

Watchmen and The Dark Knight Returns and the Legitimate Use of Force

Final Essay

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1 - Introduction

The archetype of the superhero was forever changed by two ground-breaking graphic novels: Frank Miller's *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns*, published in 1986, and Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons' *Watchmen*, published in 1986-1987. Both texts reject the traditional, often campy, conception of the superhero, in favour of darker, grittier alternate realities. These two texts, published in final years of the Cold War during the Reagan/Thatcher era, reflected not only the then current cultural and political realities, but also offered a critique of the legitimate use of force by the state. In his essay *Politics as a Vocation*, sociologist Max Weber proposed the theory that it is the state that possesses the monopoly of the legitimate use of physical force (Weber, 1968). This essay will seek to determine how both *The Dark Knight Returns* and *Watchmen* have sought to question the legitimacy of authority and the legitimate use of force, and consequently questioned the legitimacy of the use of force by the state in international relations.

This essay will begin by examining the use of fictional texts, particularly comic books, to explore issues of international relations. It will then consider the theme of the legitimate use of force within the context of vigilante justice in both texts. This section will focus particularly on the character of Rorschach in *Watchmen*, and Batman in *Dark Knight Returns*. This essay will continue by examining the themes of the legitimacy of authority and the legitimate use of force within the context of Cold War, as presented in both texts. In both texts, the United States is actively involved in an alternate version of the Cold War. This section of the text will examine the theme in two ways. Firstly, it will examine the use of superheroes as tools of the state. It will then specifically question the legitimacy of the actions of Dr. Manhattan generally in the Cold War, the Comedian in the Vietnam War, and Superman's use of force against Batman.

2 – International Relations and Pop Culture

To begin, it is relevant to examine the relationship between international relations and pop culture. Pop culture and international relations often act to influence one another. Fiction and pop culture are often heavily influenced by the political, cultural, and social context in which they were produced, and in turn, they are often produced in order to provoke a political response (Engbert and Spencer, 2009, pg. 91). Some works of pop culture blatantly challenge political boundaries or provide impassioned support of political causes. It is clear that those works are certainly representations of political realities. Even those works of pop culture which seem politically neutral on the surface, can in some way be viewed to be a representation of the current state of international relations, in that they endorse prevailing political practices and structures (Weldes, 2003, pg. 6-7).

The study of works of pop culture therefore presents an often under-explored means of examining politics, and more specifically international relations.

If we examine international relations more specifically in the context of super hero stories, it is possible to discern that stories concerning super heroes often reflect the cultural and political trends of the time in which they were published. Both *Watchmen* and *The Dark Knight Returns* were published at the end of the Cold War, during the Reagan and Thatcher administrations. These elements were arguably hugely influential on the themes presented by both texts. Though their representations of reality, both *Watchmen* and *Dark Knight Returns* raise critical questions regarding government authority and how coercion can be legitimately utilized (Spanakos, 2009, pg. 34).

In *Dark Knight Returns*, we are presented with a depiction of a Ronald Reagan who refuses to take a political stance regarding the Batman and who continues to delegate difficult political decisions to other levels of government. In *Watchmen*, there is a noted absence of Reagan, and instead Richard Nixon has been re-elected for a third term. In the text, the Moore and Gibbons only allude to Reagan's existence in the headlines of newspapers which are visible in the background of the comic's panels. On the second last page of the comic, we can note the ominous headline "RR to run in 88?" (Gibbons and Moore, 1986, Chapter 12, pg. 31). Reagan's absence in *Watchmen*, it has been argued, acts paradoxically to reinforce his presence in the reader's mind (Baurin, 2012, pg. 54). In both texts, Miller and Moore have presented critical depictions of the then present US government and US foreign relations, proving that "it is possible for pop culture to challenge the boundaries of common sense, to contest the taken-for-granted" (Weldes, 2003, pg. 6).

