



Watchmen

Steve Alexander

Heroes or villains?

Author: Steve Alexander

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Book title: Watchmen

Author: Alan Moore

Illustrator: Dave Gibbons

Publisher: Titan Books

Publication Date: 1986

Film title: Watchmen

Tagline(s): This city is afraid of me. I've seen its true face / They watch over us ... but who watches them?

Director: Zack Snyder

Screenplay: David Hayter, Alex Tse, based on the graphic novel by Alan Moore

Starring: Malin Akerman, Billy Crudup, Matthew Goode, Jackie Earle Haley, Jeffery Dean Morgan, Patrick Wilson

Distributor: Warner Bros. (USA); Paramount (UK)

Cinema Release Date: 6 March 2009

Certificate: R (USA); 18 (UK)

[Image]

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Warning: This article contains spoilers for both the film and graphic novel

The film *Watchmen* is based on the most critically-acclaimed graphic novel ever written. The graphic novel, written by Alan Moore and drawn by Dave

Gibbons, earned itself a place in *Time* magazine's 2005 list of the hundred best English-language novels from 1923 to the present (the only graphic novel to feature in the list) as well as a Hugo Award. *Watchmen*, together with Frank Miller's *The Dark Knight Returns*, had a profound affect on the comics industry when they were published in 1986, and, the two are often considered to be a watershed point when comics started to be taken seriously as works of literature.[1]

Set in an alternate 1985 (in which costumed vigilantes have been a fact of life since the Second World War), the graphic novel used its fairly simple story – costumed heroes investigate the murder of one of their number – as a means of examining and deconstructing the concept of superheroes, the most enduring and popular topic for comics. It is rightly regarded as a masterpiece, both for its writing and artwork, often juxtaposing different scenes to create dramatic irony or draw out multiple meanings. The style of *Watchmen* is one of bright, bold colours, bringing to mind the 1950s- and 60s-era of superheroes: an age of clear-cut good guys and bad guys, impractical costumes and improbable motivations. Yet alongside these bright primary colours, *Watchmen* features graphic violence and in-depth psychological examination of the motivations of its characters. The heroes of *Watchmen* are anything but clear-cut, and their motivations for putting on their masks are detailed and sometimes disturbing.

The film does a splendid job of cleaving closely to the source material, even though the writer refused to have anything to do with it.[2] The script is largely lifted wholesale from the graphic novel (no bad thing, given the high quality of the writing) and many scenes are recreated using camera angles which mimic the framing of the panels of the book. The details of the ending are slightly different, but arguably in ways that improve upon the original.[3]

Some of the themes of *Watchmen*, which were so new and radical at the time of the comic's publication, are familiar to us today. Rorschach, the violent vigilante through whom we are introduced to its world, has since been aped many times in comics. The idea of postulating what people with super-powers would be like in the 'real world' has been seen recently in the hit

TV show *Heroes* and the film *Hancock*. And the task of examining what could make a person put on a silly costume to fight crime has been tackled in the two most recent Batman films. So what makes this film different?

Morality

'There is good, and there is evil, and evil must be punished.' (Rorschach)

'I did the right thing, didn't I? It all worked out in the end.' (Ozymandias)

One of the things that most interested me when I first read *Watchmen* was the differing moral standpoints represented by the various 'heroes' of the story. Of course, most films offer differing opinions between allies (it's the basis for any number of 'buddy' movies, for a start). Yet *Watchmen* goes much further than many stories (particularly many superhero films) do. The main characters embody significantly differing viewpoints, not simply in order to generate conflict for the sake of drama, but to challenge the reader, or viewer, to think about who is right, and to what degree. Writer Alan Moore said of *Watchmen*, 'We tried to set up four or five radically opposing ways of seeing the world and let the readers figure it out for themselves'.^[4]

The most crucial distinction is between the brutal vigilante Rorschach, with his unbending idealism and black-and-white view of human nature, and the athletic genius Ozymandias, a character who embodies pragmatic utilitarianism. Few people who read the story or watch the film will wholly endorse either of their approaches, yet one reason the story is so compelling is because it prompts discussion about these differing outlooks.

The most audacious move on the part of *Watchmen* is that it posits the (entirely realistic) idea that superheroes are not enough to save the world. In the alternative world of the story, the existence of the super-powered Dr Manhattan has led to an escalation of tension between the USA and the USSR. His unexpected removal results in the world facing a countdown to nuclear war. The efforts of the heroes Rorschach, Nite Owl and Silk Spectre are completely incidental to what is eventually revealed as the main plot being played out – the successful attempt by former costumed adventurer Ozymandias to save the world from

nuclear annihilation. The irony, of course, is that Ozymandias acts in a manner that has far more in common with the standard comic-book villain than the normal depiction of a hero: playing a long game, involving a great deal of behind-the-scenes manipulation and hardly any direct confrontation, which results in the deaths of millions of innocents.

