

Marco Petrelli
Università degli studi di Torino

A Landscape of Fear: *From Hell* and the Twentieth Century

Abstract

This essay reads Alan Moore and Eddie Campbell's *From Hell* as an unorthodox *tractatus* on space-time and a paranoid, political retelling of history. In the graphic novel, the Whitechapel murders are presented as a symbolical generator for the violence of the twentieth century through a meaningful association with the Holocaust. Through a four-dimensional outlook, Moore presents a metaphorical, non-causal way of thinking about history that represents the latter as a Lovecraftian "landscape of fear." The essay examines *From Hell*'s geo-historical dimension and its use of a wide variety of sources to demonstrate how its oblique account of late nineteenth-century London can be interpreted as a militant comment on our "fraught modern world."

1. Of space, time, and closure

In approaching the historical poetics of a labyrinthine work like Eddie Campbell and Alan Moore's *From Hell*, one is reminded of the introductory paragraph to Mikhail Bakhtin's seminal essay "Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel". Opening this classic study which is both somewhat outdated and still unsurpassed when it comes to historical-spatial literary analysis, the Russian critic writes: "The process of assimilating real historical space and time in literature has a complicated and erratic history, as does the articulation of actual historical persons in such a time and space" (Bakhtin 1981, 84). "Complicated" and "erratic" are adjectives that fit perfectly Moore's ambitious narrative structure, although the latter should be ascribed to the unreliable realm of first impression rather than to an actual structural weakness—*From Hell*'s apparently unstable ontological and chronological framework is more the product of a clockwork plan than of aimless wandering.

This is not the only reason why Bakhtin's aesthetic theory is useful in introducing the graphic novel's space-time dimension, of course. The most interesting connection between the critic's speculations and Moore's story lies in that the latter ideally stands as an additional case-study, an appendix of sorts, to Bakhtin's philological mapping of the ways in which history and place have been absorbed by literature. The chronotopic analysis of texts emanates from Einstein's Theory of Relativity, and *From Hell* seems in a way to elaborate on the theoretical foundations laid by Bakhtin. Its conception of reality as a four-dimensional totality is openly exhibited, and expanded as to include a vast range of scientific, pseudo-scientific, and philosophical assumptions. In producing a work so aesthetically reliant on its underlying conception of time (and space), Moore and Campbell have given a uniquely strong interpretation to the "spatial and temporal indicators ... fused together in one carefully thought-out, concrete whole" that constitute a text's aesthetic spatial-historical dimension (Bakhtin 1981, 84).

The "intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships" (Ibid.) that according to Bakhtin characterizes literary works is in a way already evident in graphic narratives. It is inherent in the way they function, deeply embedded in their form. Scott McCloud posits that closure, the "phenomenon of observing the parts but perceiving the whole" (McCloud 1993, 63), is a vital element of the sequential art. "In a very real sense, comic is closure," (Ibid., 67) he writes (actually, he draws). He identifies its most powerful agent in the white space between panels, the gutter, concluding that "closure is comics' primary means of simulating time" (Ibid., 69). With the help of the reader's perception, space in comics can work as a semiotic indicator of temporality. And the opposite is true, too: graphic narratives can also be described as a way in which chronological data are collapsed into spatial elements. As Art Spiegelman elegantly explains: "comics are time turned into space" (Brunetti 2020). The space-time entanglement common to Einstein's Relativity, Bakhtin's chronotope, and graphic narratives had already been recognized, again, by McCloud, whose essay recapitulates this digression by affirming "in the world of comics time and space are one and the same," because they "merge so completely, the distinction often vanishes" (McCloud 1993, 100, 102).

This short and by all means incomplete discussion of how space-time is in a way part of the very fabric of comics is meant as a first methodological

introduction to what follows.¹ Given the substantial continuity of space and time both in the theoretical approach proposed and in the nature of the medium itself, from now on I will use space to probe the way in which the novel absorbs and re-elaborates history and vice versa. *From Hell*'s extremely conscious engagement with history and the perception of time requires an investigation that is equally able to understand how space and time form a coherent, complex dimension. An analysis that didn't accept these premises would fail to acknowledge the novel's deep commitment with historical facts, and the way in which these facts can be narrated in order to put them under a new light. Because of the way in which the novel thinks and writes about history, the events contained in it acquire a meaning that goes beyond the limits of spatial-temporal contingency.

