

## 6 “I’ll Be Whatever Gotham Needs Me to Be”

### Batman, the Gothic and Popular Culture

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Batman first appeared in 1939, close on the heels of the recently created and hugely successful Superman. The young comic book industry, just emerging as a separate medium from the newspaper comic strip, and hitherto mainly defined by men in suits, now demanded more visually appealing (i.e. costumed) characters. Batman was born as a darker and more complex variation on the red-caped superhero: he is Superman’s Gothic double.<sup>1</sup> Although many superheroes were created in the 1940s and since then, Batman has remained the darkest and most problematic, not least because his powers come not from a magical source but from the brooding intensity of a childhood trauma. Over seventy years later, Batman has grown to become bigger than ever, eclipsing even Superman in recent decades. Why has this been the case? And how did this happen? In addressing these questions, I want to suggest that the main reason for the success of Batman in the twenty-first century—a multi-billion dollar Batman industry—has been Christopher Nolan’s return to the darker roots of the Batman story. Like any enduring Gothic figure, Batman’s regenerative cultural power depends on his ambivalence, his ethical complexity and moral ambiguity. On a formal level, this ambivalence plays itself out in the tension between Batman’s camp aesthetics and the Gothic characteristics of the figure; that is, between the campy smirk of the “Caped Crusader” and the furrowed brow of the brooding “Dark Knight.” Historically, whenever Batman is camped to its limit, the Gothic creeps in, returning the character to a darker and more complicated figure within the narrative.

Batman, though, is not a single character—not even a complex or evolving one. He does evolve, certainly, but more importantly, he multiplies. For the figure of Batman appears in a wide range of texts and media: concurrent comic book titles (up to six different series running simultaneously in the 1970s), a television show (1966–1968), an animated television series (1992–1995), several animated films (in the 2000s), graphic novels (so called one-shots, most of which are aimed primarily at adult readers), and at least seven feature films. The Batman franchise now also includes over two dozen electronic and video games, including the highly acclaimed recent *Arkham Asylum* and *Arkham City* for Playstation, Xbox and PC.

In all its multiple variations and forms, we must pause and ask what the phenomenon of Batman can teach us about popular culture. And, to pose a slightly different question, what can the Gothic tell us about Batman? Here, I focus on the recent films directed by Christopher Nolan, *Batman Begins* (2005) and *The Dark Knight* (2008).<sup>2</sup> The success of these two films is based, I suggest, on Nolan’s thoughtful use of the Gothic mode and also relates to the political ambiguities of these popular cinematic texts (another reason for its significant mass audience appeal).

Batman is, first and foremost, a commodity. He is nobody’s disinterested brainchild, but a product to satisfy the demand for caped superheroes within a, sometimes struggling, comic book industry. Consequently, his relationship to the marketplace and to his audience is direct; however, the interpretive implications of this relationship are neither simple nor transparent. In the first Batman stories, for instance, Batman is a character who has no qualms about killing villains; he even displays a decidedly hard-boiled attitude towards their death. In one story, he snaps a villain’s neck with his foot (DC Comics n. 30). In another, Batman “socks” a scheming businessman into a tank of acid, and comments drily, “A fitting end for his kind” (*Batman in the Forties* 15). Such scenes inspired a public morality campaign against the excessive violence of comic book characters and resulted in a “code of practice” within the industry (similar to the Hays code in US cinema) that “banned” superheroes from killing villains or carrying guns (Brooker, *Batman Unmasked* 60–63). These restrictions—initially adopted due to outside pressure on the industry—had a profound impact on Batman, and most writers and editors have respected this “code” even after such restrictions were no longer necessary. The writer most closely associated with Batman’s Gothic turn in the late 1960s and 1970s, Dennis O’Neil, firmly asserts that “*Batman never kills*” and he even includes this injunction in his *Bat-Bible*, a guidebook for DC writers (Brooker, *Batman Unmasked* 277). By contrast, Tim Burton has Jack Napier fall into a chemical tank in the 1989 *Batman* film, referencing the first Batman comic strip of 1939, while also making disturbingly clear that Batman does this deliberately.

Comic books are, similar to films, collaborative works created by teams of writers, illustrators, artists and editors.<sup>3</sup> The complex negotiation between the producers-financiers, the distributors, the market, and an aggregate creative and technical team moves the comic book from its most basic level—script-writer, illustrator, colour artist and series editor—into a form of cultural production that highlights the complexities of artistry, authorship and market-forces in late capitalism. Likewise with cinema. For even if an auteur film foregrounds the artistic vision of the director, the label cannot simply erase the complex team of collaborators that have contributed to the final product and, in many respects, the director is irrelevant in studio films in which the production company authorizes its own postproduction editors to create a definitive version. In order to remain sensitive to these

complexly collaborative forms of cultural production, the following discussion will focus on several artists, writers and directors, particularly Dennis O'Neil, the script-writer for the 1970s DC Batman, Frank Miller (one of O'Neil's protégés), Grant Morrison, a Scottish comic book writer who has written several notable Batman graphic novels since the 1980s, and the Nolan brothers, who cowrote the screenplays for the two recent Batman films, and especially, Christopher Nolan, who directed them.

