IN FOCUS: *Watchmen*

Beyond *Watchmen*

by Blair Davis

Watchmen, the twelve-part DC Comics series by writer Alan Moore and artist Dave Gibbons, celebrated its thirtieth anniversary in 2016. *Watchmen*'s underlying reassessment of the morality and politics inherent in superhero storytelling rewrote what was possible in comic books. If comics have gained any increasing respectability (academic or otherwise) over the past three decades, then *Watchmen* is an important part of this shift. It is a breakthrough text, not only for the comic-book industry and comics scholarship but also as a case study of how a comic becomes translated across multiple media forms. This In Focus seeks to examine *Watchmen*'s creative legacy and its significance as a cross-media franchise and to consider the place of comics studies within film and media studies.

Through this story about a group of heroes attempting to solve the murder of one of their own, Moore and Gibbons created a work of both narrative complexity and formal intricacy that had both an immediate and an enduring influence on the comics industry. Comics author Grant Morrison describes the book's effect upon release as "a devastating 'follow *this*' to American comic-book superheroes" that served in part as a message to publisher DC Comics about the potentials of its characters and of superhero storytelling itself. "*Watchmen* was a Pop Art extinction-level event," says Morrison, "a dinosaur killer and wrecker of worlds. By the time it was over—and its reverberations still resound—the equation was stark for superhero stories: Evolve or die."[1] In turn, many superhero comics began

1 Grant Morrison, *Supergods: What Masked Vigilantes, Miraculous Mutants and a Sun God from Smallville Can Teach Us about Being Human* (New York: Spiegel & Grau, 2011), 195.

challenging the genre's conventions regarding ideology, sexuality, and the very idea of heroism itself.

From the first panel's image of an iconic smiley-face button resting against the blood-soaked gutter, Moore and Gibbons challenged the traditional formal and narrative qualities of superhero comics (Figure 1). The story begins with a journal entry from the antihero Rorschach, one of the book's main characters: "Dog carcass in alley this morning, tire tread on burst stomach. This city is afraid of me. I have seen its true face."[2] The bleak nature of these words complements (yet is not directly related to) the grim images of a shopkeeper hosing blood off the sidewalk while an unconcerned pedestrian treads through, bloody footprints trailing behind. Each panel lifts us higher and higher until we reach the broken window above, creating the semblance of a rising crane shot that would have been almost impossible to film before digital cinema. The final panel reveals a detective investigating the murder, which soon leads to the first of the book's many nonlinear moments. From Gibbons's innovative compositions to the complexity of Moore's storytelling, *Watchmen* thoroughly challenged how comic books represented their heroes.

The book's enduring popularity and critical acclaim led to its canonical status among comics fans and scholars, as well as some literary critics. *Time* chose the book for its list of "100 Best Novels," alongside *Animal Farm*, *The Big Sleep*, *Catcher in the Rye*, *The Great Gatsby*, *Lolita*, *On the Road*, and *To Kill a Mockingbird*. There has been a growing amount of *Watchmen* scholarship, most notably Andrew Hoberek's *Considering "Watchmen": Poetics, Property, Politics* and Sara J. Van Ness's *"Watchmen" as Literature: A Critical Study of the Graphic Novel*.[3] Numerous extensions and adaptations emerged across a wide range of media, from live-action cinema and animation to video games and new forms like motion comics. Many of these subsequent texts have been derided, however, by fans who see *Watchmen*'s legacy as becoming tainted by a series of inferior variations.[4]

Sequels, prequels, and adaptations can complicate how we interpret an original text in light of the new works, but the notion of *Watchmen* and authorship is especially complicated. Moore infamously walked away from any future involvement with the book, severing ties with cocreator Gibbons in the process. He declared in 2008 of the following year's feature film adaptation, "I will be spitting venom all over it."[5] If *Watchmen* is a canonical text, how are auteurist readings of the franchise complicated by these dynamics in the wake of Moore's stance (as with DC's 2012 series of *Before*

2 Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons, *Watchmen*, no. 1 (New York: DC Comics, 1986), 1.

3 Andrew Hoberek, *Considering "Watchmen": Poetics, Property, Politics* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2014); Sara J. Van Ness, *"Watchmen" as Literature: A Critical Study of the Graphic Novel* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2010).

4 See, for instance, how Joshua Wille's *Watchmen: Midnight*, a 2012 fan-edit version that recuts Snyder's film to more closely align it with the source material, "attempts to reshape the film *Watchmen* (2009) to more closely resemble the narrative structure, characterizations, and spirit of the original comic book series" (available at http://wille.tv /watchmen-midnight/).

5 Geoff Boucher, "Alan Moore on *Watchmen* Movie," *Los Angeles Times*, September 18, 2008, http://herocomplex .latimes.com/uncategorized/alan-moore-on-w/.
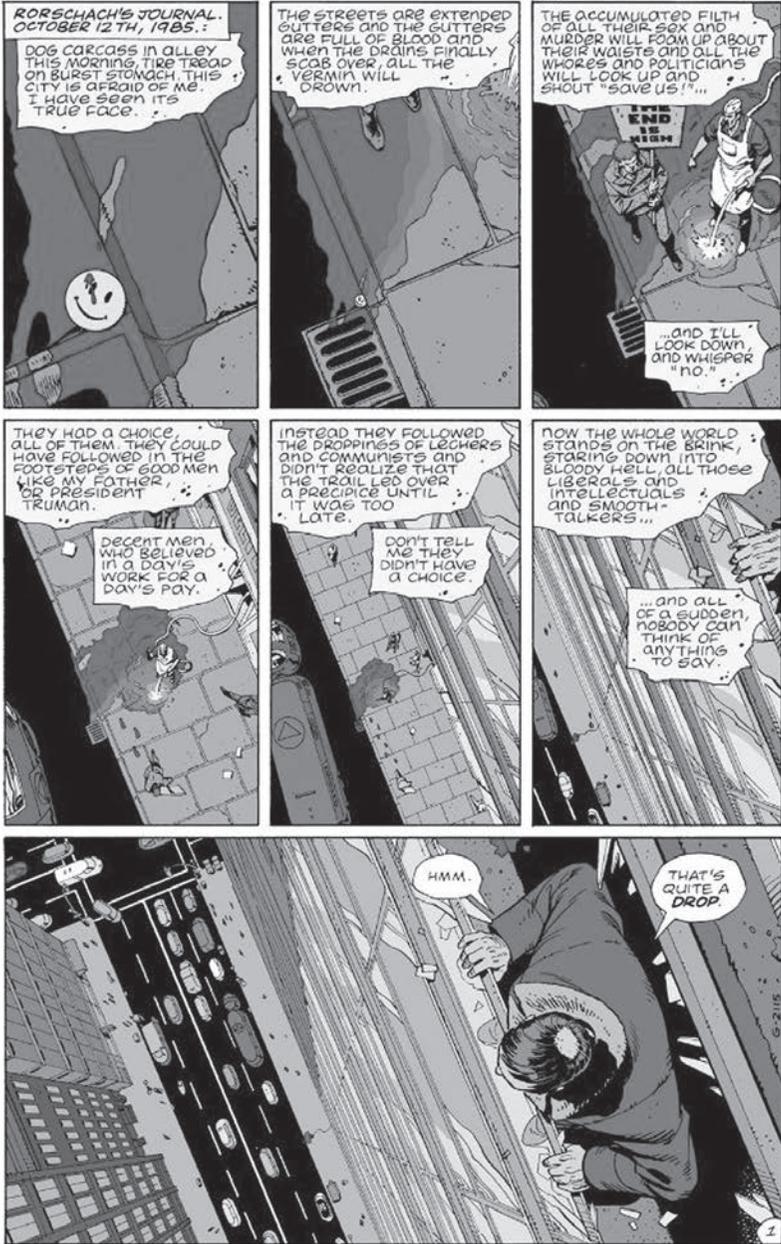
Figure 1. The first page of *Watchmen*, no. 1 (DC Comics, 1986).

Watchmen comic-book prequels, which explore the early history of the author's characters but without his involvement)?

Watchmen opens up some intriguing questions about the role of canonization in comics studies: What do we do with a comic once it becomes a franchise spanning multiple media? Do we need to account for any of the book's reimaginings, or can the original text still be studied in total isolation? Unlike how such characters as Superman and Batman are handled in comics, *Watchmen* was initially a self-contained story, not a multiyear, ongoing narrative. The fact that the book has a definitive ending means that we read it differently than other franchise-fostering comics, whose popularity typically results in multiple titles, reboots, and decades of (often conflicting) continuity. *Watchmen* served as the antithesis of the franchise superhero comic for years, but if students can now familiarize themselves with the story and its characters via a wide range of extensions, adaptations, and prequels across various media, teaching *Watchmen* becomes a different prospect from when it remained a solitary text. When a canonical comic becomes a growing franchise, does it threaten that book's continuing relevance? This idea will be put to the test in the coming years, particularly since DC Comics made *Watchmen* a part of the same narrative continuity as the rest of the company's famous heroes with 2016's *DC Universe: Rebirth* (Figure 2).[6]

We can no longer simply examine Superman and Batman as comics characters without ultimately taking into account the myriad ways in which they pervade popular culture across numerous media, and how they are consumed by more people in non-comic-book forms than through the pages of comics and graphic novels. Yet the various media extensions of those superheroes largely use the characters themselves, and not any one particular text, as the basis of the new material. The various extensions of *Watchmen* have been primarily centered on the original text and its narrative— be they direct adaptations, prequels fleshing out smaller story or character details, or a video game that draws on the book's key settings. But as the corporate need for media franchises

Figure 2. *Watchmen* becomes part of DC's regular narrative continuity in *DC Universe: Rebirth* (DC Comics, 2016).

6 *DC Universe: Rebirth,* no. 1 (New York: DC Comics, 2016). Doctor Manhattan—*Watchmen*'s nuclear-powered, godlike hero—is apparently responsible for creating the universe that the DC heroes reside in. This act seems to stem from the ending of the *Before Watchmen: Dr. Manhattan* prequel (New York: DC Comics, 2011–2012) by J. Michael Straczyinski and Adam Hughes, further problematizing the question of *Watchmen* and canonization.

that embody transmedia storytelling approaches grows ever larger, further extensions of *Watchmen* may yet follow.

Watchmen is one of few comics that have seen widespread adoption as a course text across campuses (often alongside Art Spiegelman's *Maus* and Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis*), signifying its status as a canonical work within comics studies.[7] But perhaps a single text or author can become too central to a field of study—and to that field's development. John Belton asked in a 2003 issue of *Cineaste* whether Alfred Hitchcock can be saved from Hitchcock studies, noting what he calls the "Hitchcock industry" within film studies.[8] He argues that "as Hitchcock studies has grown, the nature of the questions posed in pursuit of the object Hitchcock have been shaped by the development of Film Studies as an academic discipline rather than by the qualities inherent in Hitchcock's films themselves."[9] The same question might be asked of *Watchmen*, as its critical legacy parallels the advancement of comics studies as an academic discipline over the past few decades. Issues of media form, literary craft, and cultural representation have been at the forefront of the field in recent years, but as further growth occurs through institutions such as SCMS and the newly formed Comics Studies Society, we might also see issues of transmedia impact and industrial context become increasingly important factors in how comics are studied (much as they are applied to *Watchmen* by some of the contributors herein). Belton's question of whether a line of critical inquiry should be driven by factors within a text or by larger disciplinary developments is highly applicable to *Watchmen*, given how its current role within comics studies is perhaps comparable to the one played by Hitchcock's work within film studies in the 1970s.

With *Watchmen*'s position within comics studies in mind, as well as the latter's place in academia overall, each contributor to this edition of In Focus examines *Watchmen* beyond the original text itself. Mark J. P. Wolf begins by analyzing the role of world-building in relation to how the book's fictional world has spawned new ones. In examining the comic book and its adaptation to film, as well as various ancillary materials, Wolf notes that "what the adaptation and expansion of the world of *Watchmen* . . . demonstrates is how the transmedial nature of a world can change the way we think about adaptation."

Aaron Taylor follows by examining the specific adaptation strategies used in Zack Snyder's 2009 film version. Assessing *Watchmen*'s "reputation as an 'unadaptable' text" along with Snyder's "hyperfidelity" to the source material, Taylor analyzes the "fan-centric practices" involved in bringing the text to the screen: "maintaining structural fidelity and acquiring authorial approbation is less a matter of staying true to the spirit of the text than it is about paying a toll to subcultural gatekeepers," he argues. "The primary aim of Snyder's *Watchmen* is to flatter fan knowledge," he concludes.

