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“Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons' *Watchmen*: History Repeats History”

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Intertextuality and its arguably multitudinous forms—paraphrasing, allusion, parody, reference, plagiarism, quotation, et al.—have been investigated, critiqued, and analyzed through literary studies since philosopher Julia Kristeva developed the concept in her 1966 essay, “Word, Dialogue and Novel.”¹ Kristeva’s concept of intertextuality amalgamates philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin’s literary theory of dialogism—that literary works are in continual dialogue with other literary works—and Ferdinand de Saussure’s semiology—the linguistic study of signs and how meaning is created from them.² In Kristeva’s own words, “The term intertextuality denotes this transposition of one (or several) sign-system(s) into another” (111).

Intertextuality may have established a name rather recently, but it has been evaluated long before Kristeva coined the term. Intertextuality has been and continues to be insatiably studied in diverse literary works, including James Joyce’s *Ulysses* (1922), Stephen King’s *The Dark Tower* series (1982-2012), and Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons’ *Watchmen* series (1986-87).³

The abundant intertext resonating within Moore and Gibbons’ *Watchmen* encourages

¹ See Kristeva’s *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art* (1969).

² Both theories are referred to throughout *Desire in Language* as Kristeva builds her argument. The theories she refers to exist in Bakhtin’s *The Dialogic Imagination (The Dialogic Imaginatiois)* (University of Texas Press, 1981) and Saussure’s *Course in General Linguistics (Cours de linguistique générale)* (1916).

³ See Haider Ghazi Jassim Al Jaber’s “Intertextuality in James Joyce’s *Ulysses*” (Babylon University, 2011), C.G. Van Der Bel’s “Intertextuality and the Gothic in Stephen King’s *The Dark Tower* (Utrecht University, 2008), and Julian Darius’s “*Watchmen* and Intertextuality: How *Watchmen* Interrogates the Comics Tradition” (Sequart Organization, 2005). Also of peripheral interest may be Maria Jesus Martinez Alfaró’s “Intertextuality: Origins and Development of the Concept” (Zaragoza University, 1996).

unremitting interest for literary explications, generating an intertextual inquiry relevant to the field of literary criticism.⁴ Ultimately, what is at stake here is an exploration of the relationship of texts and their readers. Literary critics, theorists, and others may find particular fascination in the study of Moore and Gibbons’ *Watchmen*.

In an interview by Christopher Sharrett, found in *Alan Moore: Conversations*, Moore offers this insight into his and Gibbons’ creative decisions concerning intertextuality: “To us the most important thing is the semiotic substance, the things going on in the background, the meanings and intimations of meaning throughout the book” (Berlatsky 55). By making this comment, Moore encourages readerly participation with *Watchmen* by tangling the narrative with intertext so that the reader can add deeper meaning to an already pre-existing narrative structure.

Watchmen notably ends with an intertext: a quotation of a quotation. The quote derives from the epigraph of the 1987 Tower Commission Report, which itself derives from *Satura VI* by Roman satirist Juvenal: “*Quis custodiet ipsos custodes;*” or, “Who watches the watchmen?” (Moore and Gibbons 416). Here, Juvenal questions any given social structure’s governance, then reasons that the watchmen of this governance cannot be trusted (75-125CE/2011). Conversely, in the politically philosophical text *The Republic*, Plato also questions that same governance, asking the same question, who will guard the guards? Plato speculates contradictorily to Juvenal that “a

⁴ In the aggregate, *Watchmen* intersects with other texts like R.D. Laing’s *Knots*; Friedrich Nietzsche’s *Thus Spoke Zarathustra: A Book for All and None*; multiple superhero comics; E.C. Comics’ whole publication house—placing *Watchmen* in a living discourse with comic book history—intersected with *Tales of the Black Freighter*, a comic within *Watchmen*—itself a comic, making *Watchmen* intratextual with itself, as well; lyrics by Bob Dylan and Elvis Costello; a quote attributed to John Cale; poetry by William Blake and Percy Shelley; the Bible; and multiple other texts.

guardian should require another guardian to take care of him is ridiculous indeed” (380BCE/2008).

