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DECONSTRUCTING THE NEXT BIG SUPER FLICK

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Abstract

In the 1960s, Marvel Comics made superheroes more realistic with characters who had "feet of clay" like the guilt-ridden Spider-Man. Decades later, *Watchmen* would up the ante by almost totally deconstructing superheroes and presenting characters who not only had feet of clay, but who were also emotionally scarred and even psychologically disturbed. (For example, I think this was the first comic to feature a superhero who suffered from erectile dysfunction. Seriously.) More than any comic before, the series asked, "What would really be the social, financial and politically ramifications if costumed heroes ran - and flew - around fighting crime?" In one issue, for instance, it's revealed that the Superman-like hero Dr. Manhattan utilized his powers to win America's war in Vietnam, and that he's being used as a political weapon against the Soviets in the Cold War. In other issues we see how Manhattan's super intelligence led to a number of technological advances, like electric cars, way before their time. In that way, *Watchmen* was light years ahead of almost every other comic story being published at the time.

Some creators attempted to step up their game and make more challenging and artistic works. But most instead of swiping the weighty aspects of the series (the symbolism, storytelling techniques or even the sheer awe of the art and writing), absorbed the more prurient elements in *Watchmen*. As a result the industry was flooded with a new wave of comics filled with violence and contempt for the spandex-clad heroes of the past. The 1990s was a decade of comics with "dark" heroes - guys with mental problems who carried big guns and weren't afraid to blow a villain's brains out. That wasn't exactly what [Alan Moore] was trying to do to the comic industry. In 2003, he said in an interview: "G?]? some degree there has been, in the 15 years since *Watchmen*, an awful lot of the comics field devoted to these grim, pessimistic, nasty, violent stories which kind of use *Watchmen* to validate what are, in effect often just some very nasty stories ..."

Yes, *Watchmen* made DC a ton of cash, but the company pissed off Moore. He was under the impression that the rights of the series would revert back to him and [Dave Gibbons] after a while, but as he understood it that was not the case. As a result Moore felt swindled and vowed never to work for DC again. And he didn't ... sort of. He created a line of books - called America's Best Comics - for a DC subsidiary called Wildstorm. While writing the ABC line, he created a series called *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen*, which was later

made into a sucky movie. (But die comic was great) And while we're on die subject of movies, I should probably mention diat **Moore** hates die idea of his comics being turned into films. He's a comic purist and creates work specifically for die medium. To that end, he hasn't made money off die films direcdy - he lets his collaborating artists (like Gibbons) take his own share of die proceeds.

Full Text

I ast year was a big one for comic book movies. "A bunch of films that were adapted from comics - including HeUboy, The Dark Knight and Iron Man, among others - hit the big screen in 2008 and proved to be cash cows at the box office (and in the case of Dark Knight, critical darlings).

Now, with the new year in full swing, it looks like 2009 is going to be another doozie for super folk at the cinema. Keep your eyes open for bigbudget movies starring well-known characters like Wolverine (his solo flick spins out of the X-Men movies) and GJ. Joe (a live-action version this time).

Me? I'm not really tripping over those particular flicks. Wolverine looks good, but I've seen the guy in three movies already. And when it comes to G.I. Joe, I'm wondering how any director can make that cheesy property cool. (GJ. Joe fans, I look forward to your hate mail.)

No, what I'm really looking forward to is the celluloid version of Watchmen, which hits theaters on March 6.

OK, right about now, you're probably thinking, 'Watch what? Watch who?'

But don't fret It's totally understandable if you've never heard the name Watchmen before.

Granted, the movie has been seeping into mainstream pop culture since its numerous trailers started appearing on the Internet and in theaters around the country one year or so ago; however, Watchmen is primarily known to people who read graphic novels (aka comic books) on a regular basis.

Legions of critics consider Watchmen the "greatest graphic novel ever published." Hell, for what it's worth, it even made Time magazine's list of 100 Best Novels.

Trust me when I say that its imminent arrival at your neighborhood multiplex is a big deal ... and not just for comic geeks luce me - for you "gentiles," too.

Of course you, probably don't trust me one bit After all, you don't know me from Atom Ant "Why should I," you may ask, "give a rat's ass about Watchmen?"

Well, let me explain ...

WHATS GG AU. ABOUT?

In 1986, before anyone ever thought about making a movie about it Watchmen was published as a 12-issue limited series by DC Comics. (Years later, it was collected in one trade paperback.)

Looking at the trailer for Watchmen, it comes off like a big, bombastic science fiction epic. And it is ... sort of. Peering past all the costumes and explosions and such, it's essentially a murder mystery that ultimately unfolds into a global conspiracy.

According to Wikipedia, the series - written by Alan Moore and drawn by Dave Gibbons (both from England) - "... takes place in an alternate history United States where the country is edging closer to a nuclear war with the Soviet Union, freelance costumed vigilantes have been outlawed and most costumed superheroes are in retirement or working for the government. The story [starring heroes with crazy names like Nite Owl, Dr. Manhattan, Rorschach, Silk Spectre, Ozymandias and The Comedian] focuses on the personal development and struggles of the protagonists as an investigation into the murder of a government-sponsored superhero pulls them out of retirement ..."

Yeah, that's pretty much the plot in a nutshell (You've gotta love Wikipedia.), but there's so much more to Watchmen.

