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Googling ‘Vice-President Ford’ and the ‘Keene Act’: The discovery of *Watchmen*’s uchronical universe, twenty years after publication

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Abstract

Having grown up entirely within the Franco-Belgian comics tradition, I confess that I read *Watchmen* for the first time in 2009. On page 2, I realized that I would need to look up several historical facts and names in order to make sense – more than twenty years after publication – of the complex background of gloomy Cold War tensions against which the action takes place. (Vainly) desiring to get the full picture and bridge the cross-cultural gap(s), I Googled terms like ‘Vice-President Ford’, ‘KT-28’ and ‘Keene Act’, which made me realize that *Watchmen*, to my surprise, has its own ‘Wiki’, and more important, that it displays a *uchronia*, or alternate history. Different scholars have fruitfully studied Moore’s playing with the narratological levels of story and discourse. While they have focused on the manipulations at the *discourse*-level, this article divides the *story* in separate levels to probe the mechanisms of reading ‘uchronical’ comic stories. Partially [159. ||| 160:] inspired by Wolf Schmid’s narratological model (2008), I hypothesize the level of ‘uchronical *Geschehen*’. Comparing *Watchmen* to some other uchronical works, I try to explain why Alan Moore’s gradual disclosure of the alternate-historical information generates two particular ‘uchronical reading pleasures’.

This article concerns narratological categories and the ‘uchronical’ or alternate-historical universe of what in all probability is Alan Moore’s most famous work (definitely in Belgium). As the title partially indicates, these narratological and uchronical questions did not arise from an a priori craving for academic hairsplitting, but from an (in the eyes of comics scholars and all Anglo-American comics fans) incredibly, if not unforgivably, belated reading experience. To pave the way to the central point of my argument, it is necessary to focus on this specific *experience*, affected as it was by particular temporal and spatial gaps.

Many readers from non-Anglo-American comics traditions (or beginning comics readers in general) will have – and several really had – experiences similar to those that I will report here. To make the cross-cultural distance more palpable, I have chosen to present the next paragraphs, to some extent, in the way of a ‘personal reading diary’, in

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which I try to evoke my reading process as 'naive' as it really was when I read *Watchmen* for the first time. The diary will stop once I have reached the concept of 'uchronia', a notion that I actually started to consider *through* the reading of *Watchmen*.

Less than three years ago I was asked by a university colleague to co-organize a conference panel on comics dealing with representations of war, which he knew I had been studying chiefly with regard to medieval Russian historiographical texts. Saying yes suddenly reanimated my long lost love for comics. Entirely grown up within the Franco-Belgian (children's) comics tradition as I was, the first 'adult comics' (in Flanders we tend to avoid the term 'graphic novel') I read were those which my colleague recommended to me: Spiegelman's *Maus* (1986, 1991), and Satrapi's *Persepolis* (2000–2003), whereupon I read *Watchmen* (Moore et al. 1986–1987).

There existed a translation in my mother tongue (Dutch),¹ but nevertheless I decided to buy a copy in English (the 2008 collected edition). Although Dave Gibbons' style was not totally dissimilar to Hergé's *ligne claire* and colourist John Higgins had used 'European-style flat color' (Wikipedia Contributors 2010b with reference to Gaiman 1987), I immediately realized that it would take some time to familiarize myself with this truly un-Franco-Belgian story world, in other words, to narrow this 'comics-cultural' gap. What was more, after reading the second plate on page 1, words like 'scab' and 'vermin' already made me consult my dictionary. Was the 'linguistic' gap, which I had tried to bridge by buying that copy in English, already taking its toll?² Especially the first five pages were hard to struggle through, and not only because I was forced to keep a very comprehensive [160. ||| 161:] dictionary (containing slang) within arm's reach. From page 2 onwards, I needed to look up historical facts and names as well, in order to make sense, more than twenty years after the publication of the series, of the complex background of Cold War tensions. To illustrate what makes *Watchmen*'s 'uchronical' universe peculiar, it is the slow, yet thought-provoking read of these first pages that must be concentrated on.