The intertextual reference to Juvenal and Plato’s question augments Moore and Gibbons’ *Watchmen*. The question transmutes in Moore and Gibbons’ text, becoming, who creates the world? Who knows best for human life?⁵ *Watchmen* questions whether the answer should originate from the most powerful or the most lowly among society. At *Watchmen*’s climax, Ozymandias’s surreptitious plan—creating a faux-alien invasion so the world unites against a common enemy as opposed to combating each other—succeeds, and the Watchmen seem to have judiciously decided prudence on humanity’s behalf. Yet, Moore creates some narrative distance—thereby opening a space for critique on the Watchmen’s actions—with an unsettling set of intertextual references on splash page 384: The poster for Madison Square Garden reads the names of two bands playing in concert, “Pale Horse” and “Krystalnacht.”⁶

While “Pale Horse” denotes fairly obvious connotations—the horse ridden by Death in the Bible’s depiction of the apocalypse—“Krystalnacht” references the historical horror of definite decisions that have been produced by the powerful. Though missing a letter *l*, this particular band’s name is a reference to the nights of November 9-10, 1938, called in German Kristallnacht and in English Crystal Night, or the Night of Broken Glass. Coupled with the Nazi

⁵ Alan Moore, himself, validates this reading of the text’s apposite quotation in an interview with Christopher Sharrett: “I suppose the central question of *Watchmen* is the question Dr. Manhattan asks of himself on Mars, which is, ‘Who makes the world?’ What I was trying to say in *Watchmen* is that we *all* make the world” (Berlatsky 47).

⁶ As Moore points out in *Alan Moore: Conversations*, from out of the entire series’ run, these six pages are intentionally the only pages to appear as splash pages. “We deliberately held off for eleven issues so that the impact of not one but six full-pages of images depicting in brutal detail this massive loss of life would be a bit devastating” (Berlatsky 54).

references alluded to the Watchmen throughout the text,⁷ I contend that Moore and Gibbons’ intertextual usage of Kristallnacht creates an implication that Ozymandias’s plan will have the same ramifications as the Third Reich’s Kristallnacht. This one singular night began the Third Reich’s reign—what would lead to their Final Solution, later called the Holocaust—as it does the Watchmen’s.

According to journalist William Shirer, Kristallnacht began on November 7, 1938, when a young Jewish boy, intending to kill the German ambassador as revenge for the boy’s father’s deportation to Poland, shot and killed the wrong man: the third secretary of the German Embassy in Paris, who, ironically, disagreed with the Nazi party’s attitude regarding the Jewish people (Shirer 580). In response, and under Dr. Goebbels orders, SS Officer Reinhard Heydrich organized and executed a *pogrom*, a violent riot aimed at massacre or intense persecution to a particular ethnic group—historically, Jewish people.

On the night of November 9 until the morning of November 11, throughout Germany,

⁷ Three examples: 1) On pg. 72, in chapter 3 of Hollis Mason’s fictional autobiography, *Under the Hood*, Mason refers to critics calling the Minute Men fascists as well as to Hooded Justice openly approving Hitler’s activities. Mason declares, “Yes, we were crazy, we were kinky, we were Nazis, all those things that people say.” 2) On pg. 25, in panel 5, Ozymandias calls The Comedian a Nazi, and in panel 7 Rorschach responds, “If that makes him a Nazi, you might as well call me a Nazi, too.” 3) On pg. 209, Rorschach’s essay, written at age eleven, suggests his father was “the kind of guy who would fight for his country and what was right. Maybe he got killed fighting the Nazis...” This quote provides appreciable interest considering his stance against Ozymandias and Dr. Manhattan at the end of the text, implicating them as the Nazis and Rorschach as his father dying for his country and what is right.

