BUDDHISM AND GRANT MORRISON:
ON THE NATURE OF SELF AND OTHER IN THE INVISIBLES

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Introduction

The Scottish comics author Grant Morrison is one seemingly impossible to classify. He has often worked within the format of serialized superhero stories such as *Animal Man, Justice League of America* and *New X-Men* and is thus active within largely codified genres prone to formula and predictability. Morrison in no way allows his work to be the victim of such constraints, however. His narratives are in constant dialogue with the conventions of the popular genres they belong to, making subversions and innovations of those conventions possible. Morrison has “imported the auteurist sensibility of alternative comics and graphic novels to the popular genres and characters that dominate the American and British comics industries”\(^1\). Rather than an obstacle complicating the possibility of thematic depth, genre formulas become an opportunity to explore complex topics ranging from political issues such as the workings of authority and ideology to ontological inquiries into the nature of interpretation, to metafictional worries about the role of authorship. It should also be noted that although much of Morrison’s writing draws on previously existing characters and franchises, his work is certainly not limited to it. Both *We3* and *The Filth*, for instance, are standalone and novel creations that give full expression to the aforementioned auteurist sensibility. Furthermore, even when working within popular genres, the scope of Morrison’s influences is much wider than those genres. His works contain references to such a wide variety of sources as the Romantic poets, decadentism, the beatniks, Dadaism, situationism, punk music, experimental filmmakers such as Maya Deren, the postmodern Discordian Robert Anton Wilson, the Beatles, Guy Debord’s theory of the spectacle, and many others.

It is in fact impossible to fully understand some of his works without researching the influences that have affected Morrison’s worldview. As Singer points out, “any attempt to study his writing must also seek to understand his cosmology, given the powerful and reciprocal influence each exerts on the other”\(^2\). Without an understanding of the theoretical issues some of his writings explore, one cannot claim a full understanding of even the surface narrative because the two are inextricably intertwined. The previous statement is especially applicable to what is generally considered to be Morrison’s magnum opus, his series *The Invisibles*. Published by Vertigo, the series ran for six years and deals with a motley crew of guerilla anarchists in their fight against authoritarian forces that want to subject the world to a mechanistic view on society and humanity.

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\(^1\) Singer. *Grant Morrison: Combining the Worlds of Contemporary Comics*, 3

\(^2\) Ibid, 10
Consisting of an assassin well versed in the arts of the occult and tantric sexuality, a witch from the
future, a Brazilian transvestite with a voodoo background, a black martial artist from New York and
a messianic street urchin from Liverpool, this team of ‘Invisibles’ combat a conspiracy to render
existence into an impersonal, homogenous machine that considers conformity to be the highest
value. Although such a synopsis may sound very much like a familiar story of good versus evil, The
Invisibles is easily the author’s most explicitly philosophical work. As in many of his other creations,
the surface narrative serves as a mere framework to examine a multitude of intricate subject matters.
For this reason, The Invisibles may be considered his most essential work, as it offers the most
immediate look into the worldview that gives shape to much of his writing.

Although said worldview covers a huge amount of ground, I will argue that the crux of
Morrison’s philosophy is heavily preoccupied with the ontological status of the self-versus-other
distinction. In fact, the proposed falsity of that distinction, as I will try to show, permeates nearly
every component of the author’s Weltanschauung. From his views on the nature of time, to his ideas
on sexuality and the epistemological stances he adopts, the notion that the division between subject
and object is a false dichotomy underlies all. It should come as no surprise then, that his worldview
is entirely compatible with Buddhist philosophy, which in essence deals with the illusory nature of
the self or ‘ego’, thus upsetting the ontological divide between subject and object, inside and
outside. What I will attempt to do in this thesis is to map the influence of the Buddhist idea of ‘no-
self’ and to establish how all-pervasive it is in The Invisibles, as well as propose this map to be the
Rosetta stone needed to decipher a large part Morrison’s writings, even those works that contain
little explicit references to the philosophical questions that relate to it. Although it is beyond the
scope of this thesis to provide an in-depth analysis of more than one of Morrison’s works, at times
I will briefly refer to Flex Mentallo: Man of Muscle Mystery and The Filth in footnotes, as those
titles would particularly benefit from being studied from this particular angle. This will also serve
to show that the influence of Buddhist philosophy exceeds The Invisibles and is a core component
of a large part of the author’s oeuvre. Though neither Flex Mentallo: Man of Muscle Mystery or The
Filth contain direct references to Buddhist philosophy – unlike The Invisibles, which is replete with
them – the ambiguation of the distinction between self and other is so crucial to both narratives that
Buddhist thought can nonetheless clearly be discerned in them3.

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3 As the essence of Buddhism is said to be the transcendence of all relativities – cultural ones included – it resists institutionalization (cf. infra). Exponents of Zen Buddhism, for example, were said to be “universal
To be more specific, I will explore how the notion of an essential self is portrayed in The Invisibles as being of an illusory nature. The distinction between subject and object as postulated by the grammatical structure of language and conceptual thought is suggested to be incongruous with reality as it is. Hence, identification with a self is a mental process that occludes truth by creating a distorting conceptual representation of the world that eludes ‘the subject’ into claiming subjecthood. This, we will see, coincides with the Buddhist notion that there is “no permanent substantial entity that [can] be observed to correspond to the term or concept ‘I’ or 'soul’”.

I will begin the analysis by taking a closer look at the various cryptic statements and riddles that allude to the Buddhist view of no-self. Conundrums presented to Invisible pupils by their tutors, the conversations between the character of Dane and of Tom O’Bedlam, and the former’s encounters with alien entities that give him access to enlightened states of consciousness, all directly or indirectly hint at the illusory nature of the self and the implications that accompany it. The cause of such illusions, the series seems to suggest, are man’s rational faculties, something which several scenes connoting reason in a negative sense suggest. Secondly, the recurring motif of characters adopting multiple selves will be analyzed. By having the protagonists embody different ego-constructs, the series illustrates the constructed and unreal nature of every form of identity. Subsequently, the comic’s synchronous view on time will be discussed. Past and future are seen to be categories existing only relative to the self in The Invisibles. When the self is no longer identified with, as several characters experience in the series, a linear conception of time is abandoned and replaced by a profound sensation of timelessness, what in Buddhism is called ‘eksana’, or ‘the eternal Now’.

Furthermore, categories of past and future will be seen to underlie the notion Karma, which The Invisibles mainly exemplifies through the character of King Mob. Next, I will examine the consequences that the no-self view has for epistemology. It will be seen that denying the dualism of subject and object also implies the impossibility of knowledge, something which the series

individualists”(Watts. The Way of Zen, xii) for precisely this reason. The essence of Buddhist thought deals with a universal insight into the nature of the self, an abstract, metaphysical and epistemological position. Thus, a literary work does not need to display surface references to Buddhism to be said to exhibit Buddhist philosophy as I and many academics understand it. For the same reason, I have not refrained from drawing on other sources the series refers to, such as Discordianism or William Blake, if those sources are inherently compatible with Buddhist philosophy. 4 This sentence seemingly affirms that there is a factual subject, but this is precisely what Buddhist thought denies. It is, however, grammatically necessary that a subject/agent be referred to in the sentence. Discussions of such confusions are not coincidentally prominent in Buddhist texts, as we will see. 5 Jayatilleke. Early Buddhist Theory of Knowledge, 319 6 Watts. The Way of Zen, 123
reflects by thematizing the relativity of perception, portraying subjective experiences of time, making use of radically different visual styles, and by illustrating how language influences and restricts our experience of reality. As crossdressing and gender fluidity is prominent in *The Invisibles*, I will also analyze the notion of performativity by drawing on Judith Butler’s thinking and explore how this fits with the Buddhist view of no-self. Moreover, I will examine the comic’s views on sexuality by considering how the overt references to psychoanalyst Wilhelm Reich might prove relevant to the same issue, and link Reich’s theories to the series’ portrayal of Tantric Buddhism. The notion of no-self will be seen to be so crucial and all-pervasive to the work that it affects even this area of experience. Finally, the ending of *The Invisibles* will be discussed, in which the comic portrays humanity as having collectively undergone Buddhist enlightenment, suggesting that such transcendence is essential to the growth of the species.
Theoretical Framework

To support my analysis, I will draw from various academic studies of Buddhist philosophy. Previous studies of Morrison’s work will also complement my reading. Some examples are Marc Singer’s *Grant Morrison: Combining the Worlds of Contemporary Comics*, Megan Goodwin’s “Conversation to Narrative: Magic as Religious Language in Grant Morrison’s *The Invisibles*”, and *Anarchy for the Masses: The Disinformation Guide to The Invisibles* by Patrick Neighly and Kereth Cowe-Spigai.

**Buddhism**

As mentioned above, essential to Buddhist philosophy in nearly all its canonical manifestations is the doctrine of ‘anātman’ or no-self, “the view that there is nothing that corresponds to the notion of a soul or self”\(^7\). According to the Buddhist scholar Candrakīrti, for example, the notion of anātman entails that the subject – or rather pseudosubject as in reality there is no actor behind the deed – consists merely of “the occurrence of a series of interrelated physical and mental events”\(^8\) that are appropriated by the mind when they are claimed to be part of a unified self. In other words, Buddhist theory suggests that these physical and mental events should not be linked to a self and should therefore not be identified with. The events merely are and to postulate an ego undergoing them is to indulge in a metaphysical delusion. For this reason, the doctrine of Buddha emphasizes non-attachment, so as to see that the experiences of, for example, pain and pleasure are simply “non-Self passing phenomena”\(^9\). The eighth century Indian Brahman Śāntarakṣita claimed that “the sense of I-consciousness that refers to an unchanging entity is an illusion” born from the causal connection of momentary states\(^10\). Because the mind distinguishes one moment from the next and then links the two, a persisting entity or ego is erroneously postulated in the process according to Buddhist thought.

Because the ‘I’ is a symbol, the confusion is intricately related to the presuppositions of language, which is why the metaphysical implications surreptitiously present in the structure of linguistic systems receive a great deal of attention in Buddhist texts. Dualities such as those between subject and object are seen to be “the property of thought and language but not of the actual world”

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\(^7\) “Introduction”, xxii

\(^8\) Martin. “Would It Matter All That Much if There were no Selves?”, 116-117

\(^9\) Harvey. “Dukkha. Non-Self and the Teaching on the Four Noble Truths”, 41

because divisions, categories and classes are not inherent to the real, preverbal reality. They are created rather than discovered in our interpretation of the indivisible and total existence we are ourselves a part of. Note how the previous sentence whilst denying the dualism between subject and object affirms it by implying an entity (‘our’) that possesses or does the act of interpretation. Buddhist thought denies the widespread notion – so common that it is sometimes referred to as the ‘standard picture’ – that there is a link between the structure of language and the world. For example, the Mahayana Buddhist Nāgārjuna explicitly denied “the existence of a world differentiated objectively into different logical parts”.

Therefore, an essential distinction within Buddhist thought is the one between conventional and ultimate truth. The former is expressible in words and thus depends on the conventions of conceptual communication for its existence, whereas the latter cannot be expressed in verbal form and is beyond conventions. Furthermore, the conventional has a concealing effect whereas the ultimate is what is seen clearly and distinctly. Another characteristic of the conventional is that it is relational whereas the ultimate truth is absolute, intrinsic or nonrelational. A conventional truth is thus only true in relation to the presuppositions it implies, which in the case of language, as we saw above, are questionable. The existence of separate parts is true according to the conventions of symbolic/conceptual communication, but according to Buddhist thought they are not valid as ontological categories, and if separate entities do not exist then neither do the relations that are born out of separations. Therefore, “verbal conventions occlude the ultimate nonverbal truth” because the ultimate truth occurs when the distorting illusions of conceptual thinking fade away. Conceptualization is considered to be the source of all problems and ultimately the goal of Buddhism is the induction of a non-conceptual awareness that “does not distinguish between subject and object and does not construct experience into individuated objects with characteristic properties”. It thus goes beyond the limits of ordinary language and thought. Buddhism is therefore fundamentally focused not on trying to get people to accept its doctrine in the sense of accepting it on an intellectual level, but rather on changing the immediate experience of the individual by curing him/her of mental

11 Watts. The Way of Zen, 73
13 Ibid, 31
14 Mortensen. “Zen and the Unsayable”, 4
15 Ibid, 6
16 D’Amato. “Why the Buddha Never Uttered a Word”, 44
17 Lang. “Candrakīrti on the Limits of Language and Logic”, 331
delusions. Ultimate truth is thus equated to liberation or ‘nirvana’, and nirvana may be considered to be a state of utter not-knowing: The fundamental ungraspability of reality lies at the root of Buddhism\textsuperscript{18}. As “ultimate reality has no qualities and is not a thing, it cannot become an object of knowledge”\textsuperscript{19}.

