

# *The Batman*: Obscuring reality behind shadows and capes

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*Directed by Matt Reeves; written by Reeves and Peter Craig*

*The Batman*, recently released on the streaming service HBO Max, is the latest big-budget film starring the well-known DC comic book vigilante. It follows his exploits as he battles various enemies, including a deranged serial killer, a criminal syndicate, and various corrupt government officials in the fictional city of Gotham.

The film's production and release had been derailed multiple times by the COVID-19 pandemic, pushing it nearly a year from its initial June 2021 release date. Its March 2022 theatrical release took place amidst the ruling elite's campaign to declare that "COVID is over," leading to the scrapping of all measures to contain the virus, including occupancy limits and mask requirements in movie theaters. As a result of the film's ubiquitous marketing campaign and the officially sanctioned lies about the state of the pandemic, the film has drawn sizable audiences, with global box office revenue over \$760 million as of this writing.

The past two decades have seen half a dozen major film iterations of the Batman character. These films have involved the efforts of numerous talented performers and filmmakers, thousands of crew members, countless millions of labor-hours, not to mention hundreds of millions of dollars of production costs.

What has been the result of this significant investment of society's resources? In our evaluations of the Christopher Nolan-directed *Dark Knight* films, we referred to them at various times as "another dreadful film for the most part praised highly by the critics" (*Batman Begins*, 2005); "ill-conceived and poorly done, overlong, confusing and emotionally

muddy" (*The Dark Knight*, 2008); "an aesthetically one-sided and emotionally distorting encounter—condescending, cruel, misanthropic, ugly and unreal" (*The Dark Knight Rises*, 2012).

Of the superhero crossover film *Batman v Superman* (Zack Snyder, 2016), we wrote that "The characters are lifeless and flat, with scarcely more development and backstory than one would find printed on the back of an action figure box." We referred to *Joker* (Todd Phillips, 2019), which concerned Batman's arch-nemesis, as "a deeply confused work that is more a symptom of a rotten social order than a coherent commentary on it."

Little needs to be added to these statements to describe the latest Batman film.

Bruce Wayne (Robert Pattinson) is a reclusive billionaire who spends his nights prowling the streets of Gotham City and savagely beating petty street criminals as the masked vigilante Batman. When a sadistic serial killer calling himself the Riddler (Paul Dano) murders and mutilates the city's mayor, Batman and his Gotham City Police Department ally James Gordon (Jeffrey Wright) join forces to hunt down the Riddler before he can claim more victims.

Batman's search for answers leads him into an underworld nightspot owned by the Penguin (Colin Farrell, looking fairly ridiculous in prosthetic makeup) where he meets Selina Kyle, AKA Catwoman (Zoë Kravitz), a waitress whose friend was the mayor's mistress and has gone missing. Catwoman and Batman share moments of (frankly inexplicable) intimacy, but Batman, still traumatized from witnessing the murder of his parents at a young age, is reluctant to form a connection.

A tedious investigation, reminiscent of a television police procedural, ultimately uncovers a vast network

of corruption that implicates many of Gotham's political and financial elite, controlled by mob boss Carmine Falcone (John Turturro). Riddler continues his killing spree, murdering the city police chief and the district attorney, all the while claiming that he is revealing the "truth" about corruption in Gotham.

Ultimately, the Riddler's plot culminates in a devastating attack on the city. Amidst the chaos, Batman fights to stop the Riddler's followers from assassinating the city's newly elected Mayor Bella Reál (Jayme Lawson, doing a fairly convincing impression of a demagogic, yet thoroughly toothless and ineffective Democratic Party politician). After realizing that Riddler and his followers had been inspired by Batman's own crusade for vengeance, Batman decides to dedicate himself to inspiring "hope" instead.

Comic book films generally, and Batman films in particular, are bland, conformist and reactionary efforts. Their main role is to affirm the essential virtue of official institutions, chiefly the police and military, while overwhelming the audience's critical faculties with computer-generated spectacle.

Batman films tend to be the most openly right-wing of the lot. The film's depiction of Gotham as a filthy, blighted mess in the grip of an irrepressible crime wave seems straight from the fantasies of the fascistic pro-police crowd (perhaps yesterday's issue of the *New York Post*), as is Batman's closing monologue where he promises to fight "looting and lawlessness."

A handful of limp gestures are made in the direction of social criticism, including institutional corruption. But the malefactors are depicted as merely isolated "bad apples." While this or that *individual* officer may be led astray due to greed or cowardice, the police *as a whole* are depicted as defenders of the public good, selflessly working to keep the city from harm. If anything, the police are presented as being insufficiently accepting of Batman's brutal and extralegal methods.

Director Matt Reeves (best known for other big-budget films like 2008's *Cloverfield* and the recent entries in the *Planet of the Apes* series) has said that he was inspired by the noir films of the 1930s and '40s, as well as neo-noir works such as Roman Polanski's 1974 classic *Chinatown*. But Polanski's film had far more biting and disturbing social commentary than anything

on display here, as did the best works associated with the noir and mystery genres. There is nothing in Reeves' film that approaches the urgency and tension of a work like Billy Wilder's *Double Indemnity* (1944) (based on a James M. Cain novella) or the potent social realism in the writings of Raymond Chandler or Dashiell Hammett. These artists, with all their contradictions, were defined by distrust or outright hostility toward authority and official life.

In any case, one doubts they would have ever included a denouement where a recently elected mayor delivers a speech insisting that "We must rebuild people's faith, in our institutions, in our elected officials, in each other," which is how Reeves' film ends.

A number of talented and appealing performers appear in *The Batman*. Pattinson has demonstrated artistic seriousness in the right circumstances, most notably in *Ciro Guerra's Waiting for the Barbarians*. Turturro and Wright are veteran actors capable of moving work. Dano, Kravitz, and even Farrell have done well in the right roles. Yet, no one here seems to be able to inject any life into the grim, murky proceedings, which drag on for nearly three hours.

There is much that is disturbing, even horrific about social and political life. An artist committed to exposing harsh truths certainly would not lack for material. Yet, the "darkness" on display in *The Batman* is entirely without substance—timid, socially amorphous and non-threatening. It is the type of market-friendly "darkness" out of which a studio can make three-quarters of a billion dollars.



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