

# Watchmen and Hollywood's advanced state of decay

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Films are only going to get worse before they get better, if *Watchmen* and the noisy, bombastic trailers accompanying it are any indication.

Based on a 12-issue comic book series of the same name by Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons originally published in 1986-1987, *Watchmen* is largely an empty and pointless movie, with few redeeming features. The story is difficult to follow, the dialogue is both juvenile and pretentious, the acting is thoroughly uneven, the look and feel of the film are essentially without character or personality, and its social outlook is disoriented at best.

The Watchmen are a group of retired superheroes in the 1980s, a second generation of such "masked crime-fighters." This is an alternate America, where the US has won the Vietnam War, thanks to the efforts of Jon Osterman, Dr. Manhattan (the voice of Billy Crudup), a physicist turned godlike superhero as the result of a laboratory accident. Richard Nixon (Robert Wisden) remains president after several re-elections, and the US and the Soviet Union are edging ever closer to mutually annihilating nuclear war.

A holdover from the first group of crimefighters, The Minutemen, who were active in the 1940s, The Comedian (Jeffrey Dean Morgan), is thrown from his high-rise apartment. The only one of the Watchmen who remains on the job (wearing masks has been made illegal by Congress), Walter Kovacs, or Rorschach (Jackie Earle Haley), a nasty, vicious vigilante, who continues to hunt society's "vermin," suspects someone might be "picking off costumed heroes." He contacts Nite Owl II, Dan Dreiberger (Patrick Wilson), who has retired to a comfortable existence.

Dreiberger will eventually return to the anti-crime front in the company of Silk Spectre II, Laurie Jupiter (Malin Akerman), Dr. Manhattan's former love. Nite Owl II and Rorschach set about solving The Comedian's murder, which leads them to a far greater conspiracy. They begin to suspect that their former comrade, Ozymandias, Adrian Veidt (Matthew Goode), "the world's smartest man" and the director of a giant conglomerate, may be involved. Events hurtle toward a cataclysmic conclusion.

Whoever is to blame, the original authors or the screenwriters and director, this is very poor stuff. It is often unintentionally comical. This is the sort of film in which, as the production notes assert breathlessly, "From New York to Mars, plots and conspiracies are unfolding with the fate of all life on earth suspended in the hands of a few." New York to Mars, no less.

The unfortunate performers are obliged to repeat numerous silly lines. Malin Akerman is appealing, but she is not yet a particularly good actor. So, when she says things like, "I hate it when Jon teleports

me," it simply strikes one as absurd. Or, "I'm not even sure what universe he's seeing these days."

In one memorable scene, Dr. Manhattan, who glows with a blue light and is generally naked, appears to Laurie/Silk Spectre II. The dialogue goes like this. She: "The TV said you were on Mars." He: "I am.... You're going to try and convince me to save the world." Later, in response to his question, "Why would I save a world I no longer have any stake in?," Laurie gets to say, "Do it for me."

Adrian Veidt, the only one of the "costumed heroes" who has publicly acknowledged his former superhero identity, has some ridiculous lines of his own, including: "I don't mind being the smartest man in the world, I just wish it wasn't this one."

And "It doesn't take a genius to see the world has problems."

And "The only person with whom I felt any kinship died three hundred years before the birth of Christ—Alexander of Macedonia, or Alexander the Great, as you know him."

And the questionable "What, in life, does not deserve celebrating?"

Dr. Manhattan tells Veidt at a critical moment, "I have walked on the surface of the Sun...witnessed events so tiny and so fast, that they can hardly be said to have occurred at all. But you, Adrian, you're just a man. The world's smartest man poses no more threat to me than does its smartest termite."

At film's end, Dr. Manhattan explains calmly: "I'm leaving this galaxy for one a little less complicated."

In our day, a story about superheroes (or ghosts or gods) only succeeds to the extent that it is handled with a light and precise touch. Like *The Dark Knight*, *Batman Begins* and other recent "dark" and "edgy" comic book adaptations, *Watchmen* falls with a thud.

On the one hand, artists who ought to know better, but don't, are taking "masked crimefighters" and their adventures all too seriously; on the other, in Hollywood's advanced state of decay, unfortunately, intelligent stories for adults are increasingly rare. By necessity therefore, the industry's "(self-)important" themes are now often relegated to what are essentially films for adolescents, except that in such movies they lose all importance and complexity. Then the banality of the form is offered as an excuse for the banality of the ideas. "What did you expect? It's only a comic book." An all-sided decline is in progress.

In addition to the preposterous lines of dialogue, or perhaps to make up for them, *Watchmen's* makers introduce gruesome violence. Faces are smashed in loving slow motion, hands hacked off, heads split open, a child's body torn apart. It's repugnant and inexcusable.

Presumably, the original comic book series was meant to offer some kind of critique of Reagan's America. What remains of that is cheap misanthropy for the most part, the kind that seems to pop up in most

graphic novel adaptations and other shallow forays into so-called "neo-film noir" territory (*LA Confidential*, *Sin City*, etc.).