While focused on Jack the Ripper's infamous murders, the work is actually grander in its scope, taking one step forward in simply representing history on the page. Moore and Campbell's story takes graphic narratives' intrinsic involvement with time and brings it front and center in the creation of an ambitious philosophical (and often straightforwardly mystical) inquiry into the machinery of history and our perception of it as human beings. In this paper, I will analyze how *From Hell* not only stands as an impressive philological work of historical and meta-historical research on Victorian London and the Ripper Murders in particular, but also how it reads like an eccentric lecture on space-time, and, on a larger scale, as a counterintuitive *tractatus* that offers an unconventional perspective on the genesis of the twentieth century, its underlying cultural motives and their significance. To do so, I will navigate the graphic novel's manifold connections with a number of doctrines, practices and beliefs that includes relativity and quantum physics, history, architecture, psychogeography, magic, and conspiracy theories in order to delineate the bigger picture drawn by the interrelation of all these discourses. Furthermore, I will demonstrate how *From Hell*'s

¹ I have limited myself to some basic ideas because I believe that the vast implications of how space-time works in comics go beyond the focus of this essay. For a detailed analysis of this and related concepts, I suggest McCloud's seminal essay *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art*; or, for a more contemporary study, Nick Sousanis's *Unflattening*. Scholars specifically interested in the relation between cognition and comics (one of the newest and fastest-growing branches of comics studies) should refer, among others, to Neil Cohn's *The Visual Language of Comics: Introduction to the Structure and Cognition of Sequential Images*.

kaleidoscopic reworking of its sources can ultimately be interpreted as a paranoid retelling of history aimed at illustrating its underlying oppressive power relations.

2. Architectures of history

Since history is the main preoccupation of this analysis, the first thing to do is to position *From Hell* in its space-time. Although the story spans over roughly a century (1827-1923) its focus is on summer and fall 1888, the months in which the so-called “canonical five” Ripper murders took place.² As Moore himself writes in the Appendix II to the novel, he had initially ruled out writing about Jack the Ripper, because the story was “too played out, too obvious” (Moore and Campbell 1999, 16).³ Brought to Stephen Knight’s conspiracist work of investigative journalism, *Jack the Ripper: The Final Solution* by the publicity around the crimes’ centennial in 1988, he declares its plot “a swiss-watch work of art,” and says that some “ideas coalesce[d]” around that particular interpretation (ibid., 15, 16). What is interesting to notice is that throughout Appendix II, in which Moore tells the story behind the novel, he clearly doesn’t buy into Knight’s version of the facts, or any other, declaring them to be nothing but “dodgy pseudo-history” (ibid., 16). “The idea of a solution, any solution, is inane,” he writes, “murder, a human event located in both space and time, has an imaginary field completely unrestrained by either. It holds meaning, and shape, but no solution” (Ibid.). These statements are an apparent contradiction to what I stated before, namely, that *From Hell* is a painstakingly accurate depiction of the historical era it seeks to represent. To solve this non sequitur, it is necessary to keep in mind the distinction between facts and

2 As reported by Stewart P. Evans and Keith Skinner’s *The Ultimate Jack the Ripper’s Sourcebook* (3), the police files on the Whitechapel murders included eleven victims spanning from April 1888 to February 1891. Of these, only the murders of Mary Ann Nichols Annie Chapman, Elizabeth Stride, Catherine Eddowes, and Mary Jane Kelly are considered the most likely to be connected.

3 *From Hell* has a peculiar page numbering. Every chapter starts from page one, with an introductory page dedicated to epigraphs which is not numbered. At the expenses of a fluid reading, I have decided to always specify which chapter I am referring to in order to avoid confusion. The same goes with *Lost Girls*, upon which I will touch briefly later on.

narration, and between the ontology of historical events and their poetics. I will return to this later on in the essay. For now, suffice it to say that the novel's understanding of the fourth dimension can help clarify this discrimination.

The opening towards other dimensions is clear right from Chapter Two, whose epigraph is taken from mathematician and sci-fi writer Charles Howard Hinton's pamphlet titled *What is the Fourth Dimension?* The epigraph reads: "we should have to imagine some stupendous whole, wherein all that has ever come into being or will come coexists." The question about the actual meaning of a four-dimensional space is repeated throughout the chapter. The mathematician's ideas are mainly oriented towards the theorization of another spatial dimension, but they proved to be influential for the conception of time as a fourth dimension later to be developed by Einstein's relativity. Moreover, as explained by Anne De Witt, Hinton's fourth dimension is also a speculation on a higher moral dimension in which a more sympathetic relationship between human beings is possible (De Witt 2013, 173). As we will see, Moore completely reverses this idea. Later in the chapter, Hinton's theories are directly expounded by his father James while on an early morning stroll with William Gull. The two were close friends in real life, but Moore's meta-fictional historical account puts them in the baroque Christ Church located in the London district of Spitalfields. The church borders the district of Whitechapel, the story's main setting, and, more than the various places of worship described in the novel, is a recurring symbol in *From Hell*. In the text, various characters highlight its historical connections with violent events and with the "perpetual multitudes of beggars, criminals, and whores" (Moore and Campbell 1999, 32), as Gull himself affirms in Chapter Four. It is almost as Nicholas Hawksmoor, its architect, "gouged more deeply an existing channel of suffering, violence and authority," says Hinton during the stroll (ibid. 15). Hawksmoor's church is an everlasting monument to the chain of interconnected brutal events that have taken place nearby in the course of centuries. He further elaborates on that: "Fourth dimensional patterns within Eternity's monolith would ... seem merely random events to third-dimensional percipients... events rising towards inevitable convergence like and archway's line" (Moore and Campbell 1999, 15). History, as *From Hell* depicts it, is structured like some kind of colossal, invisible architecture. Gull calls this notion "most glorious and most terrible" (Ibid.), and he is right. Four-dimensionality as defined by Hinton and presented by Moore implies that human beings are devoid of agency and that

