

BUYS, Erik

Jesuit High School (Sint-Jozefscollege, Aalst, Belgium)

@ erik_buys@yahoo.com

Deceit, desire and the graphic novel watchmen in the age of terror

El engaño, el deseo y la novela gráfica.

Vigilantes en la era del terror

The graphic novel *Watchmen* represents a textbook example of literature's revelatory power concerning the mimetic aspects of human desire and interaction. It also describes the scapegoat mechanism as a recurring process that is foundational to human culture. Both themes come together in *Tales of the Black Freighter*, a tragic «story within the story» of *Watchmen*, revealing the bleak truth about humanity's denial of the mimetic aspects of human desire and of the scapegoat mechanism.

KEY WORDS: Deception, desire, graphic novel.

La novela gráfica *Watchmen* representa un ejemplo de libro de texto del poder revelador de la literatura sobre los aspectos miméticos del deseo humano y la interacción. También describe el mecanismo del chivo expiatorio como un proceso recurrente que es fundamental para la cultura humana. Ambos temas se unen en *Tales of the Black Freighter*, una trágica «historia dentro de la historia» de *Watchmen*, que revela la sombría verdad sobre la negación de la humanidad de los aspectos miméticos del deseo humano y del mecanismo del chivo expiatorio.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Engaño, deseo, novela gráfica.

1. ON FEAR, DESIRE, RIVALRY AND SACRIFICIAL PEACE

1.1 A personal story

Being human, we are able to characterize ourselves as highly «dependent creatures». This doesn't mean, however, that we are always willing to use this capacity. On the contrary, the awareness of being dependent on something or someone other than ourselves often seems to frighten us. We like to think of ourselves as free, «in-dependent» individuals. Still, even the perk skinny man with the tip-tilted nose who is writing this essay had to finally admit thoughts like



these were mere illusions. In a not so distant past I was convinced I had the sanctified right to do with my body whatever I wanted, and I tried to «improve» it. After all, I was a free, emancipated western individual –so I thought. In wanting to change myself into a shiny action hero type of figure I remained blind, of course, to the fact I didn't actually create the body I was manipulating. *I was not my own origin.* Moreover, the body I was desiring for myself apparently didn't spring from my «own» imagination. It was running around, lifting weights and sweating to smelly conclusions in the workout center I was attending. *I was not my own destination.* To my great relief I eventually came to realize that we were all inefficiently exchanging bodily odors in the gym. My attempt at being a strong, autonomous man surely was bound to end up in vain. I simply wasn't independent. I could desire to be totally free though. In the end, however, that's exactly what an aspiration for complete freedom is and what it remains: a desire.

In most instances a desire becomes more intense as its pursued goal becomes more difficult to obtain. With regard to the desire to be a self-sufficient independent individual this principle might take the form of a stubborn, even vehement denial: the more I become aware of not being my own origin, the more I might want to establish the opposite. In doing so I unwittingly confess I'm reacting out of and against a given that was already there, «before» me: the *fact* of my existence, what German philosopher Martin Heidegger called *Geworfenheit* («thrownness»).[1] We are always already depending on this factual reality which –we could therefore say– «transcends» us. So we literally are, ontologically speaking, «dependent beings». Our self is a non-autonomous self. It is present to itself as an often fearful unascertainable given^[2] –as a «present» with certain, limited possibilities, precisely because of its non-self-sufficient character. Of course I could want to change my tip-tilted nose, but I would still change the nose that was already there without any decision on my behalf. The prospect of painful surgery, but most of all the loving companionship of a friend who was dearly accepting my somewhat «nerdy» features, persuaded me not to go through with the plans to «re-create» myself. Besides, didn't Socrates have a tip-tilted nose as well?

Comforting myself with the image of Socrates, and thanking my friend she didn't expect me to become the next Hercules, I realized the following: not only are we dependent on a self as a given with limited possibilities, but also the way we look at ourselves and what we desire from and for ourselves within these possibilities, is highly dependent on the way others are watching us. Or at least on the way we *think* others are watching us. We are very much aware of being watched. Actually, we are constantly watching others watching us. To put things slightly differently: we *imitate* each other's watchfulness. We are «watchmen».

Not long ago I discovered *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel: Self and Other in Literary Structure* by René Girard that further developed these ideas in ways I could never have imagined. This book is the English translation of *Mensonge romantique et vérité romanesque*, which was first published in 1961. In it, Girard explores the writings of some classic European novelists and comes to an intriguing and thought provoking conclusion: what distinguishes the mature work of these writers from other literary endeavors, and makes it «great», is its revelatory power concerning human desire.^[3] The great novels reveal that we are not independently desiring beings. It is a romantic illusion to think that our desire is what most belongs to our «selves». Beyond our basic instinctive needs our desire is oriented and ignited by processes of imitation, what Girard persistently calls *mimesis*. Our enormous faculty to imitate grants us access to typically human phenomena, like our extraordinary

learning abilities, as well as our ability to «re-present» ourselves. That I am capable of recognizing my non-autonomous self indeed has to do with imitation, as representation is a process of «duplication», which is a form of mimesis.

