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Mimetic Masks: Reiterating Identification from Classical Aesthetics to Contemporary Media

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Doctor of Philosophy

Comparative Literature

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MA, New School for Social Research, 2014. BA, George Mason University, 2012

Advisor: Dr. Elissa Marder, PhD

An abstract of
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**Abstract**

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This project reinterprets the foundational aesthetic concept of mimesis through 19th and 20th century hermeneutics, critical social theory, and psychoanalysis, producing an interpretation of the concept which rejects the traditional translation of imitation equated with copying in favor of a performative theory of mimetic action. Paul Ricoeur's reinscription of Aristotelian mimesis within a phenomenology of time-consciousness leads to a poetic and rhetorical reading of the figure of the mask. Moving from the literal mask of Attic tragedy through its figurative role in the social history of Marx's *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* and the development of Freud's metapsychology, the final chapter explores literal and figurative masks in the mimetics of 20th century comic book media, focusing on Alan Moore and Dave Gibbon's *Watchmen*, and its transmedia adaptations.

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**Contents**

> ‘To read what was never written.’ This reading is the most ancient: reading prior to all language, from entrails, the stars, or dances. The mediating link of a new form of reading, of runes and hieroglyphs, came later. From this one could suppose that these were the stages by which the mimetic faculty, once the foundation of occult practices, found entry into writing and language. In such a way that language would constitute the highest level of mimetic behavior and the most complete archive of nonsensuous resemblance: a medium into which the earlier powers of mimetic generation and apprehension have passed without residue, to the point where they have liquidated those of magic.
>
> –Walter Benjamin, “On the Mimetic Faculty”
>
> The text in-visages [*fait visage*]. It stands like a face in front of the person reading it.
>
> –Jean-François Lyotard, *Discourse, Figure*
>
> A face presents itself in its nudity; it is not a form of concealing, but thereby indicating, a ground, a phenomenon that hides, but thereby betrays a thing itself. Otherwise, a face would be one with a mask—but a mask presupposes a face.
>
> –Emmanuel Levinas, “The Trace of the Other”

## Preface

This project begins in 4th century Athens with an analysis of the role of *mimesis* and the *prosopon* (mask) in Attic tragedy and will end in the 20th century with a comparative reading of the comic book *Watchmen* and its transmedia adaptations. Though bookended by the classical and the contemporary the middle section will not be a linear historical progression from classical drama to comic books and their remediations but rather will provide the theoretical threads which bind the whole work together. These threads are phenomenological hermeneutics, Marx, and Freud. It is particularly fitting to develop a theory of the irreducibility of masks through a hermeneutic reading of Marx and Freud because of the common misreading of the “hermeneutics of suspicion” that these thinkers are engaged in the enlightenment project of unmasking false appearances. The idea being that their work is essentially concerned with dispelling illusions and revealing concealed truth. If that were the case then there would be no need for Marx and Freud, because the entirety of their work would already be present in Plato’s allegory of the cave. While

that may sound like a satisfying conclusion to some philosophers, it would constitute a failure to comprehend the radicality of Marxist and Freudian thought. Rather than seeking to uncover a truth that the mask conceals, to bypass the copy and find the original, it might be more apt to describe this project as an attempt to apprehend the truth of masks and the originality of the copy.

This project's reinterpretation of the classical concept of mimesis through the figure of the mask begins with Paul Ricoeur's reading of Aristotle, but its roots in my own thinking lie in the skeptical questioning by which David Hume famously interrupted Immanuel Kant's dogmatic slumber. While the primary Humean challenge taken up by Kant was his unsettling of the principle of causality, this itself was based upon on the aporetic foundation of induction in general. In both his *Treatise* and *Enquiry,* Hume raised the fundamental epistemological problem that the basis for the concept that knowledge is derived from experience lies in the belief that the future will resemble the past, but that this belief itself cannot be proven through experience alone. Rather than approaching this as an epistemological problem, this project is in some sense an attempt to think through the hermeneutical consequences of formulating the conditions of the interpretability of experience in time, memory, and resemblance.

In what sense can the future resemble the past? How does the past become interpretable through the present? Can re-presentation make the past present? These questions all rely on memory in a sense which is neither purely psychological nor historical. This inability to separate historiography from historicity calls for a hermeneutic phenomenology; to account for and interpret the recognitive processes by which the historian or the historical agent (individual or collective) interprets experience through relations of resemblance, contiguity, and sequentiality. For the purposes of this study, these relations are considered matters of affect and the

interpretation of phenomena. This means that the questions being posed are not ontological questions about the true nature of reality or epistemological questions about the possibility of knowing this reality, such questions have been phenomenologically bracketed. Whether or not anything ever *actually* resembles anything else is irrelevant.

Despite these references to hermeneutics and the phenomenological method, this project is ultimately a preliminary attempt at the formation of a new methodology. The first three chapters constitute a contribution to and refinement of a new mimetic theory of interpretation, which I define as mimetics in a sense analogous to the relation between poetics and *poesis*. The proximity to poetics is no accident, not only because the starting point of the project is the Ricoeurian interpretation of the *Poetics*, but because this account of mimesis entails a fundamental metaphoricity. The status of metaphor in relation to the other classical tropes brings about the focus on the figure of the mask as a meta-metaphor. This in turn allows for the consideration of identity and identification through the performativity of masked metaphor and mimesis. Building on the first chapter's transposition of Ricoeur's hermeneutical expansion of mimesis and metaphor onto the figure of the mask, the second and third chapters explore the reiterative productivity of masked performance in the context of politics as well as individual and group psychology. The former takes place through a reading of Karl Marx's *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* informed by Derrida's *Specters of Marx* which draws out the hauntological mimetic dimension of Marx's account of the generation of political capital through masked performance. The third chapter turns to Freudian psychoanalysis and seeks to challenge and refine the account of mimetic psycho-social relationality developed in the prior chapters through a survey of some of Freud's key concepts: identification, transference, and repetition.

This study prioritizes the conceptual clarification of mimesis at the cost of a critical

analysis of individual masks. This emphasis on the theoretical dimension can serve as a basis from which further elaborations of mimetics could foreground particular identities or identity categories and analyze their mimetic dimensions/dynamics. The fourth and final chapter includes both a further theoretical development of mimetics along with examples of its application to the exchange of masks in the transtextual operations of three different versions of *Watchmen*, which provides a model for the application of mimetics to literary and media studies.

# Chapter 1

## Mimetic Acts

*Im Anfgang war die Tat* – Goethe, *Faust*

### Prologue

The opening act of this project is a proposition: Paul Ricoeur's *Time and Narrative* should not only be read as an application of hermeneutics to temporality and narrativity but also as producing a significant modification of hermeneutic methodology.[1] The reading of Aristotle's *Poetics* in Vol. 1 reinterprets the classical aesthetic concept of *mimêsis*, but this hermeneutic *mimêsis* also calls for a mimetic reinterpretation of hermeneutics itself. This chapter makes the case for this mimetic hermeneutics (or mimetics) and explore the ways in which the space carved out by Ricoeur's interpretation distances mimesis from the representational realist understanding of imitation as copying, deepening and expanding the concept and bringing it into proximity with post-modern and post-structuralist theoretical positions often thought to be at odds with Ricoeur's thought. Consequently, while rooted in an interpretation of Ricoeur, the following case for hermeneutics as mimetics leads beyond him and opens up applications and modifications which he himself could never (or perhaps would have preferred not to) have conceived and is thus quite literally a post-Ricoeurian hermeneutics.

Deriving a particular interpretive methodology from Ricoeur's work requires defining the central technical vocabulary and clarifying the formal conceptual structure, which ought to produce general applicability beyond the scope of this project. To an extent, this opening chapter and the project as a whole is a discourse on method and thus poses questions and seeks answers which are fundamentally metaphilosophical and speculative in nature. And yet, Ricoeur's

[1] *Temps et Récit*, Editions du Seuil, 1983, translated as *Time and Narrative*, Trans. Kathleen and McLaughlin and David Pellauer, University of Chicago Press.

hermeneutic expansion of mimesis comes not from speculation on the meaning of the Ancient Greek understanding of *mimêsis* in general, but from a particular encounter with the specific determination of *mimêsis* that Aristotle lays out in the discussion of Attic tragedy in the *Poetics*.[2] Act I of this chapter works through Ricoeur's reading of the *Poetics* and demonstrates that this hermeneutic phenomenological reconceptualization of mimesis is bound to the Aristotelian model of dramatic action. Ricoeur's interpretation of the *Poetics* justifies moving from the discussion of tragic drama in general to an analysis of the figure of the mask. In the material praxis of Attic tragedy, to act in the dramatic sense is inseparable from the mask. It is the condition of possibility for dramatic appearance, for *mimêsis praxeos*, the site of the mimetic event. Therefore, just as the subsequent analysis of the figure of the mask will be dependent on the hermeneutic expansion of the concept of mimesis, this rethinking of classical mimesis is only possible through the attempt to reinterpret the mask beyond the simplifications of representational realism.

The mask is an allusive polyvalent trope. It functions metonymically: through the association of its functional role in the classical dramatic production it can also stand in for the poetic act as such. At the same time, it functions synecdochally because the mask/face as part of the body of the person can just as well signify the whole person. While there are conflicting etymological theories about the source of the English word mask, perhaps traceable via the French *masque* to *mascurer*, and before that the Latin *persona* (literally *per-sonare* or sounding through), all of these variations can be linked to the Greek *prósōpon*, the mask/face, the *prós* + *ṓps,* that which is towards the eyes, the source and destination of sight and sound, that which

[2] I will use the transliterated Greek but italicized and with accents (*mimêsis*) when referencing an Ancient Greek usage of the term and the non-italicized non-accented (mimesis) when using the English term derived from the Greek. It is of course impossible to keep them separate as an English language reader of Greek texts, *mimêsis* is always already mimesis, but there are good reasons for typographically marking the difference.

opens the space of mimesis and perceptual experience itself. The mask is constitutively metaphorical, it literally and figuratively marks presence and absence simultaneously, an articulation which bears (*pherein*) absence over (*meta*) into presence and establishes the possibility of seeing/being as. While not necessarily ironic, the mask ensures that irony is necessarily always possible by giving a face/façade to any potential ironic disjunction of surface and depth. Act II of this chapter attempts to clarify this ambiguous tropology through a reading of the work which immediately preceded *Time and Narrative*: *The Rule of Metaphor* (*la métaphore vive*).[3]

Ricoeur's interpretation of metaphor provided the conceptual basis for the hermeneutics of mimesis in *Time and Narrative*, meaning that any theoretical elaboration of Ricoeur's hermeneutic mimesis needs to account for his theory of metaphor. Similarly, the exploration of the figure of the mask is not an arbitrary and separate subject matter which mimetic hermeneutics can be applied to extrinsically, but in a classically hermeneutic fashion suggests a certain inescapable circularity which must be traversed and elaborated even if it can never be fully resolved. *The Rule of Metaphor* proceeds from a rhetorical account of metaphor to a hermeneutics but much like *Time and Narrative* where a hermeneutics of mimesis articulates a mimetic dimension of hermeneutics as such, Ricoeur's interpretation of metaphor leads him to posit a fundamental metaphoricity of the hermeneutical act. After tracing the path from the hermeneutics of mimesis to mimetic hermeneutics via metaphor, Act III of this chapter returns to the analysis of the mask and considers its role in tragic mimesis and its tropological status. Equipped with the metaphorical (or perhaps meta-metaphorical) mask, the chapters which follow this one will proceed through a series of literal and figurative mimetic deployments of masks:

[3] Ricoeur, Paul, *La métaphore vive,* Éditions du Seuil, 1975, translated as *The Rule of Metaphor* by Robert Czerny, University of Toronto Press, 1977.

moving from Ancient Greek theater through modern critical theory to comic books and their transmedia adaptations, in order to critically evaluate the heuristic value of mimetics and the centrality of masks as its privileged trope.

**Act I: Mimesis**

The translation and definition of the ancient Greek term *mimêsis* as imitation, understood as a form of representation, has shaped the development of metaphysics, epistemology, and aesthetics throughout Western history, from the reception of classical Greek philosophy through thousands of years of application and reinterpretation. In the 21st century this classical definition remains a master term for both theoretical disciplines and everyday popular understandings of media and medium, communication, creativity, and cognition. Even when thinkers, artists, and movements have attempted to critique or evade mimesis, they have for the most part done so without questioning its traditional definition. A notable exception to this can be found in Paul Ricoeur's hermeneutic recovery of Aristotelian *mimêsis* in his three-volume work, *Time and Narrative*. Rather than the received translation of imitation, equated with copying (the passive mirroring of re-presentation), Ricoeur argues that mimesis itself is a productive activity, an active/imaginative making/doing.[4] This reinterpretation of mimesis produces serious consequences for all of the disciplines and discourses that have been shaped by the concept of representation, and complicates the fundamental oppositions of being/appearance, truth/lies, and authenticity/illusion which have defined Western philosophy's relationship to art and science for thousands of years.

The logical and chronological starting point for an account of the history of mimesis in philosophy is to begin with its discussion in Plato. But Ricoeur's task was not to produce an

[4] Ricoeur credits much of his basic premise of separating *mimêsis* from "imitation" to the work of a few Anglophone philosophers and classicists, Richard McKeon, Leon Golden, and O. B. Hardison. From this basis, his interpretation moves more in the direction of 20th century phenomenology and hermeneutics. See his *The Rule of Metaphor* pp. 37-38 and the notes for those pages.

exhaustive and systematic history of the concept, but rather to dislodge it from such a history and utilize it for his project of analyzing narrativity as a constitutive structure of temporal experience. By beginning his discussion of *mimêsis* with Aristotle *Poetics* and for the most part bracketing out the Platonic formulation of it, Ricoeur already establishes some distance from the traditional reading. An explication of either the Platonic or Aristotelian discussion of mimesis traditionally proceeds by beginning where they began by defining the broader category of *mimêsis* as such before outlining the general typology of its varying species, transitioning to a more detailed account of the particular mimetic form which both Plato and Aristotle gave priority to (the visual arts), and then using this as the prototypical example against which all forms would be judged. This makes it all the more notable that Ricoeur does not begin his reading of the *Poetics* by echoing Aristotle's formal categorization of poetry as one variation of the broader category of *mimêsis* illustrated via reference to the visual arts (*47a-48b)* but skips over this moment and begins with the definition of tragedy as *mimêsis praxeos*, commonly translated as "the imitation of action." This move is justified because despite beginning with reference to this more general discussion, Aristotle does not actually provide a systematic development of the taxonomy of the arts in this text and swiftly narrows his analysis to poetics, and further still to the discussion of tragedy. Afterall, the title of the work in question is *Poetics*, not *Aesthetics* nor *Art*, nor *Poetry*.

The grammatic specificity of the title *Poetics* leads Ricoeur to speak of "poetic activity" and "mimetic activity," arguing for the necessity of emphasizing the productive, constructive, and dynamic qualities of all of Aristotle's concepts.[5] This emphasis orients his entire interpretation, most crucially in what he sees as the conceptual pair which forms the "melodic line" of the analysis as a whole, *mimêsis* and *mûthos*. Understanding the precise relation of this pair, which

[5] Ricoeur, Paul, *Time and Narrative Vol. 1*, Translated by Kathleen McLaughlin and David Pellauer, University of Chicago Press, 1984. p. 33.

Ricoeur refers to in terms of a "quasi-identification," is absolutely crucial for his argument that Aristotelian *mimêsis* fundamentally "leaves behind" Platonic or metaphysical *mimêsis* (*Time*, p. 34). This means understanding them separately but also as a duality which forms a conceptual unity. Ricoeur argues that both have to be "taken as operations, not structures." Setting aside for the moment a more straightforward definition of the terms as imitation and plot respectively, in this formulation, *mimêsis* should be defined as the process of imitating or representing, and *mûthos* should be defined as the process of organizing events into a system. Ricoeur points out the seemingly circular logic here, suggesting that Aristotle seems to be "substituting the *definiens* for the *definiendum*" because essentially by defining *mûthos* as "the organization of events [*ē tōn prāgmátōn sustais*] (50a15)" he seems to be defining plot as the composition of plot. To make sense of this requires us to understand *mûthos* as Aristotle employs it here to mean not plot as a noun but as signifying the act of composing plots or *la mise en intrigue* (which McLaughlin and Pellauer have translated as emplotment). Keeping in mind that Aristotle has defined tragedy by *mimêsis praxeos*, the definition of *mimêsis praxeos* by *mûthos* ("The imitation of action is the Plot") suggests that this pair is defined in terms of each other, and therefore that dramatic *poesis* is the activity of organizing the imitation of actions into a plot (50a1).

However, this transposition from static structures to dynamic operations does not simply resolve the problem of circularity. If to act in the dramatic sense is circularly defined as the imitation of action, what would be the proper way to characterize this act which imitates other acts? This problem applies equally to the poetic activity of the organization of these acts. Are these meta-acts merely derivative forms? Shadows of an act? And where mimetic arts take other mimetic arts as their source, even less than that, shadows of shadows? How can acting in the theatrical sense, the linguistic sense, and the everyday pragmatic sense be properly delineated?

This is the ground problem for J. L. Austin's Speech Act theory and the analysis of the performative function of language: the question of categorization and contextualization, or how to properly establish the boundaries between speech genres, perhaps most importantly the boundary between serious and non-serious discourse. This problem in the philosophy of language has its direct analogue in the hermeneutic problem of interpreting literal and figurative uses of language. And yet Ricoeur chooses to ground his interpretation of *mimêsis* in this potentially circular and problematic formulation of the essence of tragedy, and in doing so stresses the dynamic quality of mimesis as the activity and process rather than its resulting object. This establishes the hermeneutic circle of mimetic activity: understanding the act of mimesis requires a better understanding of the mimetic character of action.

In order to explicate Ricoeur's hermeneutic reading of Aristotle's *mimêsis praxeos* it needs to be situated within the broader categories of classical aesthetics, namely in relation to the dichotomy of *mimêsis* and *diegesis*. This distinction belongs to the more general philosophical project of the classification of different functions/uses of language: as description, as narrative, as performative utterance etc. Despite the fact that their conflict of interpretation is commonly taken as the prototypical student's revolt against their teacher, Plato and Aristotle can be read as fundamentally consistent on the terms of this dichotomy and how this distinction defines the form of the epic and the tragic poem. The difference lies in which half of this binary opposition is deemed the superior form.

Plato's case against *mimêsis* is made throughout *Republic*, beginning in Book I and III and culminating in Book X with the affirmation of the total banishment of mimetic poets from the polis (595a5).[6] In Aristotle's *Poetics*, there is a very different evaluation of the value of *mimêsis*

[6] This is arguably a caricature and oversimplification of Platonic mimesis. Better readings of Plato are clearly possible; however, this caricature of the anti-mimetic Plato has undeniably shaped commonplace understandings

which transforms it into the source of tragedy's poetic superiority over epic. This Aristotelian position can perhaps be best summarized by a common contemporary maxim for film and television writers and directors: "show don't tell." The catharsis which Aristotle characterizes as tragedy's highest effect is possible to the extent that recognition (*anagnorisis*) occurs, and perhaps his inversion of the Platonic hierarchy of diegesis over *mimêsis* stems from the fact that *mimêsis* can provide greater possibilities for recognition. This question of the connection between mimesis and recognition demands further elaboration and will be explored to some extent in terms of the relation of mimesis to identity and identification in subsequent chapters.[7]

Aristotle's inversion of the hierarchy of the terms is the basic starting point for Ricoeur's reading of the *Poetics* in *Time and Narrative*. However, this particular return to Aristotle in philosophical hermeneutics needs to be understood as Ricoeur's continuation of Heidegger's prior rethinking of the theory/praxis dichotomy. This is what causes the *mimêsis praxeos* which defined the activity of the actor to take on a new ontological significance. No longer reducing theatrical performance to "*merely* the imitation of action," Ricoeur's Heideggerian reading of Aristotle expands *mimêsis* from a specific aesthetic technical definition into a formal structure of existential phenomenology. In other words, mimesis is not simply one way of describing or defining a particular set of entities but rather an activity which is constitutive of appearance as such. This sense of mimesis is fundamentally dynamic, synonymous with the more qualified phrase "mimetic activity" (*Time,* p. 31). This ontological interpretation of mimesis forms one half of the conceptual pair which structures Ricoeur's project in *Time and Narrative*, the other

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of the representational character of art. This project is more invested in thinking through and critiquing the consequences of this misreading than in attempting to recover a more accurate one.

[7] Further comparison between Platonic and Aristotelian mimesis is called for by the thinking through of the figure of the mask. The first step would be to account for what motivates the resistance against mimesis in *Republic*, as well as its valorization in *Poetics*. Both positions are driven by a shared concern with poetic affect and the power of spectacle, imagination, and identification.

based in a phenomenological account of temporal experience derived from his reading of Augustine's *Confessions*.

Just as Ricoeur does not posit a pure reading of Aristotle but quite deliberately foregrounds that his account of Aristotle is mediated through the lens of hermeneutic phenomenology, his encounter with the phenomenology of time consciousness in Book 11 of Augustine's *Confessions* passes through the post-Kantian Husserlian and Heideggerian iterations of this perennial philosophical theme. In Vol. 2 of *Time and Narrative* this phenomenological analysis of intratemporality (*Innerzeitigkeit*) is further refracted through the modernist literary works of Woolf, Proust, and Mann. This hermeneutic narratology culminates in a reflection on the narrative mediation of temporal experience in Vol. 3. All of the later stages of his project rely on the ontological elaboration of Aristotelian *mimesis*. Mimesis thus forms the conceptual foundation for his overall argument and its conclusions: narrative is the organizational principle which configures phenomenological time and orients it within cosmological or linear time. Ricoeur lays out the two sides of his conceptual pairing at the beginning of the third chapter: "Time becomes human to the extent that it is articulated through a narrative mode, and narrative attains its full meaning when it becomes a condition of temporal experience." (*Time,* p. 52)

This existential hermeneutic development of Aristotelian *mimêsis* is a necessary moment in Ricoeur's project, but the significance of this interpretation cannot be comprehended within the classic dichotomy of *mimêsis* and *diegesis*. That said, the three volumes are brought together under the title of *Time and Narrative*, not *Time and Mimesis*. One could argue that the interpretation of mimesis is simply the topic of fifty pages in the first half of his first volume but is then quickly subsumed into Ricoeur's true topic, narrative, in order to construct the two-part harmonic thesis of the work as whole. But is the Ricoeurian account of mimesis actually

reducible to narrative? Or rather, can the terms be used interchangeably? If not, then what does this mean for the expanded sense of mimesis and an account of diegesis informed by this reinterpretation?

Rather than simply restaging a classical debate; it is necessary to unpack exactly what Ricoeur does with mimesis and how he transitions from that to the intertwining of time and narrative. Before fully explaining why Ricoeur seems to subsume mimesis to narrative, and why I want to resist that subsumption, it is important to better articulate why mimesis takes on such significance for Ricoeur in the first place. This hinges on his disputation of the equation of *mimêsis* to imitation and representation. In opposition to this, he argues, "we have to understand something completely contrary to a copy of some preexisting reality and speak instead of creative imitation… if we translate *mimêsis* by 'representation'… we must not understand by this word some redoubling of presence… but rather the break that opens the space for fiction" (*TN*, p. 45). This break is fundamentally a temporal extension. Rather than the production of a copied object, or a momentary imitative action, Ricoeur insists on a temporalized conceptual model which is oriented towards a past, present, and future. The creative power of mimesis is therefore that of opening fictive possibilities rather than defining the boundaries of a concrete reality. Ricoeur refers to this figurative power of language as the invention of the "as-if" and the "'literariness' of the work of literature." The theoretical implications of Ricoeur's three-fold temporalized mimesis will only become clear once they are evaluated from the seemingly contradictory perspectives of a structuralist poetics (i.e., synchronic analysis) as well as the phenomenology of time consciousness (i.e., diachronic description).

The hinge which shifts Ricoeur's reading of mimesis away from the whole of the representational tradition is to define it primarily as an operation or activity. This has the effect

of immediately deemphasizing the mimetic product in favor of the productive process itself. This is initially accomplished by shifting the paradigmatic example from the plastic arts to the performing arts. While the fully developed hermeneutic can account for the temporality of seemingly "fixed" artistic ends (i.e., any artistic process which produces an object) beginning with the performing arts already foregrounds that mimetic productivity produces further mimetic activity, not simply mimetic objects. To use the language of Aristotelian intellectual virtues, this means that mimesis not only requires *technē* (mechanical technical knowledge) but also *phronesis* (practical wisdom). In other words, in order to imitate how one would act in a given situation, or to produce a script which prompts and supplies dialogue to a performance of those actions, one has to know something about acting in specific circumstances, and the type of knowing in question is that which is learned from experience. Already with this simple example of the actor performing a scene or the playwright writing the script for the scene, mimetic activity is established as dependent on past experiences and open to future interpretations. This leads directly to the next stage of the expansion of the concept, that the analysis of mimetic acts suggests something about the mimetic character of action itself.

While it may seem a stretch to claim that all action is mimetic, this does not amount to erasing the specificity between an action taken as part of a mimetic artistic practice (e.g., the example of the actor or playwright above) and all other possible actions. Rather, the argument is based on a much smaller claim, that actions appear as possible through referential contextual structures and that these actions are potentially open for future interpretation and repetition. This includes mental activity and speech acts, as well as aesthetic experiences like reading, watching, listening etc.[8] Even the most spontaneous and irrational activities bear some relation to the pre-

[8] See Ricoeur's reading of Wolfgang Iser viz., *The Act of Reading*.

understanding, the horizon of intelligibility, the traditional/conventional (linguistic, conceptual, behavioral) context in which they can be successfully or unsuccessfully situated, and in the case of the latter ultimately made interpretable as "unprecedented", "unconventional", "novel", "nonsensical" etc. Historical determinations of possibility play a role in shaping and structuring not only individual actions, but the ways in which these actions can be perceived and understood. Insofar as human activity is constituted by history, action is mimetic.

In the parlance of the early Heidegger, this constitutes a shift in interpreting mimesis ontically (as a feature of particular objects or acts) to interpreting mimesis ontologically, as a constitutive structure of existence. This existential sense of mimesis is itself hermeneutical, meaning not only is it one possible object of interpretation but that interpretation is an essential aspect of mimetic existence. *Phronesis* requires being able to understand and interpret where you are and what you can and must do. Dasein's interpretation of its *Da/there* is not a second order specialized type of activity but constitutive of the possibility of Dasein's being-in-the-world. Thus, understanding, interpreting, and applying/appropriating the possibilities which are available for action can all be understood as mimetic processes.

All of the above is contained within Ricoeur's conception of a three-fold mimesis, which he differentiates numerically. $\text{Mimesis}_1$ refers to the referential horizon of pre-understanding, the background of possible forms and concepts which are drawn upon and cited and thus form the condition of possibility for any mimetic act. $\text{Mimesis}_2$ is the level of the mimetic act as such, what Ricoeur calls *la mise en intrigue* or emplotment. This is the performance of the act, the writing of the text, the way in which a text is organized and structured or organizes and structures itself, the mimetic event. $\text{Mimesis}_3$ is the reception of the mimetic act. It occurs in the act of reading, witnessing, hearing, watching, i.e., the interpretation of an aesthetic experience by

an audience. Ricoeur defines this three-fold mimesis as roughly analogous to the hermeneutic triad of understanding-interpretation-application as well as (part of the larger project of *Time and Narrative*) the past-present-future. To illustrate this, returning to the theatrical model, it is possible to consider the performance of a play (at least) three distinct mimetic acts: the organized citation of its various sources into a composition, its enactment on stage, and its reception and interpretation by an audience, and each of these would include all three of the mimetic levels.

Ricoeur arguably develops this three-fold mimesis not for its own sake but as the bridging element which connects narrative activity to temporal experience and thus makes possible the broader project of *Time and Narrative*. But mimesis is not just a steppingstone on the way to narrative. While there can be no narrative without mimesis, mimesis exceeds the boundaries of narrative sense. I do not propose to relitigate Ricoeur's defense of narrative against the various schools of thought who deemphasize its importance (the Annales school of historiography, certain reductionist semiotic theories of literature, avant-garde literature which eschews traditional linear narration etc.) in part because I find his argument compelling, but also because I am more interested in the unexplored possibilities opened up by his expansion of Aristotelian *mimêsis* rather than what he has already done with it. For now, I will posit that whenever Ricoeur speaks of *récit* he is still speaking of mimesis, which means that the subsequent work on narrative still adheres to the quasi-identification of *mimêsis* and *mûthos*. This project thus proceeds from an inversion of Gerard Genette's formulation: *diegesis* is *mimêsis*.[9]

And yet, the question remains, why does *récit* take its place as the other half of the binary

[9] See Gérard Genette, "Boundaries of Narrative" Trans. Ann Levonas, *New Literary History Vol. 8, No. 1, Readers and Spectators: Some Views and Reviews (Autumn, 1976),* pp. 1-13. Genette argues that *mimesis* is reducible to *diegesis*. I return to Genette in the fourth chapter where his elaboration of Kristeva's theory of intertextuality provides an important resource for the structural analysis of *Watchmen*.

with *temps* that structures his three-volume study rather than mimesis? Ricoeur justifies the discursive shift from mimesis to narrative by an appeal to Aristotle's hierarchy of *mûthos* over everything else. This is specifically relevant for the prioritization of plot over character, which, depending on the aesthetic theory one applies to it, could be seen as the greatest critical insight of the *Poetics* or its most unforgivable sin. This prioritization means that anything Aristotle says about tragic *poesis* is primarily concerned with the construction of plots. Each of the other essential tragic components (*ethos, dianoia, lexis, melos, opsis*) are subordinate to *mûthos*, or rather, need to be understood as a byproduct or effect of the plot. Ricoeur summarizes Aristotle's understanding of the power of this synthesizing configuration: "To make up a plot is already to make the intelligible spring from the accidental, the universal from the singular, the necessary or probable from the episodic" (*Time,* p. 41). In the same exact spirit that he attempted to wedge *mimêsis* away from its traditional definition, Ricoeur's characterization of *la mise en intrigue* attempts to convey that Aristotelian plot should be understood as a dynamic operation and not a static structural element. Narrative is not simply equated with story, but with the discursive articulation of events, or the synthesizing organizing activity which gives sequence and structure to a play/poem/story. In other words, emplotment is to plot what narrativization is to narrative or storytelling is to story. And following the expanded ontological-hermeneutic sense of mimesis, Ricoeur feels justified in characterizing emplotment as a form of mimesis, even using the hyphenated *mimêsis-mûthos*, because Aristotle himself had already equated the two, "plot *is* the imitation of action."[10] Thus, for Ricoeur, despite the centrality of narrative to his broader project there remains "just one all-encompassing concept" in the *Poetics*: *mûthos = mimêsis*. (*TN*, p. 32)

Leaving aside the debate over the hierarchy of the terms, Aristotle's analysis of plot and

[10] Aristotle, *Poetics*, 50a1, Translated by Malcolm Heath, Penguin Books, 1996, p. 11

character both share a concern with plausibility, consistency, and coherence. This provides a foundation for the structuralist analysis of *vraisemblance* in literature.[11] To describe something in a narrative as *vraisemblable* can mean that it is believable as in "likely to happen," as well as "appropriate to its conventional context" (and correlatively, the distinct but not unrelated notion of "proper"). This sense of likeliness, or probability, is thus not the same thing as logical possibility. Aristotle even says that as far as the event depicted in a tragedy is concerned, it is preferable for something to be plausible but impossible rather than implausible but possible. This means it is narratively coherent. A plausible or *vraisemblable* event seems to inevitably follow from whatever has led to it. This does not mean that it cannot include an element of surprise or even shock; regardless of whether the reader/audience can anticipate it, once such an event has occurred a properly *vraisemblable* narrative will retroactively provide a sense of plausibility to the course of events. Thus, for a certain classical aesthetic sensibility, the quality of a narrative can to a great extent be judged on its *vraisemblance*, its internal and conventional coherence and congruity.

This is relevant for Aristotle's plot-character hierarchy because what determines the mimetic *vraisemblance* of individual characters is the *vraisemblance* of the plot. In other words, for Aristotle, a dramatic character is defined by their actions, what they are is what they do. Ricoeur is right to point out that this contradicts the priority between agent and action that Aristotle establishes in the *Nichomachean Ethics* (1105a30) where he argues that actions can only be judged in relation to the character of the one who commits them. As is so often the case when a philosopher needs to define the serious/normal/proper form of something, Aristotle contrasts this normative foundation of the quality of actions in essential character traits to the

[11] See the discussion of *vraisemblance* in the Geneva school, Todorov, Genette etc.

specialized circumstance of judging the quality of actions in artistic production. This implies two distinct causalities: in the *Ethics* actions are an effect of character, in the *Poetics* character is an effect of action. One could argue that there is a sort of scholarly sleight of hand occuring when Ricoeur takes what Aristotle says about fictional actions and applies it to actual actions. To answer this objection, it would be necessary to consider all that Ricoeur has said about the distinction between the fictive and the fictional, and perhaps also Derrida's deconstruction of the metaphysical conception of metaphor as the parasitical derivation from a pure literal origin. Suffice it to say, I follow Ricoeur in this move; to find our Aristotelian theory of action in the *Poetics* rather than the *Ethics*, in much the same spirit that Lyotard argued that a better articulation of both pure and practical reason can be found by reading Kant's Third Critique back into its predecessors.

This is not simply a matter of substituting an ethical sense of praxis for a poetic one, the *Poetics* transforms Aristotle's account of action and character. When Aristotle speaks of the tragic character as the *mimêsis* of a person, this is "a person according to ethics" based on a pre-understanding of an ethical horizon which must conform to the logical requirement of coherence aka *vraisemblance*. This background resource which poet, actor, and audience draw upon for their mimetic construction is "not only an implicit categorization of the practical field… but also a first narrative organization of this field" (*Time*, p. 47) Before the mimetic act of composition there is always already a prior mimesis which forms and structures the shared horizonal context which is the condition of possibility for *vraisemblance*, not only probability but acceptability and appropriateness (this is what Ricoeur describes as the relationship between $\text{Mimesis}_1$ and $\text{Mimesis}_2$). This implies that affective power of the poetic composition, the pathos which elicits pity and fear and ultimately catharsis, is only possible through a recognitive associative process

which Ricoeur links to the referential function of language. This is why despite all of Aristotle's emphasis on the autonomy of the poetic act, and Ricoeur's elevation of the active productivity of mimesis over and against its passive derivative/imitative reputation, Aristotle still advises poets to retain historical names, to depict historical events, and to echo the power of prior mimetic iterations. As Ricoeur aptly summarizes: "… without myths that have been passed on there would be nothing to transform poetically. Who can fully put into words the inexhaustible source of violence received from the myths which the poet transforms into a tragic effect? And where is the tragic potential more dense than in the received stories about a few celebrated houses: that of the Atrides, that of Oedipus?" (*Time*, p. 47) Depictions of such figures and events are thus always more than the sum of their parts. They are never just imitations of discrete actions or individual people, but always already carry with them an entire network of implicit and explicit connective significations.

The appropriation of history (whether in reference to actual events or prior fictions) is itself not necessary but it serves as a paradigmatic example of the referential dimension of mimesis, which crucially need not satisfy any criterion of correspondence or fidelity in order to function. In other words, on a phenomenological level the normative evaluation of whether the particular associations made correspond to the correct or proper horizon of preunderstandings can be completely bracketed. The conditions of possibility for understanding as such are prior to the quality or degree of understanding. In this sense, misunderstanding is a form of understanding. But the recognitive mimesis which attempts to situate the present in relation to a referential and inferential network of associations is necessary for any possible understanding. Just as Ricoeur argues for an interpretation of mimesis which is not subsumed under the metaphysics of representational realism, his analysis preserves a phenomenological dimension of

reference which is not reducible to the reference/referent dyad of a correspondence epistemology. This phenomenological bracketing of the concrete referent allows Ricoeur to reduce the mimetic referential function to a formal structure of relationality.

The transition to the temporalized threefold mimesis has the effect of suspending the difference between literal and figurative mimetic acts. The paradigmatic example, the dramatic actor on stage performing a character, can be considered an example of a literal sense of mimesis, but according to Ricoeur's analysis the audience member's recognitive experience is also mimetic. If an audience member has prior knowledge of the story or the character, or the particular performance triggers the memory of another performance, whether it was of the same role or a different one, or if there is an association made between the dramatic action and a memory of their own lived experience, all of these emotional reactions and thought processes would constitute mimetic activity. It follows from this that any act (regardless of whether it is a physical movement or a psychical process) which connects a present moment to something previously experienced would constitute a mimetic act. Crucially, this prior experience need not have been direct lived experience. Certainly, actors do not need firsthand personal experience in order to portray historical figures from centuries or millennia before their time or even mythical and legendary figures, gods, or the personifications of abstract concepts. While they may necessarily have to draw on their own memories of real people that they have interacted with, or composites of such people, it is undeniable that dramatic performance is still possible without this and instead relies on the recollection of information about their subject: historical knowledge, stories, images, associations, memories of their depiction in prior mimetic performances, critical judgements and the abstract concepts that they are supposed to embody etc. All of these constitute answers to the question of what a given mimetic act is a mimesis of:

not the conjuration or summoning of an individual person through imitation, but the gathering together, or composition, of all of these different referential traces which, recontextualized and reinterpreted, combine to produce something recognizable, whether for author, performer, or audience.

This underlines the profound connection between mimesis and memory. Recollection is often characterized as the recall of information, but this fails to capture the emotionality of memory: the feeling of familiarity, or the feeling of recognition. Recognition is not only cognitive. There can be affective response without comprehension, "This feels familiar, or I feel like this is something I understand, but I don't know exactly what it is or why I feel that way." In fact, misrecognition can produce this feeling just as well as recognition: the perception of an unfamiliar phenomenon can be interpreted as something familiar, something known that is displeasing can be misrecognized as something pleasing and vice versa. Filling in the blanks of an experience that resists comprehension or provides an incomplete or unsatisfying level of comprehension with memories of prior experiences is a common psychological phenomenon; one treated at length in Husserl and Merleau-Ponty's analyses of the natural attitude and perception. This would place mimetic recognition within the synthesizing role that Kant assigns to the imagination, which makes sense because Ricoeur's transcendental phenomenological account of *mimêsis-mûthos* is undeniably indebted to Kantian synthesis. The inferential or fictive component of apprehension, reproduction, and recognition is mimetic in Ricoeur's sense, and this further differentiates hermeneutic mimesis from an act of copying imitation to be faulted or praised based on its fidelity to the original. Or, as in the Platonic criticism, not merely empirically judged on its accuracy but metaphysically judged as inherently illusory and thus in some fundamental sense not merely flawed but false. Contrary to both of these formulations of

mimesis and its relation to truth, the post-Kantian hermeneutic understanding posits an irreducibly imaginative (i.e., fictive) or even hallucinatory component to mimesis as a condition of its possibility. This imaginative hallucinatory quality could be linked to the notion of illusion in Kant, as well as the concepts of fantasy, the phantasm, and phantasmagoria in psychoanalysis and Marxist theory, and to Aristotle in *De Anima*: "Phantasia has a role in all thinking" (Book III, Ch. 7).

Consequently, Ricoeur's temporalized threefold mimesis radically suspends the origin or source pole of the traditional conception of mimesis. The result is a referential structure which can function with or without any referent, an imitation which need not be an imitation of anything in particular. And yet, this somewhat abstract formalism is capable of producing, organizing, and communicating coherent and meaningful discourse and actions which can elicit powerful emotional responses (identification, desire, hatred, envy, pity, fear etc.), convey complex ideas, and directly or indirectly motivate future mimetic processes. The further one takes the analysis of the different mimetic levels, the more it becomes apparent how intertwined they are. Rather than clearly demarcating separate time domains, there is an ouroboric recursive quality to Ricoeur's tripartite structure, where the futural aspect remains perpetually open to becoming the past of a subsequent mimetic process. There is almost a mise en abyme or chiasmatic structure to the interrelation of the referential and the receptive. Ricoeur's threefold mimesis thus further differentiates itself from the ontology of the copy on a temporal level: where the copy refers back to a fixed point of derivation, the aspect of mimesis in Ricoeur's sense which "refers back" needs not reference anything in particular, which in fact means that it must be fundamentally open. This open field of reference is the exact mirror of the infinite iterability of the futural receptive level.

The result is a focal point which further analysis can be oriented around: The mimetic act, the product of interpretation and appropriation, configured, presented, and performed, open to further interpretations and appropriations. Perhaps a model for a mimetic hermeneutics, but this model is a model of a model, derived from the template of dramatic performance, with the drama as such embodied in the individual mimetic acts of a performer. Since dramatic performance was intrinsically linked to the mask in classical Greek theatre, this means that the figure of the mask is inextricable from this model of mimetic action. Quite literally the mimetic act was a masked action, and the personification (*prosopopoeia*) produced through *mimêsis praxeos* is a masked making (*prósopon* + *poiéin*). Mimesis is masking.

The intertwining of *mimêsis praxeos* as the act of being-as with the blurred distinction between faces and masks suggests a complication of the difference between the fictional and the actual, and perhaps a paradox at the heart of identity. In order to resolve this paradox, or failing that, to elucidate its implications more clearly, it is necessary to explicate the way in which Ricoeur's prior work on metaphor informs his analysis of *mimêsis-mûthos,* the distinction between fictive and fictional, and the "as structure" in the "as-if," "seeing-as," and "being-as." This will further refine the deployment of the mask metaphor. To interpret the figure of the mask along these lines requires clarification of the concept of metaphor and metaphorical language, as the mask not only serves as the paradigmatic metaphor for the paradigmatic mimetic act (tragic performance) but perhaps as a metaphor for metaphor itself. Ricoeur's analysis of metaphor in *la métaphore vive* can help qualify the tropological status of masks.

**Act II: Metaphor**

The scope of the analysis of *The Rule of Metaphor* is multi-level, moving from a rhetorical account of metaphor, through a semiotic and semantic one, culminating in

hermeneutics. This disciplinary movement corresponds to a widening of the domain of the linguistic subject matter: from the word to the sentence and ultimately to discourse as such. Ricoeur explicitly links *The Rule of Metaphor* to *Time and Narrative* in the Preface to Vol.1 of the latter: "*The Rule of Metaphor* and *Time and Narrative* form a pair" *(Time*, p. ix). It follows that understanding the role of mimesis in *The Rule of Metaphor* will help clarify its meaning in *Time and Narrative*. Perhaps more importantly for this project, however, *The Rule of Metaphor* sets up a basic linguistic vocabulary for mimetic interpretation. In other words, Ricoeur's account of the differences between rhetorical, semiotic, semantic, and hermeneutic theories of metaphor serves as a model to interpret mimesis and masks on the rhetorical, semiotic, semantic, and hermeneutic levels. In order to do this, it is first necessary to understand how Ricoeur is deploying these terms and the lexical fields which each one occupies in their corresponding accounts of metaphor.

Ricoeur's first two studies are concerned with metaphor in the context of rhetoric. Metaphor here is defined as a single-word figure of speech and categorized as a trope of resemblance. His analysis of this rhetorical determination of metaphor begins in the first study with the codification of ancient rhetoric in Aristotle, situating metaphor between rhetoric and poetics, and ends in the second study with what he characterizes as the end of the classical rhetorical tradition in the work of 19$^{th}$ century French linguist Pierre Fontanier. While the techniques and teleologies of poetics and rhetoric are separate for Aristotle (poiesis-mimesis-catharsis vs rhetoric-proof-persuasion), they share a common understanding of metaphor. This understanding can be characterized as a nomenclature theory of metaphor: "Metaphor consists in giving the thing a name that belongs to something else; the transference being either from genus to species, or from species to genus, or from species to species, or on grounds of analogy."

(*Poetics* 1457 b 6-9) What this means is that Aristotle's theory of metaphor locates it within a subsection of a segment of language, the noun, and defines it as a transfer of the meanings of nouns or names. Because this analysis locates metaphoric transference within a part of speech (i.e., a part of the sentence), this has had the effect of precluding the analysis of metaphor at the level of the whole sentence, and beyond the individual sentence at the level of discourse.

Ricoeur's characterizes the Aristotelian theory of metaphor as an "epiphora of the name." This transfer of names is equivalent to the exchange of linguistic signs; therefore, the Aristotelian definition of metaphor could be characterized as semiotic. He outlines its essential features: 1. "metaphor is something that happens to the noun." (*Metaphor,* p. 16), it consists in the naming of a thing with the name of another thing. 2. "metaphor is defined in terms of movement." (p. 17) Aristotle equates this naming with a transfer (*epiphora*) from something to something else. This is notable because Aristotle essentially defines metaphor with a metaphor, specifically a spatial metaphor related to movement. 3. "metaphor is a transposition of a name that Aristotle calls 'alien' (*allotrios*), that is, 'a name that belongs to something else'." (p. 18) This notion of the transposition of the alien name carries with it three distinct ideas, "*deviation* from ordinary usage… *borrowing* from an original domain… *substitution* for an absent but available ordinary word." (p. 20) 4. Aristotle seems to provide a definition of metaphor as the transference of the name in general but simultaneously provides a typology which would seem to assign metaphor to one place among four forms of this transference, namely the trope of resemblance. (pp. 20-21)

Perhaps the most striking feature of Aristotle's definition of metaphor is the ambiguity about whether metaphor refers to the genus of tropes, or to a specific subset of that category. Arguably, this renders his definition as itself belonging to the category of synecdoche. While

Ricoeur suggests that the history of rhetoric traditionally denied metaphor the genus level and confined it to the species as the trope of resemblance, he does not simply argue to reverse that interpretation and recover the unity of metaphor across all tropes and reject the trope of resemblance. On the contrary, if metaphor for Aristotle does indeed have some essential connection to resemblance "to metaphorize well is to be able to perceive similarity in dissimilars" (1459a 3-8) and it can also refer to every transposition of terms in general, then Ricoeur concludes that resemblance is an element of all four of these forms which can be understood as kinds of metaphors.

This positive element of resemblance which connects terms together and allows for the transposition of names has its negative corollary in "categorial transgression," which refers to the "deviation in relation to a pre-existing logical order… a dis-ordering in a scheme of classification." (p. 22) In other words, that which makes the "alien" (*allotrios*) name alien, the element which differentiates it from the *kurion* (ordinary or current). Thus, resemblance is what distinguishes metaphor from catachresis in general for Aristotle, while both involve a deviation from the ordinary use of language (a "category-mistake" to use modern philosophical terminology), metaphor also involves the "borrowing" of another non-ordinary use via this somewhat vague quality of resemblance. The question of how this disruption of ordinary language and borrowing of alien language relates to the idea of substitution is crucial for Ricoeur, not only for his reading of Aristotle but for the critique of the rhetorical conception of metaphor in general. This hinges on the confinement of metaphor to an exchange of words (something established within the Aristotelian text itself) and thus suggests the notion that the disruption and borrowing essentially amount to a substitution of one word for another. Against this conception however, Ricoeur wants to argue for the irreducibly relational character of

metaphor. Even at the nominal level, metaphor always involves a plurality (transference of… to…) which means that even in an extremely simple metaphorical configuration there is an interaction of elements as part of a network of significations.

This means that the categorial disruption is not simply the displacement of a word but the transgression of a logical order. This is what allows metaphor to create meaning through redescription. Ricoeur relates this emphasis on the productive quality of metaphor, that something new is produced out of the transference/disruption of ordinary communication, to Gadamer's discussion of language and concept formation in the final chapter of *Truth and Method*, "Language as the Medium of Hermeneutic Experience." There Gadamer suggests a fundamental "metaphoric" or "metaphoricity" (*grundsätliche Metaphorik*) at work at the origin of logical thought, classification, and concept formation.[12] From this perspective, rather than understanding metaphor as something which takes place within a pre-existing logical order and semantic field, it could be seen as constitutive of that order and field. This is not an etymological historical claim, but a structural one. In other words, it is not an argument about an archaic proto-linguistic metaphorical ground from which language sprang, but a theory about the necessity of a metaphorical dimension in an ongoing process of concept formation.

This tension of metaphor as simultaneously a modification of pre-existing meaning and the creation of new meaning is shared with mimesis. The mimesis of action in tragedy is simultaneously a repetition and organization/re-organization of actions, and also a re-description and elevation of them. Aristotle stresses that the potential power of the dramatic performance hinges on this element of intensification and elevation beyond everyday experience. Likewise,

[12] Ricoeur's reference is to page 71, 406 ff of the German edition of *Warheit und Methode*, which in the English translation corresponds to 65 and 428 (*Truth and Method* Second, Revised Edition, Translation revised by Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall, Continuum Books, 2006).

not every deviation in relation to the ordinary usage of language qualifies as a metaphor, otherwise the metaphorical would include "the rare word, the newly coined, the lengthened, abbreviated, and altered." (*Metaphor*, p. 40) Metaphorical language does something more in its transpositions and transformations, but what this "something more" entails is not easily defined. It suggests a power or force of signification. Metaphor and mimesis share this element of potentiality in tension with referentiality: both consist in re-ordering preexisting meaning but through this can create something new. Through this linkage between metaphor and mimesis, Ricoeur is outlining an Aristotelian conception of metaphor that functions beyond the level of the word. From this perspective, as the tragic poem is comprised of mimetic acts and is itself mytho-mimetic as a whole, metaphor can be interpreted at the rhetorical level of the semiotics of particular words as equally as it can be analyzed at the semantic level of individual sentences and the discursive level of the poem as a whole.

Ricoeur's transition from the semiotic epiphora of the name to the semantic analysis of the metaphorical statement in the middle chapters of *The Rule of Metaphor* is based on Émile Benveniste's distinction between semiotics and semantics in *Problems in General Linguistics*. This transition from the level of the individual word to the sentence is not a move from singularity to plurality but rather a transition to a different class of linguistic concepts: "The sentence is realized in words, but the words are not simply segments of it. A sentence constitutes a whole which is not reducible to the sum of its parts; the meaning inherent in this whole is distributed over the ensemble of the constituents."[13] For Benveniste then, at the semantic level the meaning of individual words is subordinated to the circumstantial meaning of the sentence. Ricoeur illustrates this semantics of the statement with the allegory of translation: "[Translation]

[13] Benveniste, Émile, *Problèmes de linguistique générale*, Trans. Mary Elizabeth Meek, University of Miami Press, 1971, p. 105.

shows that the sentence is not a mosaic, but an organism. To translate is to invent an identical constellation, in which each word is influenced by all the others and, bit by bit, profits from its relation to the whole of language." (*Metaphor*, p. 79) Considered through this semantic lens, Ricoeur argues for the validity of the metaphorical statement as a distinct form of the production of metaphorical meaning which cannot be accounted for within the "*epiphora* of the name."

