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Opting for Ontological Terrorism: Freedom and Control in Grant Morrison's *The Invisibles*

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Anarchism is typically understood as an ideology advocating the abolition of all forms of institutional authority in favor of natural order and, as such, is easily dismissed as overly simplistic and unrealistically optimistic. A more relevant and less utopian conception of anarchism, “ontological terrorism,” is described in Grant Morrison’s science-fiction comic book series *The Invisibles*. This paper locates *The Invisibles* in relation to other works of anarchist fiction, traces the evolution of Morrison’s depiction of anarchism within the series from orthodox anarchism to ontological terrorism, and demonstrates how ontological terrorism subverts the dualistic relationship between freedom and control. *Law, Culture and the Humanities* 2007; 3: 435–454

I. Introduction

At a time when so much of the public debate about law enforcement and civil liberties appears to be framed within the dichotomy of control versus freedom, it seems appropriate to reflect critically upon the nature of this dichotomy and to challenge the assumption that “freedom” and “control” are diametrically opposed notions. In his science-fiction comic book series *The Invisibles*, Scottish writer Grant Morrison engages in just such a critical reflection. *The Invisibles* is the story of a group of anarchist occult terrorists and their literal and metaphorical struggle against the Archons, ultra-dimensional entities seeking to subjugate humanity using the authoritarian technologies of military force, government, law and education.¹ As the story progresses, many of the apparent distinctions between the heroic anarchists and the villainous authoritarians are revealed as illusory. Morrison undermines the distinctions between orthodox anarchism and authoritarianism and between

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1. Fifty-nine issues of *The Invisibles* were written by Morrison, illustrated by a variety of artists and published by DC Comics in three volumes between September 1994 and June 2000. The series was subsequently republished as 7 graphic novels: *Say You want a Revolution*, *Apocalipstick*, and *Entropy in the UK* (reprinting Volume 1), *Bloody Hell in America*, *Counting to None*, and *Kissing Mister Quimper* (reprinting Volume 2), and *The Invisible Kingdom* (reprinting Volume 3 in its entirety).

freedom and control, and offers a more relevant and less dualistic form of anarchism which he labels “ontological terrorism.”²

This paper is a description and critical analysis of ontological terrorism in *The Invisibles*, and of its subversion of the dualistic relationship between freedom and control. The first part of the paper locates *The Invisibles* in relation to other works of anarchist fiction, and ontological terrorism in relation to other forms of anarchism. The second part traces the evolution of Morrison’s depiction of anarchism within the series, from the simplistic effort to abolish government and other forms of institutional authority, to the less confrontational, less idealistic and less dualistic ontological terrorism. The final part of the paper demonstrates how *The Invisibles* and ontological terrorism subvert the distinctions between freedom and control by examining the development of three key characters in the series.

One might ask whether comic books are worthy of such a level of academic scrutiny. The question can be answered in the affirmative for at least two reasons. Firstly, while the law and literature movement initially concerned itself with works of literature traditionally recognized as “classics,” the movement’s postmodern turn has sought to undermine the distinction between high and popular culture, and more recent scholarship is just as likely to explore the legal themes and insights of the *Law and Order* television series as it is to scrutinize Melville’s *Billy Budd*. Secondly, a handful of scholars and creators have begun to defend the literary credibility and, more importantly, the social and pedagogical relevance of the comic book.³ As a form of literature, a comic book is a unique combination of text and image capable of conveying a story, an idea or a mood in a distinctive manner.⁴ As a vehicle for rumination and social commentary, a comic book is a way to convey ideas to a relatively wide audience without

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2. Morrison in fact uses the term “ontological terrorism” only once in the series: see below. The term is used in this paper as a label for the alternative form on anarchism presented by Morrison throughout the series.
 3. See e.g. Paul Buhle, “The New Scholarship of Comics,” *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, 49 (2003), B7; David Carrier, *The Aesthetics of Comics* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2000); Will Eisner, *Comics and Sequential Art* (Tamarac: Poorhouse Press, 1994); Will Eisner, *Graphic Storytelling* (Tamarac: Poorhouse Press, 1996); Geoff Klock, *How to Read Superhero Comics and Why* (New York: Continuum International, 2002); Anne Magnussen and Hans-Christian Christiansen, eds., *Comics and Culture: Analytical and Theoretical Approaches to Comics* (Copenhagen: Museum Tusulanum Press, 2000); Matthew McAllister, Edward Sewell and Ian Gordon, eds., *Comics and Ideology* (New York: Peter Lang, 2001); Scott McCloud, *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art* (New York: HarperPerennial, 1994); Scott McCloud, *Reinventing Comics: How Imagination and Technology Are Revolutionizing an Art Form* (New York: Perennial, 2000).
 4. Like a novel, but unlike a movie or television programme, the information in a comic book can be absorbed and interpreted at the reader’s own pace, and particular passages can easily be revisited and re-absorbed whenever necessary. Like a movie or television programme, but unlike a novel, the information in a comic book is presented simultaneously in words and in pictures, creating a more immersive experience on the part of the reader. The reader is also obliged to participate in the reading process by mentally “filling the gaps” between the panels on the page, and this active participation by the reader in the construction of the fictional reality is unique to comic books.

subjecting them to the censorship and creative compromise associated with television and cinema.⁵ *The Invisibles* offers a number of ideas about anarchism, authoritarianism, freedom, control and terrorism which are certainly worthy of scholarly consideration.

II. Anarchism and Anarchist Fiction

The Invisibles is part of a long tradition of anarchist fiction. Anarchist fiction is fiction which either explicitly or implicitly advocates an anarchist ideology. “Anarchy” is usually defined as a society without government, “anarchism” as the philosophy which aims at anarchy’s realization, and “anarchists” as individuals who seek to bring about anarchy by advocating anarchism and/or by engaging in anarchic praxis. Orthodox anarchists advocate an extreme form of legal and political freedom. They reject government and other forms of institutional authority as illegitimate expressions of coercive power, and insist that the wellbeing of the community would be enhanced by their abolition. Anarchism’s opponents equate anarchy with chaos, violence and terrorism; anarchists equate anarchy with freedom, justice and peace, and ascribe the characteristics of violence and terrorism to the exercise of legal and political control.