The opposite of nirvana is ‘maya’, the “manifold world of facts and events […] ordinarily understood as an illusion that veils the one underlying reality of Brahman”; Brahman, in turn, is knowledge of the fact that the seemingly manifold world is actually one\textsuperscript{20}. The cause of maya may thus be considered the acceptance of the standard picture mentioned above, or also termed ‘avidya’: the act of ignoring the relational nature of subject and object\textsuperscript{21}. Once identification with the self is given up, so is the sense of being separate from the world and one is said to enter an experience of totality and oneness. The subject is then no longer seen as separate from the object and vice versa. Therefore, many Buddhist texts and teachers – especially within the Zen tradition – appeal to our prereflective engagement with world rather than trying to impose an acceptance of its theoretical doctrine\textsuperscript{22}. The theory is a means to an end, not an autotelic model of truth.

\textsuperscript{18} Watts, The Way of Zen, 43
\textsuperscript{19} Ibid, 83
\textsuperscript{20} Ibid, 38
\textsuperscript{21} Ibid, 47
\textsuperscript{22} “Introduction”, xix
Self and Other in *The Invisibles*23

*Riddles, Conundrums and Comments about the Self*

One of the ways in which *The Invisibles* thematizes the nature of the self is simply through the utterances of characters, offering comments, riddles or conundrums to the reader that either directly or indirectly questions the idea of an essential identity, or more broadly, that scrutinize the rationalistic models of reality that underlie such a notion.

A key scene, in this respect, is one that depicts members of the Invisibles team in training. The setting is eastern, taking place in a mountain temple and all characters wearing long red robes such as those of bhikku’s. Two tutors confront their pupils with a question about the wooden chair that stands in the center of the room: “Can anyone tell me exactly what this object is?”24. The spontaneous answer is ‘chair’, but then they are asked if that answer sufficiently describes the entirety of the object. A description of its function follows, but this is pointed out to be a merely partial one as the chair can also be approached from a financial, artisanal, artistic or historical standpoint — and yet none of them would be able to capture the essential chair. Their point is the following: “We cannot even fully describe a chair and yet we say ‘I am.’ ‘I am.’ Understand. There is no ‘I am’. Nothing ‘is’. Try to describe the logical flaw in what I’ve just said. Now!”25. What is being referred to is the Buddhist notion of ‘svabhava’, the idea that all things are without self-nature26. Separate things can only exist in relation to other things but not in themselves, which becomes clear when attempting to describe something as simple as a chair. It cannot be grasped without referring to its context and the contextual description cannot be grasped without explaining the things or symbols that constitute it, so that any genuine attempt at a full description is doomed to go on indefinitely until every ‘thing’ is described in terms of other things. This, in turn, reveals the inexistence of essences that together supposedly make up the parts out of which reality consists, debunking the world view of the ‘standard picture’. Anything said about the chair is merely a conventional and therefore not an ultimate truth because the notion of an essential chair is itself a

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23 The nature of the self was one component explored in my bachelor paper *Interconnectedness in Grant Morrison’s The Invisibles* (2016), albeit from an entirely different theoretical standpoint. As a couple of the insights explored there remain relevant, they will in part be summarized in the current reading so as to either elaborate on them or to approach them from an entirely new slant.

24 4: 67

25 4:67

convention agreed upon by the speakers who communicate to each other about it. This verbal information thus obfuscates ultimate truth.

After asking whether the pupil’s description has come anywhere close to the essential chair, one of the tutors smashes it to pieces with a sledgehammer, ostensibly to affirm the discrepancy between a symbol referring to a delineated and complete object and an essentially interconnected reality ever in a state of flux. The truth that the tutors are trying to convey, is the one of ‘anitya’ or ‘impermanence’, one of the Buddha’s teachings. It refers not simply to the idea that reality is impermanent, but rather to the notion that “the more one grasps at the world, the more it changes”\(^\text{27}\).

As reality is beyond the powers of rationality to comprehend, it cannot be categorized as either permanent or impermanent, but once one postulates entities that persist over time, such as the one of a chair, it is unavoidable that change is witnessed— not because the aforementioned flux is a quality inherent to reality, but because it is perceived in contrast to the idea of stability implied by fixed symbols.

The tutor’s remark that several hundred years ago, the object was not a chair but a tree, and the object’s subsequent destruction, would seem to merely highlight the transitory nature of the object, as the phrasing still suggests an object or an essence that persists in the process of transformation. But the real intentions of the tutors become clear when they say that “nothing is”. What they are driving at is the presupposition of their own question, the idea of an enduring thing as an ontological reality, and it is that deeply rooted assumption that they want to debunk. What the tutors are thus trying to do through the Zen method of instruction called ‘wen-ta’ or ‘question and answer’, is appealing to the pupils’ prereflective mode of engagement with reality so as to induce the non-conceptual awareness that characterizes Buddhahood. In such a state of nirvana, the perception of reality is no longer clouded by the metaphysical illusions embedded within conceptual thinking.

The above of course gains a great deal of significance when one considers what it might mean for the status quo notion of a self, of a subject that is its identity. The Buddha’s teaching of anitya (or impermanence) is closely intertwined with the teaching of anātman (or no-self) in this respect. When the tutors command the pupils to describe all that they are, they are trying to make them apply the insights about the chair to the idea of themselves. Although they presuppose that

\(^{27}\) Ibid, 46-47
they are a unitary self and identify with the symbol that refers to such a self, in trying to describe it they would discover that it is impossible to grasp the self by means of conceptual thinking because they would likewise be forced to continue to produce insufficient descriptions. There is no essential ‘I’ that persists over time, and if thought so nonetheless, its impermanence would become a tangible reality when scrutinized, debunking the idea in the process. The logical flaw referred to is thus that what the pupils must describe is inexistent and can therefore not be described—or phrased differently, the self equals its description because it is nothing more than the conceptual creation that is supposed to refer to it. Nonetheless, “[b]ecause the idea is so much more comprehensible than the reality, the symbol so much more stable than the fact, we learn to identify ourselves with our idea of ourselves”28, resulting in the sensation of being an ego separate from the world in which it navigates her/himself.

The tutors want the pupils to dissociate from the idea that they identify with not merely because it is in denial of true reality, but also because such attachment and grasping are key causes of ‘dukkha’ or suffering29. The impermanence perceived as a result of the postulation of fixed entities is experienced as painful because they are regarded to be real things and not merely conceptual creations. When the referent of the conceptual creation is no longer perceived or perceived as destroyed, the sensation of something lost follows. The tutors try to cure their pupils of attachment to ‘things’ so that such illusory suffering is no longer possible. Total non-attachment leads to nirvana, where everything is seen to be anātman30. In such a state, suffering disappears because even if there would be, for example, the sensation of physical pain, it would no longer be regarded as pain—the mind would no longer appropriate the sensation by interpreting it as a self undergoing the pain. There would merely be intense sensation complete in itself. To reach nirvana, “the fabricated and fictitious nature of all things”31 must be realized. In other words, interpretation must cease before a direct experience of reality is possible.

The scene ends with a sequence of three frames wherein the white, circular glint of understanding in a pupil’s eye is focused upon. The white circle is a recurring visual motif that has a great amount of significance throughout the series. Its appearance in the scene with the chair is illuminating for an earlier moment, wherein the character of Dane, a teenage hoodlum from the

28 Ibid, 120
29 Harvey. “Dukkha. Non-Self and the Teaching on the Four Noble Truths”, 34
30 Ibid, 35
31 Lang. “Candrakīrti on the Limits of Language and Logic”, 332
streets of Liverpool who is recruited by the Invisibles and is said to be the future Buddha, is beaten up by his mentor Tom O’Bedlam until he reaches a higher state of consciousness and emotional catharsis. Whilst abusing him, O’Bedlam taunts Dane with his issues around his parents, directly confronting him with the latter’s self-fashioning as an outlaw and rebel, a compensatory psychological mechanism that serves to keep the pain of feeling like an abandoned and helpless child at a distance. Before Dane reaches a breakthrough in consciousness, O’Bedlam shows him a white, circular badge – the symbol of the Invisibles – and proclaims: “Open your eyes! You’re still holding onto that badge, like it was an anchor, eh? Like it’s the last thing in the world, the only thing. […] Look at what you’re clinging to. Look! The badge is a mirror. […] What do you see in the mirror? There’s nothing. Nothing”32. The next page is entirely blank, lacking any symbolic or iconographic representation, suggesting that Dane has reached a state of being where he sees through the illusions of the conceptual representations that make up his self and has thus transcended the suffering they cause. Particularly, the pain caused by identification, in Dane’s case with a forsaken child, is abandoned because the self that was assumed to be mistreated is seen to be a mere mental creation. Following the white page, we see Dane staring up at the sun – a perfect white circle – with an ecstatic look on his face, suggesting that the joy of having temporarily reached the enlightened state of nirvana is still tangible. As King Mob, the leader of the Invisibles, says at a certain point: “Ego annihilation is followed by euphoric reintegration and a sense of extended understanding. […] A new relationship with time, the self, and death”33. Similarly, while being tortured by a member of the Outer Church, King Mob mutters that one can tolerate the pain by not identifying with the body34, referring to the Buddhist method of regarding suffering as no more than passing non-self phenomena.

Dane’s temporary transcendence may even be considered a direct reference to what in Buddhist doctrine is sometimes called ‘mirror awareness’, a state of being where all objects are perfectly reflected in the subject’s awareness but are simultaneously not discriminated into distinct objects opposing the perceiving subject, as in such a state there is no sense of a self-other dichotomy35. In other words, reality is experienced as an indivisible totality rather than a collection

32 1:94
33 7: 129. In the same scene, King Mob also notes that ego annihilation leads to the conclusion that all time happens simultaneously, linking his comment to the Buddhist conceptualization of time (cf. infra).
34 3: 49
35 D’Amato. “Why the Buddha Never Uttered a Word”, 45
of objects, as the experience of objects is caused by the conceptualization of experience. The badge is a mirror but it reflects no self, pointing to the unreality of a delineated ego\textsuperscript{36}.

The previous scene is merely Dane’s first experience with nirvana. Throughout the series he lives through several more moments of transcendence, most often as a result of an encounter with Barbelith. Barbelith is an alien satellite that is predicted throughout the series to be the catalyst for humanity’s approaching collective transcendence into a higher state of being and most often appears in the shape of a perfect red circle, linking it to the symbol of the white badge. During his first meeting with the entity, it tells Dane that “It’s only a game. Try to remember”\textsuperscript{37}, whilst exposing him to images of war atrocities, people starving and drug abuse. The entity says that Dane must fix himself, and the scene ends with a perfectly white frame containing only Barbelith’s text: “Do you understand? Do you understand what you must do?”\textsuperscript{38}. The implication is that even the worst horrors are part of nirvana and that it is the mind’s interpretation – resulting in attachment to the things it postulates – that results in the experience of suffering. The contrast with the white frame, lacking any kind of representation, and the previous images of anguish highlights how the horror exists in the false representation of an undefinable reality rather than in the reality of the horrors themselves. If Dane were to cease being attached to the objects that supposedly undergo the suffering, the suffering would disappear. In other words, The Buddhist solution to pain is suggested to Dane in Barbelith’s dictate to fix himself. He must realize that all problems are created by the mind and can therefore be considered a game, rather than ontological facts.

The white void also appears as the backdrop when Dane encounters Barbelith in the shape of a Buddha and likewise implies a Zen-like nothingness\textsuperscript{39}. During the run-up to this third moment of enlightenment, Dane is confronted with the King-of-All-Tears, the demon-like creature worshipped by the Outer Church. It confronts him with past rejections, painful future scenarios and unresolved traumatic experiences so as to be able to break his spirit. With no results, however, because Dane sits unaffected and calm in ‘padmassana’, or lotus position, as the taunting memories and experiences pass through him. Like a Buddha, he allows them to arise as non-self phenomena without offering resistance to them. When the King-of-All-Tears admits defeat, Dane says: “And I

\textsuperscript{36} Neighly and Cowe-Spigai. \textit{Anarchy for the Masses: the Disinformation Guide to The Invisibles}, 25
\textsuperscript{37} 3: 129
\textsuperscript{38} 3: 129
\textsuperscript{39} Garlington. “A Context for the Supercontext: On the Function of Psychedelics in Grant Morrison’s \textit{The Invisibles}”, 55
had won. I’d seen through all of it: every stupid fantasy, every cheap conjuring trick”\(^{40}\). Subsequently, he encounters the Buddha and experiences an enlightened state wherein he realizes that ‘Dane McGowan’ is made up; he becomes “God, looking at myself in the mirror. I was perfect in eternity”\(^{41}\). We see Dane’s serene facial expression within an amorphous white backdrop. By disassociating with self-representations that taunted him, Dane fully ceases to identify with any kind of concept whatsoever and becomes one with the totality of existence, here termed ‘God’. He abandons the egoic paradigm and thus ceases to interpret reality from the point of view of a subject experiencing an object outside of himself, realizing that all forms of representation distort the ultimate reality. As no distinction is made between self and other, all perception becomes self and is therefore metaphorically called a mirror.