Any discussion of Batman as a cultural phenomenon must take into account the fact that the figure exists in a variety of texts and media. As such, we cannot identify character coherence, but we can speak of "continuity," a word that is paradoxically intended to account for its exact opposite, the lack of continuity between texts featuring a character with the same name. Although editors can define the parameters of a character, there are no rules for writers of one-shot graphic novels or film versions. In 1989, for instance, Grant Morrison's graphic novel *Arkham Asylum*, the Tim Burton film and the DC Batman comic book series all depicted very different visions of the Batman figure. Moreover, some texts, such as the 1960s Batman TV series, are never meant to become part of the Batman continuity, and they exist in their own separate sphere (Reynolds, *Super Heroes* 43). Cultural analyses of a phenomenon like Batman run the risk of ignoring—or even eliding—the question of continuity and, instead, shoe-horning one theory onto a select group of accommodating texts while also asserting ahistorical or noncontextual generalizations.

Cultural critiques of popular culture have ranged from viewing popular culture as a mirror of capitalist ideology to seeing it as a mirror of popular desire.<sup>4</sup> In contrast, commentators from within the industry tend to see the content and power of comic books as drawing on deep cultural wells, something like Joseph Campbell's argument in *The Hero With a Thousand Faces* (1949). Campbell proposed that the hero narrative is an archetype, a "monomyth" universal to human culture and grounded in universal human psychic structures. Similarly, Shirrel Rhoades, former executive vice president of Marvel Comics, argues that comic book figures reflect universal archetypes (*Comic Books* 102–110), explicitly citing Campbell as well as Bruno Bettelheim's *The Uses of Enchantment* to assert his point. Along the same lines, comic book writer Grant Morrison asserts that people consciously or unconsciously "respond to deep mythical patterns" in comic books (*Arkham Asylum* 51). Frank Miller unabashedly refers to Batman as a "folk hero" (Sharett, "Batman and the Twilight of the Idols" 41). Industry workers, in other words, see the comic book as disseminating mythological archetypes or folk culture rather than just commercial entertainment. This may, in part, arise out of a semantic slippage surrounding the word "mythology," which is the term used to refer to the rules of the fictional world of comic book series (now used for television series), and which evokes an association with mythology in the anthropological sense of the term; but this does not entirely

explain the consistent claim that comic books express deep cultural and psychological structures.

At stake here are questions of mimesis and representation within a cultural industry. Do comic books—and by extension, popular culture—reflect the values and interests of the “culture industry” and the economic system behind it? Or does it reflect the values and interests of the audiences who buy the products? And/or the artists and craftsmen who make them? In the case of Batman—all of the above. Audiences vote with their dollars and cents, but they also express their opinions, desires and preferences in letters, at conventions and, more recently, on websites.<sup>5</sup> Artists and writers have a certain amount of creative leeway, though they are ultimately accountable to series editors. Finally, there is no denying that the business aspect of the Batman franchise is huge, and in a very real sense, the bottom line. Batman was created to meet market demand; it has grossed huge profits for his parent company DC Comics, and since 1989, Time Warner. The 1989 Tim Burton film version was a great success, but how much of this was due to the massive marketing campaign launched by Warner Bros. before its release? It is possible to argue that the success of this film was a by-product of the Time Warner merger—making it the world’s largest media communications company in the world—and its economic power to mobilize mass publicity, distribution, franchising and global product placement.<sup>6</sup> Costing \$185 million to make, the 1989 film version has generated over a billion dollars in domestic and foreign revenue and is one of the top ten highest earning films of all time.<sup>7</sup>

Yet how does that huge financial investment and potential revenue translate into what goes into the content?” Mass appeal and accessibility are imperatives. Indeed, the “blockbuster” movie genre is the apotheosis of this strategy, and Tim Burton’s and Christopher Nolan’s film versions of Batman conform to this form. In fact, the 1989 Batman film can be read as a mixed bag of disparate elements; so much so that early audiences were not entirely certain how to react (Bacon-Smith, “Batman: The Ethnography” 98). According to Bacon-Smith and Yarbrough, the early viewing audiences did not know if they were meant to find the Joker fearful or funny, and many people reacted with hesitation during the observed screening. Likewise, Christopher Nolan’s film versions strive to balance character-driven dramatic narratives with action-packed scenes of car chases, visual effects, cool gadgets and humorous gag lines. Nolan also invokes the formula of the romantic subplot, and a family in peril (or at least a woman and child) in the climactic action scenes. In short, studio films with such high budgets are characterized by a carefully choreographed eclecticism.

