

THE OCCULT AND COMICS

Kennet Granholm

Studies of religion and popular culture are increasing in number, but it is still fairly uncommon to find treatments of comic books in general introductions and collected volumes. This is a shame, as comic books are perhaps the popular cultural products where the occult is most prominent, as well as one of the few remaining popular cultural arenas where creators are still relatively free to experiment with unorthodox subject matter. Both of the above mentioned are likely due to comic books being viewed as an 'unworthy pursuit', mirroring the sentiments directed towards the occult itself for centuries, while everything from heavy metal to Science Fiction TV-shows are starting to be recognized as valid subjects of study.

Comic books form a broad and diverse field, including a great number of different genres and massive variations in intended readership, approach, and thematic content. In this essay I will primarily focus on comic books from the major superhero comic book companies, DC Comics and Marvel Comics. This means that I will mostly, though not exclusively, deal with the superhero genre and secondary genres derived from and/or connected to this primary one. There are two main reasons for this: First, superhero comics are by far most well known, not least due to having been adapted into numerous Hollywood blockbuster films in the last decade, and which thus have the greatest cultural impact. Second, the genre of superhero comics can in and by itself be interpreted as a genre of occult literature, which makes a treatment of it doubly significant in a discussion of comics and the occult (Kripal 2011).

When the page numbering of comic books and albums is unclear I have chosen to refer only to issue or volume number. As for comic book authors, I have chosen only to name writers, except in cases where an artist has worked on a series throughout its publication run and when referring to particular issues rather than whole series.

'Ages' and Occult Phases in Superhero Comics

The history of superhero comics is commonly divided into different phases or 'ages', which, although being somewhat simplifying (Kripal 2011, 26), give a rough sketch of major developments. The most common division is into the olden, silver, bronze, and modern ages. The golden age commences in 1938 with the first appearance of Superman

in Detective Comics' (renamed DC Comics in 1977) *Action Comics* #1 (Siegel and Shuster 1938; see Coville 2011a). This era was characterized by a great optimism with superheroes commonly portrayed as perfected human beings, representing the next evolutionary step of humanity (Kripal 2011, 75). This, combined with the superheroes often gaining their powers from advanced scientific experimentation, introduces an important occult dimension, and is why the superhero comic can in itself be regarded a form of occult fiction, preceded by the occult novels of the late-1800s and the UFO magazines of the 1950s (Kripal 2011, 85). The loss of popularity of superhero comics after the Second World War combined with a growing critique of them due to their perceived detrimental effect on youth motivated the comic book industry to create a self-censoring organ in the Comics Code Authority (CCA) in 1955 (Coville 2011b).

From 1956, there was renewed interest in superhero comics, giving rise to the silver age (Coville 2011c). Where DC Comics had dominated the golden age, Marvel Comics in many ways came to dominate the silver age with its new breed of heroes who besides battling villains also struggled with everyday human problems and concerns. The 'Marvel age' started with the publication of *Fantastic Four* #1 in 1961 (Lee and Kirby 1961), and in the next two years several popular superheroes and superhero teams were created, such as Spider-Man (1962), the Hulk (1962), Thor (1962), X-Men (1963), the Avengers (1963), and Iron Man (1963). Like their golden age counterparts, silver age superheroes were often imagined as the next steps of human evolution.

In the bronze age, from 1970, '[c]omics got more complex, rules changed, and different characters and stories were told', increasingly revolving around real-life social and political problems (Coville 2011d). The CCA relaxed its rules which made it possible to again publish horror comics, and titles such as *Vampire Tales* (Gerber and Moench 1973-5), *The Tomb of Dracula* (Conway et al. 1972-8), *Werewolf by Night* (Conway et al. 1972-5), *Ghost Rider* (Friedrich, Wolfman and Moench 1973-83), *Swamp Thing* (Wein and Wrightson 1971; 1972) which often dealt with explicitly occult themes were launched.

