

WHAT DO YOU BELIEVE IN? FILM SCHOLARSHIP AND THE CULTURAL POLITICS OF THE *DARK KNIGHT* FRANCHISE

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Aggressively hyped and weighted with feverish expectation, *The Dark Knight Rises* was presold not only as the event movie of 2012, but also as a heavily politicized talking point. This was underscored by two media events that emphasized the film's status as a touchstone for the cultural moment. First, in the run-up to the 2012 presidential election, the notorious right-wing talk-show host Rush Limbaugh claimed *The Dark Knight Rises* to be de facto pro-Democrat propaganda, alleging that the name of the film's villain, Bane (played by Tom Hardy), was too similar to that of Mitt Romney's former private capital firm—Bain Capital—to be mere coincidence. "When [voters] start paying attention to the campaign later in the year," Limbaugh pronounced, "Obama and the Democrats [will] keep talking about Bain [and] . . . these people will think back to the movie." Second, shootings at a midnight screening of *The Dark Knight Rises* in Aurora, Colorado, were enacted by a young man styling himself on the Joker (Heath Ledger) in *The Dark Knight* (2008), resulting in a tragedy that doubled as something of a grim metaphor for the fate of a generation doomed to be lost in the long-term socio-economic aftermath of the global economic meltdown. Tellingly, the massacre of a predominately youthful audience became synergistically incorporated into the promotional machine of *The Dark Knight Rises* when widely disseminated footage of millionaire actor Christian Bale, visiting survivors in the hospital, uncannily mirrored images of Bale's character, philanthropic capitalist Bruce Wayne, in Christopher Nolan's trilogy.

In a characteristically flamboyant review in the *New Statesman* (23.08.12), meanwhile, critical theory's preeminent philosopher-provocateur, Slavoj Žižek, boldly

proclaimed that *The Dark Knight Rises* invokes the heady spectre of Marxist revolution. In Žižek's view, the film is a bleak mass-produced fantasy that symptomatically reimagines the polite passivity of the Occupy Wall Street movement in the more militant guise of Bane's insurrectionary urban warrior. Whereas many saw the film as a crude right-wing demolition of the OWS protest, Žižek pointed to the potent dream-work involved. Arguing that the film's immanent radicalism manifests itself in the collective desire to see violent social change enacted on multiplex screens, the Slovenian iconoclast interpreted *The Dark Knight Rises* as an ideological litmus test in the age of neoliberal crisis.

Žižek's trademark grandstanding aside, the *Dark Knight* franchise has inarguably earned an enviable reputation in critical circles. Moreover, the emergence of a sizeable body of academic criticism engaging with the trilogy serves as a useful indicator of contemporary trends in contemporary film scholarship. Indeed, Nolan's patented brand of chin-stroking populism—a multiplex-friendly "Cinema of Ideas"—is inscribed across the trilogy. Opening with *Batman Begins* (2005), the franchise has been widely interpreted as sensitively attuned to the anxieties of the sociopolitical moment, imbuing the holiday-season event film with a political intelligence and seriousness of purpose that have critically rehabilitated the most derogated of cinematic forms: the fantasy blockbuster.

Tellingly, Nolan is coy on the subject of his films' political outlook. "Really," he told *IndieLondon* in 2008, "my co-writers . . . and myself try and be pretty rigidly not aware and not conscious of real world parallels in things we're doing." The remark will doubtless come as something of a surprise to the critics and viewers who have understood the director's "rebooted" Batman films as forthright allegories of post-9/11 anxiety, the "war on terror," and—with the resonant semiotics of *The Dark Knight Rises*—the post-2008 economic meltdown. In his book *Hunting the Dark*



Bane and revolutionary conflict

Knight: 21st Century Batman (I.B. Tauris, 2012), Will Brooker explores the ways in which Nolan's *Dark Knight* films have been interpreted from wildly contradictory political viewpoints. In the run-up to the 2008 U.S. election, for example, Barack Obama endorsed Batman as his favorite comic-book hero at the same time as the *National Review* voted *The Dark Knight* onto 12th place in its "Best Conservative Movies" poll. Whether understood as an endorsement of the Bush administration's war on terror or as a critique of the nihilistic militarism that drove the coalition into Iraq and Afghanistan, various scenes were viewed as either endorsing or condemning post-Patriot Act practices such as rendition, techno-surveillance, and the torture of political prisoners. Elsewhere, Bale's masked hero was variously read as Bush, John McCain, Dick Cheney, or Obama himself, while Batman's nemeses were interpreted as allegorized manifestations of Osama Bin Laden or the left-liberal protestors of OWS, and even as a personification of Hurricane Katrina.

