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‘Be vewy, vewy quiet. We’re hunting Wippers.’
A Barthesian Analysis of the Construction of Fact and Fiction
in Alan Moore and Eddie Campbell’s *From Hell*

This article examines the construction of the non-fictional tale presented by Alan Moore and Eddie Campbell in *From Hell*, a philosophical meditation on the Jack the Ripper murders. The events depicted in *From Hell* are based on Stephen Knight’s *The Final Solution*, a publication that has been marketed and received as both a serious exposé and elaborate hoax.[1] Knight’s theory alleges that the Ripper’s victims knew of Prince Albert Victor’s secret marriage and child with shopgirl Annie Crook, and had attempted to blackmail the Royal Family, who responded by having them removed. He therefore identifies the Ripper as a group of men led by Sir William Gull, Queen Victoria’s royal Surgeon-in-Ordinary and member of the Freemasons.

Using the narrative models of word and image proposed by Roland Barthes, this article considers the comics medium as it successfully fictionalises the Whitechapel murders as well as the ways in which the content of *From Hell* foregrounds these processes. My observations will be related to the narrative models of word and image proposed by Barthes, considering notions such as narrative atemporality, image/imitari, the non-mimetic nature of narrative, and the active/passive reader. I will conclude that the qualities of the comics medium support Barthes’ observations on the nature of narrative, making this medium ideally suited to conveying historical fiction such as the Ripper myth.

The Comics Medium

The three main elements underlying a semiotics of comics are the depiction of time as space, the construction of an open narrative that relies upon the reader’s contribution, and the creation of the hyperreal. This is, of course, only an overview: multiple visual and textual strategies are also used to limit and structure the text into its chapters, instalments, and so forth. These, however, are additive techniques rather than integral to the medium’s narrative structure. Of these strategies, the depiction of time as space is most obvious and is essential in constructing the comic book panel, which the reader must read from left to right in order to allow events to proceed in sequence.

The medium’s reliance on interpretation operates on two levels, as the reader works alongside the creators as a contributory author, not only deciphering the panel contents, but also filling in the gutters. In this manner, the medium’s narrative structure informs the treatment of symbolism, where meaning is open to interpretation. This form also allows for the creation of a linear story from the panel layout of fragmented and isolated events.

Comics’ non-realistic aesthetic and use of panels-as-signifiers offer fictional seeing rather

than literal representation. The juxtaposition of various perspectives also helps construct the hyperreal by offering the reader multiple (and often contradictory) points of view. As such, the world of comics may best be described as the world of the fictional signifier (Verano, 326). This approach accords with Rosemary Jackson's model of the Fantastic, by which definition the comic book world is an alterity that, no matter how much it may resemble our own, is not the same: it is "this world re-placed and dis-located" (Jackson, 19).

I turn now to a discussion of how these elements inform the construction of fiction in *From Hell*. As Lisa Coppin notes, "[i]n *From Hell*, the border between fiction and reality is continuously played with: almost every detail is supported with possible evidence, and yet, the conclusions drawn by Moore remain conjectures." Stephen Knight's theory, the main source for this story, attracted a lot of interest when it was first published in 1976, but has since been derided by many Ripperologists. Knight's theory is based on the story of the painter Walter Sickert, as recalled by his son Joseph. This article does not seek to address the merits of Knight's hypothesis but, rather, to analyze the contribution of the comics medium in reconstructing such a tale. *From Hell*'s dramatisation of events that are themselves largely speculative means that its content will not be assessed in terms of fact versus fiction. Instead, this article seeks to consider the ways in which the comics medium fictionalises the tale by smoothing the joints between fact and fiction, and in so doing illustrates Barthes' theories regarding role of the construction of narrative, word and image.

Alan Moore comments, "*From Hell* is the post-mortem of a historical occurrence, using fiction as a scalpel. [...] it isn't history. It's fiction." (1994: 337-38) He continues, "perhaps it's worth remembering that *all* history is to some degree a fiction; that truth can no longer properly be spoken of once the bodies have grown cold" (ibid.). Viewed in this way, the dramatisation of Knight's theory is in itself a fictionalising process, as specific words, relationships and incidents are necessarily created out of thin air. There can be no recourse to evidence regarding the specifics of conversation, or the emotions felt by the story's characters.

