
PAST AS MULTIPLE CHOICE – TEXTUAL ANARCHY AND THE PROBLEMS OF CONTINUITY IN *BATMAN: THE KILLING JOKE*

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an-ar·chy: *a*: absence or denial of any authority or established order *b*: absence of order
(Merriam-Webster Online 2011)

Anarchy needs to be carefully constructed.

(Alan Moore, Northampton, 2010)

Following the lexical definitions given above, “anarchy” as a concept seems to firmly reject all hierarchies, whether governmental or abstract. There is no order or authority in anarchy – and yet, as comics writer Alan Moore claims, it needs to be “carefully constructed”. Moore’s own work within comics has tended to advocate anarchy, as for example his acclaimed graphic novel *V for Vendetta* (1988) clearly demonstrates. As Maggie Gray (2010, 31) points out, Moore, a “self-declared anarchist”, deliberately aimed at affecting the “particular socio-historic context” in the 1980s through his comics works. While anarchy and anarchism are clearly present in the general themes of *V for Vendetta*, Moore’s other work from the same era offers a distinctively different kind of anarchism on the level of the story structure itself: the deliberate denial of continuity within superhero comics. In *Batman: The Killing Joke* (Moore and Bolland 1988; 2008), together with artist Brian Bolland, the inherently problematic constructions of superheroic continuity are exposed and represented through the notion of textual anarchy that explicitly denies any claims to seamless continuity. Moore displays his trademark levels of intertextuality, seen by Annalisa Di Liddo (2009, 62) as creating “deliberately diverse narrative forms that are open to the multiplication of interpretative levels”, ultimately controlled through his deployment of precise visual structures of cohesion and consistency. Through a careful extrapolation of DC’s over four decades of Batman mythology, Moore and Bolland create a layered text that is simultaneously ordered and denies any order within Batman’s (and the Joker’s) continuity. In this article, I will analyse *Batman: The Killing Joke* and the way it comments on the problematic construction of superheroic continuities through a careful and considered application of so-called “textual anarchy”.

Continuity has always been an issue within superhero comics: as the same characters go through the hands of innumerable writers and artists, accumulating the entire history of a character becomes increasingly challenging. Decades upon decades of superhero comics may lead to a complex continuity involving hundreds of characters, alternate worlds and multiple variations of the same events. The superhero comic is a serial production that has often been produced for decades. While the characters remain the same, their surroundings are adjusted to the



contemporary, and though some artists and writers may spend long periods of time with a character, each superhero will eventually have had a large number of writers and artists working on him or her, “crossing decades in American history” (Klock 2002, 27). The open-ended nature of comic books means that they can never be completed, and as Klock (*ibid.*) notes, this presents some fascinating paradoxes that each new narrative of the old hero needs to solve. DC’s attempts to contain some of these issues resulted in the infamous *Crisis on Infinite Earths* in 1985–1986, which divided the DC continuity into pre- and post-Crisis eras, completely erasing such characters as Supergirl and Barry Allen/Flash. In more recent history, DC announced the complete reboot of its entire fictional universe in the fall of 2011, canceling all its existing titles and debuting a total of 52 number 1 issues.¹ This reboot has received both praise and criticism, and undoubtedly one of the reasons behind the criticism arises from the transgression of established continuity.

As Richard Reynolds (1992, 38) argues in his book *Super Heroes: A Modern Mythology*, continuity forms an essential aspect of both the consumption and enjoyment of superhero comics and other serialised fiction, but especially in superhero comics, this aspect takes on a level of complexity beyond any other forms of serialised popular culture. However, while such moves as DC’s recent “reboot” appear to act as a solution to this complexity, it is this very continuity and its various levels that, according to Reynolds (1992, 38), form the key component in what “has become an expected and integral part of the pleasure of the superhero narrative”. Reynolds locates three distinct levels of continuity within superhero comics: serial continuity, hierarchical continuity and structural continuity. Serial continuity is by far the most common of these, consisting of all previous stories, which the current storyline must take into consideration in order to preserve coherence and consistency within the narrative. As serial continuity is diachronic and develops over time, it creates the most challenges for the creators, as the accumulating amount of previous issues has to be taken into consideration with each new issue (Reynolds 1992, 34–40). Serial continuity establishes the canonical level of superhero narratives, and can sometimes result in debates about whether or not a certain story is a part of the hero’s official continuity or an “imaginary” tale outside the official continuity.² *Batman: The Killing Joke* contains a famous example of controversial continuity, as Barbara Gordon, the Bat-Girl at the time, was shot and

¹ As of January 2012, a part of these new titles have already been canceled due to poor sales, while new titles are being introduced. For more, see: Khouri, 2012.

² These “Elseworlds” tales usually explore such issues that explicitly break the “oneiric climate” (Eco 1979, 114) of the superhero world by introducing time into the narrative, such as marriage, aging or death. As Reynolds points out, texts that do not fit into the continuity can be divided either into texts that exist separately from the official continuity (like the Batman TV-series from the 1960s) or purposefully rewriting certain stories within the official continuity (like the 1950s Captain America; Reynolds 1992, 43–44). Ultimate solutions to the problems of continuity can be seen in DC’s *Crisis on Infinite Earths*, which dismantled the entire continuity structure.



crippled by the Joker. Sanctioned by DC's official editors (by the infamous phrase "cripple the bitch"³), the event made it into the official continuity, as Barbara Gordon was reintroduced into the DC universe in *Suicide Squad* #23 (January 1989) with her injury and taking up the alias of "Oracle".