It barely needs pointing out that Hollywood's numerous comic-book adaptations have dominated the global box office over the last 10 to 15 years. Moreover, it is inarguably within the compulsive semiotic regime of fantasy films that post-9/11 anxiety has most transparently registered itself. As Kevin J. Wetmore notes in *Post-9/11*

Horror in American Cinema (Continuum, 2012), while audiences flocked to see the trauma of 9/11 and its militarized aftermath reimagined in Steven Spielberg's *War of the Worlds* (2005) and Matt Reeves's *Cloverfield* (2008), they avoided "serious" political thrillers such as Robert Redford's *Lions for Lambs* and Gavin Hood's *Rendition* (both 2007). It remains American film-industry lore that audiences generally do not want their entertainment to be troubled by the intrusion of politics, yet it is in the big-budget CGI universe of fantasy blockbusters that 9/11 and its aftermath explosively return like Sigmund Freud's restless repressed. It is therefore easy to understand the compulsive semiotic reimaginings of contemporary fantasy cinema as a collective response to trauma, a ceaselessly displaced process of (mis)remembering, repeating, and working through. Yet in an adjunct to his book *Film After Film: Or, What Became of 21st Century Cinema* (Verso, 2012), J. Hoberman argues that the gleeful use of playfully apocalyptic 9/11 imagery in the other key event film of 2012's summer-blockbuster season, Joss Whedon's *The Avengers*, "demonstrates how completely 9/11 has been superseded by another catastrophe, namely that of the financial meltdown of September 2008" (*The Guardian*, 11.05.12). For Hoberman, *The Avengers* invokes the geopolitical primal scene of 9/11 with a wholesale absence of ethical, social, or political



The Joker's exploding hospital

resonance. The computer-generated demolition of New York in *The Avengers* is certainly not Hollywood's crassest use of 9/11 imagery—that dubious honor belongs to Hood's execrable *X-Men Origins: Wolverine* (2009)—but Hoberman's view that the film's heroically recession-busting box-office receipts are symptomatic of more recent anxieties certainly rings true.

If the DayGlo apocalypse of *The Avengers* is symptomatic in the way it self-consciously elides contemporary geopolitics while visually invoking the most iconic moment thereof, Stephen Prince's *Firestorm: American Film in the Age of Terrorism* (2009) argues that both the 9/11 attacks and the resulting invasion of Afghanistan and Iraq simply gave the American film industry a way to put a contemporaneous spin on existing genre templates. While a film like *The Dark Knight* is certainly imprinted with the anxieties of a post-9/11 world, the key attractions for the audience were more banal. *The Dark Knight*, Prince argues, “is about what happens when civil and government authorities break the rules in their efforts to cope with terrorism. But it's doubtful that any of this was a factor in the film's stunning box-office success. Instead, the presold popularity of the franchise, the special effects, Heath Ledger's flamboyant performance, and the entertainment value of anarchic violence and a vengeance-laden narrative were the probable

draws” (285–6). Although he concedes that the affective melodramatics of the film's revenge narrative “could form an organic bond with the unhealed wounds of 9/11” (286), Prince's forthright cultural pessimism results in an analysis that sidelines potentially complex political responses to the film's “anarchic violence” in favor of dismissing the self-importance of Nolan's movie as mere 21st-century bread and circuses.

