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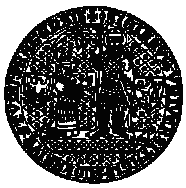

DIPLOMA THESIS

POSTMODERNISM IN BRITISH AND AMERICAN COMICS:

Postmodernist overtones in the works of Alan Moore and Grant Morrison

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Declaration:

I hereby declare that this diploma thesis, titled "Postmodernism in British and American comics: Postmodernist overtones in the works of Alan Moore and Grant Morrison", is the result of my own work and that I used only the cited sources.

Prague, March 15th 2011 ……

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Abstract

The aim of this thesis is the examination and analysis of postmodernist overtones in the medium of comics. It is concerned both with the postmodernist content in comics, and comics' possibilities and attributes as a postmodernist medium. The first part of the thesis elaborates on sequential art in general and the essential elements of postmodernism, such as deconstruction, metafiction, and intertextuality, within its context. The second part of the thesis is concerned with selected postmodernist works of prominent comicbook authors: Alan Moore and Grant Morrison.

Key words

Comics, comicbook, graphic novel, postmodernism, metafiction, intertextuality, continuum, narration, binary oppositions, deconstruction, superhero, author, creation, *Watchmen, Animal Man*

Abstrakt

Cílem této diplomové práce je rozbor a analýza postmoderního podtextu v comicsovém médiu. Práce se zabývá jak postmoderním obsahem v comicsu, tak jeho možnostmi a atributy v roli postmoderního média. První část práce nahlíží obecně na comics jako médium, a na základní prvky postmodernismu, jako jsou dekonstrukce, metafikce a intertextualita, v jeho kontextu. Druhá část práce se zabývá vybranými postmoderními díly významných comicsových autorů: Alana Moorea, a Granta Morrisona.

Klíčová slova

Comics, comicbook, grafická novela, postmodernismus, metafikce, intertextualita, kontinuum, narace, binární opozice, dekonstrukce, superhrdina, autor, dílo, *Watchmen, Animal Man*

Content:

1. COMICS

Before we can begin to elaborate on the connection between comics and postmodernism as such, it is essential to clearly define the term 'comics'. A similar attempt would probably seem absurd in the case of literature, which is to all intents and purposes understood and accepted in its entirety implicitly, but given the troubled history of the comicbook medium in Czech Republic, and its perception in general, it seems quite necessary.

First, it is important to understand comics as an autonomous medium. There is no doubt that comics shares many characteristics with literature, as well with film and visual arts, but in the same way it is not simplified literature, enriched by pictures, it is not a 'paper' representation of a film, nor a poorly executed substitute for an elaborate painting.

One of the first unbiased definitions of the term - sequential art - was coined by Will Eisner in his book *Comics and Sequential Art*, taking into account the fundamental transformation of a single image into two or more images following in some kind of sequence, and thus creating an entirely new art form. This definition was further inspected in Scott McCloud's book *Understanding Comics*. Among other things, McCloud points out the significance of the fact, that "This definition is strictly neutral in terms of style, quality or subject matter" (McCloud 5).

It is extremely important to understand the essential distinction between form and content in the case of comics. This fact is constantly overlooked in the common perception of the medium, although it is naturally understood in the case of others. Seeing comics as illiterate and lowly means mistaking the message for the messenger. The art form of comics is a vessel, able to carry any number of ideas or images; were Shakespeare to immortalize his works in the form of captioned pictures, would they lose any of their value and meaning?

While McCloud's definition of comics as "Juxtaposed pictorial or other images in a deliberate sequence" (McCloud 9) may seem overly convoluted, it successfully

manages to encompass all the types of comics, while not being so broad as to include things that are not comics.

Although the terms 'comics' and 'comicbooks/graphic novels' originally represented slightly different concepts, "The most useful distinction in comics is to be drawn between periodical and book-style publication. A periodical is comprised of issues, one of which always replaces the last one. The title is continuous, but one issue always differs from another. A book is a publication in which the title and issue are the same. A graphic novel is a unified comic art form that exploits the relationship between the two: book and periodical" (Reynolds 127), their use has changed significantly over the last years (due to many periodicals being bound into graphic novels, thus questioning the logic behind the distinction), and they are today understood as synonyms. Their variation in my thesis is purely stylistic.

For the sake of this work, I use the term 'literature' to denominate a medium communicating dominantly through the written word, and as an opposition to the combined concept of the written and the visual, as is seen in comics, although from the postmodernist point of view, the two do not represent oppositions (as no form of art is in itself an opposition of another), but merely fluid counterparts.

I believe that comicbooks have an immense value as a liminal ground between film and literature, a doorway to the world of literary and visual art, and a complex and wonderful medium in itself. Nevertheless, its position as a marginalized source of enjoyment for the uneducated, which is slowly being invalidated, makes it also a perfect object of study in relation to postmodernism. Comics represents a lush oasis for the postmodernist search for new combinations and compositions, for non-traditional narrative devices, for the seemingly nonsensical mash of literary styles and genres, and last but not least, the fierce destruction of the opposition between high and low.

The author of this thesis, will admit that his emotional investment in the subject matter might have swayed him from an objective assessment of the analyzed texts, or more precisely, from an objective delivery of his impressions. The thesis does

not presume to give a comprehensive summary of the authors' intentions; the presented interpretation of their works may be as far from their original intent as any other. If at any point of the thesis we seem to be speaking with certainty on the subject, we humbly accept and understand that we can only perceive the works from our own, inherently limited point of view.

2. COMICS AS A POSTMODERN MEDIUM

One of the most prominent effects of postmodernism on the perception of literature, film, music or art forms in general, was the destruction of the concept of high and low, and in fact, even the concept of being or not being a form of art. Where modernism searched for essential and fundamental basis of art, postmodernism tries to destroy all thus perceived bases and instead, embraces diversity and contradiction. The absolute value of the two main criteria for distinguishing between high-brow and low-brow art, genre and medium, has been effectively obliterated, and replaced by seemingly irreconcilable collage of contradictory elements. Postmodernist view transcends all "objective" art attributes, and even the attributes concerning a single work of art, which it views with a certain irony.

This process started out slowly by erasing the idea of an inherent quality of a certain genre with respect to another (the oldest and most prominent being the belief that tragedy is in terms of artistic value always superior to comedy). But such a thing cannot be confined only to genres: once you accept the relativity of quality, you must proceed even further – to the perceived difference between art forms.

Can a particular art form carry a certain level of quality in itself? Postmodernism does not seem to believe so. Yes, each medium, or art form, has certain characteristics which cannot be substituted by any other form, but in terms of 'quality' or 'value' (a notion of quality and value itself being relativized in postmodernist thinking), it is impossible to find any objective difference.

The first art form to truly struggle with its perception as being low-brow by definition, was cinematography. Movies were much faster, seemingly 'simpler' than their counterparts, literature and theatre.

What people did not realize is that since the invention of printing, there has been approximately the same amount of people looking for easy entertainment, as people looking for 'deeper' value (neither of which can be classified as having a higher or lower status). It is thus understandable that in the same way there is a mass

production of books with no intended value, there is a mass production movies of the same type.
In spite of this development, even today's world is nowhere near accepting comedy as a truly valuable genre, outside the range of making one laugh. With comedy being one of the oldest art forms, how can one expect the world to accept comics as a serious artistic means of expression?

The postmodernist search for a combination of yet unthought-of compounds has in its aim an 'unexplored source', and where literature as such was already proven to be able to carry the burden of art, such things as the comicbook medium provided a completely new playground for the provocative, self-mocking and ironic touch of postmodernism. Not even the mixing of various art elements is as interesting as the mix of elements that are not supposed (within the pre-postmodernist sensibility) to be perceived as communicating art.

Comics represents not only a postmodern substance, which can be shaped and explored in unique and entirely uncharted ways, impossible to attain in other art forms, but also a medium whose very use and serious treatment invokes the spirit of postmodernism.

Postmodernism opened the doors for a completely new manner of thinking, of perceiving things, especially those marginalized by the mainstream society. Aside from a variety of social changes and a heightened awareness of the instability of stereotypes, it led to a never before seen transcendence of long-respected analytical terms such as form, genre and content (even though from the postmodernist point of view, these have always been transcended).

Be it through metafiction, deconstruction, intertextuality, or narrative novelty, it was the postmodernist cultural relativism which brought about comics' first significant opportunity to be accepted as a serious challenge to the more conventional forms of art.

2.1. Deconstruction in comics

One of the concepts most often connected with postmodernism is 'deconstruction' – a term coined by Jacques Derrida in an attempt to show that what we often perceive as an immovable core of a certain system (whether this system is a literary work, social order or a philosophical proposition), is not necessarily as solid as we believe and thus can make the whole system invalid.

In his work *Literary Theory*, Terry Eagleton defines deconstruction as "a critical operation by which binary oppositions can be partly undermined or by which they can be shown to partly undermine each other in the process of textual meaning" (Eagleton 132).

On the example of a man as a founding principle in a male-dominated society, Eagleton first shows that man can be only reminded of what he is by seeing what he is not – a woman. Yet the idea of deconstruction goes even further, that is to the point of questioning the absolute frontier between two oppositions, and therefore questioning even the concept of defining meanings by everything they do not signify. It is perhaps fitting that Derrida himself spent a large portion of his text on deconstruction on saying what it is NOT, rather than what it IS.
Deconstruction also tries to eliminate, or undermine, the distinction between high and low art:

"Structuralism was generally satisfied if it could carve up a text into binary oppositions (high/low, light/dark, Nature/Culture and so on) and expose the logic of their working. Deconstruction tries to show how such oppositions, in order to hold themselves in place, are sometimes betrayed into inverting or collapsing themselves, or need to banish to the text's margins certain niggling details which can be made to return and plague them." (Eagleton 133)

A similar definition is provided by Jonathan Culler in *Literary Theory: A Very Short Introduction*:

"Deconstruction is most simply defined as a critique of the hierarchical oppositions that have structured Western thought: inside/outside, mind/body, literal/metaphorical, speech/writing, presence/absence, nature/culture, form/meaning. To deconstruct an opposition is to show that it is not natural and inevitable but a construction, produced by discourses that rely on it, and to show that it is a construction in a work of deconstruction that seeks to dismantle it an reinscribe it – that is not destroy it but give it a different structure and functioning." (Culler 126)

The reason that comics, and superhero genre in particular, is a perfect "victim" for the relentless drill of deconstruction, is that its founding principles and their oppositions are seemingly unquestionable, yet on closer examination surprisingly fragile and susceptible to dismantling. An argument can be made that there are significantly less 'niggling' details in the works of for example Umberto Eco (or that such details are significantly harder to unravel and use to undermine the basis of the text) than in the adventures of Superman.

We might even go as far as to say that the further a literary text is from "reality", the easier it is to dismantle its core, simply by virtue of the foundation of the story standing on something that collides with 'tangible', rational tools of dismantling it; it relies heavily on its own discourse, it constructs meaning on a virtual non-basis – in other words, it is easier (which does not say anything about the objective, if there can be such a thing, possibility of deconstructing a text) to shake the founding principles of science fiction or fantasy, than of a work rooted in reality, or a work that is purely factual.

To this, Eagleton says: "All language displays this 'surplus' (something that the text shows us even though it is not able to formulate it as a proposition) over exact meaning, is always threatening to outrun and escape the sense which tries to contain it. 'Literary' discourse is the place where this is most evident, but it is also true of all other writing; deconstruction rejects the literary/non-literary opposition as any absolute distinction." (Eagleton 134)

It comes as no surprise that postmodernism at the same time proposes and disproves theorizing. Should I try to transfer the structural issue of literary/non-literary works to that of fantastic/factual, claiming that the 'surplus' over exact meaning is more evident in comicbooks goes directly against the desired repudiation of the absolute distinction between the two. In order to meaningfully analyze a literary issue, I necessarily need to operate with positive textual meaning, which is undesirable in order of absolute deconstruction. This problem is also concisely described by Terry Eagleton: "You can be sure that if your own critical account of someone else's critical account of a text has left the tiniest grains of 'positive' meaning within its folds, someone else will come along and deconstruct you in turn." (Eagleton 127)

By its very definition, the superhero mythos is open to deconstruction on all sides. There are not many things more fantastic than superheroes – whether in the aspect of skills and abilities, or the moral basis of their behavior. The term itself is a lush oasis for postmodernist exploration, because it is as contradictory as its manifestations. The prefix 'super' indicates something 'better' than normal, something extraordinary – the binary opposite of 'ordinary', the 'non-super'; however the conventional definition of a character possessing extraordinary or superhuman powers, with a distinguishing visual characteristic (typically an outfit) has been rendered invalid both in parts (as early as in Batman, who possesses no extraordinary powers) and as a whole (Punisher). The modern age of comics (mid 1980s until present day) in fact builds heavily on characters that are deliberately un-extraordinary, but still considered to be superheroes.

In *Superheroes: A modern Mythology*, Richard Reynolds defines the superhero genre through seven key characteristics:

"1. The hero is marked out from society. He often reaches maturity without having a relationship with his parents

2. At least some of the superheroes will be like earthbound gods in their level of powers. Other superheroes of lesser powers will consort easily with these earthbound deities.

3. The hero's devotion to justice overrides even his devotion to the law.

4. The extraordinary nature of the hero will be contrasted with the ordinariness of his surroundings.
5. The extraordinary nature of the hero will be contrasted with the mundane nature of his alter-ego. Certain taboos will govern the actions of these alter-egos.
6. Although ultimately above the law, superheroes can be capable of considerable patriotism and moral loyalty to the state, though not necessarily to the letter of its laws.
7. The stories are mythical and use science and magic indiscriminately to create a sense of wonder."
(Reynolds 14).

It is quite clear that throughout the years, all of these characteristics were turned on their head, both as a part of an evolvement of the genre and through the questioning of their essence. The former approach is not inherently postmodern – in order to be successful it is inevitable to deviate from a repetitive scheme of things, if only to attract new readership and create an original work of art. But even if a rule is flouted, it is still acknowledged. By contrast, the latter is more concerned with deconstructing the scheme itself, by posing questions such as "what constitutes a costume?" (e.g. many interpretations of the movie quadrilogy *Indiana Jones* view the main character as a superhero with Henry Jones Jr. as an "ordinary" identity and Indiana Jones a superhero in a costume – his easily recognizable brown jacket, hat, whip – even though these are still widely understood as civilian clothing; another example is the interpretative reading of *Superman* with Clark Kent being the alter-ego of Superman, his suit thus filling the role of a costume) or "what is its role?"; aside from the story-given one-dimensional answers such as "to maintain secret identity", Reynolds also explores other reasons: "A costume can be 'read' to indicate an individual hero's character or powers and (incidentally) as a signal he is now operating in his superhero identity and may at any time be involved in violent conflict with costumed villains." (Reynolds 26)
Nevertheless, it is not the definition of a superhero, which is most susceptible to deconstruction; it is the type of morality that superheroes are supposed to represent. The simplest basic premise of their motivation: "to do good" can be pursued to the point where it contradicts itself, whether in the aspect of degree, as explored by

Alan Moore in *Watchmen*, moral relativity, as explored by Grant Morrison in *Animal Man*, or long-term outcomes, as explored by Frank Miller in *The Dark Knight Returns*.

Even the very premise of doing good poses more questions than it really answers. From a philosophical standpoint, a hero's responsibility should be equal to his abilities (as is mindlessly reiterated in all the incarnations of Spider-Man). How can we then call good the most iconic, and most powerful superhero, Superman, if he willingly chooses to spend his time sleeping (which he biologically does not need to do), or performing everyday activities, while there are people he could save? Why does he help almost exclusively Americans? Why does he not interfere in wars, and if he did, on which principles would he base his decisions as to which of the warring parties he should support? Is a person, however capable or powerful, morally entitled to interfere with other people's free will solely on the basis of his or her own perception of right and wrong, good and bad?

Richard Reynolds speaks about „the superhero wrestling with his conscience over which order should be followed – moral or political, temporal or divine." (Reynolds 15). Such a conflict by itself prohibits an unconditional division between good and bad, positive and negative behavior.

The initial superhero stories (such as the Golden Age Superman or Batman) were firmly built on the foundations of the structuralist division between good and bad. Oppositional readings of the text were unnecessary, if not downright undesirable. "In early superhero text, the difference between the preferred and oppositional readings remains clear-cut. The weight of moral decisions and their preferred interpretation are clearly inscribed in the construction of the narrative." (Reynolds 24). Such a naive approach to a subject matter as serious as morality obviously invites its own deconstruction by the very insistence on unchangeable absolutes of right and wrong.

The traditional concept of a superhero (which was in many ways undermined and transformed by Alan Moore's *Watchmen*) does not bother itself with the legality of

their way of obtaining information, their mode of transport, or indeed even of vigilantism itself.

Nevertheless, there is another part of the superhero mythos that secretly hungers to be dismantled by deconstruction. The aforementioned opposition of good and bad invites manifestations of both – if absolute, unequivocal 'good' is represented in the narrative, then we also need a similarly indisputable representation of 'bad'. If one is the superhero, other must be the supervillain. By questioning the perception of 'moral good', and thus the entire concept of a superhero, we also question the distinction between a hero and a villain. Our main question here is: "How and on what basis did the narrative arrive at the point of (seemingly) clearly distinguishing between the two?"

According to Reynolds, we can deduce a working definition of a villain by inverting certain characteristics of a superhero, for example 3 and 6 (sense of justice and moral loyalty to the state/people). This by itself shows that the definition of a villain necessarily shifts with the changing definition of a hero. The relationship between a hero and a villain in the conceptual sense constitutes one of the main themes in Alan Moore's *Watchmen* (see section 3).

