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# Transatlantic Exchanges and Cultural Constructs: Vertigo Comics and the British Invasion

Isabelle Licari-Guillaume

## Introduction

Mainstream US comics, with their emphasis on the superhero genre, are often presented as the epitome of Americanness. Indeed, characters such as Superman (self-styled champion of “truth, justice, and the American way”), Captain America (who was depicted punching Hitler on the cover of *Captain America Comics* #1 in March 1941) or Wonder Woman (who literally *wears* the Star-Spangled Banner) have come to symbolize American cultural hegemony in an increasingly globalized world.

Despite this strong national anchorage, however, the American tradition did not develop in a vacuum: comics scholars have shown how European productions influenced US creators over the years (Gabilliet, 2005; Labarre, 2017), or how the arrival of manga in the 2000s helped transform the industry (Brienza, 2016). Such contributions shed light on the complex transnational exchanges that tied American comics creators to their foreign counterparts, allowing us to refine our understanding of transnational transfers in the comics industry, and complicate the picture of an all-powerful American popular culture.

In this article, I propose to revisit the significance of the so-called British Invasion, a transatlantic phenomenon that gained momentum in the late 1980s and early 1990s, as mainstream publisher DC Comics started recruiting British scriptwriters in search of the next Alan Moore (the latter having severed all ties with his publisher shortly after the tremendous success of *Watchmen*). Most of these creators had been working for British anthologies such as *2000 AD*, *Strange Days*, or *Warrior*. To them, overseas contracts were synonymous with better working conditions: as Brian Bolland explains, “the page rate was better; we got our name printed – you know, we got credit – and we got our artwork back” (Khoury, 2004:55). In addition, working for an American publisher meant new artistic challenges (working on longer, full-color strips) and a broader readership (as the market was much larger). Thus, DC Comics recruited many of its future stars, notably the English Neil Gaiman, the Scottish Grant

Morrison, and the Irish Garth Ennis. Although the Invasion was not limited to one publisher (with Marvel publishing Pat Mills and Kevin O'Neill's *Marshal Law* under the Epic imprint), DC, and specifically DC's Vertigo line, played a major role in its development.

The Invasion writers, who came from similar social backgrounds and had been working for the same periodicals in Britain, formed an easily identified group akin to a school of writing. Thus, the term "British" came to be associated with a group of works displaying similar aesthetic and ideological concerns. An adjective referring to citizenship was therefore used as shorthand to refer to specific characteristics that were seldom defined in detail, such as heavy intertextuality, an attention to characterization, etc. These characteristics were most importantly associated with DC's Vertigo imprint, which was created in 1993 by DC's British Liaison, Karen Berger. They were then gradually absorbed by the American mainstream, leading to the idea that British writers changed American comics; but the "Britishness" of these writers was itself a construct, much like the America that they depicted in their comics. In this paper, I will focus on the way national identities are represented and appropriated by the writers, editors and readers of the British Invasion on each side of the Atlantic.

In order to account for both the context of the Invasion's emergence and the contents of its production in terms of cultural representations, my methodology borrows from cultural history, but also from iconotextual analysis. The first part of this paper is devoted to the historical factors that allowed the Invasion to flourish in the US comics industry; I specifically focus on how nationality and national stereotypes shaped the emergence of the phenomenon. In the second and third parts, I turn to an examination of comics produced by British writers from the mid-1980s to the early 2000s, arguing that these texts can be read as truly transnational cultural products whose depiction of Britain (and of the United States) are grounded in a set of mutual assumptions regarding national specificities. I demonstrate that Britain and Britishness are construed simultaneously as a space of otherness whose distinctive features are put on display, and as a mirror for America's own political and social issues. Conversely, as foreigners, the Invaders are less interested in exploring the daily realities of life in the US than in presenting and discussing America as a product of historical and mythical narratives told by the media in an era of increasingly globalized cultures.

## I) The Making of the British Invasion

The term “British Invasion” is most commonly used to refer to British scriptwriters who entered the field of American comics after 1986. Commentators sometimes distinguish between two “waves” of the post-Moore invasion, the first being composed of Neil Gaiman, Grant Morrison, Jamie Delano, and Peter Milligan, while the second comprises Garth Ennis, Warren Ellis, Mike Carey, and Mark Millar (Murray, 2010:41). However, there is evidence that the expression was used as early as 1983<sup>1</sup>: At the time, it referred more specifically to comics *artists*—specifically Dave Gibbons and Brian Bolland, who were among the first to cross over to America (Berger, 2017).

