The difficulty of defining where comic books and graphic novels are situated in regards to other products seems to be based on their production and distribution forms, rather than their content. Comic books are considered similar to magazines and books because of the elements that make them widely available: paper and ink. In a sense, this materiality makes comics the same as books, and probably explain why most stores that sell some combination of paper and ink carry books, magazines and comics. Magazines, by having less pages, a lesser paper quality, and including more images have been segregated from the lengthier, words-only (or at least mostly word-based), and better paper and binding quality of books.

Since they have similar origins, similar forms of being produced, and similar materials (ink and paper, mainly), we continue to link them together, despite the fact that they are two different languages, one that is very static, mainly monochromatic print lettered paper and one that is visual, more profusely colored and often dynamic, in that it may appear as single issues, compilations, maintaining a character or characters by different authors in a way that novels seldom do. Comics differ from books in as many ways as they may be similar.

It was easier to study literature when the boundaries of the literary work were clearly homogenous with the distribution platform and with the medium in which it existed. Following McLuhan (2012), we can say that the advent of electronic media has implied a reconstruction of the myth of the written word, and at the same time, a reconstruction of our ways of imagining the world that surrounds us. Literature, thus, remains fully anchored in a pre-electronic media world, and seems somehow inadequate to address any other medium that transcends the expected limitation of the written word upon paper. In fact, when carried into electronic devices, such as E-Books, there is a change of platform without many changes in the actual structure or form. You change the window through which you read, but the pages are essentially identical to

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the ones on a paper book. When we already address hyper-
texts and other media, we seem to be moving away from
the overall concept of a book.
Categories that are not inherently literary – narrative,
character creation and development, context – are not
only present in books and comics, but also in serialized
radio shows, open-air performances, film, video games
and any other possible medium in which we decide to
weave our stories. Nowadays, considering that our plat-
forms of distribution enable a multiplicity of elements at
once, including sound, images and written words, it seems
even more difficult to define exactly what the media are,
and becomes easier to define the languages or charac-
teristics shared between the different products or texts.
If we concentrate on language – in the structural sense
of a grammar and syntax, the way elements or signs are
aligned together to create meaning –, rather than plat-
forms of delivery (e.g. physical or E-books, magazines, tab-
lets, computers), it becomes easier to address our subject
matter.

Focusing on the language of comics, rather than their
materiality, is done in this book. When Hoberek studies
Watchmen (Moore & Gibbons, 2014), he does not rest in
the praise of the author or in the eternal debate between
the prestige category of “Graphic novel” and the debased
one of “Comic book”. He even sidesteps the debate of
whether Watchmen is a work of literature, presenting a
lengthy introduction where it describes some of the mer-
its that would allow it to be considered as such, includ-
ing the praise of the author, whilst also explaining why it
would be a mistake to address it as one.

This movement away from the question of literature
does not imply that Hoberek studies Watchmen as an
authorless work, following the idea of the text beyond the
author presented by Barthes (1977). Rather, it means that
he concentrates on aspects of the work in the context of its
production. Although Hoberek makes considerable refer-
ence to the authors, especially to Alan Moore’s comments
and other works, he sets Watchmen against the literary
world in which it was developed and from where it has
expanded into different formats (i.e. serialized magazines
to compiled volume to film). He concentrates on three
aspects of the work, its aesthetics, its relationship to pro-
duction and consumption practices, and the relationship
of its content to the political situation. In all three cases,
Hoberek sets Watchmen against similar developments in
literary and comic works of the time.

Hoberek tries to get at the production of Watchmen
from the cultural studies perspective presented by Stuart
Hall. Let’s recap what Hall (2006) writes when referring to
the circulation of meaning in the case of television.

Production, here, constructs the message. In one
sense, then, the circuit begins here. Of course, the
production process is not without its “discursive”
aspect: it, too, is framed throughout by meanings and ideas: knowledge-in-use concerning the rou-
tines of production, historically defined technical
skills, professional ideologies, institutional knowl-
edge, definitions and assumptions, assumptions

about the audience and so on frame the constitu-
tion of the programme through this production
structure. (164)

That is to say, in order to understand Watchmen as a work
of fiction – regardless of whether it may be deemed lit-
erature – it should be placed against the realities created
by the form of production, in its physical and discursive
aspects. Hoberek does precisely that. He analyses the real-
ism and modernism of the work as at once similar and dis-
similar from contemporary literature, in his first chapter.

The second chapter is even more interesting, at least
from a cultural studies perspective, because it reflects upon
the work as evidence of Moore’s contradictory relationship
with the existing structures of production and distribu-
tion of works akin to Watchmen. The study links the text
with the authors and with the corporate structure of the
times, to go beyond hermeneutical reading in the search
for meaning, and situating the production and develop-
ment of Watchmen vis à vis the larger debate of corporate
ownership of intellectual property rights. This chapter
moves away from an appreciation of the stylistic qualities
and merits of the work, something we have seen in other
approaches to Watchmen (see Eguren Hernández, 2014,
for instance), and engages with something less common
in the study of comics: a debate over the product, the crea-
tors, and ownership. In doing so, Hoberek seems to pre-
sent the underlying contradiction of between authors and
product. Watchmen, as he clearly points out, “turns both to
the modernist notion of the autonomous literary work and
to a vision of comics as collaborative, serial medium for
countermodels to the corporate world of the mainstream
comics industry circa 1986” (117).

This leads into the third chapter on the more evi-
dent message within the content of Watchmen, that of
politics – libertarian vs. authoritarian mainly. Here, as
in the previous chapters, Hoberek places the political
perspective and intentions, particularly those of Moore,
against the political environment in which Watchmen
unfolds as a story. Relating Watchmen’s political debate
in the comic to the political situation of the mid- to
late-eighties also falls within previously explored dis-
cussions of the text (see Hughes 2006; DuBose 2007)
and although it brings interesting new insights, it
revolves around an already existing discussion on the
topic of the conservative politics of the eighties and
their relationship to the authors’ own political stances.

Finally, in the coda, Hoberek presents an interesting
case for the cultural relevance and impact of Watchmen.
It is impossible to look at Watchmen without considering
the products developed from or inspired by it. For exa-
ample, in my case, I had barely come across the compiled
book before I watched the film adaptation, and only after
the film did I ever come to see the printed prequels. What
Hoberek presents in this chapter, and what my brief expe-
rience illustrates, is that Watchmen is a dynamic product;
dynamic in the sense that it is, at once, a series of booklets,
a book, a movie, another series of booklets and, recently,
a set of books about the artwork of the movie, about the
movie, about the comic, and so forth.
Taking Watchmen as a dynamic product implies, undoubtedly, studying it beyond the breadth and scope of what the authors intended, or what they even manage to accomplish. Watchmen is a text with many readings (Eguren Hernández 2014), and it has inspired direct and indirect re-renderings of its value as a product, through prequels and academic debates, respectively. Considering Watchmen adds to the latter category, bringing more perspectives to the work and thus seeming to confirm both the value of the originally published series and its existence as a postmodern text with multiple readings. It could be, at once, an authored and authorless work.

References
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