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STUDIES IN MADNESS: REALITY AND SUBJECTIVITY IN ALAN MOORE'S *PROVIDENCE*, AMBROSE BIERCE'S "AN INHABITANT OF CARCOSA" AND ROBERT W. CHAMBERS' "THE REPAIRER OF REPUTATIONS"

Summary

The paper presents an analysis of three texts pertaining to the H.P. Lovecraft mythos: two stories from the end of the nineteenth century which inspired Lovecraft (Ambrose Bierce's "An Inhabitant of Carcosa" and Robert W. Chambers' "The Repairer of Reputations") and a graphic novel inspired by the author from Providence, Rhode Island, his works and his inspirations (Alan Moore's and Jacen Burrows' *Providence*). Through analysis of the texts (and images) and setting them both against each other and against critical approaches, the paper demonstrates the differences in the portrayal of alternative worlds as elements of (possibly skewed) perception rather than an objective external reality. The case study serves as the basis for demonstrating what the analyzed texts imply to be the social and practical implications of changes, partly resulting from the reception of literature, in subjective perception.

Key words: Alan Moore, Jacen Burrows, Ambrose Bierce, Robert W. Chambers, graphic novels, weird fiction.

Introduction

"[I]f you're tackling a place that actually exists, you have to be every bit as thorough in your conception of the world that you are showing [as in the case of a fully fictional world]," instructed a thirtyish Alan Moore in *Writing for Comics* (2003, p. 22). Even though in an afterword written around twenty years later he claims to have learned that everything he wrote before can safely be ignored, he seems to have stuck to this piece of advice in his own writing. In *Providence*, a graphic novel based on the work and person of H.P. Lovecraft, much attention is paid to providing a realistic graphic background to the seemingly supernatural events taking place, to the extent that individual buildings and locations can be recognized when set against photographs. At the same time, this reality is supplemented with elements of the fictional worlds of other writers and, for the majority of the series, the diary of the protagonist. In effect, the reader is presented with something of an augmented visual reality and a parallel textual one. This provides an important counterpoint when the realness of the main character's experiences comes into question.

H.P. Lovecraft is not the only author appearing in Moore's graphic novel. Also present are Ambrose Bierce and Robert W. Chambers. The former first published the short story "An Inhabitant of Carcosa" in an 1892 volume¹ to be followed three years later by the latter's *The King in Yellow* collection, including "The Repairer of Reputations." While it may not be surprising that these texts inspired H.P. Lovecraft writing a few decades later, as well as Alan Moore's 21st-century graphic novel, it is interesting that Chambers not only borrowed the fictional location of Carcosa two years after its appearance in Bierce's story but made it into a central theme of his collection of weird tales². However, it is not just characteristic location names, but also the enigmatic reality they represent which echo in Lovecraft's and Moore's works. They can be seen as symbolic of a fundamental characteristic of the texts in question, and weird tales in general, especially if we agree with T.S. Joshi that 'the weird tale is an inherently philosophical mode in that it frequently compels us to address directly such fundamental issues as the nature of the universe and mankind's place in it' (Joshi 2003, p. 11).

Madmen in the ultimate decade of the 19th century

Bierce and Chambers adopt a similar approach to presenting weird fiction, understood loosely as works presenting at least seemingly supernatural and incomprehensible events (cf. Joshi 2003, pp. 2-11 for a broader discussion of the problem of defining the genre). The stories seem to fulfill Lovecraft's criterion of "unexplainable dread of outer, unknown forces" and "a malign and particular suspension or defeat of those fixed laws of Nature which are our only safeguard against the assaults of chaos and the daemons of unplumbed space" (H.P. Lovecraft, "Supernatural Horror in Literature," quoted in Joshi 2003, p. 6), at least until their very endings. These provide a backstop in case the reader wants to dismiss the supernatural elements of the story as fiction – not only from the reader's extratextual point of view, but also within the story itself.

