

## ABSTRACT

Who Do You Think Batman Is?: An Investigation of What Adaptation Has Done to the

Dark Knight

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Batman has been regurgitated through the public's consciousness in a way few characters ever have. This thesis investigates the adaptative nature of the Batman franchise. I argue that this adaptive nature has intrinsically changed the characters of Gotham due to the public's understanding of the characters being changed by their movie adaptations, Batman's character in a constant flux of being interpreted and those interpretations being cannibalized by wider audiences until the cycle begins again.

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WHO DO YOU THINK BATMAN IS?: AN INVESTIGATION OF WHAT  
ADAPTATION HAS DONE TO THE DARK KNIGHT

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## CHAPTER ONE

### Introduction

#### *What is Adaptation?*

Adaptation studies, though only recently a recognized formal area of study, arguably has existed since the invention of the filmic medium, all the way back to 1895 when the Lumière brothers invented the Cinématographe. Many of the first films ever made were adapted from books or plays. Since the field has grown into a more formal area of study, cinema scholars have been wrestling with the question of what makes an adaptation “good”. There are many different aspects of adaptation to consider. There is fidelity, tone, atmosphere, length of each respective piece, interpretation, and so on. Each is important, but I argue that the biggest issue that any scholarly paper on adaptation must tackle before moving forward is the issue of fidelity. When content is being adapted, especially from a text format, such as a graphic novel or book, to the big screen, there is almost always a need to cut or inflate certain aspects of the story. One page of a script generally accounts for one minute of screen time. Movies tend to be one and a half to two hours, with some exceptions pushing into the three-or-four-hour range. Because of that, screenwriters and directors make necessary cuts to keep within a certain time limit. Even for a shorter book, when formatted as a script there is simply no way to keep every story aspect of the text intact. The issue then becomes what to cut while still preserving the heart of the story. This issue is often described as “interpretation as adaptation”.

One must also consider that, by its very nature, adapting something from text to film format intrinsically changes the way the audience experiences the content. Reading is different than watching. Print-based media does not generally proscribe camera movements, theme music, cuts, lighting, or any other host of things that make movies what they are, which means that the adapter must interpret the source material to create those parts of the story in the film. So why do some adaptations do so well working within these parameters and others entirely miss the mark?

There are many opinions on what is appropriate to cut in a film adaptation. What is the secret formula to what makes a good cut? Every screen adaptation of a book or graphic novel has made a cut, or strayed from the source material in some way, so why are some film adaptations met with praise, and others intense scorn?

### *The Point of the Project*

In this text, I am investigating how the adaptive nature of the Batman franchise has led to an intrinsic change in the characters due to the public's understanding of said characters being changed by major movie adaptations over time.

I posit that there are a few core themes and aspects of the Batman franchise and its titular character that most screenwriters and directors must contend with in order to make the universe their own. For one, the writer must have a deep understanding of the grief and sorrow of Batman. Another important part of adapting the franchise is the level of brutality that is allowed in this universe – the controversial question of ‘does Batman kill?’ Yet another aspect to attend to is the handling of Batman's relationship with the important people in his life – the Joker, Alfred, Superman, Wonder Woman, the rotating cast of Robins, etc. Lastly, I would argue that in order to truly do justice to the character

of Batman in a major movie adaptation, there must be a solid foundation of background knowledge of the seminal texts that have defined the public's understanding of Batman since his inception. In, short, I mean that one cannot make a major movie Batman adaptation by using their understanding of the public's understanding of the character. There must be a deeper connection to the seminal texts and material of the inhabitants of Gotham.

Throughout this text, I will first give a brief overview of the theories of adaptation up until recently, and discuss which of these theories informed my idea of cyclical adaptation within the Batman franchise. Next, I speak about the history of the character, starting with Batman's first appearance in the 1939, and looking through each change he has gone through since, from television to film adaptations. After, I will focus in on the Christopher Nolan-directed trilogy of Batman films as the linchpin of my adaptive argument, moving into the larger DC Extended Universe (DCEU). After, I look forward to future Batman projects, and how the cycle will continue to revolve.

## CHAPTER TWO

### The Argument Up Till Now

#### *Introduction*

Adaptation is defined in the Oxford English Dictionary as “The action or process of changing something, or of being changed, to suit a new purpose or situation”. When placed in the context of media adaptation, the Oxford English Dictionary defines adaptation as “An altered or amended version of a text, musical composition, etc., (now esp.) one adapted for filming, broadcasting, or production on the stage from a novel or similar literary source”. While this definition is in a way accurate, it is a bit outdated considering the nuances that contemporary adaptation studies have lent to the understanding of how a media transforms from one form to another. Instead of consisting of one stable text or genesis, media adaptations are now much more likely to consist of a body of work, or works, taking into account multiple entities and media conglomerates. The following section looks at how adaptation theory has grown more complex and nuanced over time, focusing on the steps that were taken to get to our current understanding of adaptation studies today.

#### *What We Know So Far*

Adaptation theory began working off a few now disproven or reframed assumptions. Thomas Leitch, (2003), discussed twelve fallacies he saw in contemporary adaptation studies of the time. The twelve fallacies are as follows: (1) that cinematic texts

are rooted in essential properties of their respective media; (2&3) that literary texts are verbal, and films visual; (4) that novels are better than films; (5) that novels deal in concepts, and films deal in percepts (perception); (6) that novels create more complex characters than movies because they offer more immediate and complete access to characters' psychological states; (7) that cinema's visual specification usurps its audience's imagination; (8) that fidelity is the most appropriate criterion to use in analyzing adaptations; (9) that source texts are more original than adaptations; (10) that adaptations are adapting exactly one text apiece; (11) that adaptations are intertexts, their precursor texts simply texts; (12) and that adaptation study is a marginal enterprise (it is currently, but does not/should not have to be).

Later, Lawrence Venuti (2007) wrote about a need for a stricter methodology in adaptation critique, specifically focusing on the interpretive nature of adaptation. He stated that, because of the multimediality of the filmic medium, an adaptation may interpret a source text in such a way as to permanently complicate and alter the consumer's perception of the media. The act of interpreting, according to Venuti, is fundamentally what allows for media adaptation to exist, therefore studying the interpretant should be the foundation of adaptation studies.

Building off of the above mentioned work, Simone Murray (2008) brought forth further criticisms regarding common adaptation studies' pitfalls, positing that disregarding fidelity arguments is no longer anything new or groundbreaking. Essentially, Murray pointed out that much of the recent literature for adaptation studies was echoing the same tired 'discovery' that fidelity is not the only, best, or most valid thing to consider when studying an adaptation. Further, Murray posited that there is a false

understanding that books are a single creator's vision with no external footprint, while movies are an entirely communal creation. This, according to Murray, is wholly untrue because published books go through rounds of revision and marketing before the final copy is put to print, often with the goal of one day being adapted into a movie or other property. Lastly, Murray recommends switching adaptation studies' main focus from aesthetic evaluation, which is fundamentally subject to individual opinion, to sociological evaluation, which instead looks at the effect of the means of production and distribution on the content and impact of adapted material.

On the other hand, Ian Olney (2010) points to postmodernism – which Olney defines as the aim to subvert audience expectations and suspension of disbelief through genre blending and change to the traditional narrative structure – as the main force behind the evolution of adaptation studies. This change is characterized by two things: one indicates that postmodernity has affected adaptation in how it has leveled movies and literature, making one no more artistic or worthy of study than the other, and the other points out how postmodernity has changed scholar's approach to adaptation. This second point focuses more on the process of adaptation itself rather than the fidelity, echoing Murray's (2008) work. While at this point there is no tried-and-true way of studying adaptation, there is a growing amount of work postulating on how to go about it. This growing body of work demonstrates the potential for the development of an industry standard or model.

In some of his later work, Simone Murray (2012) proposes that adaptation is not an abstract process but a material industry, working in a cultural economy of institutions, stakeholders, and industry leaders. Murray also opposes the idea that the good reputation

of an original work of fiction and the commercial success of its screen adaptation(s) are in any way at odds with or separate to one another. That is to say the popularity or reception of the original work directly impacts the derivative work's success. Lastly, Murray advocates for an end to the typical compartmentalizing and separating of the study of different media forms, rather looking at them as a whole and with an understanding of how each impacts the other.

In the same year, Deborah Cartmell (2012) published *A Companion to Literature, Film, and Adaptation*, an international collection of essays focusing on adaptation studies. Within the book, Martin Zeller-Jacques discussed the way adaptation was changing specifically relating to comic books, arguing that comic book movie adaptations had begun to become self-sustaining, relying on their own metatexts and internal franchises. Rather than prioritizing fidelity to their source comics, comic book movie adaptations worry about fidelity to past movies in-universe. This is a rather interesting take to have had back in 2012, considering that the contemporary DC Cinematic Universe (DCEU) did not exist at all, and the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU) only had six movies out at that point, as opposed to the current twenty-six (as of November 2021) films that make up the MCU. Within the same novel, Dian Lake argued in "Adapting the Unadaptable – The Screenwriter's Perspective" that there is no book that is unadaptable. Lake asserts the derivative material has no obligation of perfect justice or fidelity to the original work, writing that "... it's not my job to regurgitate the book. My job is to find its center and find visual ways of bringing the story I've uncovered to life"(Lake).

Noel Carroll (2013) introduced the idea of Cognitivism to the field of adaptation studies, which is grounded in the claim that movies are pictorial representations that carry

information sufficient for viewers to access their visual content using nothing more than their natural perceptual recognition capacities (Carroll, 2013). This is a blend of two previous theories, Illusion theory and Film Language theory. In Illusion Theory, illusions have two flavors, cognitive and perceptual, where the former is when we believe what we see is true and the latter is when something exists in a way that causes misinterpretation of its nature. Film Language theory claims that films are a language, where shots are words and sequences are sentences, and there are syntactical rules that govern film language just as in the English language. In other words, Cognitivism explains, “the widespread accessibility and universal intensity of the movie-going experience,” Due to the “compositional structure of movies [being] fine tuned to the psychological structures and processes that facilitate smooth coping and social interaction in our ordinary everyday activities”(Carroll, 2013).

