



Politicizing the superhero genre: The case of *Watchmen* (HBO, 2019)

Evdokia Stefanopoulou, Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, evstefan@yahoo.gr

Volume 10.1 (2022) | ISSN 2158-8724 (online) | DOI 10.5195/cinej.2022.509 | <http://cinej.pitt.edu>

Abstract

The HBO limited television series *Watchmen* (2019) represents a politically engaged superhero television show, marking a shift in recent efforts to render the genre more inclusive in terms of gender and race. Specifically, in mixing fictional and real events surrounding racial violence, such as the 1921 Tulsa massacre, *Watchmen* inscribes the potential of the superhero genre to tackle prescient political issues and social anxieties, that became even more poignant in the wake of the 2020 George Floyd protests. The present paper explores *Watchmen*'s deep resonances with contemporary social and political issues, not only at the level of representations, but also at the series' production context, and argues that the show marks a key moment in the politicization of the superhero genre.

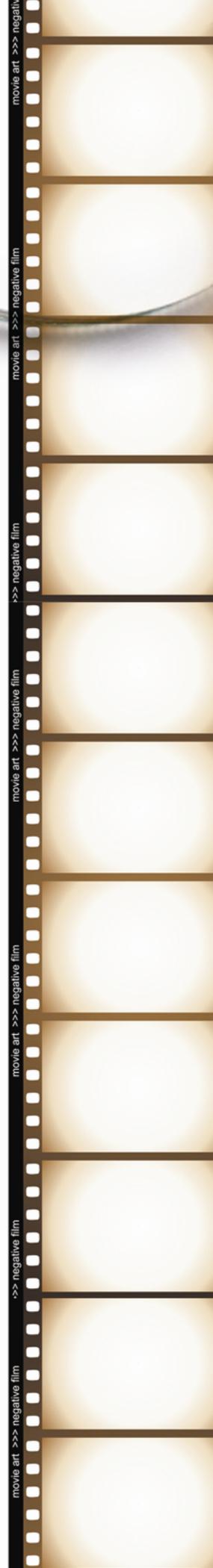
Keywords: superhero genre; *Watchmen*; racial violence; Tulsa race massacre; political television



This journal is published by the [University Library System](#) of the [University of Pittsburgh](#) as part of its [D-Scribe Digital Publishing Program](#) and is cosponsored by the [University of Pittsburgh Press](#).



New articles in this journal are licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 United States License.



Politicizing the superhero genre:
The case of *Watchmen* (HBO, 2019)
Evdokia Stefanopoulou

Introduction

Since the turn of the century there is a mass proliferation of superhero narratives. From the record-breaking blockbuster films of the Marvel Cinematic Universe and DC's Extended Universe, to television series and video games, the superhero genre has become a mainstream cultural expression of the twenty-first century. Although in the first superhero films of the new millennium the protagonists were mostly white, male and heterosexual (e.g. *Spider-Man* (2002), *Iron Man* (2008), etc.), and women were often hyper-sexualized and/or placed in supporting roles, in the last decade there has been a gradual shift toward more diverse characterizations that include female superheroes and/or superheroes of colour in central roles (e.g. *Wonder Woman* (2017), *Black Panther* (2018) *Captain Marvel* (2019), etc.). In the case of superheroes of colour, *Black Panther* (2018) marks a landmark moment, grossing over \$1 billion worldwide, and garnering critical praise as “a defining moment for black America” (Wallace, 2018). Despite its remarkable cultural impact, *Black Panther* “adheres more closely to a film production philosophy that placed less emphasis on authentic representations of Black people and culture, and primary emphasis on box office profit”, while also it “is not as vested in Black power or Pan-African philosophy as it may initially seem” (Benash, 2021, p. 45). Indeed, despite that recent Marvel/DC blockbuster films

and TV shows provide a positive change in issues of representation, they usually retain a more superficial connection to contemporary social issues and original experiences, and are driven mainly by the blockbuster logic of maximizing profit.

In opposition, the HBO limited television series *Watchmen* (2019) represents a more politically engaged and “complex” (Mittell, 2015) superhero television show with its profound exploration of sociopolitical issues, that resonate with authentic black experience and trauma. In mixing fictional and real events surrounding racial violence, *Watchmen* inscribes the potential of the superhero genre to tackle prescient political issues and social anxieties in a genuine manner. The present paper explores *Watchmen*’s deep resonances with contemporary issues, such as racial justice and institutionalized forms of violence, arguing that the show constitutes an exemplary political superhero text. The show’s political engagement is traced not only at the level of its representations, but also at the level of the production context, as exemplified in the diversity of the show’s creative team. In the first section, I discuss the politics of *Watchmen* behind the screen, examining the different political discourses surrounding the show’s production, exhibition/distribution, and reception. Such discourses confirm the clear political intentions in the show’s creation, and also that it was promoted and received in such manner. In the second section, I turn to the fictional world, and examine the show’s representations of race, and specifically the

representation of Hooded Justice—the first superhero in the *Watchmen* universe. By depicting the first superhero as a Black man, the show reimagines the history of the superhero genre from the perspective of race, deeply connecting it with racial history. In this way, I argue, the show marks a political turn in the superhero genre.