Since the paradox of contrasting opposites (or destroying the founding principles) and finding the need to first accept these as opposites (founding principles) to be able to disclaim them is connected with deconstruction and postmodernism as such, and cannot really be resolved, I will not address this issue further and leave all the necessary distinctions and absolute principles to 'contaminate' my work as it did Derrida's.

2.2. Intertextuality in a shared universe

Intertextuality is widely recognized as one of the cornerstones of postmodernist school of literary theory. It refers to the idea of an interwoven "fabric" of literature, which is created by all literary works and which in turn influences these works, whether openly (in this case, it is by some authors used as a more "high-brow" term for allusion) or covertly. Jonathan Culler provides the following explanation:

"Recent theories have argued that works are made out of other works: made possible by prior works which they take up, repeat, challenge, transform. This notion sometimes goes by the fancy name of 'intertextuality'. A works exists between and among other texts, through its relation to them. To read something as literature is to consider it a linguistic event that has meaning in relation to other discourses..." (Culler 33)

Intertextuality in superhero comics (in this instance, the term 'superhero comics' refers to comics with a shared universe) differs considerably from intertextuality as it is understood in the literary circles (even though this understanding is, as almost all things postmodern, subject to various and often contradictive interpretations). Post-structuralism postulates a literary fabric which encompasses all the literary works, and connects them. In other words, the intertextuality is inherent to the art form (a book has been written, therefore it is as a whole form and content in some relationship with all the other books simply by the virtue of it being a book), but there is no intrinsic connection in the content itself among the various books printed by the same publishing house.

Most superhero comicbooks, on the other hand, are subject to both these types – they naturally cannot escape intertextuality as part of the art form, but they also contain inherent intertextuality in the terms of content. It is always present, both implicitly and explicitly. The comicbook heroes live not only in their own books, their own titles, but also in all the other stories and comicbook series published by the same publisher.

In its specific way, no other medium is as intertextual as comics – in fact, content intertextuality is the essence of the superhero comicbooks as we know them today. This is due to the fact that almost all the superheroes and all the stories published by a particular publisher share the same 'fictional reality' as all the other superheroes and stories by that publisher. In comics, this phenomenon is called 'a universe' or 'continuity'. The two most prominent continuities are the Marvel Universe and the DC Universe, created by the two biggest publishers of superhero comicbooks, Marvel and DC respectively.

"The intertextuality, forming in total the 'Marvel Universe' and 'DC Universe', is the feature of superhero comics that most often surprises those who are not regular readers. Conversely, continuity – as it is always known – forms the most crucial aspect of enjoyment for the committed fans." (Reynolds 38)

Continuity represents a fictional universe, simultaneously and continuously created and enriched by several authors, contrasting with collaborative writing, where multiple authors work on a single story.

Although this concept also appears in other art forms, sometimes even inter-medially (such as the Star Wars Universe, which is composed of movies, animated series, books, comicbooks and board-games), it is especially significant in comics. The earliest instance of continuity was employed by DC in 1940, specifically by Gardner Fox in *All Star Comics #3*, where for the first time, characters from different series met to form the Justice Society of America. This prompted a very important transformation in the perception of the DC titles. Up to that point, all the superheroes had 'existed' only within their own titles, and although the vast majority of the stories had taken place in the United States, they had interacted no more than John Irving's characters interact with the 'clancyesque' heroes on the basis of their existence in similar places in similar timelines, and a common publisher. This was even more pronounced in the case of Marvel Comics, which preferred to have their heroes function in real-world cities such as New York or Los Angeles (whereas DC invented fictional cities like Metropolis or Gotham City).

Gardner Fox was the first author to propose the idea that all the heroes in fact shared the same universe.

Even though at first DC's publications paid little regard to maintaining the continuity, this phenomenon later developed into a cornerstone of modern comics. In 1961, Marvel adopted this idea and under the management of Stan Lee started to publish titles in which various events would have repercussions in other titles, and where the headline characters from one series would make cameo appearances in other character's series (a heavy intertextuality existed for example between Spider-Man and Daredevil).
This concept was later defined as a 'crossover', and became an inseparable part of comicbook storytelling (and story-selling, apparently, as is evidenced by the feverish overuse of crossovers in the past ten years by both Marvel and DC in order to attract readers to more obscure titles and generate income – a case in point being the various *Crisis* titles by DC or the *Civil War, Secret Invasion* and others by Marvel).
Both DC and Marvel have gradually expanded the idea of a shared universe into a 'multiverse', a term which encompasses all the various universes created by the publisher (such as the 'main continuity' and 'ultimate continuity' in Marvel Comics).

This lead to a creation of a unique sort of 'meta-text', a shared narrative, the sum of all the stories told in all the comicbooks by a particular publishing house, not only in the sense of various titles, but also temporally; a text that does not exist by itself, but only as a fragmented whole, contained in all the individual stories. "The continuity is a langue in which each particular story is an utterance." (Reynolds 45)
This inevitably poses a question concerned with the relationship of the parts to the whole, more specifically the necessity of acquiring all the "pieces of the puzzle" to create the final image. However, according to Reynolds, the metatext can never exist in any definite form because: "1. No one has in practice ever read every single canonical DC or Marvel title; 2. New canonical texts are being added every month. Any definitive metatextual resolution is therefore indefinitely postponed." (Reynolds 43). The superhero titles are in most cases self-contained literary

objects (although the publishers occasionally split the stories among various titles linked to a particular character to attract the attention of the readers – for example the storyline *Death of Superman* by DC, which, if to be read as a comprehensible whole, must be pieced together from the titles *Superman: Man of Steel, Superman, The Adventures of Superman, Action Comics* and the *Justice League of America*), but they frequently allude to other titles.

Reynolds recognizes three types of continuity – serial, hierarchical and structural – of which the last one is the most important for the creation of the metatext:
"(...) structural continuity embraces more than the sum of all the stories and canonical interactions between superheroes, villains, and the supporting casts. Structural continuity also embraces those elements of the real world which are contained within the fictional universe of the superheroes and actions which are not recorded in any specific text, but inescapably implied by continuity." (Reynolds 41)

So far, I have been writing about connections within the works published by a particular publisher – predominantly Marvel and DC. Nevertheless, a single attempt to harvest more money from the readers - a one-time crossover between the two publishers - and the subsequent creation of the Amalgam Comics, inevitably changed the perception of the two universes. In 1996, Marvel and DC comics published a 4-issue series *DC vs. Marvel*, in which characters from the DC universe competed with those originating in the Marvel universe, and throughout 1996 and 1997, both Marvel and DC contributed to a metafictional publishing house Amalgam comics, which published 'merged' versions of various superheroes (e.g. Dark Claw – a combination of Batman (DC) and Wolverine (Marvel)), existing in a parallel universe.

This one-time event was most likely nothing more than a clever marketing scheme, but from the postmodernist point of view, it drastically changed the perception of the Marvel and DC universes. It in fact seems to be insinuating that both universes are in some way connected, that they are, and always have been, parallel to each other. Much as Borges' short story *Pierre Menard* looks at literary works as unbound to their temporal period, and always subject to retrospective changes of

how they are perceived in the light of the works that succeeded them, we feel tempted to apply the connection between the DC and Marvel universes retrospectively. In other words, to believe that there has always been an implied connection between the two universes, and through the single, seemingly insignificant editorial decision, all the titles published by the two publishers must be forever seen as sharing the same content, being a part of an even greater meta-text.

But how does the concept of intertextuality change in the context of a shared universe? It obviously retains its original features if one universe or work is compared to other universes or works, both in the form of comics and literature (as they are so closely related that there is an inevitable intertextual connection between them), since there is no inherent connection in content. The question is whether the intentional connectedness of the content to the point of 'sharing' the same story changes the meaning of intertextuality, or better yet, whether there can even exist an intertextuality within a 'meta-text'. It is in itself one text, even though it comprises works written by different authors. Is the intertextuality still present? Has it been reduced to simple allusion? Or has the opposite happened – that it has been further strengthened by the related content?

It can conceivably manifest itself in the form of forward and retrospective influence within the meta-text, because what has been written still influences both what *will* be written and what *was* written, for the meta-text is composed of works by different authors and these authors and their works are influenced not only by the works outside their universe, but also, and much more strongly, by the works within. The internal influence is in fact so powerful it has actually been transformed into a sort of an 'intertextual law'; what was written by one author concerning a particular character must be observed by all the other authors who wish to incorporate this character into their contribution to the universe. This principle does not function as a 'law' if we talk about retrospective influence, but it still postulates that everything written by any author on a given character changes the perception of its past stories (in accord with the postmodernist intertextual theory).

The concept of shared universe also contributes heavily to the phenomenon of retroactive continuity, mentioned in section 3.3, and further discussed in section 4 of the thesis.

2.3. Metafiction in comics

Although metafiction is primarily associated with modernism and postmodernism, it is a literary practice the predecessors of which we can find in earlier literary works such as Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* or Cervantes's *Don Quixote*. The term itself was first used by William Gass in the late 1960s to describe some then works of fiction that were concerned with fiction itself. Patricia Waugh provides a comprehensive definition of the term in her book *Metafiction: The Theory and Practice of Self-Conscious fiction*:

"Metafiction is a term given to fictional writing which self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artefact in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality. In providing critique of their own methods of construction, such writings not only examine the fundamental structures of narrative fiction, they also explore the possible fictionality of the world outside the literary fictional text." (Waugh 2)

The purpose of metafiction is therefore at the same time to make a work of art seem more real by lessening the subjective 'reality' of the world outside the text, or by examining its fictionality with rational tools, and to admit its fictionality and the impossibility of it ever faithfully representing reality. However, metafiction is also one of the key devices through which postmodernist authors express self-conscious irony and through which they mock their own works – an approach which is also quite typical of postmodernism. In this respect, metafiction enables the author to comment on his own handiwork from without, as if assuming the position of a disinterested observer.

The practice of metafiction is often called 'the breaking of the 4th wall'. As an act of breaking the 4th wall – the imaginary barrier between the audience and the players, between the story and the reader – the nature of metafiction is determined by the medium in which it is used – by the shape of the barrier it tries to transcend. The metafictional devices differ significantly in film, in literature, in visual arts, and also in comics. The manifestation of metafiction in movies such as *Stranger than Fiction* or *Cock and Bull Story* could never be used in literature – the clean visual transition of 'fictional' and 'real' in the former and shooting crew and equipment that appears in the latter would make no sense in a literary work, as neither is a part of the literary creative process. Conversely, we can hardly expect movies to be able to transport metafiction that is hidden on the stylistic level of the text.

There are various ways to reveal a work of art as a work of art - in other words, not as a representation of reality, but as a representation of a representation of reality. We can explicitly undermine the basis of the work, for example by the author's personal appearance in the story: "I'm the evil mastermind behind the scenes. I'm the wicked puppeteer who pulls the strings and makes you dance. I'm your writer." (Morrison, Animal Man vol.3, 207). Such a device is not really medium-specific. It can appear in literature as well as a film or a comicbook.

A more interesting strategy is to employ in the narrative the various stages of the creation of the particular work of art. This of course requires the reader to understand how the work is created. If we decide to openly show a crewmember or filming equipment in a movie, we expect the viewer to understand that these are a part of the cinematic production, and therefore that we want him to realize that he is watching a movie, or more precisely, to make him realize that *we* (as the authors) are aware that *he* (as the viewer) is aware of the movie's 'unreality'.

The two mentioned types of metafiction roughly correspond to the content and the form of the work of art.

Metafiction in comics is as unique and specific as it is in any other medium. It combines many of the features of the written and the visual, while bringing its own

metafictional devices into the equation. It possesses the entire arsenal of literary metafiction, but at the same time has at its disposal the whole world of visual means. This can be seen especially in the works of the pioneer of metafiction in comics, Grant Morrison, who often breaks the "4th wall" of comics both in content and in form. His fascination with metafiction can be traced in many of his numerous works, such as the *New X-men*, where he addresses the 'over-flowing' of the story into what we call reality only implicitly, and exclusively in content, or *Doom Patrol*, where he uses the specifics of the medium to "remove" the protagonists from the comicbook (the storyline of *Doom Patrol #19-22* is concerned with a mysterious threat of Scissor-men, who clip characters out of the story, leaving only empty white silhouettes behind). Nevertheless, Morrison's greatest postmodern achievement lies in *Animal Man*, analyzed and examined in detail in section 4 of this thesis. The respective devices and narrative techniques he employs to break the 4th wall are also described in this section.

3. EXAMINED TEXT: ALAN MOORE – WATCHMEN

There is no other comicbook that shook the foundations of the superhero comics as much as Moore's *Watchmen* and it quickly gained respect even among the most prestigious circles of literature. Undoubtedly the most important of Alan Moore's masterpieces, *Watchmen* represent a deliberate deconstruction of the superhero genre, and a disturbing journey into its core. Together with artist Dave Gibbons, Moore invented and employed a wide range of novel approaches towards the subject, and towards medium itself. *Watchmen* broke new ground not only in their handling of costumed vigilantes, but also in storytelling, and the unique combination of the drawn and the written.

Moore's initial objective was to set superheroes in a real world (although recognizably in some key aspects different from ours) and simply observe the impact of this transition on their motivation, personalities, behavior, and most importantly, their perception by both the people within the story and the readers. The experiment gradually became more complex, and it developed into a study of power and the idea of the superman manifest within society.

But *Watchmen* also represented a new look at superhero stories: one that arguably marked the end of the bronze age of comics (approximately 1970 - 1985) by introducing yet unseen level of realism and a wide variety of innovative narrative techniques to the story, which in a way devaluated the preceding superhero comics. The shift towards more realism inevitably led to a grimmer and more violent setting, which helped facilitate the study of the superhero behavior and motivation in 'the real world'. Unfortunately, it also led to mindless reproduction of the theme. Moore himself expressed dismay at the fact that the deconstructivist, grim nature of *Watchmen* became a genre in itself, and more or less the basis of superhero comics published after its success. The paradoxical result of this was that many comicbook creators attempted to imitate Moore's approach to the genre, the very nature of which was an absolute singularity in respect to anything published prior to it.

Instead of inspiring writers to probe the unexplored possibilities of comics as a medium, Moore inadvertently brought about the death of an age.

It was for this reason that Moore's *Watchmen*, and to a lesser extent, Miller's *The Dark Knight Returns*, were by many blamed for killing the silver age of comics. They can thus be seen both as the last key superhero text, and the first instance of a brand new genre.

3.1. About the author

Source: Wikipedia
"Alan Oswald Moore (born 18 November 1953) is an English writer primarily known for his work in comic books, a medium where he has produced a number of critically acclaimed and popular series, including *Watchmen*, *V for Vendetta*, and *From Hell*. Frequently described as the best comic writer in history, he has also been described as one of the most important British writers of the last fifty years. He has occasionally used such pseudonyms as Curt Vile, Jill de Ray, and Translucia Baboon.

Moore started out writing for British underground and alternative fanzines in the late 1970s before achieving success publishing comic strips in such magazines as 2000AD and Warrior. He was subsequently picked up by the American DC Comics, and worked on big name characters such as *Batman* (*Batman: The Killing Joke*) and *Superman* (*Whatever Happened to the Man of Tomorrow?*), substantially developed the minor character *Swamp Thing*, and penned original titles such as *Watchmen*. During that decade, Moore helped to bring about greater social respectability for the medium in the United States and United Kingdom, and has subsequently been attributed with the development of the term "graphic novel" over "comic book". In the late 1980s and early 1990s he left the comic industry mainstream and went independent for a while, working on experimental work such as the epic *From Hell*, pornographic *Lost Girls*, and the prose novel *Voice of the Fire*. He subsequently returned to the mainstream later in the 1990s, working for Image comics, before

developing America's Best Comics, an imprint through which he published works such as *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen* and the occult-based *Promethea*."

3.2. Synopsis

The story of *Watchmen* is set in an ´alternative reality´, which differs from ours in several key aspects. One of them is the everyday presence of costumed heroes and their subsequent outlawing by the government. The central timeline of the narrative begins with the killing of a former costumed crime-fighter, Comedian, whose murder is investigated by his teammate Rorschach. As Rorschach delves deeper into the mystery, he realizes that Comedian´s death was only a link in a huge chain of events, ending in an unfathomable genocide. However, even though various characters in the story take part in Rorschach´s investigation, he is not the book´s protagonist; *Watchmen* oppose the conventional linear approach to storytelling and instead expose a complex tapestry of events. The individual actions of the characters (most prominently Nite Owl, Dr. Manhattan and Silk Spectre) culminate into a finale, in which Adrian Veidt, a retired superhero and the ambiguous antagonist of the story, succeeds in murdering millions of people in order to instill a lasting peace.

Watchmen are composed of several timelines, and a parallel pirate story, read by a minor character, which functions as an allegory and reflection of the main storyline. They are also provided with fictional newspaper articles which follow the rise and decline of superheroes. The overall theme of the work is defeating the expectations of the genre, both in the definition of heroes and villains, and in the very conclusion of the story.

3.3. Deconstructing the hero

One of Moore's aims in *Watchmen* was to look behind the curtain of the superhero genre, and show the reader its protagonist in their true, infinitely fractured light, without the masks of absolute categorization. According to Ian Thomson in his work *Comics As Philosophy*, *Watchmen* represented the coming of age of the entire comicbook medium by "developing its heroes precisely in order to deconstruct the very idea of the hero and so encouraging us to reflect upon its significance from the many different angles of the shards left lying on the ground" (Thomson 101).

By deconstructing the underlying principles by which we distinguish heroes from villains, Moore achieved a state in which the symbols we expect to communicate a particular meaning communicate something else entirely. In this respect, his approach is similar to the one of Grant Morrison in *Animal Man* – the bottom level of understanding, the 'dictionary of perception', is transformed, and thus all the higher levels of discourse fail to retain their 'original' meaning.