In the next issue, Barbelith – now represented as a red circle amid a white void – tells him that he must return because the game is still in progress\(^{42}\). At first he has trouble remembering who ‘Dane’ is, but then returns to participate in the conflict between the Invisibles and the Outer Church. Unlike his team members, though, he does not take the conflict seriously. Dane heals his wounded leader King Mob, but also Sir Miles, a high-ranking member of the Outer Church, reflecting that the distinction between self and other is no longer one he subscribes to. Later on in the series, the ineloquent Dane attempts to verbalize his experiences, saying “We’re stuck in a thought, right… We’ve been thinking it so long we’ve forgot. When you stop thinking it, you see it for what it is”\(^{43}\). What he is referring to is the subject’s thought of himself, that he/she regards as a reality and therefore acts as if it were an actual thing and not something made up. As the subject equates him-/herself with the thought, he/she will do anything to protect it, resulting in a lot of unnecessary suffering because the impermanence of the subject is bound to be felt.

It seems clear then, that The Invisibles considers the reification of what the mind conceptualizes to be a sickness that must cured, and several elements of the series indeed connote the workings of the rational faculties in a negative way. One such element is the reference to Urizen, a figure out of the poetry of William Blake that Dane and Tom O’Bedlam encounter in the Thames of London while under the influence of a psychotropic blue mold. “Look there! ‘Urizen, deadly

\(^{40}\) 3: 178
\(^{41}\) 3: 179
\(^{42}\) 3: 186
\(^{43}\) 6: 211
black, in chains bound”\textsuperscript{44}, O’Bedlam shouts out. As Urizen symbolizes “the principle of reason, rationality, law and limitation”\textsuperscript{45} in Blake’s cosmology and is even called “the evil God of the Age of Reason”\textsuperscript{46}, the chains seem to refer to our fictional construct of the world, i.e. the world of maya\textsuperscript{47}. The scene thus not only hints at what Buddhism would consider humanity’s fundamental affliction, namely conceptualization, it also foreshadows Dane’s first breakthrough moment at the hands of O’Bedlam, as it is Dane’s self-conceptualization that tormented him and which O’Bedlam made him transcend. Furthermore, a link may be drawn between the King-of-All-Tears and Urizen, the latter calling himself the “King of All” and wanting to bind everyone in his chains\textsuperscript{48} in the same way that the creature tried to break Dane’s spirit by spinning a painful narrative about his ego.

Though there are no other direct references to Blake in the series, it does establish his influence on Morrison, and studying the poet’s philosophy can indeed become informative when interpreting The Invisibles. In All Religions Are One, for example, Blake writes: “As the true method of knowledge is experiment, the true faculty of knowing must be the faculty which experiences”\textsuperscript{49}. The sentence seems to be saying that true knowledge of reality is found in direct experience rather than in textual knowledge derived from experience, which could at best be considered indirect – or conventional – knowledge. True knowledge is embodied knowledge (experience) while indirect knowledge in the form of concepts is disembodied and separated from the supposed knower. In other words, models never succeed in capturing reality, meaning that contrary to human belief, the symbolic model is never ‘it’, never ultimate truth. This is thematized when Mason, a millionaire Invisible, says that he lives in a world where the symbol is more important than the reality and where the menu is supposed to taste better than the meal\textsuperscript{50}. What Blake seems to be implying is that all religious models are derived from one and the same experience, a particular state of consciousness, but that they merely use different symbols to describe it. The irony of a dogmatic interpretation of this or that religious paradigm is clear: as it essentially points to an experience, its essence is missed

\textsuperscript{44} Murray. “Subverting the Sublime: Romantic Ideology in the Comics of Grant Morrison”, 42
\textsuperscript{45} Damon. Blake Dictionary: the Ideas and Symbols of William Blake, 422
\textsuperscript{46} Here one must note a common misconception about maya. The term refers not to a world or reality ontologically distinct from nirvana, but rather to the world as conceptualized by the rational faculties. One is stuck in maya when one is blinded and fooled by conceptual thinking/conventional truths, and one leaves maya and enters nirvana when one sees beyond conceptualization. Maya and nirvana, then, take place within the same ‘reality’, referring to states of mind rather than different worlds.
\textsuperscript{47} Damon. Blake Dictionary: the Ideas and Symbols of William Blake, 421
\textsuperscript{48} 20
\textsuperscript{49} 6: 200
out on by deifying the model, forever separating the worshipper from the direct experience it describes. It seems to be the goal of the Invisibles not only to make this insight tangible to mankind but also to induce such a direct experience— the Invisibles want to remove the delusions of rational thinking and open human beings up to the realm of non-conceptual experience. The same reasoning will prove to be most relevant for the discussion on ungraspability and transcendence below.

Another element that criticizes the deification of rationality occurs in an issue where King Mob and a fellow Invisible get trapped inside the Marquis de Sade’s novel *The 120 Days of Sodom*. The novel tells the tale of a banker, a judge, a bishop and an aristocrat, all of them libertines who lock themselves away in a castle to indulge in their animal and pitiless lust, unthinkingly inflicting unthinkable pain on their victims. At a certain point, the judge Curval says: “Ours is an age of reason. An age of line and measure. Reason will make mother nature a whore bound for pleasure, and set us high on glorious thrones as masters of the universe”\(^51\). The passage criticizes the split between self and other that causes the subject to glorify the ego-construct he/she identifies with whilst considering everything that is outside of itself to be alien, an other that can and must be overcome, which is an illusion that results in a profound estrangement from the totality of existence. In linking this kind of thinking to the most immoral fiends thinkable, *The Invisibles* seems to affirm the Buddhist conviction that the conventional truths generated by the mind are something which must be overcome and that a realization of the oneness of subject and object must be actualized. The split between the two, after all, provides the mental framework that results in the cruelties of the de Sade’s protagonists.

An image that encapsulates all of the above occurs during a scene where the Invisibles break into an underground base of the Outer Church. There they discovered a liquid mirror creature, a recurring and mysterious entity throughout the series that is said to be like “Everything that ever was or will be and put in a bottle inside of itself”\(^52\) or “a God fallen into its own creation. An artist trapped in its own masterpiece”\(^53\). When they encounter it in the base, it is indeed trapped in a cage; King Mob mutters: “Look! This is... This is the truth about everything [...] They shouldn’t be doing that. What are they doing to it? It’s every suffering thing ever... It’s what made the world the way it is...”\(^54\). The liquid mirror symbolizes the totality of existence, which the rational faculties attempt

\(^{51}\) 1: 191  
^{52}\) 6: 95  
^{53}\) 4: 101  
^{54}\) 4: 96
to subjugate to its own structures by treating it as an object that is outside of the thinking subject. The cage symbolizes the mind’s conventional truths occluding ultimate truth. King Mob’s utterance, moreover, affirms the Buddhist notion that conceptualization lies at the root of dukkha/suffering. The Outer Church, representing rational and mechanical thinking, have trapped the creature, treating it as a machine consisting of different parts that must be oiled perfectly according to the wishes of the self.

Multiple Selves

Another way in which *The Invisibles* illustrates the fictional nature of the ego is by having its characters embody different self-constructs throughout the series. Perhaps the best example of this is Boy, who at a certain point is kidnapped by higher ranking members of the Invisibles so that she can undergo a painful process of deconditioning. Her identity up until this point was that of an ex-cop from New York who joined the Invisibles to avenge the death of her brother, but they tell her that she has “become trapped, identified with this most recent exo-self identity” and expose her to a multitude of previous personalities: Michelle, an undercover agent who allowed herself to be hypnotized into becoming Boy, a street prostitute called Venus, and finally they successfully convince her that she was a member of the Outer Church all along, set out to destroy the Invisibles. Their aim is to make her realize that who she is “is a fiction. Let go. Become what you truly are”, a clear link to the command given to Dane by Barbelith. By making her experience all of the different personalities and making her wonder who she ‘really’ is, they want to lead her to the conclusion that all identities are ultimately constructs. What they want is for Boy to realize that all identity is a fiction, a creation of the mind, by showing her how easy it is to manipulate her into becoming someone else. The self’s impermanence is used as a means to render its conceptual nature tangible. Taking into account how the notion of an identity is problematized in this sequence, the code name ‘Maya’, which Boy uses in the presence of her kidnappers right before she is taken by them, becomes meaningful as well. As we saw above, it is the Buddhist term for the illusions embedded within the standard picture, which the deconditioning process of her kidnappers aims to cure.

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55 5: 172
56 5: 174
The fact of persistent character traits does not contradict the absolute relativity of identity constructs. Buddhist doctrine recognizes the “repeated occurrence of certain cittas, or ‘mind-sets’”\(^{57}\), but also claims that although such character traits might be long-lasting, they can and do change. In other words, although patterns might be distinguished over time, they are still not indexical of an essential self or ego. In fact, one might say that the self-definition that follows from pattern recognition perpetuates itself. Once one believes oneself to be a particular way, one will adapt his/her behavior to that definition and find further proof for the definition’s validity. Clearly, this was how Boy’s brainwashing worked: by programming her with a certain self-construct, she acted as though the construct were a reality and thereby affirmed it to be so.

Another character that exhibits an awareness of the plastic nature of the ego-construct is King Mob. He is presented as a ruthless freedom fighter who does not shy away from murder in his battle against the forces of oppression, but is also said to have been a bestselling pulp author called Kirk Morrison before that, writing about Gideon Stargrave: a debonair, James Bond-like adventurer. In what are either flashbacks or fragments from fictional stories, we see Gideon Stargrave with his long blonde hair looking at a windmill that was the setting of several earlier issues featuring King Mob and his teammates travelling back in time. The relationship between King Mob, who is bald, and his ex-girlfriend Jacqui, also shows striking similarities between the incestuous one of Gideon Stargrave and his sister. Jacqui, however, calls King Mob by the name of ‘Gideon’. In a flashback, King Mob is also shown to shave his head\(^{58}\). Because of this purposive confusion between the two characters, it becomes impossible to distinguish what is fact and what is fiction, and the question arises who King Mob ‘really’ is.

The multitude of possibilities, however, reveals the question itself to be faulty. At one point, King Mob says “When I was a kid, I wanted to grow up and find myself living in a ‘60s spy series. Funny how things turn out, isn’t it?”\(^{59}\) — one of several allusions to him being inspired by dualist fictions such as the Gideon Stargrave stories he writes about. It is implied, therefore, that King Mob began to fashion himself as the protagonist of his stories and thereby affirmed the reality of the King Mob ego-construct. His overly dramatic retelling of an earlier action sequence, called “preposterous”\(^{60}\) by the listener, reflects this self-stylization as well. Near the end of the series,

\(^{57}\) Harvey. “Dukkha. Non-Self and the Teaching on the Four Noble Truths”, 35

\(^{58}\) 3: 64

\(^{59}\) 1: 34

\(^{60}\) 2: 117
however, King Mob gains a distaste for the murderous character he had created and opts for a new persona— in a flashback we see him sitting in lotus position on a hill, repeating the mantra that he is “as cool as Bruce Lee”\(^{61}\) over and over again. He also alters his outfit, wearing a suit rather than leather clothes. “It’s the new me. The yuppie terrorist,”\(^{62}\) he says, presenting his new non-lethal self. The point is the following: being aware that there is no essential identity and that the ego is a mental construct, King Mob consciously installs new cittas within himself and changes his entire personality in the process, affirming the fictional nature of the self like Boy’s deconditioning episode.

Something which would seem to clearly contradict the above reading is that the narrative apparently distinguishes a clear hierarchy in the ‘realness’ of the different ego-constructs that are presented to the reader. It is suggested that Gideon Stargrave is merely a construction created by King Mob, used to shield his true self and secrets from telepathic intruders during a sequence wherein King Mob is tortured by a member of the Outer Church. The argument would be valid, if one panel did not make such a clear interpretation impossible: it shows Gideon Stargrave waking up from a trance in a different story world, saying: “That was weird. I thought I was somewhere being tortured”\(^{63}\). This small moment completely upsets any possibility of seeing one ego-construct as more real than another, as it becomes equally likely that King Mob is a creation of Gideon Stargrave than the other way around. By making it impossible for the reader to determine which ‘self’ is the real one, the comics denies the very notion that there is such a thing as a ‘real’ self. All ego-constructs are no more than mental creations, entirely relative and lacking ontological validity\(^{64}\).

