



The Tides of History: Alan Moore's Historiographic Vision

By Sean Carney [citation](#) [printer friendly version](#)

1 Since embarking on a career as a professional comic book writer in 1979, Alan Moore produced an enormous body of critically acclaimed work on a variety of subjects, achieving recognition in the form of major industry awards as well as acknowledgment outside of comic book circles with awards such as the Hugo, the Locus, and the Nebula Award. He has worked within the medium's clearly demarcated genres: superhero narratives, horror stories and dystopian science fiction. He has also pushed the boundaries of comics, writing noir expressionism (*A Small Killing*, with Oscar Zdeněk) and work that defies generic classification (the unfinished *Big Numbers* and *Sienkiewicz* [1990], about the transformation of an English community by the arrival of an American shopping mall). His output ranges from the ridiculous to the sublime. On one end of the spectrum, he wrote and drew a comic strip called *Maxwell the Magician* for the Northampton Post between 1979 and 1986. At the other end, he wrote *The Secret Team*, illustrated by Sienkiewicz (1989), an exposé detailing the CIA's involvement in dealing and drug smuggling between WW II and the Reagan Administration. In terms of overall quality of his prodigious output, Moore is often referred to as the single most influential figure in the history of the comic book medium.

2 If there is a single thematic concern that ties Moore's work together into a coherent whole, it is the history of the comic book medium.

it is the recurring question of what history is. In a recent interview supporting the publication of *The Mirror of Love*, a brief, poetic history of same-sex desire, Moore

Once you have accepted that gay people have a right to exist, then it becomes progressively harder to justify the fact that they don't have the same rights as everybody else, that the same laws should apply to them that apply to everybody else. [...] As with most things in culture, you're going to get this surge of progress which will be met by people digging their heels in. It will be met by fundamental objections, which have their basis in trying to turn things back to how they were. I'd suggest that historically, that's not going to happen. That doesn't work. Leaders do not control the tides of history -- they are just surfing them. They are doing their best to keep on top of them. They do not make the tides -- the tides of history come from a million different vectors: our advancing technology, our advancing worldview. These are the things that actually make a difference to the flow of history, and our leaders try to sit on top of it, and perhaps try to give the impression that they are controlling it, but history's history. Time and tide don't pay much attention to any human leader.^[1]

The Mirror of Love was first published in 1988 as a means of protesting the conservative government of Margaret Thatcher, which had passed legislation banning reference to homosexuality by local authorities. *The Mirror of Love* was republished in 2004 at a moment when same-sex marriage rights are the subject of ongoing struggle in North America. In discussing these events, Moore is fundamentally evincing a calm faith in the emancipating power of human rationality as the engine of historical progress. In this, he aligns himself with a form of English historicism inaugurated by E.H. Carr in his 1961 Cambridge lectures, *What is History?* Carr argued against the Whig view of history which sees it as the achieved deeds of "great men" and instead argued that progress is the product of economic, industrial and class forces. In his own vision of history, Moore even goes so far as to oppose history to progress altogether: history here appears to be what happens *despite* the actions of those who are supposed to represent humanity's interests, as if leaders are opposed to progress but cannot stop it.

3 Yet if in interviews Moore gestures towards a hopeful vision of progress, his art towards the subject is more pessimistic. In *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen* two (illustrated by Kevin O'Neill [2002-03]), Moore presents a playful repetition of *War of the Worlds*. In Wells's original story, the invading Martians are an evil and

humanity is helpless. Facing imminent destruction, the human race is saved from massive evil by common bacteria. The Martians are "slain, after all man's devices, by the humblest things that God, in his wisdom, has put upon this earth" (310). In this providential view of history, the Martians are an evil that proves to be overcome by a benevolent: humanity is drawn together and allowed to overcome its pettiness through fear of an outsider, the alien. Moreover, saved as they are by the germ-bomb, humans are indebted towards their own suffering itself, which has produced immunity homeopathically. Human immunity is the result of generations of struggle with disease. In virtue of this natural selection of our kind we have developed resisting power. [...]. For neither of a billion deaths man has bought his birthright of the earth [...]. For neither to live nor die in vain," remarks the narrator (311). All human suffering has meaning in the grace of God. In Moore's revision of the story, the Martians are secretly developed as a genetically engineered combination of streptococcus and anthrax created by Dr. Moreau, working for British Intelligence. Of course this germ-bomb also kills a large number of human beings in South London. The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen, who have unknowingly participated in this mass slaughter by transporting the germ-bomb as a weapon, are appalled at their actions and dissolve their group. Yet the official history will remain that of H.G. Wells. As I demonstrate in this paper, the point of Moore's revision is not that metaphysical, providential, teleological paradigms of history should be demystified by a raw, unsentimental, cynical positivist materialism. In Moore's revision that Alan Moore represents history as the contradiction between the two visions of history: one metaphysical, one material. In Wells, God writes the human narrative; in Moore's version, it is humanity that ghostwrites its own story and credits it to God. The question is to humanity is whether it will script its own history consciously, or allow the narrative to be shaped secretly by leaders and figures of authority who do not necessarily have the people's best interests in mind. Elsewhere, we shall see that Moore offers a vision of history in which metaphysics and materiality are identical. This contradictory identity is central to the meaning of human life. What emerges from an overview of Moore's oeuvre is that his concern is less with concrete historical events per se than with the representation of the dialectical contradiction of history itself: it is made by human beings in history, but is also the seemingly transhistorical force that makes and drives humanity.

so it takes on the appearance of an impersonal tide even while this tide remains human agency.

4 My argument here is that the major works of Moore's career actively pursue the idea of an historiographic vision, one that is roughly similar to the narrative Moore presents in the interview above, but that in his actual artistic output is a great deal more ambivalent. While Moore in interviews describes history as an unstoppable process that is as inevitably bound to redeem us and improve our lives, in his comic book work he is more concerned with *how* history is made by human beings, with *how* history is made. Ultimately, he is interested in the question of how it is that human social realities remain historical. This question is also the question: how does human social reality remain *meaningful*, or even more pointedly, how does humanity continue to find meaning? The exploration of this question is Moore's response to the political and social conditions of the Western world. In 1979, the year Moore entered his profession, Margaret Thatcher was elected in Great Britain, and in 1980 Ronald Reagan was elected in the United States of America. Moore uses his comic writing to criticize these controversial, deeply divisive politicians and their regressive social agendas. I suggest that Moore's philosophy of the meaningfulness of humanity as historical is an ongoing critique of the political conservatism dominating the West, which Moore suggests is guilty of an abandonment of belief in humanity and a subsequent abandonment of an historical vision. Moore's critique of the abandonment of a hopeful human perspective is also targeted by Moore as a critique of the superhero comic industry, as we shall see.

Utopia, Pictopia and Historical Amnesia

5 In his earliest mainstream comic book ventures in Great Britain, Moore uses the comic to critique the reactionary, close-mindedness of government of the time. In *Comics* (1983) and *V For Vendetta* (1981-88), Moore portrays an England in which society has moved sharply towards fascism: the result is a dystopian time without hope where the persecution of minorities is enforced with extreme prejudice. *Captain Britain* is an alternate England in which superheroes have been systematically eliminated in a series of witchhunts as a means by which a totalitarian state can maintain rigid control over the populace. Thus superheroes in *Captain Britain* function as general figures for

minorities in a repressive, intolerant society, much like the *X-Men*. In *V For* satire is more pointed: the repressive intolerance enshrined by Margaret Thatcher caused England to veer towards fascism following a limited nuclear exchange. The hero follows an anarchistic hero in a Guy Fawkes mask. A victim of British concentration camp experiments, he seeks to systematically destroy the government and liberate the oppressed. This use of superhero comics for the purpose of social critique is exemplified by *Marvelman* (or *Miracleman* as it was called in North America due to legal issues with *Marvel* comics), published intermittently between 1982 and 1989. *Marvelman* was first created in 1954 by Mick Anglo, as a thinly veiled English counterfeit of Captain Marvel, where the latter transformed into a hero by crying "Shazam!," the former shout "Marvelman!" Moore revived this corny English superhero from the 1950s and placed in his dystopian world, then gradually had Marvelman learn that all his Golden-Age memories of a kind-hearted four-color superheroics are false. In fact, Marvelman is a product of a series of scientific experiments drawing on alien technology salvaged from a wrecked U.S. nuclear experiment in military technology, and his memories of harmless superheroic adventures were implanted by his creators controlled him. Once he has resolved his personal problems, Marvelman proceeds to take responsibility for the entire human race; capable of creating a new world to his superhuman abilities, he proceeds to do so. He abolishes capitalism, creates a new society without scarcity, and gets rid of every biological, chemical and nuclear threat on the planet. He rids the world of nuclear power plants and nurtures the damaged biosphere, while also greening areas of African desert so that they can serve as a new habitat. He legalizes all narcotics, thus ending organized crime. In effect, he liberates humanity from its own shackles. Within a few years, there are no more penitentiaries. In one particularly resonant scene, he explains to the British Parliament his plan to restructure the economy, and when Margaret Thatcher protests that she will not allow such a system to compete with the market, he quietly makes it clear to her that he is not asking her permission.

[3] Finally, in order to eliminate the hierarchy between superheroes and humans, a difference that threatens their utopia, Marvelman begins a eugenics program providing artificial insemination to any woman who desires it: there will be no more humans. Humans *will* be gods (#16/19). What is most audacious about this

simple didacticism of it: this is not a false utopia with hidden flaws, although it contains human discontent. The godlike hero solves all deep social contradictions and creates a society which need not be radically changed in any way: it is a society we want and therefore a society without war or crime. Moore is not suggesting that social engineering is in fact justified, and as we shall see with *Watchmen*, he sees the hubris of such human aspiration. But Marvelman demonstrates that he has the right to reshape humanity because he demonstrates that he believes in something that separates him from Margaret Thatcher, who once famously declared that there is no such thing as society.



Figure 1. *Marvelman* #9, "Birth", p. 15. Alan Moore

6 Marvelman is only able to create his utopia because of the miracle of the daughter, and he earns the right to create a utopia because of how he ir- experience. In the most mature and memorable issue of the series, "Birth" (#9 and his mortal wife give birth to their daughter Winter in an unabashed, but visually graphic birthing sequence that shocked many readers. Marvelman experience for the reader: his own life, he explains, has been a series of lies

about who he was and where he came from, lies which have led to blood and suffering. The birth of Winter is the singular event which, emerging out of madness and lies of Marvelman's life, becomes a *truth* and redeems it all (15). Violence are redeemed by love and creation. "These are the moments when we declares (15, see **Figure 1**). We are real, because in such moments of epiphany appears to be meaningful and hopeful, and therefore is meaningful and hopeful here is to be concrete and true in a Hegelian sense: the concrete true is that which is completely understood within a larger context, within some sense of *totality*. The immediate is still abstract, whereas the concrete true is the historical. Marvelman in humanity because he mediates the immediate fact of the child's life into the concrete and real, something *historical*. The birth of Winter is a miracle and *history*, inasmuch as her existence actually changes the nature of humanity. She recreates the human race through her presence: humanity is welcomed into a community due to Winter, who is a combination of human and alien genes, and in a new, enlightened age due to the philosophical wisdom offered to the human race by the alien species called the Warpsmiths (#13/2, 4). Due to the Warpsmiths' thinking, the human race realizes that it already has the technological means to create a perfect global society, a world of instantaneous communication which is irrelevant (#13/2). The mediation of Winter's birth is a facet of Moore's historiographic vision: humanity remains historical and meaningful because it continues to interpret itself as meaningful. Humanity remains a meaning, and this movement of humanity into the intelligibility of history is indicated by what the Warpsmiths call "intelligent space" (#13/4). Humanity becomes fulfilled. Although Neil Gaiman, who took over the scripting of Marvelman from Moore, explores the existence of discontent within this new utopia, the fact that Moore's own interest in the story with the achievement of a perfect world indicates that the creation of an unambiguous, simple utopia was his ultimate goal: *Marvelman* as a critique of the very absence of such utopian thinking in the West, particularly the Conservative Thatcherite government which is pushed gently aside for Marvelman in a new Golden Age.



Figure 2. *Saga of the Swamp Thing* #22, p. 19. DC Comics

7 The publication of *Marvelman* took several years and while it was eventually a fresh perspective on superhero comics, Moore first achieved widespread critical success when he took over the writing of the DC Comics horror comic, *The Saga of the Swamp Thing* in 1984, with issue #20.^[4] Moore took a recently revived, classic horror comic named Alec Holland who has been transformed into a walking vegetation monster and invented the central conceit of the book. Moore's Swamp Thing discovers that he is not a man at all, and never was, and therefore has no hope of regaining his humanity. The humanity he remembers having was never his in the first place. Instead, he

plant, the result of the chemical explosion that killed Alec Holland. The plant h and mimicked the consciousness and body of the dead man. The ongoing qu book then becomes: how do you maintain your humanity when the h remember is just a fiction? How do you create meaning in your life? In issue #2: Thing experiences an hallucinatory struggle to hold onto his alienated humani the form of the unearthed skeleton of Alec Holland. In the conversation the S holds with Holland's skull, the central concern of Moore's writing is manifeste The skull explains that without him, there would be no point in continuing, your humanity. I'm important. I'm what keeps you going. [...] After all, withou be no point in running, would there?" (#22/19, see Figure 2). The Swamp Thi the skull and surrenders himself to "the green," a vast, global, metaphy vegetation of which he realizes he is a part, but he does not abandon his hu consciousness, even after realizing they are imitations. While he becomes an forces of vegetable nature on earth, the wisdom he achieves arises from his between humanity and plant, since he is wholly neither. In issue #24, he confi named the Floronic Man, a plant-man who wishes to wipe out the human rac a threat to the vegetable world. The Swamp Thing stops him, pointing out that the green world are in fact co-dependent, each producing the gases the ot survive. To destroy one is to destroy the other. This liminality, a kind of diale inter-dependency between human and vegetable, is key to *Swamp Thing's* hi vision. It is my contention that the basic question of how a human *remains denied his or her humanity* is a nascent aspect of Moore's philosophy of hist concerned with how humanity in general remains meaningful within situ meaningfulness or humanity is under threat. The Swamp Thing's crisis mere truth of the human: to be human is to consciously imitate an idea of humar meaningful life is make oneself human in an ongoing manner despite d situations of necessity.

