R for Reappropriation: The Function of Utopia in the Superhero Narratives of Alan Moore

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Introduction

Superman was originally cast into the role of the "Champion of the Oppressed." Soon after his initial appearance, however, his mission was quickly rewritten in a way that served to legitimize the existing social structure rather than repair or replace it. This became the model for the majority of comic book superheroes, and despite various developments in artistic and narrative style, this bourgeois superhero — the defender of private property — remained dominant for more than half a century. Comic writer Alan Moore's superhero narratives are generally associated with the deconstruction of the superhero genre, yet this paper will argue that these narratives go beyond deconstruction by returning the superhero to his or her original dissident position within a framework of class conflict. This is accomplished through the suggested achievement of utopia brought about by the efforts of superheroes in Moore's three famous superhero narratives: *Marvelman, V for Vendetta,* and *Watchmen.* Incidentally, these same superhero narratives, in particular *Watchmen,* are often credited with the postmodernization of the superhero genre during the 1980s, both for their intertextuality and formal innovations.

In order to justify the above assertions, this paper includes a regrettably brief examination of the history of the mainstream superhero narrative that considers the relationship between the concepts of ideology and utopia. More specifically, it will look at both the legitimizing function of ideology in Golden Age and

Silver Age superhero narratives, as well as the delegitimizing effect of utopia in Moore's postmodern superhero narratives. Although all of the texts examined here are comics and, therefore, produce meaning for the reader through the combination of word and image, the method of analysis deployed here will not specifically address the visual nature of the medium. Almost all of the criticism written on Moore's works focuses entirely on his creative use of visuals to produce new narrative effects; so this article will instead set the discussion of the visual aside in order to carry out a thematic analysis (this is done so, of course, at the risk of incurring criticism for implying the possibility of making a distinction between form and content).

Ideology and Utopia

The relationship between ideology and utopia has been debated by philosophers, sociologists, and literary critics for hundreds of years, so a full discussion of this history is beyond the scope of this paper. The main argument of this study will be based on Paul Ricoeur's model outlined in his *Lectures on Ideology and Utopia.*

In his book titled, *Ideology*, Terry Eagleton suggests that perhaps the most widely accepted notion of ideology is expressed by sociologist John B. Thompson when he writes, "To study ideology is to study the ways in which meaning (or signification) serves to sustain relations of domination" (5). Paul Ricoeur's definition of ideology resembles Thompson's in that it encompasses ideology's legitimizing function, yet Ricoeur also combines the Marxist notion of ideology as distortion with the sociological view of ideology as a system for integration.

> Ideology... bridge [s] the tension that characterizes the legitimation process, a tension between the claim to legitimacy made by the authority and the belief in this legitimacy offered by the citizenry. The tension occurs because while

> the citizenry's belief and the authority's claim should correspond at the same level, the equivalence of belief with claim is never totally actual but rather always more or less a cultural fabrication. (13)

While the function of ideology is to obscure social contradictions and to legitimize existing power structures, "the function of utopia [is] to expose the credibility gap wherein all systems of authority exceed... both our confidence in them and our belief in their legitimacy" (Ricoeur and Taylor 17). For Ricoeur, a utopia is a non-existent idealized image of society that depicts radically different economic and social configurations. A utopia's ability to serve as a critique of ideology comes from its "nowhere" function: the process of envisioning a nonexistent space, from which a comparison against actual society becomes possible (17).

Ricoeur examines Althusser's argument that ideology is something we never have direct access to, much like the unconscious. He suggests that "ideology is not something that is thought, but rather something *within which* we think" (120). In order to overcome this dilemma of never being able to speak of ideology in terms that are not ideological in themselves, Karl Mannheim sought a totalizing sociology whose objectivity was proportional to the ability to include everything within the model. This ultimately leads to the problem of the impossibility of truly objective observation, since the sociologist is himself, at one point or another, a part of the object that he or she is attempting to observe (Ricoeur 166). Ricoeur concludes that the solution to this paradox is the function achieved by utopia narratives:

> The only way to get out of the circularity in which ideologies engulf us is to assume a utopia, declare it, and judge an ideology on this basis. Because there is no possibility of becoming an absolute onlooker, then it is someone within

> the process itself who takes the responsibility for judgment.... Therefore, if there can be no transcendent onlooker, then a practical concept is what must be assumed. (172-73)

If one examines the history of superhero narratives with Ricoeur's model in mind, one can conclude that the virtual absence of utopian themes from early superhero narratives obscured their ideological nature. The following section of this paper will consider how this exclusion of utopian themes developed, as well as how changes in the production and distribution systems eventually created the potential for utopia to be reintroduced as a critique of the ideology of the superhero.

