

Watchmen Review

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Comic books have a difficult time justifying themselves as unique storytelling mediums in the public eye. They're either treated as "storyboards" for the inevitable movie/show, viewed as less ambitious animations, or read like "novels but with pictures so you don't have to describe everything". Outside of meta gimmicks, like the stuff they do with Gwenpool, Deadpool, and the more recent Flash comics, it isn't obvious why you'd choose to tell a story through a comic, given infinite resources.

Recently, I finished reading Watchmen (1986-1987). This comic book's doing a lot. It's another Superhero deconstruction. It explores what it's like to be a god. It dares to ask, "what if Superheroes couldn't just jump out the window without any consequences?". Among other things, however, it helped me understand the unique strengths of this medium.

Storytelling

Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons use all the default comic book tricks effectively – For example, changing panel dimensions and sizes to suit

the intensity/scale of different scenes is a trick that's basically impossible to do in film without it looking stupid. The more interesting trick they pull is the way that Watchmen plays with Time.

Watchmen employs the classic tactic of cutting between two scenes happening in different places at the same time to raise tension and draw parallels between those scenes. Then they crank it up to 1,000 – you're cutting between three, four, five scenes all running simultaneously by the very end. The Newspaper Vendor D-Plot happening alongside a comic book within this comic is very clever, starting as a parallel to the difficult choices that any of these "heroes" need to make, eventually evolving into a more obvious parallel to Ozymandias' clinical bloodbath and conclusion at the end of this story. The arc of the main story changes the way you interpret the nested parallel story and vice-versa, which is pretty cool.

This "rapid crosscutting" technique works well in a comic book format, since you can see the other simultaneous scenes happening out of the corner of your eye, allowing them to maintain their presence and tension. Crucially, it's still legible, since you aren't assaulted with sound/motion spam. I can't think of a way to make this technique work in novel form without it looking clunky or losing a lot of momentum, and

I imagine that any scene attempting to keep the same level of tension that this comic achieves in film would be unreadable.

Side note – Watchmen also uses the comic book format's ability to keep itself readable in disorienting settings for bits that don't cut between scenes. An earlier scene where the Comedian rants to Moloch with each panel flashing bright orange and dark blue would be seizure inducing in a film setting. Here, it's legible while still conveying the disorienting, atmospheric lighting.

Chapter IV, my favorite chapter, does the most with this medium's control over time. To convey that Dr. Manhattan experiences every moment in time simultaneously, they jump forwards and backwards in time, going through different scenes in his life, sometimes doubling back to the same moment to make a point, like the photograph falling out of his hands. Not only does this communicate Dr. Manhattan's point of view by literally putting you in his shoes, but it also helps you realize how far removed you are from truly experiencing time like he does – outside of shoving yourself in the Temporal Torment Nexus, any explanation of the way he sees every single moment in his life simultaneously is just an approximation, which justifies his lonely and apathetic view at this point in the story.

They even show you someone trying to understand Dr. Manhattan's temporal experience when Laurie joins him on Mars. Manhattan makes her relive different events from her past, in a similar manner to his own flashbacks in Chapter IV, but it's clearly not the same – she stays stuck in the past, experiencing it linearly for longer periods of time, and she doesn't jump backwards and forwards quite like he does, which really communicates how much Laurie can't understand him, which raises the stakes of this scene, since he's one of only two people with any real power in this story.

The Story Itself

Annoyingly, while I'm impressed with the storytelling, I don't have as much to say about the story itself. Any attempts on my part to critique this story have the same vibes as critiquing Shakespeare – it only feels samey/derivative because everyone else is ripping him off. As a result, this section's gonna be very short and a little disorganized, since I have no idea what to say.

The entire Superhero market is oversaturated with comic book deconstructions, featuring more “adult” themes with a focus on global politics, using grittier and darker aesthetics. Everyone wants to write a

mature superhero story, so *Watchmen* doesn't stand out as much. I get that *Watchmen* popularized this kind of Superhero story, but it feels like I've already read several stories like, which makes everything less impactful than intended. Even Ozymandias' legendary "I did it thirty-five minutes ago" scene didn't get much of a reaction from me. It feels like I've seen that subversion at least twice before, but I don't remember where. It's still well done, largely thanks to the wordless reactions and full-page panels right after, but my mind didn't explode.

I think I liked every part of this story more than the ending. They let a guy who's in this story less than the D-Plot newsstand guy hijack the entire plot. Usually, a twist of this scale would trivialize every single conflict that came beforehand – the bit with the Psychiatrist and Rorschach, the conflict between The Comedian, Laurie, and her mother, and every other C/D plot conflict are suddenly made less important. Thankfully, it doesn't completely ruin *Watchmen*'s story because of the execution. The pages full of destruction after the alien gets teleported in, with the Newspapers about incoming war scattered everywhere along with pages of Ozymandias' own writing coupled with both Laurie and Manhattan's in-character reactions to the conflict make it feel like more thoughtful than "sudden big moment for big reaction". The contrast

between Manhattan's passive reaction to his own godhood and Ozymandias' approximation of godhood pushing him to do something about the state of the world is also neat.

To me, the most compelling character was Dr. Manhattan for the reasons described in the previous section, but he just fucks off after Chapter IV and doesn't come back until the story's nearly over. It makes sense that he doesn't show up, since he isn't doing anything besides making Sandcastles on Mars. It's just a little disappointing.

Conclusion

Overall, I enjoyed the storytelling more than the story itself. Watchmen glides through time like any other spatial dimension, using clever nonlinear storytelling techniques that they can only get away with because it's a comic book. I'm just a little annoyed at myself for not getting more out of the story itself. Watchmen is a book I should've read 10 years ago, but I still wouldn't have appreciated it fully, since I was only 11 years old. I guess the only good way for me to experience Watchmen was to be born in 1960.