Anarchist fiction has a long tradition: one of the first known uses of the word “anarchy” was in the play *Seven Against Thebes* by Aeschylus, dated at 467 BC.⁶ Anarchist fiction is similar to some works of contemporary popular fiction in that it typically glorifies the rebel, the critic or the criminal, and portrays the government, the legal institution or the law enforcer as corrupt or unjust. Popular fiction, however, almost invariably portrays the corrupt legal official as an aberration; the individual official is evil but the notion of government is itself unchallenged. Anarchist fiction, on the other hand, seeks to subvert and undermine our assumption of government’s necessity. Anarchist notions can be found in the literary works of Henry David Thoreau⁷ and Henry Miller,⁸ and in the field of science fiction anarchism is espoused, or at least explored, in the works of such writers as Iain M. Banks,⁹ Ursula K. Le Guin,¹⁰ Michael Moorcock¹¹ and Robert Anton Wilson.¹²

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5. As a television programme or as a movie, *The Invisibles* – with its celebration of anarchism, terrorism, civil disobedience and the occult – is likely to have been seen as too controversial to justify a substantial investment by a major studio.
 6. Aeschylus, *Seven against Thebes* (London: Oxford University Press, 1970).
 7. Myron Simon, “Thoreau and Anarchism,” *Michigan Quarterly Review*, 23 (1984), p. 360.
 8. See especially Henry Miller, *Tropic of Cancer* (New York: Grove Press, 1961).
 9. Many of Banks’ science fiction novels are about “the Culture,” described by Banks as a “libertarian-anarchist utopia”: Iain M. Banks, *The State of the Art* (Eureka: Firebird Distributing, 1991).
 10. See especially Ursula K. LeGuin, *The Dispossessed* (New York: Eos, 1994).
 11. See especially the Jerry Cornelius novels, eg. Michael Moorcock, *The Lives and Times of Jerry Cornelius: Stories of the Comic Apocalypse* (New York: Four Walls Eight Windows, 2003).
 12. Robert Anton Wilson and Robert Shea, *The Illuminatus Trilogy* (New York: Dell, 1975).

The Invisibles is not the only science fiction comic book to advocate anarchism. In *V for Vendetta*,¹³ Alan Moore tells the story of a post-apocalyptic Britain ruled by a fascist government, and that government's downfall at the hands of an anarchist liberator known as "V". *V for Vendetta*, however, offers a much more linear and traditional depiction of anarchism than that to be found in *The Invisibles*. Moore suggests that an anarchist state could be achieved through the systematic destruction of the existing mechanisms of legal and political authority. This is orthodox anarchism. Morrison, on the other hand, offers a much more novel conception of anarchism. Rather than simply portraying legal and political authority as an illegitimate expression of power by a dominant elite and anarchism as the effort by the dominated and the oppressed to undermine this power, both authority and anarchism are portrayed as competing expressions of power. Orthodox anarchism is not simply authoritarianism's opposite, it is itself an effort to influence or manipulate the reality of others.

Morrison also questions the effort to popularize anarchism through anarchist fiction. On the one hand it could be argued that anarchist fiction advances the anarchist cause by propagating anarchist ideas. But is Morrison using a comic book to preach anarchism, or is anarchism simply being repackaged as popular entertainment? This is an issue which Morrison explicitly addresses in the second volume of the series:

The most pernicious figure of all is the anarchist-hero figure. A creation of commodity culture, he allows us to buy into an inauthentic simulation of revolutionary praxis [...] The hero encourages passive spectating, and revolt becomes another product to be consumed.¹⁴

By portraying and sensationalizing anarchism in works of fiction, anarchist writers potentially discourage rather than encourage actual anarchic resistance to institutional authority. They commodify anarchism and make anarchic resistance something to be read about and enjoyed rather than actually engaged in. Direct confrontation with institutional authority, however, is not the form of anarchism ultimately advocated by Morrison.

There are two very different conceptions of anarchism within *The Invisibles*. The first, emphasized in the first volume of the series, is orthodox anarchism: the anarchist is the heroic rebel bravely confronting the evil authoritarians. It is this form of anarchism which is potentially undermined by the "passive spectating" resulting from the popularity of stories about fictional rebels such as *The Invisibles*, *The Wild Ones*, *Star Wars* and *Fight Club*. The other, more novel, form of anarchism – "ontological terrorism" – is the endeavor not to abolish authority through direct confrontation, but rather to awaken oneself and others to the realization that we use language itself as well as our own

13. Alan Moore, *V for Vendetta* (New York: DC Comics, 1990).

14. Grant Morrison, *The Invisibles: Counting to None* (New York: DC Comics, 1999), p. 213.

thoughts, beliefs and assumptions to create the illusory dualisms which become the source of all control and restriction. “Ontology” is the study of being; “ontological terrorism” is therefore an attack upon assumptions about the nature of being.

This ontological terrorism is similar to contemporary anarchist Hakim Bey’s “ontological anarchism.” According to Bey, ontological anarchism is the practice of resistance against everything which and everyone who proclaims “the nature of things is such-and-such.” Bey argues that since nothing can be stated with any real certainty as to the true nature of things, all claims to truth are in fact attempts to exercise authority and control. He also claims that although reality cannot be defined, one can best understand it metaphorically as “chaos.” In other words, the world is already in a state of anarchy and it is a delusion to think otherwise. Ontological anarchism is the rejection of this delusion. It thus differs from orthodox anarchism in that, firstly, the focus of resistance is broadened beyond law and government to all forms of authority and all claims to truth, and, secondly, it is not only an endeavor to bring about social change but also a response to present circumstances. By this account, orthodox anarchism is misguided not because it is utopian and unrealistic but because it is unnecessary. Orthodox anarchism calls for the abolition of institutional authority in favor of a radical form of natural order. According to Bey’s ontological anarchism, reality is already fundamentally and unavoidably chaotic, all ontological claims are spurious except the claim of chaos, and governance of any sort is already and always impossible.¹⁵

Ontological terrorism is a form of anarchism that, instead of looking towards a future without government, advocates resistance – here and now – to all forms of authority, whether governmental, linguistic, psychological, spiritual or ontological and whether imposed involuntarily or embraced unconsciously. It is this form of anarchism which is ultimately advanced both by the Invisibles within the story and by *The Invisibles* itself.

