

## **After the Countdown: *Watchmen* and the Narrative Assemblage**

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### **Time's Up**

Just over 40 years ago, Michel Foucault laid out the changing nature of how scholars need to approach the function of authorship with his essay “What is an Author?” More recently, we have begun to address the changing nature of how we should approach new media (Perloff, 2006), paper (Gitelman 2006, 2010), and the circulation practices of all of them (Gaonkar & Povinelli 2003, Straw 2010). This paper represents an attempt to address all of these question through a piece of differential media that speaks to all of them—*Watchmen*—born out of an intermedial form that makes use of several media already —comics. By asking what exactly we mean when talk about *Watchmen* as though it were a coherent object of study, we may be able to use comics studies, Actor-Network Theory, and materiality discourse to build a model of differential textuality for literary studies. Because much like the denouement of *Watchmen*, time is already up, and the change is not just coming—it's here.

### **Prologue: The Black Hole and the New Frontier**

Between 1995 and 2004, Charles Burns created and released his 12-issue series *Black Hole*, a horror-melodrama comic focused on a sexually transmitted disease that causes grotesque deformities in its victims. The “bug,” as it is commonly

called, circulates amongst its victims (mostly middle-class teenagers) over one summer in the 1970s, and the remainder of the story focuses on the emotional fallout of the disease for the already alienated and now fully ostracized teens. Perhaps because he produced the limited series, only 12 installments long, over a period of a full decade, Burns prefaced each issue with an anonymous quotation from one of the denizens of the fictional Seattle suburb through which the bug sweeps. The brief epigrams usually gave a kind of general update about the state of life for the town and the affected teens without being so specific as to name any character, such as in the case of the second issue, where the reader is informed that the bug has spread and its victims have started being quarantined so that the actual story doesn't have the burden of extra exposition:

Some of my best friends have the bug...I mean, what's the big deal? They may look a little different but they're still people, right? I care about them, I really do. It's just...I think they feel more comfortable being with their own kind. I really don't think there's anything wrong with them being quarantined. I think they're much happier that way. (Burns *Black Hole*#2 1)

As the above excerpt might indicate, the epigrams also often helped to dictate the tone of the issue. They could be as specific as a summary of the political implications of quarantining bug carriers, or as general as a treatise on bad teen romance.

Flash-forward to 2005, and the series has ended. Burns' publisher, in a hurry to collect the full version of a story that has been quite popular but also quite hard for readers to track down, almost immediately released the full series in a hardcover edition—minus the wraparound full-colour covers and prelude

quotations. This collected edition still offers its reader a full narrative, and anyone who had never experienced *Black Hole* in its original format would never know that they were missing anything. However, the truth is that the collected edition offers a narrative with an entirely different ending. In this edition, the story ends much as it has progressed, with the deformed central characters on the run and looking ahead to full lives of transience and fear. The epigram of *Black Hole's* original final issue, however, tells a quite different story:

It's like tryin' to explain sex to a nun—there's no way you'd ever understand it unless you've *lived* it. I was *there*, okay? Half my fuckin' friends *died* out there, man. I never dreamed I'd get out of that shit-hole...but one day I notice the stuff on my face is starting to heal and a couple of months later, I'm totally fuckin' *clean*...out walking around with all the normal assholes. (Burns *Black Hole* #12 1)

Is this the same story as the one without any epigram? No indication exists within the issue's main body that the bug will eventually fade away. In essence, these are two different endings. It would be tempting to argue that the fullest version of the narrative, and the earliest version of the narrative, must certainly make up the primary narrative. But aside from those few who have original copies of *Black Hole's* run or those willing to go online and find pirated digital versions of the individual issues, no one has access to these epigrams. *Black Hole* achieved its cult-like status during its initial ten years, but has only reached anything closely resembling a wide readership since the release of its collected edition. Despite this fact, however, all exist simultaneously – the original issues, the pirated digital scans, *and* the collected trade edition – and all invoke each other in particular ways that are unthinkable without first referring to each other.

Six years later, a different story. In May of 2011, DC Comics' online presence *The Source* announced that beginning in September, all of DC's major titles – *Superman*, *Batman*, and 50 others – would be revamped and relaunched with new number one issues. The press release also announces, almost as a side note, that coinciding with the relaunch DC would begin “day-and-date digital publishing” for all of these titles (Hyde par. 1), meaning that digital copies would be released for purchase on the same day as their paper counterparts.

This decision by DC signifies a powerful move toward digital media in the comics industry, where networked computing's symbolic importance to the business of comics (and consequently the experience of reading comics) has increased and altered. Even more important is the change that day-and-date digital publishing implies for the authorship of comics, because such a shift ideally calls for a born-digital workflow for both print and digital comics. Furthermore, the operation and reception of the print and digital versions of the “same” comic are necessarily different, as (just for example) another level of creative editing and selection is added to transform the whole unit of the page into the smaller units of panels: rather than leaf through the pages of the comic, the digital comic reader has another option to viewing the story page by page: they can also click (on a computer) or swipe (on a Smartphone or tablet device) through the story panel by panel. DC's move to day-and-date digital publishing represents the first widespread institutionalized instance of what Marjorie Perloff calls differential text

production in the comics industry, texts “that exist in different material forms with no single version being the definitive one.” (Perloff 146)

The reason for bringing up these two seemingly unrelated anecdotes is that both represent a challenge to traditional notions of primary textuality, and accordingly to notions of textual analysis. Traditionally, our methods of production and cultural circulation (which we could perhaps sum up as “adaptation”) have positioned the print book as central and primary. Though for some time this has no longer been the case, our scholarship in literary studies seems to still treat the old view as law, even after decades of turning to comics as legitimate objects of study. The problematization of primary textuality typified by day-and-date digital publishing practices is relatively new compared to the one represented by the narrative changes wrought on *Black Hole* by the editors of its collected edition, but it is already as large of an issue: as Robert Darnton mentions in *The Case for Books*, Google has nearly finished digitizing the Library of Congress’s contents, and continues to work with publishers and Amazon.com to release new books on a day-and-date digital publishing basis for the iPad, the Kindle, and other reader and tablet devices. (Darnton 38) Just as in the *Black Hole* case, the questions remain about what digital production, writing, and editing practices remove, add, and change in the author-function.

### **Introduction: *Watchmen*’s Print History and Present**

Media scholarship must necessarily shift and mutate as rapidly as communications technology itself, as in the present cultural climate time is measured in hours, not

days or months. In a network teeming with swirling, inchoate narratives that are cast aside as quickly as they are fabricated, where few properties ever have the opportunity to coalesce, the challenge for the critic is to attempt to track and solidify the bonds between divergent elements, in the hopes that pathways can be established to explain why a story told one way in one medium must necessarily signify differently in another. The goal here is to make just such a map of media transfer and circulation practices, so that we can establish the rules that govern differential media—a task crucial to a time when many cultural artifacts are being prepared for multiple media simultaneously.

This brings us back to graphic literature. Comics constitute an extraordinarily collaborative, at times even aleatoric medium that challenges conventional notions of production, authorship, cultural ownership and circulation, owing to reasons ranging from the political economy of the industry – most comics are “work for hire” products where the companies, rather than the creators, retain the rights to the characters and stories – to the frequency with which comics are “written” by one person and “drawn” by another. They make the perfect starting point for an examination of the impact a medium’s coding needs and interface sensibilities can have on narrative, aesthetic, and interpretation. In a 2010 keynote address, Lisa Gitelman discusses the expectations even different kinds of paper formatting can create:

[A]ren’t things like dollar bills, deeds, licenses, diplomas, and subpoenas—even tickets—cases in which genre and format seem inextricably locked together, in which paper performs the role that is written onto it? I’m sticking to pre-digital cases—taking the point of view of paper once again—in which paper of a certain size

and kind seems to speak from below what's written or printed on it .... (Gitelman 5)

Gitelman's point is that we place too much importance in literary studies to the idea of the format of the "book" as a vessel for an abstracted narrative, a narrative that alone can provide meaning. We treat medium as we would a city bus—good for getting a person from point a to point b, but not something to put our own bumper stickers on. Comics, by dint of their intertextual nature, challenge this assumption, and beneath the surface of differential media practices is an outright rejection of it. How we absorb a narrative and through which media and formats is as important as the narrative itself because it affects how we read, watch, hear, or otherwise immerse ourselves in the "content".

