series is almost an anthology, especially so given that Morpheus himself is all but missing from several mini-arcs and single-issues (e.g., *A Game of You*, *Sandman: The Dream Hunters*, "A Dream of a Thousand Cats," etc.). This almost-anthological construction contributes to the sense of Sandman as a set of variations on the theme of metafiction. In this section, I analyse two distinct moments in *Sandman*, one that puts the drive towards fixity on display—in which two characters dimly perceive their constructed nature but decide to ignore it—and another that creates a moment of fluidity, or what Waugh calls radical metafiction—in which fiction and reality collapse into each other and become logically indistinguishable, thus rendering the two concepts unstable and unsustainable. The first example comes from *The Doll's House*, the second volume of Sandman, and the second from *The Wake*, the final volume.

4.4.a: Rejecting Fluidity

The plot of *The Doll's House* is somewhat convoluted because even by this early point in the series, Gaiman et al. have already started to incorporate elements from the previous volume, *Preludes and Nocturnes*, as well as pre-existing DC-Comics continuity, specifically the two previous characters called "Sandman."[169] In brief, Rose Walker searches for her long-lost younger brother, Jed, who disappeared into the American foster-care system as a small child. His foster parents keep him chained up in their basement and half-starved. As a result, he retreats into a dream-fantasy in which he is the boy side-kick of a pre-existing superhero in DC's comics, Sandman II/Garrett Sanford.[170] This dream-fantasy occurs within an artificial off-shoot of Morpheus' realm, the Dreaming, and was created by two fugitive nightmares, called Brute and Glob, who escaped during Morpheus' seventy-year imprisonment, which occurs in *Preludes and Nocturnes*. The events of *The Doll's House* both set up and anticipate many of the larger plot-points of the series, including Morpheus' eventual death. However, the important element for my purposes is the last few pages of the final issue of the volume in which Rose, a mortal human, and Desire, one of Morpheus' immortal siblings, both come very close to learning that they are fictional entities, but then deny that discovery because acknowledging it would ruin their ability to function in their respective contexts.

Rose peers past the surface of her reality when Morpheus mistakes her for a "vortex." Morpheus explains:

> Once in every era, there is a vortex. Even I do not know why… / A mortal who briefly becomes… the center… of the dreaming. // The vortex, by its nature, destroys the barriers

[169] There are several characters called "Sandman" in American comics. This results from a combination of the tendency in superhero comics to name characters with the suffix "-man" and the pre-existing figure "the Sandman" in contemporary popular culture.

[170] Sanford's appearance constitutes an early retcon of previous Sandman characters into Gaiman et al.'s mythology, which they have at this point only just begun to formulate. See 3.1.b: "Formal Self-Reflection."

> between dreaming minds, destroys the ordered chaos of the Dreaming... / Until the myriad dreamers are caught in one huge dream... // Until all the dreams are one. Then the vortex collapses in upon itself. / And then it is gone. / It takes the minds of the dreamers with it, it damages the Dreaming beyond repair. // It leaves nothing but darkness. / It is one of my functions to prevent this from occurring again. (*Sandman* 17.5:1-4)

The only way that Morpheus knows how to prevent this destruction is to kill Rose Walker. His explanation bears some scrutiny, though, because it reflects a drive to fixity and turns out to be dead wrong. Unity Kincaid, Rose's grandmother, is the original vortex and once she realises it, she sacrifices herself to save Rose. The whole affair, including Morpheus mistaking Rose for the vortex, was engineered by Desire, Morpheus' sister-brother and secretly Rose's grandfather (he/she raped Unity Kincaid while she was in a coma and Rose's mother was given up for adoption). According to the rules of the Endless, which Gaiman of course invents, if any of the siblings kills anyone of their own bloodline—which would include Morpheus killing the grand-daughter of his sister-brother—the killer would be doomed to die. All of this plot detail is pertinent because it elaborately portrays Morpheus' rigid sense of order and duty (i.e., a drive towards fixity) but also his fallibility. His perception of the value of rigid order—perfectly exemplified by the image of pain and destruction he creates to represent the chaotic force of a vortex (fig. 4.16)—does not always contribute to the greater good. Indeed, in this case, his sense of duty would have resulted in Rose's needless death, if not for Unity's intervention. It is also interesting to note that the total collapse of all dreamers' minds into each other effectively occurs in *Promethea*, and although it is initially destructive, Moore and Williams ultimately portray it as a revelation, an opening of perception. This parallel indicates that the chaos that Morpheus fears could be interpreted and depicted as not destructive but instead constructive and enlightening. Gaiman et al. build Morpheus' world to reflect his character, which in this case means pitting him against a threat that takes a form that he fears and reviles: distilled chaos. By preventing Morpheus from killing Rose, Unity demonstrates that compassionate ingenuity (i.e., a flexible approach to problem-solving) is at least as valuable as the Dream King's rigid sense of duty (i.e., a pathological desire for fixity).