In an attempt to get the full picture, I Googled 'Vice-President Ford'. I only knew that a US president with that name died recently, and learned that this Gerald Ford had been vice-president, but not in 1985, the year I noticed in the very first caption box after having turned back to page 1. Ford had been US president from 1974 until 1977, so it was strange that the two detectives did not speak of a president Ford. Perhaps it was too far-fetched, on the other hand, to link this Vice-President to Gerald Ford; after all I was only reading a 'comic book'.

The hermeneutical trouble really started on page 4. In the first panel (see Figure 1), investigator Steve Fine speaks of 'Knot-Tops', 'KT-28s' and 'luudes', three words which I did not find in my dictionary. By Googling Knot-Tops I discovered with perplexity the existence of *Watchmen Wiki*; there I read:

¹ Rob van Eijck's Dutch translation first appeared in 1989 (in six issues), and, in connection with the release of Zack Snyder's *Watchmen* (I watched the film after having re-read the book), again, in a revised version, in 2009.

² Many of his English-speaking fans may not realize it, but Alan Moore's language can be really hard for foreign readers without a degree in English. For my work, I read English articles almost every day, but from the very first page I realized that it must have been hubris that made me buy *Watchmen* in the original language.

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The Knot Tops were a New York City gang characterized by wearing their hair in knots resting on the tops of their heads Japanese style. They were quite violent and vicious; while walking to Hollis Mason’s home, Dan Dreiberg and Laurie Juspecky are attacked by a small group of them in an alley. Dreiberg and Juspecky fight them off, severely injuring them.

The Knot Tops were also responsible for the murder of Hollis Mason on Halloween, when they mistakenly believe that Mason was the Nite Owl that freed Rorschach from prison. This small group was led by a man named Derf. (Watchmen Wiki Contributors 2009a)

The information in the first sentence seemed sufficient. Fortunately, I did not know who Hollis Mason was, since the entry reveals the murder from chapter VIII.³ ‘KT-28’ (my dictionary merely told me that ‘KT’ stands for ‘Knight Templar’) is specified on *Watchmen Wiki* as follows: ‘KT-28 also known as Katie is a street drug’ (Watchmen Wiki 2009b), which is very concise and efficient information. I vaguely wondered whether Knot-Tops and these Katies were existing terms in the real world or just fictional creations. In the first case, I should have found them on the ‘default’ Wiki (i.e., *Wikipedia*). But fictional names might not automatically imply alternate history, of course. The third term is not covered by *Watchmen Wiki*, but *Wiktionary* (2009) teaches us that in Estonian ‘luudes’ is ‘Inessive plural form of luu [‘bone’]’. Did Alan Moore know Estonian? A little below on the page with the Google results, my eye fell on this small web excerpt: ‘Luudes are qualuudes, a real-world drug. Panel 2: Visible in the background is a geodesic dome. There are at least three of [161. ||| 162:]

Figure 1: *Watchmen I*, p. 4: 1.

[162. ||| 163:] them in New York; one is called ...’ This excerpt comes from ‘The Annotated *Watchmen*’, a comment by Doug Atkinson (1995: 4), as I learned afterwards.

To my astonishment, *Watchmen*, like for example Dante’s *Divina Commedia* had entirely been annotated. Students of literature not uncommonly read the classics with plenty of explanatory notes on the bottom of the page, and this from the very first lines. *Watchmen*, however, was a ‘comic book’, something one would reread more easily than a centuries-old masterpiece. If I liked *Watchmen*, I still could read it again afterwards, if necessary, with Doug Atkinson’s notes. Besides, I was afraid that these comments would spoil my enjoyment of reading, a kind of ‘anxiety’ which I did not experience while reading Dante’s adventures, however much I admire that fantastic universe.

After I had reached panel 5 of this same page 4 (see Figure 2), the *Watchmen Wiki* too turned out to be a real threat to my reading pleasures. Detectives Fine and Bourquin are talking about ‘Rorschach’. I remembered this name from the first plate of this opening chapter (‘Rorschach’s journal’), and now, for the first time, I Googled it. I learned about Hermann Rorschach and his inkblot test, of which I was aware, although I did not know its name. After some mouse clicks I ended up on the ‘default’ (i.e., not part

³ Since I read *Watchmen* in the collected ‘graphic novel’ edition (Moore et al. 2008), I speak about ‘chapters’ instead of ‘issues’.

