

Paramilitary and Police State as a Dystopian Future in Brian Wood and Riccardo Burchielli's *DMZ*

Numerous critics have viewed cultural products as indicators of social reality in many ways. In fact, comic books critic Matthew Pustz regards comics as cultural memory. Advancing the term “causal learning,” Pustz suggests that a cultural text might refer to the contemporary reality, despite its potential inaccuracies. Pustz continues to write that comics are inherently expressionistic, meaning that art is produced representing either reality or an emotion. Besides Pustz, another comic book critic Dirk Vanderbeke suggests that comics is the retriever of the position which allows it to address social and political reality. Therefore, besides the artistic value that comic books provide the reader, we might find interesting connections between the comics medium and reality.

Indeed, since its radical change in the mid 1980s notably after the works of creators such as Alan Moore and Frank Miller, the comics medium in the US has gained considerable significance in academia, primarily owing to the aforementioned indication to reality. As it is pointed out in the twenty-second issue of *Critical Explorations in Science Fiction and Fantasy* journal, “...they [comics] do not exist on the edges, but rather form a nexus between various areas and aspects of culture and cultures.” Considering the suggestions of Pustz and Vanderbeke, Brian Wood and Riccardo Burchielli's *DMZ* could be a reasonable example of this reflection through the comic book's dystopian framing of post-9/11 America, which is framed through a long-lasting and multifold narrative. Thus, *DMZ* becomes a nexus in which the negative effects and potential threats of militarism in the twenty-first century United States projected through Wood's dystopian narrative.

DMZ was formerly discussed by Angus Nurse in the context of free speech and journalism. Nurse rightfully claimed that War on Terror in *DMZ* was an allegory of the ways in which the free speech restrictions were implemented in real life. In this paper, however, I aim to offer a different perspective to approach *DMZ* since Nurse extensively discusses the challenges that investigative journalism faces. My approach to *DMZ* will rather be comprise a military context, and the ways in which the empowerment of military industry complex plays a role not only in inflicting restrictions and arguably maintaining order, but also to attempt to show the invisible unity of police and military, their role in exercising power.

If we are to regard the comics medium as potential reflectors of *status quo*, it becomes rather tempting to compare traumatic events such as war or arguably corrupt power apparatus such as military industry complex in its close relation to police departments in the US, and to the political chaos and a chain of traumatic incidents that occur in comic books like *DMZ*. A reason why *DMZ* might be viewed as a dystopia would be the entirety of destruction in which the advanced military arsenal of the US Army is used. In *DMZ*, this massive military power which so far has been present outside the US borders, now returns home to haunt its citizens. Additionally, the American metropolitan in *DMZ* functions as the area in which the effect of social issues and trauma—such as the civil war in *DMZ*—are experienced profoundly inasmuch as the scale of destruction is the deepest there. In this sense of excessive military power and the potential threat also to the homeland, the central idea surrounding the paper will be that the military power is a police power which neither suffices to stop an escalated internal strife nor provides security to all citizens.

The idea of the inseparability of military and police originates from Mark Neocleous's theory in *Police Power, War Power*, which is not only interesting to read and reflect on, but also

highly thought-provoking specifically nowadays amid the discussion of police brutality in the US following the killing of George Floyd. Before discussing *DMZ* in the themes of power and control, remembering the storyline might be helpful since the series took seventy-two issues from 2005 November till 2012 February.

DMZ is a story of a post-political crisis in the near future that results from the Middle American States rebelling and fighting their way towards the seas and halting in Manhattan. The story is narrated through the young photojournalist Matty Roth's view, who works for the national news agency Liberty News. The story of *DMZ* begins with Roth and a nation-wide famous reporter Victor Ferguson arriving in the demilitarized zone which falls on Manhattan and formed following the ceasefire made by the Free States and the United States. Roth, then, getting stuck in the area following the crash of the helicopter and a presumed death of Ferguson, refuses to be rescued by the US Army. He becomes the mere eyes and ears of the Liberty News, thus the entire nation. With one clear ideal in his mind which is to uncover the truth, Roth employs all means of his investigative journalism. However, although he surfaces a number of crimes and conspiracies belonged to politicians and high-ranking military members, he receives a sentence of life in prison without parole.

Despite its name being DMZ (Demilitarized Zone), the military presence and action exponentially magnifies throughout the graphic novel, beginning with a helicopter crash and elevating to bombings of an entire city, to bombing of a nuclear weapon. *DMZ* could be read as a scenario in which the catastrophe of militarized America is only aggravated by the ensuing martial law that becomes the ultimate cause of dystopia. Contrary to the general perception of military presence in civil society, I aim to view the visual and political absence of militaristic entities in the graphic novel as one power, which is police power, as Mark Neocleous argues.

Neocleous defines the concept of police as: “the broad range of powers through which social order is fabricated and subjects constituted – the police power – exercised by a range of agencies of policing situated throughout the state and the institutions for administering civil society.” What is interesting and novel about Mark Neocleous’ conceptualization of police power is the recognition of both police departments and military as a single unit whose common function is policing. Neocleous suggests that the operation and logistics of military power is identical to national police power since the principle of both is to fabricate social order and to maintain it at all costs.

