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“A League of Watchmen. Transmedial Metareference
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Is it not also natural that the cultured person who in moments of intellectual tension seeks a stimulus in an action painting or in a piece of serial music should in moments of relaxation and escape (healthy and indispensable) tend toward triumphant infantile laziness and turn to the consumer product for pacification in an orgy of redundancy?

Umberto Eco, *The Myth of Superman*

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And of course, none of this would have been possible without my better half, who still thinks I will grow out of these infantile infatuations.

2. Introduction

Academic attention to the medium of comics is a quite recent phenomenon. Scholars have been discovering the potentials in sequential art for only a few decades now, and there is already a significant amount of theoretical work available; still, many begin with a series of excuses and a heartfelt monologue about legitimising comics as a subject of academic scrutiny (a habit articulated by, amongst others, Groensteen, Ecker, and Ndalani). Examples and analyses have been drawn from the huge realm of popular comics as well as independent authors' works, appearing in journals devoted to the medium, such as the *Comics Journal*, the *Journal of Popular Culture*, the *International Journal of Comic Art*, or web-magazines like the *NinthArt*, or *ImageText*, and *Image and Narrative*. The interest began to grow and spread into the teaching of comics as works of art as well, especially due to the publications of introductory books such as Scott McCloud's witty theoretical book, *Understanding Comics*, or Karin Kukkonen's *Studying Comics and Graphic Novels*. Lacking a developed system, or toolkit, if you like, the most common approaches combine already existing theories of other disciplines: methodologies borrowed from film studies and art history help with visuality, literary studies aid in decoding the verbal level, cultural theory lends ideas to debunk society-related themes, etc. (see Lefèvre on medium-specific qualities, Drucker on narration, Kukkonen on metaphors and metonymy, and Horskotte & Pedri on focalisation, for instance).

In my thesis, I would like to explore the metareferential potential in comics by analysing two popular works from major labels by cult writer Alan Moore in order to examine in how far the concept recently redefined by Werner Wolf is applicable, while highlighting general as well as individual and occasionally genre-specific instances of the phenomenon. Although metafiction and comic books have been linked before (see Atkinson,

or Di Liddo), and Wolf's theory has also been applied to comics (see Kukkonen, 2011), it has not yet been tested on what is arguably one of the most well-known superhero-narratives, *Watchmen*, and a fascinating interpretation of superheroes in Victoriana, *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen*.

In the first part, I will attempt to synthesise relevant chapters from comic book and superhero comic book history which will inform the genre- and medium-related meta-reflexive instances found. In the second chapter an enumeration of strategies for analysing graphic narrative will follow, using concepts from literary studies as well as graphic narrative theory, to assist a close reading. Wolf's metareference-theory and some highlighted aspects of alternate histories will also be discussed here.

The first case study will be *Watchmen* in my third chapter, a graphic novel featuring superhero characters who do not actually own any superpowers (except for one of them), investigating a series of murder cases in an alternative United States where Nixon is re-elected and superheroes are used to help winning the Vietnam War. In addition, throughout the comic book, each chapter is amended with supplementary material from the fictional world portrayed, to enrich the aesthetic illusion: book chapters from characters' publications, newspaper articles, medical reports, etc., all provoking the sense of constructedness in the recipient. Through a closer look at these excerpts, alongside the analysis of the embedded comic book and a survey of how *Watchmen* reflects on history, medium, and genre, I will try to demonstrate how this graphic novel challenges our aesthetic illusion and takes reading comics to an entirely different level.

Secondly, I have chosen a comic book series dealing with similar issues but in a different context. *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen* deploys peculiar characters: heroes and heroines of literary fiction, such as Mina Murray or Captain Nemo, engage in adventures mostly through Victorian England, to save the world from nemeses equally

drawn from fiction, such as Professor Moriarty. A Victorian superhero comic book, *The League*, apart from the interlacement of fictional characters into another level of fictional reality, has a fantastically rich alternative world of late 19th century England, which is undoubtedly a very strong device to invoke the Wolvian meta-awareness in the reader. My foci will include how steampunk literature toys with our ideas of history, the fascinating way in which the recycling of public domain characters articulates concerns of medium and genre, and how *The League* engages with its heritage as serially published fiction.

Through the exploration of the metareferential potential manifested in the involvement of prosaic texts, the alternate history setting, the ironic approach to generic conventions, and the heavy presence of intertextual links, I would like to see if our suspension of disbelief withstands the siege of this level of constructedness. These examples drawn from the two comic books will hopefully prove demonstrative of how the extension of the concept of metareference to a transmedial realm helps understanding the socio-cultural and cognitive dimensions of comics.

3. History of Comics: An Overview

What follows here is a systematic effort to catalogue the genesis and development of the cultural phenomenon commonly referred to as the 'American comic book' within a historical context. The purpose of this endeavour is crucial, as the dimensions of the American comic book are inextricably linked to prevalent socio-cultural and political discourses.

However, an important distinction needs to be made before digging deeper in this chapter; and that is the one between the terms *comics* and *comic books*. *Comics* is not a term referring to a medium, but an umbrella term used for numerous forms of *sequential art* (a term popularised by comics-master Will Eisner) from cave paintings to tapestries, from comic strips to comic books, and more (McCloud 4-9). The following definition of 'comic book' contains all aspects we will need to keep in mind for the purposes of this thesis: "[a]s an art form, a comic book is a volume in which all aspects of the narrative are represented by pictorial and linguistic images encapsulated in a sequence of juxtaposed panels and pages" (Duncan & Smith 4). There is another term circulating in critical texts as well as amongst publishers and fans, the *graphic novel*. Practically, the definition quoted above is equally true of graphic novels. The key difference between the two is that while the former is a periodically published, serial storytelling format, the latter is more self-contained and has recently come to be understood as less commercial, more artistic and bookshop-worthy – but more on graphic novels later. *Comic strips* will be discussed only briefly, as, although they share numerous formal characteristics with other sequential art, they are an entirely different medium.

3.1. Facts and Figures

3.1.1 Early Comics and the Beginnings of the Industry

There are two things which distinguish the Bayeux tapestry from comics: first, comics segment their image sequences into panels, and they integrate the written language in speech bubbles and captions. Second, comics are printed and reproduced on a larger scale, but there is only one hand-embroidered Bayeux tapestry. (Kukkonen 100)

In the US, comic books can be traced back to two different media: newspaper comic strips and pulp magazines. The former lent the format and the commercial connection, the latter mostly provided characters and storylines. The most popular comic strip character was the Yellow Kid, a street urchin in a yellow nightshirt created by Richard Felton Outcault, who proved to bring so much profit to newspapers that the first collection published in a book format features his adventures from newspapers. The *Yellow Kid Magazine* came out in 1897, which was soon followed by characters like the Katzenjammer Kids, Little Nemo, Mutt & Jeff, and others, all strips collected and published in various formats until the 1930s. Then, the publishing company Cupples & Leon, which previously distributed comic strip collections, started featuring their own children's book series. Competition manifested in a year-long experiment in 1922 by the New York-based Embee Distributing Company, whose *Comic Monthly* appeared as a Cupples & Leon format, but on worse quality paper, reducing production and marketing costs (Duncan & Smith 26-27).

Pulp magazines donated valuable characters and writers to the comic book industry. Cheaper than dime novels, they were primarily consumed by the emerging middle-class and lower educated class. Not only did they play a significant part in the formation of popular literary genres, they also were the stepping stones for talents like Ray Bradbury or Raymond

Chandler. As comic books began to dominate the market, many pulp writers and publishers abandoned prose and tried their luck with comic books, most of them successfully. Moreover, legendary pulp heroes like Tarzan (1912), and Zorro (1919) featuring in numerous stories, and characters starring in their own titles, such as The Shadow, Doc Savage and The Spider had an immense impact on what was to become the superhero genre in the 1930s and 1940s (28).

The comic book, as we know it today, was born in 1929, when the Eastern Color Printing Company printed *The Funnies*: a collection of original comic strips that came out every Saturday. Its importance is due to the fact that it was the first publication to come out regularly, containing only original strips and not reprints from magazines. One particular salesman at the company, Maxwell Charles Gaines, was eagerly promoting the comic book form. He was the first one to realise that comic strips could be more than a platform for advertisement; they have a marketing potential as an individual product. After experimenting with different formats and contents, *Famous Funnies* #1 from EC made its way to comic book histories as the first product of the comic book industry (29-30).

Regardless of how far comics have come from being a platform for advertising to being published as an individual book, they were still considered as a consumer good, and the executives of the publishing companies, although labouring to build a brand new branch of the entertainment industry, were motivated not by artistic development but financial success. Malcolm Wheeler-Nicholson, U.S. Army Major turned pulp magazine writer, entered the business in 1935, and after a few failed initiatives to introduce new and original characters and stories to the public, he joined in with Independent News Company to create Detective Comics, or ultimately DC Comics, Inc. from 1977. Thrilling stories of mystery and adventure began to take over the funnies. Along with the change in narrative structures came a change in layout: panels grew bigger, the shades turned sinister – overall, there were

more ways for artists to be creative and innovative, to create an appropriate atmosphere. This change started to pay off slowly, but surely: freelance artists, writers and editors would collaborate, working much like a factory in what was called “the shops” at that time. Artists freshly out of art college, as well as unemployed cartoonists would work side by side, anonymously, creating comics that still lacked a main character (Wright 2-7).

3.1.2 EC Publishing & The Comic Code

The dominant genre at the time was that of superheroes (to be discussed later), funny animals, romance, Western, and crime. A particularly troublesome genre, horror, premiered in the 1950s at EC under its new editor, son of M. C. Gaines, William Gaines. The issues featured grim stories of otherworldly creatures (vampires, werewolves, ghosts, etc.), domestic homicide, cannibalism and being buried alive. Narrators were introduced, such as the Crypt-Keeper (in *Tales from the Crypt*), the Old Witch (in *The Haunt of Fear*) or the Vault Keeper (in *The Vault of Horror*), and the stories often included a surprising plot-twist in their ending – *The Tales of the Black Freighter* in *Watchmen* is paying homage to these comics in its visual style and narrative.”[I]ntelligently written, wonderfully drawn, and as gory as hell[,]” EC’s horror comics soon charmed enormous audiences, with around 150 million books out every month, while gaining the unwanted attention of authorities (Duncan & Smith 36-38).

Joined by many psychologists and politicians, American parents began to fear that these stories of monsters and evil would corrupt the minds and souls of the young and soon formed into a united opposition. The most famous advocate of the anti-comics movement was the child psychologist Frederic Wertham, who collected enough source material during his interviews with children to publish a book of fiction that portrays the dangers of comic books. *The Seduction of the Innocent* (1954) features slogans such as “juvenile delinquency”

and “moral deterioration” as we see the protagonists falling prey to a virus that is comics and their indecent stories, calling for a doctor to put an end to the disease. The novel was a tool in the hands of parents supporting the anti-comics campaign and garnered so much attention that the US Senate decided to investigate the situation. A commission was set up, hearings were organised, and with ‘specialist’ Frederic Wertham a member, there was hardly any chance for the representatives of publishers and artists to defend their case. The most well-known case was that of EC’s owner William Gaines, who tried to defend his most popular, yet most vicious genre, horror comics.¹ He was relatively successful, as no official ban was set up by the government. However, feeling endangered, creators and distributors of comics thought it best to establish some form of self-censorship in order to regain the faith of parents and critics. In 1954, the Comics Magazine Association of America (CMAA) introduced a new censorship law, known as The Comics Code.

A Comic Code Authority was set up as executor, giving out seals of approval to publications that were up to standard, allowing them to enter the market. The Code outlawed everything that comics had been criticised for before: depiction of brutality, sexuality, blood, carnage, and any form of escaping from the authorities. These rules caused major change not only in the horror genre – with its damsels tied up, body parts flying and criminals often getting away with their crimes – but in adventure as well as superhero stories: the storylines as well as the advertisements had to be altered. Gaines and his company refused to subject their work to the board, and as a result, they disappeared from the news stands, as vendors only allowed magazines that had the official seal.

Due to the general commotion, the senate hearings, and eventually the introduction of the Comics Code, the popularity of comics decreased significantly by the mid-1950s

¹ The transcript of Gaines’ testimony at the Senate Hearings is available online, see Works Cited.

(Kukkonen 110-113). Inadvertently, the majority of the very engineers of the comic book industry censored themselves, crippling their own artistic and thematic range, and thus losing their previous appeal.

3.1.3 Comix and the Return to the Superhero

The 1960s and 1970s was the period when, after the ordeal of the previous decade, comic books started to regain their stamina. A form that, in a way, evolved as a reaction to the Comics Code in the 1960s is the underground *comix*. With its roots in Tijuana Bibles (an eight-page-long format known for portraying the overtly sexual and obscene) and *Mad* (a satire and the sole survivor of EC Comics), *comix* were never destined to be mainstream. Creators of such comics were not only against the Code, but targeted socially or politically sensitive issues in a satirical manner, portraying outlawed scenes such as drug abuse or violence. They printed and distributed their own works, bypassing the CCA and ignoring the demands of the market. *Comix* had a unique, non-conformist visual and storytelling style as authors felt they could voice their own personal concerns about society, politics, and other problematic issues, drawing in older audiences. The quirky narratives and highly individual drawing styles of *comix* were features that autobiographical comics largely drew upon and adapted later on.

Slowly but surely the authority of the Comics Code was weakening. Although it is still enacted today, publishers found means to evade it ever since the legendary case of *The Amazing Spider-Man* #96-98. In 1971, Marvel-editor Stan Lee was commissioned by the US Department of Health to come forth with a story thematising the problem of drug abuse and its consequences. Marvel inevitably had to portray drug abuse, defying the rules of the Code, however, due to the departmental commission it could be published. As a consequence

of this event, the Code has been taken less and less seriously, allowing writers and artists of the 1970s to experiment with new themes, leading to a darker era of mainstream comic books, such as the death of Spider-Man's love interest, Gwen Stacy in *Amazing Spider-Man* #121 (1973), which marks the "true loss of innocence" (Duncan & Smith 51-61).

3.1.4 *The Graphic Novel*

The term *graphic novel* is difficult to define. It is usually used to refer to a self-contained narrative that exceeds the average length of comic books. Unfortunately, libraries and bookstores tend to contribute to the confusion by not differentiating properly between the different types of sequential art. Trade paperbacks, for instance, quite often end up catalogued as *graphic novels*, when in fact they are a collection of issues, usually referred to as *Volumes*, that feature the same hero or group of heroes, a story arc, a theme, or are connected in any other way. *Graphic novel* suggests a sense of sophistication, elitism, and complexity as opposed to the *comic book's* immaturity, disposability, and popularity in the most pejorative sense (Tan 31).

Will Eisner's *A Contract with God and Other Tenement Stories* (1978) is thought to be the first graphic novel, a short story collection of a kind, featuring a set of poor Jewish characters who live in a tenement in New York. The next decade brought three titles that changed comics storytelling forever: *Maus*, *Watchmen* and *The Dark Knight Returns*. Art Spiegelman's *Maus: A Survivor's Tale*, a holocaust tale about Art and his survivor father, Vladek, is told through flashbacks, with the Nazis portrayed as cats and the Jews as mice. The second volume was published in 1992 and went on to win a Pulitzer Special Prize Award, the first and since then only comic book to do so. Frank Miller's *The Dark Knight Returns* and Alan Moore's *Watchmen* left an enormous footprint on superhero narratives, as

will be discussed later. The graphic novel is a format also often used for autobiographical works inspired by the underground comix. Well known and critically acclaimed titles include French-Iranian author Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis* (2000-2003) telling the story of her childhood in Iran during and after the Islamic revolution, and American comic strip artist Alison Bechdel's award-winning *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic* (2006), an autobiography packed with intertextual references, featuring themes of gender roles, lesbianism, a broken family and how reading literature can help one overcome obstacles.

3.2. The Superhero Comic

There is a customary distinction between two major periods of superhero comics; and just like any differentiation between any two periods of history or art, this symbolical line is rather blurry. The Golden Age is generally agreed to have started in the 1930s and is primarily associated with the DC Comics Group and their cult characters, Superman (1938), Batman (1939), Green Lantern (1940) and Wonder Woman (1941). Then, due to a paradigm shift, this period ended when Marvel Comics initiated the second phase, commonly referred to as the Silver Age, launching new titles. What succeeds these two periods, however, is rather problematic to categorise. A powerful argument is presented by Geoff Klock, questioning labels such as "postmodern" or "deconstructionist." He approaches the works associated with the third period (*Batman: The Dark Knight Returns* (1986), *Watchmen* (1986), and many other titles) as a dawn of self-consciousness or in Klock's words, following in Harold Bloom's footsteps, the "revisionary superhero narrative" (Klock 3).

3.2.1 The Golden Age

Superman was introduced as the first lead of the newly launched DC title *Action Comics* in 1939. Not quite the uptight gentleman we know him now to be, the early Superman fought crime with a rather contemptuous and surprisingly masculine attitude. Lois Lane at that time was hardly more than a damsel in distress, although she did give up on Clark Kent for the sake of her career and for a shot at the overconfident hero. In the following years, Superman was followed by Batman, Wonder Woman, and The Flash, while other publishers started to introduce more stories and characters to the market, trying to win audiences. Through the 1940s and 1950s, the superhero genre was the most popular in comic books, taking boys on wonderful adventures, telling tales of good and evil. With issues coming weekly, comic books began to emerge as a dominant player in popular culture. Statistically speaking, “the average monthly circulation of comics rose from 17 million in 1940 to 70-100 million in 1953. By 1953, the American public spent over 1 billion dollars a year on comic books and about 90% of both boys and girls read them.” (Kukkonen 107, statistics taken from Wright, 2001).

As has been mentioned already, the first superhero to make his debut was Superman in 1939, advocated by DC’s crisp title, *Action Comics*. His main objective has been, whether or not intended by his creators, to “resolve the tensions of individuals in an increasingly urban, consumer-driven and anonymous mass society” (Wright 10). In the first episode, “Superman saves a falsely accused prisoner from a lynch mob, produces evidence that frees an innocent woman on a death row, and defends a woman about to be beaten by her husband” (11). In other words, he fights the power of brainless masses, undermines the authority of the legal system, and intercepts an accepted practice of patriarchal dominance. The keywords and themes that would later become definitive for the superhero genre were already present in this first issue: lost parents; ‘the man-god’; justice; the normal and the super-powered; secret identity; politics; and science as magic (Reynolds 12-16).

