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Transtextuality in Fiction: Alan Moore's Comic Book Series *Watchmen* as a Meditation on Power

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Introduction

The definition of art has been discussed and debated throughout the ages. The most agreed-upon definition is undoubtedly that of Plato and Aristotle who defined it as “mimesis” (Aristotle 23). Although both disagreed on how such mimesis should be conveyed in the literary realm, they nevertheless agreed on defining art as “an imitation of life” (Aristotle 23). In this regard, one may argue that the realm of comic studies constitutes a good instance of the mimetic nature of art. As Will Eisner¹ claims, “In the main, comics are a representational art form devoted to the emulation of real experience.” (Eisner 93) Indeed, the intermedial combination of images and text to tell a story renders such imitation almost tangible and real. In addition to being an emulation of real life, comics, or “sequential art” (Eisner 1-2) as Eisner defines it, invite readers to ponder about a myriad of issues regarding society. In the case of Alan Moore's *Watchmen*, the issue at hand is briefly summarized by the writer as a “Meditation upon power.” (Moore, Alan Moore Talks-02-Watchmen 02:33-02:36) in which each superhero character represents different sorts of power in a world of escalating conflict. In this respect, it may be interesting to study how Moore conveys this message in his comic book series *Watchmen*. Noticeably, Moore seems to resort to different transtextual techniques to transmit his ideas on power as well as the verisimilitude of *Watchmen*. Thus, this article aims to discuss Moore's *Watchmen* through a transtextual lens in an attempt to draw focus on the ways in how Moore meditates on power.

1. Transtextuality in *Watchmen*

Transtextuality is a term coined by the French theorist Gérard Genette who defines it as a form of textual transcendence in which a reader must take

1. Will Eisner was an American writer and cartoonist who revolutionized Comics Studies. He was amongst the first who taught Comic Studies as a literary discipline at the university of New York.

into consideration “all that sets the text in relationship, whether obvious or concealed, with other texts.” (Genette, *Palimpsests* 56). Through this, Genette acknowledges that no text is self-borne and emphasizes the inevitability of intertextuality within texts. However, he goes a step further and posits a new post-structuralist way of reading a text in which intertextuality is only one of the many elements to take into consideration during the probing of a text.

Indeed, Genette divides transtextuality into five main categories. First, intertextuality; The latter's definition is considerably refined from the broad definitions of Julia Kristeva and Roland Barthes who wrote prolifically about the term. Intertextuality for Genette is anything that sets a relationship between one text with another text. It could be a quotation, an allusion, or even plagiarism. (Genette, *Palimpsests* 98) for the simple reason that for Genette, an intertextual instance may be explicit or implicit. In *Watchmen*, there is a great deal of intertextual allusions that take back the readers to reality through the use of events, pictures and quotes from realistic figures. As Sara J. Van Ness claims

Watchmen includes a variety of stand-alone written documents for the readers to view in their entirety. There is a wide range of expository materials (included through issue 1 to issue 11), which are documents that provide readers with materials from within or outside *Watchmen*'s world. References to these materials are made directly in the chapters that precede them. At times, these materials give the reader a voyeuristic look into particular characters' lives. Other documents are published materials with which the characters are familiar. (Van Ness 30-31)

Van Ness' criticism on the expository materials in *Watchmen* sheds light both on intertextuality and on the apparent transtextuality of the comic book. Indeed, this passage hints at another transtextual category which Genette calls “paratextuality” (Genette, *Paratexts* 24). The latter englobes all the texts surrounding the main text. Examples of these are titles, illustrations, prefaces, epigraphs etc. In this regard, the reference to the different materials and documents published throughout the issues in *Watchmen* which Van Ness describes in the above-mentioned passage are all paratextual references while being intertextual at the same time. In many ways, all transtextual elements are woven together and almost inseparable within a text as Genette argues in *Palimpsests* (1982). Indeed, in *Watchmen*, the paratext may also be regarded as metatextuality, which is another transtextual category that Genette describes

as something that “unites a given text to another, of which it speaks without necessarily citing it, in fact sometimes even without naming it.” (Genette, *Palimpsests* 4). A metatext for Genette is a text that comments on itself or criticizes another text within the text. Instances of that in *Watchmen* are the documents mentioned at the end of each issue, as well as the *mise-en-abîme* of the *Tales of the Black Freighter*, which is a comic book series integrated within *Watchmen* as a critique on one of the “Watchmen” superheroes. The *mise-en-abîme* of a comic within a comic gives a certain metatextual dimension to *Watchmen* that highlights the fictionality of the text at hand.