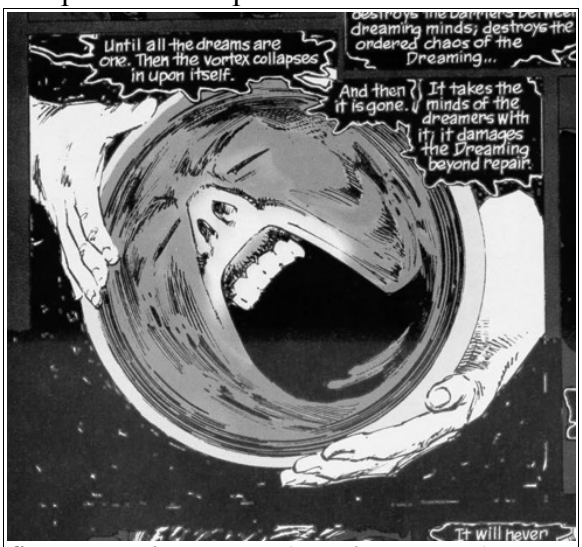

fig. 4.16: The Vortex (*Sandman* 7.5:3)

Rose experiences Morpheus' threats to kill her and her grandmother's sacrifice as a dream, but a dream that disturbs her sense of reality and which she interprets in metafictional terms. Issue #17, "Calliope," includes several excerpts from Rose's diary, which Todd Klein renders in a Courier typeface:

> Six months ago I had a really weird dream. [...] // If my dream was true, then everything we know, everything we think, is a lie. /// It means that we're just dolls. We don't have a clue what's really going down, we just kid ourselves that we're in control of our lives while a paper's thickness away things that would drive us mad if we thought about them for too long play with us, and move us around from room to room, and put us away at night when they're tired, or bored. (*Sandman* 17.18:4-5, 17.19:3)

Rose's diary is in Courier type presumably because she uses a mechanical typewriter in the story, but also because, in the era of the word-processor, fixed-width fonts are antiquated and thus call attention to themselves. Waugh implies that breaking with known conventions is an integral part of metafiction (30 – 31); Jones explicitly argues that calling attention to the material creation of comics is a metacomic effect that he calls demystification (271). The Courier type therefore constitutes a self-referential imagetext effect that intensifies the already self-reflexive content of Rose's diary. Just a few pages later, in a parallel scene, Morpheus attempts to explain this same awareness to his sister-brother, Desire, but in inverted terms. Where Rose perceives herself as a plaything of supernatural/metatextual forces that are "a paper's thickness away," Morpheus sees himself and his kin, the Endless, as the product of human imagination:

> We of the endless [...] exist because they [mortals] know, deep in their hearts, that we exist. // [...] we do not manipulate them. / If anything, they manipulate us. // We are their toys. (*Sandman* 17.23: 2-4)

Morpheus is comfortable with this conception of the cosmos because, as the King of Dreams, his insight extends specifically into the nature of perception and he quite literally lives in a realm partially ruled by mortal imagination. However, both Rose and Desire reject the idea that they are manipulated by outside forces. Rose wills herself to believe in her own agency: "My dream. My weird dream. It was just a dream. / That's all. Just a dream" (*Sandman* 17.19:8). She even narrates that decision, using quotation marks within her own narrator box, which again emphasises the metacomic element of the issue, to indicate a story-like resolution to her ontological dilemma: ""And then she woke up."" (*Sandman* 17.19:9). Desire's nature as a manipulator of human agency will not allow him-her to see herself-himself as subject to anyone else's will:

> HUMAN BEINGS ARE THE CREATURES OF DESIRE. THEY TWIST AND BEND AS I REQUIRE IT. / IF I THOUGHT

> OTHERWISE, I WOULD CRACK [...] OR I WOULD ABANDON MY REALM [...]. (*Sandman* 17.24:3)

He-she cannot conceive of a metafictional universe because she-he could not function in one, psychologically or practically. The last few pages of *The Doll's House* depict people (supernatural or not) choosing a fixed world—reliable ontology, stable identity, personal agency—despite evidence to the contrary. Morpheus tries and fails to execute his duty to the letter, Rose ignores her disturbing dream, and Desire simply dismisses Morpheus' assertion. At the end of the *Sandman* series, Morpheus eventually chooses a kind of fluidity when he implicitly commits suicide to trigger his own rebirth. The most radical moment of fluidity, however, occurs in volume ten, *The Wake*, Morpheus' own funeral.