Reynolds denotes "hierarchical continuity" as the overall hierarchy of the various interrelationships between superheroes and villains within the superhero universe, whilst "structural continuity" is essentially comprised of both serial and hierarchical continuity. More than that, structural continuity contains "those elements of the real world which are contained within the fictional universe of the superheroes, and (for the truly committed) actions which are not recorded in any specific text, but inescapably implied by continuity" (Reynolds 1992, 40–41). This kind of "extra-textual continuity" is, according to Reynolds (1992, 43), a "vital key to the way in which the mythology of comic books is articulated in the mind of the reader". In other words, a dedicated reader has the ability to envision an ideal superhero metatext, which sums up all the existing texts as well as the gaps those texts have created – but this metatext can never be complete, as no-one can read every single canonical text ever produced and because new canonical texts are being added each week, meaning that no superhero universe is finite until the day superhero texts are no longer published (Reynolds 1992, 43). However, the serialised publication of superhero comics explicitly denies the narratives any finite quality, as the stories accumulate an infinite amount of narratives that comprise the continuity.

Within this framework, *Batman: The Killing Joke* represents an interesting anomaly, as the text, despite being canonised as a part of the serial continuity, was published as a single, 46-page album instead of as one of the traditional weekly/monthly serial issues. This was a rare occasion within superhero comics, and perhaps at least partially owing to the emergence of the "comics grow up" PR phenomenon that took the press by storm in 1986 and 1987 (Sabin 1993, 87). The publication of such works as *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns* (1986) by Frank Miller and *Watchmen* (1987) by Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons was much publicised in the press as the rise of "serious" adult comics, representing what Roger Sabin (1993, 97) has referred to as "revisionist superhero comics". While the press hailed the "new" phenomenon, Sabin identifies this as more of a distinct marketing move aimed at selling certain works as "graphic novels" instead of "comics" in order to attract older audiences with more money to spend; one such way to do this was to publish works in the album-format long preferred in the field of European comics, which were seen as more culturally respectable and read by all ages (as opposed to just kids; Sabin, 1993, 93). When *Batman: The Killing Joke* was published in 1988, the rise of this new marketing trend

³ This phrasing has been confirmed by Moore in at least one interview by *Wizard Magazine* in 2006, where he identified DC's Len Wein as the editor in question (quoted in Felton, 2007, 28).



was at full swing, and undoubtedly contributed to the decision to publish the text as a single volume instead of separate issues. As Sabin notes, after the “boom” initiated by Miller and Moore’s work, the “graphic novel” became a buzz term and “virtually everything” was either published or re-published in the trendy format (Sabin 1993, 96).

A finite story published in a single volume, however, means that *Batman: The Killing Joke* goes very clearly against the traditional “mythic form” of serial superhero continuity that enables an infinite amount of narratives (Gray 2010, 35). More than that, the narrative subverts the superhero tradition by underlining its construction from an infinite serial continuity by “exposing the cracks in the sanity of organization” (Klock 2002, 59). It is this unique combination of tradition and subversion within *Batman: The Killing Joke* that creates the “textual anarchy” of this article’s title: while anarchy, as defined in the beginning of the article, appears to reject all notions of order and continuity, the text quite clearly deploys a substantial level of order and control in order to establish its denial of order. While the narrative itself is carefully ordered through a meticulous panel division and detailed artwork, the narrative simultaneously contains an anarchic level that problematises the very serial continuity it is built on.

By drawing deliberate attention to its structure as built from decades of Batman lore, *Batman: The Killing Joke* highlights the conventional and continuous nature of the story itself (the Joker attempts to commit a crime, Batman arrives to stop it). This type of contrasting could be argued to produce an effect very similar to Darko Suvin’s (1979, 6) notion of cognitive estrangement, as the comic deliberately draws the reader’s attention to its own open-ended nature. This level of estrangement of course calls for a more skilled reader, one who is aware of the genre conventions and character history of Batman and the Joker. The characters themselves contain an unusual amount of self-reflexivity as Batman himself wonders where their never-ending feud will ultimately lead them:

I’ve been thinking lately. About you and me. About what’s going to happen to us, in the end. We’re going to kill each other, aren’t we? Perhaps you’ll kill me. Perhaps I’ll kill you. Perhaps sooner. Perhaps later. (Moore and Bolland 1988, 4; hereafter cited as *TKJ* in parenthetical references).

This self-reflexivity, combined with the narrative’s deliberate focus on the iterative nature of the narrative and its impossibility for a linear, singular past creates a subversive narrative that ultimately questions its own existence.

Batman: The Killing Joke accomplishes this subversion of superhero tradition by presenting the reader with an origin story for the Joker, Batman’s arch-nemesis (although I will argue that the



narrative is not about the Joker's origins, but a meta-commentary on the very elements of superhero comics themselves). Loosely based on the Joker's first origin story "The Man behind the Red Hood" from *Detective Comics* #168 (1951), Moore and Bolland's origin story depicts the Joker as a failed comedian who agrees to rob a chemical factory to support his pregnant wife. He disguises himself as the Red Hood and is pursued by Batman. He escapes by swimming in a polluted channel where the chemicals from the plant alter his appearance for good, making his skin white and his hair a garish green. Seeing his reflection, he becomes insane.⁴ While some, like Reynolds, view the Red Hood origin story from the 1950s as the definite version, others see the Joker as a character defined precisely by his unclear and undefined origins. For example, Brian Bolland himself stresses in the afterword of the 2008 Deluxe Edition that the story of *Batman: The Killing Joke* is "just one of a number of possible origin stories" (Bolland 2008, 48). This is a trope that has gained in popularity within the last decades, as testified by the widely successful Batman movie *The Dark Knight* (2008, dir. Christopher Nolan), where the Joker (played by the late Heath Ledger), purposefully retells his origins twice (his third attempt is cut short), and both accounts are vastly different. Instead of reinforcing a unified and linear narrative by repeating a canonised origin story that reasserts the continuity, the movie underlines the conflicting ambiguity behind the Joker's chaotic character, suggesting that the ambiguity of the Joker's past and his confusing origin stories have in themselves acquired the status of a "resonant trope"⁵ within the Batman mythos.

