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## **Those Things That Only Comics Can Achieve: An Analysis of *Watchmen* on Page and Screen**

“Whenever anybody talks about comics, they usually make a great deal about the relationship between comics and film; and while I agree that a comic creator who understands cinematic technique will probably be a better creator than one who doesn’t, I feel that if we only see comics in relationship to movies, then the best that they will ever be are films that do not move. I’d found it in the mid-eighties preferable to try and concentrate on those things that only comics could achieve.”

- Alan Moore

Alan Moore and Dave Gibbon's *Watchmen* is considered by many to be a modern classic in the field of literature, earning a spot on the list of Time Magazine's 100 best English-language novels from 1923 to the present. The text deals with important, enduring political issues of social justice, serving as an indictment of capitalist regimes as well as questioning the consequences of extreme violence. Recently, *Watchmen* has become a common topic for popular discussion, as a media frenzy has been stirred up, fueled by the release of the film adaptation directed by Zack Snyder and written by David Hayter and Alex Tse. A search of Google News will bring up over six-and-a-half thousand articles written on the subject, most of them focused on the transition of the work from the page to the screen (Google.com). However, these articles are written from the perspective of film critics and comic enthusiasts, rather than as a literary analysis or comparison of the two texts. A comparative analysis of the comic to the film adaptation is warranted, since as Alan Moore implies in the quote above, the manner in which a narrative is presented must vary greatly from medium to medium; there are most assuredly "things that only comics can achieve" (The Mindscape of Alan Moore). Though there are numerous frameworks and devices which could be chosen for comparison to demonstrate this, in this paper I will be focusing on contrasting the manners in which time structuring is built

and created across both media, through a careful analysis of the differences in function between shot editing in film and page layout in comics.

### **The Double Time Structuring of Narrative**

Time is one of the central themes of *Watchmen*, and as such, the structure of the narrative through time is a salient point of comparison in the analysis of the comic and the film adaptation. A narrative is “a story, whether told in prose or verse, involving events, characters, and what the characters say and do” (Abrams, 208). The flow of time in the narrative of *Watchmen* is non-linear; events often take place out of sequence as the plot weaves the past and present together. As occurs in many of the comics Moore writes, the reader is sometimes even exposed to different points in time or space simultaneously, as the action switches quickly back and forth between two events, creating strong associations between them. The double time structuring of narrative is therefore an important theory to apply to the texts. Seymour Chatman’s famous article, “What Novels Can Do That Films Can’t (and Vice Versa)” is a seminal work in the description of double time structuring. He demonstrates that all narratives combine the independent time orders of ‘story-time,’ or the time-sequence of plot events, and ‘discourse-time,’ the presentation of the events in the medium.

These orders are independent of one another in their flow; the story-time does not have to run in chronological order, but rather can 'flashback' and 'flashforward' at the author's discretion, as it does in the *Watchmen* narrative, while the discourse-time continues on in a linear fashion (Chatman, 122). Because *Watchmen* as a narrative contains scenes in each medium that are nearly identical in content, a close analysis on these terms should yield insight into "the peculiar powers of the two media" (Chatman, 123).

### **Film: Altering the Perception of Discourse-Time**

Snyder uses interesting directorial devices to alter the flow of narrative time throughout *Watchmen*. This is most notable during the opening credits sequence, in which the camera moves freely in three dimensions through a series of images that range from near-still to nearly full speed, each shot depicting one event (Fig. 1). A slow-paced song about the passage of time, Bob Dylan's *The Times They Are A-Changin'*, plays over top of the action. These shots draw attention to the passage of time, the fourth dimension, by altering it to such a point that its flow is almost removed. This allows the audience to examine the moment the images capture as it occurs, from a shifting perspective. The shots are designed to remind the audience of old photographs and video clips, and

they set the tone for upcoming events. However, these shots do not achieve a true sensation of timelessness; they exist before the story proper begins, but after characters have been established, filling the time after the attack on the Comedian and the beginning of the investigation into his murder. Therefore, these shots are similar in characteristics to establishing shots, in which images are presented before narrative events begin, or during a break in their action, during which discourse-time is still perceived to in motion. Though the shots occur in the discourse-time after the Comedian’s character has been introduced, they depict events that occurred long before the attack in relation to its position in story-time. Because the sequence occurs between the attack and the investigation in relation to the sequence of events in the story-time, these shots, like the shot Chatman describes from *Notorious*, do not give the sense of “a hiatus in the story-time, but rather” that this sequence takes places while “the business of the plot... is allowed to happen off screen” (130).