In the same year, Kyle Meikle (2013) speaks about making adaptation theory rematerialize, to focus on the physical changes that happen in adaptation rather than the textual changes. Using the term “intermaterial” to describe a new approach to adaptation studies, Meikle details how movies are impacted not only by the stuff that records them, but the stuff that is being recorded. Both the people and the objects of a scene take on animation once they are filmed. Because of this, Meikle urges adaptation scholars to turn their attention to the combination of *things*, rather than the combination of texts, when studying adaptation, emphasizing physicality.

Rather than examining adaptation studies as a whole, John Bateman (2013) performs an in-depth case study of Ang Lee’s *Hulk* (2003), arguing that “the use of the resources of comics goes substantially beyond ‘evocation’– *Hulk* is best considered a

highly experimental hybrid, taking resources that were initially essentially comics based ... and attempting to ‘translate’ these filmically.” This means that the film adaptation of *Hulk* is not just utilizing aesthetic comic tropes, such as the split screen, visual sound cues, and onomatopoeia as a way to signal the look of a comic but is using these things in a way unique to the movie format, making entirely original aesthetic and thematic connections via these comic gimmicks. Ang Lee’s *Hulk* was and is relatively unique in its comic style. This means there are drawbacks of the use of the comic-native gimmicks to overcome when put onscreen, such as a heavier visual, and thus cognitive, load for the viewer to process. These drawbacks are quite apparent in *Hulk*, but later movies, such as *Scott Pilgrim VS the World* (2010) and *Ocean’s 13* (2007) do improve somewhat on the style.

Liam Burke (2015), in *The Comic Book Film Adaptation: Exploring Modern Hollywood's Leading Genre*, takes a more strictly capitalistic approach to the rise of the comic book adaptation genre. Burke proposes that the reasons companies are so willing to fund comic book movies are manifold, all generally leading back to profit. Comic book movies are profitable, not just because of ticket sales, but because they lend themselves easily to merchandising, franchising, theme parks, video games, etc. Importantly, all of these things are more industry-focused, rather than fidelity-focused, which is a core characteristic of Burke’s research. In contrast, Burke also points out the importance of fan culture. Fan culture includes things such as Comicon and online discourse, where fans exert far more power over their content than ever before and tending to act as watchdogs over creators and their adaptations, often advocating for the all-elusive perfect fidelity. Lastly, Burke also argues that the comic book aesthetic has

been adopted by non-comic-based movies, meaning that there can be a comic-genre movie without there necessarily being a source comic to adapt it from. Some examples of this are *Unbreakable* (2000), and *The Incredibles* (2004).

James Harold (2018) in *The Value of Fidelity in Adaptation* states that he wants to answer two questions: What do we mean when we say that a film is faithful to its source, and is being faithful to its source a merit in a film adaptation? In trying to answer these two questions, Harold argues that, while preserving the thematic fidelity of a story is a merit to its adaptation, preserving absolute story fidelity is not, thus making the point that there are changes necessary to adaptation, and making the right changes can help preserve the meaning or moral, even if the resulting adaptation is not a perfect copy. In saying this, Harold points out that there are multiple types of fidelity, and only some merit praise for their preservation. To Harold, thematic and aesthetic fidelity far outweigh story fidelity, even suggesting that absolute story fidelity is a detriment to the adaptation. In this source, Harold demonstrates that fidelity is not a bad or tired thing to consider when studying adaptation, and instead gives the practice better nuance and context, rather than dismissing it outright or over generalizing it.

Adaptation studies has come a long way from its humble fidelity-obsessed origins. In considering each above-mentioned scholar, I evaluated how or if I could apply their work or ideas to my subject in a way that was meaningful. Some of the more contemporary works, such as those of Burke and Murray (2012), focus on more easily quantifiable metrics, specifically the budget and production of a movie, which I found to be valuable. Harold's (2018) view on the idea of thematic and emotional fidelity was especially helpful in creating my guidelines and means of evaluation for my subject. Each

work allowed me to see the many approaches that one can take when studying the art of adaptation. Utilizing a synthesis of these works, I will be evaluating the impact of adaptation on the development of Batman's character, with an emphasis on tonal fidelity and commercial influence.

## CHAPTER THREE

### A History of the Bat

#### *Introduction*

Before beginning the analysis, I will summarize the history of the main topic of discussion – Batman, in all his iterations and multimedia contexts. In this chapter I will lay out a general history of the character of the Batman and the world he inhabits, filled with villains and mystery. This section is important as it emphasizes the many transformations that Batman has gone through to become the character and property he is today. It also shows how the general public’s interpretation or perceived interpretation can often influence the story of Batman for better or worse.

#### *Tragic Genesis*

The creation of Batman is an interesting and, in some ways, tragic history. Batman was thought up by Bob Kane, who, after seeing the success of Superman and the mysterious radio personality of the Shadow, was hoping to capitalize on a new superhero property. The caped crusader that Kane thought up did not have a cape – or a cowl for that matter – instead donning a bright red jumpsuit, a domino mask inspired by Zorro, rigid and awkward wings attached to the back of the suit, and black knee-high boots. Kane knew that his artistic ability was limited, so he turned to a ghostwriter. He happened to meet just the man for the job at a party, Milton (Bill) Finger. Finger was almost entirely responsible for the Batman ethos known by the world today. In many

ways, the only thing Kane ever did to advance the creation of the Batman was ask Bill Finger for help in doing so. Finger did away with the bright red suit and rigid wings, opting for darker garb and a brooding cowl, all tied together by a utility belt of gadgets and a wicked intellect. Finger also came up with the first name Bruce, which was inspired by a Scottish king, and sourced the last name Wayne to imply a sort of in-born gentry, thus creating Batman's alter ego and secret identity, the wealthy lothario Bruce Wayne. Finger created the city of Gotham for the hero to reside in, and made him into the world's greatest detective. Finger gave the hero an entirely different feel from the all-American apple pie Superman, instead employing a darker noir style much more reminiscent of the Shadow.

Truly, the only thing Bill Finger cannot take almost complete credit for is the name of the hero itself. Even so, Kane took complete credit for the creation of the character for the next several decades, amassing a huge fortune and being hailed as a creative genius, while a penniless Bill Finger died in 1974, over thirty years after the publication of Batman #1 in 1940. Because of his comparative confidence and advice of his lawyer father, Kane negotiated a deal to completely isolate Bill Finger from the genesis of the character, even claiming a percentage of the profit of everything DC produced with the character. Even after the deal was closed and Kane had shunted the comparatively meek and docile Bill Finger, Kane did not write the story of Batman, and instead employed other ghost writers (Anders).

Finger only ever got the most tangential implications of recognition in the heyday of the Batman gravy train, no one aware that he had created Gotham, Batman, Robin, The Joker, The Scarecrow, The Riddler, Penguin – everything that made the story of Batman

what it was. Only many years later, in 2015, did DC finally relent and add Finger to the co-creator credit on their feature Batman comics, television shows, and movie adaptations. Perhaps this tortured genesis is part of why the Batman franchise would grow to be seen as something dangerous and caustic in the early 2000s.

### *Getting Started*

Before the 2000s Batman renaissance, however, a slew of Batman media already had been created. Batman appeared for the first time in *Detective Comics* #27 in 1939, striking a pose over the murderous thugs on the street below him, ready to serve justice. The “Bat-Man” looms over the two thugs, silhouetted by the full yellow moon, and easily dispatches them, establishing himself as, if not a skilled martial artist, at least an effective and powerful combatant. The Bat-Man is also shown in his first appearance to be a skilled detective, the title of the issue “The Case of the Chemical Syndicate”, evoking a Sherlockian tone, as the Bat-Man uncovers the reason for the goon’s crimes and goes after the mastermind behind the death of a wealthy businessman (Weldon). Bat-Man served the voyeuristic audience of post-depression working-class people, who spent hours consuming media that detailed the lives of the socially elite. This, combined with the narrative need for a means to provide his gadgets, tech, and free time to gallivant as the dark knight, forms one of the most important aspects of Batman’s mythos; his wealth.

Over the next few issues of *Detective Comics*, the Bat-Man loses his hyphen (Issue #30), battles an evil scientist, and gets shot in the shoulder, showing that he is not interesting because of a supernatural body, but a supernaturally strong will. Batman’s origin is depicted in *Detective Comics* #33, featuring some of the most penetrative panels that the comic book genre has ever seen – the death of the Waynes, culminating in the

prayer of a young newly orphaned Bruce, swearing, “by the spirits of my parents to avenge their deaths by spending the rest of my life warring on all criminals”(Weldon).

Batman does not fight for the lofty virtues of truth or justice; he fights to wage war.

Batman went through a period of growing pains as he searched for his own identity outside of all of his spoofs and references and rip-offs, but eventually he gained his own lasting character and, in 1940, a sidekick to boot. In light of growing concerns from parents and prayer groups, those in charge of publishing for Batman began to push for a more light-hearted tone with no killing, no guns, and little moral ambiguity. That, combined with the fact that Batman really needed someone to talk to besides himself, led to the introduction of Robin, the Boy Wonder, a perfect surrogate for the audience and a great way to lighten the mood. In *Detective Comics* #38, the Batman transforms into Batman and Robin, this relationship introducing another of Batman’s most important traits: his fatherhood (Weldon).