Two of the Watchmen are openly fascistic. Rorschach is a sociopath, who "puts down" criminals as though they were animals and mutters about bleeding-heart "liberals." In a voice-over, we hear excerpts from his journal, like this one: "Dog carcass in alley this morning, tire tread on burst stomach. This city is afraid of me. I have seen its true face. The streets are extended gutters and the gutters are full of blood and when the drains finally scab over, all the vermin will drown. The accumulated filth of all their sex and murder will foam up about their waists and all the whores and politicians will look up and shout 'Save us!'...and I'll whisper 'no.'"

The Comedian is another psychotic, who attempts to rape one of his fellow crimefighters (the first Silk Spectre [Carla Gugino]), murders his pregnant Vietnamese girl-friend (Nhi Do) in cold blood, and shoots anti-war protesters in the back. Inevitably, and one needs to take the pressure of the studio publicity machinery into account, Jeffrey Dean Morgan, who plays the character, explains: "I think there's something incredibly sad about The Comedian. I think he wants so much more than he's been able to have in his life. He's a lost soul."

Why is *Watchmen* such a tedious film, and not entertaining, exciting or amusing at all? The poverty-stricken outlook of the film's creators is the proper place to begin. They do not know much of importance about the world and thus do not have much that is illuminating or dramatic to share with an audience.

Director Snyder explains the philosophy that makes up "the spine of the movie": "How do you reshape humanity and make it peaceful? Can anyone really have that kind of control?"

One of the original comic book's co-creators (Alan Moore wanted no part of the project, apparently), Dave Gibbons, comments helpfully: "At the end of the day, I believe plain luck and happenstance are much more important factors than any of us thinks; they're woven throughout the fabric of reality. No matter how carefully you plan or however many people want something, it still doesn't mean it's going to happen. I think in the end, you have to bow to the greater power of the universe."

Snyder adds: "For me, the 'why' of this movie is all the small moral questions that lead to a giant moral question, and that question has no real answer. The end of the movie is meant to spark debate. I hope people come out of it thinking about which side of the question they might fall on. The graphic novel makes you question who is a good guy and who is a bad guy, and I hope the movie does the same thing.

"What is it that someone does that makes him a hero, even in real world terms? Those questions aren't always as cut and dried, or as easy, as they are in movies. I think in the end *Watchmen* wants to make that really difficult for you. And I think that's how it should be."

This all adds up to almost nothing. If one were to take the trouble to read between the lines, one would likely conclude that the various participants in the process, to the extent that they think about the world, are terribly overwhelmed and terribly confused, and not terribly interested.

It is instructive to review briefly the background and experience of the director, co-writer and composer. It demonstrates how precious little they have to go on as artists.

Snyder began in commercial and music videos. We learn from the film's production notes that his ads "have garnered numerous awards, including two Clios, as well as a Gold Lion Award at Cannes for his Jeep 'Frisbee' spot. Britain's Communication Arts Magazine featured

Snyder as one of the most talented commercial directors in that country, and the London advertising community presented him with an award for his impressive body of work."

He made his mark in feature filmmaking with *Dawn of the Dead* (2004) and "the blockbuster action drama *300* [2006]...based on the graphic novel by Frank Miller."

He and his wife and producing partner, Deborah Snyder, recently formed Cruel and Unusual Films. The production company's projects "include the drama *The Last Photograph*, to be directed by Sergei Bodro; the fantasy-adventure *Sucker Punch*, co-written by Snyder; and the animated film *The Guardians of Ga'Hoole*."

In addition to a new adaptation of Ray Bradbury's *The Illustrated Man*, Snyder's company plans to produce "the zombie film *Army of the Dead* and the apocalyptic thriller *Cobalt 60*. Maintaining his dedication to groundbreaking film, Snyder provided the original stories for *Sucker Punch*, *Army of the Dead* and *Last Photograph*."

The notes inform us bluntly that co-screenwriter, David Hayter (better known as an actor), "has worked on films that have grossed more than a billion dollars at the worldwide box office." Who would dare argue with that?

The production notes continue: "His credits as a screenwriter include such films as the blockbuster *X-Men* and its hit sequel, *X2: X-Men United*, both directed by Bryan Singer; and *The Scorpion King*, starring Dwayne 'The Rock' Johnson. He also wrote the television movie *Lost in Oz*, on which he also served as executive producer..."

"As an actor, Hayter's credits include the lead in the sci-fi film *Guyver: Dark Hero*, and the voice of Captain America on the *Spiderman* animated series, as well as a decade-long stint in the role of Solid Snake in the hugely popular 'Metal Gear Solid' video game franchise."

Composer Tyler Bates "previously collaborated with director Zack Snyder on the 2007 blockbuster *300* and the 2004 thriller *Dawn of the Dead*. He recently scored the sci-fi thriller *The Day the Earth Stood Still*, as well as Rob Zombie's hit remake of *Halloween*. All of the films opened number one at the box office..."

"His additional credits encompass more than 50 film, television, and video game projects, including Showtime's hit television series 'Californication'; Liquid Entertainment's epic video game 'Rise of the Argonauts'; Neil Marshall's sci-fi thriller feature *Doomsday*; and the 2006 horror-comedy *Slither*, which reunited him with *Dawn of the Dead* screenwriter James Gunn."



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