Dark Knight Returns and *Watchmen* are both able to present relevant reflections of the then state of international relations by means of the authors' uses of alternate realities. Both texts present very familiar, yet slightly different worlds. The alternate realities presented in these texts exist in what is clearly a timeline that is similar to reality, but a bifurcation has occurred, therefore diverging the alternate reality from actual reality (Baurin, 2012, pg. 46). This bifurcation acts as a fork in the historic timeline of reality, therefore creating a similar world, in which there are some fundamental differences. In the *Watchmen*, the critical junction in history is the appearance of super hero vigilantes, which in turn results in the United States' victory in Vietnam (Baurin, 2012, pg. 46). *Dark Knight Returns* presents a much more fictionalized alternate reality, though it is clear that the United States is engaged in the Cold War. It seems that the presence of Superman has differentiated

the Cold War in *Dark Knight Returns*, from the situation which occurred in reality.

In both texts, the differences in these alternate realities are highlighted and explained by means of media sources. In *Dark Knight Returns*, the story is narrated by a series of news broadcasts and television interviews. In *Watchmen*, as noted above, the backgrounds of the comic's panels are littered with newspapers, which display headlines that allow the reader to follow the political timeline. In this way, the media acts as a veritable “Greek chorus”, allowing the reader to understand the alternate realities presented in these texts (Morrisson, 2011, pg. 193). In utilizing this plot device, both Moore and Miller have provided critical commentary regarding the influence of the media on political issues.

3 – Vigilante Justice and the Legitimate Use of Force

In his text, *Super Heroes: A Modern Mythology*, author Richard Reynold traces a comprehensive portrait of the fundamental characteristics of the super hero genre by outlining seven basic 'laws' of the genre (Van Ness, 2010, pg. 119). In this outline, Reynolds' third law stipulates “[t]he hero's devotion to justice overrides even his devotion to the law” (Reynold, 1994, pg. 16). In both *Watchmen* and *Dark Knight Returns*, superheroes have been forced into retirement, forcing those who continue to fight crime to operate outside of the law. This section will focus particularly on the character of Rorschach in *Watchmen*, and Batman in *Dark Knight Returns*. Both characters, faced with the rampant criminality in their cities, are unable to comply with the government's orders, and disobey the law in order to ensure their own brand of justice. Though they are arguably ensuring justice, their actions are considered outside the scope of the legitimate use of force.

In *Watchmen*, the implementation of the Keene Act resulted in mandatory retirement for all of the masked vigilantes that composed the Watchmen. The character of Rorschach is the only member of the Watchmen that refused to retire. Rorschach has completely resisted the government's attempts to control the coercive capacity of superheroes, therefore placing him as the character that most challenges the concept of the legitimacy of state violence in *Watchmen* (Spanakos, 2009, pg. 35).

In *Watchmen*, Rorschach views the state as perpetually flawed, and as a result it is unable to properly execute the law or impose proper judgement or punishment (Spanakos, 2009, pg. 37-38). Rorschach therefore feels that it is his responsibility to uphold justice, or his version of justice, in order to maintain order in the city. Rorschach defies the law, and kills criminals, because he views

them as evil by nature, and therefore justice demands that they be killed, whereas the state would incarcerate and try to reform the criminal. He states, “Why does one death matter against so many? Because there is good and there is evil, and evil must be punished. Even in the face of Armageddon I shall not compromise in this”, (Gibbons and Moore, 1986, Chapter I, pg. 24). Above all else, Rorschach seeks justice by any means necessary, regardless of whether his actions and his violence are sanctioned by the state. By means of the Rorschach character, Moore and Gibbons present a vigilante that acts with non-state sanctioned violence, in order to protect the citizens of the city. Though Rorschach is often crude and violent, he displays devotion to justice that is unparalleled in this narrative.

In *Dark Knight Returns*, Miller presents the classic character of Batman as a vigilante. The Batman character exists in a reality in which the government is unable or unwilling to exercise its authority in order to protect the citizens of Gotham. The responsibility of protecting Gotham City therefore falls to Batman. Despite Batman's actions to ensure justice in Gotham City, he is both feared and revered by Gotham's citizens. On page 65, Miller illustrates these contrasting opinions of Batman, showing two individuals being interviewed regarding their opinions on Batman. On the one hand, the reader is presented with a citizen who views Batman as “[a] ruthless, monstrous vigilante, striking at the foundations of our democracy” and another who states that they are “surprised there aren't a hundred like him out there – a thousand people are fed up with terror – with stupid laws and social cowardice. He's only taking back what's ours” (Miller, 1986, pg. 65).

