

OT: watchmen on trial

The Urth list — 15 messages, 7 voices, 22 Mar 2005

<https://urth.darkrealm.vip/thread/urth/4378>

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zvi at vex.net — 22 Mar 2005, 08:06

James Wynn said:

Blattid said:

No. [The Watchmen is] not a "profoundly fascist" work. It is a profound work_about_fascism. Gaaaaah.

I'd be interested in your explanation of how it was "about" fascism rather than founded on it. I'm not sure how you can say Alan Moore did not ****embrace**** the most fascistic elements of the comic book superhero genre in "The Watchmen".

James, you're right: Moore was interested in exploring the fascistic elements in comic books and wanted show how a world with real super-hero types in it might deform and react to their presence.

However, Moore is playing with the conventions of superhero comic books, while still being internally consistent and informed by them. (Not to mention being a formally powerful work with great art.) This is why both the fanboys and the critics hailed Watchmen as the milestone it is. This is also why the two of you have this difference of opinion: seen SOLELY as an internally-consistent comic book story, it's a triumph of the ubermensch -- Ozy and Dr. M do 'save the world' from itself; and the morally ambiguous Comedian and Rorschach are point-of-view anti-heroes. Seen from the outside, it reveals the core humanity of the superhero behind the mask and their weakness; as well as the way the world deforms around superheroes: it is the fascist NATURE of the superhero/overman that changes the world so that a war comes to be that the superhero saves it from. Dr Manhattan warps the world he comes to exist in: he wins the war in Vietnam, he acts as a deterrent to the Russians, and he helps prop up a (presumably) corrupt presidency (Nixon); this aggression and power leads the world into a world war.

Watchmen belong in the company of Disch's The Genocides and Russ's We Who are About To... and and yeah, even Wolfe's Wizard Knight (yay, got it back): books that twist convention and really ask the question: what if it REALLY happened to the world-as-we-know-it: superheroes, alien invasion, crash landing on an alien planet, giants and gods and knights.

Whew.

--Zvi

James Wynn — 22 Mar 2005, 08:41 · in reply to zvi at vex.net

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However, Moore is playing with the conventions of superhero comic books, while still being internally consistent and informed by them....This is why both the fanboys and the critics hailed Watchmen as the milestone it is. This is also why the two of you have this difference of opinion: seen SOLELY as an internally-consistent comic book story, it's a triumph of the ubermensch

Well, Zvi, now there are ***three*** interpretations of "The Watchmen". Perhaps it ought to have its own list. Nevertheless, characters do what they will and stories often go beyond the strict contrivance of the authors, but the one thing every author owns is the ending. And you and I ***seem*** to agree that the ending of "The Watchmen" is the triumph of the ubermensch. What shall I make of that?

~ Crush

Dan'l Danehy-Oakes — 22 Mar 2005, 09:43 · in reply to James Wynn

[T]he ending of "The Watchmen" is the triumph of the ubermensch. What shall I make of that?

Actually, even the ending is ambiguous.

It appears, in the final panel, that Rorschach's diary - which will expose Veidt's manipulations - is about to be published.

--Dan'l

You probably do not want to know what that odor is.

James Wynn — 22 Mar 2005, 11:01 · in reply to Dan'l Danehy-Oakes

I said:

[T]he ending of "The Watchmen" is the triumph of the ubermensch. What shall I make of that?

To which Blattid answered:

Actually, even the ending is ambiguous.

It appears, in the final panel, that Rorschach's diary - which will expose Veidt's manipulations - is about to be published.

Since my copies are inaccessible to me right now, I'll have to defer to your rendition of that (and I would like it if it were true).

But my memory of the ending is more of an Indiana-Jones-The-Ark-Gets-Lost-In-A-Warehouse type ending. I remember the diary was sitting on a reporter's desk and was in the process of being lost or thrown away.

Iorwerth said:

Regarding TDK, I think the British sf magazine SFX had a feature on it in which Miller was of the opinion that most of Gotham's villains were as they

were due to the presence of Batman; the theory put forwards by the TV psychologist that Batman is the locus of the chaos (since criminals define themselves against him) is in fact what is going on.

I find this to be the most discouraging, most morally vapid interpretation of TDKR that I can imagine. If I ever read it again, in order to find any pleasure in it, I'll have rub out the memory Miller declaring that the ONE truth teller in the graphic novel was one of his trivial TV commentators.

