



Watching (through) the Watchmen: Representation and Deconstruction of the Controlling Gaze in Neil Gaiman's The Sandman

by Daniele Croci

Have you ever wondered, little bird, what it must be like to see the world through the eyes of a God?
(Gaiman and McKean 1989: 65.13)¹

In her interview to Michel Foucault, published in the anthology *Power/knowledge* (1980), French historian Michelle Perraut claims that:

The Panopticon is by no means foreign to [...] preoccupations, if one takes account of the chief inspector's surveillance of his staff and the constant watch kept over everyone through the windows of the tower, an unbroken succession of observations recalling the motto: each comrade becomes an overseer. [...] Yet it's Bentham who begins by relying on a single power, that of the central tower. As

¹ Given the extreme length of the work, and moreover the ludicrous amount of different editions – with different page numeration – which have been published for *The Sandman*, it has been decided to adopt a slightly modified version of S. Rauch's (2003) citation style, thus employing the [issue number].[page of the issue] formula, which is respectful of the original publication form in 75 monthly issues.



one reads him one wonders who he is putting in the tower. Is it the eye of God?
(Perraut 1980: 157)

The "Panopticon" she is referring to, "the infernal model that no one, either the watcher or the watched, can escape" (Perraut 1980: 156) is a prototype of prison facility that was designed by the English philosopher Jeremy Bentham in the late XVIII century, and which is extensively analysed by Foucault himself in his highly influential essay *Discipline and Punish: the Birth of the Prison* (Foucault [1975] 1995). Designed as a circular structure of cells with a watchtower in the middle,² the Panopticon is considered by Foucault to be a metaphor and sublimation of the principle of surveillance, which allows the impalpable enforcement of discipline on the "docile body" (Foucault 1995: 135) of the condemned in modern apparatuses of power. Thanks to such design, the inmate in the Panopticon "is seen, but he [sic] does not see; he is the object of information, never a subject in communication" (Foucault 1995: 200).

Going back to Perraut's question, it can be said that her claim, while being (partially) rejected by herself, and immediately after by Foucault,³ quite unintentionally raises an interesting point, i.e. that the modern(ist) concept of surveillance still shows the signs of a religious and/or metaphysical discourse focused around the gaze of the divinity. In other words, it could be said that the underlying idea of *control* is imbued with two separate but not mutually-exclusive notions: on the one hand, the eye of the supernatural being which, from a privileged position, controls and then punishes those who misbehave; on the other hand, the ethereal and disembodied control imposed by a pervasive, invisible system (i.e. apparatus) of technological surveillance. Such a system, whose very effectiveness also relies on removing the need for an identifiable and verifiable watchman, is devised "not so much to punish wrongdoers as to prevent even the possibility of wrongdoing, by immersing people in a field of total visibility" (Foucault 1980: 153).

The present analysis stems from this assumption and investigates the ways in which a postmodern and highly sophisticated graphic novel, Neil Gaiman and Dave McKean's *The Sandman*⁴ (1989), manages to appropriate, blend into a single metaphorical figure, and even challenge (with original modalities and outcomes) the aforementioned narratives of control, respectively the divine/metaphysical and the panoptical. In particular, the analysis will focus on the penultimate story arc, titled *The*

² The cells should be built with a single window open onto the inner side of the circle and hence onto the watchtower. Complete designs of Bentham's project are attached to virtually every reprint of Foucault's *Birth of the Prison*.

³ She then adds "[...] God is hardly present in the text. [...] Then who is it?" (Foucault 1985: 157), while he replies "[In a machine such as the Panopticon] it's the place of a person which is determining, not his nature, no reliance can be placed on a single individual." (Foucault 1985: 158)

⁴ A large amount of artists (pencillers, inkers, colorists) have actually worked upon the graphic novel; however, for the sake of simplicity only the author and the cover artist (who has worked on every single issue since the beginning) have been reported.



Kindly Ones (issues #57-69). *The Sandman*, entirely written by British author Neil Gaiman (1960 -), was serialized until 1996 under the “mature reader” imprint *Vertigo* of the American publisher and corporate giant DC Comics. A modern fantasy *bildungsroman*, it is one of the most critically acclaimed graphic novels of all time, having been awarded 26 Eisner Awards; the 19th issue, entitled “A Midsummer Night’s Dream” is the sole piece of graphic literature to have ever received the World Fantasy Award.

