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DIPLOMARBEIT

Titel der Magisterarbeit

"Why We Want to be Watchmen:
Aesthetic Illusion and the Antihero in Graphic Novels"

Verfasserin

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angestrebter akademischer Grad

Magistra der Philosophie (Mag.phil.)

Wien, 2011

Studienkennzahl lt. Studienblatt:

A 343

Studienrichtung lt. Studienblatt:

Diplomstudium Anglistik und Amerikanistik

Betreuerin:

Ao. Univ.-Prof. Mag. Dr. Eva Müller-Zettelmann

Acknowledgements

Foremost, I would like to thank my parents for supporting me in everything I attempt. I do not know what I would do without you.

Many thanks go out to my friends and teammates who had to listen to my complaining. Special thanks to Valentina Hornek for the motivation and friendship, and to Alexander Grois for technical and emotional support. Thanks also go to Gabriele Gstöttinger for proof reading and much appreciated suggestions.

Last but not least, my thanks also go to Professor Eva Müller-Zettelmann for quick responses and valuable feedback.

Thank you!

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EVEY. I'm nobody. Nobody special. Not like you.

*V. Everybody is special. Everybody. Everybody is a hero, a lover, a fool, a villain.
Everybody. (Moore, Lloyd 26)*

1. Introduction

‘Adolescence’, ‘violence’, ‘sex’, ‘cheap story lines’, ‘adults with an abnormal social life’, ‘men in tights and capes’, ‘superficial’ – a decade ago, these words would not have been unlikely to come to the mind of the average person on hearing the word “comic”. When asked about “graphic novels” many would have had no associations at all (and some still do not). Luckily, times have changed and reading a book that contains pictures *and* words is neither culturally nor socially unacceptable anymore. Bookshops now offer graphic novels next to prose novels, some of the most successful movies of the past years have been adoptions of comic books, and one graphic novel even won the Pulitzer Prize¹. Yet, this does not mean that graphic novels are commonly accepted or even commonly known. What it does show, though, is a shift in attitude towards “graphic language”². It is exactly this shift that laid the groundwork for this thesis, as it led to the simple question *why have comic books suddenly become so successful?* The reasons are numerous and root in the medium and the artists themselves, as well as in political and cultural change. It is not the purpose of this thesis to research and explain the complicated cultural movements involved in the “growing up” (a controversial phrase used by some critics) of comics, but to find an answer to the question: *Why do readers feel drawn into the worlds of the medium comic lately?*

What manifested itself after some research were three points: Firstly, the fact that part of what is so intriguing about comics is not new at all, and not even exclusive to the comics medium: immersion. The simple pleasure of losing oneself in a piece of art has been around for as long as humans have felt the need to escape from their daily life. Art and literature both have different ways of creating this effect of aesthetic illusion, but only on either a visual or a linguistic level. Comics, quite obviously, can use these principles on *two* layers at the *same* time, supporting “each other like two imperfect mirrors that face and reflect upon each other” (Saklofske 20). This leads to the simple assumption that comics must have a higher potential

¹ *Maus* by Art Spiegelman

² The term is borrowed from Versaci Rocco’s *This Book contains Graphic Language: Comics as Literature*

for aesthetic illusion. Secondly, there has been a shift in the perception and portrayal of superheroes in comics. Instead of classic superhero characters, darker, more troubled protagonists who are still ‘super’, but whose antiheroic qualities have gained the upper hand, have become popular. For lack of a better term these new ‘heroes’ will be called ‘anti-superheroes’, showing their relation to both antiheroes and superheroes, whilst not quite fitting either category. Parallel to this development, the form of the graphic novel has emerged inside the medium comic. Thirdly, no other medium has been as closely associated with a specific genre as comics have been with superheroes. Subsequently the same can be said for graphic novels and anti-superheroes. While the scope of issues treated in comics has long outgrown its old ‘superheroic’ boundaries, the anti-superhero genre still seems tied to graphic novels. It therefore stands to reason that particular features of the narrative form cater to the needs of anti-superhero stories.

These findings have led to the question this thesis will try to answer in the affirmative: *Are graphic novels better qualified to tell anti-superhero stories than other media?*

The thesis is roughly split in three parts: the first one is introductory, the second one more theoretical, and the third one more practical.

Following Lewis Carroll’s advice to “begin at the beginning” (142), the first part of the thesis will present a basic overview and framework that the narrative theories can be applied to. The first chapters are concerned with presenting the essential definitions and distinctions necessary to move further into the subject matter, such as the comic – graphic novel differentiation and the above mentioned superhero – antihero divide, as well as a brief review of the emergence and growth of the comic medium. In addition, one subchapter will introduce Frank Miller and Alan Moore along with their graphic novels *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns*, *V for Vendetta*, and *Watchmen*. These three graphic novels will form the basis of an illustrative analysis of the concepts.

The second part aims at introducing narratological theories, relating them to the framework introduced in the first part, and applying them to the novels. The third chapter shows general theories on aesthetic illusion and then focuses on its application in literature. The principles in the discussion of classic narrative will then be applied to comics in general and graphic novels in particular, as well as to the three books. The fourth chapter will go back to the medium of

comics and analyze the way they work. In order to prove the basic assumption that comics have a higher immersive potential because of their combination of images and words, this will be of special importance here.

The third part will bring all theories together and apply them to a scene from one of the books for a thorough analysis. This will portray the necessity of interplay between the different concepts in order to fully make sense of this form of comics.

Only by understanding each corner of the triangle (anti-heroes - aesthetic illusion – graphic novels) as well as each side (the relationship between them) can we come to a sophisticated conclusion and show the huge potential of this long-underestimated medium, in which masked misanthropes try to save the world from itself while losing control over themselves.^{3 4}

2. Essentials

Aesthetic illusion and the *antihero* in *graphic novels* - the subtitle of this thesis contains three terms that need to be clarified: While aesthetic illusion in all its different manifestations is the topic of the third chapter, this chapter aims to clarify the other two terms, defining graphic novel and antihero. For this purpose it seems necessary to look briefly at the developments in the comics industry, especially from the “magic” year 1986 onwards. During this year, often seen as the biggest milestone in this medium in the past 50 years, two of the books discussed in this thesis were published and had an immense and lasting impact on the depiction of superheroes in comics. Therefore, it seems legitimate to introduce Frank Miller and Alan Moore and their work to demonstrate the medium’s versatility and the creativity of its artists. Furthermore, their impact on the classic masked hero will be discussed in order to define what the term antihero represents in this context. As there can be no function without a form, the development of the graphic novel and its distinction from its parent comic is the foundation the thesis is built on. In order to trace back the medium comic to its beginnings, it is necessary to first define the term. This will be the beginning of the journey into the universe of Evey, Rorschach, and Bruce Wayne.

³When using quotes from any of the primary sources (Scott McCloud’s books included), I have left out the three full stops typical for connecting speech bubbles in comics in order to enhance readability. I have applied correct capitalization where necessary. Quotes from *Watchmen* are given in the format chapter number, page number, as there are no continuous page numbers. The sections containing Hollis Mason’s fictional autobiography only contain the page numbers in the autobiography, so I have continued to count them as normal page numbers.

⁴ I will refer to the reader and author in a masculine form for reasons of readability. Hence, any references such as “him”, “he”, “his” etc are to be read as “him/her”, “he/she”, “his/her” etc.

2.1. From caricatures to animated movies – What are comics; what are graphic novels?

As straightforward as these questions may seem, different scholars have answered them differently. The opinions on the extension of both terms vary and naturally affect the number of potential historical documents to qualify as parts, or at least precursors of the medium. Therefore, I will look at the terms separately, beginning with the older and more general term comic.

2.1.1. Comic

Most people probably connect titles such as *Uncle Scrooge*, *Garfield*, or *Lucky Luke* to the term comic, some may associate it with the caricatures seen in newspapers, others may include animated series like the *Duck Tales* in the definition; and there are certainly arguments for and against including the different forms in a general definition of the medium. Hence, it seems necessary to investigate defining characteristics in order to place the term in the broader context of narrative forms.

The first person to tackle this subject was Will Eisner, a comic artist himself as well as a teacher, comic theorist, and generally a shining figure on the comic horizon. He coined the term *sequential art*, which formed the basis of further investigation in the matter and already somewhat narrowed the field. Schüwer also pointed out the importance of sequentiality:

Spezifisch für die Comics ist zunächst die Koordinierung von starren Bildern, sogenannten *panels*, zu einer linearen Sequenz, aber auch zu simultan als *tabularische Gesamtstruktur* wahrnehmbaren Comicseiten. (Schüwer, *Erzählen* 188)

As a sequence naturally consists of more than one drawing, it eliminates the one-panel caricatures often seen in newspapers, but also (instructive) signs that use “cartoony” characters. This exclusion of single panel drawings from the definition of the comic is a point that has attracted some criticism, as some feel this exclusion to be unjustified (Schüwer, *Wie Comics* 7). It already becomes clear how much more difficult the question is to answer than it seemed at first sight. Criticizing Eisner’s definition, Scott McCloud states, that his assessment does not comment on “style, quality, or subject matter” (*Understanding* 5), a point which is highly important for reaching a term with a broad scope of application. Based on the criterion

of *sequential art*, McCloud then specifies the term, excluding, amongst others, animated film, and reaches a definition that nevertheless remains quite broad: “Juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence, intended to convey information and/or to produce an aesthetic response in the viewer” (*Understanding* 9). Although widely accepted, it is by no means agreed upon without controversy from those seeking a more precise definition.

As mentioned above, reaching an agreement on the term is necessary to allocate a spot in the universe of *narrative* forms. This already alludes to the fact that plain instructional drawings, which would be included according to McCloud’s definition, would fall out of the scheme if the narratological component was to be an important criteria, a view a number of scholars with the aim to a narrower definition hold.

What seems to be even more problematic is the omission of a clear statement concerning the combination of text and image, as this interaction seems to be the central characteristic of the medium. In fact, it is the essential component that makes comics not just a subgenre of either narrative or visual art, but constitutes it as a medium of its own. As Douglas Wolk argues, “the most thoroughly ingrained error in the language used to discuss comics is treating them as if they were particularly weird, or failed, examples of another medium altogether” (13). While Eisner considered them a “literary form”, Wolk follows Samuel Delany’s term “paraliterary”, which “is useful here, if clunky: comics are sort of literary” (ibid 14). Of course this does not mean every panel has to consist of both text and image, a “silent” panel (or panels) can also create an interesting effect, yet the overall impression of a hybrid usage has to be sustained. Obviously this characteristic has very fuzzy boundaries. Would, for example, a page containing nine panels be included if only one of them contained words? Furthermore, this defining feature would exclude some of Charles Schultz’s classic *Peanut* strips that contain brilliant drawings, yet omit their verbal counterpart.

A more easily dismissible feature is the possibility of mass-medial reproduction or even circulation (Schüwer, *Wie Comics* 7). The latter would just impose unnecessary and unjust restrictions on the medium that have no counterpart in music, literature, or any other medium. A poem would also be considered a poem if it was not part of John Doe’s library. The former begs the question which works would be excluded from the definition if the possibility of mass-medial reproduction was to be considered a necessary characteristic. Big-scale drawings as in wall paintings or pop-art paintings using word balloons (in the manner of Roy

Lichtenstein) would be the sole candidates not affected by this restriction (Schüwer, *Wie Comics* 7). Yet, as long as these works fulfill the other criteria (sequentiality in particular), the narrowing of the medium seems simply a way to limit its historical potential. Another, clearly erroneous, argument is “a continuing cast of characters from one sequence to the next” (Horn qtd. in Schüwer, *Wie Comics* 7), which would exclude any narrative that consists of different, not superficially related, sequences with different *dramatis personae*. It is obvious that this criterion would make more complex storylines impossible, and should therefore be dismissed.

Further criticism of McCloud’s definition comes from Dylan Horrocks, who sees the sequentiality of images as a metaphor which highlights the medium’s viscosity. At the same time it leaves out important aspects, such as comics functioning as a “cultural idiom, [...] a publishing genre, [...] a set of narrative conventions, [...] a kind of writing that uses words and pictures, [...] a literary genre, [...] [and as] texts” (5).

To begin with, it seems problematic to read a definition as a metaphor, as this would open Pandora’s box: If every definition is a metaphor, wouldn’t this imply that almost any utterance (leave alone language as a system) is a metaphor? While this leads far away from the topic, the basic approach is interesting, especially in a medium with such a high metaphorical potential. To return to the topic: Horrocks rightly observes the different functions comics have in (publishing) culture, but attacks McCloud’s “essentialist conception” for putting form before content. Yet, he ignores the fact that McCloud does not degrade these other functions, his book is simply concerned with formal rather than the cultural characteristics.

Interestingly, while most theorists mention text as an integral part of the medium, they focus primarily on its narrative ability. This ignores the fact that words can also be used to imitate sounds, which plays an especially prominent role in a medium that is visual and textual:

Bildgeschichte meint die mehr oder weniger umfangreiche Folge narrative (erzählender) Bilder, die inhaltlich und kompositorisch eine Einheit bilden und dabei mit Schriftinformationen als Beibext, Sprache oder Geräusch verbunden sein können. (Grünwald 33)

What becomes clear from this brief introduction into what should be a fairly easy definition - after all “comic” is not a hard-to-grasp metaphysical concept, or philosophical thought experiment - is that there is a vast number of unanswered, and maybe ultimately unanswerable, questions. It is exactly the medium’s universality and popularity that causes the

problem: As literally everyone has read a comic at one time in their lives, everyone has a notion as to what it is. Hence, for the writer of an academic work a dichotomy arises between creating a definition necessary for further academic work, and the desire to acknowledge every opinion, especially due to the fact that almost any of the mentioned characteristics can be argued for as easily as argued against.

To realize this, one merely has to look at any of the features discussed above, for example the narratological component: On the one hand, it would seem incorrect to exclude technical or instructional manuals that use cartoony characters and speech bubbles to bring their message across, for the simple reason that they do not tell a story (this would also concern McCloud's works). Eisner, for example, separated sequential art in entertainment and instruction, with technical instruction and attitudinal instruction comics as a subcategory of the latter (Wikipedia Sequential Art). On the other hand, comparing a flight safety manual to a 300 page graphic novel seems odd as well. Another angle might be to find a solution by differentiation between instructions in which each panel simply shows a different reaction to different causes and those in which step-by-step instructions "tell" a story. While each view is justifiable, what becomes clear is that the only true characteristic of the term 'comic', is its gradability.

It follows, that the only way to come to a definition, is to acknowledge the existence of a flexible system with a firm base, one in which certain characteristics, some more important, some less, are contrasted. It follows that each work must be analyzed individually to render a judgment about its comic status. While sequentiality is the non-gradable key concept, the "major categories" (combination of words and images, the narratological component) have to be weighed against each other. The controversial 'minor categories' (such as mass-mediality and a continuing cast of characters) can act as further proof in either way, yet cannot solely be the ground for a decision. What Schüwer terms the "specific traditions of the medium", can also be seen as part of the major categories:

In der Formensprache der Comics hat sich diese Tradition vor allem in zweierlei Hinsicht niedergeschlagen: Sofern verbale Sprache verwendet wird, wird sie nicht vom Bild getrennt, sondern auch formal eng mit ihm verknüpft; und gegenüber der ‚weiten Bildfolge‘, die [...] Bilder nutzt die zeitlich weit auseinander liegen, tritt die ‚enge Bildfolge‘ in den Vordergrund“. (*Wie Comics* 10)

This model provides for a possibly very wide term 'comic' that, depending on its user, might not always lead to the same results. Yet, while focusing on the medium's main elements, it leaves room to stretch the borders, so as to include the afore mentioned dialogue-less *Peanut*

strips (they tell stories adhering to the principle of the “enge Bildfolge”, they are created for mass-medial reproduction, they have a continuing cast of characters), and story-less informative works, such as McCloud’s theoretical comics (they use word and image together, are created for mass-medial reproduction, they have one recurring character).

2.1.2. Graphic novel

As the prevalent mixing of the terms comic and graphic novel in the introduction suggests, there is no clear-cut distinction between the two, a point that is not very surprising when considering the difficulty in defining the more general and better known term comic in the last chapter. Yet, just as the diversity and popularity of comics results in an unmanageable number of opinions, the fact that graphic novels are less known, is an advantage. Unfortunately, this does not mean that there is a clear definition and a clear line separating it from comics. Some even argue that defining graphic novels is an even more difficult task than defining comics (see Groensteen in Nurbachs).

Once again, when studying the development of the term, a recurring name appears: Will Eisner. Although he did not invent the term, his 1978 book, actually a collection of short stories (McCloud, *Erfinden* 32), *A Contract with God and Other Tenement Stories* is often referred to as the first graphic novel.

The origins of the term are slightly murky – it seems to have been first used in the ‘60s as a name for a *potential* ‘higher’ form of comics and it was popularized by Will Eisner’s 1978 book [...] (Wolk 61)

[It] was a stand-alone book [...]. It wasn’t serialized, it didn’t belong to any particular genre, it didn’t look like either mainstream comics or ‘underground comix,’ and the cover [...] was captioned ‘a graphic novel by Will Eisner.’” (ibid 171)

What was it that made this book so different, so special, the beginning of something new? One answer may be the different format, namely a book, no longer a magazine, containing a longer story (or in Eisner’s case several) and aimed at sale in book stores rather than the newsstand. Another approach is connected to the audience. As David Lloyd states in the preamble of *V for Vendetta*: “There aren’t many cheeky, cheery characters in V FOR VENDETTA either; and it’s for people who don’t switch off the news.” In other words, these books are made for adults, not children, who are knowledgeable and mature enough to read about catastrophes and are not looking for an easy or carefree pleasure. This is also supported by the note “suggested for mature readers” on *V for Vendetta*’s back cover, or by using

Stephen King as a spoiler on *Batman TDKR*. It also renders a judgment about the topics that are depicted in this “new” medium, suggesting that it primarily deals with tragic or shocking subject matter. Yet, although most graphic novels indeed deal with serious matters, this should not be considered as a defining characteristic of graphic novels.

When keeping in mind McCloud’s definition (as well as the one used for the purpose of this thesis) that strictly relies on formal points, hence excluding any content or style related feature, graphic novels have to be considered as comics (narration, words and image, sequentiality). In other words, graphic novels are a subcategory of the comic medium. Yet, in order to distinguish them from other subcategories, it is necessary to develop a more detailed definition that focuses on style and content.

Before venturing further into the audience- or content-centered approach to distinguish between comics and graphic novels, there are two formal features that need to be investigated, namely length and drawing style. As Douglas Wolk states at the beginning of *Reading Comics*, “what I’m going to be discussing [...] is actually a subset of comics [...] I’m mostly interested in *sustained* narrative, which means comic books and graphic novels”. (18, emphasis added) In other words, a feature of graphic novels is a certain size or page count. Just as the line between a novella and a short novel is not clearly defined (or at least not undisputable), the line between a graphic novel and a short story in the style of a graphic novel (maybe the term ‘graphic novella’ would be an option here), is not clear. It has been argued that the term novel excludes shorter works, as well as implying that longer works have the privilege to be considered as serious works (Wolk 61). While the latter interpretation of the term seems simply unjustified (after all, comparing it to literature again, no one would think Hemingway’s short stories to be any less serious than his novels), the former is correct and should not be used as an argument against the term or its definition as sustained narrative. What is overlooked when taking this line of argumentation, is the fact that the reason for and natural result of creating categories, is the inclusion of some and exclusion of other works. Even though length might not be the most accurate distinctive feature and it is certainly too easy to see graphic novels as “essentially book-length comics” (Jensen), it should nevertheless act as a guideline. This still leaves a broad field, but excludes very short works from its field of application.

The second aspect of the formal distinction, the drawing style, is closely connected to the content-centered approach. As words and images normally complete or support each other, the style of the images is at least partly influenced by the content of the narrative. It could, of course, be argued that the drawing style might just as well influence the story, yet while this may be possible, most of the time it is the other way round. Alan Moore, for example, is known to send very thorough scripts to his illustrators including a multitude of details concerning each panel. This semi-formal, semi-content based feature will therefore act as a link between the two categories. It poses the need to investigate the aspects concerned with content. Without anticipating the next chapter in too much detail, this will be done by looking at the development of the genre after Eisner's 'first' graphic novel appeared in 1978.

As mentioned in the introduction, the year 1986 was an important year for the comic industry, as it saw three groundbreaking new works, two of which will be discussed in further detail. The one that probably had the biggest impact on the general perception of comics and the development of graphic novels in particular, was *Maus* by Art Spiegelman. The author tells his father's experiences during the Holocaust, depicting Jews as mice and Nazis as cats. Yet, "the further the story develops, the more complicated the metaphors become. Then suddenly Spiegelman turns his own subliminal symbolism into the topic of the story. The mice characters become humans with mice masks [...] and the story enlaces itself in self-referential strains. Text and subtext are interwoven in the visual metaphors" (McCloud, *Making* 37, my translation). The images are strictly black and white with a focus on simplicity, slightly resembling woodcuts. Comics suddenly had an acknowledged serious side to them, and the book gained an even higher profile when winning the Pulitzer Prize, "demonstrat[ing] that gravitas and the graphic arts were not mutually exclusive". (Mahr)

The two other books, while not engaging in such an obviously sensitive issue, have had an equally important role in the internal development of the graphic novel, and especially in the development of the antihero. While *Maus* opened up the former unwritten genre borders that confined the comic to mostly superhero fiction, *Watchmen* and *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns* changed the parameters of the superhero genre itself, maintaining a certain equal level of seriousness that connects them so closely to Spiegelman's work.

Frank Miller's new *Batman*, broke the prevalent "good guy" image that had been part of this '40s character for decades. A new dark side of the hero appeared:

The Dark Knight Returns, a four-issue miniseries published in 1986 [...] [that] tipped over most of the superhero clichés within kicking distance and extrapolated adult psychological complexity from forty-five years' worth of Batman stories [...]. Miller treated Batman as a sort of benign psychopath [...]. The standard phrase used to describe *TDKR* and the comics that followed its example was 'grim and gritty' [...]. The book's mood is dark and brutal, and Batman's interior monologue couldn't get any grimmer [...]. Still, *TDKR* is larded with comedy, if rather black and sour comedy: any character who isn't either a hero or a bastard is an object of ridicule. (Wolk pp174)

The story of a "benign psychopath" in a book that relies on a melancholy and apocalyptical mood cannot make use of the drawing style of traditional superhero narratives. Instead, a "stylistic distinctiveness and sense of design" lead to "hard-angled vectors [...] jerking everything into crinkly forms, decorated with tiny, eccentric lines" (Wolk 175). Although some of the features of the classical superhero drawings (for example the exaggerated physique) are maintained, the schematic yet unusually hard lines bring forth something new stylistically, which corresponds with the new mood of the character. "The message was that this was no floppy little ordinary monthly funnybook" (ibid 176).

In a similar yet different manner to Miller's work, *Watchmen* takes up the superhero image, dismantles it, and puts it back together upside down. It is similar because its superheroes are no longer the well beloved stars they used to be, but rather outcasts, psychopaths, or both. It is different because, while Batman is still bound to Gotham City and has four decades of stories that are in the back of the readers' minds, Moore's account takes place on a much grander scale with a cast of characters who are, albeit representing spin offs of earlier comics, quite original in his interpretation. Again, a grim apocalyptical mood sets the pace for a book in which the assignment of good and evil in the conflicts is not always possible and the one true superhero becomes utterly bored with humanity and its problems. Dave Gibbons painted with "a particular weight of line, using a hard, stiff pen that didn't have much modulation in terms of thick and thin [and] would differentiate it from the usual lush, fluid kind of comic book line" (Gibbons qtd. in Salisbury 80). Hence, even though the drawings are not as "grim" as with Miller, there is a definite tendency of *Watchmen* to separate itself from the former superhero fiction. What is especially striking in the art is the richness in detail as well as the gruesome scenes it depicts. And while this does not qualify as drawing style, it does show that the style is distinct enough to allow for apocalyptical scenes to appear real enough for the reader to be shocked, if not disgusted.

The groundwork that was laid by these three books influenced the industry in the decades to come. They broke thematic borders on the outside as well as conventions on the inside. The new angle on superheroes, setting a darker tone in general, and hence attracting new audiences (which in turn favors a broadening in subject matter) certainly provides aspects for

the definition of graphic novels from a content-based approach. What can be gathered from the angle of drawing style is a tendency towards a grimmer depiction of the setting. Yet, to talk about a uniform new look would be wrong and it follows that a grim graphic style is no valid criterion of graphic novels. Rather, a close connection to and a heightened sense of the overall mood and message of the book as related to drawing is what influenced new generations of artists.

Returning to the definition of the term, one can ask again: Was it even new at all? As always, some say it was new and needed a new name; others maintained that it was simply a new version of an old model. Yet, with the newfound adulthood of this subcategory of comics in form and content, the old value judgment of semi-literature that had stuck with comics from their beginnings, was seemingly confirmed. In the discussion of mainstream and art comics it brought

a schism that looks a lot like class conflict. [...] Those conflicts have been going on for a couple of decades in relation to the very basic question of what to call the things with panels and word balloons [...]. The cheap way of referring to them is “comics” or “comic books”; the fancy way is “graphic novels” (or “graphic narratives” or “sequential art”). Whatever you call them marks you as a product of an ideology. (Wolk 61)

Wolk’s argumentation is not conclusive in two ways: Primarily, it is obvious he does not want to use different terms for the different categories in order to avoid being “part of an ideology”. Yet, after considering the development and facts concerning the format of the category, the graphic novel is a separate branch of comics. It seems that seeing all comics as part of a single category in order to avoid judgment (over mainstream comics), is actually counterproductive in the effect and merely reinforces the notion that something is placed under a taboo. Furthermore, Wolk himself uses the term graphic novel later on to describe works such as *Batman*. Therefore, even after considering the cultural implications, the term graphic novel is something new and open for interpretation. Albeit the “unfortunate resonance of ‘graphic’ with the way it tends to be paired with ‘sexuality’ or ‘violence’” (Wolk 62) graphic novels have to be taken seriously. It is nevertheless necessary to mention that Wolk is not the only one unsatisfied with the term. Many writers, illustrators, and book sellers prefer other terms, yet there seems to be neither agreement on another term, nor on the reasons for disliking the existing one.

In the past 25 years the meaning of the phrase has only gotten hazier and less satisfying. Japanese manga, superhero collections, non-fiction, autobiography — all of these are “graphic novels,” a term that now applies to any square-bound book with a story told in comics format. “The problem with the word ‘graphic novel’ is that it is an arguably misguided bid for respectability where graphics are respectable and novels are respectable so you get double respectability,” Spiegelman says. Eisner

himself dislikes the phrase, calling it a "limited term," and prefers "graphic literature or graphic story." (Arnold)

Arnold further argues that, even though the term does not cater to the wants of the majority of the comic industry, the chances of it changing in the foreseeable future are rather slim. Firstly, this stems from the fact that the term sells, and publishers as well as book sellers are not very likely to change a successful product. Secondly, although many people do not know what a graphic novel is, know even less what they can expect from a "graphic story". Therefore, even if 'graphic novel' is not a precise term, it is the one used in this thesis.

Concluding, certain formal as well as content-based criteria define the essence of this comic subcategory. Firstly – and this functions as the minimum qualification – is a longer, sustained narrative. As this would include comic books as well as graphic novels, one has to make a distinction between the two. Therefore, secondly, a certain level of seriousness (though not necessarily grimness as the "grim and gritty" imitators of *Batman* took for a requisite) as far as subject matter is concerned has to govern the narrative. Thirdly, the drawing style is not limited in any particular direction, but needs to be compatible with the story.

2.2. From easy entertainment to the Pulitzer Prize – the development of comics

After the two terms "comic" and "graphic novel" have been defined, it is now possible to attempt to trace back the medium to its beginnings in order to gain a better general understanding of the reasons that led to the varied contemporary comics culture and especially to the development of the antihero. As mentioned before, depending on the comic theorist one follows, the beginnings of the term may vary.

Proposals for the first comic include cave paintings (as in the caves of Lascaux), paintings on antique Greek vases, and paintings on "the tomb of 'Menna', an ancient Egyptian scribe" (McCloud, *Understanding* 14). This view relies simply on the feature of sequentiality. Some theorists see printing as a necessary prerequisite (which connects to the mass-mediality feature discussed above) and set the dawn of the modern era as the starting point. Printing did of course have the interesting effect to make literature (formerly the sole pleasure of the literate) available to the lower classes, whilst at the same time allowing a mass production of pictures and drawings, formerly the sphere of the illiterate lower class, hence making text and images available for everyone. Those prone to using a very exclusive definition, argue that the forms developed in the 19th century were comic pioneers: "Im 19. Jahrhundert finden sich schließlich in Europa längere Bildsequenzen, die Schrift und Bild integrieren, ebenfalls

massenweise vervielfältigt werden und offen auf ein bürgerliches Amüsier- und Unterhaltungsbedürfnis zielen, womit sie bereits alle wesentlichen Merkmale auch eines engeren Comicbegriffs teilen“ (Schüwer, *Wie Comics* 8). As Schüwer then remarks, examples from each category have been pronounced the “first” and all claims can be defended.

When remembering the definition of the comic applied in this thesis as a flexible system in which each work has to be judged on its own merits, the disadvantage and limits of this approach become apparent in this context, as it is nearly impossible to make judgments on categories such as ancient Greek vase paintings or late medieval pamphlets. Yet, when looking at specific examples, the definition can be put to the test. Taking up McCloud’s example of the Egyptian tomb, the narratological component can be applied easily, as it shows a scene from the corn harvest. It lacks the second major component, the use of word in conjunction with pictures. Therefore, in order for the Egyptian drawings to fall in the comics category, the “minor categories” would have to weigh heavily enough to balance out the lack. Yet, as neither mass-mediality (as in this case the work was inaccessible to the public) nor a certain aim at entertainment play a part in it, the painting is thus excluded from the term comic, whilst keeping its function as a story told in pictures. With the possibility of print, reproduction was no longer an issue. Hence, pamphlets such as the “Tortures of Saint Erasmus” from around 1460 (McCloud, *Understanding* 16), showing Erasmus’ martyrdom from his imprisonment to his death would, even with the lack of text, be considered comics.

While that example was not a clear-cut case, Rudolphe Töpffer’s comics from the 1830’s onwards deserve the name without hesitation. His “light satiric picture stories [...] employed cartooning and panel borders, and featured the first interdependent combination of words and pictures seen in Europe” (ibid 17). Töpffer is not only often pronounced the first comic artist, but has also been considered the creator of the first graphic novel:

In 1842, the first major graphic novel was published in the United States. THE ADVENTURES OF OBADIAH OLDBUCK [...], appeared in a weekly humor magazine called Brother Jonathan. It concerned the misadventures of a young man and his ‘lady-love’, using captioned cartoons arranged in tiered or strip like fashion. (Tychinsky)

One well-known contemporary and friend of Töpffer, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, sensed the immense potential of the medium and remarked that, “if for the future, he would choose a less frivolous subject and restrict himself a little, he would produce things beyond all conception.” (qtd. in McCloud, *Understanding* 17).

The year 1896 marked the year of the first modern newspaper comic strip, *The Yellow Kid* by Richard F. Outcault, as well as the first pulp magazine *The Argosy* by Frank Munsey, relying on adventurous action. The former enjoyed such popularity that it increased the sales of the *New York Journal* (Tychinsky). When the two media merged in 1929 and Tarzan was made into a newspaper strip by Hal Foster, the “adventure comic strip was born. It was an invention that would shape much of popular heroic fiction as we know it today.” (Fingerioth 43) A few years later, *The Phantom* appeared on the comics horizon, being the first masked man in tights and in possession of a secret identity (see Daniels in Fingerioth 43), followed in 1938 by the introduction of Superman in the *Action Comics*. Parallel to the rapid development of new characters, the first “comic books” were printed – collections of already released material in book form.

Unfortunately, the success of the medium was halted when Dr. Fredric Wertham’s book *The Seduction of the Innocent* appeared in 1954, where he postulated a relation between immoral messages in comics and juvenile delinquency that raised a public uproar. “To protect itself from legal regulation, the comics industry created the Comics Code Authority” (Wolk 38). As quasi-censorship, it forbade cruelty, nudity, and obscenity, and even created rules for the development of the plot. As Article 6 reads: “In every instance good shall triumph over evil and the criminal punished for his misdeeds” (Comics Code). For the next decades the seal of the Comics Code Authority was a feature seen on almost all works published, with the effect that comics, a medium perceived as semi-serious anyway, were now legitimately connected to moral trenches that were in need of strict control. As a result, “a wave of blandness swept over the mainstream comics of the late ‘50s and early ‘60s” (Wolk 39) that in turn reinforced the notion that comics were not a very serious medium.

This vicious circle was, while not broken at least cracked, by the underground comix movement in the late ‘60s. It challenged the monotonous mainstream tone and dealt with current social and political issues, ignored the guidelines of the Comics Code, and published outside of the main companies. The spelling *comix* fulfilled the purpose “to set them apart from mainstream comics and to emphasize the ‘x’ for x-rated” (Lambiek). This divide can still be seen today, in the divide between art comics (largely independent and author-focused) and mainstream comics.

The major developments over the next decades were an improvement in creators’ rights and the invention of direct marketing, as well as an increase of collected comics in book form. As

mentioned earlier, when *Watchmen*, *Batman*, and *Maus* were published in 1986, the tone in superhero comics and the narrative opportunities for comics in general changed. These “convention-rupturing” works “became the standard against which comics that wanted to be important or meaningful were measured” (Wolk 8). Even if they do not stand out as much anymore in today’s varicolored comic world, they redefined not only comics, but also the graphic novel. It was now seen as a subgenre that had a serious concluded narrative, was very much aware of the conventions of its genre and the borders imposed by its form, and tried to deconstruct both. The proof for the change in general perception of the medium was the presentation of the Pulitzer Prize to *Maus* in 1992.

To sum up, it can be said that the first comics that adhere to the definition given above trace as far back as the introduction of printing in Europe, and even before that there are works that have to be considered. The necessary alliance between caricature and newspapers (McCloud, *Erfinden* 69) in the 20th century reinforced the notion of semi-literacy that had been the bitter aftertaste of sequential art from its beginnings. Yet, with the changes from the 1960s onwards, this semi-serious perception has lost a lot of ground and the comic is now a recognized medium for serious as well as comic subjects that caters to an audience who no longer need protection from the Comics Code. Especially the switch to a darker mood and a darker hero in the dusty superhero genre as well as the altered style benefitted these adult audiences.

2.3. From New York to London – Introducing *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns*, *V for Vendetta*, and *Watchmen*

To make the various theoretical approaches to the medium of comics, the anti-superhero genre, and the principles of aesthetic illusion more feasible, I will apply them to three graphic novels. All of them appeared in the late ‘80s and are amongst the first of the new generation of comics. *Watchmen* and *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns* have been considered the pioneers of modern graphic novels, the deconstructors of superheroes, as well as the constructors of a new superhero: „Als dann Alan Moore und Frank Miller begannen, das Superhelden-Genre zu dekonstruieren, wandelte sich der Ton. ‘Comics sind nicht mehr nur für Kinder‘, hieß es jetzt.“ (McCloud, *Making* 87) Their “pole position” alone would justify using them as examples. In addition, the story as well as images, are brilliant, allowing for a thrilling reading experience. *V for Vendetta* appeared a few years earlier, taking up the more

serious mood of the day, mixing it with numerous literary and historical puns, producing a story full of political and social criticism.

2.3.1. *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns*

This book is, in many ways, different from the other two discussed. When Frank Miller published it in 1986, he was already a well known comic author working for DC comics. “Eisner’s most prominent disciple is Frank Miller, the writer and artist of the *Dark Knight* and *Sin City* projects and probably comic books’ biggest marquee name right now” (Wolk 173). His previous achievements included *Ronin* and a new take on *Daredevil*, featuring his specific film noir style. Instead of creating a completely new character, he reinvented the already existing character of Batman. While the new Batman was certainly different, he still had a history of previous appearances that could not be erased. Therefore, Miller was much more limited than Moore was in the other two examples. This is especially visible in Miller’s drawing style and the notion of heroism which is, albeit drastically different to the classic superhero, still somewhat perceivable. “Mit seiner Bitterkeit und seiner negativen Weltsicht verwischte er die Grenzen zwischen Gut und Böse auf die gekannte Weise. Gleichzeitig öffnete Miller die Einfassungen der Comic-Panels, ließ den Figuren dadurch mehr Raum und erneuerte so das Genre der Superhelden-Comics“ (Prescher). The book’s greatest achievement is the acknowledgement of a personal and ethic “grey area” inherent in everyone, and the understanding that overstepping or redefining boundaries for the greater good may be acceptable. “*The Dark Knight Returns* blew the dust off Batman’s grim, gaudy subtext and made it the center of a brutal, smart, exquisitely drawn satire” (Wolk 8). “The fact that *Dark Knight* spawned a movement of ‘dark and gritty’ (i.e., the protagonists clench their teeth and kill people) superhero comics that missed the point of DKR, can’t be blamed on Miller, who was re-energizing the genre” (ibid 131). By recognizing this rather arbitrary take on rules, Miller simultaneously raises the problem of hypocrisy: who is allowed to overstep borders, and to what extent?

