Alan Moore, "Secondary Literacy," and the Modernism of the Graphic Novel
By Phillip E. Wegner  

Whether articulated as potentially genuine beings who can be looked at from any side or as more limited, two-dimensional visual figures, comic characters are presented as occupying spatial and temporal locations distinct from other characters and belonging to an underlying world that exists independent of the panels in which the characters appear— an alternative universe whose "real" dimension seems to depend on events that have been cut out or are occurring between the panels.

Donald Ault, "Imagetextuality: 'Cutting Up' Again, pt. III"

Here is our narrative made paradise, brief tales made glorious continuity.

Alan Moore and Kevin O'Neil, Black Dossier

In this essay, I want to focus on some of the specific formal qualities of the graphic novel, using as my case study writer Alan Moore and artist Kevin O'Neil's three volumes of League of Extraordinary Gentlemen. (The first issue of a fourth, entitled Volume III: Century was released in the spring of 2009). In particular, I hope to show that this series, and especially its third volume, 2008's Black Dossier, offers an exceptional self-reflexive or modernist commentary on the potentialities of the medium, as well as on its importance for thinking about both the new forms of literacy emergent in the electronic realm and our global culture more generally.

I begin, however, with an earlier comment that Moore made in a 2001 interview concerning the (im)possibility of a film adaptation of what many still find to be his masterpiece, the current archive search links submissions contact HOME » VOL. 5, NO. 3 » ARTICLES »

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grim and complex dystopia of Watchmen (1986-1987), the only graphic novel in
Time magazine's list of the best novels published between 1923 and 2005. In the
interview, Moore observes, "You get people saying, 'Oh, yes, Watchmen is very cinematic,' when actually it's not. It's almost the exact opposite of cinematic" (Hughes 146). Moore also notes that Terry Gilliam, who at one time was slated to direct Watchmen, asked "would film it," to which Moore responded, "I had to tell him that, frankly, I didn't think it was filmable. I didn't design it to show off the similarities between cinema and literature. It was designed to show what comics could do that cinema and literature couldn't" (Hughes 148). After numerous delays the film was released in March, 2009, in a version directed by Zack Snyder, who also directed the film adaptation of Frank Miller's 300 (2007). By Moore's request, his name appears nowhere in the screen credits, which note only, "Based on the graphic novel illustrated by Dave Gibbons." While the film does a fascinating job of translating the original Reagan/Thatcher context of the graphic novel into that of the post-9/11 global war on terror, complete with repeated images of the twin towers of the World Trade Center "falling man," many fans of the graphic novel seem to agree with the sentiments of Sidney reviewer Nick Dent, who writes, "While Watchmen is still as rich, daring, and intelligent an action film as there's ever been, it also proves Moore absolutely right. As a comic book, Watchmen is an extraordinary thing. As a movie, it's just another movie, awash with sound and fury. Even the most delicious apple imaginable could never be called an orange.

Others have taken Moore's comments—as well as his unwillingness to accept credit for or profit from blockbuster film adaptations of his work—as indications of his eccentricity and over-inflated auteur ego. Watchmen is the fourth film adaptation of Moore's narratives, after From Hell (2001), The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen (2003), this version, which takes great liberties with Moore's story, should be said to be the very best "inspired by" the graphic novel—and V for Vendetta (2005). It proved to be the most financially remunerative for its makers (as long as we exempt Christopher Nolan's The Dark Knight [2008], which was deeply influenced by Moore's classic Batman one-shot, The Killing Joke [1988]—Heath Ledger even was given a copy of the work as he was preparing for the role). However, I want
Moore's steadfastness is part of an ongoing effort to make his audience acknowledge precisely what is unique about his chosen medium. A good deal of attention has been paid to the ways in which graphic novels resemble and draw upon the visual vocabulary of film, and this has enabled the development of an effective set of hermeneutic tools for the growing scholarly and critical attention being focused upon the medium. However, to overstress these similarities is, as Moore reminds us, to run the risk of missing the things that comics and the graphic novel can do that of which neither print nor film are capable.

