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**Author(s):** Rantala, Oskari

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# The Disintegrating (Comic) Book Object and the End of the Narrative Universe in *Promethea*

**Author:** Oskari Rantala (University of Jyväskylä, Finland)

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## Oskari Rantala

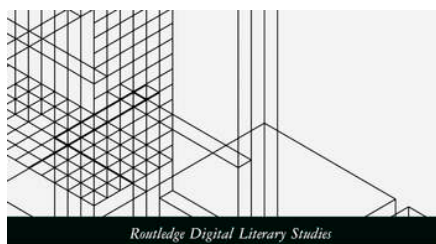
**ORCID:** <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2547-7238>

**ResearchGate:** <https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Oskari-Rantala>

**Website:** <https://oskarirantala.fi/academic>

**Twitter/X:** <https://twitter.com/OskarixRantala>

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## Chapter 7

# The Disintegrating (Comic) Book Object and the End of the Narrative Universe in *Promethea*

**Oskari Rantala**

In this article, I discuss the ways in which the medial affordances of the comic book object are employed to represent the apocalypse at the end of the run of the comic book title *Promethea* (1999–2005) by Alan Moore and J.H. William III. The end of the world is a rare occurrence, even though the default state of the storyworld in a modern Anglophone superhero comic seems to be on the edge of apocalypse. Caused by scheming super-powered villains, alien threats from strange dimensions, or something else, the end of the world is constantly looming on the horizon. This has become more pronounced during the past three decades along with the emergence of dark, revisionist superhero narratives which take a more nihilistic look on heroism. Reimagined superheroes and more apocalyptic storyworlds broke into the mainstream culture in 1980s with works such as *Watchmen* (1986–87) by Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons and *The Dark Knight Returns* (1986) by Frank Miller, and the aesthetics of these works have profoundly influenced the superhero genre (Klock 2006, 25–76). Today, more sensationally depicted violence, unstable storyworlds and sarcastic attitude towards the superhero tradition have become something of a norm in comics as well as in the broader superhero culture.

Another significant development has been the decoupling of superhero narratives from the medium of comics. Earlier the primary medium for superhero narratives, comics has been reduced to just one channel in modern transmedia storytelling projects. Superheroes have become prominent across the entertainment industry as Hollywood movies, television series and video games have made them strikingly valuable properties in the global popular culture. In the realm of comics, the serial comic book<sup>1</sup> as a publishing format is in slow decline compared to graphic novels and digital comics (Griep and Miller 2021). As movies and merchandising have become more profitable, it is not surprising that the mediality of comics and the materiality of the comic book tend not to be foregrounded in the contemporary superhero culture. Admittedly, mainstream adventure comics have never been at the vanguard

1 The misleadingly named comic book is in fact not a book but a thin pamphlet of 20–40 pages.

of experimentalism, but works such as *Watchmen* and *The Dark Knight Returns* did employ distinct medium-specific storytelling strategies such as experiments with narrative temporalities, the representation of superhuman cognitions, and fragmentary depictions of contemporary media environment.

One interesting narrative project striving to explicitly counter these trends of grim and gritty superheroes and apocalyptic storyworlds as well as the lack of medial or material reflexivity was the comic book imprint America's Best Comics (ABC), founded in 1999 for publishing a line of comics written solely by Alan Moore. He had earlier become an icon of the modern wave of dark superhero interpretations as the writer of *Watchmen*, but in titles published under ABC the tone is markedly different. These comics emphasize the positive side of superheroism, light-hearted humour as well as medial and material playfulness. During the next seven years, Moore wrote close to a hundred comic books, graphic novels and short stories that take place in a unified storyworld, establishing something of a mock company-wide shared superhero universe.

In the last issues of *Promethea* in 2004 and 2005, Moore finally dismantled this "ABC universe" in a magical apocalypse. The act of actually bringing about the end of the universe that is always shadowing the worlds of superheroes inverts the trope of a looming comics apocalypse. The publishing logic of ordinary serial comic book requires that the apocalypse is always averted at the last moment and a new threat of epic proportions will emerge in the next issue. For ABC universe, however, the end put an end to everything and wrapped up the whole line of comics. Furthermore, the end of the ABC universe was realized with reflexive and self-conscious use of comics as a medium and the comic book as a publishing format. The end – or, rather, the disintegration and transformation – of the narrative world coincides with the disintegration and transformation of the comic book object.

The present article focuses on this apocalyptic event and its aftermath. Of particular interest is the final thirty-second issue of *Promethea*, a comics series chronicling the adventures of college student Sophie Bangs, who discovers that she is the next vessel for an ancient magical power called Promethea destined to end the world. Written by Moore and illustrated by J.H. Williams III, *Promethea* discusses at length magical practice and the Western esoteric tradition, especially the strands emphasizing the potential coming age of greater consciousness. Aleister Crowley (1875–1947), Austin Osman Spare (1886–1956) and other historical personalities who developed magical techniques appear as side characters in the comic. Furthermore, *Promethea* interrogates the comic book object in a number of ways. The final issue of the series is an experimental comic book object, which can be taken apart: the staples keeping the comic book pages intact can be removed and the pages can be arranged to form a huge double-sided comics surface which offers an alternative reading order for the narrative.

In the first section, I discuss *Promethea* and the ABC storyworld which it ultimately ends. Second, I examine the final disintegrating issue of the comics series from a more material perspective before discussing its genre-specific, medial and thematic interpretations of the apocalypse in the final section of the article. *Promethea* is in many respects a highly interesting comics work that has drawn also academic interest. However, the publishing context, the broader ABC project, and more material considerations are seldom discussed, as research has largely focused on sexuality, magic, and spirituality, principally falling on the field of religious studies.

