Proceedings of The National Conference
On Undergraduate Research (NCUR) 2017
University of Memphis, TN
Memphis, Tennessee
April 6-8, 2017

The Polyphonic Poetics of *Watchmen* by Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons and Its Ontological Implications

Roy Auh
Literature
Duke University
401 Chapel Drive
Durham, North Carolina 27708 USA

Faculty Advisor: Dr. Kimberly K. Lamm

Abstract

Polyphonic poetics is a reaction against authors dictating the thoughts of characters to support their own worldview and denying them a human being's innate free consciousness. Soviet litterateur Mikhail Bakhtin saw that Dostoevsky's poetics conceived of characters' consciousnesses that resisted ideological immanence by continually reacting to any limiting descriptions placed on oneself. Humans, therefore, are what Bakhtin calls *unfinalizable.* My research first argues that the poetics of Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons's groundbreaking graphic novel, *Watchmen* (1986-87), is also polyphonic. However, polyphony expressed in the graphic dimension brings new layer of meaning to philosophical implications of polyphony. How Moore and Gibbons conceive of characters through their revision of novelistic polyphony reveals an alternative explanation of unfinalizability than the one Bakhtin articulated about Dostoevsky's characters. Through a close reading of *Watchmen* and engagement with multiple theories of graphic novels and polyphonic poetics, my theory concludes with an explication of *Watchmen*, which suggests that unfinalizability is not an innate quality reminiscent of a soul, but a result of the consciousness being an impersonal site for different societal narratives to dialogically engage with each other. A person's consciousness remains elusive because for every narrative the mind evokes to help frame a particular memory or vision, a counter-narrative springs up to disqualify it. This paper contends that *Watchmen*'s polyphonic poetics is based on an ontological viewpoint that reinterprets Bakhtinian human consciousness within postmodern philosophy.

Keywords: Bakhtin, Polyphony, Watchmen

1. Introduction

Stories unfold through dialogues. Ideas, personalities, worldviews, and realities collide within the novel, and plot happens when their collided debris shoot off to somewhere unexpected. The author's role is to observe the courses of these offshoots and make sense out of them. Inevitably, the result is a description of reality that follows the author's own worldview. The novel, in a gross oversimplification, is the author's worldview organizing the chaos of human life.

But this one literary theorist with a limp[1] considered such system of the novel archaic, for he lived at a time when the fabric of reality was being unraveled, when no number of ideologies can explain things about the world growing more complicated. No one worldview can dominantly make sense of everything anymore, especially on matters of what it means to live in a human society. He lived in a time of ideological deconstruction: World War I shattered any structural cornerstones in all spheres of society and knowledge: Russian Revolution dismantled the Tsarist autocracy; Arnold Schoenberg abandoned tonality in music; Albert Einstein proved the fragility of physical reality; Sigmund Freud revealed the human mind to be a misunderstood cosmos; and Gertrude Stein challenged absoluteness of denotations while James Joyce reconfigured syntax. In this regard, Mikhail Bakhin thought that the system of novels has become something much more of an antique from the ignorant times past. At its core, the novel organizes its reality under a single ideological claim; in light of Bakhtin's contemporary intellectual atmosphere, such metaphysical framework seemed faulty, for it no longer accurately depicted the nature of this new kaleidoscopic, disorienting reality.

Nearly half a century later, the writer Alan Moore and illustrator Dave Gibbons collaborated to create a new kind of illustrated superhero narratives that will address the same philosophical issue that has kept American comic books from fully realizing the humanistic potential of its characters. Their formalistically groundbreaking graphic novel *Watchmen* (1986-87) can be read as a reaction against primary-colored superheroes of the Golden Age of Comic Books—an era of Superman and Batman in 1930s to 50s—for *Watchmen* showcases characters that cannot be divided into the simple classes of good and evil, the hero and the villain. As Bakhtin had done, Moore and Gibbons also sought to get a bearing on the nauseatingly complex world through art, and, as Dostoevsky had done, consequently employed a pluralistic narrative form. However, Moore and Gibbons distinguished their pluralist *Watchmen* universe from Dostoevsky's with characters that were of passive ontological composition—that reflects the fact that human complexity is not an innate human quality to be celebrated, as Dostoevsky thought, but a reflection of a complex society humans are born into. In leading up to this poetical analysis of *Watchmen*, this essay will first summarize Bakhtin's revolutionary theory of 'literary polyphony,' which describes a novelistic poetics that solves the lack of metaphysical complexity of novels. Then, it will apply the described theory to qualify *Watchmen* as a polyphonic novel, and then demonstrate how the shift in the form to realizing literary polyphony similarly revises the theory of human ontology operating behind the theory of polyphony.

2. Bakhtin's Theory

In his seminal *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, Bakhtin calls this outdated aspect of novels "monologic," because the novel serves as a platform for the author to project his or her thoughts in a narrative monologue. There is, as Bahktin writes, a "firm background of a unified world of objects" whose characters are its flat murals by being "subordinated to the character's objectified image as merely one of its characteristics."[3] Most novels are composed of heroes, antagonists, and other stereotypical roles, such as the wise grandma and the comical idiot. But in reality, is anyone ever just the hero, the villain, or any other caricatures? Bakhtin's answer is a firm no, since those figures are only voiceless, static images, and not the four-dimensional beings humans are supposed to be. By flattening the characters into such ideological puppets, the fiction is actually just an elaborate mouthpiece of the author's personal views. The version of the author's world becomes the basis of each character's thoughts and actions, irregardless of what those individual characters would really think. Bakhtin claims that therefore, the novel have dominantly been single-voiced, or 'monologic,' that of the author's singular perspective. For Bakhtin, this is an ontological erasure of the characters, for they are denied agency for self-identity, and thus their humanness. The novelistic implication of monologic novels is that the characters are not people, but a group of attributes crafted by the author.