Ideology of Golden and Silver Age of Superheroes

The majority of the superhero narratives from the Golden Age and Silver Age of comics can be viewed in terms of their ideological function, or the ways that they indirectly reinforced the values of the dominant social class in America. The method for both identifying the ideological nature of these texts and then locating their position within a larger social framework is based on the first section of Fredric Jameson's *The Political Unconscious*. There he presents three levels of interpretation, each of which view texts on an expanding scale. On the first level, which deals with the interpretation of individual texts, the text is viewed as a "socially symbolic act" or more specifically, a symbolic resolution of cultural contradictions (66). As this applies to all cultural and literary texts, great importance must be placed on the method of interpretation that reveals the obscured cultural content within the text's formal appearance.

On Jameson's second horizon of interpretation, the focus is no longer on the inner mechanisms of the individual text itself; rather the text is now to be taken as a single utterance (or *ideologeme*) within the dialogical framework of class struggle

(70). Jameson points out that this dialogue cannot be observed outright in its true form, because:

> [B]y definition the cultural monuments and masterworks that have survived tend necessarily to perpetuate only a single voice in this class dialogue, the voice of a hegemonic class, they cannot be properly assigned their relational place in a dialogical system without the restoration or artificial reconstruction of the voice to which they were initially opposed, a voice for the most part stifled and reduced to silence, marginalized, its own utterances scattered to the winds, or reappropriated in their turn by the hegemonic culture. (71)

Here he describes the process by which the dominant class reappropriates cultural and literary texts by essentially *rewriting* them in a form that works to legitimize the dominant class's claim to authority. Jameson cites the example of how Christianity, originally a slave religion, was converted into "the hegemonic ideological apparatus of the medieval system" (72). In order, therefore, to restore a given text to its proper position within the dialogue of class conflict, a further rewriting becomes necessary.

In Superman's first adventures, his enemies range from corrupt lobbyists and munitions manufacturers (*Action Comics* #1 & #2) to a mine owner who refuses to pay workers compensation (*Action Comics* #3) and a deceitful business man who uses Superman's image to market his products (*Action Comics* #6). Superman uses his powers in these stories to protect the weak and to stop people who had been corrupted by greed. Superhero research authority, Peter Coogan, suggests that similar themes can be traced back much farther than the SF and pulp magazines that people usually consider to be the origin of the superhero.

> The superhero code, a primary element of the hero's mission, probably finds its cultural archetype in the stories of

> Robin Hood, the outlaw who rights wrongs. Robin Hood follows his own code, ignoring the law, but meteing out justice to the oppressors and alleviating the needs of the poor. Thus he especially serves as a model for the early Superman and Batman stories in which the heroes serve justice, not the law. (124)

By recognizing that the mission of these two prototypical superheroes was to overcome a threat that ordinary people stood no chance against, then the subsequent rewriting of their narratives into conformist forms becomes readily identifiable.

In Thomas Pynchon's article, "Is It O. K. to Be a Luddite?" published in *The New York Times Book Review* on October 28, 1984, Pynchon describes the role of the traditional folk hero as a kind of *badass* who, "when times are hard, and we feel at the mercy of forces more powerful... we, in seeking some equalizer, turn [to], if only in imagination, in wish... — the djinn, the golem, the hulk, the superhero — who will resist what otherwise would overwhelm us" (40). This suggests that the essence of the superhero, regardless of the physical form that he or she manifests, has always been a projection of people's wish for a defender of the weak who stands up against injustice.

So what exactly changed when Superman assumed his conservative role? Coogan, quoting from Thomas Andrae's "From Menace to Messiah," says that as Superman's enemies were changed into elite masterminds who employed the lowly criminal class to aid them in overthrowing the status quo, Superman was effectively recast as the hero of the middle class.

