



FIGHTING THE GOOD FIGHT?

# WATCHING WATCHMEN

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ABOVE: THE COMEDIAN (JEFFREY DEAN MORGAN) MAIN IMAGE: DR MANHATTAN (BILLY CRUDUP)

**I**n the 1980s, comic books underwent a revolution, dragging themselves – in the hands of a number of key writers including Neil Gaiman and Frank Miller – into the adult realm. This was the birth of the ‘graphic novel’. At the forefront of this revolution was Alan Moore, a kind of Shakespeare of the form, whose *oeuvre* stands as *the* example for those who lay claim to graphic novels as ‘art’. Moore is the single most influential writer in the field, and his early work – his runs on comics *Miracleman* and *Swamp Thing*, his superlative graphic novels *V for Vendetta* and *Watchmen* – shows a sophistication in storytelling and technique that had been lacking in comic books. Key to *V for Vendetta* and *Watchmen* is the ‘postmodern’ (for want of a better word) challenging of the assumptions of the superhero. It is no surprise that *Time* magazine named *Watchmen* as one of the hundred best novels since 1923.<sup>1</sup>

For some years Hollywood, ever rapacious, has been mining the graphic novel for material. Frank Miller’s graphic novels are the basis of the *Sin City* (Frank Miller and Robert Rodriguez, 2005) and *300* (Zack Snyder, 2007) films, and his *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns* was influential on the whole Batman franchise. *From Hell* (Albert and Allen Hughes, 2001), *The League of Extraordinary*

*Gentlemen* (Stephen Norrington, 2003) and *V for Vendetta* (James McTeigue, 2005) are all adaptations of Moore’s graphic novels of the same names.

There had been plans to film *Watchmen* for some time. At one point Terry Gilliam was said to be attached to the project, but it was finally Zack Snyder who directed the 2009 film, and who has greatly improved on his previous effort, the execrable *300*. The *Watchmen* film remains largely faithful to the graphic novel, at times almost reproducing it shot for panel, as if it had been used as a storyboard. Indeed, some of the film’s weaknesses can be drawn back to this faithfulness, for the graphic novel form is closer to a television series than a film. Usually a graphic novel is composed of chapters that are published monthly and which each tell a ‘short story’ while maintaining a broader story arc that develops over time. With its origins in a twelve-part comic, the film of *Watchmen* manages to reproduce the complex plot and backstory by extending to over two and a half hours, and still it shows the strain. Nevertheless, scriptwriters David Hayter and Alex Tse do a fine job of reproducing the original. Indeed, Snyder also manages to depict a world in which superheroes exist, and are treated in an adult manner, with a verisimilitude that might have been doubted before actually seeing the film.

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### Superheroes, politics and morality

*Watchmen* takes place in an alternate 1985 in which superheroes – masked and caped ‘avengers’ – are real. It takes the proposition seriously and proposes that history has been changed by the presence of these superheroes, especially Dr Manhattan (Billy Crudup), a ‘radioactive man’ who is the only one of the superheroes to have superhuman abilities. Caught in an atomic experimental chamber (in classic comic-book fashion), Dr Jonathan Osterman was transformed into the blue-skinned Manhattan, who has the ability to mould the very structure of the universe. Manhattan’s intervention has allowed the United States to defeat the North Vietnamese in the Vietnam War. As a result, Richard Nixon is re-elected president, transforming the fabric of American society.

*Watchmen* thus operates according to the technique of estrangement: it alters the world we know, allowing us to rethink that world. Indeed, in a sense, it stands as an examination of American society, and a sustained consideration of the relations of power in that society. The world of *Watchmen* – and, by implication, the US – is not one of good and evil, of light and dark, as in the traditional comic (think of *Superman*, for example). Instead it is one in which the world’s morals seem to be disintegrating. This could be either a radical left-wing or a radical right-wing view. From the very beginning, the main character of the film is probably Rorschach/Walter Kovacs (Jackie Earle Haley) (named after the mask he wears, on which black splotches move around like a shifting Rorschach inkblot test used by psychologists to assess the personality and emotions of patients). Rorschach’s opening entry from his journal – taken here from the graphic novel – tells us much about the world view of *Watchmen*:



*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 look down and whisper 'no.' .... They followed the droppings of lechers and communists and didn't realize that the trail led over a precipice until it was too late ... Now the whole world stands on the brink, staring down into bloody hell ...<sup>2</sup>*

Though Rorschach is here obviously a far (and mad) right-winger (whereas Moore himself seems to have left-anarchist tendencies), what is certain is that things are falling apart. But things in the world of *Watchmen* have become even more tenuous, for the arms race between the US and the Soviet Union has reached a crisis point: nuclear war threatens. Here we might note that the graphic novel *Watchmen* was originally written in the mid 1980s, when there was great anxiety about the possibility of nuclear war. This time also produced post-nuclear war television movies *The Day After* (Nicholas Meyer, 1983) and *Threads* (Mick Jackson, 1984), the animated feature *When the Wind Blows* (Jimmy T. Murakami, 1986, based on the 1982 graphic novel by Raymond Briggs), and a significant anti-nuclear movement in England, where Alan Moore lives.

### Superheroes and their super-woes

Because Moore has taken seriously the proposition that superheroes exist, it is immediately evident that Rorschach and the others have greater psychological depth than the usual superhero. As Moore explains in an interview with the BBC:

*There is that element of 'Wouldn't these characters be a joke, if they were in the real world.' But there's also a poignance [sic] to the characters, 'Wouldn't these characters be somehow kind of sad and touching in the real world?'<sup>3</sup>*

Indeed, taking the characters seriously changes the very structure of the graphic



OPP. PAGE: RORSCHACH (JACKIE EARLE HALEY) ABOVE LEFT: LAURIE JUPITER/SILK SPECTRE II (MALIN AKERMAN) ABOVE RIGHT: DR MANHATTAN BELOW: EDWARD BLAKE/ THE COMEDIAN

novel, opening up all kinds of critiques of the world view or ideology of the traditional comic. Moore continues:

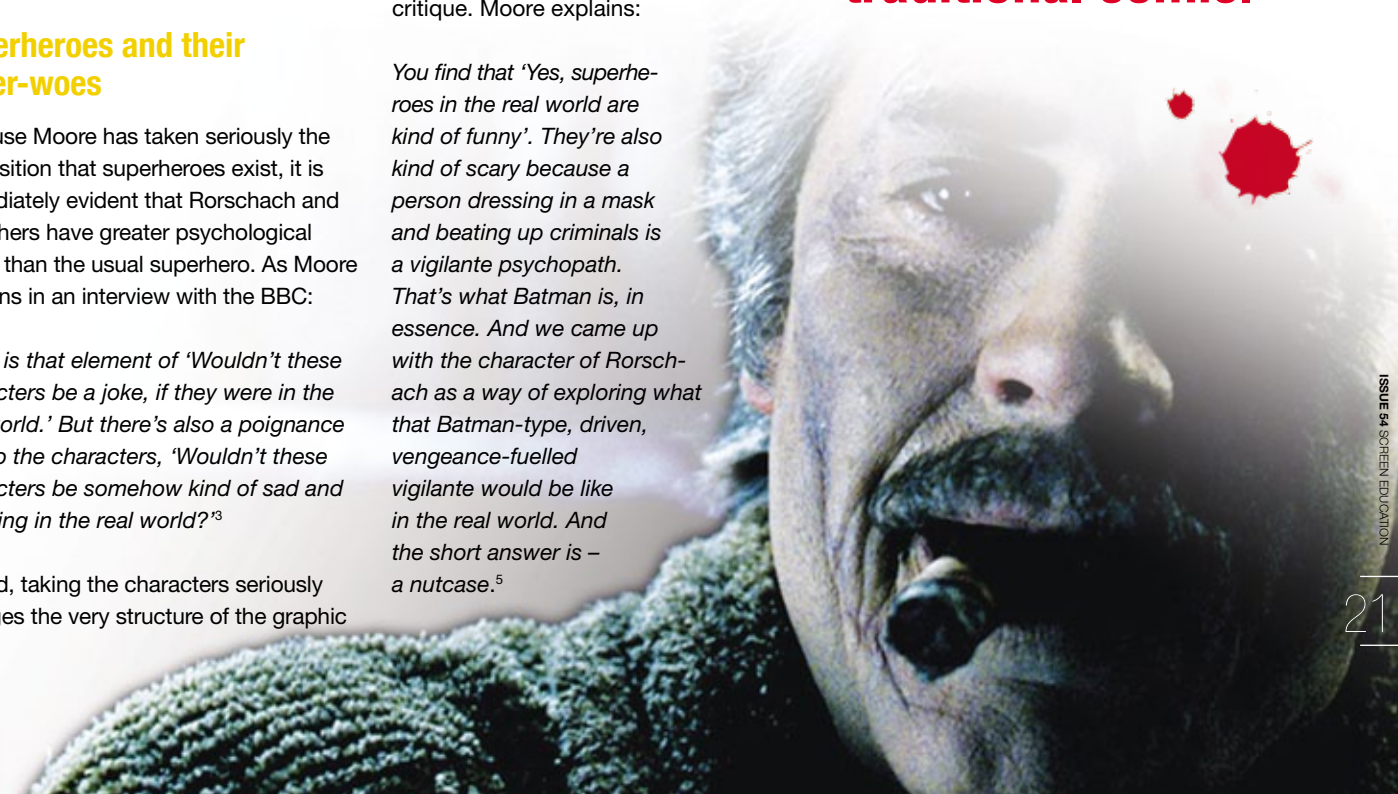
*When you look at these familiar characters from a new perspective, you can suddenly see things that have actually been true about the characters right from their very inception in the late thirties, but nobody had applied a political interpretation to them, or a sexual interpretation.<sup>4</sup>*