However, Bakhtin found someone that led a narratological revolt against this practice: Fyodor Dostoevsky, and his "polyphonic" novels. To Bakhtin, "Dostoevsky…created a fundamentally new novelistic genre, [where] a character's word about himself and his word is just as fully weighted as the author's word usually is."[4] In his "polyphonic" novels, the characters are given complete free consciousness. This means that it is not the author who decides what roles the characters fulfill, but the characters themselves. Dostoevsky's characters enjoy the luxury of maximal self-perception and the ability to react to their own portrayal, which in turn allows them to voice who they are and escape being imaged. The author's absolutist control over the thoughts of the characters is relinquished, and the novel is no longer a monologue. The novel instead becomes a place of dialogue among characters, now fully human, whose authentic voices are as equally legitimate and independent as each other's and the author's. In Dostoevsky's created universes, each character is a "not voiceless slave…[or] only objects of authorial discourse,"[5] but another human being whose degree of consciousness and extent of subjective awareness is on par with Dostoevsky. As the characters now live by their own consciousness and free will, they are no longer fatalistically governed by a metaphysically dominant vision of the world. They are no longer petrified into their roles, but 'legitimate' in being their subjective, powerfully authentic human being. All become equally legitimate in existing as their own persons, and not as tools for someone else (namely the author). There is no "unfolding of material within the framework of its own monologic understanding"[6] in Dostoevsky's novels. Instead, each character will do what it will. They are become their own voice, roaring what they are, not conforming to the common vision of the novel. Dostoevsky's novels are thereby *polyphonic*, or multi-voiced, for they are governed by the voices of many independent consciousnesses. The author no longer is disguised in many different characters; the author is one of many other consciousnesses in the novel.

When such independent consciousnesses populate the novel, not being able to impose onto each other, their voices inevitably clash. This is what Bakhtin calls a *dialogue*, and this phenomenon becomes the basis of polyphonic novels. Bakhtin defines *dialogue* as a psycholinguistic phenomenon of a "complex, dynamic relations of a semantic type" occurring "between complete utterances of various speaking subjects."[7] In the context of polyphonic existence of characters, a dialogue is an ontological relationship between two or more consciousnesses on a semantic plane in which by exchanging utterances, they affirm each character's subjective power and

complete existences. The inherently collaborative nature of dialogue requires the parties involved in a dialogue to be fully self-aware of their polyphonic position, in that no one in a dialogue has more legitimacy than the other. A dialogue happens because each partaking voice knows itself to be one of many. Each partaking voice interacts and reacts with other voices, first by acknowledging *other* voices to be fully conscious and independently subjective, and then by affirming *itself* to be fully conscious and independently subject in response. One becomes aware of oneself as soon as one bumps into the other. In every moment of the polyphonic novel, "where consciousness began, there dialogue began for him as well."[8] Because of the constant dialogue between characters fills the novel, the audience observes the activation of each voice's independent consciousness, recognizing its own and others' existential freedom, by which the novel is understood as a polyphonic novel.

This poetics gives insight to Bakhtin's own ontology, which the theory of polyphonic poetics is founded on. According to Bakhtin, we are human for our freedom in thought and self-identity. Rather, humans have free consciousness which is unbounded by any singular narrative and which actively understands the presence of multiple narratives crowding our attempted understanding of the world. The mind's ability to react to such narratives stems from its power of independent thought, for once a narrative is either presented in front of it or trying to embody it, the mind can take the narrative as a whole and engage in a dialogue with it. As external narratives are products of an another consciousness, the narrative that one comes into contact with most often is how an another person thinks of one another. So then, since I am a conscious being, once someone imprisons me with a singular description of me, I enter into a dialogue with other consciousnesses about who I am and who the other person is, and with each step in that dialogic process, both parties evolve in thought and being. Such free consciousness drives our personal growth and renders us into a being that cannot be pinned down. In other words, our essence cannot be finalized into any external narrative; we are "unfinalizable."

Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov* is expectedly exemplary of a character's resistance to being finalized. In this tale of three staggeringly different brothers, the oldest Dmitri Karamazov is held in disdain by the town for being a reckless, hedonistic, and irresponsible scoundrel. That has been the final word imprisoning his identity, in the universe created by Dostoevsky. In the villager's eyes, he is finalized as a scoundrel. Interestingly, Dmitri is fully aware of his finality. He explains every one of his actions with "Yes, I am a scoundrel, a thorough scoundrel"[9] and the like. Furthermore, he justifies his finality as a scoundrel because someone must be one in the town. Yet, ironically, his self-awareness of that label accompanies an undertone of sarcasm, which transcends Dmitri from being just a scoundrel. When he says he is a scoundrel, he is acknowledging that he is not. He also recognizes that "it's not only impossible to live a scoundrel, but impossible to die a scoundrel… No, gentlemen, one must die honest."[10] In that respect, his consciousness unfinalizes him, for his full awareness of his finality precisely breaks him out of that ontological stillness and activates his own evolution with his own subjectivity. What and how he thinks and does is what ultimately defines him. It is that "his consciousness of the self lives by its unfinalizablity, by its unclosedness and its indeterminacy."[11] As is the case with Dmitri and anyone else in Dostoevsky's novels, Bakhtin sees that one's consciousness is irreducible by societal designations or biological identity or personal history because as soon as such labels are placed to delineate his consciousness, the consciousness will use that label as a material for its evolution and cease to become describable. Any attempt to finalize man's consciousness will ironically help unfinalize himself, for "his heroes would [want to] have remained internally unfinalized (for self-consciousness cannot be finalized from within)."[12]

