

“WALK-ON PARTS”: THE DIMINISHED AGENCY OF GRANT MORRISON’S
SUPERHERO CELEBRITIES

by

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Submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements
for the degree of Master of Arts

at

Dalhousie University
Halifax, Nova Scotia
December 2019

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Dedication

Written with gratitude to my Mom, my Dad, and my Aunt Charlotte for their emotional
and moral support.

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Abstract

While several comic book writers have written superheroes as analogous to celebrities, Grant Morrison is the author who has done so the most frequently. Using *Zenith*, *Animal Man* and *The Multiversity* as its core examples, this paper suggests that Morrison's depictions of celebrities differentiates itself from others' by applying a situationist lens to fame. Morrison's work reflects Guy Debord's critique of celebrities' role in social life, wherein famous people, rather than being distinct individuals, have sacrificed their uniqueness in exchange for fame. Morrison's celebrities, instead of being able to use their public visibility to positively change society, are constantly impeded by the artifice which constructs their fame in the first place. As a result, they find themselves losing not just the ability for their words and deeds to impact the world, but their ability to express themselves as individuals, ultimately becoming unwitting upholders of the status quo.

Acknowledgments

This paper would not have been completed if not for:

The helpfulness and sheer patience of Anthony Enns, Kathy Cawsey and Jason Haslam.

The encouragement of Anne Higgins.

The Halifax Public Library staff's keen skills in curating comics and graphic novels.

“Walk-on Parts”: The Diminished Agency of Grant Morrison’s Superhero Celebrities

Will Riley

Chapter 1: Introduction

From the beginning of his career as a nationally published comic book writer, Grant Morrison’s work has had a recurring concern with fame and the public persona. Even before being an established writer for the Big Two—DC and Marvel Comics—Morrison was writing the figure of the superhero to be not just analogous to figures of “hard” power like policemen or soldiers, but also to figures of “soft” power such as media celebrities. The early stages of *Zenith* (1987), Morrison’s first full-length series, exemplifies him doing so with a primarily satirical bent. In a world where superhumans “were as much a part of the swinging ‘60s as Beatles or Twiggy” (*Zenith Phase One* 1.1), the titular protagonist is shallow and self-absorbed, more keen on using his superpowers to maintain the image and lifestyle of a rock star than fulfilling any traditional superheroic duties. When recruited to fight an extradimensional threat to humanity, *Zenith* swiftly tries to reject the call to action, seeing it as contradictory to his *real* priority: “what d’you think I *am*? Some kind of *boxer* or something? Why should I get my head kicked in for you? On Sunday, Magenta’s interviewing me for *Network 7*. Then there’s the Jonathan Ross special and the photo-session for *The Face*... and you want me to get in a *fight*? Forget it!” (4.4, emphasis in original)

Around the time of *Zenith*’s ongoing publication, Morrison’s character of a shallow glory-hound superhero was actually in good company. Across the Atlantic, Dan Jurgens had created *Booster Gold* for DC (1986), in which a washed-up athlete from the future travels to the twentieth century armed with a foreknowledge of historical events (not to mention various pieces

of futuristic technology), intent on becoming a superhero to gain wealth and fame. Earlier in the U.K, Peter Milligan's *Paradox!* (1984), one of Morrison's avowed inspirations for *Zenith*, had birthed what Milligan claimed in his 1987 introduction to be "a modern superhero for the modern eighties, both a product and a reflection of this era" (*The Best of Milligan and McCarthy* 12). For Milligan, this means making the central character of Al Cooper, "an ordinary guy with more looks than brains, with no taste for heroism but plenty for beer and infidelity" (12)—in other words, a fame-seeker with great self-regard. After he puts on the preternatural suit which gives him his powers, Cooper quickly begins posing in front of his own mirror: "Hi there, handsome," he says to himself. "what's a *hunk* like you doing in a place like this?"(18). While Cooper does fight a characteristically vibrant and outlandish cast of "Milligan-esque" villains, equally important are appointments for TV interviews, and his struggles with his duplicitous agent's ownership of his image rights.

While all these comics still work within genre conventions and depict their protagonists eventually performing heroic deeds (even if it goes against their own judgment), Morrison, Jurgens, and Milligan all point towards a similar skepticism regarding how our perception of heroism is *constructed* in the first place: it is media and publicity which precedes as the arbiter of who is "heroic" in this world. Any objective account of someone's actions is totally secondary. If such is the case, it makes sense to cut out the proverbial middle man and depict such archetypically heroic figures as media celebrities outright. What defines *Morrison's* depiction of this "super-celebrity" after *Zenith*, however, complicates this dynamic further. Rather than their fame being a sort of power that his characters seek out, over time fame proves to form a *disempowering* series unwanted restrictions that are imposed upon them, ones that they find incapable of escaping.

The works I have cited thus far are not the first to tease out the distinctions between “hero” and “celebrity”—they are simply among the first to add the prefix of “super-” to the equation. Both P.D. Marshall in *Celebrity and Power* and James Monaco in *Celebrity* follow a similar historical framework, arguing that, in a discursive sense, “before we had celebrities we had heroes” (Monaco, *Celebrity* 5). Marshall and Monaco both provide the mid-nineteenth-century examples of Ralph Waldo Emerson and Thomas Carlyle, who both attempted to define “heroes” as a specific category of people distinct from the “lesser order” of celebrities. While Emerson defines the hero by distinct individual genius, Carlyle categorized heroes into six distinct types: “heroes of the divine, prophetic, poetic, priestly, literary, and kingly orders” (Marshall 8), against which current famous people could be compared. While Marshall and Monaco treat this distinction between hero and celebrity in different ways, they both see the reality of fame as far less easily categorizable than their forebears did. Marshall nearly collapses this dualism altogether, seeing it more as a by-product of changing class structure, “articulat[ing] the separation of old wealth and new wealth” (5). A well-known person being a “celebrity” instead of a “hero” suggests that they in fact “embod[ied] the ideal type of hero that emerges from the mass audience” (8) and were therefore far less dependent on the older power structure, which the development of democracy and capitalism was replacing. Carlyle and Emerson’s insistence on the existence of a hero as something distinct from a celebrity is, to Marshall, an attempt to retain pre-democratic systems of merit within a new mass culture: “[T]his new power of determining value needs to be connected to (or critically confronted with) historical models of distinctive and important individuals, so that any new form can be truly and authentically validated. The danger of the new celebrity is that it has slipped the yoke of historical validation” (8).

