



The Textual Experience: The Interplay of the Image and the Text in *Watchmen*

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Literature, as we understand it, is a composite medium where the identity of the text is defined as the unique experience which arises from the interaction of not one singular element of the work but rather multiple such elements. To demonstrate the same, Alan Moore's graphic novel *Watchmen* has been examined in this paper as one such exemplary work that fully exploits the strength of its medium where the interaction of the textual, the stylistic, and the pictorial together contribute to the literary experience of the reader.

Two separate literary texts when positioned in the same space influence each other's meaning. As John Berger points out in particular reference to the relationship of words and images in his book, *Ways of Seeing*, "It is hard to define exactly how the words have changed the image but undoubtedly they have. The image now illustrates the sentence" (28). Depending on how the critic chooses to focus, the meaning of the image is constrained by the boundaries that are defined for it by the text. Berger further states that though seeing is an act of choice, we can never look at just one thing. Hence, it is impossible to view an image without simultaneously perceiving a line of text which exists spatially in the same vicinity and is trying to draw a connection between the two.

The reader's understanding of a text is defined by the means through which he/she accesses it. It can be argued that even if attempts are made to minimise external interference such as the presence of a caption which might prevent independent interpretation of the text by the reader, it is physically impossible to completely divorce a text from its material surroundings. Of course, the effect documented by Berger flows both ways and the caption when placed adjacent to the image is placed under pressure to say something about it, i.e., it can only be read in its interaction with the image. The meaning of one cannot exist independently of the other. As Berger goes on to suggest, "The meaning of an image is changed according to what one sees immediately beside it or what comes immediately after it. Such authority as it retain-