As an aside, a particular reason may exist why Moore and Gibbons have so many Nazi references within *Watchmen*: American superhero comics have, historically, positioned Nazis as villains alongside America’s own supermen. *Watchmen*, by containing Nazi references, engages with the textual tradition found in such comics as DC’s *Superman* #17 (Superman fights Adolf Hitler and Hideki Tojo), Marvel’s *Marvel Mystery Comics* #17 (Human Torch and Sub-Mariner fight the Third Reich), Marvel’s whole *Captain America* line of comics which features a prominent villain-group called Hydra that is modeled after the Nazi regime, and multiple other comics and comic series published throughout, and long after, World War II. These comics, sometimes, also question if our own superhuman powers are not as potentially threatening to civilization, like the use of an atom bomb, or, in the case of Ozymandias, a bomb powerful enough to destroy a city and manipulate the world into peace.

synagogues were burnt down, businesses and private apartments torched or destroyed, and the Jewish people were either shot on sight or arrested and sent off to concentration camps (581). Shirer, in his text, notes that “According to Dr. Goebbels and the German press, which he controlled, it was a ‘spontaneous’ demonstration of the German people in reaction to the news of the murder in Paris” (580-581). This parallels Ozymandias’s plan for misdirection with, and his plan for the world to misattribute terror to, the faux-alien invasion. Ozymandias succeeded in his attempts as Dr. Goebbels had succeeded in misdirection of, and with misattribution for, the Night of Broken Glass. However, where Moore and Gibbons leave *Watchmen*’s ending ambiguous, in history, the world would not know that SS Heydrich had organized and executed the entire pogrom under Dr. Goebbels’s orders until after the war (581).

Hitler believed, as substantiated in his autobiography *Mein Kampf*, that “The Jewish doctrine of Marxism [will bring] destruction for the inhabitants for this planet” (60). Like Hitler, Ozymandias intends to end the possibility of world annihilation--a topic he discusses with Rorschach and Nite Owl in panels 4-7 on page 370. Through a clandestine plan, Hitler launched his—though not given this name until 1942—Final Solution to attain peace, and, similarly, Ozymandias launched his own Final Solution to prevent the destruction of human life, beginning by inciting worldwide panic in a single, shocking day.

Bernie, the newsstand seller, unknowingly, or perhaps knowingly, predicts what is to come just before Ozymandias’s faux-alien invasion occurs when he says to himself about the Knot-Tops’ loud music: “Partyin’! Holocaust comin’, goddamn knot-heads gotta party! I can hear that God-forbid-I-call-it-music clear from Madison Square!” (Moore and Gibbons 354).

The Third Reich’s historical future, beginning with Krystallnacht, can be transposed in the *Watchmen* universe. From November 9, 1938, onward, the Third Reich would implement strategies designed for world domination and the extermination of the Jewish people—the apparent threat to world peace—including the Holocaust itself. I assert that Moore and Gibbons’ particular Third Reich related intertext alludes that *Watchmen*’s faux-alien invasion is a similarly manipulative plan, like the Third Reich’s Kristallnacht, that may have similar devastating effects on the characters of *Watchmen*’s world.

Information and language have a proclivity to repeat and reference themselves in *Watchmen*. When walking into Ozymandias’s Antarctic fortress and leaving Silk Spectre II behind, Dr. Manhattan answers her question about Ozymandias’s culpability⁸ twice for the reader: Once directly to her on page 393, informing Rorschach that he is informing her, then a second time seven panels later on the next page, 394, using the exact same language after hearing the information for the “first” time from Rorschach himself. Additionally, Moore and Gibbons’ layout of panels throughout chapter five—which mirror the layout of each page opposite the other from the middle point of this comic—reveals that the text’s own composition is inclined to repeat and reference itself.

Curiously, this repetition and reference of information and language also works as intertext. At the time of original publication, *Watchmen* was released as twelve separate issues from September 1986 to October 1987, so when information from a latter book intersects with

⁸ Ozymandias monologues his complex plan at length while battling Rorschach and Nite Owl from page 366-374, but on pg. 374 Ozymandias admits his culpability by stating, “I planned to build my monster, teleport it to a certain destination...my creature’s death would trigger mechanisms within its massive brain...the resultant psychic shockwave killing half the city.”

the text directly from a former book, this junction operates as intratextuality. Yet again, Moore and Gibbons’ encourage synthesis through re-examination and review of the text. To put it another way, readerly participation and investment in *Watchmen* enriches the meaning of, and is inseparable from, the intertextuality among *Watchmen*’s pages.

