VISUAL ICONICITY OF THE MAIN CHARACTERS IN THE WATCHMEN MOVIE

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Abstract: *Film has become a powerful medium for introducing complex and deep characters to its audience. This research adopts an approach in the field of visual communication design to explore how the main characters in the film "Watchmen" can be deepened through various visual and narrative elements. Focusing on six main characters: Dr. Manhattan, Ozymandias, Rorschach, Silk Spectre, Nite Owl, and The Comedian, this study analyzes how the visual analysis can help strengthen the characters' identities and development in creating a cohesive visual narrative by using the visual iconicity approach. Through this approach, the research not only aims to understand the characters in the context of the film but also to explore how visual communication design can depict the psychological and emotional dimensions of characters more deeply. The results of this research are expected to provide new insights into understanding the influence of visual communication design on character narrative in the context of modern cinema.*

Keywords: *character design; visual analysis; visual iconicity; watchmen*

Introduction

Character designers are artists who create new original characters by exploring their imaginations for a purpose such as fulfilling the need of a media with storyline, like film or video game (Wijasa & Almanfaluthi, 2017). Generally, by relying on their imagination, character designers made concept sketches and draw inspirations from visual data to create a depiction of character necessity for the script.

As simple as it may seem, designing a character is actually the process of creating a character. The designer must know

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the desired character and mannerisms or be adapted to the story or historical context that accompanies the character creation. The shape and appearance of the character should ideally represent the character's personality, in order to engage human emotions.

Kenjiro Sano, a Japanese art director, in the book Character Design Today suggested that character design is a symbol of personality (2007). Thus, character design should be able to visualize the character's traits. So, when the public sees the character, they can express its traits. One of the media that features many characters is Watchmen.

Watchmen is a 12-issue mini-series published by DC comics. It was written by Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons. Watchmen first appeared for the 50th anniversary special of DC Spotlight in 1985 and continue its running until October 1987 (Despotakis, 2019).

In 2016's DC Universe Spotlight: Rebirth Special, many symbols and visual references to Watchmen, such as the blood-splattered smiley face, and the dialogue between Doctor Manhattan and Ozymandias were shown in the last issue of Watchmen (Yehl. 2016). The many main characters of the Watchmen movies with their various visual and narrative elements should be explored to understand how design plays a role in creating a cohesive theme central to the narrative.

The character that will be analyzed was taken from the depiction of the movie Watchmen released in 2009. This recent depiction of Watchmen was directed by Zack Snyder under the joint production of Warner Bros, Paramount Pictures, Legendary Entertainment, Lawrence Gordon Production, and DC Comics (IMDb, 2009).

In analyzing the six main characters of the Watchmen movies with their various visual and narrative elements, this research seeks to answer the following questions:

1. How do the Watchmen movie visualize its six main characters?

2. How does the visualization of these six main characters play a role in creating a cohesive visual narrative?

This research adopts an approach in the field of visual communication design to explore how the main characters in the film "Watchmen" can be deepened through various visual and narrative elements. Focusing on six main characters: Dr. Manhattan, Ozymandias, Rorschach, Silk Spectre, Nite Owl, and The Comedian, this study analyzes how the use of costumes, facial expressions, framing, lighting, and other visual symbolism can help strengthen the characters' identities and development using the visual iconicity approach.

Previous studies on character design research have been done before. Rizkya and Tarmawan (2023) analyzed the character from Ghibli movie My Neighbor Totoro and find that Totoro has adopted a mixture of various animals into its design to help visualize the character. Wijasa and Almanfaluthi (2017) analyzed character design in three games, namely Sago Mini Babies Dress Up, Subway Surfers, and Crisis Action. They found that the character's personality was designed to accommodate storyline and challenges within the game. Damayanti and Ardhianto (2023) analyzed the character in video game Genshin Impact using Barthes denotative-connotative analysis and found that cultural reference in character building creates a narrative that attract the trust of the audience.

Previous studies have shown that visual analysis can uncover how character design influence the audience perspec-

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tive. However, previous studies mainly used formal analysis and Barthes semiotics in uncovering how the character in movie and games are designed.

Likewise, this study will use visual iconicity approach to analyze the character from Watchmen to see how the character design reflects the narrative and how designer's concept influence the character design. Through this approach, the research not only aims to understand the characters in the context of the film but also to explore how designers and the field of visual communication design can depict the psychological and emotional dimensions of characters more deeply to create a compelling narrative that is reflected by the character's design.

