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Author(s): Varis, Essi

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Speculating about Nonhuman Experiences with Comic Book Characters

Essi Varis

When you leaf through the very first pages of the collected edition of *The Sandman: Overture* (2015), your eyes are filled, spread after spread, with swirls of bright colors. Bleeding pricks of blinding white intermingle with nebulous, translucent shapes that appear to be clouds, mist, or perhaps stardust – until, on the page preceding the author Neil Gaiman’s foreword, an Earth-like planet is shown from a distance. Colorist Dave Stewart’s paratextual efforts thus highlight the tone and the themes of this strange graphic novel even before the story begins: by flinging you directly into fantastical space-scapes, the opening pages prime you into leaving your earthly, anthropocentric presuppositions behind. Even the lone, inviting planet in the midst of the fanciful color explosions provides less of a reference point than you might initially think because, rather than our Earth, it is revealed to be a home to hairy humanoids and dreaming flowers – a world that is both familiar and strange (#1, [1]).¹

The Sandman: Overture, an acclaimed mini-series published by DC Comics’ Vertigo imprint, first appeared in six issues from 2013 to 2015, constituting a retrospective prequel to Gaiman’s 76-issue dark fantasy comic *The Sandman*, which has enjoyed enduring cult fame ever since its publication in 1989–1996. Both the original series and the new prequel revolve around the moody but responsible Morpheus, or Dream, who – the series asks us to imagine – is a personified distillation of stories and dreaming. The comic explores the functions, similarities, and idiosyncrasies of human and nonhuman minds more generally as well, by experimenting with varying visual styles, and by constructing agential creatures that defy the very definitions of ‘character’ – especially the term’s anthropomorphic connotations. The original series gained its visual richness from switching between more than twenty different pencilers, and in regard to characters, it introduced the Endless: Dream and his family of personified abstract concepts. In addition, numerous minor characters turned out to be places, nightmares, or one and many individuals at the same time. Although *Overture* is only a limited series and penciled by just one artist – J. H. Williams III – it continues these traditions by constantly switching up its visual styles and color palettes, and by telling its story without involving a single human character.

Then again, most of the characters posed as aliens or abstractions in *The Sandman: Overture* appear to have extremely human-like minds and physical features, which makes one wonder how the comic actually constructs its characters as nonhuman and, in doing so, evokes the illusion of mediating nonhuman experience. The question is not only tangled in the previous discussions about narrating nonhuman or “unnatural” minds but also in the logics of fictional characters and in the expressive arsenal of comics storytelling. Thus, this chapter will start by summarizing how different branches of cognitive narrative studies have approached the possibilities of portraying nonhumans in fiction so far. Although these ponderings have not yielded much consensus, definite answers, or even optimism for interspecies understanding, they have at least begun to explain why engaging with fictional aliens may be a worthwhile enterprise, rather than just an exercise in escapism. The second subchapter will go on to consider what new perspectives character theory and comics analysis might bring to this already crowded but exceedingly important debate. Finally, the third subchapter will catalogue the main strategies *The Sandman: Overture* employs in constructing odd but relatable characters, and in marking the boundaries between human understanding and nonhuman realities more generally.

Narrating the Nonhuman: From Species-Specific Solipsism to Celebration of Speculation

Should one ask a crowd of humanist scholars if works of fiction can help their audiences to understand nonhuman experience, some philosophers of mind would immediately stand up, waving Thomas Nagel’s seminal essay “What Is it Like to Be a Bat?” (1974) and yelling no. Several proponents of cognitive and natural narratology (cf. Fludernik 1996; Zunshine 2008; Vermeule 2010) would likely nod in acceptance to this demonstration of restraint and realism. “Is this really what we should be discussing? Narratives and the cognitive capacities we use to interpret them are designed to extract social information about *human* identities and *human* interactions”, they would say. “Perhaps”, other cognitive narratologists (cf. Herman 2011; Bernaerts et al. 2014; Caracciolo 2014a, 2016) might retort, “but that does not mean different imagined scenarios could not challenge our pre-existing cognitive frames and thus affect our preconceptions of nonhumans”. By this point, unnatural narratologists (cf. Alber 2009) or practitioners of genre fiction (cf. Gaiman 2016) would likely interject: “Maybe we should start with these speculative and postmodern works you put aside here in the corner? Strange narrators and nonhuman creatures a-plenty – and, in case you haven’t noticed, they make up almost half the library!”

From this point on, the disagreements and digressions would only grow even more substantial and complicated, as the question cuts across

two extremely current, multifaceted, and cross-disciplinary areas of inquiry: “research on the nexus of mind and narrative” (Herman 2013) and research on human–nonhuman entanglements. What is more, the key concept tying them together – experience – is not an easy target for research, due to its dynamic, multisensory, situated, and uniquely subjective character (Nagel 1974, 437; Caracciolo 2014b, 6, 14). However, as Thomas Nagel (1974, 438, 449) has famously argued, we humans do not necessarily lack the vocabulary to describe and the methods to approach nonhuman experiences because such tools are categorically unattainable but because we have been looking for them in the wrong places – in the framework of natural sciences, which systematically dismisses subjective experientiality. Since an experience is “fully comprehensible only from one point of view” – that of the experiencer – “then any shift to greater objectivity” – which the physicalist sciences always strive for – “does not take us nearer to the real nature of the phenomenon” but “farther away from it” (Nagel 1974, 444–445). Narratives, by contrast, are “tailor-made for gauging the felt quality of lived experiences”, as David Herman (2013) suggests, since they tend to unfold specific circumstances from the specific point of view of a specific character, sometimes in a way that even invites the reader to simulate the characters’ experiences “in a first person way” (Caracciolo 2014a, 29).

There are obvious epistemological limitations to this narrative mediation of subjectivities, however. Since we can only receive experiential input through our human senses and bodies, and since we can only process them with our evolved species-specific cognitive faculties, the output of our imaginations must be determined by patterns of perception and thought that are central, or even unique, to human experience (Nagel 1974, 238–441). Moreover, for most people, much of the input derives from social interactions with other humans, and much of the output is targeted at yet more fellow humans, which means that most of our everyday thinking is filtered through several layers of assumptions about what matters to this specific species. In other words, humans tend to write fiction about humans for human readers, because all these human readers are likely interested in the ways other humans experience their human condition.

Accordingly, Monika Fludernik’s (1996, 9, 26) natural narratology equated narrativity with “mediated human experientiality”. The base argument for many subsequent cognitive theories has, likewise, been that the readers’ mental representations of fictional worlds, characters, and scenarios draw on the cognitive structures and “encyclopedic knowledge” they have accumulated through their continued engagement with the real world, real people, and real-life situations (see e.g. Schneider 2001; Eder, Jannidis, and Schneider 2010; Herman 2013; Jannidis 2013; Caracciolo 2014b, 58–59). As Nagel (1974, 439) formulates: “Our own experience provides the basic material for our imagination, whose range is therefore limited”.

Although the reasoning behind these claims is difficult to deny – one cannot create anything from nothing – they hardly reflect the scope of characters and subjectivities that narrative arts and media have actually attempted to (re)produce. Instead of being limited to scenarios that mimic “natural”, spontaneous storytelling situations, fiction – especially postmodernist (cf. Alber 2009) and contemporary (cf. Caracciolo 2016) fiction – is awash with stories in which “[t]he narrator may be an animal, a mythical entity, an inanimate object, a machine, a corpse, a sperm, an omniscient first-person narrator or a collection of disparate voices” (Alber, Skov Nielsen, and Richardson 2013, 2). Thus, adopting a moniker that is explicitly antithetical to Fludernik’s project, unnatural narratologists like Jan Alber (2009, 80) have experimented with applying the same cognitive reasoning to works that “radically deconstruct the anthropomorphic narrator, the traditional human character, or real-world notions of time and space”.