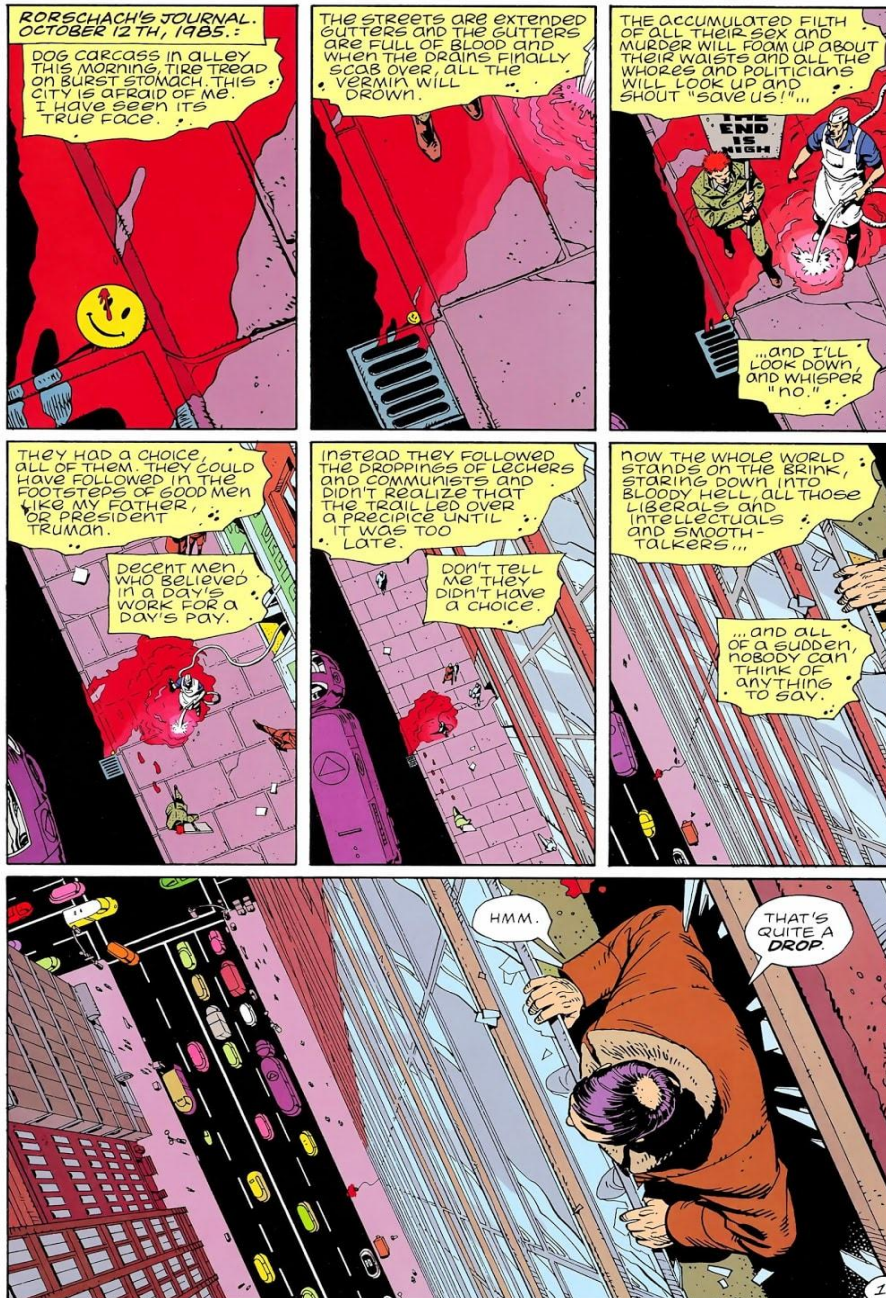


Fig. 1: Moore, Alan and Dave Gibbons. Watchmen. No. 1, DC Comics, 1986, 1.

ns, is distributed over the whole context in which it appears” (29).

The question this paper hopes to grapple with is one of literary form; literary criticism often relies upon a binary of meanings in order to create an idea of ‘text’ which can be put under lens. As has been put forward by Jerome J. McGann in *The Socialisation of Texts*, “Textual and editorial theory has concerned itself almost exclusively with the linguistic codes. The time has come, however, when we have to take greater theoretical account of the other coding network which operates at the documentary and bibliographical level of literary works” (78). McGann follows this statement by listing a number of literary works as examples that illustrate how important the manner through which the reader accesses the text is to his or her comprehension of the text. The glosses in the margins of Coleridge’s *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* and the numbering of the pages in James Joyce’s *Ulysses*, both find a mention as well as, and maybe more to our interest, the illustrations in the works of Charles Dickens, William Thackeray’s *Vanity Fair*, and Lewis Carroll’s *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* as examples of works meant to be composite texts by their authors. It is interesting to note, as McGann does, that though by literary consensus the decorated initials, the vignettes, and the illustrations of *Vanity Fair* are clearly involved in the structure of the book’s meaning, they are left out in most editions of the text.

McGann suggests of literary works, “...they are committed to work via the dimension of the aesthesis” (83). What is understood is that no literary work can ever claim to be a purely verbal text and in fact the cover, the spine, the paper, the ink, the margins, the font, and of course the images associated with the words on the page, all work together to form the reader’s experience of the text. Hence, here the text is not one singular aspect of the literary work, but an experience that emerges from the interaction of the multiple components. The semantic meaning encoded in the words of a book needs a medium through which it can be activated: a medium that is often visual but can also be aural or tactile. Since our senses often outpace our ability to interpret and understand, it can even be said that we access the material meaning of a text before the semantic meaning. Indeed, the semantic meaning is directly shaped by the bibliographic codes mentioned by McGann, a good example being the practice of italicisation that depending upon usage in a sentence lays stress on the intended word, deciding the direction of the meaning.

Taking into account the extra-verbal factors which determine one’s reading of a text leads to the immediate implication that no two



Fig. 2: Moore, Alan and Dave Gibbons. Watchmen. No. 1, DC Comics, 1986, 5.

readings of a text can ever be the same since certain aspects of the reader's experience of the text, such as the pace at which the words are perused, cannot be formalised or regulated. In such an understanding of what constitutes a text, the meaning is surely that which is negotiated by the reader, but it is important to note that the negotiated meaning is the one derived through an experience of the multiple verbal and non-verbal aspects of the text and never just the semantic one in isolation. At this point it is important to mention that the medium of graphic novel occupies the interesting position of being a composite text where the meaning must be negotiated in the space of interaction between words and images, one example being Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons' *Watchmen*. As Moore said in an interview for *Entertainment Weekly*, "There are things that we did with *Watchmen* that could only work in a comic, and were indeed designed to show off things that other media can't."

