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a neoliberal politics interested in citizens (and soldiers) who "do security" themselves. At the same time, we might come to recognize that our response to 9/11 has not been merely a product of political ideologies and institutions, but has also been motivated by a cultural logic of participation. The important questions to ask are not about whether *24* determined the war on terror or the other way around, but instead about the shared cultural and political protocols that laid the foundation for both.　　✳

Adapting *Watchmen* after 9/11

by BOB REHAK

> Every generation has its own reasons for destroying New York.
> —Max Page, *The City's End*[1]

Released in March 2009, Zack Snyder's film version of *Watchmen* was a very ambitious experiment in hyperfaithful cinematic adaptation. Taking its source, Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons's 1987 graphic novel, as script, storyboard, and design bible, the production vowed it would treat the famously complicated narrative "like an illuminated text, like it was written 2,000 years ago."[2] And for the most part, that's precisely what the movie did, marshaling the many resources of digital blockbuster cinema to reproduce as closely as possible scenes, settings, costumes, even specific shots as laid out in the graphic novel's panels.

Snyder, whose 2006 adaptation of Frank Miller and Lynn Varley's graphic novel *300* (1998) had marked him as something of an auteur in the translation of other authors' works, took on *Watchmen* with the stipulation that he would keep the story's original setting, letting the book guide production down to the last detail. The mission of the production thus became mimesis, an increasingly common approach in the era of previsualization, digital backlots, and performance capture that has produced, alongside Snyder's own *300*, films such as *The Polar Express* (Robert Zemeckis, 2004) and *Sin City* (Frank Miller and Robert Rodriguez, 2005). Such filmic adaptations are stylish and uncanny hybrids, poised somewhere between live action and animation, printed page and filmed frame, cult object and mainstream commodity.[3]

1　Max Page, *The City's End: Two Centuries of Fantasies, Fears, and Premonitions of New York's Destruction* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2008), 7.

2　Peter Aperlo, *Watchmen: The Film Companion* (London: Titan Books, 2009), 26.

3　On exceptionally faithful approaches to film adaptation, see Thomas Leitch, *Film Adaptation and Its Discontents: From "Gone with the Wind" to "The Passion of the Christ"* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2007), 127–150.

In one crucial respect, however, the film of *Watchmen* diverges from the book. In the original ending scripted by Moore and drawn by Gibbons, millions of New York City residents die in an attack that is bizarre even by comic-book standards: with a blinding flash, a gigantic squidlike creature appears in Times Square, dying on arrival but releasing a "psychic shockwave" that rips through the city, killing half its population; this is the culmination of a plot to frighten the world's superpowers into unification against a common enemy. In the movie, the attack no longer centers on New York. Instead, cities around the world are struck by spherical explosions of blue light that disintegrate buildings and leave smoking craters. As for the squid creature, it is simply gone: excised by a screenwriter's pen, omitted from the meticulous preproduction artwork, and unmentioned in the making-of texts surrounding the film's release, save for occasional references to Snyder's "reimagined ending."

As Sara J. Van Ness observes, "Squidgate" sparked a major controversy among fans, for whom tampering with the 1987 source marked a breach of trust all too common in Hollywood's treatment of material cherished by subcultures.[4] In response, Snyder defended the new ending as an elegant solution to the problem of having too much material to include in a two-and-a-half-hour movie, pointing out that to retain the squid and its numerous subplots would mean cutting other elements of the book, as well as creating an unworkably long film. For their part, the movie's screenwriters emphasized the need to update the climax for a wider audience whose lack of familiarity with the graphic novel would make it hard to accept a giant teleporting squid as the metaphorical equivalent of nuclear Armageddon.