> Once the character [Superman] was purged of his reformist tendencies and turned toward battling criminals rather than corrupt politicians and capitalists, evil was transformed from a social problem to a personal one. Superman's struggle

> against evil "becomes confined to the defense of private property and the extermination of criminals rather than a struggle against social injustice and an attempt to aid the helpless and oppressed." (Coogan 146)

Umberto Eco argues that this change toward a more conservative Superman can be explained as an inevitable result of the endless serialized narratives demanded by comic books' publication system at the time.

> [H]e [Superman] must be an archetype, the totality of certain collective aspirations, and therefore he must necessarily become immobilized in an emblematic and fixed nature which renders him easily recognizable... but since he is marketed in the sphere of "a romantic" production for a public that consumes "romances," he must be subjected to a development which is typical, as we have seen, of novelistic characters. (110)

Eco emphasizes the significance of this paradox which requires Superman to take action without actually having an impact on the fictitious world he inhabits. In order to accomplish this, "Superman must make virtue consist of many little actions on a small scale, never achieving a total awareness. Conversely, virtue must be characterized in the accomplishment of only partial act, so that the plot can remain static" (124). The ideologeme resulting from this narrative structure, although determined by publishing requirements for serialized fiction, tells the reader that radical social change is neither desirable nor possible.

One other major factor that excluded the potential for utopias in superhero narratives was the impact of the Comic Code, established in 1954. Although the Code was put into effect in response to the graphic content of postwar horror and crime comics, the guidelines were applied to all comics produced by publishers who participated in the self-censorship program. It

consisted of forty-two points relating to the content of the narratives and images in comics. Here are two examples from the list:

> General Standards Part A:
>
> 1. Crimes shall never be presented in such a way as to create sympathy for the criminal, to promote distrust for the forces of law and justice, or to inspire others with a desire to imitate criminals.
>
> General Standards Part B:
>
> 4. Inclusion of stories dealing with evil shall be used or shall be published only where the intent is to illustrate a moral issue and in no case shall evil be presented alluringly nor so as to injure the sensibilities of the reader.
>
> (Nyberg 166-68)

In her study of the evolution of the Comics Code, Amy Nyberg argues that the Code severely limited creative development in the medium for the next several years (159). Since newsstands and other retailers were apprehensive about negative responses from outraged parents and religious leaders, they generally refused to stock comics that did not feature the Comics Code seal of approval on the cover (Hajdu 320-21). It was not until after comic specialty stores became the primary system of distribution for comics that mainstream artists and writers were able to produce comics outside the code with any hope of getting their work seen by large numbers of people.

Utopia in Alan Moore's Superhero Narratives

Alan Moore is neither pro-utopian nor pro-superhero (Khoury 114-15); rather the major function of Moore's superhero utopias is instead their ability to unmask ideology. Within Ricoeur's model, Moore appears to fit Fredric Jameson's description of an "anti-anti-utopian" position as he is critical of the exclusion of

utopian themes, but does not have faith in any single plan for humanity (*Archaeologies of the Future* xvi). The presence of utopia in each of the three superhero series discussed below can be viewed then instead as a critique of the ideology represented in the conventions of the genre.

Miracleman

Moore's remake of *Marvelman* was originally serialized in British comics magazine, *Warrior*, from 1982 to 1984, and subsequently published in the U. S. by Eclipse Comics under the title of *Miracleman* due to complicated copyright issues. Although both refer to the same character, the name Miracleman will be used to refer to Moore's remake for the remainder of this paper.

Moore's *Miracleman* considers what would happen if a superhuman did not elect to become an unconditional supporter of his society and instead disrupted pre-existing power structures in accordance with his own concept of justice. Coogan says that the power of the superhuman is a metaphor for primal powers located in the collective unconscious of the masses that can only be held in check through advanced forms of social control (146). Therefore, casting the superhero into the role of social defender can be seen as a resolution of this conflict; an ideologeme that implies the inherent virtue of mid 20th century American society by saying, "If Superman likes it, it must be good!"