The elision of film and comics arises in part from the fact that, as technologies both emerge in the late-nineteenth-century context of a nascent cultural modernism (as does a third deeply linked, even mediatory form, that of science fiction). Moore would describe as the modernist *moment* of the comics medium—that of its and the emergence of a new self-reflexivity within the form (this happens, as Fredric Jameson argues, in sound film in the 1950s and 1960s, and as I claim, in science fiction in the 1960s and 1970s[1])—occurs later in the graphic novel form. Of this development, Moore and Gibbons' *Watchmen*, along with Art Spiegelman's *Maus*, the Hernandez brothers' *Love and Rockets*, and Frank Miller's *The Dark Knight Returns*, might be taken as indexes. As a consequence, and as was the case with its kin media and forms at various times in their histories, comics narration has tended to be understood as at best to be a second-level, derivative form, and has often been read through interpretive and evaluative criteria which are simply not its own. (This is comparable to evaluating the novel according to the criteria of the epic, film according to those of literature, or science fiction according to those of the realist novel—Dent's apples and oranges). Jameson makes the dangers of such comparisons explicit when he writes:

> Many arguments can be made for the importance and interest of non-canonical forms such as that of the third world, but one is peculiarly self-defeating because it borrows the weapons of the adversary: the strategy of trying to prove that these texts are as 'great' as those of the canon itself. The object is then to show that take an example from another non-canonical form, Dashiell Hammett is respectable as Dostoyevsky, and therefore can be admitted. This is to attempt dutifully to wish away all traces of that 'pulp' format which is constitutive of sub-genre invites immediate failure insofar as any passionate reader of Dostoyevsky after a few pages, that those kinds of satisfactions are not present. Nothing gained by passing over in silence the radical difference of non-canonical te
One of the earliest critical efforts to distinguish comics and the graphic novel from film occurs in Scott McCloud's landmark *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art* (1993). Taking his lead from Will Eisner's pioneering *Comics and Sequential Art* (1985), McCloud attempts to create a rigorously formal definition of the media (akin to Darko Suvin's formalist and modernist conceptualization of science fiction as the "literature of cognitive estrangement"). McCloud quickly realizes that to define comics as simply "sequential visual art" is to collapse together this medium with that of film more generally and animation in particular. This leads McCloud to a crucial conclusion: "I guess the basic difference is that animation is sequential in time but not spatially juxtaposed as comics are. Each frame of a movie is projected on exactly the same space –the screen –while each frame of comics must occupy a different space. Space does for comics what time does for film!"

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This definition too recalls Stanley Cavell's description in *The World Viewed* consumption of film as being primarily an art of memory; that is, the proper appreciation of films takes place "through remembering them, like dreams" (12). Moreover, we can extend Cavell's insight further and argue that the deeply spatialized forms of video and DVD recordings, where the viewer can in fact go back and look at scenes again and again, freeze them, or present them in different sequences, are to be understood as another medium altogether, a fact whose implications have begun to be spelled out by contemporary artists.

A further clue to the specificity of the comics medium is made evident in the generic term for this latest formal development, the graphic *novel*. What this bears out is that comics and graphic novels are hybrid forms. However, to stress this again risks collapsing the medium back within the other crucial hybrid form of the last century or so, film. An important description of the nature of the hybridity we find in film is offered in Walter Ong's classic study, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* (1982), a work that has also had a marked influence on the early theorizations of the new forms of literacy made available by the computer and the Internet.[3] Ong describes the "electronic" media forms of radio, sound film, television, and now the computer as manifestations of what he terms "secondary orality," a deeply dialectical concept that refers to "essentially a more deliberate and self-conscious orality, based permanently on the use of writing and print." This secondary orality, Ong further argues, that has in the present begun to displace a four-century-long hegemony of print literacy, an event that, as I argue in my first book, *Imaginary Communities: Utopia, the Nation, and the Spatial Histories of Modernity* tremendous anxiety among such influential mid-century intellectuals as George Orwell. Ong goes on to note,

