

“Only us...”

Magick, Language and Consciousness in the works of Alan Moore



I remember sitting on a crowded bus – one of the old Tranlink Citybuses that rattled deafeningly over every bump in the road – making my way into work during my professional placement as a student architect. I was reading a dogeared, second-hand copy of *Watchmen* by Alan Moore. I have been an avid comic reader since I was young and had encountered Moore before – mainly on more ‘standard’ comic book fodder such as Batman and Superman. This was my first attempt at *Watchmen*, the book I was aware had made the writer famous and had apparently led to the coining of the term ‘Graphic Novel’ either because the scope of the book had elevated the medium, or more likely because the term ‘comic book’ was deemed too low-brow for the broadsheets.

I had got to chapter 6, ‘*The Abyss Gazes Also*,’ which deals with the backstory of one of the main characters, Rorschach. I had read comics which dealt with gore, violence and other close to the knuckle topics before, but as I finished that chapter on that hot, stuffy bus I felt chilled to the core; the hair on the back of my neck stood on end, my arms raised in goose-flesh and deep sickening feeling in the pit of my stomach. This feeling did not rise from the horror and unpleasantness depicted in the story, but the fact that it spoke to broader themes which – in that moment at least – totally transformed my understanding of morality. This transformational moment led to my intense interest in Moore, which later blended with my interest in sociology and philosophy.

Now that the gushing introduction is out of the way, I would like to stress that the following is not intended as a literature review. Nor is it intended to convince anyone of Moore's genius or value – there is plenty of both out there already. Rather, this is an exploration of the themes and thoughts I have wrested from Moore's body of work, not all of which I agree with but nonetheless have found them useful in appraising the spiritual problems which blight us all as humans.

I believe it is worthwhile indulging in a brief biographical description, just to contextualise some of the ideas that follow. Born in the Boroughs area of Northampton, one of the most deprived areas of the UK, in 1953, Moore did not get on well with school or the job market in his early life. He became involved in the underground arts scene in the late 1960s, contributing to local fanzines and eventually becoming a comic book writer. From the late seventies he was contributing to UK based publishers such as 2000AD and Warrior, with one of his better-known works, *V for Vendetta*, being written for Warrior in 1982.¹ Growing in reputation, he was eventually asked to write for US based publisher DC Comics, one of the largest and longest running comic book publishers in the world. Here he wrote his seminal work *Watchmen* in 1986,² also taking over horror comic *Swamp Thing* in 1983³ and writing the influential Batman story *The Killing Joke* in 1988.⁴ Getting involved in a series of legal arguments with DC, Moore stopped working for them – and indeed any mainstream publisher – in 1989.

In 1993, on his fortieth birthday, Moore announced that he was a ceremonial magician; something which confounded Moore's friends along with the comic industry where he now had a considerable reputation which he seemed content to dismantle. He has continued to write comic books, has published two novels, regularly stages performance art pieces and, with photographer Mitch Jenkins, has made the film series *Showpieces*.⁵ Several film adaptations have been made of his earlier work, including *Watchmen*, *From Hell*⁶ and *V for Vendetta*, for which Moore refuses to take any money, nor be credited.

Moore's insistence that he is a ceremonial magician in the tradition of Aleister Crowley is a difficult grasp. On the one hand it seems incredibly earnest and it is obvious that he has an intimate knowledge of the history of 'magick'⁷ and has discussed various magical occurrences he has witnessed personally.⁸ While on the other hand he appears to be aware of the perceived ridiculousness of this assertion in the eyes of the wider population. However, his description of what magic is provides an incredibly fecund place to start. Crowley defined 'magick' (the spelling intended to differentiate it from performance magic) as "the science and art of causing change to occur in conformity with will"⁹ including mundane acts as well as the more 'spooky' or apparently 'supernatural.' Moore goes further, suggesting that art is an incredibly powerful form of magic around which cults – or is that cultures? – grow and develop their shared sense of meaning. Moore's art, much like Crowley's magic, "is the science of manipulating symbols – words or images – in order to achieve changes in consciousness."¹⁰ Further still, magic derives from language; 'spells' as spelling, 'grimoires' as grammar.