\(^{61}\) 7: 84
\(^{62}\) 7: 50
\(^{63}\) 3: 79
\(^{64}\) The motif of multiple ego-constructs is also prominent in Morrison’s *The Filth*. Briefly put, the protagonist, Greg, is constantly taunted by the possibility that perhaps Greg is not real, a ‘parapersonality’ (like Boy’s ‘exo-self identity’) that has been installed by an external party. It might be that he is instead Ned Slade, an officer of a secret organization that maintains the societal status quo by fighting everything abnormal. It turns out, however, that both Greg and Slade are possible parapersonalities, that Greg/Ned ‘is’ neither and both and that there is, in other words, no essential identity to be discerned. Identity in the comic is purely the product of mind, as the characters of Anders Klimaxx and Max Thunderstone also reveal. The former constructs his identity based on videotapes of himself in the past on account of his amnesia, while the latter – in a way similar to King Mob – transforms himself into a quasi-superhero through physical and mental training, inspired by a transcendental experience induced by a change in the temporal lobe, which he calls “the Buddha button” (229). The entire story of *The Filth*, in fact, is an examination of the self-versus-other distinction and its effects on the psyche of the individual. The first and last issue of the series are respectively titled ‘Us vs. Them’ and ‘Them vs. Us’ for a reason.
Time and Karma

Essential to Buddhist thought is its conceptualization of time, as a shift in temporal experience is one crucial component of nirvana or Buddhist enlightenment. Since nirvana escapes definition, it is not only “immeasurable and infinite”, but likewise eternal—temporal delineations cannot grasp ultimate reality any more than spatial ones. In other words, past and future are also revealed to be illusory mental creations within non-conceptual awareness, as in nirvana there is only eksana, or the eternal Now. As the Zen master Dōgen wrote in his canonical *Shobogenzo*: “Life is an instantaneous situation, and death is also an instantaneous situation. It is the same, for example, with winter and spring. We do not think that winter becomes spring, and we do not say that spring becomes summer”\(^{65}\). What Dōgen is trying to say is that the temporal categories of, say, the seasons are mere concepts and not realities because one can only arbitrarily and conventionally distinguish one moment from another moment. In truth, there is only one undefinable eternity on which a linear idea of time is projected by the rational faculties. Status quo consciousness thus distorts the reality of the eternal Now by cutting it up into pieces, altering our experience in the process. When temporal distinctions fall away, however, one can only experience eksana. Dōgen is thus trying to express “the strange sense of timeless moments” that occurs in a state of Buddha consciousness\(^{66}\).

The same view on time is clearly present in *The Invisibles*, something which Dane’s description of his encounter with Barbelith – when it appeared to him in the shape of Buddha – as being ‘perfect in eternity’ already hinted at. As we will see in the chapter on transcendence, the non-conceptual awareness that Dane experiences at several moments throughout *The Invisibles*, becomes the norm for all of humanity by the end of the series, something which the oracular head of John the Baptist foreshadows when he says: “We are moving across the event horizon… No more future… No more past… No more present”\(^{67}\). This is a first element of the comic to suggest a different experience of time, wherein the categories that underlie linearity and chronology are seen to be false ones. Even more explicit references to such a view on time can be discerned in the utterances of the character of Takashi, a Japanese scientist that attempts to create a time travelling device. He echoes Dōgen’s claim when suggesting that within ‘timespace’, “everything that has ever, or will ever

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\(^{65}\) Dōgen. *Shobogenzo*, 28
\(^{66}\) Watts. *The Way of Zen*, 123
\(^{67}\) 1: 203
occur, occurs simultaneously” and that “history and all our tomorrows” are a single object. In the same chapter, we jump from scenes set in Albuquerque, San Ildefonso Pueblo, Las Vegas, and San Francisco – featuring the same characters – but the denotated time in the caption that establishes the setting is ‘Now’ in every scene, reflecting The Invisibles’ view that distinguishing between moments in time contradicts the reality of eksana. Similarly, the character of Edith, a one-hundred-year-old ex-Invisible approaching death, reflects on the nature of time whilst writing her autobiography. Describing her past adventures, she says: “What strange faraway days those were… or are”. Likewise, she later writes: “What happened to my life? Where did it go? I was young… It seemed like just a moment ago I was… Of course. It’s now”. The series continually questions the notion of past and future, suggesting instead that no moment ever ends, that every instance of time is part of the same ever-present eternity.

One concrete exemplification of this philosophy is the ‘Sheman’ storyline, which “weaves plotlines from three different time periods together to articulate a theory of synchronic time”. These issues recount Lord Fanny’s initiation into Brazilian voodoo witchcraft as a young boy/girl, and intercut it with a contemporary storyline where she is abused by an agent of the Outer Church and a third storyline set in between that reveals her past as a street prostitute. However, the storyline questions the idea of such a linearity by portraying past and present events as occurring simultaneously. During the initiation ceremony, for which she consumed an unspecified hallucinogenic substance, young Fanny is told by a butterfly that “Time is not a river. Time is more like a bubble”, and “All times are the same time. The initiation of a sorcerer reveals this”. She sees her future as a prostitute and as a transvestite being beaten by the Outer Church agent, but contemporary Fanny is likewise seeing herself in the past. “Is this the future I’m seeing? Or is this now?” she asks, after having been confronted with the liquid mirror substance described above, which, as we saw, symbolizes the totality of Being and thus also eternity. Both young and old Fanny undergo an experience of heightened awareness wherein a linear experience of time is abandoned and they consequently experience every moment as part of the same Now. After all kinds of ordeals,

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68 5: 22
69 5: 22
70 5: 132
71 5: 147
72 Singer, Grant Morrison: Combining the Worlds of Contemporary Comics, 100
73 2: 133
74 2: 136
young Fanny survives the initiation and is given a final lesson by the butterfly, echoing its previous statements: “You should know that nothing begins nor does it end. Things are ever-present”.

Our status quo experience of time is similarly thematized during the abovementioned sequence that depicts King Mob being tortured by the Outer Church. To extract information from him, Sir Miles telepathically enters the former’s mind and walks through a landscape of memories, jumping from one time-period to another. He is shocked by his experience and mutters “Time is all wrong”. Sir Miles’ surprise at witnessing King Mob’s history as a vast scenery one may freely walk through can be explained by it revealing the nature of time as opposing our usual experience of linearity. Trapped inside of King Mob’s head and thus gaining insight into how the mind functions, Sir Miles realizes that past and future are no more than mental constructs and that, consequently, the standard experience of chronology is an illusion. He glimpses, in other words, that

[all] time is here in this body, which is the body of Buddha. The past exists in its memory and the future in its anticipation, and both of these are now, for when the world is inspected directly and clearly past and future times are nowhere to be found.

As a top-ranking member of the Outer Church, however, Sir Miles, represents the opposite of enlightenment, worshipping a mechanistic view on reality, which is why he offers such resistance to the insight and does not allow it to take root.

The use of form during the time travel sequences is likewise suggestive of a different temporal philosophy because “The Invisibles, or any other comic, assumes the very structure Takashi describes: a universe in which events occur simultaneously and form one single object”. For this reason, Ragged Robin’s travel through time – a metaphor for attaining an experience of eksana – is depicted as her witnessing a collection of scattered comic frames spread on a page, significantly with a white void as the backdrop. The scene is reminiscent of Takashi’s previous utterances: “Where is the past? Where is the future? Undeniably they exist, but why can’t you point

\[ \text{\textsuperscript{75}} 2: 178 \]
\[ \text{\textsuperscript{76}} 3: 51 \]
\[ \text{\textsuperscript{77}} Watts. The Way of Zen, 159. This scene as well as well as the ‘Sheman’ storyline are reminiscent of the structure Flex Mentallo: Man of Muscle Mystery, in which we similarly jump from one time period to another. The protagonist Wally is exposed to an onslaught of memory fragments and cannot distinguish what is present, past or future, creating a sense of timelessness throughout the comic. He, too, experiences that time is ‘in the body’.
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\[ \text{\textsuperscript{78}} Singer. Grant Morrison: Combining the World of Contemporary Comics, 104 \]
\[ \text{\textsuperscript{79}} 5: 48 \]
to them? The only way to do that is to jump ‘up’ from the surface of timespace and see all of history and all of our tomorrows as the single object I believe it is”80. Combined, these scenes bestow an awareness upon the reader of the linear way in which they consume the comic, the way in which we also experience existence. By suggesting one has the capacity to read differently, to leap from one moment in the series to another however one pleases, the series also suggests that alternative experiences of time are possible in the world that the reader would call ‘reality’, and that indeed, our status quo experience of time does not necessarily reflect the way things are.

Another technique that creates a similar effect is Morrison’s use of braiding: an operation that networks aspects or fragments of panels within a sequential framework, creating a series within the linear succession of images. Thus, images are “linked by a system of iconic, plastic or semantic correspondences”81 rather than their chronology, which is done in The Invisibles to collapse past and future into a single moment, “thereby producing an image of the timeless realm of the universal consciousness”82. A clear example of this is the recurring image of Takashi’s grandfather – who formulated the theory that makes Takashi’s time travel machine possible and who not coincidentally is a Buddhist monk – standing in his garden and watching a frog jump and land in the pond. This image is repeated throughout several chapters, often with the temporal denotation ‘1945: Now’. These frames interrupt the chronology of the main storyline, suggesting that 1945 is occurring at the same time as the present. It is, furthermore, significant that when Takashi’s grandfather passes into the undefined understanding that turns out to be the key to time travel, the image is one of him fading into a white void. Another connection is created by the visual similarity of an origami figure that the monk holds in his hand in several frames and the shape of Takashi’s time machine. Similarly, several images of Fanny being abused as a street prostitute, revealed in the ‘Sheman’ storyline, are repeated three issues later, suggesting that those moments of her past still ‘are’ years later83.

Dane, as we saw, enters a state of nirvana at several occasions and thus transcends a linear experience of time. Encountering Barbelith for the second time, a white void – which, to repeat, represents non-conceptual awareness – is the backdrop for the image of a Buddha “in a fifth-

80 5: 22
81 Groensteen. The System of Comics, 146
82 Garlington. “A Context for the Supercontext: On the Function of Psychedelics in Grant Morrison’s The Invisibles”, 67
83 2: 155 and 5: 165, for example: Fanny is thrown out of a car by a violent client.
dimensional space that features the worm-like trails that are repeatedly used to signify a perspective exterior to time”⁸⁴. The same image returns near the end of the series, in a scene where Dane sees his own ‘trail’ spread through time rather than seeing himself as a delineated body separate from his surroundings. The image suggests a different conceptualization of time wherein one can no longer separate the subject from time. Ceasing to distinguish one moment from another, it becomes impossible to identify with a distinct self that exists within time because in non-conceptual awareness there is only eksana; one no longer distinguishes an entity that persists from one moment to the next. An experience of such timelessness is intimately related to giving up the notion of a self, because past, future and present are self-serving categories. Such distinctions make it possible to mentally project the self into the future or to use the history of the self in order to guide one’s actions in the present. The conventional truths of past and future are egoic creations that result in a constant preoccupation with narratives around the self that is identified with, which makes it impossible for one to experience the ultimate truth of nirvana, of which eksana is an essential component. Giving up the self is thus tantamount to giving up the notions of past and future. The image of Dane spread through time like a worm symbolizes how he is no longer able to return to conventional truth because he is no longer occupied with self-serving stories. He has become complete in eternity.

If a realization of eksana is closely related to an awareness of no-self/anātman, then the illusions of past and future must likewise be intertwined with the notion of Karma, which is defined as action that arises “from a motive and seeking result”⁸⁵, two concepts that rely on the notion of ‘future’ to exist at all. The past, furthermore, is often the basis of motive. Karma is the principle that underlies ‘samsara’, the “everlasting Round of birth-and-death”⁸⁶, an endless cycle that is characterized by suffering and disappointment. Avidya/impermanence, after all, is unescapable as long as one makes distinctions. A clearer way of phrasing the above is that as long as one subscribes to the notion of a self and as long as one indulges in narratives – which are characteristically linear – surrounding that self, one is stuck in an endless series of self-serving actions that obfuscate the ultimate truths of anātman and eksana, thereby causing dukkha/suffering. By identifying with a self, the need to sustain that self through time becomes an urgently felt dictate, which is the impulse behind Karmic action. Because one now opposes the self to the world, one tries to manipulate the

⁸⁴ 3: 178
⁸⁵ Watts. The Way of Zen, 49
⁸⁶ Ibid, 46
world so as to fit the needs of the ego. But by agreeing to execute the wishes of the self one gets stuck in a ceaseless cycle of futile doing. In other words, by serving the self one is enslaved to the self. To indulge in Karmic action is to shield oneself from nirvana.

It is thus no surprise that the notion of Karma is explicitly thematized in The Invisibles. Although it is the aim of the Invisibles in the series to induce a worldwide realization of ultimate truth, meaning they are forces of enlightenment, it would be too simplistic to say that they perfectly embody Buddhist wisdom. The opposite is in fact the case. To illustrate this, it suffices to look at the behavior of King Mob, who continually engages in intentional action throughout the series. His way of fighting the Outer Church is extremely brutal – murderous even – and stems from not an enlightened position but only the semblance of one. For King Mob, the philosophy that deals with nirvana is an intellectual position that he holds and that he tries to enforce on the external world, meaning that he does not embody it. If so, Karmic action would not occur. He would make no attempts at subjugating the Other to the views of the Self, because by doing so he acts against the truths he is supposed to be a partisan of. As Nāgārjuna claimed, giving up all conventional truths – which include the theoretical constructs of Buddhist theory itself – is necessary to experience ultimate truth. Those that hold ‘emptiness’ – meaning non-conceptual awareness – as a view, says Nāgārjuna, are incurable. As mentioned above, one should not confuse ‘it’ with the model that refers to ‘it’.

