SPACE AS HISTORY: *WATCHMEN* AND URBAN IMAGERY IN SUPERHERO COMICS

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Within the superhero genre comics are mostly used to narrate stories. However, since comics exist as a spatial narrative language, they are forced to simulate time and modulate the narrative rhythm using space as their only resource. For this reason, comic theorists and scholars such as Umberto Eco [1], Will Eisner [2], Scott McLoud [3], and many others have repeatedly pointed out how comic artists create their stories by modifying the narrative structure, the layout of the pages, the size of the panels, the style of drawing, etc. Therefore a master of this language, such as Alan Moore, has to constantly try and break the storytelling conventions established by mainstream comics. He aims not only at telling us *stories*, but also to express nothing less than his personal conception of *history* itself. In fact, as many have noticed, Moore's comics reveal an historical *Weltanschauung* that can be associated even to Walter Benjamin's philosophical perspective:

> Watchmen *presents the baroque thesis that in order to understand humanity as a meaningful phenomenon, you must comprehend that time is an illusion and that everything is happening simultaneously. Henceforth in Moore's work, history emerges out of individual epiphanies, moments of illumination and apocalypse through which concrete, singular events find themselves meaningfully located within a sense of simultaneity, a perspective of totality. [...] Thus, Moore has developed in his work a theory of history as dialectical mediation, which he eventually relates to the formal, stylistic elements of the comic book medium itself, as a kind of aesthetic apocalypse of simultaneity available to the reader* [4].

I will not closely discuss these philosophical themes, because Sean Carney's essay is easily retrievable on the Web and it seems to me one of the most insightful, as well as most scholarly texts I have read to date concerning not only Moore, but comics in general. My paper will focus instead on how Moore's conception of comics and history is developed in the graphic novel *Watchmen* [5], drawn by David Gibbons and film directed by Zack Snyder (2009), as far as it concerns my research subject, namely the representation of New York City in superhero movies and comics. In fact, in *Watchmen* as well as in most superhero narratives, these linguistic features and theoretical issues are embodied in a specific subject, the image of the city, which is both a "physical" place and a spatial metaphor for the meaning of the whole superhero genre. As Scott Bukatman has perfectly demonstrated in his *Matters of Gravity: Supermen and Special Effects in the 20th Century* [6], in the classic DC and Marvel Comic series the urban environment is directly connected with to utopian dreams of liberty from social and physical boundaries. In this sense, the big city represents a crucial element of the ideological discourse of the genre. It serves as a link between its fantastic characters and the urban environment. Metropolis, Gotham City and New York all stand for an obvious metaphor of American culture and its democratic values.

Watchmen clearly deconstructs this *topos*, showing a gloomy New York, which has nothing to do with the 1930s or 1960s progressive ideals which were at the origin of characters such as Superman and Spider-Man. To the contrary, *Watchmen* is a critical allegory that chronicles the spread of 1980s neoliberal hegemony within Western countries. In this paper, I will therefore analyze how this conception of the city is reflected by the formal choices adopted by Moore, Gibbons and Snyder.

The Superhero City

Since their very first appearance in New York newspapers during the last decade of the 19th century, American comics have always been strongly connected to the metropolitan environment, not only because they were born within an urban culture industry, but also because the representation of the city immediately became one of their most reoccurring themes. From the Lower East Side immigrant slums of Richard F. Outcault's *Yellow Kid* (1894) to the phantasmagorical architectures of Winsor McCay's *Little Nemo in Slumberland* (1905), American comics explored the narrative and the visual potential of the modern metropolis (fig. 1). Later, the superhero genre was deeply influenced by Siegel and Shuster's decision to choose the big city as the natural setting for

