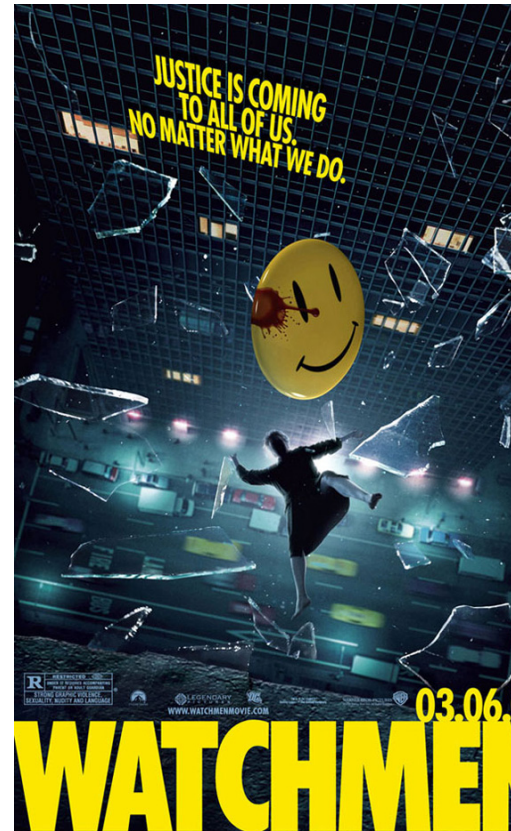


Movie Review: Watchmen

Written by {ga=mitch}

Sunday, March 08 2009 7:00 PM -

The "unfilmable" film has been filmed and has been released. And now that it has, Mitch doesn't think the arguing about "Watchmen" will die down anytime soon, and calls it one of the most critically polarizing films he's seen in the past decade; a "Love it or Hate it" movie if there ever was one. Why all the buzz? What did our trusty movie critic think of the film? He tells our readers in his latest movie review for us here at The Cleveland Fan.



The "unfilmable" film has been filmed and has been released. And now that it has, I don't think the arguing about "Watchmen" will die down anytime soon, as it is already one of the most critically polarizing films I've seen in the past decade; a "Love it or Hate it" movie if there ever was one.

For the record; I loved it.

But I certainly can appreciate the viewpoints of those on the opposite end of the spectrum. The movie is very long, slavishly devoted to the original material, depressing in its point of view, and filled with insider bits that I didn't quite understand, along with characters I can't exactly warm up to.

Of course, you could read that last paragraph, and also be talking about "Lord of the Rings" or any "Harry Potter" movie.

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The bottom line is that I don't care about the obvious flaws, and I certainly don't care about the fact that director Zack Snyder did his damndest to stay as close as possible to the original Alan Moore material. I don't care because "Watchmen" is a triumph; a completely original film that gleefully tears down the superhero genre with impunity, while simultaneously elevating the art of putting comic books to film. Visually brilliant, daring, provocative, and also quite alarming; "Watchmen" is like nothing I have seen before, including a film that probably paved the way for it, "The Dark Knight".

The comparisons to Christopher Nolan's brilliant Batman epic are as natural as they are obvious. The visions of a city (Batman) or a country (Watchmen) in near anarchy; "heroes" who are feared/hated/pursued by law enforcement, men (and women) who do not abide by the same rules as police officers and use intimidation and violence to achieve their goals; continued morality questions posed by these actions; the lack of what is normally considered "superpowers" (with one notable exception for "Watchmen"); and not the least of all, a bravura performance of an actor in the role of a lifetime.

Even though I had been planning to read Alan Moore's famous graphic novel for some time, I decided to put it off once I knew that the movie would be released, so that I could attend as a total novice. I found that it didn't take anything away from the experience, although there were numerous times early on when I was scratching my head, as the exposition of characters from the 1940s left my head spinning as badly as the first descriptions of a Quidditch from "Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone". But it wasn't totally distracting, and more importantly, it didn't screw up the rest of the movie for me.

For the plot itself, as always it seems, the less said; the better. The main thing to say about it is that it captures Moore's disdain for governments nearly as perfectly as the Wachowski Brothers' imaginative interpretation of one of Moore's other works, "V for Vendetta".

That story centered on a future Great Britain under fascist rule, and the anarchy that was used to battle it.

For "Watchmen", Moore focused on an alternate universe set in the present...which was 1985.

Wisely, Snyder does not try to update that to the present, as it would have changed too many things around (although the mind boggles on the prospect of what the movie would be like if it focused on a fifth term for Bill Clinton).

This may make things a little more confusing for the under-30 set, but it was a decision that Snyder was wise to make.

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In this parallel reality, the 22nd Amendment has been repealed, and Richard Nixon is serving his fifth term as President.

The Cold War still rages on, but is actually more intense than what it was during the Reagan years, and a sense of doom and lawlessness prevails throughout the nation, but especially in New York City, where the former members of the superhero group the Watchmen now reside.

The Watchmen helped Nixon control the criminals, but after the end of the Vietnam War (won by the U.S. in this reality, mostly due to the help of the god-like Dr. Manhattan), the populace was strongly against vigilante justice.

Living in secret since being banned by Nixon, they are stirred, somewhat reluctantly, back into action after one of their own is murdered.

