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Which Side are You On? The Worlds of Grant Morrison

By Francesco-Alessio Ursini, Adnan Mahmutovic and Frank Bramlett

1

Grant Morrison is a key figure among the first wave of authors of the so-called "British Generation" (Sandifer and Eklund). The works of the other two creators, Neil Gaiman and Alan Moore, have been the basis for a wealth of scholarly research within the field of comics studies and whole constellations of literary scholarship (Sandifer and Eklund; Sanders; Krueger and Shaeffer; Millidge). Morrison's fictional worlds, however, remain understudied, despite the fact that, as Marc Singer observes, Morrison's work and career seem to be evenly distributed along a continuum ranging from the alternative Vertigo material to the mainstream superhero comics (Singer 10-30). Furthermore, what should be of interest to comics scholars is the peculiar character of Morrison's method, which seems to lie in his unique approach to the creative process. A chaos magician, shrewd comic entrepreneur, self-proclaimed geek and a closet workaholic, Morrison has always juggled several projects at once, often transferring ideas and concepts across series as a result, using subtle references to Borges and Calvino together with obscure mentions of silver age characters of DC comics, as for instance Buddy Baker/Animal Man (Callahan; Shapira). Since Morrison has spread his intense commitment to artistic production over a vast continuum of work, the net result is that the boundaries between "mainstream" and "alternative" productions have become thin.

2 Exploring Morrison's fictional universe(s), let alone any principled methods that lie behind his work, may seem like a daunting challenge. For this reason, in December 2013, we organized a conference in Stockholm, entitled *Which Side are You on? The Worlds of Grant Morrison*. We sought to build on and add to Morrison scholarship presented at the earlier conference entitled *Grant Morrison and the Superheroes Renaissance*, which was held in Dublin in September 2012, and which resulted in the edited volume with the eponymous name (Roddy and Greene).^[1] The point of departure for the Stockholm conference was an idea, expressed in a meme-like sentence, which appears in several Morrison's works, in particular early works such as *Doom Patrol* and *Zenith*. In the celebrated issue #32 of *Doom Patrol*, Booster Gold asks Blue Beetle, upon the arrival of the Doom Patrol: "Which side are they on, anyway?" Within the economy of the story, the question provides an interesting dilemma whether the Doom Patrol is on the side of the heroes or the villains. Although the Brotherhood of Dada has used a mystic recursive painting to suck away the city of Paris, their intentions are innocuous. They simply want to make life weirder and more interesting for Parisians. The Doom Patrol, on the other hand, is hardly recognized as a group of super-heroes, and may be

faced with a task that may bring boredom back to the world.

- 3 Whether or not this issue and the rest of Morrison's run on this series answer the question of which side the Doom Patrol are on, it presents one overarching theme of Morrison's work, the question of choice between (or beyond) sides within any given binary system. This issue is related to what appears to be Morrison's systematic and yet dynamic exploration of several conceptual continua and philosophical positions. Morrison's work deals with a large number of binary tropes such as: fiction/reality, authorship/creation, male/female, human/animal, identity/anonymity, whole/fragmentary, popular/highbrow, quotidian/extraordinary, order/chaos, and many more. Though each of these binaries takes center stage in a different work, most of them appear throughout Morrison's oeuvre, forming any number of thematic relations. Comics, by virtue of their multimodal nature, can be studied as dramatizations or artistic renderings and examinations of conceptual systems. In this regard, one *raison d'être* of this collection lies in an attempt to explore the variegated systems that seem to form the fabric of Morrison's works.
- 4 Morrison seems extremely prone to exploring the conceptual spaces that emerge between polar opposites, which is why the question of "Whose side are you on?" presents a working metaphor for Morrison's building and examination of such systems. For instance, the Doom Patrol and the Brotherhood of Dada briefly engage in various skirmishes, only to join forces and fight against the fifth horseman. The Invisibles and the Outer Church turn out to be two sides of a more complex reality, triggering the coming of the super-context. Young and old generations of heroes fight for the control of reality in *Zenith* and *X-Men*; reality and fiction are perennially interwoven in *Doom Patrol* and *Joe the Barbarian*. Sides and characters can switch allegiances easily, or may just endlessly fluctuate between poles like John-A-Dreams, a character who is able to re-enter the narration of *The Invisibles* and be distributed among several incarnations.
- 5 As pointed out by scholars such as Callahan, Shapira, Singer and Meaney, Morrison often implements specific and recurring themes in his works, and builds complex conceptual systems. However, Morrison's systems seem to form a web of conceptual relations that resist simple (and simplistic) interpretations. Therefore, our goal was two-fold. First, we wanted to explore how Morrison creates his conceptual systems through synthesis, that which Singer calls the "union of opposites." Second, we sought to discover and analyse how he manipulates and sublimates these systems into newer, more complex and "stranger" ideas, through a mandala-like approach, that is beyond synthesis of opposites. Given the exploratory, inclusive approach that permeates Morrison's fictional universe(s), it seemed necessary to identify and map some of the central themes, theme-clusters, conceptual conundrums, and philosophical experiments that permeate his work. It is clear that Morrison likes to explore conceptual continua and debates, while refraining from taking a side. It was less clear, at least until the conference we held, how vast the number of possible issues was, and how they formed the edifice of Morrison's fiction.
- 6 Although the papers that were presented at the conference dealt with many issues, it became clear that Morrison had a tendency to play with and try to synthesize many apparent dichotomies. As much as Morrison is an author who follows precise working methods and schedules, he is also a man of chaos and creativity, and enjoys tricking his readers into going beyond the systems he presents in his works. This finding is certainly not surprising, for it resonates with previous analyses of Morrison's works, Singer being a particularly strong example. Much more can be said about how Morrison manipulates, fragments and recomposes entire systems in his work in a perfectly recursive fashion (Groensteen), while systematically refraining from taking an ideological stance. This special issue of *ImageText* aims at offering a further discussion of Morrison's work. It collects a set of interdisciplinary analyses, which we chose to cluster around "formal" systems, "content" systems, and "conceptual" systems.