In the 1960s, Marvel Comics made superheroes more realistic with characters who had "feet of clay" like the guilt-ridden Spider-Man. Decades later, Watchmen would up the ante by almost totally deconstructing superheroes and presenting characters who not only had feet of clay, but who were also emotionally scarred and even psychologically disturbed. (For example, I think this was the first comic to feature a superhero who suffered from erectile dysfunction. Seriously.) More than any comic before, the series asked, "What would really be the social, financial and political ramifications if costumed heroes ran - and flew - around fighting crime?" In one issue, for instance, it's revealed that the Superman-like hero Dr. Manhattan utilized his powers to win America's war in Vietnam, and that he's being used as a political weapon against the Soviets in the Cold War. In other issues we see how Manhattan's super intelligence led to a number of technological advances, like electric cars, way before their time. In that way, Watchmen was light years ahead of almost every other comic story being published at the time.

And Watchmen was also groundbreaking when it came to how it told the story. Swiping again from Wikipedia: "Creatively, the focus of Watchmen is on its structure. Gibbons used a nine-panel grid layout throughout the series and added recurring symbols such as a blood-stained smiley face. All but the last issue feature supplemental fictional documents that add to the series' backstory, and the narrative is intertwined with that of another story, a fictional pirate comic titled Tales of the Black Freighter, which one of the characters is reading."

All in all, Watchmen was probably the most successful attempt to create a superhero comic that was adult in both content and narrative construction. So how did this history-making comic come together in the first place? Read on ...

A BRIEF HISTORY

As I previously mentioned, Watchmen was written by the British-born writer Alan Moore. A few years earlier, Moore gained some popularity in America for revitalizing the down-right wack Swamp Thing for DC. Actually, you couldn't call what he did with the Swamp Thing comic "revitalization" because it was such an awful character and series; for all intents and purposes, he "remixed" Swamp Thing and became a star in the process. He went on to write several other acclaimed comics before coming up with the idea for Watchmen.

Initially, Moore wanted Watchmen to star a group of rather well-known characters DC had just purchased from a now-defunct comic company called Charlton Comics (including

Captain Atom, The Blue Beetle and The Peacemaker, among others). Officials at DC were all for it at first But after getting wind of the full story, they weren't willing to let Moore screw up some heroes that cost them an ass-load of moolah (the whole erectile dysfunction thing undoubtedly freaked them out).

After hearing that DC was not giving him the Charlton characters, Moore was disappointed. But it didn't take him long to figure out that the story would work better with brand-new creations, instead of heroes weighed down by decades of continuity. So he made up his own super dudes and away he went

Now, I remember reading Watchmen when it came out back in the day - I remember being blown away by it too. Everyone was blown away by it. Unlike some great works of art, it was immediately appreciated by fans and critics alike. No one had ever seen such a mature depiction of superhero mythology. And it wasn't long before it influenced a whole new crop of creators - and not in a good way ...

THE LEGACY OF WATCHMEN

The success of the Watchmen series should have birthed a new age of literate and thought-provoking comics - and it did ... sort of.

Some creators attempted to step up their game and make more challenging and artistic works. But most instead of swiping the weighty aspects of the series (the symbolism, storytelling techniques or even the sheer awe of the art and writing), absorbed the more prurient elements in Watchmen. As a result the industry was flooded with a new wave of comics filled with violence and contempt for die spandexclad heroes of the past The 1990s was a decade of comics with "dark" heroes - guys with mental problems who carried big guns and weren't afraid to blow a villain's brains out That wasn't exactly what Moore was trying to do to the comic industry. In 2003, he said in an interview: "G?]? some degree there has been, in the 15 years since Watchmen, an awful lot of the comics field devoted to these grim, pessimistic, nasty, violent stories which kind of use Watchmen to validate what are, in effect often just some very nasty stories ..."

Ouch. But he was telling the truth.

So what happened next? Well, good things and bad things ...

NO MORE MOORE

Yes, Watchmen made DC a ton of cash, but the company pissed off Moore. He was under the impression that the rights of the series would revert back to him and Gibbons after a while, but as he understood it that was not the case. As a result Moore felt swindled and vowed never to work for DC again. And he didn't ... sort of. He created a line of books - called America's Best Comics - for a DC subsidiary called Wildstorm. While writing die ABC line, he created a series called The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen, which was later made into a sucky movie. (But die comic was great) And while we're on die subject of movies, I should probably mention diat Moore hates die idea of his comics being turned into films. He's a comic purist and creates work specifically for die medium. To that end, he hasn't made money off die films direcdy - he lets his collaborating artists (like Gibbons) take his own share of die proceeds.

Eventually, he stopped writing for die ABC line and for DC and all its subsidiaries for good. He currendy does work for a small, indie publisher called Top Shelf.

Still, his influence on mainstream comics - and mainstream America - lives on. Several of his other comic works, such as V For Vendetta and From Hell - have been made into films. And a critically acclaimed writer by die name of Neil Gaiman (fhe guy behind comics such as Sandman, novels like American Gods and die current hit film Cordine) cites Moore as die sole reason he got into writing comics.

So, see: For good or ill, Watchmen is important Only time will tell if die film affects regular moviegoers die same way it affected comic geeks (you know, like me). In die meantime, take my advice - go watch Watchmen.

ON THE WEB

Visit www.charlotte.creativeloafing.com to:

- * See more Watchmen movie photos.
- * View a trailer for die Watchmen's animated movie-within-a-movie Tales of the Black Freighter, which will be released separately from die film on DVD.
- * Play die Watchmen retro arcade game online. It's designed to look like one of those simplistic (but cool) video games from die 1980s.

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