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of *Watchmen Wiki*) Wiki page 'Rorschach (comics)' (Wikipedia Contributors 2010a), where I immediately recognized the masked vigilante from the facing page 5, with his grappling gun, trying to climb the skyscraper. As fast as I could, I clicked back. Obviously, I did not want to know who was under that mask, although the red-haired doom-monger appearing for the second time was a likely candidate. Now, I decided to Google only the names of characters which I supposed were not important to the plot's development. With the 'Keene Act' (I did not know any Keene), still in the same panel, I took the risk to Google this term too, on the assumption that it would supply me with some useful historical information without betraying any of the plot's secrets. This is what I read, providing the biggest step forward in my understanding of the *Watchmen* universe:

The *Keene Act* was a national law passed in 1977 by the United States Congress that outlawed 'costumed adventuring'. Passed by a United States senator named John David Keene, it immediately made illegal any form of vigilantism by costumed adventurers, except for the few who worked solely in the remit of the United States government. Although the Act had been on the table for some time, it was finally rushed through as an emergency law following the police strike on America's east coast, which was itself a reaction to the extreme methods employed by costumed crimefighters (notably Rorschach) who used excessive force when punishing criminals. (Watchmen Wiki 2010)

Since this senator Keene did not have a default Wiki, only a *Watchmen Wiki* page, I finally grasped that I was dealing with alternate history or 'uchronia', as it tends to be known on the European [163. ||| 164:]

Figure 2: Watchmen I, p. 4: 5.

[164. ||| 165:] continent. Once I had come to realize this, my reading process went substantially faster, and after a while, I even stopped Googling.

Uchronia

The term *uchronie* was coined in 1857 by the French philosopher Charles Renouvier, who simply replaced the Greek 'topos' ('place') in 'utopia' by 'chronos', 'time' (Rodiek 1997: 9). Regarding the term, Christoph Rodiek states that:

Compared with competing notions ('allohistory', 'alternative history', 'politique fiction', 'historia ficción', 'Gegengeschichte' etc.), the term has the advantage that it [...] has gained acceptance in the Romance languages, and that it is sporadically used in the English-speaking area too. By 'uchronia' we do not understand an arbitrarily invented 'imaginary' story, but a 'hypothetical' past, as plausible as possible. [...] *Taking the developing potential of a real historical situation as a*

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starting point, the uchronist conceives a narratively coherent alternative to the actual course of history. (1997: 26–27, my trans. and italics added)⁴

The discussion about which is the most appropriate term is not of interest here. What is essential is the '*narratively coherent alternative to the actual course of history*' (Rodiek 1997: 26–27, my trans. and italics added). Such a coherence clearly requires a particular effort from the author, and in comics, from the artist too, although Dave Gibbons allegedly considered the uchronical setting liberating, because he did not have to rely on reference books to draw uchronical New York (Wikipedia Contributors 2010b with reference to Gaiman 1987). What is more, it also demands specific efforts from the reader, efforts that may be explored by means of narratological categories.

In a comment from his blog, Ray Tomczak (March 2009) suggest that, 'Alan Moore's alternate version of American political history seems poorly thought out and doesn't quite make sense'. Tomczak argues that it would have been better if Reagan, not Nixon, had been the president during the New York disaster, whereupon he works out an *alternative* alternate world for *Watchmen*. In the end, however, he admits:

None of these petty quibbles detract from the brilliance of what Moore accomplished in *Watchmen*. After all, when people talk about what makes the book great, they speak of its intricate structure, its deconstruction of the super hero genre, and its realistic portrayal of its characters. *The alternate history is merely background detail.* (Tomczak 2009, italics added) [165. ||| 166:]

While most comics scholars might know what Moore has achieved in *Watchmen* with the superhero genre and the portrayal of his oblique heroes, these deconstructive interventions have little or nothing to do with narratology and narrative techniques. Tomczak's praise for *Watchmen*'s intricate structure, on the other hand, undeniably has. *Watchmen*'s intricate structure – whether or not one considers the alternate history itself as 'background detail' – develops its complexity, precisely thanks to the fact that *Watchmen* displays a uchronical story world. A number of scholars (Miettinen 2006; Kukkonen 2008: 41–59) have fruitfully studied Moore's experimentation with the narratological levels of *story* and *discourse*, which makes the structure, as Tomczak declared, so intricate, and the reading experience so intriguing and challenging, what Miettinen (2006: 1) describes as a 'thrilling narrative structure'.

