



HAL
open science

Relocating/Dislocating the Center in Milligan and Fegredo's Enigma

Isabelle Licari-Guillaume

► **To cite this version:**

Isabelle Licari-Guillaume. Relocating/Dislocating the Center in Milligan and Fegredo's Enigma. *Leaves*, 2018, 6. hal-02168887

HAL Id: hal-02168887

<https://hal.science/hal-02168887>

Submitted on 29 Jun 2019

HAL is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.



Relocating/Dislocating the Center in Milligan and Fegredo's *Enigma*

Isabelle Licari-Guillaume

Enigma, written by Peter Milligan and drawn by Duncan Fegredo, was initially published in 1993 as an 8-issue limited series under DC's newly-minted Vertigo imprint. Vertigo was meant as an experimental publisher targeting "mature readers," and constituted a middle ground between DC's more mainstream titles and the freedom of the alternative press. *Enigma*, whose publication coincided with the birth of Vertigo, is in many ways representative of the imprint's aesthetic concerns.

The hero of Milligan's narrative is Michael Smith, an obsessively neat and conventional young man who clings to a "normal" life, a boring job, and a lukewarm relationship with his girlfriend Sandra. However, Michael's humdrum existence becomes considerably more bizarre when the Enigma, a comic book superhero that Michael used to love as a child, materializes in the real world, along with several of his antagonists. From that point on, Michael makes the decision to leave his old life behind and go look for an explanation. He is assisted in his quest by Titus Bird, the creator of the original *Enigma* comics. As Michael finally meets the Enigma, however, he realizes that his obsession with his childhood hero has turned into romantic attraction, and the two men's budding love helps them overcome their past trauma. Moreover, the Enigma is anything but a stereotypical superhero. He was born with psychic powers and subsequently abandoned down a well, where he survived by creating an imaginary world of his own; after twenty-five years spent in utter isolation, he was eventually rescued from the well, and dealt with the shock by re-creating himself as the Enigma, which he learned about in Michael's old comics.

Enigma locates itself in the wake of the "revisionist" phase of the superhero genre, which questioned the politics and aesthetics of hero figures, notably by encouraging metatextual engagement with the genre's history. Moreover, Milligan and Fegredo's deviation from genre conventions directly corresponds with their main character's quest for individual identity, as Michael swerves from the straight line of social and sexual orthodoxy to reassert his agency over his own life: by accepting to hold a

decentered or *marginal* position in society (both as a homosexual and as a comics fan), Michael reclaims his body as the perceptual, subjective *center* of his life.

In this paper, I suggest reading *Enigma* as a “site of ambivalence”—to borrow an expression critic Christophe Dony applied to Vertigo (Dony 96)—that simultaneously acknowledges the conventions of the mainstream comics industry and strives to upset them, thus pointing at its own limitations. The narrative formulas of the superhero genre are played with and subverted; likewise, the text questions gender norms without rejecting them entirely. The result is an eccentric text whose ambivalence is typical of the Vertigo imprint as a whole (Licari-Guillaume 464-465), and which can be read through the prism of Linda Hutcheon’s *Theory of Postmodernism*: as Hutcheon explains, “postmodernism is a fundamentally contradictory enterprise; its art forms (and its theory) at once use and abuse, install and then destabilize convention in parodic ways, self-consciously pointing both to their own inherent paradoxes” (Hutcheon 23). Hutcheon goes on to explain that this playful, parodic questioning of the status quo is frequently used to voice “ex-centric” (Hutcheon 41) points of view, to express the subjectivity of those who, like Michael, inhabit the margins.

I. Narrative eccentricity: resisting linear storytelling and reader expectation

Instead of following a straight line from beginning to initial disturbance to eventual resolution, Milligan and Fegredo make a point of taking side tracks. By withholding crucial information from the reader and playing with her expectations, they draw attention to the story’s fictional status. To readers of literature, *Enigma*’s formal experiments might seem outdated, as the novel went through a similar phase decades before its publication. However, within the field of 1990’s mainstream comic books, *Enigma*’s narrative structure stands out as a reaction against the stereotypical plots and clichéd storytelling the industry often resorted to. Thus, the authors craft an eccentric narrative that upsets conventions and expectations.