There is also quite a bit of variance in the scholars' perspectives on the comics series. Others have regarded it as a work "with a strong feminist agenda" (Kraemer and Winslade 2010, 276; see also Petrovic 2012 and Hanegraaff 2016), whereas for other scholars it "occasionally falls back into . . . objectification of women" (Kidder 2012, 177) or even "panders to traditional straight male desires" (Ricker 2017). Aaron Ricker (2017) has denounced the comics series' treatment of magic and Kabbala as "sloppy" and "shameless appropriation," while for Wouter J. Hanegraaff (2016, 239) *Promethea* is "extremely relevant to a currently emerging subfield in the study of contemporary religion and esotericism" and some modern occult and Pagan communities have embraced the comics series as ideal teaching material (Kraemer and Winslade 2010, 228). As Tracee L. Howell (2015, 384) has pointed out, "*Promethea* truly is a text that resists any one critical approach or univocalist reading."

## Setting up and bringing down the universe

America's Best Comics was launched in 1999 and the shared ABC universe was established in four separate comic book series. *Promethea*, *Tom Strong*, *Top 10*, and the anthology comic *Tomorrow Stories* all presented the adventures of different superheroes or "science heroes" inhabiting the same universe<sup>2</sup>. Different titles adopted distinct approaches to the genre and employed different archetypes, subgenres and visual styles. *Tom Strong* plays with the stereotype of a wholesome adventurer, whereas *Top 10* is a police procedural taking place in a city where everyone from taxi drivers to school children has a supernatural ability and a superhero identity. It is a more distinctly humorous take on the superheroes, as are most of the contents of the anthology comic *Tomorrow Stories*, which published, for example, the adventures of the sensual superheroine Cobweb and the crimefighter Greyshirt, an homage to Will Eisner's seminal *The Spirit* (1940–1952).

In contrast, *Promethea* draws on fantasy and esoteric lore, visiting spiritual and magical realms turbocharged with symbolism. Whereas Tom Strong encounters threats from parallel dimensions and the

<sup>2</sup> The intertextual and transmedial *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen* set in the Victorian-era Britain (see Rantala 2020) was the fifth series under ABC, but it was not incorporated in the same shared universe.

police in *Top 10* fight costumed villains, Promethea has to come to terms with her demigod powers and learn about magic while fighting demonic forces. Major parts of the series are less of an adventure comic and more of a lecture on magic and Moore's own interpretation of the Western esoteric tradition, as other characters explain different magical concepts and phenomena to Sophie Bangs. Famously immersed in magic himself, Moore announced that he had become a practicing magician in the 1990s and produced along with other artists several magical performances or "workings" consisting of occult-themed prose poetry and music (Parkin 2013, 272–285; Baker 2008, 7–14). In interviews, Moore often asserts having performed magic rituals in order to write issues of *Promethea*, and that some of "what you were seeing in the comic is not the report of the magical experience; it *was* the magical experience" (Cooke and Khoury 2004, 20, 41).

Different ABC comics titles are set in different cities. *Promethea* takes place in neon-tinted cyberpunk New York, whereas Tom Strong lives in the classically futuristic Millennium City and Cobweb and Greyshirt in the more grimy and mysterious Indigo City, respectively reminiscent of Metropolis of Superman and Gotham City of Batman in the DC universe. The ABC characters have some interactions with each other across the comics titles as in any other corporate-wide shared superhero universe. However, the fact that the narrative registers of different ABC titles vary from serious action adventure to absurd comedy produces a peculiar ironic effect.

When Promethea finally brings about the apocalypse, Tom Strong, Greyshirt, Cobweb and other science heroes get together in an attempt to stop her. Their plan involves a nonsensical "reverse doomsday machine" (Moore et al 2006, 2) that the quirky child scientist Jack B. Quick from *Tomorrow Stories* builds of "kitchen utensils and simple household ingredients . . . and some nuclear bombs and smallpox" (Moore et al 2004a, 17). Here, the different registers and disjointed elements as well as the fact that the heroes' plan ultimately fails to stop the apocalypse play reflexively with the idea of a shared superhero universe and the apocalyptic plot patterns. ABC characters themselves seem to often be in on the genre-conscious jokes that are made in the comic. When the apocalyptic event is taking place, officer Smax of *Top 10* asks, "So this is, like, really the end of the world? It's not just some crossover or something?" (Moore et al 2006, 7).

*Promethea* was geared towards the apocalypse from the outset. When Sophie Bangs becomes aware of her new magical powers and seeks to learn to understand them, she is told by several characters that she is going to end the world. It soon turns out that the apocalypse is going to be more conceptual than physical. "The world' isn't the planet, or the life and people on it. / The world is our systems, our politics, our economies... our ideas of the world," an earlier incarnation of Promethea advises Sophie Bangs in issue 5 (Moore et al 2000a, 14). Rather than a planetary annihilation, Promethea is going to

put an end to the “artificial world of global Capitalist consumerism,” as Wouter J. Hanegraaff (2016, 251) writes in his reading of *Promethea*. Hanegraaff is referring to Debordian critique of the alienating effects of the commercial mass media environment, a view adopted in the spiritual counterculture that he situates Moore in. Indeed, on the pages of *Promethea*, New York City is physically filled with relentless corporate messaging. The magical event finally takes place in issues 28–31.