The criticism of superheroes is at the core of *Watchmen*. As Van Ness argues while quoting David Hughes “*Watchmen* breathed a new life into the genre, establishing the cynical comic book hero as a staple of the superhero fiction.” (Van Ness 13) Indeed, Alan Moore portrays in his comic book series a group of six vigilantes who call themselves the “Watchmen” in an unusual fashion that drifts away from the traditional comic book genre.² The heroes, namely Dr. Manhattan, Ozymandias, Rorschach, Nite Owl, Silk Spectre and the Comedian, are all mere parodies to other already existing superhero comics. In this regard, Moore claims that “People thought that perhaps at best, it [*Watchmen*] may be a cynical joke about superheroes.” (Moore, Alan Moore Talks-02- Watchmen 00:41-00:50) The viewing of these superheroes as a “joke” emphasizes on the parodical aspect of the “Watchmen”, which leads to a subversive genre of the comic book in which superheroes are criticized. This subversion of the genre suggests that *Watchmen* is both hypertextual and architextual, which are the two remaining categories of Genette’s transtextuality.

Hypertextuality according to Genette is “the relation between a text and a text or genre on which it is based but which it transforms, modifies, elaborates or extends.” (Mirenyat and Soofastaei 536) In *Watchmen*, the way Moore subverts the genre by creating a new kind of superhero which is rather cynical as Van Ness and Moore claim, is an instance of transforming and modifying the genre, which ultimately renders it hypertextual. Finally, the architextual element lies in this genre that Moore subverts. Indeed, Genette defines architextuality as “the most abstract and implicit of the transcendent categories, the relationship of inclusion linking each text to the various kinds of discourse of which it is a representative.” (Genette, *The Architext* 36) In other words, an architextual reading of a text, although quite abstract, may be regarded as a comparative study on the genre to which the text belongs.

2. The traditional comic book genre entails the classical superhero genre whose heroes are flawless and endowed with a great sense of justice and responsibility.

In the case of *Watchmen*, it is about denoting the similarities and differences between the comic book genre with other comics, which Moore undeniably seems to seek to review and change through his innovative writing techniques and the portrayal of his unconventional superheroes.

Noticeably, all of the categories that Genette thoroughly describes blend seamlessly. Together, these transtextual categories are the ingredients that establish transtextuality. Studying a text from a transtextual approach enables the critic to uncover the subtle ways in which a writer makes a statement on reality through his writing. Indeed, a transtextual reading of a text emphasizes on the fictionality of it, which allows an objective reading to take place. In the case of Alan Moore's *Watchmen*, a transtextual reading uncovers how Moore comments on power through his fiction.

2. *Watchmen* as a Dystopian Comic Book Warning

Watchmen is a comic book that tells the story of a group of six vigilantes who ceaselessly attempt to save mankind from its destruction. The story takes place in an alternative reality in 1986 wherein the U.S has won the war against Vietnam thanks to one of the "Watchmen" superheroes, Dr. Manhattan. In addition to that, an impending nuclear threat looms around the corner due to an escalating conflict between nations in Afghanistan. Noticeably, the uchronic³ plot of *Watchmen* suggests a dystopian setting. Similar to any other literary form, dystopia is a mimetic attempt at depicting societal issues through fiction. The issues tackled in dystopian writings are often political. Indeed, the most notorious dystopian prose, namely George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451*, or Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* all denounce the manipulation of totalitarian regimes while pondering about the concept of power. Often, writers imagine a post-apocalyptic world in which human progress has led to their own demise, or as in Alan Moore's case, an alternate reality that sheds light on human fatalistic flaws that may lead to humanity's destruction. In an interview, Alan Moore affirms such claims saying that "Most dystopian science fiction is not actually about the future; it is about the times in which it was written." (Vylenz, *The Mindscape of Alan Moore* 15:25-15:30) Hence, *Watchmen* being dystopic, may be a warning that challenges the concept of power by inviting the reader to meditate on the latter.

