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1. Introduction

In a quote that is as often attributed to Fredric Jameson as to Slavoj Žižek, one can read that today it is easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of Capitalism, a systemic change from the inequalities of Capitalism into something different and better. Which is to say, despite a great part of the world population living in a real-world dystopia, it is impossible to conceive of alternatives, of change, of a better world. In "The Need for Utopian Thinking" (2005), Lyman Sargent argues that this disposition towards utopian thinking – here understood as the ability and desire to imagine and actively pursue change for a better world – arises out of the experience of the 20th Century, in which various utopian ambitions turned dystopian through human action. In the same line of thought, Chris Ferns in *Narrating Utopia* (1999) claims that it is the late-stage capitalist system which is able to take control of this very desire for betterment and turn it "from a potential engine of change to a tool of social control", for the individual is constantly being reminded and told what he desires, that those desires are being met, and that "change is neither possible nor desirable." (231-2).

Despite this apparent pessimistic view, both critics argue for the necessity of utopian thinking, and both turn attention to the new developments in utopian literature that arose in the '70s and '80s. Influenced by the counterculture movements of the late '60s and '70s, there was a resurgence of utopian literature mainly through feminist writers. These authors took the centuries-old utopian narrative of travel, guidance through a better place, and return home and turned it into something new that would correspond and address the anxieties, hopes and dreams of this particular era. As a result, works such as Marge Piercy's *Women on the Edge of Time* (1976) and Ursula K. le Guin's *The Dispossessed* (1974) represent societies with enhanced environmental conscience, equality between sexes instead of a patriarchal society, and general economic equality. Nonetheless, these works reject the naiveté of earlier utopias that conjured a perfect society in a far-off place, either spatially or temporally, and instead offer a "flawed utopia", to take le Guin's subtitle. They focus on the process of change instead of the end result, exploring how the better world came to be and the inevitable conflict that the process gave rise to. At the same time, the problems and issues of the better place are also addressed, claiming that there is no end to utopian dreaming, but instead the need for constant struggle to improve. Thus, the focus is on fluidity instead of fixity, change instead of rigid norms to be

followed. Ferns calls these utopian works "worlds of freedom" as opposed to the "worlds of order" of past centuries.

With the disenchantment of the '80s regarding possible change, the literary (critical) utopias all but disappeared, giving rise to a new wave of dystopian literature. However, these new dystopian works took from the previous decade many concepts and developments, and thus what has been referred to as Critical Dystopias came to be. These works represent a worse world than that of its contemporary reader, but contain nonetheless a beacon of hope within its pages. Instead of completely denying the utopian impulse (like the literary anti-utopias do) under the premise that all utopian ambitions will inevitably lead to dystopia (the most common example being *1984* in which the dissident individual, Winston, never stood a chance from the very beginning to bring about change and is completely destroyed by the system in which he lives), these recent works portray dystopias while maintaining utopian hope for change to a better world. They often place the narrative in the time and space of the intended reader, and make direct reference to real world events. Being openly political, these narratives explore how the dystopia came to be, how it functions, and how it can be overcome by resistance on the part of the individual who does not succumb to conformity. Fluid and open while rejecting a prescriptive quality, no specific end is offered, preferring instead the exploration of various possibilities – again, fluidity instead of fixed values/beliefs.

This thesis aims to explore the innovations of such critical dystopias published in the medium of comics. While there has been academic discussion and various publications and collections of papers on critical utopias/dystopias (mainly by Tom Moylan, who coined the terms, and Raffaella Baccollini), they focus first and foremost on novels and sometimes reach into other media like film. This happens despite the interesting and distinct possibilities offered by comics as a medium. Having been historically regarded as a subversive medium that corrupted the innocent youngsters who read them, and later playing an important role as an active vehicle for much of the New Left and overall dissident and counterculture of the second half of the 20th Century, comics have always been in the limbo between mainstream and underground, status quo and revisionist/dissident fiction. Various works were published in the '80s and following years that were openly political, dealt self-reflexively with the utopian genre and its possibilities, and thus can be argued to fall into the subgenre of critical dystopias and, in any case, demand more academic attention.

The thesis will begin by clarifying the terminology to be employed, from utopian literature to comics and their various specific terms. It will then explore how both the new wave of utopian literature and comics developed through the counterculture years, which, as shall be argued, acted as the breeding ground for the critical dystopian comics of the next decades. Social movements throughout the world, and specifically in Europe, the United States, and Japan, shall be regarded insofar as they are relevant to the literary developments – from the birth of the Underground Press in both Europe and the U.S. which made heavy use of comics, to the political manga magazines and rental-book stores in Japan.

Finally, three works in the medium of comics will be analyzed as to what innovations and relevance they bring both to utopian literature and to the medium itself, taking into account the previously addressed theory. The case studies are based on works from different cultural backgrounds – *Akira* (1982-88) by the Japanese comics artist Katsuhiro Otomo, *V for Vendetta* (1982-89) by the British author Alan Moore, and *DMZ* (2005-2012) by the North-American author Brian Wood. All these works present dystopias that are openly political and self-reflexive, while maintaining a counter-narrative of hope focused on freedom that counteracts the one based on order and control, all within its pages. For this reason, besides the utopian literature and comics theory, the socio-political background of the works will also be taken into account, exploring how exactly the authors addressed and extrapolated from contemporary issues. Utopian fiction inevitably deals with the perceived flaws of the author's society, and therefore must be acknowledged – *V for Vendetta* has many commentaries on and anxieties about Thatcherism, *Akira* explores Japan's history from the atomic bomb to the eighties, and *DMZ* tackles a divided USA after the 9/11 terrorist attacks. The three works make particular use of destructive imagery, making use of the medium's specific characteristics to further explore and add to the utopian fiction genre. The two final chapters reflect on what the three works have in common, focusing on the aforementioned use of contemporary history and politics and in their formal developments in relation to Postmodernism.

2. Theory and Terminology

2.1 Comics

The terminology to be employed must first be clearly defined, which is no easy task when it comes to comics. Relatively recent in academia, much is still being discussed regarding nomenclature; new definitions and suggestions keep coming forward. Comics as a term started to be employed to refer to the caricatures and strips that started to be published in newspapers at the end of the 19th century. These were mainly satirical and humorous. Currently, comics can be used to identify a wide array of pictorial works, from the original comic strips to works of several hundred pages. To be able to encompass such disparate works containing different genres, various definitions of comics as a medium have been put forward. The most famous and often cited is that offered by Scott McCloud in *Understanding Comics* (1994: 9)[1]: juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence, intended to convey information and/or produce an aesthetic response in the viewer – the shorter version of which is *sequential art*. It is somewhat vague, as it must be in order to be an umbrella term and to start discussion of the topic, which was McCloud's intention. Robert Harvey took the challenge; directly referencing McCloud's definition he instead put forward "pictorial narratives or expositions in which words (often lettered into the picture area within speech balloons) usually contribute to the meaning of the pictures and vice-versa." While McCloud claims that comics do not necessarily require text, Harvey sees the "incorporation of verbal content" as the "essential characteristic of comics and that which distinguishes from other pictorial narratives." In his view, it is this interplay between word and image that lies at the core of comics, through what he calls blending, achieved between the verbal and visual "to achieve a meaning that neither conveys alone without the other" (Harvey 2009: 25-6).

McCloud, on the other hand, sees the medium's sequentiality as that which distinguishes it from other media. In comics, time is represented spatially through panels separated by empty spaces between them, commonly called gutters. This dichotomy of presence and absence played out by the panels and gutters are, McCloud argues, what

[1] McCloud's work is highly influential and pervasive, his 1993 book being often recognized as given a new breath to formal discussion on comics. For that reason, this work draws heavily from them. Nonetheless, other recent developments have taken place that go away from it – for a cognitive approach to comics see Cohn, Neil. *The Visual Language of Comics: Introduction to the Structure and Cognition of Sequential Images* (2013) and Cohn, Neil (ed.). *The Visual Narrative Reader* (2016). For a semiotic approach see Groensteen, Thierry. *The System of Comics* (2007).

forms comics' sequentiality and it is specifically through the gutter that the medium achieves its unique level of closure required from the reader – for McCloud, comics is the only medium with such a high level of closure, where "the audience is a willing and conscious collaborator and closure is the agent of change, time and motion" (McCloud 1994: 65). The reader must infer from the verbal and/or visual clues what happens in the empty space and thus become active participants in decoding and building meaning.

Hillary Chute, in "Comics as Literature", argues that closure also takes place between the verbal and the visual, likewise requiring active participation from the reader. This goes against the, in Chute's view, simplistic conception of blending – "comics doesn't blend the visual and the verbal – or use one simply to illustrate the other – but is rather prone to present the two nonsynchronously; a reader of comics not only fills in the gaps between panels but also works with the often disjunctive back-and-forth of *reading* and *looking* for meaning." (Chute 2008: 452). Chute also contests the widespread use of the term "graphic novel". As an academic who focuses on graphical memoirs and reportage, Chute proposes instead "graphic narrative", getting rid of "novel" since it implies fiction.

For simplicity's sake, "comics" will be employed throughout the thesis when referring to the medium and also to the broad range of cultural works that fall under the category of sequential art, from comic strips to books of various lengths. Graphic narrative or simply narrative will be employed when referring to the specific narrative elements of a given work.

2.2 Manga

Manga as the default definition for Japanese comics has also been likewise discussed and contested. In western academic investigations, "manga" and "(Japanese) comics" are often used interchangeably since they share the same formal characteristics. The fundamentals of presence and absence, panel and gutter, are still present, as is the verbal and visual. Just like comics, the word manga also literally means something funny or humorous and has also come to be used as an umbrella term, describing both short four-panel strips and works of considerable length. There are, nonetheless, relevant differences, both in their narrative, commercialization and history. In commercialization and publication, for example, manga is still published in weekly magazines which contain chapters of various works by numerous authors, instead of the comic book serialization or full-length publications typical in western publishing practice. In Japan, only after the

series has proven itself commercially viable does it get published in full, and in most cases is also taken to be developed as a cartoon series to be aired on TV.

Regarding its narrative and use of the comics medium, manga distinguishes itself by focusing on establishing shots for mood setting, often advancing much more slowly and having a more contemplative pace than its western counterparts. McCloud noted this particularity in *Understanding Comics*, claiming that, in manga, "dozens of panels can be devoted to portraying slow cinematic movement or to setting a mood" as contrasted with western comics which lay a much heavier focus on strict action scenes (McCloud 80-1). Another characteristic is the heavier focus on facial expression and body language as opposed to heavy verbal narration. A short story by Yoshihiro Tatsumi, for example, can go several pages without any dialogue, conveying the characters' feelings and mood by their expressions and physical movements, making heavy use of visual metaphors often taken from cinema.

John Ingulsrud and Kate Allen argue, in *Reading Japan Cool – Patterns of Manga Literacy and Discourse* (2009), that the distinctions of manga arise out of its history, while at the same time pointing out how there is a divergence and lack of consensus regarding manga's origins and overall diachronic development. There are two main arguments. The first claims that its origins reach as far back as the 8th century with religious scrolls and then developed throughout the centuries with a big leap forward in the 19th century with the advent of *Ukyo-e* art and its most famous artists Hokusai, reaching its current stage as manga in the post-war years. One example of this theory can be found in the works of Frederik L. Schodt. In his *Dreamland Japan – Writings on Modern Manga* (1996), Schodt traces manga's origins from 12th-century satire drawings to picture books in the 18th and 19th century, and finally to manga in the second half of the 20th century. Schodt succinctly describes manga's history as "a long Japanese tradition of art" which "has taken on a physical form imported from the West." (21). The second argument claims that, although also a visual art, manga has no clear connection to the previous artistic movements and works of past centuries, being instead a cultural artifact that arose because of and with the specific socioeconomic and political situation of post-war Japan. Paul Gravett points out that the view of manga as a continuous evolution of Japanese visual arts from the last thousand years is an outdated one in academia, but nonetheless propagated by the official discourse in Japan – the ministry of education urges the use of manga in schools and encourages its presentation as authentic Japanese art, centuries-old and free from foreign interference. Gravett argues instead that, if not for the

post-WWII occupation of Japan by US forces and the influx of western culture into the country, manga as it is known today might never have developed (Gravett 2004: 18).

Since the second view of manga historicism heavily takes into account the social background in which it developed, it will be the one adopted for the present thesis. Following the arguments of the aforementioned critics, the terms "comics" and "manga" will be employed interchangeably when referring to the medium. However, there is a difference to be noted when addressing its genres. In Japan the difference between manga and gekiga, different genres in Japanese comics, is relevant and will be addressed in the next chapters – manga as a genre which is commonly for children and teenagers, with a distinct visual code; and gekiga, which is aimed at more mature audiences and relies on a more realistic style.

2.3 Utopia and Utopian Fiction

Terminology in utopian studies is far from being unanimously agreed upon, so for clarity's sake in the present thesis a definition of "utopia" shall be adopted which is employed by many scholars of literary utopian studies. By this definition, "Utopia" (from the Greek *u* or *ou*, no, not; *topos*, place) is understood as a non-existent place of one of two distinct types, eutopia and dystopia – eutopia as a non-existent good place, and dystopia as a non-existent bad place, both intended to be recognizable as good or bad by their contemporary readers.

According to Lymon Sargent, Utopianism can be described as social dreaming – "the dreams and nightmares that concern the ways in which groups of people arrange their lives and which usually envision a radically different society than the one in which the dreamers live." (Sargent 1994: 3). For Sargent, utopian literature is just one of the three manifestations of Utopianism, the other two being communitarianism and utopian social theory. The literary manifestation of this universal longing for Utopianism is the most widely spread and well known, and Sargent posits as its main characteristics its "non-existence paired with a *topos* – a location in time and space – to give it verisimilitude." (Sargent 1994: 5). The distinction is then summarized with his oft-quoted definitions – Utopia as a non-existent society described in considerate detail and normally located in time and space – extended to eutopia and dystopia: a non-existent society described in considerate detail and normally located in time and space that the author intended a contemporaneous reader to view as considerably better (in the case of eutopia) or

considerably worse (for dystopia) than the society in which that reader lived. (Sargent 1994: 9).

The concept of literary utopia and the genre is of course born with Thomas More's *Utopia* (1516). But utopia as social dreaming has a much longer history. Claeys and Sargent's *The Utopia Reader* (1999) lists utopian expressions in writing that in many cases put to paper what had been previously transmitted orally, positing as the earliest utopian works "myths of a golden age or race in the past and earthly paradises like Eden." (6). Particularly relevant in this early period is of course Plato's *Republic*, which would come to influence many that came after it. Nonetheless it was to be More's work that would set the genre and open it to many possible developments. Aided by the printing press and growing literacy in Europe, *Utopia* was also influential and relevant due to what separated it from previous utopian writing: whereas Plato provided a blueprint for a better society, More claimed to have found such a society, already existing and from which one could learn. Furthermore, the inhabitants of Utopia rely solely on their intellect and reason to maintain this balance, which is at the same time an expression of Renaissance thinking and the cause for the narrative's appeal (Ferns 1999: 32). While previous texts did not go beyond extrapolation, More's showed the existing state of this society and its inner functioning. The work cemented the basic utopian narrative: a character journeys into a utopian society where they are accompanied by a guide who exposes the society's inner workings, finishing with the return of the protagonist to their homeland where they can share their newly gained knowledge: that is, of a different way to live in society.

More's work and those that followed relatively shortly after – mainly Campanella's *The City of the Sun* (1602), Bacon's *New Atlantis* (1627), and Henry Neville's *The Isle of Pines* (1668) – are generally grouped and described as Renaissance utopias due to the historical period from which they came, their shared values and narrative characteristics. One of those characteristics is that these narratives are ahistorical. There is no detailed description or analysis of how the society came to be, what sacrifices had to be made, what dissident voices silenced in order to create this good place. Coming from a specific background, they show an alternative but no path, which can be read as a critique on the author's contemporary society without opening new specific paths for the foreseeable future: "confined to remote islands or remote places, utopian wishes fail to materialize" (Vieira 2010: 9).

In *Narrating Utopia* (1999), Chris Ferns also points out the absence of a process of change in the Renaissance utopias, neither how it was created nor where it is going. The

emphasis, in his view, is on "stasis rather than process, security rather than change." (Ferns 1999: 64). For Ferns, these supposedly good places are mainly authoritarian and centralist, something to be imposed on the populace in its own best interest. Ferns calls these utopias "dreams of order", offering "stability, security, freedom from hunger, from endless toil, from war." (Ferns 1999: 14). For J. C. Davis, this is the main characteristic of all eutopias, of the imagined societies that are to be seen as better by a contemporary reader than his own. In *Utopia and the Ideal Society* (1981), Davis approaches the utopias of the 16th and 17th centuries and argues that any ideal society that wishes to grapple with the fundamental problem of life in society (limited satisfactions and unlimited human desires) and does not make use of a *deus ex machina* to solve this problem, and must do it collectively through imposition and the control of human desires and ambitions – "The utopian seeks to solve the problem collectively, that is by the reorganization of society and its institutions, by education, by laws and by sanctions. His prime aim is not happiness, that private mystery, but order, that social necessity." (Davis 1981: 38).

In the 19th century, particularly in the last decades, some literary utopias tried to follow the centralist and authoritarian aspects of the Renaissance utopias by making use of the newly attained technological developments for narrative purposes. These works explored how an eutopia of order – order as the prime goal to be imposed on the population, instead of trying to achieve happiness or freedom – could be created through scientific progress. Many of H. G. Wells' works fall in this category, but the most famous is likely *Looking Backward* by David Bellamy. Published in 1888, its narrative is based also on a visitor to a better place, this time to the future, a future in which technology has eliminated all inequalities and the author's perceived injustices of 19th-century capitalism.

It is easy to see how these "dreams of order" share many similarities with the next development in the literary utopia, the dystopia. The overconfidence of a *New Atlantis* or *Looking Backward* on technology, science, and the progress the two would enable increasingly gave way in the 20h century to reservation, fear, and suspicions. How are citizens to know that the advancements will indeed be employed in their own best interest and not in those of an elite? How can it be assured that, following Plato's *Republic*, the state will have at its top a philosopher king, wise and just? Literary dystopias turn the narrative towards the future and explore these anxieties by assessing how technology and science could just as well be used to subdue an unwilling population. These two characteristics can be seen as common motifs in most of the early dystopias, those from the first half of the 20th Century (Vieira 2010: 15).

2.4. Dystopia

Regarding the exact meaning of the term "dystopia" there are various disagreements. For instance, Krishan Kumar in *Utopia and Anti-Utopia in Modern Times* (1987) makes no distinction between dystopia and anti-utopia, claiming that all take the basic premises of the previous utopias – democracy, science, beneficial socialist ruling – and demonstrate that these are what turned them into bad places: "it was in the measure that modern societies became utopian – or at least tried to realize utopian aspirations – that freedom disappeared and human values were crushed. It was the scientific, rational, democratic nation-state, the product of all that was considered progressive, that had delivered its citizens into bondage" (Kumar 1987: 110-1). Thus, in his view, the only conclusion the anti-utopian writers could arrive at was that it was the utopian impulse itself that carried within it the seeds of a dystopia, which translates to a denial of the utopian impulse.

For Ruth Levitas, the difference between dystopia and anti-utopia lies on "whether the dystopia points to unremitting closure or to another possible future", while considering anti-utopian those works that "actively opposes the imagination and pursuit of alternatives" (Levitas 2013: 110). As such, the difference is quite often in the ending – whether it is an open one or not, whether there is some hope (even if only hinted at) or the complete decimation of any resistance and change. Lucy Sargisson, on the other hand, sees anti-utopianism as a different side of utopianism – while utopianism (not in literature but in general) can be seen as an expression of wishes to see the world improve, anti-utopianism can be seen as an expression of fears – "the fear that utopia will lead to the end of history, politics, and change" or that it could lead to "mob rule and mass violence" (Sargisson 2012: 24).

What Sargisson points out of importance to the present argument is that many of the fears that originate traditional dystopias and anti-utopianism is a perceived connection between utopianism and perfection – the theory that every utopian movement will strive for perfection, leading to rigidity and unavoidably to forced conformity, since what one regards as perfect can be far from what his peers do. Thus, the following developments in utopian fiction take the utopian dream, but leave behind any rigidity, opting instead for fluidity and plurality, for dialogue and middle-grounds between disparate views. This is witnessed in the critical utopias and, later, in the critical dystopias.

2.5. Critical Utopia

After the mid-century dystopias, there is a clear turn towards a torrent of eutopian writing with roots in the ’60s and ’70s oppositional political culture and left-wing movements such as the New Left. The New Left can be seen as an amalgamation of various movements that arose in the 1950s and played a role well into the ’70s, such as the civil rights movement, gay rights, women’s rights (Women’s Liberation), Black Power, the anti-Vietnam war movement (specifically in the United States but also with protests in Europe and formal movements like the British Council for Peace in Vietnam and the Vietnam Solidarity Campaign founded by an Oxford student), to name the most proliferate. The majority of these shared the common vision of the importance of each individual and the right of everyone to enjoy full citizenship, that is, not being regarded as a second-class citizen (Gosse 2005: 1). Even though he rejected the title, Herbert Marcuse was often hailed as the spokesperson for the intellectual side of the movement, and the German philosopher described the mood of the sentiment of the struggle as not being able to stand by and take no action, for “society is increasingly repressive, destructive, of the human and natural capabilities to be free, to determine one’s life, to shape one’s own life without exploiting others.” (Marcuse 2005: 122). For Marcuse, the goal of the so-called New Left was to deal with the need for “radical change, revolution in and against a highly developed technically advanced industrial society, which is at the same time a well-functioning and cohesive society.” (Marcuse 2005: 124). Marcuse posits as an obstacle the diffusion of mass media which has a grip on the public consciousness and worked to integrate into the system the very people it oppressed. For it to be countered, one must reach out to people and make them realize that action against the oppressive apparatus and fighting the status quo is not only possible but required, and must be done in the here and now. This point, as shall be seen, is one the central themes present in critical utopian novels.

Tom Moylan, who systematized a theoretical approach and coined the term “critical utopia”, sees these literary works as critical in the sense of the Enlightenment *critique*, a postmodern attitude towards self-reflexivity, and the political implication of a “critical mass required to make the necessary explosion” (1986*:* 10). In his work *Demand the Impossible* (1986), Moylan describes critical utopias as having the utopian tradition, the utopian works that came before them, as a central concern, so that “these texts reject utopia as blueprint while preserving it as dream.” The process of social change is present

in that, quite often, the two worlds, the one recognizable by the reader and the better one, are put on conflict with one another or at least are juxtaposed in the narrative. Finally, Moylan argues, "the novels focus on the continuing presence of difference and imperfection within the utopian society itself and thus render more recognizable and dynamic alternatives." (1986: 10-1)

These works generally follow the scheme first presented by More's *Utopia*: a visitor who gets a guided tour of an eutopia, a place better than the visitor's own. However, the difference is that instead of presenting an ahistorical static place, critical utopias explore through self-reflection how the better (though still imperfect) society came to be and, perhaps most importantly, how it is at conflict with reality itself. These texts try to bridge the gap between utopian dreaming and action by juxtaposing the two facets.

One often quoted example in which this struggle is portrayed is Marge Piercy's *Women on the Edge of Time* (1976). Advertised as "the classic feminist science fiction novel", it tells Connie Ramos' struggle against a patriarchal society in which she is ignored and abused not only for being a woman but also for having dark skin, being of Mexican heritage living in the USA. Held against her will in a mental institution after trying to save her niece from her pimp, Connie receives telepathic visits from a strange woman who invites her to come and see the future. Luciente, the woman from the future, then acts as Connie's guide through the same place in which both live, but in different times, Connie being brought into the year 2137. At first she is amazed at how much the future looks like her idea of an agricultural past: there are many villages instead of big cities, and technology as a whole seems to be have been channelled into the strictly necessary and practical instead of present in every facet of daily life. Due to environmental concerns and a strong will to correct the mistakes of the past (damage to the earth through pollution), everything is ecological, from clothes made from algae that disintegrate after some wear to means of transportation that rely on wind power to cover greater distances that cannot be made on bicycle. People live in huts, ones with rain-water holdings and solar energy panels. Production labour in factories is automated, powered by methane gas from composting waste. On the social level, there is no sex-based distinction and equally no distinction between hetero- and homosexual relations. The family has been replaced with the community; a child is born through a laboratory instead of given birth to by a woman, and is raised by the whole community, more closely by three adults who volunteer for the responsibility. Politically, each community acts through participatory democracy, in which everyone can voice their opinion on the subject being discussed or

voted on. To a bewildered Connie asking if this was really the government of the future, Luciente simply replies "It's the planning council for our township" (2016: 161), of which everyone takes part three months at a time.

Each of these aspects are not formally new to utopian writing: they take what the author sees at fault in her own society and create a narrative for the exposition of a place in which those problems have been surpassed, the exposition achieved via a visitor and a guide. The main difference with this work and the others in the critical utopia genre is, as previously mentioned, that they directly tackle the conflict between reality and utopia. One of the ways in which this is achieved is by rejecting the concept of a good place detached both physically and spatially from the protagonist's own. The good place is directly related to Connie's world in Piercy's novel, of which she is constantly reminded. Thus, the good place is not ahistorical: it came to be the way it is through the actions of individuals and did not please every member of society. A revolution had to take place, and a war is still being fought against those who do not support the change. Just like the inhabitants rotate to politically orientated tasks, they also rotate to military service against a faction which does not approve of their way of life. Change and conflict are present in the narrative and depicted as essential to the achievement of a better world. The reason for Luciente to reach from the future back to Connie is exactly to teach her that a better place must be constantly fought for, and work towards it is constant and equally dependent on all. Even in the better place, Luciente dreams that "someday the gross repair will be done. The oceans will be balanced, the rivers flow clean, the wetlands and the forest flourish. There'll be no more enemies." (Piercy 2016: 357). Connie learns that it is a dream, but also a goal that everyone is working for in their present time with the means at hand. Likewise, as another inhabitant of the future tells Connie, change must inevitably come from the disenfranchised like her, the ones that struggle to make themselves heard, for "the powerful don't make revolutions" (2016*:* 213).

Hence, it is not security, peace or order that are stressed in the new utopian narratives, but the need to act in one's own time and place towards freedom. Chris Ferns describes *Women on the Edge of Time* as a "utopian Bildungsroman", describing Connie's journey into the future and becoming fully human and an individual, "the climax coming when Connie realizes that utopia is not in fact the ideal, self-evident, automatically arrived-at solution to society's ills typical of so many earlier utopian narratives, but rather a state whose very existence depends on decisions taken by individuals in the here and now." (Ferns 1999: 211). At the end of the narrative Connie takes back control of her life by

refusing the victim status and striking back against those in power, who hold power directly over her. By doing so, she consciously takes her part in working towards a better place, a better future. Opposed to the earlier utopian works that depicted a static better place, Piercy's novel aims less to show a perfect place and instead to depict a better place which is still a work in progress and that, in order to be reached, requires being able to imagine it and work towards it through acts in the here and now, highlighting the urgency of utopian desire, constantly pointing out that things do not have to be as they are and change is not only possible but necessary (Ferns 1999: 212). The work thus encapsulates the core characteristics of critical utopias, many of which have their sources in the oppositional culture and New Left political movements of the time – "infused with the politics of autonomy, democratic socialism, ecology, and especially feminism." (Moylan 1986: 11).

2.6. Critical Dystopia

Just as critical utopias were a reflection and response to the specific socio-political situation and the resistance to it from various groups in the late '60s and '70s, the next development in utopian literature was also a reaction to the newly developed right turn in politics of the '80s and '90s, which Tom Moylan notes as "massive upward redistribution of income" becoming the regular norm, followed by the steady loss of "the measures of social wealth and rights that they [the working class] had won through years of struggle", paired with the disenfranchisement of "those with little or no social power" with "harassment, battering, and rape of women and similar psychological and physical assaults on people of colour, gays, and lesbians" with the final stroke where "quality medical care, universal education, and safe and supportive work and living spaces were sacrificed to the draconian policies of neoconservative and neoliberal "reformers." (Moylan 2000: 183-4)

This new "hegemonic constellation" was led mainly by right-wing ideologies of governments like Ronald Reagan in the USA, Margaret Thatcher in Great Britain and Helmut Kohl in Germany, by which "a renewed capitalism reached towards its own dream of total exploitation and administration of workers and consumers through a worldwide division of labour" under the "pseudo-utopian flag of rational choice and free market." (Moylan 2000: 184). This particular situation gave rise to works of fiction that Moylan, together with Raffaella Baccolini, have called critical dystopias. In many cases

through the formal parameters of science fiction, works of fiction began to surface that reworked the dystopias of the previous decades and tried at the same time to move beyond what the critical utopias had done, choosing instead to portray a dystopia that better reflected the alienating and enclosing social spaces witnessed by their authors. This would fall relatively close to the former dystopias, if not for their main distinction: critical dystopias avoid the defeat of the individual at the end of the narrative and instead focus on leaving an open end which points to the way out of the dystopia into a possible eutopia. Not relying in being just read as a warning, critical dystopias maintain a beacon of hope inside the work, making a solution visible and understandable to the protagonist (and reader). This means they take the dystopian formula but not its negation of the utopian impulse. Moreover, these works achieve this through a narrative focused on the alienated and subjugated individuals pointed out by Moylan, retaining the social awareness and often the feminist concerns of the critical utopias that came before, thus giving voice to those "dispossessed and denied subjects" that were left out of the new economical configuration of the '80s and '90s (Moylan 2000: 189). This goes, of course, in contrast to the traditional dystopias of the first half of the 20th century, seen as a "bleak, depressing genre with little space for hope within the story," which "maintain hope *outside* their pages, if at all" (Baccolini and Moylan 2003: 7). In their collection of articles *Dark Horizons – Science Fiction and the Dystopian Imagination* (2003), Moylan and Baccolini offer a summarized definition of critical dystopias as works that "allow both readers and protagonists to hope by resisting closure: The ambiguous, open endings of these novels maintain the utopian impulse *within* the work." By rejecting the subjugation of the individual and of any possible change common as the end of the traditional dystopias, 2the critical dystopia opens a space of contestation and opposition for those "ex-centric" subjects whose class, gender, race, sexuality, and other positions are not empowered by hegemonic rule. (Baccolini and Moylan 2003: 7)

The open endings and non-subjugation of the individual go in direct contrast to the former dystopias, in which no such possibility was imaginable. Winston and Julia in *1984* are undeniably destroyed by the regime they sought to fight; the lengths to which the regime goes to eliminate any resistance in such a common and unremarkable man as Winston is one of the main characteristics of such hopelessness, for Winston never had a chance from the beginning, as the reader finds out when he and Julia are captured. John Savage from *Brave New World* collapses under the weight of the rules imposed by the World Controllers; D-503 from Zamyatin's *We* goes willingly to his operation to remove

his “imagination”, the source of his woes, after which he gives up all of the conspirators and his beloved I-330, and feels nothing as he watches her being tortured and executed. *We* is the only example that ends with some ambiguity and openness, with parts of the wall that separate the One State and the wilderness having been torn down by the conspirators and chaos still affecting the “western districts.” Furthermore: “a significant amount of cyphers [were] betraying reason.” Nonetheless, the individual, the protagonist who has made the internal and physical journey from machine to man is returned to machine, subjugated, and yearns for the return of safety, uniformity and unfreedom, as he states in the last paragraph of the novel: “they have managed to construct a temporary wall of high-voltage waves. And I hope we will win. More than that: I know we will win. Because reason should win.” (Zamyatin 2007: 203).