Drew Morton then explores *Watchmen* and motion comics, a "new media phenomenon" consisting of "a hybrid of limited animation and comics." In assessing

7 Art Spiegelman, *Maus* (New York: Pantheon, 1991); Marjane Satrapi, *The Complete Persepolis* (New York: Pantheon, 2007).

8 John Belton, "Can Hitchcock Be Saved from Hitchcock Studies?," *Cineaste* 28, no. 4 (2003): 16.

9 Ibid., 21.

how this emerging form affects how we experience *Watchmen*, Morton raises larger issues about the future of comics in connection with new technologies and remediation, as well as how "comics and animation have the means to engage in a balanced, formal dialogue."

Kathryn Frank looks at the series of comic-book prequels from 2012 to 2013 titled *Before Watchmen*, which explore the origins and backstories of Moore and Gibbons's characters. Seeing these prequels as a case study for issues related to "the comics industry, franchising, labor relations, and nostalgic media," Frank assesses how *Before Watchmen* has changed the way we approach the original text and how the prequels complicate the notion of authorship.

Finally, Dana Polan examines *Watchmen* and comics studies from the perspective of someone who does not study comics, using the book as an entry point for considering the barriers we must confront as scholars when facing a new object of study. Polan applies the idea of intermediality to comics, situating the medium within larger media studies practices and contemplating how the need for developing a "media-specific literacy" that involves particular "reading protocols" affects the ways scholars approach new objects of study in a medium with which they have relatively little experience.

Watchmen has been a key text in comics studies, but whether it will retain its canonical status is an important question for the study of comics. The ways in which comics studies responds to such challenges—challenges it has not had to face while its methods and approaches were still relatively young—are vital to the future study of comics as scholarly texts.   ✻

World-Building in *Watchmen*

by Mark J. P. Wolf

The graphic novel *Watchmen* (twelve issues, 1986–1987), by writer Alan Moore, illustrator Dave Gibbons, and colorist John Higgins, demonstrates the possibilities that comics offer for world-building while at the same time making full use of the peculiarities of the medium. While the film adaptation of *Watchmen* required changes to the original, including some losses, the further adaptation of the film to home-video formats was able to restore some of those losses, because of the ways in which home video is better able to emulate the original comics.

Watchmen features a world that is an alternate version of the United States in 1985 and that departs from the Primary World (the real world) when superheroes appear in 1938 and a superhero group, the Minutemen, forms in 1939. Superheroes help the United States win the Vietnam War in 1971, release the hostages from Iran in 1980,

and jump ahead of the Soviets in technology thanks to the superhero Dr. Manhattan, whose control of matter on the molecular level gives the United States a great advantage in the Cold War. By 1985, airships are common, as well as electric cars, with spark hydrants for recharging them found along the streets, and Richard Nixon is reelected for a fifth term as president. Although the degree of invention and number of world defaults that are changed is not as great as that of many science fiction and fantasy worlds, there are many subtle changes and details throughout *Watchmen*'s world that give it its own flavor. Illustrator Dave Gibbons even described how it was the world itself that inspired the way he drew it:

> I suddenly realized one day, this isn't a superhero story, this is actually a science fiction story. . . . Once I thought about it like that, I didn't draw it as if it were a superhero story, I didn't want to draw it that way, I wanted to draw it as if it was an alternative history, in which case all of the background things, all the buildings, the forms of transport, the fashions, the fads, immediately become what the story's about.[1]

So while the initial story inspired the world, world-building began to influence the story at a very early stage, resulting in *Watchmen* having much more background detail than most comic books.

The commercial and critical success of the graphic novel made a movie adaptation inevitable. The attempt to adapt *Watchmen* has a long history, including Terry Gilliam's turning down the project twice.[2] Part of the reason for that history is that *Watchmen* was designed to make use of the peculiarities of comics that make it a medium distinct from all others. According to Alan Moore:

> The relationship between films and comics has been overemphasized to a degree. If you understand cinematic techniques then you'll be able to write better, more gripping comics than someone who doesn't, but if cinematic technique is seen as the be all and end all of what comics can aspire to, then at the very best comics are always going to be a poor relation to the cinema. What I'd like to explore is the areas that comics succeed in where no other media is capable of operating. Like in *Watchmen*, all that subliminal [stuff] we were getting into the backgrounds. You are trapped in the running time of a film—you go in, you sit down, they've got two hours and you're dragged through at their pace. With a comic you can stare at the page for as long as you want and check back to see if this line of dialogue really does echo something four pages earlier, whether this picture is really the same as that one, and wonder if there is some connection there.

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1 From Eric Matthies, dir., *The Phenomenon: The Comic That Changed Comics* (Burbank, CA: Warner Home Video, 2009), DVD.

2 See David Hughes, "Who Watches the Watchmen?—How The Greatest Graphic Novel of Them All Confounded Hollywood," in *The Greatest Sci-Fi Movies Never Made* (Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 2002), 144; Kenneth Plume, "Interview with Terry Gilliam (Part 3 of 4)," IGN.com, November 17, 2000, http://www.ign.com/articles/2000/11/17/interview-with-terry-gilliam-part-3-of-4.

> *Watchmen* was designed to be read four or five times; there's stuff in there
> Dave had put in that even I only noticed on the sixth or seventh read. And
> there are things that turned up in there by accident . . . the little plugs on the
> spark hydrants, if you turn them upside down, you discover a little smiley face.
> *Watchmen* was a stream of weird [stuff] and coincidence from beginning to
> end. Bizarre things kept hitting us in the face and they were perfect for us. Like
> looking through NASA photos of Mars and finding a smiley face up there.[3]

Watchmen was first given concrete visual form when Dave Gibbons took Alan Moore's
detailed, ninety-one-page panel-by-panel script and illustrated the graphic novel,
which changed a great deal with his input.[4] According to Gibbons, much of the
changed world defaults resulted from Dr. Manhattan's ability to control matter; with
lithium and helium easy to produce, electric cars and airships become common, along
with industries to service them.[5] Some of the changes were cultural extensions of the
time as well:

> And I also reasoned that there would probably be quite a lot of subtle
> differences, and I wrote a whole list of the way that the world could be
> different . . . things like different fast foods, which became Gunga Diner,
> the idea of the Asian subcontinent being the origin of a lot of fast foods
> in the USA, which it kind of is in Britain and has been for a long while.
> Subtle changes in fashion, you'll notice that nearly everybody's wearing a
> double-breasted jacket and they tend to wear what we in England used to
> call "Chelsea boots," boots with sort of elasticated panels in the sides to make
> them easier to put on and take off again.[6]

Media in *Watchmen*'s world are changed as well; Gibbons figured that with real
superheroes, audiences would not want to read comic books about them, and so
pirate comics are the most popular comics genre, with *Tales of the Black Freighter* as the
comic-within-a-comic commenting on and mirroring *Watchmen*'s themes, its images
often textured with dot-matrix halftones reminiscent of early pulp comics. Television
images also figure into the story in a number of places. Other examples of media are
the additional materials that accompany the comics. Since the issues of the comic
books would not have advertising pages, it was decided that the extra pages would
be used to further flesh out the *Watchmen* world with diegetic materials from the
world itself. These include book excerpts from a retired superhero's autobiography,
an academic essay on Dr. Manhattan, an essay on pirate comics, an arrest record,
letters from psychiatric hospitals, an Ornithological Society journal essay, newspaper

3   Alan Moore, quoted in Vincent Eno [Richard Norris] and El Csawza, "Vincent Eno and El Csawza Meet Comics Megastar
    Alan Moore," *Strange Things Are Happening* 1, no. 2 (1988): http://www.johncoulthart.com/feuilleton/2006/02/20
    /alan-moore-interview-1988/.

4   The script was ninety-one pages, according to an e-mail sent by Dave Gibbons to the author, February 2, 2015.

5   According to an e-mailed MP3 file sent January 19, 2015, from Dave Gibbons to the author.

6   From the transcript of an e-mailed MP3 file sent January 19, 2015, from Dave Gibbons to the author.

articles, corporate memos, and a magazine article—all written by or about the story's characters. While outside of the main story line, they fill narrative gaps and provide background and backstory for the world, increasing its illusion of completeness. Thus, even the original comics version of *Watchmen* was multimedia in form from the start, imitating books, newspapers, magazines, journals, memos, and so forth; its world was already appearing in multiple media forms.

Watchmen finally arrived in theaters in 2009. Directed by Zack Snyder, with production design by Alex McDowell, the film is often hailed as the most faithful movie adaptation of a comic book, something for which the film has received both praise and criticism.[7] As such, it perhaps best demonstrates what happens when a comic book makes a transmedial move into cinema, with the gains and losses due to the differences between the two media. Some of the changes were formal ones due to medial differences, such as the shift from the varying and more vertically oriented aspect ratios of the comics panels to the unvarying horizontal rectangle of the movie screen and the spatially juxtaposed imagery of the comics to the temporally intercut imagery of the film. But changes also occurred within *Watchmen*'s diegetic world and its depiction.

Narratively, the ending was changed, and reducing the story to the manageable running time of a feature film meant eliding or cutting some scenes while new scenes were added. Attempting to remain true to the source material, director Zack Snyder even asked Gibbons to storyboard scenes that appeared in the movie but not in the comics, just to see how he would have done them. According to Gibbons:

> I did do a section of storyboarding for Zack Snyder. There is a part of the movie that isn't in the graphic novel and he wanted to see how I would have drawn it, if it had been in the graphic novel. So I redid the storyboards as three pages of comic on the nine-panel grid, also getting it colored by John Higgins so it looked authentic. But I think there were probably only three or four scenes that I drew, which were from the movie.[8]

The comics' stylized use of color in John Higgins's color design is also something that was not entirely carried over to the film, because of the need to balance abstraction with realism. While the reliance on secondary colors (orange, green, and purple) did influence the design of the film, the more unusual or extreme uses of color, like the very red-tinted color palette of the flashback panels in which the Comedian is defenestrated and killed, were not duplicated by the film. Still, great efforts were made to adapt *Watchmen*'s world. According to McDowell:

> During the design of *Watchmen*, we pored over the graphic novel, carried it as our Rosetta stone, and pulled every possible thread from the book that

7 See Andrew O'Hehir, "*Watchmen*: Could the Most Anticipated Comic-Book Movie of the Season Turn Out to Be the Most Unsettling Superhero Spectacle Ever Made?," *Salon*, March 6, 2009, http://www.salon.com/2009/03/06 /watchmen/; Anthony Lane, "Dark Visions: *Watchmen* and *Leave Her to Heaven*," *New Yorker*, March 9, 2009, http:// www.newyorker.com/magazine/2009/03/09/dark-visions.

8 From "A Q&A with Dave Gibbons on the Making of *Watchmen*," Amazon review, http://www.amazon.com/Watchmen -Alan-Moore/dp/0930289234.

we could into the film. . . . We got into obsessive layers of the world and used Dave Gibbons's details as clues to populate the space. This resulted in consistent layers of visual narrative braided though the action.

. . . The backlot that we built from the ground up—from the cracked asphalt of the streets, to four-story tall building facades, in a deserted factory in Vancouver—was the heart of the world, and we controlled it absolutely. All of the iconic architecture in the film, at street level, was included in the three city blocks that we built, and the stylization of the film evolved from the control we had in this exterior setting. Lighting and greenscreen backings were built into the set, and the surfaces were both realistic in their materials and highly stylized by the color and graphic layers.

. . . This balance between stylization and reality was the challenge, and the fun of building the *Watchmen* world. There was no way that we were not going to acknowledge the comic book and Dave's art. His work is not only essential to respect the audience as fans of the comic book, but it's also an intrinsic metaphor for the characters themselves, all of whom are flesh-and-blood outcasts trying to find a role and recognition as stylized symbols of superheroism, and who have one foot in stylization and one foot in reality.[9]

Along with the film, several ancillary materials were also released; from July 2008 to February 2009, the twelve issues of *Watchmen* were abridged and turned into motion comics, which took elements from the comics and layered and animated them, amounting to a 325-minute version of *Watchmen*. The *New Frontiersman*, a tabloid in *Watchmen*'s New York City, was given a website and a channel on YouTube with four video clips from *Watchmen*'s world. While tangential to the main story line, these extras added to the world's backstory, making them similar to the ancillary documents that appeared at the end of each issue of *Watchmen*, although there was nothing in the film to indicate that more material was available online. A book released a month before the film, *Watchmen: The Art of the Film* (2009), also contained "making of " materials and drawings by Gibbons and highlighted the level of background detail in the film.[10] Such publications, of course, are themselves arguments for the inclusion of many small, barely noticeable details in films, as the audience will, in fact, see and appreciate such details when books about them appear.