From an architextual perspective, Alan Moore's *Watchmen* is undoubtedly a comic book genre. According to Scott McCloud, comic books are

3. Uchronia is a new English word-in-formation. It is a subtype of dystopian fiction which focuses on the portrayal of alternative realities in history.

“Juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence, intended to convey information and/or to produce an aesthetic response to the viewer.” (McCloud 9) In other words, a comic book is a medium that sequentially blends text and images to produce meaning. Hence, *Watchmen*, which is a medium that uses images and texts in a sequential art form may be regarded as a comic book genre. However, *Watchmen* is also dystopian, which renders it a dystopian comic. This premise suggests that *Watchmen* tackles a political discourse within its pages. Indeed, Moore claims that

“*Watchmen* grew out of the politically shadowy landscape of the 1980s, when the Cold War was probably at its hottest in 20 or 30 years and when nuclear destruction suddenly seemed a very real possibility.” (Vylenz, *The Mindscape of Alan Moore* 18:28-18:40)

This claim from the writer himself in his comic suggests that Moore’s dystopian narrative was carefully chosen for a meditation on the politics of the 80s.

Comic books have often been regarded as nonsensical cartoons whose target audience was children and teenagers at best. However, as Eisner contends, “From the viewpoint of art or literature, this [Comics] medium can deal with subject matters and themes of great sophistication.” (Eisner 132) Which means that comics can tackle deep and even philosophical themes such as the holocaust in Art Spiegelman’s *Maus*, or the climate crisis in Alan Moore’s *Swamp Thing*, or the notion of power in Moore’s *Watchmen*. In 1988, Alan Moore’s *Watchmen* showed that comics were far from being nonsensical after winning the Hugo Award that not only classified it as a science fiction genre legitimate to be a dystopia, but also as a literary medium acknowledged on a par with novels. The architextual reading of *Watchmen* allows us to see how the genre of this art form leads us to understand how it conveys notions of power. Indeed, by understanding that the text is linked to comics and dystopia, we are most likely to assume a political discourse that ponders power dynamics, which provides a significant clue in the comprehension and analysis of the text.

3. Who Watches the Watchmen?

Moore questions and subtly meditates on power through his comic book. The clues he sets for the reader fall under a peripheral vision in which the reader only catches a glimpse of a sentence on a wall, a heading in a journal, or a picture on a table. These are the paratextual references that Moore employs to send certain messages to the reader.

Noticeably, most of these messages invite the reader to ponder the notion of power. The most prominent and recurring one is the epigraph "Who watches the Watchmen?" which is inscribed at the end of the final issue in Latin "Quis custodiet Ipsos custodes?" as quoted originally by the Roman poet Juvenal. This question was addressed by the poet when he was questioning the integrity of the guards posted to ensure his wife's fidelity. In *Watchmen*, this question seems to be the motto of the writer, Alan Moore, who displays it on the wall of different panels around his comic book issues. It addresses the group of vigilantes known as the "Watchmen" in a paratextual and intertextual fashion. As Van Ness claims

"Who watches the watchmen? Scrawled on walls, in alleyways and on fences throughout the backgrounds of Moore and Gibbons' comic, the question reflects public unrest over the presence of legal masked adventuring prior to the 1977 inception of the Keene Act." (Van Ness 61)

The Keene Act was a law that rendered vigilantism illegal in 1977 in the universe of *Watchmen*, which led to the "Watchmen" becoming illegal vigilantes who were engaging in acts of heroism without people's consent. People voting for this law, as well as the inscriptions of this quote on the different walls and Moore quoting it as an epigraph, suggest that both Moore and the characters within his story question the notion of power. In this regard, Moore invites readers to question even what seems to be unquestionable, in the sense that the integrity of a watchman/guardian must also be put into question. Through his motto, Moore encourages readers to ask, what guarantees the integrity of a guardian/watchman? This line of questioning, when combined with the depiction of Moore's superheroes in *Watchmen* sheds light on the hamartia of every hero in a fictional narrative. A hamartia which is ultimately and quite frequently related to the hero's inescapable human condition, as Moore contends

