

Guardians of an Illusion: *Watchmen* and the Misguided Idealism of Cold War America

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Abstract: Science fiction has often been the basis for dreamlands and technological paradises where anything is possible. Yet despite the popular perception, the genre is much more complex than that. This essay examines the graphic novel Watchmen, by Dave Gibbons and Alan Moore, to see what it has to tell us about the society we live in. It dissects three main characters (Rorschach, Ozymandias, and Dr. Manhattan) as allegories for aspects of Cold War-era American society using the theoretical framework of a critical utopia presented by Carl Freedman. Based on the relationships of each allegory to utopian ideology, it hopes to uncover what they have to say about the potential for a better future. In turn, it questions two tropes of American identity—individualism and capitalism—to see if a more effective utopian ideological structure might exist as a part of this identity.

Introduction

The science fiction genre, since its relatively recent beginnings, has been associated with high-tech inventions and technological marvels that are unimaginable at the moment when the books are written, such as Jacques Cousteau's submarines in *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea*. However, technological advances do not encompass the entirety of science fiction as a genre. At its most basic level, science fiction creates a world similar to our own in many ways, but where at least one feature is profoundly different—different enough to alienate the audience from the reality with which it is familiar. Beneath the whirr of invention, this altered reality can make a relevant political statement; the setting is fertile ground for utopian theorizing, a method often also used for political commentary. The graphic novel *Watchmen*, by Dave Gibbons and Alan Moore, does just that by taking the reader through a vivid,

parallel landscape of New York City in 1985—a city filled with hazy political agendas and crushed dreams, witnessed via the perspective of superheroes past their prime. It is through this setting that the novel develops a dystopian critique of the climate of Cold War America.

Watchmen exemplifies the Cold War-era dystopian fiction genre by combining the dystopian and science-fiction genres. It uses its allegorical characters to develop a critique of American identity, ultimately asserting that mixing faith with the positive, creative aspect of scientific inquiry is the last hope for American society.

Utopia and science fiction are often interwoven in order to critique a remarkable aspect of society or of that society as a whole, such as national identity or foreign relations. *Watchmen* is an example of this combination. The theoretical concept of utopia is significantly more complex than the simple popular conception of an “ideal society”. The common idea that utopia would be a peaceful place without disease or despair is not necessarily wrong, but it is too basic to include two important aspects of utopia: it is permanently located in the future, never to be actualized in the present, and it is collective in nature, not based on the betterment of one but the betterment of all. In “The Critical Dynamic: Utopia and Science Fiction,” author Carl Freedman explores his concept of utopia:

Utopia can never be fixed in the perspective of the present, because it exists, to a considerable degree, in the dimension of futurity ... as the future is the object of hope, of our deepest and most radical longings. These are longings that can never be satisfied by the fulfillment of any individual wish (say, for personal wealth) but that demand, rather, a revolutionary reconfiguration of the world as a totality. Utopian hope or longing, in other words, possesses an inherently collective character. (64)

Here, Freedman explains that the concept of utopia has two main traits: it is based on hope, a future-oriented concept, so it cannot be brought to the present and created, much like a mirage that disappears upon approach. In addition, it involves a complete rearrangement of the current reality, leaving out no one and demanding a collective spirit for its realization.

Due to these characteristics, a utopian setting is extremely common in the science fiction genre, where the imaginative forces present in both genres may highlight each other and thus permit an ideal social critique. This is because the science-fiction genre is based on an “impossible” reality, either in the future or an alternate present. This imagined reality is caused by an element known as a Novum, defined as “such a *radical* novelty as to reconstitute the entire surrounding world” (Freedman 69). Usually, this refers to an invention or scientific development, but here it will be expanded to include concepts and innovations. Nonetheless, it represents anything that, by its existence, would drastically alter reality. This essence of science fiction, coming from the introduction of something radically new, provides a fertile backdrop for utopian theorizing. *Watchmen* by Dave Gibbons and Alan Moore is a prime example, following the lives of several defunct superheroes living in a dystopian version of New York City, an alternate world where “masked adventurers” were once real enough to now be outlawed. The Novum, in this case, is the existence of superheroes—agents of utopia by nature—each of whom understands utopia differently. The science-fictional setting is thus a lens for examining the implications of utopian thinking.

