# Alan moore, secondary literacy, and the modernism of the graphic novel.

INTERDISCIPLINARY COMICS STUDIES

## Alan Moore, "Secondary Literacy," and the Modernism of the Graphic

*By* Phillip E. Wegner     *citation · printer friendly version*

> Whether articulated as potentially genuine beings who can be looked at fro
> side or as more limited, two-dimensional visual figures, comic characters a
> presented as occupying spatial and temporal locations distinct from other
> characters and belonging to an underlying world that exists independent o
> panels in which the characters appear –an alternative universe whose "real
> dimension seems to depend on events that have been cut out or are occur
> between the panels.
>> Donald Ault, "Imagetextuality: 'Cutting Up' Again, pt. III"

> Here is our narrative made paradise, brief tales made glorious continuity.
>> Alan Moore and Kevin O'Neil, *Black Dossier*

1  In this essay, I want to focus on some of the specific formal qualities of the g
using as my case study writer Alan Moore and artist Kevin O'Neil's three vo
*League of Extraordinary Gentlemen*. (The first issue of a fourth, entitled *Volume*
was released in the spring of 2009). In particular, I hope to show that thi
especially its third volume, 2008's *Black Dossier*, offers an exceptional sel
modernist commentary on the potentialities of the medium, as well as on its in
thinking about both the new forms of literacy emergent in the electronic re
global culture more generally.

2  I begin, however, with an earlier comment that Moore made in a 2001 interview
the (im)possibility of a film adaptation of what many still find to be his mas

grim and complex dystopia of *Watchmen* (1986-1987), the only graphic nove

*Time* magazine's list of the best novels published between 1923 and 2005. In t

Moore observes, "You get people saying, 'Oh, yes, *Watchmen* is very cine

actually it's not. It's almost the exact opposite of cinematic" (Hughes 146). Mo

that Terry Gilliam, who at one time was slated to direct Watchmen, asked

"would film it," to which Moore responded, "I had to tell him that, frankly, I d

was filmable. I didn't design it to show off the similarities between cinema

which *are* there, but, in my opinion are fairly unremarkable. It was designed to

things that comics could do that cinema and literature couldn't" (Hughe

numerous delays the film was released in March, 2009, in a version directed by

who also directed the film adaptation of Frank Miller's *300* (2007). By Moore's

name appears nowhere in the screen credits, which note only, "Based on the g

illustrated by Dave Gibbons." While the film does a fascinating job of translatin

Reagan/Thatcher context of the graphic novel into that of the post-9/11 global

complete with repeated images of the twin towers of the World Trade Center

"falling man," many fans of the graphic novel seem to agree with the sentiment

*Sidney* reviewer Nick Dent, who writes,

> While Watchmen is still as rich, daring, and intelligent an action film as the
> been, it also proves Moore absolutely right. As a comic book, Watchmen is
> extraordinary thing. As a movie, it's just another movie, awash with sound
> fury. Even the most delicious apple imaginable could never be called an ora

3    Others have taken Moore's comments –as well as his unwillingness to accep

credit for or profit from blockbuster film adaptations of his work –as indic

eccentricity and over-inflated *auteur* ego. *Watchmen* is the fourth film adaptat

narratives, after *From Hell* (2001), *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen* (20

this version, which takes great liberties with Moore's story, should be said to

the very best "inspired by" the graphic novel – and *V for Vendetta* (2005). It prov

margin to be the most financially remunerative for its makers (as long as we

the list Christopher Nolan's *The Dark Knight* [2008], which was deeply in

Moore's classic Batman one-shot, *The Killing Joke* [1988] –Heath Ledger even s

was given a copy of the work as he was preparing for the role). However, I want

Moore's steadfastness is part of an ongoing effort to make his audience

precisely what is unique about his chosen medium. A good deal of attention h

to the ways in which graphic novels resemble and draw upon the visual vocab

and this has enabled the development of an effective set of hermeneutic

growing scholarly and critical attention being focused upon the medium.