Reasonable as these explanations were, they failed to address an obvious question: how did the filmmakers' willingness to alter something central to the book's identity— its ending—square with the absolute fidelity they lavished on the rest of the adaptation? While the squid creature was dropped from development efforts as early as 1989, there is no overriding reason Snyder couldn't have reinstated it, given his decision to emulate the rest of the source material so exactly. His embrace of the altered ending, breaking his loyalty oath to the source material, can be read most coldly as a slippage along the economic fault line faced by any cult object transformed into a blockbuster: how do you compromise between small but fervent fan audiences and mainstream appeal? But the altered ending can also be read as a response, if a deflected and cryptic one, to the events of September 11, 2001—in particular, the collapse of the World Trade Center's Twin Towers and the scarring of Manhattan—and to the vexed protocols of visualizing a fictional disaster after real-world events have overtaken it.

Published as a limited series of twelve issues by DC Comics between 1986 and 1987, and collected in a single volume many times thereafter, *Watchmen* is a dystopian reworking of superhero mythology and an undisputed key work in the canon of comic-book literature, winning a Hugo Award in 1988 and named by *Time* magazine one of the one hundred most important English-language novels of the twentieth century. Set in a parallel-universe version of 1985, *Watchmen* follows costumed crime fighters like the masked vigilante Rorschach, the Batman-like Nite Owl, and the mercenary

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4 Sara J. Van Ness, *"Watchmen" as Literature: A Critical Study of the Graphic Novel* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2009), 184–186.

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Comedian (among others) as they unravel a conspiracy involving the polymath industrialist Adrian Veidt—himself a costumed hero called Ozymandias—and his plan to trick the world's superpowers into laying down their nuclear arms. In the story's climax, Veidt reveals that he has designed a monster in the form of a genetically engineered squid, which, placed at the center of a lethal attack on New York, will convince the governments of Earth that they are under attack by a malevolent alien force and that they must unite to defend themselves.

The cold war backdrop, in which the United States and Soviet Union stand at the brink of mutual assured destruction, is only one of the ways in which the original *Watchmen* held a dark mirror to its times. The book's gritty, downbeat take on the question "What if superheroes really existed?" is expressed less through its plot than through the very premise of its diegesis, an alternate reality in which Richard Nixon is entering his fifth term as president and the United States has handily won the Vietnam War with the help of *Watchmen*'s one true superbeing, Dr. Manhattan, a glowing blue entity whose godlike power over space and time—and complicit relationship with the US government—makes him his own form of doomsday weapon.

The book weaves this tapestry through densely rendered artwork, geometric layout grids, and intricate crosscutting that carries the reader back and forth in time: clues, symbols, and symmetries large and small are best discovered in multiple rereadings and prolonged study of panel details. Thus tied to the comic-book format in which it originated, *Watchmen* presented a challenge to the producers and directors (among them Joel Silver, Terry Gilliam, and Darren Aronofsky) who sought to turn the book into a movie almost as soon as it had been published.[5] In addition to the problem of condensing the graphic novel's four-hundred-plus pages of material, screenwriters wrestled with whether to maintain the book's period setting or to update it to reflect more current concerns, a decision that—especially as the Soviet Union neared the point of collapse in the late 1980s—forced an early reconsideration of the original ending.

In his 1989 script, Sam Hamm rejected the squid as simply too outlandish for audiences to accept, saying in an interview, "While I thought the tenor of the metaphor was right, I couldn't go for the vehicle."[6] In Hamm's new ending, Veidt opens a time portal to 1959 in an attempt to assassinate Dr. Manhattan at the moment of his origin, thereby undoing the superhuman's negative effects on history. Although Veidt fails, Dr. Manhattan grasps the soundness of his logic and erases himself from the timeline. David Hayter's 2003 script ends with Veidt bombarding New York City with concentrated solar radiation, killing a million people in order to install himself as benevolent world dictator. Once more, Veidt fails, but in a denouement nearer the original's, his hoax is allowed to stand. The post-9/11 change from Hamm's time-travel paradox resolution to one involving New York's destruction suggests an attempt to bring the ending more in line with contemporary reality.

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5   Disappointed by previous Hollywood incarnations of his work and insistent that no adaptation of *Watchmen* could recreate the formal properties of the comic-book medium, Moore removed his name from the Warner Bros. production.