Finally, with the publication of his solo series (the second comic series to be devoted entirely to a single character, behind Superman), Batman gained his on-again-off-again lover Catwoman (first introduced as The Cat), his rogues gallery full of gimmicks, and his archnemesis, The Joker, introduced in a grim murder mystery, laughing maniacally as he left his victims with a “repellent, ghastly grin, the sign of death from THE JOKER!”(Finger). For a while, the Joker and the other rogues were allowed to be the murderous psychopaths that they were originally written as, but that soon ended with preemptive efforts by comic publishers to avoid formal censorship, and then the establishment of the Comics Code Authority in 1954, which restricted what could go to print via a comprehensive list of guidelines that conformed to a particular sense of

morality. The darkness of Gotham and the tortured potential of Batman and his rogues, especially the Joker, was not allowed to re-emerge until the 1970s with the fall of the Code.

A media icon such as Batman cannot be separated from the times, as was made abundantly clear during the years in which World War II took place. While Batman definitely did not do as much patriotic pandering as some comic icons (Superman, Captain America), he was not immune to the wills of the publishing house. Thus, Batman and Robin were occasionally seen riding an American eagle or planting a victory garden, but they mostly kept to the “mean” streets of Gotham, stopping increasingly silly plots by their adversaries, as was appropriate in a time of doom and gloom in the real world. The escapist nature of the comics might have been what was skyrocketing the Batman’s sales, with a combined three million copies sold every month featuring Batman and Robin’s crusade against crime (Weldon).

The popularity of the comic allowed for further penetration into the public in the form of other media. Batman was making his way into the wider marketing world. In time, a syndicated newspaper strip was headed up by Bob Kane, titled *Batman and Robin*, which ran for three years. Batman also found his way onto the silver screen (five years before the Man of Steel would make the same leap) in a fifteen-episode movie serial, filled with fun if over-the-top touches. Some not-so-fun touches were also present in the serial, such as a deeply jingoistic portrayal of a Japanese villain who seemed to be evil only because of the fact that he was from Japan (Weldon).

This movie serial, though campy and in some ways troubling, had a lasting impact on the comic that housed the Dark Knight. For one, the relative success of the movie

serial allowed for further expansion into the market and other mediums. There was a slew of Batman and Robin merchandise that was created and sold after the serial, and the caped crusader even joined Superman every now and again on his radio drama, delivering him right into the homes of Americans. A follow-up Batman movie serial titled *Batman and Robin* (1949) was made on an even tighter budget but was not well-received and under-performed in the box-office (Weldon). For the most part, the age of the superhero was on the decline with the end of the war, and, although Batman had weathered ten years in the media thus far, there was no guarantee that Gotham could hold out long-term.

With the end of the war came the end of people devouring comic content with no need for it to be anything other than an escape. Soon, people were looking at the comics that their children devoured with such relish with a more critical eye and were struck by the themes in them that they saw as inappropriate and immoral. No one was so appalled at the content of comics as Fredric Wertham, who wrote *Seduction of the Innocent: The Influence of Comic Books on Today's Youth* in 1954. Batman specifically had a perception problem, especially in his relationship to his ward Dick Grayson. Wertham made the argument that there was a “subtle atmosphere of homoeroticism” in the Batman comics, specifically between Batman and Robin. This does not have much credence when taking entire Batman storylines into account, but, when one looks for it, there are panels that could be interpreted as implying something more than platonic between the two heroes, two spry young men living alone in a mansion together. One such panel depicts Bruce and Dick waking up in the same bed, another shows them lying naked next to each other under tanning lamps, and still another depicts them in a rowboat alone together on a moonlit night at the pond (Weldon). Of course, this assertion would not have been met

with such scorn and fear today, as Tim Drake, the most recent character to take up the Robin mantle, has come out as bisexual in the recent issue of *Batman: Urban Legends* #6 (2021). However, this was obviously unacceptable to audiences in the 1950s, and the already-waning Batman sales fell ever farther. This indictment of homosexuality has had lasting effects on the Batman ethos, particularly in the introduction of the “Bat-Family”. The main reason for this other-than-platonic perception of Batman and Robin’s relationship was identified by their publishers and writers as being because they were always alone. An easy remedy was then conceived – introduce more characters. One such character that is widely believed to have been introduced specifically to allay concerns of Batman’s latent homosexuality is Heiress Kathy Kane, who, inspired by the caped crusader, dubs herself Batwoman, with a bright yellow bodysuit and red gloves, boots, and cape to pull the look together. She sports an off-again-on-again romance with Batman. Because he was at the time written to appeal to young boys however, he mostly mansplains crimefighting to her and turns down her advances. Also of note is Ace the Bat-Hound, who was introduced to the Batman canon not three months after the introduction of Superman’s canine companion Krypto (Weldon). However, for all the effort put into keeping Batman appropriate and relevant, he was beginning to slip.

In all their efforts to make Batman suited to the times, the writers for the caped crusader had strayed far afield from his grim origins, making him a goofy and ungrounded character who was not suited to the candy-colored streets that Superman patrolled or the supernatural and science fiction storylines that heroes like the Atom and Green Lantern inhabited. With his goofy Bat-family, Batman was not a fully fleshed-out character, without specific characteristics that defined him. Soon, the publishers of

*Batman* and *Detective Comics* decided to give the caped crusader one last chance to reinvent himself, and the men tasked to do so, Julius Schwartz and Carmine Infantino, were up to the task. They did away with the Bat-family, the outlandish Bat-transformations that he had been going through (Bat-Merman, Bat-Mummy, Bat-Phantom, Bat-Giant), and even killed the butler of Wayne Manor, Alfred, to allow Batman and Robin to be the lone duo of Gotham, now about ten years removed from the accusations of homosexuality in *Seduction of the Innocent*. Schwartz and Infantino lastly introduced a redesign of the Batman suit, giving him more realistic lines, a smaller bat-symbol on a yellow oval, and bringing back slightly longer devilish horns. This adoption of the original characteristics from the early Batman comics allowed for his former cast of rogues to be reintroduced to the comics, such as the Penguin and the Riddler, who had been absent from the comics for seventeen years (Weldon).

This return to the basics of Batman allowed him to become popular again, not only with children, but with slightly older audiences, especially college students. The popularity coasted long enough to allow for a new television show for Batman to be greenlit on ABC, simply titled *Batman* (1966), starring Adam West as Batman/Bruce Wayne and Burt Gravis (known as Burt Ward) as Robin/Dick Grayson. This show, though now seen by many as parody or silly reference, took itself very seriously at the time, grafting many of the episodes almost panel-for-panel onto the screen, even using the verbal onomatopoeia cues from the comics in the exact same way. It is now seen by most people as a great example of “camp”, commonly understood to mean something along the lines of “so bad it’s good” (Lowder). This was reflected in how the public and critics responded to the premiere, with the larger audience eating the show up, and critics

turning their nose up at the oddly silly yet serious show. This commercial popularity continued to grow into the spring months of 1966, with tons of merchandise and publicity being consumed by the larger public, even while more hardcore purist fans bemoaned the childish tone of the tv show, marring their favorite character as something for kids rather than the serious character they felt they knew (Weldon).

Even with more hardcore fans dissatisfied with *Batman*, the television show was popular and lucrative, leading to a theatrical release of the caped crusader to be produced and released in the same year of the run of the first season of the tv show. The movie was titled *Batman: The Movie*, and it was met with moderate success despite its reusing most costumes and sets from the *Batman* television show. The Adam West Batman vehicle kept chugging along after the theatrical release of *Batman: The Movie* for two more years until 1968, when 120 episodes finally became too formulaic, and the tropes of the show had begun to cannibalize themselves (Weldon). Still, the show left a lasting impact on the public's consciousness, and the massive amount of content produced for the show in just two years allowed the show to be run in syndicated format for years to come, lending familiarity with the character to a new generation of fans.

As time went on, Batman was refined ever more to the brooding character known today. Many hardcore fans praised *The Brave and the Bold*, which was markedly broodier and more dramatic than the Batman movies or TV show. In *Detective Comics*, the writing on the wall was clear, this more tortured Batman sold more comics, leading to Batman ditching his kid-sidekick of almost 30 years in 1969. After that business was taken care of, Batman was handed over to Dennis "Denny" O'Neil as writer and Neal Adams on pencils, and they brought about a popular time for the Batman property,

further distancing themselves from the 1960s television show and creating an entirely nocturnal Batman. Many of Batman's rogues were depicted as disturbed or psychologically impaired, with Two-Face's coin-flipping shown to be a compulsion, and Joker's homicidal laughing being anything but funny. Through the 1980s, Batman trudged along, more noir, more grim, and more and more outsold in comic books stands by the likes of Superman and Spider-Man (Weldon).

Some comics of note that came out during and after this time were *The Dark Knight Returns* by Frank Miller (1986), *Batman: Year One* by Frank Miller (1987), *Batman: The Killing Joke* by Alan Moore (1988), *Batman: A Death in the Family* by Jim Starlin (1988), *Batman: Knightfall* by Doug Moench and Chuck Dixon (1993), and *Batman: The Long Halloween* by Jeph Loeb (1996). This group of comics are now regarded as some of the best comics of all time and the required reading for any Batman buff to have read. These comics also serve as some of the most influential issues on the later Batman adaptations directed by Christopher Nolan. During the same years ('70-'90), Batman had gained some real-estate on the television sets of fans in some animated series, namely *The Superfriends Series* (1973-1986), *The New Adventures of Batman & Robin* (1977), *Batman: The Animated Series* (1992), *The New Batman Adventures* (1997), and *Batman Beyond* (1999). Interestingly, while Batman in his comics was having something of a renaissance and maturing, the Batman in his television shows was very much still stuck to his first appearance on-screen, the campy Adam West adaptation, *Batman Beyond* being something of an exception.