Generally speaking, the Batman franchise is defined by several structuring principles that revolve around a series of tensions and paradoxes. Batman is a masked vigilante, but he often works alongside the police and he usually

does not intentionally kill any villains.<sup>8</sup> He is also a brilliant detective as well as a muscular behemoth of a man. He is often drawn as an ultra-masculine figure—a veritable square-jawed titan— but has also been dogged by questions about his sexuality (often because of Robin).<sup>9</sup> The 1950s and 1960s TV



*Figure 6.1* Batman is often illustrated as a sculpted giant. BATMAN is [trademark] and [copyright] DC Comics.

and film versions were certainly very camp. Most important, though, is that Batman often oscillates between dark and light versions, intensely alone and sometimes slightly mad (dark version), or playful and energetic as he dance/fights alongside his young sidekick (light version).

These two sides to Batman have coexisted since he first pulled on his gray tights and black cowl and took on the “Chemical Syndicate” in 1939. According to his creator, Bob Kane, the two main inspirations for the Batman figure were the 1920 film *The Mark of Zorro* and a 1931 film (based on an even earlier film and successful play) called *The Bat Whispers* (Brooker, *Batman Unmasked* 43). In the former, Zorro is a masked vigilante who fights for the rights of poor farmers who are exploited by rich landowners and the corrupt colonial government of nineteenth-century Spanish California. Like Bruce Wayne, Zorro is a wealthy landowner who conceals his heroic activities by pretending to be a foppish and effete dandy (offering a potential source for the camp versions of Batman). In *The Bat Whispers*, the figure who dresses as a bat is a villain: a jewel thief and a madman who also poses as a detective looking for the Bat. He is brilliant and cunning, but his maniacal laugh at the end of the film confirms his descent into complete madness. Aesthetically, the film echoes German Expressionism—particularly Robert Wiene’s *Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (1920)—through its striking use of shadows, silhouettes and Gothic visual effects.

The Gothic has, then, been present in Batman since the earliest DC stories written by Bob Kane. The simple fact that Batman wears a gray costume and has a bat for a mascot makes him a grim figure, particularly when placed alongside the colorful Superman. In his early stories, Batman battles business crooks; but by the fifth story (which is told over two installments and two months), “Batman versus the Vampire,” the hero is pitted against a character with the classically Gothic name “the Monk” who turns out to be a vampire with the powers of a werewolf. The following month, on the heels of this Gothic adventure, the back-story of Bruce Wayne is finally revealed for the first time: he had seen his parents murdered; he swears to revenge them and says that he will spend “the rest of [his] life warring on all criminals” (*Batman in the Forties* 17). Years of self-training in science and “athletic feats” lead Bruce Wayne to adopt a disguise that will “strike terror” in the hearts of criminals; he will become “a creature of the night, black, terrible.” But which? At this moment, “as if in answer,” a “huge bat” flies into his open window (shades of Poe’s raven) and the last caption sums up and foreshadows the future: “thus was born this weird figure of the dark, this avenger of evil, the ‘Batman.’”

Nine years later, illustrator Bill Finger and Bob Kane revisited the origin story, slightly changing several elements; the most significant change they made was to tease out the Gothic dimensions of the narrative, suggesting an obsessive and pathological dimension to the characterization of Bruce Wayne. “Something about young Bruce’s eyes made the killer retreat,” this later text states. “They were accusing eyes that memorized his every feature

... eyes that would never forget” (*Batman in the Forties* 46). Here, the illustration draws on the imagery of cinematic horror: it juxtaposes Joe Chill’s terrified and darkened face with the disembodied, floating eyes of the ever-present Bruce. Years later Batman finds Joe Chill and recklessly reveals his identity, proving that he is waiting for Chill to make a mistake for which he will be arrested. Obsessive, self-absorbed and compulsive—Batman risks everything to get his revenge.

The Gothic mode has also been, from Batman’s beginning, particularly present in the recurring villains of the series, most of whom are physically deformed and mentally deranged. The Joker, Clayface, Two-Face and the Penguin are, among other things, grotesque figures with marked faces (linking them to Batman’s masked face) and this process of facing and effacing foregrounds the ethical ambiguities of the villain-hero dyad, inviting haunting and uncanny effects. Gothic characterization is also developed over the backdrop of the city of Gotham.<sup>10</sup> The city is rarely depicted in the first years of the series; but when it is, Gotham is a place of crime and corruption. The early Gotham emerges out of the contexts of the Depression and Prohibition: the first created widespread despair; the second created a powerful criminal subculture through networks of organized crime. The film versions of Batman have, more often than not, rendered Gotham in a Gothic style; it is usually filmed at night, lit by neon lights, filled with urban decadence, crime and homeless people. Tim Burton’s film versions, for instance, utilize tilting buildings (shades of *Caligari*) to invoke a claustrophobic atmosphere, and Christopher Nolan’s first Batman movie was filmed almost entirely at night. Even one of the few day-light scenes is set on Gotham’s dark side: Rachel and Bruce drive back from the parole hearing where Joe Chill is murdered, and Bruce’s self-righteous anger inspires



Figure 6.2 Bruce Wayne’s haunting eyes from the second origin story in 1948. BATMAN is [trademark] and [copyright] DC Comics.

