

**The Joke's On Him: Shamanism, Literary Magic, and the Textualization of Grant Morrison, Heath Ledger, and The Joker**

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Grant Morrison has been working in the comic book industry for decades and is known as one of the medium's most prolific writers. He has written stories involving some of the medium's most iconographic characters, he has been responsible for reinvigorating barely remembered heroes, and he has created complex worlds and characters in his original titles. Besides his work in comic writing, Morrison also practices various forms of magic and has been very public about discussing both his beliefs and his magic rituals (Morrison 2006a: 9). The stories of his supposed alien abductions and seeing the inner workings of the universe from outside dimensions are common knowledge to fans, and his magical sigil practices are known to members of various counter-cultural groups (Morrison 2006b: 18-21). Often referring to his creative process as 'shamanic', his beliefs are well documented throughout interviews and he has published how-to guides for magical practice (Meaney 2010). On a literary level, Morrison infuses his creations of the fictional universes of his comics with his particular form of magic practice.

There is no single accepted definition of what it means to be a shaman. Gary Edson generalizes the cultural position as 'a mediator between the inspiring world of myth and reality' (Edson 2009: 7, 10). Edson quotes Stanley Krippner, stating that shamans were 'the world's first healers, diagnosticians, psychotherapists, religious functionaries, magicians, performing artists, and storytellers... Shamans can be defined as native practitioners who deliberately alter their consciousness in order to obtain knowledge and power from the "spirit world"' (ibid: 11). Though mostly noted as a 'story-teller', Morrison has been very vocal about his drug use, trance meditation practices, and meeting silvery beings of pure information from beyond the 4<sup>th</sup>-dimension (Salisbury 1999: 209-210). After these experiences, Morrison's focus on the practice and implementation of magic became more concrete in his daily life and his fiction writing.

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Shamans use their abstract power in a concrete and human way. They listen to what is unheard, discuss what is unspoken, and can teach what is unknown. This represents an important social agency in the role of the shaman. The nature of this power is complex, as Edson states, 'Shamanic power was believed to come from a supernatural force; however, division of the world into natural and supernatural realms may confuse our understanding of shamanism, which does not make this distinction' (Edson 2009: 24). Shamans do not define the spiritual world as 'spiritual' or 'supernatural', but simply as another part of their reality. The shaman has unique access to these rules of natural order, and is able to apply them to life and daily practices.

Morrison's beliefs and practices are easier to define than shamanism, as he has written about them and discussed them publicly for some time, although that does not make them any less abstract or, to the average comic fan, any less strange. Morrison discusses his earlier works in a pre-magical sense:

*Kid Eternity* was about magic, and *Zenith* mentions chaos magic. But they weren't a magical thing in themselves. All it was, I was interested in magic and I was throwing references in. Then I started to think about the potential of comics to actually *do* magic. I thought I'd do a comic that's not just about magic and anarchy, but will actually create them and make them happen (Salisbury 1999: 210).

Morrison is describing his work as pre- and post-magical objects, something that he attributes to his experience with an 'alien' abduction (ibid: 209-210). He describes the experience as being 'surrounded by raw information, swimming through pure data. It was like being in the internet but extending to whatever is outside the four dimensions we've got in this universe' (ibid: 209). In this experience, Morrison met with other beings, further describing the experience as follows: 'the creatures in it seemed to be holographic. They were blobs but it's hard to describe this because you're crunching back down into Third Dimensional language. I'd equate it with something like the Aboriginal "dreamtime"...They talk about a dreamtime, which is a

space where stories continually happen' (Metzger 2002: 104). Morrison is attempting to bridge the abstract with the concrete through translating an untranslatable experience to the interviewer, not only through an attempt to simplify it, but by equating the experience with being outside of a physical narrative object. Edson describes this part of 'knowing' as being instrumental to the world of the shaman, as there is no division between the 'seen and unseen, the physical and the metaphysical, or the sacred and the profane' (2009: 7). The duality between spiritual and mundane reality has been shattered for Morrison, and this experience transcends into his storytelling.

Morrison wants to make his comics magical, not just simple representations of magic, and to share this with others, which he does through the creation of sigils. Re-popularized and simplified by 'chaos magicians' of the 1980's, sigils are magically charged symbols that are abstractions of goals, wishes, desires, etc. (Morrison 2006b: 18). The act of sigil creation embodies some of the key elements of magical practice described by Edson, 'magic is described as pseudo-action in that it is a substitute for true action. Magical activity provided a means of 'proposing' an alternate action in situations where humankind could not alter the effects of natural or physical phenomenon. ...Using magic was a way to change something' (2009: 56). The magical activity is sigil creation, and the abstract image becomes the proposed alternate action in hope to create change. Edson further describes, 'the use of symbols allowed the shaman to evoke two worlds – the sacred and the profane' (ibid: 71). Morrison uses the symbols/sigils as a way to maintain his shamanic connection to his ideas of power.