The movement from the word to the sentence yields a theory of metaphor as predication rather than naming. Drawing on I. A. Richards *The Philosophy of Rhetoric,* Ricoeur employs the technical terminology of *tenor* and *vehicle* to define the two parts of the metaphorical statement. This semantic understanding of metaphor "consists in talking about one thing in terms of another… perceiving, thinking, or sensing one thing in terms of another" where the thing talked about would be the *tenor* and the terms in which it is talked about would be the *vehicle*. (*Metaphor*, p. 83) Ricoeur argues that while tenor and vehicle seem like unnecessarily artificial or unusual terms, this is actually a virtue of Richard's theory rather than a downfall because it helps to separate them from overdetermined pairs like "original" vs "borrowed" or "idea" vs "image," and thus helps decouple metaphor from the language of mental images understood as copies of sensible perception. Furthermore, presenting tenor and vehicle as equally necessary parts of the whole of metaphor prevents taking them separately and rendering the vehicle into an added ornament. Tenor and vehicle are equiprimordial; they co-constitute the metaphorical statement through their interaction. Rather than the substitution of one name for another, this semantic account of the metaphoric statement invokes the interaction or transaction of two contexts. There is a major consequence of this in (borrowing the language of electrical engineering) the signal flow of metaphor: rather than an expressivist "direction of fit" where meaning is conveyed through its linguistic medium unidirectionally, the tenor cannot be

understood as a fixed unchanging meaning underlying any possible interchangeable substitution. Through the interaction of the tenor and vehicle which engenders metaphor as predication, "the tenor does not remain unaltered." (*Metaphor*, p. 81) This serves to further differentiate the semantic conception of metaphor from a classical rhetoric by resisting the assimilation of meaning and form to the ontology of essence and accident.

The final chapters of *The Rule of Metaphor* build off of the semantic analysis of the metaphorical statement to develop the hermeneutical sense of metaphor at the level of the text as such. By text, Ricoeur refers to a complex entity which cannot be reduced to a unit of discourse but rather "the production of discourse as a work," that is, something more than a collection of statements but a disposition, i.e., organized and arranged into a totality, according to the formal rules of a genre, resulting in a particular work created in a singular style. Ricoeur thus defines the task of hermeneutics as unfolding the world of the work through the interpretation of its arrangement, its genre, and its style. Hermeneutics is simply "the theory that regulates the transition from structure of the work to world of the work." (*Metaphor*, p. 220) This involves a rethinking of the referential function of language as defined by logical positivism following Gottlob Frege's "On Sense and Reference" ("*Über Sinn und Bedeutung")*.

Against the tendency in 20th century literary criticism to posit a non-referential quality of literary language, Ricoeur argues for the elaboration of a metaphorical referential function which suspends the denotative function which would link language to reality. This is a subtle distinction but an absolutely crucial one. Ricoeur is not defending reference in the name of a realist theory of language, but rather positing that putting "reality," "world," and "truth," under phenomenological *epokhē* allows for the articulation of the formal structure of referentiality. Just as metaphor at the semiotic level was not only defined by contrast with the ordinary functioning

of language but also could be understood as constitutive of it, the phenomenological bracketing of the connection between language and reality allows for the conceptual isolation of referentiality as such from the meaning assigned to reference within a correspondence theory of truth. It is this development in *The Rule of Metaphor* that leads Ricoeur to the radical openness of the threefold mimesis in *Time and Narrative*, a structure which is constitutively referential without the presence of any concrete referent.

Ricoeur's hermeneutics of metaphor provides the basis for understanding the metaphorical dimension of mimesis. With that in mind, considering the mask as a metaphor for mimesis brings out the meta-metaphorical dimension of the mask. The strangeness of the mask as a metaphor of metaphor lies in its literalization of the figurative *epiphora* of meaning. This self-reflexive quality would seem to verge on a circular logic. This is not just a problem for the figure of the mask, but for metaphor as such. Returning to Aristotle's account of metaphor and the problem of circularity in its definition, Ricoeur argues that this inherent circularity suggests the impossibility of a non-metaphorical conception of metaphor, and likewise of a non-figural conception of figure:

> To explain metaphor, Aristotle creates a metaphor, one borrowed from the realm of movement; *phora*, as we know, is a kind of change, namely change with respect to location. But we are anticipating the subsequent theory in saying that the word *metaphor* is itself metaphorical because it is borrowed from an order other than that of language… we are supposing: (1) that metaphor is a borrowing; (2) that the borrowed meaning is opposed to the proper meaning, that is, to the meaning that "really belongs" to a word by virtue of being its original meaning; (3) that one resorts to metaphor to fill a semantic void; and (4) that the borrowed word takes the place of the absent proper word where such exists… Any wish to avoid prejudging the theory of metaphor by calling metaphor an *epiphora* would be shattered quickly by the realization that it is impossible to talk about metaphor non-metaphorically… the definition of metaphor returns on itself. (*Metaphor*, pp. 17-8)

Perhaps linking metaphor to the figure of the mask risks compounding this circularity, but it has equal potential to be a productive circle as a vicious one. Without making any reference to the

*prósōpon*, Ricoeur underlines the fact that in the *Rhetoric,* Aristotle attributes to metaphor the power to "set things before our eyes." (1410b) The context of this statement is an attempt to qualify vividness in the effective use of metaphor. In the case of the rhetorical usage of metaphor, this would mean whether a metaphor is persuasive or not, while in the case of tragic poetics, whether a metaphor evokes pity and fear (arguably still a form of persuasion, e.g., the audiences judgment of whether or not a narrative is compelling). Thus, Aristotle is speaking of the imagistic quality of metaphor, its capacity to stimulate the imagination and convey liveliness and activity.

Highlighting this spectacular aspect of metaphorical language would seem to suggest a closer link between the *lexis* and *opsis* of tragic drama than Aristotle indicates in his analysis of its essential elements. In the *Poetics,* Aristotle explicitly downplays the importance of spectacle, even going so far as to suggest that "the effect of tragedy is not dependent on performance" (1450b). In other words, not only is the visual element of the production inessential, but there need not be a performance at all for tragedy to be effective. This is essentially a claim about the ideality of the tragic text. The text can function in the absence of its literal performance (although perhaps through the lens of Ricoeur's threefold mimesis the reading of the text can be considered a performance where the reader is simultaneously performer and audience). Despite the formal validity of this claim, it is empirically undeniable that there is a difference in degree if not in kind between the experience of reading a tragedy and watching a performance of it. In either case, if we consider that there is an element of spectacle common to both what Aristotle called the spectacle (i.e., stage production, costumes, props, masks) and the poetic language of the play (the metaphorical power to "set things before our eyes"), then this would seem to imply that spectacle is in fact not inessential, but rather that it is present in whatever element the

experience of tragedy depends on as a medium. In this more fundamental conceptualization of spectacle as not inherently sensuous but as signifying an intensity of imaginative force, spectacularity could be seen as an essential component to the mediation of any aesthetic form.

In what sense is the mask *the* medium for tragic mimesis? Literally, in the speech sounds passing through the amplifying passageway of the mouth hole to project out into the theatre; figuratively in the metaphoric masking of the language, the performance of borrowed signs acting out new significations. It is possible to think mask as metaphor and metaphor as mask. They share the ambiguous relation to absence and presence: "The 'presence' embodied by the actor in the theater was always the sign, or mask, of an absence."[14] Mimetic performance seems to inherently signify a paradoxical identity: to "act as" means to be something other than what one is. Understanding the implications of this paradoxical identity for mimetic hermeneutics requires an account of the historical role played by masks in Attic drama that traces the network of associations at play whenever masks are deployed (whether literally or figuratively).

And yet as previously noted, Aristotle deemphasized the importance of spectacle in the *Poetics*, and even though Ricoeur's hermeneutics of mimesis emphasized the performative dimension he likewise neglects the element of material culture which would seem to demand an account of the mask in any comprehensive engagement with Attic Tragedy. Rather than seeing this lack as a deficiency, it provides an opportunity to supplement Ricoeur's philosophical interpretation of the Aristotelian text with analysis from anthropological and archaeological sources. For this, I turn to French classicists Jean-Pierre Vernant, Pierre Vidal-Naquet, and Françoise Frontisi-Ducroux, who provide structuralist interpretations of Attic texts and archaeological objects. It is necessary to acknowledge that this appeal to contextualization and

[14] Vernant, Jean-Pierre, "The God of Tragic Fiction", in Jean-Pierre Vernant and Pierre Vidal-Naquet, *Myth and Tragedy in Ancient Greece*. Trans. Janet Lloyd, Zone Books, 1988, p. 187

periodization of mimesis and masks in order to operationalize and apply these concepts as interpretive tools to texts throughout history and across completely different cultural and linguistic contexts raises important questions about the limits and possibilities of this project as a whole. This invokes the tension between historicity and trans-historicism. Can antiquity speak contemporaneously? Are the connections made in an encounter with history merely retroactive projections? I will return to these questions at the end of this chapter and throughout the ones which follow and attempt to provide an answer or at the very least outline the aporia as thoroughly as possible.

**Act III: Masks**

Beyond the role of the *prósōpon* as theatrical prop, masks in Ancient Greece were also a core element of religious rituals and were also created as sculptural art (i.e., not intended to be worn). Where the theatrical mask has a clear utilitarian purpose—it served the aesthetic function of identifying individual characters and communicating facial expressions to a distant audience—these other masks had distinct religious purposes. In the case of the masks worn by worshippers, they created a kind of anonymity through disguise (and this connects back to the theatre with the commonplace mass uniformity of the choral masks), while the unworn sculpted mask was typically the face of a god, primarily Dionysus. The phenomenon of masks as representation of the gods is noteworthy because while masks depicting the entire pantheon can be found in earlier periods, among the many other mediums in which the gods were depicted (on beams, pillars, in the likeness of animals, or monsters, as human beings etc.), in the classical period this was refined into the canonical form of anthropomorphic statuary.[15] However, this

[15] Vernant, Jean-Pierre and Françoise Frontisi-Ducroux "Features of the Mask in Ancient Greece" in Jean-Pierre Vernant and Pierre Vidal-Naquet, *Myth and Tragedy in Ancient Greece*, Trans. by Janet Lloyd, Zone Books, 1988, p. 190

general exclusion of the earlier decorative religious masks was not universal, it had a notable exception in the case of a small group of divine powers that retained a particular connection to the mask either in their representation or ritual. This group included the gorgons, Artemis (who was not depicted via mask but whose rituals mandated mask wearing and disguise), and Dionysus, "the deity whose relationship with the mask is so close that in the Greek pantheon he is known as the god of the mask." As the god of theatre, accounting for the significance of the Dionysian mask is essential for understanding the role of the mask in Attic drama,

Vernant and Frontisi-Ducroux point to two sources of evidence for the significance of the mask for the cult of Dionysus. Archaeological sources such as ornamental marble masks meant to be hung up rather than worn, and vase paintings depicting the mask of the god mounted to a pillar at the center of a feast table. The other source is the dramatic literary text of Euripides' *Bakkhai*. In this bizarre, at times hilarious and at times incredibly brutal play, we find masks upon masks: "Hidden by his tragic mask, an actor embodies the god, who is the protagonist of the drama. But this god, himself masked, conceals himself beneath a human appearance that, in its turn is also equivocal. As a man-woman wearing an Asiatic robe, with his painted face framed by long plaits and his strange gaze, Dionysus passes himself off as one of his own prophets, come to reveal to the eyes of all the epiphany of the god whose essential forms of manifestation are metamorphosis, disguise, and the mask" (*Myth*, p. 16). Like the gorgon, Dionysus' power is in his gaze, and when one looks upon the depictions of the Dionysian mask-idol in the vase paintings the perspective is head on, the god seeing you as you see him. As depicted in *Bakkhai* when one comes face to face with Dionysus "it is impossible to look at him without falling beneath the fascination of his gaze, a gaze that drives a man out of his mind." The masked idol itself depicts the god as bearded, "with tumbling locks crowned with an ivy wreath… below

stream the folds of some gauzy material" and these props are all marks of the god which a worshiper can adorn themselves with as well. The Dionysian ecstasy is not only the result of drunkenness and sexual excess but achieving oneness with the divine by "swinging into the gaze of the god or becoming assimilated to him through mimetic contagion." (*Myth*, p. 204)

What the Dionysian mask represented, in its ritual function, and as the foundation of the theatrical space, was "an eruption into the heart of public life of a dimension of existence totally alien to the quotidian world" (*Myth,* p. 205). The mask as the presence of absence simultaneously makes the absent present while introducing something absent into the present. The masked mimesis allows a temporally and/or spatially distanced figure (real or imagined) to speak, to act, to be seen and to see. The audience in seeing this can also be seen by it. They can be changed by it: moved, frightened, enraged, challenged, implicated, altered. In the language of Ricoeur's threefold mimesis, the mimetic act of the drama has the capacity to draw upon the non-presence of the prior experience of the writer, actors, and audience, to enact the event of the performance itself, and to affect in the audience an experience of becoming other to oneself (analogous to the semantic disruption of metaphor), through the consensual hallucination of the theatre, an alteration of the natural attitude of everyday consciousness.[16] As Vernant eloquently summarizes, the experience of tragic drama presents us with a very different account of the character of a human being than the ones we find in philosophical dialectic:

> Tragedy takes heroic legend as its material. It invents neither the characters nor the plots of its plays. It finds them in the Greeks' shared knowledge concerning what they believe to be their past, the far horizon of the men of former times. But within the space of the stage and the framework of tragic representation, the hero is no longer put forward as a

[16] I put this in terms of potentiality because a dramatic performance can obviously fail to have this heightened transformative effect. There is not a unitary effect of mimetic performance, it has as many possible receptions as it has potential receivers. In addition to the somewhat romantic account of cathartic transformation, there is just as likely a response of boredom, displeasure, or annoyance, and there is always the potential for a lack of understanding or misunderstanding. A particularly ineffective or dull performance may produce an effect less hallucinatory and more sedative in nature.

> model… he has become a problem… what used to be praised as an ideal… is brought into question before the public. The hero becomes the subject of a debate and interrogation that, through his person, implicates the fifth-century spectator, the citizen of democratic Athens… human beings and human action are seen, not as realities to be pinned down and defined in their essential qualities, in the manner of the philosophers of the succeeding century, but as problems that defy resolution, riddles with double meanings that are never fully decoded. (*Myth* p. 242)

This tragic depiction of human being and human action as fundamentally aporetic and enigmatic, where the identity of a person is viewed through the Augustinian self-alienation ("I have become a question to myself"), is conventionally performed in a heightened situation, in a particular sanctified location (the theatre) removed from ordinary social relations. But does this separation imply a lack of relevance for the tragic problematization of identity for the everyday sense of identity? Recalling what Ricoeur has argued about the metaphorical usage of language: while it can be defined through its deviation from the ordinary, it can also be argued that the foundation of concept formation necessary for the functioning of the ordinary logical and semantic order is itself dependent on the metaphorical transference of meaning. So too, while the heightened artistic experience of identity can be distinguished from the abstracted philosophical account of it and as well as the intuitive practical sense of the "natural attitude" (to use Husserlian language), the mimetic and aporetic dynamics at play in the tragic conception of identity and recognition can reveal elements of the structure of conscious and unconscious processes of identification in other domains of human existence.

What remains to be clarified in this extension of Ricoeur's interpretation of metaphor to the figure of the mask is the ways in which the mask would function within the various linguistic domains that Ricoeur passes through. The rhetorical/semiotic theory of tropes is the most obvious and immediate case, as the classical model defined metaphor as the *epiphora* of the name, this would correspond to the *epiphora* of the mask, i.e., the mask functioning as a

metaphor for the transference of identities. If the next extension of the linguistic domain was to the consider metaphorical statement, perhaps the mask could correspond to the performance of social activity, meaningful action in social relations. Recalling the terminology from Richards' *Philosophy of Rhetoric*, in the terms of tenor ("the thing talked about" and vehicle "the terms in which it is talked about"), the possible interpreted meanings of social activity would be the tenor, and the performative acts themselves would be the vehicle. The hermeneutic level of the text, its structure and its world, presents a far more difficult analogy.

Whereas the transition from an individual masked performance as a semiotics of identity to the intersubjective semantic interaction of masked actors in social relations is perhaps suggested by the ensemble nature of theatrical performance itself, can a mask truly stand for the text as whole, understood as a structural unity, according to a set of generic rules, possessing a singular style? The inverse is a far simpler hermeneutic task, to consider the mask as a text, i.e., as an object of interpretation. But even this seems to risk effacing the specificity of Ricoeur's language, his use of the French *oeuvre,* which is not reducible to simply a collection of statements. The applicability of the figure of the mask to the different metaphorical registers will perhaps only be truly assessed after they have been interpreted across these levels in relation to particular masks in the various contexts alluded to in the prologue of this chapter. The question remains whether masks have something inherently tied to identity and the individual, or whether a de-personalized or de-personified mask has interpretive value for mimetic processes which cannot be reduced to the being and actions of an individual.

**Epilogue**

This reinterpretation of hermeneutics as mimetics and consideration of the mask as a medium of mimetic experience and a mimetic figure in its own right sets up the readings of

Marx, Freud, and *Watchmen* in the subsequent chapters. The question remains, to what extent does mimetics as a theory and practice of interpretation remain within the horizon of textual hermeneutics, and to what extent does it constitute a meaningful deviation from it? Like all hermeneutic interpretation, mimetics involves a movement between the parts and the whole of its subject matter. Mimetic interpretation at both the holistic structural level and the granular detailed level would involve the application of Ricoeur's threefold mimesis: an attempt to account for the referential and inferential background of the text itself or any moment or figure within the text; an attention to the performative elements of the form of the medium and the way in which the mimetic text organizes itself, i.e., what does the text do and how does it do it; and the consideration of its reception and reiteration as mimetic activity, at the level of the text itself, where reception and reiteration appear as an act/event or as a theme or figure within the work, as well as metatextually in the work's *Wirkungsgeschichte*. In terms of the temporality inherent to the threefold mimesis, while the work of interpretation is always historically oriented and thus concerned with the past, this approach allows the interpreter to orient their analysis around the past-present and attempt to comprehend the time of the work and the event character of its performative dimension, and from this, to differentiate its past and future. Such a structural differentiation and clean temporal ordering is impossible to achieve from an epistemological standpoint, the "present" of a work is constituted by its past and too deeply saturated with it to ever be fully disambiguated from it, and knowledge of a works later reception forms the interpreters pre-understanding in such a fundamental way that its future can never be fully bracketed. However, the tripartite temporal structure serves a heuristic function which is justified by contrast to the one-dimensional monism of subsuming the entirety of what preceded a past work, the present of its interior temporality, and all that proceeded from it under the singular

category of the past.

The question of the relation of the mask to identity and identification will be an ongoing theme for all of the subsequent chapters of this work. The interpretation of this theme is rooted in the double meaning of identification in English: to identify something *as* something vs to identify *with* something. The former is an objective determinative judgement ("This is that)" while the latter conveys a subjective or intersubjective relation ("I feel as if I am like this" or "that reminds me of myself"). Both of these are mimetic processes, in the former, to identify something *as* something, to subsume an intuition under a concept in the Kantian terminology, involves the creation of a signifying mask through the interpretation of past experience, which functions predicatively to qualify and contextualize whatever has been perceived. In the latter, there is a feeling of resemblance, of recognition or familiarity, some part of what is perceived is interpreted as similar to the self. This element of recognition or familiarity can just as well be present in the objective determination ("This object reminds me of something; I associate this with something related to me") but the difference lies in the fact that the identification *with* produces a conclusion which says something about the self's own being ("That is what I *am*"). While the identification of something *as* something may relate to the self and may project something of the self out to form the comprehensible mask of the phenomenal world, the identification *with* takes that recognition of similarity and incorporates it within the self, it places the mask upon one's own face.

Both of these kinds of identifying judgement can take a positive or negative form. The identification of something *as* something can also function to differentiate ("This is not that"), and so too the identification of the self *with* something ("I am not that"). These identifying and differentiating judgements both influence each other, are co-constitutive, and yield both

determinant judgements about individuals ("This belongs/does not belong to that type") and reflective judgements of higher order associations ("These qualities of this do/do not apply generally to things of that type"). The affirmative judgement of belonging, the very formation of intersubjectivity and being-with, is dependent upon the exclusion or negation of others. Even bracketing the ontological priority of negation, identification, whether through determinate or reflective judgments, is mimetic. This underlines the value of mimetics as a tool for social-political theory, and the figure of the mask functioning in both interpretations of identity and non-identity, standing in for that which is appropriated or incorporated from the other into/upon the self, and as that which is projected and displaced upon the other to signify the belonging or non-belonging of the individual to the identity group.

The next chapter will explore these social-political themes and address the mimetic character of identity and identification through the mediation of history in political performance. Specifically, this means a reading of Marx's *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*. In this text, Marx performs the role of a scathing theatre critique, polemicizing against the crass reactionary repetition of Napoleon III but more importantly for this project, articulating the irreducible mimetic element of political performance. His account of this farcical repetition does not simply critique a false political performance in the name of an authentic revolutionary truth but reveals the masked character of political representation and the role it plays in the collective identification necessary to form movements and coalitions capable of transforming society. The mimetics of Marx yields a Marxist mimetics, one marked by an inescapable spectrality through the hauntological historicity of the mimetic mask.

# Chapter 2

## Einmal… Zweimal…

As in the history of philosophy there are nodal points which raise philosophy in itself to concretion, apprehend abstract principles in a totality, and thus break off the rectilinear process, so also there are moments when philosophy turns its eyes to the external world, and no longer apprehends it, but, as a practical person, weaves, as it were, intrigues with the world, emerges from the transparent kingdom of Amenthes and throws itself on the breast of the worldly Siren. That is the carnival of philosophy, whether it disguises itself as a dog like the Cynic, in priestly vestments like the Alexandrian, or in fragrant spring array like the Epicurean. It is essential that philosophy should then wear character masks.[17]

The reduction of Marx to a benevolent but dated figure most often serves the interest of launching a new theory of interpretation.[18]

### Mere Interpretation

The reading of Aristotle via Ricoeur in the previous chapter produced a redefinition of recognitive mediation as mimetic masking. This has implications beyond the originary context of classical aesthetics, notably for historiography and the philosophy of history (and the social-political acts which constitute it), rendering not only historical acts but the act of historicization as the mimetic confluence of contemporary activity and the traces of a past. Addressing the topic of history and historicity reframes a classical hermeneutic question—to what extent does tradition constitute the socio-historical limits and possibilities of beings—in terms of mimesis and masks. Reorienting this question aims to unsettle dogmatic assumptions around originality and innovation on one hand and fidelity and continuity on the other. The primary setting in which this encounter with mimesis and masks as historical and historiographical figures will be staged is Karl Marx's 1852 essay *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte.*

*The Eighteenth Brumaire* is an uncanny and elusive text (almost a parlor trick or sleight

[17] Marx, Karl, "Notebooks on Epicurean Philosophy", MECW 1: 491

[18] Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture,* Ed. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg, University of Illinois Press, 1988, p. 279.

of hand, a bait and switch) in numerous ways. Most importantly for the concerns of this project, in the way that Marx initially offers up such an astute and compelling account of the irreducible anachronism and theatricality of political action, political performance, and politics as mimetic repetition, but then immediately pivots and seems to discard all of this, seeking to confine the validity of his analysis to the bourgeois past and insisting that the revolution to come, the revolution that seemed on its way in the middle of the 19th century, would be able to escape the cycle of mimetic masking and break from it once and for all. One way to evaluate this argument would be—with the benefit of our knowledge of the history that followed Marx's prediction—to empirically question its predictive validity: was Marx correct in asserting that the communist revolutions to come would escape the cycle of anachronist mimesis? Another approach would be to examine why it was so important for him to distinguish between the revolutions of the past and the revolution to come, and why this hinged in such a significant way on the ability of the future revolution to shed the dead weight of tradition and bring about some creative realization of something radically unprecedented, thus un-hermeneutic and non-mimetic. The former approach has might have a general academic value but would best be left to a scholar of Russian history, or of the history of communism more broadly. Therefore, this chapter pursues the second line of inquiry: to try to establish what is at stake for Marx in the hard line he is attempting to draw between the tradition bound mimetic revolutions of the past and the radically unprecedented nonmimetic revolution to come.

This leads to the core contradiction of the mimetic reading of Marx: on the one hand, "the *Eighteenth Brumaire* presents a hermeneutic account of political action as masked performativity and the mimetic dynamics of the revolutionary and reactionary cycles of political history and at the same time Marx remains in a very real sense an explicitly anti-hermeneutical thinker, and

asserts the necessity and imminent arrival of a politics capable of transcending beyond the mimetic identifications he has so effectively described. This calls for an initial account of Marx's hermeneutics of hermeneutics (i.e., why he is against "mere interpretation"), in order to thoroughly work through the significance of Marx's hermeneutics of political mimesis in *The Eighteenth Brumaire*. By turning to Marx in this chapter, the intent is not simply to incorporate Marx within the framework of mimetic hermeneutics established in the first chapter, but also to challenge and expand that framework via the encounter with Marxist theory.

At the most basic level this challenge entails a rejection of methodological individualism. If individual being is constituted by social relations, then the interpretation of individual beings and their acts would need to be situated in terms of the social relations which constitute them and determine their possibilities rather than as isolated interiorities which then find expression in social contexts as a secondary feature. Marx perhaps best summarizes this point, that human beings have to be interpreted socially not only in their obviously social interactions with others but even in apparent isolated activity, in a passage in the "Private Property and Communism" essay in the 1844 *Manuscripts*:

> When I am active *scientifically…* an activity which I can seldom perform in direct community with others… then my activity is *social,* because I perform it as a human being. Not only is the material of my activity given to me as a social product (as is even the language in which the thinker is active): my own existence is social activity, and therefore that which I make of myself, I make of myself for society and with the consciousness of myself as a social being.

From even the most basic capacity to acquire and use language then, an individual is always already a product of social forces and must be interpreted in relation to their social conditions of possibility. This fundamental relationality already answers the potential critique that mimetics simply another theory of the subject, or of individual consciousness: there is no mimetic mask, no mimesis at all without structures and forces which transcend the individual, elements which

not only resist the reduction to mere contents of consciousness or subjectivity but are in fact constitutive of it. This is not a matter of arguing that a social theory of mimesis is better than a methodological individualist one for ethical or political reasons, the latter is completely incoherent and self-contradictory.

Marxist theory, irreducibly social, is thus also undeniably interpretive, and yet as the iconic claim goes, Marx was not content with "merely interpreting the world." Marx asserts this as the key difference between his own work as revolutionary praxis and traditional philosophy which he defined as interpretive and nothing more. This famous sentiment from the "Theses on Feuerbach" is echoed in 1937 by Max Horkheimer in the programmatic Frankfurt School essay "Traditional and Critical Theory." This distinction between the descriptive, hermeneutical, knowledge producing bourgeois sciences on the one hand, and the critical interventions of Marxist analysis is crucial for defining the ideological identification of the critical theorist as a revolutionary agent engaged in revolutionary activity. The difference is not methodological, but teleological. It is a question of "the point," or rather what it comes to ("*es kommt aber darauf an*"). What is it that comes? The present? The future? Marx seems to be promising that history arrives (has it arrived, or will it arrive?) at a point, a point which the critical theorist bears witness to and heralds, a point where philosophy can no longer be content with reiterating interpretations, of endless versions and variations of the world, but must become something else in order to make the world become something else. As he put it in one of his early writings on Lucretius' *On the Nature of Things*, "a task of philosophy which would not be philosophy itself."[19]

And yet, if like Adorno suggests in the opening chapter of *Negative Dialectics*, the

[19] Marx, Karl, "Notebooks on Epicurean Philosophy" MECW 1: 496

moment for theory to realize itself was missed, it failed to carry out the transformation of the world, of itself into the world or the world into itself (which is really the same thing), it was either too early or too late, but in any event the moment never arrived, what now? For the purposes of this chapter, as part of this project, it is an inconvenient but irreducible fact that Marxism is essentially defined by its normative revolutionary telos, that the point is to change what was and is into what should be, and not to merely achieve insight and understanding of socio-cultural objects and practices as they have been and currently are. Taking this seriously means owning up to what Terry Eagleton accused Derrida of engaging in with *Specters of Marx*, a Marxism without Marxism, or perhaps, simply Marx without Marxism.[20] If I indulge in the romantic search for the lost hermeneutic Marx, this is not to dispel a false surface and reveal a hidden depth, but rather to conjure up and reanimate a thinking through of the historical repetition compulsion which remains unrivaled in its insight and understanding even when disembodied and disconnected from its origins and goals.[21]

Thus, this is not a Marxist project, but it remains persistently haunted by his writings. This Marx of *The German Ideology* and *The Eighteenth Brumaire* fittingly begins that latter text with a repetition, citing Hegel's remark that the great events and figures of world history occur twice, with the famous emendation that the tragic first occurrence will be echoed by a farce. This condemnation is aimed at the Napoleon of 1851, the farcical echo of his predecessor i.e. the tragedy of 1799. Marx links this historical repetition compulsion to the anxiety of the

[20] See Eagleton, Terry, "Marxism without Marxism" in *Ghostly Demarcations: A Symposium on Jacques Derrida's Specters of Marx*, Edited by Michael Sprinker, Verso Books, 1999

[21] This remainder of this introduction and the initial reading of *The Eighteenth Brumaire* which follows it will largely stick to Marx's own writings with only occasional supplementation from secondary literature, however, as the language of this paragraph already indicates my reading is already indebted to Derrida's *Specters of Marx*. While I will draw attention to Marx's own use of imagery and rhetoric which evoke his writing's hauntological dimension, I will reserve direct engagement with Derrida's reading for the final section of this chapter, "Revenanthology."

revolutionary moment, the irony of course being that precisely when the revolutionary is called upon to create something radically new, they feel the need to disguise themselves in the language and imagery of past heroes. Marx seems to chastise these prior instances of revolutionary repetition as little more than a defense against the radicality of their moment which had to be dulled and made palatable via the appeal to familiar forms, but upon further reading it becomes clear that he differentiates between a successful revolutionary mimesis and a grotesque farce. Marx wants to clearly delineate between an appropriate and justified mimetic repetition and a crass reactionary nostalgia, which has the effect of transposing his political critique into the register of judgements of taste. In order to properly judge the appropriateness or inappropriateness of his taste in revolutionary repetitions, and square this with his insistence on leaving mimesis behind in the revolutions to come, it is necessary to reconstruct the essential steps of his argument.

**Encore toujour les jours de brumaire**

The first step is to situate the place of the "Eighteenth Brumaire" in the chronology of Marx's oeuvre. Published in 1852, four years after he co-wrote the *Communist Manifesto* with Engels, which was written a few years after another relevant set of co-authored texts, the 1846 manuscripts for *The German Ideology* (left unpublished in both of their lifetimes). The *Grundrisse* (*Foundations of a Critique of Political Economy)* manuscript is written five years after the "Eighteenth Brumaire," followed ten years later by Volume I of *Das Kapital*. In some ways then, it can be seen as a hinge text. Strictly chronologically speaking it emerges, along with *The German Ideology*, out of the period between the 1844 manuscripts and the development of his thinking which from 1857 on would lead to *Das Kapital*. And yet it remains a singularly strange text which resists simple classification as some middle point between a codified "young"

and "mature" Marx. While it has some elements of a journalistic "man in the street" reporting on current events, it was not written while Marx was in Paris, witnessing history firsthand, but after his exile to London, a Continental refugee watching the farce unfold via newspapers and correspondence. As a retelling of relatively recent affairs, it is undeniably a work of history, and at the same time it is ironically one of Marx's only direct engagements with politics (rather than political economy). However, tonally and structurally the *Brumaire* remains an idiosyncratic and peculiar example of political history.

As James Martin aptly characterizes it, Marx's text is not written "with the distanced 'objectivity' of a social scientist but with the bitter prejudgment of a theatre critic… [it] is a review of a 'low farce' in three acts."[22] While not entirely atypical of Marx's writings insofar as it is at least in part an analysis of the dynamics of class struggle in a particular historical moment, Marx seems far more invested in underlining the tropes of farce evident in the unfolding of this series of historical events: "improbable events, inversions of expected behavior and exaggerated responses all performed in outlandish costume." (p. 129) Rather than the classical base / superstructure style of interpretation, where critique is simply an unmasking which reveals the true material forces which determine the surface forms of social and ideological appearance, it is possible to take these material conditions themselves as "fictive constructs that set limits to how we might think or act." (p. 130) Therefore, rather than the relatively straightforward path of the critical *Aufklärer,* who unveils the truth of the political by moving from surface to depth in order to dispel or disarm the ideological surface through the critique of concrete, unidirectional, materially determinative forces, this postmodern hermeneutic version of Marx in the *Brumaire*

[22] Martin, James. "Performing Politics: Class, Ideology and Discourse in Marx's Eighteenth Brumaire." *Marx's "Eighteenth Brumaire": (Post)Modern Interpretations.* Edited by James Martin and Mark Cowling, Pluto Press, 2002, pp. 129–42.

looks much more like mimetics. Rather than equating critique to unmasking, the *Brumaire* explores the ways in which masks function in order "to understand how the parameters of politics are themselves defined and contested by and through processes which are performative in nature." (p.130)

As mentioned in the introduction, Marx begins the first chapter of the *Brumaire* with a citational repetition, echoing Hegel commenting on the cyclical nature of history: "Hegel observes somewhere that all the great events and characters of world history occur twice, so to speak."[23] () But then immediately seems to feel the need to editorialize, to augment and alter this observation, to correct Hegel's omission: "He forgot to add: the first time as high tragedy, the second time as low farce." He invokes Hegel in order to correct him as a way of establishing the theme of his reading of the recent events of French history via prior French history and to introduce a particular causality. While Marx doesn't cite a specific passage in Hegel where he is alleged to have made this claim about historical repetition, that doesn't make this a baseless attribution, and the gesture effectively invokes the dynamics of repetition in Hegel's thought, whether in the sense of reoccurrence as the retroactive concretizing of what was previously contingent or the sublation of a particular reality into a generalizable or universalizable ideality. Assuming that this is the Hegel whom Marx is invoking, then his intervention lies in suggesting a qualitative difference between the first time, and the other time. He goes on to complicate this formulation significantly, and from this further analysis of repetition in political action it is not clear that Marx is actually making the case that every "first time" is a tragedy, and every subsequent repetition is a farce. And yet, he felt compelled to make this seemingly definitive programmatic declaration as the opening gesture of the piece. Why is that? Should this simply be

[23] Marx, Karl, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* in *Marx's "Eighteenth Brumaire": (Post)Modern Interpretations*, edited by James Martin and Mark Cowling. Pluto Press, 2002.

read as a rhetorical flourish, a dramatization or a provocation? Is there a claim at the heart of this gesture which he makes here but then distances himself from later in the text? Does the *Brumaire* contain two contradictory theories of repetition: (1) the original/copy dyad is mirrored by the tragedy/farce, vs (2) repetition can be either a productive (even necessary) part of revolutionary action or a grotesque counterreaction? Or can seeming disjunction be reconciled into a unified Marxist theory of historical repetition? It is necessary to suspend this question for now and return to it further with a more comprehensive understanding of the text.

After positing the tragedy/farce dyad, Marx offers a list with Danton, Robespierre, the Jacobin *montagne* of 1793-95, and Napoleon Bonaparte himself (the "little corporal") in the tragic origin column, paired with their corresponding farcical repetitions in Caussidière, Louis Blanc, the democratic socialist *montagne* of 1848-51, and the eponymous Louis Bonaparte (here referred to as "the London constable"). Finally, the repetition of the titular *Brumaire* itself, "the eighteenth Brumaire of the fool after the eighteenth Brumaire of the genius" establishing the 1851 coup as the echo of 1799. While the 1851 coup was actually deliberately timed to more literally echo other historic events in the precursors rise to power (it occurred on December 2, the exact anniversary of both his 1804 coronation and the 1805 victory over the Austrians at the Battle of Austerlitz), Marx's rhetorical gesture is based on the juxtaposition of the two coups. The next line further characterizes this juxtaposition, and it merits careful consideration of the translation. In the original German the line is "*Und dieselbe Karikatur in den Umständen, unter denen die zweite Auflage des achtzehnten Brumaire herausgegeben wird!*" In the widely available Padover translation this is rendered as "And the same caricature occurs in the circumstances of the second edition of the Eighteenth Brumaire," while Terrell Carver's more recent translation has "And there is the same cartoon-quality in the circumstances surrounding

the second imprint of the eighteenth Brumaire." The Carver does not drastically improve upon the older translation per se, but the attention paid to *Karikatur* and *Auflage* is worth noting. Substituting the more homonymic and straightforward "caricature" for the slightly awkward "cartoon-quality" has the effect of emphasizing its relation to political cartoons and its comic nature.[24] Similarly, *Auflage* as edition in Padover but imprint in Carver further underlines the association with the printing press and mechanical reproduction.

Keeping this association in mind, this passage also includes what is arguably the most famous line in the whole essay: **"**Men make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please in circumstances they choose for themselves, rather they make it in present circumstances given and inherited**"** (p. 19). Thus, not a free creation ex nihilo, but perhaps something more akin to fresh ink on an old press. Moveable type allows the letters to be rearranged, but the letters themselves exist prior to any printing, and all the free possibilities of how they can be arranged are ultimately constrained by the conventions of language itself. And the expression of the new requires the pressure of the past. Seen in this light, the "tradition from all the dead generations" which "weighs like a nightmare on the brain of the living" is perhaps not simply a burden which the living must seek to rid themselves of, but a condition of possibility for the creation of their own history.

To once again draw attention to the question of translation, in the sentence "*Die Tradition aller toten Geschlechter lastet wie ein Alp auf dem Gehirne der Lebenden*" there is no immediate obvious presence of the nightmare, neither the antiquated cognate *Nachtmahr*, nor the more common modern word *Alptraum.* Instead, there is the phrase, *wie ein Alp*, literally "like an elf." The translation is thus neither verbatim nor incorrect; *Alptraum* or *Albtraum* is in fact a German

[24] Relevant for the discussion of comic books and the techniques of cartoon stylization in Chapter Four.

word for nightmare, but this word invokes the folk mythology of fae creatures, elves, imps, or demons (*Alb* or *Alp*) that visit a sleeping person at night and sit on them, causing them to have terrible dreams. The English term nightmare and the French *cauchemar* are related to this, as the Old English mare is another term for the *Alb,* related to the Dutch *merrie* and an older Germanic form *mahr,* and which as previous alluded, contributed to the German word *Nachtmahr* which has fallen into disuse, as well as the figure of the incubus or succubus, with the Latin *incubare* meaning "to lie upon." This etymological tangent is a necessary digression in order to capture the specificity of Marx's imagery. Tradition is not simply a bad dream, it has weight. It is a necromantic demon sitting on your head. Pressing down, with the weight of convention, institution, to give form to content, to make an impression, to press something in or out. In addition to the *Alp,* it is important to note Marx's use of the anatomical term *Gehirne* (correctly translated as brains rather than mind, consciousness, thoughts etc.), and the verb *lasten* which indeed means "to weigh" but as a noun or an adverb also carries the connotations of burden, load, charge, cost etc., with the same double sense that these words carry in English of physical heaviness as well as economic debt.

In summary, this is the scene that Marx has set: history happens twice, first as tragedy, again as farce. History is something made, or something done (and here again, making is not strictly speaking an incorrect translation of *machen* but *machen* is always doing something, to simply equate it with the English making is bordering on a false cognate), it is the result of the actions of individuals, of their collective actions. "*Die Menschen machen ihre eigene Geschichte*" means that history is not just an abstract passing of time, or some neutral phenomenon, but in an important and real sense the effect of human activity. If Marx stopped there, it would have served as an edifying humanist slogan, but of course he doesn't stop there,

he continues: yes, he says, history is the result of human striving, but "*sie machen sie nicht aus freien Stücken, nicht unter selbstgewählten,"* not out of their own free will, or more literally, not from pieces of their own choosing. Yes, history is made, history is the result of what one does, but what one can make and what one can do is never simply an act of free will without constraint, never a pure creation, never *ex nihilo* but rather "*unter unmittelbar vorgefundenen, gegebenen und überlieferten Umständen,*" only from within the circumstances in which one finds oneself, and only with material which has been passed down, transmitted, carried over from the past, i.e. convention and tradition (*Überlieferung*). This is Marx at his most hermeneutical.

There is a further exploration of this same idea, which can help clarify what is at stake in the opening moment of the *Brumaire,* in *The German Ideology,* where Marx/Engels define history in terms of the concept of tradition as *Überlieferung*: "[history is] nothing but the succession of separate generations, each of which exploits the materials, capital, and productive forces handed down to it by all proceeding generations…. on the one hand, it thus continues traditional activity in completely changed circumstances, and on the other, modifies the old circumstances with a completely changed activity." (Marx, 122) Despite the weight of tradition, history marches on, and eventually produces completely changed circumstances, and completely changed activity. And yet, says the Marx of the *Brumaire*, "…just when they appear to be revolutionizing themselves and their circumstances, in creating something unprecedented, in just such epochs of revolutionary crisis, that is when they nervously summon up the spirits of the past, borrowing from them their names, marching orders, uniforms, in order to enact new scenes in world history, but in this time-honored guise and with this borrowed language." (pp. 19-20) Based on the passage in *The German Ideology,* this process of continuing traditional activity in changed circumstances, and modifying old circumstances with changed activity sounds linear

and uncomplicated, but in the *Brumaire* Marx strikes a very different tone. The process of carrying over what has been handed down by tradition is characterized first and foremost by anxiousness (*ängstlich*), by a nervous conjuration (*beschwören*). This conjuration is defined as kind of borrowing (*entlehnen* and *erborgten*), of names, marching orders, and costumes. Both of the English translations have *Kostüm* rendered as uniforms for some reason, perhaps due to the militaristic association of the marching orders, but while German has many different words for various kinds of uniforms, the word *Kostüm* simply means costume. Translating it otherwise only serves to efface the theatrical tone of the text. If Marx wanted to invoke military uniforms he would have done so. Later on in the same sentence he refers to "*altehrwürdigen Verkleidung*," well translated as "time-honoured guise" but which could also, in a different context, simply refer to vintage costumes.

This then is Marx's basic thesis in the opening paragraphs of the *Eighteenth Brumaire*: in order to enact anything new, in order to revolutionize society and create something radically unprecedented, there is a necessary moment, driven by anxiety, which must dive into the costume closet of the past and borrow identities, appearances, language, ways being, doing, saying, making etc. And for the historian, critical or otherwise, this is something that can be located, analyzed, and tracked through history as a repeating pattern. Historical change comes through a mimetic performance which can be analyzed as such. Its actors play characters who were themselves actors at one point. And their *mimesis praxeos* can be characterized in terms of masquerade or masking: "Thus Luther masqueraded [*maskierte*] as the Apostle Paul" and the French revolution "draped itself alternatively as Roman republic and Roman empire." (p. 20) Marx compares this nervous conjuration to learning a language: "Likewise a beginner studying a new language always translates it back into his mother tongue; but only when he can use it

without referring back, and thus forsake his native language for the new, only then has he entered into the spirit of the new language, and gained the ability to speak it fluently." (p. 20) Thus, the mimetic performance is already being framed as an incomplete but necessary step. The "mother tongue" here is tradition, the mask, the language, the actions which a mimetic actor uses in order to enact a performance in the present. Implicit here is the idea that it could one day be transcended, that fluency could be achieved, that a non-mimetic performance is possible. Is that so? If so, how and in what possible forms? Once again, it is necessary to suspend final judgement for the time being but also to mark that from the moment he introduces the mimetic theory of historical change, Marx is also saying that transcending this dynamic is not only possible but necessary.

Despite the gesture towards the necessity of transcending the historical repetition compulsion, Marx proceeds to discuss it at length. He refers to it as a "*weltgeschichtlichen Totenbeschwörungen,"* a world-historical summoning of the dead. Taking the example of the French revolution, Marx is adamant that the emergence of modern bourgeois society and its triumph over feudalism was accomplished, "in Roman costumes and in Roman phrases." (p. 20) This was not an accidental feature of the bourgeois revolution, but a necessary one. But it was also temporary, "once the new social formation was established… the resurrected Romans… all vanished." Once the bourgeois revolution achieved its goals "it could no longer comprehend that the spectres of Roman times had kept watch over its cradle." The need for the mimetic recall as well as its possibility of reception, its *vraisemblance*, is thus highly transient. It is contingent upon specific circumstances and when the circumstances that give rise to it shift, there is a corresponding shift in mimetic possibilities. In a fundamental sense, the mimetic act is always a lie for Marx, but at some specific times for specific reasons it becomes a necessary lie:

> As unheroic as bourgeois society is, it nevertheless requires heroism, sacrifice, terror, civil war and national conflict to bring it into the world. And in the strict classical traditions of the Roman republic its gladiators found the ideals and art forms, the self-deceptions that they needed, in order to hide from themselves the constrained, bourgeois character of their struggles, and to keep themselves emotionally at the level of high historical tragedy.

Likening the French bourgeois revolution's Roman mimesis to the English bourgeois revolution's appropriation of "Old Testament language, passions and delusions," these two examples serve as one half of the distinction he wants to make between the good repetition and the bad repetition: "Thus the resurrection of the dead in those revolutions served to glorify new struggles, not to parody the old; to magnify fantastically the given task, not to evade a real resolution; to recover the spirit of revolution, not to relaunch its specter." (p. 21) Glorification and magnification of the present struggle through the repetition of the past is associated with the recovery of the spirit (*Geist*) vs the parodic evasion of real change which simply makes the specter (*Gespenst*) of the past seem to walk amongst the living. Thus, the seemingly simplistic dichotomy of the good *Geist* vs the bad *Gespenst*.

However, it would be a mistake to interpret Marx's haunted characterization of the weight of history as a simple modernist call to reject tradition. As Terrell Carver observes, "this nightmare world of tradition is, in Marx's view, *politically productive*."[25] This is absolutely essential for a basic comprehension of Marx's argument in the opening pages of the *Brumaire*. So, while Marx will eventually argue for the radical break from this condition in the revolution to come, the distinction he is trying to make between the good masquerade and the bad farce, the good spirit and the bad specter, depends on the productive power of the mimetic political performance. On the distinction between masquerade and farce, Carver traces the evolution,

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[25] Carver, Terrell. "Imagery/Writing, Imagination/Politics: Reading Marx through the Eighteenth Brumaire." *Marx's "Eighteenth Brumaire": (Post)Modern Interpretations*, edited by Mark Cowling and James Martin, Pluto Press, 2002, pp. 113–28.

*"*from 'things happening twice', to 'the second time as low farce'… to a notion of doing something once and once only, but in the guise of a previous event, thus making masquerade the opposite of farce. Farce as cartoon *reductio* is embarrassing; performing revolution in the costumes of a prior age is enabling" (121). Rather than a play-by-play reenactment of events, the masquerade is a repetition of masks, of language, of set and setting, a figurative repetition not a one for one copy. The masquerade is thus capable of creating something unprecedented through its appropriation of tradition, where the farce is nothing more than a shadow of its precedents.

Marx is adamant that communist revolution cannot content itself with the old necromancy, in another famous passage declaring that "the social revolution of the nineteenth century cannot create its poetry from the past but only from the future" (p. 22). And yet, how is the communist poet supposed to escape the nightmarish weight of the dead generations? And how is this distinct from the good masquerade? Is he arguing that, in the end, masquerade was farce all along, or rather, that it was productive for a time, but radically new conditions demand radically new tactics? In either case, he is calling for new tactics, and these new tactics have to begin with stripping away "all superstition from the past." What does this mean? Why does Marx use the term superstitions (*Aberglauben*)? He is not simply saying that the revolution must let go of attachments to its customary or traditional tactics, or nostalgia for heroic figures. It is very deliberately put into the language of superstition, which conveys irrational fear-based beliefs, which often motivate compulsive warding behaviors designed to provide protection from the source of the fear. Back, once again, to the anxious conjuration.

The historical repetition compulsion is a kind of revolutionary ritual then, which Marx wants to exorcise from revolutionary praxis. The purpose of the ritual is to dull or deaden (*betäuben*) the revolutionary "to their own content," meaning the conditions and possibilities of

their historical moment and the specificity of the actions that they need to take to accomplish their revolutionary goals. Thus, the nervous conjuring serves as a kind of narcotic, a sedative taken to anesthetize oneself before attempting a particularly anxiety producing activity, like the actor who needs a stiff drink before they enter the stage. Marx, himself known to be a fairly heavy drinker, understands this habit, even sees that it can seem to be the only possibility for action when the alternative means paralyzing stage fright. And yet, Dr. Marx insists, the revolutionary patient needs to learn to let go of old rituals, needs to put the bottle down, needs to forget the mother tongue and free themselves into a new fluency, "let the dead bury the dead" and realize their own content. Transposing into a musical register, Marx argues, where once "phrase transcended content, here content transcends phrase." (p. 22) What does Marx mean by phrase (*Phrase*) and content (*Inhalt*) here?[26] How does this translate to the nervous conjuration of political mimetics, and what would this inversion of content and phrase yield?

Perhaps there is a clue in the passage immediately following this more often quoted one, where Marx turns his attention back to the particular point and counterpoint of revolution and counterrevolution that took place between February 1848 and December 1851. If the revolutionary moment of 1848 appeared like a flash of lightning, seeming to inaugurate a new epoch, it was erased just as quickly, "conjured away by the stroke of a cheat." (p. 22) The result yielding a reactionary backslide to something pre-bourgeois. Instead of "*society* gaining for itself a new content" Marx contends, the result was that "the *state* has merely reverted to its oldest form, to the shameless, bare-faced rule of sword and cross." Here again we see the use of the

[26] This is specifically a musical metaphor because Phrase in German does not primarily mean linguistic phrase. There are several words for that (*Satz, Ausdruck, Wendung* etc.) so it seems likely that the choice of *Phrase* is intended to invoke a musical metaphor, treating the difference between the prior revolutions and the revolution to come as a matter of an inversion of the aesthetic ideology which determines the composition of revolutionary performance.

term content but associated rather than juxtaposed with form. The reversion of the state to its "oldest form" refers to the reactionary return of a prior political system, in this case from a republic to an absolute monarchy. Thus, a failure to achieve a new content, in other words, a transformation of social relations and conditions into a new form. For Marx, the French revolution of the Eighteenth century and the First Republic that it gave rise to is an example of phrase transcending content, where the phrase was the mimetic repetition (his "nervous conjuration") of the masks of the ancient Roman republic, and the content was the actual abolishment of the monarchy and subsequent creation of an unprecedented modern bourgeois republic. The mimetic repetition was a necessary part of the history of this revolution, but it eventually gave way to the reality of the new content that it helped to produce.

