UFD030 Tristan Garcia

Dr Strange: A Hero of the Mind

By the Hoary Hosts of Hoggoth, true believers! Tristan Garcia dons his cloak of levitation and enters the dazzling world of the Master of the Mystic Arts to tell the strangest tale of all, as Steve Ditko's greatest creation confronts the outer limits of the comic form itself

Of all the great characters invented by Stan Lee, Jack Kirby, and Steve Ditko at the dawn of Marvel's Silver Age, Doctor Strange has always garnered the least attention. Perhaps the recent movie adaptation will alter the fortunes of the 'Master of the Mystic Arts', and we will see children playing with action figures of the sorceror draped in his red levitation cloak, battling his arch-enemies Dormammu and Mordo. Yet this seems an unlikely prospect. Firstly, because the Doctor is a superhero of the shadows—not, like Batman, a brash footsoldier of the dark side of the world and of the heart of men, but an educated man whose weapon is the mind, and who inhabits the primitive faultlines of modern life, where reality is just one illusion among others; and secondly, because the Doctor is a pure creature of the comic medium.[1]

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Like all the great superheros of the comic art form, the Doctor is a startling amalgam of the archaic and the contemporary. In his case we have a sort of magic formula, a bizarre equation, linking oriental esotericism to the most uptight Western rationality, but also to the animism of Greenwich Village (where the Doctor lives) and finally to the colonial imaginary of the pulps and the unbridled psychedelicism of sixties counterculture.

Like Osamu Tezuka's Black Jack, with whom he shares the long cape and various characteristics

of the romantic hero who stands apart from those whom he saves, the original Doctor never chose to be famous. His work was destined to remain unknown, or to be immediately forgotten. In one of the rare jokes to feature in the original series, in *Strange Tales* #129 the Doctor is invited to take part in a televised debate with a group of scientists, but refuses

1. Originally published in L. de Sutter (ed.), *Vies et morts des super-héros* (Paris: PUF, 2016).

Doctor Strange is a startling amalgam of the archaic and the contemporary

to participate. Midway through the broadcast, the studio is suddenly plunged into darkness, and the four hardline rationalists, who were determined to mock the supposed existence of black magic and to ridicule Doctor Strange, disappear without trace.

The Doctor is summoned—the four professors have been imprisoned by 'Tiboro, the Tyrant of the Sixth Dimension'. The 'Master of the Mystic Arts' saves them from the clutches of this redoubtable enemy come from elsewhere. Upon returning to our world, the overwhelmed scientists prepare to reveal the truth to the public; but Strange, with a single gesture, makes them lose all memory of the events. Thus they return to the studio to mock the irrational and the charlatan Doctor, under the somewhat ironic gaze of the Master of Black Magic who, alone, *knows*—yet draws from his knowledge neither glory nor a sense of superiority.

And there we have the Doctor: a man who treats reality as one treats an oversized, yet still unconscious infant. A man who, at odds the most obtuse brand of reason, shelters this reality from the absolutely irrational with the indirect weapons of a noble and learned unreason: in this case, magic learnt from beyond the West.

First appearing in the pages of *Strange Tales* in 1964, the Doctor is the distant heir to the world of Fu Manchu, the adventures of Flash Gordon on planet Mongo, and Mandrake the Magician hidden away in his ultra-technological mansion of Xanadu. Little by little, the great Western hero has ceased to fear and battle against the 'Yellow Peril', instead pursuing oriental spirituality and realising the prediction of Schopenhauer, who saw in Europe's discovery of the Upanishads, of Brahmanism, of the Vedanta and the Buddhist texts, the intellectual equivalent of the Renaissance's rediscovery of the great works of ancient Greece. On the threshold of the counterculture and the hippy movement, Doctor Strange is also the precursor of Timothy Leary, Ken Kesey, the acid test, the work of San Francisco's Big Five poster artists for the Grateful Dead at Fillmore, the covers for J.G. Ballard's speculative fiction painted by Richard M. Powers, the sonic epics of Hawkwind, and Western popular culture's exploration of the thousand forgotten continents of the psyche. He is quite precisely the missing link between the outdated, exoticist strand of spirituality that emanates from the colonised Orient, and sixties youth's stupefying discovery of what was hidden behind the doors of perception that had been kept firmly shut by modernity, but were reopened by psychotropics, meditation, and 'spiritual disciplines'.

From this point of view Strange is perhaps the first postcolonial superhero, the first who taught the

youth to 'provincialise the West', to paraphrase Dipresh Chakrabarty's slogan.

Xanadu, Shangri-La, and Psychedelia: A Decolonising Hero

This will be our first working hypothesis.

In *Strange Tales* #115, we learn of the Doctor's origins. As his title already suggests, he is an eminent representative of Western science; but he is also a caricature of it. Wealthy, haughty, and calculating, Stephen Strange is a playboy with a fine Errol Flynn-style moustache, who, lighting up a cigarette following an successful operation, refuses to speak to the patient who wants to thank him: 'I can't be bothered! Just be sure he pays his bill!', he snaps to the young nurse. But the Doctor is punished for his hubris: he drinks too much and loses control of his vehicle. In the resulting accident, he partly loses the use of his hands and can no longer operate. Handicapped, Stephen Strange cannot accept becoming good for nothing. 'I must be the best...the greatest!! Or else...Nothing!' Alas for him, Strange is now nothing more than a useless surgeon, a mere aimless worker of the West. Disoriented, he drifts through the rainy streets of the modern world, wandering onto the docks of a port city where he hears talk of The Ancient One, a sorceror who can cure anything. Stephen Strange takes off for the East, leaving for the Himalayas. Not the real Himalayas, but the Tibet dreamt of by poets and travellers, the region where Coleridge sited Xanadu, the 'stately pleasure-dome' of Kubla Khan, inspired by the summer palace of Shangdu as described by Marco Polo; and subsequently—since all distant things tend to slide from reality into fantasy, and from fantasy into cliché—the region where the English popular imagery of the colonial era would place Shangri-La. Perched among the inaccessible heights of Tibet, this lamasery is in a certain sense late orientalism's 'Land of Cockaigne': an verdant isle of fresh water, a utopia of the spirituality that had heretofore been prohibited in the Enlightenment West, the West of industry and reason. In the lands of 'the Orient as the Other, invented by Europe' studied by Edward Saïd, Stephen Strange seeks The Ancient One, a paternal monklike figure who has attained enlightenment and will be able to set the white man on the road to an authentic life. Of course, we are dealing

A new hero figure for whom the Orient is not the Other of reality, but the West a mere province of that reality

in stereotypes here, in the fixed and recycled images of popular literature. And yet, little by little, *Doctor Strange* will bring these faded images to life, transform them, and invent a new hero figure for whom the Orient is not the Other of reality, but the West a mere province of that reality.

