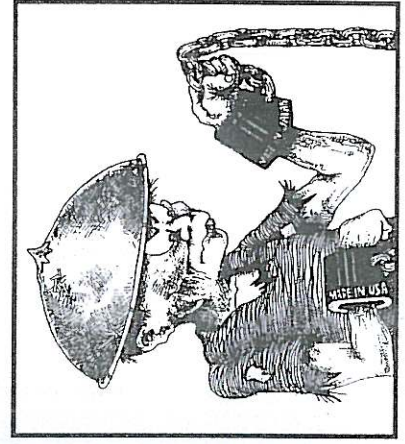
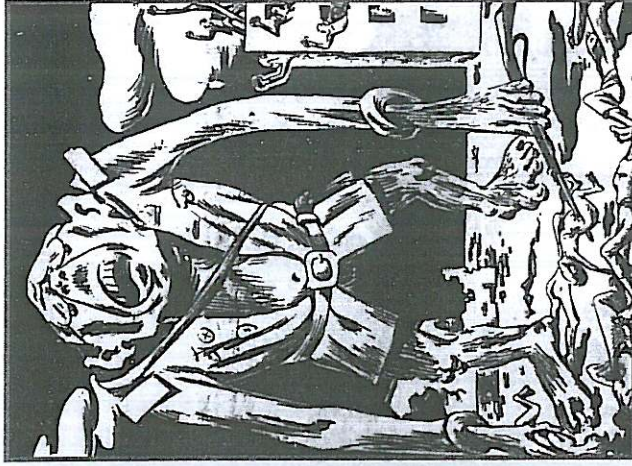


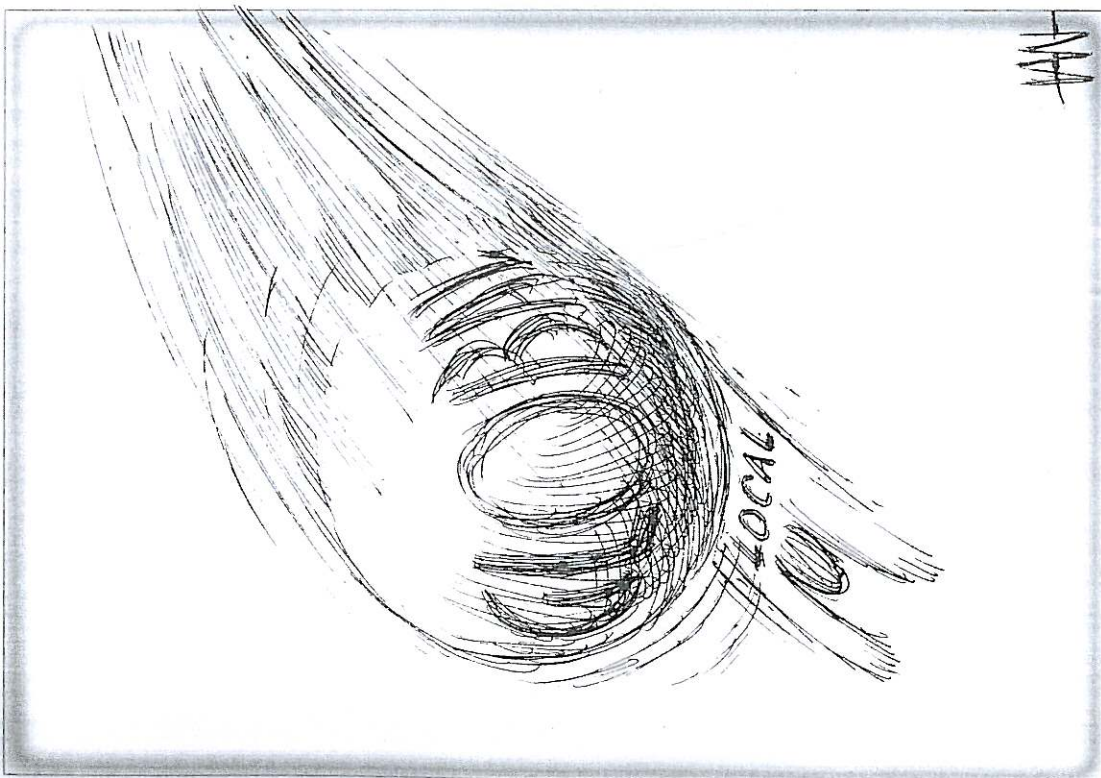
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Tan Oral (Turkey)

