

## Conference Paper

# The Form of Conflict Toward Power Authority on Superhero Graphic Novel: Semiotic Analysis on *The Watchmen* Graphic Novel

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## Abstract

This article elaborates about the Conflict toward Power Authority in a graphic novel, using the semiotic analysis method from Roland Barthes. It will highlight the denotation, connotation and myths of the visual signs and words. The research is a qualitative research and it uses constructivism as the paradigm. Primary data is taken from every chapter of the Watchmen graphic novel published in 1986. Until now, *The Watchmen* is the only graphic novel that got a Hugo Award, a worldwide acknowledgement to this genre/format as a new form of art literature. Many themes and myths can be found in a graphic novel, whereas those themes and myths throughout the story will develop ideologies that form the basic story. Theoretically, this article will reveal the ideology behind a graphic novel as a form of mass communication and the form of conflict toward power authority.

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## 1. Introduction

‘Graphic Novel’ is a format, not a genre. Graphic novels can be fiction, non-fiction, history, fantasy, or anything in-between. Graphic novels are similar to comic books because they use sequential art to tell a story. Unlike comic books, graphic novels are generally stand-alone stories with more complex plots. Collections of short stories that have been previously published as individual comic books are also considered graphic novels. A graphic novel is a book made up of comics’ content. Although the word ‘novel’ normally refers to long fictional works, the term ‘graphic novel’ is applied broadly and includes fiction, non-fiction, and anthologized work. It is distinguished from the term ‘comic book’, which is used for comics’ periodicals.

Fan historian Richard Kyle coined the term ‘graphic novel’ in an essay in the November 1964 issue of the comics’ fanzine *Capa-Alpha*. The term gained popularity in the comics community after the publication of Will Eisner’s *A Contract with God* (1978)

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and became familiar to the public in the late 1980s after the commercial successes of the first volume of Art Spiegelman's *Maus* in 1986 and the collected editions of Frank Miller's *The Dark Knight Returns* in 1986 and Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons' *Watchmen* in 1986. The Book Industry Study Group began using 'graphic novel' as a category in book stores in 2001.

The term is not strictly defined, though Merriam-Webster's full dictionary definition is "a fictional story that is presented in comic-strip format and published as a book," while its simplest definition is given as "cartoon drawings that tell a story and are published as a book." In the publishing trade, the term extends to material that would not be considered a novel if produced in another medium. Collections of comic books that do not form a continuous story, anthologies or collections of loosely related pieces, and even non-fiction are stocked by libraries and bookstores as 'graphic novels' (similar to the manner in which dramatic stories are included in 'comic' books). The term is also sometimes used to distinguish between works created as standalone stories, in contrast to collections or compilations of a story arc from a comic book series published in book form.

*Watchmen* is a superhero themed graphic novel created by two idealist artist, Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons in 1986. The definition of a superhero is a type of stock character possessing 'extraordinary or superhuman powers' and dedicated to protecting the public and has some visual characteristic (typically an outfit) that makes him/her identifiable. *Watchmen* was considered a milestone on the rise and recognition of graphic novel in the literature world. Time magazine (2005-now) put *Watchmen* as one of 100 novel best of all time. From the science fiction achievements, *Watchmen* is the one and only graphic novel that got Hugo Award. The Entertainment Weekly magazine still put *Watchmen* as one of the best 50 novel written in 25 years. *Watchmen* became the pioneer to blur the fine line between fiction and non-fiction.

There are ideologies that provide the basis on a graphic novel. Ideology work to produce meaning through a mark ([7]: 231). What kind of ideology that appear in graphic novel? How does forms conflict toward power represented in a superhero graphic novel? What traits and signs are being used to form the ideologies?

## 2. Literature Review

Research purposes will be to describe the ideology that emerged from this superhero themed graphic novel. It can tell the world that graphic novel is not just some childish

entertainment media but is a work of literature with a profound message based on certain ideology.

## 2.1. Semiotic methods

This research uses Semiotic method to analyze the 'signs' in a graphic novel. In semiotics, 'signs' may be anything from which meanings may be generated (such as words, images, sounds, gestures and objects). For the analytical purposes of semiotics (in the tradition of Saussure), every sign is composed of: a 'signifier' - the form which the sign takes; and the 'signified' - the concept it represents. Nowadays, the 'signifier' is commonly interpreted as the material form of the sign. Semiotic or semiology is the study of sign and means of signs that working. John Fiske (2004: 60-61) said that semiotic have three field of study major: a sign, a code or system that organizes sign and culture where the codes and marks work. Sobur (2003) stated that to make a graphic study means dealing with visual signs and filled with words. Symbolic review (hermeneutic) applied as the tools to search for meaning of signs within. To sharpen the interpretation of the meaning and maintain research validity, required data that serve as comment's amplifier.