Methodology

This study will analyze six main characters of the Watchmen movie, namely Dr. Manhattan, Ozymandias, Rorschach, Silk Spectre, Nite Owl, and The Comedian. The visual of these characters from the movie promotional posters and the artist sketches will be used as data. These images will be observed and analyzed using visual iconicity approach.

According to Elleström (2016), visual iconicity is a semiotic trait creates meaning through resemblance in visual art. The meaning was made based on similarity between representamen and object. Hence, an image can bear a sensory resemblance to an object established by simple cognition. Visual iconicity happened when the cognitive structure of an image bears a formal resemblance to something outside of an image. If the resemblance required complex cognitive function, then the visual iconicity formed a visual metaphor, an abstract concept expressed using similarity and resemblance to another concept (Qeis and Ihwanny, 2024).

Using visual iconicity approach, this paper will breakdown the visuals of each of the six main characters of the Watchmen. The results are expected to form understanding of the influence of visual communication design on character narrative in the context of modern cinema.

Result

In designing a character, the designer should explore the nature of each character in the story. Starting from the traits, abilities, preferences, roles in the story. Study shapes and colors to explore all these aspects. Character application with the story and character is adjusted to the atmosphere of the story.

Each character has its own uniqueness, this can make it easier to identify each character. We will discuss each of the six main character below.

Dr. Jonathan "Jon" Osterman (Dr. Manhattan)

Figure 1. Dr. Manhattan in poster
(Source: IMDb, 2009)

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Figure 2. The artist' sketch of Dr. Manhattan
(Source: TheBristolBoard, 2015)

Figure 1 and figure 2 show the visuals of Dr. Manhattan both in the movie and in the early stage of an artist sketch. Out of the six main characters in the Watchmen movie, only this character has superpowers.

In creating the character of Dr. Manhattan, Moore was inspired by science, specifically nuclear physics and quantum physics. Moore believed that a quantum being would not be bound by a time perspective. This quality will affect the character's perception of human. However, Moore wanted to avoid creating an emotionless being like the Star Trek character Spock. So, he decided that Dr Manhattan will retain the "human habits" while growing away from humanity in general (Blondvoodoo, 2012).

Moore incorporated color into the story and the artist for Dr. Manhattan, Gibbons, noted the color scheme and used the blue skin motif taken from his previous character design Rogue Trooper. He had taken the blue skin motif due to the light glowing around his body.

Powers possessed by this character include superhuman strength, telekinesis, teleportation, control over matter on a sub-atomic level, and total invincibility. He can sense the past, present and future happening simultaneously, but states that he cannot act on that knowledge because his actions and reactions to events (like reality itself) are predetermined. His abil-

ity to see the future can be hampered by unexpected waves, such as the one released when Ozymandias puts the final step of his plan into action. However, Dr Manhattan is a character who is the only one with superhuman powers.

Despite his costume, his blue skin color and white eyes with a symbol on his forehead still make Dr Manhattan look different from other humans.

Adrian Veidt (Ozymandias)

Figure 3. Ozymandias in poster
(Source: IMDb, 2009)

Figure 4. The artist' sketch of Ozymandias
(Source: TheBristolBoard, 2015)

Figure 3 and figure 4 show the visuals of Ozymandias both in the movie and in the early stage of an artist sketch. Ozymandias is a former superhero turned successful businessman and he draws his name from his inspiration in which he

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thought as his heroes, Alexander the Great and Egyptian Pharaoh Ramses II. His name, Ozymandias, comes from the Greek word for Ramses II.

Ozymandias is directly based on Peter Cannon's character Thunderbolt, whom Moore admires for using his full brain capacity and also having full physical and mental control. Thus, Ozymandias is believed to be the smartest man on the planet, even outsmarting Dr Manhattan. His combination of intelligence and highly advanced fighting skills backed by unlimited finances makes him the most feared and dangerous of all people. However, Gibbons, the artist for Ozymandias, noted that his worst sin is looking down and scorning the humanity (Blondvoodoo, 2012).

In the film, his costume was designed to parody the rubber suit popularized by Batman & Robin. He is often accompanied by his genetically engineered lynx, Bubastis. This incarnation of Veidt uses a German accent when speaking to friends and an American accent when speaking in public to emphasize the narcissistic, powerful and arrogant character of the antagonist.

Dressed as the idol he admires; Ozymandias's costume uses the baubles of Ramses II with wings like Great Alexander complete with a crown on his head. With a face covering inspired by Peter Canon by the character designer. A shield to protect his body from his torso to his feet to prevent him from injury, as he is basically just a human.