Watchmen's politics behind the screen

HBO's *Watchmen* is created by Damon Lindelof, and is based on Alan Moore's and Dave Gibbons' 1986 DC comics series of the same name. Lindelof, who also served as an executive producer and writer, is best known as the creator of “complex” (Mittell, 2015) and critically acclaimed television series, such as *Lost* (ABC, 2004–2010), and *The Leftovers* (HBO, 2014–2017). In *Watchmen*, the creator continues and expands such narrative practices of complex storytelling. According to Lindelof, the series is a remix of the original comic series that approaches the events of the comics as a canon, but also adds new characters and storylines (Hibberd, 2019). The series unravels thirty-four years after the comic's events, in the same alternate universe, and explores a present-day America inflicted by racial hatred. The defining incident of this alternate universe is the real-life 1921 Tulsa race massacre, a reimagination of which is presented in the pilot, in a powerful and historical-accurate way (King, 2019). In the alternate present, African Americans have been granted reparations, which results in a backlash

by a white supremacist group called the Seventh Cavalry. Furthermore, the police officers conceal their identities with masks, following the violent events of the “White Night,” where nearly all members of the Tulsa police department were killed by the Kavarly. The incidents of racial violence resurface when the chief of the police, Judd Crawford (Don Johnson), is brutally murdered. The central protagonist is Angela Abar (Regina King), one of the few surviving officers of the White Night, who now works secretly as Sister Night, and is masked in a nun-inspired costume. As she begins investigating Crawford’s murder, a complex web of histories about superheroes and racial violence begins to untangle.

Watchmen was the most awarded series in 2020, with twenty-six Primetime Emmy Award nominations and eleven wins, including Best Limited Series, Best Actress for a Limited Series (Regina King), and Best Supporting Actor in a Limited Series (Yahya Abdul-Mateen). The show received also widespread critical acclaim, with a ninety-six percent rating from critics on Rotten Tomatoes, and eighty-five percent rating on Metacritic. The critics praised the show not only for its artistic qualities, but also for its political themes, which are informed by past and present historical events surrounding systemic racism and violence in the US (Mangan, 2019; Tallerico, 2019). Especially the series’ foregrounding of the Tulsa race massacre was deemed as a significant history lesson, since many viewers first learned about it through the series (Di Placido, 2020).

Furthermore, in the wake of the 2020 George Floyd protests, critics also highlighted the series' eerie prescience (VanDerWerff, 2020; Di Placido, 2020; Lithwick, 2020; Gould, 2020). For example, Emily VanDerWerff (2020) commended on how the show is an "eerie reflection of our own history — both because *Watchmen* takes place in an alternate timeline version of our reality and because it's touching on darker parts of the American narrative that are rarely presented within the confines of superhero stories." Similarly, Dani Di Placido (2020) maintained that "[w]e're currently living through history, as the Black Lives Matter movement disrupts an unbalanced status quo, and in hindsight, *Watchmen* feels eerily prescient, aesthetically and tonally. Face masks, corrupt cops, race riots; it's all been foreshadowed by the series." In an academic essay, Tia Alphonse (2020) further pointed that "*Watchmen* so poignantly balances acknowledgement of the real-lived experiences and trauma of historical racism, yet in fantasy, it also creates new characters undefined by the timeline and constraints of the past." Lindelof's approach is exactly based on this dynamic mixture of history and fantasy, creating an imaginative space to negotiate historical trauma, but also to envision new possibilities and identities.