*Lights, Camera, Action!*

Finally, in 1989, Batman appears in his first feature-length movie adaptation. Batman had graced the silver screen before, but only in serials and TV show tie-ins. With the Tim Burton-directed movie, *Batman*, he began his long career as a staple in the theatres. Although now this choice of director does not seem out of the ordinary for a Batman flick, at the time Tim Burton had little in his filmic repertoire, having only just directed his first feature, *Pee-wee's Big Adventure* (1985), and had not yet directed any of the films that gave him the reputation of a director of more gothic-style films. In many ways, this choice was made primarily because Tim Burton did not yet have that reputation, as the producers were looking for someone to imbue the script with humor and brightness, having seen the success of the screwball-comedy adjacent Superman movie that had come out recently. In the end, the film was created with Michael Keaton as the Batman, and Jack Nicholson as the Joker, and was met with success in the box-office, due in no small part to the massive marketing budget (\$10 million specifically) given to the film. This Batman film is now seen by many as more of an action film with a Batman logo on it. While the film was not a failure, it did away with a lot of what made Batman who he is in the eyes of many, especially those who would consider themselves Batman buffs at the time (Weldon).

Tim Burton returned to direct another Batman film after the success of the first film. This next installment came out in 1992, titled *Batman Returns*. While the movie did well in the box-office and was mostly regaled by critics as being an improvement on the previous Burton-directed Batman film, the movie received some bad press, especially from parent's groups who thought Michelle Pfeiffer's Catwoman portrayal – especially

her costume that bore an eerie resemblance to fetish gear, was inappropriate for a movie targeted to children. Warner Brothers was especially hard-pressed to insist that the film's target demographic was not children, seeing as one of its larger marketing campaigns was through the addition of Batman paraphernalia to McDonalds Happy Meals. That backlash and an op-ed in the *New York Times* that raised concerns that the film's portrayal of the Penguin was a sneakily anti-Semitic portrayal of a Jewish person led Warner Brothers to discern that their next foray into making mainstream Batman media would have to be much more explicitly family-friendly (Weldon).

This desire to make the films more vanilla led to the hiring of Joel Schumacher as director, who was known to tell his crew on set during filming, "They're comic books, not tragic books"(Saler). Schumacher introduced a comedic tone that was reminiscent of William Dozer's Batman television show from 1960, and evoked an iconic neon laden style, heavy on backlighting and beautifully comic-accurate shots that, while completely unrealistic, were refreshingly cool to look at. *Batman Forever* did wonderfully in the box office, making a then-unheard of \$50 million during opening weekend. This film had Val Kilmer stepping into the role of Batman after Michael Keaton refused the position, feeling uneasy about the script. Val Kilmer did a fine job in the role, even as he bore the position of being the "Batman with the rubber nipples"(Pirrello). Even with the mixed critical reviews, *Batman Forever* made enough money that a follow-up film was greenlit, helmed by Schumacher.

What came out of this decision to create another Schumacher Batman film was one of the worst-received Batman films to date. The film, titled *Batman & Robin*, came out in 1997, and has since been torn apart by even the director, who claimed he was

unable to make the film he desired to make, due to Warner Brother's interference. Many people have called the movie nothing short of a two-hour infomercial for toys. Most people involved in the project have since turned their back on the film, which had replaced Val Kilmer with George Clooney after Schumacher and Kilmer butted heads on the set on *Batman Forever*. Although the box-office performance was not terrible, you would be hard-pressed to find a favorable review of the film that holds any credence (Weldon). Some fans were so hurt and enraged at the obvious pimping-out of their childhood hero they took to sites specifically dedicated to making sure Joel Schumacher never had claim on Batman again. One such site was quite literally named Bring Me The Head of Joel Schumacher (Burke). Chock-full of silly stunts, poorly written dialogue, a nearly incomprehensible plot, and those infernal rubber nipples, *Batman & Robin* shut the door on Batman movies for the next eight years, no one willing to touch the franchise with a ten-foot pole.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Christopher Nolan: Big Man on Campus

#### *Early On*

Regarding the contemporary Batman universe, the director Christopher Nolan has had a huge impact on the trajectory of the Batman franchise due to his Dark Knight Trilogy, featuring *Batman Begins* (2005), *The Dark Knight* (2008), and *The Dark Knight Rises* (2012). I posit that even today his impact on the Batman franchise is still significant and will shape the franchise for years to come. Christopher Nolan was born on July 30<sup>th</sup> of 1970, in London, England, to an American mother and a British father. Growing up, Christopher spent time in Chicago and London both, attending a boarding school outside of London in his younger years. Nolan is said to have been interested in moviemaking early on in his life, shooting little films on his dad's Super-8 camera (Albert).

Nolan, in 2005, had not completed any huge undertakings, his most notable works being *Memento* (2000), a moody revenge story featuring mind-bending twists, and *Insomnia* (2002), a blockbuster thriller commissioned by Warner Brothers. However, Nolan had managed to still garner a good reputation of himself in the film world and snag the Batman gig. At first, Nolan had only been enlisted to direct the first installment, but with the immense success of *Batman Begins*, it was no doubt that he would be kept on for the duration of the project. After the success of *Batman Begins*, Nolan went on to next direct *The Prestige* (2006), leaning even more into the mind-bending style he set in *Memento* and refining his craft. After came the next installment in The Dark Knight

Trilogy, *The Dark Knight*, which benefitted greatly from its director's insistence on a more politically charged and moody tone. In the four years between the second and last installment of the trilogy, Nolan went on to make *Inception* (2010), which garnered both a critical and financial boon. This movie truly cemented Nolan's formidable standing in the film world, some even hailing him as the successor to other great directors such as Steven Spielberg and Stanley Kubrick. The last installment of the Dark Knight trilogy was in limbo for quite a while, Nolan ambivalent about carrying on the story before he had ample inspiration and an apt conclusion. Eventually, he and his co-writer and younger brother, Johnathan Nolan, came up with a story they were satisfied with, and thus *The Dark Knight Rises* was created (Albert).

Since then, Christopher Nolan has gone on to direct a number of successful films, such as *Interstellar* (2014), *Dunkirk* (2017), and *Tenet* (2020). Each of these have cemented Nolan's reputation as an auteur with a specific vision, something that is very clear even in his Batman films. Nolan did something that had not really been done before in the comic book movie genre – he portrayed the Batman origin story, grounded in realism and textual evidence (Albert). This interpretation spawned a group of fans obsessed with Nolan's Batman films – dubbed the “Nolanverse”.

Up until *Batman Begins* in 2005, there was a very specific tone taken by the comic book movie genre – if it could even be categorized as a genre at that point – and that was very married to the cartoonish and lighthearted tone that came from early comics. Some examples of this were Sam Raimi's Spider-Man trilogy, featuring *Spider-Man* (2002), *Spider-Man 2* (2004), and the then yet to be released *Spider-Man 3* (2007). Another example is Bryan Singer's X-Men movies, such as *X-Men* (2000), and *X2*

(2003). Earlier Batman adaptations were also very committed to the rather childish and almost comedy-esque tone coming from the comics that were targeted mostly at a younger and primarily male audience. Some examples would be *Batman Forever* (1995) and *Batman: The Movie* (1966), which was especially zany and campy, with bright colors and even dancing. Because of this, Nolan's idea of making Batman into a mature and complicated character was groundbreaking. As Dan Marcus for *Medium* puts it, "While Singer and Raimi may have proved superheroes could work in a modern context, what Nolan proved is that you could make a superhero movie that sits up there with some of cinema's greatest works"(Marcus).

## CHAPTER FIVE

### The Nolanverse

#### *Batman Begins*

Starting with one of the more contemporary and impactful adaptations of the characters of Gotham is the first move of the Nolanverse trilogy, *Batman Begins*. This installment in the Nolanverse trilogy draws from many comics, especially the more iconic issues or ‘essential reading’, such as *Batman: The Killing Joke* and *Batman: The Long Halloween*. Three iconic issues were drawn on most heavily in the writing and production of the first installment of the trilogy, *Batman Begins*. These three issues are *The Man Who Falls* (1989), *Batman: Year One* (1987), and *Batman: Blind Justice* (1989). Let’s look at each comic and what was taken from it to inspire and ground *Batman Begins*.

First, there is *Batman: Blind Justice* (1989), which holds many inspirations to the plot of the movie. The comic’s three-act arc follows Batman’s pursuit of a villain named the Bone Crusher, who can hop from one host mind to another. At the same time, Bruce Wayne is framed for treason, and put on trial. A few major plot points of *Batman Begins* were inspired by this stroyline.

For one, a main element common to the story of the comic and movie is that someone is poisoning Gotham’s water supply in order to control the criminal underbelly and the city at large. In the case of the movie, this turns out to be Dr. Jonathan Crane, better known as the Scarecrow, who has introduced his fear-inducing hallucinogen to the

city's water supply and intends to vaporize it using a stolen microwave emitter from Wayne Enterprises. Another element that the film takes from the comic is the portrayal of Batman's mentor-turned-foe Ra's al Ghul. This portrayal of the villain is based heavily on Blind Justice's depiction of Henri Ducard, one of the major foes that Bruce must face in the comic. The comic and movie share the plot point that a robbery at Bruce's company links it to the criminals of the story, casting doubt on Bruce's character and creating tension with him and the authorities.

Tonally, *Batman: Blind Justice* matches *Batman Begins* quite closely, both returning to the roots of the character from the early comics, and dealing with mature themes such as death and, in the case of the comic, even suicide.

Visually, the comic is shadowy and smudgy in the same way as the movie, both drawing on noir-inspired visual cues, such as rainy nights and abandoned streets.