Morrison's work with sigil magic has gone beyond a singular practice linked with personal development – he extends the concept into his comic book writing. While Morrison often does creator-owned original work, he frequently writes well-established superheroes that are widely available and recognizable in popular print and media for a mass audience. Morrison's work with DC's heroes has given readers exposure to not just crime-fighting adventures, in particular the characters and world of *Batman*, but also a creative output for Morrison's personal beliefs and practices.

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He implements his knowledge of magic in his writing give depth to superheroes and their stories. By having the recognizable characters interact with esoteric concepts, the readers are able to interpret the abstract magical elements in a very comprehensible, accessible way.

He has expanded his practice and belief so that they may be implemented directly into his writing through the creation of what he refers to as 'hypersigils'. Morrison defines hypersigils as a practice that 'develops the sigil concept beyond the static image and incorporates elements such as characterization, drama, and plot. The hypersigil is a sigil extended through the fourth dimension' (2006b: 21). A hypersigil becomes an object with greater life, both in the form of fictional universes and that of a published item. Morrison believes he can create fictional stories that have a literal effect on reality (Salisbury 1998: 211-213).

Inspired by the work of Aleister Crowley, as well as the chaos magicians of the 1980s, Morrison's individual practice remains unique and in a state of constant development, leading to what Morrison refers to as 'Blank Magic' (Babcock 2004: 36). These approaches represent a linear development of magic, as Morrison states:

So Chaos taught me to look past the gods at what was actually happening around me and inside me when I was 'doing' magic...[I]t taught me to look at what was actually going on, and to see it shorn from its symbolic content, and then to apply new metaphors of my own...Chaos Magic is a kind of stripping away, taking magic back to the shamanic core of personal experience (idib: 36).

This emphasizes the importance of everyday experiences, and helps to cement Morrison's application of the term shaman. As Mircea Eliade explains, 'the presence of a shamanic complex in one region or another does not necessarily mean that the magico-religious life of the corresponding people is crystallized around shamanism... Generally shamanism coexists with other forms of magic and religion' (2004: 5). In this context, all religion, fiction, and reality are centered on the same plane of

tangibility, and the individuality is more important to the practice than the culture around him or her. This connects Morrison's description of his own creative process as 'shamanic' and his 'almost daily occult practices and exploration', as he partakes in the action of witnessing the various abstractions and imbue his work with his practice of sigil magic (Morrison 2006a: 9). To Morrison, magic and shamanism 'heightened participation', and are thus represented in his ability to merge his creation of narratives with his practice of magic (Babcock 2004: 36). He is participating with his narratives and encouraging his readers to do the very same. The 'Blank' in Blank Magic alludes to the idea that one can participate with this magic without realizing that one is doing so. Based on Morrison's perspective, this concept is relatively straightforward. Media consumers are outside the physical object of the text in the same way that Morrison felt himself to be during his abduction experience. This sensation is a key aspect of Morrison's work, as he wants the reader to participate with the diegesis of the story the same way one does with its physicality.

Though the process that Morrison describes is abstract, there is a concrete connection to literary theory. Textualization, as defined by Jon Thiem 'takes place when the world of a text literally intrudes into the extratextual or reader's world' (2005: 339). The process of being 'lost' in a story is very real, and is described as resulting from a truly immersive text in which a reader is completely absorbed. Thiem describes this concept in relation to the magical realism literary style, whose metaphorical nature compares well to the visual narrative construction of the comic book. The world of the superhero comic is filled with fantastical plots and super beings that defy the laws of physics and have impossible powers, but are taken on face value as simply existing in that world. The fantasy is banal and a part of daily life. Thiem supports his ideas discussing the English language phrases used to describe this process and effect, as readers often say that they are 'lost in a book' or 'totally absorbed', and notes that other languages have similar expressions (ibid: 341).

There is a vast psychological pleasure associated with reading, and the process of reading can have profound emotional effects. Victor Nell's study, *Lost in a Book: The Psychology of Reading for Pleasure*, uses a scientific approach to look at this psychological connection to reading. Nell describes this 'absorbed' reading process as a 'trance', which he sees as being remarkably similar to a dreamlike state, a process he refers to as 'ludic reading' (1988: 73). He suggests that, 'like dreaming, reading performs the prodigious task of carrying us off to other worlds', and attributes this mostly, but not exclusively, to fictional work due to its association with pleasurable reading (2). Nell describes the reading process, beginning with visual perception and working into more complex areas of comprehension and suggests that 'consciousness is a processing bottleneck, and it is the readily comprehended messages that fully engage the receiver's conscious attention' (77).