Although the narrator of *Enigma* speaks in a distinctly wry and ironic voice, his or her identity remains a mystery for most of the story. This lack of information is periodically signaled to the reader, as, for example, when the narrator explicitly

claims intradiegetic status: “I’m a part of this story. I’m a character in this story. Don’t worry, you’ll understand everything by the end” (*Enigma* #5 1). At the very end of the story, indeed, this elusive narrator turns out to be the green lizard standing in the background, which was given human intelligence a few pages earlier by the Enigma himself, in order to make a point about marginality: “if he had a human’s intelligence [and] knew this entire story, but could only communicate it to the minuscule brains of his fellow lizards” (*Enigma* #8 6), that lizard would feel as alienated as the Enigma, who is endowed with extraordinary perceptual abilities but fails to communicate them to other humans. Therefore, the eccentric narrator of the story is, in and of itself, the result of the characters’ marginality.

The narrative structure itself is similarly puzzling. On the last page of the story, the lizard begins again: s/he complains that the other lizards have not been paying attention, and thus returns to the beginning of the tale, going back to its initial sentence: “It all started in Arizona, twenty-five years ago, on a farm” (*Enigma* #1 1, *Enigma* #8 25). By solving the riddle of the mysterious narrator and returning to the beginning, the story seems to come full circle and provide a sense of closure. In fact, this return to the initial sentence is highly problematic, as the perfect circle turns out to be flawed. This is not a repetition of identical words pronounced twice in two different contexts—nor is it a return to the beginning made possible by analepsis and prolepsis; we have no choice but to recognize that the lizard’s ability to narrate predates his/her transformation by the Enigma. What is more, the discovery of the narrator’s identity implies that we, the readers, are placed in the position of lame-brained lizards listening to the rants of our marginally brighter counterpart—which certainly deflates any romantic ideals the reader might entertain regarding the nature of storytelling.

In fact, by the end of the book, the narrator completely foregoes his/her role as a storyteller and claims to be a mere commentator of the action, who has no power over its development: the lizard explicitly states “I don’t know how the story ends” (*Enigma* #8 24) as s/he watches the characters walk away. At that point, the narrative stops dead in its tracks, depriving the reader of a sense of closure, and proving to be an infinite loop rather than a harmonious circle. This is the end of the *book*, but not the end of the *story*, as it provides no resolution to the events previously set in motion. The climactic face-off between Enigma and his monstrous

mother, set out to end in either a triumph of love or a tragic ending for Michael and his lover, remains endlessly delayed.

The refusal to give the reader what she wants is in fact a crucial strategy in *Enigma*, both narratively (as above) and visually. Indeed, Milligan's refusal of a linear storyline echoes resonates with his treatment of sexuality as an element that can only be shown under certain conditions. In both cases, the refusal to *show* (show the ending, show the sex scene, etc.) becomes a way to acknowledge the conventions of the mainstream industry without transgressing them altogether. *Enigma* plays with readers' expectations, first by upsetting the conventions of what a superhero story is, and secondly by questioning the possibility of *seeing* and *showing* the sexual act, whose representation at the time was strictly regulated by the Comics Code Authority, a self-censorship guide that most publishers abided by.¹ Needless to say, homosexual sex was especially prohibited by the Code (Gabilliet 316), which filed it under "sex perversion," thus making it all the more impossible to represent on account of its allegedly deviant or marginal nature.