This may all seem very obvious and harmless. In the context of desire, however, Girard points out that mimesis can become a conflictual and even violent force. Imitating someone else in desiring a certain object always complicates my relationship with the other. Taking the other as a model for my desire also means that he becomes an obstacle in the pursuit of the object we simultaneously desire. In this way the other appears as someone I admire (as I take him as a model), while at the same time he appears as someone I envy (as he becomes an obstacle). The other, in short, becomes my partner in a mutual love/hate relationship. Since he possesses a similar capacity for imitation, the other will in turn take me as a model, thereby reinforcing his own desire. This process makes me, in turn, an obstacle for him and it all mostly ends up in an inextricable «mimetic rivalry». A classic, archetypal example of this kind of competition is the rivalry between two men desiring the same woman.

1.2. The novelistic revelation of mimetic desire

People always tend to desire what others designate as desirable. We all have our peculiar models, and we adhere value to aspects of our environment because of them. Sometimes we might even want to *be* another person because of the prestige he seems to possess, a prestige the person receives from models who signify that person as desirable. Hence my previously mentioned desire to be the next Hercules in imitating my friends at the gym, as well as my acceptance of being someone more like Socrates –who, in my case, appears to also be a valuable idol. Girard has named the kind of mimetically mediated desire to possess someone else's prestige or position «metaphysical».^[4]

As Girard shows in his readings of the great novelists, more often than not we deny the mimetic nature of our desire. Mimetic rivals remain blind for their interdependency. They are both convinced of the «originality» of their own desire and perceive the other as wrongfully laying claim to something that's not his or hers. In the end it's not about obtaining certain objects anymore, but about obtaining a kind of prestige or image. More specifically, both rivals desire the other to acknowledge them as autonomously desiring individuals.^[5] However, the more they desire to convince themselves and the other of their own glamorous autonomy, the more this desire is mutually imitated and the more this autonomy remains an object(ive) that is not obtained –and so remains desired.^[6] Mimesis stays the hidden source of a tragic competition wherein rivals more and more become each other's equals as they try to distinguish themselves from each other. Mimesis stays the hidden source of an ever increasing desire for «uniqueness» and «independency», and an ever increasing failure of reaching these goals. This fundamental insight is Girard's «novelistic truth».^[7]

1.3. The biblical revelation of the scapegoat mechanism

Positivist voices would make us believe nothing truthful was to be gained from narrative literature. Epic storytelling, as in mythology, could merely function as a pre-scientific approach





to reality which had to be abandoned during the enlightened age of epistemological maturity. Others have tried to defend the fiction department in the bookstore by claiming it to be a healthy form of entertainment in our stressful world. Now and then, we would need to distract ourselves to get away from the harsh realities of daily life. Amidst these tendencies, it is one of Girard's great accomplishments to have preserved a basic intuition of the learned spirit: that great stories don't alienate us from reality but that, on the contrary, they enable us to face realities we normally shun away from. Even Plato, who was not too keen on esthetes and artists, is the author of a beautiful allegory to open people's eyes for a darkened truth about their existence.

Although literature in general remains one of René Girard's main interests, he retains a special place for Biblical narratives in his later writings. He shows that the Judeo-Christian scriptures not only reveal the often mimetic and violent nature of human desire, but also how this violence is traditionally expelled. As initiates in Girard's further developed «mimetic theory»^[6] already know, mimetic rivalries are often resolved by sacrificial means. Rivals become allies once they have found a common enemy. The latter eventually pays for the frustrations individuals and communities have to endure because of their unacknowledged mimetic tendencies. This sacrificial mechanism again operates by means of imitation, whereby the rival of one powerful model becomes the enemy of all. While being experienced as the resolution of widespread violent reciprocities, the common enemy is also *wrongfully* perceived as the source of this violence. This enemy becomes, in other words, a scapegoat. The enemy becomes a victim whose expulsion out of a newly found community is seen as necessary and justified. The scapegoat mechanism deceives us, once again, by hiding the real source of social disintegration: the mimetic aspects of human desire.

The perception of the victim as the embodiment of uncontrollable violence makes this victim susceptible for processes of divinization. Girard argues that the traditional ambiguity of the sacred, being experienced as responsible for both good and bad things happening to human beings, can be traced back to original associations made surrounding the victims of scapegoat mechanisms. Again, because of these mechanisms, those victims were once wrongfully perceived as responsible for violence (while alive) and as responsible for peace (while being «present» as dead). New outbursts of violence became personified: they were experienced as the «invisible» presence of those who were first experienced as the embodiment of violence. Moreover, gradually and by association, the violent presence of these «ghosts» or «gods» was believed to be averted by the deadly violence against new victims. Sacrifices can be understood as the ritual repetition or «mimetic re-presentation» of the originally experienced beneficial death of a scapegoat.