Neither Miracleman nor his human counterpart, Michael Moran, were written as having radical political views, yet despite their apparent lack of political zeal, Miracleman and Miraclewoman decide to actively pursue the realization of a utopian society for all of humanity. In issue #16 (Moore's final contribution to the series) a Miracleman of the future reminisces about the beginnings of his utopian project. He says, "The Bates Affair, with forty thousand dead and half of London simply

gone, exposed us to the world, and we planned how to deal with earth overtly, having no chance now of working secretly..." (3). Facing no immediate danger and having become acutely aware of the need to alleviate human suffering after the massacre in London, he decides to fulfill the role of savior from the traditional SF superman possibilities of ruler-savior-destroyer (see Coogan 142-43), and sets to work fashioning a new world.

As an ending to this sixteen-part-series, Moore describes this entire refashioning of humanity in less than twenty pages. The basic steps of Miracleman's program include the elimination of nuclear weapons, all forms of currency, and most of all, humanity's basic needs for survival. He also brought about the legalization of all drugs, along with better education to warn people of the dangers of misuse, and finally a eugenics program designed to allow all women on earth to give birth to a superhuman as the beginning of the next step in the evolution of the human race. Here, just the presence of a utopia is of much greater significance than the content of the actual utopia itself. Moore, who has expressed a distrust of both utopian projects and superheroes, appears to be just toying with several of the 1960s counterculture's ideas for a better world rather than seriously trying to prescribe radical reforms for economic, political and social systems.

Even without going into greater detail when describing the workings of Miracleman's refashioned society, Moore seems to be saying that even in the best case, any attempt by superheroes to change the world can only end in some form of benevolent fascism. Despite this pessimism, the story does offer a utopia that exposes the ideology of mainstream superheroes and by doing so, attempts to return the superhero to his origins as the defender of justice, rather than the state.

Watchmen

In 1985, Alan Moore and artist Dave Gibbons were commissioned by DC to produce *Watchmen* as a twelve part superhero comic book mini-series. The story is set in an alternate universe that closely resembles our own world, but there superheroes participated in the main events of the twentieth century and considerably altered the events of history from 1938 to 1987. For example, through Dr. Manhattan's omnipotent presence, the Vietnam War ended as a victory for the U. S. and as a result Nixon entered a third term in office after term limits were repealed.

Unlike *Miracleman* or *V for Vendetta*, the superheroes of *Watchmen* do not break with the conventions of the superhero genre; rather they can be seen as caricatures of it (in fact the characters were all based on Charlton Comics superheroes, which DC had recently acquired the rights to). Moore's other two narratives discussed in this paper are significant because they demonstrate the limitations of the superhero genre by showing what possibilities had been excluded. *Watchmen*, on the other hand, works within the framework of the superhero genre to expose its contradictions. Rather than demonstrate the previously unexplored potential of the superhero, Watchmen plays with the idea of what should go wrong if superheroes fail to make a distinction between justice and the state.

The suggested utopia at the end of *Watchmen* is quite cynical. Although Veidt does prevent the impending nuclear destruction of the planet by sacrificing half the population of New York in an alien attack hoax, he does not appear to have any plans for a radical reorganization of society. As head of an economic empire, Veidt's power was derived from his ability to control the flow of capital through existing markets. Any utopia he might have created, therefore, would have been based on the survival of the same economic system where he acquired so much wealth.

The frames below show just how important Veidt considered his investments:

Fig. 1. Veidt identifies consumer spending trends. *Watchmen.* Chapter 10, page 8 (excerpt). © DC Comics.

Just minutes before he executes his planned "alien" attack, he is seated in front of thirty-six television monitors, carefully observing recent changes in marketing trends.

Veidt provides no details for how he will actualize his utopia or what form it will take, but given his sacrifice of three million people to bring it about, the reader is likely to have more misgivings about this utopia than the ones suggested at the end of *Miracleman* or V.

Fig. 2. Veidt announces his future utopian plan. *Watchmen.* Chapter 12, page 20 (excerpt). © DC Comics.

Regardless of whether the utopia at the end is depicted in a positive or negative way, the miniseries format of *Watchmen, Miracleman,* and *V for* Vendetta allowed for the inclusion of a beginning, middle, and end; a structure that stood in stark contrast to the ones found in standardized superhero sagas that often spanned several decades.

