

archetypes of superheroes, icons that resonate with longtime comic book readers, and the story refracts the conventions and history of the entire genre.

Also, it's really, really dark. Dogs eat children, a pregnant woman gets shot, and good guys get creamed. As source material for a big Hollywood blockbuster, *Watchmen* is non-obvious.

Even Moore warned filmmakers against trying to adapt it. (Previous attempts to make movies out of his work, such as *V for Vendetta* and *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen*, have been commercial and critical failures.) "With a movie, you are being dragged through the scenario at a relentless 24 frames per second. With a comic book you can dart your eyes back to a previous panel, or you can flip back a couple of pages," says Moore, who along with artist Dave Gibbons packed *Watchmen*'s panels with visual puns, puzzles, and a ferocious command of fiction. "Even the best director could not possibly get that amount of information into a few frames of a movie." Much of what makes *Watchmen* so powerful is that the material is so perfectly matched with the comic book form.

To further complicate matters, *Watchmen* also features a universe of far-flung locales—from New York City to Saigon to Norad to Mars. The sprawling narrative is dense with references, backstories, and flashbacks. (There's even a comic within the comic—about pirates.) And one of the main characters, the omnipotent Dr. Manhattan, is bald, naked, and bright blue. (His quantum-mechanical powers let him see all of time and space as frozen instants that he can inhabit in any order. You know—the way you read a comic book.)

No wonder, then, that the basic task of adaptation was troubled from the start. "You can make a movie with the plot of *Watchmen*, but it won't be *Watchmen*," says comics critic Douglas Wolk. "You can kind of imitate it, in the same way you can kind of imitate the way Frank Miller drew the comic book *300*. But *Watchmen* wants to be a comic."

Hollywood begs to differ.

After a decade of tentpole superhero movies, studios now take it for granted that comic books can deliver at the box office. Even *The Dark Knight*, a largely kid-proof, two-and-a-half-hour noir epic, grossed half a billion dollars in the US.

But *The Dark Knight* isn't *Watchmen*. "Batman is this character, and you can pull elements from one story or another," Gibbons says. "*Watchmen* is self-contained." In theory, there ought to be a way to adapt *Watchmen*, but as a work, it just feels finished. Many of us whose neural maps were redrawn when we first read the comic can be excused for thinking that any attempt to make it into a movie would be doomed. Doomed!

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AND INDEED, *Watchmen* has spent 20 years in Hollywood development hell. Legions of A-list filmmakers have failed to make it work. Let's start with Sam Hamm, who cowrote the script for Tim Burton's *Batman*. He took a crack in the late '80s and rendered the plot unrecognizable. Around the same time, *Brazil* director Terry Gilliam considered the project; Moore told him not

to do it. Producer Joel Silver, who had made a lot of rock-'em, sock-'em 1980s action pics and later the *Matrix* trilogy, also toyed with the idea, even envisioning a blue-tinted Arnold Schwarzenegger as Dr. Manhattan.

In 1994, producer Lawrence Gordon broke ties with 20th Century Fox and took the rights to *Watchmen* with him (or so he thought; more on that later). The project stalled

until 2000, when screenwriter David Hayter—fresh from penning the first *X-Men* movie—pitched his own adaptation, hoping to make it his directorial debut. "Then began a five-year process of each successive studio we went to taking the deal, because they knew it was valuable, and then trying to change the movie," he recalls. Paramount finally came on board, and Hayter stepped aside as director. Darren Aronofsky was

attached, then passed to make *The Fountain*. In 2004, fresh off the success of *The Bourne Supremacy*, Paul Greengrass signed up and spent six months and \$7 million in development before Paramount execs decided they didn't understand the script and killed the project again.

In early 2006, Warner Bros. approached Snyder, who had just wrapped *300* after directing a well-received remake of George Romero's zombie classic *Dawn of the Dead*. Snyder loved *Watchmen*, but his first impulse was to say no. Then he had a frightening thought: If he didn't make it and someone else did and messed it up, it would be his fault. He said yes.

Snyder, a onetime director of commercials, is something of a geek-jock hybrid. He's an avid videogamer and occasional anime fan, but he also threw himself into an intensive weight-training regimen on the *Watchmen* set. He can conduct entire conversations in lines from *Star Wars* while name-dropping sports icons. ("May the Favre be with you" got laughs from the crew.)

Snyder turned out to be the right guy for the job. Hayter's original draft had moved the

story to the present day; Snyder's allegiance to the source material led him and writer Alex Tse to shift it back to the Cold War 1980s, making it a period piece and likely adding \$20 million to the eventual \$130 million budget. Snyder's deftness with the virtual environments of *300* let him turn

a Vancouver back lot into a plausible world of skyscrapers and long sight lines, with greenscreens and CGI building out the rest of *Watchmen*'s wide world.