In *Batman: The Killing Joke*, Moore and Bolland take the Joker's 1950s "origin story" and frame it with a "present" (insofar as any superhero narrative can exist in the present) story, where the Joker tries to prove that "all it takes is one bad day to reduce the sanest man alive to lunacy" (*TKJ* 1988, 38), suggesting that something similar happened to him. In order to accomplish this, he shoots and paralyzes Barbara Gordon, and exposes Commissioner Gordon to images of her, naked and suffering, in an attempt to drive him mad. Ultimately the demands of continuity and genre win, as the Joker fails and Gordon remains sane. Batman defeats the Joker in battle, restores the status quo and waits with him for the police cars to take him away. After capturing the Joker, however, Batman slightly breaks the expected narrative by suggesting rehabilitation to the Joker instead of sending him back to prison. This suggestion, if carried through, would mean the end of

⁴ A similar version of the Joker's origins is presented in Tim Burton's movie *Batman* (1989). The Joker, played by Jack Nicholson, is revealed to have been Jack Napier, a local gangster, who falls into a chemical solution after Batman has stopped him and his men from raiding a chemical factory. The solution disfigures his face, which drives him mad. In an attempt at closure, it is revealed at the end that Jack Napier (and not Joe Chill as in the comics) was also the criminal who shot and killed Bruce Wayne's parents, and in effect created Batman. Thus, the theme of origins is strongly present in the movie.

⁵ Peter Coogan (2006, 7) defines a resonant trope as "familiar and repeated moments, iconic images and actions, figures of speech, patterns of characterisation [that] have gained this resonance through repeated use" within superhero comics.



Batman/the Joker -stories, as without the villain the hero has no purpose. In order for the infinite continuity to remain that way, the narrative must be repeated and the characters are not allowed to change.

THE PAST AS MULTIPLE CHOICE

I mean, what is it with you? What made you what you are? Girlfriend killed by the mob, maybe? Brother carved up by some mugger? Something like that, I bet. Something like that... Something like that happened to me, you know. I... I'm not exactly sure what it was. Sometimes I remember it one way, sometimes another... If I'm going to have a past, I prefer it to be multiple choice! (TKJ 1988, 39).

In *Batman: The Killing Joke*, the Joker refers to his past as one of “multiple choice”, which highlights the character’s shattered past as his origins and past exploits have been written and rewritten so many times even he cannot keep up with them. This multiple choice is not restricted to comics, but follows the character through various other formats, such as animation, TV-series and cinema. Who he is and how he came to be the Joker is unclear even to him. This disorganisation of non-linear forms that characterise the Joker’s past can be read as kind of textual anarchy, a refusal to obey the traditional meanings and linear histories. The past as multiple choice is ambiguous, open to new interpretations, new readings of the same character. As Philip Sandifer has argued, the high-compulsive retellings of the superhero (or villain) origin story within superhero narratives can be read as symptomatic repetitions of the origin trauma that refuses to stay still in a historicised past, returning in constant repetition in order to provide a stable center for the narrative in question (Sandifer 2008, 178–181). In other words, the origin trauma functions to both characterise and motivate the hero and his actions, and the repetition of this trauma at regular intervals grounds the narratives to Eco’s (1979, 114) “oneiric climate” of the ever-present, erasing the notion of time. The character origins of the hero (and usually the villain) must be fixed (Batman’s origin trauma will always be his parents’ murder, etc.), as it will form an “all-important moment of transformation” which will then mark the hero’s future actions and adventures (Reynolds 1992, 48). In contrast to this, the Joker’s origin story tends to have multiple permutations (as mentioned above). This leads to his solution of a “multiple choice past”, which may be compulsively retold like the hero’s, but due to its unstable nature, it cannot offer similar stability to the narrative, but instead questions the entire structure of the narrative by exposing its fabricated nature.

At first reading, the Joker’s origin story in *Batman: The Killing Joke* seems to do the very opposite of what I have just argued. The narrative levels alternate between the present (where the shooting



of Barbara and the kidnapping of Commissioner Gordon take place) and the past “flashbacks” illustrating the Red Hood origin story from the 1950s. In a familiar style from both comics and cinema, these two narrative levels of *now* and *then* are separated through their colouring schemes: the present is in full colour, while the past is sepia-toned.⁶ The transitions between scenes, both in the present and between the past and the present rely almost completely on visual markers: the panels echo similar images, or in the case of flashbacks, more concretely transfer the character’s pose and stature from the present to the past, indicating an active “memory” through the juxtaposition of two consequent panels. These flashbacks tell an origin story of the Joker, and accordingly, almost all the visual transitions between the present and the past in the narrative are done through the Joker’s character. On page 8 (fig. 1), the two images from the past and the present are striking in their similarity, and the positioning of the characters and the mirror image of the Joker’s face in both panels very clearly invites the reader to interpret this shift as an active visual memory of the Joker, depicted to the audience through internal focalisation by juxtaposing past and present events similarly. Within comics, internal focalisation often results in “the reader actually witnessing the character’s conscious memories” (Miettinen 2006, 52–53). However, as this type of focalisation is attributed to the character, it cannot be equated to the narrator, and it can therefore mislead the audience, as character misperception can be presented as factual within the narrative (Branigan 1992, 102–103).