The modern age, variously seen as starting in 1980 with Frank Miller's dark realistic envisioning of Marvel's Daredevil (1980-3; see Coville 2011d) or the mid 1980s with Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons' deconstruction of the superhero genre in *Watchmen* (1986-7) and Miller's in the dystopian future-vision of Batman in *The Dark Knight Returns* (1986), represents a 'loss of innocence' for superhero comics and is sometimes called 'The Dark Age' due to its overall darker tone in themes and stories. The occult characters introduced during the bronze age had mostly disappeared from mainstream comics by the early 1980s, but this was in turn compensated by an increasing number of more adult-oriented comic books which dealt with occult subject matter, particularly evident in the launching of DC Comics' Vertigo imprint in 1993. Vertigo collected existing series such as *Saga of the Swamp Thing/Swamp Thing* (1982-1996, 2001-1, 2004-6; see particularly Moore 1984-7), *Doom Patrol* (1987-1995; see particularly Morrison 1989-93), *Hellblazer* (Delano et al. 1988-2013), *Sandman* (Gaiman 1989-96), *Shade, the Changing Man* (Milligan 1990-6), and *The Books of Magic* (Gaiman 1990-1; Rieber and Gross 1994-2000), and launched many new ones such as *Death: The High Cost of Living* (Gaiman and Bachalo 1993), *Enigma* (Milligan and Fegredo 1993), *Preacher* (Ennis and Dillon 1995-2000), *The Invisibles* (Morrison 1994-2000), and *Lucifer* (Carey 2000-6).

Classic Occult Themes and Comic Books

Magic has more or less always played a role in comic books. In the pre-superhero age we find the character Mandrake, who in full stage magician attire, top hat and all, relied on illusionist tricks in his fight against evil. In the golden age of comics we find characters such as Captain Marvel (Parker and Beck 1939) who was a young boy who through the intervention of an ancient Egyptian wizard can transform into a Superman-like super being by shouting the magic formula SHAZAM! (for the wisdom of **S**olomon, the strength of **H**ercules, the Stamina of **A**tlas, the power of **Z**eus, the courage of **A**chilles, and the speed of **M**ercury). Even for Superman magic played a role, as it was one of the few weapons, aside from kryptonite, that he was vulnerable to. In the silver age we have characters such as Doctor Strange (Lee and Ditko 1963) and Zatanna (Fox and Anderson 1964) who are first and foremost magicians. However, even though these characters wield magical powers and classic occult notions such as the astral plane are included, magic appeared simply as any other superpower. In the bronze age, we find explicitly occult characters and the use of occult symbolism, as detailed above, but it is really in the modern age that occult magic properly becomes a theme in comic books.

Much of the changes in mainstream comics in the 1980s, including more complex and mature engagements with the occult, came with the so-called British Invasion in American superhero comics and writers such as Moore with *Saga of the Swamp Thing* from 1984, Neil Gaiman with *Sandman* from 1989, and Grant Morrison with *Animal Man* (1988-90). The most obvious example is the character John Constantine, who was introduced in *The Saga of the Swamp Thing* #37 (Moore, Veitch and Turtleben 1985), and got his own ongoing series *Hellblazer* in 1988 (Delano et al. 1988-2013). In stark contrast to most earlier magical characters, John Constantine is not a superhuman being wielding vast supernatural powers in a fight against super villains. Instead, Constantine possesses vast knowledge of the occult arts and engages with non-human realms and beings by ritual magic or other conventional occult means. For example, in the famous storyline 'Dangerous Habits' (Ennis and Simpson 1991), which was the main influence of the movie *Constantine* (2005), John Constantine is diagnosed with terminal lung cancer. As no medical intervention can save his life Constantine relies on occult means. In a magical ceremony he calls on Azazel, one of the most powerful demon rulers of Hell, and sells his soul, then carefully cleans and prepares his magical circle before evoking Beelzebub and selling his soul again. When he then slits his wrists and both demons, along with the 'First of the Fallen' – who has avowed to personally drag Constantine's soul to Hell, come to collect his soul they have no other recourse than to heal his wounds and cure his cancer or engage in a disastrous civil war. Constantine's trademark is that he relies on his knowledge of the occult arts and his wit, outsmarting supernatural beings who are far more powerful than he is.

