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# Panelling Parallax: The Fearful Symmetry William Blake and Alan Moore

By Roger Whitson [citation](#) [printer friendly version](#)

1 William Blake and Alan Moore stand on a precarious precipice in the globaliz world. Both are rebels, prophets, religious and occultic sages. They fill gaping secular world that has abandoned its older idols and embraced newer ones in literary figures, comic cult icons, rock and film stars. Blake and Moore are nihilistic revelry, their messages of multiplicity, indeterminacy, spiritual re firmly into new markets that promote spending, mass publication and commo figures embedded in the globalizing mechanisms of postmodern capitalis. Moore form a fearful symmetry where rebellion and visionary transgres indiscriminately intertwined with hip online markets offering every autobiographies to action figures and computer games. Blake's poem "The Moore's comic book *Watchmen* show an awareness of a split between self-i commodified dissemination. This split is what Kojin Karatani and Slavoj Ž parallax, a mechanism of capitalism fixing the subject in a loop of inter transgression favoring a growing, elastic market that can accomodate bc symmetry and parallax reflect one another, their play of continuity and incomr appropriated by capitalist ideology to obscure contradictions between the pro consumption of self-image. Moore turns to Blake in the wake of the elastic m

global capitalism, believing that the poet's dedication to individual vision can reestablish a connection to a self underneath the commodified dissemination of celebrity around the globe.

2 William Blake's poetry frustrates modern, disciplinary forms of proper ideological appropriation by the market shows its ability to signify and commodify itself, occurring in his illuminated poetry. Consequently, he often acts as an artist avant-garde artists, but his poetry also finds itself inhabiting spaces far from the printshop of an antinomian, proto-Marxist poet-prophet. Mike Goode, in his essay "Blakespotting" recalls a 2003 article of the *New Yorker* which describes a house owned by Donald Trump decorated with proverbs from *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*. While a majority of Blake critics would argue against the ahistorical invocation of a proverb by such a staunch capitalist, "it is difficult to defend the position that a proverb once dislocated from Blake's copperplate and relocated onto the gilded wall of a penthouse, cannot mean what Trump seems to want it to mean here" (Goode). Blake's poetry, and its meaning, disseminates throughout the global network of capitalism, mutating its character almost beyond recognition. This poetry appears on t-shirts sporting lines from "The Fly;" in a 2006 movie short on "The Tyger" directed by Guilherme Marcondes combining puppetry, CGI and photography; a pop music featuring the melodic vocals of British music stars Billy Bragg and John Peel. There is a Blake Tarot deck, a sect of Sufism dedicated to Blake called the Blake Derwishes, and a church headed by Aethelred Eldrige who engages in daily readings of *Milton*. Blake's influence is everywhere – from a forthcoming (2007) romance novel by Chevalier imagining the sex life of William and Catherine to a run in Todd McFarlane's *Spawn* featuring Urizen as a supervillain. Blake's cult status has transformed to include and daring innovation. In *Red Dragon* (2002), Blake signifies an occultic "other" that drives the serial killer Francis Dolarhyde to acts of murder and degradation. In Jarmusch's film *Dead Man* (1995) envisions William Blake reincarnated as a banker who, guided by a pseudo-parody of Native American religiosity, travels with frontiersmen in California. In some depictions, William Blake acts a cult figure who possesses the modern capitalist subject, perverting its very being with dark ritu-

and madness. But it is Blake's very pliability that makes his poetry so receptive. Detached from any ordinary site of production, Blake's proverbs and phantasmic networks of consumption resisting what Goode calls "the idealist abstract categories of reader, text, and corpus altogether, in the service of productions that cannot be identified or mapped according to existing scientific technologies" (772). The perversion of the Blakean text denies the idealist foundation which most literary criticism depends, and comes to rest, instead, in the realm of late capitalism and its celebrity fantasies.

3 Alan Moore uses this Blakean perversion in the establishment of a celebrity fantasy for himself by his many readers.<sup>[3]</sup> The possession of the capitalist subject by the prophetic "William Blake," becomes an image commodified by the market and sold to the public through Moore's iconoclastic experiments with comic book form and his celebrated initial deal with DC Comics due to the institution of the mature readers line Vertigo in the late 1980s. Moore, with his reluctance to be interviewed demonstrate discontent with the mainstream comics and their avid fanboys. Yet he certainly profits from his iconoclasm in ways that Blake, even with the small cult following he enjoyed at the end of the 18th century, did not.<sup>[4]</sup> This is because perversion, rebellion and revolution are easily incorporated into the logic of global capitalism and sacrifice progressive politics for a trademarked identity.