Nell notes that less complex literary works make this process more complete, stating that 'the richness of the structure that the ludic reader creates in his head may be inversely proportional to the literary [level] and originality of the reading matter' (1988: 77). The reader's comprehension is more complete when the text is less literarily and cognitively complex. Nell summarizes this idea by stating that, 'the processing demands made by James Joyce may require frequent pauses and regressions, whereas the even pace of Wilbur Smith, and the well-practiced ease with which the reader can imagine his stereotyped characters and settings, may impose a heavier continuous load of attention' (ibid.).

If the process of ludic reading is greater when the text is easily understood, does this process increase even more in the case of a visual narrative? Nell argues that when the brain does not have to struggle for comprehension, it is more able to enter the trance of ludic reading, thus allowing easier textualization. If readers do not need to put increased effort into understanding characters, settings, plots, or even the structures of sentences, then they are able to immerse themselves more fully. The comic's visual narratives allow this process to continue with greater potential. Images replace descriptions and allow for even greater comprehension through the reader's understanding of the illustrated world. One does not need to read about the

character leaving a room or a snow covered mountain if one can see it visually represented.

Scott McCloud's *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art* discusses how comprehension of a visual narrative becomes increasingly cognitively automatic through a process known as closure – 'observing the parts but perceiving the whole' (1994: 63). He describes this process as the brain completing narrative illustrations through visual comprehension, which allows effortless understanding of the greater idea of the image, and in the instance of comics, the overall story and world in the book. Comic panels are generally physically separated on each page, but when we read, we perceive them as a single narrative flow. The space between panels, what McCloud refers to as 'the gutter', allows the 'human imagination [to] take two separate images and transform them into a single idea' (ibid: 66). McCloud argues that the basic nature of comics and the process of reading them represent an absolute form of his idea of closure. If the process of narrative comprehension becomes increasingly effortless because of the images-as-narrative and the brain's ability to perceive the whole from fragments, then the idea of ludic reading trances, or being lost in a book, would naturally increase because of the very nature of this medium and the process of reading comics. The nature of the medium allows textualization to happen more naturally, due in part to its visual narratives.

Pascal Lefèvre expands on this idea in his essay 'The Construction of Space in Comics', in which he describes how the idea of three dimensional space and narrative reality are interpreted by the audience through the ideas of diegetic and extradiegetic space (2009: 157). The diegetic space of a comic may refer to the layout of a character's home, or their direct environment, while the extradiegetic space refers to the ways that a panel and page are constructed in relation to the narrative of the overall story. This extradiegetic space can vary from the ideas of panel order on a particular page to the style of the artist, as Lefèvre explains:

Consequently the form of the drawing does influence the manner the reader will experience and interpret the image: the viewer cannot look

at the object-in-picture from another point of view than the one the picture offers; he is invited to share the maker's mode of seeing, not only in the literal, but also the figurative sense (ibid: 159).

This refers to visual narratives as being able to hold narrative power in their images outside of depth cues and visual representations of people, objects and space. The images, their construction, style, and layout on the page hold a narrative power that is inseparable from the ideas of the story, characters, and dialogue of traditional text-based narratives. This can be extended outside the images, and be included in the page itself, as Lefèvre states, '[the reader] is conscious of the unseen but virtual space outside the panel borders and to link the fragments together, the reader is looking for overlaps' (ibid: 159). This idea clearly overlaps with McCloud's idea of 'the gutter', and the way the reader links static images into fluid action and story. The panels and the abstracted space outside of the panels are all narratively important. In a superhero comic, the diegetic and extradiegetic space is allowed to be more fantastical because 'if a comic pretends to be a realistic depiction of our world, the reader will expect a sufficient degree of consistency' (Lefèvre 2009: 160). Superhero comics are allowed to break away from the notions of realistic narrative storytelling, in terms of both text and visual narrative. The comic medium and superhero genre allow Morrison to include his ideas of magic in the visual narrative of a comic. It may differ from the realities of the reader, but the diegetic world of the comic is common and ubiquitous to the character, and therefore the medium allows for that reality to be accepted. The narrative space is as visually malleable as it is in terms of creating a fictional universe, and the reader is able to cope with this difference and derive personally identifiable substance from reading.

