

## Borders of the Bat: Batman's Liminal Heroism

In his comprehensive history *Batman Unmasked*, published in early 2001, Will Brooker speculates on what form Batman might take in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. With reference to developments in DC's comic book line, Brooker suggests that Batman will be less “lonely avenger and more like the boss of a well-honed outfit”,<sup>1</sup> and that the Caped Crusader's adventures would incorporate the light touch of the 60s TV series into its mythos. Brooker could not have predicted the events of 9/11, the responses to those events, the debates that would follow, and the presence of those debates within popular culture. Prominent among those debates is the tension between national security and civil liberties. This paper argues that the Batman franchise participates in this debate in the recent films *Batman Begins* and *The Dark Knight*. Particular attention is paid to Batman's status as a liminal figure, that is, an individual who crosses social thresholds such as those between legality and criminality, justice and oppression. Batman's heroism is *dependent* upon his liminality, as analysis of the films will show. In *Batman Begins*, Bruce Wayne creates the vigilante figure of Batman from a liminal and politically centrist position, with the film taking a positive attitude towards its protagonist. The character of Batman is created in the liminal space between justice and criminality, and makes a positive difference to Gotham. Yet his crusade does not end but escalates the state of fear, and in response to the escalation, Batman becomes more oppressive. In *The Dark Knight*, Batman shifts to the political right, and this swing is presented negatively. He becomes part of the establishment and the role of the superhero is problematised in a post-9/11 context.

Unlike other contemporary blockbusters such as *The Kingdom* or *Transformers*, neither *Batman Begins* nor *The Dark Knight*, released in 2005 and 2008 respectively, make direct reference to 9/11 or conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq, but they obliquely reference the War on Terror through Gotham City. These references can be found in the films' narrative and stylistic devices. In *Batman Begins* for example, Gotham is threatened and almost destroyed by the foreign enemy Ra's Al Ghul. Ra's Al Ghul has a fanatical belief in his righteousness, and uses a form of public transportation, Gotham's elevated train, to perform his act of terrorisation. Similarly, in *The Dark Knight*, The Joker instils mass panic through assassinations and bombings. Neither of these supervillains actually create Gotham's fear, they simply capitalise upon a state of fear that already exists. Therefore, Gotham serves as a metaphor for post-9/11 America.

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1 Will Brooker, *Batman Unmasked* (New York, London: Continuum, 2001), p. 319.

This metaphor is unusual within the Batman franchise, as throughout his history, the character has remained largely apolitical. Brooker notes that in the early 1940s, while other comic book heroes like Superman and Captain America were fighting the Nazis, Batman remained committed to his domestic war on crime. But much as the “patriotic icon”<sup>2</sup> of Captain America was adjusted into a non-nationalist figure following the Watergate scandal, so director Christopher Nolan and co-writers David S. Goyer and Jonathan Nolan engage in popular debate about responses to the War on Terror, and present the cinematic Batman of the 21<sup>st</sup> century as a post-traumatic hero. Gotham itself is portrayed as a city overcome with crime, corruption and apathy. In *Batman Begins*, the city is described as the pinnacle of decadence and beyond saving. There may not have been a direct terrorist attack, but the inhabitants of Gotham are so overwhelmed by corruption and injustice that even Sergeant Gordon, the only good cop in the city, comments that in “a town this bad, [there’s no one] left to rat to”. Such a city needs a hero.

The superhero role has been developed over the history of comic books. Martin Flanagan describes heroism as: “the acceptance of a singular heroic destiny”.<sup>3</sup> This destiny can be read as a form of civic duty, as superheroes do what they can for their country. Although the comic book Batman began as a vicious punisher of criminals, Brooker notes that in the 1940s, Batman’s motivation was amended from personal vendetta to “patriotic duty”.<sup>4</sup> The crusade of the superhero is in the service of “a natural, unquestionable justice”,<sup>5</sup> which the hero recognises as “the right thing to do”. The simplicity of this ideology is questioned in postmodern interpretations of the superhero, such as *Watchmen* and *Heroes*, but it has also been re-evaluated in relation to Batman. Graphic novels such as *The Dark Knight Returns* by Frank Miller and *The Killing Joke* by Alan Moore served as references for *Batman Begins* and *The Dark Knight*, and these texts question the straightforward righteousness of the Caped Crusader. In particular, *The Killing Joke* draws parallels between Batman and The Joker, while in *The Dark Knight Returns*, Batman looks upon Harvey Two-Face and sees “a reflection”.<sup>6</sup> Similarly, the Batman portrayed by Christian Bale occupies a liminal space, becoming both social hero and hunted renegade.