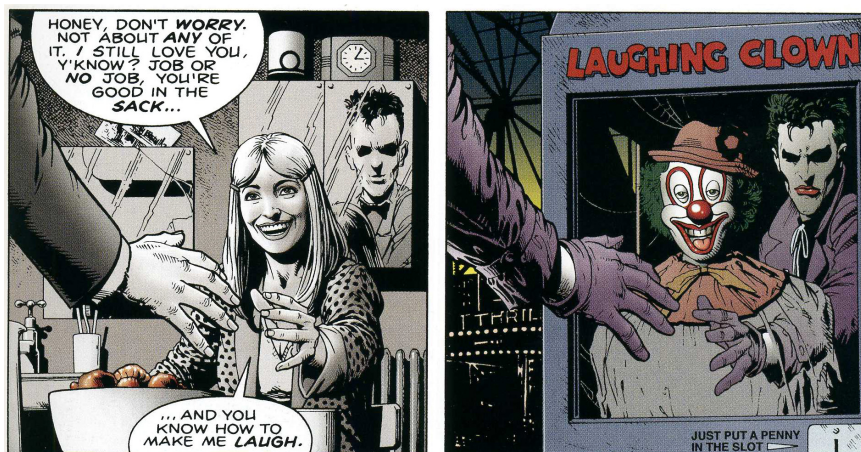


Figure 1. The juxtaposition of panels suggests an active memory. Bolland, Brian and Moore, Alan, *Batman: The Killing Joke*, DC Comics, 1988/2008, p. 8. © DC Comics.

⁶ This is significantly more pronounced in the 2008 Deluxe Edition, which was completely recolored by Bolland. The original coloring from 1988 by John Higgins displays a much brighter, occasionally almost neon-colored palette, and the distinction between the present and the past is much less visible. According to Bolland, the 2008 edition resembles more closely what he had intended than the technicolor version of the 1980s.



This narrative device of shifting focalisations possesses a deceiving narrative authority, as the visual clues clearly suggest that the flashbacks originate from the Joker's consciousness. Consequently, his identity would become "fixed", and go against the established trope of the Joker's mysterious origins. Furthermore, revealing the Joker's origin creates a feeling of empathy within the reader, thus undermining his status as a villain:

[W]hen an author elaborates on the action or condition of an antagonist, a villain, an enemy, he/she almost necessarily begins to develop a subjectivity for that antagonist, thus dulling the contrast with the hero. In this way, the sorts of opposition that would ordinarily block empathy tend to be undermined through ordinary literary exposition. Villainy in particular is difficult to sustain. For each new discussion of the villain renders him or her more subjective, and thus less villainous. (Hogan 2001, 139)

Following Hogan's argumentation, then, presenting the reader with a representation of the Joker's origin has the substantial risk of making him more sympathetic and, disappointingly, less evil. However, before we go on lamenting this loss of villainy, I suggest a more careful reading, which reveals this initial reading to be false, and instead opens up a variety of interpretations that work against the seeming unity of the narrative structure and ultimately sustain the Joker's villainous nature.

The images and text create an interesting contrast through what initially appear to be the Joker's assumed "memories". The visual narrative no doubt very consciously deploys the visual cues that lead the reader to assume the Joker as the source of the flashbacks, yet the textual narrative very clearly denies this. Indeed, whilst in *Batman: The Killing Joke* the transitions between past and present are depicted as if through the Joker's internal focalisation, his monologue on page 39 actively denies any such consciousness within the story ("If I'm going to have a past, I prefer it to be multiple choice!"). The visual cueing implicates him as the source, while the textual narrative actively denies this, creating a strong dissonance that causes the reader to become aware of the problematic nature of the origin story and to question the source of these "memories". Of course, who is to say that the Joker can be trusted when he claims no memory of his past? Clearly labeled insane, he is far from a reliable character. Ultimately, the source of the origin story cannot be located within the diegetic level of the narrative, and must be attributed to the carefully constructed anarchy of the extradiegetic narrator/author(s).



TRANSGRESSIVE VISIONS

The dissonance between the visual cues and textual denial in the Joker's origin story is but one of the ways *Batman: The Killing Joke* extrapolates the expectations of continuity within superhero comics. The visual narrative repeatedly underlines the impossibility of containing the narrative in a linear continuity by carefully extending chosen actions just slightly over the panel frames: sound effects break out of the panels, as do the pictures of the naked and suffering Barbara Gordon (TKJ 1988, 25). The final confrontation between Batman and the Joker, of course, takes place at a derelict carnival, where the Hall of Mirrors serves as the highly symbolic climax.⁷ A significant image comes on page 40 (fig. 2), where Batman breaks through a mirror, sending shards of broken glass beyond the frames. In a very symbolic reading, this scene can be read as signifying the deliberate shattering of the attempt of a single, unified image of the narrative. Instead, shards of the mirror are flying everywhere, each one projecting a slightly different visage of the characters than the others.