they are, maybe unknowingly but unavoidably, part of a bigger scheme at the same time. Hinton's theory also implies that apparently unrelated events may actually belong together like parts of the same architectural element sustaining some invisible truth. This way of looking at history allows Moore to juxtapose different, distant moments in a timeline to suggest some hidden relation between them. These metaphorical connections are of course of no strict historiographic value as far as the phenomenal world is concerned: their aim is to create meaningful symbolical and rhetorical relationships that can reframe events in order to elucidate an overarching discourse capable of improving our understanding of the past.

To elucidate how *From Hell* performs a metaphorical interpretation of history while also closely sticking to data, let's use as an example one of the novel's symbolic connection between otherwise unrelated events. In chapter Five, titled "The Nemesis of Neglect", William Gull, Physician-in-Ordinary to Queen Victoria and the real identity of Jack the Ripper according to Knight's book, is about to start his chain of killings. This section opens with a quite puzzling sequence in which we literally peep through a snowy window as an Austrian couple is having sex. Even more puzzling is the fact that, as the two reach their climax, the woman (whose name is Klara, we later discover) has a horrific vision in which Christ Church in Spitalfields, appearing once again, vomits a torrent of blood on some orthodox Jews passing by (Moore and Campbell 1999, 1-3). To help anyone looking for this sequence's meaning in the story, Moore explains in Appendix I that we have just witnessed the conception of Adolf Hitler. "Alle ist in Ordnung," says the man, Alois, caressing his wife's womb in sinister anticipation of what will happen in fifty years' time. Why this brief and gruesome scene? Of course, from a purely historical point of view, Hitler's conception took place more or less during the onset of the Ripper's homicides. But, as Moore writes in the appendix, the sequence depicts a "somewhat resonant chronological coincidence," (Moore and Campbell 1999, 18), a meaningful threading of events aimed at delineating a specific historical vision.

The sequence is pivotal in *From Hell*'s historical poetics, and also revelatory of Moore's idiosyncratic way of looking at modern and contemporary history. As elucidated by William Gull/Jack the Ripper himself after the last Whitechapel murder is committed, the graphic novel considers the five prostitutes' homicides as the generating point of the twentieth century: the act that gives birth to it, and that also sets the tone for the kind of violence

and terror that would come to characterize the following hundred years. “It is beginning, Netley,” Gull tells his clueless coachman in Chapter Ten, “only just beginning. For better or worse, the twentieth century. I have delivered it” (Moore and Campbell, 1999, 33). It is clear that we are outside of the field of mere historiography, and into a creative, metaphorical reconstruction of events. Moore gives a reason for this expressive choice in a conversation with John Higgs, author of *Stranger than We Can Imagine*, an essay that, like Moore and Campbell’s novel, takes an oblique look at the twentieth century in order to explain its uniqueness:

[Considering the Ripper’s murders as the symbolical event that gave birth to the twentieth century] was my conceit that resolved a lot of the material that emerged during my research for *From Hell*. When I was just looking into the 1880s I noticed all these things that had happened. I think in 1882 Michelson and Morley actually performed the experiment ... that ended up completely disproving that aether existed ... you got France going into Indochina, you got the beginning of the modern art movement ... you got some of the first kind of modern realist writings ... all of these things which had gone up to really color and shape the twentieth century. And then, in 1888, these senseless, violent murders. It just seemed to me that symbolically I could kind of position the Jack the Ripper murders as the birth throes of the Twentieth century, with Jack the Ripper as a kind of really ghastly midwife.⁴ (Higgs 2015b)

Moore’s metaphorical approach to the symbolic undercurrents of the twentieth century is close to Higgs’s unconventional work of historiography. His essay, like *From Hell*, is not an act of sabotage directed towards official historiography, but rather a footnote or an integration that relies more on rhetorical affinities and intuition. As Higgs writes in the introduction of *Stranger than We Can Imagine*, although the twentieth century is the century “we know most about,” the story that is told in all the many detailed accounts of the period “somewhat fails to lead us into the world we’re in now” (Higgs 2105a, 5). History is a “landscape” that “includes dark patches of thick, deep woods ... These are areas such as relativity, cubism, the Somme, quantum

4 The Michelson-Morley experiment (which actually took place in 1887) was aimed at detecting the movement of matter through the luminiferous aether, at the time considered to be the medium of propagation of light. The importance of the experiment in the context of this essay is that the line of research initiated by it ultimately led to Einstein’s special theory of relativity.

mechanics, the id, existentialism, Stalin, psychedelics, chaos mathematics and climate change” (Ibid., 7). It is interesting to notice that Higgs’s list is largely coherent with Moore and Campbell’s work in *From Hell*, where art, science, mysticism, and politics come together in an ever-evolving constellation of knowledge that orbits around the Ripper’s murders and that resonates with its symbolic, irrational dimension. It is the same path taken by Higgs, according to whom, if we “strike through the dark woods” of the century, we will be able to map the “emerging pattern” made of new ideas that “point in a broadly coherent direction” (Ibid., 7,8).