III. Anarchism in *The Invisibles*

Volume 1 of *The Invisibles* begins with the story of Jack, an impoverished teenager living in present-day Liverpool, England.¹⁶ Jack is an angry, uninformed non-conformist, rebelling against all forms of institutional authority with disobedience and violence, but with no clear plan or objective. The first shot of Jack is a full-page illustration: with a gleeful expression on his face and a Molotov cocktail in his hand, Jack screams “Fuuuuuuuuuck!!!”

15. Hakim Bey, *TAZ: The Temporary Autonomous Zone, Ontological Anarchy, Poetic Terrorism* (Boston: MIT, 1991).

16. In the early issues of *The Invisibles*, Jack is referred to as Dane. After joining the Invisibles, he adopts the code name “Jack Frost” and is subsequently referred to as Jack. In order to avoid confusion he is referred to as Jack throughout this paper.

as he prepares to throw the bomb through the window of his school library, not because he has any political agenda, but simply because he does not like school.¹⁷ The series thus begins with a demonstration of anarchism in its most violent, most brutal, and most passionate form. Jack's desire to destroy all legal and institutional authority is motivated by hatred and resentment. He is frustrated by his place in the world, knows that change is required, but knows of no other course of action beyond violence.

JACK: I love the sound of fire engines. It's like the whole world's burning down. I wish I'd an atom bomb. I'd drop it on Liverpool. They'd need a million fire engines for that. Imagine the fucking noise.¹⁸

Rather than criticize this motivation, however, Morrison suggests that Jack's penchant for destruction is *pure*, albeit misdirected. Violent confrontation with authority is immoral, unsophisticated and likely to aggravate rather than subvert oppressive practices, but the desire for freedom and the abhorrence of restriction informing that violence is understandable and even admirable.

The next day, in class, Jack is asked a question about anarchist theory by his history teacher, Brian Malcolm.

BRIAN: Can anyone tell me the name of the anarchist writer of *Mutual Aid* who denounced the Bolshevik revolution?

[...]

JACK: Sir? I don't know Sir. Was it Molotov?

Jack's response is a deliberately provocative one; the correct answer to Brian's question is Russian writer Petr Kropotkin.¹⁹ That night, Jack is caught by Brian while again trying to burn down the school. After rejecting Brian's offer of understanding, Jack brutally assaults him. Face transformed by rage and elation, he correctly answers Brian's earlier question.

JACK: It was Kropotkin ... and you'll never fucking understand me.²⁰

Jack is already aware of Kropotkin, but he has rejected Kropotkin's version of anarchism as another form of authority. Morrison thus contrasts orthodox

17. Grant Morrison, *The Invisibles: Say You Want a Revolution* (New York: DC Comics, 1996), p. 9.

18. Morrison, *Say You Want a Revolution*, p. 12.

19. In *Mutual Aid*, Kropotkin argued that Darwin's theory of evolution was too heavily influenced by capitalist and hierarchical thought, and that success in nature is defined not by competition but by cooperation: Petr Alekseevich Kropotkin, *Mutual Aid: A Factor of Evolution* (London: Allen Lane, 1972). Kropotkin denounced the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution on the ground that the Bolsheviks were a political entity seeking centralized power for themselves, no different from the Tsars: Patrick Neighly and Kereth Cowe-Spigai, *Anarchy for the Masses: An Underground Guide to the Invisibles* (Toronto, Mad Yak press, 2001), pp. 14–15.

20. Morrison, *Say You Want a Revolution*, p. 28.

anarchism with an alternative conception, one which extends to the rejection not only of legal and political authority but of *all* authority, including the rejection by the anarchist of anarchist ideology itself. Such a rejection of course undermines orthodox anarchism, but it also points towards a higher form of freedom. Jack's fellow Invisibles oppose authority but nevertheless remain committed to the anarchist project, at least initially. Jack, however, takes the rejection of all authority to its extreme, and is portrayed by Morrison as the Invisible who eventually achieves the deepest level of understanding of the nature of freedom and control.

After his attempt to burn down the school and his assault upon his teacher, Jack is arrested and tried in court. The judge is an unrealistic caricature of everything that positivist jurisprudence denies about legal authority: he is angry, disgusted by Jack's actions, and clearly biased in favor of the prosecution. The character of the judge is nevertheless a realistic portrayal of the non-lawyer's uneasy misunderstanding of the law; he is the authoritarian not merely ignorant of individual circumstances and context, but deliberately and explicitly concerned with aggravating the suffering of the oppressed. Jack is sent by the judge to Harmony House. The man in charge of the institution, Mr Gelt, is another authoritarian caricature: the headmaster.