This is best exemplified by the difference between the Comedian and Ozymandias. The Comedian is a Captain America pastiche, who functions as a satirical reworking of the nationalistic hero – he is determined to uphold the laws imposed by the state at any cost, disregarding their moral ambiguity. Under regular circumstances, the Comedian would be read as a positive force within the story, a position which is confirmed not only by his allegiance to the 'flag' (emphasized by his costume design), but also by the fact that he is attacked (and killed) at the beginning of the story. This detail is extremely important: by law, it is **never** the hero who prompts a conflict; it is always the villain (unless there is a third party involved, which is threatened by the villain). This seemingly leaves us with only one option: reading the Comedian as a hero. However, as we delve deeper into the story, we realize that it is impossible to see him as such – he attempts to rape his team-mate, Sally Jupiter, and possibly countless Vietnamese women, performs his duties with appalling ruthlessness (especially during the war), and employs villain-like brutality to uphold the status quo. Moore also uses the Comedian's costume as a means of underlining the transformation (the importance of costumes for the

perception of superheroes is examined in detail in section 3.4.); in his most productive years, Comedian changes his traditional super-heroic eye cover for a full leather mask, this time not only resembling (as in the Nite Owl's case – see section 3.4.), but fully constituting a mask of a dangerous criminal and – quite appropriately – a mask associated with rapists.

In short, the Comedian fails to fit into a definitive category: he opposes the main 'villain' of the story and under all circumstances fulfills his orders (administered by the United States government, by default a 'positive force'), dons the American flag as his costume, and is a victim of an attack, rather than its perpetrator, but in all moral respects outside the expectations of the genre embodies the vices of the most inexcusable sort.

On the 'opposite' side of the equation (but at the same time sharing the gray spectrum), we have Ozymandias: a retired superhero and a successful businessman, who, by forfeiting his vigilante career, forfeits his claim in the 'good guy' category; at the end of the story, he is revealed to be the mastermind behind the ominous doomsday plan, as well as the Comedian's killer. However, in the same way as it did for his victim, the depth of his character causes him to elude the simple categorization we would expect from the superhero genre. He is truly the Comedian's opposite: by all standards, he should be read as the negative force within the story, a perpetrator of an insane mass-murder, a killer – a true 'bad guy'. And yet, his qualities lead us on an entirely different way of perceiving his actions; he is virtuous in every sense of the word: courageous, wise, strong, respectful, and above all, morally committed to his actions (however twisted his morality may be). It is his desire to bring a lasting and global peace to humankind, which fuels his actions, whereas his opposite, the Comedian, is only motivated by his lowest desires and boundless cynicism.

An interesting point raised by Reynolds in *Super Heroes: A Modern Mythology* is that Veidt's actions are partly prompted by the realism with which the superheroes of *Watchmen* are confronted: by removing the tangible enemy from the storyline, its heroes, and Veidt in particular, are forced to face "more intangible social and moral

concerns, effectively removing the whole concept from the narrative expectations of the genre" (Reynolds 115) –in other words it is the social and moral concerns that led to the formulation of Veidt's gruesome plan – he would have no need for attacking the major Earth cities in order to instill world peace, were his only problems the occasional brawls with costumed criminals.

Moore's intricate portrayal of the two warring sides of the villain/hero duality shows this duality as much less absolute than we might believe (or unintentionally expect) it to be – in fact, it illustrates, in full, the impossibility of such a distinction. In Watchmen, as hard as we might try, we cannot distinguish good from bad – only the infinitely mirrored reflections of the two in each of the characters.

"The whole point of the book is to say that none of these characters are right or wrong. They are all humans or former humans who are doing the best according to their lives and according to the circumstances as presumably do we all. I didn't want to make any character the one who's right, the one whose viewpoint is the right point, the one's who's the hero, the one who the readers are supposed to identify it, because that's not how life is." (Khoury 114)

This point is also emphasized by the deliberate 'moral indifference', with which the comicbook is written. Although the story is largely narrated by Rorschach, it is ultimately the reader who must decide with whom to sympathize, as the ambiguous feeling of the work prevents a simple categorization of the characters, typical for the superhero genre. Moore's approach to the morality of the characters is reflected in the non-linear, simultaneous layout of the story, mentioned in section 3.5., which aims to disrupt the obviousness of importance and unimportance of certain aspects of the narrative, again leaving the reader with the decision on how to read it.

Aside from dismantling the opposition between heroes and villains, Moore also examines the forced clash of superheroes and the real world, in order to show how their behavior, their course of action, and their perception of the world and themselves, would be transformed in such a setting. The immense influence of Watchmen on the superhero genre is clearly visible in this respect: since their

publication, the tendency to move superhero stories towards more 'reality' has become the most dominant trend within the genre (as is proven in particular by the works of Mark Millar, such as *1985*, *Wanted* or *the Ultimates*).

The characters of Watchmen, Rorschach in particular, and their relationships, are used to show not the impossibility of the superhero lifestyle, but its probable impact on the parties involved. As Reynolds point out: "More than just tough guys, these heroes or anti-heroes follow through the logic of their code, even if it leads to their own destruction. A realistic rendering of the traditional superhero code would have meant the same fate for Batman many times over (...) ending in death against overwhelming opposition" (Reynolds 107).

Walter Kovacs/Rorschach is a prime example of this: his vigilante war against crime must necessarily mean abandoning any connections to a normal life. Several characters point out his unpleasant body odor and his filthy appearance. This was indeed Moore's intention, as he himself says "If you're a vigilante, then this is what you're going to be like: you're not going to have any friends because you're going to be crazy and obsessive and dangerous and frightening; you're probably going to be too obsessed with your vendetta to bother about things like eating or washing or tidying your room because what have they got to do with the War Against Crime?" (Reynolds 117)

Although Rorschach's actions are guided by a strong moral code and in spite of his viciousness, he successfully invokes an image of a superhero, he is an outsider - the undesired social element, especially in his civil life "Rorschach, in short, is cut from the template of the vigilante superhero, but with every semblance of glamour apparently taken away."(Reynolds 107). This is indeed the most probable course of the 'lone vigilante' lifestyle, confronted with the complexity of human motivation and psyche.

Rorschach is also, much like the Nite Owl (see section 3.4.), a victim of his own costume: without it, he is but a shade of his true self. This is best illustrated in issue five, when he is arrested and unmasked by the police: *"No! My face! Give it back!"*

(Moore, *issue 5,* 28). His words only go to prove how completely void of meaning his personal life is. Without his mask, to which he at many points alludes to as 'face', he is nothing.

It is also worth noting that Walter Kovacs is so strongly tied to his Rorschach persona, he would rather die as a civilian than as a vigilante. In his last moments, before he is obliterated by Jon in issue 12, he takes off his mask – as if to save 'Rorschach' from defeat, and offer his own life instead.

However, as is typical of Moore's work on Watchmen, the symbolism Rorschach represents does not function alone; he is also a part of a trinity that serves to inspect different ways in which a superhero, if faced with real world, would possibly become cut off from the rest of humanity. The other two parts of the trinity are created by Dr. Manhattan and Ozymandias.

Each of these heroes is, either due to the nature of his abilities, or his motivation, disconnected from the human race. Dr. Manhattan's power is so incredible it slowly removes him from the human affairs; the struggles of lowly Homo sapiens become entirely alien to him towards the end of the story, as he points out at several points during his conversation with Laurie on Mars: "Don't you see the futility of asking me to save a world I no longer have any stake in?" (issue 9, p. 8);"In my opinion, it (life) is a highly overrated phenomenon. Mars gets along perfectly without so much as a micro-organism."(Moore, *issue 9*, 13). "I read atoms, Laurie. I see the ancient spectacle that birthed the rubble. Beside this, human life is brief and mundane." (Moore, *issue 9*, 17). In many aspects, Dr. Manhattan is not unlike the most iconic superhero of all – Superman, who, in spite of his singularity, remains faithful to the human race - a behavior which Moore tries to deconstruct with his rendition of Manhattan. Manhattan's opposite in the sense of power range, Ozymandias, took a very different road, and developed his mental and physical faculties to such a level as to exceed any other man on Earth, purely by harnessing the latent potential present within every individual (this is also put in a strong contrast to the purely accidental omnipotence of Dr. Manhattan). The deliberateness of his training is closely bound to his desire to control and reform human affairs (while Dr. Manhattan, true to his origin, sees only determinate randomness, which should not

be tampered with). However, despite being invested so much in it in general, Ozymandias is so removed from the rest of his species that he ultimately deems it appropriate to sacrifice millions of lives in order to achieve a long-standing peace and harmony. In this, he is as removed from humanity as Dr. Manhattan.

The third part of the triangle, Rorschach, possesses neither the godlike abilities of Dr. Manhattan, nor the social power or physical and mental excellence of Ozymandias. He is also the only of the three who solves problems 'hands on', and deals directly with others – yet much like his counterparts, finds himself entirely disconnected from them. His separation is caused by the very war he wages: he can no longer perceive people as people; he only sees victims and actual or possible criminals, and the psychological space he reserves for his Rorschach persona is necessarily taken out from his own identity. In other words, the more he functions as a protector of his fellow men, the more he is detached from them.
"(Rorschach) is almost completely outside the bounds of the society he chooses to protect." (Reynolds 106).

The trinity that Moore uses to deconstruct the conflicting nature of superheroes under the pressure of their own actions, sheds a pessimistic light on the very possibility of a superhero life, as the only people in the story who are able to lead a 'normal' life are those that have forfeited their vigilante career.

Another look at Moore's work is not concerned with what it signifies for the future of the superhero mythos, but with the ripples it sends backwards in time, taking value from the conventions we thought were immovable. Geoff Klock points out that "Moore's exploration of the often sexual motives for costumed crime-fighting sheds a disturbing light on past superhero stories and forces reader to reevaluate every superhero in terms of Moore's kenosis – his emptying out of the tradition." (Klock 65).

Klock also sees this 'retrospective ripple' in the story itself, namely in Veidt's attempt to first destroy and then reconstruct in order to build a unity which would survive him. This clearly echoes archetypal redemptive violence principle.

The retrospective ripples, created by Moore's Watchmen, carry a particular significance in the field of comics. Due to the unique narrative device called retroactive continuity ('retconning'), which is closely related to the concept of a shared universe (see section 2.2), comicbooks are much more retrospectively susceptible to present changes of their content. In this respect, no other medium is as vulnerable as comics. The issue of multiple character authorship (further discussed in relation to Grant Morrison's Animal Man) is often resolved by publishers and copyright owners 'retconning' certain pivotal moments in a given character's history. The retroactive continuity essentially serves two functions, the latter of which is generally considered of greater importance: it removes inappropriate, illogical, redundant or otherwise undesirable content from the story and it ties together its crucial events (often contributed by different authors) to create an illusion of a more complex and interconnected storyline. These functions are facilitated either by addition, alteration, or subtraction of the material. Naturally, the various types of functions and devices of retroactive continuity often overlap.

As is mentioned in other parts of this thesis, the perception of a medium by the reader is shaped both intentionally and unintentionally by the medium itself; in other words certain idiosyncrasies the medium exhibits are frequently accepted by the readers as its 'rules' – not in the sense of what must be done, but more in what particular effects represent. In the same way the experienced comicbook readers unconsciously understand the fundamental difference between the authorship in the realm of comics and in the realm of literature, they also understand that this 'shared' authorship inevitably prompts many instances of retroactive continuity, and readily accept the retroactive continuity as an inseparable part of the comics storytelling.

This also means that the past of comicbook characters is not perceived as an unchangeable truth, but rather as something that is almost as likely to be changed as their future. It is therefore no surprise that Moore's contemplation of superhero motives and sexuality in Watchmen 'retroactively' changed the perception of the sexuality and motives of comicbook characters in the prior comicbooks. It certainly

revived discussions first prompted in 1954 by Dr. Frederic Wertham's infamous book Seduction of the Innocent, in which he proposes that aside from comicbooks being offensive to the law enforcement system, they also portray disturbing non-stereotypical gender roles and implicit sexual symbolism. Wertham was particularly upset by the relationship between Batman and Robin. "They constantly rescue each other… Sometimes Batman ends up in bed injured and young Robin is shown sitting next to him. At home they lead an idyllic life. They live in sumptuous quarters with beautiful flowers in large vases… Batman is sometimes shown in dressing gown… it is like a wish dream of two homosexuals living together" (Wertham 190).

Although it is the character of Nite Owl who is generally considered a pastiche of Batman, there is also some similarity between Batman and the Hooded Justice. In the second issue, when the Hooded Justice foils Blake's attempt to rape the original Silk Spectre by beating him to a pulp, Blake screams: "This is what you like, huh? This is what gets you hot..." (Moore, *issue 2*, 7), which seems to greatly disturb the Hooded Justice. While Blake's remarks can be considered simple insults and do not necessarily reflect reality, they can also be interpreted as Moore's mockery of Wertham's assertions about Batman – Hooded Justice most likely really is homosexual and it is also hinted that he has a sexual relationship with Captain Metropolis of a sadomasochistic sort. It is perhaps ironic that the type of sexual themes Moore brought into comicbooks was accepted by the readers as convincing, and they were willing to apply them to comicbooks published even prior to Watchmen, even though Wertham's opinions were a target of heavy criticism.

3.4. Costumed sexuality

Sexuality is indeed a strong influence on Moore's depiction of superheroes, even though, or maybe precisely because, it has always been tabooed in the genre. Up until the publication of *Watchmen*, sexuality, and the act of sex itself, have been curiously omitted in the medium, reflecting perhaps the fallout from the laws imposed by the Comics Code Authority (a censorship system which at one point prohibited comics from containing directly depicted violence, foul language, women's breasts, or even villains escaping from prison, as it supposedly ridiculed the American judicial system). *Watchmen*, however, provide an entirely new way of looking at the reasoning behind vigilante crime-fighting.

Moore connects sexuality particularly with costumes – an essential part of the superhero identity, and a symbol of potency and power. The relationship between impotency and potency is well-mirrored by the relationship between the civil and secret identity of the hero; this subtext has been present since the very first superhero story: "Superman's prowess in defeating Butch Matson is only the earliest of many examples of the sudden virility and sex-appeal gained when character changes 'into costume'. What if the costume were more than just a sign of the inner change from wimp to Superman? What if the costume itself were the sexual fetish and the source of sexual power?" (Reynolds 32)

In *Watchmen*, Moore reinterprets this transformation both literally and symbolically: he deconstructs the semiotic function of costumes in order to deconstruct the values and motivations of superheroes themselves. As Reynolds points out, in Moore's hands "costumes are either sexless, denying the humanity of the hero within, or garments of great erotic significance." (Reynolds 30).

The most obvious example of this is Dan Dreiberg's unsuccessful attempt to have sex with Laurie Juszpeczyk in issue 7, and the subsequent successful intercourse between the two onboard Dan's ship. While in the first case, it is Dan and Laurie, who have sex (or rather try to have sex), as ordinary human beings, in the second they are no longer in mufti: the protagonists of the intercourse are not Dan and

Laurie, but Nite Owl and Silk Spectre. Only the transformation of identities, and the presence of costumes, provides Dan with the necessary virility, which is only confirmed by the post-coital dialogue: "'Dan, was tonight good? Did you like it?' 'Uh-uh.' 'Did the costumes make it good? Dan...?' 'Yeah, I guess the costumes had something to do with it. It just feels strange, you know? To come out and admit that to somebody. To come out of the closet.'" (Moore, *issue 7,* 28)

The scene heavily undermines the supposedly 'noble' and 'pure' motivation behind costumes, and costumed crime-fighting, present even in their design: most costumes are in fact highly sexual, tight-fitting on men, and blatantly revealing on women. Their shape suggests potent muscularity and seductive sexuality – and yet, within the story, it is never addressed as such. In golden and silver age superhero comicbooks, the heroes are stripped of their sexuality, if only to vindicate the ambiguity of their clothing. Their costumes communicate both a highly erotic message, and a warrior-like abstention from sexuality.

In *Watchmen*, Moore tries to deconstruct this apparent opposition, and reveal behind it a new (or rather ever present), quite disturbing meaning. The character of Nite Owl intentionally resembles Batman – both have a totemic relationship with a creature of the night, rely on gadgetry and martial arts, and lack superpowers. However, as Reynolds points out, "The costumes of both are dark in color, suggesting the flying night creatures from which they derive – yet also include the rubber or leather masks associated with rapists and serial sex killers." (Reynolds 32).

Although Reynolds' reading of the semiotic function of Batman's and Nite Owl's costumes might be taking the meaning too far, it is true that leather, rubber and latex are closely connected to fetishism, and especially sadomasochism. This obviously sheds an unsettling light on the motivation of the two heroes: sadomasochism, much as vigilantism, contains dishing out and receiving punishment. What if the true impulse behind their seemingly honorable crime-fighting is a desire to satisfy socially unacceptable needs?

