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Since their very beginning, superhero comics that began to emerge with the publication of Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster's Superman in June 1938 and soon expanded into a full-grown genre, have been preoccupied with justice manifesting "as an ongoing tension between public safety and individual rights" (Phillips and Strobl). Both storylines and formal aspects of the genre (especially graphic style and front and back covers) have often served political purposes and "acted as a political commentary on contemporary America, a trend that would continue even through modern day comic book superheroes" (Shepard 4). The conception of a superhero has almost always involved the mixture of three primary elements. The first, obviously, is possessing superpowers, i.e. "extraordinary abilities, advanced technology, or highly developed physical and/or mental skills" (Coogan 607). Next is the requirement of having "a selfless, pro-social mission" (Coogan 607). Finally, every superhero should have "a codename and iconic costume, which typically express the superhero's biography, inner character, powers, or origin – the transformation from ordinary person to superhero" (Coogan 607). Considering the resulting righteous character with extraordinary powers and a hidden identity, it is little wonder that many stories about superheroes have been focused on the Manichean struggle between good and evil, with superheroes embodying the positive values such as justice, order, or patriotism. However, with time both the stories and the characters started to transform. By the end of the 1980s, Alan Moore's *Watchmen* (1986–1987) and the so-called British invasion changed the entire comics landscape in the United States. Moore's comics series reignited interest in the superhero genre but also set the stage for new, darker series expressing distrust of political governance and all forms of authority. In the aftermath of 9/11, this skepticism has found new fuel in a range of policies and actions collectively known as the War on Terror.

In this paper I will discuss how *Ex Machina* (2004–2010) written by Brian K. Vaughan and drawn by Tony Harris, one of such post-9/11 graphic novels, explores domestic security in the United States and raises morally complex political and ethical questions related to freedom and justice. The plot of the series alludes to the events and aftermath of September 11 and according to Vaughan "was born out of [his] disappointment with political leaders on both sides of the aisle" (Gustines). The author, who claims that he "[has] always wanted to do a superhero book that wasn't necessarily about superheroes . . . [and would] rather use superheroes as a parable to explore our world, especially contemporary local politics" ("Deux Ex Part 1 Of 3"), created an originally good and ordinary character, a civil engineer called Mitchell Hundred, who obtains the power to communicate with and control technology as a result of an accident. After spending over a year trying to do good as a masked superhero called the Great Machine, he decides against remaining a costumed vigilante of unknown identity and chooses to enter the world of politics by running for mayoral office. Initially, his campaign does not run smoothly but after he manages to save the second tower during the attack on the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001, he wins enough support to be elected Mayor of New York City. The graphic novel "chronicles how Hundred as mayor must compromise his convictions – and later his morals – to achieve political efficacy" (Pustz 1481). Indeed, the text is an attempt at answering the question "what would happen if superheroes existed in the real world" and at presenting the political and social implications of such existence. I argue that *Ex Machina* employs an extensive symbolism as I link the protagonist's superpower, the ability to communicate with

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and control the machines, to the developments in surveillance and drone warfare in the post-9/11 United States. I also examine the comics' reflections on the constraints of civil liberties related to the security that is allegedly provided by surveillance. At the same time, I assert that despite being critical of the power, the comic book questions whether abandoning it in fear of its potential misuse is justified. In other words, I claim that Vaughan strives to express a belief that it is not surveillance per se but the combination of this power with human fallibility that poses a threat to the society.

Before entering the discussion of the nature of the protagonist's superpowers and their link to surveillance, it is important to establish who the Great Machine is and what the circumstances of his rise to power are. As it was pointed out, before becoming a superhero or a mayor, Mitchell Hundred was a regular citizen of New York, a civil engineer with almost no interest in politics and lots of interest in comic books. Born and raised in Brooklyn, he has deep love for New York City, its people, and its architecture. Though it is implied that his political views are largely formed by his "fondness for comic book adventures [that] influenced his upbringing and shaped his outlook on the world" (Paul 192), he seems to consider Thomas Jefferson his most important personal hero. This aspect of Hundred's character triggers several decisions that he makes throughout the story, starting with the choice of his superhero alias, the Great Machine, a term borrowed from one of Jefferson's letters, in which the President of the United States uses it to describe American society:

