

# Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles ★★

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**Year of Release:** 1990

Review by Randy Parker

**Country:** USA

**Verdict:** Skip It

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“Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles.” It’s nearly impossible to say it with a straight face; the concept is inherently funny. Unfortunately, watching the mutant turtles is not nearly as much fun as talking about them.

*Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* is not, thank goodness, another *Howard the Duck*, but then again, it’s not *Batman* or *Superman* either. *Turtles* is a strange and ultimately unsatisfying mixture of whimsical humor, gritty action, cute puppetry, and somber violence. The movie just never finds its niche.

For those of you unfamiliar with the Ninja Turtle legacy, some background history is in order. The Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles first appeared in a black and white underground comic book by Kevin Eastman and Peter Laird. Then, the turtles went mainstream and got their own Saturday morning cartoon program and a second line of comic books, this one in color and aimed at children. *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* is the live-action film adaptation.

The protagonists are four teenage turtles who as babies were exposed to some radioactive slime which caused them to mutate. They each grew to the size of a human, learned to love pizza, and gained the ability to walk upright and to talk in surfer jargon. Like, gnarly man, these dudes sound like Bill and Ted (from *Excellent Adventure*) and Spicoli (from *Fast Times at Ridgemont High*). Every other word they utter is something like “cowabunga,” “excellent,” or “radical.” The turtles were raised by Splinter, a mutant Japanese rat, who taught them the art of ninjitsu and gave them names: Raphael, Leonardo, Michaelangelo, and Donatello.

The film is set in New York and tells the story of the turtles’ battle against The Shredder, an evil crime lord who is training the city’s teenagers as ninja thieves. The turtles team up with a pretty TV news reporter (Judith Hoag) and a renegade street vigilante (Elias Koteas) to rid New York of The

Shredder and his goons.

Sound like *Batman*? Well, the movie also looks like *Batman*. *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* is surprisingly gloomy and grim. Its dark film noir production design brings to mind both *Batman* and *Blade Runner*. So does the violence. *Turtles* is far too intense and frightening for young children. The film, however, is too juvenile for adults. That leaves teenagers and pre-teenagers as the only people on the planet who may have an appetite for *Turtles*.

Ralph, Mikey, Leo, and Don are brought to life by puppet-master Jim Henson, who claims that the creatures are the most advanced he has ever created. To get an idea of what they look like, imagine Arnold Schwarzenegger in a Kermit the Frog costume, with a shell on his back. The turtles look okay, but they certainly don’t live up to the magnificent creatures from *The Dark Crystal* and *Labyrinth*. Furthermore, the four turtles are virtually identical; it’s hard to distinguish them as individual characters. Only Raphael, the temperamental, independent loner, stands out as a distinct personality.

Unfortunately, the human characters are just as artificial and rubbery. Hoag is kind of stiff as the TV reporter, but then again the script doesn’t give her much to work with. Koteas, who comes off as a hybrid of Mel Gibson, Robert De Niro, and Sean Penn, does what he can with his clichéd role as the dumb street-fighter. The Shredder (James Saito) is a shameless Darth Vader rip-off, complete with helmet and raspy, sinister voice.

Most of the movie is condescending, but thankfully, every so often a clever sense of humor creeps into the story. Screenwriters Todd Langen and Bobby Herbeck come up with several snappy one-liners. My favorite: one of the turtles has just seen the movie *Critters* and he mutters, “Where do they come up with this stuff?” Where indeed!