Fig. 1  
Examples of frames from the opening credits sequence of *Watchmen*

## Comics: Altering the Perception of Discourse-Time

While Chatman's article describes the relationship between novels and film, the framework applies just as well to the relationship between comics and film. Whereas in comics, narrative events are constructions created from words and still images, "abstract symbols which are different from them in kind, the movements on the screen are so iconic, so like the real life movements they imitate, that the illusion of time passage simply cannot be divorced from them. Once that illusory story-time is established in a film, even dead moments, moments when nothing moves, will be felt to be part of the temporal whole" (Chatman, 130). Comics, because they are, as defined by Scott McCloud, "juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence," exist outside of the steady time passage of discourse-time (9). They do not progress at a fixed rate of panels per second, like film's twenty-four frames per second. Comics present time spatially, a manner which does not easily convert to specific timelines; and so, "as readers, we're left with only a vague sense that as our eyes are moving through space, they're also moving through time" (McCloud, 100). As a result, the reader does not experience the same type of interruption of the passage of time when the medium focuses in on specific details, as the audience

does when watching a film. The amount of time that passes in a sequence of comic panels is, in most cases, assumed by the reader based on their experience of similar actions and events.

Because of their unique presentation as a medium, comics are capable of achieving a sense of timelessness in their narratives through the inclusion of 'silent panels.' These panels are similar in concept to paintings or artistic photographs, in the sense that they are still images without internal clues as to their duration, "aimed at something more than a merely realistic rendering of the subject, and ... convey a personal impression" (Jones, 41). Silent panels present still images without text or specific action. Images such as these encourage contemplation; they have a lingering, timeless presence that can affect the reader's perception of mood and sense of place in the scenes to come (McCloud, 102-3). In these, comic artists are able to realize one of the goals Moore aspired to: to include "a tremendous amount of information ... visually in every panel," and they are able to do this without placing a limit on their viewing in discourse-time (Mindscape). Moore and Gibbons take great advantage of this in the panels that display the aftermath of the violent attack on New York (XII, 1-6). These expansive, full page panels contain huge amounts of information; each of them is filled with allusions, outcomes of earlier foreshadowing, and details that enhance the realism and emotional impact of the attack. By expanding the panel layout

on the page, the Gibbons is able to include this information without sacrificing detail. The full page layout further encourages the reader to contemplate the image on the page; without any accompanying panels for the reader's eye to travel to, it is encouraged to travel within the single panel itself. On the first page (Fig. 2), not only does the illustration include corpses, dripping blood and the image of the clock stopped at midnight, but many more subtle

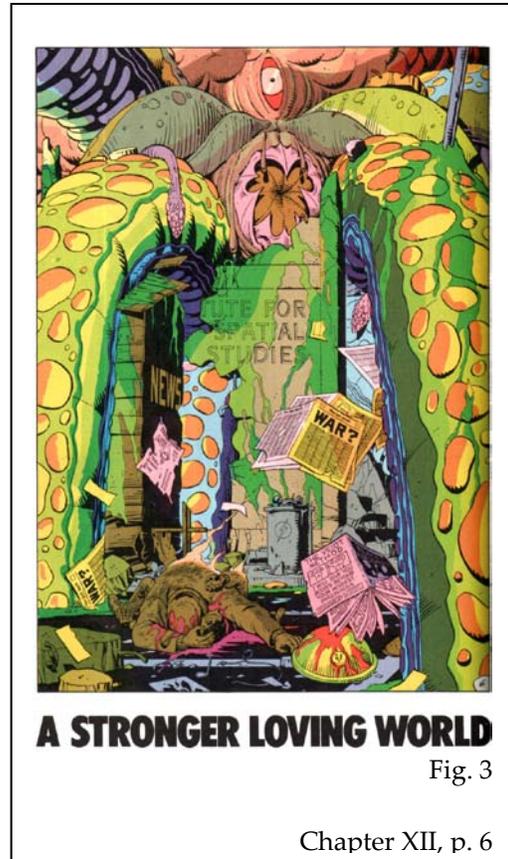


Fig. 2

Chapter XII, p. 1

inclusions as well. The reader has time to examine the images at leisure, taking in details such as the posters declaring a concert by 'Pale Horse,' an allusion to the mount of Death, one of the Biblical Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse (NIV, Rev. 6:8). Directly above the poster with the "Sold Out" sticker attached to it is a splatter of blood in the trademark shape associated with the *Watchmen* comics. Throughout the crowded scene are people locked in violent poses: a man in the bottom left corner pulls a woman's hair, another face stares directly out at the reader from above and to the left of the clock. The sixth page (Fig. 3) has the creature staring directly out at the reader, atop the Institute for Spatial Studies.