For their free consciousness, the characters in the novel cannot exist in isolation, but in constant dialogue with other characters. Human being, a figure of his own consciousness, cannot help but be engaged in a dialogue with everything in his or her reality, including other consciousnesses and his or her own. Dostoevsky's novels are essentially the tales of that dialogic ontology of man, how his heroes navigate this constant clash of consciousnesses by being composed in "a fully realized and thoroughly consistent dialogic position, one that affirms the independence, internal freedom, unfinalizability, and indeterminacy of the hero…the hero is the subject of a deeply serious, real dialogic mode of address, not the subject of a rhetorically performed or conventionally literary one."[13] For Bakhtin, as he saw in Dostoevsky's heroes, to be conscious is to be unfinalizable. The inherently dialogic nature of human existence and the consciousness's self-reflexive reactions directly formulate unfinalizability of humans. Such is the elusive ontological identity of man, as Bakhtin writes, in Dostoevsky's polyphonic world. As Bakhtin argues, this ontological concept is central to Dostoevsky's polyphonic world. It is the philosophical basis for his unique poetics.

Here thus far has been outlined what Bakhtin's original conception of literary polyphony is and how it is achieved in a novel. The theory of polyphonic poetics is Bakhtin's reaction against authors dictating the thoughts of characters to support their own worldview and denying them a human being's innate free consciousness, as well as presenting the readers a faulty reality that operated under a singular consciousness. As much as Bakhtin saw that the reality of 1920s he lived in was not so, a similar frustration arose in the 1980s United States comics community. The next part of the essay will describe how polyphonic poetics is realized in the graphic novel *Watchmen*.

3. Polyphony of *Watchmen*

Watchmen was written by Alan Moore and illustrated by Dave Gibbons and serialized from 1986 to 1987. It shocked not only the comics community but also the intellectual elite's conception of visual narratives in its unprecedented level of artistry and profound philosophical nuances. Published as the first graphic novel—not a comic book, *Watchmen* is a sobering meditation on the cacophonous eighties United States, which was an especially kaleidoscopic environment that juggled the Cold War, increasing globalization, explosion of identity politics, and the newfound possibilities of the Internet. As Dostovesky "created a fundamentally new novelistic genre,"[14] Moore "offered new possibilities as to how we perceive the environment surrounding us and the interactions and relationships of the people within it."[15] Appropriately so, *Watchmen* was the first 'graphic novel' to be elevated from a comic book, enough so that to this day it still is the only non-textual novel in Time Magazine's "All-TIME 100 Novels" list and is one of the key works of visual storytelling that heralded the Modern Age of Comic Books, an era marked by unprecedented complexity and philosophical challenges in its content.

Watchmen is advertised as a superhero comic, but it is the exact opposite of a superhero comic book. Superheroes usually "exist as an unchanging archetype that means the characters 'must necessarily become immobilized in an emblematic and fixed nature which renders him easily recognizable;"[16] but Watchmen "is about breaking down the traditional archetypes of comic super heroes…essentially argues that in the cold light of reality, all superhero characters are intensely flawed"[17]. Characters in *Watchmen* struggle with the unforgiving reality that actively resists any idealization, collapsing them into anything but super and heroic, and driving them back into their human identity that is all too vulnerable to sin and vice. Moore himself describes his work as having using "clichés of the superhero format to try and discuss notions of power and responsibility in an increasingly complex world."[18]

Watchmen narrates a story from an alternate history of 1980s New York City, focused on a group of recently retired superheroes. It begins few hours after The Comedian (birth name: Edward Blake), one of the superheroes, had been defenestrated from his high-rise apartment. Ensuing is the only active but psychotic superhero, Rorschach (Walter Kovacs), investigating the murder by following it up with all other retired heroes, such as Dr. Manhattan (Jon Osterman), Nite Owl II (Dan Dreiberg), Silk Spectre (Lauren Juspeczyk), and Ozymandias (Adrian Veidt). Novelistically, this is a highly appropriate opening. The Comedian is supposedly the most unidimensional character, having been consistently characterized as a psychopathic brute and troublemaker. The novel starts off with the physical death of such a flat character, but then one-by-one the other retired superheroes emerge to reveal their civilian selves underneath their glorious masks. They each timidly show their living, changing faces underneath that is doubtful, depressed, and hoarsely searching for meaning, or however much they show of it. But all expressions are mere suggestions for who they are, and so the audience is left to constantly guess what each character is like until they show a different expression that clashes directly with their previous conception. The superheroes unravel the scope of their complexity and unfinalizability, timed aptly after the death of the only finalized character in the novel—that is, until The Comedian himself is shown to be unfinalizable much later in the book.

Dostoevsky's prose poetics manifest polyphony verbally. Correspondingly, *Watchmen*'s graphic poetics manifest polyphony graphically. This shift in poetical medium already demands a significant revision in the rhetorical techniques for realizing polyphony; especially those achieving the equality of all character's existential standings for them to engage in an equal, non-imposing dialogue. The graphic medium rather facilitates rendering the intraliterary universe polyphonic. As consciousness is realized of its unfinalizability and freedom through dialogue, I will demonstrate throughout this essay how a character is given a polyphonic status by intrapersonal dialogue and interpersonal dialogue. But for dialogue to occur, the characters must exist in spatial relation to each other, which is the only alignment that guarantees equal standing of characters to engage.

