

Watching the Watchmen: A Philosophical Analysis of the Visual Experience

Louis "Bud" Kanyo

Department of Teacher Education

Michigan State University

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Abstract

This piece looks at the philosophies employed in the graphic novel *Watchmen*. However, special attention is given to the visual literacy of the artwork and how the related artistic choices use the art to employ philosophies visually. A brief history of the graphic novel, with summary, and the various philosophical discussions surrounding it will be shared to set the foundation for the visual considerations. Due to the wide scope and large number of discussions, various generations within these discussions, and disagreements in graphic novels intentions and resolution, the sampling used within this piece may not be able to fully engage all voices and viewpoints.

This piece focuses on the following dual inquiry: Does the graphic novel *Watchmen* offer philosophical platform, and what may they be, with its visual choices? Can academia find use with the visual choices in the graphic novel and thus help add credibility to a traditionally stigmatized genre?

Keywords: comics, comic strip, comic books, graphic novels, visual literacy, emerging literacy, fanboy art, stigma, philosophy, The Watchmen

Introduction

It's inevitable that I will fail with this piece. I'll fail because the piece talks about visuals and philosophical motivations, connections, and concepts that emerge from a piece of art that may not be art. It will interpret visuals through one person's frame of reference - namely mine - and use my own standards of art, beauty, taste, creativity, etc. to explore the philosophical depths of a graphic novel, Alan Moore's *Watchmen*. A graphic novel, I may add, that I am professionally, personally, and emotionally invested in. Admittedly, I am biased and it should be pointed out. I'll fail with this piece because visuals are open for personal interpretations. The aesthetic experience I have while reading the piece by not be the same aesthetic experience anyone else has while reading the piece. The analysis I share and theory I develop will inevitably be disagreed with on multiple levels because we will see things, quite literally, differently. *That's not beautiful; it's horrifying... but horrifyingly beautiful?* And towards the end of the piece I will share that these various areas of interpretations are what makes a seminal piece of work like *Watchmen* complex. I will claim that it is that complexity which makes this graphic novel appropriate for classroom discussions and debate. Yet it's inevitable, people will disagree and scoff at the visual choices made in the graphic novel and how I've interpreted them. My interpretations will be called wrong by some, and thus, this paper will fail. But the wonderful irony is that in failing, the premise of the piece is then proven true. When we find room to disagree about a visual, a meaning, an interpretation - we produce a complex, organic learning environment that gives voice to individual thoughts and ideas. There will not be one right answer. There is no hierarchy of power or control holding an answer sheet above our heads as a goal. Our thoughts, interpretations, and ideals -- are equal. So please, find a space to disagree, debate, and discuss; and help bring graphic novels further into the academic fold.

A Brief History & Plot Summation

The *Watchmen* began as a 12-issue limited comic book series produced by DC comics in 1986 and carried into 1987. As many comic enthusiasts may point out, this doesn't necessarily fit the definition of a graphic novel for some people. As a lifelong fanboy, I learned to distinguish the differences between the terms comic strip, comic book, trade paperback, and graphic novel in a certain manner. The comic strip is what readers may expect to see in the daily newspaper. The comic book, often, is the monthly publication (although this actually varies) hanging in a metal rack at the local supermarket or lining shelves at a comic book store. A trade paperback, as I once learned at my local comic shop, is a collection of comic books, bound together in a story arc. It may collect five or six issues of a comic title that encompass a certain spotlight, history, focus, plot, etc. The graphic novel, on the other hand, is often a longer, stand alone piece - outside the arc of the comic plots. Often, the material in the graphic novel is of a more serious tone and complexity than some of the traditional comic story arcs. This, however, isn't universal and is often up for debate. Thus, people may question how beginning as a 12-issue limited series leads to the *Watchmen* being called a graphic novel. Truth be told, I have no answer. It's not that I don't appreciate the various distinctions and nomenclatures, it's simply that I believe the terms can casually cover areas that they weren't originally intended to cover. Regardless of what label we shelve it under, *Watchmen* is *Watchmen*. That being said, I will continue to use the colloquial use and commonly associated term of graphic novel with the piece even if it is deemed an error in labeling by some readers.

