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# The Evolutionary Potential of Metacriticality in Reference to *Watchmen* — the Graphic Novel by Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons

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Abstract

In this article I discuss the impact of self-awareness and metacritical tendencies within the texts of popular culture on the development of genres in the politypical chain. Preliminary analysis proposed in the second part of this paper concerns the contemporary comics — which represent the blurring of boundaries between “high” and “low” culture. As the subject of research in this brief study I chose Moore’s graphic novel *Watchmen*, which exemplifies the evolutionary changes associated with a metacritical attitude introduced in a schematic area of American superhero graphic stories.

Because of their thematic and formal diversity, graphic novels have become an area of restless disputes among researchers involved in genre studies of cultural texts. Any satisfactory boundaries of graphic novel genre are determined and the use of this term is characterised by high flexibility.<sup>1</sup> Of course there are attempts to designate the distinctive features which may characterise the graphic novel genre (indicating its similarities to the literary novel, transparent categories of the beginning and the end of a story, the narrative continuity of the structure, the use of literary narrative, a referral to an adult reader, conscious artistic value of the text, the emphasis on aesthetic, the tendency to look for new means of expression, and the volume of such publications) (Birek 2009: 248). But as long as the proposed definitions are based on the classical theories of categorisation, their effect on the study of comics will be negligible. This is because it seems impossible to determine the necessary and sufficient standards within every graphic novel. The differentiation among this subcategory of comics resembles the fluent and processual space of the literary novel (which is not equivalent with annexation of the graphic novel into literature itself). This element, understood in the Bakhtinian way, finds its reflection in different kinds and styles of graphic novels. In both cases — literary and graphic novel — the temptation to construct a normative definition must

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1 For example, it is still widespread in the Polish media to use the term as a mark of every comic book. In France, “graphic novel” often is referred to any issue of illustrated books series, which are published in one section (about 50 pages) and present a relatively complete plot. In the United States the willfulness in naming comics goes further. Publishers call a “graphic novel” collective issues of comic books in view of their bulk. Each such collection, released in the form of a suitably thick book, is signed under this term.

fail. Fortunately, there are other solutions. One of them is to create a theoretical basis for the subsequent analysis provided by the typology based on a prototype categorisation theory and the politypical chains theory (Sawicki 1981). Running contextualisation and comparing analysed novels with a constructed prototype allow to capture both — changing conditions within the text as well as situations in the book market, which may affect the way comic books are being published (books, albums, issues, special editions, etc.) — and, therefore, to assign them to specific genres and kinds of the “text world”.

In this article, I would like to look closer at one of these prototype features, which has a significant impact on the politypical development of comic genres — the category of criticality.

Research issues related to criticism among phenomena of popular culture — in this case, graphic novels — guide us toward a broader reflection on the overvaluation of theory and critique in cultural studies, which has occurred since the mid 60s. The growing scientific interest in the ‘mass’ — the study of the so-called new media and communication, redefining the concept of modernism which emerged out of poststructural and postmodern reading practices — has gradually allowed the sanction of the academic discourse on popular culture and at the same time it has begun breaking the hegemony in the “high — low culture” classification. Currently, voices condemning pop culture, even these following Adorno’s negative dialectic — turned against the cultural industry and the instrumental reason — sound increasingly anachronistic. Those critiques which found “popular” equal to “mass” and “apocalyptic” are slowly being replaced by the “adjusted” ones (Eco 2010). Culture ceased to be an autonomous and elite domain; a notion of cultural production and demands, eliminating artificial divisions that are inconsistent with reality, has appeared. In some way the time of modernity has ended. It was replaced with many (post)modernities (Hansen 2009: 237). Theory has begun to carry out a revision of itself. Meta-theoretical discussions marked by mutual criticism of the 70s and 80s led to the overthrow of the methodology, language and the subject of studies. The ongoing debates, oscillating between attempts to define modernism and postmodernism, resulted in analyses of texts hitherto neglected (including comic books, films, graffiti, popular literature etc.). This opening is not only relevant to the scientific discourse. Expanding borders, their blurring, processes of penetrating, interference and convergence are characteristic mainly for the subject of the study — culture and its texts (Huyssen 1986). Tracing these unclear layers and mutual borrowings is a real challenge for contemporary cultural analysis.