4 Kojin Karatani's *Transcritique* seeks to address the incorporation of identity by late capitalism into the class struggle as a "transnational movement of workers qua consumers or consumers qua workers" (294). Karatani argues earlier in the text, that a majority of Marxists see "the transcritical moment where workers and consumers intersect" (21). Karatani's critique of the oppression of capitalism embodied in the interplay between workers and consumers. Workers become consumers and consumers become workers. It is not only that workers are not paid what their work is worth that disturbs Karatani. Workers, as consumers of labor, are alienated from that labor through the mediating function of capital, forced to buy the very product of their own labor. The mediation of production and consumption by capitalism produces a parallax effect, where the alienation of workers confronts them in the moment they purchase that labor.

5 Karatani further expands his notion of parallax by discussing the invention of photography, saying that initially people "could not help but feel a kind of abhorrence" toward the photographic image (2). Photographic images did not seem entirely real, nor did they line up with anyone's self image. Gradually, as photography became more and more part of everyday life, the feeling of parallax subsided. It acted as a fiction that governed the production and the consumption of the self as an image. Photography also marked the beginning of a widespread dissemination of the image. The photograph represented a loss of control over the self image dislodged from the individual seeking to form a unified totality of perceptions and affects circulating throughout the 19th century. As Walter Benjamin argued that the mechanical reproduction of the image transformed the relationship between a painting and its aura, photography fundamentally altered the character of what Immanuel Kant calls the "transcendental unity of apperception," a necessary fiction allowing for a self that gathers perceptions into a coherent whole of the world. <sup>[5]</sup>

6 Karatani's analysis of Kant's transcendental unity of apperception locates the self as a metaphysical or transcendent entity, but as a direct confrontation with "the other that we can never take for granted and internalize just on our whim for our convenience" (51). The transcendental unity of apperception perceives a unified synthetic judgment which unifies all other sense data. Unity operates here as an antimony. The self apprehends itself with apperception, which presupposes synthetic unity as a fiction structuring the experience of space and time. <sup>[6]</sup> This is the irreducible gap that emerges between the production of a self and its consumption. The gap between the apperception of the self and its representation in photographs is the essence of Parallax. For Karatani, Parallax emerges for Karatani as the basic experience of the state in transition between modernism and postmodernism, the state where the framing of the self by photography and subjectivity supplants any transcendental image we may have of the self. This subjectivity alienates the self from its transcendental unity with new, commodified desires, producing a spectacle that is – in Karatani's words – "the sublime is alienation itself, or "the hoarding drive of capitalism" (Karatani 215).

The sublime intensity of William Blake acts to reestablish Moore's radical sense to produce that self in a celebrity circuit of prophetic anger and postmodern. For Moore, Blake represents "the heroism of the imagination," a visionary re- "squalid horse toilet" of London with angels and shining spiritual utopias (p. 10). Blake has appeared many times in Moore's work: as a foil to the occultic imperator William Gull in *From Hell* and in numerous epigraphs in *V for Vendetta*. Moore's performance art piece to Blake called *Angel Passage* brimming with psychoanalytic observations and religious saints on hovercrafts. Blake's place as a redeeming figure in Moore's work explicitly denies and represses the poet's exploding popular reception. Moore has, as Esther Leslie observed, "rejected the equation of an ignored and impoverished poet and the all-too celebrated creators of superhero comics" (par. 20). Moore's wariness of identifying Blake too closely with comic creators is based upon noticing the differences separating the tradesman from current comic artists, who have leveraged their fame. But this rejection is also symptomatic of Moore's ambivalence with the superhero genre. Blake's visionary experiences gives Moore the alternate reality that the superhero promises, but supposedly without all of the popularity of superheroes who, to name a few, are in Hollywood multi-million dollar films, as action figures and in video games. Why is Moore as impoverished today as he was during his life? His numerous, if brief, appearances in films, comics, novels, and music attest to a growing mass interest in the poet. This interest is based upon Blake's marginality; he signifies alienation itself, mixed with the divine. Spenser's article from *The Observer* published during the Tate exhibition in 2000 offers a glimpse of the fully human, of the transcendent entwined with earthly realities. In this sense, Blake could be read *as* a superhero – a marginalized, alienated individual. Superman or Batman, who gains power over alienation by acquiring a demonic persona. Superman may have flight, invulnerability and heat vision, Batman may know the gothic style known to humankind and have an innumerable amount of bat-stylized elements. Blake has the imagination.