As for the look of Dr. Manhattan, Snyder's f/x designers came up with something completely new. Snyder and his production team knew the blue, shape-shifting Dr. Manhattan would have to be CG—but how to achieve the neutron-enhanced glow? Snyder had actor

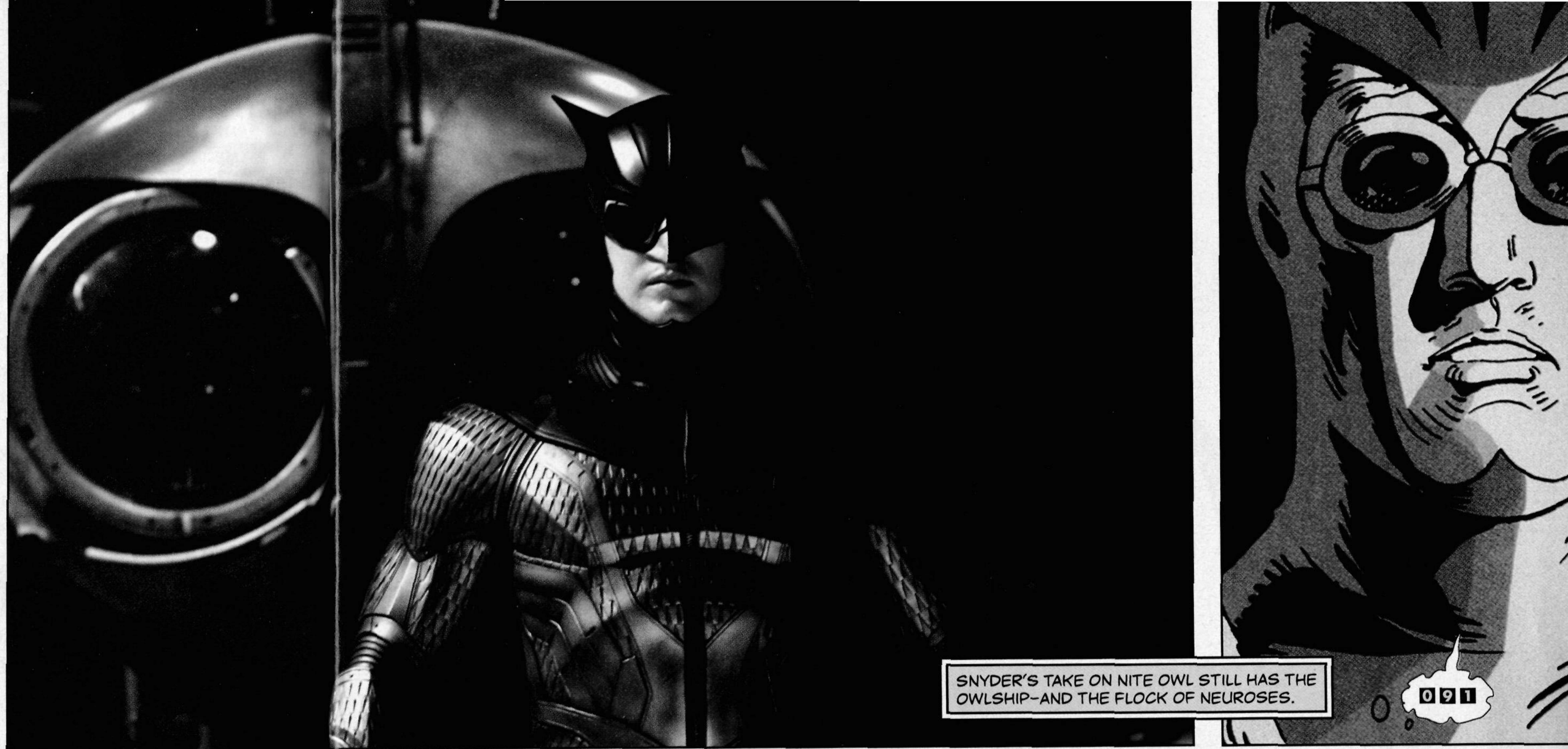
Billy Crudup perform the part wearing a suit of LEDs to cast light while reference cameras captured the movements of his face for later transfer to the virtual character. But the glow from his suit wasn't enough: Nearly every scene featuring Dr. Manhattan had to be enhanced with an LED-

covered pillar and a reflective sphere to get the light effects just right. The final result is a digital amalgamation of all three.