3.1. Spatial Poetics of the Graphic Novel

Reading a novel is a temporally displacing experience. The novel is a string of events that the reader interacts with in a sequence, allowing him or her to enter the novelistic reality that is purely aligned in the axis of a linear timeframe. The graphic novel also places each event in a temporal map, but its unique visual form disallows linearity. The key difference between prose poetics and graphic poetics is how it arranges its moments in time. Unlike its prose counterpart, graphic novel arranges its elements spatially, by the physical nature of the graphic page. Scholars agree that much of formal innovations offered by graphic novels revolve around this aspect of graphic poetics, that is the spatialization of time. Graphic novel's "fundamental syntactical operation is the representation of time as space on the page,"[19] where moments in time are not strung in a strict timeline but spread out on a plane for a simultaneous reading, as if one is to look at an array of pictures dispersed along the floor of a room. This phenomenon is inevitable because the narrative content is experienced visually, and visual objects

exist primarily in space. Graphic novels are composed of panels that illustrate the intraliterary reality, which immediately captures the temporal events within that reality into a spatial canvas. Panels by technical definition are "framed moments in which a comics story unfolds, and they are separated by the blank spaces of the gutter, a space that allows the reader to project causality between framed."[20] As the content of the graphic novel come encased in two-dimensional panels, and content are temporal events, "in the world of comics, time and space are one and the same."[21] All formal complexities of *Watchmen* will arise from the unique spatial poetics of graphic novels.

Spatial existence means that an object exists next to something, that is in context of and/or in contrast with each other. Not only does spatiality grant an object's plurality, but also it affirms equality, in that the objects are *next to* each other, and not above or below each other. Spatial existence is then synonymous with equal existence among entities. If equal standing among characters is a fundamental requirement for dialogue to happen, then the characters must enjoy a spatial relationship with each other. Bakhtin recognized that spatial alignment of characters is the only way for them to be engaged dialogically. For that, Bakhtin noted that Dostoevsky "saw and conceived his world primarily in terms of space, not time."[22] Characters in graphic novel then naturally have a potential to engage in a dialogue with each other, as they exist spatially in "coexistence and interaction,"[23] meaning they exist on an equal scale of existential legitimacy.

As a graphic novel, any evidence of the character's consciousness is visually realized. From the character's words (through speech bubbles) to his or her facial expressions, visibility is the medium of the character's existential statement. When a panel shows a character, even in the farthest background, the character is making a statement of his or her own existence, that s/he exist. Spatial existence first acknowledges the character's existential independence, unbound by an imposing power. Every panel with a character in it represents the character in its own space. But this means that the character's metaphysical declaration, that s/he exist, happens in space, suggesting that each of their existential cry exist in pluralistic context with other characters' existential claims. The character saying that s/he exist does so in the midst of others doing that too. This spatialized relation of existential claims instantly puts the characters' consciousness into an environment that is inevitable for dialogue, as the externality of existing in space is that one is occupying that space with an another. Pictorality of graphic novels immediately presents characters in *Watchmen* to exist in a dialogic role with each other, ready for a polyphonic engagement with each other. As dialogue affirms the independence and fullness of each character's consciousness, having such literary environment where dialogue happens at every moment of the character's presence is highly necessary for the character's to become more complex and conscious. Spatial poetics thereby allow an appropriate environment for any dialogue to happen, whether that is an intrapersonal one, happening within a single person, or an interpersonal one, happening between multiple conscious characters.

3.2. Intrapersonal Dialogue: Time-Selves

In *Watchmen*, moments in time do not appear in isolation one-by-one, but simultaneously with all others. The layout of *Watchmen* is formalistically one of its most interesting features. Sara Van Ness writes about its three-by-three gird pattern of each nine-panel page, where "the panels' uniformity gives the reader a sense of quantifiable time, time as measured by the clock."[24] While Van Ness goes on to argue that establishing each page in a strict standard forces the readers to give a special attention to any panels that break that three-by-three pattern, I will focus on that the uniformity furthers *Watchmen*'s mission of equalizing and thereby empowering the existential legitimacy of characters in those panels, and by the panels' regular interval in their layout, the meaning-making relationship between the panels are dialogized. The panels are physically laid out for its content to dialogize.

When in a page there is a character that shows up in multiple different panels, that character is divided into separate moments, for different panels show different instances of a given duration. That character is split into what I call *time-selves*. Time-selves, which are spatially spread out on the page and positioned to dialogically engage with each other, are temporal slices of a person that is assumed to be evolving constantly. In the conception of time-selves, a person is recognized to be different at different moments throughout his or her life—for a novelistic character, throughout the novel. For example, the original Nite Owl was once an active superhero that fearlessly fought criminals (or supervillains) with his impressive strength and martial arts, but is now an elderly who cannot defend himself against local gang members. The Nite Owl of his glory days is one *time-self*, and the retired Nite Owl in a nightgown is another.[25] The second Nite Owl, named Dan Dreiberg, is also shown to have drastically different time-selves, of which one flew his majestic aircraft to peaceably quell city riots as a superhero, and another of which that sits dejected in his dilapidated basement, facing away from his costume now hanging in a dusty closet.[26]

Though the evolutionary capacity of characters is a powerful human component, it can be a result of the author's monologism by which the character is finalized. Bakhtin mentions how chronology in the novel poses an urgent threat to the equality of characters' legitimacy in several ways. The sequence of which things unfold

and how characters evolve can operate under a monologic vision of the author that tailor such development to fit a certain version of reality. A character can grow to achieve a certain ideal, such as an evil person repenting and turning to become good—this narrative would suggest that the protagonist is someone that will eventually achieve the happy ending of goodness and is thereby finalized into an impersonal concept of moral growth. For a character of polyphonic novel, "there is no causality in Dostoevsky's novels, no genesis, no explanations based on the past, on the influences of the environment or of upbringing, and so forth."[27] The character that is locked into a predetermined course of events would not be able to have a free consciousness, for that consciousness is not allowed to react to that course of event set for him or her. But such temporally imprisoned character also have time-selves. It is when these time-selves actively engage with each other that the character escapes from his fatalistic shackles and arise in his or her free consciousness.

