



Commentary on the Adaptation of Blake's *America: A Prophecy* into a Series of Murals Inspired by Northern Irish Political Art and Popular Art Within the Graphic Novels of Alan Moore and Bryan Talbot.

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Overview

Blake's *America: A Prophecy* is a response to great social and political upheaval present at the end of the eighteenth century, and what Bindman calls a 'revolutionary energy'² in America and France. My mural adaptations focus on plates 8-10, a dialogue between this 'revolutionary energy', personified by

¹ My images as they would appear in situ.

² David Bindman, in William Blake, *America a Prophecy*, in *The Complete Illuminated Books*, ed. by David Bindman (London: Thames and Hudson, 2001), p. 153.

Orc, and Urizen in the guise of Albion's Angel, before the poem turns into Blake's 'mythical version'³ of the American War of Independence. The genre of murals, as with those in Northern Ireland, create narratives 'rich in evocative imagery' presenting 'aspirations, hopes, fears and terror',⁴ telling of stories and legends between the past, present and future. The rebellious nature of the medium makes it an apt vehicle through which to adapt Blake's work. Enriched with graphic imagery and intertextuality from Moore's *Promethea*, *Watchmen*, *V for Vendetta*, *Swamp Thing* and Talbot's *The Adventures of Luther Arkwright*, the three murals form part of a larger scale urban project which would reveal itself on city walls over a period of time, creating drama and intrigue. As murals, they enable a more accessible public insight into Blake's mythical world, on a grand scale, and outside of the confines of a gallery or library.

The murals are primarily inspired by the language and emotion of Blake's poem, embracing the nature of his, Moore's and Talbot's composite art to produce 'a synaesthetic experience'.⁵ Parallels can be drawn between Blake's 'Orc', Moore's 'Promethea' and Talbot's 'Luther Arkwright': all grew out of changing mythical worlds, alternate histories and rapidly gain experience of a 'transformative event',⁶ existing alongside metanarratives. As speculative writers, Blake, Moore and Talbot transcend time and space and so within the murals, the notion of revolution, freedom and liberty applies to all those oppressed within the fluidity of varying histories. References to Blake's work regularly appear in both Moore and Talbot comics and the resonance between them extends to the mural artwork, where strong images of both Orc and Urizen are delineated with dynamic line and composition, common to both the comic book and illuminated texts. Colour work within the murals is vivid to reflect the Celtic revivalism in various Northern Ireland murals whilst some images remain monotone for dramatic effect. A plethora of symbolism within the imagery alludes to ideas and emotions associated with oppression, colonisation, rebellion, liberty, and knowledge.

The murals loosely correspond with each of the plates 8-10, but for visual and narrative impact, they merge into and overlap each other creating a tribute to the revolutionary and visionary spirit of Blake and his legacy within the comic book genre.

Mural I

This mural relates to Plate 8, where Orc has broken his chains and begins his prophetic speech of 'universal liberation'.⁷ The crouching figure is a representation of a young Orc about to 'rise and look out, his chains are loose',⁸ and his youthful appearance heralds the new dawn of revolution echoed in the sapling tree and the white spring flowers. His classical figure has a draped cape about his shoulders with Superman's emblem, suggesting his emerging superhero status, and the Stars and Stripes flag, beginning to gradually appear on it, alludes to America's independence and its eventual superpower status. Reflecting her own enlightenment, Moore's *Promethea* is set behind Orc to support his 'awakening or...revelation',⁹ whilst hidden within the bark of the tree, Batman lurks to remind us that there is a darker, contrary side to Orc's character previously seen in 'Preludium'. The 'serpant form'd',¹⁰ encircling both the tree and Batman, suggests a transformation of Orc associated with the 'element of (purifying or hellish) fire',¹¹ underpinned by the red magma rising up from below ground, indicative of 'the fiery joy'¹² of revolution but also that blood that will be spilt.

The emerging faces of Moore's *Watchmen* 'leave[ing] their station'¹³ from the rock beneath Orc's feet represent the freedom fighters and resurrection of the oppressed, 'Reviving shake. inspiring move, breathing! awakening!'¹⁴ whilst the skulls, 'the bones of death',¹⁵ prophesise the downfall of many in the struggle for liberty and, ultimately, who watches the watchmen? The tricolour flag waving Republicans echo the uprising of rebels in Talbot's *The Adventures of Luther Arkwright* and Moore's *V for Vendetta*.

³ D. W. Dorrbecker, ed., *William Blake: The Continental Prophecies*, (New Jersey: Princes University Press, 1995), p. 27.

⁴ Stuart Borthwick, *The Writing On The Wall*, (Liverpool: Bluecoat Press, 2015), p. 7.

⁵ Matthew Green, 'The end of the world. That's a bad thing right?': *Form and Function from William Blake to Alan Moore* (Moodle, 2015), p. 5. [accessed 04 January 2016].