Prince's muscular brand of ideological criticism harks back to an earlier age of aggressively politicized film criticism epitomized by much-missed firebrands such as Robin Wood and Andrew Britton. In *Cinema Wars: Hollywood Film and Politics in the Bush-Cheney Era* (Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), Douglas Kellner—whose earlier *Camera Politica: The Politics and Ideology of Contemporary Hollywood Film* (Indiana University Press, 1988), cowritten with Michael Ryan, is a classic of its kind—offers a more compelling interpretation of the dystopian politics of *Batman Begins* and *The Dark Knight*. Key to Nolan's portrayal of “the morass and abyss of the Bush-Cheney era,” Kellner argues, is both films' articulation of “the dark, deep pessimism of people plagued by their own economic and political elites” (11). Like the insidious mantra of the Fox Network's hit show *24* (2001–2010)—“*We have no choice!*”—both *Batman Begins* and *The Dark Knight* were



Batman tortures Joker

criticized in some quarters for their apparent endorsement of “necessary evils” such as rendition, torture, and the erosion of civil liberties. Rather than simply validating Bush-era military vigilantism, however, in Kellner’s view the melodramatic fallout from Batman’s violent war on crime in *The Dark Knight*—the death of Wayne’s beloved Rachel (Maggie Gyllenhaal); the pathologization of “liberal” politician Harvey Dent (Aaron Eckhart)—signals instead that the film’s murky political allegory “suggests that going over to the Dark Side twists and corrupts individuals and society” (11).

This is all well and good, but glib Hollywood moralizing is hardly politically insightful. In focusing solely on the *consequences* of political violence, moreover, Kellner’s reading of the film as covertly progressive evades the more obvious truth that *The Dark Knight* systematically fails to condemn torture per se as a moral, ethical, and political obscenity—a feat that a supposedly apolitical family-friendly film such as Tim Story’s *Fantastic Four: Rise of the Silver Surfer* (2007) managed without the obnoxious bombast of Nolan’s trilogy. A more nuanced reading of the trilogy’s politics is provided by Justine Toh in the anthology *Reframing 9/11: Film, Popular Culture and the “War on Terror”* (Continuum, 2010). Emphasizing the films’ semiotics rather than their narrative trajectories,

Toh argues persuasively that Bruce Wayne is ultimately a regressive Reaganite throwback, the hard-bodied representative of a neoconservative political regime “that regards its body politic as the ‘great unwashed’ where citizens are incapable of governing their own affairs and need a strong, conservative leader” (135). Moreover, Toh argues, Wayne/Batman is nothing more than a neo-liberal tyrant, a faux-philanthropist only too happy to redeem the military contracts taken on by Wayne Enterprises by righteously using various weapon technologies to “protect” Gotham’s imperiled citizenry. To illustrate this point, Toh points to the film’s fetishistic investment in Batman’s militarized tech. “I gotta get me one of those,” grins an awestruck Sergeant Gordon (Gary Oldman) after witnessing Batman’s Humvee-esque vehicle in action. With said technologies rendered “cool” and happily consumable via the franchise’s lucrative ancillary spin-offs, *Batman Begins* serves to reify the politics of fear. Built into film-as-commodity are the ideological conditions that perpetuate the military-industrial-entertainment complex. “Just as Batman’s toys and tools of war merge to become talismans of consumer desire,” Toh points out, a film like *Batman Begins* “is itself a commodity selling a product: not only the merchandizing attached to the film, but a political



The Batmobile

ideology that pairs the righteous use of force with a fetish for the hard body of military culture” (137).

Toh’s essay is insightful and enjoyably punchy, but it is also structured by a refusal to acknowledge how Nolan’s films signal their awareness of these troubling contradictions. As Jacqueline Furby and Claire Hines note in *Fantasy* (Routledge, 2012), it is precisely the films’ moral ambiguity that makes them so culturally potent. All three films in the trilogy stage anxieties about the appropriation of weapon technologies that cannot be simply reduced to Manichean deadlock. Just as the Joker and Bane are refracted mirrors of Christian Bale’s “dark knight,” so too Batman’s righteous zeal threatens to slip over into the outright fascism of Ra’s Al Ghul (Liam Neeson). In *Batman Begins*, for example, Wayne develops his skills in what is to all intents and purposes a terrorist training camp, a deliberate refraction of the CIA’s mentoring of Osama Bin Laden during the 1980s. At the same time, the political ambivalence of the films has been pinpointed as problematic by critics such as *Film Quarterly*’s Mark Fisher. In a discussion with Rob White on the *FQ* website, Fisher registers his frustration with the strategic fence-sitting of *The Dark Knight Rises*. Describing the film as “incoherent and opportunistic,” Fisher argues that the concluding episode of the trilogy seems deliberately constructed “to give

someone from practically any political persuasion some nugget of satisfaction to take away from the film.”