"We treated these fairly ridiculous superhuman characters as more *human than super*. We were using them as symbols of different kinds of ordinary human beings rather than as different super beings." (Vylenz, *The Mindscape of Alan Moore* 19:01-19:19)

Indeed, the superheroes in *Watchmen* are flawed and immoral. Far from the idealized depiction of a Manichean superhero who knows right from wrong and always chooses the good side, the "Watchmen" are "more human than super" as Moore claimed, which leads them to choose the wrong side and

most of the time out of pure self-interest. Silk Spectre (Laurie Juspecky) and Nite Owl (Daniel Dreiberg) for instance, go back to vigilantism because they missed the thrill of adventuring, which was ignited when they were about to get mugged in issue #3 (Moore and Gibbons, *Watchmen* #3, 11-16) and when both explored the abandoned equipment of Nite Owl in his basement in issue #7. The excitement coming from Dreiberg showing Juspecky around, and the latter enjoying the nostalgia it provides suggests a longing for the old vigilante era. Right after the show, Dreiberg and Juspecky go back upstairs in Dreiberg's living room in which they sleep together in a couch. There, Moore and Gibbons draw a sequence in which Dreiberg dreams about Juspecky. Interestingly, Juspecky is represented as the Twilight Lady, who was Dreiberg's object of desires when he was Nite Owl. However, As both deglove each other from their human suit in the dream, Juspecky as Silk Spectre is revealed underneath the Twilight Lady and Dreiberg as Nite Owl underneath himself. This suggests that Dreiberg longs for the vigilante part known as Nite Owl that is hidden beneath the persona of Dreiberg, and that Juspecky has always been Silk Spectre. Indeed, Juspecky is the only vigilante whose character does not change when she becomes Silk Spectre. After this scene, Dreiberg and Juspecky wake up and put on their costumes and go out in Nite Owl's Owl Ship to save people from a fire in a building.

The Comedian (Edward Blake) also engages in acts of heroism out of pure self-interest. Indeed, as portrayed in issue #2 in which The Comedian's past is revealed, readers get a glimpse at The Comedian's cruel behavior, which we learn is fueled by the pleasure he gets from punishing. First, we learn that he almost raped Laurie Juspecky's mother, Sally Juspecky. (Moore and Gibbons, *Watchmen* #2, 5-6) Then, he raped a Vietnamese woman, which he killed point blank as she showed up to him pregnant with his child. (Moore and Gibbons, *Watchmen* #2, 14-15) Finally, the pleasure that he gets from his acts of sadism reaches its peak in the same issue when he is shown acting as one of the Watchmen superheroes to save people. (Moore and Gibbons, *Watchmen* #2, 16-18) Here, The Comedian is welcomed by an angry mob that throws all kinds of things at him while exclaiming "We don't want vigilantes! We want regular cops!" (Moore and Gibbons, *Watchmen* #2, 17) to which The Comedian violently reacts by throwing grenades at the people he is supposed to save. He is then shown laughing at them while they are running away in fear. At this sight, he exclaims to his vigilante partner, Nite Owl "Ha! Look at them. Run, you suckers...We are society's only protection." (Moore and Gibbons, *Watchmen* #2, 17) At this remark, Nite Owl says to The

Comedian "Protection? Who are we protecting them from?" (Moore and Gibbons, *Watchmen* #2, 17) Right after this panel, a scene in which we see a group of people writing in the wall "Who Watches the Watchmen?" unravels. The Comedian fires at these people and exclaims to Nite Owl "Ha! You see this? I've seen that written up all over during this last two weeks! They don't like us and they don't trust us." (Moore and Gibbons, *Watchmen* #2, 18) The reactions of the mob and the exclamations of the Comedian, whose smiley pin is later showed stained with blood, hints to the corruption of the superheroes in the universe of *Watchmen*. By portraying superheroes who go against the traditional superhero archetype, Alan Moore challenges the realm of comic storytelling in a hypertextual aspect. Indeed, Moore subverts the superhero genre by creating superheroes who not only act out of pure self-interest, but are also parodies of already existing superheroes. Indeed, Rorschach may refer to the Question, Nite Owl to Batman and Blue Beetle, The Comedian to the Peacemaker and the Joker, Silk Spectre to Nightshade, Dr Manhattan to Captain Atom, and finally, Ozymandias to Thunderbolt. As Moore claims in an interview, "Watchmen is a comic about comics" (Moore, Alan Moore Talks-02- Watchmen 03:04), which emphasizes the parodical dimension of *Watchmen*, while attributing a certain metatextual aspect that attempts to critique the traditional comic industry.

