

## **The Times They Are A-Changin': The Passage of Time as an Agent of Change in Zack Snyder's Film Adaptation of *Watchmen***

***Daniel Wood***

Since its original publication in the late 1980s, Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons' *Watchmen* has been hailed as a masterpiece – “the *Ulysses* of graphic novels.”<sup>1</sup> Serialised monthly in comic-book form throughout 1986 and 1987 before its dozen episodes were collected into a single volume,<sup>2</sup> *Watchmen*, like most of the work in the comic-book medium, is fundamentally a superhero story, albeit one with a postmodern streak that upends and inverts the entire concept of the superhero. Opening with the murder of a vigilante known as the Comedian, the story at first takes the form of a detective mystery as the members of the eponymous Watchmen – the superhero team of which the Comedian was once a member – attempt to identify the killer of their former ally. But soon the story turns the tables on the heroes themselves, exposing them as corrupt abusers of power so closely aligned with the United States Government that they willingly accrue popular support for its military incursions in Southeast Asia and Latin America, and then fall entirely out of favour with the Government as their vigilantism begins to foment popular unrest verging on anarchy. Despite the sensationalist narrative, however, the comparison to James Joyce's *Ulysses* is a justifiable one insofar as the formal aspects of *Watchmen* have entirely rewritten the rules and norms of the comic-book medium. With a formal structure that opens up a “near-infinite recursiveness of text [and] of metatext,”<sup>3</sup>

*Watchmen* is, in the judgment of *Time* critic Lev Grossman, “[t]old with ruthless psychological realism, in fugal, overlapping plotlines and gorgeous, cinematic panels rich with repeating motifs,” which combine to make it “a heart-pounding, heartbreaking read and a watershed in the evolution of a young medium.”<sup>4</sup> Indeed, *Time* even went so far as to select *Watchmen* as the only graphic novel to appear on its list of the top one hundred novels since 1923,<sup>5</sup> declaring it “a landmark in the graphic novel medium [that] would be a masterpiece in any.”<sup>6</sup>

Of course, as well as acquiring an air of literary credibility and critical reverence atypical for a story about comic-book superheroes, *Watchmen* has also acquired a more “stereotypical” army of fans whose ongoing appreciation of the original comic-book series has kept it alive and in print for the twenty-five years since it first appeared. One other thing those fans kept alive was a yearning to see the series adapted for the cinema – a yearning that was fulfilled when the director Zack Snyder, himself an ardent fan of *Watchmen*,<sup>7</sup> released his long-anticipated film adaptation in early 2009.<sup>8</sup> In making the film, however, Snyder met with several dilemmas. On the one hand, precisely because he was a fan of the original comic-book series, he was determined to leave as much of it as possible unaltered in the process of adaptation, reproducing “key panels from the comic... with apparently obsessive precision”<sup>9</sup> – a precision that occasionally entails “slavish[ness] to the original text.”<sup>10</sup> On the other hand, the events of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries have largely outdated the political concerns of the original text, so that the contemporary vitality of Snyder’s film necessitated and came to depend upon certain alterations to its source material. And yet, however necessary and limited those alterations may have been, they in turn posed a number of new problems to the overall narrative – the awkward handling of which, especially in the film’s radically altered climax, drew a decidedly mixed response from fans and critics alike.<sup>11</sup>

As a result, only a little over a year after its cinematic release, Snyder’s *Watchmen* is teetering on the edge of cinematic obscurity – a fate that puts the film sharply at odds with the decades-long flourishing of the comic-book series that inspired it. Of course, since it lacks much of the complexity and subtlety of Moore and Gibbons’ *Watchmen*, obscurity may well be exactly what it deserves. Nevertheless, Snyder faced a number of very unique challenges in adapting *Watchmen* for the screen and devised a number of equally unique and occasionally quite subtle ways of attempting to overcome them. As such, as Stuart Moulthrop writes, the film adaptation of *Watchmen* deserves critical consideration with as close a focus on the nature and purpose of “its significant departures from Moore and Gibbons

as [on its] ability to translate their conception to the IMAX Experience."<sup>12</sup> In other words, whatever aesthetic and cultural value Snyder's film may or may not possess, his responses to the challenges of adaptation are worthy of serious analysis – not least because his source material has received attention from serious critics writing for a broad readership while Snyder's film adaptation has received almost none. In her *Theory of Adaptation*, Linda Hutcheon argues that "the act of adaptation always involves both (re)interpretation and then (re-)creation"<sup>13</sup> which makes it simultaneously "[an] act of appropriation [and of] salvaging."<sup>14</sup> This is to say that, by definition, a film adaptation of another text both entails the appropriation of its source material in the creation of a new text and requires the salvaging of the new text from the complications that arise as a consequence of appropriation. The present article suggests that even if Zack Snyder did a poor job of adapting "the *Ulysses* of graphic novels," the sheer complexity of the process of adaptation means that his adaptation strategies are deserving of examination. How does he attempt to appropriate the *Watchmen* comic-book series for the cinema, and by what means does he attempt to salvage the resultant cinematic text from complications caused by appropriation?