Compared with the average sales of comics which were between 200,000 and 400,000 copies per issue, *Action Comics*, each featuring one story with Superman, sold 900,000 per month. Superman was all over the place: the bimonthly issue of *Superman*, dedicated to him only, sold around 1,300,000 copies. He appeared in comic strips, on radio, featured in cartoons, and, for the first time in history, inspired a diverse range of merchandise from toys to sliced bread (Wright 13). He was the first character in the history of comics to establish such an enormous fandom and transcend from the pages of *Action Comics* to become a cultural commodity, paving way for the waves of superhero superstars to come, spawning a new era of geek culture.

In the following years, many publishers and artists imitated Superman and his adventures, hoping for quick and easy financial success. However, it was not until the advent of DC's artist Bob Kane that a new character entered the arena. Out of a combination of pulp heroes like the Shadow, and both like Hollywood adventure films and dark silent pictures, Batman was born.² Unlike Superman, Batman is entirely human, using his outstanding intellect, Holmesian detective skills and advanced level martial arts against crime. Millionaire and ladies' man in real life, he is the exact opposite of the humble reporter Clark Kent. In addition, his vigilante motivations are significantly different. Having witnessed the brutal murder of his parents, Bruce Wayne spent his life training and learning in order to find and take revenge on the murderer – until that day comes, he hunts criminals in his fearsome bat costume to make the world a better place. As for the visual style of the initial issues, they take on the atmosphere of the early horror films of Hollywood, using expressionist angles and ghastly, exaggerated shadows typical of the film noir style, creating a claustrophobic world where crime and corruption are so deeply rooted that it takes a

² For an elaborate analysis of what influenced Bob Kane to create Batman, see Brooker (2000).

seemingly self-important model citizen disguised as a vigilante to achieve any success in capturing criminals. If the style and the narrative were not lurid enough, Batman has the most popular and equally feared nemeses in the history of comics: Two-Face, the ex-District Attorney turned revengeful maniac, Catwoman and the Penguin, products of the rotten city, or, the most famous of them all, Joker, the psychopathic criminal mastermind. The grim stories and bloody scenes, however, soon gave way to more humour and merriment after the introduction of Batman's juvenile sidekick, Robin the Boy Wonder, with whom younger readers identified more easily.

In the comics industry, imitation was not only flattering, but was the generally accepted *modus operandi*. The market was flooded with brightly coloured superheroes fighting evil forces and petty criminals. The first (and since then, only) serious challenger of DC's reign was Martin Goodman's Marvel Comics, started in 1939, who appointed his nephew, Stanley Lieberman, as editor, who worked under the pseudonym of Stan Lee. Their first characters included the Human Torch (not related to the one who founded the Fantastic Four) and the Sub-Mariner, the first hero to openly detest the human race, illustrating that despite generic conventions, there is room for individual personal variety. Many notable characters were born during these competitive years, including Will Eisner's *The Spirit*, an "unusually sophisticated" (19) noir comic, Flash, "the fastest man alive", and the Green Lantern (his ring as a source of power). But it was not only until 1941 that another game-changing hero was created.

Wonder Woman, the first female superhero, was not so much of a female rights crusader as many see her. Labelling her as a symbol of feminism would be problematic as, although the adventures she had could have offered a model for the readership of ambitious and tenacious girls, there was plenty of subordination and sadomasochism: she is often captured and humiliated by her – usually female – opponents, narratives often feature

masters and slaves or men dominated by women. It is her chief weapon that betrays her the most, for what could be more symbolically loaded with fetish than a magic lasso constraining her enemies?

The stories more often than not reacted to current socio-political issues: a central theme was Roosevelt's New Deal, heroes acting as the promoters of its values and ideology. Corrupt corporations, low-level political battles for local power, shady business dealings and their consequences on the life of the average citizen were recurring themes and settings for the adventures, where superheroes were the executors of the common good, that is, promoters for the federal government. Green Lantern, for instance, would often hurry to the rescue of victims of malicious corporations and encourage the community to take matters into their own hands as corrupt lawyers would not help because they fear for their own situation. However, as these mob-run corporations usually countered resistance with aggression, the Green Lantern would be there to fight off the thugs who were sent to silence the masses, "demonstrating that legal protection works best when backed by a healthy dose of righteous violence" (23). These stories echoed the fears of the average citizen, but they were not likely to question the honesty of the federal government and its leaders, and only gave place to criticism on the level of local politics, especially in urban contexts. However, as many authors and artists of these comic books grew up in places where crime played a significant role (New York City, for example), they became acquainted with how local gangs ran districts and how organized crime dictated everyday life, and they were able to voice their concerns related to the promoted New Deal values in a more critical manner through their art. As the writers had first-hand experiences of how organised crime infiltrated unions, they used the stories that circulated widely to further emphasise their point that workers needed to find their own means of survival other than those that the government or the unions offered, still "champion[ing] the cause of the common man" (26).

Post-depression US was a very fertile soil for comics to find audiences amongst the young generations who were developing a new consciousness of their own, favouring personal independence over supervision and conservative values. The comics industry, realising this, designed their products specifically for adolescent audiences, creating a new form of entertainment.

3.2.2 The Silver Age, Continuity and the Problem of Continuity

The social climate had, however, had changed by the 1950s. With readership declining and the Comic Code technically castrating comic books, publishers had to re-imagine their strategies. DC at that time had only three heroes: Superman, Batman and Wonder Woman. They had chosen to reinvent the Flash (1956), launching an avalanche of superhero-revivals. The Green Lantern was recast (1959), and then came the advent of an entirely new character format: the superhero team premièred with the Justice League of America (1960). Marvel Comics, at that time known for the legendary triumvirate of Stan Lee, Jack Kirby and Steve Ditko, did not remain idle either: *The Fantastic Four* entered the market in 1961 as Marvel's very own superhero assembly, followed by *Spider-Man* (1963), the *X-Men* (1964), *The Mighty Thor*, adapting features of Nordic mythology, and *The Incredible Hulk*, invoking the horror genre. Through the 1960s and 1970s it was Marvel who managed to win over the teenage and college audiences with placing its conflicted human heroes in darker worlds, writing more relatable narratives around them. As opposed to the Golden Age's god-like heroes, these characters got their powers through scientific accidents and laboratory explosions, simply through the thoroughly mundane experience of being in the wrong place at the wrong time. Cosmic Rays mutated the Fantastic Four, Spider-Man got bitten by a radioactive spider, The X-Men were an evolutionary milestone caused by the increased

radiation in the atmosphere. We can see how the newly-born faith in scientific advancement is mirrored through these origin stories. Comic fans found this new style captivating. The characters became more interesting, more complex: they had anger management problems, insecurities, or had to fight battles not only against supervillains or corrupt corporations, but addiction and self-destruction, too. Iron Man, for instance, had an entire story arc dedicated to his alcoholism.³ As Bainbridge writes on Spider-Man and melodrama:

many if not all characters follow Peter Parker's lead of having a problem, some difficulty dealing with their powers, and villains who are often more politically and/or physically and/or financially powerful than them.
(Bainbridge 69)

What also contributed to Marvel's huge success was the elaborate marketing campaign conducted by editor Stan Lee. He was the one to realise that having a permanent fandom would become a steady market and tried everything in his power to establish a closer connection between his brand and its consumers. He addressed audiences on the front page, responded to fan requests by featuring desired characters more often, or incorporating plot-propositions; he sometimes even appeared in an actual story and interacted with the characters. During his editorship Marvel scored numerous wins at the Alley Awards (a professional comic-book art award), after which Lee put even more effort into populating the comic books. He established the Merry Marvel Marching Society, the first official fan club for readers, which was stormed by membership applications soon after its foundation. "Bullpen Bulletins" are also his invention, a teaser page in every comic book with some

³ Aptly titled "Demon in the Bottle".

information on the next issues of Marvel comic books, behind-the-scenes featuring writers and artists, and eventually his own column, “Stan’s Soapbox,” where he would speak to his readers directly (Duncan & Smith 179-182). Marvel managed to create the on-screen equivalent of the Bulletins, keeping the initiated fans glued to their seats in cinemas until the end of the credits, where a short snippet is shown, teasing forthcoming products of the Marvel Cinematic Universe, or dropping an Easter Egg. He became the first true comic celebrity, a status he holds even today, causing millions of fans go haywire anytime he cameos in a Marvel-related product.⁴

Over fifty years of storytelling, one should not be surprised to see that quite a number of characters and storylines piled up. Featuring the same heroes and worlds for decades, navigated by different writers and artists with various political and cultural input working on them, had inevitable consequences. Although heroes are still heroes despite the changes in production, their political stance and the values they represent are being influenced by the ever-changing creators, inducing a kind of mythological state.⁵

Retaining continuity became gradually more and more difficult for numerous reasons. On the one hand, as stated already, with each change of writer and/or artist, a hero would be refashioned, origins retold, personality traits and costumes altered, resulting in multiple versions of the same character or world. Some heroes, like Captain America, would be withdrawn for marketing reasons and then reappear in a team-up, his disappearance fashionably explained as being frozen in a block of ice somewhere north, where he spent the

⁴ “The Marvel Comics Godfather has appeared in almost every Marvel adaptation since the 1980’s, sporting a brief cameo that makes about a quarter of every movie theater squeal with geek-affirming glee.” For full list of cameos see “Supercut of Every Stan Lee Cameo”

⁵ For more on continuity, mythology and superheroes, with particular focus on Thor, Superman, Batman and the Avengers see Reynolds 26-83.

years since the end of the war to be thawed by the Avengers in 1964.⁶ DC Comics also got tangled up in discrepancies following the Silver Age reboots of characters such as the Flash, coming forth with a cutting-edge solution: Earth-One and Earth-Two, populated with the Golden Age and Silver Age versions of the respective heroes. As one may have expected, the chaotic multiverses could hardly be sustained for a long time, eventuating the infamous twelve-issue series, *Crisis on Infinite Earths*, effectively “reconstruct[ing] their continuity and wip[ing] away some of the highly constricting backgrounds and characterizations that had emerged over nearly 50 years of publishing” (Reynolds 38).

3.2.3 “Revisionary Superhero Narrative”

Frank Miller’s *The Dark Knight Returns* and Alan Moore’s *Watchmen* are the two most often mentioned works when it comes to identifying the dawn of the third era of superhero comics that goes by a variety of names: Bronze Age, deconstructionist period, Era of Ambition, British Invasion, and more. But just like every other attempt to draw a line, this one has been proven problematic and been debated ever since.

Geoff Klock approaches the question from a literary standpoint in his book *How to Read Superhero Comics and Why*, by reading comic books as literary texts. Drawing on Harold Bloom’s “anxiety of influence” theory of poetics, Klock coins the term “revisionary superhero narrative,” a “birth of self-consciousness in the superhero narrative” (Klock 3). He categorises both Miller’s take on *Batman* and Moore’s *Watchmen* as products of the late-Silver Age and not as the spear-heads of a postmodern or deconstructionist trend (both of

⁶ From early on, publishers featured team-ups of popular characters, giving fans plenty of Easter Eggs and cameos to look forward to: The Justice League of America and the Avengers (DC and Marvel respectively) are the two most famous such collaborations of heroes united for the great cause. These intertextual relations evolved into what is referred to as the *Marvel Universe* and the *DC Universe*.

which labels he discards), and lists *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen*, among others, as a product of a second phase of the revisionary narrative. According to him, the superhero narratives to come are overshadowed by the “influence and burden” of the masterpieces of Miller and Moore (3). In the following we shall look at a few points of Klock’s analyses, as they serve as good examples of the potential in the academic scrutiny of comics.

3.2.3.1 *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns*

Revisionary literature is defined as “a re-aiming or a re-estimating. [...] [T]he revisionist strives to *see* again, so as to *esteem* and *estimate* differently, so as to *aim* ‘correctively’” (Bloom; qtd in Klock 28). Klock underscores Miller’s ability to address numerous conflicted territories of the genre as well as the character, creating a piece of sequential art that will be inescapable when talking about the medium for decades to come.

One of the debated issues Miller tackles is the implied homoeroticism in *Batman* comics. By casting a girl as Robin, the homoerotic nature of the relationship between Batman and his sidekick is underplayed; as if in response to the critical campaign led by Fredric Wertham, who described Bruce Wayne and Dick Grayson’s life in Wayne Manor as “[t]he wish dream of two homosexuals living together” (Wertham; qtd in Klock 32). There is, however, an undeniable presence of the homoerotic in the Batman universe, which Miller transfers to the relationship between Batman and his most famous villain, the Joker. At the beginning of *TDKR*, the Joker is tucked away safely in Arkham Asylum – which itself has undergone some changes and appears here as a mental health facility rather than a Gothic prison – undergoing medical treatment and showing no sign of his former self. However, when he learns of the return of the Batman in the common room, his face slowly changes, putting on the legendary smile panel to panel, uttering the words

“Bb...bbbat...Batman...Darling” (TDKR 41), a name by which he will continue to address Batman throughout.

We see that it is not only the Joker who has dubious thoughts. As the battle sequence begins, we read the Batman’s interior monologue, which superficially is about taking down a nemesis, but implicitly it just might suggest an entirely different reading:

Can you see it, Joker? Feels to me...like it’s written all over my face. I’ve lain awake nights...planning it...picturing it...endless nights...considering every possible method...treasuring each imaginary moment...from the beginning, I knew...that there’s nothing wrong with you...that I can’t fix...with my hands...
(TDKR 142)

Here, Miller acknowledges and, at the same time, avoids the convention that the homoerotic content is necessarily present in a superhero narrative through the side-kick archetype. Furthermore, by shifting it from the side-kick, he draws attention to its presence in the antagonistic relationship between hero and villain, which, in turn, underscores the parallel with the dual personae of most of the Batman-villains and Batman himself. The idea that these villains are representative of Batman’s different mental distortions (a popular reading by fans and academics equally) echoes here, underpinned further as seen on the last panels of the fight when Joker’s speech bubbles bear the same stylistic features as those of Batman (38).

Miller addresses another issue that comes up quite often when discussing superhero comics: their relationship to the political, with a particular focus on the fascist ideologies implied. As Klock also highlights, there are three generic conventions of superhero comic books relevant to this discussion. First, superheroes usually use violence and intimidation

against criminals. Second, superheroes are hooded or masked vigilantes themselves, so there is little difference between criminal and crime fighter - although this statement is more accurate when talking about DC heroes. And third, in the typical superhero narrative, the hero comes forth only to battle an imminent threat and restore balance to society. *TDKR* uses these conventions, especially the first two, to comment on questions such as whether Batman is a hero or a villain, or whether using physical force and disregarding human lives is the right strategy to fight for one's beliefs (39-41). But Miller takes it even further. The conflict between Superman, who at present is 'employed' by Reagan's government and is sent to Gotham City to tame the rebellious Batman, could be read as a battle of ideologies, as well as addressing the problem of continuity in superhero narrative universes. Are these heroes the supporters of, or protesters against the reigning hegemony? Are the same ideologies being communicated through heroes during the Second World War and the Cold War? How are the readers supposed to make sense of a character with such a rich history? Miller's apparent aim is to synthesise almost fifty years of various narratives and chaotic character development through openly addressing the very discrepancies that overtly or covertly arose.

3.2.3.2 *The Killing Joke, Watchmen and The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen*

Let us stay in the Batman-lore for a little longer as we take a brief look into Alan Moore's very own contribution to the Batman-universe, for it conveys a similarly self-conscious and self-reflexive attitude prevalent in the writer's oeuvre. *Batman: The Killing Joke* (1988) excavates the complicated relationship between Batman and his nemesis, the Joker. Through the juxtaposition of two men who both had to process an early and extremely traumatic experience (Bruce Wayne losing his parents and the Joker falling into the chemical

tank that transformed his appearance) entirely differently, *The Killing Joke* also relates to the anxiety of tradition, over-constructedness and mediality.

This points to the key difference between the two authors: Miller's organization and control of comic book history in his narratives involves metaphors of violence and fascism; Moore's metaphors of organization [...] are more often textual and literary (Klock 57).

While Miller is concentrating on the political and the social, and at the same time attempts to reinstate continuity in comic book history, Moore seems more driven to explore the textual and genre-specific through self-reflexive moments and allegories. The monologue below is from the scene when the Joker shoots Barbara Gordon, Commissioner Gordon's daughter, a librarian, also known as Batgirl, in the spine.

It's a psychological complaint, common amongst ex-librarians. You see, she thinks she's a coffee table edition. Mind you I can't say much for the volumes condition. I mean, there's a hole in the jacket and the spine appears to be damaged. Frankly, she won't be walking off the shelves in that state of repair. In fact, the idea of her walking anywhere seems increasingly remote. But then that's always a problem with softbacks. God, these literary discussions are dry. (*The Killing Joke* 14)

The Joker in many instances implies not only a self-awareness that is almost metaleptical, but also reflects on the genre, the medium, and in some cases, the industry even.⁷ This experimentation with self-reflexivity continues to play an important role in Moore's many other works. In *Watchmen* Moore presents the reader with a unique type of realism, questioning the very necessity of superheroes via highlighting the problems which apparently have been mostly dismissed through the history of superhero comics. The extension of this scope to the entirety of the genre and not just one character's storyline (as Miller did) had a devastating effect: "to defeat comic book history with superheroes is to take your place at the head of the tradition" (Klock 64).⁸ *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen* is included in Klock's "Phase Two" of the revisionary narrative, due to its playful reinterpretation of superhero teams using 19th-century English literary characters. A kind of homage to the origins of the superhero, *TLEG* also taunts the high culture - low culture juxtaposition through calling our attention to the fact that what was once popular culture now constitutes literary canon; this aspect will be discussed later (100-102).

3.2.4 Nostalgia & The Problem with Multiverses

One more tendency in the history of comic books needs mentioning before moving on to our theoretical framework, one that became typical towards the millennium, and as such informed *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen*, the other graphic narrative under scrutiny here.

⁷ For detailed analysis see Klock 52-62.

⁸ For full analysis see Klock 62-76.