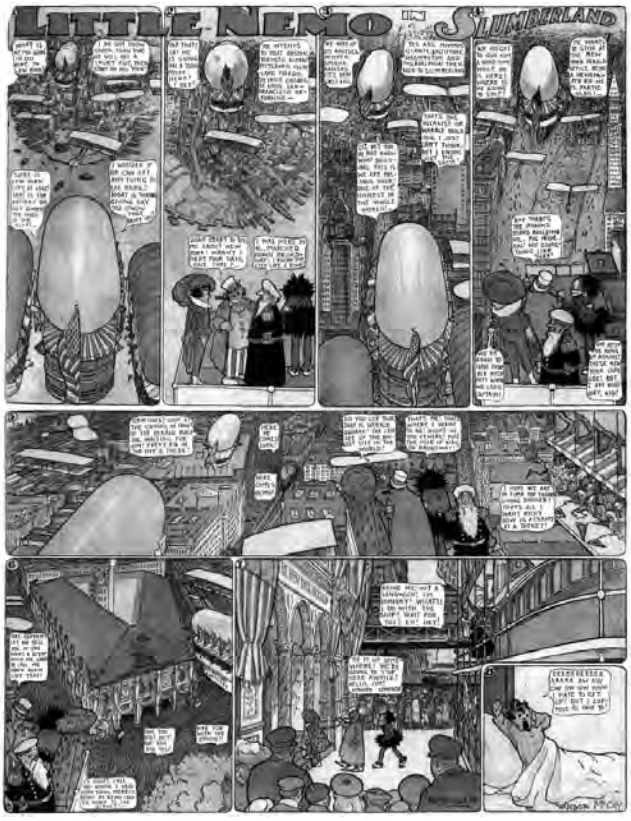

Fig. 1 – Winsor McCay, "Little Nemo in Slumberland", in *The New York Herald*, November 20, 1910.

their Superman. The image of Superman's Metropolis could not help but remind the readers of New York, which at the time was the skyscraper city *par excellence*. The two major comic publishers, National Comics (later known as DC) and Timely Comics (later known as Marvel), had their headquarters in Manhattan and characters like Batman [7], the Human Torch and the Submariner lived out their fantastic adventures there. New York icons and colors thus became an essential ingredient of the genre, expressing, as much as the superhero figure itself, the utopian and ideological issues at stake.

However, the depiction of the urban environment gradually emerged as a privileged subject also for those authors and genres that aimed to offer a counter-image of the US landscape and lifestyle. Since the 1960s, several underground comic artists, such as Harvey Pekar, the Hernandez Bros, the World War 3 group, as well as the masters of the modern graphic novel, Will Eisner, Ben Katchor, Chris Ware, Paul Karasik and Dave Mazzucchelli, gave us much more complex and nuanced representations of the American urban environment, often reporting in a very critical manner deindustrialization, suburbanization, gentrification and other dark sides of the contemporary Western metropolis. It is in this different context that *Watchmen* was created. Before writing this graphic novel, between 1985 and 1986, Moore had in fact already inaugurated his re-interpretation of the Golden Age superhero genre in *Marvelman.* He had expressed his radical beliefs in *V for Vendetta* [8] and re-booted obscure characters such as *The Swamp Thing* [9] using a literary and philosophical approach. Already in these early texts, Moore had adopted a spatial displacement of traditional American superheroes. Within the whole *Marvelman* series it is impossible to find a single panel depicting the classic urban superhero scene. Moreover, the plots deliberately reverse Golden Age archetypes. Another *Watchmen* achievement, the creation of an alternate history can be found in *V for Vendetta*. The dark, repressive portrayal of London in this graphic novel was a perfect antithesis of the New York superhero, as its Victorian horizontal buildings aptly contributed to the oppressive atmosphere of this dystopian tale.

Moore's "revisionist" approach will always be a distinctive and lasting feature of his artistic career because he is one of the most self-conscious comic artists in the history of the medium. Revisionary superhero comics have been seen by the critics, most notably Geoff Klock in his well-known *How to Read Superhero Comics and Why* [10], as a major trend in the contemporary history of the medium: as we will see, Snyder's film testifies that this renewal has perhaps finally arrived to comic book adaptations as well. In fact, if we look at the evolution of superhero adaptations on the big screen we can easily notice that there's a rough symmetry between comic book history and its contemporary Hollywood counter-parts. First came *Superman* (Richard Donner, 1978), then *Batman* (Tim Burton, 1989), Marvel superheroes (*Blade*, Stephen Norrington, 1997; *X-Men*, Bryan Singer, 2000; *Spider-Man*, Sam Raimi, 2002) and finally, the most recent revisionist graphic novels (*From Hell*, Albert and Allen Hughes, 2003; A *History of Violence*, David Croneneberg, 2005; *V for Vendetta*, James McTeigue, 2005; and *Wanted*, Timur Bekmambetov, 2008). Donner, Burton and Raimi had therefore already established a classic panorama of urban superhero cities (Metropolis, Gotham City and New York) on the big screen. Donner's *retro* taste, Burton's dark style, as well as the 1960s light colors of Raimi's films are perfect representations of the classical conception of the superhero urban space, i.e. a spectacular arena for the fights between superheroes and crazy villains, corrupted powers or mad scientists (or capitalists/scientists). Snyder's New York, to the contrary, resembles more the cities found in other superhero movies or TV series; images either directly or indirectly influenced by Moore's work (*Unbreakable,* M. Night Shyamalan, 2000; *The Matrix* trilogy, Larry and Andy Wachowski, 1999-2003; *Heroes* [11], Tim Kring, 2006-2010, and *Wanted*).