### Adaptation

An interval of some twenty-three years separates the initial publication of *Watchmen* in comic-book form and the release of its film adaptation. In many respects, the film hews closely to its source material: Stuart Moulthrop describes it as "remarkable for its frame-to-panel fidelity,"<sup>15</sup> which, as Rjurik Davidson writes, "at times [entails] reproducing [the comic-book series] as if it had been used as a storyboard."<sup>16</sup> Obviously, though, as must be done in any film adaptation of a literary text, Zack Snyder made several alterations to the original in order to translate its narrative into a cinematic medium. But the most substantial alterations to the original are neither those that twist its narrative to suit the requirements of Snyder's medium nor even those made to reflect his personal preferences: they are instead those wrought, and required, by the passage of time, by the twenty-three years separating the adaptation from the original. The comic-book series and the film both tell the same tale of tensions between superheroes and the US Government at the height of the Cold War, and both ground this tale in a realistic world-historical socio-political context whose emphasis on the dynamics of geopolitical power and institutional authority serves to counterbalance the fantasy of the superhero genre. The adaptation *does* differ from the original in its narrative climax, and the significance of its differences will be discussed here; but even so, supposing that there were no

such differences at all, the comic-book series and its film adaptation would still inevitably tell different tales given the differing circumstances of their respective eras of production.

Set in late 1985 and completing its serial publication some eighteen months later, Moore and Gibbons' *Watchmen* told a story whose temporal setting was approximately contemporaneous to its time of publication and thus addressed and expressed social and political concerns then prevalent. Snyder's *Watchmen*, however, preserves Moore and Gibbons' mid-1980s setting even though it was released in early 2009. As such, the concerns it addresses have been so outdated by later events that the film would seem to lack any meaningful contemporary relevance. The Cold War – so essential to the narrative of *Watchmen* – is over. The arms race has been run; the hands of the Doomsday Clock have ticked back a notch. So, notwithstanding the fact that Snyder freely makes several departures from the work of Moore and Gibbons, his *Watchmen* would be substantially different from theirs even if he adhered to his source material with absolute and unwavering fidelity. After all, whereas their *Watchmen* only briefly used the device of an alternate history narrative in order to open a much broader narrative that depicted what was, in the 1980s, an alternate reality, Snyder's *Watchmen* tells an alternative history narrative *in its entirety*, from the opening credits to the final reel.<sup>17</sup> This simple but inescapable difference between the original and the adaptation would of course destabilise the salience of Moore and Gibbons' socio-political commentary in *any* adaptation produced outside the original historical context of the comic-book series. So destabilised, Snyder's film would appear to be little more than a purely retrospective and therefore comparatively trivial look back at Cold War paranoia – a speculative but ultimately toothless story of Mutual Assured Destruction built around the gimmick of having superheroes embroiled in the upheavals of the day.<sup>18</sup>

Snyder clearly knows that he must at least recognise this problem, if not resolve it outright, before he can get his narrative properly underway: hence his deliberate and early emphasis on the motif of passing time. It is true, as Douglas Wolk has detailed, that Moore and Gibbons make a motif of passing time in their comic-book series as well. Citing their introduction of the Minutemen, a superhero team that predated the *Watchmen*,<sup>19</sup> Wolk points out that “[b]oth the minute and the watch are part of the book’s theme of time, its measurement, its effect, and its terminus.” He continues:

One major character, the son of a watchmaker, has come unmoored in time, and he’s free of temporal causality and the morality that goes along with it ... [and] [t]he most prominent visual motif of the book, an arrow or line pointing just left of the top of a circular shape,

alludes to a clock poised at a few minutes to midnight – specifically, to the “doomsday clock” of the *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*.<sup>20</sup>

“Even the storytelling techniques and page format Gibbons uses for *Watchmen* practically tick,” Wolk adds. “His line art is understated, even muted, with no sense of motion [so that] each panel shows a discrete, infinitely thin slice of time.”<sup>21</sup> In much the same way, Snyder manipulates time in his film via a frequent use of extreme slow motion punctuated by a sudden and almost impulsive speeding-up of the action; but more than that, Snyder explicitly calls attention to his preservation of Moore and Gibbons’ motif of passing time by twice foregrounding that motif in the opening moments of his film. In particular, when he depicts the transition from the Minutemen to the Watchmen against the backdrop of the turbulent political situation in the America of the mid-1960s, he sets this transitional montage to the tune of Bob Dylan’s “The Times They Are A-Changin’.” Reviewing the film in *The New Yorker*, a skeptical Anthony Lane singled out this tune for complaint: “Must we have [that song] in the background? How long did it take the producers to arrive at that imaginative choice?”<sup>22</sup> In fact, though, this particular song in that particular context not only testifies to the generational evolution unfolding on-screen but also conveys self-referential meta-textual meaning about the nature of the film adaptation itself to the viewers who watch that evolution unfold. (Although the songs of Bob Dylan also appear in the original comic-book series, only “Desolation Row” and “All Along the Watchtower” are actually quoted, indicating that Snyder specifically selected “The Times They Are A-Changin’” for inclusion in this sequence.) Additionally, but more subtly, in the opening scene depicting the murder of the Comedian, the victim acknowledges the strength of his assailant and the inevitability of his own murder with the fatalistic words: “Just a matter of time, I suppose.” As the first words spoken by any of the central characters in the film – and as words that, crucially, are *not* spoken in the corresponding scene in the comic-book series<sup>23</sup> – their foregrounding might be justifiably interpreted as tantamount to an acknowledgement on Snyder’s part that the passage of time has handicapped his film before it can even begin.

