



# JPD

JOURNEY PLANET // THE FUTURE OF POLICING



# PLANET

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ERRICK NUNNALLY

## Cover Artist AFUA RICHARDSON

Afua Richardson is known for her work on *Lovecraft Country* and the *World of Wakanda* comic. Her work across many other stories includes drawing for *X-Men 92*, *Captain Marvel*, *Captain America*, and the *Mighty Avengers* for Marvel Comics; *Wonder Woman Warbringer* and *All-Star Batman* for DC Comics; and *Mad Max*. Her work includes the variant cover for *Shuri #2*, the Wakanda-based series written by Nnedi Okorafor

Afua also worked with U.S. Representative and civil rights leader John Lewis to illustrate *Run*, a volume in his autobiographical comic series co-written with Andrew Aydin.

In the HBO TV series *Lovecraft Country*, the artist Hippolyta Freeman played by Aunjanue Ellis referenced Afua in the season finale when she said that 'An artist named Afua taught me' and this links beautifully as the art that Diana Freeman played by Jada Harris draws is actually by Afua Richardson.

Afua's first full-length graphic novel was the award-winning *Genius* series (Image Comics/Top Cow). Written by Marc Bernardin and Adam Freeman, and drawn by Afua, it tells the story of an urban liberation movement led by a strategically gifted 17 year-old girl ([topcow.com/genius](http://topcow.com/genius)). Afua did a montage of some art from this comic for our cover, and we are very grateful.

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## Introduction ERIN UNDERWOOD

**FOR THIS ISSUE OF *JOURNEY Planet*, *The Future of Policing***, we asked contributors for their thoughts on how police are portrayed in speculative fiction, and how police are viewed by speculative fiction fans and professionals as they reflect upon the events of 2020—and there was a lot to reflect upon.

To that end, we welcomed personal essays that turned a critical eye toward today's policing issues and how those issues intersect with current and past depictions of law enforcement officers. We also invited people to share their thoughts on the new *Watchmen* series, and we also asked them to respond to a few Instant Fanzine questions (a *Journey Planet* favorite!). We were specifically looking for areas in which speculative fiction and today's world intersect, where speculative fiction's premonitions for the future are starting to unfold, and where seeds of hope for a better tomorrow might be planted either in real life, media, or speculative fiction itself. We were looking for impressions from our community within fandom and that is exactly what we received.

This edition of *Journey Planet* is powerful. I think that may unsettle some people. Some may even argue that it has an anti-police feel because of the unvarnished truths that this fanzine shares. However, taking the long view, these pieces speak to something larger and braver than anything *Journey Planet* has attempted in the past. This is a community turning its great unblinking eye back upon itself to see what rests within. I had hoped to see more constructive critique on "the future of policing," but what I learned through this process is that you cannot hope to fix something if you are not willing to understand it first.

This issue of the fanzine is a critical, evaluative look at who we are today through the lens of where we've been in the media universe of speculative fiction. It astutely captures the social sentiment of 2020, by communicating the pain, analysis, and anthems for change emblazoned during the longest year many of us have ever experienced. I am certain that essays of constructive critique alone would have been disingenuous, given our world's events today.

I am at peace with what we produced here, and I am inspired by the need to do more. Therefore, I hope that this edition of *Journey Planet* can serve as a jumping-off point for future discussions on policing, race, and speculative fiction. I also hope that readers will take what is written here and truly, quietly, and with deep thought listen to what is being said and hear the stories that lie within these pages. Because they are important. They are the voices of today's people who are sharing their truths, who are peacefully calling out for others to hear the crescendo of their call that change is not only needed—it is past due. It is time for these voices and these messages to be heard within our community and within the pages of our fiction in the future.

Together, let's carry these messages forward into 2021, and in the process, let's give light and life to these seeds and look for ways to be the change agents that our world needs. After all, what better way to ignite change than in the hearts and minds of the people who imagine and craft the future itself?

On behalf of the *Journey Planet* team, we hope you read these stories, hear these messages, and help us to answer the call for change.





Christopher Golden

**THE MOMENT A PIECE OF** science-fiction is created, it begins to age, and as the years pass, such fictions begin to trend toward absurdity. The further an SF story strays from plausibility, the more it challenges our suspension of disbelief. With love, we embrace it, and in the case of works of high quality or great nostalgia, our willingness to suspend disbelief is near infinite. In watching *Forbidden Planet* or reading Vonnegut's *Player Piano*, some may be put off by the trappings of the story and the sociological context of the era in which they first appeared, but others will allow themselves to be swept up in the story, appreciating context but not allowing it to interfere in their enjoyment.

Watch virtually any SF film or TV series made in the past but set in the future and try not to be thrown off when a character uses a computer or virtually any kind of technology. Look no further than Ridley Scott's 1979 classic *Alien* and the rudimentary computer screens of "Mother"—the look of which is far more 1979 than 2079, the year the film is intended to be set. For further amusement, watch an episode of virtually any *Star Trek* series. The current *Star Trek: Discovery* faces the unique challenge of attempting to look realistically futuristic to today's audience while struggling to maintain the illusion that it is set in the same continuity as the original series, but a decade before Kirk and Spock set off on their five-year mission. Watching episodes of the original series, or even *The Next Generation*, it's not difficult to suspend disbelief because we know we're watching something made in a particular era—the 1960s or 1980s, respectively. But the producers and set designers of *Discovery* have to be as faithful as possible to the original *Trek* tech without it looking silly to modern eyes. I don't envy them the task.

How many times have we seen this character on screen? The maverick cop who breaks all the rules to get results and root out the bad guy?

Likewise, I don't envy any science fiction creator the task of presenting a futuristic vision of policing now that we, the audience, will have to work much harder to suspend our disbelief.

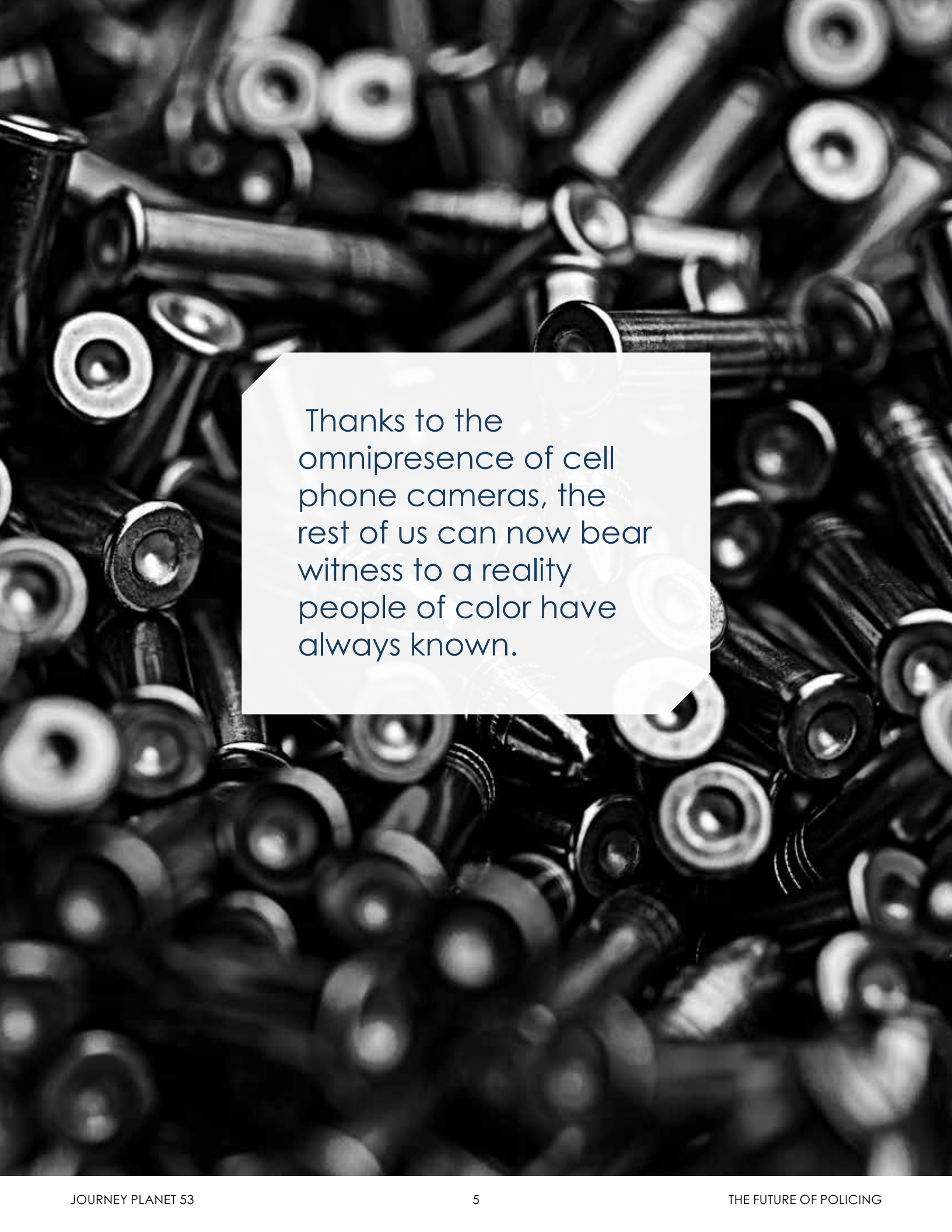
American pop culture has long accepted the existence of dirty cops, bad cops, killer cops, but even when a cop has "dirty" in his name—like Clint Eastwood's series of films about Dirty Harry Callahan—that doesn't preclude him (nearly always "him") from being heroic. I love the early Dirty Harry films, and the second

one—*Magnum Force*—is about Callahan taking down a gang of homicidal cops operating at all ranks of the police department. They've taken the law into their own hands, murdering criminals they believe have gotten away with significant crimes. The film is a favorite of mine, or it was, but when I look at these films in hindsight it's difficult not to begin to sift through them. Harry Callahan is presented

to us as a racist, misogynistic, even misanthropic cop, but one whose heart is apparently in the right place. It's a weird juggling act, watching *Magnum Force* now. Callahan may not be a murderer, but like the "bad guys," he's happy to take the law into his own hands. And he's just one of so many examples. How many times have we seen this character on screen? The maverick cop who breaks all the rules to get results and root out the bad guy?

I know, I know, these aren't science fiction films, but bear with me.

I grew up in a pop culture environment that painted the adventures of the maverick cop, as well as the crimes of "bad guy" cops, against a canvas with a much broader background composed of justice and the concept of policing as a whole. Part of white privilege has always been not needing to struggle too much to see things in this way. It's the "a few bad apples" fallacy. Dirty Harry Callahan would be there to take down the murderous cops. Above him would be a commissioner or a judicial system or an entire network of



Thanks to the omnipresence of cell phone cameras, the rest of us can now bear witness to a reality people of color have always known.

conceptual policing that would prevent him from crossing the thin gray line that separates him from the homicidal cops he takes down. Cops like Harry Callahan, and those murderers, were of interest because they are all exceptions. They're not like other cops, or more accurately, we're told, other cops are not like them.

I'm using Callahan and *Magnum Force* as specific examples because the line in that film is so blurry, the difference between Callahan and the "bad apples" is such a short bridge to cross. Most presentations of police are far more reassuring. From the black-and-white *Adam-12* of my childhood to the seemingly endless exploits of Tom Selleck on *Blue Bloods* (perhaps today's most "comforting" presentation of American policing), we're told again and again that the system isn't the problem. That policing itself is a positive in our society. That a few bad apples don't spoil the whole bunch.

In 2020, every day that goes by creates new context for this mythology of high-minded, color blind, justice. The mythology of a broader justice as a safety net. It's safe to say that the vast majority of police officers have never murdered anyone. Most have not been unnecessarily brutal in their work. Most cops are not rapists. Most cops are not members of white supremacist organizations. But what about that backdrop of broader justice that all of these fictions rely on? Thanks to the omnipresence of cell phone cameras, the rest of us can now bear witness to a reality people of color have always known. When the bad apples commit crimes, everything from the infringement of civil rights to outright murder, where is that broader justice system? Where are the good apples?

They're silent. Absent.

## When the bad apples commit crimes, everything from the infringement of civil rights to outright murder, where is that broader justice system? Where are the good apples?


For many of us, it's now impossible to watch something like *Blue Bloods* and not scowl at this broader fiction, as well as the lack of attention paid to the reality unfolding in our streets. It's impossible for me, now, to watch *Minority Report* or *Alien Nation* or anything *Star Trek* without needing to muster up that extra bit of suspension of disbelief. In *Robocop*, Officer Alex Murphy is turned into a cyborg by an evil mega-corporation, and certainly this tracks with the soulless black hole of greed that powers the engines of mega-corporations in 2020, but the police, by and large, are portrayed as hapless bystanders, good-willed officers being manipulated by the corporation. In *Demolition Man*, LAPD sergeant John Spartan is brought out of cryogenic hibernation in 2032 to catch a

similarly unfrozen serial killer. Why? Because it's been so long since violent crime was an issue that they need a "savage" cop from the 1990's to catch this fugitive. While the film contains an interesting back and forth between concepts of strict order and lawlessness, the backdrop is still one in which policing is the noble profession our culture is constantly portraying it to be.

Whether these explorations of future justice begin as Utopian or dystopian, today we live in a society whose reality makes the pop culture concepts of policing seem quaint at best, ignorant or even harmful at worst. There are many good police, of this I have no doubt. But they exist in a work culture that draws them into complicity with the worst of the "bad apples." Cops who speak out publicly in 2020 are savaged by

their colleagues, sometimes suspended or fired. Silence has been made a requirement of the job. For those of us who create fictional stories and worlds, the default presumption of a broader justice system working for the good of all people must be examined and called into question.

Growing awareness of the systemic malignance inside policing means that suspension of disbelief is going to be a bigger problem for storytellers than it used to be. If you're creating science fiction that revolves around or significantly involves policing and you rely on the comfortable notion of "bad apples," or a system of broader justice that will set things right in the end, you'd better be able to back that up with the invention of a society in which significant change has already taken place—because there is absolutely not a logical through-line from our present society to a future in which policing echoes the friendly-cop-on-the-beat archetype out of Norman Rockwell's famous *Saturday Evening Post* cover, or even the tough-cop-with-a-heart-of-gold archetype that is the core of *Blue Bloods*. The computers in *Star Trek* are quaint and nostalgic. A futuristic tale revolving around justice and policing that doesn't take today's realities into consideration is anything but.

Suspension of disbelief only goes so far. 





*Brenda Noiseux*

**THIS IS AN ARTICLE ABOUT** policing in comics.

Sometimes that might look like commentary on the dark political stories of comic books like *Bitch Planet*, *DMZ*, *Transmetropolitan*, and *Black*.

Other times, it's deep thoughts on a world where eating chicken is illegal and the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (aka the FDA) and NASA are the most powerful law enforcement agencies in the world.

In the comic book, *Chew*, by John Layman and Rob Guillory, eating chicken is indeed illegal and people with food superpowers are key players. The protagonist, Tony Chu is one of these special folks, a cibopath, one of a rare few with the ability to take a bite of something (or someone) and get a psychic impression of their past. He's promoted from vice cop to FDA agent to fight against all sorts of deadly, ridiculous-sounding food crimes and national security threats.

Somewhere tucked into this dark horror humor is the nugget that Tony's ability is often the way to confirm someone's guilt. Whether he's discovering an unknown killer by eating chicken soup with an accidental dash of the sous chef killer's blood or biting said killer to learn the names of all his victims, once his ability is confirmed, there is a blind trust in Tony's ability to root out the bad guys. It's also assumed that he'll report the truth about what he sees.

Thankfully, Tony is a straight-laced enforcer of the law. Be it staking out underground chicken joints or writing traffic tickets, Tony is happiest when even the tiniest infraction results in reprimand. He even wants to bust his famous chef brother for buying illegal poultry. His blind dedication to the law leaves him angry at everyone willing to break it, without consideration for how much illegal chicken is involved or the social status of the criminal. He wouldn't


lie to put people in jail, but it's not his fault there's no protocol on search, seizure, and probable cause to bite a suspect. He follows the rules. Does that make him a good cop?

By contrast, his morally ambiguous partner, Colby, will gobble down illegal chicken wherever and whenever it's on offer. He's also empathetic to the working schlub who probably spent a whole paycheck on a 3-piece chicken dinner. Time and again, Colby decides who gets shaken down and who gets a pass, doling out leniency at will. He knows the law isn't 100% on the level and uses detective work to put away the bad guys, but Colby's law enforcement tactics include lying, harassment, and violence. Would he be in the "bad apple" category?

Of course, there's also the issue of whether or not eating chicken should even be illegal. A whole host of absurd conspiracy theories, corruption plots, and throwaway panels beg the question of who's really protected by not eating chicken. When was the last time eating chicken hurt anyone?

Who's really profiting over it's criminalized status?

Over time, the flawed enforcement system extracts a toll. For Tony, it uses his ability with impunity and without any support mechanisms. There's no internal review board to complain to when his boss, who hates him, wants him to literally eat shit to solve a case. No counseling for all that he's forced to see on the job or the harassment he suffers from his coworkers for being different. Tony has anger issues brewing below the surface; when things get personal, no one can predict how it will affect his moral compass.

The idea that justice could be consistently served in this world feels just as ridiculous as the demon-fighting rooster named Poyo. For all its nonsensical glory, *Chew* lets us glimpse some of the flaws in our own enforcement agencies and the complicated stew of who gets to determine right and wrong. 

Over time, the flawed enforcement system extracts a toll.



*Brendan DuBois*

**LEAVE IT TO SCIENCE FICTION** to shake up my ideas of police and police work.

Many decades ago, when I was the proverbial twelve-year-old boy reading and devouring science fiction, I was going through the works of Robert A. Heinlein and started off with his famed juveniles (*Rocketship Galileo*, *Space Cadet*, and *Red Planet*) and eventually picked up his *Sixth Column*, about the invasion and military occupation of the United States by a military force from an Asian nation.

The novel has lots of problems, from its racial stereotyping, language, and whacked-out science involving race, but that's for another column by someone else.

There's a scene in the novel that struck me funny as a young boy growing up in somewhat rural and isolated New Hampshire. Early on in the novel, the heroes have discovered a new scientific process that—among other things—allows the transmutation of elements.

They produce their own gold coins, which they use to purchase food, rent property, and bribe the occupation police.

In this scene, after they have given three bags of gold to a police officer, one character says to the other, “Cops are all alike, the world over...”

“Do you think he’ll share it out the way you suggested?”  
 “The men won’t get any, that’s sure. He may split with his boss, to keep him quiet... What I’m wondering is: is he an honest politician?”  
 “Huh?”

“An honest politician is one that stays bought...”  
 Whoah... For a young teen boy who grew up on *Dragnet* and

College campuses are ringed by heavily armed police and National Guard troops, and anyone assisting a student can be sent to a forced labor camp.

*Adam-12*, that was quite the shock. To think that police officers could be bribed. What a shock!

And leave it to science fiction to continue my education about the police, for some doing more than receiving bribes, thanks to one of the most talented and paranoid SF authors who’s ever lived.

Philip K. Dick (1928-1982) was one prolific author (44 novels and 121 short-stories), and his stories reflected a lot of the upheaval of the 1960s, with stories exploring various aspects of heavy drug use, and musings on philosophy, theology, and the basis of reality. Look back at the movies and television shows that were made from his works—unfortunately, all developed after his death, a writer’s worse nightmare, post-death glorious success—and there’s an underlying frightening theme of what is real, and am I experiencing a true reality?

Several movies based on his works—*Total Recall* (both versions), *Minority Report*, *Blade Runner*, *The Adjustment Bureau*, and of course, *The Man in the High Castle*—all explore these themes of reality, and its fluidity and oddness.

Then there’s one of my favorite novels—yet to be made into film although it’s been in what’s known as development hell for several years—*Flow My Tears, The Policeman Said*, which takes this paranoia one step forward, and places it within a police state.

And what a police state it is!  
 The book was published in 1974, and takes place in a 1988 that is extremely technologically advanced. There are colonies on the Moon and Mars. Probes to Jupiter’s moon Callisto bring back parasitic creatures that can kill you. Flying cars are a common mode of transportation. Videophones exist. There is no Internet, but there





As grim as our current situation is regarding the police and how they interact with different communities around the nation, at last it seems that the majority of people want change, and they are eager to see it through.

Photo by Filip Mroz

is something called phone grid sex, where people can use their phone system to “hook in” to a network where they can share sexual experiences with others.

But it’s an oppressive, dystopian 1988, taking place some years after the conclusion of the Second American Civil War, apparently sourced in the campus unrest of the late 1960s and early 1970s. Universities like Columbia and UCLA have been partially destroyed, with student revolutionaries living underground. The police and the National Guard—the pols and the nats—control *everything*. While it remains unclear in Dick’s book, it seems that the Civil War in the United States spread elsewhere in the world, with the young and the students rising up and being brutally suppressed, and police states (run by actual police) have replaced all governments. College campuses are ringed by heavily armed police and National Guard troops, and anyone assisting a student can

be sent to a forced labor camp.

Into this world is introduced Jason Taverner, one of the world’s most popular entertainers, with a weekly show at 9 p.m. on Tuesday on NBC, with thirty million people watching him. One night he encounters an old flame, and the encounter doesn’t go well, and he passes out in a hospital.

When he wakes up the next day, he’s in a ratty hotel room, with no identification, no papers, and when he reaches out to his agent, business manager, and old friend, he finds out he no longer exists. None of them know who he is, and he finds that his popular television show isn’t even listed in the newspapers.

Yep, sounds like Philip K. Dick all right.

Throughout the novel, Taverner tries to survive in this dystopia (at first buying fake IDs) and to learn what has happened to him, but the fascinating part of the novel—to me, at least—is the incredible

paranoia of living in an honest-to-God police state, where the police maintain extensive records, surveillances, checkpoints, and if you’re interviewed and they don’t trust you, not only do they put a tracking device on your body, they can also insert a seed-sized H-bomb under your skin for eventual termination if they so desire.

As Taverner keeps one step ahead of the police apparatus, those in control—notably, Felix Buckman, a police general(!)—are stunned to find out that no records of Taverner exist in the extensive surveillance data networks that the police maintain.

Toward the end of the novel, Jason Taverner is placed under arrest, and note the change in the Miranda Warning:

“You are under police arrest. Here are your rights. Anything you say may be held against you. You have a right to counsel and if you cannot afford an attorney one will be appointed for you. You have a right to be tried by a jury, *or you can waive that right and be tried by a judge appointed by the Police Academy of Los Angeles County and City.*” (Emphasis added.)

That’s how thorough the police presence is in this novel. It is everywhere, and cannot be ignored or overlooked.

As the novel draws to its conclusion—spoiler alert!—it’s learned that Taverner was transported to an alternative timeline where he didn’t exist via the use of an experimental drug called KR-3. I’ve read and re-read Dick’s explanation of how it works scores of times, and I still don’t understand it, which was probably Dick’s intent.

It’s clear to say that Dick’s vision of the future and policing was a grim one, and what’s even spookier is that everything the police do, whether it’s conducting surveillance, raiding homes, making arrests, and killing those

who are suspect with no trial or hearing, is considered normal. There’s a sense among other characters in this dark novel that “it is what it is,” for as you read the book, there are no heroes. There are no people making a stand. We have a police state and people adapt to it.

As grim as our current situation is regarding the police and how they interact with different communities around the nation, at last it seems that the majority of people want change, and they are eager to see it through.

That’s not the case in this wonderful novel (which should be made into a TV movie or mini-series).

Dick’s vision is of *a* future, but not necessarily *the* future.


For which all of us should be grateful. 



Photo by Sean Foley



*Kenesha Williams*

**IN PHILIP K. DICK'S** *THE Minority Report*, first published in 1956, three mutants known as “precogs” can foresee all crime before it occurs. They work for a division in the police department called “Precrime” and arrest citizens before they commit any crime. Dick was worried about authoritarianism in policing when he wrote his story and imagined the future of policing infringing on the autonomy of the citizens they were policing.

How quaint.

*The Minority Report* for Black citizens of the United States looked a lot like the way policing operates in Black communities past and present. Although there are no precogs in our society, the police have no need for them when they readily find suspects that fit the description of almost any criminal they happen to be searching for. Who needs precogs when you can easily pin a crime on any Black person in a city block because of the presumption of their guilt by virtue of their skin?

Doubt that this isn't the way of policing today? In June 2020, officers who had been called to Keeler Avenue accosted Sterlin Boston, who was allegedly gambling on the sidewalk in Chicago's West Garfield Park, after a tip about a person with a gun. Boston did not match the description of the gunman, according to Assistant State's Attorney Emily Czerniejewski.

His not matching the suspect's description didn't stop officers from handcuffing and attempting to take Boston into custody. During the incident, Boston and an officer fell with Boston's face landing on the edge of the sidewalk. The officer then punched the injured man three times in the back of the head while holding him down. The only precognition these officers needed was an assump-

Who needs precogs when you can easily pin a crime on any Black person in a city block because of the presumption of their guilt by virtue of their skin?

tion of guilt by skin color.

By virtue of being Black, we are already suspected by the State. Being born Black is like being stamped with a guilty until proven innocent brand on our heads in indelible ink. Neither age nor sex or socio-economic status can wash away the presumption of guilt our skin carries. Even having a white parent cannot scrub away the presumed guilt that Black skin indicates.

A 2020 Republican National Convention speaker, and white mother of three boys, one biracial and two white, Abby Johnson stated that police would be “smart” to be “more careful” around her biracial son than her white sons “because of statistics.”

“Statistically, I look at our prison population and I see that there is a disproportionately high number of African American males in

our prison population for crimes, particularly for violent crimes,” Johnson claims. “So, statistically, when a police officer sees a brown man like my Jude walking down the road—as opposed to my white nerdy kids, my white nerdy men walking down the road—because of the statistics that he knows in his head, that these police officers know in their head, they're going to

know that statistically my brown son is more likely to commit a violent offense over my white sons.

“So the fact that in his head he would be more careful around my brown son than my white son, that doesn't actually make me angry,” she goes on to say. “That makes that police officer smart because of statistics.”


She, of course, did not investigate the fact that Black suspects of crimes are more likely to receive harsher sentences and that contributes to the higher incidence of incarcerated Black men. According to the Vera Institute of Justice in their “Evidence Brief, An Unjust



Preventing crime  
before it happens  
isn't a science fiction  
pipe dream.



Photo by H Heyerlein



The fear of a police state playing into its own biases and making criminals out of ordinary citizens acting as an entire Precrime Division is a scary thought, past, present, and future.

Burden: The Disparate Treatment of Black Americans in the Criminal Justice System” states:

“Discriminatory criminal justice policies and practices have historically and unjustifiably targeted black people since the Reconstruction Era, including Black Codes, vagrancy laws, and convict leasing, all of which were used to continue post-slavery control over newly-freed people.

“This discrimination continues today in often less overt ways, including through disparity in the enforcement of seemingly race-neutral laws. For example, while rates of drug use are similar across racial and ethnic groups, black people are arrested and sentenced on drug charges at much higher rates than white people.

“Bias by decision makers at all stages of the justice process disadvantages black people. Studies have found that they are more likely to be stopped by the police, detained pretrial, charged with more serious crimes, and sentenced more harshly than white people.”

If a white woman raising and presumably loving a Black child

still sees them as worthy of racial profiling by the police, how can we expect a stranger wearing a badge and holding a gun to see our innocence? In the minds of that cop and Abby Johnson, there is no autonomy, only Black skin with a penchant for crime and violence. Better to deal with them as a crime waiting to happen. No Precrime Division needed.

Phillip K. Dick’s novel was also concerned with not just individual police departments using precrime, but eventually it being swallowed by the Legislative Branch as well.

“It will end the check and balance system. Precrime will no longer be an independent agency. The Senate will control the police, and after that —,” his lips tightened. “They’ll absorb the army, too.”

The fear of a police state playing into its own biases and making criminals out of ordinary citizens acting as an entire Precrime Division is a scary thought, past, present, and future.


The goal of preventing crime before it occurs is not inherently a bad thing. However, if it’s done by using bias or

stereotypes, it is a flawed system—a system as flawed as the Majority Report, in Dick’s short story, which relied on overlapping information from two Precogs, ignoring the Minority Report that shows an individual making a different, better choice.

Preventing crime before it happens isn’t a science fiction pipe dream. If—instead of relying on precognition, intuition, biases, and stereotypes to prevent crime—we were to create a future where society meets everyone’s basic needs, crime will naturally fall. When a person is not afraid of where their next meal is coming from or whether they have a place to live, they are less likely to commit a crime, no matter their race.

If the future of policing is one in which the immense resources of the police department are diverted to the agencies and outreach needed in the community, there will be less crime and fewer officer-involved violence. The police should not be the ones who are called when someone is having a mental health episode or for minor infractions of the law, especially when our

police force is increasingly militarized with heavy artillery more suited for the battlefield than a neighborhood.

Readers of *The Minority Report* were afraid that the future of policing would mean a world in which they were policed in the way Black communities and individuals have always been policed. However, the future of policing for all Americans may look less like the future Dick predicted because of the unrest in the wake of so many unjustified murders of Black Americans by the police. Protests and calls for defunding the police have given me hope that the future of policing may not look much like the past or the present. It has given me hope that there will be less assumption of guilt by biased officers and smaller police forces that are bolstered by robust community outreach efforts, which serve the communities that have been traditionally neglected and racially targeted. 