GELT: Conformity. Conformity. People nowadays sneer at that word, boys. The talk is all of individualism and self-reliance, but what has this glorification of the individual brought us? The ancient structures of law and order begin to crumble, worn down by a rising tide of anarchy and violence. We are here to teach you how to put the needs of others before your own selfish concerns. When we have finished with you, you will have come to accept and understand your place as part of the status quo. We will bevel away those awkward edges and make of you round pegs for round holes. And you will learn to be soldiers, eh? For make no mistake, there is a war being waged between good and evil. The forces of chaos are forever seeking ways to gain footholds in young and impressionable minds. But fear not: we are here to pull you out of the shadows, boys. We are here to make you march in step. And here at Harmony House you will learn to have pride in your role as a cog in the great machine of society.²¹

Gelt is engaging in a popular form of dualism. For Gelt, there is good and there is evil in the world; the characteristics of "good" are control and conformity, and the characteristics of "evil" are anarchy, chaos and difference. While such views on the importance of control and the evils of anarchy and unrestricted freedom are necessarily simplistic ones for the purposes

21. Morrison, *Say You Want a Revolution*, p. 31.

of the story, they are nevertheless not far removed from those advocated by some conservative voices within the media.²² Upholders of the law and defenders of institutional authority argue that unrestricted freedom would necessarily mean turmoil and violence, and that control and authority are therefore crucial to maintain order and calm. Thomas Hobbes famously argued that a state of nature, or society without a government, is a nightmare of permanent war of all against all.²³ This view is still popular today, and many appear to assume that anarchy is something that must be avoided at all costs by having strong systems of law and government.

The judge and the headmaster represent within *The Invisibles* law and education, two key mechanisms for the disciplining of society and the maintenance of a status quo which – according to anarchists – privileges an elite minority. In *The Invisibles*, the elite minority are the ultra-dimensional Archons: terrifying, Lovecraftian supernatural beings. Legal and institutional authority, then, are the tools of monsters. In this regard, *The Invisibles* is consistent with the writings of many orthodox anarchists, who argue that government is invariably controlled by the rich and powerful – portrayed as undeserving monsters – and that law is made in the interests of this dominant elite. William Godwin, for example, described how the rich are always directly or indirectly the legislators and that government perpetuates economic inequality in society.²⁴ Petr Kropotkin argued that the State is an instrument for establishing monopolies in favor of ruling minorities.²⁵ Alex Comfort continued the anarchist depiction of authority as monstrous by arguing that the main preoccupation of legal officials and enforcers is a desire for control over others, and that legal institutions attract aggressive personalities in search of power as an end in itself.²⁶ Within anarchist fiction, the anarchist is the hero who dares to oppose these aggressive personalities.

Jack is rescued from Harmony House by King Mob, the orthodox anarchist *superhero* – charismatic, rebellious and extraordinarily violent – who responds to Gelt's attempted manipulations by shooting him in the face. King Mob later abandons Jack in London, and Jack is trained and initiated by the Merlin-like Tom O'Bedlam. Tom explains "the War" to Jack: the same duality as that referred to earlier by Gelt, but viewed this time from the perspective of an advocate of freedom. The war is between control and freedom, authority

22. The popular equation of anarchy with chaos, violence and terror is readily apparent from a scan of the various news stories containing the word anarchy, such as the recently popular "Anarchy in New Orleans" (see e.g. <http://news.independent.co.uk/world/americas/article309692.ece>). This has prompted some anarchist groups to issue guidelines such as the "Quick Guide to Anarchy for Journalists" by the Anarchist Action Network (<http://www.zpub.com/notes/aan-QuickGuide.html>).

23. Bertrand Russell, *History of Western Philosophy* (London: Routledge, 1961), p. 531.

24. Peter H. Marshall, *Demanding the Impossible: A History of Anarchism* (London: Fontana press, 1993), p. 18.

25. Petr Alekseevich Kropotkin, *Anarchism and Anarchist Communism* (London: Freedom Press, 1986), p. 9.

26. Alex Comfort, *Authority and Delinquency in the Modern State: A Criminological Approach to the Problem of Power* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1950).

and anarchy, the Archons and the Invisibles. The Archons control the governments of the world, and the Invisibles are freedom fighters dedicated to the liberation and evolution of humanity.²⁷

Once his training by Tom is complete, Jack is ready to join the Invisibles himself. Tom's parting words to Jack distil his teachings into a single word.

TOM: In the end, I've only one true teaching for you, one simple word: disobedience.²⁸

Similarly, Oscar Wilde wrote that "disobedience, in the eyes of anyone who has read history, is man's original virtue. It is through disobedience that progress has been made; through disobedience and through rebellion."²⁹ Disobedience is the continuing commitment to freedom in the face of an attempted exercise of control. There is, of course, a range of possible motivations driving such disobedience, some more sophisticated than others. Jack's own disobedience is initially driven by fear and frustration and targeted towards anyone and anything redolent of authority. As the series progresses, Jack's motivation shifts to compassion, and the targets of his disobedience are chosen more carefully.

Jack's first mission with the Invisibles is a journey to seventeenth-century France to recruit the Marquis De Sade to the Invisibles' cause. After collecting De Sade, the Invisibles return to the present via the "ontic realm" where they are forced to witness scenes from De Sade's infamous book *120 Days of Sodom*. Four men – a banker, a judge, a bishop, and a duke – engage in a spectacular range of sexual perversions and torture within the Castle Silling. The four men represent the four principal forms of institutional authority of De Sade's era: finance, law, religion and class. Like De Sade, Morrison uses these scenes to illustrate the dangers of utopianism and the excesses of extreme authority.

DE SADE: I tried to show them where it would all lead. The hypocrisy of the Enlightenment. These are the monsters bred by the God of reason. Idealists and reformers all become executioners in their turn. The road to Utopia ends with the steps of the scaffold, the endless moment of the guillotine.

KING MOB: Come off it! Why don't you admit you're just a dirty old sod?

DE SADE: Well ... that too. Sixteen years in prison, with only a wooden pole to shove up my arse for a little fun. That and my pen and paper and my imagination. I wanted revenge! I wanted to wreck the world and to shit in the ruins! I built a

27. The Invisibles are not completely fictional. "The Invisibles" was a name given to Freemasons, Rosicrucians and other neo-Templar groups in London and Paris in the 1600s.