~ Crush

Dan'l Danehy-Oakes — 22 Mar 2005, 11:09 · in reply to James Wynn

But my memory of the ending is more of an Indiana-Jones-The-Ark-Gets-Lost-In-A-Warehouse type ending. I remember the diary was sitting on a reporter's desk and was in the process of being lost or thrown away.

Close but not quite -- it's already been placed in the kook file of the New Frontiersman (the Bircher newspaper that's published out of one corner of That Intersection). The NF has just had its lead article for the current number censored (a clear sign, btw, that all is NOT well in Veidt's brave new world - prior-restraint censorship of the press), and the editor tells his somewhat dimwitted aid to fill it in with something from the kook file. We see the aide's hand reaching for the file, where the diary is right on top.

(Incidentally, the aide is wearing a smileyface shirt, with a drip of borscht on the smileyface forming That Logo one last time.)

--Dan'l

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Gryphoncrossing at aol.com — 22 Mar 2005, 11:20 · follows Dan'l Danehy-Oakes

In a message dated 3/22/2005 2:02:05 P.M. Eastern Standard Time, urth-urth.net-request at lists.urth.net writes:

1] I suspect, if they're there, Herbet either is commenting on them in a negative way, or they're space opera tropes that have snuck in without anyone noticing, which can happen if no one's careful.

My first post.

Herbert's initial impulse in writing Dune was to write a criticism of Messiah figures, from Jesus to JFK, showing that one **SHOULDN'T** follow them. Illustrating their actions, in the case of Dune, isn't the same as condoning those actions.

I feel the same way about Watchmen; I found it an illustration of the fascist underpinnings of the ubermensch supposedly serving the masses while in fact being above them (sort of like in a socialist country).

The only fascistic works I've seen in fantasy/sf, short of The Turner Diaries, have been unconscious ones, or at least unacknowledged ones. There are many of

these in post-Tolkien fantasy fiction. The tendency of these power fantasies to be so popular with supposedly liberal-minded fantasy fans is something I've always found curious.

I do think Wolfe's books have a touch of this but I think Wolfe is more interested in exploring a tradition that stretches back so far that one can't do so without including much of this material. I've never found the impulse toward glorifying "superior people" that I've seen in much fantasy fiction.

John

Dan'l Danehy-Oakes — 22 Mar 2005, 12:44 · in reply to Gryphoncrossing at aol.com

Herbert's initial impulse in writing *Dune* was to write a criticism of Messiah figures, from Jesus to JFK, showing that one **SHOULDN'T** follow them.

Correct.

Illustrating their actions, in the case of *Dune*, isn't the same as condoning those actions.

Also correct. However, it is a fascist book in that it is set in a world in which the basic assumptions of facism (and especially the leader principle) all turn out to be true. It does so to critique those assumptions - to show how badly things would turn out if they were true - but nonetheless, in the *_Dune_* universe-of-discourse, they are true.

Perhaps the problem is that when I say it is a fascist book people think I'm dissing it.

I feel the same way about *Watchmen*; I found it an illustration of the fascist underpinnings of the ubermensch supposedly serving the masses while in fact being above them (sort of like in a socialist country).

Bingo.

It's interesting to read this in conjunction with Moore's other, more or less contemporary, works, *_Miracleman_* and *_V for Vendetta_*, which approach the problem of heroes and facism from very different directions. Moore appears to be, inna final analysis, a libertarian-anarchist type.

--Dan'l

You probably do not want to know what that odor is.

maru — 22 Mar 2005, 15:37 · in reply to Dan'l Danehy-Oakes

Dan'l Danehy-Oakes wrote:

Herbert's initial impulse in writing *Dune* was to write a criticism of Messiah figures, from Jesus to JFK, showing that one **SHOULDN'T** follow them.

Correct.

Yep. There's pretty much a complete consensus about that, from Herbert, O'Reilly and beyond.

Illustrating their actions, in the case of *Dune*, isn't the same as condoning those actions.

Also correct. However, it is a fascist book in that it is set in a world in which the basic assumptions of facism (and especially the leader principle) all turn out to be true. It does so to critique those assumptions - to show how badly things would turn out if they were

true - but nonetheless, in the _Dune_ universe-of-discourse, they are true.

Perhaps the problem is that when I say it is a fascist book people think I'm dissing it.

You *are* likening it to one of the most notorious, evil political ideologies that ever was, and labelling it a member. It is rather understandable why 'people' would think you are dissing it.