Alternatively, of course, these words and the inclusion of “The Times They Are A-Changin’” might be just as easily understood as nothing more than aesthetic felicities that Snyder found instinctively appropriate to his narrative – throwaway details placed in the film with little thought, deliberation, or purpose. However, given that they appear at the very beginning of the film and back-to-back in succession, they more likely constitute Snyder’s way of openly but unobtrusively telling his audience that he knows, firstly, that times have changed between the original publication of *Watch-*

*men* and the release of his film adaptation and, secondly, that his film must somehow accommodate the changes wrought by passing time if it is to possess a contemporary salience equal to that of the comic-book series. As adaptation theorist Pascal Lefèvre writes: “Few [film] adaptations respect meticulously the storyline of a particular comic” because “[e]very real artisan of cinema knows that this medium has its own laws and rules. A direct adaptation is seldom a good choice: some elements may work wonderfully in a comic, but cannot function in the context of a film.”<sup>24</sup> In the case of *Watchmen*, though, a director who *did* seek to make a ‘direct adaptation’ found his efforts upset by events in the world outside the film – so that, as viewers, we have a reason and perhaps even a duty to pay attention to the *somehow* of his attempts to salvage his narrative from contemporary irrelevance by accommodating the changes wrought by passing time,<sup>25</sup> the strategies through which he invests a film set in a bygone era with relevance for audiences in the present day. It is not possible, here, to advance a complete or even a comprehensive view of these strategies, but, in the interests of opening a scholarly discussion on this subject and extending the fledgling scholarly literature concerning Snyder’s *Watchmen* more broadly, what follows are some preliminary notes on one such strategy in particular and a consideration of the textual implications it holds for the remainder of the film.

### Appropriation

“At the moment,” said Alan Moore during the original serial publication of *Watchmen*,

a certain part of [Ronald] Reagan’s America isn’t scared. [These people] think they’re invulnerable. There’s this incredible up mood that leads at its worst excesses to things like the Libyan bombing and things like that, and they worry me and frighten me. The power elite of America and an awful lot of the people who vote for them [believe] that they can do whatever they want because they’re invulnerable, they’re not afraid, and they can gloss over the terror of the nuclear stockpiles, the world situation and all that and just think, “Hey, we’re doing all right, we’re okay.” That’s unhealthy.<sup>26</sup>

Leaving aside the question of whether or not there is any validity to Moore’s criticism of Reagan and Reaganism, it must be said that the essence of that criticism is crucial to any study of *Watchmen*. Moore was incensed with the ethic of Reaganism insofar as it entailed taking a brusque, brash, “big stick” approach to politics in both the international and the domestic

spheres – a flexing of American muscle abroad that engendered widespread concessions to authority at home – and *Watchmen* is essentially a graphic dramatisation of Moore’s critical worldview. That, however, is exactly the problem Snyder faced in filming *Watchmen*. With the Reagan Administration and Reagan himself both now artifacts of history, no twenty-first century *Watchmen* adaptation could simultaneously preserve the mid-1980s concerns of the original and possess critical relevance for its own time. Or, at least, it could not do so without somehow extending and expanding upon Alan Moore’s criticism of the ethic of Reaganism by gesturing towards the causal relationship between that socio-political ethic and the social and political problems of the modern day.

Ironically, for all his famous refusal to become directly involved in any cinematic adaptations of any of his works, it was Alan Moore himself who identified the means by which Zack Snyder could make a *Watchmen* film that extends the criticism of the original into the present. In 2004, shortly after the death of Ronald Reagan and in the midst of a presidential campaign overshadowed by the so-called “War on Terror,” Moore gave an interview in which he explicitly identified Reagan as “the architect of much of the world’s present misery ... [who] created Saddam Hussein and Osama bin Laden, or at least set in motion the policies that would create these creatures.”<sup>27</sup> Very simply, then, the obvious way to identify Snyder’s strategies for making his film contemporarily relevant would be to identify the several references it makes to the War on Terror in the course of dramatising a critical position ostensibly concerned with the ethic of Reaganism. “[T]he *Watchmen* film,” Stuart Moulthrop argues, “proceeds from, and reproduces, a distinctly post-9/11 ideology,”<sup>28</sup> but in what ways exactly does it anticipate the post-9/11 War on Terror from the vantage point of a narrative set wholly in the late 1980s? At what points in his film does Zack Snyder faithfully replicate Alan Moore’s original criticism of the ethic of Reaganism while also tweaking aspects of the narrative in a way that looks ahead to the War on Terror and thus positions Reaganism as the cause of the present conflict?