In terms of accolades, there are two that stand out worth mentioning here in the history of Moore's piece. First, *Watchmen* is the only graphic novel to ever win a Hugo Award. The Hugo Award is given yearly by the World Science Fiction Society. Past winners include titles such as *Dune*, *Harry Potter*, and *Ender's Game*. The second award worth noting at this time is the inclusion on TIME Magazine's 2005 list of the 100 best English-language novels from 1923 to the present. It was, once again, the only graphic novel included on this list. The inclusion of these two honors helps to lay the

foundation for the quality and acceptance of the piece as a landmark that has transcended the comic field.

Before moving into the summary, a note about the characters involved may help unfamiliar readers navigate the timescape. The piece *seemingly* has two different sets of superheroes. In the late 1930's a group of costumed crime fighters come together to form a group called the Minutemen. The roster included Nite Owl, Silk Spectre, The Comedian, Captain Metropolis, Hooded Justice, Silhouette, Dollar Bill, and Mothman. As we all tend to do, these heroes aged and found a need to hang up their proverbial capes. In the mid-1960's, a new generation of heroes met to consider founding a new team of costumed crime fighters. This new group, while never fully coming to fruition, is what many people think of when considering *Watchmen*. The roster at the meeting included Ozymandias, Silk Spectre (this is the second Silk Spectre, daughter of the original Silk Spectre), Doctor Manhattan, The Comedian (the same character as seen with the Minutemen), Nite Owl (a new Nite Owl, no relation to the original from the Minutemen), and Rorschach. While this group is often thought of as the group associated with the *Watchmen* title, there was no official name to that group. The *Watchmen* title makes reference to the concept of any person or group in a position of authority who watches over the populous, protecting them from themselves and each other, as alluded to within the text narration, visuals, and character dialogue.

A last note for reader clarification: this paper will focus on events in the graphic novel version of *Watchmen*. As often happens, the movie associated with the graphic novel does not follow the storyline in certain areas. Those who are familiar with the movie, for example, may be unaware of the different endings the graphic novel and movie have. One key point: in the graphic novel Adrian Veidt creates a giant "alien" squid that attacks New York, killing half the city. In the movie version, Veidt blows up bombs across the globe that emit particle readings that mimic Doctor Manhattan's frequency -- effectively framing Doctor Manhattan for the killing of millions of people. While the outcome is

similar, the world coming together and fearing something “alien”, the unfamiliar specifics may cause casual readers to claim error when there is none.

Watchmen starts with the murder of an elderly man, Edward Blake, who is soon found out to be the secret identity of the superhero the Comedian. The time is fall of 1985. Through the non-linear plot readers learn that it has, by this point, become illegal to be a superhero. This is due to national legislation -- The Keene Act -- that was passed in the late 1970's when the vigilante actions and property destruction associated with superheroes became the height of public and political disfavor. Not all superheroes have hung up their proverbial tights, however. Rorschach learns of Blake's actually being the Comedian while secretly investigating the unsolved crime. Through intuition, Rorschach believes he has uncovered a plot to assassinate past superheroes and sets his goal on warning his past colleagues. The action of the plot then moves with Rorschach contacting Dan Dreiberg, the secret identity of Nite Owl (this is the second Nite Owl, not the original Nite Owl of the Minutemen), Doctor Manhattan (who through a twist in the story is actually the only super-powered character in the piece and who has no secret identity), Laurie Juspecky, the secret identity of the Silk Spectre (this is the second Silk Spectre) and at this point in the story, lover of Doctor Manhattan, and Adrian Veidt, who was once the superhero Ozymandias.

There are a number of points that come to light in close to the same time period. While Rorschach is informing Doctor Manhattan and Laurie Juspecky of his theory of heroes being targeted, the fact that Blake was accused of attempting to rape the original Silk Spectre comes out. Also near this point, although perhaps briefly after it, the disconnect of Doctor Manhattan to society, or perhaps more appropriately his disconnect to humanity, becomes more evident. For example, in one part of the graphic novel, Doctor Manhattan and Laurie Juspecky are having a romantic aside. However, Doctor Manhattan has “split” himself into various forms and identities and while one version is having a pleasing moment with his lover, other versions of himself are still working in his laboratory. When

Laurie stumbles onto this she is angry, feeling disrespected by his lack of personal attention and dedication to her needs. This story arc plays a role in setting up a shift in the plot of the graphic novel ultimately leading to Doctor Manhattan being accused of causing cancer in those he spends prolonged periods of time with and his leaving Earth and reflecting on his situation from Mars.