Alan Moore uses Blake's imagination as a means to navigate the fearful symmetry of his status as a marginalized, yet also unmistakably popular, comic celebrity. Moore's status as a cult-icon of the appropriated British underground in his much published work is a



against Vertigo comics as his "bastard child" and his recent decision to remove his name from the credits to the movie version of *V for Vendetta*.<sup>[8]</sup> While he certainly prizes his celebrity, he seems at the same time to hate the fact that he can no longer connect with his underground persona. Moore yearns to transcend his status as a commodity, but this very struggle keeps consumers buying his comics. Alan Moore resists the global capitalist discourse and must, on the one hand, revolt against time and narrative conventions of the comic book, both of which are textual commonplaces of capitalism that form the comic reader as a modern consumer. On the other hand, his name is enormously profitable in comic markets because of his experimentation with time and narrative conventions.

9 Alan Moore's anxiety over his status as someone who must commodify his radical visionary art in order to have a distinct audience of fans finds its expression in his obsession with William Blake. Blake operates much like the modern superhero. Alvaro Aleman argues, signifies "the market fantasy of 'super' access in technological or mystical means" (note 1). He is a suture for the experience of the mystical prophet promising the end of the gap between production and consumption. Even as Aleman notes that superheroes generally establish stability and order in the capitalist system by eliminating criminals, the mystical and magical qualities of Blake's persona allows Moore to have an elevated access to reality while maintaining this access subverts the false consciousness of capitalism and the mainstream market. In his interview with Peter Murphy, Alan Moore sees William Blake as a reflection of his own aspirations as a magician. He praises Blake for "completely believ(ing) in the power of your conviction equals magic" (par. 5). Blake is the Moore that Alan Moore could not be – one untainted with hollywood adaptations of his works and millions of fans. When the sequel to *Watchmen* will come out. Alan Moore frames his symmetrical relationship with Blake by wishing to inherit his madness and his power. Fearful symmetry is the forced resolution of parallax between Moore and Blake. The subsumption of the antimony of production and consumption by a violent difference – which, then, cements Alan Moore's status as a mystic revolutionary.

Blake's poem "The Tyger," and its fascination with reflection, symmetry and the sublime, serves as the archetype for the disconcertant visionary parallax between the two worlds.

## "The Tyger" and Burning Illumination

10 Blake's "The Tyger" exemplifies the visual and verbal play of difference and symmetry in the form of an irreducible parallax governing consumption and production. It also plays by gesturing toward a group of forced resolutions to the antimonies produced by the poem. Critics tend to talk about these forced resolutions by referring to the poem as a "subversion" of poetic convention, or its existence as a meta-text. "The Tyger" is a visual/verbal poem that traces the consequences of relieving the tension between the verbal and the visual. Stephen Behrendt argues that "The Tyger" is a meta-text "that is neither both the verbal and the visual texts, but that is neither the sum of, nor identical to, those two texts" (81). The effect of "The Tyger" is textual, but for Behrendt, the poem becomes more than merely the text on the illuminated page. Behrendt's argument transforms the poem into a non-material effect of material forces, a text that is not derived from the material elements displayed on the page. He sees this subversion operating in the interplay between text and image. Behrendt's characterization of "The Tyger" as a textual act is a repression of the parallax of the verbal and visual elements in the poem. To understand Blake's poem as a unified visual/verbal text or a meta-text, one must first understand the "fearful symmetry" described by the poem and create a meta-universe where the poem can shine forth in all its meta-glory.

11 Why does "The Tyger" invoke symmetry? The entire composition of *Songs of Innocence and Experience* follows a symmetrical pattern. Certain poems, like "The Lamb" from *Innocence* seem to reflect or deflect others, like "The Tyger." Their meanings are interdependent and meta-textual in much the same way as Behrendt argues that the Blakean illuminated print is meta-textual. This interpretive connection is made by the reference to the Lamb in the poem. "Did he who made the Lamb make the Tyger?" asks (20). The answer to this question, if there is one, could determine the meaning of the symmetry in Blake's text. It seems telling that the poem does not answer.

12 In "The Tyger," the ferocity of the opening lines is countered by an asymmetric

the heart of the word symmetry. "Tyger, Tyger burning bright/In the forests of the night;/What immortal hand or eye/Could frame thy fearful symmetry" (the regularity of the first three lines is broken with the rhythm of the fourth line, which introduces a forced rhyme in the word symmetry. Since the presence of the word "symmetry" here disrupts the orderly cadence of the rest of the stanza, the use of this word that seems to signify order and the terror that comes with this order actually subverts the order of the poem. The rest of the poem follows the same simple order set up in the first stanza, without the break of the final line. In the final stanza, the order is preserved with the same break. The asymmetries of the poem are reflected in the relationship between the text and the image that accompanies it on the plate: a very asymmetrical tiger, one who is clearly not that ferocious. In fact, this causes Behrendt to comment on the humor of the poem, saying that this poem ultimately tells us that we should not take this poem very seriously. "[N]either the *illuminated page* is symmetrical: indeed the whole notion of 'fearful symmetry' is laughable, given the insistent asymmetry of the page and the absurdly mild tiger" (88).