King Mob does exactly that, however. He considers the views he holds as an immaculate excuse to murder and maim those he does not agree with. He wants to make reality conform to the desires of the self. A figure that highlights King Mob’s hypocrisy is his ex-girlfriend Jacqui. Although she holds the same views, she criticizes him for his actions, saying: “You’re running around shooting people like they’re nothing. You’re fucked up, Gideon. You’re not cool, you’re not a hero. You’re just a murderer.” Furthermore, her claim that nothing ‘must’ be done, opposing King Mob’s fanaticism, is met with the following response: “Bollocks! Zen for ‘I just can’t be bothered.’ […] I have to do something.” His statement clearly suggests that he lacks the wisdom of Buddhism even though it is supposedly the goal of the Invisibles to have humanity enter nirvana, as we will see in the chapter of transcendence. Rather than refraining from beliefs and positions –

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88 5: 19
89 5: 18
or conventional truths – as Jacqui does, King Mob indulges in and identifies with them, and is thus stuck in samsara. Another scene that highlights this is one where King Mob shoots a Buddha statue and says “Meditate on that”\(^{90}\).

The workings of Karma are clearly exemplified on several occasions in the series. A first occurs in volume two, a mere couple of issues following the one where King Mob broke into an Outer Church facility to free Dane, mercilessly murdering several troops in the process. When the same troops have King Mob and his fellow Invisibles surrendered, one of them says: “Let’s get in there and pay back some Karma”\(^{91}\). Similarly, when two Japanese agents torture Takashi to retrieve the secret to time travel, King Mob responds by murdering them in an exceptionally ruthless fashion. When reprimanded by Ragged Robin, he says: “Ethics went flying out the window when he slashed the kid’s face from Alaska to Tierra Del Fuego!”\(^{92}\). Furthermore, the Japanese villains described themselves as agents of Karma, using the idea that others’ Karma should be balanced as an excuse for their sadistic actions and methods in the same way that King Mob uses his supposed enlightened position as an excuse for inflicting violence. What these scenes reveal is that intentional action always begets more intentional action, illustrating the notion of an endless Round of birth-and-death. Because one person identifies with a self, he performs an action that inevitably involves others so as to alter the world according to his/her wishes. The other who was affected by the action, now identifies with a violated self and reacts with more intentional action. And so on and on it goes. If all parties were to give up the self and see ultimate truth rather than egoic illusions, they would also break the Round that characterizes samsara. That ego, rather than a realization of truth, underlies King Mob’s actions, is also suggested by the fact that he oftentimes tags his name with graffiti on the scenes of his crimes.\(^{93}\)

\(^{90}\) 5: 80
\(^{91}\) 2: 13
\(^{92}\) 5: 66
\(^{93}\) A similar cycle of actions is depicted in *The Filth*. The Hand, an organization that fights everything that is considered ‘abnormal’, creates its adversaries by dispelling them. The act of creating the categories of self and other are portrayed as the cause of the conflict between the two, meaning the categories themselves are not considered to be ontological facts. In a self-perpetuating fashion, the constructs become real only by assuming them and by the fact that individuals let their actions and decisions be steered by them. Furthermore, like King Mob’s ruthless methods mirroring and eliciting the violence of the adversaries he attempts to fight, officers of The Hand – representing normality – wear the most outlandish, Day-Glo colored costumes, and when fighting a crazed porn director/sex criminal, The Hand punishes him by means of sexual assault. As Singer points out: “The Filth questions the morality of its heroes until it is impossible to distinguish them from the threats they are supposed to contain” (*Grant Morrison*, 183). The distinction between the ‘normals’ and the ‘abnormals’ is ambiguuated, suggesting that by trying to fight the other side, the other side is sustained.
King Mob’s character does evolve throughout the series however. Near the end of *The Invisibles*, he attains insight into the nature of his actions, and says to Jacqui on the telephone: “I killed all those people because they didn’t agree with me… Nobody hates Lara Croft when she shoots tigers and soldiers”\(^\text{94}\). The catalyst for this insight was King Mob getting shot, an occurrence that induces a Zen-like state of mind. He says: “The zen bullet… Zen bullet hits you and… everything becomes… just as it is, for the last time… No matter where you fire, you hit yourself”\(^\text{95}\). It seems then, that he has given up the notion of a self that underlies the principle of Karmic action, and has thus taken up a position similar to the one of Jacqui who is aware of the unproductive and pernicious workings of intentional action. In claiming that you can only hit yourself no matter where you fire, he implies that he has given up the distinction between self and other. He has entered an experience where there is only the totality of being, where everything is ‘just as it is’, as he puts it. In other words, he has come into contact with ultimate truth, with nirvana. By giving up intentional action, King Mob frees himself from the Round of birth-and-death.

**The Epistemological Implications**

That the crux of Buddhist thought is essentially a denial of the subject-object duality brings with it quite significant epistemological implications. The essence of the non-conceptual awareness that characterizes nirvana “does not distinguish between subject and object and does not construct experience into individuated objects with characteristic properties”\(^\text{96}\). The corollary of there being no distinctions within ultimate reality is that knowledge of reality is inherently impossible because knowledge is always of a dual structure, distinguishing between knower and known\(^\text{97}\). The very notion of knowledge relies on the presupposition of a subject – or knower – that is clearly separate from the object, or what is known. This explains why the fundamental ungraspability of reality is an essential component of Buddhist thought. As logic and meaning are properties of thought and language but not of the world as it is, such means can only occlude and never adequately grasp reality\(^\text{98}\). No matter how sophisticated a symbolic model of reality is, it can never be a misinterpretation because the very structure and presuppositions of such models contradict the world.

\(^{\text{94}}\) 7: 237  
\(^{\text{95}}\) 7: 220  
\(^{\text{96}}\) D’Amato. “Why the Buddha Never Uttered a Word”, 44  
\(^{\text{97}}\) Jayatilleke. *Early Buddhist Theory of Knowledge*, 41  
\(^{\text{98}}\) Watts. *The Way of Zen*, 73
it attempts to describe. The subject finds itself within the totality of Being, the supposed object, which means it can never describe that totality from the external point of view that is a condition of knowledge.

Such epistemological quandaries are bestowed with much attention throughout *The Invisibles*, as the series continually ambiguates the division between subject and object. The first time Dane encounters the Barbelith entity, for instance, it asks the following question: “Which side are you on? The soul is not in the body. The body is inside the soul”99. On the page, we see a Möbius strip (a recurring symbol throughout the series). Singer interprets the image as a suggestion of “continuity, not opposition, between the physical and the spiritual”100, but it may also be interpreted as alluding to the relation between subject and object, or self and other. Rather than separate, they are inextricably intertwined, like the two sides of the strip, or two sides of the same coin. There is no ‘soul’ or self that finds itself in the world, as though it were put there from somewhere else; the self itself is the world and consequently, the world is also the self101.

Seen in the context of the scene, the image of the Möbius strip relates specifically to the nature of perception, suggesting that there is no such thing as an immaculate observer that perceives things as they objectively are. Instead, the series claims that the subject always has an active role in the creation of what is experienced, illustrating that “human experience is determined as much by the nature of the mind and the structure of its senses as by the external objects whose presence the mind reveals”102. True, objective knowledge is therefore impossible, because one can only have access to the experience that arises out of the meeting of subject and object. *The Invisibles* illustrates this by having the characters encounter higher-dimensional creatures, such as Barbelith, which different individuals perceive in radically different ways. As King Mob theorizes: “Every nervous system makes its own model of the event: satanic abuse, shamanic trial, temporal lobe epilepsy… whatever. I don’t know if they’re aliens or time travelers or neural spasms”103. And Dane, less eloquently: “They’re different all the time, aren’t they? Sometimes you see them like aliens or

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99 2: 194  
100 *Grant Morrison: Combining the Worlds of Contemporary Comics*, 102  
101 *The Filth* illustrates this by portraying the external world as literally an extension of the body, and vice versa, the body as an extension of the world, so that the distinction between the two becomes meaningless. The reader has no clue as to what is part of the protagonist Greg Feely and what is not. It seems a likely possibility even, that the entire narrative of *The Filth* is a depiction of the ‘Feely (subject) + World (object)’ total experience.  
103 7: 129
monsters—or else they’re ancient gods or fairies or some shite”104. Both statements affirm the creative role of the subject in the creation of experience and thereby render subject and object dubious ontological categories. The spotless duality necessary for true knowledge is not fulfilled.

Similarly highlighting the role of the subject in the creation of reality is the depiction of different temporal experiences. As Singer points out: “Time in The Invisibles may be simultaneous, yet it is anything but homogenous”105. Within the synchronic universe that the series depicts, various modes of experiencing time are portrayed because the subject always plays a part in the creation of experience. For example, some images show a character multiple times in a single frame, moving through a continuous space and thus conflating several instances of time into a single panel to dramatize the unique temporal experience that is occurring106. The slow, relaxed walk of Lord Fanny is depicted in such a way to highlight how unmoved she is by the judgmental looks that are cast in her direction. Likewise, “discontinuous transitions capture the scattered attention of drug use, alien contact, and other altered states of consciousness, while cascades of tightly focused panels show the adrenalized intensity of movement and physical exertion”107. During a scene of intense conflict between Sir Miles and King Mob, for instance, the frames of the page overlap108, as if to suggest that too much is happening in too short a span of time to be able to process it all. In a scene where Boy fights two police officers, the frames overlap in a similar fashion and are furthermore tilted and shaped like parallelograms rather than the standard rectangles to reflect the confusing and overwhelming nature of the actions. Moreover, the depiction of King Mob grabbing a gun out of the air while doing a backflip is done through a collection of frames that mimic his bodily spin and that highlight every detail of the action, creating the sense that all of it happens quite slowly, while in measured time no more than two seconds could have passed. Formal experiments such as these highlight the relativity of temporal experience.

The use of form to suggest subjective experience is not merely employed to reflect different modes of time perception, though. The above examples are part of a wider stylistic technique utilized in The Invisibles to render the impossibility of knowledge tangible. Although the syncretic mixture of styles used in the series can partially be explained away by the fact that several artists worked on

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104 7: 92
105 Grant Morrison: Combining the Worlds of Contemporary Comics, 104
106 Ibid, 104
107 Ibid, 104
108 3: 71
the series during its six-year long run, it is nonetheless evident that differences in style serve thematic purposes. Cogent proof of this can be found in the next to last issue, which utilizes a huge amount of different styles in the span of a mere couple of pages. On one page, for example, King Mob is depicted in a regular, more or less realistic fashion, while the next the image of him is reminiscent of a digital infographic. Similarly, one scene begins in a somewhat sketchy, mimetic style, making use of detailed shading and earth tones, while the next two pages are quasi-cubistic and employ strikingly bright greens and blues. A few pages later, the images are noticeably less angular and contain no shading at all, and so on it goes. Also noteworthy is the singular issue that is devoted to Boy’s backstory, which is stylistically distinct from all others parts of the series because of its murky color palette and the way monochromatic colors fill up entire spaces, thus creating an entirely different emotional tone that mirrors Boy’s emotional state. Likewise, volume five ends with an absurd coda drawn in a strikingly cartoony fashion, in clear juxtaposition with the realistic style of the preceding issues and at times black and white is used to reflect the bleakness of certain events.

The previous examples indicate that the series’ stylistic variety is part of a conscious strategy and it that there is thus a point to it. One the hand it reveals the role of the subject in the creation of what is perceived beyond the temporal dimension of experience, namely emotional experience in general. The different styles create different worlds, reflecting that the kind of reality experienced is highly dependent on the nature of the subject because experience arises out of the meeting of subject and object. Because subject and object cannot be clearly separated, the series denies the utopian notion of an objective reality that can be discerned and understood. By depicting different

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109 7: 218-219
110 7: 241-243
111 7: 248
112 3: 129
113 Hence also the critique of realism in *Flex Mentallo: Man of Muscle Mystery*. As a poetical metareflection on the state of comics, the narrative comments on a trend in the medium that demands realism in comic books, importing the supposedly grim outside world into the narratives and thus giving the imaginative faculties less free reign. The underlying notion is of course the pretention one can know ‘the’ world, for which, as we saw, a clear division of subject and object must be assumed. Morrison, however, does not believe that there is one reality that can be known and in which all subjects partake. All attempts at realism are doomed to fail because they disregard the role of the subject in the creation of experience, so that even the most realistic comics fail in their mission—they have to be read by different subjects, after all. Thus, in the storyworld of *Flex Mentallo*, fantastical characters that have been dispelled by the tyranny of realism, ask the protagonist to reanimate the world they inhabited. “No more barriers between the real and the imaginary” (94), they say. In the final issue, the comic proclaims to be “the first ultra-post-futuristic comic: characters are allowed full synchrointeraction with readers at this level” (123). The reader experience, for Morrison, is fundamentally the result of the subject and object’s convergence.
empirical worlds without ranking them in terms of truth-value, *The Invisibles* also displays a deep suspicion to authority of all kinds, including narrative authority. The series nominates a great variety of narrators, including both central characters and peripheral figures that have no great importance to the story. This not only reflects the impossibility of one objective reality but likewise transposes authorial control from Morrison to the characters and eventually to the reader who must interpret the narrative for him-/herself, as if to say that there is not ‘one’ *The Invisibles*, but only a particular subject’s reading experience of *The Invisibles*¹¹⁴.