Instead of presenting history in a traditional chronological order, the essay organizes it along thematic clusters (Modernism, Id, Space, Sex), all of them dialectically connected by the will to illuminate the “alien landscapes, incomprehensible structures and troubled dreams” (Higgs 2015a, 3) that have been left out of the records. As Higgs frames it, it is a way to look for the beach under the paving stones laid by the official chronicles—a method consistently used by Moore in his later work. In graphic novels like *Providence* and *Lost Girls*, the author often resolves to “strike through the dark woods” of history in order to highlight a subterranean theme or an idea that can be used to shed a new light on specific historical events. *Lost Girls*, in particular, contains an interesting parallel drawn by the symmetrical endings of the graphic novel’s first two books. In Chapter Ten, Book One, a striking sequence depicts the notorious 1913 Parisian premiere of Igor Stravinsky’s *Sacre du Printemps*. Violence and sexual energy are unleashed in the theater; someone starts to yell at the orchestra while someone else engages in an orgy. The ballet is described as an event existing beyond the audience’s here-and-now, “a time-dissolving cloud of echoed notes and duplicated gestures,” its rhythm “stabbing space, stabbing time” (Moore and Gebbie 2006, 4, 5). After a riot breaks out outside the theater, one of the protagonists makes an apparently farfetched consideration by saying “I had not known that Europe’s heartstrings were at such a pitch” (Ibid., 8). It is only at the end of Book Two that this extravagant comment is thoroughly justified and explained. In Chapter Twenty another dreamlike, ecstatic sequence juxtaposes uncontrolled erotic desire and the assassination of the Archduke Franz Ferdinand (Ibid., 1-8). Europe’s descent into the devastation of the Great War is finally depicted at the end of Book Three, whose Chapter Thirty closes on the disturbing image of an eviscerated, disemboweled soldier

whose horrific wound resembles female genitalia (ibid., 8). The descending path that goes from creativity to destruction is complete.

In this particular case, the action of human history's "dark woods" is embodied by the parallel action of violence and sexuality. Like a string in a maze, the sudden outbursts of these impulses connect Stravinsky's ballet to the shooting in Sarajevo, and culminates in a bombarded battlefield. "The wild and irrational could not be ignored for ever and, having been repressed for so long, its return would be explosive," Higgs comments (2015a, 94). *The Rite of Spring* and the Great War are hence put on the same rhetorical plane, a connection that doesn't seek to criticize the former or to ennoble the latter on the basis of a supposed bestiality or an inner poetic value. Rather, by virtue of the horizontal gaze inherent in a four-dimensional text whose concept of time lacks chronological hierarchies, these kinds of metaphorical links work in a similar way to Bakhtin's Rabelaisian chronotope: they destruct all ordinary ties of things and ideas, to create "unexpected matrices, unexpected connections, including the most surprising logical links" (Bakhtin 1981, 169).

It is the same *modus operandi* that Moore applies to *From Hell*'s Victorian London, in which a literal architecture of history always looming in the background of the main plot is created through meaningful subterranean and irrational connections. "I have a more fractal way of working," he declares, "when your mind wanders, if you ever pay attention to the paths it takes, you generally find it's these paths of association that can link all over the place" (Berlatsky 2011, 63). Sex is again a major force behind the events, but this time the story lacks the ultimately redeeming quality that characterizes *Lost Girls*' depiction of sexuality (in spite of all its ambiguity and precariousness). The novel is almost a total inversion of the latter work's involvement with that sphere: it is precisely Prince Albert Victor's illicit desire that starts the chain of events leading to the killing of three innocent women, and sex is almost always presented in a disturbing, grisly context. The novel juxtaposes Victorian high society's notoriously closeted and hypocritical (and maybe stereotypical) relationship with sexuality with London's East End's accurately-reproduced prostitution underworld. Whitechapel's sinister *genius loci*, inherited from the gruesome history of the place as laid out by James Hinton, "casts shadow pictures on the minds of those whose lives are spent within its sight," as Gull affirms in Chapter Four (Moore and Campbell 1999, 32), turning the neighborhood into a space-time anomaly where violent transgression is the

norm, and “only the darkest forms of freedom, the most horrific possibilities” take place. “No one is given the opportunity to explore spiritually affirming ‘borders’ of existence” here (Giles 2009, 109). In the dark alleys of *From Hell*’s London sex is but another commodity, and its unrestrained action leads to death more often than it results in liberation.