The former surgeon's initiation is as classic as can be. In the first stage, Strange asks the Ancient One for instrumental teachings: he wishes to regain the use of his hands through the powerful spirit of the old sage. But he quickly learns his lesson. In the popular culture of the second half of the twentieth century, it is the same lesson that will be dispensed by Master Po to Kwai Chang Chan ('Grasshopper') in *Kung Fu*, and by Master Yoda to Luke Skywalker in *Star Wars*: that of the impatience of the white man who does not recognise that material causality prevents him from seeing and mastering the force, which opens up a far broader world.

Strange comes out of this experience a changed man. He has not lost his arrogance; but he has turned his desire away from what Western society has to offer, in order to discover, as his power grows, a world that is vaster than reality. In the Orient he has learnt magic and penetrated into unknown universes. From this point of view, he is not so different to Tony Stark, the arms dealer who, in Vietnam with Professor Yinsen, sees the error of his irresponsible ways, and goes on to transform himself into Iron Man. Stan Lee loves to tell us how men become heroes by changing the object of their desire, while

remaining the same person. Strange does not learn to become modest, but he discovers that the world that his science, his intelligence, and his money opened up to him was but a tiny part of all that exists. He learns that the West is not the world—and all because he loses the use of his hands.

Having vanquished Baron Mordo, the evil disciple of the Ancient One, Strange in some sense 'converts' to the Orient. And yet the series very quickly ceases to be orientalist. Once the lesson has been assimilated, the Master of the Mystic Arts returns to America, and discovers that it is only one dimension among others of all possible dreams, nightmares, *strangenesses*. Back in his homeland Strange becomes a chimerical silhouette of a sorceror, recognisable by his moustache, his salt-and-pepper beard, his blue (and later red, horned) cape. From within the 'civilised world' he keeps watch over other worlds, the multiple dimensions of the spirit, parallel universes, the obscure counterparts of that rationalised reality modern man has ended up taking for everything there is.

Strange enters gradually into a turbulent syncretic world traversed by pagan formulae

Taking up residence, at the end of the 'cycle of Eternity', in the 'Santum sanctorum', Strange masters the powers revealed to him by the Tibetan Ancient One, but also those to which magical objects such as his amulet of the Eye of Agamotto grant him access. The Orient was only the first detour to be taken in order to accede to all that is not of the Christian faith, Enlightenment reason, positivist order and progress, and the civilisation defended by colonisation. Strange enters gradually into a turbulent syncretic world traversed by pagan formulae, incantations, creatures Babylonian (Marduk, previous owner of the 'book of Vishanti' possessed by the Doctor) and Sumerian (the Hosts of Hoggoth), and by the gods of ancient Egypt and Vedic culture (as seen in the beautiful graphic novel of the 70s, Into Shambala); a world of Buddhist and Sufi wisdom, of characters displaced from Arab-Muslim culture (the servant Hamir), of Jungian archetypes, of astral projection, of extraterrestrial magicians, of Swedenborgian hallucinations and the fevered evocations of a Reader's Digest theosophy.[2] By virtue of Stan Lee's ragtag culture, he in fact lives in a disorderly assemblage of phantasms compiled for the busy Western reader, a compendium of all non-Western spiritual traditions.

Guardian of the frontier which, within pop culture, separates the West from the fascinating jumble (to Western eyes) of *all the rest*, Doctor Strange watches over the province of the 'real world'. But in whose name? If Strange seeks to decolonise the occidental imaginary, thenm why does he continue to protect supposedly 'modern reality' from a sort of exotic chaos that presses at its doors?

Rereading the issues on which Lee and Ditko closely collaborated in the sixties, the reader cannot help asking: Who is the Doctor fighting for? What is his cause, his homeland? Who are his companions? Later, of course, he will found the Defenders, along with the Hulk, Namor, and Silver Surfer—three more archaic, mystic, and solitary creatures, lost in the modern world. However, throughout the period mentioned above, the Doctor is still a Marvel *hapax*, who is not included in the original Avengers, and who only comes across Thor and Loki once. This version of the Doctor is not straightforwardly depicted as a dispenser of justice, a defender of America, of the human race, or of the earth. When he meets Clea, a young woman from another dimension whose world is pincered between the 'Mindless Ones' and the tyrannical power of fiery-faced Dormammu, the Doctor naturally takes the side of the young woman, in the traditional style of all pulp heroes whose sense of justice is indexed to the desire to save the damsel in distress. Nevertheless, Strange never explains the reasons for his combat. Is he a paradoxical guardian of the West, making use of the weapons of the Orient? He lives in New York, but remains far from the skyscrapers, between the walls of a Greenwich Village manor in the antique district. Is he a solitary mystic who protects materialist civilisation, with which he has broken and for which he can feel only disgust?

In truth, and contrary to the other creations of Marvel who remain meticulously anchored in contemporary

2. Only some of the influences catalogued by Jeffrey J. Kripal in *Mutants and Mystics: Science-fiction, Superhero Comics and the Paranormal* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011).

urban reality, Doctor Strange is a *desdichado* who mixes very little with his peers. He seems diligently to avoid the commercial streets of the financial district. One might search his adventures in vain for the steel-and-glass fetishes of modernity, the skyline of New York, advertising and mass media (with the exception, that is, of the adventure cited above, in #129). His enemies are not the mafiosi and thugs who haunt the dark backstreets of the city protected by the Avengers. Doctor Strange's world sometimes features haunted houses and wax museums; yet it is not explicitly gothic. Nor is his arena that of the cherished adolescents of the consumer society, the protagonists of Spiderman and X-Men. In addition, we note the absence of Marvel's usual mad scientist's laboratories. Here there is little technology, not the least trace of a family life, and no sign of American everyday existence.

In short, in the original baroque, psychedelic adventures of the Doctor, it is difficult to find any *counterpoint* to the hallucinated worlds into which a delirious Orient has initiated him.

