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Watchmen and Mimetic Theory: Are We Ready for Rorschach?

Captive on a flight across the Atlantic, I viewed the movie *Watchmen*, which is an adaptation from the graphic novel by Alan Moore. *Watchmen*, in short, is the story of a band of “dark” superheroes who, despite good intentions, succumb to violence and fail in their yearnings for justice. To my delight and surprise, *Watchmen* is also an undeniable illustration of Girard’s mimetic theory, and a philosophical exploration of possible responses to a culture trapped in a destructive mimetic cycle. In a climactic scene, Moore’s character Rorschach speaks a stunningly fundamental Girardian truth: “God doesn’t make the world this way. We do.” Are we ready for this truth?

Watchmen is set in the context of the Cold War between the U.S.S.R. and the U.S., both of whom are stockpiling nuclear weapons as humanity anxiously fixates on the Doomsday Clock which rests at the world-threatening four minutes to midnight. Four symbolic minutes to extinction—this is the predicament mimetic rivalry has brought humanity into--- a cold war—a stalemate--a situation in which the push of a button will cause the death of life as we know it. This is the war of “all against all” and there can be no winner. The communists and capitalists are mimetic doubles, sibling rivals vying for power. They are Cain and Abel, Jacob and Esau, Isaac and Ishmael, on a global scale. “The End is Nigh,” claims Rorschach in the film. Because of this mimetic rivalry for world domination, humankind is about to bring on its own apocalypse.

In this context, Moore has created a band of superheroes who claim to be “society’s only protection from itself.” Moore’s brilliant characterization, however, is satirical, and his “superheroes,” far from saving the day, manage only to propagate humanity’s tragic participation in the destructive cycle of mimetic rivalry and scapegoating. The *Watchmen* ultimately represent non-working solutions to the problem of mimetic rivalry; they propose solutions that come out of this competitive framework without transcending it. Despite the *Watchmen*’s inability to solve the global predicament without violence, however, the movie itself reveals the mimetic mechanism we are trapped in with clarity, and forces us to inquire, with urgency, whether we can even handle our violent truth. The burning questions that both Girard and *Watchmen* ask of us are: “Are we mature enough to handle the truth about ourselves?” and “If so, how will we respond?” I will grapple with these questions through an exploration of two of Moore’s superheroes.

First is Adrian Veidt, known as “the smartest man in the world” and the authoritarian head of the Pyramid Corporation. He goes by the superhero alias Ozymandias. In an opening scene, Veidt is portrayed criticizing the infamous Lee Iaccoca, former CEO of General Motors Corporation, for unjust distribution of the world’s resources. Veidt’s belief is that if the world’s resources were abundant and available equally, war would cease. Mimetic rivalry over resources is why war occurs for Veidt. As a result, Veidt sets out not to conquer evil human beings per se, but to conquer the things that *make* humans evil, i.e. oil, fossil fuels, and nuclear power. These, he states are “the drugs” of humans and the Lee Iaccocas of the world

are “the pushers.” Veidt’s vision is to eliminate rivalry over these resources and make energy free. Veidt’s grand vision is a kind of New Jerusalem—an age in which there is no competition or violence as the human race will have its basic needs met; humanity will be free and transformed. Veidt declares: he intends to “usher in an age of illumination so dazzling that humanity will reject the darkness in its heart.”

First, though, Veidt must end the Cold War. He begins his plan for the “age of illumination” by answering the problem of mimetic rivalry with the creation of a scapegoat, namely, Dr. Manhattan. (Dr. Manhattan is another of the Watchmen, and the most powerful, with God-like omniscience and omnipotence.) This move, Veidt believes, will unite the U.S.S.R. and the U.S. against a common enemy. And he is right. Veidt destroys New York City with powers imitative of Dr. Manhattan, selling the idea that Dr. Manhattan is to blame. Reconciliation happens between the U.S.S.R. and the U.S. as they unite against their new common foe. Veidt’s creation of a scapegoat causes global peace following the mimetic blueprint Girard has brought to light, and Veidt’s success illustrates how easily humanity is duped by this mechanism. Humanity mechanically moves from the “all against all” dynamic to the “all against one,” buying into the blaming of an innocent victim, and restoring a fragile peace upon the tomb of both “Manhattans.”

Veidt’s reaction to a world that has hit rock bottom is to fix it through Girard’s time-tested scapegoat mechanism. And it works like a charm. Further, the other Watchmen (with the exception of Rorschach) accept it even though they know it is a lie—perhaps for the simple reason that it worked and it will allow peace to be sustained, if only temporarily. But Veidt’s scapegoating solution to the Cold War is not a matter of hyper-intelligence; it is mere manipulation of what is already available. It is reflective of a narrow vision that has emerged out of the formation of a culture founded upon violence.

