

## The man who invented the future

Alan Moore, who reinvented the comic book as the cutting-edge literary medium of our day, talks about beheading, the diabolical power of the media, the Bush dynasty and the fall of Tony Blair.

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By Scott Thill

July 22, 2004 | "What good is knowledge if it just floats in the air? It goes from computer to computer. It changes and grows every second of every day. But nobody actually knows anything."

-- Don DeLillo, "White Noise"

"The whole thing is a movie," says **Alan Moore**. The comic-book visionary behind such epoch-changing works as "Watchmen," "V for Vendetta" and "**From Hell**" is actually talking about the war in Iraq. But the statement could sum up his view of the ceaseless complexities of 21st century life, where reality TV and celebrity culture have usurped individuality, and the human body has become not much beyond more information needing to be assimilated.

Every once in a while we are horrified by a beheading (albeit one seen only on videotape) and human culture remembers that it is not much more than a vulnerable collection of flesh, bone and nerve endings. "This is what wars are; it's not Hollywood," Moore cautions. But ultimately we return to the womblike safety of our media universe with its push-button wars and Internet porn, where sex and death are hidden behind splashy corporate graphics.

The funny thing is that Alan Moore hates to talk about film and television, because, as he explains later in our interview, both "have a lot to answer for." He's not talking about how they've distilled his densely researched, intricate tales of socio-historical interrogation, like "**From Hell**" and "**The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen**," into narrowcasted popcorn movies. Instead, he means the way they've had such an impact on human consciousness that many people were only able to articulate the horrific reality of 9/11 by comparing it to a disaster film.

Moore clearly believes that the same mechanism has foisted a deadly, unwanted and unnecessary war upon the world. "Television and movies have short-circuited reality," he asserts. "I don't think a lot of people are entirely clear on what is real and what is on the screen."

Moore, now 50, has a peculiar perspective on this problem of "misrecognition" between fiction and reality -- because so many of his works have seemingly anticipated or prefigured so much of what has come to pass. "V for Vendetta," Moore's dystopian early-1980s narrative about a future fascist Britain under siege by a notorious terrorist who was subjected to unbearable torture, echoes much of our current dilemma in the so-called war on terrorism, all the way down to the criminalization of homosexuality, the panoptic PATRIOT Act-like surveillance state and a homogeneous media that glosses over real news in favor of sensationalism.

Similarly, "Watchmen," Moore's groundbreaking serial that blew the comics genre wide open, unmasked our presumed comic-book heroes as nothing but a set of neuroses and psychoses in action, figures who look the other way (some in protest) as one of their own unleashes a devastating act of terror that kills half of New York's population -- ironically enough, in order to save the world from nuclear annihilation. It is the same kind of warped cost-benefit analysis that, some would argue, led to 9/11 and its resultant wars in Afghanistan, Iraq and who knows where else.

Then there is "From Hell," a labyrinthine masterpiece of historical research, detective work and social commentary worthy of Thomas Pynchon's "Gravity's Rainbow" or William Burroughs' "Naked Lunch." Moore's calculated tale of turn-of-the-century England -- as seen through the eyes of its prostitutes, public servants and aristocrats -- achieves its apotheosis in the birth of the serial killer, which Moore considers one of the 20th century's key innovations.

There's so much information to absorb in "From Hell" that it's almost impossible to gather it in at one sitting. In one 38-page chapter alone, Moore's Jack the Ripper takes his driver on a city-wide tour of London's points of diabolical interest, connecting the

bastions of secret societies, mythical and true lineages, transcendent architectures, phallic topographies and other landmarks into a pentagram shape. This allegorical voyage, which Moore says he made himself, relying on both recent and ancient maps of London, so terrifies Jack's driver that he vomits, sick with the realization that he is connected to his culture, his history and his employer in ways he never could have conceived.

The lesson there, as Moore explains it, is that to understand the world one lives in, one has to give "coherence to ... complexity, to say that it is possible to think about politics, history, mythology, architecture, murder and the rest of it all at the same time to see how it connects." And Moore's work is nothing if not complex. His explorations of the ways humanity deludes and condemns itself have done more to overcome the anti-comics prejudice of the American and European literary establishment than anything else in the comics genre. And he imparts a whole lot more information than Fox News or CNN.