In this article I would like to draw attention to one of the symptomatic determinants of these cultural changes, which, it would seem, has no place in current (rapid and consumer) civilisation. This important factor is criticism/criticality and

the category of distance which is an inseparable feature of such an attitude, even though, considering the concept superficially, it is easy to find it everywhere and classify it as a paradigmatic element of (post)modernity. An approach like this can consider as critical almost every action and event (Markowski 2007; Kraskowska 2011: 5). Remembering the dangers of the "civilization of arguments", especially related to depriving criticality its critical potential, I am going to consider this notion in the context of genre studies, paying particular attention to the critical aspect of genres' self-consciousness, which — for the purposes of this essay — I shall call metacriticality.<sup>2</sup> As an example, I have chosen the graphic novel, which, in my opinion, demonstrates the evolutionary potential of self-awareness and its impact on fundamental changes within a certain politypical chain. Graphic novels are also a characteristic subject to examine, because they represent significant displacement of the specific features of texts traditionally understood as culturally superior to the inferior — popular ones.

By analysing the texts, which are representations of the hybrid genres (Grochowski 2000; Rachwał 2000), agenetic, mixed (Nycz 1996; Sendyka 2006), blurred (Geertz 1990: 113-114), it is necessary to mind their fuzziness and flickering genre status. The attempt to capture the leading permutations as well as newly introduced elements has a form of prototype typology, not an unambiguous classification, which — in the case of hybrid genres — seems to be impossible to construct. Comic books, to which the graphic novel genre belongs, bring additional difficulties arising from the complexity of the comic "language"<sup>3</sup>. The "language" of comics, which characterises itself by the icon-linguistic narrative unity, places comics among literature, film and visual arts. At the same time, it is a separate medium which developed its own artistic identity.

There are tracks, where texts "wander", transforming, gaining importance, or dying with the genre they represent. One of these pathways appears to develop the self-consciousness of the genre (metacriticality), which has become the basis for the comic books' evolution since the mid-20th century. Speaking of the development of the comics, it is impossible to go directly towards the issue of self-aware-

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2 Thus I depart from the traditional understanding of the term, which refers to the space of meta-theory and defines the relationship between the critical texts. I am only interested in the self-critical processes within cultural texts, which significantly affect the evolution of the particular genre.

3 The terms "language" as well as "text" in this article are used metaphorically, in a wide understanding of both notions — as is the case with the concept "language of the theatre" or "film text". Comics can be safely taken, for example, as a "secondary modelling system" (J. Lotman) or verified successfully by the seven criteria of the text (W.U. Dressler). However, a problematic aspect of defining comics' semiotics remains — what the morpheme would be here — a comic bubble, a line, a point, a colour dot, a smear or maybe the whole frame or a strip?

ness in graphic novels. The first stage which opened comics to face its barriers was a breakthrough of counter-culture in the U.S. and France. Picture stories, as they were often called, had gone through the small transformations only at the time. They grew out of satirical forms of newspaper proto-comics characteristic for the late 19th century and addressed mostly the adult reader and then became a medium aimed at children (R. Outcault, W. McCoy, R. Dirks). They re-opened to the older reader in the 1920s and 30s (science fiction, adventure superhero comics), then entered a phase of politicisation, propaganda and indoctrination (1940s and 50s) till they reached the period of extreme trivialisation (late 1950s) when the Comics Code was introduced (1954) and by means of preventive censorship — in the name of struggling with violence, eroticism and the moral corruption of comic books — restricted its prospects for development and closed the genre's evolution behind the wall of schematic stories for children and young people. Fortunately, comic books changed significantly during the 1960s when Pop-art gained its popularity. It was a strong reaction to the consuming nature of Western civilisation. As a theme, it chose whatever was common, or belonged to everyday usage. It drew attention to repeatability within mass culture as well as to the blast of creativity underneath the popular. Pop-art also introduced advertising and commercial language, comics including, to the arts<sup>4</sup>. Not much later, the appeal of comics was discovered by the counterculture movement. Comics as an alternative art became a forum for discussion. The language of comics began to represent the frustrations, anxieties and desires of the youth revolution. Underground comics printing and new publishing houses grew rapidly from the mid-sixties to the late seventies.

On the pages of comic magazines, in addition to subversive content and grotesque aesthetics, distinct changes resulting from intra-critical analysis appear for the first time. Narrative representations of authors and readers (often confronting each other)<sup>5</sup> enter comic plots — full of political and moral incorrectness. Their talks and arguments have an autotelic and autothematic dimension. Also parodies of superhero stories, pastiches of popular characters and caricatures of contemporary celebrities become bread and butter during this period of comic books' history. Comics also start the era of formal experimentation, drawing numerous patterns from literature and film<sup>6</sup>. The rapid evolution of the genre through the

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4 Among other things, Andy Warhol and Roy Lichtenstein's works.