The “British Invasion” moniker itself was a legacy of the rock’n’roll industry, which had gone through a similar phase in the 1960s when the Beatles craze swept over America. The two events seem to follow a similar pattern: in both cases, the success of one clearly identified artist (Moore) or band (the Beatles) led to a “gold rush” as producers started signing British, predominantly male artists on the basis of their nationality (Kelly, 1991:29). Moreover, both invasions modified the consumption patterns associated with their industry: after the Beatles, the public started paying more attention to composers, just like the post-Moore era was marked by the prominence of scriptwriters over artists. However, the most striking similarity resides in these Invasions’ complex negotiation of transnational cultural influences. Rock’n’roll scholar Brian Kelly sums up the situation by explaining that “presumably these invasion artists were popular because they were British and provided an alternative to American rock’n’roll. And yet nearly all of them redid old American material!” (Kelly, 1991:29). This statement could easily apply to the British creators, most of whom had debuted in *2000 AD*, a comics magazine that was heavily influenced by American comics.

Beyond comparisons with rock’n’roll, however, the term “British Invasion” appears thoroughly problematic. First, “British” is not necessarily an adjective that all the respective creators would readily use for themselves—specifically in the case of Scottish or Irish creators, to whom “British,” a word often used interchangeably with “English,” may appear problematic. The “Britishness” of the invasion made sense from the point of view of the American industry and its actors, who were more sensitive to these creators’ common perception of American culture than to potential divisions, but it harbors potential problems nonetheless. The term “invasion” is similarly misleading: the arrival of British creators was consciously orchestrated by American publishers and in particular by DC Comics, where

editor Karen Berger was specifically in charge of recruiting new overseas talent. Thus, the handful of British writers they employed can hardly be seen as invaders, especially against the corporate power of DC Comics.

DC's investment in the British scene was based on the hope that they could somehow replicate Alan Moore's tremendous success on *Swamp Thing* and *Watchmen*. To borrow Moore's turn of phrase: "After a few years, they decided to try and set up a little 'Alan Moore farm' with Karen Berger's Vertigo imprint for DC. All the writers were instructed to 'write this like Alan Moore'" (Wilson, n.d.). Although DC officials never confirmed the fact in so many words, other creators seem to share Moore's sentiment; see for example Peter Milligan's quip that "they [DC officials] were all keen for writers to be themselves. [Short pause]. As long as you were exactly like Alan Moore" (Hasted, 1998:19).

In the wake of Moore's revamps<sup>2</sup>, up-and-coming British writers were assigned to pre-existing characters in need of a fresh start—*Animal Man* and *Doom Patrol* for Morrison, *The Sandman* for Gaiman, *Shade the Changing Man* for Milligan. Regardless of how insistent the editors may have been, it is clear that the creators themselves felt like they had to meet specific expectations, and thus tailored their scripts accordingly. (For instance, Morrison reports to have written his first 4 issues of *Animal Man* as a pastiche of Moore's style.<sup>3</sup>) Thus, the common expectations that were imposed on (or self-imposed by) all the group members reinforced the homogeneity of their styles, which had already been fairly close to one another due to the common publishing environment they had matured in.

As foreigners, indeed, the British scriptwriters of the Invasion entered the industry with a new outlook on superhero comics, at a time when the genre had begun to ossify around the heritage of the Silver Age. Several scholars have analyzed how the Invaders' cultural environment helped them breathe new life into superhero stories. For example, Kukkonen and Müller-Wood suggest the following: "British readers and authors may have read just as many [superhero] comics as their U.S. counterparts, but the heroes [were] not theirs... British authors [had] a more distanced perspective" (Kukkonen and Müller-Wood, 2010:154). This viewpoint is consistent with what the creators themselves have to say—*Watchmen* artist Dave Gibbons confirms: "I think certainly that what the first wave of Brits brought to America was a certain kind of – not 'darkness,' that's putting it too strongly – but a certain desire to tear down the idols. Not for purely destructive ends, but perhaps to show everything a bit more realistically and a bit more interestingly" (Lees, 2009:71).