Most noticeably, the film opens with, and repeatedly returns to, the televised Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in late 1985. This event not only recalls the more recent US-led invasion of Afghanistan but also reminds us that the United States responded to the Soviet invasion by funding and training the *mujahideen* who would later sponsor the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon on September 11, 2001 – the impetus for the more recent invasion. In addition, when the villain of the story, Adrian Veidt, expresses a yearning for world peace by bemoaning the preponderance of international wars fought over dwindling oil supplies, the film repeatedly recalls the criticisms levelled at the Bush Administration in the

build-up to the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003. By implicating Afghanistan and Iraq in his adaptation of *Watchmen*, Zack Snyder effectively updates Alan Moore's original criticisms of Reaganism by co-opting Moore's more recent intimation that the key antagonists in the War on Terror are Reagan's inadvertent political offspring. Thereafter, Snyder invests that intimation with a greater degree of certainty in the film when he makes a third and more emphatic connection between Reaganism and the War on Terror by literally depicting the still-standing Twin Towers of the World Trade Center as the destination of those individuals who put the ethic of Reaganism into practice.

In general, Snyder's use of the Twin Towers entails a brazen manipulation of the buildings themselves as well as the sentiment attached to them, and for that reason he has attracted close and largely unfavorable scrutiny from his more scholarly viewers. Scott Kaufman, for instance, calls attention to the scene in which the Comedian is buried in a New York cemetery while the remaining *Watchmen* unite around his grave:<sup>29</sup>

[Snyder] shoehorn[s] the Twin Towers (formerly located in Lower Manhattan) into what had been in the [comic-book] a shot of the Chrysler Building in Midtown Manhattan. ... [He] *moves the Twin Towers* in order to keep them in-frame both in the establishing shot *and* the long-shot of the priest approaching the grave.<sup>30</sup>

Moreover, Kaufman adds, "this undue attention to the Towers continues throughout the film. When Dan Dreiberg first arrives at Adrian Veidt's office, the Towers are clearly visible through the window. One of the ubiquitous Veidt Industries blimps creeps from the left side of the screen to the right *and is seemingly aimed directly at the Twin Towers.*"<sup>31</sup> For Kaufman, such manipulation of the Towers is gratuitous and therefore inappropriate. "If Snyder had done something meaningful with [the] World Trade Center that would be one thing," he writes. "Sticking [the Towers] in as many shots as possible is little more than an undignified grasp at an unearned gravitas."<sup>32</sup> In fact, Snyder *does* do something meaningful with the World Trade Center: not in every shot that shows them, of course, but certainly in one crucial shot which is invested with obvious cultural significance arising from the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, as well as additional textual significance derived from the events of the narrative that build up to this shot.

The shot in question shows an airborne vehicle thrusting upwards into the sky from a departure point beneath the surface of New York's East River. There are two passengers inside the vehicle, bound for Adrian Veidt's Antarctic hideaway. Alongside the psychopathic vigilante Rorschach is the comparatively benevolent Dan Dreiberg, a one-time superhero

known as Nite Owl. The airborne vehicle is a small airship in the shape of an owl that belongs to Dreiberg. Importantly, both of these men have, before now, revealed themselves as believers in and practitioners of the ‘big stick’ approach to problem resolution – indeed, that much is implicit in the very concept of the superhero as an agent of vigilante justice<sup>33</sup> – and so, in different ways and to different degrees, they both stand as representatives of the ethic of Reaganism. As the airship rises from the water, the Twin Towers loom in the background, and as it zooms off into the distance, it appears to be aimed straight at the Towers and flying directly towards them. Notably, in the corresponding scene in the comic-book series,<sup>34</sup> the Twin Towers are nowhere to be found: here as elsewhere, Snyder specifically inserts them.

But there is more to this scene than can be seen with the eye or retrospectively described, given that it draws on what has previously been disclosed about the airship. Concealed in Dan Dreiberg’s makeshift basement in the New York subway, the airship remains unnamed for viewers of the film until Dreiberg’s lover, Laurie Jupiter, asks him about its provenance. Dreiberg identifies the oversized owl by the nickname “Archie” – then he specifies, firstly, that “Archie” is short for its full name, “Archimedes,” and secondly, that Archimedes takes its name not from the famous ancient mathematician, but from the pet owl belonging to the wizard Merlyn in the Disney film adaptation of T H White’s *The Sword in the Stone*.<sup>35</sup> Although it may seem trivial at first, this detail acquires greater significance insofar as Merlyn enjoys a very unique experience of passing time and that Archimedes plays an important role in that experience.<sup>36</sup> In *The Sword in the Stone*, Merlyn explains that he experiences the future first and has therefore spent his life moving backwards through time, into the past, while everyone around him moves from the past into the future. Merlyn thus relies on his memories of the future in order to negotiate his encounters with the individuals he meets in the present. In the process, he is accompanied by the owl Archimedes, who serves as something like Merlyn’s anchor to those who are swept up in the opposite temporal flow, or as an interlocutor with those who experience time as the rest of us do. Archimedes, in other words, follows the reverse-chronological Merlyn through the world but himself experiences time in the usual way, moving into the future from the past.