Rachel to drive down a ramp that instantly transforms the sun-lit day into a dark night-time scene of urban decay, homeless citizens and disenfranchised pedestrians. Crime and poverty lurks under the surface of Gotham's glittering and shiny skyscraper-lined streets.

The DC writer and editor Dennis O'Neil points out that Batman has transformed and changed since his appearance in 1939 ("Introduction" 6). Indeed, far from being Gothic, the 1940s comic book versions featured a parental Batman accompanied by his cheerful ward, Robin, battling petty criminals, crooks and schemers. By the 1950s, the texts were infused with science fiction and, by the 1960s, the DC comic series attempted to mimic the humour and ironic playfulness of the television show. By 1968, in the wake of political assassinations (Robert Kennedy, Martin Luther King) and the increasing death-toll of the Vietnam War, Batman once again got serious. Here, the work of Dennis O'Neil and Neil Adams returned Batman to a Gothic aesthetic that included a sober and grim backdrop to reflect the characters' ethical complexities. And in the 1980s, O'Neil's protégé Frank Miller drew Batman in even darker tones and achieved enough success to encourage Warner Bros. to bankroll Tim Burton's *Batman*.

Tim Burton's two films were generic hybrids, successful largely thanks to their compelling representations of the complex and troublingly attractive Joker (Jack Nicholson) and Penguin (Danny De Vito). When Joel Schumacher took over from Tim Burton, Batman became much lighter and quite camp, which unfortunately killed off Batman's Hollywood career for nearly ten years. While Schumacher's *Batman Forever* found some success with the deliciously ambivalent figure of Catwoman, his *Batman and Robin* deteriorated into self-caricature, completely erasing the dark figure of the comic books and graphic novels. The planned fifth Batman film never went into production, a symptom of the bad reviews and poor box office returns of *Batman and Robin*. This is why Christopher Nolan's film version of Batman had to be a "reboot"—the comic industry's term for a complete reorientation of style and content—and why Nolan returned to the Gothic Batman stories created by Dennis O'Neil's in 1970s and 80s.<sup>11</sup>

Arguably, the 1970s might be viewed as the Golden Age of Batman Gothic. Under the editorship of Julius Schwartz (and often written by Dennis O'Neil and illustrated by Neal Adams and/or Dick Giordano), Batman became grimmer, more driven, more ethically ambiguous and socially engaged. A bicentennial story, for instance, features the ghost of Benedict Arnold; the specter captures Batgirl and Robin and tries to play them off against each other, thus anticipating the Joker's "social experiment" in *Dark Knight* when he urges the passengers on two packed ferries to blow the other up in order to save themselves ("The Invader from Hell" 76). The inclusion of a historical figure was a unique turn for the comic book industry. In another story, "A Vow From the Grave," O'Neil develops a sympathetic depiction of an ersatz family of carnival freaks, including a boy with flippers for hands and feet. In an earlier era, this character would



have become a villain (like Penguin) but in what is otherwise a grim story, the marginalized people of the carnival's sideshow are humanized and helpful to Batman. This link between outcast and hero—or hero as outcast—is further developed in the 1970s with the inclusion of the villain Ra's al Ghul. Here, the villain offers Batman a “darker mirror image of himself”: “a foe of equal intellect and drive to his own” (O’Neil, *Batman in the 1970s* 115). Although Ra's al Ghul says he is driven by the benign objective of “restoring harmony to our sad planet,” achieving this goal involves the annihilation of the entire human population; echoing Nazi ideologies, Ra's al Ghul dreams of purity, cleansing and apocalyptic rebirth.

From this early period, we also find the Gothic mode in the narrative “Night of the Reaper.” It begins with a Halloween parade featuring a faux Batman and other superhero doubles riding on gaudy floats; the text ends with a purple-cloaked Reaper who spills out of every picture panel in which he appears. He is, in the conclusion, unmasked and identified as a concentration camp victim; now a respected physician, he is out to exact vengeance on the murderer of his family who has unexpectedly appeared in America.



Figure 6.3 “Night of The Reaper” (Batman 237, Dec. 1971). BATMAN is [trade-mark] and [copyright] DC Comics.

The Reaper eventually realizes, with horror, that he has become a monster, but interestingly, the Batman figure senses a kinship with the Reaper's mad fury and thirst for revenge: "He's strong," Batman thinks, "with the strength of *madness!* Something in me *wants* to let him go! In him, I see some of *myself!*" And later he continues: "Like him, I lost parents to evil . . . No! *His way is wrong!*" ("Night of the Reaper" 61). The Gothic elements of this story revolve about the ethical ambiguity of victimization turned to vengeance (including Batman's self-doubt) but Gothicism is also present in the strikingly visual style of the story. One particularly horrific panel depicts the doctor's remembrance of the concentration camp; emaciated victims stand by barbed wire fences, as a Nazi officer, who uncannily resembles the "death-head" disguise worn by the doctor himself, screams at the prisoners. The officer's whip also mirrors the reaper's scythe; the overall effect is deeply unsettling, both terrifying and ambiguous in its odd doubling.