To handle the way Moore and Gibbons loaded every frame with information, Snyder used Easter eggs—hidden surprises for alert

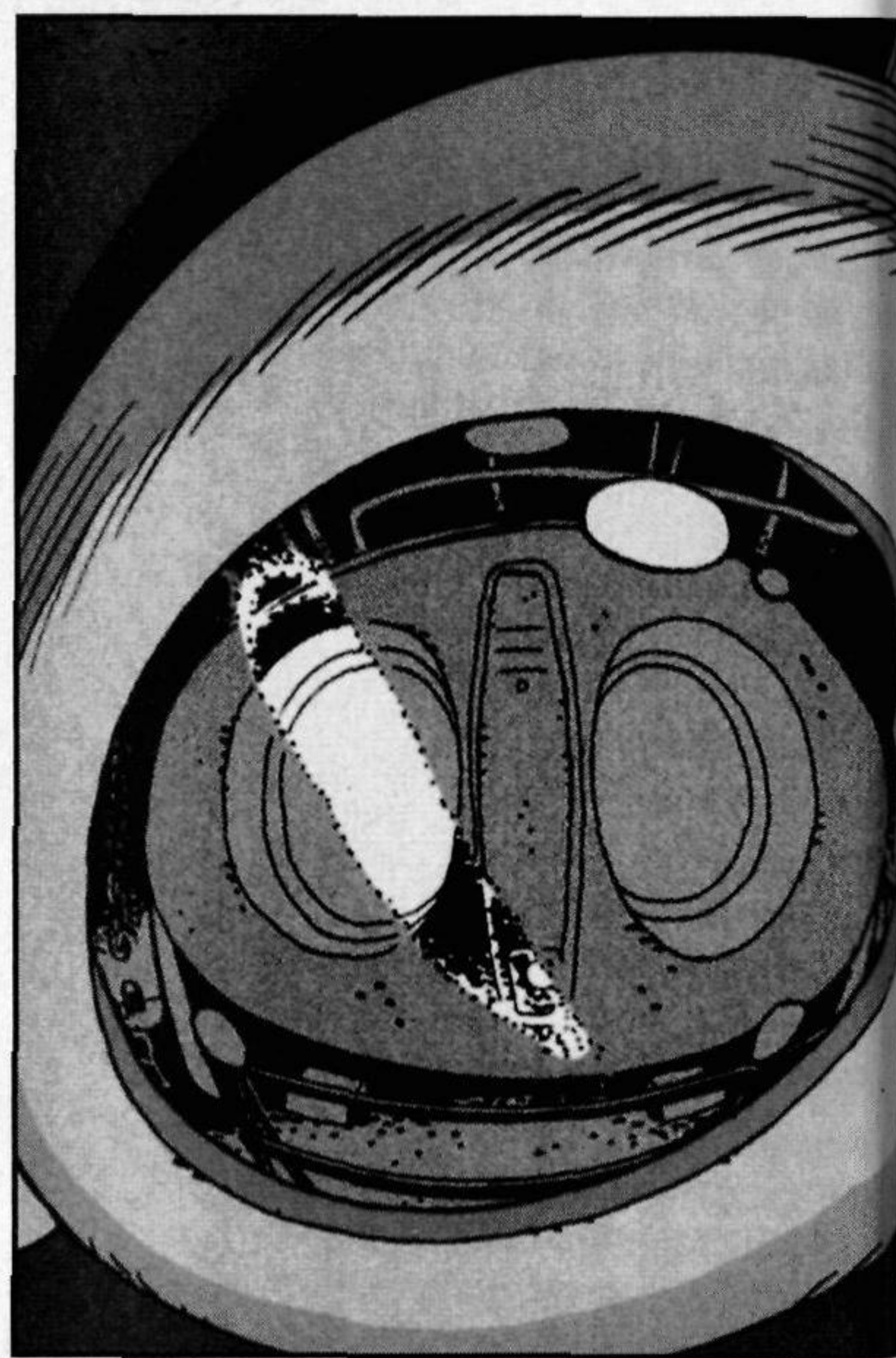
viewers that the camera will pass by fleetingly. (Don't miss the mission-specific Nite Owl costumes in the hero's secret basement and the super-dense, 6-minute opening credits sequence that retells the alternate history of the US.) "We tried to layer far more deeply than film would usually allow you to," production designer Alex McDowell says. "Zack was always saying, drill down as far as you can." That's one way you adapt the unadaptable: You find the details that the geeks are going to look for, squirrel them away in the movie's cubbyholes, and then let the fans know they're there. (The pirate story, for instance, is slated to be an animated short on the *Watchmen* DVD.)

All that reverence seems to have given Snyder the nerve to make one massive alteration to the original plot: He changed the ending. In the comic | CONTINUED ON PAGE 114



SNYDER'S TAKE ON NITE OWL STILL HAS THE OWLSHIP—AND THE FLOCK OF NEUROSES.

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PANELS: ART BY DAVE GIBBONS. COURTESY OF DC COMICS; PHOTO BY CLAY ENDIS / WARNER BROS. PICTURES. TM & © DC COMICS

#### Sacred Text

Famous fans weigh in on the adaptation.

**John Hodgman**  
Author, *More Information Than You Require*

"The movie can be good as long as it appreciates that it has no reason to exist. And yet I think *Watchmen* deserves an homage, and I'm hopeful because Zack Snyder is making it."

**Joss Whedon**  
Creator, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and *Dollhouse*

"It's a comic book about pop culture as viewed through a comic book, so I didn't see the point of making a movie. But I saw the trailer, and it looked phenomenal."