The home-video release of *Watchmen*, however, in July 2009, brought the movie even closer to the original graphic novel. A four-disc DVD set expanded the film with twenty-four minutes of live-action footage as well as the *Tales of the Black Freighter* integrated into the film. It also included the *Watchmen* motion comics, and several short pieces made to look like period newscasts and interviews that added to the world, which were similar to the extras appearing with the comics but not direct adaptations of them; for example, Hollis Mason's autobiography *Under the Hood* is presented as a video short rather than as book chapter excerpts.

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9 From an e-mailed statement by Alex McDowell, February 12, 2015.

10 Peter Aperlo, *"Watchmen": The Art of the Film* (London: Titan Books, 2009).

Visually, home-video technology encourages multiple viewings of a film and allows the viewer to examine the film frame by frame and to move back and forth to compare images, similar to the experience of looking through the pages of a book, but it still does not allow one to juxtapose images the way they appear together arranged on the comics page (although future technology could include such possibilities). Still, frame-by-frame capabilities mean that filmmakers can include hidden visual motifs, background details, and Easter eggs that are more likely to be found by home viewers than theatrical audiences. Fan enthusiasm also inspires such a level of background detail. According to McDowell:

> There was a moment on the set when a fan journalist was visiting the set and asked us about the four-legged turkey. And we had no idea what he meant. We went back to the text and discovered that due to Veidt's genetics, he possessed the capability to breed turkeys with additional limbs. It turned out that the restaurant scene features the turkey plate in a tiny detail inside a single frame [that] had not yet been shot, so we scurried to build a prop turkey to include in the scene. There are literally hundreds of details and Easter eggs from *Watchmen* scattered though the film, in fact Zack's amazing "The Times They Are a-Changin'" opening scene alone is dense with them.[11]

With the potential for visual analysis that frame-by-frame viewing allows, home video falls somewhere between the comic book and theatrical film, providing world-builders with a chance that such details will be noticed and appreciated, thereby encouraging discussion and repeated viewings.

Additional *Watchmen* material continued to appear after the release of the film. Extending the backstory even further beyond the original comic books, Warner Bros. Games produced a prequel video game, *Watchmen: The End Is Nigh* (2009), released in two episodes, the first coinciding with the film's release. Later in 2012, DC Comics released thirty-seven issues of *Before Watchmen* comic books, including art by colorist John Higgins. Neither Moore nor Gibbons participated in these issues, and while Gibbons wished them well, Moore called them "completely shameless."[12] Parody material has also appeared, including *Saturday Morning Watchmen*, an elaborate opening sequence of a supposed 1980s Saturday-morning cartoon show based on *Watchmen*, complete with a theme song.[13]

What the adaptation and expansion of the world of *Watchmen* also demonstrates is how the transmedial nature of a world can change the way we think about adaptation. As the popularity of a work, released in a particular medium for which it is designed, creates the desire for adaptations of that work into other media, it is the world itself that becomes emphasized, once we begin seeing it within a variety of different media windows. In the case of *Watchmen*, however, medium specificity and adaptation is

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11 From an e-mailed statement by Alex McDowell, February 12, 2015.

12 According to Dave Itzkoff, "DC Plans Prequels to Watchmen Series," *New York Times*, February 1, 2012, http://www.nytimes.com/2012/02/01/books/dc-comics-plans-prequels-to-watchmen-series.html?_r=3.

13 "Saturday Morning Watchmen," YouTube video, 1:21, posted by Harry Partridge, March 5, 2009, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YDDHHrt6I4w.

itself part of the thematic content, because the graphic novel deliberately both uses techniques specific to the medium and attempts to represent some of its content as other media (e.g., TV, newspapers, magazines). Its simulation of other media makes *Watchmen* a good candidate for transmedial moves, even while its use of medium peculiarities works against such moves. *Watchmen*'s world, then, can only become enriched as it spreads across different media, and at the same time its expression as a series of comic books remains a classic example of what can be achieved within the medium of comics.   ✱

The Continuing Adventures of the "Inherently Unfilmable" Book: Zack Snyder's *Watchmen*

by Aaron Taylor

"More regurgitated worms" were the words Alan Moore used to describe Zack Snyder's 2009 film adaptation of *Watchmen*.[1] Tempting as it may be to dismiss Moore's vitriol as hyperbolic egotism, it is difficult to overstate the importance of the 1986 limited series that he coauthored with Dave Gibbons. Although its import for both comics and literature has been widely documented, *Watchmen*'s relationship to cinema has received comparatively less attention.[2] Thus, Snyder's film, and its relation to its graphic hypotext, requires further attention in order to appreciate what *Watchmen* means to the respective fields of adaptation, contemporary cinema, and comics studies. Rather than reclaim Snyder's *Watchmen* as an underappreciated adaptation of an "unfilmable" comic, we are better served by situating its hyperfidelity

1 Geoff Boucher, "Alan Moore on *Watchmen* Movie: 'I will be spitting venom all over it,'" *Hero Complex*, September 18, 2008, http://herocomplex.latimes.com/uncategorized/alan-moore -on-w/.

2 For select discussions of the comic's "literary" value, see the following: Lev Grossman, "All-Time 100 Novels: *Watchmen*," *Time*, March 4, 2009, http://entertainment.time.com/2009 /03/06/top-10-graphic-novels/; Andrew Hoberek, *Considering "Watchmen"* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2013), 5–14; Aaron Meskin, "'Why Don't You Go Read a Book or Something?' *Watchmen* as Literature," in *"Watchmen" and Philosophy*, ed. Mark D. White (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 2009), 157–172; Sara J. Van Ness, *"Watchmen" as Literature* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2010), 5–23; Grant L. Voth, "Moore and Gibbon's *Watchmen*," in *The Skeptic's Guide to the Great Books* (Chantilly, VA: Teaching Company, 2011), CD.

within a broader matrix involving several fannish preoccupations.[3] These include cross-referential reception practices, attentiveness to medium specificity, and the acquisition of subcultural capital.

First, *Watchmen*'s reputation as an "unadaptable" text reopens old theoretical debates surrounding the perceived limitations of adaptive endeavors. Moore's view that his comic is beyond adaptation has been uncritically echoed by uncountable online pundits, both academic and amateur alike.[4] The film's torturous, twenty-year development seems to give credence to Moore's view. *Watchmen*'s adaptation involved five developed scripts, seven screenwriters, and five prospective directors—with at least one of these directors, Terry Gilliam, publicly admitting the folly of his own adaptive enterprise.[5] The notion of certain texts defying adaptation—because of length, narrative scope, or their exploitation of medium-specific resources—is certainly nothing new. While the notion of perfect fidelity is oft invoked as a mythic holy grail, even first-generation film scholars have characterized any quest to obtain it as absurd. Writing in 1963, Jean Mitry asserted that the piously faithful adaptation is inevitably adulterous, unavoidably violating either the letter or the spirit of its source.[6]

Zack Snyder evidently missed that sermon. With devotional fervor, he insisted instead that production designer Alex McDowell "treat [the comic] like an illuminated text."[7] Not content with preserving the maximal degree of story elements and plot structure, Gibbons's visual design and panel compositions were also painstakingly replicated. The film was completely previsualized and storyboarded shot for shot, with Gibbons's panels serving as graphic referents.[8] Thus, the "visionary director" repeated the profitably reverential tactics he had utilized before in his adaptation of Frank Miller's *300* (2007). Clearly, then, "adaptations which strive for high degrees of fidelity . . . will typically place the greatest stress on reproducing visual and graphic elements of the original."[9] But why invoke the comic artists' work so devoutly in the first place? What animates the neo-literalist hyperfidelity of comic adaptations like *Watchmen*?[10]

3 For Alan Moore's insistence that *Watchmen* is an "unfilmable" comic, see the following: Alex Musson and Andrew O'Neil, "The *Mustard* Interview: Alan Moore," in *Alan Moore: Conversations*, ed. Eric L. Berlatsky (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2012), 194; Jeff Jensen, "*Watchmen*: An Oral History," *Entertainment Weekly*, October 21, 2005, http://www.ew.com/article/2005/10/21/watchmen-oral-history.

4 For select academic discussions of Moore's allegedly "unadaptable" works, see Ian Hague, "Adapting *Watchmen*," in *Framing Film: Cinema and the Visual Arts*, ed. Steven Allen and Laura Hubner (Chicago: Intellect Books, 2012), 52; Jasmine Shadrack, "V versus Hollywood: A Discourse on Polemic Thievery," *Studies in Comics* 2, no. 1 (2011): 195–196; Douglas Wolk, *Reading Comics* (New York: Da Capo Press, 2008), 241.

5 David Hughes, *The Greatest Sci-Fi Movies Never Made* (London: Titan Books, 2008), 146–160.

6 Jean Mitry, *The Aesthetics and Psychology of the Cinema*, trans. Christopher King (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997), 328.

7 Peter Aperlo, *"Watchmen": The Art of the Film* (London: Titan Books, 2009), 26.

8 Ibid., 43.

9 Anne Furlong, "'It's not quite what I had in mind': Adaptation, Faithfulness, and Interpretation," *Journal of Literary Semantics* 41, no. 2 (2012): 186.

10 Select examples include *300, Hulk* (Ang Lee, 2003), *Immortel* (Enki Bilal, 2004), both *Hellboy* (Guillermo del Toro, 2004, 2008) and *Sin City* (Frank Miller and Robert Rodriguez, 2005, 2014) films, *The Spirit* (Frank Miller, 2008), *Scott Pilgrim vs. the World* (Edgar Wright, 2010), *The Adventures of Tintin* (Steven Spielberg, 2011), and recent casting choices on television's *The Walking Dead* (AMC, 2010–).

The answer, quite simply, is the desire to cultivate a fan-centric adaptation—an altogether categorically distinct translation. David Hayter's proclamation that *Watchmen* "is a movie made by fans, for fans" needs to be taken quite literally.[11] For a large consortium of critics, Snyder's literalism is regarded as a dunderheaded, slavish devotion to a canonical hypotext, and fan pandering of the grossest kind.[12] Although there is some wisdom to the notion that "the primary motive for fidelity in the most widely known adaptations is financial," many can still be taken aback by the lucrativeness of such cultic blockbusters.[13] But the economics of hyperfidelity should not be so surprising given the basic generic function of adaptation: "to make their audiences *recall* the adapted work, or the cultural memory of it. There is no such thing . . . as a 'secret' adaptation."[14] Fidelity still matters, then, but it matters differently for fans. Critics might have been disappointed because *Watchmen* failed to be "an original film, but one that 'faithfully approximated' an existing source."[15] And yet they overlooked why filmmakers might devote so much effort to making a film whose generic status as an adaptation was excessively overt.

First, the fan-centric adaptation is designed to cultivate cross-referential reception practices in posttheatrical viewing contexts. Not simply content to evoke the vague memories of casual readers, *Watchmen*'s allusiveness is directed toward the immediate recollections of the details-oriented obsessive. Here, the identification of Easter eggs is not the amused recognition of the way that a film rewards insider knowledge but is instead the principal point of the entire enterprise. In the "Maximum Movie Mode" of the director's cut, Snyder walks the viewer through various comparative exercises. These include panel-to-frame comparisons (e.g., the identical compositions of the Comedian being hurled through a penthouse window), as well as the foregrounding of attention to textual minutiae (e.g., the blood-spattered smiley-face pin resembling the hands on the Doomsday Clock that are positioned at five minutes to midnight).

Such strategically obsessive fidelity is not only intended to establish nerd points for Snyder; it also resists the essentialist objections of Moore and other naysayers. Moore claims that the film viewer "is dragged along with the running speed of the

11 Jonathan Llyr, "An Open Letter from *Watchmen* Screenwriter David Hayter—Updated," *Hardcore Nerdity* (blog), March 11, 2009, http://www.hardcorenerdity.com/profiles/blog/show?id=2239098:BlogPost:40658.