⁶ Green, 'The end of the world', p. 2.

⁷ Dorrbecker, *The Continental Prophecies*, p. 33.

⁸ William Blake, *America a Prophecy*, in *The Complete Illuminated Books*, ed. by David Bindman (London: Thames and Hudson, 2001), pl. 8 (p. 161).

⁹ Alan Moore, *Promethea*, (New York: DC Comics, 2000), 1.5.14.

¹⁰ Blake, *America*, pl. 9 (p. 162).

¹¹ Dorrbecker, *The Continental Prophecies*, p. 29.

¹² Blake, *America*, pl. 10 (p. 163).

¹³ *Ibid.*, pl. 8 (p. 161).

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

The sun (intertextual reference to that in *Promethea*) shines down on Orc, suggesting rebirth, and to the left of the sunbeam 'The morning comes,' in America, as 'the night decays'¹⁶ in England signifying the new dawn of a nation and rejection of the old tradition as 'The Sun has left his blacknels, & has found a fresher morning.'¹⁷ In the night sky above a modern England, signifying that the oppression of nations is timeless, the red planet Mars 'representing the god of war'¹⁸ is visible as a cosmic symbol. Similarly, Moore uses tarot symbolism in *Promethea* using the elements of earth, water, fire and air as the basis of her powers. The Celtic ring, also called a mystic or endless knot, has no beginning or ending, representing the human spirit's capacity for rebirth in both real and ethereal worlds. The word Saoirse, adjoining the top of the Celtic circle, is Gaelic for freedom.

The broken tablets of the Ten Commandments (to the right of the mural) is a symbol of Orc's promise to 'stamp to dust'¹⁹ and put an end to 'the entire system of repressive religion'²⁰ and liberate man's imagination and consciousness. This is strengthened by intertextual references of the books Orc is holding alongside an apple, the forbidden fruit of knowledge, acknowledging Blakean intertext in Moore's and Talbot's work where the contraries are embraced and histories coexist. This intertextuality emphasises the notions of knowledge and enlightenment which Orc is absorbing as he matures.

The text in the bottom right hand corner appears as narratorial discourse, enclosed within a box even though it is the voice of Orc, and therefore direct discourse, which is usually presented in a speech/thought bubble.²¹ This departure from the norm is used as a narrative form in *V for Vendetta* when characters engage in interior monologues. In this instance, Orc is making a declaration for all to hear, 'Empire is no more',²² creating dramatic tension between the two worlds. Finally, Moore's V mask is embedded in the ground to firmly symbolise Blake's revolutionary passion, through the embodiment of Orc, just as V is Moore's political critic of right-wing politics, both past and present, and acts as a catalyst for change: 'Anarchy wears two faces...creator and destroyer...thus destroyers topple empires, make a canvas of clear rubble where creators then can build a better world'.²³

Mural II

This mural relates to plate 7, Urizen's response to Orc's revolutionary speech where Blake sets them against each other through his 'own myth of clashing titanic forces of rebellion and repression'.²⁴ Urizen, in the guise of Albion's Angel is 'wrathful burnt'²⁵ and rants at Orc who rails against 'political..., sexual repression, religious authority, and all rational constraints...on all forms of energy'²⁶ and in return is called a 'Blasphemous Demon'.²⁷ In the mural, Albion's Angel is characterised by a stern-faced old man, conceivably old King George III, and this dominates the mural, symbolising British governance of the colonies. Its scale in mural form would be formidable. The gradual metamorphosis of Albion's Angel into trees roots represents the growing sprawl of colonisation deeply rooted in tradition, as do the gnarled upper branches mutation into the figure of Moore's *Swamp Thing*,²⁸ who has the ability to inhabit, or colonise, any plant matter across the globe and beyond to create a body for himself.

The 'Eternal Lions howl'²⁹ is suggested by the wolf with a lion's mane which is assimilated into the old man's beard just as Arkwright's hair visually combines with the electrifying psychic powers he challenges after confronting the illusion of Omega.³⁰ Similarly, the wings of the Britannia-like superhero merge with the beard, another intertextual reference to both Blake's and Talbot's 'Daughters of Albion', revealing a longing for the emancipation from imperialism and, contrarily, an affirmation that Britannia rules the waves. A Union Jack, a globe of the Empire and satirical political cartoons, (highlighting slavery and the 'Intolerable Acts' being pushed down the throat of America), further reflect the imperialism Orc challenges.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Dorrbecker, *The Continental Prophecies*, p. 33.

¹⁹ Blake, *America*, pl. 10 (p. 163).

²⁰ Dorrbecker, *The Continental Prophecies*, p. 35.

²¹ Green, 'The end of the world', p. 4.

²² Blake, *America*, pl. 8 (p. 161).