5 E.g., *Mr Natural* by Robert Crumb, Art Spiegelman's comics in "RAW" magazine or Harvey Pekar's *American Splendor*.

6 "The result of the underground" and the development of the comic genre was the birth of feminist and gay comics — which are the beginning for contemporary gender and queer comic books. In underground comics the debate related to gender equality, chauvinism, racism and xenophobia has begun. Between 1970-1992 Trina Robbins created the series *Wimmen's Comix* and published feminist comic anthologies. Robbins, with obvious irony,

underground movement and, after that, the "French revolution" under the aegis of Metal Hurlant magazine (since 1974 — including Moebius, P. Druillet, J.-P. Dionnet), has led to the metacritical perspective in relation to the devalued comic patterns of previous decades. In such circumstances the graphic novel was born.

Inheriting the underground's critical self-analysis came expressly to narrative and thematic paradigms known from the literature and became the closest comic form to the literary novel. It is the graphic novel, in which comics in general find the origins of the great transformation since the end of the 70s till today.

Authors of graphic novels (as had Will Eisner, the Western graphic novel precursor) started asking questions that had not been asked yet. And if reevaluation of (post)modern literature is seen as a transition from the modernist (epistemological) dominant to postmodern (ontological) one (McHale 1996: 335-377), comics went, in a sense, through the opposite process. Comic books could be considered the postmodern text, even when the so-called high modernism reigned in literature. Comics, creating alternative worlds, parallel universes, separate attributes of characters, and inferring from the ludic, "low" culture fair, at the same time opened themselves to other techniques and media (film, caricature, painting), which, according to such scholars as David Lodge, characterise postmodern texts and influences the diversity of literary representation of consciousness (Lodge 2003). However, when literature has begun to change rapidly, comics — and above all — the graphic novel (thanks to the growing self-awareness of the genre<sup>7</sup>) discovered for itself the epistemological space, which had been completely alien to this medium. In dozens of hastily created worlds, languages and figures first doubts ("why", "where", "what for", "how" etc.) began to emerge. The black-and-white construction collapsed. While literature pointed towards the possibilities of film and comics, the graphic novel noticed problems which have been present in literary fiction for a long time. This shift in thinking concerning what comic books are, their means and limitations, resulted in the constitution of the graphic novel as a subcategory — the separate genre among other kinds of comics in the whole graphic storytelling phenomena — one of whose main facets is the constant crossing of formal and thematic boundaries. That permanent need to ask questions at the level of a plot, narrative, relationships between author and the world presented, artistic techniques and other elements, make graphic novels continuously modify

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showed a woman in need of liberation from the patriarchy. In the wake of Trina Robbins, other authors began publishing their works. Today, one of the most important feminists in comics world is Alison Bechdel, the creator of comic strips — *Dykes to Watch out for* and the graphic novel *Fun Home*.

7 Linda Hutcheon underlines self-consciousness of text as one of the basic characteristics of postmodernism, which allows parodic gestures to appear and turns narration towards metafiction. (Hutcheon 1980; Hutcheon 1989: 3-32; Hutcheon 1988; Hutcheon 2001).

metarepresentations of the genre. The graphic novel undermines the comic categories, setting different mirrors before them and critically and curiously looking at its own reflection.

One of the graphic novels essential for the development of the genre (in the meaning I have drawn in this paper) is *Watchmen* by Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons. This comic book illustrates how the evolutionary potential contained in metacriticality has an impact on the changes within the politycal chain. In this case, the permanent changes occur in a specific kind of comic books — American superhero comics, i.e., one of the most stereotypical types of comics in the history of the medium, often perceived through the prism of these stereotypes.

*Watchmen* by Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons and Frank Miller's *The Dark Knight Returns* are considered breakthrough both by the fans and the theorists. The series, which consists of twelve issues (1986-1987), forms into brilliantly disturbing graphic novel, which settles with the myth-making era of superheroes. From the 1930s to the 1980s, the American comic books market was gradually filled with the growing universes of more and more (post)modern versions of ancient heroes and the like.<sup>8</sup> The morally virtuous character was a dominant pattern and in a number of variants of a single paradigm was juxtaposed with his opponent. However, this adventure model, being played through a series of fights, did not seem to bore the reader. Nonetheless, at some point this scheme deeply rooted in popular culture cracked. The counter-culture revolution of the 1960s, by ridiculing the infantilism of such picture stories and pointing out their propaganda and political content, changed the view of comics. The 1960s and 70s gave the art of comics a breath of fresh air and a momentum it needed to start changing. Thanks to *Spider-Man* and *X-Men*, introducing new topics, moral issues and the figure of the Other, the change of optics took place and superhero comic books found the way to reach the adult recipient, which led to a search for new narrative solutions and topics. The climax of altering the apparently fixed world of superhero stories was the metacriticality charge contained in the graphic novel *Watchmen*.