The dramatisation of Moore's research in Appendix 2, "Dance of the Gull Catchers", offers a similar perspective. Positioned as an appendix and taking as its subject the emergence of "Ripperology", this again is a tale based on fact. However, its pictures operate on a metaphorical level, as for example when Moore and Campbell are shown among a crowd of Ripperologists carrying nets in an attempt to catch their elusive quarry. This article's title is drawn from this sequence, and its cartoon vernacular (familiar to most from Warner Brothers' *Looney Tunes* cartoons) invokes the comedic and acknowledges the fictionalised nature of its content. This panel is also captioned "The rest is dodgy pseudo-history" (2000, II.16.3) and together the two statements seem to imply that, simply by being translated into a narrative, the events leading up to the book's conception have become, in some sense, false.[2] As Moore explains:

In studded football boots they [Ripperologists] endlessly cross-track and over-print the field of their enquiry. They reduce its turf to mud. Only their choreography remains readable. (II.1.6)

The implication is that there is no fact left in the Ripper mythos, only conjecture upon conjecture, and, as Moore concludes, "[i]t isn't getting drawn into Masonic Death Conspiracy that troubles me, you understand. It's getting drawn into the vortex of a fiction" (II.19.3). He uses the example of Koch's snowflake to illustrate his point. This is a mathematical formula which shows that, although the edge of this shape can, in theory, be infinite, its area is always limited by the

circle around it. Within Ripperology an infinite number of details and new theories continue to emerge, but the area they delineate remains limited to that of the “initial circle”: autumn, 1888, Whitechapel (II.23.3-6).

From Hell takes pains to establish its content as fiction by pointing out the inherently fictional status of all history; emphasising the conjectural nature of the Whitechapel events; and using self-conscious metaphor in its pictorial elements, thereby drawing attention to the fictionalising process of comic book visuality. “As if there could ever be a solution,” (II.22.1) Moore exclaims. “Murder isn’t like books. [...] Jack’s not Gull, or Druitt. Jack is a Super-Position” (II.16.7). *From Hell* is not concerned with simply recreating a grisly tale, or promoting Knight’s “final solution,” or even with exploring its validity. Instead it is a treatise on the nature of fiction and human psychology; on the function that the Ripper myth holds in modern life. “It’s about us. About our minds and how they dance” (II.22.7). As such, this article will discuss the ways in which both the form and content of this text address these processes.

Chronological Illusion

Alan Moore explains:

When books are closed, they represent a model of post-Stephen Hawking spacetime, the events within the book depicting past, present and future all contained within a simultaneous whole. When books are opened, two modes of time come into play; time as it seems to pass for the characters and within the book and time as it appears to pass inside the reader’s mind. (1994, 13)

Alongside the dual construction of narrative versus perceived time, *From Hell* also seems to recall the type of co-present chronology Moore assigns to the notion of a book-as-a-whole, because events are multiplied and revisited without recourse to a single, linear chronology. Gull’s murder of Mary Kelly contains scenes drawn from a previous operation and his later Masonic trial, and his final imprisonment in an asylum (p)revisits earlier conversations, childhood memories, and even future events. In this way, Moore constructs an “architecture of history” that relies on a notion of co-present time and cyclical patterns. Based on a pamphlet published by C. Howard Hinton, it suggests that “[t]ime is a human illusion [...], that all times co-exist in the stupendous whole of eternity” (2.14.2-3). Patterns within this “fourth dimension” merely seem to be random events from a human perspective.

Moore goes on to identify such a pattern as “[a]n invisible curve, rising through the centuries,” a notion he deems “most glorious and most horrible” (2.15.3-4 and 14.14.5-6). Beginning in 1788, a century before the Ripper murders, he notes slashing attacks on women by Renwick Williams, nicknamed The Monster. A hundred years later, in 1888, the Ripper stalks the streets of London. Fifty years on, in 1938, an investigation into the Halifax Slasher takes place. Twenty-five years later, in 1963, Ian Brady and Myra Hindley begin their murders on the Moors and, twelve years later, Peter Sutcliffe, the Yorkshire Ripper, claims to have received murderous instructions from a supernatural voice while working as a gravedigger. In this way, the Ripper legacy continues.