Monaco, meanwhile, maintains that a difference still exists, defining heroes as people who “have *done* things, acted in the world: written, thought, understood, led,” whereas the far greater quantity of celebrities “needn’t have done—needn’t do—anything special. Their function isn’t to act—just to be” (5-6). However, rather than just breaking each famous person into dual categories, Monaco notes that the specific ways in which these figures are received can blur together or lead into one another. While he laments that “to a large extent, celebrity has entirely superseded heroism,” his complaint is

[n]ot that we don’t have heroes—we do, of course—but the qualities of our admiration are distinctly different, and the actions of heroes are often lost in a haze of fictional celebrity unrelated to the nonfictional heroism. Often the pure glow of celebrity comes first; action follows. Celebrity makes the accomplishment possible. (6)

Even in Monaco’s categorization, where heroes are indeed people whose status is defined by actual deeds, they are still necessarily surrounded by the artifice of fame, such that genuine merit and mere media glitz blur together.

In writing about *super*heroes, then, it logically follows that supercelebrities like Booster Gold, Paradax and Zenith would eventually emerge, regardless as to whether the status of hero is legitimately separate from celebrity or not. Multiple writers’ creation of superheroes who collapse the distinction between heroes and mere public figures injects a dose of irreverent honesty into the genre, even if they are treated as humorous exceptions living alongside more “genuine” superheroes. Despite the absurd vanity of *Paradax’s* Al Cooper, for example, Milligan still writes him as “a normal, working-class guy trying to hitch a ride on the gravy train that so many others were riding” (*Milligan and McCarthy* 10). Cooper’s non-compliance to classic

“heroic” qualities, while self-centred, maintains a sort of strange egalitarian quality, similar to Marshall’s vision of the celebrity as a “hero” of the mass audience, rising to prominence without the assent of old feudal or religious hierarchies. Monaco’s view that artificial celebrity could precede genuine heroism plays out in *Zenith*, *Paradox*, and *Booster Gold*; all three, despite having fame and fortune as their top priorities, still (sometimes reluctantly) end up performing legitimate heroic deeds.

What separates Morrison’s supercelebrities from these other characters, however, is that Morrison’s preoccupation with fame reflects his interest in situationism¹ and Guy Debord’s theory of the spectacle, “a social relation between people mediated by images”(4) that is so pervasive that media and images come to be imbued with a perceived autonomy of their own. According to Debord, people’s mediated and alienated perception of the world produces “the concrete inversion of life [and] the autonomous movement of the non-living” (2), and celebrities and fame were prime examples of the “non-living’s” autonomy. In *Society of the Spectacle*, for example “celebrities” are not just individuals who possess fame. They are people who adopt broad pre-existing archetypal “images,” becoming less unique as people in exchange for fame. In many ways, fame possesses *them*:

The agent of the spectacle placed on stage as a star is the opposite of the individual, the enemy of the individual in himself as well as in others. Passing into the spectacle as a model for identification, the agent renounces all autonomous qualities in order to identify himself with the general law of obedience to the course of things. (61)

¹ Morrison has alluded to Debord both directly and indirectly throughout multiple works, adopting situationist styles in his work’s aesthetic or disguising situationist theory in the language of science fiction or occult fantasy, The most famous example most likely being *The Invisibles*.

The actual human aspect of a celebrity, then, is almost vestigial, as all power and influence goes to the archetypes that people host. And these archetypes are closely related to power structures that maintain norms. Celebrities can thus be cultural texts who are only barely dependent on the actual people they claim to represent, and this relative independence can have uncanny and ghostly effects. For example, Debord frames Kennedy (or rather the Kennedy celebrity archetype) as an autonomous phantom, who becomes removed from the living, breathing, human being to “possess” his successor, Lyndon Johnson (61). Since the speechwriters, photo-crews, and PR men who supported him and his celebrity image still survived, so too did Kennedy as an *autonomous persona*, an emulatable model for others and an archetype that forcibly asserted itself into public life, supported not just by people’s memory of him but also by the influence of the United States’ massive media infrastructure.

This phenomenon of free-floating “celebrity” independent of the living human being that hosts it is in many ways appropriately transferrable to the superhero genre, even as the reader watches its protagonists perform a plethora of heroic deeds. The separation between the autonomous public superhero and the distinct private individual is frequently visible in the genre’s frequent usage of the premise of an “alter-ego,” and the trend of superhero identities being passed down to new inheritors. The actual creative labour of producing a superhero story itself, however, also demonstrates the autonomy of the superhero persona. Even if we put contemporary film adaptations to one side and focus just on their original medium of comic books, superheroes are already the product of a complex media infrastructure. A single superhero book is often designed by a committee, produced not only through a relationship between writer and editor but also between writer and artist, colorist, letterer and so on. This committee grows exponentially when we remember that most writers of superheroes are not their *originators*.

Superman, for instance, is 80 years old: writing a new *Superman* or *Action Comics* book almost always requires negotiating how much deference you show to the multiple generations of editors, writers and artists who have come before. In this process of creation, any single contributor responsible for a superhero disappears, and superheroes gain the same level of perceived independence as a Debordian celebrity archetype, this time not even requiring any individual living host to exert cultural influence.

Characters in Morrison's oeuvre are similarly subject to autonomous archetypes, as their identities, however fantastical, are often projected upon them by societal structures, rather than created by themselves. The importance and effect of their actual heroic deeds are also treated as secondary to their ability to fulfill the roles foisted upon them (and are sometimes even nonexistent). 1989's *Animal Man* can be seen as the starting point of this turn—depicting a character who genuinely wants to improve the world, only to find that his fame gets in the way of accomplishing that very goal. Morrison's far more recent (and far less sympathetic) chapter entitled "The Just" in 2015's *The Multiversity*, meanwhile, shows a world where superheroes' identities and fame have been detached entirely, to the extent that the deeds are done *for* them, and depicts the resulting dysfunction in the lives of people living under such a social structure, as well as the shallowness of those who have known no other way of living.

Chapter 2: Animal Man: Buddy Baker, Celebrity Advocate

In *Animal Man*'s final chapters, the character of Buddy Baker, after being dragged through a gauntlet of tragic experiences, up to and including his family being murdered, is given the chance to confront the true source of his misery: his own author, and the people who read him. In this confrontation, Morrison's chalk-white self-representation (who I will refer to simply as "Grant" for the sake of clarity) continuously demonstrates Baker's own lack of agency, controlling not just the events of his life, but his very identity. Soon after meeting Grant, the generally peaceful Baker is deliberately written out of character, throwing Grant through a window and killing him—only for him to instantly revive, the window to fix itself and Baker to snap back to his old self. "I can make you do *anything*," Grant tells him, "I mean, you're not really *violent*, are you? You've never really been one of those horrible characters with a *gun* in every pocket and too much *testosterone* [...] I thought we need some *action* at the start of the story just to keep people interested" (26.5-6).

