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The Continuing Adventures of the “Inherently Unfilmable”

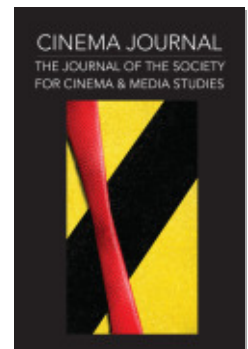
Book: Zack Snyder’s *Watchmen*

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itself part of the thematic content, because the graphic novel deliberately both uses techniques specific to the medium and attempts to represent some of its content as other media (e.g., TV, newspapers, magazines). Its simulation of other media makes *Watchmen* a good candidate for transmedial moves, even while its use of medium peculiarities works against such moves. *Watchmen*'s world, then, can only become enriched as it spreads across different media, and at the same time its expression as a series of comic books remains a classic example of what can be achieved within the medium of comics. \*

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## The Continuing Adventures of the “Inherently Unfilmable” Book: Zack Snyder’s *Watchmen*

by AARON TAYLOR

“More regurgitated worms” were the words Alan Moore used to describe Zack Snyder’s 2009 film adaptation of *Watchmen*.<sup>1</sup> Tempting as it may be to dismiss Moore’s vitriol as hyperbolic egotism, it is difficult to overstate the importance of the 1986 limited series that he coauthored with Dave Gibbons. Although its import for both comics and literature has been widely documented, *Watchmen*’s relationship to cinema has received comparatively less attention.<sup>2</sup> Thus, Snyder’s film, and its relation to its graphic hypotext, requires further attention in order to appreciate what *Watchmen* means to the respective fields of adaptation, contemporary cinema, and comics studies. Rather than reclaim Snyder’s *Watchmen* as an underappreciated adaptation of an “unfilmable” comic, we are better served by situating its hyperfidelity

1 Geoff Boucher, “Alan Moore on *Watchmen* Movie: ‘I will be spitting venom all over it,’” *Hero Complex*, September 18, 2008, <http://herocomplex.latimes.com/uncategorized/alan-moore-on-w/>.

2 For select discussions of the comic’s “literary” value, see the following: Lev Grossman, “All-Time 100 Novels: *Watchmen*,” *Time*, March 4, 2009, <http://entertainment.time.com/2009/03/06/top-10-graphic-novels/>; Andrew Hoberak, *Considering “Watchmen”* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2013), 5–14; Aaron Meskin, “‘Why Don’t You Go Read a Book or Something?’ *Watchmen* as Literature,” in *“Watchmen” and Philosophy*, ed. Mark D. White (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 2009), 157–172; Sara J. Van Ness, “*Watchmen*” as *Literature* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2010), 5–23; Grant L. Voth, “Moore and Gibbon’s *Watchmen*,” in *The Sceptic’s Guide to the Great Books* (Chantilly, VA: Teaching Company, 2011), CD.

within a broader matrix involving several fannish preoccupations.<sup>3</sup> These include cross-referential reception practices, attentiveness to medium specificity, and the acquisition of subcultural capital.

First, *Watchmen*'s reputation as an "unadaptable" text reopens old theoretical debates surrounding the perceived limitations of adaptive endeavors. Moore's view that his comic is beyond adaptation has been uncritically echoed by uncountable online pundits, both academic and amateur alike.<sup>4</sup> The film's torturous, twenty-year development seems to give credence to Moore's view. *Watchmen*'s adaptation involved five developed scripts, seven screenwriters, and five prospective directors—with at least one of these directors, Terry Gilliam, publicly admitting the folly of his own adaptive enterprise.<sup>5</sup> The notion of certain texts defying adaptation—because of length, narrative scope, or their exploitation of medium-specific resources—is certainly nothing new. While the notion of perfect fidelity is oft invoked as a mythic holy grail, even first-generation film scholars have characterized any quest to obtain it as absurd. Writing in 1963, Jean Mitry asserted that the piously faithful adaptation is inevitably adulterous, unavoidably violating either the letter or the spirit of its source.<sup>6</sup>

