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Sublime Beauty & Horrible Fucking Things - The Finer Worlds of Warren Ellis

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SUBLIME BEAUTY & HORRIBLE FUCKING THINGS: THE FINER WORLDS OF WARREN ELLIS

SUBLIME BEAUTY & HORRIBLE FUCKING THINGS: THE FINER WORLDS OF WARREN ELLIS

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy in English

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ABSTRACT

This work constitutes an in-depth discussion of the muted postmodern characteristics of contemporary comics writer and novelist Warren Ellis, highlighting his major long-form works within comics, *Planetary*, *Transmetropolitan*, *StormWatch*, and *The Authority*, as well as several shorter works such as *Ocean*, *Orbiter*, and *Global Frequency*. In addition, Ellis is situated within the British science fiction tradition, specifically, the British Boom movement which contains other comics writers such as Neil Gaiman and Alan Moore.

This dissertation is approved for
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I would also like to thank the members of the Grand Comic Database for their invaluable assistance in researching the history of the comics medium in general and the superhero genre in particular.

DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my wife Stacy and my sons Michael and Alexander without whom my life would be much, much less interesting than it now is, and to my parents Billy Junior and Shirley May Allred without whom I would have no life. Also, to all of the comics creators, past and present who have fired my imagination and contributed to a truly wonderful medium, please accept my heartfelt thanks.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

I. INTRODUCTION	1
II. SCIENCE FICTION	39
A. British Boom	44
III. PLANETARY	57
IV. TRANSMETROPOLITAN	87
V. STORMWATCH / THE AUTHORITY	96
VI. GLOBAL FREQUENCY	107
VII. OCEAN	114
VIII. ORBITER	122
IX. SUMMARY	129
NOTES	131
WORKS CITED	133
READING LIST	138

I. INTRODUCTION

The many works of author Warren Ellis, most of which lie within the comics medium and utilize the science fiction genre, appear to more successfully resist the enormous influence of the postmodern condition that dominates this current historical moment than other works of art. And, they seem to do so much better than many other contemporary works of art.

This is certainly no accident on the part of the author.

Their enhanced resistance stems from the conscious and critical decisions that Ellis has made with respect to genre, medium, and themes utilized throughout his large library of work, a library that will be examined shortly.

However, before moving the discussion to each of these factors in turn and the particular manner in which each can, and in fact does, resist late capitalism's immense power, I think a brief discussion of postmodernism must be undertaken to give us the necessary theoretical foundation upon which to build the case for Ellis as something other than postmodern due to the antagonistic relationship between his work and late capitalism.

Postmodernism remains a contentious, controversial, and often thoroughly confusing topic not only to theorists, but also to artists and critics alike. In fact, a great many theorists and critics even doubt its very existence or, as with Richard Hebdige, simply regard it as a meaningless buzzword. Frank Kermode, for example, sees postmodernism as merely a continuation of modernism instead of a drastic and recognizable break with that earlier tradition.

Marxist theorists, it seems, cannot even reach a consensus with respect to postmodernism. Alex Callinicos, for instance, questions the actual existence of any kind of radical break between modernism and postmodernism. Fredric Jameson, on the other hand, maintains that postmodernism "constitutes a cultural and experiential break" (Jameson *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* xiii) from modernism. Again, Jameson's view is not something that all Marxist critics agree upon. Teresa Ebert questions any conception of a break and takes issue with Jameson's methodology.

to confine the inquiries into postmodernism to a monolithic

postmodernity, as Jameson does, is in fact to become complicit with

"break" theories and to end up, as Jameson does, with a notion of the end of critique." (Ebert 132)

She further critiques Jameson's specific conception of postmodernism and his resultant interpretations of the phenomenon.

postmodernism is not simply a series of isolated, shifting aesthetic and architectural styles, proliferating commodifications, philosophical deconstructions, split subjectives, or multiple identities and differences. Instead, postmodernism is a contradictory historical condition, and its contradictions are those of the material base: both postmodernism and the theories that try to explain it are divided by the social contradictions of capitalism itself-by the contradictions of the forces and relations of production. (Ebert 130)

While it can certainly be argued that the very nature of this phenomenon "is not something we can settle once and for all and use with a clear conscience," (Jameson *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* xxii) this neither dissuaded Jameson from a rather comprehensive attempt to do just that, nor, in fact, prevented him from encouraging others to attempt the same.

Regardless, for most Marxist theorists, of whom Jameson is most certainly included, postmodernism as a recognizable phenomenon not only exists, but offers an opportunity to interrogate the concept with an explanatory framework that allows critics to peer into the murky depths of culture and find more than meaning. Treating it as an extant concept different from what has come before allows critics to uncover truths about the culture within which the art is conversant and reveal insights into the unique historical moment within which a work of art is created.

Obviously, postmodernism as a concept has generated a great many scholarly debates over the years as to its nature, its definition, and its very existence. Although briefly discussed and summarized within these pages, these battles will not be joined here since "the concept is not merely contested, it is also internally conflicted and contradictory." (Jameson *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* xxii) And, it is this contradictory nature and conflict that has generated so much antagonistic scholarly debate over the last few decades. So, before undertaking a more detailed discussion of the

critical stance that I will adopt in examining postmodernism, it would probably be beneficial for us to momentarily survey these various critical approaches to the subject and the underlying rationales for the vastly different results of each of their interrogations of the phenomenon.

To my mind, postmodernism, as a concept, seems to inspire what can best be described as “interpretation wars.” In these wars, scholars can lock onto the same facet of a work and then generate diametrically opposed viewpoints that ultimately lead to the classification of a work as postmodernist, via one interpretation, or modernist, for instance, from an entirely different interpretation. This apparently magical feat is accomplished by the simple act of utilizing fundamentally different critical frameworks to categorize the postmodern phenomenon based upon its relationship to modernism, its predecessor.

M. Keith Booker conducts a brief survey of the various critical approaches to postmodernism in *Vargas Llosa Among the Postmodernists* (1994) that will be briefly summarized here. Once again, the following brief discussion is meant only to illustrate the contentious nature of contemporary postmodern discussion and survey a small part of the academic debate associated with it, and not to further engage or participate in said ongoing debate.

Booker’s strategy in surveying the bloody, desolate, war-torn postmodern battlefield is to classify the assorted approaches taken by critics and illustrate the manner in which a work could be seen to be postmodernist from one critical stance and modernist from an entirely different approach. In his brief examination, he formulates five broad categories that seem to encompass the postmodern interpretive landscape and briefly discusses the fundamental critical underpinning of each category.

The members of the first of these categories can best be described as continuists. This viewpoint holds that there really is no difference at all between what have mistakenly been identified as modernism and postmodernism. Categorically, in fact, postmodernism is often seen as a simple subset of modernism when it is seen as anything different than modernism at all. Noteworthy critics associated with this approach are Richard Poirer, Richard Pearce, and Frank Kermode. Obviously, this is not the critical stance that forms the foundation of our discussion of the works of Warren Ellis.

The next grouping could perhaps best be termed the organizationists. This viewpoint defines the difference between the modern and the postmodern via the binary categorizations of order and disorder. Fragmentation seems to underpin much of the discussion of the postmodern for critics within this

category. Interestingly, fragmentation also seems to be of great importance to another category of critics which includes the Marxists and will be discussed shortly. Critics associated with this organizational approach include Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, and Gregory Ulmer.

The third group can best be described as subjectivists. These critics take a psychological viewpoint that centers the difference between the modern and the postmodern on subjectivity. This critical stance associates the possession of subjectivity within the modern which is then contrasted with the complete lack of subjectivity within the postmodern. Hoffman, Hornung, and Kunows are put forth as critics associated with this approach.

The fourth category utilizes a cultural approach, so its adherents will henceforth be dubbed culturalists. It is here that postmodernism is analyzed with respect to cultural, social, and political interpretations. This is obviously the critical foundation that underpins my entire discussion of postmodernism, comics, science fiction, Ellis, and his many, many works. Jameson is, of course, the central figure of this category. Booker, however, also discusses Terry Eagleton as another important theorist within this category.

And the fifth category can be described as the philosophists. Critics within this category utilize a philosophical approach instead of political, and given Booker's only cursory treatment, these philosophists have perhaps the least to contribute to contemporary postmodern theory. Critics associated with this methodology include Brian McHale, Richard Rorty, and Allen Thiher. (Booker *Vargas Llosa among the Postmodernists* 188-210)

At this point I should probably stop and insert a reminder concerning the debates about postmodernism, so let me reiterate that these ongoing battles over interpretation will not be joined within these pages. For the purpose of this discussion, these questions will simply not be considered. Therefore, in an effort to avoid this querulous and quarrelsome quagmire of seemingly endless academic debate, at least for the duration of this discussion of Ellis, I cast my lot with Jameson and his

“party of Utopia”: an underground party whose numbers are difficult to determine, whose program remains unannounced and perhaps even unformulated, whose existence is unknown to the citizenry at large and to the authorities, but whose members seem to recognize one another by

means of secret Masonic signals. (Jameson *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* 180)

Even though I am still waiting to be taught the secret Masonic signals, I concur with Jameson in defining postmodernism as simply the cultural logic of late capitalism, a definition promulgated by Jameson in his *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (1991). Within its pages Jameson provides multiple methods in which to view the concept of the postmodernism stemming from his definition of the phenomenon as the cultural logic of late capitalism.

The most important of these perspectives, certainly to Jameson since he initiates his discussion within *Postmodernism* with it, provides an excellent starting point for ensuing dialog and is, simultaneously, central to my subsequent discussion of Ellis. Jameson states,

It is safest to grasp the concept of the postmodern as an attempt to think the present historically in an age that has forgotten how to think historically in the first place. (Jameson *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* ix)

Historical thinking and the ability to situate oneself or a work of art temporally become, then, nearly impossible under transnational capitalism. The sequence of history becomes virtually impossible to assemble leaving one stuck in a constant present that is disconnected not only from the past and the march of historical progress, but also from any dreams of change or a better future.

Another manner in which to view this is that postmodernism eschews the temporal thinking of modernism in favor of a spatial logic. Late capitalism, in essence, blocks us from thinking in a utopian fashion. This type of existence is something very much akin to Lyotard's description of schizophrenia, a comparison that Jameson specifically draws and terms "psychic fragmentation." (Jameson *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* 90) The effect can, perhaps, also be described as a fragmentation of the perception of time which ultimately leads to a fragmentation of identity and results in the experience of the schizophrenic, as Jameson elaborated,

active temporal unification is itself a function of language, or better still of the sentence, as it moves along its hermeneutic circle through time. If we are unable to unify the past, present, and future of the sentence, then we

are similarly unable to unify the past, present, and future of our own biographical experience or psychic life. With the breakdown of the signifying chain, therefore, the schizophrenic is reduced to an experience of pure material signifiers, or, in other words, a series of pure and unrelated presents in time. (Jameson *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* 27)

Jameson also discussed this briefly in *The Cultural Turn: Selected Writings on the Postmodern, 1983-1998* (1998) when examining individualism and what he terms “the death of the subject”.

Per Jameson, then, postmodernism, tends toward fragmentation of the self, the work of art, and even reality. When he speaks of schizophrenic living and the abandonment of the illusion about psychic identity or the centered self, he specifically links this to the postmodern experience. Interestingly, though, postmodern fragmentation differs greatly from earlier modernist fragmentation in that it is centrifugal and refuses to come together.¹ Fragmentation remains one of the most important facets of postmodernism with respect to our ensuing discussion and will be touched upon again and again throughout its remaining pages.

It is, perhaps, best to digress for a moment and discuss Ernst Bloch’s theories of utopia before continuing on with our interrogation Jameson’s formulation of the postmodern since the concept of utopia does indeed play a large role in the evaluation of the innate ability of a particular work of art to resist the influence of the cultural logic of late capitalism. Bloch’s encyclopedic treatment of utopia in his three-volume work, *The Principle of Hope* (1986) provides us with an explanation of what he termed the “utopian impulse.” Jameson interprets this impulse as the element that

governs everything future-oriented in life and culture; and encompassing everything from games to patent medicines, from myths to mass entertainment, from iconography to technology, from architecture to eros, from tourism to jokes and the unconscious. (Jameson *Archaeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions* 2)

This formulation of the utopian impulse immediately places it within an antagonistic relationship with capitalism, and is, thus, an excellent yardstick with which to measure resistance to postmodernism’s

influence. As mentioned previously, postmodernism induces a lack of historical thinking that is particularly dangerous to utopian thinking, or any type of temporal thinking, for that matter. By disconnecting us temporally and ripping us out of history, it becomes impossible to situate ourselves chronologically. This renders it nearly impossible to imagine change, and as we have seen this greatly weakens the utopian impulse. This can also be thought of supersession of the temporal logic of the modernists by a kind of spatial logic, as Jameson explains

utopia is a spatial matter that might be thought to know a potential change in fortunes in so spatialized a culture as the postmodern; but if this last is as dehistoricized and dehistoricizing as I sometimes claim here, the synaptic chain that might lead the Utopian impulse to expression becomes harder to localize. Utopian representations knew an extraordinary revival in the 1960s; if postmodernism is the substitute for the sixties and the compensation for their political failure, the question of Utopia would seem to be a crucial test of what is left of our capacity to imagine change at all. (Jameson *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* xvi)

I will return to the subject of utopia with a more detailed discussion in my examination of the science fiction genre. However, this brief summary will suffice for the moment as we return to our investigation of Jamesonian postmodernism.

According to Jameson, postmodernism, in its almost total complicity with late capitalism, contains much weaker utopian impulses than its predecessor, modernism, which contained much stronger anti-capitalist tendencies and therefore, much stronger utopian impulses. This remains true, at least until modernism's canonization in the 1950s, which greatly changed how the movement was perceived. Modernism's canonization, essentially capitalism's cooptation of the movement, drained it of much of its anti-capitalist tendencies and created the radical break necessary for the birth of postmodernism. And this certainly agrees with Jameson's viewpoint of postmodernism as "what you have when the modernization process is complete and nature is gone for good." (Jameson *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* ix) This incestuous relationship between late capitalism and postmodernism did not arise

by the conscious linking of an extant postmodernism with transnational capital by any artistic school or artist. Far from it, postmodernism is an outgrowth of this third stage of capitalism as it expands into the cultural sphere. This development is at odds with the project of modernity per Jurgen Habermas.

Habermas notes that the goals of this project were

formulated in the eighteenth century by the philosophers of the Enlightenment consisted in their efforts to develop objective science, universal morality and law, and autonomous art according to their inner logic.

Habermas argues that postmodernism is not the end result of the project of modernity, nor is it the culmination of the Enlightenment. It is, instead, the result of capitalism hijacking and warping the intentions of Enlightenment philosophers.

An unfortunate side-effect of the conflicted nature of postmodernism is that virtually any discussion of it can quickly degenerate into a simple list of associated characteristics. This tactic seems to produce an endless list of often contradictory aspects that seem to encompass everything, often providing little, if any, critical benefit. By far, the better course of action is to return to Jameson's formulation of the concept as the cultural logic of late capitalism and our previous examination of it in this light. With Jameson as our guide, discussion has shown that postmodernism contains the following characteristics: complicity with late capitalism, lack of historicity, fragmentation, and diminishment of the utopian impulse. It is through the illumination of these attributes that medium, genre, works of art, and artists can be compared, contrasted, and ultimately classified with respect to their resistance to the influence of postmodernism. And, it will be these characteristics that will serve as our touchstone for the topic at hand, the ongoing discussion of the muted postmodernity of the works of Warren Ellis.

As previously mentioned, there exist long lists of binary contrasting traits between modernism and postmodernism that have been generated over the decades. It seems that contrasting postmodernism with modernism allows many critics, including Jameson, to better interrogate the cultural logic of late capitalism. I believe this is due to the historical nature of this type of comparison since it places postmodernism within an historical context in relation to its predecessor, modernism. As an example, critic Martin Irvine has compiled a collection of traits of both modernism and postmodern as a reference

for students (Irvine). Irvine's simple, binary-contrasting laundry list of the traits most frequently associated with each movement actually has much in common with attributes that Terry Eagleton associated with postmodernism when he stated,

By 'postmodern', I mean, roughly speaking, the contemporary movement of thought which rejects totalities, universal values, grand historical narratives, solid foundations to human existence, and the possibility of objective knowledge. Postmodernism is skeptical of truth, unity, and progress, opposes what is seen as elitism in culture, tends toward cultural relativism, and celebrates pluralism, discontinuity, and heterogeneity. (Eagleton *After Theory* 13)

This provides us with some of the more commonly associated characteristics of postmodernism, which are listed here only as examples.

Again, our examination of the works of Warren Ellis will utilize characteristics that we have derived from our examination of Jamesonian postmodernism. There are, however, a couple of characteristics that Jameson discusses in great detail that have not, as yet, been touched upon. These involve the concept of depth and something Jameson has termed the "waning of affect."

Depth, however, can only be examined in relation to modernism's attitude toward it. With modernism, works of art tend to express more faith in what lies beneath the surface at some philosophical or metaphorical depth. This concept of depth, of what lies beneath the surface of a work of art, with respect to meaning, content or value is an attribute displayed by much modernist art. In contrast, postmodernist works show little faith in this modernist depth and instead focus on the surface or image. By extension, this surface fixation culminates in a high level of intertextuality for postmodernist works. Jameson notes that

depth is replaced by surface, or by multiple surfaces (what is often called intertextuality is in that sense no longer a matter of depth). (Jameson *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* 12)

Eagleton also specifically mentions this particular facet, among many others, in his description of postmodern art as

arbitrary, eclectic, hybrid, decentered, fluid, discontinuous, pastiche-like. True to the tenets of postmodernity, it spurns metaphysical profundity for a kind of contrived depthlessness, playfulness and lack of affect, an art of pleasures, surfaces and passing intensities. (Eagleton *Literary Theory: An Introduction* 201)

Depthlessness is, perhaps, the most apt description of this characteristic of postmodernism, and it is a terminology that Jameson uses frequently, such as when he speaks of postmodernism possessing a new depthlessness, which finds its prolongation both in contemporary "theory" and in a whole new culture of the image or the simulacrum. (Jameson *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* 6)

This intertextuality leads to a breakdown of boundaries which can be most readily seen in a breakdown of traditional genre boundaries under postmodernism. Lack of depth is a facet of the postmodern that Jameson would return to again and again in his discussion of the phenomenon, seeing it as a new kind of flatness or depthlessness, a new kind of superficiality in the most literal sense, perhaps the supreme formal feature of all the postmodernisms to which we will have occasion to return in a number of other contexts. (Jameson *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* 9)

As with Jameson, this lack of depth as an aspect of the cultural logic of late capitalism will be something that I return to throughout the ensuing discussion of the works of Ellis.

The waning of affect deals with the fragmentation of the identity and results in a loss of deep emotions. In a sense, it could be said that this is the emotional result of postmodernisms depthlessness. Jameson also argues that it

might also have been characterized, in the narrower context of literary criticism, as the waning of the great high modernist thematics of time and temporality, the elegiac mysteries of duree and memory (something to be understood fully as much as a category of the literary criticism

associated with high modernism as with the works themselves).

(Jameson *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* 16)

Regardless, both this lack of depth and this muting of emotion can be seen as a result of the postmodernist fragmentation discussed above.

With this overview of the theoretical stance that I will take with respect to postmodernism completed, it is time to discuss the medium that Ellis most frequently utilizes, comics. Ellis has repeatedly demonstrated a deep and fundamental understanding of the mechanics of comics, as well as an extensive knowledge of the history of the medium. Therefore, the following discussion will survey these attributes to better ground our subsequent discussion of Ellis and his most important works within the comics medium.

Scott McCloud, in his groundbreaking examination of comics, *Understanding Comics* (1994), itself formatted as comics, formulated an excellent definition of the comics medium using terminology first coined by comics pioneer Will Eisner in his seminal work, *Comics & Sequential Art*. McCloud defined comics as

juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberated sequence, intended to convey information and/or to produce an aesthetic response in the viewer (McCloud 9).

And while this definition is interesting and extremely useful, McCloud's struggle with formulating it is just as interesting and useful, if not more so, to scholars and critics. Within these few pages, he cleverly revealed the fundamental aspects of what makes comics unique and different from film, animation, or even traditional text. (McCloud 6-9). He also, pointedly, excludes single-panel cartoons from his definition of comics, and rightly so. What is of paramount importance here is sequence.

Comics is not simply the combination of words and pictures. On the contrary, comics do not even require words at all, as McCloud amply demonstrates on multiple occasions throughout the text. Comics do, however, require sequence. In fact, comics, at its most fundamental structural level, is all about sequence and the magic that happens between the panels, something McCloud terms "closure."

Closure, his terminology for the "phenomenon of observing the parts but perceiving the whole" (McCloud 63), is responsible for the reader's ability to take unconnected images and form a sequence.

“Closure allows us to connect these moments and mentally construct a continuous, unified reality” (McCloud 67). However, the concept of closure is, in reality, much more important to the mechanics of the medium,

If visual iconography is the vocabulary of comics, closure is its grammar.

And since our definition of comics hinges on the arrangement of elements--then, in a very real sense, comics is closure! (McCloud 67)

Continuing his discussion of closure, McCloud also touches on the function of comic panels and how they “fracture both time and space, offering a staccato rhythm of unconnected moments”. (McCloud 67) Ellis also grasps the importance of closure not only as the mechanics of comics, but also its relationship to the fragmentary nature of the medium, itself. He posits that

...so much of comics happens ‘behind’ the senses. A comics page requires actual cognitive action to draw narrative sense from its many elements -- what Scott McCloud calls ‘closure’ -- where (say) film requires little more than the experiential processing demanded by everyday life” (McBride).

With a sequence of images, the reader is required to perform cognitive processing, in the form of closure, to build a narrative from the disparate parts, in this case panels, presented.

Another aspect of closure deals with context. Each panel lends context to the other panel or panels in the sequence which, in turn, helps the reader to ultimately build the narrative. If closure is the act of creating the narrative, then this panel inter-contextuality serves as the means that enables the reader to perform this amazing feat of unification as the sequence is brought together into a narrative whole. McCloud’s closure seems to have much in common with Wolfgang Iser’s notion of “gaps” in a text. These gaps are then filled in by the reader in much the same process as with closure, creating something that is more than simply the sum of its parts.

Use of the word “juxtaposed” should immediately bring us back to our earlier discussion of postmodernism. McCloud notes in his explanation that juxtaposed means to place side by side. Jameson speaks “of the great high modernist thematics of time and temporality” (Jameson *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* 16) and how those have been transformed under postmodernism to “a

culture increasingly dominated by space and spatial logic.” (Jameson *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* 25) This transition from time to space cannot be better exemplified by any other media. It is inherent in the very form. On the comics page, as McCloud ably and repeatedly demonstrates, time **is** space, and space **is** time.

In comics, both time and space are fragmented in presentation to the reader. The form, through closure and inter-contextuality, actively encourages the reader to take the various fragments and re-assemble them into a narrative whole. This narrative strategy, very much the core mechanics of the medium, is, as been mentioned above, immediately incompatible with postmodernist fragmentation which refuses to come together into a unified whole.²

The form, however, is not the only aspect of comics where fragmentation occurs. Due to early economic pressures to produce more and more comics as cheaply as possible to meet demand, the early American comics production process was broken up into distinct roles, something akin to a comics assembly line. Instead of a particular work existing as the product of a sole author who performed the writing, the penciling, the inking, the lettering, and the coloring, a comics story became the product of multiple authors: a writer, a penciller, an inker, a colorist, and a letterer.

This is not to say however, that there are no comics creators that write and handle the various art chores such as penciling, inking, lettering, and coloring. There certainly are many such creators, such as the previously mentioned Will Eisner, Scott McCloud, Frank Miller, Walter Simonson, Mike Mignola, John Byrne, Paul Chadwick, Eric Shanower, and Dave Sim, but as a rule, American comics tend to be the product of a writer / artist team with inking, lettering, and coloring handled by what could be considered editorial staff. Regardless, the fragmented creative team comes together as a whole to produce a unified work.

The comics medium is fascinating in this context for a number of reasons. Historically, what could best be described as modern comics is a very young medium, much closer in age to another medium that flourished during the modernist era, photography, than to the novel. Of course, many instances of proto-comics can be found throughout history as is noted in the work of McCloud, but modern comics, specifically superhero comics, are where the interests of this discussion lie.

In surveying the history of superhero comics, it is easy to see the evolution of a concept best described as continuity within the various superhero publishers. Nostalgia may, of course, play a role in the establishment of this continuity since the vast majority of superhero comics readers read them currently because they read them when they were younger. In fact, many have probably never stopped reading them. Perhaps, superhero comics provide that nostalgic “fix,” returning them to the “golden age” of their youth. According to Jameson, nostalgia can be explained as “an approach to the ‘past’ through stylistic connotation, conveying ‘pastness’.” (Jameson *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* 19) So, one could then surmise that these images of superheroes are essentially the same images of superheroes that they consumed as children. While nostalgia, with its representation of the past as image or simulacrum, is certainly associated with postmodernism, it could be part of the reason that readers of superhero comics have remained readers far longer than in other media, allowing for what has come to be known as continuity.

With readership actually having followed characters, titles, or even an entire company’s output for years or even decades, a certain level of familiarity with the events, both major and minor by the readership can certainly be expected, often much to the chagrin of both creators and editors. This familiarity coupled with the soap opera style of storytelling has led to the creation of continuity, or the accepted history of a character, group of characters, or even what has come to be known as a shared universe.

However, the concept of a shared universe did not originate within the comics medium. According to researcher Jess Nevins, it instead originated in the dime novels of the late nineteenth century with characters that were controlled by their creators. Nonetheless, it would not be until the twentieth century within dime-novel-turned-pulp-magazine *Wild West Weekly* debuted “the first editorially-driven fictional shared universe” (Nevins “The First Shared Universes”) that has the most in common with modern shared universes within comics.

In a shared universe such as the Marvel Universe or the DC Universe where Character A can, and often does, meet Character B, in something called a crossover, an inter-title continuity gradually evolved over the years in addition to the intra-title continuity, quickly creating a continuity for any title set in that universe, essentially an overall continuity, or a meta-continuity.

Crossovers, or stories “in which characters or concepts from two or more discrete texts or series of texts meet,” (Nevins "A Brief History of the Crossover") however, are nothing new in fiction. Nevins provides an excellent overview that offers up the tale of Jason and the Argonauts as the first crossover and proceeds to chronicle a multitude of other crossovers in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Regardless, crossovers are integral to the formulation of these large-scale continuities of shared universes and even larger constructions, as we shall see shortly.

Continuity is a complex construction that can be difficult to understand as publication date does not necessarily indicate that a story takes place in continuity after another story. This type of story, one published much more recently than the earlier story, but that is set earlier in the past continuity than the earlier story, is called retroactive continuity, or as it is more commonly known, a retcon. Storytelling of this type actively encourages the reader to fit the stories together into the overall story that connects all of the stories into a cohesive whole, which should, of course, bring to mind our earlier discussion concerning fragmentation. But again, this differs from formal postmodernist fragmentation in that assembly into a unified whole is the aim.

And for decades, readers have done just this. In fact, for many years Marvel Comics awarded a prize to readers for not only catching a mistake, but explaining why the mistake was not really a mistake. This “No Prize,” typically an empty envelope as it was in reality no prize, was even mailed to readers in recognition of their efforts to make things fit within continuity. The astute reader will, of course, recall our earlier discussion of the mechanics of comics, particularly closure. Continuity is really just closure taken from the granular panel-to-panel continuity of a comics page and expanded into larger and larger narrative structures. Both involve assembly of pieces into something larger.

Obviously, there are easily discernible sales-related reasons for doing this, mainly encouraging your readers to buy more to get the whole story. However, this practice also encouraged the growth of comics fandom, which led to many stories long out of print being made available to assist in the assembling of these enormous meta-stories.

Organized comics fandom, a community of comics fans, began to take shape in the early 1960s with the help of Dr. Jerry Bails. Bails enlisted the aid of DC Comics editor Julius Schwartz and writer Gardner Fox in producing “fanzines” dedicated to what he termed “panelology,” his term for the study of

comics. Schwartz was no stranger to fandom, having himself been closely associated with science fiction fandom in its earliest days. Separately, other fans such as Dick and Pat Lupoff and Don and Maggie Thompson were also publishing fanzines. Ultimately, these efforts produced a community of comics fans that endures today in such organizations as the non-profit Grand Comics Database. Organized comics fandom greatly encouraged the growth of continuity within superhero comics.

At this point, it would probably be best to give concrete examples of the various types of continuity that have been discussed. In this vein, here are some specific examples using an established character to illustrate the various concepts mentioned above.

Quasar is a lesser known Marvel Comics character whose adventures take place in what has been dubbed the Marvel Universe. He first appeared in *Captain America #217* cover-dated January, 1978, and made crossover appearances in several other Marvel titles such as *Incredible Hulk*, *Defenders*, *Marvel Two-In-One*, *Dazzler*, *Marvel Team-Up*, and *Avengers* over the next decade. In 1989, he received his own, ongoing series, *Quasar*, from Marvel. *Quasar #1*, cover-dated October, 1989, however, told the story of how he received his amazing Quantum-Bands. Up until this point, there were simply no references to how he acquired his Quantum-Bands. So, *Quasar #1* is a retcon, in that it appeared eleven years later than his first appearance, but is actually set in continuity before that introductory story in *Captain America #217*. *Quasar #2* would also contain something of a retcon as it explained where the character had been since last appearing in *Marvel Team-Up Annual #5* published in 1982. It turns out that he had been on a years-long journey to Uranus in suspended animation in the hopes of discovering the origins of his Quantum-Bands. The story detailing his search for the origins of the Quantum-Bands eventually led to yet another retcon.

