

“Who Watches the Watchmen?”: Ideology and “Real World” Superheroes

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SUPERHEROES. THE WORD CONJURES UP A VERY SPECIFIC IMAGE IN THE minds of many readers: the proud figure of Superman flying high above Metropolis or the silhouette of Batman crouched on a leering gargoyle keeping an eye on the citizens of Gotham. Both these men and other heroes such as Wonder Woman, The Flash, Green Lantern, or the Sub-Mariner are characters of comics' Golden Age (1938–1949), a time when readers were searching for methods of escape from a failing economy and the dangers of war. All of these characters, despite their various powers and realms, have one thing in common—they are archetypal visions of “the good guy.” Many are from faraway galaxies; they fight crime in the name of perfect justice. In short, they are unlike us, and because of this, they are impossibilities. For example, Superman, Wonder Woman, and Green Lantern can fly. The Sub-Mariner lives in an underwater society, swims at well over 100 miles per hour, and talks with all forms of marine life. Finally, Batman, the only major comic book character without any of these extraordinary capabilities, consistently triumphs over evil with an inhuman intelligence, a massive fortune, and a will that refuses to be broken.

Both children and adults flock to comic book stores each Wednesday—the day new weekly titles are released—to purchase what many of them lovingly call their “paper crack” because of its habit-forming nature. But what draws them to the addiction in the first place? The answer is simple. By placing these characters on pedestals as champions of justice and perfection, their creators also positioned them outside of the realm of ideology, the controlling force of the State as defined by

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Marxist philosopher Louis Althusser. Both State Apparatuses (primarily repressive forces such as the military, the government, and the police) and Ideological State Apparatuses (ISAs) (indoctrinating forces found in schools, churches, the family unit, and the media) ensure a population's submission to the ruling power. While it is true that each of these caped crusaders is aware of the existence of Ideological State Apparatuses such as religion, education, politics, and communication, none of them are controlled by these forces. Excluding those comics produced in the later years of World War II (many of which, like so many other forms of popular culture, did their part for the war effort), no superheroes claim to have an affiliation with a political party, none of them are particularly jaded by education, racism, sexism, or bigotry, and many of them, while they are in the news regularly, are not influenced by the images they see. Also, no superheroes fight crime or the forces of evil because they believe God is on "their side." It should be noted that religion, like the other ISAs, is not absent from the world of these superheroes, yet it is never their lone motivation. For example, Daredevil, a character from the Silver Age of comics (1950–1970), is an avowed Catholic; however, he does not perform his acts of vigilantism to serve God or a branch of the clergy.

Repressive State Apparatuses (RSAs) also hold no sway over these characters. Some, like Batman and Superman, choose to work with the government or the police to apprehend criminals, but it is done out of necessity, not dependence. Oftentimes, the superheroes seem to make these wings of the RSA seem inadequate—leaving criminals tied up neatly in the midst of stolen goods or evidence as if to say, "This is how it could be done without the bureaucratic red tape of warrants, Miranda laws, and chains of evidence." Their absolute power and freedom from the law make superheroes both an asset and a liability to the RSAs, for no one should be exempt from the control of the State. Therefore, from time to time, figures of authority deem the superheroes they depend upon to be menaces and attempt to try them in a court of law. This, naturally, rarely comes to fruition. After all, who else could defeat a giant spider from Mars or an invading race of lizards? This desire to be as liberated from the rules and constrictions of society as the heroes they know and love is what draws readers of comic books to the shop week after week. It should be noted, however, that this aspect of the comic world is changing. With each passing year, superheroes are becoming more involved in "real world" scenarios that mirror the current

political and social problems. What this reveals about those who write and read comics is another article entirely.

What is clear, however, is that the change began in the mid 1980s with the publication of three new works in the realm of comic books—Frank Miller's *The Dark Knight Returns*, Art Spiegelman's *Maus*, and Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons' *Watchmen*. The first of the three is known as a revisionist comic because the character of Batman, still in the fictional world of Gotham City, "was portrayed not as the square-jawed law-enforcer of earlier comics, nor as the camp, pop-art figure of the classic 1960s TV series, but as a brooding psychopath . . ." (Sabin 87). *Maus* comes closer to our world by describing the experiences of the creator's father during the Holocaust, but it does so anthropomorphically by making Jews into mice, Nazis into cats, and Poles into pigs. The work remains the only member of the realm of graphic novels to win the Pulitzer Prize, but even it falls short of the verisimilitude found in *Watchmen*, a comic that asks the rousing question, "What would happen to our concept of the superhero if such crusaders were a real part of *our* world?"

Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons set their story in the real world of 1985, albeit in a slightly altered form. Their version of New York is one in which Richard Nixon is still serving as President of the United States, people of the city eat takeout from restaurants like the Gunga Diner instead of McDonalds, and superheroes are as common as they are in a place like Metropolis. In many ways, the world of *Watchmen* is terribly close to our own, and the superheroes who live in it "exist at the mercy of contingent factors, which limit their actions . . . The superhero in *Watchmen* has become just another facet of society" (Reynolds 108–09).

These superheroes, unlike those of fantastic worlds and abilities, are completely caught up in ideology. Superman, Batman, Green Lantern, and the rest of the traditional good guys become superheroes for some intrinsic responsibility, but the brood in *Watchmen* choose to do it for much more mundane reasons—money, power, fame, or to promote their own ideology. The members of the first group of superheroes in *Watchmen* begin as individuals, but they eventually come together to form a team known as the Minutemen, a name taken from a group of soldiers in the American Revolution. Sally Jupiter, the first female superhero, becomes a crime fighter known as the Silk Spectre in hopes of furthering her own modeling career; she also pushes her daughter,

Laurie, into the same profession and name. A second superhero known only as Dollar Bill becomes popular working as "an in-house superhero by one of the major national banks," but dies when the cape the bank forced him to wear becomes tangled in a door, making him an easy target (Moore and Gibbons II, 30).¹

Other superheroes in *Watchmen* also don their outfits because of an ideological motivation. The original Nite Owl began as a member of the New York police department because of the "basic notions of decency that were passed down directly from [his grandfather]" (Moore and Gibbons I, 30). His desire to correct the "ethical revulsion" that fills him when he is exposed to the underbelly of "pimps, pornographers, and protection artists" prompts him to take more drastic steps to maintain law and order in his city (Moore and Gibbons I, 30). Captain Metropolis, a former Marine lieutenant, and the Comedian, a former cop and later Vietnam hero, are also enticed to become masked superheroes by their desire to enforce the law. The Comedian, however, becomes something quite different, which will be discussed later.

The last three original members of the Minutemen—Hooded Justice, Mothman, and Silhouette—join for reasons less clear-cut than those listed above. It is mentioned that Hooded Justice, a character who appeared in a hood with a hangman's noose around his neck, openly expressed "approval for the activities of Hitler's Third Reich" (Moore and Gibbons II, 30), and that Mothman "cultivated left-wing friends during his student days" (III, 29). These descriptions would seem to indicate that both men were motivated to become superheroes because of socialist or fascist ideologies, but the fact that an ideology is present still remains. Finally, Silhouette, an openly lesbian woman in the 1940s, seems compelled to join the Minutemen by a cultural (or perhaps subcultural) ideology, and in another example of ISAs playing a role, controlling both the actions of superheroes and how they are perceived by society, she is quickly shunned by the group because of the bad publicity she generates. The Minutemen enjoy success for approximately ten years before the "belated realization of just how much of a fad [they'd] always been . . ." sinks in (Moore and Gibbons III, 29). Eventually, many of them, after appearing before the House UnAmerican Activities Committee, disappear by simply taking off their masks and becoming "average citizens."

Up until this point in the graphic novel, it is easy to see that Moore and Gibbons have created superheroes who are nothing more than

individuals caught up in an ideology. There is no grand scheme, no great plot where the Minutemen thumb their collective nose at the repressive state. None become superheroes to avenge their dead parents, eradicate tyranny, or bestow justice on the world. These superheroes are perceived by their public much like comic book fans themselves are perceived in our society—as outcasts—albeit a sort that takes some sort of delight in running around with their underwear *outside* their pants. It is not until the second generation of superheroes (known as the Watchmen) emerge that the connection begins to get hazy and the role of ideology begins to shift.

Captain Metropolis attempts to re-form a group of superheroes together under the terribly hokey moniker of “The Crimebusters,” but the heroes quickly find that they cannot work well together. Throughout the rest of the book, many of the superheroes work in pairs to quench civil unrest, but the team as a whole never cements together. Laurie Juspezyk, now working as the Silk Spectre in place of her mother, and Dan Dreiberg, an ornithologist who has replaced Hollis Mason as Nite Owl, still fit into the stereotypical mold of their predecessors. The former becomes a crime fighter because of her mother’s wish to live vicariously through her. The latter adopts the identity of a pre-existing superhero not so much out of hero worship but as an outlet for his love of owls, a condition generated in the Ideological State Apparatus of education and the considerable fortune left to him by his deceased parents. Again, neither of them has a particularly noble or stunning reason for the decision to become a superhero; they are simply unable to see the larger world of familial and educational ideologies that prompted them to become superheroes.