The story features Batman a.k.a. billionaire Bruce Wayne, who has aged and is now in his mid-fifties. A specific date is not mentioned, but the Cold War is still ongoing, the president bears striking similarities to Ronald Reagan, and the overall appearance of characters points to a time in the near-future of 1986. Nevertheless, Wayne is still in great physical condition and returns to his masked alter ego after an old enemy, Harvey Dent a.k.a. Two-Face, is released from prison. By now, almost all superheroes have stopped their vigilante doings, and with a gang called the Mutants frightening and controlling the streets, Gotham City has

declined to a dystopian state. After losing a battle against the leader of the Mutants and suffering from heavy injuries, Batman is saved by 13-year-old Carrie Kelly, who later becomes the new Robin. The leader of the mutants is then imprisoned, but manages to escape. In a subsequent fight Batman finally defeats the leader of the Mutants, who then dissolve and split into new groups. One of the groups is a new gang called “Sons of the Batman”, that act very violently in order to achieve their new goal - to eliminate crime. When a blackout hits the entire city, Batman gathers them around and tells them to use their fists and brains instead of weapons when they protect the city that night: “Tonight we are the law. Tonight I am the law” (Miller 173). Adding to this negative publicity, are the appearances of psychiatrist Dr. Wolper, who denigrates Batman in the media. Incidentally he is also responsible for the release of another old enemy, the Joker, from Arkham Asylum. Unfortunately, he is still insane and kills the complete audience of a talk show, including his psychiatrist. Although Batman hunts down the Joker later on, his vigilante acts are not protected from the police anymore, for the new Commissioner has her eye on him. Furthermore, Superman, who now works for the government, is ordered to kill Batman, as he causes too much embarrassment. Due to this accumulation of unfortunate events, Batman has to keep a low profile for a while, preparing for the big showdown against Superman. With the help of Oliver Queen a.k.a. Green Arrow (another well-known DC comics hero), who shoots Superman with an arrow containing cryponite, Batman is victorious. Yet, moments after his victory he has what seems to be a heart attack. Only after the funeral, just when Clark Kent is about to leave the grave site, he hears a heart beat from inside the grave. His reaction - a wink and a smile - suggests that he approves (or at least does not disapprove) of Batman’s staged death, in which he unknowingly participated. This silent agreement is put by Wayne as follows: “He’ll leave me alone, now, in return, I’ll stay quiet.” (Miller 199) The last page shows him, Robin, Oliver, and members of the gang “in the endless cave, far past the burnt remains of a crime fighter whose time has passed” with “years – to train and study and plan [...] to bring sense to a world plagued by worse than thieves and murderers” (199). What exactly this evil is, can only be subject to speculation. Yet, when considering the social and political critique of the book, the most convincing answer is society itself. “[I]t is a world both familiar and foreign to us, a bleak foretelling of what could be our urban future” in which “anger would be the most rational reaction to the insanity implied in the spire of every building, in the corruption in every corner of society” (Fingerroth 132). With Bruce Wayne dead and Batman’s crime fighting days over, a man without an identity utters the last words of the story: “This will be a good life... good enough.” (199)

The entity of the narrator in the book is very interesting, as it misses an omniscient third person narration. Rather, “TV commentators act as a sort of idiot Greek chorus for the story” (Wolk 176). The news broadcasts inform about the events and resemble the public opinion, yet they only portray a rather superficial account of the happenings. Therefore, they may be seen as a third person limited narrator. In addition, first person narration through a multitude of narrators takes place. In the beginning of the book Bruce Wayne “shares his thoughts” as Bruce Wayne, later on he does as Batman. The distinction is possible due to the visual component of graphic novels: Batman’s thoughts are in a black frame filled with grey, contrasting Wayne’s thoughts, which are plain black on white next to the image. This is interesting from another aspect as well, as it allows one to see at which point Wayne’s personality changes to become Batman, namely when he stands in the alley where his parents were murdered and is threatened by two of the Mutants (see Fig. 1). Further narrators are the Joker (whose thoughts appear on a green background), Superman (whose thoughts are blue), Commissioner Gordon (whose thoughts are on a brown background), and Robin (whose thoughts are yellow).



Fig. 1 First glimpse of BM

In a number of ways, *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns* is a typical superhero comic, featuring well-known heroes and villains. Nevertheless, the darker tone that is typical for graphic novels is consistent in the drawing style as well as the content. The social and political critique is permanently present through the continuing news broadcasts: Choosing television reports as the main source of information inherently raises the issue of the prominence of the media as well as the truth value attached to it in our society. Other issues, such as the afore mentioned ethical grey area, violence as the ultimate answer, or dying for your beliefs were prominent issues twenty years ago, and are nowadays more debated than ever. In addition and correlation to the darker tone, Batman is also a darker hero, and the first of the “old” heroes to undergo this facelift. Even if Miller does not seem to stray far from the classic comic stories in this work at the first glance, the new hero and the underlying notions are directed at readers who do not simply indulge in the story, but reflect on it too.

2.3.2. *V for Vendetta*

Like *Batman*, the book was first published in a number of issues lasting from 1982 to 1985. After this black-and-white appearance, the first complete and colored edition was published in 1988. Therefore, chronologically *V for Vendetta* precedes the other two graphic novels. With regards to content it takes on where *Batman* left off: to bring sense to the world – at any cost. Opposed to most other of Moore's works, it is not “inspired by some kind of pop-culture source of the past that he can elaborate and improve on” (Wolk231). The protagonist is nevertheless based on a historical figure, namely Guy Fawkes. The book drafts a gruesome outlook onto a near-future society, ruled by a fascist government in the best Orwellian manner. As Moore states in his Essay “Behind the Painted Smile”, “[s]ince Dave and I share a similar bland of political pessimism, the future would be pretty grim, bleak and totalitarian, thus giving us a convenient antagonist to play our hero off against” (Moore, Lloyd 270). Violence and crime originate from, rather than are resolved by, the government; the citizens are too scared and/or passive to initiate change. The protagonist's, V's, purpose is to change that by giving the society a crude awakening. “It's revolution [...] – graphic novel style.” (Jacobsen) Moreover, the book is full of references and little details alluding to books, poems, films, or other real life events. In “Behind the Painted Smile” Moore even gives a rather extensive list of ideas, authors, and works that he created before writing the story and which he wanted to use, including Orwell, the Shadow, Pynchon, *Fahrenheit 451*, and *Batman* (Moore, Lloyd 272). Another often quoted source he neglects to mention in his enumeration is Shakespeare (to be fair, he does indicate that the list is only part of a much longer one). What becomes obvious from this brief excerpt of influences, is that the book's target audience is neither apolitical, nor non-critical, nor uneducated.

The story takes place in a dystopian London of 1997, which is governed by a party called Norsefire. In the wake of an atomic war that demolished Africa and parts of Europe and ensuing natural disasters, they rule with an iron fist. In the form of a police state they enact quarantine zones, food rationing, arrest foreigners and regime critics, and impose harsh punishment for those disregarding their rules. The party's leader, Adam Susan, is a firm believer in fascism and the system and even states so himself in a passage with voice over-like narration. He is also in love with the God-like computer system enabling the Orwellian regime: Fate. The female protagonist is 16-year old Evey Hammond, an orphan after her mother died as a result of the diseases following the war and her father's arrest. When she is

molested by undercover police officers who threaten to rape and kill her, a masked, cloaked figure comes to her rescue – V. After killing most of the men, V takes Evey to a rooftop to show her his “grand opening” (13), the bombing of the towers of parliament. He then takes her to his home called the “Shadow Gallery”, an underground cave containing amongst others a big library, a jukebox, and enumerable paintings, all suggesting V to be rather wealthy. As the story continues, it is revealed that V was one of the inmates of “Larkhill Resettlement Camp”, an institution clearly modeled on concentration camps. The association between the two becomes clear when V confronts an old officer: “These concentration camps...sorry... these resettlement camps don’t run themselves, do they?” (32) At Larkhill a new drug called “Batch 5” was tested. It gruesomely killed all subjects but him, who instead became mentally ill, showing signs of schizophrenia. In the camp, V is kept in cell number five (hence the name V) until he manages to create a fire and subsequently escapes the institution. It becomes clear that the murders he commits are, on a small scale, part of a personal revenge for the suffering he had to endure. On a larger scale, V wants to punish the system that has enabled and promoted these cruelties and does so without any scruple. To pull England out of its passive and fearful existence, he addresses the population in a TV broadcast, where he elaborates on humans’ reluctance to significant change and the taking of responsibility, as well as scolding society’s growing reliance on violence. Furthermore, he condemns the government, but notes that it is society’s repeated foolishness that enables it to function: “While I’ll admit that anyone can make a mistake once, to go on making the same lethal errors century after century seems to me nothing short of deliberate. [...] You have no spine. You have no pride” (117). V then gives the people an ultimatum of two years to change the system.

During the next year the chase after V continues, yet the police do not manage to catch him. Quite on the contrary, V manages to weaken the party substantially, aided by corruption, greed, and lust for power cultivated by it. After most of the important party officials are dead, London endures a wave of violence, referred to as the “Land of take-what-you-want” (195) by V, a necessary step along the way to real, orderly Anarchy. In a fight with Finch, the police officer formerly endowed with his chase, V lets himself be lethally wounded and dies in the Shadow Gallery after giving Evey some last instructions. She then steps into his footsteps and takes on the masked identity, announcing via speakers that V is not dead and that the time has come to “choose what comes next” (259). The following day, Evey gives V a “Viking funeral” by sending an old subway train filled with explosives, roses, and his body to explode beneath Downing Street. When she returns to the Shadow Gallery dressed in the costume and

mask, Dominic, Finch's former assistant whom she rescued from a riot, has regained consciousness. She introduces herself as V and the Shadow Gallery as her home, leaving the impression of history repeated - creating an assistant out of Dominic as she was an assistant to V. The last scene shows Finch leaving the city, heading north on a dark and deserted street.

The obvious issue of the book is fascism, including rather transparent allusions to the NSDAP and Hitler Germany, as well as an elaborate use of the Norse theme. It is well portrayed when Evey talks about Norsefire's rise to power: "It was all the fascist groups, the right- wingers [...] I remember when they marched into London. They had a flag with their symbol on. Everyone was cheering. I thought they were scary" (28). In connection to the Second World War it also addresses the problematic military command structure: "Look, you know as well as I do... we had to do what we did. All the darkies, the nancy boys and the beatniks... it was us or them" (33). Connected to this, range a number of topics including freedom, martyrdom, justice, and the ancient question of the best form of government.

Similar to the way *Batman* broaches the issue of media dependency through TV newscasts, *V for Vendetta* uses radio broadcast for the same matter. The "voice of fate" is the only news available and highlights how easy propaganda is created and believed. This effect is ridiculed when the voice of the broadcaster changes (as the old one has lost his mind), causing an absurd reaction in the listeners, who know that "there is something wrong with the voice of fate. [...] Whatever the future holds [...] it just won't be the same" (36). Moore brilliantly makes fun of the incredible dependency on news broadcasts already on the first page. There, it is announced that a rain shower will start at exactly 12:07 a.m. lasting until half past one. Another interesting, if not generic, similarity between the two books is the fact that the hide-out is to be found underground.

As mentioned in the introduction, Moore's influences are manifold, and so are the issues raised and works alluded to. It ranges from the Bible (considering the first names of Adam Susan and Evey Hammond but also numerous quotes) all the way to Thomas Pynchon (and his book *V.*). Furthermore, puns to the letter V are persistent throughout the text: All chapter names start with a 'V', the Shadow Gallery is close to Victoria Station, the anarchy sign bears striking resemblance to V's sign (which in turn bears resemblance to the sign of Zorro), and once Finch reconstructs V's experience in Larkhill under the influence of L.S.D., he utters: "I'm free. [...] Vaulting, veering, vomiting up the values that victimized me, feeling vast, feeling virginal... was this how he felt? This verve, vitality, this vision. La voie, la vérité, la vie" (215-16, emphasis added). In the great number of literary quotes and illusions,

Shakespeare's works are especially prominent. One reason for this lies in the general importance V attributes to drama: "You see, Evey, all the world is a stage. And everything else is Vaudeville" (31). His use of preludes and prologues underlines this connection. More specifically, the resemblance to the Elizabethan revenge play is striking:

Like the typical protagonist of a revenge play, V has been horribly wronged, but he cannot seek redress through legitimate means because the authority figures to whom he should appeal are the same parties who have wronged him. Therefore, he seeks vigilante justice by scheming to murder those responsible for his distress. [...] [Yet,] the protagonist's use of violent intrigue to pursue his retribution threatens to lower him to the moral level of his enemies, and he must pay for his revenge with his own death. [...] It would easily be possible for viewers in the early twenty-first century to condemn V [...] as a violent terrorist. However, the film uses Shakespeare allusions to indicate V's function as the hero of a revenge play, who achieves tragic status by sacrificing himself for his cause and ridding the nation of a corrupt ruling class. Aligning V with Shakespeare makes the film's title character look less like Osama bin Laden and more like Hamlet. (Friedman)

Regardless if one reads V as a hero in a modern sense or an Elizabethan one, by informing the reader of his mental illness, Moore makes it almost impossible to give V full credit for his 'heroism'. This move is interesting in the light of the deconstruction of the classic superhero which will be elaborated on further down, and leaves the reader with the task to decide where the border between heroism and terrorism lies for themselves. An important institution that is mocked is the church. Not only has the church accepted Fate as the authority, leading to the priest amending his sermon to cater to Fate's wishes. The priest is also deeply hypocritical, taking sins and virtues very light heartedly. His pedophile tendencies are an open secret and the ridicule of church and priesthood reaches its peak when he reads Evey his sermon followed by "Take your dress off, please" (53).

On the discourse level, the theater motive in general and the revenge play in particular are visible in the structure of the book. Its three 'acts', each containing a prologue, largely follow the classic model, ending with V's death and resurrection. Wolk sees it "set up as a three-act mystery: Who is V? The mystery formula dictates that by the end, he'll be dramatically unmasked. By the end of the actual book, we haven't found out who he is; instead we've found out why it doesn't matter who he is" (234). The most conspicuous anti-graphic novel element is the elimination of sound, highlighting the importance of text and pictures to "make the book satisfying on a literary level" (ibid 275). The narration is mostly done through dialogues, radio and TV broadcasts, as well as diary entries. Only scarcely an omniscient narrator contributes a few words, yet often without imminent importance to the plot. Especially V's actions are never narrated and the pieces of his history that are revealed are not told by himself. Adding to the coherence of the different textual options is the sometimes occurring interaction between narratorial text and quotes, hence unifying the textual

components. What is striking about V's use of language is the frequent use of quotations, but also a generally careful choice of expression: As an imitation of theater, or to underline the utterance, "[w]henver he or one of his characters has something meaningful to say, the language Moore uses shifts into an iambic gallop" (Wolk 235). Although Wolk gives this as an example of Moore's "annoying" habits, it may also be argued that it shows a certain understanding of language and its effects.

2.3.3. *Watchmen*

Out of the three books, *Watchmen* is probably the most critically acclaimed and most frequently academically treated one. Referring to it as a "first-rate adventure story of exactly the kind it has a grudge against" (Wolk 240) is slightly missing the point, as its attempt to deconstruct a genre whilst mock-using it goes unnoticed. As mentioned in the discussion of *V for Vendetta*, Moore tends to use mainstream comics and their characters as a base for his work. Hence, "the protagonists of *Watchmen* are thinly disguised versions of characters from '60s Charlton Comics series" (Wolk 230). He understands and uses the purpose mainstream comics fulfill, namely to "answer readers' needs to understand their own culture and experience" (ibid 232) and likes to use mass culture *for* his work, but does not accept his works *becoming* part of mainstream culture (ibid 232). With *Watchmen*, Alan Moore and David Gibbons created a highly complex graphic novel filled with meta-references and allusions, containing "a structurally magnificent superhero adventure that systematically demolished the entire idea of superhero adventures, [and] galvanized mainstream comics" (ibid 8). Already the title itself poses an allusion and an issue worth discussing. It refers to the famous quote from Juvenal, "quis custodiet ipsos custodes" - who watches the watchmen. It appears as graffiti on walls and is given as only bibliographic entry at the end of the book. The question is a necessary consequence of humans living in a community - who should hold ultimate power and why? The problem is comparable with the questions raised in *V for Vendetta*, marking the importance of the issue for Moore. Necessarily, it further raises related questions such as morality, good versus evil, and the desire for power. Going back to the title, and it is worth noting that the heroes in *Watchmen* are never actually referred to as 'Watchmen', and hence "[t]hose superheroes are the watchmen, not the Watchmen" (Wolk 237). It is therefore fair to assume that "the title is a reference to *what* it's about in a broader sense, not *who* it's about" (ibid 236). A different answer to the question can be found when looking upon it from the angle of ideology:

However, in a world like ours, which is built on production, power, infrastructures, and superstructures, one in which the State is the ultimate authority to which we all answer, who controls the superheroes? Who watches the watchmen? Once again, the answer is simple: we are all subjected to that same power—that of ideology. (Hughes 556)

The story is set in 1985 in an alternate America where Richard Nixon is still the president of the United States and America won the Vietnam war. Consistent with the overall cynical tone of the book this fact is commented on by one of the heroes: “I mean if we’d lost this war [Vietnam] ... I think it might have driven us a little crazy, y’know? As a country.” (II 13) Furthermore, and most importantly in respect to the issue of heroes, real costumed adventurers are an accepted part of everyday life. Through flashbacks and the biography of one of the crime fighters the beginnings of costumed heroes are recounted: After starting out as individual crime fighters, Manhattan’s superheroes formed the Minutemen in 1939 under the administrative guidance of an agent. Due to internal problems the group only lasted until 1949. “The Minutemen where finished, but it didn’t matter. The damage had already been done.” (II 32), meaning that the seed of costumed heroes was planted in the minds of people. While superheroes were respected at the beginning of their activities, during the fifties they either had to retire from being a costumed hero, or had to testify before the “House UnAmerican Activities Committee” (III 29) and reveal their secret identity. During the sixties, a new group of heroes “under the terribly hokey moniker of ‘The Crimebusters’” (Hughes 550) appeared, whose existence was outlawed in 1977 through the Keene Act when their popularity diminished. The story revolves around six very different characters - three of which continued to serve as costumed heroes, and three who retired after the passing of the bill. Parts of *Watchmen* are narrated by Rorschach, through his diary entries (keeping a slightly ungrammatical and brief style). In a psychological report following his arrest he is described as “a troubled man” who also appears as “prophet-of-doom sandwich-board man” (VI 31). His mask is made from a black-and-white fabric that resembles Rorschach inkblot tests which he describes as “Black and white. Moving. Changing shape... but not mixing. No gray. Very, very beautiful” (VI 10). His views on good and evil are, just like his mask, uncompromisingly black and white, and his means to achieve justice are outside the law. “However, the mask he wears also contains a deeper meaning. Like an inkblot test, society also sees what it will of itself in Rorschach” (Hughes 552). His investigation of the murder of the Comedian a.k.a. Edward Blake is the driving element of the plot, in the course of which flashbacks and “documents” shed light on the characters and their history. The Comedian is the only still active member of the original Minutemen and started working for the government, including fighting in Vietnam, after the group split up. His violence and

ethics, which are beyond questionable (“Yeah. Yeah, that’s right. Pregnant woman. Gunned her down. Bang.” [II 15]), make him a very controversial character, caught between nihilism and vigilantism. He is described as “The worst of these [problems] [...] [I] hope to God that America can find itself a better class of hero than *that*” (II 32). This quote is also interesting from another aspect, as it deconstructs the classical hero by calling the Comedian a hero, but at the same time deconstructs the new concept as well. Rorschach, on the other hand, states that “Blake understood. Treated it like a joke, but he understood. He saw the cracks in society, saw the little men in masks trying to hold it together. He saw the true face of the twentieth century and chose to become a reflection, a parody of it” (II 27). Through Rorschach’s investigations the reader meets the other heroes: Nite Owl a.k.a. Dan Dreyberg, an ornithologist with a cellar containing his outfit, gadgets, and the owlship “Archie”; Silk Spectre a.k.a. Laurie Juspecky, daughter of the original Silk Spectre and former lover of Dr. Manhattan; Ozymandias a.k.a. Adrian Veidt the “smartest man on earth”, emulating Alexander the Great and Ramses II in their desire to change the world; and Dr. Manhattan a.k.a. Jonathan Osterman, the only real “super” hero after an atomic accident that makes him immune against the absolute immutability of space and time, but also alienates him from humankind. In the course of Rorschach’s search for the alleged “mask-killer”, he and Dan discover the person behind the murder of the Comedian and the schemes to dispose of Dr. Manhattan, Veidt, and Rorschach – Veidt himself: “I would trick it [the world]; frighten it towards salvation, with history’s greatest practical joke.” (XI 24) In a spawn of narcissism he plans to save humanity from itself by staging an alien attack on Manhattan, killing three million people. The attempts made by all five other heroes to stop him fail and his plan comes into action. Just as Veidt anticipated, the multilateral threats and the pending third World War immediately cease as a result of this new, common alien enemy. Presented with the decision to either tell the world about the true mastermind behind the attacks and hence risking world peace, or to keep the awful secret and accept cognizance of the murders, all but Rorschach decide to hold their tongues. Dr. Manhattan, although not sympathizing with humans, recognizes the importance of keeping the secret and kills Rorschach to prevent him from telling anyone about it. When Veidt asks him if his plan was the right thing to do “in the end”, Dr. Manhattan answers that he understands the decision, but that “nothing ever ends” (XII 27) and subsequently leaves earth, leaving behind a slightly uneasy Veidt. The book ends with a scene in the office of the *New Frontiersman*, where an assistant is told to choose a piece from the rejected contributions (the “crank file”), on top of which lies Rorschach’s journal.

Besides its suspenseful story, the brilliant characters, and the great art, *Watchmen* displays an impressive awareness of its medium and genre. As Wolk put it, it is “full of look-at-me-I’m-a-comic-book devices” (243). The effort to disrupt the conventions of both medium and genre is more prominent here than in the other two books. This deconstruction occurs in the continuous use of meta-references, devices disrupting an illusionist reading. Therefore, in order to still work as a superhero story, it needs to balance this out (more than the other books) with story, characters, and the aid of a brilliant level of discourse as well as the interplay between text and image. As story and discourse level are very complex and a thorough discussion of all its themes and characters would extend the scope of this thesis, I will only mention one character in more detail due to his importance in deconstructing the image of the classic superhero, and only mention some of the issues raised. Besides the obvious question of power and the struggle with it, violence and justice, and the believability of superheroes in a world very much like ours, time (and - inevitably linked to it - death) takes an important place in the book. It is present in the title, “dials, clock faces, and other timepieces proliferate” (Moulthrop 291), and each chapter’s first and last pages show a version of *Watchmen*’s own Doomsday Clock (ibid). The discussion of time is striking in a graphic novel as it is prove for the awareness of the medium’s (dis)advantages: Most allusions to time are visual, yet it is time that pictures have trouble showing and that belong to the realm of the written word. Another recurring image is that of the smiley face, conspicuously present in the first and last panel of the book. Especially its frequent depiction with blood (or ketchup) stains or elements resembling a tear, fit the cynical style of the whole book.

Dr. Manhattan is probably the most interesting character of the book in relation to superheroes and their deconstruction, as he is the only one with actual superpowers. He is also most interesting in the connection with the issue of time, as he is the son of a watchmaker who manages to overcome the obstacle of time. Although he works for the U.S government, posing its most powerful weapon, his connection to humanity is quickly fading. Although he is still somewhat part of the ideological and political system he does not feel any emotional attachment to it. As he puts it: “We’re all puppets, Laurie. I’m just a puppet who can see the strings.” (IX 5) In other words, the only “classic” superhero turns out to be the only one who does not care about the human race at all: “Human life is brief and mundane” (IX 17). Nevertheless, he does regain interest in human life again, but rather as an experiment than anything else: “I think perhaps I’ll create some” (XII 27). This ‘god-likeness’ is graphically emphasized when he walks over the water of Veidt’s swimming pool.

On the discourse level, the alternating prose/comic chapters are striking. During the comic parts, Rorschach's diary entries and once those of his psychiatrist, offer the only real narratological devices apart from conversation, making Rorschach the person to relate to. The only exception is a scene in which Dr. Manhattan holds an inner monologue similar to a voice over. He and Rorschach are also the only ones whose speech bubbles are distinguishable being filled with blue and having a squiggly, uneven line respectively. Furthermore, symmetry is of major importance in the layout and creation of the book. Its twelve chapters each start with one whole page showing a close-up of a detail of the next panel and end with some prose pages containing for example newspaper articles or chapters from fictional books. The only exception to this is the last chapter, yet considering Rorschach's journal in the last panel one could assume that the book itself is the last chapter's prose element. On another thought, the absence in the last chapter perfects the symmetry as it enables the first and last page to contain the image of the stained smiley. The symmetrical heart piece is chapter five titled "fearful symmetry" which is "visually symmetrical back to front" (Wolk 238) as well as in its plot and character elements. As one character states on the chapter's last page, "it's karma, man. Everything evens out eventually" (V 28). The exact middle of the chapter underlines the symmetry which can again be connected to the cyclical nature of time. (Fig. 2)



Fig. 2 Symmetry in *Watchmen*

Furthermore, the comic-within-a-comic called "Tales from the Black Freighter" deserves mentioning. It tells the story of a shipwrecked sailor who sails back to his family on a float made out of his dead crew and acts as the first stage of a three stage metaphor. It is a "grotesque, colorful allegory for what's going on in the broader *Watchmen* story" (Wolk

243), just as the world of *Watchmen* acts as metaphor for the readers' world. Contrary to Wolk's belief that "the overarching metaphor of *Watchmen* [...] is nuclear eschatology" (244), it can be argued that it rather is the impossibility of an unambiguous view of good and evil. The text of the pirate story also matches the bigger story of *Watchmen* and comments on the happenings. The "polyphonic trick" (ibid 242) of using the words from the pirate comic in the panels of the actual comic aids the metaphor and will be discussed as comic specific element below. The pirate comic and the comments of the occupants of the newsvendor's street corner where the boy reading the comic sits and who function as the voice of the people, can be seen as a Greek chorus element (ibid 242).

Summing up, this comic about comics is at least as interested in how to tell the story, as it is in the story itself. It is full of irony, sarcasm, and references to the "real world" as well as to itself and its comic existence. Nevertheless, paradoxically, in order to bring across its point of *not* being a superhero story, it needs to engage the reader in a superhero story. *Watchmen* therefore provides fertile ground to analyze the importance of the visual component and its interplay with the written word; by distancing the reader on purpose from the text it poses the perfect example of how much power aesthetic illusion holds.

2.4. From the Man of Steel to the Dark Knight – On superheroes and antiheroes

They never want to talk about the mean one. The cruel one. The one who couldn't fly or bend steel in his bare hands. The one who scared the crap out of everybody and laughed at all of the rest of us for being the envious cowards we were. [...] Not a man wants to hear about Batman." (Miller 7)

The quote from the beginning of *Batman* is symbolic for the change that took place after Miller and Moore started to deconstruct the superhero genre: It defines Batman not only in terms of what he is, but more importantly in terms of what, or rather who, he is not – Superman, the "Man of Steel". Before even beginning the first chapter, Miller sets the mood for this anti-Superman who is cruel and mean and definitely has more flaws than just a bad reaction to green Kryptonite. While the 'original' superheroes are still around (Superman, for example, still watches over Metropolis, although now married to Lois Lane), a significant loss of their importance in the industry is undeniable. Yet, the immense success of the new hero characters begs the question as to why heroes who are only remotely "super" apparently appeal to the readers more than the heroes they evolved from. After all, superheroes stand for respected values; is it therefore correct to assume that readers do not want to escape to a world which is saved by a diagrammatic representation of society's positive values? In order to answer this question it is necessary to first look at the phenomenon of the superhero and in a

next step examine what the anti-superheroes offer the readers in recompense. With a clear view of the characteristic features involved in these new narratives, it will then be possible to draw first conclusions as to the connection between antiheroes and immersion and the reasons for the antihero's success.

2.4.1. Superheroes – What makes them super?

When considering superhero narratives as a forerunner of the anti-superhero narrative, the former have to be analyzed with a focus on three aspects. As a foundation, the superhero itself needs to be investigated in terms of his (and sometimes her) internal features, followed by a look at the intrinsically linked external features as manifested in the drawing style of the genre. Thirdly, and probably most importantly in terms of subsequent change, the metaphorical values of the stories and characters have to be analyzed. The remarks may seem very detailed as part of a thesis actually concerned with *antiheroes*, yet the majority of these aspects can be either found in the second category as well, or have been deconstructed and turned around and hence offer fertile ground for analysis.

“Thus made their mourning the men of Geatland/ for their hero's passing his hearth-companions.” (*Beowulf* 94)

Achilles, Odysseus, and Beowulf have all been considered heroes in their time, and still represent the quintessence of heroism today. As Miller states in an interview: "Schon die Griechen hatten ihre Götter, und wir hatten immer unsere Supermänner - Gollums, Riesen, wie auch immer [...] Ich habe meine gesamte Karriere lang Helden studiert. Was sie alle gemeinsam haben, ist die Fähigkeit, Widerstände zu überwinden“ (qtd. in Rehfeld). This definition is congruent with the definition given by Fingerroth for heroes in general, including those living amongst us whom we admire for the unreal-lifeactions (14). Yet,

[s]omewhere in the evolution of the fictional hero, a subset of the heroic figure came to be possessed of *superhuman* qualities. It came to be understood that the hero was defined by *fearlessness*, as opposed to the ability to face and overcome fear. Skill was at the peak of human ability, but so was *luck*.” (ibid 16)

As far as skills and powers are concerned, one needs to distinguish between the actually superhuman skills, obtained either through an accident (Spiderman, Catwoman) or possessed inherently (Superman, Wonderwoman, the Shadow), and the highly unlikely, yet theoretically possible, “human” skills (Batman, the Phantom). This differs from Fingerroth's view insofar as he considers the ability to evade aging, to fight without ever getting hurt, or always knowing

exactly who to harm, as actual superhuman qualities as well. While his view certainly also has its validity, it does not take into account the similar but different representational systems. Furthermore, it should be noted that having powers belonging to the latter of the two categories does not exclude its owner from being a superhero. Neither is it identical with being an anti-superhero. This problem will be elaborated on below.

When keeping in mind the omnipresence of heroes in (narrative) history, the scope of topics that made up the first comics, as well as the times in which superpowers were introduced (Superman first appeared in 1938) the reasons for the formation of the specific characteristics of superheroes become clear. Fingerioth neatly sums up the evolution of the superhero:

So we can say that the pulps, the comics strips, and the movies of the 1930s were rivers fed by thousand years of storytelling about heroes. These rivers flowed into the ocean of consciousness that birthed the comic book superhero, an entity that would grow and develop into a concept that, today, is one of the few universal fictional concepts known the world over. (45)

One of the features mentioned above, being lucky, can easily be forgotten in the midst of supernatural powers, exciting battles, and new worlds. Yet, it is closely connected to one of the major points constituting to the superheroic being: death, or rather the avoidance of it: “One thing a superhero will usually *not* do [...] is die” (Fingerioth 18). Immortality and, closely connected to it, the reluctance to change also effectively separate the superhero from the anti-superhero. As we will see later on, the death of such an antihero can be the trigger and accelerator of a story, and even its logical end. Part of the reason for the hero’s immortality is a simple economical thought: Superhero narratives are of a serialized nature, each sequence means profit; therefore the companies’ obvious priority is to keep a hero alive and in print. The second important reason is the symbolic statement of a superhero (i.e. society’s value system) dying.

It also needs to be clarified, that to insist that superheroes do not change at all is off the point, as the characters almost inevitably gain something from story after story. More importantly still, the hero changes with the times: As a product of, and symbol for, the society that produces a hero, it is logical that a change within that society requires a change in the character (ibid 20). Yet, as societies usually change only in very small steps, so do the features of heroes. Furthermore, change in society seldom drastically alters the core concepts of a society⁵, which in turn allows heroes to stay true to their core values. Reluctance to change hence does not imply complete standstill, but rather small, nearly imperceptible steps

⁵ The United States is a good example, as the basic features of the “American dream” has not changed significantly since the forming of the Constitution

(as for example in Spiderman's or Superman's relationships). How small they are can also vary according to the medium (due to slightly altering storylines and difficulties or advantages of different media), while the overall image stays a rather fixed continuum.

The change discussed so far, only concerns *internal* change (often caused by external change). While this is possible but hesitant, the opposite, namely *external* change (maybe caused by internal change), which means a change of society's core values rather than the change of appearance, is definitely not possible for a classic superhero. "Ironically for a group of vigilantes, superheroes generally agree that the laws of the land need to be upheld. They believe that democracy is the best form of government. [...] [S]uperheroes champion the consensus views of most residents of Western democracies." (Fingeroth 160)

In this respect, it is possible to affirm the "no change" statement mentioned above. This stems from the fact that "[t]he superhero is not an active agent of change in society. Once he or she crosses that line, then the mission is different. Then they are not there to protect but to *reform*. [...] The results in such works are for the most part disastrous" (ibid 161). It could be argued that this point neglects the possibility of educational comics (maybe a modern superhero with a mind to make the world a greener planet) or politically motivated ones. Yet, as the focus of the chapter lies on the "classic" superhero (a slightly unlucky term considering the paragraphs on change above) as one who *represents* society, only a forever changing society could be the basis of such a *reformatory* hero. "Superheroes are not called upon to act as the protagonist of individual plots. They function essentially as antagonists, foils for the true star of each story, the villain." (Reynolds qtd. in Fingeroth 162)

While immortality is a core value of the superhero (the ancient heroes die just as antiheroes do), there are some additional features that are also essential, yet not unique, to him: Firstly, and most importantly, a system of positive values. Secondly, the determination to protect that system; and thirdly, the strength of character to make the first two possible. What is interesting about these characteristics is not only their applicability to heroes in general, but also to the category of the villains. (ibid 17) Hence, when a villain says something like "you and me, we are not so different" to the hero just before the showdown, he is actually right as far as this aspect is concerned. This may also explain some of the fascination of the villain, as he presents an alternative to the hero, equal in power and determination, yet focused on a "wrong" set of values that can never ultimately succeed against the values of society manifested in the hero.

One major question for all Superman skeptics (and probably even some enthusiasts) has always been *why did no one ever think about Clark Kent without glasses* (or Superman with glasses for that matter)? Admittedly, he also had his hair combed back, but it still begs the question as to why readers accept a secret identity so easily and even expect it as another, quite important, feature of superheroes. On the one hand, having a hero that leads a normal life for most of the time enhances the tellability of the story by creating a “normal” side to the character to relate to on a less fantastic level, and can be seen as an immersive storytelling device. On the other hand, a second identity involving a costume or mask poses a number of possibilities. The most obvious reason is the mystery it produces not to know who is behind the mask, but also the gratification once the reader is part of the secret. In addition, a mask enhances the potential for identification, as everyone can put on a costume and “be” the hero. More interesting still, it enhances reader involvement by concealing the person behind the mask. This way, while seeing the image of a masked hero on the page, one simultaneously creates a mental picture of the hero under the mask. This mental image is directed by individual notions of how one imagines the hero to look and be like and naturally differs from one reader to the next. Yet, by forcing the reader to “personalize” the heroes it makes them more believable to each individual. The principle is naturally not limited to heroes under a mask, and works for villains just as well, forcing us to create a believable foe. This approach is similar to the concept of simplification, which will be further discussed in the chapter concerning comic theory. In this respect it should also be noted that secret identity can refer to both alter egos of a character, depending on which identity one considers to be the true identity. The tension this creates in the characters is not only an excellent way to produce suspense, but can be used to raise further questions of values and identity when the hero’s vigilante justice slops and the mask slowly gains the upper hand over the man underneath. Moore brilliantly deconstructs the secret identity feature in *Watchmen* in a number of ways, for example by creating the vigilant Rorschach, who quasi-narrates via excerpts of his journal, a medium firmly connected to the man, not the mask.