According to Girard, thanks to the Biblical inspiration, however, we are able to tell the truthful story about the victim who is innocently sacrificed in our ever vain pursuits of prestige or social stability. In the Bible, this anthropological truth is often revealed as «a story within the story». The New Testament portrays Jesus as a magnificent storyteller whose parables are part of a well-known Jewish tradition, which is also testified by the Old Testament. In the second book of Samuel, for example, we can read the story of king David falling in love with a woman named Bathsheba. After the king is informed that she is the wife of Uriah, one of his soldiers, his inquisitiveness for her doesn't disappear. On the contrary, he sends his messengers to bring her to him. Eventually Bathsheba becomes pregnant, carrying the

king's child. In order to protect his image, David after a while comes to the conclusion that he has to get rid of Uriah. So he orders his commander to make sure Uriah dies in battle. Thereon the prophet Nathan, informed by these events, comes to David to tell him the story of a rich and a poor man, living in the same city. As Nathan's story turns out, the rich man slaughters the only lamb of the poor man to feed a visitor. Hearing this, David becomes very angry with the rich man and swears he must be punished and executed. Nathan then reveals the identity of the rich man: he is none other than king David himself. It is clear that David's newly found social status as husband to Bathsheba could only be gained by deceitfully slaughtering a potential rival –Bathsheba's former husband Uriah. Nathan thus shows human beings have difficulty sharing each other's position or «space». It seems it is easier to share time with each other.

*We knew the world would not be the same.
A few people laughed. A few people cried. Most people were silent.
I remembered the line from the Hindu scripture, the Bhagavad Gita.
Vishnu is trying to persuade the prince that he should do his duty,
and to impress him, takes on his multi-armed form, and says:
«Now I am become Death, the Destroyer of worlds.»
I suppose we all thought that, one way or another.*

(Robert Oppenheimer, on experiencing the explosion of the first atomic bomb).

*My name is Ozymandias, king of kings:
Look on my works, ye mighty, and despair!
—Ozymandias, Percy Bysshe Shelley*

(Cited in Watchmen XI by Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons).

2. THE DISGUISED FEAR IN BEING WATCHMEN

As I mentioned at the beginning of this essay, it is the experience of our own temporality (made possible through our mimetic abilities to re-present ourselves) as being «present» without having decided thereupon, which frightens us. It means that there are forces beyond our control, determining our «time given». We often flee from the awareness of our temporal and mortal nature in creating an admirable image. Mimetically obtaining a certain image that seems watched and desired by many others, grants us a prestigious aura^[9] as a place to hide from our deepest fear –of being nothing more than a mere mortal. So we are «watchmen» in two ways: as temporal beings –keeping an eye on our «watch»–, and as watchful beings –keeping an eye on others surrounding us. Thereby we are also storytellers. As René Girard has shown, due to the Judeo-Christian narratives, we can no longer fully hide the truth concerning humanity's complicity in scapegoat mechanisms and the creation of glamorous but false images about itself. He discovered this truth was retold in some classic novels of



European literature. At the birth of the 21st century and living in a world threatened by global terror, skinny men with nerdy features such as myself, are able to recover the Biblical insights in yet another story from a relatively new medium. Strangely enough, perhaps, the story is called *Watchmen*.

2.1. Fear of the truth: the killing of the comedian

Watchmen is the title for a graphic novel conceived by Alan Moore (writer) and Dave Gibbons (illustrator) in 1986. It is known as one of *Time Magazine's* 100 best novels, and consists of twelve parts. The last image pictures a Journal, soon to be discovered by a young and somewhat clumsy journalist. Its first words? The exact first words the *Watchmen* saga begins with: «Rorschach's Journal. October 12th, 1985: [...] This city is afraid of me. I have seen its true face».^[10] So, from the first page readers are confronted with this graphic novel's main issue: a struggle for truth. We have plenty of reasons to believe this is indeed a novelistic truth as Girard understands it.

The story of *Watchmen* is set near the end of the Cold War between the US and the Soviet Union. As the multi-layered story develops, the «Doomsday Clock» nears midnight—a symbolic and «watchful» reminder of apocalyptic times, as the world is divided between a western and eastern side who mimetically keep track of each other's nuclear expansion.

The «Watchmen» are a bunch of dressed up American vigilantes. Readers are soon to find out that every Watchman or –woman hides deep personal traumas behind his or her mask. The vigilante Edward Blake, who is known as «The Comedian», apparently is very much aware of the way truths are masked, time and again, by people who try to uphold a certain image— including the Watchmen themselves.

Blake's nickname, «The Comedian», embodies the tragic paradox of the archetypal jester: he is able to show what is really behind the appearances kept up in our social fabric, but exactly because he is perceived as «just an actor» he is not taken seriously. One might think of Friedrich Nietzsche's famous story about a madman who proclaimed God's death, but was not comprehended by his fellow villagers. Shakespeare also comes to mind, with that famous quote from his comedy *As you like it* (Act II, Scene VII): «All the world's a stage, and all the men and women merely players...»^[11] In other words, «real» life is often but a play, while great theatre might reveal the (sometimes ugly and hidden) truth about that life.

Despite his theatrical appearance, The Comedian is a powerful character. He is feared as a tough Vietnam veteran and distrusted as one of two Watchmen who keeps working for the American government after masked superheroes are officially banned. He becomes an immediate enemy to Adrian Veidt. Veidt is known as «Ozymandias» and is regarded as «the smartest man on the planet».^[12]

Veidt is able to detect the mimetic origin of their mutual disgust, recollecting his first encounter with The Comedian: «As intelligent men facing lunatic times, we were very alike, despising each other *instantly*».^[13] Because of his ability to show humanity's true and often ugly face,^[14] The Comedian becomes the first victim of Veidt's «plan to save the world».