During the 1980s, Batman continued to be represented as a dark figure, but his characterization lacked the ethical complexity and sharp intelligence of the O'Neil titles. Frank Miller's *The Dark Knight Returns* (1986) is credited with reviving wide public interest in Batman (his own special kind of reboot). Miller kept Batman continuity but he also created a unique figure, who is far more pessimistic than in previous versions. Here, Batman has decided to retire and, spending his time as Bruce Wayne, he participates in death-defying car races in order to recapture the adrenaline rushes of his working life. The desire to resume his Bat-identity is depicted as a repressed beast that re-emerges from within. Becoming bat is a kind of addiction, and when he returns to it he feels high, pain-free and "born again." The plot of the book is similarly dark: the threat of an apocalyptic bomb blast, Batman stages his own death and descends into an underground world after finding all heads of state, including America's, corrupt and violent (a figure drawn to look like Ronald Reagan takes advantage of a global blackout to blow Cuba "from the face of the earth"). Indeed, the Batman universe created by Miller is saturated with mass media proliferation and corrupt political institutions; as a result, his characterization of Batman gestures back to the "violent vet" and "Dirty Harry," and bears little resemblance to Dennis O'Neil's urban protector.

In 1989, the Scottish comic book writer Grant Morrison produced a major graphic novel, *Arkham Asylum: A Serious House on Serious Earth* (illustrated by Dave McKean). The artwork in this one-shot text leaves the world of comic books far behind, and is disturbing in content and experimental in form (Morrison includes references to cultural figures such as Wagner, Marat-Sade, the Fisher King, Hitchcock, David Lynch, Lewis Carroll and even Frederick Wertham—the doctor who denounced Batman comics for subtly promoting homosexuality in the 1950s.) The story has Batman lured into Arkham Asylum by the Joker, who controls the hospital and has taken the staff hostage; once inside, Batman enters a topsy-turvy world where he faces his worst nightmares and inner demons. The book

ends enigmatically with the insane Harvey Dent, now Two-Face, lying to the Joker about which side of his coin fell face-up in order to set Batman free. A note accompanying the script version of the text reveals that the narrative has been a nightmare from which Bruce Wayne “wakes up in his bed at 3 p.m., bruised, blinking and shaking his head . . . but feeling somehow cleansed and invigorated by this bizarre insight into his own drives” (66). With this, Morrison writes that “the 1980s Batman” has been “purified and purged of negative elements” and can now be returned to Gotham City to become “the super-confident zen warrior of my subsequent JLA [Justice League of America] stories” (AA 66). The theme of Batman’s inner journey—facing his deepest fears—returns in Christopher Nolan’s film, *Batman Begins*, which also depicts Batman as a kind of “zen warrior.” But the groundwork for this version of Batman had already been laid by Dennis O’Neil.

Fans of the comic book series hailed *Batman Begins* as the most accurate film adaptation of the Batman universe to date. This is largely thanks to Nolan relying heavily on O’Neil’s distinctive and influential vision of the character. For instance, Nolan takes the background story of Bruce Wayne’s years-long travel around the world from O’Neil’s 1989 story, “The Man Who Falls” (illustrated by Dick Giordano). Here, as in the film, Bruce falls into a bat cave and is rescued by his father. Later he trains at a Korean monastery, then travels on a spiritual journey to France before undergoing an initiation ritual with a Native American shaman.<sup>12</sup> Unlike earlier versions of the back-story (in which Batman trains himself in athletics and science at home), this version has him gain key skills and, more importantly, his ethics, by travelling the world. This character development is enhanced when Nolan depicts the young Bruce Wayne as angry and vengeful—he is embittered by his failed attempts to avenge his parents’ death—before he sets off on his journey. His travels force him to confront poverty and desperation, thus influencing his ethical view and, once again, Batman is not a killer—he is “no Rambo”—another feature that Nolan takes from the pages of O’Neil. The doubling that O’Neil explored in the 1970s is also central to *Batman Begins*: Nolan foregrounds the mirroring of Ra’s al Ghul and Bruce Wayne, for the former is the mentor who helps Wayne perfect his skills at fighting crime.

