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Author(s): Rantala, Oskari

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Superhuman Cognitions, Fourth Dimension and Speculative Comics
Narrative: Panel Repetition in *Watchmen* and *From Hell*

Oskari Rantala

Abstract: This article investigates the use of repeating panels in relation to speculative fiction storytelling in graphic novels Watchmen and From Hell, written by Alan Moore and illustrated by Dave Gibbons and Eddie Campbell, respectively. Presenting the same panel several times over the course of the narrative is an expressive medium-specific narrative technique available only to comics. In the discussed graphic novels, panel repetition is used to represent the superhuman cognitions of the quantum powered superhero Dr. Manhattan, as well as the magical experiences of Sir William Gull, the homicidal madman behind the brutal Jack the Ripper murders in Victorian London. Both characters have abilities and inner life which can be considered speculative, fantastic, or science fictional. Furthermore, their extraordinary cognitions and experiences are exceptionally well-suited to be represented through the comics medium, a narrative form operating on fragmentary visual matter. Comics narrative can employ complex repetitive patterns which Watchmen and From Hell use to simulate four-dimensional simultaneity and detachment of time and space. Moreover, in “The Dance of the Gull-Catchers”, the nonfiction appendix to From Hell that examines the history of ripperology, panel repetition provides narrative evidence, takes part in speculative play, and also works as a device for visualizing the disnarrated.

Keywords: Alan Moore, repetition, panel, comics, graphic novel, graphic narrative, speculative fiction

Biography and contact info: Oskari Rantala is a PhD student of Literature in the University of Jyväskylä, Finland. His forthcoming doctoral thesis examines medium-specific narrative techniques and medial self-awareness in the comics of Alan Moore.

Comics, or graphic narrative, has in its employ a number of medium-specific narrative techniques that open up unique possibilities for speculative fiction. One of them is the repetition of complete panels, that is, the presentation of identical images several times over the course of the narrative. British comics writer Alan Moore utilizes the repeating panels in his graphic novels *From Hell*

(1989–1998¹) and *Watchmen* (1986–1987²), drawn by Eddie Campbell and Dave Gibbons, respectively, to transcend the limits of everyday experience and represent speculative, superhuman cognitions and speculative modes of storytelling.

In this article, I will argue that both works feature characters who have abilities and inner life which can be considered speculative, fantastic, or science fictional. Furthermore, their peculiar experiences are exceptionally well-suited to be represented in the comics medium, a narrative form operating on fragmentary visual matter. Complex repetitive patterns of *Watchmen* and *From Hell* simulate simultaneity and the detachment of time and space which can be explored through the concept of the fourth dimension. Finally, I will discuss the nonfiction appendix to *From Hell* titled “The Dance of the Gull-Catchers” which examines the history of ripperology and employs panel repetition in a compelling way, mirroring the four-dimensional experiences of the characters. Moreover, the appendix uses visual repetition to visualize the disnarrated – events that are narrated but do not actually take place in the story.

The article takes a somewhat formalist approach, focusing on instances in which a single narrative technique is employed and discussing its effects. The theoretical background of the article comprises of (classical) narratology and the work of a number of more semiotics-minded comics scholars, most notably Thierry Groensteen who has theorized the concept of braiding. This is a case study, however, and I do not intend to propose an all-encompassing theory, unlike much of the comics theory influenced by semiotics tends to do. Comics is a rather flexible medium, and narrative techniques such as panel repetition can be used in diverse ways in different works.

On panel repetition in the comics medium

In the twelfth chapter of *From Hell*, a historical – or, rather, an alternate historical – graphic novel about the Jack the Ripper murders in Victorian London, psychic Robert Lees is sitting in a coach on his way to Whitechapel Police Station. He has decided to inform the police that the royal physician Sir William Gull is the culprit behind the brutal murders of five prostitutes. In the storyworld of the comic, his suspicion turns out to be correct and Gull indeed is the murderer. However, Lees does not know it. On the contrary, he is motivated by personal revenge, because Gull has earlier insulted him.

This encounter took place on page 12 of chapter 9 (figure 1, left), in a scene where Lees and Gull meet each other outside the suite of Queen Victoria. Lees greets Gull courteously, but Gull accuses Lees – who acts as the queen’s personal psychic and a medium between her and the deceased Prince Consort Albert – of taking advantage on widows’ “delusions born of bereavement” (FH 9:12/4³). In chapter 12 (figure 1, right), Lees reminisces the exchange: the three-panel middle row of the page repeats again and again the panel in which the insult takes place.

¹ First eight installments of *From Hell* were originally published in the short-lived comics anthology series *Taboo* (1989–1992). Afterwards, the early chapters were republished and the story was finished in a 10-issue comic book series published first by Tundra Publishing and later by Kitchen Sink Press (1991–1996). A special nonfiction appendix “The Dance of the Gull-Catchers” was published in 1998 and the complete series was collected in a single volume for the first time in 1999. On the publication history, see Millidge (180).

² *Watchmen* was published as a 12-issue comic book series between September 1986 and October 1987 by DC Comics. The series was published in collected format in 1987.

³ Throughout the article, there will be a high number of references to individual comics panels. For the sake of brevity, I will denote them with a series of three numbers – [chapter]:[page]/[panel] – because the page numbering starts over in the beginning of each individual chapter, even in collected editions. For the graphic novels *From Hell* and *Watchmen*, I will use abbreviations FH and WM.