Newspapers fall towards the ground, and in the foreground at the bottom right is a copy of *The Black Freighter*, with an ad for The Veidt Method on the back. To the left of the comic, a man's corpse smolders where he fell in an attempt to protect the young boy in his arms; these are Bernard, the newsstand owner, and Bernie, the young boy who reads "The Black Freighter" throughout the narrative. The reader has the opportunity to spend as



much time contemplating these artistic devices and plot points as is desired, without causing an interruption in the flow of discourse-time.

### **Film: Sutured Subjectivity**

Suture is the term used to describe the techniques used by film that cause the audience to feel unaware of the camera; the viewer comes to accept the view of the camera as 'the gaze' of a character or invisible viewer (Silverman). In the film, Snyder uses directorial devices to suture the audience into accepting the

dilation of discourse-time by creating time-dilating effects in shots that emphasize almost imperceptibly quick actions into enduring images during scenes of violence. These innovative shots affect the manner in which the audience perceives the flow of discourse-time. By slowing down rather than stopping the actions presented on screen, he continues the flow of story-time and the audience's awareness of it, while also indicating that the discourse-time should not be perceived as progressing at a steady rate. During these shots, the attention of the audience is directed to specific details and actions that are occurring within a small amount of time in a single shot. The fight scenes in *Watchmen* all feature time dilation of this type; for example, in the scene in which the hired assassin attacks Veidt, the scene combines slow-motion and high-speed playbacks that direct the attention of the viewer by drawing the eye to certain actions on the screen (Fig. 4). The scene makes use of multiple 'shot reverse shot' or 'shot countershot' pairings; a film technique important to suture theory, in which the camera captures images of characters as they look at one another from opposite locations, and a type of interaction or dialogue is expressly implied between them. In the opening shots, we witness the swifter onscreen motion speed of Veidt; in presenting his movements alongside the surrounding character's slower reaction speeds, he is elevated to almost superhuman status. The playback slows as the elevator doors open, and the action cuts to a shot of

Veidt's reaction. The reverse shot focuses on the assassin, implying that the audience is now seeing from Veidt's point of view. Next comes a succession of actions in slow motion: the delivery box falls to the ground, Iacocca looks without reaction at the assassin, the assassin's gun is pulled, and Veidt's assistant screams. These are followed by a shot of Veidt, who moves at a perceptibly quicker pace than those around him, a reverse shot of the assassin firing his first bullet, and a shot showing the result as it hits Veidt's assistant in the leg. In the edge of this shot, Veidt is still moving at a higher rate of speed than the characters around him, and he continues to do so through the successive shots/reverse shots of him avoiding the subsequent



Fig. 4. Veidt Fight: Film

four bullets. In contrast, the action sequence ends with Veidt's actions being performed in high-speed; his opponent now appears trapped in slow-motion as Veidt moves with ease. After the fourth bullet is fired, two short, high speed shots show Veidt grasping and swinging a metal stand into his attacker. Through these shot/reverse shot cuts, the audience is sutured into viewing the scene alternately from Veidt's perspective and the assassin's. Like Veidt, the audience has time to take in and react to the series of events; the structure of the scene has also sutured the audience into perceiving the slow flow of time through Veidt's perspective, demonstrating his ability to react with incredible reflexes. The audience is led to believe that the actions took place in less time than it took to watch them; the discourse-time is perceptually shortened.