In a discussion about the cultural meanings of secret identities, Fingerioth points out the difference between Superman and most other heroes’ secret identities: In contrast to the “real” Superman and the “masked” Clark Kent, most other heroes’ masks make them “super” and in consequence may make their actions more noble as they chose to do the right thing (57). While the first thought is an interesting issue in terms of identity studies, his second thought does not follow, as Fingerioth earlier states that even the heroes without actual superpowers have something special about them, so they have the moral obligation to do good in the same

way actual superhumans do. “So the secret identity becomes, in the care of the superhero, a badge of honor instead of a concealment of shame” (58).

Unlike the medium comics as such, with no limitations or conventions concerning drawing style or story line, the genre of the superhero gained a certain anticipated look, forcing it into a stylistically tight corner. This process takes decades and works well until, at some point, the corner becomes too tight and something new is created, slowly driving the genre into a different corner. As McCloud puts it, “[g]enres have life cycles. As they age, [...] [it] starts to sag under the weight of too many formula-driven expectations. At that point, its audience might start to dwindle or a new breed of creators might throw away that list and give new life to the genre by rediscovering its basic appeal” (*Making* 225). This is exactly what happened in the sixties, when Jack Kirby brought new life to the superheroes, by reducing the stories to its central motive: strength.

While this also gave a certain direction for the contents of the stories, its biggest impact was on the drawing style, shaping the looks of superhero stories up until now. (ibid) "Bis heute zeichnet sich der Stil der Superhelden-Geschichten durch extrem muskulöse Anatomien aus, extrem tiefe Raumperspektiven, und ständig wachsende Ansprüche“ (McCloud, *Neu Erfinden* 118). The prominent notion in its design is therefore extreme-but-continuous. In terms of immersion, this concept is actually quite ambivalent. By presenting a style as “super” as the stories content and hence creating an equal level of fictionality for both drawings and story, neither one sticks out as extraordinary, which may enhance immersion. On the other hand, it can also break immersion by using unrealistic imagery. Wolk states that the default style of superhero mainstream is

“designed to read clearly and to provoke the strongest possible somatic response. [...] characters [...] are drawn to look as ‘sexy’ as possible [...] people and objects are partly abstracted and partly modeled, but always within a framework of representation. [...] generic mainstream drawing is doggedly quasi-realistic – or, rather, it’s realism pumped up a little into something whose every aspect is cooler and sexier than the reality [...]. It’s meant to provide an escape route into a more thrilling world than our own.” (50)

Following this argumentation, the immersive quality is therefore enhanced by the motive of strength and “extreme-but-continuous” as long as the reality that forms its base is not estranged too much, basically providing a middle way between the two (anti-) immersive effects. As discussed below, it is also possible to see a “sexy” (Wolk uses the term “pretty”) style as negative feature because based on the likeability of the visual component, possible underlying meanings are not challenged so easily (54).

„Und er war sehr klug. Er kannte alle Primzahlen auswendig ... Er war eben alles Wahre, Gute, Schöne, Menschliche, gleichzeitig war er noch so viel mehr. Kurz um, er war Superman” (Hein 10). Even in a German short-story book the significance of Superman (as the ultimate superhero) in terms of who he is metaphorically rather than individually is clear. More often than not does art reflect reality and serve as an indicator of society’s values, fears, and hopes. Following Hein’s characterization, Superman is a symbol of humanity’s positive features, while at the same time exceeding human possibilities. This leaves readers with a paradox feeling of identification and simultaneous alienation, giving rise to the sensation of rescuing whilst being rescued, in other words, rescuing oneself. This theory is actually an extension and slight alteration of Fingeroth’s theory on the orphaned hero. He points out that orphans are commonly a part of superheroes’ personal history (so for example Superman and Spiderman) for two reasons. Firstly, on a fantasy level, an orphan can become anyone he wishes, as there is neither family history nor personal ties that force him in any direction (a point that does not seem fully conclusive, as they are still influenced by how they grow up). Secondly, there is always the theoretical possibility that the reader is actually an orphan himself (even paternity test are not one hundred percent correct), and could have a secret heritage resulting in unexpected powers too. In combination, this legitimizes the high level of fictionality in the superhero narratives as well as increasing the potential for identification with the orphaned hero, leading to the effect that the reader identifies with the hero whilst also being the victim that has to be rescued. As Fingeroth puts it, “We get to save ourselves!” (67).

The key point in Fingeroth’s theory is identification, a notion that is commonly accepted as a major factor in (super) hero myths, including epics as the Odyssey, and as an important immersive quality. It follows that, when alluding to a theoretical common destiny (i.e. being an orphan) is necessary to approximate hero and reader to a level that makes identification possible in the first place, the same paradoxical effect has to be true for all “real” heroes (i.e. those that are actually human) who are already human enough to feel connected to. In this respect Batman, a “real” hero and an orphan, would even fall in both categories. Most of the antiheroes discussed in this thesis fall into the second category, which, when considering their more pessimistic nature, begs the question as to how much readers actually want to identify with them. As we will see later on, there is a connection between character flaws in the heroes and the success of this *dual identity effect*.

Following these theories on superheroes, two different representational systems can be seen as ground for interpreting the myth: On a broader scale, there is the hero as a product and

representation of society; on a more intimate scope, the hero represents each reader's values and hopes, and serves as an icon to identify with as well as aspire to. Lastly, there is also a third category, namely superheroes as metaphors for ideas. The particular advantages of a visual medium with respect to metaphors have been pointed out above in connection to the metaphors used in *Maus*, but are of course true for the whole genre.

[A] form that intrinsically lends itself to grand metaphors and subjective interpretations of the visual world goes well with characters who have particular allegorical values. Superhero cartoonists can present narratives whose images and incidents are unlike our own sensory experience of the world [...] but can still be understood as a metaphorical representation of our world. (Wolk 92)

Spinning this thought a little further and connecting it to the phenomenon of comics culture, a fan base so extensive it leaves other media standing in the dark, it might be argued that on an abstract level, immersion in comics is only a metaphor for immersion into the 'parallel universe' of comics culture.

The first of the symbolic structures to discuss has been mentioned in the discussion of the features of superheroes - society. The fact that heroes represent the society that produced them, has two significant consequences: Primarily, as people generally like to see their good features when looking in a mirror, the values of society that are represented are only the positive ones. In other (exaggerated) words, a hero will stand for the American dream, but will not stress general ignorance of foreign politics. The striving for good in all aspects is nothing less than the pursuit of human perfectibility. While Superman tries to be the perfect human when he is really not human at all, Batman tries to be super-human by appearing dangerous, giving him a slightly psychotic touch (Wolk 97). The second aspect is that, like a superpower in itself, the hero will always know what is right, because the rules that govern society are the same as the rules that govern him (Fingerroth 17).

The second level, superheroes as metaphors for ideas, could also be seen as either part of the point on society, or society's rules as part of the general ideas. Yet, even though the ideas represented in comics are logically linked to the value systems that produce them, they do not *have* to be, and can also be seen as standing outside of any value system altogether. Therefore, they are discussed separately here. In order to find the most general idea, one applicable to all of humanity, one is forced to look outside of genre and medium specific borders and ignore geographical as well as historical borders. The question is, if there is any notion that is generally true for humans and could consequently be represented by superheroes. The answer

might lie in reversing the notion of the ultimate villain: the vampire. Just as the hero, he has been haunting humanity in all ages and all parts of the world. He is described as a metaphor for “unconscious desires, with the release of what has been psychically repressed” (Byron) and later even as the repressed desires of a whole society (or even humanity itself) in the “collective unconscious”, a “racial memory [...] [in a] hidden compartment of our minds” by Carl Jung (Frost 4). Hence, it might be possible to turn around this metaphorical reading and see the hero as the manifestation of a human prototype, so perfect that no human can ever comply with it, but representing what everyone hopes for and desires to be. In other words, the hero as the metaphor for humanity’s repressed hopes and aspirations (repressed because living up to it is not possible). Just as vampires have been deconstructed over the past one hundred years and consequently have lost most of their horror in order for people to embrace their desires, heroes (i.e. the desire for perfection) can also be said to have been deconstructed alongside the genre in the 80’s, resulting in the appearance of the anti-superhero. Although the comparison might not be the first thing that one thinks of in connection with heroes, there is yet another parallel that stems from one of people’s most common fear: unpredictability. One of the appeals the figure of the vampire offers readers is eternity and with it continuity, providing a certain safety for trophobes. When looking at the figure of the superhero, there is a striking similarity: “There’s a permanence there, a continuity, a sense of predictability that means a lot to us in a world as uncertain as ours is” (Fingerroth 37).

A less abstract and more specific level is discussed by Wolk, who sees heroes as quasi-allegorical figures. They “provide bold metaphors for discussing ideas or reifying abstractions into narrative fiction. They’re the closest thing that exists right now to the ‘novel of ideas’” (92) For him, what makes them interesting “is what particular characters and their histories *mean*” (ibid). The examples he gives include, amongst others, Spiderman’s preoccupation and struggle with the intrinsic union of power and responsibility, the X-Men symbolizing political conflicts on the grounds of belonging to or separating from society due to their differences, and the Hulk as a “metaphor for the dehumanizing effects of rage” (ibid 96). The ideas represented through the characters have to change in the graphic novel, alongside the tone, to something more sinister. Yet, the basic principle holds true. As Evey states upon V’s death: “If I take off that mask, something will go away forever, be diminished because whoever you are isn’t as big as the idea of you” (250).

Focusing on the third level, the superhero as a metaphor for each individual, it should first be noted that each individual is also part of the society and will share at least some of the values

imposed through this level. In this way it can be said that there is a double effect for readers, making the metaphors more powerful, when values are represented that fall into both society's, and the individual's system of values. From what has been said so far about the positive values being represented, it is easy to assume that the same holds true on an individual level. Yet, a number of points can be easily forgotten amongst the overwhelming theories concerning a diagrammatical approach: "Kids relate to superhero comics by identifying with their characters – understanding, on some level, that the struggles of the colorful characters on the page are metaphors for their own isolation and longing for power, identity, and acceptance" (Fingeroth72). What is possibly even more important in this list than showing how representation of individuals is also part of superheroes' attraction, is the negative character of the feelings represented. While in the more general approach discussed above, the focus was on the positive sides of society, the focus here clearly shifts to undesirable notions. When seen in connection with the discussion about secret identities and costumes/masks above, the issues of identity and acceptance are especially compatible with the visual medium. The pictures raise the questions if being someone else will make life easier or if true identity can be created from scratch, so the words do not have to anymore.

To summarize, based on an exploration of the three levels that constitute to the superheroes' appearance and effect, a clearer image of the properties involved has evolved. Most obviously in their appearance on the page, are power and a certain aesthetic value. Costumes have bright colors, people's physiques are stereotyped and exaggerated resulting in superheroes' "sexy" appearance, therefore producing a strong reaction. The muscular men and skinny women are, as is the depiction of reality, a more appealing version of the readers' world, inviting escapist moods. Adding to this are certain internal features and abilities. Most prominently, the superpowers (either inherent or obtained) or skills which surpass the average human's (while not being completely impossible). The reluctance to change has been commented on in detail above, and plays an important role in the myth, especially when considered in relation to the features luck and immortality, the latter actually forming one of the most prominent characteristics of superheroes, as well as an important border separating them from antiheroes. Furthermore, the heroes' superpowers are generally used to defend and protect a system of core values (incidentally also true for villains), that are shared by the reader. In order to protect this system, he needs strength of character, and mostly a secret identity where he can live it out. On a more abstract level, superheroes represent society (or at least the parts it wants to see represented), the individual (including negative aspects such as struggle for one's identity), and concepts in general, leaving a lot of ground for interpretation.

What becomes clear, is that having powers like Superman, while being the prototype of the genre, is not the only way to become a superhero. The actual superpower is only one of the requirements of the category. More importantly, the definition of a superhero enables us to exclude other groups from it. For example, it allows us to explain why villains with superpowers cannot be considered superheroes on a more profound basis than simply good vs. bad (immortality and metaphorical representation are an issue here). So... why superheroes?

It has been suggested by Fingerioth that a society functions similarly to a family, wanting to hear the “old stories” - meaning society’s myths - over and over again, to see good triumph over evil. While it is certainly true that there are recurring archetypal themes, simply seeing good triumph over evil at the end of the day is oversimplified and would not be enough to explain the success of these stories, as it completely leaves out the effect identification and in connection thereto aesthetic illusion, plays. To stay within this metaphor, it is fair to say that no one wants to hear the grandfather-stories over and over again simply because he triumphs in the end (knowing how stories end does take out a big part of the excitement), but rather because of the gripping way the stories are told (Fingerioth 24). After providing a basis by defining the essential characteristics of superheroes, it is now possible to treat this subject more thoroughly and give first answers to the question as to why superhero stories are so successful.

When seeing superheroes as characters who differ from the reader substantially and do not have any further purpose than to react to villains’ attacks and restore order, the reason for their popularity could be said to be that it “is it easier to read of a superior being [...] outclassing us than from a guy from down the block who was just luckier or stronger or smarter” (Fingerioth 32). Yet, there is clearly more behind the costume than muscles used for a good purpose. Foremost, when considering the thoughts about heroes as a metaphor for society’s values, it is clear that readers can, and most likely do, stand for the same ideas. It is not necessary to save the universe from a meteor in order to demonstrate responsibility and a readiness to help; saving the whole city from an evil magnat is not the only way to uphold justice; and jeopardizing one’s private life in order to fulfill other duties is definitely not something heroes can claim for themselves. Therefore, superheroes’ actions cannot really be seen as a way to “outclass” readers, but simply acting on the same grounds but on a bigger scale. The advantage of this approach is its applicability not only to the superheroes with supernatural powers, but also for the “real world” heroes. Therefore, to differentiate between

the two in terms of similarity and comparability to the reader, deducing that the latter might “make you a little uncomfortable” (ibid 32) because of their humanity, would be incorrect.

As far as the changes following the deconstruction of superheroes are concerned, a different model has to be applied. As a natural consequence of deconstruction, the antiheroes do not stand for the same value systems anymore, even if the values are the same. The characters are not supposed to make one feel a little uncomfortable – they are supposed to make one feel very uncomfortable and reflect on the genre and its underlying structures of representations. By introducing a world that is more like our own (especially concerning its problems), inhabited by heroes that are more like us - not because they are actually human, but rather because they share this grimmer world - identification with the world takes over some of the identification with the heroes’ values. To clarify this, Rorschach provides a good example: The world of *Watchmen* is on the verge of a nuclear war (which also has to be seen in context with its publication date), the city is a fictional New York, and the issues treated include, amongst others, politics, violence, and war. In other words, it resembles the readers’ reality quite closely (or at least closer to reality than the problem of a meteor hitting earth). Rorschach is portrayed as (slightly) crazy, wears his mask all the time, talks and writes in ungrammatical sentences, and has serious anger issues. Nevertheless, he stands for a well respected value - justice. Even if it means hurting innocent people or dying himself: “There is good and there is evil, and evil must be punished even in the face of Armageddon” (I 24).

2.4.2. Anti(-super)heroes – Grim and gritty?

Based upon the findings of the previous chapters, it is now possible to investigate the change that happened in the superhero genre from the ‘80s onwards further. Keeping the same framework used for the discussion of superheroes above (internal/external features as well as metaphors) a comparison between them will be easier.

As mentioned in the introduction, the term super-antihero is used for lack of a better one. It marks a new class of heroes that neither really fits super- nor antiheroes. A character representing the latter category is described as “[a] main character in a book, play, or film who is an ordinary or unpleasant person and lacks the qualities that you expect a hero to have” (Longman Online Dictionary), or “[a] protagonist who is a non-hero or the antithesis of a traditional hero [...] [and] may be incompetent, unlucky, clumsy, dumb, ugly, or clownish” (Wheeler). Regarding the general definition of the hero above as “someone who rises above his or her fears and limitations to achieve something extraordinary [...] [who] embodies what

we believe is best in ourselves [...]and] is a standard to aspire to as well as an individual to be admired” (Fingeroth 14) on the one side, and the villains, who spend their time “doing what we sometimes, in our darkest, secret moments, would like to be doing: plotting – and executing – revenge” (ibid) on the other, the antihero solidifies as a compromise. Neither is it someone readers want to identify with because of his strength and abilities (apart from a certain romanticized view some may hold), nor is it someone who possesses only our darkest features. The fuzzy line between antihero and villain is one of the main points raised in the graphic novels discussed here.

It follows that this new class shares the classical antiheroic qualities for most intents and purposes, but cannot be subsumed under *just* that category. Most problematic seems the “lack of heroic qualities”, which is certainly not true for *Watchmen*, *Batman*, or *V*. Rather, the focus has to lie on the darker mood that results in the impossibility to have *all* the qualities that make a hero. It has been stated before that at some point the classic hero gained super-powers, hence superheroes can be seen as a subcategory of the hero. In analogy, it can be argued that the new superheroes are actually a subcategory of the antihero. To explain the distinctiveness of the subgenre, its evolvment from the superheroes as a way to deconstruct the genre, has to be acknowledged. Hence, anti-superheroes simultaneously continue in the footsteps of superheroes (therefore being heroes) and deconstruct them (therefore being antiheroes).

Although not a major influence, the parallels to another antiheroic subgenre are interesting and should be mentioned: the Byronic hero. With intellectual and emotional abilities that excel the average man’s, he displays arrogance, confidence, a high level of sensitivity and self-conscience (Thorslev qtd. in Modi). “In one form or another, he rejects the values and moral codes of society and [...] is often a figure of repulsion, as well as fascination” (ibid). What stands out in this description is the relation to society’s values as well as the heightened intellectual abilities, both of which are not necessarily features of the general picture of the antihero and therefore validate the comparison. The distinctly romantic features of the category are obviously in harsh contrast to the typical anti-superhero.

I will now turn to an analysis of the internal features of anti-superheroes in general as well as the books’ heroes. The first three features that are somewhat connected are fearlessness, skill, and luck.

Fearlessness, as the notion to never possess fear, is definitely a feature that holds true for the new antiheroes as well as for superheroes. This should be seen especially in connection to the

system of beliefs, the determination to protect it, and the strength of character. These elements are so crucial for the anti-superheroes, that feeling fear is never an option. Quite on the contrary, fear is created by them and used as a means to an end to gain knowledge (as in *Watchmen*), force others to reflect on their own values (as in *V for Vendetta*), or as source for amusement (as in *Batman*): “the one who scared the crap out of everybody and laughed at all of the rest of us for being the envious cowards we were” (Miller introduction).

The possession of a superhuman amount of luck is a matter of interpretation, depending on what each reader feels to be the “normal” amount of luck. When orientating oneself in terms of Fingerioth, the extra grain of luck consists of fighting without getting seriously hurt and dodging large amounts of bullets (16), but could also be expanded to include knowing the right people, stumbling upon evidence, or unintentionally finding assistants who perfect the completion of the plan. Therefore, depending on the line one draws between what is normal and what is not, luck can or cannot be counted as a feature of anti-superheroes. When looking at fight scenes in general it is fair to say that luck is an undeniable element. During a fight against the police Batman even thinks “lucky—lucky—”, as he dodges the bullets. (Miller 124) Yet, when looking at the closely connected feature of immortality, the assigning of luck as a basic characteristic of the new antiheroes becomes more difficult. As mentioned above, this is one of the main points separating the superheroes from the anti-superheroes. One of the reasons is the new approach to the stories as non-serialized works rather than endless sequels; hence the survival of the hero is not a necessity anymore. In addition, the aim to present a different, darker tone and gain a broader readership is a good ground for a mortal hero, whose amoral actions may thence be interpreted to have consequences, but also relating them to the ancient heroes. This can be observed in all three graphic novels discussed in this thesis: In *V for Vendetta* the antihero dies in the end through wounds from a fight, questioning his portion of luck.⁶ He asks for his body to be given “a Viking funeral” (260), and is laid in a subway car filled with explosives in order to perform a grand finale by blowing up Downing street. The chapter, adequately called “Vallhalla”, supports the connection to the ancient heroes, as does V’s funeral. *Watchmen* is filled with the deaths, or at least the downfall and resulting fecklessness, of antiheroes, and explaining the sudden accumulation of deaths in their ranks is the mystery that drives the plot forward. With a little stretch of the category, *Batman* also contains this feature, as he is wounded badly during a fight and in the end fakes his death in order to raise a new generation of anti-superheroes in hiding. Therefore, even though he is not

⁶ Although it is suggested that he lets himself be killed.

actually dead, he died in society's eyes and now lives underground, which can at least be seen as a symbolic death. Nevertheless, the role death plays for Batman can be observed in the first page, where Wayne says "this would be a good death... but not good enough." (10) Yet, only when we look at the last page, can we fully appreciate the significance: "This will be a good life. Good enough" (199). It can therefore be reasoned that, while death is not impossible, it is easier to meet the demands of a "good enough" life than of a "good enough" death. A symbolic death is also true for those of the *Watchmen* characters that do not die in the end as they either turn out to be the villain all along, agree to participate in covering up the murder of a few million New Yorkers thus symbolically killing some part of their value system, or leave earth and humanity behind for a galaxy "less complicated" (XII 23) where humanity is a mere scientific project, thence leaving the last human part behind. As the anti-superheroes do not represent society in the same way superheroes do (which does not mean that they cannot represent parts of the system), the death of an anti-superhero will not suggest the same symbolic meaning. One advantage this brings forth is the heightened suspense due to the fact that anything can happen. Again, this is proven in all three novels is the end with turns that most readers will not expect and that would not have been possible in a superhero story.

The question of change is far more difficult to answer for anti-superheroes than it is for superheroes due to the systems they represent. While the superhero's function is closely linked to the positive core values, there is a much wider range of possibilities for the new antihero – just as for antiheroes in general. He still represents some positive values and ideas, yet, is often a mirror for social commentary and political critique and there are few easily definable characters among their ranks. In addition, the non-serialized nature is an obstacle to change on a longer, steadier road, and leaves only change as found in an 'Entwicklungsroman'. Therefore, the internal change as a result of changes through either serialization and experience, or the change in the represented society, cannot be found in the antihero. Nevertheless, characters do not completely stand still, as can be seen in V's growing attachment to Evey, or Batman's to Robin.

The change described before as *external*, namely describing the changes brought to society though actions of the hero, and incompatible with the superhero, are quite important in the anti-superheroes' stories. It needs to be clarified, that the society here can refer to the fictional society, as well as the readers' society on a metaphorical basis. Because of their critical attitude, a certain reformatory dimension is present in all the protagonists' actions. The best illustration for this is *V for Vendetta*, whose antihero is not afraid to kill in order to force

people to think about the system they live in. Ironically, he is also a result of the system and hence just as much a representation of the forces that coined him as superheroes are. Through his actions he does represent the system's non-existent hesitation to harm or kill, as long as it serves a purpose in the value system. Still, the reason he acts this way is part of a drive towards such an external change and the creed that society needs to be changed:

You were already in a prison. You've been in a prison all your life [...] All convicts, hunched and deformed by the smallness of their cells; the weight of their chains; the unfairness of their sentences... I didn't put you in a prison, Evey. I just showed you the bars. [...] You're in a prison, Evey. You were born in a prison. You've been in a prison so long, you no longer believe there's a world outside. (pp 167)

In *Watchmen* and *Batman* change is also an important issue, yet the border to reaction (to change) is a little blurred. In *Watchmen*, the protagonists fight crime in order to restore order and justice in the fictional New York, while the villain is the only one to really act, therefore following the rules of no external change. Yet, on a bigger scale, the story wants readers to reflect on their own *real* society, hence the antiheroes do reform. *Batman* shows the same problems, as it also deals with a world that has gone off balance politically and socially, and its citizens who are either scared or violent. It follows for anti-superhero novels, that society's influence on the actual characters is minimal and gains its importance only as ground for the external (relating to the real world rather than the fictional one) change.

The strength of character and determination necessary to protect a system of core values mentioned above, is as true for heroes as it is for villains and anti-superheroes. What differs in comparison to the hero is the extent to which these values are congruent with those of society. The antihero will certainly share some of these values and will be determined to protect them, which allows readers to see him as a kind of hero, even if the methods to do so are not ethically correct. The ambivalence is exactly what makes these characters so interesting, as they stand between the hero, whose values and actions are 'society approved', and the villain, who neither has accepted values, nor sets actions that fit the general value system. Batman, for instance, believes in justice and restores it with the help of violence; V believes in freedom (of thought), and in order to teach it to Evey, he imprisons her. The paradox inherent in all the characters is especially important in interpreting their function as metaphorical figures. Furthermore, it ultimately plays an important role in the relationship to graphic novels⁷.

⁷ See chapters five and six.

The feature of the secret identity can, in its basic principles, be adopted from the discussion of superheroes: having a “real” person behind a mask helps identification or, put differently, knowing that even the hero is not always a hero is comforting. As far as the relationship between man and mask is concerned, it can be argued that, due to the reformatory rather than reactionary attitude, the identity of the man is stronger and shines through even when wearing the mask. This makes identification easier as there is always something “real”, but also creates a more realistic light on the whole. The reader involvement concerning the masked hero discussed above also ties in with this theory: As an even stronger urge to imagine the man behind the mask can be expected if the personality is more present. Yet, while with superheroes identification was a rather obvious goal, with the new antiheroes, this does not seem so clear anymore. Due to the thin line between hero and villain, there cannot be a general and certain answer to the question if readers really want to identify with the antiheroes, or if it is something else that draws them to it. For the moment it should suffice to say that the difficult position antiheroes occupy is one of the reasons that, even though the level of ‘reality’ the characters portray may be higher than that of superheroes, the potential for identification is lower due to their semi-legal actions.

The other interesting aspect of the second identity that differs from what has been discussed above is the tension created by two identities. Not only does the antihero seem more real to the reader, but also to the ‘real’ identity of the character. This leads to the assumption that the character identifies more strongly with his alter ego, enhancing the tension between the two versions and creating a blurred vision of what seems to be real and what seems to be fiction. On a meta-level this can also be seen as a commentary on the fictionality of superhero stories. Nevertheless, it leads to a stronger connection between man and mask that can prove dangerous when the scope of what is real is lost. This is portrayed in *Watchmen*, where Veidt (originally an anti-hero), turns into the villain and plans a mass murder for the greater good of humanity. As this is revealed in the final chapter, he is shown in his costume, obviously unable to separate reality from fiction anymore. Rorschach and the Comedian are further good examples for this *identity-blending*: The Comedian fights and lives in Vietnam as his alter ego rather than himself, although it seems that his real identity did not differ much from his ‘super’ identity from the beginning on. Rorschach never fully takes off his mask on his own account (not even when he eats) unless he preaches about the end of the world on the street. Only in his very last panel he takes it off, after which he gets killed. Furthermore, he quasi-narrates the story through a journal, Rorschach’s journal, proving how much his second

identity has merged with, and overtaken, the 'real' Walter Kovacs' in terms of importance. Bruce Wayne suffers a similar destiny in *Batman*, where the vigilante's impact on the billionaire grows continuously and ends with the destruction of his worldly goods, a final deadly fight against Superman (implying of course he would rather die as his true identity Batman than Bruce Wayne) and "resurrection" as a commander of an underground army - not Batman anymore, but even less so Bruce Wayne. Yet, the most obvious example in the three graphic novels is V, who is never once shown without his mask on. Although strongly connected to his history, which also provides his motives and drives him to act, the masked man is firmly in control. The ignorance of the real face behind the mask leads to the effect that V is much less of a person and more of an idea, hence the metaphorical value of the masked vigilante is much higher than that of any of the others. If the question were who the 'real' person is, the answer would have to be the mask and not the man: "If I take off that mask, something will go away forever, be diminished because whoever you are isn't as big as the idea of you" (250).

In contrast to the identity-blending and theory on the higher level of reality of characters with reformatory aims, *Watchmen* also presents a second caliber of new antiheroes created to deconstruct the honor and values connected to them: "Silk Spectre [...] was probably the first of us ever to realize that there could be commercial benefits in being a masked adventurer [...] I think we were all too unsure of our own motives to cast aspersions upon anybody else" (II 30). Publicity is suddenly something that is important not only for the masked adventurers' second identity, but also for their first. The first contact with Sally Jupiter happened through her agent, who "realized that without the occasional gimmick to revitalize flagging public interest, the fad for long underwear heroes would eventually fade [...] thus suggested placing a large ad in the Gazette asking other mystery men to come forward" (II 31). The resulting effect is a rather identification breaking one, for the heroic element of defending values because of an inner motive, gives way to the simple human pleasure of being in the spotlight. As a result, this secondary motive for "adventuring" also questions the system of core values and the determination to protect it. Yet, even though publicity is a motive or at least an additional reason for some of the new antiheroes, it would be wrong to generalize this deconstructive notion as a feature of the whole category. As Hollis Mason states in his autobiography in *Watchmen*:

For my part, all those brilliant and resourceful sleuths and heroes offered a glimpse of a perfect world where morality worked the way it was *meant* to. [...] I can't answer for anybody else, and I suspect that all our answers would be different anyway, but in my case it's fairly straightforward: I like the idea of

adventure, and I feel bad unless I'm doing good [...] what it comes down to for me is that I dressed up like an owl and fought crime because it was fun and because it needed doing and because I goddamn felt like it. (I 31)

This paragraph sums up the basic features, as it shows that anti-superheroes act partly on behalf of society's values, and partly on their own behalf. The secret identity therefore becomes a requisite in order to feel good rather than "a badge of honor" (Fingerroth 58) as it is for superheroes.

The second bundle of features discussed concerns the appearance of the anti-superheroes. Just as strength, resembling the moral superiority, was the main visual characteristic for superheroes, the portrayal of antiheroes is adjusted to the dichotomy between heroic behavior and self-fulfillment. In other words, the prototype of the new antihero comic, does not portray the same muscle packed characters one would have expected to see in a comic before. Apart from keeping the inner and outer features in relation, another reason for reducing the powerful appearance is to avoid too much somatic response which in turn leads to a high potential for immersion and hence a worse perception of the critical message of the graphic novels. By portraying more normal physiques, the focus can shift to the actions rather than the subject. Examples of this can be seen in both Rorschach and V - slim figures who wear masks all the time, are skilled fighters but wear normal fitting clothes, not giving away much. Yet, this is not a unified look, as a study of the other characters of *Watchmen* will show. The character that sticks out the most in terms of classical heroic appearance, is the villain Veidt. He is well built, very athletic, and wears a costume with a cape. In addition, his blond hair and good looks create definite association with Germanic heroes. The other 'real' hero (real in terms of his appearance) is Dr. Manhattan, who is nevertheless disqualified as a hero for his interests are not connected with humanity any longer. Choosing the two costumed heroes who are furthest from behaving heroically to be portrayed as "classic" heroes is certainly part of the deconstruction Moore and Gibbons aim at. Nite Owl and Juspezczy also display a similarity to the default superhero if not quite as pronounced. Furthermore, they too are in harsh contrast to the superhero as they are primarily concerned with themselves rather than with saving anyone else. Batman also shows similarities to the superhero-style. The problem faced here, is that *Batman* is still somewhat part of the 'old' hero comics due to its serialized history. Miller's main achievement lies in the new approach on a psychological level, which "blew the dust off Batman's grim, gaudy subtext and made it the center of a brutal, smart, exquisitely drawn satire" (Wolk 8). It portrays a world that is "both familiar and foreign to us, a bleak foretelling of what could be our urban future" in which "anger would be the most rational reaction to the

insanity implied in the spire of every building, in the corruption in every corner of society” (Fingeroth 132). In other words, Miller’s aim was to legitimize a character in a world that made dressing up as a bat comprehensible (Rehfeld). In “Behind the Painted Smile”, Moore comments on the external features associated with superheroes, showing how aware he and Lloyd were of the problem: “Dave designed a costume [...] it had a big ‘V’ on the front formed from the belts and straps attached to the uniform, and while it looked nice, I think both Dave and I were uneasy about falling into such a straightforward super-hero cliché with what we saw as having the potential for being something utterly fresh and different” (274). As far as the costume is concerned, the cape is a feature many will associate with superheroes, although not even all classic heroes have one. *Watchmen* takes this external feature as a matter of ridicule when it describes the destiny of Dollar Bill: He is employed as an “in-house super-hero by one of the major national banks” (II 30) but gets shot when his cloak, designed by the bank for maximum publicity, gets caught in the door making him an easy target. Besides making fun of the cape, this also comments on the economical side of super-heroes and the importance of mass-media.

It can therefore be concluded, that there is a trend towards a portrayal of the new antiheroes as more realistic, even if it cannot yet be called a feature. *Watchmen*’s aim, as mentioned, is to show and mock the typical features of superhero comics, therefore it does not seem correct to use the portrayal of Veidt and the others as counter argument, especially as the protagonist Rorschach adheres to the new style. As far as Batman is concerned, even though he is portrayed in the same power- and strength-stressing manner, the book offers a harsh and cruel drawing style, showing a searing Superman as well as Batman contorted with pain a number of times. This “ugly drawing style” counters the “sexy” style mentioned above and relocates the reader’s focus on the story and underlying layers of meaning rather than the characters. All three graphic novels discussed here can be said to use this technique in a slightly alienated manner. They all show gruesome pictures, even if the drawing style is not necessarily grim as in *Batman*: The beginning of *Watchmen*’s chapter XII shows six images, each filling a whole page (breaking with the nine panel pattern), of the massacre’s aftermath. The effect this produces is definitely chilling and even anti-illusionist. The images of the resettlement camps in *V for Vendetta* are ugly and horrible, even if the drawing style is not particularly so. As it will be argued later in more detail, what seems to be more important for immersion than identification with the characters, is identification with the world. Therefore, the obstacle of a hero portrayed as too strong or powerful, which seems not yet to be completely overcome, is not as much an obstacle in the big picture after all.

The third dimension of superheroes that was explored, was their function as a symbolic figure, based on the idea that readers want to identify with the heroes or the ideas they represent. Identification is also the basic component to the *dual-identity effect* discussed above, which enables the readers to “save themselves”. In order to answer if and, if so, how this effect can be applied to the new antiheroes, it is important to establish the relationship, to the reader from an individual as well as a general basis.

The latter angle, namely antiheroes as a metaphor for society, already shows a very different picture from the original one. As opposed to the superheroes, which represent the positive values of the society that produced them, the anti-superheroes are by no means allegories of only “good” values. In general, they feature good values paired with vices, are driven by motives that are far from purely good, or pursue their goal in manners beyond that which can be called flawless. This paradox was mentioned above. It could therefore be argued, that anti-superheroes present a more wholesome and accurate representation of society. If the antiheroes of *Watchmen* are symbols of a society, this society includes, amongst others violence, cruelty, questionable ethics, alcoholism, and the opinion that the end always justifies the means.

In other words, this society is not one readers will want to identify with; it is not one they *have* to identify with, because it *is* their society (if exaggerated). Nevertheless, paradox as it may sound, identification with the hero is not a necessary consequence of recognizing one’s own society represented by him. This stems, I believe, from the fact that in order to identify with another character, one needs to momentarily break partly from one’s own identity. As this proves a rather drastic step, sufficient motivation and desire to do so and consequently deliberate choice are necessary. Therefore, if (even after realizing the symbolic value of a character in connection with society) a reader does not want to identify with a character for some reason (one may not agree with that society’s values and vices, or the individual character’s) he or she will not do so even if the character was an exact representation of themselves. Yet, this does not mean the allegory is lost on the readers. Rather, it helps immersion into the world of the story (usually a scenario in which the flaws of the represented world are enhanced to an extreme), which does not portray a break with one’s own identity but simply a break with society and relocation into a different, yet quite familiar world. In

other words, on a symbolic level we identify with the world (quasi-realistically representing our own) represented by the antihero, but not with the antihero representing it.⁸

To clarify this, *Watchmen* provides a good example (but so do the other two books): Taking Rorschach as the antihero, he represents a world in which truth and justice are still important values, but to achieve his goal anything is allowed. He also portrays how a hypocritical society is in the pursuit of its values, because the reason he investigates the murders of the other anti-superheroes is obviously at least partly selfish, as he does not want to be the next victim. Furthermore, he represents a world in which violence is not merely acceptable as a means to an end, but can also be enjoyed (he calls it his “exercise”). For readers this presents, to an extent, a familiar situation to their own society, yet maybe not one with which they morally agree. Hence, even if not attractive enough to identify with personally (in the sense of “another person”, i.e. the antihero), the reader will most likely identify with the society portrayed and transfer the personification of the ‘real’ society again onto the society in the book.