It must be premised that *The Sandman’s* discourse concerning the divine eye is not mainly informed by the Judeo-Christian concept of “all-seeing eye of God”, as one might be tempted to think. This concept is undoubtedly paramount in western culture, being repeatedly mentioned in the Holy Bible, and having been represented by a myriad of artists⁵ over the centuries. Instead, this graphic novel can be said to exploit its own pastiche nature and especially its tragic structure/motifs (see Bender 2000: 174–175) in order to analyse, demystify and eventually deconstruct the implicit operations of scrutiny and control which lie hidden behind the relationship between *hubris* and *nemesis*. Such concepts serve as the backbone for many dramatic narratives, and are widely present in Greek and Elizabethan tragedies, which can be said to constitute major sources for *The Sandman*. As we shall see, the analysis and deconstruction are carried out through a wide array of representational strategies which exploit – and to a certain extent re-invent – the specificity of the *comic book* medium.

Speaking of the appropriation and re-use of highbrow literary sources within mass culture, it must be said that much critical debate – and therefore many theoretical tools of analysis – still rely heavily upon categories of signification which revolve around the ideas of *closeness* and/or *fidelity* to the original classics. Other critics, more influenced by materialist critical trends, are concerned by the(ir) dialectics between *emancipation* and *control*, the latter deriving from the material and structural conditions of the media. For instance, Shakespeare scholar Graham Holderness, speaking of televised adaptations of the Bard’s plays, claims that any translation of Shakespeare into a visually tangible form “seems inevitably to entail a liberation of the play [...] from the fettered holy writ of the text” (Holderness 1994: 207), but that in the meantime it must also be acknowledged that popular culture media are “inherently conservative” and “exercise a despotic ideological control over the spectator’s response [...] depriving the audience of an opportunity to participate in a collaborative construction of meaning” (Holderness 1994: 208).

It is here argued that the aforementioned critical stance is not productive within a theoretical framework which must necessarily dismiss the validity of a *high culture/low culture* debate that considers such categories as *real* and *objective*, and

⁵ “For the ways of man are before the eyes of the LORD, and he pondereth all his goings” (emphasis in the original) (Pr. 5:21 AV). As for western art, see for instance Jacopo da Pontorno’s *Cena in Emmaus* (1525)



which, in addition, can be accused of reductionism. A more useful approach should be taken into account, as, for instance, the consideration of consumption as a creative act, for “buyers become bricoleurs; [...] rather than being inherent in the commodity, meaning and value are constructed through actual usage” (Barker 2012: 67). Starting from such assumptions, the model of analysis that seems most suitable is Stuart Hall’s *encoding/decoding* model,⁶ which problematizes the traditional *sender/receiver* model in order to establish four linked moments (production, distribution, circulation and reproduction) in which “meaning is embedded” (Barker 2012: 327). In addition, Hall (1980) stresses that “[the encoding process] can attempt to ‘pre-fer’ but cannot prescribe or guarantee [the decoding process], which has its own conditions of existence” (Hall 1980: 125). It can be therefore argued that graphic novels should be considered as first-stage decoders, which receive the most disparate cultural suggestions and motifs, and successively re-produce them for the audience, only to be re-interpreted according to their own social and cultural resources. It should not be forgotten that from its very beginnings mainstream graphic narrative has appropriated and popularized high culture and literature – only to contaminate them with elements from less renowned cultural strata (see Morrison 2012: 17–26 for an interesting account on Bat-Man’s creation in 1939). Such interstitial, in-between conceptualization of the genre’s position within the cultural environment mirrors the hybrid nature of the medium itself, and moreover configures the graphic novel as a cultural, almost inherently postmodern third space in which (skilful) authors “deconstruct, manipulate, and reassemble the forms of tradition and narrative both in literature and comics” (Di Liddo 2009: 15).

CULTURAL SYNCRETISM, TRAGIC CONTAMINATIONS

Before attempting to analyse *The Sandman* and the representational patterns employed by the authors, several other points should be raised. The first concerns the ways in which the graphic novel articulates its own nature of literary pastiche; Neil Gaiman, in the long interview published in *The Sandman Companion* (Bender 2000), claims that issue #9, titled *Tales of the Sand*, should be considered “[his] first attempt in the series at pure pastiche – that is, openly imitating an established style of storytelling” (Bender 2000: 50). It must be noted that Gaiman, through the mastery of his narrative skills, aptly avoids turning the literary device into the aimless game of cross-reference and intertextuality criticised by Fredric Jameson (1991) as a “neutral practice of such mimicry, without any of parody’s ulterior motives, amputated of the satiric impulse” (Jameson 1991: 16). Within the series, pastiche is used instead as a tool that allows the author to reflect – amongst other things – on the art of storytelling, the

⁶ Later developed as “circuit of culture” (see Hall, Evans, and Nixon 2013: xviii)



role and creation of myths within societies and especially the falseness of the boundaries defining high and low culture⁷ (see Rauch 2003: 135).