Also present at the original meeting of The Crimebusters is the Comedian, the only member of the Minutemen who managed to stay active and in the public eye. He has traded in his flashy costume of yellow silk for one made of heavy-duty leather and now works for the United States government. Through his experiences in war, he becomes a “ruthless, cynical and nihilistic” man who is “capable of deeper insights than the others” in the room (Reynolds 106). When Ozymandias, the self-proclaimed “most intelligent man in the world,” speaks up and claims that the problems within the group could be solved by the proper leadership and organization, the Comedian is instantly at odds with him, and the former’s assertion that “America

has problems that need tackling" is met with a revealing answer (Moore and Gibbons II, 10). The Comedian states:

Damn straight. An'it takes a moron to think they're small enough for clowns like you guys to handle. What's going on in this world, you got no idea. Believe me You people are a joke. You hear Moloch's back in town, you think "Oh, boy! Let's gang up and bust him!" You think that matters? You think that solves anything? It don't matter squat. Here—lemme show ya why it don't matter It don't matter squat because inside thirty years the nukes are gonna be flyin' like maybugs and then Ozzy here is gonna be the smartest man on the cinder . . ." (II, 10–11)

During his speech, the Comedian takes a lighter from his pocket and burns a map of the United States labeled with words like "Drugs," "Promiscuity," "Anti-war demos," and "Black unrest," words that are much more closely suited to control by the enforcers of the State than by superheroes. The Comedian has seen the reason for these uprisings first hand, and he knows that they are nothing more than symptoms of an underlying disease. Because of his experience, he is able to see more deeply into the truth of American ideology, but like Laurie and Dan, he is unable to do much about it. As he says, "Once you figure out what a joke everything is, being the Comedian's the only thing that makes sense I never said it was a good joke! I'm just playing along with the gag" (Moore and Gibbons II, 13).

Although he is of a mindset similar to that of the Comedian, Walter Joseph Kovacs (AKA Rorschach) also shares Ozymandias' view that society has problems that desperately need correction; however, his vigilante methods are undeniably more stringent than the rest of his compatriots'. Born to a prostitute mother without any clue as to the identity of his father, Rorschach sees much of the ugliness of the world before the age of twenty. While working as an unskilled laborer in a garment factory, Walter runs across a dress that was made as a special order but abandoned because everyone felt it was ugly. The dress, which was made out of two layers of white Latex and filled with a black fluid, closely resembles a Rorschach inkblot test. Walter states, "Wrong. Not ugly at all. Black and white. Moving. Changing shape . . . but not mixing. No gray," and takes the dress home with him (Moore and Gibbons VI, 10).

After learning how to cut the fabric without releasing the fluid, he puts the scraps into a box and forgets about them until he reads a story

about a woman named Kitty Genovese being murdered while her neighbors looked on. Her name stands out in his mind because she is the young woman who had placed the special order for the abandoned dress, and the murder, another real event incorporated by Moore, gives Walter a reason to go back to those scraps. "I knew what people were then," Walter says. "Behind all the evasions, all the self-deception. Ashamed for humanity, I went home. I took the remains of her unwanted dress, and made a face that I could bear to look at in the mirror" (Moore and Gibbons VI, 10).

The mask not only gives the superhero Rorschach his name; it is also a symbol that represents his view of society and justice—both of which he perceives in very black and white terms. For Rorschach, there is good and there is evil. Truth and lies. Like the mask he believes is his true face, there is no gray in his judgment of society, and because society is cruel and merciless, so is he. As Brent Fishbaugh writes, "He joins the fad of costumed crimefighting not for fun, but out of guilt—guilt over what his entire race has become, guilt spawned not just from the events [that] surround Kitty Genovese's death, but from his own misbegotten upbringing" (193).