In order to analyze the depiction of sexuality, the desire to see, and the frustration of that desire, I shall focus on two parallel scenes. In the first one, Michael and Sandra, who have been previously established to have a particularly boring love life, experiment with wild sex for the first time, outdoors, on the bonnet of their car (*Enigma* #1 12). The scratchiness of Fegredo's artwork literalizes the difficulty of seeing; it also underlines the violence of the scene, with Sandra's face looking genuinely hurt (a red substance can be seen dropping down her mouth). The graphic ambiguity between playful rough sex and genuine violence may make readers uneasy as to whether they actually want to see what is going on. This ambiguity is only made worse by the narrator's interventions: as Sandra whispers to Michael "Just do what you want to me...", the narrative voice answers "But just what does he want to do to her? [...] Marry her? Leave her? Father her children? / Suck out her brains and eat them?" (*Enigma* #1 12). The reader cannot decide whether this is a mere joke by the narrator (who has a history of snarky remarks at Michael's expense) or whether it should be interpreted as free indirect speech representing Michael's own thoughts. This hesitation invites horror into the scene, leaving the reader with a sex scene that

¹ Although *Enigma* itself was not subject to the CCA's regulations, DC applied that policy to many of its books, and even the "mature titles" books published by Vertigo could only go so far before they were deemed damaging to DC's public image.

feels ambiguous at best, if not frankly disturbing. Therefore, the narrator's initial invitation to "look at this" (*Enigma* #1 12) is immediately contradicted with the infliction of a potentially disturbing sex scene.

This scene is in direct contrast with the opening of issue #7, where another full page is dedicated to Michael's sexual discoveries; this time, however, Michael is lying in bed with the Enigma, and we only get to see the post-coital couple lying together peacefully (*Enigma* #7 1). Once again, the narrator intervenes, commenting on what has just happened; but instead of deriding Michael's "passion," this time, s/he suggests a much more positive and fulfilling experience for both parties: "What they lacked in technique they made up for in feeling. Yes, really, feeling. [...] These are warm creatures, with warm skin" (*Enigma* #7 1). This sex scene, which is described in retrospect but never actually shown, may be of more interest to a reader who sympathizes with Michael's sexual uncertainties than the previous scene in #1. However, this time, the absence of a visual depiction is only made more conspicuous by the narrator's playful remark that "Actually, you should have seen it. You really missed something." This sentence clarifies the relation between desire and sight: the phrase "you should have seen it" replaces the first scene's "look at this," and thus the reader only sees what she'd rather avoid.

The desire to see, which Freud terms "scopophilia" (Mulvey 835), is frustrated through a displacement of the visual and emotional core of the scene: what remains in its stead is a reflexive process examining the artificiality of the narrative. Indeed, the sentence "you should have seen it" is twofold: first, it implies that the narrator cannot decide what is seen, as if monstration (graphic storytelling) was a separate process from narration (verbal storytelling), which again contradicts reader expectations regarding a narrator's task and points to the artificiality of the narrative. At the same time, it is clear that the reader could *not* have seen "it," that the depiction of explicit homosexual intercourse could never have occurred within a DC comic book in 1993, even one that was not directly constrained by the Comics Code. While Vertigo can be considered one of the most progressive imprints in mainstream comics at the time, the use of strong sexual suggestions, let alone graphic depictions of it, were still highly problematic. Even the simple fact of featuring male homosexual characters was quite rare, and gay men were generally relegated to the background and/or denied actual relationships (Mangels 44; Franklin III 255).

II. Generic eccentricity: subverting and parodying the superhero narrative

By questioning the conventions of US mainstream comics, *Enigma* elaborates on the tradition of revisionist superhero narratives. Like *Watchmen*, Alan Moore's seminal revisionary effort, *Enigma* relies on the depiction of violence while at the same time questioning its legitimacy (which is, once again, typical of the paradoxical postmodernist strategies analyzed by Linda Hucheson). *Enigma*'s remorseless killing of his enemies is stripped of all meaning when we learn that his antagonists the Head, the Truth and Envelope Girl were all innocent people whom the Enigma transformed into his enemies in order to emulate the contents of the original comics he based his life on: the Enigma himself is not a comic book hero, but an imitation of one. His origin story frames him as an impersonator who used the Enigma personality as a means of coping with his dreadful existence: in other words, the Enigma himself is not a hero—he is a fan relying on comics' escapist value. Milligan and Fegredo only make their point clearer by depicting a group of *Enigma* fanatics (the "Enigmatics") who think Titus Bird is a prophet and end up interpreting the last issue of his comic book as an incitement to commit collective suicide, despite Titus's claims that the book neither has nor should have any meaning beyond pure entertainment.