Lyman Sargent argues in “Three Faces of Utopianism” that such works undermine neat classifications by being both eutopias and dystopias; thus, Sargent added a new definition to his list: Critical Dystopia – a non-existent society described in considerate detail and normally located in time and space that the author intended a contemporaneous reader to view as worse than contemporary society but that normally includes at least one eutopian enclave or holds out hope that the dystopia can be overcome and replaced with a eutopia. (quoted in Moylan 2000: 195).

Sargent’s concrete example in the article is that of *He, She and It* (1991), another novel by Marge Piercy. Published fifteen years after *Women on the Edge of Time*, it continues to reflect on its cotemporary socio-political situation while achieving estrangement through the relocation of action to a close future. Taking place in 2059, it portrays a post-nation-state world in which, after catastrophic wars have ravaged the planet, multinational corporations come to the forefront and wrestle power away from all political institutions, such as the United Nations which only exists as an insignificant shadow of its former international relevancy. The corporations that hold the power are referred to as multis, and 23 of them share the world and its resources, in a constant zero-sum game of power struggle between them. The world is environmentally wrecked, having not long ago suffered a famine and losing a big portion of the population in the 2020s and ’30s “when the ocean rose over rice paddies and breadbaskets of the delta countries like Bangladesh and Egypt, when the Great Plains dried up and blew away in dust storms that darkened the skies and brought early winter” (Piercy 1991: 41). Deserts spread and people resolved to eat artificial vat food made out of algae and yeasts, but not before two billion deaths.

The world population was not able to grow back, mainly due to infertility caused by toxic fallout and radiation.

The multis have their own isolated cities under domes, inaccessible to the common individual. They do, however, draw their manual workforce from the Glop, the vast slums in which most of the world population lives in horrendous conditions. The Glop is controlled by gangs which divide it into various areas of influence. Alongside the multis and the Glop there exist various independent cities which do not belong to any particular corporation and survive by doing highly specialized work, which is in turn sold to the various multis. It is in one of these free cities, Tikva, that most of the plot develops. It is the birthplace of Shira, who after university went to work for a multi, Y-S, but ended up returning to her home town after her divorce and the company's decision to grant her ex-husband full custody of their child. Tikva is the centre of resistance and hope in this otherwise bleak world. Its founders were Jewish, fleeing from persecution, and the town remains free by selling its highly advanced Net-security devices, which it purposefully uses to defend itself by keeping one step ahead of what it makes available to the corporate conglomerates. Like the future city in *Women on the Edge of Time*, it is a participatory democracy where "the right to stand up and make a speech for the guaranteed three minutes on any point was a birth right to all." (1991*:* 404). Tikva's foundation was "libertarian socialism with a strong admixture of anarcho-feminism, reconstructionist Judaism (although there were six temples, each representing a different Jewishness), and greeners." (1991*:* 404). After being attacked through the Net by Y-S, one of the most powerful multis, Tikva seeks out allies in order to be able to maintain its freedom and fight the corporation. It finds help in the Glop, which many thought to be ravenous slums without any political identity, but which turned out to be a place of hope, resistance and militancy. The aptly named Lazarus is the leader of one of the most relevant and politically-conscious gangs, and has developed the gang's own vat-food centrals to feed his people. By reaching into 20th century history, Lazarus studies the labour-unions and their struggle, and by the end of the narrative has organized a strike which deprived the multis of their manual workforce. Unable to starve the Glop into submission, the multis go to the negotiation table to meet the previously ignored gang leaders.

The other enclave of hope and resistance comes from a matriarchal society in the middle east. This area had been destroyed in the Two-Weeks War, leaving only a "bombed-out, radioactive, biologically unsafe area which had been Israel, Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, Iraq and a good hunk of Saudi Arabia." (1991*:* 188). Out of destruction

comes a free and technologically advanced society which originally closed itself off from the rest of mankind but now seeks to reach out and step into action, hoping to bring its peaceful and democratic ways into the world.

Thus, the work departs from a dystopian disposition but refuses the anti-utopian impulse, choosing instead to maintain active resistance and hope within its pages. By the end of the narrative the world is by no means fixed, but a path of unitary struggle by those disenfranchised against the corporate status quo is clearly set out, with emphasis on the maintenance of a utopian vision for the future through working together and taking action in the present. It is heavily influenced by the socio-political conditions of its time (late eighties, early nineties) for, as Moylan argues, whether departing from a eutopian or dystopian disposition, Piercy "manages to detail the social reality of her time and then to delineate spaces and avenues for militant action within her re-vision of that reality." (2000: 265). This is clearly the case in both mentioned narratives, as their anxieties regarding the present are cleverly convoyed while, at the same time, allowing for some estrangement either through time or by the employment of science fiction elements, which enables the reader to distance himself and clearly see the analogies present.

3. Counterculture and Subversive Comics

3.1. The New Left and Underground Comix

Influenced by the subversive mood and political and social feelings of alienation that gave rise to many of the critical dystopias in the 80's and 90's, comics have produced a large number of quality works that fall in these subgenres. The comics writer and publisher Warren Ellis argues that the subversive character is inherent to the medium itself after being considered low art for so long, and being socially rejected and looked down upon. For Ellis, the medium tries to fight back by being explicitly subversive, satirical and political, making use of the freedom it has achieved by being kept away from the mainstream:

> Over here in comics, things are different, you see. Sometimes we're an outlaw medium. Sometimes we're just the preferred tiny place for neurotics and losers to gibber in. Either way, we're an outside art, a fringe medium watched by no one but the more voracious cultural commentators and the aficionados. We don't have huge corporations trembling at our every movement, because we make no money compared to the other visual narrative media. That vast commercial pressure isn't brought to bear on comics. Which means, often, that we can say what we want without rich men's scissors attacking our work until it's safe for little Tommy in Dogshit, Nebraska. (Wood 2012: Introduction)

Ellis wrote this introduction to *Channel Zero* (1997) before the 2000s, after which Hollywood started paying attention to comics as source material, giving rise to the trend of superhero movie adaptations that has ruled the movies since then. Nonetheless, Ellis' point stands for the majority of works – those not from the superhero mainstream – published in the '80s and '90s. It is interesting and relevant to see how comics got to this point in the eighties by quickly reviewing its short history as a published medium available to the wider public.

In the United States, the main publishing houses and their best-known heroes date back to the first half of the twentieth century, with DC Comics originating in 1934, Marvel in 1939 and Superman being created even earlier in 1933. The narratives and artwork of these early comic books and strips was pretty straightforward, with a clear hero which embodied American greatness in narratives that preceded the ones most widely spread in comic books in the next decade during World War II – ones with a clear "good guy" fighting a clear and unambiguous "bad guy." Of these tropes the most relevant example is probably Captain America, who made his debut in Captain America Comics #1 in 1941. In all these comics the style was bland and looked similar across various publications. This allowed the publishers to switch up artists as they pleased if they made any labour-

or artistic demands. The work was also divided, often with one artist writing, another drawing, another doing the lettering and later another for colouring. This again allowed for greater versatility on the part of the publishing houses.

This constraint and artistically stifling environment led to many artists breaking off and creating their own characters, often going to the lengths of self-publishing. With more artistic freedom, they could explore other topics and create narratives more complex and ambiguous than the traditional "good versus bad". One of the most successful publishing houses to challenge the status quo was EC Comics. Created in 1944, it concentrated on the publication of horror, suspense, crime and military fiction. Both the narratives and artwork were disarmingly different to what came before, often featuring crude and rude stories.

It was however short-lived due to government intervention. In 1954, after years of public distrust of the medium and several PTA organizations asking for a ban, a book called *Seduction of the Innocent* was published. It argued that comics were perverting and corrupting the youth. It received great social response, becoming a best seller soon after its publication. Its impact and backlash led to congressional hearings on the subject and investigations by the Senate Judiciary Committee on Juvenile Delinquency, which ultimately resulted in the creation of the Comics Code Authority. This institution controlled comics publications in the US under a strict set of rules, of which some of the most relevant clauses are:

- Crimes shall never be presented in such a way as to create sympathy for the criminal, to promote distrust of the forces of law and justice, or to inspire others with a desire to imitate criminals.
- Policemen, judges, government officials, and respected institutions shall never be presented in such a way as to create *disrespect for established authority.*
- All characters shall be depicted in dress reasonably acceptable to society.
- Illicit sex relations are neither to be hinted at or portrayed.

Any comics that did not adhere to the code were barred from using the established distribution network. It has been argued that the social uproar caused by the book in the US and its author's anti-comics campaign may have been used as an excuse for the government to formally step in and regulate the industry, since comics "were becoming relevant, and it must have been a short step to think of them as potentially subversive, a conduit for anti-establishment ideas." (Sabin 159). These fears also took root in Britain,

where many North-American horror and crime comics had been imported and published since the late ’40s. A campaign to have these publications (both imported and domestic) banned was started, involving various pressure groups. They were banned in Britain in 1955 under the *Children and Young Person’s Harmful Publications Act*.

The Comics Code Authority resulted in bankruptcy for many smaller and independent publishers, EC Comics surviving on the now cult classic MAD Magazine; since it was technically a magazine and not a comic book, it managed to evade censorship. As a result, a “wave of enforced blandness” came to categorize the comics after the Code, and up until the late sixties the great majority of comic books in North America were published by a small number of large publishing houses (Wolk 2007: 39).

Underground Comix surfaced in the sixties as a reaction against the Comics Code and were a medium of expression for the discontentment and overall counter-culture of the ’60s and ’70s, being a relevant part of the larger underground press. Proudly exhibiting the “x” for x-rated, in the first years many of these were nonetheless blunt and underdeveloped, mainly going for transgression for transgression`s sake – featuring protagonists smoking drugs, sex scenes, crimes and so on. These became widely known mainly due to Robert Crumb’s *Zap*, which originated many others in the same vein, first in the US and shortly after in Britain. As underground comix started to get politically conscious, they addressed specific themes of the counter-culture such as sexual liberation, drugs and radical politics (Sabin 1993: 36).

Underground comix were as innovative in content as they were in production, the reader-author relationship and distribution – a necessity due to the government-imposed restrictions. Patrick Rosenkranz writes in *Rebel Visions: The Underground Comix Revolution 1963-1975* (2003) that “underground comix were free from meddlesome editors and dictatorial publishers. No one bothered with market research or opinion polls, but drew upon what was important to them. The popularity of comix gave their creators the opportunity to re-invent the medium.” (174). Breaking away from the model of the big companies like Marvel which discouraged personal style in favour of a uniform, company-wide aesthetic which made firing and hiring new writers/illustrators fairly problem free, the underground comix independent publishers encouraged writers and illustrators to have their own personal and distinctive style and displayed their names proudly on the cover of the publications, meaning the readers got to know the artists by name and were able to follow them through various publications. Moreover, the artists maintained the copyright of the characters they created, not the publishing house, which

was new at the time and again contrary to common practices from major companies like Marvel. Along with copyright, the artists also received royalties, in all ensuring an equal distribution of the profits, as slim as they were. At the same time, they were self-published and sold directly to the stores, many of which were not comics-only but general stores that catered to the counter-culture consumer: alternative record shops, bookshops, and headshops (hippie stores that sold drug paraphernalia). As Roger Sabin describes, these independent publishers "represented both an alternative to the comics establishment and a ribald satirical challenge to the political and cultural status quo." (Sabin 1993: 45). By the '70s, the means of publication in the underground press had also changed, with various activist and political groups laying claim to it as their personal propaganda medium (Rosenkranz 2003: 171). For Alan Moore, who started his professional career at this stage, it was the underground press itself which managed to bring together such diverse groups of the counter-culture movements of those two decades: "underground papers arguably provided the essential glue that held the whole 1960s explosion of radical new approaches to the world together." (Quoted in Gray 2017: 105). At this stage, many underground publications made use of the medium to openly spread their left-wing political views, often forgoing narratives in favour of direct exposition.

3.2 From Manga to Gekiga – Rise of Political Adult Manga

The year 1968 is most commonly associated with revolts in Europe, but it was also a pivotal year in Japan and, just like in Europe, it stands for various events that began and had repercussions outside the delimited time. The social protest movements of the '60s in Japan were mainly, but not only, based at universities, springing up from various student organizations. Despite building up momentum throughout the decade and reaching its climax at the end of the '60s, public unrest was witnessed throughout the whole period of post-war occupation by U.S. military forces. These were against the building of U.S. military bases and runways, and also against the testing of nuclear weapons. There were also numerous workers' unions protests and strikes, mainly fighting for living wages in the decade of scarcity that followed the end of WWII. The workers' movements were supported by the Japanese Communist Party (JCP) and the Japanese Socialist Party (JSP).

Operating with these two left-wing parties in an uneasy alliance was the *Zengakuren* – All Japan League of Student Self Governments. Founded in 1948 as a federation of

300,000 students from 145 universities, it was certainly not homogenous, but all students in the *Zengakuren* shared the goals of opposing fascism and imperialism (Andrews 27). It was the students' disillusionment with the official left-wing political parties and their perceived lack of (radical) action that brought the students to active participation in protests and their organization, marking by the end of the '50s the birth of the Japanese New Left (Andrews 2016: 28). The *Zengakuren* would come into the spotlight for their role in the Anpo protests. These were a series of civilian protests throughout 1959 and 1960 (and again at the end of that decade) against the ratification of the Japanese-American Security Treaty. The treaty would increase Japan's concessions to the U.S., the most-discussed issue being the use of Okinawa as a military base from which military (espionage) operations could be launched against the Soviet Union, North Korea and China. While opposed by various political parties, unions, and common citizens, it was the student movement that was responsible for the most radical and often violent actions in the protests, an example being the invasion by students of the prime minister's residence. Despite mass public mobilization and opposition by the left-wing parties in parliament, the ratification passed. This marks another crucial moment in the Japanese New Left, for with this defeat the dissident student movements completely lost trust in conventional politics and came to see radical action as the only way to bring about change. More importantly, they sought to escape ideology altogether, even leftist, and to return to the individual as a political agent. It was about the "individual, about self-liberation and self-transformation, about taking things into your own hands." (Andrews 2016: 71).

Comics influenced and were influenced by these counterculture movements. Comics in Japan have always had a political side to them, be it challenging or upholding the status quo. As early as the '20s there were short political strips for adults, at the same time that manga started to be published with educational aims for children. The majority of political manga at this time was from the left spectrum of politics, exposing Marxist theories. This was followed by the tight control and censorship exerted by the military in the '30s, which would last until the end of WWII. In post-war Japan, although control was not so obviously exercised, the medium was never forgotten nor were its ideological possibilities – Sharon Kinsella reveals a pervading willingness to control manga by the Japanese authorities, albeit in a more nuanced way than their western counterparts. From the beginning of contemporary manga industry in the 1960s, Kinsella, argues, "fanaticism, violence, politics, and sex, mediated through manga, have been driven in and out of national political discourse". The official discourse regarding manga changed to reflect

how the authorities wished for it to be perceived by the people, and it "has been wishfully defined and redefined as non-culture, children's culture, working-class culture, avant-garde culture, counter culture, youth culture, pop culture, corporate culture, Japanese culture, national culture, Asian culture, and even international culture." (Kinsella 2000: 5)

It was precisely in the last years of the fifties and beginning of the sixties that many authors saw the need to leave the comical and cartoony style of manga and aim for something more realistic that would faithfully represent and deal with the complex realities of its readers: readers who had read children's manga like those from Osamu Tezuka in the fifties but had in the meantime grown up and were now politically conscious individuals living in a decade of counterculture. One of the most important developments of this stage is the advent of *gekiga,* which directly translates as "dramatic pictures." The term was coined by Yoshihiro Tatsumi who wanted to go beyond manga both technically and thematically. Not satisfied with mainstream manga for children, Tatsumi sought to incorporate cinematic techniques into his art and make it more realistic, while at the same time broadening its scope of possible themes. It went directly against the mainstream, opting for realistic depictions of characters instead of the typical cartoon look of manga (exaggerated facial expressions, large eyes), striving for long and complex narratives with little or no humour, and aimed at an adolescent and older readership. In his autobiographical work *A Drifting Life* (2008), Tatsumi exposes the genesis of the *gekiga* movement and how it was energized by the counterculture movements of the students. In a moment of disenchantment with the comics industry which saw the *gekiga* movement as only a means for profit and disregarded its innovative aspect, Katsumi (Tatsumi's alter ego in the comic) is swept away by the thousands of people protesting in the streets. Even though he has only a limited knowledge of the situation, he cannot help but shout "no!" in unison with the protesters. Witnessing first-hand the power of the crowd, he exclaims: "This demonstration is a new force and it's trying to destroy something! It's an incredible force fuelled by anger!" He feels a renewed energy and commitment to his vision of bringing the medium forward – "That's the element that gekiga has forgotten… Anger!" (827). Tatsumi was a witness to how, with the impressive economic recovery, many rural Japanese swarmed the cities looking for work. These individuals, in Tatsumi's short narratives, are what made the economic boom and post-war recovery possible, and yet failed to reap any benefits from it. They are marginalized, mostly ignored, have degrading jobs and live in tiny apartments often lacking a bathroom. For the critic Shige Suzuki, for

whom Tatsumi's best works conflate the author's constant strive for innovation, the maturation of the post-war readership and the rise of counterculture, Tatsumi makes an incisive social critique of post-war and recovering Japan through his works, which, set in a supposedly democratic country which was "supposed to grant equality and freedom", have "critically exposed the illusionary nature of those ideals, at least, to lower-class citizens." (Suzuki 2013: 61-2).

Thus, in the early sixties, there was a clear divide between manga as a genre, "child-oriented, cute, fantastical, and sometimes educational manga, associated with Osamu Tezuka", and, on the other hand, *gekiga* which was associated with "poorly educated young urban workers and anti-establishment politics." Artists from both movements inevitably came to "occupy two different social and political territories", which was also reflected in the media's formal distribution procedures (Kinsella 2000: 29). While *manga* was distributed in the major monthly magazines (which soon in the '60s switched to weekly publishing), *gekiga* works were distributed and often written specifically for the rental book shops that could be found throughout all cities, in which the reader could consume various books for a small fee. Furthermore, *gekiga* can be traced to a specific geographical space, Osaka. Opposed to the capital of Tokyo where the headquarters of the major manga magazines took root, Osaka offered more liberty to the authors, being historically more liberal and open to cultural experimentation. While Tokyo-based publishing houses were producing "well-packaged, sophisticated comics", the Osaka comics scene based heavily on the rental book shops was producing "comics of varied quality but that showcased more inventive and innovative content" (Suzuki 2013: 52-3).

By the mid-sixties manga became openly political like it had been in the '20s, with magazines like GARO publishing stories that explored Marxist theory. One of the most famous was *The Legend of Kamui*, in which a lone samurai fights against corruption, the class system, poverty and oppression. Initially aimed at children, *Kamui* found its readership among college students. Successes like those of *Kamui* led to commercial publishers also including political and social themes in their manga (Kinsella 2000: 31). The open support of many comics artists for the ANPO protests by students and for workers' struggles for better conditions led to a public reaction against comics. Just like in the western comic markets, "manga was blamed for inciting students to involvement with violent and anti-social activities" which by the end of the sixties ultimately led to the attempt to ban the sale of manga, in particular of *gekiga* works, by right-wing religious groups and citizens' organizations (Kinsella 2000: 34).

This pressure, together with the disillusionment on the part of students towards political action – since the movements ultimately failed to bring about meaningful change – contributed to the disappearance of most overtly political publications in the ’70s. The industry turned instead to serve its various types of readers, with many different and separate genres becoming economically viable at this time. One example is *shõjo manga*, or girls’ comics, directed at a female audience but nonetheless written by male artists. Another important development in this decade was that of *kyõyõ manga*, academic and educational comics. This genre started to be adopted by companies and schools in official publications for its workers or students (Ito 2008: 41-3). This helped legitimize comics in Japan, as long as they served an educational purpose and followed the current ideology which, at this time of the economic boom, was that of hard work for the company and state at the expense of one’s private life. In 1986 a major business newspaper commissioned a comic *Introduction to Japanese Economy*, and further in 1989 a *History of Japan* in comics was requested and approved by the Ministry of Education for use in state schools. This marked a definitive high note for comics’ social status, becoming a “fully-fledged communication medium used by authorities, business, politicians, and even the European Community delegation in Tokyo.” (Bouissou 2010: 29). Comics magazines continued to be published and witnessed a boom in the ’80s, such as *Shõnen jampu* which had 2.5 million sales in 1982 and saw that number double to 5 million in 1988 (Ito 2008: 43).

Despite the virtual disappearance of overtly political comics and magazines, some continued to publish and to carry the alternative banner. The most relevant is the aforementioned GARO, which continued to publish *gekiga* works in the seventies, most of which started exploring and pushing the boundaries of the genre to new spaces such as “the realm of dreams, collective memories, and social psychology.” (Kinsella 2000: 37). Many of the stories published in GARO represented and were aimed at individuals in the urban sprawls that felt alienated by society. These works have also been described as underground or avant-garde, since they were outside of the mainstream publishing magazines. Sharon Kinsella notes in *Adult Manga – Culture and Power in Contemporary Japanese Society* (2000) that, even though this side of the industry operated in the side-lines and opposite to the mainstream during the ’70s, it was revisited and explored in the ’80s and has come to represent “a minor but important juncture in the *gekiga* tradition, which continues to exert an aesthetic influence within the manga medium.” (37). It is in this contested space between avant-garde and mainstream, officially endorsed and

underground, that some of the most interesting Japanese comics appeared in the eighties. *Akira* was published in mainstream magazines, but contains anti-establishment narratives and directly addresses themes and issues of contemporary Japan such as post-war censorship, political control, apocalyptic nightmares and anxieties towards the future.

In the west, the superhero-filled mainstream only began approaching more important issues slowly, relevant both to society and to the individual. Works already set and with a secure and growing readership began taking this turn: The X-Men, for example, based on identity politics and tackling the social issue of racism in North American society and how it was fought, going from black and white morality to depict both peaceful struggle (Professor X – Martin Luther King) and violent resistance justified by years of abuse and oppression (Magneto – Malcom X). Douglas Wolk points out how the most famous superheroes survived by beginning to approach topics of morality and ethics: since volume one, Spider-Man has dealt with the responsibility that those with more power (superpowers – wealth, social capital, etc.) owe (or not) to their less fortunate fellow human beings; how Batman, most interestingly, stands for the utopian impulse that will not give up on dreaming, the dream of turning chaos into order – and how far one is allowed to go to achieve it. The latest comic runs of Batman after the acclaimed *The Killing Joke* (1988) by Alan Moore, and Christopher Nolan`s *The Dark Knight* (2008) also showed how this facet of Batman is just another side of his arch-enemy, the Joker, madness – one believing he can and must turn chaos to order at all costs, the other set on proving that there is only chaos hiding beneath the social (and therefore false and contrary to human nature) construct of peace and order.

There have been countless articles arguing that comics have grown up and moved past their infantile origins. Christopher Pizzino points out that, despite the constant repetition of this condescending remark throughout the last thirty years, those who devote themselves to comics, be it artistically, academically or as hobbyists, constantly feel the need to reassert it and defend their interest (Pizzino 2016: 3). Be that as it may, such articles almost exclusively cite three comic works of fiction as evidence, and they are without a doubt those that changed what comics could do and broke the old moulds; they are Frank Miller's *The Dark Knight Returns* (published in serialized form in 1986), Alan Moore's *Watchmen* (published in serialized form between 1986 and 1987, single volume in 1987), and Art Spiegelman's *Maus* (serialized from 1980 to 1991, single volume in 1992).

Frank Miller's *The Dark Knight* presents a Batman worn down and introspective, questioning whether it is all worth it and whether he has done more damage than good, a far cry from the unbeatable and unwavering Batman of the prior decades. Spiegelman's *Maus* pushed the boundaries of what comics could do by using the medium to write his father's memoirs of surviving in Poland during World War II. Its journalistic style and narrative methods set the tone for what has since become one of the most published genres in comics, graphic memoirs. *Watchmen* came to satirize and ridicule many of the tropes of superhero comics, usually hailed as the definitive superhero revisionist comic.

Even though *Watchmen* is Moore's most widely known and researched work, he had explored many of its themes in other previous publications. Utopia has been a common and often central topic in his works, together with all it encompasses, which is to be seen in his *Miracleman, Watchmen,* and, most importantly, *V for Vendetta*.

4. Case Studies

4.1. *V for Vendetta* by Alan Moore

4.1.1. Summary

V for Vendetta was written and serialized between 1982 and 1985 but not to completion due to the cancellation of the magazine in which it was initially published. It was later picked up by DC Comics in 1988, which published the whole ten issues first separately in colour and later in a single book.

It is important to note the publication date of the first issue, 1982, and the even earlier writing date of 1981, since many of Moore's anxieties about a dystopian future came to bear an uncanny resemblance to reality towards the end of the decade; these similarities are sometimes only considered relative to the 1988 publication date and not with that of the serialized version. It is also relevant that it was published in *Warrior* as "an independent comic consciously and contradictorily attempting to negotiate a space for underground and fanzine principles within the mainstream British market that accommodated this kind of social realism and political outspokenness". It sought to bridge the gap between underground magazines and mainstream ones, bringing together the best of both worlds: underground's freedom and artistic liberties that could be used on social and political commentary and satire, and mainstream's ability to reach large numbers of readers. This freedom, to Moore at the time, meant an opportunity to write a "critique of both the emerging New Right and contemporary neo-Nazi groups" (Gray 2010a: 32).

In a quick overview, *V for Vendetta* takes place in England in the '90s. The nation has been taken over by a fascist dictatorship after the outbreak of nuclear war between the two Cold War powers. The narrative mainly follows a costumed individual that presents himself simply as V, while he tries and ultimately succeeds in bringing down the fascist government through a series of terrorist acts – it opens with the bombing of the Houses of Parliament and ends with the equally destructive bombing of 10 Downing Street, official residence of the British Prime Minister. It ends with rebellion, protesting and looting on the streets by London citizens and the fall of the fascist regime. However, the narrative blurs any clear distinction between hero and villain, good and evil. Just like in *Watchmen*, the characters, their beliefs and consequent actions are deeply personal, rooted in history and sometimes relatable, refusing any clear classification or labelling. As in Moore's other two mentioned works, it asks more questions than it gives answers, thereby

forcing the reader to play along and question himself and his beliefs. V, an individual with a tragic past that takes down a fascist dictatorship through the use of violence, which often results in the death of innocent people, makes no excuses for his actions and offers at every opportunity a rhetoric of necessary change in the world, presenting himself as the villain while, through his grandiose acts, inviting a reading of heroism.

4.1.2. *Miracleman* – a Political Superman

When describing Moore's contribution to the medium, the most used expression is that he was responsible for forcing comics to "grow up" or to "ground them" in reality. Although, as previously seen with the advent of underground comics, the medium had been catering to an adult clientele for decades, it was in the eighties that "adult comics" became widely known to the public. Before his super-hero revisionist *Watchmen*, Moore had worked on the exact same themes and motifs in *Miracleman* (originally Marvel Man, changed due to copyright issues). The character had been created in the fifties and ran until 1962 under Mick Anglo. It was later taken up by Moore in 1982 to be published periodically in *Warrior*, the same comic anthology in which *V for Vendetta* was also originally published that very same decade. Instead of disregarding the previous publications by Mick Anglo, Moore worked them into his narrative, making them a dream induced into the main protagonist, Mike Moran. Mike was kidnapped as a child by Gargunza, a scientist hired by the British government to lead the "Zarathustra Project", aiming at the creation of a super-human that would work for the government, helping to maintain the status quo. At the beginning of Moore's narrative, Moran has no recollection of these events, and only by accident does he remember the secret word (Kimota, atomic spelled backwards) that turns him into his alter-ego, Miracleman. Moore then takes this conventional origin story and common tropes to bring the superhero comic into reality by posing the question of what would happen if such a superman really existed? Would he obediently follow the orders of those in charge and help them maintain the status quo, like his counterpart Superman? Or, also like Superman, would he take his unimaginable powers and hide himself, only coming out to help a tiny portion of the world? Most intriguing, would such an Übermensch maintain any connection to humanity, having surpassed them by far, and would he bother with saving such a race which seemed bent on destroying itself?