Walter Joseph Kovacs (Rorshach)

Figure 5. Rorschach in poster
(Source: IMDb, 2009)

Figure 6. The artist' sketch of Rorschach
(Source: TheBristolBoard, 2015)

Figure 5 and figure 6 show the visuals of Rorschach both in the movie and in the early stage of an artist sketch. Rorschach is a private detective wearing a hat and a long leather jacket like those worn by mainstream detectives in media. He is wearing a white mask that contains a symmetrical but constantly shifting ink blot pattern. He continues to fight crime despite his status as an outlaw and he often takes the law into his own hands in solving crimes.

Moore said that he was trying to do this classic Steve Ditko character of someone who has a funny name, whose surname starts with the letter 'K', who has a weirdly designed mask (Blondvoodoo,

2012). Moore based Rorschach on Ditko's character Mr.A, as seen in figure 7.

Figure 7. Steve Ditko's character Mr. A
(Source: Ditkoclub, 2021)

Comics historian Bradford W. Wright describes a character's worldview as a set of black-and-white values that take many forms but never mix with grey, akin to the ink smudge test of its namesake (Wright, 2001).

According to Mondal and Kumar (2021), Rorschach is the name of a popular test that has been widely used to assess and aid in diagnostic evaluation of personality and psychiatric disorders. This is evident in the character Rorschach as he sees existence as random and made him free to act as if he was building his own designs on a morally blank world (Wright, 2001).

Like a detective he relies solely on his ability to investigate and uses violence with both weapons and bare hands to solve his cases. The mask he uses is only to intimidate opponents. The weapon he often uses is an anchor gun linked to a rope to make it easier for him to climb and swing from building to building like Batman.

Laurie Juspeczyk (Silk Spectre)

Figure 8. Silk Spectre in poster
(Source: IMDb, 2009)

Figure 9. The artist' sketch of Silk Spectre
(Source: TheBristolBoard, 2015)

Figure 8 and figure 9 show the visuals of Silk Spectre both in the movie and in the early stage of an artist sketch. Silk Spectre was designed because Moore felt he needed a heroine in his story cast.

She is the daughter of Sally Jupiter, who was the first Silk Spectre, and The Comedian. Sally, Laurie's mother, wanted her to follow in her footsteps and she became a crime-fighter for 10 years before the Keene Act law banned citizens from becoming heroes.

Unlike the other protagonists, Silk Spectre is not based on a specific Charlton character. While Silk Spectre was based partially on the Charlton character Nightshade, Moore was not impressed by the

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character and drew more from heroines such as Black Canary and Phantom Lady (Blondvoodoo, 2012).

Silk Spectre's costume is a combination of tight revealing suit and long black boots. Wearing a bikini-like tight revealing suit will make the movement more agile and can influence the opponent.

Daniel Dreiberg (Nite Owl)

Figure 10. Nite Owl in poster
(Source: IMDb, 2009)

Figure 11. The artist' sketch of Nite Owl
(Source: TheBristolBoard, 2015)

Figure 10 and figure 11 show the visuals of Nite Owl both in the movie and in the early stage of an artist sketch. A superhero who uses owl-themed gadgets. The character was created by Dave Gibbons as what he considers an "obsessive hobbyist of comics." Nite Owl is partly based on Ted Kord's version of the superhero Charlton

Blue Beetle. Just as Ted Kord had a predecessor, Moore also incorporated a previous adventurer who went by the name "Nite Owl", as retired war criminal Hollis Mason, into Watchmen (Blondvoodoo, 2012).

Nite Owl's costume was initially experimented to be adorned with capes. However, the author eventually settled on a more streamlined outfit with free arms and legs. He protects his chest and abdomen with a hard leather tunic with leather protector adorning and protecting his head. His trousers were made of lightweight chainmail to protect him from injury from blows or weapons. The domino mask hides his true identity, initially attached to his face with strings, but later attached with adhesive.

Just like Batman, Nite Owl has a secret hideout to store his costumes and vehicles. With his intelligence, he designed costumes that can integrate with all the gadgets he makes. The wing cape used to levitate when he jumps can reduce the force of gravity, with a shield suit around his body from head to toe, leaving only part of the face uncovered by a shield that allows him to speak and breathe.