With a few minor tweaks of the plot, *Watchmen* could have so easily fitted a standard comic storyline: Rorschach and Nite Owl arriving in the nick of time to prevent Ozymandias from carrying out the final stage of his plan, then Dr Manhattan returning to earth in time to prevent him from killing them in vengeance. This is absolutely the ending we expect as the penultimate chapter of the story plays out, and it is a real gut-punch when the expected ending is whisked away to be replaced by the nihilistic ending. The moment when Ozymandias reveals to Nite Owl and Rorschach that they are too late is truly chilling, and a wonderful testament to the skills of writer, illustrator and director.

Ozymandias believes that he is making a rational transaction in sacrificing millions of lives in order to save billions. Killing millions of people will make the world think it is under threat from an other-worldly menace (the source of which differs between the graphic novel and film), resulting in global unity and an end to the Cold War. This is hard-edged utilitarian thinking (the greatest good for the greatest number) to an extent which seems inhuman, yet it appears to be somewhat defensible. If he is correct in his assessment that nuclear war is inevitable without his intervention, then it becomes a choice between 'billions die' and 'millions die'.

Once Ozymandias's masterstroke – and its success in averting nuclear war – is revealed, the majority of the heroes reluctantly agree that they must stay silent and conceal his plan, for the alternative is to bring him to justice but to once again doom the rest of the world to nuclear annihilation. They would not have enacted his plan themselves, but faced with a *fait accompli* the most rational thing to do seems to be to conceal the truth. Rorschach alone stands opposed to the conspiracy of silence, resolutely claiming 'no compromise – not even in the face of Armageddon'. His rigid idealism will not allow him to stand by while any evil goes unpunished, no matter what the

consequences of his actions are. So, is this a better moral position than his friends' silence? What would we do faced with the choice that Rorschach is faced with?

Neither film nor graphic novel demands that the audience agree that silence is the right choice to make. Dr Manhattan, in his unasked-for role as a neutral higher authority, says that he understands Ozymandias's decision 'without condemning or condoning'. There is conflict here within the main characters, and we are meant to have a choice of whom we side with (if anyone!). *Watchmen* is intended to raise these questions, and to make its audience think for themselves about the answers, rather than accepting a moral stance which is spoon-fed to them. Writer Alan Moore said 'Too many writers go for that 'baby bird' moralising, where your audience just sits there with their beaks open and you just cram regurgitated morals down their throat.'[5] In spite of the bleakness of the ending, I found it very refreshing to watch a superhero film which asks its audience to think for itself about right and wrong.

The Watchmaker

'Perhaps the world is not made. Perhaps nothing is made – a clock without a craftsman.' (Dr Manhattan)

Where is God in *Watchmen*? Unlike many films (and indeed graphic novels), he is not entirely ignored. When Rorschach describes to his prison psychiatrist how he came to be the vigilante he is today, he narrates the story of how he discovered the remains of a little girl who had been horribly murdered. As he exacted brutal retribution on the murderer, appalled by the horror and depravity of the world he felt had been revealed to him, Rorschach realised 'God doesn't make the world this way. We do.' This sense that God is absent or uncaring permeates *Watchmen*. The Comedian (whose death kickstarts the story) is described as having 'got the joke' that the world and human life is ultimately pointless, and decided to act accordingly, displaying an increasingly nihilistic view of life. The implication: God does not exist, or if he does, he doesn't care about us.

Meanwhile, Dr Manhattan, the only character with actual super-powers, is explicitly compared to God several times in the story. After his existence

is revealed to the public, one of the men who worked with him when he was merely human comments, 'God exists, and he's American.' Dr Manhattan himself offers the opinion, 'I don't think there is a God, and if there is, I am nothing like him.' But in spite of his protestations, time and again Dr Manhattan is compared to God.

Throughout his super-powered life, Dr Manhattan grows increasingly disconnected from humanity. His powers (teleportation, telekinesis, re-sizing himself, manipulation of matter at the molecular level, even being aware of his own future) put him so far beyond human beings that we are to him as ants are to us. When his girlfriend Laurie (the costumed hero Silk Spectre) leaves him, Dr Manhattan ends up leaving the earth for Mars, tricked into believing he has given people close to him cancer and feeling he no longer has any ties to our world. When Laurie tries to convince him to return to earth to prevent nuclear war, his response is simply 'Why would I save the world that I no longer have any stake in?' Dr Manhattan is presented as being so far above human beings that he barely cares about us at all. Who cares what happens to the ants in the garden?[6]

Is this what God is like? A divine watchmaker who set the universe going and then stepped back to watch what happened? Someone who watches dispassionately as the Doomsday clock ticks down towards annihilation? If God is absent or uncaring, like Dr Manhattan, then perhaps there is justification for such desperate schemes as Ozymandias's blood-soaked master plan to unite humanity in fear against a common foe, for in the face of utter devastation, and with no other hope, it is better to save some than none at all.