Yet this strife to expand the canon outside of the “mimetic bias” – which has reigned over narrative studies for the past century (Alber 2009, 79; Fehrle 2011, 240) – has usually stopped short of challenging the “anthropomorphic bias” framed by Fludernik (1996, 9). Alber (2009, 82, 94) has only reasserted that “even the strangest text is about humans or human concerns”, because “nobody would be interested in such narratives” that do not “say something about us and the world we live in”. Of course, naming a movement that focuses on strange narrators as “unnatural” already implies that mimetic, human-like characters are the only “natural” subject of storytelling. Moreover, employing the rhetoric of natural versus unnatural, rather than human versus nonhuman, connotes that unnatural narratologists’ inquiry is mostly focused on the ways in which narratives can deviate from mimetic norms and conventions, not on the ways in which they could suggest nonhuman experience, as embodied by characters that represent types of actual nonhumans. By keeping their claims largely to formal, metafictional, and meta-disciplinary levels, unnatural narratologists have thus been able to bypass the solipsistic concerns voiced by Nagel but they have also resigned from placing much ethical weight or consequence on their own work or on the fictions they research.

More recently, other cognitive theorists have been inclined to see nonhuman fictional characters as potential sites of negotiation and exploration, as artistic and didactic thought experiments that can actually “destabilize anthropocentric ideologies” by underlining the continuities and downplaying the differences between human and nonhuman experience (Bernaerts et al. 2014, 74–75). For Herman (2011, 166, 2012, 97–101), the first step for establishing such continuities is crafting more “fine-grained representations” of nonhumans as genuinely nonhuman – not “emptying” them out and making them vessels for allegorical meanings and “experiences imported from the human domain”.

Indeed, even if one cannot truly know what and how nonhuman animals feel or think, it is always possible to depict them accurately from a behavioristic viewpoint, that is, to produce mimetic representations based on the knowledge gained by observing real nonhuman animals “from the outside”.

According to current philosophy of mind, these “Cartesian geographies” that situate the mind on the “inside”, as if separate from outward behavior, should be discarded, however, because cognitions can only arise from the “sensorimotor coupling between agent and world”. Hence, the mind should be reconceptualized as “situated, embodied and extended” – and since this “basic structure” of an enactive consciousness is likely to apply to other-than-human minds as well, readers can, indeed, fumble for some approximate sense of animals’ lived experience by engaging with carefully constructed (multimodal) animal narratives. (Herman 2012, 97) Inspired by the philosophy of Jakob von Uexküll, Herman (2011, 167, 178; 2012, 99) names such narratives “Umwelt explorations”, and concludes that “increasingly detailed engagement with the lived texture of nonhuman experiences does not necessarily result in a diminishment of narrativity”, as Fludernik and Alber have assumed. This is because animal comics and most other nonhuman stories still retain the most fundamental ingredient of narrative: an experiencing subject, to whom the reader can attribute at least some mental states – based on how it interacts with its environment.

Two disclaimers are in order here. First, because human readers are fine-tuned by the evolution to infer mental states of other humans specifically (Zunshine 2008, 58), it seems very likely that their attributions of mental states to nonhuman characters are unavoidably anthropomorphizing and inaccurate. The narratives can, however, purposefully work against this, by anticipating and undermining some of the readerly assumptions that would aim for overstated humanization, coherence, and illusion of mutual understanding, as the analysis of *The Sandman: Overture* will demonstrate. Second, making the representations more “fine-grained” still does not make them verifiable or factual. No matter how expertly mimetic and resistant of cognitive biases narrative fictions might be, they can never provide the readers with reliable information on how *actual* bats *actually* experience their batness, because that is simply not the purpose of fiction. As noted above, narratives excel at subjectivity rather than objectivity, at providing alternative perspectives rather than “alternative facts”.

This is not to say, however, that fictional nonhumans would be completely inconsequential – or that narratives reaching toward non-existent worlds and creatures would be purely escapist. On the contrary, cognitive narratologists have repeatedly emphasized that the connection between real-life cognitive frames and fictional constructions is a two-way street (e.g. Herman 2013); that narratives can have a “feedback effect”

on the selfsame knowledge structures the reader employs to make sense of them (Caracciolo 2016, 50–51). Even more crucially, the accuracy, mimesis, and truthfulness of the fictional constructions in question may not be very important variables in this equation. If anything, Marco Caracciolo (2016, 47–49) argues that engaging with “strange” characters and foreign worldviews can result in especially extensive – even if only subtle and temporary – cognitive readjustments. In other words, nonhuman or otherwise unconventional narrators often induce cognitive dissonance, which the reader has to resolve in one way or another, by employing interpretive strategies that require reflecting and reviewing the assumptions the reader holds about himself or herself, about mental functioning, and about the world in general (Caracciolo 2016, 12–14, 34–37). Similarly, Alber (2009, 80–93) believes that unnatural, or “physically or logically impossible”, scenarios cannot always be naturalized as hallucinations or allegories; sometimes, they “challenge the mind’s fundamental sense-making capabilities” and, as a result, “blend” or “enrich” the readers’ pre-existing cognitive frameworks.

Of course, disjuncting or expanding the readers’ cognitive frameworks in this way has always been the main goal of all the different subgenres of speculative fiction (cf. Stockwell 2008, 518). Science fiction, fantasy, and horror typically ask the readers to concern themselves with worlds, entities, and experiences that are clearly not knowable, verifiable, real, or perhaps even possible. The very fact that these entire “unnatural” genres exist and continue to remain popular defies the reasoning of both natural and unnatural narratologists: it seems reductive to assume that authors would create fantastical scenarios only to explore different ways of diverting from natural, mimetic frameworks and conventions, or that the readers would only engage with them in order to glean “Machiavellian” social knowledge from odd creatures they ultimately see as cleverly disguised fellow-humans (Vermeule 2010, 30–33). Rather, genre fiction typically treats speculation and counterfactual thinking as goals in themselves. Neil Gaiman (2016, 15), the author of *The Sandman*, for instance, sees “what-if” thinking as the most important prerequisite for ever changing anything in the world or in oneself: “Political movements, personal movements, all begin with imagining another way of existing”.

Sometimes, this “imagining another way of existing” means trying to imagine what it is like to be a bat. Even if such an attempt is doomed to fail objectively speaking, it can still influence one’s understanding of bats, for better or for worse. Other times, “imagining another way of existing” means making up aliens and speculating how they might experience the world through their unique “sensory-motor couplings” with their imagined environments. In a way, this is an even better, safer form of speculation, because it does not pose the risk of misunderstanding or misrepresenting any actual nonhumans. Imagining aliens has absolutely no consequences for bats but, again, it can still be consequential

for the reader, whose ideas of humanness, nonhumanness, and experience become foregrounded, and perhaps even reconfigured, at least for the duration of the imagining. Indeed, when faced with something unknowable – such as the subjective textures of nonhuman experiences – imagining is the only option for getting any purchase on the matter.

Hybrid Humanity: Possibilities of Multimodal Fictional Characters

On a more practical level, these theoretical strands intertwine in non-human fictional characters – a strange concept in itself as characters are, of course, never truly human. Instead, they are constructions that are meant to be mistaken for humans, much like the living scarecrow Mervyn, who serves as the janitor in Morpheus' dream kingdom in *The Sandman* series. Although he pointedly describes himself in very material terms – as “a moist wet pumpkin with the seeds scooped out, carved into the shape of a face and rammed onto a hard, rough, rampant wooden stick” (#1, [19]) – his physical form and verbal self-expression are so analogous to those of regular humans that the reader is, nevertheless, likely tempted to anthropomorphize him into an agential individual – with the mind to mock Freudian interpretations of dreams. The juxtaposition between this anthropomorphic “feel” of the character and the passing foregrounding of his artifactual materiality are likely to cause a jolt of defamiliarization, however, and remind the reader that agency and sentience are more fundamental to the concept of characteriness than anthropomorphism is. In this section, I will argue that the inherent nonhumanness of characters is always ranged against the humanness of the reader, and that comics' capacity to evoke characters' subjectivities with monosensory yet multimodal narrative means can highlight these tensions in unique ways.

