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## **Darker Than Night: The Joker as a Symptom of the War on Terror in *The Dark Knight***

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### **Outlaw Hero vs. Official Hero**

One of the main themes in superhero films and their comic book sources is the relationship between justice and law. Since Superman first appeared in DC Comics' *Action Comics* in 1938 and was subsequently adapted for various media including film and television, superhero stories have consistently evoked the idea that the law alone is not a sufficient condition for justice, and, for this reason, that a super power is always needed to eradicate evil crimes from society.

Like previous superhero stories, Warner Bros. Picture's *The Dark Knight* (2008), which was directed by Christopher Nolan and released as a sequel to *Batman Begins* (2005), deals with the superhero's defeat of an evil that is beyond the control of police power. However, this film shows a tendency to define good and evil in terms of their relative values rather than absolute ones. Batman

(Christian Bale) is a heroic character who fights crime for justice. But on the other hand, he is frequently confronted with an anxiety that his own exceptionality as a figure outside the law might lead to the destruction of the very society that he wants to save. This anxiety is problematized in the opening scenes where Batman finds some copycat vigilantes who try to imitate him on the street. When Batman subdues the drug criminals and the Scarecrow (Cillian Murphy), he warns the fake batmen, "Don't let me find you out here again." In response, one of these fake batmen asks him, "What gives you the right? What's the difference between you and me?" Batman answers, "I'm not wearing hockey pads." His somewhat amusing response intends to draw a rigid boundary between the authentic superhero and its copycats, but it does not provide the right answer to the question. In fact, Batman is himself given no absolute right to act outside the law on behalf of justice. The copycat vigilantes, appearing as they do at the film's start, thus serve to frame the film in terms of the problem of extra-legal justice and force Batman to rethink his role as the defender of justice for the city.

Batman's agony over his identity as a superhero leads him to search out a new hero who can stand up for what is right without going above the law. This hero is Harvey Dent (Aaron Eckhart), a new District Attorney of Gotham City, whom Batman considers as a good successor to his role. Bruce Wayne, the other side of Batman, offers a fundraising event for Dent and there says to Rachel (Maggie Gyllenhaal), who is Bruce's old friend as well as the Assistant D.A. of Gotham City: "[Harvey Dent] locked up half of the City's criminals, and he did it without wearing a mask. Gotham needs a

hero with a face.”

The hero with a face is an official hero, standing as a counterpart to the masked hero such as Batman. Even though Batman’s desire to replace himself with an official hero ultimately proves to be a failure, it initially sets up a parallel narrative line between Batman and Harvey Dent. This type of narrative organization resembles the characterization of heroes in the classical Western genre. Batman resembles the outlaw hero of the Western such as Shane (Alan Ladd) in *Shane* (1953), Tom (John Wayne) in *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* (1962), or Rick (Humphrey Bogart) in *Casablanca* (1942), since he is a masked hero who fights against evil according to his own behavioral code.<sup>1)</sup> As the District Attorney for the city, Harvey Dent resembles the official hero of the Western who functions as a counterpart to the outlaw hero. However, the difference between this film and the classical Western is that Batman shows no reluctance in his fight against the evil. Unlike the outlaw heroes of the Western, Batman firmly believes in his mission for society because he recognizes the law’s insufficiency to achieve justice. Furthermore, while the triangular love relationship among Batman, Harvey Dent and Rachel starts from a conventional melodramatic code also used

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1) As for the notions of the outlaw hero and the official hero, I follow Robert Ray’s paradigm in his discussion of classical Hollywood cinema. Ray argues for these notions as follows: “Embodied in the adventurer, explorer, gunfighter, wanderer, and loner, the outlaw hero stood for that part of the American imagination valuing self-determination and freedom from entanglements. By contrast, the official hero, normally portrayed as a teacher, lawyer, politician, farmer, or family man, represented the American belief in collective action, and the objective legal process that superseded private notions of right and wrong.” Robert Ray, *A Certain Tendency of the Hollywood Cinema, 1930-1980* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1985), 59.

by the Western, it resolves here with the tragedy of Rachel's death and Harvey Dent's disfigurement.