Yet this is not the picture of God that the Bible provides. The biblical picture is a long way removed from an uncaring and distant God. When the suffering people of Jerusalem claim that God has forgotten them, this is the God who says 'Can a mother forget the baby at her breast and have no compassion on the child she has borne? Thought she may forget, I will not forget you!' (Isaiah 49: 15). This is the God who allows Abraham to speak to him face to face and reasons with him about the justice of destroying the wicked city of Sodom (Genesis 18:16-32).[7] But this is not the limit of God's involvement with humanity. The New Testament tells of how God,

the craftsman who created the universe, stepped into it, becoming human in Jesus Christ. This is the very opposite of Dr Manhattan. Instead of a man who transcends humanity, we have God, unimaginably far above humanity, who chose to become one of us and walk amongst us. Unlike Dr Manhattan, who is shown becoming increasingly alienated from humans, God actually became one of us, limiting himself and relating to us not just as a ruler and judge, but as a friend. Jesus also accepted all of the consequences of becoming human, including the fact that death lies before us all. In choosing to accept death, Jesus identified himself utterly with us. He is the very antithesis of a distant god; rather, he is the God who came down to us, came down to our level, in order that we might be able to relate to him.

In *Watchmen*, unlike in many films and comics of the same genre, super-powered heroes cannot save the world. Even Ozymandias's meticulously-crafted master plan is all too fragile, as evidenced by the final image of the novel and film. God's vision to save the world is not through super-powered heroics (though presumably this would be within his capabilities), nor through a complicated and deceptive master plan. Instead his plan involves salvation of a different kind: he knows that merely preserving our lives on earth is ultimately futile, for death awaits us all, one way or another. The salvation that God has in mind, through the work of Jesus Christ, does not preserve our earthly lives, but instead assures us of continued life beyond this one. More than that, God's salvation enables us to do what we were created to do – live in relationship with him, here and now on Earth, and after this life has ended as well.

If God is absent or uncaring, then the nihilism of *Watchmen's* Comedian is justified. Indeed, it is probably the most logical response to existence in an uncaring universe. Yet if God exists *and* cares enough to suffer in order for us to get to know him then a different response is called for. A creator who is both intelligent and caring implies that there is meaning behind the universe.

[1] *'With Watchmen the comic book format legitimately became what the media manipulators were attempting to tell us all about – the graphic novel. Watchmen is a work to be read and re-*

read, loved and cherished. Poetry, cinema, narrative, music ... they're all here.' (Vincent Eno and El Csawza, Alan Moore interview, 1988 ', Feuilleton, 20 February 2006, first published in *Strange Things Are Happening*, Vol. 1, No. 2, May/June 1988)

[2] Moore said, 'I didn't design [*Watchmen*] to show off the similarities between cinema and comics, which are there, but in my opinion are fairly unremarkable. It was designed to show off the things that comics could do that cinema and literature couldn't.' Quoted in David Hughes, *The Greatest Sci-Fi Movies Never Made*, second edition (Titan Books, 2008), chapter 11, 'Who Watches the Watchmen? – How The Greatest Graphic Novel of Them All Confounded Hollywood'.

[3] The ending of the graphic novel has been criticised for being unrealistic in the consequences of the 'alien attack' on the world. With New York the only target of Ozymandias's faked alien attack, it is not necessarily believable that the USSR would instantly put aside its decades' old differences with the USA in the face of a common foe.

[4] Alan Moore in Eno and Csawza, 'Alan Moore interview, 1988'

[5] Alan Moore in Eno and Csawza, 'Alan Moore interview, 1988'

[6] 'He's growing away from humanity gradually. It's not a cold unemotional thing, it's just different; a different way of seeing the universe.' Alan Moore in Eno and Csawza, 'Alan Moore interview, 1988'

[7] 'Shall not the Judge of all the earth do right?' (Genesis 18:25, AV), is quoted in the graphic novel at the end of Chapter 3. By implication, the title is applied to Dr Manhattan as he ponders on Mars, while the leaders of the USA consider the potential fallout from the looming menace of nuclear war with the USSR – a possibility brought much closer by the departure of their 'walking nuclear deterrent'.

Author: Steve Alexander

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