

Diversions

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REEL NEWS:

As reported Wednesday in *Variety*, Leonardo DiCaprio (*Revolutionary Road*) will be starring in Christopher Nolan's (*The Dark Knight*) next film, *Inception*. Nolan plans to shoot his original sci-fi piece for Warner Bros. later this year with a summer 2010 release date in sight. If Nolan does decide to come back for a third Batman film (we're betting he will, but you never know), *Inception* would presumably be his only project before *The Dark Knight's* sequel.

Leonardo DiCaprio



REVIEW | WATCHMEN

WATCHING THE DETECTIVES FLATLINE

Watchmen fails to capture the essence of Alan Moore's seminal graphic novel, skimming over the rich subtexts in favor of bigger, louder set pieces

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You could mess with *Romeo and Juliet* pretty badly and people would probably forgive you. Desecrate *Frankenstein* and, still, the Mary Shelley fans of the world can learn to forget. Even a failed adaptation like *The Great Gatsby* gets buried eventually.

But in all likelihood, the *Watchmen* that director Zack Snyder (*300*) has brought us will be the only one in the foreseeable future. And whether or not Snyder is completely to blame for the film's shortcomings, his superficial take on the comic book classic is unforgivable.

Of course, any fan of Alan Moore's brooding graphic novel should have seen this coming, if not for the blinding notion of wishful thinking. Director Terry Gilliam (of *Brazil* fame) dismissed Moore's superhero satire as unsuitable for a feature film running time; the complex backstories and interweaving narratives in the novel are incredibly codependent, and Gilliam knew the risks of condensing the piece.

The project fell in and out of several other hands before landing with Warner Bros. and right into a summer 2008 lawsuit with 20th Century Fox over distribution rights, one that was eventually settled out of court.

All the signs seemed to scream this one was not meant to be, but once the footage hit, even the geekiest of diehard fanboys quieted down. Cynicism be damned; whatever Snyder had put together, it looked like *Watchmen*.

Unfortunately, looks in this case do turn out to be quite deceiving. Along with cinematographer Larry Fong (*300*) and his production design team, Snyder has nailed the outer layers of Moore's alternate vision of New York City circa 1985. The gutters swell with rain and sewage, President Nixon has been elected to a third term, and the country is staring down the barrel of

World War III with the Russians.

It's a shadowy world where caped crusaders have been outlawed as vigilantes, doomed to live out a life with no outlet for their sexual hang-ups. They have been rendered obsolete by the emergence of a real American superhero, the godlike marvel of science, Dr. Manhattan (Billy Crudup, *Dedication*).

Manhattan stands as a nuclear deterrent for the rest of the world. But when the murder of one of these so-called watchmen, The Comedian (a pitch-perfect Jeffrey Dean Morgan, *The Accidental Husband*), arouses the suspicion of Rorschach (Jackie Earle Haley, *Semi-Pro*, also dead on), one of the few lone gunmen still in the costume business, nuclear stability begins to unwind.

As in the source material, the plot gets twisty and tangled from there on in, but as in all hero flicks, the fate of the world is at stake. Unlike Snyder and his screenwriters, David Hayter and Alex Tse, Moore created a palpable sense of dread around his end-of-the-world scenario while still maintaining a layer of superhero deconstruction.

The film adaptation does a fair job at reconstructing — the credit sequence takes us through a wonderfully imagined alternate history set to "The Times They Are A-Changin'" — but Snyder's *Watchmen* only operates on a bloated, exterior level. His inability to capture the spirit of the comics confirms Moore's long-held paranoia toward adaptations of his work.

There's no one to *Watchmen*, just atmosphere. Dan Dreiberger, the second Nite Owl (Patrick Wilson, *Passengers*), isn't impotent without his mask, but moping. His love interest, Laurie Jupiter, or the second Silk Spectre (Malin Akerman, *27 Dresses*), doesn't feel trapped by her mother's superhero legacy — she just complains about it plenty.

No matter how much the film looks like *Watchmen* should, the skimming over (Gilliam had a point about the runtime) of valuable character backstory and subtext leads the film toward an unaware parody.

Snyder's penchant for slow-motion action sequences and added gore doesn't help much, either, reflecting a misreading of the text: *Watchmen* was meant to be graphic, not gratuitous.

In trying to please both fans of the revered graphic novel and the uninitiated masses, Snyder and Co. have produced a film suitable for neither. What ends up on the screen clashes terribly with the original (any dialogue not from the book sticks out horribly), but at the same time, *Watchmen* offers very little for audiences without previous investment in the storylines.

Seen through a post-*Dark Knight* view of superhero films, it makes the grade for darkness, but only as a photographic principle. The heroes talk of nuclear holocaust and murder without any sense of gravity. In post-Sept. 11 America, it's amazing how *Watchmen* never feels timely or even relevant — just fleeting and, well, boring.

Almost a quarter century ago, Moore had the audacity to think a comic book — a medium believed to be suitable only for pulp fiction and low culture — could address the same sort of social plights and fundamental truths reserved for serious literature. With *Watchmen*, he looked into the heart of humanity through the lens of superhero tradition.

He and illustrator Dave Gibbons brilliantly recorded the loathing and despair of a generation. Snyder has given the next generation of *Watchmen* fans so much less than they deserve: His film is a mere photocopy of an idea.

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MOVIE: *Watchmen* | VERDICT: ★★☆☆☆

What is and what would never be: three directors who came close to making *Watchmen*



DIRECTOR: Terry Gilliam
WHEN: 1989, 1996
CREDENTIALS: *Brazil*, *12 Monkeys*
WHAT COULD HAVE BEEN: More than any of the other attached directors (Snyder included), Gilliam had the chops and vision to pull it off. He was the only director to meet directly with Moore, who urged him not to go forward with the film. Eventually, Gilliam stated *Watchmen* could only be done properly as a five-and-a-half-hour miniseries.



DIRECTOR: Darren Aronofsky
WHEN: 2004
CREDENTIALS: *Pi*, *Requiem for a Dream*
WHAT COULD HAVE BEEN: His first two films had the darkness and paranoia necessary for *Watchmen*, but in hindsight, Aronofsky probably wasn't ready to handle the scope (and budget) of the project. If his reimagining of *RoboCop* pulls through, it will probably be the best indicator of what Aronofsky's *Watchmen* might have looked like.



DIRECTOR: Paul Greengrass
WHEN: 2005
CREDENTIALS: *Bloody Sunday*, *The Bourne Supremacy*
WHAT COULD HAVE BEEN: Before Snyder, Greengrass came the closest — he was already well into pre-production when Paramount pulled the plug. Chances are, the director's herky-jerky *Bourne* action would've been an odd visual fit for the material. Then again, it seems just as appropriate as Snyder's slow-motion, bloodlust sequences.