Several experimental narrative strategies are employed to represent the ABC apocalypse, but the earlier issues of *Promethea* can hardly be considered conventional either. The comic book series combines superhero action with intellectual discussion on magical phenomena, while simultaneously examining the expressive potential of the comics medium and the comic book as a publishing format. Fighting demonic forces is interspersed with sections in which the plot and action are left so far in the background that *Promethea* can almost be considered a nonfiction comic. The magical notions that are discussed in depth include the symbolic attributes of the cup, the sword, the pentacle and the wand, male and female sexual energies, the Major Arcana of the Tarot, and the Hermetic interpretation of the kabbalistic Tree of Life<sup>3</sup>, all pervasive in the Western esoteric thought (Drury 2011, 5–21).

*Promethea* #12, for example, is an exploration of the Tarot. In the comic book, the twin snakes of Promethea’s caduceus wand instruct her about the cards of Major Arcana and the history of life on Earth. The issue is designed as a single 24-page long canvas, with the image continuing seamlessly over all page breaks. The beginning and the end also fit together to form a closed circle, and in the oversized hardcover edition in which the issue is reprinted, it is included as a nearly five meters long sheet that can be folded out. Each page of the comic book includes an illustration of one Tarot card, remarks on it by the snakes in the form of rhyming couplets, some commentary by Promethea as well as nine Scrabble tiles spelling a fitting anagram of “Promethea” and an aging image of Aleister Crowley quoting his book *Magick in Theory and Practice* (1929). With a rigorous structure and the same predetermined elements on all 24 pages, there is an almost algorithmic aspect to the comic book, not to mention the ergodic possibilities of turning copies of the comic book into a circular comics sheet.

Graphic styles are employed expressively as well, and the changes in planes of existence are indicated by changes in the illustrating technique. When an earlier Promethea educates Sophie Bangs about magical realities and past Prometheas in issue 7, Williams’s customary line drawings are replaced by digital art based on photographs created by artist-colorist José Villarrubia (see Moore et al 2000b, 13–21). The hyperrealist feel of Villarrubia’s visuals represents a realm somewhere between the kabbalistic spiritual

3 In Kabbalah, the esoteric tradition in Jewish mysticism, the “central symbolic aspects” (Drury 2011, 7) are presented in the form of a diagram called The Tree of Life. The concept has been appropriated in various contexts: the Christian Kabbalah of the Middle Ages sought to merge it with the framework of Christian theology (Hanegraaff 2012, 54–55) while movements of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century Western esotericism which combined it with Hermetic philosophy and other esoteric practices are sometimes referred to as the Hermetic Kabbalah (e.g., Low 2015).

domains and the physical world – this “Route 32” will be discussed further in the next section of the article. An alternative graphic register can also encompass a whole comic book. In issues 14–23, Sophie Bangs makes a spiritual journey through all the sefirot in the kabbalistic Tree of Life. In the comic, they are spiritual parallel realities or metaphysical realms situated above the physical world. Each of the nine higher sefirot has a dedicated issue illustrated with a different graphic style and a color scheme derived from kabbalistic literature. According to Moore, the comics creators were “following the colors in the Kabbalah even when they sound ridiculous” (Cooke and Khoury 2003, 40). Issue 23 representing the highest sphere Kether, for example, is illustrated with only two shades of white and gold.

When the apocalypse is approaching and the reality begins to fall apart, similar estranging visual techniques are introduced into the description of the physical world of *Promethea*. Buildings from other times and locations appear in the contemporary New York City, and the eerily colored collages convey the disorienting experience of reality becoming unstable. Finally, a wave of energy sweeps over the world. All other science heroes in the ABC universe band together attempting to save the world from Promethea’s. However, they fail and all the people in the world enter an altered state of consciousness and share something of a magical experience together. When characters cross the threshold between realities, the way they are drawn changes into a style that Moore calls “photo-reality” in his scripts and Williams realized with a technique involving parts of panels drawn separately in tonal markers and later combined and enhanced digitally<sup>4</sup>.

The moment when people reach this increased awareness takes place on the last pages of issue 30, as we see Promethea starting to compassionately address every human being at the same time, “And we are precious. / And we are all one thing. / And all conceivable places are in truth one place / and all of time is but a single endless moment” (Moore et al 2004b, 22–23). In the panels on the pages, a glowing light edges closer to different characters of the comic as well as individuals beyond the fourth wall. On one panel, we see the artist J.H. Williams III looking over his shoulder, cursing and surprised, while he is drawing with a pencil on paper the linework for the same panel he appears in. Two panels later, Alan Moore is pictured in a similar pose saying “Uh-oh” while engaged in writing the script. On his computer screen, the reader can see the description of the panel as well as the dialogue: “. . . author Alan Moore, sitting at his Packard Bell computer . . . turning my head and glancing back over my left shoulder at the reader, forehead knit into a wary frown. Me: Uh-oh” (Moore et al 2004b, 23).

4 Moore’s script for *Promethea* #29 as well as Williams’s technical notes and art samples are included in the hardcover collection *Absolute Promethea. Book Three* (Moore, Williams and Gray 2011).



The powers of *Promethea* reach over the dividing line between the storyworld and (the representation of) the real world in which the comic was produced. As the ontological boundary separating the worlds is breached, it can be described as ontological metalepsis, to employ a classification explored by a number of narratologists (e.g., Ryan 2004, Kukkonen 2011). On the last panel row of the spread, metalepsis becomes rhetoric as well. It is the other type of metalepsis defined by Marie-Laure Ryan (2004, 439–235), which in the comics narrative can take place when for example a character addresses the reader directly (Kukkonen 2011, 223). On the spread in question, one panel shows image of the whole finished and printed comic book with a photorealistically rendered hand holding it. The panel is pictured from the perspective of a reader reading the issue. The surprised person holding the comic book and muttering “Um... but...” off-panel is clearly not only a reader but a stand-in for *the* reader, us.