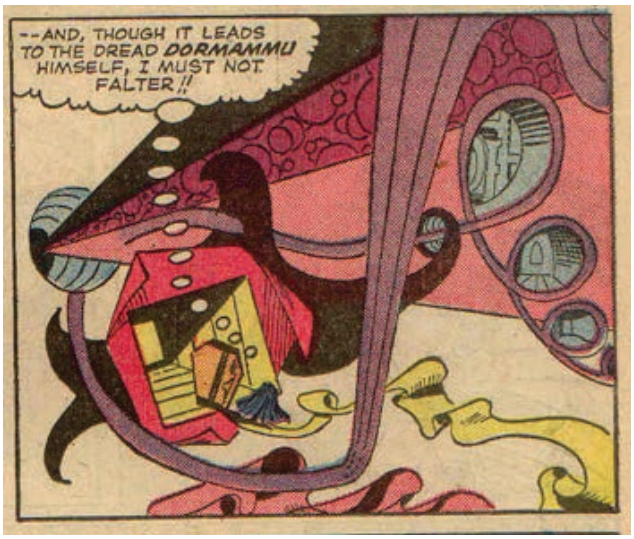
Where, then, in *Doctor Strange*, do we find the reason that would oppose the mystical, the ineffable, the pure power and unquantifiable energies of the spirit? Where do we find the West?

The reason of Dr Strange is the line; not so much the West as the comic itself

Nowhere else, we believe, than in the spirit of his creator, Steve Ditko, and in the hand of this master draftsman. The *reason* of Dr Strange is the line; it is the contours of the firmly outlined figures and the meticulous cutting-up of the layouts; it is the permanent activity of this cutting-up, image by image, of the world. It is not so much the West as the comic itself.

This will be our second hypothesis: not only is the Doctor a point of contact between the phantasms of the Occident and the Orient, he is a pure exercise in drawing. A challenge to the very possibility of representation. Under cover of colonial and postcolonial clichés, *Doctor Strange* articulates the struggle between the two drives that inhabit every draftsman: to cut up piece by piece, so as to give form to things; and to let flows, variations, and the intensitites of colours and forms proliferate, all the way to the limit of the indistinct.

Outline, Cut-out, and a Catalogue Raisonné of the Formless: A Hero of Perception



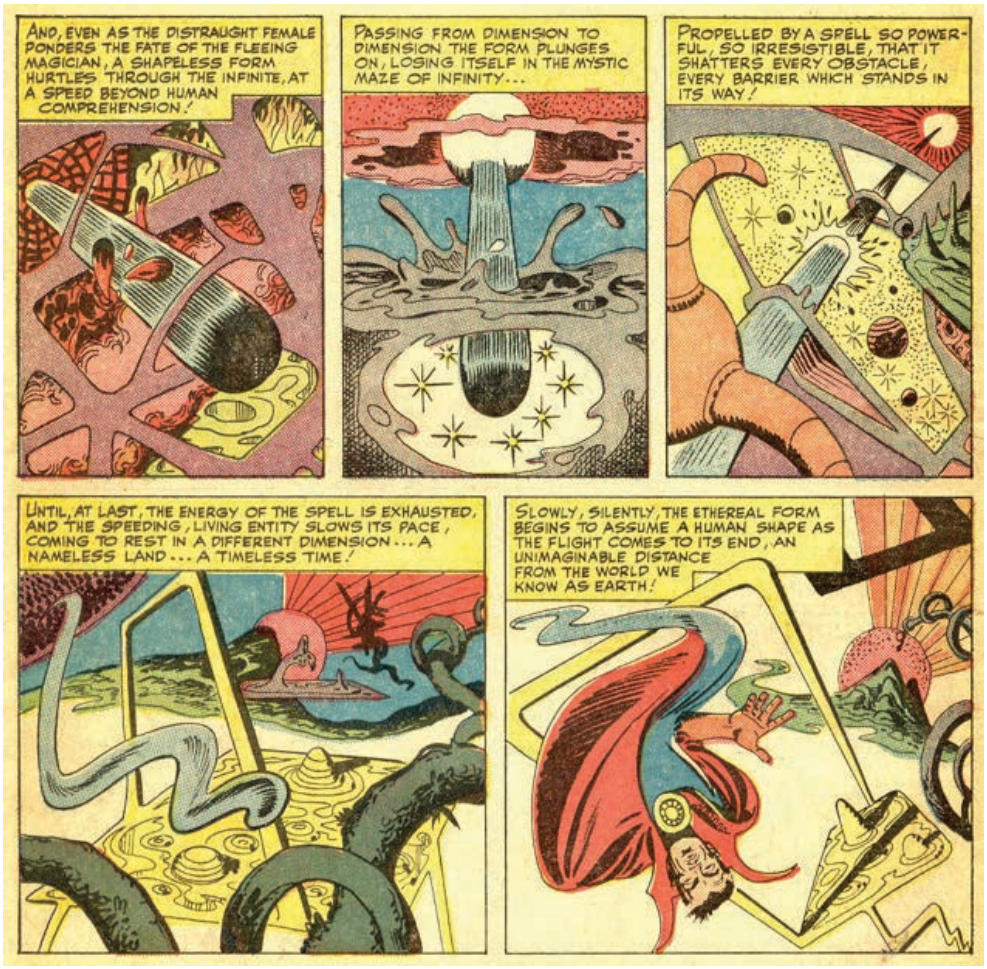
From this perspective, the superficial opposition between Occident and Orient is a mere pretext that sets the stage for a more profound conflict, not only cultural and historical but ontological, which had always haunted Steve Ditko's work.

For as long as Ditko drew it, the world of *Doctor Strange* was the theatre of a flamboyant conflict between form and the formless. Now, in comics one always finds a double articulation, which is not the traditional one of language: firstly, outlined forms within the image, which appear and reappear from panel to panel; and then the forms that cut out the image itself, framing and distinguishing one portion of space-time from another. Every comic is an articulation between what we might call a *cutting-out* [*découpage*] (the line 'from outside' which delimits a panel) and an *outlining* [*découpe*] (the line 'from inside' which gives us the contour of figures, objects, and ground). The outline gives us characters and scenes, the line of the drawing. The cut-out gives us the frame of the drawing.

The *outlining* and *cutting-out* of Doctor Strange are highly classical: we are not yet in the realm of Neal Adams's X-Men. The panels are always organised into regular grids. The inking, and the colouring in flat tones, also respond to an outlining of figures by a firm line. The world is in good order.