More specifically, *Enigma* is established as an eccentric superhero text through Milligan and Fegredo's explicit questioning of the superheroic body. *Enigma* deals with carnal desire, in an industry whose entire aesthetics is built around the centrality of the body. To quote Scott Bukatman's analysis: "Superhero comics present body narratives, bodily fantasies that incorporate (incarnate) aggrandizement and anxiety, mastery, and trauma [...]. Comics narrate the body in stories and envision the body in drawings. The body is obsessively centered upon" (Bukatman 49). At the same time, the superhero genre, which initially targeted children, stopped short of actually engaging with sexuality and desire. Hence a paradoxical situation in which "even though homosexuality was not permitted, heterosexuality could never really be confirmed" (Lendrum 289).

The suspicion of hidden homosexuality has indeed been associated with superhero comics for more than fifty years. The charge was famously brought up by psychiatrist

Fredric Wertham in his 1954 study *Seduction of the Innocent*, where he analyzes the adventures of Batman and Robin as “a wish dream of two homosexuals living together” (Wertham 190). Because Wertham’s book subsequently made history as one of the most infamous examples of the anti-comics trend of the fifties, his analysis of Batman may feel familiar to many comics readers.² Therefore, what Klock writes on the topic of Miller’s *Dark Knight* is equally applicable to *Enigma*: “Those who are familiar with Wertham’s book or its echoes—ubiquitous in popular culture parodies of Batman—will be on the lookout for these kinds of homoerotic signifiers, and discover [the author] toying with them” (Klock 34). Readers picking up early clues of Michael’s infatuation with the Enigma (which is not fully revealed until #6) might interpret it as one more sign of the text’s status as a parody of superhero tropes.

Thus, the discussion of sexuality takes place against the very specific background of comics history, and places *Enigma* within the broader tendency of ironical reevaluation that emerged in the late 1980s and became one of the aesthetic cornerstones of the Vertigo line, through texts such as Neil Gaiman’s *Sandman* and Alan Moore’s *Swamp Thing*. This metanarrative dimension becomes even clearer when Milligan and Fegredo resort to a *mise en abyme*, featuring the fictional comic *The Enigma* in the pages of their actual comic:

The original Enigma comic, written by Titus Bird [...] was noted for its lack of action. It tended to be a wordy, overindulgent piece heavily influenced by drugs and the mild paranoia these drugs induced. It drifted too often into a rambling and muddled quasi-Eastern spirituality. It sold very poorly and was discontinued after three episodes. (*Enigma* #5 11)

Michael being approximately 25 years old, his childhood comics would have been written in the fictional equivalent of the 1970s.³ However, while it is certainly possible to find comics from the seventies that fit the description above, I would suggest that Milligan’s criticism in fact applies equally well, if not better, to the late 1980’s and early 1990’s books that were to become part of DC’s Vertigo imprint, including *Enigma* itself.

² That would be especially true after the appearance of the 1966 *Batman* TV show, whose strong sense of camp was associated with queerness.

³ I am assuming here that *Enigma*, like most superhero comic books, has a timeline that closely follows the real world’s, so that a book published in 1993 would be set in 1993 in the diegetic world.