Figure 1: From Hell 9:12/1–6 (left) & 12:4/1–6 (right).

Repeating the same panel several times is an interesting technique available to comics, and it can be used rather obtrusively, as this example demonstrates. Alan Moore makes use of panel repetition in several of his works, having the past intrude into the present narrative in the form of panels that have already been shown. Often, only the image is repeated: the contents of the visual track recur but the textual track is altered. In other cases, such as this, the whole panel is repeated with the textual track intact. One can make the case that there are subtle differences between these uses and that the complete repetition of a panel draws more attention to the panel's materiality, emphasizing its status as a copy of an original. On the other hand, even panels with altered textual tracks – for example, the removal of word balloons and the insertion of captions with “voice-over” narration – are easily recognizable due to the immediate way we view images, as opposed to the way we read text. Whereas text has to be read one word at a time in a linear fashion, we perceive the image in front of us as a whole, to some extent. Different works also establish differing stylistic conventions for repetition.⁴

In simple narratological terms, the repeating panels are related to the concept of frequency. A term coined by Gérard Genette (113), it is concerned with the number of occurrences in the actual story versus in the discourse. The narrative is repetitive if an event that happens once in the story is told n ($n > 1$) times over the course of it. Gull insults Lees to his face only once in the *From Hell* storyline, but in the graphic novel the event is represented a total of five times, first when it actually takes place and later as Lees remembers it in chapter 12, most prominently on page 4 (figure 1).

The narrative is obviously repetitive, but one should note that it is not a simple retelling of an event. The complete panel is repeated exactly as it was shown to the reader the first time, apart from the ragged borders, which are markers of the fact that the represented event belongs to the past. It is doubly repetitive, repeating elements on both the story (the event) and the discourse (the panel that represents it) levels. The narrator⁵ presents the same story unit again through the exact same image, as opposed to using the same image to represent separate events⁶ or narrating the same singular event several times with different panels. Therefore, we can speak of the repetition of both

⁴ For example, Moore and Gibbons's *Watchmen* does not generally reproduce panels with dialogue intact, whereas Moore and Campbell's *From Hell* does. However, it's not reasonable to argue that the narrative of *Watchmen* would depend less on visual repetition solely because of this.

sides of the classical semiotic sign: the signifier and the signified. However, as Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan points out, the idea of repeating a complete sign in a narrative is a problematic construct:

But even when the whole sign is repeated, difference is introduced through the very fact of repetition, the accumulation of significance it entails, and the change effected by the different context in which it is placed. We never go into the same river twice, and no pure repetition exists. (Rimmon-Kenan 152–153)

Recurring panels frequently represent memories or flashbacks, which are rather commonplace narrative phenomena. The memories troubling Lees, for example, are insistent but conventional in the sense that they depict normal and easily understandable emotions. However, there are also instances in which the repeating panels represent something else than everyday thought processes.

In the following sections, I will discuss examples of such storytelling in *Watchmen* and *From Hell*. In these graphic novels, Alan Moore and his co-creators use repetitive panels to illustrate the experiences of the near-omnipotent superhuman Dr. Manhattan and the Ripper crimes perpetrator William Gull. In some comics sequences detailing their perceptions, the intrusion of other temporal levels on the page is constant and the recurring panel structures rather intricate. Repeating the same panel or its visual track is a narrative technique that appears deceptively simple on the surface, but it offers the possibility to examine certain interesting qualities of the comics medium.

I will also address the medium-specific features of panel repetition. It is, I argue, a narrative technique unique to comics medium despite the similarities with other forms of visual narrative, such as film. Indeed, the panel is a necessary and fundamental element of comics narrative. The comics medium is most often defined as a narrative sequence of images (see, e.g., Gravett; Groensteen, *Comics and Narration* 9; Harvey 3; Herkman 21–22; Manninen 9–11; McCloud 7–9; Miller 75; Sabin 5). Narration in comics moves forward in panels, and repeating a partial panel, a complete panel, or a sequence of several panels is a highly distinctive narrative technique.

Even though the most immediate meaning-making in comics happens in the framework of successive panels on the level of sequence, comics narrative also operates on the level of network. According to Thierry Groensteen (*System of Comics* 145–147), all panels of a comic are potentially linked to one another: the narrative can generate connections between panels and form non-linear panel series through a mechanism called braiding. Braiding deals with the production of meaning that is generated by correspondences between panels that are not directly following each other in the sequence. The process of braiding can be initiated by repeating shapes, motifs, panel arrangements, or other similarities, and a complete repeating panel is quite an obvious case of connections between two panels: as far as visuals are considered, they are the same panel. Even if we acknowledge that no pure repetition exists, as Rimmon-Kenan suggests, it's obvious that new links and connections are formed each time a panel is repeated – between identical panels as well as between the contexts and scenes in which the similar panels are used.

⁵ I am using the term of comics narrator in the same way as Thierry Groensteen, as “the ultimate instance responsible for the selection and organization of all the types of information that make up the narrative” (*Comics and Narration* 95). Some scholars (see, e.g., Herkman 135) have questioned the need for such a concept.

⁶ See Charles Hatfield's (48–49) discussion of this kind of use in Linda Perkins and Dean Haspiel's graphic story “Waiting” (1996).