12 See the following eviscerations: Matt Ealer, "Comic Hero Fanboys Make Terrible Comic Hero Movies," *The Awl*, June 17, 2011, http://www.theawl.com/2011/06/comic-hero-fanboys-are-ruining-comic-hero-movies; David Edelstein, "Hopelessly Devoted: Zack Snyder's *Watchmen* Is as Faithful an Adaptation as a Fanboy Could Want," *New York Magazine*, February 27, 2009, http://nymag.com/movies/reviews/55005/; Chris Kaye, "High on Fidelity: On Zack Snyder, *Watchmen*, and Missing the Point," *Blastr*, March 5, 2014, http://www.blastr.com/2014-3-5/high-fidelity-zack-snyder-watchmen-and-missing-point; Philip Kennicott, "Adaptation of *Watchmen* Is Graphic but Not Novel," *Washington Post*, March 5, 2009, http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2009/03/04/AR2009030403970.html; Anthony Lane, "Dark Visions," *New Yorker*, March 9, 2009, http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2009/03/09/dark-visions; Julian Sancton, "Did Zack Snyder Love *Watchmen* Too Much?," *Vanity Fair*, March 4, 2009, http://www.vanityfair.com/online/daily/2009/03/did-zach-snyder-love-watchmen-too-much; Scott Thill, "Is *Watchmen* Director Zack Snyder Really 'Visionary?'" *Wired*, December 22, 2008, http://www.wired.com/2008/12/is-watchmen-dir/.

13 Thomas Leitch, *Film Adaptation and Its Discontents* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2007), 128.

14 Catherine Grant, "Recognizing *Billy Budd* in *Beau Travail*: Epistemology and Hermeneutics of an Auterist 'Free' Adaptation," *Screen* 43, no. 1 (2002): 57.

15 Van Ness, *Watchmen as Literature*, 183.

projector," whereas comics, by contrast, offer images that audiences can "look at and absorb at their own pace . . . getting layer upon layer of meaning and reference."[16] But this objection is demonstrably untenable. Obviously, such scrutiny is exactly what Snyder intends, as the Blu-ray viewer "is invited to excavate the layers through multiple viewings using its new powers . . . to stop time, to study a film frame-by-frame, byte-by-byte."[17] Theorists echoing Moore's pronouncements about the time of reception in each medium recognize that one might do this very thing. And yet most strangely proclaim that such practices are a violation of "the primary intended context for viewing films," and that random-access spectatorship counters the norm of sequential viewing.[18]

The key point here is that this view confuses the audience's mode of reception with the medium's essential interior resources. Moreover, theatrical viewing is no longer the default or even optimal option. Rather, fan-centric adaptations privilege posttheatrical viewing processes involving pausing, zooming, random access, making screenshots, ripping, reediting, recirculation, and multiscreened reception. Such practices are also intended to emulate the very properties of comics that are assumed to be untranslatable. Posttheatrical viewers are granted the privileged powers of comics readers: the control of unit sequence and duration. And this is a formal translation Gibbons has publicly acknowledged even as his coauthor continues to deny that *Watchmen*'s formalism is adaptable.[19] Snyder's tactics thus reinforce Jared Gardner's simple but crucial insight: the real currency attained by the new cultic blockbuster is not so much the profits derived from devoted fans but their appropriation of comics fans' practices of reception.[20]

These cross-referential viewing practices clearly have affinities with the second component of fan-centric adaptations: a preoccupation with the inherent features of each medium. Given the formalism of these ventures, it is to Snyder's advantage that his source material is a fairly "cinematic" comic. Gibbons's disciplined use of nine-panel grids is a deliberate citation of Steve Ditko's chessboard layouts on *Spider-Man* and the EC horror comics that inspire one of *Watchmen*'s nested narratives. But his layouts also evoke the framing of a lens. "It's like watching something . . . at the movies," Gibbons claims, "this idea of a proscenium arch, where you have a single, fixed viewpoint in front of which things move."[21] Also of note is the specificity of Gibbons's portraitures. *Watchmen*'s characters were deliberately modeled after actors

16 Christopher Sharrett, "Alan Moore," and Daniel Whiston, David Russell, and Andy Fruish, "The Craft: An Interview with Alan Moore," both in *Alan Moore: Conversations*, ed. Eric L. Berlatsky (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2012), 53 and 135, respectively.

17 Jared Gardner, *Projections: Comics and the History of Twenty-First Century Storytelling* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2012), 189.

18 Roy T. Cook, "Why Comics Are Not Films: Metacomics and Medium-Specific Conventions," and Henry James Pratt, "Making Comics into Film," both in *The Art of Comics*, ed. Aaron Meskin and Roy T. Cook (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), 174 and 160, respectively.

19 "Exclusive: Dave Gibbons Interview," by *watchmencomicmovie.com*, February 12, 2009, http://watchmencomicmovie .com/021209-watchmen-dave-gibbons-video-interview.php.

20 Gardner, *Projections*, 183.

21 Mark Salisbury, *Artists on Comic Art* (London: Titan Books, 2000), 80.

such as Bruce Weitz, Michael Conrad, and Barry Foster—an intermedial process anticipating Bryan Hitch's similarly starry treatment of *The Ultimates* in 2001.[22]

In cultivating a mise-en-scène that replicates Gibbons's art in such minute detail, then, Snyder attempts to overcome the two mediums' opposing visual ontologies. That is, he attempts to address the problems inherent in converting drawings to photography.[23] More to the point, the film emulates Gibbons's meticulously structured compositions and dense layering of graphic semiotic detail. And this emulation attempts to overcome film's referential specificity, heavy indexicality, and diegetic absorption. The individualistic renderings of a comic's illustrator are said to "foreground the presence of the enunciator"—the author-maker of the fictional world.[24] Therefore, graphically invoking *Watchmen*'s handcrafted origins foregrounds the film's laboriously constructed presentational qualities. So, the singular faces of such lesser-known stars as Billy Crudup and Malin Akerman disappear within their abstract analogues. The reconstructed Times Square becomes an indexical sign of Gibbons's minutely rendered urban squalor rather than a photographic trace of the real New York. Precisely duplicated compositions become prompts for transmedia comparison instead of the situation of characters within narrative space. Given that Gibbons affixed his signature as an Easter-egg graffiti tag on one of the set's lampposts—signifying that he had "signed off on the project"—the enunciator of the film's source text is literally foregrounded within the mise-en-scène.[25]

Other examples of Snyder's own attention to media ontologies are worth mentioning. His trademarked speed-ramping effect, for example, not only provides kinetic punctuation to action scenes but also is said to emulate the eye saccades of comics readers as they absorb the unit of the page and then skitter across select portions of it.[26] Moore may disparage the film's graphic fidelity as a "children's version" of Gibbons's images, sneering that "they're bigger, moving, and making noise!"[27] And yet there is something to be said for fans' excitement at seeing still images coming to life. This is the thrill of the photographic frame's semiotic abundance as it rounds out the schematics of the illustrated panel. If, following E. H. Gombrich, comics minimize the semantic and syntactic density of the mimetic image, Snyder's film at once both abstracts the world and restores it to fullness through his hybridized designs.[28] Finally, some medium essentialists claim that viewers are not "able to process and understand . . . complex narrative structures" as well as comics because film

22 Dave Gibbons, *Watching the Watchmen* (London: Titan Books, 2008), 45, 52, and 56.

23 Pascal Lefèvre, "Incompatible Visual Ontologies? The Problematic Adaptation of Drawn Images," in *Film and Comic Books*, ed. Ian Gordon, Mark Jancovich, and Matthew P. McAllister (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2007), 3–4.

24 Hans-Christian Christiansen, "Comics and Film: A Narrative Perspective," in *Comics and Culture*, ed. Anne Magnussen and Hans-Christian Christiansen (Copenhagen: Museum Tusculanum Press, 2000), 115.

25 Peter Aperlo, *Watchmen: The Film Companion* (London: Titan Books, 2009), 35.

26 Jochen Ecke, "Spatializing the Movie Screen: How Mainstream Cinema Is Catching Up on the Formal Potentialities of the Comic Book Page," in *Comics as a Nexus of Cultures*, ed. Mark Berninger, Jochen Ecke, and Gideon Haberkorn (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2010), 17.

27 Musson and O'Neil, "*Mustard* Interview," 197.

28 E. H. Gombrich, *Art and Illusion*, 3rd ed. (London: Phaidon, 1968), 288.

"juxtaposes frames in time" rather than on the space of a page.[29] But not only does this discount the astute memory of alert film viewers—who can and do recognize patterns intentionally established across time—it also overlooks the intended design of fan-centric adaptations. Again, Snyder's *Watchmen* establishes a structural density that viewers are intended to unpack and scrutinize via multiple viewings.

The third and final component of the fan-centric adaptation, then, involves their function as interactive forums for the acquisition of subcultural capital. Snyder's performed fanboy auteurism on the director's-cut release—his casual demeanor, virtual control of multiple frames, and showcasing of the film's graphic fidelity—cue the preferred reception practices of his ideal and intended audience. Snyder's performed exegesis is a paratextual index of the film's own broader and constant performance of fandom. At every moment, the film signals to Snyder's fellow travelers his contribution to the collective intelligence of a broader community. Thus, he retains the comic's use of flashbacks to interrupt action-driven linearity, its focus on the effect of temporality on typically ageless heroes, and its emphasis on failure and moral ambiguity.[30]

The quest for fannish accreditation also requires securing the benediction of a comic's creators. With Moore denouncing the film sight unseen, Snyder managed to co-opt Gibbons's participation during preproduction, absorbing the artist's authorial status as a means of authorizing his own re-visionary approach to the comic.[31] Screenwriters Alex Tse and David Hayter infamously altered the series's original ending, which involved the destruction of Manhattan by a manufactured alien squid.[32] The film opts instead for Ozymandias's altruistic nuking of several major cities using energy reactors unwittingly created by Dr. Manhattan.[33] Fans predictably went berserk upon receiving the first public announcement that there would be "no squid for you," and yet even this significant rewrite is made palatable by Snyder cannily securing Gibbons's cooperation in the film's development.[34] Gibbons was commissioned to draw up new storyboards and fully realized alternative comics pages, thus "ensur[ing] that the film's re-imagined ending nevertheless drew from an authentic source."[35] Like other fanboy auteurs, then, Snyder is "simultaneously committed to retaining the

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29 Pratt, "Making Comics into Film," 161.

30 For a more extensive focus on the film's retention of the comic's thematic interests, see Federico Pagello, "From Frank Miller to Zack Snyder, and Return: Contemporary Superhero Comics and Post-Classical Hollywood," *Miranda* 8 (2013): 10–11.

31 DC had offered Moore's out-of-work colleague Steve Moore the contract for a *Watchmen* novelization, but allegedly withdrew it after the series's author asked to remove his name from a proposed *Tales of the Black Freighter* comic tie-in. Alan Moore, a self-professed magician, cursed the film in response. See Musson and O'Neil, "*Mustard* Interview," 196–197.

32 The outlandish scheme is extensively mocked in a memorable, low-budget work of anti-fandom: Max Landis's cutting *Vague Recollections of "Watchmen*," YouTube video, posted by "Uptomyknees," March 13, 2009, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A-oGty52mbk.

33 For the new ending's acknowledgment of contemporary anxieties involving "multiple, distributed [terrorist] attacks," see Bob Rehak, "Adapting *Watchmen* after 9/11," *Cinema Journal* 51, no. 1 (2011): 157.

34 For one particularly busy "Squidgate" thread, see Glen Oliver, "No Squid for You!!," *Ain't It Cool News*, November 17, 2008, http://www.aintitcool.com/node/39131.