Roland Barthes introduced the notion that there are different *orders of signification* (levels of meaning). The *first order of signification* is that of denotation: at this level there is a sign consisting of a signifier and a signified. Connotation is a *second-order of signification* which uses the first sign (signifier and signified) as its signifier and attaches to it an additional signified.

## 2.2. Ideology

Ideologies and meaning on a graphic novel has the ability to manipulate the reader in the direction of a certain ideology. The readers and the text both have contributed to produce meaning. Class struggle and conflicts of power, is an ideology introduced by Karl Marx. ([17]: 110)

One of the main theories of Karl Marx is that the state controlled directly or indirectly by classes who was in a position over. Because of that, according to Marx, state is not an institution above the class governing the community without expecting anything in return, but rather constitutes a tool in the hands of upper classes to secure their power. So the state did not act in the public interest, but the sake of the upper classes. State is not the neutral judge to settle disputes that arise in the community in a fair manner

and trying to establish a general welfare. So the state is not neutral, but always favors ([17]: 120)

### 3. Research Method

This research uses constructivism paradigm it has the view that social life is not natural but is the result of construction. It reflect social reality according to the subject relating to the reality.

This research adopted qualitative approaches. According to Suyanto (2005: 165-166), quantitative research frequently produce the data and information in a macro way, less detailed and not can reveal social life in their entirety. In a situation like this, a qualitative research methodology can be said more adequate to be applied. Understanding the qualitative study can be defined as research that yields descriptive data about words spoken and written, and behaviors that can be observed of the subjects (Taylor and Bogdan, in [24]: 166).

The research object is a superhero themed novel graphic the title is Watchmen. It has 12 chapter with 408 pages. The data source is taken from the graphic novel. Data collection

Primary data are taken by reading the entire chapters of the book. After that, several chapters related to the research are categorized. The next step are selecting the panels that meet the criteria to be analyzed. The criteria are panels that have conflicts toward power authority. Goodness criteria are used toward selecting the data. Which means that the data are taken directly from the book. Roland Barthes' semiotic analysis method are being used to get the meaning on each panels. denotation and connotation will be formed and then myths will be determine. Myths will reveal the grand ideology of the subjects.

### 4. Results

#### 4.1. Brief synopsis of The Watchmen

Superhero is part of the society being used by the US government to win World War 2 specifically against Japan and Vietnam. The United States and the Soviet Union is equally powerful country of the world. US have superhero while the Soviet Union to increase defense hoard nuclear warheads. Superhero who was being managed,

were no longer willing to be an instrument of the US government. A climax story happens when a superhero named Ozymandias created an artificial alien to be a common enemy from the United States and the Soviet Union. The aliens destroy the entire town of New York. Ozy claimed that he masterminded it to stop nuclear war between the United States with the Soviet Union. He cost the lives of the entire town to save the lives of all mankind

## 4.2. Ideology within The Watchmen graphic novel

A myth is a basic human need. That is why a myth is exploited as a medium of communication. Barthes in a book titled *Mythologies*, he says that as a form of a symbol in communication, myth is not only created in the form of discourse written, but as a product of cinema, photography, advertising, the idea of sports, and television. Said van Zoest (in Sobur), ideology and mythology in our lives equal to codes in deed semiotic and communication we live in. Without it, according to him, communication cannot happen. The use of any text, every the use of language, every semiosis (use of a mark) in general only arises thanks to an ideology that consciously or unconsciously known by the customer a sign. A text will be never free of the ideology and has the ability to manipulate the reader to the direction of a (sobur ideology, 2003: 208).

Within the framework of Barthes, connotation are identical with the operation of ideology, whom he described as a myth, and serves to be revealed and providing justification for dominant values which prevails on in a certain period of time. In a text, myth appears in this is a concept which appears in a repetitive manner and in the form of different. Studies forms mythology is because the repetition of the concept of occurring in a form of various shapes are. Barthes also understood that ideology is false consciousness that makes people live in a world being imaginary and ideal, although the reality of his life that actually not so. The ideology of the culture around for there are, Barthes talk about connotation as an expression of culture. Culture manifesting itself in the texts and, thus, ideology was manifesting himself through various code that oozes enter into a text in the form of the important signage important, as figures, background, the point of view of, and others ([22]: 71).

From the aforementioned descriptions and analysis, it can be seen that the theme that often arose is struggle form in this graphic novel are symbolized through the form of class struggle conducted by the the main characters. According to the objectives of this research, specific parts are selected based on on the condition this research and analyzed by the mainstream theory to research this. The specific parts researchers

consider can represent struggle form, conflict, and power in a novel graphic. There are 27 pictures to represent the form of class struggle and conflicts power and authority.