As James Phelan's (1989, 4) rhetorical character theory sums, all characters are artificial constructions – but they are constructed in such a way that conjures forth a mimetic illusion of personhood. Many literary theorists (e.g. Eder et al. 2010; Jannidis 2013) have since concurred that characters are born when textual cues are read through cognitive frames of humanness. This supposedly involves both “top-down” and “bottom-up” processing, meaning that the reader can either instantly recognize the character as belonging to a certain category – such as the category of character or the category of humanity – or extrapolate such categories by collecting specific textual cues (Schneider 2001, 619–626). Cues like a proper name or a speech balloon imply agency, sentience, and individuality, and thus invite the reader to place the entities associated with these cues into the category of character – and, most likely, into the category of humanity as well. Thus, to summarize Phelan's theory in another way, the category of characteriness binds agential

narrative functions and illusory humanity together, so that the readers are compelled to humanize agential textual constructions as well as to expect narrative agency from such textual constructions that manifest human-like traits. Furthermore, it would seem that placing a different amount of interest and emphasis on these two aspects – the synthetic and the mimetic aspects of character (Phelan 1989) – forms the main fault-line between natural and unnatural narratology's approaches to nonhuman minds.

Arguably, Fludernik's natural narratology and the cognitive narratology formed in its wake have mainly concentrated on explaining the formation and functions of the mimetic aspect. That is to say, they have largely equated the human readers' ability to understand, animate, and flesh out fictional characters with human species' evolved "ability to interpret other people's behavior in terms of underlying mental states" (e.g. Zunshine 2008, 58; Vermeule 2010, 34–37) – the so-called theory of mind. Some have further inferred that the opportunity to safely use and train this ability must be the main "point" and pleasure of reading fiction (Alber 2009, 94; Vermeule 2010, 246). Thus, while the exact chains of argumentation vary, many theorists drawing on this framework have essentially reformulated Fludernik's (1996, 28) claim that narrativity "centers on experientiality of an anthropomorphic nature". Narrativization is consequently bound up with anthropomorphization, and the blame for this bias rests on the human readers: because readers use human-centric cognitive capabilities to make mimetic sense of narratives and their characters, they are inclined to read about humans even when they are not reading about humans. In other words, even overtly nonhuman fictional characters are seen merely as "proxies for traits of human difference or otherness" (Keen 2011, 147) or as "strategic and parodic" "mask[s] or costume[s]" for the human, "whose universality is reaffirmed and reified in the process" (Chaney 2011, 130, 135).

The agenda of unnatural narratologists, by contrast, implies that characters' synthetic aspect is not subservient to mimetic interpretations but vice versa: the illusion of personhood is only one of the effects the textual cues can be used to produce. Indeed, since characters are always ontologically nonhuman, all one needs to do in order to create an "unnatural" character is to allow this nonhumanity to seep onto the representational level. Many unnatural narratologists have therefore analyzed such postmodern works that flaunt the artificiality of their characters. The very fact that such characters typically have a jarring, disruptive, "unnatural" effect actually ends up being a testament to characters' supposed anthropomorphism, however. Following Lisa Zunshine (2008, 63–75), portraying a character simultaneously as a person and as an artifact upsets essentialist assumptions that are fundamental to human minds' ontological reasoning. Since readers are unlikely to ever truly forget that characters are non-existent constructions created by the author,

the dissonance evoked by openly artificial characters must rise instead from the readers' inability to ignore the expectations of humanness they associate with characterness.

Then again, whether or not fictional characters themselves are human is less pertinent to the present research problem than whether or not they can be used as a tool for approaching other, actual or imaginary, nonhuman creatures. Some theorists claim that tampering with the synthetic level of characters' textual construction can produce other defamiliarizing effects on the interpretational layer as well – effects that can read as nonhuman in a more general sense, not only in the sense of postmodern artificiality (cf. Bernaerts et al. 2014). This relates to the blending of cognitive frames discussed in the previous section. When something presented in a text does not fit the readers' existing, anthropomorphically biased cognitive frames, they tend to react both cognitively and affectively. Together, the epistemological conflict and the accompanying feeling of strangeness constitute what Viktor Shklovsky named “defamiliarization”: the reader becomes aware of the newness – or the alienness – of what he or she perceives and is thus prompted to reflect on it, to discard automatized heuristics, and to find new pathways for thinking and perceiving it (Caracciolo 2016, 35, 48–49). If this is caused by or coupled with two other narrative devices or experiences – a character posed as nonhuman and an empathetic stance toward him or her – defamiliarization could arguably give the reader the sensation that they are glimpsing a nonhuman subjectivity.

As Bernaerts et al. (2014, 71, 75) argue, creating characters that appear both relatable and nonhuman requires striking a delicate balance between the two “poles” corresponding to natural and unnatural narratologists' main interests: the texts' deliberate, “anti-mimetic” strangeness, and the reader's “natural” projection of “assumptions and expectations about human life and consciousness”. That is, a text can season a character with textual cues evoking the dissonant cognitive categories of “animal”, “plant”, “artifact”, or “substance” (Zunshine 2008, 56–65), but the character still has to remain anthropomorphic enough to be recognized as a character. Also, the defamiliarizing effects of nonhuman subjectivities can only truly be experienced through empathy – or the imaginative, first-person adoption of the “the perceptual, emotional, or axiological perspective of a fictional character” (Bernaerts et al. 2014, 73). However, the empathetic simulation of the nonhuman character's mind requires projecting partial memories of the reader's own past, embodied experiences onto the nonhuman character (Caracciolo 2014b, 123–132), which both presumes and results in some degree of anthropomorphization. In other words, although characters are always nonhuman, even the representationally nonhuman characters can be classified as characters only by the virtue of their illusory anthropomorphic qualities, and the reader must paradoxically relate

nonhuman characters to his or her own human experiences in order to bear witness to their nonhumanness. Thus, nonhuman narrators always manifest “the conceptual integration of human and nonhuman traits”; impossibly, they blend “similarity and otherness” and “empathy and defamiliarization”, the category of human and the many possible categories of nonhuman (Bernaerts et al. 2014, 71, 72–74).

Suzanne Keen (2011) and David Herman (2011) have come to similar conclusions: they both note that comics especially can hybridize human and animal traits in different proportions for different effects. Animal features can be superimposed on human characters – for instance, in order to establish a distancing allegory (Herman 2011, 169) – or animal characters can be made more understandable and sympathetic by anthropomorphizing them to some degree (Keen 2011, 142, 148). There is no way off the continuum, however. Keeping in line with the “natural” argument that characters always have a mimetic aspect and that the mimetic aspect is based on the cognitive application of anthropocentric folk psychology, Herman and Keen imply that nonhuman characters unavoidably incorporate some human features. At the same time, they point toward a medium that can juxtapose these dissonant streams of character information with particular ease: the medium of comics.