In relation to the second level of metaphorical representation, that of ideas, Wolk sees *Watchmen* as the first big “superhero metacomic, whose point is commentary on the conventions of superhero stories” (105). From this point onward, the new superhero comics proved “an ideal framework for discussing the complexities of morality and ethics” (ibid 99). Above it was shown that the superhero can be considered to be a symbol for human wishes and hopes. First and foremost stands the desire to live up to all those wishes, in other words to be perfect. This notion has been thoroughly deconstructed and almost mocked in the anti-superhero stories. This is not to say that antiheroes do not have values or wishes they protect, but rather that the notion to satisfy all those wishes and live up to all those values is simply impossible. It follows that from a universal perspective the new antihero represents the notion of dichotomy and ambivalence, the universal idea that no one can only be good, that not even those who risk their lives heroically for others can ever reach this desired perfection. This can be seen in the fact that all the antiheroes act as vigilantes and hence against the legislative and executive system which they do not fully support and do not mind to elude (in contrast to superheroes who generally support the system and simply want to help). All antiheroes in the three graphic novels demonstrate this: Batman wants justice but deliberately acts against the law and according to his own, Veidt brings peace to the world at the cost of the lives of three million people, and V wants a world with true democracy as its form of government, but

⁸On other levels (perspective, portrayal of movements) identification with the characters is certainly an aim.

tortures Evey to make her truly understand his ideas. Furthermore, the feature of continuity that went hand in hand with being a prototype for human perfection is no longer valid for antiheroes. In a world in which ambivalence is the only certainty, there is no place for either. Anti-superheroes are the only possible heroes in the societies portrayed in these graphic novels.

From an individual perspective, it can be stated that each one of the heroes “means” something, to use Wolk’s term, just as it was true for superheroes. The only alteration is that each positive allegory is inextricably linked with a negative one.

What has been considered so far is only the notion of metaphors as representations of general ideas rather than more specific and personal ones. Yet, in order to fully understand the connection between reader and character, we have to consider the ties on a more personal level which may prove that identification is possible after all. As it is true for superheroes, antiheroes may also stand for some values that are part of society’s value system as well as one’s own. The struggle for power, acceptance, and identity is certainly also represented by antiheroes. Yet, due to their ambivalent nature, they are especially apt to portray inner struggle, a fact enhanced through the division in pictures and text.

The bottom line is, that identification with antiheroes on a metaphorical level is possible, but not very easy. While they are good metaphors for individual issues, they can never get rid of the ambiguity surrounding them. This makes it hard to forget they are only characters in a comic book. Even if a reader identifies with the antihero in the beginning because of the positive values he personifies, sooner or later the correspondent negative side will appear, leaving an even stronger impact. Moore uses this in *V for Vendetta* to create sympathy for V, who rescues Evey from a delicate situation. Only a few pages later he is shown to blow up parliament, later on murdering old enemies. If following this metaphorical approach it can therefore be argued that the double identity effect is greatly diminished if not completely impossible for anti-superheroes.

2.4.3. So... do we really want to be Watchmen?

Summing up the previous pages, the new antiheroes or anti-superheroes can be defined as a new breed of heroes that combine elements of the superhero as well as the antihero. Fearlessness and a secret identity are heirlooms of the superhero. In addition, fear is used as a weapon and the internal struggle for the ‘real’ identity (and in consequence identity-blending)

is even fiercer. A generally darker mood combined with new motives, both reformatory and selfish, lead to a picture that seems quite realistic in contrast to that of superheroes. This is also supported by a tendency to gain distance from the impressive physiques and give a more natural look to the protagonists. The switch from internal to external change and the depiction of very gruesome images, completes the list of features both enhancing and hindering identification. Yet, it can be argued that on the whole the features of the anti-superheroes are more realistic than those of the previous categories and it seems as if identification would be a natural consequence. Nevertheless, when incorporating the metaphorical component into the equation, there is a shift away from identification. As shown above, while on both the general and the individual level the antiheroes represent what can be deemed positive values of both society and individual, they also represent negative ones. While being flawed can make identification easier as one feels closer to that character, too many flaws or such that are too severe, can hinder it. It is precisely this concept that helps the classic antiheroes to gain sympathy and it is the exaggeration of it that hinders it in the anti-superheroes.

The general problem seems to be, that the first instinct when reading a book is to identify with a character and simultaneously with the world they are in. Yet, in anti-superhero stories one is inclined to embrace the fictional world and the ideas represented instead. A further problem often stems from the histories of the characters which are often so horrible that identification is not possible. This is especially true for V, who was imprisoned in a death-camp like facility, or the protagonist of *Maus*, who survives the Holocaust. Where exactly one draws the line between possible and impossible identification with the character's history is of course up to the individual. As we will see, graphic novels have a high immersive potential. Nevertheless, it should be kept in mind that the agenda behind the story is often a critical one that deliberately deconstructs and breaks that potential.

Is it, in consequence, correct to assume that the answer to the question *why we want to be Watchmen* is, that we really do not want to be Watchmen at all? Put simply: no. The only thing shown so far is that on a level of personal relation, antiheroes do not invite identification. Nevertheless, it should not be forgotten that as a reader we *want* to identify with characters, and we *do* identify with the fictional world. It follows, that, in order to “be” Watchmen there have to be other devices at work that even out the anti-identification mechanism on the level of characters. What these mechanisms are, how they work, and in what ways they connect to the concept of anti-superheroes will be discussed in the following chapters. This will allow an answer to the question of how antihero stories in graphic novels

achieve their immersive effect and will provide a basis for judging if graphic novels are indeed the perfect medium for the new antiheroes.

3. “Lost in a good book” - Aesthetic Illusion

3.1. In general

“Do you want to make comics that pull readers into the world of the story? A reading experience so seamless that it doesn’t feel like reading at all but like being there? Populated by characters so vivid they seem as real as the reader’s own family?” (McCloud *Making* 1, emphasis added). This quote is from the first page of a ‘how-to’ book on making comics. It emphasizes the importance of drawing the reader into the world of the story. In common usage the term “illusion” suggests a misconception of reality that needs to be corrected or at least admitted and clarified. In psychology it describes a process of subjectively reconstructing and expanding objective impressions in a manner that allows for its repetition. Hallucinations, on the other hand, do not have this potential for continuity, and can therefore not be repeated. In both cases, the main element is a certain deception in the perception of reality, which has to be adjusted. Therefore, the term bears rather negative connotations. In narrative theory, this negativity is largely non-existent. In part it may have survived in the general opposition to the academic treatment of (aesthetic) illusion based on the argument of subjectivity and therefore incomprehensibility.

“To get lost in a good book” is a state that almost everyone has experienced at one time or another. To forget for a few moments how the chair feels you are sitting in, how the room smells, what it looks like - simply forget reality. This is so important for humans that we are already introduced to the experience as children (*Harry Potter* is only a recent example in a long line of predecessors). This feeling is also known as “being immersed”, the phenomenon as “immersion”, “aesthetic illusion” or “recentering”. For the most part these concepts were academically treated rather one-sidedly as a property of literary narrative, although classic art (in the sense of paintings) has also been subject to the idea. This is not to suggest that other forms are completely omitted in the treatment of their impact on the reader, but generally the “high art” forms held this monopoly for a long time. Film has, by now, gained the status of a respected field of academic research, and with new media such as the internet or virtual

reality, an extension of the research of the immersive effect over old media borders seems necessary.

It could very well be argued that the reason the new territories are only explored with high caution, is that they may prove to possess more immersive potential, hence dwarfing the importance of the written language, whose position as the *ultima ratio* of narration can be traced far back: “Diesem Urteil liegt eine Wertigkeit zu Grunde, die sich durch den Einfluss der biblischen Schöpfungsgeschichte bereits im Mittelalter herausbildet: Das Wort wird in der abendländischen Kultur traditionell dem Bild übergeordnet und als höherwertig angesehen.“ (Brunner 13) Nevertheless, accompanying the general change in the observation and production of art that modernism and postmodernism introduced over the last century is a change in the treatment of new narrative forms.

One of the new media that have grown in the shadow of the omnipresent written narrative is the comic, and with it the graphic novel. Its special role as containing pictures and words and the consequences arising from this relationship is one of the main interests of comic theory, next to the semiotics of comics and their cultural function. While comic theory has been a very productive field over the past decades, the number of academic work dealing explicitly with aesthetic illusion still mostly concerns either written narrative or visual art. The following discussion will therefore try to apply the narrative framework to comics and graphic novels, and point out some visual aspects of the medium as well as their relation to the concept of aesthetic illusion. The works of Werner Wolf, David Lewis, Scott McCloud, and Martin Schüwer form the theoretical backbone of the analysis. The entity of the reader is implicitly present in all considerations and treated in connection with other elements rather than on its own. To illustrate the theories, all chapters will contain excerpts of the three works discussed for practical analysis.

Yet, before ‘losing’ ourselves in aesthetic illusion, it is necessary to point out one of the major points of critique towards the approach. As Wolf states, “it is a particularly elusive and hence problematic phenomenon: strictly speaking, it is a reception phenomenon located in the recipient’s mind. [...] Therefore there are serious methodological limitations” (Wolf, *Fiction* 7). The only indication of the illusion, whilst being caught up in it, is that no reflection takes place. Yet, once reflection happens, rationality takes over illusion’s place. (Wolf, *Illusion* 12) Containing much of the same set of empirical problems as in the thought experiment of Schrödinger’s cat, “we cannot, strictly speaking, watch ourselves having an illusion” (Gombrich 6). Furthermore, the subjectivity of the reading process due to personal experience

can never wholly be accounted for. This is not only an issue on an emotional level, but also in connection to the ability to decode a text. “[A]uch schon ein partieller Ausfall der Dechiffrierfähigkeit des Textes kann wirkungsästhetische Folgen haben.“ (Wolf *Illusion* 126) The problem becomes obvious when looking at irony and meta-referentiality in *Watchmen* or *V for Vendetta*: If a reader does not sense the ironic and meta-referential undertone – which, as discussed beneath, enhance the distance – the immersive effect will be distinctly different. Nevertheless, this does not mean that the analysis of the phenomenon is hopeless. Apart from introspection, reception testimonies from others, and aesthetic theories Wolf mentions “clues deducible from the texts themselves” as sources. These devices “play with the expectation of aesthetic illusion and undermine it, notably through self-reflexive meta devices.” (*Fiction* 1)

Prior to a more medium-specified view of aesthetic illusion, the term has to be clarified in general: What is aesthetic illusion? It means to forget the feel of the paper between one’s fingers, the presence of other moviegoers, the frame of the picture while entering a world that contains superheroes, magic, or unknown lands; in other words, “a feeling of being re-centered in a possible world as if it were (a slice of) life” (Wolf, *Fiction* Abstract). It was concluded above, that the novelty of the characters of anti-superheroes itself was not enough to account for their enormous appeal, and that they rather had the opposite effect. Instead, other elements in visual and verbal narrative capture readers and give them the illusion to be ‘there’. Wolf explored this phenomenon further and gives a detailed description of it:

Aesthetic illusion is a pleasurable *mental state* that emerges during the reception of an *artefact* [...] from the conjunction of factors that [...] are located in the artefact [...] itself, in the *recipient*, and in certain cultural and historical *contexts*. This mental state consists in an impression of variable intensity, of being imaginatively immersed in a possible world that is constituted, or referred to, by the artefact, and of *experiencing* this world in a mainly sensory (visual) and emotional way as if it were a slice of life. In spite of a dominant and willed feeling of experiential immersion, aesthetic illusion [...] is characterized by a *latent rational distance*. This distance is a consequence of the culturally acquired awareness of the fictional quality of the artefact [...] and of the illusionary status of the dominant effect induced by it. (Wolf, *Fiction* 2, emphasis added)

The definition introduces not only a number of ideas essential to the concept of aesthetic illusion, but also clearly, if not explicitly, draws a line to other, similar ‘immersed’ states. The three key words in the quote alluding to this distinction are ‘mental state’, ‘artefact’, and ‘latent rational distance’. The mental state is elicited in the process of reading (or other methods for reception in different media), hence does not appear suddenly, as would be the case in virtual reality. Wolf also claims that the illusion is not always limited to the immediate reception process, but can also “linger on for a while” as “after images”. He illustrates this via a story that ends as one character enters a room with the intention of killing another character.

Through the ‘lingering illusion’ the reader will most likely complete the murder in his head. While this is certainly true, the distance to the common ‘open end’ is not very clearly defined. In fact, it is not even mentioned. If applying the theory of the ‘lingering illusion’ to the graphic novels, the reader of *Watchmen* will possibly finish Seymour’s hand movement and see him grab Rorschach’s diary and consequently publish it; the reader of *Batman* will imagine the plans and future of Bruce Wayne and his gang; readers of *V for Vendetta* can guess the future of London. Maybe the best option to distinguish between the two ‘afterthoughts’ is to introduce a relative element: temporal distance. The story Wolf uses ends just moments before the action is about to happen (the murderer is already in the room, and so close that he can make out the texture of the chair the man is sitting in), therefore the plausibility of the action happening, considering the insinuation in the text, is very high. The same could be said about *Watchmen*, where the “truly ultimate information weapon is now on top of the stack” and although

the sequence implied here is formally incomplete – we never see where Seymour’s hands come down – the deck is stacked [...] for revelation. Rorschach’s notebook is rendered in full color and detail [...]. Other elements are sketched in [...], suggesting they are not in focus [...], the inevitable stain on Seymour’s smiley-bedecked jersey also points decisively toward the book. (Moulthrop 298)

The other two accounts, it could be argued, stretch this temporal element too far and do not fall under the realm of the ‘latent illusion’ anymore as no foreshadowing of explicit possibilities occurs in the texts. Although introducing another relative element to a research topic that suffers from enough critique relating to its methodological limitations only adds to the difficulties, Wolf’s observation of ‘after images’ has to be clarified. Otherwise, the imprecision in the definition may lead to the unwanted effect of including too many scenarios and hence undercutting the validity of the approach.

The immersive quality of the mental state to create another reality believable enough to experience it “in a way similar to that in which one experiences life” (Wolf, *Fiction* 2) also connects aesthetic illusion with hallucinations or dreams. While dreams and hallucinations are always involuntary experiences, aesthetic illusion is always willingly done. It could be argued that hallucinations may also be caused voluntarily by certain substances, but the fact remains that the hallucination itself is not further controlled. Aesthetic illusion, on the other hand, relies on certain external illusionist objects or ‘artefacts’ to trigger the mechanism as well as direct it. This artefact can be a book, a performance, a film, or a graphic novel. The fact that a work “guides the illusionist projection” (Wolf, *Fiction* 3) to a considerable amount, makes a textual approach possible in the first place. Nevertheless, it always has to be seen in

conjunction with the reader and the context, and hence regarded as part of “implied reading potentials informing the interaction between reader and text, between interpretive communities and text, between a culture’s encoded ideology and a reader’s compliant or resistant decoding” (Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan 145 qtd. in Wolf *Fiction* 3).

It does not matter how well written a book, or how well presented a performance is – aesthetic illusion can never reach its full potential. If it did, it would cease to be aesthetic, and reach a state of full immersion, which again could only be considered as hallucination. It follows, that the “characteristic ‘as-if’ quality” (Wolf, *Fiction* 2) induced by the object, is “always counterbalanced by a latent, culturally acquired awareness of the fictionality”. (ibid) In other words, while being completely absorbed in a work, a part of the reader is still aware of the non-fictional elements, such as the artefact, enabling him to enjoy horror or fear as part of the experience. Depending on the reader, the object, or other factors, this relative distance can vary “even during the reception of one and the same artefact. Aesthetic illusion may thus be represented as being located on a scale between the two poles of immersion and distance, maintaining, however a relative proximity to ‘immersion’” (ibid). The phenomenon is therefore quite paradox, and because of the latent distance Wolf suggest to consider it an “experiential pseudo-illusion” rather than ‘illusion’. The life-like quality is also interesting from a diagrammatic aspect. It is not only caused by a proximity between the objects and concepts in the real and fictional worlds, “but also [by] a fundamental analogy between the experience induced by illusionist artefacts and the basic concepts and schemata that guide the perception and experience of reality.” (Wolf, *Fiction* 2). Wolf calls this the “analogy-theory”.

As mentioned above, the given account defines the borders to similar ‘artefact-induced’ states. One example for such a state is the “referential illusion”, which refers to “an erroneous attribution of a reality status to something fictional or invented” (Wolf, *Fiction* 2). It is both involuntary and non-distanced (the artefact is thought to *be real*, not just quasi-real) and hence non-experiential. Examples can be seen in ‘fictions of authenticity’ and tromp l’oeil paintings. Similar to it is the experiential delusion without distance, which defines a state of deep immersion (often due to original referential illusion) in which the fiction becomes reality. It can be seen as “the ultimate aim of the development of ever more sophisticated strategies of total immersion”. (Wolf, *Fiction* 2) Another subcategory proposed by Wolf is the “referential (pseudo-)illusion”, in which the recipient is not entirely convinced of the reality the artefact suggests, as is true for science fiction.

Apart from recipient and artefact, a third important element in the reception process should be considered, namely the ‘room’ where reception takes place. Wolf uses the term to describe only the immediate spatial reception conditions in a particular ‘room’, but through a metaphorical extension of the term it can contain the entire “cultural and historical contexts and reception conditions” (ibid). This also includes familiarity with generic conventions, in other words how well the ‘average reader’ is informed about the conventions of graphic novels or antihero stories. Considering the verisimilitude of cultural and historical understandings, this factor adds a certain unpredictability to the phenomenon. These discrepancies can also be seen as a major factor in the difference of popularity of graphic novels in continental Europe compared to the United States or the United Kingdom. The “set of frames that rule the production and reception of the arts and media in a given period” also constitute to the element of context. “For instance, the question is crucial to what extent aesthetic illusionism and an aesthetic approach to artworks [...] are practiced or known in a given culture or period.” (Wolf, *Fiction* 3)

3.2. In verbal art

After discussing the general characteristics of aesthetic illusion that hold true for any medium, let us now turn to narrative illusion in verbal art. In contrast to visual media, written language relies on a symbolic rather than an iconic system. Yet, just because verbal narrative lacks the immediacy of iconic visual art does not make it dependant on or equal to referential illusion. Rather, it relies on experiential illusion.

An important element of narrative is the narrator, whose role needs to be specified. In comparison with the diegetic level of story, the extradiegetic narrator is subordinate. On the one hand, this caters to the average reading experience, in which one rather remembers *what* has happened than *who* told it. On the other hand, it anticipates the problem a narratorial center would create in cases of adaptations into other media. If a novel was made into a movie, necessary changes in the narrative perspective (as can be seen in the *Batman* films, compared to the books) would automatically lead to an altered “focus of aesthetic illusion”. Furthermore, a narratorial center leads to “a problematic privileging of the iconic representation of voice over the symbolic representation of characters and action”. (Wolf, *Fiction* 2)

Moreover, “a narrator is always a transmitting agency and element of discourse” (ibid). If applying the “analogy theory”, introduced above, to the diagrammatic level in general

(including, of course, the narrator) the positions become clear. One of the major presuppositions in our perception of reality is, that nothings stands between that reality and us. In other words, the thought of a mediator for reality is not something humans embrace. Texts eliciting aesthetic illusion will also be perceived as life-like experience, hence unmediated. “[T]he actual mediation through the level of discourse is mostly disregarded, and we appear to ‘witness’ the storyworld as if it were located in a realm beyond the text and even, albeit paradoxically, independently of it, hence with a feeling of ‘immediacy’” (Wolf, *Fiction* 2).

A further aspect of narrative illusion is its ‘dynamic quality’ due to the highlighting of action and characters rather than “‘descriptive’, static elements such as settings or characters’ looks – although these also play a role in the creation, and in particular intensification, of narrative illusion” (ibid). When considering the graphic novel, it seems that the descriptive elements are mainly found on the level of visual narrative. This poses an enormous advantage over other forms of narrative: In real life we mostly perceive these descriptive elements via visual channel. Hence, in accordance with the analogy theory, the experience offered through the artefact of the graphic novel is much closer to real-life experience than in other, solely written narrative. Above it was argued that the characters of antiheroes did not pose a strong enough model for identification, and that it was rather the world (the descriptive elements), that readers identify with. This could be seen as problematic, considering the dismissal of the descriptive elements as secondary. Yet, the question of identification, and the question of narrative illusion do not challenge each other, but rather co-exist and co-operate. Even if assuming a similarity close enough to challenge the view of co-existing, there is no conflict: It is important to realize that there are two narratives in graphic novels – the visual and the verbal (a feature that will be dealt with in more detail later on). Therefore, being a theory based on verbal narration, the descriptive elements are only secondary in the *verbal* narrative. In visual narrative, they are equal, if not superior. It follows, that identification with and importance of the descriptive elements in the *graphic* part of graphic novels, does not contrast the observation that characters in/and action are the focus of readers in the *verbal* part.

Based on the illusionist prototype, the realist novel of the nineteenth century, Wolf developed a number of typical features that form the ground of six principles of aesthetic illusion. The underlying principle is the production of experientiality while minimizing aesthetic distance. The focus on the story level, as mentioned above, results in the need to make the storyworld accessible to the reader. On the one hand, this leads to the necessity to portray a world which

is an “extension of the recipients’ real world” (Wolf, *Fiction* 4). On the other hand, due to the fact that illusion is the result of a process of immersing over time, it also requires the author to create a storyworld that has a life-like extension and complexity. On a more material basis it usually results in a certain length of the text. Therefore, illusionist worlds tend to portray a “certain extension and complexity, [and] are consistent and lifelike in their inventory and generally correspond to the reader’s expectations of a narrative” (Wolf, *Fiction* 4). The fact that the reader’s expectations are a reason for creating a world in a specific way highlights the interplay between context, reader, and artifact once again. The expectations can include a dynamic storyline, but also certain social, temporal, and spatial norms. The foregrounding of story elements furthermore results in a general back-grounding of discursive elements, which mainly serve the purpose of completing, transmitting, and supporting the ‘action’. Furthermore, narrative fiction aiming to immerse the reader tends to keep a certain seriousness, and refrains from comedy. Obviously, this does not imply a complete omission of comical elements, but rather that the narrative “never reaches the point of carnivalesque hilariousness and subversiveness” (ibid). A tangible reason for this feature can be seen in the distancing effect laughter has, as it pulls the reader out of the story by making him aware of the real surroundings and the artificiality of the narrative. Secondly, comic texts tend to create a world that does not adhere to a logical ‘real’ system anymore. This allows for an easier use of illusion breaking techniques such as metalepsis. Lastly, due to their representational quality, the texts are mostly “heteroreferential”. In other words, they refer to objects in a world ‘behind’ and separate from the text, rather than to the text itself (ibid).

Applying this to the field of graphic novels is fruitful, especially in setting them apart from comics. The most obvious difference lies in the length of the texts. Whereas comics may appear in the form of strips or magazines, graphic novels usually contain over one hundred pages (the shortest of the graphic novels discussed here has 199 pages). This also enables them to develop an elaborate storyworld, even if it is not the same world the reader lives in. As far as seriousness is concerned, a lot has already been mentioned in the definition of graphic novels. Therefore, ‘grim and gritty’ can be taken as an example of this seriousness. Once more, comics (especially classic comic strips) with the primary aim to amuse, stand in sharp contrast to the graphic novel. While the latter do not portray many classic slap-stick elements, they make extensive use of irony and sarcasm, due to their socio-critical agenda. While *V for Vendetta* and *Batman* meet the criterion of hetero-referentiality for the most part, *Watchmen* does not. In fact, it plays with it and hence toys with the balance between aesthetic

illusion and latent knowledge of its fictionality. The most significant instance in which the principle is ignored appears at the end of *Watchmen*. As discussed above, the panel prominently features Rorschach's journal - the very content of the story. Another self-reference can be seen in the Comedian's remark "see you in the funny pages" (II 11), another name for comics. Meta-references to the medium of comics as well as the genre of (anti-)superheroes are numerous in the newspaper clippings in *Watchmen* as well as the beginning of *Batman*: "They talk about a Man of Steel. An Amazon princess" (Introduction). The reference to Superman and Wonder Woman, the numerous remarks about masked adventurers, and the comic-within-a-comic show an acute awareness of the limitations and possibilities of genre and medium. It also means that the aesthetic distance is enlarged on this level, hence other elements generating aesthetic illusion need to weigh even stronger to keep the balance.

The application of the story/discourse divide on the other hand, is not as easy in graphic novels and comics in general. In general, there is a distinction between "erzählte Handlung" and "Struktur, durch die sie medial vermittelt wird" that corresponds to the division between "erzählte Handlung" and "Erzählvorgang" (Schüwer, *Wie Comics* 509). Some verbal narrative elements (such as the narrator) can be used in the analysis of comics as well; this is obvious due to the verbal component of comics. Yet, certain aspects do not fit neatly into either category. An example is the portrayal of motion⁹ that influences not only the discourse (*how* is it portrayed), but also the story (*what* is portrayed) level. Other aspects include the drawing style and the rhythm.

3.2.1. Wolf's six principles¹⁰

Based on the general as well as medium specific features, Wolf developed six principles of creating illusion in literary fiction. As it was true for the general features, these six principles are valid on a gradable scale, so not all of them have to be present in a specific work and their extent may vary, as long as the overall illusionist effect is kept. As he states for the text-internal factors, „[i]m Grunde sind daher alle textinternen Faktoren [...] lediglich als *illusionsfördernde* Elemente zu betrachten“. (*Illusion* 131) This balance is of major importance between the different elements of a principle, as well as the principles among each other.

⁹ See pp. 110 for a detailed account

¹⁰ This chapter is predominantly based on Wolf *Ästhetische Illusion*, 131-199

Principle of the possible world's inventory

The possible world's inventory is a main point of reference in creating a narrative universe that simulates the need of the reader for an objective reality outside of the text. So-called "building blocks", that is different features of the setting, the characters, and their experiences, offer a frame in which to tell the story. This "Prinzip anschaulicher Welthaftigkeit" (Wolf, *Illusion* 135) or principle of "the access- and immersion-facilitating construction of the possible world's inventory" (Wolf, *Fiction* 4) caters to the simple assumption that, before a believable story can be told, there has to be a setting in which to tell it in. Even the characters' inner life does not exist without the consideration of their external features: "[D]ie Innensicht der Figuren ist immer auch durch eine Außensicht auf ihre Situation, ihr Aussehen, ihr Eingreifen in die Umwelt usw., zu ergänzen" (Wolf, *Illusion* 139). Therefore, the author has to create a temporal and spatial continuum through the building blocks that allow the objects to appear real. In the attempt to build a world simulating a life-like experience, two rules that govern our perception of reality have to be followed. Firstly, objects are primarily perceived on a superficial level, resulting in the importance to describe the textual objects with a focus on their physical form. Secondly, our perception of reality is very detailed and hence governed by a constant need to filter the abundance of that input. For creating aesthetic illusion this means presenting the objects of the fictional world with a lot of "unnecessary" (in the sense of not plot relevant) detail. The importance of this "background information" can be observed in their prominence in many illusionist texts, for example by giving detailed descriptions of the scenery or characters in the beginning of the book. (ibid 134-138) To satisfy the increased attention to detail in fictional narratives, they are becoming increasingly "graphic" to aid "descriptive visualization". Apart from the amount of detail, the objects also display a general familiarity to the reader's world, such as "locales, institutions, public persons, contemporary events, etc" (Wolf, *Fiction* 4).

The advantages graphic novels have in the fulfillment of this principle are obvious, due to their semi-visual nature. Instead of describing the abundance of visual details and risking alienation because the description is too long or tedious, graphic novels can simply portray the objects - to *describe* the objects 'visually', is avoided by simply *displaying* the image. This also caters to the general mode of perception, as we tend to see our environments rather than having them described to us in order to form a mental picture of them. This fact is proven in reverse in all three books discussed, as none of them feature extensive descriptions. In fact,

one of the few examples is found in *Watchmen*, only when excerpts of Mason's book disrupt the image-text conjunction.

How much easier it is for graphic novels to create this richness of detail continuously to such a degree that readers have to filter out certain objects or object qualities is best demonstrated through an example. Figure 3, a normal sized panel without any particular attention to detail, portrays Dr. Manhattan walking into the "intrinsic field subtractor", a machine that will presumably kill him. At the same time the reader can see how the machine is built (two parallel walls constructed to leave only a relatively narrow passage between them, giving the impression of a trap; pipes, tanks, switches and other technical

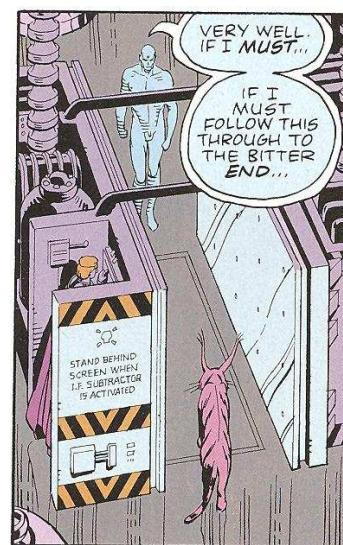


Fig. 3 Intrinsic Field Subtractor

details), Bubastis (Veidt's exotic pet) walking into it from the other side, Veidt hiding behind one of the walls, and the warning sign reading "stand behind screen when I.F. subtractor is activated". In addition, there is, of course, text, which will nevertheless be ignored for the moment¹¹. Describing all of this 'visually' in a narrative would take a lot of time and run the risk of the reader losing interest in the story after detailed descriptions about the technicalities of the machine over half a page. Through the display of an image, the recipient has the choice to focus on the details he deems most valid for the story and ignore, or just briefly glance at, others. Applying this thought to figure 3 may lead to the focused perception of Dr. Manhattan and Bubastis entering the space between the walls from opposing sides, the warning sign, and Veidt behind a wall, facing some switches. The rest of the image may be taken as background without further investigating it. By putting the reader through a visual filtering process in analogy to the one he is faced with daily in real life, the life-like quality of the fictional world is enhanced.

The general familiarity of objects to the reader's world can also be seen in all three books: In *V for Vendetta* or *Watchmen*, the story is set in London and New York respectively. *Batman* offers Gotham City as its setting which, albeit not a real town, offers a political structure, social problems, and the looks of a metropolis. In addition, Moore's books constantly refer to real life persons and events such as Guy Fawkes and the gunpowder plot, Ronald Reagan, or the Vietnam War. This technique is called *Referenzillusion*, and will be further commented on

¹¹More on the interaction between text and image in "the gutters are full of blood"

in connection to the Principle of *Celare artem*. It should be noted though, that an abundance of references to well-known institutions or contemporary events in a story taking place in a parallel world, can have a distancing effect on the reader. This is especially true if the mention of the historical events is not in accordance with actual history. *Watchmen*'s outcome of the Vietnam War and Regan's overlong presidency are examples of this.

Principle of consistency

As a second step, the actions of the newly created world have to follow a certain logic that is "compatible, or identical, with the rules governing real life" (Wolf, *Fiction* 4) and stays consistent throughout the narrative. The "principle of consistency" (ibid) or "Prinzip der Sinnzentriertheit" (Wolf, *Illusion* 140) refers to the internal coherence of the possible world, as much as to the external compatibility with basic principles of real life. Although the two terms may not seem congruent with each other, they are intricately linked and could not exist without the other. In a way, *Sinnzentriertheit* is the larger concept, concerned not only with the question how a text can imitate the guiding rules of real life's experiences (or, for that matter, what those rules are), but also what the relation to text- and fiction-specific features is. The former problem is also expressed in the notion of consistency and if one follows these analogous ideas, the narrative will turn out to be tellable (as in tellability), readable, and believable. These sentiments are behind the word "Sinn" (although Wolf does not discuss this separately). What it does not entail is the consideration that these elements are generally *expected* from a narrative, which in turn is guided by what Wolf calls the "Relevanzprämisse": Due to narrative's finite quality, the reader anticipates that all relevant information is supplied in the text, accepting a necessary "pre-selection" by the author (the main selection being made by the reader) (Wolf, *Illusion* 146). Hence, "Zentriertheit" refers to the reasons why we accept such an unrealistic degree of relevant information in a comparatively short, finite narration. It may be said that the "principle of consistency" refers to the unconsciously expected strategies, while *Sinnzentriertheit* further entails the more conscious ones. In other words, a story has to contain all relevant details that make a meaningful reading possible, and has to convey them in a way that is consistent with real-life principles. This ultimately leads to the presumption that "aesthetic illusion always appears in correlation with epistemological realism" (Wolf, *Illusion* 146, my translation), but only to such an extent that still allows for the reader to accept other worlds as possible.

‘Consistency’ refers to such “expectations of [...] meaningfulness [...] [as] the absence of unresolvable contradictions, the consistency of time and place, causality, teleology, [and] the difference between reality and fiction” (Wolf, *Fiction* 4). The avoidance of ambiguity and contradiction is a necessary parallel to real life. Yet, it is also important to note that, while these confusions can appear in reality, the fact that perception is continuous (“unabschließbar”) and hence offers infinite possibilities to re-examine an object, are not applicable to narratives. There, ambiguous and unsolved elements tend to shift the perspective away from perception of the story and towards reflection on it. An example of this can be found in *Watchmen*, where the “Institute for Extraspatial Studies” is portrayed several times, leading one to assign some importance to it. Yet, it never fulfills any further purpose than serving as foundation for the alien to land on (which is ironic of course, but does not justify its noticeable presence). An even more obvious example is the ending of the book. Not only does it leave an open end (as do all three books), but it also leaves the ambiguous possibility that the story itself may somehow result from the journal Rorschach leaves behind, posing a metaleptic ending. Furthermore, it is necessary to clarify that ambiguity here refers to diegetic ambiguity only. Thematic ambiguity on the other hand is not at all illusion breaking (Wolf, *Illusion* 144): “Viel mehr kann sich [...] Eindeutigkeit des Dargestellten durchaus mit Mehrdeutigkeit des Weltbildes oder einzelner seiner Elemente auf illusionskompatible Weise verbinden” (ibid). Closely related to the avoidance of ambiguity, is the adherence to causality and teleology. Only if following these principles, the connection of elements and a subsequent deduction of an unambiguous *histoire* become possible. This portrayal of a uniform meaning mirrors the reader’s own perception of reality as homogenous. The apparent disharmony with the first principle - stating that an (over)abundance of details is necessary to convey an immersive world – is simply a reminder of the general notion of balance necessary between in the creation of aesthetic illusion.

The transparency of discourse in agreement with the analogy theory is a general element of aesthetic illusion. Yet, it is important to note that the principle of consistency also, and especially, concerns the level of discourse. Only if this is continuously kept transparent it will resemble the transparency of our mediated perception of reality and consequently that of the story. In this context, the so far neglected role of the narrator becomes very important. “In particular the authorial, ‘omniscient’ narrator” (Wolf, *Fiction* 4) is effective in creating the desired illusionist effect. Consequently, the frequent change of narrative perspective and narrative personae poses a threat to the effect.

Although the logic has to be generally continuous throughout the narrative, consistency is not an absolute concept. Rather, it allows for deviations, as long as they can be explained: “Consistency operates according to Ryan’s ‘principle of minimal departure’ [...]: it is a default option” (Wolf, *Fiction* 4). Moreover, the medium-specific interruptions of consistency are conventionalized and hence generally accepted. For graphic novels this includes the conventional division in chapters, but also a further division if the book was originally printed in several issues. The frequently occurring quick switches between scenes (often after every other panel) may also be seen as such a medium specific feature. Just as consistency is necessary both externally and internally, departure (and of course justification thereof) is possible on both levels. An example for such an external deviation can be observed in *Watchmen*’s Dr. Manhattan who is not bound to follow “our” rules of time and space. Nevertheless, this inconsistency can be explained in the light of his nuclear accident and the subsequent superhuman powers. These events can of course also be seen as an external inconsistency, yet one that is compatible with - and even expected in - superhero and science fiction stories. The same applies to Adrian Veidt who manages to catch a bullet with his hands and “engineered a monster, cloned its brain from a human psychic, sent it to New York and killed half of the city” (XII 9). This inconsistency is plausible because Veidt is allegedly the smartest man on the planet as well as one of the richest. Furthermore, he used a technique invented by Dr. Manhattan who, as just shown, the reader does not contradict. An internal inconsistency can be seen in *V for Vendetta* when Evey, upon refusal to sign a statement incriminating V, is set free instead of being murdered. With what the reader knows so far of the regime’s methods, this turn of events is completely inconsistent with the story, and hence highly unbelievable. Yet, as it is revealed that her whole interrogation and imprisonment is one of V’s schemes to teach her the nature of freedom, the former inconsistency becomes once more a consistent element of the story. Although his plan is cruel and highly surprising (especially in the light of his affection of Evey), it is not inconsistent with his other actions. Therefore, in order to be internally and externally acceptable, the scene containing Evey’s torture had to be placed after his own story in the resettlement camp and the subsequent revenge.