As a result, the relationship between Merlyn and those around him mirrors the relationship between the viewers of Snyder’s film and the film itself: when we watch a contemporary film set in 1985, we, like Merlyn, are located in ‘the future’ but we step backwards in time to experience an aspect of the past, while the characters in the film move forward in time, presumably towards our present moment. In Archie’s rise from the East River,

then, we might understand the airship heading for the Twin Towers as an interlocutor between the allegorical historicity of the film and the film's viewers, just as White's Archimedes acts as an interlocutor with those who move forward in time around Merlyn. Snyder's use of Archie is here akin to White's use of Archimedes as a means of connecting those viewers who know what is destined to happen to the Twin Towers with those characters who are unwittingly making it happen. Accompanying those viewers who move backwards in time as they watch the film, Archie identifies for them those aspects of the past that influenced the conditions of the future they have temporarily left behind. In its flight towards the World Trade Center with Rorschach and Dreiberg as passengers, Archie unites past and present in a single shot that shows the vigilantes who wield the "big stick" of Reaganism aimed straight at the Twin Towers whose collapse ignited the present-day War on Terror and was, for Alan Moore, one of the inadvertent consequences of the triumph of Reaganism. So, whereas the comic-book series uses an alternate present to issue a *warning about a prospective future*, the film implies an *indictment of the recent past* based on an awareness of how that past has led us to our troubled present.

### Salvaging

In unpacking the cultural and textual significance of Snyder's *mise-en-scène* in this shot as well as in the opening moments of his film, I do not mean to suggest that his ability to invest the film with such significance – and thus to reclaim some of the salience of Moore's socio-political criticisms – is proof of his sophistication as a filmmaker. I mean only to identify the strategies through by which he seeks to prevent the passage of time from casting his film into immediate irrelevance, regardless of the sophistication of those strategies and the extent of their success. In turn, however, those strategies present the film with new dilemmas – particularly in that a criticism of the 'big stick' ethic of Reaganism cannot just be abandoned and left untethered to the narrative once it has been raised. How, then, does Snyder appropriate other aspects of the comic-book series in order to *augment* this criticism and integrate it into the narrative of the film, and to thereby salvage the film as a whole? An answer can be found in the climax.

In the comic-book series, Dan Dreiberg and Rorschach arrive at Adrian Veidt's Antarctic hideaway too late to prevent Veidt from committing mass murder: Veidt has already successfully orchestrated a massacre, so Dreiberg and Rorschach are left to merely listen to him explain how and why he did it. Veidt reveals that he managed to genetically engineer an alien life-form which he set loose in New York, where it triggered a sort of

“psychic atom bomb” that claimed millions of lives. But despite the catastrophic human toll, the faux alien attack proves beneficial to mankind in general – as Veidt supposed it would. “His expectation,” as Aeon Skoble writes, is “that the sudden appearance of an alien foe threatening human life will bring together all the otherwise warring nations in peaceful collaboration against this new common enemy.”<sup>37</sup> Accordingly, the people of Earth unite in common purpose to defend themselves against any further alien threats that may arise in future. By giving the United States and the Soviet Union just cause to broker a *détente*, Adrian Veidt effectively brings about world peace.

In the film, on the other hand, Veidt’s decimation of innocents is carried out not by an artificial extraterrestrial but by a man named Jon Osterman. As the sixth member of the disbanded Watchmen, Osterman is the only one to possess actual superhuman abilities; the others are all self-made vigilantes. Formerly an American scientist working on nuclear weapons testing during World War II, an equipment malfunction bombarded him with radiation: he was blown apart, entirely atomised, and declared dead. Somehow, though, his consciousness survived the blast, lingering in the ether until it grew strong enough to rebuild his body one atom at a time – in the process of which it allowed him to imbue himself with the ability to enlarge his body to the size of a building or shrink to the size of a sub-atomic particle, as well as to make multiple copies of himself, to teleport to any location, and to travel back and forth through time. In the film, as distinct from the comic-book series, it is Osterman who detonates what is essentially an atomic bomb on a helpless world populace when Adrian Veidt dupes him into doing so. Moreover, Osterman’s unwitting attack is not confined to New York but destroys dozens of cities around the world, and so the people of Earth unite against a common enemy when they find themselves apparently at the mercy of this infuriated and indestructible deity.