Dr. Manhattan’s murdering of Rorschach on page 406 underscores the lengths Dr. Manhattan and Ozymandias will go to keep world peace as the future moves onward. The *Watchmen*, with the exception of Rorschach, voice complicity to Ozymandias’s clandestine plan, accentuated when Nite Owl calls after Rorschach, who at this point has decided to inform the world of the faux-alien invasion, arguing, “Where are you going? This is too big to be hard-assed about! We have to compromise...” (402).⁹ This illicit event mirrors the Minutemen’s decision to stay silent about The Comedian’s attempted sexual assault on Sally Jupiter because their image would be damaged (10). Again, shown here, this doubling of events occurs in *Watchmen*, suggesting to the reader that *Watchmen*’s narrative is cyclical with history.¹⁰ However, Rorschach’s evisceration by Dr. Manhattan, unbeknownst to Silk Spectre II and Nite Owl, indicates Dr. Manhattan, who logically arrived at this resolution of Rorschach’s decision, will, like Ozymandias, commence in furtive holocaust against anyone opposed to their interpretation of world peace, much like how Hitler and Dr. Goebbels would later extend Kristallnacht into the Holocaust on the grounds that their version of world peace must be attained against all

⁹ Remarkably, Rorschach’s conclusion of Ozymandias’s plan opposes eleven-year old Rorschach’s conclusion of Truman’s decision to use the atom bomb on Hiroshima. A young Rorschach writes, “if he hadn’t of, then there would of been a lot more war than there was and more people would of been killed” (Moore and Gibbons 209).

¹⁰ Another suggestion of *Watchmen*’s cyclical historical narrative exists when Moore and Gibbons’ last panel signals Seymour’s potential to open Rorschach’s journal (414), thus referring the reader to the beginning of the book, which starts by using captions that hold text from Rorschach’s journal.

opposition.

History, as precedent in the comic itself, even to the structure of composition of the comic, and as alluded to by Bernie’s quote, will repeat itself in the universe of the *Watchmen*. The *Watchmen*’s decision brought world peace, but, as implied in Moore and Gibbons’ text, there will be ramifications for the world similar to the ramifications of the Third Reich’s Kristallnacht. Perhaps Juvenal holds the correct answer over Plato: the guardians should not be trusted.

Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons’ *Watchmen* provides a considerable amount of material for a continual study of how intertext operates between the reader and the literary work.¹¹ As Moore remarks to Sherrett in *Alan Moore: Conversations*, “I’m interested in manipulating symbols and images in a way that will have a rather subliminal affect [sic] on the viewer” (Berlatsky 53). In other words, Moore and Gibbons’ use of detail and background information are more than mere passing references.

My point here—that the intertextual usage of the band¹² Kristalnacht implicates a transposed narrative with the *Watchmen* for the Third Reich and also allows for critique on the *Watchmen*’s actions through this narrative distancing—has important ramifications for the broader domain of literary criticism. Intertextuality has a tendency to privilege readers knowledgeable of the intertext. If we consider that the band Kristalnacht’s name appearing on

¹¹ Intertext also operates subversively in *Watchmen*. According to Moore, he and Gibbons’ are able to speak to the then-current political climate by “sidestep[ing] certain emotional reactions people might have by dealing with issues with the aid of comic-book conventions. Rather than, say, mention Ronald Reagan, who for some reason many people seem to like, we use Richard Nixon” (Berlatsky 44).

¹² The fact that the Kristalnacht reference comes by way of a band’s name creates a precedent for an exchange between artwork and history within *Watchmen*.

the poster at Madison Square Garden¹³ is missed during a read, or we consider that the reader *does* see the intertext but does not account for its historical counterpart, the reader may lose this important implication. Nevertheless, because of the intertextual cornucopia within *Watchmen*, perhaps the argument could be made that *Watchmen*'s multiplicity would direct the same warrant of narrative expansion and critique of the Watchmen's action through other intertexts.¹⁴

¹³ An intertext as well that, like the band Kristalnacht, contains its own cultural and historical connotations.

¹⁴ I, the author of this article, would like to acknowledge and thank Dr. Paul Ardoin for his invaluable feedback and for taking the time read each iteration of this work. I am grateful.

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