On the following panels, several characters are not only addressing the reader but also looking straight at them like the panels were windows between our world and that of the comics characters. First, one of the characters welcomes us at the door as we are entering the apartment in which *Promethea* is waiting. The drawing is a copy of a panel used in an earlier scene in which other characters went through the same door and he also uses the same exact phrase: “Ah, it’s you. Come on in.” In the next panels, *Promethea* tells the reader not to be frightened and encourages them to embrace the revelations she is about to deliver, “. . . now we are grown. Now the night is over” (Moore et al 2004b, 23).

In *Promethea* #31, which is the very last issue before the finale with the disintegrating comic book, we see some of the consequences of the apocalypse. Here, the “pan-global event” (Moore et al 2006, 22) is represented as a speech in which *Promethea* assures, in short, that everyone is precious and forever, with a series of striking psychedelic visuals. A short epilogue section at the end of the issue is drawn in yet another distinct visual style employing vivid colours, flat colour surfaces and clear linework in contrast to all psychedelic photomontages seen earlier as well as the dark cyberpunk imagery of the preapocalyptic New York City. It is revealed that the conceptual end of the world led to increased interest in spirituality, people being able to communicate with the dead and other strange phenomena, even if life goes on.

In conclusion, the ABC universe is first created and finally profoundly transformed in a metaleptic apocalypse. The Greek etymological roots of the word apocalypse do not, in fact, refer to the end of the world but rather to uncovering or revealing something, in this case a magical and compassionate outlook on human existence. Metalepsis, which involves the breakdown of borders between narrative levels or “levels of reality” (Ryan 2004, 442), is of course an apt narrative figure for representing the apocalypse in *Promethea*. The comic deals with spiritual realities and, as Marie-Laure Ryan points out,

“speaking to the spirit world is generally considered a paranormal activity” (2004, 442) specifically because the participants of the communicative act are situated on the opposite sides of a boundary demarcating two worlds or realities. Exploring the narrative potential of shifting visual registers makes the issues representing the apocalypse highly unusual comics. However, the very last issue engages in delicate material play and becomes itself a profoundly experimental comic book object, something that the earlier issues in the series stopped short of doing.

## Postapocalyptic wrap party

The apocalypse sets the stage for the final issue of *Promethea*, published in May 2005. It was conceived as an epilogue to wrap up the whole ABC universe, as the project was winding down. The title of the issue is “Wrap Party,” a party thrown for the actors and other people involved in making a film or a TV production once the filming is finished.

The issue has 32 pages, all of which feature a line drawing of Promethea against a painted abstract yellow or blue background. Promethea is speaking directly for the reader with her monologue inscribed on speech balloons, and there are ornamental circles including caption-like text and accompanying visual elements. On the first page, for example, drawn faces of Albert Einstein and James Joyce are placed next to captions drawing parallels between the concept of spacetime, *Finnegan’s Wake* and the magical perspectives of *Promethea* (see figure 1 later in the article). There are few elements of traditional comics narrative present, however. The only sequence of images are the full-page arrangements following each other. On each page, there is an arched frame containing a number between 1 and 32, but these numbers do not denote usual page numbers as the issue starts with 16, 29 and 17.

The fact that there are exactly 32 pages in issue 32 is obviously not a coincidence. The magical significance of the number has been stated several times over the course of the narrative. An earlier Promethea tells Sophie Bangs in issue 7 that “there’s 32 points in the whole system: 10 spheres, 22 paths. Route 32 is the path connecting matter and imagination” (Moore et al 2000b, 13). The spheres she mentions are the ten sefirot of the Tree of Life, interconnected by the 22 pathways that various Western esoteric movements have associated with the 22 cards of the Major Arcana. Therefore, each of the 32 pages of the comic book is dedicated to a specific sefirah or Tarot path. Here, the comics narrative is summarizing the key tenets of Western esotericism which became prominent following the work of Éliphas Lévi (1810–1875) and The Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn (1887–1903) (Drury 2011, 19–21, 58–62). In *Promethea* #13, when her journey through all the spheres began, she took “Route 32” which connects

the tenth sphere of Malkuth (our material world) with the ninth sphere Yesod (meaning “Foundation”) and encompasses all kinds of imagination. Visiting Yesod in issue 14, Promethea explains that “spirituality is founded on imagination” (Moore et al 2001b, 16).

This path 32, which is associated with The Universe<sup>5</sup> of the Tarot, is crucial for the apocalypse that Promethea is about to bring. In issue 5, the Great War era Promethea discusses the end of the world with Sophie Bangs, saying, “We have many names for this event. We call it ‘the rapture.’ We call it ‘the opening of the 32nd path.’ . . . But ‘end of the world’ will do” (Moore et al 2000a, 13). She compares it to a transformation as profound as the evolutionary leap early animals took when they rose from sea to land. Many of the earlier 31 issues of *Promethea* point to the significance of number 32, and it is hardly surprising that the issue turns out to be such a key point of the comic and the whole ABC project.

