"Some Men Just Want to Watch the World Burn": The politics of Christopher Nolan's *Dark Knight* trilogy

Gregory Frame

Christopher Nolan's The *Dark Knight* trilogy (2005, 2008, 2012) emerged at a moment of profound crisis in American society, between the threat of terrorism and the responses to the 9/11 attacks, followed by the near-collapse of the neoliberal economic order in 2008. Released across a seven-year period encompassing the Bush and Obama administrations, Nolan's films provoked varied political responses, and became lightning rods for a host of reasons. This chapter will rehearse these arguments, but take advantage of the critical distance afforded by the time that has passed since their initial releases to reassess the trilogy. It will consider the films in light of *Joker* (Todd Phillips, 2019), an origin story of Batman's arch-nemesis that posited his criminality as a consequence of his social marginalization due to his precarious employment and mental instability and prompted the argument that Arthur Fleck (Joaquin Phoenix) was represents the kind of dispossessed, alienated white male who voted for Donald Trump. *Joker* emerged after the populist insurgency that caused profound political ructions around the world, a shift built in part on the dissatisfaction with conventional politicians' responses to the crisis of neoliberalism in 2008. This chapter will therefore consider *The Dark Knight* trilogy as part of the long interregnum between the near-collapse of the neoliberal order and the present moment. It will argue that the trilogy is indicative of the initial phase of neoliberalism's crisis, when politicians sought to preserve and rescue the system rather than fundamentally remake it, a failure that arguably led to the wave of populist anger that has characterized the period since 2012. In this, the chapter will suggest that the trilogy – but particularly *The Dark Knight* and

The Dark Knight Rises - can be read as an exemplar of "capitalist realism", an argument that the system we have (however problematic) is the only option, and any alternative will lead inevitably to chaos, violence and disaster. In looking to rescue the decadent, corrupt and violent Gotham City from the assailants who seek its destruction, Nolan's Batman can therefore be seen as a staunch defender of the neoliberal *status quo*.

The Dark Knight trilogy posits the rich, white, heterosexual male as society's bulwark against radical, existential threats. It did so at a time when this figure drew considerable popular ire as a consequence of the financial crisis of 2008. Nolan's films should therefore be read as conservative defenders of the neoliberal settlement, as "capitalist realist" (Fisher 2009) texts that seek rescue of the economic and political systems rather than fundamental reforms. In *Capitalist Realism*, Mark Fisher argued that, following the collapse of the Soviet Union, we have arrived at a point where capitalism, whatever its imperfections and inadequacies, has become the only viable means of organizing our economy and society. In this he meant that any alternative to capitalism (or, indeed, any modest reform to capitalism as it currently existed) was considered unrealistic, or even unimaginable (1). One can certainly see his point in the policies that were adopted to address the collapse of the global financial system in 2008: the mobilization of state funds to bail out banks whose failure was considered so catastrophic that such a possibility could not be entertained is the essence of capitalist realism. The emphasis on incremental reform of our social, political and economic systems after the seismic events of 2008 became the stated policy of most mainstream politicians. Organizations opposed to capitalism, like Occupy Wall Street and its desire for sweeping change of the system after the financial crisis, were caricatured as lunatic fringe movements in the popular press (Darling 2011), reinforcing Fisher's claim that anti-capitalist protest movements have become the "carnivalesque background noise to capitalist realism" (14). As Fisher pointed out in a later work, "capitalist

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realism isn't the direct endorsement of neoliberal doctrine; it's the idea that, whether we like it or not, the world is governed by neoliberal ideas, and that won't change. There's no point fighting the inevitable" (2013: 90). Anyone who looked to seriously question the organization and operation of the financial markets, and the economic system more generally, was characterised as naïve, dangerous, or both.