However, I would argue that these creators' British background was not merely the source of their difference, but also a tool through which they could express that difference. The writers of the Invasion were known to "stretch the boundaries of comics," to borrow an expression used by Vertigo editor Karen Berger (Berger, 2017), and that was in part because of their cultural difference. Thus Jamie Delano, the scriptwriter of *Hellblazer*, explains that staging an English main character actually allowed him to bypass the tight self-censorship practiced by DC Comics: "You could do Britishisms, 'bollocks' and things like that, because no-one in America would know what that meant! And 'wanker,' I think that was permitted also" (Young, n.d.). Because they were recognized as foreigners from the outset, it was perhaps easier for them to criticize certain aspects of American life. Thus, the transgressive writing that became closely associated with British creators (specifically during the second wave, with Garth Ennis and Warren Ellis) was to some extent a result of their "Britishness."

At the same time, and perhaps contradictorily, these writers also benefitted from positive cultural stereotypes associated with Britishness. As Beaty and Woo remind us, "for American audiences, the U.K. is, above all, the land of culture and good taste, and there is, for instance, a long-standing tendency to see British popular culture as more sophisticated than its U.S. counterparts" (Beaty and Woo, 2016:63–64). The stereotype of the British author as particularly inventive and well-read is supported by the comics' emphasis on intertextuality and erudition. In other words, this stereotype legitimized and reinforced the Brits' profiles as comics *auteurs*.

Indeed, the birth of Vertigo was concomitant with an increased emphasis on comics writers, as opposed to pencillers. The rise to stardom of creators such as Moore and Morrison set the pace for the development of an *auteur* status in mainstream comics (Licari-Guillaume, 2017). The identification of the writer as *auteur* was facilitated by the use of full script, where the writer lays out a detailed description of each individual panel and the dialogue it is to contain (as opposed to the so-called Marvel Method, where the writer simply pitches the story to the penciller, who is in charge of laying out the pages and composing each panel). All the writers of the Invasion were used to full script, which was standard practice in the British industry (*2000 AD* and the rest did not use the Marvel Method). Unsurprisingly, this format proved particularly suitable for their transatlantic productions, since British writers were likely to be at a distance from the corresponding artists, without easy means of communication between the two.

However, the use of developed scripts was often seen as proof of authorship (see for example how frequently fans and critics have emphasized the length of Moore's scripts, which are held up as signs of genius). In fact, the development of the writer-as-author figure can be seen as an implicit justification of the idea of an invasion; although these authors were clearly in a position of economic inferiority compared to the industry giant DC Comics, they nonetheless managed to "invade" comics through symbolic, not economic, power.

## **II) External Signs of Britishness**

As we have seen, the success of the British Invasion owes much to the state of the comics industry at that specific point in time. Yet it also developed in a context of exceptional political closeness between Britain and the US, which made transatlantic dialogue much easier. This closeness was prompted by the tight ideological links between Conservative Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher (1979-1991) and Republican President Ronald Reagan (1981-1989). Both of these leaders championed a return to "moral" or "Victorian" values, in stark contrast with the liberal tendency that had swept through the West in the 1960s and 1970s. Early Invasion writers were predominantly working-class young men whose strong left-wing sympathies had been exacerbated by Thatcherite leadership; therefore, their political and social discourse was particularly audible in an America that was starting to feel the Conservative backlash. Because comics in the US had been an integral part of the countercultural movement (Gabilliet, 2010:64), readers on the whole reacted positively to the Invasion's political stance.

The writers of the Invasion, born in the 1950s and 1960s, had grown up in a progressive context where equality and women's rights were advocated for: the Abortion Act was passed in 1967, the same year homosexuality was legalized; divorce through mutual consent entered the law two years later, while discrimination based on gender was made unlawful in 1975. On the other side of the Atlantic, readers of the same age had similar experiences: several states decriminalized homosexuality in the wake of the 1969 Stonewall riot, and in 1973 *Roe v. Wade* made anti-abortion laws unconstitutional on a Federal level. To many people, the 1980s' emphasis on "morality" felt like a setback, which may explain why writers and readers were drawn to stories that supported sexual freedom, for example by featuring positive representations of both female and male homosexuality (as in Neil

Gaiman's *Death: The Time of Your Life* and in Peter Milligan's *Enigma*, respectively), or by questioning rigid gender norms (as Grant Morrison does in *Doom Patrol* through the hermaphrodite character of Rebis).