- 7 In the first section, on the formal systems, the papers by Roy Cook, Clare Pitkethly, and Keith Scott explore how Morrison and his collaborators manipulate both text and image, to represent fragmented identities, suit fictions or objects made of language. With regard to the content systems, the papers by Darragh Greene and Kate Roddy explore how Morrison explores notions of interpersonal relations as political, grass-roots relations and pornography as a form of misogyny in comics, respectively. Then we have Nick Galante, and Adnan Mahmutovic, David Coughlan and Steven Blake Erwin, who respectively explore the emancipatory role of fiction in reality and the problematic boundaries between animals and humans. In the same section, Frank Bramlett's paper explores how language is used to construct the sense of superhero "quotidian." When we come to the conceptual systems, Tommi Kakko and Mervi Miettinen, and Francesco-Alessio Ursini explore how language and other cognitive faculties construct standard and hallucinatory understandings of the world in *The Invisibles*. Below follow brief synopses of the papers.
- 8 As mentioned, the first section consists of three papers which deal with Morrison's use of formal aspects of craft in his treatment of diverse philosophical systems of thought. Roy Cook's "Morrison, Magic, and Visualizing the Word: Text as Image in *Vimanarama*" explores how Morrison employs a metafictional strategy that can be read through Walton's "make-believe" theory of fiction. Cook analyses the main character's *pre-mortem* vision of a stinging wasp, represented via the word *wasp*, with the purpose of highlighting the potentiality of the medium of comics to bring to crisis some basic philosophical assumptions about the ways text and image work.
- 9 Clare Pitkethly's "A Rubble of Dislocated Fragments" explores a well-known but seldom discussed feature of Morrison's approach to writing, "fragmentation," or the use of multiple panels to represent fragmented, diffracted identities. Adopting a Lacanian theory, Pitkethly suggests that a fragmentation of a single image into several panels allows Morrison and his collaborators to represent a fragmentation of the characters and their identities.
- 10 Keith Scott's paper on Morrison vs. MorrisonTM discusses how Morrison's image as an author presents a cultivated representation of Morrison as a fictional character. Continuing on the theme of meta-fictions, Scott discusses how Morrison stubbornly refuses Barthes' notion of "death of the author," creating a meta-fictional context in which the author is "alive" at several ontological levels. Scott suggests that although Morrison refrains from envisioning himself as a cultural leader and/or a guru, he still uses his own persona as a "fictionsuit," an avatar of himself within a fictional world.
- 11 In the second section on content systems, Adnan Mahmutovic, David Coughlan and Steven Blake Erwin's paper "*Ecce Animot*" offers an analysis of animal rights and politics in *Animal Man*. They discuss how Morrison proposes human and animal identities in such a way that clashes with his support of animal rights, *qua* living, suffering beings. The authors use Derrida's reading of Heideggerian philosophy to analyse how meta-fictions allows Morrison to address the fundamental question of whether animals can suffer.
- 12 Nick Galante's "World of My Own: *Joe the Barbarian* and the Cathartic Power of Fantasy" explores the relation between the hallucinatory world of Hypogaea and Joe's quest for insulin. Galante suggests that Joe's understanding of his own hallucinatory states and his interaction with these states allows Joe to cope with the reality he lives in. Thus, Galante argues, Morrison offers a view of fantasy literature that rejects the label of "escapist," and shows how fantasy tales can have a regenerative effect on characters and, perhaps by extension, on readers.
- 13 Frank Bramlett explores how Morrison's work on *All-Star Superman* creates a sense of "the quotidian," the ingrained behaviors and expectations of characters about the worlds they inhabit. Bramlett argues that Morrison's work explores how Superman lives his daily life as the most