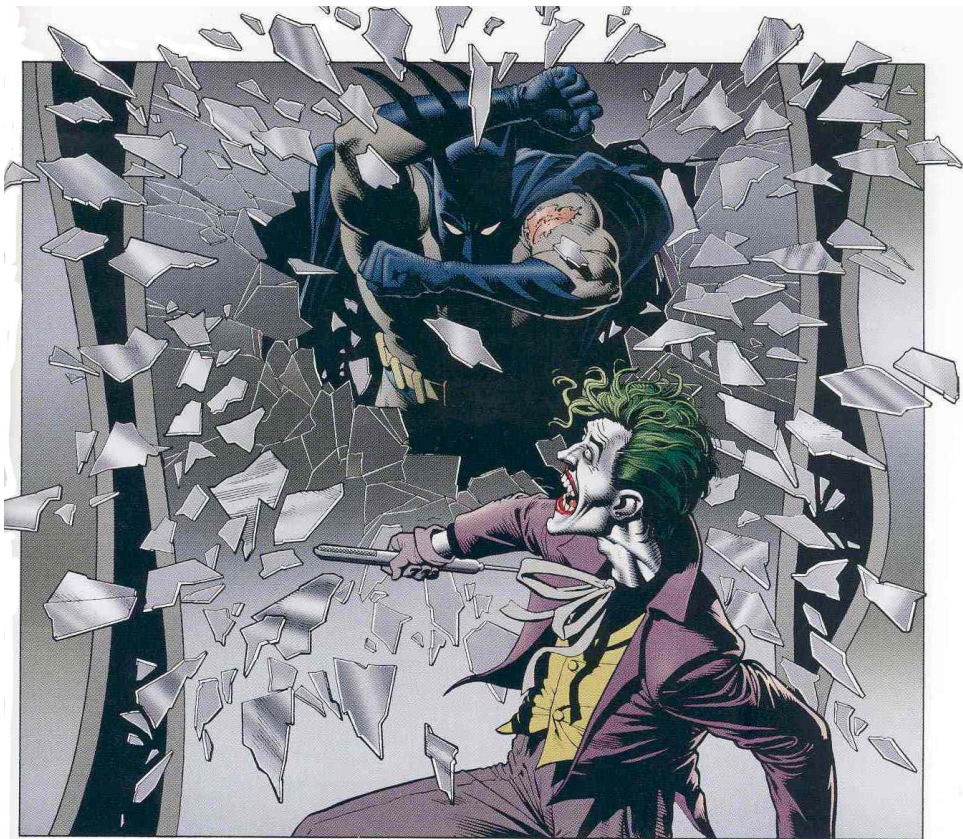


Figure 2. The mirror shards symbolise the deliberate shattering of a unified image of the narrative. Bolland, Brian and Moore, Alan, *Batman: The Killing Joke*, DC Comics, 1988/2008, p. 40. © DC Comics.

⁷ A very similar theme is present in Frank Miller's *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns* (1986), where the final battle is similarly located in a House of Mirrors. The mirror metaphor is obvious, as the two characters have often been read as reflections of each other.

The Joker, too, repeatedly breaks out of the frames, which clearly functions to underline his uncontrollably chaotic and anarchistic nature (TKJ 1988, 6; 25; 32; 45). The effect of this is clearest on page 32 (fig. 3), where the black lines of the frames disappear completely as the Joker manically laughs while he is “born”. There is no frame, and even the assumed frame that holds his laughter cannot contain him, as he escapes beyond the limits imposed upon him by the frame.

Traditionally, the panel frame has been seen as the indicator of such aspects as closure and separation (Groensteen 1999, 39), and therefore the deliberate defiance of this indicates a decisive transgression. The majority of the visual narrative is very much contained within the panels, making it even clearer that the panel frames are intentionally breached. *Batman: The Killing Joke* very discreetly produces broken frames, denying the consistency of the image within. As the page layout is otherwise quite regular and extremely contained, the “sudden and spectacular ruptures from the initially given norm” are clearly highlighted and loaded with meaning (Groensteen 1999, 97). The images break the limits dictated by the frames, producing an anarchy that is no longer textual but visual, yet doing it so slightly that the reader may not even be aware of it. The transgression of the limit set by the panel frame encompasses in a way the whole space of its trajectory; as Foucault (2003, 445) writes, “transgression has its entire space in the line it crosses”, and the line and its transgression are interdependent, and neither would be possible without the other. The existence of a limit enables a break away from it; similarly, the existence of a narrative genre formula and its continuity enable a break from it, and this break simultaneously enhances the formula itself.



Figure 3. The Joker exceeds the panel in a decisive transgression of its boundaries. Bolland, Brian and Moore, Alan, *Batman: The Killing Joke*, DC Comics, 1988/2008, p. 32. © DC Comics.



Lastly, the graphic novel declares its subversive character and resistance to adapt to serial continuity through a mode of visual “anarchy”, which can be found in artist Brian Bolland’s way of appropriating existing artistic renditions of the Joker and Batman from different eras into the comic. Consequently, the ambiguity of the past and the denial of the order of continuity is not restricted to the conflict in the Joker’s origin story, but can also be traced in the visual design. While the entire superhero genre can be characterised as “borrowing” or “cloning” from each other in the form of imitation (Bradford W. Wright [2001, 18] calls imitation within superhero comics “company policy”), in *Batman: The Killing Joke* Brian Bolland goes even further. Instead of imitating a particular house style or character, Bolland carefully and deliberately copies the illustration styles of previous Batman artists from the 1940s and 1950s in a mixture of homage and pastiche. By inserting other artists’ distinct styles into the panels and the visual look of the narrative, Bolland delicately exposes the vastness of the Batman continuity that exists on the visual level alone. The “cracks of organization” are exposed as the different and recognisable visual styles are contrasted within the text. For example, the Red Hood flashbacks present a Batman who is markedly different than the one in the “present”, resembling more closely the original art of Bob Kane, Batman creator, than the Batman of the comic’s present.