6   David Hughes, "Who Watches the Watchmen? How the Greatest Graphic Novel of All Time Confounded Hollywood," in *The Greatest Sci-Fi Movies Never Made* (Chicago: A Cappella Books, 2001), 144.

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The script eventually offered to Zack Snyder, by Hayter and Alex Tse, blended elements of all the previous versions: from his arctic hideaway, Veidt triggers explosions in cities around the world, framing Dr. Manhattan for the attacks using a manufactured "energy signature" that emits blue bursts of radiation. Dr. Manhattan, seeing that Veidt's gambit has worked and that to remain on Earth would expose the hoax, exiles himself. The run-up to and aftermath of the engineered catastrophe are identical to those of the book; only the signifiers of apocalypse have changed. Like earlier attempts to adapt *Watchmen*, Hayter and Tse's script was set in the present day. Snyder's decision to shoot the film as a period piece would require one more draft, its details taken directly from the book, except for the ending. The adaptation that finally made it to the screen thus spliced together two versions of *Watchmen*: one imported from 1987, the other from a post-2001 world.

The impact of 9/11 on representations in film and other media is well documented.[7] In the months following the attacks on New York City and Washington, DC, some films were pulled from release, while others had the Twin Towers digitally scrubbed from their imagery. Within a few years, this self-imposed ban gave way to more sober visualizations, such as *United 93* (Paul Greengrass, 2006) and *World Trade Center* (Oliver Stone, 2006), whose pseudodocumentary approaches invested their computer-generated re-creations of the burning towers with borrowed indexical gravity: less representation than simulation.

But the adaptation of *Watchmen* faced a different problem. Staying slavishly true to its source in every detail would mean bringing to the screen a dated vision of New York's destruction, out of step with 9/11's altered threat landscape. Darren Aronofsky alluded to this danger in a pre-9/11 interview on the challenge of making the 1987 material speak to a current context. Updating the story, he said, would involve generating "some kind of new threat that an audience of today would actually buy. . . . The biggest threat is that the plane you're on is going to be blown up by terrorists. I guess you could create something like a Middle East meltdown, where people take sides, but that overall conceit of nuclear war is gone, you'd have to figure out something else."[8] Seen this way, the reimagined ending was a more believable parallel to contemporary political reality, its multiple, distributed attacks recalling the fears of late 2001, when any frightening, unexpected event, from plane crashes to anthrax-laced mailings, seemed a potential part of some larger, planned aggression. But while in some ways this final version of the ending—filtered through the distorting lens of science fiction, and freed from the template set by the book—engaged with the decentralized and diffused nature of contemporary urban and global threat, it also distanced itself from both the original text and the events of 9/11 by de-emphasizing New York City as "ground zero."

For all its perverse inventiveness, then, the original ending may have been rejected because it came *too close* to actual events, albeit in metaphorical form. The work of

7   See, for example, Stephen Prince, *Firestorm: American Film in the Age of Terrorism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), and *Reframing 9/11: Film, Popular Culture, and the "War on Terror,"* ed. Jeff Berkenstein, Anna Froula, and Karen Randell (New York: Continuum, 2010).

8   Darren Aronofsky, quoted in Hughes, "Who Watches the Watchmen," 150.

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Moore and Gibbons prefigured 9/11, not in its particulars, but in its affective impact and corresponding geopolitical consequences. Just as the squid releases in death a lethal psychic shockwave, so did the emotional effects of the terrorist attacks ripple outward: at first in a spectacle of trauma borne virus-like on our media screens, and later in the form of a post-9/11 mindset notable for its regressive conflation of masculinity and security.[9] Ten years on, it remains highly debatable whether US actions after 9/11 resulted in a safer or more unified world; we seem in many ways to have ended up back where we started, poised at a tipping point of crisis. But in the initial glow of late 2001 and early 2002, it seemed briefly possible that the new reality we confronted might turn out to be, in the words of the graphic novel's closing chapter, "a stronger loving world"—or at least result in a coalition of those willing to come together to engage in a war against terrorism.