While the no-nonsense ideological critic in Fisher ultimately concurs with Toh in condemning the film as “deeply reactionary,” his comments tally with Richard Maltby’s consumerist model of American filmed entertainment as outlined in his influential tome, *Hollywood Cinema: An Introduction* (Blackwell, 2003). Maltby argues that the ultimate goal of American filmed entertainment is to appeal to as many punters as possible by producing “the maximum pleasure for the maximum number [of viewers] for the maximum profit” (472). This commercial strategy is in turn entrenched within the cultural politics of any given film. By evading political clarity, Maltby contends, Hollywood entertainment disavows any responsibility for the ideological meanings audiences attach to or extrapolate from its products. In other words, rather than having any legible political viewpoint, *The Dark Knight Rises* deliberately concedes to the individual viewer the authority to decide what it means. One might find in Bane a psychotic radical leftist whose muffled, incoherent proclamations and violent agenda provide a prohegemonic caricature of oppositional politics. Equally, the film deliberately grants Bane more than enough ingenuity, intelligence, and pathos to allow a less conservative viewer to interpret him as



Bale in “Eastern” garb

a heroic martyr. (Bane’s counter-hegemonic alterity is further underscored by his idiosyncratic accent, apparently based on the Anglo-Irish bare-knuckle boxer Bartley Gorman.) The political incoherence of *The Dark Knight Rises* is thus a commercial strategy, a marker of its status as a shrewdly constructed commodity.

Unapologetically outing himself as a Bat-fan, Brooker’s *Hunting the Dark Knight*—effectively a reboot of his earlier *Batman Unmasked: Analyzing a Cultural Icon* (Continuum, 2000)—offers a way out of this critical impasse. Engaging with the contemporary Batman mythology as “a case study to explore broader issues of cultural meaning and cultural power” (xii), Brooker draws on the caped crusaders of post-structuralism—Roland Barthes, Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault—while retaining the subcultural capital of the archetypal fanboy. Mirroring Nolan’s crossover appeal at the multiplex, Brooker’s study is aimed at fan and scholar alike. “I hope that this book will encourage some Batman fans to discover that theory is relevant and rewarding, and that, equally, it will encourage some theorists to discover that Batman is relevant and rewarding” (2–3). Brooker’s interest in power, politics, and popular culture was heightened when the author became something of a whipping boy—or cause célèbre, depending on your point of view—at the hands of the UK press. Seeing his earlier

book as evidence of British academia’s inexorable decline into the dank abyss of film/media/cultural studies triviality, Brooker and *Batman Unmasked* were held up by some as symbols of intellectual decline, with fevered talk of students graduating with degrees in “Batman Studies.”

In foregrounding the author’s personal fandom, *Hunting the Dark Knight* is in some ways symptomatic of the solipsistic methodological turn in recent cinema studies. Thankfully, Brooker is far too shrewd a critic to allow his unabashed fondness for Batman to obfuscate his clear-eyed and authoritative analysis. Nevertheless, the amalgamation of reception studies, discourse analysis, and critical theory in *Hunting the Dark Knight* is emblematic of current scholarly fashions that have attempted to displace the more monomaniacal tendencies of academic film criticism. “The number of [web]sites offering detailed annotations of comic book texts are testament to the close, intelligent and informed reading practiced by many fans,” Brooker suggests. The would-be democratic public sphere empowered by digital technologies creates a participatory culture readily documented by scholars such as Henry Jenkins, Matt Hills, and Brooker in his earlier *Using the Force: Creativity, Community and ‘Star Wars’ Fans* (Continuum, 2002). While studies of fans’ creative practices and critical discourses are often fascinating, I must admit to a certain queasiness over