On the other hand, the mixture of styles is one ingredient of the larger metareflection on the nature of representation, asking the question whether reality can be depicted through symbolic or iconographic means. As mentioned, essential to Buddhist thought is that such a thing is impossible, that reality cannot be grasped by mediation of the mental faculties. The quick succession of differing stylistic registers reflects exactly that by exposing the reader to all kinds of realities, none of which are ‘it’. By drawing attention to the comic’s artificiality, the series highlights the impossibility of objectively representing reality¹¹⁵. In this respect, one page in *The Invisibles* has a great deal of significance. It depicts King Mob who attempts to explain the workings of a higher dimension to Ragged Robin. In doing so, he flips over a frame on the page, makes different frames overlap and has other frames pierce each other, saying: “Beyond this, things are going on that we can’t even conceptualize”¹¹⁶. The scene points out that the medium of comics is a form of representation that cannot grasp the world beyond the comic. True representation, in other words, is impossible. Representation can only fathom representation, not what it is supposed to represent. Significantly, the backdrop of this page is entirely white.

The role of psychedelic drugs in the series likewise dramatizes the active role of the subject in the creation of experience. As Garlington says:

> [P]sychedelics are frequently utilized in the series as a device to retain the ontological uncertainty of the text. This is achieved by displaying the characters’ inability to determine whether what they are seeing is a supernatural phenomenon or some

¹¹⁴ Singer. *Combining the Worlds of Contemporary Comics*, 106
¹¹⁵ Though it might seem that way, none of this contradict the Buddhist notion of ultimate truth. Buddhism would not claim that the experience of nirvana is tantamount to reaching an objective reality. Rather, it is an experience that is characterized by the lack of interpretation, of mediating experience through a rational, symbolic grid that deforms said experience through the false presuppositions it contains. As we saw, nirvana is an experience of utter not-knowing. Ultimate truth is absolute in that it is a direct experience of pure, undistorted subjectivity, not an encounter with objective reality. Because it is not deformed, it is absolutely true, but that does not make it objective.

¹¹⁶ 5: 52
extraordinary result of the ambiguity produced by psychedelics’ intermingling of subjective and objective.\textsuperscript{117}

Here one must nuance that psychedelics do not so much cause the intermingling of subjective and objective as they exacerbate and thus draw attention to the intermingling that is already a fact. In any case, the point is that the usage of mind-altering chemicals in the comic reveals the distinction between subject and object to be questionable. For instance, when Dane and Tom O’Bedlam smoke the psychotropic blue mold, they promenade through London and find that their experience of the city is radically different compared to before. Marveling at his hallucinations, Dane asks: “But what about the real world?” Tom O’Bedlam answers: “You don’t think this world is any less real than the one you left, do you? Everything that ever happened to you is real, even your dreams”\textsuperscript{118}. What O’Bedlam alludes to is the common misconception that our regular experience is ‘real’ and ‘objective’, uninfluenced by distorting factors, which as we saw above is not the case. It is a common assumption that because regular consciousness is our default mode of consciousness, it is somehow more metaphysically valid than others, but no external, objective reference point is accessible to us to be able to make such a claim. Consequently, dreams may not so easily be dismissed as mere fantasies either. As all input is filtered through the subject, dreams cannot strictly be separated from reality because both reality and dreams are equally internalized. Conversely, dreams cannot so easily be separated from the external because sensory input of the world – supposedly outside the subject – is drawn upon in the construction of dreamscapes. What O’Bedlam’s comment does is stress how it is impossible for the subject to objectively judge reality and thus form knowledge of it. As the subject is as much object as subject and vice versa, one can assume no more than the direct, unmediated and total experience that is occurring from moment to moment. It may be no coincidence that during their trip, Dane and Tom see Urizen, Blake’s creation, who as we saw stressed the primacy of experience.

In several scenes, moreover, the consumption of LSD also creates an entirely different experience of time in the users, in line with our discussion of temporal perception above\textsuperscript{119}. For instance, when Dane, King Mob, Mason and Emilio undergo a trip on a mesa in Mexico, their regular, linear perception of time is confused. In one frame set during the daylight, Emilio asks:

\textsuperscript{117} “A Context for the Supercontext: On the Function of Psychedelics in Grant Morrison’s The Invisibles”, 60
\textsuperscript{118} I: 68
\textsuperscript{119} A massive dose of LSD likewise induces the aforementioned temporal experience of the protagonist in Flex Mentallo: Man of Muscle Mystery.
“Did anybody see the wine? I was drinking it a minute ago?”. The next frame features him gulping from the bottle with a starry night’s sky in the background, and in the frame following that one, Dane responds: “That was hours ago, man. When you were sick. Remember when you took that second tab of acid?”120. Likewise, King Mob asks “Is it dawn?” during the daytime. In the next frame, set at night, Mason responds: “It’ll soon be dawn”. When the trip has ended, the characters leave the mesa, but the page ends with a close-up of King Mob asking: “Is it dawn yet?”121. That a simple chemical can so radically alter perception draws attention to the active role of the subject in the creation of experience.

Furthermore, it is a well-known fact that psychedelic substances have the potential of inducing experiences of eksana and ‘ego death’122, which might be another reason why they are so prominently featured in the series. They are potential catalysts for an experience of ultimate truth. King Mob and Jacqui, for example, describe how under the influence of magic mushrooms they experienced a universe outside of time where everything was perceived as part of everything else123. The backdrop to this description, significantly, is an image of the liquid mirror creature. Not coincidentally, Morrison described the transcendence depicted at the end of the series as a never-ending, individuality-dissolving acid trip124.

Language, like psychotropic chemicals, is also portrayed as a technology with the potential to alter people’s perceptions of reality125. This issue is binal. One the one hand it deals with the already discussed topic of thought structures – which are to a great extent linguistic ones – that occlude ultimate reality because of their erroneous presuppositions. What we have not yet discussed, however, is how models of reality may be consciously manipulated and exchanged for others so as to alter the subject’s mode of experience. The series seems to be a proponent of what Robert Anton Wilson called ‘model agnosticism’126, an approach to all models that is as skeptical as it is

120 4: 35
121 4: 38
122 In Flex Mentallo: Man of Muscle Mystery, a junkie injects himself with the fictional drug ‘krystal’, which launches him into a cosmic state of consciousness. Subsequently, he realizes that he is “Everything everywhere” (36). Krystal dissolves the boundary between inside and outside, self and other. The same dissolution must, according to the comic, be the catalyst for the new age of storytelling that dispels realism and instead allows full ‘synchrointeraction’ between reader (subject) and comic book (object).
123 5: 21
124 Qtd. in Garlington. “A Context for the Supercontext: On the Function of Psychedelics in Grant Morrison’s The Invisibles”, 65
125 Ibid, 60
126 The term actually stems from the Copenhagen Interpretation of quantum physics. Wilson transposes the insights of the Copenhagen interpretation to the domain of mind.
openminded. Based on the notion that no model of reality can ever be equated to ‘it’ and the fact that the models we adopt largely determine the way in which we experience reality, model agnosticism treats such models purely as mental tools that help the subject navigate him/herself through reality and which may reveal aspects of experience that were previously unknown. In other words, you pick your model based on whatever purposes or desires you may hold. Hence the reference to Discordianism by the character Coyote, who claims to be an adherent of the movement—Discordianism was a half-serious mock religion in the sixties of which Robert Anton Wilson was a prominent member and which essentially stated that nothing is literally true because everything boils down to interpretation. For instance, the Discordian religion rejects its own Aneristic and Eristic principles, respectively the idea that the universe is ordered and that it is inherently chaotic. Their point is that when utilizing a model that depicts the universe as orderly, signs of order will be found, and vice versa for a model that postulates chaos.

By changing the subject, the totality of experience is correspondingly altered, which might be the meaning of a maxim that recurs throughout the series: “As above, so below”. Or as Barbelith says to Dane: fix yourself and the world will follow. We already saw an example of this above: King Mob altering his ego-construct (his ‘self-model’) and thereby altering his personal reality, but The Invisibles is replete with such examples. For instance, different religions are used throughout the series as a tool rather than as a reified system of belief. King Mob ‘worships’ the Hindu God Ganesha at one point, while in an earlier scene he literally deifies John Lennon and thus lives in a universe entirely different from the Hindu one. Goodwin points out, moreover, that The Invisibles makes use of Hindu, Vodou, Brujería, Christian, Native American, and popular culture imagery to reflect the active indulgence in such religious multiplicity.

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127 Wilson. *Quantum Psychology*, 50
128 Wilson. *Cosmic Trigger I*, 57
129 Ibid, 58.
130 3: 15
131 Goodwin. “Conversion to Narrative: Magic as Religious Language in Grant Morrison's *Invisibles*”, 260
132 4: 32
133 1: 26
134 “Conversion to Narrative: Magic as Religious Language in Grant Morrison's *Invisibles*”, 267. This notion is also relevant for the poetics explicated in Flex Mentallo: Man of Muscle Mystery. Opposing the hegemony of the realistic paradigm, the ‘ultra-post-futurist’ age of comics must allow as many worlds as the imagination can conjure up. The Absolute, an amorphous entity that gradually destroys the multiverse and the villain of the story, symbolizes the destruction of multiplicity by the demand to make everything ‘realistic’. 
Likewise, the series concocts several fantastical languages that radically alter the experience of those who learn to speak it, indirectly addressing the relativity and shortcomings of regular language\textsuperscript{135}. When the Invisibles penetrate an underground base, for instance, their adversaries “[h]it them with some vocabulary”\textsuperscript{136}, by which they mean an alien language that makes the characters witness things that they are unable to comprehend. “There are… things all around. Things you never see because you don’t have the words, you don’t have the names”\textsuperscript{137}, they are told, and: “Reality is all about language”\textsuperscript{138}. Similarly, the Invisibles drug an Outer Church demon with a substance that erases the distinction between language and reality. They subsequently destroy the creature by aiming a toy gun at it that shoots a flag with the word ‘POP’ on it, “making the scene one of the most dramatic illustrations of a recurring argument about the power of language to shape our perceptions”\textsuperscript{139}. At the same time, though, language is utilized by the Outer Church as means of suppression. When torturing King Mob, Sir Miles calls the alphabet “the root mantra of restriction”\textsuperscript{140}. Indeed, the series depicts regular language as a ‘slave language’\textsuperscript{141} that keeps the subject in check, affirming that the Outer Church aims to defends the metaphysical status quo of the standard picture\textsuperscript{142}, while the Invisibles want to transcend it. As Tom O’Bedlam laments: “Language hypnotizes us and traps us in little labeled boxes”\textsuperscript{143}.

**Performativity**

If all forms of identity are mere constructs, then identity is always performative. King Mob and Boy adopting radically different ego-constructs already illustrated this, but the thematization of gender and drag in *The Invisibles* relates to this issue as well. The character of Lord Fanny, a crossdressing witch who would biologically be classified as male, likewise gives expression to the idea that rather than there being such a thing as an essential identity, all notions of identity – including gender

\textsuperscript{135} Singer 16  
\textsuperscript{136} 5: 214  
\textsuperscript{137} 5: 215  
\textsuperscript{138} 5: 212  
\textsuperscript{139} Singer. *Grant Morrison: Combining the Worlds of Contemporary Comics*, 118  
\textsuperscript{140} 3: 63  
\textsuperscript{141} Ursini. “Language and Thought in The Invisibles”, 22  
\textsuperscript{142} When the individuals you want to subjugate identify with the subject you create for them, it is of course easier to control them. It would be fruitful to study the presence of Althusserian views on ideology in the series, particularly his theory on interpellation, which states that “regimes or states are able to maintain control by reproducing subjects who believe that their position within the social structure is a natural one” (Lewis. “Louis Althusser”).  
\textsuperscript{143} 1: 102
categories – are conceptual inventions. Lord Fanny seems to embody Judith Butler’s theories on gender identity, which state that the idea of an essential gender is the product of “a discourse of primary and stable identity”\textsuperscript{144}. The corollary of her contention is that gender or really any kind of identity formation can neither be true nor false, as it is nothing more than the construct itself embodied by the subject who adopts it. The subject is thus seen to be an effect and not a cause\textsuperscript{145}, in the same way that, as we saw, Buddhist thought thinks of persistent identity characteristics as the result of self-perpetuating cittas or mindsets, rather than those mindsets being the expression of an essential self. Drag, for Butler, “fully subverts the distinction between inner and outer psychic space and effectively mocks both the expressive model of gender and the notion of a true gender identity”\textsuperscript{146}. It parodies the notion of an original ego, which is considered to be an imitation without an origin. In other words, the distinction between self and other, which generates binaries such as male and female, heterosexual and homosexual, is seen to be a construction that does not reflect any discernible reality except the reality the construction itself creates.