In "An Inhabitant of Carcosa" this escape is provided in the last line of the story, a post-script describing the remainder as "the facts imparted to the medium Bayrolles by the spirit Hoseib Alar Robardin" (Bierce 1891, p. 247). The main body of the story presented the narrator's gradual revelation that he is a ghost haunting the place of his own burial among the decrepit ruins of what is probably a long-dead civilization. Hence, the introduction of an intermediary allows the reader to assume that the realm of Carcosa is simply an invention of the medium. However, to those willing to delve into mystic mysteries, the story begins with a longer quotation from Hali (apparently considered a sage by the narrator) on diverse types

¹ The story itself first appeared in the *San Francisco News Letter* in 1886, but it seems more likely that Chambers – residing on the East Coast – got hold of it through in book form in which it didn't appear until 6 years later (in 1892, the year following that printed on the title page).

² The pace of the spread of popularity of the name from the West Coast to New York may seem less surprising when one takes into consideration that a physical Carcosa (mansion) was built only two years later... in Malaysia.

of death, among them ones in which the body dies, but the spirit comes to life again. If that premise is accepted, along with the account of the ghost claiming that nobody sees him, then the medium is fully justified as a necessary tool in making contact. And the reader should assume that there may be more entities of which he is unaware around him.

“The Repairer of Reputations,” rather than in an unspecified time of ruined civilizations, is said to take place in the not-so-distant future: 1920. Also in this case there are several levels of the story and in effect possible explanations of the events taking place. The entire story is preceded by an extract on Carcosa from the fictional play *The King in Yellow* after which the collection is named, and which is later said to be read by the protagonist of the story, possibly resulting in insanity. Next, the text of the first chapter is preceded by an anonymous quotation in French declaring that the only difference between the insane and ourselves is that their insanity lasts longer. The story begins with a description of the world of 1920, after a war between the United States and Germany³. This part of the story appears to be presented by a third-person narrator until, at the end of the third page, the narrative switches from a general overview of the situation to the events in the life of the protagonist and with that to overtly first-person narration. As there is no division other than a new paragraph between these two parts, it is to be assumed that also the description of the world in 1920 was presented by the narrator of the remaining part of the story: Hildred Castaigne.

Castaigne is said to have fallen from a horse and for a time been placed, supposedly as a measure of precaution, in an asylum for the insane, presumably due to his personality having changed (according to the narrator – for the better). In effect, from the start the narrative is strewn with hints that the narrator may be unreliable. What is interesting is the reason to which he ascribes his (supposedly few) mental problems: having read *The King in Yellow*. The description of what he experienced is in line with the discussed above goals of the weird tale, though to a greater extent. The play is said to have resulted in intense joy and aesthetic delight (which could have qualified it to the sublime), but also acute terror. This is seemingly due to it having conveyed upon the reader the “creation [...] irresistible in its truth” of Carcosa “where black stars hang in the heavens; [...] the twin suns sink into the Lake of Hali”⁴ (Chambers 1895, p. 13). The book is said to have been censored, denounced and confiscated, but nevertheless spread throughout the world as a forbidden fruit.

The King in Yellow is not the most important text to Hildred Castaigne, however. It is rather “The Imperial Dynasty of America” which traces a genealogy “from Carcosa, the Hyades, Hastur and Aldebrea”⁵ to “Castaigne, Louis de Calvados” (Hildred’s brother). This document is to be the basis for Hildred taking over the world, with the help of Mr. Wilde,

³ This element of the story is often cited as prophetic, however the other elements of the fictional future, including expulsion of foreign-born Jews from the United States and the provision of a separate country for African Americans, turned out to be less accurate.

⁴ A fluidity of reference is visible here, as in Bierce’s story Hali is almost certainly a person.