Investigating Superhuman Cognitions – *Watchmen* and Dr. Manhattan

A revisionary superhero narrative, *Watchmen* takes a dark satirical look on the tropes of the superhero genre, which has overwhelmingly dominated the mainstream comics industry after the late 1950s. The graphic novel places archetypal superhero characters in a politically realistic world that is profoundly transformed by the existence of the costumed adventurers: they have affected the balance of the cold war arms race and the world stands on the brink of a nuclear war. The heroes themselves are confused individuals, sociopaths, or quickly losing touch with humanity altogether.

The graphic novel includes numerous instances of complex repeating panel structures (see Rantala), but, for the purposes of this article, the most interesting one is the fourth chapter, “Watchmaker”, published as *Watchmen* #4 in December 1986. It centers on Dr. Manhattan who is the only truly superhuman character in *Watchmen*. Formerly a scientist called Jon Osterman, Dr. Manhattan gained his powers in an accident after a scientific experiment goes wrong and Osterman's physical body is disintegrated. Mirroring the superhero lore, he does not die but is transformed into an uncanny being able to control matter down to the molecular level with the power of his mind. Dr. Manhattan can transport himself anywhere in the universe and is near-omnipotent. The most intriguing of his powers, however, is the ability to experience everything that has happened or will happen to him at once, in a simultaneous torrent of moments from history, present, and future.

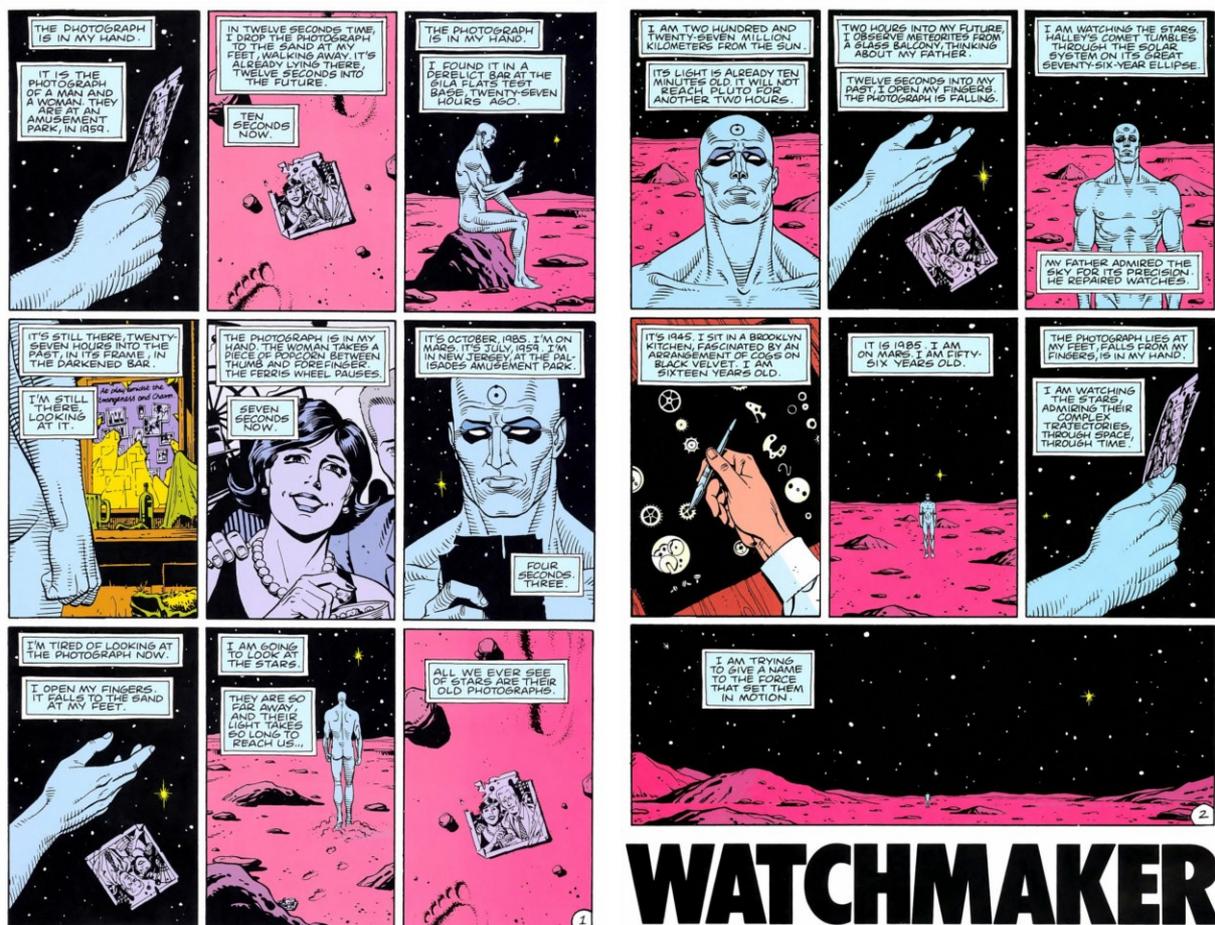


Figure 2: *Watchmen* 4:1–2.

The fourth issue of *Watchmen* recounts the personal history of Dr. Manhattan as an origin story, a prevalent storytelling trope of the superhero genre. In addition to presenting his past for the reader, the issue also attempts to demonstrate the mind-boggling concept of experiencing everything simultaneously. In the chapter, the narrative constantly jumps forward and backward, and events on different temporal levels blend, forming complex sequences of panels that are made intelligible by the superhuman's internal monologue.