~Maru

What I'd like to hear is your take on the 'Foundation' series :)

maru — 22 Mar 2005, 15:57 · in reply to Gryphoncrossing at aol.com

Gryphoncrossing at aol.com wrote:
My first post.

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I do think Wolfe's books have a touch of this but I think Wolfe is more interested in exploring a tradition that stretches back so far that one can't do so without including much of this material. I've never found the impulse toward glorifying "superior people" that I've seen in much fantasy fiction.

John

Welcome.

But you are in good company when you talk about power fantasies; David Brin has expounded at length on just that thesis. My personal take is that we always uncounsciously think of things 'different' and 'exotic' from our ordinary lives when we write or desire fantasy, and since it's been a long time since most of us were under the yoke of aristocracy we tend to romanticize it, quite aside from the archetypal appeal of it.

~Maru

<http://www.davidbrin.com/tolkienarticle1.html>

http://www.salon.com/ent/movies/feature/1999/06/15/brin_main/index.html

maru — 22 Mar 2005, 16:42 · in reply to maru

Dan'l Danehy-Oakes wrote:
Perhaps the problem is that when I say it is a fascist book people

think I'm dissing it.

You **are** likening it to one of the most notorious, evil political ideologies that ever was, and labelling it a member. It is rather understandable why 'people' would think you are dissing it.

I suppose. But what would *_you_* call a book based on the premise that facism is true?

I'd call it didactic. I'm not that fond of books that work on proof-by-contradiction, (but Dune is so great in other ways I usually overlook it, and try to see it as part of a series.)

~Maru

Concise OED; Plethora: An excess of; /"I had five dogs; a plethora of canines."/

Nathan Spears — 09 Apr 2005, 08:34 · follows maru

I apologize if someone has already said what I'm about to say: I still have about 160 unread posts but I wanted to point something out here before I forget it.

Herbert's initial impulse in writing Dune was to write a criticism of Messiah figures, from Jesus to JFK, showing that one **SHOULDN'T** follow them. Illustrating their actions, in the case of Dune, isn't the same as condoning those actions.

The problem with the Dune, I think, is that Herbert did a terrible job of encapsulating the themes he wanted to work with in the first book, which is the best (from a storytelling perspective). He wanted to debunk the messiah myth and show how power ebbs and flows. From this point of view, the Fremen were not a master race, just a sort of coiled spring waiting to be released. The pressures creating their stored power were religious fanaticism (unfortunately for them, it was artificial religion created by the Bene Gesserit), a flexible, efficient power structure, and physical prowess honed by decades of hard living and fighting. Once their power was unleashed, Paul became the somewhat unwilling Emperor, but then these causes were no longer present to give the Fremen their strength and they faded from the story. As for the Messiah, Herbert unfortunately shot himself in the foot by making us like Paul so much. The revenge and retribution story is more interesting than the Messiah part of the story, and Paul is such a compelling character that nobody (I know) was really that interested in seeing him "debunked." We feel a little guilty seeing Paul exploit the Fremen to a certain degree by pretending to have a divine mandate; at the same time, we close one eye and pretend with the Fremen, because how could God not hate those awful Harkonnens? The one moment in the book for me in which Herbert shows that not all is well with the future Emperor is when he is dealing with the Guild at the climax of the book. When they refuse to do his bidding he threatens them with the spice, which he knows how to destroy: "The power to destroy a thing is control over it," or something along those lines is what he says to them. This argument is obviously deeply cruel and, if Paul means what he says (which he might not) then he is betraying an ugly side of himself that we had not previously seen.

About Watchmen: Again, I apologize for repeating anything already said, but I wanted to chime in to agree with the person who said that in the context of the story, Ozy's arguments are viewed as "correct" and his actions justified, but that viewing them from outside the story we condemn them both. I never once thought that Ozy was meant as a persuasive tool or that Dr. Manhattan was enlightened. Those of you who did think so: are you also convinced that 1984 is a propaganda piece written by that minister of totalitarianism George Orwell?

James Wynn — 09 Apr 2005, 11:57 · in reply to Nathan Spears

I never once thought that
Ozy was meant as a persuasive tool or that Dr. Manhattan was enlightened.
Those of
you who did think so: are you also convinced that 1984 is a propaganda
piece written
by that minister of totalitarianism George Orwell?

Nathan, you are coming in a late and I don't want to restart this conversation since I have already said that Dan'I and others have a point (but only if "The Watchmen" is deeply flawed in its storytelling). But you are the second person to make this analogy with "1984" and while I didn't respond then, I'll say now that I consider this analogy flawed as well.