It is no coincidence that Nite Owl's civilian alter ago, Dan Dreiberg, is portrayed as an aging man, who might in real life be indeed attracted to costume-clad superheroines. His fascination with sadomasochism is hinted at in issue 7, when Laurie pokes around his flat, finding a picture of a dominatrix dressed in latex and leather. The dedication states simply *"From one 'Night Bird' to another. Love, the Twilight Lady"*, but it is the ensuing dialogue that reveals its deeper significance: "'Hmmm... what's this?' 'That? Oh, that isn't anybody. It's just this vice queen I put away back in '68. Called herself Dusk Woman or something.' ''The Twilight Lady'. She sent you her picture?' 'Yeah, well, I guess she had some sort of fixation. She was a very sick woman. I keep meaning to throw the picture away, but you know how it is...' 'Mmm...'" (Moore, *issue 7*, 5). Laurie's eventual acceptance of Dan's fetish is also communicated on the level of costumes, as at the end of the story she says: "I want a better costume, that protects me: maybe something leather with a mask over my face..." (Moore, issue 12, 30)

At this point, Dreiberg seems to bear no interest in the matter, but shortly after his unsuccessful sexual attempt, he dreams of the Twilight Lady, equipped with a whip and clad in leather. The two characters then proceed to rip apart their clothes, the Twilight Lady revealing a naked Dreiberg, and Dreiberg revealing Laurie Juspeczyk. However, the shedding of identities does not end at this point, as Dreiberg's sexual ego and potency reside within his Nite Owl persona. Laurie thus rips apart Dan's skin to reveal him in his costume, and he does the same for her. The significance of this scene for the understanding of Moore's deconstruction of costuming and superhero identity is immense – it uncovers the complicated relationship between secret and civil identities, and the suppression of one's ego in and out of costume. Dreiberg sees his civil identity, in which he cannot fully embrace his sexual desires, as a mask, and his costumed alter-ego as his true self. This is a characteristic he also shares with Batman, who is often depicted as tapping into his true nature only in costume, with Bruce Wayne being merely a persona whose sole purpose is to provide necessary resources for costumed crime-fighting. The said phenomenon is delved into in for example Grant Morrison's *Arkham Asylum: A Serious House on Serious Earth*: "'I want to see his real face!' 'Oh, don't be so predictable, for Christ's sake! That **is** his real face!'" (Morrison, *Arkham* 31).

Arkham Asylum is also interesting because it only proves the enormous significance of *Watchmen* for the industry as well as for the entire concept of superheroism: Morrison's study of Batman's repressed sexuality would possibly never come into existence without Alan Moore's disturbing insight into the motivations and sexuality of vigilantes. After the publication of *Watchmen*, it became impossible not to read into superheroes stories, be their publication prior or subsequent to the one of *Watchmen*, a sexual raison d'être. (see appendix 1)

However, as was already in part mentioned, Moore does not aim only to deconstruct the justification of costumes, but also the perceived absoluteness of the distinction between a mask and the 'real' identity. Dan Dreiberg feels more complete inside the Owl costume, because it allows him to recreate himself as he sees fit. His struggle to regain the true self is quite precisely mirrored in the struggles of Dr. Manhattan.

Dr. Manhattan represents the only true super-being in the story, but more importantly, the only being that is markedly non-human. Perhaps because of his former state as a human scientist Jonathan Osterman, he attempts to imitate humanity, towards which he feels an increasingly declining sense of responsibility. If we read *Watchmen* from Manhattan's point of view, it is a story of a continuous act of losing touch with the human state of existence: Throughout the narrative, Manhattan gradually bares himself of emotions and conventional reasoning, becoming a thing we can only conceive of as God; the concept being partly confirmed in his last conversation with Ozymandias: "'But you'd regained interest in human life...' 'Yes, I have. I think perhaps I will create some. Goodbye, Adrian.'" (Moore, *issue 12*, 27)
The transformation of Manhattan's relationship towards the existence of life on Earth, from an engaged association, through absolute disregard, to an awed, yet distant fascination, could be a topic for an essay in its own right, but what is important for us is that Dr. Manhattan is the only character in the story lacking an alter-ego. Or is he?

Even though he seemingly embraces his newfound state of existence in full, completely shedding his former identity but for the abbreviation 'Jon', he still falls

victim to the duality of a comicbook superhero. His alter-ego is not a person, but a species: his alter ego is his attempted humanity.

This is the reason why throughout the story, Dr. Manhattan sheds his clothing, piece by piece, only to end up completely naked towards the end. With each layer of clothing removed, he reveals more of his true self, his true non-humanity, and becomes further disconnected from the human race. It is quite interesting to note how Dr. Manhattan's transformation also symbolizes a journey towards potency (albeit not sexual). The full range of his abilities is prohibited from him until he frees himself from the last remains of his humanity – only then does he become fully omniscient and omnipotent.

He therefore functions at the same time as Dan Dreiberg's opposite and parallel. To achieve potency, Dreiberg has to don a costume, leaving behind his natural appearance. However, in order to do the same, Dr. Manhattan must revert the process: he sheds his 'costume' (a costume of humanity) and embraces his natural look. Both characters attain potency through the retrieval of the true self, but each of them finds it at the opposite (and yet the same) end of the alter ego spectrum. The connection between the two is also reflected in their shared relationship with Laurie Juspeczyk.

3.5. Non-linear narration

Although Moore's work on *Watchmen* experiments rather with the superhero genre than with the medium itself (as in for example Morrison's *Animal Man* or Moore's own *Promethea*), its success did not stem only from the storyline, but also from an innovative approach to narration, and the full use of the medium's potential.

The narrative techniques that Moore and Gibbons essentially 'invented' in the course of writing *Watchmen*, are unique in the sense that they cannot be replicated in any other medium. This is especially true of the way the complexity of the story is communicated. As Moore himself points out "The story seemed to demand a

specific way of telling it, a specific way of seeing the world. It had to be seen all at once rather than in a strictly linear way." (Khoury 111)

This is an extremely important point for the understanding of the uniqueness of *Watchmen*, which could only be provided by the comicbook medium: the *Watchmen* depict a complex world in which everything is connected – whether by coincidence or on purpose – and in which several parallel stories are taking place, with neither being more important than the others in the final tapestry of the story. This is also the reason why the movie adaptation of Moore's masterpiece confused most of the viewers who were unversed in the original; in film, it is impossible to relay several complicated storylines at once without the viewer forgetting important details and failing to make the necessary connections. In the end, the movie seemed at best overly complicated, at worst entirely incomprehensible.

However, it is precisely this kind of detail-oriented, heavily branched storyline, that thrives in the comics medium. The obvious reason is that the readers can absorb the story at their own pace (a luxury which films do not provide) and can return to previous sections of the narrative in order to fully comprehend its complexity and meaning. The two important questions here are (1) how does this differ from literature (which also grants the ability to return to previous sections), and (2) whether such an approach can truly be considered 'non-linear'.

It is true that literature almost always provides a much greater scope in terms of content than comicbooks, or even graphic novels, can ever hope to achieve. It is equally true that it is no harder to retrace our steps in a book, than it is in a comics. However, the fact that we do not read a book in a certain order does not make its reading non-linear – it makes the reading merely non-chronological.

The truly non-linear perception of a story has so far been possible only in comics: only here can we at one point communicate separate events – one through words, the other one through images. It is this very technique that Moore employs heavily in *Watchmen*, and which he perfected in his other works (such as *The Killing Joke*).

This ‘overlaying’ of information serves as a transition between scenes (see appendix 2), a way of suggesting an analogy among various timelines/places/textual realities, and as an ambiguous comment on multiple elements within the story.

Perhaps the most interesting case of the three is the last one, used as early as the initial scene of the first issue, where the two detectives investigate the room in which the Comedian was killed. The visual content of the panels switches between the investigation and the actual scene of the killing, with the detectives’ comments ‘coinciding’ with the events of the murder: “I think you’d have to be **thrown**.” (Moore, *issue 1*, 3). The climax of the page is represented by the last panel, which depicts the Comedian’s body being hurled out of a window, with an accompanying comment made by a liftboy during the investigation timeline: “Ground floor comin’ up.” (Moore, *issue 1*, 3). (see appendix 3)

This interlacing of different, but somehow interconnected scenes, tied by an ambiguous finishing comment, appears at several places in the graphic novel, and helps to achieve its mentioned ‘tapestry-like’ feeling of being seen all at once. Moore uses this strategy especially in order to evoke analogy between the narrative reality of *Watchmen*, and the comics-within-comics reality of *The Tales of the Black Freighter*.

The Tales of the Black Freighter is the title of the fictional magazine which starts appearing in the story in issue 3. It represents another level of comicbook-specific postmodernist approach: multiple narration. Via the element of ‘comics within comics’, Moore introduces a fictional pirate story *Marooned* that functions as a reflection and allegory of the ‘main’ narrative, and foreshadows its events.

Marooned first appears in issue 3 (p. 2) in the form of a comics read by a young New Yorker. It is intended to be a product of an imaginary boom in pirate stories within the comics medium in the 1960s (which, of course, never came to be), and are a part of Moore’s fictional rewriting of the American history (in which for example Nixon amends the constitution to serve five consecutive terms). Moore reasoned that because superheroes really existed in the world of Watchmen, and

were feared and generally disliked by society, "(people) wouldn't be at all interested in superhero comics." (Kavanagh) and the genre would rapidly decline and be replaced by others, such as piracy, horror and science fiction.

As described at the end of issue 5 in the fictional history of comics, *Marooned* tells a story of "... a young mariner whose vessel is wrecked by the Black Freighter before it can return to its hometown and warn of the hell-ship's approach. Cast adrift on an uninhabited island with only his dead shipmates for company, we experience the frantic mariner's torment at the knowledge that while he is trapped on his island, the bestial crew of the Freighter are surely bearing down upon his town, his home, his wife and his children. Driven by his burning desire to avert this calamity, we see the mariner finally escape from the island by what may be the most striking and dramatic devices thus far in pirate comic books: digging up the gas-bloated remains of his shipmates, the mariner lashes them together and uses them as the floats of an improvised raft on which he hopes to reach mainland...On reaching the mainland safely upon his horrific craft we see the increasingly distraught and disheveled mariner trying desperately to reach his home, even resorting to murder to acquire a horse for himself. In the final scenes...we see that the mariner, though he has escaped from his island, is in the end marooned from the rest of humanity in a much more terrible fashion." (Moore, *issue 5*, 31)

The story of *Marooned* is essentially used to develop the central themes of the narrative and mirror its protagonists. The mariner's fate creates a parallel to the one of Adrian Veidt/Ozymandias. He is so strongly set on his mission – to protect his loved ones – that he gradually casts off all inhibitions that make him human. After he uses the dead bodies of his fellow shipmates to reach land, he does not hesitate to kill the first person he meets in order to obtain a horse. The delusional massacre at the end of the story (concluded in issue 11 of *Watchmen*), in which the mariner slaughters his own family, thinking they are the pirates of the Black Freighter, makes him enact the very carnage he was determined to prevent – his fate thus being exactly the same as Veidt's. "Just like Ozymandias/Adrian Veidt, he hopes to stave off disaster by using the dead bodies of his former comrades a means of reaching his goal." (Reynolds 111) – this theme is alluded to in Rorschach's last

words “Of course. Must protect Veidt’s new utopia. One more body amongst foundations makes little difference.” (Moore, *issue 12*, 24). The mariner’s final seclusion from society also mirrors the trinity of separation created by Rorschach, Veidt and Dr. Manhattan.

An undefined metatextual connection between the two narratives is also implied in the last issue during Veidt’s conversation with Dr. Manhattan: “Jon... I know people think me callous, but I’ve made myself feel every death. By day I imagine endless faces. By night... Well, I dream, about swimming towards a hideous... no. Never mind. It isn’t significant.” (Moore, *issue 12*, 27). Although Veidt does not finish the sentence, it is quite clear he dreams of swimming to board the Black Freighter – duplicating the last deed of the unfortunate mariner.

Nevertheless, the analogies between Veidt and the mariner do not remain purely textual, as Moore uses the above mentioned overlaying of scenes as a means of tying them together in the readers mind. This occurs most noticeably on the first two pages of issue 3. The narrative panels, suddenly drawn with a scroll-style look, immediately suggest pirate stories - and indeed, the confused reader finds out that this is their content: “Delirious, I saw that hell-bound ship’s black sails against the yellow Indies sky...” (Moore, *issue 3*, 1). On the same panel, however, there also appears a comment from a present-day newspaper vendor: “We oughta nuke Russia, and let God sort it out.” (Moore, *issue 3*, 1). Visually, the image depicts a close shot of a black/yellow fallout shelter sign – thus simultaneously addressing the “black sails against the yellow sky” and the vendor’s desire to nuke Russia. But quite ingeniously, this single image also immediately ties together the mariner’s nemesis, the Black Freighter, with Veidt’s desire to prevent nuclear war. (see appendix 4)

The subsequent panels continue to textually combine the two storylines, until they climax in two close shots of the marooned mariner, complete with the vendor’s words “The weight of the world’s on him, but does he quit? Nah! He’s like Atlas. He can take it. He’s a survivor.” (Moore, *issue 3*, 2). Although the monologue seemingly comments on the qualities of a newsvendor, it coincides much more strongly with the mariner’s desperate situation. (appendix 5)

At various points of the story, *Marooned* also possibly corresponds with and reflects the events and deeds of characters other than Adrian Veidt – be it Rorschach's capture in issue 6, or Dr. Manhattan's self-marooning on Mars in issue 9.

The tapestry-like narrative approach of *Watchmen* is also possibly addressed by Dr. Manhattan's description of time: "Time is simultaneous, and intricately structured jewel that humans insist on viewing one edge at a time, when the whole design is visible in every facet." (Moore, *issue 9*, 6) – a speech which could very well comment on the unexplored possibilities of storytelling.

4. EXAMINED TEXT: GRANT MORRISON – ANIMAL MAN

Grant Morrison's contribution to the Animal Man mythos represents perhaps the "purest" (if such a term even corresponds with the nature of postmodernism) example of postmodern narrative structures introduced in comics. Aside from the deconstruction of the superhero genre, similar in its overall feeling to *Watchmen* and *The Dark Knight Returns*, the influence of social consciousness, metaphysics and study of free will and higher power, the most important theme in the story is that of metafiction - the breaking of the 4th wall.

Morrison's choice of *Animal Man* for his post-structuralist tour de force was a postmodern act in itself: not only did he choose a genre which was in itself frowned upon by literary circles, that is superhero comics, but he also chose a character that had a fair amount of background, yet was still, from the perspective of character depth, strikingly underdeveloped.

4.1. About the author

Source: Wikipedia

"Grant Morrison (born 31 January 1960) is a Scottish comic book writer and playwright. He is best-known for his nonlinear narratives and counter-cultural leanings, as well as his successful runs on titles like *Animal Man, Doom Patrol, JLA, The Invisibles, New X-Men, Fantastic Four, All Star Superman*, and *Batman*.

Animal Man placed Morrison at the head of the so-called "Brit Wave" invasion of American comics, along with such writers as Neil Gaiman, Peter Milligan, Jamie Delano and Alan Moore (who had launched the 'invasion' with his work on *Swamp Thing*).

After impressing with *Animal Man*, Morrison was asked to take over *Doom Patrol*, starting his uniquely surreal take on the superhero genre with issue #19 in 1989. Previously, a formulaic superhero title, Morrison's *Doom Patrol* introduced more surreal elements, introducing concepts such as dadaism into his first several issues.

DC published *Arkham Asylum: A Serious House on Serious Earth* in 1989 as a 128 page graphic novel. Painted by Dave McKean, *Arkham Asylum* featured uses of symbolic writing not common in comics at the time. (The story was to have included a transvestite Joker, an element toned down by DC.) The book went on to become one of the best selling graphic novels of all time."

4.2. Synopsis

Due to exposure to an explosion of an extraterrestrial starship, Bernhard "Buddy" Baker is granted the ability to 'borrow' physical and mental characteristics of nearby animals. Grant Morrison's revival of the Animal Man character, originally written by Dave Wood, was from the very beginning intended for mature audience. Although initially conceived as a four-issue miniseries, the final run consisted of 26 issues. Grant Morrison's take on the character saw him more as an everyman figure in the world of superheroes, than as a superhero himself. The focus of the series is divided between the 'fictional' storyline, concerned with seemingly regular superhero stories and issues of Buddy's allegiance to the world of men and the animals, and the 'non-fictional' author-based disruption of the story and medium itself. Inevitably, both the stable and disruptive parts of the story are intertwined. Antagonists of certain issues are destroyed by the author, rather than the characters, and the author actively changes the course of the narrative. This tendency grows more prominent towards the end of the series, culminating in author's 'personal' appearance, which is destructive for the main protagonist's sense of identity, as well as his belief in the 'reality' of his universe. The brutal shattering of the '4th wall' is as revelatory and as unsettling for the character, as it is for the reader himself.

4.3. The written: Struggling with the author

As was mentioned in section 2.3. of the thesis, the device of metafiction can basically serve two functions: influence the story itself and drive it forward as its element, and reflect upon the narrative stereotypes and genre/medium expectations. In *Animal Man*, Morrison employs both of these functions, and as is often the case, the actual lines between the two become exceedingly unclear.

The first issue of *Animal Man* which explored, at the time only in hints, a possible confrontation of different realities, and set the stage for Morrison's further development of this theme, was *Coyote's Gospel* (*Animal Man #5*) – nominated for Eisner Award (the most prestigious comicbook award) for Best Single Issue of 1989. A sudden change both in visual and literary narrative techniques was clearly noticeable: from a somewhat detailed art and complex storytelling, the comics moved onto simple caricatures and fairy-tale-like narrative.
It, seemingly nonsensically, transferred the focus of the story into a "cartoony" land, following the fate of a character called Crafty, a thinly-disguised Wile E. Coyote, the main protagonist of the famous Road Runner cartoons, in which he was the constant victim of cartoony violence while trying to catch the Road Runner.

