

THE GRAPHIC NOVEL SOPHIST:

GRANT MORRISON'S ANIMAL MAN

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*In our culture, the decisive political conflict, which governs every conflict, is
that between the animality and the humanity of man.*

(Agamben)

The Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben, in his book *The Open: Man and Animal* (2004), argues that while in early modern western philosophy, at least since Descartes, the human has been consistently described as the separation of body and mind, we would do better to re-describe the human, as that which results from the practical and political division of humanity from animality. After beginning with a brief outline of Agamben's concept of 'Bare Life', as the empty interval between human and animal, which is neither "human life" nor "animal life," but a life separated and excluded from itself; I will closely examine these ideas in relation to Grant Morrison's DC Vertigo comic *Animal Man* (1988-90) to disclose aspects of sophist logic displaced in Agamben's text.

§ 1 Bare Life

The concept of 'bare life' (2004, 38) is central to the philosophy of Agamben, not least, because he sees this empty interval between the animal and the human as the site for rethinking the future of politics and philosophy and preventing the onward progress of the 'anthropological machine' (2004, 37). A term he uses to describe the mechanism that has and continues to produce our recognition of what it means to be human. As Agamben states 'It is an optical Machine constructed of a series of mirrors in which man, looking at himself, sees his own image always already deformed in the features of an ape. (2004, 26–27) Agamben implies that to be human we must recognise ourselves in the non-human, but in doing so the 'anthropological machine produces a state of exception, a zone of indeterminacy,' (2004, 37) in which the human is demarcated by excluding all aspects of its animality and the animal is in turn only ever defined through its use and inclusion in the realm of the human.

This hidden form of sophistic rhetoric, works to divide all aspects of animality from the category of humanity while relying on animality to define humanity through its constructed difference. In finding aspects of the animal within the human, the anthropological machine applies particular language, such as, primal, barbarian, or savage, to establish a difference between humanity and animality within the human. The human is thereby constituted upon the categories that the anthropological machine describes as humanity instead of animality; a humanity that ironically has its human-ness removed, or transformed into the inhuman, by the bio-political discourses of law,

medicine, and psychology, which each construct the human body and inscribe upon it what it is to be human.

The anthropological machine depends on ‘establishing a zone of indifference wherein the figure of the human and the animal are indistinguishable.’ (2004, 37) It is in this zone of indifference that neither animal life nor human life can be found, but rather, a ‘bare life,’ a caesura between man and animal that Agamben suggests we must begin to rethink if we are to stop the anthropological machine and make way for the philosophy and politics ‘to come’.

Agamben suggests that the anthropological machine is idling and beginning to stall. He presents two responses to this stalling; first, Kojève’s rereading of Hegel’s link between time and negativity, which theorises the ‘end of history’ and the resulting ‘end of man’ in which humans are content with a life of art, love and play (Kojève, 158), where philosophy and politics will disappear once this ‘happy’ life is achieved. (Kojève, 159) The second response to the stalling of the anthropological machine, Agamben derives from Heidegger who sees the difference between human and animal not in terms of rationality or physiology, but in what he terms Dasein, the being that contemplates its Being-in-the-world, as a world-forming being (Heidegger: 177). The human, for Heidegger, is the ‘shepherd of being’ (Agamben, 2004: 80), able to think its own animality without ever mastering it. Dasein is therefore ‘open’ to the world and can question the world in the way that the animal cannot.

Agamben is however, critical of Heidegger, and suggests that he was the last philosopher to believe that the ‘anthropological machine could, up to a certain point, recompose the conflict between man and animal by producing a new history and destiny

for a people' (2004, 75). Part of Agamben's task in *The Open* is to reclaim Heidegger's thinking from the totalitarian implications of his politics. However, what Agamben takes from Heidegger's thinking, is his notion of 'laying inactive' (Heidegger 140–141); the act of simply 'letting be', of allowing the anthropological machine to idle, and produce a becoming post human, a not-yet humanity, within a 'zone of indifference' in which there is no distinction between man and his form, animal, in which both are seen as a 'form-of-life'¹ that cannot be reduced to what he terms 'bare life'.

Agamben sees in the figure of bare life, the figure also of 'homo sacer'; the sacred man, an obscure figure of archaic Roman law, in which the criminal who has foregone his rights, may be killed by any citizen with impunity, but may not be sacrificed. The sacred man is reduced to bare life; a life exposed to death. The criminal in this ancient Roman law is excluded from the community, stripped of humanity, and can be murdered, but cannot be sacrificed like an animal. The sacred man, therefore, must exist in the interval between human and animal; reduced to bare life and positioned in a zone of indeterminacy by the political order that makes a state of exception for the criminal. This ironic situation places both criminal and sovereign in a state of exception, both conditions exist inside and outside the law simultaneously. One can make the law from the inside while remaining outside it, the other, is excluded from the law, but ironically remains inside it. The sacred man unwittingly draws attention to the hidden and duplicitous foundations upon which entire political systems rest by bringing this state of exception into the light. Agamben goes on to suggest that today we all share the fate of the sacred man, we are all both inside and outside the law, left exposed to death by the duplicity of

¹ 'By the term form-of-life, on the other hand, I mean a life that can never be separated from its form, a life in which it is never possible to isolate something such as naked life.' (Agamben, 2000: 3-4)

state power. Contemporary political conditions support this, as each of us can be indefinitely detained and transformed into non-citizens if suspected of terrorist activities. It is in this way that bare life is central to the life of the modern individual who lives in a system that exerts control over the life of all individuals.