In other words, Moore is not simply one of the finest writers in comic book history. He's one of the world's finest writers, period. He's capable of illuminating postmodern culture's disorienting information overload as well as any accepted literary genius, whether it's Melville, Pynchon or Joyce.

When it comes to our current wars for democracy and struggles for identity, Moore has more than a few words to say about George W. Bush, Tony Blair, comics, Ronald Reagan, "Friends," holy wars, quantum leaps and his own peculiar place in cultural history. I spoke to him by telephone from his home in England.

**I find quite a few similarities between the fascist dystopia of your early work, "V for Vendetta," and our current political situation.**

ell, the one thing with writing stories about the rise of fascism is that if you wait long enough, you'll almost certainly be proved right. Fascism is like a hydra -- you can cut off its head in the Germany of the '30s and '40s, but it'll still turn up on your back doorstep in a slightly altered guise. I'd agree that the current

situation is particularly alarming. I tend to think that this momentum seems to have sprung up entirely from a group of largely discredited, extreme right-wingers who have been skulking in the shadows since the Ford administration and have suddenly come into the light of day surrounding George W. Bush. I think they've overreached themselves, at least I hope that.

And I really hope that people are not morally lazy or weak enough to elect this guy; I won't say "again" because he wasn't elected the first time. And it is true to say that across the world there is quite a lot of anti-America sentiment, which is different than *anti-American* sentiment. I think that even in the majority of Muslim countries that have been polled, nobody blames Americans -- they blame George Bush and the people surrounding him. Mind you, we'll see what happens this November, because you can have someone take over your country once and still have it be an accident. But twice? Well, that would be regrettable. [Laughs.]

**When you look back at "V for Vendetta," do you think the comparison sticks?**

I heard someone recently talking to David Lloyd [the artist who illustrated "V for Vendetta"] about it, because there's still occasional talk about a film. And he said, probably accurately, that the world is not quite ready for a terrorist hero at the moment. But yeah, "V for Vendetta" has had an annoying way of coming true ever since I wrote it in the early '80s. Back then, I wanted something to communicate the idea of a police state quickly and efficiently, so I thought of the novel fascist idea of monitor cameras on every street corner. And the book was, of course, set in the future of 1997. But by that year -- and I don't know if Tony Blair and Jack Straw were big fans, but evidently they thought its design for future Britain was a really good one -- we had cameras on every street corner along the length and breadth of the country. My general thought is that yes, it's depressing, but not unexpected, when this stuff happens. And I do tend to think that, given the upsurge of the religious right over the last couple of decades, these are the last spasms of those dinosaur organisms.

**Why do you think that?**

Because they are standing in the way of history, trying to turn everything, politically and spiritually, back to a medieval vision of the world. Whereas they're perfectly entitled to have whatever worldview they like, I would suggest that humanity is moving in a forward direction. And that any attempt to turn the clock back to a mythical, simpler, or better age would probably be about as effective as Britain's ancient King Canute, who famously sat on his throne along the tide line and ordered the waves to go back. To be fair, he was only doing this to demonstrate the futility of expecting leaders and rulers to be able to command the forces of history and the world. But yeah, I tend to think that this conservative backlash that has been going on since the '70s is the final spasms of a dying creature; history is not moving that way, and no matter how much people dig their heels in and assume this is the 1950s or the Middle Ages, that's not the truth of the situation. No matter how powerful our political and religious leaders think they are, they are as dust before the immense and implacable forces of history and progress. I just hope that they don't make too much of a mess or take too many more people down with them.

**One of the other similarities between "V for Vendetta" and our current situation is that the populace is cowed by fear, to an extent, through the media, whether it's television propaganda or electronic surveillance.**

Of course. One of the reasons we singled out media in "V for Vendetta" was because it is one of the most useful tools of tyranny. We invite it into our own home every night; I'm sure that some of us think of it as a friend. That might be a horrifying notion but I'm sure there are people who think of television as perhaps one of their most intimate friends. And if the TV tells them that things in the world are a certain way, even if the evidence of their senses asserts it is not true, they'll probably believe the television set in the end. It's an alarming thought but we brought it upon ourselves. I mean, I think that television is one of the most diabolical -- in the very best sense of the word -- inventions of the past century. It has probably done more to degrade the mind and intelligence of its audience, even if they happen to be drug addicts or alcoholics; I

would think that watching television has done more to limit their horizons in the long run. And it has also distorted our culture.