In adapting *Watchmen*, Lindelof was trying to make the show relevant to the present historical context. The original 1986 *Watchmen* comic was already a politically charged text, which negotiated Cold War anxieties of the Reagan era, especially the issue of nuclear war (King, 2019; Tallerico, 2019). Since *Watchmen* has always been about hidden histories and buried

traumas, Lindelof concluded that racial conflicts are the central historical trauma of our era, and should be the shaping force of the reimagined *Watchmen* universe. The showrunner did not shy away from his political intentions, and clearly stated them in interviews. In his words: "to not tell a story about race in the context of a political text in 2019 almost felt borderline irresponsible" (King, 2019). Lindelof set at the epicentre of the series the real events of the 1921 Tulsa race massacre, also known as the Greenwood /Black Wall Street Massacre, an event that he became aware of after reading Ta-Nehisi Coates' article "The Case for Reparations" that was published in *The Atlantic* in 2014. Lindelof felt that this oft-forgotten slaughter, and its repercussions to the present should be the defining event of the alternate reality's present. Acknowledging the medium's influence, the showrunner insisted on the massacre's accurate representation, since many viewers might learn this dark chapter of American history for the first time (Lithwick, 2020). Along with the other writers of the show, Lindelof also treated the historical material with respect and tried to recreate events in a non-exploitative way (Hibberd, 2019). Furthermore, he also likened the Tulsa events with a superhero origin story. As he stated: "it felt like a superhero origin story in some weird way. It felt like Krypton, you know? It felt like the destruction of a world" (King, 2019). From the above statements we can discern not only Lindelof's definite aim to make

a political narrative, but also his effort to reimagine the superhero genre through this political prism.

Lindelof's political intentions are also reflected in the composition of the writing team, since he gathered artists of color and women in order to shape the material from their unique perspectives. According to one of the series' writers, Cord Jefferson, Lindelof expressed many concerns about his position as a white showrunner, and felt that "[i]t is not [his] story to tell." Lindelof was not comfortable to develop the project unless he worked with "a big staff of black writers" (Sepinwall, 2020). He thus gathered the most diverse writing staff of his career, with half the writers being black and half being women (Bastián, 2019). More specifically the writer's room was comprised of six black writers, with half of them being women: Stacy Osei-Kuffour, Christal Henry, Ryan Lipscomb, Branden Jacobs-Jenkins, Janine Nabers and Cord Jefferson. There were also seven white writers — Jeff Jensen, Lila Byock, Carly Wray, Nick Cuse, Damon Lindelof, Claire Kiechel, and Tom Spezialy — with only four of them being white men (Bastián, 2019). In the directing department there was also strong female and black presence, with six out of nine episodes being directed by women or people of color: Nicole Kassell, directed episodes one, two and eight, and was also executive producer. Steph Green, another woman, directed episode five. Stephen Williams, a Jamaican-Canadian, directed episodes three and six and also served as executive producer. Writer Cord Jefferson attributed the show's complexity to this diversity that

enabled the interweaving of different perspectives: “I think that...throwing in all of those different perspectives and viewpoints, not just on policing, but on storytelling and America in general, was [Lindelof’s] way of getting at a show that was complex in those ways” (Sepinwall, 2020).

The show’s protagonists were also very vocal about the show’s political potential and the social issues that it raised. Regina King stressed the impact of the show during a Peabody Award acceptance speech by stating that “[t]his show not only evoked thought, conversation, but exposed history that had been forgotten—all while we were able to entertain” (Di Placido, 2020). King has also made a political statement herself during the 2020 Emmy awards virtual ceremony where she accepted the Leading Actress award for *Watchmen*, while wearing a Breonna Taylor t-shirt. Taylor was a black medical worker who was shot and killed by Louisville police officers in March 2020, and whose death instigated wide-scale demonstrations in the US. Before concluding her acceptance speech, King urged everyone to vote, saying that she "would be remiss not to mention that, being a part of a show as prescient as *Watchmen*” (Agard, 2020). King closed her speech with the phrase “Rest in power RBG,” paying tribute to the late US Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg, one of the most “prominent figures in the arena of human rights and civil liberties” (Cotter, 2020). Yahya Abdul-Mateen II, who played Doctor Manhattan/ Calvin Abar in the series, also delivered a politically charged speech while accepting the Emmy Award for supporting actor

in the same ceremony: “*Watchmen* was a story about trauma...It was a story about the lasting scars of ... white domestic terrorism ... It was a story about police corruption and brutality. But in the midst of it all, it was also a story about a god who came down to earth to reciprocate to a Black woman all the love that she deserved” (Carras and Medrano, 2020). It is obvious from the above discourses that *Watchmen* functioned as a vehicle for all the creative personnel involved in the show to draw attention to pressing political and social issues, such as systemic racism and police brutality. Additionally, the political undertones also informed the show’s distribution and reception.