With more than 10,000 shops, new publishers entering the business, and an increased financial interest in investing in original copies of comic books, the comic book industry had a peak in the early 1990s. New superhero-superstars arose: Wolverine, a metal-clawed fierce mutant joined the X-Men cast, followed by the Punisher, Spider-Man villain turned vigilante, both of whom became incredibly popular amongst readers. Two cult titles also started in the early 1990s: Dark Horse Comics, an independent publisher with a more creator-centred policy, released Frank Miller's popular title *Sin City* (1991) and Mike Mignola's legendary *Hellboy* (1993). However, the more copies of comic books were published and sold, the less their worth was in the eyes of the collectors, despite publishers' attempts to make the publications more attractive by holographic covers, special editions, or rare copies enclosed in polybags to seem more unique. As speculators and distributors withdrew upon realising the worsening conditions and readership statistics also began to decline, publishers were left with huge overstocks and fierce competition for the remnants of profit. A large number of shops had to close: around 4,000 survived out of the initial 10,000. Even the big sharks such as Marvel went bankrupt due to poorly managed marketing investments in 1996. Although sales increased in the following years, the industry is yet to come near its heyday once again (Duncan & Smith 71-77).

The above mentioned *Crisis* not only eradicated parallel narratives and discrepant storylines, but also contributed to the refashioning of many characters. Superman was given a new title in 1986, *The Man of Steel* by yet another British-American author adored by many, John Byrne, a step followed by the refashioning of numerous other Golden Age heroes. A new trend arose by the mid-nineties: nostalgia. Several "Year One" titles were released, contemplating on the origins of the most popular superheroes. This strategy of simplifying continuities was advantageous regarding accessibility and was cherished by creators as well. Editors promoted this trend, as can be seen, for instance, with Marvel, who

reset the timer of its most popular superheroes in 2000 and launched the “Ultimate” line, making series like the *Ultimate X-Men* or the *Ultimate Spider-Man* the most popular and profit-earning comic books of the 2000s (77-79). The success of comic book characters has always been inextricably linked to their reflection of topical issues and themes of the time - by bringing them into the 20th and 21st century, the artists made them relevant once more, and modern audiences could understand their worth. The numerous reset titles would eventually become multiverses, and we have seen how a highly complex narrative multiverse fares in the comic book industry: poorly.

Apparently the only way to escape is a complete annihilation of narratives, as the recent *Secret Wars* storyline by Marvel shows. Marvel seems to have caught up with DC in terms of tangled continuity, and the maintenance of parallel “Ultimate”, “2000”, and “New” timelines, just to mention a few, have become challenging. Incorporating the events of the latest and most successful *Avengers* and *New Avengers* issues, *Secret Wars* was launched in May 2015. A crossover of all of Marvel’s leading characters (Captain Marvel, Doctor Doom, Fantastic Four, Guardians of the Galaxy, Hulk, Spider-Man, Thor, and the X-Men, amongst others), *Secret Wars* is set out to dispose of the majority of parallel universes and overcomplicated story arcs, much like DC’s *Crisis on Infinite Earths* did in the 1980s. This could be a chance for Marvel to repair its declining readership statistics, or an intent to intertwine the events of the other most profitable enterprise of the company, the Marvel Cinematic Universe. Either way, superheroes seem to be the most marketable commodity nowadays in all media, let it be comic book, television or cinema, and therefore I believe they are worth keeping an eye on.

4. Theoretical Concepts

4.1. How to Read Comics? Scott McCloud & The Formalist Turn

A proper understanding of the ways the two comic books selected, *Watchmen* and *The League*, establish and re-evaluate their connections to their historical and medial traditions requires not only a socio-historical background check, but a closer look at the nuances of form and structure, and the traditional ways certain genres tell stories. Therefore, it is best to collect the terms used and processes identified when analysing graphic storytelling on a general scale so that the particularities of Moore's works could become more apparent.

A comic book on comics featuring McCloud himself as he explains vocabulary, form, style, time, space, and meaning-making in comics and cartoons, *Understanding Comics* has become a starter's guide to graphic storytelling and is used widely by scholars and teachers equally. The concept most often cited from this volume is that of *closure*, however, it is best to recapitulate his main arguments in order to broaden our knowledge in what comics are, and how they function.

McCloud introduces the word *icon*, which he prefers to *symbol*, to refer to “any image used to represent a person, place, thing, or idea” (McCloud 27).⁹ Having identified the different categories of icons (such as symbols for the ideological content, practical icons for language or science), he singles out *pictures*: icons that resemble their originals. Types of pictorial icons are determined by their level of resemblance – photographs, obviously, are

⁹ Although any discussion in semiotics involving the words icon, index, and symbol bring Peirce to mind, McCloud's theory, as could be seen, deviates to a certain extent, although the emphasis placed on the interpretant is stressed similarly. Peirce “define[s] a sign as anything which is so determined by something else, called its Object, and so determines an effect upon a person, which effect [he] calls its interpretant, that the latter is thereby mediately determined by the former” (EP2 478).

highly realistic, whereas cartoons are more abstract. McCloud argues that the reason behind our unconditional investment in cartoons is their nature of “amplification through simplification:” by simplifying an image, our focus is directed towards the essential, which we can amend the way we like while keeping the universal basics (such as two dots and a line in a circle standing for a human face) in mind. Our fascination with cartoons he traces back to the age when reading/watching them was our primary occupation: childhood. As McCloud explains, this initial interest does not fade easily: “[t]he cartoon is a vacuum into which our identity and awareness are pulled...an empty shell that we inhabit which enables us to travel in another realm. We don’t just observe the cartoon, we become it! [sic]” (24-36). Consequently, the level of abstraction determines reception and identification of cartoons and comics to a great extent.

Contrasting the real and the iconic, McCloud elaborates on the binary oppositions they are associated with: complex vs. simple, realistic vs. iconic, objective vs. subjective and specific vs. universal, where words are the “ultimate abstraction.” Words and pictures are thus hardly different; both are icons, constituting what one could call “the language of comics”. However, as he points out, they need to be differentiated according to their perception. Understanding the message of a picture requires no special knowledge, whereas writing we cannot make sense of if we do not know the alphabet or speak the language. In comics, this whole system is turned upside down: “[w]hen pictures are most abstracted from ‘reality’, they require greater levels of perception, more like words. When words are bolder, more direct, they require lower levels of perception and are received faster, more like pictures” (47-49). We can see how the unified language of comics evolves and formulates

in the chart he draws, which, though quite intriguing, will have to be left out from this chapter.¹⁰

McCloud ventures to introduce a new concept which since then has become part of the academic lingo of comics: *closure* is “[the] phenomenon of observing the part but perceiving the whole [...] mentally completing that which is incomplete based on past experience” (63). In comics, closure takes place in the *gutter*, that is, in the space between two panels. It is upon the reader to connect the images in the two panels, to create the temporal and spatial dimension of the story using the “vocabulary” (iconography) and the “grammar” (closure), which makes comics a participatory medium (60-69).¹¹ Consequently, instances of ‘meta-’ in comics can be a whole new experience compared with those in literature or film, the two media comics are often contrasted with, as audience involvement is exceptionally central, enhancing the meta-effect. During closure (as McCloud explains through an example of a kitchen sequence with four panels: a boiling pot, someone chopping vegetables, a woman with a fridge in the background and the timer going off), not only do we complement the “limbo” between two panels, we also engage in reading in a more enhanced way. Closure is the space where none of our senses are required; and at the same time, where we use all our senses: we hear the chopping sound, we smell the stew in the pot, taste it in our mouths. In McCloud’s argument, closure is the very unique phenomenon singling out comics from the realm of other representational media (89-93).

Proceeding to time in comics, McCloud makes some intriguing observations. Through his own examples he demonstrates how the organizing force behind temporality in a panel is not necessarily the panel-format itself, but the words in it, as they represent

¹⁰ For a detailed stylistic chart, see McCloud 52-53.

¹¹ On types of closure, see McCloud 70-77.

something that can only exist in time: sound. (Obviously, silent panels are an exception.) Comics, much like photography, defy the assumption that a single image represents a single moment in time. It takes time for the reader to go through a scene, just like in real life. Nevertheless, the role of the *panel*, or *frame*, is central here, as panels contain the amount of time in question. They could be seen as icons themselves, but instead of representing something concrete like words, or pliable like pictures, panels “act as a sort of general indicator that time and space is being divided” (99). When we read comics, we perceive time spatially, endowing panels to be agents of the temporal dimension, and as such, allowing both artist and reader to manipulate time – the former via panel design, the latter via order of reading. Naturally, most often there is a preferable reading order to panels, which is usually left-to-right, up-to-down, but this order can be manipulated, playing tricks on the readers, enlarging the key importance of reader participation in this medium (94-107). Comics are capable of conveying information and emotions to all of our senses through icons and symbols, which require qualified readers to translate and understand. As McCloud puts it, “[i]n the end, what you GET is what you GIVE” (137).

4.2. Generic Conventions

Now that we have understood how comics work and what details require our particular attention in a formalist approach to comics, we shall move on to genre and generic conventions, the third agent Moore mocks in his works. Two genres need mentioning before we start reading *Watchmen* and *TLEG*, as both comics under scrutiny here show extreme awareness of these generic conventions: the Gothic/Horror genres and the Superhero genre. *Watchmen* is a self-conscious superhero comic book with a horror comic mise-en-abyme,

while *TLEG* is a 19th century superhero comic engaging with the Gothic tradition and Victorian juvenile fiction.¹²

4.2.1 *The Horror Genre*

Horror stories promise “the anticipation of terror, the mixture of fear and exhilaration as events unfold, the opportunity to confront the unpredictable and dangerous, the promise of relative safety [...], and the feeling of relief and regained control when it’s over [sic]” (Fahy 1-2). As such, horror raises many questions to which we seek answers. Is there any meaning to suffering? Are we living in a just world? Is there accountability? The central themes of the horror genre are violence, suffering, and morality, with a hint of humour to lighten the mood (2).

Horror, apart from its habit to evoke extreme physical reactions in its reader/viewer, connects to our psyche as well: even the emptiest, flattest slasher bears a strong ideological and moral content of the meaning(lessness) of violence and hierarchies of power. Horror is particularly interesting in its tendency to “inform and enlighten our vision of the world by reminding us of our inner moral frailty and by forcing us to take seriously the moral reality of evil” (Tallon 36). These core characteristics of the Horror genre can be used to define Horror comics as well.

¹² Although there is much confusion around the terms Horror and Gothic, this thesis does not set out to settle this argument. Horror here is understood as a genre of comics, motion picture and pulp literature that derives from Gothic literature. Hence, when discussing *TLEG*, I will refer to the Gothic, as it draws from the literary genre; and use Horror when speaking of *Watchmen*, which builds on the Horror comics of the 1940s. On an imaginary scale, Edgar Allan Poe stands on the Gothic end and H.P. Lovecraft (of whom Alan Moore is a huge fan) on the Horror end.

Horror comics rose to fame with the help of Entertaining Comics, successfully navigated by editor Bill Gaines. Many series launched in the 1950s immediately won the hearts of huge audiences, such as *The Crypt of Terror* (the name later changed to the infamous *Tales from the Crypt*), *Vault of Horror* and *Haunt of Fear*, which attracted not only readers, but well-known writers too.¹³ The Comics Code, however, castrated the entire genre. Not only were all the defining features outlawed (monsters, vampires, gore, violence, etc.), but the use of the words “horror” and “terror” was forbidden. A few decades later, when the Code’s power weakened in the 1970s, publishers could come forth with new titles featuring otherworldly creatures, but the artists were instructed to be gentle, avoid graphic violence and disturbing images, and introduce more sympathetic monsters as protagonists. In 1971, DC Comics introduced *The Swamp Thing*, a title that was taken over by Alan Moore in 1984. He preferred a distinctly Gothic atmosphere to physical violence, and added a more psychological dimension to Horror comics by spotlighting the individuals and building a strong ambience while relinquishing the customary bloodshed, which is regarded by many as a more ‘intellectual take’ on the genre. Moreover, Horror comics benefited from the emergence of comic book stores as this way publishers were not dependant on newsstand distribution anymore, thus did not have to follow the Code, which helped the genre get back to its roots (Duncan & Smith 212).

4.2.2 The Superhero Genre

¹³ Ray Bradbury, for instance, gave permission to EC to adapt some of his works.

Peter Coogan's fundamental essay on the genre enumerates the conventions which are still present, therefore I believe it is best to rely on his observations, amended by Duncan & Smith's commentary.

Coogan singles out three central aspects of what defines a hero: mission, powers, and identity. The mission is usually saving the world and helping mankind; thus any hero who is not running immediately to the rescue is not a hero. Such a mission is necessary, otherwise the hero would be hardly more than an extremely helpful "individual in a crisis" (Coogan 77). A sub-category of the hero is the anti-hero, like Marvel's Wolverine or Deadpool, who usually lacks one hero-quality and is constantly on the verge of helping or hurting, but who eventually does the right thing most of the time. Regarding powers, they could be either superpowers or extraordinary abilities. Batman might not be able to shoot laser arrows or transform into an animal, but he is very good at close quarters combat, he is the world's best detective, and he has millions to spend on gadgets and vehicles (D & S 227).

Identity, the third constituent, "consists of the codename and the costume, with the secret identity being a customary counterpart to the codename" (Coogan 78). Generally, the superhero name relates to the hero's powers (Flash), attitude (Daredevil), or role (Captain America) (D & S 227-228). On the other hand, costumes are the materialization of the superhero identity and could be understood through McCloud's "amplification through simplification".

The concept of supervillains was not an initial trait. The first character to rise to such a position was Lex Luthor, Superman's arch nemesis, but it was Batman and the wonderfully wicked cast of Gotham City that defined the archetype. Poison Ivy, Riddler, Catwoman, Penguin, Scarecrow, Two-Face, Joker: esteemed members of probably the most well-known "rogues gallery" of comics. What makes a supervillain more than a regular villain is his inclination to plan and orchestrate massive plots against a hero, an individual or group of

individuals or the population. Moreover, they play the role of a catalyst for the conservative superheroes, who, as already mentioned, are generally satisfied with society and emerge mostly in reaction to danger or threat (D & S 228-230).

As a fully developed genre, superhero comics have numerous recurrent themes and motifs that shape the narrative, characterisation, and other features. The main characters are usually underdogs of society (e.g. Bruce Wayne is an outsider, Peter Parker is an emotionally troubled teenager, Matt Murdock is physically disabled), facing bad odds or superior enemies, and are defeated temporarily only to rise even more heroically. Their real superpower, one could say, is perseverance. This is why it is of little difference whether the hero is, in fact, in possession of superhuman abilities (Superman, X-Men) or merely an individual in an extremely good physical and/or mental condition (Batman, Daredevil, Luke Cage).

“With great power there must also come...great responsibility [sic]”, observes Peter Parker on the last page of the first Spider-Man comic, pointing at the immanent dilemma of the superhero: how far can one go? Is it mild vigilantism or extreme fascism to force one’s thought-to-be-right moral codes on villains and citizens equally? These questions have inspired many creators especially during the post-Silver Age, exploring the vast dimensions of morality and heroes in both directions. Is it fascism to help the citizens of Metropolis/Gotham City/Hell’s Kitchen by teaching the criminally deviant a lesson or two? Or: why did a hero with as massive a power as Superman ignore humanity’s grave problems, like famine or depleting resources? *Watchmen*’s Ozymandias blows up New York City to end the Cold War, in the name of humanity he says. Sacrificing millions ends the arms race, the nuclear threat is eliminated. But what right does he have? And who decides whether it was worth it?

Returning to patterns, Duncan & Smith identify recurrent narrative schemes in superhero comics. They single out the *origin story* as the most common one, due to the comic book conquest of the film industry. An average origin story “involves a transformative experience that is often both physical and emotional in nature” (232). The typical structure of the origin story can be explained through the concept of the monomyths of Western hero culture: separation – initiation – return. This pattern of “defeating menace and restoring order” (232) has been amended since the Silver Age, as Nat Gertler observed. He differentiates between four generations: the first heroes of the Golden Age fought off crime for the good of the community; the Marvel heroes of the 1960s sought answers to the question Why?; the darker narratives of the 1980s and after were entertaining the thoughts of possible outcomes of such endeavours; and finally, the ‘lost generation’ of contemporary superheroes who battle villains with close to no regard for the community and “collateral damage” (Gertler; qtd in 232-233). Further noted is that not every theorist agrees that there is such a thing as narrative pattern, likening superhero comics to soap operas or emphasising hero-ness over storylines. Another possible narrative pattern identified is the death of the hero/villain, which is usually only temporary: a secret twin, an alter-ego from a parallel universe, a robot/clone/artificial being, etc., always allowing the legendary villains to return and haunt our heroes. Similar tendencies are true for the superhero, with occasional exceptions (the most dramatic was the above mentioned *Crisis On Infinite Earths*).

4.3. Wolf’s Metareference

4.3.1 Redefining the Concept

Metareference, the concept recently redefined by Werner Wolf, elicits the process of metaisation, that is, “the movement from the first cognitive or communicative level to a

higher one on which the first-level thoughts and utterances, and above all means and media for such utterances, self-reflexively become objects of reflection and communication in their own right” (Wolf 3). During our analysis of *Watchmen* and *TLEG*, we will concentrate on this aspect, as it might lead us closer to understanding comics, especially of the extensively self-referential type.

As Wolf’s overview of the current state of meta-themed research shows, the focus of meta-research was initially on individual media, mostly literary studies, which extensively prescribed the methodology and the tools of research and which maintains its influence even now. Wolf’s suggestion for overcoming this limitation is the use of the term “metareference”, which loosens the boundaries of individual media and allows for a transmedial approach. Consequently, the methodology and toolkit for analysing such media was adapted to the new scope, which lead to a change in perspective, resulting in what is referred to as the metareferential turn.¹⁴ Numerous scholars have taken the opportunity to test this new theory, as the recent collections of essays published demonstrate.¹⁵

In his ground-breaking study “Metareferences across Media: The Concept, its Transmedial potentials and Problems, Main Forms and Functions” Wolf sets out to redefine metareference as it is known, starting by redefining the basic concepts related to his theory: medium, intermediality and transmediality. As these are taken from other fields of social sciences, a translatable definition needs to be set up in order to secure the applicability throughout the disciplines. Intermediality, he begins, can be any kind of transgression of boundaries, comprising “both intra- and extra-compositional relations between different media” (13). These media need to be understood as “conventionally and culturally distinct

¹⁴ See Wolf 2011.

¹⁵ Wolf 2009.

means of communication, specified not only by particular technical or institutional channels, [...] but primarily by the use of one or more semiotic systems in the public transmission of content that includes, but is not restricted to, referential ‘messages’” (13-14).