What then does Marx mean by content transcending phrase? In his essay, "Here Content Transcends Phrase: *The Eighteenth Brumaire* as the Key to Understanding Marx's Critique of Utopian Socialism," Darren Webb offers an interpretation of content and phrase that has nothing to do with anachronistic repetition but rather with utopian speculation. For Webb, content means something like reality, or existing material conditions, while phrase means something like representation, rhetoric, or ideology. For the French and British bourgeois revolutions, the actual limitations of their material conditions were transcended through their phrase, but for the social revolution of the nineteenth century its material conditions are sufficient to realize itself and this realization is so radically unprecedented that it is unimaginable and thus transcends any attempt to "phrase" it (i.e. represent, theorize, etc.) This definition of phrase and content does help resolve the second half of Marx's content/phrase formulation, but it also raises some additional questions and presents several problems. First and foremost, Webb seems to conflate the nostalgic or recognitive power of anachronistic mimesis with the speculative fantasies of utopian

futurism. This is necessary for him to assimilate the *Brumaire* into the canon of "Marx's critique of utopian socialism." To some extent this move seems justified. In this conflation of the historical repetition and the futurist speculation, both could provide a "phrase" capable of transcending an insufficient content, inspiring the masses towards a collective action which would not have been engendered from the basic conditions of their everyday reality.

It follows from this that contrary to the claim in the introduction to this chapter that Marxism was essentially teleological, the concept that the content would transcend phrase in the communist revolution entails that Marxist praxis is not a matter of changing reality to reach a specific end at all. As Marx and Engels state in the *German Ideology*, "Communism is not for us a *state of affairs* which is to be established, an ideal to which reality [will] have to adjust itself. We call communism the *real* movement which abolishes the present state of things. The conditions of this movement result from the now existing premises" (*Ideology,* p. 49). Communism as an ideal to which reality will have to adjust itself would be utopian socialism. Webb is right to argue that Marx was intent on differentiating his own theory from the utopians, and consequently did not provide a systematic articulation of his vision for the specific details of reality after the revolution, which has been the subject of much critical attention (see p. 256 n. 34). The question remains however, does this in fact mean that Marxism is not teleological or eschatological? Does teleology require a determinant telos? Can a theory only be defined by its orientation towards the future if it has a concrete event as its end in view? Is Webb right to conclude that Marx's differentiation between prior revolutions and the revolution to come relegates phrasing (whether recognitive or speculative) to a compensatory or agitprop role? Whether or not that holds, there still seems to be some confusion about the transcendent content of the 19$^{th}$ century social revolution. Is it that the post-revolutionary content (the content to

come) is so sublime, unspeakable, unthinkable, that no phrase can capture it? Or is that the conditions of the present, the content of the here and now (Marx's here and now, 19th century Europe) is set on a course of self-realization which requires no justification, motivation, compensation etc.? The former seems impossible to prove or disprove, and the latter seems definitively falsified based on the history of the 20th century.

Ultimately, Webb's analysis falls short because he is too eager to assimilate the recognitive mimetic acts which are the primary subject of Marx's essay to the fantasies of the utopian imaginary which Marx has criticized so explicitly elsewhere. Furthermore, the claim that Marxism is a type of presentism which radically disavows both nostalgia for the past and speculation of the future would seem to contradict Marx's explicit appeal that "the social revolution of the nineteenth century cannot create its poetry from the past but only from the future." This is not a matter of splitting hairs over the interpretation of minor details, the connection (or disconnection) between a mimetics oriented towards the past and a poetry of the future is precisely what is at stake for our overall project in the reading of Marx. Does the assignment of the rhetorical/figurative to the phrase which transcended prior content and will be transcended by a future content stem from a conception of transcendence as fundamentally futural? Is to go beyond always to go forward? This configuration would seem to be an ill-fitting garment for Marx's *Brumaire,* which was specifically concerned with revolutions that were successful in transforming the political-economic form of their societies precisely through the rhetorical/figural return of a revolutionary past. What does it mean then that the appeal to the Roman past was able to transcend the content of the French Eighteenth century? That the nostalgic/romantic mimetic mask arranged into a phrase articulated something genuinely new in the form of the bourgeois republic. But does it not follow from this that all the social revolution

of the 19th century needed to do to bring about its own new form was to once again invoke the right source material, don the proper masks, and through the performance of its phrase produce its own content? Marx definitively says no. He does not merely say that this is not what happened in the particular case of the failure of 1848, but that it cannot happen in principle. The social revolution to come cannot produce its content through mimetic performance.

Thus, while Marx gives us examples of the strategically necessary mimetic masks of the revolutions of the 17th and Eighteenth century, he refused to speculate on the content necessary to phrase the revolution to come. However, he did not shy away from ridiculing the mimetic performance of the 19th century reactionaries, which is a critical analysis worth considering on its own merits. It is undoubtedly an example of mimetic hermeneutics and even setting aside Marx's opinions about the historical longevity of such analysis (i.e. it's applicability to an as yet unwritten revolutionary future), it contains resources which will both refine and expand the working conceptualization of mimetics. Furthermore, it sharpens the contrast between a self-aware heuristic conjuration of the historical spirit and a farcical enthusiastic reincarnation of the specter. This dichotomy is not simply a contrast between truth and falsehood because all mimetic performance is constitutively fictive. The difference then for Marx might simply be a tactical one: the effective revolutionary conjurer knows that their séance is made up, while the delusional nostalgist really believes in the second coming.

In a particularly catty passage of chapter V, Marx illustrates this point through a gloss on the performative vulgarity of Napoleon III:

> A cunning old *roué*, he conceives popular history and high politics and finance as comedies in the most vulgar sense, as masquerades where fine costumes, words and postures serve only to mask the most trifling pettiness [*der kleinlichsten Lumperei*]. So it was when he processed into Strasbourg, where a trained Swiss vulture played the part of the Napoleonic eagle. For his entry into Boulogne he put some London lay-abouts into French uniforms. They stood in for the army. In his Society of 10 December he collected

> 10,000 ragamuffins who were supposed to represent the people the way Klaus Zettel represented the lion. The bourgeoisie was playing an utter comedy, but in the most serious way in the world, without infringing even the most pedantic strictures of French dramatic etiquette, and themselves half swindled, half convinced of the solemnity of their own high politics and finance, that was a time when a swindler, who took the comedy straight, was bound to win. Only now that he has removed his solemn opponent, when he has taken on the imperial role in earnest and with his Napoleonic mask means to represent the real Napoleon, does he become a victim of his own world-view, the straight comedian who no longer sees world history as a comedy but his own comedy as world history. (pp. 63-64)

Here Marx is ruthlessly mocking Louis Napoleon, while simultaneously acknowledging the effectiveness of his grotesquery. Whatever the moral philosophical objections to *Realpolitik*, any student of history could confirm that the cynic who embraces the insincerity of the game has typically fared better than the idealistic utopian. Marx knew that there was no point in the losing side of political struggle finding solace in the mockery of the stupidity and crassness of the victor. While he cannot contain his contempt for Napoleon III, the *Eighteenth Brumaire* is not merely a record of the bitter insults of a resentful partisan of a failed revolution. Mockery alone, no matter how cruel or clever or truthful, does not change the fact of who won and who lost. The reality which Marx has to contend with is that not only did Bonaparte successfully take power, but that the masses brought him there. Yes, he obviously had the support of the monarchist right, and the industrialist bourgeoisie whose political leanings predictably swayed towards the faction who was perceived as most likely to "restore order" i.e. the quotidian functioning of capitalism. But support from the traditional right was probably not sufficient to carry him to victory in the elections of 1848, and certainly not enough to prop up the coup of 1851. This required a not insignificant portion of the industrial working class, and more crucially, an overwhelming majority of the rural peasantry. This paradoxical mélange resulted in the betrayal of the revolution of 1848 and certified the defeat of the left. For an account of political history based in a theory of class consciousness this represents an inconvenient but undeniable fact, evidence of a

more complex and fragmented picture of the social strata with less of a clear path to solidarity based on shared interests. Regardless of how heavily one weighs the significance Bonaparte's unholy coalition (whether it is reduced to a minor anomaly or amplified into total catastrophe for Marxist class theory) it is undeniably the motivation behind Marx's controversial analysis of the *Lumpenproletariat* in the *Brumaire*. How then does the lumpenproletariat enter the scene in Marx's *Brumaire*? After not just one but a series of betrayals:

> The social republic appeared as a phrase, as a prophecy, on the threshold of the February Revolution. In the June days of 1848, it was drowned in the blood of the Paris proletariat, but it haunts the subsequent acts of the drama as a specter. The *democratic republic* then announced itself. It fizzled out on 13 June 1849 with its turncoat *petty bourgeoisie*, but in fleeing it left redoubled boasts behind. The *parliamentary republic* and its bourgeoisie occupied the entire stage, living life to the full, but 2 December 1851 buried it amid anguished cries from the royalist coalition of "long live the republic!" The social and democratic republic took a beating but the parliamentary republic, the republic of the royalist bourgeoisie, went onto the rocks, as did the pure republic, the republic of the bourgeois republicans. (p. 95)

The recurring culprit of course is the bourgeoisie, driven to their doomed course by their hatred and fear of the working proletariat. Marx outlines the tragicomic irony of a sequence of reversals brought onto itself by the republican bourgeois class: to prevent the rule of the working proletariat, it empowered the lumpenproletariat, out of fear of terror and violence in the streets it supported Bonaparte who brought terror and violence in the name of order, "it deified the sword; now the sword rules it. It destroyed the revolutionary press, now its own press is destroyed." (p. 95) All the tools that it used to undermine the revolutionary left were subsequently turned against it: surveillance, disbanding the national guard, imposition of martial law, etc. For Marx, they have no one to blame but themselves, and the result is not so much a betrayal of the bourgeois republic but the revelation of its truth. After cataloging the whole ironic series of events, he declares that the republic "has lost nothing but its rhetorical arabesques, the outward decencies, in a word, the appearance of respectability. The France of today was already there within the

parliamentary republic. It required only a thrust of the bayonet for the membrane to burst and the monster [*das Ungeheuer*] to spring forth." (p. 96) A hauntingly prescient argument, and considered in light of the subsequent century and a half full of similar slides from liberalism to authoritarianism I feel compelled to ask with Marx: is it truly so far a fall, was not the killer always already inside the house?

It is at this point that Marx's account of the coup turns to the analysis of the lumpenproletariat, because "state power is not suspended in mid-air" but maintains itself insofar as it represents a class, and in the case of Bonaparte, this is "the most numerous class in French society, the *smallholding peasants*." (p. 100) While the term is not first coined here, having been used by Marx and Engels several years earlier in *The German Ideology*, it is notable because of the crucial role it plays for explaining Bonaparte's political base. It has subsequently become a common piece of Marxist terminology as well as having broader usage in liberal socio-economic and political theory, sometimes translated or equated with the "underclass" or directly taken as a loan word. Breaking it down to its component parts, it is a portmanteau of the Germanic word *Lumpen* with the Latin *proletariat*, the latter such a common piece of Marxist vocabulary it needs no further elaboration here. What is necessary is to clarify how the *Lumpen* prefix differentiates these proletarians from the ones which Marx is typically concerned with. While it is not a direct cognate, as the English word lump has its equivalent in the German *Klumpen* or *Knoten*, there is probably some resonance between the English sense of a lump as a type of undifferentiated mass, a somewhat shapeless shape, and the German nouns *Lumpen* referring to rags, and *Lump* referring to a lowlife, criminal underclass type of person. Put together the result would then be: a worker who belongs to some kind of undifferentiated mass, a worker in tatters and rags, a class of worker which is sub-worker. It is an undeniably pejorative term, and Marx

means it as such. But rather than getting hung up on whether or not Marx had some personal prejudice against this type of worker, the point is to try to understand in the strictest possible terms why the people that he is referring to as lumpenproletariat are a distinct class from the proletariat and, in the specific context of the period of 1848-1851, why Marx believed that they supported Bonaparte, and what he thought made them politically useful to the right but not to the left. Leave aside for the moment whether this is a fair characterization of the lumpenproletariat, and the vast literature that attempts to relitigate their revolutionary potential, the task here is to understand Marx's *Lumpenproletariat* and the role they play in the *Brumaire*.

First and foremost, when Marx invokes the *Lumpenproletariat* in relation to Bonaparte's political supporters, he is referring to the rural peasantry, what he also calls the "smallholding peasants" [*die Parzellenbauern*]. A smallholding refers to a small farm, typically a family farm rather than a large-scale operation employing outside laborers. The production would largely be a mix of subsistence farming, and small quantities of cash crops, in contrast to larger scale agri-business owned by the rural bourgeoisie, which would have a vastly greater output quantity produced for commercial purposes and typically would have been based on monocultural mass production requiring larger tracts of land to enable its proto-industrial or pseudo-industrial form of agriculture. Even by 19th century standards then, it is clear that the smallholding is a holdout from an earlier socio-technological form of agrarian production. In one sense they clearly represent a class of laborer, insofar as they live and work in similar material conditions. But this "immense mass" [*eine ungeheure Masse*][27] does not enter into "complex social relations with one another" according to Marx, because their mode of production inherently isolates them. The smallholding subsistence farm "does not allow any division of labor in its cultivation, no

[27] Again, another monster.

application of science and therefore no diversity in development, no diversification of talents, no wealth of social relationships" (p. 100). By their nature as rural communities they are geographically isolated, smaller populations further cut off from a broader cultural consciousness by poverty and a lack of the means to communicate with the rest of the country. The result:

> The great bulk of the French nation is formed by simple accretion, much as potatoes in a sack form a sack of potatoes. In so far as millions of families get a living under conditions of existence that divide their mode of life, their interests and their culture from those of other classes and counterpose them as enemies, they form a class. In so far as there is merely a local interconnection amongst peasant proprietors, the similarity of their interests produces no community, no national linkage and no political organization, they do not form a class. They are therefore incapable of asserting their class interests in their own name, whether through a parliament or constitutional convention. They cannot represent themselves, they must be represented. Their representative must also appear as their master, as an authority over them, as an unrestricted governmental power which protects them from other classes and watches over them from on high. (pp. 100-101)

The most frequently quoted sentence from this passage, usually referenced without any context, is of course, "They cannot represent themselves, they must be represented." On its face this seems to be of particular interest to the topic of mimesis in the obvious sense that it has something to do with representation and representation is one of the traditional translations of mimesis (one which Ricoeur provided the basis for resisting in the Chapter One). A closer analysis reveals this passage is actually pertinent to the broader questions of this project for far more than that surface level proximity. In the German text the verb is *vertreten* not *darstellen/vorstellen*, all words that can be translated as representation in English but have distinct (but not unrelated) meanings. *Darstellen* and *vorstellen* are of course two of the most important terms of art in the technical lexicon of German philosophy, meaning to represent in the sense of a depiction or portrayal and represent in the sense of the creation of a mental image respectively. *Vertreten* on the other hand is a term far more commonly used in a political or business context. It refers to the sense of representation as proxy, standing in the place of, speaking/appearing on behalf of etc. That Marx is speaking of representation in this sense is

reinforced by the subsequent sentence, "Their representative [*Ihr Vertreter*] must also appear as their master, as an authority over them, as an unrestricted governmental power which protects them from other classes and watches over them from on high." In her essay, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" Gayatri Spivak discusses the distinction between these two senses of representation, initially by way of a critique of Deleuze and Foucault but worked out at length through a reading of this same passage in Marx's *Eighteenth Brumaire*. She summarizes the difference between the two senses of representation as the contrast "between a proxy and a portrait."[28] Acknowledging the long history of debate surrounding this semantic pair she defines these determinations of "representation or rhetoric" as tropology on one side and "persuasion… with stronger suggestions of substitution" on the other.[29]

Spivak's analysis is especially helpful for interpreting this passage because she asks and answers a crucial question: why is Marx so concerned with the *Lumpenproletariat*? The answer is that they represent a paradox for social class theory and the concept of class consciousness. According to Marx they both form a class and do not form a class. They fit the model of a class because "in so far as millions of families get a living under conditions of existence that divide their mode of life, their interests and their culture from those of other classes and counterpose them as enemies" and yet they do not count as a class because "there is merely a local interconnection amongst peasant proprietors, [and] the similarity of their interests produces no community, no national linkage and no political organization." Put differently, it is not that they are somehow both a class and not a class, they are class that fails to achieve class consciousness. Now, this is not as catastrophically paradoxical as it might sound, only the most naïve form of

[28] Spivak, Gayatri, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" p. 276.
[29] I feel myself compelled to point out without commenting further on the irony that in a discussion framed around her criticism of Deleuze and Foucault's conflation of these two senses of representation Spivak precedes to conflate rhetoric and representation.

Marxism would assume that the development of class consciousness in the proletariat was a simple given or a natural and inevitable process with no serious challenges. If this were the case there would be no need for the critique of ideology, no need for critical theory in general. Marxism is not simply a collectivist expansion of liberal economic social psychology, where groups are assumed to naturally form identities and make decisions based on rational self-interest. Having shared interests may be a necessary condition for achieving class consciousness but it is not a sufficient condition.

To summarize the elements which motivated Marx's analysis of the French *Lumpenproletariat*: they were a class that possessed shared material conditions, interests, and culture, that could logically be seen to have common ground with the urban proletariat, and who were actively harmed by a right-wing regime which would do nothing to alleviate their poverty, and yet overwhelming supported that very regime. Marx does of course invoke the urban proletariat, and while it is not explicitly stated here, there is an implied possibility of an urban lumpenproletariat which other theorists have developed. In other words, what Marx is defining as lumpenproletariat is not an inherently rural and agrarian class, but in the context of the mid-19$^{th}$ century French socio-political landscape it is the rural lumpenproletariat that he is concerned with. Furthermore, while he does acknowledge the existence of revolutionary peasantry, which could serve as evidence for the possibility of an organized leftist bloc forming in rural agrarian communities, the point is that in this specific case that he is discussing that was decidedly *not* what happened. Any criticism of Marx's discussion of the lumpenproletariat in the *Brumaire* that is based on a charge that he is being reductionist and/or elitist, that he is "lumping" all the lumpenproletariat together in a derogatory manner etc. can be easily refuted by an appeal to basic textual evidence. The more pressing theoretical issue is whether or not the lumpenproletariat is a

useful concept at all, or whether there are more serious problems with the fundamental Marxist concept of class as an individual and collective identity that could possess something like solidarity through the formation of collective consciousness based upon a recognitive consensus regarding basic shared material conditions and social reality. Is this possible at all? Is it possible in some cases but not others? If the latter, then what makes it possible for some groups to form a class and achieve class consciousness but not others? And what does this have to do with representation?

Returning to Spivak's discussion of the two senses of representation, which she differentiated as representation meaning depiction/portrayal/imagination/conceptualization and representation meaning proxy, substitution, identification, recognition, etc. The imaginative re-presentation recreates, signifies something absent in its being present, the rhetorical representative speaks on behalf of those who could not be present, stands in for them, carries the collective consciousness of a multitude and expresses it with one voice. Superficially, one might assume that the technical philosophical *Dar/Vor-stellung* is more relevant to the analysis of mimetic masks but particularly when it comes to the interpretation of Marx's *Eighteenth Brumaire* it is in fact representation as *Vertretung* that connects most saliently to the analysis of the mimetic mask as metaphor, or metaphor as mimetic mask. Again, Spivak's analysis in "Can the Subaltern Speak?" begins as a critique of Deleuze, who she accuses of blurring the distinction between these two senses of representation. She is responding specifically to the conversation between Foucault and Deleuze published as "Intellectuals and Power: A Conversation between Michel Foucault and Gilles Deleuze" where, to put it in her terms, Deleuze suggests that because the agents of political struggle are a multiplicity which defies re-presentation, this means that the theorist, insofar as these agents and their struggle is a subject of

their theorizing, does not represent these agents. This could be taken as a humble gesture, the acknowledgement of a kind of Kantian epistemological finitude, a limited liability clause or a reservation of plausible deniability: "I know not the reality of what I speak, I'm only doing theory." Spivak is having none of that, she argues that positing the transparent non-representative quality of theory in order to give the theorist absolution of all representative responsibility with full license to re-present (i.e., to think and speak, to theorize about) autonomous political agents at the same time denies re-presentation to these same political agents. Perhaps not such a humble gesture after all.

While Spivak's critique of Deleuze begins by accusing him of conflating these two senses of representation, she acknowledges their "complicity," an "identity-in-difference" which gets dissolved by Deleuzian monism. In other words, her argument is not that these two senses are not related, but that the relation is only comprehensible if they are differentiated, i.e., it is a dialectical relation. Thus, it is not a matter for critical theory of choosing either an analysis concerned with surplus value as the re-presentative sign of the economic exploitation of labor or an analysis concerned with the political domination of power localized in the form of a representative proxy of the state. Rather it is a both/and: "The staging of the world in representation—its scene of writing, its *Darstellung*—dissimulates the choice of and need for 'heroes,' paternal proxies, agents of power—*Vertretung."* Why this matters for this project is that it suggests that mimetic portrayal/depiction/figuration and masked substitution are distinguishable but ultimately inseparable. The fate of the "hero" of this story, that strange signifier mimesis, is inextricably bound to re-presentation as much as representation. And this can be illustrated even further in the reading of Marx through his account of the relation between the so-called "Napoleonic ideals" [*idées napoléoniennes*] and the figure of Napoleon.

Marx summarizes Bonaparte's ideological program with five points: #1., The property form of the smallholding peasantry, #2., "strong and limited government" i.e. the establishment of a police state to defend the "material order" against civil unrest, and enforcement of the tax policies which financially support the regime, #3., maintenance of a large bureaucracy which is necessary for the logistical functioning of the state but also supplies Bonaparte with "an artificial caste for which the maintenance of his regime is a bread-and-butter question", #4., the dominance of the church as an instrument of the state, and lastly #5., what Marx calls "the culmination of the '*Napoleonic ideals'*" the predominance of the army, in other words the overemphasis on and overvaluation of the military which is a common feature in all right wing regimes. The way that Marx outlines this last point about the ideological value of the military for the smallholding outlines the interconnection between ideology, identification, and representation as proxy:

> The army was the *point d'honneur* for the smallholding peasantry; it transformed them into heroes, defended their new possessions from outside threats, glorifying their recently acquired nationality, plundering and revolutionizing the world. The dazzling uniform was its own national dress, war its poetry, the smallholding, extended and rounded off in the imagination, was its fatherland, and patriotism was the ideal form of their sense of property. But the enemies against whom the French peasant now has to defend his property are not the Cossacks but the bailiffs and tax collectors. The smallholding is no longer in the so-called fatherland but in the mortgage register. The army itself is no longer the flower of the peasant youth, it is the fetid bloom of the peasant lumpenproletariat. It consists in the greater part of replacements [*remplaçants*], substitutes [Ersatzmännern], as the second Bonaparte is himself only a replacement, a substitute for Napoleon. (pp. 105-106)

Marx substitutes the German *Austausche* with the French *remplaçants*, and perhaps this dual invocation of *Ersetzbarkeit* and *remplaçabilité* already conjures the possibility of infinite exchange and substitutability without remainder, perhaps not, but regardless this passage prompts an immediate reflection on these terms in relation to metaphor and mimesis. Returning one again to Spivak's demarcation of the two forms of representation, the "Napoleonic ideals"

are a straightforward example of representation as *Darstellung*, an ideological construction. Marx argues that they are simply "the ideals of the undeveloped smallholding in its heyday" (p. 106). Which means that their appeal, or hegemonic force, is primarily derived from their claim to be a return or a reinstitution of the transformative policies of the Napoleonic era which cemented the rural peasantries transition from feudalism to the smallholding. Insofar as they are just such an echo of Napoleon I's establishment of *Le Code civil des Français* in 1804, it is necessary to recall that this was not only a matter of the rights of "man" but also quite literally a reassertion of the patriarchy. This abolishment of the right to divorce and the recodification of the supremacy of the husband over his wife and children was only possible because it is underwritten by the supremacy of the patriarch. In other words, no hegemonic ideological construction without the figure of the proxy hegemon.

This begs the question however, isn't every hegemon by definition a proxy? The position of the sovereign is defined by its substitutability, one can occupy the sovereign position only because any *one* can, even if the great lie of absolute despotism is that *only one* can. Sovereignty is defined by iterability: if one can be sovereign, they can also be sovereign no longer, another one can take their place and become sovereign, either through lawful succession or revolution, sovereign replaceability is a condition of possibility for sovereignty as such. The sovereign is inherently mimetic: the one (or ones) who represent power, as figural/ideological re-presentation and as proxy. This almost seems to make a mockery out of the sovereign. If the force of their law, their name, their status as a sovereign subject is based on their absolute singularity, but the sovereign position itself is constituted by an economy of exchange the result is a kind of split sovereignty. Perhaps then within Marx's scathing review of Bonaparte's farcical sovereignty there is also some insight into the parodic essence of sovereignty as such.

Positing as the reincarnation of the spirit of 1804, for the *Lumpenproletariat* Bonaparte's "Napoleonic ideals" are in fact "an absurdity… merely hallucinations of its death struggle, words transformed into phrases, spirits turned into specters, befitting dress into preposterous costumes." (p.106) Bonapartism is not merely false, it is grotesque and ridiculous, but Marx insists just such vulgarity is what is needed because "the parody of the empire was necessary to liberate the bulk of the French nation from the weight of tradition and to work out in pure form the opposition between state and society." (p. 106) Marx in 1851 is still holding out for the possibility of a critical mass of the rural peasantry achieving class consciousness. Even the lumpenproletariat whose reasons for choosing reaction over revolution were systematically outlined in this essay. In this moment, Marx still believed they would come around eventually. He posits an inevitable disenchantment with the Napoleonic restoration leading to a collapse of the bureaucratic machine which required the tax revenue of the rural peasants to sustain it. When this comes to pass, he dares to hope that the mass of radicalized rural peasants will transform into the chorus that the urban proletariat's solo needs to become "a swan song in all peasant countries" (p.106).

On its face this prediction seems to be simply and literally false. After all, the Second Empire's fall had far more to do with the outcome of the Franco-Prussian War than with any disenfranchisement and radicalization of the lumpenproletariat. However, the critical importance of the rural peasantry in all of the numerous revolutions and anti-colonial wars of independence that occurred around the world throughout the 20$^{th}$ century is undeniable. Furthermore, Marx's analysis of the French lumpenproletariat continues to speak to the necessity of accounting for the latent political power of groups which are not easily categorized under previously established notions of class, either due to unprecedented economic forms, material conditions, or cultural/ideological constructions of individual and collective identity. To put this in the

language of mimetics: the possibility of recognizing a group, or an individual as part of a group, or of an individual recognizing their own belonging to a group, is predicated on the mimetic construction of a mask. For any number of individuals to be gathered together into a meaningful collectivity, of which each one could be said to represent the group, and that the group as such could be said to stand for the totality of its members, this too is a form of mimesis. But as Marx shows, merely being categorizable, even being able to identify as and with the fellow members of a group, is not enough to achieve class consciousness. Furthermore, his claim that in such situations the inevitable outcome is that such a class, "because it cannot represent itself" will find its representation in a proxy. According to the theory of mimetic masking as simultaneously recognition, identification/subjectivation, and proxy, is it still possible to distinguish between an "internal" representation (i.e. a group's self-conscious representation of itself) and an "external" representation (i.e. by a proxy who stands apart from or outside of the group)? For Marx, for Marxism, this is an absolutely crucial distinction. It amounts to saying, "can we tell the difference between true and false consciousness?" If I am now forced to conclude that, for mimetics, we cannot maintain this distinction, this means that we have reached a critical juncture. This either signifies a fatal flaw for the theory, which will call for clarification and correction, or a point of contention with Marxism which will call for refinement and further elaboration. In order to fully consider the implications, it is necessary to continue to follow the thread of the analysis thus far. It is now time to reflect on what remains in the wake of this mimetic reading of Marx's *Eighteenth Brumaire*: reverberant echoes which persist where Marx had insisted on finality as well as some things that he left open and unburied, perhaps hoping to preserve a future which one may now feel has irrevocably given up the ghost.

**Revenanthology**

There are two main points to take away from this reading of Marx's *Eighteenth Brumaire*: firstly, the mimetic theory of political action as masked performativity and Marx's interpretation of its limit, and secondly, the analysis of the lumpenproletariat as an example of the mimetic structure of identification and the correlative concept of the either/or of collective self-idealization vs dependence on an idealized representative proxy. The final task in this chapter will be to consider each of these points, to evaluate Marx's conclusions in relation to each, and delineate an interpretive path forward whether in direct contradiction with his analysis or by simply bypassing it. Additionally, it is time to make explicit what has been vaguely alluded to and has implicitly haunted the reading of Marx up this point, namely Derrida's *Specters of Marx*, which contains a deconstruction of mimesis that has already informed the reinterpretation of Ricoeur's hermeneutics and allowed for the characterization of mimetics in terms of iterability and henceforth in terms of hauntology and spectrality.

Regarding the first point, the mimetic theory of political action, it is now necessary to contend with the specificity with which Marx applied masked mimesis to political theory as a concrete historical phenomenon and his conclusion that this dynamic had limited applicability and reached its definitive end point in the 19$^{th}$ century. The evidence to the contrary in historical examples beyond the scope of Marx's own analysis, both prior to and contemporary with him, and beyond into the 20$^{th}$ and 21$^{st}$ century, support the conclusion that this concept remains a critical analytic for the entirety of the era since Marx's death, up to and including the present moment. This is not meant to conclude that performative mimetics is a transhistorical universally valid lens through which to interpret any possible political action, or to make an appeal to mimetics as an essential facet of human nature, but simply to insist that the scope of applicability for this analysis extended beyond Marx's limited use of it, and that the end point which he

posited for its usefulness did not come to pass within the chronology that he indicated. This should not be taken to mean that Marx's theory is proven false by empirical evidence. It might in fact be the case that all the revolutions that can be read through this mimetic performative lens which occurred subsequently to Marx's positing its end should simply be categorized as revolutions of the past in Marx's sense. In other words, that the revolution to come, while clearly not belonging to the 19th century, has still not yet arrived. In order to properly evaluate such a claim, one would need to produce a comprehensive historical survey of the revolutions of the 20th and 21st century, including the history of communist revolution, global anti-colonial struggle, the fall of the Soviet Union, and the rise of religious fundamentalism and ethno-nationalism, and evaluate these histories according to the dynamics of performative mimetics.

This is a worthy endeavor but one that extends beyond the scope of this project and pushes the limits of my qualifications as a scholar of comparative literature rather than a trained historian. However, it does raise a question far more pertinent to the present inquiry: if Marx declared that revolution as masked mimetic performance was dead and buried, never to return, and this was meant with finality, and this did not come to pass, then why was that the case and what does this mean? Such a proclamation was in fact doubly significant, since according to Marx, the essential structure of mimetic political action is defined by the return of the dead and buried. If Marx was not simply saying that this time in particular it wouldn't happen, was he actually making the more general argument that history had reached a point where this could never happen again? Or was his point tantamount to arguing that if this same dynamic played out again that it would not actually lead to anything truly transformative, and in order for that to happen something which would radically break this cycle would be necessary? While the latter point is definitively an open question, it would be trivial to survey the present-day global reality

and assess that the current order of things does not correspond to the future that Marx would have hoped for. Given that, one could then speculate on whether such a world is yet to come or an impossibility. But rather than indulge in such utopianism or nihilism, there remains another possibility for inquiry.

Was the revolutionary potential of mimetic performance truly as exhausted as Marx declares that it was in the middle of the 19th century? He approvingly cites the English and French bourgeois revolutions as examples of its heuristic value, while generalizing that this is a dynamic which can be found in other moments of great social and political upheaval, but he doesn't give any historical or contemporary examples and obviously couldn't do so for things that had not yet occurred. Consider just one example from the era just prior to his own which he does not discuss at all in the *Brumaire,* it is reasonable to conclude that there may be more life to the mimetic mask in political struggle than he wanted to grant it. I am speaking specifically of the Haitian revolution and a particularly charged moment of mimetic activity described by C. L. R. James in *The Black Jacobins*. James encounters this in the memoires of the French military officer Pamphile Lacroix[30]:

> The dishonest political position of the French Army was now taking its toll. The soldiers still thought of themselves as a revolutionary army. Yet at nights they heard the blacks in the fortress singing the *Marseillaise,* the *Ça Ira,* and the other revolutionary songs. Lacroix records how these misguided wretches as they heard the songs started and looked at the officers as if to say "Have our barbarous enemies justice on their side? Are we no longer the soldiers of Republican France? And have we become the instruments of policy?"

The mimetic dynamic at play in this historical anecdote is an example of appropriation, albeit not in the sense in which this term is used in contemporary cultural parlance. The term appropriation applies here in the more general hermeneutic sense, defined in Ricoeur's essay appropriately

[30] Lacroix, *Mémoires pour Servir, Vol. II,* quoted in C. L. R. James *The Black Jacobins*, Vintage Books, 1989, pp. 317-318

titled "Appropriation." Ricoeur anchors his usage in the German *Aneignung:* "to make one's own what was initially alien."[31] It is the goal of any interpretation which "brings together, equalizes, renders contemporary and similar." But in this "making one's own" Ricoeur insists there is a fundamental relinquishment which distinguishes appropriation from a simple incorporation of the other into the self. Hermeneutic appropriation is not the consumption of an object by a subject, but a self-divestment of the ego, appropriation is thus simultaneously a "taking-up" and a "letting-go." For Ricoeur, appropriation as such must be understood as neither the idealist narcissistic imposition of the self upon its interpretive object nor the representational realist passive reception of an objective reality into the mind of the interpreter.

The contemporary usage of appropriation to mean an illicit or unjust act of cultural theft is ultimately reliant upon a dichotomy between an appropriate and an inappropriate appropriation. Whether this dichotomy is as stable or straightforward as some might assume is clearly open to critique. For the purposes of conceptual clarification through this project appropriation in the hermeneutic sense is used synonymously to how application is used in the classical three-part hermeneutic formula of interpretation as understanding and application. The question of whether a given mimetic act is appropriative in the sense of contemporary cultural politics (i.e. constitutes an ethical violation linked to colonial violence) would be a matter for case by case ethical-political analysis; appropriation as such is a constitutive structure of mimesis.

In the case of this anecdote from Lacroix via James this is obviously an occasion that shouldn't be analyzed in abstraction from ethics and politics. If one wanted to consider examples of contested appropriations, where opposed sides come into conflict over who has the right to a

[31] Ricoeur, Paul, "Appropriation" in *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences,* Cambridge University Press, 1981, p. 185

particular mimetic performance, there would be countless examples, straightforward ones where there is either one side who possess a stronger claim or a side who is obviously in the wrong, as well as more complex and nuanced situations where there is a true ambiguity about the origins and authenticity of what is being appropriated and by whom. What is particularly notable about the case of the Haitian revolutionary appropriation of the French revolutionary mask is that the validity of their claim to it, the completeness of their *Aneignung,* was unquestionably evident even to the French military officer recording the event in his memoir. He saw this realization on the faces of his own soldiers, soldiers who believed that they themselves marched for a certain set of ideals, ideals embodied in the songs, slogans, emblems and ornaments of the revolution, and yet they could not deny that they found themselves in a situation where they stood on the opposite side of the battle lines from those who had taken up those very emblems and ornaments and made them their own. The effect of this is not simply a double justification, as if to say, yes, they too have a right to these songs. It goes beyond that. It holds up a mirror to the Republic's betrayal of its own revolution, and in that moment, to those soldiers, the Haitians seemed more French than the French.

This moment suggests the ongoing validity and necessity of the mimetic theory of political action beyond Marx's application of it. I chose this example in particular because it is a direct and powerful example of the phenomenon but given the radical expansion of the concept of mimesis it follows that there would be many other examples which do not so cleanly align with the dynamics of direct cultural transmission and appropriation. The primary purpose of this project's initial foray into the elaboration of mimetics is ultimately an attempt to justify a methodology in principle rather than gathering and evaluating examples of its application. However, charged moments like the scene from the Haitian Revolution can serve as signpost for

the possible directions of further research. As long as politics performs itself as political theater it remains a worthy task to critique it as such.

Turning to the second implication of this mimetic reading of Marx's *Brumaire,* it is undeniable that the difference between class consciousness as collective self-consciousness capable of representing itself and the ideological false consciousness that compels a group to identify with and support a representative proxy figure is an indispensable distinction for Marxist theory and the critique of ideology. In the final analysis, this seems to the unreconcilable point of departure from Marxist orthodoxy for mimetics. To briefly summarize why this is the case: mimetics does not posit a radical difference in kind between a representation as an expression or reflection of individual or collective consciousness and the proxy which stands in on behalf of the individual or collective. The former mimetic construction is itself a proxy, because mimesis as idealization or representation is always already subject to a system of signification in which present signifiers "stand in" for absent signifieds.[32] As for the proxy stand in, this relation between the representative proxy and the represented individual or group is itself subject to the dynamics of idealization and signification, as is any cognitive or emotional assessment of a relation between an individual or a group with any other individual or group. The dynamics of desire, identification, fealty, hatred, resentment, jealousy, fetishization, etc. are completely mediated by cognitive and linguistic processes which are experienced, understood, misunderstood—in other words, consciously and unconsciously affective in any meaningful sense whatsoever—all of which would come under the category of *mimesis*.

This leads to the matter of ghosts. Traversing Marx's *Eighteenth Brumaire* has brought

[32] This begs the question however, does the term proxy lose its meaning if it can never be otherwise? What does the figurative proxy "standing in for" mean without its contrast with actual presence? If mimetics accepts that nothing is ever fully present and totally self-standing, if this implies something like an originary in-authenticity or a type of anti- or non-realism, would the concepts of proxy and representation still matter?

mimetics to a point where it must be considered within the logic of haunting which Derrida first invoked in *Specters of Marx*. The spectral character of the mimetic act has already been established, it too "begins by coming back."[33] The creative possibility of mimesis that Ricoeur was so adamant about, that it is not mere repetition, is encapsulated in what Derrida says of the notion of the appeal or political injunction: "the originary performativity that does not conform to preexisting conventions… but whose force of rupture produces the institution or the constitution, the law itself… the meaning that appears… to have to guarantee it in return." (pp. 30-31) This applies as well to mimetics which could correspond to what in *Specters of Marx* Derrida calls "performative interpretation." That is to say, "an interpretation which transforms what it interprets," which could serve as a working definition of mimetics (p. 51). Derrida's performative interpretation of the spectres of Marx via Hamlet's ghosts resulted in his most hermeneutic proclamation, a line in which I find his thinking in its closest proximity to Ricoeur: "To be… means… to inherit... The being of what we are is first of all inheritance, whether we like it or know it or not" (p. 54). Derrida's reflections take this project ahead of itself, towards the to-come of this inquiry, the encounter with Freud in the subsequent chapter, through the with the spectres of Marx, our shared inheritance of his revenanthology, and the idea of a mourning in between introjection and incorporation. This hinge between Marx and Freud is of course a matter of work, of labor, of the work of mourning, work as mourning, production linked to "trauma, to mourning, to the idealizing iterability of exappropriation, thus to the spectral spiritualization that is at work in any tekhne" (p. 97). These themes will return in the following chapter.

Where *Specters of Marx* turns to address the *Eighteenth Brumaire* specifically, it contains both resources for confirmation and modification of the mimetic reading performed in the first

[33] Derrida, Jacques, *Specters of Marx*. Translated by Peggy Kamuf. Routledge, 1994, p. 11

half of this chapter. Derrida also emphasizes the anxiety which marks the entirety of the oft quoted passage about the critical encounter with tradition (men making their own history), the anxious conjuration, the irreducibly borrowed nature of this revolutionary creative act. In the insecure but absolutely necessary repetition of these "figures of borrowing, borrowed figures, figurality as the figure of borrowing" as part and parcel of the revolutionary moment, Derrida detects the whole paradox of novelty and appropriation which haunts not only Marx's *Brumaire* but mimetics in general. This spectrality of the figurative also leads Derrida to the figures of the specter, which he too identifies with the mask:

> *Marx often aims at the head—and the chief. The figures of the ghost are first of all faces. It is a matter then of masks, if not, this time, of a helmet and a visor. But between the spirit and the specter, between tragedy and comedy, between the revolution on the march and what installs it in parody, there is only the difference of a time between two masks.* (p. 113)

Akin to the prior chapter's account of the mask as a meta-metaphor, Derrida remarks on "the figure of the ghost… perhaps the hidden figure of all figures." (p. 120) And yet precisely this is what he insists would prevent any meta-rhetoric of the ghost. I take this to mean that as figure of figures, there would be no way to account for the ghost within any "theory of the figurative." So too, perhaps, a meta-poetics could not account for the mask in a non-circular way. The consideration of these paradoxes also raises a problematic which Derrida returns to on many occasions throughout his reading of Marx which I have hitherto failed to consider, namely the untimely nature of mimesis, or to borrow a borrowed phrase, the sense in which its "time is out of joint." Is it merely a play on words to say that mimesis is always already a repetition? Is the notion of originary repetition a paradox or a sleight of hand? How to account for the fact that according to the theory thus far, "everything begins before it begins" (p. 161). This brings up an aspect of mimetics which requires a more systematic elaboration, namely the temporality implicit in the dialectic of novelty and repetition, and of the possibility of mimetic invention as

such.

Returning to the first takeaway, Marx's positing of the end of mimetic political action, it is perhaps tempting to view the division between the endlessly iterative mimetic past and the revolution to come through the lens of the famous Althusserian "early" and "late" Marx. According to this reading, Marx's early humanist work could be defined as mimetic and hermeneutic (in a derogatory sense) and contrasted with the dialectical materialist development of the later work as Marxist science. However, Kristina Mendicino provides a crucial rebuttal to that interpretation by insisting on the recurring "character masks" that Marx adopts throughout his oeuvre, including *Capital*, "In *Capital*, the ventriloquism of impersonal personification—in a language that no one had spoken before—forms one of the major strategies of presentation, signaling that there is no end to character masks in Marx's later writing." [34] As demonstrated in this chapter, so too should there be no end to the mimetic political theory which Marx so deftly employed in his reading of French political history as masked performance. Sharpened by the encounter with Marxist mimetics, the time has come to further refine the concept of mimetics by shifting registers from the socio-political to the psychoanalytical. Marx's account of the *Lumpenproletariat* and the dynamics of class consciousness and collective identifications has brought mimetics from the dialogical hermeneutics of text and reader into the far more complicated dialectics of individual and group identity. In order to elaborate on the psychical dimensions of mimetics with adequate rigor it is now necessary to draw out the mimetic resonance of some of the key concepts of Freudian psychoanalysis: identification, transference, and repetition.

[34] Mendicino, Kristina, *Announcements: On Novelty*. SUNY Press, 2020. p. 131, n. 61, p. 216

# Chapter 3

## Printing Pressure

Originary print. Everything begins with re-production.[35]

In the beginning is mimesis: as far back as one goes… one always finds the identification from which the 'subject' dates…[36]

### From Masses to Masks

The transition from Marx to Freud in this chapter is driven by more than the typical association of the two figures in intellectual history. Beyond a simple continuation to the next figure in the chronological sequence of the "Hermeneutics of Suspicion," this turn to Freud is a necessary complication and refinement of the psychosocial expansion of mimetics produced through the reading of Marx's *Brumaire*. While there is nothing novel about pairing Marxist and psychoanalytic theory in general, the specific connection which organizes this interpretation is found in the remarkable thematic proximity of the performative mimetic Marx to the core concepts of Freudian psychoanalysis. In a text which will be revisited later in this chapter, 1914's "Remembering, Repeating, and Working-Through," Freud's remarks on pathological repetition somewhat uncannily echo Marx's theatrical metaphors for political mimesis. Defining the repetition compulsion in relation to transference and resistance, he remarks that "the patient brings out of the armoury of the past the weapons with which he defends himself against the progress of the treatment."[37] Marx and Freud are aligned in the conception of repetition as a masked performance capable of producing the force necessary for resistance. The difference between their senses of repetition and resistance comes down to the role of memory. Marx

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[35] Derrida, Jacques "Freud and the Scene of Writing" in *Writing and Difference,* p. 92

[36] Borch-Jacobsen, Mikkel, *The Freudian Subject*, p. 47

[37] Freud, Sigmund, "Remembering, Repeating and Working-Through" The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud 12:151

defined both the revolutionary and the reactionary political moment in terms of mimetic identification with past figures (the "borrowed costumes") as the condition of possibility for a political performance capable of vicariously legitimating itself through recognitive power of historical memory. By contrast, in Freud's analysis of the repetition compulsion, the function of acting-out is precisely the resistance of remembrance. Ironically, the past is compelled to return through action in order for it not to be recalled in thought.

It is clear then that the reading of Marx in the previous chapter has already moved mimetics into a more ambiguous and nuanced terrain than the initial expansion into politics and history which led from Ricoeur to Marx. Mimetics cannot restrict itself to an idealized analysis of a conscious sovereign subject choosing to adopt certain identifications for rational ends. To do so would be based on fundamentally mistaken presuppositions about mimetic action. Intentional/volitional mimesis has traditionally been assumed as the default for any philosophical treatment of the subject, but already in the opening reading of Ricoeur's hermeneutics of mimesis there was evidence to suggest that even the classical paradigm of mimesis as an autonomous creative act is subject to structures and forces beyond conscious awareness. Just as Freud argued that not only was consciousness not the whole of the psychical but actually constituted a smaller part of it than the unconscious, I want to argue that volitional mimetic activity is but one small part of mimetic processes as such, the greater part of which can only be understood in relation to the unconscious. Mimesis in this sense does not only refer to the activity of the subject, but also processes and dynamics which act upon them, and even further, to the production of subjectivity itself.

This will be demonstrated in this chapter through a reading of some critical moments in Freud's writings that explicitly deal with identification, transference, and repetition. These core

psychoanalytic concepts all contain some element of the mimetic relation between a past which has been written and a present space of action. Accordingly, this chapter provides an opportunity to enrich and complicate the temporality of mimetics and to critically reevaluate the causality and "direction of fit" that has so far been taken for granted. Rather than simply assuming a static past which stands as a resource for present appropriation, a psychoanalytic reading can illustrate the bidirectionality of the masking identification. Ultimately, this raises serious practical and theoretical questions for hermeneutic interpretation, and the extent to which phenomenological hermeneutics can or cannot provide the proper framework for addressing these questions will determine the shape of future inquiries into the concept of mimesis as well as the heuristic value of mimetics as a hermeneutic category.

Working through the *Eighteenth Brumaire* and Derrida's *Specters of Marx* has resulted in a transformed mimesis, one that is only comprehensible through its social-relational dynamic. Even further, it suggests that social relations as such must be understood as forms of mimesis. Spivak's dialectical opposition of the two senses of representation, as re-presentation (*Vorstellung)* and as proxy (*Vertretung*), while a useful demarcation for a critique of the traditional metaphysical/epistemological theory of representation, was ultimately not compatible with this project's formulation of a mimesis that includes both representation and proxy. Marx's analysis of class consciousness conjured the specter of group identification simultaneously as an achievement of performed re-presentation and as produced through the collective investment in a proxy. Thus, the mimetics which emerged from the encounter with the historicity of political performance must contend with not only the social but the psychical dimension of mimesis. Afterall, the sociality or social relationality introduced by Marx could also be conceived as group psychology, or to be more precise and refer to the German title of the Freudian text we are

referencing, mass psychology, a psychology of the masses.[38]

The transposition of Aristotelian mimesis from 4th century Athens into 19th century Europe has, perhaps somewhat audaciously, attempted to bypass the entire trajectory of the reception of *mimesis* which combined it with *imitatio* eventually leading to the modern subjectivist theory of representation.[39] The benefit of this brazen evasion of thousands of years of Western metaphysics is that both the point of departure and point of arrival are contexts which possess a critical self-awareness of the fundamental importance of sociality. Aristotle's account of mimesis seems particularly amenable to this appropriation and application because it is essentially defined by spectacle, performativity, and publicness. The Greek *theatron* while not reducible to the *agora* is at least adjacent to it, synonymous with it to the extent that both form the earliest prototypes for the space which makes seeing-as and being-seen-as possible. Thus, while there is obviously a significant *quantitative* difference in scale between the sense of mass society in a 4th century BCE Greek city-state and the industrial/post-industrial national and international context, from Marx's 19th century Europe up to the contemporary moment, *qualitatively* they are much closer. This leads back to Freud and answers the question of why Freudian psychoanalysis specifically and not merely a turn to psychology in general.

Put simply, Freudian psychoanalysis is not reducible to a theory of the individual subject. Even when it addresses individual psychology, analysis takes place within a relational situation. Regardless of where a given scene is staged, from the privacy of an intimate interior to the public spectacle of anonymous masses, the metapsychology, dynamics, defenses, neuroses etc., of

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[38] 1921's "Massenpsychologie und Ich-Analyse" translated as "Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego."

[39] One is of course never fully free of this legacy, and this project should least of all be construed as an attempt to revivify a pure, pre-representational originary sense of mimesis, but it is necessary to attempt to bracket this heavily weighted conception of mimesis as the representation of a subjectivity defined as an individual consciousness in order to think of it in ways that are not wholly determined by its traditional metaphysical and epistemological determination.

psychoanalysis are only thinkable within a relational economy. The fact that this fundamental relationality is also a feature of the hermeneutic interpretation of mimesis is either proof of a strong compatibility between this project and psychoanalytic theory, or a previously unacknowledged debt to Freud present in all the prior steps of this project which have led to this point. With this in mind, a goal of this chapter ought to be demonstrating that this difficulty in determining which is the cart and which is the horse ought to be seen not as a mere coincidence or evidence of a lack of theoretical rigor but as a metatextual example of the central questions that mimetics is engaged with.

This interpretation of psychoanalysis thus emphasizes its relational aspects. Whether this is the most accurate or orthodox rendition of Freudian theory is not the primary concern; "Freud" enters the stage in order to provide our sociological account of mimetics with a more rigorous analysis of its psychical dimension. This requires an explication of the conscious and unconscious dynamics of what has hitherto been discussed primarily in the language of hermeneutics and critical social theory. While the primary goal is to use the encounter with Freud to further refine the concept of mimetics there is also a secondary benefit of providing some new conceptual resources for the further development of psychoanalytic theory. The first step will be addressing the question of mimesis as an explicit theme in Freud's work, followed by an attempt to bring out the implicit mimetic aspects of some fundamental Freudian concepts. Having established Freud's direct engagement with the concept of mimesis and then identified the mimetic character of Freudian psychoanalysis will lead back to mimetic theory and the figure of the mask in order to bring out the latent Freudianism of mimetic masks as well as address new conceptual issues which have emerged through this psychoanalytic reading.