The combination of a utopian mindset in a science-fiction setting is a common and useful practice in political writing. Gibbons and Moore made use of this hybrid during the height of the Cold War, an era that ushered in questions about the capabilities of science. They formed a part of a larger literary movement at the time that used the utopian genre, in its dystopian form, to criticize Cold War politics. In the article, “Series and Systems: Russian and American Dystopias During the Cold War,” author Derek Maus elaborates on the cultural import of the utopia-gone-wrong: “A significant number of American anti-utopias criticize the validity of American society’s exceptionalist self-image, a form of utopianism rooted in the Edenic rhetoric of ‘New World’ exploration and settlement” (76). *Watchmen*, set in a nightmarish version of New York City—the “City of Dreams”—uses striking similarities to the real New York City in 1985 to highlight the tension among its residents, and the

rife intellectual and moral uncertainty resulting from a constant threat of nuclear annihilation. As such, it fulfills its purpose as a Cold War-era dystopia, focusing the critical lens of utopia in science fiction on the failings of Cold War society, begging the reader to observe an idolized metropolis from a different point of view.

Political Allegories in *Watchmen*

In analyzing a fictional text for its political content, the first step is to identify allegorical characters or situations. There are many allegories present in *Watchmen*, but two characters most notable for their relationship to American Cold War society are Rorschach, the superhero alias of Walter Kovacs, and Ozymandias, the alias of Adrian Veidt. In their respective relationships to utopia, Walter Kovacs and Adrian Veidt become allegories for different aspects of the political climate of Cold War America.

By taking on the grandiose role as world savior, Veidt mimics the US government stance in international politics during the Cold War. He carries out an elaborate plan to unite the world by creating a common enemy—a staged extraterrestrial “attack.” While demonstrating the necessity for his actions, Veidt declares, “each step has to be taken *carefully*, constantly striving to keep in mind the enormous **scale** of what was at **stake!** The **Earth. Humanity.** All we’ve ever *known*... “*End of the world*” does the concept no **justice**” (Gibbons & Moore XI, 22). By using dramatic and emphatic language, Veidt tries to convince the audience that he had no other choice—a sentiment echoed by General Colin Powell only a couple of years after the Cold War ended, when he said, “America must shoulder the responsibility of its power. The last best hope of earth has no other choice. We must lead.” The themes of heroism and duty radiate throughout both excerpts, creating an urgent tone that begs action. However, the actions of the U.S. and Adrian Veidt share the burden of dubious success. A warning against this type of foreign policy comes in the form of a critique by Alan P. Dobson. In his essay, “The dangers of US interventionism,” Dobson addresses the influence of Cold War policies and anti-isolationism in current US

foreign policy:

Ironically, by the mid 1980’s part of this new realism involved a renewed commitment to support democracy throughout the world. No longer was this seen as a dangerous and extravagant idealistic over-commitment. Instead, concrete pay-offs were expected. (581)

Thus, the popular rhetoric in the mid 1980s, when *Watchmen* was written, revolved around the promotion of American global interests and democratic values as a safe and desirable idea, despite vague recognition that it could be “a dangerous and extravagant idealistic over-commitment.” Paralleling Adrian Veidt’s example, self-importance resonates within this ideology. As such, U.S. tactics during the end of the Cold War closely mimic Adrian Veidt’s ideology—if not in practice, then in intention: acting as the *übermensch*—or a man risen above his humanity, as outlined by Friedrich Nietzsche—the U.S. government lacked a concept of international collectivity, overstepping its bounds in an attempt to “save the world.”

Walter Kovacs, on the other hand, is about as dismal a character as possible and so reflects the paranoid individualism of the American public. Despite his disgust for humanity, he fights for justice; however, he does so as a vigilante, trying to eradicate delinquents one by one. He explains his disposition to a prison psychologist through story: about a decade before, when trying to solve the kidnapping of a 6-year-old girl, he went alone to the unoccupied house of the suspected kidnapper. It was clearly a case of murder, and when the kidnapper returned to the house, Kovacs chained him to the furnace and set the house on fire as retribution. Narrating the event years later, he describes his reaction afterward in a mechanical first-person: “looked at sky through smoke heavy with human fat and God was not there. The cold, suffocating dark goes on forever, and we are alone.... Born from oblivion; bear children, hell-bound as ourselves; go into oblivion. There is nothing else” (Gibbons & Moore VI, 26). The situation described above combines multiple levels of atrocious acts to create a potent cocktail of depravity, concluded by a statement describing the sheer powerlessness felt by

a single person from facing such an immense tragedy. This event sets the stage for Kovacs to discard all hope for humanity, letting go of his given name to fully assume his identity as Rorschach. Even before his final display of autonomy, his character has developed a nihilistic individualism that comes through in his rhetoric, making statements such as “God was not there,” “we are alone,” and “[t]here is nothing else.” This ideology actually sets him up for failure, as he puts himself against forces he cannot control with only a steel will and a tattered set of morals. Michael J. Prince provides support from his article, “Alan Moore’s America: The Liberal Individual and American Identities in *Watchmen*,” stating, “[a]s one who chooses annihilation rather than sacrificing his integrity... Rorschach personifies the struggle between the individual and the collective” (825). Eventually, he martyrs himself, as seen below, and affirms his individual right not to live in a society where this type of hypocrisy is allowed to flourish. When he fails, however, he does not do so alone. He fails along with the American public, lassoed to a sense of individuality that has become interwoven in the national moral fiber.

