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

In Russia at the end of the 1920s, a failed philosopher with a limp\(^1\) tried to make sense of the world that was becoming more kaleidoscopic with each spin of its axis. He could not count on any ideologies to anchor him about the world, on the question of what it means to be human. He lived in a time when any reliable ideological answers were collapsing left and right and nothing was safe from deconstruction\(^2\): 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. New forms of being in all disciplines were abounding, and the world needed a new system of thought to accommodate all the different voices that were populating the world. Nonetheless, as much as his anxiety stemmed from the storm of innovations, it also came from his physical danger; he was under Stalin’s watch during the purge of intellectuals, which eventually produced his sentence to an exile in Siberia (Gogotishvili).

This philosopher, Mikhail Bakhtin, however, found his answer to the uncertainty about human ontology in a literary giant that received the same criminal sentence in the previous century: Fyodor Dostoevsky. From reading his novels, Bakhtin conceptualized *literary polyphony*, a novelistic system that allowed subjective independence and freedom to each character’s consciousness by eliminating the author’s governing voice. The narratological revolution Bakhtin saw in Dostoevsky’s work allowed a new understanding of human ontology that reconciled the turn of the century’s pluralistic burst of perspectives and possibilities of being. Bakhtin showed that Dostoevsky’s poetics was founded on a particular ontological view that reconciled pluralism with Existentialist view of humanity. Nonetheless, by the end of twentieth century, the world only accelerated in its growing complexity by the end of twentieth century. The question animating this essay then is if Bakhtin’s theory from the 1920s is still capable of artistically reflecting the nature of reality of 1980s. In response, a work that is unexpectedly sophisticated tackled the same ontological uncertainty that Bakhtin analyzed in his works.

In 1986 the United States, DC Comics picked up a no-name writer from The Boroughs, the notoriously poverty-stricken part of Northampton, England (Alan Moore Fan Site). Handed only a few washed-up, bygone superheroes to create a new miniseries, he was expected to manufacture primary-colored narratives that simplified reality into clear lines and two-dimensional faces. Instead, he brought unrestrained psychological realism to *Swamp Things* that shocked the comics community into witnessing the possibility of an unprecedented artistry and philosophical nuances. Then, riding the momentum of artistry, he turned to the polychromatic world of the eighties that was juggling the Cold War, globalization, new palette of identity politics, and the Internet, and produced the

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1. His chronic osteomyelitis led to an amputation of his leg.
2. Characteristic in modern philosophy, deconstruction is a systematic process of reevaluating the truth-value of every premise within a belief system and reassessing the validity of its foundation, to either reaffirm its authority or discard it. This particular usage of “deconstruction” is more sympathetic to Cartesian school of thought as opposed to Derrida’s.
groundbreaking *Watchmen*. Portraying this unprecedentedly cacophonous reality was a mission of the highest art forms, befitting explorations in literary environments inhabited by characters such as Kurt Vonnegut’s Billy Pilgrim, Samuel Beckett’s Pim, Gabriel Garcia Marquez’s Buendia, and Naguib Mahfouz’s Gebelaawi—not Captain America or the Fantastic Four. However, Alan Moore shattered expectations and, collaborating with a British virtuoso comics artist Dave Gibbons, produced *Watchmen*. This groundbreaking work solidified his celebrity as an intellectual as much as it elevated Western comic books into “graphic novels,” a literary genre with enough sophistication for *Watchmen* to be ranked in Time Magazine’s “All-TIME 100 Novels” list. Not to be outshined by its companions in that list, *Watchmen* is a sobering meditation on its contemporary reality, especially the disorienting and terrifying faces of human society. As Bakhtin had done, Moore 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 distinguished his pluralist novelistic universe from them with characters that were of a unique, postmodernist 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.

**Thesis**

In this essay, I will show how Bakhtin analyzed Dostoevsky’s poetics as literary polyphony, a narratological environment defined by fully developed pluralism of characters’ consciousnesses, for a particular point of view on human ontology. He saw that Dostoevsky’s novelistic structure is founded on what Bakhtin coins the “unfinalizability” of man, or the infinite nature of human consciousness and its consequent resistance to any static descriptions. As poetics are founded on a basis of the author’s personal ontological opinion, so this essay will summarize how polyphonic poetics is founded on ontological basis of human unfinalizability.

The second part of the essay will then analyze the different ontological justification of polyphonic poetics, specifically those advanced by Moore and Gibbons’s polyphonic graphic novel *Watchmen*. I will first outline the various poetical techniques *Watchmen* uses. I will then lay our how *Watchmen*’s innovations in the visual dimensions of the graphic novel add meaning and understanding to our experience of polyphony. *Watchmen*’s use of the graphic form for polyphonic effect thus presents a more contemporary experience of polyphonic poetics as the novel reflects a deepened kaleidoscopic uncertainty of human ontology and meaning of life. I will argue that Moore and Gibbons’ polyphony finds its philosophical inspiration in the ontological thesis that human, as an empty mirror to society, is, unfinalizable and only because the society it reflects is unfinalizable. This is a revision of Bakhtin’s theory of unfinalizability he finds in Dostoevsky, and its placement in a postmodernist context: the source of human’s unfinalizability is not his or her innate consciousness, which is what Dostoevsky writes about, but the society he or she is lodged into, which I argue is what Moore and Gibbons represent. This essay is thus about an ontological shift of polyphonic poetics found in *Watchmen*’s graphic medium. The formalistic and philosophical revision allows the readers a more contemporary experience of literary polyphony and its ontological framework.

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3 This is a label used primarily by DC Comics to market *Watchmen* to a wider brand of audience. It is difficult to say scholarly that *Watchmen* is the first ‘graphic novel’ in this aspect, as well as considering the existence of a rich tradition of sophisticated graphic novels in Asia that has been around since 1940s.
What is Polyphony?

The term literary polyphony was first introduced in 1929 in Bakhtin’s influential Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics. In this book, Bakhtin describes Dostoevsky’s novelistic worlds as polyphonic, antithetical to traditional “monologic” novels. In music, polyphony is a phenomenon in which multiple voices, human or instrumental, sing out different notes but harmonize on a higher musical plane. However, novelistic polyphony is a concept entirely different from its musicological counterpart. To understand what polyphonic novels are, it is paramount to know what they are not: monologic novels.

In monologic novels, everything within its fictional universe happens and exists in service of the author’s personal grand narrative, or the author’s “monologue.” There is, as Bakhtin 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” (Bakhtin 18, 7). Monologic novels are most easily identifiable by their didacticism—the entirety of the novelistic universe is watered down into the ‘bottom line’ of the tale, a consequence of the authors standing above their fictional universe and employing their own consciousness to govern each of their characters, essentially rendering them as his or her marionettes at best. The fiction is rather an elaborate mouthpiece for the author, where his ideology and consciousness is the actual basis of each character’s words. Bakhtin claims that therefore, the novel have dominantly been single-voiced, that of the author’s singular perspective. In this monologic system, the author is raised to a deity that fated all that is according to his will.

Writers of philosophical novels most often exercise this framework. For example, Voltaire’s vision is clearly outlined all throughout Candide. A quick-paced story of a prince and his tutor surviving a string of tragedies and accidents, Candide demonstrates how different prominent ideologies fare in the face of all the misfortunes. Pangloss is the proponent of Leibnizian optimism, or, now thus renamed as Panglossianism, and Candide is the foiling pragmatist. Each character espouses only their specific ideology in response to each event. It is the author’s will that both characters have become mouthpieces of singular philosophies, and their thoughts are fully controlled by the author’s intentions. How Pangloss and Candide each react to any events in the novel is automated by their governing philosophies, which Voltaire placed to support his own vision. The characters, or the author’s creations, have never even enjoyed any degree of free-thinking and self consciousness, and all that happens is the unchanging author’s will.

However, as Bakhtin explains, “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” (Bakhtin 7). Dostoevsky’s novels are 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. According to Bakhtin, Dostoevsky relinquished that deistic status of the monologic author by creating his polyphonic novels, in which he is not placed above any of his characters and stand dimensionally side by side with them. In Dostoevsky’s created universes, each character is a “not voiceless slave…[or] only objects of authorial discourse,” but another human being whose degree of consciousness and extent of subjective awareness is on par with Dostoevsky (Bakhtin 6). The characters are as conscious of themselves and their membership in a created literary world as their authors, and by virtue of

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4 In his The Monadology, Gottfried Leibniz argues that this particular universe exists by God’s decision over many other possible universes. God is always good and has sufficient reason for all his creations, and so this universe that God chose over exists as the best of all possible worlds.

5 Pangloss, fictional mentor to the protagonist Candide in Voltaire’s Candide, is known for explaining away all circumstances as “everything is made for the best purpose… all is for the best” (20).
that dimensional self-awareness, they are written to enjoy enough existential freedom to create their own course of events as time flows. Dostoevsky conceived his characters to have such free will to be the “subjects of their own directly signifying discourse” (Bakhtin 7). 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. There is no “unfolding of material within the framework of its own monologic understanding” in Dostoevsky’s novels (Bakhtin 18). 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 ontological viewpoint is that humans have free consciousness that is unbounded by any singular narrative, as Bakhtin verbalized. His novels reflecting this ontological foundation, different characters chart their own voice into the novel’s environment, and thus the novel becomes polyphonic as distinct voices populate the novel. It is the highest form of power the characters can have, to be able to enjoy equal amount of self-representation and self-governing existence. The characters are not reduced into symbols, caricatures, or metaphors. In Bakhtin’s words, they are not finalized, or when the characters are given finality in what they are, without room for any more development. To be finalized is to reach an immanent final stage of what a character can be, represent, or vocalize. For example, the knight in shining armor is only a consciousnessless figure of medieval justice, the damsel in distress is a doll labeled feminine powerlessness whose only justification is to be an evidence of the knight’s justice, and the evil dragon exists only to be a foil to the knight as an object of the knight’s justice. All three characters exist not as living beings with their own consciousnesses but as metaphoric sentences that supports the author’s thesis. Polyphonic novels refuse to finalize any of its characters in that way. Its characters are “voices [remaining] independent and, as such, are combined in a unity of higher order than in homophony,” or each character’s independently striving voices are not contained in the ideological boundaries of the monologic author (Bakhtin 21). Rather, the voices of the characters and the author interact democratically as each establishes its own boundaries. Though the characters are not literally human, their psychological autonomy grants them a consciousness of actual humans, just as much living in a world as pluralistic and polyphonic as the reader’s.