In the beginning of *Watchmen #4*, Dr. Manhattan is alone on Mars. The first panel of the first page shows him sitting on the surface, looking at a photograph (figure 2). "The photograph is in my hand", he narrates. In the next panel, the photograph has fallen to the sand. Dr. Manhattan explains that this panel belongs to the future: "In twelve seconds time, I drop the photograph to the sand at my feet, walking away." He drops the photograph in panel 7, and the image of panel 2 is repeated in panel 9 when he has dropped it and walks away. In fact, this is the "correct" place of the panel in the linear chain of events. The second panel of the next page repeats the panel in which he dropped the photo. "Two hours into my future, I observe meteorites from a glass balcony, thinking about my father," Dr. Manhattan notes and concludes: "Twelve seconds into my past, I open my fingers. The photograph is falling." On panel 6 of page 2 he is again holding the photograph, which is, for him, at the same time falling down and already on the ground: "The photograph lies at my feet, falls from my fingers, is in my hand."

Watchmen #4 is filled with this kind of repetitiveness and movement backward and forward in time. For example, the image of the photograph on the surface of Mars, which is shown twice on page 1, is again repeated on pages 5, 24 and 28. In his internal monologue, Dr. Manhattan addresses the turning points of his life story: his father's decision to make a scientist out of his son, his becoming romantically involved with his colleague Janey Slater, his accident and transformation into Dr. Manhattan, his romance with the costumed vigilante Silk Spectre and their eventual breakup. The constant movement in time – or the constant movement of everything else while he stands still, as he himself puts it (4:17/7) – turns the chapter into a mosaic of repeating panels and temporal levels.

Page 17 offers an interesting example of this (figure 3). The depicted scene retells the story of an unsuccessful meeting of the superheroes in 1966 when they debate establishing a superhero group called Crimebusters. On the page, there are three panels that disrupt the linear chronology of the narrative. The last panel, in which Dr. Manhattan stands on the surface of Mars, obviously takes place in 1985, the present of the main storyline of *Watchmen*. In addition to that, there are two other panels which belong on their own temporal levels. In panel 3, the hands of Dr. Manhattan are caressing Silk Spectre's face when the two are making love in 1985 before Dr. Manhattan teleported himself to Mars. The panel was first shown in the beginning of chapter 3 in a scene which ended in Silk Spectre's angry announcement that she is leaving him (3:4/1).

Panel 5, on the other hand, shows the first kiss of Dr. Manhattan and Silk Spectre in 1966. The narrator of *Watchmen* presents the panel on this page for the first time. Therefore, the reader cannot yet recognize it as a repeating panel, but it does not fit into the logic of the story and it is obviously detached from the chronology of the surrounding scene. It is presented in its actual place on the narrative on the next page (4:18/5) in a scene which details the beginning of their relationship, mirroring (the beginning of) its end alluded to earlier.



Figure 3: *Watchmen* 3:4/1 (left), 4:17 (center), and 4:18/5 (right).

From the point of view of the narrative order, these temporal disjunctions are anachronies, more specifically prolepses (Genette 40), which present something that has not yet taken place – that is, if the scene is considered to belong to the temporal level of the Crimebusters meeting. On the other hand, if we examine the relations of these panels to the time of Dr. Manhattan standing on Mars on panel 8, they are (more recent) flashbacks interrupting another flashback, or, by Genette’s terminology, analepses. Dr. Manhattan’s total perception of time challenges these straightforward concepts of flashback and foreshadowing.

The fragmented pictoriality of the comics medium opens up interesting possibilities for depicting the inner world of this superhuman character. In a textual or audiovisual narrative, it would not be feasible to adequately present the simultaneity of his experiences, but the tabularity of the comics page and the simultaneous presence of panels grants graphic narrative some unique affordances.⁷ *Watchmen* does not simply tell the story of Dr. Manhattan on Mars, looking back at his personal history and narrating it after the fact. At the same time, the graphic narrative suggests, he *is* in the Crimebusters meeting in 1966, he *is* having sex with Silk Spectre 19 years later, and he *is* kissing her for the first time shortly after the meeting. He experiences all the moments at once, and when he is seeing Silk Spectre for the first time in panel 2, he acknowledges that they’re having sex 19 years later. When he is reliving their sexual encounter, which has not happened yet, in panel

⁷ Granted, a film with heavy reliance on split screen effects could replicate some of the narrative strategies but the end result would probably be highly experimental.

3, he is feeling Janie Slater's tug at his arm, and when Slater is telling him not to stare at the girl in panel 4, he is already living through their first kiss in panel 5. The recurring panel is an important tool in describing the experiences of Dr. Manhattan both on this page and in the entirety of *Watchmen #4*: more than every fifth of the panels used in the chapter are repetitive.⁸

Dr. Manhattan's unique way of experiencing time has been studied by various comics scholars and different terms have been assigned to it. Sean Carney (p12) describes it as *simultaneity* and Sara J. Van Ness (96–100) as *the gestalt of time* and *the eternal present*, whereas Mervi Miettinen (68–69) borrows the term *super-present* from Erin McGlothlin (185), who used it to conceptualize the meta-level of narrative in *Maus*. Mark Bernard and James Bucky Carter use the concept of *the fourth dimension* to describe the experiences of both Dr. Manhattan and William Gull of *From Hell*: “a special relationship with space and time wherein the two conflate such that infinite multiple dimensionalities become simultaneously present” (2). On a somewhat similar note, while examining the beginning of *La Foire aux Immortels* (1980) by Enki Bilal, Kai Mikkonen (320) writes about how the proleptic repeating panels create an impression of *translinearity*, the same term Thierry Groensteen (*System of Comics* 147) utilizes in describing the effects of braiding.