Batman: The Killing Joke deploys a kind of “layering of iconography” by consciously referring to images from different periods of the character’s visual history, consequently revealing a “discursive discontinuity” (Collins 1991, 175–177). The iconographic layers of the narrative can be located for example in the photographs within the comic book: one such instance is the image of a family portrait of sorts in the Bat-cave, showing Batman, Robin and Commissioner Gordon with some 1950s characters (such as the Bat-Mite or Ace the Bat-Hound) that have since then been written completely out of the story’s continuity. The portrait also contains Batwoman, Kathy Kane, and the first Bat-Girl⁸, Betty Kane, whose inclusion to the Bat-Family in the 1960s has been read as a response to the infamous accusations of homosexuality between Batman and Robin by Fredric Wertham in his 1954 book *The Seduction of the Innocent*, in which he famously labeled their relationship as “a wish dream of two homosexuals living together” (1954, 189–190). As Mark Best (2005, unpaginated) notes, the roles of Batwoman and Bat-Girl were reinserted as “the structural position of heterosexual love interest” for Batman and Robin, respectively. In fact, as Geoff Klock (2002, 59) points out, the portrait is an exact replica of an actual pinup created by Sheldon Moldoff in 1961 with a recognisable signature from Bob Kane in the right-hand corner, deliberately underlining the fact that Batman’s own history, too, is one of multiple choice. In this

⁸ Several Bat-Girls have existed since the character’s inception, Betty Kane being the first. Currently, DC’s reboot has seen Barbara Gordon reclaim the title after recovering from her paralysis caused by the Joker in *The Killing Joke*.



homage to previous artists, Bolland also exposes the impossibility of a complete and whole past for the characters by allowing “Batman’s dialectic history to stand in suspension” (Klock 2002, 59).

Batman: The Killing Joke is heavily infused with intertextuality within the characters’ own history, up to the point where it could be seen as veering to the point of pastiche and thus risks becoming a mix of references that becomes an end in itself (Di Liddo 2009, 62). However, Di Liddo (ibid.) for one argues that Moore’s use of intertextuality shares more features with “Bakhtinian heteroglossia (or plurivocality) and dialogism” where the narrative is opened to multiple interpretational levels and the possible significances of the text are not removed. Indeed, in revealing the construction of the very narrative from multiple intertextual possibilities, Moore and Bolland provide an effect that again resembles cognitive estrangement by showing us a (fictional) world we recognise and enjoy. Yet at the same time, Moore and Bolland force us to come to terms with the constructed and open-ended narrative structure that deliberately reveals the narrative’s inability to seamlessly fit into the previous continuity, both textually and visually, through the appropriation of various resonant tropes from visual imagery to plot structure.

Indeed, *Batman: The Killing Joke* retains several of the classic tropes and images of the Batman universe. Especially the visual tropes resonate strongly: the Bat-cave is showed with glimpses of some of the classical memorabilia of past foes, such as the giant U.S. penny and a mechanical Tyrannosaurus Rex⁹. Similarly, the iconic image of the Joker’s grotesquely grinning face is instantly recognisable and familiar, echoing the very first images of the character decades ago. But, as noted above, Bolland again cleverly uses various different artists’ visions of the Joker in the comic, as the various screens in the Bat-cave show the Joker in various visual styles. The images in *Batman: The Killing Joke* paradoxically both conform to the continuity and familiarity and deny it by deliberately exposing the inability to conform to a single, unified vision. Other resonant visual tropes include the playing cards (especially the Joker card), as well as the derelict amusement park and the house of mirrors as the setting for the battle between Batman and the Joker. All these visual tropes resonate strongly within the Batman saga of past decades, and visually tie the text firmly into the familiar continuity of the comic. However, the conscious disjointedness produced through a variety of visual styles within the narrative at the same time forces the reader to face the impossibility of continuity within the narrative continuum. In a combination of the familiar and unfamiliar, *Batman: The Killing Joke* reassesses the established characters of both Batman and the Joker, leading to the paradoxical situation in which the text is composed completely of the very formulaic elements of the genre which still, when assembled, are able to

⁹ The giant penny is an early item of Bat-memorabilia from a battle against the Penny Plunderer (*World’s Finest* #30, Sep. 1947), while the mechanical Tyrannosaurus Rex appears in *Batman* #35 (June/July 1946) in a story called “Dinosaur Island”. Both have since then become a standard visual trope of Batman lore, appearing frequently in the Bat-cave’s background.



contradict the narrative conventions and audience expectation attached to the genre, creating a hybrids that could be labeled “post-generic” (Collins 1991, 179).

ON COMIC BOOK CONTINUITY AND AUDIENCES

Since its conception, seriality and continuity have characterised the traditional superhero narrative. As Umberto Eco (2004) famously analysed in his essay “The Myth of Superman”, the so-called Golden Age (circa 1938–1954) tales of Superman relied heavily on the use of the iterative scheme, where each story took up from a “sort of virtual beginning, ignoring where the preceding event left off” (Eco 2004, 157). This way, the characters never had to age, and, inevitably, die – and as a part of this timelessness, Superman could never marry Lois Lane or permanently thwart Lex Luthor, as that would be a sign of permanent change, and therefore, of time. Similarly, then, Batman could never kill or rehabilitate the Joker, for that would signal permanent change, an end to the serial continuity that is characterised by the timeless, oneiric climate of the superhero universe. It could be argued that this demand for a “timeless” storytelling within superhero comics has less to do with continuity, and it could actually be characterised as a “discontinuous circularity” where separate stories take place in a nonlinear story world without any preceding or following narratives. “Continuity” as Reynolds defines it begins to appear more fully in the so-called Silver Age (circa 1956–1970s) of superhero comics, which began to feature very deliberate and exceedingly complex continuities within superhero comics. As Reynolds himself writes, this continuity went beyond anything that had been seen before, “an appreciation of the importance of continuity [became] an essential prerequisite to a fully-engaged reading of superhero comics” (Reynolds 1992, 38). In other words, Silver Age superhero comics relied upon a dedicated audience who were committed to following a complex continuity stretching over several titles and often lasting for years. Whilst the Golden Age heroes created a sort of timelessness through the iterative scheme, the Silver Age heroes created their own “endless” continuity by stretching out the complex continuities – however, both can be argued to subscribe to the “oneiric climate” of superhero comics.