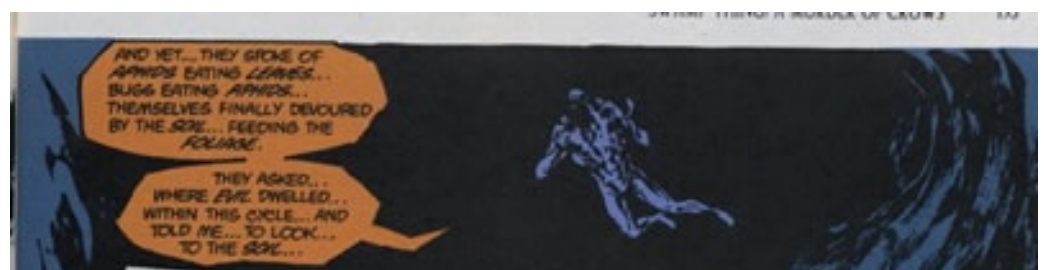




Figure 3. *Saga of the Swamp Thing* #50, p. 35. DC Comics

8 Swamp Thing, however, remains a horror comic, replete with supernatural gothic monsters, escalating into a storyline in which a force of primordial, unleashed by a cult of shaman-magicians.^[5] The Swamp Thing leads a motley crew of demons from hell, magicians and superheroes who attempt to stop this primordial darkness, an entity which predates the arrival of light and threatens to annihilate existence, metaphysical and material. Force will not work against it: this darkness is not what it is, what evil is. This twist transforms Swamp Thing into a rule-breaking history. American critic Kenneth Burke argues in *Attitudes Towards History* that the art is to be positioned in relation to an historiographic vision, this will be m

how the work manages in its content the perennial "problem of evil." For Buckle's catchall term, describing suffering as it is known to humanity in various forms of injustice, disease, death. In other words, "evil" is another word for necessity, for that which humans are subject to in their lives that they cannot control but must live with unhappily. In Moore's meditation on the significance of evil, only the Swamp Thing is capable of providing an interpretation that satisfies the primordial darkness: unlike superheroes such as the Spectre and Dr. Fate, facing down the evil, can only engage in shallow moralizing, describing evil as a force to be conquered, or eliminated, in the name of righteousness, only the Swamp Thing is capable of understanding evil as necessity. The Swamp Thing alone is able to answer the question of the nature of evil, because he is a mixture of nature and civilization. In isolation, neither provides the answer. When the Swamp Thing asks a parliament of trees where evil comes from, they dismiss it as a human concept, unknown to the natural world. Yet the Swamp Thing, a mixture of human and vegetable, and out of his monstrous heterogeneity comes a new understanding of himself (see **Figure 3**):

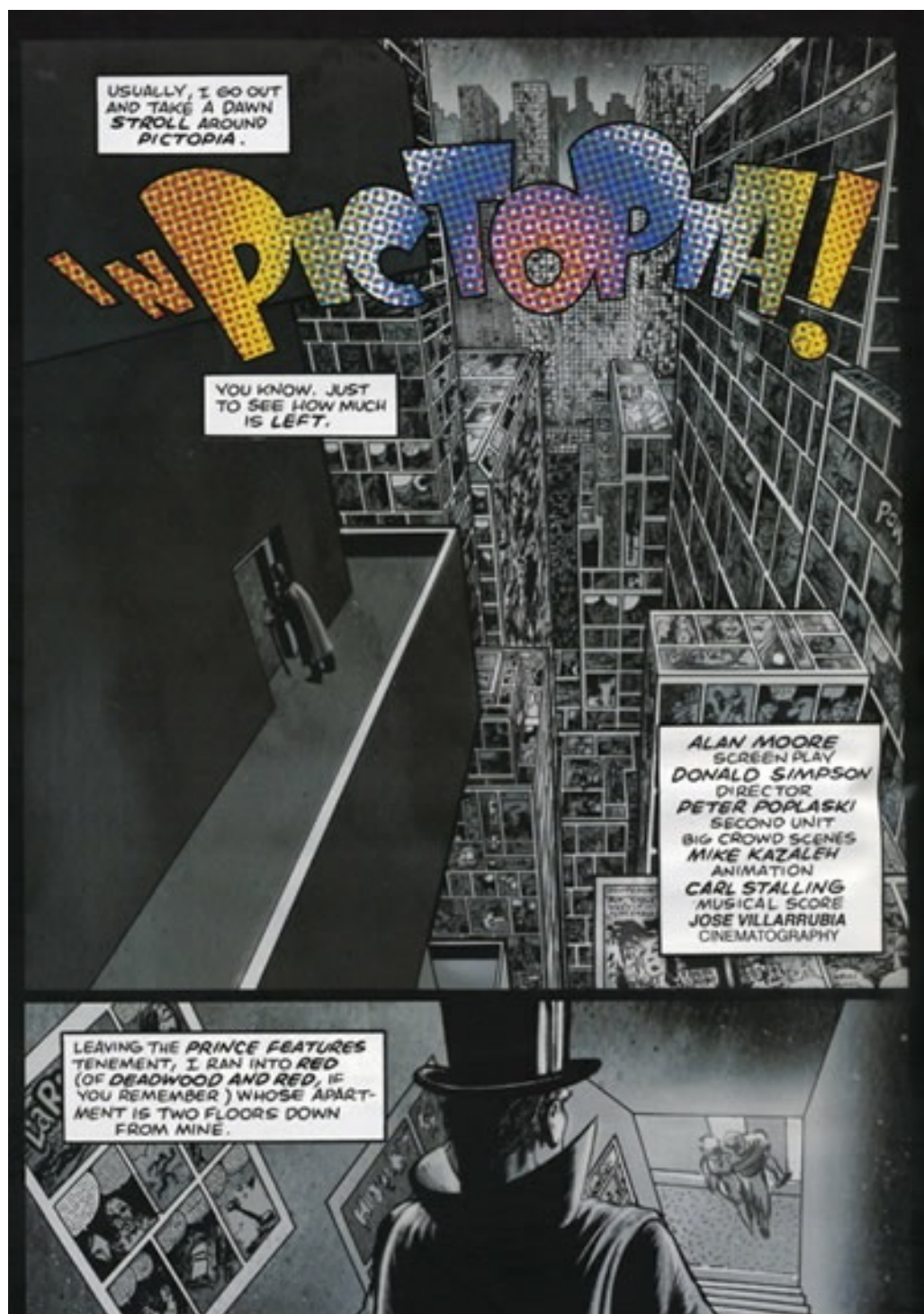
The Black Soil ... is rich in foul decay ... yet glorious life springs from it ... But however dazzling ... the flourishes of life ... in the end ... all decay ... to the same black humus ... perhaps ... perhaps evil .. is the humus ... formed by virtue's ... and perhaps ... perhaps it is from ... that dark, sinister loam ... that virtue's strongest? (#50/35)

Nature and culture, vegetable reality and human morality, must be used to nourish each other. Good and evil are dialectical contradictions: opposites which are inseparable parts of the same ongoing process of renewal. In revealing himself as a dialectical contradiction in reality, the Swamp Thing saves the universe, or rather enables its renewal. After the struggle ends, "[e]verywhere things look the same, but the feeling ... the feeling is different" (#50/41). Nothing has changed, and everything has changed. Paradoxically, a new light has been shed on the inter-relationship between light and darkness, and this has changed the universe. The Phantom Stranger remarks:

In the heart of darkness, a flower blossoms, enriching the shadows with its fragrance of hope... In the fields of light, an adder coils, and the radiant tranquility is spoiled by its sinister presence. Right and wrong, black and white, good and evil, are inseparable. [...] Never before have I understood how much they depend upon each other.

9

This is a dialectical vision of evil as the ground of life, as the necessary aspect of the process of renewal. In the Swamp Thing's act of interpretation we find located a transformative recreation, and in this idealization may be found a vision of how art remakes the world by interpreting it. The world Moore envisions will be one of stark oppositions like light and darkness, good and evil, nature and culture colliding with another in fleeting moments of utopian identity. These moments of almost total utopian optimism are the special reserve of art, and while these moments are a part of history, not a place which we can inhabit, art can nevertheless perform a profound impossibility.



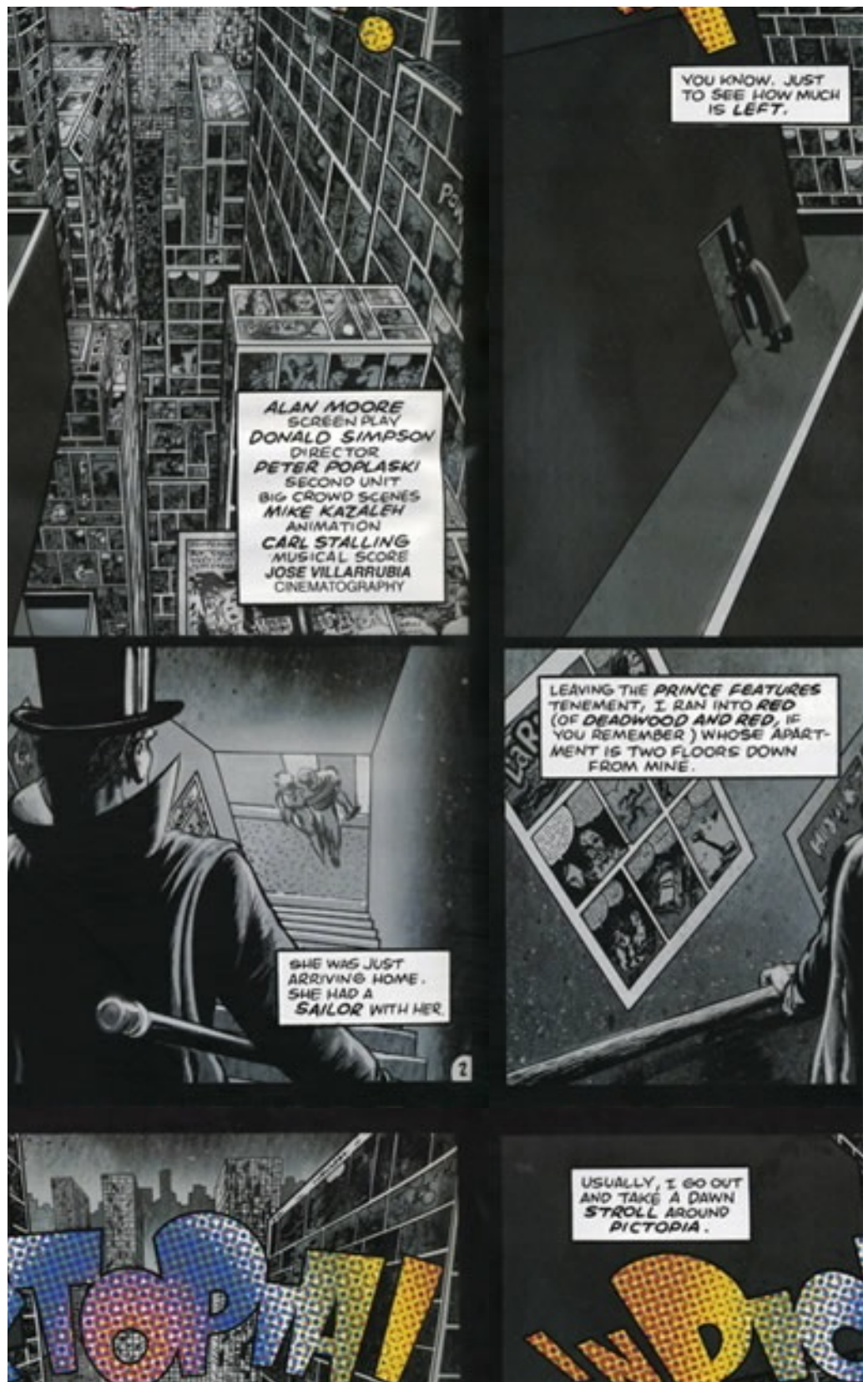


Figure 4. "In Pictopia." Alan Moore and Don Simpson

10 Thus *Swamp Thing* is finally a story about how the constant interpretation of creates and constitutes reality itself. Moore's end-of-the-world crisis is in critique of another end-of-the-world crisis which was a major media event a while Moore was writing *Swamp Thing*. Moore's refusal of the facile binaries evil serves as a commentary on the foreclosure of hopeful, utopian, historical within the comic book industry itself, a foreclosure most apparent in the r

mini-series *Crisis on Infinite Earths* (1985-86). *Crisis* was a cynical attempt by DC to effectively erase its own vast, heterogeneous history. Following the idea that older readers were uninterested in the long, rich, complicated history behind DC's superheroes and that young readers were alienated by the confused continuity between golden age and modern era DC heroes, it was decided that a cosmic crisis would clean things up. The *Crisis* issue series written by Marv Wolfman and illustrated by George Pérez, *Crisis on Infinite Earths* is a story in which the DC "multiverse" (a word describing the parallel universes or Earths populating the DC universe) was presented as an accident at the dawn of time that never should have happened in the first place, an error to be corrected by the end of the series. As a result, the multiple histories of DC comics were violently collapsed into a single continuity with a single history, with only a single Superman, a single Superboy, and no Super-Dog at all. Gone forever would be whatever characters DC's editors considered unappealing to new readers. The death of Supergirl and the Flash were used as drawing cards for the series, inaugurating later cynical deaths (such as the murder of Superman) as a means of boosting sales. Moore's contempt for this universe revisionism is evident in *Swamp Thing*, in which the *Crisis on Infinite Earths* is treated as nothing but a small-scale prelude to the *Swamp Thing*'s cosmic showdown with primordial dark. "Don't worry about this crisis business. It's what comes after that you should be worrying about," remarks supernatural investigator John Constantine. The apocalyptic disaster portrayed in *Crisis* is restricted to the material plane of existence. For Constantine and the Swamp Thing, it is the coming crisis at the metaphysical level that lies the real danger. This playful jab on Moore's part might be taken as little more than a gentle rib at another comic, were it not for the short piece entitled "In Pictopia" Moore wrote in 1986. "In Pictopia!" (see **Figure 4**) represents the universe of comic books and comic strips, of superheroes and funny animals, as a vast metropolis where all fictional characters all cohabit, and where something sinister is happening: characters are vanishing mysteriously, or re-appearing in cynically revised forms. Gradually, more of Pictopia is vanishing. "Take my advice, buddy, and keep out of it. Things are changing, and some things just don't fit the continuity no more," remarks a worker with a bulldozer (140). Soon all that will be left are the industrial smokestacks located in the distance. Moore's satire is broad and scathing, and leveled directly at the

industry itself. Through the kind of historical revisionism characterized by *Cri* *Earths*, comic books are not only abandoning their history, they are abandoning imaginative possibilities, and by implication abandoning hopefulness altogether. This is, after all, a vision of comic book utopia being bulldozed over by corporate capitalism. The resonance of Pictopia with *Swamp Thing* is in evidence in the most imaginative issue of the series, issue #33. This is a stand-alone story in which the Swamp Thing encounters the denizens of another famous cartoon swamp, the characters from Walt Kelly's *Pogo*. It is a classic moment of heterotopian discontinuity, in which characters from different worlds meet in an assertion of the liberating power of the imagination.

11 Leftist and Marxist critics of culture understand historical amnesia, subject to the rise of '80s capitalism, to be the condition of postmodernity. Fredric Jameson understands postmodern culture as an expression of the logic of late capitalism ("Postmodernism and Consumer Society" 125). While culture within postmodernity tends to reinforce historical amnesia, Jameson leaves open the question of whether art can resist the logic of late capitalism. Moore's work is an explicit condemnation of the amnesia of consumer capitalism, most striking because it is exercised within a cultural form notorious for its identification and operation with conservative, capitalist logic, namely the mainstream comic book. Moore's exploration of the possibility of an honest utopia in *Marvelman* serves as a direct challenge to the historical amnesia dominating the West, due simply to the oddity of the narrative turn within the general cynicism of the postmodern moment. Moore, as Jameson points out that to have an historical sense, to be able to imagine progress, the arrival of the new, implies a sense of the utopian, if not necessarily a vision of utopia ("The Politics of Utopia" 36). As Moore suggests in his work, the sense of the utopian, of the imaginative, and of the historical, consequently threatens the dissolution of the existence of humanity altogether. Moore's critical gaze is not so much focussed on the economic, social and political context of Western society, as much as the formal context of the comic book industry. If, on the one hand, he uses his work to enchant social reality with historical meaning and hopeful progressivism, on the other hand, he enchants himself as re-enchanting the formal universe of comic books with a liberating spirit, trying to keep Pictopia alive, while imagining the possibilities for utopia.