Quasar's origin also tangentially involves the Fantastic Four. The Fantastic Four battled the Crusader in *Fantastic Four #'s 164-165*, cover-dated November, 1975, and December, 1975, respectively. In these issues, the Crusader was revealed to be the original Marvel Boy, a character that Marvel had published in the 1950s and who Quasar was initially based-upon. The Crusader was wearing the Quantum-Bands which ultimately overloaded and destroyed him. These are the very same Quantum-Bands that Quasar received in *Quasar #1*. So, Quasar's origin intersects with both the continuity of Marvel Boy after his last published adventure in *Astonishing #7*, cover-dated December, 1951 and

Fantastic Four sometime after their battle with the Crusader but before the story in *Captain America* #217. From these various intersections, chronologies can be logically constructed, creating an overall continuity, or universal continuity.

This is the point at which the interpretation of continuity can become much more complex. Marvel recently published *Agents of Atlas*, a limited series that was cover-dated October, 2006, through March, 2007. The series, set in the present day of the Marvel Universe, reunited many heroes published by Marvel Comics in the 1950s, when the company was called *Atlas Comics*. This includes Namora, Venus, Gorilla-Man, M-11, Jimmy Woo, the Yellow Claw, and Marvel Boy. Obviously, for Marvel Boy to be alive and appearing in stories with the Agents of Atlas set in the contemporary Marvel Universe, he could not have perished in *Fantastic Four* #165, thus invalidating the origin of Quasar. The Crusader character who wielded the Quantum-Bands, however, had to die in that issue so that the Quantum-Bands could then be passed on to Quasar. Thus, another retcon, which slightly changed the Crusader from the original Marvel Boy to merely an insane, Uranian clone of Marvel Boy, preserves the continuity of the *Fantastic Four*, *Captain America*, *Quasar*, and *Agents of Atlas*.

The continuities of these titles and characters, however, do not exist in a vacuum. Quasar has encountered a plethora of characters in the Marvel Universe in crossovers within his title as well as in other titles, as have the *Fantastic Four*, *Captain America*, and the *Agents of Atlas*. These interlocking continuities present giant logic puzzles consisting of hundreds of thousands of stories simply begging readers to try and put them all together. And, for the most part, not only can they do this, but they actually have. The Marvel Chronology Project (<http://www.chronologyproject.com/>) and the DC Chronology Project (<http://www.dcuguide.com/DCP/>) are excellent examples of just such superhero comics reader undertakings.

Even so, not necessarily all stories are accepted as part of a specific continuity. For instance, readers, editors, and creators have agreed that certain stories have happened outside of the particular continuity of the Marvel Universe. These stories are not completely discarded, though. They simply happened in another closely related universe, rendering them part of a greater whole, something larger than a shared universe. Sometimes characters from the Marvel Universe will even meet these characters who are often alternate versions or counterparts.

For instance, in the accepted continuity of the Marvel Universe the heroes banded together to defeat the serpent-god Set in *Marvel Team-Up Annual #5* (1982). Quasar has, however, travelled to many different universes and in one such universe observed what would have happened had Set not been defeated in the manner depicted in *Marvel Team-Up Annual #5*.

The term for a universe that is inextricably linked to the main universe, or the universe where most stories take place, is an alternate universe. This larger construction, consisting of a closely linked series of universes, has been termed a “multiverse.” These universes are even catalogued. So, Earth-616 is considered the main Marvel Universe, while the universe that Quasar visited where Set actually prevailed instead of the heroes is labeled Earth-9151.

This is almost identical to the concept as utilized by DC Comics in its multiverse which debuted with “The Flash of Two Worlds” in *The Flash #123*, cover-dated September, 1961. Within its pages, the Flash of Earth-Two, Jay Garrick, is revealed to have been a comic book character in the world of the Flash of Earth-One, Barry Allen, that Allen had read as a child. Allen tells Garrick that

You were once well-known in my world – as a fictional character appearing in Flash Comics! When I was a youngster—you were my favorite hero! A writer named Gardner Fox wrote about your adventures—which he claimed came to him in dreams! Obviously when Fox was asleep, his mind was ‘tuned in’ on your vibratory Earth! That explains how he ‘dreamed up’ The Flash! (Broome, Infantino and Giella 179)

DC would even include our Earth in their multiverse, naming it Earth Prime, and while not as frequent a destination as Earth-Two, Earth-S, Earth-X, or the antimatter universe of Qward, DC superheroes did indeed travel to it.

One need not even travel to a separate universe or alternate dimension to find parallel Earths and doppelgangers, though. Writer Alan Moore and illustrator Chris Sprouse had Tom Strong encounter Tom “Doc” Strange and the characters of the defunct Nedor line of comics published in the 1940s on a parallel Earth elsewhere in the Milky Way Galaxy, thus adding these characters to his America’s Best Comics Universe. Dubbed Terra Obscura, it was not

just the Earth, but our whole solar system, down to the last rock in the asteroid belt, perfectly duplicated.

Back then, I assumed this must be due to some near-inconceivable fluke of mathematics, of statistical probability.

I still don't have a better answer. (Moore et al. 286)

Later in the story, Tom Strong suggests something called the "ghost particle" which deals with quantum entanglement as a possible mechanism to explain the existence of the nearly identical Earth and Terra Obscura.

Characters from one particular shared superhero universe or multiverse have actually encountered and interacted with characters from completely unrelated shared superhero universes and multiverses, and not just once, but many, many times over the past three decades. For instance, Superman and Spider-Man met and battled in *Superman vs. the Amazing Spider-Man* published in 1976 by National Periodical Publications, the company that would ultimately become DC Comics. Five years later, they would meet again in the Marvel Comics-published *Marvel Treasury Edition #28*, published in 1981. That same year, Batman would encounter the Hulk in *DC Special Series #27*, which was published in the fall of 1981. That next year, Marvel Comics would publish *Marvel and DC Present Featuring The Uncanny X-Men and The New Teen Titans*.

Inter-company crossovers would be rare until the metaphorical floodgates were thrown wide open in the 1990s when it seemed like every comics publisher had some property crossing over with some other publisher's property. And while the flood of these crossovers has somewhat abated over the last decade, they still happen with a surprising regularity even today.

During this period, multi-title superhero universes seemed to appear almost continually with the debut of the Ultraverse and the Genesis Universe from Malibu Comics, the America's Best Comics Universe from America's Best Comics, Comics' Greatest World from Dark Horse, the Valiant Universe from Valiant Comics, the Image Universe from Image Comics, the Defiant Universe from Defiant Comics, the Broadway Universe from Broadway Comics, the Impact! Universe from DC, and the list could go on. Many of these publishers instigated crossovers with properties from Marvel Comics, DC Comics, and even each other. For instance, during this period Batman encountered Grendel, the Predator, the

Punisher, Spawn, Spider-Man, Daredevil, Hellboy, and the Planetary team, to name just a few. Marvel Comics and DC Comics even temporarily merged their multiverses to create Amalgam Comics, an imaginary publisher with its own logo that published twelve issues set in this temporarily combined universe. Interestingly, Marvel Comics has designated this universe as Earth-9602, while DC Comics has designated it Earth-9, so this universe is actually part of both the Marvel Multiverse and the DC Multiverse. This publishing stunt bears more than a striking resemblance to an extremely similar project from Valiant Comics and Image Comics called *Deathmate* published in 1993 which saw the temporary merger of their two universes. Even DC's America's Best Comics line by writer Alan Moore and various artists included *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen*, not a teaming of superheroes, but a teaming of characters from Victorian literature.

Mark Gruenwald, the writer of the aforementioned *Quasar*, and many, many other comics set in the Marvel Universe, created something he termed "the Omniverse," a construct composed of all multiverses, including the reality outside your window. This framework allows for intersections between seemingly unrelated shared universes. He even wrote an issue of *Quasar* where Quasar accidentally journeys outside the Marvel Multiverse and into the greater Omniverse. Earth's Watcher, Uatu, describes the Omniverse as "a continuum of multiverse" (Gruenwald, Capullo and Candelario).

While traveling among the various universes in the Marvel Multiverse in an effort to help the Uatu track down some renegade versions of the Living Laser, Quasar is blown outside the Marvel Multiverse when he encounters an old foe, Maelstrom, in the universe designated Earth-92130. In this reality, an alternate version of Quasar failed to stop Maelstrom from accelerating the collapse of the universe. Nearly omnipotent in this alternate reality, Maelstrom attacks and the resultant energy throws Quasar out of the Marvel Multiverse into the greater Omniverse where he encounters the denizens of Marvel's New Universe.

The New Universe was an experiment published by Marvel during their twenty-fifth anniversary celebration of the publication of *Fantastic Four* #1 in 1986. The guiding principles behind its creation being that it tried to be much more realistic in its portrayal of super-powered beings and that it was completely separate from the established Marvel Universe. Before its much-hyped launch, Jim Shooter,

Editor-in-Chief of Marvel Comics, said that “their world is the world outside your window” (Shooter "Bullpen Bulletins"). At the time of the launch, he described the New Universe as

a universe hitherto unused in comics. Our own. The one we live in. Real pipes. Real people. Real bathrooms. No mer-people. No repulsors. No unstable molecules. In fact, no fantasy or fantastic elements at all except for the very few we introduce. Carefully. Does it make sense? You bet. As much as the universe outside you window does. A universe where time passes and things change, and ... well, you know. You live in it.
(Shooter "Universe News")

The time that passed in the New Universe titles equaled the time that passed in real time, so that the one month that intervened between issues also elapsed for the characters. The line, initially composed of eight titles, was quickly reduced to four and finally cancelled less than three years after its inception, although many of these characters appear in later issues of *Quasar* during a particularly poorly thought-out and badly executed crossover called *Starblast*. Ellis would ultimately revive concepts from the New Universe as *newuniversal* (2007).

While temporarily stranded in the New Universe, Quasar also discovered that he is a comics character in that reality. This is, of course, Gruenwald throwing in a bit of a wink and a nod to DC's Earth-Two Flash being a comics character on Earth-One which has already been discussed.

Continuity, or this idea “universe building,” is not unique to superhero comics. Interestingly, the pulps have been subjected to a similar process first begun by fans and scholars of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes. Expanding on this work, science fiction author Philip José Farmer created what has come to be called the Wold Newton Family in his *Tarzan Alive: A Definitive Biography of Lord Greystoke* published in 1972 and expanded upon in his *Doc Savage: His Apocalyptic Life* published in 1981. And while his aim was to ostensibly blur the lines between fiction and reality, per his introduction, “This is the biography of a real person,” (Farmer xi) an extremely postmodern strategy, he nonetheless established something akin to a shared universe devoted to the heroes of the pulp magazines. He explains that

Mr. Baring-Gould states in his *Sherlock Holmes of Baker Street* that Holmes and Challenger are first cousins. This can be shown as valid, though the relationship is not through Holmes' father. Not only that. Sir Percy Blakeney (the Scarlet Pimpernel), Dupin, Sherlock and Mycroft Holmes, Professor George Edward Challenger, Raffles, Tarzan, Korak, Doc Savage and his comrade, Monk Mayfair, Ludwig Horace Holly, Nero Wolfe, Lord Peter Wimsey, Lord John Roxton, Denis Nayland Smith, Richard Wentworth (the Spider), Kent Allard (the Shadow), G-8, and 'Bulldog' Drummond are closely related. Of the nineteen named, be it noted, thirteen had grey eyes."(Farmer 218)

According to Farmer, to understand the relationships of these various characters, who he contends were, in fact, nothing less than actual superhumans, it is necessary to

go back to 1795. Five married couples and a brother of one of the wives were riding in two coaches past Wold Newton, Yorkshire. They were on the way to visit with relatives at Rayleigh. A meteorite struck only twenty yards from the two coaches. (A monument on the spot where it hit may be seen today in this northeastern corner of England.) (Farmer 235)

Farmer continues, revealing what is probably the ultimate, and by now perhaps somewhat trite and cliché, science-fictional and superhero impetus for the advent of superhuman abilities in human beings, radiation.

The birth light and heat and thunderous roar of the meteorite blinded and terrified the passengers, coachmen, and the horses. But they recovered quickly, thanking God that they were unharmed by the near-hit. They never guessed, being ignorant of ionization, that the fallen star had affected them and their unborn. (Farmer 236)

Farmer's "universe building" approach that he employed with Tarzan and Doc Savage also greatly affected Alan Moore and his previously mentioned *The League of Extraordinary Gentleman*, as Moore explains,

Philip José Farmer was a seminal influence upon the League. I mean, I had read his *Tarzan Alive* and *Doc Savage: His Apocalyptic Life*, which had that whole 'Wold Newton' family tree that connected up all the pulp adventure heroes. Although we've taken it a little bit further than that in the League, whether we would have ever thought of that without the primary example of Philip José Farmer, I don't know. (Smith)

As mentioned earlier, these universal or multiversal crossovers were not limited to just superheroes. With DC Comics even having a designation for our Earth, superhero crossovers with comics creators was inevitable and occurred early and fairly often. For instance, in *The Flash #179*, by writer Cary Bates and artist Ross Andru and cover-dated May, 1969, the Flash, accidentally travels to Earth Prime and enlists the aid of DC Comics editor Julius Schwartz to build another cosmic treadmill to get back home to Earth-One. Bates would later travel to Earth-One in *The Flash #228*, by writer Cary Bates and artist Irv Novick and cover-dated July-August, 1974, and help the Flash defeat the Trickster. In *Superman #411*, by writer Elliot S! Maggin and artist Curt Swan and cover-dated September, 1985, Superman takes the Julius Schwartz of Earth-One to meet the Julius Schwartz of Earth Prime.

Only a short five years later, Animal Man visited writer Grant Morrison in the real world in *Animal Man #26* by writer Morrison with artist Chas Truog, cover-dated August, 1990. Here, Morrison explained the nature of Animal Man's existence and that of the DC Universe, "You live in a world created by committee" (Morrison et al. 212). Before this meeting, though, Morrison had slowly revealed clues to not only readers, but characters, as well, and many had gradually begun to understand their reality and the nature of their universe...

Look, it's all here. Comic books.

That's it!

This is the shape of spacetime.

We wonder in and out of stories and our minds fill in the gaps. We think we have histories and memories, but all we have are brief appearances in the stories of other characters. (Morrison et al. 163)

Interestingly, in the issues leading up to his conversation with Animal Man, Morrison had brought back a plethora of pre-Crisis characters and concepts and expressed a genuine fondness for the DC Multiverse that had only been gone a short four years at that point due to the events of *Crisis On Infinite Earths* (1985 – 1986). Morrison, speaking through the Psycho-Pirate, laments, “You’re all so wonderful. Why did they ever have to remove you from the continuity? You’d have made for marvelous stories.” (Morrison et al. 144)

By absorbing fragmentation into the very foundation of the medium and encouraging readers to construct a unified whole from the narrative fragments, comics and its mechanics are imbued with a great deal of resistance to the cultural logic of late capitalism, a resistance that it automatically lends to works produced within it. And it is this medium and frequently the superhero subgenre that Ellis has produced a staggering amount of work. This is not to say that postmodernity can lay no claim whatsoever upon Ellis or his many works; quite the opposite, in fact. Like all other artists, he is not producing work in a vacuum. Of course, the current postmodern historical moment affects his work. It would be sheer folly to argue otherwise. But late capitalism cannot, however, overcome Ellis’s anti-capitalist tendencies when coupled with the extremely strong anti-capitalist underpinnings of not only his chosen medium, comics, but the genre of his most important texts, science fiction. Ellis’s authorial tendencies in conjunction with these forms demonstrate an extremely strong resistance to influence of the cultural logic of late capitalism and reveal the impetus behind his mistakenly being described as “the Last Modernist” (Ellis “[Bad Signal]Sun Gone Down”) instead of simply classifying him as something other than postmodernist.

As an example, what follows is a brief discussion of an objectively postmodernist work, *Watchmen* (1986 – 1987) by Alan Moore and David Gibbons. As an exemplar, it will be used to illustrate many of the aforementioned postmodernist traits that have just been discussed. Interestingly, Moore’s later work with the DC Comics imprint, America’s Best Comics, tends to be much less postmodernist in execution and thematic content in contrast to this early, thoroughly postmodern work. Coincidentally, while both Moore and Ellis utilize the superhero sub-genre in their work, their objectives differ greatly. Each has a vastly different agenda guiding them through their in-depth interrogations of the superhero genre, the results of which reveal almost diametrically opposed intentions. With *Watchmen*, Moore seeks only deconstruction and dissection of the genre. And this goal he pursues with a breathtaking skill and

precision that leaves the concept of the superhero severely undermined. While with *Planetary*, Ellis seeks to build something new with the genre, something akin to a contemporary, more robust genre of superhuman fiction that encompasses not only the past in the form of the pulps and Victorian literature, but also the superheroes of yesterday, today, and beyond, as well.

Watchmen contains many facets of the postmodern, and as a complex work in its own right, has had much scholarship devoted to it. However, the following discussion about its postmodernity will be kept brief in an effort to not derail the main discussion concerning the classification of the works of Warren Ellis as not postmodern. Thus, the discussion will only touch on the work's use of fragmentation, the degree to which utopian energy is present, and intertextuality.

Within the pages of *Watchmen*, Moore relates a series of fragmented events in an often non-linear manner that never seems to congeal and form a narrative whole. This is accomplished in spite of the comics medium's strong anti-capitalist tendencies that we touched upon earlier.

Moore's use of postmodernist fragmentation is particularly visible when analyzing the Dr. Manhattan sequence from *Watchmen* #4. (Moore and Gibbons 109-37) Moore shows Dr. Manhattan, the only true superhuman in the narrative, experience history not as a succession of events, but as a simultaneity of events, "Now" for him is a multiplicity of events. "The photograph lies at my feet, falls from my fingers, is in my hand." (Moore and Gibbons 110) And, a few pages later...

"It's 1959. A pulse flutters in her belly, beneath my cheek.

It's 1966. The suitcase won't shut and she's crying

It's 1985. In one hundred minutes, the meteorite shower begins." (Moore and Gibbons 114)

Now is suddenly the past, the present, and the future all at once. This narrative strategy attempts to produce the same effect as the postmodernist lack of historicity in that it rips the reader out of history and places them in an unending present, leaving the reader (and, one assumes, Dr. Manhattan) in an almost schizophrenic experiential state. In fact, the sequence becomes even more fragmented spending fewer panels per time period as it jumps around between decades.

Moore alludes to a quote attributed to Albert Einstein in the final sequence of this issue and even includes the quote on the final page of the narrative,

The release of atom power has changed everything except our way of thinking...the solution to this problem lies in the heart of mankind. If only I had known, I should have become a watchmaker. (Moore and Gibbons 136)

This quote brilliantly supports the central, repeating image of the issue that consists of the many, many tiny internal parts of a pocket watch falling apart in the air as they shower down from an apartment window,

“I am standing on a fire escape in 1945 reaching out to stop my father, take the cogs and flywheels from him, piece them all together again... But it’s too late, always has been, always will be too late.” (Moore and Gibbons 136)

This central image, perhaps, best describes the narrative strategy of the *Watchmen* as a whole. Moore delivers fragment after fragment of events that span over forty years, sometimes even the same fragment from a different character’s point of view as he fragments the narrative over and over again. Dr. Manhattan typifies the experience of the reader in this fashion with his experience of multiple events at the same time.

The fragmentation of reality is a theme that Moore would return to in a different manner toward the end of the series. Adrian Veidt, the superhero known as Ozymandias, possesses a wall full of televisions each turned to a different channel and changing channels at fixed intervals as he receives fragmented and continually fragmenting views of the world as he monitors the horrific results of his master plan to kill millions in New York as part of a fake, botched alien invasion. His plan works as humanity unites against the invaders. This scene with the televisions is similar to a scene with David Bowie in *The Man Who Fell to Earth*, something Jameson briefly mentions in *Postmodernism* during a discussion of collage.

Furthermore, while Veidt does indeed “save the world” from the escalating tensions that could have led to a nuclear armageddon, his plan was not about bettering the world. It was instead reactionary and meant to return the world to a previous state, and therefore involves taking a step back, to a condition before the escalation of hostilities between the world’s nuclear superpowers. He does indeed have

greater plans for the world, though, as he states, “I saved Earth from Hell. Next, I’ll help her towards Utopia,” (Moore and Gibbons 402) but this plan was simply not part of any utopian agenda. It was instead just a small fragment of an overall agenda that, in truth, has not yet even begun. However, there surely must be a utopian impulse contained within the urge to prevent a nuclear holocaust. And while yes, there is, it remains stifled here in that this impulse is for a return to a previous state, a move back. It is therefore a wish towards the past and not one towards the future, which drains it of a great deal of its utopian energy. Utopia is a desire for the future, and no path back through the past can lead to it.

Additionally, Moore also incorporates the “Tales of the Black Freighter,” a comic book that a young boy reads at a newsstand throughout *Watchmen*. The use of a pirate comic book performs two functions within *Watchmen*. First, it illustrates a central conceit of the series. In a world with real superheroes, superheroes do not dominate comics as they do in our American comics market. Instead, pirate comics rule the newsstands. Second, the macabre pirate tale mirrors Veidt’s choices throughout the series. The allegorical tale follows a man who survives an attack by the otherworldly Black Freighter and performs unspeakably horrific deeds to stay alive and return home to save his family. He becomes something less than human in the process. Ultimately, he is wrong about the pirates forcibly controlling his hometown and kills innocent people in his quest to save his family. Only then does he realize that the Black Freighter was not there to attack the town, but to simply collect his soul, and he willingly joins the Black Freighter’s crew of the damned. Obviously, this parallels the main plot of the series and the journey of Ozymandias from superhero to mass murderer in the name of saving the planet. Clearly, the inclusion of a work of art of one genre within another work of art of a different, as in this case, reveals postmodernism’s formidable influence via intertextuality. With this brief example of an objectively postmodernist work now under our metaphorical belt, we can now move beyond our discussion of postmodernism and into an in-depth examination of Warren Ellis.

Utilizing Jameson’s Marxist critical stance, then, it is fair to say that current works of art, regardless of medium, tend to express some postmodernist sensibilities to a certain extent, but even Jameson is “far from feeling that all cultural production today is ‘postmodern’ in the broad sense I will be conferring on this term.” (Jameson *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* 6) Obviously, not all media are identical, and as such, different media display varying levels of late capitalism’s

insidious influence, which appears to be virtually omnipresent to at least some small degree in nearly all current media. In spite of postmodernism's ubiquity, there are nevertheless some current artists and, subsequently, some current works of art that utilize anti-capitalist strategies and contain inherently stronger utopian impulses than those typically found within this era of the postmodern. One such artist is the prolific British author Warren Ellis.

A prominent British comics writer with a strong presence in the American comics market, Warren Ellis was born on February 16, 1968, in Essex. He began his comics career in 1990 with contributions to the various venerable British weekly comics such as *Deadline*, *Doctor Who Magazine*, *Speakeasy*, and *Judge Dredd*. He also contributed to the short-lived magazine *Blast!*. It was in the pages of *Blast!* that Ellis's *Lazarus Churchyard* first appeared. *Lazarus Churchyard* was shortly thereafter published in America by Tundra in a three-issue series and quickly released as a collected edition by Atomeka Press. Image Comics also released a collected edition in 2001. Asked to pitch a cyberpunk series, Ellis instead produced *Lazarus Churchyard*, something it amused him to term "Decadent SF." (Ellis and D'Israeli iv) An immortal plasborg composed of intelligent evolving plastic, Lazarus Churchyard simply wanted to die, but was unable to find anything capable of killing him. Many of the themes Ellis utilized here would eventually find their way into *Transmetropolitan* half a decade later.

It was not until 1994, however, that Ellis began regularly working in the American comics market in earnest when he was hired by Marvel Comics. In this respect, Ellis followed in the footsteps of something of a small British invasion of the American comics scene. Other British comics writers such as Neil Gaiman, Peter Milligan, Jamie Delano, and Alan Moore had only just started working in American comics a few years before. Over the course of the next two years, Ellis would work on a variety of Marvel titles, including *Doom 2099*, which was a part of Marvel's group of titles set one-hundred years in the future, *Excalibur*, *Ghost Rider*, *Hellstorm: Prince of Lies*, *Daredevil*, *Doctor Strange*, *Druid*, *Ruins*, *Star Jammers*, *Thor*, and *Ultraforce* for the Marvel-owned Malibu Comics. It is on these titles that Ellis started to set himself apart from other writers working at that time. His authorial voice was certainly different than that of the typical American writer for Marvel at the time. And, the work he produced during this time was certainly as good, if not better than much of the other superhero work published by Marvel or DC.

In 1996, he began an association with both DC Comics and Caliber Press, contributing to *Batman: Legends of the Dark Knight* for DC and both *Calibrations* and *Negative Burn* for Caliber. Ellis also sustained his association with Marvel Comics, continuing to write *Excalibur*, *Doom 2099*, *Thor*, and two mini-series, *Storm* and *Pryde and Wisdom*. In addition, he wrote *DV8* for WildStorm, at the time a part of Image Comics. However, it was another WildStorm title, *StormWatch* that he also started writing in 1996 that would ultimately lead to a very high profile within the industry. *StormWatch* was really where Ellis began to shine as he displayed his thorough knowledge of the comics medium's history as well as its antecedents in the early twentieth century pulps. His fascination with the history of superhumanity and its implications would provide fodder for *StormWatch* in all of its various incarnations and form the basis of his and John Cassady's masterful *Planetary*.

Ellis continued on *StormWatch* throughout 1997, but it was the release of *Transmetropolitan* for DC's short-lived Helix imprint (*Transmetropolitan* would later be absorbed into DC's Vertigo imprint) that really began to display his capabilities as a writer. *Transmetropolitan* (1997-2002) lasted sixty issues and has been collected in eleven trade paperbacks (*Transmetropolitan: Back on the Street*, *Transmetropolitan: Lust for Life*, *Transmetropolitan: Year of the Bastard*, *Transmetropolitan: The New Scum*, *Transmetropolitan: Lonely City*, *Transmetropolitan: Gouge Away*, *Transmetropolitan: Spider's Thrash*, *Transmetropolitan: Dirge*, *Transmetropolitan: The Cure*, *Transmetropolitan: One More Time*, and *Transmetropolitan: Tales of Human Waste*) which are still in print as of this writing over nine years after the series ended. *Transmetropolitan's* success cemented Ellis's reputation as a writer to watch within the industry.

By 1998, Ellis had established himself within the American comics industry. In addition to his ongoing collaboration with Darick Robertson on *Transmetropolitan*, he ended the *StormWatch* series in a crossover with the Aliens franchise licensed by Dark Horse Comics, killing many of the characters in an effort to clean the slate for a relaunch of the series as *The Authority*. Marvel Comics also tapped him to write a short four-issue arc in *Wolverine*. By this time, Warren Ellis writing on a title had become a selling point.

With the launch of not only *The Authority* and *Planetary* for Image Comics in 1999 and high-profile work on DC's *John Constantine: Hellblazer*, as well as the continued success of

Transmetropolitan, Ellis quickly achieved fan-favorite status. Both *The Authority* and *Planetary* were successful in terms of sales, of course, but both also were critical hits, providing superhero fans with substantially more than the typical mindless slugfest. He also started the Warren Ellis Forum, his presence on the Internet until 2002. His star continued to rise as the publication of *Strange Kiss* saw the beginning of a relationship with Avatar Press that has lasted for well over a decade as of this writing. It was not all smooth sailing, though; Ellis resigned from *John Constantine: Hellblazer* after DC Editorial balked at publishing a story that dealt with school shootings. Ellis recently wrote,

Years ago, I wrote a brief run on the DC Vertigo horror comic *John Constantine: Hellblazer*. Brief, because I wrote a horror story therein called Shoot. Shoot was about schoolyard slayings in the United States. It was completed before Columbine happened, but scheduled to appear not long after. The regime at DC Comics at the time decided that it could not be released in its completed form. I refused to go along with the changes they wanted to make. They decided not to publish the book at all. I quit. (Ellis "Shoot to Finally Be Published")

Interestingly, the story was published over a decade later in *Vertigo Resurrected*, an anthology released in October of 2010.

Ellis increased both his influence and popularity in 2000 with additional work for Marvel Comics, a project named Counter X. Essentially, Ellis revamped and plotted the direction of three of the poorer selling X-Men related titles and worked with a co-writer on each title. He teamed with Brian Wood on *Generation X*, with Ian Edginton on *X-Force*, and with Steven Grant on *X-Man*. Ellis would only be associated with these titles for eight issues, while this new direction was abandoned just six months later. Grant, with his *Master of the Obvious*, was a fellow columnist at Comic Book Resources as Ellis's *Come In Alone* column was serialized weekly at the site during 2000. In it, he examined comics and culture with a critical eye and not even readers were immune...

I hate the fact that comics are treated as this bastard little medium that should hide in the dark in the corner, and I equally hate the fact that too

many comics readers would rather hide in the dark in the corner than go out and join the general cultural conversation. (Ellis *Come in Alone* 6)

The columns for Comic Book Resources really cemented Ellis's reputation as something of a visionary. Ellis also continued his association with Image Comics, producing *City of Silence*. He also continued working with Avatar Press, which collected some of his e-mail musings to his announcement-only electronic mailing list as *From the Desk of Warren Ellis*. In addition, he continued the adventures of combat magician William Gravel in *Stranger Kisses*, the first of many sequels to *Strange Kisses*. He also published a short piece of fiction in the November 16th issue of *Nature*.

Ellis continued both *Transmetropolitan* for DC and *Planetary* for WildStorm (technically also DC since WildStorm had been acquired by the publisher in 1998) in 2001. In addition, Avatar released the first volume of *Bad World*, a collection of Ellis's writings with illustrations, and AiT-Planet Lar released *Come In Alone*, collecting all of his Comic Book Resources columns slightly revised for print. May of 2001 saw the release of *Ministry of Space*, an alternate history with Great Britain leading the space race, from Image Comics. Originally intended as a monthly miniseries, the second issue was not released until September, and the final issue was not released until 2004.