Edward Blake (The Comedian)

Figure 12. The Comedian in poster
(Source: IMDb, 2009)

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Figure 13. The artist' sketch of The Comedian
(Source: TheBristolBoard, 2015)

Figure 14. Groucho Marx
(Source: Latson, 2015)

Figure 12 and figure 13 show the visuals of The Comedian both in the movie and in the early stage of an artist sketch. The comedian is one of two government-sanctioned heroes (along with Doctor Manhattan) who remains active after the Keene Act is passed in 1977 to ban superheroes. His murder, which occurs shortly before the first chapter begins, sets the plot of Watchmen in motion (Blondvoodoo, 2012).

Initially created based on Shield stories, The Comedian was later on created based on the Charlton Comics character Peacemaker, with elements of the Marvel Comics spy character Nick Fury added. Moore and Gibbons saw the Comedian as "a sort of Gordon Liddy character, only a bigger, tougher guy" (Reynolds, 1992).

Gibbons went with a Groucho Marx style look (moustache and cigar, as seen in figure 14) for the Comedian in his draft. Since the mad clown look had been acquired by DC Comics with its highly popular character the Joker. The costume itself was noted by Gibbons as being highly problematic; initially he designed a more militaristic costume which was later dropped in favor of a black leather outfit, relying on trained human strength and a variety of firearms to fight off his enemies.

Blake's murder, which occurs shortly before the story begins in 1985, sets the plot of Watchmen in motion. The character appears throughout the story in flashbacks and aspects of his personality are revealed by other characters.

Discussion

Watchmen is set in an alternate reality that closely mirrors the contemporary world of the 1980s. The main difference is the presence of superheroes. The point of divergence occurs in 1938. Their presence in this American version is shown to have dramatically influenced and changed the outcome of real-world events such as the Vietnam War and Richard Nixon's presidency (Wright 2001).

With Watchmen, Alan Moore's intention was to create four or five "radically contradictory ways" of understanding the world and give the reader of the story the privilege of determining which one was the most morally comprehensible. In line with the realism of the series, although the costumed Watchmen are often called "superheroes", only one (Doctor Manhattan) has superpowers (Wright 2001: 272).

The six main characters in the Watchmen movie has distinct attributes and colors they use. This was done not only to support their strengths and mask their identification, but also to identify the abilities of the superheroes. This section

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will map the iconicity that builds each of the six main characters and how it plays a role in building the narrative and provides background to the characters.

Table 1. Visual Iconicity of Dr. Manhattan
(source personal research documentation)

No	Image	Resemblance	Visual Iconicity
1			Opening of the third eye
2			Deity / divine being's pose
3			Blue skin

Table 1 illustrates the visual iconicity of Dr. Manhattan. We can see three main focuses in his design which is the circle in the forehead, the pose, and the blue skin. The circle in the forehead resembles the third eye, creating a visual iconicity of the opening of the third eye. According to Gallagher and Tsuchiya (2020), opening the third eye can signify spiritual enlightenment process in mystical context. The second element, which is the pose, bear a striking resemblance to the pose used when visualizing deities or higher beings. Meanwhile, blue skin usually used to depict something alien, or beings that is different than human. These three visual iconicity works to create a visual metaphor of a special being which is higher and

better than a normal human. This is in line with the context of the narrative since Dr. Manhattan is the only character in Watchmen who embodies special quality in the form of superpowers, making him different from the rest.

Table 2. Visual Iconicity of Ozymandias
(source personal research documentation)

No	Image	Resemblance	Visual Iconicity
1			Pharaoh's attire
2			Rubber "Batman-like" suit

Table 2 illustrates the visual iconicity of Ozymandias. We can see two main focuses in his design in which both are heavily invested in his costume. The accessories adorning his shoulders and waist resemble those found in Pharaoh's attire. According to Mark (2017), the ornamented collar and kilts of woven materials hung from the waist in intricate folds are a fashion style of the Pharaoh ad the royalty of Egypt in the period of The New Kingdom of Egypt (c. 1570-1069 BCE) and is the most depicted ancient Egyptian fashion in the media.

Meanwhile, the second element shown in the poster shows that it draws a resemblance to the rubber "Batman-like" suit. Though Batman is one of the iconic superheroes, he is just a normal human without superpowers. This visual iconicity and the Pharaoh's attire creates a visual metaphor of a normal human who is working to be greater than everyone, fitting to the narrative of Ozymandias' character.