**Freud on Mimesis**

It is necessary to begin this account of Freud's explicit engagement with the concept of mimesis with the fact that he rejected an appeal to an innate mimetic instinct. The disavowal in question can be found in the famous *Fort/Da* passage in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. This dismissal of the concept of an inherent mimetic drive occurs as part of Freud's reflection on his grandson Ernst's game: "It emerges from this discussion that there is no need to assume the existence of a special imitative instinct in order to provide a motive for play."[40] However, it is important to note that this reflection is itself a transitional moment from the account of Ernst's game to a discussion of the audience's enjoyment of depictions of suffering in tragic drama. The latter is brought up as an example of the limits of the pleasure principle. What makes this the starting point and not the end of an account of the presence of mimesis in Freud's writing is the fact that this transition is itself an unacknowledged but relatively straightforward intertextual exchange with Aristotle's *Poetics*.[41] It might seem reasonable to conclude from the explicit disavowal of the "special imitative instinct" that Freud was uninterested in or at least unconvinced by any appeal to mimesis as a foundational concept for human psychology, but this is actually a misreading. Freud's point is not that human beings do not behave, perceive, or think mimetically, it is that he wants to resist the notion that the specific play behavior he is analyzing

[40] Freud, Sigmund, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle,* 17

[41] See West, William N. "Repeating Staging Meaning Between Aristotle and Freud" in SubStance, Issue 89 (Volume 28, Number 2), 1999, University of Wisconsin Press. West shows that Freud directly follows Aristotle's progression from the speculation of an innate mimetic faculty in Ch. 3 of the Poetics to the reference to *catharsis* in Ch. 4. The essay frames Freud's relation to mimesis as one of early enthusiasm leading to disavowal and repetition through *Verneinung*. West sees Freud's early usage of hypnosis as an attempt at mimetic reenactment, eventually superseded by the free association technique which in its own way still aimed at a narrative reconstruction. This accounts for the seeming displacement of mimesis from its centrality in early psychoanalysis to something which could be summarily dismissed in passing by 1920, but this misses the essential psychoanalytic concepts which can be understood as forms of mimesis masked through different terminology. This non-recognition could be attributed to the fact that West's account of mimesis, while quite effectively differentiating Aristotelian and Platonic mimesis, lacks the expanded dimensionality offered by Ricoeur's hermeneutic reading.

could be simply explained by appealing to an innate mimetic drive. As always with Freud, precision is very important, and the exact theory which is being rejected is an imitative instinct (*Nachahmungstriebes*), meaning that while the play itself is clearly mimetic, Freud sees it as the expression of other forces (in this particular case, the achievement of control over the disappearance of the mother) rather than some natural human "will to imitate."[42]

This marks a point where mimetics seems to have already taken its leave from Aristotle. There is some extent to which this project remains within the realm of a philosophical anthropology, but whether owing to Ricoeur's own Freudianism or the influence of the phenomenological *epokhē,* up to this point the question of whether mimesis was a natural or essential aspect of the human being has been bracketed in favor of treating it as a heuristic for bringing together a cluster of associated concepts (metaphor, repetition, recognition, representation, proxy, etc.). From this perspective, there is no conflict with Freud's seeming rejection of mimesis, however it does mean that one would have to look elsewhere in his writing in order to find evidence of the use of mimesis as a concept in psychoanalytic theory. Despite the dismissal of an innate imitative drive Freud actually frequently discusses mimesis through his oeuvre, albeit it under different names: identification, transference, and, perhaps most obviously, in relation to the repetition compulsion. The following section of this chapter will make the case for the mimetic character of these crypto-mimetic Freudian concepts. Working through their significance for psychoanalytic theory and articulating their mimetic elements will allow for a comprehensive assessment of Freud's transmutation of mimesis and will clarify whether mimetics must content itself with only limited points of contact in certain periods in the development of Freud's thinking or whether mimesis needs to be understood as such a critical

[42] For a philosophical attempt to think through such a primordial mimetic drive, see Walter Benjamin's "On the Mimetic Faculty."

component of psychoanalytic theory and practice that it is in fact indispensable for his oeuvre and all that has followed from him.

Before turning to the three "crypto-mimetic" concepts of psychoanalysis, there is another case of explicit use of mimesis or mimetics in Freud's writing which merits some discussion. Freud uses the term "ideational mimetics" in *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious*, and its place in this text is brief but significant. While clearly closer in proximity to mimesis than the "crypto-mimetic" concepts, it is necessary to introduce this reference along with the caveat that as is often the case in multi-lingual comparative scholarship the appearance of an exact term in the English translation does not always signify the same explicit connection in the original text. The word in the German text that Strachey has chosen to translate with the phrase "ideational mimetics" is *Vorstellungsmimik*. Freud was of course not averse to using Greek technical terms, so if his intent was to use the word *mimesis* or *mimetic*, he would have done so explicitly. This brings up the broader point that the search for explicit discussions of mimesis in Freud's writing cannot be limited to a simplistic word hunt for the specific term but would have to include an expanded cluster of associated vocabulary. Most notably, of course, imitation (*Imitation, Nachahmung*), simulation (*Nachmachung*), mimicry (*Mimikry*), and the more specific yet deceptively similar term *mimik* which refers explicitly to facial expressions, as in the pantomimic meaning of *die Mimik und die Gestik* (facial expressions and gestures). Furthermore, the accounts of identification and transference will need to account for the mimetic resonance of terms which are typically translated as sympathy/empathy/compassion (*Einfühlung* and *Mitleid*).

With all of this in mind, how mimetic is Freud's *Vorstellungsmimik?* Strachey is not wildly departing from the German text with his "ideational mimetics," but it does present a degree of importation and effacement. Firstly, as outlined above, the German word *mimik* while

obviously related to the concept of mimesis does not directly translate to the technical term mimetics, which is the nominalization of the adjective form of mimesis, mimetic, terms which would correspond to *Mimetika* and *mimetisch* in German respectively. The other half of the term is *Vorstellung*, which is of course one of the most notoriously polysemic words in German philosophical vocabulary. It is equally imagination, representation, mental reconstruction etc. In Kantian terminology it is distinguished from representation as *Darstellung* to specifically refer to "mental representations," and thus becomes a sort of catch all for intuitions, concepts, and ideas. Where *Darstellung* would refer to a sensible representation, *Vorstellung* has the connotation of the conceptual and ideational. This distinction is useful for understanding Freud's point about mimetics here and perhaps justifies Strachey's translation. As will become clear, the essential element is not the reference to mimetics but Freud's qualification of it as ideational.

The term first appears in *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious* in a discussion of the use of pantomime in joke telling as a kind of somatic translation of what Freud calls *ideational mimetics.*[43] Freud suggests that such outward displays of mimicry are not merely the medium for the expression of an idea but in fact "that these mimetics exist, even if with less liveliness, quite apart from any communication, that they occur as well when the subject is forming an idea of something for his own private benefit…" (p. 239) In other words, mimesis does not only refer to forms of communication but to something foundational for concept formation as such. This is what is meant by the use of the term ideational; the *Vorstellung* in *Vorstellungsmimik* is thus itself a mimetic metaphor. It is a kind of ideational facial expression, a conceptual mask which is analogous to a somatic innervation. Just as the need to convey the size of something which is being pantomimed requires gestures which signify whether the thing

[43] Freud, Sigmund, *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, Translated by James Strachey, Norton, 1960 pp. 238-239.

being referred to is large or small, Freud suggests that to even think of something like the Sublime requires a certain innervation, not only of speech as when discussing the subject, but prior to that as a psychical modification. Thus, the phenomenon of *Vorstellungsmimik* belongs wholly within the extremely complicated realm of mind-body relations in Freud's thinking. The undeniable point remains, however, that rather than merely being the outward repetition of observed behavior or physicality, Freud's analysis of humorization (*Komischmachen*) identifies a fundamental mimetic component to the psychical and conceptual processes underlying both the performance and the reception of the comical. To clarify this further it is necessary to consider how Freud defines the comic as such in this text:

> The comic arises in the first instance as an unintended discovery derived from human social relations. It is found in people—in their movements, forms, actions and traits of character, originally in all probability only in their physical characteristics but later in their mental ones as well or… in the expression of those characteristics. By means of a very common sort of personification, animals become comic too, and inanimate objects. At the same time, the comic is capable of being detached from people, in so far as recognize the conditions under which a person seems comic. In this way the comic of situation comes about, and this recognition affords the possibility of making a person comic at one's will by putting him in situations in which his actions are subject to these comic conditions. The discovery that one has it in one's power to make someone else comic opens the way to an undreamt-of yield of comic pleasure and is the origin of a highly developed technique. One can make *oneself* comic, too, as easily as other people. The methods that serve to make people comic are: putting them in a comic situation, mimicry, disguise, unmasking, caricature, parody, travesty, and so on. (p. 234)

As is evident in this discussion of comic methods, in addition to the obvious reference to mimicry every other method that Freud lists also belongs within the expanded Ricoeurian conception of mimesis. It is clear then that at least according to this account in *Jokes,* Freud defines humorization as mimetic. Furthermore, he suggests that the "ideational mimetics" would have aesthetic applications beyond humor, but because humor was the subject of his study that is what his analysis was confined to. The experience of something as humorous, of comic pleasure, is thus a subspecies of a type of pleasure derived from comparison, which itself belongs to the

greater category of emotional responses to comparison as a general recognitive function, all of which would be characterized as mimetic processes according to Ricoeur's expanded conception. The concept of *ideational mimetics* or *Vorstellungsmimik* arguably played an essential role in Freud's analysis of humor and yet, despite his own suggestion that it has broader implications, he seems to abandon the term in his later work. Therefore, in order to properly evaluate whether psychoanalysis was always already mimetic the search will need to continue under other names. The necessary starting point, for reasons that will become clear, is in the development of the fundamental concept of identification.

**Mimetic Concepts in Psychoanalysis**

The subsections that follow will each focus on one of three distinct but related concepts which form a consistent mimetic thread in the development of Freud's clinical practice and metapsychological theory. These concepts cannot be arranged in a specific chronological or logical order due to the fact that their development overlaps and intertwines throughout the overall chronology of Freud's work. This calls for their conceptualization as constellation of mimetic elements in psychoanalysis which will provide far greater insight into the psychical dimension of mimesis than the explicit references to it discussed in the previous section. Each of these terms need to be defined as clearly as possible, with attention to the problems of translation, followed by a summary of their evolution beginning with the original usage and any subsequent revisions, and lastly considered in terms of their applicability to mimetics. While some of these terms have undergone significant reinterpretation, refinement, and expansion in the post-Freudian history of psychoanalytic theory and psychology more broadly, the intent here is to provide an account based on their origin in his work, which could then be adapted at a latter

point to come into conversation with later developments in the use of these terms.[44] The focus of this study is thus primarily Freud's own work with all references to the Standard Edition translations by James Strachey except where noted. Some secondary sources have been consulted to assist in the genealogy of the concepts, but none has been more invaluable than *The Language of Psychoanalysis* by Jean Laplanche and Jean-Bertrand Pontalis, which even when not explicitly referenced has been a constant resource in my attempt to explicate and clarify technical Freudian vocabulary (far too often obscured in English by esoteric translation decisions), in order to highlight the inherently mimetic character of these essential psychoanalytic concepts.

**1. Identification (*Identifizierung*)**

Freud's first discussions of identification appear during his early studies on hysteria and the Oedipus Complex, most significantly in *The Interpretation of Dreams*, but beyond this he did not use the term explicitly or fully develop the theory until the period between 1914 and 1923 where he began to refine the structural topography of his metapsychology. While the early analysis of identification as a hysterical symptom and as one example of the distorting mechanisms of the Dream-work might seem to be very specialized applications of the concept, it is necessary to begin there, in part for basic chronological reasons, but also in the spirit of the Freudian hermeneutical insight that the clues which will lead to the elucidation of normative or general structures are most often found in the most marginal and pathological cases. In *The Interpretation of Dreams,* identification is introduced in the 4th chapter "Distortion in Dreams," in a section where Freud is considering potential counterexamples to his "dreams as wish-

[44] A book length expansion of this chapter would need at the very least to contend with the work of Lacan, Klein, and Laplanche, as well as Winnicott, Bion, and many other figures in the history of psychoanalysis, not to mention the many influential philosophical engagements with these post-Freudian thinkers.

fulfillment" formulation. The topic of identification comes up in connection with the analysis of a patient who shares her dream of a cancelled dinner party, which, at least to her, seems a straightforward example of a dream which would not present any wish fulfillment but in fact would seem to be the opposite.[45] The only details of the dream are that she desired to organize a dinner party but only had smoked salmon in the house which gave her the idea to go shopping. Realizing that it is Sunday when all of the shops are closed, she tries to call a caterer, but the telephone is out of service, and thus the plan for the party has to be cancelled. After supplementing the details of the dream with additional background information about recent events in her waking life, Freud concludes that while the dream seems to be about an unfulfilled wish to have a dinner party, it is actually motivated by the opposite desire. Rather than representing the denial of her own wish for a dinner party, it is actually the expression of her wish to deny her friend, whom she feels jealousy towards.

While this seems relatively straightforward, Freud focuses on a specific detail which leads to the discussion of identification. Given that this is not an obvious example of a dream where a wish is directly fulfilled but actually consists in the negation of the wish of another, it is important to emphasize that plot of this dream was not "a friend desired to have a dinner party and then the dinner party did not happen," in fact, the friend doesn't seem to appear anywhere in the manifest content of the dream, it consists only of the first-person experience of the patient herself. Therein lies the identification, and the connection to mimesis: the dream is not about the patient's wish for a dinner party, it is about her wish to deny her friend's wish, but in the dreaming, she is substituted for her friend. Furthermore, this substitution of identities is accompanied by a substitution of objects, specifically of food, in this case of smoked salmon for

[45] Freud, Sigmund, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, pp. 171-175

caviar. The patient had previously mentioned her own love of caviar in connection with her husband's preference for full-figured women, and when asked about the dream salmon she mentions that her friend had a preference of salmon. This is notable in part because it also involves another denial or deferral of a desire, she admits telling her husband not to buy her any more caviar (ostensibly due to its expense) in order to tease him about denying her what she craves. This is associated with weight gain and dinner parties because her husband has sworn off attending dinner parties as part of an effort to lose weight. This relates to the friend because despite her husband's apparent affection for her, the patient describes her as thin (thus not physically desirable to her husband). However, in the same conversation where the friend alludes to her wish to attend a dinner party at the patient's home, she also mentions the desire to gain weight and achieve a fuller figure. All of this comes together into the multiple forms of identification (as well as substitution and condensation) at work in this case. The dream thus brings together all of the following elements: The patient's association of weight gain with attending dinner parties through her husband's weight loss plan, the friend's desire to attend a dinner party at their home as well as her desire to gain weight, the husband's favorable disposition towards the friend, the husband's predilection for full-figured women, the friend's predilection for smoked salmon, and the patient's deferred desire for caviar. These elements combine to produce the dream which conceals the fulfilment of the wish to deny the desire of the other under the mask of a denial of the self. The discussion of identification in dreams and waking life (recall that the desire for the withholding of the caviar manifested in waking life) leads Freud to a discussion of hysterical identification, an insertion which he laments in a later footnote, concerned that the digression lacked context. While this could seem a confusing digression for some readers, it is worth taking a closer look in order to understand why he (at

least initially) felt that the explication of hysterical imitation was necessary to explain the dynamics of this particular patient's dream.

Freud begins by defining the function of hysterical identification, stating "it enables patients to express in their symptoms not only their own experiences but those of a large number of other people… to suffer on behalf of a whole crowd of people and to act all the parts in a play single-handed." (Freud, p. 173) Already the resonances with mimetics are clear, with the hysterical symptom serving as the mask for mimetic performance reenacting the prior experiences of the self and others. And yet, immediately following this definition which seems so amenable to the mimetic reading, Freud quickly pivots and denies that this is an imitation. However, it would be a mistake to take this as a definitive rejection of a mimetic interpretation of identification. Freud's point is that the mechanism of identification cannot be explained away by the idea that the symptom is simply a reproducing imitation resulting from intense sympathetic feelings. Freud associates this kind of symptom mimicry using the language of virality, referring to the way symptom presentation could spread amongst patients in a hospital ward as kind of "psychical infection" (p. 174). While this type of sympathetic imitation could be construed as a random surface level dysfunctional response, Freud insists that it stems from more than just a parroting observation but a deeper unconscious process which has its own logic.

Underneath the surface resemblance Freud detects an etiological similarity. A copied symptom is the result of an inference based on an understanding of the source of the original symptom. A patient understands that another patient is manifesting a certain symptom as a response to certain triggers or based on a background source experience, and then "reasons" that since they may have similar triggers or similar background experiences that they too could be prone to suffering such a symptom. Thus, for Freud, "identification is not simple imitation

[*Imitation*] but *assimilation* [*Aneignung*] on the basis of a similar etiological pretension: it expresses a resemblance and is derived from a common element which remains in the unconscious." Returning to the case of the masked wish fulfillment in his patient's dream, Freud proposes that hysterical identification can provide the analogy necessary for understanding the substitution of herself for her friend. Motivated by the jealousy of her husband's high opinion of the friend, and fear that perhaps he might favor the friend over her (unwarranted based on the husband's preference for larger women but fear has no criterion of rationality) she thus swaps places with her friend in the dream, simultaneously fulfilling two wishes: 1. to deny the friend the dinner party that she desires, and 2. to take the place of her friend and thus become the object of the esteem that her husband held towards her. This is clearly not the case of imitation as a simple manifest copying, which would look more like having a dream where one experienced something that someone else had done, but rather it serves as a good example of the more abstract and indirect forms of mimetic identification, where the substitution of the other for the self allows a hypothetical vicarious experience which simultaneously fulfills an unconscious desire while negating the projected desire of the other.

Rather than a rejection of the mimetic aspect of identification, this actually constitutes a refinement of the psychical dimension which Ricoeur differentiated from a mechanical duplication. Identification as Freud defines it in this analysis of his patient's dream as well as in the analogy of the hysterical symptom involves a response to an experience of recognition, which can manifest with varying degrees of conscious sympathy or enmity, but on an unconscious level possesses some anchoring point of resemblance which motivates an appropriation (whether conscious or unconscious) of some aspect of the other into the self. This is mimetic on a number of levels: the experience of recognition prefigures the other into

something similar to the self, appropriation/assimilation refigures the self into the other, and then the expression of this similitude through the symptom, the dream, the fantasy etc. is a mimetic configuration in the active sense of something enacted, performed, the proxy structure of being-as.

It is necessary to more rigorously clarify these Freudian dialectics of self and other, inside and outside, introjection and projection etc. but this requires continuing to follow Freud's development of identification following this early use of the concept in *The Interpretation of Dreams.* Beginning with "On Narcissism" he developed a new theory of the constitution of the human ego in which identification plays an essential role. In that text mimetic processes are already evident in the account of the formation of the ego ideal. Freud defines this in relation to narcissism: if the self-investment of libidinal energy which constitutes primary narcissism is a developmental stage in the formation of the ego then the question becomes, where does this libidinal investment go once it is withdrawn from the ego itself? Freud is not satisfied with the idea that it is wholly dispersed into object-cathexis, and from this concludes that that the self-love of primary narcissism is displaced onto a substitute which is ascribed the perfection which reality has now denied to the actual ego. This is what Freud refers to as an ego ideal and is also the bridge to group psychology through the discussion of conscience which is the earliest formation of what he will call the superego. The formation of this ego-ideal is explicitly mediated through social relations. Freud explicitly defines this inner idealization of the self which would perhaps seem to be of the most private and personal nature as in fact thoroughly constituted by social institutions, e.g. the family, social class, and nationality. This is mimetic in a number of ways.

The ego ideal is formed as a proxy replacement of the actual ego, its formation is a

concatenation of various influences and models, and the activity of the ego and ego ideal dynamic which is defined by self-surveillance, evaluation, critique etc. is in a constant mimetic cycle of comparison, between the ego and its ideal, and between both of these and the social ideals and examples upon which the initial identification was based in the first place. The general social anxiety and paranoia which Freud concludes stem from the guilt associated with a fear of punishment by the parents, a fear of love lost, disappointment, failing to measure up to the ideal etc., is therefore a product of the ongoing mimetic activities of what Freud would come to call the superego. From the early discussion of identification in relation to hysterical symptoms and the distortions of the dreamwork by *On Narcissism* it had emerged as an essential component in ego formation and what would come to be called the superego. This is the identification which Diana Fuss is referring to when she says, "Identification is the detour through the other that defines a self."[46]

In terms of the historical development of Freud's technical vocabulary it might be more apt to refer to the early elaboration of the theory as proto-identification, in the sense that he did not explicitly systematize it in these works, but this begins to change with 1917's "Mourning and Melancholia". That essay once again finds Freud concerned with topics other than identification itself, however it emerges as a key concept for his analysis of grief.[47] Freud begins by framing the comparison of mourning and melancholia as analogous to the comparison of dreams as "the prototype in normal life of narcissistic mental disorders." (Freud p.243)[48] While his primary goal

[46] Fuss, Diana, *Identification Papers*, p. 2

[47] For more on the connection between melancholia and identification (and non-identification) understood through the lens of mimetic performance, see Judith Butler's essay "Melancholy Gender—Refused Identification" in *Psychoanalytic Dialogues*, vol. 5, no. 2, Jan. 1995, pp. 165–180.

[48] Freud's repeated appeal to the prototype and the need to explain the normative rule via the abnormal exemplar reiterates the fundamentally mimetic character of the basic gestures of Freudian interpretation, or perhaps beyond Freud, this suggests a broader mimetic horizon indispensable for concept formation and comparative analysis as such.

in the essay as a whole is to account for the difference between mourning and melancholia, the development of identification occurs in his pursuit of an auxiliary purpose, the examination of "the view which the melancholic disorder affords of the constitution of the human ego." (p. 247) Freud has not at this point adopted the use of the term superego (*Überich*) but the concept is beginning to form through his differentiation of the self-critical faculty from the ego itself, as a part of the ego which "sets itself over against the other, judges it critically, and… takes it as its object." Excessive self-reproach is a common characteristic of many neurotics, but in the particular case of melancholia Freud sees an overwhelming emphasis on moral self-repudiation. After a survey of the many self-reproaches of melancholic patients, Freud observes that "often the most violent of them are hardly at all applicable to the patient… but that with insignificant modifications they do fit someone else, someone whom the patient loves or has loved or should love" (p. 248). Thus, Freud concludes, these self-reproaches are shifted from this loved, or formerly loved, or obligatory love object and brought within the ego itself. How and why does this melancholic transposition occur and what does this mean for the role of identification in object choice and ego formation in general?

Freud proposes a three-phase process: there is an initial object-choice, i.e. libidinal investment in another person, then something occurs which shatters this object relationship, i.e. death, infidelity or some other betrayal, possibly something which causes the relationship as it was to come to an end, and finally in the case of normal mourning an eventual withdrawal of libido from the object and displacement to a new object. In the case of the melancholic, however, this last phase does not occur. What happens instead is that the libidinal investment is withdrawn into the ego itself, where the internalized libido establishes an identification of the ego with the abandoned object. Referring to this melancholic internalization Freud adopts a more poetic tone,

musing, “Thus the shadow of the object fell upon the ego… object-loss was transformed into ego-loss and the conflict between the ego and the loved person into a cleavage between the critical activity of the ego and the ego as altered by identification.” (p. 249) Freud argues that this identification with the object is a “*regression* from one type of object-choice to original narcissism.” This type of identification after the loss of a relationship with a love object is thus akin to the preliminary phase in the development of object-choice where the ego “wants to incorporate this object into itself, and, in accordance with the oral or cannibalistic phase of libidinal development in which it is, it wants to do so by devouring it.” (p. 249-250) Freud invokes this connection between psychical incorporation and the consumption of food, (even further of cannibalism) in passing, connecting it with Abraham’s observations on the refusal to eat during extreme cases of melancholia, and then changes the subject. This calls for further interpretation, however, there is more basic groundwork to which needs to be accomplished first.[49]

Another fundamental psychoanalytic concept which unfortunately gets obscured by a bewilderingly artificial Stracheyism is Anaclisis / Anaclitic object choice. Freud’s term is *Anlehnen* / *Anlehhnung* which literally means to lean on or to prop open (as in a window or a door which is cracked or left ajar). It can be used in a figurative way similarly to how lean is used in English, to convey dependence upon something i.e. “The prosecution leaned heavily on circumstantial evidence.” It can also imply derivation or modeling, i.e. “The novel is based on a true incident” (“*der Roman lehnt sich an eine wahre Begebenheit an*”). It is a critical term for psychoanalysis which defines the basis for object choice because, Freud posits, an infant

[49]I pause here to mark something which can only be treated at length and developed fully later. I am referring to Derrida’s “Economimesis” and his reading of Kant which brings out themes of the gustatory/gestational element of mimesis, melancholia and cannibalism, or eating disorders more broadly. Additionally, our reading of Ferenczi in the middle of the chapter will provide a further angle through an analysis of antipathy and disgust.

naturally forms an attachment to the source of life sustaining nourishment. This relation of dependence is the initial printing of which all further iterations of libidinal investment are reprints. As Laplanche and Pontalis insightfully suggest, this helps clarify why Freud is not a *pansexualist (*or perhaps more accurately, not a sexual monist), that in fact despite the necessary centrality and focus on sexuality in his work it is possible to interpret the libidinal theory as including a proto-sexual component which is the basis for the anaclitic, or to translate Freud's German more literally, that which the object investment must lean on. Establishing the line between the anaclitic libidinal investment and the sexual object-choice is obviously not a simple and straightforward matter, but Freud seems to conceive of the anaclitic as ontologically prior, or at least equiprimordial with the origins of sexuality as expressed quite succinctly in this passage from *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*:

> At a time at which the first beginnings of sexual satisfaction are still linked with the taking of nourishment, the sexual instinct has a sexual object outside the infant's own body in the shape of his mother's breast. It is only later that the instinct loses that object, just at the time, perhaps, when the child is able to form a total idea of the person to whom the organ that is giving him satisfaction belongs. As a rule the sexual instinct then becomes autoerotic, and not until the period of latency has been passed through is the original relation restored. There are thus good reasons why a child sucking at his mother's breast has become the prototype of every relation of love. The finding of an object is in fact a refinding of it. (Freud, p. 222)

Thus, more primary than primary narcissism, Freud posits the anaclitic investment in the source of nourishment as the originary mimesis of every relation of love (perhaps further; to every relation whatsoever) and crucially this originary mimesis occurs not only in relation to the presence of the object but its absence.

By the time Freud writes 1921's *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego* he feels the need to dedicate an entire chapter to the concept of identification. There he very quickly move from simple identification to a dialectic between identification and desire via the Oedipus Complex. This also has the effect of defining identification in terms of replacement or

substitution, which brings the concept of identification firmly into the realm of mimetic proxy and the metaphoricity of masks. Freud summarizes this dichotomy between identification and desire with the contrast between wanting to *be* and wanting to *have*. Furthermore, *being* here is explicitly defined as copying, the appropriation of a prototype, which is also associated with another important piece of psychoanalytic vocabulary, *introjection*.[50] Freud begins by discussing the primary identifications of the Oedipus Complex, but as this discussion belongs to the larger study of group psychology, quickly expands the concept to allow for partial identifications wherever there is "perception of a common quality." (p. 66) In a footnote which closes the chapter, Freud makes it clear that he does not intend to limit the analysis of identification and introjection to the discussion of specific pathologies, or even the Oedipus Complex, but that it has much broader implications for the preconditions of sociality in general: "A path leads from identification by way of imitation to empathy, that is, to the comprehension of the mechanism by means of which we are enabled to take up any attitude at all towards another mental life." (p. 70n2)

The topic of the origins of primary identification, or in other words, super-ego formation, in the relation with the parents brings up a number of complicated issues regarding gender difference, the Oedipus Complex, and Freud's assertion of a fundamental difference between male and female ego formation and super-ego formation in relation to the dynamics of identification and object-choice, castration anxiety, penis envy etc. This is a topic as fraught as it is worthy of discussion, which warrants acknowledgement even if it will not be fully explored here. The reason for this is that this project is primarily concerned with conceptual generality and applicability. To bypass a topic which demands complex differentiation such as this in the name

[50] First introduced by Ferenczi in 1909's "Introjection and Transference," we will return to introjection when we contrast it with projection in our discussion of transference.

of a generalizing interpretation is potentially a glaring omission. However, Freud does not assert that gender difference is an ontological difference which solely defined identification in masculine terms. Ultimately, while feminine super-ego formation cannot be of the same kind as the "identification with the aggressor" experienced by a male under the threat of literal castration, Freud did discuss the feminine "castration complex" and allowed for the possibility of "fear of the loss of love" as an alternative source for super-ego formation not only in girls but even in some boys (although to be clear this would be the exception to the rule). [51]

While one can never truly avoid the question of gender difference in an analysis of identification, for purposes of this study it is necessary to clarify that the type of mimetic identification that Freud is establishing is not an inherently gendered phenomenon. In other words, it is equally applicable to the formation of any ego and super-ego regardless of gender, although the specific features of such a formative process would obviously be subject to all of the particularities and vicissitudes of gendered experience, but this would also be true of any identity category which served to differentiate an individual case, i.e. to use the language of phenomenology, an ontic difference not an ontological difference. While it goes without saying that Freud does not use the language of fundamental ontology, his metapsychology and the concepts which form its fundamental topography and psychodynamics could all be categorized as constitutive structures.

Lest the invocation of fundamental ontology imply that the establishment of a solid ground of identification it is necessary to underline a crucial aspect of the evolution of the concept of identification in Freud's later thought. Despite the substantial reiteration and elaboration of the concept Freud never drastically revised the version of identification that is

[51] See the account of this gendered asterisk on Freud's theory of identification in Bronfenbrenner, Urie, "Freudian Theories of Identification and Their Derivatives" in *Child Development*, Vol. 31, No. 1 (Mar. 1960), pp. 15-40

established between *On Narcissism* and *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*. However, in his latter treatments of the subject such as 1933's *New Introductory Lectures on Psycho-Analysis* do contain a subtle modification which further illustrates the applicability of mimetic masking to this core Freudian process.[52] The basic structure of identification which Freud developed in the 1910s is quite simply "imitation of a model" which would be synonymous with a very classical definition of mimesis. However, in the *New Introductory Lectures* Freud takes pains to clarify that the "model" is not the "immediate image which the parent presents to the child" but actually the parents' own earlier imitation of the model of their own parents ad infinitium. The super-ego is therefore meta-mimetic, the copy of a copy: "the super-ego of the child is not really built on the model of the parents, but on that of the parents' super-ego." (p. 95)

To refine the analysis further, because there is no direct access to someone else's super-ego, the mimetic experience which Freud calls identification is an experience of the performance of the relation between the parent's ego and their ego-ideal, under the effect of their own super-ego, altered by the relationship with the other parent who in turn is performing the relation of their own ego to their ego-ideal subjected to the effect of their own super-ego. Opening this kaleidoscopic compounding complex of triangles within triangles to the broader context of the world beyond the confines of the family home would reveal that the situation is even more complicated still. This matrix of identifications would extend to familial relations beyond parent and child (other children, grandparents, aunts and uncles etc.), not to mention non-familial social relations of all kinds which break open the bourgeois interiority of the "nuclear family" to the vast field of potential models and influences of a globalized society distributed through the

[52] Freud, Sigmund, *New Introductory Lectures on Psycho-Analysis*, 1933

consumption of and participation in the expanse of ever-evolving transmedia networks. Therefore, while the primacy of the Oedipal Triangle remains a central organizational principle for Freudian psychoanalysis, already within the development of the theory of identification the proverbial door was opened to far more complicated webs of mimetic exchange than a simple intergenerational transfer reducible to the copying of a model.

**2. Transference (*Übertragung*)**

What then of transference? Arguably an even more important psychoanalytic concept than identification, the term itself holds obvious mimetic resonance. Recalling the account of the fundamental link between metaphor and mimesis in the Chapter One of this project, the concept of the transference of meaning, of the figurative power of language which allows it to be taken from one context and placed in another, transferred in order to stand in the place of other language, all of this is core to the working understanding of mimesis. The term in Freud's original German text is *Übertragung*, literally to bring or to carry something over. This is even closer to metaphor than the English transference because *Sinnübertragung* is a synonym for *Metapher* in German. *Übertragung* is also related to *Übersetzung* (translation) which, it should go without saying at this point, is inextricable from mimesis.[53] Transference then is a carrying-over. Therefore, the task of this section is to clarify what exactly is carried, where from, and where to?

In contrast to identification, which despite some specialized usage is clearly a more general term, transference has a more determinate place within the lexicon of psychoanalytic theory. First and foremost, this means the specific clinical usage of the term, the fact that when psychoanalysts speak about transference and transferential relationships, they are primarily

[53] All of the debates and problems of translation theory are relevant for mimetics.

referring to phenomena which occurs within analysis and to the analytical situation itself. While the goal with this interpretation is to develop a more general sense of transference it is necessary to account for its origin in clinical practice and the specific technical meaning assigned to it, beginning with a chronology of the development of the term in Freud's writing as well as in the influential work of Hungarian psychoanalyst Sándor Ferenczi.

The first references to transference appear in Freud's early studies on hysteria. His first attempt at defining it occurs in the postscript to the "Fragment of an Analysis of a Case of Hysteria" which concerned the case history of the patient known as "Dora."[54] There, reflecting on Dora's unsuccessful treatment Freud first articulates the paradox of transference as both a resistance to treatment as well as an essential resource for it. In this early work Freud uses the plural "transferences," referring to various separate instances rather than defining the general phenomenon, but the definition largely holds for the later more technical use of the term and consistently relies on metaphors which are of particular relevance for mimetics:

> *…new editions or facsimiles of the impulses and phantasies which are aroused and made conscious during the progress of the analysis… they replace some earlier person by the person of the physician… a whole series of psychological experiences are revived, not as belonging to the past, but as applying to the person of the physician at the present moment. Some of these transferences have a content which differs from that of their model in no respect whatever except for the substitution. These… are merely new impressions or reprints. Others are more ingeniously constructed; their content has been subjected to a moderating influence—to sublimation, as I call it—and they may even become conscious, by cleverly taking advantage of some real peculiarity in the physician's person or circumstances and attaching themselves to that. These, then, will no longer be new impressions, but revised editions.* (p. 116)

Already on the surface of this passage there is a repeated use of the language of printing and fabrication, likening transference to new editions (*Neuauflage*) and facsimiles

[54] Freud, Sigmund, "Fragment of an Analysis of a Case of Hysteria"

(*Nachbildungen*).[55] The image of transferences as a reproduction or transposition from prior associations upon the figure of the physician is most likely a familiar one for any contemporary reader of Freud, as it seems part and parcel of the general logic of projection which has made its way from the original technical Freudian usage into the canon of widely circulated general pop psychology truisms. However, it is important to avoid hastily passing over the reference to the revivification of a psychic series. This aspect of transference, as will be evident in Freud's later treatments of the subject, is the key to differentiating it from projection. Transference is a complicated and ambiguous concept because it is not simply a projection *from* the past preserved as memories in the psyche *to* the figure of another person encountered in the present. It actually involves the insertion of the figure of this other into a psychical series where they take the place of a remembered other. Freud's repeated characterization of transference in terms of series/sequence helps clarify that the phenomenon is not simply an exchange of qualities but involves something like narrativization, or to use a Derridean phrase, the movement of temporalization. These questions of temporality and "direction of fit" (i.e. is transference a form of projection or introjection or both?) will need to be revisited after reviewing some of the further developments of the theory.

Following Freud's discussion of transference in the Dora case, Ferenczi took up the subject in an important essay published in 1909 in the *Jahrbuch der Psychoanalyse* entitled "Introjection and Transference."[56] Seeking to explain number of characteristics associated with neurotics including suggestibility and intense empathy, Ferenczi sees an answer in the model of

[55] This calls to mind Derrida's reading of the "Project for a Scientific Psychology" and "A Note Upon the 'Mystic Writing-Pad'" in "Freud and the Scene of Writing."
[56] Ferenczi, Sandor, "Introjection and Transference" in *First Contributions to Psycho-Analysis,* Trans. Ernest Jones, Routledge, 2018.

hysterical identification: "The well-known impressionability[57]… their capacity to feel in the most intense way for the experiences of others, to put themselves in the place of a third person…" (p. 37) He characterizes transference as a form of displacement, which as Laplanche and Pontalis point out accords with the general approach of thinking through Freudian psychodynamics via literary tropes.[58] The analytic situation, and more specifically the character of the analyst, has a catalytic effect for transference, in part simply due to the fact that the analyst is ready-to-hand to serve as a repository for the displaced associations and impulses which come unstuck from their prior repression through the course of analysis. More than mere proximity though, Ferenczi argues it is no accident that the psychoanalyst functions as a representative of the physician in general, and the association of physicians with anatomy, nudity, desire, shame, repression etc. likely plays a role in this transferential *catalysis*. (p. 41) Even further, beyond such general associations the physician functions as an imago, a "revenant" stand-in for the absent parental figure.[59]

While transference necessarily involves both introjection and projection Ferenczi differentiates the two terms by defining introjection as the opposite of projection and at least initially associating the former with neurotics and the latter with paranoiacs: "Whereas the paranoiac expels from his ego the impulses that have become unpleasant, the neurotic helps himself by taking into the ego as large as possible a part of the outer world, making it the object

[57] While the term "impressionability" is of interest to the recurring metaphorical motifs of this chapter, Ferenczi's original German here was actually *Rührseligkeit* rather than *Beeindruckbarkeit*. While *Rührseligkeit* is perhaps best translated as sentimentality, the associations of *rühren* with moving, and touching bring it somewhere in the vicinity of the many *Druck, Drang*, and *Zwang* derived terms utilized in the psychical printing press.

[58] See the entry on displacement in *The Language of Psychoanalysis* p. 121-122. Jakobson and Lacan both associate displacement (and thus transference according to Ferenczi's categorization) with metonymy contrasted with condensation which Lacan associates with metaphor. A further development of this project would need to more rigorously address this taxonomic association of psychodynamic concepts with literary tropes.

[59] Ferenczi parenthetically credits Freud with this spectral metaphor for the imago but does not give a specific reference, summoning the absent father of psychoanalysis into the text to lend a ghostly hand.

of unconscious phantasies." (p. 47) This all accords with the Freudian concept of identification, where introjection functioned as a containment strategy for unrealized desires and unacceptable external conditions, which could then be mitigated through internalization. Ferenczi describes introjection similarly, as "a kind of diluting process" which attenuates "the poignancy of free-floating, unsatisfied, and unsatisfiable, unconscious wish-impulses." (p. 47) Just as later adult identifications were linked with primary identification and object-choice, Ferenczi argues transference at any point in one's life is a mimetic repetition of an early transference, from the self to the original objects of love and hate and back again: "The first loving and hating is a transference of auto-erotic pleasant and unpleasant feelings on to the objects that evoke those feelings. The first 'object-love' and the first 'object-hate' are, so to speak, the primordial transferences, the roots of every future introjection." (p. 49) This account would seem to assume that "intrinsic" relationality (self-love/self-hate) is ontologically prior to extrinsic relationality (object-love/object-hate) which thus assumes a self prior to any external relations. This assumption can of course be disputed from within psychoanalytic thinking itself without having to bring in any other theoretical weaponry but the parallels between the Freudian account of identification and Ferenczi's account of transference stand.

In the second part of his essay Ferenczi turns to the topic of hypnotism and suggestion. This might seem to come out of nowhere but in fact he has very clear reasons for addressing the subject in the midst of an essay on transference and introjection. It is important to recall the pre-history of psychoanalysis in the context of 19$^{th}$ century medical science. The late 19$^{th}$ century medicalization of hypnosis legitimated the practice (at least allegedly) through its redefinition as the new science of hypnotherapy. This development was profoundly influential on Freud, and while he and his colleagues eventually distanced themselves from hypnotherapy and attempted to

define psychoanalysis as its own distinct clinical practice some commonalities persisted. The question of whether hypnotherapy is just one of the many pseudoscientific practices belonging to the catch-all category of "alternative medicine" or whether it deserves a place within the catalogue of mainstream psychotherapeutic treatment methodologies is beyond the scope of this project and is as fraught if not more so than the same question leveled against psychoanalysis. While having its roots in the kind of esoteric vitalism associated with Franz Mesmer's *Lebensmagnetismus*, by the 1880s, most notably in France, hypnosis had developed into an emergent branch of neurology, centered on the Paris and Nancy schools associated with Charcot and Bernheim respectively.[60] This is the context in which Breuer, and by extension Freud and Ferenczi, would have been introduced to hypnosis as a concept and hypnotherapy as a treatment method, particularly in relation to cases of hysteria.

Hypnosis, unlike psychoanalysis, is a performance art in more than a metaphorical sense: from its inception it has been defined as both a medical practice and a form of mentalist spectacle. Despite the obvious difference of the interiority of the analytic session contrasted with the exhibitionism of the hypnotist's medical magic show, they share a clear commonality in the figure of the doctor and the performance of mastery. And yet, Ferenczi points out, psychoanalysis reveals that while hypnotism does in fact provide a window into the psyche it is not able to do so solely due to the masterful manipulation of the hypnotist who applies their technique to a passive object/patient, but rather the inverse. The patient is not merely a medium brought into an altered state by the hypnotic technique, but rather the hypnotist is the object used by the unconscious of the patient, taken up by them and placed within a past series of memory traces, made to perform a role as a substitute for a prior relation, in other words, transference.

[60] This will not be the last reference to Mesmerism in this project. See the discussion of the 2019 *Watchmen* series in Chapter 4.

While anecdotally hypnotherapy may be correlative with transference, Ferenczi disputes its ability to produce it. Ultimately, he concludes, it is not hypnotic suggestion which makes transference possible, but transference which makes hypnotic suggestion possible, and is based in activating the "deepest roots in the repressed parental complexes." (p. 67)

This inversion of the object relation does not mean that the hypnotist has no active role to play, however. Hypnotic transference is an intentional act. Hypnotism as a practice seeks to activate a transferential relationship with the hypnotized subject, and this requires a theatrical performance. According to Ferenczi, the primary method by which the hypnotist's power and authority is conferred upon them by the patient is through their performance of masculine power, successfully embodying a patriarchal mastery which underwrites and enforces the hypnotic suggestion. Ferenczi also discusses the possibility of maternal transference, i.e. a hypnotherapy defined by a feminine coded comfort and affection rather than a masculine coded disciplinary authority. Ferenczi thus posits a gendered duality of transference. This does not strictly speaking have anything to do with the gender of the hypnotist. However, it is of course worth considering that Ferenczi's discussion of the gendered/parental element is based on the particular cases of hypnotism that he would have been familiar with, either through his own use of the technique or based on the experiences of other hypnotists. Thus, he defaults to the assumption of a male hypnotist/physician and seems to characterize the masculine coded authoritarian paternal transference as primary or normative and the feminine coded gentle/maternal transference as an exception to the rule.

Therefore, it would seem that for Ferenczi the gendered factor in transference is functioning on two levels: at the level of the gender of physician and patient, and at the level of the gender coding of the transference itself. This could be differentiated further, because while Ferenczi

seems to assume the association of masculinity with the father and femininity with the mother, much like he acknowledges that the hypnotist or analyst can occupy either of these positions regardless of their own gender he extends this qualifying remark to the parents themselves. It follows from this that even assuming a binary definition of gender the gendered coding of transference is actually not binary but quaternary: feminine father (FF), feminine mother (FM), masculine father (MF), and masculine mother (MM). In order to further evaluate the relevance of this gendered matrix for the theory of transference it is necessary to clarify to what extent it is an essential constitutive feature of transference and to what extent it is a secondary quality that it only circumstantially possesses.

Firstly, Ferenczi's thoughts about the inherently binary gendered quality of hypnotic performance can be contextualized based on the historical development of the practice in the century since he was writing. Setting aside its merits as a treatment methodology, hypnotherapy like psychoanalysis persists into the 21st century and like many professions through the course of the 20th century is no longer entirely male dominated. From this following conclusions are possible: 1. Ferenczi was mistaken and there was nothing to his gendered analysis of hypnotic performance, 2. He was empirically correct in asserting this at the time, but this was simply a reflection of the patriarchal authority of that historical moment and might not be valid in other contexts, or 3. There is a necessary performance of mastery and confidence, but this is not an exclusively male power. I am inclined to agree with the final option which explains the second option as a case of Ferenczi misrecognizing the historically contingent masculinity of the hypnotist as an essential feature of transferential performance. This also raises questions about phallic power, which psychoanalytic theory does not define as inherently male, and would merit further discussion about the possibility of a non-phallic power capable of catalyzing

transference.[61]

Setting aside the question of transferential sexual difference, the main takeaway from Ferenczi's remarks on hypnosis and suggestion concerns another (albeit not entirely unrelated) binary: fear and love. Not entirely unrelated because he associates the former with the figure of the father and the latter with the figure of the mother. However, keeping in mind that Ferenczi stresses that there should not be too hard a line drawn between mother and father in terms of who embodies each side of this emotional binary, there are grounds in his account for decoupling the fear/love binary from the masculine/feminine and father/mother. This blurring of the line between fear and love suggests a notable difference between Ferenczi and Freud's understanding of the role played by the dialectic of identification and desire in transference.

Recalling that in the earlier account of identification, in *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego,* Freud characterized the difference between identification and desire in terms of "wanting to be" vs "wanting to have." This sets up a parallel structure with identification and introjection on one side opposing object-choice and desire on the other. In its simplest and most culturally conservative form, one that Freud and his contemporaries often seem to default to, identification would then be associated with the parent of the same sex, and desire would be associated with the parent of the opposite sex. Even the most conservative interpretation of this formulation permits variability, which is what allows it to account for homosexuality as well as opposite sex identification (sometimes conflated in early psychoanalysis which has understandably been the target of much subsequent criticism). Does Freud explicitly deny the convergence of identification and desire? At least, according to formulation given in *Group Psychology* this is definitively an either/or. Either you identify or you desire. Ferenczi clearly

[61] This requires an engagement with Lacan and his critics which exceeds the scope of this project.

deviates from that, and regardless of whether this deviation is due to an imprecision on his part, or the fact that this essay was written twelve years earlier than *Group Psychology* and it might be simply explained as an earlier formulation of the concept, it provides an opportunity for thinking about mimetic desire in an altogether different sense than René Girard.

Ferenczi turns to the subject of identification and desire in an attempt to explain the foundation for suggestibility in the parental complexes. He begins by anticipating a logical objection to this assertion, "why should we assume that obedience toward the parent is a natural state for any child," which to anyone who has spent time around particularly unruly children would certainly ring as a ridiculous assumption. He admits it is far more logical to assume that "the demands made by parents on the behavior and conduct of children would be felt to be an external compulsion, and as something unpleasant." (p. 77) But, he argues, this all changes with the shift from auto-eroticism to external object-love. This shift involves both introjection and identification: "The loved objects are introjected, taken into the ego. The child loves his parents, that is to say, he identifies himself with them in thought… Under such circumstances obedience is not unpleasant; the expressions of the all-powerfulness of the father even flatter the boy, who in his fancy embodies in himself all the power of the father, and only obeys himself, so to speak, when he bows to his father's will." What is most striking about this passage is the conflation of desire/pleasure with identification and at the same time with a relation of subservience. Again, Ferenczi is attempting to explain why the transferential evocation of the parental-complex primes the patient to be led by the physician, whether in terms of the literal suggestions of the hypnotist or in the sense of a willingness towards the treatment process in psychoanalysis. While the coincidence of desire/pleasure with subservience is commonplace (and a little further on Ferenczi refers to Freud's analysis of masochism) what is notable is Ferenczi's assertion that

there is also an identification, and in fact that it is this identification that is the source of the pleasure in obedience. The result is something akin to the formulation "I am my Father that commands me." In this sense the adult child who willingly carries forward the demands of their parent does so with pleasure because through introjection they have converted those external demands into an internal demand.

Ferenczi also addresses the opposite phenomenon, rather than having to account for the willingness to submit to the treatment process (whether hypnotherapy or psychoanalytic) what about the cases of unwillingness? This of course refers to another central psychoanalytic concept: resistance. His remarks on the role of resistance in transference primarily concern Freud's interpretation that antipathy and resistance are as much a result of unconscious infantile complexes as the more sympathetic and obedient transferential doctor/patient relations. Freud expands on the significance of resistance in transference significantly in the 1912 essay "The Dynamics of Transference" which is the next major step in the development of the concept.

Building off his own initial discussion of transference in the hysteria studies as well as Ferenczi's work, Freud sets about defining the phenomena of transference as it appears in analysis in order to give an account for why transference occurs in analysis, how it contributes to resistance, and yet how it can also be a tool for overcoming resistance and achieving progress in treatment. Regarding the first point, echoing Ferenczi's account of hypnotic transference, Freud is quick to point out that the presence of transference in analysis is correlative and not causal. Transference is evident in clinical situations outside of analysis; in neurotics who are being treated in a non-psychoanalytic context as well as outside the clinical context as a general feature of human psychology. However, Freud feels that it is necessary to address whether transference takes on a particular intensity within analysis and why it seems to provide the "most powerful

medium of resistance" to psychoanalytic treatment. To the first point, he concludes based on evidence of intense transference occuring in neurotics who are being treated non-analytically that this intensity is a feature of neurosis regardless of treatment methodology. The rest of the essay is primarily concerned with the second point, transference in relation to resistance.

Before turning to the question of resistance, Freud attempts to illustrate the concept of transference itself. In the initial definition he invokes a curious image, of particular interest for the search for mimetic concepts and metaphors in his metapsychology: a "stereotype plate (or several such), which is constantly repeated—constantly reprinted afresh—in the course of the person's life…" (p. 100) Throughout the essay he once again appeals to printmaking imagery, referring to these primary psychic imprints as stereotypes (*die Klischees*), prototypes (*die Vorbilder*), and also employs the concept of the imago (as in Father-Imago, Mother-Imago etc.). This speaks to the ambiguity of transference's "direction of fit," as even in Freud's opening attempt at a simple introduction to the subject it becomes immediately clear that this is not a simple a one-way process. Freud suggests that transference results from an unsatisfied or excess libido which results in a sort of anticipatory state where the ego is primed to form a new libidinal investment. If someone in this unsatisfied anticipatory state begins treatment, it follows that it is likely that they will direct this libidinal investment towards their doctor. Seemingly straightforward and yet, Freud adds, transference is also a matter of a libidinal cathexis to one of the stereotypes within the subject, meaning that it amounts to an insertion (*einfügen*) of the doctor into "one of the psychical 'series' which the patient has already formed." It is necessary to clarify the order of these psychical operations.

Firstly, there is the precondition for transference which is a lack of satisfaction in the patient. This leads to the encounter with the doctor in the analytic situation, the beginning of the

analyst/analysand relationship. This relationship gives rise to an unconscious recognition whereby the analyst is associated with one of the patient's primary imagos, most likely a relative or another significant person from the patient's past. Finally, the transference itself; occuring entirely within the psyche of the patient but seemingly possessing the "from inside to outside" movement of projection while simultaneously being an introjection (the analyst is inserted within a preformed psychical series). So, which one is it? It is important here to remember that projection is only a movement from out of the subject into/upon the world in a metaphorical sense. It is a change in the appearance of the other for the subject, which imposes/mixes/alters some elements of this appearance. This can certainly lead to modifications of disposition and behavior which have social and material consequences, but projection itself is a wholly psychic phenomenon. Is the same true with introjection?[62] In the case of transference, in contrast to identification, this is not a matter of the introjection of an object (i.e. the analyst) into the ego, but a mimetic bonding of the image of the object with a primary imago. This is the sense in which Freud describes transference in terms of introversion or regression, the insertion of the analyst into a pre-formed psychical series thus refers to the patient's way of experiencing their relationship with the analyst through the lens of a prior relationship. Freud emphasizes here that transference is *not* a libidinal investment in the analyst, as this would imply a connection to external reality.[63] To say that transference is a form of introversion means that it is a withdrawal of the libido from external reality akin to that of secondary narcissism but in this case the

[62] This once again touches on one of the core dialectical metaphors of psychoanalysis: inside and outside. What exactly constitutes an exteriority which is capable of interiorization?

