

The Dark Knight: Striving to be impressive, but essentially empty

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Directed by Christopher Nolan, written by Christopher and Jonathan Nolan, story by Christopher Nolan and David Goyer.

American studio filmmaking is in a terrible, terrible state. The current list of the 10 leading films at the box office includes three cartoons; two films based on comic books, and a third about an “unorthodox” super-hero; two remakes; an empty-headed action picture; and a film adapted from a Broadway musical based on 1970s pop songs.

At the top of the list, *The Dark Knight*, the second Batman film directed by British-born Christopher Nolan and scripted by him and his brother, Jonathan Nolan, has already been a financial triumph, bringing in a record \$222 million on more than 9,000 screens in its first six days.

Various factors might account for this phenomenal success, including the lack of serious alternatives, the relative cheapness of movies as a form of entertainment and perhaps the impression of potential viewers that the latest Batman film was darkly comical, something disturbing but action-packed and intriguing.

In fact, in my view, *The Dark Knight* is neither a good nor a serious film. It is ill-conceived and poorly done, overlong, confusing and emotionally muddled. The filmmakers apparently aspire to say something, but the comic-book adaptation is a limited form and, more to the point, one has to have important experiences and thoughts to say something interesting or enlightening about life.

Whatever *The Dark Knight's* immediate fate and the improved status in Hollywood of its creators, there is nothing here that makes a deep impact or will endure, even as a piece of popular entertainment. And American popular entertainment did once upon a time generate enduring works.

In this installment of the Batman story, a master and murderous criminal, the Joker (the late Heath Ledger), begins wreaking havoc on Gotham City. His ultimate target is Batman (Christian Bale), whom he wants to bring low. He first offers the city's gang leaders to eliminate Batman for a great deal of money. The mob bosses scoff at him, but after Batman kidnaps the crime syndicate's accountant in Hong Kong and brings him home to face the music, they agree to hire the Joker.

The latter announces that he will begin killing Gotham City officials and residents on a daily basis until Batman reveals his identity and turns himself into the police. However, instead of Bruce Wayne, Batman's public “mask,” giving himself up, crusading district attorney Harvey Dent (Aaron Eckhart) publicly claims to be the masked vigilante. Dent's hope is that the Joker will attempt to assassinate him, thus drawing the criminal into the open where he can be nabbed by Batman and the police.

This is more or less what happens, after a furious chase and

showdown. In fact, however, the master criminal is two steps ahead of Batman and the cops; in the confusion, he has had Dent and his girlfriend, Rachel Dawes (Maggie Gyllenhaal), placed at opposite ends of the city, and rigged to die in timed explosions. Batman can only save one of them.

Dent survives, with half his face burned off and his personality transformed—he now becomes an ally of the dark forces. The Joker, who has blasted his way out of jail, attempts one last “prank”—he makes the passengers on two packed ferries decide which boatload will be allowed to survive.

Meanwhile, Dent has now become a vigilante on his own and a menace to the city's population. Batman and the new police commissioner, James Gordon (Gary Oldman), work to eliminate the threat Dent represents while preserving his reputation as a hero. Batman agrees to take the blame for various crimes and earn the public opprobrium.

A good many talented and appealing performers were involved in this production—Bale, Ledger, Gyllenhaal, Eckhart, Oldman, Michael Caine, Morgan Freeman and others. And many skilled technicians, too. But it adds up to very little.

Nolan's film is far too long and grows tedious, with at least half a dozen unnecessary twists and turns, some of which are impossible (or too unrewarding) to follow. It becomes preposterous. A number of the action sequences are put together so poorly that it is difficult to make out what is happening or to whom. The special effects and explosions and weaponry don't make much of an impact, and why should they?

The critics have widely and, for the most part, lavishly praised *The Dark Knight*.

Some, bluntly, because of its supposed pessimism—“What is most unprecedented about the narrative, however, is its largely unsympathetic treatment of the yapping and yowling citizens of Gotham City, a gloomy echo of ourselves, at the gas pumps and grocery stores, still looking for easy answers from the highest bidders for our votes. In this respect, Ledger's Joker brilliantly incarnates the devil in all our miserable souls as we contemplate a world seemingly without hope” (Andrew Sarris, *New York Observer*).

...And some on the opposite grounds—“Pitched at the divide between art and industry, poetry and entertainment, it goes darker and deeper than any Hollywood movie of its comic-book kind...largely by embracing an ambivalence that at first glance might be mistaken for pessimism. But no work filled with such thrilling moments of pure cinema can be rightly branded pessimistic, even a postheroic superhero movie like *The Dark Knight*” (Manohla Dargis, *New York Times*).

The film, above all, strives in a variety of ways to be impressive,

and its makers have apparently succeeded in this. Nolan and company needn't have tried so hard; the critics are satisfied with far less.

The claims about *The Dark Knight's* supposed moral ambiguities and related matters need to be thought about. They are bound up with whatever references to or hints about the present state of life appear in the film.