V for Vendetta

V for Vendetta was serialized simultaneously with *Marvelman* in *Warrior* from 1982 to 1985. After *Warrior* went under, a completed color version was published by DC in 1988. The setting of the story is a near future England where a fascist regime has taken power and the population is being monitored through a threatening state surveillance system. The superhero, V, employs terrorist tactics, such as bombings and manipulation of the state-controlled media in order to expose the vulnerabilities of the government. V is eventually successful in educating the citizenry to a point where an anarchist revolution begins.

In contrast to *Watchmen*, this story derives significance from its depiction of the Superhero's clear distinction between *justice* and *authority*; a concept that had remained systematically obscured throughout the history of the genre. This failure to distinguish between the two concepts invariably located the superhero on the same side as the state, despite the fact that he or she had no formal ties to the government. His or her prosocial mission was offered as the only sensible option, since in the ideological world of the traditional superheroes under the Comic Code, the state is synonymous with freedom and justice.

From V's perspective, however, justice and the state are incompatible. In a dramatic depiction of this tension, V is shown speaking to the statue of justice as if she were an unfaithful lover:

Fig. 3. V's self-dialogue with the statue of justice.
V for Vendetta, page 41 (excerpt). © DC Comics.

Here, the state's version of justice is represented as deception and betrayal. V's superhero mission, then, is to make the citizenry aware of this deception and to encourage resistance against it.

The relationship between the superhero and anarchy as a political system, however, is somewhat contradictory. While the traditional superhero often sidesteps the law and acts as a vigilante, his concept of justice still reflects the values of the state. Another contradiction also exists in that even if the superhero displays anarchist qualities, his or her defining characteristics are not compatible with a society that rejects the very concept of a ruler. By definition, the superhero is superior to the average person and, therefore, could easily come to be depended upon as a leader. According to Moore, the danger in this kind of thinking is that dependence on someone like a superhero could lead directly to fascism (Khoury 116). *V for Vendetta* can, therefore, be viewed as Moore's solution to this dilemma. V's anti-fascist mission is aimed at making people aware of their dependence on authority and encourages them to take control of their own lives. The only way that a superhero could radically alter society without establishing himself as the leader of its next configuration

would be to empower people to the point that they are no longer dependent on leaders or hierarchical structures for social management.

Since most mainstream superhero narratives did not involve confrontation with entire political systems, V's tactics for battling his foes more closely resemble those of a terrorist. In most mainstream superhero sagas, evil is almost always embodied by a single enemy or a small group of enemies, so big guns or *kung fu* serves as appropriate tools for confrontation. When the enemy is an oppressive police state, however, the superhero cannot accomplish his or her mission with only physical combat. V does use explosives and physical force, but always as part of his ultimate mission to make people aware of the possibility for greater self-empowerment and freedom.

Fig. 4. V reveals his ability to manipulate the government's mainframe computer. *V for Vendetta,* page 201 (excerpt). © DC Comics.

Rather than take on the army singlehandedly, as a typical superhero might do, V manipulates the same infrastructure and technology that is used to control the public in order to stimulate them to take action. This idea of technology being turned against the dominant class is again expressed through the metaphor of infidelity.

V reveals (continuing with the metaphor) that although his lover, Justice, had been unfaithful to him and wound up in the bed of the state authority, he has managed to seduce Fate (the name of the central computer system that allows the current regime to maintain control over the masses) and use her to focus the energy of the people so as to ignite a revolution. Technology, then, is shown to be a three edged sword. There is the typical dichotomy between technology as the tool for emancipation of the human race from basic necessities, and technology as the tool of the dominant class in order to perfect its means of oppression. Moore suggests that if the technological tools of social control were placed back in the hands of the citizenry, technology could also help in uniting people against their oppressors.

The result of the revolution is never depicted and the anarchist utopia being promised is described in oversimplified terms just to excite people so that they would be willing to fight.

The actual viability of an anarchist revolution, however, is less important here than the presence of its discussion in a superhero narrative at all. Just as in *Miracleman*, the concept of the utopian ending itself functions as a critique of the ideology of superhero comics and has forced contemporary writers of superhero concepts to either directly address this dilemma or at least offer some explanation for why they avoid it.

Fig. 5. Eve assumes the role of V and leads the rioters to revolution. *V for Vendetta* # 10, page 258 (excerpt). © DC Comics.

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