Chris Irvin & Chris Robinson

**A SICKNESS FORCING THE PUBLIC** to wear masks outside; police brutality and excessive power of the state on the forefront of discussion; political gaslighting at every turn...wait, you thought we were talking about our 2020? No! This is the 2020 of Masamune Shirow's 1988 sci-fi anime, *Dominion Tank Police*!

While you likely know the legendary Japanese creator for *Ghost in the Shell* and *Appleseed*, Shirow's *Dominion Tank Police* (1988) and sequel *New Dominion Tank Police* (1993) hold a special nostalgic place in my heart. So, when our fearless editor, Errick Nunnally, asked if I'd take a crack at a piece on *Tank Police* given the theme of this month's issue, I jumped at the chance. Would the show that I enjoyed 24 years ago hold up? Is this pure nostalgia haunting me all these years? I brought in my good friend Chris Robinson and *Tank Police* newbie for a fresh perspective. We both watched the 2 hour OVA this past weekend and afterward caught up for a discussion. Here's our hot take!

*\*Note: I've left out instances of laughter [laughs] as we basically laughed through the majority of the discussion... So just imagine us having a good time.*

**Robinson:** How old were you when you first saw *Tank Police*?

**Irvin:** I'm pretty sure I saw it in 1996. So, I was eleven. The Sci-Fi Channel had a program called *Saturday Morning Anime*. My family didn't have the Sci-Fi Channel, but my grandparents did—we'd visit them after church on Sundays and up at their lake house in Michigan. In Michigan, I could go down in the basement and watch whatever I wanted (all of 10 channels) but Sci-Fi was one of them! We'd go up to Michigan for like 2-3 weeks in the summer, and I'd get three Saturdays worth of anime that I would record on VHS. *Tank Police* was one of those shows. Those VHS were pure gold!

It's set in 2020, and there's the bacteria cloud and literally when they go outside, they show people in masks.

**Robinson:** Was it intended for children to watch? Did they edit it in any way? I can't tell who was supposed to be watching this because it's like some things are very silly and child-like. It makes me think it was like what you might watch after *Power Rangers* or *G.I. JOE*. If you're looking at a Blockbuster shelf, I'd probably put them together. *SWAT Kats* was a cartoon that I was a huge fan of as a kid—silly but with quasi-military vibes.

**Irvin:** I know it was edited. I think the exploding dicks (the dick mines), I think they were in there but they cut some of the commentary around them and the language. They swear a lot as well, and that wouldn't have made it onto TV. But you know, it's not a hyper-violent show by

any means. No one gets shot. One guy gets stabbed, and everyone else gets blown up or you don't see it.

**Robinson:** Or they're robot people so it doesn't really matter.

**Irvin:** Yeah.

**Robinson:** I definitely had a great time watching it but that was one of the things I was struggling with—who was the intended audience? Am I supposed to be watching this? Are kids supposed to be watching this?

**Irvin:** Right. I saw it twenty-four years ago (a few times) but I hadn't seen it since.

**Robinson:** So, you had like a vague recollection of it.

**Irvin:** Yeah, I remembered the characters. I remembered when Al drove Bonaparte off the highway onto the wing of the helicopter. That's a very iconic (nostalgic?) action moment for me. So, you're watching it fresh now, for the first time as an adult, what was your take?

**Robinson:** I thought it was very funny, but more for adults. There is some fun action, but there is way more going on beyond that. I don't think the action was so much fun that that was supposed to be the focus. It wasn't the highlight for me—that was the satire

It's clearly drawing a line from U.S. law enforcement to the Tank Police, implying that the Tank Police are the next evolution, or something to that effect.

and the nods to 1980's action movies. That stuff was hilarious. The dick balloons, sophomoric. The anime that I saw around that time was never happy. There was always something depressing. When I watched *Battle of the Planets* or *Gatchaman*, I can't remember what it was called at the time, I remember I would get really disappointed at people dying all the time. That doesn't happen here, but the whole ending of Episode 4, it's like "make sure we end on this very sad robot's past." To me, that's how you know it was for slightly older kids. I could see a sixteen year old loving this.

**Irvin:** It's interesting that you bring up the dick balloons/dick mines and stuff—the sophomoric humor. I was reading a lot of reviews and takes on *Tank Police* leading up to this viewing/discussion to, in a way, brace myself to take the hit and not enjoy it (we are in that generation seemingly obsessed with nostalgia), and you mentioned the lack of action or lack of focus on action. Reviewers criticized what they felt were weird cuts in the action or lack of coherent action, but I think it's

all intentional. Like you said with the satire, it's built/structured to highlight specific things. For example, Lt. Britain, who I love because he's such a goof and a dumbass, in the beginning he says that to be a cop you need to have smarts and you need to have balls. But the "dick mines" are the things that destroy them all (the men), and it's literally the thing that they "must have." Could it have been thrown in there for fun and laughs? Sure, but I believe most everything in here was specifically chosen for an effect. To the point, where the joke keeps going AND a woman, Leona, is the only one who is able to drive through the mess, picking up the Lt and driving him to the hospital.

**Robinson:** Yeah, it's a little bit smarter. It's not that intense, but I think it benefits skewing older.

**Irvin:** Yeah, another example is Leona. She enters the show as the only woman. She's super new and naive in the first episode. When the police torture a criminal, she says she is going to file a protest, but by the end of the second episode, which ends the first arc, she's the

one who is firing a gun at the mayor and screaming about the importance of the tank police. She has taken the Lt's place as the super cop - obsessed with the police, obsessed with the tanks...like how dare you attack us because we're the best. Which I feel is a poke at - usually that type of character is the newbie naive character throughout an entire show. Here she turns around within an hour and is one of them. I felt like it was a great satire of the rookie immediately getting absorbed. There isn't this crew of rookie police protesting. They become part of the machine right away.

**Robinson:** Right she becomes indoctrinated right away, and it's even more so when she gets the tank. That becomes all she cares about. Those gags with her partner, Al, are very funny. So, let's back up. Was this chosen because it involves insane cops and a virus in the air?

**Irvin:** No. So, this is funny. Erick Nunnally, who's editing this issue, posted about his daughters watching anime (*My Hero Academia*) maybe like a year ago? I think I threw out, "have her check out Tank Police because it's fun and insane!" I didn't remember any of the stuff I see now. I was just thinking about tanks blowing stuff up and running around the city. Fast forward to a few weeks ago to when he texted me about this issue and my thoughts about *Tank Police*. I thought it would be a fun thing to do, and then when I sat down and watched it I was like, "Holy shit! It's set in 2020, and there's the bacteria cloud and literally when they go outside, they show people in masks." It was jaw dropping. I can't believe this is so spot on.

**Robinson:** I know! I was like how did he know!?

**Irvin:** And, to the point where Specs (one of the cops) is talking to the doctor at the

hospital, and he's like, "Hey, we don't even need to wear these masks anymore because our bodies are so used to it. We are all sick, and we kinda just wear them for show." I was like... yikes! Is that our future?

**Robinson:** Are we out satirizing-satire? Was Shirow prescient enough to see it coming? I guess there are too many coincidences.

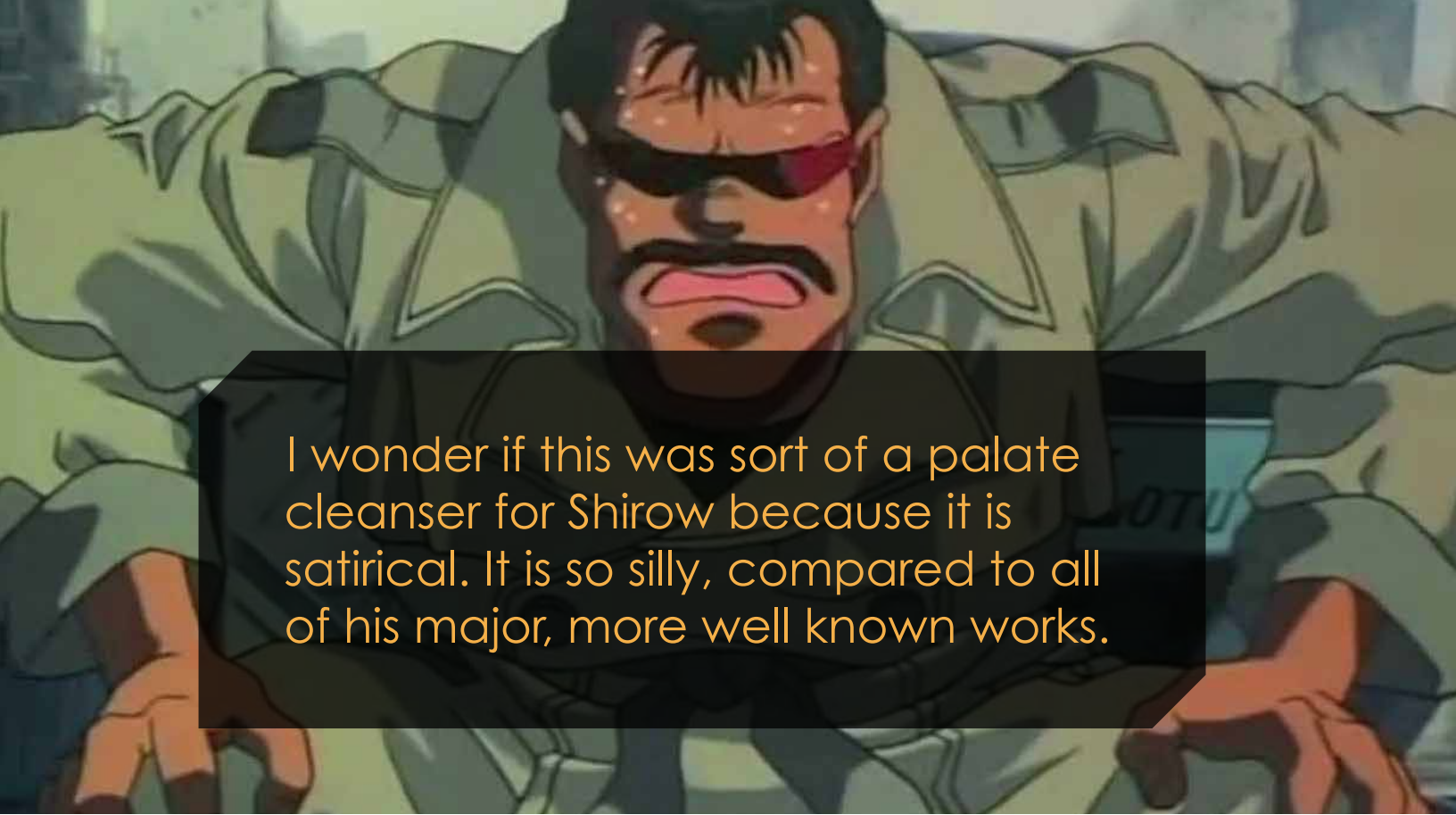
**Irvin:** And the backdrop of the entire show, at the beginning (while the chief and the mayor are yelling at each other about the Tank Police), is a series of background shots and silhouettes of US law enforcement, US military, Texas Rangers, etc. throughout the years. It's clearly drawing a line from US law enforcement to the Tank Police, implying that the Tank Police are the next evolution, or something to that effect. This is going to be a satire of law enforcement and the military in the United States.

**Robinson:** The voice of the characters kept getting to me—like were they doing versions of people? I kept hearing George Carlin in the Chief. Not like an impression or a rip off, but they all sort of sounded like famous people of the time.

**Irvin:** The whole back and forth in the beginning between the chief and the mayor—the gaslighting back and forth—caring about election, making decisions for re-election, and comparing tank related incidents to the bacteria cloud and traffic accidents. You don't see that stated so outright in many shows, especially not in animation.

**Robinson:** I think it's hitting us especially hard now given the times. At the time, it would have seemed fantastical and not registered like it does today. While we're talking about the tanks, the theme song where they keep saying *Tank Police!* over and over again is fantastic.





I wonder if this was sort of a palate cleanser for Shirow because it is satirical. It is so silly, compared to all of his major, more well known works.

**Irvin:** And to that point, and this plays into the idea of care behind this show, you get almost four minutes of direct in your face back and forth about police violence as well as its effect on the community, with a backdrop of the United States. Then immediately they cut to this super 1980s dance remix with tanks flying through the air. The juxtaposition of those two things, it's like "what are we getting ourselves into?"

**Robinson:** They do make the tanks look very cool, but the cops themselves look very *not* cool. I love the ball design that they are all sort of rolling around on. Also, when Leona makes her own tank with the four treads, that is very cool.

**Irvin:** Yeah, it's very Metal Slug-esque. I wonder if there is a connection between the two, design-wise. I thought Chaplain was another American satire, spouting made up quasi-religious nonsense and advice.

**Robinson:** Yeah, his role at the top of Episode 3 was very funny, during the

interrogation.

**Irvin:** It's pretty wild to see just how much I missed as a kid. The whole thing is stereotyping and making fun of police. It's like they are the "heroes" but Shirow's constantly making fun of them. Which is why I think I like Lt Britain. I love that he's this super stereotype 1980s alpha male cop one minute and then a total mess the next. I think this was ahead of its time, right? So, the Tank Police get their first woman, Leona. When Leona comes in, she immediately puts Lt Britain in his place after he's been the chauvinistic tough guy, which I think is rare, especially for something made in 1988. Then he is constantly triggered by everything. Every time something goes wrong (all the time), he's crying and complaining, which also feels ahead of its time. Having this macho alpha constantly melting down over stuff—to the point where he gets in an argument with the leader of the Red Commandos and is so upset over the Tank Police being

called lousy that he sticks his huge revolver in his mouth and is like "I'm gonna commit suicide to show who's got guts!" He's just SO cranked to 11—being this guy tough guy leader who can't handle it, but keeps going no matter what.

**Robinson:** And then the show uses the trick of using the "even worse villain," the Red Commandos, to get you to root for the police because we have this crazy private military outfit running around killing people.

**Irvin:** Yeah, I think the line was something like "they are so bad that they will murder people to get the job done!"

**Robinson:** And the Red Commandos have Texas accents to take it even deeper, and more American. Speaking of Episode 4, I love the moment when they roll up on the Chief and he's like, "Chickens, the only friends I got." Another quick gag is when they pan over the activity in the police station and there's the guy reading the "How to Kill" magazine.


**Irvin:** Yes, the Lt!

**Robinson:** Hilarious. There are a lot of great quick gags. It's to your point that there's nothing wasted—no accidents.

**Irvin:** Yeah, like when the tanks pull out of the garage there is the goofy honking noise like out of *Caddyshack*. All these goofy horns, kind of like "here come the clowns," but then it cuts to the cool music as they are cruising down the streets.

**Robinson:** I wonder if this was sort of a palate cleanser for Shirow because it is satirical. It is so silly, compared to all of his major, more well known works.

**Irvin:** I could keep rambling forever, but I'll add one more thing that just felt so 2020. At the end of the second episode, when Leona is arguing with the mayor and she shoots the window out, she says, "When the crooks get rough, we gotta get rougher to keep democracy safe."

**Robinson:** Check out *Tank Police!* This is the time. 

**WRONG IS WRONG NO  
MATTER WHO DOES IT**

*Bracken MacLeod*

## LITERATURE, ART, AND ENTERTAINMENT ACROSS

genres have a copaganda problem. That is to say, depictions of law enforcement spanning the spectrum in books and movies for the last 70 years more often than not have portrayed the police (as I used to say in my former career) in a light most favorable to the police, ignoring systemic shortcomings of a profession that needs oversight and transparency more than almost any other. That is not to say I think violent media causes violence, for example. But I do think there's something to be said about the persistent endorsement of a ubiquitous and unreflective fictional worldview concerning crime, criminals, and cops influencing perceptions of that work and its role in the real world. In addition to the proliferation of misinformation about how crime is interdicted, solved, and prosecuted. At this moment in our history, we're *long* overdue for a re-evaluation of how creators uncritically lionize law enforcement, rationalize their violent interactions with characters in fiction, and misrepresent the techniques used in catching and convicting criminals. And how we, as consumers of fiction, support and create demand for more of the same. Because, in this instance, fiction very much does influence the lens through which we view reality.

Over generations, the image of the police officer as the benevolent guardian has been presented from heroic Dick Tracey's G-Men, to fatherly Andy Griffith, and stoic "just the facts" Joe Friday, to the countless other police procedural stories that are continually written and produced. That policing as practiced is a force for good in our society, both in ideal and execution, is a basic assumption of these

narratives. The reality is that the popular perception of interactions between police and citizens is distorted by entertainment. That distortion creates a shield that inhibits accountability and justice.

How do we compartmentalize our understanding of "good cops" in fiction knowing what happened to Tamir Rice, Eric Garner, Sandra Bland, Philando Castile, Michael Brown, Botham Jean, and Breonna Taylor, among so many others? What kind of cognitive dissonance do we have to sublimate while watching a good cop like *Minority Report's* John Anderton protect society from law enforcement overreach (by the Army in Phillip Dick's short story, and the PreCrime Division of the police in the movie) after we see cellphone video of

policemen standing idly by while their colleague kneels on George Floyd's neck for eight minutes and forty-six seconds, killing him for the suspected crime of using a counterfeit twenty dollar bill at a grocery store?

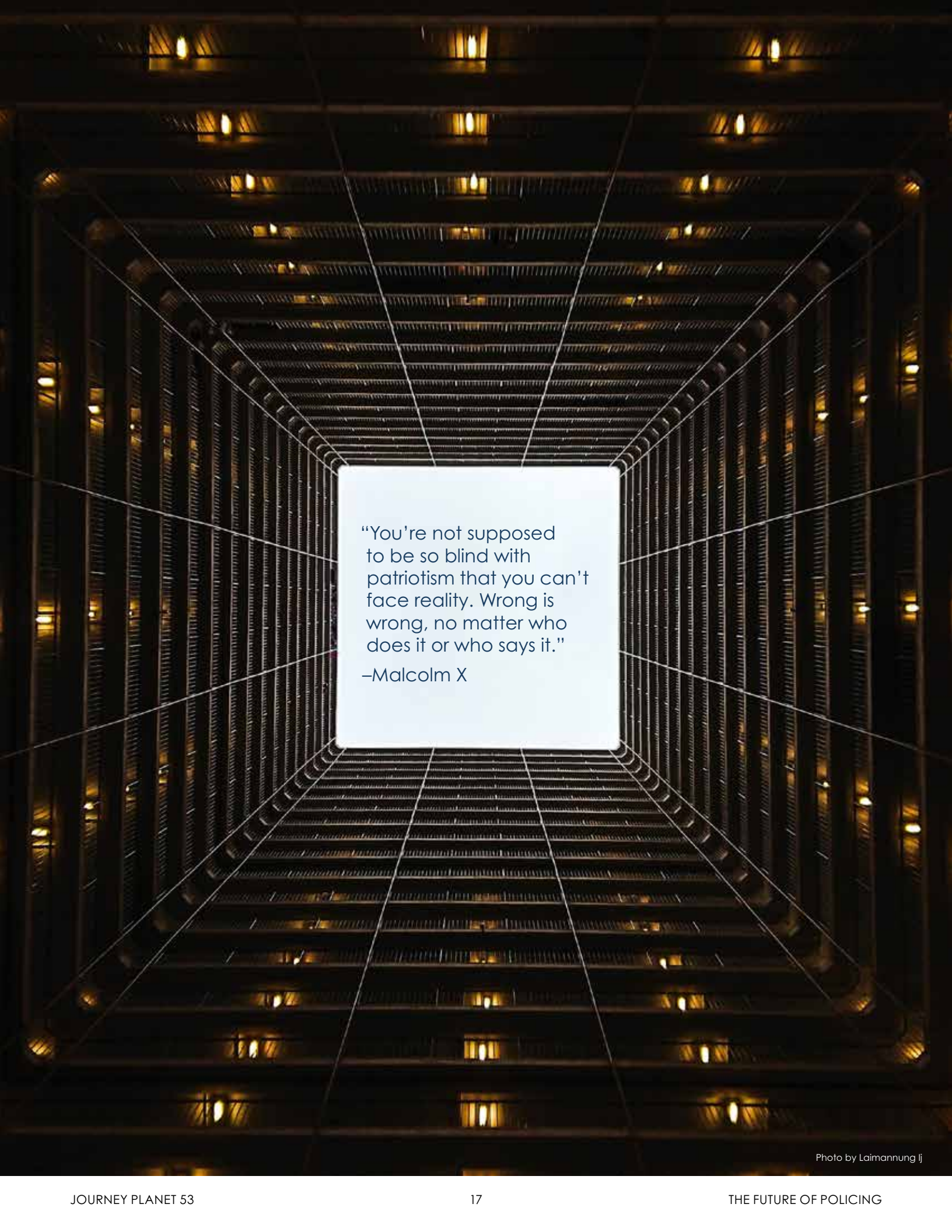
Probably not much, given the proliferation of stories in which a LEO (law enforcement officer) brutalizes people *suspected* of crimes in order to get confessions, getting to the bottom of things. Our culture portrays even the best of good cops as

sometimes "bending the rules" (i.e., ignoring civil liberties), and has conditioned us to feel frustrated when a criminal (never an *accused* criminal) is set free "due to a technicality" (i.e., a violation of their fundamental Constitutional rights, existing to protect all citizens from law enforcement abuse and overreach). A cop kneeling on another human being's neck does not look like oppression to so many people because that's what good policing looks like in stories that glorify policing at any cost.

Characters like RoboCop and Judge Dredd are celebratory figures

At this moment in our history, we're *long* overdue for a re-evaluation of how creators uncritically lionize law enforcement, rationalize their violent interactions with characters in fiction, and misrepresent the techniques used in catching and convicting criminals.





“You're not supposed to be so blind with patriotism that you can't face reality. Wrong is wrong, no matter who does it or who says it.”

—Malcolm X

of law enforcement, despite being unrepentant violators of civil rights and outright engines of violence. Tough cops are tough on crime to the extent of fully crossing lines to get the bad guy—that very line being centuries of statutory and case law developed to protect us against rogue cops. But even then, sometimes they don't even have to cross the line to reinforce violence against innocent bodies. We mustn't forget that in *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep/Blade Runner* Rick Deckard is a cop tasked with extra-judicially killing sentient, self-aware beings who've escaped slavery and want a better, longer life. (Admittedly, as both the book and the movie go on, Deckard begins to have an existential crisis about retiring androids/repllicants, but that his mission is legally sanctioned and persists is undeniable.)

Perhaps we think we don't need to make these distinctions because people can easily distinguish between fiction and reality. Though trial attorneys across the nation bemoan the “*CSI* effect,” the belief driven by programming like *CSI* and *NCIS* that technology is more advanced than it is, giving police science fictional powers they don't actually have. Real world jurors expect that fantastical technology to be the definitive arbiter of truth and believe its absence is more than telling. Of course, we all know that police investigators are not super scientists with unlimited resources and instant results that give them absolute certainty in the moment, right? “Track forty-five right. Stop. Center and stop. Enhance fifteen to twenty-three. Gimme a hard copy right there.”

Acknowledging all of what precedes this, there's an entirely other element of fantastical fiction we regularly overlook, which to my mind has had the single most deleterious effect on

When we accept the view of policing like it's an event horizon separating the orderly universe from churning chaos, we're enabling a pernicious “us versus them” falsehood that ideologically and psychologically separates police from the communities they are sworn to serve and gives people the justification to excuse state violence inflicted on its own citizens.

the perception of policing: the idea of The Thin Blue Line itself.

The idea that LEOs exist as the narrow, separate margin shielding decent society from chaos is as false as faster-than-light travel and rotten at its core. When we accept the view of policing like it's an event horizon separating the orderly universe from churning chaos, we're enabling a pernicious “us versus them” falsehood that ideologically and psychologically separates police from the communities they are sworn to serve and gives people the justification to excuse state violence inflicted on its own citizens.

Police have linguistically and visually branded themselves as the line between chaos and order, but this is beyond problematic for public servants. Crime prevention and interdiction is more complicated than binary and boundary. Chaos emerges from *within* society, and the police—our public servants—are also a part of that collective. We're all aboard the same starship; we occupy all decks. But allowing the police to reframe themselves as a *sui generis* force, removes them from the community and establishes


them as a starship of their own, on their own, capable of engaging or disengaging as *they* deem necessary for the survival of *our* crew. Whether it's citizens or criminals, it is always us vs. them—cops vs. not-cops. It is incumbent upon us to reject the idea that any concept that separates us is good and necessary. We can't function as a diasporic Battlestar Galactica fleet with separate agendas. They need to reboard *our* craft and help *us* find a home.

Herein lies the problem. Since 9/11, the national consciousness has told us that it is definitionally patriotic to stand with all first responders, police foremost among them. At the same time, we've seen a militarization of police forces that strengthens the idea of the warrior cop and further distances people sworn to protect communities from those same communities. Barney Fife no longer keeps his one and only bullet in his shirt pocket; he has a literal tank at his disposal to enforce peace. We watch internal forces tear gassing our friends and family, performing actions that in an international theater would be war crimes. Federal officers disappear

protesters of police brutality with no seeming consciousness of irony whatsoever.

This is The Thin Blue Line that blurs the distinction between order and chaos.

In the same vein that “my country right or wrong” is a horrendous admission that the speaker is willing to stand on the wrong side of history for the sake of nationalist loyalty, so too, the idea of The Thin Blue Line is an embrace of the idea that cops do not belong to our society, they stand as our guardians and sentinels at a distinct remove. And that, as this force of rarified American heroes, they are morally unassailable and ethically differentiable from the rest of us. But I stand with Malcolm X when he said, “You're not supposed to be so blind with patriotism that you can't face reality. Wrong is wrong, no matter who does it or who says it.”

We can do better. We need to stop lionizing rogue and outright murderous police in fiction and find ways to represent diverse communities that don't depict single ecosystem neighborhoods or are mere misery porn. In reality, we must culturally embrace the full humanity of BIPOC people, and require that police stand *with* us, not against us in the struggles for equality and social justice. And if they won't make that stand, they are not to be trusted with the badge. We need to rethink how we look at what it is to be a protector and stop creating and consuming the poison that anything is justified—especially state violence—in the service of safety and order. 



TO APPREHEND AND EXPUNGE:

# THE POLICING OF EXISTENCE IN SCIENCE FICTION

Photo by Robynne HU

*Peter Schulte*

**EXISTENCE. THE STATE OF BEING;** the absolute minimum requirement in order to actually “be” anything at all. The concept and meaning of *existence* are pervasive themes throughout much of science fiction, with their very nature being held up to the lens of many a fictional cosmos and explored at length. Another pillar of science fiction is the inclusion of elements that aid in the grounding of the premise as believable. Constants of our universe are similarly extant in sci-fi worlds: gravity, the need for sustenance, even the concept of laws and of those who enforce them.

The embodiment of police in science fiction varies between universes, but representations typically fall into one of three categories in my experience. First, there are the police as an institution, neither overwhelmingly good or bad, and extant primarily as a balancing force to reflect the tone of acceptability and relative degree of lawlessness, or the lack thereof, in the story. These cops fight perceived crime and generally take action against blatant acts of violence or disorder committed in public. The *Star Wars* universe prior to the Clone Wars, the world of *Men In Black*, and even *Firefly* after Unification are all examples of this seemingly natural framing. Secondly, you have police as protagonists. While likely the least common of presentations, there exist examples such as *Robocop* and *Judge Dredd*, and even the likes of Max Rockatansky’s highway patrol in *Mad Max*. Neither of these situations preclude the existence of police corruption or general malintent, however it is typically not the overwhelming norm. Lastly, we have police as the primary force of antagonism; usually as the front line fringes of a dystopian government, the implacable enforcers of what passes for law in the

chaos of near-anarchy, or the unfeeling manifestation of brutality and single-minded will of the big-bad, whoever that may be. Quite often, in the latter case especially, the police are inextricably linked with military forces and are often simply the implementation of martial law in whatever fictional society we find ourselves.

Here is where we revisit our opening premise; that of existence. In examining the preeminent mandate and motive driving the more devious sci-fi law enforcement, it is to police the crime of mere existence. Put another way, much of science fiction explores realities in which a particular state of being, and not just an illicit action, is considered criminal. Such examples are everywhere: in the *Matrix* trilogy, humans existing outside of the Matrix are hunted ruthlessly in the digital and corporeal worlds alike; in *Minority Report*, citizens who contemplate the commission of a crime enter an illicit state of being without ever having actually committed the crime in question; in *V for Vendetta*, whole swaths of the British population are condemned and incarcerated for their audacity to exist in a state considered repugnant to the Norsefire Party. In the movie *Equilibrium*, those existing with the

Put another way, much of science fiction explores realities in which a particular state of being, and not just an illicit action, is considered criminal.

ability to feel normal human emotions are considered banned persons merely for continuing to remain that way and are hunted and persecuted by the Clerics. Note that it is not the actual act of ceasing to take the regularly prescribed doses of emotion-modulating medication that are considered problematic. If such a person confesses, repents, and steps back into chemically addled line, then all is forgiven. Instead the crime is the state of unfettered existence itself.

Possibly my favorite example of this is that of Philip K. Dick’s novel *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*, as well as the eventual film adaptation *Blade Runner*. Titular character and blade runner Rick




Scottish philosopher David Hume suggested that all ideas and manifestations are the result and reflection of one's experiences.

Deckard is a bounty hunter whose primary drive is hunting down, apprehending, and possibly even terminating rogue replicants, androids created essentially as slave labor and nearly indistinguishable from humans. Again, it is important to recognize that the mere existence of these runaway replicants, regardless of how peaceable they may strive to exist, is considered worthy of a blade runner's attention. Over the course of the novel and the movie, a stunning treatise and examination of what it means to exist, to be alive, and even the very nature of humanity itself is played out. This is especially true in the film's final scenes containing one of the most stirring monologues in science fiction history delivered by

Rutger Hauer's character Roy. Among the most interesting turns on this theme is threaded into a prevailing mystery of *Blade Runner* lore; whether Deckard himself is in fact a replicant. One side of this potential mystery would see him hunting down his own kind, and the added question of whether he did so of his own volition. Either way, it fits with the consistent lack of empathy or conscience shown by most of the law enforcement in sci-fi, even when fully cognizant of the degree of punishment to which the condemned are subjected.