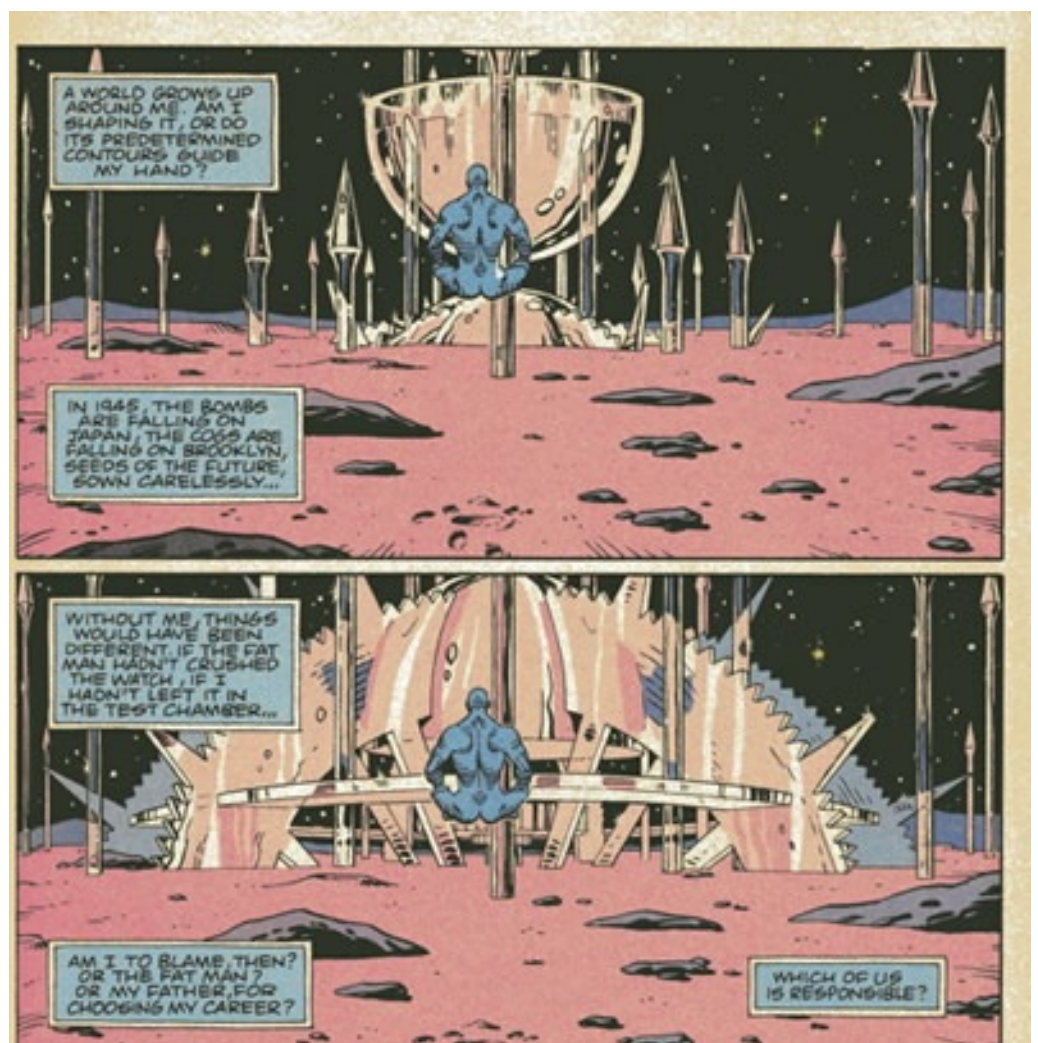
well. Ironically, while Moore has had an enormous influence on the comic book industry, his work has been largely as fuel for the bulldozers mowing away Pictopia, for the period of historical amnesia. This is due to the negative effect of his most famous, first major work, *Watchmen* (1986-87), drawn by Dave Gibbons, a revisionist superhero narrative. Due to its incredible success, it influenced the cynical turn in late '80s and early '90s comics, but in a manner Moore himself did not intend. *Watchmen*, an unsurpassed superhero narrative, was a further progression in Moore's historiographic vision. It was received by the comics industry as an invitation to abandon the past and to turn superheroes into violent, amoral killers as a means of making comics more "relevant" and appealing to new readers.

History as Simultaneity

12 In *Swamp Thing* and *Marvelman*, the characters create meaning in their existential moments of epiphany and insight, exploring fundamental questions of life and death, mediating them through larger contexts. In *Watchmen*, Moore adds another activity of mediation and the interpretation of reality: the concept of *simultaneity*. This becomes a crucial theme in virtually all of his later, major works. *Watchmen* offers a baroque thesis that in order to understand humanity as a meaningful phenomenon, one must comprehend that time is an illusion and that everything is happening simultaneously. Henceforth in Moore's work, history emerges out of individual epiphanies, moments of illumination and apocalypse through which concrete, singular events find their meaningfully located within a sense of simultaneity, a perspective of total simultaneity. In epiphanies a momentary dialectical identity is asserted between the sacred and the profane, between meaning and meaninglessness. Thus, Moore has developed a theory of history as dialectical mediation, which he eventually relates to the formal elements of the comic book medium itself, as a kind of aesthetic apocalypse of the future available to the reader.

13 *Watchmen's* concerns reach beyond the boundary of superhero comics, and they have been missed by its imitators. In *Watchmen*, the problem of history is cast as the super-powered product of Cold War science gone wrong, the blueprints for Manhattan. Manhattan, officially a weapon of deterrence in the hands of the

government, triggers a nuclear standoff when he abruptly abandons the human race on Mars, he contemplates the possibility of humanity being utterly extinguished in a nuclear war. He's not bothered: "All that pain and conflict done with? All that needless suffering at last? No, that doesn't bother me. All those generations of struggle, what purpose do they ever achieve? All that effort, and what did it ever lead to?" (#9/10). In short, Dr. Manhattan is asking: does mass human labour, the movement of civilizations, have any meaningful content in the end? Does it actually reduce human suffering? Does human history have any meaningful content? Dr. Manhattan is confused about the purpose of human labor, accomplishing nothing, leaving people empty and disillusioned... he is "broken" (#9/12). He is holding tentatively to the conclusion he articulates in "As I come to understand Vietnam and what it implies about the human condition, I realize that few humans will permit themselves such an understanding" (#4/1). He is a person who, it appears, does understand the meaninglessness of human existence. He is a mercenary anti-hero the Comedian, who sees existence as a vast, amoral joke (#4/1). Dr. Manhattan, from the perspective of Mars, the human race appears to be utterly insignificant.



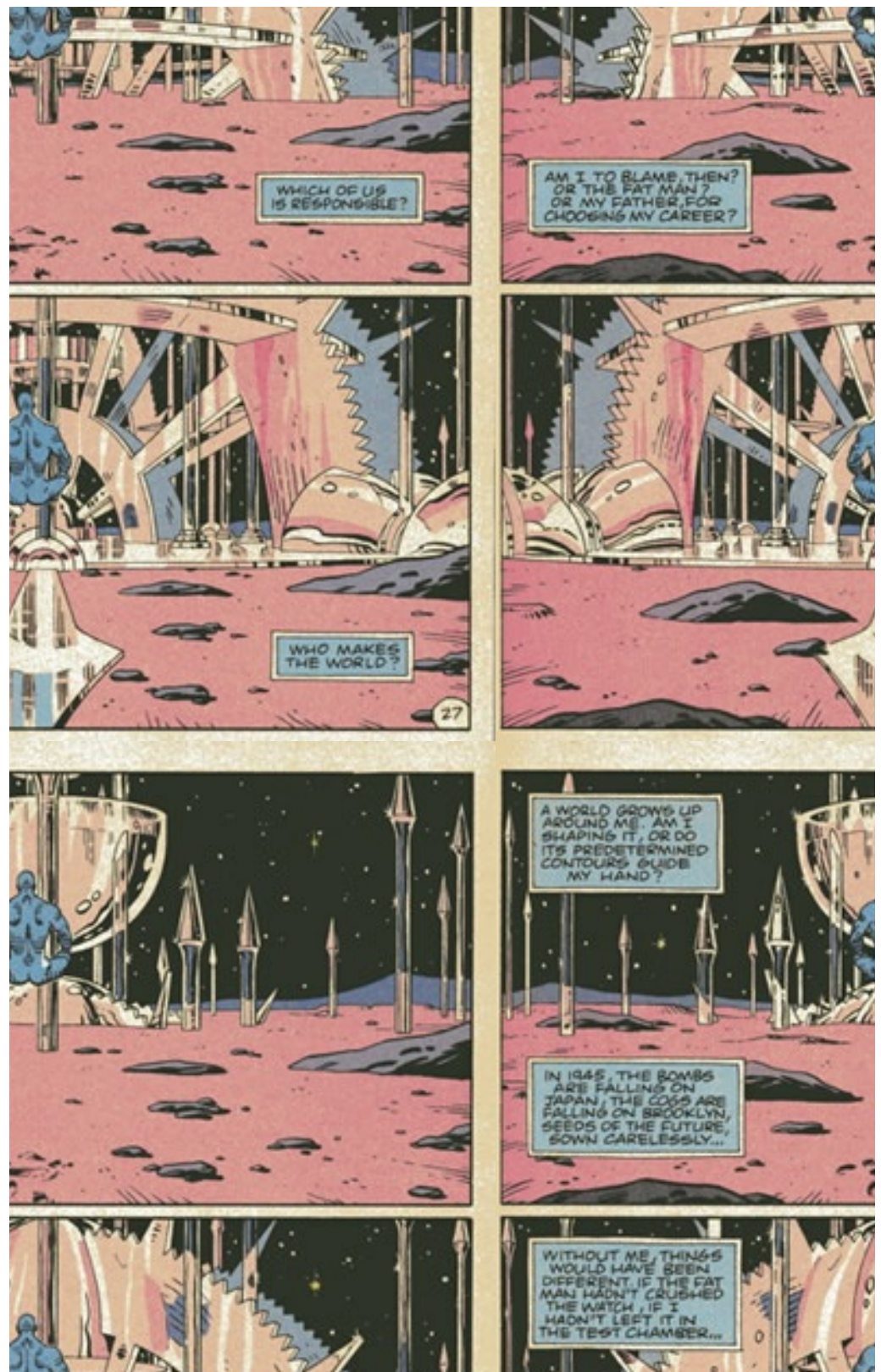


Figure 5. *Watchmen* #4 p. 27. Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons

14 Dr. Manhattan is a privileged voice in *Watchmen* because of the peculiar condition in which he exists. Accidentally caught in quantum field disruption (a World War scientific experiment), he finds himself recreated with godlike powers. He lives the past, the present, and the future simultaneously: everything is always once for him. He explains: "There is no future. There is no past. [...] Time is so intricately structured a jewel that humans insist on viewing one edge at a time when the whole design is visible in every facet" (#9/6). Manhattan's condition baffles ag

free man, but he experiences reality as completely scripted: he describes puppet who can see the strings (#9/5). He lives the contradiction between necessity as an untenable identity. Every moment seems to him both co-determined: far from falling into fatalism, he is instead thrown into a quandary. While he sees everything as preordained (#9/5), he cannot escape to agency, asking "Which of us is responsible? Who makes the world?" (#4/27, 3). Although Dr. Manhattan is the only character in *Watchmen* who actually has powers, his perspective is meant to be a humanly accessible one: it is an acknowledgment of the unresolvable struggle between temporality and totality, between past, future, which is characteristic of dialectical, historical consciousness itself. To be conscious of the presence of the past and the future is to be conscious of the essential incompleteness and insufficiency of the present itself. It is to have a sense of *historicity*.

15

It is due to this perspective of simultaneity that Dr. Manhattan is able to mechanically appear to him as locally meaningless into a moment of epiphany. On Mars, his daughter Laurie Jupiter deduces that her father is the aforementioned Comedian, a man for once having raped her mother, Sally Jupiter. Laurie suddenly perceives her father's cruel and meaningless joke. Yet Dr. Manhattan, witnessing this, is struck by how this is the sheer accident of the unique human life as Laurie's life emerges from the chaotic and cruel chaos of the universe. He remarks: "we gaze continually at the world, but we are dull in our perceptions, yet seen from another's vantage point, as if new, it may take our breath away" (#9/27). His cosmic perspective on humanity swings from insignificance to total significance, and he suddenly appreciates the meaningfulness of the commonplace and concrete: the individual human life in its singularity and the mundane meaninglessness of humanity as a whole. Here emerges Moore's major and abiding theme: the identity between the sacred and the profane, to be located in the momentary epiphanies, small personal apocalypses of insight which are, for their part, the substance of history itself. In other words, to continue to be human, for Dr. Manhattan is historical: it is to believe in the existence of humanity *per se*, as a phenomenon that is meaningful. This is a comprehension of reality which transforms it and the answer to the question "Who makes the world?" When Dr. Manhattan first asks the question

of the peculiar confusion he experiences between agency and determinism: necessity are perspectives we normally hold as being opposed to each other. In Manhattan they blur together, giving rise to his question.^[8] Until he answers, he acts in humanity's defense. The answer, implicit in Manhattan's act of interpreting the world, is that humans make the world through their conscious investment in it. Like the Superman who saves the universe through the activity of comprehending it, Dr. Manhattan saves the world by finding it meaningful. As a result, he leaves Mars and returns to Earth to prevent nuclear disaster.

16 Manhattan's sense of totality becomes a recurring idea in Moore's work: he insists that there is a conceivable perspective on human reality from which everything is simultaneously visible and hidden. A perspective of totality is hidden from humanity but its conceivability is the guarantee that life does in fact mean something. However in *Watchmen* the question of totality is asked primarily for its totalitarian, fascistic implications. The story is brought to a close by an Übermensch figure named Ozymandias, a self-made billionaire superhero who devises a scheme for circumventing nuclear armageddon: he creates a fake alien planet and teleports it into New York City, where its orchestrated psychic convulsions kill millions of people. He models himself on Alexander the Great, drawing inspiration from the solution to the problem of the Gordian knot: "Unable to unite the world by conquest . . . I would trick it; frighten it towards salvation with history's greatest ploy" (#11/24). He cuts the knot, and his plan works: faced with the threat of the unknown, global humanity predictably huddles together and overcomes it. This resolution resembles the conclusion to *The War of the Worlds*. Ozymandias is presented as a mortal human who has managed to achieve, through his unique perspective on history imitating that of Dr. Manhattan. Ozymandias routinely appears in a room with walls covered with television screens: out of this "cathode mosaic," he gradually finds meaning and coherence emerge, arising from "semiotic chaos" (#11/1). It is "the constant input" that allows "subliminal hints of the future to leak through" as a coherent worldview becomes gradually discernible amidst the media's white noise" (#11/1). Ozymandias intervenes and takes control of human history. The cathode mosaic is time, space,

as we shall see, the idea of simultaneity, as the compression of time into space, characteristic qualities of the condition of postmodernity.