Beyond specific issues of gender and sexuality, many anxieties were shared by the British and American youth alike. Ecology had become a major concern in the face of unhindered capitalism and globalization; social inequality was made manifest by the development of homelessness on both sides of the Atlantic (Collins, 2007:117); and the AIDS epidemic, after being initially associated with communities of gay men, had spread to all segments of the population. All these issues find a direct echo the comics of early Invasion writers. Alan Moore, who had been involved with the Green Party in England (Gray, 2013:46), used *Swamp Thing's* ecological theme to promote environmental awareness, notably through the depiction of planet Rann's barren earth, and the assertion of mankind's need to step up to its responsibilities. Homelessness was tackled both by Neil Gaiman in *Hellblazer #27* and by Peter Milligan in *Shade #7*; both issues depict in a sympathetic manner the plight of those who live in the streets and eventually die without a name or a friendly hand to hold. Finally, the AIDS epidemic is ubiquitous in pre-Vertigo series. A number of characters are affected by the epidemic, either literally or metaphorically—a prime example of the latter case being John Constantine's contamination with demon blood (in *Hellblazer #8*), which he later passes on to his lover Zed. The AIDS reference is made explicit when the character Ray Monde (himself a homosexual man) tells John "the demon blood has triggered some sort of psychic AIDS in you" (Delano, Alcalá, and Ridgway, Sept 1988:6).

This is not to say that the specificities of British life were never addressed. On the contrary, they played a major role in the comics of the Invasion and made these comics clearly recognizable for the American public. They often feature British characters, whose nationality is emphasized through specific and easily recognizable idiolects—Cassidy in *Preacher* uses stereotypically Irish words and expressions ("wanker," "wee" for "little," "eedjit" for "idiot"), Dane in *The Invisibles* has British body language (he "gives the finger" the British way, extending his index and middle finger with his palm facing inwards, for example in Morrison and Yeowell, Oct 1994:12, see Fig. 1), while John Constantine even uses Cockney rhyming slang ("would you Adam'n'Eve it" for "would you believe it" [Delano, Alcalá, and Ridgway, Oct 1988:19]).



Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher is represented several times; one episode of *Hellblazer* takes place during her re-election, and she is depicted as an envoy of satanic forces, complete with fangs and horns. The class system, an allegedly British specificity, is made visible through various references to the Royal Family and the aristocracy. For instance, Grant Morrison's *The Invisibles* is explicitly concerned with the antagonism between working-class characters (a Liverpool teenager, a black woman from the Bronx, etc.) and agents of authoritarianism whose champion is Sir Miles, an Etonian whose very name evokes nobility and who at various points in the series dons the red suit of fox hunters.

Some elements in particular function as asides addressed to a British (or Anglophile) audience—their specific purpose is to reward knowledgeable readers by providing a sense of complicity with the writers. In *Sandman* #32, Barbie mentions that her ex-boyfriend, whose name—quite fittingly—is Ken, left her for a woman named Sindy. As Gaiman explains, this detail is “an insider U.K. joke: ‘Sindy’ was the name of the English knockoff version of the Barbie doll” (Bender, 1999:121). Similarly, Lord Fanny in *The Invisibles* is the butt of an Anglo-American joke. “Fanny” in American slang means “buttocks”, while in British English it refers to female genitals—which is why Dane exclaims: “Every time I say ‘Fanny,’ I crack up, man. / Tt! You got no sense of humor, Americans” (Morrison, 1997:24). These examples can be considered as the British Invasion's own take on obscure references to superhero lore, which are a fixture of the genre.

Despite such “external signs of Britishness,” however, one should not forget that the books of the British Invasion are primarily aimed at an American audience. Some characters may speak British English, but this does not mean that the authors themselves are encouraged to do so. This is confirmed by Alisa Kwitney, assistant editor on *Sandman*, who explains in the letter column that they “do try to catch the odd interloping Britishism” (Gaiman, Hempel, and D’Israeli, May 1994:25). Britishness is present as *couleur locale*: Wherever an American editor considers it jarring, it is likely to be altered. A telling example in this regard is that of *Transmetropolitan* protagonist Spider Jerusalem, whose original name, “Caleb Newcastle,” was deemed “too British” (Kallies, 1999) during the development of the series.