This liminal space is one of Batman's own making. Richard Reynolds argues that, in general, superheroes are passive, and that the propulsion of the narrative in a comic book is often in fact the villain:

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2 Richard Reynolds, *Superheroes* (London: B. T. Batsford Ltd, 1992), p. 75.

3 Martin Flanagan, “Teen Trajectories in *Spider-Man* and *Ghost World*” in *Films and Comic Books*, edited by Ian Gordon, Mark Jancovich, Matthew McAllister (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2007), p. 138.

4 Brooker, p. 65.

5 Flanagan, p. 142.

6 Frank Miller, *The Dark Knight Returns* (New York: DC Comics/Titan Books, 1986), p. 47.

The common outcome, as far as the structure of the plot is concerned, is that the villains are concerned with change and the heroes with the maintenance of the status quo.<sup>7</sup>

However, the status quo of Gotham is one of crime, corruption and injustice, which Batman seeks to change. Instead of the villains, it is Batman who propels the narrative of *Batman Begins* through his opposition of criminals. This approach is a form of political centrism, as Batman combines individual efforts with social welfare. Although Batman fights crime alone, he does so in order to build faith in institutions like the criminal justice system. He demonstrates a belief in community, as he determines to “show people their city doesn’t belong to the criminal and the corrupt”.

Although Batman acts outside the law, he does not place himself above it. He may interfere with crime, but criminals are then left for the police and District Attorney's office. Laws are not ineffectual, Batman suggests, but their enforcement is lacking. Batman's centrist position is therefore liminal – he performs illegal acts of vigilante violence and surveillance, but he assists rather than replaces the justice system, and therefore demonstrates individual intervention with faith in public services. *Batman Begins* emphasises this public service in contrast to the dictatorial position of Ra's Al Ghul and the League of Shadows.

The League of Shadows intend to destroy Gotham by releasing a toxin that will unleash mass panic. This terrorisation is a dictatorial perspective on morality and condemnation of a place that does not reach a standard set by a self-righteous elite. Despite his crusade against injustice, Bruce Wayne maintains his belief in intervention and assistance rather than condemnation and judgement. It is through his liminal status that Batman is able to stop the actions of the League of Shadows. He can use their training to fight them, but needs Sergeant Gordon's help. He opposes injustice, but not to eradicate those associated with it. The League of Shadows operate on a fanatical level that punishes everyone; Gotham's justice system is either corrupt or ineffectual. Alone, Batman would either be just “some asshole in a costume”, as Commissioner Loew describes him, or a fanatic like Ra's Al Ghul. Despite his appearance as a lone hero, Batman is only *truly* effective in a cooperative capacity.

Bruce’s spaces also reinforce his liminality. Wayne Manor is on the city limits of Gotham much as Batman is on the borders of society. Liminal spaces, particularly bedrooms, have been commented on in comic book adaptations such as *Spider-Man* and *Ghost World*. In *Batman Begins*, the liminal space is broader than the bedroom, as Wayne Manor and its estate serves as a space in

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<sup>7</sup> Reynolds, p. 51.

which Bruce can be renewed. But the most significant space is the cave. Upon returning to Gotham after his time with the League of Shadows, Bruce visits the cave that he fell into as a child. The cave is a “threshold” in a Bakhtinian sense: a space where “one is renewed or perishes”.<sup>8</sup> Bruce is renewed as it is in this space that he constructs and becomes the character of Batman. The cave is never brightly lit, despite artificial lighting. Batman is created in this place of shadow, neither dark nor light but the twilight between them. The significance of the cave can be viewed in philosophical terms, such as a version of Socrates' cave, and psychoanalytically as a return to a womb-like state. For these purposes, the actual physical space of the cave is important, as it is the liminal space where Bruce re-creates himself as Batman. It is literally the liminal space that allows him to become the hero.