Lord Fanny’s character is thus another means to give expression to the illusory nature of ego. At several moments, she directly or indirectly denies the notion of an enduring, essential self. For example, when someone comments that she does not seem herself, she responds: “Myself? When have I ever been myself, darling?”\textsuperscript{147}. Similarly, when confronting an Outer Church member called Quimper with his mechanical conceptualization of the universe, she comments: “I have been a boy, a girl, a whore, a sorcerer…”\textsuperscript{148}. She criticizes the Outer Church view of the standard picture, which reifies a model of a reality that consists of different, clearly defined parts. In wanting to make everyone fit ‘the machine’, as he calls it, Quimper assumes essential selves as part of that machine. In other words, he considers the status quo discourse to be ontologically valid and thus denies any conceptualization of identity that deviates from that discourse. By making the above statements, however, Lord Fanny rejects such a view by highlighting how one can diverge from standard identity discourses. The name ‘Lord Fanny’, a male title combined with a female surname, likewise disrupts the notion of essential gender categories\textsuperscript{149}.

\textsuperscript{144} Butler 174
\textsuperscript{145} Salih 48
\textsuperscript{146} Butler 174
\textsuperscript{147} 3: 109
\textsuperscript{148} 6: 165
\textsuperscript{149} The character called ‘Boy’, being female, achieves the same thing.
Butler, in fact, suggested “a thoroughgoing appropriation and redeployment of the categories of identity themselves, not merely to contest ‘sex’, but to articulate the convergence of multiple sexual discourses at the site of ‘identity’ in order to render that category, in whatever form, permanently problematic”\(^{150}\), which is exactly what Lord Fanny does. Through its parodic power, drag deprives “hegemonic culture […] of the claim to naturalized or essentialist gender identities”\(^{151}\). Lord Fanny’s drag practices combat the Outer Church’s attempts to subjugate the world to its self-perpetuating discourse. When Orlando, an Outer Church demon, realizes that Lord Fanny is a crossdresser and not a ‘regular woman’, he expresses his disgust by saying: “What are you? What kind of thing are you?”\(^{152}\). Drag does not compute because it lies outside of the status quo discourse. The confrontation directly disrupts the ontology he is an acolyte of. When he is defeated, Fanny jokes: “I scared him. Obviously he’d never seen a trannie before”\(^{153}\).

Furthermore, performativity is part of the Invisibles’ larger project to cure humanity of the delusions of conventional truth, i.e. the standard picture. The creation of new identities, exposure to which would make the relative and artificial nature of self-constructs tangible, is one of the methods they employ to achieve this aim\(^{154}\). A male prostitute and anonymous member of the Invisibles states: “I dreamed of […] endless permutations of identity; boys becoming girls, girls becoming boys who do boys like they’re girls”\(^{155}\). In the same scene, he is recruited by the Marquis de Sade, who in the series is transported from the eighteenth century to the present and becomes a member of the Invisibles. His task is to realize the male prostitute’s dream: to craft endless permutations of identity. The new recruit says of de Sade’s instructions: “I am to be of no particular age, no particular sex. I am to be fluid, mercurial. He tells me I must slough my name and my past as a snake sheds its skin”\(^{156}\). In other words, he must go against hegemonic identity discourse so as to make new ego

\(^{150}\) Butler. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, 163
\(^{151}\) Ibid, 176
\(^{152}\) 1: 206
\(^{153}\) 1: 219
\(^{154}\) *Flex Mentallo: Man of Muscle Mystery* also inserts drag queens in the narrative to suggest that identity is plastic and moldable rather than a given. The protagonist is taunted by a self-destructive, cynical view on himself because he approaches the world from the aforementioned ‘realistic’ paradigm. At the end of the comic, though, he is liberated by realizing that that there is no clear distinction between ‘real’ and ‘imaginary’, and that by imagining himself in a different way, he can radically alter his experience. *The Filth*, likewise, features a woman character with a comb over to upset clearly defined identity categories. There is also a scene wherein the president is kidnapped and undergoes an operation that gives him breasts. One character ironically says: “That’s the great thing about democracy: Anyone can be president. And the president can be anyone” (190).
\(^{155}\) 1: 221
\(^{156}\) 1: 222
formations possible. The culmination of de Sade’s project is the creation of a new gender, termed “non”. One character, Thierro, who ‘is’ a non, is continually referred to by ‘him/her’ when talked about because nons lie outside of the discourse that postulates the traditional male-female distinction.

**Tantric Buddhism and Wilhelm Reich**

The portrayal of sexuality in *The Invisibles* also assimilates the notion of anātman/no-self and illustrates just how fundamental a concept it is to the worldviews expounded in the comic. The link with Buddhism is both direct and indirect, as there are several surface references to Tantric Buddhism on the one hand, and multiple mentions of the complementary theories of sexologist and psychoanalyst Wilhelm Reich on the other. But let us begin with the former. Tantra is a strand of Buddhism which (amongst other things) emphasizes that the medium through which ultimate truth can be realized is the body. Its esoteric methods are meant to lead the practitioner to a realization of no-self. Tantric sexuality, in other words, aims to induce non-conceptual awareness. This makes sense, as in the sexual act all attention is focused on sensation, on direct experience, and under the influence of such overwhelming stimulus it is possible to abandon the usual tendency to mediate, interpret and conceptualize. The same principle, after all, underlies the more common Buddhist practice of meditation: by putting all attention on something as insignificant and taken for granted as the breath, one goes against the drive to create meaning out of sensory input.

Surprisingly, this view on sexuality is very much reminiscent of Reich’s theories, something which Morrison realized: the issue particularly replete with overt references to the psychoanalyst is titled ‘Karmageddon: Tantrica’. Reich considers an experience of consonance between the self and the world to be a truer reflection of reality than a strict self-other division. The essence of healthy sexuality, for Reich, is a complete surrender to the somatic stimulus experienced during coitus, an utter “immersion in the streaming sensation of pleasure”. Those who are incapable of doing this, such as neurotic patients, suffer from ‘orgasm anxiety’, which is “the ego’s fear of the overpowering excitation of the genital system”. Such an attachment to the self, for Reich, as for Buddhist

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158 Duckworth. “Gelukpa.”
159 Ibid, 45
160 Reich. *The Function of Orgasm*, 105
161 Ibid, 161
thought, is seen to be unhealthy and the cause of suffering. Sexuality is “the biological function ‘out of the self’, whereas anxiety follows the reversed direction, a retreat back into the self, which Reich calls an ‘ego defense’. Ever psychic idea, i.e. all conceptual thought, can only hinder immersion into sensation. For this reason, he considers men whose main concern is to display their masculinity during intercourse to be sexually disturbed, despite their erectile potency. Because of their attitude, claims Reich, they experience little pleasure during orgasm and therefore undergo limited immersion into sensation. Their ego, their psychic idea of themselves, stands in the way.

Reich, however, interpreted the philosophy of nirvana as the product of sexual suppression or unhealthy sexuality. As the dissolving, perishing or disintegration of the self characterizes the notion of nirvana, he saw it as postulating a wish which could only be realized through the act of coitus and therefore connoted it negatively. Morrison, evidently, sees it differently, and does not consider a philosophy of nirvana to be mutually exclusive with Reich’s theories but rather as in line with each other. In the chapter subtitled ‘Tantrica’, de Sade presents his ‘tantric engines’ to Edith, which she describes as “perpetual motion orgasm generators”. She comments that de Sade’s “eyes blaze when he talks about the sex theories of Wilhelm Reich and he clearly sees his own applications of Reich’s work as the solution to the current world’s every problem.”

Something which affirms the above is the contrast between respectively the Outer Church’s and the Invisibles’ views on sexuality. The former seem to embody either sexual suppression or deviant, unhealthy sexuality as described by Reich. For example, the demon Orlando describes himself as coming from “[t]he place of the unfleshed”, one element that suggests the denial of sexuality by the Outer Church. More explicitly, the character of Gelt, an Outer Church agent and the headmaster of a correctional facility in which Dane is imprisoned at the start of the series, says the following to him: “Here we make little soldiers. Empty heads. Marching to a common beat. […] Two things we will make you; smooth between the legs, smooth between the ears”. Castration is one method through which the Outer Church attempts to subjugate its subjects. Indeed, ideals of

163 Ibid, 262-267
164 Ibid, 100
165 Ibid, 279
166 7: 110
167 1: 194
168 1: 40
asceticism and sexual suppression were considered by Reich to be essential tools to render citizens subservient\(^{169}\). Those who experience healthy sexuality after a long period of suppression, begin to experience moralistic attitudes – likewise described as an ‘ego defence’ – as alien and strange. Whereas before they performed work out of compulsive sense of duty, afterwards they felt a sharp protest against mechanical tasks\(^{170}\). Sexual suppression makes sense, then, for Gelt, who preaches conformity as the highest value and deifies “the great machine of society”\(^{171}\). By making it impossible for individuals to experience non-conceptual awareness through the medium of the body, as Tantric Buddhism suggests, the process of enslavement is streamlined because such restriction causes subjects to be strongly attached to their ego-construct. The Invisibles, on the other hand, counteract these attempts at suppression through, for example, Tantric machines. That the Invisibles are characterized by orgastic potency is likewise affirmed when Dane is about to utter the word of an alien language and warns Jolly that the word makes your skull vibrate and your nose bleed. She replies: “Fuck you. Sounds just like one of my orgasms. Say it”\(^{172}\).

The portrayal of sadomasochism in the series is similarly illuminating. When the characters enter the story of the *The 120 Days of Sodom*, for example, the most deviant, sexual cruelties are portrayed. The character of de Sade says to King Mob that in the novel he attempted to show what the deification of reason would lead to. Reich, significantly, thought sadism to be the expression of a lack of orgastic potency, which as we saw, an attachment to the psychic idea of the ego was a cause of. Aggression is not an instinct in itself but rather a means to satisfy instinctual drives. When such methods fail, though, the original goal is suppressed and aggression ultimately becomes a goal in itself, giving rise to sadism\(^{173}\). The four protagonists of the novel set themselves above their victims “like Gods”\(^{174}\). They see their victims as cattle, subjugated to such an extent that they no longer even have a notion of freedom. Reich called such self-aggrandizement “a biopsychic erection, a fantastic expansion of the psychic apparatus”\(^{175}\). In other words, in their sadistic practices they see themselves as absolute Subjects, the opposite of Tantric or Reichian self-abandonment.

\(^{169}\) Reich. *The Function of the Orgasm*, 232

\(^{170}\) Ibid, 175-176

\(^{171}\) 1: 31

\(^{172}\) 7: 176

\(^{173}\) Reich. *The Function of the Orgasm*, 157

\(^{174}\) 1: 174

\(^{175}\) Reich. *The Function of the Orgasm*, 254
The opposite side, masochism, is likewise the result of an attachment to the self. Because there is fear of becoming immersed in pure sensation, of abandoning the self during the sexual act, the masochist provokes punishment in an attempt to be brought to gratification against his/her own will\textsuperscript{176}. It should come as no surprise then that when King Mob and Ragged Robin are being psychically manipulated by Quimper, their sexuality becomes respectively sadomasochistic and masochistic. “You want to exercise power. I want to submit to authority”\textsuperscript{177}, Ragged Robin says. It seems that Quimper taps into and exploits King Mob’s aforementioned tendency towards ego-inflation – his ‘biopsychic erection’ – whilst simultaneously manipulating Ragged Robin’s fears of self-abandonment. Significantly, when breaking into Gelt’s facility to free Dane, King Mob shoots one of the guards in the genitals, linking his aggressive tendencies to the suppressive methods of the Outer Church\textsuperscript{178}.

**Transcendence**

As mentioned, humanity undergoes a collective transcendence at the end of the series under the influence of Barbelith, a mysterious alien satellite that most often appears in the shape of a red circle. The species goes from being blinded by conventional truth to attaining a realization of ultimate truth. As the illusions that occlude nirvana have everything to do with conceptual thought, according to Buddhist theory, it should come as no surprise that the Barbelith entity is consistently linked to linguistic systems, or more precisely: a removal of the metaphysics that is embedded in and implied by the structure of language. Mason, for instance, describes an alien abduction during which he got to drink from what he calls ‘The Holy Grail’, which contained a metalanguage that puts the limits of ordinary language into perspective\textsuperscript{179}. The content of the Grail is depicted as a swirling mass of red liquid, directly linking it to Barbelith. Moreover, a side character describes the approaching Barbelith revolution as “the alchemical marriage”\textsuperscript{180}, and claims it is about merging opposites, suggesting, in other words, that the binary distinction between subject and object will be seen to be

\textsuperscript{176} Ibid, 254  
\textsuperscript{177} 6: 24  
\textsuperscript{178} The view on sexuality expounded here is likewise compatible with the portrayal of unhealthy sexuality in *The Filth*: it is consistently characterized by a keeping separate of subject and object. Greg, for example, is addicted to pornography – characterized as obscene by Reich – meaning he (subject) never actually interacts with another person (object). There is always the filter of the television screen or a fantasy to keep him at a distance. When he does have intercourse, it is of a masochistic kind, his partner binding him and scratching his chest with her sharp nails.  
\textsuperscript{179} 4: 15  
\textsuperscript{180} 7: 206
a false dichotomy under the satellite’s influence. This also explains why Mr. Six, looking upon Barbelith in the sky, comments: “11:11 Precisely. Totality”\textsuperscript{181}. 11:11 means ‘completely switched on’ in binary language, likewise implying that the division between self and other will disappear in the post-Barbelith age\textsuperscript{182}. Indeed, it seems that once Barbelith introduces a new era for humanity, the Invisibles’ have attained their desired result: creating an awareness of the fact “that we use language itself as well as our own thoughts, beliefs and assumptions to create the illusory dualisms which become the source of all control and restriction”\textsuperscript{183}. Not coincidentally, the Invisibles are at one point described as an immune program that was triggered by Barbelith\textsuperscript{184}.