The principle of consistency does not really pose any specific advantages for the graphic novel. Just as in prose, the graphic narrative has to be consistent in the portrayal of the possible world’s inventory. It could even be construed as a disadvantage, or at least a difficulty, for the artist. While in prose narratives the author just has to describe an

environment once and can then rely on the reader to reproduce it, the artist of a graphic novel consistently has to provide the same inventory, following the same rules. Then again, the permanent reproduction may also prove of advantage: It may enhance familiarity with the environment, as the same details will re-occur without repetitive mention of them, while in prose the details may simply slip the reader's mind. In addition, the repetitive visual component adheres to the analogy principle. Graphic novels simulate the real-life experience to visually perceive the whole abundance of an environment, even when re-visiting places, only to filter out the situationally important details.

As far as the transparency of discourse is concerned, graphic novels have the above mentioned general advantage of being able to delegate graphic descriptions to the images. Hence, omniscient third person narration is almost non-existent. Instead, graphic novels tend to rely primarily on dialogues as well as first person narration. Dialogues are the textual element most typical for graphic novels, and comics in general. In a medium concerned with combining the best elements of images and words, the one feature not really accessible to pictures – portraying conversation – automatically becomes a priority in the depiction of text. Its significance is almost comparable to that in theater, in which conversation often is the only clue to a character's agenda. The second textual element, first person narration, occurs in the forms of diaries, letters, inner monologues, or monologue related voice-overs. This is especially prominent in *Watchmen* and *Batmen*, both of which start with the main narrator's first person account. The former achieves this in the form of a diary entry: "Dog carcass in alley this morning, tire tread on burst stomach. This city is afraid of me. I have seen its true face" (I 1). The latter uses an inner monologue as its opening line: "I've got the home stretch all to myself when the readings stop making sense. I switch to manual—"(10). Although, if following Wolf, this seemingly goes against aesthetic illusion, it neglects the power of identification that only first person narration can offer. He even states himself that our perception of reality as unmediated is



Fig. 4 Omniscient narration in *V for Vendetta*

merely illusion (Wolf, *Fiction* 2) distracting one from factual subjective perception. As

discussed above, identification (if not with the heroes, at least with the world) is an especially important element in antihero stories. It follows, that first person narration in graphic novels is a much more effective way to create illusion. After all, images accompanied by predominantly third person narration will be just that- a story with pictures. *V for Vendetta* shows traces of this problem in its scarce use of this omniscient narration. As can be seen in figure 4, the image for the most part simply accompanies the narration. The book also contains some first person narration but is rather thrifty with it. Yet, this can be attributed to the fact that Moore planned on leaving out thought balloons and sound effects and “was prepared to get rid of most of the caption boxes as well and just rely entirely on pictures and dialogue” (Moore, Lloyd 175).

Another, quite interesting, aspect is a form of third person limited narration in the form of the media which was commented on above. In the light of consistency it may be argued that it either falls in the same category as omniscient narration, or disrupts the reading process. Nevertheless, in analogy to real life some thoughts have to be considered; above all that the media is everywhere and disrupts life more often than one would like (just think of the screens on subway trains). Furthermore, the format of news broadcasts is based on narration while showing a picture or video to accompany it. It may be therefore concluded, that readers’ have accepted these as a fact of life and a medium-specific convention respectively. Hence, the role of the media should not be considered a concern on the level of discourse.

Nevertheless, there is one aspect that shows a general disadvantage for graphic novels in respect to the transparency of discourse. It was briefly mentioned that some categories (such as the depiction of motion) cannot be subsumed under either discourse or story. The consequence of “discourse”-elements being present in the story hinder a carefree transparent discourse.

So far, all three books seem, more or less, to provide a very immersive discourse. Nevertheless, one problematic fact has so far been neglected, namely the continuity of narration. If the person of the narrator switches, a break in the “flow” of reading is inevitable. Moreover, the reliability of the narration may suffer if different people tell the story. Especially when contradicting views are presented the fictio-status of the object becomes obvious. This fragmented narration is present in all three books, most obviously in *Batman* where different colors highlight the different identities of the speakers (or rather thinkers). *Watchmen* also contains this fragmentation as it provides Rorschach’s journal, along with that

of the psychiatrist, as well as several ‘voice overs’. Furthermore, it poses an exception to the continuity of image/word narration through the prose chapters. It follows, that all three books follow the general scarcity of third person omniscient narration, but still ‘step on the reader’s toes’ by challenging the source of the story and hence breaking up the continuity of discourse. Depending on the intensity of this inconsistency, a more or less striking disruption of aesthetic illusion takes place.

Principle of perspectivity

Combining the two principles offers the reader a world that is both believable and imaginable. Yet, these qualities (albeit certainly essential) are also true of fictional texts that do not aim at creating illusion, for example legal case studies. Hence, to create illusion a further step is necessary. It is concerned with relating the theoretically unlimited fictional perception to the limited one we know from real life. (Wolf, *Illusion* 150) The principle in question is called “principle of perspectivity” (Wolf, *Fiction* 4) and examines the ways to reproduce our perceiver-dependent reality. Three elements constitute to the perspective: the viewpoint (“Blickpunkt”), its partiality (“Partialität der Ansichten”), and the horizon (“Horizont”). (Wolf, *Illusion* 151).

The first constituent simply refers to the fact that, in order to let the reader forget the fictionality of the work and the reality of his own ‘outside’ viewpoint, it is necessary to offer him one ‘inside’ the fiction. The resulting diminished distance between the two positions will make it easier to guide the reader through the text. In opposition to the fixed viewpoint of paintings, narratives can switch between two or more of them, as well as alter them throughout the text. The perspective is usually tied to, and presented by people. They can be either “innerfiktional präsente bzw. Identifizierbare Perspektiventräger” or „nur gedachte Perspektiventräger“ (Wolf, *Illusion* 152) The first group includes inner-diegetic characters (such as specific ‘figural’ characters, which may also be presented through an omniscient narrator) as well as extra-diegetic characters (for example a fictional author or reader). As far as the potential for illusion of the different narrative perspectives is concerned, it can be said that the closer a viewpoint is connected to a comprehensible character, the higher its illusionist potential. (Wolf, *Illusion* 156) This naturally leads to an increased use of “internal focalization [...] [until] ‘subjectivity’ [...] gradually supersedes the ‘objectivity’ [...] and enhances the illusionist effect of ‘immediacy.’ Immediacy is an efficient trigger of aesthetic illusion.” (Wolf, *Fiction* 4) It becomes apparent that this can potentially conflict with the

principle of consistency in its preference of a discrete narrator. Once more it proves that no one single principle can dominate over all others, but rather that a compromise is necessary for aesthetic illusion to work. Considering only the textual level of the three books, examples of the inner-diegetic characters can be seen in all of them, be it in the diaries of Rorschach and the psychiatrist, or the inner monologues of Batman and Adam Susan. Examples of the narration from a non-identifiable viewpoint are harder to find. They exist in the scarce omniscient comments such as “all over London windows are thrown open and faces lit with awe and wonder gaze at the omen,” (Moore, Lloyd 14) or the time and place information offered at the beginning of scenes in *V for Vendetta*. They may also be seen in the television comments of *Watchmen* and *Batman*, yet with difficulty as the reporter or TV as source of narration is clear. How close the unidentified viewpoint can be to a figural one (presented through third person narration), becomes clear when looking at the seemingly impersonal sentence “The rumble of the explosion has not yet died away as from far below comes the rattle of smaller reports...” (Moore, Lloyd 14). Yet, when taking into consideration that V and Evey are standing on the top of a very high building, the concealed perspective offered is really theirs. As their location is only known to the reader because of the drawings, the text/image connection becomes important again. A further example of such a concealed figural perspective can be found in *Batman*:

Master Bruce was but nine years old, and restless, as he always was, at night... Still he sat, politely enough, on his bed, as Alfred read to him [...] he listened, in silence, as, finishing the tale, Alfred explained the importance of Mr. Poe's contribution to detective fiction [...] Master Bruce asked – no, demanded...”the killer was caught. And punished. (188-189)

The omniscient narration here is disturbed by three things. Firstly, ‘Master Bruce’ is an address used solely by Alfred himself. Secondly, the hesitation and subsequent correction from ‘ask’ to ‘demand’ is something typical rather of characters’ speech than of an omniscient narrator. Thirdly – and thence again underlining the importance of images for the medium – Alfred is portrayed twice during this tale with eyes closed as if engaged in memories. It follows, that the seemingly neutral narration (which complies with the consistency of discourse), is really based on a very personal account (which adheres to the need of an identifiable viewpoint). Furthermore, this scene gives another example of the problems the dual narrative of graphic novels produces in terms of the discourse/story divide. Here a visual story element (*what* is portrayed – Alfred) influences the perception of a linguistic discourse element (*how* it is portrayed – narrative voice).

The overall tendency towards a more subjective narration is quite clear when comparing the ratio of first and third person narratives. Examples of first person narration were given above when dealing with the transparency of discourse. The difficulty to find real omniscient narration is a further indication of the general “personal” tendency in illusionist works.

As mentioned above, fictional narratives have - in theory - an unlimited number of viewpoints. In order to harmonize the unique viewpoint of the reader in the real world with the possibility of altering narrative perspectives, it is important to clarify any changes in either temporal or spatial dimensions. At first sight, this may be perceived as opposing the above statement that a switch in narrative voice will be disruptive and illusion prohibiting. Nevertheless, it simply means that *if* a narrative work makes use of the change in perspective, it has to clarify those alterations. This striving for unambiguousness links the principle of perspective to that of consistency and is of special importance in texts with an inner-diegetic perspective. The best example of this clarity is the changing of background color according to the character presenting his thoughts in *Batman*, as it links graphics and text. Other methods can be found in *Watchmen*, where entries such as “Rorschach’s journal. October 12th, 1985.” (I 1) or “From the notes of Dr. Malcom Long, October 25th, 1985.” (VI 1) unmistakably identify the source of the information; or *V for Vendetta*, with spatial and temporal clues such as “The nose. November 7th, 1998” (202).

The second element of perspective is that of partiality, which refers to the fact that our perception in real life can be solely subjective and hence limited, depending on our place in time and space, our knowledge, our history, etc. Analogous to this real limitation, illusionist fictional text will usually try to provide the reader with a similarly restricted viewpoint. (Wolf, *Illusion* 153) Gombrich describes this as “negatives Augenzeugenprinzip”, meaning that a description will not contain anything that could not be known by an eye witness. On the one hand, this leads to an illusionist advantage of inner-diegetic characters (as long as the descriptions rendered by them are in fact restricted). On the other hand, this leads to a necessary imprecision in any text describing concrete and seizable entities. Yet, it also allows for the reader to fill as many “gaps” as he deems necessary through his own imagination. This phenomenon is described by Gombrich as the “etc. principle” (184), the belief to see all of something, when in fact one only sees certain of its elements. Yet, *not* showing all necessary details is in clear contrast to the principle of world-inventory which states the necessity to describe *all* possible details. Once more, a balance of some sort is necessary that prevents a

text to become pure dull description, while also hindering it to depict only unimaginable objects in an unidentifiable world.

In graphic novels a lot of the description takes place in the images, therefore the textual description of objects is rather scarce. Nevertheless, *Watchmen* contains some in its prose sequences, for example when Hollis Mason describes the heroes shortly before their break-up: “The Comedian was there, imposing his overbearing personality and his obnoxious cigar smoke upon anyone within reach. Mothman was there, a glass in one hand, slurring his words and letting his sentences trail off into incoherence” (III 32). This quote is especially interesting because it shows how a certain attitude (in this case Mason’s growing dissatisfaction with the Minutemen) will impact the objective details a person notices. In this way ‘objective’ descriptions are shown to be inevitably subjective.

The third element, the horizon, is different from that in a picture in an important way: It can change. It is therefore closely linked to the possible alteration of perspective or even change of characters. Through its predominantly metaphorical use describing the possible array of meaningful expectations and beliefs of a character, it is also related to the principle of consistency. Yet, while the latter is primarily concerned with ensuring a consistently believable story according to “basic” principles (such as causality), the horizon is concerned with displaying new developments - that may lead to an alteration of perspective - as life-like. (Wolf, *Illusion* 154) Parallel to the restricted perception of objects discussed above, the restricted knowledge of characters at a certain point in time forms the most important element here. To ensure a character’s knowledge is compatible with what a reader expects in analogy to life, two things have to be considered. Firstly, in imitation of reality’s present-bound quality, foreshadowing should be kept to a minimum. All three books mostly adhere to this rule, yet use it in moderation to create suspense. An exception can be found in *V for Vendetta* when V tells Evey to “come. We must prepare for the first act.” (14), giving away not only further mischief, but also the play-structure of the book. Secondly, the expectation a reader holds at different times during the reading process (“Erwartungshorizont”) has to be taken into consideration. In other words, when moving through the spatial-temporal universe of the text, the reader expectations have to be either fulfilled or denied. Such a restricted perception is also what makes the mystery and detective story in *Watchmen* possible. Through Rorschach’s subjective narration via his diary entries, the reader knows (for the most part) only just as much as he does, and hence believes a mask murderer is on the loose.

The factoring in of reader expectations leads to a cautious use of coincidences and accidents under consideration of the specific expectations of the reader. Parallel to foreshadowing, coincidences and accidents should also be considered an exception to the rule in general. Yet, just as in real life, they do happen and it is important to distribute them carefully in the text. Wolf differentiates between cataphoric coincidences - those that are completely unexpected, with no ties to the so far mentioned, but driving the story forward - and anaphoric coincidences – which do bear some ties to the previous text. The former are usually found at the beginning of texts, in which almost anything can still be expected, as long as the meaningfulness and believability of the narration are not destroyed. Yet, the further on the story spins, the less likely cataphoric coincidences will be, as they do not fall into the *Erwartungshorizont* anymore and would therefore pose a threat to illusion. An example of such a coincidence is the introduction of new characters, which is usually done at the beginning of books. Again, all three novels obey this rule by presenting all main characters in the beginning chapters. Even though some new characters appear quite late in the book, they do not bear any great importance to the story for the most part (such as Veidt's assistants in *Watchmen*). The introduction of Seymour and his boss on the last pages of *Watchmen* may seem problematic in this aspect, yet when considering that "The New Frontiersman" is introduced before and that Rorschach is depicted mailing his journal, this "coincidence" is actually of the second kind. Moore even comments on coincidences in *V for Vendetta* after Delia (so far only known as the pathologist) is given an exquisite rose, found next to V's victim, by a colleague and later that night is killed by V:

DELIA. What a strange coincidence, that I should be given it today. [...]

V. There is no coincidence, Delia. Only the illusion of coincidence. (74)

Anaphoric coincidences, by contrast, are more likely to accumulate during the final parts of a text, where they can connect past events and add to a believable and meaningful story. Again, there is an invisible line that may be crossed if too many coincidences create a world that excels real-life's coherence, resulting in an anti-illusionist view. Nevertheless, as the finality of a narrative leads to the expectation of *Sinnzentriertheit*, a higher frequency of coincidence and accident is accepted and even expected. (Wolf, *Illusion* 161-164) As the example of Seymour shows, the introduction of the new characters really acts as a link to past events. It could also be argued that the last scene makes an open end – an opposition to the *Sinnzentriertheit* – possible, but even if Moore had left it out, Rorschach's mailing of the journal would have remained. *V for Vendetta* offers another example of anaphoric coincidence when Almond's weapon is not loaded when he stands face to face with V. Nevertheless, it

connects to the scene in his house when he threatens his wife with an unloaded gun as a joke and can therefore almost be expected.

For graphic novels, the principle of perspective offers a lot of potential already through the mere possibility to present image and text at the same time, hence offering two different perspectives at once. The liason between the two is more important here than it was in the discussions so far, as each part presents perspective in a dimension which the other can only try to imitate, yet never fully reach the same potential. In other words, images create illusions in/of space while portraying time is problematic; narrative contrastingly produces an illusion in/of time, yet has difficulty in creating a spatial dimension. Naturally, each medium has come up with techniques to evade these obstacles, as can be seen in the discussion of the unambiguity of the viewpoint:

Fakultativ zur notwendigen Desambiguierung des Blickpunkts kann seine Veranschaulichung bzw. Inszenierung im Text als für die Illusion hilfreiches Verfahren im Umgang mit der Perspektive hinzutreten [...] in der Malerei etwa in den mit dem Rücken zum Bildbetrachter stehenden Betrachtern [...] in der Narrativik beispielsweise eine Rahmenerzählung" (Wolf, *Illusion* 156).

The comic medium can therefore use the advantages both textual and visual perspectives can offer. Let us first look at the three elements (viewpoint, partiality, horizon) and afterwards take the discussion a step further by exploring the possibility of two distinct perspectives at the same time.

In the discussion of the viewpoint, it was mentioned that even auctorial narrators usually have some figural position to attach the story to. In comics, the sometimes well-disguised subjective viewpoint may become apparent only when seeing the text in combination with the image, or at least become clearer through it. The examples given above (the explosion in *V for Vendetta* and the butler Alfred talking about Bruce in *Batman*) illustrate this. The fact that the V-shaped fireworks are in fact seen from the roof where V and Evey stand on, only becomes possible through a look at the picture. It shows the top floors of a high building in the bottom right corner which, if connected to the images preceding and following it, can only lead to the conclusion that the viewpoint is that of the two protagonists. Alfred's monologue on the other hand, already bears a subjective viewpoint in its text which is yet reinforced by the images of him reminiscing. The comic-within-a-comic even combines the textual technique of a frame story with the visual one of showing the perspective of the diegetic reader. Hence, both diegetic reader and "real" reader look at the hypodiegetic "Tales of the Black Freighter", with the effect of reducing the distance between their two viewpoints. This effect is especially

interesting because at the same time it creates illusion, it raises the reader's awareness of the comic medium, and subsequently de-illusions him.

As far as non-identifiable viewpoints are concerned, images can provide them much more easily than text, for example in the long distance establishing shots often used at the beginning or end of scenes. In connection with the alteration of the viewpoint, the differences between comics and paintings should be pointed out. Generally it is true that images can both create a clear viewpoint more easily than text, but are also bound to this one fixed perspective. Yet, while paintings usually stand alone, comics have an advantage as they consist of many panels, and can therefore change the viewpoint from one to another. Moreover, as will be discussed later on, through the combination of verbal and visual level, even two different viewpoints for the same panel are possible.

It was stated above that "objective" descriptions are shown to be inevitably subjective, rendering the element of partiality very important. For graphic novels, this is certainly true for the textual parts, but does not have to render true for the images. The reason lies in the just mentioned fact, that an omniscient perspective is possible for the graphic part. Hence, more details can be shown in an establishing shot than would be normally perceived by a single character. Nevertheless, it may be argued that this does not completely dispel partiality: As the reader lingers over the information-loaded panel he can be the subjective element. Partiality is therefore ceded from the "objective" image to the "subjective" reader. In a similar way the "etc principle" empowers the reader to perceive all text and image and imagine everything else.

The horizon in textual narration is mostly metaphorical, while graphic novels can use it in its "real" spatial dimension as well: "Anders als im perspektivischen Gemälde ist er im Erzählwerk als räumliche Gegebenheit nicht sichtbar und im Gegensatz zu einzelnen abgeschatteten Gegenständen nur in seltenen Fällen vorstellbar oder thematisiert" (Wolf, *Illusion* 153). The focus of attention is therefore not necessarily on the *Erwartungshorizont*, but rather on the techniques used to connect the different panels in a way that makes the change in horizon life-like. While graphic novels generally have to be careful about the use of foreshadowing and coincidences as much as other texts, the graphic dimension offers more potential for anaphoric coincidences. This is closely related to the visual selection process in the reader's mind, meaning that he will not remember all details of every panel of the story. Hence, some graphic details will go unnoticed (at least during the first read), which may

otherwise establish a connection. This is the case for Rorschach's recurring sugar wrappers that mark the places he visited on his search for the Comedian's murderer.

It becomes clear that, if two perspectives can exist for each moment, there are two possible relationships between them: Either both perspectives narrate the same story, by using their own advantages to form a joint narrative. Or each perspective is part of its own narration, leading to the possibility of two narrators for what seems to be the same moment in the same story.

In most comics, the art and the text [...] seem to be telling the same story. But, to be technical narratologically, it is actually the same fabula, not the same story which requires uniform perspective. That is, art and text present events from the same general plot but not necessarily at the same time, in the same order, or from the same viewpoint." (Lewis 71)

It follows, that "visual narrator and verbal narrator must be distinctive points" (ibid 78) portraying separate stories in the same fabula. It should be noted though, that this condition is not necessarily true for every panel, as visual and verbal elements may be telling the same story (for example in a panel depicting a simple conversation between characters).

Furthermore, leaving out either one of the narrators completely can be used for effect. While panels with absent verbal components are more commonly found, those leaving out the visual narrative occur less often and are, for the most part, not really absent due to the fact that

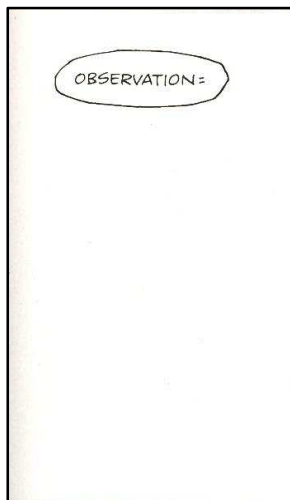


Fig. 5 Snow

leaving a panel black, white, or red may very well be interpreted as night, snow, or blood. An example may be seen in figures 5 and 6, depicting a white and black panel, yet the “images” still represent some part of the fabula. The difficulty to leave out the visual component can also be related to the fact that an absence of sound rather resembles our experience of reality than an absence of images. “Deaf” panels have the quality to intensify the visual experience, a fact often used in fight scenes, but also in psychologically dramatic scenes such as Evey’s “escape” from prison (162), Bruce Wayne’s



Fig. 6 Blackout

witnessing of his parents’ death (23) or Rorschach’s discovery of the girl’s destiny (see figure 22, p 134). According to Schüwer, the absence of sound also leads to a certain abstraction from our normal experience: “Weil jeglicher Kommentar und alle Erklärungen [...] fehlen, ist der Leser gezwungen, die dargestellte Handlung wie eine Dokumentation fremden Lebens, wie einen Tierfilm, zu betrachten“ (320). He then concludes that, as a result, the reader has to use a “höhere Kombinations- und Deduktionsleistung”, leading to a

“detektivische Lesehaltung” (ibid). While the latter argument certainly is true – if there is less information, naturally there needs to be more effort on the part of the reader – scenes without sound do not necessarily have to lead to an estrangement, as ‘normal’ fight scenes prove. Nevertheless, the example he uses (the afore mentioned scene from *Watchmen*) – but also the examples from the other books - do support this abstraction of normality and reality:

Die Sprachlosigkeit korrespondiert hier mit dem Trauma, das der Held von diesem Erlebnis davonträgt. Es geht [...] um die Erfahrung einer Welt die zusehends denn Anschein von Normalität verliert und die sich für Helden und Leser gleichermaßen als den eigenen Moralvorstellungen völlig entfremdet herausstellt. (ibid 321)

A further interesting aspect of the scene is its potential for identification with the character. This is not only due to the fact that both Rorschach's and the reader's moral and ethics are turned upside-down, but also through the perspective used to tell the sequence. The viewpoint portrayed throughout the scene is that of Rorschach - partly through his eyes, and partly showing him investigating the house (yet not focusing on what he does but rather on what he sees). This leads to the fact that both character and reader alike, have to process the visual information in the same way (without the help of words) to make sense of it. "Die



Fig. 8 Perspective

Abwesenheit von Schrifttext verstärkt also die Identifikation mit dem Protagonisten der Sequenz und trägt damit zur Schaffung des halbsubjektiven Charakters



Fig. 7 Two narrators

dieser Sequenz entscheidend bei“ (Schwuer, *Wie Comics* 322). The same holds true for the other two examples: Bruce and Evey are either portrayed as the central element of a panel, showing their surprise, fear, or shock, hence making their viewpoint essential for the scene. Or the drawings depict the characters' perceptions through their eyes, a technique Miller uses especially well in the last four panels on the page. We see the gun of the assailant and subsequently Bruce's mother trying to attack him from the perspective of Bruce, who is lying on the floor. (Fig. 8)

Returning to the original discussion of the distinct narrators/stories, another scene from *Watchmen* can illustrate the "schism" very well. (Fig. 7) The images

show the Comedian's death, while the verbal narration consists of Rorschach telling a joke about a depressed clown. Apart from the obvious irony (increased through mentioning that the Comedian "treated it like a joke" [II 27]), the independence of each story becomes clear, because Rorschach was not present when the Comedian died, hence cannot possibly narrate it. "Rorschach may be the verbal narrator [...], but he could not be one of its visual narrators" (Lewis 78). Which directions the interplay between images and words can take, will be discussed in the chapter on comic theory. For now, two things should be noted: Firstly, how well irony and tragedy can be achieved through a deliberate use of the two narrative outlets. Secondly, a problematic relation to the principle of *Sinnzentriertheit* as well as to that of medium adequacy arises out of the dual perspectives.

The three principles discussed so far offer the rules that govern the basic creation of fictional worlds. The following three principles are concerned with a regulating function over the text as a whole, by extension also including the first three sets of rules (Wolf, *Illusion* 165).

Principle of medium adequacy

The fourth principle is concerned with the necessity to yield to the specific characteristics of medium and genre, in order to keep the reader focused on his perceptions rather than the mediality of the narrative. The "Prinzip der Mediumsadäquatheit" (Wolf, *Illusion* 164), or "of respecting and exploiting the potential of the medium and the chosen genre" (Wolf, *Fiction* 4), defines guidelines to stay within the "frame" of the fictional narrative. It defines these borders on the basis of a distinction between narration's two constituents: The limits of language and the limits of narrative.

The former has to be used with its temporal nature in mind. In other words, when using language to present elements belonging to the spatial sphere, the descriptions necessary to simulate another world should not transcend a certain extent. To ensure this, descriptions always have to be of subsequent importance to the story, and in addition be motivated by it. Quantitatively, this simply means *histoire* elements outweighing descriptive elements; qualitatively it demands that the more noticeable a description is, the more complex its importance for the story has to be. This "Sinnintegration" (Wolf, *Illusion* 167) keeps the balance between „Über- und Unterdeterminierung, zwischen Details und Unbestimmtheitsstellen, durch das Beschreibungen zu einem Maximum an Illusionsbildung geführt werden“ (ibid 168). Another option, instead of limiting the depiction of spatial

simultaneity via temporal succession, is to use language's temporal dimension by adding a dynamic quality to the description. It can be achieved through using "dynamic" verbs and adjectives, hence "vitalizing" static elements. As mentioned before, graphic novels tend to portray static elements on their graphic levels, hence examples of descriptions on a textual level are scarce. Nevertheless, a few short sequences bear examples for such dynamic descriptions, such as the description of the inmates of resettlement camps: "They're so weak and pathetic you find yourself hating them. They don't *fight* or *struggle* against death. They just *stare* at you with weak eyes" (Moore, Lloyd 80, my emphasis). "Diskursmimesis" (Wolf, *Illusion* 169) is a further method to embrace language's advantages. In other words, the imitation of conversation – being the main linguistic component of every-day life – is an illusionist tool well suited for the textual narrative. Nevertheless, it has to be kept in mind that, overall, "Redeillusion" is of less importance than "Geschehensillusion" (Wolf, *Illusion* 170). At first sight, this may seem to contradict the highly conversational nature of graphic novels. Therefore, it is important to see the whole work, not just its textual parts. It then becomes clear that between images and text, *Redeillusion* is not a graphic novel's most important element. This can further be supported by a comparison between the number of text-only and image-only panels, in which the latter would dominate.

The limits of narrative are concerned with enabling the development of a story (hence marking the border to verse) while keeping in mind its necessary mediation (marking the border to drama). Parallel to the dynamic characteristics of language, the *histoire* elements portrayed through it also have to possess this quality. In other words, the story has to contain dynamic situations depicting change, "denn nur so ergibt sich eine erzähltypische Geschichte [...] Die mediumsadäquate Dynamisierung der Geschichte regelt also lediglich die Dominanz von *histoire*-Elementen, die unter dem Aspekt der Veränderung erzählt werden." (Wolf, *Illusion* 171) Comics as a whole and (anti-)superhero comics in particular, are often loaded with action and are therefore an ideal example for dynamic *histoire* elements. All three graphic novels share the dynamicity of classical comic books, although deliberately breaking it at times (for example the news broadcast in *Batman*, or *Watchmen*'s prose chapters). *Batman* even starts out with an action sequence, where Bruce drives a car at high-speed, wrecks it, but manages to bail out just in time before it explodes. *Watchmen* also starts out with a dynamic sequence, yet not such an obvious one: The first page shows the same image (that of the Comedian's smiley button lying in a puddle of blood), but zooms out on it bit by bit, showing a man looking down on the scene from a window near the top of a skyscraper on

the last panel. At the first moment it could be argued that the scene is a dynamized description, but at a closer look it becomes clear that a little bit of time passes from panel to panel, hence the *histoire*-elements are changing. As a second element, the mediation inherent to all fictional narratives has to be accounted for. It plays an important role in *Redeillusion*, where the speaker's identity has to be clarified in order to avoid ambiguity, but also for other elements that have to be evoked in the reader's mind beforehand. For graphic novels, the acknowledgement of mediation is a less important factor due to its graphic element. Similar to drama, speakers and objects are often visible to the reader via images, hence avoiding disambiguity.

“Jedes künstlerische Medium beeinflusst mit seinen Grenzen und spezifischen Leistungen den Bereich des Darstellbaren und dessen Vermittlung“ (Wolf *Illusion* 164). For written narrative, as we have seen, this means the impossibility to accurately portray the dimension of space; for visual narrative, it is the obstacle of time that cannot be overcome. The difference to classic media is especially striking in this principle, as the center point of Wolf's argument is the application to the medium and genre of the written fictional narrative. The advantage graphic novels offer is therefore quite clear, due to their dual nature: They overcome the limits of both narrative dimensions. Yet, if the depiction is not limited by either of these narrative modes, one question consequently arises: What are the borders of graphic novels and what is a media-adequate way to tell a story in those borders? It would be presumptuous to conclude that graphic novels are not restricted by any limitations and hence are the ultimate medium for any genre or story. Apart from the fact that imperfection, in the sense of not completely following all afore mentioned principles, is not necessarily illusion breaking, limitations force the author to work more intensely with the tools at his command. The resulting work may lead to results more suitable and engaging than the connection of text and image ever could have done. Furthermore, addressing the medium specific trait of a word-image combination, it can be argued that the duality of narrative forms disrupts the fluency of the reading experience rather than strengthening it. This may be true if the makeup of pictures and words is not cohesive, for example if they show different scenes, people, or times. While this is ultimately a matter to be dealt with on individual basis, it remains to point out cohesion between the visual and textual elements as a general pillar of graphic novels that should not be circumvented. The fact that breaking up this tie is used by some artists as a stylistic device proves its generic importance.

Principle of generating interest

On the first look, the subject dealt with in the fifth principle seems to be impossible to put into the corset of any rules or definitions; already trying to grasp its scope seems to be far too ambiguous and dependant on the person of the reader to achieve: “Generating (an emotional) interest in the possible world” (Wolf, *Fiction* 4), or the “Prinzip der Interessantheit der Geschichte” (Wolf, *Illusion* 172). Yet, the thought guiding this set of rules is not so much concerned with the material context, but rather with a very plausible set of features underlying any interest-creating story. The basic thought behind declaring interestingness a general principle is that, even if all above named principles are inherent to a text and the *histoire* seems probable, the illusionist effect does not have to occur. To explain and define this unknown, Wolf makes a comparison to real life: There, our mode of perception changes from a rather passive one (used for unspectacular redundant everyday occurrences) to an active one, if something out of the ordinary arouses our curiosity. He therefore concludes that, in an imitation of real life, the story has to contain extraordinary elements in order to activate the increased perception reserved for those exciting real life events. This is what he deems the “illusionistische Quasi-Wahrnehmung” (Wolf, *Illusion* 174). For example, when, in the beginning of *V for Vendetta*, Evey tries to work as a prostitute, this may not seem too unusual. It begins to become more unusual once she starts to speak and one realizes from her clumsiness that she does not do this regularly. The situation becomes yet more unusual as it turns out her suitor is an undercover policeman who then wants to rape and kill her together with other undercover agents. The extraordinariness reaches its peak when V comes to her rescue and takes her on a nearby rooftop, killing the policemen in the motion. Apart from exhibiting perfectly how passive perception can turn into illusionist quasi-perception, the scene also shows Moore’s talent to slowly increase the distance between probable and fantastic story elements. An effect of this moderately increasing level of exceptionality can be seen in an overall higher tolerance of these elements, and, as they fail to ‘shock the reader out of illusion’, consequently as an illusion enhancing method. As a comprehensive regulating principle, it governs the text as well as all other principles. Yet, because of the importance of uncommon, even exceptional, story elements, it clashes with the underlying goal of creating an experience in the parameter of probability and life-likeness. Once more, the balance between elements (which in itself may be looked at as the superior principle of aesthetic illusion) becomes essential.

Before taking a more detailed look into the rules for creating such an interest, it is important to define its subject. Both thematic as well as aesthetic interests can potentially distance the reader from the story and are also much more dependent on the recipient. Hence, the focus has to lie purely on the *histoire* elements. Nevertheless, an interesting thematic or discourse level can strengthen the illusionist effect, as long as it does not displace *histoire* as focus point. All three novels contain themes which, while not taking over the spot light, are “of topical relevance to contemporary culture” (Wolf, *Fiction* 4) and hence keep the reader interested in the story: *Watchmen*’s problematic of nuclear war and violence are still (or once more) of contemporary interest, and were even more so in 1987; the themes in *V* are broad, but are grouped around war and violence, as well as the need for the freedom of speech and democracy, and are similarly present-day issues; *Batman*’s problematic likewise concerns violence, but also the question of self-enforcement of the law and the validity of the media.

The most prominent method for creating interest in the story is suspense. On the one hand, it is a specific form of the principle of consistency by creating, using, and delaying the fulfillment of the *Erwartungshorizont*, as well as coherently integrating new *histoire* elements in it. While digressions are a useful tool in this respect, successful suspense also encompasses the need for overall consistency of the story. This is due to the temporal nature of the written narrative (i.e. it takes time for suspense to evolve) and hence prohibits too many scene changes. On the other hand, it presents a specification of more general characteristics necessary for successful creation of interest: An eventful yet clear fable at the center of the text, leading to an affective involvement of the reader.¹²

The most important factor, from a formal point of view, is the definition of the fable as a specification of the plot, hence standing next to the other *histoire* elements character and setting (Lewis 77). While the fable/plot constitutes the main focus of illusionist potential, the other two rather descriptive elements function as stabilizers or ornamentation. Furthermore, in order to function as a central element, the story lines contributing to the fable/plot need to be limited as well as linear, and should not switch continuously (leading to a “clear fable”). Keeping in mind the temporal nature of written narrative, this allows for the necessary continuity of illusion. The same thought can be applied to the relation between diegetic and extra-diegetic levels: To avoid confusion, the focus has to be clear and usually lies within the diegetic level. Should a switch to an extra-diegetic level occur, the switch has to be clear,

¹² Although suspense presents a very important aspect of aesthetic illusion and a thorough discussion of it in respect to its use in graphic novels could prove very insightful, it lies beyond the borders of this thesis.

consistent with the fable, and the diegetic quality of telling has to be transferred as well. “Ein solcher Akzentumsprung ist [...] illusionskompatibel, da der Wechsel der Ebenen eine gewisse Ökonomie erkennen lässt [...] der Interessenbildung an einem zentralen Geschehen entgegenkommt und zugleich die Vermitteltheit der Erzählung nicht all zu sehr in der Vordergrund spielt” (Wolf, *Illusion* 179). When looking at *Watchmen*, this becomes evident in the frame-narration of Rorschach’s journal entries, the *Tales from the Black Freighter*, as well as the purely textual sub-chapters. In all three instances, the clarity is not affected, as the fable still stays the same; it is simply the diegetic level that is altered. More information on the characters’ history, former activities and crimes, and present developments are presented and commented on in the diary as well as the articles; critical comments on the recent developments of the plot are given in the pirate tale. The same is true for the TV frames in *Batman*, which also comment on the recent developments or even introduce new elements. Since the narrative voice is always clear as well, there is no confusion to the reader, and hence no anti-illusionist effect caused by a switch of diegetic levels.

