

Inkblots, Ire, and Institution: Psychogeography in the Art of Eddie Campbell and Alan Moore's *From Hell*

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To explore the rich thematic material packed into Alan Moore and Eddie Campbell's *From Hell*, it is necessary to engage with the gritty, violent, and often oppressive atmosphere that their graphic novel maintains from prologue to appendix. The monochromatic nature of the text (excluding the later colourized edition) in conjunction with Campbell's distinct art style gives each page a dreadful weight; faces blur, buildings become shadow become smog, and once the Ripper's first victim is butchered each line and inkblot echoes blood. Throughout Moore's literary catalogue, he exhibits a particular interest in place and its resonances—in psychogeography. Moore's interest invites an examination of these elements in *From Hell*, particularly given the uniquely volatile circumstances of its time and setting. The people of Whitechapel are shaped by the realities of the city surrounding them—so too is Whitechapel shaped by the people inhabiting it. In many cases, the ways the city has taken shape is testament to systemic influences, or particular individuals exerting their will upon it. In a more meta sense, the material qualities of the graphic novel—its art, its structure, the layout of its panels—are reflective of these influences. The ambiguity of Eddie Campbell's art—the way it can move with ease between immersive realism and abstraction—facilitate these dynamics within the text.

Despite appearing frequently in papers analysing the works of Alan Moore and other writers, the definition of psychogeography as it specifically pertains to literature seems almost as fluid as Eddie Campbell's art style. It may be a relationship between city and city-

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dweller—of “dialogue, in which both psychogeographer and city impact upon one another, often with the psychogeographer seeking to change the city” (Link 82). For others its utility may lie in “unveiling counterhegemonic stories like the vanity of dragging an obelisk from Alexandria to London as imperial spoils” (Ho 113)—or rather, in reading between the lines of how a space is constructed in order to understand the psychology of those who made it so. For Alan Moore, the answer would seem to be something of a mix. In a 2017 interview with Rob Vollmar, Moore describes his own interpretation:

Psychogeography would be the understanding that in our experience of any place, it is the associations, the dreams, the imaginings, the history—it is all the information that is relevant to that place which is what we experience when we talk about a place . . . [it is] a way of considering the landscape around us as more than its physical components, acknowledging that there is much more to all of this than the material world. The bigger part of our experience is spent in this vague, drifting, entirely immaterial world of associations. (Vollmar 29)

For the purposes of this essay, we can understand psychogeography as operating on two levels concurrently. Within the world of the text, it concerns the ways in which a place and its people change to reflect one another. More importantly, from a reader’s perspective—and taking into account *From Hell*’s fascination with architecture both in the narrative and in the structure of the novel itself—it simultaneously concerns how the visual presentation of the text’s setting and characters change to represent or emphasize its emotional and thematic points. Not only will the inhabitants of the story be reflected in the city of London,

but also in the architecture of the book itself, both supported by the choices that Campbell makes artistically.

As a crucial vehicle of this dynamic, Campbell's art ensures that the visual presentation of the world expresses the emotional experiences of the characters. Clear examples of this are scattered throughout the text with various characters, including Liz, Monty, and Lees. On the third page of chapter eight, Marie encounters Liz in the bar they both frequent, having just discovered the news of Annie Chapman's murder. In panels two and four, the lines forming the pattern in Liz's dress are quite clean, stripes that presumably are meant to represent the texture of the dress as it exists in the world of the story. By panel four, as Liz hunches into the table and shields her face from nerves, the lines in the dress have become jagged and messy, more clearly breaching the bottom of the panel. The physical properties of the world have shifted to reflect Liz's emotional state. Similarly, on page thirty-five of chapter eleven, Monty Druitt arrives home after having been abruptly fired. Across panels four and five, the shadows grow longer until the entire background of panel six is swallowed in black—just as he is joined by Bedford, the very neighbour who will cooperate with his future killers. Crosshatching is used to similar effect on page forty of chapter eleven. Monty, seated on a park bench in a fit of despair, is surrounded by the crosshatching that marks most pages of the text. The lines grow in number and darken across the panels, completely covering the background by the time Monty is urged off the bench and towards his untimely death by Bedford (Moore and Campbell 11.40.1-6). In both instances, the background reflects Monty's emotional state, and the looming danger surrounding him. As for the arrangement of panels themselves, the fourth page of chapter twelve utilizes the three-by-three grid *From Hell* regularly employs to reflect Lees' thoughts

