

Some of the most important scenes in the seminal comic book *Watchmen* take place in the secret basement headquarters of a washed-up ex-superhero called Nite Owl. It's a damp, vaulted space packed with avian-themed costumes and machine tools, a boys'-own-adventure clubhouse. At its center is the Owlship—a UFO-looking aircraft with two round windows that look like big shiny eyes. ¶ And here, on a Vancouver soundstage, Nite Owl's legendary lair has been brought to real life. The Owlship is the size of an Escalade, and I'm standing inside. I'll admit it: I'm surprised.

I expected a set that was all facades, no guts. Instead, I'm fiddling with the flame-thrower button on the control panel, admiring the built-in coffeemaker, and checking out a picture of "vintage" superheroes taped onto the bulkhead. It's a comic book come to life, and it's perfect.

And Zack Snyder knows it. The director has been working away on his long-awaited big-screen adaptation of *Watchmen* for several months, and now, on a winter afternoon with just a few more days left of principal photography, he revels in the results. "That's not cool? That's *cool*," he says, beaming at the Owlship like a teenager with his first car. "I might not have done anything else cool on the movie, but *this* is cool."

Snyder then points out two massive chain guns mounted in the floor. "When they fire, these parts here," he says, indicating two little trapdoors, "open up to catch the shells. *Krak-krak-krak-krak!*"

Wait a minute. Not to go all Comic Book Guy here, but ... chain guns? The Owlship

doesn't have *chain guns*.

Or rather: When legendary comics writer Alan Moore and artist Dave Gibbons created *Watchmen* in 1986, the Owlship didn't have chain guns. Which means Snyder's version, while inarguably cool, is also very risky. Adapting a cult comic into a Hollywood blockbuster is fraught with danger, especially when it's the only superhero comic book ever to win a Hugo Award or land on *Time*'s list of the top 100 novels. Even slight



changes to *Watchmen*, changes that will enhance its appeal to the masses, seem certain to alienate the very people who loved it in the first place.

That's no knock on Snyder. Geeks trust him. Before *Watchmen*, the 42-year-old filmed the runaway hit *300* in just 61 days, with a \$60 million budget, a giant greenscreen, and a knack for hyperkinetic action scenes. His keen treatment of Frank Miller's sepia-tinged, ultraviolent graphic novel about the ancient Battle of Thermopylae won over the nerd fan base and did big numbers at the box office, solidifying the newbie director's reputation as a guy who could make a splashy, mainstream hit while remaining true to the source material.

So you'd think *Watchmen* would be a snap: shoot, rinse, repeat, right? Wrong. To its many devotees, *Watchmen* is untouchable, unimprovable, sacrosanct. "The literati were less hard on the Coen brothers for changes they made to *No Country for Old Men* than the geeks will be on me for changes I make to *Watchmen*," Snyder says. "There are no more fierce fans than geekdom." In other words, when the movie hits theaters March 6, even a couple of cannons tucked into the Owlship will be noted and potentially deemed unwelcome.

**A FRIEND LENT ME** the *Watchmen* comic in college, a couple of issues at a time, each in its own Mylar slipcover backed with acid-free cardboard. I was already a fan of Alan Moore, and this was his magnum opus. After a lifelong diet of stories about garishly clad people with powers and abilities far beyond those of mortal men, reading *Watchmen* changed the way I thought about comics. It was like a bar mitzvah—all my childhood stories acquired new significance and texture. It has been 20 years, and I've never read comics the same way since. None of us have.

For the uninitiated, here's a primer: It's the mid-1980s, and superheroes are real but have been outlawed since 1977. One of the last costumed adventurers, Rorschach, investigates the murder of another, the Comedian. The killing turns out to be part of an elaborate conspiracy that spans more than 50 years of alternate history originally told over 12 issues. Visual themes—primarily a doomsday clock face ticking closer and closer to midnight—recur in unlikely places (a blood-spattered happy face, a radar screen, the surface of Mars). The characters are all perfect

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