Next on the list of comics used to ground the first installment of the Dark Knight trilogy is *The Man Who Falls* (1989), which is a retelling of the origin story of Batman. The comic hits on some of the main points of Bruce's backstory, specifically his parent's death and Bruce's subsequent decision to leave Gotham in order to gain the skills to avenge his parent's murder. The opening scene of the film is heavily influenced by this comic, which depicts Bruce as a child falling down a dry well and being attacked by a swarm of bats. Bruce lays in the well terrified until his father finds him and rescues him from the swarm. Also of note is Bruce leaving Gotham and studying under Henri Ducard in Asia during his teenage years, a development inspired by the comic. This is also where Bruce gains his moral principle of preserving life. In the comic, Bruce abandons Henri Ducard after being encouraged to take the law into his own hands and get justice for his

parent's death by killing. This moral principle is brought over into the movie trilogy, with Batman refusing to use firearms or lethal weapons in his battles and avoiding indirect kills. This moral principle that is introduced in *Batman Begins* is especially important during Batman's later confrontation with the Joker, who attempts to taunt Batman into killing him on multiple occasions.

Visually, there is little explicitly the same between the comic and the film, although there are clear tonal similarities between the two works. One such similarity is the depth of grief that Bruce feels for the loss of his parents eventually pushing him to a kind of madness. Both also cover a poignant turning point in Bruce's life, where he allows his inability to move on to consume him, leaving his civilian life behind.

Last of the comics to inspire *Batman Begins* is *Batman: Year One* (1987). This one is the most generally similar to the setup of the movie, as it covers the Batman's first outings as the Dark Knight and his handling of his public image and relationship to Gotham, establishing himself as a beacon of hope to the city and a source of fear to the criminal underbelly. Another point of interest is Batman's easy perception of Detective Gordon as a good cop, unphased by the corruption of Gotham's Police department and committed to doing away with broken practices. Both in the comic and the movie, Batman works with Gordon and holds him in a certain position of trust as his contact in Gotham PD.

Tonally, both the comic and movie share an innocence in Batman as he begins his crusade against crime. Bruce is inexperienced, and often makes mistakes that other iterations of the Dark Knight would never make. At the close of both stories, the tone is much less wide-eyed and ignorant, instead adopting a more jaded outlook.

In terms of visuals, this comic shares the similarities that *Batman: Blind Justice* shares with the movie, both being steeped in noir imagery. There is also a depth to the color palette of *Batman: Year One* that is found in the movie.

On top of being explicitly grounded in at least three comics, this movie was written by Christopher Nolan and David Goyer, both self-proclaimed comic fans, who have been reading comics and Batman stories since their childhoods. In an interview for CBR, Nolan stated that “We probably read all of them. I grew up a Batman fan. David did, too ... So there's already a lot of that [knowledge] in there. And when you embark on these things, DC sends you everything”(Amaya). Suffice to say, Nolan and Goyer were doing research for this film long before they got the job of writing it.

### *The Dark Knight*

The next comic to film adaptation I will be looking at is *The Dark Knight* (2008), the second and, some would say, most beloved installment of the Nolan trilogy. One thing that makes this movie in particular interesting is the number of comics it draws inspiration from, reaching across many series and issues to form a coherent storyline. For this movie in particular, five separate comics were drawn from for style, tone, characterization, and story, all being adapted into one film.

The first comic used for inspiration for the story was *Batman #1*, published in 1940, which featured the origin story and the first two appearances of the Joker. Unlike the bank robbers and mafia bosses that Batman fights initially, the Joker comes onto the scene waging a war not for power or money, but for the very ethics and code that the Batman stands for. This characteristic is the same in the comic and the film. The storyline of the comic itself establishes the Joker as a cold-blooded killer who delights in his

victim's last moments being filled with dread. This source also sets up the criminal underbelly's initial distaste for the Joker for cutting into their business, something that is directly reflected in the movie. Tonally, this issue is marked by the beginning of the Joker's proclivity for violence, lasting until *Detective Comics* #62 in 1942, *Laugh Town, Laugh!*, where the Joker committed his last murders before becoming much more family-friendly in the wake of the Comics Code Authority's being instated in 1954. Regarding the artistic style of the source, it is old fashioned, not having a lot of influence on *The Dark Knight* visually.

The next source used for inspiration in *The Dark Knight* was *Batman* #251, *The Joker's Five-Way Revenge* (1973). This comic is one of the first in which the Joker returns to his murderous roots from *Batman* #1. This was due, in part, to Stan Lee releasing a majorly successful 3-part Spiderman series (*The Amazing Spider-Man* #96-98) in 1971 without the Comics Code Authority's approval, exposing how hollow the power of the Code was. The story of the comic is quite simple and effective. The Joker breaks out of the mental asylum for the criminally insane that Batman has him incarcerated in and goes to kill the five henchmen that are suspected of betraying him. The cat and mouse pursuit throughout the issue is reflected in *The Dark Knight*, with the Joker sowing chaos and Batman in hot pursuit.

Tonally, one of the bigger themes in this issue is the Joker's belief that his and the Batman's fates are intertwined, with the Joker stating,

—I fully expect him to find me regardless of where I hide! I don't know how ...or when...But the caped crusader will locate me! He always does! However, I intend to be ready for him!...His life is mine... I can crush the breath out of him... effortlessly! I can, at last, triumph! But such a hollow victory--! It was mere luck that caused my attack on him to succeed. I'd always envisioned my winning as a result of cunning... at the end of a bitter struggle between the Batman and Myself-

- him using his Detective Skills and me employing the divine gift men call Madness!... No! Without the game that the Batman and I have played for so many years, winning is nothing! He shall live... until I can destroy him properly! (O'Neil, 1973, pgs 6-11)

This belief is also a large driving force in *The Dark Knight*, wherein the Joker is not just opposed to Batman and his morals, but sure that they were always eventually going to end up destroying one another. As Suzana Polo for *Polygon* states, "Their Joker is a deadly force to be reckoned with, and one who sees the final clash between himself and Batman as their eternally linked destiny"(Polo, 2018). This belief is voiced by the Joker at the climax of *The Dark Knight*, stating, "You won't kill *me* out of some misplaced sense of self-righteousness ... and *I* won't kill *you* because you're too much fun. We're going to do this forever" (Nolan). On top of that, *The Dark Knight* shares a quickness with *The Joker's Five-Way Revenge*, conveying its breakneck pace via Batman's never-ending night of pursuing the Joker through Gotham with cramped pages and quick transitions. Similarly, *The Dark Knight* rarely lets up from the moment the movie begins with Joker's bank robbery.

Visually, this issue does demonstrate a migration away from the original cartoony look of the 1960s, though still nothing like the smudgy noir aesthetic of *The Long Halloween* or *The Dark Knight*. Though there is a more modern feel to the strokes, the Joker and Batman of *The Joker's Five-Way Revenge* are still far from their darker iterations. Within *The Killing Joke*, there are distinct references and inspirations taken from each. *The Killing Joke* has very similar color palettes to the movie, using shocks of cartoony green and red to contrast with the grimy and dusty reality of Gotham, seemingly suffused in smog.

The next source used for *The Dark Knight* was *Batman: Year One*, Frank Miller's four-part reboot origin story for the caped crusader, introducing many of the main players and dynamics important to the Batman for many years to come. In fact, "Frank Miller's four-part 1987 redefinition of Batman deserves some mention, as the origin of several of the Nolanverse's secondary characters who were most important to setting the trilogy's tone"(Polo).

Tonally, *Batman: Year One* is more upbeat, more cartoony, but still refined enough to take itself seriously. It even, "canonized the idea of James Gordon as an overworked, underpaid, and steadfastly moral cop in Gotham's cesspool of a police force, and updated Batman's classic noir feel to the urban concerns of the 1980s, as penned by a couple of artists who were living it"(Polo). The depicted struggle of the Batman learning how to be Batman and the city trying to understand him is both intense and joyful.

Visually, *Batman: Year One* has an abundance of lighter colors, fitting in more with contemporary animated superhero shows (*Young Justice*, *Harley Quinn* – HBO Max) while still allowing for darker more mature themes even in the brighter atmosphere. This color palette is quite removed from the movie, which leans into a darker visual aesthetic.

Another of the main sources used for the adaptation of *The Dark Knight* was *Batman: The Killing Joke* from 1988. While the actual storyline of the comic is not close to the storyline of the movie, inspiration is drawn from this comic for the thesis of Batman and the Joker's conflict. This thesis comprises of the contrast between Joker's anarchy versus Batman's staunch adherence to his moral philosophy. In a 2008 article for *IndieWire*, Christopher Nolan states,

I definitely feel the influence of "The Killing Joke," not so much in the specifics as in constructing some sense of purpose for an inherently purposeless character. That is to say, the Joker is an anarchist. He's dedicated to chaos. He should really have no purpose but I think the underlying belief that Alan Moore got across very clearly is that on some level The Joker wants to pull everybody down to his level and show that he's not an unusual monster and that everyone else can be debased and corrupted like he is. If you look at the first two appearances of The Joker ever in the "Batman" comics, we were quite startled to look back at those and realize how close that character is to what Heath's done and what our story is. I think it's very close to the original incarnation of the character some 65 years ago (Thompson).

Stylistically, the comic is more neon, gruesome, and realistic looking, not pulling any graphic punches. It is very close to the style Christopher Nolan's *The Dark Knight*, twisty and sharp. In fact, Nolan states that "When I read "The Killing Joke" I don't read it as unrealistic." He points out that he can, "interpolate a real world from the drawings, and particularly [with] works like "The Killing Joke" which are more stylistically contemporary to the time they were written and speak a little more directly to my generation" (Thompson).