The time-selves, aligned equally throughout the three-by-three layout, dialogically interact with each other, rendering each time-self a free entity. In the abovementioned monologic character that is bound into a single growth narrative, the different time-selves of that character do not interact with each other. The formerly evil character does not usually come into contact with his or her future good time-self, and vice versa. In *Watchmen*, however, the different time-selves directly enter into a conversation. When the local gang was beating the senile Nite Owl to his death, interspersed between the panels showing the beating was a flashback of the Nite Owl heroically defeating the supervillains back in the days.[28] The effect produced is a direct comparison between the two time-selves of the Nite Owl, the helpless elderly and the formidable superhero. As the panels go back and forth, the time-selves of Nite Owl engage in a dialogue about the Nite Owl's aging and the passing of time and status. As the reader sees the rosy image of Nite Owl with a confident grin, the reader also sees his lifeless body in the flurry of his wrecked home. In this alignment of time-selves, there is no singularly directional evolution, as is the case with a man turning from evil to good. Instead, each time-self is actively engaged, in that each time-self presents different voices of the Nite Owl that evolves with each clash.

The dialogue of free time-selves complicates the character enough to make him or her have a free consciousness. The panels leading up to the scene of Nite Owl's death have often been illustrated in the point of view of the Nite Owl, such as when he opened his door and saw the gang members approaching. By the established pattern of many panels directly illustrating the moments in the character's consciousness, it is possible that the interchange of images of the superhero Nite Owl and the currently retired Nite Owl may be happening inside Nite Owl's head, as he is being assaulted. This assumption is plausible for multiple reasons. As he is about to die, his life flashing before him could be happening. Nite Owl is also prone to be nostalgic about his superhero days, as previously he is shown to be reminiscing about it with Dan Dreiberg. The panels shown during the entire episode is rather frenzied, expected for someone who is being hammered on the head. Nite Owl's consciousness is free to explore what it means when he was so powerful before and so powerless now, and is seeking to make a meaning out of it. He shares this lethal reflection in *Watchmen*, where, as Dostoevsky had done, "these contradictions and bifurcations…spread out in one plane, as standing alongside or opposite one another, as consonant but not merging or as hopelessly contradictory, as an eternal harmony of unmarked voices or as their unceasing and irreconcilable quarrel."[29] The time-selves coming to life inside one's consciousness becomes evidence of the freedom of that consciousness.

This is how a character's consciousness is made organic and unfinalizable. Time-selves engage in dialogue, where the juxtaposition of multiple time-selves enacts the process of change for each, giving a vocal energy to each time-self. Dostoevsky pulled off similar technique using flashbacks and verbal materialization of that time-selves' dialogue. Bakhtin describes, "one could say, in fact, that out of every contradiction within a single person Dostoevsky tries to create two persons."[30] *Watchmen* achieved such with paneling, giving birth to multiple time-selves actively voicing its existential power within a single person. Each character is thereby shown to have the complexity and plurality inside one's consciousness that shows remarkable self-awareness about one's unfinalizability into a predictable growth. Such composition actually corresponds with the color palette of *Watchmen*, consisting mostly of secondary colors. "These colors—orange, green, and violet—are achieved by mixing the primaries with one another, and contribute an entirely different tone to the narrative than do their primary-color companions," when "the typical color palette for the traditional superhero-themes comics included bold and garish primary color combinations—red, yellow, and blue."[31]

3.3. Interpersonal Dialogue: Juxtapositions

Time-selves engaging is an illustration of intrapersonal dialogue, happening inside a single person. Such dialogue unfinalizes and makes the characters organic. But, *Watchmen* also uses interpersonal dialogue to achieve the same. Characters interact with other consciousnesses, which dialogue affirms each of their subjectivity. The characters, primarily as visualized entities, are aligned next to each other, and that juxtaposition becomes the site of dialogue.

When placed side-by-side visually, the characters instantly enter into dialogue, as in the space of the page they are so near to each other that they cannot help but clash and engage. In one example, Dan and Lauren goes on a