Shortly after discovering his other self, Moran starts having marital problems, his wife being the first human being from whom he starts to feel disconnected. Now, by uttering a single word, he transforms into an all-powerful, indestructible being incapable of aging or dying, which puts human life into perspective for him. Miracleman ends up regarding humanity with a compassion for something inferior, which he needs to help and improve, whether it likes it or not.

The third and last book is a frame narrative, in which Miracleman has entirely stopped reverting into his human form of Mike Moran and is now writing down his memoirs of how he got to be where he is. Through his account the reader learns the answers to the questions posed above. Being an omnipotent being, Miracleman has taken it upon himself (with the help of technology provided by an allied alien race) to grow humanity and rid it of its shortcomings, with the intent to build an eutopia. The deserts of Africa are regreened, the ozone layer is repaired and diseases are eradicated. On a social level, the national surpluses of wealthy nations are relocated into underdeveloped ones until they achieve self-sufficiency, at which point through a television broadcast Miracleman announces to the world that money has been abolished, every basic necessity to be met for free – "each soul shall have free clothing, food and shelter, entertainment, education. All requirements for a worthwhile life… with greater luxuries to those who wish to work providing the above." (Book 3: 102). Drugs are legalized and crime disappears, dangerous and mentally ill criminals receiving psychological help. In a short time, all penitentiaries are relegated to the past. All nuclear weapons are transported and destroyed on the sun's surface, to the outrage and despair of world leaders. Miracleman sees neither nations nor borders, and takes control, without much effort, away from the previous rulers of powerful nations. In a meeting where Miracleman announces his restructuring plans for the world's economy, Margaret Thatcher objects that they can "never allow this kind of interference with the market" at which Miracleman simply asks "allow?" (Book 3: 97). Their power taken away, previous leaders receive group therapy to help them come to terms with the new world. Even death itself is averted, the recently deceased being brought back into artificial bodies through alien technology.

Despite all the improvements and good intentions, Miracleman is met with resistance every step of the way. At the reforesting of African deserts and eradication of diseases he is opposed by the "earth-first movement", which claims that Africa "should starve and die, part of a natural balance, while insisting that the smallpox virus had its place in our ecology, and ought to be reintroduced." (Book 3: 101). A small group of religious leaders,

having been replaced by a literal God who created heaven on earth, come together to form groups of resistance whose sole means of protest is self-immolation.

The achievement of eutopia is, however, relegated to the end of the narrative, as it inevitably must be, for what could come next? The focus lies in the process of change and mainly on the cost of eutopia. What it took to achieve it were the actions of Miracleman's enemy, Bates, who had the same powers but had completely lost his touch with humanity. Bates and Miracleman have their final confrontation in London, and in the process destroy half the city, resulting in the deaths of 40,000 of its inhabitants. As Miracleman writes in his memoir, many accounts of this final battle argue that although he threw a car at Bates, it was empty and thus caused no collateral victims. Miracleman promptly dismisses this theory, admitting without guilt or remorse that the car he used as a weapon in fact had people inside. It makes the case that the cost for eutopia is invariably human sacrifice which cannot be avoided, and thus cannot be negated. People died to create the better world of tomorrow, and Miracleman does not allow humans to forget that and take it for granted. It is on the ruins of destroyed London that Miracleman builds his house, a mountain soaring into the skies above the clouds which he aptly names Olympus. Looking down on the destruction, he considers what many other characters of Moore's narratives also would: "These charnel pastures serve as a reminder, a memento mori, never letting us forget that though Olympus pierce the very skies, in all the history of earth, there's never been a heaven; never been a house of gods that was not build on human bones." (Book 3: 90).

It can be argued that Miracleman represents the benevolent tyrant, the Grand Inquisitor who rids humanity of its sorrows but, at the same time, of its freedom. Peter Paik, in *From Utopia to Apocalypse* (2010), argues that this is the case, and that Miracleman imposing his superhuman powers on the rest of mankind is a representation of the end of the Cold War (the third book, Olympus, was published in 1990, shortly before the collapse of the Soviet Union) and an exploitation of the "end of history" argument, in which only one superpower and one political ideology remains in the world. However, this argument dismisses some subtleties in the comic and a major point, mainly that after all the above actions had taken place, Miracleman seeks to better humankind itself by giving the opportunity to sound-minded people to acquire the same superpowers he possesses. Humans are able to apply themselves for a program that would turn them into demigods, and another program reaches out into women who wish to give birth to children with superpowers by making Miracleman's sperm available for in-vitro fertilization. It is,

nonetheless, part of the human sacrifice for a better tomorrow: the human race must not only change but eradicate itself in favour of a more advanced status in evolution, one which will be able to carry out and maintain this better world of today into tomorrow. In the end, Miracleman lives up to the Zarathustra Project's name that gave birth to him. He becomes Zarathustra's Übermensch, not only surpassing mankind but able to remain attached to it and make it grow to his level.

4.1.3. *Watchmen* and the Cost of Utopia

Moore had started working on *Miracleman* in 1982 and, with many breaks in between, ended the narrative in 1990 and handed it over to Neil Gailman. In one of those pauses Moore worked on *Watchmen,* published in serialized form between 1986 and 1987 by DC Comics, which also published a single complete version in '87. As already mentioned, *Watchmen* forcefully brings superheroes into reality and grounds them in the political and ideological Cold War of the Reagan years. It asks the same questions and busies itself with of the same topics as *Miracleman*, but pushes for a much more realistic socio-political background. The fear that the Cold War might turn into a nuclear war is less an apprehensive concern than an assurance, the only question being when will it break out. A doomsday clock is seen frequently in its pages, sometimes out in the open, other times almost imperceptible, getting closer and closer to midnight as the narrative progresses. This relates directly to the Reagan years at the time of writing, a period in which the fear of a nuclear holocaust was at the highest in decades. Moore himself in an interview conducted in 1988 claims that he was writing about "our world of the eighties" by "using a science fiction story as a framework for an examination of problems in our own world." (Sharrett 2012: 45).

The narrative begins in 1985 in a world where masked vigilantes have taken up fighting urban crime in the years following World War II. After strikes and protests by the population and law enforcement agents against the authoritarian use of force without regulation by these vigilantes (who are just humans in disguise, with no superpowers of any sort with only one exception), the Keene Act is instated, which prohibits all masked vigilantes unless they work for the government. A decade into the Keene Act, most of them have given up and returned to normal life, with only three exceptions: Rorschach, the Comedian, and Doctor Manhattan. Rorschach is a sociopath who sees morality in black and white, where crime must be punished no matter the circumstances. He is wanted

by the police not only for not respecting the Keene Act but also for murdering his crime suspects instead of delivering them to law enforcement. The Comedian is a cynical nihilist who works as a secret agent for the government, helping it to maintain the right-oriented ideology and upholding the status quo. He is responsible for taking down various left-wing governments in South America and shows no concern for human life or the current political predicament. In his view, nothing really matters since the world will soon go up in flames no matter what they do. Lastly, Doctor Manhattan seems, at first glance, to be the most like a typical superhero. He acquired superpowers in an accident at a nuclear plant, giving him omnipotence. Able to disintegrate everything to an atomic level, including himself, Doctor Manhattan can make what he wants of time and space, and is virtually invincible. Another former vigilante, Adrian Veidt (alias Ozymandias), has walked away from crime fighting and is now head of a corporation that encompasses almost every facet of life.

Crime, corruption, and political upheaval characterise this dystopian narrative. Richard Nixon is on his 5th mandate as president of the United States, riding on the approval after victory in Vietnam, which became the 51st state. Victory was achieved through use of Doctor Manhattan and the Comedian, and Doctor Manhattan continues in the series' present time to play a major role in the Cold War détente. Wary of the absolute power this grants to one side of the ideological conflict, the Soviet Union turns even more bellicose and, at the beginning of the series, both sides are effectively preparing to launch a pre-emptive nuclear attack against one another.

As a superhero revisionist comic, *Watchmen* deconstructs most of the conventions of the genre. There is no clear divide between good and evil, and thus no possible direct confrontation between the two. There are no clear righteous characters nor evil ones, each being much too complex, fleshed out and "real" for clean cut definitions. The one character that most resembles a typical superhero imbued with superpowers, Doctor Manhattan, is quick to point out the absurdity in all human endeavours and feels completely detached from the human race as a whole. Immediately after his transformation, Doctor Manhattan is integrated into the current ruling system and is made into a weapon, one that does not fight for freedom or peace but instead for the maintenance and protection of the state ideology, which translates to the geo-political interests of the United States. As the news report repeatedly states after the superhero's existence goes public, "the Superman exists, and he's American." Even the name has been chosen for him, "for the ominous associations it will raise in America's enemies.

They're shaping me into something gaudy and lethal…" (122-3). He is used to win the Vietnam War and as a deterrent to nuclear attacks from the Soviet Union, since he could easily destroy any incoming warheads. Nonetheless, his existence only aggravates the conflict by simply tipping the scale out of balance into one side of the Cold War. Not even such a power as his could prevent war from happening, and it is at the realization that the system itself is at fault, and the humans behind it, that his detachment takes root.

The divide is even greater here than in *Miracleman*, for although Doctor Manhattan has the same power to wrestle control away from humans and take charge, he sees no point in saving a species that seems so bent on destroying itself. The would-be superman asserts his overall superiority and disdain for what he perceives as the petty problems of humankind by openly admitting that the ideological differences between east and west, liberal capitalism and communism, is to him akin to choosing between red ants and black ants. Around the middle of the narrative, exhausted and exasperated by being involved in people's problems, Doctor Manhattan transports himself to Mars, where he sits alone in quiet contemplation.

As a comic, it also undercuts the typical visuals of superhero tales. Contrary to the heterogenous grid and panels of *Miracleman Book 1* and the free-style of *Book 3*, Watchmen follows a strict 9 panel grid throughout the whole series, with a few select exceptions for impact. This allows for the pace of the comic to be kept at a steady and constant rhythm, granting a deeper effect when the author/illustrator decides to change it for fast-paced scenes or for slowing down the perception of time passing. The 9-panel grid, combined with Moore's heavy dialogue scenes, further provide a sense of claustrophobia, of being trapped with no room to move or place to escape to. This only adds to the dystopic feel of the city and, consequentially, of the whole narrative. This atmosphere is aided by the consistent use of darker tones and pastels in the colouring in the narrative. Just like the panelling, exceptions can be used as visual metaphors – breaking away from the toned-down colouring scheme, Doctor Manhattan's bright blue hue signifies him as detached from this world, in it but not part of it (see fig. 1, p. 111). Also new for the genre at the time, most males possess a regular-sized physique, and instead of having a barely clothed female heroine, it portrays the male Doctor Manhattan frequently in the nude while his female partner, Silk Spectre, is fully dressed.

As a utopian graphic narrative, *Watchmen* deals completely with the cost of utopia, of what it takes to change the world, preferably to something better. The former vigilante Ozymandias, now Adrian Veidt, comes to the same conclusion as Doctor Manhattan:

unless there is a systemic change, war and annihilation is unavoidable. Thus, Veidt comes up with his plan to save the world and bring a new era of peace among nations, a plan which he successfully executes at the end of the narrative when it is finally revealed to the reader that, using his corporation's power and technology – most of it made possible by the unknowing collaboration of Doctor Manhattan – Veidt (dressed in his Ozymandias costume, taking the role of the superhero saviour upon himself) teleports a genetically engineered fake alien into the centre of New York. The teleportation device makes everything explode upon traversing space, and the ensuing explosion in the metropolis instantly kills 3 million people, leaving only an alien corpse as a single vague clue as to what happened. Upon such a catastrophe, the world superpowers stop their war preparations and come together as one in grief and mourning, pleading to join forces against this seemingly alien threat on humankind. The world is saved at the cost of millions of innocent lives, and a better tomorrow is created upon a lie.

The case is made, just like in *Miracleman*, for the necessity of sacrifices in the creation of a better world. Nonetheless, whereas Miracleman openly discloses everything he has done, even the murder of human beings, to bring about the better future, Ozymandias' version is founded upon a lie which must be kept secret for the maintenance of eutopia. While Miracleman shares the burden with mankind, having them know of the cost of their better world and thus forcing them to accept it, Ozymandias takes the responsibility entirely upon himself, solely carrying the weight of his moral decision. Peter Paik sees Ozymandias' actions as a "mixture of overpowering intimidation and inexplicable generosity", since he "refuses to divorce utopia, as most utopians do, from the terrors of apocalypse but grants it its proper place within the latter's overarching framework of rejuvenating destruction and shattering deliverance." (Paik 2010: 38). The narrative had begun with Rorschach investigating a murder, which in the end brings him, Niteowl and Silk Spectre (two other retired vigilantes) to discover Ozymandias' plan, if only too late. The latter two, more relatable in their moral compass, end up achieving nothing, neither for themselves nor society. As Silk Spectre notes, "all we did was fail at stopping him from saving the world".

Watchmen could, then, be read as an anti-utopia, one claiming that the only possible way for a new world to be achieved is by the sacrifice of countless innocents, and it would not be a better world since it would be based on murder, holocaust, and lies. Moore approached this question directly in an interview:

> **Chris**: Is it fair to say that Watchmen is about the foolishness of utopian dreams? As Rorschach remarks, utopias are usually built on a foundation of dead bodies.
>
> **Alan**: I think we all entertain dreams of a better world. I don't think I was suggesting that any dream of utopia is wrong. My main concern was to show a world without heroes, without villains, since to my mind these are the two most dangerous fallacies which beset us, both in the relatively unimportant world of fiction and in the more important field of politics. (Sharrett 2012: 46)

Even disregarding the author's opinion, the narrative is far too open-ended to be deemed an anti-utopia. Ozymandias' altruism on taking the guilt of the world and therefore allowing it to heal and grow to be better is betrayed by his egotistical shout "I did it!" (see fig. 2, p. 112) when realizing that his plan worked. Furthermore, his insecurities are also made plain when, reticent at even uttering the words, he asks Doctor Manhattan if what he did was the right thing to do. In a short sentence that is reminiscent of I-330's speech to D-503 that no revolution is a final revolution, Dr Manhattan answers "nothing ends, Adrian. Nothing ever ends." (409).

The narrative refuses to make a case for either side, instead throwing that question back to the reader. The last pages reveal that Rorschach had written a diary of his investigations, leading up to Ozymandias' Veidt Industries, and that he sent his diary to a right-wing newspaper. The final panels show a young man reaching into the bin full of unsolicited files, containing Rorschach's journal. This allows for the possibility that the truth will be discovered. Openness is the key concept here, a final statement that no revolution is final, no utopia can be achieved without creating resistance that will want to bring it down and create something else in its place.

Rorschach's last action can be read as laying the ultimate responsibility on the people, on the common individual and collective which will have to live in the new world brought about by catastrophe. This is a topic that Moore explores in greater depth in *V for Vendetta*.

4.1.4. *V for Vendetta* – Showing The Way Out of Dystopia

V for Vendetta is recognizable as a dystopia from the very first page, much owing to the way the verbal and visual complement each other to achieve a sense of alienation, disturbance and rigidity, something that would immediately resonate with anyone familiar with the genre. In the first page, Moore and Lloyd make use of what Scott McCloud calls parallel combination, in which the words and pictures seem to follow very different courses, without intersecting. Only this non-connectivity is apparent to the

reader, and usually makes sense at some point further in the next panels. In this case, the interplay is done through the use of seemingly unrelated images that, however, all share the same flow of text: a radio broadcast that connects all of them. The reader is thus prompted to recognize it as an introduction to a society, the radio broadcast together with the images of said society forming the general idea of it – or, to use the term most common in film studies, a voice-over played against disparate scenes. In the first panel, the reader sees a blackened sky with tall, grey buildings (see fig. 3, p. 113). These are shown at an angle, as if leaning forward, suggesting their great height towering over everything else. A jag-cornered speech bubble comes from one of the windows, its form suggesting it is a voice projected through electronic devices – radio or television – and its content giving the reader their first clues: whoever is broadcasting this message is in a position of power. The message proclaims itself to be coming from Fate, with an introduction that it is 9 o'clock in the 5th of November 1997. In the second panel the same darkened sky is to be seen, this time in the background against a factory with the workers leaving for the day. There are no particular characteristics and details to them, comprising just a mass of people leaving their work in an orderly fashion. The factory, however, is surrounded by barbed wire which, together with the fact that the reader knows it is 9 o'clock in the evening, points to less than desirable working conditions. To the right of the panel, pointing to the workers, sits a surveillance camera on a post, with the message "For your protection." On the fourth panel the reader is confronted with a car being stopped by policemen, three in total. The broadcasting message continues, warning that two districts in the London area are quarantined and advising people to avoid them – all suggesting a heavy police presence, which, combined with that seen before, implies a totalitarian police state.

The next two panels show a young girl applying makeup with a wearied and concerned look on her face, while the broadcast reports about a possible end to meat rationing starting next year, while at the same time giving "good news" about the increase in the production of egg and potatoes. Any of these characteristics would sound familiar to a reader of the genre, particularly to one of *1984*. And it can be argued that this is the feeling these panels intend to transmit: of control, hopelessness – things usually associated with Orwell's novel. However, on the next panel, a room is portrayed that does not fit with the general mood. It is ruled by disorder, with posters all over its walls overlapping each other and a shelf full of books, between them More's *Utopia* and Marx's *Capital*. The floor is covered in an extravagant carpet, all of which also goes in stark

contrast to the room of the girl in the last two panels. The contrast is not only in the physical set of the room, but also on the personality of those in it – for it is in this panel that we first see someone (unrecognizable as man or woman) walking in a confident manner towards the centre of his room. On the upper right corner of the panel there is the head of a stone gargoyle with a ferocious mandible, a visual metaphor for the mindset of the person in the room. He is also half hidden by shadows, suggesting a dark and enigmatic figure.

In the next five panels, which constitute an introduction before the title of the chapter "The Villain", the two characters are seen dressing themselves, pointing to a parallel between them which only later becomes clear. Nonetheless, at this point in the beginning of the narrative they are opposites and that is also shown through the parallel presentation. While the girl is dressing, the broadcast reports on the latest public appearance of the Queen and her lavish clothes and jewellery, which exacerbates even further the visible poverty and destitute status of the girl.

In the next two panels we see the other character, later shown to be V, putting on his gloves and reaching for his mask while the radio report continues with the messages of a promising future; "Mr. Karel went on to say that it is the duty of every man in this country to seize the initiative and make Britain great again" (10). This text is juxtaposed with V reaching for his mask, which relays to the reader that this character will exert his agency, but probably not in the way intended by the government official, given that he conceals his identity.

Through the use of these medium-specific characteristics, the setting is established – a dystopia in which two characters somehow are or will be connected – one of whom has succumbed under the burdens she bears, as it shortly established that Evey, the girl in the first panels, is resorting to prostitution in order to make enough money to survive; and the other character, V, who does not accept the conditions set by those who rule and devotes himself totally to bringing down the oppressing regime.

There is a marked difference from this introduction to the world in which the narrative is set and that of a traditional dystopia. In *1984*, for example, the reader also learns about the main character, Winston, and the society he lives in. But the focus is more in showing how much of a common man Winston is, very far from what one would imagine of someone who is intent on fighting a corrupt regime. The reader is first acquainted with Winston Smith as a man tucked in his coat, hoping to avoid the cold breeze. Even going up to his apartment proves no easy task for the man, for Winston is 39, has a varicose

ulcer, and "went slowly, resting several times on the way." Opposed to this sorrowful figure, in the first two paragraphs the reader learns about the ruling regime, in this case represented by Big Brother in his posters – more than a meter wide, "the face of a man of about thirty-five, with a heavy black moustache and ruggedly handsome features." (Orwell 2013: 3). While in both cases the rulers and their representations are portrayed as towering over the individual, a marked difference is to be read between the two, one showing a weary individual that struggles in menial tasks, representing hopelessness in the struggle, and the other showing one with a confident stride, aware of his agency and willingness to take action, standing for hope.

The plot was mainly written from the beginning around the prediction by Alan Moore that the Labour Party would win the general elections of 1983 and not the conservative party. This would result in the removal of all missile stations from British territory, making it no longer a military target in the case of war between the two superpowers of the Cold War. This is what happens in the book's universe when war takes place. Despite not being targeted, England suffers through the nuclear fallout that brings about environmental catastrophes (floods that lead to famine), followed by economic and social ones. Amidst the chaos, various right-wing groups come together to form the Norsefire Party, which takes the opportunity and seizes power. After assuring public support through a public discourse based on fighting threats that endanger the nation, the party turns to hate speech and starts to imprison everyone who is not of Caucasian ethnicity, as well as homosexuals, political dissidents and non-Christians. Many go to concentration camps, one of these people being the main character V. While most perished in the camps, V managed to escape, and the narrative takes place years after his escape.

While in *1984* the regime is personified in Big Brother, in *V for Vendetta* the fascist regime is anthropomorphised: the video-surveillance units are the Eye, the audio-surveillance the Ears, the broadcasting agencies (all state-controlled) are the Mouth, the policemen on the ground the Finger, the inspectors the Nose, and at the top the Head, with "Leader" Adam Susan and the computer Fate, which is taken to be a system of Artificial Intelligence that systematizes information to help decision making. As pointed out when discussing the emergence of critical dystopias as a genre, there is no clear distinction or simplification between the different world views. On the same first pages approached earlier, V is presented as "the villain" and, instead of representing a one-dimensional antagonist, Adam Susan, the head of the Norsefire Party, is shown to be a man who thinks deeply and wishes to do good for his people. He takes on the role of the Grand Inquisitor,

of the Benefactor in *We* and Mustapha Mond in *Brave New World*: the one who takes on the burden of assuring his people are safe, even if that means denying them any freedom. In *V for Vendetta*, Adam Susan introduces himself and his world and political views:

> I am the leader. Leader of the lost, ruler of the ruins. I lead the country that I love out of the wilderness of the twentieth century. I believe in survival. In the destiny of the Nordic race. I believe in fascism. Oh yes, I am a fascist. What of it? Fascism…a word. A word whose meaning has been lost in the bleatings of the weak and treacherous. The Romans invented fascism. A bundle of bound twigs was its symbol. One twig could be broken. A bundle would prevail. Fascism… strength in unity. I believe in strength. I believe in unity. And if that strength, that unity of purpose, demands a uniformity of thought, word and deed, then so be it. I will not hear talk of freedom. I will not hear talk of individual liberty. They are luxuries. I do not believe in luxuries. The war put paid to luxury. The war put paid to freedom. The only freedom left to my people is the freedom to starve, the freedom to die, the freedom to live in a world of chaos. Should I allow them that freedom? I think not. I think not. (37-8)

Taking freedom and offering security, the leader wishes to do the best for those he rules. He and his views are not presented as evil, unreal or disproportionate. They are presented in a matter-of-fact way, under a reasonable light. This fact, together with V's introduction as the villain instead of a hero, shows the intention of blurring the line between good and evil, making the reader question his assumptions and challenging his reading habits (especially for those who were used to decades of superhero comics under the Comics Code). Adam Susan's thinking is that of the fascist, but who seeks to ultimately do good. His eutopia is that of order, a world of peace and security to be imposed on its inhabitants for their own good. Both Adam Susan and Ozymandias in *Watchmen* worked with the utopian impulse within themselves to bring about a better tomorrow, even if based on lies, for in their view the end result fully justifies the means. Moore recognizes that this impulse for change is present in every human who is an active and not passive agent, which can be seen as coming from his political views shaped by the dissent decades of the '60s and '70s. Much of V for Vendetta is a direct reaction to Thatcherism and it is curious to note that Thatcher's mindset in 1979, preparing her first Queen's Speech, was bent on change and on taking the opportunity to "set a radical new course" (Evans 1997: 1), a mindset shared by both Ozymandias and Adam Susan.

In "U for Utopia: the dystopian and eutopian visions in Alan Moore and David Lloyd's *V for Vendetta*", Paul Moffett argues that this graphical narrative is, first and foremost, a conflict of ideologies. With V standing for anarchism and Adam Susan and the Norsefire Party for Fascism, Moffett sees the two played out as alternatives to one another. In his view, the narrative makes the point that "the alternative to political extremism is not political moderation, it is political extremism in a different direction." (Moffett 2016: 4).

To take this view is, however, to ignore the focus on liberty and freedom offered by V. As the revolutionary that opens the way for something better and new, V recognizes that he was part of the destructive first part of revolution, and removes himself after it is achieved. As he points out to Evey when making clear that he has been preparing her to take his place: "Anarchy wears two faces, both creator and destroyer. Thus destroyers topple empires; make a canvas of clean rubble where creators can build a better world. Rubble, once achieved, makes further ruins' means irrelevant. Away with our explosives, then! Away with our destroyers! They have no place within our better world." (222). V then follows the line of anarchist theory that sees the necessity of "gigantic revolutionary change", and afterwards the construction of "a new, stable, and rational order based on freedom and solidarity." (Guérin 1970: 12). Thus, the envisioned anarchist utopia would not be a "fixed, enclosed social system", which as seen by V's focus on giving responsibility back to people instead of indoctrinating them, "strives for the free unhindered unfolding of all the individual and social forces in life". The focus is and must remain freedom instead of order imposed from above, as Rudolf Rocker puts it: "For the anarchist, freedom is not an abstract philosophical concept, but the vital concrete possibility for every human being to bring to full development all the powers, capabilities, and talents with which nature had endowed him, and turn them to social account." (quoted in Guérin 1970: Introduction). For this reason, both V and Adam Susan can also be seen as separate sides of the utopian tradition. While Adam Susan seeks change through rigid control from above, the same impulse which can be seen in the utopian literature of earlier centuries, V seeks order through freedom, inserting his utopian vision in those "dreams of freedom" of the '70s.

V lives and dies by his conviction, allowing himself to be mortally wounded once the regime is falling, for he, the destroyer, would have no part to play in the aftermath. This role he leaves to Evey. In the last pages Evey appears, dressed as V, during a protest in the streets after the murder of Adam Susan and the collapse of the fascist regime, to proclaim her message of utopian hope:

> Since mankind's dawn, a handful of oppressors have accepted the responsibility over our lives that we should have accepted for ourselves. By doing so, they took our power. By doing nothing, we gave it away. We've seen where their way leads, through camps and wars, towards the slaughterhouse. In anarchy there is another way. With anarchy, from rubble comes new life, hope reinstated. They say anarchy's dead, but see… reports of my death were… exaggerated. Tomorrow, Downing Street will be destroyed, the Head reduced to ruins, an end to what has gone before. Tonight, you must choose what comes next. Lives of our own, or a return to chains. Choose carefully. (258)

No political ideology is forced upon the citizens. What V's actions achieved throughout the whole narrative was to bring people to a pre-political stage: free from ideology and with full responsibility for their future, they must choose and work to make it better than it previously was. Evey ends the narrative proclaiming as much:

> The people stand within the ruins of society, a jail intended to outlive them all. The door is open. They can leave, or fall instead to squabbling and thence new slaveries. The choice is theirs, as ever it must be. I will not lead them, but I'll help them build. Help them create where I'll not help them kill. The age of killers is no more. They have no place within our better world. (260)

What is offered is a fresh start. The old having been destroyed, a vacuum is left for them to take responsibility and create something new and better out of the ruins.