“Lack of action,” for example, is something that was criticized in Neil Gaiman’s *Sandman*—Milligan’s friend and fellow author Grant Morrison once explained *Sandman*’s influence on editorial guidelines, complaining: “The more people we have talking for 24 pages or longer the better. Don't put any action scenes, because that's no longer acceptable” (Singer 111). Wordiness was also a distinctive trend of the period, instigated by Alan Moore’s *Swamp Thing* and imitated by many of his followers: although Moore’s verve was often praised as eloquent and evocative, it also appeared “ponderous or faux-poetic” to certain critics (Callahan 76). Finally, the influence of drugs is an element frequently associated with the works of Grant Morrison and Peter Milligan himself, although whether those claims were authentic remains to be seen. For example, in an interview by Zach Smith for *Newsarama*, Milligan and illustrator Brendan McCarthy were bluntly asked “what sort of narcotics [they] recommend to young writers and artists if they wish to attempt to try to maybe possibly capture [their] creative mindset” (Smith n. p.). Milligan and McCarthy’s own *Rogan Gosh*, a winding tale about reincarnation and Indian culture which Vertigo reprinted, is also a prime example of “rambling Eastern spirituality.”

All these elements add another layer of irony to the description of Titus’ book, which ends with the following sentence: “This [i.e. the current events in the diegesis], of course, is nothing like the comic book *The Enigma. This is real life*” (*Enigma* #5 11, my italics). By comparing an intradiegetic book to the diegetic events and calling the latter “real life,” the narrator requires suspension of disbelief at the specific time when metatextual references to Vertigo books make the reader most keenly aware of the story’s fictionality. It simultaneously asserts the centrality of the superhero genre and undermines the reader’s ability to believe in it.⁴

III. Mapping the Self

As I have shown, in the first half of the series homosexuality is but one of the markers that define *Enigma* as a revisionist superhero narrative set out to deconstruct tropes and conventions. However, as the story goes on, Michael’s love affair with his hero

⁴ This aporia corresponds to a phase of crisis in the history of the superhero genre, whose inherent escapism had been considerably undermined by Alan Moore’s *Watchmen* and Frank Miller’s *Dark Knight Returns*. After this point, some creators tried to revive the superhero as a more positive and solar figure (e.g. Grant Morrison’s *All-Star Superman* or Kurt Busiek’s *Astro City*) while others exploited the metadiscursive potential of the genre (a prime example being Warren Ellis’s *Planetary*).

turns out to be the major concern of the book, and what started out as an eccentric superhero book eventually moves from the subversion of genre conventions to a story of self-discovery and identity politics in which Michael begins to question the social and moral conventions which had previously guided his life.

In this last part, I deal with Milligan's idea of "mapping the self," which first appears during Michael and the Enigma's bed scene, where the narrator calls them "two men redrawing the maps of themselves" (*Enigma* #7 1). "Mapping" can be understood in a literal sense. Michael, in particular, states his own desire for conformity in terms of controlling space: for example, he says "I always hated cliffhangers. I always liked *knowing where I was*" (*Enigma* #6 7, my italics). Through internal focalization, we also learn: "Mike stares at the maps for hours, trying to find patterns. Realizing that all his life he's been looking for patterns. He was a patterns junkie" (*Enigma* #4 13). What Michael expresses is a constant struggle to locate the center, to find his bearings in a world in which he is perpetually alienated. Ultimately, Michael's story deals with his ability to relocate the center within himself, following Foucault's conception of the body as the perceptual center of the self (Foucault 20), and perhaps suggesting new uses of the body that would not fit within the framework of the traditional superhero narrative. As Michael overcomes his anxieties and finds solace in a different form of sexuality, he makes a claim for seeing eccentricity (the refusal of the heterosexual center) as a liberating way of inhabiting the world.

The connection between the navigation of space (center/margin) and the ability to define oneself is further supported by Milligan's recurrent use of the motif of falling. The fall, an explicit symbol of sin and of yielding to temptation in the Bible, carries negative connotations: to fall is somehow to deviate, to refuse or fail to adhere by the dominant moral code. Yet in *Enigma*, Michael progressively redefines the word, equating falling with the fulfillment of desire. Michael falls for the Enigma—he falls in love, and this fall is a redemptive one. Let us examine two excerpts from #6 in which internally focalized narration accompanies Michael's first encounters with the Enigma:

Ah, he feels as though he is standing on the very edge of a high mountain. Part of him wishes he could fall from it. He's never really fallen before, he's always

pulled back at the last minute. Because, according to popular opinion, when you fall from a mountain, you usually end up getting hurt. (*Enigma* #6 5)

And he feels himself falling. As though falling from the highest mountain. And this time he will let himself fall. And he will learn... He will learn that, contrary to popular opinion... It needn't hurt at all. (*Enigma* #6 24)

Both extracts are ripe with sexual subtext: “he’s always pulled back at the last minute” suggests the frustration of sexual desire, and echoes Michael’s aborted first homosexual flirt (*Enigma* #6 22). Similarly, “it needn’t hurt at all” is a phrase stereotypically associated with penetration, which perhaps refers forward to Michael and the Enigma’s subsequent lovemaking, and in any case depicts love as a positive driving force that should be yielded to. In other words, Michael’s “remapping” of himself is akin to a fall because it allows him to connect with the repressed “low” parts of the body, associated with desire and pleasure.

This use of the fall is also an unexpected twist on a generic trope belonging to superhero narratives. At one point of issue 6, Michael literally walks off a rooftop to test the Enigma’s ability to care for people (which he sorely lacks at the beginning of the story): “To see if you were completely inhuman. And to see how important I am to you” (*Enigma* #6 16). As the Enigma catches Michael, he unwittingly reenacts a particularly iconic trope of heterosexual romance in superhero tradition: it is what Superman repeatedly does for Lois Lane or, rather more tragically, what Spider-Man does for Gwen Stacy (*Amazing Spider-Man* #121). Milligan therefore subverts a heterosexual trope by having a male couple play the part.

This depiction is problematic since it actually reinforces gender conventions by coding Enigma as masculine and Michael as feminine, instead of dismissing those codes entirely (the same process is at work in the above-mentioned post-coitum scene at the beginning of #7 where the two men’s position in bed is stereotypically heterosexual, with Michael snuggled up in the Enigma’s arms). Again it corresponds to what is authorised and can be *seen*. Yet, I would argue that within this admittedly problematic framework, Milligan and Fegredo challenge the expectations set up by mainstream comics by parodying the heterosexual superhero narrative and presenting us with queer alternatives.

“Queer,” as Annamarie Jagose explains, “focuses on mismatches between sex, gender and desire [...], exploit[ing] the incoherencies in those three terms which stabilize heterosexuality” (Jagose 3). In other words, the consensual mapping of the heterosexual body is disturbed and questioned by ex-centric representations. Regarding *Enigma*, this disruption depends on the use of stereotypically gendered attributes. Instead of doing away with gender’s rigid set of representations, the narrative explores possible ways of recombining and subverting them.

Enigma’s villains, in particular, have a decidedly queer side; the Truth and the Head, who are both established to be male before their transformation by the Enigma, are turned into strangely sexualized monsters, which Fegredo frequently depicts in bizarre bending positions, or using low angle shots to emphasize their thighs and buttocks (*Enigma* #1 14, #1 18, #2 1, #2 11). The Truth in particular is shown wearing a corset and thong—ironically, this is exactly the type of outfit Grant Morrison first intended the Joker to wear in his own Batman tale, *Arkham Asylum*, before being turned down by DC.⁵ In both cases, the use of a queer antagonist is used as a reminder of the sexual ambiguity of the supposedly straight, powerful, muscular male protagonists of the superhero genre. This ambiguity, which remains latent in a comic like *Batman*, becomes explicit in *Enigma* where Michael, a comic book reader, literally falls in love with his hero.