Researchers Peter Coppin and Stephen Hockema theorize the potential of images to hold information beyond basic visual comprehension. They suggest that 'illustrations may be increasingly called upon to help translate complex (often invisible) interconnections into visible form' (2008: 2). During the process of scriptwriting, Morrison often visualizes elements of the story and adds accompanying sketches to his scripts for artists to follow (Meaney 2010). The textual and visual narrative

creation process are not mutually exclusive to Morrison's work, and he is able to include extradiegetic narrative information in his construction. The theory of comic reading, and the cognitive research associated with it suggests, as Coppin and Hockema state, that one should consider 'comics and illustrations as physical phenomena that interact with people, thus causing effects in people' (ibid: 3). The theories of McCloud, Lefèvre, and Coppin and Hockema connect directly to those of Thiem and Nell, as these all relate to cognitive load theory. In such, Coppin and Hockema state that:

The brain is like a machine, with limited capacity working memory...we can explore graphic layouts in comics as a way to reduce cognitive load or to increase mental connections per amount of cognitive load... In comics, prose is located *within* the image; possibly enabling a learner to make a direct visual connection to prose depicted in a word bubble or adjacent caption (7).

In comics, the extradiegetic information represents the narrative information within the image, but for Morrison, this space serves as a method of and space for magic and sigils.

The works of Grant Morrison are known to have heavily inspired Heath Ledger's Oscar winning role as The Joker in Christopher Nolan's film *The Dark Knight* (2008); a role that many claim lead to his death (Complex Media Network 2008). His accidental death occurred months before the release of the film, adding a haunting element to his performance. While preparing for the role, Ledger focused on reading comic texts in which the character of The Joker was particularly prominent and versions where he was particularly evil. The Joker was given startling and demonic life in Morrison's *Arkham Asylum: A Serious House on Serious Earth* (1989) and *Batman #663 – The Clown at Midnight* (2007), both works that inspired Ledger's performance (Vineyard 2008b). Conversely, his co-stars read stories more heavily focused on the character of Batman – stories written by contemporaries Alan Moore, Frank Miller, and Jeff Loeb which lacked the surrealistic elements of Morrison's work

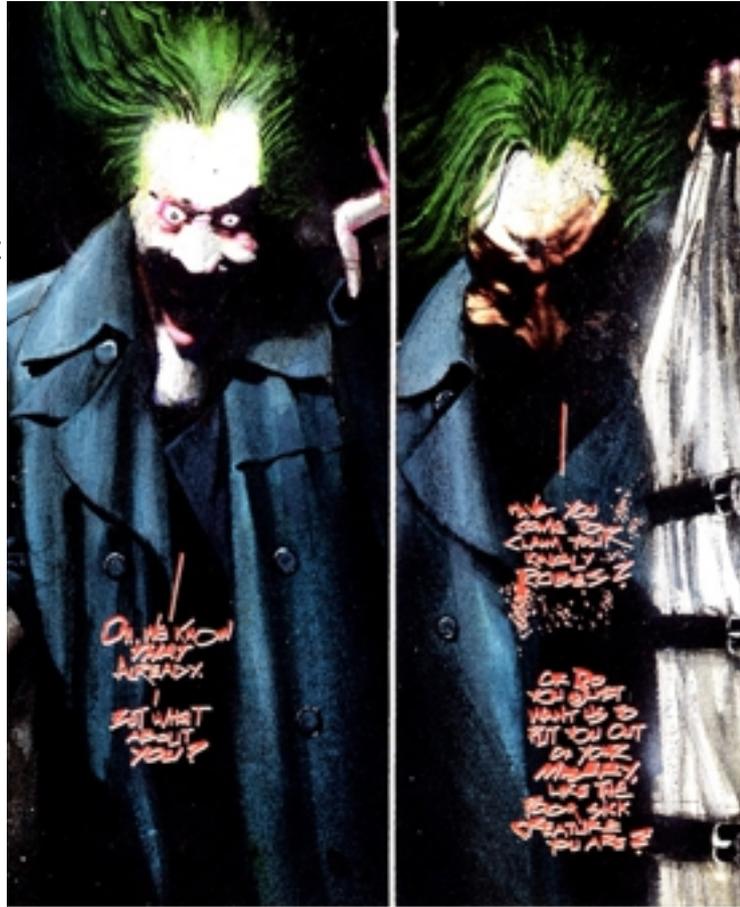
(ibid). Morrison's shamanism and work with magic is embodied in his writing, giving his characters an extra level of complexity. While both being able to write a captivating story and embed within it a deeper shamanic function, Morrison has been able to conceptualize The Joker in radically new and powerful ways. Interviews after the filming of *The Dark Knight* discuss Ledger's inability to disengage with the character (Lyll 2007). The concept of The Joker and his role as a villain has never been more prominent, public, or real.

