Batman's War on Terror

Reviewed by Benjamin Kerstein

The resurrection of the superhero movie has been an American pop-cultural phenomenon at least since the massive success of the *X-Men* and *Spider-Man* films in the early 2000s, but it has reached a new apex of popularity with the recent release of *The Dark Knight*, the latest installment in the long-running Batman franchise. Director Christopher Nolan's highly anticipated sequel to his 2005 blockbuster *Batman Begins* has already made close to one billion dollars at the box office worldwide and may well be on its way to becoming the highest-grossing movie of all time.

Undoubtedly, the film's immense popularity is partially due to the success of its predecessor, the enduring popularity of the Batman character in both comic books and pop cinema, and the more prurient interest aroused by the premature death of Heath Ledger, who co-stars in the film as the Batman's perennial nemesis, the Joker. None of these reasons, however, are quite sufficient to explain the extraordinary success of *The Dark Knight*. There have been other films based on beloved comic book characters, such as 2006's *Superman Returns*, which have not been met

with the same epoch-making enthusiasm, and superhero sequels are by no means guaranteed blockbusters in any case, as was demonstrated by the lackluster performance of *Batman and Robin* in 1997. More interestingly, *The Dark Knight* has been met with a degree of critical acclaim unprecedented for its genre. Even such highbrow organs as the *New York Times* and the *Guardian*, which usually treat comic book films and sequels in general as symptoms of the decline of Western civilization, have praised the film for both its artistry and its content. Some reviewers have even gone so far as to suggest that *The Dark Knight* represents a new maturity for the superhero genre as a whole—that what was once a ghetto for popcorn flicks is slowly becoming something like an art form. The always reliably middlebrow critic Roger Ebert went so far as to write, "Something fundamental seems to be happening in the upper realms of the comic-book movie…. *The Dark Knight* move[s] the genre into deeper waters… these stories touch on deep fears, traumas, fantasies, and hopes." Joe Neumaier of the *New York Daily News* summed up the phenomenon in fairly succinct terms: "This new Batman action-drama— 'action-adventure' is too slight a description—marks the moment superhero movies turned serious."

Indeed, if any film is going to stake a claim for the comic book movie as serious cinema, it is *The Dark Knight*. It is not a great film, but it is unquestionably a work of genuine quality, made by a director of ambition and skill. But the most likely reason *The Dark Knight* has become a phenomenon, and not just another hit movie, is that beneath the standard pyrotechnics of the summer blockbuster, it is a surprisingly explicit allegory to our current age of terrorism, the challenge it presents to traditional ideas of heroism, and America's own ambivalence in confronting this challenge. In the film's deeply uncertain depiction of an all too human superhero, Americans are watching their own tortured and conflicted relationship to the war on terror laid bare before their eyes.

Batman first appeared in 1939, and the character has outlasted almost all of his contemporaries. With the exception of Superman, he is the oldest and most popular of the superheroes and a perennial favorite of American pop culture. Despite Batman's longevity, however, the basic underpinnings of the character have remained remarkably unchanged over time. Set in the mythical *uber*-metropolis of Gotham City, all the incarnations of the Batman mythos have chronicled the adventures of Bruce Wayne, a fabulously

wealthy playboy who lives a secret life as a costumed crime-fighter. In his childhood, Wayne witnessed the murder of his parents at the hands of a petty criminal. As an adult, the traumatized billionaire channels his grief and rage by transforming himself into the superheroic Batman. Each night he stalks the rooftops of Gotham, battling criminals in a high-tech suit of armor which gives him the appearance of an enormous bat, the better to terrify the city's evildoers and recreate himself as a dark and silent guardian of the shadows.

In 1989, maverick director Tim Burton re-imagined the character in the first Batman feature film, launching a blockbuster franchise which died an ignoble death with the aforementioned *Batman and Robin* and was finally resurrected—or "rebooted," as the current parlance goes—by British filmmaker Christopher Nolan in *Batman Begins*. That film retold Batman's origin story in a new and grittier style. Nolan's realist take—to the extent that any film about such a fantastical and in some ways inherently silly character can be called realist—on the Batman mythos has both returned the character to blockbuster status and given him a new lease on pop-cultural life.