4.4.b: Accepting Fluidity

Despite how its characters sometimes behave, *Sandman* ultimately takes place in a fluid narrative universe and that fluidity is the driving force behind many of the short pieces in the series. For example, issue #18, " A Dream of a Thousand Cats," proposes that reality itself is based on belief and therefore at any given moment enough people changing their beliefs can change the world around them. A female cat seeks out Dream and of course perceives him as a great black tom with stars in its eyes. He reports that there was a time when huge cats—*feline domesticus,* not actual big cats—used to rule the world and hunt small humans for pleasure, but enough humans deliberately dreamed of a world in which they were large and cats were small that the humans thereby changed reality. Dream explains:

> They dreamed the world so it ALWAYS WAS the way it is now, little one. There never WAS a world of high cat-ladies and cat-lords. / They changed the universe from the beginning of all things until the end of time. (18.19:3)

Gaiman has Dream essentially describe what Julia Round's "Fragmented Identity" calls *superscription* or "the overwriting and adaptation of previously existing characters" (Round 359) by newer revisions of those characters. Her examples include Moore et al.'s superscription of Swamp Thing, Gaiman's absorption of Cain and Abel from DC's *House of Mystery* and *House of Secrets*, and finally the Demon Etrigan, a hero character that Moore transforms into a villain in *Swamp Thing* #49 (Round 364). These revised versions write over their previous incarnations by virtue of a critical mass of creators and fans preferring the revision. This concept is central to Revisionist comics, named as they are after the process of revising, altering pre-existing characters, settings, and stories in self-reflexive and self-critical ways. The humans in Gaiman's "Dream of a Thousand Cats" manage by force of collective will to superscribe their reality and therefore the cats believe that they might be able to change it back, but as a brown tom laments, "I WOULD LIKE TO SEE **ANYONE** -- PROPHET, KING OR **GOD** -- PERSUADE A THOUSAND CATS TO DO **ANYTHING** AT THE SAME TIME" (18.23:3). This is the

punchline of the story, of course, a joke about the solitary and wilful nature of cats,[171] but it also voices a major ontological conundrum.

If reality is a construct of perception then it is mutable, but to actually manipulate it, to arrange for enough people to alter their perceptions so that they might collectively alter their reality, requires a herculean effort. Shifting the perceptions of an entire culture, for example, is no easy task, and it usually happens only over a great deal of time. *Promethea* makes this assertion explicitly through Bill/Promethea:

> MIND AND MATTER AREN'T **SEPARATED**. THEY'RE JUST DIFFERENT POINTS IN ONE **SYSTEM** [therefore] CHANGING THE **WORLD'S** AS EASY AS CHANGING YOUR **MIND**. IT'S JUST THAT MATTER'S **THICKER** AND MORE **VISCOUS** THAN IMAGINATION, SO IT TAKES LONGER…" (7.12:13:2 – 7.12-13:3)

Matter, the world around us, has a direct effect on lived human experience. Mind, the conceptual structures by which we navigate and perceive the material world, is not above or superior to matter. The two are not separate, going by Waugh's model of metafiction in which reality is always suspended but never banished.[172] Recognising their mutual influence reveals how contingent both are; therefore, it grants insight into how they are constructed but it also suspends our ability to conceive either one as fully stable. Within Hutcheon's model, metafiction "openly assert[s] that there are only truths in the plural, and never one Truth; and there is rarely falseness *per se*, just others' truths" (Hutcheon *Poetics* 109-110). Taken together, Waugh and Hutcheon, as well as "A Dream of a Thousand Cats," indicate that the important question to ask is whose truth dominates, whose truth manages to define reality. Morpheus clearly asserts that mortals define his reality by their collective belief, but the overarching plot of the series depicts his rather dramatic attempt to redefine his own reality, his subjective identity.

Gaiman helpfully summarises *Sandman* in the introduction to a follow-up volume, called *Sandman: Endless Nights*: "The Lord of Dreams learns that one must change or die, and makes his decision" (*Endless Nights* 8). Morpheus in fact decides that he will have both change and death, which echoes the motif of sacrifice in Moore's *Swamp Thing*, as well as the revelatory nature of apocalypse in *Promethea*.[173] Morpheus wants to shed his rigidity, a character-oriented fixity, but that very same rigidity prevents him from changing so he commits an elaborate form of suicide, at which point he is immediately replaced by another version of himself, one who is compassionate and gentle where the previous version was imperious and cold, and one who specifically does not take on the name "Morpheus" (70.12:7). He likewise shifts visually, from black-haired and

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[171] The fact that cats in nature organise into prides might suggest that felines do not, in fact, possess this wilful nature, but popular conception is more powerful than zoology, here.

[172] See 1.2.b: "Metafiction."