Acknowledging the irreducibility of each character is the basis of polyphonic novels, and this is achieved through dialogue. Bakhtin defines dialogue as a psycholinguistic phenomenon of a “complex, dynamic relations of a semantic type” occurring “between complete utterances of various speaking subjects” (Speech Genres 117). 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. An unfinalizable consciousness cannot be formulated without another unfinalizable consciousness next to it rubbing against each other.

For the polyphonic literary environment to be constructed, any preexisting order that relegates the character’s independent self-measurement and the legitimacy of his or her independence must be gone. Bakhtin gives two measures of existential hierarchy that are most antagonistic to this pluralistic setup, which are the establishment of an ontological standard and the imbalanced distribution of gnostic power. Both components of monologic
novels place the author in a more powerful ontological status that falsifies a character’s existential independence and delegitimizes any individual consciousnesses. Moreover, having any kind of existential hierarchy automatically predetermines the novel’s course and finalizes each character into mere ideological puppets of the author’s own vision.

The first enemy to polyphonic environment is the delineation of a type of standard that establishes the ‘right’ way to be. When the author imposes onto his novelistic world what he or she sees as the right way to live and the way things should be, such idealism, as Bakhtin writes, “recognize[s] only one principle of cognitive individualization: error. True judgments are not attached to a personality, but correspond to some unified, systemically monologic context. Only error individualizes” (Bakhtin 81). Definition of individuality becomes the degree of which the character is wrong about the author’s overarching personal morality. The character is defined only in relation to the author. In such system, each character is delegitimized of its own metaphysical independence. For one thing, a character’s attempt to be successful in his or her own morality, different from the author, will be destined to fail, thereby rendering the character’s struggle to be meaningfully autonomous meaningless. And then, any opposition to that standardized morality would exist only for the sake of enforcing that morality. The character’s failure to be independent would be used as a supporting evidence for the author’s personal vision, thereby finalizing all character’s existence as an ideological futility. In a polyphonic setting, no single ideology can claim to be ‘right.’ There is no default position. Every character lives by his or her own standard, or his or her own measure of being; each character justifies him or herself to be ‘right’ in his or her own way, and is therefore fully realized in him or herself, not as an object of an another’s consciousness. For Dostoevsky, the character lives in his or her own ideological reality, as opposed to being subject to a literary world ruled by someone else’s moral idea. In that way, “the ideological principles which underlie the construction no longer merely represent the hero…but are expressed by the hero himself, defining his own personal point of view on the world” (Bakhtin 83). No character is founded on its relations to the author, but rather in absolute relation to itself. Bakhtin was thus able to describe how each character’s voice is its own unaccompanied soloist, and not part of an orchestral accompaniment to the author’s melody.

The second enemy to polyphonic novelistic environment is the imbalance distribution of one’s knowledge about each other. The phrase ‘knowledge is power’ perfectly describes the explanation for the stratified relationship between the author and the characters. The existential hierarchy is intrinsically imposed by author’s higher knowledge about the storyworld. In a monologic novel, because the novel’s course and environment is constructed to support the overall monologic vision of the author, he or she already knows everything about the novel. He or she knows what the characters will do, will say, and how they will react to a new circumstance, because ultimately they will all support the author’s vision. Any attempt for characters to be an individual and speak out is considered an error from the normal course of the unfolding events, as mentioned above. This means that the knowledge of that normal course puts one into a higher position of power over those who do not know. When the author knows more than his or her characters about the novelistic universe, than it is impossible for the characters to have fully realized, unhindered consciousnesses, for the characters are nothing but rats in a lab under the author’s full control. They are only as meaningful as the author lets them, thereby finalizing them in how little they know about what is going on in the novel. For example, Bakhtin uses his critical interpretation of Leo Tolstoy’s Three Deaths to demonstrate the author’s higher position (Bakhtin 70). Three Deaths is a short story about the three unrelated and mutually unaware deaths of a noblewoman, a coachman, and a tree. The three doomed subjects are each enclosed in their own universe, unaware of each other and each other’s universes. In this novelistic setup,
Bakhtin sees that the narrator has the power to freely traverse between all three universes by virtue of its narratorial authority. The narrator is essentially playing god as he observes his subjects in their solipsistic fragments of novelistic reality that are the chapters. Because the narrator-author can see what they do not know, he or she finalizes the characters into what limits they are put into, thereby losing their humanness. The characters falsely governed by the illusion of individuality “[are] accidental and, so to speak, superfluous” (Bakhtin 81). It would make no difference for the narrator to write an essay than to narrate a novel.

To shatter this approach, Dostoevsky “forced his characters to see and know all the essential things that he himself—the author—sees and knows” (Bakhtin 72). No one, especially the author/narrator, knows more about the intraliterary reality the characters occupy than the characters themselves, with the author “not [having] retained for himself any essential authorial ‘surplus’ (essential, that is, from the point of view of the desired truth)” (Bakhtin 72). In Dostoevsky’s polyphonic novels, all characters possess the same degree of knowledge about the novel that puts each one of them on an equal plane of existence. They can become conscious on their own, without being finalized by the author, thereby becoming their own persons. The ontology of Dostoevsky that Bakhtin organizes through this theory is that ‘I am conscious, therefore I am.’

For characters to exist on an equal plane of existence, time cannot be linear and sequential in the polyphonic novel, as the characters might be finalized by their moment in time in relation to the ultimate ending of the novel, which the author knows. The relationship to time becomes the source of hierarchical relationship between the author and the character. Authors can manipulate time. However much time is conceived to be one of the more objective, universally regular measurements of reality, temporality as represented in novels is unreliably fluid, as the author can lengthen, shorten, multiply, divide, and twist it to support his or her artistic vision. The characters cannot. For examples, in one of her landmark stream-of-consciousness novels To the Lighthouse, published in 1927, Virginia Woolf drew out the flow of a single evening in 122 pages in Chapter 1 “The Window,” then shrunk ten years into mere 20 pages in Chapter 2 “Time Passes,” and then stretched a single afternoon into 68 pages in Chapter 3 “The Lighthouse”—the protraction of those few hours are not aided by lengthy flashbacks or biographical expositions. Even more extremely, in 1922, James Joyce slowed 24 hours into nearly 700 pages in his Ulysses. The characters in each of these novels then have no choice but to deal with temporality that the author has full control over. This is a problem for polyphonic novels, as the author’s exclusive control over temporality automatically places him or her in a higher plane of power than the characters, thereby rendering him or her a monologic author. To prevent this, the characters must be able to transcend temporal linearity. They must live by their own time, just as they live by their own voices.

In a linear time frame, the characters are finalized into their time-selves that cannot engage in dialogues with anyone; polyphonic novels give gnostic power to the time-selves by placing them on a dialogical plane with each other. Time-selves are what I refer to in describing the different images of character as determined by a specific moment of time. Novelistic time is most often measured by evolution of a character—think of the bildungsroman. The character passes him or herself in Point A and then onto Point B throughout the novel. In Candide, that Point A could be the time in the novel in which all the major characters were living comfortably, and Point B is the time in the novel after all the misfortunes happened and the major characters take on completely different personalities and embodying ideologies. The ontological conflict this time of novelistic sequentiality creates is

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6 assuming the definition includes free will and cognitive independence.
7 I am using the pagination of Houghton Mifflin Harcourt’s 1989 edition of Virginia Woolf’s To the Lighthouse.
8 This is the page count of the Gabler edition of James Joyce’s Ulysses, printed in 1986.
that when a character is at Point A, he or she is only ‘him or her of the Point A.’ The character is finalized as what he or she is at that any given moment. Candide, when he is living the royal life, is finalized into a comfortable prince. At the end, he is nothing more than a bitter private citizen with various scars on his back. A character’s self at a specific moment, or what I call a time-self, is the character’s ontological entirety. As the character is then reduced to what he or she is statically at a particular moment without any possibility of becoming anything else, predetermination is undeniably immanent throughout the novel. Each time-self becomes a stepping-stone to the finale that culminates the author’s monologue, and so a character is measured only in finalized time-selves, which stand in relation to the author’s novelistic standard.

Bakhtin recognized that Dostoevsky reconfigured temporality into spatiality in his polyphonic world, as Dostoevsky “saw and conceived his world primarily in terms of space, not time” (Bakhtin 28). This change remedies the lethal finality of time-selves, for the characters now live by “not evolution but coexistence and interaction” (Bakhtin 28). When those temporal points become spatial points, each time-self does not grow into another but exists simultaneously side-by-side with another time-self. The different time-selves can then engage, or rather are forced to engage by the simultaneity of their existences, with each other dialogically and exercise free consciousness of each time-self. How this is possible is the consciousness’s ability to invoke different time-selves into the spatial present.

