

Reading Space in *Watchmen*
Dr Spiros Xenos (Independent Scholar)

Abstract

In this paper I argue that the grammar of *Watchmen* is a spatial grammar, a place of constituent elements transformed into practised space. *Watchmen* provokes a modernist strategy of estrangement in its representation and problematisation of the postmodern by employing the rational grid of the orderly mode of modernity, and disabling its instinct towards compartmentalisation and containment.

Paper

(S)pace is a practiced place.¹

Introduction

To speak of a comics narrative in a structural sense is to speak of a spatial narrative form. That is, comics narratives are composed of spatial units – panels. To speak of a spatial narrative form is to speak of certain spatial reading strategies, and thus to partake in a discourse in spatial hermeneutics in which ‘reading’ is the privileged metaphor of the ‘textualisation’ and ‘narrativisation’ and ‘visualisation’ of space.

In this paper I elaborate on such strategies and metaphors in *Watchmen*. *Watchmen* provokes a strategy of estrangement in employing the rational grid of the orderly mode of modernity and disrupting its instinct towards compartmentalisation and containment. The connotations of the nine-panel grid - of standardisation, rationality, inviolability and classical perspectivism - have been undermined. The “elegant, labyrinthine”² structure of *Watchmen* has been mobilised into a critique of the static and orderly. In the first part of

¹ de Certeau 1984: 117, italics in text, my parentheses

² Schechter 1989: 559

this paper I discuss spatial narrative strategies in *Watchmen* with reference to modes of filmic representation – *mise-en-scène* and montage. In the second part I develop these points in discussing the visuality of space as encountered in *Watchmen*. To introduce the discussion I begin by contrasting *Watchmen* with *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns* which serves to introduce spatial themes and references to be developed in the paper.

Watchmen and Batman: The Dark Knight Returns

Watchmen and *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns* each speculate on an ‘alternate’ apocalyptic future. *Dark Knight* re-imagines Gotham City from a possible future in the ‘DC Universe’. *Watchmen* re-imagines the ‘real world’ as a consequence of superheroes. The appeal of the dystopian is attributed by Penley (via Jameson) to our “cultural incapacity to imagine the future... we can imagine the future but we cannot conceive the kind of collective political strategies necessary to change or ensure that future.”³

Miller’s text is an artistically overdetermined representation of the city. The visual elements - the style and iconography - are beholden to the grandiose vision of Miller and to the Batman megatext. *Dark Knight* presents a future Gotham City as a Cold War wasteland overrun by militant mutants and other criminal undesirables. Batman is represented as an elemental force, almost supernaturally reincarnated to reclaim ‘his city’. After an attempted mugging at the site of his parents’ murder by this “purer breed”⁴ of criminal, the mythical presence of Batman, represented by a fiery, snarling, hellish bat totem, is mystically and feverishly reawakened in the retired 50-year-old Bruce Wayne. He is reborn, with all the connotations of the evangelical intended. Towards the end he orchestrates a final duke-out to the ‘death’ with Superman, in which Gotham City literally (em)powers Batman as he plugs his suit into the power grid, significantly, at the site of his origin(s). This primal scene fantasy, in which he is literally on the scene of his ‘conception’, registers metaphorically the meta-narrative of *Dark Knight* itself - for all its formal merits as a performance, *Dark Knight* is powered by, and is plugged into, the Batman megatext. This sense of the myopic, of a vertiginous implosive vision within the

³ Penley 1989: 116-117

⁴ Miller 1986: 6

Batman megatext is in stark contrast to the visuality of the text. Whereas the visuality and representation of the text is a virtuoso performance in terms of layout, arrangement and visceral intensity, the vision, or the dominant in *Dark Knight* is of a singularity.