4.1.5. *V for Vendetta* – Resistance and Revolution

V does not simply conduct a personal vendetta against those who imprisoned him, but also and most importantly takes the job of forcing the idle population to awaken. To take action, to assert one's agency and be responsible for one's choices, is his main concern. At the beginning of the narrative, after saving Evey from corrupt government agents intent on raping her, he takes her to witness the destruction of the Houses of Parliament, an historical symbol of power and order. Afterwards, V gradually disables the ruling party by disposing of its key members and its surveillance apparatus, slowly crippling it until it no longer functions properly. However, the goal is not to single-handedly bring down the fascist regime, but to awaken the people that have gotten used to its initial promised comforts, who longer care about trading their freedom for security. As Peter Paik notes, the people in Moore's narrative are "impoverished and chafe at the cruel and excessive character of fascist authority", which nonetheless they have accepted after a nuclear war that made most of continental Europe vanish, along with the whole African continent. The consequent absolute chaos in England left them "stunned and depleted":

> Indeed, it is the overwhelming nature of their sufferings, as well as their desire for a quick and definitive end to the incessant bloodshed on the streets, that have led them to accept, however reluctantly, the mass murder of racial and sexual minorities in internment camps. Crushed by the agony of their losses and consumed by the arduous struggle to survive in a dangerous and poisoned environment, the traumatized subjects of this postapocalyptic totalitarian dystopia elected to deafen themselves to the voice of consciousness in order to secure the practical necessities of life. (Paik 2010: 156-7)

Although the initial extreme conditions explain the adherence to a system that promises security and even the act of looking the other way when government-controlled mass murders are taking place, it does not explain how the system continues in the future once such dire conditions have been overcome. Václav Havel called this phenomenon the social auto-totality of living in a totalitarian state, in which "everyone in his or her own way is both a victim and a supporter of the system" for, by adapting to it, they create the very conditions necessary for its existence, becoming both victims and instruments of the system. Adapting to the system seems to be the only viable option to the citizen at that specific point, if order is to be restored and the citizen is to be left to live his life in peace, undisturbed by the system's internal security apparatus. After this initial adaptation, the system takes on the responsibility for and invades every facet of human life, and it perpetuates itself through those very same citizens. They surrender their identity to that of the system, participating and sharing responsibility in it "so they may create through their involvement a general norm and, thus, bring pressure on their fellow citizens. And further: so they may learn to be comfortable with their involvement […]" (Havel 2018: 31-3). Writing in the years after the events of Prague in 1968, Havel analyses and critiques not only the soviet satellite states and their rule but also the western democracies, which in his view exert just as much control as the communist rulers, only delivered in a different package. For Havel, the decision to live under such conditions and to not revolt is as much part of people as is the drive to live freely and in harmony with others, which poses a conflict in each human. For, in Havel's view, while there is in everyone a wish to live with rightful dignity, with moral integrity, with a freedom to express oneself, each person is also capable of surrendering those wishes in trade for basic comforts and security:

> Each person somehow succumbs to a profane trivialization of his or her inherent humanity, and to utilitarianism. In everyone there is some willingness to merge with the anonymous crowd and flow comfortably along with it down the river of pseudo-life. […] Is it not true that the far-reaching adaptability to living a lie and the effortless spread of social auto-totality have some connection with the general unwillingness of consumption-oriented people to sacrifice some material certainties for the sake of their own spiritual and moral integrity? (Havel 35)

This pull between two opposites inside each individual is represented in the comic through various characters. Derek Almond, head of the Fingermen (the state-police), is killed off unceremoniously by V, leaving his widowed wife Rosemary Almond to resort to working in a strip club in order to survive. It is only at this stage that the conflict inside her rises to the surface when she considers all that has happened, the rise of the party and

the subsequent persecution of innocent people: “Mrs Rana next door loaned us food all through the war years. When they dragged her and her children off in separate vans we didn’t intervene.” (205). It is Rosemary Almond that, in the final chaotic stages of the narrative, assassinates Adam Susan, the leader of the ruling Norsefire Party, in a public parade attempting to restore order. This is an extreme case of success for V who was able to take a compliant citizen and turn her into an active violent agent. Mr Finch, the leader of the Nose (the police investigators) visits the concentration camps, specifically Larkhill, where V was imprisoned, in an attempt to understand him. Looking at the ovens designed to burn human bodies, Mr Finch asks himself if he would have supported the party had he known that such mass murders would take place. His answer is yes, he would have, for in the chaos after the war, in which he lost his wife and son, the party offered what society needed at the time: order (211). Mr Finch, in seeking order and security after a monumental loss, was ready for what Havel described as the voluntary abdication of one’s own reason, conscience, and responsibility to a higher authority (Havel 2018: 10). Another example is the case of Doctor Delia Surridge, who was the head of the medical experimentations at the Larkhill Internment Camp, where V was under arrest and suffered torture and medical experimentation. Doctor Surridge is portrayed as a simple woman, with no particular ideological viewpoints, but who nonetheless followed the orders given to her by those she believed knew best, and for which she lived with remorse for the rest of her life. She takes death by V’s hand peacefully with dignified, seemingly happy to be liberated from guilt.

For such an all-encompassing system that makes its victims work for and perpetuate it, Havel argues that the first step in resistance and revolt must be at the level of human consciousness and conscience. It takes someone, in his words, to shout that the King is in fact naked, and the lie is exposed, the game shown for what it is, and it becomes ready to be torn down (Havel 2018: 42-4). For this reason, the narrative begins with the very public (followed by fireworks) destruction of the Houses of Parliament. The head of the Norsefire party realizes this problem when he admonishes the head of the Fingermen for the lack of information on what happened: “Your incompetence has costs us our oldest symbol of authority and a jarring propaganda defeat. Do you understand what happened last night? Someone did the unthinkable. Someone hurt us.” (16). Adam Susan means of course that it is not unthinkable that someone could hurt his party, but that to the people over which he rules it must unavoidably seem so if the system is to rule and continue to exert power over the population.

The citizens are being jolted out of their stupor, and V's next action is to address the population at large through television. Taking the broadcasting station into his control, V transmits a message into every inhabitant's home, in which he urges those in slumber to rise and take responsibility for their actions or lack thereof:

> We've had a string of embezzlers, frauds, liars and lunatics making a string of catastrophic decisions. But who elected them? It was you! You who appointed these people! You gave them the power to make your decisions for you! […] You have accepted without question their senseless orders! You have allowed them to fill your workspace with dangerous and unproven machines. You could have stopped them. All you had to say was "no." (116-7) (see fig. 4, p. 114)

For V, the culprits of fascism are as much those who perpetuate it as those who stand by and do nothing to resist it, which, as Havel points out, must therefore conform to it and consequently propagate it as well. Therefore, all of his actions are aimed simultaneously at showing that the system and its permeability are only illusionary, and jolting people into action. His whole speech admonishes people for, despite humanity's past achievements, constantly letting themselves be led by others, the liars and embezzlers he mentions. In this panel, juxtaposed against his body is a picture of Adolph Hitler, Benito Mussolini and Joseph Stalin. Taking the mocking role of an employer, V urges everyone to take action and live life with responsibility, allowing for a period of two years by the end of which, seeing no improvements, the population would be "fired". It is crucial to note that V does not propose another system of government, does not wish to take the place at the head of government, and does not even try to recruit people into his quest of bringing down the fascist regime. He is addressing, after all, the same people that stood by and looked the other way as he and thousands of others were rounded up and sent to their deaths in concentration camps. His actions, however, do not derive from simple pettiness or anger, but from a wish to make the country's population take it upon itself to rule. The first step must inevitably be freedom, for which he provides methodically throughout the narrative, disabling the various facets of the regime (mainly its surveillance apparatus). But the next action cannot come from another leader, but from the collective mind. As Hannah Arendt points out, simply bringing down a regime or leader to be replaced by another is liberation, which is different from freedom. Liberation is only the precondition, but it must then work towards freedom, which does not come automatically upon liberation (Arendt 19-20). For Arendt, only when the oppositional and dissenting actions are tied with the idea of freedom can it be termed a "revolution" – revolution being more than a successful insurrection, a coup d'état or rebellion:

> All these phenomena [insurrection, rebellion, etc.] have in common with revolution that they are brought about by violence, and this is the reason why they are so frequently identified with it. But violence is no more adequate to describe the phenomenon of revolution than change; only where change occurs in the sense of a new beginning where violence is used to constitute an altogether different form of government, to bring about the formation of a new body politic, where the liberation from oppression aims at least at the constitution of freedom can we speak of revolution. (Arendt 2006: 25)

Thus, V's endeavour can be called a genuine revolution, following Arendt's terminology. He does not wish to replace or switch leadership, but to achieve freedom. His concept of freedom is one without leaders, in which people take responsibility for their own actions, their own governance and associations. V envisions this future better world as an anarchist eutopia. He takes care to dispel any thought that anarchy is synonymous with chaos: "Anarchy means 'without leaders', not 'without order'. With anarchy comes an age of *Ordnung*, of true order, which is to say voluntary order." (195). Showing an awareness of the utopian literature tradition of which it is a part, the narrative distances itself from the early Renaissance utopias that strove for control and order, as seen above, following instead the genre revival brought first by the critical utopias with their focus on freedom, fluidity and plurality.

As utopian fiction, *V for Vendetta* deals directly with the utopian impulse present in various characters and offers different views on the subject, blurring any dichotomies of good and evil. It repeatedly shows how any change can lead either way, how no revolution is final. As dystopian fiction, the graphical narrative portrays a society worse than that of its contemporary reader, with links to it and its sociopolitical issues. It begins already at the "bad place" and, as Moylan demonstrates as characteristic of dystopian narratives, presents a narrative of the hegemonic order and a counter narrative of resistance (Moylan 2000: 148). It is also a "politically charged form of hybrid textuality", for it comprises another key characteristic for Moylan, the negotiation "of the social terrain of Utopia and Anti-Utopia in a less stable and contentious fashion than many of their eutopian and anti-utopian counterparts." (2000: 147). The narrative swings between anti-utopia through Adam Susan, who represents the betrayal of revolutionary ideals, and utopian views that a better place is indeed possible, with only the end of the narrative positing trust in hope that a change and revolution for the better, focused on freedom and not on fixed values and rigidity, is possible.

More relevantly, as a critical dystopian narrative it is self-reflexive on the utopian literary tradition and insists on exploring what came before it, showing the flaws inherent

in a utopian drive set on order, opting instead for a focus on freedom. To achieve this, it turns the typical utopian narrative on its head, in which society comes first and the individual is made to serve it, and instead offers the opposite possibility of a society that is based on individual freedom, a society built in favor of the individual. This, as it has been repeated, can only come through the individual himself, the one who makes full use of his agency and takes responsibility for his own actions. Thus, while it presents a dystopian society through most of the narrative, it ends with its destruction and the possibility for something new, a beacon of hope within its pages. Not content to be simply read as a warning like the typical dystopian narrative, it goes a step further and shows how militant and political action must and can be taken to improve the world inhabited by the characters. This ultimate realization, and the demand for growth in the common individual by V, is also present in the very last page. With the masses revolting and chaos in London, detective Finch, the one who mortally wounded V, is offered the possibility to "create a small army" and "restore order" (265). He rejects the offer, and the very last panel of the comic is of Finch walking away from the city. Thus, *V for Vendetta* rejects the typical dystopian closure of the defeat of the individual, opting instead for an open end that maintains the utopian impulse within its pages. It also self-reflexively addresses the utopian literary tradition by, instead of portraying a static place, focusing on change and what it takes to achieve it, the price of eutopia.

Finally, like the two previously mentioned works, *V for Vendetta* is explicitly political, making reference to real-world events and establishing its setting in the world of the reader, separated from reality by only a few years. In all of the three works, much of the focus is on what the individual can do to bring about change. Sean Carney calls this Moore's "philosophical interest in the meaningfulness of humanity" as an historical factor that brings change and thus progress, which is set against the "political conservatism dominating the west" (Carney 2006: 4). Living himself in what he saw as a bad place, after the elections of Thatcher in 1979 and Ronald Reagan in 1980, Moore set out to create works that reflected this reality but nonetheless posited hope in change for the better through individuals who did not shy away from their political responsibilities and sought to actively participate in history.

4.2 *Akira* by Katsuhiro Otomo

4.2.1. Summary

Akira's plot, which does not follow any particular character but instead takes various different points of view, can be thus summarized: the first pages depict the explosion of a "new type of bomb" over the metropolitan area of Tokyo in 1982, which marks the beginning of World War III. It then jumps to 37 years later, to Neo-Tokyo. The new city has been built around the crater of the initial explosion, which has yet to be cleared. The reader then meets a group of biker gang members, whose leader is Kaneda. They are joy riding through the city when, unintentionally, they ride into the crater site. Deciding to race back into the city, one of the bikers, Tetsuo, rides ahead of the pack only to be met by a strange boy in the middle of the road. Tetsuo crashes his motorcycle and moments later military helicopters show up, apparently in pursuit of the strange boy that caused the accident. Kaneda arrives at the scene only to see the strange boy disappear into thin air.

The gang members resume their lives and occasionally attend the vocational school of the district, but there is no sign of Tetsuo. They later find out that he has been kept in a military hospital that is running tests on him. They slowly discover that the child that Tetsuo crashed into is part and a result of a secret military project which seeks to awaken psychic abilities in children in order to use them for international political and military gains. The crash has apparently spurred Tetsuo's psychic development, and he begins to show promising power. The military project is currently comprised of three children who have the countenance of old people: Takashi, Masuro and Kyoko.

As Tetsuo's powers develop, he starts to feel drawn to something or someone called Akira, and comes to find that he was another child with extraordinary capabilities. Due to the danger he poses, Akira has been put in cryogenic sleep in a secret military base underneath the bomb crater of 1982. The three children of the project and Lady Miyako, herself a former test subject and now leader of a new-age religious movement, all sense that Tetsuo will awaken Akira and cause disaster, and all try to stop him. However, Tetsuo manages to awaken Akira, only to be met by a seemingly harmless and speechless child. The next developments in the narrative all revolve around the various groups trying to acquire and control Akira, seen as immensely dangerous by some while regarded as a saviour messiah by others. The military, represented by the Colonel, want to control his power in order to use it to further the nation's goals. The children of the project and Lady Miyako all want to avoid catastrophe, as it is later revealed that it was Akira that caused

the explosion in Tokyo in 1982 and not a foreign nation. Nezu, a corrupt politician, and his populist party try to acquire Akira for their personal gain. Ryu and Kai, who are part of a clandestine armed organization, seek to get Akira free from the military and use him to bring down the corrupt government and the authoritarian military. Kaneda and his motorcycle gang are drawn into the fight, both in order to get revenge against Tetsuo and because of Kaneda's love interest in Kai, the guerrilla fighter.

Around the middle of the narrative, Akira loses control of himself and causes another massive explosion amidst the fighting for control over him, like the one 37 years earlier. An enormous part of the city is destroyed and any remaining governmental or military authority disappears. Tetsuo and Akira form the Great Tokyo Empire, which occupies the western part of the city in contrast to Lady Miyako and her followers, who control the eastern part.

The city falls into chaos in the ruins, amidst conflict between the two factions and foreign interventions by US spies and assassination teams, and Soviet research teams. As Tetsuo gradually loses control of his power and becomes another atomic threat, Lady Miyako and the children devise a plan to drive him to the extreme, at which point Akira would use his power to absorb Tetsuo's and avoid a catastrophe that could destroy the whole planet. The plan ultimately succeeds, leaving the city in ruins and Kaneda, Kai, and the motorcycle gang in control.

4.2.2. Atomic Bomb Manga

Akira, written and illustrated by Katsuhiro Otomo, began its weekly serialization in *Young Magazine* in 1982 and ran until 1990. Its very first page has no panels, showing instead Earth on the bottom half and, on the upper half, the text "At 2:17 P.M. on December 6th, 1982, a new type of bomb exploded over the metropolitan area of Japan…" (see fig 5, p. 115). Parting the clouds on the planet, a giant black half-sphere can be made out. By turning the page, the reader is confronted with a closeup of the half-sphere, revealed to be the explosion. It takes two whole pages, a giant black mass in the middle completely destroying a city, ruined buildings shown at the edges. (see fig. 6, p. 116).

This opening, while engaging and shocking the reader, immediately establishes the comic as atom bomb fiction. This is of particular importance in Japan, being the only nation up to this date to have directly suffered the consequences of a nuclear attack. Even though Japan had been heavily bombed in the preceding months, the atom bomb is of a

different scale in the proportion of insidious destruction. For example, the raids on Tokyo that took place on March 1945 in which as many as 300 bombers dropped incendiary bombs on the city caused approximately the same number of direct casualties as the atom bomb dropped on Hiroshima later that year on August the 6th. The difference lies in the proportion: one atomic device versus several tons of bombs, the heavy employment of resources and hundreds of airplanes on the raids versus the single B29 dropping a bomb that in a split second destroys a city and causes 100,000 deaths; the comparative normality of the incendiary bombs versus a new type of weapon that not only caused direct damage, but spread radiation that caused the deaths of countless others in the following weeks, months, and years. The nuclear aftereffect that spread even to the next generations, to the children of survivors, is of a debilitating nature that leaves its own trauma.

While in Europe people were confronted with the trauma of the Holocaust, which was well documented and photographed under the direct orders of Eisenhower so that it could not be denied in posterity that it had in fact really happened, in Japan the occupying allied forces under General MacArthur imposed heavy censorship on the topic of the atom bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Japan surrendered on 15th August; as soon as September, newspapers were being prohibited from publishing any news at all for fear of breaking the allied imposition that "nothing shall be printed which might, directly or indirectly, disturb public tranquillity." (Braw 1991: 39-41). An anecdotal example is that of Wilfred Burchett, an Australian reporter for the London Daily Express, who was the first foreign journalist to arrive at Hiroshima after the war. Burchett explored the remaining ruins of the city and conducted interviews with the survivors, gaining special insight into what had happened. He was able to send his story to London, and it was published on the 6th of September. The story described how, 30 days after the atomic attack, "people are still dying, mysteriously and horribly", even people who were uninjured by the explosion, resulting in something he can only describe as "the atomic plague." (quoted in Braw 1991: 91). Arriving in Tokyo the day after, Burchett was ushered by the US authorities into a press conference with the aim of denying these allegations. The official discourse was that the victims the reporter had seen had suffered burns caused by the explosion, and their subsequent deaths resulted from the lack of Japanese expertise in treating such wounds and general lack of medicine. At Burchett's exclamation that even the fish in the rivers were dying, something he had seen with his own eyes, the response was that he had fallen victim to Japanese propaganda. (Braw 1991: 91-2).

Censorship was also already practiced regarding the bomb on the part of the Japanese authorities, even before the official surrender of the Japanese Imperial Army. News of the attack on Hiroshima was slow to reach Tokyo, and when it did, they failed to transmit the scope of what had happened. When the authorities realized that it had not been a regular bombing raid, they issued a news story for the newspapers to run. Hoping not to cause panic and demoralize the people, who were being mentally prepared to fight to the death against an amphibious invasion, the official report stated that various smaller cities had been attacked by a large number of B-29 bombers (Braw 1991: 11-13).

This reluctance to openly discuss what had happened and active censorship on the part of both sides, occupier and occupied, only grew more vital to both nation's interests in the following years. As the animosities developed into the Cold War, a powerful ally in the far east was of critical importance to the US, resulting in the quick swiping away of the past into a closely-knit future in which the two nations had no reason not to cooperate. In *Japan's Contested War Memories* (2007), Phillip A. Seaton marks the year of 1949 as the pivotal moment for this U-turn – the purges of wartime military leaders and bureaucrats stopped to give way to purges of anyone with left-wing views. This not only made public discussion of the employment of atomic weapons in Japan virtually impossible, but also took away the chance from the common Japanese citizen to reflect on the war and learn from it, not only regarding the attacks on Japan but also about the atrocities committed by Imperial soldiers in China and Korea, which had been slowly made public by the occupying forces. This whole period of possible reflection and atonement was then summarily "overtaken by cold war politics." (Seaton 2007: 36-8).

It was only in the '70s that the atomic bomb question started being discussed by the general public, and much of this openness is owed to Keiji Nakazawa, a manga artist who was a Hiroshima survivor. In 1945 Nakazawa was 6 years old and on the morning of the 6th of August was on his way to school. While he stopped and turned around to answer a colleague's mother's question, he stood behind the school's concrete wall. At that moment the bomb fell and detonated. Nakazawa was protected by the wall which collapsed on him, while everyone around him instantly died and turned black due to the extreme heat. Nakazawa's pregnant mother survived and prematurely gave birth on that day due to the shock, but the baby would die of malnutrition at only 4 months old. Nakazawa's father, sister and younger brother all perished when their house collapsed and caught on fire. His two brothers survived; the eldest was a student drafted to work in the factories in the war effort, while the youngest had been evacuated to the countryside.

In the years following the tragedy, Nakazawa tried his best to let go of the traumatic experience and move on with his life, mimicking the national sentiment. In his early twenties he moved to Tokyo to try and become a successful manga artist, and it was in the capital city that he was again confronted with the past. When confiding to his friends that he was a *hibakusha*, an atomic-bomb survivor, he was met with shock and saw people, even close friends, distance themselves from him. This judgment, Nakazawa came to find out, stems from the lack of knowledge regarding the atomic bomb and its effects. He is astounded to learn that in Tokyo, with people from all over the country, there are so many rumours and non-factual knowledge of what had happened – for example, it was widely believed that one could catch "radiation disease" from a person who had been infected by it, from a survivor of the blast (Nakazawa 2010: 146-7). Conflicted regarding the discrimination and general disinformation, Nakazawa decides to completely avoid the topic and henceforth omit that he was a survivor.

The turning point in this attitude towards his personal trauma came in 1966 when his mother passed away. In Japan it is customary to gather the bones from a cremated corpse and store them symbolically in a small urn. Nakazawa was deeply distressed and grieved at finding no bones of his mother between the ashes. As he came later to find out, this was because of the radiation that had eaten away at her corpse from the inside, weakening the bones which disintegrated in the fire. On the ride back to Tokyo, Nakazawa could not help thinking and revisiting the trauma that refused to go away from his life, that even denied him closure on his mother's death. Nakazawa recalls asking himself "Have the Japanese pursued and settled responsibility for the war? Have the Japanese pursued and settled the issue of the atomic bomb?" (2010: 151-2). Not doing so, in his view, meant that the hundreds of thousands of deaths from the bomb, the millions of deaths from the war, and the death of his family members were ultimately meaningless. With the looming thought that the lessons of Hiroshima and Nagasaki had not been learned, Nakazawa rejected his previous resolution to avoid the topic and started to write and draw manga that dealt directly with this issue. Despite no longer being under the censorship laws that prohibited its discussion, Nakazawa's first atom bomb manga, *Pelted by Black Rain*, was refused publishing several times due to its "sharply-worded political criticism" and "scathing indictment of the atomic bomb" (Nakazawa 2010: 153). His disillusionment and disappointment only grew with the following years of publishing atomic manga. Nakazawa wrote mainly short manga stories, of up to 80 pages, through minor alternative magazines instead of the biggest mainstream ones. As his stories gained popularity, he

received more and more fan mail from people all over Japan that had no knowledge regarding the two atomic bombs – their destructive power, effects and aftereffects on survivors, even on second-generation survivors. Nakazawa was simultaneously angered and disappointed that the central episode of his life and one that embraced the history of the whole nation suffered from such a widespread lack of awareness.

Nakazawa became internationally famous with his semi-autobiographical long story manga *Barefoot Gen*, published in various magazines between 1973 and 1987 with several breaks in between. The English version comprises ten volumes and tells the story of Gen, Nakazawa's alter-ego, who survives the Hiroshima bombing. The destruction of the city only happens at the end of volume 1, after depicting Gen's and his family's pitiful life of starvation and poverty in wartime Japan. The family is also ostracized by its neighbours because of Gen's father's outspoken views against the war. Inevitably the book was met with controversy, not only for the depiction of living conditions but also of the treatment of minorities, represented in the manga by Mr. Pak, the Korean neighbour. Gen's father comments that "Korean and Chinese people are brought here and forced to help with Japan's war effort… It's all because of the war." (Nakazawa 2004a: 72) (see fig. 7 p. 117). This is not the only controversial topic of wartime Japan in the comic. The use of Kamikaze troops in the finals months is also closely depicted through the personal struggle of a navy pilot who is torn between his indoctrinated sense of duty towards the land and the Emperor, and his desire to return home to his mother and bride and live a full life (see fig. 8, p. 118).

While maintaining the distinct visual cartoony style of mainstream manga that Nakazawa had developed in the previous years, *Barefoot Gen* graphically depicts the horrors of war on a civilian population, before, during, and after the atomic explosion. The atomic bomb is, however, its central focus, as everything changes with it. The critical moment in the manga depicts both Gen's point of view, going to school, and from the Enola Gay, the B-29 that dropped the bomb. Immediately afterwards, Nakazawa tries to reproduce the shock of the explosion through his drawings. Employing larger panels, the enormous mushroom cloud stands high above mountains and an injured Gen tries to go back to his house while all around him charred and burned corpses lie dead. The few remaining survivors in the area walk around trying hopelessly to stop their skin and muscles from melting away, while begging for water (fig. 9, p. 119).

This period of the mid '70s has been marked as one of change, of a turning point: a generational conflict rose between the Japanese baby-boomers, born in the years after the

war, and the older generation that had lived through the war and, in many cases, had been indoctrinated in the worship of the Emperor in the years prior to it. The boomers were now adults capable of questioning and challenging their parents' and the previous generation's war conduct and responsibility (Seaton 2007: 43). As Japan further developed with double digit yearly development in the '70s, the nation slowly regained the confidence to re-enter the international political scene, which it did most notably in the '80s. Due to this, what had been an internal discussion of guilt and war responsibility became an international issue, with many (mostly Asian) nations looking closely into how the Japanese people were dealing with the issue. It continued to be a delicate issue and far from being resolved, as seen by the many examples of ex-soldiers and survivors that took the opportunity of openness to publish or simply tell their stories, and were met with extreme pressure from conservative and nationalist officials and intellectuals, who exerted pressure to keep such stories from being published or simply publicly called them fake (Seaton 2007: 46).

On the side of fictional publications, there are various works from this period that deal with the atomic question at least in some way, giving reason to Noi Sawaragi's claim that the subculture movements drew heavily from the Pacific War, while mainstream art like painting did not approach it, with the exception of wartime paintings directly commissioned by the military (Sawaragi 2005: 197). Besides the manga works of Nakazawa, one of the most popular is the anime *Space Battleship Yamato* which aired in 1974. It tells the struggle of humanity for survival after being attacked by an alien race with a new bomb that spreads radiation throughout Earth's surface and leaves it uninhabitable. The last hope for mankind is the Space Battleship Yamato, which embarks on a journey to defeat the enemy race. The parallels with World War II are undeniable, most obviously with the atomic weapons and the Battleship Yamato, hailed by the end of the war as Japan's last hope in stopping the allied approach from the mainland. Perhaps the most famous example predates *Barefoot Gen* by decades: *Godzilla* opened in cinemas in 1954 and addressed much of the repressed anxiety and anger of the Japanese population through a science fiction narrative.

The issue of responsibility and guilt regarding the war is still open and controversial today, as seen by the incident in 2013 where copies of Nakazawa's *Barefoot Gen* were removed from a public library for its depiction of atrocities committed by Japanese soldiers during the war (Chute 2016: 121).

Returning to the opening pages of *Akira*, it is clear how the explosion of a "new type of bomb" over Tokyo was no simple narrative construction to grab the interest of the reader. It immediately labels itself as atomic manga, one in a line of works that have taken it upon themselves to deal with an issue the official authorities and academia have been keen to bury away and forget. The artist Takashi Murakami sees the pivotal moment of the end of WWII as the birth of the Japanese Postmodernism and equally the birth of contemporary popular culture, and sees the manga and anime works that deal with these difficult topics as the ones that forced the general public not only to deal with them, but through it to come to respect and admire both media:

> We feel an abiding sense of righteous indignation at the use of atomic bombs to bring the Pacific War to a close. We level cheap shots at the Japanese government, which placed Japan in that final scenario and then concealed the truth about the bombs' effects. We feel complex emotions towards the Americans who thrust the terror of nuclear annihilation upon Japan. Added to this is our own cowardly rage for accepting control as a necessary evil. All of this simmered in the Japanese consciousness as dogma without direction. When these contexts emerged, the message reached its audience in the guise of children's programming; because reality was portrayed through anime, Japan finally discovered genuine respect for its creators. (Murakami 2005: 123).

Upon introducing itself as atomic manga, *Akira* never lets go of the theme and fully explores it throughout its more than 2000 pages. While some critics see this topic as one of many present in the work, it could be argued to be the central and defining one, the one that ties all other narrative aspects of the graphic narrative together. In "Akira, Postmodernism and Resistance", Isolde Standish claims that the film version takes four "historical signifiers" and juxtaposes them to represent the corruption and degeneration of contemporary ('80s) Japanese society, creating an "historical pastiche":

1. The *kurai tani* (dark valley) period (1931-41) of pre-war Japan when right wing military factions combined with industrialists and politicians vied for control of the nation
2. The dropping the atomic bomb in Hiroshima and Nagasaki
3. The Tokyo Olympics
4. The social unrest and the student demonstrations of the '60s against the AMPO US-Japan Security Treaty (Standish 1998: 63)

Standish also argues that the film is a critical dystopia because it "projects images of a futuristic city which perpetuates the worst features of advanced corporate capitalism: urban decay, commodification and authoritarian policing." (Standish 1998: 66). While all of those are valid points, it shall be argued that the dropping of the atomic bomb in

Hiroshima and Nagasaki takes centre stage in the conception of the narrative, being the common ground that connects all the other points instead of just another in a list. Moreover, while characteristics like urban decay, commodification and authoritarian or military police states are certainly dystopic, the presence of a critique of those does not make a work automatically a critical dystopia. For that, it needs to depict a concrete and clear path to the dystopic society, its history and maladies, take a political stance and offer a message of hope that can be articulated within the pages of the work. It is relevant to note that much criticism on *Akira* focuses on the film and its postmodernist aspects. The film, however, was completed before the end of the comic and only comprises around a third of its content. Many issues and secondary plots and characters are greatly expanded in the manga, with the time and space that Japanese comics allow.

4.2.3. *Akira* – Addressing the Trauma

Otomo's knowledge and approach to Japanese history is evident, as he established many parallels for the reader to uncover. For example, the initial explosion in the manga takes place in 1982, which triggers WWIII, starting 37 years after the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The events of the manga and the following city-destroying explosions take place 37 years after the explosion of 1982, in 2019. Thus, the parallel of WWII – WWIII and the current day in the manga as the Japan of the 1980's is clear. Moreover, the repetition seems to hint at a cyclical conception of time, one in which the same catastrophic and apocalyptic events will continuously take place unless something breaks the wheel, unless the new generations learn from history and its mistakes. Otomo is writing for young adults, and this disconnection with the traumatic past is one of his main concerns, as witnessed by various narrative aspects of the comic. For example, at the very beginning, when Kaneda and his motorcycle gang almost drive into the bomb crater, it happens because they cannot see very far ahead, especially at the speed they are driving. Once they stop short of the fall and examine it, they cannot make sense of it. It bears no significance to them, apart from the eerie feeling knowing that so many died in this place. Tetsuo summarily explains that the government plans on building the Olympic Stadium for the upcoming Olympic Games right on top of the crater, literally covering up the past. A clear reference to the 1964 Olympic Games held in Tokyo, Otomo comments on how they were employed to showcase the world a recovered and healed Japan, even while so many war issues, such as aid for the survivors of the atomic bombings and the

question of responsibility for the war, were left unaddressed. The manga takes place in a present that is disconnected with the past: while it is there, at the dead centre of the city, it is unreachable and unknowable. This pull between forgetting the past and uncovering is present throughout the whole narrative, played out through the characters of Tetsuo and Akira.