This emphasis on "realism" was fundamental to Nolan's trilogy, which sought to depart from the ways in which the character had been portrayed on screen, at least in comparison with the previous two instalments *Batman Forever* (Joel Schumacher, 1995) and *Batman and Robin* (Joel Schumacher, 1997). These films, which followed Tim Burton's successful *Batman* (1989) and *Batman Returns* (1992), were detested by fans, and met with critical derision.[i] *Batman and Robin*'s camp, cartoonish qualities – clearly influenced by the 1960s television series starring Adam West - were widely considered to have sounded the death-knell for the series (Winstead 2015, 573). By recruiting Nolan to direct *Batman Begins* (2005), Warner Brothers signalled that they were moving the character away from the "bright, colorful costumes, exaggerated set pieces, and cartoonish, one-dimensional villains" of Schumacher's films, and adopting the tone and style of the comics that had taken a turn toward "masculine brooding, violence, psychological complexity, and loneliness" (Winstead, 575). As Todd McGowan notes, "The cartoonish villains of the Batman series (the Penguin, Poison Ivy, Mr. Freeze) disappear along with the outlandish gadgets that populate Batman's utility belt" (2015, 171). Nolan had by this point developed a reputation as a thoughtful, independent *auteur* following the critical successes of *Following* (1998), *Memento* (2000) and *Insomnia* (2002), adult-orientated thrillers that suggested he was a director capable of restoring the faith of fans of Batman who had so vociferously rejected the apparent frivolity and camp of the previous two films. Dan Hassler-Forest contends that Nolan's *Batman* films should be understood as drawing upon "aspects of the franchise that

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fans had found the most 'authentic' at least from the 1980s onward – dark, violent, serious – and developed a campaign that maximized the film's legitimacy to these fans while also appealing directly to audiences that were only passingly familiar with this particular superhero'" (2012, 89). Considerable emphasis was placed on Nolan's 'vision' for *Batman Begins*, and how different it would be from the previous films, particularly in relation to the psychological depth of the central character, and the film's moral complexity (88). In essence, Nolan's involvement sought to infuse the series with the director's *auteurist*, arthouse prestige at the same time as problematically equating its heteromasculine tone and style with seriousness, and thereby distinguishing it significantly from the character's earlier cinematic incarnations. As Martin Fradley suggests, "this strategic devaluation of 'bad' Bat-pleasures (camp, homoeroticism, brightness, fun) in favour of darkness, violence and machismo are a series of transparently weighted value judgments about gender and sexuality." (2013, 26). The shift in tone and style is apparent from the very first moments of all three films, where the studio and production company logos are shown in black-and-white, blue or cold grey, connoting seriousness and gritty realism.

This move toward seriousness was embraced by critics, many of whom read the films as reflective of the troubled political times in which they were produced. In addressing themes of terrorism, surveillance and detention without trial, as well as featuring spectacular scenes of destruction and urban carnage, *The Dark Knight* trilogy can be understood through the prism of post-9/11 politics, and the ethical quandaries posed by the 'war on terror'. In Batman's willingness to bend (and break) the rules of a liberal society in order to restore order, *The Dark Knight* was read as a justification of Bush's counterterrorism policies, legitimating its transgressions of international law and restrictions of civil liberties (McSweeney 2014, 118). There remains however some debate as to whether Nolan's films are critical of the *status quo*, or in fact reactionary reinforcements of it. Slavoj Žižek

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suggested that Bane (Tom Hardy) in *The Dark Knight Rises* represents the "dictatorship of the proletariat", Nolan's film envisioning the moment at which working-classes might seize political power and the means of production from the capitalist establishment (2012). Mark Fisher (2012) considered this view problematic given Bane's ultimate intention to destroy Gotham City, suggesting Bane's stated "emancipatory project" was entirely undermined by the fascistic plan to cleanse the city by incinerating it. The film was understood as painting a revolutionary movement of the kind embodied by Occupy Wall Street around the time of its release as inherently dangerous, reinforcing the suggestion that the films were capitalist realist in approach. As Fradley argues, "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." (2013, 22).

The ways in which imagery from the trilogy, in particular Heath Ledger's astonishing performance as the anarchic, nihilistic Joker in *The Dark Knight*, found its way into our politics spoke profoundly to the febrile, anxious period after 9/11, and the maladies and morbid symptoms that emerged as a consequence of the 2008 financial crisis. The Tea Party, which drove right-wing populist opposition to President Barack Obama's reform of the US healthcare system in 2009-10, used posters in its protests that made him up to look like *The Dark Knight*'s Joker, complete with greasepaint and bright red smile. Rachel Miszei-Ward explores the racial connotations of this, arguing that the poster puts forward the notion that Obama's reasonable, moderate and inclusive approach (his "whiteness") is here constructed as a superficial veneer that disguised his radicalism beneath (his true 'blackness') (2012, 183). Moreover, in branding Obama-Joker as "socialist," the poster continued the tendency after the collapse of the financial system in 2008 to equate any vaguely left-wing policy to alter the neoliberal *status quo* with potential anarchy and chaos, Obama viewed as posing a similar existential threat to the economic and political systems

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as The Joker himself. As Miszei-Ward argues of the Obama poster, "what is really feared is change as a disruption to American life, which can only lead to destruction and ultimately chaos" (184). Or, as Emanuelle Wessels and Mark Martinez put it, "The populist charge, that Obama is a masquerading trickster intent on redistributing white wealth to minorities through universal healthcare, is intertwined with the ways in which the popular culture villain has changed to become a reckless 'terrorist' who does not respect money, financial systems, and the 'established order' of medical care" (2015, 77).