Ellis's ambitious *Transmetropolitan* ended its run with *Transmetropolitan* #60 in November of 2002, completing the five-year project. Additionally, Ellis produced *Planetary / JLA: Terra Occulta*, a crossover with DC's Justice League of America. This was something of a mini-relaunch of *Planetary* as it served to generate interest for the later continuation of the series since the book had only been published irregularly since 2000. *Planetary* would ultimately continue with an erratic schedule until the final issue, *Planetary* #27, finally published in December of 2009. This year also saw the debut of *Global Frequency* from WildStorm and a continuation of his association with Avatar with the publication of *Strange Killings*, *Strange Killings: The Body Orchard*, both continuing the horror-tinged adventures of William Gravel, and *Scars*. AiT-Planet Lar also published *Available Light*, a compilation of short writings and photos by Ellis

taken using an Eyemodule digital camera connected to a Handspring Visor Platinum handheld computer. The text was written on a Targus Stowaway collapsible keyboard for Visor, connected to the Handspring

Visor Platinum, and using the Visor system's onboard Memo word processor. (Ellis *Available Light*)

Global Frequency continued in 2003, but scheduling problems would delay the final two issues until 2004. In addition to *Global Frequency*, Ellis also continued *Planetary* for WildStorm with two issues of the series and the *Planetary / Batman: Night on Earth* (2003) special published. He also penned the mini-series *Red* and *Reload* for Homage, an imprint of WildStorm. He also wrote a pair of min-series, *Two-Step* and *Tokyo Storm Warning* for yet another WildStorm imprint, Cliffhanger. DC published *Orbiter*, an original graphic novel dealing with the American space program, in early 2003. Within its pages, Ellis passionately advocated for the continuation of manned space exploration. He and artist Colleen Doran dedicated *Orbiter* to the astronauts that perished in the Columbia disaster on February 1, 2003. Ellis also continued the adventures of William Gravel in *Strange Killings: Strong Medicine* with Avatar, who also published a second *Bad Signal* collection. AiT-Planet Lar published *Switchblade Honey*, an uncomplicated send-up of Rodenberry's *Star Trek*. Ellis readily admits that, "This isn't me at my most blisteringly intellectual." (Ellis and McKinney)

Ellis then took the reins of a very high-profile relaunch of Marvel's *Iron Man* in 2004. With "Extremis", a six-issue arc, Ellis redefined the character for the twenty-first century. He also began writing for Marvel's Ultimate line, which is basically a rebooted Marvel Universe separate from the existing continuity so that it does not contain the decades of backstory of the mainstream Marvel Universe. He wrote *Ultimate Fantastic Four* for twelve issues (continuing into 2005), and *Ultimate Nightmare*, the first mini-series of a trilogy dealing with the coming of Galactus to the Earth of Marvel's Ultimate Universe. Collected as the *Ultimate Galactus Trilogy*, the two subsequent mini-series would be published in 2005 and 2006. For WildStorm, he produced *Ocean*, one of his most important short science fiction works, with artist Chris Sprouse. Ellis also concluded *Global Frequency*, while *Planetary* continued its irregular schedule with only four issues published. With Avatar, he produced *Apparat*, an experiment involving "four first issues from a line of comics that don't exist, from an imaginary label called *Apparat*." (Ellis "[*Bad Signal*]the *Apparat* Singles Group") With this project, Ellis looked at the publishing history of comics in America and considered

what adventure comics might've looked like today if superhero comics hadn't have happened. If, in fact, the pulp tradition of Weird Thrillers had jumped straight into comics form without mutating into the superhero subgenre we know today. (Ellis, Ryp, et al. 51)

The results were four issues in four different genres. *Angel Stomp Future* was science fiction; *Frank Ironwine*, crime, *Quit City*, aviator, and *Simon Spector*, pulp adventure. These, of course, were collected and published as *Apparat: The Singles Collection Volume One* later this same year. The character of Frank Ironwine can be seen as an early version of Detective Richard Fell of *Fell*. In other media, he penned an episode of Cartoon Network's *Justice League Unlimited* entitled "Dark Heart".

In 2005, Ellis continued work on *Planetary*, finished *Ocean*, and began *Desolation Jones* for WildStorm. He also continued working for Marvel, producing *Ultimate Secret*, the second mini-series of the *Ultimate Galactus Trilogy*, and finishing his six-issue *Iron Man* arc. For DC, he began a six-issue arc on *JLA: Classified*, collected in 2006 as *JLA: New Maps of Hell*. In writing it, he says,

I broke a rule of mine (isn't that what they're there for?) when I started writing my six issues of JLA CLASSIFIED, back in 2003. I usually never write with an audience in mind. With JLA, I tried to put myself in the place of someone who hadn't read JLA in a long time, or even ever, but had a certain familiarity with the characters. And a little research showed me that there's one thing JLA rarely depicts -- because of that familiarity with the characters. You don't get the transformation scene.

Transformation is at the core of the classical superhero comic: the moment at which the ordinary person becomes the extraordinary. The bolt of magic lightning, the costume change.

(Ellis "[Bad Signal]Transformations")

For Image, he produced *Down*, a crime noir mini-series, and began the crime series *Fell*. *Fell* was another experiment on Ellis's part, this time, with format and price...

FELL is going to happen, at the USD \$1.99 price point.

As some of you will remember, the format is 16 pages of actual comics,

and around 6 pages of back matter.

Each 16pp piece of FELL will be a self-contained experience -- with threads that connect and develop in each story, but also a single complete piece in its own right.

The back matter will be a combination of notes on the story, a general kind of diary of production, photos and sketches, and anything else we figure we can jam in there. Also, I'm thinking of bringing back some form of letters page/commentary section, kind of in the mode of a FAQ plus things relating to the culture of the book, probably sourced from email.

(Ellis "[Bad Signal]Fell Mechanics")

And, it was an unqualified success, resulting in strong sales for the single issues. Both the hardcover and softcover collections of the first eight issues, titled *Fell: Feral City*, and released in 2007 also saw strong sales. In addition, Ellis launched The Engine, a forum that would remain his online presence until 2007 and was

conceived as a place for serious discussion, and I wanted everyone to be aware of owning their own words and, particularly, engaging with comics creators on a personal basis and a level playing field. Having to use your own name does alter the nature of the discourse, particularly in as fraught and bitchy a fan environment as comics. (Ellis "Whitechapel - the Autumn Interrogation of Warren 2009 Comment 229")

Nextwave: Agents of H.A.T.E. saw publication from Marvel in 2006 and really showcased Ellis's skill at comedy. It also gave him an opportunity to highlight some of the ridiculous underlying assumptions of superhero comics.

To distill the essence of superhero comics, the leads can't be aware of the absurdity. If Fin Fang Foom is going to put you in his pants, the characters have to evince an almost operatic fear of in fact being put into Fin Fang Foom's pants. (Saunders)

He also completed the final mini-series of the *Ultimate Galactus Trilogy*, *Ultimate Extinction* for Marvel, as well. For Avatar, he branched out into a new genre with *Wolfskin*, tales of a barbarian warrior.

2007 was something of a banner year for Ellis as it saw the publication of his first novel, *Crooked Little Vein* for William Morrow, an imprint of HarperCollins.

Politically radical, outrageously extreme, surprisingly tender, and always entertaining, this debut novel mixes the conventions the hardboiled detective story, the political thriller, the sexual odyssey, and magic realism. (Lalumière)

Crooked little Vein was at once a satire on the puritanical attitude within the United States towards sex, and a criticism of American politics, all while displaying Ellis's outrageous sense of humor. He also wrote a weekly column entitled *The Sunday Hangover* for the Suicide Girls web site that was published on Sundays from July through December. Reuters also tapped him to write an irregularly published column about Second Life, the virtual world developed by Linden Lab. With the closing of The Engine in August, he launched a new forum called Whitechapel that remains active as of this writing. Unlike The Engine, Whitechapel is funded and hosted by Avatar, for whom Ellis produced a mini-series, *Black Summer*, and began two ongoing series, *Doktor Sleepless* and *Gravel*. *Gravel* continued the adventures of combat magician William Gravel from *Strange Kisses* and its many, many sequels with Ellis providing plots for his cowriter Mark Wolfer. In addition, Avatar published *Crécy*, the first of three graphic novellas by Ellis. As graphic novellas, they were intended "to be a permanent shelf-life item for comics stores." (Ellis "[Bad Signal]the Big Week, a Week Later") He also continued his association with Marvel, writing *Thunderbolts* and revamping Marvel's old *New Universe* property into *newuniversal*.

Ellis continued *newuniversal* in 2008 for Marvel as *newuniversal: Shockfront*, as well as succeeding Joss Whedon as writer on *Astonishing X-Men*. He also produced *Ultimate Human* for Marvel's Ultimate line. In addition, he continued working with Avatar on *Gravel* and *Doktor Sleepless* and produced two miniseries, *Anna Mercury* and *No Hero*, for the publisher. Also with Avatar, Ellis published the second of his graphic novellas, *Aetheric Mechanics*. And, once again experimenting with the comics form, as well as distribution, Ellis produced the free, weekly *FreakAngels* comic for the World Wide Web. Every episode of *FreakAngels* is freely available via the FreakAngels site (<http://www.freakangels.com/>).

Amazingly, the collected print editions of this material have still been strong sellers for Avatar. His novel, *Crooked Little Vein*, was also released in paperback in July. Unfortunately in 2008, Ellis suffered a setback that severely impacted all of his work.

My backups all got corrupted, and my backup device died. I'll fix that on Sunday, I thought, as I was under deadline pressure. Saturday evening, my main machine died in flames. Sent it off for data recovery. The guy running the data recovery shop took it in and then went off to Europe for an operation. And died on the operating table. Came back to the shop to get my machine, because no-one was answering the phone, to find it boarded up, the (mostly off-the-books, apparently) employees scattered to the four winds, and the shop stripped down to the plaster. Not a computer left in there -- not even mine.

(and no-one could do anything with the fucked backup discs, either.)

(Ellis "Whitechapel - the Autumn Interrogation of Warren 2009 Comment 170")

This loss of data impacted everything that he was writing at the time, causing the loss of notes and scripts, including *Fell*, *newuniversal*, *Desolation Jones*, and *Listener*, of which all 30,000 words were lost. *Listener* was intended to be his second novel. (Ellis "Warren's Work Faq (Revised July 2010) Comment 1")

The first quarter of 2009 saw the release of *G.I. Joe: Resolute*, a series of web-episodes written by Ellis. These were later collected and released on DVD in December. He also started a monthly column for Wired UK that ended in February of 2011. Ellis also commenced another column for comics news site Bleeding Cool entitled *Do Anything: Thoughts on Comics and Things by Warren Ellis*. These twenty-six columns were collected by Avatar in 2010. For Marvel, he continued working with its Ultimate line with *Ultimate Armor Wars*, and for Avatar he continued his practice of launching creator-owned mini-series with *Ignition City*, *Supergod*, and *Anna Mercury 2*, the sequel to *Anna Mercury*, in addition to his ongoing work on *Gravel* and *Doktor Sleepless*. *Supergod* would end in late 2010, much later than originally

planned, but *Anna Mercury 2* still has not been completed as of this writing. Avatar also published the final of his graphic novellas, *Frankenstein's Womb*.

FreakAngels continued its weekly installments in 2010. Ellis continued work on existing series, some of which have never quite recovered from the 2008 computer meltdown. For Avatar, he launched *Captain Swing and the Electrical Pirates of Cindery Island*, another four-issue mini-series. He also continued working on *Gravel* and *Doktor Sleepless* for Avatar. Marvel Comics released three volumes of his never-before-collected *Excalibur* issues and the Pryde and Wisdom min-series titled *Excalibur Visionaries: Warren Ellis*. October of 2010 also saw the premiere of the *Red* movie based on his and Cully Hamner's three-issue limited series from 2003.

2011 saw the continuation of *FreakAngels*, which ended with episode number 144 on August 5th, and his other ongoing comics work, including the assumption of writing duties for a six-issue stint on Marvel's *Secret Avengers*. Teaming with the design consultant firm Berg, Ellis and artist Matt Brooker (whose work appears under the pen name of D'Israeli) released *SVK*, which stands for Special Viewing Kit, outside the traditional American comics market. *SVK* utilizes an ultraviolet light that is packaged with the work to let readers experience the thoughts of the characters in addition to the normally visible captions and speech balloons. Ellis also decided to try his hand at conventional novels again with the announcement in April of a two-book deal with Mulholland Books. The first of which will be *Gun Machine* to be published in the fall of 2012.

Ellis has long championed the use of collected editions as part of a comprehensive marketing and publishing presence and was a prime mover in convincing comics publishers that it was a viable publishing model. One could even argue that this is a personal challenge to postmodernist fragmentation. By the continued use of collected editions, Ellis guarantees that his narratives will be viewed as a unified whole.

Unsurprisingly, a very high percentage of his work remains available and still in print via collected editions. In fact, with well over seventy graphic novels in print, he "has more trade paperbacks in print than anyone else in the American comic industry" (Seibert). He is also known for his outspoken criticism of the comics industry and has written extensively upon it. His *Old Bastard's Manifesto* (from a *Come In Alone* column) exhorted creators and readers "to reclaim the comics industry and remake it in another

image. Specifically, mine.” (Ellis *Come in Alone* 77) and was part of his October Revolution - American Tour 2000 event, a signing tour of select American cities in 2000. Very much aware of technology and culture, Ellis is “a non-dogmatic futurist. I'll take possible outbreaks of the future from anywhere.”(Ellis “[Bad Signal]Futuronomy”) With respect to his writing, he has an interesting perspective...

Why does anyone write? I want to talk about what I see. I'm compelled to. I understand that all writing, really, is about where the writer is today and what they're seeing in front of them, and I'm compelled to bring my perception to the table. It's a lunatic's job, basically. If I wasn't doing this I'd be walking the streets with a placard on a stick and wetting myself in public. The only real difference between me and the signboard guy in San Francisco who rants about the Clintons betraying 16 galaxies and a zegnalogical rocket society is that I get paid for my perception of the world. And I own better suits. (McBride)

And, it is a perception of the world that many wish to experience, as the lengthy list of his works still in print attests.

II. SCIENCE FICTION

Before ultimately moving into an in-depth discussion of Ellis's most important works, the wisest course of action would be to pause briefly and undertake a cursory examination of the science fiction genre and its enhanced capacity to resist the influence of the cultural logic of late capitalism. For, it is in the science fiction genre where Ellis finds himself most readily at home and where he produces his most imaginative and critically useful work. His fondness for the genre stems from his childhood. In fact,

The first comic I was ever given was a science fiction comic. That's how it started.

I love science fiction. It's where I can let rip. I have the actual scientific education of a mollusk, mind you. I am crap at science. I mean, I was the kid at school who managed to set water on fire, you know? My greatest achievement in science, according to one of my teachers, was climbing up on a table and kicking the shit out of a guy who'd been bugging me for a month. (Said teacher came up afterwards and told me this, and also that he wished he'd done it.) But I read science news obsessively. I love the way science *sounds*. I love the ideas for their art. There's a crazy beauty about a theory of dimensional structure that assembles itself into a snowflake, or the idea that reality is a two-dimensional plane of information and the 3-D universe is a hologrammatic side-effect. And that's how I write science fiction. I use the sound of the ideas and then make it all up.

And then it all comes true anyway. (Ellis, Ryp, et al. 25-26)

Ellis continues to publish work within the genre, but it is a specific subgenre of science fiction that he is most associated with, the superhero subgenre. The fact that Ellis is so strongly associated with this subgenre remains somewhat unusual, considering that he is "not, and never was, a big superhero fan. I had to learn how to write them." (Springer) He apparently learned well.

In our discussion of science fiction we must first consider the formal definition of the genre and what this reveals about its mechanics with respect to its higher level of resistance to the influence of the

cultural logic of late capitalism. In addition, though, we must also situate Ellis firmly within the history of the science fiction genre, particularly his participation in the recent British Boom in science fiction phenomenon.

Obviously, the genre of science fiction is much, much more than simply ray-guns, space-ships, bumpy-headed aliens, time machines, cyborgs, or the myriad of other tropes most commonly associated with it. Granted, these are staples of the genre, but it is only after removing these trappings that the inner workings and power of science fiction are revealed. Much as comics is a privileged medium, science fiction, too, is a privileged genre and holds within its mechanics a powerful resistance to late capitalism.

And, just like comics, the genre is at once both new, and ancient. As with McCloud, who found comics in ancient times armed only with his definition as a guide, the genre of science fiction, too, can be found in works millennia old, such as Plato's *The Republic*, circa 380 BCE, as well as in somewhat more recent works such as Thomas More's *Utopia*, published in 1516, Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*, published in 1726, H.G. Wells's *The Time Machine*, published in 1895, or Ellis and Sprouse's *Ocean*, published in 2006.

Regardless of publication date, though, these works are classified as science fiction not for their subject matter, but for the manner in which they work to produce an effect, an effect that is antithetical to postmodernism and capable of mounting a powerful resistance to late capitalism. And again, as with our definition of comics, this effect and its mechanics derive from the definition of the genre.

Science fiction has long held a special place in the hearts and minds of Marxist critics, and as a genre, it has held a privileged position with Marxists since the 1970s, when Darko Suvin, displaying the influence of Ernst Bloch, formulated its functional definition it as the genre of "cognitive estrangement." Formally, Suvin posits that science fiction is

a literary genre whose necessary and sufficient conditions are the presence and interaction of estrangement and cognition, and whose main formal device is an imaginative framework alternative to the author's empirical environment. (Suvin 7-8)

He further contends that the genre's utilization of both estrangement and cognition render it unique.

Estrangement differentiates SF from the 'realistic' literary mainstream

extending from the eighteenth century into the twentieth. Cognition differentiates it not only from myth, but also from the folk (fairy) tale and the fantasy.(Suvin 8)

It is the combination of these two conditions that give science fiction its power as a genre and also the power to resist the influence of the cultural logic of late capitalism. Suvin places special emphasis on the great utopian potential of science fiction as the ultimate goal of cognitive estrangement.

And, Suvin is far from alone among Marxists in privileging science fiction. Carl Freedman describes the genre of science fiction as “the literature of cognitive estrangement...the critical genre par excellence” (Freedman "Science Fiction and Utopia: A Historico-Philosophical Overview" 72).

Interestingly though, while utopia is a function of science fiction, another subgenre of science fiction, cyberpunk, seems to display the attributes of postmodernism, and subsequently an extremely low utopian impulse, better than any other genre. In fact, Jameson proclaims that cyberpunk “is fully as much an expression of transnational corporate realities as it is of global paranoia itself.” (Jameson *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* 38) He later labels it “the supreme literary expression if not of postmodernism, then of late capitalism itself.” (Jameson *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* 419) Cyberpunk merely demonstrates just how important utopia is to the genre.

This Suvinian interpretation of the genre has long held sway over Marxist theorists, and will be the framework that I utilize during my brief examination of the genre. Recently, however, prominent author and Marxist critic China Miéville has taken issue with this Marxist tradition of excluding the genre of fantasy per Suvin’s original definition. Miéville argues that

we should not be seduced by the long and honourable tradition of left utopias and utopian studies into foreclosing the reverse possibility (which better serves the project of theorising *actually-existing* SF and fantasy, rather than ring-fencing segments of the fields): that utopias (including dystopias) are, rather, specific articulations of *alterity*, and that is of that that SF/fantasy is the literature. In this model, the atom of SF’s *and* fantasy’s estrangement, in other words, is their unreality function, of

which utopia is but one – if highly important – form. (Miéville "Afterword - Cognition as Ideology: A Dialectic of Sf Theory" 243-44)

While this debate is interesting for the future of science fiction studies, it is more than a just a fascinating side note. Miéville remains the central author within the British Boom, an extremely important recent phenomenon in science fiction, so his conception of the definitional underpinning of the science fiction genre at least bears mentioning even though I will be utilizing the traditional Suvinian, and by extension, the Jamesonian conception of the genre.

Jameson, Freedman, and Eagleton have all praised the singular power of the genre to resist the hegemonic influence of capitalism by the simple act of imagining a host of alternatives to it. Ultimately, science fiction is the genre of utopia and the earnest dreams of better, finer worlds, and utopia, in the form of the utopian impulse, is the yardstick by which I have chosen to measure the resistance to the influence of the cultural logic of late capitalism.

Utopian fiction can be traced back millennia to Plato's *Republic*, although it was Thomas More's *Utopia* that would lend its name to the sub-genre. More coined the term from two Greek words.

Translated, the term literally means "no place." In essence, utopia simply does not exist, and yet, for centuries authors have been describing their various utopias to untold numbers of readers. In essence,

every valid theoretical description of utopia is thus paradoxical. Utopia is the homeland where no one has ever been but where alone we are authentically at home. It is the promised land which, in counter-Biblical fashion, can be attained only by means of exodus. (Freedman "Science Fiction and Utopia: A Historico-Philosophical Overview" 74)

More's utopia comprised a spatial utopia, whereas modern utopian fiction characteristically consists of temporal utopias, places that exist when, not where. Typically, these exist in the distant future, disconnected from the present, but somehow still inextricably linked. This link, however, is tenuous, and one wonders what something so far removed from the contemporary circumstances and experience of human existence has to offer denizens of the present historical moment. This is something that Jameson is very much interested in, as well, when he asks the political question of

how works that posit the end of history can offer any usable historical impulses, how works which aim to resolve all political differences can continue to be in any sense political, how texts designed to overcome the needs of the body can remain materialistic, and how visions of the "epoch of rest" (Morris) can energize and compel us to action.

There are good reasons for thinking that all these questions are undecidable: which is not necessarily a bad thing provided we continue to try to decide them. Indeed, in the case of the Utopian texts, the most reliable political test lies not in any judgment on the individual work in question so much as in its capacity to generate new ones, Utopian visions that include those of the past, and modify or correct them.

(Jameson *Archaeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions* xiv-xv)

Thus, the fundamental principle of the science fiction genre, via the utopian function of cognitive estrangement, resists the influence of late capitalism by its simple act of existence. Science fiction counters postmodernism's dehistoricizing impulse with the utopian impulse by not only by imagining an alternative to the present historical moment, but also by connecting us to this alternative temporally and situating us again within a historical chronology.

The utopian impulse is transformative and embodies the concept of hope for the future and therefore "possesses an inherently collective character and at bottom has nothing in common with individualist impulses like greed." (Freedman "Science Fiction and Utopia: A Historico-Philosophical Overview" 74) Utopian thinking, however, is much more than mere wish fulfillment or simple hope for something better. Both its form and function are quite a bit more complicated than simple avarice. "Utopia as a form is not the representation of radical alternatives; it is rather simply the imperative to imagine them." (Jameson *Archaeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions* 416) Jameson further posits that "the proper function of its themes lay in critical negativity, that is, in their function to demystify their opposite numbers." (Jameson *Archaeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions* 211)

In essence, utopian thinking involves a “demystification,” or critical distancing from the present social system. Or, to describe this phenomenon utilizing Suvin’s terminology, utopian thinking is cognitive estrangement from the present historical moment enabling both a critique of the present as well as the presentation of alternative social constructions even though late capitalism shrilly insists that there simply are no alternatives. It is, therefore, a form of resistance to the hegemonic power of transnational capitalism.

The science fiction genre, through its utopian component, greatly resists the influence of the cultural logic of late capitalism, and, in fact, offers a something of a cure. Cognitive estrangement encourages readers of the genre to perform the process of cognitive mapping that Jameson recommends as an antidote to the postmodern condition.

As arguably the first modern science fiction writer, H. G. Wells was certainly aware of the inner workings of the genre of what he termed “scientific romances.” He described them as

“all ‘fantasias of possibility’; each one takes some great creative tendency, or group of tendencies, and develops its possible consequences in the future.” (Wells 127)

In discussing the genesis of *The Sleeper Awakes*, clearly a dystopian text, Wells stated, “The great city of this story is no more than a nightmare of Capitalism triumphant.” (Wells 128) Ellis is no stranger to the mechanics of the genre, either, being, himself, very much aware of the history of the genre in general and Wells, in particular. He says, “I strongly believe in science fiction in its Wellsean frame as a social fiction, using the future as a tool with which to examine the present.”(McBride)

This understanding and utilization of not only the science fiction genre and its history, but also of its utopian dimension firmly situates Ellis within a recent phenomenon in British science fiction known as the “British Boom,” a trend that when observed through the lenses of cognitive estrangement and utopia causes the boundaries of genre to blur and shift and ultimately reestablish themselves and thereby encompass works that, on the surface, do not appear to belong. Interestingly, and none too coincidentally, the “British Boom” phenomenon also includes other comics writers, as well.

A. BRITISH BOOM

Great Britain has long played an important role in the history of science fiction, regardless

whether one dates the beginning of science fiction to Sir Thomas More's *Utopia* (1516), Mary Shelley's *The Last Man* (1826), or H. G. Wells's *Time Machine* (1895). Recently, the importance of this small kingdom has once again played a crucial role in the continued development of science fiction genre as it hosted something of a renaissance within the genre.

The British Boom was an explosion of creativity and imagination that occurred during the tail end of last decade of the twentieth century and into the twenty-first century, and might even still be underway. It is characterized by an inclusion of a vast number of sub-genres of science fiction, including cyberpunk, space opera, utopian fiction, time travel, and strange hybrids between science fiction and other genres and media such as fantasy, horror, comics, and sometimes, all of these at once.

In addition, authors of the Boom seem to be keenly aware of science fiction's history as well as the works of their predecessors within the genre. This has led to work within the genre that is highly conscious not only of previous works, but works that also situate themselves historically with respect to these earlier works. These authors also seem to share an unstated goal of breaking, what had been up until the time of the Boom, the American domination of the science fiction genre.

While many of the authors that participated in the Boom are still writing and publishing, much of the excitement and energy present in works from 2002 – 2005, what could be considered to be the height of the Boom, seems to have abated somewhat. In addition, no works on par with Miéville's Bas Lag trilogy have appeared within the last several years. This does not necessarily indicate that the British Boom has ended as we will see shortly, though. Miéville's return to writing more purely science fiction in his *Embassytown* (2011) after his *Un Lun Dun* (2007) and *Kraken: An Anatomy* (2010) both which appear to be more fantasy than science fiction could indicate a possible end. However, his *The City & The City* (2009), which won the Hugo in 2010 for Best Novel, also seems to be more purely science fiction. One could even argue that Miéville's decision to utilize a more traditional science fiction approach could indicate a possible end date for the Boom.

Besides this obvious difficulty in even accurately dating the Boom, there exists an even larger challenge in determining its membership. Various critics have generated lists with scores of authors, some not even British. Critic Andrew M. Butler is responsible for much of the early criticism of the Boom as an emergent phenomenon, and he proposed a partial census of its members consisting of one

hundred, thirty-two names, which is a bit too unwieldy to be useful in the following discussion. (Butler "Thirteen Ways of Looking at the British Boom")

Therefore, in an effort to force some definition upon the somewhat amorphous mass of authors composing the Boom, I am going to severely limit Boom membership to an unrealistically much smaller group consisting of those who I consider to be the most important Boom writers. This will accomplish two objectives: the first being a demonstration of the effect that even such a severely limited list of Boom authors have had upon the Hugo Awards, science fiction's most prestigious award, over the past decade, and the second being merely a method of limiting the scope of this discussion. The British Boom authors that I will focus on in the ensuing discussion include the following: China Miéville, Neil Gaiman, Charles Stross, Ian M. Banks, Gweneth Jones, Alan Moore, Richard Morgan, Justina Robson, Russell T. Davies, and Stephen Moffat.

There is, of course, one name that is conspicuously missing from the above list, a name that Butler included in his partial census. This is, of course, J.K. Rowling. Rowling is unquestionably important as a British writer, but *Harry Potter* just does not qualify as science fiction utilizing the framework that I have chosen. In addition to excluding Rowling, I am also including Stephen Moffat, the successor to Davies as Head Writer and Executive Producer of *Doctor Who*, who was understandably not on Butler's original list as it predates all of his *Doctor Who* work. Davies and Moffat, with their reinvigoration of *Doctor Who*, have dominated the Best Dramatic Presentation, Short Form of the Hugo Awards since 2006, as we shall see momentarily as we survey these awards in search of members of the British Boom.

The Hugo Awards have been awarded regularly since the early 1950s and a glimpse at nominees and winners over the past decade provides ample evidence of the effect that the Boom has had upon the science fiction genre (WSFS). Since 2002, the exceedingly small subset of Boom authors listed above have dominated the awards, winning eleven Hugos and receiving twenty-two nominations across multiple categories. Three of these wins are for Best Novel and five are for Best Dramatic Presentation, Short Form.⁵

Even with an unrealistically restricted membership for the British Boom as what has been used here, the influence of the British Boom on the Hugo Awards can clearly be seen. Increasing the membership to a much more reasonable size will only result in the authors of the Boom dominating the

Hugos to a much larger extent during this time.

Earlier, I referred to the Boom as a phenomenon that might have ended. This may very well be the case. However, certainly an argument could be made that it is still ongoing, especially with so many Boom authors not only still writing, but also winning and being nominated for Hugo Awards in 2011. Regardless, the central points of this discussion remain. The British Boom in science fiction is an observable phenomenon contemporaneous with much of Ellis's work and that it has had an immense influence on the science fiction genre.

Miéville attempted to describe the British Boom phenomenon in a 2002 interview with Butler,

There certainly seems to be something of a boom. To a certain extent these things are always artefacts - there's no objective criteria by which one can judge 'boom-ness' (boomitude? Boomosity?) - so the fact that everyone's talking about it is to a certain extent definitional of the fact that something's going on. (Butler "Beyond Consolation: An Art Interview with China Miéville" 7)

Later in that same interview, he enumerated several of what he considered the key characteristics of the British Boom writers,

it is marked out by a few characteristics.