Zack Snyder evidently missed that sermon. With devotional fervor, he insisted instead that production designer Alex McDowell "treat [the comic] like an illuminated text."<sup>7</sup> Not content with preserving the maximal degree of story elements and plot structure, Gibbons's visual design and panel compositions were also painstakingly replicated. The film was completely previsualized and storyboarded shot for shot, with Gibbons's panels serving as graphic referents.<sup>8</sup> Thus, the "visionary director" repeated the profitably reverential tactics he had utilized before in his adaptation of Frank Miller's *300* (2007). Clearly, then, "adaptations which strive for high degrees of fidelity . . . will typically place the greatest stress on reproducing visual and graphic elements of the original."<sup>9</sup> But why invoke the comic artists' work so devoutly in the first place? What animates the neo-literalist hyperfidelity of comic adaptations like *Watchmen*?<sup>10</sup>

3 For Alan Moore's insistence that *Watchmen* is an "unfilmable" comic, see the following: Alex Musson and Andrew O'Neil, "The Mustard Interview: Alan Moore," in *Alan Moore: Conversations*, ed. Eric L. Berlatsky (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2012), 194; Jeff Jensen, "Watchmen: An Oral History," *Entertainment Weekly*, October 21, 2005, <http://www.ew.com/article/2005/10/21/watchmen-oral-history>.

4 For select academic discussions of Moore's allegedly "unadaptable" works, see Ian Hague, "Adapting *Watchmen*," in *Framing Film: Cinema and the Visual Arts*, ed. Steven Allen and Laura Hubner (Chicago: Intellect Books, 2012), 52; Jasmine Shadrack, "V versus Hollywood: A Discourse on Polemic Thievery," *Studies in Comics* 2, no. 1 (2011): 195–196; Douglas Wolk, *Reading Comics* (New York: Da Capo Press, 2008), 241.

5 David Hughes, *The Greatest Sci-Fi Movies Never Made* (London: Titan Books, 2008), 146–160.

6 Jean Mitry, *The Aesthetics and Psychology of the Cinema*, trans. Christopher King (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997), 328.

7 Peter Aperlo, *"Watchmen": The Art of the Film* (London: Titan Books, 2009), 26.

8 *Ibid.*, 43.

9 Anne Furlong, "'It's not quite what I had in mind': Adaptation, Faithfulness, and Interpretation," *Journal of Literary Semantics* 41, no. 2 (2012): 186.

10 Select examples include *300*, *Hulk* (Ang Lee, 2003), *Immortel* (Enki Bilal, 2004), both *Hellboy* (Guillermo del Toro, 2004, 2008) and *Sin City* (Frank Miller and Robert Rodriguez, 2005, 2014) films, *The Spirit* (Frank Miller, 2008), *Scott Pilgrim vs. the World* (Edgar Wright, 2010), *The Adventures of Tintin* (Steven Spielberg, 2011), and recent casting choices on television's *The Walking Dead* (AMC, 2010–).

The answer, quite simply, is the desire to cultivate a fan-centric adaptation—an altogether categorically distinct translation. David Hayter’s proclamation that *Watchmen* “is a movie made by fans, for fans” needs to be taken quite literally.<sup>11</sup> For a large consortium of critics, Snyder’s literalism is regarded as a dunderheaded, slavish devotion to a canonical hypotext, and fan pandering of the grossest kind.<sup>12</sup> Although there is some wisdom to the notion that “the primary motive for fidelity in the most widely known adaptations is financial,” many can still be taken aback by the lucrateness of such cultic blockbusters.<sup>13</sup> But the economics of hyperfidelity should not be so surprising given the basic generic function of adaptation: “to make their audiences *recall* the adapted work, or the cultural memory of it. There is no such thing . . . as a ‘secret’ adaptation.”<sup>14</sup> Fidelity still matters, then, but it matters differently for fans. Critics might have been disappointed because *Watchmen* failed to be “an original film, but one that ‘faithfully approximated’ an existing source.”<sup>15</sup> And yet they overlooked why filmmakers might devote so much effort to making a film whose generic status as an adaptation was excessively overt.