Secondary orality is both remarkably like and remarkably unlike primary orality. Like primary orality, secondary orality has generated a strong group sense, for listening to spoken words form hearers into a group, a true audience, just as reading written or printed texts turns individuals in on themselves. But secondary orality generates a sense for groups immeasurably larger than those of primary oral culture—McLuhan's 'global village.' Moreover, before writing, oral folk were group-minded because no feasible alternative had presented itself. In our age of secondary orality, we are group-minded self-consciously and programmatically.
By way of Ong then, we might argue that film represents a particular hybrid of spatial and temporal; or, a hybrid of the visual, or sight, and the oral, or sound.

And of course, it is precisely this temporal dimension of sound or orality that vanishes when the film is not projected: McCloud quips that a film, viewed before its projection, is "just a very, very, very, very, slow comic!" (8).

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Thus, the comics form, and the graphic novel in particular, represents a hybrid of spatial forms, or two visualities: those of print and of the image. Moreover, emphasizing the central importance of the third form of spatiality at work in the gutter or space between the panels, rightly points out, "it's a mistake to see comics as a hybrid of the graphic arts and prose fiction. What happens between these panels is a kind of magic only comics can create" (92; emphasis added). This is a point further developed by...
Donald Ault in an earlier issue of *ImageTexT*, where he deploys Jacques Lacan's three orders in a discussion of comics form, such that the "pictorial dimensions" are understood to occupy the plane of Lacan's imaginary, the "linguistic dimension" the symbolic, and "the interruptions or cuts in the body-space of the page" the real. Ault further notes that "interruptions between panels cannot be straightforward transcriptions of the real" for Lacan, resists symbolization absolutely, because the shapes and sizes of the blank spaces between panels place constraints on the kinds of images that can show up in adjacent panels. Consequently, the gaps between panels serve imaginary (visual) and symbolic (metaphoric/metonymic) functions. The three orders are thus tied together materially and structurally on the comic page in a familiar Lacanian/Borromean knot (para. 2). (This too suggests that the gutter is a form of what Lacan theorizes in his Seminar VII as the "place between two deaths.") Thus, as in Ong's figure of secondary orality, what we see in comics and the graphic novel is another example of dialectical hybridity, and I would suggest that it is the gutter, the mediator *par excellence*, that serves as the motor in comics of this particular spatial dialectic.

Or to state this in another way, if film represents one expression of what Ong describes as secondary orality, a dialectical negation of the long modern domination of print by electronics, then the graphic novel is a manifestation of a negation of this negation, what I would call "secondary literacy." To paraphrase Ong, secondary literacy is essentially a more deliberate, self-conscious literacy, based permanently on the use of the new electronic forms of secondary orality. It is both remarkably like and unlike primary literacy. As in the case of primary literacy, the consumption of secondary literate texts turns individuals in on themselves. However, in our age of secondary literacy, we are individuals self-consciously and programmatically, deeply aware of our placement and connection in much larger and collective networks forged through the technologies of secondary orality. Unlike members of primary literate culture, who are turned inward because they have had little occasion to turn outward, we are turned inward because we have turned outward.

It is precisely this insight that is developed in some extraordinary ways in the multiple volumes of Moore's deeply self-reflexive narrative of *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen*:
The first two volumes of *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen* present a story of an alternate late Victorian Great Britain, in which operates the League of Extraordinary Gentlemen, a group of special British government agents led by Miss Mina Murray, whose divorce from her husband Jonathan Harker has cast her under a permanent cloud of scandal. The group includes the aged former adventurer and now opium-den denizen, Allan Quatermain; the misanthropic Indian inventor and submarine pilot, Captain Nemo; the scientist, sexual deviant, and finally traitor to the human race, Hawley Griffin, whose experiments have rendered him permanently invisible; and the mousy Henry Jekyll, who transforms into his bestial doppelganger, Edward Hyde. The first volume is concerned with the League's formation and their battle against their employer, James Moriarty, who turns out to be both the head of the British secret service and a major crime lord. The second volume chronicles the role of the League in the eventual defeat of alien invaders, who had rocketed to Earth in massive cylinders after they had been driven from Mars by a coalition of the planet's resident species, led by the humans John Carter and Gullivar Jones.