Ledger's performance has been described as being greater than simply acting out a character from a comic. Charles McNulty, theatre critic for the *LA Times*, called Ledger's portrayal of The Joker 'stunning, frightening, [and a] pathological marvel' (McNulty 2008). McNulty speaks further of the complex nature of Ledger's work:

Ledger's vocal mannerisms constitute a kind of diagnostic manual. Observe, for instance, the way he hits exaggerated Middle American consonants in the beginning, establishing his character not just as a criminal lunatic but a proverbial American one, a heartland offender run amok. And look how his mania affects the rate at which words pour from his scarred lips, slowing down to a normal clip by the end of Joker's deadly game...[N]othing's overdone (ibid:2008).

This emphasis on adding subtlety to the character implies an extremely thorough embodiment on the part of Ledger, suggesting that The Joker does not simply live in Ledger's actions but in his consciousness and emotions as well. We can see this embodiment clearly on screen, with the actions and words of the character forever preserved on film, but the preparatory work also speaks to the levels of the performance.

In Morrison's *Arkham Asylum* graphic novel, we see a clear connection between the vocal mannerisms of Ledger and the extradiegetic display of Joker's dialogue. Throughout the course of the book, the dialogue presents itself in several different visual formats – traditionally speaking, this is seen as voice bubbles or squares, designating a character's speech or thoughts. This is drastically different with The Joker's dialogue, as it is not contained within a bubble, nor is it consistent with the font or colour of the other characters' dialogue. It is displayed as a sharp and inconsistent font, almost as if it



were hand-written on the page or carved onto the diegetic information of the panels. The appearance of the font is violent, not simply in its extreme difference from the other characters' dialogue, but also due to what appears to be a splattering of blood that highlight various pieces of speech. Unlike a traditional font, there is no consistency between repeated letters. The text is red on top of white, giving the visual appearance of the lettering to have a form of depth, so not only is it not contained in a bubble, but also it is seemingly coming off the page itself. This is radically different from the other characters in the book and from the traditional display of dialogue in comics. This suggests a variety of extradiegetic content – aspects of the comic's art that are separate from the diegesis of the immediate visual story, particularly from The Joker.

Where the text of The Joker's speech is displayed separately from other diegetic dialogue, The Joker becomes an increasingly extradiegetic element of the story,

adhering less to the narrative restrictions placed on other characters and aspects of the comic. This content is comprehended through textualization. McCloud discusses the importance of comprehension in reading comics with the ways that faces trigger responses in people, 'the fact that your mind is capable of taking a circle, two dots and a line and turning them into a face is nothing short of incredible...but still more incredible is the fact that you cannot avoid seeing a face here. Your mind won't let you' (1994: 31). Coppin and Hockema also discuss the importance of facial recognition in terms of comprehension, noting that:

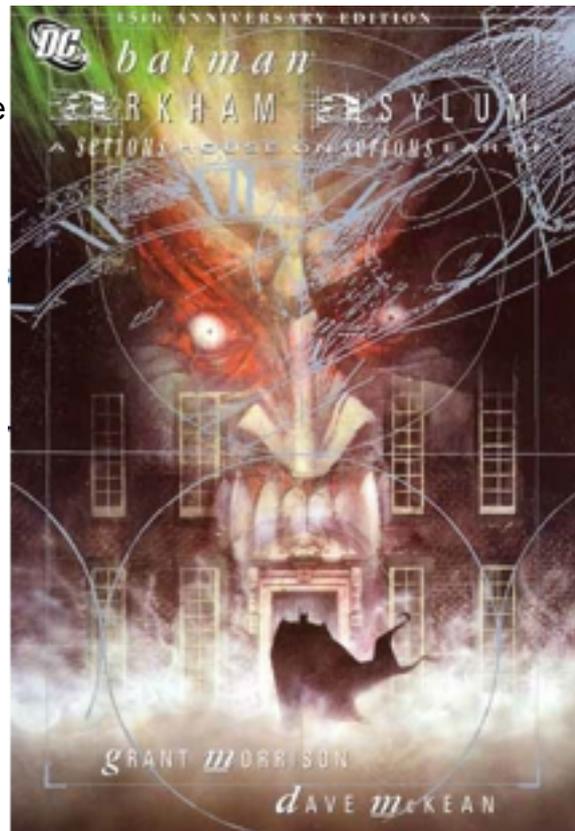
The identity of other people, facial expression, and where someone is looking, all provide meaningful information and consume large portions of the brain's processes; whereas language is focused in the left hemisphere, facial expressions are focused on the right hemisphere, along with *emotional and expressive processing* (2008: 9, emphasis in original).