We are presented with a different possibility through Rorschach. The son of a prostitute, reviled by society, Rorschach grows up to become a vicious proponent of justice; he doles out violent retribution on criminals without concern of a “fair” trial: “Dogs are put down,” he says. Rorschach is perhaps more a thug with an eye-for-an-eye ethic than a superhero. He wears a mask that imitates the black and white images a psychoanalyst would test sanity with—and operates out of this black and white morality. “Never compromise,” he says, “not even in the face of Armageddon.” It is no surprise, then, that Rorschach cannot keep quiet about Veidt’s conspiracy. Rorschach heads off to tell the world the truth: Dr. Manhattan did not create the nuclear blast, Adrian Veidt did, and he must be punished. Rorschach has barely left Veidt’s premises, however, before he is confronted by none other than Dr. Manhattan. Dr. Manhattan knows he has been scapegoated and will have to leave the earth. Further, Dr. Manhattan he agrees with this solution to the world’s current problem, although he, unlike Veidt, knows the solution is only temporary. Dr. Manhattan then kills Rorschach.

Why does Dr. Manhattan kill Rorschach? The essential element behind it seems to be concern over what would happen if the world found out about Veidt’s actions -- in other words, if the world found out the truth. Telling the truth would reveal to humanity how easily Veidt managed to manipulate them into peace through the scapegoat mechanism. It would reveal Veidt as Girard’s Apollonius— the

one with keen insight into human mimetic mechanisms and the cunning to prey on a malleable humanity. Or, we might call Veidt the Satan—the “prince of this world” who has humanity operating on his puppet strings for a self-serving and self-glorifying purpose. (Veidt is, after all, really not interested in serving the world; his “superflaw” is utilitarianism, focusing on his grand vision and using humans as pawns to get there.) The truth would derail our own estimation of “the world’s smartest man” and of what we might consider “smart” in the first place. It would also reveal to humanity the ugly mimetic drama that we have been acting out. How would we take this? Would the world even believe Rorschach? Rorschach doesn’t give these questions any thought. Rorschach thinks only that the truth must be told—that we are trapped, living in a satanic cycle, duped by our own devices. Certainly Girard is in favor of exposing this same truth.

On one hand, then, we have Veidt, who keeps the truth about mimetic rivalry and scapegoating sealed behind a false myth and a false truth, leading to an unstable peace that will ensure the continuation of the mechanism. On the other hand, we have Rorschach, who himself is trapped in the mindset of retributive justice and revenge, but seeks to expose the lies and delusions upon which our system has been built. *Watchmen* leaves us with a world left duped. What, though, I wonder, might have happened had Rorschach lived? There are two possibilities.

First, perhaps the truth would serve to make the world a better place.

Perhaps knowing the truth would be a deeper or more authentic pleasure that would outweigh the world peace brought about by lies. Or maybe the world’s nations, upon seeing that their problems drove Veidt to murder millions, would forge an even more secure and lasting peace than otherwise. (Mark White, ed. *Watchmen and Philosophy*. NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 2009, p. 98)

Rorschach is no Christ-figure, but he does represent revelation, and the destruction of the lie. But are we mature enough to handle our own vices, our own striving for domination, our own violence (no matter how subtle)? And are we mature enough to change? We seem to have had enough global catastrophes to awaken us to our own inadequacies, and yet history repeats itself. *Perhaps* knowing -- and really *getting* -- this truth would equate with a conscious move toward relating to each other, personally and globally in a different and more authentic way.

Or, second, perhaps the world would collapse into self-annihilation—it would return in anger to the “all against all,” now understanding the scapegoat mechanism, but refusing to buy into it yet again. No mechanism is yet in our gut to replace it, though. We will therefore flop around like a fish out of water, unable to make sense of the world, unable to see a clear and effective path to action. The truth might indeed cause the world to lose its foundation and plunge us headlong into an apocalypse.

This second and apocalyptic possibility seems to be the perspective of Moore and the *Watchmen*, which is why Rorschach must die. Girard, too, sees the imminent self-annihilating capacity of humankind in the face of its mechanistic unraveling. The *Watchmen* really do want a better world—a world without violence; but their powers of alchemy—of turning mimetic steel into gold—are

weak. Humans must change themselves. At the end of the movie, Dr. Manhattan (*Watchmen's* God-figure, to reiterate) declares his own resignation with the pettiness of humankind: "They are aging, I am standing still...I am tired of these people. Tired of being caught in the tangle of their lives. They say they want to create a heaven, but their heaven is filled with horrors." He adds: "I can change almost anything, but I can't change human nature. I'm leaving this galaxy for one a little less complicated."

By the end of *Watchmen*, even God leaves us, frustrated and fed up with our pettiness; also, by no small coincidence, he is the one scapegoated and accused of the destruction that had taken place. We have a humanity still trapped in mimetic rivalry and scapegoating, still being duped by the myth concealing it, and lured by the immediate gratification it presents. It is a tragic picture, resting all hopes on an unsustainable peace. The movie itself, though, like the Gospels for Girard, is a revelation that has the capacity to wake us up to the horror of our ways. Rorschach is dead, but there is hope. So I ask: Are we ready to receive its message? Are we ready to act for change – even if it will take a complete wrenching from our most primitive mechanisms? Understanding the probable end of this mimetic tragedy, what can we do to change course?

And, by the way, the Doomsday Clock, as of January 15, 2010, is at six minutes to midnight.