In other words, the elements that do emphasize the Britishness of the Invasion are actually carefully selected and then presented in a way that remains intelligible for the American public. This position can be contrasted with that of other comics of the same period that were created for a British audience—such as Alan Moore's *V for Vendetta*, which requires the reader to be familiar with specific elements of British daily life such as the

London Underground or the significance of Guy Fawkes' Day<sup>3</sup>. I would even argue that the "signs of Britishness" in American comics maximize the appeal of the books by giving them a foreign (though not exactly *exotic*) flavor, while simultaneously making sure that nothing is so obscure as to discourage readers. This strategy is akin to what translation scholar Lawrence Venuti terms "foreignization," i.e., the translator's refusal to transpose the specificities of the source text, thus preserving its foreignness for the target audience (Venuti, 2008). Although they do not go through the process of translation, I argue that the books of the Invasion are linguistically and culturally foreignized for an American audience.

### III) American Simulacra

As I have shown, the books of the Invasion develop a transnational view of Britishness, one that does not merely rely on the domestic experience of the writers but is created through collaboration with the other agents of production involved in the making of the comics, especially the editors, who make decisions based on a presumed readership. It is noteworthy that similar claims can be made regarding the depiction of America by British Invaders.

The transnational construction of Americanness in the comics of the British Invasion has already been hinted at in Fidler and Fehrle's remarkable article on *Watchmen* and the American dream. In this essay, the authors explain that America as described by Moore and Gibbons is in fact built on a series of elements belonging to popular history, such as the war in Vietnam and the Cold War (Fidler and Fehrle, 2013:514). I contend that Fidler and Fehrle's theory can be extended to most of the comics of the Invasion, insofar as those books depict America as it was remediated in a global common imagination through popular music, films and TV series, rather than as a real place which can be experienced first-hand.

Indeed, many of the writers of the Invasion found themselves invited to tell stories about places they had never visited and to rely on documentation to bring their characters to life. Alan Moore claims: "When I started writing *Swamp Thing* I read up on Louisiana and the bayou [...] and managed to glean a just-about functional working knowledge of its plant and animal life, and general makeup. [...] If I want a realistic-sounding name for an ordinary citizen of Louisiana I look in my Houma telephone directory until I come across one which strikes me as having a nice ring to it" (Moore, 2003:22).

Besides phone books and atlases, Invasion writers also relied on the knowledge they had acquired through American cultural exports. For example, Grant Morrison working on *Animal Man* decided to give the Baker family a typical Midwestern suburban house, complete with its front lawn and white fence (see for example Morrison, Truog, and Hazlewood, Sept 1988:20). When asked why he went for that specific design despite the fact that the series is set on the West coast, Morrison explains that he was thinking of the house in Stephen Spielberg's *E.T.*, and added: "I just wanted it to be America as seen by a Scottish person, you know?" (Callahan, 2011:244, emphasis mine). In other words, the cultural prevalence of the US in international popular culture is something that Morrison actively questioned by adopting a reflexive attitude towards his own status as a foreigner. He was interested in an imaginary America, one that was mediated by films, comics, literature, and other narrative or iconic forms.

This is by no means an isolated case. As Nicolas Labarre has shown, Garth Ennis's *Preacher* follows a similar strategy regarding its depiction of the American South: "The ostensible Southernness of the series is established in the very first issue with broad strokes, relying on the reader's familiarity with a set of symbols codifying the South" (Labarre, 2012:244). Labarre goes on to explain that *Preacher* offers "a version of the South self-consciously in dialogue with its popular representations and with the real histories those representations both reveal and conceal." This use of symbols to encode real places and events is, of course, highly reminiscent of Baudrillard's analysis of postmodernity as the era of simulation (Baudrillard, 1981): what the authors of the Invasion explore is the simulacra of Americanness. However, this postmodern outlook is grounded in older, more deeply ingrained views of the American Dream and the fundamental myths of American culture.