To a great extent, the success of Nolan's take on Batman has been due to his own considerable talents as a director of visceral and kinetic genre films which still retain a measure of intelligence and subtlety. But it has also been a result of the care which Nolan and his co-writers have taken to emphasize the qualities that made Batman such an enduring character in the first place: While Batman is a superhero, he is not superhuman. He has no special powers and relies on high-tech gadgets and his own strength and wit to combat evil. More interestingly, there is a basic schizophrenia to the character—he is a human being who dresses as a giant bat, after all—which adds a layer of perversion and complexity to what would normally be a simple, heroic do-gooder. Moreover, unlike most of the classic superheroes, Batman is a relatively dark character: driven, tormented, and violent. He is more a Clint Eastwood-style vigilante than the clean-cut, all-American archetype represented by Superman, a contrast which legendary comics writer Frank Miller took to its logical extreme in his acclaimed graphic novel *The Dark Knight Returns*, in which the two icons literally beat each other to a pulp. It is also hinted, and sometimes more than hinted, that Batman is at least slightly insane—perhaps just as insane as the demented villains he pursues. It is this aspect of the

superhero which Nolan explores so effectively in *The Dark Knight*: his status as an exception to the norms of society, of law, and even of sanity, along with the dangers and temptations such an exception presents to a society in crisis.

The Dark Knight picks up precisely where *Batman Begins* left off: Bruce Wayne (Christian Bale) is now well into his clandestine campaign to clean up Gotham City, which has suffered from years of crime, corruption, and neglect. In this quest, he is secretly aided by his faithful butler and surrogate father, Alfred (Michael Caine), and police Lieutenant James Gordon (Gary Oldman). Wayne hopes that Gotham's new district attorney Harvey Dent (Aaron Eckhart) will prove to be the "white knight" the city requires to return to its former glory, which will render Wayne's secret life as Batman—Gotham's "dark knight"—unnecessary. This fragile state of affairs is shattered early in the film by the appearance of the Joker (the late Ledger, in a much celebrated performance), a thoroughly deranged psychopath who launches a campaign of terror against Gotham City, threatening and assassinating public officials and their family members, setting off bombs in public buildings, and deftly using the media to strike fear and despair in the hearts of the citizenry.

As the full dimensions of the Joker's plan begin to take shape, it becomes clear that his terrorism has no rational, comprehensible motivation. It is, rather, a form of psychotic performance art: The Joker is determined to demonstrate to Gotham City that chaos is the natural state of things and that the laws and norms of society are powerless illusions. Ironically, the Joker's insanity is born of his conviction that he is, in fact, the only sane man on earth. "The only sensible way to live in this world," he declares, "is without rules." This ruthless nihilism presents Batman and his allies with a menace they can neither understand nor control. The Joker fears nothing, wants nothing, and cares about nothing. As Alfred sagely tells Wayne, "Some men aren't looking for anything logical, like money. They can't be bought, bullied, reasoned, or negotiated with. Some men just want to watch the world burn."

The allusion to the horrors of our current age is fairly obvious, and it is not limited to the film's dialogue. *The Dark Knight* is laden with the iconography of the war on terror: The Joker is repeatedly referred to as a terrorist. He makes videotapes of his victims which are eerily similar to the horrendous videos of jihadi

beheadings and other atrocities which have become so depressingly familiar in recent years. He manipulates the media in order to engage in psychological warfare against his opponents. He destroys buildings and landmarks that are promptly swamped with rescue workers and firemen in images chillingly reminiscent of the apocalyptic scenes at Ground Zero. He deliberately targets and murders innocent people indiscriminately. He makes use of human shields, booby-trapped bodies, and rocket-propelled grenade launchers similar to those employed by Iraqi insurgents. At one point he even appears as, quite literally, a suicide bomber, with several grenades hanging from his coat.