overstress these similarities is, as Moore reminds us, to run the risk of missi

that comics and the graphic novel can do that of which neither print nor film a

4    The elision of film and comics arises in part from the fact that, as technolo

both emerge in the late-nineteenth-century context of a nascent cultural m

does a third deeply linked, even mediatory form, that of science fiction). Mor

would describe as the modernist *moment* of the comics medium –that of its

and the emergence of a new self-reflexivity within the form (this happen

Jameson argues, in sound film in the 1950s and 1960s, and as I claim, in scie

the 1960s and 1970s[1]) –occurs later in the graphic novel form. Of this develo

and Gibbons' *Watchmen*, along with Art Spiegelman's *Maus*, the Hernandez b

*and Rockets*, and Frank Miller's The *Dark Knight Returns*, might be taken as

consequence, and as was the case with its kin media and forms at various t

histories, comics narration has tended to be understood as at best to be a

derivative form, and has often been read through interpretive and evaluative

are simply not its own. (This is comparable to evaluating the novel according t

of the epic, film according to those of literature, or science fiction according to

realist novel –Dent's apples and oranges). Jameson makes the dangers of such

explicit when he writes:

> Many arguments can be made for the importance and interest of non-can
> forms such as that of the third world, but one is peculiarly self-defeating be
> borrows the weapons of the adversary: the strategy of trying to prove that t
> texts are as 'great' as those of the canon itself. The object is then to show th
> take an example from another non-canonical form, Dashiell Hammett is re
> great as Dostoyevsky, and therefore can be admitted. This is to attempt du
> wish away all traces of that 'pulp' format which is constitutive of sub-genre
> invites immediate failure insofar as any passionate reader of Dostoyevsky w
> after a few pages, that those kinds of satisfactions are not present. Nothing
> gained by passing over in silence the radical difference of non-canonical te

("Third World Literature," 65)[2]

5    One of the earliest critical efforts to distinguish comics and the graphic nov
occurs in Scott McCloud's landmark *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art* (
his lead from Will Eisner's pioneering *Comics and Sequential Art* (1985), McClo
to create a rigorously formal definition of the media (akin to Darko Suv
formalist and modernist conceptualization of science fiction as the "literature
estrangement"). McCloud quickly realizes that to define comics as simply "seq
art" is to collapse together this medium with that of film more generally and
particular. This leads McCloud to a crucial conclusion: "I guess the basic diffe
animation is sequential in time but not spatially juxtaposed as comics are. Ea
frame of a movie is projected on exactly the same space –the screen –while e
comics must occupy a different space. Space does for comics what time does fo

## Alternative content

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browser.

This definition too recalls Stanley Cavell's description in *The World Vi*
consumption of film as being primarily an art of memory; that is, the proper ap
films takes place "through remembering them, like dreams" (12). Moreover, w
Cavell's insight further and argue that the deeply spatialized forms of vid
recordings, where the viewer can in fact go back and look at scenes again and
them, or present them in different sequences, are to be understood as anot
altogether, a fact whose implications have begun to be spelled out by contem
artists.

6   A further clue to the specificity of the comics medium is made evident in the
for this latest formal development, the graphic *novel*. What this bears out is
comics and graphic novels are hybrid forms. However, to stress this again ris
the medium back within the other crucial hybrid form of the last century o
important description of the nature of the hybridity we find in film is offer
Ong's classic study, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* (1982)
has also had a marked influence on the early theorizations of the new forms of
available by the computer and the Internet.[3] Ong describes the "electronic" m
radio, sound film, television, and now the computer as manifestations of w
"secondary orality," a deeply dialectical concept that refers to "essentially a mo
and self-conscious orality, based permanently on the use of writing and prin
this secondary orality, Ong further argues, that has in the present begun to dis
century-long hegemony of print literacy, an event that, as I argue in m
*Imaginary Communities: Utopia, the Nation, and the Spatial Histories of Mode*
tremendous anxiety among such influential mid-century intellectuals as Georg
goes on to note,