Batman's illegitimate and unlicensed use of force is contrasted, in *Dark Knight Returns*, by Superman's government sanctioned use of force both in Corto Maltese, and against Batman (Spanakos, 2008, pg. 56). Though Miller's Batman is keenly aware that his actions are not condoned by either the government, nor by many citizens of Gotham City, he acts in blatant defiance of the states attempts to control his actions as a vigilante. At a point in the comic, the American government turns to Superman, who acts essentially as their employee, to try to reason with Batman and to curtail his crime fighting. Batman rejects Superman's request, despite the fact that Superman warns that “[s]ooner or later, somebody's going to order me to bring you in, somebody with *authority*” (Miller, 1986, pg. 119). In refusing to yield at the request of the government, Batman truly dismisses legitimate state authority, in favour of his own conception of justice (Bundrick, 2011, pg. 36).

In both *Watchmen* and *Dark Knight Returns*, the authors are able to present two important and thought provoking characters that challenge the government's authority and use of force. The use of force sanctioned by the government in both texts, is often ineffective and unable to ensure that crime is controlled. Rorschach and Batman, despite their sometimes questionable conceptions of justice, reflect powerful symbols of justice, above the law.

4 – The Cold War and the Legitimate Use of Force

4.1 – Superheroes and Nuclear Dissuasion

The United States, in both *Watchmen* and *Dark Knight Returns*, is actively involved in the Cold War with the Soviet Union. In *Watchmen*, the United States is involved in a Cold War that appears similar to the real Cold War. In *Batman*, though the United States is involved in what appears to be the Cold War, the graphic novel emphasizes the Cold War conflict in the fictional Corto Maltese. In both texts, the authors present an alternate reality, in which the United States has been able to make use of super heroes, specifically Dr. Manhattan in *Watchmen*, and Superman in *Dark Knight Returns*, in order to establish their dominance in the conflict. Through the use of these two characters, Miller, and Gibbons and Moore are respectively able to present a reflection of the arms race that occurred during the Cold War.

Dr. Manhattan is the only member of the Watchmen who appears to display any actual superpowers. As the result of an accident, Dr. John Osterman was transformed into Dr. Manhattan, a super-being with the power to control all matter. Since his transformation into Dr. Manhattan, the United States government has utilized his unimaginable powers in order to dominate in international conflicts. In the text, a fictional publication about Dr. Manhattan's powers, states: “God exists, and he's American” (Gibbons and Moore, 1986, pg. II). This statement encompasses the power that the United States possesses as a result of their employment of Dr. Manhattan. The United States' militarization of Dr. Manhattan has afforded the US an immense technological and military advantage in the Cold War. This advantage has allowed the United States to “adopt a 'double standard' when it comes to its international behaviour, insisting that other nations behave in ways that it doesn't” (Robichaud, 2009, pg. 14). By employing this storyline, Moore and Gibbons have provided a thought-provoking analysis of the US foreign policy, drawing into question the legitimacy of the United States' actions in armed conflict.

Moore and Gibbons also heed an important warning with the character of Dr. Manhattan. Though the use of Dr. Manhattan's powers have allowed the US to essentially control the outcome of the Cold War, the plan backfires when Dr. Manhattan decides to leave earth because he is no longer interested in humanity. At this point, the Soviet's take the opportunity to invade Afghanistan, as the threat of Dr. Manhattan is no longer present and the US no longer poses a threat (Thomson, 2005, pg. 106). Moore and Gibbons have effectively questioned the legitimacy of the tactic of nuclear dissuasion. Within the text of *Watchmen* a report about Dr. Manhattan even states that though Dr. Manhattan has obviously acted as a powerful deterrent, it is a misconception to believe that this tactic will continue to work indefinitely. The text goes on to explain that in fact, the Soviets will most likely not continue living in fear of the US and Dr. Manhattan, as the option of mutually assured destruction is at their disposal (Gibbons and Moore, 1986, pg. III). Even by employing the name 'Dr. Manhattan', Moore and Gibbons have ominously alluded to the Manhattan Project, the United States' project to develop the atomic bomb (Van Ness, 2010, pg. 115).