However, the mask he wears also contains a deeper meaning. Like an inkblot test, society also sees what it will of itself *in Rorschach*. Many of the characters in the novel (superhero and normal citizen alike) view him as unclean, disturbing, and somewhat psychotic, but others see him as a powerful vigilante capable of doing great things. For every man Rorschach has killed, he has also rescued a child or stopped a drug dealer, so while some view him as a half-crazed man who cares little for society, the reverse can also be true. Like the Comedian, Rorschach is painfully aware of the state of human affairs, but aside from his attempts to act as judge and jury for the criminals he captures, he can do little to stop the larger pattern of problems he sees.

The last two superheroes present at the failed Crimebusters meeting, Ozymandias and Dr. Manhattan, are two characters who see the workings of the world within ideology; however, unlike the Comedian and Rorschach, both of them have the ability to impact the world on a much larger scale. Ozymandias has become as powerful as Alexander the Great and Ramses II, the two men he idolizes, through a determined effort to perfect the mental and physical abilities that lie within every human being. Dr. Manhattan, the only character in the book who could be classified as a true "superhero," garnered his

abilities through a quintessential Silver Age comic book method: a nuclear accident.

While both men see that the world is poised on the brink of a nuclear crisis, they take very different approaches to assess the situation. Adrian Veidt (AKA Ozymandias) believes it is his responsibility to save mankind from itself, and by using the superheroes with which he once worked, he accomplishes the goal in a very strange and macabre way. Ozymandias states, "[Because I was] unable to unite the world by conquest . . . Alexander's method . . . I would trick it; frighten it towards salvation with history's greatest practical joke" (Moore and Gibbons XI, 24). That practical joke is a skillfully designed "alien life form" created by various writers, artists, and filmmakers and transported using the technology created by Dr. Manhattan, but the process is unstable. Ozymandias' creation, which is dropped in the middle of New York, explodes upon arrival, killing three million people instantaneously. The rest of the world, terrified at the thought of being attacked by an alien life form, turns their nuclear weapons toward the sky and away from each other. Nite Owl, Rorschach, Dr. Manhattan, and the Silk Spectre all learn of the plan thirty-five minutes *after* it has taken place, and for the sake of humanity, all but Rorschach, who is murdered for his refusal to compromise, agree to never speak of what they have learned.

Ozymandias tells the others that on the very night of the Crimebusters' meeting, the Comedian's words made him genuinely understand the "fragility of [the] world in increasingly hazardous times," and that to begin to formulate a solution, he "[stood] back as far as [he] could to view the problem from a fresh perspective . . ." (Moore and Gibbons XI, 20–21). His wealth, intelligence, and concentration on past societies have already well removed him from the ideological trappings of the world and into one based on his own system of belief, and with each step back in perspective, Ozymandias is still further removed. The murder of three million people is nothing more than a means to an end for Ozymandias because he feels that "he is not out to conquer the world but rather to save it from itself, . . . but his pride, his limitless hubris in the belief that only he could [somehow transcend ideology and] save the world, leads to his possible failure" (Fishbaugh 196).

Louis Althusser states that "the State and its Apparatuses only have meaning from the point of view of the class struggle, as an apparatus of class struggle ensuring class oppressing and guaranteeing the conditions of exploitation and its reproduction. But there is no class struggle

without antagonistic classes" (125). The change in mindset from "Us versus Them" to "One World, One Accord," which is posted on walls across New York after the "attack," can only be temporary. Ozymandias' empire of peace, like those created by Alexander and Ramses II, is destined to crumble if the truth becomes known because "the State apparatus . . . may survive political events which affect the possession of State power" (Althusser 94). Simply put, no matter how elaborate or cunning Ozymandias' plan may be, he can do nothing to change humanity (or ideology).

Little does Ozymandias know that Rorschach, before leaving New York to confront him in his fortress in Antarctica (the chic place for a secret base of operations), left behind the journal in which he had recorded all he knew of the plan and the people who had died because of it. That journal eventually finds its way into the hands of newspaper editors at the *New Frontiersman*, a publication full of various forms of propaganda. Because of the world peace accord generated by Ozymandias' deception, "Nobody's allowed to say bad things about [their] good ol' buddies the Russians any more . . .," so new filler material must be found for their front page (Moore and Gibbons XII, 32). Readers are left to assume by the last panel that Rorschach's journal becomes that material and that the class struggle Althusser states is essential to the continuation of state power will persist in the future.