Once again, the visual nature of graphic novels forms an advantage: As they break through the simple temporal nature of written narrative, the reader can adjust to new settings or strands of the plot more quickly. In other words, the continuity of illusion is less fragile with the aid of an image component, leading to the possibility to “jump” from scene to scene, or strand to strand more easily. This rather frequent change is a feature of comics, and examples can be found in all three books. *Watchmen*, for example, shows each hero with his/her own story, lets the plots intertwine, and adds additional strands of story; sometimes it includes changes of place and time in one strand (especially in Dr. Manhattan’s scenes), other times story lines change abruptly.

From a content orientated point of view, the eventfulness of the fable/plot is essential for successfully creating aesthetic illusion. Firstly, this demands a closer definition of the term „eventful“, as connected to the unknown. Opposed to the formal criteria of a fable focus, this alien element can occur in settings and characters as well as plot. Its only limit is an unwritten boundary of believability which does not necessarily have to be congruent with the rules guiding the principle of *Sinnzentriertheit*, but rather functions as a corrective for it. According to Wolf, any narration includes this uncertain element due to its alien nature (in the sense of being someone else’s account). Hence, an illusionist text needs to make use of this concept and deviate (to a certain extent) on a thematic as well as *histoire* level from what the reader anticipates. The reader then presently perceives and experiences something unexpected and

needs to adjust to new circumstances. As a consequence he will get drawn into the story more emotionally. This concept of “gemäßigte Fremdheit” (Wolf, *Illusion* 181) is achieved by an overall balance between excitement and believability. It includes taking into account the different levels of illusion tolerance in the different textual dimensions: a generally a higher tolerance in the areas of content, such as theme or setting, and a generally lower one for formal as well as epistemological concepts. Graphic novels can help to keep this balance, as eventfulness may only be part of either the visual or verbal realm, whilst the other can maintain continuity.

In a next step it is important to differentiate between “inner” (in the sense of the inner life of a character) and “outer” events. With regards to the eventfulness of the plot, the outer elements - already manifested in the principle of constructing the world’s inventory - are of higher importance. With the afore-mentioned limit of believability in mind, this leads to the illusionist prototype of an action laden plot (“action” used here in the broadest sense of the word rather than in connection to the “action” often associated with comics). Prove of its importance can be seen in the headings (and therefore overall structure) of the chapters of *Batman*, such as “Hunt the Dark Knight”, or “The Dark Night Falls”, which are all concerned with outer events.

The last content related aspect is to create an “affective involvement” of the reader. Its qualities become clear when looking at the ambivalent phenomenon of suspense, where rational and emotional involvement can co-exist. While the creation of purely rational involvement (such as the solution to a mystery or crime) will lead to an aesthetic distance, the creation of emotional involvement (such as the creation of fear or the anticipation of the unexpected and extraordinary) will attract the reader to the text. The latter kind is obviously the illusionistically important one, a fact also highlighted by the high frequency of a romantic element in the plot. In this case, the usually secondary histoire-element character, gains importance over the plot by creating an emotional interest in the characters and their tragedies. However, this does not mean that the creation of “rational suspense” cannot aid illusion - it just will not succeed in doing so, if it is the only kind of suspense involved. Hence, if the plot is concerned with finding a solution to a mystery, the rational suspense has to be balanced by an emotional involvement, ideally also connected to the crime. The horror usually associated with capital offenses is an effective way to deviate from the aesthetic rational and engage the reader in pro-illusion emotion. *Watchmen* is a perfect example for this interaction: The main plot element is concerned with finding the murderer of the Comedian

(rational element), who was brutally murdered (illusionist element), and in consequence solves an elaborate scheme (rational), in the course of which several other tragedies happen, as well as the development of a romantic relationship (illusionist). How important the co-operation of the two suspense strategies is, can be easily shown by imagining *Watchmen* without any emotional involvement: Would the reader be as easily and intensely drawn into the story if the comedian had died ‘a less violent death’, if there were no love interests, if Rorschach’s personal tragedies had not been shown to explain how he became the man he is? In other words: Would we like to solve the mystery as much if it was simply that – a plain mystery? Most likely, the answer would be ‘no’. The same holds true for *V for Vendetta*, where V’s tragic experiences as the prisoner of cell five become more exposed once the investigation and search for him become more intense; and *Batman*, whose fight against cruel enemies and old acquaintances is always accompanied by his tragic early life’s lessons.

The creation of emotional involvement is one of the graphic novel’s greatest advantages. Images conjure up emotions in people much faster than a written narrative ever could, which is not to say that written narratives cannot achieve the same goal, it will generally just take them longer. The spatial nature of images on the other hand, allows them to instantly give a complete picture of a scene, and therefore demand an immediate response of the reader/viewer. The rational element of suspense on the other hand, is rather difficult to achieve in the reign of pictures. Yet, it is not impossible, as an already mentioned scene from *Watchmen* shows: On the ‘silent’ pages (see Fig. 21, p. 134) Rorschach investigates the house of a child murderer. Obviously, as there is no text, the creation of both rational as well as emotional suspense elements lies within the images. This deductive quality is brilliantly achieved by showing the reader only as much as the ‘agent’, Rorschach, forcing him to come to a conclusion by himself: Rorschach walks from one room to the next, discovers a piece of the girl’s clothes in the oven, then walks into the kitchen where he finds a newly sharpened and sparkling butcher’s knife, consequently sees fresh marks in the butcher’s block, and finally connects the dots (as does the reader) when he sees the dogs playing with a large bone. The following panels, showing him walking out to the dogs with the knife in his hand, are also silent and leave the reader with the reasonable suspicion that he killed the dogs, which is confirmed a few pages later. All of this is accompanied by the emotional element, given by Rorschach’s promise to her parents to find her and his own private reasons: “Thought of the little child, abused, frightened. Didn’t like it. Personal reasons. Decided to intervene. Promised parents I’d return her unharmed” (VI 18).

Principle of “Celare Artem”

The sixth principle is called “Celare Artem” (Wolf, *Fiction* 4) and is concerned with the “concealment of artificiality” (ibid). It is closely linked to the analogy principle mentioned earlier, but can be seen as an extension, or - as it governs all other principles and elements – a general refrain. The basic assumption is, that our perception of reality is connected to a different set of rules (primary frame conditions) than our conception of fictional situations (secondary frame conditions), the latter of which are subject to the concealment necessary for the creation of illusion. The veiling of secondary frame conditions and, in connection, of the illusion-creating principles also constitute the afore mentioned parallel to real-life perception, where we constantly disregard our permanent role in the reception process. In other words, real life perception is marked by a latent awareness that we are ourselves a subjective medium, while perception of fiction is marked by disregarding the awareness of perceiving a ‘fake’ reality. The fictionality of art, according to Wolf, is made up of two elements, namely *fictio* and *fictum*, both of which have to be concealed.

Fictio status refers to the distance created through the obviousness of the medium itself. As it was discussed above, the two limitations of the medium “fictional text” are language and narrative. Therefore, in those limits created by the principle of media adequacy, both elements should not be centralized as themes in order to allow for the necessary transparency of the medium. On a basic level, this means avoiding to make an issue of language in general or its specific use in a work, as well as discussing discourse elements (“Thematisierungsverbot” [Wolf, *Illusion* 192]). On a more complicated level, this leads to a necessary avoidance of any implicit foregrounding of the medium (“Suggestionsverbot” [ibid]). The biggest problem in the concealment of narrative is posed by the principle of *Sinnzentriertheit*, which demands a certain focus of view point. Yet, as soon as an author is established, the unmediated quasi-real-life perception becomes impossible.

Unlike post-modern literature, where language is almost always of thematic importance, the three books adhere to the general *Thematisierungsverbot* of language as such. Yet, language does play an important role in all three books in the form of slang. It marks a certain group identity/membership (for example the Mutants in *Batman* or the Fingermen in *V for Vendetta*) and hence points out the importance of language. *V for Vendetta* comes closest to violating the general rule, as it counts the importance of free thought and free speech amongst its topics. In addition, it has its main character citing Shakespeare and Blake, hence broaching

the issue of literature in general, or even fictional texts in particular. How important literature is, becomes clear when, only once Evey recognizes one of V's many quotes, he shows her the whole extent of the Shadow Gallery: "Uh-Uh. Quoting Aleister Crowley isn't good enough. It doesn't answer my *question*. I want to know what *thou* wilt, V. I want to know what your will is" (217). As a related or even interdependent subject, language as the basis of all texts is therefore omnipresent. *Watchmen*, while avoiding references to other works for the most part, highlights another aspect of language, namely grammar. From the first page onwards, Rorschach's idiosyncratic grammar in the journal entries (as well as the fact that they present the reader with yet another written medium) makes the reader aware of the factor language. It could also be argued that the oxymoronic sounds used in comics are a testimony for the insufficiency of language to accurately portray reality. Yet, I believe this becomes true only when looking at the structure and techniques behind comics, and is not of importance for someone reading it and experiencing aesthetic illusion. There, it actually has the opposite effect, namely adding the layer of sound to a 'soundless' medium. As far as centralizing the mediated quality of fictional accounts by introduction of an author is concerned, the books have two different approaches: While *Watchmen* and *Batman* foreground their narrative nature through frequent and well-marked changes of authors, *V* tries to conceal it as much as possible, sticking to dialogue and only very few authorial comments. Once again, balance is the main word to consider in this respect: If several narrative personae tell the story - therefore foregrounding its narrative character and hence ignoring the principle of *Celare artem* - this illusion breaking effect needs to be balanced out by a very strong adherence to the principle of perspectivity. This can be witnessed in *Watchmen* and *Batman*, where the switches in commentators/narrators are indicated through different shapes and colors of speech bubbles and frames. A different balance is necessary in *V*, where the importance of language is discussed more openly, therefore ignoring the language element of the disguisement of fictional texts. This overstepping of *Celare artem* boundaries is evened out by using narrators only very cautiously.

A further aspect to be considered is the structure of the text. The more striking or important (in the sense of being connected to or giving away the content) it is, the more obvious the text's narrative nature becomes. Surprisingly, the concealment of this element is completely ignored in all three texts. In fact, the structure is even of high importance for *Watchmen*, as demonstrated in the "mirror" chapter, as well as *V*, with its roots in the three act revenge play. Furthermore, the headings of *Batman* and *V* are worth looking at, as they give an insight into the content of the chapters. The former is made up of four books whose titles, such as "The

Dank Knight Triumphant” or “The Dark Knight Falls” give away the central content matter of the chapter. V’s subchapters are more subtle for the most part, but do relate to an aspect of the chapter. The name of each chapter begins with the letter V - starting with “The Villain” and ending with “Valhalla” – hence stressing the issue of structure. The utter lack of concealment of structure necessarily leads to the conclusion that structure is not something associated purely with narrative and hence its display not a major factor for the breaking of illusion. It may even be argued that structure bears resemblance to real life experiences. Although reality obviously is ultimately infinite in its possibilities and does not come in neat chapters, structuring it seems to be a human need. This can be seen in the ‘big chapters’ (childhood, adulthood, old age) with their many subchapters, but also in daily routines. Therefore, highlighting the structure of a work should not be considered only as a display of its artificiality, but also as an application of the analogy theory. It could also be concluded that it is easier to ignore striking proves of narrativity, because it relates to our mediated reality. Questioning language, on the other hand, inevitably leads to epistemological questions which, according to Wolf, can reduce the illusionist effect.

Fictionality is also perceived as such, if the text does not offer any references to an autonomous reality. Therefore, the *fictum* aspect of Celare artem is concerned with establishing the world of the text independently from its fictional author (similar to real life perception) in order to preclude the disruption of illusion. Hiding this author dependency is more important than hiding the general narrative element of the medium - another argument for the above mentioned priority of concealing language over narrative. Again, *Thematisierungsverbot* as well as *Suggestionsverbot* should be followed in order to uphold the narrative’s autonomy. The latter is especially important in the relation of discourse level and *histoire*, and hence responsible for keeping the narrative transparent. It controls the principle of the access- and immersion-facilitating construction of the possible world’s inventory insofar, as the quality and quantity of the description may not be excessive, leading to question the narrative transparency. For the *histoire* this translates into an avoidance of any fictional elements, such as dreams or hallucinations, if they are incomprehensible in the context of the text. This needs to be looked at in connection to the principle of perspectivity, as it would suggest an entity on a level beyond that of the “*Perspektiventräger*”. In addition to these more obvious mechanisms, illusionist texts also have to avoid subtle hints to the author dependency that can arise out of an exaggerated *Sinnzentriertheit*. In other words, if a scene seems to be too declarative of, or specific to a certain issue, the reader - used to an “infinitely senseless” world – will question the independence of the text.

To avoid such illusion breaking, there are a number of mechanisms working in the opposite direction, and producing “partielle Sinnzerstreuung” (Wolf, *Illusion* 194). They were already discussed above and include cataphoric coincidences, detailed descriptions, and the concept of “gemäßigte Fremdheit”. Furthermore, the “Impliziertheit des Sinns” (ibid 195) – using *Leerstellen* (Iser) when the message or purpose is obvious without further comment - has to be obeyed. Detecting the message of a scene in this way is illusion enhancing, as it relates to our process of making sense in reality.

Although Wolf does not mention this, metaphors and symbolism should be considered under this aspect as well. As metaphors are non-existent in reality, they are always a sign of the artificiality of the text, hence giving away the author creating them. Nevertheless, if the metaphors and symbols are subtle, leaving the reader with a big enough autonomous task to deduct the deeper meaning, they can be as illusion enhancing as *Leerstellen* and provide readers with their “own” meaning. How sensitive this border between too little and too much meaningfulness is, is best demonstrated in two examples from *Batman*, where the current weather is a recurrent topic on the news. Using nature as a metaphor for the story and its characters is a well-established narrative technique. Yet, how well aware readers are of these literary conventions is dependent on conditions outside of the text.¹³ The first of these references occurs very early in the book when the weatherman, standing under the words “forecast hot”, states that “it looks like it’s going to get worse before it gets better” (14). This is followed by an account of another crime. Especially since the reporters always blame the weather for the high crime rate, an association between weather *forecast* and *foreshadowing* of the story suggests itself. Nevertheless, no narrative or authorial comment forces this connection onto the reader, leaving it up to him and therefore involving him in the finding of meaning. A few pages further, however, the balance between artificiality and self-deduction breaks down: “power lines are down all over the suburbs. It’s a *mean one* – and it’s headed straight for Gotham. *Like the wrath of God* it’s headed for Gotham” (27, emphasis added). The allusion to Batman – “the mean one”, as he is referred to earlier in the book – in combination with the foreshadowing of doom by an over-powerful creature, leaves no real room for one’s own involvement. Instead, the reader has to accept the fact that some other entity with its own purpose in mind, stands behind the text as its creator and bestower of meaning.

¹³Original readers of the Storm and Stress movement, for example, were probably more aware of the symbolism of nature.

The techniques discussed until now only concerned hiding the fact that references to an independent world cannot exist. A second step involves “active” production of illusion through references – the “Authentizitätsfiktion”. Although this violates the general *Thematisierungsverbot*, it could be said that the end justifies the means. It can be achieved on two levels, namely discourse and story. The focus here lies on the former, and often already starts in the title or foreword, presenting the text as belonging to another text type (for example a travel account or correspondence). This technique is arguably also used in *Watchmen* with its diary entries and the last scene suggesting the book to be (at least partly) a product of Rorschach’s diary. Even if one dismisses this meta-referential claim for the whole book, its elements (the newspaper articles, book chapters, and other prose pieces in-between chapters) are examples for this discourse reference. The same can be said for *Batman*, which also starts out with a newspaper clipping. Even more important in this respect is “the presentation of a novel as a form of history” (Miller 457 qtd. in Wolf, *Illusion* 197), in other words the implicitness with which the text is introduced as part of a reality. On the level of *histoire*, the creation of references is aimed at introducing elements (such as people, places, or social settings) which the reader will connect to reality. Similarly to the *Leerstellen*, a more efficient way to create such references is by portraying an “Ambivalenz von Verfremdung und Transparenz” (Wolf, *Illusion* 198) - to create them in a manner similar, yet not identical to real-life. Thence, by ‘discovering’ the reference, the reader is involved in the production of the reference, which in turn aids the transparency of the narrative.

All three books are full of both ambivalent and obvious references, therefore proving the importance and effectiveness of *Referenzillusion*. Looking at the element of place provides good examples: *Watchmen* and *V* both take place in real cities - New York and London respectively – implying the reality of the story through the reality of the places. *Batman*, on the other hand, takes place in Gotham City, a fictional town. Yet, its metropolitan look, media presence, and problems are so similar to a real town that the reader may assume its existence by analogy and extension. Time references are also ‘indicators’ of non-fictionality, a technique used by Moore in *Watchmen* (e.g. the diary entries and newspaper clippings) and *V*. Resembling specific time references in their purpose, are thematic references, which also provide the reader with a certain time frame. The references to nuclear threats in *Watchmen*, such as the “mmeltdowns!”-bill (I 5), which place the book in the period of the Cold War, serve as examples. Similarly, mentioning Truman as former president specifies the time period. The same effect is achieved in *Batman* by displaying a slightly altered version of Ronald Reagan as president. Authenticity through references to people is also quite

interestingly dealt with in the article on the first page of *Batman*, where references to both Superman and Wonderwoman are made. These references are special in a number of ways. Firstly, they are not obvious to everybody (“an Amazon princess” may not trigger the notion of Wonderwoman in every reader), hence need some involvement and prior knowledge. Secondly, the ‘referees’ are themselves fictional characters, suggesting that references do not have to refer to our real world, but simply to *any author-autonomous world*. Lastly, and most strikingly, the references work. Yet, this is not the only appearance of Superman worth looking at. In the beginning of the book Dr. Wolper appears on the news wearing a Superman shirt, creating a reference to *our world* where Superman T-Shirts are a common consumer item. It can be argued that, by doing so, the ‘credibility’ of any reference to Superman is increased. The allusion to superman is especially noteworthy in connection to his later appearance in the book, which actually diminishes the referential quality somewhat, as he is now part of *Batman’s world* as well, and therefore cannot be seen as purely referential and therefore “real” character anymore. It can therefore be concluded, that references do not only work if “ein Bestandteil der Geschichte vom Leser als spezifisches Element der gegenwärtigen oder vergangenen Lebenswelt wieder erkannt werden kann oder soll.” (Wolf, *Illusion* 198) Rather, references can also allude to other independent possible worlds, or even to other parts of the world in question.

Although these references can be found all over the book, it should be noted that ‘basic’ references concerning time and place setting as well as using a different text type, are right at the beginning, hence establishing a certain reality factor early onwards. If one assumes that keeping aesthetic illusion takes less effort than creating it, it may be argued that, by achieving aesthetic illusion already at this early moment, the level of tolerance for anti-illusionistic elements is higher for the rest of the book. For the most part, *Watchmen* does this in the very first panel: “Rorschach’s journal. October 12th, 1985” (I 1) - hence establishing time as well as a journal as a more reliable source. New York is not referred to decidedly in the beginning, but the policeman on the second page wears a cap with the letters NYPD on it. Rorschach finally mentions it a few pages later: “Beneath me, this awful city, it screams like an abattoir full of retarded children. New York” (I 14). Similarly, V’s fist panel consists of a radio broadcast, a medium considered generally trustworthy: “Good evening London. It’s nine o clock and this is the voice of Fate broadcasting on 275 and 285 in the medium wave... It is the fifth of the eleventh, nineteen-ninety-seven” (9). *Batman*, as mentioned before, starts off with a newspaper clipping, followed by news broadcasts establishing Gotham City in the Reagan era as the setting.

Before going into more details concerning the specifics of graphic novels in the application of this principle, the general artificiality of the medium deserves a second thought. Wolf claims that in fictional texts the artificiality is generally higher than it always is for any art form due to their many illusion regulating mechanisms. While this assumption is based on formal matters, it should also be extended onto matters of content. Therefore, when looking at the subject matter of anti-superhero-graphic novels, it can be argued that the artificiality of this kind of fiction (as opposed to, for example, realist novels) will need much more powerful mechanisms of *Celare artem* due to its bigger distance to real-life.

Thematisierungsverbot and *Suggestionsverbot* are as relevant for hiding the *fictio* and *fictum* nature on a graphic level as they are on a linguistic one. For the *fictio* status, this means the fact that graphic novels are drawn cannot be centralized, or alluded to by reference, without risking the illusionist effect. It becomes clear that the advantages graphic novels offer in connection with, for example, the borders of the medium, turn into disadvantages for the principle of *Celare artem*: If there are more levels to convey a story, it will aid a wholesome portrayal of its world on the one hand, but present more elements to conceal on the other. Yet, disguising the graphic level should not be looked at separately, but needs to be treated in connection with language and narrative. This means that, not only should it be avoided to make an issue of language and narrative on the textual level, but also in the images. Naturally, the same is true vice versa, hence mentioning the graphic nature on the textual level should be evaded. This rule is mostly adhered to in *Batman* and *V*, yet continuously broken in *Watchmen*. The most obvious example is the inclusion of the “Tales of the Black Freighter”, the comic-within-a-comic. An example for the “cross-level” concealment (or rather the disregard thereof) is the Comedian’s already mentioned statement “See you in the funny papers” (II 11), centralizing the medium comic.

In terms of the *fictum* element, problems can arise in the realm of the *Suggestionsverbot* rather than the *Thematisierungsverbot*. Directly centralizing the *fictum* nature graphically is rather difficult and seldom. It could be achieved by showing the hand of the “author” or his pencil on the side of the panel, similar to the beginning of *Understanding Comics* in which McCloud’s comic-self works on a page of the book. Avoiding indirect attention to the *fictum* aspect on the other hand, is already more difficult and complicated, as it relates to other principles. Close-ups, for example, show the reader only one particular aspect of a scene, namely that which the author wants him to see. It could therefore be concluded that any image showing more detailed elements or a certain focus is illusion breaking. Yet, the principle of

perspectivity has to be considered here as well. Taking the “detective scene” from *Watchmen* as an example, it becomes clear that, when the butcher’s knife is shown sparkling next to the other knives, the reader’s attention is focused on that particular element. Yet, it is not the author who guides our perception, but Rorschach, hence aiding illusion rather than breaking it.

Far more important in this respect is *Sinnzentriertheit*. Especially in regard to the co-existence of images and language, an over abundance of meaning becomes more likely as both realms inevitably cause the reader to make sense of them. The issue of textual metaphors was discussed above in connection with this problem. Yet, it should also be regarded on a larger scale, examining comics in general: “Comics are particularly well suited to extended and large-scale metaphors [...] When you look at a comic book, you’re not seeing either the world or a direct representation of the world; what you’re seeing is an interpretation or transformation of the world, with aspects that are exaggerated, adapted, or invented.” (Wolk 20) Wolk goes on to say that “cartooning is, inescapably, a metaphor for the subjectivity of perception” (21). This may be a bit far-fetched though, as comics are not really any different from other media in this respect. All media fail at the impossible task to portray reality ‘as it is’ and end up portraying it ultimately subjective. Nevertheless, it should be noted that comics have a higher potential for metaphors due to their dual nature, which in turn leads to the necessity for more caution and subtlety when using them.

The above discussion of the weatherman’s comments and nature as metaphors is reinforced through the aspect of graphic metaphors. The oncoming storm is visualized by panels with lightning as well as the “sound” of thunder. At the beginning only thunder can be ‘heard’, the onomatopoetic “rrrrmmmmbllllllll” (27) expanding over the borders of the panel. On the next page, lightning can already be seen in addition to the sound, followed by a bright blue “KRAKK” (30) including lightning two pages later. It reaches its climax when ‘the storm’ hits Gotham: A whole page showing Batman’s return. In connection to the already conspicuous mentioning of the ‘mean one’, this combination of graphic and verbal metaphors could easily be perceived as hindering illusion.

“The Tales of the Black Freighter” also offers a lot of material for interpretation in this respect. It can be seen as an abstract metaphor for our world, a more concrete one for the world of *Watchmen*, but also presents a meta-reference to the medium of comics. It is fair to say, that the inclusion of such a symbolically laden element strains the power of aesthetic illusion and makes it almost impossible not to think of the author behind it. Therefore, some

elements with a counterbalancing effect exist, such as the afore mentioned perspective (putting diegetic reader and reader on the same spot).

A rather problematic scene in this respect also occurs in *Batman* during the instances in which he encounters the bat, the animal that created Batman and started Wayne's internal struggle. One way to read these scenes is to ignore all symbolic meaning and take the 'super' bat with its flaming mouth to be real and capable of controlling Wayne. Another way is to look at it from a symbolic perspective, whilst also keeping in mind the *Suggestionsverbot*. In other words, when Bruce sees "the fiercest survivor... the purest warrior... glaring, hating...claiming me as your own." (88), it can be interpreted as symbolic for the beast in him (or everyone), the power of our id, or something similar. If we accept this elaborate metaphor, it naturally leads to the author and his intentions, hence hindering narrative transparency. It may also lead to dismissing the visions as hallucinations, which foregrounds the *fictum* aspect of the text (no fictionalizing of the inner-diegetic level). This is reinforced by the fact that the vision happens more than once, accompanied by almost the exact same thoughts. The only difference lies in the words "claiming me as *his* own" (19), showing how in the course of time Wayne has embraced the creature. Furthermore, the incident in which the bat crashes into his bedroom window, which is never mentioned again, affirms the metaphorical reading and could even be seen as a dream. What can be said in favor of staying within the boundaries of aesthetic illusion, is the fact that Miller does not comment on the metaphor in any way, therefore leaving up to the reader to interpret it in this way (hence involving him) or ignoring it altogether. In spite of the last pro-illusion argument, the overall effect of the scene can be described as emphasizing its *fictum* nature. A further example for a metaphor as well as a reference, is the mentioning of the 1940 Zorro movie which Bruce saw with his parents before their murder. It was therefore causal for the death of his parents and undoubtedly a factor in becoming a masked avenger. Furthermore, before Batman's return, Wayne watches the movie again, establishing another connection between him and Zorro.

In this respect it also seems necessary to mention the obvious connection and underlying assertion between Wayne's own internal struggle and the fact that his antagonists are all suffering from some form of schizophrenia. Hence, the fight against Harvey Dent may be seen as symbolic for his own struggle. This view is underlined when Batman says "Like I said Harvey... I have to know [who is behind the mask]" (53), whilst being behind a mask himself. This interpretation is further strengthened when he finally looks at Dent's

reconstructed face, yet still sees the deformed one. He states “I see... a reflection, Harvey.” (55), whilst having a vision of the bat.

The split-personality aspect is another example for the (dis)advantages of comics due to their dual nature in connection to metaphors. When we first encounter Dent, he is portrayed over two panels, giving the impression of him being split in half, hence underlining his supposedly healed mental troubles. His image becomes whole only once he looks in the mirror, opening the door for Lacanian interpretation. In addition, he is always portrayed in the company of his two doctors (psychiatrist and plastic surgeon), establishing another split, namely between body and mind. This can, in a further (slightly excessive) interpretation, also be seen as metaphorical for our society. (Fig. 9) In connection to the principle of Celare artem the

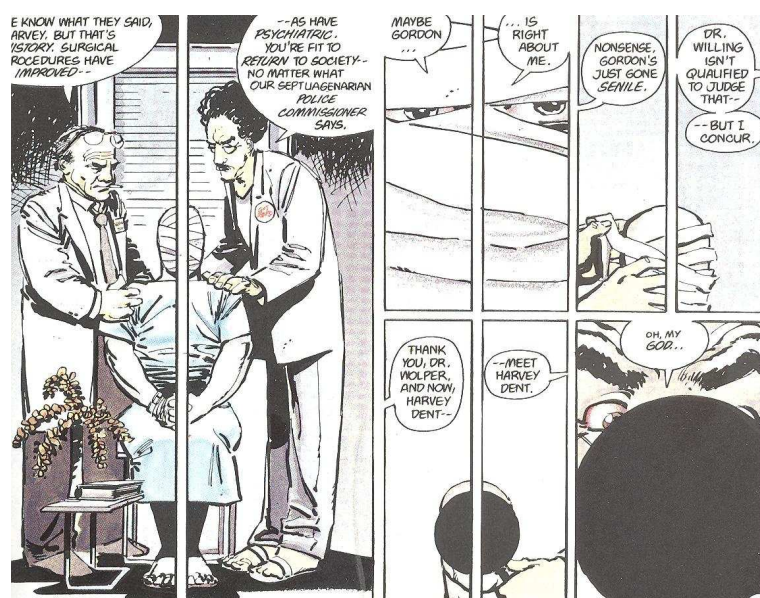


Fig. 9 Split personality effect

question is if, and if so how far, the (additional) visual metaphors aid illusion, and at which point they become illusion breaking. The ground rule persists: As soon as the *Sinnzentriertheit* becomes too obvious, making an inference to the author inevitable, the line has been crossed, the illusion broken, and

the artificiality revealed. Yet, I

would argue that the tolerance for symbolism on a graphic level is higher than that on a linguistic or thematic one, due to the fact that we look at things, even graphic symbols, *all the time* in real life (for example road signs). Texts often even try to make use of this visual ability by producing mental pictures through language.

To counterbalance this through the methods of partial diffusion of meaning (*partielle Sinnzertreuung*) one particular method lends itself on a graphic level: A richness of detail and portrayal of “unnecessary” elements is easily possible in an image without letting the histoire be contaminated by the discourse. The advantage has already been pointed out in the discussion of the *Prinzip anschaulicher Welthaftigkeit*. Yet, it should also be considered that an overwhelmingly detailed image (or rather consecutive images) can disrupt the reading process and hence constitute an illusion breaking element.

Furthermore, the active production of *Referenzillusion* is suited for graphic display, and a lot of the examples given above were actually achieved by graphic rather than textual references. Examples are the newspaper clippings or TV comments, but also subject references such as the Reaganesque president, or spatial references such as London's sights, Manhattan's skyline, or Gotham's urban American appearance. More subtle graphic references can be seen in the depiction of the Larkhill Resettlement Camp and its inhabitants (for example their clothing), where the word concentration camp is never mentioned, or the portrayal of the Gunga Diner in *Watchmen*, which bears a lot of resemblance if not to the omnipresent McDonalds, then to the fast-food chain industry as such.

In the general as well as medium specific discussion of these six principles, which serve as interdependent pillars in the creation and upholding of aesthetic illusion, two important conclusions can be made. On a general level, it can be said that the balance between the different principles is almost as important as the principles themselves and can, as I have suggested above, be seen as the seventh principle. Without it, the whole illusionist structure would collapse under its own weight. How intense that interdependence is, can be seen in figure 23 (see p 135). It shows how the principles function in general as well as the specific characteristics in respect to graphic novels. Apart from balance, it also became clear how much the success of illusion is dependent on the individual reader. This is true in terms of *Leerstellen* and the etc. principle, but also *Erwartungshorizont* or *gemäßigte Fremdheit*.

In respect to the medium comics (and underlining its claim for a respected autonomous medium), it should be pointed out that the combination of image and text is an essential element on all six levels. For most principles the existence of two levels proved an advantage, offering the author to choose the better suited one for his purpose. Although this duality is not an absolute necessity in the definition of comics above, it holds a lot of illusionist potential.

After seeing the advantages and specific features comics offer in respect to Wolf's principles, it suggests itself to look further into the structure and principles that guide the medium, the third part of the triangle next to aesthetic illusion and anti-superheroes. This will not only lead to a better understanding of the medium itself, but will also make it possible to draw a conclusion as to the interdependence of the three categories.

4. “The gutters are full of blood” – Comic Theory

“To kill a man between panels is to condemn him to a thousand deaths” (McCloud, *Understanding* 69).

The title of the chapter as well as the quote may lead to the impression that comics are a very violent genre. As previously mentioned, that was also one of the major concerns leading to the establishment of the Comics Code. Yet, a major factor was not considered in this equation, namely the reader. “The gutter” is a coinage referring to the space in between panels where the reader becomes the author of the story. In simplified terms it can therefore be said, that a comic is only as violent (or imaginative or beautiful) as its reader. This is also what McCloud alludes to when he calls comics “the invisible art”. This may seem confusing considering that text and image form its (visible) components. Yet, what he means is that a comic author’s work is not only to construct a world and lead the reader through it, but also to guide the “invisible” thoughts of the reader necessary to complete the images ‘in between’.

The importance of the reader was already discussed in some detail above; yet, while the last chapter was concerned with the concept of aesthetic illusion in general and its application to the graphic novel, this chapter will investigate comic theory and the medium’s particular strategies to immerse the reader. The issues overlap to some extent, especially as the graphic novel’s particularities have been pointed out for each principle, and some principles of comic theory will mainly seem like aspects of the different illusionist thoughts. Nevertheless, it is important to look at some of the issues again in the context of graphic storytelling rather than the light of a specific narrative theory.

Apart from Will Eisner’s theoretic pioneer work in this area, two names should be pointed out here, whose thoughts form the backbone of this chapter: Scott McCloud, a comic artist and comic theorist, as well as Martin Schüwer.

In comics, a number of concepts function together to enable an immersive reading experience. The most important are simplification and completion, combined with a general egocentrism of humans. These two strategies form the base for further concepts. For the following theories it is essential to keep in mind that the audience involvement necessary for immersion to work relies, to a great degree, on identification with characters.

4.1. Simplification

Let us first examine the concept of simplification. It is based on the idea that, unlike words with their abstract but defined meaning, images can have various degrees of abstraction. On a scale, this would translate into realist paintings with their low level of abstraction on one side, and an abstract figure on the other. Comics can also have different levels of abstraction, yet as a group they are abstract rather than realistically drawn. One of the necessary effects of this technique is a focus of attention on certain details, while ignoring others. In other words, meaning is not lost through a simplified drawing of a real-life image, but certain aspects of this meaning are enhanced. This “amplification through simplification” (*Understanding* 30) is not only limited to cartoons of course, but often used in film (and to a certain extent in books) as well (*Understanding* pp 29). The best example for such amplification are caricatures, as they focus on one or a few prominent features and exaggerate them, while ignoring more common ones.

A further concept arising from a combination of simplification and human egocentrism is that of universality. The basic idea behind it is, that the more simply a face or body is drawn, the more people it could be said to represent. Yet, this is only possible because of humans’ egocentrism, which causes us to automatically see ourselves in anything remotely shaped like a person, such as a power outlet or the front of a car (*Understanding* pp 32). Hence, a stickman or a smiley with their very simplified shapes will cause us to see ourselves, or at least another human, in almost any cartoon; realistic paintings in comparison do not have this effect, as they portray more defined images. McCloud further argues, that egocentrism is not the only reason for this automatic process, but rather suggests a second subconscious mechanism. It relies on the fact that humans normally do not see their face (looking in the mirror being the obvious exception) during everyday tasks, including conversations. Although we cannot normally see our lips move when we are in a conversation, or ourselves welling up when reading a book, we nevertheless assume that our mouth produces words and our eyes fill with tears. Humans subconsciously think of their face as a mask “slave to your every command” (ibid 34) and our mind produces images of this mask when we are doing something, while we are doing it. In other words:

The face you see in your *mind* is not the same as *others* see! When two people interact, they usually look directly *at* one another, seeing their partner’s features in *vivid detail*. Each one *also* sustains a constant awareness of his or her *own* face, but this mind-picture is not nearly so vivid; just a sketchy arrangement... a sense of shape... a sense of *general placement*. Something as simple and basic – as a cartoon. (ibid pp 35)

It follows that humans love cartoons so much because they see their own “mind self-portraits” when they look at a comic character. Hence, by subconsciously filling the void that has been left through the simplification process with their own features, readers become the comic. The concept of “non-visual self-awareness” (ibid 37) is not only applied to faces, but the whole body, and even inanimate objects that become part of our identity, such as clothes. The books discussed all make use of this simplification process and *Watchmen* even to toys with it by making the smiley button one of its most important symbols. Furthermore, the use of masks and costumes in (anti-) superhero books offers an interesting point in this respect. Connected to our concept of the face as a mask this suggests that it is even easier to identify with a character wearing a mask, because it is, in a way, the same object we are constantly ‘wearing’. In addition, clothes become part of our extended conceptual identity in reality, just as they are portrayed as part of the conceptual images in comic books. Therefore, the task of identifying with someone wearing a coat, cloak, or costume is not as difficult as it may seem at first.