Ceremonial magic also plays a role in Gaiman's *Sandman*-series, which starts in the second decade of the twentieth century with a group of magicians summoning (by use of the 'Magdalene Grimoire') and trapping the personification of dream, the titular Sandman (in their attempt to trap Death). The leader of this group, Roderick Burgess, is clearly modeled on Aleister Crowley, although he is envisioned as a rival of Crowley as he right before performing the evocation says: 'After tonight I'd like to

see Aleister and his friends try to make fun of me!' (Gaiman and Kieth 1989, 4). Though not explicitly named, Crowley's influence is evident in the sex magic-loaded series *The Witching* as well (Vankin and Gallagher 2004-5). Elsa Grimston, one of the three witches in the series, is a 'Moonchild' conceived magically by her magician father. The father, Henry Grimston, is most likely modeled on John Whiteside Parsons (1914-52), who was one of the first followers of Crowley in the US, and who with his magical partner Marjorie Cameron attempted to create a Moonchild in the sex magical 'Babalon working'.

Another interesting example is Pat Mills and Kevin O'Neill's *Nemesis the Warlock* (1980-2000). The titular warlock of the series is a demon-looking alien fighting a fanatically religious church-like Termight led by Tomas de Torquemada, who seek to rid the galaxy of all non-human life forms. Nemesis, as a warlock, uses magic and sorcery in his battle against the church.

A final example I will give is Kieron Gillen and Jamie McKelvie's *Phonogram* (2006-7). Drawing inspiration from chaos magick, the series does not contain much in the way of conventional occult symbolism or ritual magic, but instead operates with the notion of pop culture as a magical realm. The lead character is a phonomancer, a magician who works with pop music, and in a segment of the series he evokes the goddess of Britpop, who has since the early 1990s slowly withered away. In a magical working in the third issue of the series the phonomancer puts on a record with The Manic Street Preachers, dresses in the clothes and puts on the makeup he wore when being involved in Britpop, does drugs and drinks alcohol in the same way as he used to, puts a book of Sylvia Plath's collected poems in his back pocket, goes to the club he went to in the early 1990s (which is no longer a Britpop club), puts on a cassette tape with the band Pulp in his Walkman and dances to the music. The inner dialogue goes: 'Ten years ago this was my church. If I can hold this self together maybe I've enough belief left for one last mass' (Gillen and McKelvie 2006, 20-24).

Pagan Sensibilities

A feature that became popular in comics since the 1980s is a catering to pagan sensibilities, both in a nature- and non-human orientedness and the use of preexisting and newly created non-Christian mythologies. Moore's *Saga of the Swamp Thing* is a pioneer in this respect. When introduced in 1972 the character was conceived of as a scientist turned into a monster due to science gone awry (Wein and Wrigthson 1972), the standard origin story in comics. When Moore started writing the series in 1984 he made a dramatic revelation: 'We thought that the Swamp Thing was Alec Holland, somehow transformed into a plant. It wasn't. It was a plant that *thought* it was Alec Holland!' (Moore 1984, 12). The revelation was made in an equally dramatic fashion. The Swamp Thing is shot and the doctor dissecting it finds to his astonishment that its 'organs' are nothing more than crude non-functional approximations of human ones (Moore 1984, 7). As '...you can't kill a vegetable by shooting it through the head' (Moore 1984, 15), the Swamp Thing revives, exacts revenge, and escapes, going on to assume a role as protector of all plant life on earth, being in contact with all plant life through the astral plane-like 'the Green', and gaining new powers such as being able to travel vast distances near instantaneously simply by dissolving its body and re-growing it somewhere else (Moore, Veitch and Turtleben 1985, 15;

Moore, Bissette and Turtleben 1985, 12-13, 17-22; Moore, Woch and Randall 1986). The notion of a living nature is a classic and widespread feature of occult philosophy, as is the monistic worldview presented in Moore's *Saga of the Swamp Thing*.