This heritage is likewise expressed in terms of fiction within *From Hell* when we are shown Robert Louis Stevenson awakening from a nightmare of “a doctor with the soul of a terrible beast inside him” (14.15.6), the inspiration for *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (1886).[3] A few pages earlier,

we are given a glimpse of William Blake and at panel 14.16 an apparition of Gull is revealed to be the source for Blake's *Ghost of a Flea*. The historical circumstances of the sketch are again reproduced truthfully and are conceptually accurate, as Blake apparently explained the name of his strange vision by saying that "all fleas were inhabited by the souls of such men as were by nature bloodthirsty to excess" (Miles). Both events take place before the Ripper murders and, therefore, a philosophy of co-present time is essential.

As noted, events such as these are repeated throughout *From Hell*. In chronological terms, Gull's flight of fancy over the city takes place in 1896, while he is locked up in an asylum under the name of Tom Mason after committing the Ripper murders. However, this vision includes events that occurred earlier in his lifetime, such as a childhood conversation with his father or the "architecture of history" discussion with Mr Hinton. It even includes events far beyond it; such as his visitation of Ian Brady and a vision of what appears to be an open-plan, twentieth-century office. The mixing of temporalities is also emphasized textually at other junctures in the book, as, for example, when Gull seems to have a prescient knowledge of his murder of Liz Stride, saying "This is the one that I didn't finish, isn't it?" (8.33.5).

Earlier in the text, his murder of Mary Kelly is also interrupted by a flashback to a previous operation, and flash-forwards to his Masonic trial and subsequent confinement in the asylum. His speech in all of these scenarios includes the same words he utters during their appearance in his "hallucination". As the text explains, "movement, and yet there is no movement. There is not space. There is not time, and therefore nothing moves, but only is" (14.14.7). The time-as-space narrative structure of comics informs this statement at various levels. For example, the depiction of co-present time obviously relies on a comics aesthetic, where all moments are co-present on the page in the spatial layout of panels. Although the events must be read in sequence, in a linear fashion, they are positioned spatially in relation to each other. The locations Gull visits in his out-of-body experience are therefore able to be juxtaposed despite their differences in time and place. From this point of view, the role of the reader in constructing a sequential narrative from fragmented panels recalls the statement from within the text that "time is a human illusion" (2.14.2).

It also recalls Roland Barthes' work in his "Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narratives." In this text, Barthes proposes a common model for narrative across media and is at pains to include all narratives, whether "myth, legend, fable, tale [...] stained glass windows, cinema, comics, news items, conversation" (1977, 79) Barthes argues that narrative contains within itself relations that exist at both a horizontal level (that of the words themselves) and a vertical level (regarding levels of meaning) (87). This relates, very loosely, to the Russian Formalist distinction between "*story* (the argument), comprising a logic of actions and a 'syntax' of characters, and *discourse*, comprising the tenses, aspects and modes of the narrative." (ibid. 87) Barthes then divides narrative elements into functions and indices, noting that functions operate on the horizontal level (story), whereas indices (although still functional at this level) also refer to the relations between levels of meaning. The resultant model contains three levels of description in the narrative work, namely functions, actions, and narration.

Importantly, Barthes argues that all elements of narrative are functional, so that even if a sentence appears to be meaningless, its absurdity is still a meaning assigned by the narrative. He goes on to identify various types of functions, initially dividing them into cardinal functions (which are necessary to advance the plot, for example in terms of consequence) and catalysers (other functions, such as the discursive function, which affects pace) (ibid. 95). In deconstructing these elements, Barthes identifies a strange temporality within narrative as when two cardinal

functions (such as the ringing of a telephone and someone answering it) are separated by a variety of catalysers, or simple events that fill time between the two events. As he explains:

[...] the tie between two cardinal functions is invested with a double functionality, at once chronological and logical. Catalysers are only consecutive units, cardinal functions are both consecutive and consequential. Everything suggests, indeed, that the mainspring of narrative is precisely the confusion of consecution and consequence, what comes *after* being read in a narrative as what is *caused* by [...]. It is the structural framework of cardinal functions which accomplishes this “telescoping” of logic and temporality. (94)

This model contrasts with theories of narrative such as that proposed by Vladimir Propp, which privilege the notion of time as reality and therefore argue that chronological order is irreducible. However, Barthes’ model concurs with Claude Lévi-Strauss’s proposition that “the order of chronological succession is absorbed in an atemporal matrix structure” (qtd. in Barthes 1977, 98). Lévi-Strauss’s work focuses on identifying the elements of this underlying structure, which are often arranged in opposition. By way of brief example, the type of matrix one might perceive underlying *From Hell* would arrange notions and symbols such as rich, poor, blood, grapes, ceremony and conspiracy in order to examine the tensions and oppositions that are used to create the tale.