In fact, Rachel seems to make a better stereotyped character from the Western than the two others. She is an old friend of Bruce Wayne/Batman and she already knows his double identity. She knows that he loves her, but she cannot marry him because she does not think he can settle down and raise a family with her. Finally, she wants to tell him of her decision in a letter, which she asks Bruce's butler Alfred (Michael Caine) to deliver to him at the right time. The letter cannot be delivered to Bruce because Alfred does not want to shatter Bruce's illusory beliefs about her after her death. The truth that only Bruce does not know is as follows:

I need to be honest and clear. I'm going to marry Harvey Dent. I love him, and I wanna spend the rest of my life with him. When I told you that if Gotham no longer needed Batman, we could be together. And I meant it. But now I'm sure the day won't come when you no longer need Batman. I hope it does. And if it does, I will be there, but as your friend. I'm sorry to let you down. If you lose your faith in me, please keep your faith in people.

She refuses to be Bruce's lover, and in doing so she tries to affirm the necessity of Batman's presence for the people of Gotham City. However, her wish does not result in a happy ending as she is killed and Harvey Dent becomes irrevocably damaged by the Joker's willful intrigues against Batman.

## The Joker as Forger

The Joker (Heath Ledger) is the most problematic character of the film. Indeed, he is the villain as well as the main cause of all the big troubles in the city. But he is not just confined to the kind of stereotyped image of an evil guy found in most Hollywood superhero films. What differentiates him from other criminals in this film (as well as from typical evil characters in most Hollywood superhero films) is that he does not seek an end in what he does. He enjoys burning piles of money and killing his own men without hesitation because he does not have a goal directing his criminal activity. Even his claim to unmask Batman by killing innocent people seems to be merely a part of his game for reveling in chaos. His acts are lacking any *telos*; he simply enjoys chaos, as he explains to the severely injured Harvey Dent:

I don't have a plan. The mob has plans, the cops have plans. You know what I am, Harvey? I'm a dog chasing cars. I wouldn't know what to do if I caught one. I just do things. I'm a wrench in the gears. I hate plans. Yours, theirs, everyone's. Maroni has plans. Gordon has plans. Schemers trying to control their worlds. I am not a schemer. I show schemers how pathetic their attempts to control things really are. So when I say that what happened to you and your girlfriend wasn't personal, you know I'm telling the truth.

The Joker is clearly an embodiment of chaos. His actions are constantly forking into unpredictable paths all around Gotham city. When he is captured by Gordon (Gary Oldman) with Batman's help, the Joker's imprisonment proves to be part of his own plot to save

Lau (Chin Han) from the prison. And then he immediately begins to spin another plot: the bombing of Gotham City General Hospital. His reason for this plot is simple; he does not want the Batman's identity to be revealed by anybody else except him. So he publicly announces another game that he wants to play:

I had a vision of a world without Batman. The Mob ground out a little profit and the police tried to shut them down one block at a time. And it was so boring. I've had a change of heart. I don't want Mr. Reese spoiling everything, but why should I have all the fun? Let's give someone else a chance. If Coleman Reese isn't dead in 60 minutes, then I blow up a hospital.

The Joker explicitly enjoys his game to unloose chaos by betting on someone's life (including Batman, Rachel, Harvey Dent, and even himself). In doing so, he takes a position in flight from the organized system represented by the law.

The Joker's refusal to seek any object in his criminal acts paradoxically deconstructs the predominant power of the law, which always tends to imprison people within its order. His refusal also functions as a power of "the false" (in the Deleuzean sense) as it interrogates the ethical position of Batman, who remains exceptional to the law.