2.2. Fear of the monster: the ever vain escapism of violence through sacrifice

Veidt, in the shape of Ozymandias, dreams of a united and peaceful world. Therefore he uses humanity's old trick: he creates a common enemy to unite rivaling parties. Together with a host of scientists he generates a monster, from his remote hideout in Antarctica, to simulate an attack on New York City. At first, his plan seems to work. Both the US and the USSR are convinced that the Americans were attacked by an alien nuclear force from outer space. However, Veidt's accomplishment is soon questioned by Doctor Manhattan, the only one of the Watchmen with (nuclear) superpowers, and an immortal being. One Dr. Jon Osterman became this godlike creature after an accident during experiments at a nuclear power plant.

Veidt asks Doctor Manhattan what he thinks about the attack on New York City and the recently obtained world peace: «I did the right thing, didn't I? It all worked out in the end.» Doctor Manhattan's answer is far from reassuring: «In the end? *Nothing* ends, Adrian, nothing *ever* ends».^[15]

Notwithstanding all his intelligence and technological ability, Veidt is fooled by his own vanity. He idolizes Alexander the Great and openly declares him as his model: «I was determined to measure *my* success against *his*».^[16]

Nevertheless, in his quest for world peace Veidt becomes somewhat disappointed with the Macedonian conqueror: «He'd not united *all* the world, nor built a unity that would *survive* him».^[17] That's why Veidt seeks for further inspiration to surpass his model, and eventually falls on the Egyptian pharaohs: «I heard dead kings walking underground; heard fanfares sound through human skulls. Alexander had merely resurrected an age of *pharaohs*. *Their* wisdom, *truly* immortal, now inspired *me!* ... Their *greatest* secrets, however, were entrusted to their *servants*, buried *alive* with them in sand-flooded *chambers*».^[18]

Veidt's secret, of course, is the innocence, even non-existence of an alien monstrous enemy. To preserve this secret he indeed imitates his infamous predecessors: he poisons the scientists who served him. Veidt acquires his world peace at the expense of tremendous immolation:^[19] he not only kills The Comedian and the scientists who both knew the truth about the way he developed his plan, but he also sacrifices three million New Yorkers.^[20] Still, he justifies his actions by claiming he cannot do anything else but follow the demands of fate. He quotes John F. Kennedy's intended speech from the day this American president was assassinated: «We in this country, in this generation, are by destiny, rather than choice, the watchmen on the walls of world freedom».^[21]

More and more Veidt considers himself to be Ozymandias, captured by a mania to attain what his model Alexander the Great couldn't: «Ruling without *barbarism!* At *Alexandria*, he [Alexander] instituted the ancient world's greatest seat of *learning*. True, people died... perhaps unnecessarily, though who can judge such things? Yet how *nearly* he approached his vision of a united world! [...] I wanted to match his *accomplishment*, bringing an age of *illumination* to a benighted *world*. I wanted to have something to *say* to him, should we meet in the hall of *legends*».^[22]

In any case, eventually Veidt considers the sacrifice of millions justified, precisely because he looks down on «ordinary people» as being «barbarians». During an interview he states the following, wherein he shows some of his disdain for people who –in his view– don't answer «the call of destiny»: «As I said, it all depends on us, on whether we, individually, want





Armageddon or a new world of fabulous, limitless potential. That's not such an obvious question as it seems. I believe there are some people who really do want, if only subconsciously, an end to the world. They want to be spared the responsibilities of maintaining that world, to be spared the effort of imagination needed to realize such a future. And of course, there are other people who want very much to live. 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... NOVA [interviewer]: ... and in the other? VEIDT: The seventh cavalry. (Laughter)».^[23] Clearly with this statement Veidt suggests a Manichean battle between the forces of good and the forces of evil. Ironically, during the same interview Veidt criticizes yet another main character of *Watchmen*, namely Rorschach (real name Walter Joseph Kovacs), for being too Manichean: «Rorschach, I don't know very well. I believe he's a man of great integrity, but he seems to see the world in very black and white, Manichean terms. I personally believe that to be an intellectual limitation».^[24]

As mentioned, it is exactly his vain feeling of intellectual superiority which prevents Veidt to see the truth about himself. As is often done in the Bible, here also this truth is revealed by «a story within the story». It is called *Tales of the Black Freighter*, a fictional comic book that is being read by a youngster throughout the story of *Watchmen*. It is about a young mariner who sets out to warn his hometown for the coming of the so-called Black Freighter, a pirate ship, after his own ship has been destroyed. Overcome by his fear he gets a distorted perspective on reality, thinking, on arrival, his hometown is already captured by the crew of the Black Freighter. He starts killing everyone he meets, not noticing he is actually slaughtering his beloved ones... until finally he awakens from his frenzy and comes to a terrible conclusion: «The world I'd tried to save was lost beyond recall. I was a *horror*: amongst horrors must I *dwell*».^[25]

This is reminiscent of a paradox proclaimed by Jesus (Luke 9:24-25): «For whosoever will save his life shall lose it: but whosoever will lose his life for my sake, the same shall save it. For what is a man advantaged, if he gain the whole world, and lose himself, or be cast away?» Further on in the same Gospel he repeats it (Luke 17:33): «Whosoever shall seek to save his life shall lose it; and whosoever shall lose his life shall preserve it.» This evangelical paradox, to which the *Tales of the Black Freighter* perhaps unwittingly refers, can really be considered as a subtext to the situation of Adrian Veidt becoming his alter ego Ozymandias. Ozymandias unwittingly regenerates the monster he is trying to destroy. Maybe he should have paid attention to yet another sentence of Jesus: «How can Satan cast out Satan?» (Mark 3:23b).^[26] Indeed, how can one cast out fear if the regime he creates is legitimized and held together by fear? How can one cast out violence by constantly referring to the possibility of violence? How many weapons will be made in such a world? What kind of peace is that? In stockpiling ever more weapons to defend the world against some vague imminent threat of a potential invasion by monstrous aliens, the world eventually *will* become more violent.