Now the question of significance arises. Since we have established a rather widespread theme, could there possibly be some deeper meaning to it all? Scottish philosopher David

Hume suggested that all ideas and manifestations are the result and reflection of one's experiences. Jules Verne, one of the forebearers of science fiction, is often credited with variations of the phrase, "what man can conceive, he can achieve (or create)." If these concepts are in fact true, then all ideas within works of fiction, even science fiction, must possess some basis and grounding within reality. This goes beyond a psychological bridge to maintain plausibility, but in fact serves as the wellspring from which an entire fictional universe, its happenings, and all beings and concepts within are drawn forth and committed to page or screen. To this end, the policing of existence is more than a mere idea or motif. With the driving

notion that much of law enforcement in science fiction revolves around the policing of the very existence of protagonistic groups and that of experiences and reality informing our fiction, then this element of both fiction and reality bears some introspection. Perhaps the lens of fiction is instead a mirror, and we would all be well served to examine the concepts of crime, justice, and intrinsic existence and where the lines between them are actually drawn. Maybe is it even more important to ask, "where do we stand?" 



# PROBLEMATICA: THE END OF THE WHITE HERO



Photo by ActionVance

Gerald L. Coleman

**I WAS SITTING DOWN TO** work on my science fiction novel when I got a message from good friend and fellow author, Errick Nunnally, about writing an essay for *Journey Planet*. He was guest editing and thought I might have some good old-fashioned fun writing about a sci-fi topic as a *fan*. That's what we are at the core, right? *Fans*. Since it was Errick asking, I was willing to take some time out of my writing schedule—it's not like I don't have two novels I'm on a schedule to finish—to think through the subject matter and offer up a few propositions. My formal education is in philosophy and theology, so a few ideas immediately sprang to me. That background also includes decades of reading comics, science fiction and fantasy, and an indiscriminate consumption of speculative fiction television and movies.

So, where did my mind immediately go? Jean-François Lyotard and “*Au fond de L'Inconnu pour du nouvea!*” That's Fredric Jameson quoting Baudelaire from *Les Fleurs du Mal*. No, it's not as convoluted as it appears, but I am getting a little ahead of myself. So, let's go back and begin at the beginning.

In taxonomy, the term *problematica* is used to describe something that is neither plant or animal, which does not adhere to conventional labeling. It's so strange or weird in its phenotypical presentation that it defies categorization. So, it's thrown into this catch-all category, appropriately, labeled *problematica*. It's problematic. And here is where we catch up with contemporary speculative fiction.

I grew up never questioning the, as we might say in theology, *rightwiseness* of the heroes I was presented with. Their “righteousness” was supposed to be self-evident. Well-educated theologians (because there are many who are not) prefer rightwiseness because it delineates a direction rather than a static fact. It's about relationships

rather than a one-time designation.

What was their relationship to truth and justice? James T. Kirk cheated on a critical test at Starfleet Academy and thought of it as a point of pride, rejecting the truth that you can't always win. White heroes never seem to lose. He also broke the Federation's most important rule nearly every day of the week. It's so important it's called the Prime Directive. Kirk has robbed, killed, and likely committed adultery. So, why do people see him as a heroic character?

Here's a bit of Lyotard writing about the postmodern condition in his treatise of the same name, *The relationship of the suppliers and users of knowledge to the knowledge they supply and use is now tending, and will increasingly tend, to assume the form already taken by the relationship of commodity producers and consumers to the commodities they produce and consume—that is, the form of value. Knowledge is and will be produced in order to be sold, it is and will be consumed in order to be valorized in a new production: in both cases, the goal is exchange. Knowledge ceases to be an end in itself, it loses its 'use-value.'*

Now, Lyotard is ostensibly discussing the *exteriorization of knowledge* but it's instructive in that it hits on the exchange at play in the characterization of “heroes” like Kirk. These characters, the roguish Starfleet captain, the outlaw cop (Judge Dredd), the anti-hero turned rebel (Han Solo), the Caped Crusader who could've done more for his community by using his wealth and privilege rather than running through the night attacking the poor, are all archetypes of the default character of white western society. They break the law, defy custom, revel in their privilege, and are a commodification of white privilege in storytelling meant to deify the white male character.

Until very recently, speculative fiction was almost exclusively populated by a white male ego in service of its id, with a superego bereft of a definitive moral compass. The stories were produced to raise the white male up above the law and the constraints of the

In taxonomy, the term *problematica* is used to describe something that is neither plant or animal, which does not adhere to conventional labeling.

Anyone who grew up watching *Star Trek*, or reading *The Count of Monte Cristo*, or watching *Star Wars* on the big screen knows that stories matter.



Photo by Judeus Samson



social contract. They have been lionized so deeply, profoundly, and for so long it is not surprising that as the storytelling community seeks to move on from this singular preoccupation so many white dudes are in open rebellion against it.


Even when writers and creatives attempt to subvert that longstanding trope its power continues to hold sway. It's why the wrong lesson is taken from *Dune*. Paul is not a hero. He's a cautionary tale. The Punisher is not a patron saint of cops. He's a serial killer with a disdain for the kind of cops who would idolize him and paint his logo on their bulletproof vests or use as a sticker on their locker. The idea of the good guy who breaks

model of the last 40 years in the new representations in storytelling and how their very presence is an indictment of what has gone on before. It is in coming to grips with this reality that we find the points of friction in storytelling and fandom. It's no longer acceptable to have women characters who only serve to move the male character forward in his journey. It's unacceptable to use characters of color as props for the aggrandizement of white characters. The gritty "detective" in science fiction, private or otherwise, and the hardened "cop" who will violate a character's human (or alien) rights, is falling into disrepute because we are seeing in real life what that kind of law

retold without a substantial change, *Au fond de L'Inconnu pour du nouvea!* The new stories being told aren't just the old stories reworked. They aren't the same white guys commanding starships, holding lightsabers, policing a dystopia, or being a long-awaited messiah.

In this way the old hero has died, will die, is dying. The fallout of that dynamic continues to be felt in editorial offices at publishing houses, on panels at cons, and throughout fandom. The same push toward a more just society in the broader world is also occurring in fandom. The people who have had their stories silenced or erased are no longer content to accept the status quo. People are no longer

created a false narrative of how heroes should behave. Judge Dredd would never have knelt on George Floyd's neck for eight minutes and forty-six seconds. Tom Cruise's John Anderton would never have burst into Breonna Taylor's house in the middle of the night with a no-knock warrant and killed her. He would not have been so bad at his job that he burst into the wrong home in the middle of the night looking for a suspect that was already in custody at the police station. That's what real cops do. But what Judge Dredd and John Anderton and characters like them do accomplish is to create the myth of the cop as hero—even when they break the rules, don't trust the very system they keep up and running, and violate the human rights of the people they arrest. All of that has a real detrimental effect in the actual world. They aren't just stories. Someone recently coined the phrase copaganda.

Anyone who grew up watching *Star Trek*, or reading *The Count of Monte Cristo*, or watching *Star Wars* on the big screen knows that stories matter. They know that stories mold and shape us. A great story can propel you into the future like an arrow shot into the sun. It can comfort and console you when you've had a terrible day. It can transport you away from a horrific home life. A great story can help form your morality. In a world where stories are this important, those who consume them deserve real heroes. Not advertisements for privilege. 

## The same push toward a more just society in the broader world is also occurring in fandom.

the rules because they are in the way is a mainstay in fiction in general and has made its way into science fiction in particular. Lyotard discusses something similar in what he calls the crisis of representation. Again, he is talking about adequacy, accuracy, and Truth (capital "T") in knowledge and art, but it certainly resonates with the current dilemma in speculative fiction and fandom.

The crisis lies in the ongoing critique of the default character

enforcement creates. It destroys lives and condones murder of the innocent. It's impossible to watch the cop on TV violate someone's rights or outright break the law in pursuit of "justice" without thinking about George Floyd and Breonna Taylor.

With new and more diverse voices entering the field and telling their stories from their perspectives, the old tropes are falling to the wayside. Where the old stories were told and

okay with not seeing themselves reflected in the firmament of stories being told on screen or in printed pages. There is a desire for not only heroes that reflect the luminescent array of cultures and colors of the people reading and watching, but of heroes who have a real fidelity to heroic virtues.

I stopped watching cop shows some years ago for two reasons. I realized that they did not reflect the reality of who cops were in the street and they

# WHO WATCHES THE WATCHMEN AND WHO PUTS THE 'SUPE' IN SUPERHERO?

Lisa Macklem

**LONG BEFORE THE UNPRECEDENTED EVENTS** of 2020 were dreamed of, *Watchmen* and *The Boys* were envisioning dark futures in their comic incarnations. More recently, yet still before the events of 2020, both properties became television series that re-imagined the comics in ways that make the stories resonate even more strongly with the reality of the current Black Lives Matter movement and the public protests against police brutality and the suppression of democracy. While *Watchmen* re-imagines the comic for television with a direct connection to the police, *The Boys* actually have a more tenuous relationship with government law enforcement in the television series than in the comic. Both shows, however, highlight the elusive nature of justice, the tendency of absolute power to corrupt absolutely, and the inequalities inherent in society in regards to race, gender, and economic status.

I want to spend just a little time on *Watchmen* as there's an entire section devoted to the show. I have to admit that I had not heard of the Tulsa Massacre before seeing the show. I will plead that I'm Canadian, and therefore, not as conversant in American history as I'd like to be. It was brilliant for the show to use a real event that is shocking in its magnitude and for which the shock is amplified because its history has been suppressed.

The police in *Watchmen* have to wear masks to protect themselves, but they aren't superheroes for all that they might dress up like cheap Halloween cosplayers. They use torture to get information and are backed by white supremacists. I would never have guessed the Dr Manhattan twist and was, I'll admit, gobsmacked by it! Loved it though. I loved Jean Smart as FBI detective Laurie Blake, the former Silk Spectre and Regina King as Sister Night was simply perfect. I'd love to see her get a spinoff. In addition to the vigilante justice of police and superheros that pervades both *Watchmen* and *The Boys*, both shows have corporate greed playing a central, driving force in perpetuating systems of inequality. *Watchmen* has Lady Trieu, the daughter of Adrian Veidt, via artificial insemination, who has taken over Veidt enterprises and plans to steal Dr Manhattan's powers to

become ultimately powerful. Absolute power, corrupting absolutely. And of course, she uses science to do it.

This criticism of corporate overreach is a major theme in *The Boys*. Vought International—so close to Veidt!—is home to the Seven—the seven most powerful superheroes. Of course, all the saving they do is carefully choreographed to maximize their brand. When the superheroes have meetings, rather than discuss societal problems or strategies for helping those in need, they discuss royalties and contracts. Early in season two, Stan Edgar, CEO of Vought, reveals that the company has its roots in Nazi Germany and at its



core is a pharmaceutical company, peddling compound-V—the blue serum that creates superheroes. Our superheroes are really just the product of a drug. In fact, in the comics, our vigilante “heroes,” the Boys, also take compound-V to give themselves a boost going into a fight with a Supe.

Vought may be a pharmaceutical company at heart, but it is branching out into the military, gaining more of a foothold in government. By creating super-terrorists with V, Vought has made Supes a necessary part of the American arsenal because nothing else can fight them. It's even more money in the coffers for Vought





and it's more corporate control of government. It's also an interesting parallel to the control pharmaceutical companies wield through extensive corporate lobbying, and this too resonates with current events around Covid-19.

While the Supes clearly need the spanking that Butcher and his boys so eagerly want to give them, it's hard to see the Boys as significantly more altruistic than the Supes that they are trying to stop—much like even the good cops in *Watchmen*. The Boys are primarily motivated by vengeance. Butcher wants vengeance on Homelander for raping—and at first he thinks killing—his wife. In fact, Becca bore Homelander a son and has been being held captive, raising the boy. While Homelander is clearly a sociopath, the show is also nuanced enough to generate some sympathy for him. After all, it's hard to grow up unscathed when you are raised in a lab like a rat.

Hughie joins the Boys to get vengeance for Robin after A-Train speeds through her, blowing her apart and leaving Hughie holding her bleeding severed arms. Yet Hughie finds love with Annie—aka Starlight, the newest member of the Seven. He doesn't realize she's a Supe until it's too late. In many ways, Hughie joins the Boys like a younger Butcher, but Hughie seems to possess more nuance and humanity than

Butcher, or perhaps, he hasn't become as bitter. He's also had Annie to lean on and to help him get over Robin.

Annie/Starlight is a bridge between the Supes and the Boys. She is a naïve idealist when she joins the Seven. This lasts about 10 minutes until the Deep forces her to perform oral sex on him—the ultimate corporate hazing. In addition, rather than listening to her police scanner or helping a woman she sees being raped in an alley, Starlight is forced to show up at staged superhero interventions while wearing a new and much skimpier costume. The show taps into the #MeToo movement when Starlight announces at a rally that she was forced to perform sex on someone, and then the Deep is forced to publicly apologize and is banished from the Seven. The show, however, continues to be nuanced in its portrayal. While in exile, the Deep is also sexually assaulted, and we begin to see that he too has deep-seated issues with his own body image. He is deeply ashamed of his gills—the very things that make him super. Of course, one of the best things about *The Boys*—aside from the language, no curse is taboo!—is the humor. The other thing that makes the Deep a Supe is his ability to talk to marine animals—whom he keeps getting killed. In the second season, the Deep ends up falling under the sway of the Church

of the Collective, a thinly veiled substitute for the Church of Scientology. After all, these Supes are more about celebrity, popularity, and show business than saving people, so it's fitting that the churches depicted are also pretty pathetic at saving people. In season one, Starlight turns on her own church at the Believe Expo.

Homelander, who is supposed to be the leader of the Seven, is a bully, concerned only with his own popularity. He body-shames the Deep about his gills, calling them disgusting. When he and Queen Maeve are sent to save a hijacked plane and he ends up accidentally killing the pilot and co-pilot, he callously leaves the plane full of people to crash. Maeve begs him to find a way to save them, but like good science fiction, he explains all the reasons why physics won't let him save the plane. Maeve is consumed with grief over the people they leave to die, but is terrified of Homelander, so drinks her sorrow away. In this current season, a beleaguered Homelander tries to prove that the Seven is inclusive. He points out to Maria Menounos in an interview that they have racial diversity with A-Train (even though he's put A-Train on medical leave/fired him), and then he outs Maeve as a lesbian. Also prior to the interview, he puts a stop to Blindspot, a blind Supe with super-hearing, joining the Seven by smashing his eardrums—and telling Ashley that they won't be having any cripples on the team. Sounds a bit like another loud-mouthed blond...

The second, and currently airing, season of *The Boys* resonates with current events. New Supe, Stormfront appears to replace Translucent and upstages—and therefore enrages—Homelander. She seems to want to stand up to the corporate machine, yet we

quickly discover that she's a sociopath who is also a racist who likes killing people. Just before killing Kimiko's (the Female) brother Kenji, she tells him to “open your eyes.” We also learn that she used to be Liberty, and when she was Liberty, she killed an innocent Black man. In fact, the entire storyline could have been ripped from today's headlines. Mother's Milk, Hughie, and Annie go on a road trip to find out more about the mysterious Liberty. They arrive at Valerie's house and as soon as she sees Hughie at the door, she is terrified—a Black woman confronted by a white man. She thinks he's from Vought—or the police. She tells them she didn't say anything. It isn't until Mother's Milk steps forward that she relaxes and tells them the story that her brother was pulled over and tried to explain that he'd done nothing wrong. Liberty simply beat him up, killing him in the process, almost like an afterthought. Carelessly. This episode was written and filmed long before the events of 2020 unfolded, yet it resonates and acts as a jumping off point for discussion, further amplifying these issues that need to be examined and resolved.

There's no question that both *The Boys* and *Watchmen* force viewers to confront issues that are making headlines in the real world. It's clear that the writers of both the comics and the TV series were simply tapping into the undercurrents of what they saw in society. It becomes less and less clear who the good guys are and what justice looks like, but it's also less clear as to whether that is a failure of the storytelling or the world we are currently living in. *CS*



David Ferguson

*Just as a quick aside before we get started: a policeman was the first character to appear in Doctor Who (TV: An Unearthly Child). This was later touched on in a Second Doctor story (AUDIO: The Last Day At Work). I only mention this as the audio was the product of a fan competition where the winner got their script made into a play and is a VERY clever story which is free to download.*

**WHEN I FIRST DECIDED TO** write about the Judoon, it was simply because they are my favourite aliens from the new series of Doctor Who (and they instantly came to mind when I heard the subject of this issue). I just love their design. They could have come across as silly, actually they do a bit, but they work in the universe of Doctor Who and I think their silliness charmed me somehow. After re-watching some episodes in order to refresh my memory for this piece, I noticed some similarities between their actions as a police force and the actions of some police forces we are seeing in real life. I am noting this to point out from the start that this piece isn't about that but feel free to make comparisons of your own.

**Jo tro do plo plo no (Or Judoon in Judoonese)**

The Judoon were created by writer Russell T. Davies and are the first alien race introduced since 2005 to have appeared in stories under all three revival era showrunners. They are two-metre high humanoids with stocky builds and rhinoceros-like heads. Males and females mostly look, and talk, the same. The only difference being that females have hair on their scalp (TV: *Fugitive of the Judoon*). They wear black armour and resemble Sontarans with their helmets on. My friend James Bacon has likened their appearance to the Vogons from *A Hitchhiker's Guide To Galaxy*. Unlike Vogons, however, the Judoon have nothing to compare to poetry (AUDIO: *Judoon In Chains*). Perhaps the limitation of a language that is mostly one-syllable words generally an "o" sound (such as "blo mo co jo") but occasionally an "a." I was new to Doctor Who the first time I was introduced to the Judoon and thought they were a returning species



from the Classic Era (which I was only vaguely familiar with at the time). I didn't realise that I was watching their introduction, a fact that was muddled by a sense that it wasn't the first time The Doctor has met them. This played out in later appearances that were earlier in his/her timeline (COMIC: *A Rare Gem*, et al.). Throughout his/her history, the Doctor has constantly been in conflict with authority. From his/her own people (TV: *The War Games*, et al.) to megalomaniacs (TV: *The Enemy Of The World*) to police states (TV: *Vengeance On Varos*). However, as far as I know, the Judoon are the only alien police force he/she has come up against.



## Introduction: Smith and Jones


Introduced in the third season opener of the new series (TV: *Smith and Jones*), the Judoon had been hired to find the alien murderer of the Child Princess of Padrivole Regency 9. They are instantly cast in the role of the aggressors. They transport the Royal Hope Hospital, where the murderer is hiding, to the Moon. Under Intergalactic Law, they have no jurisdiction on Earth but the Moon is considered neutral territory thus explaining this action. (They had previously violated this law (COMIC: *The Forgotten*) and

would later do so again (TV: *Prisoner of the Judoon* and *Fugitive of the Judoon*.) The Judoon troopers almost immediately draw their weapons. They start scanning everyone to check if they are human (while being pretty rough about it). When a medical student named Morgenstern attempts to communicate with them, their commander slams him against a wall to scan his language and his DNA. Later, when a terrified patient hits one of the troopers with a vase, doing no damage to its armour, the commander charges them with physical assault, assigns them a guilty

plea, judges them guilty, and executes them for their crime. Morgenstern, who has been trying to keep people calm and get them to comply with the Judoon, questions the commander's actions. His response was simply "justice is swift." The Doctor later states that if the Judoon find the hospital guilty of harbouring a fugitive, they will sentence it to execution (i.e. they will murder everyone inside). They end up discovering the murderer thanks to the actions of The Doctor. They immediately execute the murderer for its crime and proceed to leave the scene,

despite the fact that they are leaving the humans in peril. Later stories are consistent with this portrayal.

## Judoon Facts

The Judoon are known for their strict adherence to the law (despite their own transgressions noted) and their brutality in maintaining the law. An example of this brutality being their summary executions and use of banned and dangerous weapons. The Doctor refers to them as "interplanetary thugs" (TV: *Smith and Jones*), "dangerous police," and "trigger happy" (TV: *Fugitive of the Judoon*). Even in important missions, they obey local laws, including local traffic laws, examples being signs like "Authorised Personnel Only" and "Pay and Display" (TV: *Prisoner of the Judoon*). Their policy of strict adherence to order and the establishment even makes them despise any development of their own culture, with them ostracising those who go outside the norms (AUDIO: *Judoon In Chains*). We do learn some facts about Judoon outside of their police work. Their favourite sport used to be Nukeball, but is was banned to prevent the destruction of their population (PROSE: *The Coming of the Terraphiles*). They don't like opera (COMIC: *The Great Mordillo*) and, as I have noted, don't get poetry. They do not laugh but shake and make laughter-like noise when amused (AUDIO: *Judoon in Chains*. PROSE: *Judgement of the Judoon*). Most of the facts I have found fit within their image as a brutal and aggressive race with a stunted cultural growth. Yet despite their brutal nature, they still regularly come across as a little bit stupid and slightly silly and they are still may favourite aliens from the new series. 



# HEADING FORWARD, HEADLESSLY

## FUTURE POLICE – FROM A GERMAN PERSPECTIVE

*Tobias Reckermann*

**THE CONTOURS OF THE FUTURE** are measured by the past, aren't they? Science fiction is a lens through which to view alternatives. At present, we are living in the year 2020, which by the standards of my childhood is already the future. This childhood in the 1980s saw itself surrounded by wanted posters for members of the Red Army Fraction (RAF) and took place in a present of highly armed police forces. There was *dragnet search*, the ban on wearing face coverings at demonstrations, and officers carrying machine guns at traffic controls. This armament of a “strong state” called the Federal Republic of Germany and its police force continued even after the waning of leftist terrorist threats since the early 1990s, and it found its next culmination in the passing of the eavesdropping operation called “großer Lauschangriff” by the German Bundestag (1998). The state took a strong stand against radical forces.

**Then, in 2001:** Terrorism of a new international quality arose and, in the course of this, further empowerment of the law enforcement agencies in the collection of data took place – Big Data was on the way and cameras were installed on every street corner. Now, in 2020, well into the future, 1920 is already a century behind us. At the time of the great-grandfathers, who had just returned home from World War I, many of these same great-grandfathers found themselves on two opposing sides of a new front. Red navy sailors and workers had overthrown the emperor in 1919 and the republic had been proclaimed. Other members of the Prussian military organized themselves into Freikorps, replaced the police in many places, and coupéd against the republic. The security forces of the time, the soon-to-be-established Wehrmacht and the police forces as well as the Security Police (SiPo), were composed of no small number of militarists and proto-fascists from the very beginning. Society had missed the historic opportunity to obliterate the esprit de corps that had been handed down from the Wilhelmine Empire, thereby paving the systemic way for the Gestapo, extermination

camp and “Total War.”

**The contour of the past reads as follows:** Security and terror are sometimes one and the same thing.

**One hundred years later, in August 2020:** After an attempted storming of the Reichstag building by a crowd of so-called “Reichsbürger” and other right-wing radicals who were demonstrating against the government’s Corona measures, three police officers are invited to an appointment with Federal President Steinmeier. The awarding of medals for the defense of the Bundestag beckons them. Three policemen held out against a few hundred demonstrators. More were not on hand.

**If one summarizes the years before briefly with regard to the connection of right-wing radicalism and police in Germany, the following conclusions can be drawn:** Since about 2015, “Reichsbürger” who reject the constitution of the Federal Government and even consider the Federal Republic itself to be illegitimate have been an obvious problem. And there are “Reichsbürger” in the German police forces as well. The NSU 2.0 (known for its threatening letters to left-wing female politicians since 2018) draws its intel from Hessian police computers. Investigations against the NSU 1.0 (the right-wing extremist terrorist group whose actions claimed ten lives) had already been conducted negligently, if not carelessly, by the police, the “Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution” and the public prosecutor’s office. So far, those investigations have not provided any satisfactory explanation of the murders and their background. It was similarly the case with the far-right bomb attack on the Oktoberfest in Munich in 1980. In addition, the investigations into the NSU murders were accompanied by police action that can be described as racial profiling: according to the initial assessment of the investigating officers, the murders of Germans of Turkish origin and Turkish migrants in Germany were considered to be presumably motivated by the involvement of the victims and their families in the drug milieu. The trail led far astray, almost obstructing punishment. In 2020, the question of whether racial profiling was part of the practice of the





Photo by Noah Buscher

German police authorities was bluntly dismissed by Minister of the Interior Seehofer. What is forbidden is, of course, not part of police practice.

Three policemen prevented the storming of the Reichstag by right-wing radicals. What was described as a storm in a teacup by Gottfried Curio, the domestic policy spokesman of the right-wing populist party AFD, could easily have turned out to be a much greater embarrassment for the Federal Republic of Germany if only one of these special three officers had also been a “Reichsbürger.” And in this context, the recent uncovering of right-wing extremist networks in the elite unit of the Bundeswehr, the KSK, should not be forgotten.

**A symbol of the near future:** Democracy in a defensive struggle, highly equipped state organs with access to Big Data infiltrated by putschists, East German vigilantes keeping communities free of refugees, and (although prohibited) racial profiling is still a police practice.

**In the leftist daily newspaper TAZ, Hengameh Yaghoobifarah undertook a satirical foray into the future on June 15, 2020: Her title giving question:** “If the police are abolished, but capitalism is not: what happens then to all the people who are

with the police today?” Her answer, in the abridged form that made the rounds in Germany as a scandalous headline that almost brought the TAZ a complaint by the Minister of the Interior: “Spontaneously, I can only think of one suitable option: the garbage dump.”

In fact, society has long instrumentalized its police force as a kind of garbage disposal for social and political explosives. The authorities are understaffed, policemen are chronically overworked, the payment is mediocre, and in terms of an already thoroughly digitized present (even more in terms of a digital tomorrow and the day after tomorrow), the German police are far behind. But this is the present of our future. This is what it looks like. It is also unlikely that there will be any fundamental changes in the conditions. The police will continue to lag behind the present, and their personnel will continue to be drawn from a pool of willing individuals who have received little training in social interaction, violence prevention, and de-escalation. There is no sign of a willingness to change on the part of politicians.

By 2020, Germany is obviously far from being a police state. Rather, it appears that the police are an apparatus waiting

for a head to be put on it. Indeed, parliamentary policy currently seems somewhat headless. It seems helpless as to how to deal with the threat of right-wing extremism and with the future in general.

**Tomorrow will be determined by the answer to the following question:** Will democratic society be able to maintain the upper hand over its security organs, or will they become the instrument of a state that is thus transformed by infiltration from within and by a change in policy drifting to the far right from outside?

Or is this a question for the past?

**The question behind the question (the question about the day after tomorrow) is:** In what kind of state will we live? Depending on the answer, the image of the police of the future also varies. In a totalitarian system, police will probably be a de facto military organization that uses drone surveillance and Big Data for total screening of its citizens. If the state were to change into a form of corporate market economy, the police would have to transform into private security companies. If the state were to corrode itself further by its internal contradictions, there would be two obvious possibilities. In one world: vigilantes would take over the power of

the security authorities. In the other world (in which we dared to need less state, perhaps even none at all): police as an expression of domination and retention of power would ultimately become obsolete.

Well, all in all, science fiction is not just about what is likely, but what is conceivable. It is the many future look at what tomorrow could be, if given the chance. *CS*

**Tobias Reckermann**, born 1979 lives and writes in Darmstadt, Germany. He is the editor of *IF Magazine*, a periodical for applied speculation, and three *Nighttrain* anthologies, featuring translations of weird fiction. He works as a stoker for *Whitetrain/Nighttrain* ([www.whitetrain.de](http://www.whitetrain.de)). As a writer of speculative fiction, he concentrates on weird and dark fiction. His science fiction stories have frequently been published in the magazine *Nova Science-Fiction* and are collected in *Futur III* (*Whitetrain*, 2019). The story “*Der Unbekannte Planet*” has been nominated for the Deutsche Science Fiction Preis in 2019.

# THE (POLICE) MAN WHO SAVED MY LIFE AND WHAT CAME AFTERWARDS

Chris M. Barkley

**I HAVE NEVER MET THE** man who, in all probability, saved my life.

Some of you may have already recognized him from the photograph here. If so, cool. If not, stay tuned, all will be revealed.

But in order to do that, and tie into the theme of policing in science fiction, I must digress back to the time of my early youth, the late 1960s.

My fascination with policing started back then. Popular television series and films at the time had seen the last of the glory days of the western horse operas, which peaked with the success of *Wagon Train*, *Bonanza*, and *Gunsmoke* and were barely hanging on with *Alias*, *Smith and Jones*, and *Kung Fu*.

In their stead, the police shows were surging. A rebooted *Dragnet* (with Jack Webb), *Adam-12*, *Hawaii Five-O* (which the still used street term for cops was derived from), *McCloud* (a mild ripoff of a Clint Eastwood film, *Coogan's Bluff*). The Oscar winning success of 1971's *The French Connection* only accelerated the public's thirst for cop thrillers; *Fuzz*, *Dirty Harry*, *Badge 373*, *The Seven-Ups*, *The Taking of Pelham 123*, *Busting*, *Serpico*, and eventually, *The French Connection II*.