dinner one evening as old friends, but it is known to the reader that Dan has had feelings for Lauren.[32] His reason for asking Lauren, who had just left her lover, Dr. Manhattan, to a dinner is unclear. As former superhero comrades and a friend, he might have wanted to comfort her, or as someone that once pined for her, saw her emotional vulnerability as an opportunity to get close. Intertwined the panels presenting this dinner are panels that unfold another narrative: scenes from *Tales of the Black Freighter*, a pirate comic book that one of the New Yorkers are reading in the street. The comic describes a marooned mariner whose isolation in the sea and wretched state—after all he is surviving off of live seagulls on a raft made out of the bloated corpse of his crewmen—drives him to savage insanity, and compels him to proclaim the violent state of the world. In this context, one panel of Dan eating a chicken leg takes on a whole new meaning when posited next to the portrait of the bloody-faced and frenzy-eyed mariner, eating a seagull he caught with his bare hands. As much as their difference in context is accentuated, so is their similarity in meaning. This chicken leg eaten by Dreiberg would be nothing more than a piece of ordered entrée if presented alone in the meal. Because that image of Dreiberg eating the leg directly juxtaposes the pirate's demonstration of savagery and rawness, the transition implies Dreiberg's savagery as well, particularly in dealing with his feelings for Laurie—he is eating the chicken leg while Laurie is confiding in him very personal concerns, which illuminates how Dreiberg might think of Laurie as a piece of meat. Reversely, the pirate eating the bird has a hint of normalcy in that it is compared to an ordinary guy eating an ordinary chicken leg, and that may be representative of every man's inner animalism. As such, each instance of juxtaposition of scenes redefines and challenges each narrative's content. Each panel is no longer a singular entity but an image highly conscious of its pluralistic context, coming to life with meaning by its dialogical relationship with neighboring images. This narrative effect is what is called *braiding*,[33] in which "graphic narrative puts every panel in a potential, if not actual, relation with every other."[34] In this way, the characters involved in the braiding of the panels evolve their meanings in a framework of interpersonal dialogue.

This type of interpersonal discourse operates with the character's voice that is expressed through their visibility. In *Watchmen*, the characters' voices are not heard but seen. This is a significant shift in how polyphony is achieved and what ontological statement polyphony expresses. In Dostoevsky's novels, polyphony materializes through the character's literal voices. The characters exercise their free consciousness through verbal utterances and dialogize with each other through verbal discourses. In *Watchmen*, each character's visibility is the medium for their consciousness to dialogize with others. As Dostoevsky writes the characters' humanity to be embodied in words they speak, *Watchmen* embodies the characters' humanity in their images. Therefore the way in which the characters engage in a vocal dialogue in *Watchmen* is the graphic juxtaposition, which operates the same way as Dostoevsky's characters engage in a verbal discourse. Furthermore, in that dialogical relationship between multiple images, not only do images become accentuated in their uniqueness, but they reveal something new about each other. For *Watchmen*, each content deals with the meaning of existence of each character. The interactions between these storylines thus explore the depth of humanness in each superhero, disrobed of their glorified image and displayed as fully human. Then, the deeply human flaws of each character are only revealed because someone else sees them, and that sort of visual interaction furthers the image-based ontological composition of humans.

4. Ontology of *Watchmen*'s Polyphonic Poetics

Watchmen is thereby a polyphonic novel, complete with poetics qualifying Bakhtin's theories. Through the character's dialogic existence, the characters resist existing under other people's finalization, and then by directly penning how they are portrayed in *Watchmen*, their existence becomes maximally authentic and autarchic. As Bakhtin originally described the structure of Dostoevsky's novels, "dialogic relationships exist among all elements of novelistic structure; that is, they are juxtaposed contrapuntally."[35] However, as mentioned in the beginning, I am further arguing that *Watchmen*'s polyphony is based on an ontology that is the inverse of that of Bakhtin.

With *Watchmen*'s graphic poetics comes an image-based ontology of the characters. In the polyphonic novel, the characters exist by their voicing of themselves, as one of the *–phonos* in the polyphony. However, in *Watchmen*, the characters exist primarily by their visuality in their pictoral existence. Their visuals become their voice. And as an authentic voice frees the character into unfinalizability, so does the character's visibility. How this works is that at all times a character expresses him or herself visually, exactly what of him or her is being expressed is ambiguous. Just as Dostoevsky's characters resist limiting verbal descriptions, *Watchmen*'s characters resist limiting visual portrayal. Dan eating the chicken leg is rather ambiguous about how he truly feels for Lauren; Nite Owl dying and thinking back on his glory days may be either pitying his old current self or looking back on his life to be comforted; several chapters of the book are dedicated to quickly narrating much of one character's life, and they usually end with that character looking off into space. The readers are left to only make speculations about how each character really feels, or what each of their consciousness is saying. How this happens is that upon watching someone, other people try to impose their interpretation onto that someone. But those other people each have different consciousness, and so the interpretations vary by infinity. That said, literary

'polyphony' becomes 'polyvisibility,' a literary environment in which a visual materialization of consciousness becomes a place of dialogic intercourse of its interpretive value, rendering that original consciousness unfinalizable.

This leads to a striking discrepancy about the nature of the unfinalizable consciousness. For Bakhtinian consciousness, it is unfinalizable because the consciousness actively resists finalization through authentic vocalization. It assumes that a human has a consciousness that is essential to his or her identity, separate from and rather pitted against the rest of the world, to be evolved by the individual him or herself. This conception of consciousness has an Existentialist streak, not only for its time of conception—publication of Bakhtin's first edition of this theory is 1929[36]—but also this idea is the basis for many Existentialists' projects, that "hell is the others."[37] But for Watchmenian consciousness, the direction of which complexity of the consciousness is created is reverse. Instead of from within, it is from the without. The onlookers of a consciousness, precisely those that are outside it, accidentally invalidates a finalization, rendering it unfinalizable. As described above, a character's image is complicated by the elusiveness of its single meaning. Physically, the character did not do anything to fuel the ambiguity. It is the onlookers that produce a myriad of different possible interpretations, and because no one perspective can finalize the character's image, the character is given its unfinalizable quality. The consciousness passively becomes unfinalizable, because other people cannot agree into any one finalization. The innate consciousness has no active role in creating that complexity for him or herself.