The interesting cross-section of Neocleous’ theory and *DMZ*’s portrayal of military is air power. Neocleous’ claim that air power has always been police power in terms of surveillance and control virtually perfectly fits the way in which the US army dominates the demilitarized zone in the graphic novel. Throughout the story, numerous panels include depictions of war helicopters and fighter jets tracking suspects, seeking out and finding target locations, and neutralizing them. Then, from these representations of the US army in *DMZ*, we might infer that the high military presence is the last resort form of policing, similar to the Paramilitary Police Units (PPUs) that we see during the protests. Therefore, what is at stake is not that policing is militarized, but the war power of police becomes more observable because a ground emerges for it to be more active.

One of the consequences of militarized public space in *DMZ* is the fetishism of using weapons. A soldier reacts to bombing of the demilitarized zone as: “Hell fuckin’ yeah! Lit up like Christmas!” (Issue 10, page 2) Also, since the martial law is in force in the demilitarized zone, any suspicious–or allegedly suspicious–movement culminate in gun fights, as manifest from the trigger-happy soldiers in *DMZ*. In the story, the journalist Matty Roth uncovers a story concerning a mass shooting of 198 protesters. Remembered as “Day 204 Massacre,” the mass shooting

becomes the breakpoint of civil war in *DMZ*. As a member of the squad that shoots the citizens that day recounts the story to Matty Roth, the civil war breaks out from South Dakota, the Free States attack New York, the United States soldiers “graduate” to combat patrols and clear the streets, and combat patrols (PPUs) do duck hunting. Then one of the combat patrols encounter a group of protesters walking under the rain, whose faces shadowed by the hoodies. A member of the walking group puts his hand into his hoody, and the patrols immediately open fire without clarifying the possession of a gun. They gun down the entire group. 198 civilians, peace protestors die, yet later on Roth finds a person who survives the incident.

Following the event, only the soldiers involved in shooting are put into trial, treated as “bad apples,” a story which resembles New York’s former police department investigations in the early 70s and 90s, usually recognized as Knapp and Mollen Commission, in which the corruption in police departments were considered to belong only to “bad apples.” According to Chris Stevens, who is one of the combat patrols during the day of mass shooting and the only person who does not pull the trigger, “Day 204” is “a symbol of a broken country and a discredited military.” Also, according to the independent sharpshooter who was involved in the massacre nicknamed The King, it was the day “America died.” The general who is in charge of the army that day interprets the shooting as: “We fight against white trash, this time what they fought were trash that spoke American.” General accepts ordering Day 204, and tell that he’d order another one in order to get it right one day. Thus, being the entity that is supposed to protect citizens at all costs, American military becomes the ultimate cause of unrest and insecurity. Despite the natural development of local governance and means of security of each faction in *DMZ*, the true destruction and violence is inflicted by the armies and private security company.

Besides the mass shooting, the existence of high military power further demonstrates that it only takes small number of utilitarian politicians for the function of weapons of mass destruction turn from internal security into exacerbating conflicts. In the story, the newly elected local leader of the demilitarized zone named Parco Delgado purchases a nuclear bomb from the Free States, and manages to have it transferred through the US territory. In response, the President of the US considers such transfer as an ultimate threat to the nation and orders the destruction of the assumed location of the nuclear bomb. The event shows how sensitive the decisions of using weapons of mass destruction become. Not only do the prior bombings in DMZ not solve the conflict, they only create a ground for the employment of greater weapons, thus the aggravation of violence. Therefore, *DMZ* shifts from asking the question concerning who should have the power to use such weapons into the very questioning of the allowance of enjoying such uncontrollable power.

In the comic book, virtually the entire means of military power that the US enjoys in order to maintain dominance over the world is utilized internally to restore social order. This use of ultimate force at the expense of not only monetary resources but also human lives conceives the question “what if it is actually us?” In this sense, *DMZ* presents an important question to the exponentially growing military power in reality, which is in certain ways becoming integrated into police departments. This integration was extensively discussed in historical context of American policing by historian Stuart Schrader.

In his recent book which was published in 2019 titled *Badges without Borders: How Global Counterinsurgency Transformed American Policing*, Schrader argues that the counterinsurgency policy of the US outside its borders shaped American policing. He suggests that this gradual transformation led to the militarization of police departments. With the significant influence of former police chiefs such as August Vollmer, Byron Engle, and Orlando Wilson, the

counterinsurgency model has come to be adopted as an internal security model, most notably since the 1980s.

The 1980s are essential to understanding the militarization of policing in the US, as Peter Kraska and Viktor Kappeler's extensive research on the rise of Paramilitary Police Units shows. Kraska and Kappeler's research shows that under Clinton government, the partnership formed between the Department of Defense and the Department of Justice resulted in the perception of fighting crime becoming the same as fighting wars. Therefore, police forces in the post-Vietnam War era began to utilize the same kind of military technology. However, the point where this advancement of military equipment of police departments manifested itself in social reality was when the average call-outs had a sharp rise from 1980 on. Despite their initial purpose of suppressing protests, the paramilitary police units increasingly responded to drug raids, or other types of calls. In sum, this historical background of militarization of American policing may be helpful in understanding the dystopian framing of police state as portrayed in *DMZ*.

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