And yet the world drawn and contained within this twofold limit (within the panels, and then within the line) is something like a *catalogue raisonné* of the formless. We might say that Ditko and Lee sought to catalogue all possible modes of appearance of the formless, the malleable, the vague, the *almost*, precisely so as to feel out the very solidity of the comic's system of outlining and cutting-out, and the reason that lies behind them.

For what the Doctor ceaselessly confronts, or rather attempts to master, is *the power of the formless*.



Through the increasingly crazy adventures of the Doctor, this power takes on the aspect of hallucinated landscapes, which to sixties readers constituted irrefutable proof that the Marvel authors were writing and drawing under the influence of prohibited substances. The anecdote is well known: many hippies used pages from Doctor Strange to accompany their trips, certain that Ditko's images were a faithful representation of LSD experiences. But Ditko was a man of extreme moral and intellectual rectitude, who had doubtless never touched the drugs popular with the counterculture. Remember how Robert Heinlein, who dedicated *Starship Troopers* 'to all sergeants everywhere who have labored to make men out of boys', became the idol of every American freak by writing, despite himself, *Stranger in a Strange Land*, a book which describes the 'sharing of water' by a sort of Martian Christ. This Christian sharing became a symbol of communion for thousands of stoned hippies. Similarly, Steve Ditko inadvertently created a faithful image of psychedelic experience, even though he was a sober admirer of Ayn Rand, a voluntarist who admired only the force of thought, and who despised the sloppiness of the long-haired hippies.

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Let's clarify our hypothesis: it is as a draftsman, a comic artist trying to test the limits of the cutting-up of things by the line, that Ditko, almost by chance, ended up creating figures that evoked hallucinations, figures that challenged the usual cutting-up of visual perception.

Why was *Doctor Strange* liable to be read as the result of psychotropic visions? Because Dr Strange's images endlessly tested the cutting-up of the drawing. It's not that Ditko makes abstract art, or lyrical expressionism. He continues to work within the strict framework of the double articulation of the comic: panels distinct one from another, in which recognisable forms are repeated, 'silhouetted' by a line. The line can be seen as the representative, in the image, of the structures of human perception. If perception's cutting-up of the environment into apparently stable entities is thrown into question by psychotropic experience, then the analogy is quite valid: in Strange the very borders of things, within each image, are continually on the point of giving way, even while they remain in place.

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What Ditko's drawing represents, therefore, is the least determinate, the least distinct depiction possible while continuing to use firm lines to create a succession of images—the minimal forms of the formless.

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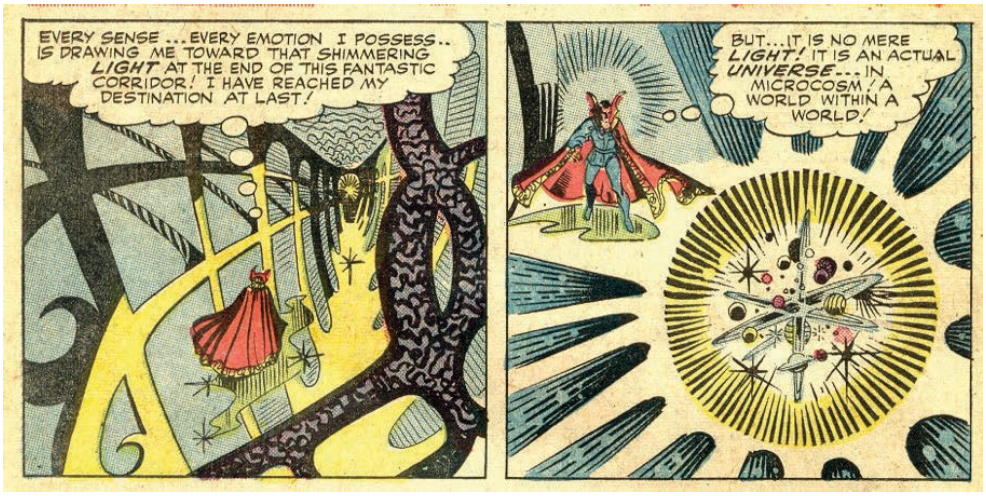
Let's run through some of Ditko's visual repertoire.

Of course, there are the recurrent devices of the comic artist. For instance, he frequently employs a confusion between the infinitely small and the infinitely large: spirals that recall the strands of DNA or crystalline structures submerged in vast galactic panoramas. But these effects of scale are not the most original of his devices. What grabs the attention when Ditko's pen is at work is his talent for things that are vague, blurry, and visually disconcerting. He experiments with the faculty which, from Kant to Gestalt Theory, distinguishes form and ground and establishes that, in order to identify an entity, one must cut it up in space and time, thus rendering it separable from its environment. On the contrary, in his scenes Ditko seeks out the possibilities of the almost perceptual, those which allow one to confuse in front and behind, under and over, end and beginning. Every effort is made to render the perception of forms possible, yet uncertain. Thus a fog or mist whose silhouette is never clear very often indicates the irruption of a force foreign to reality. We might think in particular of the 'Vapors of Valtorr' in #115 and #125.

Sometimes the fog is confused with a quasi-liquid form. In the zones of turbulence between sublimation, condensation, and deposition, when the nature of matter in transformation is uncertain, the reader cannot tell exactly in what state (solid, liquid, or gaseous) are the violet, red, or yellow forms that spread around Strange, or towards what state they are moving. The fog becomes in one case a sort of scintillating foam, 'a mystic glow' of embedded abstract forms, of abstract circles and arabesques. Is this still matter, or mere geometry? We cannot tell. This is what interests Ditko: to represent,