The disconnection with the past and the previous generation is further exacerbated in the comic through the non-existence of redeeming adult characters. Between the authoritarian Colonel, the corrupt Nezu, and the ineffective and ultimately useless members of the general ruling council of the nation, the younger generation of Kaneda and Tetsuo are left to fend for themselves. Abandoned by their birth parents and shipped off to a vocational school, they find a sense of community and camaraderie in the gang, their only family. The biker gang is a direct reference to the Bōsōzoku gangs of the '80s in Japan, a subculture or counterculture movement.

The Colonel is the only adult that is a constant from the beginning to the end, and one of the characters that is developed throughout the series. In the beginning, he is the ruthless head of the military and of the Akira Project, responsible for acquiring data on how to control Akira before his reawakening. He is depicted as part of the old generation that seeks to blindly acquire power. Visiting the secret military facility where Akira is held frozen, the Colonel berates the lack of courage of the national council in pursing this path: "What a disgrace! They were afraid…ashamed… They chose to conceal it…they buried the roots of a great civilization… They lacked the courage to go further…and they turned their backs on what science had to offer them… They tried to seal it away forever – the hole they had torn open with their own hands." (*Akira* vol.1, 215-6[2]). The Colonel's relation to Akira is twofold – on the one hand, he seeks to control Akira and bring power and international relevance to his nation; on the other, he is afraid of Akira's power, for he knows what it is capable of. When Tetsuo begins his quest to find out where Akira is being stored and to reawaken him, the Colonel does everything he can to stop him. When Tetsuo succeeds in awakening Akira, the Colonel uses SOL, a satellite in space which is capable of shooting a laser beam. Since he cannot yet control either Tetsuo or Akira, the Colonel prefers to eliminate both and avoid a possible catastrophe like the one 37 years earlier. He only manages to injure Tetsuo, destroying his right arm with the laser weapon.

[2] All direct quotes from the Akira manga refer to the 35th Anniversary Edition published in six volumes by Kodansha Comics in 2007. Hence, the following quotes will refer only to the volume number and page

When Akira is loose in the city and the various factions are all striving to reach him, the Colonel stages a military coup d'état and takes control of the city in order to regain control of the situation. Up until the very end of the narrative, the Colonel sees the awakening of Akira and of Tetsuo's power and the ensuing destruction of the city as his responsibility, and he makes it his single goal to destroy both.

It is at this stage, around half way through the narrative, that the second disaster takes place. While all factions desperately try to gain possession of Akira after his recent reawakening, the city is in total chaos and numerous armed skirmishes take place. It is at this point that the second explosion takes place, again caused by Akira. At this stage he is nothing more than pure energy, without any trace of a personality. Despite that, witnessing one of his close friends from the project, Takashi, being murdered triggers an emotional response in him which causes massive destruction with Akira at its centre. As seen in *V for Vendetta*, destruction is often used to take away the old and make room for the new, and hopefully for the better. Otomo offers a bleaker view, in which the new generation is doomed to repeat the mistakes of the past since they have no connection to it and were thus unable to learn from them. The scenes immediately after the explosion offer imagery of renewal and opportunity: dawn comes, with rays of sunshine breaking the clouds and announcing a new day; water pours into the remaining ruins, cleansing everything in its path (fig. 10, p. 120). After the destruction, Tetsuo is reunited with Akira and both form the Great Tokyo Empire. In a clear metaphor for wartime Japan, Akira is the leader in theory, but he never utters a single word or takes any action, and it is Tetsuo that is the de facto leader who makes the decisions. Akira is nonetheless hailed as "the awakened one" and the members of the newly formed empire are coerced into worshipping him as a God on Earth (fig. 11, p. 121). As one character comments, they are "out to build a perfect nation", starting "a nation for the people" (vol. 4, 36-7), which is ironic seeing as they are the leaders of a pile of rubble and ruins inhabited by starving people – a direct reference to Imperial Japan, especially in the last years of WWII.

Otomo's connections with the wartime and post-war periods in Japan continue with other visual metaphors, such as the fact that Akira's throne is in the destroyed and half-flooded Olympic Stadium, which failed to cover up the past. The whole system is further ridiculed by having an official ceremony take place in the Olympic Stadium, much like the one in 1943 in Tokyo: a celebration took place when the imperial government lifted the law on the conscription of students. From that year on, all able-bodied students who were not in the sciences were forced to join the military, and a final send-off was

organized in the same place that would later host the Olympic Games in 1964 – a farewell rally in which students from 77 schools marched in the rain before being sent to the front (Igarashi 2000: 144). In the manga, Tetsuo's direct subordinate organizes a public assembly at the ruins of the Stadium, where the two leaders could show off their powers and inspire the population, which was growing thinner due to defections to Lady Miyako's side of the city where humanitarian aid was available. The hopelessness and ridiculousness of the whole endeavour is conveyed by the fact that the citizens, who could not be fed on shows of supernatural powers, are forced to attend; the enforcers shout to ragged and starving children to prove their loyalty to the great Emperor Akira (see fig 12, p. 122).

By having Akira sit on a destroyed throne and rule over a city of ruins while standing in for Emperor Hirohito, Otomo again raises the question of the Emperor's responsibility for the war and for the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, issues that were present throughout the whole post-war period and were never fully addressed, at least officially. Keiji Nakazawa, for example, cannot hide his anger towards the Emperor for not having accepted the Potsdam Proclamation and ended the war months earlier, which would have saved the two cities from atomic destruction. Nakazawa found himself disgusted by his fellow Hiroshima residents who rejoiced at the Emperor's visit in 1947 and blames pre-war education and Hiroshima's conservatism (Nakazawa 2010: 174).

In the manga, the assembly proves unfruitful and a catastrophic ending is presaged by many characters. Following Lady Miyako's advice, Tetsuo has stopped consuming the drugs that allowed him to keep his powers in check. This causes his power to grow too much, so much so that his body cannot contain it anymore and it seeks to assimilate everything around it in a grotesque show of oversized flesh and muscles. As Tetsuo starts to lose control and threatens to cause another massive explosion, Akira resonates his power and creates the opposite energy flow in order to negate it. The two centres of energy converge on each other, and finally disappear (see fig. 13, p. 123). At the very end, past and present have surpassed the distance that kept them from each other and re-joined. Like the other explosions, this is followed by imagery of the sun piercing the clouds (see fig 14, p. 124). This time, it is truly a new beginning, the trauma of the past having been dealt with and dismissed. Christopher Bolton, in "From Ground Zero to Degree Zero: Akira from Origin to Oblivion", notes that while most of the action in the manga develops at night time, the recurring post-disaster stance of Kaneda and Kai on top of buildings watching the sun rise suggests not only positive beginnings, but also signals that now the

characters can see what lies around them, where they came from and where they can go, making it possible for them "to locate themselves in the world (individually, ethically, and politically) and move forward" (Bolton 2014: 311). At the end it leaves a message of hope: not that change is possible but that it is unavoidable, and it takes a conscious effort for it to be for the better.

In the original serialized version, this panel was the last panel of the comic. However, in the later collected series, Otomo revised and added a number of pages after it, as an epilogue. In it, Neo-Tokyo is invaded by a foreign military, claiming to come with humanitarian aid. They are met by Kaneda and Kai, together with an armed militia, who assert the sovereignty of Neo-Tokyo and reject any outside intervention. They carry a banner that reads "Great Tokyo Empire – Akira", and shout that "Akira still lives among us!" (vol. 6, 422). In the final disaster that destroyed the city and took away Akira and Tetsuo, Kaneda was absorbed into one of the spheres of light where he learned the truth about the government projects by witnessing Akira's memories, and what had happened recently by revisiting Tetsuo's memories. It is with the hope of this knowledge that the narrative ends: Kaneda has learned from the past and incorporated it into the present, and with it sets out to create something new, breaking the cycle of continuous destruction. In the final panels, as Kaneda rides out on his motorcycle together with his gang, the spectre of Tetsuo appears riding beside him just like he used to when they were still friends. As the riders move into the city, the ruined buildings reconstruct themselves as they pass through them in the final panel (see fig. 15, p. 125 and fig. 16, p. 126). It is an open ending, with much room for interpretation, but one that strikes a positive tone after such a bleak narrative. Bolton claims this ending to be clearer and more positive: "we can locate ourselves geometrically and geographically in the city, we can restore the city's clean lines from the rubble, and we can chart our own future direction." (Bolton 2014: 311). Reaching for Japan's post-war history, it is easy to understand Kaneda's cry for independence from any outside interference. It could be argued that, in this joining of forces between Kaneda (the leader of the anarchist biker gang) and Kei (one of the leaders of the clandestine movement that sought to bring down the corrupt government through armed conflict) the values of freedom and equality take centre stage in the newly formed city-state. In fact, Murakami sees this "bid for freedom" as the central theme in the final stages of the manga. Since the characters have learned from the mistakes of the past, it becomes their right to reassert themselves as sovereign individuals in a sovereign nation, and make their own path.

4.2.4. *Akira* and Genre Blurring

Rafaella Baccolini points to genre blurring as one of the main features of the critical dystopias of the late 20th century. Genre blurring is understood to be the employment of characteristics from various genres, creating something that avoids a clear definition: "by self-reflexively borrowing specific conventions from other genres, critical dystopias more often blur the received boundaries of the dystopian form and thereby expand its creative potential for critical expression." (Baccolini and Moylan 2003: 7).

Akira is a prime example of this practice. Critics struggle to define it, often invoking terms such as post-apocalyptic, dystopian, sci-fi, cyber-punk, and postmodernist. In the reading for this paper, it can be classified as a critical dystopia that makes use of genre blurring, borrowing from all the aforementioned genres. This offers a simple solution, but does not clarify how it is achieved or to what purpose. First, it is a critical dystopia since it represents a worst society than that of its contemporary reader, but nonetheless leaves room within the narrative for a conclave of resistance and hope to be articulated and act, offering a way out of dystopia into (e)utopia. Murakami traces this movement from dystopia to utopia to a specific moment: the extended ending of the manga in which Kaneda and his gang ride out into a city rebuilding itself (Murakami 2005: 111). But this moment had been foregrounded from the very beginning of the narrative. Already in the first pages the gang members are depicted riding through the city, a vertical colossus that does not care about them. Susan Napier sees the motorcycle as a phallic symbol of power and authority, but also an agent of change, a symbol of subversive flexibility against a monolithic and indifferent state. The vigorous but fluid movement of the motorcycles against the unmoving skyscrapers in the background, houses of the structures of power and official authority, implies the riders challenge the power structure from the outside and from below (Napier 2005: 41). Unlike a traditional dystopia, there is room for resistance and subversion of the values of those in power. It is these teenagers, outside of the corrupt society, who in the end are able to change it and take it further from its deplorable condition. They are always depicted outside of it, alienated and rebelling against the city itself, and Otomo goes to great lengths to depict the dilapidated condition of their school, the place which was supposed to give them direction.

Following Fredric Jameson's previously quoted view that science fiction can and is often employed to allow the reader to distance himself from a narrative that hints at his

own current world, its presence in Akira is deeply understood. Otomo draws from the previous 50 years of Japanese history and employs imagery that could be considered offensive and lead to censorship, the most obvious example being the city-wreaking explosions. The science fiction elements thus allow the reader to distance himself and look objectively into the story and plot, in order to later, at his own pace, make the connections to his own real society.

Akira also draws from apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic fiction. Motoko Tanaka, in *Apocalypse in Contemporary Japanese Science Fiction* (2014), explains that the Japanese apocalyptic imagination underwent a remarkable change under the historical conditions of the nation. After the events of 1945 in Hiroshima and Nagasaki, much of post-war fiction dealt with apocalyptic cases of "total destruction of the self, the community, the nation, the Earth, or the universe", often caused by the misuse of technology – Godzilla being one of the earliest post-war examples. Tanaka goes on to point out that most of the (post)apocalyptic fiction of the post-war decades was aimed at a teenager and young-adult male audience (like *Akira*), and often dealt with specific issues of identity and self-worth following the catastrophic and humiliating defeat in WWII. Besides helping create or recover a national and personal identity, it sought to deal with contemporary issues like the delicate balance of the Cold War and Japan's politically and geographically dangerous position in it (Tanaka 2014: 2-3).

In "The Metamorphosis of the Apocalyptic Myth: From Utopia to Science Fiction", Vita Fortunati points out that the rewriting of the apocalyptic myth may take several distinct forms and often adapts to the historical and cultural conditions from where it originates. One example is the end itself, which may take various nuanced forms: from a total end of the world, to a cyclical end that brings another stage, or a liberating end that renews because, by destroying what came before, it achieves re-generation (1993: 83). It is interesting to note the various facets of the end in *Akira*: from the cycles of 37 years that destroy but don't bring real change, to the final disaster which liberates and purifies the survivors from a shackled past to be able to move on and regenerate. Akira plays a crucial role in this aspect, not only as the source of destruction, but by being hailed by various characters as a messianic figure that will bring about change. If Akira is taken to represent Japan's traumatic past that refuses to be buried away without being dealt with, his final outburst in which he and Tetsuo absorb each other can be seen as the cathartic regenerative Apocalypse that allows for real change – living up to the original meaning of the word as *revelation* or *unveiling*.

4.3 *DMZ*

4.3.1. Summary

DMZ was written by Brian Wood with artwork by Riccardo Burchielli. It was published monthly from November 2005 to February 2012. *DMZ* takes place in an alternate reality, in an unspecified time period. The final marker that connects the author's empirical world and the fictional one is the events of 9/11 2001 and the consequent invasion of Afghanistan and Iraq in the following years by the US military. This means that, just like Moore and Otomo, Brian Wood places his dystopic vision in the reader's present as a means to critique it. In the pitch to the publishers, Wood described the narrative as "inspired in large part by the current Bush Administration and its effort overseas". Just like the other comics mentioned in this paper, DMZ takes several aspects and issues from the author's and reader's empirical world and exaggerates them, causing a feeling of estrangement with the familiar. In this case, of particular note are the overseas wars and the public's reaction to them, which ultimately causes a second civil war: "The United States is in a state of civil war. While the military and National Guard are busy overseas, a strong and determined militia rises up from the middle states and begins to take over. They call themselves the Free States, or the Free Armies, and support the same core desire as always: a small government that leaves the average citizen alone, not one that spends trillions fighting pointless wars overseas and cracks down on basic freedoms at home" (Wood 2015b*:* 287). The revolt, which starts in the mid-west and spreads both east and west, halts at New Jersey, faced with hastily returned troops from overseas to defend the city of New York. The conflicts in the city claim more civilian than military lives, and both armies retreat from it. Manhattan Island becomes the DMZ, a no-man's land ruled by its inhabitants.

The narrative starts on the fifth year of the war. Liberty News, a major news outlet with close ties to the US Government and Military, decides to send a news team lead by veteran Viktor Ferguson into the DMZ to report on it. Mathew Roth, commonly called Matty, goes along as an intern. As soon as it arrives, the helicopter is hit by unknown forces and destroyed, and its crew killed. The exception is Matty, who manages to escape with some of the photo-journalistic material. A native woman, Zee, takes Matty into her protection and shows him around, after which Matty realizes the dire but also lively conditions of the DMZ, a far cry from what the news agencies had him believe back home.

He decides to stay in the DMZ and forgo an extraction, with the objective of reporting on how it really "is" in there.

The graphic narrative is comprised of various arcs, each with its own main theme, which usually span from 3 to 5 issues. The final hard-cover edition compiles all issues into five volumes. Many issues follow Matty in his attempt to report on the DMZ, meeting closed off societies (the environmentalist Ghosts in Central Park, Wilson in Chinatown, the far-right Nation of Ferghus, among others) while others give background information on how the DMZ developed through the story of Zee, a medical student who decided to stay in order to help, or several paramilitary organizations that seek to control distinct sections of the island. There are also city-guide-style arcs, in which Matty draws maps and descriptions of the inhabitants and their way of life. Matty is constantly used as a pawn between the major political forces at play and, in the end, is arrested and imprisoned for life for his participation in the revolutionary Delgado Nation, which tried to make the 400,000 strong island an independent state.

Just like with Alan Moore, Brian Wood is interested in a set of main themes that he develops in practically every work. In DMZ, a central theme is that of media and its influence on people's perception of reality; another is the neo-liberal politico-economic system that thrives on war – both of which will be explored in further detail. Prior to *DMZ*, Wood had worked on *Channel Zero*, which already dealt with an authoritarian government, dissident subcultures and resistance.

4.3.2. *Channel Zero*

Brian Wood first worked on what would later be *Channel Zero*'s first part, Jeannie 2.5, for his senior project during his art studies. Despite comics not being part of the curriculum, Wood brought them into every project possible, mainly for the opportunity to draw them and, as a necessity, coming up with a story for them. *Channel Zero* takes place in a dystopian United States, focusing specifically on New York. In this timeline, an unnamed conservative US President and his administration follow the lead of a Christian extremist lobby and its agenda to "purify" and bring safety back into the nation. This is to be achieved through heavy police control of the population and a break with various personal freedoms. But the narrative's main focus is on media and its censorship through the Clean Act, which eradicated every privately-owned news relay in the country and only left those completely under the control of the official authorities. The opening

paragraphs set the tone: “The Christian Right were all up in arms. M.A.N.I. was everywhere, picketing networks, bookstores, you name it. Even creepy-assed Parents for Social Responsibility was into it, and the result of this unholy unity was the Clean Act.” (Wood 2012: 9). As is later explained, the President announced that such bill would be brought to congress with just one week’s notice, making any structured political resistance impossible to form. As soon as it passed, not only were the media heavily censored, but the National Guard took up positions in the main cities, including New York, to disperse protesters and regain control. Official order is quickly restored – Jeannie, just like V, is at the same time angry at the establishment and at the lack of action, at the complete inertia of the people who are having their personal freedoms taken away and do nothing about it: “they have their TV and newspapers, filled with positive reassurances and government propaganda that always seems to make everyone feel better about themselves.” (Wood 2012: 11). Jeannie constantly alludes to the media as a weapon that can be employed by both sides, official and dissident, to spread its ideology. As she goes on to comment, “the ten o’clock news is full of celebrity gossip, stories about puppies being rescued from burning buildings, and reviews of the newest Disney films.” (Wood 2012: 11). A sentence that is constantly repeated is “and people seem to like that just fine.”

The country effects a complete media blackout with the world: no news comes in from the outside, nor does the world get any from within the US. The official rhetoric describes it as a “God fearing country” (22) and its racist and imperialistic actions against immigrants and expansionism further down south into Mexico are described as “pro-Democracy, pro-Christian, and pro-American.” (24).

A dissident source of resistance is found in Jeannie. There is no physical space of resistance against the status quo; a symbolic one like the V’s Shadow Gallery in the old metro station beneath London is not to be found. Instead, Jeannie makes herself heard and fights for space in mass media, in television. She successfully hacks the main government broadcaster and periodically interrupts their programming with messages that challenge the conservative neo-liberal consumer society of indoctrinated citizens (see fig. 117, p. 127).

The stance of the narrative seems to be one of anti-utopia. Even though Jeannie carries out her broadcasts – which soon become regularly scheduled – on national TV, the corporation that owns the station soon finds way of capitalizing on the massive viewership it gets them, even trying to sell advertising time during the anti-establishment broadcasts.

When Jeannie realizes that she is becoming part of the problem, she tries to address the viewers directly in a message berating them for their lack of action and general apathy towards the dystopic situation: "Wake up, America! Listen to the voice of the resistance… Listen to me! Why must I become part of the problem to show you the answer? Turn your televisions off! Put down your newspapers! The poison has spread! The sitcoms you watch, the buzz clips, the tabloid news shows, they are all infected with the misinformation the Government wishes you to believe!" (Wood 2012: 55-6). This is her final broadcast, since as it is being transmitted, the military is closing in on her position, but not before allowing the news crews to go ahead and set up so that they can televise her arrest for ratings and, of course, to show that any resistance is futile. Unlike V, she fails at bringing about any meaningful change. She is arrested and exiled, and "nothing really changed" – "TV was still the same, so were the newspapers. The Clean Act was still firmly in place, and Jeannie 2.5 was dismissed as a fad. Some even thought it was all a government fabrication designed to boost ratings and to demonstrate the futility of resistance." (68).

At the end of the narrative, Jennie returns to the US with the intent to keep fighting the established order, only to give up at the sight of how even her resistance has been packaged and sold as another commodity. "Jeannie 2.5" t-shirts are worn by teenagers, who also adorn themselves with fake tattoos mimicking Jeannie's iconic face tattoos; there are songs about her, as well as pictures and fake artworks by her. Jeannie is distraught and gives up: "You know how when you are young you have the stupid notion that you can actually make a difference in the world? You think you are unchangeable and indestructible, that whatever you want you can get with a lot of want and just a little hard work? I used to think that way." (Wood 2012: 135-6). The only message of hope in the end is the one Jeannie deposits on her closest followers to carry on her work. But she recognizes in them the same rebellion against the status quo and egotistical wish to be heard and given attention as she saw in her younger self, suggesting that just like her, they too will fail and give up.

Channel Zero has a pessimistic view of the world and of change, regarding to what extent the individual can exert himself and bring about change in the system. It is, however, a small and compact work that does not explore these issues in depth. It feels like an angry revolt against conservatism and consumerism, and its stark black-and-white pages are filled with subliminal messages (even between the panels, in the gutters) which convey a direct message clearly divided between good (resistance to the status quo,

dissenting youth) and evil (established authority, mass media). Despite its lack of subtlety, it contains many important characteristics that Brian Wood would later explore in his following works. In his commentary to the collected edition, Wood comments on how Channel Zero was "born out of a very specific time, culturally and politically" (Wood 2012: 210). Wood calls it a direct reaction to "Rudy Giullani's rule over New York City" in the mid-nineties, a time period in which "the city looked and felt like a police state, with City Hall barricaded from the public and under armed guard, artists under constant attack, street vendors driven out of business, rampant police brutality, any valid and legal protest or criticism of Rudy's policies supressed, journalists fired and blacklisted…" (Wood 2012: 210-1).

DMZ picks up many of the issues hinted at in Channel Zero and approaches them in a more nuanced and ambiguous way, following its political engagement with what is happening in the world at the time of writing and setting the events in an alternate time line instead of a close (or distant) future. Just like in *Channel Zero,* one of the main themes is mass media and its power over the population.

4.3.3. Media in the DMZ

Throughout the whole comic, the media is an omnipresent entity that no one can escape from. It is through the news station Liberty News that Matty is sent to the DMZ, and it is through his early found desire to chase the concept of "truth" in the media that he chooses to stay in the DMZ and report on it, despite having been nearly killed several times.

At the beginning of the narrative, Matty is the common citizen that believes what he has been told by mainstream news outlets. Coming from the US government-controlled part of the country, his limited and biased knowledge on the conflict and the DMZ itself, including its inhabitants, is glaringly obvious. Matty himself quickly realizes this after meeting Zee, the first New Yorker he gets to personally know after the war started. In his defence, Matty claims "you don't understand what we're… told over there. I didn't know so many civilians still lived here…all we hear about is insurgents and stuff." (Wood 2016: 26). As the only known survivor of the attack on the helicopter carrying the news crew, Matty comes to understand that he is both a victim and perpetrator, also part of the problem. He is victim in the sense that he is also, as he points out, fed news by the mass media that does not accurately describe what is really going on. At the same time, he is a perpetrator by not questioning what he is told by the government-sanctioned news outlets

and letting his view of the war and the DMZ be a one-sided one. It is after this realization and with some nudging from Zee that Matty decides to stay in the DMZ and try to report on what he experiences. Thus, throughout the whole graphical narrative, one of the main driving forces is of Matty trying to uncover the "truth", to accurately portray the DMZ inhabitants and their living conditions, all while trying to stay impartial and conscious that his contractor, Liberty News, is obviously partial to one side and will not run just anything that he sends them. Brian Wood describes Matty at the beginning of the narrative as "apathetic, not much of a thinker, certainly not someone particularly interested in politics in any meaningful sense" and that he is "the sort of guy who gets his news from headlines only" (Wood 2016: 293). One of the constants throughout the narrative is the square speech panels that narrate the news by Liberty News, juxtaposed to what is really happening in the DMZ in the background, which are often quite disparate. Through these and other methods, Brian Wood intends to comment on corporate media and their involvement in packaging information to be consumed by their viewers. While in *Channel Zero* this comment was abstract and based on a fictional ultra-conservative Christian take-over, in *DMZ* the actual background is that of the Iraqi War and the War on Terror in general.

There is a consensus amongst critics (usually with left-wing views) that the media was the main propaganda tool used by the Bush Administration to advocate and gain domestic support for the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, and to enable further manipulation of the information regarding the occupation of Iraq so as not to lose public support. Noam Chomsky and Edward S. Herman, as early as 1988 in their seminal *Manufacturing Consent – The Political Economy of the Mass Media* (1988), had drawn attention to this phenomenon, arguing that the main objective of mass media is to "inculcate individuals with the values, beliefs, and codes of behaviour that will integrate them into the institutional structures of the larger society" and that, in a world of capitalist wealth management (concentration) and perpetual conflicts of class interest, the fulfilment of this role by the media requires "systematic propaganda." (61).

What makes it difficult to perceive, they go on to point out, is when the media are privately owned and there is no formal censorship. What happens in these cases is that, while continuing to be mouthpieces for official propaganda and corporate rhetoric, the media outlets portray themselves as a "spokesman for free speech and the general community interest", periodically attacking and exposing government and corporate malfeasance, all on their terms and in controlled doses (Chomsky 1988: 61). One perfect

example of this practice is offered by Anthony DiMaggio in *When Media Goes to War* (2009) regarding the New York Times and its reporting on the Iraqi war. DiMaggio describes how, in 2007, the New York Times started advertising itself as an "anti-war forum" and, for the first time, openly supporting a military withdraw from Iraq, a position that came more than two years after the general public had deemed the war and occupation "not worthy" anymore. The news outlet explained this change of position as the realization that the goal of building a stable and democratic Iraq was gradually being regarded as too difficult for the Bush Administration and military leaders on site to achieve, while at the same time pointing out the non-existence of weapons of mass destruction (WMD) in occupied Iraq, the official reason for going to war in the first place. However, just as much evidence regarding the presence – or lack thereof – of WMDs, and Iraqi disarmament in the nineties were already available in the years and months prior the invasion in March 2003, but the New York Times never published these. There were later condemnations of the Bush Administration for "manipulating WMD intelligence" in favour of a pre-emptive invasion, "yet these criticisms were too late to have prevented the United States from entering into a conflict based on false pretences" (2010: 12). DiMaggio goes on to note that despite President Bush being "denigrated for lacking the vision necessary to fight the war", he is not directly criticized for "illegally invading a sovereign nation, for maintaining a material interest in Iraqi oil, or for responsibility in deaths of over one million Iraqis since 2003". This example, in DiMaggio's words, perfectly demonstrates "the limits of dissent in the American press." (2010: 12). Just as Chomsky argued two decades earlier, such news agencies pose at uncovering the truth and critiquing the official rhetoric, only to appease the reader's desire and need for such content, while not changing anything in the political or social spectrum. DiMaggio, like Chomsky, argues that it is exactly this lack of formal censorship that allows this system to be so effective. The Government and corporations with stakes in warmongering and control of public opinion reach their goals mainly through socialization and indoctrination, banning undesirable journalists from formal events and press conferences, and pressuring news agencies to replace those who do not conform (DiMaggio 2010: 119-21). This results in a news system in which "reporters are more concerned with gaining access to officials than with questioning the legitimacy of their statements" (DiMaggio 2010: 122). The example offered is again the same regarding the possession of WMDs by Iraqi forces; while there were various voices that strove to make themselves heard, claiming that there was no evidence of the existence of such weapons in Iraq and that on

the contrary, the various inspections had found nothing, the mainstream media chose to continue to publish the Bush Administration's rhetoric of threat and necessary pre-emptive measures instead of those questioning the motives (2010: 123). In *Mass Media, Mass Propaganda* (2008), DiMaggio exemplifies just how effective the propaganda was: polls show that as late as 2005, more than one year after the start of the war and with still no evidence or proof of the existence of WMDs, more than half of queried American citizens still believed in their existence and, moreover, that the Iraqi government also had ties to al Qaeda, despite a similar lack of evidence. For DiMaggio, this leaves no doubt: mainstream media played an active role in spreading the official propaganda that there was an external threat to the US, coming from the so-called "Axis of Evil" (Iraq, Syria and North Korea) and thus created a willingness to go to war and later consent in the costly occupation of Iraq (2008: 26).

The first text the reader encounters in the comic is exactly that of the Liberty News broadcast, reporting on the ceasefire taking place in the DMZ, at the 5th year of the war. It spreads the official discourse of labelling the Free States Army as "thugs and murderers" while claiming to know how day-to-day life is in the DMZ: "looters, roving gangs of neighbourhood militia, insurgents, car bombers, contract killers…" (vol. 1, 2). The news station has no real idea of what life is like on Manhattan Island, but nonetheless packages and sells it to the citizens of the still-standing United States. It is also a means to boost ratings, since increasing the sense of danger and unpredictability only adds value to the team of reporters they are sending in, led by the famous Viktor Ferguson. This will be, they say, "unforgettable television" (Wood 2016: 8).

The comic continuously demands the reader start differentiating between what he is told by mainstream mass media and what is really happening. This is achieved throughout the whole narrative by, as mentioned, directly juxtaposing news reports with images from the ground, which tell disparate versions of the same event. Not only does the fictional Liberty News often omit US Army casualties and blunders to maintain domestic support for the war, they often hide the official agenda and choose to publish the official, clean version of the motives behind various actions, from bombings to the invasion of the island by US troops. This is concretely exemplified in two instances.