In *The Dark Knight*, however, different spaces appear, problematising heroism. In this film, Bruce inhabits a penthouse apartment in the centre of Gotham. This may indicate Bruce's maturation – no longer living in a family home but within his own space. Similarly, Bruce participates in the running of Wayne Enterprises. These changes in space and environment express Bruce Wayne's movement to a position within the establishment, and the same is true of Batman.

While ostensibly Batman is an outlaw who is to be “arrested on sight”, Batman actually works with the law officers of Gotham, particularly Jim Gordon and Harvey Dent. Over the course of the Batman comic book line, there has long been an engagement between this vigilante figure and the forces of law and order in Gotham City. In his essay “Governing Gotham”, Tony Spanakos argues that the “The Real Dynamic Duo [are] Batman and Gordon”<sup>9</sup> rather than Batman and Robin. Indeed the relationship between Gordon and Batman has not only remained key throughout Batman's history, but receives close attention in Nolan's films. After recruiting Gordon as an ally, Batman meets with the cop to discuss strategy, and in *The Dark Knight*, Harvey Dent joins their meeting. The rooftop sequence featuring the three of them is characterised with a circular pan. The shot captures the three figures of crime fighting, as well as the tensions between them. Dent is presented as an idealist, demanding that everything should be done perfectly. Gordon is a pragmatist, working with what he has. And Batman is an extremist, doing whatever is necessary. By presenting Batman as part of this group, Batman has become part of the establishment.

In this scene, the three men discuss Chin Lau, the accountant for the crime syndicates of Gotham. Lau has retreated to Hong Kong, and Batman agrees to bring him back into Dent's jurisdiction. The clandestine nature of the rooftop meeting, the lack of questions from Dent and

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8 Mikhail Bakhtin, p. 169, quoted by Flanagan, p. 290 n. 7.

9 Tony Spanakos, “Governing Gotham” in *Batman and Philosophy: The Dark Knight of the Soul*, edited by Mark D. White and Robert Arp (Hoboken, New Jersey: John Wiley and Sons, Inc., 2008), p. 65.

Gordon, and Batman's violent kidnapping of Lau in Hong Kong, present state approval of illegal activities. As the violence in Gotham escalates, Batman commits further questionable acts as an unofficial part of the criminal justice system.

In a technical sense, Batman is a terrorist, performing acts of violence and intimidation which provoke fear among the crime syndicates. Although Batman uses his methods more sparingly than the League of Shadows, he has created a mood of fear among the criminal community. This fear leads to the manifestation of anarchy that is The Joker. The Joker played by Heath Ledger is coded as a manifestation of chaos, anarchy and terrorism. Unlike previous incarnations of the character, such as in the comic books and Jack Nicholson's 1989 portrayal, his skin is not bleached white, he simply wears make-up, or "war paint" as one henchman describes it. He has no other name or alias. Alfred describes The Joker as a man who "just wants to watch the world burn", and The Joker declares himself to be "an agent of chaos".

Unlike the fanatical Ra's Al Ghul however, The Joker is not a threat from outside. The Joker states that Gotham deserves "a better class of criminal" – an ideological criminal to complement the ideological hero. Both are extremists, Batman in terms of law enforcement, The Joker in terms of chaos. The Joker is initially liminal, able to work with the mob bosses as well as robbing them, but eventually takes over organised crime completely and terrorises Gotham. Both of these characters are post-traumatic figures that perpetuate fear through terrorisation. They begin as liminal figures but as events escalate they become the establishment. Unlike Flanagan's *tabula rasa* concept of the superhero,<sup>10</sup> Batman's actions are not simply applied and then withdrawn – this War on Terror creates further terror. In response to the escalated threat, Batman becomes more oppressive.

Much as the Bush administration accepted "the necessity for torture as an instrument of American statecraft",<sup>11</sup> Batman decides it is necessary to torture The Joker. The space of this confrontation is significant. The police interview room is within the establishment, and Batman is doing what the police will not, though with Gordon's approval. Therefore, the torture is part of the establishment as well. When The Joker does reveal the location of his prisoners, there is no attempt to apprehend Batman; the police act on the information he has obtained.