Bane in the stadium

regular assertions of “scholar-fandom” in recent critical writing—a regressive move within a profession that is already rather too fond of talking about itself. Admittedly, this kind of critical self-awareness and acknowledgement that film scholars are themselves members of participatory cultures is a necessary part of the intellectual process. Indeed, it can be a useful rhetorical strategy: Gary Needham’s avowal of “Brokeaholism” in his monograph on *Brokeback Mountain* (Edinburgh University Press, 2010) serves to rhetorically structure the book’s broader methodological emphasis on gay politics. Elsewhere, David Church’s thoughtful afterword in Steffen Hantke’s anthology *American Horror Film: The Genre at the Turn of the Millennium* (U.P. of Mississippi, 2010) enables him to reflect on the critical blinkers that genre fandom can unwittingly impose on scholarly thinking. Nevertheless, my own feeling is that more often than not this brand of academic solipsism is self-indulgent and redundant. Intellectual self-reflection should inflect one’s work silently and be worked through before committing words to print. True critical distance may well be an empirical impossibility, but it is still an ideal to strive for.

Nevertheless, Brooker insists that Nolan’s trilogy must be understood as dialogic and contradictory, an exploration of divergent political positions rather than a reductive

political message serving either left or right. Unless Batman is understood as embodying a range of possibilities, “the protagonist of *The Dark Knight* presents only a simplified choice between a Bush analogue or an Obama avatar, rather than the embodiment of cultural dilemmas, a wrestling with contemporary contradictions, a figure straddling a fault line” (217). One might easily accuse Brooker of lapsing into banal cultural-studies orthodoxy here, of contentedly sitting on the fence rather than “straddling a fault line” with any kind of political efficacy. Indeed, while Brooker’s approach avoids the pitfall of lazily ascribing the labels “progressive” or “reactionary” to any given Bat-text, the problem with this brand of otherwise level-headed criticism is that it also seems—as do Nolan’s films—frustratingly wishy-washy in an age of brutally enforced austerity.

As if to hammer this point home, Thomas Schatz’s polemical contribution to the anthology *Film Theory and Contemporary Hollywood Movies* (Routledge, 2009) uses *The Dark Knight* as an exemplar of the machinations of 21st-century conglomerate Hollywood. As he points out, the tent-pole release of the epochal 1989 Time-Warner merger was Tim Burton’s *Batman* (1989), a film (and franchise) that reinvigorated comic-book adaptations as a viable production trend and has long been used by scholars to

illustrate the vacuity of the modern-day blockbuster. Schatz sardonically invokes Gresham's law to account for the hegemony of fantasy blockbusters, noting that while Nolan's rebooting of the franchise is aesthetically and tonally distinct from the earlier Burton-Schumacher cycle (1989–1997), the commercial success of the trilogy underlines the infinitely renewable nature of Hollywood brands.

Similarly, in *Cult Cinema* (Wiley-Blackwell, 2011) Ernest Mathijs and Jamie Sexton point out that in its fusion of Nolan's critically established indie-auteur reputation with the cult aura of the source graphic novels, the *Dark Knight* trilogy was carefully constructed, presold, and marketed with built-in credibility and "cult" appeal. Although those of us older than thirty may mourn the crude industrial appropriation of a once-organic term such as "cult," any critical opposition to the voracious reifications of conglomerate Hollywood is soon drowned by the commercial avalanche of multiple DVD and Blu-ray releases, video games, soundtrack CDs, toys, novelizations, t-shirts, and other goodies that follow in the wake of each Batman installment. Just as Brooker posits that "Batman is, by nature, *multiple*" (108), so too are Nolan's films dispersed and fragmented across a multimedia promotional campaign and endless ancillary tie-ins. Of course, you don't need to be a card-carrying Marxist to understand that demanding radical political commentary from a franchise with a collective production budget of \$585 million (and a worldwide theatrical gross of almost \$2.4 billion) is a fool's errand. Indeed, the corporate hegemony of Hollywood is ultimately reapproved by the narrative's endorsement of Wayne Enterprises' socially altruistic manifestation of "caring capitalism." Moreover, Wayne/Batman's neurotic branding of his crime-fighting persona—his unmistakable logo and militarized "toys"—all too clearly mirrors the American film industry's fascination with the selfsame practices. As if to bear out Theodor Adorno's worst fears, the narrative arc of the *Dark Knight* franchise ideologically reaffirms the logics of the capitalist system from whence it sprang.