How to extend narratological levels when dealing with alternate history?

⁴ Gegenüber konkurrierenden Begriffen ('allohistory', 'alternative history', 'politique fiction', 'historia ficción', 'Gegengeschichte' usw.) hat der Terminus den Vorteil, daß er sich [...] im romanischen Sprachraum durchgesetzt hat und sporadisch auch im englischsprachigen Bereich verwendet wird. Unter 'Uchronie' ist nicht eine willkürlich erzeugte 'imaginäre' Geschichte zu verstehen, sondern eine möglichst plausible 'hypothetische' Vergangenheit. [...] *Ausgehend vom Entwicklungspotential einer realen historischen Situation verfaßt der Uchronist eine narrativ kohärente Alternative zum tatsächlichen Geschichtsverlauf.* (Rodiek 1997: 26–27, italics added)

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In a forthcoming article on comics dealing with historical matters, Anouk Dubois and I put forward a four-layered model that is largely based on the narratological levels as presented by the German narratologist Wolf Schmid (2008: 251–84):

- a. Presentation of the narration (*Präsentation der Erzählung*)
- b. Discourse (*Erzählung*)
- c. Story (*Geschichte*)
- d. That which happened in real history (*Geschehen*)

The first level, *presentation of the narration*, in comics – as in film – by a meganarrator,⁵ and the second, *Erzählung*, in other words Chatman's *discourse* (1978) or Tomashevskii's *siuzhet* (1931), do not interest me in this article, although they are very relevant to the elaborate composition of *Watchmen*. In connection to comics with a prominent, but *common* (non-alternate) historical setting, the reader more or less feels the need to reconstruct for himself level d, *Geschehen*, 'that which happened', the real historical facts, the historical background against which the *story* (level c, Schmid's *Geschichte*, Chatman's *story*, Tomashevskii's *fabula*) has to be interpreted. Here lies the main difference between Schmid's *Geschehen*, which is intrinsic to the *fictional* world of the literary work in question, and the *Geschehen* as presented in my article with Dubois (in press), which directly refers to our *historical* world. As Schmid, who calls his model 'idealgenetisch' (2008: 259), rightly emphasizes, this model in no way represents the *actual* creative process of a literary work, not even the process of its reception. It merely serves as a means to reflect on the devices under operation in the narration (and the reception) of a work, in this case, a comic book.

In more or less realistic comics with a *common* and recognizable historical setting (e.g. the works of the Italian comics author Attilio Micheluzzi, Satrapi's *Persepolis*, etc.), the words and images of [166. ||| 167:] story level c normally fit with the implicit historical data of level d. This not being the case in alternate-history comics, we might postulate an alternative for d, namely a *uchronical* (or *uchronian*) narratological level d²:

- a. Presentation of the narration (in comics, by a meganarrator)
- b. Discourse
- c. Story (*Geschichte*)
[d¹. Historical *Geschehen* (that which happened in real history) /]
- d². Uchronical *Geschehen* (that which happened in the alternate history)

This uchronical level contains the events that must have happened in the fictional, uchronical course of history. Essentially, these events to some extent differ from those in the real course of history (level d¹), which nonetheless functions as the implicit background that urges reflection during the reading process. In uchronical story worlds, this level d² does not simply replace level d¹, but constitutes an – at best – intriguingly interfering distortion of level d¹. As a matter of fact, level d¹, the history as we find it in

⁵ Film theorist André Gaudreault's narratological category of the *meganarrator* (1989: 114) is responsible for the *narration* in words, but also for the *monstration* (showing) in pictures, the sequencing of the images, etc., cf. Ann Miller's application of the *meganarrator* into the field of comics (2007: 107).