The narrative of *Watchmen* is set in 1985 in New York City with the tensions of the Cold War being at an all-time high and the Doomsday Clock set mere minutes away from midnight. However, this is an alternate universe where the point of divergence was the emergence of costumed superheroes in America in the 1940s and 1960s leading to the United States winning the Vietnam War and the Watergate Scandal never taking place. The murder of the retired superhero, The Comedian, sparks off an investigation by the masked vigilante Rorschach ultimately revealing a conspiracy which threatens to change the world as it is known. *Watchmen* is set apart from the mainstream superhero genre by existing as a deconstruction of the idea of the superhero through an examination of the real-world ramifications and impact that the existence of such caped crusaders would have on society. Though the subject of the narrative is fantastic, the mode of telling the story is realist so that, even as the reader traces the paths of various men and women in tights across the panels, the grit and grime engaged in the depiction of the Big Apple mark it as so reliable that the reader is almost tricked into forgetting that the world on display is not the one that we know and inhabit. In this masterful work Gibbons manages to present us with a landscape that is both familiar and yet unnerving. Though the skeleton of the city might be one that the reader still recognises, the emergence of superheroes ensured a number of changes in the ecosystem of the city which, though never obviously referred to in the textual narrative of *Watchmen*, are still made appare-

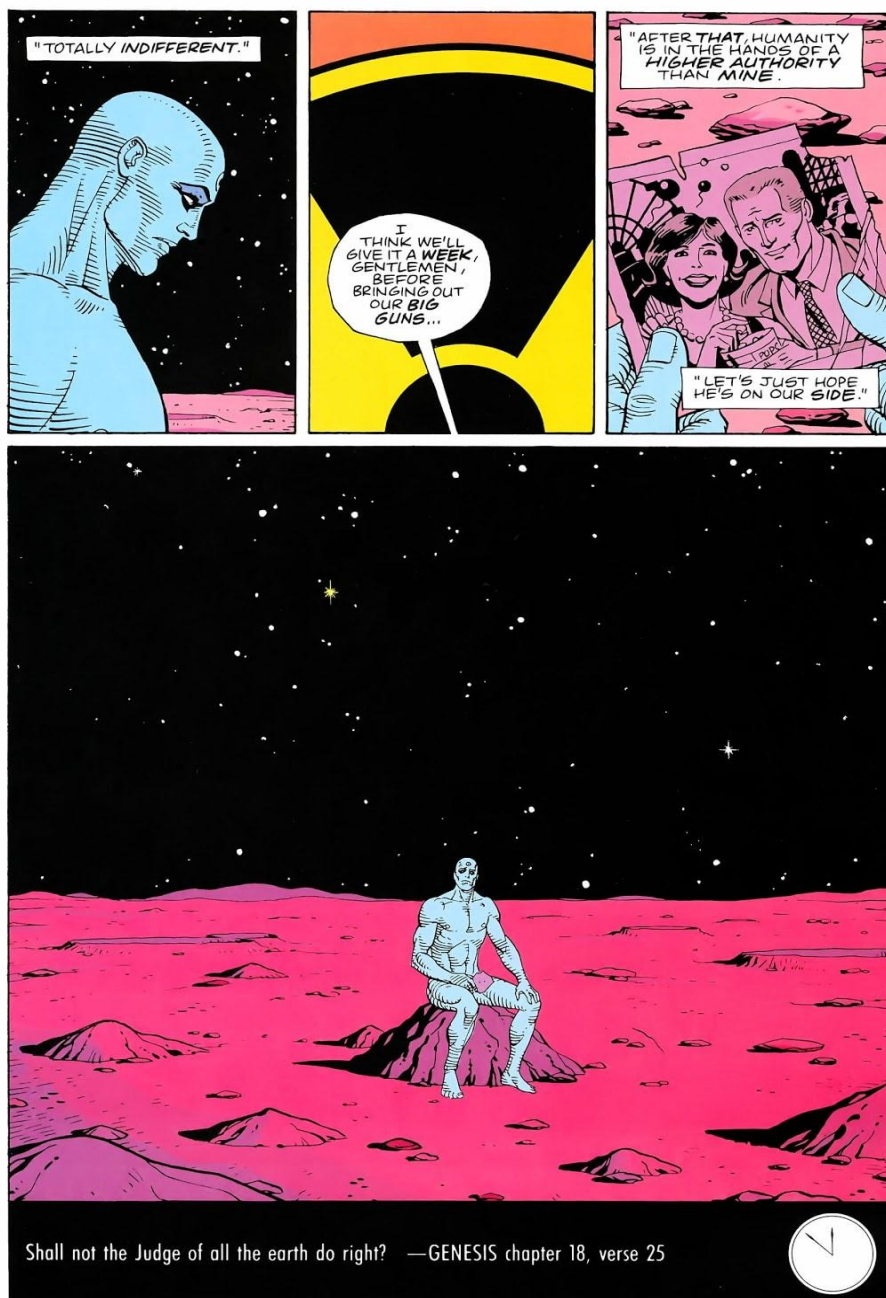


Fig. 3: Moore, Alan and Dave Gibbons. Watchmen. No. 3, DC Comics, 1986, 28.

nt through the artwork of the graphic novel.¹ As mentioned by Leslie S. Klinger in *Watchmen: The Annotated Edition* on the very first page itself, “Note that the large delivery truck has a triangle on top (the trademark, as we see later, of a company called Pyramid Deliveries), and the truck itself is oddly shaped. This is the first indication that this is a different world from the one in which the reader lives” (11).

It is never overtly stated in the text that the landscape before the reader is more alien than he perceives but is only subtly presented via the visual form throughout the novel. Alongside this ongoing process of alienation, the reader is presented with a myriad of visual details that often end up being directly connected to the plot of the text. On the same page as this annotation, the reader glimpses for the first time a man holding a placard stating ‘The end is nigh.’ It is only much later that this is revealed to be the secret identity of Rorschach who hops into frame just four pages later. The text is littered with recurring symbols and visual motifs such as the smiley face, the Doomsday clock, and the Gordian Knot, all of which find meaning in relation to the themes of the text as the narrative is played out. While Gibbons meticulously constructs a visual narrative for the reader to explore, Moore’s verbal narrative drives the action of the plot through speech balloons and caption boxes imposed upon Gibbons’s images. The result is a complex work where words and images often have to rely on each other to drive the action of the plot. It is further demonstrated in the flashback sequences involving the characters of Doctor Manhattan and the Silk Spectre. Here, as the characters directly describe the events of the attached images through caption boxes, dramatic irony is brilliantly used to bring out the subjectivity of these characters who are oblivious to some details of information that are easily picked up by reader upon the examination of the panels.²

¹Doctor Manhattan’s superpowers allow a series of technological developments to occur in the world of the text; hence, the presence of the rounded electric cars on the roads as well as the ‘energy hydrants’ populating the pavements. His intervention in the Vietnam War led to the absorption of Vietnam as the 51st state of the USA, a fact referred to in the text through pictures of newspapers (Chapter 1, Page 4, Panel 3).

²Much like Doctor Manhattan, the reader enjoys an omnipresent awareness of the events of the text due to his ability to pause before every image and glean every bit of information before proceeding. In Fig 4., Moore and Gibbons having given the last seven panels equal space encourage the reader to transition back and forth, to compare and contrast. In this particular page, though Janey’s reaction might seem to be overtly hysterical in the moment to the characters, the reader can spot in Panel 3 that Laurie wears the same ear rings Manhattan had previously given to Janey, the ear rings that Janey still wears in this page, indicating Manhattan having replaced one person with the other. Considering this, Janey’s paranoia and insecurity seem entirely justified.



Fig. 4: Moore, Alan and Dave Gibbons. Watchmen. No. 4, DC Comics, 1986, 17.

Gibbons and Moore effectively exploit their medium of choice in *Watchmen* by occasionally contrasting the interplay of word and image in the panels with instances where one of the two elements is removed. In the case where the verbal is diminished in favour for the visual, the image is imbued with a certain staticity. The static nature of the image in *Watchmen* is by no means seen as a handicap to be overcome through the use of motion lines and creative panelling as is sometimes done in order to reach a more ‘cinematic’ form of storytelling through the graphic novel. Rather, the lack of motion in these pictures is exploited in order to set the tone for narrative.