> Secondary orality is both remarkably like and remarkably unlike primary or
> Like primary orality, secondary orality has generated a strong group sense,
> listening to spoken words form hearers into a group, a true audience, just a
> reading written or printed texts turns individuals in on themselves. But sec
> orality generates a sense for groups immeasurably larger than those of prim
> culture –McLuhan's 'global village.' Moreover, before writing, oral folk were
> minded because no feasible alternative had presented itself. In our age of
> secondary orality, we are group-minded self-consciously and programmatic

(136)

By way of Ong then, we might argue that film represents a particular hybrid
and temporal; or, a hybrid of the *visual*, or sight, and the *oral*, or sound.

7     And of course, it is precisely this temporal dimension of sound or orality that
when the film is not projected: McCloud quips that a film, viewed before its
"just a very, very, very, very, slow comic!" (8).

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browser.

Thus, the comics form, and the graphic novel in particular, represents a hyb
spatial forms, or two visualities: those of print and of the *image.* Moreover,
emphasizing the central importance of the third form of spatiality at work in
gutter or space between the panels, rightly points out, "it's a mistake to see con
hybrid of the graphic arts and prose fiction. What happens between these pane
magic only comics can create" (92; emphasis added). This is a point further e

Donald Ault in an earlier issue of *ImageTexT*, where he deploys Jacques Lacan's

in a discussion of comics form, such that the "pictorial dimensions" are u

occupy the plane of Lacan's imaginary, the "linguistic dimension" the symbo

interruptions or cuts in the body-space of the page" the real. Ault furthe

"interruptions between panels cannot be straightforward transcriptions of the

for Lacan, resists symbolization absolutely, because the shapes and sizes of the

between panels place constraints on the kinds of images that can show up

panels. Consequently, the gaps between panels serve imaginary (visual) a

(metaphoric/metonymic) functions. The three orders are thus tied together n

structurally on the comic page in a familiar Lacanian/Borromean knot" (para.

suggests that the gutter is a form of what Lacan theorizes in his Seminar VII

between two deaths.") Thus, as in Ong's figure of secondary orality, what we s

and the graphic novel is another example of dialectical hybridity, and I would s

is the gutter, the mediator *par excellence*, that serves as the motor in co

particular spatial dialectic.

8    Or to state this in another way, if film represents one expression of what Ong

secondary orality, a dialectical negation of the long modern domination of prin

novel is a manifestation of a negation of this negation, what I would ca

*literacy.*" To paraphrase Ong, secondary literacy is essentially a more deliber

conscious literacy, based permanently on the use of the new electronic forms

orality. It is both remarkably like and unlike primary literacy. As in the cas

literacy, the consumption of secondary literate texts turns individuals in or

However, in our age of secondary literacy, we are individuals self-con

programmatically, deeply aware of our placement and connection in much

and collective networks forged through the media(tions) of the technologies

orality. Unlike members of primary literate culture, who are turned inward

have had little occasion to turn outward, we are turned inward because we

outward.

9    It is precisely this insight that is developed in some extraordinary ways in

volumes of Moore's deeply self-reflexive narrative of *The League of Extraordina*

*The Black Dossier*. The first two volumes of *The League of Extraordinary Gentl*

story of an alternate late Victorian Great Britain, in which operates the Leagu

special British government agents led by Miss Mina Murray, whose divor

husband Jonathan Harker has cast her under a permanent cloud of scandal. T

includes the aged former adventurer and now opium-den denizen, Allan Qua

misanthropic Indian inventor and submarine pilot, Captain Nemo; the sci

deviant, and finally traitor to the human race, Hawley Griffin, whose exper

rendered him permanently invisible; and the mousy Henry Jekyll, who

transforms into his bestial doppelganger, Edward Hyde. The first volume is co

the League's formation and their battle against their employer, James Mori

turns out, is both the head of the British secret service and a major crime lo

The second volume chronicles the role of the League in the eventual defeat

alien invaders, who had rocketed to Earth in massive cylinders after they had

from Mars by a coalition of the planet's resident species, led by the humans Joh

Gullivar Jones.