It soon becomes clear for the reader that the non-linear page numbering is connected to this 32-part magical system. Scattered around the comic book, pages 1–10 represent the ten spheres and pages 11–32 the twenty-two cards of Major Arcana. After opening the comic book, the reader first encounters on the inside cover a note informing them that the issue is not an ordinary one. Some pages are upside down and there are two alternative reading orders, as the issue can be read either from cover to cover or the whole comic book can be taken apart and reassembled as a two-sided poster. Only in the latter format is it possible to see that the painted background is not in fact abstract at all. In case the reader goes through the trouble of taking the comic book apart and reassembling it, they get to see two huge close-up images of Promethea’s face. Both comprise 16 pages, so the image cannot be perceived by looking at the pages separately. The red patch on the first page of the comic book was in fact the jawline of Promethea (figure 1).

The mechanics of this disintegration are rather complex, and they are derived from the materiality of the comic book object. At the material level, *Promethea* #32 is a standard comic book consisting of sheets of paper that are folded, stacked and stapled together at the spine. A comic book with 32 pages is made out of eight sheets in total (not counting the covers). Therefore, each sheet is formed of two two-sided leaves and includes four comics pages. For the first sheet, these pages are the first two (1–2) and the last two (31–32), as the first page is a recto (right) page and the second one its verso (back side) page on the reverse side of the same leaf (see first image of figure 2 for visual representation). The design is mirrored at the end of the comic book where the second to last and the last page form a similar recto-verso pair. Due to the fact that the rest of the sheets are stacked and folded inside the first one, each following sheet includes the next leaves towards the centre. The second sheet has pages 3–4 and

5 There are a number of variations of the Major Arcana in different Tarot decks. In *Promethea*, Moore seems to employ the titles of the Thoth Tarot deck by Aleister Crowley – in the perhaps better-known Rider-Waite Tarot deck the corresponding card 22 is called The World.

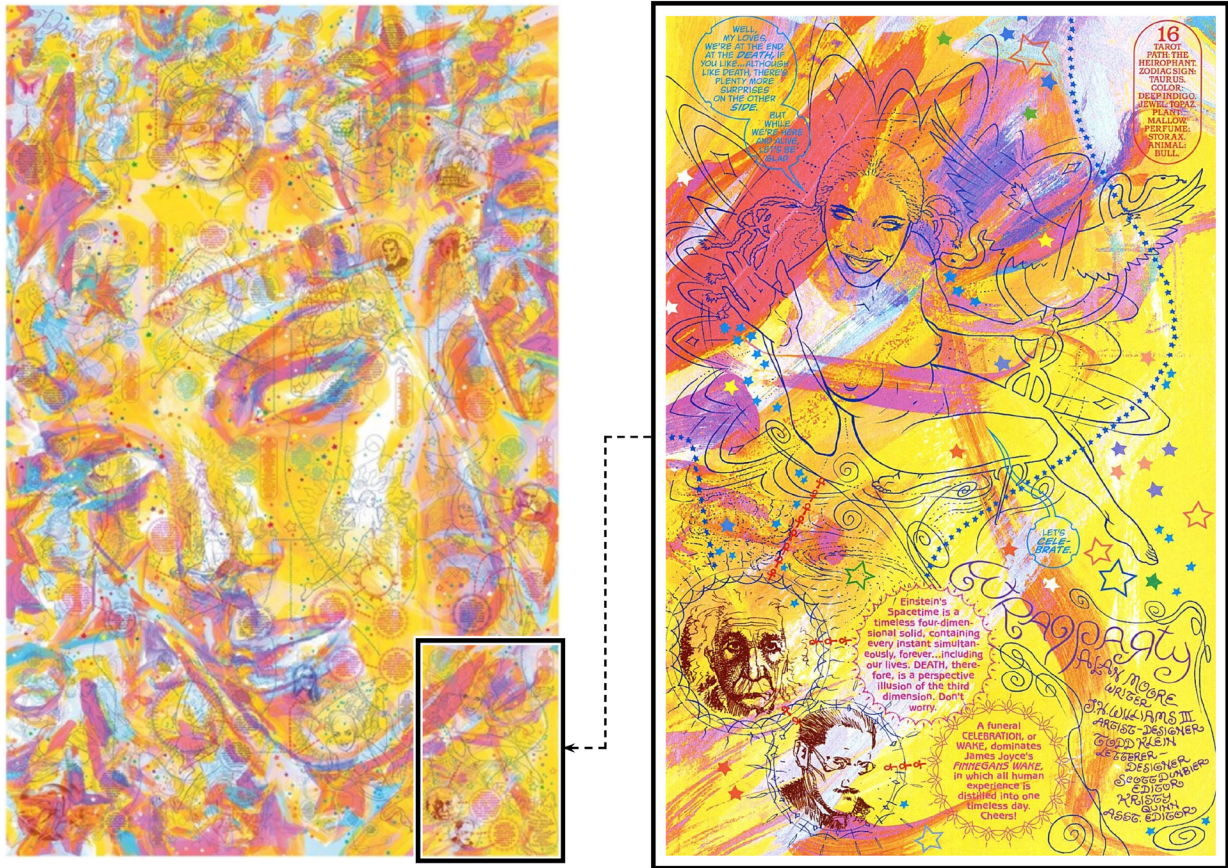


FIGURE 1. *Promethea* #32 assembled as a poster (the yellow side, pages 1–16), indicating the placement of the first page of the comic book (page 16) on the right. © America’s Best Comics. All Rights Reserved.

29–30, the third sheet pages 5–6 and 27–28 and so on until we get to the four pages in the middle of the comic book (15–18) on the last eighth sheet.