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in the structure of the page. In panels four to six, the previously seen panel in which Gull insults Lees is repeated three times, creating a line across the page. As the reader's eyes move left to right in panels one to three and seven to nine, the insult looms parallel to every panel. The page itself is designed to reflect the way the interaction with Gull hovers ever-present in Lees' mind, influencing the actions he is taking in each panel. Perhaps the most definitive example of the page reflecting its characters is the watercolour panels of chapter five, contrasting Gull's morning with Polly's in both content and form. As the page moves back and forth between the dreamy watercolours of Gull's panels and the harsh, "designing sketchiness" (Fischer and Hatfield 75) that characterizes most of the book in Polly's panels, it is clear "Campbell understands that shifts in style constitute shifts in tone, focus, and implicit meaning" (Fischer and Hatfield 76). The material and emotional reality of the characters' lives are starkly different—Polly's dark and rough, Gull's bright and quite literally borderless—and the composition of the pages are designed to reflect this.

Much like individual characters, the depiction of the city itself changes in response to the Whitechapel murders. As *From Hell* is entirely in black and white, ink is used to depict blood. This creates an implicit invitation to perceive any splotch of ink as such. On page fifty-eight of chapter nine, Gull enters the home of Marie Kelly to commit his final and most graphic murder. Across the bottom row of panels, the still front of the house is repeated, the only difference being the shadows seeping further forward in panel nine—the darkness on the ground giving the impression of a pool of blood leaking out from beneath the door. In a cricket game opening chapter eleven, the sky itself seems filled with blood splatter (Moore and Campbell 11.1.6), and the sprays of water beneath a team of horses' feet evoke much the same (Moore and Campbell 11.10.7). In chapter nine, at the

postmortem of Catherine Eddowes, the stripes of the wallpaper visually mimic the trails of blood down the side of the autopsy table (Moore and Campbell 9.5.1). The architecture of the city is quite literally stained with blood—and the panels themselves are no exception. During and after the postmortem, certain panels dotted across the pages have, instead of neat lines, thick and blotchy borders that emulate blood (or, perhaps, the fake blood that characterized certain hoax letters sent under Jack’s name). If “a comic is an architected visual space” (Fischer and Hatfield 82), there is little doubt that the architecture of *From Hell* is thoroughly shaped by the carnage of its contents.

As the focal point of the entire story, it is no surprise that Gull himself exerts his own influence over the text. There are times, such as in chapter eight, when Gull is placed in panels that do not have borders (8.22.8). This gives the impression that Gull inhabits a space outside the confines of the panels, blending into the gutters that surround each square. In this particular instance, a scene in which Gull exerts power over the head of police to continue his killings, it is fitting that Gull’s influence would seem to creep across the whole text. Being one of the characters through whom the narrative is focalized, even Gull’s hallucinations act as a sort of expression of his power, visually dragging his surroundings into his own perception—like when Netley loses sight of him in the dark (Moore and Campbell 8.41.1-4), or Marie Kelley’s room becomes an operating theatre in which he can lecture readers (10.14.1-6). In the appendix for chapter ten, Moore explains facial mutilations, like those performed by Gull in some of the opening pages of this chapter, as a means for serial killers to “dehumanize their kill and rob it of identity” (Moore and Campbell I.33). It is notable, then, that this dehumanization carries into the art. On certain pages, such as the tenth page of chapter ten, the victim’s body in the bottom foreground of

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the shot ceases to look like a human body at all. It becomes indiscernible even as a corpse, a part of the scenery while Gull chats with a hallucinated Hinton (Moore and Campbell 10.10.1-9). The appendix of chapter ten, which considers the climax of Gull's power, is the only one not subdivided on the page—an interesting choice, perhaps indicating that Gull escapes in-depth scrutiny from even the book itself, in much the same way he avoids due process in the world of the story. Regardless, the structure of the book bends itself to Gull's will. In Campbell's style, corpses become blotches of black and white, and the ambiguity of faces means that Gull can even bear resemblance to Blake's monster if he so chooses (14.16.9).