35 Aperlo, *Watchmen: The Art of the Film*, 62.

integrity and essence of the franchise, and elevating the property through his unique artistic vision."[36]

But maintaining structural fidelity and acquiring authorial approbation is less a matter of staying true to the spirit of the text than it is about paying a toll to subcultural gatekeepers. The primary aim of Snyder's *Watchmen* is to flatter fan knowledge. No wonder, then, that each successive home release incrementally extends its range of fidelity—hence the integration of the animated *Tales of the Black Freighter* nested narrative in the "ultimate cut," and the supplemental *Under the Hood* mockumentary as a bonus feature. In the end, the fan-centric adaptation serves as a pretext for fan labor: a challenge to would-be creators of even *more* faithful fan edits, an inducement for the creation of metatextual information ecosystems, a prompt for the communal display of one's own receptive or critical competencies. One hopes these endeavors constitute "mechanisms of reply" to a culture industry that was previously content to marginalize fandom.[37] For the cynic, however, *Watchmen* might just be a feature-length effort at interpellation—its fidelity a game of one-upmanship that seeks only to integrate fans within the hive-sourced economy of Hollywood advertising. If we are to believe Dr. Manhattan's assertion that "nothing ever ends," then contemporary executives will doubtless be cheered at the prospect of fan-centric adaptations exploiting geekdom in perpetuity. ✳

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36 Suzanne Scott, "Dawn of the Undead Author: Fanboy Auteurism and Zack Snyder's 'Vision,'" in *A Companion to Media Authorship*, ed. Jonathan Gray and Derek Johnson (Oxford, UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013), 446.

37 Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, "The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception," in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, ed. G. S. Noerr, trans. E. Jephcott (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press), 96.

"Watched any good books lately?": The Formal Failure of the *Watchmen* Motion Comic

by Drew Morton

I n an interview, the comic-book writer Mark Waid described the new media phenomenon of motion comics—a hybrid of limited animation and comics—as being "unfortunate."[1] Similarly, when asked for his opinion, the comic-book writer, artist, and scholar Scott McCloud remarked that the medium was "a sad, temporary, abomination."[2] Indeed, in the seven years that have elapsed since the release of one of the most noteworthy of motion comics—*Watchmen* (Zack Snyder, 2008)—the medium has evolved out of its former existence and into tablet-friendly applications and "motion books." In this space, I would like to consider the formal attributes of the motion comic and how it does and does not remediate aspects of its two parental media. I do so not to redeem the medium of the motion comic but to use *Watchmen* to explore the aesthetic incompatibility of comics, animation, and film.

One of the main reasons motion comics are frowned upon as being "unfortunate" and an "abomination" is because they openly challenge the romantic notion that each work of art should exist as a unique and original object. Yet as the box art for *Watchmen: The Complete Motion Comic* prompts us, "Watched any good books lately? Be in the know!" However, *Watchmen*, like the bulk of motion comics ranging from the 1966 syndicated television series *The Marvel Superheroes* to the 2010 title *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, is merely a scan of the original comic text with the addition of limited, rudimentary animation. The compromise this hurried process of stylistic remediation—the representation of one medium's formal attributes within another—produces leads to text that is not as ontologically rewarding as animation or comics. For instance, the "animation" of the motion comic is often produced by the suggestion of movement (through zooms, pans and tilts, and montage) rather than smooth and fully rendered character metamorphosis.

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1   For those interested in motion comics more broadly, this essay is meant to complement and build on another article I recently published: Drew Morton, "The Unfortunates: Towards a History and Definition of the Motion Comic," *Journal of Graphic Novels and Comics* 6, no. 4 (2015): 347–366. I have made a videographic adaptation of this article. For those interested, please see my Vimeo page at https://vimeo.com/166858225.

2   Ibid.

Similarly, an essential formal quality of the comics medium, juxtaposed panels structured by a multiframe, is often avoided altogether.

This formal incompatibility and the difficult process of stylistic compromise that arises from it may come as a surprise for some readers. After all, early animation was partially born from comic strips. The early animated films of Winsor McCay (*Little Nemo*, 1911) and J. Stuart Blackton (*The Enchanted Drawing*, 1900) can be tied back to their work as newspaper cartoonists and vaudevillian lightning-sketch artists. Moreover, the reliance of both comics and film on montage and visual storytelling has led some media studies scholars and industrial figures, such as Avi Arad, the chief creative officer at Marvel, to remark that "comic books are basically . . . highly detailed storyboards."[3] However, as I hope to illustrate here, and as the writer and artist Art Spiegelman has stated, "Comics are not storyboards for movies at their best."[4] To ground this observation, let us briefly define these separate media from a formal standpoint.

As Craig Smith has argued in one of the few pieces of scholarship devoted to motion comics, they are incapable of being "simply defined with a singular mode of animation practice."[5] This is because their formal attributes vary widely from title to title. For instance, some motion comics have limited motion within the panels (*Watchmen* does), while others suggest it through the aforementioned limited animation of camera movement and montage (as the 1966 syndicated television series *Marvel Super Heroes* does). Some employ multiple voice actors (*Marvel Super Heroes* does), while others take the audiobook approach of casting one performer (as *Watchmen* does). Finally, additional stylistic characteristics—like the representation of text and the comic-book multiframe—lack representational norms.

Thus, because of the formal fluidity of the motion comic, the logical starting point for beginning a definition would be to define these remediations in relation to their parental media: animation and comics. For the sake of brevity, as academic disputes regarding definitions are frequent (especially in the field of comics studies) and could easily bog down a brief essay, I define animation as the illusion of frame-by-frame movement *not* produced by a live-action, twenty-four-frames-per-second shooting.[6] Moreover, animation—as already implied—tends to be defined by two aesthetic poles: limited animation versus full animation. Limited animation involves the repetition of drawings and larger gaps in character movement, creating a staccato form of motion that is often supplemented by camera movements (e.g., IPA shorts). Full animation, in contrast, tends to be defined by constant motion and a minimal use of cycles, making movement much smoother (e.g., Disney features).

3   See the Starz documentary *Comic Books Unbound* (Jackie Levine, 2008).

4   Kerry Lengel, "Graphic Novelist Art Spiegelman Keeps the Faith," *Arizona Republic*, January 29, 2006.

5   Craig Smith, "Motion Comics: Modes of Adaptation and the Issue of Authenticity," *Animation Practice, Process, and Production* 1, no. 2 (2012): 358.

6   I have essentially combined definitions from animation scholars Paul Wells and Giannalberto Bendazzi. See Paul Wells, *Animation: Genre and Authorship* (London: Wallflower Press, 2002), 4–5; Giannalberto Bendazzi, *Cartoons: One Hundred Years of Cinema Animation* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), xvi.

With regard to the overstated overlap between animation and comics, animation is sequential in time, whereas comics are sequential in space and involve the juxtaposition of multiple panels (structured, according to Thierry Groensteen, by the multiframe).[7] As Scott McCloud has described, this juxtaposition demands that the reader perform an act of closure—a spatiotemporal, narrative hypothesis—to decipher the sequence of panels. To illustrate with one of McCloud's examples, let us imagine a three-panel sequence in which the first panel depicts a woman's horrified face and a man with a knife behind her. The second panel depicts a close-up of the knife, and the third panel depicts the woman's dead body. As McCloud notes, the writer or artist does not directly represent the murder of the woman; the reader is complicit in the crime because of his spatiotemporal narrative inference.[8] Outside of Eisensteinian montage, the viewer of the typical narrative film—animated or live action—typically does not need to perform the same cognitive gymnastics because of the codes of the continuity system. As David Bordwell, Kristin Thompson, and Janet Staiger have described, the continuity system is powered by the guiding desire of formally rendering a story as unambiguously as possible.[9] Such a system of rigid formal conventions—beyond general principles taken from a diverse pool of media from the graphic arts to literature—simply does not exist in comics.

This fundamental formal difference between animation, film, and comics produces an epistemological tension in most motion comics. How can a reader take the time to juxtapose multiple, discrete images that are simultaneously in motion? In the case of the motion comic *Saw: Rebirth*, viewers are presented with a moving multiframe while the images in the panels themselves are still.[10] Essentially, the only motion in this motion comic comes from the transitions *between* the panels. Perhaps this would qualify as limited animation, but only as much as the transitions in a PowerPoint presentation are animated. Essentially, in this specific example, the comics heritage of this motion comic dominates the formal compromise, as the necessity of closure is prompted by the panel juxtapositions. *The Marvel Super Heroes*, in contrast, veers toward limited animation, eschewing the multiframe in favor of the singular canvas of the film frame. Hence, the inherent formal paradox of the motion comic: if it attempts to remediate the formal conventions of animation, it does so at the expense of its comic-book ancestor.

This brings us to *Watchmen: The Complete Motion Comic*, directed by Jack Strider Hughes, with illustrations and ink work credited to the original comic's artistic team.[11] The motion comic follows the original novel almost directly in terms of story and serialization. The series is fractured into twelve episodes, with each episode adapting one of the twelve issues of the comic. The first episode ("At Midnight, All the Agents . . .")

7 I direct the interested reader to Thierry Groensteen, *The System of Comics*, trans. Bart Beaty and Nick Nguyen (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2007).

8 Scott McCloud, *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art* (New York: Kitchen Sink Press, 1993), 65–69.

9 David Bordwell, Janet Staiger, and Kristin Thompson, *The Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style & Mode of Production to 1960* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), 70.

10 *Saw: Rebirth* (Eric R. Lieb, Kris Oprisko, and Renato Guedes, 2005).

11 *Watchmen: The Complete Motion Comic* (Jake Strider Hughes, 2008).

begins with a slow, backward zoom out of the Comedian's bloodied badge. As the zoom-out continues, voice actor Tom Stechschulte begins his narration of the captions that begin to appear: "Rorschach's journal. October 12th, 1985." Initially, the shot reads as a zoom-out of a motionless composition. However, as the shot continues to its thirty-second mark (which covers approximately the first three frames of the first page), movement begins to occur at the upper-right portion of the frame: a merchant is washing blood into the gutter as Rorschach's alter ego walks through the puddle. By the time the zoom-out reaches its point of origin upon the balcony of the Comedian's apartment, nearly one minute has passed. While the motion comic has animated the first page of the text, it has done so via the elimination of the multiframe and the abridgment and translation of the captions and dialogue into narration. Essentially, we are presented with a singular frame that encapsulates the progression of the first nine panels of the comic book and the temporality of the sequence is largely defined by the tempo of the voice-over, not the speed of the reader.

Once we reach the inside of the apartment, the motion comic's transpositions of the original book's panels depicts significant variations in framing. For instance, the first panel on the second page of the comic depicts three detectives talking in a deep-focus shot: a patrol officer's obstructed face is in the extreme foreground, one detective is in the middle ground examining a broken lock, and the third is looking out a broken patio window. The motion comic revises the panel by removing the officer from the foreground, initially providing a closer view of the second detective, who, once he finishes his dialogue, is ultimately removed from the frame by a slow zoom into the third detective. This reformatting is notable because the original text extensively utilizes static tableaus—three panels per row, three rows per page—to produce both a steady tempo and symmetrical multiframes (the fifth issue's layout is completely symmetrical). Yet it is as if Strider and the creative team felt the need to add camera movements to make the already-moving tableaus even more dynamic.

I should note that my goal here is not to account for all the alterations the team has made (it is an adaptation, after all!) but to examine how the comic is altered by its formal dialogue with animation and that dialogue's ultimate remediation into a motion comic. The following reverse shot of the detective looking out the window is noteworthy in this regard as Strider layers a stylistic device derived from cinematography into the shot: a shallow depth of field. Unlike the original comic panel, which keeps the entire space in focus for the viewer, the motion comic captures the focal distortion of what David Bordwell describes as "staging in depth."[12] Despite the fact that photographic distortion is not a by-product of animation, Strider built it in and created a multilayered, spatial remediation. The resulting end product remediates comics (Dave Gibbons's original artwork), animation (artificially produced movement), and the cinematographic apparatus (the aesthetic by-products of photography).[13]

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12 David Bordwell, *On the History of Film Style* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), 158–271.

13 Bolter and Grusin describe the same phenomenon as the attempted erasure of our awareness of a medium's presence (immediacy) via the use of multiple media forms (hyperimmediacy). See Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin, *Remediation: Understanding New Media* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1999), 20–51.

Another of Strider's deviations is the inclusion of all of the detectives' dialogue over shots set in the present. In the comic, the reader of the comic book "listens" to the detectives as they try to piece together what happened in the apartment, while Moore juxtaposes their present-time interactions in flashback panels. The dialogue between the detectives, both in the form of the word balloon in the present and in the form of the caption in the panels depicting the past, provides continuity to the sequence. The motion comic eschews that continuity by presenting the flashback panels as diegetic inserts, without captions or dialogue. Given the earlier discussion regarding how the soundtrack seems to slow down the action in order to stay in sync, this allows the flashback panels to retain their visceral quality. They function in both texts as short, visual bursts, depicting the violent struggle between the Comedian and his assailant. Using the dialogue as a through line would only prolong the sequence, and the decision to excise it allows the motion comic to capture the staccato rhythm of the original panel breakdown, even if the act of animation alters the effect it has on the reader or viewer.