[63] This is complicated by the further development of the theory in "Observations on Transference-Love," first published three years later in 1915 and then revised and retitled in 1924.

withdrawn libido is invested into "imaginary intrapsychic formations."[64]

The question remains, based on this account of transference, why does Freud claim that it constitutes such a formidable medium of resistance in analysis? Freud explains this using the logic of the defense mechanism. Given that transference involves introversion (withdrawal of the libido into the unconscious) and constitutes a regression (investment into infantile imagos) the patient's resistance to treatment can be understood as a protective response. This introversion and regression does not occur randomly, it is the result of a combination of different unconscious forces and as well as a response to any number of past or current situations in the patient's life. Thus, the resistance is motivated by this same combination of forces. It seeks to protect "the new state of things," which means that the goals of analysis are opposed to it. Transference serves the purposes of this resistance, insofar as the transferal of elements of an unconscious complex upon the figure of the analyst can lead to a stoppage of associations, or even more simply, the transferential associations with the analyst can obfuscate other associations which the resistance would rather remain repressed. In this sense transference can function in a similar way to the distortions of the dream-work, or the censorship and fabrication of memories which Freud calls screen-memories (*Deckerinnerung*). This gets to the point of the apparent contradiction presented by transference, that it is simultaneously the greatest obstacle in the way of successful treatment and also one of its most powerful tools. Our preceding discussion of resistance explains the former, while the latter comes down to the fact that fully unconscious processes cannot actually be directly dealt with in treatment. It is only insofar as transference makes manifest such unconscious complexes and impulses that they can be articulated and named as

[64] *The Language of Psychoanalysis*, p. 231 This is a point of differentiation between Freud and Jung. While Freud credits Jung for coining the term, he also criticizes him for using too loose of a definition of introversion and reducing all psychosis to a form of introversion. See "The Dynamics of Transference" p. 102n1.

such and from this that the patient can come to an understanding of the sources of their neurosis and recovery becomes possible.

The development of transference from the early studies on hysteria through Ferenczi's analysis of its role in hypnotic suggestion and Freud's further inquiry into its dynamics and its connection to resistance provides the basis to concludes that transference is a fundamental component of mimetic sociality. This amounts to generalizing transference from its clinical usage to an essential dynamic at the root of sociality. Ferenczi expresses this in terms of the unconscious sexual basis of social relations: "*Everything points to the conclusion that an unconscious sexual element is at the basis of every sympathetic emotion*, and that when two people meet, whether of the same or the opposite sex, the unconscious always makes an effort towards transference." (p. 65) Combined with Ferenczi's remarks on transference as mask ("It turns out here also that the physician has served as a 'cover-person' for the indulgence of affects, mostly of a sexual nature, which really refer to other personalities much more significant to the patient") this expanded sociological sense of transference suggests the masked mimetic proxy as a basic feature of social reality, both within and beyond the clinical context. Ferenczi sees this as a precondition for the formation of positive social bonds, "whether it is in a pure sexual (erotic) or in a sublimated form (respect, gratitude, friendship, aesthetic admiration, etc.) a bond of 'sympathy' is formed between the two persons," but also, as a way of accounting for hostility: "When consciousness refuses to accept the positive unconscious desire, then we get, according to the degree of intensity in each case, antipathy of various degrees up to loathing." (p. 62) Both the successful and the failed formation of such bonds would constitute mimetic acts; whether positive or negative there is a construction of a figure who performs the function that the unconscious requires.

With this in mind, expanding the category of transference beyond the analyst-analysand relation in the clinical context leads to something far more subtle than a pop-psychology theory of projection, where amiable social relations are imbued with positive associations and hostile associations become the repositories for the negative emotions. Quite the contrary, Freud and Ferenczi show that rather than there being some predictable natural balance between positive and negative, quite frequently transference involves the conversion or transmutation of love into hate and vice versa, and this actually provides far more meaningful insight into the transferential dynamics of the social performance of the self: “The fact that every sort of humanitarian or reform movement, the propaganda of abstinence (vegetarianism, anti-alcoholism, abolitionism), revolutionary organizations and sects, conspiracies for or against the religious, political, or moral order, teem with neuropaths is similarly to be explained by the transference of interest from censored egoistic (erotic or violent) tendencies of the unconscious on to fields where they can work themselves out without any self-reproach.” (Ferenczi pp. 37-38) Having outlined both the development of the technical clinical definition of transference and considered some of its broader social-psychological implications the time has come to turn to the final crypto-mimetic psychoanalytic concept, perhaps the one which is closest to the traditional understanding of mimesis, repetition.

### 3. Repetition (*Wiederholung)*

As was the case with identification and transference, the concept of repetition in psychoanalysis has both a narrow technical definition as well as a more general sense, but this is an even wider gulf between the technical and the general as the concept of repetition is itself far more common than either of the prior terms. Both senses of repetition are relevant to mimesis, so it is necessary to begin by distinguishing them. Compared to identification and transference, the

technical sense of repetition seems to have the least explicit treatment in Freud's corpus. The most sustained treatment of the topic is found in formulation of the repetition compulsion, the essay which was already referenced at the beginning of this chapter, "Remembering, Repeating, and Working-Through." Repetition also plays a role in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* and is important for the formulation of the death-drive. Despite these notable appearances, the repetition compulsion is undoubtedly less ubiquitous in Freud's writing than either of the other crypto-mimetic concepts. By contrast, the general concept of repetition is so inescapable that there are likely some references to it (or at the very least a synonym) in every single one of Freud's works. While the technical definition of the "Repetition Compulsion" (*Wiederholungszwang*) is of particular interest for the theory of mimetic action, the compulsion's relation to the general meaning of repetition seems paradoxical in the sense that it is defined in opposition to remembrance.

On its face this may not seem that strange, but given that memory for Freud, whether voluntary or involuntary, is definitively a form of recollection/recall and clearly belongs to the general category of psychical repetition in some sense, the non-remembrance of the repetition compulsion appears somewhat ambiguous. However, upon further analysis it is not actually a hard contradiction. The apparent conflict can be resolved by framing both the repetition compulsion/acting-out and remembering as different forms of the same general category of psychical repetition. This more general concept of repetition is aided by the Ricoeurian temporalization of mimesis and its blurring of the lines between composition, performance, and reception. While mimesis as the ever-expanding master concept of this project is always teetering on the edge of falling into shallow overgeneralization, this tendency is justified in this case because the subsumption of both the acting-out of the repetition compulsion and the

repetitive character of recollection under the general concept of psychical repetition provides a distance from which articulation/expression/enactment and figuration/structuration/re-configuration can all be interpreted as different forms of the same phenomenon. For mimetics, as for Freud, all of the above can be seen as forms of repetition. [65]

The task of working through the convergence and divergence of mimetic repetition and its psychoanalytic usage necessarily begins with Freud's definition of the repetition-compulsion. This will help to clarify how the technical term "acting-out" differs from either the everyday or theatrical sense of action which have been a consistent point of reference throughout the project thus far. The direct causal link is that the compulsion to repeat manifests in acting-out. This means that while purely psychical activity can be interpreted as action in Ricoeur's expansion of Aristotelian mimesis, as well as belonging to the general category of repetition, the specific type of repetition that Freud defines as compulsive has an inherently external and observable quality. This is another example where reference to the German text can be a useful guide. Freud's term is *agieren*, but as this is a word with a Latin root, and it also happens to be the root of the English term that the German is typically translated with, it is necessary compare its typical usage against the other German words for act/action in order to limit the extent to which the shared etymology overdetermines our interpretation. While *agieren* does indeed mean to act it is most closely related to acting in the dramatic sense and is thus associated with *spielen.* While it can be used to describe any sort of action it is far more common to see variations of *handeln, machen, tun,*

[65] There is an unavoidable circularity for this project's account of repetition in psychoanalysis. The problem lies in the fact that the mimetic concept of repetition is based on a reading of Ricoeur's hermeneutics of mimesis and Derrida's account of iterability, both of which are undeniably indebted to the Freudian concept of repetition. This cannot be resolved within the current inquiry beyond acknowledging this circularity and hoping that it can be productive rather than vicious. Any further exploration of either mimesis or repetition that wanted to escape this interpretive loop would need to appeal to a non-Freudian theory of repetition. That said, the only one which immediately comes to mind would be Deleuzian (see *Difference and Repetition*), although Deleuze's repetition is Nietzschean which brings us back to Freud's own debt to Nietzsche and the Nietzschean shadow which hangs over any philosophical reading of Freud.

*wirken,* or the more direct cognate *Akt/Aktion* when discussing a general theory of action, a deed/doing, an activity/process etc. *Agieren*/Acting-out then would seem to have an explicitly performative dimension for Freud, and this is evident in its everyday non-psychoanalytic usage where it is used to characterize behavior, i.e. when someone is "acting in a certain way." While there is no "*aus*" in the German term, the addition of "out" to the English is actually helpful for clarifying that this is not referring to action in general. Acting-out conveys simultaneously "acting out a scene" but also can signify acting "out of character."

While nothing prevents the transposition of the concept beyond the clinical setting as a social psychological category by which could contribute to an analysis of performative identity, this is strictly speaking a departure from the limited usage that Freud assigns it when discussing the repetition-compulsion. That is to say, generalizing acting-out and applying it indiscriminately to all social interactions, risks depreciating the clinical efficacy of the concept. The reason why it is a useful clinical concept is that it is meaningfully distinct from general behavior, it is a pathological manifestation of a compulsion. While mimetics seeks to generalize masked performance as a social-psychological heuristic, and undeniably draws on Freud's concept in doing so, it is important to resist distorting the technical term. That said, beginning with the reading of Ricoeur's hermeneutics of mimesis the categories of inside/outside, physical/mental, and even autonomous/autonomic, have been fundamentally destabilized, which disrupts the foundation upon which different kinds of acts would have been classically categorized.[66]

Freud's basic clinical observation which gives rise to the theorization of a repetition-compulsion in "Remember, Repeating, Working-Through" is that in the course of treatment when resistance blocks remembrance, Freud found that patients will act-out and repeat attitudes

[66] To what extent this disruption is itself already Freudian and to what extent it is Heideggerian is the perhaps the central unresolved question for my reading of Ricoeur, and perhaps Post-War French thought in general.

and behaviors related to the repressed memories. It is not strictly speaking an acting-out of the memory as such, but rather "everything which has made its way from the sources of the repressed into [the] manifest personality." It can be viewed as a kind of transferential regression. Although notably, rather than defining repetition in terms of transference, Freud actually says that transference itself can best be understood as a repetition. Perhaps this means that the attempt to maintain the distinction between a clinical definition of repetition/acting-out and a more general one is eroding as soon as it has been proposed. If transference is a form of repetition, so to identification. This leads back to the questions which opened this chapter and the initial reasons which motivated the turn from Marx to Freud.

Mimetics needs to be able to encompass both unconscious and conscious repetitions in order to make sense of the coexistence and even simultaneity of repetition and remembrance which on its face seems denied by Freud's account. An intentional act of repetition, a voluntary recollection, the willful donning of the mask of the other to perform some sense of the self, these brief flashes of conscious mimesis are like tiny rafts adrift in an unfathomable ocean of mimetic forces perpetually crashing against each other regardless of the presence or absence of awareness or will. However, these brief flashes do not amount to nothing, in fact for the arts, the humanities, for social theory and cultural study in general, they are everything. These identifiable entities, whether individual, collective, or purely conceptual, can be called masks insofar as they form an identity capable of interpretation. However, the conditions of possibility for the appearance *and* apprehension of any mask cannot themselves be considered fully recognizable and interpretable through phenomenological hermeneutics. The encounter with Freud thus leaves mimetics with an aporia, which while not a problem unique to this project in particular does

force the acknowledgement that mimetics undeniably remains within the theoretical impasse which befalls any attempt to fuse the horizons of phenomenology and psychoanalysis.

**The Limits of Psychoanalytic Mimetics**

Having reached the end of this account of mimesis in Freudian psychoanalysis it is necessary to explicitly acknowledge some of the limits of the present study as well as indicate the logic behind the transition between this engagement with psychoanalysis and the turn to comic book media in the subsequent chapter. This serves the double purpose of indicating some further directions for this inquiry which cannot be given a proper account in either these brief closing comments or in the fourth and final chapter of this work. This philosophical reading of Freud asserted the interpretive guideline that any comprehension of Freud's work needed to interpret the metapsychology and psychodynamic technical vocabulary in terms of the clinical context and the specificity of the analyst-analysand dyad and the Oedipal triad, and yet, at the same time, Freud's own work points beyond this context to broader social-cultural implications. This is true not only of the more obvious anthropological/cultural works like *Civilizations and its Discontents* or *Totem and Taboo* but even the most seemingly narrow clinical Freudian texts invariably draw themselves out beyond the walls of the clinic and the family home. That said, while acknowledging the presence of theoretical expansions which could easily be assumed to be post-Freudian within Freud's original texts themselves, there are equal resources to support a more narrowly defined clinical reading of Freud that resists the expansion of psychoanalysis to literary and critical social theory. While this interpretation has made the case that Freud's work cannot be reduced to a theory of the individual subject in a classical philosophical sense, whatever theoretical expansions that have been drawn out from it have ultimately still been

bound to a phenomenological account of social-relationality as intersubjectivity.[67]

From the onset of this project one of its stated goals was to articulate an account of mimesis which broke away from the individualistic epistemological conception of representation. One of the primary ways that mimetics has attempted to distance itself from epistemological representationalism is contesting the confinement of mimesis to the activity and psychical content of an individual subject. The basic gesture has been to draw mimesis out from the mere content of a consciousness into the multiplicity of social relations. While this aspect of the argument is not without merit, the close reading of Freudian psychoanalysis in this chapter has brought the limitations of this gesture to the surface. The critique of an abstract individualistic definition of mimesis via the appeal to a non-individualistic social-relationality has fallen into the trap of confusing a quantitative difference for a qualitative one. In other words, the problems with the epistemological translation of classical mimesis are not solved by adding another subject and producing a dialogical relation nor by multiplying the subject into a vague notion of an intersubjective social-relational network. In order to articulate a mimetics which would be less oblivious to its adherence to the metaphysics of presence, it is necessary to shift from the characterization of masked mimesis as forms of intersubjectivity to an account of mimetic operations as intertextuality.

[67]The same cannot be said of Lacan's interpretation of identification and the formation of the ego. Whether an engagement with Lacanian psychoanalysis would yield a productive expansion, a problematic complication, or an unnecessary digression for mimetics remains unexplored but the obvious direction for further development of the psychoanalytic dimension of this project would be the Lacanian mirror-stage. A necessary first step would be a mimetic account of Lacan's 1949 lecture, "The Mirror Stage as Formative of the Function of the I," alongside a reading of the social-political expansion of this theory in Althusser's "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses" in order to stage a comparison between the heterodox Freudo-Marxism of this project with the Lacanian-Althusserian reading. While there have been some references to Derrida in this chapter as well as the prior reading of Marx, a more rigorous working through of the conflict between deconstruction and hermeneutics would need to include an account of the differences between Derrida and Lacan's readings of Freud.

The final chapter of this work explores this shift from intersubjectivity to intertextuality (or rather, following Genette's modification, what I will come to call transtextuality) by moving from 19th and 20th century critical theory to an engagement with pop culture, specifically comic book media, in order to highlight hypermimetic elements at the level of content, form, and metatextual reception history. The text(s) in question is/are *Watchmen*; primarily the 1986 graphic novel but also including interpretations of the 2009 film adaptation and the 2019 television series of the same name. This project culminates in a reading of *Watchmen* because (both individually and in their relation to each other) they enact all of the major themes which have been discussed up to this point both literally and figuratively. The heightened reality of superhero comic media in general, and the disturbing tragicomic satire of Alan Moore's alternate history of the 20th century in particular, provides a rich text for an analysis of the mimetic mask of identification. This is amplified exponentially by the fact that not only do both texts treat this theme explicitly, but the television series posits itself in an explicitly mimetic metatextual relationship to its predecessor. It will thus provide ample opportunity to analyze two distinct forms of this phenomenon: through the analysis of the characters and themes of the narratives, a kind of tragic mimesis, the mask of fate, repetition as destiny, necessity, inevitability, and powerlessness, and at the same time, on the metatextual level, perhaps something more productive, spontaneous, bound yet not pre-ordained, the radical potential of the reiterative interpretive act.

# Chapter 4

## Masks on Masks

The more technology develops the diffusion of information (and notably of images), the more it provides the means of masking the constructed meaning under the appearance of the given meaning.[68]

We in this country, in this generation, are—by destiny rather than choice—the watchmen on the walls of world freedom… For as was written long ago: 'except the Lord keep the city, the watchman waketh but in vain.[69]

We do not do this thing because it is permitted. We do it because we have to. We do it because we are compelled.[70]

### I. Masks of Literature

I feel compelled to open this closing chapter by addressing my interpretive object-choice, to pose and answer the following questions: why comics? why superhero comics? and why *Watchmen*? This decision—to extend the theoretical analysis of the preceding chapters through this application of mimetics and the figure of the mask to this medium, its most popular genre, and this particular work which stands as both a culmination and a deconstruction of its medium and genre—is not arbitrary. Nor is it *necessary*, by which I mean necessarily the only possible evolution of the elaboration of mimetics which preceded it. However, this medium and genre are particularly well-suited to mimetic analysis and the figure of the mask, and this exemplary suitability is both amplified and complicated exponentially by *Watchmen*. From the opening chapter of this work, where the hermeneutics of classical poetics positioned the figure of the mask as *the* meta-metaphor, through its metonymic appearance in the subsequent readings of

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[68] Barthes, Roland. "Rhetoric of the Image" in *Image Music Text*, Trans. Stephen Heath, Hill and Wang, 1977, p. 159-160

[69] Kennedy, John F., "Remarks Prepared for Delivery at the Trade Mart in Dallas, TX, November 22, 1963 [Undelivered]" JFK Library, https://www.jfklibrary.org/archives/other-resources/john-f-kennedy-speeches. Kennedy is quoting Psalm 127.

[70] Moore, Alan and David Gibbons. *Watchmen*. DC Comics. 2014. p. 193.

Marx and Freud, where it was transformed into the costumes and props necessary for the performative acts which produce identifications (whether political or egoistic), the mask has persisted as the recurring mimetic trope, as a metaphor for mimesis itself. With all this in mind, I seek now to demonstrate that just as the figure of the mask appears to be the trope par excellence of mimesis, identity, and identification, that it is also *the* iconic figure for the comic book medium and the superhero subgenre in general, and for *Watchmen* in particular.

This consideration of medium and genre raises the question of this chapter's genres. The prior chapters have largely been written from within the disciplinary framework of comparative literature and philosophical aesthetics, and in a sense this final chapter is no different, but it also marks an attempt to incorporate comics studies as well as a more generalized cultural/media studies approach. It is worth considering what this step beyond literary theory and philosophical aesthetics entails. I believe it is necessary to directly address what might seem to be a minor disciplinary technicality because it should not be simply taken for granted that *Watchmen (*whether the 1986 comic book, the 2009 film or the 2019 television series) can be read as a work of literature. Many of the academic studies of *Watchmen* open up with a consideration or a justification of its designation as a work of literary art.[71] For the purposes of this project, the answer to the question of whether *Watchmen* is literature is essentially, "Yes, but not only that."[72] While Moore's idiosyncratic version of literary modernism invites a reading steeped in

[71] See Van Ness, Hoberek, and Di Liddo. Sara J. Van Ness's *Watchmen as Literature: A Critical Study of the Graphic Novel* is primarily framed as a literary analysis but obviously also pays attention to the interplay of word and image. It could be seen as an attempt to account for and incorporate the graphic novel within the canon of traditional literary studies. Rather than arguing the merits of including *Watchmen* within the literary canon, Hoberek's study aims to use *Watchmen* to critically examine the boundaries of literary as such. Annalisa Di Liddo's *Alan Moore: Comics as Performance, Fiction as Scalpel* is written in a similar spirit to Van Ness but covers more of Moore's oeuvre beyond *Watchmen* and attempts to identify the essential elements of Moore's style and thematic preoccupations. My reading is indebted to her application of Genette's transtextuality to *Watchmen* which I take up and expand into one of the primary frameworks for my reading. See Di Liddo p. 61 and section II of this chapter.

[72] This disciplinary question belongs to one of the core problematics of this project which cannot be neatly resolved into a higher dialectical synthesis. There is a fundamental contradiction between the obligation to respect

literary theory, this alone cannot provide a comprehensive approach to analyzing the text for the simple reason that *Watchmen* is not a novel by the author Alan Moore; it is a series of individual comics created through the collaboration of the writer Alan Moore and the artist Dave Gibbons, collected and bound as a trade paperback and marketed as a graphic novel. *Watchmen* is twelve comics hidden beneath the mask of a novel, and at the same time this collection of issues possesses the overarching narrative, structure, and conceptual/stylistic unity to satisfy all of the formal criteria which traditionally serve to elevate the novel to the status of a standalone work of literary art. This textual hybridity demands a reading which equally draws upon the specific critical vocabulary of comics studies as well as the terms of classical poetics, philosophical/literary hermeneutics, and critical social theory that have been employed in the previous chapters.

While the analysis of the 2009 film adaptation and 2019 television limited series sequel in the final sections of this chapter will necessarily move away from the medium of comics, I want to underline that this transposition of media should not be taken for granted nor meant to imply that the media are interchangeable. On the contrary, this move is juxtaposed with the explication of the specificity of the comic book medium and thus provides an opportunity to critically evaluate Moore's insistence on the unfilmability and unadaptability of his work. This explicit thematization of adaptation is not simply a matter of comparative criticism (evaluating the relative merits of derivative works in relation to their source text), but also a continuation of

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the specificity of media and disciplines and push back against the tendency to collapse distinctions and dissolve heterogenous discourses into a universalizing homogeneity, and the equally forceful drive towards continual expansion of the applicability and relevance of mimetics and the figure of the mask. While this may be a problem without resolution, it still demands acknowledgement. One of the echoes of deconstruction which most deeply haunts my work is precisely the recognition of this conceptual double-bind: the simultaneous push towards the erosion of borders and disputation of sovereign boundaries which also interrupts all attempts to concatenate, amalgamate, and distill.

this project's recurring attempt to recontextualize the concepts of poetics and textual hermeneutics in broader social-political phenomena. As this project concludes with the application of mimetics to comic book media, this once again prompts the invocation of a ghostly apparition: this time in the form of the post-modern spectre of adaptation/appropriation as an unavoidable mimetic modality of late capitalism.

The foregrounding of adaptation/adaptability is also yet another branch in the ongoing expansion of mimetics and could be utilized as an approach to analyzing many different forms of intertextuality. This is all the more relevant for a reading of *Watchmen* in particular, and Moore's work in general, because of the tension between Moore's ideology of the autonomy of the artist with his own practice of appropriation and revision. Thus, our reading will also give an account of generic revisionism and reiterative appropriation in Moore's work, considering some examples of superhero revisionism in his pre-*Watchmen* comics, and the genesis of the idea for the *Watchmen* project as a paradigmatic case of appropriation and detournement.[73] This quintessentially mimetic artistic practice thus stands in obvious conflict to Moore's vocal objections to the appropriation and exploitation of his intellectual property by DC Comics and will be analyzed against the backdrop of the material history of the medium as an industrial commodity.

The threads which intertwine to produce the core mimetics of *Watchmen* thus seem to be revisionism and intertextuality. However, I have come to think it is more apt to substitute Kristeva's term with Gérard Gennette's broader category of transtextuality because his typology of different forms of transtextuality provides a crucial lens for analyzing the complex operations

[73] The "original" cast of characters in *Watchmen* are all masked appropriations/amalgamations of pre-existing comic book characters. The initial plan for the comic involved the free use of characters from the Charlton Comics roster, an independent comic book company which had been purchased by DC Comics. See Section IV for a more detailed discussion on the revisionist use of Charlton Comics IP in the creation of *Watchmen*.

at play in *Watchmen* in ways that cannot be differentiated sufficiently through the concept of intertextuality alone. The term intertextuality has come to be used in a much looser and more general sense than in Kristeva's original usage, so in order to avoid this imprecision I will adopt Gennette's terminology. My appropriation of Genette's formal categorization thus violates his explicit rejection of any assimilation of transtextual poetics to textual hermeneutics in *Palimpsests*.[74] Recalling the decision in the first chapter of this work to side with Ricoeur's hermeneutic radicalization of Aristotelian *mimesis* rather than Genette's reduction of *mimesis* to a form of *diegesis,* I thus seem to be doubly transgressing against him. However, I believe that this is justified for the purposes of this project, and furthermore, despite Genette's explicit disavowal of hermeneutics and subsumption of mimesis to diegesis, each of the transtextual levels undeniably function mimetically. Furthermore, the deployment of the neologisms *mimetism* and *mimotext* for the analysis of hypertextuality in *Palimpsests* provides further evidence to suggest that despite the explicit disjunction between these two poetics, at least in this one respect, Genette and Ricoeur's thinking might be closer in spirit than letter. Alternatively, it seems just as likely that despite grounding this project in a reading of Paul Ricoeur and

[74] Genette's disavowal (or perhaps, renewal of his vow against) hermeneutics comes up in the consideration of a universal hypertextuality: "What of hypertextuality? It too is obviously to some degree a universal feature of literarity: there is no literary work that does not evoke (to some extent and according to how it is read) some other literary work, and in that sense all works are hypertextual… The less massive and explicit the hypertextuality of a given work, the more does its analysis depend on constitutive judgement: that is, on the reader's interpretive decision. I could decide that Rousseau's Confessions is an up-to-date remake of the Confessions of Saint Augustine and that its title is the contractual index thereof, after which there will be no dearth of confirming details—a simple matter of critical ingenuity. I can also trace in just about any work the local, fugitive, and partial echoes of any other work, be it anterior or ulterior. The effect of such an attitude would be to subsume the whole of universal literature under the field of hypertextuality, which would make the study of it somewhat unmanageable; but above all, this attitude would invest the hermeneutic activity of the reader—or archireader—with an authority and a significance that I cannot sanction. Having long been at odds with textual hermeneutics—and quite happily so—I do not intend at this late stage to embrace hypertextual hermeneutics. I view the relationship between the text and its reader as one that is more socialized, more openly contractual, and pertaining to a conscious and organized pragmatics." Genette, Gérard, *Palimpsests: literature in the second degree,* Trans. Channa Newman and Claude Doubinsky, University of Nebraska Press, 1997, p. 9

employing the language of hermeneutic phenomenology frequently throughout all of the chapters up to this point, that my own thought has departed in significant ways from the well-trod path that Genette was disavowing. Mimetics, as a theory of interpretation, is a textual hermeneutics, but having passed through Ricoeur, Marx, and Freud it is clear that it does not belong within the bounds of any theory of interpretation defined by intersubjectivity. This chapter thus aims to articulate this shift from intersubjectivity to transtextuality through the analysis of two primary texts: a comic book and a television series which both bear the name *Watchmen*.

This chapter is structured into twelve subsections. The first five sections attempt to answer the opening set of rhetorical questions (Why comics? Why superhero comics? Why *Watchmen*?) by laying out the theoretical concepts which inform the readings of the three *Watchmen* (the comic, the film, and the television series) in the back half of the chapter: the poetics of comics, meta-historiography, revisionism, and transtextuality. The theoretical subsections are bookended by Scott McCloud's 1993 study, *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art* which furnishes this reading with a medium specific set of critical vocabulary (Section II) as well as serving as a bridge to the close reading of *Watchmen* and comparative reading of its transmedia adaptations (Section VI). McCloud provided comics studies with something like a structuralist poetics which is necessary for analyzing what Moore refers to as the "under-language" of comics.[75] For Moore, this term attempts to express the core element of his collaborative work with artists like Gibbons that renders it "unfilmable." Analyzing this source of unfilmability will thus provide some criteria for evaluating Zach Snyder's critically and commercially middling 2009 film adaptation in section X, before transitioning to the

[75] This concept, coined by Moore in an interview, refers to the way in which image, text, space, and time are figured, configured, and reconfigured in the comic book medium and in *Watchmen* specifically. This will be contextualized and explained in more detail below.

analysis of the 2019 television series (an appropriation of the world of the original comic which showrunner and head writer Damon Lindelof characterized as an "unscrupulous defiling").[76] Genette's transtextual poetics will thus come to play in both the textual analysis of *Watchmen*'s under-language as well as the metatextual analysis of its reception history. *Watchmen* is a particularly apt candidate for Genette's transtextual analysis because it includes all of the different transtextual types in myriad ways and at multiple levels.

Sections III and IV make the case for characterizing *Watchmen* as a work of meta-historiographic revisionism and seek to differentiate and articulate the multiple senses of history and revisionism at play in the book and its adaptations. Section V outlines the various forms defined by Genette's transtextual schema and illustrates how *Watchmen* performs each of them. A structural analysis of the comic's textual operations helps to develop the concept of mimetic masking into a more refined tool for the interpretation of transtextual performances. Genette's formalization of these various textualities also enables the comparative criticism of *Watchmen*'s cinematic and televisual adaptations in the final sections of this chapter, which consider each adaptation's performance of fidelity and infidelity to their hypotext and attempts to account for which aspects of the hypotext's mimetics are missing from each (as well as the ways that the filmic and televisual hypertexts each produce their own medium specific mimetisms). The significance of the 2019 *Watchmen*'s mimetic "remediation as remix," for this project as a whole lies in the adaptation's attempt to produce a revisionist reparation which does justice to its source material but also brings it to justice. By highlighting the comic's blind spots around race and making explicit what lay implicit in its politics, the series' deliberate centering of what was

[76] Because all three works are simply titled *Watchmen*, I will occasionally adopt the following nomenclature to help differentiate them: *Watchmen* or *Watchmen* (1986) for the comic, *Watchmen* (2009) for the film, and *Watchmen* (2019) for the limited series.

previously marginalized performs far more than simply updating *Watchmen* to better conform to contemporary cultural attitudes, it actively reorients and retroactively transforms the significance of its source material while simultaneously seeking to critique and transcend it. The chapter's concluding reflections address whether this reparative remediation's success constitutes fidelity or betrayal to its hypotext and consider the broader implications of this comparative reading for the attempt to rethink mimesis through the figure of the mask.

**II. The Poetics of Comics**

The origin story of comic books is a matter of some historiographical debate and is largely dependent on how one defines comics.[77] The academic study of comics on the other hand has a more identifiable and recent genealogy. Will Eisner's 1985, *Comics & Sequential Art*, considered one of the foundational works of comics studies as a distinct field of inquiry, provides comics scholarship with a technical definition of comics as "the sequential art." This definition is what Scott McCloud attempts to complicate and refine in the opening chapter of his equally foundational 1993 book, *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art*. The sequential element, while obviously not solely belonging to the medium of comics, is undeniably a defining feature, and one that clearly delineates the multi-panel comic form from the single panel cartoon. According to this formal definition, while comic strips or animated films can be classified as cartoons it would be strictly speaking a misnomer to do so. However, there is another sense of the word cartoon that has less to do with form/sequence and more to do with style. Understood in

[77] A comprehensive and cross-cultural history of textual-visual art forms is obviously far beyond the scope of this project. McCloud addresses some of the historical precursors to modern comics, and at times seems to suggest that the term comics can be used transhistorically as a universal signifier, a gesture which I am extremely resistant to for a number of methodological, historiographical, and philosophical reasons. The term "graphic novel" has its own history, and since the 1980s has served as a marketing term which often serves to elevate the comic book from its lowly origins. As a technical term, it applies to non-serial works, but it is used interchangeably to refer to both singular publications and for collections of previously serialized texts. I favor the term comics and use it in place of graphic novel for a variety of reasons. See Di Liddo's survey over the terminological debate in *Alan Moore*: *Comics as Performance, Fiction as Scalpel*, pp. 15-21.

this sense, the term cartoon refers to a type of deliberate abstraction, a simplified and/or exaggerated non-realistic style of representation. McCloud argues that for comics, cartooning ought to be understood as a technique which can be employed to produce "amplification through simplification" (p. 30).[78] I will return to this concept later on in relation to the "masking effect."

Eisner and McCloud are certainly not the first writers to address the relation between text and image, but they may have been the first comic book creators to try their hand at producing academic scholarship on the subject from the perspective of practitioners of the medium itself. Both of these works are hybrid constructions, performing the analytical/didactic role of academic theory but also functioning as comics in their own right to some extent. Eisner's work is more of a hybrid between an academic textbook that provides illustrations and examples of comic book panels alongside explanatory captions and longer purely textual passages, whereas McCloud's work functions fully as a comic book. Before I turn to the specific elements of McCloud's theorization of the medium that will be utilized in my reading of *Watchmen*, I want to highlight a comics studies precursor more obviously relevant to literary theory whose work provides some fundamental tools for analyzing the unique textual operations of sequential graphic art. I am speaking of Roland Barthes, and more specifically of his 1964 essay, "Rhetoric of the Image." While not solely dedicated to the topic of comics (they are mentioned a few times), this essay helps frame a structuralist account of the unique medium specific play of text and image that Moore will call its "under-language."

Barthes opens this essay with a consideration of the fundamental problem for any semiotics which wishes to apply structuralist linguistics to the study of images: if images are

[78] This concept has a long history in the aforementioned pre-history of comics and merits further elaboration within a broader semiotic context which would include the history of a variety of iconographic forms including emblems/heraldry, flags, monuments/memorials, murals, stained glass, calligraphy, illuminated manuscripts, etc.

purely analogical (aka mimetic in the classical sense of imitative reproduction), doesn't this mean that they can at best be defined as aggregations of symbols, but cannot be truly said to possess a system of signs? In other words, from the linguistic perspective, the image cannot be said to have a language. Images are traditionally characterized as sub-linguistic in this sense, or conversely, as representing something transcendent, ineffable, beyond language. This is the antinomy which Barthes sets his sights on in this essay, and precisely on this relation between discourse and figure, he seeks to produce a "spectral analysis" of the connection between image and signification. While this addresses the question of the "language" of a purely wordless image, what is more pertinent for the purposes of comic book interpretation is his analysis of the juxtaposition of image and text. What exactly is happening in a text when an illustration is provided as a supplement or inversely when an image is accompanied by a caption, Barthes asks, "what is the signifying structure of 'illustration'? Does the image duplicate information given in the text by a phenomenon of redundancy or does the text add a fresh information to the image?" (p. 155). He proposes two primary functions of the pairing of text and image: anchorage and relay.

Anchorage is by far the more common function and ought to be associated with the denotative function of language: "The denominative function corresponds exactly to an anchorage of all the possible (denoted) meanings of the object by recourse to a nomenclature… With respect to the liberty of the signifieds of the image, the text has thus a *repressive* value" (p. 156-157). In other words, the linguistic caption can function as an anchor to affix meaning to a limited set of possible interpretations. Barthes doesn't turn it around, but the same thing could be said for the function of an image which is used diagrammatically to anchor the interpretation of text, to supplement or even fully replace linguistic signs. The function of relay is thus the

opposite, rather than denotative repression it participates/cultivates in the production of possible significations and "can be seen particularly in cartoons and comic strips." In this function, text and image "are fragments of a more general syntagm… dialogue functions not simply as elucidation but really does advance the action by setting out, in the sequence of messages, meanings that are not to be found in the image itself" (p. 157). In the latter part of this passage, Barthes is speaking about cinema, but it is undeniably applicable to sequential comic art and arguably to non-sequential static arts that employ graphical and linguistic juxtapositions.

While useful, anchorage and relay are not going to be nearly sufficient for articulating/differentiating the complex operations of text and image at play *Watchmen*, so I turn now to comics studies proper. The key technical terms that I will draw from McCloud's *Understanding Comics* are closure, the gutter, and masking. With closure once again we are dealing with a concept which is not the sole provenance of comic books, but it takes on a particular significance for the writing/drawing and experience of reading which McCloud helpfully illustrates. Closure is such an essential element for McCloud's theorization of comics because it is what enables the sequentiality of sequential art. It is what differentiates a single panel cartoon or an advertisement with a caption from a comic book. While the analysis of the imagery and text of an individual panel is an essential part of comics studies, a single panel taken out of context is not a comic any more than a single word taken from a novel is a story: "If visual iconography is the vocabulary of comics, closure is it's grammar." (p. 67) Furthermore, while one can speak about juxtaposition within a static pictorial image (between different visual elements, between word and image etc.), closure is what enables juxtaposition between discrete panels which means it is also what provides comics with their conditions of temporal representability. I will discuss closure and its connection with "the gutter" (the space between

panels) in more detail in section VI, which will segue into the close reading of *Watchmen* in sections VII-IX.

The other key term from McCloud's study which will play an important role here (for obvious reasons) is masking. The discussion of "the masking effect" in comics comes out of a sort of "Semiotics 101" in the opening pages of the second chapter of *Understanding Comics,* where McCloud is introducing the basic concept of icon and iconography, what he calls "the vocabulary of comics." Perhaps the most iconic of the icons, held up here as the paradigmatic icon, is the image of the human face. Crucially however, this is not just any image of a face, the iconic face in question is the minimalistic abstract face of a stick figure cartoon. In its most rudimentary form, this icon is nothing more than a circle with two dots for eyes and a line for a mouth. And yet, McCloud argues, this cartoon face actually provides more possibilities for identification and self-insertion than a realistic representation of a face. His argument hinges on the concept which I alluded to previously in the definition of cartooning, "amplification through simplification" (McCloud p. 30).

According to this theory, the more realistic the visual depiction of a character is, the more the viewer sees them as another person, whereas the more simplistic or abstract the figure, the more one can see themselves in the position of the character. In other words, the realistic face is more likely to be seen as an Other (he/she/it/them), whereas the cartoon face can be seen as a self (I/me). This is precisely because it lacks the distinguishing features to set it apart as a genuine other; it is a face, but an incomplete one, and thus presents an at least partially blank slate, a vessel which can be invested with the reader/viewers own sense of self. Iconic minimalism is linked here with a certain formal universalism, a plenitude of possible identifications and projections precisely because it lacks the details which would produce an immersive

*vraisemblance*. This leads us to the so called "masking effect" because, while comics can be produced in wildly divergent styles: from simplistic cartoons to hyperrealism, to primarily narrative works where minimalistic imagery merely supports the linguistic elements of the text, to worlds of pure abstract modernism (the play of color, shape, and line sans signification or any sense of representation), a common approach involves some mixture of realistic backgrounds and objects with iconic/minimalist characters (the paradigmatic example given here is Hergé's *Tintin*). This hybrid approach is what McCloud dubs "the masking effect," the deliberate juxtaposition of realistic elements intended to produce the believable objectification needed for immersive *mise-en-scène* with abstract or distorted characters intended to produce subjective identification. I will discuss this concept at length in section VII in relation to the most iconic of *Watchmen*'s icons, the same icon of icons which McCloud uses to introduce his theory, the smiley face.

**III. Meta-Historiography**

Giving an exhaustive historical contextualization of Alan Moore and David Gibbon's *Watchmen* would take an entire chapter or perhaps a book length study itself. That said, in order to analyze the "meta-historiographic" character of this work (to borrow Jochen Ecke's characterization) it is necessary to at least briefly outline the history of its genre (the so-called comic "ages") and the peculiar significance of *Watchmen*'s creation and publication both inside and outside the sphere of the hegemonic "Big Two" publishers.[79] By this latter point, I am referring to the fact that it was a superhero comic series published by DC Comics which to some extent conformed to generic standards of their typical output but was also fundamentally separate from the mainline of comic books produced up to that point by either DC or Marvel Comics in a

[79] Ecke, Jochen, *The British Comic Book Invasion: Alan Moore, Warren Ellis, Grant Morrison, and the Evolution of the American Style*, McFarland, 2019. p. 158

myriad of ways. Perhaps most significantly for the discussion of history on a textual and metatextual level, the world of *Watchmen* exists in a completely separate universe from the canonical continuity of the rest of DC comics.[80] Comic books often try to have their cake and eat it too when it comes to real-world history and geo-politics. The worlds of both Marvel and DC comics include a mixture of actual places, historical figures/events alongside wholly invented geographies and chronologies, but *Watchmen* is different in that it is intentionally and explicitly set up as an "alternate history." To describe *Watchmen* as meta-historiographic is to say that on multiple levels the text is concerned with histories.[81] The alternate history of its world and the relationship of this divergent timeline to our own as a space for social critique, the micro-histories of its characters, their individual life stories and how they are intertwined with each other, with their predecessors, with the world historical events of their 20th century, but also the history of the comic book medium as such which is made an explicit theme through ongoing effects of the presence and/or absence of multiple generations of heroes (analogous to the three ages of comics). To put this in the terms of Genette's transtextual poetics (discussed at length in Section V below): history in *Watchmen* is textual, intertextual, intratextual, paratextual (with almost all of its interstitial back matter contributing to and reflecting on historicization), hypertextual (and insofar as one of its hypotexts is the history of the genre/medium one could argue that the architext is figured hypertextually), as well as metatextual insofar as it comments on the histories that it interpolates within itself as well as its own historicity.

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[80] This is true at least in Moore's original twelve issue series, but the separation between *Watchmen* and the rest of DC's intellectual property was predictably eroded against Moore's wishes in more recent comics appropriating the characters and world of *Watchmen*. While the existence of later iterations on the "original" text would seem to be the exact subject matter which this reading would be most interested in, I have adopted the theoretically untenable but pragmatically necessary rule that all references to the comic book *Watchmen* throughout this chapter refer to the 1986 version and not other later comics written by different authors. Discussions of the other *Watchmen*, include the medium and/or release date (i.e. the 2009 film adaptation or the 2019 tv series).

[81] Another characterization would be Hutcheon's term, "historiographic metafiction." Whether *Watchmen* is better described as one, the other, or both, is a question worthy of further consideration.

In order to understand the extent to which *Watchmen* interpolates its own architextual history and deconstructs it, it is necessary to lay out a rudimentary timeline of the medium and genre followed by a basic timeline of the alternate history and plot of the comic. While the case can be made for a much longer pre-history of the modern comic book in a wide variety of media and works that combined text and image, the typical periodization in superhero centered comic book historiography begins with the Golden Age from 1938 to 1956. Inaugurated by the publication of Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster's *Action Comics #1* (aka the introduction of Superman), this era represents the initial codification of the modern superhero archetype and the regional/independent business model for the industry. I will return to the significance of this quasi-mythical origin point for the genre as it plays a role in both the *Watchmen* comics and TV series.[82] This is followed by the mid-century/post-war Silver Age from 1956-1970, a period of expansion and refinement of the narrative tropes and visual style of the medium as well as the creation of some of the most popular and iconic characters and teams in comics' history and the evolution of the consolidated corporate model of the two dominant publishers which would profoundly shape the subsequent development of the comics industry, Marvel and DC Comics. The Bronze Age is typically defined as beginning in 1970 and ending in 1986, the year *Watchmen* is published. This era brought about the introduction of more "mature" subject matter (drug addiction, domestic violence, permanent deaths of major characters previously considered "untouchable" etc.) and corresponded with a decline of the popularity of the superhero genre (at least compared to the heights of the 1960s boom).[83]

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[82] As well as providing the paradigmatic example of the exploitation and appropriation of the labor of comic book creators by the corporate owners of their intellectual property.

[83] From 1986 to the present is typically referred to as the "Modern Age" but this is irrelevant to the discussion of meta-historiography in *Watchmen*. An analysis of post-*Watchmen* comics would undoubtedly involve the history of *Watchmen*'s reception. This would bring additional context to the analysis of the 2009 film and 2019 tv series

*Watchmen's* inter-generational narrative, while primarily set in the 1980s, contains frequent references and flashbacks to earlier decades in the 20th century, and to some extent each of the three comic book ages are represented in the story. At first blush this seems to be a very direct parallelism, with a superhero team in each generation who symbolize their corresponding age in comic book history: the Minutemen in the 1930s clearly stand for the Golden Age, and the Crimebusters in the 1960s are suggestive of the Silver. However, this pattern is broken in the era in which the main story of the series takes place. There is no paradigmatic team representing the Bronze Age because in this alternate timeline by 1985 freelance vigilante superheroes have been outlawed and all of the active heroes of the prior eras are either retired, deceased, imprisoned, fugitives, or have been co-opted by the federal government. A closer analysis also reveals that the "Crimebusters" only ever had one team meeting, a failed pitch to form a team, and thus there aren't actually any superhero teams in *Watchmen* aside from the original Minutemen.[84] That said, with or without a team each generation of vigilantes still function as proxies for their age and just like in the actual history of mainstream Marvel and DC comics, the epochal/generational difference is not dissolved by the presence of some continuity in the personnel between ages, or the overtly mimetic repetition of legacy heroes.

The readings of the text in sections VI-VIII of this chapter are primarily character studies focusing on the way particular characters are intertwined with some of *Watchmen*'s most repeated motifs (masks, memory, and time respectively). To set up those closer readings it is necessary to begin with a basic outline of the plot and characters. This will also provide the basis for the final third of this chapter's analysis of the mimetic incorporations, omissions, and

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but would call for a more comprehensive engagement with other comics, pre, post, and contemporary with *Watchmen*, and thus stretches beyond the scope of this chapter.

[84] Certainly not one called The Watchmen, something which is noticeably altered in Snyder's 2009 film adaptation.

transformations in *Watchmen*'s filmic and televisual adaptations. Accounting for the presence/absence/transformation of canonical characters and events of the hypotext is a basic precondition for articulating the mimetic processes at work in these two hypertexts. Once this is established, attention to the presence/absence/transformation of formal and stylistic elements, marginalia, and overall meaning (intended, received, contested etc.) can all take on further significance than they would have otherwise.

The following is a brief summary of the alternate history timeline and the plot of the book, drawn from the comic itself as well as its paratexts, focusing on the main characters and presented in a generational order to highlight the intergenerational aspect of *Watchmen*'s transtextual historiography:

In America, at the end of the 1930s, masked vigilantes begin independently fighting crime, wearing costumes and operating under pseudonyms, starting with Hooded Justice (a man who wears an executioner style hood and a noose around his neck whose identity and face are never revealed in the comic) and eventually coalescing into a crimefighting team called the Minutemen. They achieve a level of social acceptability and popularity equivalent to entertainment industry celebrities and are allowed to operate with unofficial sanction and no oversight from law enforcement. This original group included the aforementioned Hooded Justice, Captain Metropolis (Nelson Gardner), Silk Spectre (Sally Jupiter), Silhouette, Nite Owl (Hollis Mason), Moth-Man, Dollar Bill, and the Comedian (Edward Blake). The group gradually falls apart over the course of the 1940s, starting with Blake's departure after his attempted rape of Jupiter, Silhouette is kicked out after being outed as a lesbian and is subsequently murdered, and Dollar Bill (the mascot of the National Bank) is killed attempting to stop a bank robbery when his cape gets stuck in the bank vault door. Sally Jupiter retires, and Blake goes on to work

directly for the federal government. By the 1950s, masked vigilantes have attracted the attention of Joseph McCarthy's House Un-American Activities Committee, and all of the original Minutemen besides the Comedian are forced to testify and reveal their identities. Hooded Justice refuses and promptly disappears with some speculation connecting him to the body of an East-German wrestler found dead on the shore near Boston. Moth-Man devolves into alcoholism and mental illness and is eventually institutionalized, and the original Nite-Owl (Hollis Mason) retires after the arrival of Dr. Manhattan in 1960.

Back in the 1940s, Jon Osterman and his father escape Nazi Germany and are living in Brooklyn, NY when the U.S. drops the atomic bomb on Hiroshima. Jon studies nuclear physics, which eventually brings him to the atomic test facility at Gila Flats where an accident completely disintegrates his body. Over the course of a few months, he reconstitutes his physical form and is reborn as the superhuman (frequently described as a god in the comic) Dr. Manhattan. He is the only character in the comic with supernatural powers; depicted as practically limitless control over matter and energy at the cost of a fundamental separation from his own humanity and a disorienting synchronic experience of time.[85] Manhattan eventually becomes a government agent which leads to his association with the other 1960s vigilante characters who also make up the main cast of the 1980s present era: Ozymandias (Adrian Veidt), Rorschach (Walter Joseph Kovacs), two 2nd generation legacy heroes—the new Silk Spectre (Laurie Jupiter, daughter of the original) and Nite-Owl (Dan Dreiberg)[86]—and the only active leftover from the original

[85] Explored in detail in section IX of this chapter.

[86] Juxtaposing these "legacy heroes" provides a fruitful contrast of legacy of origin and legacy of choice: Where Dan is a fan, motivated by a somewhat Quixotic and childish attachment to Arthurian legends and other fantasies, chooses to don Hollis Mason's mask and carry on the Nite Owl tradition, Laurie has her mother's legacy thrust upon her. And yet, by the end of the comic, when Laurie decides to free herself from this past mask, the implication is that her new start will essentially be an echo of her father in becoming the Comedienne. *Watchmen* (2019) picks up on this thread in their continuation of the character who by 2019 goes by the name Laurie Blake.

Minuteman, the Comedian (Edward Blake). The organizer of the previous generations team, Captain Metropolis (Nelson Gardner), and Ozymandias attempt to put together a new team with these heroes called the Crimebusters in 1966 but the meeting is a failure and met with open mockery by Blake who literally sets fire to the presentation that Gardner has prepared for the group.

This "Silver Age" generation thus operates either independently, or in small groups, and at times as government agents. It is heavily implied that Edward Blake was involved in the assassination of JFK and a successful cover-up of the Watergate break-in. His actions contribute to the continuation of an emboldened Nixon presidency which subsequently removes executive term limits and leads to an alternate 1970s-80s where Ford, Carter, and Reagan are never elected and Nixon is still in office by the end of the book. In the 1970s, Dr. Manhattan and the Comedian are active participants in the Vietnam War and in the alternate timeline of the comic this tips the scales and leads to an American victory and continued occupation. Through the course of the 1970s, masked vigilante activity became increasingly violent, whether state sanctioned as in the case of the Comedian or completely illegally as in the case of Rorschach. Growing public discontent with the actions of masked vigilantes culminates in a massive police strike and major riots in multiple cities, eventually leading to the passage of the 1977 Keene Act removing any grey area between state sanctioned vigilante activity and criminality. Following this, the "heroes" of the 1960s generation either had to reveal their identities and fully come under the jurisdiction of federal government oversight, retire, or go on the run.