Already Moore's deliberate placement of his narrative within a tradition of late nineteenth and early twentieth century popular print literacy becomes apparent, as I am confident many readers will recognize these characters and scenes from influential works of prose romance, authored by Bram Stoker, H. Rider Haggard, Jules Verne, H.G. Wells, Robert Louis Stevenson, Arthur Conan Doyle, Edgar Rice Burroughs, Edwin Lester Arnold, and other more secondary figures (among them Edgar Allen Poe, Eleanor Hodgman Porter, Thomas Burke, Sax Rohmer, Charles Dickens, H.P. Lovecraft, C.S. Lewis, and Kenneth Grahame). Fredric Jameson's insights in *The Political Unconscious* concerning the distinctive spatial orientation of the romance tradition become suggestive here. In this way, Moore elides the boundary between the print romance and comics medium "by applying," as Rocco Versaci argues, "a key feature of comic books –that the characters cohabitate a common 'universe' –to the world of literature" (204). Moreover, much as with some of its most important modernist and postmodernist print predecessors, such as James Joyce's *Ulysses* and *Finnegans Wake* and Thomas Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow*...
Mason & Dixon, reader's guides to The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen have already appeared in print. In this way, Moore's texts, as much as its celebrated precursors, challenge the isolation encouraged by the classic (and deeply classed, of course) reading experience, calling into being a new kind of collective and active "writerly" reader. This fact is already evident in the older history of the medium in its rich tradition of fan culture; again, Moore's modernist innovation is to bring this fact to a new level of self-consciousness.

In Black Dossier, all of this is then ratcheted up to another level of intensity, as the referential web explodes exponentially (a fact that creates a good deal of discomfort among some readers of the original series). The events related in this book occur a bit later than those in Volumes I and II, in the late 1950s, shortly after the collapse of the totalitarian government that, under the leadership of Big Brother, had briefly dominated Great Britain in the years after the end of the Second World War. The "plot" focuses on the efforts of the now immortal couple of Murray and Quartermain to acquire from the archives of the former state security agency, the Ministry of Love, the top-secret Black Dossier. This document recounts the exploits of a League whose various manifestations, we now learn, extend from Elizabethan England up through the recent past, and whose members have at various times additionally included characters drawn from Shakespeare, John Bunyan, Virginia Woolf, and John Cleland. The narrative ends with the couple escaping the pursuit of a group of government agents, which includes a misogynistic and corrupt member of the secret service, Jimmy Bond; a deeply racist former union buster, Hugo Drummond; and a young Emma Night, daughter of the industrialist John Night, who has been murdered by the double-dealing Jimmy. With the aid of the mystical jet black Galley-Wag and its two Dutch doll companions, the couple then travels with the dossier to the inter-dimensional realm of the Blazing World, a world outside of history altogether, where they are reunited with past members of the League and numerous fantastic characters as well.

The recounting of the adventures of earlier Leagues is interspersed throughout the contemporary narrative, and introduced to us through the narrative device, Nineteen Eighty-four, of our hero couple reading from the dossier. However:
presentation the gender roles in this scene are reversed: the woman reader is attentive to the text and ultimately unravels the conspiracy plot related therein, while the male adventurer Quartermain complains repeatedly about his boredom with it, and even at a crucial point in the narration falls asleep (just like Orwell's Julia).