Whatever handle the experiences of Dr. Manhattan are given, one can obviously raise the issue of free will and agency. “I can't prevent the future. To me, it's already happening,” he explains in the comic (WM 4:16/2). Later, when Silk Spectre questions his free will, he tells her that even though they are all puppets, he is “a puppet who can see the strings” (WM 9:5/4), a highly speculative mindset challenging our comprehension.

Exploring the Monstrous Architecture of History – *From Hell* and Sir William Gull

As opposed to Dr. Manhattan in *Watchmen*, Sir William Gull in *From Hell* has not gone through a laboratory accident which would have given him superpowers. Instead, he suffers a hallucination-inducing stroke. He later explains to his coach driver and accomplice John Netley: “I saw God . . . and he told me what to do” (FH 4:22/3). Despite the obvious differences between a quantum superhuman and a homicidal madman, the two characters have a great deal in common.

Gull is murdering prostitutes at the order of Queen Victoria, because the Ripper victims have information about an illegitimate child of her grandson, Prince Albert Victor. However, the royal surgeon is not merely interested in protecting the throne. The series of murders he commits is in fact a masonic ritual that is meant to symbolically defend the apollonic supremacy of men and rational thought over matriarchy. Gull fears that the “female irrationality” is resurging in the form of socialism, the suffragette movement, and more modern occult organizations. During their lesson in magical geography, he informs Netley that “[s]ometimes an act of social magic is NECESSARY; man's triumph over woman's INSECURE, the dust of history not yet SETTLED” (FH 4:30/2).

The further into the symbolic realm of his rituals and hallucinations Gull is drawn to, the more he becomes detached from his own linear time. After murdering his fourth victim in Mitre Square in chapter 8, he sees before him a modern skyscraper that is situated in the crime scene a century later (FH 8:40). After killing his final victim, a prostitute known only as Julia⁹ he first sees (or is transformed into) a Babylonian stone carving of the ancient god Marduk killing the goddess Tiamat, connecting the homicide with the symbolic war between the sexes. On the next page, Gull and the mutilated body of Julia are transported into a modern office building where Gull is

⁸ To be exact, 40 out of 189, by my count.

⁹ Gull mistakes her for Marie Kelly, who was the last victim of the Whitechapel murders in the factual history. In the comic, Moore has the real Marie Kelly escape this fate and move secretly to Ireland.

perplexed by bright lights, computers, and, by Victorian standards, indecent clothing of the women passing by. He is probably not seeing the puppet strings the same way Dr. Manhattan is – for Gull, his visions are frightening and unexplainable. However, the four-dimensional detachment from time and the simultaneous experience of different temporalities is the same.

As far as the repeating panels and Gull’s visions are concerned, the most noteworthy part of *From Hell* is chapter 14, in which Gull ultimately dies in St. Mary's Asylum in 1896¹⁰. The chapter includes a 20-page section which describes the experiences of Gull at the moment of his death. In it, temporal levels become blended and his memories and precognitive visions combine, forming a mystical totality and bringing together the main themes of the graphic novel. Moore and Campbell rely heavily on repeating panels in this section, as Moore and Gibbons did in *Watchmen* #4.

The first time a repeated panel is connected with Gull’s supernatural visions occurs in the beginning of the chapter. On page 2, there are three panels that are drawn from his point of view (FH 14:2/1–3, the top row of panels on the right in figure 4). Two of them have been previously presented in chapter 10 after Gull killed his last victim and had a series of disconcerting hallucinations discussed above. Frightened by his visions, Gull sits on the bed next to the dead body and experiences a temporal shift: unknown men look down on him and call him “Tom” (10:25.3–4, the panel sequence of the left in figure 4) – that is his fake identity which will be used when he is later locked up in the asylum.



Figure 4: *From Hell* 10:25/1–6 (left) & 14:2/1–6 (right).

¹⁰ In public, the murders remain unsolved, but the brotherhood of Freemasons considered Gull’s gory rituals unacceptable and locked him up in an asylum for the rest of his life, after staging his funeral (FH 12:23–24).

In chapter 10, Gull does not yet understand what is happening and he protests that his name is William on the sixth panel. In chapter 14, these panels are situated in their correct place in the timeline: the men are asylum orderlies who have come to take care of the body of the dying Gull. While the visual track is leaking from chapter 14 to chapter 10, the textual track seems to be doing the opposite. In Chapter 14, the soon to be dead Gull repeats his own frightened words he said after the homicide-induced visions: "No! No, I don't know you! / I'm not Tom! I'm NOT JACK! / I'm William" (FH 14:2/4). Other than that, he is not able to speak at all anymore.

At the moment of his death, Gull finds himself in a dark tunnel, approaching a light. All nine panels on the page are reproduced from pages 2 and 3 of Chapter 2, from the scene in which the reader first encountered William Gull as a young boy (see figure 5). In Moore's original script (quoted in part in *From Hell Companion* 265–266), he names the panels that he wants reproduced – for example, panel 6 should be a reproduction of panel 2:3/1, panel 7 a reproduction of panel 2:3/3 and panel 8 a reproduction of panel 2:3/5. The art of Eddie Campbell roughly follows the directions laid out by Moore, but upon closer inspection we can see that none of the panels are exact copies. In panel 6 (the last panel of the middle row on the page on the right in figure 5), the silhouette of Gull's head is not so close to the wall on the right, there is smoke coming out of the barge chimney and the tunnel opening is further to the right and lower than in panel 2:3/1 (the first panel on the page in the middle in figure 5). There are similar subtle differences in all panels, but, despite them, the reader is sure to recognize that the whole scene is a reproduction of an earlier one.