The atrophy of collective imagination and political agency may be the ironic or unconscious dominant of *Dark Knight*, but it is in large part the thematic basis for *Watchmen*. *Watchmen* rehearses both the classical detective fiction model of the 'whodunnit' - Who killed the Comedian? - and the hardboiled model. The investigators - Dreiberg, Rorschach, Laurie - are hardboiled figures operating in an ostensibly stable and legible albeit hazardous environment. Spurred on by Rorschach's paranoia about a 'mask killer', a Chinese puzzle-like maze of clues and coincidences leads the remaining heroes to a conspiracy masterminded by one of their own, Ozymandias, for whom only an extreme crisis, such as an invasion, can hope to elicit collective political action.

The fictional alternate world of *Watchmen* is painstakingly realized as a consequence of the superheroes, especially the appearance of Dr. Manhattan. The old world, represented by the Minutemen, has been superseded by the quantum change in physics that Dr. Manhattan has inaugurated. For example, Hollis Mason, the first Night Owl, not only retires from adventuring, but is retired as a car mechanic with the advent of electric cars, made possible by Dr. Manhattan. The streets of New York are now populated by electric power terminals similar to fire hydrants. These details are not heralded by expository captions or speeches, but rather inform, in incidental details, the environment. In this sense Dr. Manhattan sets the historical context and frames reality itself since he supersedes all the rules by which reality (still) operates. This is a complex and selfconscious recognition built into the work, of the implications of the standard superhero comic world in terms of suspension of all the 'normal' rules of reality. *Dark Knight* expresses this differently, by casting a phantasmagoric glow over Gotham City, as if the whole city were already in tune with the suspension of the normal that Batman himself involves.

Unlike *Dark Knight*, *Watchmen* doesn't present the reader with 'white space' or abstracted backgrounds. The logic of its setting is consistent. *Dark Knight's* splash pages operate within a logic which highlights moments in the text while also referencing iconic moments in the megatext. Often in such instances the backgrounds are blank, foregrounding the figure in a frozen moment, or are symbolically charged in an abstract design. In contrast, *Watchmen's* background details are as clear and representationally consistent as its movements are smooth and deft, the details gathering rhetorical and symbolic power cumulatively.

Part 1

Place as *Mise-en-Scène*

Siting the newsvendor's corner

The newsvendor's corner is a locus for miscellaneous action, and may also be considered the symbolic center of *Watchmen*. It is an intersection through which many of the minor characters are introduced. A birds-eye view of the area is not provided, which is apposite given that such a perspective is, as per de Certeau, a dehumanised geometry. The gradual synopsis is built up as the omniscient reader scans and makes connections between scenes from within the drama. Paranoid texts are exemplars of connectivity and interconnectivity.

The newsvendor's corner is replete with signs and portents which the semi-permanent occupiers (the newsvendor and comic book reader) and passers-by are unconscious of, but which are conspicuous to the omniscient reader. The cover of Chapter 3 begins the panning away to the newsvendor and comic book reader in which the sign (being fixed to the wall by an unnoticed worker) "Fallout Shelter" reads as "Allout Helter". As split by the smoke, it also reads "All Hel". The smoke itself doubles as the profile of a skull. The many readings are available to the reader, but the characters are oblivious to the misreadings. In the first panel the quotation from the comic-within-the-comic, set against

the warning sign: "...that hell-bound ship's black sails against the yellow indies sky..."⁵ of the "Black Freighter", again unsettles the stability of the radioactive sign.

The news vendor provides most of the ironic and frustrated misreadings. In the next panel, the news vendor makes a gesture towards cognition; "I see the signs... look things inna face, y'know?"⁶. The irony is that the connection is made visually for the reader, including the proximity of his word balloon to the sign, but the news vendor doesn't make the connection. When he says "I had it tagged for a red smear"⁷ he is oblivious to the connotations of the smiley badge and doomsday clock. The distributor of news and information, the seer of connections, apprehends a conspiracy but cannot read the mobility of the signs, the "impossible totality"⁸ of the postmodern network. All his attempts at reading the signs are off the mark. He unconsciously registers the "red smears" and the doomsday portents, but he is ignorant of the source of his contaminated impressions.