Not only is The Joker the most visually emotive character in the story, but the reader hardly sees Batman's face – readers see a variety of emotions on The Joker's face, but more importantly, are *constantly* seeing his face. One cannot help but strive for a further comprehension of the villain, rather than the masked hero. This is supported both by the extradiegetic information and by Coppin and Hockema, according to whom 'experiments show that infants respond more to a face that is talking than one that is not talking' (ibid: 8). In *Arkham Asylum*, The Joker's dialogue is presented without bubbles, or containment on a panel. The reader is forced to acknowledge that words are coming out of his mouth, rather than reading them contained on an artificial bubble on the page – we read him as speaking. The Joker is seemingly capable of breaking the diegetic space of the comic.

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The cover of the 15<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Edition of the book suggests that The Joker is transitional figure between these two different layers of reality – he is superimposed over the asylum, but also underneath elements of McKean's collage work. While The Joker exists in the world of the story, he is not contained in the same diegetic restrictions as other aspects of the book.

Rather, he is able to mediate between diegetic space and the reader's reality. These visual elements of the story, whether diegetic or extradiegetic, and of The Joker in particular, create a difficult reading experience. Morrison describes this artistic process as 'a deliberate response to the prevailing current of Hollywood realism' (2011: 225). The surrealist nature of the book's art creates a destructive narrative as Lefèvre states, '[the reader] expects – in analogy with daily life – a consistent space, because he tries on the basis of cues (given in the panels) to form a global image of the complete space' (2009: 159). *Arkham*



*Asylum* and The Joker have no consistent diegetic space, and there is no global or complete image. The reading becomes as chaotic as the visuals and ultimately as chaotic as the character of The Joker himself. Comics, regardless of their artistic complexity, are able to benefit from their visual nature by allowing interpretive prose to be transformed into more comprehensible visuals. As McCloud notes, 'Comics is a sight-based medium. The whole world of visual iconography is at the disposal of comics creators! Including the full range of pictorial styles, from realistic representational art to the simplest cartoons – to the totally abstract and the invisible world of symbols and language!' (1994: 202 – 203). Regardless of the complex appearance of *Arkham Asylum*, it remains one of the most bestselling graphic novels (Morrison 2011: 227).

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Filming began in April 2007, giving Ledger months to bring his interpretation of The Joker to life. To what extent would not be understood until after his death. Grant Morrison became privy to the extremes that Ledger wrestled with in order to *become* The Joker. After the filming, it became known that Ledger had kept a 'Joker Diary' in order to help cement the character, something very few people have been given the privilege to read afterwards. Morrison was among those few. The journal was kept four months before shooting, demonstrating that Ledger had been going through this process as early as December 2006 (Vineyard 2008a). This is important, as Ledger's journal kept track of things that would make Joker laugh – including 'AIDS, landmines, geniuses suffering irreversible brain damage, brunch and sombreros', something that Morrison's Joker did in a stand-alone single issue, *Batman #663 - The Clown at Midnight*, which came out in March 2007 (Vineyard 2008a). The word-for-word exactness of the content had an effect on Morrison, a man used to strangeness, who stated, 'It gave me this chill'. However, Morrison admits that this issue was unpopular among comic readers, as the story was written completely in prose, with few accompanying images, and was a stand-alone issue between main story arcs in his *Batman* comics (Vineyard 2008a).

This single-issue comic presents several important narrative elements. Instead of being images that create diegesis, they are images of emphasis for the narrative. It breaks away from traditional visual narratives and uses standard prose to tell a story with illustrations on each page showing the main point of action. We will often see the image before reading the passage, so the image is often be the first place for story. The accompanying images are also quite different from traditional comic book art, drawn by John Van Fleet, and are still images of three dimensional, computer generated art. The art has full dimensionality for the reader to engage and interpret, giving the story's limited visuals a powerful sense of life. For much of *Batman #663*, Joker's face is covered in gauze, as he is recovering from a previous beating from Batman.