The thematic thread in *Animal Man* most commonly recognized by comic enthusiasts regards Morrison's views on the state of the comics industry at the time, as it transitioned into producing darker and more "adult" fare. However, the modern academic consensus is that treating the work as simply a comic about comics is both quite limiting and not entirely accurate. Marc Singer claims in *Grant Morrison: Combining the Worlds of Contemporary Comics*, that "*Animal Man* is not solely concerned with metafiction, and Morrison applies its metafictional elements towards representing a host of thorny moral, ethical, and theological dilemmas (57)." A particular use of metafiction in this scene which Singer does not address, however, is how

Baker, as a person whose identity is created for him without his input, is analogous to his status as a celebrity, a simultaneous agent and subject to the spectacle of his world.

Animal Man was originally intended as a four-issue miniseries, and as a result the synopsis of those first four is fairly straightforward and contained: after a long time out of commission, Buddy Baker decides to recommit to being a superhero, and is asked to help a biological research lab under repeated attacks from B'wana Beast, another animal-themed character. Soon realizing that these labs are committing experiments that are unethical to animals and humans alike, Baker subdues B'wana Beast only to let him go free, resolving to commit his abilities to the cause of animal rights. Though *Animal Man*'s first arc was written to be self-contained, I am skeptical of the current tendency to isolate it from the rest of the work, as the way that Morrison frames it places emphasis on how the superheroes that inhabit it are, as in *Zenith* and *Paradox* before it, seen as media figures—celebrities—before they are seen as “heroic.”

Celebrity is consistently an ambient factor in the world of Morrison's *Animal Man*, adding secondary thematic elements to scenes dealing with an entirely different primary topic. An important arc features the pre-existing character of Mari Macabe, the Vixen. By merit of her animal-based powers alone, Vixen is already a straightforward addition to an *Animal Man* story. Yet Morrison goes out of his way to invoke her celebrity status through one of the Baker's neighbours: “that's Mari Macabe,” she exclaims, “she's one of the most famous fashion models in the country! See? She's in this month's *Vogue*, modeling the new Miyake collection” (10.16). Even Superman, for the most part treated by Morrison as a genuine hero in this world, may not be entirely pure: commercial merchandise has been made based upon his likeness and “brand”

(though we never see whether he consents to this): Buddy makes reference to a Superman night-light used by his son (14.20).

These elements of fame are first emphasised in *Animal Man* by initially placing Buddy Baker on the outside of the superhero clique looking in. In Morrison's rendition, despite having his powers for years, Baker's life and surroundings are those of an unambitious suburban family man. From this distant vantage point, the lives of bona-fide superheroes are presented to Baker and his peers in a totally mediated fashion: for his wife Ellen, certain superheroes are only remembered in relation to their media appearances: "What's that (group) with the weird-looking guy who was on *David Letterman*?...*Element Man*..."(1.6). Even this early in the story, however, we see hints of an underlying tension between the celebrities that superheroes are presented as and the potential for genuine heroism underneath. When discussing his future with Ellen, for example, Buddy holds out an issue of *Rolling Stone* with four members of Justice League International on the cover, supported by the headline "Superheroes for Africa." The inside of this issue juxtaposes two radically different images, which are legible in Monaco's hero/celebrity dualism. On the right page, we see a photograph of a solemn-looking Captain Atom in a tent city lifting up a clearly starving child. The image on the left page, however, features Blue Beetle, cheerily waving at the camera next to Stevie Wonder (1.6). These images are clearly at odds with each other, but no comment is necessarily made yet as to whether the heroic qualities implied by the right image are hindered by the celebrity spectacle of the left, or if these two elements can simply coexist. We can, however, read which of the two elements Buddy is prioritizing at this point of the story. Faced with two images of superheroics, Buddy's finger is pointing at the one featuring Stevie Wonder, as he tells Ellen all the ways a membership in the Justice League International will make him famous and wealthy: "In the J.L.I. I could do magazine interviews,

talk shows, personal appearances... we wouldn't have to rely on *your* job to pay the bills!" (1.6, emphasis Morrison's). This juxtaposition of glamour and destitution also clearly evokes a real-life corollary to the hero-celebrity tension—namely, the still-recent memory of *Live Aid*, which was itself a microcosmic point of debate on the possibility of positive change through celebrity. While the fame of *Live Aid*'s participants assisted in drawing attention to the famine in Ethiopia, as well as raising a great deal of money, criticism existed from the very beginning that the whole event did far less for Ethiopians than it did for the images of *Live Aid*'s celebrity participants.

Buddy's re-entrance into superheroism is not made known to the world through any specific heroic deed. In fact, for how condensed *Animal Man*'s first arc is, Baker does not even get involved in the sort of fight the superhero genre typically demands until just halfway through the second issues (one in which Baker is completely trounced, as well), though intercutting between Baker's narrative and B'wana Beast's helps conceal this. Instead, in an example of celebrity preceding heroism, Baker arranges an appearance on a tv talk show through Roger, a well-connected friend who becomes his agent. What Buddy learns early on into his career is reflective of the normative properties of fame's pursuit, whether this is intended or not: instead of being a person of influence, someone who can impact and change the world, the public individual is instead required to conform to pre-existing tastes and norms, or face ridicule. Baker is treated as fodder for jokes by the TV host and a laughing audience, ending with a ribald comment that his old-fashioned skin-tight costume "doesn't leave much room for secrets"(1.18).² Buddy immediately feels the need to re-work his look, supplementing his spandex outfit with streetwear (1.19). In adhering to norms, however, Baker just becomes a uniform and

² This has parallels to *Paradox*'s own initial humiliation, made more explicit by the book's brasher content: "touch my kid brother an' I'll break your leg!" (25).

unrecognizable superhero like many others in his world; the first person to ask for his autograph is quickly disappointed upon seeing his signature: “I thought you were Aquaman!” (2.10).

While *Animal Man* starts off as a narrative about an aspiring celebrity drawn to become a hero, what happens next is a sort of inversion, a story of a hero who must navigate a world where his deeds are mediated by the power of fame. At first, Morrison doesn’t treat this as an inherently bad thing; at this stage in the work, fame appears to be a helpful tool for Buddy to use in advocating for his particular agenda. Baker uses his powers in ways that effectively constitute political activism, such as assisting a group of fox hunt saboteurs, yet his cachet as a publicly recognized person can be made just as much a tool in achieving his ends. Baker’s rescue of a hunted fox is immediately followed by posing with the rest of the saboteurs for a photograph, which, we are told, will “be great publicity”(10.7). At the same time, Buddy’s interaction with his manager grows more argumentative. Roger, who “thought this Animal Man stuff was strictly business,” finds Buddy’s actions actually contradict his duty to increase Buddy’s fame and fortune: “I’m supposed to be your *manager*, okay? And all I’m getting is calls from animal rights groups who want you to help them rescue some lab rats!” “Tell them I’ll do it,” Buddy defiantly replies (6.4).