His comments partake in the economy of the panel compositions. That is, his speech balloons operate as a visual analogue to the signs and narratives of his siting, floating amongst each other, ungrounded, contributing to the milieu of the crossroads but not to his cognitive mapping. Even the comic-reader's exclamation, "Ripoff story ain't got no endin'"⁹ misreads *Watchmen* and his own fate which are intertwined in the final explosion.

The comic book reader is the agent through which the fictional world intrudes into the 'real world', and facilitates the double narration on the 'real' world by the fictional world. The ontological status of the corner is destabilised by the comic-within-a-comic, "The Black Freighter" - it turns the corner into a crossroads and a portal. The crossroads of the

⁵ Moore and Gibbons 1986: 3.1.1

⁶ *ibid.*: 3.1.2

⁷ *ibid.*: 3.22.3

⁸ Jameson 1991: 38

⁹ Moore and Gibbons 1986: 3.25.2

newsvendor's corner is not fixed and immobile, but becomes a practised place not only by the bodies of the minor characters passing through, but by the reader of *Watchmen*.

The doomsayer is later revealed to be Rorschach, himself a writer of the space in *Watchmen*. In the opening panel of Chapter 1 the hardboiled narration of Rorschach/the doomsayer - "The streets are extended gutters and the gutters are full of blood..."¹⁰ - conflates references to the formal narrative properties of comics (the spaces between panels as gutters), the parodic excess of violence in mainstream superhero comics, and also to his own walking across the pool of blood as the street cleaner tries to wash it away. It is his presence as constant re-reader over this space which gives him the literal and metaphorical authority of writer/reader/narrator for the blood in the gutters. When he says in the sixth panel: "Now the whole world stands on the brink, staring down into bloody hell, all those liberals and intellectuals and smooth talkers... and all of a sudden, nobody can think of anything to say",¹¹ the following panel shows us the detective peering down from the top window, from de Certeau's elevated perspective, with the innocuous non-statement "Hmm...that's quite a drop."¹² The space is practised and narrated by Rorschach, and the 'privileged' perspective of the detective is not capable of reading the drama.

In *Watchmen*, the social is registered in opposition to deep focus. It is registered by the lack of acknowledgment of signs, the complicit misreading of signs. The various elements of composition in the panels co-exist but slide across and past each other. "The deep shot... is an invitation to stasis and to contemplation: nature as an overfurnished and traditional room around which you can slowly gaze, lingering on its objects."¹³ The 'realistic' rendering in *Watchmen* is used to catch the reader off-guard in interpreting the incidental actions and backgrounds. *Watchmen* disarms with its verisimilitude.

The smiley badge

¹⁰ *ibid.*: 1.1.2

¹¹ *ibid.*: 1.1.6

¹² *ibid.*: 1.1.7

¹³ Jameson 1992: 58

Tracing the smiley face symbol in its various manifestations reveals the manner in which minor and occasional details accumulate and add pressure on the paranoia/determinism axis of the text.¹⁴ *Watchmen* begins with a close-up of the smiley badge lying in the gutter, the smear of blood crossing the right eye in the manner of a clock hand approaching 12 o' clock. Rorschach's diary entry notes his apprehension of the city's "true face". It is clear Rorschach is not referring to the badge at this point, but it is equally clear that we, the omniscient reader, recognise the proximity of the two levels of narration, that is, the 'face' of the city as smeared with blood, and Rorschach's unconscious registration of the badge as pertinent symbol. Moore refers to this double-tracking as a

sort of "under-language" at work ... that is neither the "visuals" nor the "verbals," but a unique effect caused by a combination of the two. A picture can be set against text ironically, or it can be used to support the text, or it can be completely disjointed from the text - which forces the reader into looking at the scene in a new way.... the reader has the ability to stop and linger over one particular "frame" and work out *all* of the meaning in that frame or panel...¹⁵