Surprisingly, not all scholarly critics of Watchmen have been willing to admit that this radical difference between the original and the adaptation is in any way significant. Sharon Packer, for instance, insists that, despite their climactic differences, “the film and the [comic-book series] are strikingly similar.”<sup>38</sup> She implies that the conclusions she draws from her reading of the film could just as easily apply to the comic-book series. In doing so, however, she dismisses – without responding to – the skepticism and even the hostility of devoted fans of the comic-book series who have engaged in over a decade’s worth of close reading and found the alterations to the climax in Zack Snyder’s film to entail profound repercussions for the film overall. In particular, as the administrator of the hugely popular ‘geek film’ website *Ain’t It Cool News*, “über-fan” Harry Knowles had been moni-

toring the progress of the *Watchmen* adaptation for thirteen years. After seeing it, he asked himself: "What doesn't work for me?" He answered:

The new ending. I just don't like it as much as the ending of the [comic] books. As the movie nears its ending, it felt like it was rushing to an established conclusion. It's more than the [absence of the alien]. It's that... it makes [Jon Osterman] the big scary guillotine instead of alternate dimensional attacks. ... I always got that the localized event in New York felt small in a post-9-11 adaptation of this material [so that the global scale of the attack in the film is understandable], but honestly – having the [alien] happen on the scale of this event – would have been fine. NOW – does this ending change [or] RUIN the film for me. No. But it will always be one of the reasons I'll push people to reading the book. There's just a reality to adaptations. You lose things.<sup>39</sup>

Fans of the comic-book series on other "geek film" websites issued very similar criticisms,<sup>40</sup> and Zack Snyder himself conceded their validity.<sup>41</sup> Meanwhile, at least part of Scott Kaufman's more articulate dislike of the film seems to stem from his deep appreciation of the ways in which Alan Moore subtly establishes Jon Osterman as an avatar of the reader of the comic-book series rather than as a character to be manipulated in the course of the narrative.<sup>42</sup> And since Douglas Wolk,<sup>43</sup> Brandy Blake,<sup>44</sup> and, most recently, David Barnes,<sup>45</sup> have each expressed a similar appreciation of this technique, it is reasonable to assume that their responses to the climax of the film would be somewhat similar to Kaufman's response. Whether viewers come to the film as scholarly critics or as fans of the comic-book series, most of them seem to arrive at the same conclusion: Snyder's rewritten climax violates the letter and the spirit of Moore and Gibbons' climax, and therefore pales by comparison.

Consider, though, not only the surface differences between the *faux* alien attack and Osterman's unwitting attack but also the differences in their respective implications. For an alien attack to inspire the people of the world to reconcile their differences, by implication it must first inspire a worldwide reassessment of loyalties; it brings mankind to a point of unity by forcing human beings across the world to see their species as one under attack by another species and to agree to dismiss intra-species disputes in order to preserve the species as a whole. However, for the Osterman attack to inspire a similar reconciliation, it need not at all impel a reassessment of loyalties because it dramatically replaces inter-species conflict with the total subjugation of an entire people by a godlike overlord wielding absolute power. In both the comic-book series and the film, Osterman is fi-

nally persuaded by Veidt to abandon Earth altogether and to find himself a home elsewhere in the galaxy, but in the film, as Stuart Moulthrop observes, “[he] is not merely tricked into exile; he is stripped of his charisma as *the condition for a new world order*. ... In both comic and film, [he] remains at large, whereabouts unknown; but in the film, this absence constitutes an impending threat. ... [A]ny future geopolitics must [therefore] account for his possible return” because “the world will always live in fear of [his] judgment.”<sup>46</sup> In the film, then, the people of the world have no incentive to recognise anything so internal and introspective as common humanity: they need only recognise the external omnipresence of a common enemy forever threatening further strikes with a ‘big stick’ clenched in his fist – which is to say that Osterman’s actions in the climax of the film augment the strategies by which Zack Snyder attempts to preserve Alan Moore’s socio-political criticisms at earlier moments. Rather than leaving prior alterations to the comic-book series as free-floating adjustments or addenda, Snyder also alters the climax of the film in a way that makes his prior alterations *point towards it* – and so, in a sense, those prior alterations preemptively rationalise his climactic alterations. Buried amidst an avalanche of *Watchmen* fan comments, one writer on *Ain’t It Cool News* noted something similar to this, although with less favour than it has been noted here:

[L]eaving out the [alien] does [ruin] the ending. ... [T]he [alien] unites humanity against a common, EXTERNAL foe. If the disasters are blamed on [Osterman] (who represents perhaps a future evolution of man, a ‘perfect’ being) – what exactly is mankind supposed to unite against? SCIENCE? THE FUTURE? It’s fucked up and misses a big point.<sup>47</sup>

Those words are close to the mark, but they do not quite hit it. Far from entirely missing the point, the replacement of the “external” alien foe with the “internal” foe of Osterman simply makes a *different* point – a point in line with the more contemporary socio-political criticisms of the film and thus attuned to Snyder’s attempts to accommodate the changes that the passage of time has wrought on *Watchmen*. By substituting Veidt’s *faux* alien for Jon Osterman, Snyder finds a way of overcoming mere *gestures* towards the inherent oppressiveness of the “big stick” approach to problem resolution and instead *foregrounds* the very oppressiveness of that approach so that it stands as the final note of his film.