“[Dostoevsky’s characters] remember from their own past only that which has not ceased to be present for them, that which is still experienced by them as the present…every act a character commits is in the present, and in this sense is not predetermined; it is conceived of and represented by the author as free” (Bakhtin 29). By thinking, different time-selves of a character exist simultaneously. The character can be comfortably engaged in dialogic interactions with him or herself of different moments, as in with each time-selves standing equally in existential legitimacy. This is a powerful setup to expose the fact that “within a single person, Dostoevsky tries to create two persons, in order to dramatize the contradiction and develop it extensively” (Bakhtin 28). Each character is the cross section of all the different personalities he or she has been influenced by at different times and the ongoing dialogue within him or herself about those experiences and reactions. At every moment he or she evolves due to the constant discourse with him or herself. Even the author cannot control what his or her character will become, so the author is forced to engage in an equal dialogue with them while writing.

We have so far seen how Bakhtin formalizes the novelistic design of polyphony; we must then examine the ontological stance that gave rise to Dostoevsky’s polyphonic poetics. The ontological base to polyphony is the total respect for the human soul’s infinite depth. Humans, as Bakhtin sees presented in Dostoevsky’s polyphonic world, are unfinalizable beings. Because humans have consciousness, it is not possible for anyone to be finalized, or placed in a final word. A person’s essence or identity cannot be completely captured through verbal descriptions. 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

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9 The poetics being grounded in Dostoevsky’s particular artistic vision is not contradictory to the poetic’s polyphonic status. The monologic author’s vision counts as a substance within the monologic framework of a novel; what is happening inside the novel is the author’s philosophical message. Poetics are of a formal, not intraliterary, sphere of a novel. What Bakhtin sees as Dostoevsky’s particular philosophical stance occurs at a poetical level, not on the intraliterary plane.
“Yes, I am a scoundrel, a thorough scoundrel” and the like. Furthermore, he justifies his finality as a scoundrel because someone must be one in the town (Dostoevsky 169). 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” (Dostoevsky 554). 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 unfinalizability, by its unclosedness and its indeterminacy” (Bakhtin 52). 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)” (Bakhtin 73).

The consciousness involuntarily unfinalizes itself. Bakhtin’s theory is that because a consciousness is nothing but independent, or unfinalizable by others, only way to interact is through a clash. No interactions conclude with dominance or subjection. Man, a figure of his own consciousness, cannot help but be engaged in a dialogue with everything in his reality, including other consciousnesses and his 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” (Bakhtin 63). 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.

Let us examine how the independent consciousness materializes in a polyphonic novel. Language as a formalized utterance is a powerful tool to affirm one’s own consciousness. Since Bakhtin, there have been many further theoretical expansions of polyphonic narrative techniques. As Bakhtin did, recent literary theorists focused on the verbal discourses as the hallmark essential for novelistic polyphony. Literary theorists Clara-Ubaldina Lorda and Patrick Zabalbeascoa conceptualized how “as soon as speaker uses language, and turns to such formal elements, s/he establishes an interlocutor and underlines a relationship with a partner” (1). By speaking, all persons involved in the conversation, or interlocutors, take on a role of either the speaker or the listener. Two independent consciousnesses become interlocutors with the other person in mind, arising from one’s awareness that one is speaking coherently to the other with hopes of being understood. Each consciousness quietly acknowledges that the next person is also a consciousness. Thus, by speaking, a consciousness enters into a dialogical relationship, but with two entities: with other consciousnesses, such as other partners in the discourse, and with itself. The first relationship is what I call interpersonal polyphony. The second is what I call intrapersonal polyphony.
Interpersonal polyphony is a dialogical relationship occurring at both formal and textual level. Whatever is said during a verbal discourse is intensely personalized in form and content. Any impersonal ideas, or statements that poses itself as being universal and belonging to no one in particular, becomes stained with personality as they are uttered by a consciousness. This happens in two spheres, of form and content. For the content, it is the way an idea is paraphrased, which is influenced by one’s personal viewpoint on that idea and what unconscious mutation one applies to it like in the game of telephone. For form, how an idea is uttered is a signifier of the uniqueness of one’s consciousness.

Lorda and Zabalbeascoa further explains, “for Bakhtin, a particular case of polyphony is heteroglossia, which should refer to the clash of antagonistic forces through different languages, one whose manifestation is diglossia, or polyglossia, i.e. the simultaneous use of two or more national languages in a given society” (1). Different speakers speak differently, and seeing that one speaks differently than the other, a discourse is considered to be interpersonally polyphonic. Particular word choices and pronunciations evoke the speaker’s background, whether that is socioeconomic, cultural, and academic, and so all utterances of a consciousness are linguistically personalized. Clash of consciousnesses also occur on the semiotic level. Dostoevsky uses unique slangs and ethnic accents to instill ‘polyglossia’ in his polyphonic discourses. We shall later see that Watchmen achieves similar discourses of interpersonal polyphony between characters, but takes them beyond the verbal dimension. Before venturing into a different manifestation of interpersonal polyphony, we must return to the second type of dialogic relationship of the consciousness, which occurs internally.

Intrapersonal polyphony is established by the standardized nature of language. The first utterance of an idea not only establishes interpersonal polyphony by acknowledging the subjectivities of other people, but also starts an antagonistic relationship between the speaker and the words spoken. By verbalizing a highly personalized idea into words comprehensible by other intensely subjective consciousnesses, one begins a dialogical relationship with the very words he or she uses. To use words of a standardized language is to translate one’s consciousness into a different sphere of understanding. Linguist Emilia Parpala explains that “the ‘locutor’ is not a unitary notion, because the person who utters a sentence is simultaneously assuming three roles: as a speaking subject, he is a presence in the world; as an enunciator/locator, he is the ‘the deictic center’ of enunciation; as a locator/author, he is responsible for the illocutionary acts which alter the relation between interlocutors” (Lorda and Zabalbeascoa 239). As Parpala points out, there is a three level of separation within oneself because of language. A consciousness becomes a consciousness that must translate itself, then a consciousness that knows that it translates itself, and then a consciousness that knows that it must translate itself tailored to another particular consciousness. Words will never fully communicate what the consciousness wants to, since the standardized nature of words, to be understood by all, mutes all specific nuances and implications personalized by a particular consciousness. For example, when a character describes itself as feeling blue, what does that even mean? Oxford English Dictionary defines “blue” as “melancholy, sad, depressed” (“Blue” def.2). But for every single listener of the word “blue,” the meaning is interpreted differently, such as Person A’s notion of blue is a static, paralyzing sadness giving rise to a feeling of emptiness, while Person B’s notion of blue is a disturbing, noisy rush of confusion and anxiety that similar paralyzes the person, not out of stillness of heart but a loss of what to do. Philosopher Emile Benveniste describes how a consciousness knows this failure of language, and in this way, “an interiorize dialogue, [is] formulated as an ‘inner language’ between an ‘I who speaks’ and an ‘I who listens’” (Lorda and Zabalbeascoa 3). This is a finer articulation of Bakhtin’s explanation of intrapersonal polyphony, how “out of every contradiction within a single person Dostoevsky tries to create two persons, in order to dramatize the contradiction and develop it extensively” (Bakhtin 28). A consciousness is
stuck with an ontological conflict due to the standardized language: the medium that expresses the consciousness does not express the consciousness. And when the listener is involved, the problem is further complicated.

One danger of verbal utterance is that if a person is too typified in his or her speech, then he or she can be finalized into the speech characterization, as “the more objectified character, the more sharply his speech physiognomy stands out” (Bakhtin 182). For a character with strong accent in his or her speech, it is too easy for that character to be defined by what that accent stereotypically represents. The stigma associated with various race, region, and class unfortunately attaches itself to one’s characterized speech, and the listener might only pick up on that stigma. The locutor becomes finalized by his or her illocution. By having his or her words be received only as an indicator that the speaker is a general member of a particular group, such as by race and social class, then not only are the nuances indicating the complexity of one’s consciousness ignored, but also one’s individuality is denied. There then arises a three-way tension between 1) the unfinalizable consciousness knowing itself as unfinalizable, 2) failure of words to fully embody a personalized idea of the consciousness, and 3) arbitrary societal stigma enveloping certain verbal characterizations that blurs an individual into a perceived group. Literature scholar Flore Coulouma emphasizes, the “conventions of cooperative/agonistic dialogue reveal the difficulties of communication and the impossibility to understand linguistic interactions according to a single model” (Lorda and Zabalbeascoa 234). The combination of these three opposing phenomena within a dialogue points to the incommunicability of a consciousness desiring to communicate. The irreconcilable gap between mutual understandings of consciousnesses thus reframes the definition of a conversation. Such “ambiguities of dialogue…subverts the traditional conception of cooperative conversation, and brings to the fore the narcissistic game of speakers vying for power within inter-subjective relationships” (Lorda and Zabalbeascoa 234). The characters, noticing that they cannot be fully understood, then become more aggressive in their desire to be heard, by ignoring the consciousness of the listener. In order to not be finalized, the speaker finalizes the listener. Frustrations of language’s incommunicability corner the character into finalizing the other person, for it is easier to talk to a static image than to a thinking being. This happens mutually, and so arises an ontological dissonance between the characters in a novel.