Lewis refers to the overlay of text and image in *Watchmen* as "harmonic counterpoint",¹⁶ which aptly registers the effect of the quotation of visual symbols throughout the text. In his account the smiley badge represents repression, blocked vision and denial. The smear over the right eye symbolises wilful blindness and denial, and similar instances of impaired vision reinforce the denial theme, for example, the juice smeared over the eye of

¹⁴ A precursor to the smiley face in *Watchmen* is the fixed grin of V's mask in *V for Vendetta*. On the one hand the smiley face has exceeded the confines of *Watchmen* - see Groth and Fiore 1988 for Moore's comments on the badge as a symbol in rave culture; on the other hand it has recirculated within the comics-reading community, albeit in appropriately altered fashion. See for example Spider Jerusalem's three-eyed smiley badge in Ellis' *Transmetropolitan*. A not dissimilar smiley face appears as a signifier of conspiracy in Clowes' *Like A Velvet Glove Cast in Iron*. In an accompanying illustration for Moore's "On Writing for Comics" (Moore 1988c) Sienkiewicz illustrated a composite of the smiley badge and nuclear sign resting in Moore's typewriter.

¹⁵ Moore 1993: 163, italics in text

¹⁶ Lewis 2001: 139

Mason's Halloween pumpkin, and the water covering the right eye of Laurie's slippers. Lewis argues that this motif of impaired vision is transformed into a symbol of clearing vision. For example, the clock hand on Dreiberg's goggles is not an imposition on the glass, but rather a clearing away of accumulated dust. The clock hand on the cover of Chapter 11 [Fig.4] is similarly a clearing away as it breaks the film of white space to reveal the bright colours of the butterfly and arboreum.

The abstractions of the smiley badge - the clock face, the yellow background, the black spots, the blood smear - are referenced in *Watchmen* in a number of ways and instances; as the nuclear clock, the radioactive sign, Veidt's tape reels. The radioactive sign also rehearses the black on yellow of the smiley badge. The smiley badge/nuclear sign/tape reels/nuclear clock provokes a visual motif of yellow and black signs which is employed in a number of other such symbols, for example, the motif of triangles in a circle. All these variations of the visual motif reinforce the paranoia of the text, not just by their omnipresence, but by their scopic activity - that is, they are always 'disinterested' watchers.¹⁷ As Dolar says in the context of the suspicious and paranoid gaze in Hitchcock,

the traces arouse the suspicion, they remain enigmatic - that is, they demand new traces that would clarify them. The suspicions increase and decrease and we hope to find an unambiguous trace, a steadfast signifier which would stop the gliding and determine the sense. Yet this deferring movement, maintaining and nourishing the suspicion, cannot stop until the last scene.¹⁸

Indeed all symbols and signs within the visual field of *Watchmen* comment either directly or metaphorically on the action in the frame. For example, in the first Chapter, Dreiberg, about to leave Mason's place, says "It's almost midnight"¹⁹ which the clock confirms, an incident which, whilst true, is unregistered by Dreiberg for foreboding and

¹⁷ The extent of these quotations has been traced by diligent fans. For reference see "The Annotated Watchmen" at <http://faraday.clas.virginia.edu/~jbf9a/watchmen.html#part1>.

¹⁸ Dolar 1992: 145

¹⁹ Moore and Gibbons 1986: 1.9.3

foreshadowing. As he leaves, we see part of the graffiti “Who Watches The Watchmen”²⁰ for the first time. It is invariably only partially framed, incidental in its off-centredness, as if seen from the corner of our eye, and yet it recurs as a meta-commentary. Up until this point, most of the background graffiti has been muted by washes of colour. In the next panel, the sign “Obsolete Models A Specialty” is foregrounded as Dreiberg’s stooped figure recedes. These signs behave like “tiny events going on in the foreground or in the background of a picture, seemingly with no relevance to the main story but subliminally reinforcing the ideas in the actual narrative.”²¹ In effect Moore has trained the reader’s eye to be alert to a greater density of visual meaning, even though, paradoxically, signs are interchangeable and unreliable.