The opening of the book begins in the present timeline of 1985, and the Comedian has just been killed. Rorschach is the only one of them still operating independently (illegally), Adrian Veidt has retired and gone fully corporate, Dr. Manhattan is working for the government

but seems primarily to be concerned with research, Laurie Juspeczyk is no longer going by her mother's stage name Jupiter nor the inherited superhero persona Silk Spectre and is romantically involved with Dr. Manhattan, Dan Dreiberg is officially retired but is soon revealed to have kept all of his costumes and equipment. The world of *Watchmen* is very much defined by Cold War anxiety, and the in-world version of the Doomsday Clock is rapidly approaching midnight. The threat that the Cold War was about to break out into World War III and most likely global nuclear annihilation is omnipresent in the background of the main story which proceeds as a murder mystery. The general apocalyptic atmosphere and clues to the broader conspiracy are primarily introduced through paratextual supplements and interstitial scenes. These "background" scenes are primarily set at a newsstand where a young boy (Bernie) is shown reading the intradiegetic *Tales of the Black Freighter* pirate comic while the owner of the newsstand (Bernard) rants about current events, but also include full pages of the *Black Freighter* comic, updates from the two plain clothes detectives, scenes involving journalists from the mainstream liberal *Nova Express* magazine and the far right *New Frontiersman* newspaper, and eventually, contextless flashes to the conspiracy simmering in the background which are only fully legible after the big reveals in the closing act of the story.

Throughout *Watchmen*, Rorschach plays the role of the disheveled misanthropic hard-boiled detective (complete with noir style narration from his rambling, Son of Sam meets Ayn Rand journal entries). In the end, he solves the case and is killed for it. The Comedian's murder is revealed to have been just one small part of a far greater crime, orchestrated by Adrian Veidt, which culminates at the end of the penultimate chapter with a massive Wellsian science fiction hoax which is simultaneously an all too real act of mass murder. A gigantic genetically engineered squid is teleported into the middle of New York City, alongside the release of a blast

of psychical energy which instantly kills roughly three million people. The hoax element is that the blast is masked as an extradimensional invasion, an attack on Earth by an eldritch horror from beyond the stars, and by extension, an existential threat to all humanity. This is Veidt's "Big Lie," a *Gestamtkunstwerk* orchestrated in the background throughout the whole narrative, crafted in secret by a multi-disciplinary team of experts (notably employing the literary talents of Max Shea, author of the *Black Freighter*), intended to produce a Schmittian style unity in the face of a common enemy.

What makes this more than typical comic book supervillainy is that not only does Veidt succeed in bringing his plan to fruition (which is ironically revealed to the reader as having already occurred by the time the heroes finally stage their confrontation with him), but his plan, at least in the immediate aftermath of the attack, seems to have worked. Russia and the U.S. deescalate and officially launch peace talks and declarations of intent to collaborate in a united defense of the planet. As Veidt and the heroes who have all converged on Karnak (his Antarctic "fortress of solitude") watch the various news reports displayed on his wall of tv screens, it becomes immediately clear that the horror that he has unleashed has had its intended effect and possibly averted the imminent destruction of the entire planet and extinction of all life on Earth. To reveal the truth to the public would risk undoing that and could potentially lead to global annihilation. This logic is enough to ensure the silent collaboration of all of the heroes with the exception of Rorschach, who leaves vowing to reveal the truth of Veidt's crimes to the world and is subsequently disintegrated by Dr. Manhattan.

In one of the closing scenes of the comic, Veidt and Dr. Manhattan have a one on one conversation. Manhattan indicates that he is going to leave Earth, perhaps to go somewhere else and create life. Veidt asks him, "I did the right thing didn't I? It all worked out in the end" to

which Manhattan replies, before vanishing, “Nothing ends, Adrian. Nothing ever ends” (p. 409). Dreiberg and Juspeczyk are last shown visiting her mother, on the run and living under the new identities of Sam and Sandra Hollis. The very final takes place at the offices of the *New Frontiersman* newspaper, where the irate managing editor instructs his hapless underling Seymour to find something publishable amongst the “crank file” pile of miscellaneous submissions. In the closing panel, the editor fully delegates the selection to Seymour, with the final line of the book “I leave it entirely in your hands” suspended in a word bubble as Seymour’s hand hovers over the pile of submissions with Rorschach’s journal laying close to the top. While this summary is a poor substitute for the actual comic, it is necessary to lay out the basic features of *Watchmen*’s alternate history timeline, as well as the essential plot and character beats in order to contextualize the thematic and character focused readings in the middle of this chapter, as well as to stage the comparative analyses of the transmedia adaptations at the end. I will return to various points from this summary throughout the remainder of the chapter.

One of the elements which makes *Watchmen’s* mimetic interpolations from actual history more pronounced than a mere “influence” or “inspiration” is that it is set in an alternate history in the specific generic definition sense of the term. This is what differentiates it from historical fiction, although alternate history can be seen as a hybrid of science fiction and historical fiction. Alternate history as a sub-genre within speculative fiction has many commonalities with science fiction stories whose settings are based on a hypothetical elaboration of a possible future. While some science fiction completely ignores the connection between its setting and real-world history, for others this is an essential part of their world-building. *Star Wars* famously declares that it takes place in the past, “A long time ago, in a galaxy far, far away,” while *Star Trek* ostensibly takes place in a possible future of real-world history, just several centuries later. The

difference between alternative history and a speculative future like *Star Trek*'s is that rather than imagining what might happen that had not yet happened, alternate history proceeds from a counterfactual hypothesis about the past, "what if X never happened" or "what if Y happened instead of X?" This means that alternate history is more directly mimetic than science fiction stories set in a speculative future, or at least, constitutes a more overtly realist form of mimesis (closer to historical fiction). For an alternate history to be successful it inherently needs to blur the line between realism and fantasy while maintaining a balance of believability and novelty in order to function as simultaneously quasi-fantastical and quasi-historical. This discussion of *Watchmen* as genre fiction invariably brings back the opening question of my introduction, is *Watchmen* a literary work of art?

To elaborate on both sides of the initial answer of "yes, but not only that," the literary dimension of *Watchmen* could be summarized with reference to Alan Moore's aesthetic modernism. Stylistically, this amounts to the pursuit of formal experimentation combined with social and psychological realism. The decision to frame *Watchmen* as an alternate history, a branch off from actual history, where real-world events like the creation of the atom bomb and subsequent bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the Vietnam War, the assassination of JFK, and the criminality of the Nixon administration are written into the fictional history of the world of the comic is part and parcel of the realist side of Moore's particular modernist aesthetic ideology. And yet, *Watchmen* is also undeniably a work of post-modern art, particular in its usage of the collaborative textual/visual medium and revisionist play with comic book tropes and conventions (from the fact that it is a superhero comic of all things to the usage of the nine-panel grid). In a sense which I will revisit in the analysis of *Watchmen* (2019), "realism" in alternate history can be interpreted as an example of hypertext which creates its own hypotext. Moore and Gibbon's

post-modernism is nowhere more evident than in *Watchmen*'s "attempt to think the present historically in an age that has forgotten how to think historically in the first place" and, when it comes to the way it all ends with a "nothing ever ends," its "incredulity toward metanarratives."[87]

**IV. Revisionism**

This question of *Watchmen*'s aesthetic status cannot be separated from its status as a commodity. This presents a central aporia for any comic book creator(s) who wish to produce an autonomous and complete work of art within a medium/industry defined by open-ended serialism. From a purely economic standpoint, the infinite iterability of comics is its only true renewable resource. This aspect is not unique to the comic book form and should be understood within the broader context of the development of the publishing industry through the 20th century and the particular commodity form of the mass market paperback (most obviously in popular genres like romance and science fiction). The decoupling of the intellectual property from its creators corresponds to an industrial demand for the fungibility of all elements of the literary work, not only the plot, characters, and world of the text, but its author (or as is often the case, their name). Creators, like consumers, are necessarily replaceable, like the machine parts for the printing press, and from the industrial standpoint for a comic storyline to end because a creator said it had ended would be tantamount to killing the golden egg laying goose of an inherently reproducible commodity. This is emblematic of the death of the autonomous work of art, or more accurately, its non-consensual undeath: the denial of its right to die and stay dead. Mimetic appropriation as commercial necromancy is an essential element of the logic of capitalism. Nothing ever ends. The conversion of an author's name into a brand is thus a form of mimetic

[87] See Frederic Jameson's *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* and Jean- François Lyotard's *The Postmodern Condition*.

reification which seems inescapable within the reality of capitalist reproduction. Within the capitalistic determination of art as intellectual property, it is not a question of whether property rights should or should not be protected, but who (or what) is permitted to violate them.

The difference between an artist asserting ownership of their own work and a media conglomerate consolidating ownership of content comes down to wealth and power, and which entity is able to influence the political-legal apparatus more effectively. Moore has been extremely outspoken about his discontent with the way in which DC Comics and parent company, media conglomerate Warner Bros., have milked the *Watchmen* cash cow, going so far as to have his name omitted from any of the spinoffs and cross-media adaptations, while Gibbons has been more willing to play along. It is possible to acknowledge the validity of Moore's complaints while not wholly invalidating the artistic merit of the artists operating within the boundaries of corporate controlled pop cultural production/reproduction. While it is not entirely baseless to characterize the corporate impetus for the two most notable adaptations of the comic as motivated by nothing more the perennial need for ROI, such a reductive materialist simplification doesn't actually provide any compelling theoretical reason for ignoring either the 2009 film or 2019 series, despite showrunner Damon Lindelof's self-conscious description of the latter as an "unscrupulous defiling." Despite, or perhaps because of it. In truth, unscrupulous defiling is one of *Watchmen*'s core themes, and perhaps not that far removed from Moore's own modus operandi.

It is no accident then that the Brechtian theme of criminality as the truth of capitalism appears in the *Threepenny Opera* referencing pirate comic which runs from Ch. III to Ch. XI as

an ironic counterpoint, microcosm, and transtextual mise en abyme.[88] Moore has stated that the genesis of this intradiegetic comic, *Tales of the Black Freighter,* and the status of pirate comics in general within the world of *Watchmen,* was just another part of the commitment to a certain realism, i.e. following through on the hypothetical logic of alternate history. If one of the facts of this alternate version of reality is that the fantasy of comic book style superhero vigilantism actually occurs in this world, then what fantasies would fill the pages of comic books? At first glance, the choice of the pirate trope can seem an arbitrary substitute, like something randomly selected from a list of archetypical genre fiction stand-ins. Whether or not an alternative to pirates could have worked just as well, the decision inevitably alters the connotations and associations of the masked vigilante through this parallelism with the figure of the pirate.[89]

In a comic book which deliberately foregrounds the inherent criminality of the vigilante superhero—classically depicted as extrajudicially fighting crime in the name of the law—and further underlines this paradoxical hypocrisy of the trope by literally making masked superheroics illegal in its alternate history timeline (via the 1977 Keene Act), the figure of the pirate is revealed to have more in common with the superhero than the surface level penchant for ridiculous costumes and pseudonyms. The picaresque quality of a pirate protagonist might seem to have little in common with the pseudo-lawman posturing of the standard costumed crusader but both figures inherently blur the lines between hero and villain. These types of stories present predatory violence as courageous acts of heroism, and both fit together within the broader

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[88] The name *Tales of the Black Freighter* is a reference to the song "*Seeräuberjenny*" ("Pirate Jenny") from *Threepenny Opera*, sung by the character *Spelunken-Jenny* (Low-Dive Jenny) who, like Macheath ("Mack the Knife") is a character borrowed from John Gay's *The Beggars Opera,* based on the historical figure Jenny Diver.

[89] While the connection between piracy and the transatlantic slave trade is not made explicit in the comic, it haunts the text in ways which are brought to the surface somewhat by the 2019 series focus on race and racism, a topic which I will return to in the discussions of the series in the final sections of this chapter. There is an argument to be made that *Watchmen* (2019) substitutes the cowboy for the pirate, see further discussion in section XI of this chapter and Henry Jenkins' foreword to *After Midnight: Watchmen after Watchmen*, University of Mississippi Press, 2022, p. XVI

horizon of narratives which romanticize the outlaw. Furthermore, even their outlaw status is questionable, because comic book vigilantes are deputized (whether de facto or de jure) as frequently as pirates are commissioned into privateering. The essential element which links superhero vigilantes with pirates thus connects back to the political anxiety that haunts the Juvenal citation which serves as *Watchmen*'s rhetorical slogan. Who indeed, if the line between political authority and its violation is erased, if, in fact, that very authority had to have been originally sanctified and constituted through acts of definitionally unsanctioned violence, if the maintenance of the status quo requires it, if the basic logic of surplus value defines capitalism as theft, if any possible critical objection to the hypocrisy of the law and its enforcement necessarily critiques one law in the name of another and thus posits itself as the true enforcer?[90] Through the equally ridiculous and sublime heightened reality of masked performance, *Watchmen's* core rhetorical question, driven by the commitment to follow the logic of socio-political realism, invokes the entire not-so-secret history of both on and off the record, official and unofficial, symbiotic/collaborative relationships between governments, law enforcement agencies, and military institutions with paramilitary militias, gendarmerie, mercenaries, bounty hunters, and perhaps most forcefully and brutally, the "justice" of the mob.[91]

*Tales of the Black Freighter* is presented as marginalia, primarily appearing as superimposed parchment style text boxes accompanied by occasional intercutting panels in the interstitial newsstand scenes. In addition to its title's reference to Brecht, it contains elements

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[90] On sovereignty, law, and policing the police see Benjamin's "Critique of Violence" as well as Derrida's *Limited Inc*, "Force of Law"*, Rogues*, *The Beast & The Sovereign* and other later writings.

[91] I will return to the connection between the masked vigilante and mob justice in my discussion of *Watchmen* (2019) because this is one of its central themes. Further analysis of *Tales of the Black Freighter* will also be deferred to the section dedicated to the 2009 film adaptation because its omission from the film is emblematic of its fundamental misreading of the comic, which drives a fetishistically meticulous pursuit of visual fidelity (the dream of a "panel accurate" page to screen mimesis) that simultaneously defaces the actual pages of the text by surgically removing its intradiegetic literary throughline.

reminiscent of nautical gothic literature (Poe, Melville etc.), Coleridge's "Rime of the Ancient Mariner," and can be viewed as a transposition of the Odyssean voyage home into an existential horror. The particular issues of the comic which are interpolated within *Watchmen* belong to a two-part story entitled "Marooned," helpfully summarized in the paratextual *Treasure Island Treasury of Comics* backmatter for Chapter V:

> The story of a young mariner whose vessel is wrecked by the Black Freighter before it can return to its hometown and warn it of the hellship's approach. Cast adrift on an uninhabited island with only his dead shipmates for company, we experience the frantic mariner's torment at the knowledge that while he is trapped on his island, the bestial crew of the Freighter are surely bearing down upon his town, his home, his wife and his children. Driven by his burning desire to avert this calamity, we see the mariner escape from the island… digging up the recently buried and gas-bloated corpses of his shipmates, the mariner lashes them together and uses them as the floats on an improvised raft… On reaching the mainland safely upon his horrific craft we see the increasingly distraught and disheveled mariner trying desperately to reach his home, even resorting to murder to acquire a horse for himself. In the final scenes… we see that the mariner, thought he has escaped from the island, is in the end marooned from the rest of humanity in a much more terrible fashion.

In the end, paralleling the events of the main story in fearful symmetry, the mariner brings about the doom which he was hellbent on preventing. Assuming that the worst has already occurred, when he encounters a couple on the beach he takes them to be "collaborators" and murders them, stealing their horses and using one of the corpses as a prop rider on the other horse to impersonate them on his return to town. Seeking vengeance on the pirates he assumes have already murdered his family, the mariner enters his own home and brutally beats the first person he encounters to death. As he sees terrified faces of his children he recognizes the "unnervingly shrill" screams of his victim belong to his own wife. With the revelation of his monstrous reality, the mariner flees to the shore. Finding the Black Freighter waiting to take him aboard, he declares, "The world I'd tried to save was lost beyond recall. I was a horror: amongst horrors must I dwell," as the unholy crew lets out a putrid cheer and welcomes him aboard.

The use of generic tropes to produce a critical commentary on both the cultural and

literary sub-genres at play, as well as the historical narratives which influenced them (and which are influenced by them), belongs to that element of Moore and Gibbon's collaboration which can be categorized as revisionism. This begs the question, what kind of revisionism is this? Critics of Moore's oeuvre and its influence on comic books as a whole and superhero fiction in particular often characterize his revisionism as overly cynical, of taking heroes who are supposed to represent the aspirational peaks of virtue and dragging them into the gutter of corruption, destruction, and nihilism. Read in this way, Moore's work as a whole, and *Watchmen* in particular could be blamed for some of the worst excesses of "grimdark" pop-culture, a revisionist trend which has proved marketable to angsty teens across numerous genres and forms of media, but which undeniably produced countless examples of unintentionally parodic gritty self-seriousness. More favorable interpretations would want to position Moore's revisionism as a form of the hermeneutics of suspicion: an unmasking of banal hegemonic fantasies motivated by an anti-authoritarian ethic and a commitment to social-political realism. My own reading would fall closer to the latter than the former, but partially in reaction to the 2019 series' intervention and reimagining of *Watchmen*'s central themes and subject matter, reading *Watchmen* after *Watchmen* demands an acknowledgement of the remarkable absence of any explicit treatment of race/racism combined with the high frequency of racially charged or coded language, as well as scenarios and motifs which implicitly invoke race. While this could apply to many elements and motifs throughout the book, limiting the analysis to the basic premise of a revisionist pirate narrative and considering the particular language and place of *Tales from the Black Freighter* in the narrative as a whole seems to both clarify and obscure the nature of this revisionism.

Prima facie, one could read *Tales of the Black Freighter* as a pseudo-revisionist narrative, one which amplifies the horror and misery that lay latent within its hypo-genre and drains it of

all of the sensationalism and heroism which still fails to articulate a coherent historical-political critique of the constitutive racial violence without which any fantasy of a "golden age of piracy" wouldn't have been possible. This absence of any explicit reference to the transatlantic slave trade haunts the text in ways that make it hard to see it as a simple case of thoughtless omission. Firstly, and most obviously, the titular Black Freighter, a name which, as mentioned previously, is taken from the song "Pirate Jenny" in Brecht's *Threepenny Opera*. That this ghostly vessel is associated with the color black could be handwaved as simply an example of the persistent and pernicious invocation of Manichean symbolism in genre fiction but even bracketing the more general connection between the moral metaphysics of darkness and light and anti-Black racism, given the context of the pirate narrative it seems even more directly relevant. The title of the two-part series, "Marooned," while having a widespread ahistorical meaning, is derived directly from the slave-trade and originally referred to an escaped slave (and thus carries a particular history of being used as a racial epithet), not merely to being stranded or lost at sea in a general sense. What kind of ship was the mariner originally aboard, and what kind of ship is the Black Freighter? Turning to the context of "Pirate Jenny," a class war revenge fantasy where a downtrodden servant girl dreams of being rescued from her lowly existence by a ghostly pirate ship that would murder all the wealthy people of the town and take her away, one is left wondering what type of revenge is being imagined here and which bodies are being piled up. Perhaps Moore had in mind Nina Simone's 1964 cover of the song, which would cast the entire scenario in a very different light. Whether all of this is the result of an uncritical obliviousness, or an unsuccessful attempt to producing something subliminally evocative, it cannot have been an accident that one of the comics only two named Black characters is the reader of this intradiegetic comic, the young Bernie from the newsstand.

The question remains, what kind of revisionist is Moore? In order to properly answer this, it is necessary to clarify the meaning of revisionism as such. Producing a critical history of the concept of revisionism (in genre fiction, in political theory, in historical studies etc.) would be a worthwhile meta-historiographic undertaking, but when the term is used in scholarly discussions of *Watchmen* or Moore's broader oeuvre it is typically stated without any contextualization or qualification that he is a revisionist. Without attempting to produce a comprehensive general account of revisionism, it is possible to more explicitly define the significance of revisionism in this context, and how it relates to this project's themes of mimesis, repetition, iterability, and masked performance.

The closest well-known analogue from popular culture to the type of revisionism at play in *Watchmen* would be the revisionist Western. A genre defined in spatial/regional terms (at least in name), Westerns have also traditionally been by and large a type of historical fiction, despite the fact that exceptions to both of these definitions abound in the many examples of Westerns set outside the American West, as well as set in historical periods beyond the mid to late 19$^{th}$ century (including contemporary or even futuristic settings ex. the science fiction "Space Western"). There is a loose sense in which all of these deviations from the traditional Western could be characterized as revisionist, but it might be more accurate to use a term like neo-Western. A true revisionist Western retains the historical and geographical specificity of the genre but revises the characterization, politics, ethics, representation or lack of representation of people and groups historically marginalized by the genre, and perhaps most importantly the fundamental framework in which the "frontier" is situated within a broader conception of the nature and/or origins of civil society and political order.

The revisionist turn in any historical genre is somewhat inevitable, as changes in the

cultural zeitgeist over time lead to historical revisionism, this leads to a similar contestation of traditional narratives in the fictions informed by this shifting historical discourse. The precise form this revision takes is far less inevitable of course, and any attempt to revise a traditional narrative will always be met with resistance, not only from conservatives opposed to change in principle but from any number of competing accounts offering their own revision of the history, genre, and tropes in question. All of this can be applied to *Watchmen* and its relationship to the superhero comic book subgenre, but also, in relation to the extra-textual history of the medium/genre, as well as the way in which superhero comics have constructed their own in-world histories and the relation between these histories and the history of the 20th century. This then, is *Watchmen*'s meta-historiographic revisionism, but this revisionist element is more complicated still because of the already revisionist practices of comic books in general and superhero fiction in particular.

This type of revisionism could also be called iterability, appropriation, reinterpretation etc. and it is a common practice in an industry where characters and narratives possess an iconic or symbolic status which allows for perennial renewability or reapplication of the templates which constitute its intellectual property. The power of graphic icons in mass media lies precisely in their absence of aura.[92] Whether Mickey Mouse or Batman, the cartoon/comic book character needs to be an infinitely reproducible figure.[93] Such an icon only possesses some sense of identity to the extent required as a condition of identifiability. Comic book characters and their storylines, worlds, costumes, logos, and paraphernalia all possess this same prerequisite of reiterablity. This is true whether or not they are actually "iconic" enough to be recognizable.

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[92] See Walter Benjamin's "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction."

[93] The origin of the archetypical 20th century cartoon icon, Mickey Mouse, in the imagery and tropes of the blackface minstrel-show merits further analysis, particular in connection with this discussion of reiterative fungibility in relation to Afropessimist theory.

While a prototypical case would involve the relaunch of an already established and recognizable brand, the industry is full of examples where unsuccessful or obscure titles or characters were (at least commercially) successfully revised despite lacking the built-in audience of a popular setting or cast of characters. This latter is the case for *Watchmen*, which was initially planned to be a revision/revitalization of the roster of failed independent comics company, Charlton Comics, purchased by DC Comics in 1985. After the plan to turn over the newly acquired IP to Moore and Gibbons was scrapped (most likely to protect the investment from being tarnished by edgy weirdos), "new" characters were created who all possessed clear traces of their origins in the Charlton characters as well as elements borrowed from other iconic comic book characters.

This is the standard form of mimetic characterization in comic books, where new characters are almost always copies of prior figures (sometimes explicitly as in the case of "legacy heroes"), amalgamations of several prior characters, or else inversions or modifications of prior characters. What often amounts to direct plagiarism of competitors could be more charitably described as a way to circumvent copywrite protection of unavailable assets. In the case of *Watchmen*, the use of these characters and the incorporation of elements from iconic Marvel and DC characters like Superman, Batman, Captain America etc. is not born out of a desire to capitalize on the creations of earlier writers and artists but rather stands as yet another example of the critical revisionism which I discussed previously in relation to history and generic convention. At the time that *Watchmen* was starting to take shape Moore was already known for adapting and rebooting pre-existing characters and storylines, having made his name on creative reinterpretations of the superhero comic *Miracleman* (formerly *Marvelman*, already a plagiaristic "revision" by UK based L. Miller & Son comics of the Fawcett Comics character "Captain Marvel," itself purchased by DC Comics and rebranded as Shazam for obvious legal reasons)

and the horror/monster comic *Swamp Thing*.[94] In a sense then, there is nothing original about *Watchmen*'s revisionism of characters, tropes, and histories from inside and outside of comics, and yet at times it is precisely the use of the unoriginal to the point of cliché which produces the most original effects in the work. I will return to this idea (initially in section VI and further in section VII) with the examination of the comic's most iconic icon, the smiley face, but in order to analyze *Watchmen* with the appropriate clarity and precision (to read the comic as a comic), it is first necessary to differentiate and define the variety of textual operations which structure it (Section V), in order to more rigorously work through the panel-by-panel movement through which it is articulated (Section VI). This means first turning to Gerard Genette's transtextual typology and then returning to Scott McCloud's comic book poetics in the subsequent section.

**V. Textualities**

Through outlining the basic terminology of Genette's transtextual poetics, some preliminary connections to *Watchmen* will be made, but seeking to catalog every example of these textual operations would consume the entire chapter. That said, once the key concept of the transtextual typology has been explicated and transposed slightly to fit the language of mimetics as it has developed over the course of the preceding chapters, the analysis of *Watchmen* which follows will be able to more precisely account for specific examples of these textualities. To begin with the overarching term which includes all of the subsequent types, Genette defines *transtextuality* as "all that sets the text in a relationship, whether obvious or concealed, with other texts."[95] While this is a broad and somewhat vague definition, it needs to be in order to

[94] *Swamp Thing* in particular is relevant for interpreting the revisionist qualities of *Watchmen* as it reexamines and redefines the distinction between hero and monster, between entity and environment, humanity and nature etc. Moore took what could be seen as cheesy "creature feature" style sensationalist pulp and produced an exploration of post-humanist ecopoetics not dissimilar to the moral universe of *Watchmen*.

[95] Genette, Gérard, *Palimpsests: literature in the second degree,* Trans. Channa Newman and Claude Doubinsky, University of Nebraska Press, 1997, p. 1

function as a formal characterization of the subject matter which poetics is concerned with in general. The taxonomy of the different types thus provides a more precise definition of various forms of transtextuality, which while not mutually exclusive require technical differentiation.

The first type, defined with reference to its origin in Kristeva's work but differentiated here, is *intertextuality,* "a relationship of copresence between two texts or among several texts" which includes quotation, plagiarism, and allusion. (p. 1) This broad definition means that intertextuality encompasses a spectrum which covers all types of textual interpolations from the highly literal and explicit citation to the undeclared yet still literal borrowing/theft to the allusion which can be neither declared nor literal but nevertheless able to perform a referential function. The minimalistic formal categorization of a "relationship of copresence" means that whether verbatim or as pure spirit sans letter, the text of some other text is placed within a text. Intertextuality is everywhere in *Watchmen*, through both direct citation and allusion, as well as through self-referential intratextuality (which, while it might seem paradoxical to say this, would be a form of intertextuality according to Genette's definition). The breadth of this definition would also seem to include all hypertextuality and metatextuality (both discussed below).

To take one paradigmatically complex example, the epigraph to the final chapter which appears as graffiti at several points throughout the text is an oft-quoted sans context question from Juvenal's *Satires,* "*Quis custodiet ipsos custodes,*" here followed by the English translation "Who watches the watchmen." Also included in this reference is an acknowledgement that these lines were quoted as the epigraph to the 1987 "Tower Commission" report (the report commissioned by President Reagan which disclosed the details of the Iran-Contra affair). Thus, prima facie this citation appears already to be a citation of a citation. The inclusion of the translation, however, brings it to a further degree of intertextuality. While this passage can be

translated with many different English synonyms, "Who guards the guardians?" might be the most literal and certainly the one which would connect it to Plato's *Republic* for an anglophone audience with a philosophical background. Moore's choice of "watches" and "watchmen" grafts imagery upon this phrase taken from the closing paragraph of JFK's undelivered speech intended to be given the day he was assassinated, lines which the hero/villain of *Watchmen,* Adrian Veidt, quotes in the penultimate chapter and which also serve as one of the epigraphs for this chapter.[96] Juvenal's question, and the translation of it via borrowed imagery from JFK (who borrowed it from the King James Bible, which translates/borrows it from Solomon) placed as the final epigraph thus literally gets the last word in *Watchmen*, and in some sense comes to stand for *Watchmen* itself as its animating question, the question which drove its creation but also the one which lingers with the reader after the story has concluded. Binding Juvenal's *custodiet* to the figure of the watchmen has several important consequences which I will return to later in the chapter.

On the topic of binding, the second type, *Paratextuality*, refers to that which binds the text to its paratext.[97] Genette offers some examples of the paratext: "a title, a subtitle, intertitles; prefaces, postfaces, notices, forewords, etc.; marginal, infrapaginal, terminal notes; epigraphs; illustrations; blurbs, book covers, dust jackets, and many other kinds of secondary signals, whether allographic or autographic." (p. 3) Paratextuality offers the space in which the final category, architextuality, is most often made explicit (see the discussion of architextuality

[96] Veidt quotes JFK with explicit reference to the assassination on page 366, in the midst of his "supervillain monologue" which functions like "the big reveal" in a crime fiction story. Kennedy's death is cited as the philosophical beginning of his plan to ensure world peace through a grandiose act of deception and violence. The speech he is quoting is itself quoting the King James version of Psalm 127, which provides Kennedy (or his uncredited speechwriter) with the language of the "watchmen."

[97] Discussed at length in Genette's 1987 *Seuils* (English translation published in 1997 as *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation*).

below). Much like literary novel's history of serial/periodical publication, comic books like *Watchmen* which are initial published serially as individual issues and subsequently collected into a volume or trade paperback inherently have an added layer of paratextuality which may or may not be preserved in the collected volume because each issue has its own cover page, front matter, and back matter. *Watchmen* is conventional to the extent that it preserves the issue cover art and converts issue titles into chapter titles, but it also subverts standard comic book conventions by incorporating its paratext within the text in a number of ways. Epigraphs are included at the end of every chapter which are often referenced intertextuality in the main text, but even more notable is the use of back matter as an extension of the text. Every issue/chapter except for the final one includes some non-comic text which is presented in a pseudo-journalistic fashion, often an excerpt from some intradiegetic book, or an archival collection of files, clippings, photographs etc.

The first three chapters all include back matter taken from the original Nite Owl, Hollis Mason's tell-all superhero memoir *Under The Hood,* Ch. IV, the introduction to an academic study called *Dr. Manhattan: Super-Powers and the Superpowers,* Ch. V, an excerpt from a work of comic book history and criticism specifically focused on pirate comics, Ch. VI, criminal and psychiatric case files on Rorschach, Ch. VII, an article in The Journal of the American Ornithological Society about owls written by Dan Dreiberg (aka 2nd gen Nite Owl), Ch. VIII, pages from the far right newspaper the New Frontiersman, Ch. IX, a collection of clippings of news articles, interviews, film reviews, and correspondence related to the original Silk Spectre, Sally Jupiter, Ch. X, internal memos and ad copy from the Veidt corporation, and finally in Ch. XI a puff piece interview with Adrian Veidt in the Nova Express. All of these are fictional and belong to the worldbuilding and storytelling of the comic, and yet their placement as back matter

complicates this because back matter in comic books is traditionally always reserved for ostensibly non-textual paratext: letters to the editor, interviews, advertisements etc. Moore and Gibbon's use of this space for a pseudo-paratextual expansion of the text is just one example of their mimetic revisionism.

Genette associates the third type, *metatextuality*, with critical discourse and "commentary." Defining it functionally as that which unites a given text with another "of which it speaks without necessarily citing it (without summoning it), in fact sometimes even without naming it." (p. 4) When discussing this type of metatextuality scholars and commentators often say that the text is "in dialogue" with another text. Genette gives the example of how Hegel's *Phenomenology* "allusively and almost silently" evokes Diderot's *Neveu de Rameau*.[98] Like intertextuality, metatextuality is a term that has been popularized (some would say misunderstood) and is often used to signify self-reflective commentary (a text commenting on itself). This interpretation is thus something like a synecdochic substitution, i.e. it defines metatextuality as such by merely one aspect or subset of it. Although it also would seem to be a worse distortion of meaning than that, because insofar as metatextual comes to stand for "self-referential" it loses the defining sense of commentary. To call all auto-citation metatextual would be mistaking a form of intertextuality (intratextuality) for metatextuality. While intertextuality and metatextuality are not contradictory (both can be present at the same time) they are meaningful distinct and should not be conflated. In other words, all metatextuality is intertextual, but not all intertextuality is metatextual, and intratextuality is only metatextual if it takes the form of a self-reflective commentary.

*Hypertextuality*, the primary subject of *Palimpsests* (the work from which I am drawing

[98] My own reading of Freud's uncited commentary on Aristotle in the previous chapter would also be an example of this sense of metatextual commentary.

this taxonomy) is Genette's fourth category, defined as the relationship between a text (the *hypertext*) with an earlier text (the *hypotext*) which is not metatextual commentary. The examples cited to illustrate this contrast are Aristotle's *Poetics* and its metatextual relationship to Sophocles *Oedipus Rex*, vs both Virgil's *Aeneid* and Joyce's *Ulysses* hypertextual relationships with a shared *hypotext*, Homer's *Odyssey*. Certain common forms of literary allusion (already been defined as a type of intertextuality) would seem to fall into the category of hypertextuality: homage, parody, modernization, adaptation etc. *Watchmen* participates in hypertextuality in a general generic way as well as within specific literary allusions, but perhaps more importantly in the fact that all of its central characters are adaptations/transformations/amalgamations of prior comic book characters, something which I will discuss at length in the next section where I cover Moore's revisionism.

The last type of transtextuality, *architextuality*, refers to the level of genre or formal categorization, the "types of discourse, modes of enunciation, literary genres" which constitute an individual text as one of a kind. Genette observes that the architextual level is typically not made explicit within a text, and when it is this typically occurs in a paratextual title or subtitle. While *Watchmen* seems to abide by this insofar as it never explicitly announces "This is a comic book" or "This is superhero fiction" or "This is crime fiction" etc., the presence of a comic book (the intradiegetic *Tales from the Black Freighter)* within the story is an essential metatextual commentary that is presented as a marginal albeit reoccurring mise en abyme. Thus, in some sense the architextual level is made explicit within the text through this metatextual device. Furthermore, as alluded to previously, the architextual level is actually present within the text in more subtle ways through intertextual, paratextual, metatextual, and hypertextual elements which will require critical explication and cross-reference in order to register as such. This account of

Genette's transtextual typology helps to classify the various operations at play in *Watchmen*, but it is necessary to shift the focus from this general analysis to the level of the page and the panel and return now to Scott McCloud's comic book poetics.

**VI. The Panel & The Gutter**

Closure, which McCloud called the grammar of comics, is the concept from his poetics that most directly resonates with the reading of Aristotle which opened this project. It is necessary to pause and underline the relevance of this particular comic book structuralism for the broader philosophical horizon of this work. As discussed in the first chapter of this work, a fundamental aspect of Ricoeur's interpretation of Aristotelian mimesis is the interplay between representation and arrangement, typified by the hyphenated amalgam of two of the *Poetics* key terms, *mimesis-muthos*.[99] *Time and Narrative* elaborates this dialectic of semantics and syntax through the configuration of literary narratives as an example of the inseparability of individual mimetic acts/figures/signs within structures and processes of organization, sequencing, arrangement etc. McCloud's analysis of closure provides a compelling case for applying Ricoeur's hermeneutic narratology to comics in order to reiterate one of the core claims of this project—that mimesis is not reducible to representation—within a visual medium commonly defined in terms of pictorial representation. Representation is one aspect of mimesis, and rather than seeking to analyze it in isolation, Ricoeur's *mimesis-muthos* allows us to consider the mimetic dimensions of comic book composition holistically. This supports McCloud's structuralist approach to understanding comics in terms of their grammar, not just within the panels but between them. While that holds for comics in general, it is particularly resonant with *Watchmen* because, as Moore himself once acknowledged, "what *Watchmen* was about was its

[99] This is not Ricoeur's invention, Aristotle provides this conflation himself: "The imitation of action *is* the plot" (50a1).

own structure."[100]

This concept of closure is articulated through the discussion of "the gutter" and the grammar of panel layout and sequencing in McCloud's third chapter, entitled "Blood in the Gutter." The comics industry term "gutter" refers to the space between panels. McCloud defines "the blood" in terms of perceptual closure and the role that the imagination of the reader/viewer performs in connecting/collecting/synthesizing the series of discrete panels that make up a comic. This is crucially important for *Understanding Comics* as a whole and provides the text with its subtitle (*The Invisible Art*), because without the negative space between panels there would be no sequence. In other words, time and thus "followability," or even legibility as such (of the sequence even if not of an individual panel), are predicated on spacing and what is omitted, what is indirectly implied but not directly depicted is just as if not more important than the contents of the panel itself. Hence, the notion that the blood, i.e., the drama, the action, the energy which produces narrative out of disconnected images, lies within the thin abyss that separates each instance of the sequential work of art.

This interpretation of the blood in the gutter might seem to imply that every comic book panel is a distinct moment in time. However, McCloud is careful to underline that while a panel can function as a snapshot of an *Augenblick* it does not necessarily function this way. There is much more variability in the interplay between panel and gutter that produces (or perhaps more aptly, demands) closure, as well as techniques for creating it within the space of a single panel. Elements such as variable panel width, spacing, arrangement, the use of text boxes (and all of the possibilities that this brings), or the arrangement of logically or chronologically distinct events within different spaces of a single panel, all have an influence on the potential perceptions of

[100] Millidge, Gary Spencer, *Alan Moore: Storyteller*, Ilex Press, 2011, p. 131

causality and temporality. McCloud's argument is that these operations are present in even the most simplistic comics and that to some extent in conventional or traditional comic book visual storytelling the degree to which these closure inducing techniques are successful is correlative to their invisibility to the average reader. When it comes to the formal experimentation of creators like Moore and Gibbons, however, the situation almost seems inverted, where the magicians seem to be deliberately drawing attention to their sleight of hand, making the invisible art visible, forcing the figurative into the literal, multiplying it and refracting it multidimensionally.

While McCloud's chapter makes no explicit reference to *Watchmen*, its title and central imagery bleeds right into the iconic cover art and the opening panels of the opening chapter: the first images shown are the Comedian's blood flowing from the sidewalk where his body landed, dripping down into the literal gutter where it stains his yellow and black smiley face pin, the blood seeming to flow between the panels as the point of view pans upwards. This imagery is juxtaposed with the opening lines of text, quoted from "Rorschach's Journal, October 12, 1985," printed in black letters on smiley face yellow text boxes: "The streets are extended gutters and the gutters are full of blood…"[101] The second panel shows a pair of shoes walking through the blood, revealed to belong to a red-haired man holding a sign that says "The End is Nigh" who walks through the blood without reacting, staring straight ahead and tracking bloody footprints behind him, all of which seems to further upset a man dressed in the apron and paper hat of a soda jerk who is futilely attempting to wash the blood off the sidewalk with a hose. The "panning" or "zoom out" effect of the sequence on this page culminates in reaching the floor of the building where Edward Blake, "the Comedian," had lived and where he was thrown to his death the previous night. The next three pages alternate between two detectives having a

[101] Moore, Alan and Dave Gibbons, *Watchmen*, DC Comics, 2014, p. 9

conversation while surveying the crime scene and red-tinted panels depicting Blake's murder without showing who the killer is, with the detectives' conversation running across both sets of panels. The scene resolves with the detectives exiting the building and passing the sign-holding man on the street while discussing the possibility that one of Blake's old associates, "Rorschach" might be the killer.

Even in just these opening pages it immediately becomes clear that Moore and Gibbons are constantly working in between the gutter and the panel to produce the narrative effects and iconic associations of image and text in a mode of expression specific to the comics medium. Building on the initial definition of closure as the grammar of comics, McCloud attempted to categorize all of the possible types of panel transitions. This typology provides a useful framework for the analysis of panel sequencing in *Watchmen* as all but the final type of transitions are utilized in the book: 1. moment-to-moment (i.e. the same scene but with an implied passing of time), 2. action-to-action (a single subject performing an action over time), 3. subject-to-subject (different characters or focal points but connected by the scene or scenario), 4. scene-to-scene (differences of time and space unified by concept or causality), 5. aspect-to-aspect (associated images which establish a place, idea, or mood but do not have any shared subjects, locations, or obvious temporal/causal connections), 6. the non-sequitur (no logical relationship between panels).[102]

The effects produced by panel transitions in comic books typically do not draw attention

[102] The non-sequitur transition type is the least common, so it is perhaps not strange that it is missing from *Watchmen* but its absence from further consideration in this chapter is not due to an inability to interpret this transition within the framework of Ricoeurian mimetics. *Vol. 2* of *Time and Narrative* is largely concerned with the inescapable linear temporality of narrative, even so-called non-linear narratives. A discussion of the followability of that which does not follow (the non-sequitur) ought to be developed with reference to the elaboration of Ricoeur's narratology in the latter volumes of *TN* that were necessarily left unexplored in chapter one of this project.

to themselves, or put differently, they work because the reader does not notice them working. A reader can see time passing and objects moving through space in a series of juxtaposed static images because they cannot see each image in isolation. While there is some sense an analogy to the illusion of the passage of time in cinema (whether film or animated), there is a key difference in comics, which is that the whole page is visible at one glance and even prior or subsequent pages can be flipped to at any point in the act of reading. This places the experience of reading a comic closer to that of reading a literary text, where each individual word in a sentence, each sentence in a paragraph, each paragraph on a page, each page in relation to the other pages, can be read and re-read with an inherently variable tempo, started and stopped and restarted, skimmed, skipped, repeated etc. While digital playback of video has introduced some of these elements into the possible viewing experience, cinema and television largely remain forms of media with a static mode of presentation: a predetermined and unchanging framerate which proceeds with or without the perception or participation of the viewer. This is why even though the discussion of closure and the grammar of panel-transitions would seem to have its closest analog in film/television, the way in which an individual frame of a film can be interpreted in relation to all of the prior frames is fundamentally different from the juxtaposition of multiple comic panels on a single page, or even across pages. This is all the more relevant for *Watchmen* specifically and helps support Moore's assertion of its unfilmable nature and his resistance to its cinematic adaptation, because contrary to the typical comic book creator's aim to produce the illusion without being detected, Moore and Gibbons "show the strings" and foreground their games with time and space at the level of form as well as content.

Moore characterizes this synergistic interplay as something like an emergent property of the collaboration between writer and artist, defining the unique effects offered by the medium

with the term "under-language" in a 1997 interview:

> What it comes down to in comics is that you have complete control of both the verbal track and the image track, which you don't have in any other medium, including film. So a lot of effects are possible which simply cannot be achieved anywhere else. You control the words and the pictures—and more importantly—you control the *interplay* between those two elements which not even film can achieve. There's a sort of "under-language" at work there, that is, neither the "visuals" nor the "verbals" but a unique effect caused by a combination of the two.[103]

Leaving aside the grandiosity of the alleged "complete control" (perhaps charged by Moore's ongoing frustrations with the expropriation of his intellectual property), this quote is significant because it helps to the particular form of linguistic and graphical juxtaposition that Moore argues can only be achieved through the comic book medium. A defining trait of Moore and Gibbon's particular version of this under-language is a certain exhibitionism of the visual-textual operations: the foregrounding of artifice amplified by overt puns, literalization of what is being figured, unnecessary doubling, mirrored inversions, overtly telegraphed self-reference etc. Dr. Manhattan refers to himself as "a puppet who can see the strings" (*Watchmen* p. 285). Moulthrop draws on this to suggest a figure for the under-language, characterizing the strings as "those threads or skeins of meaning that network the text, and thus the basic geometry of *Watchmen* itself" (Moulthrop p. 292). The language of network and geometry is apt, helping to reinforce the *muthos* half of *mimesis-muthos*. This is the sense in which masking is structuration as much as it is incarnation.

The masked enactment performs more than a replication of an identity; it reconfigures time and being. Moore and Gibbons' visual-textual interplay functions like the mask in Attic theater, which served not only to conceal but also to reveal, to project, visually and sonically, an

[103] Wiater, Stanley and Stephen R. Bissette, *Comic Book Rebels: Conversations with the Creator of the New Comics*, Underwood Books, 1997, p. 163.

exaggerated expression. The exaggerated or distorted features of the theatrical mask, its living death as the inanimate substitution of the animate face is not a failed realism but an intentional display of artifice. Rather than effacing its traces, masked mimesis faces itself, gives itself a face, amplifying through simplification and signaling the performativity of the performance, not just the performance of acts but the act of performance, the presentation of the presentation. *Watchmen* obsessively reiterates the identity and difference of mask and face through the repetition of the trope of the true face beneath the mask as well as its opposite, the mask as true face, performing the paradox of identity as performance and disorienting the dialectic of surface and depth which serves as the paradigmatic analogy for any hermeneutics of suspicion.

**VII. The True Face**

The postulation of a "true face" is introduced as early as the first panel of the first page, where the text box of Rorschach's journal reads, "Dog carcass in alley this morning, tire tread on burst stomach. This city is afraid of me. I have seen its true face." (p. 9) These journal entry text boxes are imposed upon the aforementioned images of blood in the gutter, dripping from the sidewalk into the street, spilling and splattered across the Comedian's smiley face pin. What to make of this "true face" of the city? Of Rorschach, whose journal plays the role of the hard-boiled narrator or film noir voiceover, whose face is shown from this opening scene (the red-haired man with the "End is Nigh" sign) but without any explicit connection to the disembodied non-diegetic journal entries, and who will appear on multiple occasions unmasked and anonymous but only shown as Rorschach while wearing his iconic inkblot mask until he is arrested and unmasked in the final panels of Chapter V. How to interpret the ink blot?

Rorschach is arguably the character for whom identity and mask are most explicitly linked and literalized. He wears his name on his face. This is never directly addressed at any

point in the text, even when Rorschach is undergoing Rorschach tests during his state mandated psychiatric sessions in Chapter VI, “The Abyss Gazes Also,” except by the psychiatrist’s introduction of the test as he places a white card with a familiar inkblot pattern on it on the table between them: “Okay, now I guess you know what this is…” (p. 179). The chapter serves as Rorschach’s origin story, providing flashbacks to his childhood and life as Walter Kovacs interspersed with ineffectual treatment sessions with Dr. Malcolm Long who narrates the chapter. Long, his treatment methods, and his interpretations of the patient are presented with ironic overconfidence. His initial optimism and enthusiasm for the opportunity to analyze this particular enigmatic and disturbed patient are constantly undercut by the dissonance between Kovacs’ phony positive responses and the shocking brutality of the flashbacks which are initially shown but remain verbally undisclosed. The sessions culminate in a particularly gruesome narration and a declaration of Rorschach’s nihilistic philosophy which leaves Long in stunned silence. The confidence and authority of the doctor are gradually dissolved through the course of the chapter, progressively showing the toll that this work has on him and his marriage until the final page where Long is shown alone in the dark, gazing into the abyss and contemplating the emptiness and meaninglessness of life. The general tone of the chapter is anti-psychiatric and could be characterized as an example of “resistance to treatment.” Beyond a skepticism towards psychotherapy, it suggests a certain suspicion of hermeneutics, summarized by Rorschach himself in the final session, “Existence is random. Has no pattern save what we imagine after staring at it for too long. No meaning save what we choose to impose” (p. 204). The inversion of the therapeutic relationship, where instead of the doctor making the patient get better, the patient makes the doctor worse, is mirrored in Rorschach’s declaration to the other inmates moments after throwing scalding hot food in the face of a prisoner who was about to stab him in the lunch

line, “I’m not locked up in here with you. You’re locked up in here with me” (p. 191).

His “origin story” includes an origin for his iconic mask, as well as the moment he became, or as he puts it, “was Rorschach.” Why the character chooses this particular this concept and this name is never made explicit. The mask itself has its origin in the garment industry where Kovacs was employed prior to becoming a vigilante. Made from a scrap of experimental fabric composed of “viscous fluids between two layers latex, heat and pressure sensitive” and originally intended to be used for a custom ordered dress but rejected by the client because she “said dress looked ugly” (p. 188) Kovacs, fascinated by its “black and white… changing shape… but not mixing” takes the fabric home and experiments on it, cutting it “until it didn’t look like a woman anymore.” Two years later he sees an article in the newspaper about a brutal rape and murder that occurred while the neighbors watched and did nothing, and he recognizes the victim as the unsatisfied client, Kitty Genovese.[104] This crime is cited as his justification for becoming a masked vigilante, but it seems it is not the crime itself that had such a particular effect on Kovacs, but the voyeurism of the onlookers: “Some of them even watched, do you understand?... I knew what people were, then, behind all the evasions and the self-deception. Ashamed for humanity, I went home. I took the remains of her unwanted dress… and made a face that I could bear to look at it in the mirror” (p. 188) Rorschach sees his mask as his true face and makes that explicit when he’s being arrested and unmasked at the end of Chapter V, screaming “My Face! Give It Back!” (p. 172).

The primary hypotextual “origin story” for the character lies in two earlier comic book characters created by Steve Ditko. Ditko, most famous for co-creating Spider-Man and Dr.

[104] Another example of transtextual interpolation in *Watchmen*’s alternate history, this actual murder and the way in which it was initially reported have had an enduring legacy in the cultural imaginary regardless of the fact that the circumstances of the original report and it’s “bystander effect” have been called into question.

Strange for Marvel Comics was an evangelical devotee of Ayn Rand's Objectivist philosophy. He was also a significant contributor to Charlton Comics, the smaller publisher purchased by DC whose characters were originally to be used in *Watchmen*. The two Ditko characters that are the most direct template for Rorschach are Mr. A and the Question, both known for costumes that looked like noir detectives (suits and fedora hats) with blank featureless masks and a Manichean moral code. After the decision not to use the Question or any of the other Charlton Comics was made the only explicit trace of the character lies in the name of the boys home that a young Kovacs is sent to after he assaults an older bully, Charlton Home.

