

## In an Alternate Universe: If Vietnam Had Lost

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And in the naked light I saw  
Ten thousand people, maybe more  
People talking without speaking  
People hearing without listening  
People writing songs that voices never share  
No one dared  
Disturb the sound of silence. (“Sound of Silence” – Simon and Garfunkel)

The release and worldwide popularity of “Sound of Silence”, composed and sung by Paul Simon and Art Garfunkel, is not a mere topical allusion for this essay, but it serves another role. This song, like Pete Seeger singing “We Shall Overcome” or Bob Dylan’s “How Many Roads”, becomes the trailblazer of the mass to sing against oppressive misanthropes, often planted in the West. “Sound of Silence” was released in 1964, at the height of insurgencies and political instabilities in the then Vietnam and growing US intervention in South-East Asia (Romeo 02). Simon and Garfunkel highlighted silence as a cultural trope signifying absolute submission of the common people before the leaders of the “free” world without apprehending the consequences. Silence can brew like a cancer and infest as many people as possible who would then be chilled into consciously giving up their freedom and being Pied Pipered by their leaders. People might gradually lose the faculties of reason, conversation and unlearning while hanging on to every phrase of their leaders as divine oracle, they might become capable only of “hearing without listening”. Paul Simon and Art Garfunkel were forthright champions of civil rights. And Vietnam War was one of the many hyperrealities presented to the American people, riding the wave of the anti-Communist patriotic fervour of the moment. Young American soldiers were deployed twelve thousand miles away from their homes to allegedly fight Ho Chi Min’s Vietcong, portrayed as the next impending doom after Nazi Germany of World War II.

This song is played as an important overture during the narration of the plot of a 2009 Hollywood motion picture, *Watchmen*, directed by Zack Snyder. The movie is based on a seminal graphic novel of the same name. In 1986 and 1987, British comics-artists Alan Moore, Dave Gibbons and John Higgins created a comic-strip titled *Watchmen* in two parts which would be published in 1987 by Detective Comics, and acquire cult status.

*Watchmen* is unanimously considered to project a lopsided view, a deconstructive retelling of the American superhero narrative. The superhero narrative has had its beginnings in the U.S.A. with the publication of *Superman* in 1938 by Jerry Siegel and Joseph Shuster. Superman represented one of the earliest fictional superheroes. The year of the first appearance of Superman as comic superhero is significant. Nine years prior to the publication of Superman, the stock exchange had taken a nosedive in USA, resulting in the great American recession. Along with the severe economic crisis, the rise of fascism on the other side of Atlantic was fast emerging as a spot of concern. Amidst the turmoil a metahuman is shown to be born with unrestricted powers who can deliver justice and safeguard the

interests of the weak (Morrison 12). It also initiates the formative trope of the superhero narrative in the USA, presenting one powerful metahuman or more as protectors.

*Watchmen* shares a subverted, apocalyptic version of superhero narratives, as found in movies like *Brightburn* (2019) or an ongoing web-series like *The Boys* (2019). The text is simultaneously akin to and different from the perspective shared by the mainstream graphic novel or comic genre. Here the superheroes are not all whitewashed, rather they live in shadows of grey where morality becomes an ambivalent, even dubious category. *Watchmen* is a superhero narrative, which on the one hand critically parodies and undercuts the already established superhero formulae of protecting the weak, and on the other hand restores a certain noir to the universe of graphic-story telling. In particular, there is an implied condition in the superhero genre, that the heroes have two singular identities – one as a crime-fighting vigilante, the other as an everyday nobody, like Spiderman and Peter Parker (Jones 21). *Watchmen* foregrounds the role of historiography in giving currency to a set of definitive images around an event, which while interpreting the past that has created it, questions the construction of that very past in mainstream historiographical narratives by fashioning an alternative, imaginary history as counter-discourse (Morrison 243).