In July 2012, James Holmes, having dyed his hair to look like Batman's arch-nemesis, opened fire on a midnight screening of *The Dark Knight Rises* in Aurora, Colorado, killing twelve and injuring seventy others. Fradley describes the incident as "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." (2013, 15). Mass shootings perpetrated by alienated white men proliferated in the years following, often motivated by racism and misogyny. There is certainly evidence in the films to support the view that Nolan's films should be read through the prism of 9/11 and the subsequent 'war on terror': The Joker wears a suicide vest and Batman exploits cutting-edge surveillance technology to spy on Gotham's population in the hope of catching him in *The Dark Knight*, and the beginning of *The Dark Knight Rises* demonstrates the ways in which The Dent Act (modelled on The Patriot Act, passed after 9/11) gives the city the power to imprison suspected criminals without recourse to due process. But the Obama-Joker poster and the mass shooting in Colorado suggest it is perhaps more instructive to consider what the films have to say about broader political developments. These phenomena can be interpreted as disturbing precursors to that which would come later: the backlash against the United States' first black president that would lead to the election of an openly racist authoritarian in

Donald Trump, the popularity of whom was built in part on a reliable bedrock of angry white men driven by their feelings of economic disenfranchisement and social exclusion.

Considering *The Dark Knight* trilogy in light of *Joker* is potentially revealing in this regard, as the films emerge at either end of the long interregnum between the near-collapse of the neoliberal economic order and the political turn toward populism that has emerged as a response to it. As Adam Tooze contends, "the financial and economic crisis of 2007-2012 morphed between 2013 and 2017 into a comprehensive political and geopolitical crisis of the post-cold war order." (2018, 20). The absence of Batman in *Joker*, Todd Phillips's origin story of Batman's arch-nemesis, renders stark his status as defender of the neoliberal *status quo* in Nolan's films. Phillips's Joker, Arthur Fleck, is a mentally ill, impoverished loner abused and discarded by a cruel, uncaring economic and political system, rather than a flamboyant trickster working with or alongside organized crime. Fleck responds to these circumstances by taking violent revenge against those he perceives to have wronged him, including a celebrity talk show host (Murray Franklin, played by Robert De Niro), and three suited financiers who taunt and beat him on Gotham's underground subway system. His violent actions inspire a popular movement against the rich elites of Gotham City, his supporters donning clown masks as they engage in violent protest and insurrection at the conclusion of the film. By removing Batman from the equation altogether, Jeffrey Brown argues *Joker* poses a challenge to the convention of the superhero film which posits the hero as the glorifier of the *status quo*. *With* Batman, the Joker becomes the embodiment of chaos, crime and evil in opposition to the hero's order, justice and good. *Without* him, "the Joker emerges as a counter-hegemonic embodiment of all the social failings that the status quo seeks to deny and dismiss. The film establishes the Joker as an icon of disaffected uprisings just as sympathetically as Batman is usually presented as a symbol of heroic social control."

(2021, 13). In essence, in his absence, Batman's status as the defender of an indefensible system becomes obvious.

The contrast in characterization of Bruce Wayne's father, Thomas, between *The Dark Knight* trilogy and *Joker* renders this vivid: consistent with the comic books, Nolan's films portray Wayne Sr. sympathetically, as a doctor and wealthy philanthropist seeking to help Gotham's poor, and at least partially ameliorate the effects of a desperately unequal and unjust economic system. In *Batman Begins*, for example, Wayne Sr. (Linus Roache) explains how in response to the economic depression that has plagued the city, he helped to build a cheap public transportation system. In this regard, the Wayne Sr. of Nolan's trilogy can be read fairly clearly as a reinforcement of the neoliberal theory that wealth "trickles down" from the top through the largesse and generosity of the rich. Consistent with the establishment perspective of society's millionaires and billionaires in the aftermath of 2008, Wayne Sr. is characterized as a "wealth creator," the kind of supposedly benevolent figure mythologized and defended by the mainstream press. By marked contrast, *Joker* renders Wayne Sr. a rich businessman who speaks contemptuously of Gotham's poor, describing them as envious, and blaming them for their own plight. He runs for the city's mayoralty in defence of the economic system that has created such stark inequalities. He is precisely the kind of individual at whom the violence and anger in the film is directed and, consistent with Batman mythology, he is murdered at the film's conclusion (though this time not in a mugging that goes awry, but by a violent protestor). The contrasting characterizations of Wayne Sr. demonstrate the extent to which Nolan's trilogy belongs firmly to the first phase of neoliberalism's crisis, at a point in which most mainstream rhetoric and significant financial resources were devoted to rescuing this system from collapse.