⁵ Aldebaran and the Hyades are referred to in ‘An Inhabitant of Carcosa’, but apparently as natural stars, perhaps to show that the story is not set in a completely different universe. Hastur is prayed to in another story of Bierce’s: ‘Haita the Shepherd’.

the titular repairer of reputations, described as a disfigured, yellow-faced man who would appear suitable to be placed in an asylum of the insane. This plan appears to be increasingly realistic, as the repairer of reputations seems to have far-reaching knowledge and influence on many people – as confirmed by other characters than the narrator. However, in the end nothing comes of the plan, as Mr. Wilde is killed by his cat (sic!) and Hildred arrested.

The story concludes with an “[EDITOR’S NOTE – Mr. Castaigne died yesterday in the Asylum for Criminal Insane.]” (Chambers 1895, p. 54). This seems to put into question the veracity of the entire story preceding the note, especially taking into account that the volume was edited a quarter of a century before the supposed events taking place. Mr. Castaigne could have written the entire story in the asylum, although he would rather not have been placed in one for the *criminally* insane if some similar events had not taken place. Hence, the main weird element of the story seems to be not so much the existence of a worldwide conspiracy for the establishment of the Imperial Dynasty of America, as the influence of arcane knowledge on the human mind. A play appears to have been able to convince a man to pronounce himself “King by my right in Hastur” and try to murder his own brother. It is also said to have been read by many more, suggesting a potential for mass insanity and delusion. This brings the reader back to the motto which indicates that sanity is a relative, not absolute quality.

Providence

The premise that sanity is a relative state and one which can be influenced by texts is one of the main axes of Alan Moore’s *Neonomicon* and *Providence*. In the former graphic novel, taking place in the 21st century, a mysterious Johnny Carcosa⁶ sells a drug and speaks arcane words which appear to drive people insane by giving them access to knowledge of the horrors and mysteries of the Lovecraftian mythos – analogically to *The King in Yellow*. Carcosa himself avoids arrest by turning into a mural, again blurring the border between art and the reality it influences. However, the later pages suggest that some permanent changes in the “objective” reality of the majority have also taken place, albeit along with or through readings or invocations of the Chtulhu mythos. Nevertheless, as the final conversation announcing the birth of Chtulhu takes place between a convicted ritual murderer and a victim of imprisonment and repeated rape by a non-human creature, it is possible to assume that the scope of perception of the new reality is limited to the extent that it can still be considered madness. However, this interpretation is not in any way encouraged by the text itself, as was the case with the 19th-century stories.

In *Providence*, both a prequel and a sequel to *Neonomicon*, the protagonist, Robert Black, appears as a character in the graphic part of the series set in a world inspired by the work (and

⁶ The inspiration is made clear in the narrative, with one of the characters identifying the name Carcosa as appearing in Bierce’s and Chambers’ texts.

life) of the weird fiction writers, and as the author of a diary illustrating his point of view on the same events. This allows for a contrast of the seemingly objective visual representation with the subjective textual one, although the events each one presents do not fully overlap (some events not witnessed or described by Black are presented in images and Black writes of some events not described in the graphic narrative).

The story begins with Black's former lover, Jonathan Russell, committing suicide at a special public facility built for that purpose, described in "The Repairer of Reputations." The opening scene of the entire *Providence* narrative presents a letter from Black to his lover being torn into two by the latter to be discarded into a stream next to the suicide chamber. In the first panel, all that is visible is the letter, gradually torn into pieces to reveal the "extra-epistolary" world and Russell standing on a bridge in the park. Thus, we are presented with a partly text-based reality in which Black and Russell were lovers being destroyed to be replaced by a new one, in which Black abandoned Russell for fear of his sexual preferences being discovered, presumably resulting in the latter's suicide (as Black states in his first diary entry). When learning of the event at his workplace, however, Black suggests that it may have been the result of Russell having recently read *Sous Le Monde*, a fictional text described in *Providence* as the actual inspiration behind *The King in Yellow* in Chambers' stories. Thus, the reader is presented with two possible interpretations, as in Bierce's and Chambers' stories: a rational one in the diary and a "weirder" one in the graphic narrative. A similar convention is maintained until Chapter 10, with the reader witnessing seemingly supernatural events which are rationalized in Black's narrative, largely as the effects of trauma after his lover's death.