An ideal comic to start this examination with is *Watchmen*. Written by Alan Moore and drawn by Dave Gibbons, *Watchmen* was originally published by DC Comics in 12 issues between September 1986 and October 1987. In its more than 20 subsequent years of publication history, the work has been released in many different formats, each of which has its own unique qualities that work to affect reception. To begin with, it has been collected in trade paperback form three different times in English (DC 1987, 1995 2005), and once as a large-print hardcover "Absolute" edition (DC 2005). Furthermore, in screen media, *Watchmen* has also been adapted into a "motion comic", a video game, and a major motion picture. Finally, the work also exists in both official and pirated digital versions available online. At this point, what was once available only as a stack of stapled-spine comics (ironically, now the hardest version of the work to procure) can now be

consumed in paperback, hardcover, on a television set through a DVD player or video game console, on a computer, on a mobile phone, on a tablet device, and, most recently, as an e-book, as in late September of 2011 DC Comics took its new digital publishing model and extended it to some of the large-form works in its catalogue:

DC Entertainment, the first publisher to offer more than fifty comic book titles on the same day in digital and print, is now taking the world of digital books by storm. The comic book giant has worked with Amazon to bring 100 of its original graphic novels exclusively to Amazon's newly announced Kindle Fire, including best-selling graphic novels WATCHMEN, BATMAN: ARKHAM CITY and SUPERMAN: EARTH ONE, which are available for the first time digitally. (CBR News Team "Watchmen, other DC graphic novels announced as Kindle Fire digital exclusives" par. 1)

Though the deal was originally exclusive with Amazon's Kindle Fire, DC quickly deflated the deal with the announcement that the exclusivity would last only four months before the graphic novels would become available on all e-readers, a decision that may have been influenced by bookstore chain Barnes & Noble's decision to pull the physical copies of the books from their shelves until digital versions would be available in their stores (Reid 2011). Paradoxically, a spokesperson for Barnes & Noble commented that selling the physical book in their stores but not the e-book would contradict their commitment to making books available:

...regardless of the publisher, we will not stock physical books in our stores if we are not offered the available digital format. In recent instances, exclusive publisher deals have prohibited Barnes & Noble from selling certain eBooks, preventing millions of our digital customers from access to those titles. To sell and promote the physical book in our store showrooms, and not have the eBook available for sale would undermine our promise to Barnes & Noble customers to make available any book, anywhere, anytime. (Carey



qtd. Reid "B&N Pulls 100 DC Graphic Novels From Shelves Over Kindle Fire Deal" par 7)

The faulty logic of this argument (making something completely unavailable rather than partially available, in the name of availability, as well as the attempt by a bricks and mortar retailer to protect the last vestiges of a dwindling print market by demanding total coverage in digital format) is presented here mostly to reflect the changing importance of various media forms and showcase the growing tendency to regard digital media as essential as print media, if not more so. It serves to give a sample of the stakes in the political economy of digital books, a political economy growingly differently from that of traditional print economy. In any event, issues just such as this one, as well as its multiplicity of editions and forms, makes *Watchmen* a perfect object of study for this research paper, because the overarching theory driving this piece is that each different form of *Watchmen* must be read differently, and quite possibly understood differently as well. In fact, media theory has argued for quite some time now that different media manifestations of the same text may mean that it no longer *is* the "same" text across media. (cf. Carpenter and McLuhan "The New Languages" 1956) If this is true, then the notion of primary textuality—and the critical approach to literary study through interpretation and close reading—may no longer work.

## **Methodology**

So how do we argue that while these adaptations and different presentation methods are much more than adaptations or reproductions? We might best approach the task of studying these works as multiplicities through an analytical

methodology that allows us to nonetheless examine them as elements of a singular larger assemblage. In his book *Reassembling the Social*, Bruno Latour explains the techniques of Actor-Network Theory (ANT), a theoretical perspective that seeks to examine disparate elements as circulating nodes in a constantly developing, moving whole. Rather than initiate the examination of an object of study by attempting to analyze it or test a claim, ANT engages in descriptive scholarship by breaking the whole down—not into distinct parts, but into connected elements, actors in an assemblage, and then listing the controversies (or in our application, discrepancies) that occur. “The project of ANT,” Latour writes, “is simply to extend the list and modify the shapes and figures of those assembled as participants and to design a way to make them act as a durable whole.” (Latour *Reassembling the Social* 72) Latour’s method developed from a need to describe and identify the hybrids and partial objects that our traditional disciplines and categories exclude, something he first observed in his 1993 book *We Have Never Been Modern*:

Our intellectual life is out of kilter. Epistemology, the social sciences, the sciences of texts – all have their privileged vantage point, provided that they remain separate. If the creatures we are pursuing cross all three spaces, we are no longer understood. Offer the established disciplines some fine sociotechnological network, some lovely translations, and the first group will extract our concepts and pull out all the roots that might connect them to society or to rhetoric; the second group will erase the social and political dimensions, and purify our network of any object; the third group, finally, will retain our discourse and rhetoric but purge out work of any undue adherence to reality – *horresco referens* – or to power plays. (Latour *Modern* 5)

Latour proposed ANT as a way around the pitfalls of a deterministic theoretical framework. Ordinarily, the method is divided into the four stages of identifying controversies, taking differences into account, putting them in order, and

intellectualizing them (Latour *Reassembling the Social* 247). Typically, several passes are necessary, as a first pass will inevitably miss a number of elements for identification. For this project however, we must turn Latour's theory inside out, as one of the main problems we seek to deal with is whether or not the "actors" that make up the different *Watchmen* media forms *should* be addressed as a durable whole. Still, ANT is well suited to the task at hand, as it functions by letting the relations between different elements reveal themselves before trying to dictate terms:

...instead of taking a reasonable position and imposing some order beforehand, ANT claims to be able to find order much better *after* having let the actors deploy the full range of controversies in which they are immersed...The task of defining and ordering the social should be left to the actors themselves, not taken up by the analyst. This is why, to regain some sense of order, the best solution is to trace connections *between* the controversies themselves rather than try to decide how to settle any given controversy. (Latour *Reassembling the Social* 23)

This move towards tracking the changes that arise in the narrative as it is shuffled from medium to medium is perfect for a project that can't claim to absolutely know the hows and whys of the transferences. Latour stipulates that in good ANT research, the concepts of the objects – actors with agency in and of themselves – are allowed to be *stronger* than those of the analyst (Latour *Reassembling the Social* 30). Consequently, the full relationships between the actors will be revealed. It is also important to note here that Latour distinguishes between mediators, which "transform, translate, distort, and modify the meaning or the elements they are supposed to carry," and intermediaries, which "transport meaning or force

without transformation.” (Latour *Reassembling the Social* 39) This distinction will come in handy later when we look specifically at media forms.

This practice of descriptive criticism has already been posited for comics studies by Samuel R. Delany in his book *Shorter Views: Queer Thoughts & the Politics of the Paraliterary*. In analyzing Scott McCloud’s *Understanding Comics*, Delany takes umbrage with what he feels is the paraliterary critic’s insecurities about defining genres before ever actually studying works:

If, realizing the way in which the two meanings of definition (like the two meanings of art) create an unwinnable game of round-robin chasing-after-one’s-tail, critics of the paraliterary could retire the notion of definition once and for all, if they could restrict themselves to the far more modest-seeming task of describing our objects of concern (like comics, SF, pornography...), describing never-before-noticed aspects, pointing out the most interesting examples, describing the myriad and fascinating ways in which those aspects react with one another and how they interact with readers and the world, we would produce a far less arrogant, far more interesting, far less self-crippling, and finally far more powerful criticism—as does McCloud at his strongest—than we usually do, a criticism that would go far further toward effecting the revolution *in esthetic values* that McCloud (and I) would like to see. (Delany *Shorter Views* 237-238)

Though Delany comes to descriptive criticism by a different path than Latour, both argue for the similar methods. The task now is to hybridize the two in order to reveal the mediating influences of *Watchmen*’s media forms. By looking at each of the forms the work has taken through this descriptive analysis, we can see some of the strings being pulled behind them (if not who is pulling the strings) and perhaps determine whether or not a different story *format* can necessarily call for or create a different *story*. Moreover, this view of the narratives and the material forms that constitute them as assemblages is well in keeping with what Will Straw

calls the “Circulatory Turn,” a view of cultural artefacts that comes with “an understanding of media as mobile forms circulating within social space.” (Straw 23) Straw’s view is that the way these material forms move in virtual and physical spaces impacts not only who encounters them, but how. Subsequently, we in turn may be able to encounter the importance of form, circulation, and method of control (i.e. the way the interface allows the user to experience and manipulate content) to the way we receive a given piece of narrative. And at the same time, a healthy, clear comparison of each of *Watchmen*’s media forms may allow us to see that our current models for textual analysis—and textual unity—may no longer be adequate in a networked digital milieu.

### **Who wrote *Watchmen*?**

*Watchmen* has a particularly complicated relationship to the notion of primary authorship and primary textuality because one of the work’s original authors has disavowed it entirely. After many years of lengthy legal battles, writer Alan Moore chose to simply disconnect from *Watchmen*, and has stated in interview that he no longer even has a copy of the book in his home (Thill “Alan Moore: ‘I Don’t Want *Watchmen* Back” par. 6). Moore has also gone on record as saying, “My book is a comic book. Not a movie, not a novel. A comic book. It’s been made in a certain way, and designed to be read in a certain way.” (Moore qtd. Jensen “*Watchmen*: An Oral History” 5) So according to the writer of *Watchmen*, anything that steps outside of the general comic book format is no longer his work, regardless of whether or not we perceive them to be different representations of a whole.