17 One of the ambiguities of *Watchmen* is that Ozymandias's plan actually works. Ozymandias has quite literally written history: he makes of himself an agent of order out of vast, incalculable human suffering, while also authoring the significance of that suffering. He shapes the course of human events in a potentially redemptive direction, a question that he is portrayed as effectively a fascist, but the narrative is also complicated by the fact that fascism, based as it is on lies, works very well at ordering and directing human destiny as long as those lies are believed. In the story's conclusion, the members of the disbanded superhero team confront Ozymandias at the South Pole, realize he has achieved his goal, and also realize there is nothing for them to do about it. Nite II in Manhattan sees no point in revealing the truth about the alien monster: it would only render pointless the deaths of three million people.

18 Ironically, the one character who insists that the truth be told is *Watchmen*'s most ambivalent figure, Rorschach, who of all the heroes has refused to retire or accept the American government and has continued to persecute and terrorize the criminal underworld. Rorschach is the most demystified superhero in *Watchmen*; his motives, deranged, amorally violent, sexually repressed, and alienated from humanity, his reasons for fighting crime are revealed to be the product of both childhood trauma and a naive belief in the worthiness of the human race. Rorschach is a vigilante because he loves humanity and sees it as a cesspool of filth, not because he loves it. He has no question of the philosophy of history for himself. Having witnessed the worst that humans are capable of, he concludes:

Looked at sky through smoke heavy with human fat and God was not there
cold, suffocating dark goes on forever, and we are alone. Live our lives, lacking
anything better to do. Devise reason later. Born from oblivion, bear children
hellbound as ourselves, go into oblivion. There is nothing else. Existence is
random. Has no pattern save what we imagine after staring at it for too long.
Meaning save what we choose to impose. This rudderless world is not shaped by
vague metaphysical forces. It is not God who kills the children, not fate that
butchers them or destiny that feeds them to the dogs. It's us. Only us. (#6/

For Rorschach, a world where meaning is only imposed by humans is a violation of inherent meaning, while Moore's argument is that it is a fallacy to separate meaning from the world in the first place: the world is *made* by the discovery of meaning in the world. Rorschach insists that the truth about Ozymandias must be told no matter the consequences, Dr. Manhattan destroys him. Meanwhile Rorschach's journal, a reactionary right-wing newspaper, is the final indication from *Watchmen* that the truth will eventually come out. While the logic of Ozymandias's plan is the thinking explicitly borrowed from Hitler, where ends are allowed to justify the most violent means, Ozymandias is portrayed as honestly benevolent in his thinking: he takes the full burden of guilt upon himself and he is willing to do anything to guarantee the future of humanity. At the same time, he is an intelligent, opportunistic, individualist who plans to benefit financially from his scheme through shrewd investment. In an irony, *Watchmen's* plot is driven forward by the mysterious death of the Comedian in his search for his murderer: it emerges that the Comedian discovered Ozymandias had to be killed. The Comedian, the most casually cynical of the heroes, found himself overwhelmed by the scale of Ozymandias's plan. We are left to draw our own conclusions about the ultimate injustice of Ozymandias's scheme: while Ozymandias has a different perspective on totality practiced by Dr. Manhattan, the difference between the two is clear. Dr. Manhattan's final words to Ozymandias, a warning that "nothing ever ends" (#12/27). Ozymandias is convinced that he did the right thing and "that it all worked out" (#12/27). But it has not worked out in the end because history has not concluded. Lacking the mediation which maintains the singularity of the concrete, nameless lives of three million humans, Ozymandias has succumbed to the illusions of the totality. He thinks that human history can be concluded, simply because one can impose a perspective on events. To paraphrase Stalin with irony, the death of one human is a statistic, the death of three million is a statistic. What Ozymandias lacks is a sense of the meaningfulness of humanity which would restrain him from mass murder.

However, the opportunity to transcend the immediacy of Ozymandias's plan is offered to the reader. Significantly, the location we are shown at the very moment the creature is teleported into New York City is a street corner which recurs

Watchmen. Among the human beings who die there are characters we have grown to care for over the course of the story: a news vendor, a boy who reads comics at the newsstand, the psychiatrist analyzing Rorschach who becomes traumatized by what happens at the moment they die they are being drawn together by a fight on the corner between two women, former lovers, whose quarrel has escalated into an assault. It is a scene that human beings, seeing a conflict, are drawn by a basic sense of concern to intervene and help. It is this scene that is interrupted by the arrival of the alien: human beings are trying to understand and resolving, as best they know how, the conflicts which are an essential part of life on Earth. It is this human process which is circumvented and cancelled by the alien's usurping of human agency: they are "making their world" as Dr. Manhattan puts it. It is a basic sense of human compassion, free of prejudice or selfishness, just when the alien decides to make it for them.

20

Ozymandias's simultaneous "cathode mosaic," his wall of television screens, is a form of prognostication that he claims has an earlier precursor in the shamanistic practice of divining goat innards. The imagery of the priest-shaman as malign architect emerges as a major concern in Moore's 1990s work. In the first chapter of his novel *The Fire* (1996), Moore tells a story set in 4000 BCE about a hapless young man who is turned into a human sacrifice by a shaman. *The Voice of the Fire* takes place in the vicinity of what today is known as Northampton, Moore's birthplace and residence. In the first chapter, Moore recounts an incident of human scapegoating, either fictional or historical (such as the burning of women as witches or the institutionalization of the Roman Empire by John Clare), implying that human sacrifice is the burning engine of transformation that fuels the western world up to the present day. In the first chapter, the murder of a nomad is needed in order to give the shaman's sayings strength:

There is a path, off out in dark, all of queer sayings make. It go from edge of edge of world, and many sons is come to axe for make of it. May as it is they is set in neath of path, as bone of women set in bridges neath. A path of bone about of world, that bones is make a top for world in low of we. (41-42)

Human sacrifice is the fuel with which the shaman creates a path of sayings that connects the entire world and connect together tribes of settlers. .. It is with this brutal sacrifice that all storytelling must contend, as Moore comments in the final chapter of the

History, unendingly revised and reinterpreted, is seen upon examination a different class of fiction [...]. Still, it is a fiction that we must inhabit. [...] A remains in question is whose map we choose, whether we live within the w insistent texts or else replace them with a stronger language of our own. (31)

This activity of choosing is its own form of violent struggle, a rewriting of the c if Moore understands that in order to change history one must become a pa and thus engage in a kind of human sacrifice, as much as he would like to in other way. *The Voice of the Fire* begins with a map of the Northampton area icons indicating the location of each of the chapters. This image of local arranged simultaneously in space indicates a further development of the simultaneity in Moore's work. If simultaneity is an experience of time mani space, then the ambivalence of simultaneity in *Watchmen*, as a perspective potentially, both humanizing and dehumanizing, relates closely to the capitalism. The importance of space for postmodernism has been a constar Fredric Jameson in his cultural analyses. Jameson observes that one of the sym postmodern is a loss of a sense of depth in relation to the temporal "Postmodernism" 6). Yet postmodernism is not a monolith, and while Jameson loss of historicity, he also suggests that postmodernism's popularism and storytelling after the experiments of modernism are potentially emancip crucially, it is the very logic of capitalism to transform time into space. This w by Georg Lukács as one of the central principles of the activity of *reification*, gradual rationalization and objectification of human existence by reason (90).

21

We should note the contradiction that has immediately emerged by rel concept of simultaneity to postmodernism: Moore replicates the logic o internalizing it and making it an operating principle. He embraces simu transformation of time into space, as an avenue through which we mig ourselves a perspective of historicity. Jameson, significantly, neither co celebrates postmodernism, but sees it simply as a site of struggle, and sugges resistance from *within* the postmodern: "To undo postmodernism homeopat methods of postmodernism: to work at dissolving the pastiche by using all the

of pastiche itself, to reconquer some genuine historical sense by using the in what I have called substitutes for history" ("Regarding Postmodernism" 17). such a strategy can only be dialectical and contradictory. Moore is emblematic of artistic strategies which Jameson envisions for postmodern art, which can reject the cultural logic of late capitalism *not* by rejecting its cultural symptoms, but by embracing them and using them against that cultural logic.

22

There is no hope or idealistic redemption to be found in *The Voice of the Fire*. The logic of art is not itself hopeless. Its entire logic is homeopathic. Thus as he explains in discussing the process of writing *The Voice of Fire*, Moore found himself becoming being he dedicates so much of his writing towards condemning: a shaman: "I think that by the end of the book I would be a self-styled Northampton shaman."^[9] Moore's identification of himself as a magician and of his work as acts of magic becomes Moore's way to understand the substantial force of the human imagination and its manifestation as something actual while not conforming to the dictates of rational binarisms:

Magic to me is about a more dynamic relationship with our own consciousness. It's a more dynamic way of understanding it; what consciousness is, what thought is. Because thought is the blind spot of science. We cannot talk in terms of Cartesian logic and empirical experiments when you're talking about the mind [...] I'm just thinking maybe you need a different model of consciousness. I came up with this model and I'm not claiming it's new. [...] [I]t's the idea of the Idea Space.^[10]

Significantly for our discussion of simultaneity, Moore considers Idea Space as a space and time: : "There's no space and there's no time. It's just as easy for me to talk about what you were doing this morning as Victorian street scenes. You can do it instantly. You can imagine a scene from ten years in the future."^[11] Idea Space is the medium through which human consciousness draws connections across space and time, finding meaningfulness in the immediate through its mediation within larger contexts. In other words, Idea Space is a description of what Hegel called totality. Idea Space is the work of human consciousness as an ongoing activity of meaning-making, without any substantial shape and reality. The concept reflects the argument I have already made in *Watchmen*, which is that humanity makes the world through its consciousness and the continuous re-investment of humanity with meaning. While Moore's use of

"magic" to describe his work is a deliberate flirtation with the metaphysical rhetorical strategy meant to refuse the easy binary oppositions of "true" and "false" and "fiction" which are employed to subjugate fiction to a position of inferiority. Moore's point instead is that fiction, like human consciousness, is real, even if it is "mimesis" in the Platonic sense of an imitation. As Moore suggests in *Swan*, the discovery that one's consciousness is a fraud, an imitation of human consciousness is merely an apprehension that this is all consciousness ever has been: an activity that is real, while not Platonically "true." Fiction is how reality is made, just as the chapter one of *The Voice of the Fire* both maps the world and makes the world "sayings."

23 In light of this discourse on shamanism we can say that in *Watchmen*, Ozymandias turns himself into a shaman-priest and performs an act of social magic when he convinces a million people and successfully shapes this sacrifice into an enormous lie: he creates a new reality, filling it with a meaning and significance that he dictates and exploits. The question we are left with is: how can humanity afford to continue to embody meaning in a world where the old world? How can we continue to think historically when the philosophical concepts of history -- as the meaning of life and of human effort -- of some end of human struggle are defunct, irrelevant, and moreover a heinous metanarrative whose uses are totalitarian? As a writer interrogating these questions, Moore gradually grows into an ambivalent position of shaman himself, respecting that he cannot take a position of neutrality at the site of struggle if he wishes to effect any change in these meanings. This ambivalence of the position of shaman becomes reflected in his work through an acknowledged complicity with the narratives that he interrogates. The ambivalence of the shaman's acts of human sacrifice is fully realized in Moore's first major work of the 1990s,

The Architecture of History

24 In Moore's most significant work after *Watchmen*, *From Hell* (1989-1999), drawn by Alan Moore and Eddie Campbell, the question of how humanity can continue to embody meaning in a world where the old question of how humanity becomes a meaning. This investigation of the Jack the Ripper murders represents a subtle and significant shift in attitude: no longer content with the mere possibility of history, Moore henceforth takes it as actual and explores its structure

Hell, Moore presents the Ripper to us as Sir William Gull, physician Royal to Queen Victoria. Gull is commanded by the Queen to suppress the evidence of a royal bastard, Prince Albert Victor. The Ripper's murdered prostitutes are women who know of this secret and are blackmailing an associate of the Prince. Moore's point in writing the book is not to "solve" the murders, and so he refuses to create suspense, telling us all this from the beginning. Moore comments in his appendix to the book: "Truth is, this has never been about the murders, not the killer nor his victims. It's about us. About our minds and how they work" (Appendix II, 22). Moore is interested instead in what the murders mean, a meaning that came to mean something through the dance of human minds. In recounting the Ripper murders drawing upon painstakingly researched historical sources and rationalizing each narrative decision and extrapolation in a meticulous appendix collected edition, Moore is not primarily interested in whether or not he has discovered what "really happened." Consider his dedication, to the five murdered women: "your demise: of these things alone we are certain" (ii). While it would be easy to read *Hell* as an exercise in detective fiction, as "historical documentary," Moore warns of the pitfalls of such hubris. His interest is in how the murders have become history, the Ripper as a social phenomenon and as meaning:

In terms of the Whitechapel crimes, we cannot establish a real material physical identity for the being we call Jack the Ripper. Not Gull, not Druitt, not Stephen and certainly not poor old bloody James Maybrick. Jack the Ripper, in a very real sense, never actually had a physical existence. He was a collage-creature, made from crank letters, hoaxes, and sensational headlines. He exists wholly in Idea Space. [...] If the realm of concept and consciousness is, as I believe it to be, the realm of the sacred, then in the crucible of the Whitechapel murders, both killer and victims were in a sense "made holy." ("Correspondence: From Hell," 2, 321)

Moore is obviously not suggesting that the murders never happened and that it was "nothing more than some Baudrillardian simulacrum," as José Alaniz surmises in the above statement (147). Such logic falls prey to the binary thinking Moore seeks to transcend. In *From Hell*, he is not interested in the relationship between history and the meaning derived from history, but in meaning as history, meaning as where humanity cannot escape itself, with all the ambivalent violence entailed in that act of meaning-making.



Figure 6. From *Hell* #8, p. 32. Alan Moore and Eddie Campbell

25

And so, Moore portrays the Ripper much like Ozymandias, engaging in a deliberate activity of social semiosis. Upon receiving his mission from the Queen, a freemason suffering from the debilitating mental aftereffects of a stroke, decides to use magic and that the Ripper murders will be what he calls acts of social magic that guarantee the stranglehold of patriarchy over female energy. All magic is explained, and symbols are how warlocks conquered women (#4/24). Gullible and hapless driver: "Sometimes an act of social magic's necessary; man's triumph is insecure, the dust of history not yet settled. Changing times erase the constraints society's irrational, female side. Our workers, lately given votes,

socialism, talk of rights, riot in Trafalgar square, and won't quit 'til they are... Moore portrays the 1890s as a moment of great historical possibility, an instant of change and progress, of emerging socialism and class-consciousness, which... his mission to stifle and suppress. In illustration of this conflict, in chapter... creates a startling juxtaposition between the Ripper murdering a woman in an... a meeting of the International Worker's Education Club happening nearby... Morris reads a poem, "Love is Enough," and our gaze is focused upon a portrait... hanging on the wall, while in adjacent panels the Ripper's knife cuts the exposure... Elizabeth Stride (#8/32, see **Figure 6**).