On the one hand, comics have traditionally fostered an exceptionally high “tolerance”, or even a preference, for the fantastic and the unnatural (Fehrle 2011, 211). Not only are the institutions and fandoms of speculative fiction and comics historically linked – for example, Neil Gaiman is known as both a fantasy author and a comics writer – but cartoonish and expressive graphic styles presuppose story content that does not necessarily follow the laws and conventions of realism. That is, because comics are rarely photorealistic, they might activate the cognitive frames and memories readers have of fantastical fictions, rather than of real life or realistic fictions, inviting them to actually *expect* such “unnaturalities” as altered laws of physics or nonhuman characters (Fehrle 2011, 215). On the other hand, contemporary comics show an increasing interest toward the inner worlds of characters (Groensteen 2013, 129). This inward turn is likely related to the recent surge of critically acclaimed autobiographical comics, from Art Spiegelman’s *Maus* (1991) and David B’s *Lascension du haut mal* (1996) to Marjane Satrapi’s *Persepolis* (2000) and Alison Bechdel’s *Fun Home* (2006). Meanwhile, in academia, cognitively informed scholars have started to notice how the multimodality of comics allows depicting “minds in action” – that is, evoking fictional minds through repeated visual bodies embedded in “physical contexts” (Mikkonen 2008, 303, 316; Herman 2011; Kukkonen 2013, 154). Where these two tendencies – fantastical speculation and innovative depiction of embodied minds – collide, comics and comics research can contribute to the speculative exploration of nonhuman experiences.

What is more, colliding or paralleling different discourses is what comics do best. This is because a page of a graphic narrative is always a composite of several, more or less independent elements: pages are divided into panels, and panels consist of foregrounded and backgrounded elements belonging to “two distinguishable semiotic tracks”, the verbal and the pictorial (cf. Kukkonen 2013, 136). All of these parts and tracks can stand in vastly different relations to one another: transitions from panel to panel typically introduce some changes in time, location, perspective, or even graphic style (McCloud 1993, 70–79); a single page or panel can parallel several simultaneous events (Kukkonen 2013, 136); and the words and images can either complement or contradict each other (e.g. Fehrle 2011, 221). As Keen and Herman’s analyses already testify, this modularity of comics’ expressive arsenal provides plenty of options for such human–nonhuman hybridization. Bernaerts and his colleagues assume that nonhuman narration necessitates.

Unlike film – to which it is often unfavorably compared – comics is also “a monosensory medium” (Groensteen 2013, 122), meaning it must pack all the information and expression on the static, two-dimensional space of a page. As a result, things belonging to different sensory domains and different levels of mimesis become forcibly juxtaposed. The most prevalent example of this is the speech bubble, “a desperation device” (Eisner 2008, 24) that allows auditory and abstract information to intrude the visual, physical reality of the storyworld. For regular comics readers this device has, of course, become naturalized (Groensteen 2013, 122) – no one really imagines the characters walking around with white balloons on which they write their thoughts – but translating thoughts into images can take other, more elaborate or defamiliarizing situational forms as well. Since the 1920s, cartoonists have remixed objective and subjective perspectives both within and between panels, devoting specific story elements or entire passages to flashbacks, daydreams, and other character-focalized outlooks on the storyworld (Groensteen 2013, 130). Bill Watterson’s *Calvin and Hobbes*, for instance, constantly demonstrates how imaginatively and vividly Calvin experiences his toy tiger and everyday situations: in his mind, teachers become dinosaurs, girls appear as disgusting aliens, and Hobbes is alive (cf. Groensteen 2013, 129; Varis 2013, 60, 120). Although these changes from more objective to more subjective and private perspectives are typically signaled by changes in the graphic expression, they can still leave quite a bit of room for ambiguity and interpretation. That is, the reader may be left hesitating between what is real and what is imagined, and for which characters (Groensteen 2013, 124, 131).

Of course, this kind of oscillation between interpretations, between empathetic and more external stances, is also closely related to character-centric defamiliarization (Caracciolo 2016, 47, 55). As noted above, the concept of defamiliarization is an important ingredient

in the discussion about nonhuman narration as its emotive component marks the textual source of the defamiliarization as new or alien, while the cognitive dissonance prompts the reader to blend and reconcile his or her pre-existing cognitive structures in relation to this alien, possibly nonhuman domain. In the context of comics, however, this hesitation may also target the “Cartesian geographies” and the subjectivity of mind and experience, heightening the readers’ awareness not only of the presence of something Other but also of the ways and extent in which its subjectivity can be known and shared.

To sum, the necessity to express both the storyworlds and the characters’ subjective experiences solely through the “visual channel” causes them to blend with and through different semiotic devices and graphic qualities, so that the dichotomies between the “inside” and the “outside”, the mental and the fleshly, the subjective and the objective become deconstructed. Indeed, although the minds of the characters can be revealed by direct, verbal means in speech and thought balloons (Mikkonen 2008, 306–307; Groensteen 2013, 122), the imaginary subjectivities rarely remain confined in them. Instead, anything from colors and graphic qualities of the lines to the shifting perspectives and appearances of the characters can convey (aspectual) character-focalization (cf. Thon 2014). Such visual devices allow evoking subjective experiences without verbalizing them, which is especially important when aiming for mimetic depiction of the experiences of creatures that do not think or communicate in written or spoken language. Then again, traditional, “behaviorist”, third-person graphic narratives, which provide no direct access to their characters’ minds at all, also depict their characters as visually embodied and embedded in social, spatial, and temporal situations (Mikkonen 2008, 303). Thus, the reader can draw on much of the same cues they would take note of when observing sentient creatures in real life. Facial expressions and bodily postures, for instance, can be observed directly from the visual track, which, according to Suzanne Keen (2011, 135, 146), allows comics to tap into the readers’ immediate affective responses: the characters’ core emotions are recognized before the neocortex has time to judge whether the character in question is one of “us” or one of “them”, a human or a nonhuman.

Of course, one crucial difference between reading comics and observing real life is that the visual perspectives of comics’ panels do not only situate and embed the characters in the storyspace, but they also situate the reader in some relation to the characters: near or close, opposite or over the shoulder, outside or as-if inside (Mikkonen 2008, 309–312). This is likely to have some effect on the empathetic perspective-taking, which, as noted above, is a logical prerequisite for engaging with the nonhuman characters’ experiences. As the page designs keep leading the reader from panel to panel, through the different perspectives and trajectories, “the representational and experiential dimensions of the fictional

mind” are often brought together (Kukkonen 2013, 154). In other words, the overlap between the visual storytelling and character focalization can force some degree of aspectual overlap between the narrated, speculatively nonhuman experience of the character and the real viewing experience of the reader (cf. Caracciolo 2014b, 123). As a result, it becomes more difficult to view the character only as a static, alien object, whose unfamiliar way of seeing the world can forever remain completely outside of the reader’s considerations. The next chapter will demonstrate, among other things, how the page designs can manipulate the reading experience in this way, and how they can thus underline what the reader can and cannot assume to know about the nonhuman characters’ minds and perceptions.

Fables and Reflections: A Brief Experiential Analysis of *The Sandman Overture*

When discussing the fictional experiences of nonhuman characters as well as the readers’ experiencing of those characters, it seems necessary to employ a method that also leaves some room for experience. Therefore, this section presents not only an analysis of *The Sandman: Overture* but also an analysis of my personal process of (re-)reading it. Of course, this process involved the kind of subjective layers, inaccuracies, and irrelevancies that academic research typically rejects, but it is only against this experiential backdrop that I have been able to ask the questions the present chapter seeks to answer: how does this unusual comic and its nonhuman characters make the reader think and feel about the borders of humanity and nonhumanity? It seems to me that all researchers engaging in close reading must implicitly go through this same step; we build our appropriately distanced analyses on more holistic, embodied, and immersive interpretive experiences (cf. Kukkonen 2014). The only novelty of my approach is that I have endeavored to make this preliminary experiential juncture of my reading slightly more visible and systematic. In practice, this means that as I read *The Sandman: Overture* for the third time, I recorded, by hand, spread by spread, as many of my observations and associations as possible. I do not claim that this method captured more than a fraction of my entire experience or that the presence of a pen, a notepad, and a specific interpretive agenda did not affect the experience itself. Despite these inadequacies in comprehensiveness and authenticity, the method did yield some merit, however: it revealed which elements on each page potentially draw the reader’s attention, highlighted the metatextual layers and trajectories implied by the page designs, made it more obvious which pages and panels might make one stop or misread, and generally added nuance to my understanding of the work – as well as to my understanding of my understanding of it. The findings of this initial, subjective, and visually

oriented raw analysis are here grouped, contextualized, and refined further, into a more objective and less digressive, fairly traditional discussion. Nevertheless, whenever I am referring to “the reader”, I am still primarily referring to myself.