However, defining *The Sandman* a pastiche would seem to be reductive. Compared to other postmodern works such as *V for Vendetta* (Moore and Lloyd 1989), the series can be said to elevate the device to the state-of-the-art, being a true mythopoesis which builds a literary hyper-reality in which historical figures, comic-book super-heroes, Shakespearean *dramatis personae*, personifications of aspects of the universe (the Endless), religious figures, mythological creatures and normal human beings more or less pacifically coexist. It can therefore be suggested that Gaiman invests the whole narrative and character structure with an unusual *cultural syncretism* which juxtaposes different cultural and literary heritages and which, in addition, blends different figures within the same character: for instance, the protagonist, the anthropomorphic personification of Dream, is shown to be simultaneously the Greek God Oneiros (see 17.23), the Roman God Morpheus and the European folklore creature Sandman. Apart from the Sandman, the character that best exemplifies such syncretism is the Triple Goddess, also known as Three-who-are-One (see Bender 2000: 199), a tripartite figure invariably composed by a maiden, a mother and a crone which is, often with minor variations, common to the most different cultures and lores all around the world. Gaiman blends together the cultural inputs creating an overlapping, unstable figure – which continuously shifts the appearance of the women and which assumes the appropriate role according to the situation, thus becoming the Greek Fates, the Irish Morrigan, William Shakespeare's Weird Sisters from *Macbeth*, the Greek Erinyes (also called Furies or Eumenides) and many more.⁸

The relationship between the graphic novel and Classic Greek and British Renaissance tragedy can be demonstrated by several elements. First of all, some explicit and straightforward references to Aeschylus's trilogy of the *Oresteia* can be traced,⁹ especially to the third part entitled *The Eumenides*, from which *The Sandman's* main antagonists the Furies/Erinyes/Eumenides¹⁰ are obviously absorbed. While in the graphic novel their purpose is to avenge Dream's blood sin with his death,¹¹ in the original play these Chthonic deities

⁷ The main character, Dream, is "the personification of story-telling" (Rauch 2003: 53), and defines himself as the "Prince of Stories" (Rauch 2003: 76:36)

⁸ A full account of the references employed by Gaiman can be found in the *Sandman Annotations* (Morrow and Goldfarb 2007), freely available online.

⁹ The trilogy of the *Oresteia* was originally performed in Athens in 458 BC. The version employed in this paper is the English version translated by Ian Johnston (2003) and available online.

¹⁰ The equation between the Erinyes (lit. the Avengers) and the Eumenides (lit. Kindly Ones) was allegedly borrowed by Aeschylus from an earlier tragedy, Euripides's *Orestes*, composed in 408 BC (see Gantz 1993: 832)

¹¹ He euthanizes his own son Orpheus in the 49th issue after experiencing a lengthy process of personal maturation and self-refashioning.



are older than Zeus or any of the other Olympians. Their task is to hear complaints brought by mortals against the insolence of the young to the aged, of children to parents, of hosts to guests, and of householders or city councils to suppliants – and to punish such crimes by hounding the culprits relentlessly, without rest or pause, from city to city and from country to country. (Graves 1955: 117)

In both texts they fill the role of the *chorus* but also, in comic-book terms, of the *villain*: this is another element that helps us to consider *The Sandman*, and especially the already mentioned penultimate story arc *The Kindly Ones* (#57-69) as a “tragedy in classical terms” (Rauch 2003: 58), and moreover a work which does not simply imitate motifs and elements from the classics, but which appropriates them to exploit its own generic structure and generate new meanings.

The explicit references to tragedies are not confined to classical Greek theatre, since Jacobean and Elizabethan plays are also widely quoted in the series, with deliberate prominence given to Shakespeare. The Bard himself is an important secondary character, and two issues are entirely devoted to two separate plays, i.e. *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (#19) and *The Tempest* (#75), in which Shakespeare's friend and colleague Ben Jonson also makes a brief cameo appearance. In addition, as mentioned before, the Triple Goddess occasionally assumes the shape of *Macbeth's* Weird Sisters (as in 58.14), with direct quotations from the play.