With regard to what has been said about some of *Watchmen's* superheroes, it may be argued that these vigilantes are motivated by the power that vigilantism attributes to them. "Who watches the Watchmen?" which is a question that questions the Watchmen's power in this comic book series is also a reminder of Friedrich Nietzsche's Will to Power concept, which is described as the main driving force in humans. It is often defined in general terms as self-determination and egoism. The fact that Alan Moore cites Nietzsche in a paratextual fashion, as a title in Issue #6 "If you gaze into the abyss, the abyss gazes also into you." may hint to the notion of will to power about the Watchmen. Indeed, issue #6 is about Rosharch's (Walter Kovacs) real identity, who is a vigilante who is able to showcase power only when he wears his superhero mask. Similarly, Dreiberg, Juspeczyk, and Blake can show their power only when they wear their costumes.

Conclusion

In conclusion, through a transtextual analysis, one may deduce that *Watchmen* is a meditation upon power. Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons critique the traditional comic book superhero archetype and subvert its

genre in a hypertextual and metatextual fashion while using a great deal of allusions and quotes through intertextual and paratextual elements all the while hinting at the theme of power about the superheroes in the universe of *Watchmen*.

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Abstract

The philosophical debate that defines art as mimesis leads us to interpret fiction as reality disguised in beautiful imagery and hyperboles. Indeed, the mimetic aspect of literature has captured and immortalized life in different ways through fiction. From George Orwell's dystopian prose that denounces totalitarian regimes, to postcolonial writings from Chinua Achebe that decry the lingering effects of colonization, fiction has always effectively and efficiently "turned blood into ink" as T.S. Eliot put it. It has managed to capture the essence of life and transcribe it into words. While many fictional narratives depict things that happened or may happen in a near future, Alan Moore's comic book series *Watchmen* tackles what may have happened to warn the reader about the danger of history repeating itself as well as the idea of bestowing power in the wrong hands. For this reason, Moore creates a uchronic setting that puts his characters in an alternate reality in which the United States of America won the war against Vietnam. Moreover, Moore's masked superhero vigilantes in *Watchmen* are far from being positive figures. On the contrary, they appear ethically ambiguous or utterly corrupt. Every superhero in *Watchmen* rests on a net of intertextual references that refer to previous comic book heroes, villains, or even real life political and historical figures. This renders it a work of fiction that criticizes itself in a metatextual fashion. In this regard,

Moore posits a “comic about comics” type of narrative to remind people of the link between fiction and reality as well as how intertwined both of them can be. Using Gérard Genette's concept of transtextuality, this presentation aims to discuss “the textual transcendence of the text” as Genette claims in Moore's *Watchmen*. In this respect, this presentation will explore the ways in which Alan Moore's *Watchmen* redefines the superhero genre as a “meditation upon power” through the use of transtextual techniques.