28. Grant Morrison, *The Invisibles: Apocalipstick* (New York: DC Comics, 2001), p. 205.

29. Oscar Wilde, *The Soul of a Man under Socialism* (New York: Max N. Maisel, 1915).

door made of words, escaped through it. I wished blackness and annihilation on my captors, my family, God and humanity. I went into the pit. I showed the rotten face of corruption behind the painted mask of the State. Alone in my cell, I unmade civilization. I let the beast out of the cage to devour a 'moral universe' conceived by liars and dissemblers. I exposed the monsters who govern us and make pretty speeches while dining on the entrails of children! And then the revolution came and I saw the weak become strong and do in their turn what the strong have always done to the weak. I was sickened.³⁰

Just as the exercise of authority is typically driven by fear of the other and a base need to control, orthodox anarchism is often driven by anger and a base need for revenge. In Morrison's version of *120 Days of Sodom*, the story ends with one of the slaves being forced to detonate a bomb, killing everyone and destroying the Castle Silling. As De Sade and the Invisibles move on, King Mob gives one of the first explicit explanations of the Invisibles' ultimate objectives, and Morrison again alludes to the limitations of orthodox anarchism:

KING MOB: This is a crisis point, right? We're coming up on the Apocalypse at last and things could still go either way.

We're in the final furlong in the race between a never ending global party and a world that looks like Auschwitz.

DE SADE: So it's more feeble minded utopianism? I thought you were more intelligent than that. I have no wish to live in anyone's perfect world but my own.

KING MOB: Exactly. That's why we're trying to pull off the trick that will result in everyone getting exactly the kind of world they want. Everyone including the enemy.³¹

The goal of the Invisibles, like all anarchists, is a state of anarchy, a society without government, freedom without restriction. Most orthodox anarchist theorists who describe such a society are either disappointingly prescriptive or overly optimistic about human nature. Max Stirner and Benjamin Tucker, for example, described an ultra-capitalist society where Adam Smith's "hidden hand" would translate private interest into general good and promote a coincidence of interests.³² William Godwin based his model of a harmonious free society on the reign of reason in accordance with universal moral laws.³³ Pierre-Joseph Proudhon argued that the members of

30. Morrison, *Say You Want a Revolution*, p. 185.

31. Morrison, *Say You Want a Revolution*, p. 204.

32. Marshall, *Demanding the Impossible*, p. 17.

33. Peter H. Marshall, *The Anarchist Writings of William Godwin* (London: Freedom Press, 1986).

an anarchist community would recognize and accept that they all gain from voluntarily coordinating their economic interests.³⁴ Mikhail Bakunin described a society governed by conscience and reason.³⁵ It is these and other such models that Morrison, speaking through De Sade, labels as “feeble-minded utopianism.” All are efforts by orthodox anarchists to hypocritically impose their ideal world upon others. How does Morrison avoid committing the same hypocrisy? *The Invisibles* is a science fiction story, and Morrison can therefore get away with making his description of an anarchic world a fantastic one. In 2012, the world will merge with the “Supercontext” and those who survive the process will thereafter exist in a reality shaped completely by their own desires and perceptions. Everyone will get what they want, “including the enemy.” Beyond this, Morrison does not describe explicitly the consequences of merger with the Supercontext. “Merger with the Supercontext” is probably best understood as a metaphor for the achievement of the goals of ontological terrorism and the widespread realization of the contingency of all dualisms; that is, a state of anarchy achieved not through revolution and political upheaval, but through revelation and education.

After being injured in a violent struggle between the Invisibles (who at this stage of the story are still practicing a more confrontational form of anarchism) and an agent of the Archons, Jack decides that he no longer wishes to be an Invisible. While looking for Jack, King Mob is captured by the Invisibles’ human nemesis, Sir Miles Delacourt. In the process of interrogating King Mob, Sir Miles explains that the strategies of control used by the Archons are far more insidious than the brute force of the police and the military, the coercive sanctions of the law and the disciplinary tactics of formal education.

SIR MILES: Have you ever wondered why we talk of ‘spelling’? There is a spell word, an ‘abracadabra’, implanted in the brain of every English-speaking child. The root mantra of restriction, the secret name of a mighty hidden demon: ‘Eybeesee-Dee-Ee-Eff-Geeaitcheye-Jai-Kayell-Emenn-Ohpeequeue-Are-Ess-Tee-Youvedouble-You-Ex-Wyzed’. That name and all the names it generates were designed to set limits upon humanity’s ability to express abstract thought. What you see depends entirely upon the words you have to describe what you see. Nothing exists unless we say that it does.³⁶

The authority with which the ontological terrorist must contend extends beyond force, law and education to language itself, and it is the limitations

34. Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, *Selected Writings of Pierre-Joseph Proudhon* (London: Macmillan, 1969).

35. Mikhail Aleksandrovich Bakunin, *Bakunin on Anarchy: Selected Works by the Activist-Founder of World Anarchism* (New York: A A Knopf, 1972).

36. Grant Morrison, *The Invisibles: Entropy in the UK* (New York: DC Comics, 2001), p. 63.

of language which must be recognized and transcended before a truly anarchic state (or merger with the Supercontext) can come into being. The ontological terrorist cannot abolish language as the orthodox anarchist seeks to abolish government, but they can reveal its limitations.

Meanwhile, alone in Liverpool, Jack recalls an important experience from his time with Tom: a series of visions, including one of Jack knelt before the crucified Christ with a pair of bloody pliers.³⁷ The Invisibles finally locate Jack and ask him to return to London to help rescue King Mob, and as Jack asks why he should bother, he remembers his final vision. Suspended naked, with images of starving children, war, drug abuse and cruelty around him, Jack screams while a disembodied voice (“Barbelith”) addresses him:

BARBELITH: This is the world you made. This nightmare will persist until you wake up. What will you do?

JACK: I'll fix it. Let me fix it ... I want to fix it all ... I want to make it all right ... It's horrible ... Just let me fix it ...