The unyielding requirements of iteration, of never-ending serial continuity, also entail problems for comic book writers and artists: the demands of continuity often meant that the characters could not really mature, change or evolve in any way (not counting the complete reboot of the character). Even though the genre has evolved tremendously since the Golden Age and its relationship with continuity has been increasingly challenged, the superhero narrative still has a strong element of being often very predictable, with the only question each week being *how* the hero will this time free himself from the devilish device designed by the villain. As Danny Fingeroth (2004, 36–37) sees it, this element is an essential part of the superhero narrative



because it offers the reader a type of continuity that relies on “a sense of predictability” within the narrative, which gives the reader comfort. Fingerroth clearly recalls Umberto Eco (2004, 160), who has dubbed this feature of popular serial fiction as “hunger for redundance”, characterising the way a highly predictable text provides the reader with a moment of relaxation and escape (which is typical to serialised and popular fiction, such as comic strips or soap operas). By revealing the inherently redundant nature of the iterative scheme in superhero narratives, it could be claimed that *Batman: The Killing Joke* is once more removed further from the very iteration that defines it as it calls attention to its own formulaic nature. The audience’s hunger for escapist entertainment, the redundant scheme, is made obvious by stressing the never-ending continuity of the narrative.

Ultimately, comic book continuity requires a dedicated audience, and the reader’s position to the demands of continuity cannot be ignored. As Matthew Wolf-Meyer (2003, 499) has argued, comic book readership, especially within superhero comics, relies strongly on continuity, on the construction of a language of difference that is particular to the community. This means that the readers identify with a cultural position that has its own names and vocabulary, and which clearly separates them from others. The readers become a part of a distinguished reading community, and the highly complex nature of the comic book continuity with its various and intricate histories and subplots produces a hierarchical structure of knowledge which enables demarcating distinctions between fans (Nikunen 2005, 132; Wolf-Meyer 2003, 500). Superhero comics themselves also participate in creating their readers through fandom, requiring “a savvy and knowledgeable fan” to read their texts (Sandifer 2008, 176). Wolf-Meyer also stresses the relevance of the conservative nature of superhero comic book audiences, and how the relationship between the readers and producers empowers the readers, while at the same time the readers’ conservative strategies may limit the possible superhero narratives (Wolf-Meyer 2003, 512). Comic book readership has been seen as a highly interactive one, echoing Marshall McLuhan’s “participational form of expression” (Shaviro 1997, 4). According to Shaviro, superhero comic books have “fans” more than they have “readers”, and these fans pay fanatical attention to detail, and are quick to point out any inconsistencies or continuity errors and express approval (or disapproval) of character or plot changes (ibid.). It is this fan base that comprises the conservative audience that a new superhero text must satisfy in order to gain approval and acceptance into the superhero canon. The conservative audience of superhero comics puts great emphasis on continuity, and easily disallows narratives that include permanent change or alteration of the status quo.

The 1980s witnessed a strong trend of revisionist superhero comics aimed at revamping older heroes into more postmodern interpretations, often with increased violence and a more cynical and “realist” outlook. In this process, what proves to be crucial is the balance between familiarity



and reinvention, which requires the realisation that popular culture has a history which does not simply disappear as the new text appears, but persists in both the original and diverse forms, and which comprises an essential part of the audience's cultural memory, and consequently, often a large part of the reading pleasure for some audiences (Collins 1991, 171). So while seeking the approval of the readers, texts like *Batman: The Killing Joke* expect their audiences to be familiar with the characters and their vast history so that they may enjoy the adaptation's subtle transformations and transgressions, the dislocations within the characters' history.

Indeed, *Batman: The Killing Joke*, too, appears initially to be a predictable and essentially familiar superhero text, relying strongly on the traditional superhero plot where the Joker takes the active role, and Batman remains reactionary in his attempt to stop him; the Joker acts and Batman reacts, following the traditional plot structure. However, the characters possess an unusual amount of self-awareness when it comes to their formulaic nature; as the Joker has used his final trick (the empty gun), he asks:

Well? What are you waiting for? I shot a defenseless girl. I terrorized an old man. Why don't you kick the hell out of me and get a standing ovation from the public gallery? (TKJ 1988, 43).

The Joker's questions show that he is well aware of the iterative nature of the hero-villain-game, and he knows what the next step will be (and that it will all happen again). This self-awareness of the character exposes a rare level of metatextuality, as the reader, too becomes aware of the forced structure of the superhero narrative, where repeatedly the hero chases the villain, only to have him escape, *ad infinitum*. Similarly, the obligatory battle scene at the end has an air of predetermination to it, as if both characters were acting out an agreed choreography, a dance where both know their moves and cues. Batman, too, reveals his awareness of the never-ending game by replying:

Because I'm doing this by the book... and because I don't want to. Do you understand? I don't want to hurt you. I don't want either of us to end up killing the other... But we're both running out of alternatives... and we both know it. (TKJ 1988, 43-44)

The problems of continuity arise as the narrative formula established by the genre (as well as the financial demands of the industry) requires the stories to continue – if one kills the other or the Joker is rehabilitated, the narrative cannot continue anymore. The Joker recognises this, seeing that they cannot escape the demands of continuity – rehabilitation is not an option.¹⁰ The graphic

¹⁰ This aspect of the Joker has been extrapolated in both Frank Miller's *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns* (1986) and Brian Azzarello and Lee Bermejo's *Joker* (2008). Miller's work depicts the Joker as catatonic in a



novel ends with Batman's opening monologue repeated over the battle images, and the last panel echoes the very first panel, zooming in to a puddle of water. Both the textual and the visual narration signals a return to the beginning, the restoration of the status quo in the endless time-space of the superheroic universe (a visual trope recurrent in the works of Moore, cf. *Watchmen*). The juxtaposition of Batman's reconciliatory rehabilitation speech with the images of the two characters fighting is clearly aiming for an ironical effect, as they convey the very opposite messages.