Table 3. Visual Iconicity of Rorschach
(source personal research documentation)
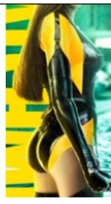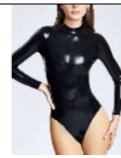
No	Image	Resemblance	Visual Iconicity
1			Detective outfit
2			Full face cover

Table 4. Visual Iconicity of Silk Spectre
(source personal research documentation)

No	Image	Resemblance	Visual Iconicity
1			One hand on hip
2			Long-haired woman
3			Rubber high-cut body suit

Table 3 illustrates the visual iconicity of Rorschach. We can immediately see two main focuses in his design which is the outfit and the face cover. The outfit resembles those worn by detective in media, while the face is fully covered, leaving no identification visible. According to Fili-mowicz (2024), detective outfit conveys a sense of mystery and intelligence while projecting authority and acumen. This sense of mystery is further emphasized by the covering of the face symbolizing hiding one's identity. The visual iconicity creates a visual metaphor of someone intelligence but shrouded in mystery. This is fitting to the Rorschach' character who is created as a vigilante detective.

Table 4 illustrates the visual iconicity of Silk Spectre. We can see three main focuses in her design which is the pose, the hair, and the outfit. The first iconicity is the pose, which resembles putting one hand on the hip. According to van Edwards (2024), putting one hand on the hip communicates the mindset of disagreement and alerting others that they are about to cross the line. The long hair, according to Fabry (2016), is a traditional depiction of

women as hair embodies immense social significance in which long hair signifies glory to woman.

The third iconicity is the outfit which resembles high-cut body suit. This high-cut body suit made from rubber / latex is a form of fetish fashion which, According to O'Donnel (1999), enables women empowerment by reinforcing their own of masculinity through virility and inducing sexual arousal for others. This body revealing suit along with the pose and long hair create a visual metaphor of a powerful heroine with principle, fitting for the character of Silk Spectre.

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Table 5. Visual Iconicity of Nite Owl
(source personal research documentation)

No	Image	Resemblance	Visual Iconicity
1			Two hands on hip
2			Owl head

Table 5 illustrates the visual iconicity of Nite Owl. We can see two main focuses in his design which is the pose and the mask. The pose in the sketch features a resemblance to two hands on hip. According to van Edwards (2024), this is a classic pose of "superman" which gives cue to confidence and ready to act. The mask has an iconic resemblance to owl head, giving the visual iconicity to the character name which is Nite Owl. The two visual iconicity create a visual metaphor of nocturnal superhero who is confident and ready to act, akin to Batman, which is true to the narrative of the character.

Table 6. Visual Iconicity of The Comedian
(source personal research documentation)

No	Image	Resemblance	Visual Iconicity
1			Man smoking
2			Standing mic

Table 6 illustrates the visual iconicity of The Comedian. We can see two main focuses in his design which is the pose and the weapon. The sketch features a pose of a man smoking. According to Kodriati, Pursell, and Hayati (2019), smoking expresses male masculinity and related to risk-taking behavior. Meanwhile, his weapon bears a striking resemblance to standing mic. The two create visual metaphors of a stage performer who is prone to risk-taking behavior. This fits The Comedian's character since he's described as a cynical tough guy.

In designing the six main characters in the watchmen film, the naming and physical form and costumes they use adjust the characteristics of the characters in the story. Each character has a uniqueness and strength that is different from the others, this becomes a characteristic that makes it easier to recognize each character. The attributes embedded with visual iconicity not only support their characters, but also identify the narrative behind each character.

Conclusion

The design of the six main characters in the Watchmen resemble themselves, both in shape and nature as well as shapes or animals that they base their name of. The visual iconicity of each character becomes a point that makes it easier to identify characters in a story.

Identification or recognition of characters in the story can be visualized from traits through expressions, facial shapes, and gestures. Recognition can also come from objects that are worn by the characters such as the costume, accessories, and weapons. Moore and Gibbons stuck with the concept, and by using visual iconicity in the artist sketch and the in-movie character, they cemented the concept within the character. Each character is a reflec-

tion of distinct superhero stereotypes that existed individually without repetition. All six characters are drawn by Gibbons with ordinary proportions rather than muscle-bound superhumans.

It's not just the complexity of the narrative that makes Watchmen so influential, but also how each of the character has visual iconicity that connected the design into the narrative. This implies that there is a need to take inspirations and create visual iconicity in creating characters so that it became memorable and relevant to the narrative as a whole. This paper offers a new perspective on designing characters for entertainment media. Not only based on the storyline and brief, the character can also be influenced by designer's concept by realizing said concept through relevant visual iconicity without disrupting the narrative and the storyline. Instead, this paper argues that by incorporating visual iconicity, the depth of characterization can be brought up and made the character more relatable and easily memorized by the audience.

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