In *Preacher*, this exploration is specifically set against the cultural backdrop of Hollywood western movies, which are constantly referenced, either as direct quotations or as more distant hints. The western genre, even if it is grounded in historical fact, belongs to the realm of fiction. However, as we shall see now, narratives do not need to be fictional in order to feed into the broader myth of Americanness. A prime example of this phenomenon would be the Vietnam War, whose traumatic prominence in US collective memory derives specifically from its status as the first conflict to receive live covering on television networks in the US and abroad. Because the story of America's war was televised worldwide, it became everybody's war (at least in the political West). This point is explicitly made in an early episode of *Hellblazer*, where several American veterans, possessed by the memory of the war,

start to rape and kill their loved ones. As he stares at the carnage, Constantine states: “Anyway, it’s not my bloody war. / But, in a way, I know it is. Vietnam was everybody’s war. A movie war, fought nightly on TV in front rooms around the world. / Now the missing stars of that movie have come home. / Trouble is, they’ve brought the war with them” (Delano and Ridgway, Jan 1988:14). The veterans are presented as “stars” in a “movie”: TV news and Hollywood movies are the same, because they both delineate Americanness.

To finish this analysis, I would like to focus on a passage from *Shade, The Changing Man*, which stands as a remarkably clear statement of intent and sums up the British Invasion’s stance on America. The first arc of Milligan’s series deals with Shade’s arrival from his home planet of Meta in order to fight the American Scream (which, as the name suggests, is an embodiment of the American Dream gone astray, see Fig. 2) as it spreads madness to the most iconic parts of the country (Hollywood, the Western deserts, etc.). It is eventually revealed that the American Scream was caused by another Metan character who, like Shade himself, has received information on Earth and its civilizations through a “deep culture tank,” but has been exposed to an excessive amount of information. The character explains: “I’ll tell you what happens [when a subject is exposed to such treatment]. The subject is overdosed and overloaded with America. He’s poisoned, diseased, infected by America... / He’s got a galloping cancer inside him called America. / I’ve heard they do one for France too and that is a little easier to digest.” (Milligan, Bachalo, and Bryant, Oct 1991:11)

Ironically, the American Scream is not even American: he is an alien, filled with a culture he has not experienced but only known vicariously through the mediation of the culture tank. He is, in other words, a perfect metaphor of the Invaders themselves. Thus the American Scream is not about America’s inability to live up to its Dream; it is about the foreigners’ engagement with it. Milligan explains: “Some of the things that I was dealing with [in *Shade*], like Kennedy and the mid-sixties, had people asking then, ‘Why aren’t you dealing with current issues?’ But it appears to me that these are issues that even now resonate with people in 21st century America. It was the big issues that I was interested in, perhaps because I didn’t grow up in America” (Renaud, 2009).

In other words, Americanness and Britishness are depicted through different sets of symbols—writers emphasize the daily experience of life in Britain, while America stands out as a mediated cultural construct. However, both are fundamentally transnational objects because they are meant to be interpreted in different ways by readers of different origins.

## Conclusion

The transnational phenomenon known as the British Invasion of comics demonstrates how deeply stereotypes and expectations relative to nationality can shape the way artistic practices develop and the way people speak about them. Constant references to the Britishness of the “Invaders” suggest an essentialized, unproblematic view of nationality; however, as I have shown, both Americanness and Britishness are in fact highly complex objects that the authors of the Invasion articulate within a transnational framework, both in their works and in the paratextual discourse they build around it. By questioning the stereotypes associated with both countries, they shed light on the cultural, commercial and ideological weight of national representations.

## Endnotes

1. In a 1983 interview, Jim Salicrup asked Dave Gibbons: “Do you think there’s a British Invasion?”, to which Gibbons answered: “If there’s a British Invasion, it’s not from any desire to invade” (Salicrup, 1984:64).

2. *Swamp Thing* was created by Len Wein and Berni Wrightson, while the characters of *Watchmen* are derived from old Charlton characters acquired by DC.

3. “I’d roughed up a kind of *Animal Man* pitch based on *what I presumed they’d expect from a British comic-book writer* [...]. It was me sort of playing with all of [Moore’s] transitions and finding that they were clunky and kind of unpleasant” (Callahan, 2011:243, emphasis mine).

4. In an interview, Moore explained: “There are a few people in America who like [*V for Vendetta*]. I thought it might be too British to translate well. Frank Miller liked it, but he had one problem: he didn’t know who Guy Fawkes was!” (Lawley and Whitaker, 1984:15).

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