Impotency of a Superhero (Or “Supernation”)

Walter Kovacs becomes the poster child of American hyper-vigilance during the Cold War, representing the over-wrought idealism of the American public through his actions after learning about Veidt’s “solution.” In the last issue, after uncovering the gruesome reality of Adrian Veidt’s plan, Walter Kovacs leaves the company of the other superheroes to tell the world of the scheme, but Dan Dreiberg calls after him, asking him to compromise. Kovacs replies, “[n]o. Not even in the face of Armageddon. Never compromise” (Gibbons & Moore, *XII*; 20). He thus allows himself to be killed, rather than renounce his values, because living in a world filled with the hypocrisy of Adrian Veidt’s plan is an intolerable thought. In his struggle to uphold his principles, he mimics the struggle of the American people to maintain individuality at all costs. This has a deeper significance than a mere cultural habit, according to Timothy Melley in his article, “Brainwashed! Conspiracy

Theory and Ideology in the Postwar United States,” when he states, “[f]or U.S. cold warriors... the tenets of liberal individualism—the view that persons are autonomous, rational agents wholly responsible for their own actions—were not only good philosophy but a crucial bulwark against totalitarianism” (149). The American sense of individualism, then, is not merely the national style, but takes on a more visceral, protective tone. The level that Kovacs reaches—death—to avoid compromising his personal convictions smacks of a similar urgency. He does not see this as a weakness, though, and nor does the American public. Instead, it is a form of defense against intrusive ideas and beliefs. The individualism that drives his heroic spirit, battling against the scum of New York City, is the same individualism that does not permit him to see beyond his own ideals for the (albeit dubious) good of the world at large.

Kovacs’ ultimate downfall has larger implications for the effectiveness of liberal individualism as a whole. Aligning his efforts with a functional concept of utopia, it is easy to see that he is not working with a collective-minded spirit; he is too antisocial for that. Upon closer examination, the real issue is a lack of hope for the future. Freedman writes, “[utopia is not] in the future as the latter is imagined by mere chronological forecasting, or in mechanistic and philistine notions of bourgeois “progress,” but rather as the future is the object of *hope*” (64). Considering that Freedman does not confine the future to linear time and instead broadens it to include whatever may be but is not, staunch individualism does not have room to conceive of this type of futurity, blocking both Kovacs and the American public from achieving the ideal they are after. Kovacs is not opposed to the common good, but what he does not understand is that there are possibilities beyond his dismal individual experience. Due to this, he has no respite from his utter despair facing the problems of the world, limited only to tangible solutions. Thus Kovacs as well as Americans during the Cold War faced similar hurdles, their paranoid closed-mindedness rendering them impotent in the face of atrocity.

On the other hand, Adrian Veidt, also known as Ozymandias,

is rich, handsome, fit, and socially graceful. He sees himself as an ideal man, perhaps a god, evidenced by his alias, *Ozymandias*, the Greek word for the Ancient Egyptian pharaoh Rameses II. He perceives his ambition to unite the world and bring it towards utopia as part of a kingly duty. In order to achieve this, he creates the effect of dropping an atomic bomb on New York City by exploding a multi-dimensional creature on top of it. When clarifying his reasoning, he explains, “Unable to unite the world by **conquest**. . . Alexander’s method. . . I would **trick** it; frighten it towards salvation with history’s greatest **practical joke**” (Gibbons & Moore XI, 24). Here, while explaining his reasoning for the equivalent of a nuclear explosion over Manhattan, Adrian Veidt brushes his actions aside as if they were something laughable. He implies that the general population is so sheep-like that the best way to save it is to frighten it with something as trivial as “history’s greatest practical joke.” Additionally, despite the bizarre and horrific nature of his plan, he still believes that it will ultimately save people—that by killing the few, he is saving the many. He is the savior of the people, saving them from themselves.