Snyder, then, concludes the film by substantially underscoring the indictment of the political past that he was compelled to advance because of the passage of time, and the consequent possibility that his film would lack the political relevance of the original *Watchmen* when it hit cinema screens.

While critics and fans alike, and cinematic audiences in general, might accuse his film of lacking the aesthetic sophistication and political salience of his source material, those who make such accusations should bear in mind that the passage of time required alterations to the source material and that, although the alterations to the climax were not among those requirements, the rewritten climax does still serve a purpose within the context of the earlier alterations. As such, we cannot justifiably interpret any of these alterations as products solely of the independent agency of the filmmaker. On the contrary, they are products of the historical events that *subsumed* Zack Snyder's independent agency – and, if we are to place responsibility for them anywhere at all, we must place it largely on the twenty-three years that preceded the film he made.

Melbourne University  
wooddj@unimelb.edu.au

#### NOTES

- 1 See, for example, Brooks Landon, *Science Fiction After 1900: From the Steam Man to the Stars* (New York and London: Routledge, 2002) 232; and Ian Nathan, "Watchmen", *Empire Online*, February 2009, date of access: 1 December 2010, <<http://www.empireonline.com/reviews/reviewcomplete.asp?FID=11018>>.
- 2 Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons, *Watchmen* (New York: DC Comics, 1986-87).
- 3 Bryan Dietrich, "The Human Stain: Chaos and the Rage for Order in *Watchmen*", *Extrapolation* 50.1 (2009) 137.
- 4 Lev Grossman, "Watchmen (1986)", *Time* 166.16, 16 October 2005, date of access: 1 December 2010, <[http://www.time.com/time/specials/packages/article/0,28804,1951793\\_1951946\\_1952878,00.html](http://www.time.com/time/specials/packages/article/0,28804,1951793_1951946_1952878,00.html)>.
- 5 Lev Grossman and Richard Lacayo, "TIME 100 Novels", *Time* 166.17, 24 October 2005, date of access: 1 December 2010, <<http://www.time.com/time/specials/packages/completelist/0,29569,1951793,00.html>>.
- 6 Lev Grossman, "10 of *Time's* Hundred Best Novels", *Time* 166.17 (24 October 2005) 110.
- 7 Frank Lovece, "CGI: *Watchmen*", *Film Journal International*, 19 February 2009, date of access: 1 December 2010, <[http://www.filmjournal.com/filmjournal/content\\_display/news-and-features/features/movies/e3i8f6bf92e292731581559af0969092ce9](http://www.filmjournal.com/filmjournal/content_display/news-and-features/features/movies/e3i8f6bf92e292731581559af0969092ce9)>.
- 8 Snyder, Zack (dir.), *Watchmen* (Warner Bros. Pictures, 2009).
- 9 Stuart Moulthrop, "*Watchmen* Meets *The Aristocrats*", *Postmodern Culture* 19.1 (September 2008), date of access: 1 December 2010,

- <<http://pmc.iath.virginia.edu/text-only/issue.908/19.1moulthrop.txt>>.
- 10 Nathan, "Watchmen".
- 11 For an overview of responses, see *Rotten Tomatoes*, date of access: 1 December 2010, <<http://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/watchmen>>.
- 12 Moulthrop, "Watchmen Meets *The Aristocrats*".
- 13 Linda Hutcheon, *A Theory of Adaptation* (New York and London: Routledge, 2006) 8.
- 14 Hutcheon, *A Theory of Adaptation* 9.
- 15 Moulthrop, "Watchmen Meets *The Aristocrats*".
- 16 Rjurik Davidson, "Fighting the Good Fight: Watching *Watchmen*", *Screen Education* 54 (Winter 2009) 19.
- 17 In his analysis of the politics of *Watchmen*, Rjurik Davidson actually notes something similar but does not think it deserving of elaboration. See Davidson, "Fighting the Good Fight": "[T]he real significance of *Watchmen*," he writes, "lies in its examination of American history and society, most particularly as it developed in the 1980s" (22) – as if Zack Snyder deliberately decided to set his *Watchmen* in the 1980s for the primary purpose of examining American history and society in that decade rather than the purpose of faithfully reproducing the work of Moore and Gibbons.
- 18 In his review of Snyder's *Watchmen*, Ian Nathan recognises this problem but does not dwell on it at the length it deserves. See Nathan, "Watchmen": "In boldly keeping the book's (then contemporary) 1985 setting fraught with Cold War paranoia... the film becomes a less urgent period-piece."
- 19 It should be noted that, within the film itself, the superhero team is never explicitly referred to as the "Watchmen." However, since both the comic-book series and the film carry the title *Watchmen*, that name has been applied to the team in discourse concerning both of those texts.
- 20 Douglas Wolk, *Reading Comics: How Graphic Novels Work and What They Mean* (Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press, 2007) 237.
- 21 Wolk, *Reading Comics* 239.
- 22 Anthony Lane, "Dark Visions", *The New Yorker* 85.4 (9 March 2009) 82.
- 23 For the corresponding scene in the comic-book series, see Moore and Gibbons, *Watchmen* Ch. 1, p. 1-4.
- 24 Pascal Lefèvre, "Incompatible Visual Ontologies?: The Problematic Adaptation of Drawn Images" in *Film and Comic Books*, eds Ian Gordon, Mark Jancovich, and Matthew P McAllister (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2007) 4.
- 25 For more on film adaptations and the necessary accommodation and salvation of source material, see Hutcheon, *A Theory of Adaptation* 6-9.
- 26 Gary Groth and Robert Fiore (eds), *The New Comics: Interviews from the Pages of The Comics Journal* (New York: Berkley Books, 1988) 100.
- 27 Scott Thill, "The man who invented the future", *Salon*, 22 July 2004, date of access: 1 December 2010, <<http://dir.salon.com/story/books/int/2004/07/22/moore/>>