This is a postmodernist reading of consciousness, which is wholly appropriate given the time of *Watchmen*'s serialization—1986 to 1987. It supposes that the consciousness is passive, and human being is wholly dependent on its environment to be characterized. This supposition aligns adequately with notable postmodernist theories on human ontology. According to Claude Levi-Strauss, human is not a being physically separate from culture and society so that he or she can have a dialogic relationship with it, but "an empty space, a mere vantage point where the codes and conventions of language and culture happened to coincide."[38] The substance that makes a human is not an inherent human nature, but his or her environment, with which slew of narratives he or she is dyed. The human, then, is a product of relationships, not an overarching entity that governs the universe. Such focus on pluralistic relationship between sections of culture and nature is the focus of the dominant ideology of the era, poststructuralism. The main focus of poststructuralism is "the questioning of the absoluteness of any determinant of meaning."[39] The 1980s intellectual community can be characterized as "resistance to totality…to teleology…and to closure of any kind—narrative, conceptual, metaphysical."[40] Novelistic rejection of similar central meaning, represented by the monologic author's voice, falls in line with poststructuralist writing. Polyphonic novels focus on the dialogue between characters in equal standing, each of whose existential centers is the character's selves, requiring them to negotiate existing in a poststructuralist pluralist reality. However, that existential center is not the Bakhtinian consciousness that is able to exist independently of reality, but entirely reflective of reality itself. The reflective consciousness *Watchmen* advances exists in *Watchmen*'s poststructuralist reality, and consequently reflects the polychromatic nature of *Watchmen* universe, which gives the consciousness its unfinalizability. In effect, the consciousness is unfinalizable because the reality it takes in, as an empty space Levi-Strauss describes, is just as cacophonic. Echoing another characterization of poststructuralism, "identities are now redefined as what result from, rather than what give rise to, differential relations."[41]

So then what does this say about the reader? After all, it is the reader that gives the characters their unfinalizability, for it is the multiple narratives placed on the character's image *by* the reader that makes them so complex. Polyphonic poetics ontologically reconfigures the reader as an acknowledged entity, which theory actually returns to Bakhtin's original statement.[42] The novel's final effect is that the reader becomes unfinalized. The monologic author dictates what the reader should take away from the novel, thereby finalizing the reader. But polyphonic author accepts the fact that the readers have their own consciousnesses and will react to the characters in their own way. Especially in a graphic novel, the reading experience cannot be controlled as well, as many elements are presented simultaneously, and so there's no telling where the reader's eyes will go first and in which sequence the reader will take in the particular page. Though "there are many ways an artist can manipulate the reader's gaze to focus on a particular aspect of the piece…However, there is never a guarantee that a reader will perceive information in exactly the way the artist intends."[43] The reader will interact with the novel with his or her own consciousness, thereby entering into a polyphonic relationship with the polyphonic text. Many scholars on polyphonic theory have noted this aspect as one of the most powerful attributes of the poetics, and *Watchmen* is no exception to his benefit. In rendering the *Watchmen* reality to life, the reader creates his or her own reality that is determined by the reader's consciousness, and thereby re-subjectivizing an already subjective reality. The reader in essence becomes one of the dialogic players in the course of the novel. The final line of *Watchmen* embodies this last fact of polyphonic novels. "Go on just run whichever you want... I leave it entirely in your hands."[44]

5. Acknowledgements

This research was supported by Lee D. Baker Scholars' Program, run by Thompson Writing Program at Duke University. I would like to thank, in no particular order of significance, Dr. Kimberly K. Lamm for mentoring me during my introduction to the academic practice and demonstrating to me the standard; Dr. Sachelle Ford for not only guiding me through the research program but also advising me throughout the preparation for NCUR 2017, and then continuing to be a great role model; Ms. Arianne Hartsell-Gundy for assisting me with library usage; Ms. Hannah Rogers for introducing me to *Watchmen* through her course; and Dean Stephen Nowicki for funding my trip to NCUR 2017.

6. Notes

1. His chronic osteomyelitis later led to an amputation of his leg.[2]
2. Gogotishvili, L. A. "Bakhtin." In *New Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Russian Academy of Sciences, n.d. Accessed July 6, 2016.
3. Bakhtin, Mikhail, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 18.
4. Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, 7.
5. Ibid., 6.
6. Ibid., 18.
7. Bakhtin, Mikhail, *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1986), 117.
8. Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics,* 40.
9. Dostoevsky, Fyodor, *Brothers Karamazov* (Ware, UK: Wordsworth Editions, 2007), 169.
10. Ibid., 554.
11. Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics,* 52.
12. Ibid., 73.
13. Ibid., 63.
14. Ibid., 7.
15. DeZ Vylenz, *The Mindscape of Alan Moore,* Film, performed by Alan Moore (2003; London: Shadowsnake Films), online.
16. Darowski, Joseph J, "The Superhero Narrative and the Graphic Novel," in *The Graphic Novel (Critical Insights)*, ed. Gary Hoppenstand (Ipswich, MA: Salem Press, 2014), 149.
17. Robinson, Michael G, "Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons *Watchmen*," in *The Graphic Novel (Critical Insights)*, ed. Gary Hoppenstand (Ipswich, MA: Salem Press, 2014), 100.
18. Vylenz, *The Mindscape of Alan Moore.*
19. Chute, Hillary, and Marianne Dekoven, "Introduction: Graphic Narrative," *Modern Fiction Studies* 52, no. 4 (2006): 769.
20. Chute, Hillary, and Marianne Dekoven, "Comic Books and Graphic Novels," in *The Cambridge Companion to Popular Fiction*, ed. David Glover (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 175.
21. Kukkonen, Karin, "Space, Time, and Causality in Graphic Narratives: an Embodied Approach," in *From Comic Strips to Graphic Novels: Contributions to the Theory and History of Graphic Narrative*, eds. Daniel Stein and Jan-Noel Thon (Berlin, Germany: de Gruyter, 2013), 54.
22. Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics,* 28.
23. Ibid., 28.
24. Van Ness, Sara J, *Watchmen as Literature: A Critical Study of the Graphic Novel* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2010), 80.
25. Moore, Alan, and Dave Gibbons, *Watchmen* (New York, NY: DC Comics, 2014), 8:27.
26. Ibid., 2:16.
27. Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics,* 29.
28. Moore and Gibbons, *Watchmen*, 8:27.
29. Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics,* 30.
30. Ibid., 29.
31. Van Ness, *Watchmen as Literature,* 40.
32. Moore and Gibbons, *Watchmen*, 5:10.
33. Theory of braiding was originally conceptualized by Theirry Groensteen in *The System of Comics* (2007).