Although his logic of the great good can be achieved from great sacrifice—is not entirely flawed, it cannot be a long-term solution for the problems that have plagued the human race for millennia, including war, theft, rape, and so on. Without knowing the exact conclusion of this plan, it clearly cannot reach utopia because it lacks collectivity. Instead of society growing organically towards an ideal future, he imposes order on the world by separating himself from it. In the article, “The World Ozymandias Made: Utopias in the Superhero Comic, Subculture, and the Conservation of Difference,” Matthew Wolf-Meyer analyzes the role of the Nietzschean *übermensch* in superhero comics, literature that necessarily features larger-than-life superhumans. He notes, “[p] art of being superior is an alienation from humanity because of that superiority” (499). The confidence and abilities that allow Ozymandias to bring a plan like this to fruition are also the same characteristics that prevent him from creating a true utopian society. He sees himself as

superior, and therefore is unable to actually participate in his proposed utopia. His utopian ideology does not have a collective aspect because, as far as he is concerned, it is unnecessary. Although his intentions seem noble, Veidt negates the possibility of the altruism he originally claimed because he is simply the puppeteer of a new world order; his grasp on utopia is no better than Kovacs’. Moreover, he effectively becomes a totalitarian dictator, bent on a better world by *his* calculations, rather than a true utopia.

Initially, it might seem extreme to denounce these attempts to save the world, but on closer examination, all they yield is greater confusion while paralleling American attempts to do the same. It is true that, where the novel ends, Ozymandias’ plan has been successful, and the world is beginning to reap the benefits of united forces against a common (albeit imagined) foe, without any negative consequences. It is even possible to paint Rorschach as the villain, as Wolf-Meyer does, asserting how “[t]hrough the petty actions of Rorschach, the world Ozymandias made is no world at all—Rorschach’s diary has fallen into the possession of yellow journalists and the truth of utopia is revealed” (508). He implies that the discovery of Kovacs’ diary will cause Veidt’s carefully constructed “utopia” to crumble. This is true, but neglects to look at the bigger picture. American foreign policy, like Veidt’s plan, was successful—for a time. Over time, it has become clear that offensive foreign policy creates a game of whack-a-mole: a cycle of conflict after conflict to maintain the status quo. As time marches on and the U.S. continues to intervene in foreign affairs, one after the other, it is relevant to question the true success of this ideology. Muhammad Asadi questions the political tactics involved by analyzing the “call-to-arms” speeches used in several incidences since entry into World War II in his article, “Constructing Global ‘Wars Without End’: Vocabularies of Motive and the Structure of Permanent War.” Using these speeches as a vehicle, he makes the point that the US uses self-important and over-dramatic reasoning to justify entry into each of these conflicts. Thus these “interventions” serve national interests rather than any true international

humanitarian effort. Asadi defines this structure as such: “[c]all-to-arms speeches... involve moral panics, the politics of fear (involving the potential for random violence), and a marked separation between victim and other (the positive-self and negative-other presentation [van Dijk 1993]” (46). In fact, the speech Ozymandias gives his guests closely parallels this, when he starts out by highlighting the moral issues of the nuclear arms race, making statements including, “expensive arsenals meant less cash to spend upon their *old*; their *sick* and *homeless*; on their children’s educations” (XI, 21). He continues on to fear politics, listing economic and political problems across the globe, such as deforestation, increased international lending rates, and the production of nuclear waste (XI 22) in order to drive home the need for drastic action. Finally, directly before the section of the speech mentioned earlier, he places himself in the role of savior, thus giving himself the qualifications to save the world: “[m]y plan required preparation for the day when I’d assume the aspect of kingly *Ramses*” (XI 22). By using each of the above segments in his speech, Veidt unconsciously aligns himself with the overarching rhetoric of a nation launching into endless war. This connection becomes clearer as Asadi rattles off one example of this pattern after another, starting with World War II, up to the most current “Global War on Terror.” According to Asadi, the effect on world affairs is undeniable when this ideological pattern “assumes a reality in the global arena [and] plunges poor (so-called) underdeveloped countries in a cycle that ensure that they go from one humanitarian crisis to another, from one dictator to the other, and from one military coup to the next” (66). Following this logic, that these repetitive international interventions by the US create a cycle that does more harm than good, the US government’s Cold War “solution,” as well as Adrian Veidt’s, is more of a catalyst for catastrophe than a useful plan to move towards utopia.