- i) Generally, good to excellent 'literary' quality. Very hard to judge, I know, but we're not for the most part talking about the kind of sf (that we grew up on and probably still love) that has wonderful ideas ploddingly put.
- ii) A disrespectful relationship to generic and thematic boundaries - see the discussion about sf/fantasy earlier. Other books, like Mary Gentle's *Ash* (2000), do a similar job to *Perdido Street Station* in this regard.
- iii) A loving but critical relationship to, and impressive knowledge of, the traditions of the fields. The wave of Space Opera, for example, that people like Al Reynolds (and now M. John Harrison) are associated with is the best kind of revisionism.

iv) A cultural milieu in which 'mainstream' literature is containing ever-growing numbers of books, often by younger writers, with fantastic or sf tropes, that are not hamstrung by the generic embarrassment of earlier half-arsed forays into the fantastic. (Butler "Beyond Consolation: An Art Interview with China Miéville" 7)

Miéville hits upon one of the most important aspects of Boom authors, their "impressive knowledge" of the history of the genre. As we have seen in our earlier discussion, the cultural logic of late capitalism contains within it a powerful de-historicizing force. Boom authors, in particular, as Miéville tells us utilize their great knowledge of the history of the genre within their work. This historicizing of the genre overcomes late capitalism's de-historicizing force and renders works by British Boom authors that much more resistant to late capitalism than traditional science fiction.

As we have seen, British science fiction writers working in media other than the novel, such as comics or television, are also included in the Boom. Butler's partial census of Boom writers includes many comics writers such as Gaiman, Alan Moore, and Grant Morrison. (Butler "Thirteen Ways of Looking at the British Boom" 376-77)

Although not listed, I contend that the work Ellis has produced also exhibits many of the same qualities and should therefore qualify him for membership. Thus, what follows will constitute a brief examination of the work of several British Boom authors. It would, therefore, be best to begin this examination of Boom writers with the author that best typifies it, China Miéville.

Miéville is, perhaps, not only the most important writer of British Boom, but best represents the imaginative and genre-bending aspects of it. It is this that will act as the touchstone to bring such a disparate band of writers as has commonly been associated with the Boom together under its umbrella. He, therefore, shall be utilized as a guide and the central pole around which subsequent writers will be positioned within this phenomenon, particularly, in relation to the strategies and effects at work within his novels that have come to be known as the Bas-Lag Trilogy.

The three novels of this "anti-trilogy," as Miéville describes it, *Perdido Street Station* (2000), *The Scar* (2002), and *Iron Council: A Novel* (2004), are all set in the fictional world of Bas-Lag, a richly detailed and exceptionally realized fantastic world of magic, monsters, and fantastic creatures. Noted

critic Carl Freedman describes the world of Bas-Lag as “arguably the most boldly and meticulously realized alternative world in fiction.” (Freedman "To the Perdido Street Station: The Representation of Revolution in China Miéville's Iron Council" 238) Nonetheless, it is a world quite unlike any other, a world with magic called thaumaturgy, torque energy, and golemetry. It is a world with the Scar,

a fissure right through Bas-Lag. A split. Jagging in from the world's rim for more than two thousand miles, splintering the continent.

That's the Scar. That crack. Teeming with the ways things weren't and aren't but could be. (Miéville *The Scar* 600)

Bas-Lag does not just contain strange creatures. The world, itself, contains places of utter alien strangeness such as the cacotopic stain, which is a

rift through which spilt great masses of the feral cancerous force, Torque.

A badland beyond understanding. Where men might become rat-things made of glass and rats devilish potentates or unnatural sounds and jaguars and trees might become moments that could not have happened, might become impossible angles. Where monsters go and are born. Where the land, and the air, and time are sick. (Miéville *Iron Council: A Novel* 269-70)

The Bas-Lag Trilogy contains many such descriptive passages that showcase the strangeness of Miéville's world. For instance, the city of New Crobuzon is built upon the bones of some monstrous alien beast of nearly unimaginable scale. The people of New Crobuzon even have a name for the bones of this ancient rib cage. They call them

“the Bonetown Claws, the Ribs. The ancient bones that gave the area its name curved more than two hundred feet into the air, cracking, yellowed, mouldering at a geological pace, dwarfing the houses around them.”

(Miéville *Iron Council: A Novel* 97)

Situated within Bas-Lag is a myriad of different species and groups. There are, of course, humans, but they represent only a small percentage of the beings that can be found there. The Cactacae are a vegetable race that grows thorns upon their bodies; the Garuda, a bird-people; the Vodyanoi, an

amphibious race that can manipulate water; and Khepri, insect people in which the females have the body of a human female, but the head of a scarab. There are also the Remade, humans who have been cruelly bonded with animals, machines, or even objects as punishment for crimes. In *The Scar*, Miéville even added such horror staples as zombies and vampires to the population. Not only does he include a great many tropes commonly associated with fantasy, he also includes elements from gaming, television, and other media. Miéville has termed this mutant hybrid amalgamation “weird fiction.” (Miéville "China Miéville: Messing with Fantasy" 5) Hybridization and genre-blending, however, are not the elements of a work that render it science fiction. As established earlier, science fiction requires cognitive estrangement, a strategy very much present in Miéville's work. As an example, one need simply examine his richly detailed city of New Crobuzon.

In a very straightforward way, the city of New Crobuzon is clearly analogous to a chaos-fucked Victorian London. But it's more than just the geography (river straddling, near the coast) and the industry (heavy, riddled with class conflict). It's the way the city intersects with the literature that chronicles it. London is a trope for literature in an incredibly strong way. (Gordon 362)

Miéville's New Crobuzon may simply be a London trope, but he hardly limited himself to just it. He also incorporated a great many fantasy tropes. One can almost go down a checklist of the elements of fantasy and see them reflected in all three novels. And, he did not content himself with fantasy, either. He threw in tropes of other genres and media, as well, such as horror, gaming, television, and movies, to name just a few. Miéville's blending of these disparate genres and media is arguably of keen interest to postmodernist critics as his work seems to contain many of the hallmarks of postmodernism. Do not call his work postmodern, however, as he bristles a bit at this description...

I realize that to some extent this is a semantic quibble, and if someone finds it useful to describe my stuff in that way, that's up to them, but I'd resist it, because I don't think it's fair that hybridity, uncertainty, blurring identities, fracturing, formal experimentation, or the blurring of high and

low culture should be ceded to postmodernism! I want all that, and I'm a classical Marxist. (Gordon 363)

Regardless of what he terms his fiction, Miéville's novels do achieve cognitive estrangement, and thus, are rendered more than works of mere fantasy. They are rendered science fiction. One might even say that while they look like fantasy, they feel like science fiction, and there is a perfectly valid reason for this. Essentially, Miéville uses an alternative framework (other than science) to achieve his goal of cognitive estrangement and imbue his works with a strong utopian impulse. Consequently, his weird fiction displays a high level of resistance to late capitalism.

Miéville is nothing if not versatile. Two of his more recent novels *The City & The City* and *Embassytown* eschew his normal weird fiction and utilize a more traditional science fiction approach. *Embassytown*, in particular, contains many common science fiction tropes such as aliens and space travel. Ultimately, the central issue of the text comes down to language and how it shapes reality. Regardless, whether he utilizes traditional science fiction or his weird fiction, Miéville is able to create works that contain a strong utopian impulse and its resultant resistance to the cultural logic of late capitalism, something that the other authors of the Boom have achieved as well. It is here, at the nexus point of genre multiplicity and alternative estrangement frameworks that Gaiman, Moore, and, ultimately, Ellis interface with and participate in the British Boom phenomenon.

Using fantasy as an alternative framework to induce cognitive estrangement in much the same manner as Miéville, Gaiman first came to prominence as the writer behind DC's *Sandman* (1989-1996) in the early 1990s. He is best known, however, as a bestselling and award-winning author of traditional novels. As has already been noted, Gaiman won the Hugo Award for Best Novel for two of his novels, *American Gods* (2001), in 2002, and *The Graveyard Book*, in 2009. All of his novels utilize common fantasy elements such as monsters, gods, fallen angels, and magic, but *American Gods* and *Neverwhere* (1996) use these to a much different purpose than what is typical of the fantasy genre, and much more in line with science fiction.

Neverwhere is especially interesting as Gaiman creates a weird, shadow version of London called London Below. He then contrasts his oddly familiar London against London Above, the more recognizable and "normal" London. Interestingly, Gaiman's protagonist Richard Mayhew spends most of

the narrative attempting to escape London Below and return to the “normal” world of his job, apartment, and upwardly-mobile fiancé. Ultimately, he succeeds in his quest to return to London Above, but quickly realizes that London Below is the more real of the two to him and happily returns to it as the novel ends. This framework of comparing and contrasting the two Londons allows Gaiman to defamiliarize and critique London in much the same manner as Miéville’s New Crobuzon. *Neverwhere* also contains a very real critique of capitalism which is, of course, intrinsic to world of London Above. There is, of course, much of the utopian impulse contained within the presentation of London Below as an alternative to London Above, an alternative that is ultimately preferred over London Above by Richard.

Gaiman’s *American Gods* is able to produce a similar effect by utilizing both the old gods that America’s immigrants brought with them and new gods of celebrity, drugs, and technology, among others that have arisen in this country. America, at once both real and mythical, is seen not only through the eyes of the old gods, but also the new, modern, and powerful American gods.

During the course of the novel, Gaiman his protagonist, Shadow, visit Lakeside, an idyllic small town. It recalls Andy Griffith’s Mayberry and appears to be the quintessential American small town as depicted by Norman Rockwell. And ultimately it is this mythic place, but only because one child every year is sacrificed to the kobold that magically keeps the town such a wonderful place. Shadow ultimately kills the creature and frees the town from his power, but it is an ambiguous victory since the townspeople will now be forced to deal with all the difficulties of the modern world from which the kobold had protected them.

Much like Miéville, Gaiman takes elements more commonly associated with fantasy, such as gods and magic, and uses them produce cognitive estrangement. In doing so, he imbues his works with a resistance to late capitalism in the form of the utopian impulse that is inherent within the science fiction genre.

A contemporary of Gaiman, Alan Moore is an extremely prolific author in the field of comics in a career that stretches back to the late 1970s. His inclusion here is somewhat problematic, though, in that his seminal works, *Watchmen* and *V for Vendetta* (1982 – 1988), predate the Boom and do not seem to intersect and participate with the phenomenon nearly as well as do many of his later works, such as *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen* (1999 – Present), *Top Ten* (1999 – 2001) and *Promethea* (1999 –

2005). This trio of works, part of his ABC Comics project, seem to much better situate him within the Boom.

This much more recent work interfaces and participates within the Boom at the same genre-bending junction point occupied by both Miéville and Gaiman. Moore's previously mentioned *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen*, *Top Ten* and *Promethea* for America's Best Comics, an imprint of DC Comics, all display this now familiar blending of genres while establishing an alternative framework with which to estrange the reader. The same could be said of Moore's other ABC work, but these three most readily demonstrate the characteristics required to situate Moore within the British Boom.

The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen is the quintessential superhero team by way of the Victorian novel and Farmer's Wold Newton concept with a vastly increased scope. It is a mish-mash of Victorian literature and highly esoteric Victoriana, bringing together characters from a wide variety of nineteenth and early twentieth century fiction such as Mina Murray from *Dracula* (1897), Allan Quartermain from *King Solomon's Mines* (1885), Captain Nemo from *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea* (1870), Griffin (given the first name of Hawley by Moore) from *The Invisible Man* (1897), Dr. Henry Jekyll and Mr. Edward Hyde from *Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1886). The multiple volumes also include cameos by, or allusions to, an absolutely stunning array of works from this era, even going so far as to include ancestors of other fictional characters that would fit with the incredibly complex continuity that Moore has created.

For instance, Moore established that the Mars of John Carter from *A Princess of Mars* (1917) by Edgar Rice Burroughs, the Mars of Gullivar Jones from *Lieutenant Gullivar Jones: His Vacation* (1905) by Edwin L. Arnold, the Mars of Michael Kane from *Warriors of Mars* (1965) by Michael Moorcock writing under the pseudonym of Edward P. Bradbury, and the Mars of the invading Martians from *War of the Worlds* (1898) by H. G. Wells are all the same Mars. Not only is Moore blending genres (perhaps all genres), he is universe-building on a grand scale orders of magnitude higher than what Farmer attempted with his Wold Newton family. It is almost as if he is building a fictional universe that is composed of all fictional universes...a literary Omniverse, as it were.

This universe building on such a grand scale is antithetical to postmodern fragmentation, and it through this construct that Moore defamiliarizes the present to produce the cognitive estrangement effect

necessary for science fiction. Obviously, then, this work contains a high level of resistance to late capitalism.

Another of Moore's ABC projects, *Top Ten* is ostensibly a superhero comic, but one mutated by way of the television police drama. The futuristic Neopolis boasts a population entirely composed of superheroes, and the narrative follows the daily lives of the police officers of the 10th Precinct police station.

The tone and structure is extremely similar to that found in the classic television police drama, particularly *Hill Street Blues* (1981 – 1987). Moore is able to take the standard tropes of the police drama and defamiliarize them with the addition of the superhero framework, thus creating the cognitive estrangement effect central to science fiction. Not content with just superheroes, Moore once again brings in other genres as members of this diverse cast of characters include a humanoid dog, a pulp-era adventurer, and a medieval fantasy knight among others.

On the other hand, Moore's *Promethea* obviously utilizes magic as a framework to defamiliarize and estrange the reader. *Promethea* is essentially a superhero fantasy that takes the reader on an investigation of magic and its attendant symbolism and rules. It also presents magic as a valid and useful methodology in which to evaluate reality, and is within this framework that the reader is encouraged to view not only *Promethea's* world, but his or her own reality. Also, as if to underscore the fantasy elements of the work, Moore even has the main character undertake a quest that occupies a large part of the narrative and formally explicates the magical framework in which the narrative operates. The approach here has much more in common with Miéville's *Bas-Lag* Trilogy and is probably the best example of Moore's participation in the British Boom.

With Gaiman and Moore firmly situated within the Boom, the time has come to justify the placement of Ellis within this phenomenon. And, once again the genre-blending and alternative estrangement frameworks that have served as the touchstone of the British Boom in our earlier discussion also serve as something of a Rosetta Stone for the phenomenon, providing a method for deciphering the underlying justification for grouping such dissimilar works and such wildly divergent writers together under the umbrella of the Boom.

Ellis's ambitious *Planetary*, which can most easily be described as a piece of superhero

archaeology, firmly situates Ellis within the British Boom. Within *Planetary*, Ellis does not limit himself to the superhero genre as he draws upon the pulp influences of the superhero and the myriad of other genres that intersect and influence it, as well. From this hodge-podge of genres and sub-genres, he is able to construct a new genre, one with a strong science fictional slant...one that can best be described simply as superhuman fiction.

This structure allows Ellis to incorporate Dracula, Sherlock Holmes, and Frankenstein from the Victorian era. By way of proxy, he is also able to add pulp icons Doc Savage, the Spider, the Lone Ranger and others to this world. And what a wonderfully strange world it is. It has an island where all of the monsters from the Japanese monster movies dwell, including Godzilla. It has a secret hideout full of trophies from all members of this world's ersatz Wold Newton Family. It has ships that sail between universes.

Ellis does not content himself with incorporating superhero tropes and clichés, he also includes Hong Kong cinema, horror, and Hollywood B science fiction movies from the 1950s all into a cohesive world. This imaginative restructuring of genre undoubtedly intersects with the same impulse that has been shown as a characteristic of the Boom.

The British Boom remains a fascinating recent phenomenon in the area of science fiction that seems to challenge the traditional genre boundaries with its almost voracious inclusion of other genres, sub-genres, and even other media. Upon closer scrutiny and by utilizing the concept of cognitive estrangement as an evaluative framework, it is obvious that science fiction already contains within itself the necessary flexibility to encompass what had once been considered problematic works, such as Miéville's Bas-Lag Trilogy. This new flexibility, by way of an old concept, is also able to embrace authors currently producing in the comic book medium such as Gaiman, Alan Moore, and Ellis, all of whom are very much a part of this intriguing phenomenon.

With the strong anti-capitalist tendencies of both the comics medium and the science fiction genre now established, it is easy to see the degree to which they are simply not postmodern. The remainder of this discussion will evaluate six works by Warren Ellis in a similar manner. These six works will encompass three representatives of his longer form works, *Planetary*, *Transmetropolitan*, and

StormWatch / The Authority, and three representatives of his shorter form works, *Global Frequency*, *Ocean*, and *Orbiter*.

III. PLANETARY

Planetary was first glimpsed in the *Planetary Preview* story "Nuclear Spring" which was published as part of both *Gen*¹³ #33 (September 1998) and *C*23* #6 (September 1998). The series was officially launched with *Planetary* #1 with a cover date of April, 1999. And, while the series appeared somewhat regularly through *Planetary* #15 with fifteen issues published over the course of thirty-one months, the remaining twelve issues would take over eight years to finally be published. The series has been collected, of course, into four hardcover collections that have since also been released as trade paperbacks. In addition, two oversized hardcover collections collecting the entire series have also been released. *Planetary* #1 was also re-released in May of 2009 as part of DC's After Watchmen ...What Next? promotion which was conducted in conjunction with the *Watchmen* movie.

However, before undertaking a detailed examination of *Planetary*, it is first necessary to ground ourselves in a discussion of the history of the comics medium, particularly superhero comics, as it is this history that Ellis continually engages throughout the entirety of its twenty-seven issues. This grounding in comics history will also be of great benefit to the subsequent examination of *StormWatch* which also engages it.

Although most histories of the comics medium begin with *Funnies On Parade*, a repackaging of newspaper comic strips that debuted in 1933 and in reality, probably the first modern comic book, recent research by scholars such as Robert Beerbohm, Doug Wheeler, and Richard Olson have traced American comics back to the mid-1800s. *The Adventures of Mr. Obadiah Oldbuck* by Swiss comics creator Rudolphe Töpffer first saw print in the United States in September, 1842. It consisted of forty pages and comprised 195 panels. Comics of this era also differed a great deal from modern comics.

The feature which most distinguishes Victorian comics from those of later eras is the extremely rare use of word balloons within sequential (multi-picture) comic stories. When word balloons are used, it is nearly always within single-panel cartoons. On the occasions when they appear inside a strip, with very few exceptions the ballooned dialogue is non-essential to understanding the story. Nineteenth Century comics tended to place

both narration and dialogue beneath comic panels rather than within the panel's borders. (Wheeler, Beerbohm and Olson 247)

These type of comics predominated for over sixty years, until the reprinting of comic strips from the newspapers at the end of the nineteenth century and beginning of the twentieth century overwhelmed the comics market. For well over a decade now, Beerbohm, Wheeler, and Olson have expanded research into pre-twentieth century comics with their findings published annually in the *Official Overstreet Comic Book Price Guide* (1970-2011).

Richard F. Outcault was responsible for the next comics milestone in the United States, The Yellow Kid. The Yellow Kid appeared in other strips by Outcault previous to *The Yellow Kid in McFadden's Flats* in 1897, which is regarded as the first comic book to feature the character. Although now barely remembered, the character was a merchandising bonanza when he first appeared, and it is this achievement that merits scholarly interest today.

The Yellow Kid's importance is widely recognized today as the first newspaper comic strip to demonstrate without a doubt that the general public was ready for full color comics. **The Yellow Kid** was the first in the USA to show that (1) comics could increase newspaper sales, and that (2) comic characters could be merchandised. (Beerbohm, Wheeler and Olson 276)

It was not until 1933 when *Funnies on Parade* was published as a send-away promotional item, that the first recognizable modern comic book appeared. Consisting entirely of reprints, a scant ten thousand copies were originally printed. With its success, the floodgates were opened and new comic books quickly found their way onto newsstands across the country, as well as continuing to be highly successful promotional items for a wide variety of companies and products.

The late 1930s and early 1940s saw an explosion of superhero characters after Superman's appearance in *Action Comics #1* in 1938. Perennial favorites such as DC Comics's Batman, Wonder Woman, Flash, Green Lantern, Marvel Comic's Captain America, and Fawcett Comics's Captain Marvel all appeared during this time. Also, while not really a superhero title, Will Eisner's *The Spirit*, began publication as part of the Sunday section of newspaper comics. Superheroes enjoyed immense popularity

up until the end of World War II, and then were gradually replaced by a variety of genres, including westerns, science fiction, and crime.

E.C. Comics came under attack from censors in the mid-1950s after the 1954 publication of psychiatrist Fredric Wertham's *Seduction of the Innocent*, a poorly researched book directly linking the alarming increase in juvenile delinquency to the reading of comics. According to William Savage, Jr., it "may indeed have been a blatantly opportunistic book. It was most assuredly a pompous, polemical, biased, and poorly documented one." (Savage 96) Other, more recent critics have not been much kinder to Wertham. According to David Hajdu,

Wertham conducted no scientific investigation—that is, no study applying the scientific method; he employed no formal measures to test anything, and he had no control groups. His book provided no endnotes and no corroborative support for his conclusions. (Hajdu 233-34)

Hajdu also looked at additional articles about *Seduction of the Innocent* published not long after it and found several highly critical of it. For instance, Frederic Thrasher, a professor at New York University "analyzed Wertham's methods and found them indefensible" (Hajdu 259). Regardless of its accuracy, *Seduction of the Innocent* contributed to a hysteria that ultimately led to a Congressional investigation, the establishment of the Comics Code Authority, a comics industry organization to basically censor themselves, and ultimately, the driving of E.C. completely out of the comics business. The Code kept American comics aimed squarely at children and stunted the growth of the medium for decades.

Superheroes became popular again in the late 1950s and early 1960s with DC Comics reviving / retooling many characters such as the Flash and Green Lantern in *Showcase*. With the success of the DC revivals as well as the superhero team book, *Justice League of America*, Marvel Comics introduced the *Fantastic Four* by Stan Lee and Jack Kirby, which revolutionized superhero comics. Superheroes have since gone on to totally dominate the American comics market.

Besides the renewed interest in super-heroes, the late 1960s saw the emergence of the underground comics, or comix, as was the preferred term, with the "x" indicating the rating of the material. Underground comix were typically self-published and dealt with subjects forbidden by the code and

usually distributed through head shops. Robert Crumb quickly emerged as one of the best known underground comix creators. Interest in the undergrounds waned during the mid-1970s.

An explosion of black and white “independent” comics (not published by Marvel or DC) occurred in the 1980s due largely to the rise of the direct market and comics specialty shops and the success of Eastman and Laird’s *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* (1984). With the publication of the first volume of *Maus: A Survivor’s Tale*, *Watchmen*, and *Batman: The Dark Knight*, 1986 was something of a watershed year for not only comics in general, but superhero comics in particular, suddenly taken seriously, as a valid art form. Unfortunately, much of the promise of these works was wasted as collectors looking to invest invaded comics shortly thereafter. This caused a publishing boom in superhero comics that led to a bust in the American comics market in the mid-1990s, ultimately causing the closing of a large percentage of comics specialty shops and comics publishers, as well as allowing comics distribution in the United States to become monopolized by a single distributor, Diamond Comics..

There are, of course, many, much more in-depth histories of the American comics market in general and superheroes in particular that offer a much more detailed view of comics history than the extremely brief, capsule summary presented above. For instance, Colton Waugh’s *The Comics* (1947), which looks at the history of the medium up until the 1940s, appeared not long after the end of superhero dominance of the medium. Ellis is, of course, deeply familiar with much of the medium’s history as he overtly demonstrates in works like *Planetary*, and *StormWatch / The Authority*, which not only involve the history of the comics medium, but also the history of the superhero sub-genre.

Superheroes have long held a fascination for comics historians. Histories of the medium focusing on them began appearing quite early. For instance, *The Great Comic Book Heroes* (1965) by Jules Feiffer appeared just as superheroes started gaining in popularity again. Feiffer, who worked with Eisner on *The Spirit* for several years, discusses the medium from an insider’s perspective. Only a few years later, Bails would self-publish his *The Collector’s Guide to the First Heroic Age* (1969). That very next year, legendary comics creator Jim Steranko began his own history of comics, entitled *The Steranko History of Comics Volume 1* (1970). Many future volumes were planned, but only *The Steranko History of Comics Volume 2* (1972) has actually ever been published. Rumor has it that the additional volumes are all but finished, but it is doubtful that Steranko will publish them now, nearly forty years later.

Comix: A History of Comic Books In America (1971) by Les Daniels debuted only a couple of years later and focused on the history of the medium up until the late 1960s. Daniels wrote several, more focused histories that saw print in the 1990s and 2000s, such as *Batman: The Complete History* (1999), *DC Comics: Sixty Years of the World's Favorite Super Heroes* (1995), *Marvel: Five Fabulous Decades of the World's Greatest Comics* (1991), *Superman: The Complete History: The Life and Times of the Man of Steel* (1998), and *Wonder Woman: The Life and Times of the Amazon Princess* (2000).

Only a couple of years after Daniels's *Comix*, Bails began publishing *The Who's Who of American Comic Books* (1973-1976). Published as four volumes, this project focused on the creators of comics. *The Who's Who* would later morph into an extremely useful website that can be found at <http://www.bailsprojects.com/whoswho.aspx>.

Teaming with fellow comics fan Howard Keltner, Bails also published *Howard Keltner's Index to Golden Age Comic Books* (1976). Bails's work, attempting to give credit where credit is due, remained a lifelong passion for him and serves as a foundation for the work of the Grand Comics Database (<http://comics.org/>).

The GCD is a truly international effort to index comics and comic books via an on-line database. Originally conceived as a comics creator database building on the work of Bails, the GCD was organized in 1994 and has expanded its scope to encompass more than just creator information. Publication dates, character appearances, and reprint history are just a small sample of the metadata now collected. In addition, members of the community actively research the history of comics, with many focusing on the often purposely confusing information about early comics publishers. In fact, Bails was an honorary member of the project and continued to participate in comics research until his death in 2006.

The underground comix scene also received some coverage by Mark James Estren in his *History of Underground Comics* (1974). This appeared near the peak of underground comix popularity in the United States.

The 1980s and subsequent decades saw an explosion of interest in this history of comics with a drastic increase in both books and magazines dedicated to it. Michael Barrier and Martin Williams collaborated on *A Smithsonian Book of Comic-Book Comics* (1981). Only five years later Ron Goulart began writing about the history of comics in a multitude of books, such as *Ron Goulart's Great History of*

Comic Books/the Definitive Illustrated History from the 1890s to the 1980 (1986), *The Great Comic Book Artists Volume 1* (1986), *The Great Comic Book Artists Volume 2* (1989), *The Encyclopedia of American Comics* (1991), *The Comic Book Reader's Companion: An A-to-Z Guide to Everyone's Favorite Art Form* (1993), *Masked Marvels and Jungle Queens: Great Comic Book Covers of the '40s* (1993), *Comic Book Encyclopedia* (2004), and *Good Girl Art* (2006).

Not to be left out, Bob Kane fittingly had Tom Andrae assist him on writing *Batman & Me: An Autobiography* (1989). This same year, Mike Benton published *The Comic Book in America: An Illustrated History* (1989), and Ernst Gerber began his four-volume *The Photo Journal Guide to Comic Books* (1989-1991). Benton would also pen more focused works, such as *Horror Comics: The Illustrated History (Taylor History of Comics Volume 1)* (1991), *Superhero Comics: The Illustrated History (Taylor History of Comics Volume 2)* (1991), *Science Fiction Comics: The Illustrated History (Taylor History of Comics Volume 3)* (1992), and *Superhero Comics of the Golden Age: The Illustrated History (Taylor History of Comics Volume 4)* (1992).

The 1990s continued the interest of the 80s and saw an increase in magazines devoted to the history of comics, such as *Comic Book Marketplace* (1993-2004). Besides the usual back-issue market reports, *CBM* featured a variety of articles on creators, titles, and publishers. Just a few years later, Trina Robbins published her *The Great Women Superheroes* (1996), which focused on female superheroes, but also touched upon female comics creators. The next year saw a resurgence in interest in early comics fandom with the publication of a revised version of Dick Lupoff and Don Thompson's *All In Color For A Dime* (1997) that was originally published in 1971 and Roy Thomas's *Alter Ego: The Best of the Legendary Comics Fanzine* (1997). That same year, Gerard Jones and Will Jacobs published *The Comic Book Heroes* (1997). Two years later, Bill Schelly published *The Golden Age of Comic Fandom* (1999) with some assistance from Thomas.

Thomas, formerly Editor-in-Chief of Marvel Comics, has long had a passion for the heroes of the First Heroic Age, particularly DC's Justice Society of America. In 2002, he restarted *Alter Ego* and has published over one hundred issues of the magazine that delves into comics history and focuses on a variety of creators from the First and Second Heroic Ages. Indulging his love of the Justice Society, he also published four volumes of *The All Star Companion* (2000-2009).

In 1999, Maurice Horn published *The World Encyclopedia of Comics* (1999) which did not just focus on American comics, but comics from all over the world. Four years later, the underground comix scene received another book dedicated to its history with the publication of *Rebel Visions: The Underground Comix Revolution, 1963-1975* (2003) by Patrick Rosenkranz. A year later, Gerard Jones published *Men of Tomorrow: Geeks, Gangsters, and the Birth of the Comic Book* (2004). Recently, Paul Levitz, former publisher of DC Comics, published a hefty, detailed, and focused history of DC Comics entitled *75 Years of DC Comics: The Art of Modern Mythmaking* (2010).

Ellis, while certainly not familiar with each and every one of the aforementioned histories, surely encountered quite a few as he demonstrates not only a profound understanding of the mechanics of the superhero sub-genre, but an exhaustive knowledge of its creators, characters, and stories. This feat is even more impressive when one takes into account his admission that superheroes held little interest for him growing up and therefore represents a studied acquisition over a short period of time.

There are, of course, quite a few other published works that deal with the history of comics that have been omitted from the preceding chronology. The above list is merely a survey of many of the works encountered over the years, and should, in no way, be considered exhaustive.