For Ditko and Lee, minimal determination is also maximal force

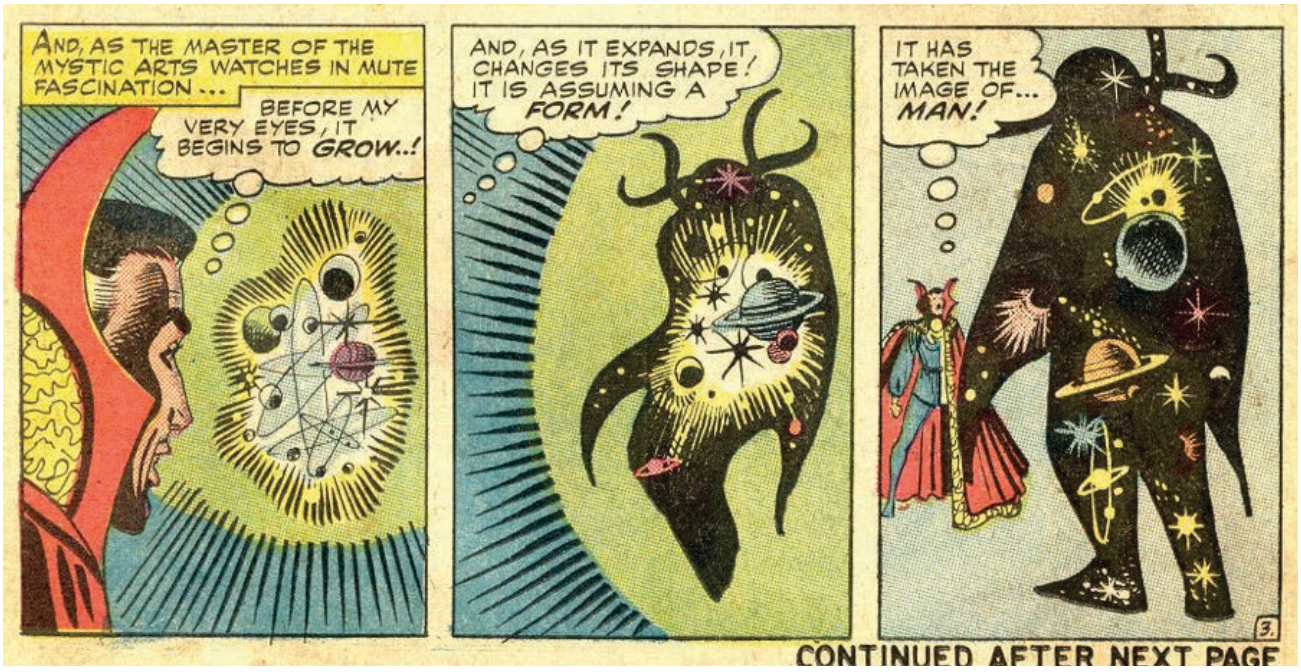
with a line, the border that separates indistinction and the minimal determination of an identity. Why? Because, for Ditko and Lee, minimal *determination* is also maximal *force*.

We might state this as follows: the more, the better it is outlined, clear and distinct, the less powerful it is. Inversely, the more powerful it is, the less it is clearly outlined. It may be gaseous, or it may be fiery like Dormammu's face, a permanent inferno in which we cannot make out his facial features but only the approximate shadows of eyes and a mouth behind the haze of the endless combustion of his own face. Now, Dormammu is very powerful. Why? Because his face is at the limits of distinction: it ceaselessly goes up in smoke.

This is the tension that governs all the illustrations in Strange: to represent confusion clearly, but without annulling it. Without a line there is no longer anything, the panel is empty. But as soon as there is a line, something is distinguished, and loses in power. We sense how Ditko's rationalist, well-ordered spirit is drawn to a sort of primordial fusion, a kind of Greek apeiron inaccessible to sensibility yet which would explain all to the intellect. Sometimes the reader hopes to lose himself with the same straitlaced dignity as the Doctor when he loses himself in the 'mystic gaze of infinity', drawn in by the multitude of stars, blurry, blank, auratic forms that are scattered across the strip: 'Every emotion I possess is drawing me toward that shimmering light at the end of this fantastic corridor!' And yet, restricted by the need to distinguish things from panel to panel, Ditko never yields to the 'cosmic soup': he continues to outline everything that presents itself to his mind. We have to represent light? Well then, we will have to use a few lines organised in a ray pattern, so as to figure it, to outline it. Even the absolute has need of some form. Of course, Ditko, who draws every day, does not always quite manage to be original. How many times do we find, floating in a sort of acidulous red, yellow, or violet ether, those aberrant reticulations, those anamorphic grids that Ditko uses and abuses? His vocabulary is sometimes limited. And too often the landscape of the mind ends up being arrayed according to a well-known vocabulary, that invented by surrealism in painting; in Ditko's visions we can make out reminders of the dream representations of Dalì, Delvaux, and de Chirico. But then a few panels later we will find something original: halves or thirds of objects traversed by passageways that lead nowhere, truncated staircases. In the corners of the great surrealist landscapes he draws, the delimitation of things seems incomplete. On one side, we seem to guess at the beginning of an object. But we cannot manage to make it out either because it is missing a dimension, or because it is set into a paradoxical Escher-like perspective. This is a weird universe of aborted entities. Everything begins as almost what it is—but it never ends up being completely something.

We can then understand that the power of the worlds visited by Strange is also the Greek *dynamis*. If matter is pure power and pure indetermination in Aristotle, the worlds of Strange are worlds of almost pure power, which test out the capacity of representation to be engulfed by indetermination. Ditko peoples the environment with entities that have

begun to appear as actualities, but which remain partly potential. We might think of half-sculpted clay forms which emerge from the earth but remain still attached to it, and thus retain the capacity to become *almost anything whatsoever.*



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In the course of his early adventures, Strange wanders from dimension to dimension as we, the readers, follow him from panel to panel. With him we watch, from birth to extinction, forms at the limits of the formless. But there is no totality of these forms, no overall design. The idea remains unfinished.

But in the last pages drawn by Ditko, Strange's quest suddenly makes sense. In what remains one of the greatest narratives arcs of Marvel, the Master of the Mystic Arts learns, in #134, that the last word murmured by the Ancient One before he fell into a deep coma was: 'Eternity'. 'What, eternity?', to repeat Rimbaud's words. But here the question becomes instead: Who? In search of Eternity, in #138 Strange ends up penetrating into the ultimate world, the world of all worlds. And here Ditko touches on the endgame of his internal conflict as a draftsman. This is 'a world that defies description'—a phrase that sums up marvelously the intention of the authors: to defy description, but within the most conventional limits of representation (the outline and cutting-out of the comic).

At this point a great monstrosity appears: the entire world, cracking and distorting, comes back together and takes on a form. 'It is an actual universe...in microcosm! A world within a world!' In other words, the form of all things—the world—receives in its turn a form, becomes an object. This gives us the key to all of *Doctor Strange*, which is summed up in the phrase: 'It is assuming a form!' This 'it' which assumes a form is Strange's obsession. This object has the contours of a man, or almost. It is the silhouette of a giant, adorned with flourishes and sinuosities like the flagella of insects. Inside it the entire universe is held, figured by an inky interstellar blackness within which a thousand galaxies shine.