After the sheets are detached, it is revealed that all eight of them have a yellow spread on one side of the paper and a blue spread on the opposite side. On both sides, the image is contiguous, and the numbers printed on the two pages next to each other are adjacent as well. In the comic book, their order seems random, but now an organizing principle becomes apparent. Yellow pages have the running numbers from 1 to 16 while the blue pages on the opposite side are numbered 17–32. Consider the sheet that was called first in the last paragraph. It includes pages 1–2 and 31–32 of the comic book, with the image on page 1 continuing seamlessly on page 32, which is on the same yellow side of the opened sheet on the left side of page 1 (figure 2). On the blue side, there are pages 2 and 31.

In figure 2, the comic book page numbers used above are printed in black squares. The other numbers below them indicate the numbers printed on the pages, 15–16 on the other side and pages 29–30 on the

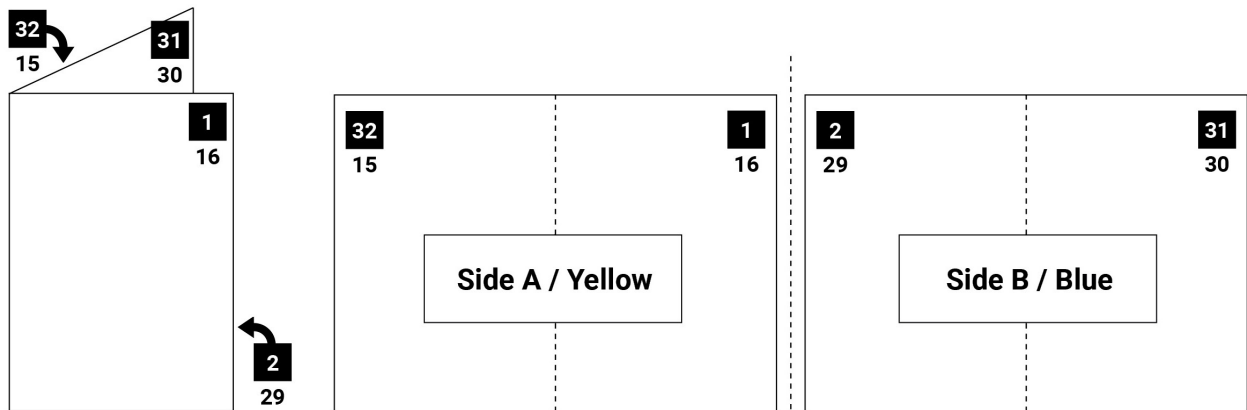


FIGURE 2: The sheet including the first (1–2) and last (31–32) pages of the comic book folded on the left and opened on the right. Black numbers indicate the numbers printed on the pages. Image produced by the author.

other. The sheets can now be ordered in a constellation of  $4 \times 4$  pages according to the latter numbers to form the poster layout. The sheet in figure 2 will be placed on the lower right corner of the yellow poster (which is the lower left corner of the blue side), as shown in figure 1. If the narrative is read in the poster format, these are the last two pages before the poster must be flipped around in order to continue reading on the other side.

The order of the pages in the comic book as well as the fact that half of them are upside down becomes understandable when the transformation is reverse engineered with the final poster as the starting point (figure 3). First, there is the two-sided  $4 \times 4$  poster with the first sixteen pages on the other side and pages 17–32 on the visible side in step A. If the poster is folded horizontally (step A), then vertically (step B) and then again horizontally (step C), the result is a comic book size booklet with the centrefold facing up (step D). These are pages 12 and 11 upside down. It would now be possible to staple the sheets together and make the final vertical fold that would leave the first page of the comic book (step E) on top.

When reading the issue as a comic book, the sequence of pages is 16 – 29 – 17 – 4 – 1 – 20 – 32 – 13 – 9 – 28 – 24 – 5 – 8 – 21 – 25 – 12 – 11 – 26 – 22 – 7 – 6 – 23 – 27 – 10 – 14 – 31 – 19 – 2 – 3 – 18 – 30 – 15. Despite seeming random at first, the order is on closer inspection produced by this material algorithm. The narrative is constructed in such a way that Promethea's speech is not merely understandable in both arrangements, but it also makes up a coherent comics essay. The textual contents on each page indeed tie in with those on the preceding and following pages in both page orders. The textual matter is exactly the same, and Promethea delivers the same meditation on consciousness, magic and imagination in both constellations. There are some subtle differences, however, and the shifting context affects parts of the dialogue.