As far as the distribution is concerned, HBO followed this current of political statements in relation to *Watchmen* by making the series available for free streaming from its website, and other on demand services on the weekend of June 19, 2020— the holiday of Juneteenth, which celebrates the end of slavery in the US. The network’s announcement reads: “HBO is proud to offer all nine episodes for free of this timely, poignant series that explores the legacy of systemic racism in America” (VanHoose, 2020). By placing *Watchmen* along with other free content offerings which “highlight[t] Black experiences, voices and storytellers,” such as *Being Serena* (2018-), *Bessie* (2015), *Say Her Name: The Life & Death of Sandra Bland* (2018), and the Spike Lee’s documentary *4 Little Girls* (1997), among others (Rosen, 2020), the streaming platform

recognized the superhero show as equally important with more ‘serious’ forms such as historical dramas, documentaries, etc.

In regard to the show’s performance, *Watchmen* is HBO’s most viewed new series since *Big Little Lies* in 2017,¹ with an average of seven million viewers per episode across all platforms, the majority of whom viewed the show as a result of the “word of mouth” effect (Aurthur, 2019; Porter, 2019). Despite the strong performance, it is worth noticing that both in Rotten Tomatoes and in Metacritic the audience score is lower than the critics' consensus (fifty-six percent for both sites). Interestingly, in Metascore the most negative critiques focused on the series departure from the source material, and the emphasis on political themes. For example, reviewer Weyivi in Metascore, who rated the show with two out of ten points, writes: “This show uses the backdrop of *Watchmen* in order to push its own themes of race relations in the American south in an alternate history with some continuity from the graphic novel...It's another "woke" television show concerned more with politics than world building” (“Watchmen”, 2019). Matt Miller (2019) commented on similar reviews posted in Rotten Tomatoes and IMDb, stating that these “far-right trolls” represent a backlash to the recent effort of superhero/fantasy/sci-fi television and film, such as the new *Star Wars* trilogy, *Black Panther* etc., to be more inclusive in terms of gender and race. The critic noted that such comments point to the show’s disturbing prescience since “the language

and politics and ideas of these trolls so closely resemble those of the 7th Cavalry in the show” (Miller, 2019). In the other end of the spectrum, many viewers were deeply moved and educated by the series. Thousands of people posted on twitter, commenting that they first learned about Tulsa Massacre from the show or expressed their gratitude that someone had finally dramatized this buried history chapter for a mass audience (Sepinwall, 2020). After the series premiere, there was a massive surge in Google searches for Tulsa race riot from around the world, highlighting how the show engaged its audiences in a deeply political way (Matos, 2019; Sepinwall, 2020). The above discourses surrounding the show’s production, distribution and reception establish the politics of *Watchmen* outside the text. In the next section I explore the political dynamic of the narrative itself, by focusing mainly on the character of Hooded Justice/Will Reeves (Louis Gossett Jr./ Jovan Adepo). A special emphasis is put on episode six, "This Extraordinary Being"— a superhero origins story seen through the lens of race.

Hooded Justice: *Watchmen*’s politics of representation

Watchmen’s first episode (“It’s Summer and We’re Running Out of Ice”) opens with the projection of a fictional silent film. We hear the sound of a film rolling in the projector, while a small iris opens up, marking the beginning of the silent film, which is displayed in a squarish aspect ratio. The screen depicts a white (and white-dressed) man on a white horse being chased by

another man who is all covered in black. Shortly after, the white man is knocked down, and from a nearby church people begin to flow out to see what happened. The priest recognizes that the man in the ground is their sheriff, and—as we read in the following intertitle— asks what is going on. The black dressed man, whose face hasn't been revealed yet, explains to the people that their sheriff has stolen their cattle, and he doesn't deserve to wear the badge. The priest then asks the stranger to identify himself. In a low angle shot the black dressed man takes off his cloak, revealing his black skin and his badge. A small boy from the church crowd recognizes him, and exclaims that he is Bass Reeves, the Black Marshal of Oklahoma. Bass Reeves demonstrates his badge while the squarish frame begins to widen, steadily occupying the entire widescreen image. As the camera begins to pan left, we see the movie theatre where the film is being played. In the audience, a young Black boy, Will, is captivated by the onscreen events. In a following shot we see the child from behind watching the film, where now the crowd asks Bass Reeves to lynch the thief. As the movie unravels, we hear the child delivering Reeves' answer: "there will be no mob justice, trust in the law." In the soundtrack the piano sounds begin to intermix with the sound of a siren and an explosion. The theatre's roof starts to collapse, signalling the beginning of the Tulsa Massacre. While the shooting, lynching and destruction of the black community of the Greenwood district continues, the little boy's parents hide him inside a wooden box, aboard a car that leaves Tulsa.

As the car departs, Will watches through the box's openings a biplane dropping dynamite on the building where his parents remained, thus witnessing their death. This is the beginning of Will Reeves' story, Angela Abar's grandfather and the first superhero of the Watchmen universe.