The last core source that Nolan is said to have used in his making of *The Dark Knight* is *Batman: The Long Halloween*. As it is the most contemporary of the comics that Nolan used in his adaptation, it makes sense that it is the closest visually. With a cinematic, noir-esque style and a storyline that was as grounded and realistic as possible, this limited series that redefined Batman for a new generation was a perfect place to look for inspiration and direction in making *The Dark Knight*. This comic is one that Nolan takes more direct pointers from as far as story goes. For one, Nolan borrowed the idea of Batman functioning within a "triumvirate".

In *The Long Halloween*, Batman functions as a point in a triangle with the police – more specifically, detective Gordon – and the DA's office. Batman brings criminals in,

but the police must arrest them, and the DA must prosecute them (Loeb). One obvious plot point taken from *The Long Halloween* comics is the consequence of the Batman causing so much damage to the mob in Gotham that they are forced to hire “freaks” into their ranks to try to combat the rising tide of enforcement against them. This happens in a very similar fashion in *The Dark Knight*, with the Joker leveraging the mob’s vulnerability against them to be allowed to join into their ranks.

Tonally, this comic is a little darker than the film, what with the amount of murder and mayhem that takes place in the pages of the comic. Both the comic and film affect a frenetic and off-kilter tone, making Batman seem out of his league and blindsided. David Goyer, writer for *The Dark Knight*, says it this way “By the time *The Dark Knight* comes out, it will become apparent that *Long Halloween* is the preeminent influence on both movies.”

### *The Dark Knight Rises*

The next movie adaptation I will investigate is the third and final of the *Dark Knight* trilogy, *The Dark Knight Rises*, which came out in July of 2012. There are quite a few comics that the film pulls iconic imagery and plot details out of, though no single comic encompasses the full story. There are somewhere around ten to twelve comic series and issues that one could argue inspired at least some minor detail of *The Dark Knight Rises*, so I will focus on the more prominent comics, *Knightfall* (1993), *No Man’s Land* (1999), and *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns* (1986) and note the smaller references at the end.

Starting with the oldest of the three, let’s look at the 1986 *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns*, a limited series comprised of four issues. This series was published

outside of the ongoing DC canon as a one-off series and has since been assimilated into the universe of Earth-31, part of the DC multiverse. Despite the fact that this series takes place in an alternate universe, it is hailed by many as one of the most, if not *the* most, influential comic in the contemporary superhero genre. As far as what parts of the comic inspired and informed the writing for the movie, there are a few examples. For one, both start with the premise of the mantle of the Batman being taken back up by Bruce Wayne after a long hiatus caused by a huge failure. In the case of the movie, that failure is the loss of Harvey Dent after he is driven to villainy, forcing Batman to take Harvey Dent's place and preserve his legend and hope for Gotham. In the comic, Bruce retires the Batman mantle after the loss of the second Robin, Jason Todd. In both, we are starting with an older and more frail Batman, out of practice and past his prime. The aspect of Batman's agedness in the film especially informs the tone as Batman desperately tries to save his city; there is a sense of finality to both the comic and film, a closing to the legend.

Another element from the comic that inspires the film is one of the comic's main villains. In the comic, there is a grotesquely muscular villain called the Mutant Leader, who is, aptly, the leader of a gang called the Mutants terrorizing Gotham. In the movie, this dynamic is translated to the character of Bane, of similar build and level of brutality as the Mutant Leader, though tied into the story a different way. Bane also leads a group of thugs and terrorists that are hungry for power to wage war on the city, paralleling the Mutant Leader's Mutants gang.

Another smaller detail that is sourced from the comic for the movie is the introduction of a Robin-esque character. In the comic Batman meets the new Robin

during a battle. The tenacious Carrie Kelly assumes the title of Robin for herself without consulting Batman and eventually is accepted by him as his partner in crimefighting. In the movie, the allusion to a Robin is much more subtle, as the filmmaker Christopher Nolan noted that he was hesitant to introduce the character to the film, because he was not sure how well it would be received (Weldon). The director settled for introducing Joseph Gordon-Levitt's character John Blake, a young police officer in Gotham PD with sharp instincts and upstanding moral fiber, leading him to be promoted to detective by the aging Detective Gordon, who notes that he sees himself in the young cop. It is revealed that John Blake's legal name is Robin John Blake, making a subtle nod to the iconic sidekick.

Lastly, the movie parallels the comic's 'death' of Batman serving as the climax of the story. In *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns*, Batman slogs through confrontations with the Mutant Leader, Two-Face (Harvey Dent), and the Joker before finally succumbing to the Man of Steel himself, Superman, in an epic final battle. In the end, Bruce Wayne is buried, only to have it be revealed that he faked his death, after which he continues his crusade in the shadows alongside Robin. In *The Dark Knight Rises*, Batman makes his way into a crime-infested city after being imprisoned and fights with Bane, who has plans to detonate a neutron bomb in the city. After subduing both Bane and Talia al Ghul, Ra's al Ghul's daughter, Batman is then forced to use his plane, the Bat, to take the bomb above the bay where it can safely detonate, assumedly being killed in the explosion. In the last scene in the film, Bruce is shown living what seems to be a very happy life in Europe with Selina Kyle, who he had formed a romance with during his

time as the Batman and her time as Catwoman, having managed to survive the explosion and fake his death.

Visually, the comic is not particularly like the movie, especially in its portrayal of Batman. In the comic, Batman is very obviously grizzled and old, whereas Christian Bale still cuts a very handsome and spry figure. The colors and lines of the film are not similar either, the style of the comic too far removed from realism to make any sense on the big screen.

Next on the list of the three comics that inspired the writers of *The Dark Knight Rises* is *Knightfall* from 1993. The first big influence that the comic has on the film adaptation is the character of Bane. *Knightfall* was the storyline that birthed the insanely strong and intelligent metahuman. In the *Knightfall* storyline, Bane deduces Batman's secret identity as Bruce Wayne and unleashes many of the members of the Arkham rogues gallery in order to weaken him. Over time, this plan works, and when he eventually gets into a battle with Bane, a battered Batman is defeated handily, with Bane breaking Batman's back over his knee as a final blow. This imagery is employed in *The Dark Knight Rises* as well, the shot in the film matching almost perfectly with the iconic panel from the comic, sans the bright colors.

Another story beat that is copied from the comics is the resignation of Alfred, Bruce's childhood butler. Alfred's reason for his resignation is the same in both comic and film; he simply could not bear to see Bruce continue to destroy himself as the Batman. This resignation is almost a form of protest on Alfred's part. *The Dark Knight Rises* was further influenced by a trend that was happening in the DC universe at the time of the publication of *Knightfall*. Published around the same time as *Death of Superman*

(1992-1993), DC was implementing a major overhaul giving many of its main characters life-altering changes in their stories, often manifesting as a death. This tone of finality carried over to *The Dark Knight Rises*. In the comic, after Batman has been defeated and had his back broken by Bane, he leaves the mantle of Batman to Jean-Paul Valley, a local graduate student who has been unknowingly brainwashed by a secret society of assassins. This is eventually undone due to Jean-Paul Valley's unethically violent behavior, but this comes quite a while after the events of *Knightfall*. In the same vein, the film implies that the mantle of Batman will be taken up by Detective John Blake after he leaves the police force of Gotham. In the later scenes of the film, Blake is given a set of coordinates by Bruce, leading him to the discovery of the Batcave. Although nothing is confirmed in what he does with the discovery of the Batcave, it is commonly hypothesized that John Blake will take up the mantle of Batman at the end of the film.

Last in the trio of big influences on *The Dark Knight Rises* is *No Man's Land*, published in 1999. This comic directly inspired the isolation of the city of Gotham in the movie. In the *No Man's Land* comic, an earthquake destroys the city of Gotham and cuts it off from the rest of the world, prompting the Governor to declare the city a no man's land and order everyone in the city to leave. Because of its status as a no man's land, the city of Gotham is left to be overrun by criminals with no protection from the larger federal government, with only a small gang of police officers called the Blue Boys and the Bat-family left to protect the city's remaining citizens. In the movie, the city is similarly isolated after the bridges in and out of the city are blown up, and, with Batman imprisoned by Bane with a broken back and the police being trapped in the sewers, Gotham is left to be carved up by the criminals and villains of the city, who have been

freed from imprisonment by Bane. After five months of this chaos, Batman manages to make his way back to Gotham and free the police, defeating Bane and restoring Gotham to order.

Visually and tonally, while there are shared elements that are common to most Batman media, there is nothing in particular that *The Dark Knight Rises* employs from this comic. The visuals for the comic are quite apocalyptic, not like the sleek streets in the film. Tonally, there is a more dread-filled atmosphere in the comic than what is present in the film.

Finally, two more comics, *The Dark End of the Street* (2002), and *Batman, The Cult* (1988), served as further inspirations for the film. *The Dark End of the Street* was used as inspiration for Anne Hathaway's portrayal of the feline villainess and love interest of the dark knight himself. Another more tenuous influence on the film is *Batman, The Cult*, which is said by many to be the darkest Batman story ever written. The dark and bleak tone of the comic is one of the things that helped to set the more mature and gritty tone in the Dark Knight trilogy, especially in the last of the three. There is also the confrontation in the latter half of the movie that is reminiscent of the class warfare near the end of the comic.

### *Discussion*

Now, after looking at each of the comics that were adapted into the final product of the Nolan Trilogy, I am going to examine each film's financial and critical reception. Financially, all three of the movies performed very well, breaking multiple records for their opening day and weekend box office performances (Mendelson). *The Dark Knight* was a box-office boon, at the time being the fourth-highest grossing film of all time.