Further complicating the issue is the fact that artist Dave Gibbons has *not* disowned *Watchmen*; he frequently collaborates with adaptors and critics alike, from consulting on the *Watchmen* film to co-authoring the 2008 companion book *Watching the Watchmen* with designers Chip Kidd and Mike Essl. So if Moore distances himself from all works of adaptation completely and Gibbons participates to varying degrees in their production, whose works are they, and how do we study them in a meaningful way?

Of course, the idea that definitive textual analysis may not be adequate for critiquing works of paraliterature is not a new one. In his book *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, Michel Foucault suggests that the way we view texts—as single, indivisible units—is at best illusory, and at worst deceptive:

...is not the material unity of the volume a weak, accessory unit in relation to the discursive unity of which it is the support?...the unity of the book, even in the sense of a group of relations, cannot be regarded as identical in each case. The book is not simply the object the one holds in one's hands; and it cannot remain within the little parallelepiped that contains it: its unity is variable and relative. As soon as one questions that unity, it loses its self-evidence; it indicates itself, constructs itself, only on the basis of a complex field of discourse. (Foucault *Archaeology of Knowledge* 23)

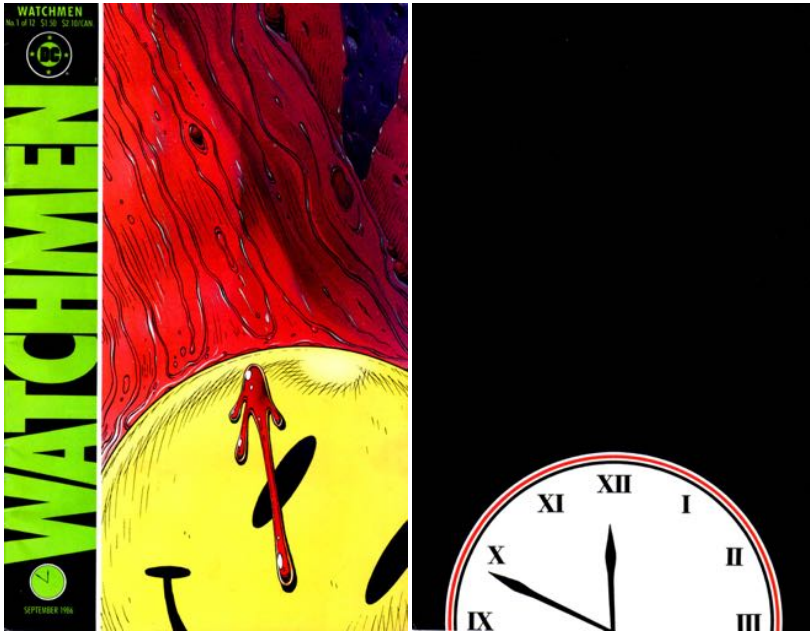
For Foucault, the only unity that the critic can count upon as indivisible is the unit of the discursive framework. In fact, it is Foucault's idea of the discursive archive that informed Latour's conception of networked objects (Latour *Reassembling the Social* 212). The object of study is something akin to a fiction that exists only to allow the discourse about it to exist. If we take this as granted, it is then much easier to challenge the authorship of *Watchmen* and reassign all of its creators

instead as author-functions—a concept defined by Foucault in his essay “What is an Author?”:

Further elaboration would, of course, disclose other characteristics of the ‘author-function,’ but I have limited myself to the four that seemed the most obvious and important. They can be summarized in the following manner: the ‘author-function’ is tied to the legal and institutional systems that circumscribe, determine, and articulate the realm of discourses; it does not operate in a uniform manner in all discourses, at all times, and in any given culture; it is not defined by the spontaneous attribution of a text to its creator, but through a series of precise and complex procedures; it does not refer, purely and simply, to an actual individual insofar as it simultaneously gives rise to a variety of egos and to a series of subjective positions that individuals of any class may come to occupy. (Foucault “Author” 910)

Clearing the field of the sovereign Author and replacing it with the author-function makes it easier for us to see the ways in which *Watchmen* is a fluid, discursively built property, and that the viewing of the film can have just as much impact on our interpretation of the narrative as the reading of the original, “authentic” codex. Once the genie of these different forms and adaptations are out of the bottle, there’s no putting them back in, and the new reader can approach and encounter them in the order in which they emerged in our culture, backwards, randomly, or all at once. In any given encounter, the only sense that the ‘reader’ will have that what they view may be less than authentic, or has some antecedent, is at most embedded in the first few moments of the ‘reading’. For example, the cover of the originally printed first issue of *Watchmen* has no mention of its creators on either its front or back (see fig. 1). In fact, Moore’s and Gibbons’s names do not even appear until the sixth page of the issue (common practice in the political economy of print comics throughout most of their history; creators

were only credited on covers once they had an established reputation). The only attribution the outer shell of the book gives of its origin is its publisher, DC Comics, identified by its logo in the upper corner (of course, this would be easily recognized by most comics readers at the time and might perhaps establish some sort of expectation of the content within).



*(fig. 1: The front and back covers of Watchmen #1 as it originally saw print)*

Meanwhile, if we turn to subsequent collected editions, both print and digital, Moore and Gibbons are identified at first glance. Most print editions, in fact, identify them on both the front and back covers as well as the book's spine (see fig. 2).





(fig.2: the cover of the 1987 collected edition of *Watchmen*)

Authorial identification becomes much more complicated when we move onto works that seek to be adaptations rather than reproductions, as Moore refused to be credited for any of these works. The 2008 *Watchmen* motion comic, for example, credits only Gibbons at the beginning of each chapter, listing him as “illustrator” before going on to credit colourist John Higgins (who worked on the original series as well) and narrator Tom Stechschulte. In the motion comic, *Watchmen* has no author, and doesn’t seem to aspire to one (a feature that may have to do with any number of issues, from the lack of legality or regulation protecting the new medium of motion comics at the time to deference to Moore to the possibility that no formal “writer” was employed in the production process). In the 2009 film, the opening credits tell us that the film is “based on the graphic novel co-created and illustrated by Dave Gibbons and published by DC Comics” right before crediting the screenplay to David Hayter and Alex Tse (see fig. 3)—

and then mentioning the film as “directed by Zack Snyder.” Snyder, in fact, is mentioned closer to the head of the credit sequence, as *Watchmen* is a “Zack Snyder film.”



(fig. 3: the crediting of the writing for 2009’s *Watchmen* film goes to Hayter and Tse, with Gibbons “co-creating” the graphic novel)

So each of these different versions of *Watchmen* present a different authorial origin for the narrative—a narrative that in all its versions can be transcribed in largely the same way. The content of the actual text of all print and digital editions of *Watchmen* is unaltered, and the motion comic adds none and primarily omits the mock-apocryphal material that appears after chapters 1-11 (an excision which has entirely its own impact on our ability to interpret the greater narrative, as apocrypha and appendix usually plays an extremely large role in Moore’s work—even more so than the epigrams in the *Black Hole* case). Even the film, in many scenes, has the actors reciting the dialogue from the original comic verbatim. If, however, the comic’s writer and co-creator insists that these are not his works, one must look past the words, and often past the imagery (as we will see in the next section) to attribute them to a given source. Returning to the same essay in which he identifies the author-function, Foucault also describes what he calls initiators of

discursive practices, authors whose distinctive contributions produced “not only their own work[s], but the possibility and the rules of formation of other texts.” (Foucault “Author” 910) Moore’s disavowal of any adaptations, however ekphrastic, is based around the fact that he believes *Watchmen* to be a comic just as much about the form of comics as it is about superheroes or Cold War anxiety. Adapting or translating it into a film changes the nature of that thematic relationship. The *Watchmen* film is not just metafiction, but a piece of film exploring film as a concept and a vehicle as much as it does comics. The argument that may follow is that Snyder and co. are initiators of their own discursive practices, but how sustainable that argument may be is not necessarily our concern here.

It is a much simpler task to instead credit each contributor as serving an author-function, channeling and enunciating *here* and *now* rather than trying to locate authors breathing life and nourishing *before* or *after*. This is well in keeping with a framework based around assemblages, as it allows for the objects themselves to take on distinctive agencies, rather than holding that distinction for some initiator or creator. To do this makes a great deal of sense especially when we consider that Moore and Gibbons first proposed *Watchmen* to DC Comics not as an entirely original work, but as a story using characters from the then-recently acquired Charlton Comics stable of properties: Doctor Manhattan was intended to be the nuclear-powered Captain Atom, Nite Owl’s role was meant for the affable gadget-wielding Blue Beetle, Silk Spectre was going to be a grittier version of Nightshade, and so forth. The main reason that *Watchmen* came to be developed

using new characters was that DC Comics suggested it, hoping to keep the already established characters for use in other projects (Gibbons *Watching* 29). As this positions DC as yet another part of the author-function of *Watchmen*, it is consequently where the issue of a discourse's initiator becomes crucial. If *Watchmen* is a discursive field, can we regard Moore and Gibbons as that field's initiators? Or does a different media form necessarily indicate towards a different discursive practice, even if *Watchmen* itself is a discourse? "Beginnings" are always relative; ANT is informed by Foucault, cover credits on the first issue of a new comic series are informed by the established success of its creators, and the content of the first page of an chapter of *Black Hole* is informed by the epigram preceding it, If Moore and Gibbons had gone ahead as they had originally planned and produced *Watchmen* using an assortment of characters each created by a different artist or writer, perhaps we would now be trying to further account for the origins of the narrative, making a diagram that not only has the different adaptations branching out from Moore and Gibbons, but also branches out backwards as well. This knowledge only further moves into focus the fact that the task of tracing authorship is potentially endless and certainly confusing, while viewing the text as merely the object one holds in one's hands is extremely tenuous. Instead of trying to construct arguments and analyses based on these shaky foundations of origin and hierarchy, we may find it more profitable to study the connections between the versions, and view them as nodes networking together and impacting on one another with equal force.