Contrary to Wile, Crafty becomes conscious of the hopelessness of his role, of the pointless stream of brutality and the absurdity of his mission, thus foreshadowing the awakening of Buddy Baker himself. Tired of the endless cycle, Crafty decides to meet his creator, his 'God' and asks for freedom. The conversation is depicted from 'the creator's' point of view. The reader is only able to see legs, hands, and a giant brush. Crafty is given a chance to escape his fate, but only by being transferred from his cartoon reality into the "hell above" (Morrison, *Animal Man vol. 1, issue 5,* 20), i.e. the 'reality' of Animal Man comics, which he accepts. (see appendix 6)

The shift from one reality into another is facilitated by both visual and textual transformation. In Animal Man's reality, Crafty is drawn much more subtly, realistically, his humorous cartoon appearance is replaced with somewhat terrifying

likeness of a man-coyote. The background undergoes a similar change as well, with simplified desert rocks being transformed into a genuine desert. This helps the reader to understand the transition between the two, and immediately accept the more detailed as 'more real', with everything that it connotes.

The dissociation of the two realities is also marked by a stylistic transformation of the text. Crafty's ability of constant resurrection is described in shocking detail once he appears in Animal Man's world, significantly distinguishing the phenomenon by the sheer naturalism from its cartoon counterpart. "The pain is gigantic. A newly activated nervous system is suddenly jammed with frantic signals, like an overworked switchboard. The creature shudders, weeping. Its pelvic girdle fuses along hairline sutures, to cradle rapidly healing organs. A splintered rib, that saws back and forth in one lung, is withdrawn. The thoragic cage locks seamlessly. The lung reinflates. Trembling, the creature rises. Overhead, cheated vultures wheel into sunset. Behold! The miracle of resurrection!" (Morrison, *Animal Man vol.1, issue 5,* 4)

The cartoon world is also mirrored in the behavior of the nameless hunter, who tries to kill Crafty with methods very similar to his own attempts to kill Speedrunner in the cartoon. However, in accord with the more realistic feeling of Animal Man's reality, the cartoony violence assumes a completely different character.

"The first bullet is semi-jacketed, hollow point, shatters the devil's collarbone and smashes its shoulderblade like a china plate. Briefly, its feet pedal empty air. And then it goes down. An outcrop breaks its spine. A second impact crushes its skull. Unhinges the jaw. Snaps both legs. And it hits bottom blind and quadriplegic." (Morrison, *Animal Man vol.1, issue 5,* 12)

Many segments of the description echo their cartoon counterparts ("its feet pedal empty air"), but at the same time strike the reader with their level of terrifying literality and detail ("the first bullet is semi-jacketed, hollow point" ; "…hits bottom blind and quadriplegic"), forcing him to reconsider his perception of the animated violence, and its presupposed harmlessness. The stylistic transformation of the text intuitively reinforces the reader's understanding of the difference between the two worlds.

The reason I alluded to 'a possible confrontation of different realities', rather than 'of two realities' is that the story in fact confronts not two, but three (or, possibly, an indefinite number) of 'realities' (none of which could ironically be considered absolutely and unassailably real – much in accord with the postmodernist philosophical background). Crafty first becomes aware of his existence within the cartoon world and makes his transition into the comicbook world of Animal Man. Upon his death, the 'pull-back' shot from the scene makes the reader aware that even the world of Animal Man is not, so to speak, completely true: the pool of blood next to Crafty's body is being additionally colored by a huge hand with a brush (similar to 'the creator's' in the cartoon reality), hinting that there is a 'reality beyond reality', an author beyond the author, a God beyond the God (see appendix 7). This multiplicity is also touched upon in Crafty's tale in the sentence "So God sent Crafty forth from heaven and earth. Into the dark hell of the second reality." (Morrison, *Animal Man vol.1, issue 5,* 20), with the word "second" implying numerous levels of 'real'.

Coyote's Gospel is both a juxtaposition of different layers of what we call reality and a religious allegory (a particular aspect of the story often incorporates both). Aside from a reference to the banishment from Eden (in this case, the Cartoony land), the story also follows the Christian traditions in the retelling of the sacrifice for the sins of humankind (the sins of violence in the media) and the following resurrection (in this case, continual) – a visual reference to the crucifixion of Jesus Christ is made both on the last page of the issue and its cover (see appendix 8).

Still, the central question of *Coyote's Gospel* remains "what is beyond man?" Obviously, we could bind the influence of the story to the point where we see that a character from one world realizes the existence of 'higher' planes of existence, and thus 'higher' authors/gods, and moves onto a world where another character realizes the same. Yet we could also go deeper and take the story further, or rather follow it into depths into which it may have already gone. How is our reality more real, compared to Animal Man's, than is his compared to Crafty's? If one author is a product of a 'higher' author, is it also not possible that there is yet another author

behind the latter? We distinguish different layers of reality in the story by referencing it with our own. The more complex, more similar to ours it is the higher it stands on the imaginary ladder of realities, with our world at the immovable top. Crafty cannot die in the cartoon world, but he dies in Animal Man's reality, marking it as the higher one. However, the message of *Coyote's Gospel* might also be this: if a literary character confronts a story of another character, fictional even in the fictional reality, and realizes its unreality, the character does not necessarily realize his or her own. Therefore in the same way we believe our reality to be 'true' by the virtue of its complexity, and consider it the final, 'top' layer of being, we could very well be a fictional story of a completely different layer of reality, complexity of which we cannot even begin to fathom.

Morrison tightens the screws of metafiction through the character of James Highwater, who first appears in issue 8, and becomes a guide through, and a personification of, the metafictional level of the storyline. Standing in the middle of the desert, he is the first protagonist of the story to doubt the foundation of his reality: "Why am I suddenly here? I don't remember driving or walking to this place. Is it only the existential terror that makes me feel as though I have been newly brought into the world with a full set of memories and a purpose already prepared for me? Or could it be true after all… That Einstein was wrong." (Morrison, *Animal Man vol.1, issue 8,* 23). Not only does he address Einstein's quote depicted on the first and last page of the issue, which he could in no way see, he is also, in his doubt of his own existence, the first herald of Morrison's personal involvement in the Animal Man universe.

Highwater's subsequent appearance in the next issue is carried out in a similar fashion and reinforces the feeling of displacement in the reader. The scientist walks into his home, confused: "This is my apartment? It must be. My name on the door. J. Highwater. I have the keys. I feel that I'm seeing it for the first time and yet I recognize everything." (Morrison, *Animal Man vol.1, issue 9,* 8).

The page is dedicated to Highwater's struggle for the reconciliation of the narrative and metanarrative logic of the story: his character is written to have a home, which he has, quite logically, seen innumerable times before, while at the same time, the

problem lies in the very fact he 'was written' to have and remember it, but in metanarrative reality does not. As a new character in the Animal Man mythos, he does not 'posses' any past other than the one we **expect** him to have simply because he must have one in order to exist (this corresponds with the implicational level of the structural continuity of comics, described in section 2.3.). His creator has bestowed upon him a sense of higher planes of reality, bewildering him with the apparent discord between what the world in which he lives is telling him, and what he perceives. The concluding message of the page: "You're only one of the things in his dream." (Morrison, *Animal Man vol.1, issue 9*, 8) prepares the ground for further development of the story, and at the point leaves Highwater as baffled as the reader.

The theme of unfamiliarity of the narratively necessarily familiar also resonates in volume 3, this time from Buddy's mouth: "Why is my life so disconnected? One minute I'm at home, in the next, I'm in the Faroe Islands or in Paris and I **think** I remember how I got there, but I don't really **know**." (Morrison, *Animal Man vol.3*, 44)

Highwater later finds out the exact reason of his simultaneous inability and ability to recognize his home, and of the way in which he is transported between two places with and without the knowledge of the transport itself: "We wander in and out of stories and our minds fill the gaps. We **think** we have histories and memories, but all we have are brief appearances in the stories of other characters." (Morrison, *Animal Man vol.3* 163)

As Highwater attains deeper awareness of the ultimate truth of his reality, the author becomes more directly committed to stopping him from reaching Animal Man and his family. This occurs for the first time in volume 2, after Highwater begins to unveil the fiction: "I know why there is suffering. And I know why it is suddenly fall... I know why my name is James Highwater and where this car came from and why I have to find Animal Man and... and..." (Morrison, *Animal Man vol.2*, 207). For this train of thought, Highwater is 'awarded' with a partial erasure of his arms (a visual metafictional device described in section 4.4. of the thesis), which, within

the comicbook logic, prohibits him from driving the car, since a character cannot drive a fully-drawn and colored car with black-and-white drafts of arms (see appendix 9). He undergoes a similar ailment only a few pages later, when his legs are partly erased and he can no longer stand on them, again giving the scene a feeling of a not quite finished picture (Morrison, *Animal Man vol.2*, 223) (see appendix 10). In the following dialogue, Buddy ponders on the surreal nature of the phenomenon: "When you came in you looked like... I don't know... You looked like you were only half real..." (Morrison, *Animal Man vol.3*, 9) and immediately connects it with the erasure of He who never dies by the yellow aliens "It was like something I saw happen in Africa. It's almost impossible to look at. The mind... rejects what it's seeing, you know?" (Morrison, *Animal Man vol.3*, 9); the last sentence referencing an imaginary mental block that prevents all fictional characters from realizing their state. The reiterated foreshadowing of the full-fledged breaking of the 4th wall is typical of Morrison's work on *Animal Man*. As the characters near the point where the reality of their narrative is broken down, they see more and more through the veil of fiction: "That was the second time. It's like someone's trying to erase me. When it happens, my thoughts seem to become simpler, more primitive... I think it was trying to keep me from coming here." (Morrison, *Animal Man vol.3*, 9). Highwater's words throw an interesting light on Morrison's perception of fictional comicbook characters, and fictional characters in general; if simplicity is what prohibits them from realizing their fictionality, then what Morrison suggests is that the widening complexity of their motivations and behavior must necessarily lead to a realization of their fictionality – as if the next step in the complexity of a fictional character is its transcendence of the boundaries of the work in which they appear.

What Morrison achieved by clearly stating "this is a comicbook character and everything that happens to it is just a work of fiction", and letting the character itself be aware of it, was effectively 'pulling' the character into our reality, where, though not real, it became in its conscious unreality more real than it could have been in its own. Transcending the fourth wall thus immensely intensified the emotional impact of the story on the reader and provided a possibility of reflection of the superhero genre as a whole and its change over time.

In harmony with the concept of interwoven layers of realities, first hinted at in the *Coyote's Gospel*, Morrison also reintroduces the 'yellow aliens', formerly a one-dimensional threat to the world from the second issue of the original *Animal Man*, into the story as a higher power, more direct servants of 'the creator': *"We are agents of the power that brings your world into being."* (Morrison, *Animal Man vol.2*, 96)

Since their appearance in issue 10, the yellow aliens continue to comment on the changes made to the mythos. "Our 'Animal Man', as you see, has somehow been altered almost beyond recognition." (Morrison, *Animal Man vol.2*, 11). This, as is typical for Morrison's work, makes it difficult, if not impossible, to ascertain their relationship to the author – they manifest his will, but at the same time comment on and correct his creation as if they somehow stood above him in the causal hierarchy. An inspective reading clearly shows that the yellow aliens must necessarily exist on a different plane of reality than the basic storyline. It is questionable what their standpoint is. Are they representatives of our reality, even though they themselves are fictional (a theme that appears throughout the whole work since *Coyote's Gospel*), or are they just another layer of possible comicbook direction? It can be argued that they represent a mid-layer between Animal Man and our reality (again pointing at the possible innumerate layers of realities between these two), which epitomizes a 'thinking man's' comics – a comics that is both more complex and more demanding on the reader.

However, although they function on a higher plane of reality than other characters in the comics, and exhibit the above mentioned 'metatextual' powers, they do not perceive the cause of the disruption of the narrative as something that transcends them. Rather, they often allude to the crossover event of the DC Universe *Crisis on Infinite Earth*, during which the alternative realities of DC Universe were destroyed: "While we slept, there seems to have been a catastrophic and unforseen assault on the continuum." (Morrison, *Animal Man vol.2*, 12)

In other parts of the book, their seemingly omnipotent power is shown to be constricted by the "higher plan"; this is eloquently exemplified in issue 23: "'I really don't want to be here. I don't want to be here at all...' 'You have no choice in the matter, Dr. Highwater. Nor do we (...) we can only play out our assigned roles in the story.'" (Morrison, *Animal Man vol.3*, 136), a claim reaffirmed an issue later in a very similar dialogue: "'Can't you do something?' 'It would interfere with the story.'" (Morrison, *Animal Man vol.3*, 160). Their inability to operate within the full scale of their powers is nothing else than a parody of the stereotypical development of the genre: a being of near-omnipotent powers (such as Superman) scarcely uses the same methods in each story, as it would make the narrative repetitive. Morrison parades his dirty laundry before the reader: he refuses to let the yellow aliens destroy Overman simply because it would be anti-climatic, and it would only repeat the removal of He who never dies from continuity; in other words, as long as the author does not wish for the story to take a certain direction, it cannot do so – a fact of which every reader is so surely aware they often overlook it and do not include the author's will and personality in the equation of the literary work (even though in several parts, Morrison 'lets' characters defeat his own purposes, only to arrive at the obvious purpose of such benevolence).

After witnessing the birth of the original Animal Man, the yellow aliens point out: "The Buddy Baker we've just observed is surely an older man, living in a barely-defined world. Additionally, his attitudes and motivations seem so much less sophisticated than those of the current Buddy Baker." (Morrison, *Animal Man vol.2*, 20). The sequence is immediately contrasted with Buddy Baker's 'original' adventures, again juxtaposing two layers of reality (as in the *Coyote's Gospel*). The pages 13-19 are markedly different both on the stylistic level and in the relative simplicity of the narrative. Good example of both is provided on the very first page of this sequence, where Buddy springs up to hit an elephant: "Wow! What a combination –a tiger spring and a gorilla sock to clobber this berserk elephant!" (Morrison, *Animal Man vol. 2,* 13); the word 'sock' and the narrative device of the (quite unnecessary) explanatory introspection naturally evoke the feeling of the old, 'simpler' times of comics. This is also explicitly remarked upon by the aliens

themselves: “No attempt made to question the motives or the origins of the “aliens”. Things were simpler then.”(Morrison, *Animal Man vol.2*, 23).

The yellow aliens’ observations of the ‘original’ Animal Man in fact epitomize Morrison’s perception of the comicbook industry and the rules it imposes on the characters and stories: “‘There’s something touching about the blind faith with which they greet the impossible.’ ‘It’s always been the same on this stratum: radiation chemical accidents, magic rings. The physical laws under which these people operate are all but incomprehensible.’” (Morrison, *Animal Man vol.2*, 20) – echoing Reynolds’ definition of the superhero genre as a genre that identifies science with magic – see section 2.1.

This inquiry into the workings of the genre is closely connected to an examination of out-dated concepts. How are today’s comics different from their predecessors? How much realism can be expected of them, and how much realism is in fact desirable? How have comicbooks grown since their modern-day ‘conception’? Is it possible, after the works of Alan Moore, Frank Miller, Grant Morrison or Neil Gaiman, to keep retelling the same stories, to resist change and evolution, which is necessary for any medium in order for it to survive?

A work of fiction is in Morrison’s view no less important for the understanding of existence than is the state of things we describe as reality – as much as life contains works of fiction, the works of fiction contain life itself, and it is therefore impossible to distinguish one from the other: “The symbol of David Bohm’s implicate order theory. A vision of a vast, interconnected universe where every part contains the whole. Where the universe is a mirror reflecting itself. Everything is everything.” (Morrison, *Animal Man vol.2*, 130) are the author’s very own words during his first appearance in the story in volume 2.

It is difficult to tell if Morrison’s worldview was only confirmed, or entirely inspired, by David Bohm’s theory of the implicate order, but it undeniably influenced his work on *Animal Man*. In the same way the followers of this theory

believe it can explain the nature of our reality, the characters in *Animal Man* use it to explain theirs, in its complexity explaining ours, and all realities, at the same time. "Bohm is saying that reality is unfolded out of a higher state – the implicate order. The implicate order is a vast sea of potential... When you talked about heaven, I think you meant the implicate." (Morrison, *Animal Man vol.3,* 45) An interesting point is made here: that if the theory of the implicate is to be believed, it may be also seen as mirrored in all works of fiction, as they indeed are concrete manifestations of the infinite potential present in their creation; in other words, anything can be created, be it written, painted or filmed, and particular works are thus only fragments of what could have been formed, unfolded from the totality of the limitless options. "It's the primal reality, if you like. All our dreams of ideal worlds are just attempts to describe that infinite possibility. And everything in the universe is connected, you see." (Morrison, *Animal Man vol.3,* 45).

This belief is interestingly close to Reynold's concept of the relationship between the comics metatext and a particular work reflecting the relationship between langue and parole (see section 2.2.).

The pondering on the relativity of the order, importance and nature of different realities, is also reiterated during Buddy's and Highwater's mescaline trip. Morrison intentionally juxtaposes the characters' existential questions to which we, as their 'gods', know the answer (or to which we think we know the answer) with the existential questions we ourselves pose: "Did the universe arise by chance or was it created? Did someone create us? Are they still creating us now? I saw into another world and it was worse than this one. It was like I glimpsed heaven and... it wasn't paradise. It was more like hell. What if God, or whoever it is, created us to be better than himself? What if God's reality... heaven, if you like... what if it's so bad that he had to imagine us to help make his life bearable? What if we're just characters and not people?" (Morrison, *Animal Man vol.3,* 43)

The theory of multiple layers of existence, which Morrison proposes, also postulates that each level seem godlike to the levels below. The literary authors of our reality are in all aspects 'Gods' to their works: they are both omnipotent and

omnipresent, they can bend space and time to their will. The way the comicbook characters perceive the inhabitants of our layer of existence is exemplified on page 158 of the third volume by James Highwater: "We're just minor characters in a story to entertain... I don't know... the Gods, if you like." (Morrison, *Animal Man vol.3*, 158), to which Ultraman replies: "Minor character? That can't be right! I'm Ultraman..." (Morrison, *Animal Man vol.3*, 158); the mischievous irony and clever juxtaposition of the value of the character within and without his reality reflects the relativity of their standing: Ultraman is in all abilities Superman's equal, undoubtedly one of the most powerful beings in the DC Universe, yet as a comicbook character, he is a minor variation of the original and of no real consequence, and was indeed removed from the continuity during the crossover event *Crisis on Infinite Earths* (his short-lived return on the pages of *Animal Man* being his last "adventure").