As Matthew Joseph Wolf-Meyer claims, "Batman's primary purpose is one of maintaining hegemonic stability and the position of the upper class, of which Bruce is a

part", in order to preserve "the hegemonic order, and particularly one based upon class hierarchies and the privilege of power." (2006, 193). To reinforce this point, the narratives of all three of Nolan's films see Batman/Bruce Wayne (Christian Bale) standing up against enemies that pose existential threats to Gotham. Batman defeats them all, often having to make significant ethical choices and compromises to save the city. In different ways, The Joker and Bane seek the destruction of the economic and political systems that undergird Gotham. Both could therefore be understood in Gramscian terms as "morbid symptoms" of the kind that emerge at moments of systemic crisis. As Milan Babic notes in relation to the current, ongoing crisis of the liberal international order,

> These symptoms are morbid because they show that the existing order suffers from existential problems that are unlikely to be solved within the limits of the old framework … a new, hegemonically stable order does not seem to be on the rise, ready to supplant the old one. This crisis period is thus shaped by morbidities that cannot be managed but at the same time do not represent a viable alternative for the future. (2020, 773)

The Joker, who has no respect for human systems, seeks to achieve social collapse by destroying faith in politics, whereas Bane attempts to foment an uprising against the city's social elite. Moreover, the narrative machinations of the latter film, which suggest Bane's populist revolution is nothing more than a front for The League of Shadows, a secret organization which considers Gotham as a corrupt, decadent and decaying city beyond redemption, is important in order to establish the worldview of the series (the League of Shadows also seek Gotham's destruction in the first instalment of the trilogy, *Batman Begins*). The Joker, Bane and The League of Shadows have no "viable alternative" to the problems Gotham faces: the choice we are faced with is a *status quo* of economic inequality and political failure, or apocalypse. In this regard, the films have been read as reflective of the political philosophy of Thomas Hobbes, "who argued that human beings in their natural

state are inclined to war and distrust. When the structures of social order are challenged by large-scale disasters, this 'natural state' rears its ugly head again, forcing representatives of that social order to step in and fight to reclaim the social construct." (Patterson 2008, 42). This may be true, but perhaps we should therefore consider the establishment response to the crisis of neoliberalism as Hobbesian, inasmuch as it sought to rescue and further entrench the economic order by successfully inculcating widespread fear and mistrust of any alternative social, political and economic formation: Rather than engage meaningfully with their calls for economic, racial and environmental justice, Occupy Wall Street, Black Lives Matter and Extinction Rebellion have all been characterized by the neoliberal establishment as violent, criminal threats to law and order (Darling 2011; Adams 2020; Moir 2021)

The Dark Knight reinforces the tenets of capitalist realism through its construction and characterization of The Joker. Though the comic books offer competing origin stories for the character, the iterations of the story on which *The Dark Knight* was based see his malevolent anarchism as born of circumstances owing to his impoverished background. In Alan Moore's *The Killing Joke* (1988), The Joker is an unnamed, unemployed engineer working for a chemical company who aids and abets criminals looking to rob the playing card company next door. Batman confronts him during the robbery, and he attempts to escape by jumping into the chemical plant's waste. His disfigurement, coupled with the fact his wife and unborn child die as a result of a faulty baby bottle heater, drives him insane to the extent he cannot remember what made him this way. Seemingly playing on the competing versions of the story offered in the comic books, this uncertainty is true of Heath Ledger's Joker in *The Dark Knight*, who offers competing narratives of how he got his scars. The first suggests they were perpetrated by his abusive, alcoholic father, and the second that they were self-inflicted in solidarity with his wife whose face was slashed by gambling sharks to whom she was indebted. The Joker's origin stories suggest his anger stems from