As Barthes asks, then, “is there an atemporal logic lying behind the temporality of narrative?” (ibid. 98). He elaborates further that “time belongs not to discourse strictly speaking but to the referent; both narrative and language know only a semiotic time, ‘true’ time being a ‘realist’, referential illusion” (99). This statement certainly seems to be illustrated by *From Hell*, most obviously in its story content (“What is the fourth dimension?”) and structure (Gull’s visitations in Chapter 14). But the comics medium, whose panel-based aesthetic requires that the illusion of linear time be consciously created by the reader, also forces us to acknowledge the processes by which we create narrative temporality.

Image and Imitari

As might be expected, *From Hell* makes use of some striking imagery that pertains to its content, the most remarkable of which is the pentagram motif that links Gull and Netley’s tour of Masonic landmarks within the geography of London. However, visual elements are also used to blur fact and fiction; for example as in the scenes discussed above, which are revisited in different contexts. For example, the climactic murder of Mary Kelly is simultaneously represented as an autopsy in a sequence that is clearly William Gull’s fantasy (10.14) as the audience observing his scientific demonstration includes Ian Brady and Myra Hindley, recognizable from their arrest photographs. Within the terms of the narrative, though, this sequence can be deemed no less real than Gull’s other contact with the couple--whom he observes watching a Jack the Ripper movie at the cinema (14.13.8)--or his appearance to a younger Ian Brady (14.18).[4]

As noted, the visuality of comics has been defined as the world of the fictional signifier. Traditionally, both contents and aesthetics are aligned in order to depict fictional events in a non-realistic manner, offering fictional seeing rather than literal representation. The incredible events of superhero narratives take place in a world whose primary colors and heavily stylized art seem to draw attention to their impossibility. By contrast, historical events in *From Hell* are rendered entirely in black-and-white line drawings, a conscious choice to unite style with content in a

similar manner.

The comics medium is essential in conveying this fiction, because photographic or other realistic depiction would alter the status of this narrative significantly, fictionalizing it in an entirely different manner. In “The Rhetoric of the Image,” Barthes analyzes a photograph, identifying three messages carried within it: the linguistic (any written content), the coded iconic (the symbolism of the elements themselves and their composition), and the non-coded iconic (the literal message of the photograph’s content) (1977: 36). By contrast, Barthes notes that the drawing, which incorporates a process of transformation (“there is no drawing without style”), is always coded (ibid. 43). The photograph only appears to constitute a message without a code, although the truth of this is dependent on its context.

Barthes again returns to the question of temporality: arguing that, rather than immediacy, the photograph establishes an awareness of *having-been-there*. This represents a new space-time category: “spatial immediacy and temporal anteriority” (ibid. 44). This, however, does not hold true for the drawn image, which, by being highly coded, is effectively dislocated from both space and time. The coded message obviously requires interpretation, and Barthes goes on to discuss the importance of this process and the factors affecting it. Multiple elements are selected and interpreted by the reader, and it is important to note that this number will vary from person to person, according to the different kinds of knowledge they possess. “This is the case for the different readings of the image: each sign corresponds to a body of ‘attitudes’—tourism, housekeeping, knowledge of art—certain of which may obviously be lacking in this or that individual” (ibid. 47). This process is clearly observable in comics, where the reader must interpret the panel contents. As comics creator Will Eisner notes,

[...] it is inherent to narrative art that the requirement on the viewer is not so much analysis as recognition. The task is then to arrange the sequence of events (or pictures) so as to bridge the gaps in action. Given these, the reader may fill in the intervening events from experience. (1990: 38)

The content of *From Hell* further emphasizes this message, as in the duality of meaning attached to the pentagram symbol. The pentagram is itself a minor Masonic symbol, but is more generally associated with religious iconography. Although it is popularly understood as Satanic, this is a relatively recent association, and originally the pentagram was a Christian symbol. Broadly speaking, its modern interpretation may depend on whether the point is up or down, but historically this distinction was rarely made.[5] As such, the pentagram is a divided symbol that stands for both good and evil, and is therefore entirely dependent on interpretation. In this sense, the content of *From Hell* again echoes the tenets of comics narrative form as regards a reliance on codification and interpretation. Furthermore, the treatment of these processes conforms to a Barthesian analysis of the rhetoric of the image.