Keywords

Intertextuality, Metatextuality, Mimesis, Transtextuality, Uchronia

مستخلص

المناقشة الفلسفية التي تعرّف الفن كتقليد تقودنا إلى تفسير الخيال كواقع متنكر في صور جميلة وتضخيمات. في الواقع، جانب التقليد في الأدب قد أسروخلد الحياة بطرق مختلفة من خلال الخيال. من نثر جورج أورويل المظلم الذي يستنكر الأنظمة الاستبدادية، إلى كتابات اللااستعمار من تشينوا أشيبي التي تستنكر تأثيرات الاستعمار المستمرة، أثبت الخيال نفسه دائماً بأنه «حوّل الدم إلى حبر» كما قال تي. إس. إليوت. لقد نجح في التقاط جوهر الحياة ونقله إلى كلمات. بينما تصوّر العديد من السرد الخيالي الأشياء التي حدثت أو قد تحدث في المستقبل القريب، تتعامل سلسلة الكتب المصورة «واتشمن» لأن مور بما قد يكون قد حدث لتحذير القارئ من خطر تكرار التاريخ وفكرة منح السلطة في أيدي خاطئة. لهذا السبب، يخلق مور إعداداً أخرونياً يضع شخصياته في واقع بديل حيث فازت الولايات المتحدة على حرب فيتنام. وعلاوة على ذلك، الأبطال الخارقين المقتنعين في «واتشمن» لأن مور بعيدين عن كونهم شخصيات إيجابية. على العكس، يظهرن أخلاقياً غامضين أو فاسدين تماماً. يستند كل بطل خارق في «واتشمن» على شبكة من الإشارات النصية الداخلية التي تشير إلى أبطال الكتب المصورة السابقين أو الأشرار أو حتى الشخصيات السياسية والتاريخية الحقيقية. وهذا يجعله عملاً خيالياً ينتقد نفسه بطريقة نصية. في هذا الصدد، يقترح مور نوعاً من السرد «حول القصص المصورة» لتذكير الناس بالرابط بين الخيال والواقع وكيف يمكن أن يكونا متداخلين. باستخدام مفهوم الترابط النصي لجيرار جينيت، تهدف هذه العرض إلى مناقشة «تجاوز النص النصي» كما يدعي جينيت في «واتشمن» لأن مور. في هذا الصدد، ستستكشف هذه العرض الطرق التي يعيد بها «واتشمن» لأن مور تعريف نوع الأبطال الخارقين باعتباره «تأملًا في السلطة» من خلال استخدام تقنيات الترابط النصي.

كلمات مفتاحية

الترابط النصي، النص النصي، التقليد، الترابط النصي، الأوكرونيا

Résumé

Le débat philosophique qui définit l'art comme une imitation nous conduit à interpréter la fiction comme une réalité déguisée dans de belles images et des hyperboles. En effet, l'aspect mimétique de la littérature a capturé et immortalisé

la vie de différentes manières à travers la fiction. Des proses dystopiques de George Orwell dénonçant les régimes totalitaires aux écrits postcoloniaux de Chinua Achebe déplorant les effets persistants de la colonisation, la fiction a toujours réussi et efficacement «transformé le sang en encre», comme l'a dit T.S. Eliot. Elle a réussi à capturer l'essence de la vie et à la transcrire en mots. Alors que de nombreuses narrations fictives décrivent des événements passés ou futurs proches, la série de bandes dessinées Watchmen d'Alan Moore aborde ce qui aurait pu se produire pour avertir le lecteur du danger de la répétition de l'histoire ainsi que de l'idée de conférer le pouvoir entre de mauvaises mains. Pour cette raison, Moore crée un cadre uchronique plaçant ses personnages dans une réalité alternative où les États-Unis ont remporté la guerre contre le Vietnam. De plus, les superhéros masqués de Moore dans Watchmen sont loin d'être des figures positives. Au contraire, ils semblent éthiquement ambigus ou totalement corrompus. Chaque superhéros dans Watchmen repose sur un réseau de références intertextuelles renvoyant à des héros de bandes dessinées précédents, des méchants, voire même des figures politiques et historiques réelles. Cela en fait une œuvre de fiction qui se critique elle-même de manière métatextuelle. À cet égard, Moore propose un type de récit «comic about comics» pour rappeler aux gens du lien entre fiction et réalité ainsi que de leur intrication. Utilisant le concept de transtextualité de Gérard Genette, cette présentation vise à discuter de «la transcendance textuelle du texte» comme le soutient Genette dans Watchmen de Moore. À cet égard, cette présentation explorera les façons dont Watchmen d'Alan Moore redéfinit le genre des superhéros comme une «méditation sur le pouvoir» à travers l'utilisation de techniques transtextuelles.

Mots-clés

Intertextualité, Métatextualité, Mimesis, Transtextualité, Uchronie