From this opening sequence, the show places race at the center of its narrative, interweaving fictional and real events to shape a racially charged superhero story. As mentioned above, the dramatic depiction of the real-life Tulsa Race Massacre is the catalyst of the unfolding events in this alternate universe. In addition, the fictional silent film played within the opening sequence not only refers to the real life, first black deputy US marshal west of the Mississippi River, Bass Reeves (1838-1910), but also introduces the themes and tone of the show. This chase film alludes to early cinema while inverting the color coding established in the western genre, by equating the black color with justice and goodness and white color with deceit and crime. Importantly, Bass Reeves is the role model of Will, inspiring his trust in the law, his choice to become a police officer and even his last name. In the opening sequence, Will's story is also signaled as a superhero origin story, since the similarity with Superman's myth was also noted by Lindlelof himself (Bastién, 2019). The show clearly aligns Will with Superman when his parents put him inside a crate and help him escape from his hometown which is under attack, just as Kal-El's parents helped their son to flee away from the dying Krypton. This association is further stressed in episode six, when in some point Will reads *Action Comics* No. 1, where the first story of Superman was published in

1938. Therefore, not only is Will Reeve's story imbued with superhero signifiers, but also his source of power and strength is his racial identity. In this way the show rewrites the genealogy of the superhero genre, by rendering the first superhero a man who has suffered from racial injustice and violence. This origin story is further elaborated in a powerful way in episode six.

In episode six ("This Extraordinary Being") Angela experiences Will Reeve's memories, after taking a lethal dosage of his Nostalgia pills—a specially designed drug that enables someone to relive his/her own past memories. During this episode, Angela, who has recently found out that Will Reeves is her grandfather, sees through his eyes what it was like to be one of the first black officers in the NYPD in the late 1930s-early 1940s. In addition, she witnesses Will's childhood memories from the 1921 Tulsa race massacre. In this revisiting of the past, we see how Will's childhood aspiration to serve the law is undercut by the systemic racism, injustice and violence, and how his desire for justice is inevitably transformed into vigilantism. The episode is shot in black and white and it consists of extensive long takes that adopt Will's/Angela's point-of view, thus conveying a subjective view on the events. Director Stephen Williams and co-writers Damon Lindlelof and Cord Jefferson agreed that the "visual grammar of the... [episode] was going to be first-person and subjective" in order to make it "as visceral and as real and as truthful as possible" (VanDerWerff, 2020). Indeed, the point-of-view shots enable the viewer not only to identify with

the characters, but also to have an embodied, visceral experience of the onscreen events (Plantinga, 2009). Furthermore, the long take has been famously advocated and theorized by influential film theorist André Bazin as the exemplary cinematic technique that enables a more direct access to reality (Bazin, 2005). The episode's elaborate camerawork therefore evokes, at the same time, notions of realism and subjectivity, providing the audience with an intimate experience of a reimagined historical reality. What's more these characteristics become even more accentuated, and deeply felt, in the lynching scene, which marks the second turning point in Will Reeve's transformation into the first masked vigilante and superhero.

The lynching scene takes place midway in the episode, after Will has arrested a white man for attacking a Jewish store— an action that provokes his white co-officers. As Will walks home, his white colleagues abduct him, cover him in a hood, and lynch him. Moments before they choke Will to death, they warn him: “stay out of white folk's business.” The scene uses subjective and complex shots that emulate Will's viewpoint through the hood, while the soundtrack conveys his panicked breathing, thus creating a powerful, shocking and visceral cinematic experience. Director Stephen Williams, commented on the technical and emotional difficulties of the episode, and emphasized that the approach was meant to be “as honest as possible about the sheer, ugly terror of that experience without crossing over into a voyeuristic or exploitative depiction of it” (VanDerWerff, 2020). As Will returns home, with his noose on and the hood on his hands, he

notices a young couple being attacked by thugs. Using the hood as a mask, Will goes on to rescue the couple. This is the birth of the "Hooded Justice," the first superhero born not from some sort of technological accident or any other fantastical incident, but from the very real, brutal act of racial violence. It is in this moment, when Will Reeves realizes that his Bass Reeve's inspired moto "trust in the law" cannot work for people like him, and the only way to deliver justice is outside the law and by hiding the color of his skin. It is in this instance that Will's "devotion to justice overrides...his devotion to the law" (Reynolds, 1994, p. 16). Therefore, the central traits of the superhero genre, identified by Richard Reynolds as a "personal rather than legal sense of justice" and the "hero's doubtful relationship to political order" (Hatfield, Heer and Worcester, 2013, p. 75), acquire a racially charged meaning that subvert the genre's usual "conservative function as an upholder of the "social order" (Hatfield, Heer and Worcester, 2013, p. 75).