[173] For a detailed discussion of *Swamp Thing*, *Promethea*, and apocalypse, see Elizabeth K. Rosen's "Sentient Vegetable Claims the End is Near! : The Graphic Novels of Alan Moore," in *Apocalyptic Transformation*.

black-garbed with white-on-black speech balloons, to the opposite, white hair and white clothing with black-on-white speech. The two are inverted opposites, two sides of the same coin.

Given that the entity called "Dream" cannot die, and indeed has already reappeared by the time of his own funeral, Ibliss O'Shaunessy—a golem created specifically for the wake and who serves as a convenient source of exposition because he does not know the story up to that point—asks "**WHAT** DIED? **WHO** ARE YOU MOURNING?" The answer is a "POINT OF VIEW" (71.4:3-4), which just shows the kinds of paradoxically literal explanations that metacomics offer. Morpheus is not a person, but instead an "idea[...] cloaked in the semblance of flesh" (21.10:2). He cannot die, so his funeral is a sham, in a sense. His experiences cannot be directly compared to human experience, of course, because he is explicitly not human. Even within his own diegesis he is not exactly real, as his speech to Desire from *The Doll's House* suggests. Morpheus is doubly fictitious: for the real-world audience he is a character in a comic book, and even within his own world he is a figment of human imagination. However, despite shifting between many different appearances—pale man in black, African god, black tomcat, and a dozen different artists' interpretations—Morpheus also has a recognisable personality that makes him different than his successor, the white-clad "Daniel" version of Dream. Herein lies the ultimate paradox of Morpheus' death. The other characters in the series know full well that he is not "real," but they mourn just the same. Arguably, the audience, which is fully aware that Morpheus is fictional, also mourns the loss of a character with whom they lived for ten volumes of comics and possibly seven years of continuous publication, if they read/viewed the series in its original form. The characters do not mourn a dead body—in one elaborate sequence of panels, Ibliss lays a shroud over empty space that takes the shape of a body (72.4:5)—and they do not mourn the loss of a person's presence because a version of Dream is still among them. The only thing they have left to mourn is a point of view, the unique subjectivity and agency that comes from the personal experience from which people construct their personalities. The audience similarly has no body to mourn, except in the metaphorical sense of a body of literature, a corpus, and Dream is still available at any time, because that audience can go back and re-read the series at any time. The wake, therefore, makes little practical sense, either within or without the diegesis, because Dream is not dead. It makes perfect emotional sense, however, because the person that the characters have come to know does not live, or even just "live," any longer.

Morpheus' death also parallels the knowledge that the *Sandman* comic-book series was soon to end. At the time of publication, it was known that Gaiman intended to end the series, and thus the death of the protagonist, as abstract as that death may be, would seem to signal that end as well. The end of a narrative is itself a kind of death, the death of a story, but like Morpheus' death-that-is-not-quite-death, and as *Promethea* demonstrates, stories cannot die unless they are forgotten. In a literal sense the story of *Sandman* cannot die even when the character of Morpheus does. It continues for another ten issues, over the

course of which the audience gets to see Morpheus again, before his death, through a time-travel device (#74, "Exiles") and a scene with Shakespeare as he writes *The Tempest* (#75, "The Tempest"). DC Comics even produced two more *Sandman*-themed volumes, written by Gaiman, after the series ended: *Sandman: Dream Hunters* and *Sandman: Endless Nights*. From one perspective, these follow-up books might seem like crass attempts to cash in on the immense success of the *Sandman* series, and I do not deny that a profit motive exists—DC Comics would not have produced them without it—but the follow-up books are also quite consistent with the metacomic nature of the series. Morpheus is a fictional character. He can live and die at the whim of both creators and audience alike. The objection that the character is dead and ought to stay dead is simply less important than the concern that *Sandman* comics should carry on the themes and motifs, and reproduce the title character, of the original series. In practise, then, narrative consistency and coherence are far more important than logic/causality, but logic/causality can contribute to a sense of consistency and coherence. Thus, we arrive at a kind of continuity that strongly resembles Todorov's more complex concept of verisimilitude,[174] rather than a strict adherence to narrative consistency. Morpheus' death reveals this tangle of logic, emotion, and narrative significance, the same suspension of the very idea of reality that Waugh describes as central to radical metafiction (Waugh 52-53).

However, on a metacomic level, the question ("**WHAT** DIED?") and the answer (a "POINT OF VIEW") are both quite literal. Within the diegesis, the part of Dream that dies *is* a point of view. Point of view is the personal equivalent of Hall's articulation or the more common conception of subjectivity in which identity arises from experience of a context, from looking at the world from a particular perspective: historical, social, physical, psychological, gendered, socialised, national, ethnic, etc. Thus any death, of a fictional character or a flesh-and-blood person—or even a fictional personification of the human capacity for imagination—is the loss of a point of view. That is what we mourn at every funeral, a perspective, a subject, a particular articulation of individuality and context. Through metacomic awareness, *Sandman* transforms a fantastic narrative event (i.e., an elaborate suicide that is not a suicide) into an extremely literal definition of identity. The concept of identity that *Sandman* asserts is very similar to the concept of reality that it asserts in "A Dream of a Thousand Cats." In both cases, identity and reality are ultimately mutable, but still extremely valuable and, ironically, difficult to change.