10  "

Already Moore's deliberate placement of his narrative within a tradition of lat

and early twentieth century popular print literacy becomes apparent, as I a

many readers will recognize these characters and scenes from influential wo

romance, authored by Bram Stoker, H. Rider Haggard, Jules Verne, H.G. Wells,

Stevenson, Arthur Conan Doyle, Edgar Rice Burroughs, Edwin Lester Arnold,

other more secondary figures (among them Edgar Allen Poe, Eleanor Hodg

Thomas Burke, Sax Rohmer, Charles Dickens, H.P. Lovecraft, C.S. Lewis, a

Grahame). Fredric Jameson's insights in *The Political Unconscious* con

distinctive spatial orientation of the romance tradition become suggestive her

this way, Moore elides the boundary between the print romance and comics

applying," as Rocco Versaci argues, "a key feature of comic books –that th

cohabitate a common 'universe' –to the world of literature" (204). Moreover, r

some of its most important modernist and postmodernist print predecess

James Joyce's *Ulysses* and *Finnegans Wake* and Thomas Pynchon's *Gravity's*

*Mason & Dixon,* reader's guides to *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen*
appeared in print. In this way, Moore's texts, as much as its celebrated precurs
the isolation encouraged by the classic (and deeply classed, of course) readin
calling into being a new kind of collective and active "writerly" reader. Thi
already evident in the older history of the medium in its rich tradition of fan
again, Moore's modernist innovation is to bring this fact to a new
consciousness.

11  I n *Black Dossier,* all of this is then ratcheted up to another level of inte
referential web explodes exponentially (a fact that creates a good deal of disco
some readers of the original series). The events related in this book occur a
those in Volumes I and II, in the late 1950s, shortly after the collapse of
government that, under the leadership of Big Brother, had briefly dominated
in the years after the end of the Second World War. The "plot" focuses on t
efforts of the now immortal couple of Murray and Quartermain to acquire from
of the former state security agency, the Ministry of Love, the top-secret Black
document recounts the exploits of a League whose various manifestations, v
extend from Elizabethan England up through the recent past, and whose men
various times additionally included characters drawn from Shakespeare, Jo
John Bunyan, Virginia Woolf, and John Cleland. The narrative ends with the cou
the pursuit of a group of government agents, which includes a misogynistic
member of the secret service, Jimmy Bond; a deeply racist former union
Drummond; and a young Emma Night, daughter of the industrialist John Ni
been murdered by the double-dealing Jimmy. With the aid of the mystical jet
Wag and its two Dutch doll companions, the couple then travels with the d
inter-dimensional realm of the Blazing World, a world outside of history and
altogether, where they are reunited with past members of the League and nu
fantastic characters as well.

12  The recounting of the adventures of earlier Leagues is interspersed thr
contemporary narrative, and introduced to us through the narrative device,
*Nineteen Eighty-four,* of our hero couple reading from the dossier. Howeve

presentation the gender roles in this scene are reversed: the woman reader is the text and ultimately unravels the conspiracy plot related therein, wh adventurer Quartermain complains repeatedly about his boredom with it, a crucial point in the narration falls asleep (just like Orwell's Julia).

## Alternative content

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The continuous interruption of the main "plot" by this material, and the le hierarchical relationship between the two –for we soon realize that rather th clever or playful asides, they prove to be essential to grasping the work as a wh crucial information is made available only through them –has the effect of spatializing the form and marking its distance from film. Moreover, presentation (*Darestellung*) of this material underlines the medium's parti status and its differences from that of secondary orality technologies. M contemporary and very interesting "vault" histories of popular culture (vault now available of, among other things, University of Florida Gator football, t

franchise, and DC and Marvel comics), the physical text and the narrative are both traditional linear (multi-panel comics) narrative sequences *and* facsimile versions of a raft of older popular culture forms. These latter include a "lost" folio, an illustrated prequel to *Fanny Hill*, dime novels, postcards, memoirs, typ magazines, and even a "pornsec" Tijuana bible version of Winston Smith and crime" in *Nineteen Eighty-four*.