«Whosoever shall seek to save his life, shall lose it.» Ozymandias not only repeats the failure of the previous «princes of this world», he also loses himself during the process. His biggest fear is to vanish in oblivion, but precisely because he is trying to achieve an immortal, «legendary» image, revered by the masses, his «original» persona vanishes. Ozymandias wants to be his own origin and he wants to have total control over the world's destiny: «I gave away my *inheritance* to demonstrate the possibility of achieving anything, starting from *nothing*.» He literally tries to erase his own, «given» identity in a quest to establish a heroic,

«immortal» image, like a manic Don Quixote: «Next I departed for northern Turkey, to retrace my hero's steps».^[27] Instead of becoming a paragon of humanity, he becomes the violent, «horrific» barbarian he had always despised. In this respect, Ozymandias can truly be depicted as a tragic hero who, by doing what he does, exactly seals the fate he was trying to avoid. In desiring to be an autonomous, self-sufficient individual, he becomes increasingly dependent on the way his image is perceived by others.

*I come to this magnificent house of worship tonight
because my conscience leaves me no other choice.
A true revolution of values will lay hand on the world order and say of war:
«This way of settling differences is not just.
This way of burning human beings with napalm,
of filling our nation's homes with orphans and widows,
of injecting poisonous drugs of hate into the veins of peoples normally sane,
of sending men home from dark and bloody battlefields
physically handicapped and psychologically deranged,
cannot be reconciled with wisdom, justice and love.»*

(Martin Luther King Jr., preaching during the Vietnam War).

Love does violence to totality, and shatters the Powers and Principalities.^[28]

(René Girard).



3. FEAR UNMASKED: KENOTIC GRACE IN WATCHMEN

According to René Girard, as he describes in his books *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning* and *Battling to the End – Conversations with Benoît Chantre*, we can only escape the satanic cycle of ever regenerated «sacred» demands for sacrifice if we accept the following truth about our existence: that we only live fully by a Grace, granted to us through others.^[29] We are only able to «save» ourselves if we abandon our desire to establish a prestige over against someone else. «Whosoever shall lose his life shall preserve it.» If we let go of, or indeed «lose» our desire to manipulate the way others are watching us (by constructing «an acceptable image»), and instead «trust» each other, we can remain «who we already are» as relational beings (!). In this way we «save» ourselves. «Fear not», Jesus says in the Gospels. He argues to base our relationships on mutual trust, on faith. Therein we are enabled to discover a love for the other as opposed to a love for our or one's image. It's the former love John refers to in his first letter (1 John 4:18): «There is no fear in love; but perfect love casteth out fear: because fear hath torment. He that feareth is not made perfect in love.»

Of course, by entrusting ourselves to others we run the risk of not being accepted and of being betrayed. *Because Jesus refuses to sacrifice himself* to a socially acceptable image, and because he refuses to take part in the sacrifice of people who don't seem to harmonize with



that image, *he is eventually sacrificed –crucified– by the establishment*. Despite this ever recurrent reality of innocently killed people, the Gospels still proclaim the hope of a different foundation for human relationships. The narratives of the resurrection depict the situation whereby the apostles, who betrayed Jesus, experience the presence of «the crucified Jesus» as a non-vengeful presence. Instead of denying their responsibility in abandoning Jesus, and instead of blaming others for their shortcomings (which would be the establishment of a scapegoat mechanism), the apostles are liberated to accept the truth about themselves. In the living presence of the «forgiving victim» they no longer have to hide behind an image to protect themselves from being avenged, but they can acknowledge themselves as associates of this «Victim», refusing a world that is built on sacrifices.^[30] The view of themselves through the eyes of the Grace they experience in the presence of the risen Jesus, enables the apostles to love and accept themselves, and this in turn enables them to love others (and so on). In the experience of the resurrection the mimetic competition of people who try to establish their prestige over against one another is replaced by an invitation to take part in a «mimesis of withdrawal»,^[31] whereby people abandon the temptation to imitate each other's self-assertion. The event of the resurrection *transforms* our mimetic abilities. As the crucified Jesus answers the sufferings he had to endure by «turning the other cheek», humanity in general is invited to take part in this Grace and to imitate Him who is portrayed as revealing in parables «what had been hidden since the foundation of the world» (see Matthew 13:35; also see *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World*, René Girard's magnum opus, first published in French in 1978 as *Des choses cachées depuis la fondation du monde: recherches avec Jean-Michel Oughourlian et Guy Lefort*).