At some point during the piece (again, the nonlinear timeline doesn't provide many anchors for unfamiliar readers to gain footing) Laurie Juspecky becomes friendly with Dan Dreiberger. The two, over the course of the story, become romantically entwined and pick up their superhero activities together via various episodes: saving people from a burning building, beating up a group of thugs who attempt to mug them, breaking Rorschach out of prison, investigating Rorschach's theory of the masked hero assassin, etc. Through various twists and turns that I begin to leave out for sake of time and space, Doctor Manhattan comes back to Earth to get Laurie and takes her to Mars to debate human worth. She pleads for him to get involved with world's approaching global nuclear armageddon. In the end, Laurie inspires Doctor Manhattan to value humanity and become involved again. As they return to Earth they find that millions of people in New York have been killed by an alien -- a monstrously large squid. The crime scene was emitting strange readings that Laurie and Doctor Manhattan are able to follow. The two of them end up joining Rorschach and Nite Owl at the "villain's" lair to confront the mastermind controlling the events. The villain, if it is right he be called such, is their one time colleague, Adrian Veidt -- formerly the superhero Ozymandias. The world, on brink of global nuclear war, with the doomsday clock inching closer to midnight, seems ready to destroy itself. Veidt, a genius (or evil genius if more fitting), creates the alien that attacks and ends up killing millions of people. The creation of the *alien* gives the world a common enemy to fear and defend against instead of quarreling with each other. While the plan was uncovered before Veidt's attack occurred, there wasn't enough time to thwart it and the group (Rorschach, Nite Owl, Silk Spectre, and Doctor Manhattan) was in Veidt's lair when the alien took the lives of millions, pointing blame and fear towards the alien menace. Over the few minutes that

followed, the political leaders of the world backed their governments away from global annihilation and focused on the newly perceived common threat to the world. While not particularly agreeing with the manner to reach the end, Doctor Manhattan doesn't find fault with the outcome and realizes that for the greater good, he will not take Veidt's plot to the public. Rorschach, however, will not bend his principles and doesn't buy into the logic of Veidt's plot that killed millions of people. Rorschach vows to blow the whistle on the scheme. However, in a surprise move to protect the outcome of peace achieved by Veidt's plan, Doctor Manhattan follows Rorschach and kills him.

A Nod to the Philosophical Discussions

There have been a number of philosophical considerations made in terms of addressing *Watchmen*. While the conversations are often open for debate, the purpose of this section is to offer a glimpse at the framework of past generations of discussion. This glimpse is just that -- it is not meant to be a wholehearted analysis or complete exploration of past philosophical considerations. I do not feel we'd have adequate time or space for a complete framework to be constructed. Instead, this section is a foundational springboard to help launch this piece into the visual philosophical section. This is not to say, however, that each author, concept, or discussion isn't vital to the ongoing conversation -- I feel they are very important and mean no disrespect to any author or concept of which it may seem I have not spent adequate time.

One philosophical discussion that has undergone consideration focuses on Doctor Manhattan and moral reasoning. It has been offered that after the nuclear physics experiment that turned Jonathan Osterman into Doctor Manhattan, Doctor Manhattan no longer engages in moral reasoning (Robichaud 2009). While this conversation revolves around concepts of Hume's (1711-1776) *emotivist* concepts, it doesn't necessarily prove Doctor Manhattan's fit into the discussion. While the emotivists may possess and express emotions, as Manhattan does at different times during the piece, this doesn't

necessarily prove moral reasoning. His emotions, theorized to be jealousy (over Silk Spectre and Nite Owl's budding relationship) and anger (as seen during his television interview which led to the accusation that he causes cancer) shows reactionary emotions, but not, as Robichaud paraphrases Prinz (2007), "...the capacity to experience moral emotions" (2009, p. 8). Thus, by having gained near god-like powers, Doctor Manhattan has lost the ability to reason out moral actions, perhaps by focusing on the scientific meaning of the mechanism of humanity (Ritchie, 2010).