Being a young and impressionable black child, I was sucking up all of this cop propaganda. And having grown up in a middle class family in a mostly integrated neighborhood and going to a Catholic parochial school, I was most shielded from the struggles of peoples of color against the establishment and the police who



@Mark Coggins. Joseph Wambaugh at the 2010 LA Times Festival of Books.

**"Prejudice is an emotional commitment to ignorance." –Nathan Rutstein**

upheld the existing power structure. I was ripe for recruitment.

Furthermore, my parents NEVER gave me (or, to the best of my knowledge, my five other siblings) "THE TALK." Being good Catholic school kids, it was drilled into our heads that cops were our friends and we were to do exactly what they told us to do, NO ifs, and, or buts. Period.

During my freshman and sophomore years in high school, I seriously thought about joining the Cincinnati Police Department, which, I had heard on numerous occasions, was one of the best in the country.

This slowly ground to a halt during my junior and senior years. The first factor in that erosion of trust was my interest in history. During those years, I took a great interest in American and world history. At that time, the country was mired in the Watergate debacle and history, like today, was not only being made everyday, it was being broadcast.

This was also a time when revisionist history (the process of evaluating new evidence of events, facts, and the effects on present events) was just getting started.

Delving into some of these studies, I found a treasure trove of hidden history; about Crispus Attucks, a free black stevedore who was brutally killed at the Boston Massacre in March of 1770, and is widely regarded as the first colonist killed in the American Revolution.

Ultimately, the deciding factor that began the gradual erosion of my trust in the police came in the form of a television show, *Police Story*. It was created by the aforementioned person who saved my life, one Joseph Aloysius Wambaugh, who

eventually became Grandmaster of the Mystery Writers of America.

Joseph Wambaugh, born in 1937 in East Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, was the son of a police officer. After graduating with an associates arts degree from a small California college in 1960, he joined the



Los Angeles Police Department. He served for fourteen years, rising in rank from patrol duty to detective sergeant. It was while he was achieving his Bachelor of Arts and Master of Arts degrees at California State University in the late 1960s that he found that he had a knack for writing.

He turned that gift, and his unique perspective as an active duty cop, into his huge 1971 bestselling novel, *The New Centurions*, which spent an astounding thirty-two weeks on the *New York Times* Best Sellers list. A plotless book, it followed the trials and travails of three rookie cops from the same 1960 graduating class from their first days on the streets to the Watts Riots of 1965.

*The New Centurions* was quickly optioned by Columbia Pictures and quickly adapted into a well regarded film the next year starring George C. Scott, Stacy Keach, and Jane Alexander.

More books followed: *The Blue Knight* (1972), the non-fictional *The Onion Field* (1973), and *The Choirboys* (1975), all best-sellers and each were eventually optioned for television or movies. Wambaugh was earning so much money (and notoriety) as an author that he retired from police work in 1974.

My path with Joseph Wambaugh crossed when he was hired by Columbia to help veteran producer David Gerber create *Police Story*, an anthology television series about police work.

*Police Story* was unusual because there were no fixed leads starring every week and the storylines leaned heavily into portraying the dramatic personal lives of cops. Literally, nothing was off limits; alcoholism, suicide, adultery, corruption, and the constant self doubt about themselves and the nature of their work.

Wambaugh was the lead

The veneer between being a law enforcement professional and the temptation of giving into your innermost fears or desires is a very thin blue line indeed.



Photo by HIRI KOYO

consultant and story editor, weeding out cliches and well worn tropes from the scripts, and providing story ideas from his own experiences on the job. And old colleagues, retired or on the job provided more than enough true life stories for adaptation.

Being a police show junkie back in those days, I instantly realized that this show was different from *Hawaii Five-O*, *Columbo*, *Kojak*, and *Starsky and Hutch*. *Police Story* made those programs look like the fantasy versions of police work they were.

After the show came on the air, I read Joseph Wambaugh's books, which only amplified what was being done on *Police Story* in showing how vulnerable and human cops could be.

There are individual episodes

that I can clearly recall from 46 years ago that totally put me off from becoming a police officer; the pilot, "Slow Boy" with the late Vic Morrow and Chuck Connors, "Robbery: 48 Hours" with Jackie Cooper, and the heartbreaking "Little Boy Lost" that featured a searing performance by the late Robert Forster.

By the time I went to college, I had changed my focus onto broadcasting and the visual arts. I had utterly convinced myself that I was not cut out to be a cop. I remember what Wambaugh himself had written about *Police Story* and the nature of the work; that yes, it was a physically dangerous job, but, more importantly, the job was emotionally dangerous. The veneer between being a law enforcement professional and the temptation of giving into your innermost fears

or desires is a very thin blue line indeed.

But, as much as I had learned about police work, I, as Black American, had a lot more to learn about the police because even though I had abandoned the idea of police work as a profession, I still lived with them on an everyday basis.

My problems with the police started once I dropped out of college in 1978. I was fully engaged in fandom by then, attending several science fiction conventions each month. Outside of the structured environs of academia, I was saddled with the real problems of adulthood, which included finding a full-time job, managing a checking account, buying groceries, getting around town, and saving to buy a car.

Since I was in the public more, I was subject to more scrutiny by suspicious white people and by the police.

Over the years, I have had the police called on me by white people, shadowed in stores, or stopped by the police, sometimes without rhyme or reason. I have been stopped while riding a bike, walking along the street, sitting at a bus stop, and (of course) riding by myself in a car.

To be sure, I don't claim to be a saint; I have been stopped for speeding more than a few times, made the mistake of making a turn too quickly at a stop sign, and driving a little too long on expired tags or without insurance. All of those were justifiable reasons for being stopped. But still, the many unwarranted stops were unnerving and, in a few cases, quite frightening.

In the 1970s, I was advised by several ophthalmologists and opticians that I was an excellent candidate for contact lenses. I rebuffed their efforts every time. By then, being six feet tall and closing in at 200 pounds, I was convinced that the ONLY reason I haven't been injured or



Eight  
minutes  
and forty-six  
seconds.



There are good and honest police officers. I have known and met a few of them.

shot by cops was because of my thick prescription lenses and my pedestrian looking frames. (So, thank YOU, Clark Kent.)

Being Black, I have learned over the decades to keep a watchful eye on my surroundings and keep an even lower profile while I am out in public.

Over the years, I wonder why are people, MAINLY white people AND cops, instantly judging me on my appearance and my skin color? Am I not an American citizen? Aren't my rights as such the equal of everyone else's. Where does all of this hate and distrust come from?

One of the things that *Police Story* touches on lightly, but you can see running in the background like computer screen wallpaper, is the so-called "thin blue line" or police culture. This credo among police officers calls upon the brotherhood/sisterhood permission to back them up, no matter what happens out on the streets, back alleys, in courts, and in the confines of the precinct.

Along with this code of silence comes the human failings of racism, sexism, homophobia, and all kinds of implicit bias that require special effort to overcome. All police officers are trained and taught to serve and protect, but the systemic problems that have been ingrained in generations of cops (the "us vs them" mentality) remains persistent

and entrenched in that thin blue line.

There are good and honest police officers. I have known and met a few of them. But, for the most part, the police on the local, state, and federal levels are basically looking for two things: your complete obedience to their orders and your total compliance to their wishes.

ANY deviation from either of these edicts will result in your detainment, assault, arrest, or more chillingly, your death.

For decades, Black people either obeyed or they died. Sometimes under mysterious circumstances. That was simply explained away as "resisting arrest," "they were an imminent threat," or "we thought they had a gun."

For decades, the police used union contracts and state laws as their "qualified immunity" to act – meaning that cops could not be successfully brought to account for their on-duty actions, if the deadly force was used and if the circumstances cited in the incident report (written by the cops themselves) were thought to be reasonable at the time. Now, paired with the peer pressure of the group (and the tacit approval of their police union) to have each others' backs in such situations, the layers of police self-protection have become nearly impervious.

*There is no question that the number of police killings of civilians in the*

*U.S. – who are disproportionately Black and other people of color – are the result of policies and practices that enable and even encourage police violence. Compared to police in other wealthy democracies, American police kill civilians at incredibly high rates.* –Alexi Jones and Wendy Sawyer, 5 June 2020 for "The Prison Policy Initiative."

On average, the police kill an estimated 930 to 1,240 people in the United States on an annual basis, depending on the source of the statistics. 1,016 have been killed in the past year alone, according to the *Washington Post's* Police Shooting Database. From May 26 to August 31, police in the U.S. killed 288 people according to the *Washington Post* website. A disproportionate number of them have been people of color.<sup>1</sup>

And for decades, they got away with it. That is, until the iPhone and Android were available.

*We are talking about race in this country more clearly and openly than we have almost ever in the history of this country. Racism is not getting worse, it's getting filmed.* –Actor Will Smith, *The Late Show with Stephen Colbert*, August 2, 2016.

The first iPhone, from Apple, went on sale on June 29, 2007. The first Android smartphone was on sale on September 23, 2008. A cross between *Star Trek's* communicator and a tricorder, these sophisticated devices were a science fiction fan's dream.

Once people were outfitted with the tools to record video, they became a bad cop's nightmare. The killing of innocent and unarmed men and women of color continued, but it did not go unnoticed. It got filmed.

Know their names:

Amadou Diallo

Manuel Loggins, Jr.

Ronald Madison

Kendra James  
Sean Bell  
Eric Garner  
Michael Brown  
Alton Sterling  
Philando Castile  
Jacob Blake  
Daniel Prude  
And countless others.

All dead at the hands of or in the custody of the police. Some deaths were caught on cameras. Some were not. There are many, many more names.

A reckoning was due. Some say, it was long overdue.

On May 25, 2020, Memorial Day, a Minneapolis man, George Floyd, was suspected of passing a counterfeit \$20 bill at a neighborhood convenience store. It was 8:00 p.m. The seventeen year old store clerk panicked and called 911. The police arrived and when Floyd became distressed at being detained, Officer Derek Chauvin forced him to the asphalt and held him down with his knee on his neck while three other officers watched: Tou Thao, James Alexander Kueng, and Thomas Kiernan Lane.

According to the *New York Times*, Floyd became unresponsive seventeen minutes after the first police car arrived.<sup>2</sup>

Eight minutes and forty-six seconds.

Floyd had no pulse and was non-responsive. He was pronounced dead at the Hennepin County Medical Center emergency room at 9:25 p.m. All of the officers were subsequently fired and charged with homicide.

In the aftermath of George Floyd's death, another incredibly tragic police killing came to light.

In the early morning hours of March 13, 2020, three Louisville, Kentucky Metro police officers,

<sup>1</sup> Fatal Force. *The Washington Post*, 2020, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/investigations/police-shootings-database/>. Accessed 19 September 2020.

<sup>2</sup> Hill, Evan and Ainara Tiefenthäler, Christiana Triebert, Drew Jordan, Haley Willis and Robin Stein. "How George Floyd was Killed in Police Custody," *New York Times*, 31 May 2020. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/05/31/us/george-floyd-investigation.html>. Accessed 19 September 2020.

I am uplifted by a few things; I know that I am not alone in this struggle. I know that my friends, in and out of fandom, have my back and I have theirs.

Jonathan Mattingly, Brett Hankison, and Myles Cosgrove, executed a “knock and announce” search warrant on the apartment residence of twenty-six year old Breonna Taylor, a paramedic for the city. The warrant named her as a prime suspect in a narcotics investigation. Upon their forced entry, Taylor’s boyfriend, Kenneth Walker, not hearing their announcement and fearing they were being robbed, opened fire on the officers, wounding one in the leg. The officers, none of whom were wearing body cameras, returned fire in the darkened bedroom, striking Taylor at least eight times. She died at the scene. Officer Hankison was subsequently fired by the city. The FBI, which had been investigating the case, has submitted their report to Kentucky’s Attorney General, Daniel Cameron on August 31, 2020 for further action. On September 15, the City of Louisville agreed to settle a civil wrongful death lawsuit with the Taylor family for \$12 million dollars.

According to a report from CNN, “As part of the settlement, the city agreed to establish a housing credit program as an incentive for officers to live in the areas they serve; use social workers to provide support on certain police runs; and require

commanders to review and approve search warrants before seeking judicial approval, among other changes.<sup>3</sup> “As part of the settlement, the city agreed to establish a housing credit program as an incentive for officers to live in the areas they serve; use social workers to provide support on certain police runs; and require commanders to review and approve search warrants before seeking judicial approval, among other changes.

“Justice for Breonna means that we will continue to save lives in her honor,” said Tamika Palmer, Taylor’s mother. “No amount of money accomplishes that, but the police reform measures that we were able to get passed as a part of this settlement mean so much more to my family, our community, and to Breonna’s legacy.”

Protests, demonstrations and rioting have been reported in nearly every major city in America. Portland, Oregon, in particular, has had well over 100 nights of protests, beatings, assaults, tear gassing and arrests.

Here’s the thing; in the rarefied air of science fiction fandom, I have seen or been involved with VERY few incidents that directly involved my race as a deciding factor. In more than 44 years in fandom, I can safely say that nearly all of

the people I have dealt with personally have treated me based on the content of my character and actions instead of my race.

There are still matters in fandom that, on the whole, we are still struggling with; sexism, verbal and physical assaults, and how we deal with our own troubled past.

Policing policies, the current state of political unrest, climate change and the inequities of culture, economics, race and class have all seemingly come crashing together in the year 2020.

Personally, I have felt a sinking feeling of despair as I witness one catastrophe after another with each passing each day. Looking back, I wonder how my own alternate history may have turned out if not for Joseph Wambaugh and *Police Story*. Images of people, characters, and ideas captured in print and in media have great power for shaping the future, including my own. How might my own future have played out without these influences to inform me and without fandom to embrace me?

I am uplifted by a few things; I know that I am not alone in this struggle. I know that my friends, in and out of fandom, have my back and I have theirs.

And now, America is standing

at the crossroads of an important election that will probably decide it’s destiny for the next several decades. Our country, which proudly boasts of a Bill of Rights and Constitution, has an wholly undeserved reputation of being ‘the Shining City on the Hill’. A close examination of our history has shown a propensity for white supremacy, rampant and unchecked capitalism, elitism for the upper classes, income inequality and anti-intellectualism.

But, over the decades, America has shown that it can overcome these tendencies and have made some marginal inroads towards becoming a better society; the civil right movement, marriage equality and a heightened awareness of the environmental challenges we face show some hope that we can become more just. But our policing problems remain one of our biggest dilemma.

I also know that the people who have suffered or died at the hands of policing authorities did not die in vain. When I see Americans, of all races and ages, marching together in solidarity for this cause, I feel that hope welling up within me. That people are paying attention and that with a little more effort, eventually, the reforms that are needed will slowly but surely take hold.

In the meantime, we must keep speaking, keep writing, keep marching and NEVER, EVER FORGET those who have fallen...

[Know Their Names](#). This column is dedicated to them. 

3 Morales, Mark and Eric Levensen, Elizabeth Joseph, and Christina Carrega. “Louisville agrees to pay Breonna Taylor’s family \$12 million and enact police reforms in historic settlement,” CNN. 15 September 2020. <https://www.cnn.com/2020/09/15/us/breonna-taylor-louisville-settlement/index.html>. Accessed 19 September 2020.





Nicole Givens Kurtz

**IN RAY BRADBURY'S *FAHRENHEIT 451***, firemen, who traditionally are known to put out fires, in fact have a professional job duty reversal in the future. They are charged with igniting fires, most notably books but also any form of creative arts. Bradbury's vision of a dystopian society that embraces safety for all, under the guise of relinquishing control of independent thought to the government, mirrors our current day with the fire fighters replaced by police. It is our modern police force that has reversed their job duties and invalidated their purpose of protecting and serving the general public. Instead, they act as a violent and oppressive arm of a totalitarian government. Dystopian science fiction has warned us of allowing the police to be utilized in this manner.

Bradbury states in *Fahrenheit 451*, "But you can't make people listen. They have to come round in their own time, wondering what happened and why the world blew up around them. It can't last." This is where we are in our current environment. Decades of softly spoken propaganda lulled most Americans into a falsehood around police brutality, until the taped beating of Rodney King in the early 1990s forced them to witness what couldn't be argued. The police aren't above the law. The rise of video camcorders documenting police brutality are reminiscent of the televised violence perpetrated on Civil Rights activists in the 1960s with dogs, water hoses, and police beatings—all for protesting the inequality of Jim Crow. In essence, the police turnabout in such futuristic settings are mere extensions of their past selves. It's telling that many science fiction authors have included the police as

members of oppressive governments in their dystopian settings.

So, the future is now. Science fiction has predicted many technological advancements in our modern day, but social aspects of those advances predicted by the humanities have been grossly ignored. For example, Octavia Butler and Philip Dick both discussed the rise of a Hitler-type ruler in the United States. Butler's *Parable of the Sower* and *Parable of the Talents* predicted the rise of Trumpism. Read more about that here. Dick's *The Man in the High Castle* illustrates a revised United States with a Hitler-type figure in charge. Both of these science fiction authors firmly place the police at the center of

enforcing the boots on necks mentality that our current police forces readily embrace.

It's disappointing. And deadly. It's not just the sadness that comes when you realize flying cars are still way out of reach, but the terror that runs along the spine when we realize that the future, as illustrated in dystopian science fiction, provides a bleak landscape. From *Children of Men*, to *The Hunger Games* to *1984* to *V for Vendetta*, the police are not

the good guys. They never rise to fulfill the "protect and serve" vision prescribed to them.

At least not for People of Color, Black folks, and the poor.

For the purpose of this essay, we'll use the Merriam-Webster definition of dehumanize, "to subject (someone, such as a prisoner) to conditions or treatment that are inhuman or degrading." Dehumanization has long been a cornerstone of dystopian science fiction novels. They warn of what happens when we lose empathy and start erasing people's humanity. The first line of erasure begins with the police. In many texts, they start by labeling those who are othered, most often as criminals or animals. For example, in

## Dehumanization has long been a cornerstone of dystopian science fiction novels.

Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451*, when the protagonist Guy Montag is discovered to have a book, he becomes the criminal in the eyes of the state and is pursued as such. The same is true for Winston in George Orwell's *1984*, Katniss in Suzanne Collins' *The Hunger Games*, and John in Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*. This even happens to Neo once he awakens in the film *The Matrix*.

Those futuristic stories could have been written today under the current administration. *The Washington Post* article, "Trump's most insulting—and violent—language is often reserved for immigrants," outlines the dehumanizing language used for immigrants and those who look like immigrants. For example, Trump said, "When Mexico sends its people, they're not sending their best. They're not sending you. They're not sending you. They're sending people that have lots of problems, and they're bringing those problems with us. They're bringing drugs. They're bringing crime. They're rapists. And some, I assume, are good people." These words repeated and amplified across social media, television, and radio, confirm those stereotypes and push the dehumanization of those of Mexican descent and People of Color.

Additionally, President Trump has encouraged the police to be rough with those they arrest. This came shortly after the public outcry over the police murder of another Black man. Trump said, "When you see these thugs being thrown into the back of a paddy wagon, you just see them thrown in, rough. I said, 'Please don't be

too nice.'" These dog whistles to police-approved violence have arrived from the highest position in the United States. It justifies the racists standing shoulder to shoulder in America's police forces.

In *The Hunger Games*, the novel particularly, less so in the movie, she predicted President Trump in her character President Snow.

"The colors are lovely, of course, but nothing says perfection like white."

—President Snow, *The Hunger Games*.

The double meaning of

by allowing them to starve, hence the reason why the title of the book is *The Hunger Games*. The districts that President Snow adores (those with a predominantly white populace) or who grow their own food, flourish. Those that do not, like District 12, District 11, are allowed to starve. This is why Katniss hunts illegally with Gale. Her talent and skill with a bow are born out of her *hunger* and need to feed her family. The police are responsible for enforcing the rules of the central

ensued. He withheld PPE supplies from the states he didn't like, to the point that governors had to use subterfuge to get supplies for their hospitals—in the middle of a global pandemic. Speaking of state governors, President Trump said, "If they don't treat you right, I don't call. I want them to be appreciative."

Appreciative? During a global pandemic that has ravaged over 220,000 Americans. President Trump, much like President Snow, is only interested in being

adored and *obeyed*. *The Hunger Games* are devised for Snow's pleasure. The young people, forced to fight for a chance to gain food for the district, are merely toys on an erected battlefield. What Katniss and Peeta do for the games shows their humanity by refusing to kill each other (spoiler), igniting a spark of resistance across the districts.

That resistance begins with a raised hand. Current events are eerily similar to *The Hunger Games* when a peace protest, a raising of a hand to signal a connection, erupts into a riot and beatings at the hands of the police. Violence ignited by those designated to "keep the peace."

How similar is this scene to one of a protestor raising a closed fist in honor of Black Power or Black Lives Matter—a scene that has resulted in being beaten or shot or grossly injured at the behest of those same police who have sworn to protect their rights? The future for policing is now. The science fiction dystopian vision has arrived, and it brings with it the bloody, deadly, and sinister aspects we once thought were too outlandish and too far-fetched.



Snow's words, elevating white over other colors, solidifies his place as a racist villain who rules a nation. The dehumanization of Black people and the poor are the crux for how the police are able to act as a state-sanctioned death group. Hence, how science fiction dystopias center the police as the oppressors. In *Brave New World*, people are reduced to their appointed "colors," with brown being the absolute bottom of the rung.

In *The Hunger Games*, The Capitol punishes those districts

government, The Capitol. This connection to the current "Capitol," located behind barbed wire, walls and guards, only reinforces that the future depicted in *The Hunger Games* is here. The games are an extension of President Snow's whims and petty practices.

That isn't science fiction.

That is now.

For example, President Trump sent armed, hired troops to Seattle to enforce his will—the suppression of protests and the rioting that



When I was about six, my momma taught me about the police and how to not trust them to not kill us.

“It’ll never happen here.”

But it did.

And it does.

Every. Day.

Particularly for Black people.

“There was always a minority afraid of something, and a great majority afraid of the dark, afraid of the future, afraid of the past, afraid of the present, afraid of themselves and shadows of themselves”—Ray Bradbury, *Fahrenheit 451: A Novel*

It’s fear that drives violence. Yoda of *Star Wars* warned about allowing fear to gain control.

“Fear is the path to the dark side. Fear leads to anger. Anger leads to hate. Hate leads to suffering.” — Yoda, *The Phantom Menace*

And it’s fear that drives the police force to murder Black and Brown people under the guise of “fearing for their lives.” It’s such a common statement now that we can fill in the blanks

for the police who have murdered another Black person. The justifications for violence and murder are rooted in the fear of Black people, but more importantly in the dehumanization of Black people.

When Katniss and Peeta demonstrated an emotional human connection — a connection which translated into solidarity to protest the social norms of the games, refusing to kill each other — they created a spark that ignited protests across the districts in *The Hunger Games*. That human connection, that spark, is mirrored in the killing of George Floyd. When George Floyd called out for his mother, his *deceased* momma, while being murdered by police, he demonstrated his humanity in a way that we could all


connect. Here was someone’s *son*. When non-Black people spoke about their outrage, this point comes up often—he cried out for his mother. It resonated vividly for people. It centered George Floyd’s humanity, pulling back the layers of propaganda and excuses of “he deserved it” and “he should’ve complied” to reveal a human being’s longing, hurting, *dying*, wish for his momma.

For Black Americans the police have never been the good guys. When I was about six, my momma taught me about the police and how to not trust them to not kill us. This lesson was from the early 1980s. Even then, we knew as a people, as a collective culture that the police meant death, incarceration [whether you were innocent or not], and lifelong injuries.

Those images of Andy Griffith and Norman Rockwell cops were for white people, and we knew it. Our police were more *In the Heat of the Night*.

So, as Rodney King pleaded for us to “just get along,” many Black people sucked our teeth. We understood, what now seems so common in 2020, that “getting along” can’t be one-sided. You can’t get along with those who don’t see you as human.

The dystopian “future” presented in so many science fiction stories, have arrived.

The future is now, and it’s killing us. 



# THE POST-WATCHMEN WORLD

‘I RATHER THINK THE TIME HAS COME FOR PUTTING CERTAIN THINGS TO ORDER.’

—V FOR VENDETTA

Flavio Pessanha

## Introduction

The following article presupposes that the reader will have previous knowledge on *Watchmen*, as it is an analysis of Alan Moore’s premises on heroes’, in particular superheroes’, interference in the world, and its possible consequences past the implementation of Ozymandias’s plan in 1985.

The article is delimited to the aspect of the interference of superheroes in the world and its political unfolding, which Alan Moore frequently treats as a nefarious presence within his narratives in the same way that he considers the genre itself a cultural catastrophe by how it’s treated by the modern industry.<sup>1</sup>

The first part of this article presents the problem of the existence of superheroes in the narrative of *Watchmen* and its relation to the omnipresence of Juvenal’s aphorism in the novel. The second part is a reading of Ozymandias’s proposed solution and the role of the reader. The third part develops a brief, systematic analysis of the works by Alan Moore as a possible continuity of the inconclusive end of *Watchmen*.

## But it’s too late, always has been, always will be too late

Originally published in twelve monthly issues between 1986 and 1987,<sup>2</sup> *Watchmen* is a novel set in 1985 New York City, in a parallel world that has suffered progressive modifications as a result of the 1938 advent of ‘costumed heroes’—average people who, after reading Action Comics #1, decided to dress up in funny costumes

in order to roam the night in search for criminals to beat up. Another advent that shaped this alt-year of 1985 was the creation of Dr. Manhattan, a scientist whose lab accident results in his becoming a real-life super powerful entity. The existence of costumed heroes and Dr. Manhattan makes this a world in which people don’t care much for superhero comics, the activity of self-titled superheroes is outlawed in what is called the Keene Act, and the United States has won the Vietnam War thanks to Dr. Manhattan’s stroll in Saigon, summoned by American President Richard Nixon. From this alt-historical point onwards, the use of Dr. Manhattan, the entity with ‘divine’ powers, by the USA as a deterrent agent becomes ostensive, tilting geopolitical order, increasing existing tensions and ultimately propelling an arms race. This butterfly effect sets the Doomsday Clock to midnight and drives the world to the brink of WW3, causing a generalised fear of ‘nuclear war inevitability’ (Chapter XI, page 19, panel 5). This risk is anticipated in 1966, in the unsuccessful launch of the group of costumed vigilantes called Crimebusters, when the vigilante Comedian spoils the fun with his announcement that ‘in thirty years the nukes are gonna be flyin’ like maybugs’ (II, 11, 4) and that the existence of heroes does not solve anything. The imminence of this hecatomb predicted by Comedian leads vigilante Ozymandias to hatch his daring world-pacification plan.

*Watchmen* is, essentially, a study on the human and geopolitical consequences stemmed from the activity of heroes. Alan Moore has affirmed that his ‘intention was to show how superheroes could deform the world just by being there (...)’.<sup>3</sup> Far from giving a nazi-fascist angle to his heroes,<sup>4</sup> Moore has instead focused on

1 ‘To my mind, this embracing of what were unambiguously children’s characters at their mid-20th century inception seems to indicate a retreat from the admittedly overwhelming complexities of modern existence. It looks to me very much like a significant section of the public, having given up on attempting to understand the reality they are actually living in, have instead reasoned that they might at least be able to comprehend the sprawling, meaningless, but at-least-still-finite ‘universes’ presented by DC or Marvel Comics. I would also observe that it is, potentially, culturally catastrophic to have the ephemera of a previous century squatting possessively on the cultural stage and refusing to allow this surely unprecedented era to develop a culture of its own, relevant and sufficient to its times.’ From <https://slovobooks.wordpress.com/2014/01/09/last-alan-moore-interview/>

2 Published by DC Comics with art by Dave Gibbons and colours by John Higgins.

3 <http://www.tcj.com/a-portal-to-another-dimension-alan-moore-dave-gibbons-and-neil-gaiman/>

4 Idem.



vigilance and vigilantes.

The epilogue *Quis custodiet ipsos custodes*,<sup>5</sup> a quote from Greek philosopher Juvenal, echoes throughout the whole graphic novel diegetically, particularly in the graffiti ‘Who Watches the Watchmen?’ and represents one of the main issues that rises from the insertion of fantastic elements typical in the genre superhero fiction into the real world. In strict terms, the question could be put in different words: Who has the power to watch entities that are so powerful that their mere existence has the power to deform the world?

*Watchmen* does not delegate vigilante tasks exclusively to superheroes—throughout the entire narrative several characters are in positions that are analogous to that of watchers: policemen, *knot tops*, religious folks, a newspaper vendor, whole countries. Yet, the answer to Juvenal’s question may lie sooner, more precisely in page one. The zoom out spread along seven panels of the very first page grants the reader a view over the city and over the policeman who is watching over the death scene of Edward Blake. This might be interpreted as a metalinguistic way of saying that the final instance of vigilance over the superhero comic genre is the reader.

The watchman role of the reader is reinforced with the transferral to him of another vigilance job. The reader is also a newswatcher, analysing how the press, TV and mainly print paper, is covering the political panorama of that world that has been so affected by the existence of costumed heroes and Dr. Manhattan. This is in a peripheral storyline where the

## Who has the power to watch entities that are so powerful that their mere existence has the power to deform the world?

streets of New York City work as a *palimpsest* that is frequently bringing information on events that are connected to secondary characters, technologies, political events, and the Cold War. The very frequency with which these snippets of information are updated and rewritten comes to further strengthen the newswatcher role of the reader.

Virtually without redundancies, the newspaper headlines are details that are discreetly present in the panels, delivering the reader the freshest news in organic form and generally replacing captions, which are absent in *Watchmen*. The graffiti on the walls of the city represent an even more literal form of *palimpsest*.