13

Every act of subsumption or repression is countered by a pronounced parallax. The interplay of verbal and visual elements is irreducible and held together only by the necessary fiction of a unified text. The function of the poem, its structure, is highly dependent upon constantly moving beyond the mere textual minutiae of the text. Part of the meaning, in fact, depends upon ignoring parts of the text altogether, or seeing them as part of something that is not immediately representable in the lines of the poem. Reading the poem frames the fearful symmetry it describes, but because this symmetry is also tripped by the word "symmetry," "The Tyger's" framing of symmetry symmetrically subverts itself. The framing, furthermore, suggests an uncanny symmetry that directly contradicts all



**Figure 1.** William Blake, "The Tyger," from *Songs and Experience*.



attempts at forming a symmetrical interpretation of the poem. The use of subvert symmetry suggests a parallax effect: symmetry gets invoked by being erased. "The Tyger" marks a transcritical moment, where the production of is directly related to its consumption. Symmetry is erased with symmetry. The irony of symmetry holds the piece together with its disconcertant rhyme and rhythm.

## Moore Symmetry

14 Alan Moore provides his own analysis of parallax, alienation, and symmetry in the middle of his massive meditation on the limitations of superheroes: the dystopian and "deconstructive" epic *Watchmen*.<sup>[10]</sup> William Blake's poem appears in chapter five. Titled "Fearful Symmetry," Moore focuses on the nihilistic anti-hero Rorschach and his investigation into the murder of The Comedian, a Vietnam veteran and particularly violent anti-hero. Blake's invocation of fearful symmetry in the poem "The Tyger," becomes a method driving the formal elements of the chapter. The panel sequence has a symmetrical layout. Adrian Vendt, the hero Ozymandias, forms the central panel. On each side, characters, backgrounds, and actions repeat themselves in a symmetrical manner. Doug Atkinson's *Annotated Watchmen* argues that "The entire issue's story pages are a mirror image. Page 1 reflects page 27, and so forth; the two-page spread on pages 14-15 is where the symmetry is most apparent. Each page is a reflection both of layout and content" (V; par. 4). Symmetry frames the issue and uses symmetry as an essential part of the issue's sequence. The main character of the issue, Rorschach, has a mask with inkblots that change according to his mood. At different times, these blots are symmetrical. The issue begins with a reflection of a skull for Rorschach reflecting R's in a dirty pool. This skull is repeated throughout the issue and forms the basis of a multitude of reflections throughout.



Figure 2. Cover of Watchmen Chapter V, 1987.





**Figure 3.** *Watchmen*, Chapter V, p. 14 & 15. 1987 DC Comics.

15

Symmetry is repeated again and again, layered on top of itself, and made to su and meaning in the issue. The suggestion of pattern and meaning hollows out of the issue and focuses the attention of the readers on the writing and/or g temporal sequence. Sequentiality becomes, in this sense, secondary to the su "deeper" meaning that can only be achieved by holding sequence in susp deeper meaning, for Donald Ault, is best described by the conjunction of Jac Real and the logic of comic sequence. Comic sequence invokes Lacan, ' interruptions or cuts in the body-space of the page which leave blank spaces panels that correspond to (or mark the absence of) events that are assumed to 'between' the panels" (par. 2). The events between the panels are not symboliz function of sequential art is to produce the illusion of motion through the abs cannot be symbolized. The white space cuts through the consistency o separating characters from each other, slicing off body parts, separating one r another with rivers of nothingness. Subsequent images become consequent "form networks of interrelations from panel to panel, panel to page, and page



thus participate in a symbolic order governed by laws of substitution and (metaphor and metonymy)" (par. 2). The comic page functions by association lines become faces, eyes, characters with identifiable flaws and heroic features suggested and made by skipping from one panel to another, transforming static and poses into characters. The laws of substitution and association cover up what cannot be seen on the comic page, the motion of single characters operating in a two-dimensional space, and allow for the suggestion of that motion *because* of the representation.<sup>[11]</sup>