The single most radically metafictional moment in *Sandman* occurs in issue #71, "In Which A Wake Is Held," and it is engineered from a very subtle combination of second-person narration, self-reflexive imagery, and an aspect-to-aspect transition. The first three issues of *The Wake* (#70-72) employ highly descriptive narration, sometimes more descriptive than necessary in a comic book, a visual form, but for which Gaiman has a particular penchant (e.g., the storybook format of issue #5, "Ramadan," or the storybook version of *Mirrormask*, both of

[174] See the introductory section of Chapter 2: "History."

fig. 4.17: Radical Metafictional Collapse (*Sandman* 71.1:3-4)

which contain narration for its own sake). This narration appears to be in the third person in issue #70. There is, however, a radical shift at the beginning of #71, which persists until the end of #72. In #70, the audience witnesses Dream's wake in the third-person omniscient mode, jumping from place to place as the attendants gather to mourn, but the opening page of #71 informs the reader/viewer that she is in fact one of the attendants: "THEY WAIT AWKWARDLY, SHUFFLING AND MAKING SMALL-TALK, IN THE WASTELAND THAT WAS ONCE THE HEART OF THE DREAMING. / EVERYBODY'S HERE. // YOU'RE HERE" (*Sandman* 71.1:3-4). Logically, this means that the reader/viewer is also one of the dreamers, and by this point the series has thoroughly associated dreaming, imagining, and storytelling. The symbolism is practically inescapable: all of *Sandman* is a dream *and* a story, so of course "YOU'RE HERE" (71.1:3-4). "You," the reader/viewer, are as "here" as there is a "here" to be in. Morpheus' wake has no other "here" than this dream and this dream has no other "here" than issue #71 of the DC/Vertigo comic-book series called *Sandman*, as written by Neil Gaiman, illustrated by Michael Zulli, and read by "you." Understood from a metacomic perspective, this line of narration, in the shocking second-person, is utterly literal: you *are* here. "You" create "here" in the act of reading/viewing the comic book.

Zulli's art supports Gaiman's narrative assertion, initially mirroring the third-person narrator voice by depicting the characters from behind and displaying no awareness of a viewer's presence (see fig. 4.17, upper panel), but then reversing perspective in the next panel and depicting at least four fictional

characters looking directly at the viewer (see fig. 4.17, lower panel).[175] This kind of unflinching, direct gaze is unusual in visual storytelling.[176] A character's eye-line usually cheats above, below, or to the sides of the frame, specifically because the characters are ostensibly unaware of a viewer or camera. It is particularly visually arresting in a comic book because, as Groensteen points out, multiframes depict whole scenes *in praesentia* (*System* 148), which means that several perspectives are simultaneously available to the viewer at once, unlike most paintings, photographs, or cinema. The multiframe, therefore, is less apt to make viewers feel as if they were situated in space relative to the image because the page as a whole contains many panels that collectively imply many physical positions at once, unlike the chronological presentation of cinema. Viewers of comics pages more easily attain a sense of distance from the action because they see it from multiple positions at once and are constantly visually reminded that they reside outside of its diegetic space. In addition, viewers see comics from outside of their diegetic time, which is true of any form of book. They can scan panels out of order or flip back and forth between pages, as opposed to film, which locks the viewer into a particular sequence and a rigid pace.[177] Comics viewers are therefore even less likely to consider their hypothetical, physical position relative to the imagery. A film that contains rapid cutting from one location to another can attain this same sense of distance of course, but comics automatically create it. Zulli's figures, looking directly at the viewer, at eye level, lock her into a physical space in a way that comics rarely do.

From a metacomic perspective, this page from "In Which A Wake Is Held" creates a moment of genuine of radical metafiction, the total collapse of the fictional world into the audience's world and vice-versa. The Dreaming, a fluid narrative space within *Sandman*'s diegesis, allows that moment of collapse to take place because it provides a very literal explanation for what would otherwise be only a symbolic assertion. "You" are always "here" in any moment of reading or viewing, but the conceit of the issues, that the reader/viewer is experiencing a dream, brings that realisation to the surface. It also accounts for the necessary

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[175] One character, in the suit and the mask, seems to be looking to the left, and another, with the sphincter-like face, also seems to be looking left, but it is hard to tell given his/her appearance.