TV and politics have always made inevitable bedfellows, but the results have been disastrous. Look at the situation we have now. Let's say that tomorrow someone who is a political genius were to emerge -- and I'm not expecting this to happen, but say that it did. Say that a politician emerged who seemed, for once, basically competent, who seemed to be able to do their job as well as the average cab driver, comic writer or journalist. If they were the most intelligent, visionary, humane political thinker in the history of mankind, but were also fat, had some sort of blemish or something that made them less than telegenic, we would not be able to elect them. All we're able to elect are these telegenic, photogenic crypto-Nazis. As long as they look good. I suppose it's too early to go into my rant on Ronald Reagan? That would be tasteless.

**Actually, I was going to mention him. Especially his recent sanctification by America's television news media.**

[Laughs.] Well then, OK. You've got Ronald Reagan -- the much eulogized, recently deceased former president -- who everyone seems to have forgotten was regarded as one of the most low and treacherous individuals by those in Hollywood that he sold out to the McCarthy hearings. This is someone whose response to the AIDS epidemic was probably responsible for hundreds of thousands of deaths worldwide. This is someone who created Saddam Hussein and Osama bin Laden, or at least set in motion the policies that would create these creatures. This was the architect of much of the world's present misery. Why did we elect him? Because he had been in a lot of films that some quite liked. We thought him an honorable man because in his films he played a lot of honorable men. I believe there are some who believed he had an outstanding war record. Even Ronald Reagan himself talked with misty eyes about the time he liberated concentration camps, which he may have done in a movie. But Ronald Reagan was out of World War II, fortunately for him, because of ill health. So all of his memories of military service came from movies. I've got to say that there are probably better people to elect than film stars.

## **And now there's Arnold.**

What is it with California? They keep doing it! Who's next? Is Robert Downey Jr. going to be the governor of California after Schwarzenegger? This is ridiculous. Television and movies have short-circuited reality. I don't think a lot of people are entirely clear on what is real and what is on the screen. They will take what they perceive as qualities of fictional characters and attribute them to the actor called upon to play them, and then disastrously elect those actors to higher office. I think television and movies have a lot to answer for. It's when they start to have an impact on our politics that we should become anxious about it. I used to joke a lot after Ronald Reagan was elected that the future probably promised a President Springsteen. Or a President T; you know, "I pity the fool!" Who knows? Unless we get our democratic system overhauled fairly urgently, there is really no telling what manner of monsters or buffoons we'll have steering us into this still-young century.

**It's amazing how much power media can have if we let it, especially if we're using it to supplant our political dialogue.**

I guess we'll just have to wait and see. At the start of this current conflict back in 2001 and 2002 when we were starting into Afghanistan, I said to my girlfriend -- Melinda Gebbie, who's Californian -- that I believed there was a possibility George Bush could walk away from this with his political career intact. Because, and this may be a sweeping generalization, the American electorate has a somewhat shorter attention span than the English electorate. There's a good chance that many people in the American electorate have already forgotten that Saddam Hussein had nothing to do with 9/11, that he was supposed to have weapons of mass destruction ready to deploy in 45 minutes. I think they're going to forget that they were lied to; there's a good chance that many of them will forget entirely who they were at war with. That may be doing a terrible injustice to the American electorate, and I hope that I am.

**How about Tony Blair?**

No, I don't think so. I mean, I think that the recent savaging Labor was handed at the European Parliament election is purely attributable to Tony Blair having taken us into this war against our wishes. We despise him. He is an object of almost universal hatred. People who voted Labor feel that they've been misrepresented, that they've been made party to things that they would never in a million years have voted for if they had known that Tony Blair was going to suck up so shamelessly to the American presidency over this. No, I don't think that we'll be forgiving him anytime soon. I'd be very surprised if Labor wins the next election with Tony Blair at their head; the fallout from this is going to take several years, even decades; it's going to take us a very long time to sort out the mess these clowns have made.