In the original scene, Gull is riding a barge in the Limehouse Cut canal tunnel with his father, and the two are having a conversation. In the first panel of the retrospective scene, his father's dialogue from 2:2/1 is repeated in a speech balloon that has lost its tail. The dying Gull himself is aware of the fact that he is seeing something he has seen before. In a caption in panel 2, he asks, "H-Has this happened before? Father? / Father, where am I?" First, he addresses his father: "Father, are you there? / I dreamed I was a grown-up man. I dreamed that I was famous for my use of knives. / I dreamed that I was dying in a madhouse" (FH 14:5/4). Two panels later, he acknowledges what is happening: "That was true, wasn't it?" (FH 14:5/6).



Figure 5: *From Hell* 2:2–3 (left) & 14:5 (right).

This page sets in motion a sequence of peculiar experiences. Gull's consciousness appears on the scenes of several supposedly paranormal historical events, and *From Hell* suggests that Gull's presence is actually causing them. He is, among others, the naked man whom passersby saw jump down to Thames (FH 14:8/4), the mysterious fog on the courtyard of Tower in 1954 (FH 14:11/2) and the cylinder of blue light appearing before the Tower's keeper and his wife in 1817 (FH 14:11/3)¹¹. Furthermore, Gull is the scaly phantom figure whom William Blake reportedly saw in 1790 (FH 14:9/4–10/5) and 1819 (FH 14:16/1–9), and he also appears to writer Robert Louis Stevenson in a nightmare in 1886 (FH 14:15/3–7). Apparently, he inspires Blake's famous miniature painting *The Ghost of a Flea*, which is itself used as a repeating panel in *From Hell* (in 9:15/7 and 14:17/1), as well as Stevenson's novel *Dr. Jekyll & Mr. Hyde*, featuring "a doctor with the soul of a terrible beast inside him" (FH 14:15/6). He also appears to a number of more contemporary English serial killers (FH 14:17–19) and to John Netley, causing the coach driver's death (FH 14:20–21).

Gull relives the discussion he had with his friend James Hinton, the father of the mathematician and early science fiction writer Charles Howard Hinton, at the beginning of the graphic novel (FH 2:13–15). Hinton describes some of his son's ideas to Gull, suggesting that from a four-dimensional viewpoint the history can be said to have an architecture and, thus, seemingly random events scattered in time form exquisite patterns. At the moment of Gull's death, the speculations of Hinton finally gain a sinister meaning. He suggests that there might be a rising curve of occurrences: something happening in 1788, then one hundred years later in 1888, then 50 years later in 1938, then 25 years later in 1963, and again 12 and a half years later in 1975 or 1976.

All years are notable for their links to violent crimes in Britain. Naturally, 1888 is the year of the Ripper murders depicted in *From Hell*. A century earlier, in 1788, there had been a criminal attacking women with a knife, nicknamed "The London Monster". In 1938, on the other hand, there was the case of "The Halifax Slasher" who eventually turned out to be the product of a peculiar mass hysteria, with a number of supposed victims inflicting wounds on themselves before reporting to the police. In 1963, Ian Brady and Myra Hindley, who were later dubbed "The Moors Murderers", sexually assaulted and murdered the first two of their five child victims. Finally, in 1975 and 1976, "The Yorkshire Ripper" Peter Sutcliffe murdered his first victims in a series of 13 murders and other violent attacks on women.

The comics sequence places the repeating panels of Hinton talking side by side with glimpses of these other killers and repeated panels of the Ripper murders (see figure 6). The most important panel which shows Hinton describing the "invisible curve through history" is not repeated only once but a number of times. In its original appearance (FH 2:15/3), it includes a lengthy bit of dialogue, but, in chapter 14, the panel is fragmented. It is repeated in five parts in 14:12/9, 14:13/4, 14:13/7, 14:14/2, and 14:14/5 (the first three instances are shown in figure 6), each time delivering only part of the original textual track. The section reveals the most speculative concept of *From Hell*: the Ripper murders are actually only a part of the monstrous architecture of history, and their perpetrator was, at least in part, directed by some kind of dark, chthonic energies. Moore and Campbell have included panels in which Gull is in contact with Brady, Hindley and Sutcliffe: Brady and Hindley are shown in a movie theatre watching the 1959 movie *Jack the Ripper*, while Gull is directly speaking to Sutcliffe – who later claimed that the voice of God had told him to kill prostitutes. In a sense, the scene renders the graphic novel as supernatural horror.