As *Animal Man* continues, we see Buddy climbing the ranks, becoming a full-fledged member of Justice League Europe and a known public figure. As Buddy’s prestige grows, however, his views on animal rights grow progressively become more full-throated, and the action he takes in regards to abuse of animals becomes more and more direct. Buddy becomes increasingly identified with the animal rights movement, and, in turn, he gradually constructs his identity around it. Saving a solitary fox from one hunt and taking pictures with the saboteurs grow into working with “The Sea Devil” Dane Dorrance, an eco-terrorist by his own admission

(“It’s kind of funny to get to my age and find that you’ve turned into a terrorist, but I guess that’s what I am—an ecoterrorist”) (15.7). While Buddy’s involvement in Dorrance’s plan to capsize a Faroese whaling boat herding dolphins to shore for slaughter is mostly replete with traditional exaggerated displays of superheroic strength and speed, Dorrance, on the shore, is engaged in threatening an entire fishing community with a much more recognizably real form of violence, by pointing an assault rifle at the crowd and threatening to fire if anyone moves towards any beached dolphins. When asked what right he has to violently disrupt the traditions of other cultures like this, Dorrance’s only reply is “I have a moral right. I also have a loaded machine gun” (15.20).

While we can read this as a well-trod narrative, in which Buddy becomes gradually radicalised until he finally “goes too far,” this framework risks reducing Buddy’s progression to something totally internal. Buddy’s identity as “the animal rights superhero,” however, creates a self-reinforcing cycle between Buddy and the rest of the world. Buddy’s role is ultimately more reactive than proactive, awaiting a call to action from his agent or a sudden intervention into his regular life, just as so many *Batman* stories begin with a bat-signal bringing him to the scene. As such, the deeds of Buddy as Animal Man are dependent on those who identify with him and seek him out, and Buddy in turn, obliges as an indirect agent of their will. As Buddy’s convictions grow stronger, the people he identifies with become more ethically ambiguous, resulting in him unintentionally going beyond what he himself is comfortable doing to create change in the world. This is exacerbated by being “the animal rights superhero,” and by being unreasonably treated as responsible for the actions of every person who can be associated with him. After he secretly assists a group of eco-terrorists to empty a university’s primate testing lab of its test subjects, one of the participants begins to burn the building down. Buddy hesitantly expresses his

disapproval at this, but is brusquely dismissed: “just get the monkeys out huh? I know what I’m doing” (17.7). The next day, he finds out secondhand that one of the firefighters dispatched after their retreat was critically injured in the ensuing chemical fire, leaving Buddy in part responsible for harming someone totally uninvolved in his political goals. “We’re not talking about evil experiments or animal torturers,” Ellen says with a great deal of restraint, “these were just guys doing their job. *Firemen*, buddy” (17.12). Though Buddy’s involvement with the attack on the lab is never made public, and the fire cannot be traced to Buddy in any legal sense, it is treated by himself and others as if he lit the match himself, both in terms of Buddy’s own guilt and how he is approached by those in his immediate vicinity.

What follows the fire is a swift chain of events that leads to Buddy questioning, then ultimately abandoning, his roles as superhero and public figure. Roger meets Buddy to officially quit as his agent, lamenting that Buddy’s life as someone with superpowers, once focused simply on pursuing “anything for a few laughs,” has now finally “gone too far” with the recent fire. Roger’s reminiscence that “every couple of months you’d stop some guys robbing the pet store or something, [and] it was nice and simple then” (17.14) functions both as a commentary on Buddy’s own character arc, as well as a metacommentary on the history of *Animal Man* as a series, moving from traditionally light and campy silver-age fare, to the politically involved and comparatively darker depiction that Morrison has created up to this point. Buddy accepts Roger’s quitting almost without much reaction at first, staring at his feet with his hand in his pockets: “Yeah, okay. That’s okay, because I don’t want to be Animal Man anymore either” (17.16). Even though Buddy is many times more powerful than a regular person, and has much more ability to influence the events of the world, Buddy reveals to Roger that he perceives his real influence to be quite limited. Buddy’s summation of the state of the planet is not one expected of

a confident superhero; he sounds more like a horrified, passive spectator than a person with true agency:

The ozone layer's breaking up. The whales and dolphins are dying. Poachers have brought the elephants close to extinction. The chimpanzees and the tigers are almost gone... All those vicious...pointless experiments...and then there are the dog fights and the stray cats and all the little cruelties that go on every day. *Why isn't anyone doing anything?* These things drive me insane, Roger. They really do. But I'm only one man. I do what I can (17.17).

Buddy's exasperated question, "why isn't anyone doing anything?" asked with gritted teeth and clenched fists, is ironic because much of *Animal Man's* broad appeal until then has been built by Morrison specifically around watching Buddy "do something," about issues that most people see as out of their control. Here, however, Buddy's deeds, rather than an expression of his power and influence, are characterized as an expression of his own sense of impotence. Buddy returns, rather quickly, from an extraordinary individual, to "only one man." Even his claim that he "does what he can" is deflated by Roger: "this time you did the wrong thing, Buddy" (17.17).

Despite Buddy's private disillusion with any further political value to public life, he is still obliged to participate in a televised debate to which he has already agreed. Morrison explicitly shows that Buddy's belief in the value of what he's doing finally dries up entirely while he is in the public eye. Buddy had been unable to craft the desired narrative around himself when he first came into public life, turning into a laughing stock. Buddy again struggles to present his desired narrative here, but this time fails to draw attention *away* from himself to what he believes are the real issues at hand. Buddy's justification for activism in the debate is that "moral laws are more important than the law of the land" (17.19), but rather than addressing the

truth or untruth of such a statement, his opponent, a cartoonish distillation of every conservative TV commentary “suit,” simply turns this into a critique of Buddy as a public figure: “you sit there, wearing that costume, knowing full well that you are a role model to countless American children? Let me put this to you...*have* you broken the law?” (17.19). There is no existing evidence of Buddy’s involvement in the fire, so it seems likely that this is just a stab in the dark to get under Buddy’s skin, but clearly the attempt succeeds. Buddy’s frustrated response, while an attempt to end the personal attacks coming his way, is ultimately his undoing as a public figure:

I don’t see how that has anything to do with you! You’re just avoiding the *real* issues here! I mean...what I do as an individual has absolutely nothing to do with what we’re really supposed to be discussing here! I refuse to be set up as a role model! For children or anyone else! I do what *I* think is right! It has nothing to do with you! I’m not *Superman!* I’m just a *man* and I make mistakes like anyone else! And just because I wear a costume doesn’t mean I always have to be *right!* (17.20)