The group is an odd assortment. The most prominent is Dr. Manhattan, a ghostly blue character of what seems to be pure energy in human form...often naked, (with a little too realistic, but not overtly graphic, depiction of genitalia). He was a former nuclear physicist named Jon Osterman, and in the typical prop of "science accident gone awry", he is transformed into a creature of almost limitless powers, including teleportation, matter transformation, and the ability to see backward and forward in time.

Plus the ability to destroy people in a truly disgusting manner.

The others could best be described as similar to Batman...with possibly some super strength and speed as well. It was really hard to tell from the movie whether they were just supremely trained athletes with the finest martial arts abilities, or if they were blessed with heightened powers. Three of the characters, Rorschach, Ozymandias, and the Comedian, certainly had strength and speed you'd never see from Batman, while the other two; Silk Spectre and Nite Owl, seemed quite capable in taking down ten to fifteen people at once, without so much as a scratch.

What I found most fascinating about the characters were that all of them had "problems". And here, we're not talking about the garden variety "issues" normally seen by the likes of Iron Man (dealing with alcoholism), Spider-Man (teenage angst and guilt from his uncle being murdered), Batman (depression and guilt from Mommy and Daddy being murdered), or even the X-Men (social outcasts).

With the Watchmen, they are all screwed up individuals battling numerous inner demons.

Some of them, particularly The Comedian, are complete sociopaths who are just as bad as the

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people they put into prison.

This is where Moore fully shakes up the superhero genre.

These are not good people playing hero that may have some faults that make them human.

These are basically bad people who try to salvage some decency out of their messed up lives by acting like a hero...often stepping far over the line in their "duties".

At the opposite end of the spectrum is Dr. Manhattan. He is the single factor stopping the Soviets from launching nuclear war against the United States, but he is rapidly losing any connection to his once human self. He still feigns attraction to his girlfriend Laurie, who is Silk Spectre, but his detachment eventually drives her away, and with that removed, his last connection to his former humanity might have been severed, to the detriment of the entire world.

For this type of film to be pulled off, lots of things must come off nearly perfectly. First and foremost are the special effects, and they are magnificent.

I was expecting/dreading some versions of the obvious green screen CGI that was seen in Snyder's last film, "300";

Luckily, that wasn't case here, and the only bad CGI was the artificial nose they had on Nixon.

But just as important were that the performances were believable, and for the most part, they were. Patrick Wilson did an admirable job as the conflicted Dan Dreiberger, a Bruce Wayne-esque son of a millionaire banker who took his money and training and turned himself into the high-tech wizard known as Nite Owl. Billy Crudup also shines, literally and figuratively, as the mysterious Dr. Manhattan.

Most of the time, his voice shows no more emotions than the computer HAL from "2001: A Space Odyssey";

Therefore, it takes an immensely talented actor to put in the subtleties needed to bring this type of character to life, and Crudup does so.

Jeffrey Dean Morgan also does a great job in showing the different sides of a true scum-bag in his performance as The Comedian.

It's not an easy task to play a cretin and avoid stereotypes, but Morgan handles it well.

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The talents of Wilson, Crudup, and Morgan aside, the breakout performance in this film belongs to Jackie Earle Haley as the diminutive, psychotic Rorschach. Playing most scenes behind a fascinating mask that continually changes its ink-blot patterns, Haley makes the role his own, inhabiting it in a way that is eerily similar to Heath Ledger's turn as the Joker.

Rorschach is at once chillingly savage and warmly comforting as the one "hero" who doesn't take his banishment, nor the decaying conditions of the world, lying down.

Brutally honest and brutally merciless, he is the linchpin of the movie; the vocal narrator of the film, and the glue holding the other heroes together.

Later in the film, we finally get to see Haley's face without the mask, and during those scenes, his acting is even more incredible.

I was shocked to see how good the former child actor was in his role as a pedophile in the sublime "Little Children"...but even that exemplary performance didn't prepare me for how good he was going to be in this film.

Unfortunately, not all the acting was up to the levels of those four. Matthew Goode had very little to do in his role as Adrian Veidt/Ozymandias, and he made the least of his time on camera.

And while Malin Akerman looked great as Laurie/Silk Spectre, especially in the sex scenes that were part of what gave this film its well deserved R-Rating, her acting wasn't very good.

Luckily, it wasn't so bad as to drag down the film.

The film itself will go down as a slightly flawed classic, in my opinion. The social commentaries, the action sequences, the cinematography, and the acting of some of the stars will make this a film that will be talked about for ages.

But unlike "The Dark Knight", I can't give it a full grade of 4 footballs.

The length, while somewhat understandable in order to remain true to the original material, is still a bit of a problem.

As is Snyder's love of grotesque violence and gore.

We saw it in "300", with continued slow-motion shots of amputations, knifings, and cringe-inducing snapping of bones in full Technicolor glory (and stomach turning sound effects), and it's even worse in this movie.

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I understand that violence is a main component of the story, but Snyder went far beyond anything seen in any previous superhero movie.

And in that aspect, more does not equate to better.

Be warned; this R-Rating is for real.

No child under the age of 14 or 15 should be watching this movie.

That quibble aside, "Watchmen" absolutely delivers as the most unique comic book adaptation of all time. Is it the best of all time? At this point, I'll still lean towards "The Dark Knight" for that honor...although I reserve the right to change my mind after another couple of viewings, as this is definitely a film that you want to see more than once.

My Rating: Brian Sipe - 3 ½ footballs.