In *Dark Knight Returns*, the character of Superman is similarly employed by Miller to question the legitimacy of the United States' foreign policy during the Cold War. In this text, Superman has also been employed at the disposal of the United States government. Throughout the text, Miller portrays Superman as a sort of government stooge, who is called upon to do the bidding of President Ronald Reagan (Morrisson, 2011, pg. 194). When the United States intervenes into the fictional fascist state of Corto Maltese, it is Superman that the United States employs as its primary weapon. In the panels on pages 135-139, Miller illustrates Superman engaged in armed combat in Corto Maltese. In these panels, the reader sees dead bodies strewn across the ground, Superman exploding a tank, and then sinking a naval aircraft carrier (Miller, 1986, pg. 135-139). It is clear that the United States has been able to utilize Superman in order to dominate the conflict.

The Superman character is utilized by Miller to draw into question the actions of the United States during the Cold War, in a fashion that is very similar to Moore and Gibbons' use of Dr. Manhattan in *Watchmen*. The character of Superman is even, similar to Dr. Manhattan, referred to as 'God', when President Reagan states in a news address, "don't fret...we've got God on our side...or the next best thing, anyway" (Miller, 1986, pg. 119). In *Dark Knight Returns*, Superman is actually used as a defence in what is thought to be a nuclear attack. When the Soviet's launch a warhead towards the United States, Superman is employed to divert the missile away from the US. In this way, Miller has truly utilized the character of Superman to provide a critical reflection of the

arms race that occurred between the US and the USSR during the Cold War.

In both *Watchmen* and *Dark Knight Returns*, the respective authors make use of the characters of Superman and Dr. Manhattan in order to provide critical illustrations of the arms race conflict during the Cold War. In utilizing the unimaginable powers of super beings, the United States has clearly established their dominance in the conflict. By employing these storylines, the authors have effectively questioned the authority and the legitimacy of the United States' actions, particularly because the US has adopted a double standard when it comes to its behaviour in the conflict. In both texts, the authors present negative consequences to the United States' foreign policy choices. In *Watchmen*, Moore and Gibbons illustrate that despite the use of Dr. Manhattan, the US is still vulnerable in the conflict. In *Dark Knight Returns*, though Superman is able to divert the blast of the Soviet missile, Gotham City is still affected by an electromagnetic pulse, plummeting the city into darkness and inviting chaos.

4.2 – The Legitimacy of Superheroes' Use of State Sanctioned Force

In both *Watchmen* and *Dark Knight Returns*, the respective authors further draw into question the authority of the US government and the legitimacy of its use of force. This is achieved by the questionable actions and motivations of the characters that are employed by the government, specifically Dr. Manhattan and the Comedian in *Watchmen*, and Superman in *Dark Knight Returns*.

In *Watchmen*, Moore and Gibbons draw into question the legitimacy of force, by means of the character of Dr. Manhattan. Once human, Dr. Manhattan has since lost all interest in humanity and his emotional connection to humans has dissipated (Van Ness, 2010, pg. 166). This is illustrated by Dr. Manhattan's reaction when he is informed of the death of his fellow Watchman, the Comedian. Upon hearing of the Comedian's murder, Dr. Manhattan states “[a] live body and a dead body contain the same number of particles. Structurally, there's not discernible difference. Life and death are unquantifiable abstracts. Why should I be concerned?” (Gibbons and Moore, Chapter I, pg. 21). Though Dr. Manhattan clearly no longer has any clear attachment to or interest in humanity, he is called upon by the United States government to engage in armed conflict. Dr. Manhattan acts to end the Vietnam War, though he does so with little concern for or attachment to the lives he has saved or taken. Employed by the state, this draws into question the legitimacy of the government's use of force in these conflicts (Spanakos, 2009, pg. 36).