At the end of Nolan’s first film version, Batman is depicted as confident, intelligent and sane: he seems to have mastered his two, or really three, personas—the clueless playboy, the Batman, and the serious man who loves Rachel Dawes. Here, the Gothic Batman is not grounded in the character’s troubled psyche or ethical ambivalence; rather, the Gothic arises out of the mise-en-scene: its sober style, grim atmosphere, its setting for the themes of madness, anarchy and terror. Using a dark and somber color palette, the film references Tim Burton’s depiction of Gotham as a Gothic space, and the urban scenes are filmed almost exclusively at night or at dusk. There is also an extended sequence in Arkham Asylum (the creepy Gotham

psychiatric hospital), but the most disturbing scene occurs when we see the effects of the “weaponized hallucinogen” that Ra’s al Ghul intends to release into Gotham’s atmosphere. Mimicking the substance Bruce Wayne was given in the final stages of his initiation, the hallucinogen turns ordinary people into violent psychopaths, distorting perceptions so that monsters are seen everywhere. The point-of-view shots allow the audience to see through “hallucinogenic” eyes as we witness the dark prospect of Gotham violently tearing itself to pieces.

Following the commercial and critical successes of *Batman Returns*, Time Warner commissioned the Nolan brothers to do a sequel. But in between the two projects, the British-American duo directed another film, *The Prestige* (2006), which powerfully resonates with the themes of the Batman story. Set in late nineteenth-century London, the film revolves around a rivalry between two magicians—both of whom are driven by ambition and a desire to outwit the other. Acted by Christian Bale and Hugh Jackman, the two magicians sacrifice love and happiness as they ruthlessly compete with one other. In the end, it is revealed that one of the characters is actually two people—they are twin brothers who have spent their lives pretending to be one person, and that the other character has knowingly created and murdered a hundred clones of himself while performing a magic trick. With this grim ending, the film brings into focus a theme raised at the end of *Batman Begins* but which remains relatively unexplored until the conclusion of *Dark Knight*, namely, Bruce Wayne’s extreme self-sacrifice in adopting the identity of Batman. There is a hint of this in *Batman Begins*, particularly when Rachel Dawes tells him, as they wander through the rubble of his mansion, that the man she loved has never returned from his world travels. Batman, in other words, leaves no space for Bruce to live as himself.

The Gothic mode has long been associated with men who are driven by forces or ambitions that they cannot entirely control (Manfred in Horace Walpole’s *Castle of Otranto*; Ambrosio in Matthew Lewis’ *The Monk*; Falkland in William Godwin’s *Caleb Williams*; Doctor Frankenstein in Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*; and Dr. Jekyll in Robert Stevenson’s *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*). Riding the wave of Gothic popularity over the last decade or so, Nolan takes these long-standing Gothic tropes and, in *Dark Knight*, filters them through a horror-film lens. Horror is particularly present in the Joker who, like so many Batman villains, combines sadistic tendencies, intelligence and early-life trauma (shades of what Batman could become).<sup>13</sup> Heath Ledger’s portrayal of the Joker highlights the character’s evil; he has an overwhelming need for mindless destruction and chaos. Writers have occasionally given the Joker a back-story to explain his fixed smile and dementia, but this Joker’s proliferation of back-stories—all of which include victimization and suffering—parodies the current tendency to explain abusive behaviour as a by-product of trauma. Ledger’s Joker remains mysterious, irrational, indifferent to wealth (he burns his share of the money he’s stolen), complex and uncanny. Only the Batman comes

close to understanding him: “Nothing is simple with the Joker,” he says, as Gordon aims at the Joker clones (who are, in fact, the Joker’s hostages).

The overt conflict in *Dark Knight* is resolved with the arrest of the Joker and the death of Two-Face. But this conclusion also engenders a darker and more Gothic persona for Batman. Here, Batman takes on the identity of the “dark knight”: he assumes responsibility for the murders committed by Harvey Dent in his revenge spree as Two-Face. If Knighthood is associated with medieval history and folklore (crusading Christian warriors), the US context for knighthood includes a different, though equally dark, connotation. The Reconstruction-era novels of Tom Dixon and the Southern cult of the Lost Cause linked American knighthood to the white supremacy of the Ku Klux Klan. The KKK was just one of several vigilante organizations in the postwar South, but virtually all of them drew on the language and imagery of chivalry: the “Knights of the White Camelia,” the “Alabama White Knights,” and the “True Knights” of the KKK. Andrew Ross explores this context in relation to Tim Burton’s Batman film, analysing some of the more troubling racial politics of the Batman franchise. For instance, according to Bill Finger, the name “Wayne” was taken from a general of the American Revolution, and it was intended to connote “colonialism,” which Finger thought was appropriate for a member of the US “gentry.” Moreover, the name “Bruce” comes from the fourteenth-century Scottish warrior and patriot, Robert the Bruce; therefore, Bruce Wayne’s etymological origins refer back to a patriot warrior, creating a discursive bridge between the chivalric feudal world and a modern democracy. Batman’s ambivalent relationship to the forces of law and order mirror these historical roots. Although he is a vigilante, Batman



Figure 6.4 Wayne’s inspiration for the bat disguise (Batman 47, 1948)  
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usually puts criminals before the law—he does not allocate punishment. Or at least not all the time.