Man is in the universe, which endows him with form; and the universe is in man, who endows it with form in return.

Strange has done battle with the absolutely formless, using every power at his disposal; but he has always done so within the conventional framework of the cut-out. This has remained the framework of the world of all the worlds he has traversed, that of the ultimate form common to all things. Suddenly, like a gnostic, he discovers that the cosmos has a human form. He is confronted with that which endows form: with man, with himself, with what he thought he was going to escape, but into which everything has entered.

Shortly after this, Ditko would stop drawing *Strange*. He had understood. It seems that the author, together with his hero, had reached the endpoint of his quest: to face up to his desire for the formless that lies at the limit of the distinct and the indistinct, to represent chaos in what is most evanescent, to the point of exhausting the resources afforded by moving from panel to panel with pen, ink, and paper; and then discovering the form of all that is.

The limits touched on by Ditko are the limits of his art

It is supposed to be 'eternity' incarnate. But in truth the response is more disappointing: the form of everything that Ditko had drawn—and he knows it—is the comic. The limits touched on by Ditko are the limits of his art: the cutting-out of panels. And Eternity is like a gigantic comic panel in human form, one that contains the entire universe.

On Disruption and Continuous Creation: A Hero of Comics

Let's push our investigation a little further: Of what is Strange really the hero? Is he the hero of the limits of perception in general, or only the limits of the comic?

At this point of our inquiry, we can guess how, in the tortured mind of Ditko, the structure of the comic ended up fusing with the structure of the cosmos: the cutting-out of images, that which takes place between images, gives us the general form of the world. It is the transcendental. Now, the comic figures an essentially discontinuous world: namely, a serial assemblage of portions of space-time, generally called panels. The very principle of the comic is to repeat the world as many times as necessary in order to tell its story. Each time, the world is framed, and we see only one aspect of it—one image. And then another. Strange does not go beyond the comic: he is imprisoned in a world made up of a series of cells which never communicate immediately.

From one image to another, the reader's eye must, like the hand of the draftsman, pass over an abyss of nothingness which separates the world from its reiteration under a different aspect. But now this white abyss which surrounds the whole image-world of the comic has passed into the panel itself: here is Eternity, the transcendental, the between-panels in human form.

In Ditko's visions, this white which separates one panel from the next is a fathomless gulf, a thin strip of nothingness which in fact separates one moment from another. Every comic recounts, from difference to difference, the adventure of an identity:

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a character, most often. In any case, a recognisable silhouette. What is given in the comic is pure difference: the gap between one state of the world and another, separated either by a movement in space or by the passage of a little time. The work of the comic consists in constructing a minimum of identity capable of traversing all the differences. And this identity in *transit* makes up the story.

In *Doctor Strange*, Ditko and Lee figured their own adventure as artists who, working within a popular artform, attained the limits of that artform. For, childishly, they desired the formless, pure power, the flux of unlimited becoming—which they perhaps identified with some sort of gimcrack Orient, kicking against their modern education and their reason's cutting-up of the world. But they could only desire and figure this absolute within the frame of the piece by piece cut-outs of their comic, which imposed upon them an absoutely discontinuous conception of the world.

Most of the time, the world in the comic is stable from one image to another: it does not change, or it changes only enough to permit the action to take place. But in *Doctor Strange*, as was already the case in *Flash Gordon* and *Blake et Mortimer* (certainly the only Franco-Belgian equivalent of these 'disruptive' comics), in each panel the world threatens to transform radically, to become entirely other. And it is this that torments Ditko's character. This is what he confronts: sudden fractures of worlds. There is no a priori principle of continuity of being in the comic. The landscape of one panel has no reason to be carried over into the next: it could perfectly well be different. Now, if everything were to become radically other from one image to the next, it would be impossible to identify a minimal identity from panel to panel, the order of images would therefore collapse, and the comic with it: there would no longer be a world whose tale could be told.

Let us say that it is this radical *disruption* that the Doctor battles against. Radical disruption is the introduction, between two blocs, of a little uncrossable nothingness, which prevents causality from absolutely linking one moment to the next, which breaks the chain of being, blocks the dreamt-of flux of becoming. It is that which makes it so that the world is first of all composed of solitary outlines. Obviously, they may communicate with one another, and we can go from one to the other; but nothing guarantees the continuous existence of what was there nor what will be there a little further down the page.

This world figured by the comic, a world cut up into blocs, could well be mistaken for that of Cartesian 'continuous creation', the most radical conception of an ontology cut-out part by part. That which the comic is the image of, continuous creation is the concept of. The expression does not occur in Descartes himself, although the theme appears in his letter to Hyperaspsiste of August 1641, in the *Discourse*, and in the *Pensées*, where '*concursu dei*' is discussed. Spinoza reprised the concept, translating the term as '*creatione continua*' during the course of his exchanges with Blyenbergh. By 'continuous creation' we understand the representation of a world where *that which exists could not subsist without being maintained by the creative activity of God*. At every instant, I must be recreated by God, extirpated from the nothingness into which I dwindle, just as I was created the first time: having been created does not exempt one from having to be created once again, unflaggingly, in order to persist through time. Time separates and destroys: every creature can be supposed *a priori* to be annihilated by its passage through time; the exercise of a superior power is necessary in order to maintain it. This conception, of course, supposes a discontinuous cutting-up of time, in which every moment is separated from the preceding moment and the following one by a gulf of non-being that no thing is powerful enough to cross, to cause itself, and to persist: it takes as much power to continue to be as it does for something to *appear* in the first place, since every thing is entirely new, at every instant.

The best possible image of 'continuous creation' is the comic. And this is what *Doctor Strange* ultimately reveals to the thoughtful reader. The world must be tirelessly redrawn, re-viewed and re-read, so that each time is like the first, even when it forms

The best possible image of 'continuous creation' is the comic

one of a succession of moments. All images are ceaselessly doomed to disappearance, and to give birth to one does not exempt one from having to continually rebirth it in perpetuity. For this reason, to recreate is as important as to create, to re-read as important as to read, to re-view as important as to see for the first time, to redraw as important as to draw. For without this repetition, unsupported images would of themselves collapse, in a universe where each occurrence of a being is separated from its reiteration by a void.