I was reading today that NORAD used to run simulations in the late '90s in preparation for hijacked planes being flown into the World Trade Center. They would have been prepared; they could have sorted it all out. Except that the rules of engagement in such a situation were changed by the secretary of defense, Donald Rumsfeld. He changed them so that there suddenly wasn't a way to cope with planes flying into the WTC. And then to basically use that terrible disaster to validate something they were going to do anyway? Rumsfeld had been talking for years about invading Iraq to safeguard U.S. oil supplies, and all of a sudden he had George Bush, a scion of the Bush dynasty and someone with unresolved issues about the way his dad had been humiliated and laughed at.

### **Emasculated.**

Right, he wanted to show the world that you can't laugh at a Bush. I was reading this excellent book called "**American Dynasty**," that gives the whole lineage of the rotten bastards all the way back to Prescott Bush, who was dealing with the Third Reich up until 1942. I mean, it's not that long ago! We shouldn't forget these people, or their sons or grandsons. I tend to think that the whole tree is rotten, that's the only conclusion I can draw. These are dynasties; they carry out the will of the family, which is old, avaricious, power-mad, arrogant. Generation after generation, they see that the family's will is done. I'm surprised that the Bushes are doing so well over there. You people actually had a war of independence to free yourselves from a dynasty of blue-blooded

Georges. I thought that was the whole idea! You were fed up with having a bunch of aristocrats named George ruling your country, but obviously it seems that you can't get enough of it! [Laughs.]

**We're addicted to them. My chief problem is that he keeps bringing along a bunch of Bible-thumping fundamentalists who are stoking this global holy war we've got going on.**

Well, that's because of the alarming influence that Southern Baptists now have upon the American presidency. His language is very often cribbed from the Book of Revelation; it's obviously very emotive for the religious fundamentalists that make up so much of his base. As far as I understand it, George W. Bush is the de facto leader of the Christian right in America. Pat Robertson kind of stood down, didn't he? I mean, for the first time you've got an American president who's also a major American religious leader. And it's a funny kind of religion. I was noticing that Bush's buddy Rev. Moon -- in front of a number of Republican and Democratic senators he **declared himself the messiah and savior of mankind.**

We don't have this terrible problem with the religious right that you have over there, and I truly have every sympathy for you. If there's anything that makes America a laughingstock, it's those people. America is a huge, surging, relentlessly modern country that will nevertheless send Oral Roberts millions when he tells them that if they don't, the Lord will send him home. They'll actually give credence to people who -- in any other country of the world except perhaps some of the equally addled fundamentalist Muslim countries -- would be laughed at. At the same time, since it's a crusading religion, it's difficult for them to accept that some might possibly reject their frankly retarded values. It's certainly dangerous that you've got a president who's playing pope to all these frightening, God-struck rednecks, which is probably a bit sweeping. But what the hell, I'm in the mood for it.

**One thing I did want to mention to close out this subject is that there is no shortage of American moral outrage over the various beheadings going on in Iraq and Saudi Arabia. Such acts have enormous symbolic power, and your work, especially "Voice of the Fire," is full of them.**

Oh yeah, there are heads all the way through "Voice of the Fire." They're a kind of punctuation that runs through the entire book. Well, yeah, heads -- they're important. I mean, I was up visiting my youngest daughter, Amber, in college sometime last year and noticed a carved head at least above every third or fourth doorway. This is a surviving practice of the Celtic cult of the head, where you would place the real heads of your enemies above your doors as a way of usurping their power. After all, if you've got your enemy's head above your door, all of their power is now yours. So I should imagine that it's got a certain symbolic strength.

**Do you find it curious that those of us in our part of the world are repelled by these visceral beheadings, but we can't find the time to blink at the fact that we've already killed thousands by pushing buttons?**

Yeah, because it's remote, impersonal, and you don't have to look your enemy in the eyes while you're doing it. This is a thing that has come to typify much American warfare over the past 10 or 15 years, and can be explained by Sigourney Weaver's strategy in the second "Alien" film: "Nuke 'em from orbit." It doesn't matter if those black dots so far beneath you are enemy troops or a wedding party. Or your own troops, for that matter. You're up there in the stratosphere and all you have to do is press a button, just like Super Mario. For people who have grown up on Pong and Space Invaders, it's only a small step. And it does show that when you do finally get to the unfortunate physical aspects of warfare, like beheadings, they still have the power to shock. And the Americans do seem rather squeamish, especially with the blackout on the body bags or disabled soldiers coming home. I mean, most of the people we saw on television were gung-ho at the start of this war; surely they understand what happens in war. People do tend, for some reason, to get killed.