As a brief aside, McCloud takes an alternative view of comics history in *Understanding Comics*, eschewing the familiar narratives of many of the comics historians listed above, including my capsule summary. Instead, utilizing his definition of comics as his only guide, he gazes back across the sweep of human history and comes to some interesting conclusions about the origins and history of the comics medium, finding comics in what some would consider highly unlikely locations in the process. According to McCloud, a pre-Columbian picture manuscript from circa 1519, Egyptian paintings, but not hieroglyphics, the Bayeux Tapestry, and *A Harlot's Progress* (1731), first a series of paintings and then a portfolio of engravings, by William Hogarth all qualify as comics because each meets the criteria of his definition, that of

juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence, intended to convey information and/or to produce an aesthetic response in the viewer (McCloud 9).

Comics, it seems, is at once both an ancient and modern medium.

As mentioned earlier, superheroes appeared just as the modern American comic book industry was in its infancy. And while certainly something new and different, superheroes have their roots deep in the heroic myths of various cultures, as well as the adventure heroes of the pulp magazines of the early twentieth century.

Obviously, superheroes are greatly and deeply influenced by the heroic myths of cultures across the world. Joseph Campbell has published many works, such as *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (1949), *The Masks of God* (1959–1968), and *The Mythic Image* (1974), that deal with what he has termed “the monomyth,” or the hero’s journey, and the need that cultures have for these stories. Superheroes emerge from this same tradition, but are changed by the historical context of their development. And in this case, the pulps of the early twentieth century supply the early historical context for the emergence of the superhero. Simply put, the pulps greatly influenced superheroes

Pulp magazines, or pulps as they are often called, recounted colorful tales of characters such as Tarzan, the Shadow, Doc Savage, the Spider, G-8 and His Battle Aces, and Fu Manchu on cheap paper beneath often lurid covers. They flourished in America during the 1920s and 1930s. It was these characters and early science fiction tales of the period that would greatly influence Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster when creating Superman, that strange visitor from another planet who would debut in *Action Comics* #1 cover-dated June, 1938. Superman’s success inspired the creation of superheroes by the hundreds. It was Superman’s first appearance in *Action Comics* #1 that marked the beginning of what some comics historians have named the First Heroic Age.³

The First Heroic Age saw the emergence of untold masses of superheroes with only a small percentage ultimately proving themselves able to endure the subsequent decades. These survivors are often seen as the pure templates or archetypes of superhero subgenre. Batman, by artist Bob Kane and writer Bill Finger, debuted less than a year after Superman in *Detective Comics* #27, cover-dated May, 1939. Perceiving the need for a female superhero, Dr. William Moulton Marston, a psychologist, and artist Harry G. Peter created Wonder Woman who first appeared in *All-Star Comics* #8, which carried a December, 1941 cover date.

All-Star Comics was the home of the Justice Society of America, the first team of superheroes, and was composed of many of the heroes owned by what would ultimately become DC Comics. *All-Star*

Comics #3 was the first appearance of the team and included Doctor Fate, Hour-Man, Spectre, Sandman, Atom, the Flash, Green Lantern and Hawkman. Other important DC characters that were created during this time include Green Lantern and Flash. Green Lantern was created by writer Bill Finger and artist Martin Nodell and debuted in *All-American Comics #16* with a cover date of July, 1940. The Flash, created by writer Gardner Fox and artist Harry Lampert, first appeared in *Flash Comics #1* cover-dated January, 1940.

While DC Comics seems to possess the largest number of these characters, Marvel Comics holds the rights to three characters that have survived into the modern age, Captain America, Sub-Mariner, and the Human Torch. Captain America, created by Joe Simon and Jack Kirby, first appeared in *Captain America Comics #1* (March 1941). The Sub-Mariner was created by artist Bill Everett and debuted in *Marvel Comics #1* cover-dated October, 1939. Coincidentally, The Human Torch, created by Carl Burgos also debuted in *Marvel Comics #1*.

Although now owned by DC, Fawcett Comics's Captain Marvel, created by writer Bill Parker and artist C.C. Beck, first appeared in *Whiz Comics #2* with a cover date of February, 1940. Captain Marvel actually outsold Superman for a time, but a lawsuit by DC ultimately caused Fawcett to cease publication.

The dominance of this, the first generation of the superhero, in this country lasted only a short time, ending with the disappearance of the venerable Justice Society of America from the pages of *All-Star Comics* in 1951. Superheroes would lie nearly untouched for almost a decade, although Superman, Batman, and Wonder Woman would remain in publication. It was not until 1959 and the debut of the Flash that the Second Heroic Age⁴ would begin and superheroes would again dominate comic book sales in the United States.

American comic book publishers have always chased fads, constantly on the lookout for the next "big thing." In the late 1950s, the next big thing was, ironically, something old, superheroes. A new Flash, one retooled with much more of a science fiction influence, appeared in *Showcase #4*, cover-dated October, 1956. This is commonly referred to as the beginning of the Second Heroic Age. The Flash would make three additional appearances in *Showcase* before being granted his own title, which continued the numbering of the series from the 1940s.

Continuing this trend, Green Lantern was revamped into a “cosmic cop” with the same science fiction slant in his debut in *Showcase #22* which has a cover date of September–October 1959. In a successful attempt to emulate the success of the Justice Society of America, the Justice League of America was introduced in *The Brave and the Bold #28*, cover-dated February/March 1960. This team included DC Comics characters that were being published at the time and was composed of Superman, Batman, Wonder Woman, Flash, Green Lantern, Aquaman, and the Martian Manhunter.

The success of superheroes had become the latest bandwagon to try and hop on for other publishers. Marvel Comics decided to give superheroes a try and the Fantastic Four, created by Stan Lee and Jack Kirby appeared in *Fantastic Four #1*, with a cover date of November, 1961. Although repeatedly debunked, there is an apocryphal story that has publisher Martin Goodman playing golf with either Jack Liebowitz or Irwin Donenfeld of what would become DC Comics, then known as National Periodical Publications. During this game supposedly much bragging was done about the success of the Justice League of America. Never one to miss a publishing fad, Goodman then directed Stan Lee to create a team of superheroes. Again, this is only myth, but it is particularly compelling.

From the beginning, though, the Fantastic Four was something slightly different, both in writing and art. Lee’s approach to storytelling contained many hallmarks of the “soap opera,” with stories that continued from issue to issue. Kirby’s approach to art was nothing short of revolutionary with bold lines and bold action. Together, their style of storytelling became the de facto style for the burgeoning Marvel Comics and slowly spread throughout the American comic book industry.

The Fantastic Four was a dysfunctional family with superhuman powers that they received from exposure to cosmic rays during a space flight. The group consisted of Dr. Reed Richards, Susan Storm, her brother, Johnny Storm, and Ben Grimm. The cosmic rays gave Reed the ability to stretch his body, in much the same manner as Plastic Man from the 1940s, and he took the codename Mister Fantastic. Susan gained the power of invisibility, taking the codename Invisible Girl (later changed to Invisible Woman). Johnny gained the ability to burst into flame and control fire, the same abilities of Marvel’s 1940s Human Torch, whose codename he appropriated. Finally, the cosmic rays mutated Ben into an extremely strong and tough misshapen monster. He took the codename Thing. His transformation, for which he blamed Reed, was a constant source of conflict within the group. These characters were hardly

the iconic heroes of DC Comics. They bickered with each other almost continually. And, while they had codenames, they immediately did the unthinkable and revealed their identities to the world.

Superhero comics slowly, but inexorably choked off all other genres over the next three decades. And while little by little, other genres such as crime and fantasy have recently started to gain readership again, superheroes still dominate the American market to this day. Conversely, another reason for the dominance of superheroes involves the genre not actively choking out the other genres. As the American comics market shrank, something that affected all genres, the direct market was founded by superhero fans to save the genre they loved. The superhero genre did not eradicate other genres, it simply had a vocal and powerful enough fan base to allow it to survive in the American market while the other genres died off. Obviously, Ellis favors the first interpretation, as we will see in *Planetary*.

Most scholars put the end of this second age of superhero dominance in 1986, with the publication of DC Comics's *Crisis on Infinite Earths*. This was an attempt by DC to simplify their publishing universe and presumably become more like rival Marvel Comics. Apparently, the science fictional notion of multiple earths existing in different dimensions was deemed too difficult for readers to grasp, so the decision was made to streamline everything into a single universe, completely destroying any sense of story continuity within their new universe as characters remembered events that never happened in the new continuity, characters from other Earths still existed without explanation, and origins for some characters were completely undone.

For instance, the Legion of Super-Heroes, a superhero team in the thirtieth century, modeled their behavior and took their inspiration from Superboy, who was actually a member via time travel. Unfortunately, with *Crisis On Infinite Earths* completely changing Superman's history to the point that he was never Superboy, there was now no longer a reason for them to exist. Readers and fans did not know which stories were then part of the new continuity and which were not. It seems not even editors, writers, or artists for the company could keep things straight, either, as pre-*Crisis* events, characters, and continuity slowly seeped back into published comic books.

This produced a fragmentation of DC's overall continuity, in essence a postmodern lack of chronology that could not be resolved into a cohesive continuity, and one that readers ultimately rejected in favor of the much more orderly multiverse. Finally realizing the importance of continuity to readers and

the value of their multiverse, it was recreated at the end of *Infinite Crisis* (2005-2006) and shown to exist in *52* (2006-2007), a weekly, year-long series that acted as something of a sequel to the *Infinite Crisis* limited series.

This brings us to what has been alternately called the Bronze Age and the Gimmick Age, among others, but is probably best described as the Modern Age. There are not really any particular comic books that mark the beginning of the Modern Age. Some scholars point to the creation of the direct sales market in the early 1970s which signaled a slow abandonment of the newsstand in response to dwindling sales in that venue. Others prefer the publication of the socially aware stories by Dennis O’Neill and Neal Adams that began in *Green Lantern* #76.

Interestingly, 1986, the year of *Crisis on Infinite Earths* and the end of the Second Heroic Age, saw the publication of Spiegelman’s Pulitzer Prize winning *Maus: A Survivor’s Tale*, Miller’s *Batman: The Dark Knight*, which was collected as *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns* that same year, and the beginning of Moore and Gibbons’s *Watchmen*.

The 1990s saw a glut of superhero material as publishers fought for shelf space within comics specialty shops. Publishers released individual issues with multiple covers, issues with die-cut covers, glow-in-the-dark covers, issues poly-bagged with trading cards, multi-title crossovers, and many, many other gimmicks to increase sales. This led to a speculator boom and subsequent bust that saw the collapse of distributors, comic book publishers, and comic book specialty shops, alike.

Currently, the American comic book market is only a pale shadow of what it once was mere decades before. Individual issues would often post newsstand sales of well over one million copies in the heyday of comics publishing while today most superhero comic books sell less than one hundred-thousand copies direct to comic book stores, the newsstand having been all but abandoned. And while superhero comics were formerly aimed at a pre-teen boy demographic, the age of the average superhero comic reader is now much closer to 19 – 25 years of age or even older.

With the necessary background in the history of comics, it is now time to turn our attention to the first, and arguably most important of Ellis’s works. *Planetary* is ostensibly a superhero comic written by Warren Ellis and illustrated by John Cassady, and yet it is so much more than the typical superhero slugfest that dominates the spinner racks.

From the beginning, Ellis had grand plans for *Planetary*. His aim was to perform an archaeological excavation of sorts on the science fiction sub-genre of superhuman fiction. As such, he does not limit himself to contemporary superhero characters or conventions. Instead, he widens his gaze and looks back at the depth and breadth of the sub-genre. In addition, he draws upon the pulp influences of superheroes, as well as the erstwhile influences of the pulp characters, specifically their antecedents in the form of characters from the annals of Victorian literature. With superhuman fiction as his guiding principle, Ellis is able to include within his newly constructed genre of superhuman fiction, quite a few representatives that have historically been excluded, as well.

In his proposal for the series, he asks

What if, underneath all that, there was an entire classic old superhero world? What if there were huge Jack Kirby temples underground built by old gods or new, and ghostly cowboys riding the highways of the West for justice, and superspies in natty suits and 360-degree-vision shades fighting cold wars in the dark, and strange laughing killers kept in old Lovecraftian asylums... what if you had a hundred years of superhero history just slowly leaking out into this young and modern superhero world of the Wildstorm Universe? What if you could take everything old and make it new again? (Grey)

This approach, which will be discussed in depth shortly, lends a great deal of weight to the argument for *Planetary* as a postmodernist work due to this high level of intertextuality.

And yet, such an approach seems to be much more akin to the previously discussed “universe building” and establishment of continuity so intrinsic and critically important in superhero comics and similar to what Farmer was attempting with the construction of his Wold Newton Family. This attempt to build something greater is very much a conscious decision by Ellis,

I decided early on to soft-pedal a lot of the Wildstorm U stuff. I bring elements in from all over because, really, so did Jim Lee and the others when they were generating their "Wildstorm Universe" superhero environment. It's all mix-and-match. And that's nothing new, people have

been doing this for years, especially during boomtimes in superhero publishing. But that leads to a terrible dilution of what made those core concepts great in the first place, and that's a big part of what *Planetary's* about. Showing you why millions of people were interested in that stuff in the first place... and what's been lost. (Ellis "Slashdot | Warren Ellis Answers")

The *Planetary* Field Team was initially billed as “archaeologists of the impossible”, and as they were uncovering the secret history of the twentieth century, Ellis was performing some archaeology of his own upon the superhero subgenre.

It comes down to asking questions of the genre, as opposed to obeying and enjoying the genre or, as in *PLANETARY*, scraping away the weeds and dog shit around the roots of the genre to get a good look at where it all came from. (Ellis "Aicn Comics Q & @ with Warren Ellis About Black Summer!")

In his excavation of the decades of accumulated detritus and debris surrounding the superhero subgenre, Ellis's aim was to show the reader

“a whole new world unlike any we've seen before, crack-full of infinite possibility... but also strangely familiar, as we dig out and play with classic superhero concepts in a new and hopefully fascinating way”.
(Grey)

By examining the origins of the genre, he was able to create a wondrous whole that encompasses the entirety of superhuman fiction, weaving together the lurid heroes of the pulp tradition with spandex-clad superheroes of today, even throwing in some Victorian superhumans for good measure. In his introduction to *Planetary: All Over the World, and Other Stories*, Alan Moore discusses this approach,

“As fascinating as this central concept is, without the love and talent lavished on the work by its creative team it could too easily descend into a mere nostalgic romp. What elevates the stories here above the level of the simple rose-tinged retrospective is the sheer imaginative energy and

craft involved, the impulse to accomplish something new in mainstream superhero comics that transcends the backward-looking and historical approach that a tale of archaeologists must obviously embrace.” (Ellis and Cassaday *Planetary: All over the World, and Other Stories* 8)

This forward-looking, historical whole that Ellis is able to create with *Planetary* is very much at odds with the result of Moore’s obviously postmodern, fragmented deconstruction of the superhero in *Watchmen* that was discussed earlier.

Planetary follows the adventures of the Planetary Organization’s Field Team, which consists of three members, Elijah Snow, Jakita Wagner, and the Drummer, as they, in their roles as archeologists of the impossible, excavate the secret history of their world, a strange world of superhumans, science, magic, aliens, monsters, ghosts and superspies. In fact, all three members are themselves superheroes, albeit unconventional examples of such and all have superhuman abilities. Ambrose Chase, a fourth member of the team remains missing for the duration of the series and is only rescued by Snow, Wagner, and the Drummer in the final issue of the series.

Elijah Snow is the founder of Planetary and also the organization’s mysterious Fourth Man, although he does not remember this fact for the first eleven issues of the series due to memory blocks forced upon him. At his core, Snow is a detective, and it is his drive to uncover the mystery of the holes in his memory that allow both him and readers to gradually learn the truth of what was done to him, and by who. It is revealed that Snow essentially submitted to memory modification by The Four Voyagers to keep both Jakita Wagner and the Drummer from being killed (Ellis and Cassaday *Absolute Planetary Book One* 302). The mystery of the Fourth Man’s identity provides the narrative engine of the first twelve issues, and its resolution initiates Snow’s conflict with The Four Voyagers, a struggle which dominates the narrative structure for the remainder of the series.

Snow is also what Ellis has termed a “Century Baby.” This is a somewhat complex concept that has appeared in all of his books nominally set in the WildStorm Universe. Simply put, certain babies born on January 1, 1900, possess extraordinary abilities and unusually long lives. And yes, Ellis does indeed know that the twentieth century did not officially begin until January 1, 1901, and did not officially end until December 31, 2000. He actually calls attention to this in his final issue of *The Authority*. After saving the

entire planet by electrocuting a monstrous alien returning to claim the Earth, Jenny Sparks lies dying in the Carrier as midnight quickly approaches on December 31, 1999. When confronted with the fact that the century does not end for another year, she remarks,

Don't blame me. Blame the planet that counts it. Consensus reality.

Entire bloody century's been run by the fish-head majority.(Ellis and Hitch 91)

People born on a certain date being somehow special is certainly not a convention exclusive to Ellis. For example, Salman Rushdie utilizes a similar concept in his *Midnight's Children* (1981) which posits that all children born in India between 12:00 AM and 1:00 AM on August 15th, 1947 have special powers. Later in the *Planetary* series, Ellis reveals that the century babies are simply one system, of many other independent systems, that together act as a multiversal immune system for life on the Earths within the multiverse. The Drummer describes them as "humanity's immune system," (Ellis and Cassaday *Planetary: Crossing Worlds* 23-24) but later issues specifically demonstrate that this phenomenon exists throughout the multiverse. More importantly, as we can see, this system is anchored in history.

Century babies are functionally immortal and typically exist for a very specific purpose. Other characters specifically designated as Century Babies are Jenny Sparks from the Ellis-penned *StormWatch / The Authority*, Doc Axel Brass, Kevin Sack, Lord Blackstock, and Hark. Many of these characters are analogues for existing characters. For example, Doc Brass stand-in for Doc Savage, while Lord Blackstock is an analogue for Tarzan. Hark is, of course, an analogue for Fu Manchu.

Jenny Sparks, dubbed the Spirit of the Twentieth Century, dies saving the planet from an immense alien, ably serving the purpose for which she had been created. Snow's purpose as a facet of this multiversal immune system, at least in the eyes of the Drummer, is to save things. His superhuman ability, the ability to generate intense cold, or freeze things, is really just a metaphor for his purpose, that of saving things, or preserving them. Snow also studies with Sherlock Holmes and is responsible for ending the secret conspiracy of the Victorian superhumans, which consisted of Holmes, Dracula, Baron Von Frankenstein and his monster, and the Invisible Man, among others, in 1919.

Jakita Wagner is the second member of the Planetary Field Team. Unbeknownst to her until very late in the series, she is also the daughter of Kevin Sack, Lord Blackstock, as previously mentioned, a

Century Baby like Snow, and Anaykah of the hidden city of Opak-Re. Anaykah also holds the distinction of being the first great love of Snow's life. As the daughter of these two, Jakita possesses enhanced strength, speed and durability and has a much, much longer lifespan than a normal human. Her chief characteristic is that she bores easily, a trait that she apparently shares with her long-dead father. And, it is this trait that provides the reason for her becoming a member of Planetary, as she explains to Snow in the first issue of the series,

I get bored easily.

Planetary stops me getting bored.

That's it?

That's it. (Ellis and Cassaday *Planetary: All over the World, and Other Stories* 20-21)

The final member of the Planetary Field Team is the Drummer, who apparently does not use a code name as he re-introduces himself to the amnesiac Snow in the first issue,

The Drummer.

First name The, second name Drummer. (Ellis and Cassaday *Planetary: All over the World, and Other Stories* 16)

He was kidnapped as a boy and used in a series of brutal experiments to try and control the then nascent Internet by The Four Voyagers. He is eventually rescued by a Planetary Field Team composed of Snow, Jakita, and Ambrose Chase. The Four Voyagers ultimately have his entire genetic line expunged in order to keep another person with abilities like his from being born because he is

an informational black hole.

He sucks up and processes information. Any information.

Any diagnostic tool tends to stop working around him...

Half of his brain is off in...you could call it informational space. (Ellis and Cassaday *Planetary: Spacetime Archaeology* 116)

With no family to return him to, Snow recruits him into Planetary.

The Drummer possesses a certain affinity for machines in that he can communicate with them and make them do as he wishes. He is also an excellent example of a postmodern man as he is

constantly bombarded with information with very little ability to stem its flow. Ellis and Cassaday allude to this when revealing the Drummer's origins as everything around him, such as the coffee and the cell phone, impart some form of data to him. (Ellis and Cassaday *Planetary: Spacetime Archaeology* 99)

While it may be difficult, or even impossible, for the Drummer to control this flow of data, he still maintains the ability to take the constant, fragmentary flow and construct some form of useful information from it. His ability grants him the insight to understand Snow's purpose as a Century Baby, and it is also the reason that he is the first to comprehend Snow's plan to not only defeat the Four Voyagers and but to also finally rescue Ambrose Chase. He comments to Jakita, "what you all forget about me is – I know everything" (Ellis and Cassaday *Planetary: Spacetime Archaeology* 101).

Planetary also allows Ellis to voice a harsh criticism of the American military industrial complex, a criticism that reveals a deep-seated mistrust of the eerily hydra-like shadowy institution responsible for so much pain and suffering on this planet. Intermingled with this attack, however, Ellis launches a scathing attack on the American comic book industry which is dominated by the superhero sub-genre and what he perceives are its failures as a mass medium in the United States.

First and foremost, The Four Voyagers are the secret rulers of the world, at least since gaining their powers in 1961. As seen in the earlier discussion of the history of comics, this is also the same year that Marvel's *Fantastic Four* debuted. While the Four Voyagers serve as the villains against which the Planetary Organization and Snow must struggle throughout the series, they not only represent the ascension of the military industrial complex and its web of secrecy and disregard for human life as hoarders of knowledge and the secret rulers of the planet, but also represent in a much more concrete manner the characters that comprise Marvel's *Fantastic Four*. The Four Voyagers are essentially analogues of the *Fantastic Four*, and in this role as stand-ins, Ellis uses them to comment on the history of the American comic book industry. The Four try to keep the secrets of the world from becoming known and hoard wondrous science and technology. This, of course, puts them completely at odds with Snow and the rest of Planetary. Speaking for The Four Voyagers, William Leather (the Human Torch analogue) states, "We are the secret history of the planet – for we are its secret chiefs" (Ellis and Cassaday *Absolute Planetary Book One* 149).

More importantly, however, Ellis uses them to comment on the science and technology inherent in most superhero stories. Typically, this advanced technology and scientific know-how never benefit anyone but the superheroes who possess it. The knowledge stays hidden and closely guarded by the superheroes and supervillains and never seems to make a difference in the world. One would expect the villains to hoard technology and show no interest in making the world a better place, but Ellis makes the point that we expect better of our superheroes. Regardless, the technology never benefits the rest of the world, and the world never changes. Leather sums up this attitude nicely when he says,

We're adventurers, my crewmates and I. On the human adventure. And you can't all come along. (Ellis and Cassaday *Absolute Planetary Book One* 147)

When Snow rediscovers that the Four Voyagers simply hoard knowledge instead of using it to try and make the world a better place, he comments, "I know that you've done more than your share of making the world mediocre" (Ellis and Cassaday *Absolute Planetary Book One* 147).

With so many lives lost and so many opportunities to make a finer world utilizing the advanced science and technology in the possession of the Four Voyagers simply squandered by their greed and small-mindedness, Snow is justifiably incensed. Of course, in defeating the Four Voyagers, Snow gains access to all of their accumulated knowledge and saves the planet from invasion by the superhumans of an alternate universe Earth, which the Drummer christens Earth-Toilet On Fire as he continues DC's long and venerable tradition of naming alternate Earths, in this case with tongue firmly in cheek. He quickly begins to make all of the science and technology that they hoarded freely available to the world, and the world begins to change rapidly,

-- rush trials of the so-called "anti-cancer" treatment developed by the Planetary Organization --
-- New York offices of the Planetary Organization today demonstrated a cheap electrical levitation system with applications in --
-- New Orleans, the Planetary Organization's "super-fabber" for generating instant temporary shelters --
-- legal challenges to the Planetary Organization's "life stations,"

community devices that provide water, basic protein, heating and light for free --

-- towards the end of its nine-month voyage to Mars, carrying, most famously, the Planetary Society's "qunet" device for instant communication across deep space --

-- Planetary Society's "hyper-collimation" sheets, carbon fabrics that become bombproof shields -- (Ellis and Cassaday *Planetary: Spacetime Archaeology* 192)

The other metatextual comment Ellis is making with *The Four Voyagers* involves the history of superhero comics. By specifically and literally making the Four Voyagers responsible for the mediocrity of *Planetary's* world, Ellis purposefully establishes an overt link between what the Four Voyagers are responsible for and what he believes Marvel's *Fantastic Four* is responsible for within the history of American comics.

The success of the *Fantastic Four* ultimately led to the eradication of nearly all other genres in favor of superheroes within the American market, essentially resulting in what Ellis and most critics would certainly call mediocrity. The loss of these other genres is particularly felt by Ellis and given voice by Snow, "The things these scum have cost us since 1961..." (Ellis and Cassaday *Absolute Planetary Book One* 144). In addition, and to a much lesser extent, Ellis makes the same point in the very first issue of the series as the pulp heroes, except for Doc Brass, are all killed by analogues of DC's Justice League of America upon the activation of snowflake. This parallels the historical battles between the different media and how the success of the comics medium led to the end of the pulps.

The use of multiple old pulp characters, figures from Victorian literature, and doppelgangers is no mere act of nostalgia and rises above pastiche. These characters are instead utilized for much more important reasons. Chief among these is to establish a superhuman history within *Planetary's* world that mimics the history of the superhumanity in comics, the pulps, and Victorian literature and establish a Wold Newton family within the context of *Planetary*. Ellis also historicizes these inclusions, creating a historical continuity. This act allows him to include other texts but not in a postmodern, fragmented sense. It is

inclusion by way of the tried and true method of universe building that is so fundamental to the superhero subgenre.

In addition to the building of an historicized continuity, Ellis also includes these characters and their doppelgangers so that he can work with many of the archetypes of superhuman fiction that due to licensing and copyright are ultimately unavailable for him to utilize. With these surrogates, Ellis is able to get at the core initial concept and demonstrate why the concept has endured. For instance, he is able to do this with Tarzan, the Lone Ranger, the Hulk, Superman, Wonder Woman, Green Lantern, and Doc Savage, among others.

Interestingly, he actually gets the opportunity to use a primary superhero archetype in Batman instead of utilizing a surrogate. He is able to perform much the same form of superhuman archeology on him as he does on the other characters via the surrogates. And, once stripped back to bare bones, Ellis is able to then take this character and present what he sees as the fundamental reasons for Batman's decades of longevity. With respect to Batman, he is also able to demonstrate the great flexibility of the character by demonstrating how the concept has twisted, changed, and transformed over the decades as the Planetary team encounters multiple versions of Batman as portrayed by multiple creators over the past seventy years.

Planetary also includes another attack on late capitalism. Jameson speaks of commodification with respect to the postmodern condition, something we see repeatedly in *Planetary* with respect to knowledge. The quest for knowledge drives the narrative engine of *Planetary*. Its discovery remains Elijah Snow's, and by extension the Planetary Organization's overriding motivation. *Planetary*, however, do not commodify this knowledge as do the Four Voyagers. Knowledge and its pursuit are also of paramount importance to them but for far more sinister reasons. To The Four Voyagers, knowledge is simply a commodity, something to possess and jealously guard. It contains only exchange value, only useful for what it can get them.

The Four Voyagers and their fragmented shadow organization commodify everything. To them, people, objects, and knowledge have no intrinsic value and exist only as commodities. For example, people are commodified during the experiments conducted at Science City Zero. Objects, such as the

missing shift ship, are also commodified. In this case, the Four Voyagers desire the ship not for what it is, but what it can buy for them.

They treat knowledge in much the same manner. Commodification is, of course, associated with postmodernism, which can also be thought of as “the consumption of sheer commodification as a process.” (Jameson *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* x) To Planetary, knowledge is not simply a commodity. It is, instead, a means to make a finer world. To the Four Voyagers, the hoarded knowledge of their world merely buys them their lives when the superhumans from Earth-Toilet On Fire arrive and demand payment for granting them their respective superhuman powers. Elijah and, by extension, the entire Planetary organization simply yearn to know. They desire knowledge for understanding and the betterment of humanity and not for something as base as profit or control. The Four Voyages seem to typify the pursuit of knowledge described by Horkheimer and Adorno in their critique of the Enlightenment.

Knowledge, which is power, knows no limits, either in its enslavement of creation or in its deference to worldly masters. Just as it serves all the purposes of the bourgeois economy both in factories and on the battlefield, it is at the disposal of entrepreneurs regardless of their origins. Kings control technology no more directly than do merchants: it is as democratic as the economic system with which it evolved.

Technology is the essence of this knowledge. It aims to produce neither concepts nor images, nor the joy of understanding, but method, exploitation of the labor of other, capital. (Horkheimer and Adorno 2)

However, knowledge as simply power seems to be a corruption of Enlightenment principles by capitalism, at least per Habermas and his defense of the Enlightenment Project. Thus, Planetary is fulfilling the promise of the Enlightenment in their quest for understanding as opposed the Four Voyagers quest for power.

Planetary allows Ellis to borrow from many other genres to comment on various genre conventions, typically superhero genre conventions. This borrowing, such as when the Planetary Field Team visits an ersatz Godzilla’s corpse, blurs the boundaries between genres, but not in the traditional

postmodern sense. Ellis uses the various genres to show the reader that these other genres have always been a part of the whole that is superhuman fiction. His list of genres utilized is many and varied, but the following is a sampling of the genres touched upon in *Planetary*: Hong Kong cinema, mystery, horror, spy, magic, 50s monster cinema, pulp fiction of the early 20th Century, and the list goes on. In a similar vein, *Planetary* pays homage to the various genres in the form of its cover. The covers of the series are something of a unique feature. Ellis states in the proposal

Simply put, the covers will change radically each issue.