We can also see how a particular format *necessarily* changes the narrative to best suit its own biases (as defined by Harold Innis in his brilliant *The Bias of Communication*). One thing that the original print run offered its readers that no subsequent reissue or adaptation has captured since is the inherently suspenseful nature of serialized publication. Only those who read *Watchmen* as it appeared on the rack from 1986 through 1987 *had* to wait in anticipation for the next installment. The collected edition, conversely, offers readers just the opposite: a greater unity of narrative, as it has no adverts interrupting the flow of the story, and an immediacy of flow, as *Watchmen* takes place over a course of weeks, not months. On a visual level, the single issues' covers are separated from the beginning of the chapter by a publication information page, while the collected edition places the cover image of each chapter facing the first page of the story—which makes it crystal clear to the reader that the cover image is always a zoomed-in version of the chapter's first or second panel (fig. 4):



(fig. 4.: cover and first panel of *Watchmen* #2, cover and first page of *Watchmen* #12)

This is significant because it is a unique motif not only in comics, but also in covers in general. The cover image of a book is so rarely a representation of the

first imagery described within that readers aren't accustomed to looking for connections between the two. To not only embed the cover image entirely in the narrative, but also make it into the narrative's opening salvo and still have it speak to the contents thematically, is groundbreaking. This speaks in a more general sense to the importance of edition, something frequently focused on by textual analysts, but rarely applied to comics. The closest we get, in fact, is textual criticism of concrete poetry like Randall McLeod's article "FIAT *f*LUX", where he looks at different codex representations of 17<sup>th</sup> Century poet George Herbert's "Easter Wings." Here, however, McLeod is attempting to be specifically critical of common editorial practices when it comes to textual analysis:

Nothing is easier than to mock the editorial tradition. Our practice of literary criticism proceeds without self-scrutinizing rules of evidence (such as one expects in law or in the experimental sciences), rules to derive from the alleged authoritative documents whatever it is editors proffer their readers. Editing in our tradition is largely hear-say. Even if one decides on philosophical grounds that the question of authority is ever to be left open, it is primarily the documentary evidence relevant to that question that can provide a stable material basis for reference and speculation—if only that kind of *objectivity* were what we sought. But instead of having recourse to a common factual ground, editors and those whose literary consumption depends on them live in the *objective* world of editorial appropriations....its intellect is self-absorbed; it is virtually cut off from the objects it needs to contemplate. (McLeod "FIAT *f*LUX" 148)

In picking at the seams of editorial practice, McLeod makes the point that to study editions in terms of deriving from some "authoritative" codex is inherently tautological as an exercise because it assumes that the "authoritative" codex is accessible for modeling, or exists in the first place. He further tries to communicate to us the futility of seeking to differentiate between authors and

editors (the “self-absorbed” intellect masking editors from the fact that their “objectivity” is completely fabricated). Taking this point one step further, we can imagine that authors, artists, editors, adaptors—all act quite comfortably as author-functions enunciating an assemblage of works that is always *here* and *now*. Moreover, all the objects produced are actors exercising agency within the same network, to varying degrees of success. The removal of Moore’s name and the addition of Snyder’s when *Watchmen* made the leap into film, for example, changes the “authority” of the work a great deal—communities of Moore loyalists may say that the “Snyder” *Watchmen* is not as good as the “Moore” *Watchmen*, but this would in turn disregard the fact that to Moore, they are two different works entirely, and to Snyder, the film is a loving homage to the comic. The notion is similarly complemented by Jerome McGann’s book *Radiant Textuality*, in which McGann identifies editing as a theoretical pursuit capable of both conceptual and concrete creative undertakings (McGann *Radiant* 48).

The digital version of *Watchmen* sits somewhere between the single issues and the collected edition: there are no publication info pages to separate the cover from the first page, but an e-reader will only allow one page to be viewed at a time. Scanning quickly through these pages, however, can draw our attention to points of interest not necessarily otherwise obvious to us, points of interest that, while not necessarily relevant to the narrative, make for unique forms of reading pleasure (more on this to come). As for the motion comic, it does away with covers entirely, sometimes to the advantage of the intended effect (the first chapter of

*Watchmen* begins with a seven-panel page zooming out and up from the street to figure looking out of a skyscraper window, while the first installment of the motion comic opens with these panels represented as an actual static zoom, integrating the cover motif), and sometimes to the disadvantage of the effect (the first panel of *Watchmen*'s second chapter is a pulled back view of a statue, while the motion comic awkwardly pans down the panel to give the image movement, because it is a *motion* comic, and, well, the original picture is an image of a statue). In any event, the resultant effect of the media forms dictate cognitive connections for the reader, and the way that *Watchmen* uses its covers as pronounced but fully integrated parts of the narrative means that the covers often dictate tone for the rest of the chapter.

The movie, of course, has no publication intervals or covers to concern itself with, and has to be much more creative in adapting the narrative to the screen. For the most part, the *Watchmen* film altered the writing of the comic by making massive cuts to backstories, subplots, and minor characters in the interest of brevity: a familiar character's name substituted here to avoid a lengthier search scene (for example, Dr. Manhattan's ex-lover Janey Slater is now indirectly responsible for hiring Veidt's would-be assassin), a flashback scene moved here so as to move forward a revelation (the issue focusing on Silk Spectre's past overlaps with the issue detailing Rorschach and Nite Owl's search, and the secret of her parentage is foreshadowed as early as the opening credits). And while most of the alterations made to the writing altered the narrative through condensation and



removal, most of the alterations to the visuals altered them by making them darker and sexier: the group of middle-aged retired heroes pushing fifty and forty became an inexplicably ageless group in their twenties and mid-thirties.

The impact of medium working on narrative in the film adaption is most clear, however, in the denouement. In the comic, Adrian Veidt attempts to avert World War III by manufacturing a massive fake alien to decimate New York, the hope being that the warring Superpowers will put aside hostilities in favor of creating a unified front against an imminent extraterrestrial invasion. In the film, Veidt frames the omnipotent Doctor Manhattan for the instantaneous destruction of New York and several other major world cities by replicating his “energy signature,” in the hopes that the Superpowers will put down their arms in fear of the all-seeing being they think watches over them and behave. Simply put, in the comic Adrian gives the world a devil to hate, while in the film he gives them a god to fear. The reasoning for this can be traced not necessarily to the screenwriters wanting to make some sort of different statement, but in the interest of serving the medium of film. It’s not hard to imagine that a movie audience may have a harder time convincing themselves of the reality of a giant special-effects alien squid corpse, presented to them in the final half-hour of the movie, after they have suspended so much disbelief already. It also makes for a more tightly drawn web of characters and events, because the alien explanation requires the presence of several extra scenes and subplots, and really comes together for the reader with the inclusion of some of the chapter-break appendix material from earlier in the

book—material fully based in a subplot that would have added at least another hour to the movie, (and would have seemed totally out of place in the movie, as the subplot was largely a commentary on genre within the comics medium—the giant alien squid, for example, operates as a satirical statement on the superhero science fiction genre, where invading aliens are usually highly intelligent, humanoid, teeming legions).

