"WHO WATCHES THE WATCHMEN?" HISTORICAL FICTION AND TRANSDIEGETIC SOCIAL INITIATION IN ALAN MOORE'S WATCHMEN

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ABSTRACT. Alan Moore's Watchmen was hailed as one of the most noticeable coming-of-age moments in the history of graphic novels, as his work dripped a haunting mélange of grit, nostalgia, and the uncanny into the minds of his audience, forcing their eyes open to the uncomfortable and previously very little considered private struggles of costumed vigilantes. His Cold War-styled antiheroes draw on a liminal space that is part-history and part-fiction, as well as rife with paranoia and nihilism, and struggle to make sense of what, if any, purpose they retain in a world that seems to no longer need heroes, masked or otherwise. This paper investigates the intricate links between our world and theirs and specifically what sociopolitical insight we stand to gain by answering the troublesome but ever-relevant transdiegetic question of "who watches the watchmen?"

KEY WORDS: antiheroes, historical fiction, initiation, liminal, transdiegetic, uncanny

Introduction

No artwork arises or exists in a void. It is a product, whether direct or indirect, of a certain cultural background, on which it draws and which it most often further enriches. Thus, the fiction produced by a society may largely be said to evolve in step with that certain society and to reflect its preoccupations—its fears and fantasies—at particular points in time.

There are, however, unique moments in time—typically around major sociopolitical turmoil or upheavals—that organically concentrate and foment unusually high amounts of reflection and speculation, and therefore generate a correspondingly vast amount of fiction. New realities and their corresponding central concepts are ruminated on, in a simultaneous overlapping multilayered process occurring on both personal and societal levels. Depending on the particulars of the given society and civilization, we may find certain genres of speculative fiction to emerge as crucial to such a process, arguably seminal in the exorcising of its denizens' associated apprehensions while occasionally percolating innovative solutions.

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In recent history, one such point of turmoil was the latter half of the twentieth century. Tottering out of the Second World War, human civilization witnessed the Cold War rearing its insidious head as the specter of atomic annihilation loomed on the never-too-distant horizon. With the East again pitted against the West, the postwar struggle nevertheless ushered in the chilling novelty of a global conflict that was not fought directly or classically, but—behind pretenses of peace—relied more and more on paramilitary forces and covert operations ranging from sabotage to terrorism and to unethical military research projects. Indeed, even though all wars are times of individual and worldwide devastation, the Cold War was particularly poignant in terms of the sheer paranoia it spread simply because the enemy was never directly present and thus directly manageable but manifested through various proxies. The enemy was no longer one of Them but always potentially infiltrated and disguised as one of Us, while complex global politics and rapidly advancing technology became increasingly inscrutable to the common man. As such, for the general public left (and potentially kept) in the dark to wonder and dread, the two civilization vectors joined forces—as the notorious "military-industrial complex" hinted at by presidents such as Dwight D. Eisenhower and JFK (Schlesinger 2011)—to provide an even more fertile ground for the breeding and exacerbation of conspiracy theories, some resurrected from previous wars and ages, while others more modern and more befitting the space age.

In the broadest of terms, this paper discusses the relationship between reality and fiction, particularly between historical reality and its fictionalization, but the way it goes about it is rather particular in that the main focus of its investigation—Alan Moore's Watchmen franchise—is rooted in a markedly fiction-intensive medium (graphic novels/cinema) but deliberately sets out to be as realistic as possible. It is precisely at the crossroads of history and imagination that creative tensions are produced, and in fact, as we argue herein, intensified simply by that inherence of the uncanny between fact and fiction.

The major gamble of most historical fiction is that, lest its creator's art be perfect in its intricate balance of the two worlds' details and synergies, any such speculative attempts could easily slip into the ridiculous and the grotesque by simply miscalculating the necessary dosage of the uncanny. Not enough, and fiction slumps back into non-fiction; too much, and historicity stifles creativity.

Successfully clear of that, Alan Moore's fictional United States is indeed uncanny because it is a liminal space, where our 1980s reality is overlaid with an osmotic diegesis where the "masks", the superheroes, are shown to not only be a local historical reality, but in fact, by this point, a posthumous

historical reality, seemingly already revolute, under public scrutiny, and struggling to cope with our historical terms. It is uncanny because, though with hues only slightly removed from our own, it manages to tell a jarring tale that we have come to know only too well, one of superhuman scope but intimate poignancy, a tale of grit and brutality but ultimately a sublime lesson about simply keeping your head above water in a complicated, shifting world.