A brief exposition of the plot of the novel is necessary to understand the rubrics of the alternative history being limned. The narrative begins with the murder of one Edward Blake, an aging masked crime-fighter known to the world as ‘The Comedian’. He was murdered somewhere in 1985 at the height of the Cold War. The background of the novel is a noticeably different world. It is contemporary and concurrent to the timeline of 1980s when the *Watchmen* series was being composed, but the crime-fighting superheroes exist and are employed by the government (Moore et al 04). Their involvement and contribution have altered history as we know it, resulting in a fourth term Presidential reign for Richard Nixon following the US victory in Vietnam. History is bended and the superheroes in this alternative history are no longer a self-manifested entity. They are rather harnessed as powerful tools of the state-machinery, as their elements of annihilation. The Comedian’s brutal murder is being investigated by Rorschach, another masked vigilante. Rorschach interprets the murder as part of a pre-conceived and well laid-out vendetta against the masked superheroes. He begins to suspect his old crime-fighting associates: Adrian Veidt or ‘Ozymandias’ – a multi-billionaire industrialist; Dan Dreiberger or ‘Nite Owl’ – a wealthy ornithologist; Laurie Juspecky or ‘Silk Spectre’ – the girlfriend of Jon Osterman or ‘Dr. Manhattan’. Now, Dr. Manhattan is the only entity in this group with actual superpowers. He is a nuclear physicist who acquired super-human capabilities like bending time and matter, invisibility, superhuman strength and much more after he met with an accident at an atomic plant.

The masked vigilantes, the new avatar of the superman, who now wield terror on instruction from the government against the masses, soon become the alternate peace-keeping force bolstering the police and the military forces. In one event of the novel, the Nite Owl and The Comedian are sent to disperse a riotous mob in the street. The mob want the original regular cops/policemen back on the streets. When repeated requests of Nite Owl fall on the deaf ears of a protesting public, the Comedian beats them severely with his bare hands and then opens fire at them at random:

Nite Owl: How long can we keep this up?

The Comedian: Congress is pushing through some new bill that's gonna outlaw masks. Our days are numbered. Until then, it's like you always say: We are society's only protection.

Nite Owl: From what?

The Comedian: Are you kidding me? From themselves.

...

Nite Owl: What the hell happened to us? What happened to the American dream?

The Comedian: What happened to the American dream? It came true. You're looking at it.

(Moore et al. 17-18)

Soon Dr. Manhattan is indicted of causing his once close colleagues to be infected with radioactive cancer, he is forced into exile. His disappearance marks the escalation of the Cold War, which has been depicted in the novel as "Doomsday Clock". The clock indicates the looming full-scale nuclear war against Soviet Russia resulting in total annihilation of the planet. Soon the plan is revealed. Veidt's plan was the genocide of millions of innocent human beings, in order to terrify the nations of the world into a concord for global unity and peace, set of course to his template. He would falsely accuse Dr. Manhattan as the reason behind the genocide. Then the entire world would have forgotten the petty disputes between nations and the nations would unite against their common enemy, Dr. Manhattan. The nuclear conflict would be avoided and there will be peace for which these masked superheroes are fighting for decades. Veidt claims, "I saved Earth from hell. Next I'll help her towards utopia" (Moore et al. 20). The other characters consent to keeping the pact secret for the sake of the new world order, excepting Rorschach. He remarks, "Never compromise. Not even in the face of Armageddon" (Moore et al. 20). Finally Rorschach is killed by Dr. Manhattan to avoid the exposé of the conspiracy. Veidt's plan succeeds, but Rorschach has trailed his truth in a journal behind.

The timeline of *Watchmen* is a warped one as it willingly plays with the fabric of reality as we know it. This is an anachronism, a counter-factual history, where every other alternative is possible. In the parlance of postmodern hyperreal worldview, this is "virtual history" which segues history into a play of alternatives. Virtual history is the term for a substitute vision of f/actual history which tells us what could have possibly happened if some historical event took some other turn, for instance if Nazis had won the World War II. The journey of mainstream historiography is factual, teleological. It is plotted as connected dots of momentous events and moves from one distinct point of origin and progress to other momentous moments. Virtual history tinkers with the events-obsession of dominant historiography by evoking the ethics of "what ifs", besides also of course being a commentary on the contemporary by evoking an unabashedly invented, yet also uncannily proximate past. What if the event did not take place but something else did? For example, Robert Harris's celebrated novel *Fatherland* (1992) or C. J. Sansom's novel *Dominion* (2012) evokes such alternative versions of history. In Harris's novel, World War II took another course as the Axis Powers of Hitler and Mussolini eventually won the Great War. The world now lies in the shadow of an ignoble autocracy. Sansom's novel builds on much the same premise with only the hope that Russia is still free from the clutches of Fascism (Ferguson 21). Mainstream historians like E. H. Carr had of course disapproved of alternative history as a cheap parlour game, as observed by Niall Ferguson in his title (35).