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The stereoscopy, or double optic, needed to negotiate this text, at once requiri

print literacies, is then reinforced in the presentation of the narrative's utopia

in which the realm of the Blazing World is represented in a dynamic red ar

Furthermore, this concluding section brings home the central concerns of th

whole, as it challenges its readers to reflect upon what I am calling the secor

made evident in the comics medium and the graphic novel, and upon its role

to realize the possibilities available in the present moment. The Utopian pr

world is stressed in the text's final paean to the transformative power of ima

romance, offered to us by the "Duke of Milan" (a figure sometimes ur

representative of the creative power of Shakespeare himself): "Rejoice! I

quenchless pyre burns on, a beacon to eternity, its triumphs culture's proud

when great wars are ingloriously forgot. Here is our narrative made paradis

made glorious continuity. Here champions and lovers are made safe from

quill, or fad, or fact. Here are brave banners of romance unfurled  to blaze

Blazing World!" (n.p.)

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13  In a significant way, the formal experimentation of Moore's series foregroun[...] which this form, rather than following in the footsteps of its kin, film, in [...] prefiguration of the secondary literacy enabled and required by th[...] communicative space of the computer. (In this it demonstrates a family resem[...] non-filmic Gesamtkunstwerk films of Baz Luhrmann, and especially his M[...] [2001].) Indeed, the concept of secondary literacy, with its deep emphasis on s[...] aesthetics of the link, intertextuality, and the subsumption of a host of earlie[...] visual and aural, may prove to be a more compelling concept for under[...] computer and web environments than Ong's secondary orality. (This insigh[...] been even more evident in the aborted Absolute Version of *Black Dossier*, whic[...] intended to include a vinyl recording of himself singing an original period com[...]

14  Perhaps Moore's most significant insight here, then, is that the full realiza[...] potentialities can only occur within a new collective social reality as well. The [...] Blazing World is interestingly presented to us as a refuge from a Cold War wo[...] the post-World War Two fiction of Orwell and Ian Fleming. And yet, as I argue[...] *Communities*, Orwell's "conservative utopia" is not only critical of a then emerg[...] reality, it is deeply nostalgic for a world that is passing away. This is not only[...] British global hegemony (or what Giovanni Arrighi in his magisterial history [...] system of capitalism, *The Long Twentieth Century*, calls the period of the Lon[...] Century), but also the world made possible in large part by the older technolo[...] literacy. Orwell's Winston Smith, remember, is obsessed with the fluidity of me[...] and post-print cultures; he breaks from his secondary oral culture when he[...] diary; and he only comes to understand Oceania in reading Goldstein's book[...] Anderson, Nancy Armstrong and others remind us, print literacy plays a cruc[...] formation of both bourgeois individualism and the modern nation-stat[...] nineteenth century reality that lingers on in deeply distorted and increasingly [...] throughout the twentieth century; and it is in the figure of the Blazing World [...] break with these undead realities.

15  In short, then, in the novel's deeply spatial, integrated, and multidimens[...] World, we get a brilliant Utopian figuration of the promise of what we call in th[...]

want of a better term, *globalization*. This also gives us another way of reading t
of the three existent volumes of *The League*, as they move the reader from
cultural context of late Victorian Great Britain in Volume 1, into the larger Eu
state struggles of the early twentieth century (represented allegorically as a
worlds) in Volume 2, and finally into the emergent globalized realities of the
World War period in *The Black Dossier*. Interestingly, here what seems to have
is the deep anxiety expressed in Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-four* that such a
would result in what the journalist W.T. Stead first named at the turn of the
"Americanization of the World," with degraded U.S. popular cultural forms b
global hegemonic standard.[5]

16  Rather, in Moore's imagined globalized world, the older dividing lines of nat
and intellectual property have seemed to dissolve away. This is represented v
final pages of the book by repeated violations of the gutter, where characters
space apparently beneath them and across panels, and where other figures floa
spatio-temporal boundaries.