Section 2: Wizard! Moore, Morrison, and Superhero Comics

2.1 London's Calling: Alternate Worlds and the City as Superhero in Contemporary British-American Comics

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This article examines the visions of London offered by *From Hell*, *Neverwhere*, and *The Invisibles*. These comics depict a divide in this city, whose surface image hides an underlying truth or another world, and it will be my argument that this divided state can be linked to the superhero figure. After first defining the city as body, I'll identify the motifs and symbols attached to the various Londons of these texts and consider the terms in which the split between Londons is defined. Can geographical duality be linked to the superhero and alter ego -- are these creators simply rewriting this figure as a new trope? I'll then discuss how the treatment of environment is informed by the comic book medium, before concluding as to the consequences of defining the city as a superhero trope within the gothic.

The City as Divided Body

The notion of the city as body is common to both popular culture and literature and a similar anthropomorphism may be found in these comics, which also define the city as a living body. In *The Invisibles*, the underground world of this anarchic terrorist group is described as "THE OTHER CITY UNDER THE SKIN OF THIS" (Morrison, 1996:59.1).¹ The city is further defined in terms of the "BLOOD AND SWEAT AND SHIT" that runs under the street (1996:106.4) and Mr. Six also characterizes its underground locations as the "BOWELS" of London (2002:145.6). Bodily images recur throughout the series, for example as when, commenting on the addition of the Millennium Dome near to the Canary Wharf Tower, Lord Fanny says "BUILD ANOTHER ONE, THEN *TRAFALGERS!* LONDON HAS TITS AND A DICK LIKE *MOI!*" (2002:75.2). In this way both metaphor and simile are used to assign a gross physicality to the city.

Jack Frost's initiation allows him entry into a second London, the home of the Invisibles. The comic clearly shows this divide, for example by rendering the alternate London in literal opposition to the other, showing even its landmarks as reversed (1996:68.1). Further, the comic's whole philosophy rests

on the notion that our universe is a hologram that was created when two universes overlapped (see Fig. 10). A form of "GROWING SELF-CONSCIOUSNESS" (2000:123.3) is assigned to this, our world, and as such the universe becomes a cyber body. Its London may therefore also be read as a microcosm of this, as a location that contains two overlapping worlds.



Fig. 10. *The Invisibles*, King Mob explains the structure of the universe.

Alan Moore and Eddie Campbell's *From Hell* uses a similar bodily metaphor, as William Gull describes London's lights and leylines as "veins" (14.10.7). The comic tells the story of the Jack the Ripper murders, identifying the Ripper as Sir William Gull, Queen Victoria's royal surgeon, an explanation previously offered by Stephen Knight in his book *The Final Solution*. Gull's motivations for slashing prostitutes are, however, only partly to protect the reputation of the Prince Albert Victor (whose relationship with Annie Crook is the subject of blackmail from the victims); and Moore also links the murders to Masonic ritual and the psychogeography of London.

In this sense, the London of *From Hell* can also be read as two worlds. Merlin Coverley (2006:45) has commented on the "double life of privilege and despair" that characterizes the city of the 19th Century, and this class divide is, of course, the underlying basis of Moore's plot, whose events are sparked by the liaison of a prince and a shop girl. The city's divide may also be defined in terms of the visible versus the occult, as the murders that link its two halves also represent both of these polarized elements by signifying both as sex crimes and ceremonial sacrifices.

Neil Gaiman's *Neverwhere* (adapted for comics and scripted by Mike Carey) assigns physicality to London in more literal terms. It tells the story of everyman Richard Mayhew, a good Samaritan who gets sucked from his city ("London Above") into the world of "London Below." Many elements of this

alternate London are explicitly anthropomorphized -- for example Old Bailey, the Earl of Earl's Court, and even the Angel Islington all exist as characters.

It seems clear that these texts do not simply assign London a body but construct this as a divided body. Identifying this divided state returns me to previous work, where I have argued that a gothic motif of fragmented identity underpins the superhero figure. This article will therefore approach the superhero as a psychoanalytic symbol of fragmented identity which recalls the gothic in its use of inversion, constitutive otherness, and transformation (see Round, [2005:358-369], in which I consider this figure as a gothic symbol. It should however be noted that this is just one possibility for interpretation; as a floating signifier the superhero can -- and has -- been used to represent all manner of cultural, psychological, and political concerns).