While characters engage in a discourse, with all its ontological paradoxes of interpersonal and intrapersonal polyphony, where does the reader stand? The reader, reading a literary discourse between characters, is inevitably involved in the dialogue. The authors intend for the characters’ discourses to be read, and they write with the reader in mind. By incorporating the possible consciousness of the reader, the discourses in the novel also embody that third consciousness of the reader within its dialogues. The characters are thus polyphonically engaged only with each other but also with the readers. Upon consumption, the words uttered by the characters become available for an intrapersonal polyphonic treatment, since the words uttered cannot truly capture the characters’ consciousnesses. In that moment of linguistic collapse, the reader’s consciousness activates to guess at the characters’ consciousnesses. James Wood describes Henry Green’s view on dialogue in How Fiction Works, “dialogue should be carrying multiple meanings and…it should mean different things to different readers at the same time…it can carry several indeterminate meanings for the reader” (215). A novels’ audience, by processing the characters’ dialogue of personalized ideas with their own digestive consciousness, is partaking in that discourse as they emotionally react to whatever is being said. This forces them to decide for themselves which of the characters’ voices to heed, and this freedom to align themselves in any way they want is a way in which polyphonic novels affirm the subjective, unfinalized consciousness of the reader. After all, the reader is also a human being.
The readers are not provided a crutch of the monologic authorial discourse to navigate a particular novelistic world with safety. Because of a sudden responsibility to choose their own framework when reading a polyphonic novel, the readers who interact with them realize their consciousness. The true power of polyphony is this: the relationship between the novel and the audience is no longer one-sided, but a communal activity of beings included in a democratic discourse that will ultimately become guides to the realization of our own self-consciousness. It is no wonder Alan Moore’s work is polyphonic, for his worldview is that “the single most important thing that we can ever attain [is] the knowledge of our own Self” through interacting with others (Vylenz 36:56). Polyphonic novels carry not only multiple voices of its intraliterary entities but also any entity, of any dimension, to come in contact with it, especially the reader. Alan Moore is not only proud of polyphony’s power to change the reader’s relationship with the text but also suggests that to change who and what the readers are is the fundamental purpose of literature. As he confesses, “art is, like magic, the science of manipulating symbols, words, or images to achieve changes in consciousness…indeed, to cast a spell, is simply to spell, to manipulate words, to change people’s consciousness” (Vylenz 28:08). Watchmen does exactly that through polyphony.

Here I have outlined what Bakhtin’s original conception of literary polyphony is and how it is achieved in a novel. 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. Bakhtin saw that Dostoevsky’s poetics conceived of characters’ consciousnesses that resisted ideological immanence by continually reacting to any limiting descriptions placed on oneself. Polyphonic poetics appropriately reconciles the individual’s desire to be honored as an individual, with his or her own unfinalizable, irreducible consciousness, while finding oneself situated to live with all other consciousnesses in a society. Polyphonic novels describe the tension between those two aspects of human living, of individuality and of coexistence. Watchmen, as a polyphonic novel, addresses the same concern, but it does so beyond the generalizing nature of words. Watchmen offers new possibilities of polyphonic poetics through its graphic novel medium, by setting the characters’ consciousnesses and their discourses in the graphic dimension. This next section of the essay will then answer how the poetics of Watchmen are polyphonic and what modifications to the literary technique does the novel’s graphic genre enact. I will then analyze how Watchmen’s revision of polyphony reveals the reality different from the one Bakhtin explored back in 1920s.

**Polyphony of Watchmen by Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons**

Watchmen is a graphic novel telling an alternate history of 1980s, when a group of retired superheroes find themselves trying to fight crime once more. The former superheroes, who do not sport any actual superhuman abilities, were going about their relatively new lifestyle of a private citizen, when one of them was murdered by a mysterious figure. The sociopathic Rorschach, who is illegally still active as a vigilante, goes on an investigative journey to find the murderer, while personally cautioning his former colleagues about this supposed mask killer. A few of his colleagues that Rorschach reaches out to are Dan Dreiberg, the former Nite Owl II who has now grown rather overweight, Dr. Manhattan, who is the only superhuman depicted in the novel, Laurie Juspeczyk, Dr. Manhattan’s girlfriend and the former Silk Spectre, and Adrian Veidt, the former Ozymandias who is now a billionaire CEO and dubbed ‘smartest man alive.’ The victim of the murder that set off the plotline is The Comedian, who was despised by both his fellow superheroes and the citizens for his proud disregard for others and psychopathic love of violence. Watchmen begins with the immediate aftermath of his murder, with the cover of the novel showing his trademark smiley face pin with a drop of his blood on it. While Rorschach’s investigation into the
murder poses itself as the primary storyline, *Watchmen* also narrates a myriad of different plotlines. Not only do each former superhero have his or her own storyline, but also do minor characters, such as private citizens that remotely come into contact with the superheroes. Weaving in and out of those narratives are other literary works, such as a completely separate comic book titled *Tales of the Black Freighter*, a scientific treatise on Dr. Manhattan’s superhuman physiology, a memoir written by a former superhero of an older generation, and a psychiatric evaluation of Rorschach. As much as *Watchmen* is about the superheroes, it is not. In terms of the number of storylines itself, *Watchmen* begins with much potential for narrative polyphony.

Intended for mature audiences, what could have been a fantasy of superheroes, nostalgic of the Golden Age of Comics that ended thirty years ago, is instead an unexpected confrontation with human phenomenology through gritty and gutty images that we normally shield ourselves from: the unorientable, unstandardizable nature of reality and its mercilessness in slaughtering any attempt to reduce it into static ideologies and moral narratives. Moore himself describes his work as having used “clichés of the superhero format to try and discuss notions of power and responsibility in an increasingly complex world” (Vylenz 18:41). The novel portrays a vision of society that has become a kaleidoscope of identities, narratives, faiths, and histories. Its characters must somehow stay afloat in that muck of clashing and some time harmonizing voices and perspectives. For a novel about former spandex-wearing ideology enthusiasts embattling other spandex-wearing so-called villains, things are pretty heavy. As Dostovesky “created a fundamentally new novelistic genre,” Moore “offered new possibilities as to how we perceive the environment surrounding us and the interactions and relationships of the people within it” (Bakhtin 7, Vylenz 20:14). Appropriately so, *Watchmen* was the first ‘graphic novel’ recognized by the public in the West, and is one of the key works of visual storytelling that heralded the Modern Age of Comic Books. For that era’s popularity in new kind of gritty realism, it is also understandably called the Dark Age of Comic Books. As *Watchmen* begins with a death of a superhero, so does the work kill off old superhero novels and commence its own type of masked characters.

What made *Watchmen* so groundbreaking was that its content and form defied the expectations of how superheroes usually go about throughout the plot and revolutionized how heroes interact with reality. Most superhero stories are reminiscent of medieval tales of a protagonist, as a full embodiment of goodness and justice, triumphing over extraordinary evil. Both Superman and Batman always ultimately take the most ethical course of action in the face of calamities and personal trials to triumph over superhuman villains. The heroes are heroic, the villains villainous, and that was that. However, similar to the way in which Dostoevsky refused a monologic presentation of reality in his novels, Alan Moore confessed that what was “most important [to him about *Watchmen*] was the actual storytelling [i.e. poetics] where the world that was presented didn’t really hang together in terms of linear cause and effect, but was instead seen as some massively complex, simultaneous event with connections made of coincidence, synchronicity” (Vylenz 19:31). In other words, *Watchmen* is celebrated for its polyphony. But, as the first half of this essay described, polyphony is not defined merely by an elimination of a singularly dominant ideology narrating the novel. It requires many more technical complexities that secure the subjective freedom of the characters’ consciousnesses. The narrative techniques Dostoevsky used in his novels that Bakhtin interpreted as polyphonic, Moore and Gibbons spun it graphically. Three aspect of

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10 An era of American comic books from late 1930s to early 1950s, when many of the archetypal superheroes were created. Characters such as Superman, Batman, Captain America, and Wonder Woman were the primary figures from this era.

11 Philosophical study of nature of being in occurrences.
Watchmen’s polyphonic poetics I will explore are: temporal spatiotemporality; removal of objectivity; and visualization dialogic discourses. These ideas will summarily arrive at my illustration of Watchmen’s ontological foundation.

Watchmen’s graphic novel form provides unique formal advantages to polyphonizing the treatment of time, by inherently equalizing the temporal position of characters and aligning them on a common dialogical plane. Time is not perceived linearly but simultaneously as if events on a timeline are spread out across a room for the eye to see all together. Because the temporal moments are put on the same plane of consideration, the characters that are embodied by those moments are also horizontalized. Much has been studied about graphic novels’ formalistic relationship with time in the narrative as the reader experiences it, and many theories attribute the graphic genre’s highest critical fortitude to the visual presentation of novelistic temporality. By the very nature of its format, graphic novels cannot help but reinvent how time flows in the novel and how the reader experiences it. Whereas prose relies on a graduated progression of events smoothly passing through each moment linearly, time is represented spatially, spread out in all directions on the visual platform. The graphic genre “meant scaling of time into space, of succession to simultaneity” (Connor 62). Graphic novels reconfigure time as an arrangement of serialized moments, spatially spread out to exist simultaneously in the reader’s experience. Graphic novels are composed of “panels [that] are the 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 frames” (Chute and Dekoven 175). Besides, as graphic novel pages are laid out in two-dimensional format, time cannot but be expressed spatially, which makes it that “in the world of comics, time and space are one and the same” (McCloud 100). This equation of space and time is crucial for Watchmen’s polyphonic poetics, as the characters no longer become a linearly progressing figure, fatalized by the author’s monologic vision. Instead, the characters become divided into multiple time-selves that exist simultaneously in the leveled space.