- print.html>.
- 28 Moulthrop, "Watchmen Meets *The Aristocrats*".
- 29 For the corresponding scene in the comic-book series, see Moore and Gibbons, *Watchmen* Ch. 2, p. 1-28.
- 30 Scott Eric Kaufman, "Watching *Watchmen*: How unfilmable novels become unwatchable films", *Acephalous*, 10 March 2009, date of access: 1 December 2010, <<http://acephalous.typepad.com/acephalous/2009/03/watching-watchmen-how-unfilmable-novels-become-unwatchable-films.html>>.
- 31 Kaufman, "Watching *Watchmen*".
- 32 Kaufman, "Watching *Watchmen*".
- 33 For more on this subject, see Geoff Klock, *How to Read Superhero Comics and Why* (New York and London: Continuum, 2002) 62-76.
- 34 For the corresponding scene in the comic-book series, see Moore and Gibbons, *Watchmen* Ch. 10, p. 11.
- 35 For the corresponding scene in the comic-book series, see Moore and Gibbons, *Watchmen* Ch. 7, p. 7.
- 36 T H White, *The Sword in the Stone* (London: G P Putnam, 1939) 34-39.
- 37 Aeon J Skoble, 'Superhero Revisionism in *Watchmen* and *The Dark Knight Returns*' in *Superheroes and Philosophy: Truth, Justice, and the Socratic Way*, eds Thomas V Morris and Matt Morris (Chicago and La Salle: Open Court, 2005) 36.
- 38 Sharon Packer, *Superheroes and Superegos: Analyzing the Minds Behind the Masks* (Santa Barbara: Praeger, 2010) 21.
- 39 Harry Knowles, "Harry Watches The WATCHMEN And Can Remain Silent Not One More Second!", *Ain't It Cool News*, 24 February 2009, date of access: 1 December 2010, <<http://www.aintitcool.com/node/40225>>.
- 40 Devin Faraci, "EXCLUSIVE: IS THE SQUID IN WATCHMEN AFTER ALL?", *Chud.com*, 18 February 2009, date of access: 1 December 2010, <<http://chud.com/articles/articles/18204/1/EXCLUSIVE-IS-THE-SQUID-IN-WATCHMEN-AFTER-ALL/Page1.html>>.
- 41 "Merrick", "No Squid for You!! 30 Minutes of WATCHMEN Screens In UK & Snyder Talked 5th-dimensional Squidish Thingies!!", *Ain't It Cool News*, 17 November 2008, date of access: 1 December 2010, <<http://www.aintitcool.com/node/39131>>.
- 42 Scott Eric Kaufman, "Does Dr. Manhattan act as a figure of the reader in Alan Moore's *Watchmen*?", *Acephalous*, 11 March 2009, date of access: 1 December 2010, <<http://acephalous.typepad.com/acephalous/2009/03/dr-manhattan-as-a-figure-of-reader-of-alan-moores-watchmen.html>>.
- 43 Wolk, *Reading Comics* 241.
- 44 Brandy Ball Blake, "Watchmen: The Graphic Novel as Trauma Fiction", *ImageText: Interdisciplinary Comics Studies* 5.1 (Winter 2010), date of access: 1 December 2010, <[http://www.english.ufl.edu/imagetext/archives/v5\\_1/blake](http://www.english.ufl.edu/imagetext/archives/v5_1/blake)>.
- 45 David Barnes, "Time in the Gutter: Temporal Structures in *Watchmen*", *KronoScope* 9.1-2 (2009) 51-60.

46 Stuart Moulthrop, "*Watchmen* Meets *The Aristocrats*".

47 "captainalphabet" comment number 2370759 quoted in "Merrick", "No Squid for You!!".