Textual Mimesis

In depicting fictional events at a visual as well as a textual level, the comics medium may be described as hyperreal: creating a comic is not a way of telling a story with illustrations that replicate the world it is set in, but a creation of that world from scratch. This might seem a strange statement to make about *From Hell*, as the accuracy with which the various locations of London are rendered, the use of historical characters, and the historical importance of the murders

themselves all link the events in the text strongly to our world. However, Moore's comments on the fictional status of his tale, together with the treatment of its *metafictional* background in "Dance of the Gull Catchers," firmly denote the world of the text as a fictional one. As he notes, "[t]his reality [the murders] is dwarfed by the vast theme-park we've built around it" (II.22.6).

His character Mr Lees offers an opposing point of view, saying "[b]ut that's just the thing, it isn't just stories. Those women really died" (Epilogue.5.2). But as Moore points out, the events themselves are no longer the focus of the tale, which has instead shifted towards the cohesion between theories. Furthermore, these theories—Masonic conspiracy, royal sanction, and a secret marriage—are certainly fantastical in the extreme.

In the broadest possible terms, the genre of the Fantastic is based around a notion of hesitation between reality and the marvelous (Todorov 1975: 25), achieved through the co-presence of natural and supernatural elements.[6] It takes place in an "alterity" that may be defined in terms of its relationship with reality, a term introduced and further defined in the later work of Rosemary Jackson. She comments that "[f]antasy re-combines and inverts the real, but it does not escape it: it exists in a parasitical or symbiotic relation to the real" (20). Fantastic worlds are therefore alterities: "this world re-placed and dis-located" (ibid. 19). Although the terminology has not been widely adopted, other critics such as A.B. Chanady concur with this perspective, noting that fantastic literature is set in a world "very similar" (though not identical) to our own (5), in contrast to fairy tales, which take place in the world of the outright marvelous. A narrative with a fantastic element is thus set, by definition, in a world distinct from the consensus reality. The importance of the comics medium to this conclusion is apparent, as its *visuality* immediately creates this new world. But is this medium relevant to the fictionalizing process more generally?

The Barthesian model seems to accord with this perspective. Barthes notes a "mythical appearance of 'life'" in narrative which he also defines as creativity (1977: 123). He notes, however, that this narrative creativity is heavily restricted, as it must always operate under two codes: the linguistic and the translinguistic. It is situated between the code of language and the code of narrative (as identified previously in terms of functions, indices and so forth). He continues:

Claims concerning the "realism" of narrative are therefore to be discounted. [...] The function of narrative is not to "represent," it is to constitute a spectacle still very enigmatic for us but in any case not of a mimetic order. The "reality" of a sequence lies not in the "natural" succession of the actions composing it but in the logic there exposed, risked and satisfied. (ibid. 123)

Narrative is therefore exposed as the result of these two operations, and a deconstruction of the same will reveal only an adherence to its own specific rules, created by the interaction between linguistic and translinguistic codes, rather than to external reality.

Barthes also attacks the notion of realist narrative in a different manner, by pointing out that "[n]arrator and characters [...] are essentially 'paper beings'; the (material) author of a narrative is in no way to be confused with the narrator of that narrative" (ibid. 111). If true of the author/narrator relationship, this statement may also inform the relationship between historical figure/literary character, again supporting a conception of comics narrative as an alterity, peopled not by the "real" but by fictional characters. The comics medium again has the capability to emphasize this point, because narrative, when included, is typically typeset in a similar manner to the story's (fictional) dialogue and demarkated within a box (rather than dialogic speech bubble).