COMING TO TERMS WITH THE "PAST TENSE"

Jim Collins has described *Batman: The Killing Joke* as "both an acknowledgement and an extension" of the Joker's origin story, oblivious to the more open and deliberate denials of the unproblematic nature of this "extension" (Collins 1991, 172). As has been demonstrated in this article, the graphic novel goes far beyond a mere acknowledgement of the Joker's origins, producing a metanarrative that through its very construction comments on the superhero genre and its limitations imposed by serialised continuity. *Batman: The Killing Joke* is not a superhero narrative explaining the Joker's origins, but dissection into the very heart of the genre, offering not just an "extension", but multiple extensions, multiple interpretations, a demonstration of the impossibility of a singular, linear or otherwise coherent narrative within the superhero world. As the Joker himself exclaims, trying to remember and reconcile an unfragmented continuity is a dangerous mission:

Remember? Ohh, I wouldn't do that! Remembering's dangerous. I find the past such a worrying, anxious place. "The past tense", I suppose you'd call it. Ha ha ha. (*TKJ* 1988, 21)

The Joker finds that "the past tense" is too much for him to remember, and instead chooses not to confine himself into any singular, linear account of his past. The anxiety over the multiple versions of his past is resolved by a deliberate refusal to conform to any linear accounts within the continuity.

In the end, the Joker's response to the idea of rehabilitation ("It's too late for that. Far too late") can be read as a commentary on the very construction of the superhero narrative itself: even though the new "revisionary superhero narrative"¹¹ can reorganise history, make it strange, it

mental institution, while Azzarello and Bermejo (2008, 31–32) depict the Joker released from Arkham Asylum, stating "I'm not crazy anymore... Just mad" and continuing immediately to wield chaos and violence on the streets of Gotham.

¹¹ Clearly borrowing Sabin's earlier term "revisionist superheroes", Klock (2002, 25) writes on the phenomenon of "revisionary superhero narratives", to which he includes superhero narratives that rewrite



cannot completely escape “the anxieties of influence”, as the superhero continuity cannot be escaped, and its suspension is only temporary (Klock 2002, 61). One can suggest changes to the formula, but inevitably the stories must return to form, and succumb to the expectations of the genre rules. Despite seemingly conforming to the iterative scheme, *The Killing Joke* does end with a peculiarly unsettling note, as both Batman and the Joker share the joke told by the Joker and laugh as if the divide between them has momentarily lifted, and the two are just “these two guys in a lunatic asylum”. The panels zoom in to the puddles of water at their feet, while their laughter dominates the top part of the panel and the sound of the police car screams in the lower part of the panel. The laughter ends, but the car siren blares. The last two panels show just raindrops in the puddle, leaving open the question of the suddenly ending laughter – did one of them finally end the game, for good? *Batman: The Killing Joke*, once more conforming to the demands of continuity in its adaptation of the Joker’s origins, leaves the question unanswered and the narrative as open-ended, thus securing the continuity of the narrative.

FINALLY

Arguably, the past can only be understood through the construction of narratives that give the past shape in relation to the current situation in order to make sense of it (Spiegel and Jenkins 1991, 118). The refusal to understand the present in relation to the past denies the possibility of a linear narrative, a chronology; instead of order, *The Killing Joke*’s textual anarchy embraces the liberating chaos of madness:

Faced with the inescapable fact that human existence is mad, random and pointless, one in eight of them crack up and go stark slaving buggo! Who can blame them? In a world as psychotic as this... any other response would be crazy! (*TKJ* 1988, 33)

Madness is for the Joker the only logical solution in the face of the discontinuities of identity he faces. As Shaviro (1997, 66) notes, while the Joker may indeed be a “gleefully sadistic mass murderer”, he also embodies the postmodern subject. Instead of choosing and organising his perceptions of the past and present and maintaining a permanent identity, he simply goes “with the flow”, free of any restraints of society: “he *lives* and *enjoys* the postmodern condition, this mutation of our sensibility into non-linear, non-Euclidean forms” (ibid., 67; emphasis in original). Considering the problems of continuity that plague the superhero genre as a whole, embracing madness instead of the sanity of organisation is often a necessity rather than choice. This is why Barbara Gordon can never “work out a proper filing system, like we used at the library” (*TKJ* 1988,

the genre in a deliberate Bloomian “misreading” of the tradition, such as *Watchmen*, *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns* and *Batman: The Killing Joke*.



12) for Commissioner Gordon's newspaper clippings, as the conflicting histories of the superhero narratives will never allow it (Klock 2002, 59–60). The past is comprised of several alternative options forming alternate histories, and organising it all into a single unified narrative poses too many challenges. Moore and Bolland take this challenge as their premise, and through the use of resonant tropes both textual and visual, create a narrative which on the surface follows the genre expectations, but which soon begins to question its very structure, approaching a form of deliberate, carefully woven textual anarchy.

As Moore himself has stated in a 2007 interview ("Authors on Anarchism" 2007), anarchy is not so much about chaos as it is about "diversity" – diversity as a lack of hierarchy but not without careful thought. It is this anarchic diversity that emerges in *Batman: The Killing Joke*: the diversity of the Batman mythos, its various strands, characters and visualisations that ultimately do not form a unified and coherent whole, but an anarchistic diversity that remains open and changeable. Instead of simply recreating the Joker's origins, Moore and Bolland decidedly expose the impossibility of continuity within superhero mythology. By revealing the cracks in the sanity of organisation, the text instigates textual anarchy and opens up the characters and their multiple pasts. In approaching the narrative past as one of multiple choice, open to new interpretations and new readings of the same character, the text highlights the endlessly open-ended nature of the superhero narrative.



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