The graphic narrative seems to suggest that the horrible events are in fact the workings of 'outer, unknown forces' rather than fabrications of Black's mind. When he wakes up in Chapter 2 in a cellar which had seemed to lead to an underground altar where humans were sacrificed, he does not see the occultist symbols or passage which he had before, but neither does he see his hat which was depicted as falling off his head underground. Chapter 4 begins with the representation of a later event from the point of view of an invisible monster which Black later – understandably – does not see. The opening images, however, imply that there was in fact a being there, capable of looking. At the beginning of Chapter 9, the occultist Mr. Annesley's point of view is represented directly, showing that through the glasses he constructed he sees multiple supernatural aquatic creatures permeating the world around him, including Black. They appear again at the end of the chapter, where Lovecraft's supposedly insane mother sees them as well.

The pervading message appears to be that Black is in fact deluding himself by providing rational explanations for events which cannot be explained solely by his psychological states. This is quite consistent until Chapter 10, wherein Black finally admits in his diary that something is wrong with the world, not him. His attitude changes when a church seems to crash into his lodgings and he is visited by (Johnny) Carcosa who rewards him for hav-

ing unwittingly served the interests of the supernatural creatures of the Lovecraft mythos with (rather traumatic) oral sex. However, at this point the graphic narrative switches from a star-laden supernatural setting to a view from outside the window, which presents the room empty except for Black covering his eyes and moaning with an erection. All supernatural elements also disappear in one earlier panel when Black closes his eyes. In effect, at the point when everything would seem to be clear, the roles of the textual and graphic narratives are reversed: the former declares that the supernatural elements exist objectively (though this happens still in the form of a subjective diary) while the latter suggests that the graphic representation was not objective. It may have been quite a sight, as Scott McCloud put it, due to providing a representation of the characters' minds rather than of an external world; this is usually the case in stories based on characters' evolution rather than action per se (2012, p. 132).

In the second to last chapter, three narratives alternate: the ending of Black's life, the legacy of his diary and the life and legacy of H.P. Lovecraft. After Black follows Russel into a suicide chamber, his diary is passed on to a representative of the police. The policeman also witnesses supernatural phenomena while trying to rid New England of the dangers insinuated by Black and later described in detail by Lovecraft. Events from the latter's stories – seemingly real in the graphic narrative – alternate with events from his life⁷ and extracts from his letters which underline that he did not believe his fiction to be anything else. However, already during his life there appears a fictitious review of the nonexistent *Necronomicon* (a fictional text within a text, as in the case of *The King in Yellow*) and belief in its existence is later shown to grow after Lovecraft's death, with various versions being fabricated along with the growing influence of Lovecraft in the fields of literature, occultism and popular culture. Also shown are the murders committed by devotees of the Cthulhu mythos, suggesting that Lovecraft's writing and the texts it inspired had in fact a similar effect to *The King in Yellow* – inspiring a following and, to some extent at least, madness.

The narrative of the suicide of Robert Black is illustrated mostly by the continuous rotation of the record "You Made Me Love You" in the suicide chamber, seemingly playing in the background to all of the above events. It is taken off the turnstile only at the end of the chapter. As the biographical and supernatural narratives were synchronic, the duration of the suicide temple scene could be seen as undermining the credibility of the remaining events in the chapter, allowing for the interpretation that they were all products of the dying Black's imagination.⁸ However, an alternative interpretation is that the background music serves to

⁷ Taken together, these add up to a model 'imaginary life': brief, visionary, oneiric and with a strong metaliterary component (González-Rivas Fernández, Saez de Adana 2014, p. 157).