Another important characteristic of the superhero genre, the secret identity, is also reconfigured through the prism of race, thus becoming a political signifier. Several scholars of the superhero genre (see Reynolds, 2013; Bukatman, 2012; Smith, 2009) stress the importance of the double identity motif, and the usual masquerade it entails, as well as the different connotations attached to it. The adoption of a secret identity and the concealment of the special powers is an essential aspect of the superhero, with the costume being a central part of it, marking both the

superhero's uniqueness and otherness. However, in the majority of superhero stories, this motif signifies the playful nature of the genre and connects it with adolescent rites of passage (Bukatman, 2009; Bainbridge, 2009). This playful tone is completely reversed in the show, since Hooded Justice's costume acquires a radically different meaning that firmly grounds it in an adult, violent world. Will's costume — a hood and a noose— is not a fanciful option, but a historical evidence, a dark reminder of the racial violence he has experienced, and the only viable way through which he can be seen. What's more, Will further conceals his identity by wearing a white makeup around his eyes. As Kristen J. Warner argues, this act of “inverse minstrelsy” puts on display “the visibility of his black invisibility” in a tragic manner (Gillespie, 2020, p. 53). This act also evokes Franz Fanon's (1986) seminal postcolonial text *Black skin, White masks* where the author argues that postcolonial black people often internalize and reproduce whiteness in order to feel visible in the context of white hegemony. Although Will has not internalized hegemonic notions of white superiority, he still wears a literal white mask, which, along with his costume that alludes to black trauma, creates a double masquerade that enables him to be seen in a predominantly racist society.

Another layer in this entangled story of racial violence and superheroes is the show's reference to Minutemen, and the fictional show *American Hero Story* dedicated to them. After Hooded Justice gains popularity in the press, Nelson Gardner/Captain Metropolis (Jake McDorman) invites him to join the Minutemen, a group of masked avengers who are inspired by

his actions. Will accepts, but Nelson advises him to maintain his masked identity in front of the other Minutemen. Furthermore, the two men also start a secret sexual relationship. Will's homosexuality, in addition to his blackness, further adds new layers in his secret identity, leaving him in a state of double exclusion: hidden both from the public and Minutemen due to his black identity, and from his wife due to his queerness. The action of the Minutemen is commemorated through *American Hero Story*, a fictional show within the show, which is opposite in tone and style from *Watchmen*, alluding to cheesy televisual products (Bastián, 2019). Additionally, this fictional show portrays Hooded Justice as a white man. Through this fictional superhero show, with its trashy aesthetic and conservative political assumptions, *Watchmen* suggests that the formation of the superhero genre is an act of cultural appropriation (Bastián, 2019). In *American Hero Story* the true black identity of the first superhero is never revealed, and instead it is buried under a hegemonic white culture. *Watchmen* acknowledges this distortion or elimination of black histories in popular culture, thus surpassing even its original comic book source, which also implied that Hooded Justice was a white man. By firmly grounding the origins of the first superhero in black trauma and racial justice, *Watchmen* becomes the political superhero show of the twenty-first century par excellence.

Conclusion: Towards a political revision of the superhero genre

The recent shift towards more inclusive representations in the superhero genre reflects the changing political and social climate which the studios take under consideration in order for their products to stay relevant for a global audience. From the new millennium onwards, superheroes of colour, from *Luke Cage* (Netflix, 2016-2018) to *Black Panther* display the response of the studios to the pressing issue of racial justice, and the growing visibility of the Black Lives Matter movement. Another way that the studios try to renew the oversaturated genre, and maintain its effectiveness is by imbuing the superhero text with self-reflexivity and irony, as for example in the *Deadpool* films (2016, 2018), *Kick Ass* (2010), and, *The Boys* (Amazon Prime, 2019-), among others. Such superhero texts deconstruct the superhero myth, thus challenging the moral superiority of the white superhero, and enabling the genre to question established myths and discourses. Despite that the main drive behind such changes is mainly the maximization of profits for the studios, they nevertheless challenge the supremacy of the white superhero, and prompt the visibility of black stories and black artists both in the small and the silver screen. *Watchmen* further advances these developments, but with a more genuine political commitment involved in its production.