Each cover will be put together according to its own distinct plan, which I'll write and otherwise spout on about. The logo will be moved, altered, shrunk, ghosted, warped and sometimes even removed completely, according to each cover's goals. Because each cover will speak directly to the issue's contents in a way that most covers don't. If we do an issue set in Hong Kong, the cover will look like a still from a Hong Kong movie. If we do an issue in Japan, then we'll look like the cover of a manga magazine. If we do a gothic horror issue set in England, then the cover will look like a Cocteau Twins CD. If Milan, then we'll look like Italian Vogue. (Grey)

These cover homages take many forms.

For instance, the cover of *Planetary #2* alludes to Japanese monster movie posters, while *Planetary #3* suggests the widescreen still of a Hong Kong action film. Other covers allude to various genres and specific characters. For example, *Planetary #7* recalls the haunting Dave McKean covers of Gaiman's *Sandman*. *Planetary #5* is an obvious homage to the covers of the *Doc Savage* paperback reprints of the 1970s by James Bama. *Planetary #8* suggests 1950s monster cinema. This list could go on as most covers of the twenty-seven published issues make just such an allusion.

Planetary also allowed Ellis to voice his disapproval of the power of America's military industrial complex and the inordinate amount of power that it exerts, a theme he would also utilize in other works such as *Global Frequency* and *StormWatch / The Authority*. Within *Planetary*, Ellis shows a web of conspiracies that has no compunctions about kidnapping and experimenting on human beings or

murdering hundreds of people to secure power. U.S. Science City Zero was “first and foremost an experimental concentration camp for American dissidents.” (Ellis and Cassaday *Planetary: The Fourth Man* 43) It was operated during the 1950s by the organization that spawned the Four Voyagers, and it was built on a lie

“There was no real ‘Red Threat.’ They were as afraid of us as we were of them. The people who built City Zero knew it. That’s not why they built City Zero. The ‘Red Threat’ angle just got them the initial funding and the secrecy they needed.” (Ellis and Cassaday *Planetary: The Fourth Man* 50)

The Four Voyagers demonstrate their disregard for human life again and again throughout the series. They even destroy an entire Planetary office building with an orbital death ray, murdering the hundreds of people in it in a vain attempt to kill the Planetary Field Team (Ellis and Cassaday *Planetary: Spacetime Archaeology* 135-38).

Oddly enough, when *Planetary* begins, the thoroughly late capitalist and, by extension postmodernist, Four Voyagers have won. Their allegiance to late capitalism has made them the secret rulers of the world. In addition, they have seriously weakened the only people that have even a slim chance of harming them, Planetary.

The Planetary Organization is crippled without Snow as their leader, and Snow is crippled without his memories and his driving sense of purpose. In inducing amnesia and altering Snow’s memories, the Four Voyagers have fragmented his past and his being and stolen his history. The Earth is under their control and is little more than simply another commodity for them to exploit. Knowledge and technology that could make a lasting and immense difference to every living person on the planet remains locked away in a vault like some miser’s gold coins.

As previously stated, when *Planetary* begins, late capitalism has won and holds the world in a postmodern thrall. Fortunately, this is but a temporary condition. Snow is able to rebuild himself from the fragments left by the Four Voyagers into something better than he was before and defeat them. Ultimately, all of their knowledge and technology and science are freely given away by Planetary to the world. And, more importantly, progress through science and technology is once again made. The driving

force behind history is revealed and humanity's faith in science and technology is rewarded by the creation of a truly finer world that is not a step backward and a return modernism, but instead a step forward, beyond postmodernism.

In the beginning, however, Snow is a representative postmodernist man cast adrift in a postmodern world. Given his age, it is even possible to see him as a modernist man that has become postmodernist and is now lost. When first introduced, he suffers from amnesia and clearly does not fit in with his surroundings. For the first eleven issues of the series, he suffers from the postmodern condition of a lack of historicity in that he is cut off from his memories by blocks implanted by the Four Voyagers. His own history has been taken from him. This inability to place himself within his own chronology, let alone within a larger historical sequence would seem to have much in common with Jameson's (by way of Lyotard) previously discussed conception of the schizophrenic.

Fortunately, this is only a temporary condition as Snow recovers both his memories and his powerful sense of purpose (Ellis and Cassaday *Planetary: The Fourth Man* 121). With or without his memories, though, his driving motivation remains to discover a history that has been lost or hidden and put the pieces of the puzzle of history back together.

This is no more apparent than in the cover to *Planetary* #26 which depicts Snow staring at the reader holding the last piece of the puzzle which comprises the cover. In a complex form of mise-en-abyme, Snow can, of course, never really insert this final piece without irrevocably changing the rest of the cover. This missing piece lies within the middle of Snow, himself, and is a powerful message about change and where the real power for change lives. Ellis is positing that true change must come from the inside, and that it is in changing ourselves that we change the world. To do so, however, we must complete ourselves by taking the various pieces (fragments) of our beings, and constructing a whole that will always be much greater than simply the sum of its parts.

History not only provides an antidote to the postmodern, but is shown to contain an ability to not only heal Snow, but, by extension, the entire planet. In discovering the secret history of the 20th century, he rediscovers not only his own history, but a unifying sense of purpose that will carry him far, far into the future. He explains this to Jakita Wagner after dispatching the last two members of The Four Voyagers

It's just starting. The real work. We have so much to show people, now.

And so much more to sift from the ground.

Just one loose thread to take care of. One last thing to take from the soil
of the 20th century.

And then we spend the rest of our very long lives on that strange world
we love.

Keeping it that way. (Ellis and Cassaday *Planetary: Spacetime*

Archaeology 189)

Here, we once again see Snow displaying his dedication to keeping the world strange and extraordinary.

Snow, and by extension the entire *Planetary* organization, is essentially fighting routinization, which can be thought of as an “increasing cultural and economic homegenization associated with late capitalism.”

(Booker *Encyclopedia of Literature and Politics: Censorship, Revolution, and Writing* 618) This dedication

to preserving uniqueness and strangeness that is so much a part of *Planetary* is something that Ellis

would return to again and again throughout the series. In *Planetary* #23 after rescuing the young boy who

becomes the Drummer, Snow explains *Planetary*'s purpose to him.

What we really do is save things. We keep the world strange because

that's the way it's supposed to be. And we save the people on it. (Ellis

and Cassaday *Planetary: Spacetime Archaeology* 119)

Another method of addressing and combating late capitalism involves the manner in which Ellis presents alternate or alternative realities. Alternate realities seem to be a common element in many postmodern literary works, such as Thomas Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow* (1973), Philip K. Dick's *Time out of Joint* (1959), or William Gibson's *Neuromancer* (1984), to name just a few. This can be traced back to the earlier discussion of fragmentation as a facet of the postmodern. Presenting alternating realities leads to a fragmentation of reality, unless one imposes some form of order or hierarchy upon these alternate realities.

In the very first issue of *Planetary*, Ellis posits the existence of a multiverse of nearly unimaginable scale composed of as many universes as “the number of atoms making up the earth”. (Ellis and Cassaday *Planetary: All over the World, and Other Stories* 21) There is, however, an order to this

multiverse. It looks like a snowflake, and even allows for travel between universes via the Bleed, thus connecting each universe to the whole.

As previously mentioned, an excellent example of this would be when the Planetary Field Team encounters Batman. Unable to control his powers, the child of a Science City Zero survivor repeatedly shifts the team into slightly different universes with different versions of Gotham City. In these alternate universes the Planetary Field Team encounters Batman as portrayed by different creators over the previous sixty-four years. One second, they are seeing the original Bob Kane Batman, then “some kind of transvestite hooker” (Ellis and Cassaday *Planetary: Crossing Worlds* 135) in reference to the 1960s TV show Batman as portrayed by Adam West. Another shift occurs, and they are facing the hulking, dark, and grim Batman of Frank Miller’s *Batman: The Dark Knight*, and then, just as suddenly, the 1970s version by writer Steve Englehart and illustrator Marshall Rogers. Ultimately, Ellis and Cassady present readers with their version of Batman, a synthesis all of these many iterations of the character that best fits the historical moment in which the character was published.

This, of course, displays superhero comics’s high level of self-referentiality. Nevertheless, these realities are not meant to be seen simply as fragments of reality or signify the fragmentation of reality. Each of these realities is presented as a piece of the whole, a part of an overall continuum. What Ellis calls the Snowflake is, in reality, not actually all that different from a multiverse or an omniverse, concepts that, as we have seen, superhero comics have been utilizing for decades.

In addition, history is a constant presence in *Planetary*, revealing a much different strategy on the part of Ellis. This, perhaps, stems from the role of the Planetary organization as “archaeologists of the impossible.” Their goal is to create an overall “story” of their world, to give it a history that has heretofore been hidden in the dirt of the twentieth century, waiting to be discovered and made whole. This approach strongly contrasts with the approach taken in *Watchmen*, in which time is presented as fragments that ultimately fly apart and never come back together.

Planetary depicts many instances of the utopian impulse. Elijah Snow, the leader of the Planetary organization cannot only imagine a different world than that of the Four Voyagers, but can see how they have actively repressed and stunted the development of his world. Snow comments to one of the Four

Voyagers, "I know that you've done more than your share of making the world mediocre". (Ellis and Cassaday *Absolute Planetary Book One* 147)

As mentioned previously, the Planetary organization is more than just the Field Team. It is composed of thousands of individuals all across the world who collectively dream of changing the world. With Snow's defeat of the Four Voyagers, many of these people receive the opportunity to actively work for this change as they carefully access and decode the massive database Snow retrieve from them. From this data, Planetary's collection of scientists and technologists are able to provide humanity with hope for the future in the form of technology that contains the potential to truly free the human race.

Collective action is something that is shown repeatedly throughout not only *Planetary*, but many of Ellis's other works. In fact, it is demonstrated in the very first issue of the series. The members of the cabal of pulp heroes come together in a bid to build a finer world. And while it is true that their attempt goes horribly wrong, it nonetheless represents the expression of a collective wish for a better future. Ellis continues this trend during the series as Snow slowly and carefully organizes allies of his own in his bid to defeat the Four Voyagers. He recruits Jim Wilder, the superhuman children of the Science City Zero survivors, the Hark Corporation with Anna Hark as its head, and the superspy John Stone to help Planetary against the Four.

In addition to *Planetary*, numerous other works by Ellis also contain a strong utopian impulse, as will be demonstrated shortly. When examining *Planetary* and these other works, it appears that...

Ellis seems to believe that creating lasting, positive change on a grand scale is an ultimately fatal endeavor. But, to his credit, his writings consistently argue that this is a risk that is not only worth taking, but in fact must be taken by men and women of good conscience. (Grey)

Many of his characters not only dare to imagine a better world, but continually strive for it, and typically at great personal cost.

For instance, Jenny Sparks dies saving the planet in *The Authority*, and while Spider Jerusalem of *Transmetropolitan* does not die in his crusade against the President, he nonetheless sustains physical wounds that cannot be healed. In *Planetary*, we see the price of trying to make a finer world paid by the cabal of pulp heroes. Each and every one of them, except for Doc Brass, die fighting to protect their world

from invading superhumans, and Brass maintains a solitary vigil for over fifty years guarding their attempt gone wrong and protecting the world from any other incursions.

Snow and the Planetary organization see the world as a place filled with wonder and mystery. "It's a strange world. Let's keep it that way." (Ellis and Cassaday *Planetary: All over the World, and Other Stories* 33) This contrasts sharply with the Four's conception of the world as simply a means to power. They commodify knowledge, and by extension, their entire world. It is their iron grip on the world that Snow must break to save it and release it and its people from its postmodern thrall. But Snow's liberation of Earth does not represent a return to a modernist world; it instead represents a freeing of the world to create a new history with knowledge toward understanding as its base.

The postmodernist conception of depth is another theme that Ellis directly engages within *Planetary*. At its core, the science of archaeology is about building a narrative from fragments of found history. Typically, assembling this narrative requires digging, or going beneath the surface to discover what lies beneath. To members of Planetary, history is a mystery with clues scattered about that must be uncovered and placed within context to become the story or the narrative of history. As has been discussed previously, a lack of depth is associated with postmodernism. For example, Snow, as a master detective that studied under Sherlock Holmes, is always digging, always looking beneath the surface. It was Snow's innate need to know the secrets of the world that convinced Holmes to train Snow. In addition, it is ultimately the revelation of the final secret, the location of the buried, lost shift ship deep beneath the Earth that allows Snow to defeat the remaining members of the Four Voyagers.

History as a totalizing narrative of progress, therefore, operates at the core of *Planetary* and drives much of the action of the plot. This utilization of history is, at once, at odds with the deshistoricizing force of postmodernism. Fundamentally, *Planetary* is Elijah Snow's quest to make the world a better place through the acquisition and sharing of knowledge and technology. The belief expressed by him and his entire organization is that the world can be made better with the advanced science and technology withheld by the Four Voyagers. Snow and Planetary's faith is ultimately rewarded in the final issue of the series with not only the ongoing release of new technologies for the betterment of all of humanity, but also in the return of Ambrose Chase from the stasis bubble that his power had placed him in after being shot

multiple times as detailed in *Planetary* #9. This faith in progress through science and technology permeates *Planetary* and is most certainly at odds with late capitalism.

Ultimately, Snow, and by extension the Planetary Organization, defeats the Four Voyagers. This defeat of the cultural logic of late capitalism, however, is not then an opportunity to move historically backward to the modernist era. No, the defeat of late capitalism finally allows for a move forward past capitalism into socialism. One simply has to see all of the wonderful innovations that *Planetary* is providing freely to the world to understand that soon there will be no more hunger, no more homelessness, and much less suffering in the world. By utilizing the science and technology acquired from the Four Voyagers, *Planetary* is freeing the world from the grip of capitalism, and by extension, its cultural logic, postmodernism.

Planetary directly combats late capitalism not only via the underpinnings of its medium and genre which have been shown to possess an innate defense against it, but also through themes and strategies critical of late capitalism utilized by Ellis throughout the work. This results in a work that contains an exceptionally strong resistance to the cultural logic of late capitalism.

IV. TRANSMETROPOLITAN

Launched in September of 1997 as a part of DC's short-lived science fiction imprint, *Helix*, *Transmetropolitan* teamed Ellis with artist Darick Robertson. The series quickly established itself as an innovative science fiction title and ultimately long outlived the imprint that had birthed it, being absorbed into DC's Vertigo imprint beginning with the publication of *Transmetropolitan* #13. The title continued until *Transmetropolitan* #60, cover-dated November of 2002, where Ellis concluded Spider Jerusalem's story. *Transmetropolitan* became the crown-jewel of the Vertigo imprint during its publication, occupying a position similar to that of Gaiman's *Sandman* while it was being published, even though sales were never high in the Direct Market. The series never ranked higher than #95 in the monthly sales charts (*Transmetropolitan* #45) with its highest number of copies sold only reaching 20,618 (*Transmetropolitan* #48). As was mentioned before, the entire sixty-issue series and two special issues have been collected in eleven trade paperbacks.

Transmetropolitan follows Spider Jerusalem, formerly a superstar journalist and author, as he is forced through threat of a lawsuit to return from his mountain home to work in the City in order to fulfill an old contract. After five years away in the mountains, Spider is initially assaulted by the sights, sounds, and smells of the City.

This goddamn noise...I don't know if this recorder's picking up half of what I'm saying.

It's like coming out of sensory deprivation, or waking up from a really nice dream and finding yourself naked on a busy freeway...

...with mice up your ass... (Ellis and Robertson *Transmetropolitan: Back on the Street* 15)

Initially, the City seems every bit the future dystopia that many readers have come to expect from decades of science fiction going back to H. G. Wells, but it is much more than that. It is a living thing, as Spider observes,

This city never allowed itself to decay or degrade. It's wildly, intensely growing. It's a loud bright stinking mess.

It takes strength from its thousands of cultures. And the thousands more

that grow anew each day.

It isn't perfect. It lies and cheats. It's no utopia and it ain't the mountain
by a long shot -- but it's alive. I can't argue that. (Ellis and Robertson

Transmetropolitan: Back on the Street 16)

And, regardless of his ranting and raving, Spider cares a great deal for the city and its people even when they disappoint him.

In the above description, Ellis takes special care to note that the City is not a utopia. However, he also takes issue with those trying to label the City a dystopia,

I really don't see the City of Transmet as dystopian. It's just like where we
live now. There are horrible fucking things and there are things of
sublime beauty, and they all live in the same place.(Oliveri)

Apparently, the City is neither utopian nor dystopian, and yet possesses characteristics of both. It is both and neither. For example, many, many atrocities are perpetrated within the bounds of the City. A small catalogue of these sins includes a totalitarian government, child prostitution, the spread of a flesh-eating disease among the poor, the use of force by the City's ruling class against the Transients, the indifference to the suffering of the Revivals, hate crimes against those genetically different, the cockroach like proliferation of religious sects and cults, and the Machiavellian politics of the presidential nomination.

All of these things point toward a dystopia, or what could also be described as a negative utopia. And yet, the City does not seem to be a dystopia as it differs greatly from the repressive societies seen in science fiction. While, the authoritarian societies presented in works such as Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932), George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949), or even H. G. Wells's *The Sleeper Awakes* (1910) do differ greatly from The City, they also differ greatly from each other. Dystopia, it seems, can be presented in just as many forms as utopia.

However, the City also contains many positive aspects that could be considered utopian. Science and technology have progressed and truly improved the lives of all the City's denizens. Human life expectancy has vastly increased. Typical humans now live for over a hundred years without trying anything special to increase lifespan.

Also, denizens of the City seem to have nearly limitless possibilities with respect to lifestyle. They can choose to live temporarily as other species. They can become Foglets, which are networks of tiny computers that can modify matter in much the same way that the makers do. The makers are an interesting science fictional device that can recombine matter into thousands of different forms, something very similar to the replicators shown on *Star Trek: The Next Generation*. Devices similar to this are staples of science fiction and are also known as molecular assemblers.

The City contains cyborgs, mutants, intelligent animals, advanced artificial intelligences, genetically modified humans, the Transients, people slowly changing themselves into aliens via alien genetic material, and others that all contribute to its radical diversity. It contains a vast number of differences within it, and as such, many arguments could be made for the City as both a utopia and a dystopia, but it is probably best described as a heterotopia.

This is a term coined by Michel Foucault to describe places of diverse otherness. The City as this other space serves as a microcosm for human society and thus contains a multitude of differences within it. Foucault called for a society with many heterotopias, not only as a space with several places of and/or for the affirmation of difference, but also as a means of escape from repression. Samuel R. Delany posited something similar in his science fiction novel *Trouble on Triton: An Ambiguous Heterotopia* (1976). Delany, directly attributes his use of the term to Foucault, but he was also writing partly in response to Ursula K. Le Guin's *The Dispossessed: An Ambiguous Utopia* (1974). However, one could also argue that the City represents something that Jameson briefly discusses, a "multiplicity of utopian communities." (Jameson *Archaeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions* 219) Foucault's heterotopia could, perhaps, be seen as simply this multitude of utopias.

Regardless of its utopian status, the City contains within it something that certainly combats the de-historicizing forces of late capitalism, the Reservations, which could be thought of as living history. These isolated spaces exist throughout the city as places where history can actually be seen and experienced. These sealed environments reproduce a particular culture as truthfully as possible, including practices that a modern City-dweller would find horrific. People who volunteer lose all memories of the City, have their immunities removed and their lifespans shortened, often drastically. They live, love, and die there. And, as Spider observes,

People die to teach us lessons about religion and environment. We keep history close to make damned sure we learn from it. (Ellis and Robertson *Transmetropolitan: Lust for Life* 131)

In fact, Spider believes that the Reservations will ultimately justify the existence of his society to those that follow.

Inherent within the core of Ellis's presentation of the City lies a strong faith in history and the belief in progress through science and technology. Ellis powerfully, and with a comedic twist at the end, states in no uncertain terms that progress is what drives the engine of history, and that on the whole history is progressing and things are slowly getting better over time. Spider espouses this belief, which is fundamentally at odds with late capitalism, in the *Transmetropolitan* short story, "Next Winters" from *Vertigo: Winter's Edge* #3.

The future is inherently a good thing.

And we move into it one winter at a time.

Things get better one winter at a time.

So if you're going to celebrate something, then have a drink on this:

The world is, generally and on balance, a better place to live this year than it was last year. (Ellis, Robertson, Ramos, Aiken, et al. 139-40)

Obviously, change and the concept of improvement are at odds with postmodernism. History and progress are obviously very important to Ellis and lie at the heart of Spider Jerusalem and *Transmetropolitan*.

In addition, Ellis calls special attention to the fact that measurement of time has become relative in the City. Everything is measured from a perpetual now forward or backward as opposed to an absolute time.

The problem with no one knowing what year it is, is that we have to define backwards, as it were.

Therefore, because it's difficult to refer back to the past, we tend to live in the present moment a lot more than we used to. Or, at least, than we presume we used to. (Ellis, Robertson, Ramos, Eyring, et al. 127)

Essentially, this is Ellis calling attention to the fragmentation of historical thinking and the relative, disconnected time experience of the postmodern.

Transmetropolitan provides Ellis with a vehicle to address many social and cultural ills via gonzo journalist Spider Jerusalem, a character given to excessive rants both outrageously humorous and often particularly insightful. During the course of the series, Ellis turns his attention to a variety of topics. Politics, religion, hate crime, child prostitution, poverty, and journalism all bear the brunt of his satirical pen.

Journalism, however, while criticized for its failure in the City is actually put forth as a true agent of positive social change in the world. In fact, it is Spider's column, published live throughout the rest of the city, about the brutality occurring during a staged riot that actually causes the corrupt police to stop and leave the neighborhood. While writing the column, Spider explains journalism to the strippers that accompany him to the roof...

Journalism is just a gun. It's only got one bullet in it, but if you aim it right, that's all you need. Aim it right and you can blow a kneecap off the world.

(Ellis and Robertson *Transmetropolitan: Back on the Street* 58)

Spider earns a savage beating and a warning from the city's police for his interference, but this does not deter him in the least.

Not long after, he utilizes his fame and reputation to slowly lead a group of people and other reporters to a slum where its people suffer from third-world diseases and are forced to live in horrible squalor.

This is called the grazer. This disease used to be limited to what were called "third world" countries -- the undeveloped nations, the ultimate poverty zones.

Now it exists only in America. (Ellis and Robertson *Transmetropolitan:*

Year of the Bastard 86)

Here, he points out that these people only suffer because they voted against the current president. Spider's publicity stunt forces the opposing political party to specifically address the situation in their platform. With the announcement of the platform, Spider says, "I did it. I forced the bastard to commit in

public to fixing everything I wrote about.” (Ellis and Robertson *Transmetropolitan: Year of the Bastard* 106) And this is the real power of journalism according to Ellis, not in fixing problems itself, but in bringing the truth of the problem to the public so that the right people can then be brought in to fix the problem.

Later in the series, Spider interviews the corrupt President (whom he has nicknamed the Beast) and is treated to what the sitting president considers to be the true role of the President of the United States of America...

Look, my job isn't to make everything beautiful. My job isn't to make living life a good time...My job is just to keep things the way they are.

Everyone stays the same. (Ellis, Robertson, Ramos, Aiken, et al. 65)

This reveals the Presidency and, by extension, the entire government that it represents as not just agents of the status quo and by extension, late capitalism, but also as active and incredibly strong impediments to positive, lasting social change.

Unfortunately, the opposing party candidate that Spider unofficially endorses is revealed by Spider to be actually worse than the incumbent party's candidate, so he makes it his mission to take down the opposition candidate, whom he has nicknamed the Smiler. As a result of Spider's antics, the Smiler's approval ratings go from great just after Spider's unofficial endorsement to abysmal after Spider's revelation that the Smiler's running mate had been recently grown in a cloning facility and was in fact only a little over two-years-old, apparently the only manner in which to find a "clean" politician. Ratings for his political director, Dr. Vita Severn, however, remain high, so the Smiler has her killed to guarantee him the sympathy vote. His gambit works, and he is elected President, but Spider vows revenge since Vita had become something rare for him, a friend. It is his fight against the Smiler's administration that dominates the remaining forty-two issues of the series.

While political corruption and Spider's fight against it would remain a recurring element of the series and dominate the final issues, Ellis repeatedly sets his sights on other targets. And, it was not long before Spider Jerusalem attacked organized religion. In the City, there was "one new religion invested every hour." (Ellis and Robertson *Transmetropolitan: Lust for Life* 52) The sheer number of sects, cults, and factions provide ample opportunity for more than a few angry rants and tirades dedicated specifically to religion...

I am sick of the city's loose change and spare sanity sucked up and lived off by an ever increasing pile of parasitical shit-ticks incapable of standing up and dealing with the world on their own. (Ellis and Robertson *Transmetropolitan: Lust for Life* 54)

After debunking, discrediting, and denouncing a myriad of religions and their proponents at a convention for new religious movements, Spider once again explodes...

Y'know I wouldn't mind all this half so much if there was some historical truth in it. This whole concept of 'faith'—of believing in something that isn't fucking there—was invented by a man to cover up the cracks in the 'Christianity' he cobbled together with the Romans.

This whole god thing comes from the days when our brains weren't as connected up as they are now, and we all hallucinated daily! (Ellis and Robertson *Transmetropolitan: Lust for Life* 66)

And finally, pushed beyond the limits of pitiful endurance, he erupts in a rant full of invective, hate, anger, and bile...

That's it! That is the absolute fucking limit! You're all in for it now, you bunch of cheap scam artists! All of you!

Thieves, the goddamn lot of you! Thieves and leeches!

Fucking vampires sucking the will from the people whose only goddamn crimes—uff—were to be frightened and tired!

And you don't help them! You don't listen to them! They get no truth from you!

(Ellis and Robertson *Transmetropolitan: Lust for Life* 68)

Apparently, Spider's father had become a cultist many years before, thus explaining some of his anger, but that does not explain all of his reaction. Spider's angry rant simply demonstrates that religion in all of its forms offends him at every level because it is ultimately, at its core, antithetical to truth and anti-historical.

Unsurprisingly, this is something that both Ellis and his creation have in common. In an interview, he states,

There is such a thing as truth. Non-relative, unassailable, valuable truth.

Do not let people relativise the concept of truth into vapour. (McBride)

Obviously, the concept of truth remains outside those attributes commonly associated with postmodernism. Eagleton refers to it as a “remarkably modest, eminently reasonable notion,” (Eagleton *After Theory* 103) and this certainly seems consistent with Ellis’s stated views on the subject. Additionally, Eagleton appears somewhat amazed that

In fact, some postmodernists claim not to believe in truth at all – but this is just because they have identified truth with dogmatism, and in rejecting dogmatism have thrown out truth along with it. This is a peculiarly pointless manoeuvre. (Eagleton *After Theory* 103)

Since some postmodernists do indeed reject the very concept of truth, it seems only natural to classify Ellis’s attitude toward truth as antithetical to the cultural logic of late capitalism.

Transmetropolitan seems to possess a great deal of utopian energy. Not only is there much collective action by the City’s citizens, but one also gets a sense that really almost anything is possible within the City. For instance, the Farsight Community is an experimental reservation in the City that attempts to preserve the culture of a history that has not yet happened, and is, in a sense, something very much akin to the ultimate Blochian “not yet” community. Within Farsight, “they try to learn the lessons of the future before it arrives.” (Ellis and Robertson *Transmetropolitan: Lust for Life* 135)

As mentioned previously, there is a great deal of collective action by the City’s population throughout the series. For example, the City’s citizens flood Civic Center with phone calls demanding that police pull-out of the Transient neighborhoods and end the riot that, in reality, they started anyway. In addition, the dream of collective political action and the positive change that it can bring about underlies the entire presidential election process as covered by Spider, from the primaries through the eventual election of the Smiler over the Beast. Even the backward, fascist followers of the Heller, another candidate in the presidential primary, express some utopian longing in their collective support of him.

Spider even unites many of the disenfranchised of the City as the New Scum, bringing them together to make a difference in the primaries by forcing the Smiler to deal with the horrors and poverty that he wrote about in his column. Obviously with politics playing a central role in the series, Ellis

demonstrates his anti-capitalist tendencies as he displays a faith in national politics, as he shows that many, both in and out of the City, strongly identify themselves as members of the national party in power or as members of the opposition party. This attitude toward politics, that of large unifying groups, is in opposition to the postmodernist attitude, where fragmentation has reduced it to something best described as micropolitics.

Ellis also explicitly demonstrates what typically blocks the expression of this utopian desire for change. Those in power fear radical change and will do anything to prevent it. In this case it is the President, or the Beast, as Spider has nicknamed him. In fact, preventing the fulfillment of this utopian desire for change is apparently the only thing that he actually does believe in.

Much like *Planetary*, *Transmetropolitan* directly combats late capitalism not only via the underpinnings of its medium and genre which have been shown to possess an innate defense against it, but also through the themes and strategies critical of late capitalism that Ellis utilizes throughout the work. This results in a work that contains an exceptionally strong resistance to the cultural logic of late capitalism, and, is thus, something other than postmodern.

V. STORMWATCH / THE AUTHORITY

StormWatch began in 1993 with issue #1, cover-dated March 1993. It was produced by Jim Lee's WildStorm Productions for Image Comics. Initially, a generic superhero team in much the same vein as the innumerable other superhero teams published by Image Comics at the time, such as *WildC.A.T.s*, *Youngblood*, or *Cyberforce*. *StormWatch* chronicled the adventures of the United Nations Special Crisis Intervention team. The first thirty-six issues contain pretty standard and often substandard superhero fare, but nothing really exceptional.

This would change dramatically when Ellis began writing the series with *StormWatch* #37 (July, 1996). He continued writing the series throughout the remaining fourteen issues of *StormWatch Volume 1*. Ellis also remained on as writer for the title for the *StormWatch Volume 2* relaunch which lasted eleven issues. In addition, he penned *WildC.A.T.s/Aliens*, which allowed him to again relaunch the franchise as *The Authority*. Ellis only wrote the first twelve issues of this series, which DC has continued publishing with multiple volumes, spinoffs, and limited series through the present.

StormWatch was, unfortunately, never a sales juggernaut for WildStorm, as Ellis remembers...