Thus, this paper examines how the overlapped narrative space of Alan Moore's Watchmen not only juxtaposes historical fact and historical fiction for the sake of producing an uncanny thriller, but that in fact that inherent uncanny—manifested through liminal, and occasionally even monstrous, situations and characters—deepens the experience of readers/watchers acquiring insight into their own world by the depiction of familiar paranoia and cynicism.

The Uncanny Liminality of Here and There
Whenever Moore plunges his audience into his fictionalized world, he compels them to reassess and renegotiate their positioning relative to their own world through their transdiegetic (and often intertextual) communication with the world of the characters. Readers have not failed to notice subtle changes in contemporary staples, e.g. the McDonalds of Moore's world have been replaced by the Indian-themed Gunga Diners, and interbellum-styled water-cooled pipes stand in for the more mundane cigarettes (see Hodler and Stone 2012). And yet, unmistakably, the world of Watchmen is ours too, up to an extent and, quasi-historically, up to several sociopolitical decisions ago. The Doomsday Clock ominously obsessed about in that reality also featured, as the symbol of a thankfully narrowly averted crisis, in ours, and many cultural references, from entertainment to politics, are shared.

That is not to say that Moore, a self-styled magician though he may be, whisks away his audience into this world's yonder counterpart, but rather that he employs an arguably even more potent trick—worthy of similar master conjurers such as Rabelais, Shakespeare, and Cervantes –, that of confronting the audience, in a decrescendo of subtlety, with the speculative consequences of various sociopolitical decisions and actions undertaken here. As we have alluded to before, such a feat of literary magic is often intended to spur personal or indeed societal pause for thought, once more reminding us of the immense custodian-cautionary role literature plays in civilized society.

Essentially, the uncanny of the Watchmen world of history joined to fiction is underpinned by several points of liminality, where the planes overlap and are paradoxically reconciled. The most evident one, as per

above, is found in the realization that theirs is a world where here and there coexist, or otherwise, where history and literature, and non-fiction and fiction, are amalgamated. Secondly, this leads to a blurring of the demarcation between Us and Them, or further between humans and superhumans. This, in turn, forms two other confluences, namely with the similarly blurred planes—in both diegeses—of "right" and "wrong", and "conformity" and "non-conformity", respectively. The higher-order matrix resulting from their intersections defines most of the character interactions in both spaces, making up for a believable three-dimensional spectrum of characterization which, towards its extremes, also allows for manifestations of the monstrous.

In other words, the social patterns of the Watchmen reality depict, in a manner exaggerated for additional clarity and persuasion, and using notable antiheroes in place of the genre-expected superheroes, the challenges of transitioning between two worlds and two socio-cultural paradigms, the likes of which were witnessed aplenty over the second half of the twentieth century as the tide of each new generation's prevailing reforms in ethical and ideological affiliations proved too swift for the corresponding social and political institutions to keep up with, which often resulted in communication failures and inadequate performances. Thus the monstrous—in fictitious terms held up as a mirror of real-life ones—is liable to emerge when individuals are deformed by social pressures compelling them to conform to certain social roles typically unaligned with their psycho-emotional build, in which case they will respond either by rebelling—as outlaws or in deliberate seclusion—or acquiescing, but this latter choice leads to frustrations, anxiety, and an overall stunting of their natural social and emotional development.

Masks and Antiheroes

Heroic figures appear to have been a staple of fiction ever since recorded history, as argued by Reynolds (1992), Wright (2001), Klock (2002), Thomson (2005), and multiple others. We have looked to heroes for comfort and leadership in troubled times and inspiration in times of peace. They have always reminded us of our innate potential to make more of ourselves, to become better, and to reach for the stars. It is no happenstance then that heroic figures—albeit in degenerate guises here—have also been used by Alan Moore as characters of his sobering dark drama, partly since their fall from grace is more conspicuous and lamentable. Put simply, their forced retirement en masse—symptomatic of a Nietzschean world where apostates have eventually cast out their saviours and driven them into obscurity—reveals how the mighty can fall too. In fact, narrative irony is often unforgiving in this hybrid uncanny world of depressive realism, as

evidenced by the case of Dollar Bill—former bank mascot turned professional superhero—whose showy cape got caught between revolving doors and led to his death (Hughes 2006). But there is nevertheless also a more uplifting message also encoded in Watchmen: if, when faced with near-impossible odds, though fallen, forgotten, and, for most practical purposes, no better or worse than most average people, heroes still manage to get up and fight, surely there must yet be hope for all of us!