The partial view of the “Who Watches the Watchers” graffiti is in keeping with the logic of the representation of the environment’s signs in *Watchmen* - after a few glimpses, we ‘get the picture’. It also suggests that the frame doesn’t end at its border as we infer the rest of the message exists off-screen. It is also differentiated from the graffiti of the Hiroshima couple, which we actually see being spray-painted, and which is quoted elsewhere in *Watchmen*:

[T]he most prominent form of self-expression these environments inspire is invisibly perpetrated graffiti... The site of these messages is as important as their content. They are written over the very surfaces that signify the death of that haptic environment on whose existence, the graffitiists imply, our own existence depends.²²

Apart from the image of the Hiroshima couple, the graffiti in *Watchmen*, by unseen (authorless) hands, has been superseded by unattributed floating signs. Even the blank

²⁰ *ibid.*: 1.9.7 This phrase also appeared in the indicia boxes of DCU titles during *Watchmen*’s serialisation, paradoxically rehearsing the text’s status as non-DCU while exercising its own uncontainability as excess; however, this is far from “invisibly perpetrated”.

²¹ Moore 1988c: 138

²² Carter 1992: 10

wall facing the newsvendor, with its logo-less legend, “Institute For Extraspatial Studies”, seems mute in comparison to symbols of watching. As Carter says, “In a situation where buildings exist to provide a surface for signs, where the traditional relationship between signifier and signified is reversed, spray-canned messages urging us to shoulder our human and environmental responsibilities have a sharp pathos.”²³

Space as Montage

“(T)he appeal of the grid plan lies precisely in the fact that it does *not* resemble a place: the grid is a meta-place, it offers a spatial grammar...”²⁴

The New York setting of *Watchmen* is such a rational grid of numbered streets and cross-sections, but the grid itself is the cartographer’s view, not the pedestrian’s, who only makes sense of the layout in relation to a moving body – in Carter’s terms, “haptically”. Indeed the grid is not the place itself, but a mechanism for traversing and cognitively mapping, for reading and navigating. The spatial grammar of *Watchmen* is one which is similarly read and interpreted. *Watchmen* applies a variety of montage ‘takes’ as part of its spatial grammar to enable the negotiation and reading of its logic of ontological contradiction between movement and stasis. The layout of *Watchmen*, specifically, the cutting between scenes and panels is a reading practice and strategy.

In film theory, the syntagmatic placement of shots is referred to as either (1) “cutting” or “editing”, or (2) “montage”. The American terms “cutting” and “editing” suggest trimming, a cutting-away from. The European “montage” suggests a building-up from.²⁵ In *Watchmen*, the sense of control of movement, or guiding hand, is closer to “montage”

²³ *ibid.*: 11. It is interesting that the next cultural stage of graffiti is the illegible ‘tag’, writing abstracted as in a de Kooning painting in that the surface is covered with sensuous enactments of brush strokes, or writing (calligraphic), but nothing is said as far as the casual passerby is concerned. This is intensified in the instance of tags on trains, which can’t be read because it’s illegible and in motion.

²⁴ Carter 1992: 13

²⁵ See Monaco 1977:

than “editing” in this schema. However the elaborate system of quotations of images and iconic symbols throughout the text suggests a concentration of cross-cutting that is not completely or adequately encompassed in the “building up” of montage. Certainly there is a fluidity of motion in *Watchmen*, in which the action, the sense of foreboding and inevitability courses throughout the text, but at the same time, there is a constant re-reading and re-referencing that the reader is engaged in.

There are many varieties of montage cuts: parallel montage, continuity montage, accelerated montage, flashbacks and involuted montage, and the match cut, or cut-by-analogy, “a device which links two disparate scenes by the repetition of an action or a form or the duplication of *mise-en-scène* factors.”²⁶ In *Watchmen*, cuts are not just seamless utilitarian transitions. The manner and context in which many of the ‘tricky’ cuts are employed further the sense of a guiding hand, a watching consciousness which contributes to the foreboding and paranoia, just as objects and symbols do via *mise-en-scène*.