The Graphic Novel: the Grid and the City

Any close examination of *Watchmen* must start from the extraordinary work that Moore and his artist Dave Gibbons by focusing on the structure of the comic page [12]. Choosing as their model the Golden Age nine-panel layout of classic superhero comics (fig. 2), the authors utilized this grid with unprecedented creativity and freedom, transforming its regular and symmetrical look in order to undermine the conventions and clichés that were usually found in older comic books. The narrative and visual "puzzle games" that were created with this potentially repetitive structure were too many to list here, but most revolved around the idea of crosscutting and mirror-like com-

Fig. 2 – Bob Kane, "Batman", in *Detective Comics*, no. 28, National Comics, New York 1939.

positions (fig. 3). Contemporary actions as well as past and present events are constantly shown in parallel, while panels, pages and entire sequences are juxtaposed alongside in spectacular patterns. Due to this strategy, the reading of *Watchmen* requires a much more complex approach than a normal superhero comic book would. It asks its reader to follow several situations related to different time/space coordinates and very often forces them to reconstruct the linear sequence of events later, by going back through the book and re-reading the text again. As a result the breathtaking rhythm that typically characterizes superhero comics is impossible to find here. *Watchmen* readers are forced, by the linguistic choices that compose the text, to slow down their reading and are entrapped in a visual structure that mirrors not only the characters' condition but also the theoretical and philosophical themes discussed in the narrative.

When one thinks of Manhattan, it is impossible, if even unconsciously, to not have in mind the grid that the city is based on [13]. The numbered and regular streets and avenues that cover almost

Fig. 3 – Jerry Siegel, Joe Shuster, "Slam Bradley", in *Detective Comics*, no. 2, National Comics, New York 1937.

entirely the surface of the island form an amazing visual pattern. Scott Bukatman noticed that the newspaper grid (from which American comics probably inherited some of their characteristics) could be related to the urban organization of US cities. He additionally outlined that the colorful Sunday pages where comics originally appeared were often the only break from the boring sequence of black and white columns [14]. Superhero comics, with their phantasmagoric metropolitan landscapes, emphasized therefore precisely this subversion of the urban grid. While often blocked by the nine-panel layout, even the earliest Golden Age superhero comics broke this rigid cage to explore other spectacular solutions that cannot be found with the same regularity in any other comic book at the time. In particular, we can find these solutions in the first Siegel & Shuster works, especially those published before Superman [15], and in Timely's *The Human Torch, The Sub-Mariner* and other Jack Kirby series. From the 1960s onward, initially with innovative series by Marvel and later with post-Neil Adams' and Frank Miller's works, that grid was totally abandoned in the superhero genre. This was done with a coherence that most likely could not be found in any other popular comic (just think about European comics for instance).

Watchmen dramatically reverts this trend: it chooses the grid as its general pattern, and also when it does not present the conventional nine panels, it still respects its deepest structure, using panels which are multiples or submultiples of the standard one (figg. 4-5). The page layouts as well as the representation of the city are then conceived to be an immediate expression of the philosophical and political themes that the graphic novel is about. The grid and the gloom of New

Fig. 4 – Alan Moore, Dave Gibbons, *Watchmen*, no. 1, DC Comics, New York 1985.

Figg. 5-6 – Alan Moore, Dave Gibbons, *Watchmen*, no. 1, and *Watchmen*, no. 12, DC Comics, New York 1985 and 1986.

York are meaningful elements in Moore's deconstruction of the ideological form and content of traditional superhero comics because they make the creation of phantasmagoric sequences and consequential utopian aspirations impossible.

Furthermore, in *Watchmen*, an event that had haunted previous superhero stories eventually happens. In other series superheroes had, for fifty long years, saved New York City from destruction. Every week, every month, they defeated crazy villains who schemed to erase the symbol of American ideals. Yet in *Watchmen* it is actually one of these heroes who decides to blow up the city and succeeds quite easily in his effort. This is why the six splash pages opening the final chapter of *Watchmen* are so important (fig. 6). The splash page became a traditional feature of action comics predominantly after Jack Kirby's innovative work in the 1960s, but was used in Timely Comics already in the 1940s. Their usual function, however, was to increase the level of spectacle, astonish readers and speed up the rhythm of the narrative. But, Moore and Gibbons used this solution to show a silent, terrifying scene of mass slaughter that pushed the reader to reflect about the meaning of the pages. Therefore, the hidden Ur-event of the whole genre is represented through an unconventional use of one of its most common linguistic features that additionally interrupts the regular layout of the graphic novel itself. This image, never seen before, was the ghost that obsessed the superhero genre from its very beginning. The bright mythology expressed by the traditional New York superhero is thus replaced with Moore's pessimistic view of human history.