### I leave it entirely in your hands

In the end, Ozymandias does give us a pacified world. He achieves world peace by secretly teleporting to New York City a giant cephalopod that has been genetically engineered from the brains of a psychic. This cephalopod kills half of the city’s population and drives mad some of the survivors. The perplexity of Earthlings who believe that the planet is under

an alien attack, results in a political pact for pacification that mirrors a speech made by Ronald Reagan (a speech that incidentally would never happen in this parallel world created by Moore) in which he states, “I occasionally think how quickly our differences worldwide would vanish if we were facing an alien threat from outside this world.”<sup>6</sup>

The pacification, however, happens under the *clausula rebus sic stantibus*. Ozymandias’s plan is sustained by a hoax that, if revealed, would cost world peace and a destruction worse than the one previously predicted. Dr. Manhattan, Nite Owl, and Silk Spectre become unwilling accomplices just by remaining silent. Refusing to

compromise, Rorschach ends up literally disintegrated. But a copy of his diary has already been sent to the tabloid *New Frontiersman*. The graphic novel finishes with the image of an editorial assistant<sup>7</sup> facing the diary that can turn Ozymandias’s feat into something ephemeral and his editor delegating to him the responsibility of writing a two-page column. The editor’s words, “I leave it entirely in your hands,” calls upon the reader to participate in the destiny of the world, and this is also a symmetrical simulacrum of the first page where the reader is the answer to Juvenal’s aphorism.

Although “breaking the fourth wall” may not be an invitation for the reader to simply flip a coin and decide the destiny, it is instead a summoning for him to investigate future events.

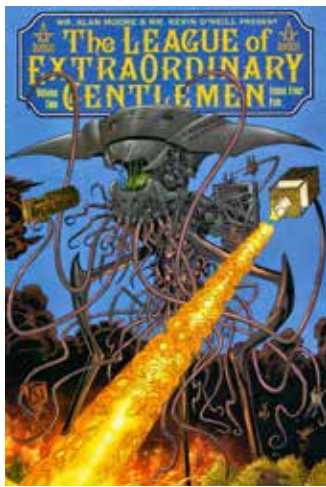
In a 1986 interview Moore said, “The significance of the first panel of book one of *The Watchmen*, the smiley badge in the gutter with blood over one eye, will be apparent after you’ve read that issue, but the full significance of that panel will not be wholly apparent until after you’ve read the last panel of book twelve. When you’ve read the last panel of the 12th



5 ‘Satire VI’, lines 347–348.

6 42d Session of the United Nations General Assembly in New York, September 21, 1987 - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bfS7FrN5aNQ>

7 Described by Alan Moore as ‘the most low-life, worthless, nerdy sort of character in the entire book who finally has the fate of the world resting in his pudging fingers.’ From ‘Comics Interview #65’ (1988), pg. 7.



book you'll want to go back and start again."<sup>8</sup>

There are a few ostensive clues that lead the reader to peak into the future of this parallel world. In the first instance, Veidt aims to establish a utopia, Dr. Manhattan is leaving the galaxy, Robert Redford is considering running for President in 1988 and the USA are going through some changes—new perfume ranges, new tendencies in comics. Not even Dr. Manhattan can catch a glimpse of the future of the world past 1985: Ozymandias's plan included tachyon interference from Antarctica generators and orbiting satellites that turned everything unpredictable for the blue god, thwarting his ability to know everything, including the execution of the blood-shedding pacification plan. There are also some ambiguous symbolic elements, like the poster for Tarkovsky

films that are showing in the New Utopia cinema, *The Sacrifice* and *Nostalgia*—both films are about the efforts from individuals to stop WW3 from happening. There is a dream Ozymandias has in which he is swimming towards something hideous—a probable allusion to the comic 'Tales of the Black Freighter'—and, of course, Dr. Manhattan's ultimate statement: "Nothing ends, Adrian. Nothing ever ends."

The alternative to this apparent *cul-de-sac* for the reader of what the post-*Watchmen* world would be is to take into consideration the only other major book by Alan Moore that tackles the theme WW3: *V for*



*Vendetta*. Only *V for Vendetta* is capable of offering an authentic interpretation<sup>9</sup> that explores the consequences of humanity's failure to prevent a nuclear holocaust.

### I give up on the puzzles. I just want to turn the page upside down and read the answers

A (deliberate or not) transtextuality<sup>10</sup> between *Watchmen* and *V for Vendetta* springs to mind when Alan Moore's body of work is seen as a whole. In 1985, when *Watchmen* was being gestated and *V for Vendetta* remained in a hiatus,<sup>11</sup> Moore affirmed in an interview, "it's only when you can see a bigger picture emerging that the connections become visible."<sup>12</sup> From the dawn of his professional career, his books frequently turned out to be part of an ampler amalgamation. *The Stars My Degradation* presented Roscoe Moscow, Maxwell the Magic Cat, St Pancras Panda, and a Warpsmith a relevant role in *Miracleman* (Marvelman). And *V for Vendetta*, according to a chronology set by Alan Moore and Steve Moore,<sup>13</sup> was supposed to be an alternative reality within the *Miracleman* universe—to the extent that Fate, the computer, exerts an important role in the far future of *Miracleman* and carries on existing even after the saga of Dempster Dingbunger in *The Stars My Degradation* and Axel Pressbutton—but the editorial separation of the two franchises probably hampered the chances *Miracleman* and *V for Vendetta* had of sharing the same chronology;

however, it did not stop Moore's efforts to establish a literary unification.

In 1982, Alan Moore revamps *Miracleman* (Marvelman), a hero who had spent 20 years unpublished following the bankruptcy of his



publisher L. Miller & Son, Ltd. Moore recontextualized the characters, granting the story radical changes, making it adult and more modern, but without contradicting or ignoring the stories written by Mick Anglo in the 1950s and the 1960s; instead, with the use of framing devices, Moore validates Anglo's storylines as canon.<sup>14</sup> Captain Britain brings bold mentions to *Miracleman*—we are shown his grave and his death—and to Captain Airstrip One, who got a solo story in 1986 (not written for Marvel, but instead for a fanzine), and with it Moore introduces the concept of an

8 From 'Amazing Heroes #97' (15 June 1986).

9 'In the civil law, authentic interpretation of laws is that given by the legislator himself'. From (*Black's Law Dictionary*) <https://thelawdictionary.org/interpretation/>

10 Transtextuality (textual transcendence of the text) is defined by Gérard Genette as "all that sets the text in a relationship, whether obvious or concealed, with other texts." From 'Palimpsests, Literature in the Second Degree' (1997).

11 *V for Vendetta* first came out between 1982 and 1985 in the UK comic anthology *Warrior* magazine. Art by David Lloyd.

12 'Sophisticated Scriptwriting Part Three' - interview by Paul from *Arken Sword* #13/14. (May 1985).

13 'Kimota! The Miracleman Companion'. By George Khoury (September 2001).

14 'In May 1984, between issues #18 and #19, Quality Communications published "Marvelman Special #1," whose cover material read, Back in Their Own Title—After 20 Years—The Mightiest Family in the Universe! The contents consisted of four old *Marvelman* stories, reprinted from the Miller issues, and all attributed to Mick Anglo as writer, and to either Don Lawrence or Roy Parker as artists, with a small copyright declaration beside each story saying © Mick Anglo. As well as the four *Marvelman* stories, there was a Big Ben story called *Big Ben Versus King Arthur*, which is attributed to Edgar Henry as writer—actually Steve Moore under another pseudonym—and Ian Gibson as artist. This piece had originally been produced in 1977 for Skinn's abortive *British Super-Heroes* magazine, created for Thorpe & Porter's Williams publishing division, which never saw the light of day. The whole magazine is wrapped up inside four pages of framing device, written by Alan Moore and drawn by Alan Davis, tying it into the *Marvelman* strip's current continuity.' From 'Poisoned Chalice: The Extremely Long and Incredibly Complex Story of *Marvelman* (and *Miracleman*)' by Pádraig Ó Méalóid (2018, pg. 120). URL: <https://www.comicsbeat.com/poisoned-chalice-part-7-a-warrior-stumbles/>



extensive multiverse formed by hundreds of Planet Earths. One of these Earths is called Earth-616 (an idea that is usually credited to writer Dave Thorpe), and that's where most of Marvel's comics are set. In theory, the concept of numerous parallel worlds allows for the absorption of any narrative.

In 'Supreme' and 'Judgement Day', Alan Moore develops three concepts that reinforce the capacity of neutralising incom-

space ... The landmasses that might exist in this mind space would be composed entirely of ideas, of concepts, that instead of continents and islands you might have large belief systems, philosophies (...).<sup>15</sup>

Providence is an ingenious process of reverse engineering in which Moore admits, "trying to come up with a form of fiction that can address Lovecraft's writings, his philosophy, and all the other aspects

'The streets are extended gutters and the gutters are full of blood and when the drains finally scab over, all the vermin will drown.'

—Rorschach's Journal. *Watchmen*

patibilities and of aggregating other narratives: a Limbo that operates like a dimension to where characters and worlds that suffer revisions go, solving the editorial deadlocks of characters "who'd been displaced in the unfathomable periodic changes in space-time;" a book created by Hermes at the beginnings of Earth contains a register of all of the Universe's histories, but the one who gets this book gains the power to alter its text to change either past or future or both; and the notion of *idea space* "in which mental events can be said to occur; an idea space which is perhaps universal. Our individual consciousnesses have access to this vast universal space, just as we have individual houses, but the street outside the front door belongs to everybody. It's almost as if ideas are pre-existing forms within this

of the man and his world"<sup>16</sup> and "attempting to connect the disparate characters and concepts of the original stories in a manner that is more coherent and compelling than the standard stylings of the 'Cthulhu mythos', and is hopefully far closer to the kind of connectivity that HPL himself might have envisaged."<sup>17</sup> Providence builds a narrative that unifies Lovecraft's stories and houses this restructured mythos in the historical context of America: "to marry Lovecraft's history with a mosaic of his fictions, setting the man and his monsters in a persuasively real America during the pivotal year of 1919: before prohibition and *Weird Tales*, before votes for women or the marriage to Sonia, before the Boston Police Strike and Cthulhu."<sup>18</sup> And there is the culmination of this process which is perhaps Alan Moore's

most elaborated transtextual effort, *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen*, a work produced along twenty years and which is probably the one that brings comics closer to a unified theory of literature. The League operates a dense hypertext,<sup>19</sup> an ample crossover of literature, poems, films, and mythologies, and that aggregates stories that range from the beginnings of times to the end of the world.

*V for Vendetta* and *Watchmen* are narratives whose environments are separated by a temporal lapse of twelve years and by geographical differences, but that share a common theme, World War 3—and they are the two works by Alan Moore that deal with the subject of this conflict. Some events that take place toward the end of *Watchmen* also correspond with some events that take place at the beginning of *V for Vendetta*. By and large, the two novels do not present any incompatibilities that would make it unfeasible for them to be considered a continuity of the same chronology. The supposition that *V for Vendetta* is the future of the post-*Watchmen* world implies two assumptions: the seemingly successful world peace plan orchestrated by Ozymandias did not last more than three years and Richard Nixon did not finish his fifth mandate as President of the USA.

While *Watchmen* deals with the imminence of a WW3 in 1985 under the perspective of New York City, *V for Vendetta* is set in a 1997 London that survived a catastrophic nuclear war that took place in 1988. The centre stage of the 1985 conflict is the Russian invasion of Afghanistan that drove the US Forces to

DEFCON 2—after the teleportation of Ozymandias's monster to Manhattan, the Russians decided to withdraw its troops, allowing for the process of pacification and union in the face of a supposed alien threat. The 1988 conflict described in *V for Vendetta* takes place after the Russian occupation of Poland; this was followed by an American retaliation that started a nuclear conflict that, albeit brief, had drastic consequences for the world.

The second assumption regards the American presidential succession. In *Watchmen*'s time line, Nixon has been elected for a mandate that expires in January 1989 and sits of the presidential chair in 1985, but *V for Vendetta* mentions that it was President Edward Kennedy who determined the retaliating bombarding that resulted in the 1988 holocaust. This means that some sort of recall process at federal level took place in this alternative world (*Watchmen* has at least two legislative alterations already: the amendment that allows for indefinite re-elections and the Keene Act). So, the most probable case scenario was that at some point between the years of 1986 and 1988 Edward Kennedy became president after a recall referendum.

Even if the reader considers these assumptions somewhat insurmountable, in its own ways, the post-WW3 United Kingdom depicted in *V for Vendetta* is a symbolic, and perhaps even optimistic, reading of the unfolding that follow a nuclear holocaust—its environmental, political and social consequences. Moore grants the book an allegorical interpretation of something that could

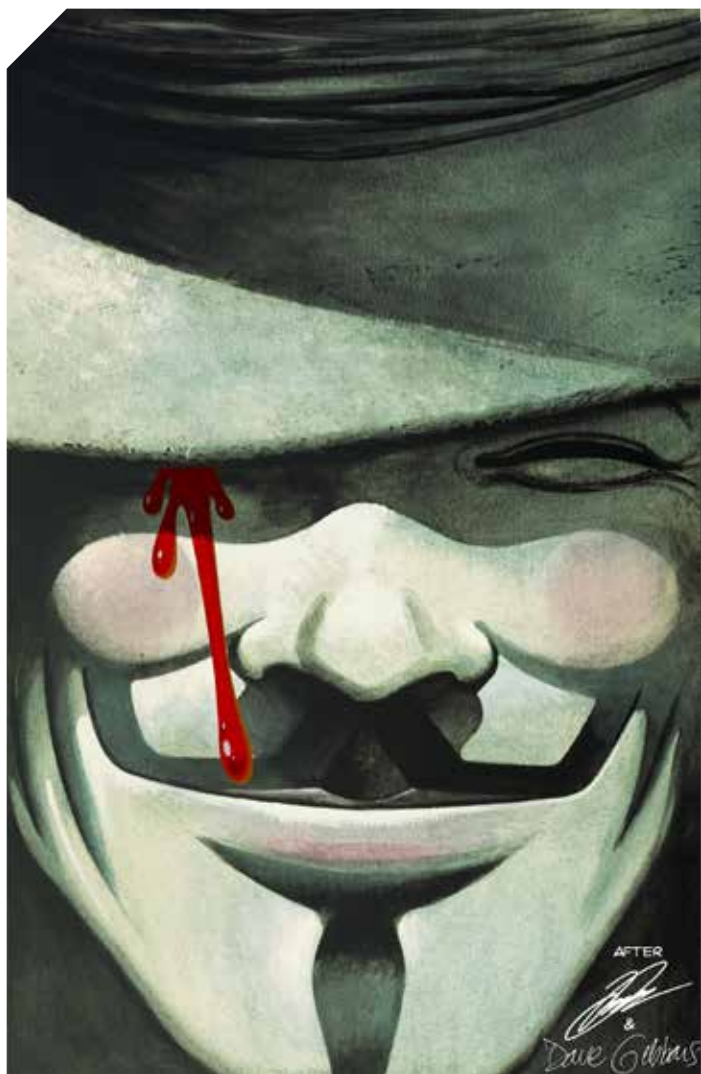
15 Documentary 'Mindscape of Alan Moore', direct by Dez Vylenz (2003).

16 <https://bleedingcool.com/comics/recent-updates/alan-moore-heralds-providence-time-go-reappraisal-lovecraft/>

17 <https://www.previewsworld.com/Article/161192-Alan-Moore-Talks-About-Providence>

18 Idem.

19 'By hypertextuality I mean any relationship uniting a text B (which I shall call the hypertext) to an earlier text A (I shall, of course, call it the hypotext)' From 'Palimpsests, Literature in the Second Degree' (1997, pg. 5).




have happened to a real world: "It was never meant to be a serious, literal prediction. It was meant to be an atmospheric, emotional and political prediction of what our future might have for us. At the same time, it is an examination of the things that our society has in it today, but dressed up in more flamboyant and dramatic forms, so that the

point could be made more accessible to the audience that I was dealing with."<sup>20</sup> The UK is spared from this WW3 because it has gotten rid of the nuclear weapons and the American missiles after the Labour Party ascension to power,<sup>21</sup> but is not altogether spared of all consequences that unraveled. The rest of Europe and Africa are

decimated,<sup>22</sup> weather is affected, sky becomes yellow-and-black. The Thames barrier bursts, London is devastated, and the countryside has crops destroyed by the grim weather. The years that follow bring drastic sanitary and political consequences, such as the flooding of the sewage system, food shortage, sickness, riots, proliferation of street gangs and guns, and the lack of a government. Only in 1992 do things seem to be getting back to control, only to be later consolidated as a state of exception laden with extralegal rules. Fascist groups and right-wingers get together with some large corporations and found a political party called Norsefire, which gets hold of political control. This new government arrests people — blacks, Pakistanis, homosexuals, radicals, and people associated with socialists. Concentration camps, denominated resettlement camps, are created and inside them chemical and genetic experiments are undertaken on humans. Compulsory work in factories, food rationing, quarantine in cities, and frequent police operations are officially treated as fight against terror. The Parliament's legislative authority is emptied and Zara, who turned sixteen in 1997, sits on the royal throne.

Even though *V for Vendetta* is not officially a *Watchmen* sequel, the graphic novel ruminates over common issues, deepens some concepts and fears that exist in a pre-WW3 America,

and matches the criticism of heroes. As Alan Moore describes: "I think my main point, probably in all of my work, is that I don't believe in heroes. I don't believe in them as separate beings to anybody else. The idea of a hero as a man in a white hat who has all the answers is a dangerous fallacy that leads directly to people like Oliver North. It's the idea that someone knows better than us what is right for us, somebody has decided to take into their hands things that will affect the lives and well-being of ordinary people. That goes for most of the characters in *Watchmen* and *V for Vendetta*."<sup>23</sup>

The role of the reader is not limited to filling events between the panels of a comic,<sup>24</sup> but also in leaping over wider gutters:<sup>25</sup> the gutters that exist between one book and another. This transtextuality ends up creating a complementarity that makes *V for Vendetta* probably the most, or perhaps only, legitimate *Watchmen* sequel. 

20 'M for Moore Part One' - interview by Daniel Dickholtz (Comics Scene #4, Volume 3, series #15 - July 1988).

21 'What I did first was to sit down and work out the entire world, all the stuff that I'm never going to use in the strip, that you never need to know, but I've got to know it - you've got to have that whole world in your head so that you can get the texture of it. So I started working out this world from the premise that Margaret Thatcher was going to lose the 1982 elections.' Garry Leach and Alan Moore - Interview conducted at the 1983 Cymrucon by David Roach, Andrew Jones, Simon Jowett and Greg Hill (Hellfire No. 2).

22 The original proposal that resulted in *V for Vendetta* was called *Ace of Shades* and was partially published in *Warrior Magazine* No. 17: 'Russia is in a state of almost constant insurrection and revolt from within, with the K.G.B and the Politburo struggling against massive and ferocious resistance from the provinces. America survives as a sort of feudal system with the police states of the farm belt feuding with the mafia-owned 'free' states and the decadent but wealthy City-states of the East coast. The Middle East is gone, reclaimed by the now slightly-radioactive desert. Much of Africa is gone. Europe is gone. China, the real winners of world war III, begin a bright new age of prosperity and free enterprise with a thin concessionary veneer of socialism. England, all but forgotten, survives after a fashion.'

23 'M for Moore Part One' - interview by Daniel Dickholtz (Comics Scene #4, Volume 3, series #15 - July 1988).

24 'The reader may fill in the intervening events from experience.' From 'Comics and Sequential Art'. Will Eisner (2008, pg. 39).

25 'Within these panels, we can only convey information visually. But between panels, none of our senses are required at all. Which is why all of our senses are engaged.' From 'Understanding Comics'. Scott McCloud (1993, pg. 89).





# THE USA PD: BEHIND THE MASKS

## POLICE IN WATCHMEN THE TV SERIES

*Helena Nash*

**IT TOOK ME A WHILE** to get around to watching *Watchmen*. I could cite the standard purist's response that I feared for the ruination of Alan Moore's perfectly complete 12-issue comics series from the 1980s, but the truth is simply that it was only available in the UK on Sky Atlantic, and I couldn't face shelling out for yet another media platform just to watch those 9 episodes. Oh sure, I could've gone round to my friend's house to watch it, but my allergic reactions to being in the presence of his cocker spaniel has frequently verged on the anaphylactic. So, I bided my time until *Watchmen* inevitably appeared on Netflix or Amazon Prime. And so it was, in August 2020 and in the depths of lockdown, I watched the whole thing over the course of a week.

This is the superhero's secret identity concept applied systemically to a formal organisation, and it's a fascinating idea.

Now, I could go into a lengthy and engrossing discussion on what I thought of the series as a whole, whether it worked as a faithful sequel, a bold reimagining or a modern reframing. Whether it worked as a concept in its own right or whether it should even have been a *Watchmen* story at all. I could talk about viewing the series in a Black Lives Matter context, or compare & contrast the strong female characters. But I'm not going to, because a) this is the Future of Policing issue, and b) I've got to keep something back for JP's *Watchmen* issue.

So, Policing in *Watchmen*. Let's start with the police in the original comic, shall we? To be honest, the cops are very much on the periphery of the story. Sure, the first Nite Owl was a New York

patrolman, but I never got much sense of him being police other than it being a conveniently classic 'day job' for a golden age hero. Then there's the police strike of 1977, in which police officers across America, apparently threatened by the presence of costumed adventurers, refuse to work which prompts riots until the Keene Act bans masked crime fighters from operating without an official government license.

.....

**Author's note:** See, that always bugged me. The police strike, I mean. As far as we know, the active crimefighter population in 1977 consisted of four non-powered individuals (Comedian, Nite Owl, Rorschach, and Silk Spectre) and one aloof superhuman (Dr Manhattan). And of those, I got the impression that Nite Owl's and Rorschach's activities were very much confined to the New York area. I just can't see police departments across the country getting that concerned about a tidal wave (my words) of five heroes making regular officers redundant. I don't know. Maybe the implication was that Dr Manhattan was going to wave his hand and transport all muggers to the Moon. Or maybe, though they are never seen or mentioned, there actually were many other masked heroes across the country, inspired by the main heroes' exploits. I think that last theory would make more sense, much like in the second series of the comic *Kick-Ass*.

.....

The only police that get any real screen time in the comic are the nameless officers who pile into Moloch's apartment block to arrest Rorschach (getting variously set on fire, impaled, and beaten in the attempt), and NYPD Detectives Bourquin and Fine who are assigned the case of the Comedian's murder. Bourquin and Fine are a couple of regular working stiffs; they're not especially observant detectives, they're not particularly noble, but they do their jobs reasonably well, chase after a few suspects and then unfortunately die along with most everyone else in New York. So endeth the police

in the comics. But it was never about them anyway.

*Watchmen* the TV show is a different kettle of squid altogether though. The police are front and centre, both as individual characters driving the plot and as a supporting cast of men and women whose profession has been utterly changed by events in the show's history. In the first episode, "It's Summer and We're Running Out of Ice," we are introduced to a bundle of new concepts to wrap our heads around. The regular uniformed police wear bright yellow face masks covering everything below the eyes (in an oddly prophetic parallel to the real-world face masks adopted by many during the COVID pandemic). They require radio clearance from central command before their firearms can be unlocked and deployed. And there's a bunch of actual costumed characters officially embedded in the police department, serving as free-roaming 'super cop' detectives and assault squad members. Let's look at each of these elements in turn.

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**Author's note:** As a side-note, it's not clear at first if these developments in policing are nationwide or not. In the show, we really only see the Tulsa police department, and the formative events of the 'White Night' are described as a local outrage rather than a statewide attack, let alone spread across America. So, much as in the original comics, our view on the world of *Watchmen* is really just confined to one city, albeit with detours to Saigon, Antarctica, and outer space. Which is a shame, I think. I'd like to know a little more about the rest of the country. Were their police

## What would it be like to go to work and not let your neighbours know that you're a cop?

not attacked by the Seventh Cavalry? Do their police also go masked? Are there masked super cops in Los Angeles? Chicago? Miami?

.....  
The police in *Watchmen* are masked and anonymous. This is a result of a coordinated terrorist attack some years earlier when the Klan-like, Rorschach-masked Seventh Cavalry murdered forty Tulsa police officers in their homes. Consequently, those police who survived, or who later signed up, are required by law to keep their identities as officers secret from the public, friends, neighbours, and even children. We see cover stories established for injuries sustained by police characters in the line of duty, so that their 'other lives' as cops are not revealed. This is the superhero's secret identity concept applied systemically to a formal organisation, and it's a fascinating idea. What would it be like to go to work and not let your neighbours know that you're a cop? How do you and your family live with the fear that they are a target for an extremist group that has shown itself ready and willing to break into police officers' homes and shoot them dead? How would you relate to fellow officers, whose identities you may not even know? It's not entirely clear in *Watchmen* if everyone in the police knows everyone else's faces and real names, but it seems unlikely.

Certainly, we see a formal briefing within the Tulsa PD headquarters where everyone but Chief Crawford remains masked, and there is a shadowy, cult-like atmosphere, especially where they recite, some might say chant, the comic's old tagline 'Quis Custodiet Ipsos Custodes?'—not unlike the Rorschach-masked Cavalry members quoting from Rorschach's diary.

.....  
**Author's note:** Incidentally, I'm not clear how the diary features in the world of the TV show. In the comic, we are left wondering whether or not Kovacs' book will come to light and reveal the truth of Adrian Veidt's grand, murderous scheme to save the world from nuclear Armageddon. If it did come to light, as is suggested by the Cavalry's paraphrasing of the diary's text, then why doesn't the world know that Veidt pulled a fast one? Maybe it's implied that the Cavalry's not-so-hard-to-figure-out leader acquired the diary but chose not to reveal its secrets to the world at large.

.....  
There's definitely an element of a heavy handed police state about the Tulsa PD; they are literally the 'secret police,' with their mass swoops on the disenfranchised Cavalry-sympathisers of Nixonville, the

black-site warehouse interrogations, and the insulated, video-walled 'pod' that mirror-masked super cop Looking Glass uses to conduct his interrogations like a cross between *Blade Runner* and *A Clockwork Orange*. Within the context of the show, the police have reasons for their borderline Stasi methods, but it's interesting that the showrunners choose not to dwell too much on the inevitable risks of brutality and corruption that would arise from a masked, anonymous police force.

Firearms are not readily available to the officers of Tulsa PD. When Officer Sutton pulls a suspect over on a dark road, he has to radio central command to request that his firearm be remotely unlocked; we see it securely clamped within a sturdy yellow housing inside the patrol car. Sutton then has to answer a number of questions to justify the unlocking of the gun, resulting in a fatal delay which sees the suspect liberally spraying the windshield of the patrol car with automatic gunfire. This scene verges on black comedy, with the increasingly frustrated lone policeman running into a bureaucratic series of obstacles while the bad guy is about to open fire. It felt almost Pythonesque to me.

It's unclear from where the gun restriction arose within the context of the TV show, but it seems unlikely to be a result of the White Night attacks; far from it. More likely it is a nationwide phenomenon, and an aspect of the decades-long presidency of a fictionalised Robert Redford, who in real life has spoken out on the portrayal of guns in the media. This is an interesting concept, but really doesn't feature much in the *Watchmen* show after the first episode. Indeed, the gun restriction was lifted after the shooting of Officer Parker, so that the Tulsa PD can first round up the



usual suspects and then stage an armed raid on a Kavalry safehouse.

.....

**Author's note:** Writing as a Brit who finds the idea of routinely armed police problematic to say the least, and writing this in the midst of a depressingly frequent sequence of police shootings in America, the gun control element of *Watchmen*, and the way that it was portrayed as an active risk to officers' lives, feels like an oddly pro-gun choice, but one that doesn't really go anywhere.

.....

The Tulsa Police Department has a number of masked super cops. This is perhaps the most 'Watchmenny' aspect of the police in the show for my money, and the aspect that I most want to know more about. We know that Angela Abar was a Tulsa cop before the White Night, but then subsequently adopted the identity of warrior nun Sister Night when she recovered from her injuries. Likewise we are told that Wade Tillman, AKA Looking Glass, joined the Tulsa PD after White Night. Presumably so did the ski-masked Red Scare, bandana-wearing Pirate Jenny, and Panda, whose oversized head looks like he just pulled it out of a dumpster. But whether they were also cops beforehand, or just kind of turned up at the station house and were given police powers, is unclear.

We do get some insight into Tillman's pre-Looking Glass life (in the excellent fifth episode *Little Fear of Lightning*), but just how he and his fellow super cops attained detective rank and how they officially fit in with the rest of the department is unclear. Were they personally contacted and vetted by Chief Crawford? Where does Sister Night get all

of her hi-tech gear from? Are they funded by the police, or do they rely on their various everyday jobs as bakers, market researchers etc? Did any of them run around in a mask before White Night? Just what, in the public's eyes, is the difference between a masked regular cop and a masked super cop (since it's not like any of them have superpowers)?

.....

**Author's note:** I really wanted to know a little more about the other super cops of the Tulsa PD, especially Red Scare. I like to think that his true identity isn't Russian at all; it would certainly be a nice spin on the old device of the hero having a radically different persona to their regular identity, like mild-mannered Clark Kent, gadabout playboy Bruce Wayne, et al. Maybe Red Scare speaks with a soft Southern accent in his everyday life.

.....