§ 2 The Gospel of the Sacred Coyote

In the act of bringing together both bare life and homo sacer, Agamben indicates that in order for life to move forward, the anthropological machine must be allowed to stall and for a situation to take place in which the human is understood to be animal instead of defined by her difference from the animal. This collapsing of the difference between human and animal is brought into shape focus in Grant Morrison's *Animal Man* issue #5 where he presents us with an example of this coming together of bare life and homo sacer, in the state of exception, where man and animal do indeed bleed into one another. What Morrison gives us in this mixing and retelling of the Promethean myth as well as *certain* aspects of the Crucifixion Gospels, entitled 'The Coyote Gospel', is a spanner thrown into the works of the anthropological machine.

In *The Coyote Gospel*, the reader is introduced to a dishevelled canine creature who is tormented throughout the narrative by repeated and agonising deaths and resurrections. *Animal Man*, the alias of Bernhard 'Buddy' Baker, catches sight of the creature being shot, blown-up and crushed by falling rocks. After another unbearable regeneration, the

creature staggers toward Buddy and hands him a scroll upon which is ‘written’: ‘The Gospel According to Crafty.’

Chas Truog’s artwork for the ‘gospel panels’ are in the style of a Warner Brothers ‘Looney Tunes’ cartoon and the reader begins to recognise a similarity between Crafty and *Wile E. Coyote*. The gospel tells the tale of Crafty, a revolutionary character who is sickened by the strife and endless cycle of cruelty and violence in his cartoon world. He set out on a quest to confront his creator. For this act of rebellion against the ‘creator’, Crafty must be punished and offers to “bear any punishment that will bring peace to the world” (Morrison, 1991, 20). His creator exiles him to the world above, our world of flesh and blood, where he is positioned by the law but placed outside its protection. Crafty is transformed into the non-citizen in the form of the wolf, or coyote; in the manner in which the original term was used to define the citizen who had been banned from the city and transformed from human to wolf (Agamben, 1998, 105). It is in this way that Crafty becomes the figure of bare life, exposed to death as ‘homo sacer’. As the coyote, Crafty is made to suffer in exchange for peace in his world.

Animal Man cannot decipher the language of the gospel on the scroll and at that moment a silver bullet through the heart kills the coyote. On the last page, Buddy stands confused by the dying body of the coyote, and as we move further and further out from the scene, we are left with an image of the dying animal, a pool of blood seeping from the fatal wound, as he lies on the crossroads, crucified for the sins of his world.

The idea of Wile E. Coyote as a Promethean/Christ-like figure is a startling one and is captured in a remarkable cover by Brian Bolland who encapsulates the narrative and theme of the story in a single image. When we look back at Bolland’s cover we see that it

is Buddy Baker, 'Animal Man' himself who lies prone on the road, arms outstretched, in the same final position as the coyote, and it dawns upon the reader that the coyotes endless Promethean suffering has not ended but has been past on to Animal Man whose 'super-power', we know as readers, is to absorb the abilities of all animals he comes into close contact with. Animal Man will now take on not only the coyote's characteristics but also his Promethean suffering. By the end of Morrison's run on Animal Man, Buddy too, will have to suffer at the hands of his creator. The abilities that Buddy absorbs are not merely the coyote's animal life or simply the messianic aspects of his 'fallen' human life, but relate closely to what Agamben refers to as 'bare life'. In this sense both Crafty, the man-animal, and Buddy, the animal man, bleed into one another and represent Homo Sacer, the sacred one who can be killed but not sacrificed. It is in this respect that the myth at the heart of Morrison's Animal Man is far more Greco-Roman in its proximity to the story of Prometheus than to the figure of the suffering yet sacrificed Christ.

§ 3 At Play in the Fields of the Lord

A recurring theme in much of Morrison's work and especially in his run on Animal Man is his breaking down of the fourth wall, the imaginary barrier that separates the story from the reader and the character from the author. This theme is clearly expressed in issue #19 where Buddy stares in shocked horror out of the comic book pages and sees the reader looking back at him. In the culmination of Morrison's run on Animal Man, the

reader sees Buddy finally discover that he is himself a fictional character who comes face to face with his 'creator' Grant Morrison, whose own reality is also brought starkly into question in the final panels of the comic.