Another subtler element which allows us to speak of *The Sandman* as a tragedy is the series' focus on (and some characters' obsession with) the idea of *natural order*, whose disruption (often caused by *hubris*) in tragic narratives normally leads to the anti-hero's fall (*nemesis*). Within Greek culture, the concept is termed *dikē*, and can mean, according to Simon Goldhill (1986), “a universal principle, as a cosmologist's description of the natural order of things”; the scholar stresses the importance of *dikē* within the *Oresteia*, a play which “dramatises a movement from the sense of *dikē* as retribution to the sense of *dikē* as legal justice” (Goldhill 1986: 37). Consider, for instance, this short passage from the *Eumenides*, in which the chorus of the Furies discusses the consequences that Orestes's absolution could bring:

If his legal action triumphs
if now this matricide prevails,
then newly set divine decrees
will overthrow all order.
Mortals will at once believe
that everything's permitted.
From now on parents can expect
repeated blows of suffering
inflicted by their children –
now and in time yet to come (629-638)



The idea of the natural order of things is also paramount in English Renaissance drama, articulated as a Christian providentialist belief variously influenced by a pagan idea of natural law. Jonathan Dollimore devotes an entire section of his *Radical Tragedy* (1993) to an analysis of the traces of such belief – and eventually the ways it is actually challenged – in the drama of Shakespeare and his contemporaries, arguing its importance as “ideological underpinning for ideas of absolute monarchy and divine right” (Dollimore 1993: 89) which were the basis for the crown of King James I.

Going back to *The Sandman*, the concept of the natural order of things is repeatedly addressed by many characters; its existence and importance are acknowledged by Dream when, speaking of his realm, he claims, “[...] the gates of horn and ivory. I carved them myself, when the world was younger, and order needed.” (2.11). Later on, when his raven friend Matthew asks him the reason why he does not physically eliminate the threat of the Furies, he replies “[b]ecause there are rules. And because they are part of something far huger and older than simple goddesses and bound and empowered by rules, as I am” (68.3). Here Dream is revealing that the order of things is regulated by “rules”, which “empower” and define it. During another story arc, *A Game of You*, the Moon Deities, another facet of the feminine Triple Goddess, tells the witch Thessaly, “You have disrupted the order of things enough this night, Thessalian. One day there will be a reckoning” (34.20). At the end of the series, during the final confrontation, the Eumenides make explicit to Dream what they mean by disruption of the order, “You have spilled the blood of your family, Morpheus. You killed your son. That makes you our legitimate prey” (64.19).

REPRESENTATIONAL STRATEGIES, SUBJECTIVE GAZES

It can be suggested that in *The Kindly Ones* story-arc Gaiman – and his artists, especially penciller Marc Hempel – employ specific strategies of representation to conceptualise the Furies as an anthropomorphic personification of the gaze; to hypostatize the interplay between crime and punishment; to make explicit the pervasive practices of control to which the characters in the tragedy are subjected. In addition, it can be argued that the authors try to achieve a certain degree of identification between the reader and some specific characters, in order to trigger unpredictable proreptic effects.

The first representational device to be analysed appears within the very first pages of the story-arc, i.e. at the beginning of issue #57, during a three-page sequence in which the Triple Goddess, working as the Fates (or *Moirai*) comments on the development of the plot and speculates about the possible outcomes, thus fulfilling



the role of the chorus. Artist Marc Hempel¹² here never represents the women's full body, crafting instead a metonymic¹³ representation which focuses on details or close-ups of the hands, face, legs, and even the scissors they are using. It can be speculated that such discontinuous narrative strategy implies a greater degree of attention – and thus involvement – from the reader; as Scott McCloud (1994) argues, speaking of what he defines “aspect-to-aspect transitions”, “the reader here must assemble a single moment using scattered fragments” (McCloud 1994: 79).