Batman's presence in the establishment has led to the disregard of civil liberties, as in the real-life cases of Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo. While it could be argued that torture is legitimate when lives are at stake and that The Joker deserves what he gets, torture in *The Dark Knight* is not presented in a positive light. Batman loses his effectiveness, as he roars and strikes in frustrated impotence. The Joker laughs mockingly, cackling: "You have *nothing* to threaten me with!" The

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10 Flanagan, p. 149.

11 Alan Wolfe, *Does American Democracy Still Work?* (London: Yale University Press, 2006) p. 160

torture is useless, as Batman and Gordon both do exactly as The Joker has manipulated them. As a result, Rachel Dawes is killed, Harvey Dent is hideously disfigured and The Joker escapes, to raise the level of threat on Gotham even further.

Once again, violence begets more violence. In order to find The Joker and Harvey, Batman uses a form of sonar omni-surveillance, which his ally Lucius Fox describes as “unethical”, “dangerous” and “wrong”. Desperate times, it seems, call for desperate measures, and spying on 30 million people is legitimate when fighting terrorism. Batman has helped create a right-wing dictatorship that compromises civil liberties. The film's attitude to the sonar is ambivalent: it does allow Batman to stop The Joker from blowing up two passenger ferries, but even Batman acknowledges that the surveillance must not continue. It would be useful for further crime fighting, but its perpetuation will maintain the dictatorship. Batman entrusts Lucius to destroy the device, ensuring that freedom is returned.

The usefulness of the surveillance is questionable however, as Harvey Two-Face murders five people and kidnaps Gordon's family despite the sonar. The presence of this surveillance device is a further demonstration that the threat to Gotham has become more internal. The foreign threat of the League of Shadows has been replaced with the domestic threat of The Joker, who is a response to Batman. When Batman becomes part of the establishment, The Joker responds by driving the DA mad – the dictatorship takes on a murderous quest for revenge that uses chance as a deciding factor, and invades the privacy of every citizen. The film demonstrates that the extreme tactics of Batman and Two-Face in the pursuit of justice are themselves injustices.

Batman cannot win his battle through force, but by his own idealism, demonstrated by saving The Joker rather than letting him die. Although he resorts to torture and omni-surveillance, execution is not permitted. The Joker's assessment of Batman as “incorruptible” may be going too far: as part of the establishment he did become corrupted by desperation. Rather than acting as a panacea to Batman's transgressions, saving The Joker signals his return to a liminal state, which is completed when he tells Gordon to report that Batman committed the crimes of Harvey Two-Face. Batman acknowledges that his actions have gone too far; as part of the establishment with Dent and Gordon, Batman became brutal and oppressive. Rather than remaining a hero who facilitates brutality, Batman takes the blame for Harvey's crimes, and in doing so takes responsibility for his own actions. Batman helped create the dictatorship, and by taking the blame, he allows it to collapse, but the ideal of justice can prevail. He, Gordon and Harvey all serve this ideal, but Batman compromised it by joining the establishment. To become a hero again, he must return to the borders.

Both Harvey and Batman comment that “You either die a hero, or you live long enough to see yourself become the villain”. As the “villain”, Batman can return to the liminal space where he belongs. This return emphasises the importance of liminality to heroism – when the hero is part of the establishment, he gets away with everything. But such a figure becomes a dictator, and *The Dark Knight* reflects post-9/11 America where civil rights have been compromised by the state in the name of national security. Through its contemporary resonance, the film questions the “natural, unquestionable justice” favoured by superhero narratives. Neither the idealism of Dent nor the dictatorship of Batman are tenable. What is left is the moderate position of Commissioner Gordon. He will uphold the ideals of Harvey Dent, and pursue the renegade Batman, and do the best he can. A moderate position is the film's conclusion, with Harvey eulogised as Gotham's “knight, shining”, and Batman consigned to the shadows as “a watchful protector, a silent guardian”. But it is Batman's return to the borders, to liminal heroism, that hopefully ensures Gotham does not enter an even darker night.