I am sensible how far I should fall short of effecting all the reformation which reason would suggest and experience approve, were I free to do whatever I thought best, but when we reflect how difficult it is to move or inflect the great machine of society, how impossible to advance the notions of a whole people suddenly to ideal right, we see the wisdom of Solen's remark that no more good must be attempted than the nation can bear, and that all will be chiefly to reform the waste of public money and thus drive away the vultures who prey upon it and improve some little upon old routines. Some new fences for securing constitutional rights may, with the aid of a good Legislature, perhaps be attainable. (506)

It is worth emphasizing that instead of alluding to himself as a cog in the said machine of society, Mitchell unequivocally declared himself to be an entity expressing the will of the society as a whole. One could say that he forcefully undertook a function reserved for governments in democratic countries. Interestingly, while he fails to acknowledge that reading of his superhero persona, several of his enemies take notice of that fact.

As the protagonist's superhero project ends in a complete failure, he declares firmly: "I'll be able to do much more good inside the system than I ever did above" (Vaughan, *Ex Machina Book Four*). Thus, he reveals his identity to the general public and announces his intent to run for Mayor of New York City.

From the beginning of the graphic novel, then, Hundred views the society as a machine which, thanks to his strange powers, he should be able to transform or, if he deems it necessary, to control. And, as he explains to commissioner Angotti, his evolving superpowers allow him to communicate with and command almost all types of technology:

The night that I first... changed I experienced a kind of sensory overload, blacked out half of Manhattan. After that, my abilities re-presented themselves slowly, like a stroke patient learning to talk again. At first, I could only “hear” machines that I was holding. Over time, I discovered the ability to “talk back” to them. And with practice, I extended my reach to any machine that I could see... Anyway, by the time I retired I was just learning to have a dialogue with devices even beyond my field of vision. (Vaughan, *Ex Machina Book Two*)

Given this description and the political overtones of the graphic novel focused on the period called the Age of Terror, it is not difficult to establish parallels between this kind of growing control of the machines and the increased surveillance implemented under the USA PATRIOT Act of 2001. Arguing in his book *Nothing to Hide* that privacy “understood as a societal value” (Solove 15) is as important as security and that one should not be traded off against the other, Daniel J. Solove discusses tools and methods that can (and often are) used to violate laws that protect privacy as well as other liberty rights:

Technology is giving the government unprecedented tools for watching people and amassing information about them – video surveillance, location tracking, data mining, wiretapping, bugging, thermal sensors, spy satellites, X-ray devices, and more. It’s nearly impossible to live today without generating thousands of records about what we watch, read, buy, and do – and the government has easy access to them. (2)

All pieces of technology listed as the tools of surveillance are also the ones that can be controlled by Mitchell Hundred. Similarly, the fact that he obtains public support only after September 11 and, indirectly, is elected as a result of the terrorist attack and thanks to a sense of security his presence gives the terrified population of New York City, bear a close resemblance to the passage of the PATRIOT Act and overwhelming support for the Global War on Terrorism immediately after 9/11. The same applies to a steady growth of indifference or opposition to the surveillance. As commissioner Angotti describes it: “It didn’t take long for this city to go right back to the way it used to be. For better or worse.” (Vaughan, *Ex Machina Book Four*).

The first time the comic book raises the question of the relationship between law and security is at the very beginning of its timeline (as the story is told through a series of flashbacks it would be very difficult to analyze it in order of chapters). After obtaining his powers, Mitchell, viewing the society as a machine to be repaired, engages in vigilantism or, as his two friends consider it, heroic crime fighting. However, not only are his achievements limited to a small group of petty criminals but he is also disrupting order and soon is wanted by police believing that he is going to trigger a domino effect. Commissioner Angotti, the present-minded pragmatist, explains it to her men:

The so-called “Great Machine” isn’t a joke, he’s a threat to the stability we’ve all worked too hard to bring to this city. I’m sure you all had this drilled into at the academy.