Having described the phenomenon in terms of mediality, its basis, Wolf attempts to establish a general definition of metareference. First, the word itself is built up of two terms: the logical nature indicated by ‘meta-‘ (the juxtaposition of object-level and meta-level), while ‘-reference’ highlights the underlying semiotic nature while preventing the restriction of the term’s applicability to one medium and allowing the inclusion of non-representational and non-textual media as well, such as music. Meta-reference, as opposed to hetero-reference (in the linguistic sense of signs referring to elements outside their own set) and self-reference (that is, an intentional referral to self or other sign or system which shares characteristics), is self-reference with a meta-dimension. Wolf’s example to illustrate his argument is the sentence “This sentence contains five words,” as it shows how it “establishes a logical difference between object-level [...] and meta-level” (22). Furthermore, metareference is not a binary concept; it can be measured by degrees, to be discussed later. There are two further perspectives that need to be taken into consideration, now that the semiotic aspect has been looked at: the communicative and the cognitive.

In media studies terms, metareference in a novel/film/painting/etc. (‘message’) affects more than just its direct environment: the medium (made up of code and channel), the author (sender), the recipient, and the (cultural-historical) context. Augmenting the semiotic approach with a media-centred one helps us understand the transmedial nature of the phenomenon, and also allows us to transcend the boundaries of one medium. The cognitive perspective, on the other hand, concentrates on the importance of the recipient and takes media as layers of sign-systems, where a primary creates a secondary. For instance, literature makes use of well-organized language to establish a secondary (semiotic)

meaning. When reading, we decode these with the help of *frames*: “metareference activates a certain cognitive frame in the recipient’s mind” (27). Drawing on Goffman’s frame theory, Wolf identifies a *secondary macro-frame* responsible for the development of *meta-awareness*: the realisation that whatever is in front of us, it is not real, but “reality processed through a medium” (27).

As the degree of metareferentiality may vary, there are different shades of this meta-awareness. In the pragmatic zone, the secondary frame is latent, used for understanding the text as such, but not detecting what triggers this realization – the medial nature remains “in the back of one’s mind”, allowing immersion. In the metareflexive zone, however, the secondary frame is activated, and the trigger, mediality, “becomes an object of reflection”. In other words “[t]he cognitively most basic effect of metareference [...] is [...] to trigger such metareflection, to render the mediality and representationality implied in the secondary frame [...] an object of more or less active awareness” (29). To further specify, this realisation, as Wolf states, does not necessarily disrupt aesthetic illusion (the condition that is of central importance for my analysis), and this basic function does not stand in the way of other functions, such as humour.

Taking into account all that has been detailed, Wolf’s definition of metareference could be summarised as follows:

[I]t is a special, transmedial form of usually non-accidental self-reference produced by signs or sign configurations which are (felt to be) located on a logically higher level, a “meta-level”, within an artefact or performance; this self-reference can extend from this artefact to the entire system of the media, forms or implies a statement about an object-level, namely on (aspects of) the medium/system referred to. Where metareference is properly understood, an at

least minimal corresponding "meta-awareness" is elicited in the recipient, who thus becomes conscious of both the medial [...] status of the work under discussion and the fact that media-related phenomena are at issue, rather than (hetero-) references to the world outside the media. (31)

This definition eliminates said obstacles, such as media- or genre-dependency, and could be applied to a great number of things: an individual phenomenon, a work, a medium, as well as more pragmatic fields such as meta-science or the theory of mind; or, on the contrary, non-pragmatic ones (like arts).

4.3.2 Typological Map & Degrees of Metareference

Having settled definitions, Wolf establishes an adequate toolkit for analysing artefacts of different media in terms of metareferentiality. First, there is macro-structural mapping, based on Nünning's system, in which there is a differentiation between metanarration as a reflection on narrativity, metafiction, reflecting on fictionality, and metalinguistic comments. These concepts are transgeneric and transmedial, Wolf argues, however, they still need configuration: the formula he proposes is "meta + X", where X is the object of metaisation. Ideally, the combination of these two ideas would be the most applicable: a generalisation, taking into account the individual medium's particularities (32-35). As, in our case, a meta-comic is a work of art which thematises its own mediality, genre, and fictive nature.

According to the scope of reference, we can distinguish between intracompositional/direct and extracompositional/indirect metareference. The former, Wolf defines, operates within the text itself, for instance metalinguistic comments from the narrator, or in paintings, a painter who portrays himself while painting. The latter does not

refer to the work itself, but still stays within the boundaries of the medium. Examples listed are references to other books or comments on the medium. By doing so, the work indirectly refers to itself too, as it belongs to that medium, hence the indirect nature, such as parodies of already existing works (35-37).

As for discernibility, a metareference can be explicit when a metacomment is made by the conventional meaning of the sign, such as using words like “pen,” “reader,” “book,” etc., which addresses medium-related issues, in this case, reading. Implicit metareference, on the other hand, often mocks certain generic or other conventions, for instance when a chapter (a text unit which is agreed to be long, coherent and meaningful) is reduced to one sentence, thus calling attention to the very deviation from said convention which is taking place. In the latter case, recipient-cooperation is crucial. In Aristotelian words, explicit reference is telling, whereas implicit is showing. Nevertheless, as Wolf emphasises, the presence of markers is crucial, otherwise meta-awareness of any degree could not be triggered (37).

In terms of content there are fictio- and fictum metareferences. Fictio is textuality-, or mediality-centred, calling attention to the made-ness, constructedness of the artefact a result of creative work, and is always lurking in every form of metareference. Whereas fictum comes from Latin, and means ‘lie’, this type refers to the actual truth-value of the work, to its inventedness, and suggests that the work is not real/true (38). The last binary opposition Wolf highlights is connected to the content and function of metareference. It can either be critical, like Escher’s witty paintings commenting on, for instance, the truth-value of representation, or non-critical, again when in painting we are presented with the painter’s self-portrait (38-43).

What if the metareferential element is too weak to trigger awareness? In visual media, one could hardly find any elements of vocabulary or register that bear a

metareferential potential in the sense as the ones literature operates with (for example, “dear reader” or “this chapter”), due to which, applying the defined above, only implicit metareference could be detected. However, as Wolf suggests, if we extend the set of signs that provoke explicit metareference awareness from symbolic only to iconic and indexical, we will be able to categorise instances as explicit metareference in non-verbal arts, such as painting, photography, or in our case, an art form that is not strictly verbal, comics. According to the type of such signs or sign systems in operation, and the mode and frequency of occurrence, we can differentiate between certain techniques that help evoke meta-awareness - however, the presence of such indicators does not necessarily build up to a meta phenomenon (43-49). Among these indicators, two in particular will be of vital importance for our analysis, *mise-en-abyme* and intertextuality.

We are facing a *mise-en-abyme* when the work is mirroring its parts or its whole self, presupposing similarity between the two. As it has to happen within the work itself, it will always be intracompositional, however, not necessarily metareferential; it is context-dependent. Its weak potential lies in the fact that it is very difficult to embed such a composition, and “naturalize it”, as Wolf puts it. In addition, it can only be executed “with reference to some rare cases in which only a few factors, in particular generic conventions and an effect of habituation, apply” (60); conditions that are fulfilled in both *Watchmen* and *The League*, as I will argue. Intertextuality and intermedial reference, both strictly extracompositional, constitute yet another problematic case. There are certain factors determining whether the phenomenon at hand can be considered to be meta- or not, such as frequency, salience as a secondary reference, functional dominance, etc. Furthermore, intertextuality qualifies as meta- only if it refers to medium- and fictionality-related content, whereas an intermedial reference can only be considered meta- if it imitates the “alien”

medium, deviating from it (60-63). Again, all these expectations are met in both graphic narratives I intend to analyse, as we shall see.

The guiding assumption of this thesis is that due to the immanently participatory nature of comic books as a medium, they require a more agile reading attitude, which allows for a more flexible approach, not necessarily suspending the disbelief, but incorporating the seemingly alien information into one coherent reading. Moreover, for a certain type of reader, the ‘initiated’ or the ‘connoisseur’, if you like, this campaign to disrupt immersion works to the opposite end, namely that the connoisseur reader will have an even deeper, richer reading experience, much like a treasure hunt. Furthermore, I would like to examine how the choice of a generic framework (alternate history), which builds on our previously acquired knowledge in real and fabricated narratives alike, contributes to an enhanced reading experience.

4.4. Alternate History

Both comic books under discussion are set in an alternative world: a socio-historical setting modified to suit the peculiarities of stories of a superhero-backed Cold War, or comic book adaptations of literary characters preventing the outbreak of a great world war or saving the planet from an alien invasion. As such storytelling practices originate in science-fiction literature, it is best to enumerate a few conventions of the genre.

Andy Duncan in *The Cambridge Companion to Science Fiction* defines alternate history as follows:

Alternate history – or, as grammatical purists call it, ‘alternative history’ – is [...] not a history at all, but a work of fiction in which history as we know it is changed for dramatic and often ironic effect. (Duncan 209)

Stories which make use of an alternate history, as opposed to historical fiction, usually make their point of divergence clear early on to prevent confusion. By altering ‘our timeline’, as referred to in most discussions of the genre, the reader’s interest lies not only in the development of the characters known from our world (if there are any), but also in that of the world which has been changed. Although there are some stories which make use of such an effect for humorous reasons, the majority of such works tends to be grave, portraying dystopias, decayed societies, or could-have-been scenarios. One salient characteristic of the genre is that it makes “the readers feel better about their own timeline, however troubled it may be” (216). Furthermore, alternate history, as observed by Duncan, tends to see only one option for conflict resolution: war. Militarism, “a fixation on war as the instrument of historical change,” is an outstanding characteristic in the majority of the stories (209-219).

The two most popular questions around which alternate histories have been written, as Duncan also points out, are “What if Hitler had won?” and “What if the Confederacy had won?” (212). In literature, famous alternate histories include Philip K. Dick’s *The Man in the High Castle*, entertaining the former scenario; or fan-favourite William Gibson and Bruce Sterling’s *The Difference Engine*, a novel presupposing that Ada Lovelace’s computing machine design had been realised, turning 19th-century London into a steampunk dystopia. Alternate history has been present in other media as well; we can think of the crowd-funded film production, *Iron Sky*, where Nazis flee to the Moon after World War II to build a supermachine and take revenge in 2018; or a plethora of video games which alter the events of famous wars or other moments of our shared cultural-historical memories

(most famous probably is the *Fallout*-series, a role-playing shooter game set in a post-apocalyptic America after World War II, defined by retro-futuristic sentiments and technologies).

Alternate history “considers the individual’s role in making history, and it foregrounds the constructedness and narrativity of history” (Hellekson 454). A work of this genre is likely to feature characters who are agents in events of a grander scale, such as a world war or other apocalyptic scenarios, and labours to question thought-to-be fixed notions such as time or history. Deconstructing the familiar concepts of history and fiction, alternate histories offer an intriguing reading experience; they are the ultimate ground for elaborating on the fundamental question of science fiction as a whole: what if?

The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen is a showcase of a particular sub-genre of alternate history, steampunk. To understand steampunk, one could turn to the genre it is closely related to, cyberpunk. Cyberpunk is a science fiction genre which had its peak in the 1980s, but is still present. “Cyber” refers to its technological nature, whereas “punk” may be attributed to the misfits and outlaws the stories feature. As opposed to grand-scale space operas and stories of alien invasions of other planets in the distant future like the majority of science fiction until the 1980s, cyberpunk stories concentrate on the near future, and take place in tech-noir metropolitan dystopias. Some keywords which might help grasping the essence of the genre: technology, evil corporations, urban spaces, anti-heroes, femmes fatales, cyberspace. Probably the most famous writer, also holding a prophet-like title amongst fans of the genre, is William Gibson, whose novel *Neuromancer*, a classic film noir-tale of an artificial intelligence with a split personality and a misfit who tries to solve all mysteries with the help of a cyborg femme fatale, can be seen as a prototype of the genre. Another prominent example, albeit only partially literary as it is a film based on a short story by Philip K. Dick, is *Blade Runner* (dir. Ridley Scott, 1982).

Steampunk could be regarded as the counterfactual twin brother of cyberpunk: they share some of their generic roots (film noir and detective fiction), but the setting is an altered version of what is known as the Victorian era and, on some occasions, the Wild West, with steaming machines and smoggy cities. Jules Verne and H. G. Wells are often mentioned as forerunners of the genre, as other pulp authors of the mid-20th century, but steampunk gained wider acclaim in the 1990s. Again, turning to keywords to assist us in grasping steampunkness: steam-powered apparatuses, retro-futurism, decadence, wood and copper, corsets, and zeppelins. Steampunk literature exploits the potential in the juxtaposition of history and fiction, and in doing so, invites us to contemplate on the nature of both.¹⁶

¹⁶ Steampunk is also a label applied to a style in art and design, architecture, and fashion, respectively.

5. Alan Moore & Dave Gibbons: *Watchmen*

Watchmen is a superhero comic book per definitionem, however, it is without question an unusual take on the genre. It is a graphic novel with superhero characters who do not actually own any superpowers (except for one member), dressing up in costumes to rescue the common people of society. The focus of the plot is an investigation around the mysterious murder of a group member, the Comedian, conducted incognito by the rogue Rorschach. Through his endeavours to reveal the truth we learn of each character, their relationships to each other, their personal histories, and their forerunners, the Minutemen. The setting is an alternative United States of the 1980s, where superheroes came into being in the 1940s and 1960s (note the correspondence to the dates of the dawn of the Golden Age and the Silver Age) in reaction to the Vietnam War and then the Cold War, at which point Nixon is in his second term of presidency and a potential nuclear threat is hanging in the air. *Watchmen* emits a strong sense of constructedness through primarily its structure. The layout is highly suggestive of orderliness (9-panel grids), and each chapter has a few extra pages that are not in the familiar format of the comic book page: excerpts from books written by characters, medical reports, scrapbook pages, newspaper articles, etc., which enrich the fictional world while juxtaposing the book-as-an-object and the book-as-a-medium. The ways Moore and Co. thematise, criticise and dismantle the genre, the medium, the industry, and to a certain extent, ideologies, have been discussed on numerous occasions as “Moore and Gibbons have produced a text which transcends the accumulated myths through which superhero texts are read – they have, so to speak, stretched the boundaries of the genre” (Reynolds 117). *Watchmen* is an incredibly intricate and labyrinthine text, therefore, in the following, only aspects which are of relevance to a metareference-oriented reading will be taken into

consideration, in the hope that it will offer a new perspective on how superhero comics can work and how we can read them.

Undoubtedly, one of the most powerful and effective tools in structure building is numbers. *Watchmen* is divided into twelve chapters; however, there is more to this particular number. The number twelve is an esteemed apparatus in our efforts to impose systematization on time, a concept beyond our comprehension. The Gregorian calendar divided a year into twelve months, a day consisting of twelve hours twice, determining morning, noon and evening, the round clock with the numbers one to twelve, all seem to suggest the sense of fullness, totality - all false, attempting to trick us into believing we could master something that forever will be beyond our grasp. This elementary symbol of integrity is used in *Watchmen* with two purposes. Primarily, in the form of chapter – or issue – titles, to live up to the storytelling conventions of using an ascending series to differentiate sub-units of the main body, comprising of fragments of the story which ultimately will become a whole in the end. Secondly, the number twelve manifests in the symbol of the Doomsday Clock at the end of each chapter. Originally it was a metaphorical countdown set by physicists during the 1940s, indicating the time estimated remaining until the occurrence of a potential global catastrophe when the hand reaches twelve o' clock (whether in the form of a nuclear war or a severe climate change), still operational and currently displayed at the University of Chicago. The application of such a powerful symbol in *Watchmen* draws on its original meaning of the coming apocalypse as the hands are drawing closer to twelve by each chapter ending. This foreshadowing effect is amplified even further by the blood streaming down on the chapter-closing pages with the clock in larger and larger quantities, to leave the page almost entirely covered on the last page of Chapter XII, only leaving the hands pointing to the number twelve visible.

5.1. Supplementary Material

5.1.1 Chapter Endings

Arguably the most salient way *Watchmen* provokes our suspension of disbelief is the inclusion of the prosaic texts at the end of each chapter: letters, biography chapters, reports, all containing information which helps us to see the proverbial big picture. One could either see them as an outrageous transgression of generic conventions immediately breaking our pleasurable excursion from reality at first sight; or, as I would like to argue, they may be considered a successful attempt at enlarging the palette of storytelling tools, the McCloudian vocabulary of comics, asking its reader to reconsider the strategies of reading. Is the aesthetic illusion broken or is it not?

Before any attempt to answer this question, a few general features of this phenomenon need to be recalled. Most importantly, the development of aesthetic illusion is an ambivalent and highly complex process. The degree of its depth depends on whether we perceive the work or segment in question with “total rational distance,” or we are completely immersed in the world, feeling, etc. Furthermore, however intense the simulation of the fictional world is, “[i]llusion, to the extent it is aesthetic, presupposes the implicit acceptance of a ‘reception contract,’ one of whose stipulations Coleridge described as ‘the willing suspension of disbelief for the moment’” (Wolf, “Illusion”). In other words, although we are aware of the ontological status the perceived subject holds (“fictional” or “non-real”), we willingly suspend our doubt nonetheless. One might ask why we would do this. Entertainment as a primary reason could come to mind, or, more profoundly, a certain kind of aesthetic experience; however, let us leave this as it is and return to our focus, the process itself. These two levels of mental processing functioning synchronously is the key for us to

understand how *Watchmen* toys with us, the readers. Therefore, I must rephrase my question posed beforehand: in what way does *Watchmen* address and explore the possibilities of the complexity of our perception?

There are, as already mentioned, supplementary pieces throughout the graphic novel that differ from the generic conventions of comics both in terms of form as well as content. It is, however, not only the mere presence of these fragments that triggers a halt in the reader. The notes pinned to the corner of the attachments to Chapters I, II, III (from the autobiography of one of the characters), and Chapters V, VII seem to suggest that they are deliberately included.

We present here excerpts from Hollis Mason's autobiography, UNDER THE HOOD, leading up to the time when he became the masked adventurer, Nite Owl. Reprinted with the permission of the author. (28; ch. 1)

Presented here are the excerpts from UNDER THE HOOD: In these chapters Hollis Mason discusses the formation of the Minutemen. Reprinted with permission of the author. (29; ch. 2)

The following is reprinted from chapter five of the Treasure Island Treasury of Comics (Flint Editions, New York, 1984) with permission of the author and publishers. (29; ch. 5)

The following text is reprinted from the Journal of American Ornithological Society, Fall 1983. (29; ch. 7)

The reader is left with suggestions with regards to the identity of the mysterious voice behind these notes: it could be the narrator, the author, policemen investigating the case, just to list a few. Is the reader annoyed by this feeling of confusion or could these parts be accepted as organic pieces of the whole text? There is no definite answer to this question, however, I would argue that, despite the fact that they were initially included to fill up the empty ad space, they become such an organic part of the text that after the first shock and surprise (the evocation of the sense of constructedness), the preliminary verbal sign system, which later though bears features of the verbal-visual as well (in the form of photographs, book covers, child drawings, etc.), is received and processed on the same level as the sign system of the comics.