Now, literature never affirms but hints at patterns, residues and emergences. As Philip Sidney contends in his *Defense of Poesie*, “[T]he Poet, he nothing affirms, and therefore never lieth. For, as I take it, to lie, is to affirme that to be true, which is false” (Sidney 54). History, or at least its normative version, has the obligation to remain tenacious with facts and reason, however arbitrary, macabre. Authors like Sansom or Harris or in this case Alan Moore proves to be an avant-garde practitioner of the alternative narrative method. Postmodernists argue that the template of “history is irrefutable” – is a capitalist grand narrative which consolidates hyper-reality. John Bellamy Foster writes, “Postmodernists too assert that there has been an ending of sorts, and that we live in a world that is in a certain sense post-historical, an eternal afterwards. But rather than presenting a grand narrative of capitalism's final triumph, they more commonly argue that we must liberate ourselves from all grand narrative...” (Foster 184). If the illusion of the permanence of history is installed as the undeniable fact or a dominant discourse, then any counter-cultural measure against that could be considered futile. One may for instance sympathize with the tragic end of Napoleon Bonaparte at St. Helena but, if one is writing history one cannot refute the fact that he was defeated. But “virtual history” or alternative history can bend this unassailable historical fact and fashion out a narrative like *Watchmen*. Moore is devising a quasi-historical narrative that alludes to the superhero genre in order to question that discourse which projects an “event” as “history”.

In *Watchmen* it is not World War II, but the US war on Vietnam, which is subjected to scrutiny as it alters the actual outcome of the war. Vietnam, like many other nations of the world, suffered a series of foreign invasions throughout the centuries. Vietnam was a kingdom in Southeast Asia’s Red River Valley and the Empire of China had conquered the Vietnamese land around 111 BCE. Though Vietnam had received many of its cultural lineages from China, the Vietnamese people had not remained subservient to the Chinese monarchical oppression. With one rebellion after another, they resisted Chinese governance. The Vietnamese had witnessed the Mongol invasion too. The Chinese and the Mongols had invaded from the north and the Hindu dynasty of Cambodia (ancient Champa Empire) raided from the south and south west. As Michael K. Hall notes of their wars of independence even during the medieval and early modern periods, “The Vietnamese themselves expanded southward, conquering Champa by 1471 and finally taking the Mekong River delta from the crumbling Cambodian empire during the early 1700s. Although divided by the competing Trinh and Nguyen families in 1620, Vietnam was reunified within its modern boundaries in 1802” (Hall 23).

But the foreign invasion of Hanoi soil did not end with the Chinese invasions. Post 1500s, the European maritime forces emerged as the new superpower since they had infiltrated every nook and cranny of the globe in quest of colonies for trade and conquest. The British and the French claimed India, Belgium invaded Congo, the Dutch and the Portuguese went to the south of Africa. The French came to Vietnam in the guise of missionaries of Christianity and took the nation into their own custody. According to Michael K. Hall, “Annexing neighbouring Cambodia and Laos as well, by 1893 France established the Indochinese Union governed from Hanoi. Although a minority of Vietnam’s traditional mandarin ruling class allied its interests to the French presence, the majority of the population suffered economically and politically under French rule” (Hall 34).

The resistance to French rule soon became inevitable. The native Mandarin population of Vietnam gradually staged nationwide unrest and conflict against European autocracy. The early nationalists of Vietnam, however, shared the liberal political ethos and faith in armed struggle of many European thinkers. The Vietnamese Nationalist Party or V.N.Q.D.D. was established in 1927 and its prominent members mostly comprised the upper-middle class intelligentsia (Cawthorne 56).