As is becoming apparent, different media forms often have to make different content decisions based on how different they can manage time, space, and data. In adapting *Watchmen* to its various media, formats and editions, each author-function makes editorial choices that, impact reader reception. Each instance of *Watchmen* necessarily filters meaning in different ways. These types of decisions are most obvious in massive rewriting situations called for by something like the transference from comic book to film, where it's necessary to focus more on certain parts of the narrative than others in service of conciseness and aesthetics. In adapting *Watchmen* to film, the screenwriters evidently found the first two chapters of the series quite striking: nearly a third of the *Watchmen* movie is spent on these two chapters, which comparatively make up only one sixth of the original narrative—meaning that the film places double the significance on establishing the situation and backstory of the characters, and less emphasis on subplots, supporting characters, and the small details that flesh out the narrative. The adapted content breaks down to these approximate amounts:

*Film:*

Chapter 1: 32:30 minutes (20.8%)

Chapter 2: 21 minutes (13.46%)

Chapter 3: 11 minutes (7.05%)

Chapter 4: 9:30 minutes (6.08%)

Chapter 5: 10 minutes (6.4%)

Chapter 6: 8:30 minutes (5.44%)

Chapter 7: 14 minutes (8.97%)

Chapter 8: 7:30 minutes (4.8%)

Chapters 9-10 (heavily layered into one another): 18 minutes (11.5%)

Chapter 11: 8 minutes (5.12%)

Chapter 12: 16 minutes (10.25%)

*Approximately 156 minutes total*

These numbers describe the creative agency of the author-function at work. In all print and digital versions of the comic, every chapter takes up the exact same number of pages, meaning that the precedent sets a clear divide of 8.33% per chapter. Even the motion comic keeps close to these proportions, the shortest chapter making for 7.62% and the longest chapter accounting for about 9.18% of the content:

*Motion comic:*

Chapter 1: 25.28 minutes (7.93%)

Chapter 2: 29:30 minutes (9.18%)

Chapter 3: 25.07 minutes (7.78%)

Chapter 4: 29.37 minutes (9.18%)

Chapter 5: 24.48 minutes (7.7%)

Chapter 6: 29.13 minutes (9.1%)

Chapter 7: 25.49 minutes (8%)

Chapter 8: 24.43 minutes (7.7%)

Chapter 9: 27.41 minutes (8.61%)

Chapter 10: 26.48 minutes (8.32%)

Chapter 11: 28.24 minutes (8.81%)

Chapter 12: 24.35 minutes (7.62%)

*Approximately 321.25 minutes total*

The fact that the first iteration of the narrative can be broken down into neat proportional page counts makes it easier to see the impact media has on narrative.

For the movie, the filmmakers not only changed the proportional focus on various aspects of the plot, but also moved events around so as to draw viewer attention to various moments of foreshadowing that may only have taken up a single panel of the comic, as film requires an emphasis be placed on time so that the viewer is able to process the significance of an image before moving on to the next one.

In addition, the move to film downplays the spatial narrative present in comics: a field of panels arranged on a grid to relate to each other in a specific way. In trade, film's temporal bias arranges the images in time to provide the illusion of movement. In film, the relationship is always linear, but in comics, this is not necessarily the case. Again, we are returned to the question of what constitutes primary authorship. If we were to take a newspaper article, cut out each sentence, discard some and rearrange the rest into a similar order, so it still told a similar, coherent story, is this plagiarism? Editing? Or genuine authorship? Keeping in mind that this sort of thing happens in archival research and journalism somewhat frequently. It is easier to say that in hard scientific fields, facts are reported, and for a fact to change renders it invalid. But in this case, various author-functions are at work on the narrative concept of *Watchmen*, which, as an abstract, does not change either. If different news articles reporting the same facts, and using a great deal of the same quotes and language, are still two unique pieces of journalism, should these iterations of *Watchmen* be regarded as different narratives? The complications are as confusing as they are endless.

## Painting With Colours

In the original paperback collected edition, the likely goal of the editors was to put forward an object that was easy and cheap to produce, required a close to minimal amount of new creative production or alteration of existing creative content. We can see this in the edition's lack of introduction, appendices, or extra material, as well as the lack of cuts to original material. The main productive changes made for this edition were in paper stock (from pulp to matte), binding (from staples to glue), and inking. The *Absolute* edition, on the other hand, sought not only to reproduce the content of the original work, but also celebrate it with the presentation of multiple archival materials (including script excerpts and character designs), a special slipcover, an enlarged print format, glossy paper stock, and sewn binding. Setting aside the circulation implications of the extremely large and heavy book, the magnified imagery of the large-print format can alter our experience of reading and interpreting *Watchmen* in several very interesting ways. To begin with, blowing up the halftone screen dot-coloring of a comic book produced without a digital paint program might help to address the weakening of historicity suggested by Frederic Jameson in his book *Postmodernism*. Far from the "set of dusty spectacles" Jameson describes our prehistory as (Jameson *Postmodernism* 18), historicity in a blown-up comic book is splattered all over the page. The halftone screens rendered enormous can call to mind the way comics were produced all those decades ago in the medium's putative past, making the satirical statement aspects of *Watchmen* all the more

biting and poignant. It is not hard to imagine that a study of *Watchmen* which only examined the *Absolute* edition might then intensify its focus on a reading of the book that operated as a cultural critique of postmodernity. This reading is, of course, easily justified, but the point remains that it may be the specific edition that ignites such a reading for a given reader in the first place. In fact, everything about *Absolute Watchmen* radiates a fetishization of materiality that results in the production of historicity, not history, from the enlargement of the halftone process to its abundance of archival materials to its tome-like dimensions. These aspects, contextualized with the actual narrative content of the book, may leave a new reader with a perspective that the work was produced entirely as an narrative and art object to evoke and monumentalize the past, when Moore and Gibbons may have set out not only to comment on history, but (amongst many other things) contemporary politics, culture, and models of dystopian and utopian futures.

Digital recapitulations, on the other hand, may lose a great deal of the sense of historicity, not only because of their presentation format of being read on a tablet device, e-reader, or personal computer (all of which will immediately connote newness and communication technologies that hardly existed when *Watchmen* first appeared – no less ideological, but different), but because of the editing process that goes into digitization, especially in terms of color (see fig. 5).



*(fig 5: a panel from Watchmen #1 as it appears on the page (left), and on the screen)*

The differences playing out in these panels are numerous. Most notable is the fact that in digital form, the colors are rendered brighter and more vibrant—a necessary decision when reproducing artwork on a screen, where colors require more distinctiveness to keep the figures represented from blurring. While we may want to perform the closure that allows us to see these two images as reconcilable if not comparable, the very mechanics that go into colouring a print image versus those that go into colouring a digital image with visual light behind it are quite different: print uses the cyan, magenta, yellow, black (CMYK) model, while print is always done by a model combining red, green, and blue (RGB). The necessity of a different colouring approach is especially true for the screen culture of mobile devices, where the lighting of the space around the device can create distracting reflections and darkening effects. Brightening up the colors increases the clarity of the image on the screen and is easier for the backlighting to process in a coherent way. But the sacrifice we can see here is that the mood and tone of the image is altered. In the print version, the reader must look closely to make out the features

of the figure on the windowsill, and look quite closely to make out the blood smattered on the floor and painting. Changing the shade of the blood to ketchup-red makes for a slightly over-the-top effect, while making the figure on the windowsill clearer negates the grittiness of the picture and creates less of a contrast between the darkened apartment and the luminous cityscape. Finally, we can see the basic sanitizing effect of digitization on comics. The digital version of the panel looks cleaner, slicker; there are far fewer imperfections and no colour bleedthrough to speak of at all. The CMYK model of colouring evokes no trace of the materiality of print, let alone old comic books. However, even CMYK colours can only be seen as RGB onscreen—which would in turn offer an entirely new object for comparison.

In other instances, the presence of digital color and backlighting may be able to intensify the sought-after effect. In the final climactic scene of the *Watchmen* motion comic, Doctor Manhattan attacks Ozymandias with a burning cyan glare totally appropriate for an omnipotent being (fig. 6):



(fig. 6: Doctor Manhattan in pale blue (left), and a more intense, otherworldly glowing hue)

The brilliant vibrancy of this coloring is even more awing when the motion comic is actually in motion, because with movement it is clear that Manhattan's skin is



fuzzy and almost flickering, like snow static on a television set. How much more suitable for a god created during the rise of television and through fifties-era science is a static consistency reminiscent of TV aeriels? This is also to say nothing of the added debris, or the fact that the speech bubble appears and disappears out of the frame in a motion comic.

All of this speaks to the importance of viewing the technology as part of the voice that utters the work, rather than just an empty mediator that channels unadulterated content. These technologies are more than just pipes; they are filters. Even more important is what this demonstrates: in order to make a full and faithful account of any one of these given objects works, we need to go beyond examining their contents and into a study of how they operate in relation to each other (as well as other types of media). Returning to *Radiant Textuality*, we can observe McGann indicating that technological leaps forward in printing and representation have always been signs of “a culture-wide effort for the technical means to raise the expressive power of the book through visual design.” (McGann *Radiant* 62) While McGann infers from this historical pattern that things like “computerized art editing programs can be used to *raise* our perceptual grasp of aesthetic objects” (McGann *Radiant* 85, emphasis mine), it may not be so much evolution as permutation, or, put more bluntly, it may not be so much better as different. Objects articulating each other in different ways will always result in different modes of signification, from the panel grid of the page to panning sweep of the screen. Ultimately, the way these editions and versions relate to each other

is subjective. A new interpreter may come to the book by way of the film, or may only ever have read the narrative on a Kindle, experiencing it in vectors or pixels rather than printed dots, or windows and screens rather than pages. The intricate narrative of the comic, its appendices, subplots, and space-alien horror climax may seem convoluted or hokey in comparison to the compact plot and clean narrative of the two-hour forty-minute film that disposes of pirate meta-narratives and keeps the denouement focused on the primary characters. Or perhaps the decades-old paper of the print comic has now faded, while the relatively new digital format is still stark and bright, letting the reader experience in a more powerful way the colorful world of superheroes plunged into a blacker-than-black dystopian past that Moore and Gibbons may have been attempting to effect. In any case, it is far less useful to focus exclusively on creator than as part of the assemblage that produces the creation.