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our history books, and on the default Wiki pages (if these are reliable), *never* stops being our frame of reference:

- a. Presentation of the narration
- b. Discourse
- c. Story (*Geschichte*)
- d². Uchronical *Geschehen*
[needs d¹, historical *Geschehen*, as frame of reference]

Point(s) of divergence in *Watchmen*

When does level d² come into play in the reading process? Frenchman Emmanuel Carrère, who has written an elaborate essay on uchronia circumscribes it as follows: ‘In this vast territory [of our history], bounded only by the fleeting present and by the limits of historical knowledge, it is necessary to produce a modification, and that this is a modification of *heavy consequence*’ (1986: 15, my trans. and italics added).⁶ The latter specification, he goes on, is imperative, since in reality, hardly every work of fiction (slightly) changes the past in one way or other. Carrère gives the example of Fabrice del Dongo, the Romantic hero of Stendhal’s *La Chartreuse de Parme*, who is a fictitious character who ends up on the battlefield of Waterloo in 1815, but who, in fact, does *not* affect the course of history. In other words, this kind of modification is *not* of ‘heavy’ consequence: since del Dongo’s actions in the novel do not make Napoleon win at Waterloo, no one considers *La Chartreuse de Parme* to be a uchronical novel. **[167. ||| 168:]** What then are deeds or events of ‘heavy’ consequence? Unsurprisingly, this is a very debatable question. Nevertheless, there are really classic *what if*’s. For example: What if Napoleon had captured Moscow in 1812 or had won at Waterloo, what if the Confederates had won the Civil War, what if Hitler had won WWII (Ryan 2006: 657)? Such uchronical events of high consequence are described as ‘points of divergence’, and this brings us to ask: what is the point of divergence in *Watchmen*? It has been suggested (Schmunk 2010) that it is the public debut of Hooded Justice (13 October 1938), but is the impact of this debut really *heavy* enough to speak of ‘uchronia’? Rather, it is just a fictional element, present(ed) on levels a and b, that one can put into the chronology of story level c by means of the date. Rather, *the* point of divergence in *Watchmen*’s universe is not the advent of masked vigilantes in Moore’s United States, but the ‘rebirth’ of Jon Osterman in 1959, or, more probably, the start of his service as Doctor Manhattan for the American government, the impact of which is not manifest until we see him, during his own flashback (a device on narratological level b) in Chapter II in Vietnam, together with the Comedian. The United States turn out to have won in ‘Nam’: *that* is an event of high consequence, which leaves no doubt for the reader: this is a work of uchronia. From that moment on – and here I return to my own reading experience – I was able to more satisfactorily assess and appreciate other events and details, like the Keene

⁶ Dans ce territoire immense [i.e., of our history], borné seulement par le fugace présent et par les limites de la connaissance historique, il s’agit d’opérer une modification, et qu’elle soit *lourde de conséquences*. (1986: 15, italics added)

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Act, that is, within the appropriate framework of uchronical level d^2 , which allowed me to give shape to *Watchmen*'s particular universe.

Admittedly, Moore and Gibbons provide the reader with hints of the victory in Vietnam on page 4 of the opening chapter. As I discovered afterwards, thanks to Doug Atkinson's annotations (1995: 4), one of the omnipresent newspaper headlines that Miettinen calls 'detail texts' (2006: 25–26) proclaims, 'Vietnam, 51st state'. Jeffrey Lewis appropriately observes (his second sentence, though, might be too flattering):

In telling this story, Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons really packed the panels with a huge amount of detail, so that there are constant subtexts to every image. [...] *Watchmen* is really a medium unto itself; no comic book before or since has used words and pictures to communicate ideas in the way used in *Watchmen*. (2001: 139)

And a fair but fortunately not too large portion of these 'words and pictures' (might) point to the 'uchronicity' of the story world. Even on page 1, as suggested by Atkinson, one might have discovered such hints: 'If the vehicles appear strange, it's because they are electrically powered' (1995: 3). To me, they did not appear strange; *now* after reading Atkinson, they do a little. Personally, one of the first purely *visual*, though still vague clues that Moore and Gibbons had created a uchronical world, were the dirigibles in the New York air (for the first time on page 5, see Figure 3). While [168. ||| 169:]

Figure 3: *Watchmen I*, p. 5: 1.

[169. ||| 170:] reading, I did not regard the advertising posters ('mmeltdowns!' in this same panel; see also Lewis 2001: 142) or the appearance of pirate comics from the third chapter onwards as uchronical.