Morrison's *Animal Man* continues in the same vein. When created in 1965 Animal Man was a superhero who in contact with crash-landed aliens gained the power to mimic the abilities of different animals, but when Morrison started writing the character in 1988 he made drastic changes. In an entheogen-assisted Native American vision quest Animal Man comes to realize that his powers are the result of him being in contact with all animal life on earth through the astral plane-like 'the Red', and it is through this contact that he can 'borrow' the powers of different animals (Morrison, Truog and Hazzlewood 1989). In Animal Man's newfound affinity with non-human animals he becomes a strict vegetarian, starts increasingly working for animal liberation and ecological welfare, and eventually even starts to take on physical non-human characteristics when borrowing animal powers. The same theme of animal liberation continues in Morrison and Frank Quitely's *WE3* (2005), which revolves around a trio of animals, a dog, a cat, and a rabbit, who have been modified by the military to be super soldiers. The animals escape, are hunted by the military – with humans thus being the evil antagonists, and eventually two of reach freedom (the rabbit having sacrificed itself in order to save the other two). The series is also of occult interest as it portrays the transfiguration, and indeed transmutation, of beings to into a higher evolutionary state through technological means.

Gaiman's *Sandman* creates its own non-Christian mythology, in presenting the Endless, a 'family' of eternal principles manifested in personified form; Destiny, Death, Dream, Destruction, Despair, Desire, and Delirium (who first manifested as Delight). The series engages heavily with existing mythologies, including that of Christianity, but the Endless embody principles which are more ancient and fundamental in the fabric of the cosmos than gods and other supernatural beings. A story that always struck me as particularly interesting in portraying the power of *imaginatio* (as in the power of dreams) is the self-contained 'A Dream of a Thousand Cats' (Gaiman and Jones 1990). In the story a cat meets Sandman in the form of a black cat (as *Dream* will appear in the form expected by the dreamer), who tells the cat the story of how humans in times past were the pets of cats, and miniscule compared to them, but how they collectively dreamed themselves as the rulers of earth, and thus changed reality to always having been so. The cats meet in groups, discuss, and the story ends with one cat sleeping and in his sleep hunting something – to the adornment of the cat's unwitting owner – implying that the cats are now dreaming a new reality into existence.

Comic Books and Occult Practice: Grant Morrison

In terms of the occult, Scottish comic book writer Grant Morrison is of particular interest. Morrison identifies as a magician, and his work not only reflects and expresses his occult interests, but sometimes even becomes a tool for magical practice.

Born in Glasgow in 1960, Morrison began doing comics at a young age, publishing his first work in the Scottish alternative comics magazine *Near Myths* in 1978. At

around the same time, at age 19, he did his first magical working, purportedly because wanted to prove that Aleister Crowley's magic was nothing but fantasy. When a demon showed up, however, he was hocked for life (Babcock 2004; cf Cowe-Spigai and Neighly 2003, 237). Morrison's comic book career really took off when he started to write *Zenith* for the comics anthology *2000AD* (Morrison and Yeowell 1987-2002). The success of *Zenith* got the attention of DC Comics, and he was commissioned to re-imagine the company's B-list character Animal Man. After this Morrison was given increasingly prestigious comic book work, eventually even writing flagship titles such as *New X-Men* for Marvel (2001-4) and *Batman* (2006-8, 2010) for DC. In 1992 Morrison had started experimenting with drugs in magical workings, and in 1994, while in Kathmandu, India, he 'was taken out of Four-D reality, shown the entire universe as a single object, shown the world as it is from the outside' (Babcock 2004) – an experience which greatly affected him and flowed into his comic book work. Morrison has also written on his take to magic, an approach he has called Pop Magic (Morrison 2003) and which is greatly influenced by chaos magick.