A parallel effect of these processes may be that, while the importance of the representational aspect of the images dwindles (in the sense of representing a particular person), the message is highlighted at the same time. In other words, in a medium that blends text and image in the way comics do, there is naturally a certain balance between these elements. The more abstract a cartoon is, the more this balance begins to shift the focus towards the text. “Who I am is irrelevant. I am just a little piece of you. But if who I am matters less, maybe what I say will matter more” (*Understanding* 37). While this may not be an important factor in the comic strips whose aim is to entertain, it becomes highly important in such comics that want to convey a message. This seriousness is generally true for graphic novels.

In order to use the concept of universality as part of a general theory, McCloud distinguishes between the realm of the concept and that of the senses. While the former includes ideas and identities, the latter is made up of all objects in the sensual world; therefore, anything one encounters can be sorted in one of the two categories. Yet, while ideas can only be part of the conceptual realm, objects can gain identities of their own or become part of humans’ identities and cross over from the realm of the senses. When considering all that has been said about the immersive qualities of cartoons, it is easy to place the comic as a whole category:

By de-emphasizing the *appearance* of the *physical* world in favor of the *idea* of form, the cartoon places itself in the world of *concepts*. Through *realism*, the comics artist can portray the world *without* and through the *cartoon* the world *within* (ibid 41).

If following the idea of the comic as representing concepts rather than mirroring reality, their success in genres portraying the supernatural or fantastic, where subjects and objects are usually more than just part of the sensually stimulating world, and reality is distorted or parodied, becomes obvious. In addition, McCloud argues that the “people growing up in the late twentieth century didn’t want goals so much as they wanted roles! And that’s what visual iconography is all about” (ibid 59). This can already be seen in children’s classics such as the *Duck Tales* with their fable qualities. Yet, the nature of (anti-) superheroes as representations of different ideals or subconscious qualities renders them the perfect subjects for comics.

Naturally, some objects (such a background elements) are less important for the identification process than others (such as characters) and do not have the same level of abstraction. Those elements are drawn more realistically and may even be seen as part of the realm of the senses rather than that of the concept. The combination of the two levels of abstraction gives rise to the “masking effect”: “[R]eaders mask themselves into a character and [can then] safely enter a sensually stimulating world” (ibid 43). In other words, the characters are easier to identify with because they are simplified and therefore more universally immersive; at the same time the other elements, which readers do not identify with but rather experience sensually, are more realistically drawn and hence also aid immersion. In comparison to written narrative, where all elements have to be described and detailed accounts can easily overstrain the reader, comics have a big advantage. This corresponds to the thoughts guiding the *Prinzip der Welthaftigkeit*, the principle of perspectivity, and the principle of *Celare artem*.

A further consequence of the separation in two different realms is the peculiar effect realistically drawn characters can have on readers. Following the thoughts on simplified identification through a high level of abstraction, a (more) realistic portrayal of a character must, e contrario, have an alienating effect, emphasizing its difference from the reader. This process of objectifying can be used to make readers aware of the object having a certain “weight, texture and physical complexity” (*Understanding* 44), but also to hinder their identification with certain characters.

4.2. Closure

The process of “filling the void” simplification has left with our own experience and imagination is not only important for the identification with characters, but a similar strategy is used in between panels, as well as in each panel itself. The phenomenon is called closure

and is not solely applicable to comics, but also plays a part in film, books, psychology, and even generally in everyday life. It allows us to “observ[e] the parts but perceiv[e] the whole” (ibid 63). On a general level it means that humans have the acquired ability to trust their experience to complete physically seemingly incomplete objects. In film and television closure happens subconsciously as the viewers combine the series of pictures. Yet, a second kind of conscious closure that creates suspense and causes the audience to participate deliberately can also be observed in films, as in cliffhangers. This second kind of closure is the one with importance for comics. Unlike film, where conscious closure is not a necessity, comics could not function without it; closure is the comic’s “agent of change, time, and motion” (*Understanding* 65). McCloud even goes as far as saying that, since his “definition of comics hinges on the arrangement of elements [...] *comics is closure!*” (ibid 67). Although it pays a highly important role in the immersive effect, to reduce the medium that drastically to one element seems a bit too simplified, especially taking in account the widespread application of the concept in other media.

Before taking a look at closure between panels the hardly discussed, but actually logically preceding, closure within a panel is worth a closer examination. It is automatic, even subconscious, and closely related to the process of completion necessary in everyday life (such as mentally completing the back of an object one only sees the front of). The most obvious example in comics is the portrayal of a head or upper body whilst leaving out the legs - naturally readers assume there is actually a whole body. Furthermore, in the closed space of a panel this *pars pro toto* is unavoidable and more explicit than in the written narrative, where descriptions of certain parts still appear as part of the whole narrative rather than being perceived as separate pieces. In other words, there is a curious concurrence of perceiving a panel as a separate image on the one hand, leading to a certain halt in the reading process as well as the completion of the image with own ideas. On the other hand, it is perceived as part of a whole narrative. This kind of closure is practically present in every panel, but best demonstrated in close-up images, such as the very first image of each chapter of *Watchmen*. True to its general meta-referential tone, the book almost mocks this mechanism in the very first chapter in order to prove how easily closure can be misleading. Like a camera moving farther away each moment, each panel incorporates the previous one. This leads to the effect that the reader’s just completed picture is corrected already in the following panel. Interestingly, apart from the first images of each chapter the book refrains from close-up or cut-up images for the most part, adding significance to the few instances where it does occur, such as a butcher’s knife in Rorschach’s hand during the silent scene (underlining the point

where his personality changed), or a number of times in connection with watches (relating to time as one of the books recurring themes). *Batman*, in comparison, uses a lot more of these clipped images, especially in action laden or suspenseful scenes. It may therefore be argued that clipped images produce or intensify suspense. This is due to the fact that, if only a piece of the action is portrayed, there is an endless world of possibilities concerning the rest of the scene that is completely up to the reader for the panel being. This idea is not entirely new and was mentioned under the name *etc principle* in the discussion of perspectivity above.

Following the ‘in-panel’ closure, let us examine the panel-to-panel closure that enables us to connect separate images and create a coherent story in our minds. It is the most important concept for understanding the immersive quality of comics, as it makes the reader a “willing and conscious collaborator” (*Understanding* 65). As is the case with the ‘in-panel’ closure, the effect of creating suspense is also part of the importance of the gutter. It is related to the concept of *Leerstellen* and can be seen as a special form of it. The former refers to any not explicitly mentioned part of a narrative triggering the reader’s involvement that *may*, but does not have to be, limited by a subsequent event or description (such as a character disappearing from the narrative who is, or is not, mentioned again later in the text). The gutter also triggers the reader’s involvement but is *usually* limited by the panel following it, making the connection of panels the reader’s main, but not sole, task. A further difference lies in the sheer quantity of occurrences: The gutter has to be filled after each panel, whereas *Leerstellen* are less frequent and used for additional effect. It may also be argued that no amount of words can portray the world sufficiently, hence *Leerstellen* are omnipresent in the written narrative as well. Yet as these holes in the narrative are an inevitable consequence of the medium language rather than an intention of the author it does not really fit this concept of reader participation.

Apart from simply involving the reader, this completion of the story has another essential effect: As it is up to every reader themselves how the space is filled, each individual will construct the story elements in a way that appears logical, believable, and intriguing. The gutter, implying the notion of an endless undefined space holding things that should better stay hidden, therefore stores the success of each individual’s reading. Taking the silent scene in *Watchmen* as an example once again, it becomes clear how many questions lie in the power of the reader to answer: How fast are Rorschach’s steps when he walks around, does he close the doors silently, is the kitchen closet with the knives the first one he opens, how does he kill

the dogs exactly and stay unharmed? The individual answers create, together with the panels, a personal comic book that seems so real, it is easy to get lost in.

So far, panel-to-panel transitions have been introduced as a homogenous group, all requiring a similar amount of closure. Yet, McCloud differentiates between six types of transitions. Although the line between them is not always distinct, the categorization offers an interesting perspective towards the closure necessary for a comic to work. The first category is called “moment-to-moment” and requires very little closure. It features a single subject with very little time in between the panels. This is rarely used in Western comics, but can be found occasionally in all three books. Miller actually makes frequent use of it in the panels portraying news reports. The second category, “action-to-action”, also features a single subject (or sometimes more than one subject) in the act of doing something, caught between two parts of an action or between two different but related actions. This category is by far the most common type as it is able to describe the continuous flow of an action of a single character, an important feature in a medium that relies heavily on identification. The third transition already requires a higher level of closure. In the “subject-to-subject” progression, the idea or scene behind the pictures stays the same, yet subjects change. The fourth category is called “scene-to-scene” and features a change of characters, time, and space, hence it often requires a high degree of closure to make the sequence meaningful. *Watchmen* is striking in this respect, as it often tells two storylines at the same time either in the form of the comic-within-a-comic or by alternating between two different scenes from each panel to the next.¹⁴ Related to this is the fifth category, which McCloud calls “aspect-to-aspect”. It “bypasses time for the most part and sets a wandering eye on different aspects of a place, idea, or mood” (*Understanding* 72). The last group requires the highest degree of reader involvement, as it does not offer any logical relationship, hence separating it from the fourth category where the panels do share some common background. The “non-sequitur” arrangements force the reader to consider seemingly unrelated images as part of a whole (ibid 70-73). The absence of an obvious connection allows other elements to guide the reader in the completion process. As Schüwer observes,

[d]as Gesamtlayout der Seite ist der linearen Entwicklung jedoch übergeordnet und preßt sie in eine nicht-lineare, simultan wahrnehmbare Gesamtstruktur. Wo die Bewegungsdarstellung im Vordergrund steht, tritt die tabularische Dimension daher in der Regel zurück. (*Wie Comics* 192)

¹⁴ The “jump” between scenes or story lines relates to the discussions of the principle of consistency as well as the *Prinzip der Interessantheit der Geschichte*

In other words, as soon as the connection between panels thins, the overall structure that is the comic, takes the place as uniting, cohesive element. While McCloud argues that, even in non-sequitur transitions, the reader will inevitably make some connection (suggesting a very big involvement), it is not mentioned that these panels can also have the opposite effect, namely to alienate the reader from the images and the story. This effect can be compared to a violation of the principle of *Celare artem* by letting the fragmentation that is necessarily part of any comic become too obvious.

It is often quite hard to draw the line between the different types of transitions – when does an action end and become a new scene; when are parts of an action so close that they are still moment-to-moment; is the switch from a person to an animal subject-to-subject or simply a different aspect of the same moment? Furthermore, not all names are compelling: action-to-action, for example, suggests a connection between two actions, yet some actions may be considered one long action. McCloud says himself, that this categorization is an “inexact science at best” (*Understanding* 74), but it does open up a new angle for the examination of closure in comics.

In the three graphic novels, just as in most Western comics, types two, three, and four prevail, occasionally incorporating type five. The other two categories are used only very scarcely. The reason for this cannot simply be seen in the fact that these comics want to connect events as McCloud suggests (*ibid* 76). Rather, the level of reader involvement is the crucial factor. Moment-to-moment requires only very little effort of the reader and may easily lead to a growing awareness of the fictionality of the whole story and break immersion. Non-sequitur elements have the same effect by requiring so much of the reader’s effort, that he is equally removed from the reading flow. Choosing largely these transitions is therefore not a symptom of an action-laden plot (which is traditionally not taken seriously), but rather the consequence of a high level of reader involvement necessary in telling a story with a plot so far from reality.

Furthermore, the gutter is qualified as “conceptual territory” where “none of our senses are required at all. Which is why *all* of our senses are engaged” (*ibid* 89). McCloud argues that, while within the panels only visual representation is possible, in between them the reader can complete the space with all his senses. This does not follow. Naturally representation in comics is visual, but it is very capable of triggering other senses. In fact, one of the great things about comics is that they can portray sound (through word balloons and onomatopoeia), smell (for example by indicating steam coming from a pot), and touch

(through objectifying) within a panel. Furthermore, it has already been established that simplification leads to a process of completion *within* the panels that is not necessarily limited to characters. Just because one sense is mainly and continuously engaged does not mean the other are obsolete in this process. It may be argued that the balance between the different senses is more even in between panels, but excluding all senses but vision from the perception process within panels is not correct. In addition, not only the gutter but also the panels are conceptual territory (assuming the cartoons are not overtly realistic), therefore part of the world of ideas and hence engaging all senses.

4.3. Time and Motion

So far, the tenor concerning the success of comics has been the more reader involvement the better. Yet, more than anything, the phenomenon of immersion is subjective and variable, and always relies on the balance between different elements. It is therefore not always the best option to let the reader's imagination construct too much of the story, and leave him behind in an undefined time and space (which would have an illusion-breaking effect). In other words: The degree of reader involvement is essential for the comic's success, giving rise to the necessity for ways to control it.¹⁵ Between panels this concept is partly realized through the second panel which limits the reader's options somewhat. Yet, also within each panel certain techniques can be used to install points of reference. Lastly, the panel itself can act as such an indicator of space and time, guiding the reader through the pages. Therefore, some of the options available to comic artists shall be discussed in respect to the immersive effects they have on the reader. The main dimensions are time and motion, as well as the effects of text/image combinations.

At first sight, it may seem like the passing of time in comics can only happen during the timeless space of the gutter, as each panel is perceived as a "single moment in time" (*Understanding* 94) that needs to be connected by the reader. The problem "in the world of comics [is that] time and space are one and the same" (ibid 100). The question therefore is, how the passing of time can be accurately portrayed (or at least indicated) within and outside of a single panel. According to McCloud "time can be controlled through the content of the panels, the number of panels and closure between panels [...] [and] the panel shape" (ibid 101). In the following pages a similar but slightly different structure will be used,

¹⁵ This line of thought is not restricted to comics, and has already been mentioned in the chapter on aesthetic illusion (for example concerning the degree of detail in constructing the world's inventory).

corresponding to the one used in the discussion of closure above. Four different factors should be taken in consideration here and will be discussed in the following order: the single panel, the connection between two (or more) consecutive panels, the coherence of the whole page, and the shape of the panel itself.

When recalling Wolf's thoughts on the temporal quality of narrative, it follows that simply through the incorporation of language time passes. Hence, within a panel every utterance or sound prolongs the duration of that panel, giving the reader a rough estimate as to the period of time that has passed, relying on his real life experiences as to how long such utterances and sounds usually take. In harsh contrast to this stand the silent panels, where time seems to exist and the space in time occupied by it is largely up to the reader.

The role the reader plays in the gutter has already been discussed at length, so it only seems necessary in this respect to mention the limiting quality the next panel usually has, and the influence of the size of the gutter (i.e. the actual room between the panels). The former can take the form of a very specific indication of time, for example through a caption reading "ten minutes later", or a graphic hint such as the watches in figure 11 (that leave a period of one minute between the panels [the watch in the right panel is in the top left corner]) and the display in figure 10 (leaving only one second

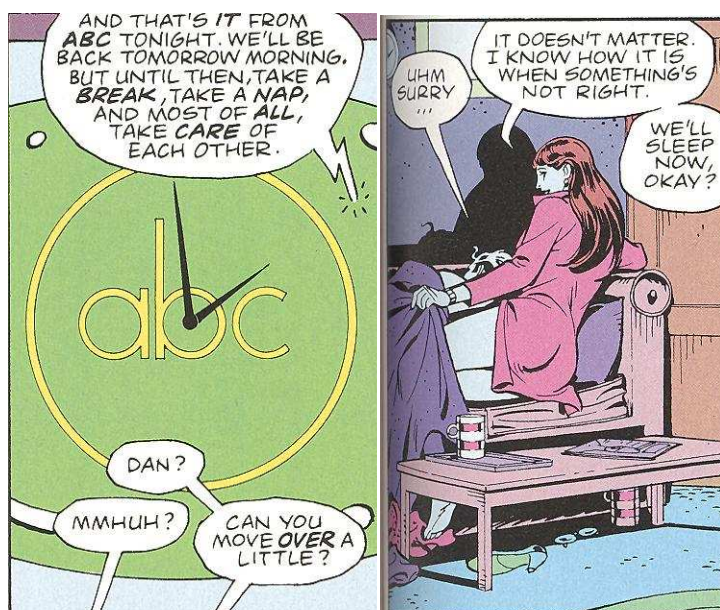


Fig. 11 Time in Watchmen

between the panels). Otherwise the reader has to rely on his own experience to assign a certain stretch of time between panels (in the silent panel in Watchmen one has to ask how long it usually takes to go from the kitchen door to a cupboard, open it, and look at what is inside). The length of the time between the panels also corresponds to



Fig. 10 Time in Batman

the type of transition - moment-to moment would take naturally shorter than action-to-action or non-sequitur. The ‘time-clues’ can also be of importance in the connection of several panels or pages, providing a limited time for the sequence. Examples can be found in all books, most prominently in *Watchmen* with its diary entries, but also in *Batman*’s last fight where he is depicted taking a pill with the words “in one hour... at midnight...” (187), marking a period of sixty minutes for the next ten pages until “the clock strikes twelve” (196). In addition, figure 10 divides this passage in two, leaving roughly 48 minutes for the first two pages of the sequence and twelve for the remaining eight.

Furthermore, the composition of the whole page is of importance in respect to the “rhythm” as well as in connection of the panel shapes. Rhythm is established through a sequence with identical time spans between the panels. Moore demonstrates this in the beginning and end of chapter V, where a blinking street sign illuminates every other image, giving each transition the same amount of time. The feeling of a constant timeframe is also achieved through the use of same-size panels over a whole page, giving significance to panels that disrupt this rhythm. *Watchmen*, with its nine-panel grid, bears many examples of this, such as the silent scene in which the only two panels out of the grid-size show the dead dogs being thrown at the owner. Although these moments may not necessarily *be longer* than the others, they *feel longer* to the reader. It can also be argued that the reason for this effect is rather related to the panel shape than the disruption of the rhythm, and will be elaborated on next. The reality of the effect is probably a combination of the two.

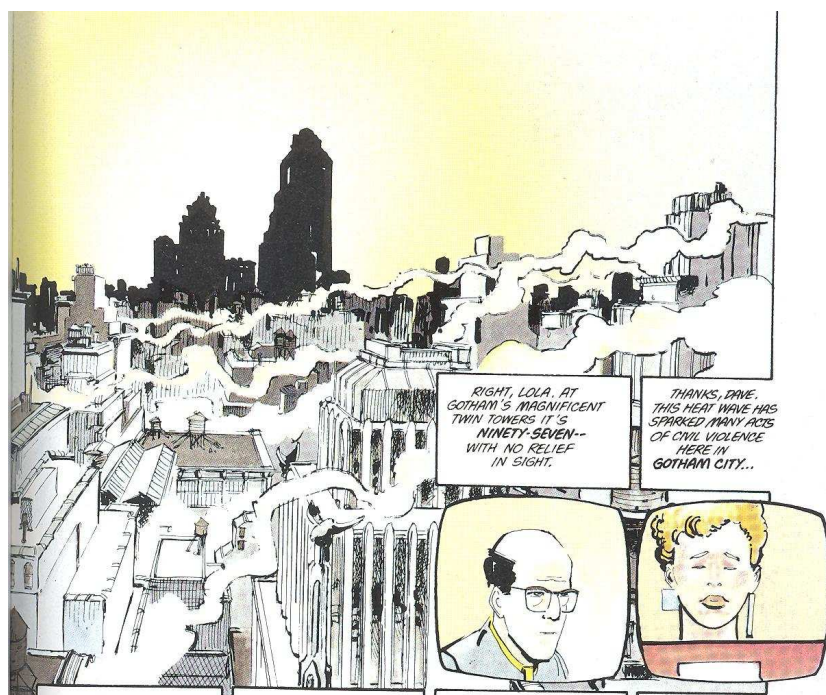


Fig. 12 Bleeder

As just mentioned, the last factor to be considered is the panel shape itself. The panels or frames “have no fixed or absolute meaning [...] [but act] as a sort of general indicator that time or space is being divided [...] [and] can affect the reading experience” (*Understanding* 99). It follows, that a panel without a frame (a so-called

“borderless” panel) does not indicate this division and hence can produce a timeless effect. A special form of the borderless panel are the so-called “bleeds”, where an image “runs off the edge of the page” (*Understanding* 103). Miller makes frequent use of this technique and introduces the first “bleeder” already on the second page - a picture of Gotham city that does not have an upper panel border. It gives a limitless impression that acts foregrounding and is underlined by an overlapping border portraying the weather forecast “it’s ninety-seven – with no relief in sight” (Fig. 12).



Fig. 13 Lightning

Less metaphorically, bleeders are used a few page further where the panels depicting lightning and thunder seem to expand beyond the page and lengthen the duration of the panel. (Fig. 13) Sometimes this technique can also lead to an evoked feeling or mood subconsciously remaining in the reader’s mind through its “lingering timeless presence” (*Understanding* 103). This is portrayed in figure 14, where Batman is shown running off into the night on the right side, whereas the panel bleeds to the left and bottom, seemingly expanding into the darkness. The “drawn-out” character of the panel is enhanced on the one hand through its



Fig. 14 Bleeder 2

longer shape (compared to the panels before it), and on the other hand through the correspondence of panel shape and subject shape. While Batman is moving dynamically out of the border

in reading direction, his body and cloak still cover most of the image in an almost horizontal line, causing a feeling of his omnipresence. What is lengthened here is not primarily the moment itself, but rather the mood evoked by it, that will linger in the reader’s mind, forming an important part of his reading experience. This example also shows how the lines and shape

of the image (not to be confused with what McCloud calls “content”¹⁶) can influence the perception of time through the reader.¹⁷

Summing up, the lengthening of a panel through bleeders can therefore be directed towards the actual timeframe of the panel, the lingering of a mood or feeling, or a metaphorical dimension. Furthermore, it can influence the spatial dimension. In addition to the shape of the panel, its arrangement on the page can influence time. One example is the already mentioned distance between the panels that can be increased to suggest a lengthened period in between. The opposite can also occur, namely when two or more panels overlap. This minimizes the distance and evokes a feeling of simultaneity, as can be seen in figure 13 which overlaps with the previous and following row of panels.

A problem related to the portrayal of time in two different ways, is that of motion. Firstly, it faces the same problem by trying to portray something moving in a static medium. Secondly - as motion happens in time - by succeeding in showing motion within a panel, it automatically gives the panel a certain length. Furthermore, the portrayal of motion bears a specific relevance to (anti-) superheroes:

[Die] amerikanische Comiclandschaft [ist] dominiert von den Superhelden, die nichts so sehr charakterisiert wie ihre hypertrophierte Bewegtheit [...] Zum anderen aber sind die Comics ein Medium aus starren Bildern. [...] [Es] läge die Vermutung nahe, dass Superhelden und Comics im Grunde nicht zu einander passen [...]. (Schüwer, *Wie Comics* 41)

In his chapter on motion, Schüwer then tries to answer a part of the question this thesis is concerned with - namely *are graphic novels the best medium for the portrayal of anti-superhero stories* - for the level of dynamic motion: “Eignet sich der Comic dazu [d.i. Dynamik zu erzeugen] womöglich sogar besser als andere, auf den ersten Blick ‘dynamischere’ Medien?” (ibid). Hence, it seems as if the portrayal of motion holds a major role in the success of anti-superhero graphic novels. The following pages will therefore look at the way motion can be portrayed in comics, and as a consequence make observations as to the suitability of comics in general (and graphic novels in particular) for the portrayal of (anti-) superheroic motion.

For McCloud, motion is mainly a way of depicting time within and between panels. He largely neglects its immersive potential (apart from two marginal remarks), but gives a good overview on the different styles. The most important concept is the motion line, which has

¹⁶Which refers to the entirety of the panel, including inserts, speech balloons, and onomatopoetic expressions

¹⁷ Unfortunately the issue of drawing style cannot be elaborated on in the scope of this thesis.

become highly stylized and diagrammatic. In its traditional form, it shows a background and object in a clear style while “the path of motion is imposed over the scene” (*Understanding* 112). One variation is the portrayal of the moving object in different stages of the motion “attempting to involve the reader more deeply in the action” (ibid) (see Fig. 15, p 113). Although McCloud tries to incorporate the immersive quality of this technique in his depiction, he does not offer any explanation.¹⁸ Another form are streaking techniques, borrowed from photography, where the object in motion becomes “blurred” while the background stays clear. Following the thought of immersion through identification, a second category, depicting the object in focus while the background becomes blurred, was introduced. McCloud calls this “subjective motion” (*Understanding* 114), as it simplifies the identification process for the reader. He further mentions the “polyptych, where a moving figure or figures is imposed over a continuous background” (ibid 115). In fact, this is only a special case of the first variation and will therefore not be of further interest.

With this framework (and especially the question *how* this sort of portrayal of motion might aid identification) in mind, let us now turn to the more detailed account given by Schüwer. He first distinguishes between turning points of a motion (“Wendepunkte”) and intermediate motions (“Zwischenbewegungen”)¹⁹ (Schüwer, *Wie Comics* 43). The former mean extreme points in a motion that cannot be carried on and hence have to be followed by a different motion (such as a step with the right foot that cannot be prolonged and must be followed by a step with the left foot). The latter are any moments within two turning points (such as the lifting of the right foot). As humans tend to orient themselves towards turning points of a motion rather than single moments, it is easier to identify with a motion (and hence the character or scene) that portrays such change and evokes the feeling of motion in the reader: “Das Bild eines solchen Wendepunktes erleichtert daher die Einfühlung in die dargestellte Bewegung und wirkt somit dynamischer als das Bild einer Zwischenbewegung” (ibid 44). In reverse it becomes clear that the use of intermediate motions distances the reader from the motion (character, scene) (ibid 46). Establishing this dynamic element is essential for Schüwer’s question, as he contrasts dynamic characters with a static medium. In very complex motions, the portrayal of several turning points in one image may be necessary to achieve the same dynamic effect (ibid 44).

¹⁸ Martin Schüwer explains the effect in more detail, hence the reason for reader involvement will shortly be further illustrated in the part commenting on his book.

¹⁹ following Wilfried Ennenbach

Within the notion of turning points Schüwer, following Gilles Deleuze, further distinguishes between pose (“Pose”) and form (“Gestalt”), which differ in the meaning of the motion they portray. The latter mainly corresponds to what has been said about turning points in general: The form aims at portraying a moment of a motion with the effect of enabling the reader to “feel” it himself - “psychologische Synthese der Bewegung” (ibid 47). The pose, on the other hand, is more concerned with the idea of the motion. Rather than being concerned with the *particular motion* of that *particular image*, it corresponds to the *general meaning* behind that *sort of motion* – “transzendente Synthese der Bewegung” (ibid 47). This is especially important for the discussion of superheroes and consequently anti-superheroes: “Einem solchen Vorgang aber – und, wenn man will, auch seinen mythischen Implikationen, dem Kampf Gut gegen Böse – wird die Pose am besten gerecht“ (Schüwer, *Wie Comics* 45). In this respect, the “cut” (“Momentschnitt“, corresponding to the intermediate motion) shows an arbitrary moment in time that does not bear any particular significance, but “sie selbst lässt das Herausgehobene in einem beliebigen Moment entstehen” (ibid 46). It leads to analysis rather than identification, and enables new and unexpected views rather than evoke concepts of motion and ideas. Furthermore, through its distancing effect, the *Momentschnitt* suggests the position of an onlooker, and approximates the image of the panel to that of a photograph, suggesting its potentially diegetic character (ibid 48). In the universe of comics this separation serves as a very divisive purpose: “Posen für die Helden – Momentschnitte für die Massen” (ibid 50). The distinction between form and pose is not always clear, but mainly form also occurs in the motion of heroes.

This leads to a seemingly unsatisfactory outcome, namely that superheroes can be portrayed in a manner inviting identification (pose) as well as one leading to distance (form), without a definite distinction.²⁰ Yet, Schüwer argues, this conclusion is only unsatisfactory if perceiving the superhero as an un-ambivalent character. However, if one looks at superheroes as ambiguous images portraying an ideal as well as offering a character to identify with, the concept fits.²¹ “Weil Superman ein übergeordnetes Prinzip verkörpert, ist ihm die Bewegungspose angemessen. [...] Weil Superman aber auch eine romanhafte Figur ist, die als Identifikationsangebot taugen soll, ist ihm die Bewegungsgestalt angemessen” (Schüwer, *Wie Comics* 78). It follows, that both author and reader gain immense freedom in this particular form. The author can develop his character in two ways and change this direction at will; the

²⁰ As a general guideline Schüwer states, that the less a panel fits into the plot or page layout, the more it fits his understanding of pose.

²¹ This ambiguous view is mostly identical with the different representational systems of superheroes stated above, but combines the different metaphorical levels (society, specific ideas) into one.

reader can see the hero as more or less iconic, which gives him a lot of power and also enables him to identify with the character in a way that suits his own personality and hence aids immersion. “Hier kann er [d.i. der Leser] sich mühelos in zwei Welten zugleich bewegen: in Posen und Gestalten” (ibid 78). At this point, it is important to keep in mind that Schüwer only analyzed the motions of classic superheroes, not those of anti-superheroes. How these thoughts can be applied to antiheroes in general and the three graphic novels discussed here in particular will be elaborated on in the next sub-chapter with the help of some images.

Only now does the immersive effect McCloud mentions become understandable: motion lines in a panel depicting a turning point indicate a motion with dynamic (immersive) quality. Yet, what he depicts in his panel concerning multiple images that allegedly lead to a greater immersive effect, are two forms on the outside and two cuts in the middle (see Fig. 15). Following Schüwer, this would not constitute effective immersion. If we dismiss the thought that McCloud simply did not draw a very good panel for making his point, the only other option is to consider the outer forms as leading images (the latter being in fact highlighted) and the two cuts as simple imaginative help and guidance for the reader. This also corresponds to the general balance necessary in aesthetic illusion.

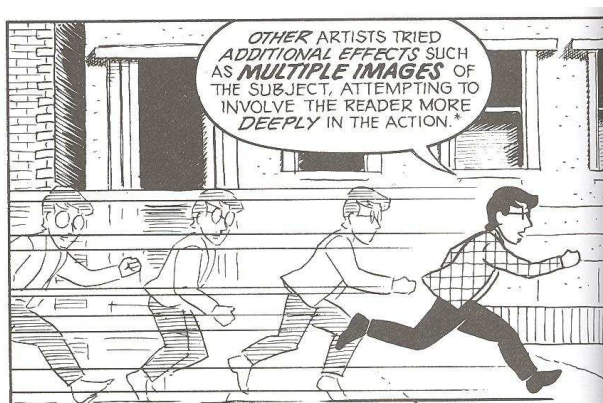


Fig. 15 Motion in McCloud

In relation to Wolf, the thoughts behind motion lines and the distinction between pose, form, and cuts with their respective effects can be seen as part of the principle of perspectivity, offering either immersion into a particular motion and character, or the view of an onlooker.

While a clear cut between heroes and other characters in terms of the portrayal of motion may be possible in classic superhero comics, the same general statement is not true for anti-superhero stories. This becomes obvious when we recall the iconic differences between superheroes and anti-superheroes developed in the second chapter: Superheroes are generally characters we want to identify with, or connect with superior ideas, making them perfect subjects for the ambiguous portrayal of motion as pose/form. Anti-superheroes, on the other hand, portray more realistic characters which have some of the same qualities, yet always have some “dark” side as well. Realistic in this respect refers to their metaphorical representation of society including its flaws, as well as to the impossibility for each individual

to live up to all expectations. The often reformatory characters deconstruct value systems while fighting for values, but also provide the best ground for identification with internal struggles. In other words, anti-superheroes carry the same idea/identification paradox with them superheroes do; yet, at the same time they carry a second paradox, namely to abide and destroy the system they live in. This conflict is mirrored in the content of the stories, that generally deal with the notion that good or bad cannot be put as simple as that, but rather that everything mostly happens in an undefined grey area. Therefore, we cannot simply adopt the conclusion Schüwer draws for superhero comics to anti-superhero comics.

Firstly, let us examine what can be adopted without further change. As the first paradox stays valid for anti-superheroes, the pose/form distinction (or rather ambiguity) with its consequences for the significance of the character, as well as the immersive possibilities for the reader, can be applied. Unfortunately, this is where the easy adoption ends. Considering the fuzzy boundaries between good and evil, the application of the “poses for heroes, cuts for the masses”-concept must fail. Rather, the circle of subjects portrayed in poses and forms is increased to include villains and even “normal” people, although the latter are still mostly portrayed in cuts. More importantly, the circle of subjects portrayed through cuts is increased as well, now including anti-superheroes. This blending of iconic forms of display must be seen in connection to the second paradox. When characters are ultimately trying to restore a system with methods not encouraged by it (*Watchmen*, *Batman*), or try to break the system in order to develop a better one (*V for Vendetta*), in other words operate outside of the system, no depiction of an idea or motion alone can do them justice. Rather, they aim at an analysis of ideas or systems (by the characters in as well as outside the book) and try to form new



Fig. 16 Pose

thoughts in a world that has fallen victim to chaos. These notions can only be portrayed through cuts, urging the reader to distance himself from the characters.

Let us now take a look at the final fight in *Batman* (against Superman), to see how the theory is exercised on paper – which depiction of motion is

predominant, is there a difference in the motions of the opponents, and what does this

suggest? Already the match of opponents here deserves a few thoughts. Firstly, it mirrors the superhero/anti-superhero contrast. Secondly, it does not show Superman as a superhero anymore, but as a sell-out who says yes to “anyone with a badge – or flag” (190). This negative depiction opens up the way for a shift from Superman’s predisposition for poses/forms to cuts or motionless images. When looking at the six page long fight, two images are striking due to their panel size. Both show Superman falling backwards onto the floor after getting hit by Batman (once a punch, once a kick). He, on the other hand, is portrayed at the turning point of a motion both times (see Fig. 16). Due to the sheer size in comparison to the other panels, as well as the metaphorical values of the fight, a reading of the motion as pose rather than form seems appropriate. Which ideas exactly one sees represented here, is up to the reader’s interpretation of the characters (truth, integrity, revenge). The panels are also highlighted in comparison to the motion depicted in most of the other panels. Superman, for example, is never clearly depicted at a turning point during the whole fight, but either motionless (when getting hit) or in between turning points, urging the reader to distance himself from the character. Batman’s actions on the other hand, are often at turning points, invoking the feeling of the motions and enabling identification with his character. Both figures are also shown in cuts. On a story level this actually seems fitting, as a fight always bears an element of unexpectedness and chaos, so only pose and form would not do it justice. On a metaphorical level this makes sense, implying chaos and change are a part of these characters. Matching the general ambiguity of story and characters and balancing this almost too clear reading of the scene is the post-fight panel depicting victorious Batman, apparently dead, in Superman’s arms.

Even fuzzier boundaries between the pose-, form-, and cut groups are demonstrated in *Watchmen*. Again this matches the problems portrayed in the story: no clear-cut boundaries between good and bad, no character one can really relate to on a personal level, no distinct value roles. The latter leads to a very interesting effect, namely that there are only very few panels that can be described as clear pose-panels. Only Dr. Manhattan is repeatedly shown in motions suggesting a comparison to God (in his first appearance he floats above the heads of people with an air of resurrection and a pose not unlike that of Jesus on the cross, later he pours water out of an empty flask, and in the end he walks on the water of Veidt’s swimming pool). This can be explained by the fact that Dr. Manhattan does stand for an idea – to be far beyond humans in every way. Another instance of a pose panel can be found in the often mentioned silent scene. Rorschach’s motions are mostly portrayed in turning points in the sequence. While most depict forms rather than poses, as there is no specific idea attached to

them, the panel with the raised knife can be seen as a pose. Here, Rorschach represents a clear idea – ‘good’ – that dominates over ‘evil’, depicted by the dogs. The fact that we can only see part of his outstretched arm in the panel does not harm the effect, as the reader fills in the rest. For the rest of the book it can be stated, that generally ‘normal’ people are still mostly portrayed in cuts, mirroring the state of chaos and uncertainty of the world of *Watchmen*. Furthermore, the anti-superheroes are shown in form- as well as cut panels, enabling “psychological synthesis” with all characters but simultaneously proving their normality.

Without going into any detail, it should be mentioned that images in *V for Vendetta* are often motionless, or cut panels. When relating this to the (mind) set of the book, it matches perfectly: No other book shows a society so far away from what we would consider right, where chaos rules, and where the demand for analysis and a new future is so unbearably present.