Little by little: Moore's gradual disclosure of *Watchmen*'s uchronia

If part of *Watchmen*'s success can be situated in the fact that it displays an alternate history, what certainly makes this 'uchronical device' (even) more successful is the fact that Moore reveals the alternateness of his story world in much the same 'intricate' way as he presents events in the protagonists' turbulent lives (the events of level c by the presentation on levels a and b): little by little, slowly but surely. Through the eyes of Rorschach we see a blue man – is he a man? – in Chapter I, in Chapter II we see him in Vietnam, in Chapter IV he tells us his story and in the appendix of this chapter we fully understand his heavy impact on Moore's uchronical universe. Other details from level d^2 are unveiled later on and, as a rule, rather modestly. Not earlier than Chapter IX, for example, does the observant reader get to know what happened to Watergate investigators Woodward and Bernstein (Moore et al. 2008: 20, Chapter IX) on level d^2 , that is to say, *if* these two names sound familiar and are part of the reader's cultural knowledge, which functions as his personal level d^1 .

A brief look at some other uchronical comic books teaches us that their 'uchronicity' is not always kept veiled as carefully, comparatively speaking, as in

Watchmen. In ‘Ucronia’, for example, an alternate-history issue from the popular Italian series *Dylan Dog* (Sclavi et al. 2009; see Figure 4, mind the dirigible), Stalin and Hitler have established ‘communazism’ (see Figure 5). Tiziano Sclavi, however, lets his detective Dylan Dog, the London-based ‘investigator of the supernatural’, ponder (together with a quantum physicist; Sclavi et al. 2009: esp. 38–41) the existential implications of uchronia, rather than letting the reader experience what this ‘communazism’ implies for the heroes in the complicated fictional world. The ‘comunazismo’ (Sclavi et al. 2009: 32) is merely *one* possible parallel world within the 98 pages of this issue, which therefore lacks a narratively coherent alternative story world. ‘Ucronia’ certainly makes a fine read as a reflection on the phenomenon of uchronia, but (1) it does not surprise the reader at all with respect to discovering *that* (part of) the presented story world is uchronical. Actually, Sclavi’s issue title immediately gives it away, as is the case in many other alternate (comics-)stories, like Louis-Napoléon Geoffroy’s *Napoléon apocryphe* (1835, revised 1841), one of the earliest uchronical works in literary history, or Éric Corbeyran’s intriguing recent French comics series named *Uchronie(s)* (2008–2011), in which the main characters seem to be present in each of the three parallel (uchronical) worlds of the series: New Byzance, New Harlem and New York.⁷ Another ‘uchronical reading pleasure’ (2) that Dylan Dog’s ‘Ucronia’ fails to offer is the challenging reconstruction of the particularities of the alternate-history course, in the same way as readers may choose to reconstruct story level c in detective stories, or with regard to *Watchmen* (which in its own way *is* a detective story), in the biographies of Edward Blake, Walter Kovacs, [170. ||| 171:]

Figure 4: Dylan Dog, ‘Ucronia’, cover.

[171. ||| 172:] Figure 5: Dylan Dog, ‘Ucronia’, p. 32: 5.

[172. ||| 173:] Laurie Juspezyk and the other characters. That is why I was so glad that, on the back of my English copy (Moore et al. 2008), no mention was made of alternate history whatsoever, while on the Dutch edition (Moore et al. 2009) – as I recently discovered – the publishers *have* mentioned this uchronical peculiarity of the *Watchmen* universe, thus potentially spoiling what I have just outlined as ‘uchronical reading pleasure (1)’.

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⁷ The specific character of each of the three parallel worlds is intensified by scenarist Corbeyran’s choice for three different artists (Chabbert for New Byzance; Tibéry for New Harlem; Defali for New York; each world being depicted in three large-format albums). The tenth and final album ‘Épilogue’ (drawn by Chabbert) has just been published. While the series’ very name *Uchronie(s)* spoils what I call ‘uchronical reading pleasure (1)’, Corbeyran convincingly succeeds in maintaining ‘uchronical reading pleasure (2)’ throughout the series. Another brand-new French uchronical series is *Jour J (D-day, 2010–)*, by Fred Duval and Jean-Pierre Pécau.

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