Just as the reader can see time spatialized, so can one of the superheroes that experiences time the same way. Dr. Manhattan is one of Watchmen’s superheroes that fully grasp this new aspect of time and consciousness. His ability to experience time simultaneously, or spatially, dictates the poetics of Chapter 4, which is a biographical section unveiling his personal history. To him, “there is no future. There is no past. Time is simultaneous…the whole design is visible in every facet” (Moore and Gibbons 9:6). The reading experience of Chapter 4 reflects the reading experience of Dr. Manhattan’s spatiotemporality orientation of time. This is where the graphic medium facilitates this experience. The past and future events all happen at the same time as the present for him. Objective chronology does not influence which events are narrated first. Watchmen demands the reader to resist the linear left-to-right, top-to-bottom panel reading of a traditional comic book reading experience, and instead to engage in a simultaneous, horizontal digestion of the storyworld material. Readers are presented with a scattered collection of different events from his life, where temporally unrelated events are juxtaposed. As comics critic Douglas Wolk explains, “there’s also a sort of ‘polyphonic’ trick that Moore and Gibbons return to…in which language or dialogue from one scene is attached to images from another, usually giving the words some kind of second meaning” (242). Because the events described are not relevant to each other through chronology, the readers are forced to make extraliterary connections between the images to make sense of the otherwise random organization of information. This “calls for a simultaneous reading that takes into account the size and positioning of the separate elements within the page layout, their layering one on top of another” (Horstkotte 38). In Chapter 4, distant moments come together into single panels. On the picture of Dr. Manhattan’s father’s deathbed, “in 1969, I’m receiving news of my father’s
death. In 1959, he’s opening a telegram from the military informing him of his son’s accidental disintegration. I never correct their mistake” (Moore and Gibbons 4:19). On the picture of Dr. Manhattan’s then-girlfriend packing and leaving him, “it’s 1959. Janey is handing me the glass [on their first date]. It’s 1966, and she’s packing: tearful; careless with anger. [Back in present on the surface of Mars.] The photograph lies in the sand at my feet” (Moore and Gibbons 4:18). On the picture of Dr. Manhattan talking with President Nixon, “In January, 1971, President Nixon is asking me to intervene in Vietnam, while ten years earlier Kennedy is avoiding any mention of Cuba. Later in November, I’m told that Wally Weaver has died of cancer, aged 34” (Moore and Gibbons 4:19). The third panel of page 25 more directly emphasizes simultaneity of memories. Accompanying the image of Dr. Manhattan sexually caressing his present girlfriend, Laurie, the text boxes show different memories on the side. While “Saturday the 19th now [of 1985]. My hands encircle Laurie’s face…” Dr. Manhattan is also “in 1959, I am telling [then-girlfriend] Janey I shall always want her” while he is witnessing “in 1966, the costumed people are arguing” (Moore and Gibbons 4:25). In the representation of Dr. Manhattan’s point of view on his own history, there is not a linear sequence. The objective classification of time, such as dates, is acknowledged only as an arbitrary detail to each moment. Chronological sequences curl up into a ball that can be seen all at the same time, existing on a single horizontal plane of consciousness, which is the page.

The juxtaposed pieces of information, by their unlikely association, reproduce the intrapersonally polyphonic discourse. If Dostoevsky’s characters realize their voice by clashing against one another, then each panel, or each element within a panel, becomes more distinct and meaningful by being next to one another. When the image shows Dr. Manhattan’s hands making love with Laurie, the words “I am telling Janey I shall always want her” suddenly become artificial and counter Dr. Manhattan’s foresight into the future, for he does not end up always wanting Janey. At the same time, the tenacity of Dr. Manhattan’s love for Laurie is questioned, as his love confessions no longer can be held viable. In addition, the fact that he is also thinking about a superhero meeting where he meets Laurie shows that love is more heavily inspired by circumstances, not necessarily by personal faithfulness. The juxtaposition of these details reconfigures what these details mean and how they look in a larger context. Nonetheless, Dr. Manhattan’s fluidity of response is not representative of his singular body moving through a set of different circumstances, per se. He splits into multiple time-selves, each embodying a different face of Dr. Manhattan, who exists simultaneously in the space of time. Within the same page, the Dr. Manhattan that “shall always want” Janey is dialogized with the Dr. Manhattan making love to Laurie. The time-selves of a single character, composed separately in each panel, are physically on the leveled horizontal plane to exist simultaneously. Putting them together to be judged side-by-side highlights the different personality of each time-self, confirming for the reader that a character is a different from moment to moment. Because a single character is actually a multiple time-selves, the question of who the characters truly are becomes meaningless, as the answer to it changes every moment. The time-selves become distinctly separate entities in the graphic novel by their spatially juxtaposed existence. In this aspect, the graphic representation of a simultaneous temporal experience brings new possibility of what polyphonic poetics can express.

Different storylines take on new meaning when Watchmen interweaves tangential storylines into a parallel narrative structure. The storylines’ plurality and topical asymmetry gives birth to the voices of each narrative, facilitate interactions, and give rise to meaning. In Watchmen, three exclusive narratives exist simultaneously: the extraordinary lives of superheroes, ordinary lives of citizens, and a plotline of a separate comic book, *Tales of the Black Freighter*. These unrelated storylines are only connected by visual relevance during
transitions, e.g. the corresponding imagery of the comic-book pirate eating raw seagulls and Dan Dreiber eating a chicken leg during a dinner with Laurie (Moore and Gibbons 5:10). However, this chicken leg eaten by Dreiber would be nothing more than a piece of ordered entrée if presented alone in the meal. Because that image of Dreiber eating the leg directly juxtaposes the pirate’s demonstration of savagery and rawness, the transition implies Dreiber’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 Dreiber might think of Laurie as a piece of meat. Dreiber’s objectifying thinking resurfaces when he easily forgives Ozymandias of killing three million New Yorkers in the name of world peace, for in that moment, the three million human lives are denigrated into objects for Dreiber’s ideals (12, 20). 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. The scenes are what is called braided, or how “graphic narrative puts every panel in a potential, if not actual, relation with every other” (Horstkotte 41). 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. The characters involved in the braiding of the panels thus negotiate their meanings in a framework of interpersonal polyphony.

A character’s multiple time-selves that are engaged in a polyphonic discourse through their juxtaposition actively facilitates the unfinalizability of that character, and we can see this most conspicuously in a scene from Chapter 2. Moloch, a minor retired supervillain who is no more than a retiree now, recounts the night when The Comedian broke into his room and exposed himself in an emotional meltdown. The Comedian, usually a macho, stern-faced cynic that projects ruthless dominance over everything, is instead seen bawling in front of his former nemesis with a catharsis of uncharacteristic self-deprecation and anxiety. First dominating the reading experience of this episode is the starkness of monolithic colors. On the nine-panel layout, every panel is either entirely orange or entirely blue, switching back and forth. Coordinated with those alternating colors, The Comedian alternates moods. He oscillates between sobbing and desperately ranting at the foot of the bed. In one panel the Comedian is weeping “Ahuhh. Ahuh ahuh ahhuhhh,” another moment he is murderously threatening Moloch as “If I thought you did know… I saw your name on the list, you and Janey Slater, but if I thought you were in on this… I’d kill you. You understand? Kill you” (Moore and Gibbons 2:22). Few panels later, he is begging “Oh, mother. Oh, forgive me. Forgive me, forgive me, forgive me…” and immediately after he is drunkenly shouting “I mean, what’s funny? What’s so goddamn funny? I don’t get it. Somebody explain...” (Moore and Gibbons 2:23). These are the different time-selves, within a single evening, of the guy who, a few pages ago, was full of self-righteousness killing a pregnant woman point blank and gleefully shooting rubber bullets at protestors. Each time-self of the Comedian varies significantly in his emotions, and the starkly alternating colors of the panels reflect his vacillating state.

This particular episode is crucial in unfinalizing The Comedian. For one, this scene is so uncharacteristic of The Comedian the reader knows so far. The Comedian has so far been “deliberately amoral” man who tries to rape one of his fellow superheroes, sabotages a superhero meeting out of toughness, and kills a pregnant woman point blank (Moore and Gibbons 4:19). So far defining him, on top of being a sociopath, was his general dismissal of moralities as arbitrary and pointless, reminiscent of Absurdism. The Comedian notes how this “wanna go on playin’ cowboys and Indians [referring to being active

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12 Theory of braiding was originally conceptualized by Theirry Groensteen in his The System of Comics (2007).
...don’t matter squat” because of the eventual nuclear war that will burn the entire world (Moore and Gibbons 2:11). He finds enforcing justice and order meaningless, and imposes that view upon others. He is the first one to discredit any type of moralities voiced by other superheroes. Back in Vietnam War, in response to Dr. Manhattan’s horror at The Comedian murdering a pregnant woman, The Comedian shouts, “you coulda changed the gun into steam or the bullets into mercury or the bottle into snowflakes! You coulda teleported either of us to goddamn Australia...But you didn’t life a finger! You don’t really give a damn about human beings” (Moore and Gibbons 2:15). He points out the measure of which killing a pregnant woman is deemed sinful is rather ironic when judged by the all-powerful Dr. Manhattan, essentially calling him a hypocrite for moralizing. But in Moloch’s bedroom, here the reader sees a terrified, panicking, helpless old man. The overarching vibe of this scene is enough to shatter any calcified image of The Comedian as a man confident in Absurdism. Perhaps it is that for someone who lives by a philosophy reminiscent of Absurdism, he fell victim to his own philosophy. Here he is, as much as he loves to disintegrate ideologies others profess, his own ideology of non-ideology, of universal disintegration and disbelief, is ironically also disintegrated. The Comedian became the butt of his own psychotic joke. He is no longer a comedian laughing at the world, but someone who is just as confused and lost as everyone else. The graphic format expresses his horror-inducing unfinalizability to the level of each panel. Each image shows something different of what he is terrified, how he is scared, how he responds to such anxiety, and how he tries to brave his fear. He is portrayed in different light from panel to panel, figuratively and literally, as each panel oscillates from orange tint to blue and back. Moreover, the Comedian is seemingly fully aware of the different ways he is afraid and anxious. He realizes that the different light he is under does captures a momentary fragment of his consciousness. He sees the irreconcilable distance between his image and he as a person. The fact that his medley of panelized images is seen from a first-person perspective of Moloch, furthers the dialogical tension, for The Comedian’s image is resubjectivized by Moloch’s consciousness, invariably different than what The Comedian wants to show him, pointing to a collapse of visual communication. Such intrapersonal polyphony, which we have seen in a verbal discourse, is here manifested in the visual dimension.