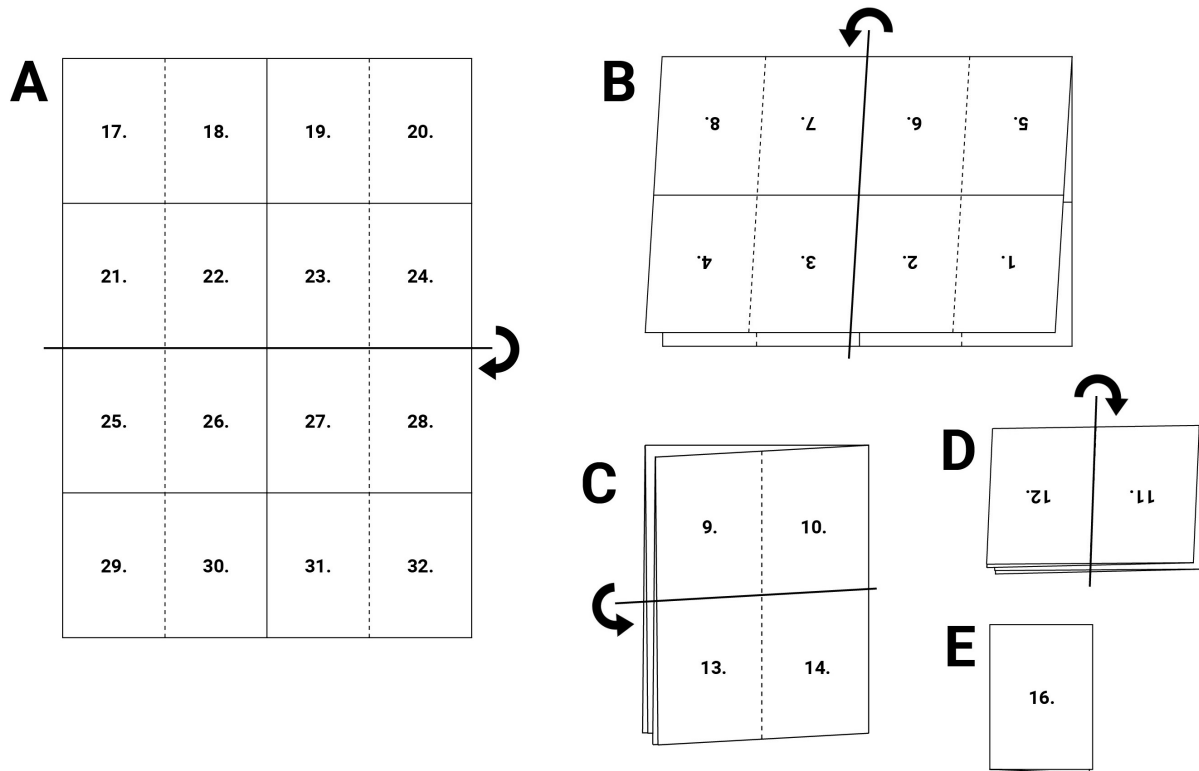


FIGURE 3: Blueprint of the poster-to-comic book transformation in *Promethea* #32. Image produced by the author.

In the poster format, the overall structure is somewhat clearer and the topics of the essay are demarcated on the two color-coded sides of the poster. On the yellow side, *Promethea* discusses consciousness and language, which are the key components of human culture, whereas the blue side is dedicated to imagination and its limitless, magical potential. The colours have some astrological significance, as consciousness is associated with sun-bright yellow and imagination and fantasy with lunar blue. “This light, this palace of imagination, is mankind’s inheritance, a blazing lunar Immateria that the final 32nd path reveals,” *Promethea* proclaims in the last page of the poster layout (Moore et al 2005, 32<sup>6</sup>).

An example of how the context affects meaning is the first page of the comic book (on the right in figure 1). In the comic, the narrative starts with a reference to the apocalyptic event of the previous issues: “Well, my loves, we’re at the end, at the death, if you like... although like death, there’s plenty more surprises on the other side” (Moore et al 2005, 16). Her point has been raised several times during the run of *Promethea*. “The death, if you like” is not a final conclusion, and there is something “on the other side.” In the magical and symbolic frame of reference, the death does not mean the end of life but of something else, a crucial transformation of some kind. In *Promethea*’s magical education in issue

6 In references to *Promethea* issue 32, the page numbers refer to the numbers printed on the pages – that is, the sequence of pages when they are assembled in the poster format.

12, the rhyming snakes of her caduceus explained that “death, our eventual, awful fate / means nothing more than ‘change of state’” (Moore et al 2001a, 15).

The other side that Promethea mentions gains a more material meaning once the pages are assembled as a poster. Now, the opening page of the comic book (page 16) is the very last one of the first yellow side of the poster. After reading Promethea’s dialogue about the surprises waiting on the other metaphysical side, the reader is going to physically flip the large canvas around and see what is on the literal other side. Promethea is discussing not only language, consciousness and imagination but also commenting on the act of reading the material comics narrative. On the first page of the blue side, she continues, “Here, on the other side... if fiction is reality’s flipside... let’s celebrate imagination” (Moore et al 2005, 17). The other side beyond death and the physical other side of the paper are combined with imagination and fantasy, the other side of reality.

In *Promethea* #32, the comics series continues to employ metalepsis. Unlike the scenes representing the apocalypse in previous issues, however, the boundaries between narrative levels do not collapse so completely that metalepsis ought to be considered ontological in this case if we follow the typology laid down by Ryan and Kukkonen. Rather, Promethea’s dialogue does occasionally “open a small window that allows a quick glance across levels” (Ryan 2004, 441), but the breach of illusion remains temporary. On the first page of the comic book, Promethea is looking straight out of the panel, waving her hand and addressing her audience as “my loves.” On the first page of the poster layout, on the other hand, she discusses the origins of the title Promethea and a caption reveals that Moore and Williams were unaware of *The Book of Promethea* by Hélène Cixous while creating the character with a similar name, even though the Cixous novel later appears in the comic.

In these cases, the metaleptic breach does not threaten the ontological order of the narrative levels in a serious way and can therefore be considered merely rhetoric. On the other hand, a comic insisting to be taken apart and reassembled does engage the real-world reader considerably. Reading the comic book in its intended form certainly requires “nontrivial effort” and can thus be seen as an example of a comics narrative that is ergodic, a term coined by Espen J. Aarseth (1997, 1). The nature of ergodic literature inevitably produces a specific form of metalepsis that has been called interactional (Bell 2016, 298). The discussion related to it has so far focused on digital fiction but works such as *Promethea* #32 demonstrate the need for taking the conversation to a more transmedial direction and expanding it to cover analogue forms of culture as well. Moore and Williams’s comic book is very self-consciously *non-digital* and the fact that it foregrounds its materiality and engages in tactile play make it extremely resistant to digital adaptation. The reader might of course perform similar or much more complex and

nuanced reordering of narrative fragments in a digital environment, but it is hard to envision how the element of tactile materiality of the comic book could be retained.