* * *

Doctor Strange is none other than the cosmic metaphor of this discontinuous world that the comic supposes: states of space-time which follow one another but which are radically disjoint—a world where everything must be recreated and sustained.

This is why Strange is a marginal within the Marvel pantheon. Of all the paper heroes, Dr Strange is the one who *truly* lives in the world of the comic. And the Doctor travels through dimensions just as he travels from panel to panel. He transits via nothingness, coming out of one world and into another, without knowing what—rules, laws, forms or figures—will be conserved in the process of passage.

Doctor Strange is the waking nightmare of the comic, as it discovers that it is founded on the reiteration of the world by a system of cutting-up, a system that affords it no certainty as to the permanence of the being of things.

The Hand and the Brain: A Hero of Thought

But this is neither sufficient nor entirely satisfying.

Strange is not the hero of a purely formalist work, of a comic that would be the *mise en abyme* of itself. When he fears, when he marvels, the Doctor is facing something other than his own condition as a character in a comic-book world.

We must therefore deliver a final hypothesis on the most singular heroism of Doctor Strange. Not only is he the one who 'provincialises the Occident', even while defending the existence of this province of the world. It's true, he accedes to a superior world, greater, more immense, a world of which scientific, technical, and rational reality is but a part. He is also the great psychedelic master who liberates ordinary perception from its constraints, who treats hallucinatory entities as objects of lucid sensation. And he is the hero of the comic, who discovers that a system of cut-out images brings about disruptions, interruptions by nothingness through which the hand of the draftsman and the eye of the reader must always transit, undergoing the stupefying experience of a universe that must remain stable in order to remain readable, but which might, at any instant, become entirely other. He is the guide who teaches the amateur of comics to transit from one panel to another as from one dimension to another. He is the great explorer who discovers that the world of continuous creation is that of which the contemporary comic is both the purest and the most childish image.

But Doctor Strange is not only the hero of a self-conscious form of the comic. He does not live in the pleasant but somewhat vain metaphor of a vast comic. He belongs to a world beyond panels, layouts, and paper.

This world, which always mattered to Steve Ditko, the most cerebral of all draftsmen, is that of thought. Just as Eternity is the entire universe finally contained within the silhouette of a man, Strange is a paper hero contained in panels, themselves contained within the (tormented) brain of Steve Ditko.

Certain readers of Ditko have long remarked on the importance, in his drawing, of faces and hands: for him, all humanity is concentrated in the face and in the folds of the hands. Throughout his life, from the short stories published in Creepy to the conceptual characters of Mr A and The Question, Ditko tried to put his brain into his hands.

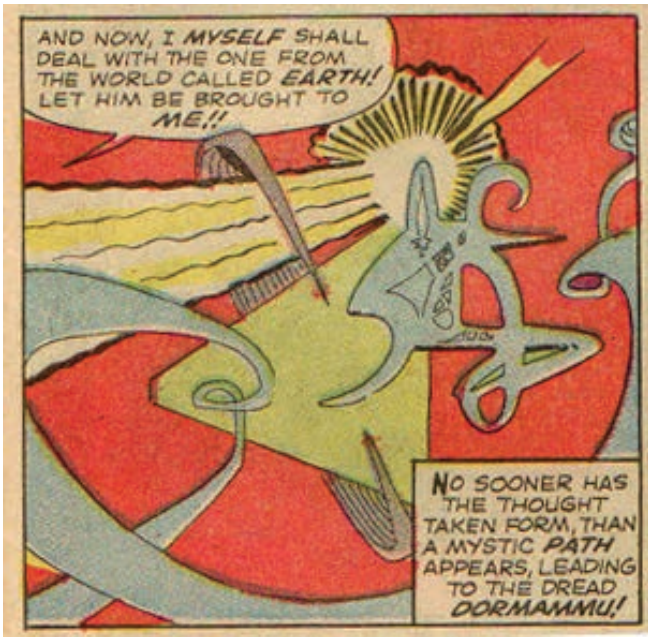
Now, before setting out to meet the Ancient One, the surgeon Stephen Strange is indeed a man of hands, a technician who does not believe in the power of thought. He has heard tell of men who had 'such powers'—but he lives, and lives well, in

the material reality that his hands provide for him. Perhaps Steve Ditko considered himself, also, to be a man of the hands, a draftsman rather than a cynical surgeon, who tried to think with his fingers: for drawing opened up to Ditko a concrete universe of abstract thought, one that Stephen Strange was only able to envisage after having lost the use of his hands, when he became destitute. This world, which can be envisaged *if one thinks about it*, is a world in which there appears everything that is possible, one where the constraints of reality no longer prohibit the formless from taking on a minimal form, one where the determination of things is so weak that a luxuriant ontological jungle springs up. It is what David Lewis called the 'Philosophers' Paradise'.

By way of a phantasm of oriental philosophy, Strange discovers the existence of the possible, and of all-possibility through thought, which distances one from the real and from the hands. And then Strange tries to plunge into this Paradise, or this Hell, without losing himself in it.

Drawing opened up to Ditko a concrete universe of abstract thought, one where the determination of things is so weak that a luxuriant ontological jungle springs up

The naïve fable recounted in Strange's origin story does indeed indicate that one may live without ever penetrating into the world of thought. One may decide to exist as a real being in the real, or indeed to believe in a revealed truth. It is possible, it is even probable, that one will live better under condition of reality, or of some belief. But Strange discovers that, like biting into the fruit of knowledge, when you enter into thought, you will never get out again. From the point of view of thought, the ordinary reality of men can no longer figure as anything other than one region among others; it can never more pass for the integral whole of what exists. Impossible to take the West, science, technique, matter, for *all that there is* —even if, perhaps, like Strange, we start out believing that it is. Once he started to think, thanks to the Ancient One and the detour via the Orient, Strange learned to treat what seemed to him to be the totality—all that he believed was *absolutely* the world, outside of which nothing existed—as but a tiny part



