

*Critic and crowd pleaser raucously uninspiring*

*Written by Jonathan Nolan*

*Directed by Christopher Nolan*

Christian Bale ... Bruce Wayne / Batman

Heath Ledger ... The Joker

Aaron Eckhart ... Harvey Dent

Michael Caine ... Alfred

Maggie Gyllenhaal ... Rachel Dawes

Gary Oldman ... Gordon

Morgan Freeman ... Lucius Fox

*Batman: Why do you want to kill me?*

*The Joker: [laughs] Kill you? I don't want to kill you! What would I do without you? Go back to ripping off mob dealers? No, no, you... you complete me.*

As we're leaving the theater, I ask Bill, of the other couple we went with, what he thinks of the movie. "Well, I feel it's just like the half-dozen previews—one of them was the new Bond flick—we had to sit thru: excessively loud and excessively violent." Bill pretty much nails it. Plus, it takes forever (152 minutes) to reach the end of this particularly long and convoluted bat cave. My take: if you like playing richly textured, complex, viscerally violent video games in surround-sound at 90 decibels, this movie is for you.

In terms of acclaim and popular appeal, the Dark Knight Batman ranks up there with the highest rated movies of all time; IMDb gives it an unheard of 9.3 rating, Rotten Tomatoes (RT) a 94%. The critics mostly render some version of the RT synopsis:

*"To say that Christopher Nolan's THE DARK KNIGHT is the best comic book adaptation does the film a bit of a disservice. It may be a Batman film, but this isn't a kid-friendly action movie full of the bams and pows of the original series. This is a pitch-black thriller with enough drama and tragedy to..."*

More or less to my point that the film is a comic-book graphic novel, dark in the manner of Sin City, with only feeble attempts at humor. (Actually, I found Sin City—for all it's gore and malevolent-universe premise—to have the refreshing quality of a meaningfully absolutist morality play... a dose of Mickey Spillane on steroids.) But Dark Knight does not ascend to Sin City's level of moral relevance to actual humans: too many contrivances of gimmickry, plot, and even character—two veteran all-star actors, Morgan Freeman and Michael Caine, play indecipherable menial roles. And, again, the slightest action is amped up with gratuitous noisy violence.

Thinking about violence in film and TV for a moment: when Bill first mentioned the film was too loud and violent, I had to pause. As most modern Americans, I guess I've become inured to high-volume sound systems in movie theaters and to violence on flickering screens everywhere.[1] Heck, it just didn't seem anything special to me... until I thought about it a minute. You know, Bill is absolutely right. All this screaming mayhem is so over the top awful—so horrifyingly mind-deadening and emotion-deadening to even the most sensitive persons—that it needs to be classified as a health hazard... at least as harmful as cigarettes or binge drinking. And this is the damage to ADULTS!

Back to the movie, clearly the actors are first rate and the dialog is entertaining. I particularly enjoy the incarnation of The Joker by Heath Ledger, which may bring Heath a posthumous Oscar nod; the writers give him some clever lines... like the "you complete me" phrase in the above quote (from Jerry MaGuire). But you know what I'm not buying? I'm not buying that this Batman flick is better than other comic-book-inspired movies because of it's dark humor; aside from the rare Joker line, nothing in this movie is humorous, dark or otherwise. In fact it's uncommonly depressing. I suppose Knight is similar to the later Spider Man films, in which we're to solemnly consider the deep emotional conflicts presented to a post-pubescent boy who has been given superhuman powers.

My friends, these are movies (and movie advocates) that take themselves way too seriously. I liked the older Batmans, even the earlier Supermans and Spider Man because they were cleverly tongue-in-cheek about extraordinary powers. They had an innocence that made them entertaining. Qua comic books, I still did not regard them in the same league with true movie art. But give them their due as mind candy and eye candy. Further, the earlier stuff never really had the violence level we're seeing today.

I have a question. Does anyone remember in the old days when the cops had a suspect how the detective and possibly his deputy walked up to the suspect's residence, knocked on the door, and questioned him? Even when the suspect became the sure-thing perpetrator, the detective would walk up to the door, knock, be allowed in, present the ironclad case, and the suspect would voluntarily surrender into custody. Remember how civilized and effective it was bringing someone to justice?! Today, the police don't even question a witness without sending in a SWAT team... to bust down the doors and terrorize his family and neighbors. Talk about violence! Pure product of the WOD! [2]

So let's give the fond critics and moviegoers their due. Dark Knight is a serious movie, but is what it is serious about worthy of our appreciation? Nah! The hero-villain conflict in Dark Knight is distressingly murky. Who's a mother to love? Poor Joker with his abusive father, maybe he's not so bad after all. Perhaps Batman does need him. And is Batman merely another form of evil since whenever he smashes a bad guy, it seems the political system adjusts to create more bad guys to take his place. Moral relativism lives, except I'm not so sure this writer's version of moral relativism allows for any "good" at all.

And there you have my principal antagonism toward Dark Knight: it's trashing the good by obscuring its qualities. I have the feeling its creators are (pretentiously) advocating "life as a sewer" with the only possible redemption to make some emotional altruistic choice in a ludicrous emergency situation. Even that doesn't do you much good. Life still sucks, and nobody is any good. In contrast, I find Warren Beatty's 2002 masterpiece Dick Tracy—a serious morality play, though full of comic flair—to be brilliant and positive: a shining beacon of psychological health.

Finally, I suspect Dark Knight is some evidence our culture, from Ebert and Roeper on down, is succumbing to brutish childishness as some sort of campy virtue... highly dangerous when the species is facing extinction via the Kleptocons. Wake up, people! This movie is expensive crap masquerading as high art. It's hazardous to your moral sensibilities, not to mention your eardrums.

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[1] I've noted recently the proliferation of UFC (Ultimate Fighting Championships) fights on the sports-bar-format big TV screens—that have also been proliferating in places where you used to be able to have a quiet beer or two and civilized conversation with your peers. Talk about tossing a big ol' turd in the punch bowl! If you haven't seen UFC "competition," think of two guys in a ring kicking and hitting each other senseless, then when one of them is down the other straddles him and pounds him on the head. It's ultimate barbarism and Brokeback at the same time; utterly nauseating to anyone who has a shred of feeling for, like, you know, other people.

[2] War on Drugs

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