The graphic novel – and to a lesser extent the film – is thus filled with jokes about the kinds of problems these superheroes have, and the kinds of world views they need to sustain them. Some of them are far right, as is implicit in the ideology of the traditional comic.

*Watchmen's* attitude to the superhero is not one of approval but of critique. Moore explains:

*You find that 'Yes, superheroes in the real world are kind of funny'. They're also kind of scary because a person dressing in a mask and beating up criminals is a vigilante psychopath. That's what Batman is, in essence. And we came up with the character of Rorschach as a way of exploring what that Batman-type, driven, vengeance-fuelled vigilante would be like in the real world. And the short answer is – a nutcase.<sup>5</sup>*

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The characters are thus hardly people of virtue. Indeed, the Comedian, a right-wing, cold warrior, is presented as a heartless product of realpolitik. At one point, in Vietnam, he shoots down a Vietnamese woman whom he has impregnated, after she demands that he look after her.

For some, the satire in *Watchmen* fails and leads not to the critique intended, but instead to a celebration. *The New Yorker's* Anthony Lane, for example, argues that:

*The problem is that Snyder, following Moore, is so insanely aroused by the look of vengeance, and by the stylized application of physical power, that the film ends up twice as fascistic as the forces it wishes to lampoon.*<sup>6</sup>

Indeed Lane goes so far as to identify Moore's voice with Rorschach's:

*You want to hear Moore's attempt at urban jeremiad? 'This awful city, it screams like an abattoir full of retarded children.' That line from the book may be meant as a punky retread of James Ellroy, but it sounds to me like a writer trying much, much too hard; either way, it makes it directly into the movie, as one of Rorschach's voice-overs.*<sup>7</sup>

There may be an element of truth to Lane's criticisms, but they are out of proportion with the greater substance of *Watchmen*. Snyder's film *does* lose some of the playfulness and humour of the graphic novel, and introduces a new and over-the-top aesthetic of violence – not surprising, considering the neo-fascism of 300. Still, the real significance of *Watchmen* lies in its examination of American history and society, most particularly as it developed in the 1980s.

### Watching the end of the world

In other ways, the film seems quite contemporary. There is a trend in recent literature and film towards the sense that things are falling apart. What connects the Left and the Far Right is agreement on this point – something is wrong, and it will take more than simply a reform here or a change in policy there to confront this fundamental problem. This, indeed, has always been the political unconscious of the superhero genre, for the superhero is that authority that stands outside of the law, that asserts his or her authority when the moment of 'the exception' occurs, when normal law and order breaks down. They deal with the very criminals that the police cannot deal with; they are, in

essence, vigilantes. And vigilantes have relevance only when something has gone wrong with the 'natural order' of things.

