

Over his head

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Batman Begins, directed by Christopher Nolan, written by Nolan and David S. Goyer

This is another dreadful film for the most part praised highly by the critics. Why not, since the latter operate with more or less the same body of ideas and instincts as filmmaker Christopher Nolan? These are people with only a dim grasp of things, including a vague notion that society is decaying, that the relatively quiescent “old [postwar] world” has come to an end, without having any idea why or what should be done about it, and that “other people,” both those on top, usually painted in cartoonishly malevolent colors, and those on the bottom, often represented as backward and bestial, are rather awful.

However, the “despair” and the “pessimism” only go an inch deep. This is not the disturbing vision of someone who gazes intently at life and society and draws some understandably harsh conclusions. The honest, genuinely tortured artist or critic might be forgiven for expressing horror at the present state of things, as long as he or she did not for an instant give up on suffering humanity or forget its infinite potential. In fact, a horrified response would be one of the means by which he or she would help to alert and enlighten his or her fellow creatures.

No, this is the “market pessimism” of the comfortable petty-bourgeois cinema professional, who never misses a meal or a career opportunity. He or she proceeds from the café or the restaurant to the film festival screening, the interview session, the production meeting or the film set itself and then back to the hotel or the pleasantly appointed apartment in a fashionable section of town unburdened by the troubles of the world.

The “darkness” comes later, as more or less an afterthought, grafted onto whatever project or script is at hand. It’s a posture, not a commitment. Nothing here of Pasolini’s soul and body thrown into the work without regard for the cost. One can identify the work of those who lose sleep over humankind’s difficulties, the human type who can break into tears at the sight of the faces he or she meets on the street.

This is a bleakness without consequences; it doesn’t alter one’s life, not for an instant. One goes about one’s affairs,

building up a résumé and a bank account. “Change the world? No, thanks, it’s rather difficult, I’d rather have a nice career.”

Seven years ago British-born Christopher Nolan was an unknown on the film festival circuit, promoting his 69-minute film *Following*, about voyeurism. Then came *Memento* (2000), a film with a gimmick, which caught the fancy of critics and film studios.

I wrote at the time: “The absence of psychological or dramatic believability is not accidental. In the final analysis, it stems from the filmmakers’ lack of interest in the problem. Their concentration lies elsewhere. Endlessly cool and clever, mannered and empty, the works lack any real, sensuous feeling for the world. No one talks or acts like these characters.... If the filmmakers were able to step back and extract themselves for a moment from their influences and ambitions, think about the world and how it operates, think about people they know and how they act, think about themselves seriously, they would quickly see how silly and unreal it all is. If they could only work honestly and directly.”

Insomnia, Nolan’s entrance into major studio filmmaking, was an empty and purposeless work, again, nearly all posturing. Joanne Laurier commented on the WSWS: “Nolan reveals himself a conformist who is sadly ignorant of social realities. In a recent interview in *USA Today*, the director criticized ‘many studio movies’ for not being thought provoking. ‘The characters don’t wrestle with moral issues, particularly in cop movies. They don’t throw up any ambiguities,’ said Nolan. There is little ambiguity in *Insomnia*’s defense of the police or in its attitude toward crime and ‘evil.’ Certain of the film’s arguments are imbued, one would like to hope unwittingly, with an Ashcroftian flavor. ...

“The question is again raised: independent filmmaking is independent of what? It has increasingly come to mean filmmaking that simply has not yet made money. Nolan and others create works that are disturbingly devoid of critique and protest, and disturbingly saturated with a complacent and submissive attitude toward both society and the film industry—“the whole big machine,” as Nolan himself puts

it.”

With *Batman Begins*, the fifth of the series of films that began in 1989, Nolan has rapidly and relatively effortlessly reached the summit of his profession. One can hardly say worse than that.