the cruel precarity foisted upon him by a broken, decaying society. As Richard D. Heldenfels suggests, "The existing social order – especially its demand for capital to ensure its survival – has given Bruce Wayne wealth and privilege but the Joker only poverty and despair … Batman / Bruce Wayne and their upper classes have caused the Joker's rage." (2015, 101). His aim, as he says to Harvey Dent (Aaron Eckhart), is to reveal to the gangsters and the police – ostensibly both sides of the social order the film constructs – "how pathetic their attempts to control things really are." His critique of a system that sees the lives of a soldier or a gangster as disposable because such deaths are expected, or "part of the plan", is a stark comment on the neoliberal system which has so convinced us that its injustices are natural and inevitable that we largely shrug our shoulders when confronted with them. As The Joker says, "Nobody panics when things go according to plan, even when the plan is horrifying", something that could easily be said of neoliberalism as a system of economic and political organization.

However, the inconsistencies in his story suggest he cannot be trusted. In some respects, it is tempting to read Nolan's Joker as precisely the kind of caricature of a dishonest welfare claimant demonized in the right-wing press in the years following the financial crisis, spinning melodramatic yarns as explanations or justifications of his criminality. In this regard, *The Dark Knight* does its utmost to ensure that the Joker's anarchistic revolution should be viewed only with suspicion and fear. This requires a comprehensive "othering" of The Joker in comparison with Batman who, we have established, is the embodiment of heterosexual, masculine, capitalist power. This is reinforced by his appearance. In marked contrast to the earlier styling of Jack Nicholson in Burton's *Batman* as a smooth-talking, nattily dressed 1930s-style gangster, Ledger's Joker is dirty, with greasy, stringy hair, slapdash make-up and dishevelled purple suit, connoting poverty and social marginality. In contrast, every aspect of Batman's costuming and equipment is black, connoting his sober,

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clean, responsible, adult seriousness, whereas The Joker employs "drag, makeup, visual pageantry, and other elements of camp to prove that the citizens of Gotham can be pushed into depravity" (Winstead 2015, 582). Therefore, not only does Batman's black costuming reflect his seriousness, but also his heterosexual masculinity, whereas The Joker's style suggests the film asks us to view his anarchic nihilism as not only proletarian but also queer, and therefore even further outside the bounds of hegemonic acceptability as established by the film. This further undermines The Joker's critique of the *status quo*, for which he has no coherent alternative. The Joker admits to having no rules and no plans, and "wouldn't know what to do" if he caught the metaphorical car, viewing instead the world as inherently chaotic and determined by chance. As Alfred (Michael Caine) says, "Some men just want to watch the world burn." What renders The Joker particularly threatening in a film so invested in the idea of restoring the *status quo* is his lack of interest in money, which he displays in typically theatrical fashion by burning his half of the cash paid to kill Batman. In equating "the world" with money, the film reinforces the capitalist realist sense that our economic system has become as naturalised a part of the social fabric as the air we breathe, and therefore such disregard is, as J. Hoberman argues, "one of the scariest things about the Joker." (2013, 185). In reducing The Joker's opposition to Batman to the desire to bring about a wholesale collapse of social, economic and political order in Gotham City, *The Dark Knight* reveals its capitalist realist credentials: As in the period during which the financial crisis took hold, any suggestion to reform or fundamentally alter the neoliberal settlement was caricatured as insane. Here, that insanity is characterised as proletarian queerness, in stark opposition to Batman's aristocratic, heterosexual masculinity.

The Dark Knight trilogy is somewhat confused by its attitude toward human nature, however. In perhaps the most famous example, The Joker's orchestrates a moral test whereby he rigs two boats with explosives, one populated with ordinary citizens, and the