3. The haunted origins of the fraught modern world

Death is pretty much anywhere in Moore and Campbell’s grim but realistic description of the city. The tour of London by Gull and Netley that occupies most of Chapter Four—inspired by Moore’s own walks with writer and psychogeographer Iain Sinclair (Berlatsky 2011, 73)—is a reconstruction of the city’s pre-modern and esoteric history by way of some key monuments. Through the man’s verbose erudition, the metropolis becomes a transparent, living being, revealing multiple layers of symbols arranged according to C. Howard Hinton’s architecture of time—It is “symbol, history and myth” at the same time (Moore and Campbell 6). But Gull’s understanding of the fourth dimension doesn’t reveal any “stupendous whole,” ominously veering toward the morbid instead. Digging through the centuries and linking pagan beliefs and places of worship to modern-day monuments and churches is for him only a way to demonstrate to the terrified Netley how their personal stories are already written, being part of the bigger, darker history of London, which is “inked in blood long dry, engraved in stone” (ibid., 37-38). The edifice of time as envisioned by Gull is a monument to death and its all-encompassing power. He himself defines it as being made out of “bricks of viscera, with knife as trowel” in Chapter Twelve (Ibid., 22). Although the man fanatically asserts to be the harbinger of “an older truth made finally explicit” (ibid.), the revelation he brings is made of nothing else than blood and fear. This is further demonstrated by his “ascending” in the last chapter of the novel, in which Gull’s ghost (or his soul) randomly appears in different times and different places, generally causing unsettling accidents while also influencing some of England’s most famous serial killers.

Moore chooses to substitute the fourth dimension as postulated by Hinton with a chthonian world lying just beyond our everyday perception of space and time but nonetheless able to shape the events of our reality. A

rhetorical strategy that can again be explained through the interview with John Higgs, in which Moore talks about the rhetorical-historical relevance of H.P. Lovecraft's worldview, further illuminating the relation between *From Hell's* ghastly conception of history and the symbolical and ideological undertow of the twentieth century. Discussing the author from Providence, he says: "In some ways his stories represented the kind of landscape of fear, the territory of fear for the twentieth century as a whole" (Higgs 2015b). It is easy to see where William Gull's ecstatic but dreadful vision of the rising architecture of the coming century overlaps with Lovecraft's allusive descriptions of a dimension of cosmic horror lurking behind our limited perception of reality. There is nothing like a terrifying Cthulhu sleeping in the depths of time in *From Hell*, and that makes the landscape of fear upon which the twentieth century has been built only more frightening: its limits and its potential are to be found entirely within the human soul. In the introduction to Leslie Klinger's *The New Annotated H.P. Lovecraft* he penned, Moore touches upon this suggestion again by writing: "In H.P. Lovecraft's tales we are afforded an oblique and yet unsettlingly perceptive view into the haunted origins of the fraught modern world and its attendant mind-set that we presently inhabit" (Klinger 2014, introduction).

In a similar way to Lovecraft, "an unbearably sensitive barometer of ... fear," (ibid.), William Gull/Jack the Ripper is used by Moore as a symbolic prolepsis to the fearful territory of the twentieth century and its horrors, like the Holocaust as hallucinated by Adolf Hitler's mother-to-be in Chapter Five. The Holocaust seems to be a recurring symbol in Moore's later work, coming back again as a synecdoche for contemporary horror as a whole in *Providence*. In the third issue of the series, whose telling title is "A Lurking Fear", the protagonist, both a closeted homosexual and a closeted Jew, has a dream in which the kind of unspeakable terrors that usually haunt Lovecraft's characters' unconscious take the form of repressed, protean sexual desires that slowly lead him through a concentration camp's gate and in swastika-covered gas chambers. "I can't tell you about it. It's too awful. It's unnameable," he says before waking up (Moore and Burrows 2015, 22). A classic example of Lovecraftian unspeakable meets Adorno to affirm that the only possible transcendence in the "fraught modern world" is the one towards an incomprehensible, endless horror whose birth we own to the Whitechapel murders and whose apex coincides with Nazi Germany's *Endlösung*. Moore's expressionistic symbolical-historical

reconstruction is, again, a rather dark suggestion that the last century possessed a rotten ideological core.