The Movie: Flashbacks, Slow-motion and Backward Tracking-shots

Given what I have said so far, it is easy to understand why Snyder's film, being very faithful to the original graphic novel, cannot be fully associated to any other superhero movie previously produced in Hollywood. Even if it could not imitate all the stylistic features of the original text, the *Watchmen* movie is nevertheless one of the most faithful comic book adaptations ever. Its zealous rendering of the main visual, narrative and philosophical aspects of the graphic novel is really surprising. Moreover, its partial box-office failure can probably be related to the film's indifference to Hollywood's current standards of action, sex and violence. Although in an attempt to reassure the producers, Snyder craftily strengthened the few action sequences and made the sex scene much longer than in the comic (where it is contained in one page only), box office revenues dropped after the first weekend [16]. This attests that *Watchmen* is not a conventional superhero blockbuster and that it could not be easily appreciated by the average action-movie fan. More importantly, Snyder's filmic choices reveal a deep understanding of Moore's work in regards to the connection between the spatial language of comics and the author's conception of history.

First of all, it is important to notice that Snyder takes advantage of our distance from the historical setting of the story in order to increase the alienation effect of the alternate history's strategy. In 2009, *Watchmen*'s 1985 is not an alternate present anymore: it is an alternate past. Snyder stresses this from the very first sequence when we see a character, the Comedian, watching some dated (and quite kitsch) TV programs with a manifest satisfaction that immediately makes us aware of the gap between our present and the diegetic events. The urban environment we are going to see for the rest of the movie is therefore doubly far from our reality and the 1980s atmosphere reinforces its ambiguous charm. The Comedian lives in a luxury loft on the top of a tall building. As a result we are able to see the night skyline in the background, i.e. a glamorous view of New York. However, the character is suddenly beaten to death by an unknown aggressor and thrown into the street. The camera follows him falling out of the window, until he sinks into the darkness. From the very beginning, we are forced to realize that this city is not the same city we have seen in other superhero movies.

Immediately after this opening scene, the title sequence starts. It is a rapid *resumé* of the historical events that have occurred between 1940 and 1985 in a *Watchmen* fictional reality. We see the superheroes living through many important episodes of post-war American history; scenes that give us several fragments of the familiar, yet estranged, United States. Thereafter what we view is the search for the Comedian's killer in New York by the main characters. This pursuit leads us through dark alleys populated by lunatics and dangerous gangs, into decaying neighborhoods filled with prostitutes and porn movie theaters and toward dreadful secrets hidden in the most glittering skyscrapers.

Many shots of the city are filmed through the enormous window of a skyscraper. We can therefore clearly see a quite depressed metropolis and a skyline that is much less impressive than that of the real New York; a city dominated by grey clouds, the Twin Towers and a sky crowded with anachronistic dirigibles. Once again, an alienation effect makes this metropolis both attractive and disturbing. The World Trade Center silhouette is another reference that could not have the same meaning in the graphic novel and it gives the spectator quite a strong sense of nostalgia. Likewise, the clouded grey atmosphere strengthens this melancholic mood, while the bizarre dirigibles and a huge pink elephant balloon seem to be glimpses of a scary future, ruled by hypocrite environmentalist-corporate capitalism.

From a stylistic point of view, Snyder cannot obviously reproduce the graphic novel's grid or any other of its spatial tricks. The director therefore chooses to insist on three combined elements: the flashback, slow motion and the backward tracking shot. The already mentioned title sequence shows these solutions at their apex. Not coincidentally, this is the portion of the film where Snyder was free to experiment in terms of film style, with no need to respect the original text in order to condense the complex story (400 pages) into a two-and-a-half hour movie. This sequence is a long flashback, made of static compositions and a succession of very slow camera movements – often drawing away from the subject – that perfectly embody the whole movie's aesthetic choice. Snyder renders, in fact, the graphic novel's sophisticated temporal and spatial structure by proposing an intricate accumulation of flashbacks that undermine the conventional linear storytelling of the contemporary blockbuster movie. His constant use of backward movements, which stress the regressive and dangerous direction of the story's events, and recurrent use of the slow motion effect remind us of the anti-naturalistic nature of this work and of the comic language itself.