BARBELITH: Then fix yourself. The world will follow. Everything will follow. 'As above, so below.' Do you understand? Do you understand what you must do?³⁸

From this point on, Jack's anarchism is motivated not by fear and anger, but by a compassionate desire to liberate others. He agrees to return to London to help the other Invisibles. Volume 1 concludes with a confrontation between Jack and one of the Archons. Jack triumphs by remaining cross legged and, Buddha-like, resisting the temptations and illusions proffered by the Archon. Jack eventually steps from his circle of power and “names” the Archon, which promptly vanishes: Jack has begun to question the very existence of the “war” between freedom and control. Following King Mob's dramatic rescue by the other Invisibles, Jack quietly heals Sir Miles' injuries. His subsequent insistence that “Nobody knows what I am” references his statement to his teacher from the beginning of the volume, and demonstrates that while he is no longer the brutal thug committed to violence, he nevertheless remains committed to disobedience.

In Volume 2, the Invisibles relocate to the USA, and the tone of the series shifts from dark occult drama to Hollywood blockbuster. The stories become more fantastic, the artwork becomes brighter and slicker, and the violence becomes more extreme. The distinctions and tensions between authority and anarchy, and between control and freedom, continue to be simultaneously emphasized and undermined. In *Bloody Hell in America*, King Mob explains why the Invisibles' victory is inevitable:

KING MOB: That's why they can never hope to win. Chaos sneaks in every time. They can cover the world with cameras, but they can't

37. Morrison, *Entropy in the UK*, p. 122.

38. Morrison, *Entropy in the UK*, p. 129.

stop the guys in the monitor rooms from jerking off or playing the fifteenth sequel to 'Doom' for the hundredth time. Total bloody chaos.³⁹

These and other references to chaos evoke Hakim Bey's "ontological anarchism," described earlier. The world is already in a state of anarchy. "Chaos" is the undifferentiated reality existing prior to all dualities; "order" is an illusion which emerges once dualities are accepted as real. In Volume 2, Morrison investigates the nature of this illusion. Volume 2 is replete with references to film and television, and these references eventually become the focus of the story. Expanding upon the notion from the first volume that authority and control are exercised through language itself, Morrison explores the disciplinary impact of the image, suggesting that contemporary society is regulated primarily through control of what Guy Debord referred to as "the Spectacle."⁴⁰ The illusion of order is shaped and reinforced by the television people watch, the films they see, and the books and magazines they read. It doesn't matter how many teachers the Invisibles beat up or how many police officers and soldiers they murder, people continue to willingly obey authority and crave control because they are bewitched by the Spectacle.

MASON LANG: Imagine the moment when they thought of a whole new way to control the world. With light. With the powers of illusion. [...] What I'm saying is that the image rules the world. The hallucination has taken control. How do we take control of the hallucination?⁴¹

For the ontological terrorist the war between freedom and control is fought not with guns but with language and imagery. Anarchy already exists, and the myths of law and government only persist because of mistaken belief. The anarchist project is the endeavor to dominate the Spectacle.

In Volume 3, the shortest volume in the series, the war between the Invisibles and the Archons continues, but the differences between the two sides have almost completely dissolved. Characters believed to be on the side of the Invisibles join the Archon conspiracy, and characters believed to be working for the Archon conspiracy turn out to have been Invisibles all along. The anarchists embrace the techniques of the authoritarians: they engage in kidnapping, interrogation and brain washing. It is revealed that the ultimate agitator behind the Invisibles and the ultimate leader of the Archon conspiracy are the same being. The overall impression is that the many characters in the story are engaged in an elaborate game.

Volume 3 climaxes with Jack defeating the Archons, but he does so not by beating them up or by killing them, but by "eating" them. Instead of destroying the monstrous symbols of authority and control, he understands them, accepts them, assimilates them and defuses them of their potential

39. Grant Morrison, *The Invisibles: Bloody Hell in America* (New York: DC Comics, 1998), p. 72.

40. Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle* (New York: Zone Books, 1995).

41. Morrison, *Counting to None*, p. 103.

for terror. Anarchism for Morrison is by this point in the story no longer concerned with violent resistance to and confrontation with institutional authority in the name of freedom. Dualistic orthodox anarchism has been displaced by anti-dualistic ontological terrorism, the effort to rescue everybody – including other anarchists – from their self-imposed prisons of belief. The story of the Invisibles of today ends in the penultimate issue of the series with Jack, now a school teacher, passing on the message of subversion and disobedience to a new generation of potential Invisibles.

IV. Freedom and Control

“Freedom” and “control” are intimately related rather than diametrically opposed. Each arises as a consequence of the existence of the other: the exercise of control provokes resistance to that control which takes the form of a striving for freedom, and an insistence upon greater freedom invariably leads to an effort to either enforce or restrict that freedom through a greater level of control. The attempt to abolish authoritarianism through the practice of anarchism is as futile as the effort to abolish anarchism through the practice of authoritarianism. This was a point explored by science fiction writer Philip K. Dick in his later work, and Dick’s ideas are explicitly referenced by Morrison in Volume 2 of *The Invisibles*.

KING MOB: These people, these things we’re fighting ...
They want to enslave everyone and everything ...

JACQUI: They won’t be able to. It’s only you fighting them that gives them strength. ‘To fight the empire is to be infected by its derangement.’ ‘Whoever defeats part of the empire becomes the empire; it proliferates like a virus ... thereby it becomes its enemies.’ Philip K. Dick. I memorized it after the last time we had this argument.

KING MOB: Philip K. Dick is dead, alas.

JACQUI: What’s that supposed to mean? Everything in the universe is going exactly to plan, Gideon. We don’t have to ‘do’ anything. Surely you can see you’ve ended up needing your enemy to make you who you are. You couldn’t live without them now.⁴²

The attempt to understand a whole by dividing that whole into two opposing parts is *dualism*. In philosophical discourse, dualism usually takes the form of Cartesian dualism, the division of reality into the physical and the mental or the body and the mind. This is not, however, the only form of philosophical dualism: the pre-Socratics, for example, distinguished between appearance and reality, Plato distinguished between the pure form and the actual form,

42. Morrison, *Counting to None*, pp. 18–19.

Hume distinguished between fact and value, Kant distinguished between empirical phenomena and transcendental noumena, and Zarathustra posited a world shaped by the conflict between the forces for good and the forces for evil, a view subsequently influential upon the development of Judaism, Christianity and Islam. Nor is dualism a tendency restricted to philosophical discourse. At almost every level of being, in almost every aspect of our lives, we all divide an initially undifferentiated whole into two categories – such as freedom and control, like and dislike, or something and nothing – and value one above the other, telling ourselves that the distinction is objective and universal rather than subjective and local.

