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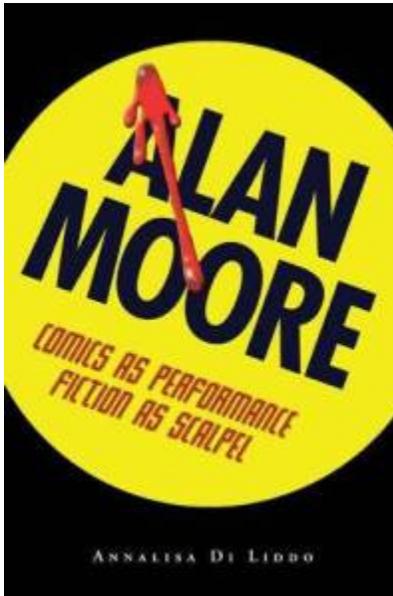
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Review of Annalisa Di Liddo's
Alan Moore: Comics as Performance, Fiction as Scalpel

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Di Liddo's *Comics as Performance* is best understood as a collection of intriguing chapters rather than one whole argument. The volume proceeds in four chapters with a short but interesting introduction and an equally brief conclusion. Taken individually, all of these discussions are genuinely interesting and critically sound, but the whole volume does not necessarily add up to one, singular conclusion.

The introduction employs the term "graphic novel" to refer to certain of Moore's books (e.g., *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen*, *Promethea*, *From Hell*, etc.) and then spends several dense pages reviewing previous attempts at defining the term to demonstrate why she has chosen it. The result is a useful discussion of the issues, largely formal and industrial, pertaining to the term, and a new definition that she synthesises from statements made by, among others, Sabin, Spiegelman, Eisner, Campbell, Moore himself, Baetens, Harvey, and Hatfield (15-21). The upshot is a definition that consists of three criteria: "thematic unity, large structure, and cohesiveness (21). Roughly speaking, these criteria refer to the notion that a graphic novel must articulate a coherent set of ideas that add up to a singular theme, have a degree of narrative complexity, and, finally, contain some kind of narrative structure that, perhaps only implicitly, involves one form or another of closure. The definition itself is somewhat based on questions of quality, which are always a bit subjective, but such is the nature of these kinds of definitions. The

definition is, thus, more useful as an applied theory than as objective truth, which makes sense given that its function is to propose a way of looking at Moore's books.

The first chapter contains an overview of Moore's formalism in terms of the comic-book form itself, self-reflexivity, and revisionist superheroes, an appropriate if by-the-numbers approach. The second chapter contains three, in effect, close readings on the theme of the Bakhtinian chronotope in *Halo Jones*, *From Hell*, and *Promethea*. If nothing else, this chapter actually examines *Halo Jones*, and almost entirely overlooked work in Moore's early career, but the chapter never quite explains why these three comics belong together or what they add up to. The third chapter is the most socially and historically engaged part of the book, as it addresses Moore's on-going discussion of what Di Liddo calls Englishness but might be more properly termed Britishness: the legacies of Empire and the Thatcher years. Thus, she makes the important point that these two eras within Moore's corpus are directly related in terms of the politics of domination and marginalisation, a very useful, critical connection, and a highly teachable one if one wanted to demonstrate the historicity of his work.

Finally, the last chapter talks exclusively about *Lost Girls*, at the time still a recent publication, in terms of pornography, and it returns to the chronotope, but the real point of discussing *Lost Girls* seems to be that it displays all of Moore's creative tricks in one, convenient volume. Teachers having trouble constructing a way to approach that challenging (and not altogether successful) book might find great use in Di Liddo's attempt to look at it as a coherent whole with a specific, conceptual core. The conclusion of *Comics as Performance* discusses the performance aspect of the book that last appeared in the introduction but does not significantly appear in the chapters. The concept seems as if it was important in constructing the whole text, but it does not actually come up all that often. Ultimately, it is simply not a necessary element of the book for the reader, though, because the individual chapters function quite well without it, which is why I contend that the book is more useful as a collection of individually interesting readings, albeit structured around a set of coherent themes, than as a fully integrated volume.

This description of Di Liddo's chapters should not be taken as damning with faint praise, however. The book is extremely useful to the Moore scholar; it contains a great number of individually coherent and fascinating analyses. It would be of particular use to a teacher working with Moore because it meticulously explains some of the more obscure elements of his work. Chapter 2's discussion of *From Hell* as "The Urban Chronotope," for example, describes the precise temporal play that *From Hell* engages in during Gull's murders, all culminating in the final murder and dissection in which Gull appears to travel through time to the 1980s (79-81). Teachers preparing lessons on *From Hell* can quite easily invert these methodical, detailed discussions in Di Liddo into questions to set in front of students: "When do Gull's visions occur, under what circumstances? What does he see and where does he go? How do the spaces that he visits reflect upon his highly patriarchal view of a cosmic order? What critique of that view does *From Hell* construct?"

That Di Liddo provides specific answers to these questions is useful, but that her work

implies these questions is crucial to any discussion-based pedagogy in which taking the time to discuss these kinds of questions would be more valuable than having ready answers to them.