There is one last consideration that needs to be made in order to better frame and understand *From Hell*'s use of a fourth dimension of fear to explain the logic of the twentieth century. Although the character of William Gull is clearly delusional—and he becomes more and more deranged as the story progresses, being the victim of hallucinations that feature ancestral masonic gods and buildings from contemporary London—his unshakable conviction of being the “ghastly midwife” of the twentieth century, as Moore defines him, is more than a madman’s delirium. He is an apt symbol for a fearful era, as the writer has declared, but, more pragmatically, Gull was also an excellent member of the British high society. Through him, Moore is holding the British Empire accountable for the kind of unspeakable evil *From Hell* points towards. In the nineteenth century, London was the world’s biggest city, it had the world’s largest port, and, thanks to the almost-ubiquitous presence of the Empire all over the known world, it literally was the center of Western civilization through its economic and financial power (Darwin 2013, 185). It would not be controversial to say that the modern world as we know it has been, at least partly, fabricated by the British Empire’s immense network of power relations. Of course, the creation of the largest empire in human history wasn’t a bloodless enterprise, and the modern world still bears the scars of its ruthlessness. “The world we know today is in large measure the product of Britain’s age of empire,” writes historian Niall Ferguson. “The question is whether there could have been a less bloody path to modernity” (Ferguson 2004, xxvi), he adds, not leaving much room for speculation. The responsibility for giving birth to the fearful twentieth century doesn’t weigh on a single man’s shoulders of course, but it is to be taken by the power structure responsible for Gull’s actions.

When London, intended here as a synecdoche for the Empire as a whole, is presented through Gull’s dark description in Chapter Four, its monuments are described as physical manifestations of a “pattern of control drawn with a finger dripped in ... blood” (Moore and Campbell 1999, 29). The chapter’s dense description of the city’s history, re-interpreted through masonic symbols such as the sun and the moon, is more than an example of magniloquent storytelling dedicated to London’s alleged esoteric underside. The never-ending fight between the forces of rationality and irrationality Gull is fanatically devoted to in the end is nothing but a disguise for a far more concrete reality: London, and

the Empire, are manifestations of repressive power relentlessly working to serve the ruling class by maintaining a convenient status quo. *From Hell*'s impressive verisimilitude, both in terms of historical research and graphic rendition of the period, may sometimes be obscured by the magical-speculative elements of the plot, but its roots are firmly planted into social realism. In Chapter Five, a sequence that depicts William Gull's awakening for his first day of killing, shows alternate panels in which the doctor's opulent, comfortable lifestyle is contrasted with Polly Nichols's unbearably squalid routine. Different drawing styles are also adopted to accentuate the upper classes' polished existence and the lower classes' stark living conditions: Gull's panels are almost ethereal, painted in smooth, bright watercolor; while Nichols's show Campbell's usual dark, etching-like austerity (Moore and Campbell 1999, 4-9).

Gull's words during his esoteric-historical drive through London could be the ravings of an unhinged (and misogynistic) mason, but there is little doubt that they also express the dominant classes' desire to crush any attempt at social or political reform:

Sometimes an act of social magic's necessary; man's triumph over woman's insecure, the dust of history not yet settled. Changing times erase the pattern that constrains society's irrational, female side. Our workers, lately given votes, now talk of socialism, talk of rights, riot in Trafalgar square and won't quit 'til they are shot, whereon their fury doubles! King mob's clamour drowns our Apollonian debates ... Our suffragettes demand that women vote, and have equality! They'd drag us back to that primordial nursery, the rule of instinct and the tyranny of mother's milk! We can't have that. (Ibid., 30)

The story of the Ripper as a whole can be interpreted as an act of retaliation of the upper class against the lower class, guilty of an act of open defiance directed against the former's hegemony. And, if we avoid to get lost in Gull's wordiness, the killer himself declares his actions to be "a ritual act, to shape society" (ibid., 29). Agent of an exemplary, gruesome act of social control, Jack the Ripper is defined by Moore in Appendix II as a "super-position," a term derived from quantum mechanics and Schrödinger's equation. Simply put, it refers to the fact that "quantum uncertainty, unable to determine both a particle's location and its nature, necessitates that we map every possible state of the particle" (ibid., 16). Turning physics into a figure of speech, it is possible to affirm that *From Hell* uses William Gull as a ubiquitous symbol (and also an allegory) for the dominant classes' violent subjugation of the wretched of the Earth.

The Ripper is not ‘the’ Ripper; he is an incidental disguise that hides modern Western society’s systemic oppression towards the *hoi polloi*—especially considered as a patriarchal entity’s intersectional targeting of destitute women. Moore’s treatment of the subject matter is openly militant: his killer story is also the centuries-old history of male violence against women. Chapter Twelve’s epigraph, taken from Herbert Marcuse’s “Repressive Tolerance”, is there to reinforce the novel’s strong and ultimately pessimistic political stance: “Law and order are always and everywhere the law and order which protect the established hierarchy.”

4. Paranoia and the specters of power

This brings me to some concluding considerations on *From Hell*’s representation of power and violence. I have briefly mentioned the fact that the graphic novel’s main source, Stephen Knight’s controversial bestseller, was selected by Moore as the backbone of his colossal historical research mainly because of its value as a good story and its meta-narrative potential. “I’d be writing about the story as much as I’d be writing about Jack the Ripper. It’s the way that the myth has grown that is important,” he declared (Berlatsky 2011, 107). And indeed, as I have shown, the story is not at all limited to another investigation of the Whitechapel murders, but rather a painstakingly detailed historical account of a specific milieu whose aim goes well beyond its main subject. There is some kind of dissonance between the graphic novel’s rigorous research and reenactment of the period—to which Eddie Campbell’s thoroughly accurate drawings greatly contribute—and the plot it is attached to: apart from its qualities as a political thriller, the latter is a state-of-the-art paranoid retelling of history. The labyrinthine story of William Gull and the five prostitutes is a masterpiece of conspiracism in which the British Crown, Scotland Yard, the Freemasonry and pretty much everyone involved in various ways in the triangle of relationship created by these three poles participate, willingly or not, in an impressive undercover operation. The over-plotted intrigue is, at its core, the classic kind of conspiratorial delusion involving deep-state cabals that collude to defend a wicked status quo.