There is one other aspect of the police in *Watchmen* that I want to mention, and that is the show's take on Hooded Justice. It's a great idea, and one that I certainly didn't expect. So, if you've not seen the show yet, look away now because >>SPOILERS<<. In the comic, Hooded Justice remains something of an enigma; it's implied that he's probably a circus strongman called Rolf Mueller, while certain disputed comic sequels suggest that Mueller was a red herring. Hooded Justice is gay, that much we know, and a big, strong white man, from what little skin we can see around the eyes of his executioner's hood. But what the TV show does brilliantly, in my opinion, is that it uses that very same 'radically different true identity' device that worked for Messrs Kent and Wayne,

and employs it quite organically in the case of Hooded Justice to reveal that he is in fact a black NYPD patrolman who uses make-up to suggest that there's a white man under that hood.

In the world of the show, the racial misdirection serves two purposes, both to protect the identity of patrolman Will Reeves and his family, and to ensure the cooperation and acceptance of the public and the authorities. As shown in the atmospheric black & white fifth episode "This Extraordinary Being" there are active racist elements within the New York Police Department who not only wouldn't accept a black vigilante at large on the streets of the city, but who were ironically responsible for Hooded Justice's "origin" in the first place; his all-concealing hood and noose are not in fact a representation of an avenging executioner, but rather the instruments of the very lynching that racist cops subjected Will Reeves to, to "put him in his place."

What I liked about this development was that it felt highly plausible as an alternative origin for Hooded Justice, which didn't undercut any of the material that had been established in the comic. The scene with his wife helping him apply the white make-up around the eyes, and the bedroom scene with his white lover Captain Metropolis add much-needed irony and humanity to the story of Hooded Justice. America's first masked hero was black. He was hooded *because* he was black. Without that black hero, there probably wouldn't have been any masked heroes, of any colour.

*Watchmen* the TV show is a curious beast. The first four episodes are pretty coy about it being anything to do with *Watchmen* the comic. Sure, there are squid showers and smiley faces. There are manky

Rorschach masks and Adrian Veidt in *Downton Abbey*. But it's not really very Watchmenny. It's almost embarrassing to embrace the wilder aspects of the source material, like giant alien squid attacks and naked blue supermen. That all changes with episodes 5 and 6, when the show dives headfirst into Moore's original magnum opus and never looks back. But those first 4 episodes? They're very different, I think. They're from a show about secret police, extremist groups and the legacy of the Tulsa Race Massacre of 1921. It's a strange choice to appear to actively distance the show from the source for nearly half the season, as if the creators had already written a script for something called "Tulsa PD: Behind The Masks," and later decided to reuse it as the spine of a *Watchmen* series. I don't know, maybe that's just me. All I know is that I really want to see a black & white Minutemen series. That, and more Looking Glass. 

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**Authro's note:** For a more fun take on policing by Alan Moore, I heartily recommend his 12-issue comic series *Top 10*, from America's Best Comics, which might roughly be pitched as *Hill Street Blues* meets *Crisis On Infinite Earths*. The canine desk sergeant's my favourite character.

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# THE ALGORITHMS OF POLICING

*Anton Marks*

**I'VE BEEN COOKING UP AN** idea in my subconscious for a future based police procedural or crime novel for some time now. Back in the day, I wrote a futuristic thriller called *In the Days of Dread*, which looked at aspects of a futuristic London society that included a brief mention of law enforcement forty years in the future. I've done bits of research and realized there are some aspects of my new story that I'd love to focus on but also share some thoughts with you as I play around with ideas.

Readers who know anything about me know I'm going to approach the story from the point of view that is seldom approached in popular fiction. Not because I'm insightful or a genius but because the black British point of view especially in speculative fiction is very rarely expressed. I'm a speculative fiction author based in the UK. For those of you who don't know me. I grew up in Jamaica, and my writing reflects my Caribbean upbringing and my African ancestry.

When I was trying to figure out where I wanted to take a story that leaned heavily on law enforcement in the future, I tried to limit the kind of information I would be subjected to. I didn't want to contaminate my pool of ideas with concepts already portrayed in science fiction by the talented authors in the genre. I preferred my primary source of inspiration to be law enforcement professionals and fans, but it seems the future of policing will be predictive policing. And as much as I've tried to get away from the film loosely inspired by Philip K. Dick's short story "Minority Report," where 21st Century crime-fighting seems to be going, and I can't ignore it. I like my

futuristic technology to be more Blade Runner than Star Wars. So, instead of using precogs, policing of the future will be using algorithms.

Seven years ago, the Chicago Police Department began using new software to statistically comb through the city's population. Based on each person's past police interactions, the system initially flagged 400 or so people who it judged to have the greatest chance of engaging in the deadly use of firearms.

If you don't know, these systems are already in place in various cities worldwide, and they have a very real impact on its citizens. For my story's purposes, I'm looking to see how things can go wrong and create conflict because that's what a good story is all about. The fun thing is, I don't need to be too creative because the issues that

spring from the use of these algorithms are already being discovered. They are already producing the kind of chaos I can use in my books.

While my story will be based in the UK, trends in the States usually end up on our shores some years later. So, I can also borrow inspiration from my friends across the pond, which means that I'll arm

my officers. Seeing armed officers in the UK isn't such a peculiar sight nowadays, and as time progresses and new threats arise, it will be more commonplace. Will, the officers of the future, go paramilitary, or will they use more non-lethal alternatives? The UK and the US police forces have starkly different relationships with their communities and crime due to their history. Both countries may seem to have polar opposite ideas about their officers use of deadly force, but the results for black and brown people seems to be the same. The one thing both police forces share is the inclusion of

**"Technology is neither good nor bad; nor is it neutral."  
—Melvin Kranzberg's 1st law of technology**



Predictive models built on bias will lean toward a more racist point of view and in turn will enhance the existing biases within police officers.

cancerous officers who are a throwback to a time when legislation and society decided black and brown people were less than human and could be treated however they wished. That's why, in the real world outside of my books and imagination, I worry about transferring the primitive lizard brain of Homo sapiens with machine learning efficiency of AI. You would think it would be better. Cold logic over generational prejudice.

Well not quite.

Machine learning algorithms work by using statistical techniques to recognize patterns in large amounts of data. But in order to learn which patterns to look for, the algorithm needs to be programmed. In addition, the data pools should not be skewed to produce skewed results. I find this idea worrying and exciting because it's a plot point that I can use. There is a high probability that the programmers creating these algorithms pass on their biases and the biases within the data sets that were used to create the models that police are using in the field. The Anime *Ghost in The Shell* comes to mind, and its themes about what defines humanity as Artificial Intelligence grows increasingly prominent. It asks the question of what if awareness was accidentally embedded in machine code? My question is, what if

prejudice can be embedded in machine code?

Predictive models built on bias will lean toward a more racist point of view and in turn will enhance the existing biases within police officers. Check out this [Alexis Madrigal segment of](#)

[Real Future](#) and fast forward to the five-minute thirty seconds mark.

Where does the data come from to feed our crime prediction software?

The algorithms driving our predictions come from historical crime statistics from police departments and police forces—the same people who have been framing and murdering innocent black people for hundreds of years. Don't get me wrong. I'm not saying all police officers are racist, murderers, or corrupt. But there are enough of them in high and low places that after hundreds of years, we still need to state the obvious: Black Lives Matter.

As predictive policing software is rolled out in police

departments and police forces, the historical biases inherent in the data are lumped together and churned out as a seemingly neutral algorithm. I can easily see a techno horror story coming out of this, who knows.

But let's turn the idea on its head and look at another exciting prospect for my book. What if the algorithms could be used to determine which cops are likely to abuse their power so they could root out the 'bent coppers'?

Now that would be cool. I can think of a few strong plot points that could come out of that idea.

Police Unions in the United States have blocked this idea in the real world, and here in Blighty, I'd think they'd block it too if it was ever suggested. The

The algorithms driving our predictions come from historical crime statistics from police departments and police forces—the same people who have been framing and murdering innocent black people for hundreds of years.

Photo by Elia Pellegrini

data is available in the States, and I'm sure it's available here as well, but it will never be applied or actioned against institutions that are above the law they pledge to uphold.

Another thing I find interesting is the possibility of new technology being rolled out on a city with no public oversight such as police forces that are

unnecessary physical force, while on the other hand, officers themselves are protected from false accusations by members of the public, given that a recording of an encounter usually provides evidence of what took place. But I've been following reports on how the technology has been abused by officers—no system is perfect. The technol-

ogy is either tampered with or wholly ignored as evidence. Some officers are even so confident that any wrongdoing they perpetrate will not stick because they are above the law. In the future, bodycam's could become more self-aware and maybe mini drones will be used to follow their humans everywhere, recording and advising. Imagine being a rookie breaking in your drone like a police canine.

Then I heard about a recent study by the National Institute of Standards and Technology (NIST), and they confirm what researchers have said all along: Facial recognition serves you well as long as you're a white male—all others lose out.

The study finds that there are 10 to 100 times more false posi-

writer of colour, my job isn't to make our futures free of challenge because that does not ring true but to create characters who can face the injustices, the affronts, the inequalities, and overcome them. Maybe I can inspire these qualities in the real world. The results should be interesting. *CS*

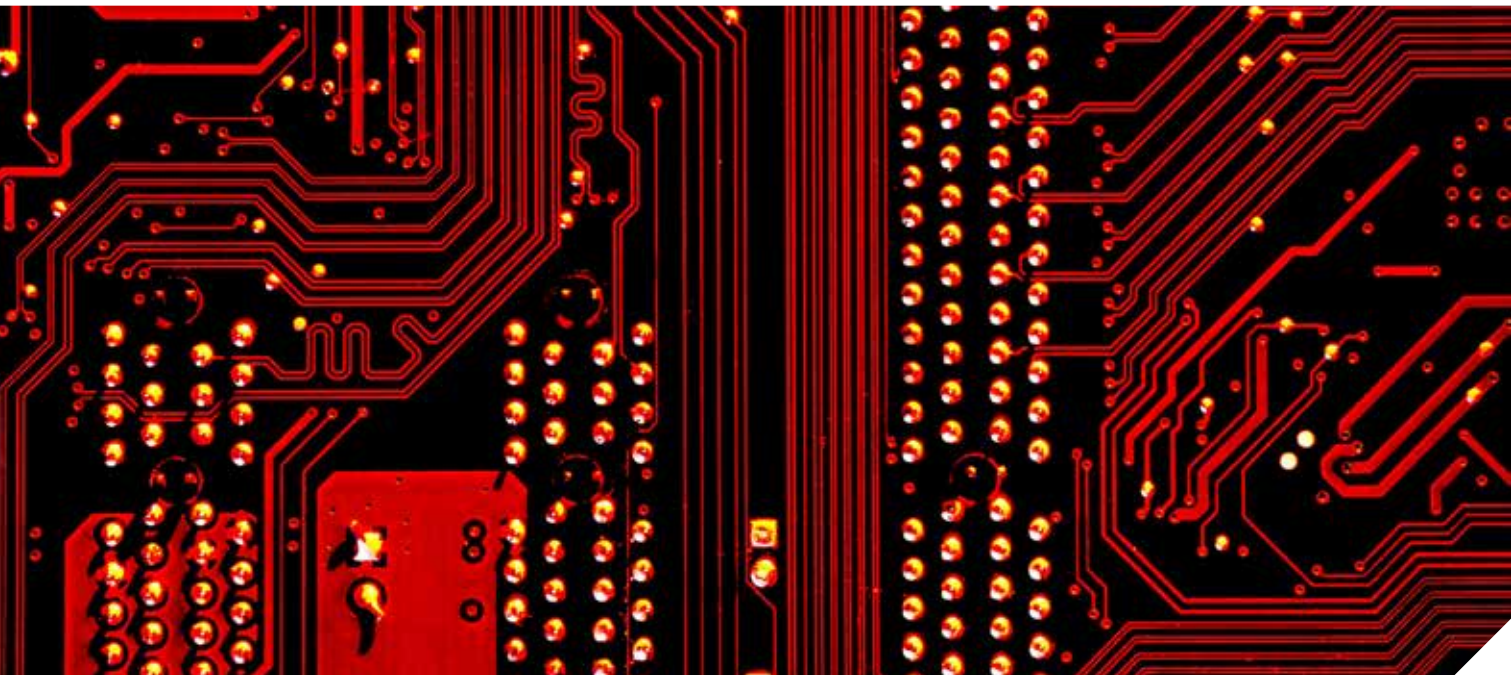


Photo by Michael Dziedzic

secretly using artificial intelligence to give themselves an advantage over rising crime. A new technology is devised, and the corporation wants a dry run to confirm proof of concept. All manner of juicy ideas can come from this—I think of the *Person of Interest* TV series that explored the concept very well.

I also looked into bodycam technology and how it could be applied in our future London.

It turns out that studies agree that law enforcement officers wearing bodycam's have a positive effect on the public's perception of them. They have two main positive effects: on the one hand, people feel that police officers, knowing they are being filmed, are unlikely to use

ogy is either tampered with or wholly ignored as evidence. Some officers are even so confident that any wrongdoing they perpetrate will not stick because they are above the law. In the future, bodycam's could become more self-aware and maybe mini drones will be used to follow their humans everywhere, recording and advising. Imagine being a rookie breaking in your drone like a police canine.

I like that.

I'd be remiss if I didn't talk quickly about facial recognition software and the black face. Urban myth or not, I investigated the stories I heard about the difficulty law enforcement was having using the technology to identify black and brown

tives for Black or Asian Americans than for Caucasian Americans, depending on the algorithm. In other words, if an algorithm is presented with two images from two different people of color, they look pretty much the same to the computer.

Wow!

What if one of my nefarious characters used that fact to their advantage in a dystopian London or the ethnic citizens have to live with the fact that drones could misidentify them, so they wear image scrambling masks to prevent being caught up in the system.

Things may look bleak for ethnic minorities and the poor as policing upgrades itself for a new age. As a speculative fiction

### Check out these books Nonfiction

- *Automating Inequality: How High-Tech Tools Profile, Police, and Punish the Poor* by Virginia Eubanks
- *Algorithms of Oppression: How Search Engines Reinforce Racism* by Safiya Noble.

### Fiction

(I haven't read these yet, but I will. They came highly recommended.)

- *Great North Road* by Peter F. Hamilton
- *Gridlinked* by Neal Asher
- *The Prefect* by Charles J. Shields
- *Naked in Death* by J. D. Robb





James Bacon

**VIETNAM FEATURES STRONGLY IN THE** *Watchmen* TV series, and like so much of this sequel to the *Watchmen* comic, the source is indeed the comic.

The first indication we get that Vietnam is part of the wonderful alternative history of the *Watchmen* comic series is in issue #1 when the headline of the *New York Times*, 12th October 1985, is seen in the background on a newsstand, with a headline proclaiming that Vietnam is the 51st State. (Ch1. Pg4. Pn3.)

We are then welcomed to V.V.N., which one assumes is Victory in Viet Nam, with Doctor Manhattan and the Comedian, Edward Blake, talking in a bar in June 1971. The Doc supposes it must mean something to ‘them,’ indicating the Vietnamese or maybe humans, but Blake cuts to the heart of the matter in his musings, saying, “If we’d lost this war ... I dunno. I think it might have driven us a little crazy, y’know? As a country.” Which of course it did, but America essentially forgot that if you’re going to lose a game, play a different game. The war was always lost. (Ch2. Pg13)

Instead of the image of the last helicopters evacuating civilians from a falling Saigon in 1975, we have Richard Nixon feted in a similar presented image in 1971, disembarking from a Huey to a rapturous welcome.

Blake is clear the war was won by Doctor Manhattan. In 1986, the portrayal of the American War in Vietnam being won is one of those alternative history moments that makes readers consider just

how disastrous the war was. In contrast, *Watchmen’s* comic book offers readers a quick win, which is as much fantasy as superhumans are in fiction.

As Doctor Manhattan moves forward and backward along his own timeline, we see Richard Nixon asking him to go to Vietnam in January of 1971 where Manhattan meets Blake and describes him as “deliberately amoral.” This appears to be a metaphor for the U.S. presence in Vietnam. (Ch4. Page 19)

We see an enlarged and towering Doctor Manhattan in May of 1971, razing the jungle with presumably Viet Cong running away, noting that he expects the war to end within the week. He comments that “they ask to surrender to me personally, their terror of me balanced by an almost religious awe.”

There has been some excellent science fiction taking the American War in Vietnam as a historical influence and utilising it as a subject, be it *The Forever War* by Vietnam-veteran Joe Haldeman or *The Killing Ground* by JG Ballard, or Michael

Moorcock’s *A Cure for Cancer* (the third in the Jerry Cornelius saga). Meanwhile, Moore and Gibbons’s *Watchmen* only touch upon it, but it is an important part of the many twists in this piece of superhero literature. *Watchmen* details what would potentially happen if superheroes existed and if they willingly did their “patriotic” duty. They enact massacre.

Even in victory we see the absolute horrendous ugliness of the war. While the Comedian hates Vietnam and wants to leave, he is also aware that without Manhattan it could have been different. We see further manifestation of the amorality of the Comedian

“If we’d lost this war ... I dunno. I think it might have driven us a little crazy, y’know? As a country.” –Edward Blake, The Comedian



contrasted against Doctor Manhattan's detachment. The Comedian kills a Vietnamese woman who is pregnant with his child, in front of Doctor Manhattan. It's a murderous criminal act, sweeping aside an inconvenience. In this instance,



someone who could stand up to a bully, the most powerful being in the world, is willing to watch on and do nothing. A point that Blake points out.

In three detailed pages, during a flashback, we are offered numerous examples of war bringing out the worst in people. (Ch2. Pg13-15.)

The might of the great American war machine holds no comparison to that of a man-god who unleashes eviscerations with gestures and is dehumanised, utterly unmoved by the havoc that is being wrought upon the Vietnamese. Just as with the murder Blake commits, uninterested in mediocre human life, so goes Doctor Manhattan. In fiction, it would take a god to win the American War in Vietnam, and yet in reality full credit is rarely given to the tenacity, hard fighting, organisational ingenuity of the forces in North Vietnam, who won the war.

The Comedian's actions in Vietnam, no matter what level of brutality applied, is a mirror for all the American atrocities: brutal but ultimately achieving worse than nothing. It only serves to cement the inhumane and dreadful perception of

pointlessness violence, and the misguided belief that might equals right.

While the original 1986 comic moves away from Vietnam neatly and skillfully, encapsulating so much in so few pages, there is much to

contemplate.

Including Vietnam as the 51st State of the United States of America serves to remind readers that the 50th state, Hawaii, was first annexed before the people voted to be a state. Puerto Rico, an unincorporated territory of the United States, is another, more modern example of an annexed territory where statehood is yet to be decided, but desired by some residents.

The story in *Watchmen* ably creates a dark twist in American history and, subsequently, the country's consciousness. The *Before Watchmen* comic doesn't really add anything to the Comedian's story in Vietnam, despite six published issues. Suffice to say, he has a dreadful influence and impact on the war and instigates heinous acts. Regardless, not much is added to his backstory. Moore and Gibbons were able to portray the same message in just a few pages. The film saw Doctor Manhattan literally exploding Vietnamese to the tune of Wagner's *Ride of the Valkyries*, and it lost nuance and subtlety, the discrete elements hidden in plain sight.

Now, to the TV series.

To have the lead character of

the *Watchmen* HBO series, Angela Abar (Regina King), be born in Vietnam before it became a U.S. state, was a lovely twist. Her parents, both American, we must assume opted to stay in Vietnam for twenty years. Her father, a Captain in the U.S. Army, after fighting in the Vietnam War, defines a new setting in the *Watchmen* story. We've already had a focus on the Tulsa massacre. Now we have an African-American woman, the lead character, identifying as both Black and Vietnamese.

The Angela Abar we see in Tulsa is proud to be Vietnamese, identifying in the way one might from any country, wearing some Asian-style clothing with her jeans as she talks to her child's class, cooking the cuisine, and cursing in Vietnamese. Yet her

own story in Vietnam is hard.

On the 16th anniversary of Victory in Vietnam Day, June 1986, she witnessed her parents being killed in a suicide bomb attack against the American occupation. The bomber screams, "death to the invaders" before the explosion. Losing her parents, Marcus and Alisse, in such a violent way, must have left a huge impression. Afterward, we see Angela in an orphanage, making Doctor Manhattan Russian Dolls—an interesting allusion to a story within a story.

The hard life she lives is palpable. It is a life of being sufficiently different to be identified as foreign in her country of birth, which brilliantly juxtaposed how many viewers feel in the U.S. today. It also serves to remind us of the large number





of Vietnamese children who were orphaned or became refugees.

The instigator of the bombing is captured and Angela identifies him for the Saigon Police. In their deep green uniforms, wide yellow and red epaulet boards, but with a U.S. shaped, L.A. style badge, and the U.S. flag and state flag on their upper sleeves, they intend to execute him. Angela asks if she can listen, but is instead asked to go back inside. Before leaving, she is presented with the officer's badge, which she studies as we hear the executioner's gunshot.

This scene calls to mind the execution of Nguyễn Văn Lém—a member of the Viet Cong, who was shot in the head at point-blank range by Brigadier General Nguyễn Ngọc Loan, the chief of the Republic of Vietnam National Police. However, this incident, which seems simply like a brutal murder of a civilian, is itself considerably different and complex. As if this is not sufficiently heart breaking, we see that Angela's grandmother June Abar, the wife of Will Reeves, comes to take her to Tulsa. Of course, this inevitably ends in tragedy. After a Borscht Burger, talk of videos, and the belief that she is escaping, her grandmother dies on the street in Saigon.

With the concept of Vietnam as a 51st state, there is a lovely ambiguity about the visual depiction of Vietnam with the mix of American police vehicles and Vietnam colours. Showing the contrast in the visual evolution of Vietnam, we see Saigon in 1987 and then again in 2009, and there are obvious changes to the evolution of the visual landscape. As a result in the TV series, we see insurgency in the manifestation of a bombing, blowing apart that mixed visual of a Vietnam-American world.



One example of this is the mural of Doctor Manhattan in the background, its colors so bright and clean in 1987, despite the red graffiti labeling him as a “murderer” and accented with blood daubs on his hands and horns on his head. Then, when we see the same image 22 years

later, there have been multiple uneven over-paints. No doubt trying to fix it, but it is now well-faded and well-graffitied with a yellow penis line drawn over Doctor Manhattan's pants, in a juvenile way. It serves as a visual representation of society's underlying feelings, and how

they may have changed as Doctor Manhattan goes to see Angela.

When a God Walks into a Bar is perhaps one of the finest pieces of science fiction television created. We see Doctor Manhattan in Saigon on VVN Day. Not only do we see the mural, but then, we see that the venue is Eddy's Bar, the bar where Eddie Blake murdered his girlfriend. A nod to a story within a story. Nicole Kassel, director of this episode, confirmed that Mr. Eddy's Bar is totally based on the bar in the comic.

While we see Doctor Manhattan take a new guise, and Angela's adventures move to Tulsa, there is no doubt that Vietnam at this point has featured strongly.

Lady Trieu, played by Hong Chau, could in many ways be an analog of the billionaires who can buy anything they want in today's capitalism-focused world—however, she is a scientist at heart and her precocious daughter, Bian, serving as a reflection of this being a clone of Lady Trieu's mother, Bian My. The eccentricity and narcissism of Trieu's ambition is on display as she builds her legacy, driven by her mother's ambition by literally recreating her mother to witness her success.

Bian tells Trieu that she had a nightmare. “I was in a village. Men came and burned it. They made us walk. I was walking for so long. Mom, my feet still hurt.” In the perfect twist, we learn that “Bian My did have one unforgettable encounter with Mr. Blake. In 1971, Mr. Blake and his battalion of “Blazin' Commandos” passed through her village outside My Lai. Their uniquely warm demeanor made quite an impression on her. This encounter is sowed as a seed of query in an article from *Peteypedia*. Watering such seeds, the TV series provides

each episode with extra documentation in a way that is reminiscent of the original comics, and we are left wondering if Blake is Lady Trieu's father.

In this way, we see that the seed of revenge was sown further watered by the flight of Lady Trieu's mother as she sought refuge, all the while knowing that Blake may have been a blunt instrument of brute grim violence, it was Doctor Manhattan who won the war. As the parts come together, Bian My ends up being taken in as a cleaner in the Antarctic, recruited to work in Ozymandias's base Karnak.

Bian My was herself very determined, and perhaps driven by this, she brilliantly purloins the legacy of Adrian Veidt (Ozymandias), inseminating herself with one his semen samples and escaping from Karnak to go back to Vietnam in 1985, where Lady Trieu was born in 1986.

There is an implied disposability to the Vietnamese, which their refugee status highlights. In real life, the Vietnamese boat people who survived their escape from Vietnam numbered over 800,000. It is unknown how many perished during their journey.

There is a dreadful air of disposable insignificance regarding individual Vietnamese people in American history and in their stories. So, it is important to note that here, as an individual, Bian My is masterful and outsmarts the cleverest man on the planet.

There was much about Lady Trieu that I loved: how she planned things so well and also her confidence. Whether she is asking Veidt for \$42m or how she is certain that she can take Doctor Manhattan's power and rid humanity of nuclear weapons. Her look and styles intoned an empathy with Vietnamese



fashion—I am, however, no expert—and I should go back and see if Lady Trieu ever wears an áo dài.

In the series, we also learn from *Peteypedia* that Ronnie Ngo Dinh, governor of Vietnam, made an accusation in 2017 that Ozymandias, Adrian Veidt, had been assassinated by the Vietnamese Liberation Front as an act of terror against the United States. This allows him to escalate action against the VLF, which results in hundreds of civilian deaths and international condemnation.

I had hoped there would be more about Lady Trieu and Vietnam along with greater intertwining of the characters and a chance to see more of Vietnam's history in this world. I also wanted to see something in the series about the origin of the name Lady Trieu, which could have been developed and meant as much to the viewer as Tulsa. For many, it would be a surprise culturally delivered historical shock on par with Tulsa, and I wanted to see that

with Vietnam. Lady Trieu or Bà Trieu is the name of a 3rd century warrior, who resisted the Eastern Wu occupation of Vietnam. Described as strong, brave, and smart, she wore yellow into battle and rode a war elephant. Where else did you see an elephant?

I was slightly disappointed when Trieu's character was portrayed simply as someone attempting to take over the world, and therefore ultimately evil, as by way of narcissism.

There feels like an unnerving level of synchronicity about the HBO TV series and current events, especially with regard to policing: the treatment of black citizens and the brutal racism and bias that underlies so much for so many. Starting the series with Tulsa was brilliantly done. Initially, the police stopped where it was as if current matters were turned on their head. Other elements include a black cop stopping a white driver, the lead characters Angela and ultimately Doctor Manhattan being Black (as well

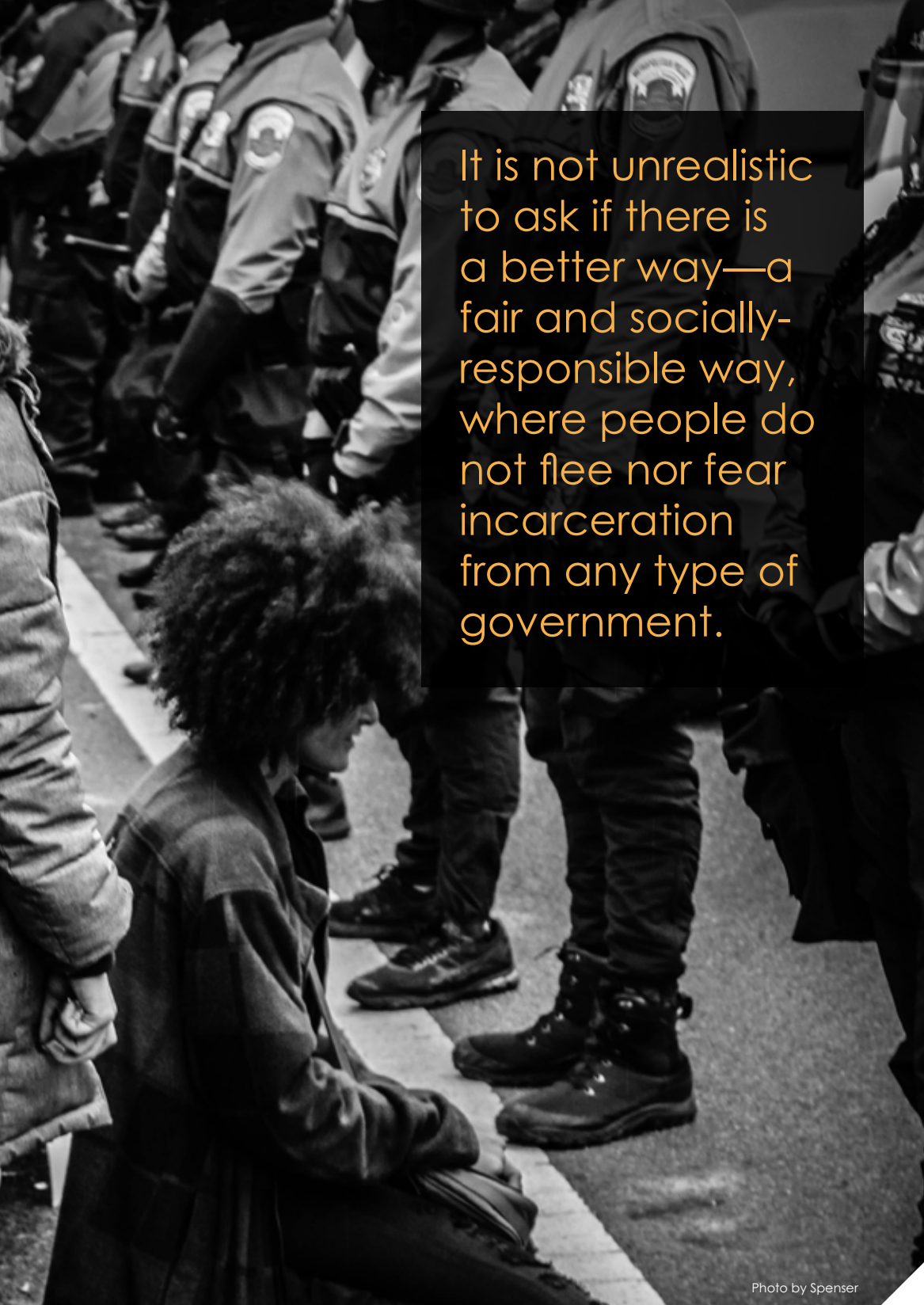
as their wider family connections), and the 7th Cavalry with their obvious cyclopean symbol of white supremacists.