## **In Conclusion: Seeing the big picture(s)**

Ultimately, what is the significance of the unraveling storyworld and the disintegrating comic book in *Promethea*?

The comics series inverts a number of tropes common in superhero narratives. The hero causes the apocalypse instead of preventing it, the apocalypse is not a violent but a hopeful and empowering event, and the status quo of the storyworld is not retained but upset completely in the end. Perhaps as poignantly, *Promethea* violates the economic logic of comic book storyworlds. These universes are valuable intellectual properties carefully handled in such a way that they can be exploited in the future. Obliterating a financially viable superhero universe goes against the operating principles of corporate storyworlds, making it a subversive gesture. Moore has acknowledged that he was fascinated with the prospect because “nobody’s ever really had the chance to finish off a comic line deliberately” (Khoury 2003, 179). When whole lines of comics are ended in a commercial publishing landscape, it happens because unprofitable titles are dropped and companies go bankrupt, not as a result of a creative choice.

In *Promethea* #32, the apocalypse of the storyworld is mirrored on the material level, and the whole comic book is designed to be dismantled as well. But what is taken apart, exactly? All the pages, images and textual matter remain the same, even though the comic book is disassembled and the pages are arranged in an alternative reading format. Even if the pages are reshuffled, the comics narrative remains intact. One answer might be that what is disintegrated is *Promethea* #32 as a comic book. However, the disassembling is only made possible by the material features of the modern comic book and the ability to be disassembled in this way is one of its affordances. Today, *Promethea* #32 is available for the readers only as part of collections that reprint the whole run of the comic in five or three volumes. In fact, these reprint editions or graphic novels (not to mention their electronic versions) do not reproduce the materiality of the comic book. The thick collections do not have staples that one could remove, and thus the whole productive tactile and ergodic aspect of the work is absent. It is not possible for the contemporary reader to interact with *Promethea* #32 in the same way as its original audience. One could perhaps argue that the ephemeral, material comic book and its medium-specificity are celebrated rather than destroyed or eliminated in *Promethea*. What is undermined is not the comic book, necessarily, but the principle of how a traditional comic book does and is able to present its contents for the reader –



something that can be called the comic book as a mere container. Once reassembled in a poster format, the comics narrative oversteps the material limitations that the comic book container had set for it.

What *Promethea* #32 suggests is that these limitations can be transcended, in the same way as the *Promethea* as a whole and the wider ABC project around it sought to transcend other kinds of constraints set by the genre and the commercial publishing context. Obviously, overcoming limitations is central to *Promethea* on the thematic level as well. The reassembling comic book conceptualizes the countercultural esoteric understanding of reality that the series seeks to communicate. Under the surface of material reality, there is an order of a higher level waiting to be discovered that can provide us a transcendent perspective on our existence. There are hidden spiritual spheres and altered states to be explored with consciousness, language, imagination and will. Analogously, there is the visual mystery to be uncovered in *Promethea* #32 under the surface. Only when the container is disintegrated and the sheets are reassembled, does the reader get to read the narrative in the designed order and see the enormous hidden images. By looking at the pages scattered around the comic book in isolation, it is impossible to discern the painted portraits, but once one knows that they are there, different elements gain narrative meaning. The ergodic activity of taking the comic book apart is a requirement for seeing the big picture.

In this sense, *Promethea* #32 realizes the alchemistic principle of “*solvé et coagula*” which Alan Moore has often raised as a concept that reinforces his magical as well as artistic practice (e.g., Ecke 2011; Ó Méalóid 2007; Vylenz 2003). It is even mentioned and explained in a caption in the final *Promethea* issue, “‘*Solvé*’ is reductionism, taking things apart for study . . . ‘*Coagula*’ is holism, reconnecting everything into a better and more accurate picture” (Moore et al 2005, 28). The structural mechanics of the comic book object offer an intriguing application for this alchemistic and magical aspiration.

To sum up, *Promethea* #32 can be approached from at least three different angles: the superhero genre, the materiality of the comic book mirroring the state of the storyworld, and magic as the theme of the narrative. All of them inform the rich network of meanings around the unconventional comics artefact.

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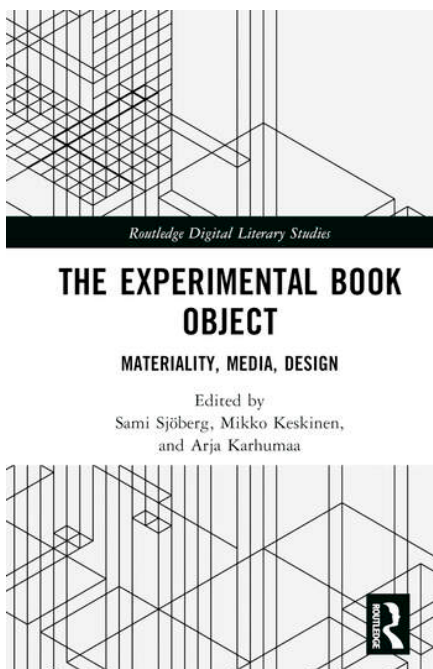
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