A single broken window left unfixed leads to vandals breaking more windows leads to squatters taking over the building leads to hard drug leads to a shitload of major crimes. Well, this vigilante is our broken window, and unless we do something to repair the situation, we're going to be dealing with thousands of even more dangerous freaks soon enough. (Vaughan, *Ex Machina Book Four*)

In her view, the most disturbing is not the fact that there is a person with some strange powers but the fact that this person operates outside the law. Vaughan has made her law-abiding to the extreme. In the context of Hundred standing for government surveillance, Angotti can be read as a reflection of law enforcement. Yet, several years after she spoke the above-mentioned words, she encourages him to go above the law and geolocate a suspected terrorist. This is personal for her. Driven by fear and hate, she puts her ideals aside and is soon seen abusing her power as the commissioner to conceal the involvement of the Great Machine. Indeed, there are indications that she is well aware of various cases of the mayor's use of his superpowers that is forbidden by law, which she chooses to ignore. This seems no different from the revelation that "the federal government had actively exploited the PATRIOT Act to investigate American citizens engaged in ordinary criminal behavior, under the guise of thwarting terrorism" (Fox). Public anger and horror stirred up by the September 11 attacks and fueled by military casualties in the post-9/11 conflicts as well as intense hatred for Osama bin Laden and al-Qaeda were used by various federal agencies to advance their own agendas that were often completely unrelated to terrorism. Widespread surveillance advertised as a method for detecting and preventing acts of terror proved to be a tool for restraining civil liberties. Fear, one of the weapons of terrorism, became building block of mass surveillance laws.

Over the course of the graphic novel, Vaughan reveals the increasingly disturbing features of the protagonist's power, ranging from quite innocent ability to hear his grandmother's watch to the construction of a "white box" that can influence and control human minds. Hundred's ethical attitude changes faster than the reader may suspect as only in the 42nd chapter is it implied that not only his victory in the elections was ensured by the usage of such "white box" but that he also keeps it for the potential future use. Interestingly, it seems that the further away he deviates from his Great Machine alter ego and into the world of politics, the more self-centered and emotionless he becomes. This change culminates in his murder of one of his two best friends, Ivan "Kremlin" Tereshkov, whom he once considered more a father figure than his real father, and the complete rejection of the other, Rick Bradbury. The readers are invited to see a terrible flaw at the heart of the optimistic view that any human can hold such great power and stand above the law.

Ex Machina explores various implications of Hundred's abilities. One of them is the appearance of what one might call his copycats or followers, ones who obtained power similar to his because they strived for it and these whose lives became twisted as a result of becoming infected with a derivative of his power. If Hundred's power may be identified with surveillance then the fate of these copycats would be outcome of it getting into the wrong hands, the hands of the very people against whom it is supposed to protect the nation. The first victim of Hundred's power is Jack Pherson, who becomes corrupted after he tries to "hack into" Great Machine's powers and gains the ability to talk

to and control animals. This former sound technician becomes an extremist animal rights protector and starts to murder people in the name of his own beliefs. In the end, Hundred manages to kill him but only after several dozen of innocent bystanders are hurt. The second victim is Connie George, wife of an NSA agent working on the origin of Hundred's power, who is exposed to the fragment of a device that gave Hundred his powers and obtains her own version of such abilities together with insanity. She violently kills her entire family and starts murdering others in the subway. Like Pherson, she is also killed by Hundred. The third victim of the interception of superpowers is Suzanne Padilla who is hit in the head with the "white box" and obtains its power – control of human minds. She uses radio to cause havoc in New York and endangers the entire planet with an invasion of hell-like "immigrants" from another version of reality. Hundred kills her though this act is mostly an expression of his personal revenge as she killed his mother. In presenting these derivatives of Hundred's abilities, it is as if Vaughan determined to both emphasize and warn against the origin and purpose of this superpower. However, the protagonist refuses to believe that his abilities may be coming from or leading to evil. Instead, he seems to think that they are almost of heavenly origin and, believing that he is the only one capable of changing the society for better, becomes hungry for more power: "I know how to work the political machine, but the gears just turn too damn slow inside city hall" (Vaughan, *Ex Machina Book Four*). What should have been a warning against succumbing to these dangerous abilities becomes a cue for pursuing presidency: "A lot of shit has happened over the last few months that's made me realize the gifts I've been blessed with... There's more I'm supposed to do with them. I can hear the clock ticking" (Vaughan, *Ex Machina Book Four*).

In *Ex Machina*, the author uses various ways of cautioning against the dangers of total control of technology, namely Hundred's ability. Soon after obtaining his abilities, the protagonist starts alienating himself from people around him. When advised by his closest friends on the use of his powers, he openly tells them: "This isn't a democracy" (Vaughan, *Ex Machina Book Three*). He makes no attempt to conceal his desire to have sole decision-making power.