Without further ado, let us dive into the space-scapes evoked in the beginning: *The Sandman: Overture*’s plot unfolds nonlinearly, and at a cosmic scale, but underneath all the formal experiments and stretches of imagination, it actually follows the familiar formula of an apocalypse and a messianic intervention. Long ago, in a fit of compassion, Morpheus – a god-like personification of dreaming and stories – refused to kill a star, who had gone mad from seeing into other creatures’ sleeping minds. This madness has since spread through the “four hundred billion galaxies in the universe —, like a cancer” spreading through the “four hundred billion cells in the human brain”, which means that “soon enough, the mind that is the universe will cease to think and all things will cease to be” (#2, [17–18]). After Morpheus learns that he is the one responsible for this apocalyptic domino effect, he sets on an intergalactic, interdimensional journey to stop it. He succeeds – after a fashion – with a little help from the rest of his family of metaphysical concepts: Father Time, Mother Night, and his siblings Destiny, Death, Destruction, Desire, Despair, and Delirium.

The scenario *Overture* sets up is thus the one scenario that positions all imaginable life forms and exists on an equal footing: the destruction of the entire universe affects everything in the universe in the same way, from monocellular organisms to star systems. The impending erasure of such fundamental common denominators as dimensional space effectively nullifies the more refined dichotomies we normally use to classify different entities: organic or inorganic, sentient or non-sentient, human or nonhuman. Combined with a protagonist like Morpheus, whose ability to understand, traverse, create, and destroy different worlds exceeds even those of regular gods, this premise invites the reader to stretch their imagination far beyond the scope of human reality. Author Neil Gaiman is well aware that this is a tall order, and explains in his introductory chapter-by-chapter notes how he wanted to intersperse the “spectacle” and “futuristic spatter” with “something contained and very human”, in order to make “people care” (“The Accompaniments”,² [40]). The dual strategies of nonhuman narration (Bernaerts et al. 2014) are thus very much present throughout the work: the near-systematic, multimodal induction of defamiliarization alternates with invitations to more anthropocentric, more empathetic perspective-taking, which covertly presupposes a human reader.

Before pointing out its inevitable limitations, let us first consider the ways in which the comic does manage to evoke cognitive and emotive strangeness through its character designs. The very first character whose inner world the reader of *Overture* glimpses is clearly situated

on a foreign “small planet” and belongs to a “race of huge carnivorous plants, with limited mobility, but beautiful minds” (#1, [1]). Subsequently, each issue keeps introducing ever more fantastical alien species: “there are ships that live and warriors who are worlds” (#3, [1]); there is a “a cluster of metallic beetles”, who “have come to participate in the destruction and to make art from the wreckage” (#3, [3]); and there is “a bacteria complex”, who is “one of the universe’s greatest mathematicians, yet immediately lethal to the majority of life-forms it encounters” (#6, [1]). While the diversity of these nonhuman characters seems striking at the first glance, they are all made concurrently comprehensible and strange by the same, simple strategy: by cross-attributing traits from several, normally irreconcilable “ontological categories” to one single character (Zunshine 2008, 63–64). A “carnivorous plant” already defies prototypic thinking, as meat-eating is much more common for the existents in the “animal” category than for the existents in the “plant” category. As such creatures exist in the actual world, however, they are not that defamiliarizing or difficult to imagine. What pushes such a creature outside the known reality is complementing it with a mind that “dreams”, because – while this trait may still be weakly commensurate with the carnivorous category of “animal” – it is rarely associated with the barely sentient category of “plant”. The following page heightens the dissonance even further by connecting the plant creature with speech bubbles, which imply a cognitive ability associated exclusively with personhood: language. Still, this talking plant pales in comparison to the increasingly simple organisms – beetles and bacteria complexes – who in the later issues are claimed to be capable of even more sophisticated human feats, of making art, and of understanding high-level mathematics.

All in all, *The Sandman: Overture* makes use of a much wider selection of ontological categories than the usual talking animals, which some theorists consider to have already become naturalized (Alber 2009, 94). That is, anthropomorphic animals, or zoomorphic people, are so familiar from fables and comics, they no longer require cognitive adjustments from the readers’ part. In addition, one could claim that the majority of such characters sit firmly on the allegorical, “coarse-grained” end of Herman’s (2011, 165) continuum, meaning that Donald Duck, Blacksad, and their ilk mostly convey human experiences, like having a job and a family, or fighting against criminals and racism. By contrast, they convey very little of their experience of using wings for arms, of seeing in the dark, or of being coated in fur or feathers. *The Sandman*, too, teems with so many colorful critters there is hardly any space to render the depiction of individual characters’ experiences particularly “fine-grained”, but the ontological blends manifested by the crowds of Gaiman’s odd figures are so many, extreme, and unusual they can at the very least surprise the reader and thus open a door for thinking outside

the established cognitive frames. Moreover, many of these nonhuman characters are portrayed multimodally, which allows the reader to experience their strangeness in an even more concrete, multifaceted, and defamiliarizing way.

One of the most striking ontological fusions in *The Sandman: Overture* is achieved completely non-verbally, through a gradual development of a disturbing visual motif. Many of the backgrounds and landscapes incorporate inappropriately organic features: architectural structures of the City of Stars (#4, [11–12]) mesh with red, tree-like shapes that could be interpreted as blood vessels, and an abandoned dream hospital (#2, [4–5]) appears to be in possession of sensory and internal organs – teeth, eyes, and tongues poke out of the windows, and the attic is filled with brain tissue. The comic delivers on these background details in the final issue, where the near-death of the universe is signaled by a giant EKG chart running through several blacked-out spreads (#6, [18–19; 24–35]): the very space of the universe – and, by analogy, the narrative space of the comic – has both veins and a heartbeat. This effectively hybridizes the categories of entity and its environment, of foreground and background, giving places the kind of biological traits that are usually associated with characters, due to their anthropomorphism.

As for the verbal narration and dialogue, they constantly attribute very human-like, language-mediated minds to very nonhuman-looking creatures, which in itself might have a dissonant effect. In addition, the verbal track can be used to twist around the more abstract and cultural laws and conventions that define human life. For instance, the narrator boxes describe the air on a warring planet as “undrinkable”, while the aliens living on that planet discuss their interspecies “fourmarriage” (#5, [11]). Even the names of the aliens are made dissonant by picking them from unconventional grammatical categories or by making them extremely difficult to reproduce with English alphabet or human vocal tract: the late “Clearly” (#3, [16]) and “the floating jelly-balloon” called Rr’arr’rr’ll (#6, [2]) are unlikely to have any namesakes in the comics’ readership.