The following pages move instead to Lyta Hall, the woman who is starting to suffer from mental delusions after Dream's alleged kidnapping of her son Daniel, and who will consequently unleash the Eumenides on the Sandman.¹⁴ It can be speculated that the unclear representation of the Fates in the first few pages anticipates the sensorial *aporia* which is bound to invest the woman's labile mind after the loss of her beloved son, and which the reader is forced to experience keenly. The following step in the representation of her progressive derangement is in fact the use of captions instead of traditional speech balloons: captions are a device in comics which normally conveys intimacy and closeness to the reader, and are arguably employed here to express her mental detachment, as in “This is me walking into the family room” (59.23). She is describing what we – and she – are actually seeing: Lyta steps outside of her diegetic physicality as character and reaches the privileged observer position of the reader, who is starting to perceive the same sensorial uneasiness. The reader-character identification, which started as a greater degree of involvement due to metonymic representation, grows stronger page after page. It is worth noting that *The Kindly Ones'* strongly cartoonish artistic style – it is allegedly the least realistically-drawn story arc of the whole series – can be deemed as another clue to the authors' intention to stimulate such identification. McCloud (1994) argues that this process occurs because iconic, stylised images match our own “awareness of our biological selves [as] simplified conceptualized images” (McCloud 1994: 39), and therefore “the cartoon is a vacuum into which our identity and awareness are pulled” (McCloud 1994: 36).

As the plot proceeds, and Lyta's condition worsens, the (reader's) visual focalization shifts anarchically inside and outside the woman, as seen in issue #60, in which we are constantly and alternately shown what she is perceiving and the reality of what she is actually doing (she mistakes, for instance, a traffic light for a tall pink cyclop). Her – and our – grip on reality is increasingly weaker: on page 61:21 she sees herself – and we see her – becoming tripartite thanks to her reflection in a shop window. Eventually, she meets the Eumenides (63.18 and following), and asks them to avenge her son; the meeting is undoubtedly the climax of her/our sensorial *aporia*, as

¹² It must be said that Neil Gaiman has learned Alan Moore's lesson on the extreme detailedness of his scripts, which contain precise information on the pages' layout (see Bender 2000: 156).

¹³ The notion is borrowed from Nicoletta Vallorani's *Gli Occhi e la Voce* (2000).

¹⁴ She can be therefore considered, to a certain extent, *The Sandman's* version of Aeschylus's Clytemnestra.



confirmed by the utter darkness of the scene, and also by the overload of names the Erinyes claim to possess and which are supposedly employed to hypostatize their own shape-shifting identity: "The Furies [...] is one of the things they call women, to put us in our place... Termagan. Vixen. Shrew. Virago. Witch. Bitch" (63.21).

After the meeting between Lytha and the Erinyes, the narrative focus is shifted towards the latter; however, before moving to this part of the analysis, it is interesting to point out the way in which the Erinyes' house (or at least place of residence) is represented, namely an isolated cubic bungalow (63.18), lacking furniture and pierced by large windows. This unassuming building, which heavily contrasts with, for instance, the opulence of Dream's palace, is coherent with the panoptic function performed by the Eumenides, which are supposed to eternally look and seek those who misbehave in order to punish them. The contrast hence articulates between "an architecture built simply to be seen (as with the ostentations of palaces)" and one built to "observe the external space (cf. the geometry of fortresses)" (Foucault 1995: 172).

After the aforementioned meeting, the Triple Goddess (in the form of the Eumenides) becomes the core of the narration, and abruptly ceases to be visibly represented: instead, every time the Eumenides are supposed to appear on the scene, the reader assumes their own direct point of view, through what can be defined, borrowing a term from the language of the cinema,¹⁵ a subjective camera. The process of identification between the reader and the character – now the Triple Goddess instead of her associate Lyta Hall – becomes complete and absolute, not without a certain degree of displacement and disorientation, also caused by the sudden disappearance of the reader's on-page *avatar*. This representational choice, which is not typical in Hollywood movies (see Vallorani 2000: 71), is even rarer in graphic literature; the reason may be the lack of sound and movement, which would probably make difficult to understand whose gaze is being employed. Gaiman and Hempel manage to partially avoid such issues by employing a different kind of lettering for every character – which allegedly makes them more easily recognisable.