The Superhero and the City

Links between body and location seem particularly strong in the context of the superhero, for example with reference to figures such as the Swamp Thing, who is a literal embodiment of his environment. Other heroes' environments also align with their personalities and ethos: while Superman resides in sunlit Metropolis, Batman is more regularly associated with Gotham at night. Denny O'Neil has famously commented in this regard that "Gotham is Manhattan below Fourteenth Street at 3 a.m., November 28 in a cold year. Metropolis is Manhattan between Fourteenth and One Hundred and Tenth Streets on the brightest, sunniest July day of the year" (Boichel, 1991:9); a statement that recalls the notion of the divided city. Matt Wagner and Dave Stewart's *Trinity* provides excellent examples of the use of color and composition to associate the hero with his domain: for example, picturing Superman flying upwards over a sunlit Metropolis, while Batman is jumping down into the murk of Gotham (Wagner and Stewart, 2003c:58-59).

It is surprisingly difficult to find a comprehensive definition of what might be called the "superhero qualities" as attributes vary widely, both from figure to figure and from time to time. However, a by-no-means exhaustive list might include: extraordinary powers or abilities; a motif or theme that informs the hero's name, costume, and other aspects of their character; and a secret identity (whose qualities are frequently directly opposed to the superhero persona) and origin story. These elements exist within a model whose structure is maintained through processes of exclusion and opposition.

A wide range of extraordinary powers may be linked to the superhero and so I shall limit my focus to but two of these: invisibility and flight. While the alternate London of *The Invisibles* and *Neverwhere* is literally unseen by the majority of the city's inhabitants, this also applies in a metaphorical sense to the lower classes of *From Hell*, whose existence and plight are ignored by

the residents of the upper-class city. The motif of extraordinary powers is employed here -- after crossing between the two cities, both Jack Frost and



Fig. 11. *Neverwhere*, alienation and identity crisis are recurring themes for Morrison.

Richard Mayhew become invisible to the inhabitants of their old world (see Fig. 11, also Morrison, 1996:94,5-6).

The flight motif used in *From Hell* is treated in a similar way, as it is aligned with Gull's disdain for puny mortal flesh (14.10.6), which again evokes the superheroic. Flight is also used in *The Invisibles* as Tom allows Jack to assume the eyes of a pigeon and fly above London (1996:80-85). This instance also references the superheroic via the motif of transformation.

The superhero figure holds opposed qualities within it in constant flux. As such, transformation is the bridging mechanism between the two halves of the whole and can be defined as a structural motif or organizing principle of the figure. In *The Invisibles*, this motif is attached solely to our world, which itself contains elements of both the overlapping universes Morrison postulates. As Lord Fanny says "IN YOUR WORLD THERE IS ONLY EVER THE UGLY CATERPILLAR, JUST AS IN THE WORLD ABOVE, ONLY THE BEAUTIFUL BUTTERFLY EXISTS. [...] / HERE, IN MY WORLD, THERE IS CHANGE. [...] ONLY HERE." (2000:166.1-2). Transformation allows the polarized elements of the superhero and alter ego to coexist, and *The Invisibles'* attachment of this motif to a physical location thereby supports my argument.

The opposed qualities of the superhero and alter ego are also present in these comics' treatments of London. In *Neverwhere*, the anthropomorphization of place in London Below frequently applies names and meanings that are in direct contradiction to that of London Above. The Angel Islington, for example, turns out to be far from good, while the everyman Richard Mayhew ultimately becomes a great warrior. This strategy is also extended to locations that are not overtly personified, such as Harrods, which hosts the low-class floating market, or Knightsbridge more generally. Far from being the upper-class (and therefore safe) space it holds in London Above, this is "NIGHT'S BRIDGE"; a

crossing shrouded in the darkness of night, and the most dangerous place in London Below.

In *From Hell*, the pentagram motif that links Gull and Netley's tour of Masonic landmarks within the geography of London (see 4.36.7) contains a similar duality of meaning. 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, the modern interpretation of it may depend on whether the point is up or down, but historically this distinction was rarely made. As such, the pentagram is a divided symbol that stands for both good and evil, and is entirely dependent on interpretation.

In this way the pentagram also references Hell, which label is used to define the location of Whitechapel (when the Ripper gives it as his address in a letter to the press [9.33.5-6]), giving the book its title. Like the Knightsbridge example from *Neverwhere*, and *The Invisibles*' definition of the city as built on blood, sweat, and effluent, this again recalls the literality of superhero naming as metaphor becomes literal.