Along with the pictorial and the verbal tracks, some of the comics-specific metatextual elements also add to the defamiliarization and dehumanization of the characters. First, and most notably, the page designs of *Overture* avoid regular, angular grids to an unusual degree, utilizing various organic, nonlinear, and representational shapes instead. As a result, almost every spread boasts a sense of striking visual novelty, which might even leave the reader unsure of the proper reading order. This makes the affectual dimension of the reading experience regularly coincide with the confused mental states of the focalizing characters: both the reader and the character are often equally unsure about the stability of the spatio-temporal parameters defined by the panel frames and equally

amazed at the developments of the story. This experiential overlap reaches its crescendo in the fourth issue, where the gradual tilting of the frames prompts the reader to turn the entire album upside down for the duration of two pages (#4, [17–18]). Williams, the illustrator, specifically explains that the trick is “intended for the reader to sort of feel what Morpheus is feeling”: disoriented, and possibly frustrated (“The Accompaniments”, [6]). Caracciolo (2016, 74–75) has named these parallel and “shared” experiences between characters and readers “mirroring effects”.

Second, *The Sandman* series is extremely well known for its use of unconventional-looking speech bubbles. Letterer Todd Klein remembers having created over 50 individualized fonts and bubble styles for different characters in the original series (“The Accompaniments”, [17]). Variations of bubble styles and fonts are widely used in comics for suggesting different qualities of voice and prosody (Eisner 2008, 24), but in the context of *The Sandman*, this device has also served as an additional marker of nonhumanity (Bender 1999, 74). In *Overture*, too, the more anthropomorphic characters have rather standardized black-and-white speech bubbles, whereas the more overtly nonhuman figures speak in various colors, or in letterings that are slower to decipher – an apt way of simulating cross-species communication problems.

In the same vein, some of the characters are doomed to complete silence due to their extreme alienness: the reader never hears the mathematically gifted bacteria complex speak, and even when the artistic metal beetles do speak, they collectively assemble into a very human-looking configuration (#3, [15], see Figure 4.1). By contrast, an alien girl called Hope, who appears emphatically human apart from her blue skin, is given an extremely central role toward the end of the series: her human-like face, human-like body, human name, and reported needs for food, warmth, sleep, and companionship (#3, [13]) apparently qualify her for the role of a full-blown character-focalizer. The final issue (#6, [1–3]), for instance, opens with her breaking the fourth wall, by looking challengingly out of the panel, as if asking for attention. After this, her first-person internal monologue and her recurring, translucent but very human-like figure guide the reader’s eye across several pages of completely opaque, much less anthropomorphic aliens in a way that seems to truly illustrate, or even prove, the alleged necessity to nest defamiliarizing effects within a more anthropocentric narrative discourse.

All in all, no matter how alien or nonhuman ontological categories the characters evoke, humanity is always one component in – or at least congruent with – the resulting blend. There are no half-animal, half-mushroom blends or half-substance, half-AI blends, but the animals always speak in human language, the machines are always androids, and every non-carbon-based creature has a human face. As a result, in this



Figure 4.1 The beetles must assume a human-shaped formation in order to speak, while Dream’s face momentarily reflects their insectoid features (2015, #3, [15]). *The Sandman: Overture* © 2013 DC Comics. Written by Neil Gaiman and illustrated by J. H. Williams, III.

comic of cosmic concerns and zero human characters, there is still a clear continuum between the less human-like and the more human-like characters (cf. Herman 2011), and this continuum largely dictates the hierarchies of saliency and agency: the more human traits a character incorporates, the more the reader is shown its inner world and, as a result, the more the reader is invited to empathize with it.

The most egregious example of this is that Morpheus the protagonist and his six equally god-like siblings are mostly depicted as white, able-bodied human adults. They do transgress the borders of ontological categories rather radically, of course: as “anthropomorphic personifications of — universal forces” (Bender 1999, xii), they give fleshly, individualistic forms to things that are so abstract and non-sentient they do not

normally even qualify as ‘existents’, let alone ‘persons’. Yet how narcissistic is it to portray Death – which should be equal to all living creatures – as a perky Goth girl? Similarly, it is quite difficult to think of Dream purely as an abstract concept when he so clearly experiences solitude (#5, [1]), never calls on his mother (# 5, [6]), eats an occasional bite (#5, [7]), and even dresses appropriately for battles and state visits (#1, [20]). If anything, the Endless only seem to reinforce the human tendency to comprehend and construct even gods in terms of human mental states (Vermeule 2010, 145–146). The mythologies of ancient cultures amply demonstrate this tendency, of course, and the pantheon of *The Sandman* does bear some resemblance – and, in fact, some blood relation (Bender 1999, 152) – to Greek deities: the spindly, moody, black-robed young man in the midst of the ontological, intergalactic tempests of *Overture* even shares the name with the Greek god of dreams. However, as the multimodal storytelling repeatedly underlines, Morpheus is only one aspect – indeed, the anthropomorphic aspect – of the incomprehensibly complex entirety of Dream.

One of the most fascinating aspects of *The Sandman*’s storytelling is how it constantly attends – again, both visually and verbally – the ways the characters see each other. This allows the more nonhuman characters to passingly project their nonhuman minds on the more anthropomorphic characters, momentarily dehumanizing, or at least defamiliarizing them. For instance, the aforementioned, human-like but blue-skinned alien girl is branded a “meat child” and ultimately “deleted” (#4, [8, 20]) by a community of stars – who, *Overture* assures us, are “flaming balls of gas in space” but “also alive” (#3, [12]). An even more sustained, more multimodal example of this inter-character projection is provided by the shifting appearances of Dream and the other Endless. As the rare heterodiegetic narrator underlines in the original series, “we perceive but aspects of the Endless, as we see the light glinting from one tiny facet of some huge and flawlessly cut precious stone” (Gaiman et al. 1992, #21, [11]). On every given moment, any and all of their apparent attributes are merely a matter of perspective – and comics are especially deft at creating rapid shifts of perspective. The entire gem metaphor is thus concretized 15 years later in *The Sandman: Overture*, when Dream uses his ruby necklace to contact another character in another dimension. For the duration of their conversation, the page designs resemble giant rubies, so that the facets comprise the panels, and in each panel, Dream assumes a different physical form – a cyclops, a robot, a bat, and an ice creature. Yet the conversation can carry on as normal, underlining that all these seemingly different figures share the same godly mind and identity (#2, [16–18], see Figure 4.2).

The appearances of all the Endless siblings morph to mirror the implicit expectations, worldviews, or self-images of whichever characters they are interacting with (Bender 1999, 25) in various other sequences



Figure 4.2 Dream’s fluid physical form appears to be fractured into various possible appearances by the ruby amulet he uses for long-distance communication with other god-like characters (2015, #2, [17]). *The Sandman: Overture* © 2013 DC Comics. Written by Neil Gaiman and illustrated by J. H. Williams, III.

as well. In a flashback concerning an ancient world of anthropomorphic panther creatures, for instance, all the appearing Endless – Dream, Death, and Destruction – look as if they belonged to this same unnamed half-human, half-feline species (#4, [13–16]). Similarly, when negotiating with the metal beetles, Dream’s face becomes decorated with the same orange patterning as their elytrons, just for the flash of one panel (# 3, [15], see Figure 4.1). Such quickness and fluidity suggest that these changes are not really metamorphoses but effects of focalization – a way of showing something of an alien mind by projecting it on to something slightly more palpable and familiar. Meanwhile, the coherence of the morphing characters is maintained by contextual clues like continuous action, dialogue, or monologue as well as by stable visual “pointers” (Varis 2013, 135). These can be part of the character’s physical appearance – for instance, Death always wears an ankh – or metatextual, like Dream’s black, amoeba-like speech bubbles.

One could thus deduce that the Endless wear their human skins as their default mode because of the one onlooker they cannot possibly shed, not even for a single panel: the human reader. Even when there are no other characters around Dream and his siblings, they are still being watched and read by the reader, whose anthropocentric worldview and anthropomorphizing cognitive strategies they thereby reflect. Although *The Sandman* comics never address or acknowledge the presence of the real-life reader with overt metalepses, especially *Overture* demonstrates an implicit awareness of the reader. Particularly in the first issue, this awareness is realized through the prevalence of reflections as a visual motif.