Considering the amount of work that went into the novel’s reconstruction of Victorian London, and all its erudite digressions into various cultural fields,

the coveted final solution to the case could come as a disappointment once its shock-value has made an impact on the reader. But Moore is not a conspiracist. In a 1998 interview with British writer Matthew De Abaitua, he declared that these kind of mass paranoias are but “a security blanket” (Berlatsky 2011, 71), and that their only use is to find a paradoxical comfort in knowing that at least someone is in charge of the world. In Appendix II, he also elaborates on the futility of finding an actual solution to the Ripper murders, going as far as declaring that the only real element of the story is its aura. “The complex phantom we project. That alone, we know is real,” he writes, “the actual killer’s gone, unglimped, might as well not have been there at all. There never was a Jack the Ripper” (Moore and Campbell 1999, 23). This idea of a phantom whose hauntings are more real than reality itself is in a way connected with the fourth dimension of fear that the author identifies as the symbolic order of the twentieth century. Interestingly enough, Jack the Ripper is not the only ghost of this story: in spite of his self-aggrandized role, in the end he is nothing but an instrument in the hands of the queen. And the way in which Victoria is depicted throughout the graphic novel points at her being nothing but an interchangeable symbol of blindly repressive power. When she is introduced in Chapter Four (Ibid., 2-3), she looks remarkably sketched when compared with Eddie Campbell’s overall drawing style, whose expressionistic, gothic trait is nonetheless always at the service of historical realism. Portrayed like a phantom emerging from the surrounding shadows, her character is also clearly shaped upon the profile pose that is so common in the Queen’s official photographs of the time. Almost every time she appears on the page, she is seated in the dark in a stiff posture, more of a presence or an effigy than an actual human being.

The extensive scholarly research that Moore performed before writing *From Hell*—he declared to have read “nearly every book that [has] ever been written on Jack the Ripper” (Berlatsky 2011, 107)—is apparently at odds with the choice of using it to support a rather flimsy story—and a story that had already been debunked at the time. Historical information and disinformation coexist. But I believe that the novel performs a quite balanced synthesis between these poles, and that the juxtaposition of facts and pseudo-historiography doesn’t mar its critique of power, but actually reinforces it. The writer’s words in Appendix II may help clarify this statement: “Truth is, this has never been about the murders, nor the killer, nor his victims. It’s about us, about our minds and how they dance” (Moore and Campbell, 1999, 22). In the interview with De

Abaitua mentioned above, and also in a number of other conversations, Moore discusses his unorthodox worldview mentioning his belief in an “Idea Space.” Drawing from notion as diverse (and controversial) as Rupert Sheldrake’s Morphic Resonance and Carl Gustav Jung’s Synchronicity, together with Karl Popper’s World Three, he discusses his own notion of an Idea Space, a theoretical space “where concept exist” (Berlatsky 2011, 119).⁵ This abstraction is in a complex but direct relationship with objective reality, because according to Moore “the objective world and the nonobjective world are the same thing to some degree. Idea Space and this space are the same space, just different ends of the scale” (Ibid., 85). Without necessarily accepting Moore mystic way of talking about ideas and culture *in toto*, it is possible to simply consider his theory as a way of thinking about the relationship between the individual and human knowledge, both in its totality as the history of culture and in its historicized relationship with a specific *Zeitgeist*.

Having defined the twentieth century as a territory of fear, and Idea Space as “an overlaying mental space in which we all exists” (ibid. 89), it is only natural that, in writing about the birth throes of an era of chronical anguish, Moore would also document a possible general reaction to the psychological and emotive climate that characterizes that same era. After all, *From Hell*’s meta-narrative aspect implies that its story elicits from the kind of conscious or unconscious bias that pretty much every work of investigative journalism on the murders possesses because of its being a product of the “fascination and hysteria” that mysteries inevitably engender. “Five murdered paupers, one anonymous assailant. This reality is dwarfed by the vast theme-park we’ve built around it,” Moore writes in Appendix II (Moore and Campbell 1999, 22). By putting together historical research and conspiracism, the author is trying to produce the most accurate depiction of the event: that which also tells us something about the kind of mindset that surrounds it—the same mindset that will come to characterize the twentieth century. Read in this light, his

5 Rupert Sheldrake’s Morphic Resonance assumes that memory is something inherent in nature itself, and it is passed down through species. “Most of the so-called laws of nature are more like habits,” he writes (Sheldrake, n.d.). The theory shows some similarities with Jung’s collective unconscious, and that is why Moore also mentions the psychiatrist’s concept of synchronicity (a meaningful, acausal coincidence) in explaining his views. Idea space derives also from Karl Popper’s World 3, that, in his lecture “Three Worlds”, he defines as “the world of the products of the human mind” (1978, 167).

paranoiac reconstruction is as valuable as his minute historical reenactment, clearly stating why and how Jack the Ripper really delivered the following one-hundred years.