[176] It is not at all unusual in documentary or film/video journalism, of course, but that exception proves the rule because those forms often assume a form of direct address to the viewer, whereas *fictional* visual narratives tend to attempt to suspend disbelief, and thus go out of their way to deflect attention away from the audience's presence, as well as the presence of the technology of cinematic production. Of course, *Sandman* constantly hints at and implies its own fictional nature, but unlike *Promethea* for example, it rarely addresses the reader directly, except for these few issues of *The Wake*, which come at the end of the series.

[177] The ubiquity of video tape, DVD, and even video games means that creators of cinema have less and less control over the flow of time. Groensteen's theories of the comic-book syntagm and the non-sequential series make clear, however, that comics have always, by virtue of their physical technology (the page), contained within them a great deal of viewing freedom. Which is to say, it is simply easier to flip one's eyes back to a previous panel than it has been, historically, to wind back a reel of celluloid or a video tape, or scan backwards on a DVD.

deletions that any narrative must make in order to move the story along. Exact details of every moment of the wake are not available:

> WE NEED NOT RECOUNT EVERY SERMON AND EULOGY. AFTER ALL, YOU WERE THERE. YOU MAY HAVE FORGOTTEN IN YOUR WAKING HOURS, WHAT YOU HEARD THAT DAY // BUT YOU WILL REMEMBER IT, IN THE SOFT, LOST, SLUMBERING MOMENTS BETWEEN WAKING AND TRUE SLEEP. (72.15:1)

The first three issues of *The Wake* thus take on the subjective impression of a dream and asserting the reader/viewer's literal presence within the diegesis renders the story more convincing, more verisimilar, in the process. Waugh's conception of radical metafiction specifically includes the breakdown of language, meaning the breakdown of representation as a rational system, but *Sandman* contains a stable model of how representation can be fashioned to express a statement that is both literally true and utterly preposterous: " You're here."

Although *The Wake* technically continues through issues #73 to #75, which ends the series as a whole, #72 closes the plot (i.e., the narrative as linear, causal timeline) with the words "... and then [...] you woke up" (72.24:4). This line signals the end of the narrative that has been *Sandman*, as well as the end of the dream of the wake itself, and of course it once again collapses dreaming and storytelling into each other. However, the series continues for three issues, tying up loose ends: Hob Gadling (#73 "Sunday Morning"); the new Dream (#74 "Exiles"); and Shakespeare's second play, in payment to Morpheus (#75 "The Tempest"). The events depicted in "Sunday Morning" (#73, December 1995) occur a few months after "In Which We Wake" (#72, November 1995), but are more or less contemporaneous to the audience's sense of time. "The Tempest" simply takes place in the past, specifically the Jacobean period, although it includes one last psychological explanation for Dream's suicide. "Exiles," however, is set in Imperial China. The exact date is appropriately unclear because the story takes place in "one of the Soft Places, at the edge of the Dreaming" (74.13:3) where different time periods can meet and interact. Soft Places create fluid narrative time where the Dreaming creates fluid narrative space. "Exiles" uses that fluid time to directly juxtapose Morpheus with the new Dream through Master Li, a somewhat bewildered sage who meets them both in rapid succession even though they are separated by hundreds of years. A temporally-fixed comic would have to move back and forth between periods to present this same character juxtaposition; this fluid comic can do away with the conceit of splicing disparate moments together. Just as Manhattan informs Ozymandias that "**NOTHING** ENDS, ADRIAN. NOTHING **EVER** ENDS" (*Watchmen* 12.27:5), Dream repeats a Latin phrase "OMNIA MUTANTUR, NIHIL INTERIT. / EVERYTHING CHANGES, BUT NOTHING IS TRULY LOST" (74.22:7). This line directly references Morpheus' death and subsequent rebirth, of course, but it also reflects a specific Revisionist attitude. Comics have traditionally been a disposable art form, first physically and then narratively. They exist within a publishing tradition that forgets or retcons its own past as quickly as it creates its present. "With each new

issue, continuity is theoretically revised, making previous stories important as history but obsolete as contemporary guides to a superhero universe" (Pustz 132). Revisionist comics, however, consistently assert the power and importance of the past, of memory, of history, of knowing where we have been in order to perceive where we are and where we might go.

4.5: Conclusion

The comics in this chapter—Ellis and Robertson's *Transmetropolitan*, Moore and Williams' *Promethea*, and finally Gaiman et al.'s *Sandman*—all move beyond self-reflexively analysing American comics themselves and towards analyses of the concept of representation, either embedded in materialist culture or as a more abstract concept. However, they all retain self-reflexivity as a tool of analysis and that tool turns out to be entirely able to investigate, re-present, and otherwise engage with issues outside of just the "text." As Hutcheon so eloquently and forcefully argues, metafiction does not inexorably lead to myopic, self-absorbed, inward-looking art. Under the right conditions, it can lead to self-contextualisation—historically, socially, economically, politically—which in fact exemplifies Jameson's famous call to "always historicize" (*Postmodernism* 1).