The Nolan film versions of Batman play to mass audiences by simultaneously glamorizing Batman’s autocratic persona *and* celebrating the ethos of democracy, particularly in *The Dark Knight*, where the two ferry loads of people *vote* to not blow each other up. Yet this duplicity is consistent with the complex and equally ambivalent racial politics of the franchise. We must remember that Bruce Wayne choosing to use a bat costume because criminals are a “superstitious cowardly lot” (as presented in the 1939 “Origin” and again in the 1948 “The Origin of Batman”) is an uncanny echo of the scene in W.B. Griffith’s *The Birth of a Nation* when the Southern founder of the KKK dons white robes after watching a group of African-American children frightened by white kids disguised as ghosts.

Likewise, ambivalence arises out of Batman’s mythopoetic drive to create Batman only to replace him with Harvey Dent as “White Knight of Gotham.” The need to become a symbol and legend—“more than a man”—is suggested to him by Ra’s al Ghul, a troubling source, to say the least. In *Batman Begins*, this villain inspires Batman to use the bat as an emblem (becoming a lucrative brand); and in *Dark Knight* Wayne’s conviction that Gotham needs a symbol of heroism, a “White Knight,” drives Gordon and Batman to protect Dent’s reputation by any means necessary.

Such ambivalence inevitably leads to interpretations and reinterpretations of the film’s textual politics. The philosopher Brett Chandler Patterson, for instance, argues that Batman represents social order, and that his enemy is anarchy; by contrast, Tony Spanakos asserts that Batman represents a progressive challenge to the status quo by questioning the nation-state’s “monopoly over the legitimate use of violence” (“No Man’s Land” 42, 53; “Governing Gotham” 68). Writing on the two Nolan films, the critic Marc Edward DiPaolo describes Christian Bales’ Batman as a technocrat and a “feudal lord” who runs Gotham like his own fiefdom; however, DiPaolo concludes that the appeal of Batman lies ultimately in his “nobility” and “his desire to protect and improve his home city” (“Terrorist, Technocrat, and Feudal Lord” 215). Following DiPaolo, it is clear that the political ideologies and potential readings disseminated by Batman are, like so many blockbuster movies, mixed and contradictory.<sup>14</sup>

On the one hand, the two Nolan films portray Wayne’s class status and extreme wealth sympathetically. A millionaire of the “Harvard trust fund set,” Wayne and his friends are benevolent and generous: they flock to a fundraising event in Harvey Dent’s honor. In this, *Batman Begins* gestures back to the comic strip of the Depression-era, particularly those scenes that depict Bruce Wayne’s father as a philanthropist who sets an example for Gotham’s wealthy elite. The crime-fighting millionaire hero was, initially, a by-product of 1930s economic conditions, and he returns in the 2005 Batman film version and performs a similar function of ethical redemption. For example, the happy ending of the first Nolan film has Lucius Fox

(Morgan Freeman) stepping into the role of CEO of Wayne Enterprises, thus suggesting that this multi-national corporation will serve the public good. On the other hand, representations of poverty and crime are politically charged: the Nolan films represent poor, small-time crooks as victims of their circumstances. Even Joe Chill, the Wayne's murderer, is an object of pity (for the audience, if not for Bruce Wayne). The real criminals are, the films suggest, engaged in networks of organized crime or simply madmen (Joker and Two-Face). Furthermore, in these versions, the manufacture and distribution of arms is condemned even while they put on display a wide range of military equipment: from the black body armor and night vision goggles to the Batmobile (a military vehicle called The Tumbler, possibly the real star of the first film). In a clear reference to the post-9/11 "homeland security" policies, Lucius Fox is highly critical of intrusive surveillance and questions the technology Wayne uses to trap the Joker (transforming the mobile phones of Gotham into microphones). Still, Batman *does* use the device to track his nemesis, and he also employs enhanced 3-D X-ray vision to see through walls and darkness (going beyond the night-vision goggles of *Batman Begins*). The scene is visually arresting and beautiful, thus making the destruction of the machine seem almost regrettable.

Anticipating the release of *The Dark Knight Rises* (which will be after this book has gone to press), we know that the new version will feature a more recent villain, Bane. A victim, like Batman, of debilitating childhood trauma, Bane is raised in prison on a Caribbean island to serve out his father's life sentence. In adulthood, Bane becomes a subject of medical experimentation, and is transformed into a mercenary juggernaut, the only villain to almost kill Batman (by breaking his spine in *Batman # 497*). Bane first appeared in 1993, a year after the first Gulf War launched the US into a new era of neo-colonialist warfare. His postcolonial as well as prison origins made him the ideal villain for the post-Reagan era. Like many popular culture figures, Bane is the uncanny reflection of the most charged and politically sensitive issues of his time. Representing Third-World resentment of the colonial past (and present) as well as the current policy of domestic colonialism in the form of the largest penitentiary system in the world, Bane is the return of a historical repressed. He is also one of Batman's most disturbing doubles. Like the Bat, he is both super-intelligent, a self-taught forensics genius, as well as incredibly strong and muscular. Like Batman, his power is not magical but based on will-power, martial arts and science. The Nolan film may not use all the details of Bane's comic book backstory, but many aspects of the character are visual and therefore easily transferable to screen. Like Batman, he wears a mask meant to both protect his identity and intimidate others. In previews of the film, Bane appears like a cross between a gladiator and a s&m fantasy gone wrong. The blurb describes him as a "terrorist" and the trailer makes it clear that the line between war and peace in post 9/11 America will be one of the issues explored. Whether the Nolan brothers stick to their hitherto