⁸ It is interesting to note that if the biographical narrative was skipped, a large part of the chapter would amount to a tale of the macabre. As Marek Paryż pointed out, "madness can be a crucial ingredient in the grand design of rendering the human condition on paper, but it can as well constitute the primary sensational principle in kitsch literature which deluges the reader with all imaginable kinds of carnage and atrocity" (2000, p. 92). Through counterpointing three parallel narratives, Moore allowed for the scenes of madness to serve a higher purpose.

underline Black's lasting legacy. Such an understanding is encouraged by the narrative, as the chapter's final scene is set the 21st century where Lovecraftian creatures appear to three FBI agents who got hold of Black's diary.

The final chapter opens with a representation of several books by Lovecraft or inspired by him and continues into an oneiric escapade by the three agents. They meet the various characters of the mythos, as well as a real Lovecraft scholar, and are witness to the birth of Cthulhu, signaling the end of the rational world which they were successively forgetting. In the final scene, the main detective tears up Black's diary and throws the pages off a bridge, echoing the opening scene of the novel.

Although the final chapter seems to represent the end of the world as we know it, it is in fact the one most prone to interpretation as the product of the (deranged) characters' imagination. There are indirect intratextual suggestions, such as a violet sky analogical to that seen by Black in the scene where he is presented from the outside as being immersed in a subjective reality, as well as direct ones: the events reenact a dream described in Black's diary. While these elements alone could be seen as enforcing the illusion (the psychic world taking over the physical one), the chapter is also replete with not only overt references to Lovecraft's fiction, but also their direct interpretation by a *criticus ex machina*. A character based on S.T. Joshi, also cited in this paper, is said to have "somehow found his way here".

This intertextual, oneiric world illustrates well the state of delirium, described by Foucault as "the dream of the waking person" (1988, p. 184), echoing the motto to Chambers' story which underlined the fluid border of sanity. The interpretation of the FBI agents' going mad is strengthened by their own comments on the dreamlike quality of the events and the possibility that "the world **inside** us [...] that's the only world that's changing" (Moore, Burrows 2017c, n.pag., emphasis in original). This impression is strengthened by the fact (also underlined in the narrative) that apart from the FBI agents there are almost no "real" people to be seen, as well as the agents' rapid forgetting of the previous reality as they become immersed in a world reflecting Lovecraft's and Black's texts. Hence, the final scene of tearing up the diary can be seen as a symbolic acceptance of being immersed in the dreamland through rejection of the narrative which described it as such, rejection of the awareness of illusion.⁹

Conclusion

The questions underlying all the texts discussed are to what extent can fiction influence reality and how subjective reality influences the objective one. A key argument against the

⁹ It is interesting to set this against Foucault's description of Descartes' Meditator's musing on dreams: "Descartes sought this absolute awakening [to reality], which dismisses one by one all the forms of illusion [...] and found it, paradoxically, in the very awareness of the dream, in the consciousness of deluded consciousness" (Foucault 1988, p. 184). From behind the torn diary emerges the Lovecraftian world of the fantastic, an immersion into the world of dreams (nightmares?) by assuming that it is the more real one. Man is shown to be able to dismiss rational reality as well as the dreamlike one.

interpretation of the horrors of *Providence* as individual delusions is the fact that more than one person sees the same creatures and events, even if nowhere is this shown to be the reality of people *en masse*. This leads to the underlying tenet that Bierce, Chambers and Lovecraft were revealing an existing world (putting it in words, as Carcosa suggests at one point) rather than creating a fictional one, even if it can only exist as a collective delusion. And if the delusion is experienced by the majority, then the minority should be considered mad.

The intense intertextuality of the final chapter may suggest that in today's postmodern world we exist in a web of texts which make an objective reality increasingly difficult to establish and subjective ones easier to popularize (as indicated by the popularity of such terms as "alternative facts"), while facilitating the immersion into a bubble of selected information on a given topic. Moore provides the example of religions in the final chapter, describing them as "fictions that modify the world". The Cthulhu mythos is suggested as being able to result in an even more effective reality bubble through the theme's improbable popularity among readers and writers.