But on a slightly less lofty level, Watchmen introduces the audience to a world where, with few exceptions (such as Doctor Manhattan), the heroes and villains are not exactly "super" (Bensam 2010). In fact, their "powers" are more often than not only symbolic, or, that is to say, only as "real" as the powers granted by the other, more organised and traditional, institutions functioning by mandate of social contract. For instance, in this vein, it may be argued that a police officer comes into his power(s) every time s/he dons the uniform emblazoned with their Power Symbol, the badge which guarantees, for each bearer, certain personal and professional attributes enabling them to put on the Team Costume represented by the uniform, but also that, by wearing the badge, those personal and professional attributes, presumably already a notch above those of the common individual, are further enhanced by the Power Political vested in them through and by the institution they serve, not unlike the various knightly orders of medieval lore pledging their mystical allegiance via power-imbuing oaths. Similarly, the heroes in this diegesis, ultimately all classified as antiheroes since they are technically outlaws, use what we may call the "dark side" of that Power Political, namely the power of civic dissent. Specifically, if there are issues affecting the public that the proper authorities seem unable or even unwilling to remedy, trust in said authorities will diminish, and thus, in principle, so will the individual power(s) of their agents—the police officers, as per the above example. The more the public law enforcement are seen as ineffective and/or corrupt—i.e., the more the public's legitimizing trust in them dwindles so as to markedly influence their perception across society, "their powers"—the more the counterforce, civil dissent, will grow, which of course grants legitimacy to any and all heroes operating parallel to, or above, conventional laws.

It then makes sense for the heroes of their world to be indeed more aptly referred to as "masks". On one hand, the term elegantly circumvents any a priori designation of ethical value, unlike the more normative term of "hero", which assumes a perpetually raised bar in what social conduct is concerned and which would then be clearly invalidated given not only their official status of outlaws, but, more significantly, the highly questionable methods or even motives of many of them, hence the better moniker of

"antiheroes" for the vast majority. On the other hand, the mask is—as commented upon above—a most empowering aspect of their identity. It is, in a way, otherwise reminiscent of masked rituals encountered in early and/or polytheistic societies around the world. There, rites of passage involving frightful masks depicting gods or ancestors are supposed to symbolically lead the candidate, most always a boy, through simulated deaths and rebirths in order for that boy to acquire his cosmic-ontologically complete powers of an initiated man, so he may serve his community to the best of his abilities (see Mack 1994).

But that comparison can only hold for so long, as the masks in the Watchmen diegesis are, for all practical purposes, much more prosaic. For most heroes and villains alike, their masks, literal or not, are a sort of empowering double-blind mirror between them and their social context. They grant them the cover of social anonymity, while allowing them to reinvent themselves as a completely new social player—a form of social re-branding (literally, in the case of Ozymandias/Adrian Veidt)—safe from any public misgivings (e.g., racial, gender or sexual persecution or even legal retribution for heinous crimes), and, at times, boosting their normally subdued personality. The latter is often akin to a (therapeutic) release by means of social roleplay, as exhibited by most of the female heroes, who—in their public persona—are no longer automatically labeled as "housewife material", although most of them simply end up trading labels, for the dubiously more liberating tag of pin-up sex symbol.

As, for better or worse, exceptional members of their respective communities, the masked vigilantes had always been a mistrusted minority even before the Keene Act demanding them to choose between public identification and retirement, which effectively ended—at least officially—the career of most of them. It is thus an unfortunate irony that most of them, though having perhaps bested many foes in their career, met their end at the hands not of larger-than-life criminal nemeses, but rather of the very public they had vowed to protect but who eventually turned on them, deciding they were no longer needed—and no longer acceptable.

The times, they are a-changing, as the Watchmen film soundtrack croons bitter-sweetly, is then a fitting epitaph. It echoes the cynical response given by psychopathic mercenary The Comedian/Eddie Blake to the rhetorical, if earnest, question of fellow Watchman Nite-Owl II/Dan Dreiberg: "What happened to us, what happened to the American Dream?"—"It came true, you're looking at it." Though they were supposedly fighting for democracy, it was exactly democracy and its individualistic mechanisms that eventually determined they had outlived their usefulness, and that the average individuals no longer had any need for personified ideals beyond and above themselves. For the end of the Watchmen was only superficially brought

about by Ozymandias' antivillainous scheming—that was merely the tip of the iceberg, the first chute as part of an abyssal descent, for a world that had stopped believing in its heroes, or perhaps in heroes in a general sense. It was nothing less than a "twilight of the gods" set against the backdrop of the Cold War with the Doomsday Clock ticking its final countdown.