The occult figures prominently already in *Zenith*. For example, the Nazi super being Masterman is a genetically engineered human body possessed by 'Iok Sotot, Eater of Souls' – which is a name strongly reminiscent of beings in H.P. Lovecraft's Cthulhu mythos, which is popular in modern occultism – through the 'Ritual of Nine Angles' – which is a ritual described in Anton LaVey's Satanic Bible (1969), in which in 'The Order of the Black Sun' – with the Black Sun being a symbol which figures prominently in discussions of (primarily imagined) Nazi occultism, communes with a formless 'Dark God' – again showing an influence from H.P. Lovecraft (Morrison and Yeowell 1987). Other examples are: a story titled 'A Separate Reality' (Morrison and Yeowell 1989) – clearly referencing Carlos Castaneda's famous neoshamanic book, a character is called 93 Mantra – clearly referencing Crowley's religiomagical philosophy of Thelema (Morrison and Yeowell 1989), and the chaos magickal group Thee Temple of Psychick Youth (see Partridge 2013) mentioned in passing (Morrison and Yeowell 1990).

Kid Eternity (Morrison and Fegredo 1991) has even clearer occult symbols and more elaborated occult themes, and also demonstrates some of Morrison's chaos magickal leanings such as the mind creating its reality – e.g. in Hell adapting to the mindsets of individual souls trapped there (79) and duality ultimately being an illusion (105), popular cultural icons representing archetypical occult forces (123), and the inclusion of a 'chaosphere engine' devised to speed up human evolution (101).

Occult themes are explored most clearly and deeply in Morrison's *The Invisibles* (1994-2000), which is directly influenced by his experiences in Kathmandu. The series portrays a terrorist cell of chaos magickians fighting a conspiracy of the political and economic establishment governed by outer-dimensional beings seeking to control and passivize humanity. To give just a few examples of the occult ideas and practices contained in *The Invisibles*: A heavy-handed push by a magical mentor shifting the initiates perception (Morrison and Yeowell 1994b, 7) – as described in Castaneda's books – and extreme experiences being able to do the same (Morrison and Yeowell 1994c, 10; cf Cowe-Spigai and Neighly 2003, 235); the idea of sigil-magic being used in mainstream corporate culture – the McDonald's golden arc described as 'the sigil

of the dark emperor Mammon' (Morrison and Yeowell 1994b, 16; cf Morrison 2003, 20); the alphabet described as the name of a demon, 'a spell word, an 'abracadabra,' implanted in the brain of every English-speaking child, the root mantra of restriction' (Morrison and Jimenez 1996c, 7); and, again, popular cultural icons, John Lennon this time, being invoked as archetypal occult forces being invoked as (Morrison and Yeowell 1994a, 18-9). Morrison writes, '[Ragged Robin]: The Beetle's supposed to stand for death and resurrection, isn't it. Is that why you invoked John Lennon? [King Mob]: Yeah. I figured he's got all the attributes of a god now, so I used traditional ceremonial magic methods and summoned him for advice' (Morrison and Yeowell 1994a, 26).