Finally, one of Strider's most significant modifications of the original book involves the handling, and lack thereof, of Moore's, Gibbons,'s and Higgins's own remediations. The *Watchmen* (1986) comics series is known for being a multilayered text, a graphic novel taken literally. The legacy of the book is contingent on its status as both a deconstruction of the superhero and a deconstruction of the comic-book form itself. With regard to the latter, each chapter of the book ends with additional narrative information delivered in an alternate medium. For instance, one chapter ends with a textual duplication of a police case file, which has also been stylistically remediated by the creative team via illustrated textual artifacts (faux coffee stains and pieces of tape) and a range of different printing processes. The motion comic, however, avoids this narrative content almost completely.

In fact, the only remediation from the original graphic novel to survive the translation is the integration of the comic book *Tales of the Black Freighter*, a fictional comic-book title that one of the characters is shown reading at various times in the graphic novel; the comic book's theme parallels and intersects with the larger story. The personnel behind the original novel differentiated this comic-book material from the *Watchmen* narrative by simplifying the character design and utilizing a more baroque color scheme, reminiscent of the simplified color palates of earlier comic-book publishing. While Strider directly presents the viewer with the artwork of Gibbons and Higgins, he once again adds two noteworthy formal embellishments. The first, an additional layer of remediation, casts a halftone dot filter over the image. This gives the sequences the tactile appearance of newspaper print. Yet not even the representation of a diegetic comic book *within* the motion comic is aesthetically permitted to remain static. Paradoxically, the panels of the comic within the comic also move. It is as if stasis—within or between the frames—would be the kiss of death, killing the text's momentum by being too much like a comic and not enough like an animation.

Thus, the *Watchmen* motion comic graphically remediates Gibbons's and Higgins's original work while sacrificing the ambiguous spatial and temporal aspects of the original medium to motion. Specifically, the motion comic dictates the diegetic speed

for us and, by removing the multiframe and juxtaposition of separate panels, forbids us from becoming McCloud's "conscious collaborators."[14] Moreover, although the motion comic's presentation adds the additional remediations of photography's depth of field and halftone printing, it does so rather superficially. At every stylistic turn, *Watchmen: The Complete Motion Comic* favors animation and the "motion" of its namesake.

As alluded to throughout this essay, this unsustainable formal compromise is not unique to *Watchmen*. Although it is difficult to construct a concrete taxonomy of the motion comic because of the formal diversity exhibited by the medium, its texts generally avoid the textual properties of the comic. For instance, while *Watchmen* presents the viewer with dialogue balloons and textual captions, it simultaneously renders them narratively redundant through the use of voice-over narration. These motion comics simply do not have the formal vocabulary to successfully remediate the unique process of reading *Watchmen*. Just as the motion comic's director has noted, "No one will ever be able to take the experience of actually reading *Watchmen* away because of things like panel layout and even the way it's structured and organized."[15]

With the rise and fall of the contemporary motion comic, one young new media format has risen to fill the void: the motion book. Fueled by the rapid adoption of tablet devices like the iPad and Kindle (both of which launched in 2010), individual applications like Chris Ware's *Touch Sensitive* (2011) and *CIA: Operation Ajax* (2012) and publishers like MadeFire have attempted to reinstall the reader in animated comics. While *Touch Sensitive* and *Operation Ajax* feature both intra- and interpanel limited animation akin to that seen in motion comics like *Watchmen*, the key difference is that their bursts of movement are contingent upon the touchscreen swipes and clicks of the reader. Because of this significant change in interface, comics and animation have the means to engage in a balanced, formal dialogue. Yet time will be the true indicator of whether we should share Rorschach's belief when it comes to this new medium: "Never compromise. Not even in the face of Armageddon."   ✻

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14   McCloud, *Understanding Comics*, 65.

15   John Siuntres, "Word Balloon: *Watchmen Motion Comics*' Jake Hughes," *Newsarama.com*, January 28, 2009, http://www.newsarama.com/comics/010928-WB-Watchmen-Motion.html.

"Who makes the world?": *Before Watchmen*, Nostalgia, and Franchising

by Kathryn M. Frank

I n the field of comics studies, there are relatively few texts considered canonical, particularly for superhero comics. Perhaps more than any other, Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons's 1986–1987 series *Watchmen* stands in for the whole of the medium in classrooms and critics' lists. *Watchmen*'s appeal as an object of analysis is clear: as a self-contained story, it is easier to purchase and to read than many other superhero comics, whose story lines can stretch over years and are not always collected into neat volumes; it has also garnered critical acclaim to a degree that few other comics have. On the front cover of the trade paperback reprint of the series, DC touts *Watchmen*'s status as "one of *Time Magazine*'s 100 best novels"; the back cover includes a quote from *Time* calling *Watchmen* "a landmark in the graphic novel medium."[1] *Watchmen* stands alone on the list as the only comic worthy of inclusion alongside canonical literature such as *To Kill a Mockingbird* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four. Watchmen* also holds a special, if not singular, place in the pantheon for comics readers. Thirty years after its conclusion, the collected edition routinely places among DC's top sellers and is a standard holding for public and academic libraries alike.[2] *Watchmen* has also been credited, along with Frank Miller's *The Dark Knight Returns*, with ushering in an entire "dark era" of comics storytelling by inspiring superhero storytellers to create darker, "grittier" antiheroes and villain protagonists.[3] Although these violent antiheroes have not been as popular in comics recently as they were in the 1980s and 1990s, *Watchmen* is still held in high regard for its critical take on the role of superhero narratives in society and its formal experimentation with intertextuality and parallel structure.

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1 Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons, *Watchmen* (New York: DC Comics, 1995).

2 "Tilting at Windmills: BookScan Numbers Show Big Book Market Growth for Comics in 2014," *Comic Book Resources*, February 27, 2015, http://www.comicbookresources.com/article/book scan-numbers-show-big-book-market-growth-for-comics-in-2014.

3 Frank Miller, Klaus Janson, John Costanza, Lynn Varley, Dick Giordano, and Dennis O'Neill, *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns* (New York: DC Comics, 1986); Christopher Murray, "Holy Hypertexts! The Pose of Post-Modernity in Comics and Graphic Novels of the 1980s," in *Reflections on Creativity*, ed. Hamid van Koten and Sandra McNeil (Dundee, UK: Duncan of Jordanstone College, 2007), 14–15.

Given this critical and popular admiration, it is not surprising that reactions to proposed adaptations of (or additions to) the *Watchmen* universe have been largely negative. While Zack Snyder's 2009 live-action film adaptation was not universally panned, and has in recent years found both a cult audience and a place in academic analysis (particularly in adaptation studies), the *Before Watchmen* comics series has not yet found a similar niche in *Watchmen* fandom or scholarship.[4]

Before Watchmen, a series of prequel comics released from 2012 to 2013 by DC, spanned thirty-seven single issues and is available as four collected volumes in trade paperback and digital format. Each series focuses on a character from *Watchmen*, detailing the character's past and in some cases filling in his or her whereabouts or perspectives during the events of the original series. The characters profiled in *Before Watchmen* include the Minutemen, Silk Spectre and her daughter Silk Spectre II, the Comedian, Dr. Manhattan, Ozymandias, Rorschach, Nite Owl and his protégé Nite Owl II, Dollar Bill (one issue), and Moloch (two issues).[5] Despite containing approximately four times as much material as the original *Watchmen*, and some of the series garnering positive reviews from comics and media critics, the series has failed to generate the cottage industry of academic study that *Watchmen* boasts. *Before Watchmen*'s perceived position among fans as largely superfluous to the *Watchmen* canon can be understood as the result of a number of factors, including "fanboy" ire and inconsistent quality.[6] However, it deserves examination both in comparison and on its own merits for what it adds to the textual and industrial analysis of *Watchmen*. *Before Watchmen*'s content and the reactions to it reveal uneasy truths about nostalgia, franchising, and authorship in the comics industry.

Deconstructing and Reconstructing *Watchmen* Nostalgia. There seems to exist a kind of nostalgia about *Watchmen* that makes the overt expression of nostalgia in *Before Watchmen*—both in the content of the series and in its existence more generally—uncomfortable. *Before Watchmen* reminds the reader that *Watchmen* was a DC series, produced under contract to a major publisher and subject to the same impulse toward character licensing and franchising as any other DC or Marvel superhero series. The political message and implications of *Watchmen* and its deconstructive or postmodern use of form and language are two of the most explored topics in *Watchmen* scholarship.[7]

4 Jacob Brogan, "Stop/Watch: Repressing History, Adapting *Watchmen*," in *The Politics of Adaptation*, ed. Dan Hassler-Forest and Pascal Nicklas (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 214–226, http://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1057/9781137443854_16; Rjurik Davidson, "Fighting the Good Fight? Watching *Watchmen*," *Screen Education*, no. 54 (2009): 18.

5 Darwyn Cooke, *Before Watchmen: Minutemen/Silk Spectre* (New York: DC Comics, 2014); J. Michael Straczynski, *Before Watchmen: Nite Owl / Dr. Manhattan* (New York: DC Comics, 2014); Len Wein, *Before Watchmen: Ozymandias / Crimson Corsair* (New York: DC Comics, 2014); Brian Azzarello, *Before Watchmen: Comedian/Rorschach* (New York: DC Comics, 2014).

6 Poet Mase, "*Before Watchmen*: Dr. Manhattan #4 Review," *IGN*, February 27, 2013, http://www.ign.com/articles/2013/02/28/before-Watchmen-dr-manhattan-4-review-2.

7 Andrew Hoberek, *Considering "Watchmen": Poetics, Property, Politics* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2014); David Barnes, "Time in the Gutter: Temporal Structures in *Watchmen*," *KronoScope* 9, no. 1 (2009): 51–60; Richard Bensam, Julian Darius, and Timothy Callahan, *Minutes to Midnight: Twelve Essays on "Watchmen"* (n.p.: CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2011); Vyshali Manivannan, "Interplay amidst the Strangeness and

Whether or not *Watchmen* ought to be considered truly deconstructive or postmodern is a question beyond the scope of this brief essay, but the recurrence of these themes in analyses of *Watchmen* provides a lens for examining questions of nostalgia, both as represented in the texts and for the original *Watchmen* series.

One of the criticisms of *Before Watchmen* on a content level is that it is largely an attempt to evoke nostalgia for readers of the original series. *Before Watchmen: Dr. Manhattan* (DC Comics, 2012–2013) and *Before Watchmen: Ozymandias* (DC Comics, 2012–2013) have entire issues that largely reproduce scenes from the original series, with minimal added detail. Both of these series also include significant portions that take place during the events of *Watchmen*. While *Before Watchmen: Minutemen* (DC Comics, 2012–2013) is a true prequel, it mainly reproduces the *Under the Hood* segments from *Watchmen* in first-person form. *Minutemen* suggests that much of what was included as *Under the Hood* in *Watchmen* was sanitized by its in-universe writer Hollis Mason (the original Nite Owl), and that the truth was much seedier. However, it, too, largely relies on reproducing these known events from *Watchmen* with slightly altered contexts. *Silk Spectre* (DC Comics, 2012), a prequel and perhaps the *Before Watchmen* series with the most original content, references the original *Watchmen* in some overtly uncomfortable ways by referencing how much the sympathetic second Silk Spectre resembles and acts like her father, the immoral Comedian. In the third issue, one scene mirrors *Watchmen*'s rape of the original Silk Spectre by the Comedian with a fight scene between the second Silk Spectre (the first's daughter) and a criminal; in the fourth issue, the reader sees that the Comedian really cares for his daughter when he takes his iconic smiley-face button from her room and looks genuinely moved to see that she is fighting crime.[8] DC's characterization of the mirrored rape scene as a fun "Easter egg" evacuates the horror that is supposed to accompany the first scene and replaces it with nostalgia (Figures 1 and 2).[9]

Analyses of *Watchmen* have invoked Baudrillard to demonstrate the series's postmodern deconstruction of superheroes (and media in general).[10] These analyses note that its intertextuality and the glut of in-universe media information presented support Baudrillard's argument that the preponderance of media information and "meaning" leads to "the destruction of meaning."[11] *Watchmen*'s treatment of nostalgia similarly seeks to question the purpose of looking to the past. Adrian Veidt's Nostalgia perfume, a recurring image in the series, is described by the character in a company memo as an effort toward placating a nervous populace and necessarily reaching the

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the Charm: Under-Language and the Attenuation of Meaning in the Film Adaptation of *Watchmen*," *ImageTexT: Interdisciplinary Comics Studies* 5, no. 4 (2008): http://www.english.ufl.edu/imagetext/archives/v5_4/manivannan/.