16

Reading Moore's issue through the question provoked by Blake in "The Tyger" characterizes it even further. Blake's suggestion that symmetry is forced, written into the structure of asymmetrical elements is translated by Moore into a formal style that directly influences the graphing of the issue's sequence. To see the symmetrical layout of the issue is to shift consciousness away from the content of the issue. Noticing the layout takes a second reading of the issue or reading outside annotations that explore the relationship between Blake's poem and the issue proper. The diegetic world of the comic book, its temporality and history, is sacrificed to a second reading in the search for a formal symmetrical structure. The balance of the structure might lend a euphoric feeling, a revelatory moment that would seem to make all the elements come into a clearer focus. This revelation comes at the expense of the moving living continuity cut up, vivisected, into individual images that now participate in a symmetrical structure. Paying attention to the overall picture of the individual panels means ignoring the diegetic world the comic inhabits. Temporality and movement become impossible and absences no longer suggest movement, they only indicate pieces in a larger symmetrical puzzle. Symmetry is fearful precisely because it entails the absolute annihilation of the diegetic world of the comic. Its people and places, colors and backgrounds whose comparison indicates whether or not they are symmetrical.





**Figure 4.** *Watchmen*, Chapter XII, p. 23, top panel. 1987 DC Comics.

17 The formal violence of Moore's text is reflected in the final scene of the issue. The violent hero Rorschach is unmasked. Rorschach spends the majority of the issue intimidating reformed criminals. He had also been known as a particularly violent character, sometimes killing his enemies in the name of justice and balance. At the end of the issue, Rorschach's true face is revealed, its childish innocence reflecting the cartoonish mask of Blake's print. While kicking and punching him, the police capturing Rorschach with glee "[w]ho is he? This ugly little zero is the terror of the underworld[...]and we're taking him up with them. It's karma, man. Everything evens out eventually. Everything balances out" (Moore and Gibbons V; 28). Moore shows this belief in symmetry and karma as a form of violence and restoring a sense of balance and meaning to history. Rorschach's unmasking and the violence of the police in the final scene, indicates a belief in the reality and meaning of time and history. It is the vacillation between the violence of a real history and the violence of writing that interests Moore, and it is also this vacillation that brings in the haunting aura of William Blake. As Blake's words echo on the final page of the issue, and as Blake's Tyger (reincarnated as Rorschach) is beaten into submission, an uncanny aura permeates this issue. It slips in between the absent panels and the characters who do not realize that they are merely ink blots on a reproduced page.







Figure 5. *Watchmen*, Chapter V, p. 28. 1987 DC Comics

## Making the Symmetry

18 Fearful symmetry frames, in *Watchmen*, the moment the characters in his story don't realize, the printed nature of their existence. In this sense, Blake's question "who made the Lamb, make thee" gains a new significance. Blake made both the



the Lamb, wrote both of them into existence, and imposed their alienation on another as a fundamental mechanism uniting the disparate worlds of *Iron Experience*. The making of the Tyger and the Lamb foregrounds their being as a complex production engineered by Blake: the relief etching that, according to Robert Rauschenberg and Joseph Viscomi, "combined the printmaker with 'the Painter and the Poet'." Blake's dual role as a painter and a poet and their – sometimes fraught – combination on the surface of the relief etch, reflects the fearful symmetrical symbiosis of *Iron Experience*. This combination is never a strict synthesis. It emerges unevenly. Blake's prints echo the words inscribed on the page, some are wildly different from the text, and the reverse appears. What is visually fascinating about Blake's illuminations is the way the parallaxes they embody. Opposites directly confront the reader who must bring them together in order to produce a meta-textual meaning that combines images and text to fictionally transcend the minute particularity of the material artifact. This work is as violent as it can only be achieved by effacing and destroying the materiality of the different poems in favor of producing a single unifying meaning that the various words and images signify.

19 Likewise, all of the violence of *Watchmen* is authorized and performed by Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons as a necessary element in the production of the universe they inhabit.<sup>[12]</sup> Formally, this violence takes the form of the logic of the comic panel: the tearing apart of images from one another in order to produce the visionary effect of a new action. The physical violence inflicted by and towards Rorschach moves the reader forward and makes reading the comic more visceral or real. Violence is a formal quality of the framing that provides for the cohesion of the diegetic world. This cohesion is achieved through the annihilation of the materiality of the text in favor of the sutured world they inhabit.