Chapter 7 begins with a close-up of Dreiberg’s Nite Owl goggles which Laurie has brushed with her finger, therefore slotting the goggles into the smiley face/nuclear clock motif. She makes a similar motion on one of the windows of Dreiberg’s ship, reinforcing the motif of the smiley face, but also of clearing vision. The close-up of the goggle appears three times in this chapter, each time as the last panel on the page. In the first instance the overlaid speech balloon completes Dreiberg’s train of thought regarding the costume and gadgets - “That’s, y’know, with hindsight. .. on reflection”,²⁷ as he and Laurie are caught in the glass’ reflection. The second time it appears Laurie has already tried on Dreiberg’s nightvision, and their exit from the hideaway is accompanied by a speech balloon: “These days I feel like something’s watching my every move.”²⁸ In its third appearance there is no speech balloon as Dreiberg lifts it to fit the costume. However, this is a silent page in which the transference of action is rather quick and deft.

²⁶ Monaco 1977: 183

²⁷ Moore and Gibbons 1986: 7.4.9

²⁸ *ibid.*: 7.10.9

Two tiers above this panel, Dreiberg is wiping condensation from the window. The moon is evident beyond the glass, and his wiping of the glass connotes the smiley face again. This continuity montage has occurred not in immediate sequence but across a number of pages.

In between the second and third appearance of the goggle, Dreiberg and Laurie have their first impotent fling. The awkwardness is comically and ironically narrated in parallel montage by the changing programs on the television. This has its analogue in the fight sequence in Chapter 3 in which their fending off of attackers is narrated in voice-over from the alternating cuts to the television studio, during which Dr. Manhattan is being accused of causing the cancer of his friends. As they retire, the clock face on the ABC logo screen again quotes the smiley face and doomsday clock until it fades to white noise static as transmission ends. The white space is seen reflected in Dreiberg's glasses. On the following two pages an accelerated montage is employed to illustrate Dreiberg's dream in which he and Laurie run into each others arms after stripping off their real/fake selves. The orgasmic crescendo is illustrated as the two figures parallel the Hiroshima couple. The white space of the explosion carries over into the next panel via the television screen which is covered by Dreiberg waking up into the frame.

After they rescue the fire victims, they are aroused by their escapades in full regalia. The layout used in the accelerated montage of the dream sequence is employed again, but whereas it initially showed quick incremental stages of an action, this time it is also partially used in a panoramic montage. In each instance the transition from one panel to the next has incorporated a method of reading and interpretation of the action along a visual and spatial axis. That is, the visuality of the drama has been interpreted by a spatial manipulation of the individual units of frames.

Watchmen promotes the re-scanning of the panels and pages so that the reader is continually retracing previous panels, pages and chapters for echoes of these symbols. In one sense the character's ignorance of the signs is understandable - they operate in a linear progression from one panel to another. As omniscient readers, we have no such

restriction. Just as the eye scans the page and then the panels, so can the eye re-scan and linger on details in the page or the panel. The grid layout of *Watchmen*, in its standardisation, uniformity and rationality, enables such a secondary inspection precisely because the initial scan has already been done on previous pages - that is, it is habitual and therefore 'invisible'. As McHale says of Frank: "[U]nderstanding was less a process unfolding in time than the reconstruction by the reader of a pattern in space, drawing on elements widely separated in the text."²⁹ This experience of simultaneity is where montage and collage are situated in the modernist urban experience of Eisenstein.³⁰

The uniformity of the grid may render it 'invisible', but its very rhythm - indeed, its moments of variation - is a structure which foregrounds the reading and meaning-making process. When variations do occur, they are apprehended as shocks, and the time spent on the larger panel is commensurate with the increased size and scale.

Part 2

I have briefly discussed the differences between *Dark Knight* and *Watchmen* in terms of vision and visuality, and the presentation of the world of *Watchmen* via *mise-en-scène* and montage. I wish to return to the issue of the consciousness, that is, the privileged vision in the text. Having accounted for the misreadings of the newsvendor, and the discourse on visuality via the smiley face, we come to the tunnel vision of Rorschach, and the privileged vision of Dr. Manhattan and Veidt.