Most importantly, by interweaving real, historical events with fantastical stories, the show provides spaces to handle historical trauma, but also to imagine new possibilities for racial identities. The superhero genre as a mode of speculative fiction has the ability not only to envision different timelines and alternative universes, but also to critically examine the discourses that permeate and shape our commonplace reality. Although most mainstream superhero films and TV series fail to explore such potentials, *Watchmen* is a rare example of a superhero text that critically interrogates racial discourses, while also exploring new imaginative territories for blackness that move beyond conventional racial identities (Nama, 2011, p. 154). *Watchmen* offers different racial imaginings by mixing fiction and reality, and by revisiting the historical past through the lens of an alternative present/future. In this way, the show remains relevant to the present historical context, while also reconfiguring the superhero genre in a deeply political way. *Watchmen*, thus, provides a possible model for the superhero genre's reconstruction— a reimagining of the genre where the superhero stories are entangled with issues of race, justice, authority and politics in general. The political undertones of *Watchmen*, evident not only in the show's representations but also in its production context, render the show as a key moment in the history of the superhero genre in film and television, signalling its potential political reconstruction.

REFERENCES

- Agard, C. (2020, September 20). Watchmen star Regina King urges everyone to vote while accepting Emmy Award. *Entertainment Weekly*. Retrieved from <https://ew.com/awards/emmys/regina-king-emmys-lead-actress-limited-series/>
- Alphonse, T. (2020, November 3). *Watchmen* walked so that *Lovecraft Country* could run: the Jordan Peele effect on TV's new black sci-fi. *Flow: A Critical Forum on Media and Culture*. Retrieved from <http://www.flowjournal.org/2020/11/watchmen-lovecraft-country-black-sci-fi/>
- Aurthur, K. (2019, December 4). TV Ratings: HBO's *Watchmen* Is a Word of Mouth Hit. *Variety*. Retrieved from <https://variety.com/2019/tv/news/hbo-watchmen-ratings-1203425067/>
- Bainbridge, J. (2009). 'Worlds Within Worlds': *The Role of Superheroes in the Marvel and DC Universes*. In A. Ndalians (Ed.). *The Contemporary Comic Book Superhero* (pp. 64-85). New York and London: Routledge.
- Bastián, A. J. (2019, November 24). Who Is Hooded Justice? *Watchmen* Has a Stunning Answer. *Vulture*. Retrieved from <https://www.vulture.com/2019/11/hooded-justice-watchmen-hbo.html>
- Bazin, A. (2005). *What is Cinema?* Volume 1. Essays collected and translated by Hugh Gray. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Benash, W. R. (2021). *Black Panther* and Blaxploitation: Intersections. *Quarterly Review of Film and Video*, 38 (1), 45-60. DOI: 10.1080/10509208.2020.1762475
- Bukatman, S. (2009). Secret Identity Politics. In A. Ndalians (Ed.). *The Contemporary Comic Book Superhero* (pp. 109-125). New York and London: Routledge.
- Bukatman, S. (2012). *The poetics of Slumberland*. Animated Spirits and the Animating Spirit. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Carras, C. & D. Medrano. (2020, September 20). Yahya Abdul-Mateen II dedicates 'Watchmen' Emmy to 'the Black women in my life.' *Los Angeles Times*. Retrieved from <https://www.latimes.com/entertainment-arts/tv/story/2020-09-20/emmys-2020-watchmen-yahya-abdul-mateen-speech>

- Cotter, D. (2020, December 14). Rest in Power, Notorious RBG. *American Bar Association*. Retrieved from https://www.americanbar.org/groups/crsj/publications/human_rights_magazine_home/rbgs-impact-on-civil-rights/rest-in-power/
- Di Placido, D. (2020, June 12). HBO's 'Watchmen' Has Never Felt More Timely. *Forbes*. Retrieved from <https://www.forbes.com/sites/danidiplacido/2020/06/12/hbos-watchmen-has-never-felt-more-timely/?sh=22f2d46a702f>
- Fanon, F. (1986). *Black Skin, White Masks*. Translated by Charles Lam Markmann London: Pluto.
- Gillespie, M. B. (2020). Thinking about Watchmen: With Jonathan W. Gray, Rebecca A. Wanzo and Kristen J. Warner. *Film Quarterly*, 73 (4), 50–60. <https://doi.org/10.1525/fq.2020.73.4.50>
- Gould, G. (2020, February 11). Watchmen review: an alternative fantasy for surreal times. *BFI*. Retrieved from <https://www2.bfi.org.uk/news-opinion/sight-sound-magazine/reviews-recommendations/tv/watchmen-demon-lindelof-alan-moore-dave-gibbons-ta-nehisi-coates-tulsa-superhero-race-fantasy>
- Hatfield Charles, H. Jeet & K. Worcester (2013). Theory and Genre. In C. Hatfield, J. Heer & K. Worcester (Eds.). *The Superhero Reader* (pp. 73-77). Jackson: University Press of Mississippi.
- Hibberd, J. (2019, September 18). Damon Lindelof gives his first deep-dive interview for HBO's Watchmen. *Entertainment Weekly*. Retrieved from <https://ew.com/tv/2019/09/18/damon-lindelof-watchmen-interview/>
- King, N. (2019, October 22). 'Watchmen' Creator Damon Lindelof: Not Talking About Race Felt 'Irresponsible'. *NPR*. Retrieved from <https://www.npr.org/2019/10/22/771998690/watchmen-creator-damon-lindelof-not-talking-about-race-felt-irresponsible>

