Green Lantern
PG-13
105 Minutes
Rating:  ****1/2

Green Lantern has never been quite as popular as some of the other heroes in the DC Comics stable—Superman and Batman, for instance—but he’s been around in various incarnations since 1940, and is a mainstay of the superhero universe. He’s also one of the most powerful heroes in comics—blessed with a ring which bestows virtually unlimited powers upon its wearer, Green Lantern is frequently rated as one of the two most powerful members of the Justice League (along with Superman, naturally). Given his neat powers and renowned history, it was only a matter of time before Green Lantern made it to the big screen.

And the wait has been worth it. The story begins when test pilot Hal Jordan discovers what appears to be nothing less than a crashed UFO. Without a second thought, Jordan pulls the injured occupant of the alien vessel out of the wreckage and tries in vain to save his life. But before he passes away, the alien informs Jordan that he has been chosen to wear the ring of a Green Lantern. Baffled, Jordan buries the stranger from the stars and takes the aforementioned ring—and its lantern-like battery—back home with him. Gradually, Jordan discovers that the ring can draw upon his own willpower and project beams of green energy with which the wearer can form nearly anything imaginable—force fields, giant bulldozers, glowing swords, even machine guns and gargantuan fists. But when Jordan is called before the Guardians of the Universe and the rest of the Green Lantern Corps, he learns that with this power comes enormous responsibility…and that he will only achieve his full potential if he can overcome his personal fears. Meanwhile, the very embodiment of fear, a monstrous being known as Parallax, flies through outer space toward Earth. Can Jordan overcome his inner demons and rise to the world’s defense? Or will fear be his undoing—and that of the Earth as well?

It’s an epic plot, perhaps the most ambitious in the history of superhero films, but director Martin Campbell pulls it off. The story is brought magically to life with some of the best computer generated effects ever captured on film, and the assorted aliens, monsters, and action scenes the plot throws at us are all rendered with an almost ethereal beauty and sense of wonder. Thanks no doubt to the unique animated effects and set pieces, the movie even looks good in 3D (wonder of wonders!). I would even go so far as to say it is the most expertly rendered 3D film yet produced.

The cast does an incredible job. Ryan Reynolds would probably not be my first choice to play Green Lantern/Hal Jordan, but despite my misgivings he does a standout job, capturing Jordan’s transformation from reckless immaturity to sober heroism with an entirely believable portrayal of an iconic comics figure. Blake Lively has been criticized for perhaps being a few years too young for the part of Carol Ferris, Jordan’s on-again, off-again girlfriend and boss, but there’s nothing wrong with how she actually plays the part and in fact the movie wouldn’t work without her. And no, it doesn’t hurt that she’s totally hot. This could be a big breakthrough role for Lively, and the chance to see her reprise the part is a big reason to hope for a sequel. Naturally, Carol’s love provides Jordan with the inspiration he needs to ultimately prove himself worthy of the title “hero.” Mark Strong is outstanding as the enigmatic Green Lantern Sinestro, and Peter Sarsgaard delivers a knockout performance as Hector Hammond, an ordinary mortal infected by the evil of Parallax and slowly transformed into a being only barely human. The parallel lives of Hammond and Jordan play out the ultimate differences between a life lived on willpower, or fear. The final battle between Jordan and Parallax is cinematic magic, accompanied by a stirring recitation of the Green Lantern’s vow that may be the most inspiring moment in ANY superhero film to date.

Visually glorious, never boring, and well executed on almost every technical front, Green Lantern is a terrific addition to the ever expanding canon of live-action comic book adaptations. A scene after the credits sets up a promising sequel. Here’s hoping we don’t have long to wait.