The first and possibly the most unsettling instance of this motif is the spread that resembles a giant gaping mouth: each bared tooth frames one panel, giving the impression that scenes of the storyworld are actually reflected on their enamel surfaces. The effect is further heightened by the fact that some of the panels are clearly depicted from a first-person perspective, and even incorporate the rims and dark tint of sun-glasses. The fans of the series are likely to instantly associate these visual signs – the mouth and the glasses – with the Corinthian, a murderous nightmare who looks like a normal, white-haired man but has two extra mouths where his eyes ought to be. The spread thus situates the reader into two equally disturbing but dissonant positions, which concretize the concurrent “insiderness” and “outsiderness” of (defamiliarizing) character engagement. On the one hand, the first-person panels place the reader behind the glasses of this horrific serial killer, forcing empathetic perspective-taking on the level of visual perception. On the other hand, the page is not, in fact, a gaping jaw but an extreme, metaleptic close-up of the Corinthian’s eye, staring back at the reader (#1, [6–7], see Figure 4.3). Indeed, in creating Corinthian, Morpheus says he “wished only to build something that would reflect humanity — would show it itself, show it everything about itself it did not want to acknowledge” (#1, [14]).

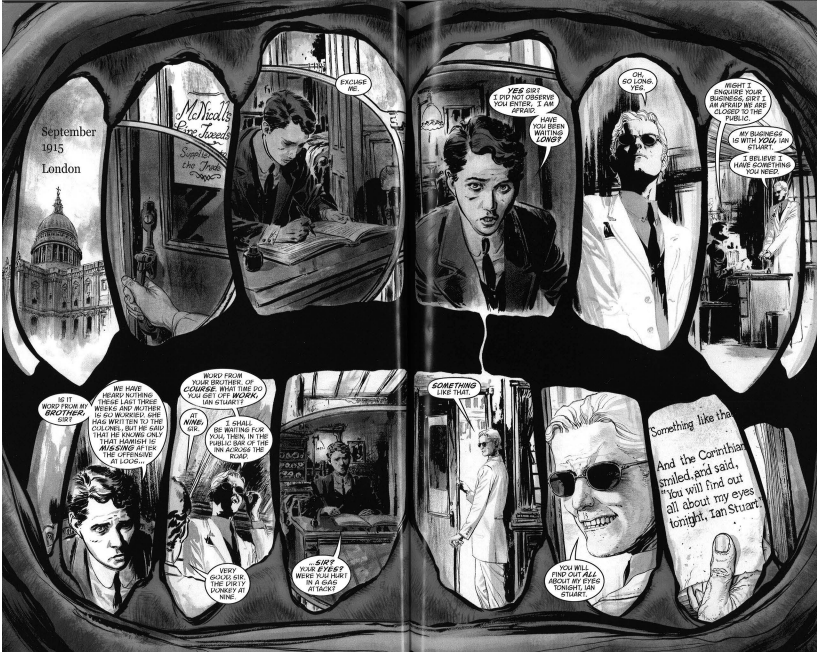


Figure 4.3 The readers are watching the storyworld as – while also being metalectically watched by – the Corinthian (2015, #1, [6–7]). *The Sandman: Overture* © 2013 DC Comics. Written by Neil Gaiman and illustrated by J. H. Williams, III.

The reader is again challenged to a similar metalectical staring contest only a few page-turns later, on a page whose composition resembles a lithograph of old-fashioned window panes (Figure 4.4). The visual style of this sequence deviates greatly from the rest of the series, and may allude to the works of M. C. Escher, who was famous for creating the kind of visual illusions this scene aims to deliver. First of all, the single squares of the window constitute the panels, but in a way that plays with medium-specific illusions of transparency: squares containing text are completely opaque and thus function as narration boxes – they tell of abstract things rather than show concrete things – whereas squares that only contain images give the impression that the reader can peer through them, straight into the storyworld, as if peering through a window. For the first few panels, the only character on the other side of the window seems unaware of being watched, busying himself with everyday tasks. In the fourth panel, however, he turns around, as if to look back toward the reader. What makes the effect especially startling and convincing is that his face appears to be replaced by a mirror, which reflects the frames of the same window, but from the inside. (#1, [11]) The changes of angles

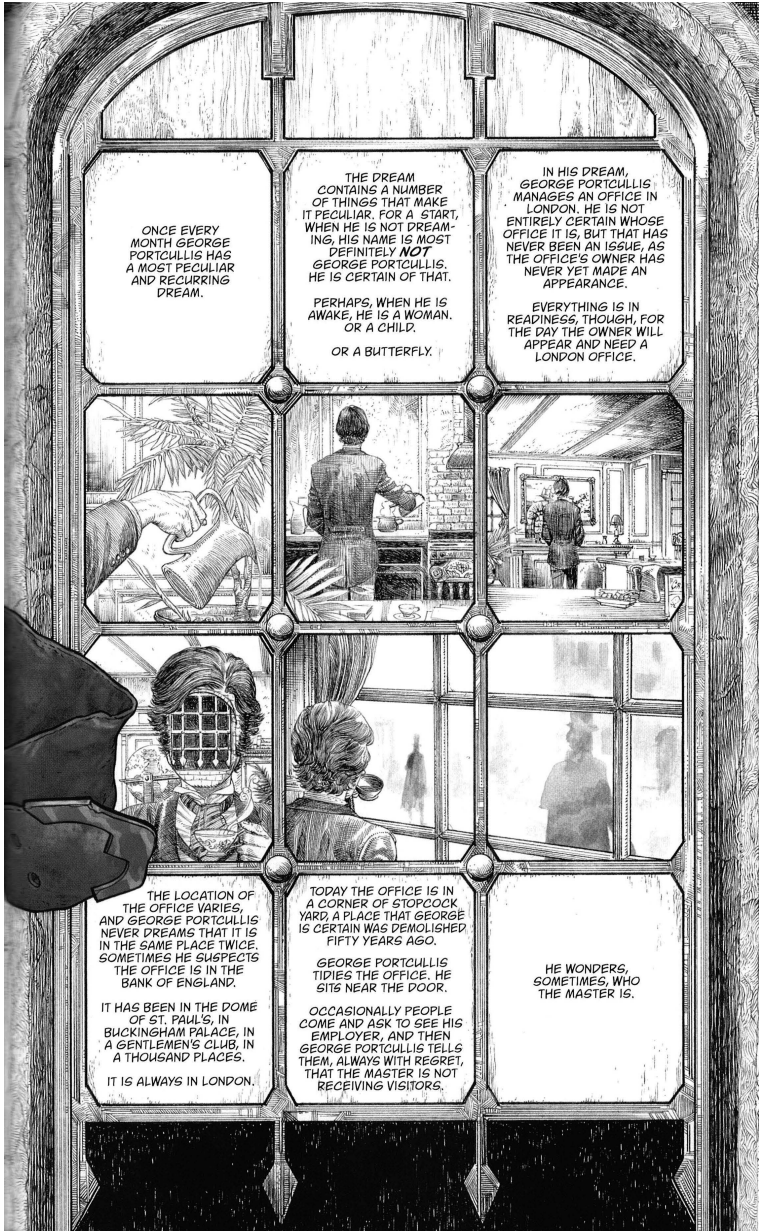


Figure 4.4 This page layout plays with the “opaqueness” of written language, the apparent “transparency” of pictorial presentation, and the book’s overarching motif of reflections (2015, #1, [11]). *The Sandman: Overture* © 2013 DC Comics. Written by Neil Gaiman and illustrated by J. H. Williams, III.

on the next page reveal that the character's face is not, in fact, a mirror, but permanently shaped like a portcullis – as per the character's name, George Portcullis (#1, [12]). Yet the illusion that the reader is separated from the storyworld only by a thin, transparent surface has already been formed – momentarily but memorably. Put in the larger context, the scene seems to imply that while the page is “transparent”, the characters are not; they are mirrors at least as much as they are windows.