Ledger refers to the character construction as a 'combination of reading all the comic books I could that were relevant to the script and then just closing my eyes and

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meditating on it' (Richards 2007). This can be seen as an instance of Ledger's ludic reading process, as he became more psychologically and emotionally invested in the character of The Joker, allowing himself to be affected by the reading. He also admitted to locking himself away in a hotel room for over a month before shooting, in order to achieve this meditative process, giving the period for character development between mid-March and mid-April. It is entirely likely that he bought Morrison's issue, featuring Joker's diary, or was given it, although still surprising to Morrison himself. The fact that it was, at the time, the *newest* story with Joker in print, as specific titles are generally released monthly, speaks to the devotion of Ledger in terms of mastering the character.

Ledger also reportedly had great influence on the character make-up for The Joker,



working intimately with the make-up design team (Jolin 2009). The film's facial scarring, permanently extending Joker's smile, also appears in Morrison's *The Clown at Midnight* in one of the few images that accompany the text. Though we see Joker throughout the comic, he is confined to a wheelchair, and covered by surgical gauze. The first time we see Joker's face is well into the issue and its image takes up nearly the entire page. We see the radical facial scarring that Ledger brought from the issue into his own portrayal. Ledger's infusion of self into the role is reminiscent of Morrison's inclusion of magic in his narratives.

Regardless of *The Clown at Midnight's* low sales, it speaks to Morrison's writing and Ledger's performance in several hypothetical ways. Ledger became so entrenched in reading Joker comics that he went to a comic shop in order to continue reading current stories, particularly those being written by Morrison at the time, implying that his performance construction was a lengthy and continually developing process. This suggests a performance construction that moved outside the confines of collected stories and single character interpretations that his co-stars may have picked up. Ledger purposely read multiple Joker-centric stories, and clearly kept Morrison's work as a central focus preparing for his own performance. This suggests that Morrison's character development of Joker was so complete that it became an essential reference point for Ledger's character development very late in the pre-filming process. Ledger was seemingly radically affected by reading Joker stories, so much so that Morrison got chills reading Heath's journal, partially because of the story being referenced having been widely rejected and quickly forgotten by fans, but also because of how Ledger fully textualized Joker for his development of the character. Morrison interpreted this as an example of his hypersigils in action, a written character, developed and infused with magic, which had seemingly escaped the realms of his writing and into the mind of another. Ledger, most likely unaware of Morrison's beliefs, brought a startlingly literal interpretation of a fictional character to life, based primarily on Morrison's writing.

Ledger died of an accidental overdose of sleeping pills before the film's release to the public (Barron 2008). The mysterious nature of his death, the character he was performing, and the fact that the film had yet to be seen by the public all added to a supernatural aura that surrounded his death, his performance, and the film itself. Magazine and newspaper headlines asked such questions as 'Did the Joker Kill Heath Ledger?', speculating that 'evidentially, playing one of the most psychotic super villains of all times can be a harrowing task and even be a factor in the untimely death of Heath Ledger' (Complex Media Network 2008). Statements about Ledger's sleeping patterns quickly spread as rumors, as Ledger told the *New York Times* in November of 2007, 'Last week I probably slept an average of two hours a night. I couldn't stop thinking. My body was exhausted, and my mind was still going',

later stating that taking Ambien, a strong prescription sleeping pill, had no affect (Lyll 2007). People began to wonder about Ledger's mental state at the time of his portrayal of The Joker, and speculated that he could not escape the mentality of a 'psychopathic, mass-murdering, schizophrenic clown with zero empathy' (Lyll 2007). This is also supported by the idea of Joker's make-up, as Ledger stated that it felt like he was not wearing any, as if it was just a natural part of his face, furthering the impression of an inescapable embodiment of the character (Jolin 2009).

The implication was present, but no one blatantly stated that the fictional character of Joker had somehow literally killed Ledger. However, they were not discussing it in a wholly figurative sense either. Stories of his life before his death seemed to suggest that The Joker haunted Ledger, and the lack of sleep seems to imply that Ledger was having difficulty getting the character out of his system, affecting him mentally, emotionally, and physically. The press began to discuss ideas of wariness and restlessness surrounding his death, and an article in *Rolling Stone* stated 'he couldn't seem to disengage' (Lipsky 2008). This article further stated that, 'Ledger had no formal training, and there's this to be said for acting school: it teaches you to approach a role as foreign, temporary. Ledger didn't appear to have that...It didn't always shut off when a production did. ... On set, Michael Caine said the performance sometimes turned so frightening he forgot his own lines' (ibid). There is a strong implication here that Ledger's untrained and informal acting style allowed for a dangerous embodiment of the fictional character.