Nothing Buddy has said here is particularly incorrect if we treat him as an actual individual, but that is not how he is treated by the media infrastructure around him. As far as anyone in the studio is concerned, Buddy is *required* to function not as “just a man” but as a representative for the animal rights movement in its entirety. This is what is prickly about being given the status of “role model”: Buddy is not actually expected to be a positive example to emulate, but rather a person who can be elevated or denigrated in lieu of a larger group of people in agreement with him, as groups are always harder to turn into something definite compared to one man. Buddy’s refusal to accept this role makes him irrelevant and disposable to the debate program itself. Buddy’s mere admission that he is *capable* of doing the wrong thing is just as bad in the context

of this debate as saying that he *has* done wrong, as both negatively affect the way he can be perceived as a pure distillation of the ideals of the animal rights movement. The moment Buddy refuses to be “the opposite of the individual,” he is disposable. Buddy has set out a cogent argument and tries to keep the debate on the topic, and his opponent has relied on off-topic *ad hominems*. And, as the visual language of the page tells us, Buddy has lost nonetheless, and everyone in the room knows it. As the readers’ eye descends the page, the space that Buddy occupies in the panels shrinks. As he finishes speaking, a panel is dedicated to the uncomfortable silence afterwards; Buddy nervously rubs the back of his neck as tiny lines of surprise emanate around his head. By the end of the page, Buddy has been shoved to the far-left corner and shrouded in shadow, his hand over his mouth in shock over what he’s just done. His opponent, with a slight grin of satisfaction, chimes in: “I think that outburst says it all, don’t you?” (17.20).

A political culture which emphasises the words and deeds of a few prominent individuals over the larger masses of people will have a flaw that this debate presents built-in. *Ad hominem* attacks are such a standard fallacy that pointing them out can come off as a tiresome cliché, but if individual people with all their unique imperfections, are going to be turned into figureheads of entire political movements, often without their own consent to such an arrangement, magnifying those individual errors or instances of hypocrisy in the public eye will always allow entire movements to be dismissed by whoever chooses to do so. So long as Buddy Baker maintains some vestiges of individuality and flawed humanity, he cannot be the winner of any conflict on any public stage so long as public stages are constructed as they currently are, and since he is treated as the figurehead for animal rights in its entirety (a role he has passively accepted passively until just recently), neither can the cause he believes in.

By the end of *Animal Man* #17, Buddy quits his role as Animal Man with finality: “I’m not a figurehead. I’m not a spokesman. I’m just a *man*. Animal Man is *finished*. I’ve had enough” (17.22). Of course, this story continues for a whole nine more issues. As if his words of resignation were some instantaneous summoning spell, the latent metafictional elements of *Animal Man* come crashing in to take primary focus within the narrative. Buddy comes home right after quitting and, before he can even inform Ellen of his decision, he finds a man lying on his living room floor, quite literally half drawn—fully inked and coloured above the waist, with rough pencil sketches in place of his legs—and a brand new arc begins (17.24).

It would be a mistake, however, to thematically place *this* arc, eventually leading to Buddy’s meeting with his own author, as something altogether separate from what has just preceded it. As Buddy’s status as a fictional character is made explicit to him, he can be addressed by the reader as a “public figure” in a new regard. Buddy’s sudden transformation into an enraged killer through nothing but a few keystrokes on Grant’s word processor, for instance, is akin to how his status as *the* “animal rights superhero” (not to mention the unreasonable expectations placed upon him as a “role model”) resulted in his public and private identity changing to fit a narrow role. Grant’s brief but immediate transformation of Buddy into a murderous character “with too much testosterone” parallels a far more gradual transformation the reader had previously seen from an autonomous individual to a powerless archetype. Similarly, we can find a metafictional parallel to his frustrated speech to Roger, in whom he confided his perceived lack of agency. “If I’m the *star* of this ‘comic book,’” asks Buddy, “then why am I always on the *sidelines*? Why am I always just an observer?” Grant’s reply leads the reader back to the real world: “It’s the same for almost everyone. We expect starring roles in our own lives, but somehow we end up with walk-on parts” (26.11). Just as Buddy’s superheroic deeds

eventually boiled down to an expression of his own impotence in the currents of world affairs, so too has Grant's own sense of writing Buddy's life: "In my world, in the real world, I can't do *anything* about the things that upset me. All I can do is join protest groups and write this comic" (26.13). The power Grant has over Buddy is practically god-like (Grant introduces himself as both "a demiurgic power" and "a little bit satanic" (26.3)), but even he figuratively returns to the same spot that Buddy was in in his own life, asking "why isn't anyone doing anything?" (17.17) in a horrified state of spectatorship.

No *Animal Man* writer following Morrison has pushed the metafictional bent as hard as he has, though oblique references to his run, the most well-known for the character, are often visible. Despite Morrison's *Animal Man* being known first and foremost for its "meta" nature, it is actually the thematic elements of fame that has had the longest influence over the writers after him. Tom Veitch's time with the character, just a little more than a year after Morrison's, leads among other things to Buddy working in Hollywood as a stuntman—the man in films who actually does the "heroic deeds" captured on camera, while someone else takes the credit and fame.³ Jamie Delano's take, inflected with supernatural horror elements, turns Buddy into a very different public figure of influence, advocating for animal rights as the leader of a religious group. Most recently, Jeff Lemire has gone so far as to make Buddy an outright movie star: we are introduced to Buddy by way of a promotional magazine interview, and Lemire suspends his narrative midway through to dedicate a whole issue to showing an "excerpt" of a drama with Buddy in the lead role, directed by an Aronofsky analogue. While most scholarship which focuses on Morrison's *Animal Man* defines it firstly by its metafictional lens, its practical legacy

³ Though it is infrequent in actual *Animal Man* books, most other comics which feature Animal Man as a character depicts his average life in the way Veitch has set it up: a Hollywood stuntman who works as a superhero on occasion.

for all the *Animal Man* stories which follow it instead defines it as a story about the positive and negative potentials of fame and the wielding of influence as a public figure.

Chapter 3: “The Just”: Flash Denied Substance

Morrison’s most recent deployment of the superhero as a celebrity analogue, the chapter entitled “The Just” in his expansive and maximalist limited series, *The Multiversity*, is his most explicit since *Zenith*. Matching the overall tone of the rest of the series, it is also one of the most pessimistic and cynical ones—much to the surprise of the enthusiasts’ press upon its publication. Morrison has been established as a “reconstructionist” whose writing, while frequently literary, embraced the outlandishness and optimism of comics’ earlier eras. “The Just,” while echoing some of that outlandishness in its latter parts, has very little optimism, or for that matter sympathy for the world it depicts or the majority of the characters inhabiting it. With “The Just,” it appears that Morrison’s estimation of celebrity’s value to culture and society has gone closer to zero than ever before. Whereas Buddy Baker in *Animal Man* saw fame as a potential tool to exert a positive influence on the world, only to discover a loss of agency upon gaining it, the characters of the Just, all celebrities in their own right, not only have *no* ability to exert any larger influence outside their immediate sphere, but do not even have agency over whether they are famous or not in the first place.