Regarding their content, these segments are a rich source of information on the history of this alternative world and how the so-called masked vigilantes came to life, as well as accounts of the personal histories of each of the Minutemen, the previous group of heroes. There are excerpts which contain a visual and textual reference to the fact that they are included on purpose, others lack the little note on the upper right corner, and there are some which are richer in detail than others. Rorschach's file and the reports from his childhood appear to be lying on a desk in Chapter VI; the article from *New Frontiersman* seems to be a series of photos taken during the editing process in Chapter VIII (indicated by the tapes in the corners, the pencil lying on the desk, and the "Photo to come" notes); the photograph supposedly taken of Veidt's desk in Chapter X; all meddling with our conceptions as to what or who the source could be. Is it the person investigating the events? Or somebody trying to find the missing pieces of a puzzle? Is it the journalist who is in possession of Rorschach's Journal, as we see at the end of the graphic novel?

These mixed sign systems, the chapter closing prose pieces and montages, convey an immanent tension of comics pointed out by comics scholar Charles Hatfield, between

“reading-as-experience and the text as material *object*” (Hatfield 132). In doing so, they contribute significantly to the construction of an alternative world, enriching and deepening the reading experience. And once the reader has accepted them, that is, extended the suspension of disbelief from the generic traditions of comics to this new form of content, the continuous challenging of reception traditions, instead of breaking the aesthetic illusion, becomes part of it.

5.1.2 *The Tales of The Black Freighter*

A pirate comic by genre, *The Tales of the Black Freighter* appears in Chapters III, V, VIII, X and XI. The pages are incorporated through the character of a young boy, Bernie, who is reading the issue ‘Marooned’ by a news stand on the street. A chapter ending also features related content: in Chapter V. there is an article on the pirate comic book, and its creator, real-life artist Joe Orlando and horror comics publisher EC Comics. The title of the embedded comic book is taken from Brechts’s *The Threepenny Opera*; a choice one cannot simply overlook, given all the fourth wall-breaking and alienating effects throughout *Watchmen*. As for why he chose the pirate genre, and why the Brecht-reference, Moore gives a very clear answer in an interview:

We were trying to work out the texture of the world and so we sort of said "Well, what sort of comics would they have? If they've got superheroes in real life, they probably wouldn't be at all interested in superhero comics" and I think Dave [Gibbons] said ‘What about pirate comics?’ and I said ‘Yeah, sounds good to me,’ so we dropped a few pirate comic titles into the background, including "Tales of the Black Freighter" because I'm a big Brecht fan [sic]. (*The Alan Moore Interview*)

This comic book within a comic book, a mise-en-abyme, not only functions as an intertextual link to EC and Horror comics, but through these references further depth is added to the storyworld insofar as it intertwines themes and motives which are also present in the frame narrative.

As we learn from the article at the end of Chapter V, *The Tales of The Black Freighter* is a pirate comic title launched by National Comics, written by Max Shea and drawn by real-life artist Joe Orlando, later on taken over by Walt Feinberg. It was the peak of their career, but very shortlived, as the series stopped in 1985. It is outstanding and considered to be untraditional in that there is only one character, who is narrating the story mostly in captions. The issue presented throughout *Watchmen* is ‘Marooned’, telling the story of a castaway crazed by hallucinations as he tries to return home and warn his town and family that a giant ghost ship, the Black Freighter, with a crew of damned souls and an evil captain, is coming for them. Only after mistakenly killing two citizens and his wife, the Captain realises that he has been hallucinating. Running to the shore, he sees the true Freighter waiting for the only thing it intended to acquire: his soul.

The main character is Sea Captain, whose ship was sunk by the Freighter, and who is the only survivor of the attack. Devastated, he tries to come forth with a solution to return to his home, Davidstown, so that he can warn its population from the evil ship’s raid. Driven by desperation and anguish, he uses the gas-bloated bodies of his crewmates to build a makeshift boat which will get him home. While on the boat, he survives on salt water and raw meat of seagulls as he contemplates his miserable situation, when sharks attack his boat, eating away his comrades’ corpses. He stabs the sharks to death, the struggle causing one of them to get tangled in the ropes, which helps keeping the boat in balance, and also provides food for his remaining journey. Tormented by the thought of his wife and children falling

victim to the crew of the freighter, he gradually loses track of reality and is consumed by agony, throwing himself in the water. By then, however, as he too realises, he has reached the shores of Davidstown. His messianic sentiment thus fades, and revenge becomes his new incentive. Under such delusions he murders an innocent couple who, as he argues to himself, could have survived the raid only if they betrayed the citizens of the town. He takes their horses to ride to town, taking a scarecrow for a watchman on his way, which serves proof of his complete madness. His vision is clouded by rage and misery, he is unable to see that the town is unharmed. He storms into his house and kills whom he takes for a pirate, but who in fact is his wife, with his children watching. At this point, the horrid realisation dawns upon him, and he flees town. As he reaches the shore, he sees the Black Freighter in the distance and starts swimming towards it, frantically, having understood that what the ship had always wanted was not the town or its people, but him.

Reading *Watchmen* together with 'Marooned' offers interesting perspectives. The characters of Adrien Veidt and the Sea Captain show numerous parallels. For instance, both of them make use of the bodies of dead friends to achieve their goals which they believe is worthy of such a sacrifice. The calculated arrangement of the segments included also strongly encourages the reader to draw parallels, as demonstrated in the climactic example of Chapter XI. As Ozymandias reveals his grand scheme to Nite Owl 2 and Rorschach of how he had the monster built to stop the Cold War by uniting nations against a new enemy by sacrificing the people of NYC to set up a fake attack, a scenario from which he profits as a businessman but which also solves the crisis of society, there are panels of the boy reading 'Marooned' in New York intertwined; he serves as a mediator to open the universe of the Sea Captain. His slow realisation of what has, in fact, been the course of events since the beginning; that he had to go through this physical and emotional hell to become suitable, and available, for the Freighter, as he continues swimming towards it, accepting his fate.

The Captain's despair offers an entirely different perspective on the events, asking characters and readers alike: was it worth it? Ozymandias achieved his goal of ridding society of the threat of world war by uniting the countries against the public enemy, the Other, the extra-terrestrial. His master plan could just as easily be seen as a coup, the rise of a man to infinite power. The juxtaposition of the Sea Captain and Ozymandias accentuate how the individual, when in possession of the power to act upon his beliefs, takes or ignores responsibility for his deeds, and the toll it might take on his soul. Furthermore, one cannot help but see a prophecy for Adrian Veidt in the fate of the Sea Captain, interconnecting the two plots, with the former being the allegorical continuation of the latter.

Numerous small allusions can be found between the stories, such as the "two riders" of Chapter X (entitled "Two Riders Were Approaching..."); where the Sea Captain and the corpse, and Rorschach and Nite Owl 2 ride to their fate in similarly designed panels, but this *mise-en-abyme* operates on the grand scale as well. Mirroring features is the *modus operandi* of this device, and here the list of characteristics at play is quite long: the comic-book-format; the genre of the embedded text being just as rich in details and tools as the one it is embedded in; the parallels in plot (moral downfall of the hero), character (self-authorised individuals), and motifs (such as using the dead to reach the living); or the shared themes of what is right or wrong and what right does man have to act upon either. As already discussed, Wolf's argument regarding the metareferential potential in *mise-en-abyme* is that it depends on how neatly it could be 'naturalized', or in other words, placed within its frame without severe disturbance of the whole. *Watchmen* has successfully disabled this threat to the core. Much like the 'Murder of Gonzago' in *Hamlet*, which has a decisive function in the development of the narrative (that is, through this play the King learns that his secret is known to Hamlet), the *Freighter* has been intertwined with the story level with the help of a minor character, the boy who is reading it by the news stand. As a central location in

Watchmen, also an agent of media, and a pun on media-awareness, the news stand holds implications for the state of humanity. The news vendor Bernard poses as vox populi, heralding society's rottenness, a decay that is being illustrated by the small scale conflicts taking place around the news stand, through which we get an insight into the struggles of everyman: assaults, constant arguing and fighting, verbal and physical aggression; an apocalyptic chaos of a sort.

The strategic placement of the panels and excerpts from the *Freighter* further contributes to the process of its naturalization as a device. By the time we get to the first pages from 'Marooned' in Chapter III, we have already been trained in expanding our horizons in terms of what is proper in comics by definition, and what is not, as a result of which this myse-en-abyme is perceived as a fully immanent part of the whole, especially when encountering the article at the end of Chapter V, informing us on details of the production of *The Tales of the Black Freighter*.

5.2. Historiographic Metafiction: A Transmedial Concept?

5.2.1. A Critique of Society

The setting of *Watchmen* is an alternative world that highly resembles the real 1980s. Apart from a critical tone this feature yields, relying on our factual knowledge of causalities in our cultural memory, it also hits a different note: there is an invitation to a seemingly playful excursion to the what-if world, to a simulacrum. Here the aesthetic illusion is challenged on the content level. Upholding the suspension of disbelief becomes slightly more difficult, the illusion is threatened: we read a work of fiction, portraying a fictional world that imitates our reality (first strike to the suspension), however, in a slightly different manner which

makes us aware of the constructed nature of history (second strike to the suspension), and yet, instead of the whole illusion collapsing, it remains intact, if not stronger even.

The most fundamental difference between our world and that of *Watchmen* is the fact that superheroes are part of everyday life, and they interfere in minor or graver issues, as a result of which major events of real history, such as the Vietnam War or Nixon's presidency, have an altered outcome. These costumed heroes, however, do not actually possess any superpowers as such, with the exception of Doctor Manhattan – a victim of a laboratory accident, whose mere existence is a powerful tool in the hands of the US against the Soviet Union in the Cold War, resulting in an even tenser relationship between the two nations. Despite the success these costumed vigilantes manage to achieve, public opinion about them gradually changes, resulting in the Keene Act in 1977: a legislation forcing all superheroes to give up their identities and outlawing all superhero activities, such as interfering with police forces, playing private detective, etc. Most of them retire or seek another profession to make a living, but not everyone: The Comedian and Doctor Manhattan are asked to cooperate as agents of the government, and Rorschach, refusing to reveal his identity, continues his underground activities. From this basic setup, through the parallel narrations of point-of-view characters combined with supplementary documents and a presumed authorial narrative frame, we are presented with a twisted tale featuring themes like morality, relationships, politics, and memory; while the concept of the superhero and superhero comics as a genre are also under scrutiny.

The same is true here as in any other alternate history: the very portrayal of the fictional world implies a commentary on the era it imitates. The problems addressed here, on a grand scale, are that of the contemporary society: being at war and its consequences (would superheroes really be a solution?), processing trauma as a nation (or as a species, humanity, against an extra-terrestrial threat), the conquest lead by people of power for

wealth and for the control of minds (Veidt Enterprises as well as the politicians), and the conflict of moralities – in a plural, as we will see. In *Watchmen*, despite the generic conventions of the fight between good and evil, the characters and their actions hardly fit into this bipolar frame, a tendency typical of superhero comics from the 80s on.

5.2.2 A Critique of Medium and Genre

Watchmen caters to the taste of the knowledgeable reader in a, one might say, postmodern fashion (although this disposition raises more questions than it answers). Seeing the original superhero team of Minutemen as an homage to Golden Age heroes, and the Crimebusters as a nod to the Silver Age is only too easy a deduction to make. In the following, I will attempt to synthesise the ways writer Alan Moore, artist Dave Gibbons, and colourist John Higgins toy with our knowledge of superheroes and our ways of reading comics.

The idea of the traditional superhero, as defined by Umberto Eco as one representative of an aesthetic universality with “a capacity to serve as a reference point for behaviour and feelings which belong to us all”, is redefined in *Watchmen* (Eco 148). Each character appears to be an embodiment of completely different approaches to the world and what it encompasses, while also exhibiting complex, often troubled, personalities. Unlike the vigilantes of the Golden Age, who cast aside every personal goal to serve a greater cause, or Silver Age heroes, who, albeit conflicted, struggle to stay on the right path, *Watchmen*’s do-gooders “choose to do it for much more mundane reasons – money, power, fame, or to promote their own ideologies” (Hughes 548). Thus, *Watchmen* offers the reader the choice of different readings. Is it a dark mirror of modern American political ideologies? Or the study of a sociopath? Or is it an abstract excursion into the philosophical aspects of Einstein’s works? “I leave it entirely in your hands”, as we are told on the last page of the

graphic novel (32; ch. 12). Moreover, they, much like us humans, often behave inconsistently, or on the contrary, are devoted to certain beliefs and morals and act upon them accordingly. Such a portrayal of superheroes (instead of them representing the two poles of the good-bad axis, the saviour and the nemesis which has been the convention in the early years of the genre), calls our attention to this very convention. Or, in technical terms, it is a case of Wolf's intracompositional metareference. A closer look at each character will reveal some details about each filter, if you like, of the fictional world portrayed.

It is a universally acknowledged fact that the characters of *Watchmen* did not come out of nowhere, but are mostly based on 'Action Heroes' by Charlton Comics. This publishing house never belonged with the publishing elite, DC and Marvel, yet they had modest achievements primarily due to their sci-fi, war, and horror comics during the Silver Age. However, when Steve Ditko, creator of Spider-Man, re-joined their team (he started with this label and then went on to Marvel), resurrecting his old character Captain Atom under the flag of "Action Heroes", things took a turn for Charlton Comics. He went on to give birth to another iconic character, the Question, and refashioned the Blue Beetle. These heroes were joined by the Peacemaker, Thunderbolt, and Judomaster, but as the series was short-lived, they were incorporated into the DC Universe. The superheroes from *Watchmen* are largely based on these characters: Captain Atom and Dr. Manhattan share their origin-story and their nuclear powers; the Blue Beetle and Nite Owl have complicated gadgets and are both academics in their civil lives; Rorschach echoes a similar philosophy on responsibility and right and wrong from behind a mask as queer as that of the Question; Thunderbolt as human perfection is reiterated in Ozymandias; and the ambivalent approach to peacekeeping is shared by the Peacemaker and the Comedian, much to the delight of

devoted comic-fans. It is best to borrow the list Hudsick compiled in his essay on *Watchmen*'s origins:

[A] scientist caught in an atomic accident who gains superhuman powers, yet retains his association with the government; a rich guy who uses scientific equipment to follow in the footsteps of an earlier hero of the same name; a brutal vigilante with an uncompromising social philosophy and a completely obscured face; a man of refined tastes whose exceptional talents are the result of years of training and reflection; and a costumed avatar of political irony, a government operative whose name belies his brutal methods and attitudes. Sound familiar? (Hudsick 12)

The odd-one-out is the only female hero in the ensemble, Silk Spectre, who is supposedly based on superheroine oldtimers Black Canary, Phantom Lady, and Nightshade. However, it remains unknown whether she was intentionally chosen to be left out of the predecessors, or by not singling out one female hero to be Silk Spectre's foregoer *Watchmen* comments on their generally marginal state, as Hudsick also points out (13). Although the recycling of the Action Heroes was Moore's deliberate choice to evoke an "emotional resonance" in the readers as they recognize them, to add "a shock and surprise value" to the overall piece, there is more to these characters than their predecessors, as we shall see (Moore; qtd in Hudsick 13).

One of the heroes who is often singled out as a possible focal character is Edward Blake or The Comedian. His murder triggers the investigation at the heart of the plot, calling all the other heroes to action. In his living days, he was an extremely violent and barbaric poster boy for the American army. His chosen name would suggest something that makes

people laugh, who is cracking jokes and entertains, however, as we learn through the memories of his former peers, he has an essentially different concept of fun. Rorschach says about him at his funeral:

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. No one else saw the joke. That's why he was lonely. Heard joke once: Man goes to doctor. Says he's depressed. Says life seems harsh and cruel. Says he feels all alone in a threatened world where what lies ahead is vague and uncertain. Doctor says 'treatment is simple. Great clown Pagliacci is in town tonight. Go and see him. That should pick you up.' Man bursts into tears. Says 'But Doctor...I am Pagliacci. (27; ch. 2)

We read Rorschach's thoughts next to images recalling past events from the Comedian's life: the assault and near-rape of Silk Spectre; the images of him being beaten to death; the woman in Vietnam, to whom he promised a new life and whom he left eventually, resulting in her cutting his face revengefully, which provoked him to murder her, as we got to know beforehand from Doctor Manhattan's memories; him in his Vietnam War costume smiling gloriously (or, after getting to know him more, ironically and self-critically); a confession of a broken man to his once nemesis, Molloch; and his eventual death (being thrown out the window by Veidt). A man, a life, a set of values, de-and-reconstructed through a few images and words (26-27; ch. 2). If Edward Blake is a tongue-in-cheek comment on society-imposed ideas of right and wrong, his costume is a most visible indicator: Marvel's Captain America rebooted, he has the stars and stripes, red and

blue, but, instead of the shield as a symbol of defence, of protective patriotism, the Comedian sports grenades and other weapons which suggest a slightly more aggressively articulated nationalist sentiment.

Interestingly, he is the only vigilante who was part of both groups in *Watchmen*, the Minutemen and the Crimebusters. Thus his insights into the heroic are assigned with more credibility:

Damn straight. An'it takes a moron to think they're small enough for clowns like you guys to handle. What's going on in this world, you got no idea. Believe me. [...] You people are a joke. You hear Moloch's back in town, you think 'Oh, Boy! Let's gang up and bust him!' You think that matters? You think that solves anything? It doesn't matter squat. Here – lemme show ya why it don't matter. [...] It don't matter squat because inside thirty years the nukes are gonna be flyin' like maybugs and then Ozzy here is gonna be the smartest man on the cinder. (*Watchmen* 10-11; ch. 2)

His monologue at the first meeting of the Crimebusters points out the immanent problem in self-authorised crime fighting. And the fact that the only person to realise this is also the one who is an ex-hero, acting as a mercenary for the American army in Vietnam, further stresses the problematic relationship superheroes have with society and its governing ideologies, a theme that rarely appeared in superhero narratives before.