Rorschach represents the logical extension of the driven vigilante type of superhero and is also a parody of the hardboiled dick with an unwavering moral code, for which he may suffer torture, misunderstanding or injustice himself, but will not compromise. This 'ideal' of a rigid, non-negotiable morality is as incompatible with the logic of the

²⁹ McHale on Frank, McHale 1987: 190

³⁰ For discussion see Donald 1999

Watchmen universe as it is redundant in a postmodern context where everything is negotiable. When Rorschach is attacked in the jail, Lawrence taunts: “We got a jail full of guys out here hate your guts. What in hell do you got?”, to which Rorschach replies “My perspective”.³¹ After Veidt has unleashed his bomb on New York, Nite Owl pleads with Rorschach not to reveal the truth lest any possible good be undone: “This is too big to be hard-assed about! We have to compromise...”, to which Rorschach replies “No. Not even in the face of Armageddon. Never compromise.”³² Veidt’s amused response, “Hmm. Now what would you call that, I wonder? “Blotting out reality” perhaps?... As a reliable witness. Rorschach is hardly... How shall we put it... “without stain”?”³³ puns on Rorschach’s mask, his ‘true face’ through which he sees the world. His ‘face’ is also a product of Dr. Manhattan’s distorting presence on emerging technologies: “Black and white moving, changing shape... but not mixing, no gray.”³⁴ Rorschach spends much of his time in *Watchmen* advocating a point of view, be it his apocalyptic warnings or his (as it turns out, well-founded) conspiracy theory. The instances in which he successfully communicates result in devastation. For example, his doctor (also a watcher) who, once he sees through Rorschach’s eyes, can only see the black of the rorschach test; or when, in leaving Veidt’s fortress after the conspiracy has been revealed, the only unfinished business is his own death at the hands of Dr. Manhattan.

Dr. Manhattan is post-human in body and perspective, a quantum being. When he is distracted from joining Laurie for dinner due to his being “close to locating a gluino, which would completely validate supersymmetrical theory”,³⁵ he is not only stating a virtual manifesto for his superior perspective, but is also demonstrating the disintegration of his humanity. The advent of the atomic bomb changed the order of things for his father, who “admired the sky for its precision... He repaired watches”,¹ throwing Jon’s now outmoded set of mechanical interlocking cogs and gears out the window. Watches

³¹ Moore and Gibbons 1986: 8.14. 5-6

³² *ibid.*: 12.20.8-9

³³ *ibid.*: 12.21.1-2

³⁴ *ibid.*: 6.10.3

³⁵ *ibid.*: 1.23.7

¹ *ibid.*: 4.2.3

and watchmakers are as obsolete as the car mechanics, such as Hollis Mason. However, in his omniscience and apprehension of past, present and future as simultaneous events, orders with their own (“fearful”) symmetry and beauty, Dr. Manhattan has become the watchmaker he dreamed of becoming. It is a broken watch which leads to his accident; Dali’s clock from *Persistence of Memory* later adorns his quarters. The passages when he is on Mars break away from the uniform nine-panel grid to better encompass all he surveys in panoramic shots.

Dr. Manhattan’s perception of time as simultaneous and present in the design of things, visible in every facet, recalls chaos theory, in which despite the evident turbulence, an accountable system of operation may be inferred. The analogue is also to the reading of comics, in which the frames are already laid out across the pages, and may be accessed randomly or at will. The apprehension of the plotting of the action in discrete units - panels - recalls the photograph Jon holds in Chapter 4, which instigates the telling of his origin, his becoming, via flashbacks. His perception of time and space as simultaneous reflects the syntagmatic arrangement of panels in the comic as also simultaneous. That is, it undermines the narrative thrust of sequentiality and accelerated progress mentioned earlier in reference to the countdown of the doomsday clock.

