
“A THING OF MANY LEVELS, AND COMPLEXITIES.”

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Di Liddo, Annalisa. *Alan Moore: Comics as Performance, Fiction as Scalpel*. University Press of Mississippi, Jackson, 2009. ISBN 978-1-6047-3213-9. 211 pages.

GULL: Take this city, in itself a great work, you'll agree: a thing of many levels, and complexities. How well do you know London, Netley?

NETLEY: Like the back o' my hand, sir.

GULL: Ha ha! As grubby, certainly, but London's more besides: it too is a symbol, history and myth... Do you begin to grasp how truly great a work is London? A veritable textbook we may draw upon in formulating great works of our own! We'll penetrate its metaphors, lay bare its structure and thus come at last upon its meaning. As befits a great work, we'll read it carefully and with respect (*From Hell*, pp. 4; 6-9).

University Press of Mississippi's Great Comics Artists Series has so far featured very different comics artists from Donald Duck-drawing Carl Barks to the 19th century caricature artist and often-quoted "father of comics", Rodolphe Töpffer. Other featured artists include Chris Ware, Garry Trudeau and Osamu Tezuka. The first featured "comics artist" who doesn't actually draw comics, British comics writer Alan Moore (b. 1953) is undoubtedly an awaited addition to this group, and the expectations regarding a comprehensive analysis of his work are high. In her book *Alan Moore: Comics as Performance, Fiction as Scalpel*, Italian scholar Annalisa Di Liddo takes on the daunting task of dissecting Moore's extremely vast *oeuvre* in order to create a "consistent argument" about what she regards as "core aspects of his production" (p. 14). These core aspects include such essential themes as intertextuality and form, the relationship of space and time (what she refers to as "chronotopes") and the issue of identity. While her work (like Moore's) has its faults, her overall examination here remains focused, well-argued and lucid throughout the book. Di Liddo takes on some of Moore's essential comics works from the criminally under-analysed *The Ballad of Halo Jones* to the fairly over-analysed *Watchmen*, opening the formal and intertextual structures and cultural connections of the texts. Also Moore's very recent work (in collaboration with partner Melinda Gebbie), the pornographic *Lost Girls*, receives a whole chapter devoted to its analysis at the end of the book. However, due to the understandably limited scope of the book and considering the productiveness of Moore, a substantial amount of especially his earlier (and rare) underground comics have been left out in favour of more commercially successful and widely published works.

Di Liddo's approach is, as it should be with regards to a hybrid form such as comics, a multidisciplinary one, and her methods include both literary and cultural studies with modern and postmodern approaches, not forgetting the recent school of specialised comics studies. Her



primary method is an attentive and carefully balanced close reading of the texts, through which she produces insightful and precise observations. Di Liddo devotes several pages of her introduction to the contextualisation of the term (and literary phenomenon) “graphic novel,” successfully illustrating the polemics of the word and its problematic status within comics studies. Her own approach stresses the importance of “thematic unity” in defining graphic novels, which is achieved through the deployment of “one or more adequately developed motifs that build up the core of the narrative” (p. 20). While spending a subsequent section devoted to defining this term, she leaves other essential terms, such as the overly vague “postmodern storytelling,” completely without definition.

The title of the book and its relations to the content puzzles the reader from the start. The word “performance” immediately arouses expectations of analysis on Moore’s later performance work and his relatively new role as a self-proclaimed magician. However, Di Liddo discards most of this aspect of Moore’s career, only briefly mentioning it in her conclusion. Her assertion of Moore’s comics “as performance” is not fully explored, and the concept remains fairly vague throughout the study. While quoting Alan Moore as “a performing writer,” (p. 22) and mentioning his later passions for theatrical performances realised in *The Birth Caul* (1995) and *Snakes and Ladders* (1999), she then completely ignores the subject until she reaches her conclusion, where she quickly draws parallels between Moore’s performance work and the themes of stages and masks in *V for Vendetta* and the multiple superhero narratives of masked avengers as “performance” (p. 168). She also makes no distinction between the terms “performance” and “performativity”, despite their very clear differences. She asserts the “scalpel” metaphor (itself a quote from Moore) more successfully as a way to analyse the “distinctive deconstructive quality” of Moore’s comics work, and with this one she fares considerably better. Indeed, Di Liddo approaches Moore’s repertoire as a comics writer much in the same way that *From Hell*’s Dr. Gull approaches London, viewing it as “a thing of many levels, and complexities” (pp. 4; 6-9). Her reading is done “carefully and with respect” as she uncovers the core structures of the graphic novels and penetrates the textual and visual metaphors that comprise them. The reader becomes the Netley to Di Liddo’s Gull, thinking he knows Moore’s work, but will soon discover the true magnitude of it as Di Liddo proceeds to lead him through its structures and complexities work by work.