8   For a more in-depth discussion of the problematic parallel in *Before Watchmen: Silk Spectre* and *Watchmen*, see William Leung's critical essay "Who Whitewashes the *Watchmen*? Part 2," *Hooded Utilitarian*, May 2013, http://www .hoodedutilitarian.com/2013/05/who-whitewashes-the-*Watchmen*-part-2/.

9   "5.2 Reasons *Before Watchmen* Is Turning Christmas into Easter," *DC Comics*, December 13, 2012, http://www .dccomics.com/blog/2012/12/13/52-reasons-before-*Watchmen*-is-turning-christmas-into-easter.

10   Ho-Rim Song, "Text's Resistance to Being Interpreted: Unconventional Relationship between Text and Reader in *Watchmen*," in *Practicing Science Fiction: Critical Essays on Writing, Reading and Teaching the Genre*, ed. Karen Hellekson, Craig B. Jacobsen, Patrick B. Sharp, and Lisa Yaszek (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2010): 118; Iain D. Thomson, *Heidegger, Art and Postmodernity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 149.

11   Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1995), 156.

Figure 1. The Comedian attacks Sally Jupiter (Silk Spectre), from *Watchmen* (DC Comics, 1986).
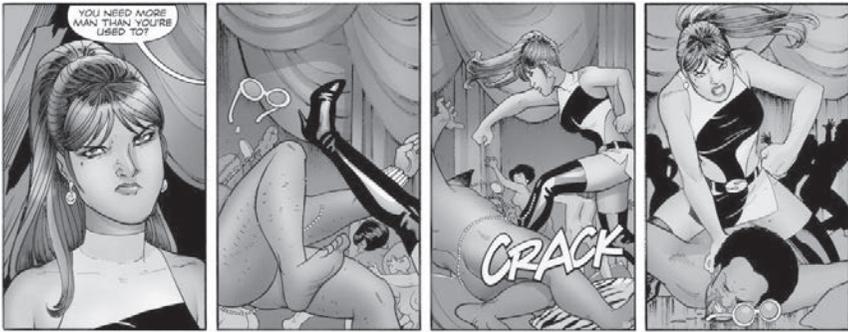
Figure 2. Laurie Juspecyzk (Silk Spectre II) beats a crime boss, from *Before Watchmen: Silk Spectre* (DC Comics, 2012).

limits of its efficacy in the shadow of nuclear war.[12] If *Watchmen*'s purpose is to question the status quo of superhero narratives by showing their futility and meaninglessness in the postmodern world of the series, then *Before Watchmen*'s additional information and invocation of the "visible myth of origin" (*Watchmen* itself) through reproduction suggest that *Before Watchmen* reveals the meaninglessness of *Watchmen* itself.[13] This philosophical understanding resonates with the idea that *Before Watchmen* somehow taints or disrespects the original, and threatens its canonicity by suggesting that it, too, lacks meaning.

 Before Watchmen's reliance on recognition of the *Watchmen* universe, repetition of scenes and themes from *Watchmen*, and insistence on references to disturbing scenes from the original series as Easter eggs points out that *Watchmen* was itself dependent on DC's eagerness to leverage licensed characters.[14] *Watchmen* is comprehensible without knowing the histories of Charlton Comics and other bygone comics

12 *Watchmen* no. 10 (New York: DC Comics, 1986–1987), 31. The final issues of *Watchmen* also feature a theater playing a double bill of Tarkovsky's *Nostalgia* and *Sacrifice* right before a presumed nuclear apocalypse (and an unexpected actual crisis), further advancing the idea that nostalgia "reassures us about our end" (Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, 10).

13 Ibid.

14 "5.2 Reasons *Before Watchmen* Is Turning Christmas into Easter."

characters, but its critique of superheroes and their morality is much stronger if the reader understands the narratives and structures that Moore and Gibbons appropriate or subvert. On a broader level, the project of *Before Watchmen* illuminates uncomfortable aspects of our feelings for *Watchmen*. Is it appropriate to insist on the purity of a text powered by pastiche and intertextuality (including a climactic crisis lifted whole cloth from an episode of *The Outer Limits* [ABC, 1963–1965])? Given *Watchmen*'s ambivalent, if not outright hostile, treatment of nostalgia within the text, is acknowledging nostalgia for the original series contrary to that series's intent?

Authorship, Franchising, and Who Owns the *Watchmen*. Although *Watchmen* is commonly referred to as a graphic novel, including on the cover of the 1995 trade paperback edition, the circumstances of its publications are distinct from those of most texts referred to as graphic novels.[15] *Watchmen* was conceived as a complete story by one author and one artist, as detractors of *Before Watchmen* rightly point out; however, it was not envisioned or published as a single-volume trade paperback.[16] Rather, *Watchmen* was originally published in single-issue volumes, like most other superhero comics, and then collected into a trade paperback. The formal features of *Watchmen*, especially its layouts, do not appear in their precise original formats in the common trade paperback version, and examinations of *Watchmen* as a text should take seriously the distinction between its format and those of graphic-novel original texts.

Watchmen is also frequently listed among "alternative" comics because of its mature content, subversion or deconstruction of superheroes, and authorial vision.[17] However, just as it does not strictly fit the format of a graphic novel, *Watchmen* differs from other "alternative" comics in that it was published by one of the "Big Two" publishers, DC Comics. DC and Marvel are the definition of "mainstream" against which alternative comics are measured. The slippage between non-mainstream or subversive content and alternative publication models is entrenched when it comes to prestige titles, but examining the industrial differences among these series is crucial for understanding how nostalgia for these titles develops and is preserved, and why the industry norms that are revealed when this nostalgia is challenged are so discomfiting. By emphasizing the cohesiveness of the story through the designation "graphic novel" and refraining from franchising the property for so long, the marketing of *Watchmen* had, until 2012, effectively masked its own origin; *Before Watchmen* encourages readers to compare the industrial contexts of the original and new series, revealing more similarities than differences when it comes to creators' relationships with major comics publishers.

The messy business of authorship, rights, and compensation in the comics industry has remained largely unchanged since Moore first clashed with DC over the series's legacy and what DC could, could not, should, or should not do with his and Gibbons's work. Contracts, freelancing, and intellectual property have been problems the comics

15 Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons, *Watchmen* (New York: DC Comics, 1995).

16 Noah Berlatsky, "Who Watches the *Watchmen*'s Watchers?," *Slate*, May 31, 2012, http://www.slate.com/articles/arts /culturebox/2012/05/before_watchmen_controversy_alan_moore_is_right_.html; Benjamin Woo, "Quis custodiet ipsos Prius Custodes?," February 3, 2012, http://www.benjaminwoo.net/news/2012/02/03/quis-custodiet-ipsos -prius-custodes.

17 Sara J. Van Ness, *"Watchmen" as Literature: A Study of the Graphic Novel* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2010), 18.

industry has failed to address substantively since Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster signed away the rights to Superman in 1938, despite increased reader awareness of creators' contributions (artists, inkers, and colorists have been receiving credits for decades) and fan skepticism toward franchising.

Robert Loss of the media blog *PopMatters* presents a cogent argument as to why *Before Watchmen* is morally reprehensible from a creator's rights standpoint, explaining that the insistence on the constant proliferation of new stories "means, in this case, that DC can finally capitalize on its branding, [and] there's no need to honor Moore's vision because he's not actually an author, in their understanding of the word, consciously or subconsciously."[18] Comics scholar Benjamin Woo, following on arguments about franchising from John T. Caldwell, suggests that "franchising denies not only co-creators of record . . . but also . . . many, many others who, in mixing their creative labor with the characters, made them, in a sense, their own."[19] Both Loss and Woo point out an uncomfortable truth that *Before Watchmen* reveals—that major comics publishers depend on the relative replaceability of their creative staff to satisfy demand for stories and merchandise centered on characters, and that *Watchmen* is not exempt from this franchising impulse because it is, and has always been, owned by DC. *Watchmen* does not exist outside the realm of exploitative business practices and struggle between corporations and creators; rather, it is a product of that very environment. This is not to suggest that regarding *Watchmen* as canonical or worthy of study is wrongheaded but to point out that its content (subverting expectations of superheroes) and its context (struggles over ownership and how said heroes ought to be portrayed) inform one another, and should be considered alongside one another.

Conclusion: Nothing Ever Ends. *Before Watchmen* represents a double-edged sword for *Watchmen* and its position as a prestige comic. Although the series garnered mixed reviews and never achieved grand sales numbers, it did draw attention to *Watchmen* and reinforced its position as standard-bearer of "quality" comics.[20] Its use of *Watchmen* nostalgia undermines the original series's brutal attitude toward idealizing the past but also demonstrates how much *Watchmen*'s appeal relied on readers' historical and genre knowledge. Although not necessarily groundbreaking in terms of form or content, *Before Watchmen* provides us an incisive lens through which to evaluate how and why *Watchmen* persists in popular and scholarly imaginations. Given that teaching comics often focuses on prestige titles and texts that can be accessed as one trade paperback, it seems unlikely that *Before Watchmen* will appear in many curricula or be incorporated

18 Robert Loss, "Fanboy Fury and Authoring *Before Watchmen*," *PopMatters*, August 20, 2012, http://www.popmatters .com/column/161948-fanboys-and-after-authoring/.

19 Benjamin Woo, "Why Is It So Hard to Think about Comics as Labour?," *Comics Forum*, December 9, 2013, http:// comicsforum.org/2013/12/09/why-is-it-so-hard-to-think-about-comics-as-labour-by-benjamin-woo/.

20 Each of *Before Watchmen*'s series experienced large drops in readership from the first issue to the second, with each final issue selling half the copies or less of the first issue. The trade paperback collections of the series averaged around five thousand copies sold in 2013. Numerical data are from trade publication *ICv2* and comics research website ComiChron. More detailed summaries using these data include Martin de la Iglesia, "*Before Watchmen*: Some Final Thoughts," *The 650-Cent Plague* (blog), June 30, 2013, https://650centplague.wordpress.com/2013/06/30 /before-watchmen-some-final-thoughts/; "*Before Watchmen* Sales Roundup," *Comic Book Sales Charts and Stats*, March 6, 2014, http://salescharts.blogspot.com/2014/03/before-watchmen-sales-roundup.html.

into the scholarly study of *Watchmen* specifically and comics more broadly, beyond this In Focus. Although *Before Watchmen* ended in 2013, there are still only a few scholarly texts that even reference it, let alone devote significant time to its content or form.[21] As with *Watchmen*'s ending, this brief exploration of *Before Watchmen* offers more questions than it answers. *Before Watchmen* may not have been a monetary hit and thus far has not seemed to affect the canonicity of *Watchmen* in the minds of critics, fans, or scholars. It does represent a rich case for examining discourses and practices of authorship and canonicity. Given my personal investment in comics and industry studies, I hope to see it mined more for what it can show us about the comics industry, franchising, labor relations, and nostalgic media.   ✳

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21 Hoberek, *Considering "Watchmen"*; Peter Waites, "On the Boundaries of *Watchmen*: Paratextual Narratives across Media," 2015, http://www.diva-portal.org/smash/record.jsf?pid=diva2:869023.

Watchmen from the Point of View of Cinema and Media Study

by Dana Polan

For thinking about medium specificity and contrast or comparisons among the practices of contemporary popular and media culture, I have personally found most productive the writings on radio music that Theodor Adorno crafted in American exile in the late 1930s and early 1940s and that were edited into a book, *Current of Music*, published in English in 2008.[1] Most of the material derived from Adorno's efforts as head of the Music Division of the Princeton Radio Research Project, which a number of scholars have considered a key early moment in the history of communication research. Wanting to understand what modern media of mass reproduction did to live performance—especially in works from that European tradition we associate most with classical music—Adorno looks at the technologies of radio and, for further comparison, the phonograph. If—and it's of course a big "if" given his well-known prejudices against the culture industry—we bracket out the ways Adorno turns distinctions among media into aesthetic judgments of the worthiness of this or that medium, Adorno can offer, to my mind,

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1 Theodor W. Adorno, *Current of Music*, ed. Robert Hullot-Kentor (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2009).

one of the most productive approaches to thinking out the specificities in and among media in all their concrete detail.