As the instigator of the crime, Veidt also demonstrates a privileged perspective. Whereas Dr. Manhattan is a disinterested observer, Veidt is the agent of action and change. His view of the drama is symbolised by the banks of screens in front of which he sits - “Just me and the world”² - which broadcast simultaneously the world’s “information in its most concentrated form.”³ He decodes the cut-up information - he reads the “subtext” and the “juxtaposition” of the images.

Chapter 11 opens with a white space panel, Veidt’s speech balloon merely stating “observation”. Again, the ironic counterpoint of the caption to the scene suggests both

² *ibid.*: 10.8.4

³ *ibid.*: 10.7.6

blindness and transparency. His commentary on this page is a manifesto of postmodern
visuality as a hermeneutic:

Multi-screen viewing is seemingly anticipated by Burrough's cut-up technique. He suggested re-arranging words and images to evade rational analysis, allowing subliminal hints of the future to leak through... Perceptually, this simultaneous input engages me like the equivalent of an abstract or impressionist painting... Phosphor dot swirls juxtapose; meanings coalesce from semiotic chaos before reverting to incoherence. Transient and elusive, these must be grasped quickly... music channels process information blips, avoiding linear presentation, implying limitless personal choice... These reference points established, an emergent worldview becomes gradually discernible amidst the media's white noise.⁴

As Dolar confirms, "[O]ne sees either too much or not enough. Or rather: one sees too much and not enough at the same time... seeing too much entails blindness, the opacity of vision."⁵

Veidt's Utopian imagination is "a crucial test of what is left of our capacity to imagine change at all" ⁶ A remnant of the '60's coalition of superheroes, and therefore a "compensation for their political failure",⁷ Veidt's simulated invasion by a '50's space monster acknowledges the gap between the synoptic visuality of his terminals and screens, "a geography of simultaneous relations and meanings that are tied together by a spatial rather than a temporal logic",⁸ the quantum of Dr. Manhattan's scopic activity, and the inadequate interpretive gestures of the newsvendor.

There is no fixed ontology in postmodern fiction. There is no singular moderating consciousness, there is no depth model - there is but a decentred zone, in McHale's sense

⁴ Moore and Gibbons 1986: 11.1

⁵ Dolar 1992: 144

⁶ Jameson 1991: xv1

⁷ *ibid.*: xv1

⁸ Soja 1989: 1

of “the site of ontological shifts”.⁹ Every character in *Watchmen* is a paranoid reader-critic, a decoder of signs. The environment of *Watchmen* is littered with signs and symbols which are either unheeded or misread, and which operate within a system which escalates the rate of proliferation and manner of quotation. Signs not only always also mean something else, but are quoted in other signs, leading to what Eco calls the “[interpretation of] the images as signs of other signs.”¹⁰ The signs are variously literal; metaphorical; analogical; and structural. Individual panels and sequences - edits and cuts - are at once delimited and active. It is the ‘divine’ reader who is privy to the network of signs and symbols.

Just as the city and environment of *Watchmen* is a place of constituent elements transformed into a practised space by the reading of the characters, so too is the book itself transformed from the orderly proper to the spatially mobile by the act of reading. *Watchmen* is routinely regarded as a ‘postmodern’ comic in the sense that it self-consciously references historical moments and motifs in the superhero genre. I would argue that it is just as responsive to the movement in comics from the single image to the grid and the panorama of, for example, *Nemo*, but that *Watchmen* intensifies the reading experience, the negotiation of the spaces between panels and between the pages. It registers postmodern scenic space - the clutter, the illegibility, the surface textuality - but provokes the modernist disruption of the rational grid in the mobilisation of the reader as textual walker.

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⁹ Bukatman 1993: 163

¹⁰ Eco 1982: 146

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Dr Spiros Xenos has been researching and writing on comics for over ten years. He has presented papers at international conferences and in Australia, and published articles in general and academic journals. He completed his PhD thesis on spatiality and comics in 2002. He is on the International Editorial Board of the International Journal of Comic Art.