

Review: JAR1322

## THE CLOCKWORK DESPAIR OF THE WATCHMEN

by Robert Velarde

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It's 1985. Richard Nixon is president of the United States, an aggressive Soviet Union is threatening nuclear doomsday, and superheroes are real. Originally published as a twelve-part series in the mid-1980s, the acclaimed graphic novel *Watchmen*<sup>1</sup> made its way to the big screen in March 2009, complete with an R rating and a running time close to three hours.

Directed by Zack Snyder, who is known for the violent film *300* (2006), *Watchmen* the film is, ironically, more graphic than the graphic novel. Broad in cinematic scope, there are moments when the material is masterfully handled, echoing the rich tapestry of ideas present in the source material. Much of the time, however, it is merely loud, violent, and disturbing. Prior to delving into an apologetic critique, it will be beneficial to assess briefly the differences between print and film and how the filmmakers failed to capture the essence of *Watchmen*.

**Print vs. Film.** *Watchmen* as a film fails largely because of the differences between print and film. Print is mostly conceptual, dealing with ideas. The graphic novel raises ideas that can spark rational discourse on serious matters, but does so in a manner that is often gradual and text-heavy, rather than fast-paced and flashy. Film, however, is largely visual and auditory. In reading *Watchmen* we have no need to turn up or turn down the volume. In print, the story is a quiet endeavor, giving the reader as much time as necessary to ponder the ideas. On screen *Watchmen* is a loud venture, offering little time to contemplate what few key ideas from the graphic novel actually made it on screen.

Print generally requires an active audience, while film is mostly passive. When we read we make efforts to process ideas thoughtfully, but viewing makes little demands on our intellects. Events happen larger than life while we sit and try to make sense of a twelve-part story that has been crammed into less than three hours. Both print and film can tell a story, evoke emotions, provoke thought, and entertain, but print is better suited for rational discourse.

*Watchmen* the film fails in many respects because much of what is in the graphic novel is something that film does not handle well, such as the process of thinking through multifaceted ideas. Nevertheless, the worldview content that does remain in the film deserves an intellectual critique.

**"It's All a Joke."** Although there is an undercurrent of despair throughout the graphic novel, onscreen it is best encapsulated by the Comedian, an amoral "hero" and mercenary whose actions are sanctioned by the U.S. government. At the beginning of the film he says, "It's a joke. It's all a joke." The Comedian, however, is not laughing. He sees reality as meaningless, hopeless, and desperate. In short, he is representative of nihilism. Realizing this, he chooses to live it up and to defy the seemingly pointless universe.

**“A Clock without a Craftsman.”** Another key character is Dr. Manhattan, easily recognizable because he is blue, naked, and glows in the dark. The result of a scientific accident, Dr. Manhattan has become godlike in his abilities. He is capable of transporting himself anywhere, he can construct and deconstruct matter instantly, and he borders on being omniscient. One character quips of Manhattan, “God exists and he’s American.” But Dr. Manhattan knows better. Denying his divinity but also teetering between deism and atheism, he describes the universe as “a clock without a craftsman.”<sup>2</sup> Later, when asked to save the world from destruction, he replies, “Why would I save a world I no longer have any stake in?” Dr. Manhattan comes across as representative of a deistic god—omnipotent, but distant, uncaring, and absent.

**“King of Kings.”** “My name is Ozymandias, king of kings,” reads the inscription on a monument in the Antarctic hideaway of superhero Adrian Veidt, also known as Ozymandias (the quote is from Percy Bysshe Shelley’s poem of the same name).<sup>3</sup> Veidt is a former superhero who voluntarily revealed his secret identity. A powerful entrepreneur overseeing a media empire, Veidt is representative of the human potential movement.

While this comes across more overtly in the graphic novel, complete with references to Zen and mind-over-matter thinking, on screen Veidt still communicates belief in unlimited human potential. He wants to save the world and believes he has the best plan to do so. Although he has supposedly developed something resembling super powers and actually stops a bullet with his hand, his abilities are nothing in comparison to those of Dr. Manhattan, who likens Veidt’s intelligence to that of an insect. (Veidt is regarded as the smartest man in the world.)

**“God Doesn’t Make the World This Way.”** In addition to the belief systems of nihilism, deism, and human potential, *Watchmen* also touches on ethics and human nature. The Comedian lives for himself, thus exemplifying ethical egoism. Veidt wants to save the world, but goes about it in a way that is hardly traditional for a superhero. It is instead utilitarian, seeking the greatest “good” for the majority. Another character, Laurel “Lori” Juspeczyk (AKA Silk Spectre II), utilizes ethical emotivism (the view that ethical imperatives are based in human emotions rather than objective facts) in her appeal for Dr. Manhattan to save the world. For his part, Dr. Manhattan doesn’t appear to care much about anything that happens in the world, preferring a sort of fatalism, and in this sense is mostly ethically indifferent. In the end, Dr. Manhattan responds to Lori by agreeing to help, not because of some higher ethical calling, but because he comes to believe that life on earth is an undirected miracle worth saving. Consequently, his ethics are more akin to what is found in secular humanism.