²³ Alan Moore and David Lloyd, *V for Vendetta: New Edition* (UK: Titan Books Ltd, 2008), p. 248

²⁴ Mary Lynn Johnson and John E. Grant, eds., *Blake's Poetry and Designs* (New York: W. W. Norton and co., 2008), p. 83.

²⁵ Blake, *America*, pl. 9 (p. 162).

²⁶ Johnson and Grant, *Blake's Poetry*, p. 84.

²⁷ Blake, *America*, pl. 9 (p. 162).

²⁸ Alan Moore and Stephen Bissette, *Saga of the Swamp Thing, Book 1*, (US: Vertigo Comics, 2012), cover.

²⁹ Blake, *America*, pl. 9 (p. 162).

³⁰ Bryan Talbot, *The Adventures of Luther Arkwright* (Milwaukie: Dark Horse Books, 2007), p. 199.

There is a comic book symmetry of compositional design between mural I and II; the moon replaces the sun to set age/experience against youth, and the distant land presents the revolutionary glow of America. This reinforces the contrary state of Orc and Urizen whilst affirming the extraordinary 'fearful symmetry' of Blake and Moore where 'Blake's visionary experiences gives Moore the alternate reality that the superhero genre promises' establishing them both as 'prophets of nihilistic revelry...multiplicity...[and] spiritual revolution'.³¹ The clock encircling the moon is a reference to the doomsday clock in Moore's *Watchmen*, ticking down to the doomsday of imperialism. The text placed at the bottom of the mural summarises Urizen's displeasure at the revolting colonies calling Orc a 'Lover of wild rebellion'³² and the additional pertinent line 'Ah, the impatience of youth'³³ are words taken from the illusionary Omega against the youthful Luther Arkwright.

Mural III

By this mural, relating to plate 10, Orc has risen up and announces a new age of revolution and liberation. In contrast to Urizen's declaration of him as 'Antichrist, hater of Dignities',³⁴ Orc is now presented as a 'resurrected Christ',³⁵ the energy that fuels revolt, and declares 'I am Orc'.³⁶ This is written in comic lettering style, suggestive of tone and volume, suiting its biblical scale. His full superhero status, complete with cape, relates to the images of Moore's Dr Manhattan³⁷ and Talbot's Luther Arkwright,³⁸ as a 'terrible beauty' within 'radiant white fire'³⁹ whose nakedness is a sign of liberation.⁴⁰

'Amidst the lustful fires'⁴¹ of rebellion, from where Orc ascends with 'His knees and thighs like silver. & his breast and head like gold',⁴² faces of revolutionary people, emanate and swirl around Orc's naked body. Orc is part of all revolutionaries – a super-position – which relates this composition to that in Moore's final appendix in 'From Hell' where Moore muses over the events in his novel concluding that 'Jack is not Gull or Druitt. Jack is a super-position'.⁴³ The figure of Orc painted in gold and silver gives him iconic status, particularly on a mural scale, adorned by the two iconic symbols of liberty – the Statue of Liberty headdress and the V for Vendetta cloak fastener.

The murals, bringing Blake's ideas to the streets where revolutions are born, depict a part of a revolutionary prophecy connecting the past, present and future. Rich in intertextuality and allusion, they transcend time and space to have a universal relevance and represent my adaptation of and engagement with Blake's, Moore's and Talbot's work. Blake's visionary *America a Prophecy* heralds rebellion and liberation and also warns of its consequence, but 'it does not predict an inevitable future',⁴⁴ for that, as Moore says, 'I leave it entirely in your hands'.⁴⁵

³¹ Roger Whitson, 'Panelling Parallax: The Fearful Symmetry of Alan Moore and William Blake', *ImageText: Interdisciplinary Comics Studies* (Dept of English, University of Florida, 2007) <http://www.english.ufl.edu/imagetext/archives/v3_2/whitson/> [accessed 07 January 2016].

³² Blake, *America*, pl. 9 (p. 162).

³³ Talbot, *Adventures of Luther Arkwright*, p. 197.

³⁴ Blake, *America*, pl. 9 (p. 162).

³⁵ Morris Eaves, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to William Blake* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), p. 211.

³⁶ Blake, *America*, pl. 10 (p. 163).

³⁷ Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons, *Watchmen* (London: Titan Books, 2007), ch. 4, p. 10.

³⁸ Talbot, *Adventures of Luther Arkwright*, p. 126.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 127.

⁴⁰ Eaves, *The Cambridge Companion*, p. 212.

⁴¹ Blake, *America*, pl. 10, (p. 163).

⁴² *Ibid.*, pl. 10, (p. 163)

⁴³ Alan Moore and Eddie Campbell, *From Hell* (London: Knockabout Ltd., 2006), Appendix II, p. 16.

⁴⁴ Johnson and Grant, *Blake's Poetry*, p. 83.

⁴⁵ Moore and Gibbons, *Watchmen*, ch. 12, p. 32.

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Appendix

Artwork



Mural I



Mural II



Mural III