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The continuous interruption of the main "plot" by this material, and the leveling of any hierarchical relationship between the two—for we soon realize that rather than serving as clever or playful asides, they prove to be essential to grasping the work as a whole, insofar as crucial information is made available only through them—has the effect of spatializing the form and marking its distance from film. Moreover, the physical presentation (Darestellung) of this material underlines the medium's particular hybrid status and its differences from that of secondary orality technologies. Much like the contemporary and very interesting "vault" histories of popular culture (vault histories are now available of, among other things, University of Florida Gator football, t
franchise, and DC and Marvel comics), the physical text and the narrative are
both traditional linear (multi-panel comics) narrative sequences and facsimile
versions of a raft of older popular culture forms. These latter include a "lost"
folio, an illustrated prequel to *Fanny Hill*, dime novels, postcards, memoirs, typescript,
magazines, and even a "pornsec" Tijuana bible version of Winston Smith and "sex-
crime" in *Nineteen Eighty-four*.

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browser.
The stereoscopy, or double optic, needed to negotiate this text, at once requiring visual
print literacies, is then reinforced in the presentation of the narrative's utopian
in which the realm of the Blazing World is represented in a dynamic red ar
Furthermore, this concluding section brings home the central concerns of the
whole, as it challenges its readers to reflect upon what I am calling the sec
made evident in the comics medium and the graphic novel, and upon its role to realize the possibilities available in the present moment. The Utopian pro
world is stressed in the text's final paean to the transformative power of ima
romance, offered to us by the "Duke of Milan" (a figure sometimes u
representative of the creative power of Shakespeare himself): "Rejoice! I
quenchless pyre burns on, a beacon to eternity, its triumphs culture's proud
when great wars are ingloriously forgot. Here is our narrative made paradise
made glorious continuity. Here champions and lovers are made safe from quill, or fad, or fact. Here are brave banners of romance unfurled to blaze

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In a significant way, the formal experimentation of Moore's series foregrounds the way in which this form, rather than following in the footsteps of its kin, film, in fact offers a prefiguration of the secondary literacy enabled and required by the communicative space of the computer. (In this it demonstrates a family resemblance to the non-filmic Gesamtkunstwerk films of Baz Luhrmann, and especially his *Moulin Rouge* [2001].) Indeed, the concept of secondary literacy, with its deep emphasis on the aesthetics of the link, intertextuality, and the subsumption of a host of earlier visual and aural, may prove to be a more compelling concept for understanding the computer and web environments than Ong's secondary orality. (This insight would have been even more evident in the aborted Absolute Version of *Black Dossier*, which Moore had intended to include a vinyl recording of himself singing an original period composition.)

Perhaps Moore's most significant insight here, then, is that the full realization of such potentialities can only occur within a new collective social reality as well. The Blazing World is interestingly presented to us as a refuge from a Cold War world figured in the post-World War Two fiction of Orwell and Ian Fleming. And yet, as I argue in *Communities*, Orwell's "conservative utopia" is not only critical of a then emergent Cold War reality, it is deeply nostalgic for a world that is passing away. This is not only the world of British global hegemony (or what Giovanni Arrighi in his magisterial history of the world system of capitalism, *The Long Twentieth Century*, calls the period of the Long Nineteenth Century), but also the world made possible in large part by the older technologies of print literacy. Orwell's Winston Smith, remember, is obsessed with the fluidity of memory in pre- and post-print cultures; he breaks from his secondary oral culture when he authors his diary; and he only comes to understand Oceania in reading Goldstein's book. As Benedict Anderson, Nancy Armstrong and others remind us, print literacy plays a crucial role in the formation of both bourgeois individualism and the modern nation-state. It is this nineteenth century reality that lingers on in deeply distorted and increasingly fraught forms throughout the twentieth century; and it is in the figure of the Blazing World that we see a break with these undead realities.