Another area of discussion surrounding *Watchmen* considers Immanuel Kant's (1724-1804) notion that, "...morally right actions are those that conform to the categorical imperative--they're the actions that treat people as ends in themselves and not merely as means" (Robichaud, 2009, p. 9). Rorschach's actions throughout the piece, but focusing especially on his actions in prison, give food for thought to this discussion. This discussion leads to a consideration that since morals often spur people to action, a person's outlook on right and wrong, moral and immoral, often coincide with each other. It's through the emotion that a person will begin to frame their moral stance (Robichaud, 2009). This is what helps make Rorschach an interesting specimen for this consideration. When Rorschach murders a murderer, he does not feel his actions are immoral, thus he sees himself as in the right (Phillips, 2010). In many respects it is the age-old rule of *lex talionis* - an eye for an eye (Held, 2009). While he may deplore what the murderer has done, Rorschach seems to have no qualms with murder itself, as it is an often employed tool of his trade. However, this discussion becomes more complex when it begins to consider Kant's retributive theory of punishment. "He [Rorschach] maintains that wrongdoers must be punished for no other reason than that they did wrong; they deserve it. Likewise, the punishment they receive must be fitting. You don't execute a petty thief...you don't let murderers live" (Held, 2009, p. 21). In considering Kant, this discussion begins to see Rorschach as possibly more moral than Doctor Manhattan, even though Rorschach's actions are often heinous in efforts for the punishment to fit the crime.

Building from this platform of Kant's retributive theory of punishment, the next generation of discussion seems to consider concepts of consequentialism. In short, it is the consequences of an outcome that determine the rightness of an action. Simply put, Rorschach killing a murderer is "right" because it has an outcome of removing a murderer from the equation (Nevett, 2010; Phillips, 2010). Because of this, the moral (if it is right to be called such) character of Rorschach is shown as consequentialist because of his strict stance on non-compromise. "We punish those who deserve it because they deserve it, period. On this, there can be no compromise" (Held, 2009, p. 23). Moving away from Rorschach, however, still shows the idea of consequentialism through other characters. For example, Adrian Veidt kills millions of people and "frames" the alien squid he has created for the crime - in efforts to stave off global nuclear armageddon. By saving the world and every living organism on it, Veidt feels the cost of a few million lives an affordable price, *consequence per se*, to pay. Meanwhile, by giving the world a common enemy to unite against in the off-world attacker, Veidt has used conceptualizations of threat rigidity within his strategy to maintain the facade when the initial impact diminishes. Thus, if an alien could attack today, another alien could attack tomorrow or some future tomorrow.

Another framework that adds complication to these considerations is that of deontological ethics. If deontology can be summarized into adherence to a rule or set of rules via duty or obligation - then many of the characters in the graphic novel seem to fit this concept. Rorschach, for example, follows his strict rule of non-compromise. Doctor Manhattan, appropriately to character, follows the strict rules of science (Ritchie, 2010). However, other characters begin to cause pause in terms of rule adherence. Veidt, for example, didn't adhere to rules when he murdered millions of people. Although he may have felt it his duty or obligation, the avoidance of rule (or law) compliance doesn't fit with deontology. "Deontology says that we should not think of morality in terms of ends and means at all; instead, we should act only in ways that express essential moral rules" (Loftis, 2009, p. 64). What

complicates this area of discussion is that it seems consequentialism and deontology contrast each other. In the example of Veidt's actions, the final outcome -- saving the world -- may be worth the lives of a few million people, exposing itself consequentialist in nature (Nevett, 2010). However, his actions do not adhere to standard rules or laws. As such, the debate of his actions may focus on his obligations as a superhero -- but still not fully escape the immoral perception of his actions. Such is the wondrous complexity of *Watchmen*.

What complicates the conversation even more at this point is a more focused look at the duty and obligation of these superheroes. Friedrich Nietzsche had a special name for these figures who were capable of wondrous feats. "Nietzsche's 'superman,' the Übermensch, a figure who is capable of feats beyond those of mere mortal men" (Keeping, 2009, p. 47). The Übermensch -- Nietzsche's "herald of the lightning" (Keeping, 2009, p. 48) -- are people who do what needs to be done without guilt for their actions or resentment towards the common masses for needing protecting. However, this discussion struggles to keep its footing in the philosophical current of the day as nihilism seems just as plausible as a conceptual foundation in many of the discussions, "...and the cynical nihilism of characters like the Comedian informs much of the subtext of *Watchmen*" (Keeping, 2009, 49).