As Brooker is at pains to point out, however, the films contain their own internal dialectic. The Joker, for example, is a carnivalesque figure, a parody-cum-mirror of Wayne/Batman himself. It is telling that "*Why so serious?*" became the unofficial tagline of *The Dark Knight* and that Batman's po-faced visage came in for gleeful ridicule. As malevolent trickster and advocate of chaotic praxis, Ledger's Joker makes manifest the cruelty and contradictions of neoliberal capitalism, his actions literalizing the symbolic violence of Gotham's rigid class system. As Helena

Bassil-Morozaq points out in *The Trickster in Contemporary Film* (Routledge, 2012), the Joker is inextricably bound up in the contradictions of Gotham's neoliberal economy even as his unruly behavior exposes class divisions and the cruel fictions of self-sufficient individualism. Opening with an ultraviolent bank heist and featuring a scene in which the Joker gleefully burns a mountain of hundred-dollar bills, *The Dark Knight* arrived in theaters in July 2008 on the cusp of the financial abyss, and this imbues the film with no little retrospective irony. "I just *do* things," Ledger squawks with all the irresponsible glee the popular imagination ascribes to faceless and malevolent bankers. "The scariest thing about the Joker," J. Hoberman succinctly notes in *Film After Film*, "is that he has no respect for money" (185).

Lucrative fantasy franchises such as *The Lord of the Rings* (2001–03), the *Harry Potter* series (2000–2011), and the *Pirates of the Caribbean* (2003–) series have dominated the global box office in the 2000s. No longer simply a marker of Hollywood's creative bankruptcy, the sequel—once the *bête noir* of any self-respecting cinephile—has more recently become accepted as a legitimate topic of scholarly inquiry. This shift in attitude is exemplified by *Second Takes: Critical Approaches to the Film Sequel* (SUNY Press, 2010), edited by Carolyn Jess-Cooke and Constantine Verevis. Paul Sutton's essay "Prequel: The 'Afterwardsness' of the Sequel" offers an intriguing reading of *Batman Begins* and its uneasy temporal relationship with the Burton-Schumacher franchise. Despite its aggressive promotion as a radical break from the earlier films, *Batman Begins* can be variously understood as a remake of Burton's 1989 film, a prequel to the Burton-Schumacher series, or a stand-alone movie. "As a prequel," Sutton states, "Nolan's *Batman Begins* returns the spectator to the period in Bruce Wayne's life before he becomes Batman, to his childhood and the *locus classicus* of Freudian psychoanalysis. 'Afterwardsness' is central to this return, not only as that which describes the temporality of trauma, but also as that which accounts for Wayne/Batman's subjectivity" (149). The viewer's encounter with *Batman Begins* thus provides an ontological recontextualization of the earlier films, retranslating and rewriting the viewer's memories of previously fixed narratives. "*Batman Begins*, which charts the before of these earlier films, afterward effectively remakes them" (150).

The intertextual relay between Nolan's film and the earlier series is further complicated by their convoluted relationship(s) with the vast body of Bat-texts that have emerged since the character first appeared in 1939. Largely



The Joker and money to burn



Young Bruce Wayne witnesses his parents' death

absorbed into the perpetual “now” of the digital archive, the vast cultural history of “Batman” has become a rich and almost illegible palimpsest. “[A]ll Batman texts enter a matrix of cross-platform product, and operate in a dialogue between the other incarnations,” (219) notes Brooker in *Hunting the Dark Knight*. Similarly, Nicholas Rombes—also writing in *Second Takes*—asks intriguing questions about the temporality of sequels in the digital age. “[W]hat does releasing a sequel mean when audiences exercise a much greater degree of control over not only the film cycle that includes sequels, but also over the temporal dimensions of the individual films themselves? In what way do the numerous bonus features, added material, and alternate endings and footage included on DVDs contribute to the conceptualization of the sequel in contemporary film production?” (192). As if to illustrate Rombes’s point, *Gotham Knight*, a DVD of animated shorts linking the first two Nolan movies, was released in 2008.