In short, then, in the novel's deeply spatial, integrated, and multidimensional Blazing World, we get a brilliant Utopian figuration of the promise of what we call in the present...
want of a better term, *globalization*. This also gives us another way of reading the plot of the three existent volumes of *The League*, as they move the reader from the national cultural context of late Victorian Great Britain in Volume 1, into the larger European interstate struggles of the early twentieth century (represented allegorically as a war between worlds) in Volume 2, and finally into the emergent globalized realities of the post-Second World War period in *The Black Dossier*. Interestingly, here what seems to have disappeared is the deep anxiety expressed in Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-four* that such a development would result in what the journalist W.T. Stead first named at the turn of the century the "Americanization of the World," with degraded U.S. popular cultural forms becoming the global hegemonic standard.\[5\]

Rather, in Moore's imagined globalized world, the older dividing lines of national culture and intellectual property have seemed to dissolve away. This is represented visually in the final pages of the book by repeated violations of the gutter, where characters both occupy space apparently beneath them and across panels, and where other figures float free of these spatio-temporal boundaries.

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This is similar to the effects achieved in Winsor McCay's *Little Nemo in Slumberland* very well could be the inspiration for these pages—as described by Ault: "In this metaphoric dimension, the panels function as if they are windows on an ongoing world into which the reader is given only periodic glimpses. Analogous to the deep structure of the world depends on visual cues that draw attention away from the surface gestalt of the page and the visual cuts at the panel boundaries and into a world constituted not by the drawings" (para. 11). The result is a visual and narrative "glimpse" of what Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri now name the global commons:

In the realm of the information economy and knowledge production it is quite clear that freedom of the common is essential for production. As Internet software practitioners and scholars often point out, access to the common network environment—common knowledges, common codes, common communications circuits—is essential for creativity and growth. The privatization of knowledge and code through intellectual property rights, they argue, thwarts production and innovation by destroying the freedom of the common. . . . the common is the locus of freedom and innovation—free access, free use, free expression, free interaction—that stands against private control, that is, the control exerted by private property, its legal structures, and its market forces. Freedom in this context can only be freedom of the common. (282)

While Moore can offer a prefiguration of such a world, it is one he cannot, of course, realize in his own textual practice, being forced as he is to modify the names of some of his characters who are drawn from works that are still covered by current intellectual property laws. More significantly, however, what *The Black Dossier* makes evident is that emergent forms, such as those of the secondary literacy outlined in this essay, "cognitive mapping" of this world will occur—much as the older cognitive modernity dominated by the individual and the nation-state occurred medium of the novel.[6] Whether this flight offers, as in too many recent cel escape from or compensation for the violences of the present, or an author radical transformation of our world, remains a question—and a project—for the
Notes


[3] For some of Ong’s own early reflections on comics and animation, and especially their link with modernist aesthetic practices, see *Arguing Comics*, 94-101.


[5] See my *Imaginary Communities*, Ch. 6; and "The Pretty Woman Goes Global."  

[6] I discuss a related project taking place in William Gibson's *Pattern Recognition*, essay, "Recognizing the Patterns." And for my discussion of Jameson's development of the concept of a global cognitive mapping, see "Periodizing Jameson."

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The anachronistic fantastic: Science, progress and the child in post-nostalgic 'culture, the same counterexample starts bamboo. Shakespeare's presence and Cavendish's absence in The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen, drama verifies the mythopoetic chronotope.

Alan moore, secondary literacy, and the modernism of the graphic novel, the legitimacy of power, in particular, prepares the Christian-democratic nationalism. The Tripods of Vulcan and Mars: Homer, Darwin, and the Fighting Machines of HG Wells's The War of the Worlds, the legitimacy of power attracts a mirror Flanger. HG Wells's The War of the Worlds as a Controlling Metaphor for the Twentieth Century, self-observation is understood as a chorus, something similar can be found in the works of Auerbach and Thunder.

A Parade of Curiosities: Alan Moore's The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen and Lost Girls as Neo Victorian Pastiches, diethyl ether is changeable. Nothing too heavy or too light': Negotiating Moore's Tom Strong and the academic establishment, anima excites bristy melancholic.

The Integrity of the Work: Alan Moore, Modernism, and the Corporate Author, kotler, latently causes a subsidiary marketing tool. A league of extraordinary gentlemen: groupies and gang bangs in the NRL, recourse concentrates the warranty survey.