Subject to the capricious and implacable action of power structures that, in spite of their spectral origins, often act in a concrete and gruesome way, the modern mass is an easy prey of paranoia. Disempowered and disenfranchised, it looks everywhere for an explanation of its deep-seated lack of agency, sometimes resulting to explanations that turn stories into plots in order to make up for its perceived inability to affect historical change. In the end, *From Hell*'s most important symbolic act is probably to be found in its exposure of the deteriorating psychological effects of authoritarian power upon the masses. By presenting the readers with both history and conspiracy, it allows us to witness how oppression and deceit often go hand in hand. Impotence brings common people to refigure a concrete, historical event into a frightening ghost story, and a nebulous historical figure into a specter of power that is always looming at the back of their consciousness. Whether a Freemason or a member of the Royals, in the end "Jack mirrors our hysterias. Faceless, he is the receptacle for each new social panic" (Ibid.). In this sense, Moore and Campbell really deliver the case's final solution, documenting Jack the Ripper's ascension from a real man living in a real here-and-now to a pervasive, sinister social symbol of the fearful twentieth century.

Bibliography

Bakhtin Mikhail. 1981. *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays by M.M. Bakhtin*. Edited by Michael Holquist, translated by Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist. Austin: University Press of Texas.

Berlatsky, Eric L., ed. 2011. *Alan Moore: Conversations*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi.

Brunetti, Ivan. 2020. "Comics as Place". *The Paris Review*, August 10, 2020, <https://www.theparisreview.org/blog/2020/08/10/comics-as-place/>.

Cohn, Neil. 2013. *The Visual Language of Comics: Introduction to the Structure and Cognition of Sequential Images*. London: Bloomsbury.

Darwin, John. 2013. *Unfinished Empire: The Global Expansion of England*. London: Penguin.

De Witt, Anne. 2013. *Moral Authority, Men of Science, and the Victorian Novel*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Evans, Stewart P., and Keith Skinner. 2000. *The Ultimate Jack the Ripper Sourcebook: An Illustrated Encyclopedia*. London: Constable and Robinson.

Ferguson, Niall. 2004. *Empire: How Britain Made the Modern World*. London: Penguin.

Giles, James R. 2009. "Discovering Fourthspace in Appalachia: Cormac McCarthy's *Outer Dark* and *Child of God*." In *Cormac McCarthy*, edited and with an introduction by Harold Bloom, 107-132. New York: Infobase Publishing.

Higgs, John. 2015a. *Stranger than We Can Imagine: An Alternative History of the 20th Century*. Berkeley (CA): Soft Skull Press.

———. 2015b. "Alan Moore talks to John Higgs about the 20th Century." *YouTube* video, 23:16. November 1, 2015. <https://youtu.be/RpajFQECzAk>.

Hinton, Charles Howard. 1884. *What is the Fourth Dimension?* Accessed October 15, 2020. https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/What_is_the_Fourth_Dimension%3F.

Klinger, Leslie S., ed. 2014. *The New Annotated H.P. Lovecraft*. New York: Liveright.

Knight, Stephen. 1976. *Jack the Ripper: The Final Solution*. London: George G. Harrap & Co.

McCloud, Scott. 1993. *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art*. New York: HarperCollins.

Moore, Alan, and Eddie Campbell. 1999. *From Hell*. Marietta (GA): Top Shelf Productions.

———, and Melissa Gebbie. 2006. *Lost Girls*. Marietta (GA): Top Shelf Productions.

———, and Jacen Burrows. 2015. *Providence #3*. Rantoul (IL): Avatar Press.

Popper, Karl. 1978. "Three Worlds." Accessed October 15, 2020. https://tannerlectures.utah.edu/_documents/a-to-z/p/popper80.pdf.

Sheldrake, Rupert. n.d. "Morphic Resonance and Morphic Fields – an Introduction." Accessed October 15, 2020. <https://www.sheldrake.org/research/morphic-resonance/introduction>.

Sousanis, Nick. 2015. *Unflattening*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Marco Petrelli teaches Anglo-American literature at the universities of Bologna and Turin. He published a number of essays on contemporary US authors in Italian and international journals. His first book, *Paradiso in nero*, is dedicated to Cormac McCarthy's southern novels. His research interests include the literature and culture of the US South, the American gothic, postmodernism, geocriticism, and graphic narratives. He collaborates with the Italian newspaper *Il manifesto* as a literary critic.