Since its release in 2012, *The Dark Knight Rises* has been regarded as a financial success, as it is one of the first and only films to have generated a billion dollars in the box office.

Critically, the Nolan trilogy has similarly fared well. *Batman Begins* currently has an 84% freshness rating and a 94% audience score on Rotten Tomatoes. At the time of release, the film did very well in the fan-space and made the franchise more accessible to a larger audience. Many hail *The Dark Knight* as a genre-defining masterpiece, displaying the power and marketability of the comic book movie. The movie boasts an impressive 94% freshness and audience rating on Rotten Tomatoes, and Heath Ledger's performance of the Joker is often said to be the one to beat. *The Dark Knight Rises* was a satisfying conclusion to the years-long trilogy, and most fans were happy to see their Batman go out in an appropriately epic fashion. This installment has a similarly high Rotten Tomatoes score as the other two: a 90% audience score and an 87% critical consensus.

I argue that this movie trilogy (*Batman Begins*, *The Dark Knight*, and *The Dark Knight Rises*) became, in the public's eye, the definitive representation of the Batman story. Whereas the very first representations of the Batman in *Detective Comics* no. 27 are rather campy and silly, created to appeal to young boys, the understanding of Batman that emerged in the public's mind in the early 2000s was darker, grittier, and more interested in engaging in mature topics and themes. Notably, around the same time, there were more child-oriented portrayals of Batman and Joker in the media at the time in the form of direct-to-home animated movies and episodic cartoons, but the relative impacts that a major blockbuster and a cartoon have on the public's general understanding and awareness of a character or franchise differs greatly. For example, *Batman Begins* (2005)

has a 84% freshness rating on Rotten Tomatoes based on 288 critic's reviews, while *The Batman* (2004) animated tv show does not have enough critic ratings to even gain an average freshness rating at all, demonstrating that the film reached a much greater audience, and thus shaped a larger number of people's understanding of Batman.

## CHAPTER SIX

### Changing Identities

#### *A Matter of Dilution*

After the mad success of The Dark Knight franchise, the understanding of the universe of Gotham changed. Heath Ledger's Joker and Christian Bale's Batman were the character's definitive depictions. Their take on those characters was dark, gritty, and full of nuance. However, I would argue that the nuance was largely lost as it was digested through the public's consciousness. The tortured anarchy of the Joker was reduced to the actions of a thuggish jerk, obsessed with violence for violence's sake. The soft insides of the Batman, still a scared child wanting to be loved, were erased or swept to the side, leaving the Batman as a hollow character, with no lovable or redeeming qualities other than the blanket concept of 'justice'. Now, the defining characteristic of Batman is his brooding – overshadowing the fact that he is a skillful detective and scarily driven man, who is so deeply motivated by care for others that he is pushed to moral ambiguity. This new image of Batman, robbed of its nuance and context, wormed its way into the minds of movie executives, screenwriters, and directors.

In a 2008 article, one fan identifies what made *The Dark Knight* work so well for him and so many others. Topping the list of reasons is the mature tone taken by the film, adapting Batman into a mystery-noir, rather than a campy thriller. Other aspects that fans loved was the epic and serious feel, a piece of artistry more aptly titled a 'film' rather than a 'movie'. The last item on the list is the nuance given to each character, especially

in the case of Batman and Joker's tortured relationship (Sciretta). It is not an overstatement that Nolan fans capital-L Loved the Dark Knight trilogy, so much so that even small criticisms levelled at the film were met with outrage, sometimes even leading to threats of physical harm (Weldon). In 2012, following the release of the final installment of the Dark Knight trilogy, Devin Faraci, a critic for *Badass Digest*, expressed his concern for how riotous the backlash for a colleagues' rating of *The Dark Knight Rises* was, stating, "These people have tied their identities and self-worth into Nolan's Batfilms so strongly that the smallest slight feels like a deep, personal attack" (Faraci). At the time of release, even Rotten Tomatoes had to disable the comment section for the film and instate a Facebook-style commenting system to try to crack down on anonymous hate and death threats being spewed at critics that gave the film less than perfect reviews (Faraci). The Nolan Batman films left a lasting impact on how people viewed Gotham, sometimes leading fans to take extreme or inappropriate measures to express their affection for the film.

On top of that, the media coverage of the Dark Knight trilogy became increasingly deeply maudlin and incendiary. The first event that caused this shift was the death of Heath Ledger on January 22<sup>nd</sup> of 2008, four years before the release of the final installment. The reputation and understanding of the Batman were further changed by the tragic shooting in Colorado during a midnight screening of *The Dark Knight Rises* on July 6<sup>th</sup>, 2012. During said attack, a gunman opened fire on the theater's occupants, killing 12 people and injuring 58. In the inflammatory aftermath, there were claims that the gunman identified himself as the Joker, and even though that claim was later proved false, I would argue that there was a new understanding of the effect of that Batman

franchise for the public to chew on, no matter how far from the truth. The Batman franchise became seen as something caustic that could infect the participants in the film and even metastasize out to the audience of the franchise.

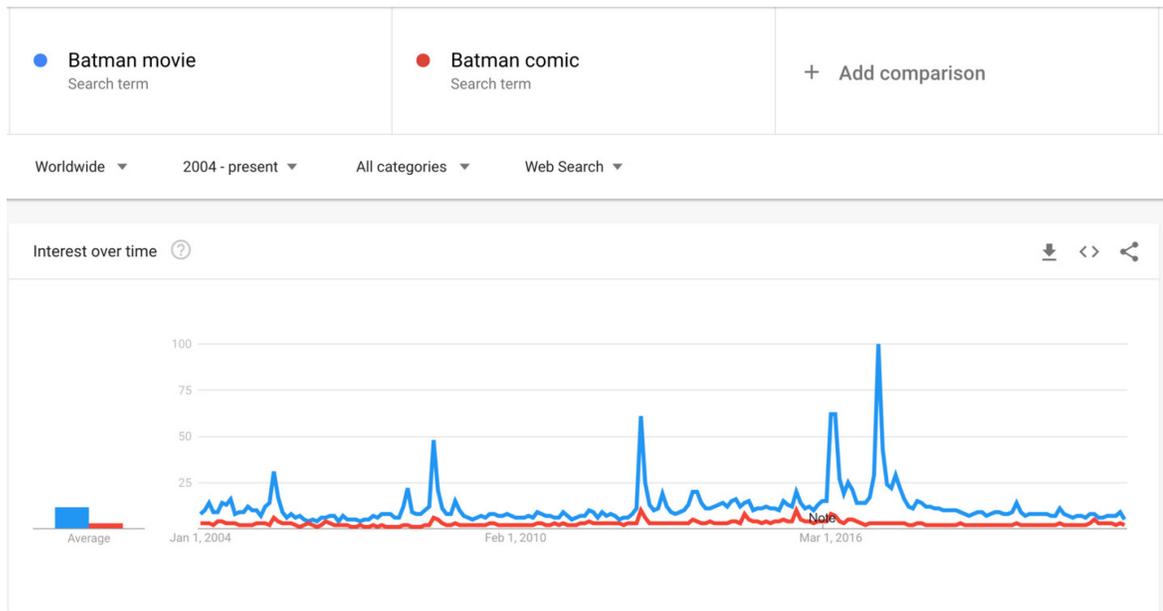


Figure 1: Graph illustrating the difference in interest between ‘batman movie’ and ‘batman comic’ terms on Google search from the years of 2004-2021. Data source: Google Trends (<https://www.google.com/trends>).

Noting Figure 1 above, it is obvious that Batman’s prevalence in the media does not translate into people’s researching the origins of the character. Because people do not have to be familiar with previous iterations of a movie’s story or characters to enjoy a

movie or understand it, and because movies are often a more accessible form of media, a movie can have more cultural impact in the mind of an average person than a comic.

This change after the Nolan trilogy's release in how the public viewed Batman and the universe of Gotham lead to a change in how movies about Batman were written. Enter: *Batman v. Superman*, *Suicide Squad*, the DCEU as a whole, and Joaquin Phoenix's *Joker*.

*Batman v. Superman* (2016) was the first major blockbuster to feature Batman's iconic cowl since the end of the Nolan trilogy in 2012. While the Nolan trilogy was painstakingly researched and grounded in the comics that birthed the hero, the Batman of *Batman v. Superman* was a different beast altogether. For one, the director and front man for the production, Zack Snyder, stated explicitly that his story was not an adaptation, only loosely giving homage to Frank Miller's *Dark Knight Returns* comics through the imagery of the film and the look of Batman's suit: "That's what I'm saying, as far as how much we used and how much we didn't use. The visual elements, there are some that I homage, but I don't think the movie [is an adaptation]"(Amaya). This decision is arguably one of the core issues that caused the movie to be received poorly amongst critics and especially among comic book fans. At this point in the adaptive history of the character, the core of Batman had been distilled beyond recognition. There are myriad aspects of the film that many have pointed out as being unfaithful to the character of Batman. I would thus posit that staying faithful to the character, especially one so storied and beloved, is paramount to creating a successful adaptation. Zack Snyder writing an original story for the character was not the issue, but rather his story fundamentally contradicting the heart of the character. For one, Batman is portrayed as almost clueless.

There is no doubt that Batman can be blinded by his relentless pursuit of justice (O'Neil), but in this film he is portrayed as almost stupid, missing the most basic of clues that he and Superman are on the same side and are being manipulated by the treacherous Lex Luthor. On top of that, the morals that are so important to Bruce, especially that of preserving life, are being severely muddled, so the point that he is willing to fight a godlike being to the death. The final spear in the heart of the film is the revelation that Batman and Superman's mothers share a first name. This pivotal piece of information stops Batman from taking Superman's life, not an alignment of morals or righting of wrongs, but an inconsequential and unrelated piece of information. This nonsensical portrayal of Batman and his complicated relationship with the Messianic Superman, which was entirely divorced from nuanced relationship the heroes shared in other media, left the audience disappointed.