Academic writing on *Multiversity* as a whole is still sparse, as the text isn’t necessarily presented as a single linear narrative but a collection of self-contained and tonally diverse issues in independent comic book “universes,” bookended by a framing narrative and supplemented with the narrative in a “guidebook.” All but one piece, the last chapter, is marked “#1.” Though collected volumes publish each issue in order of publication, no explicit order of events exists

beyond “The Multiversity #1” happening first, and “The Multiversity #2” happening last.⁴ The extreme scope of the multiverse Morrison shows (and implies), paired with the heavily segmented narrative of the work, resists a totally straightforward reading or even a straightforward timeline of events. Many of the pieces within *The Multiversity*, such as *Pax Americana*, Morrison’s formal stylistic play on Alan Moore’s *Watchmen*, can even be studied individually, with minimal acknowledgement of the larger framing narrative.

Thematically, however, a few lines fit in with those I have discussed thus far. Celebrity, in its traditional sense, makes itself explicitly known in “The Just,” depicting events on “Earth-16,” where the role of a superhero as a celebrity is more directly shown than in any of Morrison’s works since *Zenith*. Indeed, the very cover of “The Just” is designed to mimic a celebrity gossip magazine, a chaotic jumble of headlines (“ARROWETTE—SHOCKING!/ ‘I’m not Daddy’s little girl anymore!’/ See her sexy photo-shoot for *Maximus*”), paired with still, mostly posed promotional “photographs” of heroes.

“The Just” is legible as a revamping of the tropes utilized by Morrison, Milligan and Jurgens back in the mid-to-late-eighties, depicting the role of the celebrity as it exists now. Characters who have obtained the title of hero by way of deeds are few and far between, as “the directionless protagonists embody the phenomenon of people who are “famous for being famous.” For example, all of the primary figures in “The Just” are superheroes by inheritance: Clark Kent and Bruce Wayne are long gone, replaced by their children, Chris Kent and Damian Wayne, who take up their respective mantles. If a character is not related to the original character

⁴ This is in part a format simplified from Morrison’s *Seven Soldiers of Victory*: A starting issue, an ending issue, and seven four-issue miniseries of independent, but continuously intersecting, narratives. Like *Multiversity*, today’s collected editions opt to simply arrange issues in order of publication.

by blood, they are still the products of a line of succession as pre-existing secondary, tertiary or even quaternary iterations upon the first. Ironically, among all the superheroes still “working,” the most heroic life belongs to Kyle Rayner, who is chronologically the *fourth* human to be given the title of Green Lantern. Every speaking character is given a title card to remind the reader that recognizable superheroes are not the actual people one initially associates with that name.

Not only is the social capital of fame inherited, but so is material wealth: the settings of “The Just” are primarily the haunts of all the characters with great stores of inherited material wealth as well, such as Damian, inheritor of the Wayne fortune, as well as the newly-invented Sasha Norman, daughter of Shilo Norman, who made a wealthy celebrity of himself doing televised stunts as (the third) Mister Miracle. We also see that infamy, or celebrity in the negative sense, can be inherited as well: despite not having done anything particularly bad herself, Lex Luthor’s daughter Alexis continues to bear the bad reputation of her late father (who, we are told with minimal detail, killed the original Superman soon before dying himself) and is ostracised by nearly all superheroic offspring as a result. The primary exception is her boyfriend Damian, who, despite benefitting from being recognized as Bruce Wayne’s son, can at least empathise with Alexis’s status, being raised for most of his early life by his mother, the villainess Talia al’Ghul.

Many of the characters in “The Just” are depicted as shallow and self-absorbed, and the primary inciting action revolves around Lex Luthor’s reformed daughter not getting invited to Norman’s “party of the century” in Malibu. Zenith and Milligan’s Paradax, at the very least, had actual threats they were required to address, however reluctantly. Those in the world of “The Just” do not even have that possibility, as any chance to commit valorous deeds is overtaken by the machinery of their society before anyone can involve themselves. Indeed, this machinery is

quite literal—a legion of robots nearing the strength of Superman (designed by Clark Kent before he died, we are told) handles every crisis before anyone who would wish to be heroic has a chance to involve themselves. The result is a swath of celebrities who are continuously the center of attention, even though the influence they have over the things they get attention for is minimal.

The reader is introduced to Damian as an invading threat attacks the earth, as he simply watches passively from his high-rise apartment window with binoculars, beseeching his girlfriend, Alexis Luthor, reading “Ultra Comics” with a dry sense of remove, to watch with him. “Are you *certain* you don’t want to see this spectacle?” he asks, “You *really* don’t *care*? Real life is better than *any* comic book, and this only proves it” (“The Just” 4). Luthor is unimpressed: “I saw it online. They’re from *another* boring *universe* and they’ve decided to --yawn--to invade reality et cetera et cetera et cetera...” (3). Ultimately, blind hope is the only thing behind Damian’s initial bluster towards the primacy of “real life.” The invasion, by the consensus of seemingly everyone, is rather un-entertaining. There are only two panels depicting the fight, one being the opening of a dimensional portal in the sky, and one of the fight proper, its composition making it difficult to even discern what is happening. All the while, civilians walk around on the streets below unaffected and barely acknowledging it: the biggest verbal reactions anyone can muster come from two people not even looking up at the sky to begin with, flatly saying “wow” and “whatever” (4). “It was totally boring,” Damian admits, “you were right”(6).

While outlandish in a distinctly comicbook-y way, these Superman robots are nonetheless reflective of elements of our culture that have been taken out of the control of individuals and offloaded into machines, by way of algorithmic and financial calculations. Content creators and e-celebrities on platforms like YouTube, if they intend to remain successful, are under constant

pressure to relinquish agency and produce strictly within the confines of search engine optimization and monetization requirements, a pressure which has continued to grow as those confines gradually narrow.

In the particular universe Morrison has constructed here, superheroes continue to exist as public figures well after they have totally outlived their usefulness. They are a strange vestigial cultural emblem, existing in a society that will keep following the same path regardless of their input. Holding all the same aesthetic signifiers as their forebears, those in “The Just” have not even constructed the artifice they inhabit for themselves. “Superman” and “Batman” are not so much people as identities external from themselves which Chris and Damian have absorbed and embodied. Identities of the characters on Earth-16 are in many ways even more predetermined than Buddy Baker’s, which was at least under his control for a while.