Together with their predecessors, The Minutemen, and the attempted revival team Crimebusters, The Watchmen on-and-off spanned the "masked decades" between the 1940s and the 1970s, when eventually the "costumed fad" (so called by its initial denouncers as well as, by the end, even some of those directly involved) effectively ended. Their rise and fall closely follow the variable evolution of comics throughout the corresponding decades in our world, thus giving rise to a potential new interpretation for the obsessive tagline "who watches the watchmen?" hidden in various locations in the panels of the original graphic novel. On first glance, the more evident meaning is that of whether or not those entrusted to protect society have themselves anyone to watch over them or they are entirely at the mercy of their own personal flaws, of their country, and of the public in general—which correlates to the Roman satirist Juvenal (Quis custodiet ipsos custodes?) having begun a socio-philosophical debate on the issue of the checks and balances required in any functional republic and democracy.

The Ars Magnum, or The Transdiegetic Initiation
But there seems to also be a metatextual reading possible here, considering the effect on the audience that Moore sought to generate, insofar as he deliberately tried to do "something that would make people feel uneasy" (Hodler and Stone 2012), in order to galvanize the typically passive readership into taking responsibility for social changes affecting them directly, and which fiction was once again poised to forewarn about. To that end, the juxtaposition of the blood stain on top of the yellow smiley-face badge appearing on the front cover and as an immediately recognizable logo for the story and franchise itself seems pointedly relevant. There is brutal irony in The Comedian using the smiley face as his personal logo, which otherwise belies his general nihilist, "it's-all-one-big-joke" attitude, but the forever-smiling barely-human-looking neon-yellow (signifying showmanship and fakeness, perhaps?) vacuous face is also reminiscent of his interpersonal numbness only occasionally interrupted by lustful interludes. Yet going even further, smileys are closely associated with youth and children, and are perhaps as effective for visually approximating the concept of childhood as any Disney character's face. Thus, to superimpose a smudged bloodstain on such an icon brings up disturbing connotations of stolen innocence, of an implied rape of the innocent victim's cognitive and emotional dimensions.

Unsavory as it may be, that visual metaphor applies equally well both intra- and transdiegetically. The innocents—as much as they could ever be called that—are, in this case, the slain Comedian himself and sociopathic investigator Rorschach, who smells the conspiracy and doggedly pursues it, eventually dragging along Nite-Owl and even Silk Specter down the rabbit hole. But beyond the sheer plotline, the greater stakes are for the audience to gain insight—the bloodstained smiley standing in for a reminder that all is not as it seems, and that the audience must be made to understand—even by force—and be initiated into the greater picture.

Watchmen has been described as "Moore's obituary for the concept of heroes in general and superheroes in particular" (Wright 2001), since the audience seeking to extract the meaning of this modern-day fable should not stop at the political level. Yes, the setting evokes unsettling times, uncannily close to various moments in our own history of the western world—but it's not truly about "the Reagans, the Thatchers, and other 'Watchmen' of the world supposed to rescue us and perhaps lay waste to the planet in the process" (Wright 2001). Moore deliberately presents the unembellished gritty reality, in which fallible antiheroes struggle with their own demons and to make sense of anything at all simply to do away with childish obsessions for Superman-like saviors beyond ourselves, because to sit idly by waiting to be saved is to relinquish responsibility and ultimately civil freedoms potentially into the hands of charismatic individuals who would, left unchecked, wreck the world even further. In fact, the author himself is said to have claimed that working on the graphic novel had exorcised him of his superhero nostalgia, "and instead he found an interest in real human beings" (Thomson 2005).

The great art, the transdiegetic magic of Alan Moore in the context of Watchmen begins iconoclastically. He undermines and eventually smashes his heroes, deconstructing them one thread of meaning at a time for the audience's benefit, in a form of iconoclastic kenosis (Klock 2002), so they may see whether or not the hero concept retains validity to this day, and if so, under what specific circumstances. Do the audience care about their heroes' origins and social impact? Do the audience care about their heroes' delicate balance of flaws and fortes? Do the audience care about their heroes' affiliations, orientations, interests and passions? And then the stage is set for the most significant question, whether or not "we would not in fact be better off without heroes" or that "the time for heroes has passed" (Thomson 2005).

The answer, of course, rests with the audience, individually as well as societally, with all that is asked of them being that they make their choice

wisely and in good faith—after all, this is an eye-opening process of initiation. Is it then really too much of a stretch to see the traumatic blood-smudged moment of falling through the rabbit hole as supposed to turn the entire audience into "watchmen"—i.e., knowledgeable watchers, who examine the fate of fictional worlds in order to glean from them precious insight for the benefit of our own world, so that perhaps the nightmarish scenarios encountered there could be prevented here?

Conclusions

We must not forget that the Watchmen were never taken down by their enemies, but crumbled from the inside—and even that only after they were forced to renounce their oath and vision. Whether or not we still believe there is a need for heroes—some might say, nowadays more than ever before—perhaps the best answer for the question of "who watches the watchmen?" should be the same as for that seeking to find out for whom the proverbial bell tolls—"it tolls for thee".

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