Not even the material landscape is safe from Gull's influence—or, more broadly speaking, from patriarchal influence. Throughout *From Hell*, Gull is associated with oceanic imagery; from the looming presence of seagulls (Moore and Campbell 1.7.8, 8.5.4) to the sea boxing in Abberline and Lees in the epilogue (Moore and Campbell E.9.1-7), to water as negative space, bleeding into the city (8.5.4)—it is suitable that Gull would be symbolically associated with a natural force like the ocean given how Gull ascribes his actions to a kind of naturalism. “Gull imposes meaning upon locales, monuments, and churches to symbolically define the city and his actions” (Prince n.p.), impressing on both Netley and the reader a “mysticism” that holds “material foundation” (Link 86) in the systems and architecture of London. Of course, patriarchy is not natural—but Gull and his peers would do everything in their power to ensure that it seems so. Once again, the patriarchal systems that bend reality in the world of the novel are expressed in the book's own architecture. Hawksmoor's churches penetrate panel borders until the final page (Moore and Campbell 7.11.7, AII.24.5). In Monty Drutt's death scene, an outline like that of a bedframe stands in

the foreground (11.46.7), not dissimilar to the one in Marie Kelly's home (10.15.4). The two characters, Monty and Jack the Ripper's final victim are mirrored visually. The opening pages of chapter eleven move back and forth between the introduction of Monty and the discovery of the victim, placing them next to each other (11.1-4). Although they are up to this point completely unrelated in the world of the story, it bends itself to align them—bed and riverbed. In much the same way, the patriarchal systems of power in the text bend the truth to tie them together in a neat—and beneficial—bow.

Many of the text's disenfranchised characters are susceptible to a visual cohesion with the background—or rather, they are often at risk of becoming a part of it. From the borders of nameless background characters blending into the negative space of walls (Moore and Campbell 8.2.9) to more significant characters like Marie becoming inhuman blobs at a distance (Moore and Campbell 9.24.6), the victims of Jack the Ripper are especially endangered. The discovery of Polly's body transforms her from a human woman (Moore and Campbell 5.34.1) to a hardly noticeable blip in the crosshatching (Moore and Campbell 5.34-36)—the art once more reflecting the city's disregard for the victims' humanity in favour of the spectacle. By far the largest victim to this is the subject of the book's plot twist. The woman who dies in place of Marie Kelly is stripped of her life, her name, and her personhood; practically the first thing Gull does in his mutilation of her is to remove her bangs, the one feature distinguishing her from Marie (Moore and Campbell 10.5). The ambiguity of Eddie Campbell's art—the way it can confuse faces, and makes the women in particular difficult to tell apart—is what allows this twist to take shape. His style reflects the disregard both Gull and the public of Whitechapel, and even modernity, show to the

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murdered women—one could so easily be swapped for another—which, in a way, makes the reader complicit.

There can be no greater medium for the expression of theme than the relationship between form and content. The brilliance of *From Hell* lies, of course, in the marriage of Alan Moore's place-rich writing, laden with historical and emotional resonance, and Eddie Campbell's dynamic art style—the way it can offer intricately detailed architecture on one page and formless smears of ink the next, can move with ease between place and person and feeling. In much the same way a city and its people shape one another, a narrative will naturally be in conversation with its container—with its architecture. In both cases, Moore and Campbell urge us to notice the conversation, the changes, and especially the damn gulls.

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