The first is regarding the pressure exerted upon war journalists embedded with troops on the ground. In reality, deaths of non-embedded journalists in Iraq are seventeen times higher than those who work under the protection of the military, which is a huge incentive to do so. However, this leaves journalists only able to report on what the military deems

fit to broadcast, with troops going so far as “confiscating and destroying film, tapes, and electronic files” (DiMaggio 2010: 121). In the first arc of the series, “On the Ground”, Matty is warned by his handler at Liberty News of an impending incursion into the island by US army troops. After being mistaken for a sniper and almost being killed by said troops, Matty is coerced into joining them as a member of the press. Soon afterwards they encounter corpses, a family of four that were killed in the pre-invasion air strikes. The Commanding Officer at the scene quickly orders Matty to take “a series of photos” with “no street signs, no distinctive background architecture, and no faces of my men”, while adding the description to be used: “this is «insurgent cell defeated on route to engage American forces» or whatever. And crop out the small bodies.” (Wood 2016: 62). Matty is allowed to be a “reporter” under the protection of the troops, but only as long as he cooperates and transmits their false and manipulative version of events. At the end of the arc, after the reader has seen US troops losing their grip on reality and breaking down psychologically, the Liberty News report informs its viewers of the mainly successful operation into Manhattan, achieved by the brave and professional servicemen of the Army (Wood 2016: 73).

The second instance in which this unofficial censorship is exemplified is in the “Body of a Journalist” arc. Shortly after the events described, Matty is invited by the FSA Commander at the Lincoln Tunnel (the connection between Manhattan and New Jersey, FSA territory) into their territory, with the purpose of showing Matty that Viktor Ferguson is still alive and is being held hostage by the FSA. They do this with the objective of having Matty transmit a ransom price through his connection at Liberty News. While the US government expected their high demands to be rejected, they go a step further and make public, again through Liberty News, that Viktor Ferguson is still alive, only to later falsely claim that he and Matthew Roth have both been murdered by FSA troops. This would allow the US enough domestic and international support for an offensive war – one costly in terms of resources and lives, both military and civilian, but with the public behind a full-scale invasion the government would finally have an opportunity to take Manhattan. When an alive-and-well Matty sees the news of his death and the consequent impending invasion, he is dumbfounded as to how something like that could be possible, until Zee explains and correlates it with his previous experiences of the “truth” and what he had been told: "Because this is how it works, Matty. I’m an insurgent, the FSA are terrorists, we eat rats and pigeons, we hate America, you name it. They told you all that and you believed it. And now you’re dead.” (Wood 2016: 212). The official propaganda

further justifies the government's actions by increasing the perception of a threat from the Free States Army, calling them "terrorists who use women as shields, strap bombs to children and store weapons in maternity wards and public schools." These are terrorists, devoid of humanity, and thus their eradication and the means to reach it are justifiable.

The plan does not work, however, for Matty is able to find Viktor Ferguson alive, having escaped the FSA with some unknown help. While he is fleeing towards US troops, the journalist, already reported as dead, is deliberately shot by US troops before he can leave the DMZ. The solution to stopping the invasion and massacre that would follow comes, pointedly, through the media. Matty manages to photograph the murder of Ferguson by US soldiers, and shares copies with a fellow reporter from Independent World News, a "progressive" news station from Toronto. With this bargaining chip Matty is able to blackmail the government into stopping the invasion and breaks his contract with Liberty News, while keeping the photo evidence as "life insurance". The message of these initial arcs of the comic seems to clearly say not to trust official reports from established authorities, for they will always have an agenda and try to uphold the status quo that put them in power. However, Brian Wood also complicates this question by asking if there is really any objective truth to be reported on. After all, Matty was able to save lives, but only by not reporting what he saw and knew to be true. It is also known to Matty and to the reader that the whole situation was only possible due to his efforts to report on the "truth" of life in the DMZ in the first place. Had he not been there, the attempted rescue would not have happened and Viktor Ferguson might have survived.

Matty's struggle to report on what happens and remain true to himself and to the people of the DMZ – who, although never taking him as one of his own, come to slowly respect him – is constant throughout the series. As such, the commentary on media war-reportage and its influence on the politics of armed conflicts is one of the main foci of the whole series. When the trial regarding the "Day 204 Massacre" starts, the "biggest military trial in the war", Matty is called in to give an unbiased view on the proceedings and on both sides of the story. Although he is reassured that there will be no interference or censorship from Liberty News on his report because it is "too hot an issue and public opinion is a bitch these days", Matty quickly realizes that the verdict had already been reached beforehand and that the trial was just a public spectacle – and to make sure it reached more people, especially those in the DMZ, he had been called to report on it. The massacre happened shortly after the beginning of the war between US and FSA troops, when both still occupied different parts of Manhattan, and the shooting of civilians by US troops had

caused them to lose the "moral high ground" and domestic and international support, forcing them to retreat from the island and reach an agreement for a demilitarized zone which persists to the present day. The guilty verdict against Sergeant Nunez and his squadron, with subsequent dishonourable discharges, while not appeasing the angry DMZ citizens is meant to close the wound that had kept US troops from effectively mounting an assault on the island. Thus, the media is a direct accomplice in reframing the events, even though Matty, who intended to accurately report on both sides of the story, ends up being used and manipulated. The media are at the complete service of official propaganda, and are used as a weapon in the war, one even more important than the troops on the ground since it allows for greater liberty in action, in what the public perceives as acceptable and necessary action to end the war.

4.3.4. *DMZ* and Disaster Capitalism

While the media aspect of *DMZ* comes from a deep concern and critical observation of the world around him, Brian Wood points out in an interview that another central arc of the comic was also "ripped from the headlines": the company "Trustwell" is the main focus of the "Public Works" arc in which, during a ceasefire, the US Government subcontracts part of the reconstruction of Manhattan to the privately owned company. Wood wrote this arc in direct reflection of the news coming out about the private contractors the US Government was (and is) employing at the time in both Afghanistan and Iraq, mainly Blackwater and Halliburton. Both companies have been awarded billions of dollars' worth of contracts for reconstruction, maintenance and security services in warzones, specifically in post-official tense conflict situations like Afghanistan, and both have been constantly under investigation for fraud and abuse of power.

These two companies, among many others, are part of an effort to privatise various governmental institutions that had been underway since the Reagan administration and were pushed further by the Bush administration, which also included privatising different facets of the armed forces and disaster-response institutions. The most famous US domestic example is FEMA and its disastrous response to Hurricane Katrina and the subsequent flooding of New Orleans, and the various structural issues that were witnessed on the ground on 9/11. These public infrastructures were now manned by private sector workers – underpaid, undertrained, un-unionized – and the results were evident: "radio communications for the New York City police and firefighters broke down in the middle

of the rescue operation, air traffic controllers didn't notice the off-course planes in time, and the attackers had passed through airport security checkpoints staffed by contract workers, some of whom earned less than their counterparts at the food court." (Klein 2008: 295-6).

This rampant privatization was further escalated after the attacks with the so-called War on Terror. For Naomi Klein, who coined the term "disaster capitalism" in a 2005 article, the war took privatization in a new direction: instead of privatizing the public sector, the whole War on Terror was meant to be a profit-driven endeavour from the beginning, and thus the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq "represented nothing less than the violent birth of a new economy" (Klein 2008: 381).

Naomi Klein coined the term in "The Rise of Disaster Capitalism", exploring how both wars (Afghanistan and Iraq) and natural disasters (Haiti, New Orleans, Thailand, and many others) have been taken advantage of by companies who profit from the disasters, all under the label of "reconstruction". The theory was then further explored in *The Shock Doctrine – The Rise of Disaster Capitalism* (2008), in which Klein defines the term as "orchestrated raids on the public sphere in the wake of catastrophic events" and "the treatment of disasters as exciting market opportunities" (2008: 6) which gave birth to the disaster capitalism complex – "a full-fledged new economy in homeland security, privatized war and disaster reconstruction tasked with nothing less than building and running a privatized security state, both at home and abroad" (2008: 299). More recently, in an article published in 2016, anthropologists Mark Schuller and Julie K. Maldonado offer the possible definition for the concept: "national and transnational governmental institutions' instrumental use of catastrophe (both so-called "natural" and human-mediated disasters, including postconflict situations) to promote and empower a range of private, neoliberal capitalist interests" (2016: 62).

Halliburton and Blackwater, Wood's two main inspirations for the fictional Trustwell, were constantly in the news during the comic series' print run. Both had profited immensely from the War on Terror – a *Financial Times* article reports on how contractors in general made 138 billion US dollars from the Iraq War alone, and that KBR, a subsidiary of Halliburton, was one of the frontrunners with around $40 billion, again for the war in Iraq alone. The general public consensus is that these multi-million-dollar contracts are not in the best interest of the tax payer, nor the governments. The same article goes on to note that a 2011 report shows that contractors had "wasted or lost to fraud" as much as $60 billion since 2001, resulting from both Afghanistan and Iraq

(Fifield 2013). This had long been known: a Corpwatch article from 2004 had already reported that Halliburton "significantly and systematically" provided false information on their operation costs with the goal of acquiring more funding (Borenstein 2004).

Adding to the accusations of fraud are the humanitarian scandals; various contractors, including Halliburton and Blackwater, employ their own security forces who operate on the ground independently from the army, with much less accountability. The most infamous instance is known as the Nisour Square Massacre of September 2007, in which Blackwater security forces shot and killed 17 Iraqi civilians, wounding 20 more. To this day, only four Blackwater security guards have been convicted for the massacre, one of them having been sentenced to life in prison (Alexander 2018).

All these issues are explored throughout the *DMZ* series with the presence of Trustwell, a presence that was announced at the end of volume 1's "Body of a Journalist" arc. Liberty News reports that the company has been awarded a "reconstruction project for key Manhattan infrastructure sites" (Ground Zero, Empire State Building, among others). Trustwell is immediately linked to the disaster capitalism companies that the reader would be familiar with by pointing out its "longstanding ties with the military" and its role in reconstruction projects in "Iraq, Afghanistan, and Somalia, as well as post-hurricane gulf states", while also reporting on the immediate protests after the decision was made public due to the company's "past history of corruption and violence" (Wood 2014a: 376). Despite possessing its own security forces, Trustwell lacks the political consensus it needs to go into the DMZ, and so it requests the help of the United Nations Blue Helmets to keep peace and allow for the reconstruction.

Matty, sharing the general opinion that Trustwell is corrupt, goes into the company incognito, as a regular worker hired for menial manual labour; it is not long before he runs into a terrorist cell operating from within the company. The brutality of its security forces is made clear by Matty's first incursion, which ends with a suicide bomber detonating himself near Ground Zero. As Matty notes, "Trustwell security beat the shit out of us until the blue helmets arrived. Then they processed us politely as per Article 3." (Wood 2014a: 13).

The first bombings that Matty witnesses are directed against Trustwell workers and property; however, it becomes known that these attacks are funded and made possible by the company itself in order to pressure the UN soldiers into leaving. The final stroke is given at a press conference held inside the DMZ, with the participation of a US General, a Trustwell representative and the Secretary General of the United Nations. All the

various concepts previously discussed are present at this event: the general continuously praises the reconstruction works, although almost nothing has been achieved, and reinforces that "the government of the United States of America is fully behind Trustwell and its subsidiaries", all while the Trustwell representative wallows in praises and promises that he is working to mend and rebuild not only the city but the once-great nation (Wood 2014a: 57). The UN Secretary, on the other hand, underlines that for the physical reconstruction to happen other steps must be taken first, such as gaining the confidence and respect of the DMZ inhabitants, comments which both the US General and Trustwell director physically turn away from. The visual metaphor in the scene is aptly achieved, more so when the panel focuses its centre on the two real characters in control, while the UN Secretary is often cut in half or does not so much as appear in the panel, even when he is speaking. Both through verbal and visual metaphors, the reader is shown who truly wields power, and who truly has the peoples' best interests in mind (see fig. 18, p. 128). Although the Secretary General has pure intentions and speaks of peace and reconciliation, both he and his arguments are dismissed.

Matty foils the terrorist cell's plan to send a suicide bomber into the press conference, but their contingency plan works nonetheless: an attack on the UN convoy that results in the death of various UN blue helmets and that of the Secretary General. The inevitable consequence is the retreat of all UN troops and staff from the city, leaving Trustwell completely free to act independently. The following panels juxtapose the news of the attack with images of Trustwell hit-squads mercilessly shooting civilians (see fig. 19, p. 129). Danzing, an FSA officer who has infiltrated the company, explains to Matty how Trustwell funds small underground terrorist cells to cause chaos and create a need for the company's services and, in this case, to hit the UN so hard that they had to leave, leaving Trustwell to run the city.

Matty does manage to report on these events and make these dealings known to the general public, but not even that is enough to bring down the company. While some members are trialled for the funding of terrorist groups, the company itself maintains its contracts and the end of the series sees a rebranded Trustwell return to the city to continue "reconstructing". This is another feature taken from real-world headlines, since the real Blackwater also rebranded itself to Xe and later again to Academi as of 2011, and keeps on receiving government contracts despite clear evidence of abuse of power and corruption.

The way the series develops and its take on real life politics and neo-liberalist war profiteering are definitely pessimistic in nature. In this sense, *DMZ* seems to negotiate the space between anti-utopia (negating the utopian impulse, no hope for real change or a better world) and critical dystopia (a worse place than the reader's but with a way or possibility of betterment) more ambiguously and with more reservations than the other two analysed comics, which will be discussed in the next chapter.

4.3.5. Utopian Dreams Live from the DMZ

One of the main descriptive characteristics of critical dystopias is the existence of resistance to the established dystopian order. This resistance can take many forms, but it needs space (both physical and metaphorical) to articulate itself and act against what it perceives as bad and move away from dystopia and towards eutopia. In many cases the eutopia is not present, but the path is shown and its future possibility is made clear. In *DMZ*, however, these spaces of resistance are at once easy to identify and difficult to judge. The demilitarized zone is, in itself, a place of resistance: it refuses to join either side of the conflict that has torn it apart and chooses to empower its own will. This is nonetheless complicated by the fact that the DMZ is not a homogenous socio-political zone, but rather a space full of small conclaves, each with its own vision of what a better future entails and what is needed to reach it.

Georg Drennig calls the graphical narrative a "sectarian dystopia" and the Manhattan demilitarized zone a "spatial alternative that, while marginalized from the viewpoint of power and representation, carries significant potential in offering an escape from siding either with the FSA or the USA" (Drennig 2013: 84). However, this potential remains unrealized. The best attempt at it is seen in the "Blood in the Game" arc, in which both the US Government and the FSA agree to hold elections in the DMZ for a provisional government. The US government agrees to it since it has a vested interest in gaining a foothold in the city, to be achieved by an envoy who will run in the election with support of US troops and Trustwell, and is fully expected to win. It does not, however, go according to plan, for a populist alternative arises from the poor northern neighbourhoods which had been mostly ignored in the narrative up to this point. Parco Delgado rises up promising an alternative to the same old two sides which do not and cannot take into account, in his words, the "thousands of people, hundreds of tribal and local groups" (Wood 2014b: 19). Brian Wood describes his character as equal parts Hugo Chavez, Che

Guevara and Al Sharpton (Wood 2014b: 376). Just like all the other armed forces and political sides in the conflict, Parco Delgado uses Matty and his access to mass media to promote himself. He wins the elections, despite or because of an assassination attempt, and even after violent and murderous intervention by Trustwell squads on election booths. Thus, Parco starts his project of bettering society, through conventional politics, to reach for his utopia, which he calls Delgado Nation. Nonetheless, the utopian dream is quickly betrayed. Parco shows an authoritarian side to his control of the city, deploying his personal armed forces wearing a red beret with a star imprinted on them. Conflicts inevitably arise between the new faction and the various smaller congregations which Parco promised he was running for, and the DMZ again plunges into chaos.

Perhaps the most revealing issue in this arc is not that Parco Delgado's vision for a populist utopia does not work out, but that he manages to corrupt Matty with power. Always having been on the outside looking in, Matty is unable to control his enthusiasm when the charismatic Pablo asks him to be on his side during the campaign. After the elections, Matty plays a crucial role in Pablo's plan for securing their position, perhaps even establishing a Manhattan independent state; Matty acts as go-between and literally purchases a nuclear weapon from a rogue military group to be used as a deterrent by the Delgado Nation. The plan does not work, however, as Delgado's possession of a nuclear weapon is used by the US government to gain the moral high ground and both domestic and international support for a full-scale invasion of the island.

It is a pessimistic view on utopian thinking, the same which caused Drennig to refer to the narrative as a dystopia in which no hope for change is possible and all that remains is "sectarian warfare". It can be argued, however, that the narrative is indeed pessimistic and negative regarding change, but specifically regarding change via the conventional means of politics and warfare. Going back to its beginning, the war in the US represented in *DMZ* starts as a dissident reaction to the continuous investment of power by the US Government in foreign wars. A discontented and disgruntled population took it upon themselves to change that, bearing arms and dividing the country into two along with its people, those with them and those against them. They formed the Free States of America, which in itself is an expression of utopianism: interpreting their situation as undesirable, they took the matter into their own hands and tried to change it, by "building a better America" in the words of the Lincoln Tunnel FSA Commander (Wood 2015b: 39). The other side of the conflict, the official US Government, holds tight to the status quo and refuses to give in, even when its actions have resulted in civil war. Both parties are

depicted as morally bankrupt and corrupted by the power they have always had, in the case of the US, or by the power they wrestled away to themselves by force, in the case of the FSA. Matty, constantly trying to be objective and report on the people that live in the DMZ, is also completely corrupted by his newly gained power. When a group of US soldiers assault him, he seeks immediate revenge and orders his private security force, assigned to him by Parco, to shoot the first group of people they see on that street. Mistaking them for the soldiers, his guards murder a group of civilians, whose deaths Matty is responsible for.

Another example is that of the Ghosts, a group that represents yet another space of resistance and hope. The Ghost are a legend among the DMZ inhabitants, albeit a real one. They were part of a special operations unit of the US Army sent into Manhattan in the early days of the war. Dismayed by fighting and shooting what they saw as their own kind, they went AWOL and decided to dedicate themselves and their expertise to protecting Central Park. Over the years, they have completely buried it underground and replaced the roofs with "a combination of solar panels and plexiglass, solar power, natural light, and instant greenhouses". They are a "fully functioning community, independent of any city electrical or gas or even plumbing system", with its own generators for power and heating, waste disposal, etc. (Wood 2016: 86).

Despite all their good intentions, in the end they too are corrupted by power. Once Parco Delgado wins the elections and seeks to consolidate his position, he bargains with the Ghosts for the nuclear weapon they had previously secured for fear of how it might be used. The group relinquishes the weapon to Parco, on the sole condition that they are allowed to keep and take care of the Park whatever the outcome of Parco's power play and the results of the war. Thus, in trying to secure their position, an environmental group that focused on regeneration betrays its ideals and chooses a side, ultimately sealing their fate: once the preparations start for the US invasion of Manhattan, the Park is targeted for heavy bombing and is destroyed.

One other space of resistance that is annihilated by the final invasion of Manhattan is Chinatown. It had long tried to stay neutral and close itself off from the problems of the DMZ under the patriarchal Wilson and his "grandsons", all with the aim of prevailing during the war and coming out stronger after it. Wilson is a recurring character throughout the whole series, often giving sound advice to Matty by always maintaining a detached and analytical perspective. His rule over Chinatown is explored more deeply in both the "Wilson" and "Wilson's Kitchen" arcs. In the latter, Wilson takes Matty on a tour to show

him just how independent Chinatown really is: they have developed a communitarian kitchen the size of three blocks. Drawing water from the river and using in-built greenhouses, the kitchen is a testament to the self-sustainability and independence of Chinatown: in the middle of the conflict, it chooses to close itself off and not play favourites, focusing instead on surviving. Among the various enclaves of the DMZ, Wilson's Chinatown "is one of the few that has not only kept its name and identity, but more or less original borders" (Wood 2015b: 152).

Nonetheless, the official power of the US government is not ready to relinquish control to a minority, and issues Wilson an ultimatum: give up his position and move out of Chinatown to make way for the new, or be destroyed along with it. Wilson is unable to give up what power and position he had worked for his entire lifetime, and chooses to die together with his neighbourhood. The Chinatown inhabitants, however, despite their deep gratitude and with great admiration for their leader, choose to vacate the city and live on.

By depicting the failure and inadequacy of conventional politics and armed conflict, the narrative posits no hope in them as a valid means of change for a better world. In contrast, it offers a more humane side to counter the concepts of power, politics, and war. From the very beginning, the reader witnesses how the people in the DMZ have organized and cared for themselves, from the communal rooftop green-gardens to vegan bistros that grow tofu and sprouts in their basements. Matty is quickly taken aback by how life in the DMZ is vibrant, despite all the horror that surrounds it: "Artist's studios. Rooftop cafés. Tofu farms. Architecture students. Construction projects. Children's hospitals. When it's not fucking terrifying around here, it's kinda cool." (Wood 2016: 45). There are continuous arcs that focus on the people of the DMZ – not the sectarian enclaves or tribes, but the people who find a sense of freedom in it all. Freed from neo-liberal politics and an economy that urged each member to consume as much as possible, they find a joy in their otherwise distraught condition. One example is the DJ Random Fire, who often hosts underground parties and who, after the war, goes on to a successful career. In the DMZ, he rejoices in a new-found liberty: "everything's underground now, music, fashion, culture. Block by block, everyone does their thing. We´re all fuelled by innovation and style, not money, so it's pure, it's all pure now" (Wood 2016: 272). Matty reports on live music venues with weekly shows, art exhibitions by famous street artists, on a general booming scene. In his view, this creates an entirely different space: "money's not super-valuable to the average person here. It's about the day-to-day, living off the grid, getting by and being happy." (Wood 2016: 275).

With this in mind, it seems that *DMZ* is not so much an anti-utopia that seeks to show the hopelessness of utopian dreaming, that any change or revolution is bound to change, but instead can be seen as a critical dystopia that maintains various spaces of hope and resistance within its pages, while advocating that change through the same old means – conventional politics, war – are bound to fail for they are not different enough in their essence from what came before. It shows how change is possible through a more humane method, focused on freedom: freedom not as an empty word, a concept to be used by the ruling authorities to justify their actions, but real freedom for each to do his best in improving his small place in the world, be it Jamal the architecture student doing his best to not let the river overflow into the island; Zee, who never fails to run into disastrous situations with her med-kit in hand, helping those in need no matter whose side they are on; or Annie, with her vegetarian restaurant. In contrast to these characters, all those who vied for power in the traditional sense are corrupted and ultimately fail in their endeavour, from Matty himself to Soames (the leader of the Ghosts), to Wilson and Parco Delgado, and the FSA movement as a whole.

The narrative as utopian fiction is even more unconventional when one considers that, unlike the usual dystopian narrative in which the protagonist already starts in the bad place, Matty comes from the outside and never really belongs, getting much of his early information of his new surroundings through a native, Zee. This is more in line with a typical utopian narrative, in which the protagonist goes into the better place, gets a guided tour by a native inhabitant, and leaves to impart his new-found knowledge to his peers. Matty does come and, at the end, go. However, he is not received as a hero but as a villain, and is sentenced to life in prison for his actions in the DMZ, mainly the handling of the nuclear weapon on behalf of the Delgado Nation. He does, however, also impart his knowledge to the world through a book he authors whilst in prison, urging others to see past the grand narratives of war on terror, liberty, fighting for the real America and Americans, and instead insisting people focus on people, on the individual, on the small narrative. The final arc of the comic is that of the reconstructed city through the eyes of a tourist who has read his book and visits all the places he had been to. Matty wants, in his book, to tell the story of and for "all the hundreds and thousands of unrecognized people who died in the war, who weren't outspoken characters or famous faces, but who sacrificed just the same…" (Wood 2015b: 278). The final panel is a two-page spread depicting the rebuilt city under a bright blue sky, with white doves flying above. The war is over, but its causes still remain. There is no definitive closure. The narrative simply

showed the wrong way to bring about meaningful change through its various spaces of resistance. The peaceful imagery of the final page (fig. 20, p. 130) is all the more relevant after the hundreds of pages depicting destruction and destitution (fig. 21, p. 131; fig. 22, p.132, and fig. 23, p. 133).

4.4. History, Politics, and Estrangement

The founding text of modern literary utopian fiction, More's *Utopia*, is deeply rooted in the history and politics of its time. For a better understanding of what makes Utopia a good place, the reader needs to be acquainted with the feudal system reigning in 16th Century England, and with the reign of Henry VIII. Going further, a knowledge of the relationship between More and Henry VIII and More's religious questioning prompted by the King's establishment of a church separate from the Catholic Pope will also shed light on some of the text's features. It was so with *Utopia*, and it has been so with every work of utopian fiction since then: utopia and history have always gone hand in hand. Nonetheless, it is not a straightforward relationship. Usually the utopia is located spatially and/or temporally distant from the author's and reader's present, as the name itself indicates. While many of the Renaissance utopias placed the new-found land in a remote island in the newly-discovered world, more recent works, especially the ones with science-fiction elements, choose to temporally dislocate the narrative into a distant future. Raffaella Baccolini argues that, even more than eutopias, dystopias are deeply rooted in history. Since typical dystopias do not leave space for hope and resistance within the work but rather function as a warning for the reader, they are outside of history, aiming instead for a form of intellectual progress in the reader who will learn the work's message and move forward in a better direction. Baccolini goes on to argue that "whereas the protagonists, in classical dystopia, usually do not get any control over history and the past, in the critical dystopia the recovery of history is an important element for the survival of hope." (Baccolini 2003: 115). For Baccolini, one of the main characteristics of the critical dystopia is precisely the juxtaposition of history and the utopian narrative (2003: 116). The example given in the first chapters of a literary critical dystopia is Marge Piercy's *He, She and It*: when Lazarus, the leader of the most politically conscious gang in the slums known as the Glop, decides to revolt, his actions and those of his clan against the multinational companies that exploit them are guided by the recovered history of 19th and 20th century union workers' strikes and movements.

It is easy to see, across all three analysed comics, how history shapes the genesis of the narrative and continues to do so during their publication. Moreover, it is important to see how history is recovered and thrown into the narrative both as a means of (political) resistance (if society was not always like this, it means it does not have to be like this) and as a way to make sense of the events and find a way out of catastrophic situations. In

V for Vendetta, for example, resistance can itself be seen as history: V is a symbol, and he chooses to present himself as a piece of history every British citizen recognises through the Guy Fawkes mask (which has since become a widespread symbol of resistance to the status-quo throughout the world, mainly through the Anonymous group of internet hackers). Moreover, V's bomb attacks are against historical symbols of political power: the Houses of Parliament and 10 Downing street. The importance of history and the past as sites of resistance is further underlined in the narrative through V's harbouring of historical artworks (paintings, books, music) in his hideout. Moreover, when he publicly announces a revolution against the authoritarian government through a TV broadcast to every citizen's home, V focuses on the history of fascism; instead of pointing out the flaws in the Norsefire Party that rules this fictional London, he makes a survey of past authoritarian regimes and how one must learn from such mistakes. Of course, his actions can be seen as just as devious as those of the authoritarian government he is trying to bring down: he destroys historical symbols he deems unworthy and corrupt while preserving the ones he deems fit to survive and be passed down. This can be seen as a failure of the utopian drive (in this case, of a particular individual), which will be discussed in greater detail in the following chapter.

In *Akira*, history is not only the genesis of the narrative but what makes it develop by being present as the main source of conflict. Otomo works through the last fifty years of Japan's history, from the militarisation in the late 30's, through the war and its catastrophic end, to the post-war period. These historical events are all condensed into a single narrative, and further condensed into the single character of Akira who, representing the traumatic past, refuses to stay buried and emerges to clash with the present.

In Wood's *DMZ*, a reworking of history also takes place through the fictional second civil war as a means of critiquing the real-world present. The narrative relies heavily on the short history of the utopian project of the United States as a nation, on two hundred and fifty years of building an identity that does not hold true. A particularly revealing moment is when the President of the United States addresses the nation on television: his speech is full of references to Lincoln's Gettysburg Address.

While the ending of *DMZ* leaves many unanswered questions, the narrative's relation to history is in line with the other two works: all advocate for the preservation of history as a necessity and a tool of resistance and hope. While V had history preserved in his hideout for posterity, Matty in *DMZ* goes to great lengths to document the various groups,

individuals, and life in general in the DMZ, and publishes it as a book, turning his personal memory into a collective one. History cannot be buried away and forgotten, as *Akira* showed: it must be preserved, recorded, dealt with and learned from by future generations. In all three works one can witness a promotion of "historical consciousness", a common element Baccolini finds in critical dystopian works: history as central and necessary for the development of resistance and the maintenance of hope, even when this is a dystopian (traumatizing, catastrophic) history (2003: 116).

For factual history to be approached and thematized in these works, there needs to be a clear connection between it and the fictional narrative, which leads to the question of estrangement. While estrangement is part of any work of fiction, it plays a more important role in a narrative that seeks to draw parallels between the fictional and real world in order to critique it. Lucy Sargisson argues it is not just another characteristic of utopian fiction, but rather lies at the heart of it. Utopias, meaning both eutopias and dystopias, are distanced from and tethered in their present, both at the same time (Sargisson 2012: 18). The key is to present the familiar in an unfamiliar way, either through distance, excess and exaggeration, or difference. This allows the reader to gain distance and be able to critically see what is being represented – that is, his own reality: "this permits a new cognition of the now and creates a moment which is potentially liberating", a moment in which "our old and tired perceptions can thus be revitalized and transformed." (2012: 19). For Ruth Levitas, estrangement is equally constituent as a part of utopian fiction, for through it, the "utopian experience disrupts the taken-for-granted nature of the present" and "creates a space in which the reader may, temporarily, experience an alternative configuration of needs, wants, and satisfactions." (Levitas 2013: 4). Discussing the "limits of utopia", Levitas points out that most critics agree that the "proper role of utopia is estrangement, calling into question the actually existing state of affairs, rather than constructing a plan for the future", which would constitute the "first step towards political change". (2013: 119).