Throwing another wrench into the ongoing discussions, we should also consider the "normal" people (the populace of Earth) in the graphic novel. While they aren't a character, so to speak, the *average Joe* living in Iowa, Michigan, or Nebraska -- for example -- plays a role in story arc and associated considerations of philosophical discussion. It is an often stated position that *Watchmen* is a critique of authoritarianism (Loftis, 2010). The conceptualization of such a critique asks who the real authority is within the graphic novel. Is it the superheroes, the politicians, or the general public? This questioning often associates the words of the Roman poet, Juvenal (55-138 AD), to the graphic novel: *Quis custodiet ipsos custodes?* Loosely translated, and open for debate, this saying asks, "Who will watch the watchmen?" This question implies the understanding that even the Übermensch may not be

morally flawless. That leads to many a consideration of the role the public plays behind the scenes in the piece.

One implication the public played in *Watchmen* is through the passing of The Keene Act. The Keene Act was a national law passed in the graphic novel's "1977" that made costumed adventuring illegal. In the plot of the piece, the law caused the majority of superheroes to hang up their capes. This is sometimes considered in connection to Weber's Theory of Social and Economic Organization, wherein the graphic novel the general public voices an outcry for the policing of superhero activity. When bad guy "x" fights superhero "y" the destruction to public and private property is seldom considered. However, when the citizenry has to repair the accompanying damage repeatedly, frustration ensues (Spanakos, 2009). Responses to this concept have varied. Even though focusing on an individual's cost to repair property damaged in efforts to apprehend criminals may seem selfish, it is worth considering that acting in the self-beneficial way may lead to greater good for the whole. David Luban, University Professor of Law and Philosophy at Georgetown, and the Acting Director of the Center on National Security and the Law is paraphrased by Robichaud:

One line of reasoning Luban looks at claims that the best way of promoting the emergence of more democracies, of advancing more economic stability, and of securing more meaningful freedoms -- all very good things, no doubt -- is for the United States to act in its own self-interest, involving itself in the affairs of other nations in a way that is impermissible for other nations to do. Another line of reasoning explored by Luban claims that the United States is granted permissions other nations don't have because it endures costs that other nations don't. (2009, p. 15)

What this implies in terms of *Watchmen* is that the citizens of the United States had every right to create The Keene Act because they endured the burden, in terms of financial cost, that came with having superheroes in the nation. However, there seems a trend in philosophical discussions to

consider The Keene Act through considerations of egalitarianism. The basis for that avenue of discussion revolves around the view that superhero activity is actually nothing more than vigilante activity (Loftis, 2009). Thus, the egalitarian conception is one that implies that since the general public has to consider, then be held accountable for their actions, so should the costumed adventurer crowd. Another issue within the egalitarian discussion forms around the notion of equal worth and social status. However, the notoriety of the superhero role seems to challenge that point. Readers may struggle to consider Doctor Manhattan and his ability to teleport to Mars at a level that makes him equal to an average Joe.

The last consideration to be made here may actually be the most complex. This final area is the concept of Utilitarianism -- which is sometimes broken down into various areas, such as virtue utilitarianism, rule utilitarianism, etc. -- in connection to *Watchmen*. The discussions that consider utilitarianism often focus on the character of Adrian Veidt and his concluding actions of the piece. Veidt, who was the costumed hero Ozymandias before The Keene Act, decided to destroy New York City via the attacking "alien monster," killing millions of people who live there, and giving the world a common threat to face together. In his plan, Veidt sees the overall happiness of billions of people (the population of the planet) as more important than the lives of a few million people. This happiness, as shown during the resolution of the graphic novel, comes in the form of backing away from global nuclear armageddon and a blossoming sense of community and togetherness as they now assess common threats, namely invasion and destruction from a non-human entity.

The Watchmen in an iVisual Society

One of the inquiries this piece tasked itself with considering asked: Does the graphic novel *Watchmen* offer philosophical platform, and what may they be, with its visual choices? In addressing this I will attempt to find visuals from *Watchmen* that visual portray, symbolize, address, or connect with

the philosophical discussions that address word-based text and plot. I will attempt to follow the organization and presentational order from the previous section when presenting visual considerations.

The first consideration to visualize is Doctor Manhattan and moral reasoning. To show this, visuals would need to show a lack of engagement in moral reasoning. Consider Figure 1.



Figure 1: Doctor Manhattan losing connection with moral reasoning.

The visual spread in Figure 1 shows Doctor Manhattan, a being with god-like powers, standing by and watching as his teammate, The Comedian, raises a weapon on a pregnant Vietnamese woman, a woman whom he has sexual relations with and impregnated, and fires a round into her chest – killing her. The complication here

is that Doctor Manhattan could have easily stopped this but didn't due to an implied moral disconnect. moral reasoning. Another set of visuals that show implications of moral disconnect may be shown in

Figure 2. In this set of visuals, Doctor Manhattan and Laurie Juspeckzyk are engaging in sexual relations.