That mass deception underlies Veidt's plan now seems an ironic commentary on 9/11 to those who believe the attacks enabled the US government to define the responsible forces as a shadowy network whose conveniently elastic boundaries could both dilate to encompass whole cultures and contract to enable the torture of individual suspects. The Bush administration's response to the attacks, as played out in suppressions of liberty and free speech in the United States, in bellicose pronouncements of righteous vengeance in the World Court, and ultimately in the Afghanistan and Iraq wars, was like a cruel proof of Veidt's concept, conjuring into simultaneous existence a fearsome if largely fictional enemy and a "homeland" united in public avowal, if not in actual practice.

Although the Twin Towers are never foregrounded in the graphic novel, they do appear prominently in the movie in two scenes. The first is at a funeral, where they stand in the rainy sky beyond a cemetery as the Comedian's coffin is interred. The second is in Veidt's office, where they are part of the skyline behind the character as he speaks of growing nuclear fears and his desire to "make war obsolete." Invoked in this fashion—an elegiac mode similar to the concluding shots of *Munich* (Steven Spielberg, 2005) and *Gangs of New York* (Martin Scorsese, 2002)—the towers signify on multiple levels: as markers of their own absence, adumbrations of what is to come, and subtle interventions by Snyder and his scenarists in a text intended to pass in every other respect as the nearest possible approximation of a work designed in another medium and another time.

The long and detour-riddled journey of *Watchmen* from page to screen embodies the many paradoxes of contemporary blockbuster film production, so capable of outré visualization yet so constrained in its operations. It would be simplistic—and, given the historical record, inaccurate—to conclude that the reimagined ending was prompted solely by the events of 9/11; multiple concerns converged to motivate the change, from the desire to streamline an unruly narrative to the fear of alienating potential audiences. The matrix of factors from which this grand but incomplete experiment in hyperfaithful adaptation emerged should remind us that Hollywood's "state of the art" is never just a performance of technological prowess, but instead a complexly overdetermined mutation of texts across time and intermedial borders, balancing

9   Susan Faludi, *The Terror Dream: Fear and Fantasy in Post-9/11 America* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2007).

the preservation of some original artistic aura with the pursuit of new forms of cultural resonance and relevance. The tragically ineradicable stamp of September 11 on *Watchmen*'s cinematic incarnation may be less about what is absent or altered than about how difficult it has become to read the film otherwise.   *

Remember Everything, Absolve Nothing: Working through Trauma in the *Bourne* Trilogy

by VINCENT M. GAINE

T he Jason Bourne trilogy constitutes an interesting example of mainstream Hollywood cinema attempting to engage critically with contemporary political issues following the terrorist attacks of 9/11. Although the critique is constrained by commercial and generic expectations, *The Bourne Identity* (Doug Liman, 2002), *The Bourne Supremacy* (Paul Greengrass, 2004), and *The Bourne Ultimatum* (Greengrass, 2007) nonetheless intersect with debates about terrorism, trauma, and the war on terror. This essay discusses the tension between the franchise's attempt at political critique and its commercial context of romantic sentimentalization.

Generically, Jason Bourne (Matt Damon) shares much with James Bond and other secret agents such as Jack Ryan and Harry Palmer, but the trilogy expresses discomfort with the role of the spy as an unproblematic agent of his government. This is significant in relation to 9/11, as since the attacks there has been significant cultural debate about the appropriate response. The political and military response presented a binary opposition between "us" (the United States) and "them" (terrorists), which avoided critical analysis.[1] Similarly, although 9/11 provided what Susan Sontag called "a monstrous dose of reality," the response was, for some, a replacement of politics with psychotherapy, indicating more concern with treating the traumatized "victims" than with identifying the motivations for the attacks.[2] However, various popular entertainment texts *did*

1   Richard Jackson, *Writing the War on Terrorism: Language, Politics and Counter-Terrorism* (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 2005), 69.
2   Susan Sontag, "The Talk of the Town," *New Yorker*, September 24, 2001, 32; E. Ann Kaplan, *Trauma Culture: The Politics of Terror and Loss in Media and Literature* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2005), 16.

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