TABLE 1:

No. Panels	Theme/Form	Representation
1. Chapter 1 page 4 panel 5	One of the main characters is a fugitive	Conflict toward authority
2. Chapter 1 page 6 panel 1	One of the main characters break the law	Class struggle and conflict toward authority
3. Chapter 1 page 9 panel 4 & 5	The weak class disadvantage	Authority government
4. Chapter 1 page 13 panel 4	Government's rule discredit lower class	Authority government
5. Chapter 1 page 18 panel 4	Government's rule discredit lower class	Authority government
6. Chapter 1 page 19	One of the main characters break the law	Class struggle dan conflict toward authority
7. Chapter 1 Page 20 panel 1	Superhero are governments asset	Authority government
8. Chapter 1 attachment page 1	Superhero supports government.	Authority government
9. Chapter 1 attachment page 3	Superhero are a part of the government.	Conflict toward authority
10. Chapter 1 attachment page 5	Superhero have go public	Class struggle dan conflict toward authority.
11. Chapter 1 attachment page 6	Government exploited superhero	Authority government.
12. Chapter 1 attachment page 7	Governments rules discredit superhero	Authority government dan conflict toward authority
13. Chapter 2 page 9 panel 5	Superhero tries to form a group	Class struggle dan conflict toward authority
14. Chapter 2 page 10 panel 1 – 3	Authority disbanded superhero group	Authority government
15. Chapter 2 page 13	Superhero is the key to win World War	Authority government
16. Chapter 2 page 14	Superhero cannot solve international conflicts	Conflict toward authority
17. Chapter 2 page 15	Authority are above the law they created	Authority government
18. Chapter 2 page 17 panel 6	Mass riot masterminded by the government	Authority government and the form of manipulation
19. Chapter 2 attachment page 4	Authority exploit superhero	Authority government and the form of manipulation
20. Chapter 2 attachment page 5	Government can manipulate facts and history	Authority government and the form of manipulation
21. Chapter 3 page 11 panel 3	Government control the mass media	Authority government and the form of manipulation
22. Chapter 3 page 23	Government's rule discredit weaker class	Authority government

No. Panels	Theme/Form	Representation
23. Chapter 4 page 12	Superhero became a tool to frighten opposing party	Authority government
24. Chapter 4 page 13	Authority exploit superhero	Authority government
25. Chapter 4 page 14 panel 2 & 3	Executorial form of authority	Authority government
26. Chapter 4 page 19	Mass media manipulation	Authority government and the form of manipulation
27. Chapter 4 page 20 panel 1	Authority exploit superhero	Authority government

The government depicted on this story are described as the party authoritarian who adheres to system dictator. The government may look like they are defending the general public, but what they did was only in the interest of their own. They also do not want to look weak and will do what it takes so their positions stay above and safe. Watchmen is also present a dictatorship in its government.

After being analyzed, the themes the had a struggle, conflict, and how power are being used (usually antagonist). Thus it can be said that a novel graphic has the ability to communicate equal to other media, equally capable to satirical describe a form of government. Only in a graphic novel usually the idea was more covert and covered by other elements, for example the development of the characters itself, narrative story, comedy, mystery, action always adorn the story.

Graphic novels are usually identify as a collection of images that can be seen in contrast to when read more detail and thoroughly. In the Watchmen graphic novel there are the form of themes that appears to be repeated. With the themes that often appears it can be seen that ideology there are on this story. Thus it can be said that this graphic novel reflected the ideology of struggle and conflicts to power, where it is being constructed many times through the passing of story.

## 5. Conclusion

Graphic novel is one of the media communication, who with progress are capable of being penetrated to all human life. Graphic novel have a serious and more complex narrative compared to comic. Graphic novel is a reflection of each society and cultural matter. Graphic novel may be said is a mirrors to conventional media, waiting term or even a parody, in society. Because of that culture and ideology elements usually provide the basis of the words of a graphic novel, depending on which form a graphic novel came and cultural backgrounds to create although not always. Graphic novel

from one culture or ideology certain could have imitate culture or the ideology of other countries.

An ideology in a society could have been a platform for a story in a graphic novel, although not always. In this research, Watchmen had themes that always emerged in the story. Repetition themes that formed myths and eventually can be conclude ideology as a basis that story. The ideology that provides the basis story in a novel graphic is an ideology of struggle and conflicts toward power. The ideology describes upheaval between a lower class against class more powerful. Form of government constructed in such a way that in a novel graphic is described as the figure of dictator government. Government in power this described as the figure parties the upper classes, whereas the main character in graphic novel is described represent parties a weaker class.

## 6. Suggestion

Research on graphic novel actually has rarely been implemented whether toward native of America graphic novel or other western countries, and graphic novel derived from Asian countries. When so many the can be taken up and examined from each graphic novel. Research similar often held by, is usually comic strip or comic editorial used as the subject the analysis. It was because comic strip are in nature reality and to the point interpretation. And graphic novel that has a groove story complex long can also researched in detail. Graphic novel will shall said having the same level by the popular other, where equally held up a reality that is in in society.

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