These questions become more pressing when we consider the accelerated histories of franchise renewal. In *Retromania: Pop Culture’s Addiction to its Own Past* (Faber & Faber, 2011), Simon Reynolds argues that the 2000s have been marked by a retrograde obsession with recent popular cultural history. “Instead of being the threshold to the future, the first ten years of the twenty-first century . . . were dominated by the ‘re-’ prefix: revivals, reissues, remakes, re-enactments” (xi); to which one might add Hollywood’s favored terminology, reimaginings and reboots. The voluminous body of recent film studies literature devoted to issues of temporality, memory, and the shift from analogue to digital finds its reflection in academic studies—Garrett Stewart’s *Framed Time: Toward a Postfilmic Cinema* (University of Chicago Press, 2007) and Todd McGowan’s *Out of Time: Desire in Atemporal Cinema* (University of Minnesota Press, 2011) are useful touchstones—and in the multiplex with an array of films thematically preoccupied with the same issues: *Source Code* (2011), *Looper* (2012) and the painfully ironic remake of *Total Recall* (2012) are only the most recent examples. The sense of an entropic perpetual present is reiterated by recent and forthcoming reboots of already rebooted franchises: *The Amazing Spider-Man* (2012) and Nolan’s latest project, *Man of Steel* (2013).

The political economy of Nolan’s sequels finds its echo in the increasingly market-driven halls of academe. Indeed, the glut of books about film and philosophy that have emerged in recent years can be explicated in part by the need for unfashionable disciplines and departments under threat of redundancies and/or closure to “sex-up”

their curriculum. An example of this publishing trend is *Thinking Through Film: Doing Philosophy, Watching Movies* (Wiley-Blackwell, 2012) by Damian Cox and Michael P. Levine. Using *The Dark Knight*’s climactic ferry-bomb set piece to illustrate concepts of deontology and consequentialism, the authors ponderously explore the ethical conundrum set up by both the Joker’s social experiment and the film’s ultimate endorsement of the deception of Gotham’s citizenry. “Sometimes truth isn’t enough,” Gordon remarks at the end of *The Dark Knight*. “Sometimes people deserve more. Sometimes people deserve to have their faith rewarded.” The illusory “noble lie” perpetuated by Gordon and Batman—a deception allowing the late Harvey Dent to remain the heroic “good object” in Gotham’s socio-political imaginary—is, according to Cox and Levine, a “lazy appeal to totalitarian thinking” (241) that ultimately reaffirms the cynical doctrines of capitalist realism.

Yet beyond all the fevered speculation over the latent meanings of the *Dark Knight* cycle, it may well be that Nolan’s blockbusters tell a much older political tale. It is a truism that fantasy films from *The Lord of the Rings* to *The Avengers* have obsessively offered overblown fantasies of white patriarchal protectionism with barely a trace of irony. In *Extra-Ordinary Men: White Heterosexual Masculinity in Contemporary Popular Cinema* (Lexington Books, 2009), Nicola Rehling points to the regressive gender politics at stake, noting that “fantasy settings allow the staging of a nostalgic return to a white masculinity unchallenged by gendered or raced others” (108). Nolan’s films are no exception to this rule. Not only are the films neurotically white in terms of their casting—the sagely paternal Lucius Fox (Morgan Freeman) notwithstanding—they are also resolutely hetero-masculinist in outlook. Nolan’s homosocial paeans are also curiously sexless affairs in which subtle and intelligent performers like Maggie Gyllenhaal and Marion Cotillard are reduced to doomed ciphers in painfully underwritten roles. In the coda of *The Dark Knight Rises*, Wayne/Batman covertly retires from self-appointed public service in order to vanish into monogamous exile with Selina Kyle (Anne Hathaway). Yet the film’s celebratory heterotopia is shadowed by the bond between Wayne and Alfred (Michael Caine). A final knowing glance between master and servant both raises and disavows the persistent specter of homoeroticism while also serving to reiterate the depressingly conservative class, gender, and racial economies of the franchise.