In *Watchmen*, it is Rorschach who refuses a peace that is built on sacrifice and on the lie concerning «the common enemy». Being the troubled son of a prostitute, he refuses to take part in the big masquerade set out by Ozymandias. Growing up amidst people who lead double lives, he has seen such masquerades from close by, and he knows how they kill people's ability to love one another. He becomes the last victim of Ozymandias.

Rorschach's is a truly Christian stance (although he not always upholds this, as he uses violence himself). As mentioned, the stories of the passion and the resurrection of Jesus reveal that the victim people use, time and again, to found their communities upon, is in fact innocent –or at least not as guilty as they would like to believe. Therefore this victim is no longer feared and revered as the monstrous and/or divine idol who is responsible for any form of violence within the community. This, of course, creates the possibility of new violence. If people no longer fear the «god»-victim as the embodiment of violence, they also no longer fear the actions (of certain forms of mimesis) associated with this victim, the kind of actions that were the real causes for the violence in the first place. At the same time they will no longer automatically shun away from or fear marginalized persons –such as, for example, sick people or kings– whose social status also depends on associations with the divine. By no longer fearing their «god», people no longer expel the social realities associated with that god from everyday life, realities whose forbidden character they, until then, respected as «sacred taboos». Christianity's unmasking of «the sacred» as based on a false presumption and on nothing but a mere illusion concerning the victims of mimetically ignited violence, in fact destroys religion as the means by which communities traditionally regulate their social interaction. This makes possible a new foundation for human relationships (a non-sacrificial

«transformation» of religion), but it might also unleash the violence that used to be controlled by a religious system of fear and ritual expulsion (sacrifice).

René Girard is very much aware of Christianity's apocalyptic powers. In the aforementioned *Battling to the End: Conversations with Benoît Chantre*, he once again refers to a quotation of Jesus he already discussed in other books (Matthew 10:34): «Think not that I am come to send peace on earth: I came not to send peace, but a sword».^[32] Thereby Jesus challenges humanity to accept mutual *differences* that are not resulting from mimetic rivalry and from a social hierarchy that tries to prevent such a rivalry. Jesus favors «non-violent conflict» (of open, benevolent discussions) over «violent peace» (resulting from mental or physical sacrifices). Ozymandias is only able to pursue the logic of mimetic rivalry in desiring the prestige of his models (as something he *loves*) and in distinguishing or *differing* himself by surpassing those same models (as he comes to *hate* them in a way). Contrasting this ambiguous logic of ever recurring and justified violent sacrifice, is the Christian recasting of violence as a *possibility*, as something that is *not necessary*. Because we no longer dread some «hellish punishment» or enslave ourselves to an illusory «divine» social idol, we might indeed become our brother's murderer, but we might equally dedicate ourselves to a Love beyond the love/hate dynamics of mimetic rivalry. When we no longer fear punishment for not upholding a certain image before an all-seeing «evil eye» –because we experience this sacred social eye to be actually non-existent–, we will only respect each other out of pure and simple Love. As mentioned earlier, this entails the risk of failure.

At the end of *Watchmen*, it is Doctor Manhattan who eventually converts to the dynamics of Love. Not surprisingly, he is the one who experiences the perspective of eternity. Indeed this is the condition for not having to seek refuge in a heroic image that will survive throughout history. Only one who doesn't fear to be «a mere mortal» is capable of transcending the pursuit of vain «worldly successes». This pursuit surely can only be considered as a tragic one, since history itself might end, so the «immortality» gained in this historic world is also «mortal». Only one who doesn't fear to be a mere mortal is able to withdraw from a desire to become immortal –since he no longer has to chase this goal. So, instead of taking immortality as a goal normal humans vainly and tragically pursue, Doctor Manhattan's experience of eternity becomes a *means* by which he is no longer entangled in the empty preoccupations of this world.

Firstly, Doctor Manhattan's near omnipotence allows him to totally destroy our world. His name clearly refers to the Manhattan Project of the US during the second World War, wherein scientists developed the first atomic bomb. Since that time, humanity faces the terror of total annihilation, which seems even nearer in this day and age –as we are faced with the apparently uncontrollable expansion of unpredictable terrorist attacks.

Secondly, Doctor Manhattan's omnipotence not only allows him to extinguish the world, but, by contrast, also gives him the opportunity to «love without fear». His love therefore becomes totally pure, without ulterior motives –he doesn't really «need» others to feed a desire to feel «immortally important» or «necessary» or «wanted». Hence he withdraws from mimetic rivalry at the end of the story.

Doctor Manhattan finds his former girlfriend Laurie Juspezyk (known as Watchwoman «Silk Spectre») lying safe and at peace with his friend Daniel Dreiberg (known as Watchman «Nite Owl»).

If Doctor Manhattan still has one fear it is the fear of his own power to destroy the world with his beloved Laurie in it. As Jewish philosopher Emmanuel Levinas pointed out, the





subversive nature of Judeo-Christian scriptures (the Ten Commandments especially) precisely consists of this reversal: the fear of potentially being killed becomes the fear of being a potential murderer.^[3] That is why Doctor Manhattan –being the embodiment of mankind’s ability to destroy itself– decides to leave earth, wishing the other’s life and happiness. As said, he withdraws from mimetic rivalry with Daniel Dreiberg. He leaves to create «some new humanity», and that is exactly what he does with his «kenotic» movement. In the graphic novel this «creative withdrawal» is suggested with a touch of genius by Dave Gibbons, as he draws Doctor Manhattan walking on water past the two love birds. We don’t need much imagination to see here a reference to the story of Jesus Christ walking on water towards his apostles, saving them from a chaotic storm. Throughout the Bible this is a powerful, symbolic image for the creative and redeeming powers of God, probably best known in the story of Moses who frees the Israelites from Egyptian slavery by leading them through the Red Sea under Yahweh’s guidance.