26 From the very beginning of *From Hell*, we are presented with a discourse about... story opens with an argument in 1923 about whether or not the achievements of the... Russian Revolution prove Marx's thesis about the inevitability of socialism. In... Abberline, the revolution is clearly a failure and a mistake due to the strife... suffered by Russians in the six years since the revolution. Abberline grew up in a... class family and is confident that the working class, in England anyway, have... revolution. For professional psychic Robert Lees, the survival of the revolution... hardships suffered proves Marx's point: socialism is human destiny. Socialism... The argument is one they cannot consciously solve between them, but they solve... reader, indirectly, over the course of their conversation. Lees confesses here that... career as a psychic is a fraud, and that when he claimed to be seeing the... Whitechapel murderer back in 1888 he was making it up. Abberline points out... nevertheless, everything Lees said happened: "It was all true." Lees agrees: "I... and it all came true anyway. That's the funny part" (prologue, 5). We can... revelation to the argument about the Russian Revolution, as a means of... contradiction between necessity and contingency that divides Lees and Abberl... lies, fictions that are nevertheless true. The difficulty of Marx's dialectical m... rationalized thinking is that Marxism specifically denies easy binarisms such... false, seeing them instead as dialectically interrelated, as aspects of a single pro... George Lukács wrote *History and Class Consciousness: Studies in Marxist Dialectic*... he argued for the necessity of the revolution and the self-liberation of the cla...

proletariat. To Lukács, the historical occurrence of the proletariat signals the metaphysical alibis for humanity and the destruction of binary thinking.

27

Thus Lees's question of necessity or inevitability is dialectically complicated by the presence of metaphysical alibis, since history must now be understood at all times to be the product of human activity itself and never from an abstract "elsewhere." Lees has answered his question with the revelation of his "false" prophecies, which nevertheless proved true and thus revealed themselves as *necessary*, much as revolution is a prophecy that is fictional in the abstract, creates itself as true in its realization. As Timothy Leary has said eloquently: "history is not the discovery of truth, but its generation; not the reflection of truth, but its *revelation* -- which consists not of the unveiling of truth, but the production of truth. The present needs to be viewed dialectically, not contemplatively, with a methodological insistence on the immediate as emblematic of a wider totality, rather than as the summation and end-point of history" (175). Reality is not a meaning, written by human activity, that makes the world. It is an interpretation of reality, if you will, that is also a making of human reality. Therefore Marxism must not rest for the "inevitability" of socialism as a metaphysical destiny that awaits the proletariat at its redemptive end, makes no guarantee of success or victory. "[T]he historical process does not come to fruition *in our deeds and through our deeds*" Lukács insists, a process that is realized *only* by being achieved (43). Unlike Lukács, who finally posits that the materialist truth is found only in the proletariat masses, and who rejects Hegel's theory that truth is expressed through the consciousness of philosophers, Moore suggests that history is not a more collectively diffuse forms of social semiosis, neither wholly materialist nor wholly abstract and metaphysical, but an aspired-to identity between the two. In *From Hell* Moore resists the metaphysical fallacy to which Lukács succumbs, which is to imagine the proletariat class as the earthly manifestation of Hegel's *Geist*: the identical subject-object. Instead, in *From Hell* Moore shows us what from Lukács's perspective is properly called the failure of history, in as much as the Ripper emerges as a force working to consciously suppress the revolutionary spirit of socialism. In the course of the novel, the lies that nevertheless become truth, Lees describes the central theme of *From Hell*: how fiction is constitutive of history, how the two are *identical*.

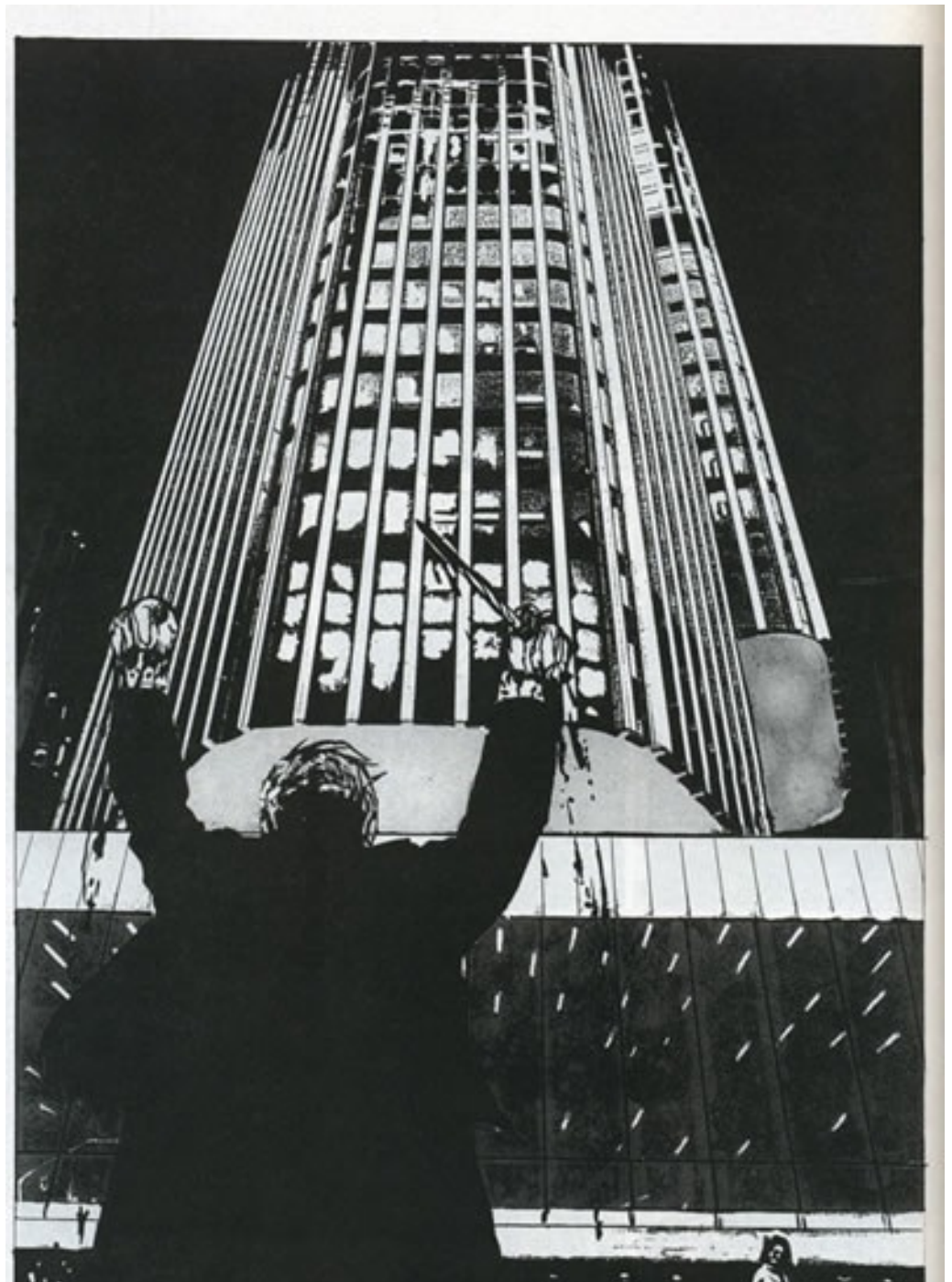


Figure 7. *From Hell* #4, p. 27. Alan Moore and Eddie Campbell

28

In *From Hell*, Sir William Gull emerges as a sinister philosopher and architect who achieves this perspective through a vista of simultaneity and totality reminiscent of that of Dr. Manhattan, Gull expounds the idea that all time is at that "all times co-exist in the stupendous whole of eternity" (#2/14). This surmise that history itself has an architecture (#2/15), that it is a simultaneous and that Freemasons have been its architects. The architectural work Hawksmoor, in particular Christ Church, Spitalfields, figures prominently in *F* malign presence looming over the narrative and presiding over the Ripper's r demonstrates a postmodern understanding that space is the realm of political

architecture, necessity itself is compressed; human suffering as experienced transformed into space, creating "a dynamo of blood and history" (#4/27, s Christ Church, located in Whitechapel, is such a rendering of history's empowered by human suffering. Despite its historical setting, *From Hell's* concerns are distinctly postmodern, suggesting that Hawksmoor's work as it st a symptom of the postmodern compression and transformation of time into transformation of time into space is a symptom of the logic of late capitalism, the reification of traditional meanings which provides the ground for articu sense of humanity. The Victorian situation in the 1880s is portrayed by Moore a for the emergence of advanced capitalism. In *From Hell*, the condition of post delivered through the Ripper's crimes.



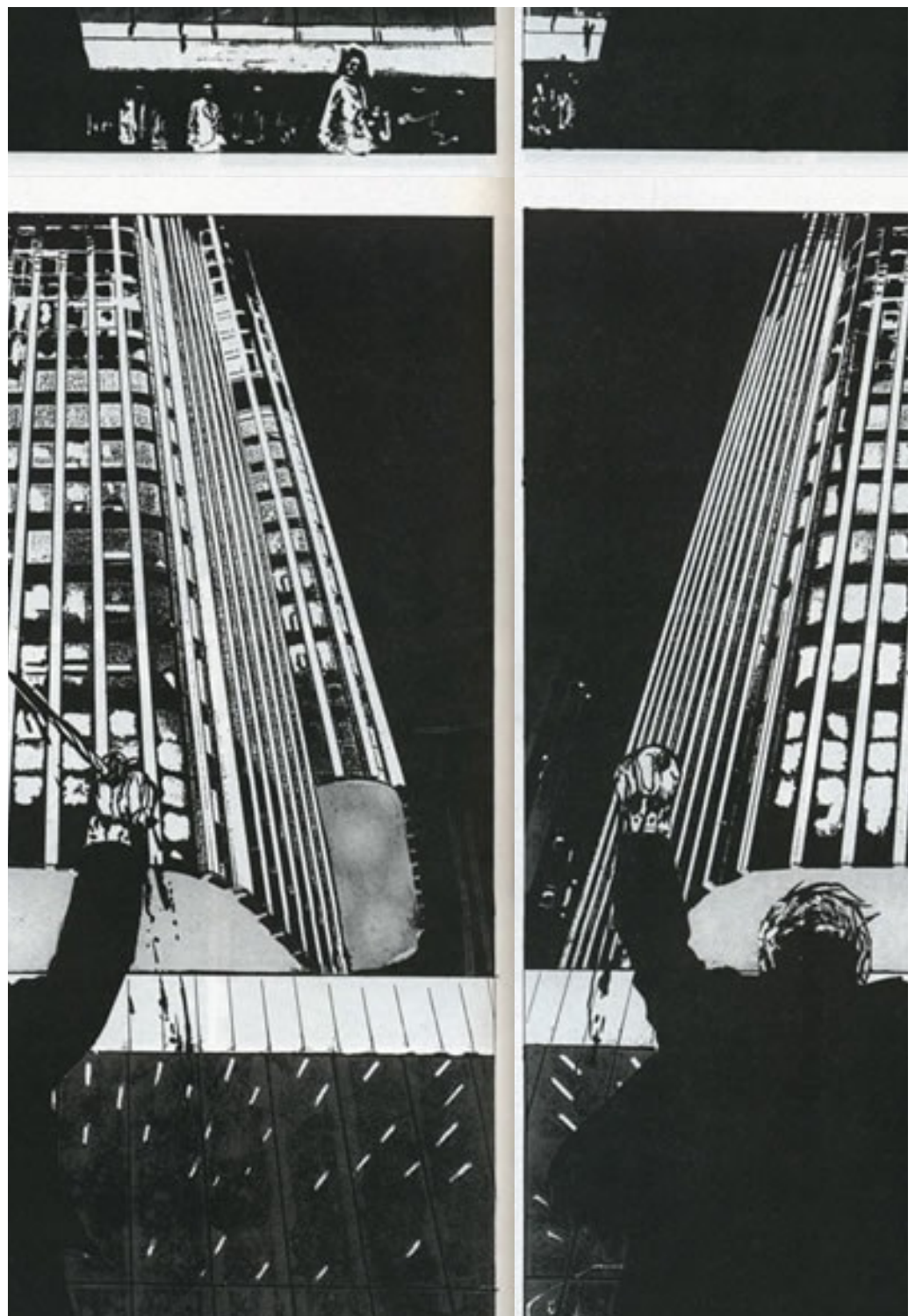


Figure 8. *From Hell* #8, p. 40 Alan Moore and Eddie Campbell

29

Like Ozymandias and like the shaman in *The Voice of the Fire* William Gull makes himself the architect of history, murdering women in acts of social magic, magic which is the narrative *as the material substance of history itself*. At a crucial moment amidst mutilating a victim's corpse, Gull experiences a vision of a late twentieth-century skyscraper rising before him (#8/40, see **Figure 8**). This is not an hallucinatory moment of non-realism in which Gull's magic actually gives him access to the future. However this vision is also understood by Gull as the creation of that which he is creating. Gull eventually realizes that through his crimes, he has played "midwife" to the new world. "It is beginning, Netley. Only just beginning. For better or worse, t

century. I have delivered it," the Victorian gentleman and man of science re driver (#10/33). Subsequent visions merely confirm this as a fact within the re *Hell*: in the story's conclusion, Gull dies, transcends his flesh and through an magic becomes the transhistorical meaning and energy that courses beneath history, an eternal, godlike force of fire (#14/10-11). He becomes a wave, an infl time, unshackled from temporality. In other words he is deified, both thro deeds, and through humanity's collective obsession with those deeds. He bec part of the collective meaning of the human race.

30

The history that Gull creates in *From Hell* is clearly not the revolutionary histo by Marxism. In as much as Gull's magic is composed of conscious acts of pu the service of rationality, conservatism and especially Christianity, it is thought of as *ressentiment* in the Nietzschean sense. *Ressentiment* describes t repression and asceticism characteristic of the restrictive self-denial, the "bac of the orthodox Christian religion. Nietzsche saw human history as little m depreciation of the affirmatory will to life by the elevation of weakness to virtue. As Gilles Deleuze argues in *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, the instinct to rev Nietzsche, the force called history itself, a universal motor of nihilism leavin race a repressed husk (34-35). Gull, describing his deeds as an attempt to sup called instinctive and irrational, a deliberately contradictory project to yoke an Dionysiac, "female" powers of the unconscious through subjection to Apollon reason (#4/23), is from a Nietzschean perspective an enemy of life, an agent *ressentiment*, creating a crippled, self-denied humanity. This appears to be so himself realizes too late, as, during one of his visions of the future, he app twentieth-century office and realizes what he has created through his acts of condemnation of the condition of postmodernity sounds, ironically en Nietzschean (#10/22). When he reveals to his driver his belief that he has c bleak, lifeless twentieth century, Gull indicates his understanding that he h Dionysiac life force which he sought to yoke and force to serve reason: he ha triumph of *ressentiment* to drain the soul from the human race. He has succeed history, but the project of the "Dionysiac Architects" (#4/23), which Gull pc

glorious contradiction between reason and the unconscious, seems to be a productive contradiction in the modern world, leaving a shell of reason without an unconscious drive, producing an "ugly English future" (#14/19). He has managed to escape the condition of postmodernity, the reification of human reality that leaves everything rationalized.

