Judge Dredd, originating in 1977, is Britain’s most iconic comic character export. Set in an American metropolis in the 22\textsuperscript{nd} Century, the futuristic setting for the “Judge Dredd” series was one of several created for the science fiction comic anthology \textit{2000AD} to tap into the wave of 1970s science fiction cinema as well as generate a market competitor to US comics in the United Kingdom.

First conceived by John Wagner and developed further by Pat Mills, with character and helmeted costume design created by Carlos Ezquerra, “Judge Dredd” was conceived as one of a series of continuing comics to be included in the weekly science fiction anthology \textit{2000AD} published by IPC (International Publishing Corporation). Although neither Wagner nor Ezquerra were involved with the first publication of “Judge Dredd” in the second issue of \textit{2000AD}, Wagner would go on to become the longest running writer for the series, while Ezquerra, was one of fourteen comic artists such as Brian Bolland, Ian Gibson and Dave Gibbons in the first few years of the series alone to visualize the character. Set in a post-apocalyptic future United States where the Western Pacific and Eastern Atlantic states have become vast metropolises or Mega-Cities, Judge Dredd is one thousands of judges empowered to dispense criminal judgements, sentences and punishment, including execution, of lawbreaking citizens. Combining long-running storylines with self-contained day-in-the-life of Judge Dredd stories, the series was also a notorious satire on consumerism, technology boosterism, celebrity culture as well as the ascendency of right wing British politics, with democracy suspended and draconian laws implemented in the Mega-Cities. Inventive storylines drawing on countless science fiction tropes including clones, robot uprisings, aliens, radioactive mutants, psychic police officers, organ transplants as well as gothic horror such as life-extinguishing undead Judges, made “Judge Dredd” the flagship comic of \textit{2000AD}. In 1981, “Judge Dredd” appeared as a weekly newspaper strip in the UK tabloid \textit{Daily Star}. With \textit{Judge Dredd: The Megazine} starting in 1990, a spin-off expansion of the world of Mega-City One, the 1990s would see Judge Dredd involved in licensed crossovers with iconic franchised characters from US comic and film properties.
including *Batman*, *Aliens* and *Predator*.

The conversion of the Judge Dredd franchise into British comic’s most adapted film property reveals much about the legitimisation or mainstreaming of comics as visual culture. *Judge Dredd* (1995), like the films *Tank Girl* (1995) and *The Mask* (1994), departed from other comic book-based films released the same year such as *Batman Forever* (1995) and *Casper* (1995) by being based on more recent comic-book properties. Yet studio reliance on Sylvester Stallone as Judge Dredd, an action film actor with enough Hollywood star power to justify investment in an $80 million US/UK co-production budget, continued the trend of 1990s Hollywood adaptations of long established comic-book properties as major studio blockbusters with action-driven narratives, special effects and bankable A-list Hollywood stars such as *Batman* (1989), *Dick Tracy* (1990) and *Batman Returns* (1992). While the film’s screenplay stayed consistently close to “Judge Dredd” storylines from the late 1970s as well as utilising other recognizable characters and events from the series, neither their creators Wagner nor Mills nor any other *2000AD* writers and artists were involved in the film production. *Judge Dredd* was not a box-office success, and while film critics savaged the film’s failings, *2000AD* fans expressed outrage at the film as a disaster.

With the release of *Dredd* (2012), the absence of Wagner’s involvement in the production and lasting fan disappointment with the first film were reversed. Not only was Wagner onboard as a consultant, but reactions to *Dredd* by fans and critics praised Karl Urban and Olivia Thirlby’s portrayal of Judge Dredd and Judge Anderson as remarkably loyal to the characters and futuristic setting of the series. With Mega-City One itself been a character in the series, the Judge Dredd films continue the cinematic tradition of visualising cities. And production differences between the two films highlight an overlooked aspect of how *Dredd* and the *2000AD* comic franchise now relate to changes in the geographical imaginary involved in the global production of science-fiction. With the shift from the US-UK production zone of *Judge Dredd* to Johannesburg and Cape Town in South Africa for *Dredd*, Mega-City One now joins the South African locations of dystopic science fiction films such as *District 9* (2009), *Elysium* (2013) and *CHAPPiE* (2015). However, *Dredd*’s lacklustre box-office returns quashed future prospects of a sequel, a reminder that as much as the first *2000AD* film property, produced by a division of the Walt Disney Company, predated Marvel’s earliest film properties such as *X-Men* (2000) and *Spider-Man* (2002), by the time of the second Judge Dredd film *2000AD* had become a marginal comic property compared to the Disney-Marvel Entertainment conglomerate. The high-quality fan-made film *Judge Minty* (2013), based on a *2000AD* story by Wagner
and artist Mike McMahon, expanded the world of Judge Dredd as both the original creators of the characters and Rebellion, owner of 2000AD, endorsed the non-profit, unlicensed film adaptation.

Aside from Judge Dredd appearing in other licensed formats such as print and audio novels and video games, he has been fondly namechecked in popular culture, including his signature catchphrase “I am the law,” in song titles and lyrics, especially by British music groups in the 1980s. Influences by 1970s cinema on 2000AD have also fed into instrumental, atmospheric synthesizer-driven scores such as Drokk: Music Inspired by Mega-City One (2012) by Geoff Barrow and Ben Salisbury.

Both the comic and character of Judge Dredd have been the subject of academic studies, especially in the area of audience research, with Professor Martin Barker’s empirical scholarship on the readership of series and fan reaction to the 1995 film being the most well known. The comic’s setting in the US has also been studied for its 1980s Cold-War British perspective on American exceptionalism, political freedom as well as American influences on British culture. The series has also attracted interest from interdisciplinary legal studies examining representations of law and popular culture.

— Jason Davis

Further Reading

Interview about The Waking Fire on SFF World. Audio interview about The Waking Fire on the Grim Tidings