Also playing a significant role in the turn of events, Adrian Veidt, or, as he calls himself, Ozymandias, represents a stance likely to be the most debated, amongst characters and readers alike (a forum is dedicated to the question 'Hero OR Villain?' on ComicVine, "[t]he largest comics database online"). If we had to point at the villain of *Watchmen*, he

would certainly be the one, only his deeds are not entirely easy to judge. His mental and physical strength (which he achieved by extensive physical training, diligent studying, psychic exercises, and meditation), he believes, makes him superior to others. Ozymandias, or Alexander the Great, as he often sees himself, is thought of as the most that can be made out of the human potential. An embodiment of Nietzsche's *Übermensch*, he treats the rest of humanity as inferior, and is appalled by the political climate with its power-hungry agents driving the world to the verge of nuclear war. Because of his self-proclaimed superiority he believes he has the right to intervene and composes a grandiose and horrific solution, which, accidentally, also gets him in the position of world domination. Adrian Veidt, the entrepreneur, leader of the mega-corporation Veidt Industries, has access to every tool he could possibly need to rid society of its plague: he is assembling a group of artists and scientists to create an extra-terrestrial entity which he will use to massacre millions in New York City, to unite nations against a common enemy, thus putting an end to the arms race. Is he the saviour of the day, or most evil supervillain of all times? It is up to the reader to decide whether Rorschach is right to oppose until the end, whether Nite Owl and Silk Spectre choose wisely when they decide to walk away. Ozymandias functions as the most 'super' in Crimebusters, the second vigilante group, yet he is the very one through whom the concept of the ideal superhuman (regardless of whether the 'super' quality is due to transcendent forces or diligent training) is deconstructed. Although he uses his powers for the greater good, his actions are questionable at best.

The only two characters who stand in his way are the Comedian, already disposed of, and Doctor Manhattan. He poses a more serious threat to Veidt's master plan, as he cannot simply kill him in the same way as he killed the Comedian. However, things work to his advantage as Manhattan's growing indifference towards humanity and the Earth cannot be rescued. Doctor Manhattan, his name a reference to the Manhattan Project, making him

a symbol of atomic power, was once known as Dr. Jon Osterman: a quantum physicist, who fell victim to a tragic accident in his laboratory. He got trapped in the Intrinsic Field Subtractor, a device he often made use of in his research. For a short period of time, he was lost, but then miraculously reassembled himself from the atoms he had been blown into by the machine. We follow his struggles to process this trauma as a human, only to see him eventually giving up on his humanity and leaving Earth. The phases of his detachment indicated by how he gradually leaves the state-given uniform behind piece by piece. As a result of such a dreadful experience, he has a fundamentally altered perspective on time and space, detaching him from the world as humans know and define it. He tries to hold on to his habits to stay connected (an idea that invokes a huge body of philosophical thought, which contemplation, sadly, will have to be left out from the pages of this thesis)¹⁷, but fails ultimately, when his relationship with the Silk Spectre, Laurie Juspechzyk, ends. Having lost all that tied him to our planet, he abandons it, ignoring Juspechzyk's efforts to convince him to stay and help in the fight against Ozymandias. As seen from this recollection, the superhero embodying the superpowered aspect of the character archetype's definition leaves not only the scene but the entire planet, defying, yet again, the conventions of the genre.

Although *Watchmen* is narrated through multiple internal and external focalisers, let them be occasional like the detectives investigating Edward Blake's apartment ("What do you think happened here? [...] Well, looks like someone broke in by bustin' this door down" 2; ch. 1) or the hand who pinned the mysterious notes on chapter endings, Rorschach is arguably one of the most significant ones. Through his introspective monologues and journal entries in captions the plot unfolds; he is the one who starts the investigation, who interrogates former heroes to gain a wider perspective. Based on Ditko's iconic hero, The

¹⁷ For a diverse collection of contributions in this regard see White (2009).

Question, Rorschach similarly represents a black-and-white view of the world and its constituents, although his judgement calls are sometimes contradictory. A true believer of capitalist values on the first page (“They could have followed the footsteps of good men like my father, or President Truman. Decent men who believed in a day’s work for a day’s pay” (1; ch. 1)), then articulating nihilistic sentiments of meaninglessness on another (“Existence is random” (26; ch. 6)), his stance on the world and the things within are hard to follow. Nevertheless, he always acts on them without any regard for the consequences.

Rorschach’s appearance is also reminiscent of *The Question*: a somewhat formal outfit, as opposed to the usual tights and capes, a hat, and a mask covering the face. In the *Question*’s case, it is a blank white piece of fabric (which is supposedly representative of the character’s unbiased and pure approach to justice), whereas Rorschach’s mask is a fictional material, a white sheet, covered with black inkblot-like spots which move around, much like the world-famous psychological test’s tools. This mask represents not only Rorschach’s stance on what is morally right and wrong, but also raises suspicion, especially in the light of his medical records included (ch. 6): is the simultaneous presence of the above mentioned distant viewpoints a result of a split personality? The fact that Rorschach/Walter Kovacs has by far the most coverage in the supplementary segments, providing us with the most detailed character background (a history of a dark childhood, abusive environment, and medical reports of a psychological condition), provides significant evidence to this presumption. Through his character, Moore and Gibbons reflect not only on superhero comics history, but also pose questions that had rarely been asked before: just how mental can a superhero be? How would such a bipolar conception of right and wrong affect an average, if maybe already slightly troubled person? *Watchmen*’s answer is that he is consumed by the world he lives in. Like *The Comedian*, he, too, realises that society is rotten, and that he cannot do anything to stop it, a realisation that will ultimately destroy

him. Rorschach, when facing Ozymandias while his plan is taking effect, cannot accept failure, like Nite Owl and Silk Spectre, who admit to their incapability to stop the carefully planned massacre; he chooses death over the prospect of a life with such a memory to live with. Both characters who are self-conscious about what their role should be and the difficulty of embodying it, The Comedian and Rorschach, die. It is a rather direct critical self-reflexion on hero-hood and what it morally entails, consequently inviting the reader to reconsider his expectations of the heroes on the pedestal as well as to have a more critical and conscious approach to society, ideology and power.

Representing (and, consequently, debunking) the stereotypes of female superheroes are the two incarnations of Silk Spectre, Sally Jupiter and her daughter, Laurie Juspecky. Although neither of them receive as much attention as their male colleagues, their influence is significant, while they also act as a surface for further self-reference to Moore and Gibbons. Sally, a burlesque dancer turned action hero (hence the pin-up appearance), is a sex symbol rather than a crimefighter, and she is more than content with it. From the little we are told about her background, she has always enjoyed men's attention (as shown not only by her former dancer career, but also the pride she felt when she had learned a Tijuana Bible was published with her pictures), and was in the superhero business more for the money and fame. As she openly admits during an interview when asked about the possible reasons behind putting on costume:

Well, let me say this, for me it was never a sex thing. It was a money thing. And I think for some people it was a fame thing, and for a tiny few, God bless 'em, I think it was a goodness thing. I'm not saying it wasn't a sex thing for some people, but, no no, I wouldn't say that's what motivated the majority. (32; ch. 9)

She is a parody of the deeply involved, resolute, nearly obsessive messianic attitude many superheroes act upon, although there are a few instances of depth and honesty: she covered for the homosexual member of the Minutemen by being his girlfriend to save him from prosecution; or when, in the retirement home, she cries and kisses the Comedian on an old group photo of the Minutemen, showing her true feelings for him. One could also see Sally's character as a critique of the industry and the thoroughly superficial nature of the few superheroines who managed to go into print at all.

Sally's daughter, Laurie, on the other hand, following this logic, could easily be seen as a heroine Moore would rather see in print. Curious, fierce, slightly feminist, a trained fighter, concerned about the fate of humanity. She is against her mother's wish for her to join the masked heroes from early on, yet decided to go with it to please her. Sally picks a costume for her, one which she thought was too sexy and not so handy in an actual fight. She says to Dan Dreiberg/Nite Owl II when they plan their new life with babies and crime fighting: "I want a better costume that protects me: maybe something leather, with a mask over my face...also, maybe I oughtta carry a gun" (30; ch. 7).

A slightly different, nevertheless important trait we need to include briefly is how *Watchmen* reinterprets the formalist notions characteristic of graphic storytelling. There are no thought balloons, no BOOM! or POW! to capture sound, and no motion lines either. Instead, the graphic novel makes use of different media to communicate, for instance, thoughts. What would be in a thought balloon over Rorschach's head is instead in the captions, taken from his journal. Doctor Manhattan's blue captions also narrate his internal monologues. In the abandonment of such thought-to-be-immature traits of the comics genre one could see an attempt to be taken more seriously, a work deliberately trying to distance itself from the pejorative connotations of its genre.

5.3. Intertextuality

Structure plays probably the most important role in *Watchmen*, creating systems of signs and symbols that serve almost uncountable numbers of interpretations. The central roles of symbols such as the number twelve or the Doomsday Clock have already been discussed, but those are mainly intracompositional references targeting the domains within the graphic novel under discussion. There are numerous instances of *Watchmen* referring to something outside its actual boundaries, and many attempts have been made at exploring the depths of its intertextual dimensions. One of the most cohesive, devoted fan-initiative is *readingwatchmen.com*, the outcome of “A year-long journey examining, analysing, and discussing Alan Moore & Dave Gibbons' seminal graphic novel, *Watchmen*, in order to better appreciate this groundbreaking book” (*readingwatchmen.com*).

Many of the characters, as discussed already, are reincarnations of previous superheroes. Moreover, their names are also references, like Doctor Manhattan, Edward Blake (invoking William Blake, Moore's favourite poet), or Ozymandias.

My name is

Ozymandias,

king of kings:

Look on my works,

ye mighty,

and despair. (28; ch. 11)

The inclusion of this Shelley-quote provides the character with more depth, so much is obvious. However, ‘Ozymandias’ is also a chapter title, in which his character's true nature,

his life story and his motivations are revealed, simultaneously narrated with an account of his grand scheme to destroy an entire city just to teach a lesson, as well as to profit financially like a true tyrant. This is only one of the many ways *Watchmen* situates itself in the middle of an intricate intertextual web.

The International Edition, which is the most widely purchased format, divided into twelve chapters according to the issues in which it was initially published, has a noteworthy first and last page. They are covered with two huge signs respectively: 'WATC', and the edition is closed by the sign 'HMEN' on its last two pages. This symmetrically divided frame (four letters each) surrounding the actual text body is located on a secondary peritextual level, the cover in this case being located on the primary. Together they create a symbol informing a wide realm of interpretations. It could refer to basically anything that contains two poles and is unified by a third entity, for example, history as known and its alterations combed together and creating a consistent storyworld in *Watchmen*; the civil and the superhero identity of the individual; or the complicated relationship between art as representation and its object, a problem addressed by the heavy presence of intertextuality in the text. This framing technique, that is, taking the title word or sentence and using its parts to build a structure, is repeated in each chapter of the graphic novel.

The title of the graphic novel not only reiterates, amongst other implications, the role heroes take in society, it is also borrowed from Juvenal's *Satires* as is seen from the last page's motto. Furthermore, each chapter incorporates lines from musicians, philosophers, and poets, which set the mood of the whole chapter just like a motto would. Using segments of the quotes as titles, the same framing effect is repeated as the one discussed in the previous paragraph. Each chapter has a quote on the last page of the panels, right before the prose segments, which addresses the various agendas of the chapters. Much like the prose segments at the end of each chapter, such intertextual links contribute to the meta-effect via

linking related content from the extracompositional dimensions, which, expanding the inherent rhetorical nature of the motto, highlights the moral, intellectual, and other themes present in individual chapters, or in the comic book as a whole.

Exploring the music-related intertextual instances in *Watchmen* certainly aids us in better understanding the graphic novel's quirky loopholes, as pointed out in a critical essay by Borsellino. I would like to concentrate on one peculiar example, the recurrent quotes by singer-songwriter Bob Dylan. It is not by coincidence that the film adaptation of *Watchmen* (Snyder, 2009) features his songs: a neat transmedial translation of this meta-tool. The title of the first chapter "At Midnight, All The Agents..." is a quote taken from Dylan's song "Desolation Row". At the end of the first chapter we find a longer segment: "At midnight, all the agents and superhuman crew, go out and round up everyone who knows more than they do" (26; ch. 1), which is basically the plot summary of *Watchmen*. Another appearance of Dylan's lyrics can be found in Chapter X. "Outside in the distance a wild cat did growl, two riders were approaching, the wind began to howl", from "All Along the Watchtower". The choice of a singer-songwriter as a source of intertextual references whose entire profile is characterized by social, political and cultural awareness, whose songs became anthems of civil right movements and anti-war protests ("The Times They Are a-Changin'"), complements the political tone of *Watchmen* as well as the desire to voice contemporary concerns of society. Furthermore, Dylan himself is also an artist who intertwined, apart from the above mentioned political, social and philosophical agendas, musical and literary influences in his songwriting and performance, creating quite a rich intertextual web of references, pastiches and adaptations (such as "A Hard Rain's a-Gonna Fall", retelling the Anglo-Saxon ballad of *Lord Randall*).

Chapter IV, titled "Watchmaker", is outstanding in many aspects. Its guiding quote is by Albert Einstein: "The release of the atom power has changed everything except our

ways of thinking...The solution to this problem lies in the heart of mankind. If only I had known, I should have become a watchmaker” (28; ch. 4). As debated the originality of this quote is, its general message undoubtedly echoes the philosophical ideas most commonly associated with Einstein. Nevertheless, though reading anything particular into it might lead astray, there are some aspects that indeed tie in with the character of Doctor Manhattan and this chapter alike. First of all, the name itself. The infamous letter from Einstein to President Roosevelt served as inspiration for the later Manhattan Project, a name shared by the character who came to life through an accident transforming an atomic researcher into a supernatural being. Second, from the a-chronological narration of Doctor Manhattan’s memories (which are real time events occurring simultaneously, as the concept of time to him is relative) in Chapter IV, we learn that Jonathan Osterman originally wanted to become a watchmaker, just like his father, until the bomb was dropped on Japan. There are also visual manifestations of this metaphor: “The cogs are falling...”, we read in the last panel on page 3, with pieces of a pocket watch scattering, the same image appearing again on the last page of the chapter, but with different bubbles. It is, however, more than just a pun, as Osterman’s father elaborates further on the issue of watchmaking and its place in society:

Forget pocket watches! Have you seen the news? [...] They dropped the atomic bomb on Japan! A whole city, gone! Ach! These are no times for a repairer of watches...this changes everything! There will be more bombs. They are the future. Shall my son follow me into an obsolete trade? [...] This atomic science...this is what the world will need! Not pocket watches! [...] Professor Einstein says that time differs from place to place. Can you imagine? If time is not true, what purpose have watchmakers, hein? [...] My profession is a thing of the past. Instead, my son must have the future. (3; ch. 4)

This is the exact opposite of what Einstein has thought. However, in the light of the coming apocalypse, Mr Osterman embodies yet another example of the individual aspiring for humanity to be more, a scenario it will most likely be unable to truly handle. The guiding notions present in the Einstein-quote as well as in the father's outburst, namely, the problem of time, atomic research, and the human reaction, are themes intertwined throughout the story. However, this chapter in particular, alongside the character of Doctor Manhattan himself, is an inquiry launched to discover the place of the individual in the cosmos, or, in other words, the meaning of life; a quest parallel to the reader's endeavours to find/create the meaning of/from the text read.

Expanding this intertextual horizon further, the potential for power in humanity, its dangers and its relation to the divine are just a few of the ideas that echo in the numerous lyrical, philosophical and biblical intertexts found in the next chapters. Most notable probably is "fearful symmetry," the "driving metaphor for *Watchmen*" (Cormier 86). The phrase occurs in the quote from William Blake's poem *Tyger* in Chapter V. The original verse asks who could create such a creature as a tiger, beautiful yet fearsome and cruel.

Tyger, Tyger
burning bright,
In the forests
of the night,
What immortal hand or eye
Could frame thy fearful symmetry? (28; ch. 5)

In the poem, the first and the last lines are the same, framing the poem itself just like the creator framed the “fearful symmetry”. Apart from being the title of Rorschach’s feature chapter (in which the first and last page reflect on each other, the second and the second-to-last, and so on, colliding in the centre where we see Ozymandias’ staged assault), “fearful symmetry” is a fundamental theme reverberating in many aspects of *Watchmen*. From one of the protagonist’s name, parallel point-of-view narrations, narrative techniques such as the intertwined comic-within-the-comic, to the unyielding panel-formatting, it is nearly impossible to enumerate all the ways this metaphor connects to the graphic novel (although many thorough attempts have been made by, amongst others, Cormier, and Whiston). Attempting to unfold the relevance of the quote, the things it might refer to, and the depths of the readings in terms of this notion, the number of questions and presumptions arising are infinite: is this tiger the dangerous potential in human knowledge? The possible outcome of an atomic arms race? In such a case, are we, humanity, the answer to Blake’s question? To what extent does “fearful symmetry” apply to the entirety of this graphic novel? Is it the iconography? The formal aspects, such as the page layout? Or narrative-related tendencies, like the parallel points of views of each character?

Although “fearful symmetry” is probably the most powerful intertext-induced metaphor in *Watchmen*, there are numerous other philosophical and religious texts referred to, which provide further options for an intertextual reading. Nietzsche’s aphorism about fighter and monster being the same, quoted in Chapter VI (28; ch. 5), or Jung’s dramatically phrased sentence about the human experience being nothing more than a struggle for meaning in nothingness (28; ch. 9) generate an even deeper understanding of the related themes and motifs of the text. Through the inclusion of these excerpts we join the characters in the quest for answers to the unanswerable questions of self, morality, causality, power, or our universe.

6. Alan Moore & Kevin O'Neill: The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen

The Moore who wrote *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen* was the Moore whom hundreds of thousands of fans held dear. By 1999, when the first issue was released, he had already established himself as a comic book guru. A quick overview of his achievements by then: *The Swamp Thing* (through which he redefined the Horror genre); *Superman: Whatever Happened to the Man of Tomorrow?* (an overview of the hero's mythology right after the happenings of *Crisis on Infinite Earths*); *Watchmen* (redefined the superhero genre), *Batman: The Killing Joke* (most well-known Batman-graphic novel, next to *TDKR*); *V for Vendetta* (post-apocalyptic dystopian cult classic), *Lost Girls* (what happens when Alice from Carroll's tale, Wendy from *Peter Pan*, and Dorothy from *The Wizard of Oz*, meet as grown-ups at a holiday resort in 1913 and start sharing sexual fantasies?); and *From Hell* (a dark and spooky graphic novel re-interpreting the myth of Jack the Ripper in a scene-to-scene hunt for the killer); only to name the most famous ones. The original publisher of *The League* was WildStorm, then it was taken over by Moore's own publishing house America's Best Comics, and the trade paperbacks were launched from Vertigo, all trademarks of DC Comics. The last instalment, *TLEG: Century* is the only one which was released at a publisher other than one from DC's crescent, Knockabout.