Dualism is rife within the fictional worlds of popular culture, worlds often constructed upon simple dichotomies of good and evil and of right and wrong: heroes versus villains, law enforcers versus criminals, governments versus terrorists. Of course, many stories invert these dualities by, for example, portraying the criminal as hero-victim and the law enforcer as villain, but the dualism remains. *The Invisibles* begins in the popular tradition by positing a universal struggle between freedom and control, but by the third volume of the series, this duality has been subverted altogether.

When the character Sir Miles is first introduced in Volume 1 he is a villainous caricature. He is the authoritarian from the perspective of the oppressed: rich, powerful, successful, selfish and cruel. He is a willing agent for the exercise of institutional power, and he appears to have accepted his role in the war between freedom and control. He is loyal to his Archon masters and determined to not only exterminate the Invisibles but to undermine the very notion of freedom itself.

SIR MILES: You think you're fighting for 'freedom'. From what? From whom? Your chains are imaginary. The mass of the people are free; free to live and work and die. How dare you presume to 'liberate' them from their comfortable lives? How you must loathe yourself; so eager to struggle against anything but your own inadequacy. The truth is, you long to be like us but because you cannot fit into society, you dream of overthrowing it. What is this infantile urge to destroy which others have labored to build?⁴³

At the end of Volume 1, Sir Miles suffers the indignity of having his life saved by Jack. This act provokes within Sir Miles for the remainder of the series both a renewed resentment towards the Invisibles and an increased level of self doubt. In Volume 2, we learn that Sir Miles has a wife, that he is disturbed by strange dreams, and that he has reservations about his role as an agent for the Archons. In Volume 3 it is revealed that Sir Miles was once himself an anarchist and outsider, a potential Invisible lead astray by his own ambitions. He is provoked by the Invisibles to face his crimes and

43. Morrison, *Entropy in the UK*, p. 62.

he finally feels remorse. By the end of the series Sir Miles has become a sympathetic character. For the ontological terrorist there are no enemies, only others. Even the most oppressive authoritarian is no more than a human living the consequences of their circumstances and the results of their choices, and experiences doubts and misgivings about their commitment to discipline and control. The resistance which is an inevitable consequence of the exercise of control is not only external to that exercise; resistance is also internal to the power-wielding subject.

King Mob, like Sir Miles, begins as a caricature, this time of the heroic rebel committed to freedom at any cost. He too is cruel, merciless and murderous, but we are initially expected to accept his murders because he only kills “bad” people: authoritarians and their agents. As the series progresses, however, and as the violence accelerates in Volume 2, we begin to question his actions. The murders become increasingly graphic. We cease to sympathize with King Mob, and begin to wonder what the difference is between an evil character who kills wantonly and a good character who kills wantonly. In one scene, King Mob is confronted by his ex-girlfriend Jacqui and forced to address these issues.

JACQUI: 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.⁴⁴

By the end of Volume 2, King Mob has finally come to realize the futility of violent confrontation, and while remaining committed to freedom, decides to change his methods.

KING MOB: Thought I’d opt for ontological terrorism. It’s a big word I know, but the dictionary’s always worth a look. [Throws gun into lake.] Bond is dead.

King Mob’s shift from violence to pacifism evokes the body of anarcho-pacifist literature. Anarcho-pacifists insist that non-violent resistance is the only method of achieving an anarchist revolution. According to Leo Tolstoy, for example, it is because government is ultimately based on violence that it should be abolished, and the means he adopted was to refuse to cooperate with the violence of government through civil disobedience and non-violent resistance. Gandhi famously developed Tolstoy’s method of non-violent resistance into an effective means of mass struggle, and managed to break the British hold on India.⁴⁵ King Mob is not, however, an anarcho-pacifist in the same sense as Tolstoy and Gandhi. He rejects both confrontational anarchism and passive resistance in favor of ontological

44. Morrison, *Counting to None*, pp. 18–19.

45. According to Gandhi, “the ideally non-violent state will be an ordered anarchy”: George Woodcock, *Gandhi* (London: Fontana, 1972), p. 86.

terrorism, and decides that proactive yet non-violent seizure of the Spectacle is the most effective path to anarchy and freedom. By the final issue of the series, set in 2012, King Mob has willingly embraced the techniques of authority and succeeded in his goal to assume control of the Spectacle. The anarchist and the authoritarian are one; the hero is the master villain.

As the world prepares to merge with the Supercontext, it is King Mob who represents the anarchists in the final confrontation with the Archons. Armed with a handgun, King Mob approaches the King-Of-All-Tears, but his thoughts are no longer of violent opposition.

KING MOB: I'm there at the end of the world that was and the beginning of birth into full understanding – fusion with the Supercontext. I am part of 'nature.' Every airplane, every power station is a result of 'nature's' process. We never fell. We were never apart from the world. We lied to ourselves. But now we're being born, fully grown, like insects, like Athena, the goddess of truth. Larval consciousness experiences the introduction of necessary inoculating agents from the Supercontext as a form of invasion by hostile, bacterial forces. The inoculation is conceptualized by the developing larva as an invasion of threatening 'not-self' material ... the confronting and integration of 'not-self' being a necessary stage in the development of the maturing larva's self-awareness – 'phylogeny recapitulates history.'⁴⁶

King Mob's gun is a toy gun, and when he shoots the Archon, a flag emerges from the barrel, emblazoned with the word "Pop." The scene is imbued with at least three layers of meaning: "pop" is a humorous reference to the sound normally made by a gun; an imaginary gun is being used because the Archon – the monstrous aspect of control – is an imaginary creature; and Morrison is suggesting that the antidote to authority which takes itself too seriously is not violence, passive resistance or somber criticism, but playful irony and humor: "pop."