20 Annihilation, violence, destruction – all of these are products of framing. The tearing apart, the symmetry, effacing the parallax to make ontology cohere. But this is also what makes possible the strangeness of the parallax. Parallax is most often described as a displacement that causes the subject to understand how changes in perspective transform what is viewed. It is, in Kantian terminology, the Copernican Revolution – the moment when we realize that perception is directly related to perspective. The stars, galaxies, planets

do not revolve around a stable earth, rather, our understanding of planetary orbits is from our placement on an object endlessly revolving around a sun revolving, in galaxies and universes. Slavoj Žižek complicates this concept even further by materialism. Materialism, for Žižek, includes the blind spot of the subject, it is a twist by means of which I myself am included in the picture constituted by it (17). I bear "witness to my 'material existence'" by placing myself both inside and outside the picture (*Parallax* 17). The viewing of the fearful symmetry writes Moore into the scripts and David Gibbons illustrates. The small quotation from Blake's "The Tyger" makes the very symmetry that materially writes Moore back into the comic. Moore writes himself through Blake, and by repeating Blake's visual parallax fictionalizes himself. Moore ceases to be a real person, if he ever was one, and instead marks a moment between the production of his self as a lived experience (i.e. the self we produce ourselves by living through what we consider to be a life) and the construction of his image by readers who notice his style in the comic book. Alan Moore, by writing himself into the narrative, constitutes a materialist "blind spot," and he is inside in his own picture by being his own written trace. He is both inside and outside the narrative. The fearful symmetry is thus made and – consequently – redoubles itself. Moore writes himself into the ambivalence of global capital by making himself a recorded picture, an aura haunting the characters who seek a deeper underlying meaning that will erase their feeling of alienation.

21 The irony of this desire reveals itself in the formal dimensions of Moore's comic. The officers, newspaper merchants, even the heroes themselves all search endlessly for a clue that will reveal the killer of the Comedian and bring meaning to the seemingly senseless acts of violence punctuating the entire series. Simultaneously, the characters feel separated from one another – nuclear war threatens the survival of the human race. Everyone knows the end of the world nears, and no one knows how to stop the build up to global annihilation. Ozymandias, self-proclaimed perfect human being, develops a plan to bio-engineer an alien-like creature, teleport it into the middle of New York, and kill millions of people. He hopes that this will force people to develop a sense of unity against a common terrestrial enemy. The characters conceive of this unity in relation to an absent

deeper pattern that will reveal the killer and the alien race whose difference  
that forces people to see the need for finding a commonality.

22

If there is any pattern at all, it lies on the most fundamental surface of the symmetrical pattern of panels. At its deepest level, meaning in *Watchmen* surface and shows the underlying meaning to be merely empty form. The deep Moore's comic must be made by disrupting the diegetic world the characters only the empty skeleton of the symmetry remains. Violence, destruction, form annihilation bring the characters together on a series of still comic pages that again and again – in the original run of the series, in the first edition graphic subsequent editions, the 1987 hardcover, and the 2005 *Absolute Watchmen* printing run of each edition edges into the millions. Each time readers glance delight in the symmetry of an issue of the series quoting William Blake's revealing a symmetrical layout, they reenact these deaths, ripping apart the die of the comic, suturing it back together again, framing the fearful symmetry of their narcissistic fantasies. The sheer popularity of the comic insures the publication and distribution of the series across the world. *Time* called the comic of the Top 100 Novels of all time, modules for the DC role-playing game based have been published, and the looming promise of a film adaptation promises a kind of diegetic interplay: the cinematic.





**Figure 6.** Alan Moore. Photograph 2005 Jose Villarubia.

23

Alan Moore's grave face, his primordial visage graces the back of *Watchmen* prophet from the wilderness. His eyes pierce the surface boundary of the photo directly at us. This piercing gaze is amplified by the beard and hair des nothingness, gazing into the darkness of his fictional world. Other larger photos sporting a black jumpsuit with boots, multiple rings on each finger of his bon strange occultic pose known only to worshipers of the Roman snake god Glyco each time, for the camera, each time seeing the photograph as a means to singularly intense public image. Alan Moore has nostalgia for comics, sure, but to suggest that his stories emerge from a messianic rupture in time. His co comics, the publisher of *Promethea* and *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen* him "almost mystically," as a memory of a Golden Age before the advent (Pappu 2; par. 5). Moore is convinced that such stories are also the only viable

market. He is a nostalgic prophet, swinging the snake staff he keeps closely by black robes and wide brimmed hat harkening back to a time when storytellers traveled from place to place and were frequently mistaken for magicians and warlocks.

24

In 2002, Trina Robbins enhanced a sketch of "Alan Moore's closet" for the publication of the homage book to Alan Moore, *Portrait of an Extraordinary Gentleman*. Moore wears the uniform of his early hero Marvelman, but alternate cut out costumes are also provided. Robbins appended parodic instructions telling the viewer to "cut carefully around Alan's beard, slide outfits under" if they wanted a "perfect fit." Alan Moore has been reduced to a set of costumes, each supplanting the earlier version of Moore, each generating a new take on the same image: Alan Moore stands as a prophet, holyman, occultist superhero – complete with cloaks, tights, masks, even a metal corset.