My experience was that Wildstorm, particularly Jim Lee and Scott Dunbier and certainly several of the editors I worked with (John Layman especially comes to mind), looked after their creators, and kept a personal connection. They probably weren't the best businessmen — one of the reasons I turned their STORMWATCH into THE AUTHORITY is that I found out that, despite the fact that no-one was buying STORMWATCH, they kept it going because they liked reading it in the office and wanted to keep me employed. And I felt so bloody awful about that, and at the same time had been so struck by Bryan Hitch's STORMWATCH issues, that the train of thought that led to THE AUTHORITY began. (MacDonald)

In fact, sales of individual issues of the title rarely ranked in the top one hundred sales list published by Diamond Comics in any given month, but it, nonetheless, stands as some of the most innovative work in the superhero sub-genre while it was being published as Ellis methodically examined both the sub-

genre's function and its underpinnings.

Ellis immediately changed both the tone and the direction of the title with *StormWatch #37*, his first issue. A fitting move since change would be a continuing theme throughout the fourteen issues of *StormWatch Volume 1* and the eleven issues of *StormWatch Volume 2* and his twelve issues of *The Authority*. He had the leader of StormWatch, the Weatherman, recruit new members and radically change the operating methods of the organization. As the Weatherman recruits Jenny Sparks, he asks her, "Didn't you ever want to change the world?" (Ellis, Raney, et al. 9) He subsequently reorganizes StormWatch into three teams,

StormWatch Prime becomes the unit suited to deal with superhuman threats in hotwar situations.

StormWatch Black is the covert insertion unit. We must recognize that times are changing, and urban, low intensity war is commonplace.

StormWatch Red will comprise those members with greatest destructive capability for acts of deterrent display and retaliation. (Ellis, Raney, et al.

19)

and turned the formerly reactionary, bureaucratic, and inflexible organization into a diverse, adaptable, and politically active world power with an agenda.

Immediately the newly reconfigured StormWatch comes up against the American military industrial complex as a former member of StormWatch is killed by some faction within the United States to send a message to the United Nations stating in no uncertain terms that StormWatch is not welcome on American soil. In retaliation, StormWatch Black reveals human rights abuses by the Lincoln Police Department which was using superhumans as police officers with the result of ill treatment of suspects, deaths of suspects in custody, and unjustified shootings. As he is battling StormWatch member Jack Hawksmoor outside a youth center, one of the superhuman police officers reveals the real reason they were recruited:

You know why we were recruited?

To keep things the same. Change is no good.

Some kids want to change things. That's no good.

So we just stamp on 'em until they grow out of it.

Everything stays nice and safe and the same. Why rock the boat? (Ellis, Raney, et al. 84-85)

This echoes the Beast's conversation with Spider Jerusalem in *Transmetropolitan*, and is a continuing theme not just within *StormWatch*, *Planetary*, *Transmetropolitan*, or *Global Frequency*, but across much of Ellis's large body of work. *StormWatch*, of course, defeats all of the Lincoln City police superhumans and gives the United States a well-deserved political black eye in the process. The American military industrial complex would serve as a continuing menace throughout most of the remainder of *StormWatch Volume 1*.

During these early issues, Ellis would occasionally focus on a single character for an issue. For instance, *StormWatch* #43 focuses on Jack Hawksmoor, while *StormWatch* #45 focuses on Battalion. *StormWatch* #44 focuses on Jenny Sparks and her history as a superhuman, a history intimately intertwined with the history of the superhero genre and American comics.

Ellis utilizes the full sweep of American comics history to lend his fictional universe a history built up from the histories of all super-hero comics. It also lets him comment on this history and place it chronologically in reference to the current works within the subgenre. He accomplishes this through the immediate introduction of Jenny Sparks to the team. This gives Ellis the flexibility to introduce a history of superhumanity to the WildStorm Universe.

At close to one hundred years old, Sparks is positioned as a witness to much of the superhero history of *StormWatch*'s world, a history that closely mimics the history of American superhero comics. Ellis digs into this history in an issue that focuses on Sparks and her participation within this history. In the process of this examination, he displays an impressive knowledge of and familiarity with the history of American superhero comics. His investigation here is something of a trial-run for what he would eventually accomplish with *Planetary*. This also gives Ellis and artist Tom Raney an opportunity to imitate the various art and writing styles of American comics throughout the last several decades.

StormWatch #44 shows the reader a Jenny Sparks deeply affected by each era in which Ellis places her. Initially, Sparks is shown flying on a rocket ship in outer space, much like the illustrations of scientific romances seen in early science fiction magazines of the 1920s.

Raney changes styles and imitates the artistic style of Joe Shuster as Sparks is shown in the 1930s. Here Ellis emulates the prose style of Jerry Siegel to produce something that looks and reads very much like an early *Action Comics* Superman story as Sparks finds herself in America where,

We sprang over those imprisoned Depression streets, me and mine; like
our lives were being written by teenage kids, and all their guts and
lunacy and hope were encoded into every piece of us. (Ellis, Raney and
Lee 33)

The time frame changes to the 1940s, and the style changes to match that of Eisner's *The Spirit*. The style changes again for the 1950s segment and resembles something out of an E.C. science fiction comic. The 1960s era art patterns itself after Jack Kirby's work at Marvel with the prose emulating Stan Lee. And finally, the 1980s segment looks and reads very much like *Watchmen* with similar dialogue to that utilized by Moore. In addition, Raney uses identical panel layouts and an art style similar to that used by Gibbons. The coloring is also used to great effect in this sequence mirroring *Watchmen's* rather dreary palette. There is also, of course, a suitably gruesome ending.

Finally, the style of the framing sequence adopts the normal style of the series, or one could say a 1990s superhero style. Ultimately, this history of Jenny Sparks reveals Ellis's faith in progress as Jackson King helps Sparks realize that things are slowly getting better,

But it's not the eighties any more.

Nor the sixties, or the forties. Things have changed. Things can still
change.

Life is not as grim as your eighties story, nor as hopeless.

You can still see the stars, Jenny. (Ellis, Raney and Lee 53)

Not only has the world changed during Jenny's life, but change is still possible. Comics have, of course, changed a great deal during this time and will continue to change into the future.

Different art and writing styles are adopted throughout *StormWatch #44* by Ellis and artist Raney, but their purpose is much more than mere postmodern pastiche. They adopt these different styles to demonstrate a historical sequence of the evolution of American comics. Pastiche dehistoricizes styles of the past by borrowing them without regard to their historical sequence. Ellis and Raney are instead

historicizing these styles and demonstrating a capsule chronology of American comics. This capsule history places each style within the proper historical context. For instance, the 1940s sequence utilizes the style of Eisner's *The Spirit* which debuted during this time. The 1960s segment emulates the Marvel Comics by Lee and Kirby, specifically the *Avengers*, that became popular in the 60s. The 1980s segment mimics *Watchmen*, which was published during the mid-1980s. Ellis and Raney present an historical progression of American comics history with their final sequence being shown as the culmination of all this history.

Ellis also shows the reader that these different and fragmented aspects of American superhero comics are, in reality, part of the continuum that is superhero fiction. This allows him to connect the reader to the shared history of the superhero subgenre and place his work in context of the whole of superhero fiction. This is not done for the sake of nostalgia, as it could be in the case of someone who read and enjoyed superhero comics in the past since Ellis is "not, and never was, a big superhero fan." (Springer)

This is far from the only manner in which Ellis utilizes history within the series. He integrates characters from other comics publishing companies and time periods to give his superhero universe something akin to a gestalt superhero history. He accomplishes this via stand-ins and doppelgangers, an approach that we have seen he also utilized in *Planetary*. For instance, the High is obviously supposed to be read as this continuity's Superman. In fact, Ellis would reveal that he came to this Earth through the Bleed from an alternate Earth in much the same manner that Superman was sent to Earth from Krypton. Again, this is a strategy he would use in a more sophisticated manner for *Planetary*.

In addition, Ellis reveals his strong belief in progress through science and technology with "Change or Die" storyline in *StormWatch* #'s 48 – 50. It is through the gift of technology and science that the peoples of the earth will be freed by the High and his team of superhumans. Their science, philosophy, and technology will free humanity from their superstitions and truly give them a better way of life. Technology from the Engineer in the form of nanotechnology within the Garden will end hunger and privation. With Gardens scattered across the world, humanity will no longer want for anything. The price for this is that individuals must simply start thinking for themselves and reject the authority that has neither been earned nor used wisely.

It was not the American military industrial complex, however, but this team of superhumans that

would prove the undoing of the Weatherman's plans in the final story arc of *StormWatch Volume 1*, the aptly titled "Change or Die." Apparently driven insane by the cybernetic implants that grant him his abilities as the Weatherman, Henry Bendix seeks to control the world to make it safe, as he explains to an enraged Jenny Sparks...

Freedom doesn't work. All we use freedom for is to kill each other.

I'll change the world. No one will die – unless I decide they die.

I'll change the world one body at a time if I have to, until people start controlling themselves.

Control is the key, not "freedom". There must be discipline. (Ellis, Jimenez, et al. 81)

This is in direct contrast to The High and his team of superhumans who simply wish to set the world free. In this case, the Weatherman equates freedom with anarchism and the replacement of the present civilization with a society bereft of hierarchical power structures. He accuses this group of "vandalism on a monstrous scale." (Ellis, Jimenez, et al. 60) The High, an obvious allusion to Superman, has sat and thought for a decade about new paradigms and new ways of living, and he has come to a conclusion. In addition,

He has travelled the world, spoken with thinkers of every race and style, and he has spent ten years framing his response.

His message is simple, and not only needs to be heard, but needs to be incised into the Earth --

Think for yourself and question authority.

And if you can think for yourself, what do you need authority for? (Ellis, Jimenez, et al. 23)

He has recruited like-minded superhumans to help him change the world, such as Blind, Wish, the Engineer, Rite, Smoke, Eidolon, and the Doctor. Interesting, the Doctor is something of a modern shaman for the global village of humanity, and his ideals closely match those of the High,

The Doctor thinks, soaked in drugs. If all could drag themselves from the mire of mundane life as he did, if all could see that it's change or die --

what evil could survive when ordinary people become all that they can be
-- from the inside. (Ellis, Jimenez, et al. 15)

With the help of nanotechnology from the Engineer, they plan to end hunger and suffering and truly change the world. Their plan is simple, as The High explains,

Thanks to my friends, there is now a garden in Nevada that will give you
anything you want.

Food, energy, machines, medicine, protection. All for free, like picking
fruit from a tree.

Tell me something. If you all had a garden like this, what would you need
your current society for?

Think about this. You could be standing on Mars in three weeks. What
would you need war for?

What would you need government for? (Ellis, Jimenez, et al. 47)

It is not because they want to rule the world. They simply want to help everyone by solving the root of humanity's problems instead of continually fighting the symptoms. Once done, they will then disappear. They would end capitalism with a single stroke and see an end to hunger and privation all over the world. Ultimately, the Weatherman kills most of them, and The High is killed when he attacks SkyWatch, the orbiting headquarters of StormWatch, in a suicidal rage. And, the moment passes, leaving the Earth unchanged.

Jackson King, formerly the StormWatch trainer, becomes the new Weatherman after the revelation of Bendix's insanity. He would remain Weatherman until the deaths of many of his team members and the dismantling of the StormWatch organization. Here, Ellis seems to be intimating that StormWatch, a tool of the establishment, faced a turning point with The High and his group, and since it could not change, it finally died, too.

With the dismantling of the StormWatch organization, Jenny Sparks and StormWatch Black take on the responsibility of protecting the world, reasoning that

There has to be someone left to save the world.

And change it.

Same thing. (Ellis, Hitch, Ryan, et al. 93-94)

With the relaunch of *StormWatch* as *The Authority*, Ellis continues with the theme of change as part of the natural order. This can be clearly seen with the new Doctor, the successor of the one killed during the “Change or Die” story arc...

And it became your job, as it was mine and all of ours, to change the world.

Because magic is nothing but change. (Ellis, Hitch, Neary, et al. 19)

He also introduced a new female Engineer, the successor to the male Engineer who used nanotechnology to create the garden in Nevada.

Although never a top-selling title, *The Authority* sold quite a few more copies per issue than *StormWatch*. The true impact of the series, however does not lie in anything as mundane as number of units sold. It shaped the approach that many creators would subsequently take with respect to superhero comics and has assumed a high place in the canon, as it were, of the superhero sub-genre.

Both volumes of *StormWatch* and *The Authority* contain a diverse cast, further emphasizing the diversity of the world that they protect. *StormWatch* contains Hellstrike, an Irish man; Flint, a Kenyan woman; Fuji, a Japanese man; Fahrenheit, an American woman; Jenny Sparks, an English woman; Swift, a Tibetan woman, and Battalion, an African American man. Once the team was reconfigured as *The Authority*, the fewer members did not allow for as much cultural diversity as that of *StormWatch*, but Ellis did include diversity with respect to sexual orientation by including Apollo and the Midnighter, a homosexual couple. These characters are obvious analogues for DC’s Superman and Batman.

Interestingly, with the relaunch, Ellis seemed to focus less on the politics of superhumanity and instead on widescreen, over-the-top action, and this is further demonstrated in the less diverse cast. In fact, the structure of Ellis’s three arcs for the title involves a series of escalating threats to Earth.

In “The Circle,” hundreds of cloned superhuman terrorists attempt to destroy several cities as an act of international terrorism. With “Shiftships,” Ellis ups the ante for the second arc by having the Authority repel an invasion by an alternate Earth with plans for turning the Authority’s Earth into a rape camp. The Authority takes the battle to this alternate Earth and actually liberates it from its alien masters. With his final arc, “Outer Dark,” Ellis increases the threat level to the maximum as the Authority faces

“God.” The creature, approximately the size of the moon and responsible for the creation of the Earth as its “retirement home,” comes back to see a world infested with humans. Jenny Sparks, dying with the twentieth century, electrocutes it and saves the planet.

Even though Ellis dialed back the political intrigue and chose a more action-oriented approach, the theme of change so strong in *StormWatch* still found its way into *The Authority*, as Jenny Sparks explains to Apollo,

But there had to be someone left to save the world.

And someone left to change it. (Ellis, Hitch, Neary, et al. 49-50)

She also kept up a connection to Jackson King, her former StormWatch teammate, a connection she would use to insure that the United Nations would be in control of the advanced technology that the Authority retrieved in their battle with the superhuman terrorists from Gamorra as she explains to the rest of the team,

So it'll be a U.N team not a single country, that'll find Gamorra's
bioreactor and teleport system.

It'll be the U.N holding ways of mass-producing human tissue from DNA
scrapings, the U.N. holding a revolutionary mass transit system.

And they'll know we know they have it.

So give it four or ten years of testing and bidding and building, and,
well...

...the world will be a better place. (Ellis, Hitch, Neary, et al. 94)

And this is ultimately what Ellis has had these characters striving for since he first utilized them in *StormWatch*, a finer world.

Through the High and his team of superhumans, Ellis displays another of his typical themes, that of order and hierarchy. In this case, a lack of trust between the members of the High's group ultimately leads to the failure of their grand plan. In the end, their organization fails. They did, however, have the fortitude to imagine something different, something better, putting lie to capitalism's shrill insistence that there are no alternatives. This also clearly demonstrates that those that ally themselves with capitalism will do anything and everything within their power to prevent change.

Continuing this theme of order and hierarchy, the Authority becomes a “higher authority” to help the world. This displays a belief in hierarchy and centralized control, a common theme not just in *The Authority*, but in *StormWatch*, as well. Only by action did the Authority seize their position as Earth’s saviors. Although, former members Christine Trelane and Jackson King do lend the team legitimacy as United Nations representatives when they call them for help. Ellis demonstrates again and again that only diverse organizations that are flexible not only deserve to survive, but are the only ones that will continue to survive.

Both of the groups that the Authority is thrown into conflict with exhibit deep, fundamental flaws as organizations and ultimately fail utterly. The Circle is controlled by the insane Kiazen Gamorra, but his soldiers are all clones. There is no diversity at all within his organization, and it is completely destroyed by the diverse and flexible Authority. The second group that the Authority comes into conflict with is an entire parallel Earth dubbed Sliding Albion. The blue aliens that control this parallel Earth are virtually sterile and remain unchanged after hundreds of years in control of that Earth. Their military monoculture of rape and domination is also destroyed by the Authority.

StormWatch under Ellis’s pen is crackling with utopian energy, particularly the “Change or Die” arc. Change, progress, and the building of finer worlds are all of paramount importance during his tenure on the title. The dream of a finer world permeates the work. The entire agenda of the High and his superhuman associates is a utopian agenda. Make no mistake, the cost of trying to change the world for the better is high as many, many characters die trying to do just that. Ellis seems to believe that this goal is ultimately worth the sacrifice, though.

There are many instances in *StormWatch* where characters consciously strive for this finer world. For instance, the High and his group do not just imagine a better world, they actively work to make their dreams of a free humanity a reality. It ultimately costs all of them their lives. They fail, but the simple act of imagining a better world against capitalism’s insistence of no alternatives is a powerful action. Jackson King, as Weatherman, changes an entire parallel Earth by simply having the courage to act. During “The Bleed” story arc in *StormWatch Volume 2*, he provides that reality’s Jack Hawksmoor with vital information that fundamentally changes that parallel Earth for the better.

Both volumes of *StormWatch* and *The Authority* provide ample evidence of Ellis’s anti-capitalist

tendencies. Whether one examines his use of history to establish a superhuman continuity and historicize its use or his continued utilization of the theme of progress, the anti-capitalist viewpoint remains obvious. In addition, Ellis imbues and the myth of progress through science and technology, themes of order and hierarchy, or simply the strong utopian dimension of these works, these works with a strong utopian impulse which only intensifies their resistance to the cultural logic of late capitalism. These attributes, of course, must be taken in conjunction with the strong, innate resistance to late capitalism contained not only within the comics medium, but also within the overall science fiction genre in general, and the superhero sub-genre in particular, that these works participate in. All of this taken together, reveal a work with a strong anti-capitalist inclination which lead to a high level of resistance to late capitalism and its cultural logic.

VI. GLOBAL FREQUENCY

Published by WildStorm, an imprint of DC Comics, *Global Frequency #1* carries a publication date of November of 2002. The twelve-issue limited series allowed Ellis to partner with twelve different artists to chronicle stories of the Global Frequency, an independent rescue organization composed of one thousand one members across the world. These artists include Garry Leach, Glenn Fabry, Steve Dillon, Roy Allan Martinez, Jon J. Muth, David Lloyd, Simon Bisley, Chris Sprouse, Lee Bermejo, Tomm Coker, Jason Pearson, and Gene Ha. Ostensibly a monthly series, there were, however, delays of several months for the final two issues.

Global Frequency takes aim squarely at the American military industrial complex as the Global Frequency organization attempts to defuse the “unexploded bombs” (Ellis, Dillon, et al. 19) of their dirty little secrets. These lethal results of these secrets left over from the last century are scattered across the world. In fact, Miranda Zero says, “The whole planet is an unexploded bomb. That’s why we’re here.” (Ellis, Dillon, et al. 111)

It is this theme that Ellis returns to again and again throughout the twelve issues of the series. During which, the members of Global Frequency prevent an inadvertent nuclear strike on San Francisco, stop an insane bionic soldier before it can kill an entire city, prevent an alien meme from taking over humanity, disarm a bomb that would distribute an Ebola-type virus in the heart of London, prevent the firing of a “dirty nuke” over Europe, destroy a lab performing human biological experiments, and prevent a kinetic harpoon from destroying Chicago.

Global Frequency exists because “there has to be someone to rescue people from the world they live in.” (Ellis, Bermejo, et al. 19) But, it is perhaps the final episode that best gets at the heart of Ellis’s criticisms of the military industrial complex. A killer satellite that is a member of a constellation of fifty-nine other killer satellites is activated due to a glitch in the Pentagon’s mainframe. This satellite has Chicago as its target and is classified as a kinetic harpoon, which are

simply very hard, very dense carbon spears.

And all they do is drop.

Re-entry into the atmosphere superheats them without breaking them down.

They impact at several thousand miles an hour, in an envelope of heat comparable to the edge of the sun.

This effects a nuclear-scale detonation without radiation. (Ellis, Bermejo, et al. 119)

Apparently, it was decided in the halls of power that some American citizens were expendable as these United States military satellites were not aimed at foreign cities, but at cities across America. Part of a doctrine known as die-back, Miranda Zero informs her agents, "Die-back means reducing the human race to a manageable population." (Ellis, Bermejo, et al. 115) Here, the American military complex commodifies the whole of America's population and comes to the logically conclusion that all holders of commodities eventually reach...more is not necessarily always better. They decide that they really only need to maintain a certain level of the American citizen commodity to ensure genetic diversity and maintain an acceptable workforce. More is simply a waste of resources.

An enraged Aleph questions Miranda Zero's willingness to keep this secret for the American military, instead wanting to go public with it. Miranda Zero reasons that to do so would cause a panic unlike anything ever seen in America, but Aleph is not wholly convinced,

Yeah. And maybe people march on Washington, and maybe whoever approved this crap gets burned out of their house.

We don't have to just cover people's eyes and sing them a lullaby all the damn time.

Maybe telling some nasty truth would rescue people too.(Ellis, Bermejo, et al. 126)

In essence, the American military industrial complex launched a fleet of kinetic harpoons into orbit with a stated mission of destroying American cities. These harpoons get launched at the Earth and at impact create a nuclear-scale detonation without any pesky radiation as a side-effect. Unfortunately, the satellite that has been activated can only be disarmed from the station in Chicago whose soldiers only check-in periodically per stringently enforced orders. All other attempts to contact them outside of this periodic check-in period are treated as hostile. In addition, any attack on a single satellite causes the remaining fifty-nine satellites in the constellation to launch because

Constellation 1990 is on a hot cascade. If it's fired on, it sets off a retaliatory strike from all our space-based attack systems
And that strike is out of our control.(Ellis, Bermejo, et al. 121)

Ellis holds up the utter, unmitigated idiocy and sheer stupidity of such a ridiculously short-sighted system for all to see. Here is a system that could in essence be responsible for not only the end of humanity, but quite possibly all life on this planet. And yet, it is a system that no one will take responsibility for. The one chance that they have of saving the millions of people in Chicago rests with an astronaut who must ultimately sacrifice himself in order to destroy the satellite. Here, Ellis once again repeats the central theme of *Global Frequency*,

Life goes fast. And we seem to spend most of it dancing around all these damn landmines left in the dirt.

All this stuff left over from the last century that some bunch of bastards thought we didn't have the right to know about.

Screw them all. We'll do what we like. We'll save our own lives and grow our own wings. (Ellis, Bermejo, et al. 135)

This reiterates something Miranda Zero said in the first issue about not being able to depend on anyone but ourselves to save us from the often insanely destructive results of military industrial complex blundering,

But there's no one else doing this job, Mr. Alibek. Even the G-8 governments paying us hush money for the horrors that we find admit that. Ultimately, we have to rescue ourselves from the things visited upon us. And we can't always be nice about it. (Ellis, Dillon, et al. 22)

Those responsible for the problem, the American military industrial complex, not only bear the responsibility for the insane situation, but are themselves an active impediment to its resolution, requiring us to save ourselves. Basically, humanity no longer requires the military industrial complex, if, in truth, it ever did. It is a backward, foul, evil, and parasitic thing, and its childish and destructive games need to be relegated to the past.

While Ellis does, of course, critique the military industrial complex and question its very necessity,

he, nonetheless, articulates the perverted reasoning as to why some believe that it is needed, and it boils down to a logic emanating from capitalism,

War is the desired state of the human race; has been ever since homo sapiens hunted down and exterminated neanderthal man.

War promotes technological growth. War economies are healthiest. War is what makes us human. (Ellis, Bermejo, et al. 22)

A constant state of war allows for the continued, positive growth required for capitalism to endure. It also provides a mechanism by which capitalism can expand its already prodigious influence upon the world. So, in essence, the military industrial complex acts as yet another support structure that strengthens capitalism. In criticizing it, Ellis is also attacking another facet of late capitalism, and by extension, its cultural logic.

The concepts of hierarchy and control are apparently extremely important to Ellis as they recur again and again in not only his works that have been discussed here, but many others that have not been touched upon. Clearly, *Global Frequency* displays an overriding interest in these themes as the narrative centers around the Global Frequency team's encounter with the military industrial complex.

The military industrial complex exists as the epitome of the slow moving, bureaucratic, strictly hierarchical organization. The Global Frequency organization exists outside the formal military chain of command, and is thus able to maintain its fluid and flexible structure. This is, of course, the point that Ellis is making. Global Frequency is far superior from an organizational standpoint in that while there is indeed central control, agents are strongly encouraged to think for themselves and given the leeway to do so. In fact, this appears to be the most important reason just behind their subject areas of expertise as to why agents are chosen.

Ellis contrasts this with the military hierarchical command structure that actively discourages independent thinking, action, and the acceptance of responsibility. Ultimately, it is the fundamental structure of the military industrial complex that leads to the emergencies that the agents of Global Frequency must face as they confront the monsters and horrors that this system, as an ugly, tumorous outgrowth of capitalism, produces.

Global Frequency is an open secret and an unofficial organization. They are, however, granted legitimacy by the recognized authorities such as the military or the police once they are called in by these selfsame authorities. Typically, the situation is simply swept under the rug by these authorities so that they never have to take responsibility for their actions. This is a fundamental difference between the two organizations. The hierarchical military industrial complex is structured such that abdication of responsibility is easily accomplished. Global Frequency, on the other hand, often places the responsibility for the survival of millions upon the shoulders of its agents.

With *Global Frequency*, we again see Ellis putting his faith in the organization of like-minded individuals. Here that organization must be extremely flexible and highly-efficient to combat literally anything that the immoral, cruel, and corrupt minds of the military industrial complex can throw at it. While Global Frequency is centrally controlled by Miranda Zero, it does not contain a fixed hierarch. In contrast, the military industrial complex is a shadowy organization that is both fragmented and decentralized, and yet utilizes a centralized control. Ellis argues convincingly that such a combination can only lead to a lack of communication and an abdication of responsibility. Ellis concerns himself with the internal dynamics of both of these organizations, obviously favoring the structure chosen by Miranda Zero that of central control with a multitude of connections between her network of experts that can grow and change as the situation requires.

The military industrial complex has never matured past the strict hierarchical structure that leads to communication problems and a reckless abdication of responsibility by those within the hierarchy. Ellis clearly demonstrates this unwillingness to simply take responsibility by its members in the final issue of the series when the idiocy of the military chain of command and the strict following of orders to the exclusion of common sense very nearly cause the complete destruction of Chicago and its millions of inhabitants.

Within *Global Frequency*, Ellis touches on another theme at the heart of our earlier examination of postmodernism: hybridity. Even though Miéville may wish it otherwise, hybridity is nonetheless seen by Eagleton as a characteristic of postmodernism. In fact, the cultural logic of late capitalism seems to delight in hybridity.

A return to our earlier discussion of fragmentation seems most relevant here. Hybridity is really nothing more than a type of fragmentation. For instance, the cyborgian mixing of machine and human produces not a whole cyborg, but something that contains fragments of humanity and fragments of machinery. Hybridity is not about producing a “whole” merely presenting a grouping of fragments. For example, the hybridization of genres does not produce a new genre, merely a work with a dominant genre that contains bits and pieces of other genres. However, Miéville’s weird fiction just might prove to be the exception to genre hybridity.

Ellis brings this to the forefront in the second issue of the series, “Big Wheel,” as Captain Richard Quinn goes insane and kills over one hundred eighty people after becoming a “full-body enhance.” (Ellis, Dillon, et al. 29) When confronted by Miranda Zero and her team and told that he can be taken away and be fixed, he responds,

There's a wire in my brain that simulates sexual pleasure when I kill people.

That's all I have now. (Ellis, Dillon, et al. 37)

Becoming a full-body cyborg horrifies and terrifies Quinn, just as his monstrous appearance horrifies and terrifies the Global Frequency members that encounter him. Quinn appears sickening and gruesome in his hybrid state. To further drive this point home, one member of the Global Frequency team, Member 436, is a partial enhance with a bionic arm who says that “I look at this thing that’s on me every day and throw up.” (Ellis, Dillon, et al. 40) She is horrified by her own hybridity and longs to be whole again.

While she fights Quinn, she requests that an EMP (electromagnetic pulse) be thrown at them even though she knows that it will kill her. When warned about the effects, she shouts, “Look at me! Do you think I care?” (Ellis, Dillon, et al. 41) This repeated stance towards hybridity is obviously not the playful attitude associated with postmodernism’s delight in hybridity described by Eagleton earlier in our discussion.

As with *StormWatch / The Authority*, Ellis utilizes a diverse caste with *Global Frequency*. While the reader is never quite certain of Miranda Zero’s ethnicity or nationality, Ellis is not quite so stingy with information about other agents. For instance, John Stark and Allison Fitzgerald are both African

Americans. Lana Kennedy is a bisexual American woman, while Lyn Hilton is an African American woman and single mother. Nick Cho is a Chinese American man. Danny Gulpilil is an aboriginal Australian, while Jill Cabot is an English woman. Beta Krisjansdottir is an Icelandic woman, and Donna Lo is a Chinese American woman. Sita Patel is a British woman of Indian ancestry, and the list could go on as, together, this multicultural and multiethnic mix of people, work together exceptionally well to save lives and defuse the unexploded bombs all over the world.

VII. OCEAN

Published by WildStorm, the DC Comics imprint, *Ocean* teamed Ellis with artist Chris Sprouse, who was just completing his collaboration with writer Alan Moore on ABC's *Tom Strong* for DC Comics. Initially published as a six-issue limited series, the first issue shipped with a cover date of December, 2004, with the final issue cover-dated September 2005, shipping several months late. As with most of Ellis's work, *Ocean* was then quickly released as a trade paperback collection.