However, the arbitrary hierarchy of various layers of existence (in this case the 'tangible' versus the 'imaginary') does not necessarily simplify the relationship between their inhabitants: literary and comicbook characters transcend and outlive their creators to the extent determined by their relative quality. Even though we can study the life of William Shakespeare, *Hamlet* or *Othello* will always seem more real to us; we can 'touch' neither, yet *Hamlet* and *Othello* are presented to us in a way most possibly not tampered with since their conception, whereas we cannot experience William Shakespeare in the same way we experience living human beings – and thus, in many aspects, he is just a poorly defined character.

This approach also considerably changes the perception of continuity, as used in *Animal Man*: the continuity is shown to be a non-diachronic device - even though it does develop over time in a seemingly linear fashion, all the events that compose it are at any point available for re-reading, and therefore re-living (as it would be experienced by the characters), and in fact exist simultaneously. This theme is developed especially on page 171: "You can all still be seen. We can all still be seen. Our lives are replayed every time someone reads us. We can never die. We outlive our creators. We outlive our gods! If we could move outside our world, outside our space-time continuum, **this** is what it would look like. (Highwater

pointing to a comicbook page) A comicbook. Like drawings on a page. Every time someone reads our stories, we live again!" (Morrison, *Animal Man vol.3,* 171)

This is admitted even by Morrison himself on page 214, during his dialogue with Buddy: "'Tell me one thing: am I real or what?' 'Of course you're real! We wouldn't be here talking if you weren't real. You existed long before I wrote about you and if you're lucky, you'll still be young when I'm old or **dead**. You're more real than I am.'" (Morrison, *Animal Man vol.3*, 214)

Towards the end of the story, Morrison also links the theory of the implicate order to the infinite monkey theorem, which proposes that a monkey randomly hitting keys on a typewriter would, given enough time, reproduce all of Shakespeare's plays. The infinite monkey first appears on the cover of the 25th issue and utilizes the script-like description of the first page panels examined in the following paragraphs. Morrison almost bizarrely convolutes this technique on panel 2, which shows a page with the text of Shakespeare's *Tempest* being written on a typewriter – with the whole panel, together with the written text, being described in the script (see appendices 11,12).

The infinite monkey is used as a metaphor for the way Morrison sees himself in relation to his works, and perhaps even for the relationship between authors and their works in general. The monkey represents the randomness with which all art is created out of the infinite potential of the possible. It becomes a full-fledged element of the story in limbo, where it is clearly shown to represent Morrison's alter-ego: "'Monkey? What monkey?' 'Oh, just a monkey. He used to be famous, but no one's allowed to say his name anymore (...) There's this kind of legend that says one day the monkey will write us all out of limbo.'" (Morrison, *Animal Man vol.3,* 189) It is in fact Morrison himself who writes the obscure characters out of the limbo, by using them on the pages of *Animal Man*. This theme is closely connected to Morrison's demiurgic understanding of his role (see section 4.5.): he works with characters written by other authors, and employs them in unusual ways for his own purposes.

Starting with issue 24, Morrison employs a wholly new method of communicating the metafictional nature of his work, or rather the next step in the aforementioned simultaneous narration of a story and a reflective comment on it. He replaces the story with its actual script, which results in the description of the very images we are looking at, as well as openly discussing the story. This can be seen clearly on page 156 (see appendix 13).

In the first panel, the textual aspect of comicbook narrative is identified with its graphic counterpart: the words attempt to transmit the image, while the image communicates ideas we subsequently put into words. This evokes both the feeling of an unfinished work of art, as well as a peek 'behind the curtain' of its creation. In the second panel, Morrison adds a new layer to the device, as Psycho-pirate openly reacts to the way he is supposed to be drawn: "I know you're there. Trying to make it hard for me to think." (Morrison, *Animal Man vol.3,* 156)

This approach is curiously 'inverted' in issue 25: instead of the text representing the script, and the images standing for the story itself, the images now show only fingers typing on a keyboard (and thus have no communicative value for the story whatsoever), while the text transforms into a stream of consciousness.

A fiercely surreal zenith of this technique is presented from the end of issue 25 onwards, when Buddy personally reads the script, which depicts his own adventures, and the very moment of it being read: "Animal Man #25 'Monkey Puzzles.' I read it. I read my own words, my own thoughts, and I realize they're not mine after all. They were never mine. I flip through to the end of the script and there it is in black and white: 'We're looking over Animal Man's shoulders as he rummages in the kitchen drawer and finds a pair of scissors." (Morrison, *Animal Man vol.3,* 201); the result of which is the very action described in the script. To differentiate the script from Animal Man's thoughts (even though the first actually includes the latter), Morrison changes the font type and the background color of the rectangle in the descriptive part beginning with *'We're looking...'*. This once again

proves the unique and unprecedented ability of the medium to communicate metafiction and interlaying of realities.

In issue 26, a similar approach is used, only this time we are not actually reading the script from the description squares, but from Morrison's computer screen itself: as Morrison points towards the screen, we can see that the text editor says "Close-up on Morrison's hand pointing at the screen." (Morrison, *Animal Man vol.3,* 208) (see appendix 14)

On page 212, the interweaving of fictional and actual realities finally forces Buddy to read an account of his own life in the form of a comicbook, re-experiencing the trauma of the death of his family and at the same time perceiving it as a fictional story, frighteningly separate from his current existence. His mind is divided between the two modes of thought: he feels the pain, yet at the same time realizes its instability and unreality – it is a pain he was **written** to feel, and at any point of the story he may be written to feel blithe of it.

Still, Morrison constructs connections between the narrative and its creation even outside the obvious metafictional level, through subtle connotative links; a good example of this can be glimpsed on page 194: "We've been walking since then, across ink-stained plains, through deserted pasteboard cities. The monkey's breathing sounds like paper being torn." (Morrison, *Animal Man vol.3,* 194) The metaphors and similes in both sentences serve to evoke the external influences of the medium present within *Animal Man's* reality – as if the paper on which the story is narrated, and the ink with which it is drawn, are embedded into its very nature.

One of the typical, though not easily definable aspects of postmodernist writing is self-reflection and introspection, often of an ironical sort. This tendency indeed heavily pervades Morrison's work. It would not be far from truth to say that his whole run on *Animal Man* is at the same time homage, parody, analysis, deconstruction and exemplification of the genre.

Although this approach is quite characteristic of all Morrison's works, in *Animal Man*, the 'added value' lies in the use of metafiction as a means of telling a story and commenting on it at the same time. The self-irony reaches its full potential (as do many of Morrison's other postmodernist devices) in the last issue, where the content of the entire narrative becomes the topic of the conversation between Buddy Baker and Grant Morrison: "'You haven't been much good at writing my life, have you? I've just wandered through a series of unconnected events with people telling me that **everything** is connected.' 'Yeah, well, that's the trouble with my stories – they always seem to build up to something that never actually happens.'" (Morrison, *Animal Man vol.3,* 216). However, Morrison also draws a connection between the way his stories are written and his perception of life as we experience it: "Life doesn't have plots and subplots and denouements. It's just a big collection of loose ends and dangling threads that **never** get explained." (Morrison, *Animal Man vol.3,* 216) Immediately after this seemingly meaningful reflection, irony makes its way back to the dialogue in Buddy's reply: "Listen, where **I** come from, we expect real stories. I'm sick of these pseudo-existential narratives!" (Morrison, *Animal Man vol.3*, 216)

In the course of self-conscious writing, Morrison also mocks his own authorial decisions: in issue 24, during Ultraman's fight with Overman, the Psycho-pirate begins screaming: "No! Stop! Stop! You're forgetting the real enemy! Out there! Don't fight! That's what they want! They want to see people hurting each other! Why do you think the world is the way it is? That's all they **ever** want!" (Morrison, *Animal Man vol.3*, 161).

The statement only serves to epitomize the inextricable paradox of the way *Animal Man* is written: Morrison's attempt to mirror the readers' desires and expectations, and make them reflect on them, is manifested through the use of a stereotypical smack-down between two characters (and frankly, even the appearance of a 'negative' character, whose only purpose is the aforementioned smack-down with a hero). Yet although Morrison criticizes this decision, he includes the fight in the story not only for the sake of commenting on it, but indeed also for the sake of adding suspension and pace to an otherwise purely dialogue-based part of the

narrative: he thus mocks both the reader and himself at the same time, and contravenes, as well as observes, the rules and expectations of the genre.

This ironical self-mockery is continued throughout the last issue, during Buddy's confrontation with Morrison, where Morrison nonsensically makes Buddy throw him out of a window on a fast-paced page, only to reappear standing behind the hero, commenting on the story development: "I **made** you do it. I thought we needed some action at the start of the story, just to keep people interested." (Morrison, *Animal Man vol.3,* 211). A few pages later, Morrison makes a group of superheroes appear out of the water, only to erase them in a spray of blood on the next panel: "They're not part of the story. I only put them in to make this conversation more interesting to draw." (Morrison, *Animal Man vol.3,* 216) (see appendix 15)

The bizarrely nonsensical fight, which takes place during Morrison's acknowledgment speech, is also (according to the author) prompted by the (supposed) external 'need' of the story to pick up the pace by including an action sequence: "This is getting boring. Too much talk. Time for a fight scene, I think." (Morrison, *Animal Man vol.3*, 219)

In a similar fashion, his critique of violent, 'realistic' and complex (and therefore complicated) comics storytelling does not prevent him from writing such stories. "I don't want to live in this world. All the fun's gone out of it. Everything used to be bright and now everything is dark. I want to go home." (Morrison, *Animal Man vol.3*, 172), exclaims the alternative Green Lantern, effectively criticizing the *Animal Man* comicbook itself; 'home' here possibly referring to the straightforward and optimistic silver age comics in which his character had previously appeared.

The self-mockery, present throughout the whole work, is perhaps best exemplified on page 173, when the yellow aliens indecisively stare at a ticking doomsday bomb, unsure of its purpose in the story and their relation to it: "'Are we authorized to act here?' 'I fear not. The bomb's continued existence seems to suggest that the word **is** to suffer destruction after all.""Either that, or it simply serves some dramatic

function.' 'Or exists to make a philosophical point.' 'Who can say?'"(Morrison, *Animal Man vol.3*, 173)

4.4. The visual: Partial erasure and the use of panels

In the same way Alan Moore was able to employ various narrative features, available predominantly to the medium of comics, to communicate a work of art that could not have taken any other form (see section 3.5.), Morrison also employs a method of metafiction that could not have been attained via any other medium.

By relying on the shared knowledge stock of the comicbook readers in the aspect of the comicbook creation, he could use various steps of creating comics to display its "un-creation". In literature as such, a writer would have to use completely different narrative techniques to express that something or someone is slowly ceasing to exist – if such a notion could even be expressible in words – for there is no metafiction of form in describing the effects of the approaching non-existence – the effect is only carried in content.

A narrative device Morrison frequently uses is a state of partial erasure – the juxtaposition of pencil drafts with the finished art, or, when the characters that are being uncreated speak, the underlining of the text in text bubbles, as if the letterer tried to keep the characters even.

Since most comicbook readers realize that the underlining is erased in the final version of the bubble, and thus that it must precede it, and that pencil drafts precede inking and inking precedes the final version of the art, this device perfectly expressed the reversed process of creation in its various stages (see appendix 16).

In issue 12, the yellow aliens anti-climatically destroy 'He who never dies' by simply erasing him from the story. "You are nothing. A minor character. Old-fashioned and melodramatic. Best forgotten." (Morrison, *Animal Man vol.2*, 97). He who never dies is erased only because the author feels that such an unambiguous, straightforward character is absolutely unsuitable for a modern story

(as if he had changed his mind in the middle of the creative process), again granting him a paradoxical depth of the awareness of his own shortcomings in the very end. The one-dimensionality of the character is communicated by both textual and visual means. On the textual level, the name of the character, "He who never dies", hints at the absence, or lack of, permanent death of both heroes and villains in comics, which preserves the fruitless status-quo, enforced by the editors (more in section 4.5.): "You don't understand... I cannot be killed..." (Morrison, *Animal Man vol.2*, 97). Visually, the depiction of the character is even more interesting: He who never dies is **literally** black and white, fully reflecting the simplicity of his personality.
The partial erasure is also utilized to portray the vanishing of Animal Man's reality in issue 12 - the empty places in the sky are in fact the blank pages of the comics ("The great light you see is a manifestation of the vast absence that lies behind what you call 'reality'." (Morrison, *Animal Man vol.2*, 92) - and the disappearance of Psycho-pirate on page 145, vol. 3 (depicted in the same way as the erasure of He who never dies).

A juxtaposition of different drawing techniques is also used in issue 23 to portray the clash of several different continuums: the building of the Arkham Asylum on page 137 (vol. 3) is composed of three distinct drawing and architectural styles, of which two are incomplete, and nonsensically connect to the fully drawn part of the *Animal Man* continuum (see appendix 17). Yellow aliens call this "a breach in the architecture of the real" (Morrison, *Animal Man vol.3*, 151), further underlining the metafictional struggles of their universe.

Another metanarrative device, perhaps even more specific to comicbooks, that Morrison uses, is the transcendence of comicbook panels. The characters, aware of their fictional essence, become aware of the panels limiting their world, and in some cases, try to interact with their borders. This most notably occurs in the sequence where Buddy, after the use of psychedelics, begins to transcend the restraints of the comicbook panels: "I'm outside! I... I... Highwater, is that you in there?" (Morrison, *Animal Man vol.3*, 47), growing out of proportion, to which Highwater, from inside a panel, and the size of Buddy's palm, replies: "Is that your hand? Where is it coming from? I don't understand." (Morrison, *Animal Man vol.3*, 47). The segment

culminates in the arguably single most famous page of Morrison's run, when Buddy notices the reader for the first time and turns to look at him, uttering his crucial line: "I can see you!" (Morrison, *Animal Man vol.3*, 40) (the image is foreshadowed as early as issue 11 by a virtually identical shot of James Highwater's face when he visits the Arkham Asylum, and Madhatter taps on his shoulder (Morrison, *Animal Man vol.2*, 33), and echoed in Psychopirate's stare in issue 22 - "And don't think I can't see you, because I can. Always watching. Perverts." (Morrison, *Animal Man vol.3*, 112), or even in his later 'Medusa mask' state: "As for you... I can still see you. Don't think you're going to get away with just watching for very much longer." (Morrison, *Animal Man vol.3*, 131) (see appendices 18, 19, 20, 21).

This section of the story is also interesting because it reflects Morrison's belief in the power of hallucinogenic and psychedelic substances. Buddy is required to take mescaline in order to see the "higher" plane of existence, i.e. our reality. In his personal life, Morrison has been known to promote the use of psychedelic substances as a means of reaching into normally untouchable parts of human mind and augmenting our perception of what we call "reality".

Quite fascinatingly, it is also madness that enables characters within the story to 'see through the looking glass' - whether it is the Psycho Pirate: "How can I sleep? If I go to sleep they might decide to remove me from the continuity and then I'll never wake up." (Morrison, *Animal Man vol.2*, 35) or Mad Hatter: "We're all just words on a page. We're just a script, rushed out to meet a deadline. We can never aspire to more than penny-dreadful melodrama." (Morrison, *Animal Man vol.2*, 34). Both statements evidently comment on the meta-narrative level of the story. The combination of madness and psychedelics, both of which distort the perception and understanding of one's surroundings, suggest the impossibility of judging reality objectively, of finding the one "absolute truth" - whether in real life, or ascribed to characters in a work of fiction.

The panels in *Animal Man* are also used to easily distinguish various levels of the narrative from each other: when Highwater obtains a short story written by Morrison himself (the author can be easily deduced from the last sentence "Years later, I found out what my surname means in Gaelic. Son of the fox." (Morrison, *Animal Man vol.2*, 36), and a torn page from the 'original' Animal Man comics

(pages 36 and 37), Morrison employs the device of a 'story within a story', rather than 'a fiction aware of its own fictionality'.

As illustrated in for example *Dorian, an Imitation* by Will Self, the only way to achieve the device of a story within a story in literature is (quite logically) textually. Visual arts have far wider range of possible devices, intended to communicate the discrepancy between what is read by the reader, and what is read by a character within the narrative (see appendix 22).

The story that Highwater is reading is provided with rugged, yellowish panels (as opposed to the clean-cut, white panels of *Animal Man*) and a different font-type, in order to suggest a different author (that is not the author of *Animal Man*, but Grant Morrison – in this case two different "characters"). Morrison also uses a quite typical shot of hands holding a page, which immediately and self-explanatorily informs the reader that he is looking at a text "within" the story.

A slightly different effect (although based on a similar principle) is used in issue 19, when Buddy is confronted with his own story (Morrison, *Animal Man vol.3,* 36-37) (see appendices 23, 24); although the red paneling and the use of descriptive squares, rather than bubbles, suggest a shift in the layer of the portrayed story, it is not "read" by Buddy in the conventional sense. Instead, the images unfold before him in an ungraspable psychedelic fashion that fully utilizes the possibilities of the medium: it shares no characteristics with textual description or linear flashing of images used in films. This method is used throughout the entire psychedelic section, with different images, representing different layers of 'real', randomly intertwining and transcending panels and seemingly 'separate' scenes.