Unlike the book’s villains, the Enigma is indeed presented as visually attractive; tall, muscular and brooding, he is endowed with many traits of stereotypical masculinity, to the point that Fegredo sometimes represents him in poses that evoke ancient statuary (see *Enigma* #7 3, as opposed to Michael’s more banal physique and body language). In the introduction to the trade paperback collection of *Enigma*, Fegredo’s work is called “sexually arousing” by Grant Morrison, who goes on to add that “there’s enough libido here to light up Broadway” (Morrison 5). Once again, though, the trope of the straight hero is destabilized, both by the use of gay codes (at one point, Michael stumbles upon one of Titus’s gay porn magazines and mentally

⁵ In his original script, reproduced in the anniversary edition of *Arkham Asylum*, Morrison describes the scene as he first envisioned it: “the Joker stands on the threshold, posing enticingly [...] He is dressed as “Madonna”, in a black basque, seamed tights and lace-up stiletto boots [...] he should look simply grotesque but standing there, hand on thrust-out hip, he projects an absolute confidence that confers upon him a bizarre kind of attractiveness and sexuality” (Morrison, note to pages 12-13).

pictures the Enigma in leather paraphernalia [*Enigma* #4 14]) and by Fegredo's use of stereotypes that would normally be associated with female beauty.

This last point is particularly visible if one looks at Fegredo's hand-painted covers for the individual issues. Whereas Fegredo's interior art has a certain scratchiness to it (which becomes more fluid as the book goes on), his luscious paintwork and striking use of colours serve to emphasize the Enigma's lush hair, slender graceful hands, pulpy lips, all of which are stereotypical markers of femininity and are abundantly used to depict women in comics cover art. In other words, the art is at the service of a queer reenvisioning of the body that fits Michael's changing view of the world, where the boundaries of straight thought no longer apply.

In issue #4, the pivotal point of Michael's first encounter with his future lover confirms this blurring. After Michael was flung to the ground in a fight against the Truth (another instance of the "fall" motif), as he rises to his knees in front of the Enigma, the narrator states: "Michael remembers the first time he stood naked in front of a strange girl... / Because that's what he feels like now. / A strange girl" (*Enigma* #4 3). In this sentence, the verbal style creates a hesitation between two possible interpretations: the pronoun "what" in "what he feels like now" may refer to the notion of "standing naked in front of a strange girl," but it may also suggest Michael *feels* "like a strange girl." In the passage from one interpretation to the other, the adjective "strange" shifts meaning: it no longer means "unknown," but "bizarre," "eccentric"—or "queer," which is the title of the eighth instalment of the series. By accepting being queer, Michael stops being "a stranger" to himself; as he embraces eccentricity, he destabilizes the centrality of straight thought and straight behaviour.

Conclusion

Ultimately, Milligan and Fegredo's *Enigma* is about a progressive decentering from various sets of conventions: a linear, "straight," superheroic narrative veers, almost unexpectedly, into an eccentric quest for identity and self-definition. It was never marketed as a "gay" title, and paratextual information actually seems to downplay that aspect, integrating it within a broader interrogation of identity. For example, at the end of issue #6, Young teases the upcoming issue by simply stating: "Michael has a major revelation and takes a big step" (*Enigma* #5 25). However, the creators'

intention was always to create a positive and relatable depiction of gay life, notably by grounding the story into Art Young's personal experience of coming out (Dissanayake n.p.). This commitment was praised in the letter column by readers such as George Andrew Karavas, who expressed gratitude for this all-too-rare depiction of "an openly gay relationship develop[ing] between two men" (letter printed in *Enigma* #8 26).

Thus the story engages with sexual politics, discussing homosexual desire while at the same time foregrounding the limited scope of inquiry and the frustration of desire inherent to the medium's industry regulations. This, I would argue, is typical of both the innovations and the limitations brought to mainstream comics by the Vertigo imprint. Although *Enigma* boldly deviates from convention, it does not attempt to overthrow corporate mainstream constraints, choosing instead to acknowledge them and then work in their margins: its aims at eccentricity, not full-blown revolution.

Bibliography

Primary sources:

Milligan, Peter, and Duncan Fegredo. "Enigma #1: The Lizard, the Head, the Enigma". New York: DC/Vertigo, 1993.

---. "Enigma #2: The Truth". New York: DC/Vertigo, 1993.

---. "Enigma #3: The Good Boy". New York: DC/Vertigo, 1993.

