

# Grant Morrison



A Playful Man on Precarious Earth



## Chaos Magician Grant

*Your head's like mine, like all our heads; big enough to contain every god and devil there ever was. Big enough to hold the weight of oceans and the turning stars. Whole universes fit in there! But what do we choose to keep in this miraculous cabinet? Little broken things, sad trinkets that we play with over and over. The world turns our key and we play the same little tune again and again and we think that tune's all we are (Revolution 93).*

# Morrison at Disinfo.con New York

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⌘ [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KV\\_S-nfgLq8](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KV_S-nfgLq8)



# A Little Background



- ❧ Born in 1960 to activist parents in Glasgow (Singer 9-10)
- ❧ Bohemian household, would accompany father to photograph missile bases and bomb shelters (Singer 9-10)
- ❧ Parents and uncle introduced Morrison to comics and occultism (Singer 9-10; Supergods 177-178)
- ❧ At nineteen received Crowley's Thoth tarot deck and decided to become a magician

# Inspiration



- ❧ Carl Jung (Swiss psychiatrist)
- ❧ Aleister Crowley, Austin Osman Spare (early twentieth century English artists and occultists)
- ❧ Punk movement of the mid-1970s
- ❧ 1960s pop and psychedelia
- ❧ 1960s British television series (*Doctor Who*, *The Prisoner*, *The Avengers*)
- ❧ The Romantics, the Decadents, the beats
- ❧ Fantasy (Michael Moorcock) Science Fiction (Philip K. Dick)

# Process



- ❧ Mixes chaos magick, pop culture, the avant-garde and comic book continuity
- ❧ Uses postmodern techniques and the comic book's status as a pulp medium to question assumptions about authority, art and identity:

“...‘postmodernism’ would seem to designate art forms that are fundamentally self-reflexive-in other words, art that is self-consciously art (or artifice), literature that is openly aware of the fact that it is written and read as part of a particular culture, having as much to do with the literary past as with the social present” (Hutcheon 1)

# Intent



- ❧ Morrison seeks to challenge and entertain
- ❧ He wants to explore the limits of the comic book medium and he wants to expand the consciousness of his readership
- ❧ He playfully engages in a masquerade: "...he has played the part of the young radical, the team player, the company man, the revisionist, the nostalgist, the postmodernist, the magical guru, the drug user, the straight-edger, the public speaker who lectures corporations on branding, and the countercultural icon who appears in music videos" (Singer 4).



# Chaos Magic Roots



- ❧ Began in England in the late 1970s as a reaction to the rigidity of English occultism (Hine 15)
- ❧ Austin Osman Spare's development of sigil magic combined with Aleister Crowley's magickal world view were essential to chaos magic's development (Hine 15-16)
- ❧ Peter J. Carroll's *Liber Null* and Ray Sherwin's *The Book of Results* are seminal texts in the development of chaos magic as a system (Hine 15)
- ❧ "...the actual methods of magic are basically shared by the different systems, despite the differing symbols, beliefs and dogmas" (Hine 17).



# Five Principles of Chaos Magic

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- ❧ Avoidance of Dogmatism-rejection of binaries and absolutes, celebration of play
- ❧ Personal Experience-DIY!
- ❧ Technical Excellence-develop a set of skills, practise, practise, practise!
- ❧ Deconditioning- “...the aspiring magician is to thoroughly decondition himself (sic) from the mesh of beliefs, attitudes and fictions about self, society, and the world...the ego is a fiction” (Hine 14).
- ❧ Diverse Approaches-use whatever system works but don't rely on only one

(Hine 13-14)

# Arkham Asylum



- ❧ Released December 1989 shortly after Tim Burton's first Batman film
- ❧ Sales were excellent
- ❧ Meant to be a critique of the hyperrealist depictions of Batman in Miller's *The Dark Knight Returns*, and Moore and Bolland's *The Killing Joke* (Singer 64)

# Reception



- ❧ Critics accused Morrison of writing “the most pretentious Batman book ever.” (Hasted 67 qtd. in Singer 64)
- ❧ Some critics claimed that McKean’s and Morrison’s symbol systems clashed (Singer 71)
- ❧ Although Moore praised McKean’s work, he referred to end product as a “gilded turd” (Supergods 228)



# *Arkham Asylum* and Chaos Magic?

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- ❧ Avoidance of dogmatism: play of various symbol systems and comic book conventions
- ❧ Personal experience: Morrison claims to have drawn from his own childhood fears “Tunnel of Love”
- ❧ Technical Excellence: Morrison attempts to “make his mark” with the publication of *Arkham Asylum* (Supergods 225).
- ❧ Both Morrison and McKean brought in numerous references from outside Superhero comic medium
- ❧ Idea of comic auteurism: “The creator of a comic...is its author, and comics produced under the sole or chief creative control of a single person of significant skill are more likely to be good” (Wolk 31).

# More Chaos



- ❧ Deconditioning: Is this the batman we know and love?
- ❧ What does the Joker represent? Is he a hero? Is he a monster? Is he a He?
- ❧ How does the Joker break the fourth wall and look into our world?
- ❧ Diverse Approaches: How does the text play with linearity? How does it destabilise and re-establish binaries?

# Works Cited



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