In *Neverwhere*, the names of characters in London Below also reference the superheroic in this way -- as the character Hunter says, "MY NAME IS MY STORY. I HUNT. I AM THE HUNTER." (Carey, 2006b:20.1). The Lady Door and her family are "openers" who can create a door anywhere. The Marquis de Carabas takes his name from "A LIE IN A FAIRY TALE" (Carey, 2006c:12.2), referencing his deceptive nature.

Due to space limitations, the secret identity and origin story may best be discussed together. As noted, many elements of the alternate London in *The Invisibles* are literally reversed, which include landmarks, authority structures (as the *Invisibles*' cell members swap roles periodically), and so forth. The economic terms that divide the city of *From Hell* create a similar polarization. This split is made clear visually by sequences that contrast the West and East Ends of the city; sketching Gull's West End lifestyle in soft pencils while Polly Nicholls' East End life is depicted in scratchy lines (5.8-9). It is also emphasized by word -- Detective Fred Aberline's view of his reassignment to Whitechapel as an exile polarizes the two worlds (6.5.4-7), and other characters such as Gull and the coachman Netley, his accomplice to the murders, are explicitly juxtapositioned to emphasize this divide. This aligns with the polarization of the superhero and alter ego.

Further, the various locations of the murders may be viewed as the site of a split between the visible (being a simple sex killing) and the hidden (Masonic ritual, or the regal directive behind the matter). These locations are not simply the points where the division between the rich and poor is inverted (for example as the superior Gull stands in awe of the poor prostitute [5.33.1-3]), but simultaneously the point at which the occult and the visible coincide. As such

they represent a point of origin for the divided city structure.

It therefore seems that all three texts take place in a divided London whose segregation is maintained by processes of exclusion and opposition. The city is defined in bodily terms and then shown to contain within itself at least two Londons, whose parallel existences are sustained by a mechanism of transformation. The hidden Londons are characterized by extraordinary occurrences and abilities, such as the flight motif and invisibility. They frequently oppose the qualities of the other London, and also display a literality of naming and use of an overarching and cohering theme that further recalls the superheroic. Finally, the existence of the alternate world is revealed by a defining act that in this respect recalls the superhero origin story.

Comics Narratology

As noted, the city divide established above is reinforced by the aesthetics of the medium. However, before concluding, I wish to briefly address how comics narratology informs this depiction of the city as superhero. To this end I define the three main elements underlying a semiotics of comics as: 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, installments, and so forth; however, these are additive techniques rather than integral to the medium's narratology.

The depiction of time-as-space informs a psychogeographic model where location represents history, as in the work of writers such as Iain Sinclair and Peter Ackroyd. This traces temporal and spatial correspondences through history, identifying the repetition of violent events at certain locations as due to historical resonances inherited from the past. As such, it is informed by the comic book medium whose layout also uses spatial correspondences to represent temporal ones.

The medium's reliance on interpretation also informs the city's depiction. In reading a comic, the reader works alongside the creators as a kind of contributory author, by interpreting the panel contents and filling in the gutters. As such, the medium's narratology informs the treatment of symbols such as the pentagram, whose divided meaning is entirely open to interpretation.

The world of comics may best be described as the world of the fictional signifier (Verano, 2006:326). This approach aligns 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, 1981:19). This is due not only to the presence of fantastic events but also to the nature of the medium, whose

non-realistic aesthetic and use of panels-as-signifiers offer fictional seeing rather than literal representation. As such the medium creates the hyperreal, thereby sustaining the presence of multiple/divided worlds in all three texts.

It seems that many of the characteristics of an alternate London accord with the superhero figure and, if viewed as a psychological metaphor, the superhero trope has much in common with the city depicted in these texts. Application of a gothic psychoanalytic model identifies a fragmentation of identity that is structured as a duality. Various superhero motifs are then employed to create and maintain this split. Comics narratology further supports this interpretation as it informs both the selection and treatment of these motifs. As such, the tropes of both city and hero can be read as floating signifiers for narrative identity.

Endnote

¹ References from trade paperbacks, whose pages have been renumbered will take this form, where 59.1 refers to page 59, panel 1. In some trade paperbacks, page numbering is retained from individual issues and in these instances, I shall cite references in three-digit form (for example, 14.10.7 corresponds to part 14, page 10, panel 7). When quoting from comics I have used '/' to indicate divisions between speech balloons or narrative boxes, and imitated the use of font and style so far as is possible in order to avoid inflicting my own capitalization, punctuation, and so forth on the text.

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