Ironically, the novel usually presents a slice of its intraliterary universe as truth, but every image in Watchmen points to how artificial and fluid one’s experience with the world is. In its form, the panels are disregarded of its separating element. Though the panels are supposed to be isolated moments within a flow of time, their chronologically irrelevant juxtapositions displace its physical separation and enter them into a realm of metaphysical connectability. Watchmen is “highly conscious of the artificiality of its selective borders, which diagram the page into an arrangement of encapsulated moments” (Chute 455). As much as meaning inside each panel is fluid and collapsible, so are the formal structures containing it. What does this say about the graphic novel as a whole? If its physical structure is collapsible, and everything from the meaning of the images to its experience is personally interpretable, then that means the notion of objectivity is debunked. In Watchmen, subjectivity is imbued into every corner.

In Watchmen, objectivity does not exist, for every element of storytelling is subjectivized. By subjective meaning entirely dictated by consciousnesses, then the pages’ speech bubbles, text boxes, panel size, and coloring all fall under the control of a character’s subjective affirmation of self, or what they want to say. Usually “the cartoonist’s subjectivity can be detected in the use and combination of stylistic conventions such as the graphic line, lettering, or the spatial organization of the page” (Mikkonen 101). But in Watchmen, the owner of that subjectivity is not the author, but the characters. Michael Robinson notes, “the series also avoids the traditional use of the yellow narrative box, in which an omniscient
narrator reveals information. When used, boxes represent the subjective voice or thoughts of characters” (99). For example, the marooned mariner’s narrations are contained in text boxes that resemble frayed parchment paper, which reflects his barbaric condition. Dr. Manhattan’s narrated text boxes are blue, just like his skin color and his disposition. Rorschach’s narrated text boxes are roughened up like a scruffed paper and his scruffy personality. Speech bubbles, too, directly signify the characters’ personality. Dr. Manhattan’s speech bubble is filled in blue, like his skin and personality of cold removed outlook, and the tail is missing to further denote his ethereal quality, where his speech is floating in mid-air, unattached to any physical body. Rorschach’s speech bubble is frayed around the edges, much like his mental state and his way of interacting with people. The form of each character’s manifestation in the novel is personalized. If Dostoevsky’s characters each have their own slangs and accents characterizing their prose-embodied existence, then in Watchmen, each character has a similar ‘accent’ but in its graphic-embodied existence. Just as Dostoevsky represents his characters creating themselves and their unique personalities, so do Moore and Gibbons for theirs in Watchmen. Their graphic novel is a graphic rendition of Bakhtin’s heteroglossia.

Subjectivity also imbues the style of paneling, the structural beams of the graphic novel, by consciousnesses dictating how they are represented. In Watchmen, as Michael Robinson explains, “each page of the series is based on a standard format of nine panels per page. These panels are arranged in three rows and three columns... For dramatic effect, some panels on some pages may become larger, occupying any number of grids” (Robinson 98). For a panel, size is its sole measurement of voice. In a paneling system where every panel is standardized into an equal section within the nine-panel-grid page, when a panel is bigger, it is making a statement louder than other comic books. The dramatic effect Robinson points out is a theatrical voice put forth by the panels themselves, and thereby self-affirming that panel’s subjectivity. In the scene where Rorschach visits Dan Dreiberg in the basement of Dreiberg’s home, the former headquarters of the duo’s superhero days, most panels are one to two units big, creating an effect of sameness and immanence during their conversation that bemoans Dreiberg’s bygone era of superheroics and his currently washed-up, dead-end life as an average person. When Rorschach leaves after his final condemnation of Dreiberg, the final panel hits like an unexpected tsunami of nauseating stillness by occupying six panel-unit of Dreiberg, revealed to be much more overweight and exhausted than before, sitting pitifully in his dull worn-out suit while his superhero costume hangs upright colorfully in the closet. This also aligns with the flow of Dreiberg’s reflection of the topic. During the conversation, Dreiberg treats his now-average life with contentment and brushes off Rorschach’s condemnation. He coolly proceeds to talk about matters Rorschach brings up, such as the murder of The Comedian. But as Rorschach leaves, as Rorschach’s “You quit” comment echoes throughout the basement, so it also resonates louder in Dreiberg’s consciousness as he hunches down in his average image. As that sobering thought takes on a louder presence in the scene, so the panel that portrays Dreiberg in his wistful contemplation becomes bigger. Within the panels, the images themselves are products of character’s consciousness. Kai Mikkonen argues, “the various visual styles, such as expressionist, realist, or romantic style, abstract or mimetic style, and the changing colors and hues in the narrative correspond intimately to the character’s personalities and emotional states, or in some cases to specific events. Therefore, the various graphic styles and colors are metaphorically attributes to given characters, connoting their world view, experience, or emotional states” (16). The characters’ visibility directly correlate with what they have to say, as if they are painting their own portraits themselves. In illustrating Watchmen, Gibbons explains, “I used my choice of color to complement and accentuate the art first and foremost, but also to enhance the mood and drama of the story...the colors begin to darken and reflect the corruption and despair that created Rorschach” (Gibbons 171). Different elements of graphic storytelling are thus
subjectivized by characters’ consciousnesses, thereby the graphic elements becoming integrated with the characters’ consciousnesses themselves. There is no longer an objective narrator drawing and writing the graphic novel, but the characters’ consciousnesses seemingly composing their own panels.

Reinforcing the subjectivity of each element in the graphic novel, *Watchmen* universe is narrated in the style evocative of Virginia Woolf’s free indirect discourse. Woolf’s free indirect discourse is a narrative style in which the role of the narrator gets passed around the different characters, and so each character, being a first-person narrator for a few paragraphs, is provided a momentary rule over the presentation of the novelistic universe. Because it is the characters that narrate in first person, what is said about the storyworld is highly conscious of its subjective bias. But, because each narrator is aware of other characters who enjoy the same narratorial capabilities, each character is mindful of his or her pluralistic context. Woolf designs her poetics where different narrations are introduced one after another to highlight their disagreement in portrayal of the same physical reality. How one character describes a park is wildly different from how the next character describes it. *Watchmen* takes this first-person narration style into the graphic form, where what the character narrates is translated into what the character sees. In free indirect discourse, the story is unveiled through a seeing eye consciously positioned within the setting. *Watchmen* explores this technique of a narratorial gaze to portray a graphically polyphonic world composed entirely of a consciousness’s subjective point of view. “*Watchmen* in particular devotes itself to fleshing out the subjectivities of its characters, and in this way we might see it as paralleling a literary tradition, exemplified by writers such as Henry James, E. M. Foster, and Virginia Woolf, in which modernist experimentation in fact serves the ends of a more precise psychological realism” (Hoborek 39). Reality as we know it is always experienced through a subjective eye, namely that of our own consciousness. Portraying the inherent subjectivity of interaction with reality, all images in *Watchmen* are drawn as if the reader enters the mind of a person living inside that universe and is walking through Manhattan from a singular point of view, with its own subjective framing of the world. As there are no notions of objectivity in the formalistic plane of the graphic novel, there is also no unfolding of the storyworld from an objective narrator who is removed from the novelistic universe. The narratorial perspective gets passed around the different characters of *Watchmen* in the style of free indirect discourse, replicating the inescapable positioning of the eye into someone’s mind. At the time he was writing *Watchmen*, Alan Moore emphasized this in his literature. Moore’s abandonment of omniscient third person “in favor of a more subjectively grounded free indirect discourse and first-person narration…in the direction of the concern with character’s subjectivity…became one of the hallmarks of Moore’s work during the 1980s at DC” (Hoborek 36). *Watchmen* certainly heightens that graphic narrative technique to a richer exploration.