The typography used by comics also emphasizes this distinction. Although traditionally hand-lettered, the mass-production of comics means that the handwritten appearance of their lettering is essentially a fiction. Many modern publications go still further by featuring computerized lettering that nonetheless mimics the appearance of handwriting. This “fiction of fonts” may be read as another signpost indicating that the narrator is, like his characters, also fictional.

Moore uses no omniscient narration, with the exception of informing us of place and dates, in the main body of *From Hell*. Wherever explicit narration does occur, it is variously drawn from police reports, or attributed to William Gull during his out-of-body experiences. By clearly attributing instances of narration such as these to exact sources or characters, *From Hell*'s content also highlights the falsity of narrative voice. That both the aesthetic and typography of the comics medium emphasize this distinction is, again, an example of the form and content aligning in support of a Barthesian tenet: the fiction of the narrative voice.

The ending of *From Hell* also provides us with what seems to be a further alterity, as Gull's vision takes him to Ireland in 1904, where he encounters a woman who strongly resembles Mary Kelly and her four young girls. It is tempting to interpret this scene as an afterlife, but Moore has suggested another possibility, pointing out that “obviously, the simple truth of it is, how could anybody have identified what was in 13 Miller's Court? [...] I've seen the photographs, it's difficult to actually tell which way up she is for a while, let alone who she is. There is no positive evidence” (Kavanagh). Moore thereby offers the possibility that Kelly might have escaped – a notion that finds some support in other elements of the case, such as her boyfriend Joe Barnett's testimony that he and Mary had been arguing due to her inviting other prostitutes to stay in their room. Two independent witnesses also stated that they saw Kelly alive the following morning, which is also a matter of recorded testimony and represented in Chapter 11 of *From Hell*.

Moore explains that he “just wanted to give the poor woman a happy ending [...] without actually going against what was possible, I wanted to sort of give her a way out” (Kavanagh). Perhaps it is only wish-fulfillment, but a scenario in which Mary Kelly escapes to Ireland seems no less likely than any other element of the text. Although it obviously goes directly against traditional *interpretations* of the events, this conclusion still adheres to the facts as known, and could actually be considered more plausible than most theories, as it manages to make the known facts cohere with the troublesome testimonies of Mrs Maxwell and Mr Lewis. However, in the final event, the onus is on the reader as to how they wish to interpret this scene.

The Active Reader

In *The Pleasure of the Text*, Barthes offers a series of vignettes addressing the ways in which relations between the reader and the text operate.

On the stage of the text, no footlights: there is not, behind the text, someone active (the writer) and out front someone passive (the reader); there is not a subject and an object. The text supersedes grammatical attitudes: it is the undifferentiated eye which an excessive author (Angelus Silesius) describes: “The eye by which I see God is the same eye by which He sees me.” (1975, 16)

The role of the reader in interpreting panel content has been previously noted, but this statement seems to go beyond a simple notion of decoding or deduction of meaning. Although noting that Silesius's analogy is somewhat excessive, Barthes nonetheless concurs with his principle: that the relationship between the writer and reader is reciprocal in nature.

Although sounding somewhat unlikely within our understanding of reality (for if the text has been finished by the writer before it has been passed to the reader, how can there be any kind of two-way effect?), this identification of the writer/reader connection was also pointed out by theorists such as Maurice Blanchot, in *The Space of Literature*, which offers an inverted approach to literature as a silent empty space. Blanchot argues against common literary perceptions in proposing that art is not the real made unreal, proposing instead that we do not ascend from the real world to art, but that we emerge from art towards what appears to be a mutualized version of our world (Blanchot 1982a: 47). Literature dwells in a silent, empty space and is inward-looking: concerned only for its own essence.

Although space does not permit a detailed discussion, it is worth noting that Blanchot's denial of an external reality as the text's referent (1982a, 47; 1982b, 118); supports my previous analysis of Barthesian theory regarding the non-mimetic nature of narrative and its lack of an objective referent. Blanchot also notes the performative nature of narration, a notion that aligns strongly with comics' presentation of the hyperreal (1982b: 63). His theories also incorporate an analysis of the disjointed temporality that is produced by the writing and reading experience, where literature arises from the death of the subject while simultaneously sustaining this subject (1982a: 198, 247).