Even more compelling is the film's depiction of its characters' *reaction* to terrorism. Though Gotham City is defiant at first, the escalating violence soon leads the citizenry to despair and defeatism. As their usual methods fail one by one, the police begin to resort to increasingly aggressive and potentially dangerous tactics, such as torture, endangering innocent people, and deceiving the media and the public. Even the honorable Harvey Dent uses violent coercion to get information from a suspect. Batman himself begins to wonder if he is capable of defeating an enemy as indifferent to

death and destruction as the Joker without breaking his own personal code, which forbids him to kill. In the end, he uses a city-wide surveillance system—which fundamentally violates the basic right to privacy of every citizen of Gotham—in order to find and subdue his adversary. Ultimately, the film seems to be asking the central question of confronting terror—the "Guantanamo dilemma," so to speak: At what point do the exceptional methods required to fight terrorism become a threat to the society which employs them in its own defense? Can the norm be preserved in the state of emergency without destroying it?

This dilemma is played out through the story's three protagonists, each of whom follows a very different path over the course of the film. Harvey Dent, who eventually becomes the evil Two-Face, begins the film as an upstanding officer of the law. Several characters remark that he is an idealist, an inspirational figure. It is assumed that he believes in the law and in the necessity of defending it. At several points, in fact, he displays considerable moral and physical courage in the face of the Joker's evil. But there are also hints that he is not quite what he appears to be. He is self-confident to the point of arrogance, personally vain,

and extremely ambitious. More importantly, his idealism is not as pure as his admirers believe. In his most telling scene, Dent refers to the ancient Roman custom of appointing a dictator in circumstances of extreme danger, and wonders whether an enlightened tyranny may not be superior to the rule of law—indicating a secret lack of faith in the institutions he represents.

Dent's weakness leaves him vulnerable to the satanic machinations of the Joker, whose savage and purposeless cruelty finally breaks the district attorney's façade of nobility. "You had plans," the Joker tells him. "Look where it got you. I just did what I do best: I took your plan and turned it on itself. Introduce a little anarchy, you upset the established order, and everything becomes chaos. I am an agent of chaos. And you know the thing about chaos, Harvey? It's fair." Convinced by the Joker that pure chance is the only real justice in the world, Dent abandons his duty to the law in favor of the random indifference of fate. He hunts down those he believes have betrayed him and decides their punishment by the flip of a defaced coin—heads, they live; tails, they die. "You thought we could be decent men in indecent times," he tells Gordon. "But you were wrong. The world is cruel. And

the only morality in a cruel world is chance. Unbiased. Unprejudiced. Fair." Like many idealists, Dent is ultimately unable to reconcile his lofty beliefs with the brutal realities of the world, so he abandons his faith in favor of an equally fervent belief in nothing.

The other officer of the law, Lieutenant James Gordon, is the quintessential everyman. Unselfish, hard-working, honest to a fault, utterly lacking in personal ambition, Gordon works faithfully within the bounds of the law despite the constant frustrations of doing so. "I don't get political points for being an idealist," he tells Dent. "I have to do the best I can with what I have." While Gordon makes use of Batman's services in order to fight crime, he is wary of the vigilante's tendency toward extralegal violence. At one point, he even attempts to prevent Batman from brutalizing the Joker himself. Gordon realizes that his efforts may ultimately prove futile, but he nonetheless persists. Somewhere beneath his tough exterior he clearly believes in the law and his small, often thankless role in enforcing it. Indeed, to a certain extent, Gordon is the only true hero in *The Dark Knight*. He does not take to the shadows, disregarding the constraints of society in pursuit of personal vengeance. His

normal, everyday heroism is the rule to Batman's exception.

And yet, as the German thinker Carl Schmitt—whose analysis of the state of emergency is the subject of much academic discussion today—once put it, "The exception is more interesting than the rule…. In the exception the power of real life breaks through the crust of a mechanism that has become torpid by repetition." We are fascinated with Batman precisely because he is anything but normal and everyday. Like the Joker, he is the quintessential exception. Driven by uncontrollable, chthonic inner forces, he is fanatical in pursuit of his own sense of justice, which sometimes accords with the law and sometimes does not. He is a force unto himself who answers, ultimately, to no authority except his own personal definition of right and wrong. In many ways, he is the Joker's mirror image; but while his enemy acts only to satisfy his insane compulsions, Batman, like Gordon, is a self-sacrificing altruist: "I'm whatever Gotham needs me to be," he says. And at the end of the film, Gordon muses that "He's the hero Gotham deserves…. Because he's not a hero. He's a silent guardian. A watchful protector. A dark knight."