### **The Comedian's Fall**

In addition to the technical changes wrought on graphics by processing them through different media, there exists a disparity in the visual languages of print comics, digital comics, and film. Take for example an iconic moment from the opening of *Watchmen* displayed in three different forms. In the third page of *Watchmen's* first chapter, Edward Blake is thrown from his skyscraper apartment window, or more appropriately thrown through it. In its original comic presentation, the panel of Blake flying through the window appeared like this (fig. 7):



*(fig. 7: Blake's fall through his apartment window as depicted in the print edition of Watchmen #1)*

And in 2009's *Watchmen* film, the shot of Blake being hurled through the window is slowed down so as to closely resemble the comic panel (fig. 8):



*(fig. 8: Blake's fall through his apartment window as depicted in the 2009 Watchmen film)*

However, much difference still remains in tone, colour palate, framing and composition—and consequently interpretive reception. The comic panel is embedded in the white frame of the gutter, while the film’s widescreen layout borders only the top and bottom of the shot with thick black bars. Each bordering style complements the actual content of the image as well. The comic panel is lit up in bright colors and Blake’s horrified expression is clearly visible, while the film still has a dark color scheme (which makes it easier for the special effects in the shot to be matchmoved into place) and Blake’s face is obscured in shadow. While the two images depict the same action or moment, the natures of their mediums lend themselves to different tones: the former is outspoken, while the latter is muted. Perhaps this is because in the comic, a single image is being captured in time, while film necessarily offers movement. In fact, the closest the film can come to capturing a single moment in time is through a slow-motion tracking shot. Interestingly, by presenting Blake’s fall in slow motion here, the film has achieved the opposite tone that the comic panel communicates. And this is only one item in a *very* long list of differences: the page number, the assassin’s hands, the still-motion of the glass shards—all differences necessitated by the transfer in medium, and all differences that may be important in their own ways, just as the difference between a static frame screen shot and a panel that is always static evokes the different processes of spatial and linear arrangements.

Another point of interest here lies in the presence of the button in the comic panel. The smiley face button with the fleck of blood is an extremely

important image to *Watchmen* on a number of levels: it carries the story along by reappearing again and again, it is the first *and* last image shown in the entire extended narrative, it is a visual metaphor for the “doomsday clock” referred to throughout the story, and it is a thematic reminder of the cynicism inherent in the story’s handling of the heroic and the macabre. There are implications of the fact that the button is clearly visible in the comic panel while it can’t be made out in the film still. The *Watchmen* movie gives special attention to the button just before this shot, and just after (which the comic does not), but this is because the framing devices of comics and film allow for different things. In the static image of the comic book panel, the eyes are allowed to move freely around the page, taking in details at whatever rate the reader chooses. The film viewer, however, usually directs her gaze towards the center of the screen or wherever the camera focuses. Because the interpreter’s methods of control (that is, the tools available for consumption) in film are differently limited than in comics, it is easier for a shot in film to become overloaded with important material. The filmmaker does not want the shot to end up looking too “busy.” While this is still a consideration in comics, the comic artist can reasonably fit more into a panel than the DP can fit into a single still in a shot. In comics, time is as slow or as fast as the reader desires, but film is far more prescriptive in the pace at which a viewer should proceed. Instead, the filmmakers must be more telling in showing off the significance of the button by giving it the aforementioned close-ups just before and just after the window

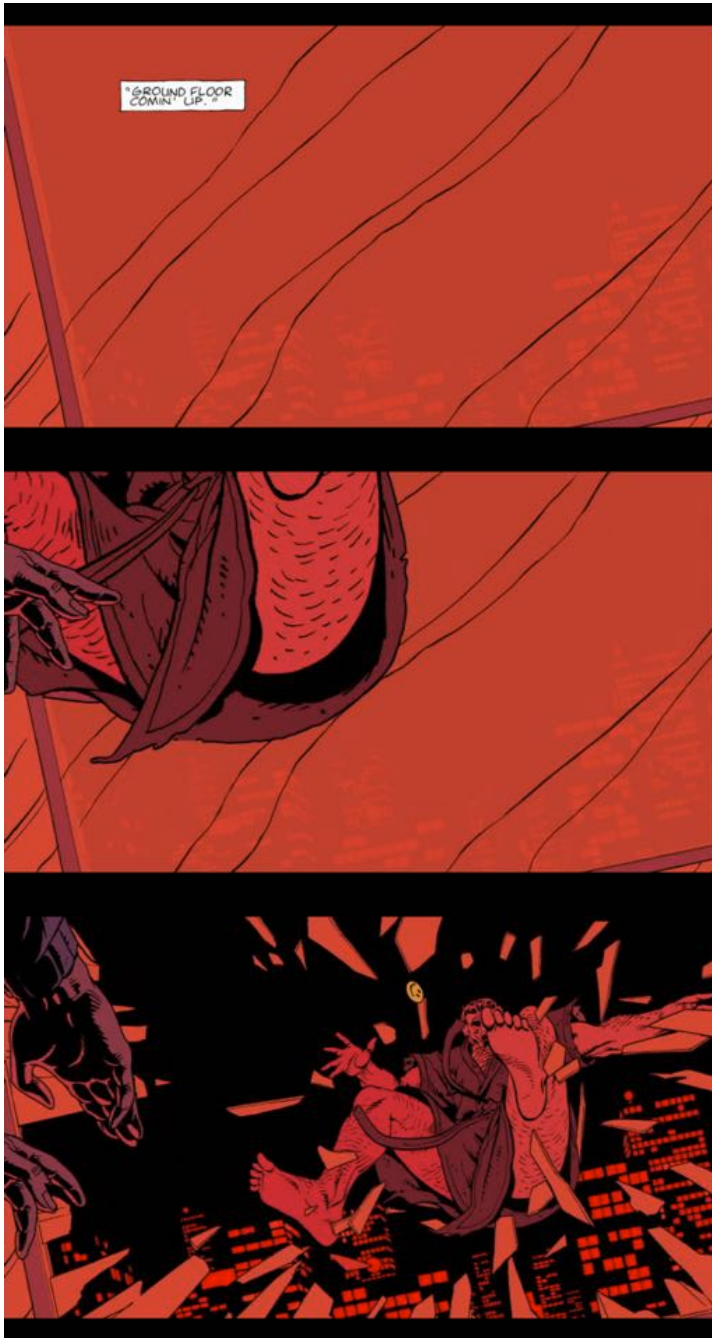
breaks. In the comic, on the other hand, the button is present but not closed in upon throughout the flashback—which in the film is not a flashback at all.

Another layer of meaning can be found by turning to the 2008 *Watchmen* motion comic. The motion comic strikes a kind of hybridity between the print comic and the film, while mostly using the images of the comic. If the sequence is slowed down enough, however, it becomes apparent that some work *has* had to be done to accommodate the motion comic media form (fig. 9). Just as with the film, the motion comic fuses the images of the panels into a static frame that never changes shape or size, calling for the absence of the gutters and the closure-making process Scott McCloud describes in *Understanding Comics*:

The closure in electronic media is continuous, largely involuntary and virtually imperceptible. But closure in comics is far from continuous and anything but involuntary! Every act committed to paper by the comics artist is aided and abetted by a silent accomplice. And equal partner in crime known as the reader ... while film makes use of audiences' imaginations for occasional effects, comics must use it far more often! From the tossing of a baseball to the death of a planet, the reader's deliberate, voluntary closure is comics' primary means of simulating time and motion. (McCloud *Understanding Comics* 68-69)

As defined by McCloud, closure is the process by which we create meaningful connections and internally sequentialize the images. With comics, the reader takes an invisible hand in cognitively creating the narrative, by taking two images, putting them in order, and deciding that they represent a continuation. Here, however, closure is being performed for us. Only those versions of *Watchmen* that retain the unity of the page broken down into panel units allow for the reader to perform closure, while the screen culture of the film and motion comic always complete the circuit of meaning for us. Consequently, the way we process the

different media forms calls for a different interpretation of the “same” narrative material.