The narrative of *From Hell* uses repeating panels to make this important revelation. The individual panel in which Hinton says "An invisible curve, rising through the centuries" and another one which is completely black and includes only the phrase "What is the fourth dimension?" – the

¹¹ Interestingly, these manifestations resemble those of Dr. Manhattan: after the experiment that created him, he appeared to several people as a walking circulatory system and as a partially muscled skeleton (WM 4:9).

title of Charles H. Hinton’s article published in 1880 – are both repeated three times (in FH 14:14/5, 14:17/2, and 14:19/7, and in FH 14:4/9, 14:12/4, and 14:18/5, respectively). The repetition highlights the importance of the statements. The repeated panels are the portal into the fourth dimension for Gull, as they are for Dr. Manhattan. Moreover, the narrative strategy of panel repetition is at the core of the “speculativeness” of both of these fictions. The extraordinary powers of Dr. Manhattan and Sir William Gull are the strongest speculative elements in the graphic novels – otherwise they would simply be tales of disturbed people in masks and a madman killing prostitutes in Victorian London with alternate historical storylines.



Figure 6: From *Hell* 2:15/1–6 (top left), 14:12/4–9 (bottom left), and 14:13 (right).

Towards Speculative Nonfiction – “The Dance of the Gull-Catchers”

While the comics segments illustrating the cognitions of Dr. Manhattan and William Gull are undoubtedly taking advantage of the comics medium's affordances, there is one segment in the collected *From Hell* in which the use of panel repetition can be considered even more medium-conscious, highlighting its form as a comic. That is “The Dance of the Gull-Catchers”, an appendix published in 1998, two years after completion of the narrative proper. It is a 24-page nonfiction comic about the formation of mythology around the Jack the Ripper murders and about ripperology, the history of which is as strange as the unsolved crimes themselves.

A documentary meta-comic, “The Dance of the Gull-Catchers” offers in several instances bits of information about *From Hell* that isn't apparent for the readers of the graphic novel. On page 3, for example, a panel previously shown in *From Hell* chapter 9 appears again, this time revealing the identity of the child who detective Abberline is talking with (figure 7, left): he is Aleister Crowley, who would later become a notorious occultist known for his interest in the Ripper murders. Other characters are given names as well. The appendix discusses the theory of “the first ripperologist” Leonard Matters, who suggested in 1929 that the murders were committed by a surgeon called Dr. Stanley. Stanley was supposedly connected to Dr. Saunders, the doctor who had done the autopsy of one of the Ripper victims. The autopsy was shown in *From Hell* chapter 9, and the panel 9:5/5 is repeated in the appendix (figure 7, right). The image has been altered, however, and a crude text and an arrow have been added to indicate who is the doctor that the text discusses.

In a number of other repeated panels, even the original textual track is left intact but partly covered by captions belonging to the voice-over narration of the appendix. When discussing the theory of Thomas Stowell put forth in 1970 – the first one to connect the murders to the royal family – the comic repeats the panel in which detective Abberline and Robert Lees enter Gull’s house in *From Hell* chapter 12 (figure 8, left). The original textual matter is visible but new captions have been placed over it, reminding the reader of two things. First, that the details discussed – the statements of Gull’s daughter about police and a psychic visiting the house – are familiar and they have been shown during the course of the narrative. Second, that the panel in question is a *comics* panel and it has been shown during the course of a *comics* narrative.



Figure 7: *From Hell* 9:4/5 and Appendix 2:3/5 (left). *From Hell* 9:5/5 and Appendix 2:5/5 (right).

The same kind of panel repetition technique is used when the appendix explores other sources of similar conspiracy theories. In a journal interview in 1970, Cynthia Legh claimed that Robert Lees told her an account of the murders resembling the one which is depicted in *From Hell*, whereas *Chicago Sunday Times-Herald* had run a similar story already in 1895. When these are discussed on page 12 of the appendix, two panels are repeated (figure 8, right): one showing Robert Lees having a fake seizure (Prologue:4/6) and another one depicting the secret meeting in which the leading Freemasons decided to fake Gull’s funeral and shut him in an asylum (FH 12:21.6). In the latter panel, the partially visible speech balloon includes the name Dr. Howard who was named as a source in the *Chicago Sunday Times-Herald* article.



Figure 8: *From Hell* 12:10/1 and Appendix 2:11/5 (left). *From Hell* Appendix 2:12/2–3 (right).

The repeated panels give references and form new connections, linking what is said to what has happened before in the comic and providing new raw material for speculation. Furthermore, the original panels are treated in the appendix like canvas that can be written over, with new captions superimposed over the original textual contents and names scratched over the image. One can argue that the appendix presents a Dr. Manhattan-like consciousness who assembles a coherent narrative out of the matter that has already been shown.

The appendix can also be seen as a culmination point of the material recursiveness: here, the repeating panels repeat – in addition to the signifiers and the signifieds discussed in the beginning of the article – medial markers of repetition. With the partially overwritten panel surfaces indicating that what we are reading is a comics narrative, the appendix plays self-consciously with its own mediality.

Other forms of repetition in the appendix express other speculative possibilities of the comics narrative. While discussing different theories, the narrative includes panels that depict Marie Kelly waking up in her bed as the murderer storms in through his bedroom door. Each time, the murderer is a different individual, giving visual form to different ripperologists’ speculations.

Notably, this treatment is reserved for the more outlandish theories. When discussing Stephen Knight, whose nonfiction book *Jack the Ripper: The Final Solution* (1976) Moore largely based *From Hell* on as far as the masonic conspiracy theory is considered, there are no such panels. On the other hand, this kind of panel arrangement is employed when discussing John Morrison, one of the more disturbed ripperologists who speculated on traveling in time to save Marie Kelly from her fate (Appendix 2:18/7, second panel in figure 9). Speculations of, for example, Russian lookalikes (Appendix 2:9/4), the revengeful sister of a dead prostitute (Appendix 2:6/4, first panel of figure 9), a Jewish ritual slaughterman (Appendix 2:10/1) and a large group of perpetrators including police and political leaders (Appendix 2:19/7, third panel in figure 9) are all described with the same panel arrangement, with only the murderer changed to match the theory. In these panels, the speculations are discredited by combining them with other dubious theories, the last two of which suggest alien intervention and even “unusually determined suicide” (Appendix 2:22/9 and 23/9, fourth and fifth panels in figure 9).