These examples are more than simply the use of the literary device of Metafiction, where fiction is made to draw attention to itself as a fiction. What Morrison draws attention to, is the fictitious nature of reality itself, a reality that isn't fixed, but contains multiple creative possibilities. To quote Morrison from his early essay on Pop Magic! 'Anything you can imagine, anything you can symbolise, can be made to produce magical changes in your environment.' (Metzger: 16) Sequential art has this magical, world changing ability, especially when 'the creator and the reader are partners in the dance of the visible and the invisible that creates something out of the nothing...in the baffling two-step of time and space' as Scott McCloud suggests in *Understanding Comics* (205). Through his use of Metafiction, Morrison can transform the way we interpret the world not as something separate, or other, than fiction, but as itself a form of fiction that we call reality. Sequential art is at its most powerful, when it's at its most comic-like, and when it is drawing attention to itself as a fictitious medium. In this way sequential art is not trying to copy our everyday vision, or merely imitating cinema, or attempting to recreate the novel, it is the 'letting be' of the comic book, a letting be that allows the comic books' connotations to consistently come into a state of becoming.

Sequential art has the potential to offer us a perception liberated from the organising structures of everyday life, and it can do this by maximising its own internal potential by intensifying the relationship between words and images. In the act of becoming or letting be, sequential art can offer a challenge to our perception of reality and life. The very

techniques sequential arts uses to communicate its narrative; i.e., words and images, can be used to transform life by disrupting structured interpretations of life especially in terms of our regulated perception of space-time that sequential art transforms like no other medium.

Sequential art, generally, like every day perception, connects a flow of different images into ordered wholes. However, there are also moments in comic books where by extending this very process, sequential art takes us away from actualised objects and wholes, to the very flow of images themselves. Instead of connecting or synthesising images and words into meaningful progressions, sequential art can present images and words in their purely optical form. In *Animal Man #26*; for example, the story combines the 'realistic' colourful character of Buddy within the sepia 'washed out' tones of Grant Morrison's 'real' world. The sombre ochre tones that depict the character of 'Morrison' are juxtaposed against the comic book vitality of *Animal Man*. This device precludes us from reading the whole as a single coherent narrative. It is as if Morrison's appearance within these narrative images is merely seen as part of a comic book imagination. The sepia tone is presented as if it were something that we have to see through in an attempt to grasp at a reality.

§ 4 Deus ex Machina

In issue #25 Buddy wanders the wastelands of Limbo where comic characters who are no longer written into comic books, are left to live out their bare lives in the void between

fiction and Metafiction. Buddy sets out on a quest to find what exists beyond the land of limbo and his own reality. He; eventually, winds up back at his own house where he comes face to face with his own personal creator, Grant Morrison.

Morrison's 'world', is a representation of our world, which is by extension, a world of *différance*, a textual realm of deferred representations. It is a grey, colourless place in which the brightly coloured Animal Man is represented in terms we might call, in Baudrillard's language 'Hyperreal'. Morrison's final issue on *Animal Man* entitled "Deus Ex Machina" or 'God from the machine' is a reference to the theatrical convention from ancient Greek theatre, in which the play ends with a God, as an active agent, being introduced by means of a crane to unravel an unsolvable difficulty in the plot to provide a satisfactory ending. In this issue, Morrison and Buddy have a comic-book length discussion about the nature of Buddy's reality, which begins to create doubts over the author's own grasp of reality. Here, we see the author not only providing an implausible happy ending, in which Buddy wakes from a dream and is reunited with his dead wife and children, but Morrison also integrates a similar paradox to the one Agamben presents in the figure of bare life as homo sacer. What both writers give us is a form of four-fold logic similar to that employed by the ancient Greek Sophist, Gorgias in his infamous work 'On What is Not, or On Nature'¹ Agamben presents the bare life of the sacred man, as animal, as not animal, as both animal, and not animal, and as neither animal, nor not animal. This can be seen in the following passage where Agamben writes: 'the sacred man is not a piece of animal nature without any relation to law and the city. It is rather, a threshold of indistinction and a passage between animal and man, *physis* and *nomos*, exclusion and inclusion...who is precisely *neither man nor beast*, and who dwells

paradoxically within both while belonging to neither.’ (1998, 105) However, where Morrison celebrates this paradoxical and sophistic logic, in his presentation of *Animal Man* as animal, as not animal, as both animal, and not animal, and finally as neither animal nor not animal; Agamben, in *Homo Sacer*, attempts to deny this sophistic rhetoric in his own work. He does this by presenting the sophists in a negative light that positions them on the side of nature, chaos, and violence as opposed to Reason, order, and law (1998, 34–35) although his own argument clearly rests upon the use of this rhetorical form that blurs the boundaries between simplistic binaries.

In this way Morrison’s writing can be seen to challenge Agamben’s denial of his own sophistic rhetoric. Where Agamben both uses and denies the four-fold logic of his writing, a sophist, like Morrison, proudly employs this playful device. In doing so Morrison can communicate ideas as a ‘letting be’ instead of communicating a fixed and permanent Truth that only serves to perpetuate the anthropological machine and its exclusion of the animal within the human. Morrison as novel sophist can challenge traditional metaphysics that merely rely on a dubious leap of faith and employs the miraculous appearance of the active agent of Truth to unravel and resolve its argument as *Deus ex Machina*.

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