Therefore, although it is located in a dubious temporality and within a purely fictional state, the writer/reader relationship is deemed by both critics to be more than simply that of an active writer and passive reader. In *Understanding Comics*, Scott McCloud identifies the active role of the reader in interpreting comics, using two sequential illustrations. The first of these depicts a man being threatened by an axe-wielding maniac, while the second only shows a scream echoing out over a silhouetted cityscape. McCloud comments:

Every act committed to paper by the comics artist is aided and abetted by a silent accomplice. An equal partner in crime known as the reader. I may have drawn an axe being raised in this example, but I'm not the one who let it drop or decided how hard the blow, or who screamed, or why. That, dear reader, was your special crime, each of you committing it in your own style. [...] To kill a man between panels is to condemn him to a thousand deaths. (68-9)

As this example shows, the gutter is often the site of major events with the result that readers are implicitly involved, investing the story with their own identities and experiences. This creates the illusion of linearity, as writer and reader constantly exchange positions throughout the narrative, depending on whether the story is being told within a panel (by the creator) or between panels (by the reader). This encourages a view of narrative sequential art in line with Jean-François Lyotard's notion of language games, in which speaker and addressee interchange positions constantly.

The content of *From Hell* emphasizes this process, using it to great effect to create its most graphic scenes. The murder and mutilation of Mary Kelly lasts over thirty pages, and is a horrific sequence by any standards. Gull's cuts progress slowly, with one panel showing his knife entering her body, while the next shows the resulting wound and the new position of the knife. As such, our deduction of the knife's motion necessarily takes place between the panels. As Mary Kelly's body becomes more and more unrecognizable we are left with the ghastly realization that, thanks to the nature of the medium, these cuts are ours.

Conclusion

This article has demonstrated some of the ways in which the content of *From Hell* emphasizes the

role of the comics medium in constructing fiction, and explored the ways in which these processes may be linked to the Barthesian models of narrative, word and image. *From Hell*'s theory of co-present time emphasizes the medium's use of a time-as-space narrative structure and so form and content together demonstrate the atemporality that characterizes narrative. The codification of the image identified by Barthes necessarily informs the medium's stylized aesthetic, and this is particularly apparent in *From Hell*'s use of symbols such as the pentagram. This aesthetic is also essential to the creation of the hyperreal and enables the comic-book world to be viewed as an alterity, a notion which informs Barthes' observations on the non-mimetic nature of narrative. The possibilities for interpretation of certain alterities and symbols also emphasize the active role of the reader, another key Barthesian concept. Finally, the importance of the reader's role is again emphasized by the content of *From Hell*, which quite literally makes the reader Gull's accomplice.

Not only does *From Hell* expertly manipulate the possibilities of the medium to create this fiction, but it also draws attention to these processes. It displays the ways in which fiction is created, and emphasizes the notion that every story, whether ostensibly non-fictional or not, exists in this state. In demonstrating the applicability of Barthesian models and theories, it seems clear that the comics medium has much to teach us, not just about the construction of fiction, but also about the processes by which we derive meaning.

Biographical information

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[1] Moore notes Knight's use of the Shakespearean quotation 'Here comes my noble gull-catcher', and points out that gull-catcher means trickster (II.15.5).

[2] References taken from *From Hell* will be cited in this format, which correspond to Appendix II, page 16, panel 3. Please note that references drawn from Chapter 2 (rather than Appendix II) will be delineated 2.16.13.

[3] Interestingly enough, the circumstances depicted are factual; Stevenson got the idea for his story from a nightmare his wife awakened him from.

[4] With reference to my comments on temporality, it is worth noting that this vision takes place some pages after the cinema scene, although it is obviously earlier in Brady's lifetime.

[5] This popular belief appears to have originated in the work of Éliphas Lévi, who claimed that the direction of the

rays of the pentagram determine if it represents the good or evil principle: one point up representing order and light, two points up representing disorder and darkness (Levi 1970, 55). Lévi gives no justification or citation for this distinction and no research associating the pentagram with evil appears prior to this, yet this commonly held belief is now ingrained in the dogma of heavy metal music, occult circles, the American Satanist Association and so forth. (Yukon A.F. & A.M, 2007)

[6] This conception of the Fantastic owes much to the Freudian notion of the uncanny, which is discussed by Lisa Coppin in her 2003 article “Looking Inside Out: The Vision as Particular Gaze in *From Hell*.”