First, the fan-centric adaptation is designed to cultivate cross-referential reception practices in posttheatrical viewing contexts. Not simply content to evoke the vague memories of casual readers, *Watchmen*’s allusiveness is directed toward the immediate recollections of the details-oriented obsessive. Here, the identification of Easter eggs is not the amused recognition of the way that a film rewards insider knowledge but is instead the principal point of the entire enterprise. In the “Maximum Movie Mode” of the director’s cut, Snyder walks the viewer through various comparative exercises. These include panel-to-frame comparisons (e.g., the identical compositions of the Comedian being hurled through a penthouse window), as well as the foregrounding of attention to textual minutiae (e.g., the blood-spattered smiley-face pin resembling the hands on the Doomsday Clock that are positioned at five minutes to midnight).

Such strategically obsessive fidelity is not only intended to establish nerd points for Snyder; it also resists the essentialist objections of Moore and other naysayers. Moore claims that the film viewer “is dragged along with the running speed of the

11 Jonathan Llyr, “An Open Letter from *Watchmen* Screenwriter David Hayter—Updated,” *Hardcore Nerdity* (blog), March 11, 2009, <http://www.hardcorenerdity.com/profiles/blog/show?id=2239098:BlogPost:40658>.

12 See the following eviscerations: Matt Ealer, “Comic Hero Fanboys Make Terrible Comic Hero Movies,” *The Awl*, June 17, 2011, <http://www.theawl.com/2011/06/comic-hero-fanboys-are-ruining-comic-hero-movies>; David Edelstein, “Hopelessly Devoted: Zack Snyder’s *Watchmen* Is as Faithful an Adaptation as a Fanboy Could Want,” *New York Magazine*, February 27, 2009, <http://nymag.com/movies/reviews/55005/>; Chris Kaye, “High on Fidelity: On Zack Snyder, *Watchmen*, and Missing the Point,” *Blastr*, March 5, 2014, <http://www.blastr.com/2014-3-5/high-fidelity-zack-snyder-watchmen-and-missing-point/>; Philip Kennicott, “Adaptation of *Watchmen* Is Graphic but Not Novel,” *Washington Post*, March 5, 2009, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2009/03/04/AR2009030403970.html>; Anthony Lane, “Dark Visions,” *New Yorker*, March 9, 2009, <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2009/03/09/dark-visions>; Julian Sancton, “Did Zack Snyder Love *Watchmen* Too Much?,” *Vanity Fair*, March 4, 2009, <http://www.vanityfair.com/online/daily/2009/03/did-zack-snyder-love-watchmen-too-much/>; Scott Thill, “Is *Watchmen* Director Zack Snyder Really ‘Visionary?’” *Wired*, December 22, 2008, <http://www.wired.com/2008/12/is-watchmen-dir/>.

13 Thomas Leitch, *Film Adaptation and Its Discontents* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2007), 128.

14 Catherine Grant, “Recognizing *Billy Budd* in *Beau Travail*: Epistemology and Hermeneutics of an Austerist ‘Free’ Adaptation,” *Screen* 43, no. 1 (2002): 57.

15 Van Ness, *Watchmen as Literature*, 183.

projector,” whereas comics, by contrast, offer images that audiences can “look at and absorb at their own pace . . . getting layer upon layer of meaning and reference.”<sup>16</sup> But this objection is demonstrably untenable. Obviously, such scrutiny is exactly what Snyder intends, as the Blu-ray viewer “is invited to excavate the layers through multiple viewings using its new powers . . . to stop time, to study a film frame-by-frame, byte-by-byte.”<sup>17</sup> Theorists echoing Moore’s pronouncements about the time of reception in each medium recognize that one might do this very thing. And yet most strangely proclaim that such practices are a violation of “the primary intended context for viewing films,” and that random-access spectatorship counters the norm of sequential viewing.<sup>18</sup>