31 At the end of *From Hell*, Sir William Gull transcends into the realm of the gods because he is a good person, but because the human race has sent him there, through its obsession with the Ripper murders. "The Gods exist in our minds, but they are real," Gull explains earlier (#4/18). He becomes a god, though not explicitly shown that his last intended victim, in Moore's version of events, actually died in Ireland and gave birth to four little girls named after her murdered friends. Moore secretly fled London after finding another woman mutilated beyond recognition. It is a small, grim glimpse of possibility, that "nothing is ever over," that Gull's death has been no more final than was Ozymandias's. But the deification of Gull is also a part of the act of storytelling as complicit in Gull's crimes, since storytelling participates in the perpetuation of the meaning of the Ripper murders. As a writer of fiction, Moore is freed from that violence. As he remarks concerning the writing of *From Hell*: "For as much as I am concerned with cutting into and examining the still-warm corpse of history it is in some of my chilliest moments I suspect that this was [the Ripper's] foremost preoccupation, albeit in pursuit of different ends" (*From Hell*, back cover). They are both part of the same history, with different goals in mind. In a coda story to *From Hell* called "I'll Be Back," Moore implicates himself in the murders through the very activity of writing about them, as if the murders themselves and the meanings they have come to embody are inseparable from one another. The most Moore, as a shaman himself, is able to tell the same stories with a slight sense of difference, hoping to produce a different meaning out of the same repeated acts of sacrifice. This difference may amount to little more than rendering taut and visible the contradiction of the "Dionysiac Architects," with the hope that the contradiction contains historical possibilities that were lost through the process of *ressentiment*.

History as Comic Books

Significantly, the place Gull goes is seen again, in Moore's recently conceived *Promethea*, the epigraph for which could well be Gull's statement "the Gods are real. Therefore they are real." *Promethea* is about a young woman who realizes she is the incarnation of the human imagination: as the latest of many Prometheas that have existed throughout history, she is a god, and she goes on a journey of enlightenment in order to understand who and what she is. It is with *Promethea* that Moore interrogates the conjunction of the substance of history with the form of comic book sequential visual art, and suggests that the perspective of simultaneity essential to the historical perspective is embodied in comic book form. This conceit is Moore's intervention into the philosophical discourse surrounding questions of historical consciousness would suggest, is from an Enlightenment perspective associated with reason and ultimately with the symbolic order of language itself, as Lacan would have argued rather than with the realm of the mimetic, the iconic, or the visual. Even in the history of Enlightenment philosophy, historical consciousness appears in abstract thought, in the escape from representation into imageless truth. The domain of reason and progress are understood to inhabit the realm of abstract symbols rather than mimetic iconography. This is a truism in the semiology of both Ferdinand de Saussure and Charles Sanders Peirce. In *Course in General Linguistics*, Saussure writes, "Signs that are wholly arbitrary realize better than the others the ideal of the semiological process. Why language, the most complex and universal of all systems of expression, is the most characteristic" (68). Peirce, who considered social semiosis to be the constitutive process of human reality and human consciousness, also elevated the abstract linguistic sign to the status of privileged sign, arguing that it was through abstract symbols that reason, and thus human progress, manifested itself:

Symbols grow. They come into being by development out of other signs, particularly from icons, or from mixed signs partaking of the nature of icons and symbols. We think only in signs. These mental signs are of mixed nature; their symbol-parts of them are called concepts. If a man makes a new symbol, it is through thoughts involving concepts. So it is only out of symbols that a new symbol can grow. *Omne symbolum de symbolo*. A symbol, once in being, spreads among peoples. In use and in experience, its meaning grows. Such words as *force*, *wealth*, *marriage*, bear for us very different meanings from those they bore for our barbarous ancestors. (19)

And as French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan extrapolates from semiotic logic, visual illustration bears too much of a resemblance to the activity of mind to inhabit what he calls the symbolic order, the realm of abstract thought (see *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, 105-19). Mimetic drawings are to be primitive and simplistic, and telling a story with pictures little more than cave paintings, one step above the acts of masquerade and mimicry practiced in the past. Abstract, symbolic thinking, the preserve of language, is where full consciousness, humanity, and history are assumed to reside. For Hegel, poetry was the form of philosophy due to the abstractness of the linguistic medium. For Moore to bring the question of the philosophy of history into the realm of visual storytelling is perhaps to make pictures do something they are not supposed to do. But this in itself is a historical task. When Marxist philosopher of history Walter Benjamin presents his concept of "dialectical images," he was describing a contradiction: the intuition of transformation and the unfinished new within something static and unchanging. He is also trying to suggest that the moment of the dialectic came not in movement or progress, because, unimpeded, change is really just more of the same. "History is the subject of a structure whose site is not homogeneous, empty time, but time as the presence of the now [*Jetztzeit*]" (261). The dialectic comes in the interruption of the movement of time, not in the movement itself. History erupts in the fleeting light where continuity is ground to a halt and real change is glimpsed as a possibility. Benjamin called the moment of *Jetztzeit*, or Now-Time.

33 Such a dialectical, post-Enlightenment vision of history seems appropriate to Moore, which is so deeply critical of concepts of naive progress, and envisions the future moving forward as springing out of disastrous failure and regression. Peter Szondi called this historical vision a "New Enlightenment" (52), an attempt to rescue the Enlightenment from its own rationality and from the mythologization of history. Szondi sees this New Enlightenment as one taken up by Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno and Ernst Bloch, who attack the basic premises of Enlightenment with the goal of saving Enlightenment from its own *telos*. Moore may be best described as a critic of the mythologization of history: where others see progress, he shows us violence.

sacrifice, scapegoating, bloodshed, totalitarianism and fascism. For him, human myth, or in other words fascist ideology. But at the same time where other namely the simplistic, ideological thinking of generic comic book visual storytelling sees instead a site within which to intervene and pry open a new historic interrupts expectations of form, and also interrupts expectations of these images

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New Enlightenment is an appropriate way to describe the dramatic arc of *Promethea*. The story follows Sophie Bangs as she discovers that she is the latest of many in *Promethea*, and then goes on a journey of Enlightenment, learning about magic through various paths of the Kabbalah, up through imagination and rationality, to a conscious awakening. In issue #15, Sophie and one of her older incarnations travel through the realm of Hod, the mercurial space of language, magic and intellect. In this way, they ruminate on the significance of meaning-making, affirming their understanding of the manifestation of consciousness within the abstraction of communication. "I suppose communication is how minds reveal themselves. Language gives a splendour of the intellect," *Promethea* observes (#15/4). Moreover, they connect the connection of semiosis to a sense of historicity: "Language, it shapes consciousness, how we put ideas together. Even our concepts of time. Because we have command of language, we couldn't record events in the past" (#15/5). Without language, we have no history, in the sense that we cannot reason and thus cannot think historically. *Promethea* draws this conclusion after noticing some Egyptian hieroglyphs and comments: "I guess that telling stories with pictures is the first kind of writing. Probably that's why *Promethea*'s mostly appeared in comic books this last century. It used to be in tapestries, but now they're in strips" (#15/5). This gesture is ahistorical, overlooking the fact that hieroglyphs are not mimetic icons but are signs. The connection is a playful reminder that we should look for history in the place we least expect it: *Promethea* is a story about comic books *as* history.

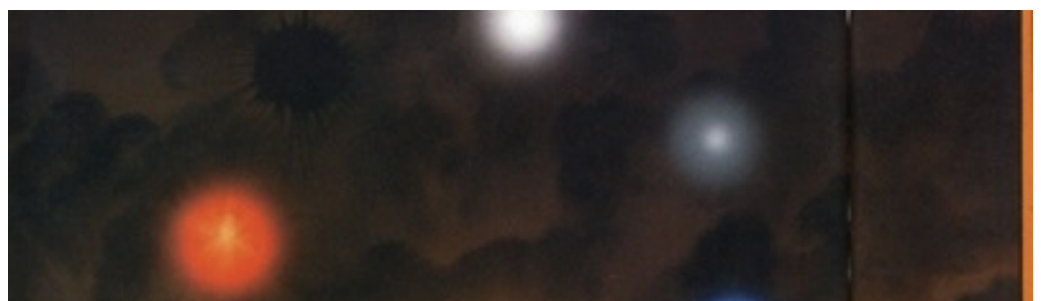




Figure 9. *Promethea* #17, p. 20. Alan Moore, J.H. Williams III, Mick Gray and Jeromy Cox.

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A little later on in her journey Promethea arrives at the highest possible *human* Kabbalistic system, where humanity touches divinity, where the transitory and the eternal connect. This is the realm of transcendental *symbol*, where the Ripper has been the place where humans and Gods can overlap, the realm of beauty and truth, golden and eternal, a space of presence and perfect forms, of angels, and of perfect meaning. It is the realm of the symbolic order, what a philosopher might think the *telos* of the historical process. Yet Promethea learns quickly that this space is not inhabited by decay when she notices Osiris, the Egyptian ruler of the underworld, and his symbols of death and rot. "It's profane," she remarks, and then wonders if this is the point: perhaps it means that "the profane is kinda sacred too" (#17/19). Turning on this revelation we are confronted by the crucifixion of Christ, in a remarkable

image by J.H. Williams III, that springs upon us unexpectedly and dominantly (#17/20, see **Figure 9**). The Prometheas are moved to tears by the profanity of the scene as they see the highest point of humanity reduced to a state of abjection, murdered. From this vision of Golgotha they learn the same thing Walter Benjamin did in *German Tragic Drama*, where he observed that Golgotha is the allegory of a point where transcendence and materiality, sacred and profane, become indistinguishable from one another. This exploration of the dialectical identity between the sacred and the profane becomes a recurring concern in *Promethea*, signalling its importance to the understanding of the simultaneity of Idea Space as a location where the sacred and the profane can no longer be separated from one another. In this sense, it is a critique of over metaphysical thinking altogether, in as much as metaphysics is essentially a search for meaning and materiality are not the same thing. This is what is most dialectical in Moore's sense of history: it is a substance both sacred and profane. Terry Eagleton describes the phenomenological effect of the crucifixion of Christ as a fundamental tragic rhythm: "a classically tragic rhythm could then become the source of renewed political meaning of this rhythm which matters" (37). The political meaning of this rhythm is history, the wresting of freedom from necessity, hope from hopelessness, meaning from meaninglessness itself, the discovery of the sacred within the profane. As they descend the hill of skulls, Promethea's guardian angel remarks: "Even down here, at the Auschwitz ass-end of what humans are, and what humans do ... our highest meaning is here with us. There's light. Always remember that. There's light at the bottom." This final point is the salient one: as we move towards the highest point in the narrative of the movement of allegory itself, we are cautioned never to lose sight of the Benjaminian, melancholic, downward gaze: to find light, don't ascend, but to find the sacred in the profane, hope in hopelessness, redemption in darkness. The guardian angel warns of what is to come. At the end of her journey Promethea achieves Enlightenment and arrives at a place so holy it is terrifying, and has a vision of Mystery as Revelation of Babalon (#21/13, see **Figure 10**), and realizes that this is she, and that Babalon is the Madonna (#21/18-19). Promethea is both the madonna and the whore, because of the identity of the sacred and the profane, and herald to the end of the world. As the motor of imagination, the motor of meaning, Promethea is dialectical epiphany, the

history itself.



Figure 10. *Promethea* #17, p. 20. Alan Moore, J.H. Williams III, Mick Gray and Jeromy Cox.

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The apocalypse which takes place in *Promethea* is the simultaneity, the fulfillment of history, that Moore has promised in *Watchmen* and *From Prometheus* is the fulfillment of the promise implicit in all of Moore's work, and that with *Promethea*'s conclusion Moore has declared he will retire from commercial comics. With *Promethea* Moore is arguing that comic books tell history. Moore has given spoken word performances, deeply poetic, lyrical works with striking imagery. They have been illustrated as comics by his collaborator Edc and these texts serve as useful symbolic keys for his mainstream comic book *Caul* (performed 1995, illustrated 1999) and *Snakes & Ladders* (performed 1999, 2001) originated as site-specific performances which, like his novel *The Voice* demonstrate a postmodern consciousness of the politics of space and pl

importance of the claiming of this place in a kind of psychic cartography. Both consciously begin their narratives in the immediate time and place of their performance, then move back in time, excavating the history that looms beneath the performance itself, before mediating the immediate material of space and history into them in order to address about the problem of human meaningfulness.

37

In *The Birth Caul*, for example, Moore engages in a playful Romantic vision of the self as a gradual forgetting of the absolute. In our modern, rationalized, commodified world, we exist in a reified state, having lost something essential to us, and Moore's performance presents itself as a shamanic ritual centred upon a birth caul found amongst the ruins of the effects shortly after her death. The caul is a totem of what is lost in our fall into the modern, a fantasy of a pre-symbolic identity. It "documents a personal Atlantis, a dreamtime" (1). It is a promise of a return to lost origins, to be born wearing the caul as an initiation into "a sect of trappist embryos who dream the absolute" (10). This lost truth is presented with a critical distance: The Birth Caul is a shamanic performance that follows the lead of the totemic caul back through time. This takes the narrative from history, past pre-history, only to arrive at "The cold white page," complete with the caul in the corner (47). *The Birth Caul* also suggests that the vision of simultaneity is a return to humans as newborn infants, who do not recognize the separation of past, present, and future. For them, all is now, but this is something the conformity of society threatens. In *Snakes & Ladders*, Moore offers a solution to this contradiction: simultaneity is momentarily recaptured in aesthetic experience itself. He tells the history of the individual apocalypse: the movement of consciousness into knowledge of itself through the imagination in the form of a woman, Promethea again, figured here as Mystical. *Ladders* presents a theory of art as the experience of this process of revelation: the aesthetic emerges from the wedding of imagination and will into a vision of truth (34). It touches the universal, "the eerie sense that there is just one of us" (35) is also an apocalyptic vision of collective humanity where we are each other's mirrors forever (37), where space and time fold into each other and collapse into here and now, a grand simultaneity (40). This is envisioned as a city of the imagination, where the self exists in miniature and where the sacred and the profane are the same thing.

truth (43), and is accessible to us in personal apocalypse, moments where we are in an abyss of self and are crucified, yet find redemption within the depths, the bottom," as with the crucifixion of Christ in *Promethea*, and thus achieve resurrection.

38 Hegel called such a dark night of the soul "tarrying with the negative." *Snark* thus tells the story of an inner Enlightenment that allows individuals to find themselves are pregnant with meaning, reality enchanted and full of luminous sense, as Dick does in *Watchmen* when he finds the miraculous in the everyday on the surface. This apocalyptic vision of collective humanity within the experience of the vision of anagogy, as Northrop Frye puts it in *Anatomy of Criticism*:

In the anagogic phase, literature imitates the total dream of man, and so in the thought of a human mind which is at the circumference and not at the center of its reality. [...] When we pass into anagogy, nature becomes, not the content but the thing contained, and the archetypal universal symbols, the city, the quest, the marriage, are no longer the desirable forms that man constructs inside nature, but are themselves the forms of nature. Nature is now inside the mind of an infinite man who builds his cities out of the Milky Way. This is not reality, but it is the conceivable or imaginative limit of desire, which is infinite, eternal, and hence apocalyptic. By an apocalypse I mean primarily the imaginative conception of the whole of nature as the content of an infinite and eternal body which, if not human, is closer to being human than to being inanimate.

It was Fredric Jameson, in *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act*, who amended Frye's vision of anagogy, politicizing it as a vision of collective revolution. From a political perspective, anagogy is the necessary utopian imagination of collective humanity's self-liberation, the utopian redemption of all human history is thus another casualty to the condition of postmodernity, and art is the possible recovery of this perspective.