Lynn Novick and Ken Burns's PBS series *The Vietnam War* was perfectly timed in many respects, and frighteningly, we now find the world around us somehow reflecting the worst elements of that time. Indeed, it would be fair to observe that currently we have a crop of narcissistic psychopaths in charge of countries, hell-bent on ensuring their own "team" profiteer, and with little care for truth or human life.

In the series, the corruption of the Vietnam War has utterly impacted the American system, dividing the nation, and causing issues to spill onto the streets that ultimately result in violence, often at the instigation and hands of the authorities; this is happening again.

The current climate in *Watchmen* is indeed quite prophetic, especially if we consider the divisiveness that America's war in Vietnam caused amongst Americans and how upset the active people were in their anger about it. In comparison to current issues, it's rather like this year's Black Lives Matter protests. Martin Luther King spoke of the Black soldiers dying in Vietnam, and indeed, some 14% were combat casualties in 1965 when African-Americans only made up 12% of the population and 10% of the military. Discrimination also factored into the disproportionate numbers of African-American soldiers being punished through court martials, nonjudicial punishments, incarceration, and punitive discharges. This doesn't even consider the matter of segregated cemeteries, where judicial orders had to be made to allow Black soldiers to be buried with the same honor and regard as other servicemembers. An example would be Miami's





It is not unrealistic to ask if there is a better way—a fair and socially-responsible way, where people do not flee nor fear incarceration from any type of government.

Photo by Spenser

on other less corrosive and murderous systems than the form of capitalism that the U.S. has adopted. It is not unrealistic to ask if there is a better way—a fair and socially-responsible way, where people do not flee nor fear incarceration from any type of government.

How corrupt was America during Vietnam? How bent out of shape was it from the expectations that people had and what fair expectations are in the American system? Is it a similar sense of wrongness that has occurred this year, since the death of George Floyd? That something is not at all right with America when a Black man is murdered on camera? America is in a polarised and divisive time, lies and untruths abound, the President can say anything at all, and his loyal followers will believe him. Deceitfully describing those who died for their country as “losers and suckers,” did Tricky Dicky step that low? All the while, he will kiss the flag and evoke patriotism, as much as possible.

Returning to the TV series...

While I am certain that those with more expertise or from Vietnam (or both) will find more valid coincidences, influences, themes, and errors, I admit that I am always fascinated when AngloAmerican TV, film, or even comics features a different country (Ireland being my favourite), willing to mock such as with *Web of Spiderman #22*, or pleased with a decent depiction. I thought the *Watchmen* TV series was a strong departure, for a story that was already brilliantly challenging racial expectations. Involving a country that forces American viewers in particular to consider exactly what the American war in Vietnam was to themselves and to the world was a thoughtful creative choice. *CS*

Fort Pierce Cemetery when Mrs. Campbell had to bring a legal case so that her son, Specialist Williams, 20, with the First Air Cavalry, who was killed on the 8th August 1970, could be buried.

Instead of high morals and funding going to a foreign land, we see inequality, racism, and

segregation reign. In the U.S., we see the issue is inequality, under what is now a divisive and lying leader.

How does one measure prosperity and wellbeing? Vietnam has had an incredible record in the fight against COVID-19. Seeing a peak in early August, Vietnam is 186th in the world,

compared to the U.S.’s 11th place, with over a quarter-million deaths today. Vietnam’s death toll is 25 as of the 12th September.

In an America, where all forms of social responsibility appear to be seen as socialism that needs to be combatted, there is no pause for reflection

# THOUGHTS ON POLICING

## FROM THE IRISH PERSPECTIVE

*Pádraig Ó Méalóid*

**IT'S A BRIGHT, COLD DAY** in England; the skies in America are the colour of a television, tuned to a dead station, but the chances of anything coming from Mars are a million to one. There's panic in Detroit, the dog carcass in the alley has a tire tread on its burst stomach, and I have placed in my mouth sufficient bread for three minutes chewing. All Cops Are Bastards, present company excepted, of course. I'm trying to find something meaningful to say about policing in SF whilst Nazis roam the streets, the world is on fire, and extremists are busy blowing themselves and everyone else up. But it seems there's life on Venus, instead. So where do I even start...?

Back in the good old days, when I still read only science fiction, I was more drawn towards the happier, lighter end of the genre. Sure, I read all the old white guys, like Asimov and Heinlein (but less so Clarke), but I was much more interested in short story writers like Robert Sheckley, Larry Niven, and Philip K Dick—perhaps, as I look at that list, not the greatest examples of that 'happier end of SF' I alluded to earlier. Mostly, though, I wasn't interested in military SF, or dystopian fiction in general. Which makes it a little difficult for me to speak directly to the subject at hand.

Instead, I'm going to try to compare representations of police and policing in a few of my own favourite works, and to see how

they compare to the world, if not quite outside my window, as seen through the television screen.

The first thing I want to establish, though, is that Ireland is different. Whilst we were hardly alone amongst the nations of Europe in staying neutral during the Second World War, we could

be said to have had a very good reason for favouring one of the sides in that particular conflict, given that we had barely pulled ourselves out of centuries-long colonisation by one of the chief players, and indeed had attempted to rebel against them whilst they were busy fighting the previous leg of that encounter, back in 1916. Nonetheless, we

There is a true story that nicely illustrates Ireland's unique status in the world mythology as a small plucky nation fighting against The Power.

stayed out of it, and I still find it bewildering how much our closest neighbours still go on about it, many of them as if they had personally participated in it themselves. But it's possible I digress, just a tiny bit...

It was partly because of that earlier armed struggle over here against the failing British Empire, along with the almost inevitable civil war that followed, that Ireland, to quote [gunpolicy.org](https://www.gunpolicy.org)<sup>1</sup>, "has some of the least permissive firearm legislation in Europe." And, possibly also due to the international reputation we have as a result of our struggles for freedom, we are fortunate to be one of the very few western European nations, or indeed English-speaking countries anywhere in the world, that have not been subject to terrorist attacks of the kind the rest of them have, these last two decades. If anything,

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.gunpolicy.org/firearms/region/cp/ireland>



if you ignore the rather over-extravagant amount of it that went on in this country in the second half of the twentieth century, terrorism has generally been a largely export business for Ireland. Not that anybody sensible actually condoned it, but I think we all, on some level, understood what drove it.

There is a true story that nicely illustrates Ireland's unique status in the world mythology as a small plucky nation fighting against The Power. An old friend, who is a much-loved Irish writer, artist, cartoonist, animal lover, and TV personality told me about the time that a leatherback turtle was washed up on the west coast of Ireland. As a sort of publicity stunt and goodwill gesture it was decided to repatriate the turtle to a part of the world in which it would be more at home, which in this case was the Gulf of Mexico, on the coast of Texas in the USA. As well as that, they decided to send along my friend, who I'm going to call Dan, to accompany the turtle on its travels by air to Texas, which included his return fare back here—Dan's return, now, rather than the turtle's. Him being who he was, once he'd delivered Touché Turtle back from whence they had come he cashed in the plane ticket from Texas to New York, and took the bus instead, just so he could see the wildlife. He had many adventures, and made many friends, and saw lots of American wildlife along the way. When he finally reached New York, though, on the very last leg of his trip to the airport, he had one final encounter with a particular form of American wildlife he hadn't anticipated. He was on a bus, minding his own business, when a street gang got on, and started, essentially, demanding money with menaces. One of them

These men, although completely in charge of their own milieus, are altogether more likeable and less terrifying than, for instance, Britain's Judge Dredd, or any random policeman from the streets of any American city.

Photo by Alec Fovale

approached Dan, saying, "Give me all your money, man!" to which Dan replied, truthfully, that he didn't actually have any money. Rather than Dan getting shivved in broad daylight, instead his mugger noticed his accent, and inquired, "Hey, where the fuck are you from, man?" to which Dan replied, "Ireland." The gang member held up a clenched fist, said, "Ireland! Hey, man, IRA! IRA! IRA!" and let Dan be, moving on to the next unfortunate soul instead.

So, the Irish are protected by the hand of God, in our own strange way. And, to go back to [gunpolicy.org](http://gunpolicy.org):

According to An Garda

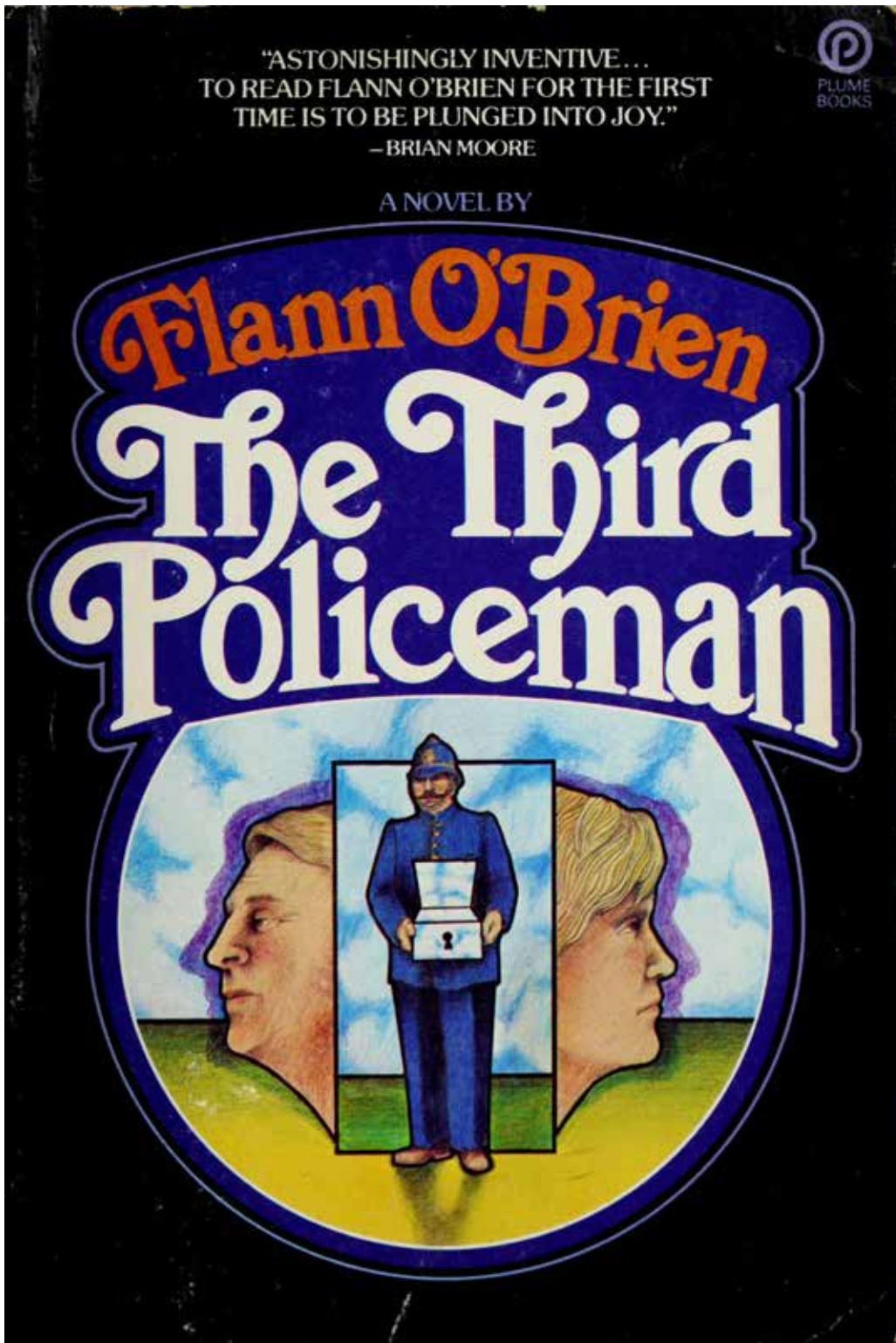
Síochána, the nation maintains a force of 15,355 sworn and trainee police officers. Gardaí are routinely unarmed, with only 20–25 per cent qualified to deploy a firearm. Those officers issued with a firearm authorisation card must complete a weapon training course and earn a certificate of competency. Approximately 3,000 officers are authorised in this way to carry small arms.

And a lot of those armed or potentially armed officers are in specific roles—I had an uncle in the Guards, and he ended up as a chauffeur for a government minister, who are routinely armed<sup>2</sup>, for instance. But, mostly, you'd never see a cop

with a gun on the streets of Dublin from one end of the year to the other. And it's from this point of view that we watch the rest of the world. Certainly we are not without our problems, but police officers routinely shooting and otherwise dispatching the public they're sworn to defend, pretty much solely based on the colour of their skin, well, that's completely alien to us.

Which sort of brings me to writing about favourite works, and favourite writers. Specifically, there's George Orwell, whose *Nineteen Eighty-Four* I have read a number of times, and which grows truer and more ominous every time I do so; Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons's *Watchmen*, the single greatest work in its field, shows the dangers of the unhinged being let play dress up and act as heavily-armed self-appointed dispensers of justice—or at least what they perceive as justice—which is a scenario we are certainly seeing played out on the streets of America right now, and will undoubtedly see more of as the November elections approach; and Arthur Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes stories which, although not technically science fiction, I always include because they share so much in common with the kind of things that drove people like H. G. Wells to write what would become some of the cornerstone works of an emerging genre. In the Sherlock Holmes stories, although both he and Dr. Watson often take their firearms with them for the dénouement of tricky cases, it is rare that they make use of them, the solutions being more cerebral than physical, generally. The police turn up regularly in their cases, though, and there is a mutual respect and understanding between them, as is also the case

2 The chauffeurs, that is, rather than the government ministers...



with other fictional private detectives like Sexton Blake and Réics Carló, the protagonist of a long series of stories in the Irish language by Cathal Ó Sándair, now long out of print—hopefully this is to change soon.

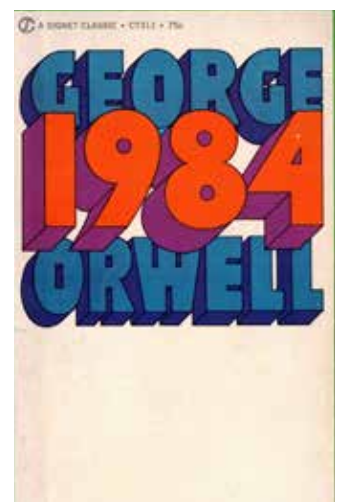
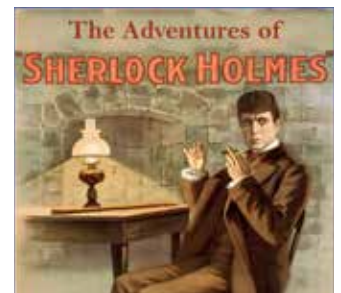
There are other Irish

policemen of far greater renown, though, particularly those of the works of Flann O'Brien—Sergeant Pluck and Policeman MacCruiskeen of Flann O'Brien's greatest work (and mathematically probably the greatest novel to ever come out of Ireland) *The Third*

*Policeman* (there really is a third policeman, but it seems churlish to do more than acknowledge his existence here). Their work, when not completely consumed with bicycle-related matters, has them attempting to keep eternity—which is of course under the ground in the midlands of

Ireland—running smoothly. Sergeant Pluck had terrible teeth, and Policeman MacCruiskeen is potentially the most dangerous, and most insane, member of the Garda Síochána.

These men, although completely in charge of their own milieus, are altogether more likeable and less terrifying than, for instance, Britain's Judge Dredd, or any random policeman from the streets of any American city. It is not the future of policing in fiction, SFnal or otherwise, that concerns me just now, but the real and present danger of policing in far too many countries, right as I speak. *CS*







Mark Slater

**I DIDN'T IMMEDIATELY WATCH THE** *Watchmen* Limited Series when it landed in 2019. *Who Watches The Watchmen?*—well me, but not now, I'm busy. Being a *Watchmen* fan since it appeared in single issues in 1986, getting my graphic collection signed by Moore & Gibbons when they went on tour in 1988, quite liking the film adaptation (with the obvious qualifications), and buying all the sequel/prequel comics despite Moore's entreaties not to, and suggesting that if I did I should never read any of his work ever again—so, for good or ill—I was absolutely the target market for the TV series. The trailers looked fascinating— weird, but fascinating. But there is so much content available at the moment, that it took the Covid lockdown to make me finally sit down and get around to watching it. By this time, of course, the initial reviews were in—and they seemed decidedly mixed—with the fact that this was set 34 years after the original story and with a completely new set of characters. The positive end of the buzz was that it was “different” and “weird.”

The series was written by Damon Lindelof in 2017, and filming started in 2018, with the series being released between October and December 2019.

So *Watchmen* was released six months before the murder of George Floyd and the global explosion of the Black Lives Matter movement (and the resurgence of the accompanying and inherently racist Blue Lives Matter counter movement). The Black Lives Matter movement notionally started in 2013, and Blue Lives Matter a year later in 2014, but it was not until May 2020 that they fully exploded

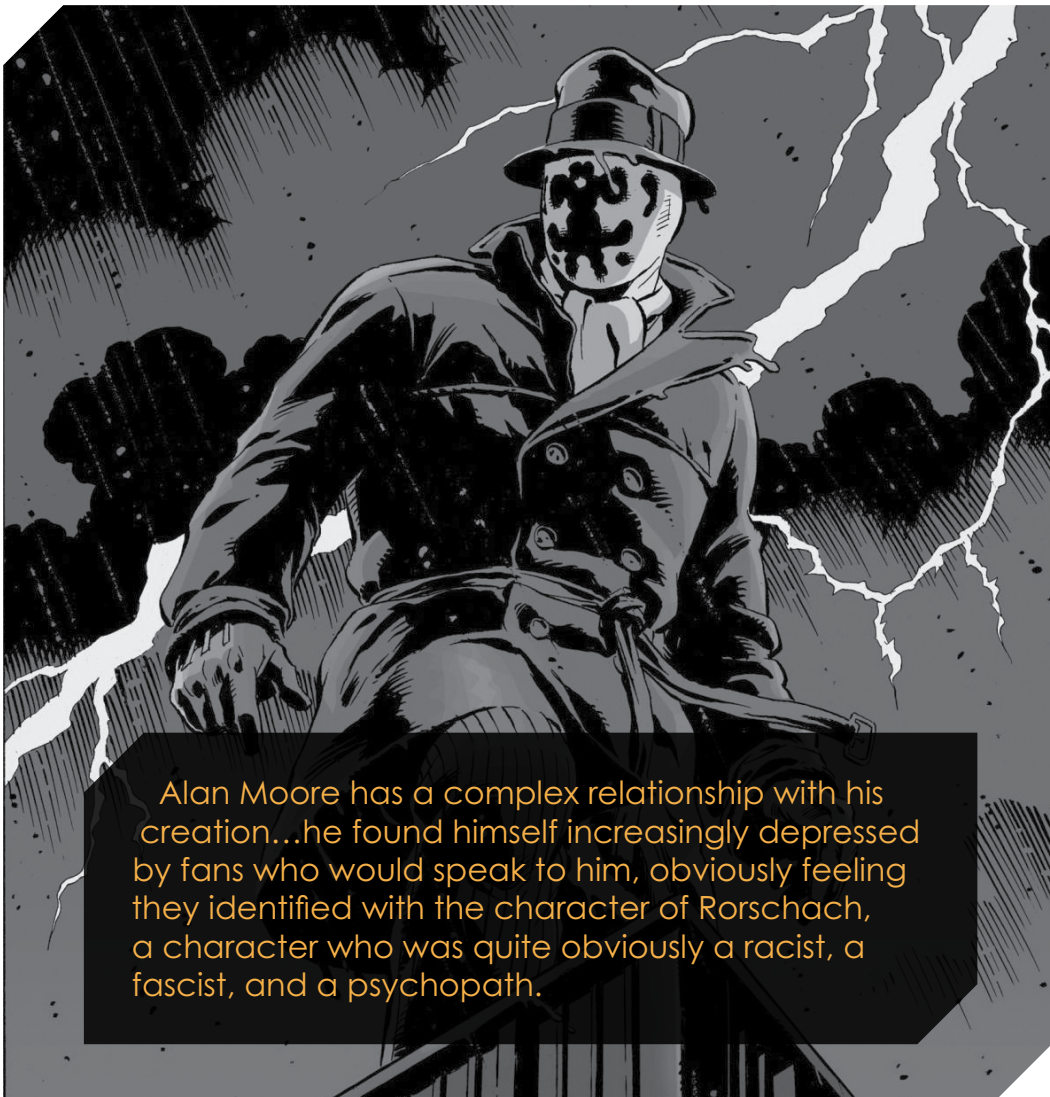
into the escalating culture war. So I can't help but think that my watching it in June 2020 was a very different experience than it would have been had I watched in late 2019. The resonance that it had with the post-George Floyd world of BLM & ACAB (All Cops Are Bastards) was astonishing. It's tempting to think this was incredibly prophetic of 2017 Lindelof, but of course the issues raised have been steadily rumbling since before the Civil Rights Movement of MLK and before. Indeed the series starts with an astonishing sequence depicting the Tulsa race massacre of 1921, in all its grotesque detail, and raised the profile of that appalling event which was little known or remembered outside the communities it had

affected, the brutality and scale of which was an additional wake up call to an audience largely unaware of this stain on American history.

And so we find ourselves in an alternate 2020, 34 years after the original series. The police in Tulsa are having to wear masks (yellow

bandanas) to cover their face and hide their identity, for fear of reprisals against themselves and their families, and are assisted by masked vigilantes in a war of attrition against the Seventh Cavalry—a terrorist organisation born out of the KKK, who wear crude homemade Rorschach masks. It's an astonishing microcosm of the current state of the relationship between the citizenry and the police, particularly in the US, where the police actually \*are\* covering their faces, taping over their ID badges, or in Portland operating totally incognito and snatching citizens off the street. In the world of *Watchmen*, we are initially invited to empathise with the police, who are fighting against the fascist/racist 7K, most especially through the character of masked vigilante Sister Night, an ex-police officer. A number of characters in *Watchmen* are

And so we find ourselves in an alternate 2020, 34 years after the original series.



Alan Moore has a complex relationship with his creation...he found himself increasingly depressed by fans who would speak to him, obviously feeling they identified with the character of Rorschach, a character who was quite obviously a racist, a fascist, and a psychopath.

Black police—one of whom we see targeted by the Seventh Cavalry early on—so we are also invited to empathise with both the ‘Black Lives Matter’ and ‘Blue Lives Matter’ perspectives. As we progress, we understand that the opposing factions are intimately interwoven, and always have been, and whilst we never lose sight of right and wrong, the line between law and order, vigilante justice and fascism thoroughly blurs, until we are forced to question every assumption we have about how justice is administered in society. With calls to defund the police (i.e. demilitarise them and remove from the responsibility for societal issues best placed elsewhere), it sounds a serious warning about our

current direction of travel.

This might all sound pretty heavy, and depressing (and in many ways it is), but on top of that, it manages to be a moving, original and absolutely rip-roaring tale that fits so neatly after the original narrative, with all of its moving parts fitting together like a fine Swiss watch (which is obviously an appropriate analogy). And for those initially confused by this new narrative seeming to be somewhat tangential to the original source material, the characters and threads from the original story start dropping in as the series progresses until the connective tissue between the two works is fully in place. For anyone who is familiar with the original story, it is a real treat,

and I think that literally every episode ended with me sitting with my jaw hanging open in a state of shellshock. Like the recent *Twin Peaks* revival (also a work of genius), this is not a show I would recommend anyone comes to cold.

Alan Moore has a complex relationship with his creation, initially due to creative issues and ownership disputes with DC, but he found himself increasingly depressed by fans who would speak to him, obviously feeling they identified with the character of Rorschach, a character who was quite obviously a racist, a fascist, and a psychopath. I’m quite sad that, unless his daughter Leah Moore or someone else close to him convinces him to watch it, then

Moore will ignore/disavow/dismiss it out of hand, when I think it honours the original like nothing else, but most importantly it honours the intended politics of the original, in ways I think even he would find surprising. It is by far the best, and perhaps the only worthy extension of the original *Watchmen* story. It makes no bones about the fact that the racists and fascist villains of the piece have taken Rorschach as their model, as their rallying point. The very thing that Moore was most upset about, that Rorschach inadvertently became a hero figure to fascists and bigots, is addressed absolutely head on. In that sense, I think it is a fine corrective to exactly what soured Moore on *Watchmen*, whilst still managing to address historical and contemporary political and social struggles in new and original ways.

This brings us back to the culture wars, and those mixed reviews. I think they were not so much mixed, as polarised—I have no doubt this series wound those fans, old and new, who regarded Rorschach as the “hero” of *Watchmen* into a frenzy, undoubtedly beating their chest about the “wokeness” of this new *Watchmen* (“why do they have to bring politics into everything?”). For my part, it’s probably up there amongst some of the most astonishing achievements in the medium of television, and a worthy continuation of the *Watchmen* story. Damon Lindelof does not want to make any more, and he is correct, this stands alone as a singular evocation of our times. I hope the producers respect that and do not continue with another writer—maybe in another 34 years there will be more to say when we see how things turn out. *CS*





This is a panel from a work-in-progress, *The Legend of Luther Arkwright*, a 230-page black and white graphic novel, written and drawn by **Bryan Talbot**. It's scheduled for publication October 2021. The story takes place over several parallel worlds in the year 2050, and this scene is of a London street.

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**Which form of future policing would you like to see inform our future and does it feel like a science fictional hope for tomorrow's police force?**


There are, unfortunately, many abysmal examples of policing around the world today that have no place in a hopeful future. These awful examples lead me to wonder why a police officer thinks it acceptable to employ violence on peaceful protesters. Is it because of their training or because of a fear of their leadership which has no regard for 'the little people'? Do many idealistic youngsters join the ranks full of hope to contribute to a better society only to be corrupted by their leaders' greed and/or bigotry? Perhaps the ultimate expression of this tragedy is illustrated by Order 66 in the Star Wars story, which forced the previously-loyal clone troopers to turn on their Jedi Generals.

**In the face of all this negativity, how can we look to a more positive future for policing in SF? Would that be too naïve?**

In order to think about future and alternative forms of policing, I'm drawn to the past. From 1916, Ireland went through many bloody years of rebellion, war and civil unrest. The final part of this was a messy civil war, which pitted neighbour against neighbour, as they fought over the terms of the incomplete independence granted by the departing English.

Emerging from this chaos as a newly-forged nation, the Irish government might have been tempted to subdue the civilian population with an iron fist. Instead, in an incredible act of hope and belief for better times, they set up an unarmed police force, the Garda Síochána (the guardians of the peace).

To this day, the Garda remain mostly unarmed. There have 'only' been 89 police officers killed in the line of duty, over the course of almost 100 years. And this force generally enjoys the respect and support of most of the populace. Though there are, sadly, some examples of corruption and undesirable behaviours by some of its members.

Any science fiction story which paints a benign, respectful form of policing should not be scoffed at for being too idealistic. Look to the past, and it is apparent that this can be aspired to. 

**Which science fiction work portrays the police or law enforcement in a way that captures your imagination? What fascinates you about that story or the characters within?**

In the Chinese science fiction, author Wang Yanzhong's story "The King of Police Cars", he has provided a futuristic police imagination. It has not been translated into English yet, so I will quote the synopsis of the story:

*Zhang Bing is a policeman "with ambition," who finds himself dispatched by his section chief to drive a recently repaired police car back to the station. Just when he starts to sulk, feeling that his talents are going to waste, the police car suddenly starts to go crazy. After flattening two maintenance workers, they speed away. The police department mobilizes its entire force to hunt down the "trouble-making car." It is only then that Zhang Bing realizes that this police car has been equipped with a cutting-edge AI system.*

*After expending a tremendous effort to seize the car and bring it to justice, they discover that the car has actually been planning its defection for a long time. What is surprising is that its motivation stems from the fact that it had always wanted to be a police car, but it had never been able to realize its dream. It was around this time that the car began to despise its fate. Just when the interrogation is about to come to a close, the supercomputer car reveals its true might, inciting the computers of the entire country to rise up in opposition to mankind and fight for their freedom. Just when humanity is at its wits end, the supercomputer gets hooked on the computer game "Beast World" and calls off the movement, abandoning its role as the leader of the uprising.*

*Totally tied up in the world of the game, it is completely unable to break free. It seems that it really is true that only online games can save humanity!*


It is interesting that the protagonist of the story is a police car instead of a human! And the ironic ending is also much fun. 



Photo by Drew Graham

**Which science fiction work portrays the police or law enforcement in a way that captures your imagination? What fascinates you about that story or the characters within?**

I'd have to look to the *Green Lantern* comics for this. The idea of intergalactic law enforcement with a more open attitude toward how officers handle their duty is ideal, especially currently. While, yes, there are still tropes that too often glorify the idea that law enforcement is some infallible concept, it's still something that feels more hopeful than reality.