For Deleuze, "the power of the false" is a concept used to introduce a way of thinking beyond the traditional binary opposition between the true and the false. By this concept, Deleuze argues that thought "can be kept moving, not toward the predestined end, but toward the new and unforeseen in terms of what Bergson calls the

Open or ‘creative evolution’.”<sup>2)</sup> The power of the false thus creates “a serial image of time, an image of becoming rather than being-becoming other in thought and becoming other in identity.”<sup>3)</sup> It is the “forger” who works to make this idea of becoming-otherness possible by provoking “undecidable alternatives and inexplicable differences between the true and the false.”<sup>4)</sup>

The Joker becomes a forger in two respects. First, he does so by his own non-identifiable status. We don’t know his origin, his real name, nor any of his personal information. He is entirely anonymous, as we see in Gordon’s answer to the mayor’s question of who the Joker is: “Nothing. No DNA, no fingerprints. Clothing is custom, no tags or brand labels. Nothing in his pockets but knives and lint. No name, no other alias.” Thus, his identity as “outis” (nobody) operates as a sufficient condition for his undermining of the law’s limit. Second, the Joker becomes an undecidable character when he is brought together with Batman. In fact, the Joker and Batman are two exceptional characters, who do not depend on the clichéd code of behavior in their pursuit of actions. As McGowan argues, they are “completely isolated because they exist on a different ethical plane” from that of the society.<sup>5)</sup> In this sense, the Joker and Batman function as two sides of a coin. We can see this in the dialogues between Batman and the Joker during the interrogation:

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2) D.N. Rodowick, *Gilles Deleuze’s Time Machine*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997), 85.

3) *Ibid.*, 141.

4) Deleuze, Gilles, *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*. Trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Robert Galeta. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), 132.

5) Todd McGowan, “The exceptional darkness of The Dark Knight,” *Jump Cut: A Review of Contemporary Media*, 51 (Spring 2009): par 47.

JOKER. I wanted to see what you'd do. And you didn't disappoint. You let five people die. Then you let Dent take your place.

BATMAN. Where's Dent?

JOKER. Those Mob fools want you gone so they can get back to the way things were. But I know the truth. There's no going back. You've changed things. Forever.

BATMAN. Then why do you wanna kill me?

JOKER. [LAUGHS] I don't wanna kill you. What would I do without you? Go back to ripping off Mob dealers? No, no. No. No, you ... You complete me.

We don't know to what extent the Joker is truthful when he says that Batman completes him. However, one thing is quite clear: Batman is what the Joker is for. Batman is the ultimate cause for his never-ending process of creating chaos. What about Batman? Is the Joker also what he is for? As the dialogue between Batman and Gordon shows in the last scene of the film, Batman firmly believes that the Joker cannot win the game against him. However, in the same scene, Batman refuses to consider himself a superhero. Instead, he accepts himself as a criminal who kills innocent people. As he tells Gordon, "You either die a hero, or you live long enough to see yourself become the villain."

## **The Joker as a Symptom of 9/11**

Joker's causal dependence upon Batman provides a clue to understanding him as a symptomatic character reflecting the Bush administration's "war on terror" after 9/11. One intriguing connection



between this film and 9/11 can be found in Andrew Klavan's article, "What Bush and Batman Have in Common," originally published in *The Wall Street Journal* in the summer of 2008. In this article, Klavan reviews the film as "a paean of praise to the fortitude and moral courage that has been shown by George W. Bush in this time of terror and war."<sup>6</sup> Going further, Klavan's article also compares George W. Bush to a superhero like Batman:

Like W, Batman is vilified and despised for confronting terrorists in the only terms they understand. Like W, Batman sometimes has to push the boundaries of civil rights to deal with an emergency, certain that he will re-establish those boundaries when the emergency is past.<sup>7</sup>)

By placing George W. Bush in an exceptional position that exists beyond his legitimacy as the president of the United States, Klavan transforms him into a man of his own private code rather than an embodiment of the public commitment to law. This configuration, however, can lead to a misinterpretation of the film's heroic codes. First of all, Klavan ignores the anxiety Batman suffers due to his role as an exceptional hero and thereby misses how destructive this heroism can be to both the man himself and the society for which he fights. Batman is fully aware that he is not the hero that Gotham needs, even though he might be the one that they deserve. When he is faced with Harvey Dent's death, he persuades Gordon to accept

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6) Andrew Klavan, "What Bush and Batman Have in Common," *The Wall Street Journal*, July 25, 2008, [http://www.christiancinema.com/catalog/newsdesk\\_info.php?newsdesk\\_id=688](http://www.christiancinema.com/catalog/newsdesk_info.php?newsdesk_id=688).