Although we can conceive a writer skilled enough to conjure an image of mingling scenes that transcend the concept of "real", such a description would still lack the absolute dissolution of the way we perceive the medium (an interesting way to communicate this in a book might be the overflowing of the text over the borders of the page – then again, such a method would be visual rather than textual).

Compared to film, the discrepancy lies in the pacing of the scene. Unless we choose to display a frame that would contain a scene resembling the layout of pages 36-37 (thus losing the essential advantage of the medium - movement), we are bound to show the images in a temporal succession; by contrast, in comics, various layers of the narrative can be portrayed 'timelessly' - at the same time in a succession of images and in one 'still' image (both of which can 'last' however long the reader wishes them to); this allows Morrison to give both layers of the narrative reality a feeling of synchronicity, of happening 'at the same time '.

It is quite interesting that the removal, or distortion, of comicbook panels influences the content both on the temporal and spatial level; in other words, a comicbook panel is the carrier of both dimensions, and the metafictional deconstruction of its workings manifests itself in giving a sense of 'broken time', as well as 'broken space'. This can be seen for example on page 38 in vol. 3, where Buddy falls across the top of the page, only to land face first nonsensically against the whiteness of the following irregularly-shaped panel. The color white - the natural state of the paper, on which the comics is read, serves as an implicitly understood symbol of nothingness, of the disappearance of the tangible, and gives the scene a feeling of being removed from identifiable space. When Buddy crashes against whiteness on page 38, he does not crash against the content of the comics, an object within the narrative, but against the paper itself.

Later in the story, the revived Ultraman identifies white with a state of non-existence – in other words of not being drawn/written, of staying in a 'comicbook character limbo' (see section 4.5.) "But I was... I was dead. I remember. A wall of whiteness... miles high... Whiteness eating the world." (Morrison, *Animal Man vol.3*, 135)

The comicbook panels become a direct part of the narrative itself in issue 23, when the near-invisible Psycho-pirate calls the attention of other heroes to their existence: "This cage we're kept in. They keep us here for their cheap amusement. Haven't you seen it before? Look!" (Morrison, *Animal Man vol.3*, 131). (appendix 25) On

the following page, Ultraman successfully attempts to break through a division between two panels, in spite of the frightened warnings of the Green Lantern "Ultraman, I'm afraid! We're going too far! This is **wrong**! This isn't meant to happen!" (Morrison, *Animal Man vol.3,* 152), emphasizing the strenuous mental reconciliation of multiple layers of reality. In breaking the comicbook panel, Ultraman invokes the feared 'whiteness' of the blank paper. (see appendix 26)

On the following page, Morrison underscores the Psycho-pirate's ambiguous embrace, aimed towards the reader ("We're through! We're through! And we're coming to get you!" (Morrison, *Animal Man vol.3,* 153)), with a simple visual method: the character's hands and head extend slightly over the edges of the panel, as if to symbolize that he is freed from the 'cage that is the page'. (see appendix 27)

The panels (and especially their removal) are thus assigned an entirely new role, "A breach in the continuum. A door into the impossible. (...) The middle ground between our reality and the higher world, out of which we are unfolded." (Morrison, *Animal Man vol.3,* 157). The yellow aliens' words again bring to mind Bohm's implicate order (see appendix 28).

Being somewhat aware of the nature of his reality, and the 'higher order', Animal Man becomes able to use the white parts of the page to his advantage, successfully defeating Overman on pages 164 to 170 (see appendices 29, 30, 31). On the last page of their fight, Morrison introduces another way for characters to be removed from the story by the tools of the medium itself, aside from partial erasure: Overman is 'trapped' within a contracting panel, which "squeezes" him out of the continuity (see appendix 32). After witnessing the whiteness and perhaps gaining some insight into the true powers behind the direction of the story, Overman's appeal "Let me out! I'm real! I'm realistic! This can't happen to me!" (Morrison, *Animal Man vol.3,* 170) seems to be addressed to the author himself, rather than to other characters within the story.

In other parts of the story, Morrison employs a wide range of visual devices, connected predominantly with film; in vol. 3, page 6, he captures the dialogue from

Buddy's eyes. This mechanism is usually used to pull the viewer/reader deeper into the scene (while still presenting the two realms as separate), but in the context of the later revelations, in *Animal Man* it also suggests the readers involvement in the story, which is soon to be noticed by the character. Both the reader and Buddy then notice a large white rectangle, which is on the opposite page, bearing the title of the chapter, recognized as the flashing cursor in a text editor (see appendices 33, 34).

This theme is echoed on the first paged of the following issue, where we instead 'see' through the eyes of Morrison himself – the 6-panel layout of the page suggests action and progress, but in fact captures only one big shot of Morrison's study (judging by the dictionaries, thesauri, and Bohm's *Unfolding Meaning*, referenced earlier in the story), as if to contrast the fast-paced dissolution of Animal Man's life with the deliberate calmness of its superior reality, in which it is woven (see appendix 35).

Animal Man also explores how motion and transfer are communicated in comicbooks, and the way they are innately understood by the readers. If we see a man walking into a plane on one panel, and exiting it on another, we naturally suppose that he has taken a flight, and possibly arrived in his destination – even though the flight itself never took place on the comicbook page, and it exists only in our minds. In the dialogue "'Where are we going?' 'Nowhere, just walking. I don't suppose you ever notice how easy it is to travel just by cutting from one panel to the next. Maybe that's why superheroes never grow old – they save up all their time by **cutting** from one place to another.'" (Morrison, *Animal Man vol.3,* 214) Morrison references both the relativity of movement inside and between comicbook panels, and the agelessness of comicbook characters. While the former is only a clever play on the presupposition of movement where there is none (the characters are drawn in the middle of a step, but this does not change their motionlessness – at least anywhere else than in the reader's imagination; this theme seems to correspond closely with the absence of real experience of the world, or emotions, which the characters are **written** to have, but do not actually posses), the latter is probably connected to Morrison's strong dislike of rigidness within the genre: the superhero narratives are especially infamous for the unwillingness of editors to permit any

significant changes to the characters (a problem again connected with the fact that the titles are owned by the publishing houses and not the authors themselves) – a majority of alterations to the universe is eventually inevitably reverted. Morrison's first-hand experience with this inflexibility occurred shortly after *Animal Man* during his tenure on the *New X-men*.

4.5. The creator and the created

At several points of the story, it is implied that the persona of the author has his or her own interest in the narrative (obviously almost impossible to separate from the actual author's interest, as they represent at the same time an identical and yet different influence on the story) and exerts its 'external' powers to achieve its goal.

An example of this can be found in Morrison's constant efforts to stop James Highwater from reaching Buddy Baker (mentioned in section 4.3.). The self-contained flow of the story is further contaminated by the author's influence throughout the following issues: Morrison incorporates additional layers of reality in the form of the 'yellow aliens' (also section 4.3.) and manipulates and 'corrupts' the narrative.

Morrison's attempts to stop the characters from 'ruining' the story could be seen as a metaphor for a postmodernist author's struggle to hold his work together in spite of the absence of the core, of the stable part necessary for unshakable storytelling, but destroyed by the postmodernist perception of such solid points. Author's intention itself ceases to be clearly identifiable, as he writes the story which he at the same time disrupts. How can the reader tell which story he really wanted to communicate? What is the 'author's intention' really? Is the final work necessarily a reflection of the original aim? Or is the message the unclearness of the intent itself?

The reflective function of metafiction becomes more important towards the end of the story, where Buddy finally meets his creator. Here, Morrison addresses and toys with a great number of stereotypes and tendencies in the superhero genre.

When asked why he had to kill Buddy's family, what purpose it served in the story, Morrison simply replies "I wrote your grief and your rage and your acceptance. It added drama. All stories need drama and it's easy to get cheap emotional shock by killing popular characters" (Morrison, *Animal Man vol.3*, 212) Later in the story, he adds: "We'll stop at nothing, you see. All the suffering and the death and the pain in your world is entertainment for us. Why does blood and torture and anguish still excite us? We thought that by making your world more violent, we could make it more 'realistic', more 'adult'." (Morrison, *Animal Man vol.3*, 224). Here, in accordance with the prevalent motif of resurrection of comicbook characters, Buddy asks him if he could bring them back. Author feels contempt for such a narrative device and pronounces it unrealistic and unwanted to bring characters back from the grave: ""If you can do anything... if you can... will you bring my family back?""Sorry. It wouldn't be realistic. Pointless violence and death are 'realistic'. Comicbooks are 'realistic' now."" (Morrison, *Animal Man vol.3*, 218). The following story twist (the actual resurrection of Buddy's family with the explanation that it was only a dream) clearly illustrates the author's own internal struggle between the two choices – the improbable happy-end and the sustenance of "reality". But more importantly, what Morrison's dialogue with Buddy achieves is a transformation of the reader's feelings: where before he would despise and label character resurrection improbable and childish, now, when faced with the reflection of his own thoughts on the matter, which are for their unoriginality and influence of prevalent opinion no more complex than the very device they despise, he wishes for Buddy's family to come back from the grave, because now he truly sees his suffering over such a trifling matter as the "realistic" tendency.

However, Morrison goes even deeper in his guilt-trip prepared exclusively for the suffering reader: in the middle of Buddy's pleading, he suddenly proclaims "that the talking has gone for too long and that the readers want action." (Morrison, *Animal Man vol.3*, 219). At this point, undefined monsters nonsensically appear from nowhere and start attacking Buddy. As he is desperately crying for the author's mercy, so is the reader. The catharsis, the absolute cleansing of the reader's preconceptions, leads him back to the core of every story: a genuine interest in the

character's fate. Morrison implies that what the tendencies towards more realistic storytelling may have actually achieved was reader's distance from the characters, his indifference to their suffering. This dissociation is partly dissolved by the metafictional openness with which Buddy's fate is presented.

Morrison also examines the relationship between an author and his creation, in particular the characters. This relationship has very unique and peculiar overtones in comics. In literature, it is quite uncommon for different authors to contribute to the mythos of one character, and although it is not unheard of (for example the various additions to Robert E. Howard's *Conan*, Arthur Conan Doyle's *Sherlock Holmes* or Frank Herbert's *Dune*), there is always a clear distinction between the original author and his successors. This distinction is neither clear, nor necessary in the realm of comicbook heroes. Dave Wood, the first author of Animal man, is in no way more native to the character than Grant Morrison, or any author that preceded or succeeded him. The concept of authorship has an entirely different meaning in the world of comics – the artists (both the writer and the inker) always hold authorship over a storyline, never over the characters themselves, which they only 'borrow' from the fluid, authorless 'stock' of personas.

Morrison uses his own appearance in the story to address this issue: "'Did you create the yellow aliens?' 'Well, I didn't create them, but I did rescue them from obscurity and put them to work for me (i.e. changed their original role from Animal Man #2). I didn't create you either. Or your family. I am more of a demiurgic power.'" (Morrison, *Animal Man vol.3*, 208). The choice of words in this dialogue is immaculate. Morrison plays both on the platonic interpretation of the term 'demiurgic', that is "a creator who does not create by himself, but according to a certain pattern" (commenting on the rules of the comicbook industry), and the Gnostic perception of the demiurgic force as antagonistic to the will of the Supreme Being, a malevolent, satanic force that tries to create a semblance to the God's creation, but whose result is necessarily flawed. This interpretation is further evidenced by Morrison saying "Someone else creates you to be perfect and innocent and then I step in and spoil everything. It's a little bit satanic, I suppose." (Morrison, *Animal Man vol.3*, 208). He conceivably refers not only to his attempts

to disrupt the story as a character, but also to his general approach to 'pre-made' superheroes as something stable and straightforward to be deconstructed and relativized in his hands – precisely to follow the demiurgic attempt to imitate God, i.e. our own reality.

Morrison sees himself as a disruptive force not only to his own storyline, but to the entire mythos of *Animal Man*. Throughout most of the second volume, he keeps reiterating Buddy Baker's origin with subtly modified details (Morrison, *Animal Man vol.2*, 25, 51, 95) (see appendices 36, 37, 38) only to show that his Buddy Baker might as well be a completely different character from the original Animal Man. These changes also function as a reaction to the popular practice of ret-conning, mentioned in part 3.3.

The ret-conning and discrepancies within the *Animal Man* mythos are addressed openly during Buddy's confrontation with his 'original' self, that is the Animal Man of the Silver Age, written by other writers. "I was almost 30 when I got my powers. A spaceship blew up in my face and weird radiation gave me animal powers. I fought crime. Aliens. Simple. I was married. No kids. The radiation sterilized me. And then they changed everything. They wiped out my life and replaced it with yours." (Morrison, *Animal Man vol.3,* 39) This shows that Morrison indeed sees the various incarnations of comicbook characters as non-interchangeable.

Buddy's 'double' then proceeds to comment on the comicbook itself on the meta-narrative level: ""They twist us and torture us. They kill us in our billions. For what? For entertainment." "They? Who's they?" (Morrison, *Animal Man vol.3,* 39)

Ironically, one of the last coherent remarks of the original Animal Man is "I'm not real anymore." (Morrison, *Animal Man vol.3,* 40), the cruel joke only serving to illustrate the simplicity of the character, who, even in seeing the 'world above', fails to comprehend that he never was real.

Even though the character, the 'platform', the 'canvas', is the same, Morrison' Animal Man is unique. The circumstantial similarities are no more significant than the differences between various takes on the character.

Grant Morrison also explores the relationship between an author and his creation in more general terms. When Buddy objects to the notion of his fictional origin, saying "I'm a vegetarian!", Morrison replies "No, I'm a vegetarian. You'll be whatever you're written to be." (Morrison, *Animal Man vol.3*, 217) Yet it is impossible to tell one from the other – as Morrison himself admits in the introduction to the collected edition of Animal Man, in the course of writing the series, he himself turned to vegetarianism. Hence it was Buddy, not Morrison, who was originally a vegetarian – which serves as perhaps the best illustration of the fact that a fictional character exerts the same (or similar?) level of influence on the author as the author does on it. This further develops the theme of interwoven realities without a definite hierarchy. When Morrison briefly appears in issue 14 (although at the time the reader does not know who he is) to wake James Highwater, he esoterically ponders on the nature of the relationship between an author and his creation by saying "Sometimes I wonder, in an interconnected universe, who's dreaming who?" (Morrison, *Animal Man vol.2*, 131)

Morrison is therefore interested in the extent to which a single author can influence the development of "borrowed" characters (if at all): "You live in a world created by a committee" (Morrison, *Animal Man vol.3*, 213), he says to Animal Man, simply stating that he as an author has to conform to editorial decisions, and cooperate with the other authors (for example the ones that write *Animal Man* during his appearance in the *Justice League of America*).

Most comicbook characters (that is characters which are not confined to the limits of a particular self-contained storyline or series, as are for example the protagonists Alan Moore's *Watchmen* from section 3) differ greatly from their literary counterparts: they are perceived more as ever-changing platforms for the particular author's vision or imagination, rather than relatively static and unchangeable fictional objects. Yet, absurd as it may seem, at the same time, they are infinitely

more static than their literary counterparts, since they do not belong to any author and thus lack any dominant force that would drive them in one particular direction. This of course puts an immense pressure on the author: there are rules as to how the characters should be written, there are rules to the overall direction of the story, there are rules to the significance of the changes made to the mythos: the changes exacted on the characters by a particular author must never be greater than the storyline itself – in other words, the author may do as he chooses with the characters, but he must "return" them as they were before he got them. This is obviously in direct opposition to any long-standing changes to the characters' history, attire, social connections, or their very existence. The element of death (which, outside of the realm of comics, is in most cases permanent) is in no way a hindrance for the characters upon whom it is inflicted – therefore the common saying "Every comicbook character is resurrected, except for Bucky and uncle Ben" (a statement that was recently at least in part rendered invalid by Ed Brubaker's run on Captain America). Yet at the same time, it is the very existence of rules which allows postmodernist approach to thrive.

From issue 23 until the finale of Morrison's work on the mythos, an interesting view of the relationship between an author and his creation emerges: with several characters becoming aware of their fictional state, their existence becomes a struggle with their creator (alas, one they cannot hope to win). The author is thus cast into a negative role, in which his choice not to include certain characters in the story leads to their painful removal from the continuity ("You're all so wonderful. Why did they ever have to remove you from the continuity? You'd have made for marvelous stories." (Morrison, *Animal Man vol.3,* 144)). Since the readers read a story about the characters, and not the authors, they are obviously on the side of the former, and share the pain of their limited existence, always hanging in the balance of public interest.

The evilness of the comicbook authors functions as a recurring theme especially throughout issues 23 and 27. In 23, Psycho-pirate is appalled by some of the existing continuities: "Who makes these awful worlds? Whose idea was this?"

(Morrison, *Animal Man vol.3,* 149), vainly looking for a reason of existence of some of the more disturbed realities.

A central term of this struggle, 'continuity', is understood by Morrison as a synonym of existence, as the continuity encompasses all comics that was, is and will be printed, and forms the metatext of the comics universe examined in section 2.2.