The final sequence shows us an apocalyptic scene: a giant crater in the center of Manhattan. This last shot of New York adopts again one slow backward traveling shot above the ruined city (as if the camera had quite literally become Benjamin's Angel of History). Even if this is not a flashback, its effect is precisely that of reversing the movie's narrative. Just as in the beginning of the movie we see again the Comedian's yellow pin and we hear Rorschach's voiceover. Whatever happened between the beginning and the end of the movie will be totally forgotten, as soon as Rorschach's diary will be available to the public.

It seems therefore evident to me that only through his use of film language and the representation of the city, was Snyder able to convey Moore's idea that human history will be inevitably catastrophic if mankind continues to put its destiny into the hands of political leaders and freakish egomaniac individuals:

> *Anarchy [...] is clearly the only way, the only morally sensible way to run the world. Everyone should be the only master of their own destiny, their own leader [...]. It is about 0,0000001 per cent of the world's population that causes the 99,999999% percent of the world's problems. And that tiny percentage [...] it is leaders* [17].

The same tragic events will repeat again and again like a flashback, progress will always turn into regression like backward camera movements, the passing of time will be forever blocked by an inescapable present that is like a slow motion sequence. The myth of the fast, exciting and progressive New York life-style depicted by previous superhero comics and movies, therefore, appears here only as the childish dream of an oppressed and naïf American psyche.

1 Umberto Eco, *Il mito di Superman*, in Id., *Apocalittici e integrati*, Bompiani, Milano 1964.
2 Will Eisner, *Comics and Sequential Art*, Poorhouse Press, Tamarac 1985; Id., *Graphic Storytelling*, Poorhouse Press, Tamarac 1996.
3 Scott McCloud, *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art*, Kitchen Sing Press, Northampton 1993.
4 Sean Carney, "The Tides of History: Alan Moore's Historiographic Vision," in *Image Text: Interdisciplinary Comics Studies*, vol. 2, no. 2, Winter 2005, available at the address http://www.english.ufl.edu/image-text/archives/v2_2/carney/, last visit 5 June 2011.
5 Alan Moore, Dave Gibbons, *Watchmen*, DC Comics, New York 1986-1987.

6 Scott Bukatman, *Matters of Gravity: Special Effects and Supermen in the 20th Century*, Duke University Press, Durham 2003.
7 Gotham City is of course a nickname for New York, but the link between Batman's city and New York City is even more explicit: in *Detective Comics,* no. 31, September 1939 (the fourth Batman story ever), we read "In a New York Night:" before "moving" to Gotham, there was Manhattan…
8 Alan Moore, David Loyd, *V for Vendetta*, DC Comics, New York 1982-1989.
9 Alan Moore, *The Swamp Thing*, DC Comics, New York 1983-1987.
10 Geoff Klock, *How to Read Superhero Comics and Why*, Continuum, New York 2002.
11 *Heroes* presents many other similarities with *Watchmen*'s plot and themes, in particular that of a conspiracy to destroy New York and establish a new political order. However, *Heroes* "political" background seems to be much closer to American democratic ideology than *Watchmen*. Not coincidentally, while in Moore and Gibbons' text the city gets destroyed, in *Heroes* the protagonists finally succeed in avoiding the explosion, as it was a perfectly American optimistic reply to the British, pessimistic graphic novel.
12 See, for example, Spiros Xenos, "Reading Space in Watchmen," *Watchmen Comic Movie*, http://watchmencomicmovie.com/downloads/reading_space_in_watchmen.pdf, last visit 5 June 2011.
13 About the symbolical meaning of the Manhattan grid see Rem Koolhaas, *Delirious New York. A Retroactive Manifest for Manhattan*, Oxford University Press, New York 1978.
14 Scott Bukatman, *Matters of Gravity. Special Effects and Supermen in the 20th Century*, cit., p. 187.
15 In their series *Federal Men* and *Slam Bradley*, created for *Adventures Comics* and *Detective Comics* between 1936 and 1937.
16 Whereas *300* (Zack Snyder, 2007) had a 65 million dollar budget, and earned 456 million dollars at the box-office worldwide, *Watchmen* had a 130 million dollar budget, and a worldwide gross of "only" 185 million dollars (see www.boxofficemojo.com, last visit 5 June 2011).
17 "Alan Moore on Anarchism," in *YouTube*, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fKfF-nxjDi0, last visit 5 June 2011.