The aura of Ledger's performance displayed a representation that was so real, frightening, and intense that he seemingly could not escape the character he had created. His textualization was so complete that he was, for a period of time, Joker, and it was interpreted by some as having killed him. Fox News printed a story about Ledger being advised to seek professional help, and quoted an anonymous source from *The Dark Knight* set, stating that he 'refused to speak to anyone out-of-character. If you tried to communicate with him normally instead of the Joker, he would just ignore you' (Hollie 2008). Stranger statements began to appear in the press, as Jack Nicholson, the actor to last play Joker before Ledger in Tim Burton's

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*Batman* (1989), told reporters, 'Well, I warned him' (Neumaier 2008). Did Nicholson warn Ledger about the dangers of method acting, the dangers of prescription sleeping medications, or the dangers of being The Joker? Regardless of the context for this quote, it exists in the lore surrounding the death. These sources, regardless of their credibility in the popular media, help to illuminate a mysterious quality of Ledger's Joker performance, implying a supernatural aura of Ledger's interpretation to the fictional The Joker, and a warning of the mystical dangers and superstitions associated with performing as The Joker in film.

Ledger's ludic reading and trance meditation with Joker comics speak to Thiem's process of textualization, being truly affected by a piece of writing, more than simply being engrossed with the reading. The embodiment of the fictional Joker concept as a part of the acting process of character development for film can be seen to work with a part of Morrison's particular shamanic belief process; contacting the spirits of a different plane of existence. In an interview from Mark Salisbury's *Writers on Comics Scriptwriting* (1999), Morrison describes a remarkably similar concurrence of shamanism and textualization, stating that:

Within a year we'll see man's first contact with a fictional reality, seriously. That's what the magic's all about. Fiction and reality are going to become interchangeable. It will happen very slowly. One of the things we can do with the comics universe is go into it. I've already done it in *Animal Man*, but I went in as myself. I realize now that you can go into any comic or any piece of fiction wearing a Fiction Suit. This is pioneering stuff; we are now astronauts entering fiction as a dimension. I can go into the comics' world wearing a Superman body and walk around (1999: 213).

The idea of going into the fictional dimension as explorers and having contact with the reality of the comics speaks to Ledger's full immersion with The Joker from the comics, and of him taking Joker out of the comics and into our reality. Morrison speaks of going into fiction as a figure in the same way that he supposedly interacted

with the beings of a higher dimensional existence. Perhaps Morrison's earlier mentioned 'chills' refer to his silent understanding of Ledger's interaction with the fictional dimensions created in his own stories, an eerie reminder of the power of his own beliefs. Thiem warns us of this process in his essay:

On this delicate balance between detachment and identification rests traditional apologia for fiction reading: through it we can experience without having to undergo the suffering and anxiety that actual experience in the extratextual world entails. In a textualization, this balance is upset. The world of the text loses its literal impenetrability. The reader loses that minimal detachment that keeps him or her out of the world of the text (2005: 343).

Thiem's warning about the nature of literature speaks to the process of reading as an important part of the developmental nature of experience, but not as something greater than the actual phenomenon of reading. Though we can gain experience from reading, particularly through the ludic nature of textualization, the experience has the potential to be dangerous. Perhaps Morrison realizes this and it is why he is very public about his magic practices and how he implements them in his writing techniques, or why he generally chooses the ever-moral world of the superhero for his narratives, believing it is a way of countering the potentially dangerous activity of crossing into and interacting with the fictional world. Though Morrison's beliefs are uniquely his own, he remains focused on the possibilities of fiction. New comics are developing his 'technology' of hypersigils with the intent to "make a superhero in front of' the reader in our own world" (Brettauer 2013).

Heath Ledger's complete transformation into the fictional villain of DC Comics' Joker had a noticeable effect on his physical and mental health after the completion of the film's production, ultimately resulting in his accidental and mythologized death. Ledger's process of character development was so complete that he read Joker comics constantly, learning more and more about the villain, meditating, and infusing the character within himself. The process of textualization allows this to happen on a

neurological level, particularly within works of fiction. The literary practice of textualization emphasizes this, demonstrating how a writer explicitly wants to have the reader engage more closely with the narrative and to get them lost in their book. Morrison uses this technique in his writing, particularly with the mixture of literary skill and his belief in shamanism and magic. His comics become what he refers to as hypersigils – when a plot, as opposed to basic wishes or desires, becomes a magical device and represents the goal of having an effect on reality. Morrison's intent with fiction is to manipulate it in the same way a spirit or god would manipulate an individual in our own reality, and perhaps Ledger accomplished this by allowing himself to become one with a fictional character, unaware of the eventual outcome. When one plays with true villainy, one must be prepared for the consequences.

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