*(fig. 9: The Comedian's launch through the window in the Watchmen motion comic required the additional artwork of the intact window to be drawn)*

Even more interesting here is the fact that we can clearly see from the above figures that the makers of the motion comic had to do more than just animate *Watchmen* in order to give it movement. Although the only *entirely* new part of this sequence is the intact window (no more than opaque coloring and a few squiggly lines), we can also see changes to coloring process (halftone in print, digital paint in the motion comic), the text (in the motion comic, Blake being thrown through the window wipes away the text box as his body moves into the frame), and the lighting (in the motion comic, the windows in the buildings in the background are the same red as the shattered window, and the shadows on Blake are absent, giving his expression a more cartoony quality). Changes like this necessitate a different understanding of the Comedian's fall—for example, the background he's being flung into lacks the stark contrast that the coloring of the print comic gives the buildings, and the absence of shadows on Blake does not convey in the same way that he is being hurled into darkness and the city—both of which changes may alter the way in which we view the impact of what is happening to Blake, or more generally our ability to lose ourselves in the carefully constructed reality of the world. The consequence of these changes may be something like seeing a film where the special effects have not been matchmoved into the surrounding reality of the footage—which removes us from our immersion into the narrative. The fascinating miscarriages of these media forms in recapturing or recapitulating effects of the original comics—if this is indeed what



the film or motion comic are attempting to do—hint at where the borderlines of translation and adaptation lie.

### **Different Ways to Pick a Rose**

Part of the point of this exercise is to argue that *Watchmen's* media forms *are* actors, by showing that the media forms themselves fit as transformative mediators rather than as merely transportive intermediaries. As soon as an element is shown and treated as a mediator rather than an intermediary, the movement of the social is rendered visible to the reader, the points where transformation occur are revealed, and the way different forms articulate meaning can be accessed with a great deal more clarity. Luckily, some of this work has already been done for us if we simply apply the lessons taught to us by the law of identity. When Gertrude Stein wrote “A rose is a rose is a rose,” each of those roses was implied as unique because each was experienced at a different time and place and within a different given context. This helps in thinking about the differences between each iteration of *Watchmen*: the 2<sup>nd</sup> collected edition is necessarily a different work than the ultimate edition, simply by virtue of the ultimate edition representing everything in a larger format; the film is different from the comic even when its imagery *and* dialogue only reproduce and recapitulate that of the comic book because of the additions of aspects like soundtrack, movement, or a less controlled experience (especially if viewed theatrically); the motion comic is different simply by virtue of adding sound effects to a comic book that famously has none; and the digital versions are different from the print because the pages

have been scanned, mounted in a frame, and backlit by a screen. The issue is further interestingly complicated when we take context into account: the 1<sup>st</sup> collected edition arrives already contextualized by the serialized issues, the 2<sup>nd</sup> collected edition is contextualized by both, and so forth right down the line.

The best way to think about differentiating between different media (or different formats within the same medium) may be to consider them through modalities of control. If we only analyze a work like *Watchmen* on a close reading narrative level, we will only get part of a large, kinetic picture. Close reading over-emphasizes “content” in a way that presents an illusion of text, where meaning can be extracted from its material form. As a practice it treats materiality as clothing that can be removed or disregarded to reveal a naked truth, rather than skin, without which the nervous system inside would collapse. With close reading, we will have a hard time finding differences between the ways that the work is represented, but if we take media theory into account and think about *interactive* reading experiences (because every different medium affords different forms of control and therefore must indeed *be* interactive), we will find the differences lying *beneath* the surface of the story, at a more fundamental metatextual level. These differences can then float back up to the surface, affecting the story in concrete ways; as Edmund Carpenter and Marshall McLuhan note in their 1956 article “The New Languages,” “...each communication channel codifies reality differently and thereby influences, to a surprising degree, the content of the message communicated.” (Carpenter & McLuhan 49) We can start to think about this in

terms of something as simple as making mistakes. With a book, you drop it and lose your place. On a digital reader, your finger slips and you accidentally zoom in. In a movie theatre, you leave to go to the bathroom or refill your popcorn and end up missing a piece of key exposition without which the film's ending makes no sense to you. On a DVD player, you accidentally sit on the remote and skip ahead to the next scene. If we can start thinking about the way we interpret based on these kinds of experiences, the ways in which these iterations of *Watchmen* can be seen as actors networking with one another becomes more transparent.

Now that discourse analysis and ANT have been used to identify the cracks between dominant models of authorship and definitive textual analysis, it may be profitable to turn towards other forms of criticism based in examining the materiality and aesthetics of these works independently from questions of narrative. For example, there are many things we can do with print media that we can't do with digital media: smell the paper, flip back and forth, hold multiple bookmarks at once that we can return to with a simple flare of the synapses, skim, or dog-ear pages. But we can also perform new modes of critical investigation while reading the digital version of *Watchmen* that we can't play with the print editions, and notice moments of symmetry in ways not before possible. By defocusing the eyes and swapping back and forth from one page to the next, we can see the balance of frame and color at play in the work of Gibbons and Higgins in a new, kinetic fashion. For example, when reading the first collected print edition, it is not hard to decipher that the entirety of chapter 5 is laid out like a

Rorschach test (suitable for one of the chapters focused on the Rorschach character). This chapter, titled “Fearful Symmetry” (after the line in William Blake’s “The Tyger”), is actually in its form a statement on the comics form and marginal textuality. Blake’s *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* sought to create a new way to present poetry—not just through its intertextual pairing of word and image, but in its production as well, its carefully crafted artisanal qualities. Moore and Gibbons designed “Fearful Symmetry” to use the comics medium in a way that had never been done before by offering a taste of what the medium *could* do, and the references to Blake in the chapter (the title is again reiterated in its epigraph, which presents the final stanza of Blake’s seminal poem) are meant to hint to the reader not only about the symmetrical layout of the chapter, but also to recall Blake’s trailblazing practices with print media. Digitally, the trailblazing qualities of Moore’s and Gibbons’s work is easy to see and display in all its beauty. Here, the motif is most obvious in the center pages, which the creator can use as a cue to flip backwards and forwards, pinching the center pages together so as to make the “fearful symmetry” of the material book all the clearer and more exciting (fig. 10):



(fig. 10: in the center of *Watchmen* #5, it is clear that the facing pages mirror each other, but moving forwards and backwards to the first two and final two pages shows that the motif has been carried throughout, and often impacts on the coloring and figuring of the art as well as the panel layouts. Note the lines from Blake in the final panel)

The print edition allows us to pick up on this clue where the digital version doesn't make it so easy (as mentioned earlier, an e-reader will only allow us to view one page at a time, and we may miss the connections between the pages since on a screen they are not actually pages anyway), but removing the digital pages as we have done here and fanning them out allows us to see a whole picture with a simultaneity not before possible. Instead of viewing the print and digital versions as entirely different works or as two editions of the same work, it may be profitable to view them as actors circling each other and interacting. Here, we can use the center pages of the print edition to make evident the motif at work, and then turn to the digital edition to see what copy and pasting possibilities there are for us to play with. Furthermore, if we load the PDFs of the pages into a basic viewing application like Preview, we can flip back and forth between certain pages to create fascinating optic effects. Taking the final two pages from the above figure, for example, and switch rapidly back and forth between the two, their identical layouts and inverted lighting give off the sense of the actual blinking light and chaotic panic that the scene is meant to convey. So by treating *Watchmen* as a network of differential media and following connections from one medium and format to another, and then by trying to focus on the noise rather than the signal, we can come full circle and use experience the mood of the scene in a new, palpable way.

This is no isolated incident. A little more searching reveals that we can do something similar at at least one point in *Watchmen's* final chapter. In figure 11

below, we have two pages that in print occupy the two sides of a single leaf (i.e., impossible to look at simultaneously):



(fig. 11: two opposite pages of Watchmen #12)

The attentive reader will know that at this point in the narrative, Doctor Manhattan is cognitively unstuck in time, and will easily pick up on the fact that in the two pages, his posturing is identical (made even more obvious by the identical dialogue). But it is impossible to see in the print edition just *how* identical Doctor Manhattan is from page to page. Not so with the digital comic, where we can put the two pages side by side and see that Manhattan is perfectly aligned on each. We can also again complete the circuit by playing our switchback game, through which we can observe how flipping back and forth between the two pages allows the reader to inhabit the environment as Manhattan does: because everything on

the page except for his figure is entirely different, what *appears* to be different is time. The change in medium brings about new modes of making meaning.

These techniques allow us to take narratives that have already been mastered in one way and add a ludological perspective to derive both new interpretations and new ways experiencing the interpretations we have already developed. And seeing the meaningful possibilities that can be teased out only piques more curiosity about what kinds of interpretations can be extricated from the media at work in *Watchmen's* various forms and versions. If we adopt new reading strategies (like the ones demonstrated here), the possibilities are limitless. For each new strategy, as a matter of course, it may be necessary to come up with a new vocabulary—after all, it is quite difficult to speak in a new way while using the same old words. Again, these types of criticism always begin by asking questions about methods of control. During the earlier discussion of the Rorschach chapter, it might have been useful to ask whether the work was still *capable* of being a Rorschach on a tablet, e-reader, or Smartphone. These devices also resist being handled like a book or a PDF, because they work against the reader's desire to tilt or turn the image. Instead, they self-correct and flip so that however the reader actually *holds* the object, the image remains the right way up. While a feature like this prevents us from playing with the material of the page the way we can with a book, it allows for a whole new mode of play simply by virtue of its existence.