relatively pacifist agenda or whether they allow the film to shift registers into a more Frank Miller-esque flirtation with proto-fascism remains to be seen. By virtue of narrative and sequel logic, this installment of the Nolan trilogy promises to be the darkest and most violent, the one in which Batman comes closest to being broken (as he was in the comic book). It is also very likely that the politics of the film will end up striking both progressive and reactionary—anti-war and militaristic—chords.

In his book-length study of Batman, Will Brooker concludes that Batman is no longer a mere product of consumer culture; instead, Batman could live on, outside of commercial media, as a form of folkloric culture (*Batman Unmasked* 333). In 2003, two years before Nolan’s reboot, and in the wake of Schumacher’s disappointing *Batman and Robin*, Brooker’s musings made sense; Batman seemed to have lost his profit-driven prowess. But after the financial success of *The Dark Knight*, and with a third Nolan Batman film on the way, it is impossible to test Brooker’s theory. For now at least, Batman is riding high on the highly profitable wave of contemporary Gothic popular culture. The themes of childhood trauma and haunting, the dark city of Gotham, ethical ambiguity and the two sides of justice and revenge—all of these themes keep Batman flying in the twenty-first century.

#### NOTES

1. The point about the visual appeal of costumed crime-fighters comes from Bill Shelly’s “Introduction” to *Batman in the Forties* (5). Regarding the relationship between Batman and Superman as light and dark variations on the superhero, Scott Bukatman compares Batman’s appearance in Superman’s wake to Terry Castle’s description of the Gothic as “the toxic side effect” of the Enlightenment (*Matters of Gravity* 205).
2. The third chapter in Nolan’s Batman trilogy will be released around the time of this book’s publication.
3. It must be noted that the comic book industry has produced some well-known artists who have become “stars,” but it has also relied on large numbers of artists working invisibly in sweatshop conditions.
4. Early studies of popular culture often defined it sociologically, i.e., as the “culture of the urban, industrial bourgeoisie” (McCormack, “Folk Culture and the Mass Media” 4). Popular culture was in this guise synonymous with “mass culture” (commercial, tacitly alienated and alienating) and always contrasted to “folk” or traditional culture, as well as legitimate (“high”) art. After the 1970s, cultural critics began to examine popular culture in a less explicitly critical way, looking for resistant readings, semiotic complexity, and the inscription of subversive, progressive or radical energies in commercial cultural texts.
5. See Patrick Parsons, “Batman and his Audience: The Dialectic of Culture,” and Camille Bacon-Smith and Tyrone Yarbrough, “Batman: The Ethnography,” *The Many Lives of Batman*, eds. Robert E. Pearson and William Uricchio (New York: London, 1991), and Will Brooker, “Fandom and Authorship,” *Batman Unmasked*, 279–294.
6. For example, the merged company’s ability to draw on its music division, especially the talent of Prince, who wrote several songs for the film, created an unprecedented “synergy” and profit boost.



7. <http://boxofficemojo.com/alltime/world/>
8. This principle doesn't apply across the board, of course, and Frank Miller's work is a notable exception. There, Batman is violent and even sadistic, pursued by the forces of law for his vigilantism.
9. Most notably in Dr. Fredric Wertham's *Seduction of the Innocent* (1954). For a useful discussion of the queer readings of Batman, see Will Brooker, *Batman Unmasked*, 101–170.
10. Bill Finger apparently found the name randomly in a phone book, from the listing for a company called Gotham Jewelers, and liked it enough to use for his thinly veiled fictional New York (Brooker, *Batman Unmasked* 48).
11. It is worth pointing out that Nolan's Gothic Batman is *not* inspired by the dark vision either of Frank Miller's political fables nor of Grant Morrison's psychological horror story, *Arkham Asylum*. This is a reboot of specifically O'Neil's Batman only.
12. There is also another O'Neil story from this period that explores Wayne's shamanistic initiation: "Shaman," *Legends of the Dark Knight* # 1 (New York: DC Comics, 1989).
13. Here, the Joker is played by Heath Ledger, whose death just before the release of the movie morbidly helped to promote it.
14. The reception of a movie's meaning is further complicated by the unpredictable dynamics of spectatorship, as reception studies scholarship has demonstrated. See, for example, Janet Staiger's *Media Reception Studies* (New York: NYU Press, 2005) and Will Brooker and Deborah Germyn's *The Audience Studies Reader* (New York: Routledge, 2003).

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