ALAN MOORE'S CLOSET

FOR A PERFECT FIT, CUT CAREFULLY AROUND HIS BEARD. SLIDE OUTFITS UNDER.



Figure 7. "Alan Moore's Closet" 2002 Trina Robbins

With some cutting and fitting – specifically by sheering off his prophetic persona – Alan Moore magically transforms into his characters. Moore cannot control his popularity any more than William Blake can. He moves into and out of his own writing, becoming Marvelman, the Promethea, the V he depicts on the comic page. All distinctions between the "real" Alan Moore and the Alan Moore on Robbins's illustration break down: Moore becomes the intertextual web of referentiality, becoming his own written trace – a character no longer under his own control but one that spreads and disseminates through a myriad of different blogs, motion pictures, comic books, and biographies that commodify mysticism, superheroics and prophecy in a flourish of monetary exchange. While William Blake possesses the capitalist subject, the capitalist subject pervades Moore – Alan Moore becomes William Blake – and one cannot tell if the capitalist subject is being perverted or if the capitalist subject is dominating everything: transcending the commodifying mysticism, superheroics and prophecy in a flourish of monetary exchange. Who made the Tyger? Who made William Blake, or Alan Moore? All contribute to, pound away at, and fracture the sublime network that is c



global capital.

## Notes

[1] Parallax, which will be discussed more fully later on in the paper, is developed by Kojin Karatani in *Transcritique: On Kant and Marx*. In his review of the book, published in *New Left Review*, Žižek explains the parallax by reference to class and pork:

In today's English, 'pig' refers to the animals with which farmers deal, while 'pork' is the meat we consume. The class dimension is clear here: 'pig' is the old Saxon word, since Saxons were the underprivileged farmers, while 'pork' comes from the French *porque*, used by the privileged Norman conquerors who mostly consumed the pigs raised by the underprivileged farmers. This duality, signaling the gap that separates production from consumption, is a case of what, in his formidable *Transcritique: On Kant and Marx*, Kojin Karatani refers to as the 'parallax' dimension. (121)

Žižek develops the notion of parallax in his book *The Parallax View*, but ultimately favors Karatani's Kantian reading in favor of a Hegelian emphasis on the difference of itself with itself.

[2] An exhaustive list of all the musical works – and artists – inspired by William Blake is obviously beyond the scope of this paper. Briefly, Jah Wobble's *The Inspiration of William Blake* came out in 1996 and features songs using Blake's words and strange electronic music in the spirit of Blake's work. Billy Bragg has Blake songs sprinkled throughout his discography, most notably his *William Blake* (1996) and the song "Blake's Jerusalem" from *Time on My Hands* (1999).

[3] Most recently, Moore depicted so-called "perversion" in the *Lost Girls* collection, which featured the sexual fantasies of Dorothy from the *Wizard of Oz*, Wendy from *Peter Pan*, and Alice from *Alice in Wonderland*.

[4] In an interview with *Entertainment Weekly*'s Jeff Jensen, Moore remarks:

Celebrity was nothing I enjoyed, and it prompted me to become the mumbling recluse I am. When I started writing comics, "comics writing" was the most obscure job in the world! If I wanted to be a celebrity, I would have become a moody English screen actor. (4)

The irony here is, of course, that Moore is speaking to *Entertainment Weekly*, a not international publication, about not wanting celebrity.

[5] It is important to Kant, and to Karatani, to differentiate between the transcendental and the transcendent. For Karatani, the transcendental "seeks to cast light on the structure that precedes and shapes experience" (1). Kant uses the transcendental apperception to introduce the problem of universality to his epistemological system.

unity of apperception assumes a unified structure through which perceptions are processed, and stored. It provides a self looking at itself that organizes particular impressions into a whole. This whole is *transcendental*, it emerges for Kant as a not an ontological actuality. Universality cannot, in Karatani's words, exist "if not a certain leap" (100).

[6] Justin Clemens, in *The Romanticism of Contemporary Theory*, addresses the the "I" in Kant by arguing that it "[c]annot be a unified or unifying force *if one of these determinations in their common sense signification*, but is rather a primordial bifurcated and paradoxical non-entity which sutures two ontologically incommensurable registers of Being. And yet these registers must somehow coincide" (51). Karatani's intervention would argue against the inevitable "suture" of the transcendental apperception which, like in the difference between transcendent and transcendence, cannot act simply to unify experience but must remain a problem that occurs via Karatani's "certain leap."