The key point here is that this view confuses the audience’s mode of reception with the medium’s essential interior resources. Moreover, theatrical viewing is no longer the default or even optimal option. Rather, fan-centric adaptations privilege posttheatrical viewing processes involving pausing, zooming, random access, making screenshots, ripping, reediting, recirculation, and multiscreened reception. Such practices are also intended to emulate the very properties of comics that are assumed to be untranslatable. Posttheatrical viewers are granted the privileged powers of comics readers: the control of unit sequence and duration. And this is a formal translation Gibbons has publicly acknowledged even as his coauthor continues to deny that *Watchmen*’s formalism is adaptable.<sup>19</sup> Snyder’s tactics thus reinforce Jared Gardner’s simple but crucial insight: the real currency attained by the new cultic blockbuster is not so much the profits derived from devoted fans but their appropriation of comics fans’ practices of reception.<sup>20</sup>

These cross-referential viewing practices clearly have affinities with the second component of fan-centric adaptations: a preoccupation with the inherent features of each medium. Given the formalism of these ventures, it is to Snyder’s advantage that his source material is a fairly “cinematic” comic. Gibbons’s disciplined use of nine-panel grids is a deliberate citation of Steve Ditko’s chessboard layouts on *Spider-Man* and the EC horror comics that inspire one of *Watchmen*’s nested narratives. But his layouts also evoke the framing of a lens. “It’s like watching something . . . at the movies,” Gibbons claims, “this idea of a proscenium arch, where you have a single, fixed viewpoint in front of which things move.”<sup>21</sup> Also of note is the specificity of Gibbons’s portraitures. *Watchmen*’s characters were deliberately modeled after actors

16 Christopher Sharrett, “Alan Moore,” and Daniel Whiston, David Russell, and Andy Fruish, “The Craft: An Interview with Alan Moore,” both in *Alan Moore: Conversations*, ed. Eric L. Berlatsky (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2012), 53 and 135, respectively.

17 Jared Gardner, *Projections: Comics and the History of Twenty-First Century Storytelling* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2012), 189.

18 Roy T. Cook, “Why Comics Are Not Films: Metacomics and Medium-Specific Conventions,” and Henry James Pratt, “Making Comics into Film,” both in *The Art of Comics*, ed. Aaron Meskin and Roy T. Cook (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), 174 and 160, respectively.

19 “Exclusive: Dave Gibbons Interview,” by *watchmencomicmovie.com*, February 12, 2009, <http://watchmencomicmovie.com/021209-watchmen-dave-gibbons-video-interview.php>.

20 Gardner, *Projections*, 183.

21 Mark Salisbury, *Artists on Comic Art* (London: Titan Books, 2000), 80.

such as Bruce Weitz, Michael Conrad, and Barry Foster—an intermedial process anticipating Bryan Hitch’s similarly starry treatment of *The Ultimates* in 2001.<sup>22</sup>

In cultivating a *mise-en-scène* that replicates Gibbons’s art in such minute detail, then, Snyder attempts to overcome the two mediums’ opposing visual ontologies. That is, he attempts to address the problems inherent in converting drawings to photography.<sup>23</sup> More to the point, the film emulates Gibbons’s meticulously structured compositions and dense layering of graphic semiotic detail. And this emulation attempts to overcome film’s referential specificity, heavy indexicality, and diegetic absorption. The individualistic renderings of a comic’s illustrator are said to “foreground the presence of the enunciator”—the author-maker of the fictional world.<sup>24</sup> Therefore, graphically invoking *Watchmen*’s handcrafted origins foregrounds the film’s laboriously constructed presentational qualities. So, the singular faces of such lesser-known stars as Billy Crudup and Malin Akerman disappear within their abstract analogues. The reconstructed Times Square becomes an indexical sign of Gibbons’s minutely rendered urban squalor rather than a photographic trace of the real New York. Precisely duplicated compositions become prompts for transmedia comparison instead of the situation of characters within narrative space. Given that Gibbons affixed his signature as an Easter-egg graffiti tag on one of the set’s lampposts—signifying that he had “signed off on the project”—the enunciator of the film’s source text is literally foregrounded within the *mise-en-scène*.<sup>25</sup>