In *Watchmen*, the United States government also employs the services of Edward Blake, known as the Comedian, another ex-Watchman, to fight during the Vietnam War. The actions of the Comedian in the Vietnam War are portrayed by Moore and Gibbons as violent, arbitrary, and amoral. In one panel, the Comedian can be observed shooting a Vietnamese woman that he impregnated (Gibbons and Moore, 1986, Chapter II, pg. 14-15), in another, the reader sees an image of him with an evil grin, armed with a flame-thrower amid charred structures and bodies (Gibbons and Moore, 1986, Chapter IV, pg. 19). Dr. Manhattan described the Comedian in a flashback. He states,

“Blake is interesting. I have never met anyone so deliberately amoral. He suits the climate here: the madness, the pointless butchery...As I come to understand Vietnam and what it implies about the human condition, I also realize that few humans will permit themselves such an understanding. Blake's different. He understands perfectly...and he doesn't care” (Gibbons and Moore, 1986, Chapter IV, pg. 19).

By utilizing the character of the Comedian, Moore and Gibbons have further drawn into question the legitimacy of the state's use of violence. The Comedian is an actor of the US government, though it is clear that he has acted with unreasonable and incredible violence. The Comedian can therefore be considered a metaphor, utilized to denounce political violence and oppression (Baurin, 2012, pg. 54).

The character of Superman in *Dark Knight Returns*, is used by Miller to question the legitimacy of the use of force by the United States government. It is clear that Superman and Batman represent radically different perspectives on justice and order. Though Batman is clearly acting in order to protect the citizens of Gotham City and preserve order and justice, the government, and therefore Superman, clearly oppose Batman's vigilante actions. Despite his amicable relationship with Batman, it is clear that Superman has no misgivings as to his support for the US government (Spanakos, 2008, pg. 56-57).

In presenting Superman as a soldier of the US government, prepared to do its bidding, Miller has drawn Superman as Reagan's pawn, bringing into question the legitimacy of his use of force against Batman. Superman is presented as a sell out, willing to appease the President, or anyone with a badge or a flag (Miller, 1986, pg. 190). In their final battle, Batman says to Superman, “You sold out Clark. You gave them the power that should have been ours... We could have changed the world, now look at us. I've become a political liability, and you...you're a joke”

(Miller, 1986, pg. 192-194). Miller has effectively forced the reader to question the legitimacy of Superman's use of force and his unquestioning adherence to the US government's order.

5 – Conclusion

Miller's *Dark Knight Returns* and Moore and Gibbons' *Watchmen* effectively revolutionized the superhero genre. With gritty portrayals of alternate realities, these texts have numerous parallels, which draw into question the authority and the legitimacy of the use of physical force by the state, specifically the United States government during the Cold War. Providing critical reflections of the atmosphere of the end of the Cold War and the Reagan and Thatcher administrations, these works of pop culture were able to effectively bring into question the use of force by the state in international relations.

In both texts, the presence of unrelenting vigilantes provided a critical questioning of state's ability to ensure the maintenance of order and justice. By illustrating characters that employed force that was not sanctioned by the state in order to achieve justice, the respective authors brought into question what truly constitutes a “legitimate” use of force.

Both *Watchmen* and *Dark Knight Returns* further posed critical reflections on the question of the legitimate use of physical force through US government's use of super heroes in armed conflicts in both texts. In presenting the state's use of Dr. Manhattan and Superman essentially as arms in the Cold War arms race, Miller, and Moore and Gibbons provided a critical analysis of the United States government's foreign policies, in which they adopted a double standard in their international behaviour. In employing this strategic advantage, the United States established a double standard, in that it insisted that other nations behave in ways that it would not (Robichaud, 2009, pg. 14).

Finally, the authors also questioned the legitimacy of the state's use of violence, by means of illustrating the government-employed superheroes as either amoral or unquestioning pawns of the state. In *Watchmen*, Moore and Gibbons present Dr. Manhattan as a soldier uninterested in the fate of humanity and the Comedian as brutal and violent murderer. In *Dark Knight Returns*, Miller illustrates Superman as a golden boy, prepared to act without question, for the US government. Though these three characters use force that is sanctioned by the state, their motivations and actions are clearly questionable, therefore forcing the reader to question the legitimacy of the state's use of violence.

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