There are those that would disagree with the film being an unsuccessful one, pointing to *Batman v. Superman* being not only a financial success, but a smash. It was the highest-grossing March release of all time, and the fourth largest worldwide opening of all time. Despite the utter beating the film took critically with a Rotten Tomatoes score of 29%, the audience score for the film holds at an acceptable but not particularly enchanting 63%. When considering these elements alone, one could argue that *Batman v Superman* was a success, a great movie even. However, the quality of the movie is not the cause of the financial success, but rather the fact that this movie features two of the most beloved and well-known figures in media dueling it out in a major blockbuster. This is evidenced by the Metacritic score for the film at a rather poor 44, and a pallid

CinemaScore B rating, and the aforementioned mediocre audience score on Rotten Tomatoes.

In contrast to the public's positive perception of the Nolan trilogy, the public largely rejected *Batman v. Superman*'s overly dark and grotesque distortion of Batman's character and the DC universe.

This unfavorable reaction lead DC wildly pivoting after the release of this movie. The DCEU currently contains 11 films, with *Batman v Superman (BvS)* serving as the second installment after Henry Cavil's portrayal of Superman in *Man of Steel*. Almost every movie after *BvS* has made a concerted effort to affect a more jovial, bright, and lighthearted tone, especially the movies immediately following *BvS*, *Suicide Squad* (2016) and *Wonder Woman* (2017). *Justice League* began filming in April 2016, a month after the release of *Batman v Superman*. Other films following *Justice League* include *Aquaman* (2018), *Shazam!* (2019), *Birds of Prey* (2020), and *Wonder Woman 1984* (2020). Each of these movies affect a much brighter tone, some so much so that it is almost confusingly incongruous for the traumatized and hardened Batman to exist in the same world, *Justice League* in particular, tries to give him a lighter tone and more depth of character, albeit poorly executed by the directors.

### *Moving Forward*

To set the stage, it's the end of 2016. *Batman v. Superman* came out in March, and, while the movie made money, the general critical consensus is that it's a bad movie. On top of this, *Suicide Squad* (2016) has recently hit theatres, introducing the DCEU's interpretation of the Joker, played by the eccentric Jared Leto, that will serve in the rest of the franchise. This Joker, just like his Batman counterpart in the DCEU, is seen by many

as a pale imitation of the deeply moving and complex character that audiences have been treated to in the past, which was enhanced by Heath Ledger's now immortalized performance following his passing. This rather disappointing performance on Jared Leto's part is due to two main factors. For one, the production of the movie itself was completely chaotic, stemming from disagreements between Warner Brothers executives and the director, David Ayer's, vision and opinion and idea of what would be best for the film. Eventually, because the executives at WB decided to that a more lighthearted *Guardians of the Galaxy*-esque film would work better, there was a massive ballooning of the original budget for the film with reshoots and extensive editing. This hodge-podge movie worked terribly with Jared Leto's performance, moving it from over the top and absurdist territory to the land of cringy and unwatchable (Placido). On top of that, there was a feeling throughout the production that Jared Leto was allowing the shadow of Heath Ledger's performance to hang over him, anchoring his performance in the need to up stage the iconic portrayal of Ledger, rather than anchoring himself in actual textual background and history of the character (Kyriazis).

So, why did *Batman v. Superman* do so poorly with the critics compared to the Nolan trilogy? Both are dark and gritty, both have an epic noir feel, both have talented actors. The biggest difference between Nolan's Batman and Snyder's is that Snyder's version of Batman is not informed by a bedrock knowledge of comics and lore. It is rather informed by what the writers have come to understand about the character as informed by the reactions of the public. The next iteration of the Batman story, *Justice League*, was similarly informed by the audience's reaction, this time being informed by

the negative reaction to the Snyder interpretation. This is evidenced by the tone shift in the next iteration of the Gotham story, *Joker* (2019).

*Joker* was greenlit in 2018, after the disappointing performance of *Justice League* led to the replacement of Jon Berg with Walter Hamada as head of DC film production at Warner Brothers. As with *Suicide Squad*, there were things beyond the scope of production, especially the stepping down of Zack Snyder due to the loss of his daughter, leaving the film to be finished by Joss Whedon, that impacted the quality of the film. The comic book sources that inspired *Joker* overlap with some key sources for the Nolan trilogy. The most impactful comic influence on the film was *Batman: The Killing Joke* (1988). This comic's influence is most obvious in its main premise –the origin of the Joker. Both the film and comic are relatively removed from the main Batman canon, which allows the authors to explore his genesis more than is allowed in the canon. *Batman: The Killing Joke* concurrently covers the Joker's past descent into madness in and present attempts to bring a "good man" – Detective Jim Gordon – down to Joker's level, to break Jim. In the film from 2019, the audience is treated to a more in-depth explanation of how the Joker became the homicidally broken man he is known as. In both the comic and film, the Joker is a failed or failing comedian, seen as a loser by those around him, and easily manipulated. Another text linking the Nolan movies to *Joker* is *The Joker's Five-Way Revenge*. This comic features a lengthy monologue about Joker's conviction that his and Batman's destinies are intertwined, which is an important theme in Christopher Nolan's *The Dark Knight*. Joaquin Phoenix's Joker is rather convinced of the same, even going so far as to believe that he and a young Bruce Wayne are half-brothers, although it is left ambiguous in the film if that is truth or the product of a

deluded mind. Another comic providing inspiration is *Arkham Asylum: A Serious House On A Serious Earth* (1989), which the 2019 movie uses as a template for one of the most shocking scenes near the end of the film. In the comic, the Joker horrifies a man coming into the hospital to visit his wife and newborn by telling a twisted joke, eventually building to the punchline “YOUR WIFES DEAD AND YOUR BABY’S A SPASTIC”(Morrison), and punctuating the end of the joke by shooting a hostage in the head. In *Joker*, Arthur Fleck’s full emergence as the Joker parallels the hospital scene from the comic. Fleck tells an off-color knock-knock joke on live television, the punchline being “It’s the police, Ma’am, your sons been hit by a drunk driver, he’s dead!”(Phillips). After telling another knock-knock joke, Arthur shoots the television show’s host in the head.

Another similarity between the production of both the Dark Knight trilogy and the *Joker* movie is that both directors have said that, while they respected the vast history of the characters they were adapting, they did not set out to make a superhero movie. Rather they tried to elevate the film to a more artistic level, something that could compete with its cinematic contemporaries on a critical filmmaking level. Director of *Joker* Todd Phillips said in an interview with *Empire*, “We just wrote our own version of where a guy like Joker might come from. That’s what was interesting to me. We’re not even doing *Joker*, but the story of becoming Joker. It’s about this man.”, while Ramin Setoodeh for *Variety* reports that

Nolan admitted that he approached the comic-book world through a different lens, as a noir-thriller. “Yes, it’s a superhero, but it’s based on ideas of guilt, fear, these strong impulses that the character has,” Nolan said. “he’s very relatable and human. I think that’s why I gravitated towards it” (Setoodeh).

### *Conclusion*

*Joker* is a good example of another installment of the cycle of adaptation that the Gotham franchise is constantly going through. Because of the lack of positive response from Jared Leto's Joker portrayal of the Joker, DC decided they needed to pivot from their original plan for the DCEU, specifically how they had handled the public's perception of the Gotham universe. *Joker* was a response to that, still rather far removed from comic origins, but with enough bedrock information and desire to make the movie into a serious film that it worked. This film mirrored the production philosophy of the ever-popular Dark Knight trilogy, instead attempting to make a good movie, not just a good comic book movie, and for the most part, DC's attempts at injecting more maturity into the Gotham universe worked, with the film grossing \$1.074 billion worldwide, the highest-grossing R-rated film of all time (Bean).

## CHAPTER SEVEN

### Closing Review

#### *It's Cyclical*

This text has covered a large expanse of content. For one, there has been an examination of the prevailing and past theories concerning adaptation, especially those scholarly works that investigated the adaptation of comic books. There has also been a large history of Batman covered. Batman began as an interesting but not fully-formed character, and emerged for a while as a crime-fighting hero without much depth, and then a badass gun-toting mans-man. He then was pulled back into safer family-friendly storylines, and gained a sidekick, only to lose said sidekick after keeping him around became too much of a PR nightmare to justify. Batman became campy in the 1960s, and then patriotic during WWII, and then a form of escapism for a time, before he eventually circled back to dark and gritty in the 1980s and 1990s, especially in the comics. After making it to the silver screen in Tim Burton's Batman movie, the hero was even more prone to tone change, going from dark back to something more PG-13, delivering some rather normal action films. After came Joel Schumacher, who plunged the Dark Knight into infamy of quite a time with the ill-conceived *Batman & Robin*, Christopher Nolan took on the task of rehabilitating the protector of Gotham, and came out with the Nolan trilogy of Batman films.

After that great success, the things that made the Nolan films good (dark, gritty, realistic, somber) were overblown by director Zack Snyder in *Batman v Superman*, and in

a pivot of massive proportions after the failure of Jared Leto's Joker interpretation, *Joker* (2019) was born.

Because of my investigation into the history of Batman and how he has been adapted over time, I believed that moving forward, the cycle of Batman's identity crisis will continue, and that no matter how hard directors and writers and producers try to understand the character and franchise fully, that there will never be a perfect interpretation. I do think that there can be good adaptations, ones that walk the line of interpretation and adaptations, and balancing what is seen from the audience's reaction and what is seen in the text that gave the character life. Regardless, the cycle is one that will not end, and this has only been an investigation into the very smallest of manifestations of it.

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