The same theme is once again evoked on the final page of the issue, which shows three interlocking, circular panels, all focusing on Morpheus from the straight-on, eye-level angle. In the uppermost panel, he is wearing his bone helmet, which makes his head appear elongated, insect-like, and alien. A myriad of his nonhuman aspects – whom he has just encountered – is reflected, small and distorted, on its lenses. In the second panel, the helmet disappears, so that the final panel can clearly display Morpheus' familiar human face, expressing a familiar human emotion – which, again, is likely to reflect the readers' confusion about what has just happened. This simple, fairly static three-panel sequence containing only one word – “What?” – thus states quite clearly what the comic and its protagonist can and cannot convey. The human Morpheus is emotive, vocal, and clear, but the parts of him that reflect the nonhuman world – only partially and imperfectly – remain unreadable and incomprehensible, hidden behind the helmet. (#1, [24], see Figure 4.5)

All in all, the framing of the panels throughout *Overture* gives the reader a very palpable sense that something is always left outside the frame. Scenes where different aspects of Dream and different alien species gather together are given plenty of space: an entire spread (#6, [2–3]) and even a rare double-wide fold-out spread (#1, [22–23]) show all types of creatures, which gain added diversity from the fact that some are drawn with digital, some with analogue techniques (“The Accompaniments”, [16]). Yet the framing and the composition emphasize that only a small part of the crowd is shown. Only the feet of one creature and an arm of another have been fitted in the frame, suggesting that the nonhuman multitudes extend beyond the page – and beyond imagination.

To summarize, *The Sandman: Overture* seizes an ambitious scenario that requires adopting a universal perspective and, accordingly, triggers constant defamiliarization by blending human and nonhuman traits in all of its characters, often multimodally. Yet, before long, the story runs into the insurmountable wall of subjectivity outlined by Nagel, and gets tangled up in the human experientiality implied in the very act of narration. Although *The Sandman* series has always been an unabashed celebration of stories and their power – one of Dream's sobriquets is “Prince of Stories” – an oddly familial encounter between Morpheus and his mother Night indicates that in *Overture*, the triumphant narrativity



Figure 4.5 Some aspects of Dream are irrevocably hidden and unrepresentable, whereas his familiar human form results from, and appeals to, the human readers' perspectives (2015, #1, [24]). *The Sandman: Overture* © 2013 DC Comics. Written by Neil Gaiman and illustrated by J. H. Williams, III.

finally reaches its limits. “It’s one of your stories, isn’t it?” Night mocks as she realizes that Dream is trying to stage a conventional happy ending for entropy itself: “In the reunion of Time and Night the mad stars will become sane, and peace and wisdom and joy and beauty will reign for ever and aye...”. Being less tied to entities and subjectivities than her son, Night understands that only certain aspects of universes can be contained, controlled, and understood by the narrative logics employed by Dream, the human reader, and the comic that brings them together.

Thus, *The Sandman: Overture* attempts to stay aware of its creators’ and readers’ human perspective while it avoids totalizing it. The more nonhuman the character, the more consistently the illusion of “transparent minds” – and the over-projection of anthropomorphic experience it entails – is avoided. Instead, nonhuman creatures are often approached with wonderment and curiosity. For instance, as Hope, the human-like alien girl, weaves between the less human, more opaque aliens, she ponders how they might experience the refugee situation they are presently sharing: “But we are all here. I wonder what they see. I wonder how they talk” (#6, [3]). Similarly, the reader can attend the perspectives and the emotions of the characters quite closely and concretely “from the outside”: Morpheus especially is often depicted either straight-on – which reveals his emotional state – or so that the reader looks over his shoulder – seeing an approximation of what he sees (see e.g. #3, [24], which gives both views simultaneously). This encourages empathetic perspective-taking and alignment with the character without any need or pretense of conveying his private, lived experience. The abundance of extreme close-ups of eyes may be symptomatic of this same epistemological stance: the reader can look into the characters’ eyes and wonder what would be going on behind them if characters truly were minded beings – what they would see if they could see – but as with real life, there are no thought bubbles to explain away any of it. In this way, the comic encourages “non-intrusive” ways of approaching and empathizing with nonhuman characters – ways that circumvent at least some of the anthropocentrism inherent in verbalized subjectivities and spelled-out folk psychology.

Conclusions

In conclusion, *The Sandman: Overture* mostly evokes nonhuman experience by not really depicting it at all but by gesturing – vigorously – to its general direction. For this, the comic has two overarching strategies. First, it does not even pretend to represent any actual nonhuman creatures but invents instead an array of aliens that blend human and nonhuman features in imaginative ways. The nonhuman traits tease the readers’ imagination with little, counterfactual alternatives, which the reader can grasp in an embodied way due to the intertwined human traits: we know how humans dream, but how would plants dream; or

how would my life change if I had mouths for eyes? The tension between the familiar and the unfamiliar – the defamiliarization – thus provides a manageable, but potentially consequential challenge to the reader’s cognitive capabilities. Second, the reflection motif constantly confronts the reader with his or her own humanity and the epistemological limits it entails. The comic seems to imply that it narrates the tale that it is narrating from the point of view it is narrating it from because that is what the human reader is ready, willing, and able to receive. Various vast non-human domains always lie beyond the panels, but depicting them, either in words or images, is either difficult or impossible. All *The Sandman: Overture* can do is to remind the reader that they are there. Like the sun, nonhuman experience cannot be looked at directly, but speculative fiction and the multimodal storytelling of comics are quite competent at dancing around it and making the reader wonder about it.

Unfortunately, discussing nonhuman experiences is not any easier to a researcher than it is to a comics creator. It seems clear that discussing the possibility of understanding nonhuman minds through narratives requires considering several layers of discourse, representation, and cognition, but the texts, worlds, and minds are so tangled together, it is often difficult to discern where they truly intersect and when they are collapsed together more or less needlessly. The concept of character is an excellent case in point: in spite of actually being nonhuman constructions, they are, in practice, burdened by very anthropomorphic connotations. It may thus be worth considering whether detangling mimetic personhood and narrative agency would actually be possible, and whether the resulting agential concept would allow narrativizing nonhuman experiences in a less anthropomorphizing manner.

One could also ask to which extent these entanglements between characters’ mimetic aspect and the readers’ anthropomorphizing assumptions depend on specific medial contexts and their affordances. For instance, comics clearly draw very non-Cartesian cartographies, where the mind and the physical world cannot be separated any more than the verbal and the pictorial elements can, without losing something crucial of the characters’ imagined experience. The constant presence of visual bodies makes it awkward to even refer to the characters as “minds”, which is perhaps a signal for the slowly transmedializing narratology to start theorizing characters more holistically. Indeed, in the face of the mimetic, anthropomorphic, and literary biases of current narratology, considering speculative, nonhuman comic book characters poses an aptly defamiliarizing challenge.

Notes

- 1 Because the collected hard-back edition of *The Sandman: Overture* lacks page numbers, all the references are made to specific issues or chapters,

whose pages have been counted manually: “#” designates the number of issue, and the unmarked page numbers are specified in the square brackets.

- 2 “The Accompaniments” is a collection of interviews and other extra materials included in this specific hardback edition of the comic. The page numbers are, again, based on manual counting, as they have not been marked on the original documents.

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