Unhappily, it’s all entirely predictable, although one could not have been entirely prepared for the amateurishness, the sheer awfulness of *Batman Begins*. The drama is unfathomable, the fight scenes impossible to follow, the screen so dark one can hardly distinguish the characters, even the dialogue is a challenge to make out. Along with everything else, the 35-year-old Nolan is entirely out of his depth.

This of course is not entirely his fault. There was a time when directors served an apprenticeship. They might assist on or direct a dozen smaller films or more, commit all sorts of youthful errors, before they earned the right to make a “major motion picture.” The studio system had many horrors, but craftsmanship and knowing one’s vocation were valued. Now a “hot” prospect is handed \$100 million or \$150 million by a crowd of studio executives, who have no idea how to make a good film themselves, and a *Batman Begins* is the inevitable result.

We will be told that the shadowy, fragmented and distorted look of the film was Nolan’s intention, an element in his effort to “post-modernize” the Batman story. That’s no doubt true, in part. But to what end?

A critic writes of the new film’s contribution to “the dark and troubled depths of the Batman legend.” This is a comic book that one read as a 12-year-old, not the saga of King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table! That type of comment is absurd and unworthy. The degradation of American culture knows almost no limits. The “Batman” television series in the 1960s struck a far more persuasive note with its utterly irreverent attitude toward the “Batman legend.” The material should be clearly marked “Fatal if taken seriously!”

And Nolan takes it oh, so seriously! One knows that this is all a terrible mistake only minutes into the film. Why is young Bruce Wayne apparently in a Chinese or Tibetan prison? What is Liam Neeson doing there, lurking in the shadows? Who is Ra’s Al Ghul? Do we ever satisfactorily find out? Do we care? It’s a false complexity and gloom, all surface, adding up to nothing.

As far as one can figure out, Bruce Wayne (the future Batman), whose parents were murdered by a homeless man, has been driven to the ends of the earth to investigate the criminal mind (but the killer was not a professional criminal, or was he?) Contacted by the League of Shadows, a mysterious band who apparently arrive on the scene when any civilization has reached its height of decadence (they

sacked Rome and burnt London to the ground!), Wayne is instructed to kill a local criminal as his initiation rite. No vigilante, he will have none of it. The entire gang sets upon him. He beats them all off, the structure perched on a mountain side blows up and Wayne is forced to save Ducard (Neeson).

Back in Gotham City, Wayne constructs his Batman identity with the aid of a discredited scientist and his butler, Alfred (Michael Caine, virtually the film’s only redeeming feature). He adopts the lifestyle of a dissolute playboy to camouflage his crime-fighting efforts. His childhood friend, an assistant district attorney, is disappointed by his apparent indifference to criminality. A criminal mastermind is planning to drive the entire population mad by introducing a hallucinogenic drug into the water supply and turning it into a vapor—which people will inhale—with a fantastic super weapon.

Wayne has to confront his fears, of bats, for instance, and his guilt feelings, about his parents’ murder (he insisted they leave a theater early, which set the scene for their shooting deaths by a mugger), meanwhile making contact with the city’s only honest policeman. Ducard makes another appearance, spouting his lethal “Eastern” wisdom, hoping to bring about the city’s destruction for his own apocalyptic reasons.

The whole business is laboriously, but incomprehensibly laid out before us. None of it makes sense, none of it is psychologically plausible or insightful.

In most cases today, neither artists nor critics feel a deep or abiding purpose in what they do. No one has any sense about what brought society to its current impasse, or where it might go, or any other important question. The artists know, however, that if they include a sufficient quantity of “extreme” or “intense” moments, the critics and a certain portion of the audience will respond. Everything is a shot in the dark. Charlatanry and mediocrity stroll comfortably hand in hand.

Leaving aside its fatal aesthetic and dramatic failings, *Batman Begins* is an utterly conventional, conformist work, respectful of order and wealth, unable or unwilling to challenge any of contemporary society’s taboos. Worse than that, its grim pomposity and self-seriousness invite only laughter.



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