39 From one perspective, Moore's vision of art as truth is too romantic to be a viable intervention into the postmodern situation. It is a critique of reification, fragmentation and rationalization of humanity in late capitalism, which deliberately mysticizes as a means of "escaping" reification into a sense of wholeness of the absolute or totality which is presented merely as something lost to

Moore seems to mourn nostalgically for an anagogic experience that art can conjure for us, rather than engaging with the reified ground of postmodernism's raw material from which to create meaning. Such an attitude is more modernist than that it imagines art can render itself autonomous, indifferent to the social, and countering its effects. This theory of art lacks the sense of the homeopathic mourning happens at the level of content, while at the level of *form* comic books are emblematic of everything that is reified within postmodernity. Comic books are produced, a depthless and popular form, inherently disposable culture, and type at the level of content due to the prominence of stereotypes and other such compartmentalized thought.

40 *Promethea* houses an awareness of these issues and a sense that the means of the condition of postmodernity is not by rejecting it but by inhabiting it fully and passing through it. Comic books become a site of negotiation in this process. When we first meet Sophie Bangs as she and fellow University student Stacia Van C about the merits of their respective term paper projects. While Sophie is researching an obscure historical figure of Promethea, Stacia is writing about a ubiquitous comic book character called the Weeping Gorilla. The Weeping Gorilla is perhaps a cliché about postmodern art, a reification of reification itself: this character is more than a commercial icon which is meaningless, plotless and everywhere, and billboards all over New York. The Weeping Gorilla is the commodification of humor and emotion: every time it appears in the narrative, a thought bubble appears above its head containing phrases such as "Modern life makes me feel so alone!" or "I want to change." It is the emblem of the culture of the commodity. Stacia is fascinated by the Weeping Gorilla because it is, apparently, pointless and thus amusing, devoid of emotional or human investment from her. Yet when they later encounter the Weeping Gorilla in its pure symbolic form within the "immateria," a plane where images reside, they are struck by the full emotional force of this symbol, free of irony, and the reified content of the Weeping Gorilla's thoughts becomes a sincere investment for Stacia: "I know. And I understand what he means now. He isn't f-funny at all. He's us! He's us, and he can't stop c-crying..." The Weeping

humanity: "W-We're the gorilla that weeps!" (#3/16). This logic is dialectically reified, inauthentic form of the commodity itself emerges the ground for authentic experience and collectivity. *Promethea* tells us that anagogy is a collectivity that comes out of popular, mass-produced, ubiquitous culture, out of postmodernity itself, out of a wishful dream for an autonomous modernist aesthetic.

41

In *Promethea* the anagogic vision of simultaneity, the promise of everything at once, is fulfilled and offered directly to the reader of the comic book, or rather prompted to recognize that we have had this vision of totality literally at our disposal along. When *Promethea* causes the end of history, the apocalypse, everything happens at once for characters in the story. In issue #28, a character is literally above the narrative and floats above it in a state of infancy and simultaneity, nude and in a diaper: beneath her are the simultaneous panels of the comic book itself (see **Figure 11**). She is experiencing everything at once in a vast vision of comic book time. This is anagogy, but it is mass-produced anagogy. Here is where content becomes form. Images recall Scott McCloud's thesis in *Understanding Comics* that in comic book time the function of space, much like William Gull's architecture of history. McCloud argues that the comic book is a landscape of past and future co-existing with the given moment, being whichever panel we happen to focus upon (104). If as an aesthetic object the comic book can be understood to function as a sundial of history, then its form may be understood the way Dr. Manhattan reads the simultaneity of time: as a multifaceted jewel where we only see one facet. The reader of *Promethea* is being offered the vision of totality from whence meaning emerges, in an aesthetic apocalypse wherein the reader, and the characters are all consumed and redeemed by *Promethea*'s story. They live together in a city of the imagination where all of history simultaneously exists in miniature. It is a vision of simultaneity arising *out of* the fragments of commodity, rather than in a rejection of them. If we can politicize McCloud's thesis about the form, then we may suggest that comics are emblematic of reification in that qualitative experience, is rendered into spatial terms in comics, thus qualitatively rationalized. Yet at the same time, the narrative storytelling form of comic book is the *Aufhebung* of those reified fragments, the possibility of both cancelling and

them in a larger landscape of past and future, which is rendered present by the of the reader.

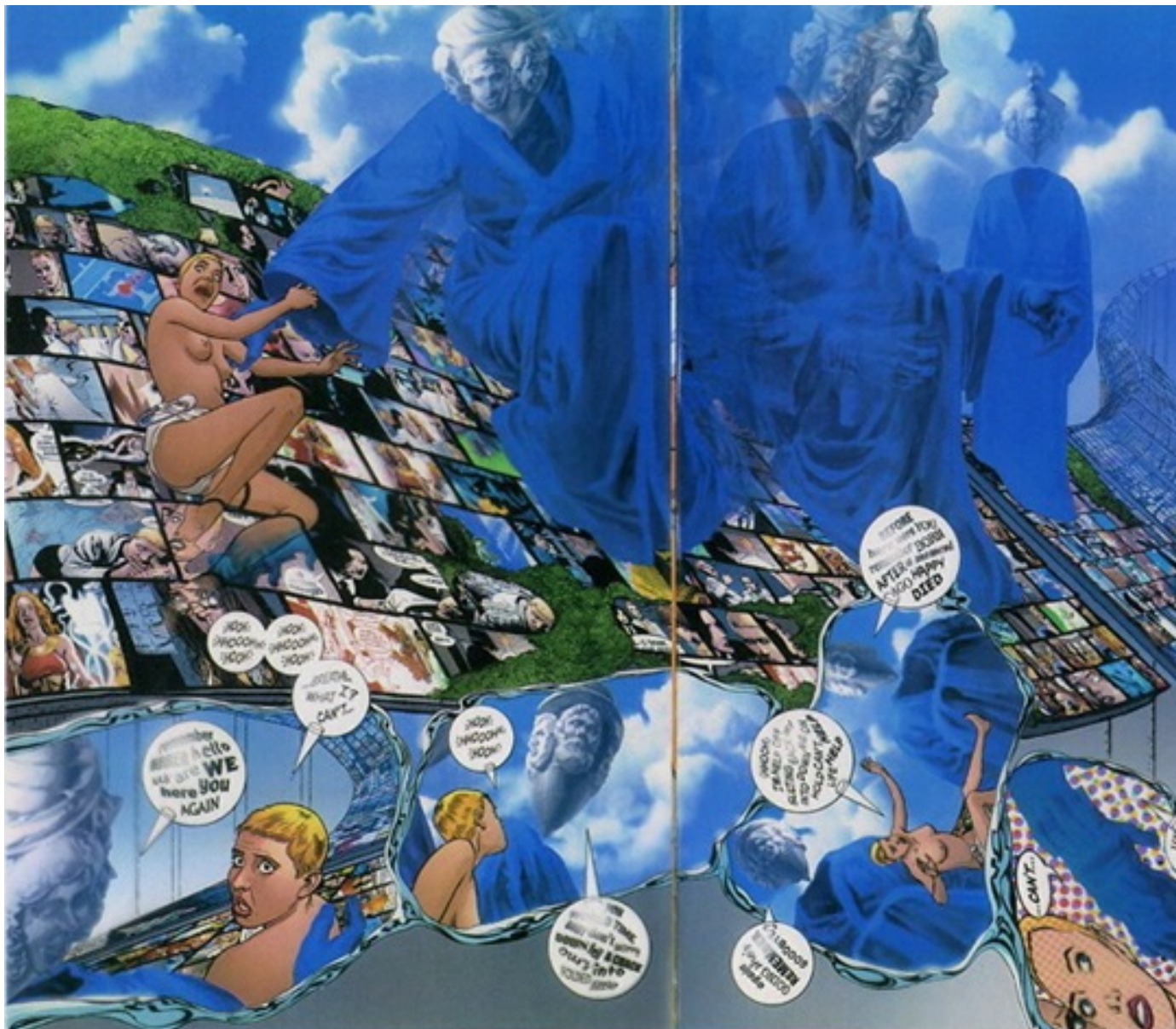


Figure 11. *Promethea*, p.10 - 11. Alan Moore, J.H. Williams III, Mick Gray and Jeromy Cox.

42 *Promethea* concludes with literal Revelation. The importance of a vision of Judgment to an historical attitude is articulated by British historian E.H. Carr in *What is History?* Carr argues that in order to have a vision of history as progress, one needs a sense of the absolute, of some total goal towards which humanity is moving. Carr is careful to avoid the pitfall of totalitarian thinking, and his sense of the absolute is compatible with Moore's vision of simultaneity:

The absolute in history is not something in the past from which we start; it is something in the present, since all present thinking is necessarily relative. It is something still incomplete and in process of becoming -- something in the future towards which we move, which begins to take shape only as we move towards it and in the light of which, as we move forward, we gradually shape our

interpretation of the past. This is the secular truth behind the religious myth: the meaning of history will be revealed in the Day of Judgment. (121)

In *Promethea's* representation of the Day of Judgment, the comic book's aesthetic here offered as a utopian redemption through personal apocalypse. This is an intervention, an introduction of anagogy into a reified form of consumer culture reflected in the stylistic flourishes which characterize *Promethea's* artwork. *Promethea* is distinguished by a fair amount of formal experimentation such as polyptychs, in which moving figures are reproduced over a continuous background. Frequent elimination of gutters, inviting us to grasp a series of images as a whole. These all gesture towards images of simultaneity and totality. One telling example is this moebius strip image (#15/8-9, see **Figure 12**) which literally requires the reader to turn the page in order to continue the narrative, since the characters are caught in repetitive dialogue without beginning or ending.

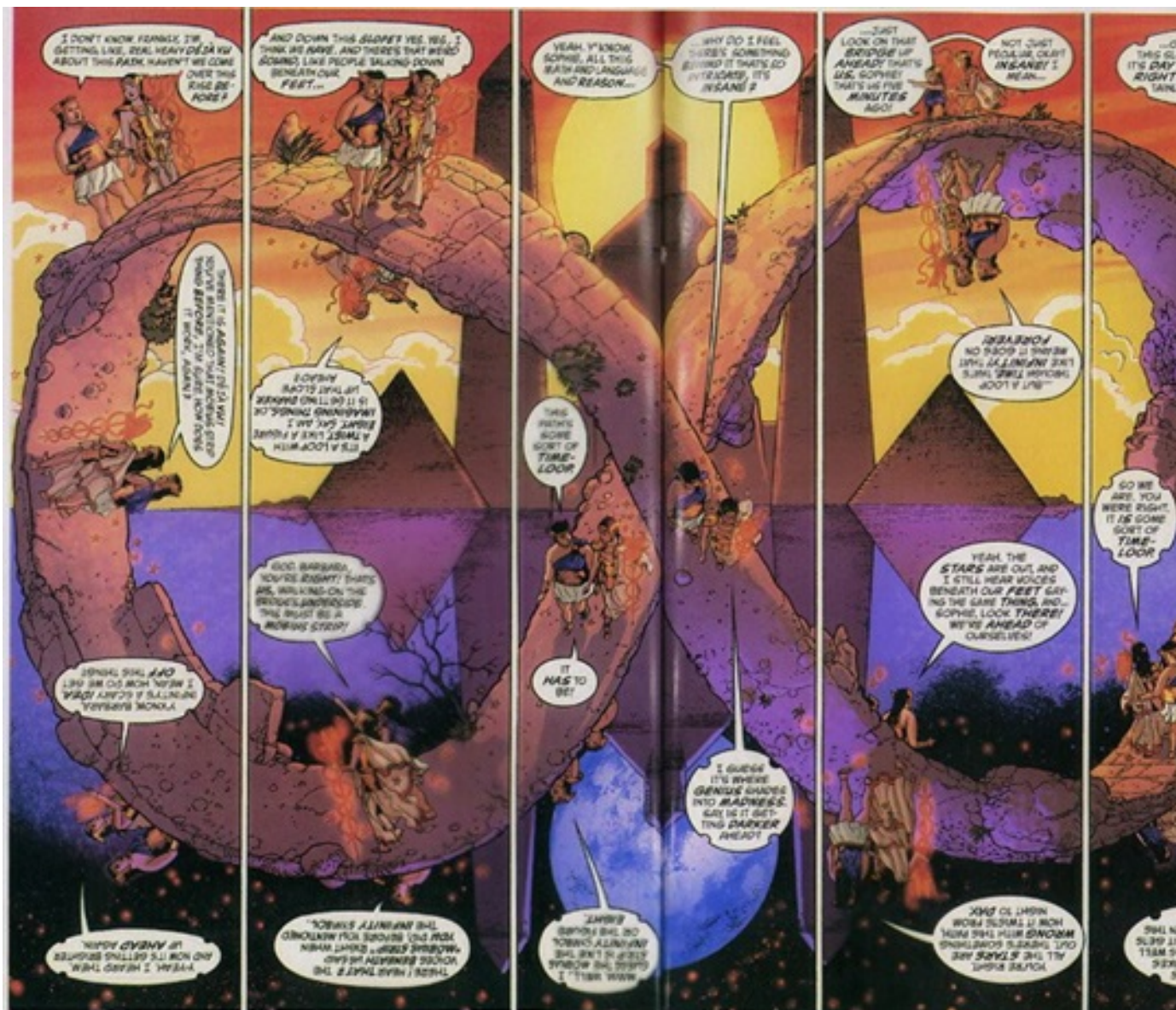


Figure 12. *Promethea* #15, p. 8 - 9. Alan Moore, J.H. Williams III, Mick Gray and Jeromy Co

Yet lest we conclude that this is a turn towards the formally aesthetic, we should note that the apocalypse happening in *Promethea* in 2004 is presented as revisiting upon the catastrophe of September 11, 2001:

We all looked up to blinding spectacle, said holy this or holy that, so it was terrible blue day again, but night now, with two towering absences more vivid more heavy than the gone mere solids raised before, our captured rooks, w curling in on that same dreadful, beautiful elliptic, New York's gaudy hot-a-fabulous apocalyptic angel spirit, three years gone, entered again into her c (#28/1)