Scott Bukatman in his essay “Sculpture, Stasis, the Comics, and Hellboy” examines a number of methods that creators might use to emphasise the static nature of the image that is found in comic books, “The slowing down of the reading process, the elevation of observational detail over action, a sense of deliberateness, an enframing of the moment, and an evenness of pace...” (443). These methods give the artwork of *Watchmen* the same air of contemplation that Bukatman ascribes to *Hellboy*. The static nature of the imagery gives weight to individual panels, underlining the present and providing it with a certain concreteness.³

Never is the use of the static nature of the image more effective than in the portions of the narrative involving Doctor Manhattan who, being the only superhuman character in the text, stands quite outside of time.⁴ Since he is immortal, bending time and space before his powers, he is indeed a static human being. In relation to him, the lack of motion in the images also plays the role of emphasising the alienation and vulnerability felt by such ‘special’ men and women who cannot conform to society. The readers of *Watchmen* are offered a portrait of the superhero, trapped by the panel due to the difference that marks him out, unable to move, unable to escape.⁵ Here, it should be noted that this static quality is only possible when presented in sequence with scenes of motion, often scenes of verbal exchange, where the flow of the conversation sets the rhythm of movement.

While the image can be isolated from the text, the converse is not possible. Will Eisner underlines this point in his book *Comics and Sequential Art*, “Words are made up of letters. Letters are symbols that are devised out of images which originate out of familiar forms, objects, postures, and other recognisable phenomena” (14). The written

³Cf. Fig 2.

⁴Cf. chapter four.

⁵Cf. Fig 3.

pieces delving into the backstory of the world of *Watchmen* which are attached at the end of each issue would have had a different gravity and emotion associated with them if they had not been presented as excerpts from newspapers, journals, doctor's notes, and letters: they play an important role in building the context for the plot of the text in an organic fashion without putting extra stress on the narrative.

The fact that even the font of the text is important can be observed by how the presentation of the text alters the meaning of the text by indicating tone, pitch, volume, emotion, or just the quality of voice.⁶ While reading *Watchmen*, the reader is encouraged to engage with the words at various levels and pay attention to not only what is written but also how it is written, further demonstrating the point made earlier regarding the impossibility of divorcing semantic meaning from its material aspect. Hence *Watchmen*, as a text, exists not in the words authored by Alan Moore or in the images crafted by Dave Gibbons—it is a collaboration and exists in the interaction of the two.

By the inferences made from *Watchmen* regarding the relationship that exists between the different elements of a text when applied to the medium of the graphic novel as a whole, the isolation of the verbal from the visual does not seem to be an effective technique for criticism when dealing with the question of the comic book where the two are impossibly intertwined with each other. Since the text exists in the interaction of the two, separating them is indeed an act of cutting the Gordian knot, which would ultimately kill the text.

The tools and vocabulary which serve us in analysing works that neatly fit into the literary tradition are at best ineffectual when used to approach the experience of a graphic novel like *Watchmen* or at worst are misleading and prone to error. Isolating the semantic or the visual meaning creates an alternative text in the mind of the critic which is not the same as the tangled work that the critic hopes to understand. As comic books enter mainstream circulation and begin to be finally viewed under the lens of 'serious literature,' criticism seeking to concern itself with the medium requires the development of independent tools and vocabulary to analyse and approach the experience

⁶In Fig. 1, the yellow colour and the irregular shape of the caption boxes indicate age as well as wear, indicating towards how even the thought for which the words are used for present narration in the moment: they have actually been written far in future and are talking about events which occurred in the past. In Fig. 4, the blue colour of Doctor Manhattan's caption boxes indicate his alien nature. More examples from the same page include the use of boldface in Panel 3 to indicate the character putting stress on certain words as well as bordering of speech balloons with dashes to indicate whispering.

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of the texts instead of using lexicon borrowed from other disciplines.

The purpose of this investigation is to complicate the idea of what is popularly understood to be a 'text.' As criticism turns its focus to media other than that which easily fits the literary canon, such as the graphic novel, there is need for examination of the many possibilities that the space opens up for thought. For the words of yesterday cannot be used to describe the experiences of tomorrow, there is a need to deconstruct the existing popular critical discourses in order to ensure that justice is done to new and emerging media that would otherwise be unable to find their place.



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