Finally, *Watchmen* once again reveals one of the fundamental claims made by Christianity: that when we look at ourselves through the eyes of «The Eternal» –from a perspective of eternity that has been granted to us–, we are saved from being entangled in a destructive cycle of ever recurring deceitful images and idols.

Is it a coincidence, then, that the vision for this salvation be born from a child whose genealogy reveals four women who are known as adulterous or as prostitutes (see Matthew 1), the aforementioned Bathsheba being one of them? Perhaps indeed this child, Jesus of Nazareth, was destined to become the Christ because he could only emerge as the result of the failure of mimetic rivalry, as the result of a non-avenged adultery. It is in this constellation and by this Grace he was born. It is by this Grace, according to Christian tradition, that we are eventually saved.

Interestingly, in director Zack Snyder’s movie adaptation of *Watchmen* (2009), Leonard Cohen’s song *Hallelujah* is played during an intimate love scene between Daniel and Laurie. The song refers to the story of David and Bathsheba in its first verses. So the future of the world is sketched out, here also, by the Biblical vision of a child who can only be born from the abstention of mimetically repeated, vengeful violence. In accepting Daniel’s love for Laurie, Doctor Manhattan indeed converts to the loving Spirit of the One who forgave David. It is through this Spirit that we are all, again according to Judeo-Christian tradition, created as «Sons of David».

4. ENDNOTES

[1] Heidegger, M. (1967). *Sein und Zeit* (11th ed.) (pp. 175-180). Tübingen: Max Niemeyer Verlag.

[2] Heidegger, M. (1967). *Sein und Zeit* (11th ed.) (pp. 140-142). Tübingen: Max Niemeyer Verlag.

[3] Girard, R. (1961). *Mensonge romantique et vérité romanesque*. Paris: Grasset, p. 30: «A la différence des écrivains romantiques ou néo-romantiques, un Cervantès, un Flaubert et un Stendhal dévoilent la vérité du désir dans leurs grandes oeuvres romanesques.»

[4] Girard, R. (1961). *Mensonge romantique et vérité romanesque*. Paris: Grasset, pp. 69-76 & p. 101: «Le désir selon l’Autre est toujours le désir d’être un Autre.»

- [5] Girard, R. (1978). *Des choses cachées depuis la fondation du monde*. Paris: Grasset, p. 320: «L'objet du désir, c'est bien l'objet interdit, pas par la "loi" comme le pense Freud, mais par celui qui nous le désigne comme désirable en le désirant lui-même. Seul l'interdit non légal de la rivalité peut vraiment blesser et traumatiser. Il y a là autre chose qu'une configuration statique. Les éléments du système réagissent les uns sur les autres; le prestige du modèle, la résistance qu'il oppose, la valeur de l'objet, la force du désir qu'il inspire, tout cela ne cesse de se renforcer en un processus de *feedback* positif. [...] Une fois qu'il entre dans ce cercle vicieux, le sujet en vient rapidement à s'attribuer une insuffisance radicale que le modèle aurait percée à jour et qui justifierait son attitude envers lui. Étroitement uni à cet objet que jalousement il se réserve, le modèle possède, semble-t-il, une auto-suffisance et une omniscience dont le sujet rêve de s'emparer. L'objet est plus désiré que jamais. Puisque le modèle en barre obstinément l'accès, c'est la possession de cet objet qui doit faire la différence entre la plénitude de l'Autre et son vide à lui, entre l'insuffisance et l'autosuffisance.»
- [6] Girard, R. (1999). *Literature and Christianity: A Personal View*. *Philosophy and Literature*, 36: «Mimetic desire makes us believe we are always on the verge of becoming self-sufficient through our own transformation into someone else.»
- [7] Girard, R. (1961). *Mensonge romantique et vérité romanesque*. Paris: Grasset, p. 31: «Nous réservons... le terme *romantique* aux oeuvres qui reflètent la présence du médiateur sans jamais la révéler et le terme *romanesque* aux oeuvres qui révèlent cette même présence.»
- [8] A first summary of Girard's basic insights: Girard, R. (1978). *Des choses cachées depuis la fondation du monde*. Paris: Grasset. Also see: Fleming, C. (2004). *René Girard. Violence and Mimesis*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- [9] On the desire to obtain a certain image and the tragic nature of such a pursuit: Girard, R. (1978). *Des choses cachées depuis la fondation du monde*. Paris: Grasset, p. 331: «Dans un monde où les individus ne sont plus définis par la place qu'ils occupent en vertu de leur naissance ou de quelque autre facteur dont la stabilité repose forcément sur l'arbitraire, l'esprit de concurrence, loin de s'apaiser, s'enflamme plus que jamais; tout dépend de comparaisons qui forcément ne sont pas "sûres", puisqu'aucun point de repère fixe ne demeure. Le maniaco-dépressif a une conscience particulièrement aiguë de la dépendance radicale où sont les hommes à l'égard les uns des autres et de l'incertitude qui en résulte. Comme il voit que tout, autour de lui, est *image*, *imitation* et *admiration* (*imago* et *imitare*, c'est la même racine), il désire ardemment l'admiration des autres, c'est-à-dire la polarisation sur lui-même de tous les désirs mimétiques, et il vit l'incertitude inévitable –le caractère mimétique du résultat– avec une intensité tragique.»
- [10] Gibbons, D., & Moore, A. (2008). *Watchmen I*. New York: DC Comics, p. 1.
- [11] Shakespeare, W. *As You Like It*. Retrieved from <http://shakespeare.mit.edu/asyoulikeit/asyoulikeit.2.7.html>
- [12] Gibbons, D., & Moore, A. (2008). *Watchmen II*. New York: DC Comics, p. 10.
- [13] Gibbons, D., & Moore, A. (2008). *Watchmen XI*. New York: DC Comics, p. 18.
- [14] Gibbons, D., & Moore, A. (2008). *Watchmen XI*. New York: DC Comics, p. 19.
- [15] Gibbons, D., & Moore, A. (2008). *Watchmen XII*. New York: DC Comics, p. 27.
- [16] Gibbons, D., & Moore, A. (2008). *Watchmen XI*. New York: DC Comics, p. 8.
- [17] Gibbons, D., & Moore, A. (2008). *Watchmen XI*. New York: DC Comics, p. 10.
- [18] Gibbons, D., & Moore, A. (2008). *Watchmen XI*. New York: DC Comics, pp. 10-11.