of a more vast ensemble. Just as Eternity reveals itself to him as a 'world within a world', Strange is initiated into the fundamental form of thought *by comprehending that which comprehends him*, by making his own world part of a vaster totality. For this reason, his career as 'Master of Black Magic' is the illustration of an initiatory voyage upon which anyone who starts to think has embarked, whatever their discipline, their school, or their references. First he enters into dreams, nightmares, representations of men, into their *images*— and he does not see them only as illusions or as the cognitive effects of creatures embedded in material reality, he also considers them as products of the independent thoughts of those who think them, ceaselessly threatening to encompass and swallow up the subjects of which they are the mere creations. This is what Strange is confronted with: the autonomisation of the products of thought. At this stage, one can become a materialist or realist, taking the side of that which truly exists, of that which exists as primary. In which case one must fight, in thought, *against* the thought that invents its own fantasies. But then one loses the sense of the strange, the evil spell of thought. And let's not forget that Strange is a hero of black magic. Resolutely antimaterialist and antirealist, the *Doctor Strange* of 1964–1965 is perhaps Lee and Ditko's philosophical masterpiece: a vertiginous plunge into the world of independent thought detached from those who think. For to think is—in spite of the efforts of all idealisms and all realisms—to necessarily accord as much reality to thought as to reality, *no more and no less*: once in the realm of

thought, the one who thinks cannot but treat the entities of perception, dreams and nightmares, visions, hallucinations, images, and thought itself, as characters just as worthy of being as their effective and material conditions of production. Or else one betrays thought.

And the Doctor does not.

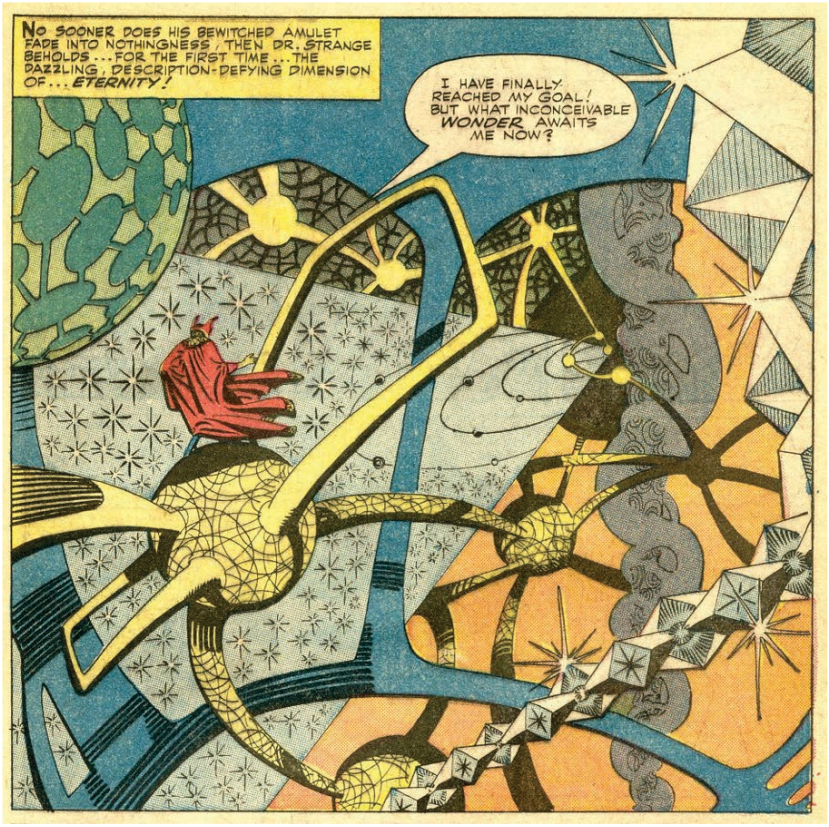
Matter, the real, and reason do not vanish into irrationalism, but become possibilities among others. For the watcher of the universal night, Doctor Strange, all that remains is to defend reality *as if it were his homeland*, against a threat posed particularly by Dormammu, a tyrant from another dimension who ceaselessly oversteps the frontier of worlds. What threat? That the real and reason should disappear entirely, destroyed by the very products of an imagination that has become autonomous and delirious. The Doctor's obsession is always the definitive victory of the formless over form; being swallowed up by the pure power of unbridled thought, the power of dreams and nightmares, the *enfants terribles* of the mind, of that fundamental level of being where fantasies take root: the actual world, Strange's original world, the homeland of existence—that is to say, material reality. But Strange took leave of this province of the enormous universe of the possible. And therefore, against realism, of which the rationalist West is here the incarnation, he defends the equal dignity of all the dimensions discovered and invented by thought, those dimensions to which the Ancient One had opened the doors wide for him.

Solitary and loveless before meeting Clea, Strange is the romantic hero who defends form against the formless, and vice versa; he is the Atlas who carries on one shoulder the real world from which thought is born, and on the other the imaginary worlds to which thought flies.

The Doctor's obsession is always the definitive victory of the formless over form; being swallowed up by the pure power of unbridled thought, the power of dreams and nightmares

Perpetually between two worlds, Strange is sometimes fatigued. Who knows him? Who celebrates him? He is not a public man. At the beginning of #122, he sleeps, exhausted. And above all, at the end of #141, the last issue drawn by Ditko, the Doctor speaks a monologue in the dark: 'my limbs grow weary! Too long have I been without rest––without sleep––! The time is come to shut my eyes––to seek respite in the shadow world of dreams! Then, when I awake—I shall begin the struggle anew!' In this speech with its Shakespearian accents, Strange is tempted by the eternal sleep. But once again, for him the night's repose will be one full of thoughts: the Nervalian access to the other world, behind 'the doors of ivory and of horn that separate us from the invisible world', that of dreams, which we know never cease to rattle their chains, to claim their independence, and to win it over in the human sleeper who believes he can domesticate them. Strange does not wait hopelessly to sink into the numbing of unconsciousness. He rests, gets up, and takes up arms once more.

And in the burden of his mission he finds an intense joy. This joy is quite simply the contemplation, for the passenger of possible worlds, of the magnificence of all that can take form—a joy of which the man of reality deprives himself.



'No sooner does his bewitched amulet fade into nothingness, than Dr Strange beholds...for the first time...the dazzling description defying dimension of... Eternity!' And strange then exclaims, with that almost juvenile emphasis characteristic of the series: 'I have finally reached my goal! But what inconceivable wonder awaits me now?

It is not the truth that recompenses Strange, but instead an aesthetic sentiment: marvel before the possibility of seeing that which escapes perception, imagination, and even conception. It is the pleasure of he who thinks.

For Doctor Strange is, ultimately, *the superhero of thought.*