Morrison shows the hollowness of the life of an agent of spectacle to its furthest degree, although a spectrum exists in terms of who can cope with that hollowness. On one end of the spectrum, living under a pleased and self-indulgent sort of nihilism, there is Arrowette, who, with her short blonde sidecut and revealing outfit, appears to be designed after Miley Cyrus, a real-life second-generation celebrity, at the peak of her self-presentation as a “shocking” public figure. Arrowette, as someone who has never known a world away from Superman’s robots, understands the role of a superhero to be totally divorced from deeds, and is fully at ease with its contradictions. Her very name is a misnomer—it evokes that she is the daughter of Connor Hawke, the current Green Arrow, but is disconnected from anything she does: she has no arrows of her own, and must ask her father to lend some so she can qualify as a bona fide member of a team. What the team does other than receive attention is unclear; Green Arrow, active before the creation of Superman’s robots, is still worried about the potential for real danger, while danger is

an impossibility in his daughter's mind. "I don't want you getting involved in all the rough-and-tumble superhero stuff," Hawke warns. "It's not a *game* for spoiled *kids*. You could get hurt." For Arrowette, however, a frame of reference where what she does as a public individual could have genuine consequences in the world is totally obsolete. "Dad," she responds, "it *is* a game" (31).

It is a game for Hawke now as well, just as it is for all the other Justice League members who were active before their job was automated, though Hawke would likely rather not admit it. Morrison shows their training regimen, which is justified by their belief that they still may one day be called on to save the earth. "Who knows when the next alien invasion might arrive," one says. "Who knows *when* we might be needed" (25). What this training actually entails, however, is endlessly repeating battles from their glory days by way of robotic simulation exactly according to memory, a sort of coping mechanism for their actual irrelevance— like eight Norma Desmonds from *Sunset Boulevard* watching their old movies all at once.

The Justice League invites Hawke to a simulated battle against Red Amazo that he wasn't originally present for. This invitation proves disastrous for everyone involved, as doing "what [he] *would* have done if [he'd] been there" (24) throws everyone off balance once they can't simply repeat the actions which proved their heroism years ago. For example, an attempted "coup de grace" by Alpha Centurion, acting according to his memory of the fight, immediately results in his getting put out of commission with a single punch. Failure to stick to the script also results in Kyle Rayner suffering a very real post-traumatic break, crazedly lashing out at the training robot while referring to it as Major Force, a character who infamously, in Ron Marz's 1994 run on *Green Lantern*, murdered his love interest and put her body in Kyle's refrigerator. All the rest of the Justice League can do is try and fail to bring Rayner back to performing a

straight re-enactment, reminding him of the current fictional scenario: “Professor Morrow fused Amazon and the Red Tornado at a molecular level, remember? Kill Red Amazo and our teammate dies!” “*NO ONE dies!*” Rayner screams back (27). The fact that this battle is a mere simulation only compounds the frustration of Rayner and the other heroes: they have retained some fame and reputation but being given a taste of moments of genuine heroism, even if death and destruction came along with it, leaves them struggling to navigate a society where heroism no longer correlates with risk. Believing that what they do is not “just a game,” as Arrowette puts it, and that it can still have weight and consequences in the real world, can be seen as admirable, yet it also contributes to their dysfunction. In Kyle Rayner and Conor Hawke we can perhaps see a Buddy Baker who despaired at his sense of impotence, yet never mustered the courage to attempt quitting.

If Arrowette is entirely able to cope with the purely abstracted and spectacular nature of her existence, and Rayner and Hawke live with it (albeit in a totally dysfunctional way), Saffi Mason, who kills herself at the start of the book, is presented as someone who cannot cope at all, on the opposite end of the spectrum from Arrowette. “We’re all doomed and there’s nothing we can do about it and everything else is just a joke on us,” she tells Sasha Norman over the phone, as she overlooks the ledge of a tall building (1). Mason asks if any superhero has committed suicide, and after receiving a confused response in the negative, she reflects “So that makes *me* the *first*,” she reflects, as she begins to leap. “Cool” (2). Saffi’s suicide, for her and the people around her, seems to be the first bit of action and novelty in the superheroing world in years.

Her death is also the main vector through which any of the characters are able to reflect on the state of their lives. When Chris Kent brings news of Mason’s death to Damian, Kent

recognizes, with little in the way of prompting, that the lack of substance in a super-celebrity's life, brought on by way of automation, was likely a major factor in her death.

Sapphire Mason. She was *Mega-Morpho* to me. She was *one of us*. She was a *superhero*. It's not my *fault* my dad left behind the most foolproof and sophisticated *planetary defense system* ever created—It's not my *fault* it put everyone out of *work*. I should have *thought* about it—but—the super-robots can't be *turned off* or tampered with. Even if they *could*, I can't break my promise to my dad. (12)

Kent does not need to do a lot of theorizing here. Simply saying that Mason was a superhero implies that her sense of alienation would be a given, and that the automation of her life, and others' lives, is the primary cause of that alienation. Thus, Kent immediately washes his own hands with "it's not my fault" statements. Despite being aware of this, Kent still tries to maintain a sense of having a potential future value to the world, however illusory, just as Conor Hawke and the Justice League do. As he leaves, Kent begins to chastise Damian for his relationship with Alexis Luthor, in tones similar to Hawke's admonishment of Arrowette. "[Y]ou need to take this whole *super-hero* thing way more *seriously* than you actually *do!*" Kent scolds. Damian is unfazed: "I'd take it more seriously if we *had* anything to *do*. You know why Saffi committed *suicide? Boredom*" (13).

Mason's suicide evokes recognition in multiple characters that the thoroughly alienated nature of a superhero's life is dysfunctional and harmful, framing Mason as someone who refused to live under it any longer. This creates a bizarre sense of disappointment in the reader when it is revealed that her death wasn't really the result of her inner turmoil, but of a fairly standard comic-book villain plot with rather flimsy motives. Incensed over something as minor as not being invited to Sasha Norman's party, Alexis Luthor had covertly teamed up with the one

other person not on the guest-list, the magic-powered Jakeem Thunder, and had used his power to put a death curse on Mason, one of Normans' friends. Now, she plans to use the same magic to send defense robots to attack the party in Malibu, which will also leave the planet undefended for the next inter-dimensional attack. The revelation of this is incredibly brisk, taking up fewer than two pages, with half of the key information explained second-hand over a text message. When the reader understood Mason's death to be a genuinely self-motivated suicide, then the death could be perceived as an indictment of the arrangement of society and the hollowness of the role superheroes played within it as celebrities, and both the reader and character could extrapolate a yearning for substance in an insubstantial existence. The scenario that actually exists, however, is a victory of the shallow and insubstantial over the substance that was perceived in her death. Mason did not kill herself because her life was hollow—even if it actually was. She killed herself because someone else was angry they were not invited to a party.