- [19] On the escalating nature of the «sacrificial system»: Girard, R. (2010). *Battling to the End. Conversations with Benoît Chantre*. East Lansing Michigan: Michigan State University Press, p. 118.
- [20] Gibbons, D., & Moore, A. (2008). *Watchmen XII*. New York: DC Comics, p. 19.
- [21] Gibbons, D., & Moore, A. (2008). *Watchmen XI*. New York: DC Comics, p. 18.
- [22] Gibbons, D., & Moore, A. (2008). *Watchmen XI*. New York: DC Comics, p. 8.
- [23] Gibbons, D., & Moore, A. (2008). *Watchmen XI (interview with Veidt)*. New York: DC Comics, p. 10.
- [24] Gibbons, D., & Moore, A. (2008). *Watchmen XI (interview with Veidt)*. New York: DC Comics, p. 10.
- [25] Gibbons, D., & Moore, A. (2008). *Watchmen XI*. New York: DC Comics, p. 23.
- [26] Girard, R. (1999). *Je vois Satan tomber comme l'éclair*. Paris: Grasset, pp. 64-65: «La répétition du mot Satan est plus éloquente que ne serait son remplacement par un pronom mais ce n'est pas le gout du beau langage qui l'inspire, c'est le désir de souligner le paradoxe fondamental de Satan. Il est un principe d'ordre autant que de désordre. Le Satan expulsé est celui qui fomenté et exaspère les rivalités mimétiques au point de transformer la communauté en une fournaise de scandales. Le Satan qui expulse est cette même fournaise lorsqu'elle atteint un point d'incandescence suffisant pour déclencher le mécanisme victimaire. Afin d'empêcher la destruction de son royaume, Satan fait de son désordre même, à son paroxysme, un moyen de s'expulser lui-même. C'est ce pouvoir extraordinaire qui fait de Satan le prince de ce monde».
- [27] Gibbons, D., & Moore, A. (2008). *Watchmen XI*. New York: DC Comics, p. 8.
- [28] Girard, R. (2010). *Battling to the End. Conversations with Benoît Chantre*. East Lansing Michigan: Michigan State University Press, p. 99.
- [29] Girard, R. (2010). *Battling to the End. Conversations with Benoît Chantre*. East Lansing Michigan: Michigan State University Press, p. 22: «We absolutely need Pascal. He saw and immediately understood the “abysses” of foundation. He considered Descartes to be “useless and uncertain” precisely because he thought he could base something on the *cogito* and “deduce” the heavens and the stars. Yet no one ever begins anything, except by grace. To sin means to think that one can begin something *oneself*. We never start anything; we always respond. The other has always decided for me and forces me to answer.»
- [30] These thoughts on «The Forgiving Victim» rely heavily on the work of James Alison. See, for instance: Alison, J. (1993). *Knowing Jesus*. London: SPCK Publishing; Alison, J. (1996). *Raising Abel. The Recovery of the Eschatological Imagination*. New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company; Alison, J. (1998). *The Joy of Being Wrong. Original Sin Through Easter Eyes*. New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company.
- [31] Girard, R. (2010). *Battling to the End. Conversations with Benoît Chantre*. East Lansing Michigan: Michigan State University Press, pp. 122-123.
- [32] Girard, R. (2010). *Battling to the End. Conversations with Benoît Chantre*. East Lansing Michigan: Michigan State University Press, p. 117.
- [33] Levinas, E. (2000). *Totalité et Infini. Essai sur l'extériorité*. Paris: Kluwer Academic (Le Livre de Poche), p. 273: «La volonté est sous le jugement de Dieu lorsque sa peur de la mort, s'invertit en peur de commettre un meurtre.»