Sir Miles is a subversion of the villainous authoritarian and King Mob is a subversion of the heroic anarchist, but the subversion of the distinction between freedom and control is most apparent in the transformation of Jack. From the very first issue Jack defies categorization. He refuses to accept his role as a student at school or as an inmate at Harmony House. When invited to join the Invisibles, Jack initially refuses, and when he does join the cause and is given his code name, he rejects it. Throughout the series, the characters and the reader are repeatedly asked "Which side are you on?," the implication being that all must choose between siding with freedom or siding with control. (The question is often accompanied by an image of a Moebius strip; the symbolism is obvious.) It is Jack who finally

46. Grant Morrison, *The Invisibles: The Invisible Kingdom* (New York: DC Comics, 2002), p. 277.

rejects this duality. When asked in Volume 2 which side he is on, Jack responds: “I’m on the side that’s got butter on it, I am.”⁴⁷ Jack has realized the meaninglessness of the question. There are no sides because there are no dualities, only the categories created by the observer. There is no war between freedom and control or between anarchy and authority. There is no difference between the good guys and the bad guys, between the conservatives and the radicals, or between the legislators and the civil libertarians. The most insidious oppressor is thinking itself and the language with which the thinker binds themselves and the world. The authoritarians and the conservatives imbue the anarchists and the radicals with monstrosity, and vice versa. The observer then forgets that it is they themselves who construct categories – “good,” “bad,” “freedom,” “control,” “authority,” “anarchy” – and the observer is imprisoned within their own creation.

MISTER SIX: In preliminary training, you may have heard or been told a number of contradictory stories about the nature and origin of our universe and about the reasons why the Invisible Order has come into being. We lied. We are not at war. There is no enemy. This is a rescue operation.⁴⁸

In the final pages of *The Invisibles* the world merges with the Supercontext and the Invisibles’ efforts to free everybody from their self-imposed prisons of belief are finally realized. Was merger with the Supercontext an inevitability or was it dependent upon the success of the Invisibles’ efforts? Is reality predetermined by fate or shaped by the exercise of free will and the making of choices? The subversion of the distinction between freedom and control renders such questions meaningless: “free will” and “destiny” are labels attached by the observer to an initially undifferentiated reality which exhibits the characteristics of both concepts simultaneously.

JACK: There’s no difference between fate and free will. Here I am; put here, come here. No difference. Same thing. Nothing ends that isn’t something else starting. So which side are you on? Do you know yet?⁴⁹

As both the comic book and the world end, snow begins to fall and we realize that the snowflakes are really absences as the comic book panels gradually dissolve and vanish from the page.

JACK: Don’t believe nothing that you hear. Trust what you know. Remember it’s all just a mirror we made to see ourselves in. And when the Archons come and it all turns inside out with scary miracles, it’s only all the things you left outside when you were building your little

47. Grant Morrison, *The Invisibles: Kissing Mister Quimper* (New York: DC Comics, 2000), p. 142.

48. Morrison, *The Invisible Kingdom*, pp. 17–18.

49. Morrison, *The Invisible Kingdom*, p. 285.

house called 'me.' [...] We made gods and jailors because we felt small and ashamed and alone. [...] We let them try us and judge us and, like sheep to the slaughter, we allowed ourselves to be sentenced. See! Now! Our sentence is up.⁵⁰

V. Conclusion

What, then, do *The Invisibles* and the notion of ontological terrorism contribute to our understanding of the nature of freedom and of control? It shows that legal and political authority can be viewed as oppressive and illegitimate exercises of power and that obedience to law can be viewed as a form of slavery, but orthodox anarchist scholars and writers have been saying this for a very long time. It shows that law is only social control at its most obvious, and that the more insidious and effective strategies of social control are education, language and thought itself; but this is a point which has been made repeatedly elsewhere. It demonstrates a range of strategies for the opposition to and undermining of institutional authority, but this too is nothing new.

Three features of Morrison's portrayal of ontological terrorism in *The Invisibles* are relatively original. The first relates to the novelty of comic books, humor and a pop sensibility as vehicles for the propagation of ideas. Questions regarding the nature of anarchy and the relationship between freedom and control are serious and important questions but that does not mean that they cannot be addressed playfully, colorfully or humorously. A text which takes itself too seriously is more likely to be disregarded by non-academic readers; by expressing these ideas in comic books and other forms of popular culture, depth of analysis is willingly sacrificed in favor of wider appeal and more successful propagation.

Secondly, Morrison emphasizes the relevance of compassion in the ongoing dialogue between the advocates of freedom and the advocates of control. In the earlier parts of the story, anarchic resistance is violent resistance, but as the story progresses the characters – especially Jack and King Mob – come to realize the futility of violent confrontation and the importance of compassion.

Finally, and most importantly, ontological terrorism undermines the popular conception that freedom and control are diametrically opposed concepts. Rather than antonymic, freedom and control are intimately related. Both the anarchists and the authoritarians seek to shape the thoughts and behaviors of others; the striving for greater freedom provokes greater effort to control, and the effort to control provokes a greater desire for freedom; and the distinction between "freedom" and "control" is subjectively constructed rather than

50. Morrison, *The Invisible Kingdom*, p. 282.

objectively real. The goal of the ontological terrorist is to recognize, and to encourage others to recognize, the contingency of these and other such dualities. There is some value in debating the merits of freedom versus the merits of control, whether in the form of anarchism versus authoritarianism or in the form of civil liberties versus security, but in doing so we must not lose sight of the fact that these binary categories are contingent rather than universal, and that it is only language, not reality, that demands that one side of a duality be embraced at the expense of the other.