Ocean takes place approximately one hundred years in the future and posits a world where technology seems to have fulfilled its promise and made the world a better place in a number of ways that Ellis briefly demonstrates. The reader is quickly given glimpses of this future New York in which United Nations Special Weapons Inspector Nathan Kane apparently litters by throwing a cup down. Only, the cup has dissolved into nothing by the time it hits the ground.

There are apparently drug implants, as well as other technological modification, such as implanted identification technology, which Kane utilizes when boarding Clarke's Walk, a large space station in Earth's orbit. It is not clear if this technology is something different for United Nations Special Weapons Inspectors than what a typical person might have, but Ellis certainly leads one to believe that this type of technology is seen as normal since those requesting his identification are not surprised when viewing his electronic ID. Clearly, there are significant risks to any type of identification technology, especially in service to a totalitarian state. Regardless of this technology's dystopian capacity, though, Ellis seems to portray a society that has overcome the temptation to slide into dystopia on the back of this technology.

Obviously, biotechnology has advanced a great deal in the intervening century, and Ellis portrays these advancements in a mostly positive light. There is, however, a notable exception, corporate humans. Corporate humans, which will be discussed in greater detail shortly, are another result of these great innovations in biotechnology that have occurred in the intervening century. Ellis's attitude toward them, however, is pity, mixed with a righteous rage at the perversion of technology and the suffering of these corporate humans.

Nonetheless, this future seems to be one of the finer worlds that Ellis has his characters struggle for, especially since the United Nations began actively taking weapons away from people that it deems

should not have them all across the world. Kane has a very personal interest in his job since it is revealed that his father was shot and killed in the street on the very same day that New York City banned handguns.

It was not handguns that Ellis turned his critical eye to in *Ocean*, though. Instead Ellis focused his attention on corporations and the threat they inherently represent to humanity. It follows Kane as he surveys the discovery of a race of hibernating aliens far beneath the ice of Europa, one of Jupiter's many moons, and their cache of ancient and incredibly powerful and destructive weapons that

can stellify planets or crack them open.

Or incinerate a world's surface so badly that all of the oxygen in the atmosphere oxidizes and drops into the soil...

...staining it red. (Ellis, Sprouse and Story 92-93)

It was, in fact, just such a weapon that not only destroyed the planet that is now only the asteroid belt, but also incinerated the surface of Mars and stained it red.

Apparently, these beings are humanity's parents, having sent a mission that seeded the requirements for human life a billion years ago on a young Earth. Insane with hate and rage, they had been responsible for the destruction of two planets, Mars and what has since become the asteroid belt. Unwilling to commit suicide after the destruction of their homeworld, the whole race simply went to sleep under the protection of miles and miles of Europa's ice with their ancient and unimaginably powerful weapons close at hand for when they awaken.

John Wells, a scientist on Cold Harbor, deciphers their language and discovers a clue to the depths of their insanity and explains it to Dr. Fadia Aziz, Cold Harbor's director,

You can tell a lot about a culture from its language.

I mean, if we were aliens looking at Inuit text here, we'd see that they've got fifty-some different words for snow. What do we get from that?

It snows a hell of a lot where they come from. I get that.

Get this: so far I've logged a hundred and sixty-three different words for murder. (Ellis, Sprouse and Story 77)

A remote weapon research outpost of the Doors Corporation, which is nothing more than a very thinly disguised Microsoft, opposes Kane and the scientists of Cold Harbor as each race to discover the secrets entombed there. Cold Harbor is an exploration station tasked with mapping Europa and has a purely scientific interest in the discover beneath the ice. According to Dr. Aziz, "Doors are the biggest computer and communications company in existence. And it's also three nations." (Ellis, Sprouse and Story 45)

Ultimately, Kane fires the weapon at Europa, destroying not only humanity's parents and their terrible weapons, but the moon itself. He thus proves his final comment true in that "we don't have to do things the way our parents did."(Ellis, Sprouse and Story 152)

And while commenting on the destructive tendencies within humanity is an important component of *Ocean*, the more important critique of the corporation takes center stage. Kane's initial meeting with the local Doors representative reveals that he is dealing with "corporate humans." (Ellis, Sprouse and Story 48) Basically, "when people are hired on, their own personality is shut off for the duration of the work contract," (Ellis, Sprouse and Story 48) rendering them little better than biological robots that react with a pre-approved script and perform tasks based on memos and directives from the network that they all share.

This surprises Dr. Aziz since she thought corporate humans were only an urban legend. Confronted with proof of their existence, all she can do is pity them as she laments their "giving up being human just to earn a salary for a few years" (Ellis, Sprouse and Story 48) which is, of course, a rather transparent commentary on what corporate employees must already do to earn their salaries and survive in the world.

The Doors Station Manager matter-of-factly narrates the horrific process of creating a corporate human to Kane in their first meeting...

They inject a web of liquid computer into your brain. This is not a
painless procedure.

It lays on the surface of your brain. It drills down into the brain's various
components.

It spawns control centers in your brain. Like insects laying eggs.

In your brain.” (Ellis, Sprouse and Story 84-85)

Unfortunately, the Doors Station Manager has become somewhat unstable since routine, six-week maintenance has not been performed on his implants in over fourteen months. He no longer even remembers his own name. He sees the historical nature and incredibly destructive capacity of the find below the ice as simply a way to retrieve his name by proving himself worthy of promotion and an upgrade to his implants. Ellis certainly portrays the Doors Station Manager as insane, but his simple and all-too-human need to know his own name and remember himself resonate strongly with a readership all too familiar with corporate culture and its stifling of difference.

Not even the Doors Station Manager thinks very highly of the corporate humans that work on his station. When discussing the discovery of the weapons and aliens below on Europa with Kane and Aziz, he remarks,

Their template personalities don't allow them the concept of...

...grandeur

For them, retrieving a sleeping alien race from an ocean moon is something to be described in a spreadsheet. (Ellis, Sprouse and Story

55)

They, and by extension the Doors Station Manager, all commodify the find below the ice. Here, Ellis is also commenting on capitalism's stripping of wonder and magic from the world, something closely associated with Max Weber's concept of routinization.

Immediately after his first confrontation with the Doors Station Manager, Kane momentarily disables the Manager's control over the rest of the workers on the station in order for he and Aziz to escape, but he is certain that everything will quickly come back on-line, after all, “the last thing Doors wants is its staff thinking for itself.” (Ellis, Sprouse and Story 65) Ellis is purposely lampooning corporate inability to deal with changing circumstances or new threats or opportunities. However, just because corporations are big, slow to change, and inherently conformist, they are in no way less dangerous as the subsequent encounter proves.

With *Ocean*, Ellis once again touches on the concept of progress through science and technology. This can be seen in multiple instances throughout the narrative. As an example, technology seems to have fundamentally enriched the lives of humanity as the exploration of the solar system has begun with multiple human bases throughout the inner solar system. Humanity now has the opportunity to live and work all over the solar system as can be seen when Kane briefly stops not only on Clarke's Walk, a large space station in orbit around Earth, but also on Mars.

Technology is also portrayed as a positive method of bettering society. The New York City one-hundred years in the future is portrayed as a clean and pristine city with birds flying among the towering spires. The reader is shown Kane apparently casting a drinking cup carelessly to the ground. Amazingly, the cup dissolves before it ever hits the ground. This certainly corresponds with the portrayal of New York as a much cleaner city than it appears today. When viewed with the cleanness of the city, the dissolving cup seems to indicate that humanity has finally found a way to live sustainably within the natural environment and no longer pollute the Earth's biosphere. One could reasonably assume this is due in some small part to humanity's exploration of the solar system as technology from NASA's current program of space exploration has produced many technological advances that have greatly affected our present culture. In addition, space and other environments are not nearly as forgiving as Earth's biosphere, so sustainable living in a space station, moon, or other planet would certainly be a necessity as humanity leaves Earth and spreads out among the solar system.

Body modification is also shown to be a positive aspect of technological progress. Kane, and therefore probably many other humans seem to carry identification as part of their bodies. This type of technology does not seem to have led to a dystopian state of totalitarian control, either. In addition, other humans apparently have drug implants. The benefits to biotechnologies like these are, of course, numerous.

Ellis does, however, present a much darker side to the use of this biotechnology in the form of the corporate humans. In fact, Doctor Aziz is profoundly disappointed when she first encounters them. She comments, "Just when you think we're going forward." (Ellis, Sprouse and Story 48) These beings are clearly something to be pitied and certainly not seen as progress, but Ellis goes beyond this and makes

the none-too-subtle point that corporate humans are something that can be found in the corporations of the present without having been technologically enhanced, or in this case, technologically damaged.

Ellis utilizes a grand sweep of history within *Ocean* to ground the narrative. He specifically places the time period of its events exactly one hundred years in the future. He then ties this future to the past by bringing the history of manned space exploration, specifically the Mercury and Apollo space programs. In linking the past to the future described in *Ocean*, Ellis creates a grand historical narrative that serves to enrich the fictional world and inextricably link it to our own.

Ellis does not stop here, though. His chronicle expands and encompasses a history for the entire solar system that ultimately explains many of the larger questions about the origins of the solar system and life on Earth. By linking humanity to its insane parents in the sarcophagi, Ellis is able to provide a grand sweep of history encompassing a billion years or more. And, it is this history that serves as an explanation for many phenomena discussed during the narrative. The destruction of the planet that is now the asteroid belt between Mars and Jupiter, the destruction of the Mars biosphere, and the seeding of life on a young Earth are all explained within the history established by Ellis. The existence of humanity's parents serves as a totalizing explanation for the entire narrative. This use of such a grand, historical narrative is, as we have seen, oppositional to postmodernism's dehistoricizing force and is a form of resistance to late capitalism, itself.

History also plays another important role in *Ocean*. This is, of course, with respect to the corporate humans. As it is clearly shown, these people, who could best be described as subhuman while their natural personality is shut off in favor of the corporate-approved personality, are directly controlled by the station manager. Without free will or even self-awareness these people are little better than biological machines. They have no connection to their own history, let alone any conception of a shared human history.

These corporate humans, then, represent postmodern humanity. They appear to experience a constant present with no connection to the past and one could even equate their lack of emotion with a complete waning of affect. Here, daily existence has even been completely routinized. Apparently, the Doors Station Manager retains just enough autonomy to know that his history, and, therefore, his very self, have been taken from him. He, however, cannot think outside of the strict limits placed upon him by

late capitalism. He commodifies the epic discovery beneath the surface of Europa by only comprehending it in the terms of what he can trade it for, which is, in this case an upgrade and partial retrieval of his lost self.

In the scientists of Cold Harbor, Ellis demonstrates a different type of structure. This can be seen most clearly when Doctor Aziz embraces her authority as station manager and orders the other scientists to abandon the station. Although an imposed order, the hierarchy presented by Cold Harbor is much less rigid and much more fluid and flexible than that of the Doors Station. Ellis leaves no doubt that the superior order is that utilized by Cold Harbor since it is voluntarily adhered to and built on respect and trust instead of imposed by essentially enslaving humans, lobotomizing them, and reducing them to little more than biological automatons.

Ocean contrasts these two types of control structures and unsurprisingly presents the Cold Harbor model in a much more positive light. Clearly, Ellis seems to prefer to put his faith in organizations of like-minded individuals. This is something that can be seen in many of his works, including the works under discussion here, *Planetary*, *StormWatch / The Authority*, *Transmetropolitan*, *Global Frequency*, and *Orbiter*.

Within *Ocean*, Ellis also shows an effective United Nations through its only presented representative, weapons inspector Nathan Kane. Kane is an efficient, thoughtful, compassionate, and intelligent man who is strongly committed to taking weapons away from people that he believes should not have them. Assuming, of course that Kane is not unique in this organization, then, it would seem that the United Nations must have had some success in preventing pointless deaths on Earth and throughout the colonized solar system. It also appears that the hierarchy of the United Nations is very similar to the form espoused in the organization of Cold Harbor.

Within *Ocean*, Ellis once again presents a diverse multiethnic and multicultural cast of characters to the reader. Nathan Kane is an African American man, and Dr. Fadia Aziz, the director of Cold Harbor station is an Iraqi woman. Siobahn Coney is the station's engineer, and she appears to be of Irish descent. Anna Li, an Asian woman, handles analysis on the station, while John Wells, an American man, handles field science and is the only other man on Cold Harbor except for Kane. Ellis sharply contrasts Cold Harbor's diversity with the Doors research station where the members of the crew appear to be

predominantly white male.

With *Ocean*, we again encounter a work that contains within itself a strong resistance to the influence of the cultural logic of late capitalism. And again, we can see that this resistance not only originates within the medium and genre utilized by Ellis, but also in the anti-capitalist themes he develops within the work, itself.

VIII. ORBITER

Orbiter was published as an original graphic novel by DC's Vertigo imprint in April of 2003 and featured art by Colleen Doran. Sales on it were impressive with over 7,200 copies sold in the Direct Market in its month of release. Published not long after the Columbia disaster on February 1, 2003, *Orbiter* was dedicated to the seven astronauts killed in the destruction of STS-107 upon re-entry into the Earth's atmosphere, Michael Anderson, David Brown, Kalpana Chawla, Laurel Clark, Rick Husband, William McCool, and Ilan Ramon.

Orbiter's central message also became even more important to both Ellis and Doran in light of Columbia, as Ellis wrote in the introduction,

I wrote it in the face of the disappointment of the International Space Station, the wounded Russian programme, the crushed Japanese space initiative, the intellectual poverty of the European Space Agency, and of the site of the beautiful Shuttles never getting further than an eight-minute burn away. There has to be more, I wrote. We're losing space, I wrote, when there is so much out there for us. It meant something huge to Colleen and me; and it means more now.

This is a book about returning to space in the face of fear and adversity. It's a book about glory. About going back to space, because it's waiting for us, and it's where we're meant to be. We can't allow human space exploration to become our history. (Ellis and Doran)

His passion for the space program, particularly the American space program, is unsurprising considering his first memory is that of the Apollo moon landing July 20, 1969.

My first memory is of being held up in front of a tiny black-and-white TV set by my mother and being told, "Remember this. This is history, this is." July 1969. I was seventeen months old. Neil Armstrong had gotten that sticky hatch open and was making that odd little jump from the end of the ladder to the soil of the Moon. (Ellis and Doran 5)

In this, *Orbiter* does not disappoint. It shines as a passionate call for a return to manned space

exploration as a manifest destiny for the human race. In light of the Apollo 1 tragedy in 1967 that killed three astronauts, the Challenger disaster in 1986 that killed seven astronauts, and the loss of Columbia and her entire crew of seven in 2003, Ellis understands better than most that manned space exploration is fraught with danger. He knows the history of NASA and that

Human spaceflight remains experimental. It is very dangerous. It demands great ingenuity. But we are old enough, now, to do these things. Growing up is hard. But we cannot remain children, standing on the shore or in front of the TV set. (Ellis and Doran)

But, obviously, he and many, many others strongly believe that manned spaceflight is a risk more than worth taking.

Orbiter involves the unraveling of the mystery surrounding the return of the shuttle *Venture* ten years after it simply disappeared without a trace. It returns to a Kennedy Space Center that is no longer a shining beacon representing mankind's desire to explore the heavens. Instead, it has become a shantytown for a people who seem to have lost their imagination and sense of wonder. They merely survive from day to day. Here, Ellis provides a potent warning. Without progress, imagination, and dreams, humanity is doomed to a mean and miserable existence

The *Venture's* disappearance was the final nail in the coffin of manned space flight, leaving exploration to mechanical stand-ins.

This final NASA disaster committed the Earth to programs of robotic discovery flights only.

No human has been in space for a decade. (Ellis and Doran 10)

And while robotic exploration certainly has its place, Ellis argues persuasively that not just the machines need to venture out into space, human explorers need to go, too.

Three groups, headed by Dr. Anna Bracken, Dr. Terry Marx, and Dr. Michelle Robeson, are assigned to discover what happened to *Venture*, and where it has been for the last decade. Dr. Bracken is a psychiatrist, Dr. Marx is a propulsion expert, and Dr. Robeson is the sole remaining member of the Astronaut Corps.

Of its crew of seven, only John Cost, the mission commander and pilot, returns aboard the

shuttle. Unfortunately, he is almost completely catatonic, so these three, disparate groups must piece together what happened from the clues left behind on the shuttle. They discover that the *Venture* has been modified with a special gravity drive, and that it has landed on Mars. In addition to their discoveries about modifications to the shuttle, Dr. Bracken, a psychiatrist, is able to coax Cost out of his catatonia and get the full story

Apparently, the aliens were nearby in space. According to Cost, "They were waiting for us all along. But they thought we were lonely. Trapped and lonely they said." (Ellis and Doran 92) Utilizing their advanced technology, they whisked the *Venture* away to the dark side of the Moon where they made first contact with the crew of *Venture*.

Don't be afraid.

You're just growing up.

You're ready and you just don't know it yet.

We tried to wait for you, but you're just too scared.

We have so many things to show you. You shouldn't have to wait. (Ellis and Doran 91)

Evidently, the other six members of the crew had gone with the aliens, but Cost had stayed onboard the *Venture* since it was his responsibility to bring the ship home. He struggles with explaining their motivations, but finally is able to put it into words,

They want us to come out and play. They don't want us to sit at home being lonely.

But we have to make that one step. (Ellis and Doran 93)

Before returning home, these aliens offer him a grand tour of the universe. Being an astronaut who laments that fact that "we just don't go far anymore," (Ellis and Doran 88) he simply cannot resist, and so his tour takes ten years. His first stop is Mars. Here, Ellis gets at the heart of his message, that space exploration elevates all of us. It is a human adventure. Cost describes his arrival on Mars, "I'm walking on Mars. You should all be here with me." (Ellis and Doran 79) Ultimately, Cost and the three heads of the investigative groups board *Venture* and fly off to meet the aliens and the other members of his crew.

Orbiter, of course, inherits the resistance to late capitalism inherent within both comics and science fiction, and thus already possesses a great deal of resistance to the cultural logic of late capitalism. Ellis, of course, adds to this reservoir of resistance in choosing themes that are also harshly critical of capitalism.

Ellis once again uses history as a theme within *Orbiter*. He deftly connects the over sixty years of the history of the American space program to this, the near-future presented within *Orbiter*. This situates the reader historically and successfully combats the cultural logic of late capitalism's dehistoricizing influence.

Orbiter also contains an extremely strong utopian impulse. Not only does Ellis present a possible future full of hope as the *Venture* flies into space to formally meet the aliens, but he carefully builds a case for this eventuality. Each clue that is deciphered simply adds weight to his argument for this future. As previously discussed, he also posits the negative case, simply ignoring space travel and the promise of progress, in the shanty town that had taken over Kennedy Space Center. Here we see a people barely surviving. They no longer dream of space or the future, they merely survive under the thrall of the cultural logic of late capitalism.

Ellis is pointedly exposing the commodification of these dreams of space. The loss of *Venture* revealed the truth of space travel as subsumed by capitalism. While it remains a dream for many, those that fund do not share the dream. They, instead, expect a return on their investment. With yet another lost shuttle, they simply shifted into other commodities and things to commodify. Again, we see late capitalism draining the world of any kind of magic or sense of wonder.

Ellis also shows that late capitalism, powerful though it may be, simply cannot conquer humanity's natural curiosity and tendency to dream. And, it is precisely these dreams that combat the cultural logic of late capitalism so well. Within these dreams lies a powerful utopian energy that can not only withstand the onslaught of late capitalism, but successfully resist its cultural logic.

At its most fundamental level, *Orbiter* strongly advocates the theme of progress, something obviously important to Ellis as it is present in a great many of his works. The narrative leaves no doubt that the space program is the catalyst that will elevate all of humanity. This will be accomplished through the use of science and technology derived from it, but is really a result of humanity's natural curiosity and

need to know. Manned exploration of space will reveal the wonders of the universe to humankind. During the narrative, the reader is given glimpses of some of the many wonders that Cost has seen as he walks without a space suit on Mars and orbits Jupiter.

Each of the three department heads expresses a genuine desire to be a member of something greater than themselves. Here, this something is the space program, and Dr. Marx sums up this need to belong when he addresses his team,

I should've been working with all of you. I was born too late.

I should've been with you, working out how to lash ion drives into an array, investigating pulse drives, arguing about zero point theory.

But we're all coming from the same place. We were all left behind by the end of crewed spaceflight. (Ellis and Doran 27)

In addition, Ellis cleverly illustrates the price of not belonging to a group of some sort, or something larger than oneself. In this case, we see the effects of being truly alone, in Cost's ten years of isolation. For that decade, he was a fragment of humanity completely divorced from humankind. It ultimately drives him, at least temporarily, insane, and fractures his psyche. He is only slowly able to recover his sanity and humanity through the efforts of Dr. Bracken.

Orbiter also displays a fascination with what lies below the surface, certainly not an attribute associate with the cultural logic of late capitalism. None of the three department heads investigating the miraculous return of *Venture* take anything about the shuttle's return at face value. On the contrary, they continue metaphorically digging deeper and deeper into the mystery of its return in the hopes of explaining what happened to the crew and *Venture* and, more importantly, why it happened. This is illustrated in multiple manners throughout the narrative.

The first breaching of the surface actually occurs before the department heads are called in. Immediately after the *Venture* lands, soldiers enter the orbiter and find Cost. These soldiers are not really attempting to solve the mystery of its return except in the most immediate and rudimentary sense. Their attempt, however, does result in not only bringing Cost into custody, but also in clues that will be used by Robeson, Marx, and Bracken in ultimately solving the mystery.

Ellis and Doran provide an excellent scene with Dr. Robeson carefully peeling back the bio-mechanical skin that covers the *Venture*. Here, she is symbolically peeling back another layer of the mystery as she finally discovers the truth behind the skin covering the orbiter and how it not only reinforced its structure, but also consumed the massive radiation generated by the new bias drive that allows it to travel much, much faster than the speed of light.

Shortly after Robeson's discovery, Dr. Marx carefully drills through a bulkhead to see what is being concealed within *Venture*. The fiber optic camera quickly reveals the existence of the bias drive, which is composed of impossibly dense elements much higher on the periodic table than anything humanity has discovered, floating within *Venture* by creating its own gravity.

Finally, Dr. Bracken is able to break through to Cost and get him talking about his experience. She initially hypnotizes him in an attempt to get at his subconscious, but it is her final attempt in which she reveals her need to see the wonder and glory of space through the eyes of the astronauts that finally break through to Cost and get him talking about his experience. Her connection to him brings him back to senses and helps him regain his sanity.

As with *Global Frequency*, *Orbiter* displays an attitude toward hybridity that is not consistent with the cultural logic of late capitalism in that there is a clear and well-defined boundary between the organic and the inorganic. The humans depicted are completely human. Even Cost who meets the aliens and returns is left unchanged by them, except for possibly making him a healthier and perhaps slightly physically younger human.

For example, he requires the orbiter's alien skin as a covering to survive on the surface of Mars. In addition, the modifications made to the *Venture* seem to be organic in nature as Robeson notes, "it eats radiation and excretes it." (Ellis and Doran 70) However, Ellis and Doran's strategy here is not to blend the organic and inorganic in a cyborgian demonstration of hybridity. Quite the contrary, the modifications made to the orbiter by the aliens are supposed to look alien.

This biomechanical technology simply does not blend into the 1980s era technology that comprises a space shuttle. There are clear demarcations between this alien technology and the technology that could reasonably be expected to be found on a space shuttle. Neither is Ellis employing

any of the genre-bending antics associated with the British Boom movement. *Orbiter* is a straightforward science fiction narrative that has a simple message at its heart.

With *Orbiter*, Ellis once again displays his penchant for utilizing diverse casts of multiethnic and multicultural characters as can be seen in the heads of the three investigative groups. Dr. Anna Bracken, is an American woman. Dr. Terry Marx is an American man. And, finally, Dr. Michelle Robeson, the last member of the Astronaut Corp, is an African American woman. These three very different people come together for the common purpose of uncovering what happened to *Venture*, but it is, in truth, their genuine love of the American space program that unites them.

IX. SUMMARY

Fundamentally, this discussion has been an examination of the anti-capitalist sensibilities of the author Warren Ellis. His work should not be classified as postmodern for three reasons: his chosen medium, his chosen genre, and finally his chosen themes and attitude toward late capitalism contained within the works themselves.

The comics medium, as has been shown in our earlier examination of the medium, resists the influence of the cultural logic of late capitalism through closure which combats postmodern fragmentation. This grants comics a greater resistance to the influence of postmodernism than many other media. In addition, the concept of continuity utilized within the superhero sub-genre also resists postmodern fragmentation through its promotion of the creation of enormous universal, multiversal, and even omniversal chronologies. As nearly all of Ellis's work appears within the comics medium, it inherits this integral and enhanced resistance to late capitalism.

The genre of science fiction, as has been repeatedly demonstrated during the previous discussion, resists the influence of postmodernism through its status as the genre of utopia and its resultant strong utopian impulse. This grants the genre a greater resistance to late capitalism's insidious influence. In addition, Ellis participates within the science fiction tradition known as the British Boom, a phenomenon shown to be much more historically engaged and thus better able to combat the dehistoricizing force of postmodernism. As much of Ellis's work appears within the science fiction genre, it also inherits this innate and enhanced resistance to the cultural logic of late capitalism.

Ellis utilizes many themes that are, in fact, antithetical to postmodernism. History, a continuing theme within his works, combats the dehistoricizing force of the cultural logic of late capitalism. His use of the modernist conception of depth presents a critique of postmodernism's lack of depth and focus on surface. Ellis also touches on themes of social and cultural unity which allows him to include sociocultural and even political criticism.

This practice meshes comfortably with the underpinnings of his most utilized genre, science fiction. One only has to look at the works of Wells, Miéville, Ursula K. Le Guin, Gaiman, Bradbury, or any of the innumerable writers utilizing the genre to understand that social criticism is as much a component of science fiction as the common tropes of time travel, aliens, space ships, or ray guns.

When the overtly anti-capitalist comics medium is combined with the staunchly anti-capitalist science fiction genre, the resulting works already contain a great deal of resistance to the cultural logic of late capitalism. The addition of an author with an ongoing tendency to utilize anti-capitalist themes can, therefore, only increase the resultant works' resistance to the influence of late capitalism. Such is the case with Warren Ellis and his large volume of work in the science fiction genre and the comics medium. His utilization of anti-capitalist themes again and again throughout his career leave little, if any, doubt as to his classification as something other than postmodernist.

NOTES

^{1.} Here I am primarily referring to the work Theo D'Haen in "Postmodernism in American Fiction and Art: from *Approaching Postmodernism* and his discussion of multiplicity on pages 219-223.

^{2.} Again, referencing the work of D'Haen.

^{3.} I much prefer these terms coined by Dr. Jerry Bails in his description of the various "ages" of superhero comics. Golden Age, Silver Age, Bronze Age, etc. are typically used in the discussion of superhero comics. However, First Heroic Age and Second Heroic Age are much more appropriate and descriptive terms.

^{4.} Again per Dr. Bails, Second Heroic Age is a more descriptive and much more precise term than simply Silver Age.

^{5.} In 2002, not only did *American Gods* (2001) by Gaiman win Best Novel, but *Perdido Street Station* (2001) by Miéville was also nominated in the same category. Also, although it did not win Best Novelette, "Lobsters" by Charles Stross was nominated. 2003 saw another Boom author win. Gaiman won Best Novella for *Coraline* (2002). In addition *The Scar* (2002) by Miéville was nominated for Best Novel and "Halo" by Stross was nominated for Best Novelette. In 2004, Stross received nominations for Best Novel with *Singularity Sky* (2003) and Best Novelette with "Nightfall." Three novels by Boom authors, *The Algebraist* (2004) by Iain M. Banks, *Iron Sunrise* (2004) by Stross, and *Iron Council* (2004) by Miéville, were nominated for Best Novel in 2005. In addition, "Elector" by Stross was nominated for Best Novella. In 2006, the *Doctor Who* episodes "The Empty Child" and "The Doctor Dances" (2005) written by Steven Moffat won the Best Dramatic Presentation, Short Form award and began the domination of this category that has continued to this day. Also, *Accelerando* (2005) by Stross was nominated for Best Novel. Moffat again won Best Dramatic Presentation, Short Form in 2007 with the *Doctor Who* episode "Girl in the Fireplace" (2006). Also nominated in this same category were the *Doctor Who* episodes "Army of Ghosts" and "Doomsday" (2006) written by Russell T. Davies. In addition, *Glasshouse* (2006) by Stross was nominated for Best Novel, and "How to Talk to Girls at Parties" by Gaiman was nominated for Best Short Story. 2008 saw Moffat again win the Best Dramatic Presentation, Short Form for the *Doctor Who* episode "Blink" (2007). *Halting State* (2007) by Stross was also nominated for Best Novel. In 2009,

Gaiman won Best Novel for *The Graveyard Book* (2008) with *Saturn's Children* (2008) by Stross also receiving a nomination. And, although the only year since 2006, that neither Moffat nor Davies won Best Dramatic Presentation, Short Form, both were nominated; Moffat, for his *Doctor Who* episodes "Silence in the Library" and "Forest of the Dead" (2008), and Davies for his *Doctor Who* episode "Turn Left" (2008). A host of Boom authors either won or were nominated in 2010. As previously mentioned, *The City & The City* (2009) by Miéville won Best Novel (in a tie with *The Windup Girl* (2009) by Paolo Bacigalupi). Stross also won not only Best Novella for "Palimpsest" (2009), but also won Best Novelette for "Overtime." *Doctor Who* continued its domination of the Best Dramatic Presentation, Short Form category with Davies winning for "The Waters of Mars" (2009). There were also two additional episodes of *Doctor Who* nominated, "The Next Doctor" (2008) and "Planet of the Dead" (2009) both also by Davies. In addition, Gaiman was nominated for Best Graphic Story for his *Batman: Whatever Happened to the Caped Crusader?* (2009). In 2011, Moffat won the Best Dramatic Presentation, Short Form award again for his episodes of *Doctor Who* "The Pandorica Opens" and "The Big Bang" (2010). Another of his episodes, "A Christmas Carol" was also nominated.

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