An opposition of continuity, the undesired state of being erased, is represented by 'limbo' - a place/state that first appears in issue 25. Limbo is inhabited by the characters that are no longer used in mainstream comics, and have virtually disappeared from public awareness. Nevertheless, their state is never the one of complete non-existence, as they can be always called upon to act in new comics. "See, this is where all the old characters end up. The ones nobody cares about anymore. You know, the dumb and the old-fashioned ones." (Morrison, *Animal Man vol.3*, 186)

Obviously, the limbo is but another way for Morrison to exert his endless irony: as the anti-thesis of the 'continuum', no story can ever take place here: "'Listen, you mentioned a city. What if I take the monkey to this city? Maybe they'll be able to help both of us...' 'Well, they say that the City of Formation is some kind of outpost of the creative force, so...I don't know. It sounds suspiciously like a story.' 'What d'you mean?' 'Well, it's just... there are no stories in limbo. It's one of the conditions of existence here.'" (Morrison, *Animal Man vol.3*, 192) "I'm sorry we can't come with you, but like I said, we have to be kind of aimless." (Morrison, *Animal Man vol.3*, 193); by letting Animal Man pass through the limbo, Morrison creates an intentional paradox – for he is telling a story in a place in which there cannot be one, using characters who complain about never having chance of being used again. This paradox is partly observed by the Gay Ghost on page 193: "Why is this happening? Nothing ever happens here." (Morrison, *Animal Man vol.3*, 193)

4.6. Deconstruction

The deconstruction of the superhero genre Morrison utilizes in *Animal Man* differs in some aspects from the one realized by Alan Moore in *Watchmen*. Both authors are concerned with the relativity of good and bad, the motivation behind costumed crime fighting and the presence of a personal codex as a key variable of the superhero behavior, but where Moore addresses the relativity of good and bad in terms of degrees into which they can go, Morrison's work is concerned with the relativity of the moral responsibility depending on its objects. Moore's heroes transcend the conventional labels of positive and negative because their goal is the well-being of humankind, regardless of the necessary sacrifices, including human lives.

However, Buddy Baker's morality is divided between humans and animals (or nature in broader sense). His actions are not meant to bring unconditional satisfaction to humankind, but to deliver a balance between the two. This is evidenced for example in issue 6: "'Yeah but surely it's better for a few rats to die if the research saves one kid.' 'You're just assuming that a rat's life is somehow less important than a human life. Who's to say that's true?'" (Morrison *Animal Man vol. 1, issue 6*, 4). Animal Man's philosophical standpoint inevitably distorts the essential concept of a superhero, whose task is to protect humankind at all costs. The idea of a hero, whose allegiance is through the nature of his abilities divided between humankind and animals, prohibits the possibility of an absolute judgment of the morality of his behavior, destroying the absoluteness of the binary opposites of good and bad in the process.

Instead, in the very first *Animal Man* story-arc (issues 1, 3, 4), concerned with B'Wana Beast, Morrison mocks the traditionalist and modernist opposition between good and bad by contrasting the two protagonists. B'Wana is re-envisioned as Buddy Baker's mirror: he reflects both his attitudes and his abilities, yet his allegiance lies more heavily with the animal world. This puts him at odds with human interests, however misguided they may be.

It is also the only element of the story that could possibly define him as a 'bad guy', but more importantly, it lets both the author and Buddy speculate on the nature of moral responsibility. Morrison takes great care not to openly depict B'Wana as the antagonist within the story, even though he cleverly plays with the readers' expectations and prejudices – that is, their mechanical understanding of B'Wana as the villain solely on the basis of his conflict with the main protagonist.

B'Wana's ability to merge together tissues of different species, more specifically of human and animal DNA, is also used to further cloud the distinction between the human and animal world, and thus the object of moral responsibility, possibly by pointing out that the two are one and the same. This element is present throughout the entire story arc, and is openly depicted especially on page 13.

The conclusion of the story-arc is similar to the one in issue 15 (examined in the next paragraph), with homo sapiens being in cast into the role of exploiters. It is also interesting to note the transformation of Buddy's moral sense: although he assumes the humans' side here, he sides with animals in issue 15.

Here, Buddy confronts a company of whalers, intent on slaughtering a school of dolphins. With the help of a group of 'eco-terrorists', cast into the role of positive force in the story, Buddy manages to stop the massacre and lets the leader of the bloodthirsty sailors fall into the waters full of dolphins.

Morrison's intent to explore the relativity of what we consider moral behavior is clearly visible in his decision to present eco-terrorists as the 'good guys', the principal heroes of the story. Furthermore, the description of the annual massacres performed on the dolphins "Screaming… blades grinding against spines, people carving their names into the faces of terrified dolphins, hacking of the flukes for souvenirs… And the children… the men cut fetuses from the bodies of pregnant dolphins and give them to the children to play with. To play with…" (Morrison, *Animal Man vol.2*, 157) calls attention to the similarities between humans and animals, therefore questioning the 'moral right' of homo sapiens, traditionally

ascribed and understood as inherent to man. The use of words such as ‘face’, or ‘pregnant’ is supposed to evoke the feeling of empathy among the readers.

Although the whalers do not threaten other people (except their opponents in the final confrontation), and could be exonerated by the argument that they provide humankind with food, enjoyment and clothing, they are marked as the bad guys of the story, and are dealt with in an appropriate manner.
Morrison’s final argument for the relativity of morality concerning the interests of humans and animals is the epilogue of the story, where the dolphins decide to let the leader of the whalers live, effectively showing more compassion, respect for life, and understanding of mutual respect among different species.

“One day only the world will exist no more agony no more fear in the vast enfolding of time and the world. One day. Until then the killing will continue the blood spilling slaughter of innocents. Until then there will be aggression and pain and sadness. That is the way. That is the way of the sad hu-men. Our way is different.” (Morrison, *Animal Man vol.2*, *173)*

Buddy’s inner conflict of allegiance escalates and becomes insolubly entangled in issue 17, where he directly hurts a human being (a fireman) in the course of destroying an unapproved animal testing lab. Ellen’s comment on the situation “I agree with you. Up to a point.” (Morrison, *Animal Man vol.2*, 212) quite fittingly reflects the moral grayness of the problem; it is difficult to know when one has crossed a line, if we do not posses any certainty in drawing it (regardless of whether this line is supposed to divide good from bad, natural from artificial, or high from low).

The destruction of the simple distinction between good and bad within the story is fully carried out by Buddy’s best friend Roger: “Now I don’t know whether you’re a superhero or a super-villain.” (Morrison, *Animal Man vol.2*, 215); this remark is addressed to Buddy as well to the reader. Morrison then ponders on the nature of the Animal Man character through his own mouth: “I’m 30 years old, Roger. I don’t want to spend my life beating on guys in tights who want to rule the world. I didn’t

want to be like all those other 'superheroes', you know? I wanted to make a difference... The real super-villains don't want to rule the world, they already do. Businessmen in suits... multinationals... big corporations..." (Morrison, *Animal Man vol.2*, 215). The monologue then moves on to the issues of animal cruelty and human ignorance regarding nature. Judging from the introduction Morrison wrote for the first collected issue of *Animal Man*, we can assume that at this point his identification with the main character is absolute, and it is no longer possible to distinguish between the direction of influence: does Morrison believe the opinion voiced by Buddy, this being the reason he wrote it, or does the said opinion provide the reason for Morrison to truly believe it? This reinforces the theme of intertwined realities, and the uncertain nature of the relationship between the creator and the created, touched upon in section 4.5.

Issue 17 marks the final shift of Buddy Baker's allegiance towards a unified balance between man and nature, as well as his resignation as a costumed superhero, the label no longer sufficiently describing his motivations and perception of the world.

A heated dialogue between Animal Man and a conservative politician during a TV discussion sheds new light on the subject: "'All I'm saying is that moral laws are more important than the law of the land.' 'Are you saying then that you set yourself above the 'law of the land'? Is that what you're saying? Would you break the law?' 'Yes, if I thought the law was morally wrong, I guess I would...'" (Morrison, *Animal Man vol.2,* 218); although his approach to superheroism brings into question the moral relativity of a behavior focused solely on the satisfaction of humankind, Buddy in fact believes in the possibility of a subjective distinction between good and bad: in other words, as moral laws are not 'written', their realization can be (and often is) in contradiction to the criminal law – i.e. the law by which the nature of a typical comicbook character (or, more specifically, their labeling as a 'hero' or 'villain') is determined. This subjectivity, and the impossibility of a clear assignment of a fictional character to one of the two categories, is concisely pointed out by Buddy himself at the end of the dialogue: "Just because I wear a costume doesn't mean I always have to be right!" (Morrison, *Animal Man vol.2*, 219)

Towards the finale of the story, Buddy's status as a superhero becomes even more indeterminable: after his family is killed, he slowly ceases to possess the traits we expect in a superhero. The simple presupposition, understood almost as a law of the genre, is vocalized by Mr. Brumley, one of the men responsible for the death of the Baker family: "Animal Man's a superhero. Superheroes don't kill people." (Morrison, *Animal Man vol.3* 91). Nevertheless, the decomposition of the concept becomes obvious to people close to Buddy, be it McCulloch: "'I don't know... the goodies are worse than baddies these days.' 'It doesn't matter what we do. We're just characters in a bad story. It's not our fault.'" (Morrison, *Animal Man vol.3,* 92) or the Guardian: "You lied? What kind of a superhero are you?" (Morrison, *Animal Man vol.3,* 110)

Morrison's query here is simple: will a costumed hero retain his characteristics even if faced with impossible grief and anger? Or rather, how much stress can a superhero's moral compass sustain before it causes him to flout the rules of his status, in other words the genre?

Nevertheless, the deconstructive attempts in *Animal Man* are also concerned with the depiction and the concept of comicbook villains: the initial study being presented in issue 7 - *The Death of the Red Mask.* As it takes places in the beginning of Morrison's 25-issues run, there is no visual metafiction to speak of (simply in order not to give away the final twist of the story), and it provides only subtle comments on the imperfect nature of comicbook antagonists, such as when a policeman on page 8 tells Animal Man about the red robots attacking the city: "Just stomping around, blowing themselves up, breaking things. They really don't seem to **work** too well." (Morrison, *Animal Man vol. 1, issue 7*, 8). This sentence, seemingly tied only to the actions within the narrative, can also be read as Morrison's comment on the simplistic depiction of robot-controlling villains in comics. In the golden age era stories, evil robots actually did little more than walk around and blow up.

The clever play on the multiple meaning of the phrase "to work" should also be noted. Red Mask himself later exclaims that "The damn things never worked back

in the '40s and they're even more useless now." (Morrison, *Animal Man vol. 1, issue 7*, 10). Is the comment literal, or is its meaning in fact 'above the text', so to speak? "Damn things never worked" can obviously refer to the mechanical imperfections of the robots, but it can (especially if we make allowances for Morrison's fascination with metafiction, and its presence in the *Animal Man* arc) covertly refer to the fact that killer robots "never worked" as a narrative device – their involvement in the story was ludicrous in the 40s stories AND it is even more ludicrous now.

The *Death of the Red Mask* is also the first issue which is in greater part concerned more with the comment on the superhero (in this case, supervillain) narrative, than with the narrative itself. It provides a fine example of Morrison's complex approach to the genre (a combination of homage, parody, and analysis). In the final (or rather initial confrontation) with Red Mask, the villain decides to tell Buddy the story of his life – "The secret origin of Red Mask." (Morrison, *Animal Man vol. 1, issue 7* 10) and so begins a journey through the stereotypical birth of a villain, provided with author's rather non-stereotypical commentary. The young Red Mask strolls through the woods and sees a falling meteorite, immediately running to it ("You have to remember now that o **lot** of funny meteorites were coming down back then. A lot of guys were getting weird powers and stuff." (Morrison, *Animal Man vol. 1, issue 7*, 11), gaining the quite self-explanatory power of the 'death touch' ('The one thing I always wanted was to be able to fly. Maybe if I'd just found a different meteor. I mean, look at you – **you** can fly. I'll bet that was an accident...", to which buddy replies "Yeah, spaceship blew up in my face. Gave me animal powers."(Morrison, *Animal Man vol. 1, issue 7*, 12). This part of the story is literally dripping with comics stereotypes (falling meteorites, easily explained power gains, absent sense of self-preservation in the affected), but by facing Buddy with the ludicrousness of his 'origin' it also prepares the character for the final metafictional twist of the story (and for the disruption of his origin in issues 11 and 12).

On the same page, Red Mask also declares: "So, in the end, what else could I **do** with a death touch? I became a bad guy." (Morrison, *Animal Man vol. 1, issue 7*

12). An attempt at the deconstruction of the superhero mythos is clearly visible here – the character within the story, bound by the rigid opposition between good and bad, and also by the expectations of the genre, sees no other choice than to decide between being a 'bad guy' or 'good guy ', completely overlooking hundreds other alternatives present, as if the genre itself prohibits them. However, in order to confuse the readers, who subconsciously expect a clear distinction between good and bad, the Red Mask is intentionally depicted as a likeable and somewhat harmless old man. It is thus a trinity of voices – Buddy's, the author's, and the reader's, that exclaims: "You don't seem like a bad guy to me..." (Morrison, *Animal Man vol. 1, issue 7*, 15), to which the Red Mask mockingly responds: "I don't, huh? I got a death touch, an army of killer robots and a skull drawn on my chest and I don't look like a bad guy to you? I think you could be in the wrong business." (Morrison, *Animal Man vol. 1, issue 7*, 16) In other words, even though all the characteristics of a comicbook villain are present, they still fail to maintain the imaginary absoluteness of his role. This is simply because what was deconstructed was the basis of the opposition, and all its 'upper floors' of discourse now no longer communicate anything – the symbols are there, but the dictionary of our perception, through which we interpret them, has fundamentally changed.

A slightly different moral dilemma, related to the imaginary opposition between a hero and a villain, is presented in issue 16, where Buddy confronts an antagonist known as the Time Commander. Both characters are reluctant to proceed in a conflict that usually ends in a beat down of the 'bad guy' and a satisfactory physical victory of the 'good guy'. For one, Time Commander's actions do not necessarily constitute 'crimes'; in fact, by turning back the time, he manages to resurrect the loved ones of the nearby strollers – an act that would be interpreted as heavily positive in most cultures – and even aims at bringing the ultimate peace to Earth: "I could have turned it all back... I could have taken us all back to the Garden. To the Garden of Eden..." (Morrison, *Animal Man vol. 2*, 196). The conversation between the protagonist and the antagonist of the story thus takes on a peculiar form; Morrison intentionally distorts the expectations of the genre: "Do you want to fight me, too? Do you want to try to hit me?" "No. Not really. Just because I wear a costume doesn't mean I enjoy fighting." (Morrison, *Animal Man vol. 2*, 195). To

confuse the reader even more, it is the villain who finally proclaims that he does not consider the hero a bad guy ("I don't really think you're a bad person, whoever you are, but you're still on their side. On the side of the hammers." (Morrison, *Animal Man vol. 2*, 195)).

What Morrison achieves in this issue is to take away from the reader the satisfaction of seeing the villain defeated, merely by warping the genre-defined moral standards that provide a simple answer to any presented conflict. The pointlessness of the violence, visited upon the Time Commander by the Justice League of Europe, is felt heavily during the last pages, and is emphasized by Metamorpho's confused jabbering: "What's wrong? What did I do? I beat the bad guy, didn't I? That's what we're supposed to do, isn't it? What did I do? What did I do wrong?" (Morrison, *Animal Man vol. 2*, 197) – a question, to which even the reader is unable to find a satisfactory answer...

5. CONCLUSION

The aim of this thesis was to examine and analyze the postmodern narrative and structural possibilities of sequential art in general, and to illustrate the manner and the degree into which these possibilities are made use of by contemporary comicbook authors. Hopefully, it has succeeded to prove that both comics and the superhero genre deserve a scholarly, as well as literary appreciation, which they have so far been denied, and that comics in general is a potent artistic vehicle, which holds a unique range of creative expression and receptive enjoyment, especially in connection with the postmodernist sensibilities.

There are two main areas of exploration that provide a lush playground for both aspiring authors, and literary theorists: one of them is concerned with the possibilities of the art form, the other with its content. It is nevertheless obvious that the two cannot be truly separated, as they influence each other and function as parts, rather than counterparts, of a greater whole.

As an art form, comics represents a unique merging of visual, as well as literary arts, employing and omitting many aspects of both, and thus creating a singular artistic experience of its own. Its use of pictorial juxtaposition, and panels in particular, as a means of conveying time and movement, allows the readers to adjust its pace to his or her needs, and in consequence, enables the writers to employ entirely new and original narrative approaches, ranging from multiple narration and complex non-linear storytelling, as seen in Moore's *Watchmen*, to visually communicated metafiction, and chronological and spatial distortion, as seen in Morrison's *Animal Man*, none of which could be utilized in the same way and with the same results in any other art form.

From the standpoint of content, the superhero genre which is also in great part a subject of this thesis, offers in its presupposed clarity of opposites, and their subsequent deconstruction, a reflection of the ambiguity and relativity of our own moral behavior. In the hands of Alan Moore and Grant Morrison, superheroes, the embodiments of ultimate good and bad, are stripped down to their core and shown

in their entire impossibility. Being confronted with intellectual, social and moral concerns as complex as ours, their heroes have to evolve, and therefore cause the genre itself to undergo an evolution. However, this transformation also affects the readers, in whose eyes the superhero genre becomes a multi-faceted exploration and pondering on the eternal questions of good and bad, moral and immoral, and the grey zone of human decisions. By deconstructing something as basic and as clearly distinct as heroes and villains, the authors can epitomize the internal struggle of mankind, at the same time illustrating its ever-present ambiguity, and the ideals to which it is important to aspire, however impossible the endeavor might seem.

The postmodern overtones that are clearly traceable in the two presented works, *Watchmen* by Alan Moore, and *Animal Man* by Grant Morrison, and whose general relationship to comics is examined in the first part of the thesis, are deconstruction, intertextuality, metafiction, and multi-layered narration.

Literary theorists and demanding readers alike should pay no heed to the dismissive reputation of sequential art in the literary circles, and the shallow way in which it is handled by most of its creators, but to its high points, which only serve to illustrate its future possibilities.

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