Heath Ledger's performance is at the center of much of the discussion. While Bale is largely blank, Ledger created a sometimes disturbing, sometimes amusing Joker—but it's not at all clear what significance the characterization might have. The criminal is a self-described “agent of chaos,” who wants to see the world in flames for the fun of it. “I'm a dog chasing cars,” he says. “I just do.” He wants to introduce “a little anarchy.”

In *The Dark Knight's* production notes, we read: “‘The Joker is somebody without any rules whatsoever,’ [Christian] Bale states. ‘How do you fight somebody who is bent on destruction, even if it means self-destruction? That's a formidable foe.’ The actor goes on to say that The Joker's total lack of morality is one of his most potent weapons in his war with Batman because, conversely, ‘Batman has a very strict moral code for what he will and won't do, and The Joker can use that to his advantage. Batman still has this huge reserve of anger and pain and knows he could easily go too far, so he must not cross that line. He has to be sure that in chasing a monster, he doesn't become a monster himself.’”

Nolan says, “As the screenplay developed,...we started to explore the effect one guy could have on an entire population—the ways in which he could upset the balance for people, the ways in which he could take their rules for living, their ethics, their beliefs, their humanity and turn them on themselves. You could say we've seen echoes of that in our own world, which has led me to believe that anarchy and chaos—even the threat of anarchy and chaos—are among the most frightening things society faces, especially in this day and age.”

It is hard to ignore the references to someone “bent on destruction, even if it means self-destruction,” the “echoes of that in our own world” and the dilemma of a crime-fighter who mustn't “become a monster himself.” A review in *Variety* refers to the Joker as “the superhero-movie equivalent of a modern terrorist (one of several post-9/11 signifiers).” The phrase “modern terrorist” appears in numerous comments on the film.

In the first place, in what universe does this type of “terrorist” exist? The Joker's freakish and depraved personality is an invention, which, again, is meant primarily to make an impression. It doesn't speak to any substantial reality. Such a figure as a *social being* is not to be found outside a certain kind of fevered or panic-stricken imagination.

Moreover: morally troubled anti-terrorists, with “strict moral codes,” pursuing the incarnation of evil and fearful that they will lose their way in this painful but necessary exercise? What is this about? Indeed, there are several points in *The Dark Knight* at which Dent or the police are tempted to torture or beat their prisoners. Batman intervenes to remind Dent in one scene of the consequences.

What worldview does this correspond to or suggest? It brings to mind the recent article in the *New York Times*, following the release of minutes from a meeting among military torturers and their accomplices at Guantánamo Bay, Cuba. The *Times* piece referred to the “confusion” among those in attendance “about both the legal limits and the effectiveness of interrogation methods.”

This is not to say that the Nolans consciously share the wretched latter-day liberalism of the *Times* or its British equivalents. But it

points to the consequences of not thinking seriously about things, a failure that permits the artist to be picked up by or used by stronger currents in the absence of knowledge and principled opposition.

The writer and director have loaded each character—with the exception of the Joker, who represents “pure, unadulterated evil” (Nolan), whatever that might mean—with doubleness and ambiguity to the point where he or she can hardly stand up under the weight. Nolan comments, “There are a number of dualities in this film, and there are also several mirrored relationships. The relationship between Batman and The Joker is an interesting one, as is the relationship between Harvey Dent/Two-Face and Lieutenant Gordon.”

They aren't actually, nor are the characters' ambivalences, because they are either trivial or contrived. A serious moral ambiguity, one with resonance, is not simply any arbitrarily arrived at internal conflict. Batman is a relentless and nearly superhuman vigilante who disapproves of vigilantism—he desires a city where he wouldn't need to exist; Dent is a crusading prosecutor, with a “dark side,” which the Joker ultimately manipulates and turns into madness; Rachel loved Bruce Wayne/Batman, but couldn't accept his double life as billionaire playboy and crime fighter.... It's too silly to go on!

A moral ambiguity that means something in art is the reflection—in the internal life of a character—of the great questions or challenges of a particular epoch, artistically worked through and made psychologically and socially true. In our day, for an artist to render such an ambiguity would require cutting through the deliberate mystification of the present social order and arriving at harsh truths.

For example, if an American interrogator were to realize that far from defending “democracy” and “freedom” with his or her brutal methods, he or she were defending privilege and tyranny, that might establish an interesting internal conflict. But one would have to adopt an independent standpoint.

The Nolans, despite their noise and flourishes, appear thoroughly conformist and accepting of the status quo.

The production notes: “While The Joker wreaks chaos and fear, the crusading District Attorney Harvey Dent is the new face of law and order in Gotham City. ‘Harvey is a man of the people. He's an all-American hero in a very different way from Batman,’ says Nolan. ‘So now you have the triumvirate of Batman, Harvey Dent and Lieutenant Gordon—the justice system, the police and a vigilante—forming an alliance to bring down crime. Using Batman gives them an edge over the criminals, but it is still the police who will arrest them, and then they will be tried through the justice system. But what comes up is the question of whether you can bend the rules without breaking them. And that becomes the underlying theme of the story.’”

Someone who accepts the official version of things in this manner is incapable of doing much.

The distance between a complex and often painful social reality and the version of life offered up by the entertainment industry continues, by and large, to grow larger.



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