What's singular for me in Adorno's approach is that he looks, years before French apparatus theory, at what we might call the apparatical aspects of these media. For Adorno, potential differences among media are not just issues of content or meaningful style; they have to do with the entire institution of the forms from production to reception. The apparatus of a medium includes the sociology of its authorship, the basic effects inherent in its technologies and vehicle of transmission, its modes of dissemination, the psychical makeup of its audience, and so on. In other words, what describes a medium is not an ontology whether in form or content—or even a set of thematic or stylistic traits alone—but a social phenomenology, how that medium works materially in space and time: what it does to its consumers. To take one of Adorno's examples, listening to classical music on the radio often occurs domestically; it happens by the radio being turned on willfully by the listener and, unless that was done according to a program guide or some such, it means perhaps coming in on the middle of a piece of music—music, moreover, that one hasn't chosen for oneself. And in the 1930s, it would generally have meant listening to a live studio performance that would not have been repeatable. All these contribute in their way to the experience the listener then would have of radio music. Differently, then, phonograph listening (to continue Adorno's example) might well happen domestically, but this time even more at the will of the listener, choosing time and place and enabling mechanical repeatability and without radio's impression of liveness and sharedness, of many people listening to the same broadcast and at the same time. Differently from both of these would be a live performance at a concert hall: the listener chooses to go but at a time chosen by others and with a program chosen by others, and so on.

Adorno is reminding us that media always take place in contexts and that these make meaning as much as the expressive content or style of the works: there are contexts of material presentation, contexts of audience awareness and preparation, contexts of conventions agreed upon or negotiated over, protocols of reception, and so on, and all of these make the experience of the specific work. My own remit for this dossier on *Watchmen* is to think about what film and media studies might contribute to the understanding of comics, and Adorno's reflections are at the back of my reflections here. Of course, we can find formal similarities between comics and film, and scholars of comics have often been at pains to pinpoint these for reasons that are themselves often perhaps sociological, having to do with a new disciplinary area turning to another for inspiration or contrast. (Think, for instance, of Scott McCloud's groundbreaking *Understanding Comics*, replete with references to cinema.[2]) We can study traits like sequence, frame and gutter, and marked point of view, and find productive exchange and inspiration between media. But when we move from ontology to phenomenology—the lived experience within which we make meaning of media—the comparisons become more complex. Hence, the sheer interest of Scott Bukatman's recent book on *Hellboy*—which certainly analyzes formal traits and content *within* the comics, but also is very much about the bookishness of comic books and what happens

2   Scott McCloud, *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art* (New York: William Morrow, 1994).

when we read them precisely as books: what it means, that is, to hold a comics volume in one's hands (especially as it moves from soft cover to deluxe edition, something that we know also happened with *Watchmen*), what it means to read sequentially but also have an array of panels simultaneously present in one's view, what it means to feel the paper and turn pages, and so on.[3]

These are physical acts, but they are also acts of meaning, and in that respect they are social and historical even when we may be doing them alone, just one's self and the book. Take, for example, protocols of reception: even if we are not aware of them, we come to media with background trainings that either make us receptive to them or not, that make us literate in them or not, that make us able to even understand them or not, and that relate to both our personal biography and what we might call our social biography—class, education, and so on. I, for instance, grew up in my childhood and early adolescent years with both comics and film (and TV, but that took much longer to seem an object of study). But for reasons professional more than personal, comics have not been part of my life for close to fifty years. A graphic novel like *Watchmen* presupposes *that* sort of classic 1950s–1960s comic-book reading that I once engaged in (and *Watchmen* even allegorizes it in the little boy Bernie who consumes EC-like comics on the curb at a newsstand), but *Watchmen* also presupposes a subsequent history that one needs to be part of in order to really make full sense of what it is up to within the trajectory of comic books. The comic presupposes a lineage in which, for instance, superhero values have been deconstructed; in which the comics have taken on new legitimation; in which media have become multimedia (as in the interspersed sections of text of varying genres between *Watchmen*'s chapters); in which alternate-universe and what-if narrative bends have become more normalized; and above all in which it makes sense to think of comics aspiring to the qualities of modern(ist), ambitious novelistic form. All of this requires a media-specific literacy that is honed over time—both the time of the medium itself as it develops and the time of the individual consumer as he or she develops over time and either learns the protocols or not. To confess, once Blair Davis gave me my assignment to write on *Watchmen* from the point of view of cinema studies, I found it difficult to get into *Watchmen* and had to keep at it: the issue, again, wasn't one of aesthetic judgment but the fundamental one of not having the protocols to read modern comic books. To take just one example, *Watchmen*, especially in two chapters set on Mars, uses very complex time structures in which diverse moments of social history overall and personal biography overlap to come to exist on one plane of immanence. Perhaps the history of cinematic modernism could help in understanding this: for instance, it might be said that *Watchmen* here resembles the time-thought experiments of Alain Resnais, and we could then remember both that one of Resnais's most explicit forays in the realm is directly science fictional, the time-traveling film *Je t'aime, je t'aime* (1968), and that Resnais himself possessed, as Karen Beckman has best analyzed, a very strong investment in comics.[4] The point,

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3 Scott Bukatman, *Hellboy's World: Comics and Monsters on the Margins* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2016).

4 Karen Beckman, "Animating the *Cinéfils*: Alain Resnais and the Cinema of Discovery," *Cinema Journal* 54, no. 4 (2015): 1–25.

though, is that temporal modernism in *Watchmen* no doubt implies most a history of comic books and their own modernist history—how they sequence, how panels on a page relate to one another, and so on—and this may matter more for effective reading of the book than a sideways glance at the history of cinema and its own homegrown brand of modernism.

In passing, I would note how gratified I was, after writing these last lines, to turn to Thierry Groensteen's classic *The System of Comics* and find that he anticipated my use of the notion of reading protocols—*protocole* is precisely the word he uses in the French—and soon after cites *Watchmen* as one key example. Speaking of the "reader's knowledge of the illustrator" in relation to all other background knowledge the reader brings to a comic, Groensteen goes on: "[T]his knowledge is effectively determinant, behaving as an art that practices a lot of auto-reference, notably in the parodic mode, but also in the more serious regimes of homage or of critical rereading. For example, we do not fully understand the masterpiece that is *Watchmen* if we do not have any preliminary familiarity with superheroes."[5] (And of course, that's not the only background we need.)

Perhaps it's one quality of long-form comics—the graphic novel—to teach us over the course of many pages how to internalize protocols: we bit by bit learn the conventions (of at least the comic book presently in our hands) and use them as we move along the pages and then perhaps move to other comics. In a way, this is somewhat like what I argued for long-term serial television in my book on *The Sopranos* (HBO, 1999–2007): over time, one can become adept at figuring out connections, narrative and otherwise, between large sets of characters, even for long forms that demand big efforts of memory across large swaths of time (late seasons of *The Sopranos* might pick up a line of dialogue from much earlier—for instance, "Poor you," said by the mother Livia (Nancy Marchand) and then by girlfriend Gloria (Annabella Sciorra)—and expect us to remember that).[6]

In fact, if we're to think about the intermediality of comics, perhaps serial long-form television needs to be brought into the mix as much as cinema. Think, for instance, in Adorno's terms, of the material phenomenology of reception: although comics and television can have portability, newly so for the latter in an age of mobile devices, they historically have also been emphatically domestic forms and ones for which the consumer him- or herself often decides on the time and place of the reading or viewing (we probably don't randomly start reading any comic whatsoever and at any page whatsoever; much TV viewing, especially in the age of time shifting and appointment viewing, starts with the beginning of episodes and with viewer choice). If we think of comics and TV sociologically, it might be worth reflecting in this respect on the effect of ownership of the cultural product by the reader or spectator: where theatrical exhibition of movies in the classic studio days meant that one had to venture out to an experience that one paid for but didn't really possess, comic books can be owned and collected, and from the VCR on, TV shows can be owned and collected.

5   Thierry Groensteen, *The System of Comics*, trans. Bart Beaty and Nick Nguyen (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2007), 127. Special thanks to Bart Beaty for discussing by e-mail with me some of the translation choices.

6   Dana Polan, *The Sopranos* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009).

The ability to hold the medium, to feel it is one's own, changes our relationship to culture (as it does of course for movies now, too, in the age of small screens, DVDs, streaming, and so on). As I put it in my film history course when I teach the 1970s, challenging films from early in that decade often mastered their spectators, who came out different from when they went into the theaters; in contrast, franchise films from late in the decade and into the 1980s (and after) came to be mastered by their spectators, who stood as possessing consumers (video and tie-ins made the franchises all about collectibility), and this seems to change everything.

These comparisons of media of course are generalities: if TV viewing has some of the same consumer-end control as comics, such viewing certainly can become more casually "programmed" in some cases (e.g., turning on the TV to zap arbitrarily), or quite the contrary, it can be about unpredictable programming coming into the home without one's choice (emergency bulletins, for example, and it is perhaps interesting to note how much of the TV viewing in *Watchmen* is of this sort: people watching breaking news of crises and unexpected revelations). But TV and comics are most typically willful acts by the consumer performed in domestic isolation: when Comedian is broken in on in the first pages of *Watchmen*—in his home in the dark wearing a bathrobe and watching TV with a girlie magazine by his chair—he could also have been reading a comic book.

In fact, if we think of the media that show up in or are referenced in *Watchmen*, we get an interesting image of intermediality. As we know from, for instance, the role of TV *in* Hollywood movies of the 1950s (such as, say, the snowy screen the dad has fallen asleep to in *Rebel without a Cause* [Nicholas Ray, 1955]), the ways in which one medium references another historically can instruct us on how each constructs its identity in relation to others, whether seen as complement, inspiration, rival, or corrupt debaser (that last one, for what it's worth, is how Adorno sees radio sound in relation to the live symphony). In this respect, it may be illuminating to observe how rarely *Watchmen* references cinema. Even though it's about building a detailed, extensive world like ours in many respects (but, of course, not all: it's a what-if story), *Watchmen* presents an Earth in which movies have little presence. Lots of other media forms appear: newspapers, pulp magazines, right-wing screeds, personal journals, memos, scholarly articles, and lots of television (even to the extent of supervillain Adrian Veidt watching multiple screens at once and deriving a full theory of modernity from that). It seems to me that we can pinpoint just five or so mentions of cinema in *Watchmen*, and two, we see, interestingly make film more of a debased form than comic books themselves: there's a marquee for *The Day the Earth Stood Still* (Robert Wise, 1951), seen when half of New York is decimated (but it's not absolutely clear that it's the 1951 movie that's showing in this scene from the 1980s); there's a sandwich board (half cut off by the frame line for the panel it appears in) announcing a Tarkovsky season (at a cinema that seems to bear the name "New Utopia"); there's an allusion to the creative workers on a boat that eventually blows up thinking they're making a movie (rather than knowing they're helping in an alien invasion); and then there are two references to the world of B movies: footage shot of Sally Jupiter for a children's serial that doesn't get released and is reused for a terribly reviewed stinker (for which her name is spelled wrong), and when Adrian Veidt tells Rorschach and Nite Owl that he's devastated New York, he contrasts

his action to that that of a "Republic serial villain" who would make the mistake of announcing dastardly deeds in advance and giving heroes a chance to foil the plot. It's as if *Watchmen* were announcing its mature superiority over schlock cinema.

Of course, such explicit references to movies don't tell us anything about deeper complementarities (or lacks thereof) between cinema and comics. But they do suggest that the avenues we need to pursue in thinking out the intermediality of cultural forms can be quite complex and not easily answered by ontological theories that concentrate on formal or thematic traits and assume a fixed identity to works of art, high and low. Even as it references other forms of visual (and, as well, print) culture, *Watchmen* offers a particularity that is all its own, yet one that has more to do with the sociology of how we consume it (and these other forms) than with any sort of medium specificity that would somehow exist outside the practicalities and pragmatics of consumption.   ✳

Contributors

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