As has been shown, the narratives of Bierce and Chambers were an early example of a common fictional world spreading in literature, and in at least one way emanating in extra-textual reality through the mansion of Carcosa. Lovecraft and his followers greatly extended this alternate reality. If we accept Joshi's argument that all writing is the product of a worldview, and philosophy and literature are only different ways of conveying it (1990, p. 7), then the popularity of weird fiction could be seen as stemming from the search for an alternative explanation of reality. The one provided by the Cthulhu mythos can be accepted as one of many in the postmodern schizophrenic tradition (Giżycki 2001, pp. 74-75). However, as the final scene of *Providence* illustrates, this may entail the risk of earlier interpretations of reality being rejected.

Appropriately, this is not the only possible interpretation. Bierce, Chambers and Moore all provide different possible readings of their texts and the fictional universe, depending on how the protagonist is treated. This is in line with Kundera's statement that "Man does not relate to the world as subject to object, as eye to painting; not even as actor to stage set. Man and the world are bound together like the snail to its shell: the world is part of man, it is his dimension, and as the world changes, existence (*in-der-Welt-sein*) changes" (1988, p. 35). Even though Kundera refers to the historical dimension, in the postmodern reality, the borders between different histories – individual, collective, fact-based, alt-fact-based, fictional – are fluid, to say the least. Accordingly, the supernatural stories can be seen as a subjective interpretation of the objective reality. Moore points to this directly when in Chapter 5 Black writes in his diary the first paragraphs of his novel on the life of a man with a biography similar to that of Black himself. In the novel-within-a-graphic-novel, the narrator speaks of, among other things, "immigrants in their self-contained communities with bitter scents and indecipherable ululations, names unsettlingly unpronounceable," (Moore, Burrows 2017b, n.pag.) pointing to the possibility of symbolic/allegoric interpretations of weird fiction, i.e.

reading Lovecraft's texts through his individual prejudices or Black's own story through fears resulting from, inter alia, his sexual orientation. As one of the supernatural creatures/visions tells Black, "In our narratives we may signify without constraint," and such sublimation, no matter how weird, may be a way for madness to be avoided.

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Studia w szaleństwie: rzeczywistość i jej postrzeganie w *Providence* Alana Moore'a, „Mieszkańca Carcosy” Ambrose'a Bierce'a i „Naprawiaczu reputacji” Roberta W. Chambersa

Streszczenie

Artykuł służy analizie trzech tekstów istotnych z punktu widzenia mitologii opartej na twórczości H.P. Lovecrafta: dwóch opowiadań z końca dziewiętnastego wieku, którymi Lovecraft się inspirował („Mieszkańca Carcosy” Ambrose'a Bierce'a i „Naprawiacza reputacji” Roberta W. Chambersa) oraz powieści graficznej zainspirowanej przez autora pochodzącego z Providence w stanie Rhode Island, jego twórczość i jego inspiracje (*Providence* Alana Moore'a i Jacena Burrowsa). Poprzez analizę tekstów i obrazów oraz zestawienie ich ze sobą i podejściami krytycznymi, artykuł wykazuje różnice w reprezentacji światów alternatywnych jako elementów (potencjalnie wypaczonego) postrzegania, a nie obiektywnej rzeczywistości. Studium przypadku służy jako podstawa do wykazania, jakie wy-

nika z analizowanych tekstów praktyczne i społeczne znaczenie zmian w subiektywnym postrzeganiu świata, częściowo będących skutkiem odbioru tekstów literackich.

Słowa kluczowe: Alan Moore, Jacen Burrows, Ambrose Bierce, Robert W. Chambers, powieść graficzna, fantastyka grozy.

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