- Lithwick, D. (2020, June 19). The Creator of HBO's Watchmen on Trump in Tulsa, Masks, and Who Should Wield Power Now. *Slate*. Retrieved from <https://slate.com/news-and-politics/2020/06/watchmen-trump-tulsa-masks-damon-lindelof-interview.html>
- Mangan, L. (2019, October 21). "Watchmen review – the perfect superhero story for our tattered times." *The Guardian*. Retrieved from <https://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/2019/oct/21/watchmen-review-the-perfect-superhero-story-for-our-tattered-times-hbo-alan-moore>
- Matos, C. (2019). Watchmen pilot causes surge in Google searches for Tulsa race riot. *Hypertext*. Retrieved from <https://htxt.co.za/2019/10/24/watchmen-pilot-causes-surge-in-google-searches-for-tulsa-race-riot/>
- Miller, M. (2019, October 24). The Right-Wing Troll Backlash Against HBO's Watchmen Is Hilariously Stupid. *Esquire*. Retrieved from <https://www.esquire.com/entertainment/tv/a29565670/watchmen-hbo-backlash-controversy-white-supremacy/>
- Mittell, J. (2015). *Complex TV. The Poetics of Contemporary Television Storytelling*. New York and London: New York University Press.
- Nama, A. (2011). *Super Black. American Pop Culture and Black Superheroes*. Austin: University of Texas Press.
- Plantinga, C. (2009). *Moving Viewers. American Film and the Spectator's Experience*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Porter, R. (2019, December 16). 'Watchmen' Finale Hits Series Highs for First-Night Viewing. *The Hollywood Reporter*. Retrieved from <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/live-feed/watchmen-finale-hits-series-highs-first-night-viewing-1263021>
- Reynolds, R. (1994). *Super Heroes: A Modern Mythology*. Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi.
- Reynolds, R. (2013). Masked Heroes. In C. Hatfield, J. Heer and K. Worcester (Eds.). *The Superhero Reader* (pp. 99-115). Jackson: University Press of Mississippi.

- Rosen, C. (2020, June 18). HBO Will Stream Watchmen for Free Starting on Juneteenth. *Vanity Fair*. Retrieved from <https://www.vanityfair.com/hollywood/2020/06/watchmen-streaming-for-free-hbo>
- Sepinwall, A. (2020, June 17). ‘Watchmen’ Writer on Trump in Tulsa, Bad Cops, and America’s White Supremacy Problem. *Rolling Stone*. Retrieved from <https://www.rollingstone.com/tv/tv-features/watchmen-writer-interview-police-brutality-white-supremacy-1014494/>
- Smith, G. M. (2009). The Superhero as Labor: The Corporate Secret Identity. In A. Ndaliansi (Ed.). *The Contemporary Comic Book Superhero* (pp.126-143). New York and London: Routledge.
- Tallerico, B. (2019, October 16). HBO’s Watchmen is Like Nothing Else on Television. *RogerEbert.com*. Retrieved from <https://www.rogerebert.com/streaming/hbos-watchmen-is-like-nothing-else-on-television>
- VanDerWerff, E. (2020, August 31). The eerie prescience of HBO’s Watchmen. *Vox*. Retrieved from <https://www.vox.com/culture/2020/8/31/21403294/watchmen-hbo-masks-police-violence-stephen-williams-interview>
- VanHoose, B. (2020, June 19). HBO Makes 'Timely, Poignant' Series Watchmen Free to Stream in Honor of Juneteenth. *People*. Retrieved from <https://people.com/tv/hbo-makes-watchmen-free-to-watch-in-honor-of-juneteenth/>
- Wallace, C. (2018, February 12). Why ‘Black Panther’ Is a Defining Moment for Black America. *New York Times*. Retrieved from <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/02/12/magazine/why-black-panther-is-a-defining-moment-for-black-america.html>
- “Watchmen.” (2019). *Metacritic*. Retrieved from <https://www.metacritic.com/tv/watchmen-2019/season-1/user-reviews>

ENDNOTES

¹ This record has changed after the completion of the article. Since August 2022, the most-watched new series in HBO is *House of Dragons*.