However, Doctor Manhattan duplicates himself, unbeknownst to Juspeckzyk and without her consent,



Figure 2: Doctor Manhattan duplicating himself during sexual relations with Laurie Juspeckzyk.

and four. The fact that his lover, Juspeckzyk, is uncomfortable with the duplication and Manhattan is unaware that she would find displeasure with this adds to the growing sense of disconnect shown in panels 1-4 of Figure 2.

Moving on to Hume's (1711-1776) *emotivist* concepts, Manhattan's emotions of jealousy and anger are reactionary emotions at best and are not shown in the majority of his actions. In considering his anger and jealousy reactions and lack of moral connect, we see Figure 3. In the panels of Figure 3 Doctor Manhattan is being interviewed on a television program. During this interview he is subjected to

during the activity. The visuals show her surprise and reaction to this intimate invasion and add to the consideration of Manhattan's moral disconnect. The looks of intimacy and enjoyment in panels one and two of Figure 2 are replaced by looks of shock and dismay in panels three

surprise questioning about his interactions with people. A number of people with whom Manhattan had prolonged contact with are revealed to have gotten cancer. His reaction seems to be shock at first, but quickly turns into anger and a resulting reaction of jettisoning everyone around him at that moment, the television show's host, the audience, the crew, etc. to an undisclosed location – and again, as in the example with Juspeczyk, this is without their knowledge or consent.



Figure 3: These are non-sequential panels showing Doctor Manhattan getting frustrated, angry, and reacting by teleporting people, followed by teleporting himself.

Transitioning from the discussions of moral reasoning and emotivists reactionary emotions to the next topic of discussion, Kant's (1724-1804) notion of categorical imperatives shows a slew of characters that visually fulfill the "ends to a means" consideration. For example, Rorschach's actions, especially those while he is imprisoned or actions he's speaking of to the prison psychologist, tend to show Kant's theory. Figure 4 shows a panel in which Rorschach throws a vat of fryer grease into the face of a prisoner – over time ending up with the prisoner's death. Another panel in Figure 4 shows



Figure 4: These are non-sequential panels showing Rorschach burning a prisoner with fryer grease (panel 1); breaking the fingers of another prisoner (panel 2); electrocuting a prisoner (panel 3).

Rorschach breaking the fingers of another prisoner. The final panel in Figure 4 shows Rorschach electrocuting a prisoner. These visuals all show Rorschach treating the prisoners as less important than the message he sends to the prison population, a message he verbalizes implying that he isn't trapped



Figure 5: Rorschach gives the handcuffed criminal a hacksaw as he sets the kerosene surrounding the criminal on fire.

inside the prison with them, but they [the other prisoners] are trapped inside the prison with him. Another situation in which Rorschach shows this tendency to see past the person involved and only the final outcome is shared in Figure 5. In this scene, Rorschach has handcuffed a criminal to a pipe of some type and poured kerosene around the man. As Rorschach lights the kerosene on fire, we see he's left the man with a hacksaw. The choice is to cut

through his own arm (as there wouldn't be enough time to cut through the handcuffs) or burn in the fire.



Figure 6: An unknown assailant (Adrian Veidt) battering Edward Blake and throwing him out a window.

Considering the opening of the graphic novel, shown in Figure 6, is the at-the-time unknown assailant (which turns out to be Adrian Veidt in the conclusion) throwing a battered Edward Blake (the Comedian) out a high-rise window. This visual element also shows emotional interest framed with a person's moral stance. Veidt felt strongly enough in his quest to "save" the world from itself that he was willing to kill anyone who could intercede in the plan. Just as with Rorschach, Veidt shows, literally via these visuals, that the immoral action of murder is less of a concern than the moral action of saving the world. Other visuals utilizing the Comedian, however, work to further show Kant theory – namely Kant's retributive theory of punishment. Consider the panels shared in Figure 7. These panels show the Comedian, heavily intoxicated, having broken into the residence of one of his old enemies, Moloch. The Comedian, carrying the heavy burden of having become aware of Veidt's plan to "save" the world, is crumbling under the pressure and implications. He sits on the edge of Moloch's bed and babbles on in his drunken stupor. This is the reason, inevitably, that Veidt decides to kill the Comedian. The

Comedian, in essence, must be punished because he has babbled on to Moloch. Moloch, as later shown in the novel, must be killed because of what he knows (and to elaborately frame Rorschach for the murder of Moloch).