Like Adrian Veidt, Jon Osterman (AKA Dr. Manhattan) is a character created by ideology, but he is the only one who is eventually freed from it. As a young man, he is training to become a watchmaker like his father, but when nuclear bombs are dropped on Japan, his father asserts, "Ach! These are no times for a repairer of watches. This changes everything! There will be more bombs. They are the future. Shall my son follow me into an obsolete trade? No My son must have a future" (Moore and Gibbons IV, 3). Because of the pressure brought to bear upon him by his father, Jon attends Princeton where he receives a PhD in atomic physics and eventually becomes a member of a nuclear research team stationed at Gila Flats. At this point in his life, he is still firmly under the control of both the family and educational ISAs, but his statement, "Other people seem to make all my moves for me" indicates that he is aware of their presence (Moore and Gibbons IV, 5).

When Jon is killed in a reactor, he plays repairman on himself and places all the molecules of his displaced body back in the correct

sequence. He returns as a true superhero, capable of disassembling matter with his mind, understanding the cyclic nature of time, and transporting himself and others through time and space. The government finds that Jon, whom they dub Dr. Manhattan (after the Manhattan Project), is a very persuasive and powerful weapon in the confrontation with the USSR.

During a quarter-century stint working for the government, Dr. Manhattan single-handedly wins the Vietnam War in two weeks and creates multiple solutions to energy and conservation problems. As he performs these amazing feats, he wears a uniform provided by the State, which would seem to indicate he will be fully controlled by it, but his liberation begins shortly after he agrees to act the part. He quickly deems the helmet and the complicated molecule meant to be his symbol meaningless because Jon Osterman, the man who allowed others to control him, is now Dr. Manhattan. He asserts, "They don't know what I need. You don't know what I need. If I'm to have a symbol, it shall be one I respect" (Moore and Gibbons IV, 12). He then burns the symbol for hydrogen into his forehead and casts the helmet aside. As the work progresses, Dr. Manhattan gradually rids himself of further control at the hands of the State, which is evidenced by the condition of his uniform. In the early stages of his development, he is manipulated, and the costume completely covers his body (Reynolds 30). This progresses to a short leotard, a small "loin cloth" around his waist, and eventually, when he is free from his former culture's ideological restraints, he wears nothing at all. In a sense, he is like Ozymandias, removed from the old State that controlled him. His nakedness becomes a symbol, one that represents his own beliefs and personal ideology.

Strangely enough, as the pieces of his costume vanish, so, too, do his connections with humanity. He states, "The newspapers call me a crimefighter, so I fight crime . . . The morality of my activities escapes me," and the separation only continues as he witnesses the war in Vietnam (Moore and Gibbons IV, 14). Eventually, he becomes disinterested in the affairs of mankind because, as Moore said in an introduction he wrote to a subsequent edition of *Watchmen*, "He is no longer human enough to be driven mad by the experience, he is no longer human enough to feel an attachment to the world and its concerns" (qtd. in Fishbaugh 195). However, this does not mean that he is unaware of the part that time and ideology have laid out for him to play in the events now set in motion. "We're all puppets . . ." he says to

Laurie. “I’m just a puppet who can see the strings” (Moore and Gibbons IX, 5). Sadly, being aware of ideology does not mean one is free of it.

However, Dr. Manhattan illustrates that he is just that when he refuses to condone or condemn the actions taken by Ozymandias. The complicated life on Earth no longer interests him enough to remain, yet, unlike the others, Dr. Manhattan is aware that the peace created at the cost of three million lives will not last. When asked by a triumphant Ozymandias, “I did the right thing, didn’t I? It all worked out in the end,” he replies, “In the end? Nothing ends, Adrian. Nothing ever ends” (Moore and Gibbons XII, 27). Dr. Manhattan has truly attained the perspective Ozymandias sought in his musings. He is capable of viewing all time and space simultaneously, and ideology is another mechanism to study and evaluate for Jon, not a cycle that will hold him indefinitely.

The question that became the genesis of this article was taken from the very title of the graphic novel itself. “Quis custodiet ipsos custodias,” or “Who watches the watchmen?,” a quotation taken from Juvenal’s *Satire VI*, is one that Moore and Gibbons incorporate into several panels throughout the comic. For Superman and the rest of his Golden and Silver Age ilk, the answer is simple. They are answerable to no one but themselves, for they are above and beyond the worlds they choose to save. However, in a world like ours, which is built on production, power, infrastructures, and superstructures, one in which the State is the ultimate authority to which we all answer, who controls the superheroes? Who watches the watchmen? Once again, the answer is simple: we are all subjected to that same power—that of ideology.

NOTES

1. Because *Watchmen* was released in twelve individual issues, all citations of the text will include chapter and page number.

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