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other with convicted criminals. He gives the passengers on each boat the trigger for the other, assuming that it is inevitable one will blow up the other, as he believes people to be entirely self-interested. In the event both groups of people decline the opportunity, apparently restoring faith in humanity. However, despite this, the masses are not to be trusted with the truth that Harvey Dent, previously viewed as the savior of Gotham City as a district attorney willing and able to stand up to crime and corruption, has turned into a violent criminal after the Joker murdered his girlfriend, Bruce Wayne's childhood friend, Rachel Dawes (Maggie Gyllenhaal). By bringing down Dent, The Joker has at least partially succeeded in proving "that beneath the superficial veneer of civilised society, man is little more than a brutal and savage animal." (McSweeney 2014, 120). It is for this reason that, after killing Dent, "Batman recognises that if the citizens of Gotham learn about Dent's turn to the dark side, their faith in law and justice will be ruined forever, so he decides to take the blame for the murders that Harvey committed and offers up Batman as the villain that the people need in order to maintain their belief in the system." (McSweeney, 122). Allowing Dent's image to remain unblemished suggests a deep suspicion of the masses, constructed as both infantile in their need to believe in a heroic figure, and potentially dangerous because of the concern as to how they might react if they knew the truth. *The Dark Knight* appears to arrive at the position that order – however it is restored and maintained, even if that means peddling untruths and undermining legal due process through the passage of The Dent Act – is preferable to the only alternative the film can imagine, which is the violent chaos embodied by The Joker. As Helena Bassil-Morozow argues, "The trickster film portrays the capitalist system as unstable, undermined by constant "stirrings" from "within"; ready to crumble, ready to be reduced to chaos." (2011, 93). The threat The Joker poses to the system articulates this vividly and clearly.

The Dark Knight is therefore very much a product of its moment, offering a moral compromise and restoration of a fragile social order more akin to a sigh of relief than an ideologically sound "happy ending." In this respect, rather than view it solely through the prism of the violations of constitutional and legal norms during the 'war on terror', it is instructive to think of *The Dark Knight* as embodying the spirit of the period of interregnum following the near-collapse of the neoliberal economic order. To save Gotham, Batman, in cahoots with his colleague Lucius Fox (Morgan Freeman), utilizes technology capable of spying on all the citizens of the city to find The Joker. While Fox objects to the wild (and unconstitutional) infringement of privacy, he acquiesces to Batman's demands on the basis that it is reasonable for men of benign intention to trample on constitutional norms in order to restore order. Many critics interpreted this as providing ideological support to the Patriot Act, legislation passed in the aftermath of 9/11 that radically expanded the surveillance abilities of law enforcement. This is no doubt a compelling reading, though it may be even more revealing to consider it in light of what was to come shortly thereafter. *The Dark Knight*'s rescue of Gotham's social, political and economic order at the conclusion of the film reinforces the central tenet of capitalist realism: while the system may be far from perfect (indeed, it may be obviously corrupt, manifestly inadequate, and seemingly doomed to failure), our governing elites have so successfully convinced us that the only alternative is violent disorder that we passively accept what we are given for fear of something even worse.

This compromised conclusion of *The Dark Knight* and its restoration of a fragile order in Gotham City presages a more comprehensive engagement with the neoliberal crisis in its sequel, *The Dark Knight Rises*. The film attracted considerable critical attention for its apparently conservative politics. Telling the story of a proletarian revolution in Gotham that functions as cover for The League of Shadows' attempt to use Wayne Enterprises' fusion

reactor to execute a genocidal destruction of the city, Mark Fisher described it as "a reactionary vision which can only imagine radical social transformation as catastrophic." (2012) Fradley suggests the film's political meanings are deliberately vague, so viewers of any persuasion would find something to support their worldview (20). However, it is difficult to see the film as ambivalent given the overwhelming evidence to the contrary. Bane is determined to show the people of Gotham the truth of their city, revealing the reality about Dent's crimes, and attempting to destroy their faith in the system as a precursor to bringing it down. He attacks the Stock Exchange, bankrupts Gotham's rich, and sets up a kangaroo court to exile and kill them. The court is presided over by Jonathan Crane (Cillian Murphy), the malevolent psychiatrist who was the main villain in *Batman Begins*, suggesting we should not view these events with anything other than horror. Wealthy CEOs are hauled in front of him and sentenced to death or exile, with the latter effectively amounting to a death sentence. Žižek's claim that the film worries at themes of economic inequality and proletarian revolution without taking a definitive perspective seems wide of the mark. As Todd McGowan suggests, while the film does highlight the injustice of Gotham's class system, "the primary voices of this indictment are those of the villains." (2012). The court scenes suggest that "the absence of the hetero-masculine power structure results in chaos, anarchy, and a world ruled by the lawless. It is the white male American dream that needs saving, and Batman shows up to deliver its salvation." (Winstead 2015, 583). Given that the revolution is prevented, Batman sacrifices himself to save Gotham from the explosion, and police officer John Blake (Joseph Gordon-Levitt) (whose real name is Robin) appears to have had Batman's mantle handed to him by the man himself at the conclusion, it seems the film is fairly definitive in its assessment that the restoration and maintenance of order, however imperfect, is contingent upon strong, male, vigilante action, and something to be celebrated.