Indeed, he may be a perfect illustration of what was described by Solove as the problems caused by surveillance that

affect the power relationships between people and the institutions of the modern state. They not only frustrate the individual by creating a sense of helplessness and powerlessness, they also affect social structure by altering the kind of relationships people have with the institutions that make important decisions about their lives. (26)

Interestingly, all other versions of Hundred presented to the reader in the visions of different realities have both more power than the protagonist and less inhibitions when it comes to exerting it. Hence, if we read Hundred and his abilities as the government and surveillance, other realities are the images of what could happen if the balance between security and privacy or security and liberty is lost.

Mitchell Hundred is not only a superhero. He is also an idealist. This juxtaposition of a gentle geek and a mighty person saving thousands of lives is especially evident in a scene where he refuses to return to his Great Machine days claiming that if he were a real hero he would have saved both towers.

This moment exemplifies the use of the notion of heroism and it is the use of the heroism in this comic that, among other things, establishes the personality of the protagonist. He does not want to be considered a hero. In fact, he is tired of this. His confidence in himself as a human and not as a superhero seems to increase especially after his visit in the Vatican where he is told by Pope John Paul II: "You are not a damned machine! The Lord lives in you and He has blessed you with the gift of free will! Stop talking . . . and listen" (Vaughan, *Ex Machina Book Four*). This leads to something Hundred considers to be a divine revelation of the righteousness of his intention of becoming the President of the United States. However, if one looks at his face the moment he announces his decision to the Pope, they see that he looks humbled and relieved. All this raises reader's expectations (despite the fact that the comic is said to be a tragedy) that maybe he understood all the warnings and will stop using his power, the power that seems to pose more threat than provide benefits. Vaughan creates momentum and anticipation for the readers only to deal the finishing blow with the revelation that Hundred fixed the previous elections. The author makes the message completely clear: as long as Hundred can use his powers without any real restrictions and ramifications, he will not stop. As Solove wrote, "If we can't ensure that the law is followed, the rule of law becomes meaningless" (16).

This is not to say that all actions and beliefs of the protagonist are entirely illegal or without regard for civil liberties. As Mayor of New York City, he makes most of his political decisions without using his superpowers. He does not avoid difficult subjects, even when they are against his personal beliefs. At the surface level, *Ex Machina* "serves to intelligently explore contemporary political issues such as gay marriage, the legalization of marijuana, free-speech, and public education. It also has Hundred weighing the importance of public demonstrations and protests against the safety and security of the city" (Pustz 1481). Yet, it is Hundred's individual behavior that threatens the very essence of liberty. Prohibited by the regulations from disclosing the nature of his abilities and from using them, he deceives everyone into believing that his powers can be "jammed" by special machines. This allows him to fix the elections. He resorts to his powers whenever he has a need for them, e.g. to threaten a politician with a pacemaker or to kill his previous mentor in a way that makes it look like a suicide. All of this mirrors the problems surrounding security in the US as "law protecting privacy and other civil liberties is often violated in times of crisis. A prime example was the NSA surveillance program, under which the NSA contravened the law by engaging in warrantless wiretapping of phone calls" (Solove 16).

With Mitchell Hundred and his Great Machine alter ego, Brian K. Vaughan shows the readers what it would be like to live in a world in which a single person or entity controls every piece of post-medieval technology on the planet. The original idealism of main characters and attachment of the general population to the first actual superhero soon turns into what the readers are told on the very first page of the comic it would be – a tragedy. As the Vice President of the USA under John McCain, he explains his initial popularity that won him the office of Mayor of the Big Apple: "Everyone was scared back then, and when folks are scared, they want to be surrounded by heroes. But real heroes are just a fiction we create. They don't exist outside of comic books" (Vaughan, *Ex Machina Book One*). This criticism could be applied to the supporters of surveillance and drone warfare that they consider super-weapons against all kinds of threats and who dream of safe and just future,

but who fail to notice that lack of appropriate regulations of government actions and the fact that human nature is flawed lead to surveillance abuses and a country which instead of being free and just is one step from becoming authoritarian and dystopian. In effect, *Ex Machina* implies that if people want to make a better tomorrow (or at least not worst), they cannot rely on some superhero, both literally and figuratively, but they should improve themselves as individuals and as a nation, gradually and without coercive measures, not by limiting civil liberties but by keeping a reasonable balance between privacy and security. As Hundred said, "Government should be a safety net, but it can't be a... hammock. If the city gets too comfortable in the belief I'm going to personally fix everything, they'll stop striving to solve problems on their own" (Vaughan, *Ex Machina Book Three*).

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