The idea that language is a form of magic means that we all practice discrete yet incredibly complex magic 'tricks' or 'spells' thousands of times a day. In the act of communicating information to another person, by conveying some form of data through speech, writing, drawing, physical gestures, etc., we are affecting another consciousness. Artists, as later day shamans to use Moore's assertion, develop the spells (spellings) compiled into grimoires (grammars) which then define the focus of the cult (culture). In contemporary life we must

broaden the definition of artist to include politicians and advertisers, media outlets and the person on your Twitter feed ranting about 5G masts.

The idea that we are the magicians is at once liberating and disturbing. Returning to chapter 6 of *Watchmen* – the one that gave me the willies on the bus – the character Rorschach, recounting the horrific events that led to his mental breakdown, concludes “Existence is random. Has no pattern save what we imagine after staring at it for too long.”¹¹ No meaning save what we choose to impose. This rudderless world is not shaped by vague metaphysical forces. It is not God who kills the children. Not fate that butchers them or destiny that feeds them to the dogs. It’s us. Only us.”¹² This obviously bleak view serves the character and story, but it also means that the opposite is true; all that is perceived to be good derives from us, “only us.” And further than this, there is no such thing as good and bad, only perceptions. The world is morally blank, and it is up to us to cast our spells and create meaning.

In several interviews I have heard Moore using the metaphor of the mirror in reference to the hubris of the artist, and it never sat happily with me. The analogy is that a mirror hangs on a wall on a bright sunny day reflecting a bright rectangle of light on the floor, beautiful and luminescent, the rainbow spectrums visible at its edges. The mirror looks down with pride and what it has created. But, of course, it has not created anything. It is the sun, beaming in through the window and the mirror has merely captured an aspect of this glory and created a fragmentary representation, much lesser than the totality of the glory of the sun.

The mirror, in this tale of sentient furniture, appears to represent the artist, but I could never figure out what the sun represented. Coming from a Christian culture I immediately thought it was God. Then looking at Moore’s status as ceremonial magician, I assumed he was referring to spirits, perhaps the fairies, the Elder Gods, or the impertinent ghost of John Dee. Then Moore introduced the concept of Idea Space – a form of hive-mind. This was something which I always felt was too nebulous, ill-defined, and problematic to be a useful conceit.

Then, on a long car journey¹³ I realised that the concept of Idea Space could really just be reduced down to the concept of culture itself, and the grammars and spells it offers to us to translate the bombardment of data in this morally blank world. Some of Moore’s most popular works have relied on wresting ‘grammars’ from culture and using them as cyphers to make novel statements about the world.¹⁴ Here Moore is a much more canny mirror, capturing only the aspects of the sun’s magnificence, and able to adjust to isolate individual spectral wavelengths and combine them. We are all capable, indeed we cannot help but perform in this way, of taking the jumble of data and cultural interpretations and arranging them to form our entire world.

This goes against what I have referred to as the common sense notion of how-we-are-in-the-world, which appears to derive from the Cartesian notion of physical space and a Newtonian model of physics which does not begin to deal with notions of conscious, other than to say there might be a soul ‘haunting’ the physical object we refer to as our body.¹⁵ Moore suggests that this derives from the alchemical notion of solve et coagula; the concept of pulling something apart to analyse it (solve) and then putting it back together again with a renewed understanding, and perhaps even altering its construction to improve it (coagula). This could relate to the Cartesian notion of the divided self, but as I have demonstrated in previous papers, this is more helpfully considered as two processes of thought which allow us to understand and bring meaning to the physicality of the world around us; abstraction and

contextualisation, isolate an object to understand it, then place it back into the world to understand it's connection to other objects in the field.

Further to that, it can be extremely disturbing to discover that meaning is not intrinsic to the physical world. In issue two of Moore's anthology comic title *Cinema Purgatorio*, a series which Moore explains deals with "the horror of movies,"¹⁶ the protagonist goes to a cinema to watch an historical epic in the vein of Ben-Hur or Spartacus. The two characters on screen, one a Roman Centurion the other an old wiseman, discuss the outcome of a recent battle. As the conversations continue the characters slowly become aware of the inauthenticity of their surroundings, discovering the temple behind them is "flat and held up by pipes," one of the notices they are wearing a wrist watch and can't fathom what it is, the old man accidentally pulls off his beard which he remembers growing for years. The dawning realisation that nothing is real terrorises them; "The principles that are civilisation's fulcrums are not there!" the old man despairs, "Is everything pretence?"¹⁷

To begin to develop an answer to that substantial question we can turn to Moore's concept that "consciousness is an emergent property of complexity."¹⁸ As conscious beings, possibly because we have the magical ability to speak and articulate ideas about ourselves, all we are is a cluster of ideas about what we believe ourselves to be. Understandings about what phenomena appear to mean to an individual can become commodified through the magick of communication, bringing the ideas and understandings of a great many other consciousnesses to bear, and the idea grows and grows in complexity until the idea can stand up on it's own.