Things took a turn once the World War II ended. The French governance over Vietnam waned and USA emerged as the next global superpower. The Great War had left the earlier mighty Great Britain a wreckage with enormous erosion to its global clout, a post-1945 wave of decolonization having followed the withdrawal of the British army from its erstwhile colonies and the subsequent collapse of the pre-1941 western imperial order in Asia and Africa. A vacuum in power was in the making, USA having emerged the frontrunner along with the U.S.S.R. to acquire the position of the next global superpower. USA had showcased its brutal might in Hiroshima and Nagasaki on August 6, 1945, that terminated the World War II. In the post-World War II context, any form of Communist ideology and policy gradually came to be branded as the enemy in the matrix of capitalist and neo-imperialist policies of the USA. The rise of Communism in Vietnam in the 1950s had not gone unnoticed by the US government and they thought the moment opportune to weed out Communism from South and South East Asia, lest USSR extend its empire. With the rise of the Indochinese Communist Party in Vietnam and its calibration of the different factions of northern and southern Vietnam, Ho Chi Minh consolidated his influence upon the Vietnamese populace. The communist uprising in Vietnam, in the context of its national, anti-imperial, anti-colonial sentiments through the 1950s (Lockhart “Australia and the Vietnam War” 62), caused strong ripples in the West, though both President Roosevelt and Eisenhower chose not to disrupt the protracted war of decolonization in Vietnam at this point. President Dwight Eisenhower followed the footsteps of Roosevelt and coalesced with the French agreement of Indochina independence. Dienbienphu fell to the hands of Vietminh on May 7<sup>th</sup>, 1954, marking the end of French supremacy in the region (Cawthorne 91).

The US Government was pressed into action following the fall of the French bastion. The shadow of the Cold War loomed large through the 1950s and worry brewed in the US about the alleged Soviet Russia-Vietcong nexus under Ho Chi Minh. The nation of Vietnam was divided, as rebel communists held their fort at Hanoi in Northern Vietnam and US controlled Saigon in the South (Caputo 36). The battle between the local guerrillas and the US army began to wrest attention from all over the globe. Vietnam surged into becoming an icon of resistance of decolonised peoples from the Global South against autocracy and imperialism throughout popular media and mass movements. The traditional Vietnamese people were followers of Buddhism. Catholic Christianity had arrived on the trail of the European missionaries and during the civil war between North and South, Christianity seemed to have been weaponized by the neo-imperial powers to replace the ancient Buddhist lineage. On 11<sup>th</sup> June, 1963, one Buddhist monk Thich Quang Duc immolated himself on a busy street of Saigon as a mark of protest against the US infiltration of Vietnam (Chong 112). The monk’s flaming body was reported across global media and the claim of Vietnam’s independence from US colonisation became a global issue. Even within the US, demands of withdrawal of US troops from Indochina began to gain traction.

With the ascension of John F. Kennedy to the US president's chair in 1961, the terms "communism" and "Cold War" spread like a Halloween phantasmagoria across the world. It was imaginary enough to horrify with thoughts of the red scare, and real enough to wage a war for imaginary causes on somebody else's land. President Kennedy devised a functional plan to end the War in Vietnam. Before the plan could be executed, he was assassinated in Texas. The American people were coerced to believe the magic bullet theory, Lee Harvey Oswald having carried out without any accomplice one of the most impossible tasks known to men. Newly elected president Lyndon B. Johnson wanted the US strategy for the Vietnam War to shift gear. He was able to convince the Congress that the Viet Cong or People's Liberation Armed Forces (PLAF) and People's Army of Vietnam (PAVN) guerrillas needed to be eliminated in order to finally decimate Soviet insurgencies in recently decolonised spaces. The action flared the existent military conflict in Vietnam. The American masses were temporarily terrified into falling for the words of their political leaders regarding the war forged by the US in Vietnam. Consensus was built for the moment, performing the chilling silence prophesied in the song of Simon and Garfunkel.