The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen is an umbrella title referring to four comic books (so far), with the first published in 1999. There are two six-issue volumes titled *TLEG*, a graphic novel titled *TLEG: Black Dossier* (2007), and a third volume, *TLEG: Century* (2009-2012). The second volume features the same group of heroes as the first instalment, and is mostly a retelling of H. G. Wells' *The War of the Worlds*. It is the last time we see the Victorian superhero ensemble together, and it is also the last story to be set in the Victorian

Era. *Black Dossier* is a graphic novel about two of the original characters stealing the legendary Black Dossier, a collection of documents on the history of the League and the universe in which they exist. There are regular comic-book pages as well as excerpts from the Dossier itself, with prose stories, mythologies, photographic evidence and further documents. *TLEG: Century* is a story of a century-long chase to prevent the arrival of the Antichrist, featuring, again, the same two original characters as the *Black Dossier*, Mina Murray and Allan Quartermain. In this chapter I will concentrate on the first volume of the series, as most of the themes and motifs which are of relevance for our discussion are neatly delineated in the first six issues. Consequently, unless noted otherwise, the part referred to in the following sub-chapters will always be Volume I.

6.1. A Steampunk League

6.1.1 Steampunk Style and Storytelling

More so than other historical periods, the 19th century, especially the Victorian era (1837-1901), is an excellent mirror for the modern period. The social, economic, and political structures of the Victorian era are essentially the same as our own, and their cultural dynamics – the way in which the culture reacts to various phenomena and stimuli – are quite similar to ours. This makes the Victorian era extremely useful for ideological stories on subjects such as feminism, imperialism, class issues, and religion, as well as for commentary on contemporary issues such as serial murderers and overseas wars. (Nevins; qtd in Jones 104)

The League, precisely because of its simultaneous exploitation of our knowledge of Victorian culture and literature, provides a unique reading experience. Such narratives, on the one hand, invite the readers to re-examine their relationship to history and literature, and their potentials withheld by convention; on the other hand, they constitute a treasure hunt for allegories and allusions, and nothing makes reading more participatory than a vicious hunt for intertexts. The only way to compose any meaning whatsoever is a wholly immersive reading, a dive into this chaotic, anachronistic and ahistorical world. Steampunk, therefore, is not merely a style, as Jones also points out (101), a pattern of visual aesthetics, but a way of self-reflexion, whether it is the genre re-examining its conventions, a medium testing its boundaries, or the reader tracking down connections between what is and what had been. As such, steampunk literature, especially works so intricately constructed as *TLEG*, is more than an ornate intertextual web: it invites us to “redefine our cultural spaces and identities” (Jones 105).

The first volume of *The League* is set in an alternative 1898, in a fictional world where (mostly 19th century English) literary characters and their respective stories are real. This work of art is a spectacular illustration of steampunk visual and literary style combined. The title panel, following the opening sequence which sets the mood, features a grandiose construction of a bridge-like building, the Channel Causeway, as we read on the plaque; a reference to the Channel Tunnel. The statue immediately capturing our attention has a shield with the Union Jack on it, and the word ‘Industry’. It appears to be a sort of Statue of Liberty, the defender of the nation. One of the piers sports cogs as decoration, a distinctly steampunk element, while the steaming, rusty machinery seems abandoned [*TLEG* 8].¹⁸

¹⁸ The most commonly purchased edition of *TLEG Volume I*. does not have page numbers, therefore I will apply the technique advised by Murray (2011): my pagination begins on the very first page of the volume, including advert pages.

Another strikingly retro-futuristic image greets us when we first encounter the Nautilus, Captain Nemo's monstrous submarine, in its entirety: it resembles a giant squid, seemingly made of copper and glass, a vehicle whose steampunk-ness can only be topped by its owner's weapon: Nemo carries a harpoon gun, a weapon of his own invention [*TLEG* 16-17]. The city of Paris also underwent a makeover in this alternative world of the 19th century; we see a burnt orange toned picture of a busy and crowded city containing multiple instalments of its most famous landmarks, the Eiffel Tower (the caption indicates the year 1898, only ten years after its initial erection in 1888, meaning that steampunk Paris hosts at least two more, illustrating the advanced state of technology which made it possible), and the mill of the Moulin Rouge. The air is filled with zeppelins and other steam-driven spaceship-like vehicles, the streets are packed with the bourgeoisie and the homeless [22-23]. A steampunk world is being constructed from early on, page to page, each panel meticulously stuffed with elements of the visual vocabulary of the this style. However captivating the pictorial representations of steampunk in *TLEG* may be, the comic book exhibits more of steampunk than its visual aesthetics.

When engaging with a steampunk narrative, there are two immediate, blatant realisations dawning on the reader. The first is that what is being read has a certain level of historical accuracy, a feeling evoked at the very beginning when encountering the familiar historical context. The second, evoked early on as the *nexus point*-convention prescribes, is that this world admits to no factuality whatsoever. *TLEG*'s nexus point is the title page described above, followed shortly after by an exposition by Campion Bond, when he gives Mina Murray her mission to compile a team:

We live in troubled times, where fretful dreams settle upon the empire's brow.

If England's to survive them, then your work is vital. Be about it vigorously and

without delay, for the shadows of the century grow long...and your chariot approaches. [10]

Bond's prophetic warning foreshadows the end of the glorious empire, and he also might accidentally betray his true allegiance to Professor Moriarty. He uses the word 'chariot' to describe the carriage seen beforehand, a word he uses again when referring to Moriarty's destructive zeppelin-like vehicle [109]. Let us linger some more on this page, as it is not only the bubbles and their contents that are allusive.

The page is divided into four equal-sized horizontally cut panels. The scene portrayed is that of a dock, where Campion Bond and Mina Murray meet for a mission briefing; we can see the wooden planks, the posts, the bodegas, the sea, the seagulls, all props required for a seaside setting, overarching the gutters; it is the same scene, not recreated each panel, but spreading across four. The characters, reminiscent of the narrative paintings of Botticelli or Bosch, are mobile within their static surroundings, simultaneously appearing in different positions. Campion Bond and Mina Murray are on the level of the dock, but behind the swing door, the first panel cuts the door midway. In the second panel, Mina's upper body is already at the edge of the dock, while Bond stands behind her. The third panel continues where the third was cut, with Mina's lower body, in the same posture and at the same place. This page is representative of what the comic book as a whole is labouring to achieve as a meta-discourse. It is a visualisation of a break in continuity, a disfigured temporality, and the approaching descent of something great. The static background could be history, the passage of time, which, though dynamic, feels stagnant to the individual, the mobile figure who walks amidst its props. History, in a sense, is a fragmented body of texts, a database of memories, pulled together by the individuals who share it; just like the separate panels connected by Mina's body. *TLEG* invites the reader to

pursue an independent query not only in terms of temporality and historiography. It also fiddles with the questions of how stories are told and how they should be read, considering that history and fiction share a substantial characteristic: they are both narratives (as pointed out in Hayden White's famous essay "The Historical Text as Literary Artifact"). Both are something coherent and consistent, following a set of conventions, which may vary in particularities, but in essence and function remain the same. The reader is bestowed the task of finding a meaning, even if it requires overstepping the boundaries; the traditions, that is. The way the individual sets history in motion, the reader sets the narrative in motion, by reading it. The reading order of these panels is from top to bottom, the reader's glance moves from the entrance of the dock to the sea, with Bond's foreshadowing words echoing the outcome of the narrative bringing the particular story into context.

This page underscores, early on, what the comic book is set out to achieve, articulating the conceptual dimensions its frame narrative embodies. Steampunk, therefore, encompasses more than a set of stylistic patterns; it is an approach interwoven with discourses of history, philosophy, and fiction.

6.1.2 "Allan and the Sundered Veil"

The short story at the very end of the first volume of *The League*, "Allan and the Sundered Veil", is not only a pastiche to Yellow Book fiction of Victorian England, and the writings of H. P. Lovecraft and H. Rider Haggard, but it could be seen as a mise-en-abyme (also identified by Jones; 116), although less obvious than the *Tales of the Black Freighter* is in *Watchmen*. "Allan and the Sundered Veil", similarly to the opening pages of the comic book itself, amplifies the essence at heart of steampunk storytelling: the subjectivity of experience, as opposed to an objective history, its effects on the perception of time, and our self-realisation amidst space, time, and narrative.

The story is a retelling of Quatermain's visit to a Lady Ragnall to obtain a mysterious narcotic only she is in possession of, taduki. However, things take a horrid turn as Quatermain goes through a transformation. "It seems to me as if your friend has not been taken by the drug into a previous life, as has transpired before, but rather torn from past and present altogether, taken to a wasteland that is quite beyond all time, or space, or anything we know" [*The Veil* 7], Marisa, the "obsidian" servant tells Lady Ragnall.¹⁹ Torn such way from time and space, Allan finds himself in a strange place where he teams up with, amongst others, the Time Traveller from H. G. Wells's *The Time Machine*, who explains to him that he discovered a leakage between our time-space and another "pit". He also reveals that the horrid creatures Allan and the others encountered during their adventures (known to readers of the original novels) have come through this hole, which he intends to close now, but which he can only do if they get through an army of vicious monsters (Morlocks and the Mi Go, H. P. Lovecraft's creations, members of the Cthulhu-universe). They emerge victorious, but continue to drift in Time as the Time Traveller's vehicle is damaged. They come across a set of gigantic, uncanny floating rocks which the Traveller identifies as chrono-crystals, "a fourth-dimensional mathematic growth within the five-dimensional fluid underlying all existence" [15]. Through these looking glasses, Allan sees what he believes to be visions, which are, in fact, events happening in *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen* volumes, some we have encountered already (like Allan lying in the opium den, visited by Mina), some are yet to take place (like the attack of the Martians on Earth at heart of the plot of the second volume). Allan is soon torn out from this netherworld, returning to Lady Ragnall's library, only to realise that another Lovecraftian monster is using his body as a bridge

¹⁹ The same page numbering strategy applies to the short story. Page [1] is the cover page of *Allan and the Sundered Veil*.

between the netherworld and the world we know, in order to conquer it. He helplessly witnesses as the monster kills Lady Ragnall, and that Marisa is using ancient tribal magic to rid his body of its intruder. Then, a few decade-long jumps in time later, we see Allan travelling to the East to find a substitute to ease his hunger for drugs with opium. Lying deliriously in an opium den somewhere in Egypt, a stunning woman with cherry red lips and a scarf around her neck arrives, and starts talking to him. The realisation dawns upon him, and he tries to send her away, but she is persistent. “And everything occurred, according to its course” [24], which the reader, having read the volume already, recognises as the origo of the story of the first volume’s narrative into which this short story is embedded. The non-linear structure of time is mirrored thus in this “temporal loop” of reliving beginnings, linked through Quatermain’s person, or in a more abstract way, the subjectivity of experience (Jones 119).

Such disruption of the linearity and comprehensiveness of time and space ties in with the anachronistic, history-rewriting tendencies of steampunk. “Allan and the Sundered Veil” provides guidance for the reader as to how to engage with steampunk literature, time travelling, or alternate history narratives by thematising, and, in a way, undermining the most common traits of such stories.

6.2. Proto-Heroes: A Victorian Justice League

Standing in between the mighty heroes of Greek mythology and the early-20th century pulp vigilantes, protagonists of Victorian fiction constitute a separate level of hero-ness. Although many are driven by the prospect of personal gain, power-hunger, or a will to survive, there is one underlying feature which they share with their ancestors and their future incarnations: they follow their own judgement, for better or worse. This they have in

common with the majority of the superheroes of the 20th century, making them a convenient choice for an intermedial/transmedial/transgeneric adaptation. Furthermore, through the critical re-evaluation of fictional narratives deeply embedded into the literary (and cultural) canon, *TLEG* questions the legitimacy of the existence of any canon of any sort. Choosing the comic book as a medium for such an endeavour addresses the discourses around the legitimacy and worthiness of comics as a form of artistic expression.

The initial volume of *The League* is about how the League of Extraordinary Gentlemen came to being and how they handled their first mission (although later volumes reveal that this was not the first or the last such taskforce). Mina Murray, from Stoker's *Dracula* (1897), is tasked with assembling a group of adventurers to assist the British Empire in avoiding a rather gruesome outcome of events, the outbreak of a great war between nations. The mysterious chief is referred to as M. (thought to be Mycroft Holmes, from Arthur Conan Doyle's works, revealed to be Professor Moriarty, Sherlock Holmes' nemesis) by Murray's contact Campion Bond (one cannot help but think of Ian Flemming's fabled spy, although apart from their surname and their profession, they share no other feature). In this Cold War-like climate, Murray travels to a Cairo opium den to hire the second most prominent member of the group, who, later, would reappear in every sequel of the series, Allan Quartermain, the protagonist of H. Rider Haggard's colonial stories such as *King Solomon's Mines* (1885). With the assistance of Captain Nemo, Verne's legendary captain from *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea* (1870), they travel to Paris, where a certain gentleman with valuable abilities is to be found. Aided by Le Chevalier Auguste Dupin (Edgar Allan Poe's detective) they hunt down a dangerous beast killing prostitutes, who is revealed to be Mr. Hyde, or Dr. Jekyll, R. L. Stevensons's protagonist from *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1886). The third member they recruit while investigating a case of mysterious pregnancies at a disreputable school for "wayward gentlewomen"

[*TLEG* 42]; with Hawley Griffin (from H. G. Wells' *The Invisible Man*, 1897) the League of Extraordinary Gentlemen is complete. Some hidden clues are scattered across the volume implying that this is not the first such assembly, such as the old photograph Mina Murray discovers in the gathering room of a group of men and women, including, amongst others, Gulliver and Fanny Hill, as indicated on a parchment below [*TLEG* 53].²⁰

The centre of the plot is a stolen crystal called the cavorite (another H. G. Wells reference), an anti-gravity material the Empire would use to travel to the moon. It is believed to be taken by the Doctor (Fu Manchu, Sax Rohmer's villain), a Chinese warlord, now East End crime lord, who will most likely use it to destroy the city out of vengeance. The League's task is to localise the Doctor's centre of operation, and reacquire the cavorite. Shortly after their success, Professor Moriarty is revealed to be the villain, part-time secret service agent, part-time crime-lord; only this time his two personae share a cause, namely the elimination of the Doctor. This act (the bombing of the East End, that is) reverberates the pattern seen with Ozymandias, whereby both men exhibit the heroic persona on the one hand (superhero and superspy, respectively), while selfishly striving for dominance and power (as an entrepreneur and as a criminal mastermind). The generic tradition of dual identities is also present to some extent in the case of the other members, though not as emphatically. Mina Murray is not only a divorcée, but also an ex-vampire still bearing the marks (hence the red scarf around her neck); Allan Quatermain was once the adventurer, but now is hardly more than a sack of bones awaiting death in an opium den; Dr. Jekyll staged his death and is living underground as Mr. Hyde eventually takes over; Hawley Griffin, too, faked his death. These heroes resemble those of the Silver Age of comics, as they are, first

²⁰ For a full account of literary references see Nevins.

and foremost, humans, rather than channels of communication for articulating sets of values or ideologies.

TLEG, even more so than *Watchmen*, constitutes itself as a self-contained superhero-mythology, driven by nostalgia and a will to honour not only the comics medium, or the superhero genre, but fiction as such. Accordingly, the heroes featured exist in what Umberto Eco called an *oneiric* climate, a time-space unique to the comic book format, where, as the heroes participate in narratives throughout the issues, time passes, their experiences and memories are expanding, thus, after all, they age, only that they do not. It is a paradoxical situation, where the heroes are consumed by the plot-induced passage of time, but they remain inconsumable due to their mythological nature (Eco 149-151). Each literary character featured in all four volumes of *The League* exists in the *oneiric* climate of literary fiction, and thus substantiates a mythology of the universe of *TLEG*.²¹

6.2.1 Mina Murray

The character of Mina Murray is based on the one with the same name in Bram Stoker's *Dracula*. The events of the novel occurred before the events of Volume I. of *TLEG*: *Campion Bond* comments on Mina's disposition quite early:

Dear lady, what am I to say? Your history has placed you in far beyond the social pale. Divorce is one thing, but the other business...ravished by a foreigner and all that. Quite against your will, of course, but then, people do talk so, don't they? [9]

²¹ An aspiration further supported by the extra material in Volume I, *The New Traveller's Almanac* in Volume II, or the Black Dossier.

Although she was bitten by the Count in Stoker's novel, and eventually transformed into a vampire herself, she ceased to be one after the Count was killed, and only the scars remained. She does not have a superpower anymore per se, but she is exceptionally resourceful (she is the only one to realise that instead of trying to beat up the Invisible Man in an attempt to capture him, it is more sensible to pour white paint all over him so that at least his contours become apparent), and very talented in organising (after all, she is the appointed leader of the group, a sort of executive employed by the British Empire). In *Watchmen*, the two incarnations of Silk Spectre embodied a meta-commentary on superhero comics' tendency to marginalise and/or simplify female characters. Mina Murray's potency, already delineated in Stoker's novel, is further amplified in *TLEG*, giving way to a tongue-in-cheek commentary on the conventions of female characterisation in the medium of comic books and the genre of adventure and science fiction. She is a powerful leader with authority as an executive and gravitas as a woman, who exceeds the boundaries of any archetype used to categorise women in superhero comics, let it be damsel in distress, or femme fatale.

6.2.2 Allan Quatermain

This character shares his initial traits and his personal history with H. Rider Haggard's adventurer who first appeared in the novel *King Solomon's Mines*, and was featured later on in numerous sequels and short stories. He is an elderly gentleman, once adventurer of exotic colonies, hunter, ladies' man, drug addict; Quatermain prefers to lead and does not bend easily to the will of others, especially if the other in question is a female, which brings an

intriguing dynamic to him and Mina, the appointed leader of the League.²² They are often teamed up for smaller assignments, providing plenty of scenes in which their personal relationship is further developed. Their melodramatic relationship occasionally proves to give comic relief as well. They fight like a married couple, Mina having trouble substantiating her authority, while Allan is appalled by female leadership, constantly attempting to undermine her, acting surprised when her wit eventually helps out of a situation, which is basically always the case.