Subjectivity of viewpoint through which the novelistic universe is revealed has been one of the most studied aspects of graphic novels. Alan Palmer uses the term *aspectuality* to define his principle that “whenever events occur in the storyworld, they are always experienced from within a certain vision,” to which Kai Mikkonen adds “that is, perceived by the characters in that world from a particular perceptual and cognitive aspect” (Palmer 51; Mikkonen 106). In the graphic novel, any visual narration is told from a consciousness that is grounded in a singular body that exists in the same physical plane as the characters. Sometimes, that narratorial body is one of the characters. “The most common techniques of subjective focus of perception…include the various ways in which the character’s positioning in a given image—in relation to the frame and what is known in the image—suggests a subjective narrative perspective” (Mikkonen 102). *Watchmen* opens up with a sequence of images that directly demonstrate this. The cover of the *Watchmen* is a super zoomed in center
of a yellow smiley face button, from which the cover of the first chapter zooms out a bit to reveal how the button is sitting on top of a pool of blood, from which the panels thereafter continue to zoom out to reveal more visual information. This continues until the zooming-out stops on top of a skyscraper looking at the entire city street, where the button has fallen. “The zooming-out operation of the first pages is there symptomatic of a narrative strategy that only appears to be objective while constantly withholding or disguising crucial information from its readers” (Stein and Thon 28). But revealing that the first few panels and the cover images are not images taken from an omniscient third-person but a balding detective looking out from a window, tossing a trivial comment such as “Hmm. That’s quite a drop” adds a tone of ambiguity to the aspeectual position of Watchmen’s graphic narratology. This breakdown of a middling objective narrator is crucial in equalizing the amount of knowledge between the character and a supposed narrator, since both see the same thing, the same upon looking at the novelistic universe. There is no authorial surplus of information that gives the author/narrator a higher degree of power to control the characters. The characters do not become reduced for they know as much as the supposed narrator does, by seeing what they see. In that way, the portrayed characters are, to use Bakhtin’s words to describe Dostoevsky’s characters, ‘profundely personalized.’ In critical theory of graphic novels, Alan Palmer names this Woolf-esque style of narration a continuous-consciousness frame, which “is the ability to take a reference to a character in the text and attach to it a presumed consciousness that exists continuously within the storyworld between the various, more or less intermittent references to that character” (2010:10). As Watchmen is thus entirely composed of each character’s subjective consciousness that authors the novel itself, resisting finality, and their individual conventions are juxtaposed and interacted physically on the page, it is thereby polyphonic.

Ontology of Watchmen

As noted in the introduction to this essay, every novel’s poetics is designed on the basis of the author’s particular ontological stance. Watchmen, too, advances its own ontological supposition, but without turning the novel into a monologic work. Moore and Gibbons’ take on the identity and nature of human consciousness is not explored by the voices of characters, which would render the text monologic, but the structure of the novel itself. The novel is read as a reflection of human consciousness, and therefore qualities of the consciousness are revealed through the nature of Watchmen poetics.

What is consciousness, according to Bakhtin and Watchmen? Bakhtin notes that Dostoevsky’s novels operate with the definition of consciousness as the innate thinking quality of every human individual. The consciousness is the essence of a human being, reminiscent of a soul. Its unfinalizability becomes the source of human’s infinite depth in their character. In delving into the Watchmen’s revision of Bakhtin’s definition of consciousness, we can keep two premises from Bakhtin’s logic: 1) consciousness defines human ontology, and 2) consciousness is unfinalizable, which supposes that humans are unfinalizable due to their consciousness. However, that is as far as Watchmen will go with endowing humanity to its definition of consciousness.

Every formal component of Watchmen encompasses a subjective consciousness. The novel is essentially a piecemeal of manifested subjectivities. The voice of each character personalizes the speech bubbles and text boxes; the panels are sized appropriately by a subjective consideration of a character in concern; the angle from which an image is drawn is implied to be from a first-person point of view. Normally, formal composition of a novel is assumed to be beyond the character’s subjective control; but in Watchmen, it is anything but. At the structural level, objectivity does not exist in Watchmen, for every element of its novelistic reality is subjectively produced as if they embody the voices of consciousnesses.
themselves. What gives *Watchmen* reading experience a unique dimension of polyphony is that these subjectivity-dictated formal elements collide and dialogize like voices. This refashioning of the novel’s graphic structure implies that its reality is purely constructed by subjective elements. *Watchmen*’s philosophy is that the reality the conscious individual’s present moment experience is a subjective body. Reality is, as Alan Moore outlines, “purely a construction of ideas, and not just the physical structures, but the mental structures, the ideologies that we’ve erected” (Vylenz 1:10:52). Walking through the reality presented by *Watchmen* is not looking around the alternate 1980s and marveling at its physical landscape, but swimming in a weave of ideological bodies produced by different conscious individualities engaged in a discourse at every turn.

If some manipulation of formalistic elements is an expression of interpersonal polyphony constituted by different characters, then spatialized temporality is an expression of different time-selves, who take over *Watchmen*’s paneling to enable their dialogic interactions. Spatialized temporality means that all temporal events in concern are laid out spatially for a simultaneous reading of them. How scattered pieces of memory come together within the space of a consciousness is that they are arranged not by an external measurement of reality, such as chronology, but by a subjective categorization of the conscious individual. Each moment is tagged with a specific emotional intensity and contextual importance, which the consciousness uses to organize his or her reflection on them. *Watchmen*’s treatment of time supposes that the meaning of an event is not confined by a universal framework, but is constructed solely by one’s subjective determination. As such, the emotional breakdown of The Comedian is given meaning not by its occurrence but by the fact that Moloch felt it important enough to remember it and put it on the page. That said, memory is meaningful not because of the event’s actuality but its memorability. A metaphysical relevance of this conception is that once again *Watchmen* concedes the reality’s physical texture to the subjective power of a consciousness in significance.

*Watchmen* visualizes dialogic discourses through pictoral juxtaposition, which is a shift from Dostoevsky’s technique of expressing dialogic interactions through verbal discourses. For one, the pluralistic context into which a panel is placed enhances the subjective potential of each panel in *Watchmen*. Like a voice in a verbal discourse, a voice is given its stand-alone identity as a unique entity by the presence of other voices. A panel is then given meaning by the presence of other panels. If the juxtaposition of two panels is enough to make them come alive with meaning, what about nine panels altogether on the page, which is the paneling format *Watchmen* uses throughout? In this respect, a piece of memory is meaningful because it is remembered alongside others.

Then, as characters are manifested through imagery, graphic juxtaposition of their images becomes the characters’ ontological juxtapositions. When placed side-by-side visually, the characters instantly enter into an extraliterary dialogue. A picture of Dan eating a chicken leg takes on a whole new meaning when posited next to the portrait of the savage-looking marooned sailor. As much as their difference in context is accentuated, so is their similarity in meaning. This type of intrapersonal 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. It is part of Moore and Gibbon’s plan of showing “all of these people, warts and all…show them that even the worst of them had something going for them, and even the best of them had their flaws” (Moore). 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.

The notion of visibility is that one is seen by others, and it is this necessity of an audience that complicates the character’s expression. A character’s voice, which is this or her visibility, is framed by other’s gaze. Each character can only have a voice if he or she has an audience. It is as the graphic novel characters only come to life when there is a reader looking at them and imagining them to be living, speaking individuals. The requirement of the audience’s gaze, from both another consciousness and oneself, then becomes the source of the character’s complexity. There are thousands of ways to look at an object, and much more to see a person. The individual, encapsulated into an image, then becomes a site of competing visual interpretations. Each possible framework is a set narrative that echoes verbally finalizing descriptions. For example, The Comedian has a buffet of possible interpretations in his visuality, from a psychopath (in Dr. Manhattan’s flashback) to a musclehead drunk with power (in Dreibeig’s flashback) to an unlikely philosopher that understood everything before everyone (in Laurie’s flashback). In ways to look at a person, there is an infinite number of possible narratives to fit that person into. However, The Comedian is agreed as a complex figure precisely for this sheer number of competing narratives. Whenever a narrative is imposed to understand another individual, another narrative will kick in and debunk it. One of the prime examples of an unfinalizable consciousness is Dostoevsky’s Underground Man from Notes from Underground. A diary-like look into the mind of a hyperconscious man, Notes from Underground paints the self-unfinalizing character of The Underground Man’s consciousness, which contradicts itself in every single point he asserts. To every thought he arrives at, he pops up a contradictory thought that renders the initial thought misled or ignorant. For this constant self-defeat, he can never arrive at a resolution. If a character is the sum of his thoughts, just like Superman is Superman because Superman always thinks ethically and universally, then the Underground Man does not work in that framework, for his thoughts nullify each other and he is left with no defining resolutions of his own. For him, it is not that one thinks and therefore one is, but that one thinks and therefore one is not. In Watchmen, the consciousness works the same way but graphically: one is seen and therefore one is not.

The difference between Dostoevsky character’s unfinalizability and Watchmen character’s unfinalizability is that for the superheroes created by Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons, the source of a consciousness’s unfinalizability is not humanity but an aspect of society coloring the passive consciousness. “In the anthropology of Claude Levi-Strauss, man was reduced to an empty space, a mere vantage point where the codes and conventions of language and culture happened to coincide” (Sheehan 25). Michael Foucault also chimes in, “For that tide [of history] will reveal man in his true aspect: not as a timeless, godlike being possessed of an immortal soul” like Dostoevsky ascribed consciousness to “but as an

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13 “Cogito ergo sum,” or “I think therefore I am,” is Descartes’ famed punchline that dispels all doubts about the existence of oneself by the fact that one is able to think and doubt. This line is a sloganized form of a quote from his Discourse on the Method (1637).
accidental, provisional creature, precariously poised between the ‘epistemological regions’ or economics, biology, and philology” (Sheehen 26). What populates the consciousness, which is an empty site for dialogue? Alan Moore describes, “we inhabit the physical world, but at the same time, since we can only ever truly experience our perception of that world, then it would seem that we more truly inhabit a world purely of consciousness and ideas. That the landmasses in our landscape would be composed entirely of ideas, of concepts. That instead of continents or islands, you might have large belief systems of philosophies…Human minds interact, albeit weakly in limited ways, with idea-space every moment of the day” (Vylenz 1:07:17). The consciousness is the gathering place for all the different societal narratives to enter and dialogize, just like how within a single page from Watchmen, a myriad of subjectivities crowd in and clash through personalized formal tools. This allows for one’s different time-selves to emerge, as a character embodies a certain interpretation each moment. The character is complicated because he or she has shown him or herself in multiple lights through different time-selves. It becomes impossible to singularize who a character is. In that way, an individual, as a site of intersection between thousand narratives, is unfinalizable because of the millions of contradictory narratives available in society, shown by a million number time-selves possibly manifested. Because society is so kaleidoscopic with narratives, so is the consciousness, which then continually rejects settling upon one ideology and unfinalizes itself.