**This is not a pillow fight.**

No, it's not. People tend to come home with bits missing, or sometimes they don't come home at all. This is what wars are; it's not Hollywood, not that ridiculous manipulation of Jessica Lynch,

where they had soldiers shooting blanks into the air to make it look as if they were rescuing her under fire. It's Jerry Bruckheimer warfare; they even had to dress it up to make it seem as if she was sodomized or raped by her captors. And there's no evidence of this, she doesn't remember it, and it seems that the people looking after her were trying to get her back to the Americans. The whole thing is a movie.

We always win our wars in the movies, and I think there are people raised on war movies who thought that was what real war was going to be like, that once the cameras stopped rolling, all the people who were killed would be able to get up and carry on with their lives. It's a shame that we seem to need one of these things every generation just to teach a very simple lesson: War never accomplishes anything. It's never going to look good in the history books. People are never going to look back and think, "He started a lot of wars; what a great leader he was!" That's not the way it works. God knows how many more of these things we're going to need before it starts to sink in.

**It's an eerie correlation to the devastating terrorist act visited upon New York in "Watchmen" -- which is itself, along with other narratives, an eerie textual precedent for 9/11 -- one that is ultimately preferable, for all the superheroes involved, to a full-blown nuclear war between America and the Soviet Union.**

Oh yeah, I've heard some people who were apparently in New York during 9/11 say that it felt like the last episode of "Watchmen," that they were expecting some giant alien jellyfish to turn up in the middle of it all. Because it all felt staged somehow.

**It felt like a movie. That tended to be one of the more popular refrains about 9/11.**

Yeah, that's it. It felt like some sort of entertainment or spectacle.

**Is there a kind of cultural disconnection between the image and fleshly reality? You interrogate the idea of the body in your work, especially in "Promethea," "Watchmen" and**

**"From Hell," where Jack the Ripper's dissection of prostitutes' flesh gives him epiphanies as well as the power to transcend his own body, time and space.**

Well, the body is one of our first sources of metaphor. One of the ways in which we create our language is to talk about things that are unfamiliar to us in terms of things that are familiar to us. Most of the metaphors that we use come from our own bodies. Of course, in magic, such as that I'm interested in, every part of the body has its own symbolic significance. We were talking earlier about the cult of the head. Various parts of the body, such as the sexual organs, have profound meanings in most systems and cultures. The eyes, the hands -- these are all very rich in symbolism because they are so immediate to us. We all know our bodies intimately; it's all we have and all we are. It tends to provide the easiest sort of metaphor. We talk about the face of a clock, or the foot of the stairs. The limbs of a corporation. In the case of Jack the Ripper, they tend to get our attention; same with the beheadings of those unfortunate hostages we talked about earlier. Although, with regard to those hostages -- and I've got enormous sympathies for their families -- but you don't really hear the word "mercenaries" much these days, do you?

**No, now they're called contractors.**

Oh, contractors, that's right. I heard about these security contractors and wondered whether they're the same guys with shaven heads and bandoliers and knives in their teeth that you'd sometimes see going around to the hot spots of the world. You know, to help out with the humanitarian effort.

**To shift gears a little, my contention in this article is that it's pretty much undisputed that you're the heavyweight champion of comics, but that you should also be considered among the world's literary greats, up there with Pynchon and DeLillo, because of what you do with language and narrative.**

Well, thank you. That is praise indeed. I'm a huge Thomas Pynchon fan. But, I don't know, it's nothing that I'm really that bothered about. Over here, the literary establishment is still

running, as back in the days of Jane Austen, on the novel of manners, which she more or less invented. And, of course, they're about the social intricacies of the middle class, who were also the only people at the time who could read or afford to buy the books. They were also the people who made up the book critics. And I think that, around this time, critics were so delighted by this new form of literature mirroring their own social interactions that they decided that not only was this true literature, but this was the only thing really that could be considered true literature. So all genre fiction, anything that really wasn't a novel of manners in one form or another, was excluded from that definition.