[7] The sublime, for Kant, is the negative pleasure derived from the disconnect between an experience of overwhelming immensity and the paltry attempt of our cognition to fit that immensity into our individual conception of totality. Karatani sees this as an explanation for the appearance of surplus value in Marx's *Capital*. The sublime is a pleasure of negativity, arising from displeasure. He quotes from Kant's *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*, where Kant argues that one should refrain from excess, not with the Stoical intention of complete abstinence, but with the refined Epicurean intention of having in view an ever-growing pleasure" (qtd 215). The seeker of sublime experience is thus, a masochist or – in Marx's terms – "the 'rational miser,' insatiably looking for the pleasure of sustaining and expanding the right of direct exchangeability rather than actual consumption" (215).

[8] An article in the March 16, 2006 issue of the *New York Times* quoted Moore as saying his movie "rubbish." He also claimed that the "mainstream comic book industry – DC Comics, the American publisher of "Watchmen" and "V for Vendetta" – [...] the properties he created, and the American film business, [...] has distorted his work beyond recognition" (par. 3).

[9] Jason Tondro articulates a very similar relationship between Moore and Blake, arguing that Moore is attracted to Blake's "power to transform the banal society of his surroundings into a heavenly, cosmically good environment. This is the path Alan Moore is trying to follow, and William Blake laid the cobblestones" (392). While I see Tondro's take on the sublime as ultimately lacking in fundamental Marxist and psychoanalytic contours, his argument is much of the groundwork of my current work and includes a transcript of *Angelina*, an essential to any scholar who wishes to grapple with Moore's provocative and complex poem describing the life and afterlife of William Blake.

[10] I am flirting with redundancy to mention that the word "deconstructive" is more ubiquitous than Blake's proverbial poetry. Frequently, reviewers will state that a work "deconstructs the superhero genre." The list of references to deconstruction in

*Watchmen* are too numerous to mention here, despite the fact that Moore never mentions Derrida in any of his comics. For example, Jeff Jensen, writing for *Entertainment Weekly* on the 10th anniversary of the publication of *Watchmen* calls it "a radical deconstruction of superhero archetypes" (par. 3). The automatic identification of Moore's text with "deconstruction" would necessitate a project analyzing the proliferation of the term throughout popular and academic culture.

[11] Without going into an extended diatribe on Lacan's Real, I must mention that neither Donald Ault nor I mean to argue that the white space of the comic page symbolizes the Real. There is no mimetic correlation between my characterization of comic page white space and a stable idea one can call "Lacan's Real." In a recent conversation, Ault suggested that white space could suggest the Real "if it – being movement – could happen on a page which the interruption by the Real prevents/gestures toward the 'realization' of."

[12] I must mention the contrast between Blake who solely participated in all stages of poetry's production and Moore who frequently uses other artists, inkers, and copiers to produce his work. Alan Moore is famous for writing mammoth scripts to direct artists through a given panel layout. Eddie Campbell remarked in his speech at the 2001 convention that when Alan Moore begins a comic project

he sends you all his reference material. When I first got the big packet for *From Hell*, he sent all this wonderful reference material: two books, two scripts, there was a pile script. The script was endless. I could write my own script in half the time it takes to read Alan's. By the end of the project though, you get your pages through the fax one at a time because he's doing something else. His mind's on other things, so they're coming through one at a time. Dave Gibbons once told me that at the end of *Watchmen*, he was sending the pages down by taxi. Two pages at a time in the backseat of a Taxi all the way from Northampton, which is fifty pounds one way. It's a one hundred pound taxi ride, two pages, two at a time. Of course, we have fax machines now. (par. 7)

Donald Ault remarked to me that the "division (asymmetry) between verbal and visual artists (i.e., Moore and his various illustrators) produces singular narratives, while singular authority produces multiplicity." For me, the issue is different. The various artists add different nuances to the market identity of Alan Moore. Ironically, much criticism and fan reaction to Moore's work fail to take into consideration his collaboration with the artists that help him to produce his work. Moore, furthermore, attempts to use the mammoth script Campbell mentions above as a means to describe precisely that he wants other artists to produce for him. The combination of the control Moore exercises through his scripts and the inability of fans to adequately attribute the work to the artist produces the "singular narrative" of Alan Moore's market identity as an author. This narrative is also applicable to Blake, if we (as critics often do) see him as a character or figure producing poetic and prophetic revelations of multiplicity. It is more interesting, and productive, to consider Blake (and Moore) as a collective of critics, authors, and artists whose multiplicity adds to the innovation of the authorial voice.

mystique.

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