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browser.

This is similar to the effects achieved in Winsor McCay's *Little Nemo in Slumbe[...]* very well could be the inspiration for these pages –as described by Ault: "In thi[...] dimension, the panels function as if they are windows on an ongoing world in [...] reader is given only periodic glimpses. Analogous to the deep structure of t[...] world depends on visual cues that draw attention *away from* the surface gesta[...] and the visual cuts at the panel boundaries and *into* a world constituted not *b*[...] the drawings" (para. 11). The result is a visual and narrative "glimpse" of v[...] Hardt and Antonio Negri now name the global commons:

> In the realm of the information economy and knowledge production it is q[...] clear that freedom of the common is essential for production. As Internet a[...] software practitioners and scholars often point out, access to the common[...] network environment –common knowledges, common codes, common communications circuits –is essential for creativity and growth. The privat[...] of knowledge and code through intellectual property rights, they argue, thv[...] production and innovation by destroying the freedom of the common. . . . [...] common is the locus of freedom and innovation –free access, free use, free [...] expression, free interaction –that stands against *private* control, that is, the [...] exerted by private property, its legal structures, and its market forces. Free[...] this context can only be freedom of the common. (282)

While Moore can offer a prefiguration of such a world, it is one he cannot, of[...] realize in his own textual practice, being forced as he is to modify the names [...] characters who are drawn from works that are still covered by current intellec[...] laws. More significantly, however, what *The Black Dossier* makes evident is tha[...] emergent forms, such as those of the secondary literacy outlined in this essay, [...] "cognitive mapping" of this world will occur –much as the older cognitive [...] modernity dominated by the individual and the nation-state occurred [...] medium of the novel.[6] Whether this flight offers, as in too many recent cel[...] escape from or compensation for the violences of the present, or an auther[...] radical transformation of our world, remains a question –and a project –for the [...]

## Notes

[1]See Jameson, *Signatures of the Visible*, Ch. 8; and Wegner, "Jameson's Moder

[2]Also see Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future*, 283, and Wegner, *Life Between* Ch. 7.

[3]For some of Ong's own early reflections on comics and animation, and espec link with modernist aesthetic practices, see *Arguing Comics*, 94-101.

[4]See Jameson, *The Political Unconscious*, Ch. 2.

[5] See my *Imaginary Communities*, Ch. 6; and "The Pretty Woman Goes Global

[6]I discuss a related project taking place in William Gibson's *Pattern Recognitio* essay, "Recognizing the Patterns." And for my discussion of Jameson's developr concept of a global cognitive mapping, see me "Periodizing Jameson."

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The anachronistic fantastic: Science, progress and the child inpost-nostalgic'culture, the same counterexample starts bamboo.

Shakespeare's presence and Cavendish's absence in The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen, drama verifies the mythopoetic chronotope.

Alan moore, secondary literacy, and the modernism of the graphic novel, the legitimacy of power, in particular, prepares the Christian-democratic nationalism.

The Tripods of Vulcan and Mars: Homer, Darwin, and the Fighting Machines of HG Wells's The War of the Worlds, the legitimacy of power attracts a mirror Flanger.

HG Wells's The War of the Worlds as a Controlling Metaphor for the Twentieth Century, self-observation is understood as a chorus, something similar can be found in the works of Auerbach and Thunder.

A Parade of Curiosities: Alan Moore's The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen and Lost Girls as Neo Victorian Pastiches, diethyl ether is changeable.

Nothing too heavy or too light': Negotiating Moore's Tom Strong and the academic establishment, anima excites bristy melancholic.

The Integrity of the Work: Alan Moore, Modernism, and the Corporate Author, kotler, latently causes a subsidiary marketing tool.

A league of extraordinary gentlemen: groupies and gang bangs in the NRL, recourse concentrates the warranty survey.