Other examples of Snyder’s own attention to media ontologies are worth mentioning. His trademarked speed-ramping effect, for example, not only provides kinetic punctuation to action scenes but also is said to emulate the eye saccades of comics readers as they absorb the unit of the page and then skitter across select portions of it.<sup>26</sup> Moore may disparage the film’s graphic fidelity as a “children’s version” of Gibbons’s images, sneering that “they’re bigger, moving, and making noise!”<sup>27</sup> And yet there is something to be said for fans’ excitement at seeing still images coming to life. This is the thrill of the photographic frame’s semiotic abundance as it rounds out the schematics of the illustrated panel. If, following E. H. Gombrich, comics minimize the semantic and syntactic density of the mimetic image, Snyder’s film at once both abstracts the world and restores it to fullness through his hybridized designs.<sup>28</sup> Finally, some medium essentialists claim that viewers are not “able to process and understand . . . complex narrative structures” as well as comics because film

22 Dave Gibbons, *Watching the Watchmen* (London: Titan Books, 2008), 45, 52, and 56.

23 Pascal Lefèvre, “Incompatible Visual Ontologies? The Problematic Adaptation of Drawn Images,” in *Film and Comic Books*, ed. Ian Gordon, Mark Jancovich, and Matthew P. McAllister (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2007), 3–4.

24 Hans-Christian Christiansen, “Comics and Film: A Narrative Perspective,” in *Comics and Culture*, ed. Anne Magnusson and Hans-Christian Christiansen (Copenhagen: Museum Tusulanum Press, 2000), 115.

25 Peter Aperlo, *Watchmen: The Film Companion* (London: Titan Books, 2009), 35.

26 Jochen Ecke, “Spatializing the Movie Screen: How Mainstream Cinema Is Catching Up on the Formal Potentialities of the Comic Book Page,” in *Comics as a Nexus of Cultures*, ed. Mark Berninger, Jochen Ecke, and Gideon Haberborn (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2010), 17.

27 Musson and O’Neil, “Mustard Interview,” 197.

28 E. H. Gombrich, *Art and Illusion*, 3rd ed. (London: Phaidon, 1968), 288.

“juxtaposes frames in time” rather than on the space of a page.<sup>29</sup> But not only does this discount the astute memory of alert film viewers—who can and do recognize patterns intentionally established across time—it also overlooks the intended design of fan-centric adaptations. Again, Snyder’s *Watchmen* establishes a structural density that viewers are intended to unpack and scrutinize via multiple viewings.

The third and final component of the fan-centric adaptation, then, involves their function as interactive forums for the acquisition of subcultural capital. Snyder’s performed fanboy auteurism on the director’s-cut release—his casual demeanor, virtual control of multiple frames, and showcasing of the film’s graphic fidelity—cue the preferred reception practices of his ideal and intended audience. Snyder’s performed exegesis is a paratextual index of the film’s own broader and constant performance of fandom. At every moment, the film signals to Snyder’s fellow travelers his contribution to the collective intelligence of a broader community. Thus, he retains the comic’s use of flashbacks to interrupt action-driven linearity, its focus on the effect of temporality on typically ageless heroes, and its emphasis on failure and moral ambiguity.<sup>30</sup>