Interestingly enough, the subjective camera device is also employed for another (villainous) character earlier in the series, i.e. the anthropomorphic killer-nightmare Corinthian (see for instance 10:25, 11:20-21), who is gifted with toothed mouths in place of eyes, and who literally devours other people's eyeballs for his own pleasure. Penciller Mike Dringenberg gives an interesting account of the rationale behind the Corinthian's subjective-camera panels, "The Corinthian is someone who devours everything he sees" (Bender 2000: 48). Such a description could be employed, with some distinctions, for the Eumenides as well, who slaughter *everything they see* on the path to their main target, namely Dream (see 65.15-16). This consideration, which adds the explicitly destructive derive to the identificational process triggered by the already

¹⁵ "From a historical and formal point of view, the comic book perspective used in the pictures of frames ('panels') can be described by camera positions ('zoom,' 'sequence shot,' 'pan shot,' 'tilt shot,' or 'jump cut') used in film-making." (Ahrens and Meteling 2010: 3).



mentioned graphic devices, can be interpreted through the two different axes of desire which, according to Sean Nixon (2013) – who draws heavily from S. Freud – organise the spectatorial subjectivity: “the possessive or proprietorial dimension of object cathexis and the destructive, assimilating tendency in identification” (Nixon 2013: 313).

It is now possible to formulate some hypotheses as to the reasons that lie behind these representational strategies and behind the deconstruction of the traditional gaze perspective/discourse normally employed in graphic literature. In the first place, it would be easy to conclude that such strategies serve the purpose of delineating the ontological status of the Eumenides: they actually exist as abstract, pure “visibility organised entirely around a dominating, overseeing gaze” (Foucault 1980: 152). An eye that sees but is not seen: *The Sandman’s* Eumenides are the anthropomorphic personification of the gaze which controls and punishes within tragic narratives. The Kindly Ones’ disembodiment could trick us into believing that they incarnate a perfect modern panoptical power, which “may throw off its physical weight; it tends to the non-corporal; and, the more it approaches this limit, the more constant, profound and permanent are its effects” (Foucault 1995: 203). However, the extreme, spectacular violence of their vendetta reminds us of pre-modern forms of torture, and of forms of rule and domination based on “an emphatic affirmation of power and of its intrinsic superiority. And this superiority is not simply that of right, but that of the physical strength of the sovereign” (Foucault 1995: 49). The contradiction, as several others found within *The Sandman*, is irreconcilable, and it is held together, as we shall to see, only by a precise ideological stance. In this respect, the subjective-camera identification can also be considered as a practice of discursive subjectification – in Foucaultian terms:¹⁶ the reader is metaphorically forced to assume the subject-position which the Eumenides’ discourse on essentialism, duty and responsibility creates, and to accept (the degree of such acceptance will be analysed in the next section) their own “regime of truth” (see Hall 2013: 34; Foucault 1980).

A final point that needs to be raised is the protreptic significance of the efforts to stimulate the reader’s identification with the characters of Lyta Hall and the Kindly Ones. Going back to Aeschylus’s original play *Eumenides*, it is interesting to note that it features the original presence of a silent chorus of ten “Athenian Citizens”, which are invoked by the city’s Goddess, “You citizens of Athens, you judges at the first trial ever held for murder” (868, 869). As Elizabeth Markowitz (2009) points out (directly quoting Vernant and Vidal-Naquet 1990: 33–34):

¹⁶ It is interesting to note that Foucault himself employed the subjective eye of Diego Velasquez’s *Las Meninas* (1656) to explain the practices of subjectification (see Hall 2013: 41–42)



the Oresteia [...] called on the spectators to judge themselves. This occurred on several levels. Most obviously, the plays model citizen judgment and the difficulties it entails in the story itself, presenting individuals in a variety of scenarios, actively judging and acting in different ways. It is also reflected in the chorus, 'the collective and anonymous presence embodied by an official college of citizens...[whose] role is to express through its fears, hopes, and questions, and judgment the feelings of the spectators who make up the civic community'. (Markowitz 2009: 428)

Although it is virtually possible to establish easy links between the characters in the two works (Drem/Oreste, Lyta/Clytemnestra, etc.), no direct correspondence with the Athenian Citizens' chorus can be found in the graphic novel. It can therefore be supposed that Gaiman's Eumenides characters aim to recuperate the need for such intradiegetic involvement:¹⁷ the text's receivers are therefore welcomed – or better invited – to identify with an on-stage character in order to deliver their own judgement on the moral dilemma which permeates the latter half of *The Sandman*. In this respect, the graphic novel appropriates another structural element of classic Greek (but also English) tragedy: it stimulates a moral/ethical involvement "by taking up the heroic myths and recasting them in light of the new ways of thinking" (Markovits 2009: 430). It is however worth noticing that Aeschylus's trilogy, in line with the features of the genre(s) it belongs to, is to be considered a *grand narrative*¹⁸ which purports to contain important, ahistorical truths, like the importance of the shift from a pre-modern, tribal form of retribution (i.e. vendetta) towards a more organised and civic form of negotiation (i.e. the trial) – in which nonetheless the presence of divine legitimisation is still necessary. *The Sandman*, while containing deliberate considerations on meta-concepts such as responsibility and subjectivity, does, however, focus on intimate and private narratives, which often revolve around people who are normally marginalized by the official discourses (LGBTB people, AIDS patients, the elderly). Even though the main characters are superhuman, and to a certain extent more than divine, their (especially Dream's) experiences are not meant to be universal and/or metaphorical of the whole of humanity's condition, or at least not to the extent myths are normally supposed to be. *The Sandman* can be therefore considered – almost oxymoronically – a post-modern tragic myth,¹⁹ which "embraces local, plural and heterogeneous knowledges" (Barker 2012: 202) in order to stimulate personal

