

Ray Spass, pronounced "space," struggles to complete his science fiction screenplay before succumbing to the tumor growing in his brain. That seems about as unedifying a premise for a comic book as one can imagine, but as Grant Morrison wrote this particular book, one should take nothing at first, or second, or third, or fourth, appearance. Ray proves not to be alone in his battle. He finds an ally, and a tormentor, in Max Nomax, the anti-hero of his screenplay who appears bodily and claims that the tumor killing Ray actually consists of toxic information, information that Ray must spew forth in the form of his narrative, thus purging himself of the poison and in the process solidifying Max's existence on our level of reality. A creator confronted with his own character is nothing new, and wasn't new in 1921 when Pirandello wrote *Six Characters in Search of an Author*. The idea of poisonous information descends through a long history as well, reaching us by way of Samuel R. Delany's *Babel-17*. But Morrison goes beyond both of those concepts. He reaches out to explore the theme of narcissism, of building an entire universe so that it can revolve around one's own self. The chief conceit of *Annihilator* is that Morrison chooses to explore selfishness through a dyad that may, in fact, be only one person. Ray and Max torture one another mentally largely so that each can prove his own existence by gaining ascendancy. They are a bizarre Ouroboros, a two-headed serpent somehow managing to swallow its single tail. Frazer Irving illustrates the fragility of the existence the two share with his alternate use of wide and tight spaces, as if the characters are caught in some titanic heartbeat of madness. Frazer sketches the characters' forms, particularly their faces, with blurred lines and smudged shadows. Often it seems as if Spass and Nomax are losing coherence and blurring together, or fading entirely into the surroundings. Frazer uses ambient color to demarcate the "real" world from the "story," which features Nomax trapped on a haunted space-station called Dis orbiting a black-hole known as the Annihilator. But the reds of Spass's apartment and the purple-blue-blacks of Dis seem oddly flat and ineffective, as if only a pro forma gesture to delineate realities that can't really claim full existence apart from one another. In the course of the story each of the two antagonists must face challenges to his existence and find some defense against the assault. Max discovers evidence that he is not, in fact, an original creation spooling out from a packet of extra-dimensional information, but a long-existing open-source character who has cycled through repetitive stories of death and escape through the decades, serving as a King of Ants, a torturer of angels, and generally a force of chaos and Satanic corruption. He defies history itself, proclaiming that his presence creates a backward imprint on the timestream, a yawp of defiance if ever one was uttered. Ray's status as the master of the story receives a challenge from the appearance of yet another character from his screenplay, this time Makro, assassin-emissary of Vada, the computer god of Nomax's universe. But Makro, after killing two federal agents, promptly assumes Ray's own form by way of disguise, once again raising the possibility that everything in the book is a projection of Ray. As the issue closes with Ray and Max on the run, it isn't clear whether or not Ray is merely trying to escape from himself. It is all well organized, well developed, and peculiarly stale. The freewheeling creativity of Morrison collapses in a web of obvious movie references. The space station Dis comes from both 1979's *Alien* and 1994's *Event Horizon*. The angel torture brings up images from John Carpenter's 2005 *Cigarette Burns*, probably the best of the *Masters of Horror* series. Oliver Stone's 1974 film *Seizure* provides the recent model for a mad screenwriter confronting his own characters. And of course Makro, assassin of the machine god, steps forth from James Cameron's 1984 *The Terminator*. The post *Annihilator* #3 appeared first on *Weekly Comic Book Review*.

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