Both theorists mentioned above and Tom Moylan draw heavily on Darko Suvin for their understanding of estrangement. Suvin, who focused on science fiction, called the genre the "literature of cognitive estrangement", having estrangement as its formal framework (Suvin 1979: 4-7). The projection of the familiar into an unfamiliar place creates a novum, a "strange newness", which establishes a new perspective on an already known issue or theme, both through the content and the form of the narrative. Moylan summarizes this point thus: "this de-alienating look of estrangement is both cognitive and

creative, for it not only coolly assesses a given situation from a distanced perspective but it imaginatively does so by way of the textual form and not simply the content." (Moylan 2000: 43). This new perspective (or "socially critical perspective") on the part of the reader comes precisely from the interplay between estrangement and cognition, which "generate[s] a distanced and fresh view of an author's reality that rejects narrowly empirical, commonsensical accounts yet does so by way of a representation of an alternative framework that is «realistically» rigorous and consistent in terms of its own provisional reality and in its critical relationship with the empirical world" (Moylan 2000: 44).

This concept of estrangement goes hand-in-hand with the histories and politics of the three graphical narratives discussed, albeit in a different way than the original propositions by Suvin (who drew from Brecht and the Russian Formalists). The most obvious is of course that the comics discussed do not place their narratives in an entirely distant place and time, but in settings similar to their present. Moreover, they go to great lengths to achieve this recognition on the part of the reader, both through the text and through visual cues. Both *V for Vendetta* and *DMZ* take place in settings directly derived from the reader's present time and make direct references to the politics of the author's present. On the visual side, both draw realistic depictions of the cities where the action unfolds. In *V for Vendetta*, there are constant references to the buildings of London, including metro stations, which ground the work. *DMZ*, on the other hand, is filled with maps – both official maps of Manhattan and hand-drawn sketches by the characters, both differing in their depiction, from official to dissident. *Akira* achieves this effect via the connection of a set number of years, signalling to the reader that it is his present time being represented: the loops of 37 years paired with contemporary events like the Tokyo Olympics. This is a particularity of comics, since they are published gradually and not at once like a novel, for example. Making use of this opportunity, the authors are able to shift and accommodate readership feedback, but more importantly to adapt to the world around them. The "Public Works" arc in *DMZ*, as Brian Wood mentioned in an interview, was published as a direct reaction to the news reports regarding fraud and abuse of power by private contractors in Iraq, mainly Blackwater and Halliburton, and their fictional counterpart Trustwell remained a regular presence and influence in Wood's narrative. In *Akira*, the final issues were published during the Reagan years that saw an increase in defence expenditure, making both sides of the cold war heavily rearm and raising fears of the war going hot. It is in these issues of the comic that Tetsuo notes an American

aircraft carrier approaching and docking near Neo-Tokyo. The vessel houses an international team of scientists trying to acquire more information on the events the occurred on the Japanese islands. Furthermore, a North-American special forces team is sent into the island, equipped with biological weapons. All these images and developments would connect at a deep level with a Japanese reader, both anxious at the possible outbreak of war and resentful of the North American military presence in Japan.

In all three narratives, then, a familiar concept, historical event or political issue is taken and placed in an also-familiar place. This can be argued to be a different kind of estrangement, or one more closely connected to Brecht's *Verfremdung* since it also has a political aim. Unlike in most science-fiction works where the familiar themes are taken to a temporally or spatially distant place, these works can be said to bring somewhat familiar themes into the deeply familiar, almost into the private life of the reader. *V for Vendetta* and *Akira* both explore the anxiety of the residents of both nations which would certainly have been involved and suffered consequences if war broke out between the two main powers at the time. Not only that, they also address issues that are present during publication and which the reader is aware of: the right-wing turn in British politics in the '80s and various social issues in Japan in the case of *Akira*, from the taboo regarding the atom bomb and bomb-survivors to the official reluctance in dealing with Japanese history, specifically regarding the war and the atrocities committed. Both comics bring these issues to the fore, making them the catalyst for the development of the narrative, which takes place in a completely familiar place – London and (Neo)Tokyo. *DMZ* makes an interesting juxtaposition of history and contemporary politics: the dystopic USA and the several dystopian places were born out of segregation, out of the breaking up of the utopian project that is the US itself. It then takes the historical civil war of the 19th century and brings it to the present day, making the case that a knowledge of the history of the nation and its pluralism is needed in order to understand the present. Moreover, it demonstrates a highly critical view of contemporary US politics by bringing topics that are known to the general population – corruption, the illegitimacy of the invasion of Iraq, the power-politics behind the scenes – and makes them an intrinsic part of the narrative. While the first and second Gulf Wars were witnessed through television, in *DMZ* the common citizen cannot turn off and turn away from the catastrophic events.

Thus, in all three works, history, politics and the preservation of their knowledge are presented as fundamental to knowing the present, recognizing its flaws, and being able to chart the path for a better future. For this to have an effect on the reader, a certain level

of estrangement is required, so that the reader can critically look at the familiar events on the pages. This is achieved in comics through the specific characteristics of the medium itself. As already mentioned, these works take familiar events and place them in familiar settings. Nonetheless, the graphical illustration of such places allows for a distancing from reality. The most discussed case of this is Spiegelman's *Maus* and his graphical representation of the Holocaust through Mice (Jews) and Cats (Germans). Discussing the representation of the events of 9/11 in comics, Lynda Goldstein argues that "one of the distinguishing characteristics of graphic narratives is their hand-drawn illustrations, which provide the reader with a clear and consistent sense of the constructiveness of the narratives" – by which comics draw attention to the medium itself as a subjective representation "rather than an illusory reality effect so often conveyed by documentary film, television, or photography." (Goldstein 2000: 130-1). In this sense, comics as a medium have an advantage at representing traumatic events, from a possible outbreak of nuclear war to civil war within the reader's own know environment.

4.5 Critical Dystopias and Postmodernism

Postmodernism as a concept and term to be employed in the social sciences is still controversial, with various definitions being put forward throughout the last decades. However, one point of agreement seems to be the plurality of postmodernism, meaning that there is no longer a belief in concepts like the Truth, Progress, or even History – what Lyotard called metanarratives (or grand-narratives), which gave way to micronarratives and pluralism. This fact is reflected by utopian fiction in an important way, for it takes away any prescriptive qualities that could still linger in the genre since the Renaissance utopias and moves them into the exploration of multiple possibilities. Fredric Jameson, writing on Kim Stanley Robinson's Mars trilogy (1993-6) explores this phenomenon or "formal tendency", in which "it is not the representation of Utopia, but rather the conflict of all possible Utopias, and the arguments about the nature and desirability of Utopia as such, which move to the centre of attention." (2005: 216). Jameson goes on to argue that the utopian works of the late 20th century start to explore the various ways in which utopia can be achieved, and if it should even be strived for. If not, then a better way must be found: "what is Utopian becomes, then, not the commitment to a specific machinery or blueprint, but rather the commitment to imagining possible Utopias as such, in their greatest variety of forms" (Jameson 2005: 217). As previously described, the most recent

innovative works in utopian fiction are dystopias which retain in the dystopian world a place of resistance, have alternatives within their pages, and function as more than a mere warning to the reader. All three works discussed achieve this, and, to varying degrees, also move from proposing a specific blueprint or plan to exploring alternatives and plurality.

In *V for Vendetta*, there is a constant pull between two political ideologies, fascism and anarchism, throughout most of the narrative. Between Adam Susan, who undertook his revolution for the good of his people and nation, turning it into an authoritarian police state and eliminating any signs of resistance and dissidents, and V, who seeks his own revolution based on personal freedom, freedom for the people to govern themselves, the citizens in this dystopian state who are made to choose between responsibility and security, freedom and safety. Nonetheless, as discussed in the specific chapter, while V does support a particular political view, he does not impose it on the people, leaving them instead to choose how to act after he has called them out on their passivity and has brought the weight of history to bear on them. Thus, in this narrative, there is a self-reflexive discussion of the utopian dream, of the drive to change things, represented in cyclical events of revolution and anti-revolution, which must continue until a satisfactory state of affairs is reached.

Cyclical revolution, or better, cyclical destruction, is also what characterizes the meta-discussion in *Akira*. In the dystopian Neo-Tokyo, catastrophes constantly take place, providing a clean slate on which to build. The discussion of how a better future can be achieved is divided between the various factions: military authoritarianism through the Colonel, new-age religions with Lady Miyako, anarchic freedom with the bike gangs. While they continue to hold onto the concepts and old ways that brought about the war in the first place, apocalypse continues to take place and a new beginning is continuously offered. The discussion thus centres on learning the history, reconciling with it, and moving past it in order to achieve a better tomorrow. Motoko Tanaka argues that the character Akira and his destructive power not only represent the recent Japanese historical past, but modernity and its ideals too, such as "territorial expansion, diffusion of ideologies, and the amplification of production." (104). Akira – modernity – is "out of control" and constantly brings destruction. It is only in the end, when Akira and Tetsuo absorb each other, when the present reconciles with the past, that a possible better future is shown – one separate from the concepts associated with modernity. It breaks with its ideologies and ideas, and goes from a clean slate to find something new and better.

DMZ, the most recent of the three works, is also the one where this development in utopian fiction is mostly witnessed. In fact, *DMZ* could be described as postmodern utopian fiction, as a process-only utopian narrative. While the other two works end with a sense of freedom from the past, a liberation from having dealt with and overcome what made it a bad place, leaving a clear open possibility for hope and change, in *DMZ* the focus seems to be entirely on the exploration of the utopian drive itself and the possible ways for it to act in contemporary society. In an exchange of letters between Ruth Levitas and Lucy Sargisson, Levitas explores this very problem: how can the utopian impulse take into account all the different ways of dreaming a better world and go beyond criticising contemporary society to actually offer a way out of the bad place? "[V]alues and desires are relativized, solutions partial and provisional. Postmodernity is radically anti-foundationalist, so that at least those forms of utopianism which entail claims about truth and morality are called into question." (Levitas and Sargisson 2003: 15).

DMZ thus seems to explore this very question: is a focus on process, the self-reflexivity characterised in critical dystopias, enough to maintain the utopian impulse within the work and not fall into anti-utopianism? Sargisson, on the other hand, counterargues that "the exploration of alternatives is a transformative process in itself" (Levitas and Sargisson 2003: 16). The formal structure of *DMZ* comes exactly from the exploration of various possibilities regarding change and resistance, and how useful the utopian drive and self-reflexively in the text can be. The framework is that the only remaining superpower after the Cold War, the United States, wishes to maintain its neo-liberal utopia, which was declared in 1991. To do so, it embarks on various overseas endeavours which end by alienating its own population at home, generating a revolution which intends to make it a better place, according to the views of the Free States. This conflict and its stalemate end up creating a new space, the DMZ, where the narrative conducts a series of experiments on resistance to the status quo, revolution, and creation of a good place out of a bad one. The various facets have already been mentioned, from the environmentalists to the right-wing conservative gangs, to the anarchists. They all fail, ultimately destroyed and overtaken by the official hierarchical power of the US government and army. However, the experiment, the process of exploring the new ways in which humans can co-exist and govern themselves, was itself the place of the utopian drive. What it shows, most clearly through the case of Parco Delgado and his attempt to achieve utopia, is that it cannot be achieved while still holding on to the same concepts and paradigms that it is trying to resist and fight against. Trying to achieve a better world,

Parco resorts to power politics exemplified through the nuclear device he acquires, which in the end dictates the failure of not only the Delgado Nation but all of the dissident spaces in the DMZ. As Sargisson notes, one of the reasons for the failure of widespread left-wing change is "a mistaken affection for and adherence to the mind-set and/or vocabulary and paradigms that are supposedly challenged" and, for that reason, "the exploration of alternatives is a necessary part of the process of transformation", for it allows for a creation of news ways to perceive and think about the world, "and is an integral part of sustainably changing the way we behave." (Levitas and Sargisson 2003: 17). Sargisson's last point, regarding changing the way the individual sees the world and behaves in relation to it, reflects the argument offered before regarding *DMZ*'s negotiation between utopia and anti-utopia: the focus is on showing how the positive *cannot* be achieved, as opposed to offering a specific blueprint for action. It shows how, still working within the same frame as the political systems that created the bad place (with war, political corruption, media and corporate negative influences), any attempt to change will fail. This is achieved through the recording and passing down of history in the form of Matty's book, which tries to transmit his personal memories and experiences into the collective. Naturally it offers no easy answer, for even this recording of history is subjective in a sea of multiple possible interpretations. The comics series does end on a hopeful note, hoping that the next generation will learn from past mistakes and move beyond them – reconciling with and learning from the past, just like in the other two graphical narratives. DMZ is, in this sense, a perfect example of what Sargisson calls "pluralist utopianism", or "utopianism of process".

5. Conclusion

In a recent article published in November 2019 entitled "In a Dystopian Age, We Need a Revival of Utopian Thinking", Manu Saadia argues that

> We live in difficult times. Technology, once heralded as an agent of human liberation, has only brought upon us rampant economic inequality and a dreadful resurgence of fascist filth. Runaway climate change, the bitter fruit of our industry, is consuming forests and melting glaciers and ice caps. Coral reefs are dying; heat waves are desiccating arable lands; cities and islands are drowning. Civilization is staggering on the edge of a precipice. Our present is dystopian. (Saadia 2019)

Saadia goes on to claim that while dystopias have been the main cultural outcome of the utopian impulse in the last decades, citing movies like *Blade Runner* (1982), utopia (as in eutopia) "is a lost art, a practice of the mind lost for lack of exertion", since "you can count on your fingers the major speculative works of the past century that fully embrace an utopian orientation" (Saadia 2019). While it is not explained in the article what exactly is meant by "utopian orientation", it is easy to counter the argument. As seen in the present thesis, what has been developing is a reworking of the utopian fiction role itself, from prescriptive to something that takes into account the cultural and social pluralism of the present age. Such works as those analysed try to learn from the utopian literary tradition while forcing it to move forward and bring it to relevance in our times. A rigid world like that in More's *Utopia* would be impossible to imagine today, but a dystopia set in the present time that not only approaches but insists on working through historical and social issues like the three main cases studies of this thesis is not only possible to imagine and speculate about but, it could be argued, necessary to move beyond any conceived stagnation in utopian thinking. Despite dystopian and generally pessimistic, these critical dystopias always leave room for resistance, a space for articulating alternative ways to organize human life in society and human life itself, with a focus on freedom, humanism, and openness – not on claims of perfection and absolute solutions.

Coming from a specific place within the cultural field achieved by its roots in counterculture movements, comics have come to play this exact role in the utopian fiction genre. These roots, from the New Left and Student Movements of the '60s and '70s overviewed in chapter 3, guaranteed that comics grew with a character of dissidence and resistance to the status quo, mainly as a consequence of being marginalized as a medium. The argument is not that comics are an inherently subversive medium, but that a large part of the cultural production in comics incorporates its historical outsider and outcast

status and works with it to offer commentary on the contemporary world in general. By combining the underground culture of the medium and bringing into use in the utopian literary tradition, specifically dystopian fiction, these works achieve something new and bold – new developments in dystopian fiction, namely what has been called critical dystopias. These move away from the anti-utopianism of the 20th century and refuse to let the utopian drive go extinct by always placing spaces of hope and resistance within their pages. Grounded in history and current politics, these works force the reader to confront the problems that plague his actual world, and as an opposite to escapism, they show and urge possible paths of action. These critical dystopias are thus not only critical of their society but of the utopian tradition itself, both literary and socially speaking. All three works question the very tradition of which they are part of, while presenting a narrative that refuses to be disassociated with that of the reader's own world. The narratives are not set in a different time or space, but make direct reference to the reader's own contemporary issues and events, of which comics as a medium is particularly useful for. The graphicness of drawings lends a subjective view to the reality that is conveyed, either through direct reference to real life events, or graphical representation of real places.

Advocating openness, plurality, and discussion of different and new possibilities, critical dystopias are in constant reimagining and development, of which the three analysed are perfect examples of. While *V for Vendetta* opposes two conflicting ideologies of the 20th century and seems to offer a blueprint for a better world, it shows its knowledge of what came before in the utopian literary tradition. In that sense, it refuses to ultimately advocate for a specific socio-political blueprint, urging instead for the individual to find the answer in himself with his own freedom, taking action and not cowering from it. *Akira,* at the same time, complicates this question by exploring how history, specifically contemporary events, shape the direction of the present, for good or for worse. Despite its insistence on dealing with the past to know the present and form a future, *Akira* complicates this issue by question the conception of time itself – linear vs. cyclical, for which many argue it is a postmodernist work. *DMZ,* finally, fully embraces a cyclical view of history in which conflicts will arise and fade away only to come back until a new way of organizing human co-existence can be found. *DMZ* goes the furthest in questioning the utopian impulse itself by presenting several spaces of hope within other spaces of hope, all with their own justifications and reasoning as to why they are the "better place", all taking place in a dystopian alternate reality of the post-9/11 years. The

hope itself is what differentiates those spaces, for while some strive for freedom, others seek control through the guise of security and stability. Brian Wood thus encapsulates much of the history of utopian literature within its wrecked DMZ, only to end with an appeal for new ways of thinking based on freedom and peace, ways that would break the recurring cycle of violence and destruction.

This trend continues today, with works such as *Lazarus* (2013-) by Greg Rucka and Michael Lark, a dystopian world in which states are no longer the main international actors, having been replaced with sixteen families that share the world and its resources between themselves while in a constant state of conflict; and *The Massive* (2012-14) also by Brian Wood, where a ship crew searches for hope in a post-apocalyptic environmentally-ravaged world. Despite Hollywood's adaptations of comics into franchises worth millions, the smaller publishers and writers still make use of comics' status and roots to show resistance and political dissidence in a pessimistic age, an age in which artists strive to show through their works that alternatives to socioeconomic organization are indeed imaginable and possible despite our pessimistic age.

6. Bibliography

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7. Appendices

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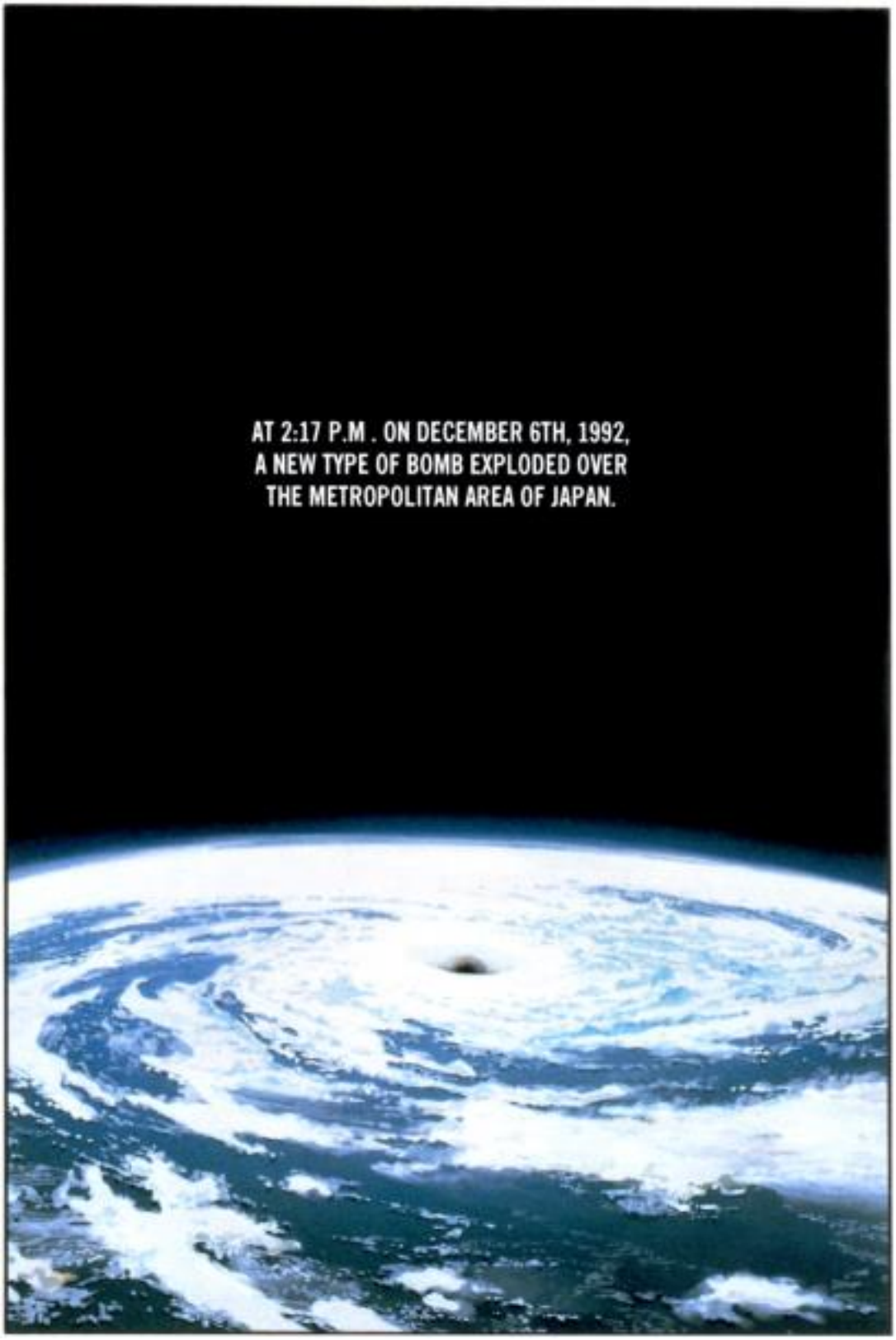

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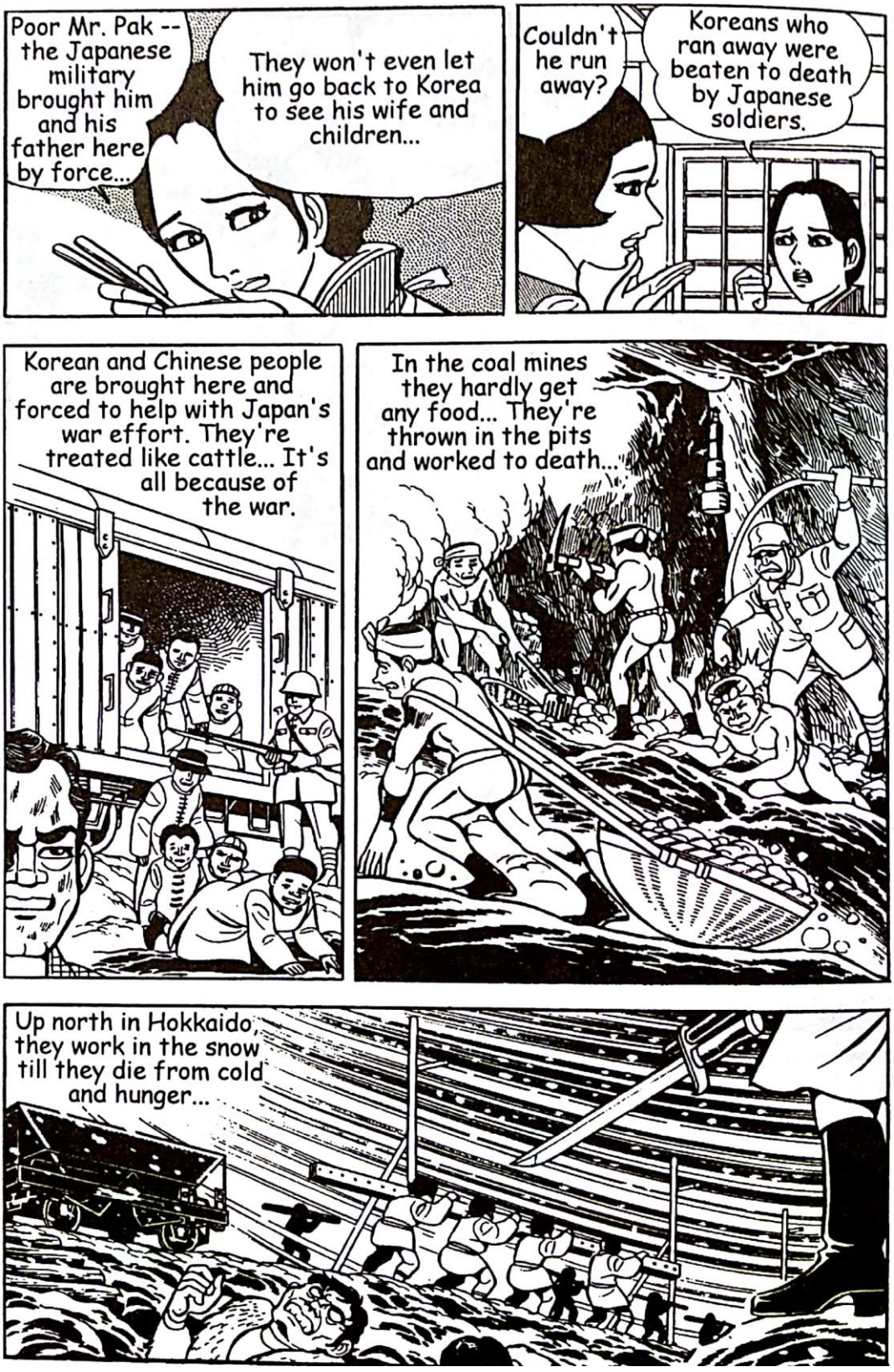
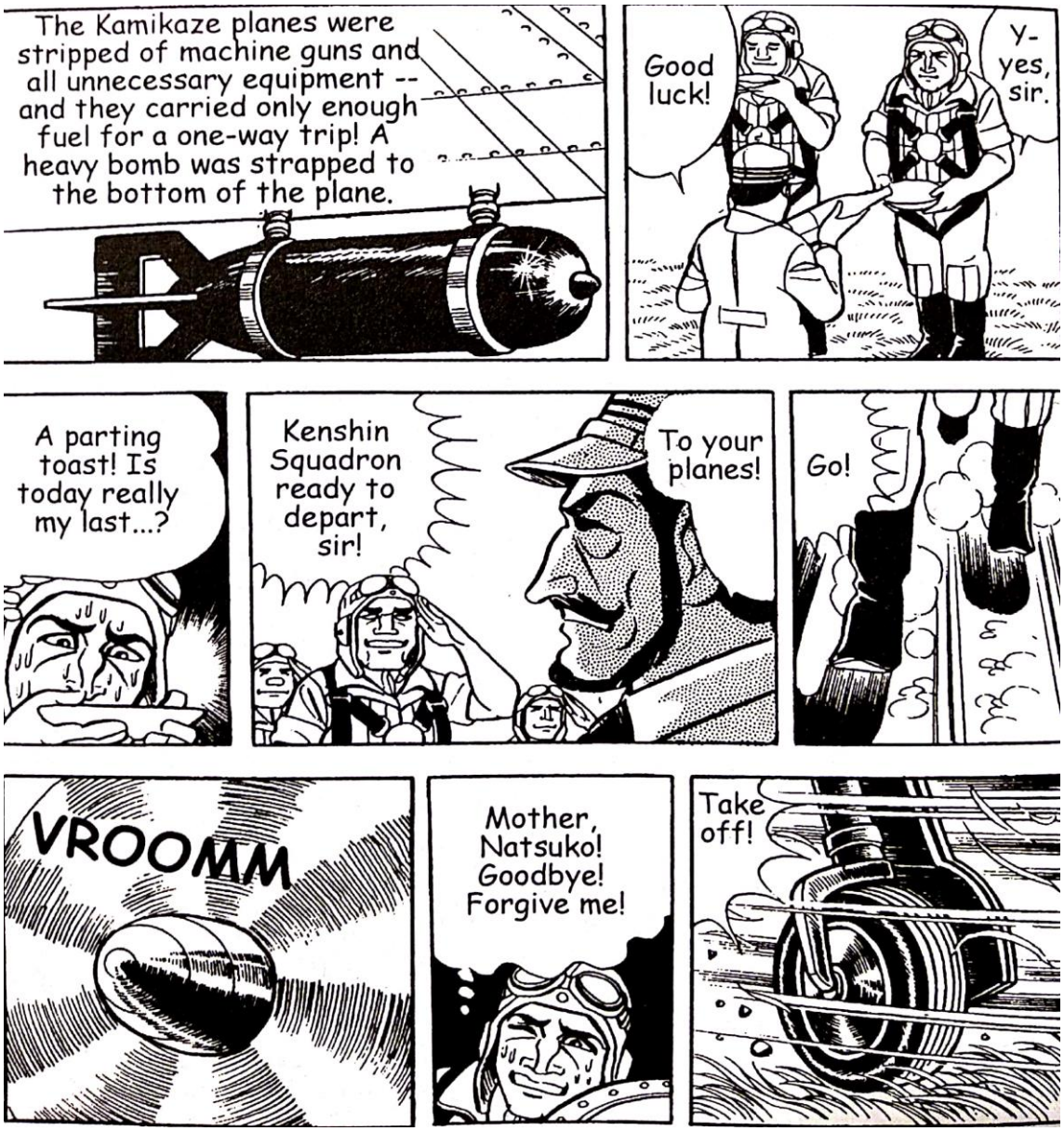