### **Comic: Symmetry of Form**

The attack in the comic is presented in a strikingly similar fashion; the sequence begins when Veidt's assistant sees the assassin, and is shot (Fig. 5). The attack itself is laid out on two facing pages, with the central panel spanning the gutter. Similar clues to Veidt's preternatural speed are employed in the images as were used in the film: in the first three panels, which run down the left side of the page, his reaction, including deflecting a bullet, takes place before his

assistant's body has time to fall to the ground, her blood still trailing through the air. The central panel contains a great deal of visual movement. The eye is led along Veidt's body to the motion line of the arc of blood. Motion lines possess the ability to depict action with drama (McCloud, 112). In the right column, Veidt and his attacker plunge into the pool of water, with such speed that in the first panel, the motion line of the blood arc is still visible. In the background of these final panels, the reactions of the onlookers give visual clues that support the timing of the panels; they barely move in position from panel to panel.



Fig. 5 Veidt Fight: Comic

What is most significant about this scene, however, is that it is mirrored across the gutter<sup>1</sup>, echoing the visual form of a Rorschach inkblot. In fact, these pages mark the central point in an issue of *Watchmen* that mirrors entirely, along this axis. Symmetry is a recurring motif in this chapter, in both its layout and content. The page layouts and contents are mirrored, repeated, and reflected from beginning to end through this chapter, aptly titled “Fearful Symmetry.” Reflections and symmetrical images are prevalent, appearing on most pages in this chapter. Two examples of these symmetrical pages are referenced in Figure 6. In the upper half of Figure 6 are pages six and twenty-three, which mirror one another. Here, not only are the page layouts symmetrical, but the actions depicted are reflected as well. On page six, Rorschach is leaving Moloch’s apartment, and on page twenty-three, he is returning. Although they occur at a distance from one another in the narrative, they are linked by this symmetry, even to the point where it appears that the first of these pages could flow into the second, as Rorschach is stepping into the very same puddle. The surface of the puddle is reflective as well, as is the motif of the skull and crossbones. On the second page, the puddle reflects the symmetrical image.

The lower half of Figure 6 shows pages ten and nineteen of “Fearful Symmetry,” depicting the scene in which Dan invites Laurie to stay with him,

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<sup>1</sup> In design, a gutter is the inside margins or blank space between two facing pages.

and her arrival at his home. Both pages deal with the distance between the two characters that Drieberg seeks to surmount. In keeping with the motif of reflection, most of the action showed here is viewed as reflected in mirrors, which emphasizes this distance in emotional space by altering the manner in which visual space is depicted. In the diner, all but one of the panels are reflected in the restaurant's mirror; the Utopia, which figures prominently in the aftermath panels of chapter twelve (like those in Figs. 2 and 3), across the road from the Gunga Diner, is seen in reverse. In Drieberg's, home, the images are reflected in the vanity in Laurie's room. These mirrored panels are strikingly similar in composition and content across the two pages. The second rows on each page are reflected in form but opposite in content, using a complimentary colour scheme to underscore this distinction<sup>2</sup>. The framing of the panels on this page are strikingly mirrored in the panels on page nineteen; the second and third rows of panels on page ten are almost exactly mirrored in the first and second rows of panels on page nineteen.

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<sup>2</sup> Complimentary colours are located opposite from one another on a colour wheel. In primary-secondary complimentary colour schemes, the two complimentary colours are made of one primary colour (in this case, red) and the secondary colour created when the remaining primary colours (in this case, blue and yellow) are mixed together (resulting here in green).



Fig. 6. Symmetrical layouts of pages in the chapter "Fearful Symmetry"

## The Transcendental Gaze

In the *Watchmen* film, the audience is sometimes sutured into a transcendental gaze, a point of view which is not related to any character in the narrative, but is able to look in on events in a manner that those within them cannot. This occurs in the film when Doctor Manhattan is presented as being interviewed on a television talk show at the same time that Laurie and Dan are attacked by a gang in an alley. The scenes, which occur in two different locations, are perceived to be occurring simultaneously; in the film, this is accomplished through editing the shots together so that the actions in the two locations intercut one another, and the audio of Manhattan's interview responses is allowed to bleed into the fight scenes, continuing to play as the other shots become visible. Manhattan's lines directly relate to the actions that are displayed in the alley while he speaks; the first cut has his line, "Even in a world without nuclear weapons, there would still be danger," played over shots of gang members attacking Drieberg with a knife, and being brutally rebuffed. This is not just clever wordplay; these relationships are crafted to link these events in time and theme. Manhattan is being questioned about global events in which he is expected to take a hand, at the same time that Laurie and Dan are dealing with

more mundane problems, using the skills that they are no longer allowed by law to use for the benefit of society, since the passing of the Keene Act. Next, the interview scene cuts away to the fight as Manhattan responds to a query about his ability to see multiple points in time: "I can only see my own past, my own future. I am not omniscient." This makes reference not only to the ongoing theme of time in the *Watchmen* narrative, but also calls attention to the fact that the audience is not seeing things from even this unusually perceptive character's point of view; the narrative is presented in a manner here that Manhattan admits to being unable to duplicate.