Rorschach's hypertextual origin is the most directly mimetic of any of *Watchmen*'s characters, but with that said, what kind of mimesis is this? How to interpret the ink blot? Is this borrowing from Ditko an act of pure mockery, a darkly satirical funhouse mirror version of his Randian protagonists, intended to deride and refute his ideology? Is this an act of deconstruction, or disfiguration? In a sense, the hypertextual mask can be seen as a defacement of the monochrome precursors.[105] Yet, the symbolism of the black ink included within the white fabric but never diluting it preserves the binary moral metaphysics. Ditko conceived of his objectivist heroes as "psychologically and intellectually healthy" in contrast to the typical neurotic superhero, so Rorschach's brutality and obvious mental illness could be seen as an inversion or perversion of the Objectivist fantasy.[106] However, rather than a simple critique performed through parodic betrayal of the source material, Rorschach's relationship to these precursors can also be seen as a far more subtle mimetic act, a faithful extension of the hypotextual logic pushed to its extreme limit. Ditko stressed the importance of choice for his heroes, that they chose to be

[105] Defacement is a recurring motif in Chapter VI.
[106] "The Question's Fraternal Twin". *vicsage.com*. Archived from the original on 21 August 2006. Accessed on 29 March 2025.

heroic, that they chose to be moral etc. and there is a trace of this voluntarism in Rorschach, albeit taken to the point of an Absurdist Nihilism. After he tells Dr. Long about Kitty Genovese, ostensibly his "superhero origin" story, when Long starts to say, "you decided to become Rorschach," Kovacs interrupts him, declaring "Don't be stupid. I wasn't Rorschach then. Then I was just Kovacs. Kovacs pretending to be Rorschach" (p. 192). For the young Kovacs who decides to become a vigilante, the mask is just a mask, and the persona is an act. He claims that it takes a second traumatic horror for him to become Rorschach, which Kovacs details to Long in their final session. Eleven years after the news of the Genovese murder inspired him to pretend to be Rorschach, news of a kidnapping prompts him to investigate. After discovering that the victim has been killed and the majority of the evidence burned and the remains of the child seemingly fed to the kidnappers dogs, Rorschach brutally kills the animals, throws one of the carcasses at the killer, handcuffs him to the furnace and then burns the house down, waiting in the street to make sure he didn't escape. At this moment of gazing into the abyss and having the abyss gaze back, Rorschach says he felt, "reborn… free to scrawl own design on this morally blank world. Was Rorschach" (p. 26) Seeing the "true face" had given him his own. He remains fully committed to his own moral code, and never truly questions or recants his own interpretations of the events of the story up until the very end where he is killed for refusing to compromise his principles. He is arguably consistent with Ditko's vision of a non-neurotic superhero with a black and white moral philosophy. The problem is that the absolute commitment to one's own choices and complete lack of self-reproach, doubt, empathy, anxiety, and guilt yield a "hero" that is a complete psychopath. Ultimately, this comes back to the resistance to theory/treatment that runs through the entirety of Chapter VI. There is a contradiction at the heart of the character's self-analysis, which is itself just another incarnation

of the classical aporia of free-will and determinism: the conviction that his Nietzschean "becoming who he was," the moment when mask became true face, was a free choice, vs. his equally insistent claim that he and others like him do not choose, but simply "are compelled." His worldview cannot resolve this with a both/and, it has to be either one, the other, or its nothing. Perhaps seeing "the true face" is nothing more than that. The encounter with the abyss that marks the self with the trace of the abyss. The recognition of one's own monstrosity through the monstrous face of the other. There was only one other person that Rorschach ever claimed had also seen the true face, the murderer who was also a murder victim whose death serves as the inciting incident at the start of it all.

In order to evaluate Rorschach's claim that he too had seen "the true face," it is first necessary to catalogue the many faces of *Watchmen*'s sad clown Edward Blake. First and foremost, the smiley pin itself, inseparable from his persona as the Comedian. His literal costumes have two different iterations: the 1940s "Golden Age" clown costume was yellow like the smiley pin, with a smiley face belt buckle and a "Lone Ranger" style black domino mask; the 1960s-70s "Silver Age" costume is more militaristic, mainly composed of tactical combat gear with American flag pauldrons, a BDSM gimp mask at times, but at times also still depicted with the old domino mask as well. The smiley pin is present in both costumed eras, as well as in all of his civilian appearances. In his final appearance (chronologically, technically his first appearance narratively) in the moments before his murder he is wearing a bathrobe with the smiley pin, bloody face matching the bloody pin. The motif of his face bleeding or with some liquid dripping down it is repeated a number of times throughout the comic: scratched by Sally when he attempts to sexually assault her in the 1940s; his face bleeding in Vietnam after the unnamed Vietnamese woman he has impregnated and is about to abandon slashes him with a broken bottle moments

before he shoots her in cold blood; a week before his murder, when he visits his old enemy Moloch (a former supervillain now ex-con waiting out his last days with terminal cancer), and Blake appears unmasked and gives a rambling monologue about a conspiracy which ends up with a close-up panel of his face with tears streaming down it like the blood on the smiley.

This repeated motif of Edward Blake's bloody face and the bloody smiley doubles down on the "blood-stained leftover from some mindless fad, turned into the calling card of a government assassin… a token of his violent death… the true face of *Watchmen*'s Pax Americana: a brittle, false prosperity built on brutality and lies."[107] The mask as a figure of unmasking, a truth represented through falsehood. Seeing the true face is also equated by Rorschach with the recognition of the cruel joke of reality, or of a realistic understanding of history and society. This is what he credits the Comedian with, his journal entry lauding Blake for seeing "the cracks in society… the little men in masks trying to hold it together… he saw the true face of the twentieth century and chose to become a reflection, a parody of it" (*Watchmen* p. 69). This reflection segues into the famous "Sad Clown Pagliacci" joke, given across blood-red panels repeating scenes from the Comedian's life alternating with scenes of his death from the opening of the first chapter: "Man goes to doctor, says he's depressed, says life seems harsh and cruel. Says he feels all alone in a threatening world where what lies ahead is vague and uncertain. Doctor says 'Treatment is simple. Great clown Pagliacci is in town tonight. Go and see him that should pick you up. Man bursts into tears. Says, 'But Doctor… I am Pagliacci. Good joke. Everybody laugh. Roll on snare drum. Curtains." (p. 69-70) The true face is a good joke which serves to further reiterate the despair and nihilism of the Comedian, but also to bring out the intertextuality of his original costume as a sort of yellow smiley face version of the

[107] Moulthrop, Stuart, "See The Strings: Watchmen and the Under-Language of Media." *Third Person*, Eds. P. Harrigan and N. Wardip-Fruin, MIT Press, 2009. p. 290.

classic *commedia dell'arte* Pierrot. Perhaps the Vietnam War era version is something of a transformation into a jingoistic Harlequin, although it is notable that the Comedian bares very little resemblance to the most famous and archetypical anarchic trickster in comic books, the Joker.[108] Judging by the name alone one would imagine that the Joker is the obvious source from mainstream comics which was being reinterpreted through the character of the Comedian, but he is much closer to a parody of patriotic figures like Captain America, perhaps amalgamated with violent fascistic anti-heroes like the Punisher.

If the smiley face stands for Edward Blake, it also stands for *Watchmen* itself, and the motif is not only repeated with direct reference to the Comedian. Another key smiley face image in Chapter IX, "The Darkness of Mere Being," might not immediately appear to have anything to do with the Comedian, although ultimately it performs a visual repetition that parallels the lasting damage of his legacy. It appears on the second to last page (p. 307) in the midst of the culminating eureka moment, Laurie's existential crisis over the circumstances of her birth providing the reminder to no-longer-human Manhattan of the thermo-dynamic miracle of life juxtaposed with a canyon smiley face carved into the surface of Mars (which as Moulthrop points out is an actual physical feature of the planet Mars, Galle, the so called "happy face crater"). This face on the face of the planet is not an unblemished simple smiley face, however. Much like the iconic blood splattered smiley, it has been defaced; with the "blemish" caused by the falling wreckage of the elaborate clocklike crystal palace which Manhattan has been assembling in the background of the scenes from his self-imposed exile on Mars in prior chapters. This palace has been reduced to a pile of fragments (the blemish on the face of Mars) because Laurie has thrown a bottle at it. Other commentators have characterized this moment as

[108] A character that Moore and Gibbons were both intimately familiar with. See Moore's *The Killing Joke* and Gibbon's *World's Finest*.

a use of the "domestic dispute" trope where an emotional outburst is punctuated with broken glassware. However, the precise type of bottle matters quite a bit here. In order to fully appreciate the significance of this object in this moment, it is necessary to go back to the end of the previous chapter to properly unpack what is contained within this vessel which plays such a catalytic role in the epiphany that brings Manhattan and Laurie literally and figuratively back to earth.

**VIII. Nostalgia**

The bottle in question is a bottle of perfume, "Nostalgia by Veidt," one of the many commodities produced by the corporation owned by Adrian Veidt, aka Ozymandias, Laurie and Jon's former superhero colleague and the mastermind hero/villain pulling all the strings behind the scenes throughout the story. Bottles of Nostalgia or advertisements for it appear in almost every chapter. It is worth listing all of these appearances and providing some additional context for them in order to appreciate the significance of the fact that this bottle is the instrument of destruction/epiphany in Ch. IX as well as to setup the significance that the Nostalgia brand will take on in the 2019 series.

The first reference to Nostalgia occurs in Ch. II, on p. 43, where the bottle and name of the perfume are shown in an ad on the back of one of Sally Juspeczyk's magazines. The second appearance is in Ch. III, on p. 83, where a billboard that reveals the full name is "Nostalgia by Veidt" along with an image of the bottle floating in the air next to a woman in a fur coat reading a letter with the caption "Where is the essence that was so divine?". The third appearance, Ch. VII, p. 225, is in a TV commercial playing in the background while Laurie awkwardly attempts to initiate sex with an impotent Dan Dreiberg, the lyrics for the ad's jingle ("Unforgettable" by Nat King Cole) playing out in the text bubbles: "Oh, my darling it's incredible that someone so

unforgettable… should think I am unforgettable, too." Nostalgia appears three times in Ch. VIII, "Old Ghosts," first on p. 247, a bottle is in the foreground of a panel while Sally speaks to Hollis Mason on the phone reminiscing about their past, a few panels later we are shown the name of her retirement community is Nepenthe Gardens.[109] It appears again on p. 268 when Laurie is packing up her possessions and one of them is a bottle of Nostalgia. This is the same bottle that will play the aforementioned pivotal role in the subsequent chapter. The third reference to Nostalgia in Ch. VIII is a billboard ad on p. 271, echoing the title of the chapter and prefiguring it's closing epigraph, "Oh, how the ghost of you clings…"[110] Finally the cover art for Chapter IX (p. 280), which is also its first panel (p. 281), reiterated throughout the chapter (p. 283, 288, 292, 296, 301, and in four separate panels on p. 304), is a bottle of Nostalgia flying through the air, angled to imply clockwise movement. Its cap is missing, and perfume is spilling out of the bottle in a counter-clockwise arc. It continues its clockwise rotation in each of the reiterated panels until it is shown smashing against Manhattan's crystalline Martian palace, triggering the collapse of the structure, the remnants of which provide the defacement of the smiley face on the face of Mars, echoing the blood splatter on the Comedian's pin and the scar on his face.[111]

The arc of the bottle parallels Laurie's arc in this chapter. She is attempting to balance two tasks: 1) to convince Manhattan to care enough about humanity to return to Earth and attempt to prevent an imminent catastrophic event and 2) to follow Manhattan's instruction

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[109] The reference is to *nēpenthés pharmakon,* the "forgetfulness drug." See Odyssey Book IV, v. 219-221. I will return to this reference to Nepenthe in connection to Nostalgia later as Nostalgia appears in a transmuted form in *Watchmen* (2019) and functions as a dialectical inversion of Nepenthe.

[110] The closing quotation on p. 274 which gives the chapter its title is from a poem by Eleanor Farjeon entitled "Hallowe'en": "On Hallowe'en the old ghosts come about us, and they speak to some; to others they are dumb."

[111] This is the final visual presence of Nostalgia in the main text, although it is referenced once more, when Laurie and Dan are comforting each other after Veidt's "big reveal" and she asks about his scent and he says its "Nostalgia," and an additional time in the backmatter for Ch. XI, the puff piece interview with Veidt in the Nova Express has one final ad which includes three lines of text, gradually morphing from an Art Nouveau font to the Westminster font associated with computers, "The Times They Are A 'Changing." (p. 380)

(prompted by his detached deterministic responses to her attempt to get him to return to Earth) to remember her earliest memory. Following the memory trail leads to the thrown bottle which resolves the disinterested Manhattan. The first panel of the memory is at the bottom of page 286: a first person POV in a dark room, two small hands frame a snow globe with a castle inside it overlayed with the reflection of a child's face (reduced to eyes and smile). Young Laurie's clandestine appreciation of the snow globe occurs as her parents fight in another room, circling around but not directly expressing that the subject of this fight is infidelity and the truth of Laurie's parentage, and so left to her own devices she enjoys a private moment contemplating an escape to some elsewhere. She recalls the globe as "like a little glass bubble of somewhere else. I lifted it, starting a blizzard. I knew it wasn't real snow, but I couldn't understand how it fell so slowly. I figured inside the ball was some different sort of time. Slow time" (p. 287). This reverie is interrupted by the appearance of her parents, her father, angry at her for sneaking around (potentially spying on their argument, although the panels depict Laurie as uninterested or seeking escape from it), surprises her and this flash of anger causes her to drop the snow globe. It shatters on the ground revealing that "inside it was only water." (p. 288)

A few pages later, back on Mars, Laurie asks Manhattan for a drink, something which he will create out of thin air, and when he asks her what she wants she says "water, just water." Manhattan responds to Laurie's plea for him to care about the fate of humanity with a general reflection on the purposelessness of human striving and this prompts Laurie to reflect on the purposelessness of her own striving. She flashes back to the early 1960s when she was living with her mother. Their relationship dynamic blurs the lines between mother-daughter and something more akin to an entertainment industry agent / client relationship. Sally's ex-husband, (the "dad" in the earlier flashback) had been her agent before they were married, something

which is referenced but not depicting directly in the comic, and Sally's parenting is no doubt a kind of mimetic repetition of the way she was coached into her pseudo-entertainment / pseudo-law enforcement career. After finishing a workout, Laurie returns to the apartment to find that her mother has visitors: a sort of informal reunion of a few of her old crime-fighting colleagues. Initially present are the retired Minuteman Nelson Gardner (Captain Metropolis) and Hollis Mason (the original Nite Owl). The topic turns to Mason's book "Under The Hood" (which had revealed the details of Edward Blake's sexual assault of Sally to the public) and despite her interest in the book we learn that Sally has kept Laurie from reading it. They are soon joined by Byron Lewis (Moth-Man), accompanied by a doctor who interrupts the offer of a drink for the late arrival, "Just a club soda for Mr. Lewis." Lewis, clearly addled with either dementia, "wet brain," and/or under the effects of heavy medication, is disoriented and drops his glass as Nelson calls out, "Careful, your glass, you're… [intercut with an image of the spiraling bottle of Nostalgia] …spilling everything," followed by an image of the shattered glass on the floor echoing the snow globe. Witnessing this pathetic display, a young Laurie presses her mother, "is that what I'm training for? What I got to look forward to?" (p. 292)

Cut from the shattered glass back to Mars, where Manhattan once again queries, "the point of all that struggling; the purpose of this endless labor; accomplishing nothing, leaving people empty and disillusioned… leaving people broken." Admitting that many people have miserable lives and never accomplish anything, Laurie still insists that there has to be some significance to life, to the fact of the existence of life. Unconvinced, Manhattan insists on the irrelevance of life to existence, citing the surrounding Martian landscape and it's "chaotic terrain" as a viable alternative. To this Laurie retorts, "if you're so fascinated by rocks getting twisted into weird shapes, Jesus Christ, you should have seen me before I met you! My mother,

she eroded my adolescence, chipping me into the shape she'd have been if she hadn't had me… pushed me… trying to live her life through me…" (p. 294). This reflection on her mother's attempt at redemption or extension of her own life through the vicarious proxy of a daughter made into her reiteration leads to another flashback. Perhaps triggered by the "before I met you," this memory takes place moments after Laurie and Jon's first encounter.

The scene begins with Laurie's perspective on the failed 1966 meeting where Captain Metropolis and Ozymandias hoped to form the Crimebusters team, a new generation (Silver Age) of masked vigilantes that could face the problems of the day. That meeting itself first appears in the comic as a flashback from Adrian Veidt's perspective (prompted by the Comedians funeral in Chapter II). That scene played out in Veidt's memory immediately following Sally's flashback to the 1940s triggered by a photograph of the original (Golden Age) team, the Minutemen, which revealed that she had been sexually assaulted by Edward Blake. This time the memory is less about the meeting itself and instead focuses on its aftermath (ala Sally's flashback to her assault). Echoing her mother's flashback, Laurie is alone and is approached by Blake. They strike up an uncomfortably flirty conversation (Laurie is sixteen years old at the time, and as will be revealed later in the chapter, Blake is most likely her biological father) about how much Laurie physically takes after her mother. The only exception, Blake notes, is her hair, as two panels highlight their own strikingly similar hair. The conversation is interrupted by the arrival of Sally, who accuses Blake of trying to do to her daughter what he did to her twenty-five years prior (although she stops short of naming what exactly it was that he did). After a short drive away, Sally is finally able to open up to her daughter about what happened, "she pulled the car over and just sat there… and it all came pouring out" as the panel transitions from Sally crying in the car to the spinning bottle of

Nostalgia. (p. 296)

Back on Mars, Manhattan is still unmoved by the plight of humanity, and unwilling to consider anything beyond cosmic detachment. He presses Laurie to produce some example of human experience which could measure up to the peaks and values of the Martian landscape that they are observing. Compared to the beauty and sublimity of nature, he asks, "does the human heart know chasms so abysmal?" (p. 299). Digging for a suitably wretched emotional nadir, Laurie finds herself at the bottom of a glass of scotch. Refracted through this miserable looking glass is a particularly ghoulish Washingtonian banquet in honor of Edward Blake, where what passes for cocktail hour small talk are jokes about the bodies of Woodward and Bernstein turning up in a parking garage and Blake's thinly veiled telegraphing that he assassinated J.F.K. (met with raucous laughter by the Nixonian old boys club). This encounter between Laurie and Blake plays out quite differently than the last one. She's talked with her mother, she's read Mason's book, she's had seven glasses of scotch, and she confronts Blake. After belittling her decision to go by the family name Juspeczyk instead of her mother's stage name Jupiter, he once again tries to turn the conversation back to her physical resemblance to her mother, at which point Laurie accuses him of the attempted rape. As the circle of old men predictably react to this angry young woman "making a scene," she doubles down on her accusations, "what kind of man are you, you have to take some woman, you have to force into having sex against her will…" to which Blake weakly admits/protests "only once." (p. 301) Laurie was unable to make the connection and see the significance of this "only once" at the time, but what is unsaid here but implied elsewhere is that her mother "forgave" Blake and had something resembling a consensual relationship with him at some point *after* he attempted to rape her. Back in 1973, Laurie throws the remnants of her last glass of scotch in his face, an explosion of ice and liquor, splashing over his scar and

down to the smiley face pin on his lapel. As the Nostalgia bottle keeps on spinning, Laurie punctuates the memory: “I let him have it.”

All of these memories come together eventually, and panels and text boxes from each one are repeated, interspersed with present day Laurie reaching a climactic moment of horrified realization that Edward Blake, the Comedian, is most likely her biological father. One last repetition of the snow globe smashing on the floor gives way to adult Laurie’s horrified face reflected in the bottle of Nostalgia moments before she hurls it at Manhattan’s crystalline clockwork palace. As the palace collapses around them, Manhattan extends the invisible force field that she has been incased in (previously only to provide oxygen/atmosphere) into a protective globe that encases both of them. Something about this final realization is finally sufficient to bring Manhattan back to earth. At least in this moment, he is content to declare that the sheer improbability of human life is enough to constitute a “thermo-dynamic miracle” and that this is all that is needed to, in the words of the Carl Jung quote that closes the chapter, “kindle a light of meaning in the darkness of mere being.” (p. 308)

**IX. The Watch**

In the early account of Genette’s theorization of transtextuality, the epigraph of the final chapter (“Who watches the watchmen?”) was cited as the paradigmatic example of intertextuality in *Watchmen*. This quotation from Juvenal’s *Satires* provides the animating question for the text as whole and, via the particular language used in the included translation, merges the concept of the guardian with the figure of the watchmen. With the verb to watch, the act of looking (and thus of theory but also spectatorship and voyeurism) also carries associations with authority, oversight, the ability to hold accountable or give an account, thus, to witness and survey, the watchmen as the one who watches in this sense would seem to be the literal or

conventional meaning (though already stretched into the figurative and intangible by connotating far more than active visual sense perception). In the context of *Satire VI,* the quotation has much less of a political/juridical meaning than it has been associated with through the history of its aphoristic transformation. The satire concerns the topic of marriage and can be read as a classical example of misogyny but even more explicitly of misogamy (and implicitly of a particularly paranoid homophobia).[112] The "watchmen" in question are the household attendants, or "guardians," tasked with simultaneously serving and surveilling/protecting wives. The problem, which "*quid custodiet ipsos custodes*?" is addressing is the fear that the servant/guard will seduce or be seduced by the wife, and Juvenal critiques the customary ways of guarding against this: the use of the eunuch and/or *cinaedus* (passive homosexual male). Such guardians cannot be trusted because either they are pretending to be eunuchs or *cinaedi* (masked) or, even if they are who they seem, women will be attracted to them precisely because of their emasculated and effeminate nature (perhaps suggesting that the fear of the seductive *cinaedi* simply masks the fear of the lesbian wife, or further, that all of these "phobias" mask a repressed voyeuristic desire). Moore has stated that he came upon the quotation second-hand and thus appropriated it without any conscious awareness of the content of *Satire VI*, but there are compelling reasons beyond authorial intent that justify excavating the origin of *Watchmen*'s iconic rhetorical quotation further. Most explicitly, Juvenal's concern with surveillance and the possession/regulation/exploitation of the bodies of others is also a thread which runs through both the *Watchmen* comic and the televisual adaptation. Furthermore, for the purposes of the comparative reading of the two transmedia adaptations of the comic in the remaining sections of this chapter, the focal point of Juvenal's case against marriage— fidelity/infidelity and its

[112] Braund, Susanna H., "Juvenal—Misogynist or Misogamist" The Journal of Roman Studies, Vol. 82 (1992), pp. 71-86.

relation to *pudicitia* (purity/modesty/chastity) or the lack thereof—frames the quasi-religious devotion which animates the anxious performance of fannish adaptation.[113]

There is also another possible sense of watchmen, perhaps more playful or cartoony, more at home in the nomenclature of comic book superheroes. This reading of watchmen requires the noun form of the watch as a literal timepiece. Considered in this sense, a watchmen becomes a clocksmith, a clock-man, perhaps echoing the father's profession which provides the title of Chapter IV. *Watchmen* continually plays with this parallel between the watchmen who watch and the watch-men: through the repeated motif of clock faces, the Doomsday Clock, and most directly through the origin story of Jonathan Osterman as the watchmaker's son. In the opening pages of "Watchmaker," a blue text box provides a timestamp, "It is August 7th, 1945," and a young Osterman in his family's Brooklyn apartment is practicing disassembling and reassembling his father's pocket watch, practicing for the career he plans to follow his footsteps into, but this clockwork mimesis is differed, interrupted by the father brandishing a newspaper with the headline reporting the atomic bomb dropped on Hiroshima. This micro-moment crystallizes a human response to a macro-epochal Kuhnian scientific revolution: Newtonian physics is dead, Einsteinian relativity and modern atomic science have replaced the old clockwork universe, and if his son is to have any hope of relevance and success in life, he will need to forsake his father's profession and embrace this New Science. As he declares this to his son, the elder Osterman scatters the pieces of the disassembled watch, destroying the past to ensure that his son has a future.

This scene is experienced by Dr. Manhattan aka Jonathan Osterman, in the same

[113] Further dimensions of Juvenal's text which demand subsequent exploration beyond the bounds of this chapter: the scholarly debate around the use of *personae* and the extent to which the *Satires* themselves need to be interpreted as masked performances, the role of the *cucculus* (hood) in providing the anonymity necessary for adulterous liaisons, and the discussion of theater and actors as prime suspects in the case of adulterous seduction.

simultaneity that he experiences all time, because he too was deconstructed and reconstructed by atomic energy, and the experience of linear time is as lost to him as the cogs of the pocket watch flung from the Brooklyn fire escape. The motif of the broken watch plays a key role in his own disintegration; when his colleague turned lover Janey's watch breaks and Jon offers to fix it, and then later after he has repaired it and she asks about it, he remembers that he left it in his lab coat in the atomic test chamber. Predictably, as is common in superhero origin stories, there is an accident which leads to the death of Jon and the birth of Dr. Manhattan, but rather than the miraculous deux ex machina which typifies such moments in Golden and Silver Age comics, in this case the reader is forced to linger on the build up from the moment of realization that he is trapped, the revelation that the automated time-locked chamber cannot be manually disarmed, to Jon's inevitable doom and disintegration. The final panel frozen in the body horror of this moment of uncanny transformation (a two-third page splash image of Jon's atomic disassembly)[114], followed by the awkward months of gradual reconstruction, a molecular autopoiesis in a sense no different from the reassembly of the watch. While all the pieces might have been made to fit, something is undeniably lost. The resurrected Dr. Manhattan may be an Übermensch or a demi-god, but through the scattering of his consciousness into a simultaneous singularity, where all of the discrete moments of his life are experienced at the same time, at least one aspect of his humanity appears to have been permanently eradicated.

Yet another watch face appears in this chapter, once again a broken watch, this time frozen by the atomic blast that leveled Hiroshima, the face memorialized on a 1985 Time magazine cover commemorating the anniversary of the bombing. Manhattan is also frozen,

[114] A death/transformation scene like this in a typical comic book would have been fully masked by a flash of light but here amidst the blinding light we are shown a flesh melting from his bones, eyeballs wide in the sockets, entrails and blood falling out as the body is erased from existence, all rendered in an inky black splatter not wholly dissimilar from Rorschach's mask.

standing still, experiencing all moments simultaneously, everywhere and nowhere, always reaching out to stop his father from discarding the pieces of the watch but "it's too late, always has been, always will be too late." (p.138) At one point when Manhattan tries to describe his experience of time, he is forced to employ spatial metaphors: "Time is spontaneous, an intricately structured jewel that humans insist on viewing one edge at a time, when the whole design is visible in every facet." (p. 286) There is something of this geometrical representation of time as space folding in on itself, a reiterative fractal *mise-en-abyme* in the structure and under-language of *Watchmen* itself, in the experience of reading *Watchmen* as both/neither literature and/nor visual art. And yet, one reads *Watchmen* the same way one reads any comic or anything at all: one word at a time, one text box/bubble at a time, one panel at a time, one page at a time. Understanding and interpretation may be emergent properties, something may be produced which is more than the sum of a sequence, but reading as mimetic narrativization, as emplotment (*mise en intrigue*), whether in a purely linguistic medium or a hybrid, does not happen all at once. A reader cannot read an entire page simultaneously, despite the intricacies and subtleties of Moore & Gibbons fractal folding of the under-language of their form, to equate the experience of reading *Watchmen* to Dr. Manhattan's own experience of time is simply false.

The question of whether it is possible to depict the experience of time attributed to this character comes down to a matter of what Freud called *Darstellbarkeit* or conditions of representability. This is related to Ricoeur's argument in *Time and Narrative* that so called non-linear narrative is ultimately a misnomer and might be more accurately called nonchronological discourse. Narrative as such is organization into a sequence. Regardless of where they fall on the "real" timeline of a story, events in narrative discourse proceed in a horizontal diachrony. Thus, rather than everything happening simultaneously, all we can ever be given is a stream of

consciousness sequential journey through Jon's past, present, and future, where he is never fully present because he is constantly dragged out of the moment by his train of thought, driven by associations which trigger *memoire involuntaire*. Bracketing the superhuman power to predicting the future or representing/remembering the past with total accuracy, the rest of this is not that different from a typical person's lived experience of time. In a sense, it has to be, because it is the only way that a narrative work of art can represent the experience of time. Dr. Manhattan's actual *Innerzeitigkeit* is conceivable but unrepresentable. I will return to this issue of the impossibility of representing Dr. Manhattan's time-consciousness in the analysis of *Watchmen* (2019), which also attempts to depict it but with the added difficulty of a medium whose space-time is defined by frames per second.

This theme of the possibility or impossibility of representation is what lies behind adaptation anxiety. For the literalistic traditionalist, the sole criterion for an adaptation is fidelity to the source. Such a conception of mimesis leads to a creative process which organizes itself around the goal of accuracy and often adopts the religious language of faithfulness. It associates itself with the task of preservation, suggesting that the perfect adaptation would be identical to its hypotext, albeit transposed into a new form. While the language of fidelity in the discourse of artistic and technological representation has no innate link to theological dogma, the "almost religious awe" which pervades the narratives around works which explicitly attempt to remake or reboot a "classic" precursor.[115] While the sense of fidelity as accuracy and the sense of it as loyalty and devotion are etymologically related, a technical discussion of the relative fidelity of electronic media comes down to a matter of vividness and when it comes to digital media can even be quantified according to various specifications (and the corresponding amount and

[115] *Watchmen,* Episode Seven, "An Almost Religious Awe" HBO, 2019.

frequency of data involved). While this technical sense has an implicit metaphysical/epistemological commitment to representational realism and the correspondence theory of truth, such technical discussions rarely verge into the equally anxious and reverential rhetoric of the faithful (re)creator. This reiterative religiosity is present to some extent in the discourse surrounding both the 2009 film version of *Watchmen* and the 2019 television series, but while the filmmakers claimed to seek total replication of the comic book, the creators of the show explicitly disavow adaptation and characterize their efforts using the musical metaphor of "remixing." The mere existence of both works could be seen as a refutation of Moore's attestation of *Watchmen*'s "unadaptability" but a more nuanced reading of that claim would suggest that the point is not that it is strictly speaking impossible, but that it would be impossible to do it well. This begs the critical question, by which criteria should an adaptation be judged? In the following sections I will make the case that the 2009 film's quest for hyperfidelity produces an adaptation which is simultaneously "panel accurate" and at the same time fundamentally misunderstands, suppresses, and distorts the comic. The 2019 series shares the films "fannish preoccupations" but channels its own adaptation anxiety into more explicitly reiterative and revisionary mimetic practices which produce something novel (therefore unfaithful) in the spirit of the novelty of the source text (therefore faithful).[116]

**X. Fidelity as Betrayal**

> Mimesis here is not the representation of one thing by another… the reproduction of a product of nature by a product of art. It is not the relation of two products but of two productions… The artist does not imitate things in nature… *natura naturata*, but the acts of *natura naturans*, the operations of the *physis*. But since an analogy has already made *natura naturans* the art of an author-subject… an artist-god, mimesis displays the identification of human action with divine action… The communicability of pure judgments of taste, the (universal, infinite, limitless) exchange between subjects… presupposes a commerce between the divine artist and the human one. And indeed this

[116] Taylor, Aaron. "The Continuing Adventures of the 'Inherently Unfilmable' Book: Zack Snyder's *Watchmen*." *Cinema Journal*, Vol. 56, Number 2, (Winter 2017), pp. 125-131.

> commerce is a mimesis, in the strict sense, a play, a mask, an identification with the other on stage, and not the imitation of an object by its copy.[117]

The entire modus operandi for the 2009 film version of *Watchmen* is self-described by its creators in religious language, treating the original comic as "an illuminated text" (Taylor 126).[118] What this means in practice is that the film's production involved extensive previsualization and storyboarding which attempted to completely recreate scenes directly from the model of individual panels and pages. This performance of reverence needs to be understood within the context of the contemporary culture industry's relationship to fandom. The commitment to hyperfidelity and declaration of that intent through media outlets is a gesture of reassurance/legitimation and identification. It is simultaneously a promise on behalf of its filmmakers to consumers/fans of the source material that their opinions are being catered to, and at the same time serves to establish the fannish identity of the filmmakers themselves, which constitutes a promise that they too care deeply about this work and take it seriously. In the words of *Watchmen* 2009 screenwriter David Hayter, "a movie by fans, for fans." Despite the similarities to a prototypical "I'm not just the owner, I'm a client too" testimonial advertisement, this commitment to fidelity is far more than a marketing slogan. The pursuit of identical replication from panel to screen is genuinely religious to the extent that, when it came to depicting the climactic attack on New York and the screenwriters made the decision to commit heresy and drastically deviate from the source material, director Zack Snyder hired original *Watchmen* artist Dave Gibbons to create original comic book style storyboard panels of their newly invented ending to serve as the originary source for the storyboards for these scenes which

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[117] Derrida, Jacques, "Economimesis," *Diacritics*, Summer, 1981, Vol. 11, No. 2, The Ghost of Theology: Readings of Kant and Hegel (Summer, 1981), pp. 2-25

[118] As mentioned in the earlier discussion of the prehistory of the comic book medium, illuminated manuscripts are a clear ancestor of the form so this rhetorical gesture of treating the hypotextual comic "as if" it was such a sacred text is perhaps reenacting more than it would seem.

appeared nowhere in the original comic. The production of a loophole through this type of logical contortionism, to effectively violate the law without technically violating it, demonstrates a form of betrayal through fidelity which would only present itself as a possibility to the true believer.

Deferring this substantial change for a moment, at the level of the plot of the book, the original theatrical cut of *Watchmen* 2009 does seem to produce a remarkable facsimile, but from the opening scene which depicts the murder of the Comedian it is clear that the temporality of the narration has been fundamentally altered.[119] In the opening page of the comic, the Comedian is already dead, and the panels which present the scene of his murder are flashbacks intercut between the detectives surveying the scene the next day. In Snyder's film, the murder is played out uninterrupted in the vein of a typical Hollywood action movie fight scene, augmented with Kung Fu style sound FX amplifying every punch or the breaking of glass, as well as Synder's cinematic signature, the use of slow motion. On its surface then, the scene seems to achieve a certain level of visual fidelity but also seems to have already deviated significantly from the sequencing of the comic. However, it is worth noting that the slow motion is not a static effect, and the particular way it is implemented here, known as the "speed ramping," which involves the use of a variable framerate to speed up and slow down within the same shot. This is notable for the evaluation of the allegedly unadaptable essence of reading a comic book. On the one hand, this opening scene is emblematic of the film's need to excise the formal experimentation with multiple overlapping timelines, enabled in the book by the multi-panel structure of the page. On the other hand, the speed ramping effect's variable framerate can be read as a filmic translation of the experience of reading the whole page of a comic book, slowing down and stretching out

[119] All of the subsequent analysis of the film will be based on the original theatrical cut. The subsequent revisions and additions of the "Ultimate Cut" will be considered later.

the scene to accommodate a pictorial quality and a mode of viewing more suited to static imagery.[120]

The opening scene of the film ends with the Comedian's smiley pin clattering to the ground where it was found in the opening panel of the comic, a near picture perfect replication. This segues to an original cinematic paratext, an opening credits montage set to Bob Dylan's "The Times They Are A-Changin'" which depicts scenes from the alternate history of *Watchmen*'s storyworld, condensed here to one sequence rather than dispersed through flashbacks and serialized paratexts.[121] After history has been dispensed, the montage turns to wholly invented scenes which are nowhere present in the comic and are clearly intended to provide additional context for the main characters of the 1980's present day. Starting with the Comedian's assassination of JFK which was alluded to but never confirmed, there are also scenes depicting Dr. Manhattan inserted into Neil Armstrong's moon landing, Andy Warhol at an art show unveiling screen prints of Nite Owl, Ozymandias, and Rorschach, Adrian Veidt hobnobbing at Studio 54 with Bowie and Jagger, and lastly, and perhaps most unfaithfully, the Comedian, Laurie, Dr. Manhattan, Ozymandias, Nite Owl, and Rorschach lined up for a team photograph. This last scene makes complete sense for a superhero film, but of course, absolutely no sense for the comic where no such team ever existed for significant reasons outlined in the previous sections of this chapter. The montage closes with an anti-vigilante riot, possibly set during the 1977s civil unrest prior to the passing of the Keene Act, where the inevitable "Who Watches the Watchman" graffiti appears painted on a glass window moments before it is

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[120] Ecke, Jochen, "Spatializing the Movie Screen: How Mainstream Cinema is Catching Up on the Formal Potentialities of the Comic Book Page." *Comics as a Nexus of Cultures*, ed. Mark Berninger, Jochen Ecke, and Gideon Haberkorn, McFarland, 2010.

[121] The use of this song is itself a reference to a reference, as the song's title was used in the Nova Express interview with Adrian Veidt included as the paratextual backmatter for Chapter XI, in the ad which inaugurated the end of Nostalgia and the birth of the new Millenium.

smashed by a rioter.

The film then reintegrates the detectives surveying the scene of the crime and Rorschach's opening monologue, although the latter is given as voiceover for the evening break-in to Edward Blake's apartment, with the opening scene of the unmasked Kovacs holding the "End is Nigh" sign completely omitted. The next few scenes play out in the same order as the comic, with the next notable deviation occuring in the scene where Rorschach goes to speak with Adrian Veidt. The film swaps out Rorschach for Dan Dreiberg, who waits to speak with Veidt while the Nova Express interview from the Chapter XI paratext is depicted. Veidt refers to his vigilante colleagues as "The Watchmen," signifying that in the world of the film, the characters shown taking the group photo in the opening credits belong to a superhero team bearing that name. The conversation between Dan and Adrian covers the same material as the original scene with Rorschach but in a more congenial tone. In the next stage of the investigation, Rorschach is back in the detective role visiting Dr. Manhattan and Laurie. The scene wildly deviates from the comic, with Manhattan suggesting that Rorschach is there to ask him to "look into my future and see if the killer is publicly identified" (*Watchmen* 00:26:28-0:26:48). He cannot do this, he claims, because his "future is blocked by some kind of temporal interference" speculating that this could be caused by nuclear holocaust. After Rorschach is teleported away, Manhattan opines to Laurie "if only you could perceive time as I do," and touches her forehead which triggers a sequence of images culminating in a version of the fight between Laurie's parents that was depicted in flashback in Chapter IX. The idea that Manhattan can give someone else a glimpse into his experience of time is never mentioned in the comic, but this could be seen as a literalization of the effect that their conversation has on her in Chapter IX.

The adaptation of Chapter II doesn't remove or drastically alter any of the scenes, but the

opening of Chapter III which introduces the newsstand and *Tales from the Black Freighter*, intradiegetic pirate comic is completely omitted. The next major revision/omission comes with the depiction of Chapter IV's nonlinear stream of consciousness journey through Dr. Manhattan's memories. The structure of the chapter is rearranged to fit a more linear progression, with occasional intercut flashbacks. The same trend continues with Chapter V, "Fearful Symmetry" completely disassembled and rearranged into a more straightforward progression of the plot at the cost of the symmetrical structure of the chapter. This is notable because it is the first time that the parallelism with *Tales of the Black Freighter* is brought to the surface of the text, with the entire chapter oriented around the "inverted world" of mirrored juxtapositions and inversions. This is all the more notable due to the omission of the intradiegetic comic, but it is far from the only omission. The "symmetrical" structure of the chapter could be schematized as follows:

A1 – Rorschach enters Moloch's apartment
B1 – Detectives examine the scene of a murder caused by apocalyptic hysteria
C1 – Newsstand with textbox overlays and intercut panels from *Black Freighter*
D1 – Laurie and Dan scene
E1 – Rorschach scene with journal entry
C2 – Newsstand with textbox overlays and intercut panels from *Black Freighter*
G – Adrian Veidt assassination attempt, split between two pages in the center of the chapter
C3 – Newsstand with textbox overlays and intercut panels from *Black Freighter*
E2 – Rorschach scene with journal entry
D1 – Laurie and Dan scene
C4 – Newsstand with textbox overlays and intercut panels from *Black Freighter*
B2 – Detective Scene
A2 – Rorschach entering Moloch's apartment, leading to his arrest

The film's structure is G-D1-E1-A2. In addition to the subtraction of the formal symmetry there are changes to the content of these scenes. Rorschach's journal entry is modified so that the line when he is explaining Dan and Laurie not recognizing him when they pass him in the street is changed. The original line is "They didn't know me." The film changes it to "They didn't know

me without my mask." This is strictly speaking, incorrect, since Rorschach does not refer to his mask as a mask but calls it his face and refers to his Kovacs persona as his mask. The film seems to know this, because a few moments later when his mask is removed, it accurately quotes his screams of "Give me back my face!". This scene leads directly to Rorschach's time in prison, as depicted in Chapter VI. In keeping with the established formula, the sessions between Dr. Long and Kovacs are presented with a meticulous level of visual parity, but all condensed into one therapy scene instead of spread throughout the chapter. This condensation comes at the cost of the entirety of Dr. Long's narration, his scenes without Kovacs, and most glaringly, the entire Kitty Genovese story and how it relates to Kovacs decision to create the mask and "pretend to be Rorschach." The absence of Long's story from this section means that once again the fearful symmetry has been avoided. There is no depiction of the effect that exposure to Kovacs has on Long, meaning that even if the gaze into the abyss that is Rorschach is presented with relative fidelity, the possibility of the abyss gazing back has been averted.

In another example of a mimetic transposition that inexplicably alters the source, the sex scene between Laurie and Dan Dreiberg is soundtracked by Leonard Cohen's "Hallelujah," a tonally jarring choice that renders the scene ridiculous (whether intentionally or unintentionally). Setting aside this choice of music, this constitutes a strange modification because in the book this is one of the rare scenes that has an explicit intradiegetic soundtrack, Billie Holiday's "You're My Thrill." The film can't use that song in this scene, however, because it is inexplicably used for an earlier sex scene between Laurie and Dr. Manhattan. While perhaps insignificant, given the narrative of hyperfidelity and obsessive attention to details, these changes are evidence of a mimetic ideology where the mere presence of "Easter Eggs" is meant to perform the intimate insider knowledge required to lay claim to the hypotext as one's own. To borrow a culinary

metaphor, the 2009 film is created in the manner of a chef who has all of the ingredients for a dish but has no idea how it is supposed to taste. In another paradigmatic example of the tastelessness of this duplication, there is a scene in Chapter VIII where Laurie and Dan are breaking Rorschach out of prison which is similarly altered in a seemingly minor but actually significant manner. The scene in question depicts Kovacs pursuing an old criminal antagonist into a bathroom to murder him. Laurie and Dan find him on his way and try to get him to leave the prison with them, but he says, "have to visit men's room" (p. 266). In both the comic and the film, Rorschach enters the restroom and murders the man while Dan and Laurie wait outside. The key difference is that in the comic they cannot see what he is doing and take him at his word that he needs to urinate or defecate. While they wait, Dan tells a story about staking out a dope dealer and losing the tail because he was afraid he was going to soil himself, forcing him to take a break to change in and out of his costume. When Kovacs exits and the group turns to leave, the final panel of the page shows blood seeping from under the door. The film cuts all of this dialogue and clearly depicts Kovacs approaching his victim through the swinging door of the men's room, completely removing all irony and bathos from the scene. This small change reflects the filmmakers commitment to take their source material *seriously*. A film made by fans, for fans, requires an appropriately fanatical reverence, a mimetic hyperfidelity which refuses to undercut itself with neurotic ambiguity.[122]

As previously mentioned, the most overt perversion comes in the climax. Veidt's psychic squid is swapped out for simultaneous atomic detonations in multiple metropolises. Like the book, this is a masked performance, an actually lethal attack synchronized with a fictional sleight of hand. Rather than book Veidt's "Big Lie" of an extradimensional invasion, film Veidt

[122] Two counterexamples to this would be found in the audio track of the film: the potentially ironic use of Leonard Cohen's "Hallelujah," and the use of the cartoonishly exaggerated amplified impact sound effects.

has engineered it so that the blasts carry the energy signature of Dr. Manhattan. The resulting moral dilemma is presented as if it is the same as the book: the attack has united humanity, the truth could undo that and risk global nuclear annihilation. Rorschach objects and is killed for it (although this time with Dan Dreiberg inserted into the scene to scream "No" when his friend is vaporized)[123], the rest agree to silent collusion, which in this case means Dr. Manhattan has to exile himself from the Earth and keep up the appearance that he is a looming threat to the planet which humanity must remain united against. The final exchange between Veidt and Manhattan is cut, meaning he never asks for confirmation that he "did the right thing… it all worked out in the end" and Manhattan never gets to tell him that "Nothing ever ends." Instead, this line is given to Laurie, who nonsensically quotes the line as something she "knows Jon would say," in response to Dan's suggestion that the world will "be alright in the end" (*Watchmen*, 2:33:20-2:33:38). As for the attack itself, it is obviously a completely different scene but several figures from the comic are included among the victims, including the two Bernard's from the newsstand and Dr. Malcom Long, but the audience is given no real reason to care about these characters because their plotlines have been omitted, so their presence is just another "Easter Egg" with nothing inside it.

More importantly, the change from the psychic squid to a Dr. Manhattan frame-job shifts the imaginary enemy from the extradimensional outside into an enemy within, a human who is no longer human and thus must be banished. Narratively, this turns Manhattan from a character who exists at the margins of the comic to the central plot device and the punchline to Veidt's

[123] The decision to modify several scenes to include/substitute Dan Dreiberg where he was absent in the comic could be explained metatextually as motivated by the desire to punch up the role for actor Patrick Wilson, perhaps the closest to a "leading man" playing what could be seen as the closest to a traditional heroic protagonist in the story. Alternatively, it could be viewed as a self-insert by the fan-creators, since Dan is the only character who possesses any fannish qualities.

"practical joke."[124] By turning the attack from an eldritch horror from beyond the stars into a superpowered military-industrial auto-immune disease—America's living weapon of mass destruction turned against itself—Synder, Tse, and Hayter have revised *Watchmen*'s Cold War paranoia and updated it for a post-9/11 world. When the film ends with perfect fidelity to the comic in the offices of the New Frontiersman, the office might has well have had a sign that said "Generic Newspaper" because almost all of the traces of the paper's reactionary right-wing ideology have been scrubbed from the story. When the decision of what to publish is left entirely in the hands of Seymour, the possible implications of publishing Rorschach's journal are undoubtedly altered. In the comic, the revelation that Veidt engineered a vast conspiracy and fabricated the alien squid would mean that there is no actual alien threat. This would remove the conditions for ceasefire and potentially bring the end of history through a global extinction event. In the film, whether or not Veidt's role is revealed, Dr. Manhattan exists, and he has the power to do exactly what he has been accused of doing (and in some sense if the attacks were derived from his power, he can be considered to have indirectly caused it). This result seems to suggest a very different end of history, seemingly guaranteed whether Rorschach's journal is published or not: world peace and perhaps limitless energy, all underwritten by an eternally vigilant global military intelligence apparatus.[125]

After the release of the original theatrical cut subsequent editions of the film retroactively added many of the elements which were omitted from the original release. Most notably, an

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[124] Moulthrop, Stuart, "Watchmen Meet the Aristocrats" in *Postmodern Culture*, Volume 19, Number 1, September 2008, Johns Hopkins University Press.

[125] The 2019 series decides to affirm the comic book ending as canonical, but sidesteps the imminent apocalyptic potential of Rorschach's journal through the logical extrapolation that due to its publication in the fringe *New Frontiersman* its immediate audience would be confined to the world of paranoid conspiracists and therefore its existence was relatively inconsequential in the short term, but would have long term ramifications in its reception and dissemination in far right extremist groups. See the discussion of the Seventh Kavalry in section XI of this chapter.

animated film version of *Tales of the Black Freighter* (initially standalone and then later integrated into the film) and a documentary version of Hollis Mason's paratextual *Under the Hood* memoir from the comic. The decision to omit the *Black Freighter* from the theatrical release has been attributed to a matter of budget, with Snyder initially intending a full live action version which proved too expensive, only creating and reintegrating the animated version as a belated revision. Regardless of the behind-the-scenes metatextual reasons for its absence, there is no narrative reason for including it because the element which brings the comic from intradiegetic marginalia to the center of the plot is the involvement of writer Max Shea in Veidt's cephalopodan *Gesamtkunstwerk* which ultimately remains cut from the film even its "Ultimate Cut." Through its commitment to hyperfidelity, fannish reverence, and self-seriousness, the film produces a mimetic mask defined by a consistent flattening, censorship, condensation, and incomprehension of its source material. At times it perfectly replicates decontextualized elements which fail to signify anything beyond their own referentiality, and at other times it inserts modifications which add nothing to the original work beyond marking it as a product of and for the post-9/11 cultural imaginary. In summary, this first transmedia repetition of *Watchmen* is primarily defined by empty redundancy and occasional farce. It reverently dons the mask of its predecessor and faithfully betrays it.

In contrast, the 2019 series seeks fidelity through betrayal. Showrunner David Lindelhof described it as an "unscrupulous defiling" of the comic, but this self-deprecation aside, it is clear that he and the rest of the team behind the 2019 series believed that they could honor the spirit of the 1986 original precisely by breaking from it, by refusing direct filmic adaptation of the text itself, and instead pursuing succession through remediation. As stated previously, the show's creators explicitly disavowed the act of adaption, and pitched the series as an "original remix"

but is this simply a matter of marketing language or is it a meaningful distinction? Lindelhof posted a multipage "letter to the fans" on his personal Instagram account which attempted to explain the creative vision behind the project, stating:

> We have no desire to "adapt" the twelve issues Mr. Moore and Mr. Gibbons created thirty years ago. Those issues are sacred ground and they will not be retread nor recreated nor reproduced nor rebooted. They will, however, be *remixed*... Those original twelves issues are our Old Testament… *Watchmen* is canon. But we are not making a "sequel" either. This story will be set in the world its creators painstakingly built… but in the tradition of the work that inspired it, this new story must be *original*… it must be *contemporary*.

In a sense then, Lindelhof, speaking on behalf of the team behind this televisual remix, repeats the "by fans, for fans" message of the 2009 filmmakers: you can trust us, we are faithful, we will not betray. But there is an essential modification: their faith would be incarnated in deeds which will honor the spirit of the sacred predecessor through truly observing its traditions of innovative revisionism, radical meta-historiography, sublime ridiculousness and ridiculous sublimity. Not content with merely wearing the mask and pretending to be *Watchmen*, the creators of the 2019 series sought to create something which "was *Watchmen*."

The initial task in this attempt to "earn the name" was outlining a list of adjectives which described the original *Watchmen*, the first and foremost of which was, appropriately, the word "original."[126] The distillation of precursor concepts into the template against which their own original creation would be judged is a form of the same hypertextual autopoiesis which was attributed to alternate history earlier in this chapter. In a sense, the televisual remix is an alternate history of an alternate history: it converts *Watchmen*'s hypertext into its own hypotext. This doubling of the double is more than a hat on a hat, it is a mask on a mask. This metamimesis serves as simultaneously a conceptualization of the series' mode of adaptation as well as a motif

[126] Mazin, Craig and Damon Lindelhof. (2019-2020). *The Official Watchmen Podcast*, HBO.

which is repeated both literally and figuratively throughout all nine episodes.