7.8. Fig. 8 – *Barefoot Gen* vol. 1, p. 154



7.9. Fig. 9 – *Barefoot Gen* vol. 1, p. 253

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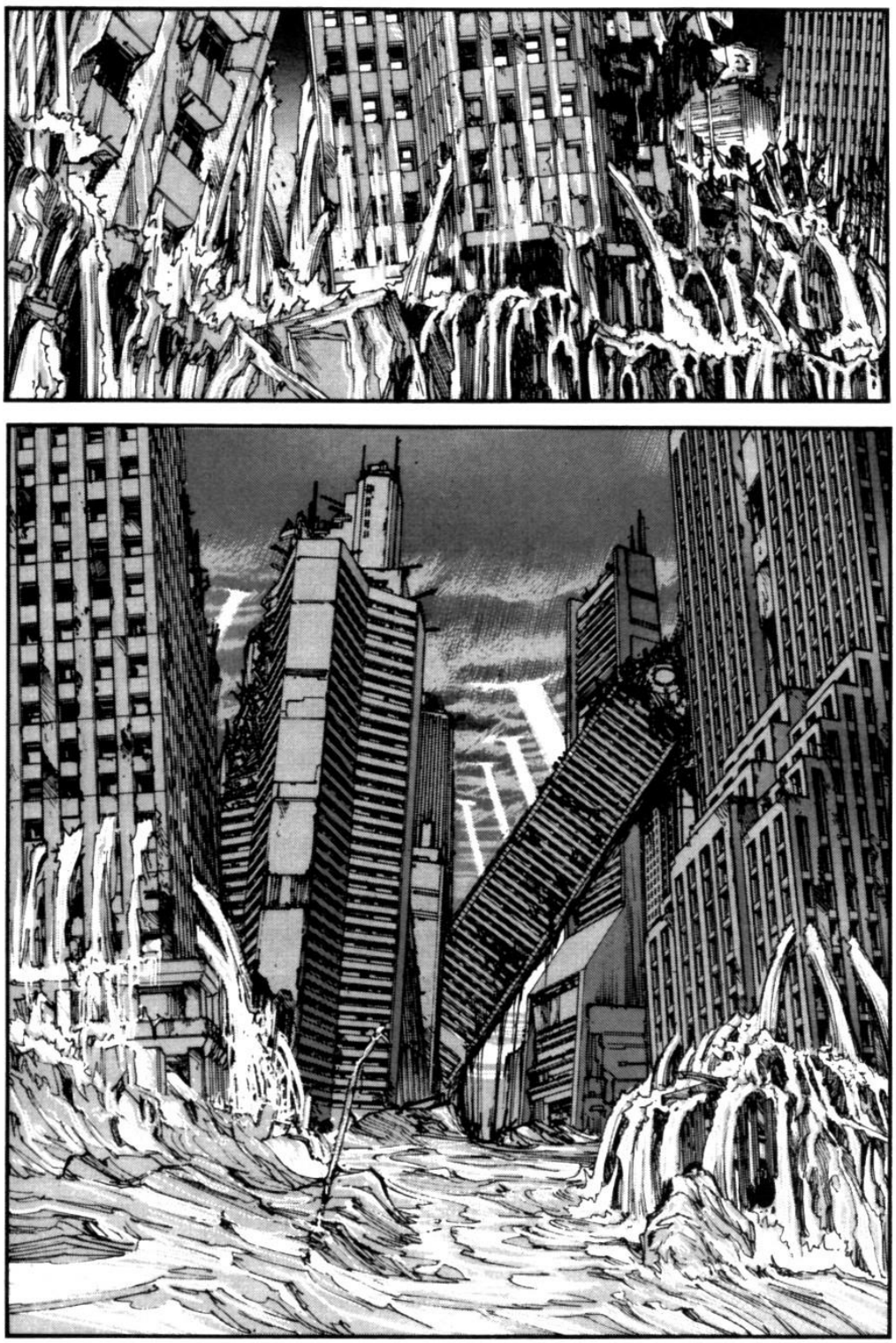

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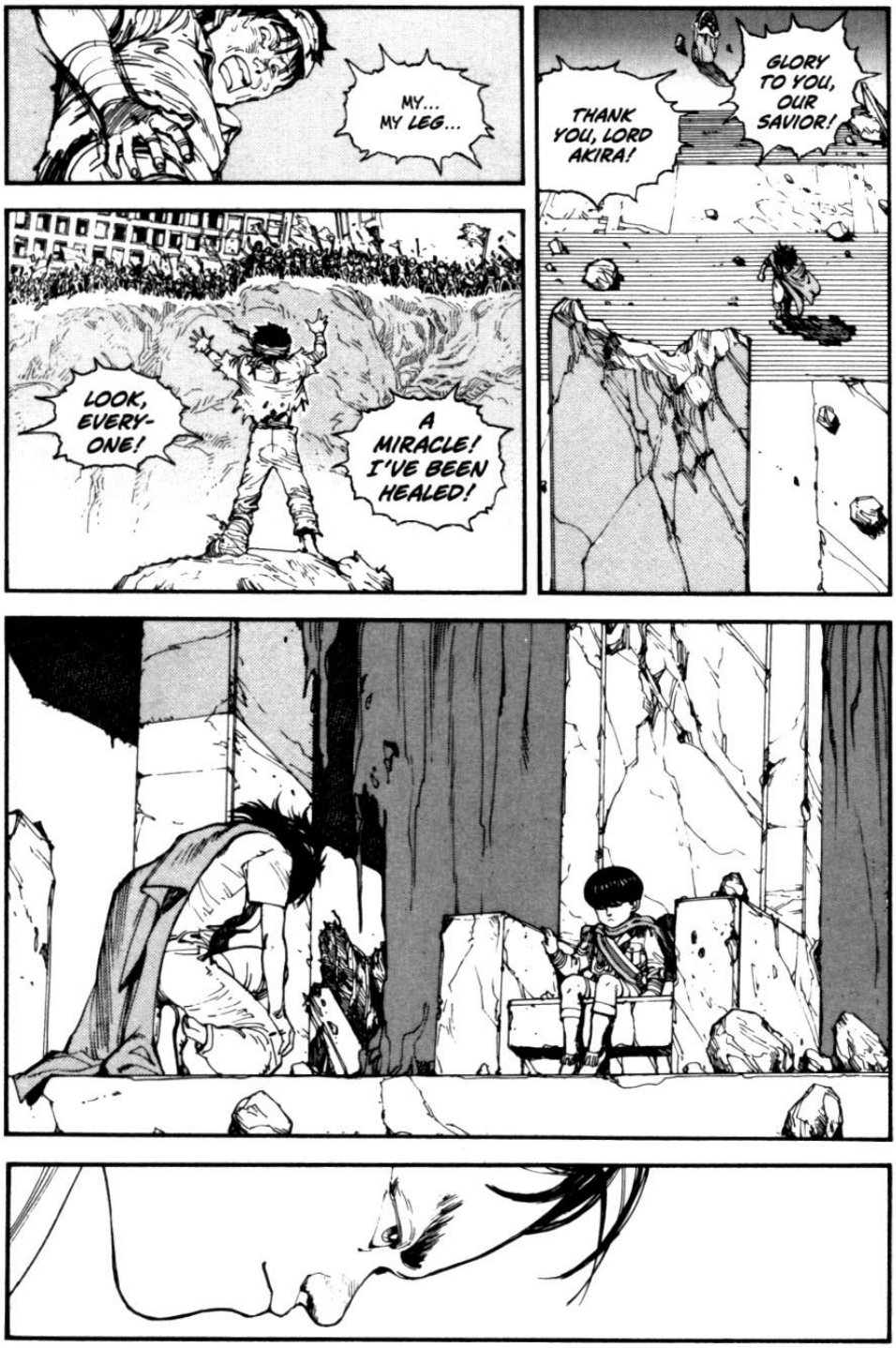

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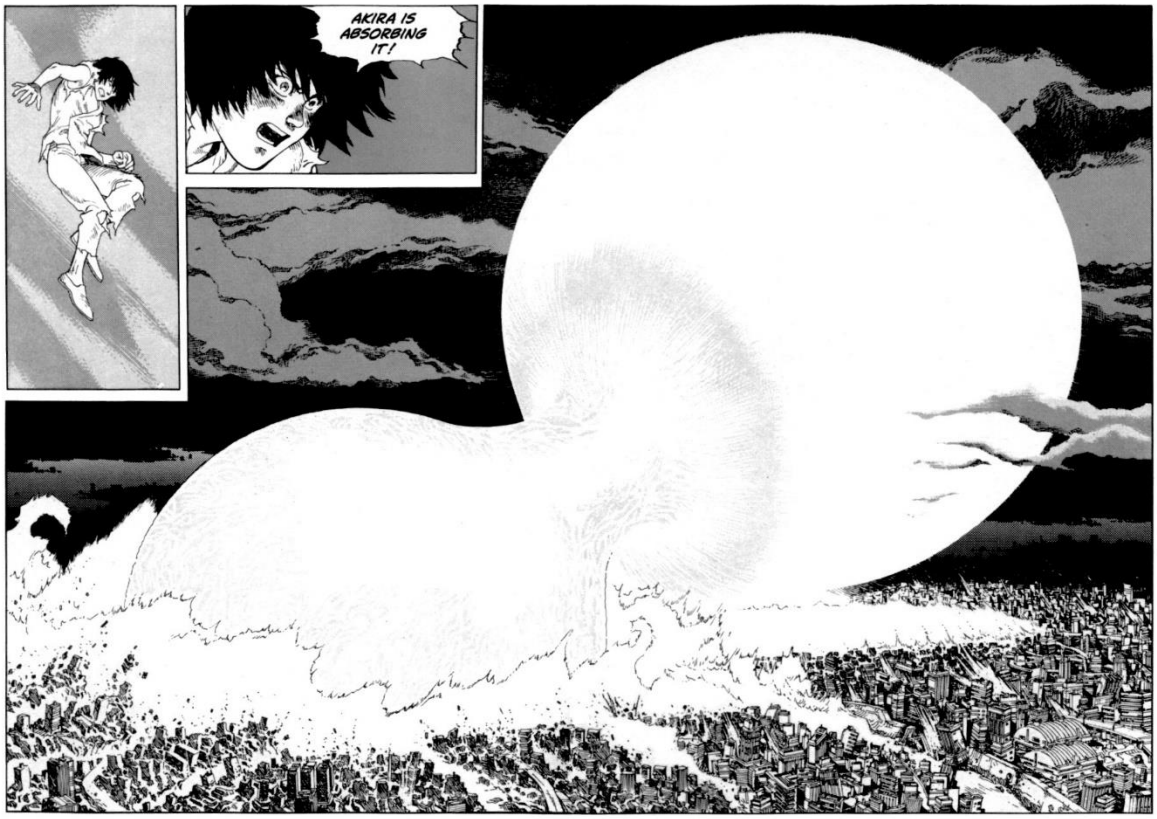

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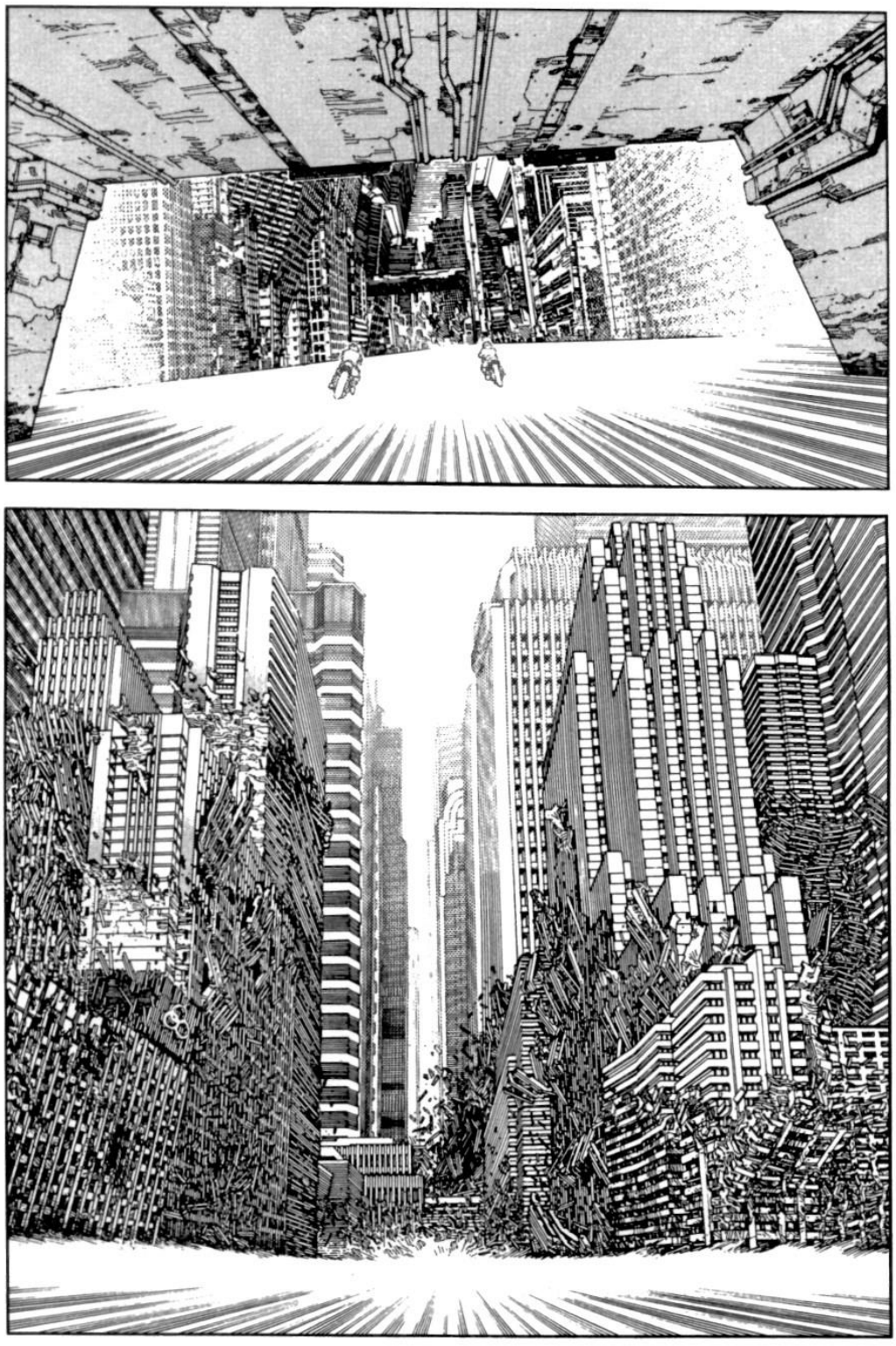

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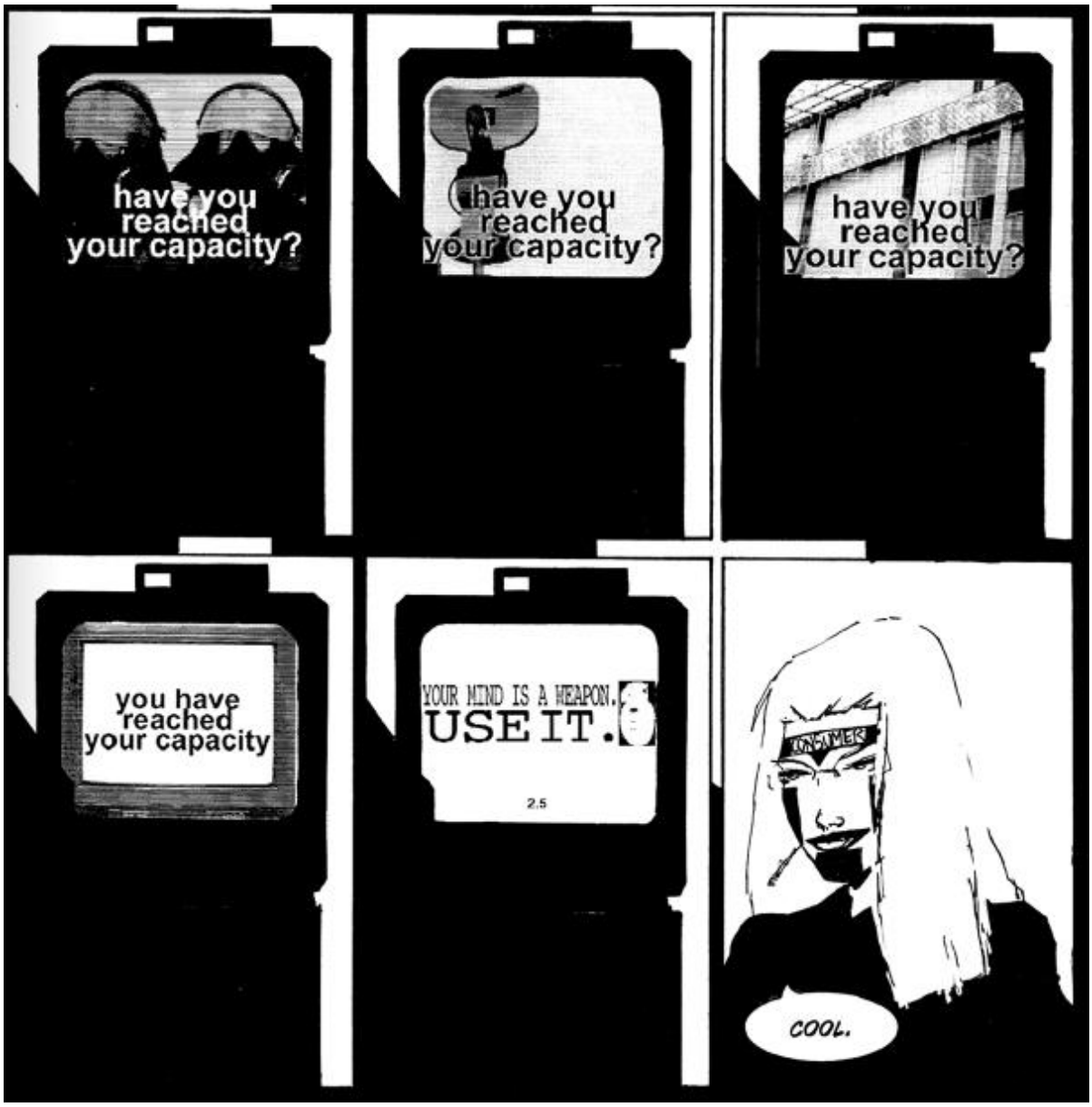
7.17. Fig. 17 – *Channel Zero*, p. 27

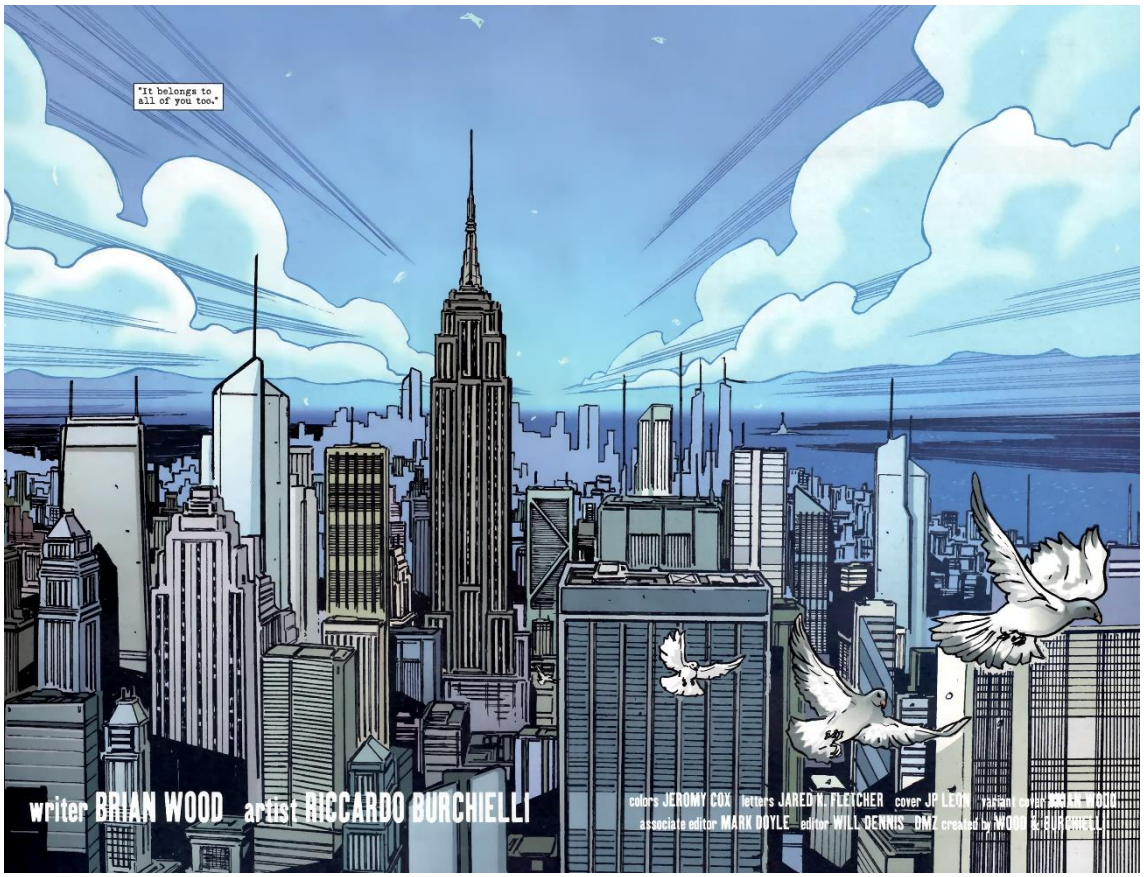


7.18. Fig. 18 – *DMZ* vol. 2, p. 57

DMZ vol. 2, p. 61

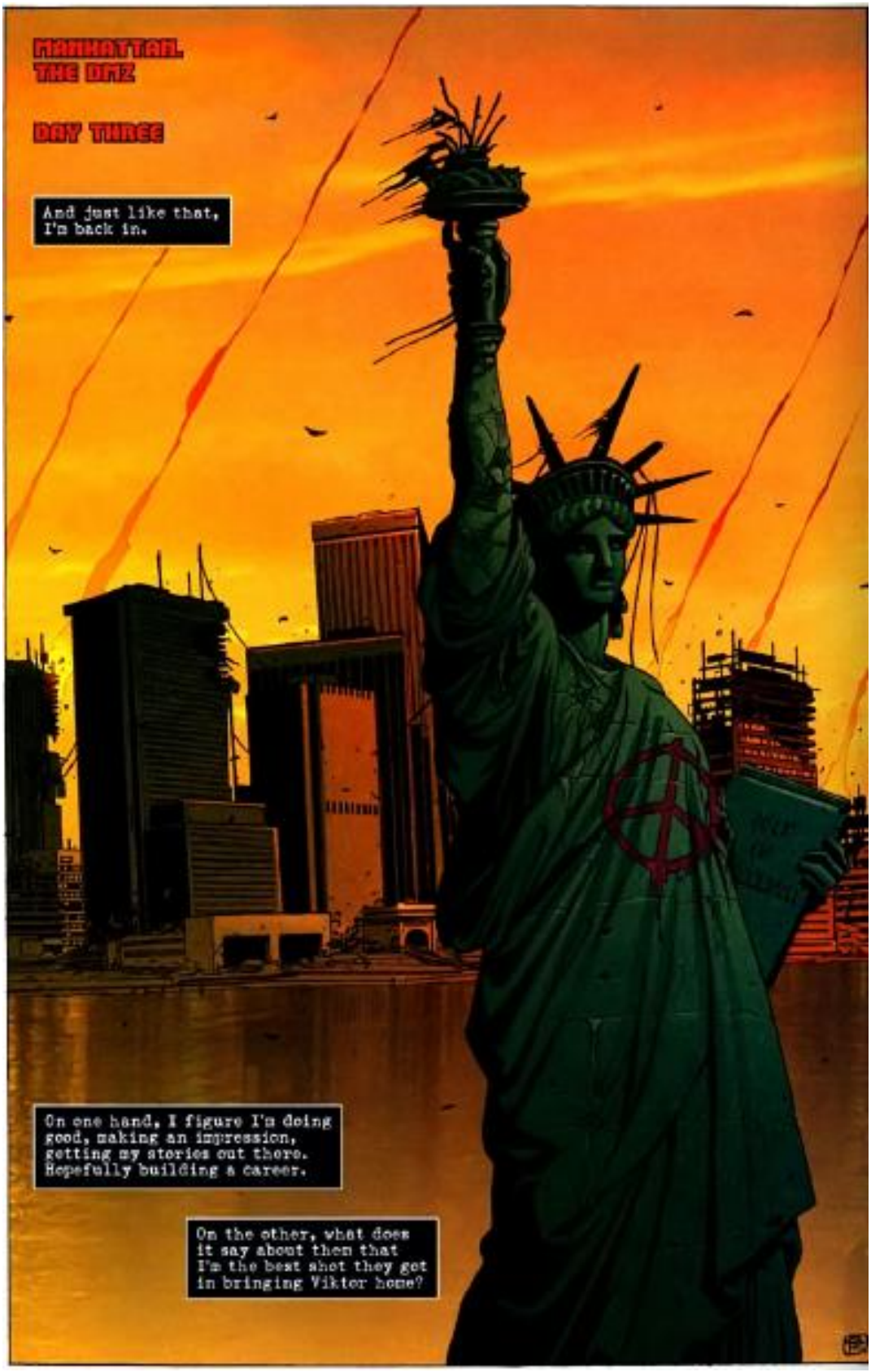
7.19. Fig. 19 – *DMZ* vol. 2, p. 81

7.20. Fig. 20 – *DMZ* vol. 5, p. 284-5



7.21. Fig. 21 – *DMZ* vol. 1, p. 13

7.22. Fig. 22 – *DMZ* vol.1, p. 154



7.23. Fig. 23 – *DMZ* vol. 4, p. 349

7.24. Abstract (English)

Academic study on utopian fiction has been largely focused on literature and, more recently, on films for case studies, leaving comics as a medium often unnoticed, despite its large number of contributions to the genre. Therefore, the aim of this thesis is to analyse comics that deal with the utopian impulse, particularly the ones that can be argued to fall on the subgenre of critical dystopias – dystopias that are open-ended, subversive and overtly political. Some questions to be tackled will arise, such as how do comics make use of their medium-specific characteristics to represent utopian fiction and how do comics take advantage of their status as a fringe medium to create subversive and critical narratives.

The research relies heavily on the theoretical works of Tom Moylan and Raffaella Baccolini, who introduced the terms Critical Utopia and Critical Dystopia in order to better understand utopian fiction that surged in the last three decades of the 20th century.

The case studies are based on works from different cultural backgrounds - *Akira* (1982-88) from the Japanese manga artist Katsuhiro Otomo, *V for Vendetta* (1982-89) from the British author Alan Moore, and *Channel Zero* (1997) and *DMZ* (2005-2012) from the North-American author Brian Wood.

After an overview of the theoretical framework, especially with key concepts and terms such as Comics and Critical Dystopia, an historical view will be taken of these works, identifying the socio-political background from which they originate, with the goal of bringing to the fore the socio-political commentary achieved by the narrative through addressing contemporary issues and setting them in a fictionalized society which nonetheless is clearly tied to the original one. The objective is to understand how exactly this criticism is achieved, the role played by such an academically disregarded medium in social critique, and to consider the insights brought on utopian thought, ascertaining what these works bring new to utopian fiction.

7.25. Abstract (Deutsch)

Wissenschaftliche Forschung, die sich mit utopischer Fiktion beschäftigt, hat sich stark auf Literatur und in letzter Zeit auch auf Films als Fallstudien gerichtet, dabei blieben Comics als Medium trotz der großen Anzahl von Veröffentlichungen in dieser Gattung unbeachtet. Das Ziel dieser Thesis ist es, Comics, die mit dem utopischen Impuls umgehen und vor allem jene, die als Kritische Dystopien bezeichnet werden können – Dystopien, die ein offenes Ende besitzen, subversiv und unverhüllt politisch sind – zu analysieren. Es stellt sich die Frage, wie Comics durch ihr mediumspezifisches Verfahren utopische Fiktion darstellen können und wie Comics ihren Rand-Status ausnutzen, um subversive und kritische Erzählungen zu schaffen.

Die Recherche ist stark auf die theoretischen Werke von Tom Moylan and Raffaella Baccolini angewiesen – sie haben die Begriffe Kritische Utopie und Kritische Dystopie geprägt, um die utopische Fiktion, die in den letzten drei Jahrzenten des zwanzigsten Jahrhundert erschienen sind, besser zu verstehen.

Die einzelnen Fallstudien gehen in Werke von verschiedenen kulturellen Hintergründe hinein - *Akira* (1982-88) von dem japanischen Manga Autor Katsuhiro Otomo, *V for Vendetta* (1982-89) von dem britischen Autor Alan Moore, und *Channel Zero* (1997) und *DMZ* (2005-2012) von dem nordamerikanischen Autor Brian Wood.

Nach einer Auseinandersetzung mit dem theoretischen Rahmen, vor allem mit den Begriffen Kritische Dystopie und Comics, werden diese Werke historisch betrachtet und ihre gesellschaftspolitisches Umfeld analysiert. Diese Untersuchung der gesellschaftlichen und politischen Probleme sowie ihre Kritik werden in diesen Werken durch das Eingehen in die gegenwärtigen Probleme einer fiktiven dystopischen Gesellschaft, die offenbar eine Verbindung zu der vom Autor hat, dargestellt. Es ist das Ziel dieser Arbeit festzustellen, wie genau diese Kritik erreicht ist, zu verstehen was für eine Rolle Comics, ein akademisches unberücksichtiges Medium, in sozialer und gesellschaftlicher Kritik spielen und welche besondere Bedeutung sowie unerforschte Qualitäten sie zur utopischen Fiktion beitragen.