Morrison has described *The Invisibles* as a hypersigil, 'a sigil extended through the fourth dimension... an immensely powerful and sometimes dangerous method for actually altering reality in accordance with intent' (Morrison 2003, 21). According to Morrison, the series 'consumed and recreated my life during the period of its composition and execution' (Morrison 2003). He wrote himself into the stories, as the musician and author 'Kirk Morrison' and the superspy Gideon Stargrave, whom Morrison had used as a character in his stories in *Near Myths*, as imaginary 'shield-personas' used by the character King Mob when being tortured and interrogated (Morrison and Jimenez 1996a; 1996b; 1996c). King Mob became both reflection of Morrison and a character that influenced his circumstances, with things written for the character manifesting in various, often unpredictable, ways in Morrison's own life (Morrison 1996b, 26; Cowe-Spigai and Neighly 2003, 233-4, 246-7). As a magical working the series was intended to both change the world and Morrison himself, and at a point when sales of the series were down to the degree of cancelled Morrison deplored his fans to engage in a 'wankathon' as 'a magically charged global masturbation session initiated in order to increase the sales of *The Invisibles*' (Morrison 1996a, 25; Brother Yawn 2002), instead of simply asking the fans to buy more copies or to encourage their friends to do so.

Final Words: The Occult and Comics in non-English-language Contexts

The occult is naturally not only a factor in English-language superhero comics, but for a proper treatment I am limited by the scope of this essay, my language skills, and the plain fact that the world of comics is simply too vast for a single person to be fully familiar with. I will, however, end this essay with one short example from a non-English-language context.

An interesting example of the occult in comics in a French context is Alejandro Jodorowsky and Moebius' (Jean Giraud) *L'Incal* (translated into English as *The Incal*). Jodorowsky is more famous for being a film director, and particularly his *The Holy Mountain* (1973) is ripe with occult easily identifiable as being inspired by the 'Fourth Way' philosophy of George Ivanovich Gurdjieff. *Incal* is set in a massive futuristic city, where the protagonist John DiFool receives the crystal-like 'light incal', which is in turn sought by, among others, a cult which worships of the 'dark incal'. As an alien/higher intellect the incal educates and temporarily transforms the protagonist, quite literally by butchering his body, into four beings representing the classic elements air, water, fire, and earth, while asking '...who is John DiFool?'

And just how many of you are there?’ (Jodorowsky and Moebius 1988, #1). Further on in his adventures DiFool encounters a nude woman called Animah, to whom he promptly gives the black incal he just obtained and also instantly develops a deep longing for (Jodorowsky and Moebius 1988, #1). This theme of the union on gendered opposites is expressed elsewhere in the series as well, such as in the being Foetus – composed of a male and a female joined at the head (Jodorowsky and Moebius 1988, #1), the union of the light and dark incals – in a ritual-like performance by DiFool and Animah – which grants them greater power than each of them holds separately (Jodorowsky and Moebius 1988, #2), and the child character Sunmoon – whose ‘heart is that of a perfect androgyne’ (Jodorowsky and Moebius 1988, #2). Animah is a being of great spiritual wisdom and power, who teaches DiFool’s company to gain control of gigantic ‘psycho-rats’ through meditation: ‘Control your minds! Rid yourselves of fear and violence’, she says (Jodorowsky and Moebius 1988, #2). Later, she identifies herself and the rest of DiFool’s company as ‘the seven keys’ who can open the ‘portal of transfiguration’. She says to the group: ‘...we cannot open the portal unless we strip ourselves ... of our self-images! Bare our souls for the transfiguring process!’, and to Sunmoon who will form the centre of the portal: ‘you must now leave your childhood behind! Become your essential self. Reconstruct your own axis!’ after which the child reaches its full potential as an androgynous being (Jodorowsky and Moebius 1988, #2). Further, books three and four of the series are named ‘That Which is Above’ and ‘That Which is Below’, which in combination form a phrase which has been widely used in occultism. It can be added that the series should seem familiar to anyone familiar with science fiction movies of the last two decades, as it is clearly a direct inspiration for Baz Luhrman’s movie *The Fifth Element* (1997). Very little in Luhrman’s movie is not derived from *Incal*, including the title of the movie itself. The fifth and sixth books of *L’Incal* are named ‘La Cinquième essence’, or ‘The Fifth Essence’ in English (Jodorowsky and Moebius 1988, #3).

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