Despite the shared fannish religiosity between the 2009 filmmakers and Lindelhof, the creation of the 2019 series has its own extratextual origin story which has nothing to do with reverent repetition. Lindelhof was actually presented with the opportunity to adapt *Watchmen* twice prior to the series and turned down the opportunity both times, partially out of deference to Moore and not wanting to defile the sacred ground. This abstention was lifted due to historical developments, in the sense of contemporary events but also revelations about American history brought on by them. Both Lindelhof and director Nicole Kassell cite the 2017 "Unite the Right" white supremacist rally in Charlottesville, Virginia as an inciting incident, and in particular the circulating rhetoric in the aftermath from the scandalized liberal commentariat: "I can't believe they're not wearing masks." Reading the writings of Ta-Nehisi Coates, in particular, the discussion of the 1921 massacre and destruction of Tulsa, Oklahoma's Black Wallstreet in his article for the Atlantic "The Case for Reparations" further cemented that the answer to the questions, "Why *Watchmen*? and "Why now?" had to be related to race and America's racist history. The goal for *Watchmen* (2019) was not merely reverential repetition, but reparation and remediation.

**XI. Reparation and Remediation**

In order to account for the metamimetic qualities of *Watchmen* (2019), it is necessary to outline how it puts a mask on a mask at the level of its plot, characters, form and structure. This will allow for a closing reflection which will consider how the overall themes and conclusions of the show repeat or deviate from those of the comic. This section will thus be an abbreviated version of the treatment of the comic in the earlier subsections of this chapter, but oriented around the theme of metamimesis. The first step is outlining some of the basic alternate history

canon added to the world of the comic from the years between 1985 and 2019, then working through the plot and introducing the main characters which will enable some further reflections on the elements of the comic's form and structure which are remixed by the series.

Early on in *Watchmen* several key facts are established which bridge the canon of the original story to this remixed extension of it. First and foremost, despite the possibility for revelation contained within Rorschach's journal at the end of the book, Veidt's "Big Lie" remains intact, as well as the new world order that it engendered. Nixon is no longer president, and his replacement follows the speculative thread from the end of the book about an R. R. running, although rather than Reagan as the book implies, the expectations are subverted to reveal a different Hollywood cowboy in office: Robert Redford. Vietnam has become a US state, and is the birthplace of the series' main character, Angela Abar (Regina King). Periodic "squidfalls" occur around the world, in a farcical repetition of the comic's climactic tragedy which comes off more as an irritating weather pattern rather than a dangerous extradimensional incursion. The exact policy details of Redford's administration are never fully disclosed but the general ideology is depicted as left-liberal, particularly in its association with the Victims of Racial Violence act, pejoratively referred to as "Redfordations."[127] The bill authorized tax exemptions for the survivors and descendants of racially motivated atrocities like the Tulsa massacre. Consistent with the comic, fossil fuel seems to be a thing of the past with all of the cars and other technology seemingly powered off of renewable energy sources derived from or created by Dr. Manhattan. Lastly, while eventually shown to be misinformation, the general belief at the start of the show is that Dr. Manhattan is living in self-imposed exile on Mars and

[127] The bill's hypotext is clearly the Affordable Care Act, not only because its critics also renamed it with the name of the president that helped pass it, but because both represent a state mediated compromise between a more universally mandated national policy and the conservative status quo.

Adrian Veidt has long since receded from public life and is presumed dead. The absence of Dr. Manhattan might explain a somewhat stagnant technological development following his departure in 1985, with technology that was depicted in the comics still present but no appearance or mention of the internet, cell phones, or any of the other consumer technologies associated with Silicon Valley from the 1990s to the 2010s in actual history.

*Watchmen's* first episode, "It's Summer and We're Running Out of Ice," begins with another contribution to the series' expansion of the alternate history: a black and white silent film attributed to Oscar Micheaux entitled *Trust in the Law*! The opening scene depicts a man in white pursued by a man in black, but subverts the white hat vs black hat Western trope by revealing that the man in white is a corrupt sheriff and the man in black is Bass Reeves, immediately recognized by the white crowd when he removes his mask as an excited white child declares via intertitle, "Dontcha know who this is? Bass Reeves, the Black Marshal of Oklahoma!". Reeves points to his badge and the crowd cheers as the camera pans away from the movie screen revealing that this film is being projected in a small theater accompanied by diegetic piano music. As an intertitle shows the crowd calling for the corrupt white Sherriff to be lynched, a small black boy in the theatre repeats Reeves' lines from memory, "There will be no mob justice today! Trust in the Law!" The scene is interrupted by sounds of violence from outside of the theater, and segues to a depiction of the destruction of the Greenwood community in the 1921 Tulsa race massacre. Where the *Watchmen* comic was haunted by the looming threat of the end of the world and culminates in a mass murder ostensibly committed to avoid it, the 2019 series begins with mass murder and the destruction of a world. The little boy from the theater is snuck out of town, waking up at night in a field to discover that he and a crying infant are the only apparent survivors. The only thing left of his parents is a note from his father written

on the back of some printed document that reads “Watch Over This Boy.” The parents desperate act to smuggle their child out of a doomed world echoes the classical origin story of superhero comics, the infant Kal-El sent away in an escape pod from Kypton, which is itself a version of the clandestine preservation of Moses in defiance of the Pharoah in Exodus.

Though his name is not revealed in the traumatic opening scenes, the story of this child is gradually unveiled throughout the series. He is Will Reeves, the grandfather of Angela Abar, a detective in the Tulsa PD who also operates as the state sanctioned vigilante, Sister Night. An elderly version of Will (played by Louis Gossett Jr.) shows up as early as the end of the first episode. His first appearance is presented as interstitial background flavor, an old man in a wheelchair trying to strike up a conversation with Angela as she enters her permanently “Opening Soon” bakery which doubles as her vigilante base of operations. At this moment, conversation with this strange man is her least concern as she is investigating the attempted murder of a fellow police officer that opens the present timeline of the show and establishes the A plot of the police procedural genre which the series occupies in a slightly altered repetition of the comic’s hard-boiled noir. The inciting incident begins at night with a traffic stop on an empty country road. A cop wearing a *Watchmen* yellow face mask catches sight of what he refers to as “Kavalry contraband” in the driver’s glovebox. Before his call into dispatch can authorize the use of a firearm, the officer is hit with a burst of gunfire. The shooter is now wearing the contraband, revealed to be a DIY Rorschach mask (with a lo-fi black spray-painted pattern rather than the sci-fi morphing fabric of the original comic and film).

The next day, a video is released claiming responsibility for the shooting from a white supremacist group known as the Seventh Kavalry, with all the members in the video shown

wearing these same Rorschach inspired masks.[128] After watching the video with the entire police department gathered, the Chief of the Tulsa PD, Judd Crawford (Don Johnson), declares, "Kavalry's back. Three years of peace and we convinced ourselves they were gone but they were just hibernating," indicating that this new violent threat is a repetition of an earlier violent threat. After rallying the troops and authorizing the use of firearms (which are only available for police use "if the majority of the police force believe their lives are under direct immediate threat"), Judd closes the meeting by intoning: "Quis custodiet ipsos custodes?" to which all of the officers respond in unison, "Nos custodimus!" By the end of the episode the initial framing of the show as a conflict between police protagonist and white supremacist terrorist antagonists is undermined when the inciting incident is doubled; a second murder puts a mask on a mask and brings with it the second appearance of Will, sitting in his wheelchair beneath the hanging body of Judd Crawford.

After summoning Angela to the scene of the crime with a cryptic phone call, Will takes credit for the murder in question at the start of the second episode, "Martial Feats of Comanche Horsemanship." Because he is a 105-year-old man in a wheelchair, Angela doesn't believe Will is the real killer, but rather than releasing him or taking him to the precinct she holds him captive at her bakery hideout. This establishes a B plot: Angela's investigation into Will's claim that he killed Judd, however, because she does not disclose any of this to her fellow officers and masks the fact that she knew about Judd's death before them, for the rest of the Tulsa PD, Judd's

[128] The mask is not the only repetition from the comic, the name of the group itself comes from the Nova Express interview with Adrian Veidt in the back matter for Ch. XI. After expanding on his utopian ideas, he is asked about whether he ever considered the possibility of apocalyptic or dystopian futures and replies "I see twentieth century society as a sort of race between enlightenment and extinction. In one lane you have the four horsemen of the apocalypse… [in the other] the seventh cavalry" (*Watchmen* p. 380). Veidt is referencing the 7th Cavalry of the US Army, most famously associated with General Custer and his defeat at Little Bighorn as well as for perpetrating the Wounded Knee Massacre. The alternative spelling used by the series is most likely meant to allude to the KKK.

murder is assumed to have been committed by the Seventh K. Angela is thus able to pursue the B investigation under the mask of the A investigation, a sleight-of-hand which is echoed with the arrival of FBI agent Laurie Blake (Jean Smart) who is ostensibly sent to Tulsa to investigate the Seventh Kavalry's attacks against the police (A plot) but is actually investigating the murder of Judd and ultimately Angela's connections to it (B plot). Two additional recurring subplots are introduced in the first episode: *American Hero Story*, an intradiegetic tv series about Hooded Justice, the original Minuteman, delivered in the mode of the typical "ripped from the headlines" sensationalist true crime reenactment, and the seemingly non-sequitur scenes of an initially unnamed "Master" of an English country manor, eventually revealed to be Adrian Veidt (Jeremy Irons) marooned on Europa, a moon of Jupiter, in a livable environment created by Dr. Manhattan after the events of the original comic, populated by a seemingly endless supply of identical clones whom Veidt has named Crookshanks and Mr. Philipps. While the former would seem to be filling the role of *Tales of the Black Freighter*, by repeating the comic-within-the-comic mise-en-abyme, this time a "superhero tv show" within the "superhero tv show," it is actually a mask whose main narrative purpose is to represent the whitewashed official history which will be eventually undermined by the show's own critical revisionism. The Veidt sequences are actually the repetition of the *Black Freighter*, where the allegory has been turned inside out and now Veidt who was allegorized in the comic is now the one providing the allegory and reenacting elements of the original allegory as well (utilizing the catapulted corpses of mass murdered clones to spell out an SOS signal).

Continuing with the B plot, when pressed by Angela to answer why he killed Judd, Will responds "He had skeletons in his closet." This leads her to investigate Judd's literal closet, revealing a hidden costume (echoing Rorschach's discovery of the Comedian's costume inside

the murdered Edward Blake's closet): a Ku Klux Klan robe and hood. Unconvinced by Will's claims of "a vast and insidious conspiracy," Angela is initially unwilling to consider that the robes could have actually belonged to her fatherly friend and colleague. The revelation of the literal patrilineal connection between her and Will comes from an automated phone call from the Greenwood Center for Cultural Heritage where Angela has sent a sample of his DNA for testing. The call confirms that he is her paternal grandfather and is "eligible to be a beneficiary of the Victims of Racial Violence Act." Able to speak directly to the nature of their relationship, Angela says she wants to know "why you are here" to which Will responds "to meet you and show you were you came from." Unwilling to explore this further in the moment, Angela attempts to arrest Will but in a surreal deus ex machina that ends the episode and literalizes his earlier claim to have "friends in high places," he is snatched away by a flying machine later revealed to belong to Lady Trieu, the inheritor of Adrian Veidt's legacy. Will eventually makes good on his promise to show Angela where she comes from, via chemical assistance from the Trieu Pharmaceuticals drug, Nostalgia.

The drug, which "put memories into pill form," was originally intended as a dementia treatment, but this limited market gave way to broader use which predictably led to abuse and a subsequent ban by the FDA. Angela takes an overdose of her grandfather's memories at the end of episode five, leading directly to the hallucinatory trip through his traumatic past in the following episode, "This Extraordinary Being." The condition brought about by ingesting someone else's memories is described by a Trieu Pharmaceuticals "tutorial injection" in the seventh episode as "Recollective Infestation," requiring "pneumodialysis" to flush the foreign memories from the neural pathways. The recollective infestation in "Extraordinary Being"

contains a number of significant revelations, both for the plot as well as for the series' intervention and reinterpretation of the comic book canon.

The transformation of the *Nostalgia* brand from Veidt's perfume to Trieu's memory drug is emblematic of the show's multi-layered mimetic performance. On the most superficial level, it serves as a simple "Easter Egg" reference and performs fannish attention to detail. The comic had a recurring intradiegetic product placement which provided served as a running subtextual metatext and even plot device (see section VIII of this chapter) therefore its successor has its own version, and it bears the same name. The memory-drug bearing the name of the perfume is more than a "call-back," a fannish repetition for repetition's sake. The presence of the perfume Nostalgia in the comic was not just a matter of background detail, simply one of the many commodities produced by the Veidt corporation but served to posit the seductive danger of nostalgic recollection, for the individual interpreting their own life as much as for a culture interpreting its history. The perfume itself is irrelevant, but the emotion associated with its name, its ad campaign and the fantasy that it sells all suggest that in *Watchmen* nostalgia is like a drug. It is intoxicating, alluring, and habit forming. Through its association with the character of Sally Juspeczyk it binds memory to forgetting, allowing her to feel that even though "every day the future looks a little bit darker… the past, even the grimy parts of it… just keeps on getting brighter all the time." (*Watchmen* p. 46) Nostalgic recollection in *Watchmen* functions as a *nēpenthés pharmakon*: a way of censoring and revising the past to escape the weight of trauma and grief and find solace in comforting fantasy.

The transformation of the perfume into the drug has a number of consequences. First, it repeats the masked mimetic gesture of literalization by taking the sentimental orientation to past memories which was merely associated with the perfume through its name and advertising

campaign and making it the actual psychoactive response to ingesting the substance. Rather than the association between scent and memory which connects the perfume to its namesake and brand identity which evokes the notion that "nostalgia is like a drug," the fictional pharmaceutical is alleged to recreate memories, allowing for a patient to re-experience their own memories, or even (as happens in the show) experience the memories of others. In practice, this means entering into a dreamlike hallucination which is alleged to perfectly recreate a memory. This implies that neurological memory is simply another form of recording media, and that given the right tools, memories could be extracted from their host, preserved, recalled, and re-experienced directly. This obviously raises serious psychological and hermeneutic questions, but in order to understand what the series is attempting to do with this science-fiction drug it is necessary to maintain the suspension of disbelief. The writers even self-consciously have Trieu call out the use of Nostalgia as "passive aggressive exposition" which is "too cute by half" in a cryptic conversation with Will in an earlier episode, but, perhaps signaling that the series needs this device in order to accomplish its own goals, Will insists that he cannot simply tell Angela who he is, "she has to experience it for herself". What she experiences is the life of a young Will Reeves as one of the first Black police officers in the 1930s NYPD.

"This Extraordinary Being" proceeds with a hallucinatory dream logic provided by the narrative device of the Nostalgia overdose. The camera point of view shifts, at times showing scenes of Will from a third-person perspective as if Angela is watching a film of his life but also utilizing the first-person perspective to produce the image of an experienced memory. This is doubled perspective is also punctuated by moments where Angela is shown from a third-person perspective replacing Will in the scene. The dreamlike hallucination thus allows for the surreal blurring of the two characters across three time periods: Angela in Tulsa, 2019, Will in New

York, 1939, and Will in Tulsa, 1921. The cinematography and editing of the episode also conjures the juxtaposition of intercutting comic book panels through interpolation of characters and imagery from 1921 and 2019 Tulsa within scenes of the New York in 1939 main story. By inserting these elements into the scenes rather than cutting to them, the show creates a televisual grammar which simultaneously deviates from the comic book structure (i.e. swapping multi-panel juxtaposition for intra-frame juxtaposition) while effectively reproducing the comic page's potentiality for synchronic cross-referential reception. The deployment of this technical innovation in this episode is motivated by more than the desire to recapitulate the experience of reading the comic book. Thematically, the intra-frame juxtapositions literalize the hauntology of traumatic memory, and while the surreal blurring of identities and time periods is logistically attributed to the effects of Nostalgia, the depiction performs a version of the existential bleedthrough which occurs in intergenerational trauma. The latter concept is explicitly discussed in a prior episode and then is literalized through the techno-pharmakon in order to tell Angela "where she comes from" by showing her who Will is.

Angela's "dream" returns the narrative to the child who escaped Tulsa in the opening scene of the first episode but takes place eighteen years later. Will Reeves is living in New York and has just joined the NYPD. He had his name and sense of justice from the figure of Bass Reeves that he saw depicted in *Trust in the Law!* as a child. His faith in law and order is shaken when an antisemitic arsonist that he arrests is immediately released without any charges being brought against him, despite having openly set fire to a Jewish deli in front of a police officer. Inquiring further attracts the retribution of a gang of white cops who grab Will off of the street, place a hood over his head and lynch him, only cutting the rope at the last minute, warning him to mind his business or be killed. As a beaten and bloodied Will makes his way through the

streets in a daze, still wearing the severed noose around his neck, the screams of a victim of a violent street crime reintroduce this historical trauma into the tropology of superhero origin stories. Will rips two eye holes into the hood, turning it into a mask, and violently interrupts the mugging in progress, receiving the gratitude of the white couple he saves. The next day, his wife June shows him that his vigilante activity has the newspaper praising him as a hero, "a mysterious hooded savior." June presses him, "why did you put it on?" and Will protests, "I already told you, the cops put it on me when…" but June interrupts, insisting "Yeah, but then you put it back on." This repetition is itself a repetition, a masked mimesis enabling Will to borrow more than a last name from his cinematic hero. June insists on a further reminiscence, pushing Will to recall more than the grateful white townsfolk cheering Bass Reeves after he removes his hood and shows his badge. She reminds him what happened to the movie theatre where he used to watch that film, to the neighborhood, to the world of their childhood. He will not get justice with a badge, he will need to put a mask on a mask. Not only must he cover his face to protect his identity when he is Hooded Justice, but under the hood Will must wear a painted white mask to protect his black skin.[129]

This revelation of Will's identity as Hooded Justice radically transforms the entire alternate history of *Watchmen*. The character, while never central to the plot of the comic (only appearing in paratextual historical documents and in the flashback to his interruption of Edward Blake's attempted rape of Sally Jupiter) is posited as the first masked vigilante, the character who marks the break from actual history where masked superheroes only existed on the pages of

[129] Whether this was intended as an "Easter Egg" for Frantz Fanon or not, the moment indexes complicated history of discussions of Black identity and double-consciousness. This topic demands further elaboration, in particular, the fact that Angela (as Sister Night) applies black paint to her face in an inverted repetition of her grandfather's double-masking until learning the truth of his identity and subsequently forgoes the costume for the rest of the series.

Action Comics #1. Positing that Will Reeves is Hooded Justice effectively reinscribes race and racism into the entire history of masked vigilantes in *Watchmen*'s storyworld, but also, because he is Angela's grandfather, ties this original superhero created for the television series (ostensibly without any predecessor or clear hypotext from the comic) to *Watchmen*'s originary superhero. The mask under the hood also serves to protect this retcon from accusations of distorting the source material, since the only part of Hooded Justice's skin that is depicted as white in the comic is the area around his eyes. Lastly, the fact that it is Will under the hood performs a reversal of the Klan reminiscent imagery of the character's costume, perhaps intended by Moore and Gibbons as signifying the reactionary mob violence hidden under the mask of the American superhero fantasy, transformed here into a radical reappropriation of the iconography of the enemy, with the noose around his neck converted from a symbol of Hooded Justice's own penchant for violence (perhaps even kink for it as implied by the Comedian) into a sign of survival and defiance against the oppressor.

Will's story as Hooded Justice in 1939 contains further revelations which connect to the broader mystery of the series. His suspicions about the release of the arsonist and the attempt to scare him off the case led him to uncover a far more "vast and insidious conspiracy." The activities of a secret white supremacist organization called Cyclops involve the use of mesmerism to subliminally influence people through secret messages encoded in films. At least one of their intended targets is revealed to be Black Americans who will be brainwashed into committing acts of violence against each other. Meanwhile, just as in the comics, Hooded Justice's vigilante heroism has attracted the attention of Nelson Gardner aka Captain Metropolis who approaches Will to recruit him for his superhero team the Minutemen, promising to help him with his investigation into Cyclops. The two become lovers, confirming another implied

detail from the comic, but ultimately Gardner is unwilling to help Will, patronizingly gaslighting his theory and ultimately just admitting, "This sort of thing isn't really the Minutemen's cup of tea… you're going to have to solve black unrest all on your own."[130] Will's relationship with Gardner is treated as factual but inessential in this depiction of Will's life, whereas in the intradiegetic scenes from the *American Hero Story* tv show, the revelation that Hooded Justice was secretly gay is the main sensationalist focal point, punctuated by pornographic sex scenes and a sex tape blackmail scenario involving J. Edgar Hoover which culminates in the removal of his hood and the revelation of this version of the character as a conventionally attractive white man.

Will's crusade against Cyclops becomes increasingly violent, and the episode departs from this period in his life without revealing what happened to him or the conspiracy in all of the decades between this story and the main time period of the show. The last we see Will in 1939, his increasing volatility causes a blow-out with his family, triggered by catching his young son imitating him and painting his face white in the same under-mask pattern. When his son declares "I'm like you" Will begins panicking and aggressively trying to wash it off of the boy's face. Jane intervenes and declares that rather than allowing Will to work through "this thing you have… it just fed it" and she and her son leave Will and return to Tulsa. This break-up of his family, which explains why Angela had never been told about her grandfather, segues to a newly contextualized version of the events leading up to Will's meeting with Angela under Judd's body. Will uses a Cyclops mesmeric strobe device to control Judd and orders him up to the tree at the top of the hill. When Judd asks, "Who are you?" Will replies, "Justice." This prompts Judd to defend himself, saying, "Whatever you think I did, you don't understand. I'm trying to

[130] The "black unrest" line is a direct quote from the comic, where it is listed as one of the social ills that needed to be addressed on Gardner's presentation board in the 1966 pitch meeting for the Crimebusters.

fucking help you people. You don't know what's really happening here," to which Will responds, "You have a Klan robe in your closet." Judd insists, "I have a right to keep it, it's my legacy." When Judd offers one final defense, "You don't know me old man," Will responds, "Oh yeah, I know you," making the sign of the Cyclops (the alt-right appropriated "okay" sign) on his head, and orders Judd to hang himself.

In order to understand how this vast and insidious conspiracy plays out in the final three episodes of the series, it is first necessary to double back and explain the role of the other main characters and their connections to the 1987 comic. In addition to Angela, *Watchmen* (2019) introduces three other original main characters with varying connections to the source text. Wade Tillman (Tim Blake Nelson), aka Looking Glass, is another one of the masked detectives working for the Tulsa PD. The previously mentioned Lady Trieu (Hong Chau) is a trillionaire inventor and corporate CEO, the purchaser of Adrian Veidt's corporate assets and his biological daughter, the product of a clandestine artificial insemination performed out of spite by her mother Bian, one of Veidt's Vietnamese servants at the Karnak compound. Senator Joe Keene, the son of Joseph David Keene (of 1977 Keene Act fame from the comic) is a politician responsible for the DOPA (Defense of Police Act) which was passed in response to the "White Night," a domestic terrorist attack committed by the Seventh Kavalry which resulted in the deaths of hundreds of police officers. DOPA mandated masked anonymity for police officers, and consequently, the reintroduction of state sanctioned masked vigilantes (ala Sister Night and Looking Glass). While Keene and Trieu are both the children of named characters from the comic, despite the significance of his impact on the story, the elder Keene was not depicted in any scenes of the comic and so Joe Keene's presence in the series only constitutes a repetition of the name. His role in the A plot as a supporter of the Tulsa PD against the Seventh Kavalry is

revealed to be a mask in episode 5, “Little Fear of Lightning,” where Keene outs himself as a member of the Seventh Kavalry (albeit claiming to be working within the group to control them) while simultaneously disclosing the truth of the 11/2 psychic squid attack to Wade.[131] Trieu’s connections to Veidt are more significant than Keene nominal repetition, and in a similar manner to his role in the comic, she is a marginal figure in the narrative until her plans are revealed in the final act of the story. Wade, like Angela, is presented as having no direct connection to any character from the comic but it becomes clear that he is in some sense a mimetic reiteration of Rorschach, perhaps positing an alternate reading to the Seventh K’s fascist appropriation.

The first sign that Wade is in some sense a repetition of Rorschach comes early in the first episode, when he is speaking to Judd with his mask pulled halfway up in a similar way to how Rorschach ate in the comic and Judd tells him to pull his “face” down so he can use the mask as a mirror and straighten his tie. Wade both is and is not Rorschach. He is in a sense Rorschach redeemed. In many ways a kindred spirit: a traumatized, working-class loner. The revelation of his trauma comes in “Little Fear of Lightning” and it reveals his more overt connection to the events of the comic: Wade was in the vicinity of NYC when the 11/2 attack was carried out. The episode opens with a flashback to 1985, young Wade is a Jehovah’s Witness missionary that has traveled with a group from Oklahoma to Hoboken, NJ to try to save souls before the apocalypse. After failing to convert a group of teenagers at the carnival, he is lured into the hall of mirrors by a seemingly sympathetic girl. She comes on to him and convinces him to strip naked, insisting he should lose his virginity before the end of the world. Once he is completely naked she grabs his clothes and runs away laughing. He is left naked and humiliated, surrounded by mirrors, and begins to shame himself in the mirror for being a “filthy,

[131] The episode’s title is a reference to Jules Verne’s *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea*, "If there were no thunder, men would have little fear of lightning."

dumb sinner." At that moment, everything begins to shake, glass shatters, and when a naked terrified Wade emerges from the destroyed carnival attraction he finds the girl he went in with and almost everyone in the surrounding area dead on the ground, in a manner reminiscent of the gruesome opening pages of Ch. XII in the comic. When the camera zooms out and pans from NJ to NYC, it reveals the squid that the 2009 film could not depict despite its commitment hyperfidelity.

The presence of 11/2 in the series is another example where a sci-fi comic book logic provides an in-world literal explanation for something which could also be explained psychologically/figuratively. Wade's presence in the vicinity of an equivalent event in real history would be enough to qualify him for PTSD, but in *Watchmen* this is supplemented with the fact that the psychic blast (attributed to the squid, but as any reader of the comic or characters like Laurie would know is actually caused by a synchronized weapon created by Veidt's team, the real technological-psychical lightning to the squid's faux-physical thunder) caused lingering effects on people that survived. These lingering effects for Wade constitute both a typical "superhero" power, allegedly the ability to function as a human lie detector test, as well as PTSD. Wade lives a masked life in multiple ways, literally operating as a vigilante in his mirror mask, but also projecting a level of calm and mastery over his demons which the episode shows to be largely a front. His mask is revealed to be, like Rorschach's, made from a sci-fi material, Reflectatine, a most likely pseudo-scientific snake oil product which is alleged to protect against psychic attacks. The baseball cap he wears in his civilian guise is also lined with it (revealing he is not just "mirror guy" as Laurie deliberately misnames him but a "tin-foil hat guy"). Despite being an active member and leader of the Extra-Dimensional Anxiety support group, where they close each meeting with a prayer affirming that they "will not live in fear," Wade is revealed to

have a "squidfall shelter" in his backyard which he has run safety drills in so frequently that he has damaged the equipment. At the end of the episode, when he returns home after being given the world-shattering revelation that the 11/2 attack was a hoax perpetuated by Adrian Veidt, he sees his replacement unit for the squidfall shelter alarm has arrived and throws the box in the trash. Moments later, he retrieves it, unwilling to let go of the lie he has built his life around despite now knowing the truth.

Like Rorschach, Wade plays the role of a detective in the story, not just in his job title, but as a protagonist advancing the plot and contributing to the resolution of some of its mysteries. This is a role also occupied by Angela, Laurie, and Will in episode six. His role in the department involves an inverted interpolation of the Rorschach tests that Kovacs was given in Ch. VI by Dr. Long, inverted because in the series Wade is the one administering the test, this time a sort of funhouse mirror version of an IAT (Implicit-association test) which projects a serious of images on a 360-degree screen while a masked Looking Glass asks a series of questions. [132] Wade explains to Agent Blake that the test is designed to assess racial bias and/or extremist ideology, and whether or not his alleged supernatural lie-detector abilities assure certainty in this assessment is left ambiguous. His role in the plot is primarily to provide Angela with the answer to her grandfather's mysterious pills, which directly leads to her Nostalgia overdose and the furtherance of her own investigation. He is also the character who most directly leads to the revelation of the true plans of the Seventh Kavalry and Joe Keene's involvement with them. By the end of the series, he has eaten Rorschach's beans and worn his mask

[132] The test chamber, which Agent Blake mockingly refers to as "a racist detector," is reminiscent of the Ludovico Technique aversion therapy in *A Clockwork Orange* as well as the Voight-Kampff test in *Blade Runner*. Later in episode VII, Lady Trieu's "daughter" (later revealed to be a clone of her mother) Bian administers a more traditional analog IAT test to Angela utilizing paper cards which also echoes Long's Rorschach test sessions with Kovacs.

(infiltrating the 7th K in a stolen mask), but near the closing moments of the final episode when he repeats Rorschach's refusal to remain silent in the face of Veidt's atrocities, he survives where Rorschach could not. The significance of this ending will be discussed in the final section of the chapter.

When it comes to returning characters, Will Reeves as Hooded Justice is an outlier because his story is expanded to such an extent that he effectively constitutes a wholly original character while also being a definitively "legacy" character.[133] A more direct continuation is presented in the depiction of Laurie, going by her father's name Blake rather than the pseudonym Hollis from the books end. While at least by 2019 she doesn't seem to have adopted her father's costume as she alludes to in the comic, she has the gun, and in many ways her more cynical and mocking personality at least initially seems to perform as something like "the Comedienne." She repeats the "Good joke. Everybody laugh." lines verbatim, evoking both her father and Rorschach, but rather than retelling the "Sad Clown" joke, she repeats the series' signature doubling, telling a brick joke about a literal brick.[134] She tells this joke in a "Blue Booth," which are alleged to be trans-planetary communication devices which allow people to call and leave a message for Dr. Manhattan on Mars. Like Wade returning to the trash to fish out his phony extradimensional defense system, Laurie knows that the booths are probably a scam but feels compelled to patronize them anyway.

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[133] Hooded Justice in the comic is historically important, mysterious, and (in terms of presence on the page) definitively marginal despite his connection to some key moments in the narrative. He is only depicted in the main text in Chapter 2, as part of Sally's flashback to her assault by Edward Blake. All of the other references to him are in paratextual back matter.

[134] In a brick joke, the punchline to an initial joke is thrown away, and then comes back in a second joke. In the case of Laurie's brick joke, she pretends to have messed up the punchline of the literal brick joke, apologetically masking it as a "bad joke" but then when the thrown brick comes back and kills god at the end of the second joke reveals it to be a "good joke" which prompts the verbatim recitation of Rorschach's "good joke, everybody laugh" from the comic.

Leaving aside the other returning character from the comic that has already been mentioned (Adrian Veidt), the elephant in the room is Dr. Manhattan. His role in the series is another repetition of *Watchmen*'s "hidden in plain sight" trickery. He is shown in a disguise from the first episode but is presented, allegedly undisguised, via news reports as being "on Mars," and thus not a part of this story. The truth of his role is revealed in episode 7, "An Almost Religious Awe," where the aftermath of Angela's Nostalgia overdose leads her to relive events from her childhood in Vietnam. As she undergoes pneumodialysis the episode cuts between flashbacks to Vietnam and present-day scenes in Lady Trieu's compound where Angela has been brought for treatment. The flashbacks include scenes of a young Angela trying to get her parents to let her rent the Blacksploitation film *Sister Night* (the hypotext for her vigilante persona), her parents' death in a suicide bomb set off by Vietnamese dissidents on VVN (Victory in Vietnam) Day, her time in an orphanage, and lastly a visit from her estranged grandmother June who tells her about her roots in Tulsa and promises to take her back there but dies from a heart attack before she can fulfill that promise (although successfully planting the seed for Angela to move there eventually). In the present-day scenes, Angela eventually follows the trail of the tubes connecting her to the "organic host" being used for the pneumodialysis and breaks into a room she believes will contain her grandfather only to find a sleeping elephant is being used as the repository for the extracted memories. After Trieu reveals that Dr. Manhattan is not on Mars, but "right here in Tulsa, pretending to be human," and that the Seventh Kavalry know who he is and are planning on killing him and stealing his powers, Angela leaves without asking who he is, rushing back home to awaken the sleeping elephant in her house: an amnesiac Dr. Manhattan who has been living under the guise of her unassuming husband Cal (Yahya Abdul-Mateen II).

The penultimate episode, “A God Walks into Abar,” begins in Saigon, on VVN Day in 2009, with Dr. Manhattan picking up and putting on a discarded Dr. Manhattan mask and walking into Mr. Eddy’s Bar (itself a doubled-reference to the flashback scene from the comic set in Eddie’s Bar, where the pregnant woman Edward Blake murders refers to him as “Mr. Eddie”). Angela is drinking alone on the anniversary of her parents death and Manhattan approaches her and strikes up a conversation over drinks. The scene, and the episode, is largely presented as a “meet-cute,” with Angela initially annoyed by his presence and dubious of his claims to be Dr. Manhattan and to consequently have knowledge of their inevitable future together. At one point, he creates an egg out of thin air, which she easily rationalizes as a cheap magic trick. While the episode includes flashbacks and dialogue from Manhattan indicating his synchronic experience of time, there is no attempt to recreate the intra-frame juxtapositions of “This Extraordinary Being” or any other formal experimentation which would replicate or improve upon the depiction of Manhattan’s time-consciousness from “Watchmaker.” In addition to exploring the star-crossed love story of these two characters (doomed to end tragically in ten years according to Manhattan), as well as setting up the possibility of Dr. Manhattan willingly transferring his powers to another person through an organic medium (the egg he created in the bar), the episode also explains both Dr. Manhattan’s presence in this story in relation to the end of the comic and contextualizes the seemingly non-sequitur scenes of Adrian Veidt in the country manor. Manhattan reveals that the manor, its environs, and the clone-like staff who populate it are all his creations, the result of his project to “create life” somewhere less complicated announced in his final comic book appearance. The somewhere in question is Europa, a moon of Jupiter. The manor and its occupants are direct copies of the British couple who temporarily housed Jon, his father, and many other refugees that were fleeing the Nazis on

their way to America. His recreation of them is an attempt to honor his promise to them that he would “create something beautiful” but it can also be taken as a sign of the “profound lack of imagination” which Veidt accuses him of in a flashback scene that explains the mechanism for his eventual amnesia as well as Veidt’s presence on Europa.

Manhattan’s transformation into Cal begins with the appropriation of the first name and physical appearance of a body in the Saigon morgue, selected because he had no family on record and a “no strings attached” identity for Manhattan to assume. This gives the couple a chance to somewhat approximate a normal relationship, perhaps akin to Kovacs wearing a mask “pretending to be Rorschach,” but underneath Cal’s skin this is the same Dr. Manhattan whose relationships are all doomed to fail because of the non-presence of his temporally scattered consciousness. The solution lies in a device, provided by Adrian Veidt, originally developed as a weapon meant to neutralize Manhattan’s powers, but here presented as a gift: a small metal circle with a metal dot suspended in its center (mirroring Manhattan’s symbol, the hydrogen atom symbol) which when inserted into his forehead will free Manhattan of the burden of his past and future, offering the gift of a present freed from all memory and knowledge of Dr. Manhattan. In exchange for this gift, Manhattan will send Veidt to Europa, offering him a chance at the paradise he had hoped to live in post 11/2. By 2009, Veidt has grown disillusioned with the new world he helped create, despondent at the lack of credit for his masterplan, and marginalized by the Redford administration. By this point in the series, the audience also knows that Veidt will become equally disenchanted with the Europan paradise Manhattan offers him, but in 2009 he doesn’t know this yet.

Back in 2019 Tulsa, after Angela takes a hammer to Cal’s head and extracts the device, he has reverted to his blue skinned superpowered self but has retained Cal’s appearance. He is

disoriented and phases between different periods of time, allowing for additional explanation of mysteries introduced earlier in the series, and some cryptic setup for the closing moments of the finale. Inexplicably, at one point he starts to make breakfast, telling Angela to "Watch the eggs" as a carton of eggs floats out of the fridge. Frustrated, Angela smashes the carton on the ground. A moment of recognition clarifies Angela's survival three years prior on the "White Night," accounted for by Manhattan teleporting the Seventh Kavalry home invader hundreds of miles away to Gila Flats, NM, in an unconscious defense response. In the present, Calhattan wanders around the backyard walking on the pool, because "You need to see me on the pool… it's important for later." Explaining that he has sent their children to the Dreamland theater to be watched over by her grandfather. This triggers a flashback/time-phasing to his discussion with Will Reeves ten years prior, just before implanting the memory-inhibiting device. The result is a three-way conversation between 2009 Will, 2019 Angela, and Calhattan mediating between them in both times. Angela tells him to ask her grandfather how he knew Judd was a member of Cyclops and that there was a Klan robe hidden in his closest, to which Will responds, "Who's Judd Crawford?" revealing that the entire catalyst for the events of the show originates from a time paradox. By the end of the episode, the Seventh Kavalry have attacked their home and successfully captured Cal with the intent to destroy him and siphon off his power as Lady Trieu had predicted.

In the finale, "See How They Fly," all of the various plotlines come together. Adrian Veidt is brought into the main time period of the story by Lady Trieu, and her connections to him are fully disclosed. Prior to the visit from Dr. Manhattan which led to his Europan exile, Veidt was visited by Trieu who discloses that she has figured out the truth behind 11/2, and later, that she is his biological daughter. Initially ingratiating herself with him through flattery, she then

criticizes his simulated squidfalls as merely a rerun of his original genius plan, a mere diminished repetition. Veidt insists that the maintenance of the façade is necessary for the maintenance of world peace, because without the continued presence of the extradimensional threat the world powers would once again be on the brink of mutually assured destruction. This is where Trieu reveals her plan, the same plan she told Angela the Seventh Kavalry was on the brink of enacting: kill Dr. Manhattan and steal his power. In her case however, the intent would be utopian: to rid the world of nuclear weapons, end world hunger, reverse climate change etc. She has come to Veidt to ask for him to lend her the capital necessary to construct the machine capable of extracting and imprinting his power and reveals that the reason he ought to do this is because she is his daughter. Scandalized by the pilfering of his "legacy" through clandestine artificial insemination, Veidt refuses and vows that he will never call her daughter, a prediction revealed to be false moments later as the Europa plotline concludes with the revelation that he had used the broken bodies of murdered servants to spell an SOS message directed towards her on the surface of the moon: "Save Me Daughter."[135]

He is rescued by an escape pod sent by Trieu, encased in a gold substance (reminiscent of Han Solo's carbonite imprisonment in *Star Wars*) in order to place him in stasis so that he can survive the multi-year journey back to Earth. The golden statue of Veidt prominently displayed in Trieu's compound in episode four is thus revealed to be another secret "hidden in plain sight," and in the present he is reanimated for the purpose of witnessing Trieu's triumphant execution of her plan, the activation of the Millenium Clock which will inaugurate a true utopian era rather

[135] The great irony of Veidt's outrage at this violation via appropriation of his biological material is of course that Veidt, like the Mariner from *Tales of the Black Freighter*, has, in both the comic and the series, consistently acted as if he is entirely entitled to appropriate the bodies of others for his own purposes. One could even argue that the belief that the body of the other is a resource whose sole purpose is to provide value for him is the sine qua non of his entire ideology.

than the false one that Veidt engineered thirty-four years ago. Keene attempts to inaugurate his own new world in front of an audience of Seventh Kavalry / Cyclops leadership, as well as Laurie, Wade, and Angela. At the moment of activation, the entire room is teleported to a town square, revealed to be the site of the Tulsa massacre, where additional equipment has been installed that will provide Trieu with the means to actually perform the execution/extraction/implantation. As Keene's body is revealed to have been reduced to a puddle of bloody goo, she vaporizes the gathered leadership of Cyclops and prepares to start the transference. The Keene goo spreads into the containment field where Manhattan is held, providing a medium for him to act at a distance and teleport Veidt, Laurie, and Wade to Veidt's Karnak compound. They are too late to save Dr. Manhattan, who is destroyed by the machine, but are able to trigger a high velocity squidfall with deeply frozen squids which destroys the equipment and Trieu in the process. Angela shelters in the restored Greenwood theater where the show began and is reunited with her grandfather and children.

**XII. Ends**

The closing scenes of the final episode of *Watchmen* offer something of a reparation for Will and Angela's family, and a remediation of the figure of the mask in the series. It also offers an end to Adrian Veidt's story, with Wade and Laurie refusing to let him walk away from his historical crimes despite his deux ex machina assistance in the present crisis. His arc in the comic paralleled the mariner of the *Black Freighter*: a "marooned" individual obsessed with the salvation of paradise became a monster capable of committing a dramatic act of violence which "maroons" him from humanity. His story here is a reprise in some sense: he begins exiled in paradise and obsessively pursues a way to escape and return to Earth, which culminates in a

dramatic act of violence. The key difference is that in the comic his justification was the imminent destruction of the planet, whereas in the series, even if Trieu is undeniably supervillain coded, her plans for what she will do with the power are explicitly utopian. The great evil that the heroes of *Watchmen* (2019) successful avert may very well have been global peace and universal wellbeing. Of course, what Trieu would actually have done is unknown, and both the comic and the show can lead the audience to question whether anyone should have the power of Dr. Manhattan. This sentiment is put into question, or perhaps puts into question, the final scene of the series.

After the death of Manhattan and Lady Trieu, Angela and Will have a conversation about his past as Hooded Justice which she was also able to experience via his Nostalgia pills. Speaking of his mask, he asks, "When I put it on, you felt what I felt?" to which Angela responds, "Anger." He agrees that he too thought that at the time, but that he realized it was actually "fear.. and hurt." As Angela starts to cry, he tells her "You can't heal under a mask… Wounds need air." Still in mourning over Cal/Jon's death, she laments that he wanted her to let him die to which Will responds, "You can't make an omelet without breaking a few eggs." When pressed to explain what he means, Will reveals he doesn't even know, he is just repeating something which Manhattan had said to him ten years ago so that Will would say it in this moment, and that "he said you would understand when the time was right." In the final dialogue of the episode, Will offers some condolences to Angela, "He was a good man. I'm sorry he's gone" but adds, "considering what he could do… he could've done more." Angela moves to clean up the smashed carton of eggs from earlier and recalls Cal saying, "Watch the eggs" and the discussion of the possibility of transferring his powers through an egg. She finds a single egg intact in the carton, walks out the pool, breaks it and swallows it raw (ala Rorschach in the

comic, the source scene for the "omelet" justification for breaking eggs), and steps towards the water as the camera abruptly cuts to black.

The series ends on an ambiguous note, neither confirming nor denying whether Angela did in fact absorb Dr. Manhattan's powers, and if she did, leaving the kind of god a Dr. Manhattanized Angela will be open to interpretation. Would this be just another mask? Would it be a rerun? Would Angela become marooned and dehumanized, temporally unmoored and disconnected from all of the "more" that Will says Dr. Manhattan could've done? Can Dr. Manhattan's action and in-action be attributed to Jon Osterman, or to his power itself? Would someone else given his power be able to act in ways that he could not? Was his temporal scattering a consequence of his elevated form of conscious, or a trauma response brought on by the fact that his powers came to him through his own death and rebirth, meaning that if he actually was experiencing all moments of his life at all times, he was constantly experiencing his own death twice over (the death of Jon in Gila Flats in 1959 and thanks to the series, the death of Cal in Tulsa in 2019). The series, like the comic, leaves such speculations entirely in the hands of the receiver.

In terms of its attempt to produce reparation through remediation, the series is undeniably successful in many ways and profoundly alters the way any future reader will interpret *Watchmen* after *Watchmen*. And yet, it also perpetuates or produces its own blind spots. Both *Watchmen* are haunted by traumatic legacies which they alluded to, evoke, and allegorize to amplify the stakes of their narratives, but also seem to reserve for marginalia or subtle invocation possibly to a fault. While the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki are frequently referenced throughout the comic, the Holocaust is never explicitly mentioned aside from the suggestion that the Osterman's were refugees, although it haunts the text through the repeated motif of breaking

glass paired with background details of promotional posters for the concert on 11/2 at Madison Square Garden featuring a band called Kristallnacht. Likewise, while the series somewhat addresses the aftermath of the Vietnam War through its depiction of the colony (and eventual state) and anti-colonial resistance, this is all treated as background detail to Angela's story and despite Lady Trieu's name evoking Vietnamese history there is no attempt at all to explain her motivations in relation to that history. Even more striking, despite the undeniably powerful focus on the history of American racism which drives the remediation of the world of the comic, the series is ultimately silent on the two most significant pieces of that history: slavery and the genocide of the indigenous communities. The former is glaring not only because of the series unflinching depiction of Jim Crow but because the history of the transatlantic slave trade was latent in the comic (particularly in *Tales of the Black Freighter*, see section IV of this chapter) not to mention the historical connection between law enforcement and the institution of slavery (and thus crime fiction in general). The absence of any mention of Native Americans, of any Native American characters, of any reference to the genocide and/or forced relocation of Native populations etc. is particularly jarring in light of the setting (Oklahoma), as well as the play with Cowboy/Western tropes. The one exception to this omission is the title of the second episode, "Martial Feats of Comanche Horsemanship," itself a reference to the painting "Comanche Feats of Horsemanship" by George Catlin, shown hanging on a wall in the home of Sheriff Judd in the episode. While left unexplained in the episode, the painting is itself a white colonialist depiction of Native culture, but its true significance for *Watchmen* most likely lies in the particular horsemanship technique it depicts, a Comanche rider using his own horse as a body shield while he prepares to fire an arrow at a combatant. This type of cryptic thematic symbolism (doubly potent because it symbolizes the *Watchmen*'s motif of masking in plain sight) thus expertly

performs a reenactment of Moore & Gibbons techniques and also repeats the overly subtle handling of the historical violence that both projects position themselves as fearlessly engaging with.

If the comic's big question was "Who watches the watchmen?" perhaps one of the show's lingering questions is "Can we live without masks?" In this sense, it also echoes Marx's question from the *Eighteenth Brumaire* and Freud's question from "Remembering, Repeating, Working-Through": can there be a new poetry which speaks to the birth of a wholly new world, and is a complete working-through possible? Does freedom from the mask of the past come at the cost of comprehending it? The past is only visible to through the projection of the mask of the present upon it. The show seems to be positing a true remediation: Angela is no longer be stuck with the mask repetition-compulsion, she has worked through it via the shock of the unmediated experience of her grandfather's memory. Perhaps this is the ultimate fantasy: to banish fantasy and illusion once and for all and radically accept the true nature of reality. Is this possible? Is it a regulative ideal? Or is the true face beneath the mask always just another mask? How do you know where the mask ends and the face begins if nothing ever ends?

*Watchmen* is a masked repetition, and the series creators explicitly stated that they felt compelled to make it. Compelled to put a mask on a mask. The gesture is repeated constantly through the series: the brick joke about a brick, the episode that deals with the elephant in the room (Dr. Manhattan) having an actual elephant in a room, Dr. Manhattan wearing a Dr. Manhattan mask, but perhaps most notably in the egg as the Easter egg. The latter is *the* Easter egg because it is first introduced with a composite form, in Angela's first scene where she is making bánh bía for a cooking demonstration at her son's school and the eggs in a bowl make a smiley face with a little splash of red from a fertilized egg. This repetition of the old master

Easter egg is then sublimated into the new egg. From here on everything yellow is egg and every egg carries a smiley face within it. This tropological *Aufhebung* echoes the becoming Christ of Yeshua. Without the story of his death, resurrection, and ascension, Jesus is just another heretical prophet. Easter is the egg from which Christ is born.

The theological resonance of the 2019 series is not reserved for the level of the exchange of tropes and puns. The roots of this can certainly be attributed to the comic, from the frequent references to Dr. Manhattan as a god, to the fact that Jon dies and a specific amount of time passes before he is reborn (three months rather than days as in the Christ myth). But ultimately his presence in the comic is anything but that of a savior, fully justifying Will Reeves assessment that he "could've done more." The series pushes this much further into religious allegory, converting Jon Osterman into the Easterman, which is also of course, the Eggman, referenced twice in closing credits musical paratexts; the Beastie Boys "Egg Man" at the end of episode two and the finale's obscure 1970s cover of the Beatles "I am the Walrus" by the band Spooky Tooth. And yet, against the self-serious hermeneutical urge to find hidden depth beneath every surface, the fact that the finale's title, "See How They Fly" is also a citation from the song, whose lyrics are undeniably evocative, iconic, and absolute gibberish, perhaps all of these eggs add up to nothing more than a bad joke. If the comics open end seems to preclude the possibility of an ultimate redemption, and thus explicitly rejects a theological teleology or eschatology ("Nothing ever ends"), the series seems to pine for it, holding out hope for the coming of a god who not only can save the world, but actually will. This would seem to constitute an ultimate betrayal of the comic, but perhaps for a mimetic act to be truly original such a betrayal is a necessary evil.

## Postscript

A number of historical, technological and cultural developments occurred between the original drafting of the prospectus for this dissertation in 2019 and its completion in 2025 which render it both timely and untimely. The simultaneous prescience and belatedness of this project is perhaps appropriate for the strange familiarity (or familiar strangeness) inherent in attempting to produce an original theory of mimetic repetition. To identify the figure of the mask as a figure of identity itself is nothing new. However, having embarked upon this inquiry into the symbolic charge invested into masks prior to the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, witnessing the emergence of the clash between the normative discourse of preventative public health and the reactionary resistance to it (fueled by anti-social right-wing conspiracy theorists), produced an uncanny and deadly confirmation of the masked mimesis inherent in political identification. The techno-cultural context from which this project emerged was largely defined by the prior decade's rapid expansion of social media networks and streaming media platforms, but the first half of this current decade brought about two developments which uncannily evoke this project's preoccupations as much as the pandemic driven transfiguration of the mask: a revivification of the fixation on the singular uniqueness of the work of art, through the possibility of a technical verification of an auratic signature inscribed within inherently reproducible digital artwork (NFTs) and the widespread adoption and proliferation of various forms of generative AI across almost all technological sectors. The latter, and the discourse surrounding it, presents a unique repetition of some of the oldest philosophical debates around the concepts of nature, artifice, and intelligence as such.

While the connection between these technological and cultural developments and this project's reinterpretation of Ancient Greek aesthetics may not be immediately obvious, it is clear

that the predominant attempts to define and differentiate AI and human intelligence are based upon dogmatic assumptions about originality, creativity, and human nature which are radically insufficient for addressing this current moment in history. In order to comprehend the significance of this emergent pseudo-intelligence, and effectively combat the ideology which drives its proliferation, it is necessary to rigorously interrogate the unexamined assumptions which underlie the rhetoric of both its partisans and critics. While this project did not attack this contemporary rhetoric directly, it offers an alternate history of a concept which has profoundly shaped the fundamental principles of Western philosophy, not only through the aesthetic discourse from which it originated, but even playing a role in the formation of the modern concept of the mind itself, and thus all of the central dyads of modern philosophy: mind and world, self and other, sense and meaning etc. In this moment of closing reflection on the demand that this work speak to contemporary moment and what is to come, the opposing principle which drove the return to Aristotelian mimesis feels both justified and complicated: Reimagining the concepts which preceded the formation of the contemporary world can break open the space of possibility from which an unprecedented future can emerge.

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