The Unorthodox Solution

As the world is hurtling towards nuclear annihilation in the mid 1980’s, neither the American public nor the American government have a functional utopian ideology. Actually, the one character with a

functional idea of utopia is also an allegory of “the bomb”—the power and threat of nuclear weaponry. Dr. Jon Osterman, a young research scientist, becomes Dr. Manhattan after being obliterated in a nuclear reactor and reconstructing himself into a superhuman with the power to rearrange atoms. Because of this ability, he has endless power to manipulate energy, paralleling the power of the atomic bomb. Although his presence would seem ominous, he is actually the last vestige of hope present in the constellation of characters in *Watchmen* by virtue of his functional utopian ideology. In the last scene, before he leaves to create life of his own, Veidt asks him, “Jon, wait, before you **leave**... I did the right thing, didn’t I? It all worked out in the end,” to which Jon replies, “‘In the end’? **Nothing** ends, Adrian. Nothing **ever** ends” (Gibbons & Moore XII, 27). While he says this, his character smiles for the first time in the novel, demonstrating peace and delight with the idea. The idea, of course, is that future possibilities are endless—an essential property of utopian ideology. His concept of futurity, then, is highly developed, which contrasts Walter Kovacs’. Dr. Manhattan also differs from Adrian Veidt, too, by way of his relationship to the collective. Although Dr. Manhattan is still not a part of society, he does not separate himself from it in the same way as Adrian Veidt. Jaime A. Hughes, in her essay, “‘Who Watches the Watchmen?’: Ideology and ‘Real World’ Superheroes,” notices this, writing, “[Dr. Manhattan] is capable of viewing all time and space simultaneously, and ideology is another mechanism to study and evaluate for Jon, not a cycle that will hold him indefinitely” (556). Despite his intelligence and super-humanity, Dr. Manhattan sees existence as a unified entity, so he is not caught up in power struggles and superiority like Adrian Veidt. He has separated himself from the struggle of ideology; he smiles because of his freedom. Rather than continuing to grapple for rank like Veidt, Dr. Manhattan can make decisions independently and with level-headed inclusivity, potentially driving the world in a positive direction.

Unlike Rorschach and Ozymandias, though, Dr. Manhattan does not have a clear parallel in American society. He clearly embodies

the scientific fraternity on some level, but that does not encompass his whole character. He demonstrates a love for and faith in humanity that is not present in either of the other two characters mentioned. In Book 9, after disagreeing with Laurie Juspezyk about whether or not humanity is worth saving, Dr. Manhattan finally relents, saying that “you [Laurie] are life, rarer than a quark and unpredictable beyond the dreams of Heisenberg; the clay in which the forces that shape all things leave their fingerprints most clearly” (28). Here, he juxtaposes one of the founders of nuclear science, Werner Heisenberg, with the indefinable forces of the universe that shape life, and finds that science comes up short. In making this comparison, he could almost replace Heisenberg with himself, saying that science, powerful and superhuman though it is, cannot match the wonder that is life. In that case, when he leaves Earth to create life elsewhere, he has transcended the logical boundaries of science into another realm of being. Although he is not quite human enough himself to be considered a part of the collective, Dr. Manhattan has an outlook on humanity that allows him to support the collective of society. He is a being based on both logic and a form of spirituality.

Conclusion

This ideological position Dr. Manhattan adheres to has enormous implications about the relationship of science to the world at large. The parallels to utopian ideology suggest the fusion of science and humanism is the ideal that the human race (or at least Americans) should follow in order to find a way up and out of the hopelessness of perpetual war. Utopian ideology can actually be considered a type of faith; according to the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, faith can be seen as “the adoption of a line of conduct not warranted by present facts, that involves experimenting with the possible or ideal, venturing into the unknown and taking the risk of disappointment and defeat. Faith is not an attempt to will something into existence but rather treating hoped for and unseen things *as if* they were real and then acting accordingly (Tennant 1943/1989 p.104)” (“Faith as sub-doxastic venture”). This passage states that belief in something “hoped for and unseen”—roughly

equivalent to Freedman’s concept of futurity—is part of religious faith. Despite personifying pure science, Dr. Manhattan displays these traits. He demonstrates that although faith and science are traditionally at odds, a humanistic approach to science could become a new ideal to replace the tired and ineffective rhetoric of liberal individualism or global superiority.

Science fiction plays an important part in this ideological shift. Dr. Manhattan is essentially a *Novum*, in the sense that he represents a radically new, but plausible element that changes the organization of reality. Such a new idea could play a similar part on a real-world level, where an understanding of the connections between science and religion could, in theory, usher on an entirely new level of understanding by linking the progress of scientific development and the collective nature of humanism. Of course, no one can say for certain what the future can or should hold, but this is where science fiction allows us to envision a world beyond our current understanding, and possibly even move towards it. Science fiction, as a genre, permits a greater imagination of what could be, and thus allows us to come ever closer to creating it. Clearly, it is not just for entertainment. When coupled with an analytical focus such as utopian theory, science fiction and its underlying characteristics provide the framework to create solutions that would be inaccessible through other, more realistic genres.

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