



Longform Movies



Dredd at 10

By [Ryan Fitzmartin](#) | September 21st, 2022
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"America is an irradiated wasteland," a voice gravely intones, as the camera swoops over the dystopia of Mega City One. This is the striking opening to Pete Travis and Alex Garland's vicious, gritty and violently over the top *Dredd*. Set in a dystopia, fascist future where supercops function as judge, jury, and executioner, and gangs rule the street. *Dredd* stars Karl Urban as Judge Dredd. It was unlabeled upon release ten years ago, but it's a phenomenal film and deserves a second look.

The initial release of *Dredd* was not a success. Despite a "certified fresh" rating on Rotten Tomatoes, *Dredd* opened to only six million dollars at the U.S. box office, a tragic figure considering its forty five million dollar production budget and equivalent ad spend. Hopes for a sequel were dead on arrival. Numerous fan petitions were in vain, and the creative team moved on.



Yet, *Dredd* lives on a cult classic. The dazzling filmmaking, inspired writing, terrific acting, and phenomenal score make it an iconic film that hasn't aged a day. In a year featuring the first MCU *Avengers* film, a reboot of the Spider-Man franchise and the final Christopher Nolan Batman film, *Dredd* stands as a blood soaked, brutal testament to the power of independent, R-rated comic book films based off of non-DC or Marvel comics. This indelible adaptation of *2000 AD's* marquee attraction remains a searing and unique work of cinema.

It's best to start with the bedrock of the movie, the glue that makes *Dredd* work at its core, Karl Urban. In a feat of brave acting and loyalty to the comic, Urban dons Dredd's helmet in his first scene, and we never see his uncovered face for the whole movie. Using only his mouth and his body language, Urban conveys the stoic anger that fuels and motivates Dredd. We get no backstory for the character, no explanation; we judge him as he judges others, through actions alone. Urban is grim, compelling, and sometimes even dryly funny. He is a powerful lead for an intense movie.

Urban is backed by a talented supporting cast, including Olivia Thirlby as the determined rookie Judge Anderson, Wood Harris as a ruthless enforcer, and Garland regular Domhall Gleeson as panicked techie with futuristic augmentation. The real standout though, is Lena Heady, who captivates as the sadistic, murdering head of the Ma-Ma clan. Heady has played dangerous queens on *Game of Thrones* and in *300*, but she's never been as lethal as she is here. Ma-Ma would just as soon skin you alive, drug you, and throw you off a building as look you and Heady makes her downright terrifying.

The script, by Alex Garland is satirical and streamlined. Garland uses a simple premise, two cops fight to the top of an apartment block, and fills it with good characters and strong details. He explores the corruption of fascism, the failure of social services, and the impact of a punishment driven legal system. *Dredd* is a fun action movie, but it's also a provocative and strong satire on American policing.

The film is gorgeously, hypnotically shot and scored. Oscar winner Anthony Dod Mantle is behind the camera, lighting and composing *Dredd* sumptuous visuals. He combines sparkly, drug-fueled aesthetics with a grim, dour vision of a dystopian apartment block. Mantle photographs action in a clean but stylish way, using smoke, steam, light and color to maximum effect. There are so many striking shots and visuals which stick in my mind, years after release. Dod Mantle's cinematography is some of the best in a comic book film in the past ten years.

Finally, the music, composed by Paul Leonard-Morgan, is a thumping, pulsing electronic wave. A percussive beat curves into heavy guitar riffs as the action builds to a crescendo within a scene. Drugged-out bliss is scored with euphoric, ephemeral vocals that contrast the violence appearing on screen. From the first frame to the last, Leonard-Morgan's score elevates everything happening on frame in a brilliant and beautiful way.

All of these elements come together to create a special and unique film. The unconventional lead, the gorgeous visuals, the edgy script, and wild score all create a comic-book film unlike any other. There isn't one single element that stands alone, all the elements come together to create an outstanding, thoroughly exciting dystopian vision that's ahead of its time. In a sea of blockbusters, *Dredd* quietly elevated the medium of comic book films with its powerful artistry.

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