The idea now belongs to no-one and everyone. It has the appearance of creating its own set of rules and begins to influence and absorb other smaller ideas around it. One can now commune with the idea; ask it questions that it appears to answer, even if it is in a voice only we can hear. Gods, then, can be said to be clusters of ideas which have gained the requisite amount of complexity to possess a consciousness; "gods as linguistic entities"¹⁹ invoked by the magical spells of our everyday chatter. The same, then can be said of culture, of the "fulcrums of civilisation." They are very much still there as enormously complex sets of conscious ideas about the world, but they are created by us, "only us."

Andrew Molloy – 31 May 2020

¹ Moore, Alan. *V For Vendetta*. New edition. New York: DC Comics, 2009.

While originally published by Warrior in 1982, the title collapsed before the series could be finished. The series was then picked up by DC in the late eighties, allowing Moore to complete the story.

Cowsill, Alan, and Michael McAvennie. *DC Comics Year by Year a Visual Chronicle*. 1st edition. London: Dorling Kindersley, 2010. P.234.

² Moore, Alan. *Watchmen: The Deluxe Edition*. New York, NY: DC Comics, 2013.

³ Moore, Alan. *Saga Of The Swamp Thing: Book 1*. 01 edition. New York: DC Comics, 2012.

⁴ Moore, Alan. *Batman The Killing Joke*. Special edition hardcover. DC Comics, 2008.

⁵ Jenkins, Mitch. *Show Pieces*. Lex Records, 2015.

⁶ Moore, Alan. *From Hell*. Ninth Printing edition. London: Knockabout Comics, 2006.

⁷ To use the 'Crowlean' term, to which we will return.

⁸ Some of these are referenced in his book 'Unearthing,' a biography of fellow comic book writer and occultist Steve Moore (no relation). Some of this appears to be fictionalised so it is hard to discern what happened from this source.

Moore, Alan, and Jenkins, Mitch. *Unearthing*. Marietta, GA; London: Top Shelf Productions; Knockabout Comics: Diamond [distributor], 2012.

⁹ Crowley, Aleister. *Magick*, Book 4. p.127.

¹⁰ Vylenz, DeZ. *The Mindscape of Alan Moore*. DVD - double disc edition, Documentary. Shadowsnake Films, 2003.

¹¹ Hence the character's name.

¹² Moore, Alan. *Watchmen: The Deluxe Edition*. p.204.

¹³ Incidentally, I was listening to a podcast with comedian Adam Buxton talking to musician Nile Rodgers about David Bowie's 'post-modern rephrasing' of the Isley Brothers' 'Twist and Shout' in his song 'Let's Dance' when this occurred to me. This feels both absurd and relevant.

¹⁴ Most notably this occurs in *From Hell*, *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen* and *Providence*, although it is rife throughout his work.

¹⁵ Molloy, Andrew. "*Myths of Belfast: The Process of Poetic Experience*." Ulster University, 2018.

<https://www.passoverinsilence.com/myths/>.

¹⁶ Johnston, Rich. "'Has The Human Centipede Taught Us Nothing?' Alan Moore Answers Questions About *Cinema Purgatorio For Bleeding Cool*." *Bleeding Cool News And Rumors*, February 8, 2016.

<https://bleedingcool.com/comics/has-the-human-centipede-taught-us-nothing-alan-moore-answers-questions-about-cinema-purgatorio-for-bleeding-cool/>.

¹⁷ Moore, Alan and O'Neill, Kevin. *Cinema Purgatorio #2*. 18 vols. Avatar, 2016.

¹⁸ Daniel P Carter. "*Someone Who Isn't Me (SWIM) podcast*." *Alan Moore Parts 1 and 2*. Released 16 August 2016.

¹⁹ Moore, Alan. "Unearthing." In *London: City of Disappearances*, edited by Iain Sinclair, 328–73. Penguin, 2012. p.352.