powerful creature on Earth. Although Morrison is known for creating highly fantastic scenarios, he can nevertheless build contexts in which he can portray the daily life of the world's strongest individual, and the interruptions of this quotidian life, such as Superman's discovery of his own imminent death.

- 14 The third section opens with Tommi Kakko and Mervi Miettinen's analysis of Morrison's subversion of the boundaries between reality and hallucination via the tropical use of drugs, in a manner substantially symmetrical to traditional "drug literature." Kakko and Miettinen discuss how Morrison creates forms of narrative *metalepsis*, a breaking of narrative ontological boundaries (fiction vs. reality) that invites the readers to make sense of fragmented and unconnected narrative sequences.
- 15 Francesco-Alessio Ursini's paper, "Which side are you on? The Reality of the Language of Thought of *The Invisibles*" explores how Morrison uses the themes of language, cognition and the relation between these domains. The main thesis is that the use of linguistic signs in Morrison's works explores themes related to how characters understand the world (cognition), not only when under the influence of drugs, but also when under the control of external agents. Ursini revises Rauch's argument that Morrison followed a relativistic perspective ("language shapes cognition"), and proposes instead that Morrison does not espouse specific stances, but discusses several possible solutions to this relation, in order to make multiple perspectives co-exist within a single narrative structure.
- 16 Darragh Greene's "'Here Comes Tomorrow': The Ethics of Utopianism in Grant Morrison's New X-Men" deals with Morrison's engagement with political themes in his *X-Men* run. Greene suggests that a significant change in Morrison's work, post 9/11, lies in how he discusses methods in political changes. While *The Invisibles* presented a struggle between two sides of an overarching conspiracy to change the world in a top-down fashion, in the *New X-Men*, such mirror approaches are shown to lead to disastrous results, in particular when they articulate the visions of one leading figure (Xavier, Magneto, Sublime). On the other hand, basic interpersonal relationships are suggested to be the building blocks of a better tomorrow and a better society, a goal that is better achieved via a gentle, incremental process.
- 17 Kate Roddy's paper, "Eternal Superteens and Mutant Spermatozoa: Morrison and the Comic as *Porneau*" shows Morrison's use of pornography and sexualisation. She argues that Morrison identifies a problem of traditional male chauvinism and sexualisation in comics, and explores how these themes are presented in works such as *The Filth* and *Seven Soldiers: Bulleteer*. An ongoing aspect of comics that Morrison seems to address is how negative and stereotypical images of women affect social perception of comics.
- 18 In addition to the articles, our readers can take part in the roundtable that involved most participants, which was held on the 20th of December, 2013. [\[2\]](#) The roundtable transcription presents excerpts from the discussion on the key themes of fiction and reality, the presentation of gender, race and ethnicity, species and political entities, and conceptual problems regarding text and image. Overall, as our papers fragment and project Morrison's topics onto a wider conceptual map and its seemingly fragmented sub-systems, our roundtable aimed to bring these topics back together into a coherent whole. Several conclusions were made, but one main result was agreed to be a conceptual toolbox that allowed the participants to better understand Morrison's universe(s) and methods. If the given tools could be employed to crack Morrison's universe, it was suggested, then analyses of any other comics authors will be a piece of cake.

Notes

[1] <http://morrison...ce2012.blogspot.se>

[2] An introduction to this roundtable can be found online, together with a short promotional video: <http://www.engl...uru-grant-morrison>

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Francesco-Alessio Ursini, Adnan Mahmutovic and Frank Bramlett

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