Ruwan M. Jayatunge writes, "US Military dropped more than three times the total tonnage of bombs dropped by both sides in World War II and spent over \$170 billion for the War" (Jayatunge 01). The Vietnam War was probably one of the first examples of large-scale chemical warfare: "The United States armed forces used Napalm and Agent Orange in the Vietnam War that caused tens of thousands of deaths among the Vietnamese" (Jayatunge 01). The brutality of the politically and economically expensive war was kept from the public for years: "... the US public was unaware of these facts for long years. The War was conducted for the benefit of the very few at the expense of the masses" (Jayatunge 01). Yet there were no decisive victory against the Vietnamese resistance: "we won every battle and lost the war" was the disbelieving American/Australian post-war observation (Lockhart "Australia and the Vietnam War" 64). Given the international pressures and rising domestic angst, USA had to withdraw its forces from Vietnam, but not before chipping its global image. As John Garofano argues, "Policymakers understood that domestic support would not last forever and would likely decrease as casualties mounted... Yet the nation embarked on a war that reduced U.S. power and prestige, claimed the lives of some 58,000 of its citizens, and led to a skepticism of limited war that still shapes civil-military relations and foreign policy today" (Garofano 145).

The outcome of the Vietnam War marked a political tipping point of the Cold War era. *Watchmen* the movie features a scene in which a peace-loving protestor puts a flower at the muzzle of a gun and the gun erupts fire immediately after, killing the protestor. Tax-paying people of the US had begun to protest the hegemonic domination of the US army over the sovereignty of other, formerly colonised peoples in the global South. Even the US government could not afford to remain nonchalant, as rendered in the following excerpt from US governmental records, curated from the hearings of the Committee of Foreign Relations before the US Senate, dated the 9<sup>th</sup>, 10<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> May of 1972, "The questions we will address in these hearings are: Why are we fighting in Vietnam? How did we get there? What were the reasons for the initial US commitment? Have these reasons changed, and if so, why do we persist?" (Causes, Origin 03). The US-Vietnam War effectively ended with the election of Richard Nixon as the US President in 1968. Given the dates on the government record

cited above, it seems to have taken four more years for the US policymakers to publicly accept and reflect on the loss and trauma of an unnecessary neo-imperialist war. America's defeat in Vietnam had roused in the public domain the questions recorded in the document. The Vietnam resistance not only marked victory for the freedom-loving Vietnamese, but provoked the language of buried tongues, of protest and possibilities against the hegemonic aggression of the West upon the East using red scare as the new alibi.

*Watchmen* projects the alternate universe in which Vietnam has fallen and the US enjoys uncontested supremacy all over the world, along with uninhibited access to a perennial state of exception. The Comedian has raped and impregnated a local farmer girl, and when she comes to him demanding to be taken care of, the Comedian shoots her in the face. Dr. Manhattan is shown in one of the graphic panels as a large pale blue god-like entity against a sky dyed fire, much as we see in Francis Coppola's movie *Apocalypse Now* (1979) – one of the most influential movies made on the brutalities of the Vietnam War. He lights up and incinerates a large section of the Vietnamese, on the suspicion that they could be the Vietcong guerrilla.<sup>1</sup> The genocide in Vietnam is limned as uncannily proximate to the nuclear decimation of Hiroshima and Nagasaki by the US.

American defeat in Vietnam resonates as a watershed moment in postcolonial world history. Superior military resources, strategies and armed forces were defeated through protracted war or people's war strategies and armed propaganda<sup>2</sup> by an interactive group of irregular and semi-regular peasant forces of national resistance who apparently had little but the political-military weapon of mass mobilisation for national liberation. Andrew Martin in his book, *Receptions of War: Vietnam in American Culture* (1993), analyses the social and political changes that took place globally in the aftermath of the Vietnam War. Martin writes at length about the Vietnam Syndrome of the US government, which indicates the reluctance and inhibition of the government to interfere in the policies of nations in the global South. Martin writes, "In the making at the same time, however, was a series of sub-cultural or countercultural movements that would shatter this paradigm during the following decade: notably, the civil rights movement, feminism, and the emerging youth movement. The Vietnam War would force these potentially volatile social compounds together for a brief explosive moment in the late 1960s, before splitting them apart again in the changed conditions of the 1970s and 1980s" (Martin 41).