Transmetropolitan uses cyberpunk to depict the relentless oppression of the labour classes through miraculous technology and the marginalisation of creative subcultures based on their putative misuse of that same technology. It also demonstrates, though, that self-identification, constructing one's own identity within the mass media—essentially controlling the symbols by which one's own social group is identified—is itself an act of transformation. Spider's column, translated into an imagetext series for the benefit of the comic book in which it appears, can make the threatening and the alien appear loving and human. It can alter how the new scum are treated by forcing a new perception of them. This act of transubstantiation is precisely what *Promethea* characterises as magic, and magical transformation or conjuration through language is precisely the solution that Moore and Williams (and Promethea) offer to check the dehumanising force of institutions like corporation, church, and science. Embracing one's individual capacity to imagine different possibilities is the first step on the road to altering one's situation, as many of the characters in *Promethea* do, once they experience the narrative conceit of the revelatory apocalypse. In the face of the realisation that we, the citizens of the media-saturated world, might actually be puppets of a kind, zombies shuffling through our worlds under the influence of media enchantments, *Sandman* depicts two different responses. One is denial for the sake of continuing to function, ignoring the evidence of a complex nexus of ideas that float under the world we see in favour of living in the world that is most apparent to us. The other is embrace of that nexus, learning how to control and recognise language manipulation rather than be a tool of it. Spider Jerusalem starts as a manipulator of media, both using it to find information and to expose truths to the world, but he eventually opts out, retires from that world. Sophie Banks quite explicitly trains in the art of manipulating linguistic magic and in so doing brings about the apocalypse that allows everyone to share that power.

Finally, Morpheus is supposedly the master of all imagination, but is trapped in his sense of duty. His only escape is suicide. In experiencing death and rebirth through the *Sandman* comic book, the "you" that the narration refers to might very well have learned to embrace the nexus, to navigate the fuzzy boundaries of fiction and theory, and to recognise the instability of reality itself.

Conclusion

This dissertation has two corollary theses, a positive assertion and negative assertion. The positive assertion is that the group of comics that have come under the umbrella term "Revisionist"—published within the American mainstream, created in the early-80s to the present, mostly by British writers/artists—have a strong tendency towards metacomic techniques through which they critique, revise, and overturn previous conventions of American comics, largely but not exclusively conventions related to the superhero and related fantastic action/adventure genres. At their most extreme, these self-reflexive comics deconstruct the comic-book itself and arrive at what Patricia Waugh calls radical metafiction, which destabilises the notion of a discreet reality outside of the text, and thus makes text "real" and turns reality into a "text." However, there is a large span of possibilities within the Revisionist style, from Waugh's radical metafiction, to exposing the manipulation of public opinion in media-saturated democracies, and all the way to the relatively modest task of critiquing the political implications of the superhero genre. My positive claim is not that the Revisionists all do one thing or arrive at one conclusion, but rather that they use a set of related and overlapping narrative techniques and, because of certain shared experiences as reader/viewers of comics, tend towards certain conclusions. Chapters 3 and 4 group Revisionist comics according to the topics they take on and the kinds of conclusions at which they tend to arrive, but they also display a variety over a number of years, two decades and counting.

My negative assertion emerges directly from my positive assertion. Form, in this case the formal devices of metacomics, simply does not guarantee politics or ideology. Metacomic techniques can be, and have been, used to justify and reify the conservative politics of the superhero just as well as they have been used to critique the normative culture from which that genre emerges and valorises. Chapter 2 surveys comics from the Silver-Age mainstream and the Underground. All of the comics in that chapter employ metacomic techniques, but the former use them to assert that veering too far from the generic/ideological norm of the American superhero is inherently dangerous; thus, these metacomics effectively police the boundaries of the genre, just as the Comics Code defined those boundaries in the early fifties. The latter—reacting against precisely the normative values of the Silver-Age, Code-defined, superhero-dominated mainstream—explode those boundaries, often in the service of a larger ideological agenda but also occasionally just for the sake of rebellion as symbolic act that simply demonstrates the possibility of subversion.

When I began writing this dissertation, I feared that I would have to start it with the traditional lament at the lack of scholarly attention paid to comics as an art form and the popular opinion that it is not fit for anything other than adolescent power fantasies and slap-stick comedy, but in the time it took to research and write this document, that situation has radically changed. There are now a handful of journals dedicated to comics, books published several times a year, dedicated classes in universities at both the undergraduate and graduate levels, and a growing list of canonical works employing diverse themes and genres. The field is growing so quickly that it is almost impossible to keep up.