However, despite the merits of Di Liddo’s research, her work has some inconsistencies that need to be addressed. Her treatment of illustrators is, despite mentioning the collaborative nature of comics creation, overly dismissive. She systematically credits Moore for the works throughout the book until she gets to *Lost Girls*, where she suddenly credits Moore’s partner Melinda Gebbie for the artwork and gives equal creative status to her (unlike the other illustrators Moore has worked with). Instead of fully resolving the matter at the beginning of her study, she chooses to leave the



matter of collaborative authorship mostly unresolved. This is especially disappointing as the book, to the reader's immense pleasure, contains not only detailed attention to page and panel construction but several reproduced images from the original works. While the images are all in black and white, their number and quality make up for the lack of colour, as they function well with Di Liddo's concise visual analysis, which she systematically carries out throughout the book.

The phenomenon of stressing Moore's role as the author can be located within a larger problem within the study. Di Liddo herself criticises previous comics scholarship for its "all-too-celebratory" nature in discussing Moore's work, and calls for a "more systematically critical study" of his work (p. 14). Yet, she herself proceeds to produce a study which, while initially claiming objectivity, ultimately ends up celebrating Moore in fan-like adoration. Despite Moore's generally recognised uneven quality, Di Liddo finds little flaw in his work, citing even his poorer work as "absolutely intentional" (p. 147) in its mediocrity, and then cites this as further proof of his genius. While she does occasionally mention that a particular work may not be up to par, she nevertheless systematically proceeds to discuss the merits of the work extensively rather than the faults. Especially lacking from her analysis is Moore's highly problematic portrayal of female characters, who are often subjected to brutal violence and suffering for the sake of the plot. Similarly, the complete absence of *Captain Britannia* in a work discussing Moore's work on English identity seems a strange oversight.

Her celebratory reading of Moore's work is even more problematic, in my view, when one considers the fact that she relies extensively on Moore's own opinions and views about his work, derived from various interviews and pamphlets. As one of Di Liddo's main arguments about Moore's work focuses on intertextuality and its highly significant role in the textual, visual and structural nature of his comics, relying on the author's intentions instead of her own discoveries as a comics scholar does not compliment her analysis. By relying so much on Moore's own opinions, she tends to mythicise him as a genius author (she even refers to his writing as an "almost alchemical act", p. 34). While authorial motivation behind such phenomena as intertextuality can have limited interest, relying too heavily on Moore's own motivations threatens to further weigh the book into the very swamp of idolatrous scholarship that Di Liddo previously criticised.

In conclusion, *Alan Moore: Comics as Performance, Fiction as Scalpel* still fares reasonably well. The text flows fluidly, and a reader familiar with Moore's works will undoubtedly enjoy the observations made by Di Liddo. Her close readings provide an overall structure of Moore's "key strategies" (p. 27) as a writer, and it is only towards the end that Di Liddo falls fully into the fan girl mode as she fails to critically assert her analysis of these strategies in *Lost Girls*. Thus, a



scholar looking for a “more systematically critical” study of Alan Moore’s comics may be partially disappointed with Di Liddo’s book, as her writing becomes increasingly embedded with the celebratory approach she claims to avoid in her introduction. A fan of Moore, on the other hand, will undoubtedly enjoy the observations and connections pointed out by the book. Di Liddo’s own voice and focus can be heard throughout, and her research is admirably thorough. Like picking raisins from a (huge) bun, Di Liddo analyses Moore’s works with her own scope in mind, and successfully avoids the temptation of overanalysing the works.