This conservatism is underwritten by Nolan’s much-vaunted preoccupation with realism. As Brooker details



Harvey Dent behind Commissioner Gordon



Miranda



Bruce and Selina in secret exile

at length, the Nolan trilogy was marketed via a series of recurrent promotional tropes—rationality, realism, political seriousness, masculine gravitas—which functioned to distinguish the franchise from the high camp of *Batman and Robin* (1997). At stake in this strategic devaluation of “bad” Bat-pleasures (camp, homoeroticism, brightness, fun) in favor of darkness, violence, and machismo are a series of transparently weighted value judgments about gender and sexuality. The latent homophobia and anti-feminism of Nolan’s films is thus encoded within their realist aesthetic. In her fascinating monograph *Pretty: Film and the Decorative Image* (Columbia U.P., 2011), Rosalind Galt demonstrates how aesthetic judgments that privilege realism are always already intertwined with broader political assumptions. Exploring the iconophobic prejudices of film theory and the persistent devaluation of the cine-decorative—the recurrent claim that CGI-laden blockbusters constitute “empty spectacle” being a case in point—Galt argues persuasively that the repression and derogation of the “pretty” contains “a legacy of patriarchal and racist aesthetics” (23). Indeed, reviews of *The Dark Knight* favorably contrasted the film’s committed realism and minimalist use of CGI with the digital baroque of the widely despised *Transformers* (2007–) franchise. Yet as Rombes astutely points out in *Cinema in the Digital Age* (Wallflower, 2009),

all too often “[w]e do not recognise the avant-garde qualities of blockbuster films” (148). Michael Bay’s bewilderingly hyperreal posthuman epics are arguably more art installation than popcorn movie; by comparison, the aesthetic realism of Nolan’s neoclassical trilogy appears unremittingly conventional.

The economic catastrophe of 2008 has found expression in numerous cinematic forms, from comedy (P.J. Hogan’s *Confessions of a Shopaholic*, 2009) and horror (Sam Raimi’s *Drag Me To Hell*, 2009) to melodrama (Jason Reitman’s *Up In the Air*, 2009; Courtney Hunt’s *Frozen River*, 2008), dystopian science fiction (John Hillcoat’s *The Road*, 2009; Gary Ross’s *The Hunger Games*, 2012), crime film (Andrew Dominik’s *Killing Them Softly*, 2012), and indie-arthouse flicks such as Steven Soderbergh’s *The Girlfriend Experience* (2009) and David Cronenberg’s *Cosmopolis* (2012). However one reads the films, the political ambivalence of the *Dark Knight* franchise is a sure indicator of the cultural schisms of the present era. But at the end of *The Dark Knight Rises*, are we really that far removed from the infamously conservative conclusion of *Metropolis* (1927), a film that Gotham’s shimmering, dystopian cityscape cannot help but recall? Just as the underclass revolt led by Bane echoes the workers rising from the catacombs in Fritz Lang’s visionary masterpiece, so too does *The Dark*



Batman and the city

Knight Rises quash the insurrectionary flames in the interests of an unconvincing and untenable status quo. Is unabashed one-percenter Bruce Wayne any more than a militaristic purveyor of social cleansing, a policy endorsed on a political level by Harvey Dent's Guilianiesque advocacy of the systematic gentrification of Gotham? Perhaps more to the point, are the politics of Nolan's films anywhere near as incisive as those of Burton's *Batman Returns* (1992), a film from the Reagan-Bush era that has attracted a vast body of scholarly analysis praising its playful but intelligently unambiguous critique of Gotham's endless inequalities and pitiless social structure?

After all the hype and critical acclaim, I find it difficult to forgive the thunderously dull climax of *The Dark*

Knight Rises. Nolan's trilogy concludes with such an unremitting bombardment of clunking genre clichés that I assumed the director was deliberately testing the patience of his audience. A school bus laden with imperiled poppets is dangerously stranded upon a bridge; Batman and Bane engage in a tediously protracted bout of pounding fist-cuffs; kisses are stolen as an apocalyptic clock ticks down; a disgruntled cop (Joseph Gordon-Levitt) tosses away his badge in disgust. In the film's opening bank heist, an embattled bank manager bellows furiously at his assailant. "What do you believe in?!", he demands of an indifferent Joker. Those of us disgruntled with the false dawn of the so-called "intelligent blockbuster" may well ask the same question.