In *Watchmen*, the world is hurtling towards nuclear apocalypse. In the face of this doomsday scenario, the smartest man in the world, Adrian Veidt/Ozymandias (Matthew Goode), is able to reproduce Dr Manhattan's powers and use them to destroy a number of the world's great cities (here the film departs from the resolution in the graphic novel). Terrified of Manhattan's powers (and thinking he is responsible for the destruction), the two superpowers – the US and USSR – come to a détente, and world peace is assured. The final scenes show a New York being rebuilt in the sun.

That world peace must be brought about by the actions of the superheroes to which *Watchmen* has such an ambivalent relationship reveals a great deal about the political dilemmas of radicals. Something about the world is fundamentally flawed, and yet – and this is the overriding political dilemma that over-determines the entire left radical movement, though probably not the Right – what strategy is capable of effectively dealing with this problem? Indeed, for thirty years the Radical Left in developed

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ABOVE LEFT: RORSCHACH ABOVE CENTRE: MEETING ON MARS ABOVE RIGHT: DAN DREIBERG/NITE OWL II (PATRICK WILSON)





ABOVE: SILK SPECTRE II AND NITE OWL II BELOW: DR MANHATTAN

countries has been wrecked on the shoals of this problem. One response, common in the 1960s, has been the turn to minority action. The superhero is, of course, just such an example of minority action. Moore's other great work, *V for Vendetta*, examines this same problem in another alternate history – a fascist Britain during the 1980s that owes much to George Orwell's *1984* and Harlan Ellison's short story 'Repent Harlequin!' *Said the Ticktockman*.<sup>8</sup> Any radical critique of contemporary society currently faces this same dilemma of strategy. *Children of Men* (Alfonso Cuarón, 2006), for example, presents us with a society that has already fallen apart (humanity has become sterile, society fascist). The film cannot resolve this problem of how to right a broken world and instead finds itself trapped in a cul-de-sac, searching for a messianic figure who might help to find a way out.<sup>9</sup>

*Watchmen*'s denouement thus ambivalently supports the actions of Adrian Veidt, in what can only be a radical position: the view that the ends justify the means is not something that anyone

in the centre or considering themselves 'liberal' would agree with. The most likeable of the characters (the real heroes of the film), with the exception of Rorschach, are the soft liberal Laurie Jupiter/Silk Spectre II (Malin Akerman) and Dan Dreiberg/Nite Owl II (Patrick Wilson). But ultimately it is Veidt who gets things done – an extreme situation necessitates extreme action. And, just like in *V for Vendetta*, the population is not considered capable of any form of mass or democratic action.<sup>10</sup> Rather it is the action of an elite that is effective. In

this, *Watchmen* remains true to the superhero genre, of which it is such an effective re-examination.

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#### Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> See 'Time All-Time 100 Novels: *Watchmen*', *Time*, <<http://www.time.com/time/2005/100books/0,24459,watchmen,00.html>>, accessed 20 April 2009.
- <sup>2</sup> Alan Moore & Dave Gibbons (illustrator), *Watchmen*, Warner, New York, 1987, p.1.
- <sup>3</sup> Alan Moore interview on Comics Britannia, BBC production: <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qKebCtCTbCA>>, accessed 14 April 2009.
- <sup>4</sup> *ibid.*
- <sup>5</sup> *ibid.*
- <sup>6</sup> See Anthony Lane, 'Dark Visions: *Watchmen* and *Leave Her to Heaven*', *The New Yorker*, 9 March 2009, <[http://www.newyorker.com/arts/critics/cinema/2009/03/09/090309crici\\_cinema\\_lane?currentPage=1](http://www.newyorker.com/arts/critics/cinema/2009/03/09/090309crici_cinema_lane?currentPage=1)>, accessed 15 April 2009.
- <sup>7</sup> *ibid.*
- <sup>8</sup> See Rjurik Davidson, 'Vagaries and Violence in *V for Vendetta*', *Screen Education*, no. 46, 2007, pp.157–162.
- <sup>9</sup> See Rjurik Davidson, 'Hope in *Children of Men*', *Screen Education*, no. 47, 2007, pp.125–131.
- <sup>10</sup> See Davidson, 'Vagaries and Violence in *V for Vendetta*', *op. cit.*