Promethea is the terrifying holiness, the sense of meaningfulness, that becomes moments of human history and renders them historical: "She ran across brilliant paint whereafter everything we touched came away wet yellow, sticky l clothes spoiled with fresh thought" (#28/6). *Promethea* is *significance*, in human reality itself, and J.H. Williams portrays this meaningfulness through montages of New York as a global cityscape: towers and buildings from a variety architectural situations around the world are placed next to each other and glowing pastels. Moreover, the visual representation of the apocalypse as meaningfulness is figured in the comic as a rolling wave of vibrant color that from New York and engulfs the planet: it is history portrayed as an unstoppable washing over humans and transforming them in its wake. As they are caught in a spreading wave, the characters are transformed from inked and flat-colored into lushly painted figures, given greater depth and dimensionality. The blackout of August 2003 is figured as another emergence of *Promethea*. It is a moment of simultaneity and anagogy: "Then New York dimmed to shadow deep where thousands tramped the bridge or hung from creaking tailboards c manpiled truck so it felt like Bombay, like Tijuana, as if all the cities of the Earth one simultaneous place," and which made "our six billion seem a family of f The events following September 11, 2001 are portrayed as moments of collective and epiphany, but which quickly returned to mundane reality: "Suddenly exactly who we were, for better or worse, and then the President announced we were needed in Iraq" (#28/18). Moore wants to remind us that the act of mass non was September 11th has also become the raw material for modern shamans to

acts of social magic: we have our own Ozymandias, our own sinister architect Moore reproduces in *Promethea* the overt politicizing gestures which characterize her work in the 1980s. Moore also relates *Promethea* to the ensuing invasions of Afghanistan in an allegorical narrative resembling Hegel's interpretation of *Antigone*. Moore frames the historical conflict between Christianity and Islam as an internal division within herself. He offers a story of two Prometheas, one serving Christ and one serving the Islamic world, ignorant of the other's existence: "And so the spirit of Promethea was divided in two, and she did not know it" (#24/9). This culminates in the Crusades, and the encounter between the two righteous defenders of their monotheisms in 1097, at Antioch, where they are to destroy each other, and the Promethea spirit reunites. Moore's allegory would be enough if not for the concluding lines of this narrative: "And the planes hit the World Trade Center. And the smartbomb hit the mosque. The tanks roll over a demolished set of streets. A pretty student in the shopping precinct gets exactly halfway through her last day of school" (#24/18). The conflicts between America and the Islamic people of the Middle East, and between Palestinians and Israelis, are mediated by Moore as Promethea, divided within herself. Much as Hegel read *Antigone* as a story of the Absolute Spirit divided in the substance of Antigone and Creon, who are doomed to a conflict between themselves that resolves itself in their mutual destruction, Moore points out that monotheistic religions arise from a common root, which is quite simply the human imagination itself. These gestures, which deliberately ruin Moore's allegory, drag it down to earth, so to speak, must be understood as blunt gestures of politicizing and didactic limitations on our interpretations of a highly abstract narrative of Judgment. When the apocalypse begins we are offered a series of renderings of the tarot, with intertextual gestures towards the significance of the symbolism unfurling in the cards. One particularly resonant image presents the card called The Chariot as a photograph of the Kennedy motorcade, moments before JFK was shot: next to Jacqueline Kennedy sits not the President, but an enormous grail-chalice (#29/18-19, see **Figure 13**). This image is simultaneously an allegorization of history, and a politicization of Moore's work. The infamous "seven seconds that broke the back of the American century," as Dorrit Lin (181), are figured here as a moment of revelatory apocalypse. Promethea is history, and the events become the substance of history itself. She is how humanity becomes n



Figure 13. *Promethea* #29, p.18 - 19. Alan Moore, J.H. Williams III, Mick Gray and Jeromy C

Libidinal History

44 Hegel called the absolute the Absolute Spirit; in Moore it is the human image which is always privileged in *Promethea* as able to transcend the oppositions of thinking. As we have seen, as *Promethea* moves towards the end of her allegorical enlightenment she arrives in a series of mental planes where identities are still in opposition. Popular deconstruction tends to valorize such collapsing of opposites, but in Moore the fundamentally ambivalent nature of the identity between opposites for humans is addressed on more than one occasion. If history is a substance which is both immaterial and material, meaningful and meaningless, simultaneously sacred and profane, the violence inherent in this substance must be acknowledged. And this is something Moore does in *Promethea*, when the Prometheas arrive at the realm of Taboo. This is the source of all existence, the metaphoric "birth" of the universe. "All existence. The moment it ends. I love you. Godsex. It's all godsex. It's so pure, and

it's ... what's that word? The word that means sacred and profane?" (#22/13). The word is taboo, and this word heralds in a two-page image that was censored by DC comic book. The comic book appeared in single issue form: "Pan and Selene. The myth, where Pan is a satyr, although ... it's almost like she wanted that. Like he had to" (#22/16. **see fig. 14**). This is a vision of libidinal history, of the origin of creation as a cosmic rape: as profane as sacred, it is an act of "godsex." It is the orgasm at the origin which is the dialectic between meaning and meaninglessness within history. Moore repeats the apocalypse proper: the current mayor of New York, former porn-star Ulysses, decides to celebrate the end of the world by having sex with former Miss America Baskerville, who suffers from a multiple personality disorder. Their carnal act culminates in Baskerville sprouting many heads, and Cascade demanding that Ulysses "£\$%& me! £\$%& me, you filth, you animal! £\$%& me until I hurt until I bleed until I'm like twenty thousand burning cities!" (#30/13). The result of their sex act is an explosion of energy that escalates the ongoing apocalypse into a nation-wide catastrophe.



Figure 14. *Promethea* #22, p. 16.

The attempt to explore the consequences and the possibilities of a dialectic and hate, sex and rape, as a substantial historical force, reminds me immediately of *Watchmen* that continues to trouble readers. As discussed, Dr. Manhattan's personal epiphany, in which he rediscovers the singular meaningfulness of hurt, its sheer accidental quality, arises as a result of witnessing Laurie Jupiter's realization of her own: she is the daughter of a man who is notorious for once raping her mother. The truth that eventually emerges is that Sally Jupiter eventually forgives the Comedian, despite hating him. Once more we are presented with a seemingly misogynistic logic: one that conflates sex and rape. This is the logic of the rape in his own actions. Yet this is not what Dr. Manhattan learns from the revelation; he returns meaning to humanity for him:

Thermodynamic miracles ... events with odds against so astronomical they are effectively impossible, like oxygen spontaneously becoming gold. I long to witness such a thing. And yet, in each human coupling, a thousand million sperm meet a single egg. Multiply those odds by countless generations, against the odds of your ancestors being alive; meeting; siring this precise son; that exact daughter your mother loves a man she has every reason to hate, and of that union, out of a thousand million children competing for fertilization, it was you, only you, who emerged. (#9/26-27)

It is not that Sally Jupiter subconsciously wanted the assault and therefore felt sympathy for her rapist. It is not that her apparent *hate* was in fact *love*. Rather, to understand this situation we must think in contradictions: her love and hate for the Comedian are irreconcilable; her hate was not simply love in disguised form. Both emotions were not compatible. They are aspects of a real contradiction, and out of the collision of these contradictions arises the impossible yet true miracle: the resolution of these contradictions in the new human life, the identity of opposites that are still irreconcilable to each other. Like the thermodynamic miracle, it is something impossible for the rational mind which cannot conceive of both poles of a contradiction as true. Impossible yet true in the realm of taboo is the identity of the sacred and the profane, the resolution of incompatible opposites are rendered identical. As taboo, Promethea is effective precisely because which is inconceivable for the rational mind. An encounter with her is overheard as "you're like the horniest thing I've ever seen, and ... and I feel like I'm talking with

(#27/15). She is an emancipatory rendering of the violation of the incest taboo so as to render clear its truth: incest, the will to endogamy, is the experience from which humans are severed by their humanity.

46

Lacan theorized the imagined end of human desire as the impossible experience of *jouissance*, from the French word *jouir*, to enjoy. *Jouissance* is the idea that Lacan seeks to lead us towards a small personal apocalypse. The theory of *jouissance* in order for civilization to function, there must be a limit to human pleasure: that impossible extra-pleasure we deny ourselves by virtue of being historical human beings. It is enjoyment *beyond* pleasure, and therefore the intimacy of human must always be both desirable and threatening: much like the contradiction of Moore's "godsex." As the imaginative limit of desire, *jouissance* is analogous to anagogy. For a human being, *jouissance* is the experience of pleasure indistinguishable from suffering, and *jouissance* is often characterized by an alienated imperative to enjoy oneself: of course, there is nothing less pleasurable than being commanded to enjoy oneself. Within Lacanian thinking, *jouissance* functions as the concept of the absolute in the quotation from E.H.Carr above. In *Prometheus Bound*, redemption in apocalypse is represented as the realization of *jouissance*, the violation of the realm of libidinal taboo. When Prometheus witnesses Pan raping Selene, crowned by a chalice with a dove about to enter it. When the apocalypse of humanity experiences Revelation as an overly libidinized state of being, a situation is heralded by a wand entering a chalice, a piece of over-determined symbolism. This is an apocalypse of desire, the fulfillment of anagogy in the full term. It is both intensely desirable and deeply terrifying at the same time.





Figure 15. from *Lust: A Pornography*. Alan Moore and Mike Matthews.

47

This dramatization of *jouissance* ultimately creates a conjunction between narratives of personal history, insight and epiphany which I have explored through the mediation of those individual apocalypses into a larger, collective space of historical work. For Moore, libidinal history is both individual and collective at the same time. This returns us to the book which began this essay, *The Mirror of Love*, a short history of sex desire, a lyrical, first-person portrayal of the redeeming historical power of love which ends quite apocalyptically: "While life endures we'll love, / and afterwa

they say is true, / I'll be refused a Heaven / crammed with popes, / fundamentalists, / and burn instead, / quite happily, / with Sappho, Michel
you, my love. / I'd burn throughout eternity / with you" (80). It is productive
The Mirror of Love to a short piece Moore wrote the next year, called *Lust: A*
(1989).^[13] The narration of *Lust* describes, in graphic detail and from a male perspective, an aggressive seduction/rape of a woman, while the visual imagery of the story depicts the nuclear escalation between America and the Soviet Union which ends with the
destruction of the Earth, a figurative rape which the male narrator experiences as a
successful sexual conquest (see **Figure 15**). There is nothing redeeming about this
apocalypse: it is the result of the profane power of history without any sense of purpose.
Here, meaninglessness inherits the earth in a triumph of *ressentiment*.
somewhere between *The Mirror of Love* and *Lust: A Pornography*. As *jouissance*,
Janus-faced force, alternately a drive of redemption and damnation, of salvation

48 Thus the logic of history is contradictory. In its ideal imagined state, history is
between the sacred and the profane, but humanity within the historical process
experiences history as the gap or distance between the two: history as incomplete
yet fulfilled. Any human perspective on redeemed history can only see it as a
substance which is *both* sacred and profane (what would this be? It is inconceivable
and we can only call it taboo), but as the identity between what are, for us, opposites.
our perspective on fulfilled history will always be imperfect and fraught, will always
a threat of some kind, as a danger to human reality as it stands now because it is
alien to our consciousnesses.

49 Yet Moore offers comic books as playful intimations of such transcendent possibilities.
effect, Moore is trying to keep Pictopia from being bulldozed over. When *Watchmen*
appeared in 1986, its effect was to spawn imitators who were content to do little more than
cynically demythologize mainstream comic books. When Moore, after a brief period of
independent publishing in the late '80s, returned to superhero comics in the 1990s, he
rejected the cynical treatment of this subject matter, of which his own previous work was
necessarily a part:

I suppose with things like the ABC work, with *Supreme*, with *1963*, it was kind of an attempt to say, "Look, you know, get over *Watchmen*, get over the 1980s." It has to be depressing, miserable grimness from now until the end of time. It's only a bloody comic. It wasn't a jail sentence. That was the thing I most regretted about *Watchmen*: That something I saw as a very exciting celebratory thing was going to become a kind of hair shirt that the super-hero had to wear forever after -- yeah, super-heroes from now on, they've all got to be miserable and do it. And if they've got to be psychopathic as well, so much the better. That was what me and Dave intended. (Khoury 120)

Moore's work in the twenty-first century, while continuing to explore the themes of the 1980s and 1990s, does so with an eye towards maintaining the imaginative possibilities of comic books, of enriching the particular fun inherent in the form. No doubt why Moore is the consummate collaborator: he writes out of a love for the form and for its history, and with an appreciation of the strengths of every artist who works with him, tailoring his scripts to their particular styles of illustration. I suggest, finally, that in the pleasure, in the fun of comics that Moore sees its most liberating possibilities. The representation of Pictopia is a vast metropolis where every character who has ever existed still lives: the sides of buildings are a vast array of simultaneous comic book panels stretching as far as the eye can see. Pictopia has an interesting resemblance to the multifaceted jewel of time, the simultaneity described in *Manhattan*, and the Radiant, Heavenly City where Promethea takes us at the end of her tale. Pictopia is utopia, the place we are offered small glimpses of in every issue of Moore's work.

Notes

[1] Moore and Villarrubia on *The Mirror of Love*. newsarama.com.
<http://www.news...rs/Mirror_Love.htm>.

[2] The long history of Marvelman/Miracleman is documented by George Khoury's excellent book *Kimota! The Miracleman Companion*.

[3] Throughout this paper I cite individual issue numbers and page numbers (issue number/page number) of comic books, whenever possible, even when the material is readily available in collected form. This citational method allows readers using either individual issues and collected editions to access the citations with equal ease. I note here that the comics quoted in this essay often lack pagination, either in individual issues or collected editions.

[4] He continued to write the book until 1987, and during this time it was drawn by John Totleben, Steve Bissette and Rick Veitch.

[5] As we shall see, the figure of the shaman becomes a recurring villain for Moore. The shaman is essentially a figure who claims to mediate between humanity and the spirit world, while in fact puppeting humanity for his own ends. In this, the shaman is a trope for the political leaders who are often the object of Moore's scorn.

[6] "In Pictopia!" is reprinted in *The Extraordinary Works of Alan Moore* by Geoff Klock.

[7] In *How to Read Superhero Comics and Why*, Geoff Klock points out that Moore's famous Superman story called "Whatever Happened to the Man of Tomorrow?" is also a rejection of *Crisis on Infinite Earths*'s revisionism. Declaring itself an "imaginary story" which need not be determined to fit into the official Superman continuity, Moore points out that they are all imaginary stories. The mistake of revisionism is in determining some stories are "true" and others "false." This binary thinking abandons the essential liberty of fiction to imagine alternate worlds. Klock also notes that in the mini-series *The Watchmen*, Moore's nostalgic take on the silver age of Marvel superheroes, we are given a brief glimpse of the Aleph, a point from which all the universes of all comic books are simultaneously visible. In *1963* issue number six, pages 20-21, we see several windows into the fictional worlds of numerous comic book creators, such as Scott McCloud, Eddie Campbell, Dave Coverly, Miller, Dave Sim, Steven Bissette and Michael T. Gilbert. See Klock 22-24.

[8] The interrelationship between freedom and necessity is an ongoing theme for Moore. In *Marvelman*, for example, the superheroes debate their project in the face of criticism from liberals who claim that the heroes are interfering in human affairs and taking away humanity's free will, comes the reply, "Bullshit. You see some liberal about to drink Clorox, you take away his free will or he ain't gonna get no destiny." This doesn't end the debate between the superheroes but it represents the refusal of Moore's writing, to rigidly oppose such concepts. In this crudely phrased response, the point is nevertheless lucid: destiny and free will are aspects of a single process. In *Vendetta*, the terrorist in a Guy Fawkes mask engages in consciousness-raising by convincing people they have been captured and imprisoned: it is when they are dehumanized and placed in a cage that humans learn of *freedom's necessity* (260). It is when they become conscious of the oppressiveness of their society and resolve to reject it.

[9] <http://www.thee...uk/mooreiview.htm>

[10] <http://www.thee...uk/mooreiview.htm>

[11] <http://www.thee...uk/mooreiview.htm>

[12] In a playful extrapolation on the theory of comic book simultaneity, consider *Alan Moore's Tomorrow Stories*, in which boy-inventor Jack B. Quick turns back to a point where he retreats past earlier issues of the comic, and finally back to a point where there are no panel borders and he can talk to himself in the adjacent panels: "This is a sort of timeless state, where there are no dividing lines between the individual panels."

me! Look! There I am again down there! Hi, Jack! How's things?" (#4/26). The scene serves as an illustration of McCloud's thesis on the identity of space and time in

[13] The historical importance of *Lust: A Pornography* for Moore personally is in his request that it be reprinted in George Khoury's *The Extraordinary Works of*

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