



Film review: *Watchmen*

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Journal of Evolution and Technology - Vol. 20 Issue 1 – June 2009 - pgs 67-69
<http://jetpress.org/v20/rinesi.htm>

This piece is not about the experience of watching *Watchmen* (dir. Zack Snyder, 2009), but rather about what the Watchmen were watching, and therefore what they were doing (needlessly to say, it spoils the entirety of the movie, and assumes the reader has seen it). This will be more difficult than it would seem at first, because some of the characters were literally mindless, some were fighting a battle, some were fixing a clock, and some were watching a static picture, and although those are radically different activities, they were all patterns over the same events. The key is that what things mean depends very much on who you are, and in that sense *Watchmen* is a very clear lesson on what happens when different kinds of posthumans interact or fail to.

Humans as such – “baseline humans,” to borrow a useful term from comics – play little to no role in the plot. The story deals instead with four different classes of posthumans. The first class, and by far the most numerous, is the handful of merely extraordinary humans, the bulk of the Watchmen, including Rorschach, Daniel, Laurie, and the Comedian. While they are all supposed to be within the normal range of human abilities, their fighting prowess, access to technology, and tactical skills are clearly and enormously superior. If they are not posthumans, they are definitely above most humans.

Still biologically human, but at a further remove in skills, lies Adrian Veidt. He is widely known as the world’s smartest man, and his mental and physical abilities are shown during the course of the movie to be even greater than what could be expected of a peak human; he effortlessly defeats other implausibly skilled Watchmen, culminating with the act of literally catching a bullet on his hand. As with all the extraordinarily characters in *Watchmen*, his gifts can be traced to chance – in his case genetic chance –

rather than being deliberately sought, but this doesn't conflict with his status as post- (or at least stretching the definition of) human.

Dr. Manhattan is clearly posthuman, and definitely no longer biologically human, or even biological. His senses, abilities, and cognitive process have been enormously extended, to the point that he actually perceives time as a separate dimension. "God exists," says one of the characters, "and he is American." The first part of that phrase, at least, is very close to being true.

The fourth class of posthuman entities has only one member. It isn't seen, and that is very important, because if it were seen it would be the end of the movie: it's the Russian nuclear arsenal. It might seem unfounded to include it as a character, and perhaps it isn't one from our point of view, but keep in mind that individual humans show no initiative from Dr. Manhattan's perspective. For him, as for the Russian military as a whole, human beings are merely systems that unfold according to certain laws. At the same time, the nuclear arsenal is certainly more than human in the scope of the destruction it could unleash – a destruction that even Dr. Manhattan is unlikely to be able to stop.

There is in fact little direct conflict between these different classes of posthumans, if conflict is understood as a deliberate, mutually-understood engagement. For the "baseline Watchmen," most of the movie is about a mystery: battles fought under the shadow of an Apocalypse that seems impossible for them to do anything against, unless it were convincing a more powerful posthuman to help.

Veidt, on the other hand, is fixing a clock. He can map and predict psychological, societal and political trends, and has devised a plan to prevent the otherwise inescapable destruction. Paradoxically, Dr. Manhattan is the character associated in various ways with the clock motif, but from his four-dimensional point of view, clocks are as static and constant as everything else. The universe he can watch is a static picture that he glides his eyes across back and forth; perhaps it's as mechanical a view as Veidt's, but he also includes himself in the picture. Able to perceive reality at an almost raw level, Dr. Manhattan is a force of nature in more senses than one, immensely more aware than the nuclear arsenal (indeed, immensely more aware than everybody else), but at the same time almost equally uninvested in the succession of individual events.

It's difficult to say that anybody has bested anybody until *after* Veidt's explosions have gone off. Prior to that moment, they have all been playing, as it were, different games over the same chess board (if Dr. Manhattan's mostly detached observation could be thought of as a very particular game). It is at the end

that they are all revealed to and judged by each other, and it is interesting that this is at all possible, and that it is sought by all the characters. Despite their sometimes radical differences in perceptions, abilities, and modes of being, they all share what can be thought of as a social, or at least interpersonal, bond. Their moral choices might differ, but they are sufficiently mutually intelligible to gather together, fortuitously or otherwise, and interact in personally meaningful ways (though, strictly speaking, the only thing that matters to Veidt, once he has effectively defused the nuclear arsenal, is whether he will be able to kill Dr. Manhattan or convince him to go along with his plan).

Ultimately, watching *Watchmen* reveals an ambiguity about the possibility of communication and interaction between different classes of posthumans (although it might make more sense to think of them as different variations of humanity, as the human/posthuman dichotomy itself is not the point of the movie). The practically unbridgeable gradations of power aren't glossed over, and mutual isolation, more or less lamented, is at least their temporary fate. Yet, at the same, there is enough of a common psychological framework, distinct for each of them but at some level mutually compatible, to make it possible for all of them to share, in a sense and perhaps for a last moment, the same world. Human nature is shown as flexible enough to allow for some level of mutual understanding, even if it means hate, and even when it ceases to be strictly human.

That, at least, is an optimistic proposition.