This may be the most interesting aspect of *The Dark Knight*: its extraordinary ambivalence toward the issues it presents. While the film raises serious questions about the necessity and dangers of using extreme measures to protect society from exceptional threat, it never really answers them. This is most likely the reason for the diametrically opposed political interpretations proffered by some of the film's critics. Andrew Klavan in the *Wall Street Journal* wrote that the film is fundamentally conservative and "is at some level a paean of praise to the fortitude and moral courage that has been shown by George W. Bush in this time of terror and war." Cosmo Landesman in the *Sunday Times*, who disliked the film in general, claimed in contrast that "the film champions the antiwar coalition's claim that, in having a war on terror, you create the conditions for more terror. We are shown that innocent people died because of Batman—and he falls for it. Here is a Batman consumed with liberal guilt and self-loathing."

The key to *The Dark Knight*'s success may lie in the fact that both men have a point. The film certainly seems to endorse the idea that society needs men willing to take to the shadows: to act outside of society's norms in order to save them. Indeed, Gordon openly acknowledges that he needs Batman to go beyond the law and accomplish what he cannot. And yet the film also holds that this state of affairs cannot be allowed to become

the norm: At the end of the film, Batman realizes that if Dent's crimes are revealed, Gotham will lose its last vestige of faith in justice and order, thus giving the Joker his ultimate victory. In a supreme act of self-sacrifice, he tells Gordon to blame Batman for Dent's murders. "You'll hunt me," he says. "You'll condemn me. You'll set the dogs on me. But that's what has to happen. Sometimes truth isn't good enough. Sometimes people deserve more. Sometimes people deserve to have their faith rewarded." The film ends with a sense of bleak uncertainty as Batman, now a hunted fugitive, disappears into the darkness, determined to be the city's shadow protector, its dark knight, whatever the cost.

This surprisingly desolate coda implies that Batman's sacrifice is necessary, because even if Gotham needs a dark knight, it cannot be allowed to consciously acknowledge this fact. Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben summed up this imperative with the observation, "What the law can never tolerate—what it feels as a threat with which it is impossible to come to terms—is the existence of a violence outside the law." To preserve the law, people must believe that the man who works outside it is a criminal, however indispensable he may be. They must believe, as Gordon says, that "he's not a hero."

This conclusion has some fairly dark repercussions, because it implies that, in some measure, the Joker is essentially correct: The norm is, in fact, a lie. Society needs the lie, demands the lie, if it is to survive in the face of an extraordinary threat. In turning Batman into an outlaw, and having him destroy the surveillance system he has used to stop the Joker, the film holds that for the norm to remain the norm, the exception must remain an exception, even if that exception— especially in a state of emergency—is existentially necessary for society.

In this sense, *The Dark Knight* is a perfect mirror of the society which is watching it: a society so divided on the issues of terror and how to fight it that, for the first time in decades, an American mainstream no longer exists. Perhaps this is why the film has struck such a responsive chord with audiences: The ambivalence it expresses is the same ambivalence with which most Americans—consciously or unconsciously—regard their current predicament. Americans want to defeat terrorism, but they want to defeat it without upsetting the basic ideals of a free society. They want terror to be fought by any means necessary, but without any of the attendant horrors and compromises of war. And *The Dark Knight* may well be correct in positing that the only possible resolution of such a dilemma

is not to resolve it at all, but to live in a society based, in some manner, on a lie. Because society, in order to *be* society, needs the lie. It is a noble lie, perhaps, but a lie all the same. The alternative, the film seems to say, is to become a society of Harvey Dents or, worse still, Jokers. It is, ironically, not a particularly happy or optimistic message, but it is one which a great many Americans appear ready, and even strangely gratified, to hear.

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