¹⁷ It must not be forgotten that they constitute the other (and, to be precise, the primary) chorus in Aeschylus's play.

¹⁸ In the meaning outlined by F. Lyotard (see also Barker 2012: 202)

¹⁹ It must also be noted that *The Sandman's* relationship with the *topoi* of tragedy is ambiguous and to a certain extent productively paradoxical, as Morpheus ultimately exploits the mechanisms of retribution (i.e. *nemesis*) to die and reborn as new facet of the dream, and therefore as the new subjectivity he would never have been able to shape in his previous life.



philosophical interrogations (here is the moderate *protreptis*) rather than to teach a secure way to make sense of the world.

CHALLENGING THE EYE: SUBJECTIVITY AND RESPONSIBILITY

It has already been said that many *Sandman* characters – the protagonist Dream is one of these – promote and defend the idea of a natural order of things which regulates men's and gods' behaviour, the breach of which is to be severely punished. As J. Dollimore demonstrates in *Radical Tragedy* (1993), this philosophical concept is heavily and invariably linked to an essentialist conception of subjectivity, namely the idea that "identity exists as a universal and timeless core" and that "descriptions of ourselves reflect an essential underlying identity" (Barker 2012: 221). For instance, for most of the series, Dream conceptualises his own self-identical subjectivity through the adherence to his responsibilities towards the world and humanity, responsibilities which dictate a whole set of rules and duties:

Rules and responsibility: these are the ties that bind us. We do what we do, because of who we are. If we did otherwise, we would not be ourselves. I will do what I have to do. And I will do what I must. (Gaiman and McKean 1989: 67.24)

For him, "the exercising of free will [...] is a catalyst for great angst" (Sharkey 2008: 7), and the reformulation of his own subjectivity, which slowly starts after his imprisonment in the very first issue of the series, leads him to an identity crisis which culminates with his suicide.²⁰ Interestingly enough, such sense of duty linked to an idea of personal nature is the same principle which, in the ultimate analysis, informs the actions of the Erinyes; immediately before killing Dream, they claim, "We are merely performing our function" (69.9). It must be pointed out that this claim fits the Erinyes' self-description in Aeschylus's tragedy:

Remorseless Fate gave us this work
to carry on forever, a destiny
spun out for us alone,
to attach ourselves to those
who, overcome with passion,
slaughter blood relatives. (407-412)

²⁰ The series' development suggest that the real invisible hand behind the whole Eumenides' affair is Dream himself. As his sister Death points out, "The only reason you've got yourself into this mess is because this is where you wanted to be" (Gaiman and McKean 1989: 69.5).



They later add, "These rights are ours from birth" (425). This point is also analysed by Cannizzaro (2013), who observes how the Furies are bound to their punitive role and are not allowed to understand any other point of view. As Markovits points out, "[t]he tension between claims of necessity and responsibility run throughout the *Oresteia*, alongside the development of a democratic ethos of intergenerational responsibility" (Markovitz 2009: 434). However, it must be acknowledged that the very relationship between *necessity* and *responsibility* is eventually subverted in *The Sandman*: while in Aeschylus's play the two concepts are clearly opposed,²¹ and the assumption of *responsibility* is what unveils the fallacious and pernicious nature of *necessity*, in *The Sandman* the dichotomy collapses into an ontological claim of *duty* which mystifies the role of agency and the possibility of self-refashioning. However, within the graphic novel, that possibility is repeatedly demonstrated by the personal growth experienced by several characters, and in particular of Dream's sibling Destruction and of Hell's ruler Lucifer. As for Destruction, we are shown that, a long time ago, he opted out of his role as Endless and decided to live as a cheerful wandering artist. He in fact claims that:

The Endless? The Endless are merely patterns. The Endless are ideas. The Endless are wave functions. The Endless are repeating motifs. The Endless are echoes of darkness, and nothing more. We have no right to play with [people's] lives, to order their dreams and their desires. (48.16)

Lucifer, on the other hand, decides to relinquish his role as king of Hell²² and eventually to become a sophisticated bar pianist in Los Angeles. It can therefore be concluded that Lucifer and Destruction plant an idea in Dream's mind, i.e. that "following the rules is nothing more than a choice" (Rauch 2003: 77), as is complying with the role everyone is supposed to have within the "order of things".