## **Circulating and Circuiting**

Thinking about the electronic mobile devices on which *Watchmen* can be read segues nicely into a discussion of the effects that circulation can have on our reading experiences. The city in *Watchmen* is as integral a character as the heroes whose dramas rise and fall within it. The importance of the city is fitting for our purposes here, as an important part of the work of mapping narrative assemblages is mapping how they move in relation to one another, in both the physical and virtual worlds. In “The Circulatory Turn,” Will Straw draws our attention to “the ways in which media forms work to produce particular tensions between stasis or mobility” (Straw 28), suggesting that in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, “[t]he key question [of cultural analysis] is no longer that of how personal or collective life registers itself within communicative expression, but of how the movement of cultural forms presumes and creates the matrices of interconnection which produce social texture.” (Straw 23) Darren Wershler crystallizes this for us as it pertains to comics studies in his 2011 article “Digital Comics, Circulation, and the Importance of Being Eric Sluis,” writing, “Rather than thinking about digital comics as bridges between a source and a destination, the point is to consider them as an aggregate in flux” (Wershler 128). The point here is that we have only scratched the surface of how narrative assemblages operate until we begin to delve into how they move in and move our culture, examining each component in relation to one another. All assemblages are kinetic, Latour reminds us, writing, “If you don’t have the festival now or print the newspaper today, you simply lose the grouping, which is not a



building in need of restoration but a movement in need of continuation.” (Latour *Reassembling the Social* 37) In the case of *Watchmen*, the most obvious place to begin tracking the movement and its options for continuation is with the *Absolute* edition. This heavy tome has a very limited range of circulation: to start with, it is never going to be stocked by a retailer in the numbers that the paperback edition will be, owing not only to its more limited print run but also to its shipping weight and the challenges it poses to shelving. The majority of comic trade paperbacks measure 6 5/8” x 10 1/4”, but DC Absolute editions are an impressive 8 1/2” x 12”. This means that retailers are less likely to shelve Absolute editions with the rest of the graphic novels, often opting instead to display them in oversize sections or with specialty items (marking the Absolute edition off as an art object more than a book). This, along with the Absolute edition’s inflated price, means that a different type of reader will approach *Absolute Watchmen*—one with heightened aesthetic concerns perhaps, or maybe one more involved in collecting than reading (we can see again how *Absolute Watchmen* might call up historicity here—the prestige format with its hand-sewn binding not only implies value in a way the other editions don’t, but is also reminiscent of a gentleman’s library at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, which in turn reminds us of the breaking up of collections and the resultant mismatched sizing of volumes that would become so common in the layperson’s library). Once the Absolute edition is out of the store and in the reader’s home, it is less likely to circulate regularly than other of *Watchmen*’s volumes or media forms—purely due to its size and weight. On the subject of

portability, certainly the tablet or smartphone version of *Watchmen* are the easiest for a reader to carry around, but similarly difficult to transfer from one reader to another directly from those devices—the file size of *Watchmen* as a digital document is too large to attach to an email, and tablets and smartphones don't have ports for USB keys or drives for burning disks. A personal computer is necessary to bridge the gap to allow for transference (or more likely duplication) from one reader to the next—unless your friend feels like lending you her iPad.

No, the most easily transferred and physically circulated version of all the *Watchmen* editions is still the paperback collected edition (the single issues are easier to break up, lose, or destroy accidentally, and pirated digital versions offer some of the same transference challenges as “official” ones). The only media forms that can be more easily transported are the DVD or the motion comic, but these forms are arguably more fragile and less malleable than the paperback (rip a page of a book and some ordinary household scotch tape may fix the problem but scratch a disk and see how easy it is to keep it from skipping afterwards). More importantly, transportation does not necessarily constitute circulation. As noted above, circulation involves a turn towards not only how cultural objects move, but also with what agency and disseminative practices. For our consideration, we might simply ask how much attention each media form will garner while being consumed on a city bus. The Absolute edition, DVD, and motion comics disk are out of consideration because of the impracticality of carting a heavy hardcover book (spread out over a foot when fully opened, keep in mind) or open laptop

around (while many do use their laptops on the bus, it makes for less than ideal movie-watching circumstances). One might think that the tablet or smartphone versions will attract the most attention by virtue of their glowing, backlit screens, but screen angle counts for a great deal when considering this, and the tablet or smartphone versions are also much easier to hide—a single click of a button and the screens go dark, leaving no trace behind of the specific reading material. Conversely, if a reader closes the paperback and tucks it under her arm, fellow passengers can still see the book’s cover; the text is still circulating in a public, traceable fashion even when closed.

And this is not the only agency these objects take in their circulation. Returning to McGann once again, we learn that from an academic perspective, the “hypermedia edition” holds its genesis in two distinct drives: one, to disseminate as widely as possible, and two, to change our toolsets to something weightless and compact (McGann *Radiant* 140-141). Regardless of the eventual importance of these two drives, the fact remains that neither really takes into account the potential impact on *what* we interpret and take away. How does it differently affect *Watchmen* to be presented on a glowing backlit screen, or to be moved through with a sweeping gesture rather than a flip? In his article Wershler discusses the impossibility of using an iPhone comic reader app to view an entire page of a comic at once—the user must instead move from frame to frame (Wershler 127); this must have a large affect on a reader’s ability to interpret and understand the narrative progression of a story.

## Exchanging Dynamics and *Saturday Morning Watchmen*

Just one day before the release of the *Watchmen* motion picture, animator Harry Partridge uploaded an 80-second video to YouTube called *Saturday Morning Watchmen*. With the uploader comment “Classic cartoon intro ripped from an old VHS, enjoy!”, the clip featured an inane theme song and the characters of *Watchmen* united as a group of kid-friendly crime-fighting buddies (“I’m nutty!” claims Rorschach).



(fig. 12: the Comedian’s fall once more—this time rescued by his good friend Ozymandias.)

This joke video constitutes not only another object of study for the ever-expanded assemblage cloud of *Watchmen*, but its claim to authenticity and history also returns us to the question of authorship and the interchangeable role of the author-function. Is Partridge’s clip parody, copyright infringement, or something else entirely? Can he claim to have “created” *Saturday Morning Watchmen*, or does he just fill another author-function for a piece of media that circulates effortlessly through the free ranges of cyberspace (the video has had over 5 million hits on YouTube alone in the three years since it was first uploaded)? More importantly, which is the greater transgression against the copyright holders of *Watchmen*: for Partridge to claim the video as his creation, or to attribute it as a licensed cartoon

property, as he has done? Certainly, the historicity evoked by both the sanitization of the characters and the style of the animation is expertly rendered enough to position it as authentic for the uninitiated viewer. Someone who stumbled across this the day before going to see *Watchmen* might approach the film in a whole different way—after all, the film came out in the same year as *Transformers: Revenge of the Fallen* and *G.I. Joe: the Rise of Cobra* (2009), two children’s cartoons of the 1980s to get the sexy adult-oriented action epic treatment.

This year will see the release of the some half-dozen *Watchmen* prequels, each written and drawn by different creators. The prequels follow many years of legal battles and speculation on whether or not Moore and Gibbons would reunite for a return to the series that changed them from comics creators to comics icons, and their impending publication speaks not only to the importance of reimagining the way we study culture, but also that reimagining’s relationship to the political economy of comics, where “work for hire” has ever been the cry. The fact of the matter is that Moore and Gibbons may have created *Watchmen*, but DC Comics owns it. Such a consideration brings us full circle: as scholars, we are still invested in a romantic idea of the author that has had little to nothing to do with the last century of comics production—and less and less to do with the production of most culture. As literary studies have begun to examine graphic literature, our scholarship has increasingly tried to suck comics into our frameworks rather than branching our frameworks outward into comics. If our work is to maintain its relevance, it needs to begin crafting new vocabularies, new methodologies, and

new lenses for filtering the integral signal and noise of media—put simply, new avenues of approach that treat a work’s narrative as primarily an actor in a assemblage—one element amongst several—rather than the sum total of what we can or should study.

The central question this paper is trying to ask is whether or not our close reading methodologies still work; whether or not they can in turn answer the question of how these reproductions—which are in reality, as we have seen, so much more—relate to each other, their own media, and each other’s media. And the study undertaken here is only the tip of the iceberg. In *The Case for Books*, Darnton touches upon the importance of aspects of media like the smell of paper and their various shelf lives, from microfiche to lossy bits (Darnton 37-39). In the case of *Watchmen*, it is difficult to try to trace the connections between the various versions’ odors, and all digital versions of the narrative are at this point too fresh for us to observe the diminishing returns wreaked by data degradation. In spite of this, these topics and numerous others are already or will soon become extremely relevant to a discussion of the impact of media on narrative interpretation.

Returning one more time to *Radiant Textuality*, McGann puts it quite succinctly: “...meaning is more a dynamic exchange than a discoverable content, and the exchange is best revealed as a play of differences.” (McGann *Radiant* 111) If meaning is a dynamic exchange, it seems quite appropriate that we exchange our current dynamics of study for those that allow for the play of differences to fully play out by locating them as moving parts in a propulsion engine.

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