Figure 7: A drunken Comedian babbling on to Moloch, bending to the pressure of what he knows regarding Veidt's plan.

In moving into the concept of consequentialism, one of the most prolific examples may be when Veidt transports the "killer space squid" onto New York City. The immediate consequence, as the visuals

show in the graphic novel, is the death of millions of people (see Figure 8). However, the implications, when combined with the visuals from Veidt's television banks at his arctic lair, show that the other

consequences actually were Veidt's successfully backing the world away from global nuclear Armageddon (see Figure 9.a & 9.b). As mentioned earlier, by saving the world, Veidt feels the lives of a



Figure 8: The monster space squid's destruction of New York.



Figure 9.a: Veidt and the (implications of) the heroes seeing the planetary reaction to the New York attack via media response.

few million people are an acceptable consequence. However, these visuals may more clearly show the various concepts of Utilitarianism discussed previously. The complexity here, on some levels, would revolve around the question of the general populous “knowing” they are happier due to Veidt’s actions. As the planet slowly backs away from midnight on the doomsday clock, the world mourns together, and breathes a collective sigh of relief together as the major world powers unite against off-world enemies. The aggression and fear that were pushing the world closer to oblivion, were subsiding. However, if the general populous didn’t know about Veidt’s plan and the implications associated with it (in moral

terms), they may not gauge themselves as happy or even happier. The implication, and here is where I believe the complexity continues to intrigue readers, is that being aware of the



Figure 9.b: The slow realization that the world is uniting in the face of the common “squid” enemy possibility.

plot, readers often assume the populous to be happier.

In the end, one of the most stunning visual develops is when Doctor Manhattan kills Rorschach to protect the fragile world piece that was a consequence of Veidt's plan. Knowing that Rorschach will not compromise, Doctor Manhattan fulfills the role of *Übermensch* by doing what he perceives needs to be done without hesitation, remorse, or guilt – as shown in Figure 10.



Figure 10: Doctor Manhattan murdering Rorschach to protect Veidt's peace.

In Conclusion - Finding Room to Disagree

One of the issues that makes considerations of visual frameworks for philosophical exploration complex in sequential narrative art texts like *Watchmen* is the complicated concept of right and wrong. Perhaps, without meaning to oversimplify the issue, this complication arises from the positionality of the reader/viewer. If the viewer of the visual text decodes what they see as appropriate in context of the story (i.e. a glowing, floating, naked blue man) they may not question the choices made in presentation. However, it borders on obvious that a viewer who is offended by nudity or who sees Doctor Manhattan's "god-like" powers as blasphemous would process the visual through a different philosophical framework. The viewer who accepts the premise of Doctor Manhattan would then experience the story, as told through its visuals, differently than the viewer who battles the disruptions the visuals cause in presentation. In barest terms, reading a traditional word-based text description of a naked man may not cause as much of a schism for viewers as actually witnessing Doctor Manhattan's full frontal nudity in the piece. This seems to lead to a question of aesthetics and an often posed philosophical question of, "What is art?"

It's curious what leads different viewers to look at the same visual and consider it art or not art. The answer may reside somewhere in past experiences that mold a viewer's frame of reference (Mezirow 1997). However, as alluded in the introduction of this piece, it may not be rational to expect agreement. I came into this exploration expecting people to disagree. I have yet to find a theory, position, or argument strong enough to convince me that people should agree on concepts of beauty, appropriateness, right, moral, etc. I do hope, however, that through sharing and exploring the different positions we may hold, we can begin to understand -- and perhaps even appreciate -- those differences.

The goal of this piece was to consider the dual inquiry asking: Does the graphic novel *Watchmen* offer philosophical platform, and what may they be, with its visual choices? Can academia find use with the visual choices in the graphic novel and thus help add credibility to a traditionally

stigmatized genre? At this point, I feel the visual choices made in Watchmen do extend the philosophical platform, allowing the complexity to be processed by the visual choices made therein. As to the second point of inquiry – I find the answer to also be positioned as affirmative. By considering the generations of discussion dealing with plot and story elements, and adding the visual considerations and implications into the ongoing discussion, academics have a plethora of entry points to connect the philosophical underpinnings of the graphic novel to classroom and research orientations. However, that may simple be *how I see it...*

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