The graphic novel *Watchmen* was being created and marketed in the 1980s, with the Vietnam War and its aftermath having been finally begun to be explored from the perch of popular culture. The novel provides us with an alternative vision of history in which the possible seismic shifts

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<sup>1</sup> The Vietnamese forces in arms, including the guerrilla, who stood up against the US invasion comprised not just communists, though that was the impression created by the US-funded capitalist media. It comprised from "1960, at least, anarchists, Buddhists, religious sects, and landless peasants, as well as communists, [who] supported the southern insurrection against the US-backed RVN and its armed forces", as observed by historian Greg Lockhart in his review essay "Blocking out the nature of the Vietnam War" (44).

<sup>2</sup> According to Greg Lockhart in "Blocking out the nature of the Vietnam War", "armed propaganda" referred to the military method of advancing the political process of mobilising widespread support for national independence and a better life in the peasant society and vice-versa (45), "propaganda" in Vietnamese suggesting something closer to religious proselytizing rather than misinformation.

in the global order are evoked, had the US really won. The Vietnam War works much like the definition of an “event” as delineated by Jean Baudrillard in his essay “Simulacra and Simulations” (1983). The “event” could have referred to true historical incidents. But the “truth” and “reality” of history, as Baudrillard proposes, are given life in the public domain by symbols and images circulated around the event in the dominant discourse, which could paradoxically make the truth of the event increasingly hermetic. The dominant discourse in this novel is shadowed by the capitalist totalitarianism of the US government and its instruments of exceptionalist power – the metahumans or superheroes. In the novel, this gives birth to militant nationalism and a despotic brand of world leaders. The superheroes of this new, alternative world reflect its leaders, creating a hyperreality envisioned by Baudrillard, “Thus, feigning or dissimulating leaves the reality principle intact: the difference is always clear, it is only masked; whereas simulation threatens the difference between “true” and “false”, between “real” and “imaginary”...” (Baudrillard 367).

The novel works here as a simulator which warns us of the hovering possibility of a world of watchers, which would have become imminent, apparent even, way back in the 1970s and 80s, had Vietnam lost “its 1945-75 war of national independence” (Lockhart “Blocking out the nature of the Vietnam War” 41). The voices voicing the quest for freedom in that world are made to choke under the coercive measures of the Vietnam-victor US. The victory at Vietnam in the graphic novel *Watchmen* has made US into a global empire, a tyrant without parallel and the wielder of the imminent terror of nuclear winter hovering over the planet. Alan Moore renders the postmodernists’ take on history as an inter-textual mesh positioned in contexts curated, claiming meanings from contexts curated, foregrounded by the then dominant in power politics. “History” in the world of simulacra and simulations provides no route to truth, it is a craft, a manufacture: “As Jonathan Culler puts it, meaning is context bound, but context is boundless” (Currie 86).

Moore tinkers with this “context” of Vietnam War to predict the apocalyptic futures many territories today seem to be hurtling into. Global fate and futures of multilateral world orders had apparently been printed in the aftermath of the Vietnam War. The loss of the US government had political and economic inflections, but in excess of that a message of postcolonial transformation for the global South. Post World War II, there was no Nazi Germany to blame and propagate against, so the US government orchestrated Cold War overemphasis on the communist menace as the newly-minted terror for the sovereignty of any state. Their loss to Vietnam kindled registers and strategies of decolonization, and helped the communist regimes in Asia and Africa survive for around three decades, until the next enemy emerged – the Islamist Fundamentalist as the fresh signifier of global terrorism. *Watchmen* is a brilliant art-work which exposes this alternate, proximate universe of terror and apocalyptic doom, as also the invincibility of it. In the immediate aftermath of the Vietnam war, the watchers might have been driven underground for the moment, but the surveillance regime seems to be in vivid waiting to resurface. Not only as the titular character of *The Watcher* (2022), a Netflix-sponsored popular American TV-series, but also as the globally surging terror of digitally accrued metadata, accessible to corporates and governments, both obscure absolutes in charge of data that makes the public their infinitely transparent, utterly predictable variables.



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