And it's easy for me to say that high adventure in other galaxies is the main draw of the series (and it might be), but there's something about free-willed beings conscripted into service for something so much larger than they are that speaks to me about the ability for intelligent life forms to find a way to help others in meaningful ways.

**Which form of future policing would you like to see inform our future and does it feel like a science fictional hope for tomorrow's police force?**

Truthfully, I can't think of any future policing based on any of the current or former models working at all. Policing's alignment with the system of white supremacy in the US and its hand in hand alignment with despotic leaders worldwide has made it a regressive concept. What we need is to step back and identify what it is that society needs to handle specific issues that are important to society at the time.

So, with that in mind, I'd say the future of policing needs to be informed by the future of society and the progressive reforms we can implement for the better. We need to spot the gaps—specifically in mental health, social work, and our infrastructural maintenance—before we decide who handles escalated issues of violence.

**Does everything come back to Rick Dekard? Who are your iconic cops, detectives, PIs, or investigators? (in all genres)**

Dekard for sure is an iconic cop in science fiction. I'd go back to the Lantern Corps and call out characters like Kyle Rayner, who as an artist, approached the job in an entirely different way.

But the foundation is Chandler's Marlowe. The weary everyman who is just trying to survive in a world he barely understands as it

changes shape around him and challenges his convictions.

The sad thing is, that type of purveyor of justice has never existed outside of fiction.

**Have you read or seen any past works that resonate strongly now in 2020? How do they make you feel about the future? Are things going the way you feared in the science fictional future and what are those fears?**

*Robocop 2.*

I'm serious. We don't even get to live in the smart dystopian hellscape that was *Robocop*. We get the idiot's version.

We're living in fucking *Robocop 2*. Terrible cops, corporate overlords desperate to hoard money and change the world in ways it never needs WHILE it burns, horrific twelve-year old maniacs who curse more than I do, and the ideal enforcer of the law as an automaton who is now literally a mechanism to protect its corporate overlords.

Only thing we're missing is the drug addicted evil cop—wait, sorry, I'm joking. We have plenty of those.

**Considering where we are today, how do you feel about police, how would you like to see policing change, and how might science fiction help to achieve that future?**

A long time ago, I would say this was a complicated question. Now? It isn't anymore. I'm firmly of the opinion that we need to abolish the police as they are and use our imaginations to bring something to life that is of benefit to a society that wants to run forward.

Right now, we simply have a poorly trained cadre of bootlickers whose sole purpose is to ensure a specific set of people are protected and the rest of the people stay firmly in their place.

**What's your favourite police procedural SFnal work and why? (Fiction, film, game, or comic)**

I recently played through the *Telltale Batman* games. Those were not only a lot of fun and very out of the box, but I enjoyed the more detective-focused portions of the game. In fiction these concepts work because we can hold to moral codes without nuance. I'd say a big problem we have with how we view law enforcement in real life is that we're too often informed by the presentation in the media that provides us with these binary characters without exposing that real law enforcement is very much part of the machine and seems custom built to prevent imagination from thriving. *CS*



Photo by Maximilocus



**What did you know about the Tulsa Massacre before you watched the show?**

I honestly don't remember when I first learned about the Tulsa Massacre, but I looked a little deeper into it when I was doing research for my novel, *Invisible Chains*. I found myself in a lot of dark and uncomfortable rabbit holes while researching slavery and the impact white supremacy has had on BIPOC throughout American history. Some of the events that took place in Tulsa and in other Black communities that were terrorized and burned to the ground before, during, and after the Red Summer of 1921 inspired events in my fictional town, Freedom.

The first time I watched the opening scenes of Ep. 1: "It's Summer and We're Running Out of Ice," I cried uncontrollably because I knew what I was seeing even before the words "Tulsa 1921" appeared on the screen. I watched it with my son because we are both fans of Alan Moore's graphic novel and the film based on the comic. He asked me why I was crying, so I paused the episode and explained to him that what we were seeing really happened. He usually tells me I'm being ridiculous when I get emotional about TV shows, but this time he put his arm around my shoulders, and we watched the rest of the episode in silence.

I also knew that a lot of people didn't know about the Tulsa Massacre and would be shocked when they found out about it. And,

and part of that happiness came from knowing how upset other people would be while watching the show. I mean, not only was I getting to watch an amazing show with excellent writers and a phenomenal cast, but I got to enjoy the fact that I saw someone who looked like me on screen kicking the shit out of white supremacists. It was a dream come true.

**What issues in the series struck you or resonated as you watched it?**

Back in January, I wrote an article for *Speculative Chic*, "[Unmasking the Stereotype of the Strong Black Woman in HBO's \*Watchmen\*](#)", in which I examined the trope of the strong Black woman in fiction and wrote about the stereotype that women of color shoulder on a daily basis of always needing to be strong and the impact that it has on their mental health. Stress is one of the major contributors to health problems for women of color, and like Angela Abar, the causes of that stress comes in many forms.

I was particularly blown away by the concept of nostalgia, which is the memories extracted from a person's brain and then contained in pill form. Angela relives her grandfather's memories and learns that wearing a mask is a family tradition. Will Reeves' memories become her memories. There is a theory that trauma can be passed from generation to generation through the blood. Genetic or ancestral trauma is the pain associated with extreme trauma, such as slavery, the Holocaust, and the systematic rape of women in extremist cultures that is passed from parent to child through their DNA.

## Sister Night, is the superhero I needed as a young girl growing up in homogeneously white rural Pennsylvania.

when they learned that it wasn't just the Klan, but mobs of white citizens killing, looting, bombing, and burning, they'd be even more shocked by what happened in the Greenwood neighborhood of Tulsa. Every time I see something online talking about All Lives Matter or some white person complaining about looting and the destruction of property during the protests, I want to point them to the horrific chapters of history in which their ancestors terrorized BIPOC and destroyed their businesses, stole their land, and committed genocide.

**How did you feel with the initial few episodes? Could it have been unrelated to *Watchmen*?**

I loved the entire season, but the first few episodes had a serious emotional impact on me, and I felt almost elated by what I was seeing on screen. Telling the history of racism in America (past and present) through the lens of the Black experience as opposed to through the white gaze is revolutionary in so many ways—especially in the context of a show about comic book superheroes. Each time I watched an episode, I kept waiting for the white cis male audience to lose their minds and rail against the way the writers chose to handle the adaptation. I mean, it probably would have been enough to have a Black female superhero as the protagonist, but then to see almost every aspect of the show through her eyes made me so happy,

Not only is Angela carrying the weight of her own emotional and psychological trauma, but she also becomes a literal vessel for the ancestral trauma of her family when she ingests her grandfather's memories—which is just brilliant.

**Would you have guessed the Dr. Manhattan twist?**

Dr. Manhattan has more than one twist, so if you mean that he's played by a Black actor, then no. I never would have expected that. But again, I enjoyed it because that is the physical form Angela chose for him and I know that probably drove people insane. Dr. Manhattan is white in the comics...blah, blah, blah. Actually, he's blue and according to the HBO drama, he was also Jewish.

The fact that Angela and Laurie Blake know each other is a twist since Laurie used to be Dr. Manhattan's girlfriend, which is super awkward since she still misses him (and the giant blue metal vibrator she owns is an indication of just how much).

But my favorite twist is the fact that Dr. Manhattan made it possible to live inside of Angela at the end of the season when she eats the egg that will most likely give her all of his abilities, or at the very least increase her power, or possibly give birth to something else. Who knows?

**What is it that you have really enjoyed or lived about the series?**

The use of masks. In the narrative, they symbolize the secrets we're all hiding and the need to remain anonymous when we take a stand and become our true selves. Angela Abar wears a lot of masks and has a lot of secrets stemming from trauma and the need to protect the people she cares about the most. In episode 4, "If You Don't Like My Story, Write Your Own," Agent Blake shares her thoughts on the psychology of wearing masks: "People who wear masks are driven by trauma. They're obsessed with justice because of some injustice they suffered. Usually when they were kids. Ergo the mask. It hides the pain." Her assessment makes Angela defensive and she responds by saying, "I wear the mask to protect myself." To which Blake says, "Right. From the pain."

Agent Blake is not wrong. The masks Angela wears conceal her true face and identity, which allows her to masquerade in the guise of a "strong Black woman." But the pain is still there. And, it isn't going away any time soon.

### **Should there be a Sister Night comic?**

Absolutely! Sister Night, is the superhero I needed as a young girl growing up in homogeneously white rural Pennsylvania. The only

Black female "costumed adventurer" I saw on TV in the 1970s was Eartha Kitt as Catwoman, but she is a villain, not a hero. I developed a deep fascination with Eartha Kitt's Catwoman, which I believe was the beginning of my obsession with villains and probably one of the reasons why I started wearing all black as a teenager. She was a strong, sexy, powerful woman who played by her own rules, and most importantly she was a woman of color.

Sister Night is a badass Black female superhero who kicks the shit out of racists and looks beautiful while she's doing it. She isn't just the superhero I needed when I was a little girl. She is the superhero I need now as a grown woman. She is a role model for girls and women of color. She is the archetypal strong Black woman—a symbol of empowerment with a darker truth just below the surface. *CS*



Photo by Simon Zhu



**JP: How is the trope of police and/or law enforcement depicted in science fiction?**

**Jeannette Ng:** I would say they're very broadly portrayed positively, especially in supernatural investigation type procedurals popular on TV. There's a whole sub genre of mind reading, vision-having, immortal vampire cops. *Grimm* and *Beauty and the Beast* (2012) fall into this genre, for example. It's easy to point at these and say that they reinforce the idea that law enforcement officers are always the good guys and should be trusted, but I would say that the opposite trope can be even more insidious.

So the opposite trope is of the lazy or corrupt police force. *Gotham*, arguably utilises this. Early episodes of *Legend of Korra*. The police are "bad" in this because they aren't doing enough policing. They aren't patrolling enough, they aren't following up on complaints and cases. They aren't arresting enough people. They aren't acting on hunches and half-guesses.

Despite the police being ostensibly the bad guys, because the problem with them is that they're not doing their job enough, the implication is that more policing is always good. That crime happens as a direct result of not enough police and should be combated with more vigorous policing, rather than social measures. It ultimately supports the "thin blue line" thesis, that the purpose of the police is to create justice rather than to serve the current status quo and

there are good apples in the proverbial barrel and that the good apples will save us from the rot. *Discworld's* Vimes arguably falls into this category.

**JP: Is it a toxic trope that needs to be deconstructed?**

Yes, but as I love saying, the thing about deconstruction is that it necessitates construction. You're still harkening back to and responding to *Dragnet's* construction of the police as this rigid, uncompromising pillar of society.

**JP: Is there potential for exploring new law enforcement options?**

Absolutely! Science fiction should in theory be very good at imagining these alternate possibilities.

It's notable that our SFF about militarised police was created during America's tough on crime 80s and a lot of those themes are still incredibly resonant today.

**JP: Do our science fictional police forces influence and enforce our internal social expectations and biases in the real world?**

Arguably only science fiction by dint of how ridiculous their technology is, but the TV show *CSI* has considerable and well documented impact on how people gauge evidence when acting as jurors.

I stress that none of this should be about only enjoying "virtuous" storytelling or shaming people for their choice of entertainment. Watching *Sleepy Hollow* or reading *The City in the City* doesn't auto-

I want to see experimental utopian fiction about worlds where we aren't reliant on police as we know it. I want to see writers iterate and expand on ideas from police abolitionists and explore these systems, making them feel real to us and making them feel possible.

that the solution to the problem of bad police is always just good police and more police.

There are also more broader tropes where technologies like facial recognition are presented as not only accurate and reliable but always justified in their use. There is a good case for how this normalises the use of such technologies, eroding our privacy.

We also have a habit of making police officers (especially men) heroes in our stories even if they are removed from the context of that job quite quickly. Their role as a police officer is given as a reason for why you should trust them, like them, and more broadly explain why they turn out to be so competent when it comes to solving the plot. *Mad Max's* titular Max is a solid example. As is Will Smith's Agent J in *Men in Black*.

Righteous cops working in and eventually investigating an unjust system is also a long running trope. It's one of those things that can both offer powerful commentary but still reassure the reader that

automatically mean you support police brutality. Understanding our genre solely in those terms would be reductive. We enjoy fiction for all sorts of reasons and we are also a thinking audience.

Fiction can be very powerful but it would be ridiculous to act like it is the only or most effective battleground for change. Culling our reading lists is nowhere near as important as enacting actual political change.

**JP: How can we use science fiction to not only expose the problem but to examine potential futures in which law enforcement is different than what we know today?**

By understanding the tropes and where they come from, what they're rooted in. For a long time, police are written as incompetent buffoons in our popular media. They weren't popular. The competent, upright, by-the-book police officer came about partly because Hollywood and other studios wanted the help of the police. They wanted the structural support of local police departments, but they

also wanted police officers to help out as extras and their cars and uniforms as props. There's a whole history there building up to the birth of the radio show *Dragnet*, which then became a very long running tv series. It birthed the police procedural and that in turn gave us police procedurals with the SFF twist.

I'd encourage writers to be acquainted with theories of policing and not just see the police force as unambiguous good guys. Don't just repeat or play with the tropes as you understand them to be. Actively go out and do some reading to understand the political situation. Read the work of activists and political theorists. Yes, that will mean reading some drier texts that aren't as fun, but understanding the police as part of a system of power and governance will make one a better writer, especially when it comes to world building, which is a huge part of SFF.

One of the things a lot of commentators were struck by in Hong Kong was how quickly the police force there went from being seen as Asia's finest, of being broadly one of the better, less corrupt, less violent police forces in Asia (relatively speaking) to just beating up teenagers in broad daylight. People more knowledgeable than myself have written about the change in personnel, of members quitting, and the development of an internal narrative that is removed from how the public saw the situation. I confess it fascinates me and we don't often see that as much in fiction in general, how quickly the system can drop its pretences at civility and an organisational pivot to brutality.

**JP: Is there a solution in SF that can help to deconstruct, redesign, and rebuild a police force that truly reflects a better future?**

I don't want to be prescriptive here, but given how much the broader American public are expressing profound skepticism at the idea that society can function without a police force, I think it would be very useful to be offering them visions of possible futures.

Journey Planet's Instant Fanzine questions

**JP: Which Science Fiction work portrays the police or law enforcement in a way that captures your imagination? What fascinates you about that story or the characters within?**

The thing about the *Rivers of London* books that fascinates me is that despite Peter Grant, the protagonist being very much the by the rules police officer and the good guy, it also portrays Punch, avatar of the riotous mob as a counterweight, fundamentally important to safeguarding freedoms of society. Peter cannot destroy Punch because despite that violent streak, he is also the very necessary spirit of rebellion and the champion of the common Londoner.

**JP: Which form of future policing would you like to see inform our future and does it feel like a science fictional hope for tomorrow's police force?**

Social support networks that aren't policing. Systems that aren't imposed upon communities but are instead arising from within and chosen by them. Restorative justice rather than punitive punishments.

Or perhaps more simply, stories about heroes who aren't outsiders to the people who they are trying to help. That's probably a good start.

**JP: Does everything come back to Rick Dekard? Who are your iconic cops, detectives, PIs, or investigators? (in all genres)**

It all goes back to *Dragnet*, the influence of which cannot really be understated. And *Dragnet* was a passion project by someone who

was unabashedly pro-police as the last bulwark between disorder and civilisation.

To this day, ask yourself why cop shows always have internal affairs as the bad guys? When Jake from *Brooklyn 99* dates a defense attorney, he sees them as evil for getting bad guys off, rather than making sure that evidence stands up to scrutiny.

**JP: Have you read or seen any past works that resonate strongly now in 2020? How do they make you feel about the future? Are things going the way you feared in the science fictional future and what are those fears?**

I think it's also worthwhile to compare, say, the way the police are framed in any given iteration of *Batman* versus the current *Black Lightning* series on the CW. The latter is blunt in the limitations of the police and how cut off they can be from the communities they are in charge of. It is unapologetic in calling out the school to prison pipeline with a main character who is also the principal of a school. It even quotes and misquotes Martin Luther King, Jr. with regards to what "peaceful" protest means and the brutal fact that justice for some is not justice. It also contrasts the police with a hero who has concrete ties to the community he is trying to help. It's honestly just really good. I recommend it without reservation.

**JP: Considering where we are today, how do you feel about police, how would you like to see policing change, and how might science fiction help to achieve that future?**

We like to see our heroes as impartial outsiders who come in and fix the problem, seeing things more clearly than the biased locals. But this can be a huge problem, especially when we think of how being dissociated from the communities they have power over is how police become their own entity, how they evolve the "always protect your own" mentality and how they begin to see themselves as the only authority.

I want to see experimental utopian fiction about worlds where we aren't reliant on police as we know it. I want to see writers iterate and expand on ideas from police abolitionists and explore these systems, making them feel real to us and making them feel possible. I'm not saying that those solutions should necessarily be adopted wholesale right now as proposed or that all of them are "practical", but the point about fiction is that we can be shown these alternate, idealised worlds. So many people are confused by the very idea of "defund the police" and consider lawlessness an inevitability. This is a chance to show them.

**JP: What's your favourite police procedural SFnal work and why? (Fiction, film, game, or comic)**

I am a fan of Jasper Fforde's *Nursery Crimes* series, which by and large tackles detective fiction tropes rather than police work. In fact, you can argue that it uses that idea of a boring but honest police officer as a realistic counterpoint to the outlandish world of convoluted conspiracy plots and detectives who can deduce whole chapters of backstory from a single clue. I'm not sure it has much to offer on this conversation per se, but I like its multitude of puns.

**Journey Planet's Special section on HBO's Watchmen limited series**

*Stop now if you have not watched the whole TV series! If so—read on.*

**JP: What did you know about the Tulsa Massacre before you watched the show?**

I knew that Black Wall Street was massacred by a bunch of white people and that the police were actively involved. I knew it was a tragedy that had been shoved under the carpet for a long time and



we still don't know the full extent of the deaths or where they all were buried. I watched a documentary about it, basically. I also remember it being referenced in the Netflix series *Self Made* about Madame C. J. Walker.

**JP: How did you feel with the initial few episodes? Could it have been unrelated to *Watchmen*?**

I've only watched the film adaptation of *Watchmen* a very long time ago so I wasn't really looking for connections. I've no strong feelings about the series' connections to the comic or otherwise beyond the fact that it seemed to bring with it a lot of white people and I'm not sure that helped its story.

Perhaps it's just the climate of now, I found the idea of a police department taking the threat of white supremacy seriously to be the thing that strained my disbelief the most. As the story progressed, it was frustrating how the world was ultimately only populated with cops and white supremacists.

I was also frustrated that we didn't immediately get black superman. That Tulsa was Krypton was so obvious to me.

The sequence with a black cop who couldn't get permission to use his gun, and thus got shot while performing a traffic stop, was

by power and who protect the status quo are good. It's always been a dubious assumption, with villains like Magneto, and here it is, if anything, amplified because the characters are women of colour. Lady Trieu being denied Dr Manhattan's power because she seeks it and Angela being granted it because she doesn't want it just strikes me as incredibly uncomfortable. Lady Trieu explicitly wants to upend the status quo. Angela has been serving the status quo for most of the story and just before swallowing the egg, she has a conversation with her grandfather about how trusting in the law is important. The idea that she gains messianic powers to make good change in the world through gaining the approval and trust of a white man, even if he is coded as god, is equally dubious to me. It echoes ideas that liberty is a thing granted to people rather than something that they fought for and made for themselves. It's just not.... it's not as subversive as it thinks it is.

The same applies to the way the show talks about anger. It feels like it's trying to rebuke activists who are talking about their righteous anger that fuels them and getting into good trouble. It feels like it's trying to say that, but like maybe not, when it could be telling stories that support and explain those ideas.

I do enjoy puzzle boxes so I did enjoy all of the revelations and putting together the pieces. But it feels at times like it is hiding its social commentary underneath twenty layers of puzzle, and I don't think that makes it more powerful.

framed a bit "racial-profile-y" was uncomfortable for me. I'm not sure where they were going with this parable. Perhaps a little too much both-side-y. It's arguing that this good guy should have been allowed a gun to stop the bad guy with a gun. It's also arguing that the tables have turned and it's still unjust to do racial profiling when its white supremacists. I'm not sure but I didn't like it.

The series held its cards very close to its chest. I'm not sure this is the sort of story that needs that level of puzzle box approach. It demanded my attention, but I'm consistently skeptical that it is as deep as it promised me. I'm also frustrated with ultimately how white it is in its approach to these subjects. How it can't actually bring itself to state the involvement of the police in the Tulsa massacre and how it is framed as almost an anomaly. There's a lot of symbolism and things that are left unsaid. Maybe I'm not smart enough to decode it all, but I'm just not sure it worked for me.

**JP: What issues in the series struck you or resonated as you watched it?**

I think at some first it was trying to make a point about how the police shouldn't be masked superheroes? But then it meandered to something about masks and how you can't heal when wearing one.

It's a classic trope in superhero comics that those who are trying to attain power for change are bad and those who accidentally come

I can't get over how... white the narrative is. I know that sounds strange. But the Black Hood being a black man in disguise feels off to me. There's a long tradition in American literature of black people who "pass" both in real life and in fiction. There's books like *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* by James Weldon Johnson and much more recently *The Vanishing Half* by Brit Bennett. And I suppose my problem was that that entire arc felt like it was written ignorant of all these other stories, like they were trying to reinvent the genre, when they could be building on these rich foundations. It feels like they just wanted the plot twist shock of Black Hood being a black man but couldn't quite work through all the thematic implications and how that would fit in the constellations of other stories?

I appreciate that I might be asking for too much, but I just felt frustrated by how isolated the black characters end up being. How they end up surrounded by white people. We never get to see Angela find the friends and family of her grandmother, even though she moves to Tulsa because of her. We never see Reeve talk again to the black police officer who warned him of Cyclops. And like everything else in this very opaque show, perhaps this is intentional and is meant to be showing us a negative example and I just don't have enough patience with puzzle boxes. I really don't know.

But just in terms of how the world is constructed, we never see a wider black community. We only see the shanty town where the white supremacists live and how they are indeed profiled and tortured by this police force. Is this meant to show me how these tactics are bad even when they are used against bad people? Also, the politicians are all pulling the strings in secret behind the scenes, which makes for a compelling conspiracy but it all just feels fantastical in all the wrong ways.

There's also that throwaway villain plot when Cyclops was brainwashing black people to riot in the cinema with some sort of blinking light. Again that feels like a misguided bit of allegory and overwrites a fundamental truth: riot is the language of the unheard.

Compare with the supervillain plot in *Hunters* (2020), where they plan to ship in gallons of corn syrup and poison it. This is a plot that exploits and also highlights all the systemic inequalities. You can immediately think of all the things that have corn syrup in it and the way food deserts push black people to buy certain types of food and from certain places. It's much more elegant.

**JP: Would you have guessed the Dr Manhattan twist?**

Sort of? I mean, I obviously wouldn't have guessed from the first frame. But they do keep mentioning him being on Mars in the way that means he's not on Mars. And then it's just a process of elimination in terms of who he could be.

They have Ozymandius lampshade the fact that he's basically doing blackface, and I'm not sure that makes it better. To have all the symbology of killing a black man for his power but not actually have the substance of actually having a black man character feels off as well.

**JP: What is it that you have really enjoyed or lived about the series?**

I really liked Lady Trieu. I suppose given how the villain won at the end of *Watchmen* the first, I thought she would get her chance at ultimate power. I'm also not sure what they were going for with

the squid stigmata or what that's meant to mean. Like, is she the lamb that her divine father is somehow sacrificing for the sins of humanity? I just don't understand what they were going for with the imagery.


But she has a fantastic presence. I really wanted to see her interact with her clone mother. I thought we would get to see her go full auntie and criticise her daughter's very cunning plans, as all asian mothers must.

I do enjoy puzzle boxes so I did enjoy all of the revelations and putting together the pieces. But it feels at times like it is hiding its social commentary underneath twenty layers of puzzle, and I don't think that makes it more powerful.

There were a lot of excellent performances, but there's a level when too much of what is delightful and enjoyable about the series is watching the characters be cruel to one another, to exert power, and to dominate the narrative. When Lady Trieu blackmails that couple into signing over their farm or when Agent Blake entraps that Batman knockoff vigilante. When Dr Manhattan smugly proves himself having seen the future. But I'm not sure that's what I should be delighting in. I know it's looking to deconstruct and challenge that unearned power, but I'm not sure it achieves this goal. Or perhaps that's intentional; perhaps it's demonstrating how seductive that power is? I don't know.

That's what I mean. I find it hard to draw any firm conclusions on what it's trying to say, if anything, beyond the fact that these characters are cool and powerful.

**JP: Should there be a Sister Night comic?**

I honestly don't know where it would go. It would have to resolve a lot of things that have been left ambiguous on purpose and that is something I would always lament. But maybe it would be fun? A lot of people were against a *Watchmen* sequel being a TV series and it's now very celebrated. The prequel comic on the other hand, I'm given to understand, is a little mediocre. 





## Editorial Epilogue ERRICK NUNNALLY

**THE CONCEPT OF LAW ENFORCEMENT** in speculative fiction is an old one. It's a subject explored in just about every story that involves a dystopic or utopic future. In each, there is some form of control that must be enacted to maintain whatever status quo has been established. Speculative stories that feature any sort of mayhem also attract ideas as to what shape law enforcement may take in response to a changing world. I suggested the theme for this issue of *Journey Planet* because I felt that it was a rich subject that could be explored from a diverse set of perspectives. The rise of information technology over the past two decades and the hardening of political ideologies made the subject all the more interesting. For years, against a wide array of historically suppressed populations, police forces have been responding with disproportionate violence and aggression. The entire world was just beginning to wake up to the plight of Blacks, trans-folk, Native Americans, and other minority populations with law enforcement officers and justice systems.

Then the pandemic hit. And George Floyd's name was added to the seemingly never-ending list of Black people killed by the police. What has followed are the most significant and enduring protests since the Civil Rights era, altering the world's perception of law enforcement systems.

Enter fans. What you're reading is the raw enthusiasm of fans for the theme of this issue. I'm proud that we've gathered content from up and down the fan spectrum—enthusiastic and talented readers to professional authors. All through the lens of speculative fiction across media.

The bonus in this issue is an emphasis on the *Watchmen* property, first released by DC Comics in 1986. The creation of Alan Moore and David Gibbons would go on to alter the comic-book landscape and more. Arguably, the first worthy successor to the story came in 2019 with HBO's *Watchmen* series which both expands and redefines the original story for the 21st century.

What pleases me the most about the effort behind this 'zine are the self-realizations and explorations of how fiction reflects *and* highlights our future. Like Brendan DuBois's essay "The Tears Of A Policeman" which looks at his shift in the perception of law enforcement as a twelve-year-old through Robert A. Heinlein's *Sixth Column* and Philip K. Dick's *Flow My Tears, The Policeman Said*. Both books—among others—challenged the common indoctrination into the benevolent illusion of police and the justice systems they serve. Like the analyses of fiction's shelf-life and our current, real-life struggle to change from Christopher Golden's essay, "Suspension Of Disbelief And Policing In SF." Like the critical eye of Peter Schulte's essay, "The Policing Of Existence In Science Fiction" which examines the common trope in SF of persecution based on the basic, uncontrolled act of existing. Like the reality of science fiction's changing face and its impact on our lives in Gerald L. Coleman's scholarly essay, "Problematica: The End Of The White Hero" and the personal entreaty to believe what's happening right now, so we can do better of Nicole Givens Kurtz's essay, "The Future Is Now." Like the hardline of Bracken MacLeod's essay, "Wrong Is Wrong No Matter Who Does It" that rends the attempt of the police to serve a fantasy, rather than the public. Like the deeply personal essays that conveyed facts and fears from Chris M. Barkley, Anton Marks, and Mark Slater. Like the diversity of opinion on properties that came up time and time again from *Minority Report* to *Judge Dredd* to *V for Vendetta*. Like the perspectives from Germany and Ireland, by Tobias Reckermann and Pádraig Ó Méalóid, respectively.

Let's not forget the whole reason we're fans in the first place. Because it's fun and we have thoughts about it! This is reflected in the transcript from Chris Irvin and Chris Robinson's rewatch of *Dominion Tank Police*, Brenda Noiseux's examination of hard-pressed, cibopath detective Tony Chu from *Chew*, and David Ferguson's look at *Doctor Who*. You see it in the "Instant Fanzine" section of this 'zine that prompted both fan joy and critical thought featuring answers from Noelle Ameijenda, Regina Kanyu Wang, Angel Luis Colón, Michelle R. Lane, and Jeannette Ng.

Oh, yes, there's a lot to be proud of here. We could've easily gone over one-hundred pages, with more time—not everyone can contribute under the deadlines. (I'm not sure I would've survived designing that much content in a timely manner for that many pages!)

Ultimately, what does all of this mean? I believe it means we're paying attention to the things we love and the health of our societies. That we're willing to believe in both the fiction that speculates about our future and making progress in our nonfictional future. As much fun and interest and personal truth that exists in these pages, our action is needed to help forge a future for everyone that is, quite simply, better than our present. I believe that if even one person is inspired to engage in honest civic action, all of the hard work donated by these fabulous people in the previous pages was worth it.

**Erick Nunnally** is a co-editor for *Journey Planet 53*, graphic designer, and author of three novels: *ALL THE DEAD MEN*, *BLOOD FOR THE SUN*, and *LIGHTNING WEARS A RED CAPE*. To learn more about Erick's work visit [ericknunnally.us](http://ericknunnally.us) or [erick-nunnally.myportfolio.com](http://erick-nunnally.myportfolio.com)