There is another passage from the graphic novel that is worth a brief consideration. In the *A Game of You* story-arc (#32-37) we are told the tragic tale of the pre-operative transsexual woman Wanda, who eventually dies during a storm brought about as indirect consequence of Dream's actions in the Dreaming world. Before her funeral, her friend Barbie hears from Wanda's conservative relatives from Kansas that "God gives you a body, it's your duty to do well by it. He makes you a boy, you dress in blue, he makes you a girl, you dress in pink. You mustn't go trying to change things" (37.14). Later, during Wanda's funeral ceremony, her mother claims that the hurricane which killed her "was God's judgement on a city of sinners." (37.16). This passage clearly testifies how the ideas of providentialism (with a strongly religious connotation) order and essentialism are appropriated and exploited by dominant

²¹ "Orestes [...] contrasted with his parents, who continue the cycle of violence because of their refusals of responsibility for their actions" (Markovits 2009: 436)

²² As depicted in Dante's *Inferno* and, especially, Milton's *Paradise Lost*.



discourses in order to validate their own assumptions. In a previous passage of the story-arc, Wanda's transsexualism is refused by some elder gods, namely the Moon Deities, who are not willing to welcome her since "gender isn't something you pick and choose, as far as gods are concerned" (35.19). However, as we are shown during the funeral sequence, other progressive gods,²³ like Dream's sister Death are able to accept – and appreciate – Wanda's feminine self (37.23). As Gaiman himself points out, "the gods have their point of view; but in *Sandman*, those have no more validity than the point of view of anyone else" (Bender 2000: 121).

Neil Gaiman's emphasis on the "point of view" confirms what was initially suggested, i.e. that within the (postmodern) tragic narrative of graphic novel the ideas of order and identity are discursively constructed and sustained by dominant and hegemonic discourses. Those concepts share the same ontological status of the Endless as explained by Dream, i.e. that "we of the endless are the servants of the living – we are NOT their masters. WE exist because they know, deep inside their hearts, that we exist" (emphasis in the original) (16.23). Order and nature are ideas that are exploited and simultaneously mystified to sustain power, hence they can be considered ideological stances concealing the role of personal agency – and therefore personal responsibility. As Barker points out, ideology

is commonly used to designate the attempt to fix meanings and world views in support of the powerful. Here ideology is said to be constituted by maps of meaning that, while they purport to be universal truths, are historically specific understanding which obscure and maintain the power of social groups. (Barker 2012: 442)

Going back to the original object of this analysis, such a concept can finally be applied to the Eumenides; their duty, their need to seek and destroy wrongdoers is not an absolute and inescapable rule of nature. It is instead part of a discursive formation which produces a certain knowledge of the self supporting – and supported – by pre-existing power relationships. As Foucault (1980) points out, power and knowledge are strictly intertwined and mutually reinforcing, as "'Truth' is linked in a circular relation with systems of power which produce and sustain it, and to effects of power which it induced and which extend it. A 'regime' of truth." (Foucault 1980: 133). We can therefore conclude that *The Sandman's* scrutiny of the ways in which it is possible to negotiate resistance against practices of control and subjugation is not linked to the material execution of surveillance, but rather – and probably more importantly – to unveiling the mystifying relations of power which lie behind such practices. In other words, acknowledging that the presence of an eye which controls, and therefore the

²³ Quite interestingly, the old gods/new gods clash is also a structural feature of Aeschylus's trilogy, as "*Eumenides* repeatedly notes the relationship between the bearers of the old laws (the Erinyes) and the younger generation of the Olympian gods" (Markovits 2009: 432)



“state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power” (Foucault 1995, 201) is not a necessary (i.e. natural) state, but a precise ideological configuration of domination shaped by – and actively shaping – pre-existing disparities like gender, class, power.

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