(...) Who is not afraid, he will find in *Watchmen* something completely unique, a rare hybrid which comments its own genre in a critical way, develops it, and yet is understandable to naïve readers. Indeed, this is probably the best feature of pop culture achievements — to be in dialogue with experts on the subject, overcome the limitations and reach the ignorant reader (Chaciński 2003).

Moore decided to debunk finally the image of a superhero. Even the first page of the book is revolutionary, on which the reader sees the murder scene, in which, as it turns out, the victim is one of *Watchmen* (Comedian). This solution resulted in the following experiments with reader's "horizon of expectations" among

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8 Comics published mainly by Marvel and DC.

superhero comic books (the writers have begun to kill or maim superhero icons — Batman, Batgirl, Superman, Captain America). *Watchmen*, however, breaking with black-and-white division into "good" and "bad", is mainly the murderers of immaculate image of superheroes. Relativism of this graphic novel brought to the mainstream so far unknown shades of gray — morality ceased to be a clear category and motivations of the heroes began to be directed by the fuzzy logic, which had been at that time an undiscovered land in this kind of comic. *Watchmen* gave superheroes a human face, but not in a good sense.

For example, Comedian abuses alcohol, he is guilty of rape and unjustified acts of violence, he pacified the demonstrators, he was a mercenary in Vietnam (where he had no hesitation to shoot a girl carrying his child). Dr. Manhattan is a kind of a "superman", who is tired of the past, and who, at the same time, renounces more and more his humanity. The main character, Rorschach, is a grotesque implementation of a figure of *hard-boiled* detective, taken directly from Raymond Chandler's novels. He is "the other among the others" — Rorschach compulsively hates vice and evil. He is marked by the pathological childhood and remains truly alone in his crusade, which leads him towards a mental illness.<sup>9</sup> Another example is Silk Spectre whom Moore presents as an aging beauty who lives in the past and former glory, drowning in grief, drinking glass after glass of alcohol. Night Owl II is portrayed as impotent, who, along with the order to withdraw *Watchmen* from public life, lives a meaningless existence. Ozymandias — the smartest man in the world, a businessman and philanthropist, turns out to be the author of a demonic plan endangering hundreds of thousands people ("the lesser of two evils" chosen for the sake of world peace on the eve of a nuclear war, whose beginning is counted off with the Doomsday Clock).

There are many more examples of unconventional solutions in the construction of the characters in *Watchmen*. All of them may be explained by the vision of an alternate reality of the 1980s, which Alan Moore created. For the first time, politics and social issues appeared in the comic book on such a scale, playing the key role in the structure of the whole narrative.<sup>10</sup> Moore also brought media to his story. By the time of *Watchmen*, almost the only sign of the media in superhero comics was the second identity of Superman, or Spider-Man (a journalist Clark Kent and a photojournalist Peter Parker respectively). In the graphic novel by Moore and Gibbons news programmes, talk-shows, live interviews, newspa-

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9 The name Rorschach is a clear cultural allusion.

10 The reader is presented to the "new" history of the United States, in which Richard Nixon was elected for the third presidential term and superheroes, widely regarded as renegades, operate on the outskirts of society, stigmatised and spurned by ordinary citizens. America and the Soviet Union are at the Cold War — only the presence of Dr. Manhattan (who is — literally — a walking nuclear weapon) saves the world from destruction.

per articles, etc. play an important role in a plot and are also a relevant part of the narrative structure of the text. Mechanisms of propaganda, lies, political rhetoric and persuasion are shown in a vivid way. Sensationalism, which determines reality, and its major medium — television, are tools to build a nationwide paranoia. Superhero comic books created for teenagers were the last place to look for such sharp images of social relations and politics.

Critically analysing the existing superhero stories, Moore and Gibbons presented the "real adult" fiction. Their graphic novel, in addition to the proposals from the magazines *Metal Hurlant* and *Heavy Metal* and Will Eisner's undeniable impact on the development of the comic art, initiated the time of involved main-stream comics. In *Watchmen* catastrophe, death, sickness, poverty, aging, infirmity, and many other afflictions known from the daily news appeared. The earlier superhero series were mostly dominated by the positive factors: youth, beauty, immortality, strength, faith in tomorrow. *Watchmen* is a negative pattern of that type of comic books.