The film's ideological standpoint can be further understood through the character of Selina Kyle (Anne Hathaway), the cat burglar who steals from the rich. She articulates her belief in a proletarian revolution at the beginning of the film, when she informs Wayne that he and his friends "better batten down the hatches, because when it hits, you're all going to wonder how you ever thought you could live so large and leave so little for the rest of us." She gives voice to the disenchantment with the persistence of the neoliberal settlement after 2008 that was embodied by the Occupy Wall Street protests, and consistently affirms her Robin Hood-like approach to theft where she claims to steal only from people with more than enough. However, the radical potential of the character as a counterhegemonic rebel is ultimately recuperated into a narrative which seeks the restoration of capitalist, patriarchal power and authority. By the conclusion of the film, Kyle seemingly abandons her radicalism, joins in the effort to defeat Bane, and stop Talia Al Ghul's (Marion Cotillard) attempt to destroy the city. An earlier clue that she is having second thoughts about a violent revolution against the superrich comes when she surveys the wreckage of a wealthy family's apartment. She picks up a framed photograph of the family, the glass on which is shattered, and describes it sentimentally as "someone's home." She appears doubtful when her friend celebrates its violent confiscation. Through Kyle, the film determines that violent revolution and summary justice are unacceptable means to achieve political change. In humanizing the moneyed victims of this revolution, many of whom have built their wealth on the relentless exploitation of human labour and natural resources, the film takes a fairly clear stance: Bane's call for the ordinary people of Gotham to seize their city from the rich is something to be feared and rejected, not celebrated or supported. Kyle's reconsideration of her position and ultimate support of Batman is confirmation of this: Rather than flee Gotham, which she beseeches Batman to do, she returns to play her part in restoring the hegemonic order.

With the benefit of hindsight, it is clear that the relationship between *The Dark Knight* trilogy and the politics of the time is worthy of reappraisal given the populist insurgencies in western democracies since the final instalment was released in 2012. In this light, it becomes even more obvious that Batman/Bruce Wayne should be viewed as the defender and protector of capital and establishment interests at a time when such forces and institutions had come under considerable scrutiny after the near-collapse of the financial system in 2008. By positing the white, heterosexual billionaire as the hero and protector of a *status quo* that benefits his interests, Nolan's films should be interpreted as conservative responses to the crisis in its initial phase. Wayne personifies the benign capitalist that right-wing discourse sought to defend against populist anger after 2008, and rehabilitate as an essential component in the recovery of the capitalist system after the recession. Following the billion-dollar success of *Joker* at the global box-office in 2019 which posits Batman's arch-nemesis not as the nihilistic anarchist of Nolan's film, but as an (anti)hero for whom we are invited to have some empathy as an economically disenfranchised social outcast, it is difficult to view *The Dark Knight* trilogy as vocalising anything other than a reinforcement of the neoliberal *status quo*. Indeed, *The Batman* (Matt Reeves, 2022) appears to take considerable inspiration from *Joker*. The film suggests The Riddler's (Paul Dano) hideous crimes are born of his political and economic marginality and, like Fleck, he inspires an army of the disaffected to rebel violently against the corrupt city establishment. Batman/Bruce Wayne (Robert Pattinson) is not the swaggering playboy of Nolan's trilogy but an addled recluse who comes to realise his vigilantism is an ineffective response to Gotham's social, political and economic problems: he fails to prevent The Riddler's grand scheme from coming to fruition. Unlike Nolan's trilogy where Gotham City is worth saving because the alternatives are shown to be far worse, *The Batman* portrays it as entirely irredeemable: damp, decaying, and rotten to its core, it is more akin to the unnamed

megalopolis in *Se7en* (David Fincher, 1995), and the film leaves us in no doubt that it is the rich, white men who slide easily between the worlds of politics, organised crime and big business who are to blame. *Joker* and *The Batman* demonstrate that, in celebrating the rich white man as our great defender and protector rather than the cause of so many of the world's ills – social, political, economic, environmental – Nolan's vision of the caped crusader is no longer the hero we deserve, or need.

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[i] For a snapshot of the critical consensus on *Batman Forever* (https://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/batman_forever) and *Batman and Robin* (https://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/1077027-batman_and_robin), please see *Rotten Tomatoes*.