There has been a small flurry of academic publishing on the Revisionists very recently. For example, Lance Parkin's *Alan Moore* (2002), the essay anthology *The Sandman Papers* (2006), *ImageText*'s[178] début issue dedicated to Neil Gaiman (2008), and Annalisa Di Liddo's *Alan Moore: Comics as Performance, Fiction as Scalpel* (2009) all focus on either Moore or Gaiman's corpus. There has been a particular focus on Moore in the last few years, partly attributable to a number of films have now been made from his comics (*From Hell, The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen*, *V for Vendetta*, and most recently, *Watchmen*).

These critical treatments have of course acknowledged that Moore and Gaiman are not isolated prodigies that sprang into existence of their own accord, but they do not always go out of their way to understand the history of English-language comics in particular, from which both Moore and Gaiman emerged. Ironically, fan scholarship displays a great deal of awareness of this historical context, largely because the comic-book-fan community knows that history extremely well. Indeed, knowledge of history drives the content of many books on comics. Caulton Waugh's *The Comics*, Maurice Horn's *The Comic Book Encyclopedia*, David Kunzle's *History of the Comic Strip* (volumes I and II), Matthew Pustz' *Comic Book Culture*, and Bradford W. Wright's *Comic Book Culture* have all surveyed various fields within comics (i.e., global, American, European). Geoff Klock's *How to Read Superhero Comics and Why* (2002) is the only recent book to focus on Revisionist comics with a special attention to superheroes. He analyses the genre as it develops from one dominant mode to another, as is true of many popular-scholars of superheroes.[179] By limiting himself to just the superhero, however, Klock misses out on discussing the degree to which Revisionist creators have pushed against, and indeed reached past, the boundaries of that genre.

This dissertation argues that the Revisionist sensibility is historically situated in relation to American mainstream comics, but not entirely located within it. The Revisionists use and play off of the traditional narrative and formal devices of the mainstream, so often using self-reflexive devices that they are almost the norm of the style. However, Revisionist comics also employ and play with devices from other kinds of comics (the Underground, Japanese *manga,* and various European comic-book/strip traditions) as well as other fantasy genres (horror, science fiction, magical fantasy) and ostensibly high-class forms of literature (modernism, fairy tale and folklore, Victorian literature, Shakespeare, Classical mythology), mixing them all into each other and thus symbolically equating them, placing them on a common plane. Moore's rhetorical question, "This is an IMAGINARY STORY... aren't they all?" reverberates throughout the Revisionist style, granting leave to appropriate, retool, and reverse-engineer any and every bit of narrative, literature, or visual culture to which the creators have access, while simultaneously displaying a great respect and gratitude for that

[178] *ImageText*, the journal, is not a specific reference to W.J.T. Mitchell, but the combination of those two concepts is very common within comics scholarship.

[179] Klock has graduate-school education, but is currently not affiliated with a university, so he represents something of a middle-ground between popular scholar and academic scholar.

material. The Revisionists are not little Oedipoi, in search of fathers to kill and mothers to impregnate, but cordial children who honour their parents by using what they learned from them in order to find their own way in the world.

There are, of course, miles to go until we sleep. This dissertation largely consists of close readings placed in historical relation to each other, tracing lines of influence between them. I have strived to display how these comics place themselves in their historical context—*Planetary*'s pastiches of pulp/film styles or *Miracleman*'s self-conscious revival of a Silver-Age hero in the 1980s—but there is still much to be written on how they emerged from their various historical moments. While *Planetary* comments on the Thatcher government, for example, *V for Vendetta* and *Miracleman* clearly arise from it. Another area that deserves more attention is the American comic-book subculture's relationship to these highly self-conscious comics. I have demonstrated that they go out of their way to engage with the subculture on its own terms, and so the natural next step is to compare academic analyses of them to popular reaction. Academic researchers have relatively easy access to the thoughts and words of the fan community, in the form of printed fan mail or fanzines as well as digital resources such as UseNet, web fora, blogs, personal web sites, and, most recently, Twitter. Academics can quite easily place critical work, driven by standards of academic methodology and rational/empirical analysis, alongside fan texts, driven by a whole different set of needs and desires, none of which are particularly beholden to academic rigour. The goal for my next project is to write this dissertation's doppelgänger, which would focus on fan responses to Revisionist metacomics, comparing what I think the comics articulate with what the fan community takes from them. I seriously doubt that the two will entirely match, and by juxtaposing them, academic critics can learn a great deal about how comics function in culture as well as just how far removed our analytical systems might be from popular experience. There is no point in trying to determine who is right between these two perspectives, but investigating the gap between them could teach those of us who are in the academy a great deal about how to engage with communities and cultures that are not located on our campuses.

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