Concerning the portrayal of motion, the anti-superhero comics are therefore very different from classic superhero comics: They are characterized by an ambiguity that transcends that of earlier comics, adding a second paradox and hence the need to portray it in the depiction of motion. Anti-superheroes can occur in poses, forms, but also cuts. The same is true for villains, due to the blurred boundaries between them. Normal people are still mostly portrayed in cuts, but they are not restricted to it. Yet, whichever way is chosen for the depiction of motion, it is always connected to the content of the book. In terms of reader involvement, it follows from the examples as well as the general theory, that the blurring of boundaries, especially where protagonists are shown in cut panels, is rather hindered in this respect. On the other hand, the pose/form ambiguity (with its reader involving effects) can still exist in characters that stand for an idea. The identification effect of form panels is also very effective, but can be somewhat obscured by the fact that a number of characters (for example all anti-heroes in *Watchmen*) are portrayed in this way. Yet, this may be explained by presuming that the identification serves the purpose of a momentary, scene-related immersion rather than that with a character. Overall, this leads to the assumption that the way motion is portrayed is a major aspect in the effectiveness of reader involvement.

The second reason Schüwer lists for the successful display of motion in comics, is what he calls “Rhythmus der Dauer” (*Wie Comics* 55). As the name suggests, it is concerned with the connection between the time of a panel and its “rhythm”. If this “rhythm (of perception)” is high, it can lead, in its extreme form, to a stretching of time; if it is low, to the acceleration of time. Yet, as perception of the length of a moment is very subjective, there are different

rhythms between the characters of the book. Most notably in respect to time and motion, but also reader identification, the difference between superhuman and human perception concerning the speed of movements has to be portrayed. These disparities can only be explained and shown through differing rhythms: “Ein variabler Rhythmus der Dauer: Das ist es, was Bewegungssequenzen in Comics realisieren” (Schüwer, *Wie Comics* 63). In other words, comics have the ability to show different rhythms of perception from panel to panel, or even inside a single panel. This enables the reader to perceive each action in the same way the individual characters do. Only through this particular effect can the reader experience and identify with a superhuman rhythm. Furthermore, a high rhythm of a sequence can suggest the importance of the event for a character. Hence, “[d]urch Variierung des Rhythmus der Dauer kann die Bewegungsdarstellung sich der Wahrnehmung einer bestimmten Figur annähern, sei es psychologisch [...] oder physiologisch“ (ibid 82). Considering the focus on a viewpoint, the concept shows strong ties to Wolf’s principle of perspectivity.

Schüwer offers the scene in which Bruce Wayne’s parents get killed as an example for the psychological identification. In contrast to the rest of the book, the happenings are depicted in a detailed way containing a lot of moment-to-moment transitions, mirroring the powerful effect it had – and still has – on Wayne’s life. Through the changed rhythm, the reader too can experience this intensity.

For (anti-)superhero stories, the possibility to portray switches between human and superhuman rhythms is essential. Yet, it was established that the anti-superheroes are often not superhuman in the classical sense anymore. Does this fact therefore change the effectiveness of the variable rhythms? As far as the psychological identification is concerned,



Fig. 17 Rhythm

the effect is less concerned with actual speed, therefore it does not lose any significance in the portrayal of antiheroes. This is already shown above in the example of *Batman*’s childhood trauma. For the realm of physical motion, the issue may seem more complicated at first, as most of the antiheroes are still human. Yet, even humans have different rhythms of perception, therefore the possibility to portray them is just as important here. Furthermore, some of the characters are in fact portrayed with a rhythm that differs greatly

from an “ordinary” one (but does not deserve to be called superhuman). Examples of this can be found in *V for Vendetta*, where V’s motions in combats are so swift (his rhythm so high) that his “normal” opponents, whose perception the reader

often shares, do not realize what is happening until it is too late for them to react. The opposite extreme is shown in *Watchmen*, where the image of a photograph is accompanied by Dr. Manhattan's thoughts "In twelve seconds time, I drop the photograph to the sand at my feet, walking away. It's already lying there, twelve seconds into the future" (IV 1). In this panel the reader is allowed to enter the extremely lowered rhythm of the anti-superhero.

Another example from the book shows how the heightened rhythm of physical motion can be portrayed. (Fig. 17) The short sequence of the page is mainly subject to a normal human rhythm, in this case that of Laurie Juspecky, with the exception of the third panel, depicting Veidt's heightened rhythm. What is interesting here, is that the rhythm of the villain of the story is shown, allowing the reader to experience his motions as well. When considering the general tenor of anti-superhero graphic novels, blurring these hero/villain boundaries, the panel is very fitting. This also marks one of the main differences to superhero comics, where only the switch between superheroes and humans is of interest.

For superhero comics Schüwer concludes that

[g]leich in doppelter Hinsicht ist das Medium der starren Bilder dem Pop-Mythos vom Superhelden also besonders angemessen: Seinem Status zwischen romanhaften Helden und Verkörperung eines Prinzips wird es durch die Zweideutigkeit von Gestalt und Pose gerecht. Seiner zwischen menschlichen und übermenschlichen Bereichen wechselnden Dynamik vermag es durch variable Rhythmen der Dauer zu entsprechen. Beide Aspekte sind in dieser Form keinem anderen Medium zu eigen. (*Wie Comics* 80-81)

For anti-superhero graphic novels the thought can be applied in a similar way, yet keeping in mind that one of the aims is to blur not only the human-superhuman boundaries, but also the good/bad distinction. This leads to the fact that, while different methods for depicting motion are also used for anti-superheroes, the groups of characters attributed to each method is not consistent anymore: Villains can be shown in their rhythm, anti-superheroes can be portrayed in cuts, less poses are used overall. In terms of illusionist potential, the blurring of boundaries is a double-edged sword. On the one hand, it enables the reader to relate to different characters in different ways and portrays how even good characters can have negative sides, a problem any reader will be able to relate to. On the other hand, there is a chance that too many viewpoints are being offered, or the switches between different rhythms are too quick, leading to an illusion breaking effect. The only general rule that can be deduced is, that there is an immense potential for illusion, but also the possibility to use the same effects against it. The techniques can therefore be used to match any story and its intended meaning.

4.4. Image and Text

A combination of words and pictures - this aspect of comics is one often seen as most descriptive of the whole medium. Although it was established in the beginning, that this combination is only one of the main features constituting comics and hence not a prerequisite, its prominence, importance, and effects cannot be disregarded. This became especially clear in the discussion of aesthetic illusion. If image and text co-occur, their arrangement and interaction can influence all other aspects of comic theory (motion, time, space). McCloud, Schüwer, and Lewis all discuss this aspect in their work. While McCloud is more interested in the content related issues, Schüwer analyses narratological aspects and examines the different elements. Lewis' model compares three different concept (one of them McCloud's) to illustrate how narrative meaning is produced. Therefore, Schüwer's thoughts will be discussed first, followed by McCloud's and Lewis' categorization, and an attempt to connect them to the general issue of aesthetic illusion and anti-superheroes.

In order to fully appreciate the interaction between graphic and verbal elements and text, it is important to distinguish between text ("Schrift"), that can also have a graphic function, and the language ("Sprache") it represents. Hence, the dichotomy between words and images is inherent in the element of text itself. Another difference lies in the modes of perception in a single panel: simultaneity for images, sequentiality for words. Therefore the two can never be perceived in *exactly* the same instant. Considering the difference in reception, the distinction between text and language has another important consequence: While language always has to be perceived sequentially, text (in its graphic elements) can also be perceived simultaneously (Schüwer, *Erzählen* 208). Naturally, comic artists have established techniques to minimize this discrepancy between visual and verbal perception. The best known example is of course the visual symbol of the speech balloon. Although the text inside it still needs to be read, the reader sees a scene that contains language, which will lead to a difference in perception (for example the assumption that the panel will take at least as long as the utterance would take or that certain mimics correspond to the text) and cause him to blend visual and verbal components. Schüwer calls this "virtuelle Gleichzeitigkeit" (*Wie Comics* 325), as the simultaneity can never be real.

In the portrayal of the verbal aspect there is another distinction, yet not one inherent only to comics – diegetic and non-diegetic. The former refers to any text or language that has its source in the world of the story. In other words, anything the characters can see or hear

constitutes a diegetic element, anything else a non-diegetic element. These categories have to be applied to both language and text, leaving us with four different verbal groups. This marks a major difference to written narrative, where diegetic text almost never occurs (Schüwer, *Wie Comics* 329).

Three of the four possibilities can be found on the second page of *V for Vendetta*. (Fig. 18)



Fig. 19 Verbal categories

The voice on the radio (the diegetic language) is heard by the people in the book, while they cannot see the words (the extra-diegetic text) used to portray it. The same is true for any conversations or thoughts any of the characters have, as well as the use of onomatopoetic text. The writing on the posters in V's dressing room on the other hand are also part of the story world and hence portray an example of diegetic language and text. The last row of panels features the already mentioned instance of an authorial narrator commenting on the image (extra-diegetic text and language). The most problematic category is the combination

of diegetic text but extra-diegetic

language which would require some element of the story world portraying language that only

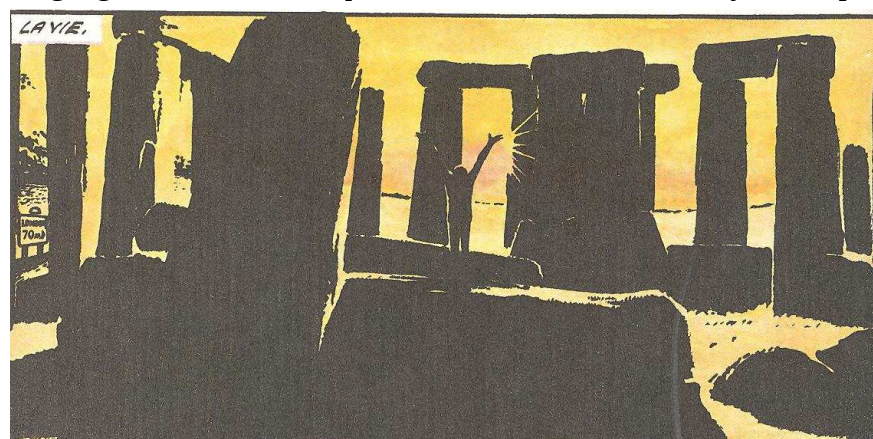


Fig. 18 Diegetic text, extra-diegetic language?

the reader can see. This basically never occurs. An instance of it may be seen in *V for Vendetta*, when Finch stands with his stretched-out arms, shaped like a V – a diegetic “text”

portraying extra-diegetic language. (see Fig. 19) This rather shaky interpretation is stabilized through his thought “la vie”, a homophone for the letter “V”. Yet, in general it is true that diegetic text portrays diegetic language.

In terms of illusionist effect, especially as regards the principle of *Celare artem*, it seems that the further apart text and language are from each other, but also from the storyworld, the greater the effort on the part of the reader necessary to close the distance. For the four categories this would lead to the diegetic text/language category bearing the most immersive potential. This is certainly true, as the text and language offer a viewpoint inside the story. The distance between language and text of authorial comments is also small, yet their distance to the story world constitutes an element of latent awareness of the illusion. The distance in the common diegetic language/extra-diegetic text category is also illusion breaking, yet the category as a whole so important for the narrative aspect, that the methods to hide this distance received special attention. The fact that the second ‘mixed’ category, almost never occurs is probably also related to the difficulty on the part of the reader to close (or ignore) the distance created in it. This leaves the two diegetic language categories as potentially most illusionistic and leads to an assumption very much in line with Wolf’s theories on the viewpoint, namely that the most effective reader involvement takes place when the viewpoint is one *inside* the story. In a similar way, Schüwer argues that:

Vielleicht ist das der Grund warum Denkblasen in ernsten Comics häufig vermieden werden: Die enge Verknüpfung zwischen Schrifttext und Bild, die durch Blasen ermöglicht wird, korrespondiert für manche Künstler offenbar mit einer Verknüpfung von Sprache und sichtbarer Außenwelt (*Wie Comics* 332).

In order to overcome these distances, different techniques have been developed to integrate verbal elements better into the visual ones. A common way is to exploit the visual aspects of text, using the text font to convey a particular intonation or emotion, or text size to convey volume. Similarly, the shape of word- and thought balloons can express such suprasegmental features (*Erzählen* 209). The radio voice in *V for Vendetta*, for example, is symbolized through a balloon with an irregular edgy form. The differently colored balloons in *Batman* identifying the speaker or thinker also serve this purpose. Furthermore, the arrangement or connection of different balloons can suggest a pause or an overlap of two different utterances.

Especially in the use of onomatopoetic expressions the visual composition becomes almost as important as the verbal one. The reason lies in the mode of perception:

Die dargestellten Geräusche lassen sich eigentlich nicht in einzelne Laute zerlegen, wie das eine neutral gestaltete Buchstabenreihe suggerieren würde. Die Comics nutzen [...] die ‘buchstäbliche’ und die

simultan rezipierte graphische [Seite der Schrift] [...], um die verschiedenen Seiten unserer lautlichen Umwelt, Wörter und Geräusche, zum Ausdruck zu bringen.“(*Wie Comics* 334)

It follows, that, through integrating onomatopoetic expressions in a visual way, the story world can be portrayed in a manner closer to our perception of reality. It follows Wolf's principle of the world's inventory and leads to a high level of illusion. The text may also highlight certain movements or suggest a spatial dimension. An example can be seen in figure 13 in *Batman*, where the sound as well as its direction and expansion over the panel borders are expressed purely graphically. Yet, most importantly in respect to the graphic dimensions of text, is to keep in mind that any structure or form is always motivated by the content of the story.

Schüwer distinguishes between four different dimensions to portray how text, language, image, and structure interact in order for the reader to deduct meaning from it.²² The graphic dimension (“graphische Dimension”) relates text and drawing style, the dimension of discourse (“Erzählstrukturelle Dimension”) verbal and visual narration and focalization, the “diegetische Bedeutungsdimension” contains the interplay between diegetic language and images, the “inszenatorische Bedeutungsdimension” that between extra-diegetic and diegetic elements (*Wie Comics* 336). While each dimension in itself portrays the interaction between the verbal and the visual, it is the interaction between dimensions that makes comics such a promising medium. Even without going into further detail here, this model illustrates the complex relationships between the different components.

A different approach to the categorization of image/text interplay is taken by McCloud, who concentrates on the varying significance of the verbal/visual elements and the resulting combinations in the production of content. In relation to Schüwer it may be said that it is concerned with the diegetic and extra-diegetic dimensions of meaning. The first two categories, “word specific” and “picture specific”, are the most obvious combinations, where images or text, respectively, only illustrate but do not hold an own narrative function. If both elements “send essentially the same message” (McCloud, *Understanding* 153), it presents a “duo-specific” panel, an example of which can be seen in the second panel of *Batman*, where he rips apart his computer, thinking “but the computer crosses its own circuits and refuses to let go. I coax it” (10). If one element underlines or amplifies the other, the combination is “additive”. This is the case when Dr. Manhattan holds a photograph of himself and Laurie Juspezyk in his hand commenting “[t]he photograph is in my hand. It is the photograph of a

²² The distinctions leading to this outcome and the outcome itself are not entirely unproblematic from a narrative perspective, but will have to be accepted for the purpose of this thesis due to its limited scope.

man and woman. They were in an amusement park, in 1959” (IV 1). While the first four categories mostly allowed the reader to perceive the meaning by looking at one of the elements, the last three categories are much more demanding in terms of reader involvement. In “parallel combinations” image and text belong to different scenes or ideas, but through their combination can add another layer of meaning to the panel. *Watchmen* is full of this form of interaction, for example in the comic-within-a-comic. In a “montage [...] words are treated as integral parts of the picture”. (ibid 154) Such is often the case with onomatopoeic text, like the thunder (see figure 13) that interacts with the image of lightning (the effect is intensified through the use of similar colors). This means a focus on the graphic qualities of the text, which is now *perceived* rather than *read*, whilst not losing its linguistic qualities altogether. The last category, “perhaps the most common type of word/picture combination is the interdependent”, where the elements support each other to give the panel a meaning “that neither could convey alone” (ibid 155), for example the last panel on the second page of *V for Vendetta* (see figure 18). In terms of illusionist potential, the thoughts applied to Schüwer’s theory (and in accordance with Wolf) are still valid here – offering a viewpoint inside the story, offering no more than one viewpoint at once, and keeping the distance between language/text and image minimal will aid immersion. Parallel combinations and montages can also aid immersion as they engage the reader to a higher extent, yet if the distance becomes too great it can easily lead to the opposite effect. Therefore, it does not come as a surprise that the most common category is also the one with the highest illusionist potential: The interdependent panels engage the reader to integrate text and image to create meaning, yet the elements are cohesive, keeping the language/image distance small.

In an attempt to illustrate how images and words concur to produce narrative meaning in comic books, Lewis compares three different approaches: One is concerned with narrative in prose, one with cybertexts, and the third with comic books. While the first two lack the visual component needed to describe comics, the third (McCloud’s *Understanding Comics*) leaves out the reader as part of the process of forming meaning. To give a full picture of the relationships involved, he combines the different approaches and displays them graphically. Let us have a closer look on the theories in question before examining Lewis’ model.

The prose approach (by Wolfgang Iser) introduces three elements responsible for developing “narrative meaning: the author’s inscrutable intent and choice of expressive medium are only two cogs in the machine that makes meaning. In addition to ‘author’ and ‘text’, the ‘reader’ completes” (Lewis 72) this trinity. “Through interplay between the three, not only is a

personal understanding of the material created for the reader, so is his/her own unique world.” (ibid 73) The second model, by Espen Aarseth, deals with cybertexts. Yet, it has a very similar notion of the three cornerstones to that of Iser: “‘The Textual Machine’ [is] composed of ‘verbal sign’, ‘medium’ and ‘operator’ (Aarseth 1997: 55, 21 in Lewis 73). While the importance of this trinity in terms of the effects it creates in the reader should not be dwarfed, it is obvious that the lack of a visual component will not suffice in creating a full picture of comics.

In McCloud’s approach to the question, the medium is already that of comics. Hence, he talks extensively about the most intriguing aspect, namely the relation between pictures and words. Yet, as Lewis points out, “McCloud’s definition of comics wiped out the importance or need for words from its essence. [...] Perhaps McCloud’s definition is a response to the dominance of the verbal sign that saturates large proportions of narrative theory” (72) In *Understanding Comics* McCloud introduces a ‘narrative triangle’ containing the “pictorial vocabulary of comics or of any of the visual arts” (51). Any story and its meaning are therefore bound by the borders of ‘reality’, ‘language’, and ‘the picture plane’. Although this model includes both visual (reality) and verbal (language) signs, “McCloud omitted the viewer/reader entirely” (Lewis 75). It should be noted, though, that this observation is tempered by McCloud’s later remarks on reader involvement, such as his comments on ‘the gutter’. The picture plane is described as “the realm of the art object [...] where lines and colors can be themselves and not pretend otherwise” (*Understanding* 51). Any object considered ‘abstract’ in the common usage of the word would therefore converge with this corner. McCloud’s terminology here can be a little misleading as he continuously uses ‘iconic abstraction’ to describe the growing distance from reality towards graphic icons and eventually written language.

Based on the two quasi-congruent triangles by Iser and Aarseth on the one hand, and McCloud’s on the other hand Lewis creates his own ‘hybrid model’ of narrative meaning: “Taken all together, this four point tetrahedral model displays how narrative meaning is constructed

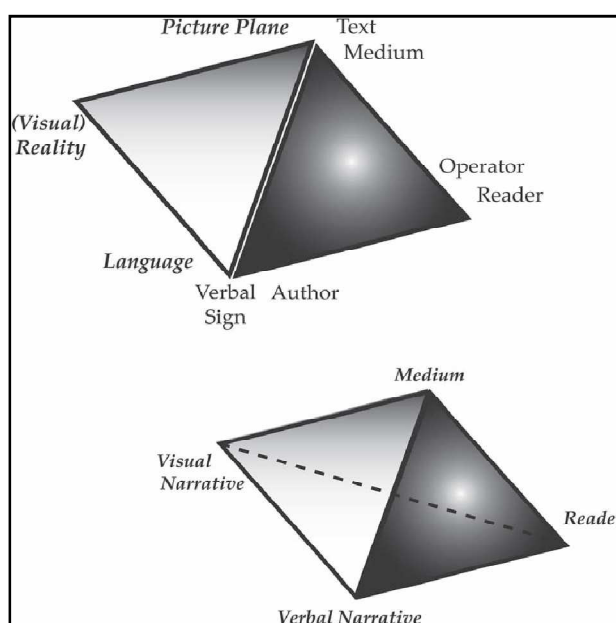


Fig. 20 Lewis' hybrid model of narrative meaning

specifically in the comic book medium. Taking a quick inventory, the four points in question are the ‘medium’, the ‘reader’, the ‘verbal narrative’, and the ‘visual narrative’” (75). It might not seem plausible at first, how the ‘picture plane’ is equitable with the ‘medium’, but becomes clear when looking at it in terms of restrictions. If this is where ‘lines and colors can be themselves’, it means the only restrictions are the size of a page or the limitations of color printing - in other words, the medium.

Summing up, it has been demonstrated that the possibilities of comics to combine words and pictures are almost endless and therefore give authors a lot of room to play with the elements and adapt the interplay to the content of the story as well as guiding the reader’s reception process more or less strictly. “Je nachdem, wie Kombinationen zwischen Schrift/Sprache und Bild in Comics gestaltet sind, können sie narrative Zusammenhänge eindeutiger machen und das Verständnis erleichtern oder Komplexität generieren und zusätzliche Leerstellen schaffen, die es im Rezeptionsprozess zu füllen gibt.” (Schüwer, *Wie Comics* 319)

5. Putting it all together: Aesthetic Illusion, Anti-superheroes, and Graphic Novels – the Holy Trinity?

In the course of this thesis three terms have been of importance - aesthetic illusion, anti-superheroes, and graphic novels. They form the edges of a narratological triangle. The question if, and if so how, this narratological form²³, the genre, and the concept of narratology interact, stood at the beginning. Analyzing each of these separately in a first step was necessary to gain an insight into the features that separate or connect them. These foundations made it possible to see, in a second step, where the potential of the combination lies. The relationships between the three corners were continuously highlighted and theories presented with examples. As a third step, and in order to answer the question underlying this thesis in a satisfactory way, it seems appropriate to pick one scene from each book in order to show how the different theories can be applied together. This will prove how, only in combination, the most illusionistic effect can be achieved and therefore that graphic novels are, in fact, the best way to portray anti-superhero stories. Yet, before conducting this final analysis it seems necessary to recall what has been considered so far.

²³ or medium if we work with the term comics instead. This would be based on the assumption that the main differences between the terms that are of relevance to this question, are reflected in the term anti-superheroes as well as in the interaction between word and image (the relation between drawing style and text/language)

Firstly, comics were defined as a flexible system with sequentiality as its non-gradable base, two major categories (word/image combination, narrative component) and several minor categories. Graphic novels were then categorized as a subcategory of comics that contain a longer, sustained narrative, as well as a certain level of seriousness. Secondly, aesthetic illusion was discussed with a focus on verbal narration, following Wolf's six principles. When relating this to comics, it was established that the medium has advantages in almost every principle due to its dual nature. Only in the concealment of the artificiality, as described in the principle of *Celare artem*, does the image/text combination bear disadvantages. Thirdly, anti-superheroes were described as a new category that shares superheroic, as well as antiheroic qualities. When relating them to aesthetic illusion, the results showed that the characters were illusion-breaking rather than enhancing. Although identification with them is possible on a metaphorical level, it is not very easily achieved due to the value paradox surrounding them. After establishing the anti-illusionistic potential of anti-superheroes, it followed that some other illusion-creating element must be involved in these books, or else they would not be as successful and immersive as they are. This component was then found in the analysis of comic theory: Simplification and closure as basic principles engage the reader in ways no other medium can; the ways to depict time and motion overcome the borders of the static panels; techniques to integrate verbal and visual spheres almost fully correct the problem created through the different perception processes of language and images.

What follows from this recollection are two things. Firstly, graphic novels (or comics) generally offer a lot of immersive potential due to their dual nature as well as the techniques at the author's disposal. It has to be kept in mind though, that the extent to which these techniques are used, are motivated by the context and can also be used to achieve an illusion-breaking effect. Secondly, the anti-superhero genre has been generally rather anti-illusionistic, in terms of its characters and (reflective) issues, hence demanding a medium that can balance out these lapses. While this would already prove the success of anti-superhero stories in graphic novels, as well as the form's apparent monopoly on it, it does not show any other connection between genre and form. Besides proving that graphic novels may be a perfect form for a lot of other genres as well, it leaves one remaining question: Is there something that connects anti-superhero stories with graphic novels? The answer lies in the essence of the protagonists' character, namely their internal dichotomy (which may also metaphorically represent a dichotomy existing in the real society of the reader). While this forms part of their anti-illusionistic potential (for example less poses but more cuts in the portrayal of motion), it also corresponds to the graphic novel's image/text division that can be hidden but never quite

erased. Louis' two narrators are therefore able to portray the two parts of a 'split personality' better than any other medium could. Thence, while no other genre can allow for a play with this medium-specific dichotomy without accepting an illusion-breaking effect, anti-superhero stories profit from them. Furthermore, due to the simultaneity in the reception of images in connection to the perception of the whole sequence, readers do not have problems with rapid switches between storylines. This is often used in order to show two overlapping storylines that gain further meaning through their association, but can also refer to the protagonist's inner conflict.



Fig. 21 Batman and the bat

Compared to the other two books, *Batman's* protagonist is the only character that not only seems to be aware of the ambiguity in his existence, but also suffers from it. I will therefore pick a page from *Batman* to illustrate the interaction of image and text, and use the concepts and categories defined. One scene already mentioned in this respect (see p 96) shows him defeating Two Face. Yet, while he looks at him, he sees his own monster (in the form of a bat) mirrored in his opponent's face. The idea of symmetry is already apparent in the layout and again in the characters' thoughts and utterances.²⁴ A portrayal of this inner conflict already

²⁴ A brilliant and exhaustive analysis of this page can be found in Schüwer, *Wie Comics* pp 491-500, which is why I will analyze a different sequence.

appears much earlier in the form of blocktext or inserts containing thoughts of a different, yet still undefined, part of Bruce Wayne. The first time the reader sees the monster bat is therefore quite significant and fruitful for analysis. (Fig.21)

The structure of the page, with its twelve even panels followed by a big panel showing the bat, immediately conveys a feeling of pressure, because the reader perceives the whole page (including the striking last panel) at once, knowing the story is headed for a 'crash'. The last image also destroys the regular structure of the first three rows. The colors are dim, emphasizing the eerie quality of the sequence, and stress the play with light and shadow that offers itself as a metaphor for inner contradiction. In the first panel, Bruce is seen in a pose standing over his desk, conveying the idea of defeat and powerlessness. This is supported by the construction of space that uses two overlapping grids. The shadow lines on the floor lead away into the darkness, suggesting the depth of the room, but also a never-ending pattern of light/darkness. The narrowing white lines of the second grid, the pattern of the window, also imply a burden that pushes down on Bruce. Moreover, the window frames him, prohibiting movement in any direction. He is caught between a pattern of shadow and one of light that add up to a prison cell, just like the inner conflict that he cannot escape.

On the verbal level, the duality is continued. While the first part of the sentence "you try to drown me out..." is displayed outside the panel, the second part "...but your voice is weak..." is part of the image in the form of blocktext. How much power it costs Bruce to drown out this voice is graphically suggested by the fact that this line of text takes up space of the image, making it smaller in comparison to the others. In addition, the text line can also be said to be "drowned out" of the picture. Furthermore, both lines are at the top of the window grid, hence are part of the weight that pushes down on him. The division between the two parts of the sentence and their different form is also of special importance. It mirrors the struggle between his good and bad side, and also marks the first instance where the "monster" wins this fight and is allowed to become part of the image. The topic of the sequence is further highlighted through the messages he receives, especially that of Harvey Dent alias Two Face who, as was already mentioned, serves as a reflection of Bruce's own struggle. His words "I feel so whole, so free" stand in obvious contrast to the tenor of the scene and hence highlight it. The next message is from Superman, yet another character that serves as a mirror for Bruce; although he does not have to fight the same internal struggle, he stands for a conflict between principles and authority. The last three panels of the first row also contain onomatopoeic expressions and show how the form of speech bubbles can be used to convey more than just the text and

language (in this case, that the voice is coming from an answering machine). Furthermore, the arrangement of the onomatopoetic expressions guides the reader's eyes to the next panel so that he 'enters' it at the same level where the next speech bubble is shown. While the second panel shows Bruce in a form, encouraging the reader to 'feel' the motion of pushing the key of an answering machine, the third and fourth panel show poses again, conveying the same idea as in the first panel. The desperation is especially obvious in the third panel, where he holds his lowered head with his hand. On the other hand both leave a lot of *Leerstellen* for the reader to fill (for example the mimics).

The next two rows are highly rhythmic, as they alternate between the image of a window (always from the same perspective, namely Bruce's, hence suggesting he does not move at all during this sequence) and Bruce. The last message occurs in the panel just before we see the bat flying towards the window: "Selina, Bruce. I'm lonely." This loneliness is also portrayed in the image showing him wrapped in shadows. From there on, the growing influence of the approaching bat is clearly portrayed. The cut – giving rise to something new - in the fourth panel of the second row shows this change of power. This is highlighted by the shadows on Bruce's face, marking him as a target. The rather painful look in this image stands in harsh contrast to the settled and prepared look he has in the third image of the third row. One could also read this depiction as a pose, portraying the idea that Bruce has accepted the monster back into his life and is prepared for its intrusion. The last panel of the third row, showing nothing but black night behind the window is the calm before the storm. It makes the effect of the last panel even more explosive. The huge bat breaks through the window that has created the light-shadow plays at the beginning, destroying any previous structures. The power of his dark side, that has been suggested in the first panel, has increased over the sequence, ending with the bat bursting through the window into Batman's life, deciding the internal struggle (at least for the time being).

6. Conclusion

More than anything, the theories and concepts discussed here deal with non-absolute concepts: comics, graphic novels, superheroes, anti-superheroes, aesthetic illusion, poses, forms, amongst others. There is always a certain element that will have to stay ambiguous and open for interpretation. Yet, as reader identification and immersion is also an important element in the success of any narrative form, it may just be this element which forever

remains in the hands of the reader that makes immersion work. In addition, it gives us an important key-word – ‘balance’. How important balance is, became especially clear in the discussion of Wolf’s theory, where it is the coordinating factor within and between principles. Nevertheless, it remains true for any analysis including reader involvement and is of great importance in another area dealt with, namely the interplay of text/language and image.

It was established that this duality is not generally a prerequisite for comics. Yet, it plays a major factor not only in the connection of anti-superheroes and graphic novels, but also in the connection between graphic novels and aesthetic illusion. In other words, the duality anti-superheroes stand for is mirrored in one aspect of the medium, while the same aspect allows for great potential in aesthetic illusion. No other genre would allow ambivalence to this extent without immediately breaking the reader’s illusion.

The only side of the triangle that does not seem to fit the generally successful interaction in terms of illusionist potential, is that between anti-superheroes and aesthetic illusion. The only common ground is a certain level of seriousness necessary to avoid awareness of the illusion, that is always present in graphic novels. We have seen that, especially on a metaphorical level, the characters do not form very fruitful ground for immersion (at least in comparison to superheroes); even though certain techniques promote their viewpoints or invite the reader to immerse into their movements, full identification with those characters is often not possible. Yet ultimately, it is also not necessary: In contrast to the personalities of the protagonists, their worlds usually follow the principles of aesthetic illusion and allow readers to immerse into a world that they help to create. Furthermore, a key-word that is equally important for both concepts is ‘paradox’. It relates to the values of anti-superheroes as well as the term ‘aesthetic illusion’ itself. In addition, it is closely linked to the balance aspect. It may therefore be assumed that the elements of duality/balance and seriousness are the common denominator occupying the center of the triangle.

Concerning the title, it is now possible to state that readers do not necessarily *want to be Watchmen* (as a category rather than single characters). Yet, the immersive potential of the world of anti-superheroes does lead to an immersive process and readers become part of the fictional world. Relating this to the original question “*are graphic novels better qualified to tell antihero stories than other media?*” it is now possible to give an affirmative answer. Firstly, graphic novels have a very high potential for aesthetic illusion. Secondly, they make the reader an integral part for the construction of the story (closure). Thirdly, and most importantly, the inner schism that is a main factor in distinguishing superheroes from anti-

superheroes matches graphic novels perfectly. This is most notable in their word/image duality, but also in other ways that only a graphic medium could have (such as alternating images from two different storylines).

Overall, the analysis of the different concepts and theories and their application to the genre of anti-superheroes has quite successfully closed a hole in the academic comic horizon. Yet, it has also shown that an extensive and thorough research of the topic is not possible within the limited scope of this thesis. Many more ideas would have to be included²⁵ and analyzed in their relation to the particular genre; the framework presented here was only that – a framework, offering an insight and a new approach into a genre that had not previously received a lot of attention.

Any work on comics usually ends with praise to the potential of the medium and points out how much academic ground is still untouched. I at least want to present this praise with a more metaphorical tone: What strikes me as the essence of this particular genre is that, under the surface of what many still believe to be ‘simple’, lies an incredible amount of depth, sarcasm, self-reflexive humor, and social commentary, a fact that is often forgotten in our superficial world. Lastly, more than in any other genre or medium, the reader becomes an essential part in the production of the story. This means that any discussion, however thorough, will always leave an element of unpredictability exceeding that of verbal narrative or film. As far as the reader is concerned, the last utterance in *Watchmen* is therefore appropriate in this context as well: “I leave it entirely in your hands” (XII 32).

²⁵ Such as Lessing’s Laokoon, concepts of on the arrangement and structure of drawings, iconic representation in onomatopoeic sounds, a detailed analysis of the interaction between discourse and story elements, an exhaustive comparison to the audio-visual medium film, post-modernist concepts in graphic novels etc.

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8. Images



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9. Appendix

9.1. Abstract German/Deutsche Zusammenfassung

Die Aufmerksamkeit, die dem Medium Comic in der akademischen Behandlung gewidmet wurde, hat in den letzten Jahrzehnten stetig zugenommen. Grund dafür ist unter anderem die Entwicklung einer neuen Unterkategorie, der Graphic Novel, welche seit den 80er Jahren des 20. Jh massiv an Popularität gewonnen hat und großes illusionistisches Potential birgt. Gleichzeitig ist in dem Genre der Superhelden eine neue Art „Held“ aufgetreten, der sowohl Parallelen zum klassischen Superhelden aufweist, wie auch zum Antihelden: Der Anti-Superheld. Während sich Comics schon lange aus der Verknüpfung mit dem Superhelden Genre befreit haben und auch Superhelden den Wechsel in andere Medien getan haben, so scheinen Anti-Superhelden an die Graphic Novel gebunden zu sein.

Ziel dieser Arbeit ist es, diese Bindung sowie die Popularität der neuen Generation von Helden zu erforschen um zu beweisen, dass Graphic Novels die beste narrative Form für Anti-Superhelden darstellen. Die wichtigsten theoretischen Grundlagen dafür liefern Werner Wolf mit seiner Arbeit über Ästhetische Illusion, sowie Scott McCloud und Martin Schüwer mit ihren Werken zur Comic Theorie. Die Beschäftigung mit dem Dreieck Ästhetische Illusion – Comic Theorie – Anti-Superhelden hat besonders den Aspekt der Balance bzw. inhärenter Paradoxa hervorgehoben. Einerseits betrifft das die Wort/Bild-Dualität der Graphic Novels, die sich in den gespaltenen Charakteren widerspiegelt. Während dieser nicht unbedingt eine Voraussetzung für Comics im Allgemeinen darstellt, wird er aber zu einer für die Subkategorie. Andererseits betrifft es die Balance zwischen Wort und Bild, die sich auch in der Balance zwischen den einzelnen Perspektiven von Wolfs Theorie zeigt. Auch auf der Dritten Achse, der zwischen Anti-Superhelden und Ästhetischer Illusion, spielt das paradoxe Element eine Rolle: zum einen findet man es in den Charakteren, zum anderen in den theoretischen Überlegungen zur Ästhetischen Illusion (deren Bezeichnung bereits paradox sei). Anhand von drei der einflussreichsten Graphic Novels sollen diese Überlegungen und Ergebnisse anschaulich gemacht werden: *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns*, *V for Vendetta* und *Watchmen*.

Auch wenn keine umfangreiche narratologische Untersuchung im Umfang dieser Arbeit möglich ist, so soll doch ein Einblick in allgemeine Konzepte zu den erwähnten Bereichen gegeben werden, sowie nähere Überlegungen für den Bereich der Anti-Superhelden Graphic Novel - einem Bereich, der in dieser Form bisher noch wenig beachtet wurde - angestellt werden, um die Gründe für das häufige Zusammenwirken dieser beiden Gattungen herauszuarbeiten.

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