"1984" is pretty obviously an intended Tragedy. If "The Watchmen" was meant as a tragedy then it was verrrrrry subtle and quite ambivalent one. Also, I've sense remembered that it was not Mr. Manhattan that justified Ozy's plan (he only murdered the only common man hero in the story), it was Night Owl who was the character with the primary narrative perspective. If it was a mistake to take Night Owl's summation of Ozy's plan ****at the climax of the story**** as the author's own, then I think it was a forgivable mistake ~ and I hereby absolve myself. ;-)

~ Crush

Nathan Spears — 09 Apr 2005, 17:00 · follows James Wynn

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I don't condemn you but . . . don't you read Gene Wolfe? I admit that I never assumed that the author was speaking through the characters because the characters presented such a bleak view of morality and humanity, but those are the same reasons I assumed Orwell wasn't speaking through O'Brien. Maybe it didn't come across as well in comic book format, but if Watchmen were transcribed in prose I imagine that the scenes with Ozy lecturing to those guys at his stronghold would have read much like O'Brien defeating each of Winston's arguments through cold-blooded logic. The great tragedy of Watchmen is the triumph of that logic over our own humanity, just as it was in 1984. The arguments are different, as the regime in 1984 was pursuing power as its own end, but the tragedy is the same.

James Wynn — 09 Apr 2005, 19:19 · in reply to Nathan Spears

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The arguments are different, as the regime in 1984 was pursuing power as its own end, but the tragedy is the same.

Well, of course I do read Wolfe but he takes a *lot* of pretty obvious steps to signal that his narrators are unreliable. First, he tells the story in first person, he sets up the narrator so that he is clearly insane, stupid, clearly covering some awful truth, or some combination of the three. In the case of "1984", Winston is defeated and his arguments do not win over O'Brien, but Winston *does* carry on a quite adamant argument which he never concedes ~ even after he betrays his sweetheart. Night Owl does not put up much of an argument to Ozy (if he put up any at all) and in the end he concedes that he cannot *condemn* the argument...that it is somehow beyond conventional morality (just as Commissioner Gordon absolves Batman and FDR for their actions, and I *still* believe that viewpoint in the "Dark Knight" series was influential to "The Watchmen").

Despite all this, Dan'I suggests that Moore did not intend Night Owl's concession to be his own, that he intended Rorschach's diary to expose Ozy's plan in the end. Hm....maybe. I'm not convinced, but I can see that one could take that stance if he were strongly so inclined.

Sooooo.....the question is, how do we know when an author POV is coming through such as, say, is Silk's attitude on gun-control Wolfe's view as well? Or does the revolution in Dorp reflect Wolfe's own view of the current temperament of the American Judicial branch? What is Wolfe's attitude toward Severian, the Hieros, and even Typhon. The last question it is difficult to answer because Wolfe has taken so many steps to separate himself from the story. But there is even lots of room for argument in the other two for the same reason. I took it that Night Owl's final conclusion on Ozy's plan was the one Moore would have adopted in his place because he didn't have Night Owl put up much of an argument against it (implying he didn't see a serious argument against it) and because of the point in the story at which Night Owl comes to that conclusion. I could be wrong. But I'm far from convinced that I am.

~ Crush

Chris — 10 Apr 2005, 01:20 · in reply to James Wynn

I generally agree with Crush that we have somewhat overdiscussed the Watchmen, but I dug up something interesting from the archives so I thought I'd revisit the topic one more time. It appears that there have been repeated discussions of this over the years on the list, and that the comparison of Severian and Ozymandias is almost comulsory. Some links below.

For what it's worth, while I am not going to argue that there's a wrong or right answer on this, the intuitions of *almost* everyone who reads Watchmen is that Ozymandias is a villain, and that his "answer" is not seriously endorsed by Moore. So I do not think that such a reading is really out of line, I think it's pretty solidly there; perhaps if anything Crush is reading a little bit more into certain scenes (and a little less into others) than most.

Now, back to the old days... from a batch in 1999:

Mantis: <http://www.urth.net/urth/archives/v0028/0118.shtml>

John Bishop: <http://www.urth.net/urth/archives/v0028/0113.shtml>

Tony Ellis: <http://www.urth.net/urth/archives/v0028/0116.shtml>

Jim Henley: <http://www.urth.net/urth/archives/v0028/0114.shtml>

Alex David Groce: <http://www.urth.net/urth/archives/v0028/0111.shtml> Alex David Groce (2):
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