Figure 9: *From Hell* Appendix 2: 6/4, 18/7, 19/7, 22/9, and 23/9.

Whereas the repeated panels including Abberline and Lees offer tangible visual evidence of the claims and speculations they are discussing, this series of panels is, interestingly, doing the opposite. In “The Dance of the Gull-Catchers”, therefore, the panel repetition also operates on the level of absence: *From Hell* does not include a panel with the kind of arrangement that is used in the

panel series in figure 9. The series of panels is not founded on the narrative proper and, in addition to text captions which are skeptical of the proposed theories, the narrator uses visual means to express disbelief.

This panel series offers an example of the disnarrated in the comics medium. A term coined by Gerald Prince (1–8), it refers to events that are explicitly narrated but do not actually take place in the story, such as unrealized possibilities, incorrect beliefs and speculations. The series demonstrates the flexible narrative possibilities of the comics narrative. The dual-track nature of comics makes it possible to have the visual channel disnarrate while the textual channel makes explicit that the reader is not meant to take the visualized content seriously, especially later on in the appendix as the solutions to the Ripper crimes offered by panels in the series descend to absurdity. Visual repetition has the ability to interrupt the normal narrative flow and force readers to draw connections and conclusions, re-evaluating previous narrative content.

Conclusions

In this article, I have discussed the ways in which panel repetition is used in *Watchmen* and *From Hell* to represent superhuman cognitions and the experiences related to the concept of the fourth dimension. Both Dr. Manhattan and William Gull are superhumans whose exceptional cognitions the comics medium is very apt to depict. It is hardly a coincidence that Moore, Gibbons and Campbell have chosen such abilities for their characters. In several interviews, Alan Moore has declared his conscious intention to “come up with things that comics can do that could not be achieved in any other medium” (Baker 69). Dr. Manhattan and Gull were specifically designed to be comics characters, and it is worth noticing that in the film adaptations of these two graphic novels all the elements related to the visual recursiveness of their perceptions has been left out: Gull is portrayed as an ordinary psychopath in the Hughes brothers’ *From Hell* (2001) whereas the long introspective segment of Dr. Manhattan on Mars has been replaced with a simplified narrative of his personal history without repetitive imagery in Zack Snyder’s *Watchmen* (2009). However, even if the scenes had employed visual repetition in the films, they would have lacked the aspect of co-presence of the panels that the scenes feature in the graphic narratives. Repeating panels is a medium-specific narrative technique, and both works use it regularly to depict the cognitions of their characters. Therefore, we can probably speak of medium-specific cognitions as well.

As Bernard and Carter suggest, Dr. Manhattan acts as a metaphor for the graphic novel experience: “He is not most like any other character in the book, but most like the reader himself in that he transcends transience, simple being, via not displacement, but *multiplacement*”(p20). His experience of simultaneity is represented as panels from the history and future arranged in different sequences and combined with his voice-over monologue which builds causality, creates connections, offers interpretations, and makes the story comprehensible. In *From Hell*, Gull does the same, even though he is less in control and his visions are strange and frightening even to himself, whereas the serene and unemotional Dr. Manhattan remains uninterested in what will happen to all of humanity. Ironically, Gull is very concerned about the future of his world and is ready to commit brutal crimes in order to steer it into the right direction.

Using repeating images like this is a technique only available in the realm of the comics medium, even though other types of visual narrative, such as film, are obviously able to produce a superficially similar effect through repetition of frames or sequences. Simple flashback or foreshadowing sequences which are shown multiple times are relatively common in film, and, in addition to that, there are also more complex and creative uses of repeating sequences in films like *Groundhog Day* (1993) and *Edge of Tomorrow* (2014) or in the TV series *Westworld* (2016) which

all feature time loops the characters are stuck into. However, as Barbara Postema points out, reading a comics page is different experience than following audiovisual narrative (XVIII). On the page, a number of panels are visible for the reader at once, and the narration is produced by their interplay. Comics storytelling is by design fragmentary, relying on the reader to construct the narrative and deduce what happens in the empty spaces between the panels (McCloud 66–68; Postema 50; Groensteen: *System of Comics* 10). Film narration, even though it consists of still images in a material level, is experienced as a one single moving image – something very unlike the four-dimensionality of comics that Bernard and Carter discuss.

While Dr. Manhattan can be considered as a metaphor for the graphic novel experience due to his cognitions represented through the use of repeating panels, as Bernard and Carter suggest, I feel that the same can be said of the *From Hell* appendix narrator. He/she/it employs panel repetition in more complex and medium-conscious ways to offer textual proof, speculations and narrative play with the disnarrated.

Repeating images or fragments of images is an interesting medium-specific possibility of comics. Repeated panels can be utilized in numerous ways in speculative fiction – either to describe speculative phenomena or to discuss the process of speculation itself. Examining repeated panels draws our attention to the fragmentary and translinear nature of comics storytelling and to the way in which the process of braiding establishes connections and meaning.

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