This calculated disappointment of the reader is doubled by the fact that the perpetrator of this is Alexis Luthor, one of the few characters who seems to be at least partially unlike her original. Though her cynicism and sarcasm matches previous Morrisonian depictions of Lex Luthor, her circumstances suggest that she is due at least a sliver of sympathy. Because of the reputation and deeds of her father, she complains early on that “[Chris] the world's most beloved superhero, *hates* me. Which means *everybody* hates me!” (14). While the “heroes” of this world lead a hollow existence, at the very least they are recipients of good, if unfounded reputations; though the “villains” do not seem to have poor material conditions, they are still the victims of unfounded prejudice— “bad fame,” just like “good fame,” is totally untied to deeds. This prejudice primes the reader to expect, or at least hope, that the evil reputation is unfounded, and reflexively side with Damian, who keeps dismissing early accusations of Alexis's involvement in

Mason's death as unfounded. Instead, by putting into action a diabolical plan nearly as outlandish and petty as the campiest of silver-age comics writing, Alexis Luthor has disrupted the order of things not by allowing herself to be her own person, but only by hewing even *more* to the brand of her predecessor than any of the new superheroes have. The current social order, where fame and deed are separate, stands to end, but only by way of reverting to an older order where the unique self, separate from hand-me-down legacies, is even further repressed.

Morrison chooses to end "The Just" in a place where the reader can reasonably assume what will happen next; yet satisfaction, or even catharsis, is withheld from the reader. With the Superman robots under Alexis's control, and a new inter-universal attack expected to occur soon, we can extrapolate that characters like Arrowette may get a comeuppance or a brutal reality check as they face a threat that is more than "a game." Older heroes like Hawke may have a sense of relief in finding that they have use again, though they may get the same reality check as their younger counterparts. Some sort of societal change is around the corner, for good or bad—and Morrison cuts the reader off before they have a chance to see it. We end on a splash page with some Superman robots destroying cars in traffic with their heat vision, but the story ends before they reach the party in Malibu, before the undefended attack from a parallel world. The last we see of the superheroes consists of Arrowette and Sasha Norman's set enjoying the "party of the century," seemingly totally over Saffi Mason's suicide, and confident that nothing in their lives will change. When they discover that their whole world is "about to be invaded from an alternate reality" (38) in the same text that explained that their friend's suicide was effectively a murder, the information just passes over them. No-one attending yet knows that the robots can no longer be relied upon, and react just as they had every other time. Arrowette sees it as a chance for more games: "It's amazing—I'll get the chance to use my *arrows!*" (38). Sasha

Norman is simply bored: “whevs. Supermans’s robots can deal with the invasion like they usually do” (38). Mason’s death is not even addressed; that spectacle has already been consumed and set aside hours ago. Sasha, who briefly had a genuine emotional reaction to the suicide as it was happening, was already using it as fodder for jokes mere hours later: “Are you guys coming to my party? If I don’t get you and *Chris*, it’ll be *mass suicide*” (15). The last the reader sees of the heroes is via social media, as Sasha posts some ruminations on the incoming invasion, turning the event into being about the party and herself: “the mayhem begins #party to end all parties. Parallel worlds! Isn’t it nuts? That means another me! I wonder what she’s like! I mean, just how cool would it be to meet yourself?”(39). The reader is not even afforded the chance to see Norman’s realization that this time, the attack is not just a disposable spectacle.

“The Just” demonstrates celebrities as figures even further from the machinery of power than *Animal Man* did more than twenty years before. While Buddy attempted to positively impact the world and to be a hero in Monaco’s sense, his discovery that fame actively alienated him from these pursuits, he at least attempted to resist. Everyone in “The Just,” meanwhile, has succumbed by different means and degrees. Many characters, having known nothing else, do not even conceive that their lives could or should have a greater impact on the society around them. Even those who recognize how diminished their agency and status actually are are unable to do anything about it and must react with denial, reasserting their importance by endlessly repeating their time of relevance. If “The Just” reflects the contemporary situation like *Animal Man* reflected the late 80s, the potential for fame to function as a tool to positively influence society has been constricted even more than before.

Chapter 4: Conclusion

Despite inhabiting a genre that focuses on depicting valorous people doing valorous deeds, Morrison tells the reader to ask where valour comes from in the first place. Even though Morrison's stories almost always inhabit worlds where individuals are endowed with powers well beyond normal humans, he frequently chooses to write characters who are primarily perceived as "super" based on the properties that the greater societal structure projects upon them. Rather than a tool of empowerment for either the individual or a greater demographic an individual is set up to represent, the projections that constitute fame ultimately create limitations and restriction: upon how others perceive an individual, how they perceive themselves, and what is considered the proper way for someone of their status to act. Because the media apparatus that authoritatively "creates" fame is *already* of the pre-existing state of things, and is frequently invested in maintaining it, so too are these restrictions. Instead of an avenue for societal change, fame constitutes a set of norms that impede it.

Guy Debord criticizes "stars" as becoming agents of spectacle by way of their calculated falseness: "the admirable people in whom the system personifies itself are well known for not being what they are," he writes, "they became great men by stooping below the reality of the smallest individual life, and everyone knows it" (61). Morrison's summary of fame after Debord is potentially even more dire: Debord's celebrities had a modicum of choice in "stooping," and in continuing to do so. The celebrities that Morrison depicts come to experience the unreality propping up their society being *projected upon them* without their consent. In Morrison's work, agents of spectacle are more often than not conscripted. In the case of "The Just," written in the social media era, that conscription is from the very point of birth. Contrasting *Animal Man* and

“The Just,” we can see that Morrison has also begun to employ the fact that “everyone knows” the artificiality of fame in order to reflect an overwhelming sense of stagnancy to the current order. In 1989, Buddy Baker still needed to go through a process of discovery to at last see that despite his best efforts, he was detached from the actual occurrences in the world. In 2015, the protagonists of “The Just” are all aware of their detachment from moment one and, from what little we see of them, so are ordinary civilians. Morrison goes straight to depicting a variety of methods of coping and denial to justify their position in the world. Even though everyone concerned seems to be aware that the world as it currently exists is restrictive, pierced through with falsehood, and ultimately unsustainable, no-one seems capable of providing a better alternative. All that can be done is to keep watching the show.

While earlier works like *Paradox* and *Booster Gold* provided well-constructed satirical jabs at the self-absorption associated with famous people, for Morrison, this was only the start of things. Celebrity characters provide Morrison with an avenue of critique that expands into a structural commentary on modern culture and its relationship to power. In Morrison’s work, being famous entails placing one’s identity into the hands of other people. The people with the most say in the resulting transformation of identity will invariably be the most invested in maintaining the status quo. As a result, fame reveals itself in Morrison’s oeuvre as a system in which people are unwittingly turned into enforcers of the norm.

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