Rorschach, who may very well be the one character tying the entire graphic novel together from beginning to end, is another superhero, but like the Comedian is more of an anti-hero. Rorschach’s vigilante methods are severe, disturbing, and constant. Surprisingly, it is this psychologically unstable character who offers a number of insights not only into ethics but human nature. He is determined and unwavering in his commitment to pursue what he perceives as justice. Despite the underlying existential despair of *Watchmen* as a whole, it is Rorschach who believes there is hope. In the graphic novel he says, “Never despair. Never surrender.” Of the evil and suffering in the world it is Rorschach who says, “God doesn’t make the world this way. We do.” In so doing he doesn’t so much offer support for God’s existence as place moral blame on human beings and their ethical choices.

*Watchmen* underscores the “savage” nature and general wretchedness of human beings, but it does so to the neglect of human greatness, which reflects God’s image.<sup>4</sup> Blaise Pascal argued that the greatness and wretchedness evident in human beings is a puzzle that only Christianity adequately solves on the basis of the Fall and the fact that we are made in God’s image.<sup>5</sup>

**The Watchmen Stand Guard in Vain.** What is wrong with the worldviews of *Watchmen*? Nihilism ends in despair—a world without purpose. If a theistic God exists, on the other hand, then there is hope and meaning. Deism grants the reality of God, but this god is absent, merely a watchmaker who has no stake in his creation or its inhabitants. But the Christian worldview posits a loving, transcendent God who is active in His creation, directing a purposeful history. As such, He does not abandon the world or leave it hopeless, but offers salvation through the incarnation, death, resurrection, ascension, and eventual return of Christ and the ultimate restoration of creation. The human potential movement elevates human beings to the position of God, but fails to realize human limitations. We are creatures, not creators.

Ethically speaking, *Watchmen* is a mess. Without a moral compass rooted in God and His nature, the characters labor in vain to find their way. Ethical egoism may have powerful rhetoric, but it offers little in the way of reasons to live morally. It leaves no room for altruism and collapses on itself when it encounters other ethical egoists or systems that disagree with it. This is because there is no clear way to settle moral disputes between egoists.

Utilitarianism seeks the greatest good for the greatest number, but who is to decide what is “good”? Even if Veidt’s master plan succeeds, how does he know that his actions will result in the greatest good over the long term? Moreover, utilitarian ethics could lead to justification of unacceptable behavior such as the sanctioning of slavery.

Christian ethics, however, provide a transcendent moral center for ethics rooted in God’s very nature. A mixture of divine commands, virtue theory, and other elements, Christian ethics finds its foundation in God’s love, exemplified by Christ and empowered in individuals by the Holy Spirit. In Christianity the ethical call to love God, love neighbors ([Matt. 22:37–39](#)), and “do to others as you would have them do to you” ([Matt. 7:12](#)) has a firm foundation.

[Psalm 127:1](#) reads, “Unless the LORD watches over the city, the watchmen stand guard in vain” (NIV). Indeed, the “watchmen” of *Watchmen* are functional atheists. Despite some variety in their overarching worldviews, they live day to day as though God does not exist. In doing so, they “stand guard in vain.” *Watchmen* offers a clockwork universe of despair, rather than a Christ-centered universe of hope.

—Robert Velarde

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#### notes

1 Alan Moore (writer), Dave Gibbons (illustrator/letterer), and John Higgins (colorist), *Watchmen* (New York: DC Comics, 1986–1987).

2 In chapter 4 of the graphic novel, Dr. Manhattan says, “I don’t think there is a God...If there is, I’m not him.” Deism in the graphic novel is even more overt in *Tales of the Black Freighter*, a comic within the comic: “That night, I slept badly beneath cold, distant stars, pondering upon the cold, distant God...Was he really there? Had he been there once, but now departed?” (chap. 3).

3 A larger portion of the quote from Shelley’s poem is revealing in relation to the despair of *Watchmen*: “My name is Ozymandias, king of kings: Look on my works, ye Mighty, and despair!”

4 The human potential movement elevates human greatness to the neglect of human wretchedness, but leaves a theistic God out, opting instead to deify humans.

5 See my article, "Greatness and Wretchedness: The Usefulness of Pascal's Anthropological Argument in Apologetics," Christian Research Journal 27, 2 (2004); available at <http://www.equip.org/IAP500>.