34. Horstkotte, Silke, "Zooming In and Out: Panels, Frames, Sequences, and the Building of Graphic Storyworlds," in *From Comic Strips to Graphic Novels: Contributions to the Theory and History of Graphic Narrative*, eds. Daniel Stein and Jan-Noel Thon (Berlin, Germany: de Gruyter, 2013), 41.

35. Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics,* 40.

36. Most scholars today study *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* (1972), which is a much more refined version of an earlier edition, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Art* (1929). It is important to note that the original theory of polyphony and analysis of Dostoevsky's novels were invented in the time of the first edition.

37. Sartre, Jean-Paul, "No Exit" (New York, NY: Samuel French, 1958), 54.

38. Sheehan, Paul, "Postmodernism and Philosophy," in *The Cambridge Companion to Postmodernism*, ed. Steven Connor (Cambridge, England: Cambridge Universty Press, 2004), 25.

39. Chow, Rey, "Poststructuralism: Theory as Critical Self-Consciousness," in *The CambridgeCompanion to Feminist Literary Theory*, ed. Ellen Rooney (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 198.

40. Connor, Steven, "Introduction," in *The Cambridge Companion to Postmodernism*, ed. Steven Connor (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 21.

41. Chow, "Postructuralism: Theory as Critical Self-Consciousness," 198.

42. Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics,* 56.

43. Van Ness, *Watchmen as Literature*, 24.

44. Moore and Gibbons, *Watchmen*, 12:32.

7. Bibliography

1. Bakhtin, Mikhail. *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984.

2. ---. *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays.* Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1986.

3. Chow, Rey. "Poststructuralism: Theory as Critical Self-Consciousness." In *The Cambridge Companion to Feminist Literary Theory*. Edited by Ellen Rooney. Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 2006.

4. Chute, Hillary. "Comics as Literature? Reading Graphic Narrative." *PMLA* 123, no. 2 (2008): 452-465.

5. Chute, Hillary, and Marianne Dekoven. "Comic Books and Graphic Novels." In *The Cambridge Companion to Popular Fiction*. Edited by David Glover. Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 2011.

6. ---. "Introduction: Graphic Narrative." *Modern Fiction Studies* 52, no. 4 (2006): 767-782.

7. Connor, Steven. "Introduction." In *The Cambridge Companion to Postmodernism*. Edited by Steven Connor. Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 2004.

8. Darowski, Joseph J. "The Superhero Narrative and the Graphic Novel." In *The Graphic Novel (Critical Insights)*. Edited by Gary Hoppenstand. Ipswich, MA: Salem Press, 2014.

9. Dostoevsky, Fyodor. *Brothers Karamazov*. Ware, UK: Wordsworth Editions, 2007.

10. Gogotishvili, L. A. "Bakhtin." In *New Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Russian Academy of Sciences, n.d. Accessed July 6, 2016.

11. Horstkotte, Silke. "Zooming In and Out: Panels, Frames, Sequences, and the Building of Graphic Storyworlds." In *From Comic Strips to Graphic Novels: Contributions to the Theory and History of Graphic Narrative*. Edited by Daniel Stein and Jan-Noel Thon. Berlin, Germany: de Gruyter, 2013.

12. Kukkonen, Karin. "Space, Time, and Causality in Graphic Narratives: an Embodied Approach." In *From Comic Strips to Graphic Novels: Contributions to the Theory and History of Graphic Narrative*. Edited by Daniel Stein and Jan-Noel Thon. Berlin, Germany: de Gruyter, 2013.

13. Leibniz, Gottfried. *Leibniz's Monadalogy: A New Translation and Guide*. Edinburgh, UK: Edinburgh University Press, 2014.

14. Mikkonen, Kai. "Subjectivity and Style in Graphic Narratives." In *From Comic Strips to Graphic Novels: Contributions to the Theory and History of Graphic Narrative*. Edited by Daniel Stein and Jan-Noel Thon. Berlin, Germany: de Gruyter, 2013.

15. DeZ Vylenz. *The Mindscape of Alan Moore*. Film. Performed by Alan Moore. 2003. London: Shadowsnake Films. Online.

16. Moore, Alan, and Dave Gibbons. *Watchmen*. New York, NY: DC Comics, 2014.

17. Robinson, Michael G. "Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons *Watchmen*." In *The Graphic Novel (Critical Insights)*. Edited by Gary Hoppenstand. Ipswich, MA: Salem Press, 2014.

18. Sartre, Jean-Paul. "No Exit." New York, NY: Samuel French, 1958.

19. Sheehan, Paul. "Postmodernism and Philosophy." In *The Cambridge Companion to Postmodernism*. Edited by Steven Connor. Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 2004.

19. Van Ness, Sara J. *Watchmen as Literature: A Critical Study of the Graphic Novel*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2010.