### **Do you still find that to be the case?**

I recently saw a program about the history of the novel on TV over here -- it was a short series and it was ridiculous. I predicted before the thing was actually shown that there would be nobody representing any form of genre fiction whatsoever -- and I was, for the most part, right. They managed to get through the 18th and 19th centuries without a mention of, say, the gothic novel. Fair enough, perhaps the gothic novels weren't as extraordinary as literature, but they also didn't mention Mary Shelley's "Frankenstein," which is an incredibly important book for all sorts of reasons. But I guess it has become what they would term genre fiction, so it is amongst the literary damned. My only mistake was that I said I didn't think there would be a mention of H.G. Wells, but my girlfriend told me they did mention "The History of Mr. Polly," which is one of the few works by Wells that I have not been able to get through. To completely ignore "The War of the Worlds," "The Time Machine," "The Invisible Man" and all his other work shows you the way that the literary critical establishment tends to regard even people in so-called lower literary genres. So if you are working in comics, which is considered a whole lower medium, well, let's just say that I'm not anticipating being given the Booker Prize anytime soon -- and I'm immensely glad of that.

### **You're not too worried about mainstream appreciation.**

No, I think that the real life in any culture happens on the margins.

I'd agree with what the brilliant, divine, wonderful Angela Carter said about Booker Prize-winners; I believe she referred to them as shortlist victims, which I think pretty well sums it up. The most interesting writers are the ones that are seldom going to get anywhere within shouting distance of a literary prize because they are considered too vulgar. Take Michael Moorcock, for example, who wrote the wonderful "Mother London," one of the most astonishing London novels ever written -- and there have been a great many astonishing London novels. "Mother London" is a tour de force; it is the best thing he's ever written, but there is no chance of Moorcock ever being given literary respectability because he has dabbled in ignored, disregarded and, some would argue, frankly juvenile comics or fantasy.

**Are there other authors you feel are devalued because of the nature of their work?**

Sure, people like Iain Sinclair, who is I think perhaps one of the best writers of the English language who is currently alive and working. His books are not an easy read. They're very dense with a lot of information on a single page. Culture today predisposes us to receive our information predigested and prepackaged, and most, as a rule, tend to shy away from anything which hasn't been simplified to the level where anyone could understand it. That is not the job of an artist or a creator, yet all too often in the mainstream you'll find that is what people are doing in order to remain popular. They know their audience, and they know if they push the right buttons in the right order that they can create another bestseller or whatever. I'm very content with this kind of strange, underground ghetto that I've been shunted into. It's a wonderful place and you meet a much nicer class of people.

**Have you been thrown into that same ghetto in America? It seems that the American literary establishment is at least a bit more free-form and chaotic.**

It's a lot looser in America, although I'm sure you still have a literary establishment. It may be a lot less snooty than over here, although I bet you there are still a good portion of readers and critics who tend to think that American letters begins and ends

with Henry James. There are probably strands of snobbishness that exist in American letters just the same as in their English equivalent. I'm kind of an anomaly, but I'm treated very nicely. That's because there's only one of me, so there's no danger of me reproducing and ruining the neighborhood! [Laughs.] I don't really fit into any category, so I am more or less left to my own devices, which is exactly how I want it. I don't think there is a great deal of difference between the American and European response. They are probably both more vociferous than the British response. Not to say that I don't get a fair amount of attention here in Britain, but perhaps the British see me as less exotic than the people across the water.

**One of the things about your work that is so striking is that it is utterly dense with information, history, myth and legend. You pack more political and social history into one comic like "From Hell," for example, than we're likely to find in an actual history book.**

I'm trying to produce work adequate to my times, and one of the things which makes our current times stand out is that we are saturated with information. Yes, there will be -- especially in my longer works like "From Hell" -- complex layering of levels of symbol, information and narrative. But that's my experience of being an inhabitant of the late 20th and early 21st centuries. All of us have an astounding amount of information in our heads. Hence the rise of the trivia quiz, where we've actually got a brief opportunity to download some of this useless junk our craniums are crammed with! [Laughs.] If we look back a few generations to perhaps our great-grandparents, we've got a very different world in terms of its information content. You have a world where the people's heads were more than likely filled with the details of their own lives. I know that sounds completely unlikely from our cultural standpoint, where our heads are filled with the doings of Joey, Chandler, Ross, Fabian, whoever the other ones are, I can't remember.