Currently, the comic book market, especially its graphic novel branch, is imbued with difficult and serious issues, from the Holocaust and the Gulag to terrorism. Since such publications as *Watchmen*, unidimensionality of comics was finally shattered. *Watchmen* became a link in the politypical chain, introductory storyline solutions, without which there would be no *Martha Washington*, *Sin City* and *The Dark Knight Returns* by Frank Miller, *Preacher* by Garth Ennis, Grant Morrison's *Arkham Asylum*, and *Kingdom Come* by Alex Ross. Self-consciousness which reached graphic novels at this stage enabled a deep and critical review of its own representations. The effect was a reevaluation of superhero stories — one of the key varieties in comic books medium. *Watchmen*, however, played an important role in the transition process of the other elements of comic fiction — not only those connected with superhero plots. The main one is the structure of the narrative.

At the beginning of the third issue, *Watchmen* presents a scene in front of a newspaper stand. The owner is clearly nervous. He is commenting on the political situation in the international arena and he is underlining his confidence in the U.S. nuclear power. Next to him, there is a boy who is sitting on the ground and reading a comic book about the Black Freighter, which we, the readers, also get to know. The motive of two supporting characters gradually returns. It is one of several innovative narrative tricks used in *Watchmen*. The authors seem to go to war with every accepted solution, likewise at the level of the narrative structure. A metacriticality is clearly visible in a contestation with the linearity, uniformity and homogeneity of the narrative surface — typical features of superhero comics from the 1930s-70s.

The example of returning supporting characters in another simultaneous plot on the one hand points to the accumulation of figures (superhero comics used to be characterised by simplicity and transparency, such as a pair of leading heroes: pro-tagonist — antagonist, aides/sidekicks on both sides and objectified "persons of the background"); on the other hand, it suggests the text within the text technique. Moore did not stop by merely increasing the number of "actors". He decided to expand the relationships between the structures of the characters. The complexity of the actant model had its origins in a critical analysis of the popular adventure narrative paradigm. The decision that the protagonist could at some point be used as an aid and finally become the antagonist (Rorschach), and other similar narrative operations, have the significant influence on the literary value of the story. As for the placing text within the text — it is bound directly with metacriticality. The story of the Black Freighter and a survivor initially seems a paraliterary manipulation close to architextuality (Genette 1992). Telling the complex and innovative story, it refers to the adventurous comic books published from the mid-20s, at the same time paying them tribute and recreating them in a pastiche way. But this is only a first impression. The comic book read by the boy in the graphic novel which we try to read assumes the function of Rorschach's fate as allegory to finally become an obscure symbol of the fate of all people living in that possible alternative world developed by Moore (or to be more precisely, by the virtual, model author). This final observation, combined with the reflective echoes of *Watchmen*, leaves the reader with the eternal question accompanied by the problem of Theodicy — *unde malum?*

Further devices — to use Shklovsky's terminology — of defamiliarisation that interfere with the one-dimensional and linear narrative are recurring flash-backs run by several characters, sometimes simultaneously. The way they appear in the text recalls techniques of the stream of consciousness (Humphrey 1977). Although the thoughts in individual streams are ordered, the narrative method of transition from one stream to another and the emphasis put on the catalysts of these thoughts (empirical stimuli, memory, imagination) are deceptively similar to the methods developed in the first half of the 20th century by James Joyce and Virginia Woolf,<sup>11</sup> adapted here to the form of visual storytelling. Another example of a critical self-awareness of the genre is the apparent abandonment of the auctorial narration — until *Watchmen* the distinctive feature of the narrative in superhero comics. Moore replaced it with first-person narrator, Rorschach. To be more accurate, he used the figure of metonymy to "equate" Rorschach's voice/perspective with the bits and pieces of the diary that he had left behind. In *Watchmen* there

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11 I quote these names, deliberately omitting other important writers such as Édouard Dujardin, or Henry James, because only works of V. Woolf and J. Joyce are the examples of successful attempts to revolutionise narrative techniques.

are included also excerpts from fictional chronicles, articles, interviews, photos, fragments of lyrics, quotes and a number of literary allusions and associations with other texts related to pop culture. These are not only, it should be stressed, the mere ornaments and accessories to spice up the reading. On the one hand, they facilitate the suspension of disbelief, creating "fictional documents" of this alter-native reality; on the other hand, they form an important commentary for one of the first attempts to construct the morally and ideologically complex comic story.

All these elements create an unprecedented effort to cross the barriers of superhero genres. Thus, they involve *Watchmen* in a critical dialogue with tradition, not only of the graphic novel genre, but also the whole medium, which, for decades, was developing exaggerated simplicity and schematic solutions. Achieving self-consciousness allowed graphic novels to rebuild the old narratives into the fascinating storyworld with a strong evolutionary potential — the world as complex and surprising as his literary counterpart.

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