This ontology can be labeled as a postmodernist revision of Bakhtin’s theory of unfinalizability. The notion that elusiveness in a consciousness is an innate human quality that deepens the essence of an individual is, compared to what Watchmen argues, is quite Existentialist14. This is understandable, since Bakhtin’s Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics was first published in 1929, which is when canonical Existentialist philosophers such as Martin Heidegger were dominating the philosophical landscape. In the 1980s, the decade of Watchmen’s publication, the mainstream philosophy was any “resistance to totality…to teleology…and to closure of any kind—narrative, conceptual, metaphysical” (Connor 21). The poetry of the 1980s “polemically and parodically oriented against the excessively conventional and over significant modern discourse, the stereotype of totalitarian discourse, and the semiotic pressure of cultural saturation” (Parpala 238). Philosophical atmosphere of the time emphasized the plurality of societal narratives that subconsciously dominates the thoughts of an individual. Literary artists especially capitalized on this idea. In the novels, “many modernist novels are also much concerned with the multiplication of voices and perspectives and the concomitant difficulty of orchestrating those voices and perspectives. But one of the ways in which this orchestration takes place is by displacing questions of voice into questions of point of view. Rendering the question ‘who speaks?’ in the form of the question ‘who sees?’ makes it a question of a position rather than of an event” (Connor 63). That said, polyphony in literature is modified to become polyvisibility, a literary environment in which a consciousness is seen in ways that is not dictated by the author, and the clashes of its interpretative value renders the consciousness unfinalizable. As the philosophy of literary polyphony in prose is embodied in nature words, the philosophy of literary polyphony in graphic novel is embodied in nature of images.

What does this say about the readers then, who look at the images inside Watchmen and brings the characters to life by their gazes? Appropriately, the reading of Watchmen is similarly governed by subjectivity. The poetics of Watchmen “invent the Kantian perspective that time and space structure human experience, which underlies much of the narratological

14 “Existentialism,” as defined by Oxford English Dictionary, is “a philosophical theory or approach which emphasizes the existence of the individual person as a free and responsible agent determining their own development through acts of the will” (“Existentialism.” def.1.).
understanding of these [graphic] parameters, and proposes that they arise as a consequence of readers’ experience” (Kukkonen 49). It is not that human experience is subservient to objective construction of reality, but the vice versa: human subjectivity fashions the construction of reality. In Watchmen universe, no objective structure is immune from a constructivist consciousness exists, especially the way to unravel it. Let us return to the meltdown of The Comedian. In Moloch’s recounting of that night, each panel does not flow from one to the next smoothly. Nothing that The Comedian says in one panel unquestionably causes him to say what he will in the next. Though two consecutive panels may share a string of words that vaguely connects them, the whole attitude of the recounted episode is that of randomness and confusion (what Moloch undoubtedly must have been feeling at the time—who would not be if one’s former nemesis breaks into one’s bedroom and start crying?). The seeming randomness and isolation of each panel then gives the reader a narrative power, in deciding the sequence of the panels to be read and how to connect one panel with the next. As such, this embracing of the reader’s creative freedom in mapping out the narrative him or herself is a rejection of a traditional linear reading of comics. It is a significant opening of the reader’s new relationship with the novelistic universe, where the reader is included in the unfolding of the storyworld. Ontologically speaking, human consciousness becomes the conscious controller of experience reality. As much as human consciousness is elusive, the way in which a consciousness can read a given reality is also unsettled.

In relations to Watchmen, the reader is also unfinalized. In monologic novels, the reader is indirectly finalized when the author imbues his monologic work with an intended takeaway. The author is finalizing the reader as someone that will only understand what the author tells him or her to. In the polyphonic Watchmen, the reader is included in the mutual acknowledgement of subjectivity and consciousness, where the reader is not assumed to be someone who will glean a set message from each panel, each narrative, and the novel as a whole. Watchmen resists this with graphic information overload and ambiguity. “[D]etailed foregrounds, midgrounds, and backgrounds encourage the reader to look beyond what is presented directly,” which Watchmen does with its proliferation of Easter Eggs and allusions (Van Ness 37). When a subject in the image is placed in a panel that is populated with other graphic information, “subjects placed off-center in a panel’s composition give readers’ eyes a ‘license to “wander”…such compositions create a sense of entering a setting with a person in it, rather than meeting a person with a setting behind them’ (McCloud 165). They invite the reader to explore the setting as freely as the characters” (Van Ness 36). As much as the characters are affirming their free consciousness through its control over meaning and the composure of the novelistic universe, so does the reader. With so much in the panel happening at the same time, the reader can choose to look at whatever he or she decides to first, thereby confusing the singular message of each image. 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” (Van Ness 24). The reader will interact with the novel with his or her own consciousness, thereby entering into a polyphonic relationship with the polyphonic text. They have as much artistic freedom as the characters themselves, since they are put into a position that is capable of engaging in a dialogue with the characters and the Watchmen universe, starting with the moment the readers elect to pick up the novel. The reader realizes his or her own free consciousness as well, unfinalized. As the final line of Watchmen requests, “Go on just run whichever you want… I leave it entirely in your hands” (Moore and Gibbons 12:32).

The polyphonic poetics of Watchmen is composed with a background of a particular ontological viewpoint. Its basis of human ontology is a postmodernist revision of an outdated, Existentialist conception of Bakhtin’s unfinalizability. Such adaptation of the theory is necessary for Watchmen to reflect the world Moore and Gibbons understand, which is “the
world that was presented didn’t really hang together in terms of linear cause and effect, but was instead seen as some massively complex, simultaneous event with connections made of coincidences, synchronicity, and [Moore] thinks that it was this world that resonated with an audience that had realized their previous view of the world was not adequate for the complexities of this scary, shadowy new world that we were entering into” (Vylenz 19:31).

Polyphonic novels enable us to understand reality in its full kaleidoscopicity. The world we live is nowhere near black-and-white under the understanding of a single unifying ideology. The reality of everyday is, like *Watchmen*, encased in secondary colors, ambiguously mixed with primary colors of fundamental humanness and circumstances—but sometimes even those supposed essences get muddled. As readers experience the framework of a polyphonic novel, they can dialogize with characters as unfinalizable as actual human beings, and doing so will facilitate the readers to realize their own literary consciousness. Manifesting this mechanism in the graphic dimension brings an additional layer of experience where the reader’s consciousness can be related to his or her own visibility, in his or her existence that he or she is a physical entity that can be looked at and have meaning in how they are visually perceived. As such, *Watchmen* is the a work populated with figures that come to life by our watching them, as much as we are made self-aware of our own existence when experiencing the gaze of others. A graffiti written in one of the images in *Watchmen* asks, “Who watches the Watchmen?” (Moore and Gibbons 2:18). It is the readers, but also it is the characters’ intrapersonal self-consciousness. That said, who watches us? Who are our own readers that accompany our daily self-consciousness? As we venture into the pluralistic world full of competing ideologies seeking to finalize us at every moment, those are the questions we must be wary of.

So how did graphic novels, or more humbly (and at times disdainfully) categorized as comic books, become one of the most representative of art forms to embody the labyrinthine relationships between the consciousness and the reality, when it was initially “understood as an anti-elitist art form” (Chute and Dekoven 176)? Only half a century ago, it was accused of being corruptive and demoralizing in Frederic Wertham’s influential *Seduction of the Innocent* (1954). Ironically, it is that very infamy that facilitated the graduation of the medium into an intellectual forefront of literature and theory. The active censorship of the vulgar content in 1954, the Comics Code Authority motivated by Wertham’s criticisms, drove the writers underground where creative freedom was available by “reject[ing] mainstream publication outlets, self-publishing work without any commercial strictures” such as Comics Code that ended the Golden Age of Comics (Chute and Dekoven 185). ‘Graphic novels’ were born there, in “the space where a concern for populism and reaching a common audience met with the political force of disinhibition; a sharp awareness of the power of visualizing the suppressed and unspoken; and a rigorous experimentation with form, particularly in how a comics narrative approaches temporality and spatiality” (Chute and Dekovan 185). The spirit of rebelliousness against all restraints of content, form, and thought became the mission of graphic authors. The intellectual atmosphere of the comics underground was reminiscent of Modernism as it was “expressive of a register of oppositionality...seen as harnessing the same energies as the historical avant-garde” (Chute and Dekoven 181). It was only natural for writers soon to challenge its content predecessors, the superhero comics. *Watchmen* did exactly that, the “breaking down [of] the traditional archetypes of comic book superheroes” (Robinson 100). While superhero genre “can demonstrate moral codes that benefit society,” *Watchmen* “shattered expectations about superheroes by casting the archetypes against cold, hard realism” (Hoppenstand 15, Robinson 94). The graphic novels surpassed the expectations of its predecessors. As Goethe foretold upon the advent of first comics, “if for the future, [Rodolph Topffer, the inventor of European picture-novels] would choose a less frivolous subject and restrict himself a
little...he would produce things beyond all conception” (Chute and Dekoven 176). Goethe foresaw correctly. *Watchmen* created a storyworld that no other work of art could have captured, by nature of the medium and by the depth of its ontology-inspired poetics.
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