---. "Enigma #4: And Then What?". New York: DC/Vertigo, 1993.

---. "Enigma #5: Lizards and Ghosts". New York: DC/Vertigo, 1993.

---. "Enigma #6: The End of the Word". New York: DC/Vertigo, 1993.

---. "Enigma #7: Sex in Arizona". New York: DC/Vertigo, 1993.

---. "Enigma #8: Queer". New York: DC/Vertigo, 1993.

Morrison, Grant, and Dave McKean. *Batman: Arkham Asylum, a Serious House on Serious Earth*. New York: DC Comics, 2012. Print.

Secondary sources:

Bukatman, Scott. 'X-Bodies: The Torment of the Mutant Superhero'. *Matters of Gravity: Special Effects and Supermen in the 20th Century*. Durham, N.C: Duke Univ. Press, 2003. 48–78. Print.

- Callahan, Timothy. *Grant Morrison: The Early Years*. Edwardsville, Ill.: Sequart Research & Literacy Organization, 2011. Print.
- Dissanayake, David. 'Unsung Masterpieces - Enigma With Peter Milligan, Duncan Fegredo, And Art Young'. *Bleeding Cool*. N.p., n.d. Web. 20 May 2015. <<http://www.bleedingcool.com/2013/12/09/unsung-masterpieces-milligan-fegredos-enigma/>>.
- Dony, Christophe. 'Reassessing the Mainstream vs. Alternative/Independent Dichotomy or, the Double Awareness of the Vertigo Imprint'. *La bande dessinée en dissidence alternative, indépendance, auto-édition = Comics in dissent: alternative, independence, self-publishing*. Ed. Tanguy Habrand, Gert Meesters, and Christophe Dony. Liège: Presses universitaires de Liège, 2014. Print.
- Foucault, Michel. *Le corps utopique suivi de Les hétérotopies*. Fécamp: Nouvelles Éditions Lignes, 2012. Print.
- Franklin III, Morris E. 'Coming out in Comic Books: Letter Columns, Readers, and Gay and Lesbian Characters'. *Comics & Ideology*. Ed. Matthew P. McAllister, Edward H. Sewell, and Ian Gordon. New York: P. Lang, 2001. 221–250. Print.
- Gabilliet, Jean-Paul. *Of Comics and Men: A Cultural History of American Comic Books*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2010. Print.
- Hutcheon, Linda. *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction*. New York: Routledge, 1988. Print.
- Jagose, Annamarie. *Queer Theory: An Introduction*. New York: New York University Press, 1996. Print.
- Klock, Geoff. *How to Read Superhero Comics and Why*. New York: Continuum, 2002. Print.
- Lendrum, Rob. 'Queering Super-Manhood: Superhero Masculinity, Camp and Public Relations as a Textual Framework'. *International Journal of Comic Art* 7.1 (2005): 287–233. Print.
- Licari-Guillaume, Isabelle. "'Vertigo's British Invasion": La Revitalisation Par Les Scénaristes Britanniques Des Comic Books Grand Public Aux Etats-Unis (1983-2013)'. Thèse de doctorat. Université Bordeaux Montaigne, 2017. Print.
- Mangels, Andy. 'Out of the Closet and Into the Comics. Gays in Comics: The Creations and The Creators Part 1'. *Amazing Heroes* 143 (1988): 39–54. Print.

- Mulvey, Laura. 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema'. *Screen* 16.3 (1975): 6–18. Web.
- Singer, Marc. *Grant Morrison: Combining the Worlds of Contemporary Comics*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2012. Print. Great Comics Artists Series.
- Smith, Zach. 'Milligan & McCarthy Retrospective'. *Newsarama.com*. N.p., 26 Sept. 2013. Web. 31 Mar. 2016. <<http://www.newsarama.com/19042-milligan-mccarthy-retrospective-pt-2-skin-rogan-gosh-more.html>>.
- Wertham, Fredric. *Seduction of the Innocent*. New York: Rinehart, 1954. Print.