**Sacrilege!**

How quickly we forget! [Laughs.] But, yeah, people's heads are

stuffed with a fantastic amount of information, and I think all too often they cannot assimilate, digest or connect up that incredible amount of data into a coherent worldview. And I like to think that if my work is complex, it's because we live in a complex world. What I'm trying to do is give a bit of coherence to that complexity, to say that it is possible to think about politics, history, mythology, architecture, murder and the rest of it all at the same time to see how it connects.

With reference to my interest over the last 10 years in magic, one of the most useful formulas in alchemy, specifically, is "solve et coagula," where "solve" is the act of dissolving something, where we take something apart and study how it works -- what in our modern terms would be called analysis. In a scientific framework, it would be called reductionism. The other part of the formula is "coagula," which is synthesis rather than analysis, holism rather than reductionism, the act of putting something back together in a hopefully improved form. Once you take the watch to pieces and see what was making it run slow, you put it back together and hopefully it works better.

I'd say that we've had an awful lot of "solve" in our culture, but far too little "coagula." There are people who seem daunted by the complexity of our culture to the point that they'll shy away from it rather than try to put those thousands of jigsaw pieces together into some sort of useful, coherent picture. Which is not to say that everybody is like that. You mentioned Thomas Pynchon earlier, and he would be one of my primary inspirations for that worldview. Reading "Gravity's Rainbow" first alerted me to the fact that yes, you could work with this sort of complexity and richness. Pynchon was an authentic 20th century voice adequate to his time; the same with writers like James Joyce and Iain Sinclair.

**Writers who have not shied away from the complexities of the world.**

Right, and I've tried to do the same in my work. Connection is very useful; intelligence does not depend on the amount of neurons we have in our brains, it depends on the amount of connections they can make between them. So this suggests that having a

multitude of information stored somewhere in your memory is not necessarily a great deal of use; you need to be able to connect this information into some sort of usable palette. I think my work tries to achieve that. It's a reflection of the immense complexity of the times we're living in. I think that complexity is one of the major issues of the 20th and 21st centuries. If you look at our environmental and political problems, what is underlying each is simply the increased complexity of our times. We have much more information, and therefore we are much more complex as individuals and as a society. And that complexity is mounting because our levels of information are mounting.

**Information is the 21st century's primary currency, it seems.**

Information is funny stuff. In some of the science magazines I read, I've found it described as an actual substance that underlies the entirety of existence, as something that is more fundamental than the four fundamental physical forces: gravity, electromagnetism and the two nuclear forces. I think they've referred to it as a super-weird substance. Now, obviously, information shapes and determines our lives and the way we live them, yet it is completely invisible and undetectable. It has no actual form; you can only see its effects. Information is a kind of heat. I would suggest that as our society accumulates information, from its hunter-gatherer origins to the complexities of our present day, it raises the cultural temperature.

I feel that we may be approaching a cultural boiling point. I'm not saying this is a good thing or a bad thing; I really don't know because I can't imagine it, quite frankly. But I think we may be approaching the point at which the amount of information we are taking becomes exponential, and I'm not entirely certain what kind of human culture will exist beyond that point. Except it will happen sooner than we expect, and the difference between us and the kind of people that will exist after such an event will be vastly different than the difference between us and the hunter-gatherer society we've evolved from.

**You're saying we might not be able to recognize human beings of the future that well.**

Yeah, it could be a quantum leap, a sudden, massive and unprecedented leap. Boiling point is a good analogy, because what you have before that stage is water. What you have after it is something that does not behave at all like water; it's a completely different substance altogether. And that's what I see looming for society -- and it's probably necessary, probably inevitable, probably scary. That's my prognosis. I suppose, as an artist, one of the obligations upon my work is to try and prepare people for the more complex world, to try and make it more palatable and accessible to them and not quite so frightening. That would seem to be a worthy goal, illuminating reality.

**That's the "coagula" part of the formula. Synthesizing the future.**

Yeah, that's it. If you can find a new synthesis, as I try to do in my work, you can help people find new ways of seeing, thinking and dealing with the times in which they find themselves. That's my intention. Whether or not I've succeeded is up to the readers.