Thinking in terms of function, Quatermain is the action-man of the group, he is always the first to engage a target, to act upon a situation. Presumably due to his past as a hunter he is no stranger to physical violence. The first time we encounter him in the comic book he is lying helplessly in an opium den in Cairo, hardly conscious. He comes to his senses when two men attempt to rape Mina while she is trying to convince him to join The League. His typical characteristic of a strong and protective man, a hero, is dormant until now, when it is triggered by a damsel in (temporary) distress, much like Superman hurrying to the rescue of Lois Lane. The spotlight, however, is only temporary, as Mina remains the appointed leader of the group, a hierarchy he is never able to truly accept. Furthermore, his early hallucinations mirror the immanent tension of steampunk between what is real and what is fiction, an aspect which will be discussed later in greater detail.

²² The film adaptation is quite interesting in this regard in that it is Sir Sean Connery who plays Quatermain, and naturally he is the lead, while Mina's character hardly bears any resemblance to the stern, clever young woman Moore wrote her to be.

6.2.3 Dr. Jekyll/Mr. Hyde

Having staged his death, Dr. Jekyll fled London and settled in Paris, where Mr. Hyde took over entirely; this is what happened after the events of Stevenson's Victorian Gothic novel *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*. The classic case of a split personality, Dr. Jekyll and his evil twin embody the role of the tough guy in this curious assembly of heroes: he is violent, cruel, and listens to no one except Miss Murray, who, presumably by treating Hyde as a gentlemen ("Mr. Hyde, you are hurting my hand, sir, and I will not allow that. I should be grateful if you would release me." [136]), appeals to his suppressed noble subconscious Dr. Jekyll, and manages to regulate him more often than not. A convenient parallel can be drawn between Dr. Jekyll/Mr. Hyde and Marvel's Bruce Banner/The Hulk not only because the latter is technically the 20th century copy of the former, but also in terms of their role in their respective (super)hero-assembly. Although Bruce Banner is one of the most capable scientists in the world, thus being of help to the team in terms of scientific matters, his alter-ego, The Hulk, is of more substantial use during combat to the Avengers (the team he is in). Dr. Jekyll, likewise, tends to remain in the background, occasionally humouring his teammates with his philosophical or psychological insights to team dynamics [70-71] or human relationships [63], whereas Mr. Hyde is always the first to join Quatermain in initiating hand-to-hand combat. A further similarity between the two characters is that their transformations occur when they are angry, anxious, or provoked in any way.

The link between Stevenson's antihero and Moore's monster is laid out by Mina Murray in a letter to Champion Bond.

I am convinced that this appalling creature is none other than the missing Doctor we were seeking, despite all appearances to the contrary. You informed me, Mr. Bond, that he'd vanished from London some twelve years ago after a scandal and was feared a suicide. You, however, thought that he might be in Paris. You were right. [...] I only need to say that the man who woke was not the man we put to sleep. I think you understand me. [37]

During the capture of the beast we are offered with what is arguably an excessively interconnected intertext quite the overindulgence for an Easter Egg-hunter²³. Poe's Le Chevalier Auguste Dupin, from "The Murders in the Rue Morgue" (1841) and "The Purloined Letter" (1844) is revealed to be the local contact of the British Intelligence in Paris. In one of the first panels we see him, he is standing under a street sign which reads 'Rue Morgue', an overt extracompositional reference to said short story [23]. Then he recalls the murders he investigated, each corresponding to the mysteries he encountered, which here are thought to be committed by an ape-like creature (Mr. Hyde). One of the victims, an unfortunate prostitute, is called Anna Coupeau, or Nana, bringing Emile Zola's ill-fated protagonist into mind. Last, but not least, the pattern of a homicidal monster targeting prostitutes at night, and the images of mysterious, shady figures walking the streets of a city in the dark, contemplating murder mysteries, invokes Moore's epic, *From Hell* (1989-1996), his take on the Jack the Ripper investigation [22-28].

Metareference (to literary databases, generic conventions, and narrative traditions) is used for multiple purposes here. Through such an intertextually burdened sequence of

²³ An inside joke hidden intentionally by creators. The term is usually used in the context of interactive media, such as video games.

panels, quite typical of Moore one should say, *TLEG* accentuates its desire to contemplate on the relationship between reality and fiction, history and heritage, and the agency of the individual, a theme along which his entire work seems to revolve (see Carney). Moreover, by featuring not only one, but two of the most prominent literary detectives of all times, Sherlock Holmes and C. Auguste Dupin, the comic book promotes a reading attitude most fitting to it: the science of deduction, or ratiocination, a combination of intellect and creative imagination.

6.2.4 Hawley Griffin

Yet another example of extracompositional metareference through intertextuality is Hawley Griffin, tying in with the already articulated transmedial connections. Much like in the case of the characters discussed above, Moore stayed true to the original source for the most part. The protagonist of H. G. Well's novel *The Invisible Man* (1897) is an albino man called Griffin, a chemist/chemist, experimenting with optics, more precisely, with ways how light bends when encountering different substances. Motivated by feeling outcast as an albino and wanting to gain world dominance as a scientist, his research aim was to discover how to become invisible, a task he achieved early on. However, he failed to find a way to reverse the process, thus his blessing is also a vulnerability as he must remain naked in order to avoid being seen. He moves to a secluded village where he hopes he can find a cure for his state, but is discovered eventually, which leads to his death. He is violent tempered and aggressive, with no remorse for the people who fall victim to his struggle to keep his state hidden.

His name is Hawley Griffin. He made himself invisible last year. He'd also secretly made a half-wit albino man invisible, as a guinea pig. It was the albino man who was kicked to death by an enraged West Sussex mob mistaken for Griffin. Griffin, meanwhile, fled to Edmonton and made himself very comfortable in Miss Coote's school. [50]

From *Campion Bond*'s update to the League the slight plot alteration Moore effectuated is revealed. This Griffin is the same as Wells', only his temper is moderated, amplifying the slippery, untrustworthy nature of the original character. As such, he takes the role of the stealth-guy in the hero-assembly, spying, tailing, eavesdropping, and occasionally distributing fatal blows from behind to defend his teammates in need. He joins the League only when he is promised a cure for his condition, and a royal pardon for his crimes, thus his alliance is based not on trust or common goals, but more selfish motivations. He disobeys Mina on more than one occasion, though throughout the first volume, his private investigations prove useful for the team (in Volume II. he betrays the League and humanity when he teams up with the attacking Martians).

6.2.5 *Captain Nemo*

Verne's captain emerges from the depth of the ocean on the early pages of the comic book to rescue Mina Murray and Allan Quatermain from their pursuers in Cairo. In Verne's novel *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea* the fate of the captain is left unresolved as he disappears. His physical rendering in *TLEG* is suggestive of his Eastern origins, a trait only revealed in Verne's novel *A Mysterious Island*, in which Nemo meets his death; therefore the events of *TLEG* can be placed in between the two novels on a fictional timeline. Nemo

articulates his nationalistic sentiment quite clearly early on. When Mina Murray corrects him saying “your empire” to “our empire”, his response is: “No. The Indian mutineers may have surrendered, but I did not. If I work with the British, it is because I no longer feel even Indian. The sea, now, is my only nation” [19]. Shortly after, there is a panel with a direct reference to his name’s etymology. When Quatermain asks him who he is, his reply is “No-one”; Nemo, in Latin, means No-one.²⁴ We see his face outlined in black and green, and the next panel shows his head’s silhouette with what seems like tentacles in the background [19].

The inclusion of Captain Nemo is of significance as it leads the way to a multi-layered appropriation of literature and genre. Not only is *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea* a 19th century novel like the other referred works; Nemo is a creation by Jules Verne, ancestral father of steampunk literature. Through his character the already established connections and familiarities between literary fiction and comic books are chiselled, so much is evident. However, featuring him as one of the leads draws in a historical and generic framework with a narrower focus, namely proto-steampunk science fiction. This act could be seen as a writer honouring (or mocking) a master, or, as I would like to argue, it is an invocation of a sub-level of genre-consciousness. A petite mise-en-abyme in the sense that, contrary to the other members of the League from mere science fiction worlds, the proto-steampunk hero illuminates the most defining aspect of the comic book as a whole: its genre. As such, it contributes to what could now be seen as the fundamental aspiration of *TLEG* to situate itself in relation to its medial and generic history while promoting a critical and alert reading of all things written.

²⁴ Which roots even deeper in Western literary traditions, as Homer’s Odysseus used the same pseudonym to trick the cyclops in the cave.

6.3. Victorian Penny Fiction and Modern Comic Books

The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen is not the first occasion on which Moore engaged with the Victorian world. The graphic novels *From Hell* and *Lost Girls* are testimonies of a thorough knowledge and critical interest in the subject, whereby Victoriana's nostalgic attitude towards the late 19th century and our cultural history is demystified. While *From Hell* places mythology at its centre, and *Lost Girls* addresses questions of youth, gender and sexuality in Victorian literature, *TLEG* exhibits a genuine interest in its history as a medium (of comics) and its position in the continuity of the history of serially printed media. In this series, Moore merged two conventions, the superhero and the neo-Victorian, to explore, amongst others, the themes of the individual's agency in history-making, and that of the reader in meaning-making. Moreover, the meta-reflexive act of recycling 19th century literary characters as members of a superhero-assembly accentuates their shared origins, namely the printed format, as Rutherford perceptively pointed it out in a thorough study on Moore's appropriation of Victorian juvenile print forms and *TLEG* (127).

The first issue begins with a fictional editorial, setting the mood for the entire series: "Greetings, children of vanquished and colonised nations the world o'er. Welcome to this Christmas compendium edition of our exciting picture-periodical for boys and girls" [*TLEG* 5]. A "picture periodical for boys and girls" is a description which already points at the similarities between the two media involved. Furthermore, the register of each editorial note in the following issues is tinted with archaic expressions and references reminiscent of another age:

In the next number of our picture periodical there are further scenes to divert and astonish, including episodes of a bawdy nature that our Lady readers, being of a more delicate sensibility, may wish to avoid. [30]

The next edition of our new Boys' Picture Monthly will continue this arresting yarn, in which the Empire's finest are brought into conflict with the sly Chinese, accompanied by a variety of coloured illustrations from our artist that are sure to prove exciting to the manly, outwardgoing youngster of today. [54]

Tremble, dearest Reader, at the horrid spectacle of Johnny Chinaman, armed with the mighty weapons of our new Electric Age and bent on turning them against our island home! Can any force prevail against this terrible affront? Do not fail to reserve the next edition of our illustrated chapbook and thus learn the outcome of this rousing and invigourating narrative! [78]

The most ostentatious feature of these snippets is the manner in which they channel the traditions of Victorian publications for children, while, through the chosen medium of comics, it is a self-conscious intention to establish a continuity of printed media, whereby 19th century "chapbooks" and 20th century superhero comic books are intrinsically linked. In *Watchmen*, as we could see, the systematic metareferential construction extended only as far as superhero comic history (and continuity) is concerned. In *The League*, a whole new territory is targeted, one which already has been teased with characterisation and storyworld-building discussed above. This piece of sequential art exploits the uniqueness of comics as a medium, its format, to engage in a dialogue with another medium it has more than enough in common with.

TLEG, much like *Watchmen*, is not short of prosaic and other amendments, out of which the longest and most consistent, the short story, has already been discussed. Apart from the intertextual references within the narrative, there are numerous pages of fictional advertisements (a steampunk vehicle with “methane-burning engine” for example [12]), colouring pages (portraits of Dorian Grey and his true self in particular, with colouring instructions such as “light anemia” or “spoiled fruit sienna” invoking the macabre [11; 13]) and games (leading Quatermain through a taduki-maze, for instance [15]).²⁵ The inclusion of these serves a different purpose, however, compared to *Watchmen*. There, the supplementary prose pieces’ primary aim is to enrich the storyworld through documentary segments from characters’ past to shape a cohesive universe contained within the graphic novel, whereas in *The League* they are extra-compositional references to the traditions of another medium whose origins, form, and function are similar to that of comics: Victorian periodicals for young readers.

The issues of *The League*, as well as “Allan and the Sundered Veil”, the short story at the end of Volume I, draw inspiration from a widely popular genre of the time, the penny dreadful. *Watchmen* gave hints as to the origins of the interwoven comic book (*The Tales of the Black Freighter*) in the form of a fictional article on EC Comics. Similarly, *TLEG* features the cover of “Allan and the Sundered Veil”, which contains two such allusions: “The ‘Boys’ First Rate Pocket Library’ of Complete Tales” was indeed a penny dreadful, and Aldine Publishing Co. really printed this series (as observed by Rutherford; 132). Such direct references and contextualising, on the one hand, elicit strong feeling of constructedness in the reader, potentially threatening the aesthetic illusion. However, they also contribute to a more critical and vigilant reading attitude on the other, provided that the

²⁵ Pagiarising starts on the first page of the Cover Gallery.

reader is familiar with the conventions, histories, and databases referred to. The “first kind of truly mass reading”, penny dreadfuls can be summarised in four characteristics: “bad style, cheap format, excesses of expression, implausible plotting” (Bristow 11-13). It is not hard to see the similarities with the superhero comic books of the 20th century, a connection which further amplifies the medium-critical tone, and the related social and cultural discourses around the effects mass production of serially printed stories have on their target audiences, and the values and ideologies they channel, let them be those of imperial Englishness or the anxiety of a modern age.

Another element worthy of consideration is the manner in which Moore playfully engages with the Victorian middle class parents’ fear for their children’s souls, threatened by such scandalous narratives.

In the next number of our picture publication we see astonishing reversals as apparent victory is swallowed in impending catastrophe. Mothers of sensitive children may wish to examine the contents before passing it on to their little one, removing those pages which they consider unsuitable. [*TLEG* 102]

The warning comes only a few pages after the arguably disturbing panels of Mr. Hyde tearing human bodies apart [91-92; 97]. Rutherford makes illuminating remarks in this regard when she argues that

[t]his coupling of moralising text and sensational imagery is a running joke throughout the series, enjoyable for its sheer absurdity but also based on the contradictions of a middle class that felt that children “should be reared in a calm and healthful atmosphere as far aloof as possible from the restless world of their

elders” (St. James Medley [1863] qtd. in Drotner 1988: 80), while simultaneously accepting child labour, urban poverty, and imperial exploitation. (Rutherford 137)

Such a socially intricate commentary gains new dimensions when thinking of Fredric Wertham’s crusade to eliminate the comic book industry in the 1940s, for precisely the same reasons. Only a slight adjustment is required: when talking about superhero comics, “urban poverty” should be extended to urban lifestyle as such, and instead of “imperial exploitation” there were corporations taking advantage of the working class and lower middle class, the target audiences of early superhero comic books. Thus, *TLEG* labours to accentuate a cohesive continuity of two media (novel and comic book), two genres (the penny dreadful and the superhero comic book) and two epochs (Victorian England and a “Comic Book Nation”)²⁶ within the gigantic framework of storytelling (fictitious as well as real).

²⁶ See Wright (2003)

6. Conclusion

The comic book is an incredibly versatile medium, and has proven, from its birth in the late 19th century through its early years and maturation during the 20th century, that there is a potential within that many other products of popular culture lack. Although it is mostly the underground-inspired works that gained critical acclaim (*Maus*, *Fun Home*, *Persepolis*), the most typical and popular genre to date is still that of the superhero. Superhero comic books are unique in that they have a very close and, in a sense, intimate relationship with their readers. Audience participation in comic book reading is special, due to the fact that a more intense investment is required during the reading process (for McCloud's closure, as we have seen). The two comic books discussed here draw the reader in in a more complex way, forcing him to develop a new reading attitude where even the disruption of the language and parole of the medium does not interrupt the development of the aesthetic illusion.

Watchmen and *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen*, though they may seem far-fetched a comparison at first, both exhibit a similar attitude towards their heritage (the superhero comic book, printed periodicals, a piece of fiction, and a historical narrative). Through the reinterpretation of known characters (superheroes, or protagonists of 19th century novels), these pieces of sequential art reinterpret fiction and history while inviting the reader to revisit his memories of both, consequently promoting a more vigilant manner when engaging with these texts.

Hopefully this thesis may serve to illustrate that the comics medium, and the superhero comic in particular, is capable of more than just an "orgy of redundancy" (Eco), namely of offering a truly complex and multi-layered content that is not only self-conscious, but self-critical in that it thematises its own generic and medial conventions in many more ways than I had the opportunity to present here.

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Abstract

When thinking of graphic novels, ones that are critically acclaimed, and loved by fans as well as targeted by academic attention, three titles come to mind: Frank Miller's astonishing reboot of the Batman series, *The Dark Knight Returns*, Art Spiegelmann's *Maus*, and Alan Moore's and Dave Gibbon's *Watchmen*. These three works have been analysed by a surprisingly wide variety of angles. There is, however, an approach that rarely has been touched upon in comics studies: metareferentiality.

Following the path Werner Wolf had laid down by opening up the term to transmedial dimensions, in my thesis I would like to concentrate on a specific aspect of metareferentiality: illusion-breaking. Through the exploration of the metareferential potential in the involvement of prosaic texts, the alternate history setting, the ironic approach to generic conventions and the heavy presence of intertextual links, I would like to see if our suspension of disbelief withstands the siege of this level of constructedness in Alan Moore's *Watchmen* and *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen*.

Zusammenfassung

Wenn man an von Kritikern gefeierte Comicromane denkt, die sowohl von Fans geliebt werden, als auch akademisches Interesse hervorrufen, so drängen sich drei Titel auf: Frank Millers beeindruckender Neustart der Batman-Reihe, *The Dark Knight Returns*, Art Spiegelmanns *Maus*, und Alan Moores und Dave Gibbons *Watchmen*. Diese drei Werke sind unter Einbezug einer überraschenden Anzahl von Blickwinkeln analysiert worden. Trotzdem gibt es einen Zugang, der bisher selten behandelt wurde: Metareferentialität.

Im Bezug auf den Ansatz von Werner Wolf, der den Begriff für transmediale Dimensionen geöffnet hat, möchte ich mich in meiner Arbeit auf einen spezifischen Aspekt von Metareferentialität konzentrieren: das Aufbrechen von Illusionen. Durch das Erforschen des metareferentialen Potentials im Miteinbeziehen von Prosatexten, alternativen Geschichtsverläufen, dem ironischen Zugang zu Genrekonventionen, und der starken Präsenz von intertextuellen Verbindungen, möchte ich feststellen, ob unsere Aussetzung der Ungläubigkeit diesem Grad an Konstruiertheit in Alan Moores *Watchmen* und *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen* standhält.

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