Indeed, the new age depicted in the final issue reflects the prediction of an enigmatic chess player that appears at rare instances throughout the series: “Ego scaffolding necessary to your development must now be husked before it constricts your growth”\textsuperscript{185}. The era before Barbelith is described as having been “tormented by individuality, cursed by 2000 years of ego”\textsuperscript{186}, whereas of the new era it is said that notions of territory and boundary have come to an end, having adopted Jacqui’s stance with regards to Karma: the Round of birth-and-death has been abandoned. Rather than an egoic paradigm, the status quo following Barbelith’s arrival is something called the ‘MeMePlex’: the possibility to alter the self as one sees fit, “or multiple personality disorder as a lifestyle option”\textsuperscript{187}. As Garlington points out, this notion seems to reflect “Timothy Leary’s LSD-induced awareness of the fictional nature of self”\textsuperscript{188}, which lead him to the realization that he could change personalities like sets of clothing. Morrison, as mentioned, described the post-Barbelith age as a never-ending LSD trip. It seems, then, that Morrison offers a creative conceptualization of nirvana to the reader. What now, now that human beings are freed from the metaphysical trappings of conceptual thought? For no other reason that it seeming like a good idea, The Invisibles seems to suggest that the plasticity of ego-constructs be fully exploited by actively creating multiple constructs out of which one can choose, to use them as nothing more than a mental tool to give shape to reality and experience. Since all identity is performative, the series seems to suggest that

\textsuperscript{181} 7: 247
\textsuperscript{182} Neighly and Cowe-Spigai. Anarchy for the Masses: The Disinformation Guide to The Invisibles, 208
\textsuperscript{183} James. “Opting for Ontological Terrorism: Freedom and Control in Grant Morrison’s The Invisibles”, 6
\textsuperscript{184} 7: 207
\textsuperscript{185} 7: 253
\textsuperscript{186} 7: 266
\textsuperscript{187} 7: 270
\textsuperscript{188} “A Context for the Supercontext: On the Function of Psychedelics in Grant Morrison’s The Invisibles”, 64
we push the potential of performativity to its limits whilst remaining entirely aware of the ego’s constructed nature.

The above reveals a frequent misunderstanding regarding the series’ ending. Singer claims that the series aspires to “transcend language and symbolic communication entirely” and Goodwin likewise says that language collapses and is no longer in use at the end of the series. All characters still communicate through traditional language, however, and evidently the MeMeplex employs conceptual thought. It is not so much that language is no longer utilized, but rather that language is put into perspective and seen for what it is. That does not mean, however, that it cannot be exploited as a mental tool. Nirvana, likewise, does not mean dispelling language or concepts, but merely a clear awareness of what they are:

A Buddha would employ language without falling under the spell of words and objects—employing concepts and language in perfect accordance with conventional usage, while remaining aware that ultimately there are no referential objects. […] a Buddha’s engagement with conceptualization and language has not ceased, but has been fundamentally transformed through the attainment of a nonconceptual awareness.

The new age is also characterized by a realization of eksana, or timelessness. Toasting to the approaching revolution, King Mob says: “Here’s to the blank badge […] No more then. No more now”, echoing Lord Fanny’s earlier praise of the oncoming age: “Here’s to… no future, darling!” Indeed, the new era is described as the “end of history”. It seems then, that a linear conceptualization of time is seen for what it is, a mental fiction projected onto direct experience. Post-Barbelith, humanity lives in an eternal Now, which might be why they call the new age the ‘Supercontext’: every type of conventional context creation is no longer subscribed to. Demarcations of ‘events’, contextualized in relation to a past and to a future, are seen to be no more than inventions of the mind. Within the Supercontext, there is only the totality of being.

189 Singer. *Grant Morrison: Combining the Worlds of Contemporary Comics*, 118
190 D’Amato. “Why the Buddha Never Uttered a Word”, 50
191 7: 209
192 5: 44
193 7: 266
The series ends with Dane talking directly to the reader. “There’s no difference between fate and free will”, he claims. After all, if there is no such thing as an essential self, then there can neither be an agent that is determined by outside forces nor one which makes decisions of its own accord. There is neither freedom, nor control, because there is only total, ineffable existence. Dane exclaims: “See! Now! Our sentence up”194, echoing the command the tutor gave to his pupils after presenting them with the chair conundrum. All around Dane, white circular snowflakes drop from the sky, and the final frame is the white void that represents understanding.

194 7: 285-286. That Flex Mentallo: Man of Muscle Mystery ends with a character being told to ‘Look up’ (125) and behold a sky full of fantastical characters, living in a world that has abandoned the realistic paradigm, might be an intentional link between the two comics. A realization of the oneness of subject and object is central to both endings.
Conclusion

I began the discussion of Grant Morrison’s *The Invisibles* with an analysis of a key scene that quite succinctly and abstractly hints at the philosophical soil out of which the narrative of the comic sprouts. It was seen that central to *The Invisibles* is a Buddhist denial of the metaphysics of ‘the standard picture’, which assumes a world that consists out of distinct parts or entities. By questioning the notion of something as simple and self-evident as a chair and by then transposing that same reasoning to the idea of a self, the series creates the possibility that humans are blinded by erroneous ontological presuppositions. Various depictions of characters transcending those illusions likewise suggest that they are the cause of all dukkha/suffering, illustrating the significance Buddhist thought may hold. In the moments that Dane reaches nirvana, he is relieved of all pain. This, in turn, explained why *The Invisibles* connotes the rational faculties – are at least the deceitful effect they can have on individuals – in such a negative fashion: they make the self-versus-other distinction possible, resulting in pain, cruelty and delusions.

With the core philosophical notion established, I moved on to other aspects of *The Invisibles* and illustrated how said notion was all-pervasive and essential to an understanding of nearly every component of the series. A first was the motif of characters embodying different identities, illustrating the constructed nature of the self. The character of Boy is made to understand the fictional nature of the ‘I’ by being indoctrinated with different ‘exo-self identities’ and King Mob actively creates his self-construct in order to alter his experience and reality. The same motif is also present in *The Filth* and *Flex Mentallo: Man of Muscle Mystery* (cf. infra), reflecting how important an idea the plasticity of the self is to Morrison. It is in fact essential to the series’ post-enlightenment vision depicted in the final issue.

Subsequently, I examined the view on time that *The Invisibles* puts forth. The analysis showed that the series considers all temporal categories to be illusory as such conceptual demarcations only exist within the mind and contradict the nature of reality, and because they exist only in relation to a non-existent self. There is only an ‘eternal Now’, meaning all things happens simultaneously. Understanding this notion gives us a grasp of the fragmentary narrative structure that characterizes not only many parts of *The Invisibles* – such as the ‘Sheman’ storyline – but other Morrison works as well. *Flex Mentallo: Man of Muscle Mystery*, for instance, employs a confusing, anti-linear structure that becomes easier to fathom once one understands that Morrison considers past and future to be products of the mental faculties. Furthermore, people’s belief in linear time/ or
'ego-narratives’ was shown to be the cause of Karmic/intentional action, which creates an endless and futile cycle of pain and suffering (samsara). The cyclical nature of conflict that is illustrated through the character of King Mob, as mentioned, is also central to The Filth.

That self and other might not be valid ontological categories was shown to also underlie the series’ questioning of the possibility of knowledge. Because experience is always the result of the subject and object’s confluence and because knowledge depends on a strict duality of both, true objective knowledge is unattainable. Fundamental to Buddhist thought is a realization that all proposed knowledge is illusory. The Invisibles dramatizes the active role of the subject through having different characters perceive the same ‘things’ – such as time or encounters with undefined entities – in radically different ways, and by revealing the influence psychotropic chemicals and language have on perception. This skeptical epistemological stance is also the key to understand many of Morrison’s formal experiments, such as the comic’s stylistic syncretism. They serve to reflect the subject’s involvement in the creation of experience, as well as to suggest that reality can never be accurately represented. The model can never be ‘it’, but models can be used to manipulate experience, giving rise to the series’ multiplicity. Different models that are in theory mutually exclusive can happily co-exist because they are no more than perception-altering tools and never reified. The same notion is present in Flex Mentallo: Man of Muscle Mystery, which as we saw disavows realism’s pretention that the universe can be known. Rather than picking one model, the comic is “all about leaving the possibilities open, rather than shutting them down, and not destroying parallel worlds, but keeping them alive”195. Likewise, The Filth presents a superabundance of incompatible realities to the reader to create a feeling of epistemological uncertainty196. The skepticism that the elision of subject and object generates seems to be an essential component of many of Morrison’s works.

It likewise explains the motif of crossdressing and gender ambiguation in The Invisibles. Drawing on Judith Butler’s theory of performativity, I illustrated how the presence of drag in the series negates an essentialist discourse on identity. In line with the Buddhist notion that the self is no more than a collection of entirely relative and moldable cittas or mindsets, the act of crossdressing exposes the constructed nature of all forms of identity by parodying the idea of an original ‘I’. It was seen that one aim of The Invisibles is to go against status quo gender/identity

195 Pedler, Martin. “Morrison’s Muscle Mystery Versus Everyday Reality… And Other Parallel Worlds!”, 261
196 Singer. Grant Morrison: Combining the Worlds of Contemporary Comics, 196
discourses so as to make new identity permutations possible. As mentioned, the same motif occurs in *Flex Mentallo: Man of Muscle Mystery* and *The Filth*—getting rid of restricting identity discourses seems to be an important ingredient of a large part of Morrison’s writing.

Next I discussed the significance of the view of anātman/no-self for sexuality by looking at the presence of Tantric Buddhism and the compatible theories of Wilhelm Reich in the comic. Simply put, healthy intercourse is characterized by self-abandonment and is non-conceptual in nature. Any type of sexuality that affirms the subject-object division, such as sadomasochism and masochism\(^ {197} \), is considered to be the result of an unsound attachment to the self. Sexual suppression, furthermore, is portrayed as a tool of the oppressor to keep the status quo and system-serving ontology intact. Having extracted a basic attitude towards sexuality, we now have a framework to analyze the portrayal of sexuality in other Morrison works. As mentioned above, the division of subject and object is central to *The Filth* and underlies the series’ depiction of neurotic sexual practices.

Lastly, the cryptic ending of *The Invisibles* was discussed, in which humanity has collectively undergone Buddhist enlightenment. No longer does the world confuse conceptual thinking/conventional truth with reality. The characters have attained an awareness of ultimate truth, but nonetheless utilize concepts to manipulate their reality. Fully realizing the constructed nature of the self, they actively create identity constructs to give shape to their experience. More than anything else, this is the message that Morrison wants to convey to the reader: that nobody is determined to be any certain way, that one can change selves as easily as outfits\(^ {198} \). The same notion is likewise the crux of *Flex Mentallo: Man of Muscle Mystery*, which ends with the protagonist abandoning his cynical and pessimistic self-construct and entering a world wherein superheroes can exist—a way suggesting the power of concepts and imaginary constructs to direct experience and action\(^ {199} \). As Pedler puts it: “Morrison’s mission isn’t to deconstruct the superhero […] It’s to make our reality as interesting as theirs, as surreal, full of every potential and possibility”\(^ {200} \).

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\(^ {197} \) Here the nuance must be made that criminal and deviant forms sadomasochist and masochist practices are referred to. The presence of fetish clubs and the portrayal of S&M in the sense of erotic gameplay suggests that the series certainly does not condemn such expressions of sexuality, provided that they are consensual.

\(^ {198} \) It is in fact well known that Morrison modelled himself after the King Mob character and purported to have radically changed his experiential world in the process (Singer. *Grant Morrison*, 14).

\(^ {199} \) Singer. *Grant Morrison: Combining the World of Contemporary Comics*, 142.

\(^ {200} \) “Morrison’s Muscle Mystery Versus Everyday Reality… And Other Parallel Worlds!”, 264.
In summary, I have illustrated how a Buddhist ambiguation of the categories of self and other provides the groundwork for *The Invisibles* and how an understanding of the view of no-self is essential to grasp nearly every component of the series, from its concept time to its epistemological position, to its views on sexuality. Although there was not enough room for an in-depth discussion of other Morrison works, references to *Flex Mentallo: Man of Muscle Mystery* and *The Filth* should have made it clear that these notions are important to much of the author’s writing. The map of Morrison’s worldviews extrapolated here may be used as a starting point for further research of both *Flex Mentallo* and *The Filth* and in all likelihood other Morrison titles, in order to expand our understanding of his oeuvre. *Flex Mentallo* in particular, being the author’s poetical statement, deserves much more attention than it has received up until this point, as it could reveal Morrison’s basic stance towards the medium and its potential and thereby help us grasp the complexity of his writings.
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