### Voice Over and Page Layout

These same scenes are presented in a similar manner in the comic medium (Fig. 7); in fact, the use of voiceover to draw associations between two events



Fig 7  
Chapter III, p. 13

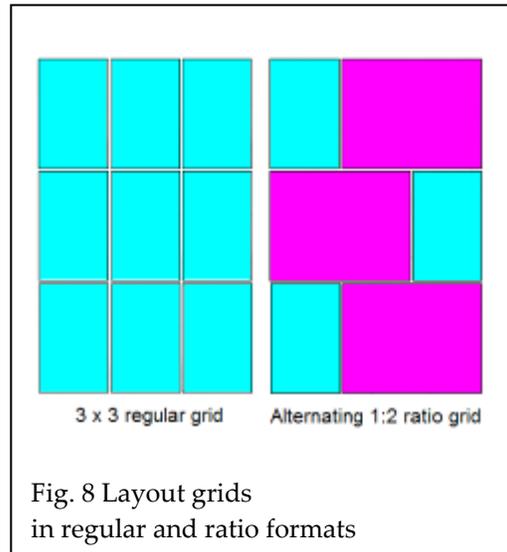
occurring at the same time is somewhat of an artistic signature of Moore's<sup>3</sup>. On the page, panels depicting Manhattan's interview share space with the panels containing the fight scene. The device of voiceover is used here as it is in film: the fight panels contain voice-over boxes of Manhattan's interview. The callout boxes containing parts of the interview dialogue create associations between the two events in the same manner as it is accomplished in the film. There is more here than just "snappy" double-entendres; the brutality that "super-people" use in their "battles [and] conflicts" is emphasized, and the same relationship between Manhattan's global responsibility and the way in which the old heroes are treated is alluded to.

The page layouts and colour designs of these spreads are very important to the content. The same red-green complimentary colour scheme that was used on pages ten and nineteen of "Fearful Symmetry" to emphasize the metaphorical distance between Laurie and Dan (Fig. 6) is used again here, creating visual interest in the design and separating the events and creating a firm differentiation between them on the page. The contrast between the warm and cool tones gives a sense of calm to the interview panels, contrasted with a sense of action in the fight panels. It is also important to note that in these pages, the comic abruptly deviates from the predominant layout of nine equally sized and

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<sup>3</sup> See Moore and Campbell's *From Hell*, Moore and Lloyd's *V for Vendetta*, and Moore and McNeill's *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen*.

spaced out panels on a grid, and begins a back-and-forth pattern of two panels per row in alternating ratios (Fig. 8). Changing widths and spatial intervals in this manner to deconstruct a conventional grid pattern creates tension, discomfort and spatial conflict in the layout (Samara, 222). This tension in page layout underscores the violence of these panels, demonstrating the violence not only within the scenes, but between them as well. The shifting alley<sup>4</sup> between the panels visually mimics the back and forth



motions of the fight shown in the panels of the right column, giving the impression that the panels, and by extension their contents, are fighting one another for dominance of the page.

## Conclusions

In contrasting the presentation of nearly identical scenes as they are presented in two different media, a ‘peculiar power’ of comics has been revealed. Comics possess the same ability as novels, in that they can subsume the flow of

<sup>4</sup> In design, an alley refers to the gap between columns of information.

the story-time in order to draw attention to descriptive details without interrupting the perception of discourse-time. Further, they are capable of presenting a narrative in images that are juxtaposed in space , which means that the reader is exposed to the same scenes and actions from multiple view points and time points at once. In fact, comics have been called the most successful art form in which to bridge the fourth dimension, and may be considered futurist and cubist (Bernard and Carter). Indeed, design and layout play an important part in the structure of graphic novels; the layout and sizing of panels create visual cues that underscore meaning in the narrative and affect the manner in which the information is read. Without applying judgment or assigning value, this is a function of comics that is not replicated in film.

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