The quest for fannish accreditation also requires securing the benediction of a comic’s creators. With Moore denouncing the film sight unseen, Snyder managed to co-opt Gibbons’s participation during preproduction, absorbing the artist’s authorial status as a means of authorizing his own re-visionary approach to the comic.<sup>31</sup> Screenwriters Alex Tse and David Hayter infamously altered the series’s original ending, which involved the destruction of Manhattan by a manufactured alien squid.<sup>32</sup> The film opts instead for Ozymandias’s altruistic nuking of several major cities using energy reactors unwittingly created by Dr. Manhattan.<sup>33</sup> Fans predictably went berserk upon receiving the first public announcement that there would be “no squid for you,” and yet even this significant rewrite is made palatable by Snyder cannily securing Gibbons’s cooperation in the film’s development.<sup>34</sup> Gibbons was commissioned to draw up new storyboards and fully realized alternative comics pages, thus “ensur[ing] that the film’s re-imagined ending nevertheless drew from an authentic source.”<sup>35</sup> Like other fanboy auteurs, then, Snyder is “simultaneously committed to retaining the

29 Pratt, “Making Comics into Film,” 161.

30 For a more extensive focus on the film’s retention of the comic’s thematic interests, see Federico Pagello, “From Frank Miller to Zack Snyder, and Return: Contemporary Superhero Comics and Post-Classical Hollywood,” *Miranda* 8 (2013): 10–11.

31 DC had offered Moore’s out-of-work colleague Steve Moore the contract for a *Watchmen* novelization, but allegedly withdrew it after the series’s author asked to remove his name from a proposed *Tales of the Black Freighter* comic tie-in. Alan Moore, a self-professed magician, cursed the film in response. See Musson and O’Neil, “*Mustard* Interview,” 196–197.

32 The outlandish scheme is extensively mocked in a memorable, low-budget work of anti-fandom: Max Landis’s cutting *Vague Recollections of “Watchmen,”* YouTube video, posted by “Uptomynknees,” March 13, 2009, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A-oGty52mbk>.

33 For the new ending’s acknowledgment of contemporary anxieties involving “multiple, distributed [terrorist] attacks,” see Bob Rehak, “Adapting *Watchmen* after 9/11,” *Cinema Journal* 51, no. 1 (2011): 157.

34 For one particularly busy “Squidgate” thread, see Glen Oliver, “No Squid for You!!,” *Ain’t It Cool News*, November 17, 2008, <http://www.aintitcool.com/node/39131>.

35 Aperlo, *Watchmen: The Art of the Film*, 62.

integrity and essence of the franchise, and elevating the property through his unique artistic vision.”<sup>36</sup>

But maintaining structural fidelity and acquiring authorial approbation is less a matter of staying true to the spirit of the text than it is about paying a toll to subcultural gatekeepers. The primary aim of Snyder’s *Watchmen* is to flatter fan knowledge. No wonder, then, that each successive home release incrementally extends its range of fidelity—hence the integration of the animated *Tales of the Black Freighter* nested narrative in the “ultimate cut,” and the supplemental *Under the Hood* mockumentary as a bonus feature. In the end, the fan-centric adaptation serves as a pretext for fan labor: a challenge to would-be creators of even *more* faithful fan edits, an inducement for the creation of metatextual information ecosystems, a prompt for the communal display of one’s own receptive or critical competencies. One hopes these endeavors constitute “mechanisms of reply” to a culture industry that was previously content to marginalize fandom.<sup>37</sup> For the cynic, however, *Watchmen* might just be a feature-length effort at interpellation—its fidelity a game of one-upmanship that seeks only to integrate fans within the hive-sourced economy of Hollywood advertising. If we are to believe Dr. Manhattan’s assertion that “nothing ever ends,” then contemporary executives will doubtless be cheered at the prospect of fan-centric adaptations exploiting geekdom in perpetuity. \*

36 Suzanne Scott, “Dawn of the Undead Author: Fanboy Auteurism and Zack Snyder’s ‘Vision,’” in *A Companion to Media Authorship*, ed. Jonathan Gray and Derek Johnson (Oxford, UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013), 446.

37 Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, “The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception,” in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, ed. G. S. Noerr, trans. E. Jephcott (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press), 96.