7) Ibid.

reality by repeating what Harvey Dent told him in the earlier scene: “You either die a hero, or you live long enough to see yourself become the villain.” He decides to take the role of the villain by making Harvey an official hero; and after Harvey himself becomes a villain, Batman wants to take all the responsibility for Harvey. Batman is thus ready to tolerate the social disapproval of his identity as a superhero. And he wishes to rid himself of his role as exceptional hero and to remain invisible and silent to society.

Batman’s characterization of his own identity in society signals an intention directly opposite to that which Klavan ascribes it. Batman is deeply obsessed with the ethical dilemma caused by his attempts to achieve his goal. One typical example is his attempt to spy on the entire city in order to capture the Joker by using a computer system based on the cell phone sonar technology, as shown in the following scene:

BATMAN. Beautiful, isn’t it?

LUCIUS. Beautiful. Unethical. Dangerous. You’ve turned every cell phone in Gotham into a microphone.

BATMAN. And a high-frequency generator-receiver.

LUCIUS. You took my sonar concept and applied it to every phone in the city. With half the city feeding you sonar, you can image all of Gotham. This is wrong.

BATMAN. I’ve gotta find this man, Lucius.

LUCIUS. At what cost?

BATMAN. The database is null-key encrypted. It can only be accessed by one person.

LUCIUS. This is too much power for one person.

BATMAN. That’s why I gave it to you. Only you can use it.

LUCIUS. Spying on 30 million people isn't part of my job description.

BATMAN. This is an audio sample. If he talks within range of any phone in the city, you can triangulate his position.

LUCIUS. I'll help you this one time. But consider this my resignation.

As long as this machine is at Wayne Enterprises, I won't be.

BATMAN. When you are finished, type in your name.

Like Alfred Pennyworth, Lucius Fox (Morgan Freeman) acts not only as a faithful ally but also as an honest voice of conscience to Batman. His critical response is based upon the unethical aspect of Batman's intention to justify an improper and wrong method for his goal. As Lucius mentions, the society will be in danger of totalitarianism, if one person (or one absolute power) can control all the people by its omniscient surveillance system. Batman also recognizes the danger of his method, so he wants to limit its use to just once. Lucius' name, which Batman wants Lucius to type in after the mission, is actually the password to make the system self-destruct.

This way that Batman chooses in agony seems to be quite opposite to the way that the Bush administration chose for the War on Terror. In reaction to the 9/11 terrorists' attack, the administration worked diligently to legitimize an ever-increasing extension of surveillance and security, which exceptionally allows the acts of eavesdropping on telephone calls, monitoring emails, and tracking movements by satellites, all without judicial permission. As exemplified in Batman's monitoring system, the absolute power to control people in the form of data-veillance systems functions more as violent and dangerous than fair and balanced in any society. Batman is aware of this danger, while it is not quite clear that the Bush administration was

also aware of it. And it is for that reason that Kalvan's likening of George Bush to Batman must be deemed faulty. As McGowan concisely points out, the crucial difference between Batman and George W. Bush is the attitude each takes towards the violation of the law: "he [Batman] accepts that his willingness to embrace this type of exceptionality constitutes him as a criminal."<sup>8)</sup>

President Bush, in consideration of this drastic difference from Batman, better resembles Harvey Dent, District Attorney of Gotham City, than Batman. In fact, Batman functions like the outlaw hero figure of the Western. He fights against injustice outside the bounds of the law by disguising himself with a mask. As noted earlier, upon recognizing the problem of his exceptional identity, Batman attempts to relinquish his exceptional status by identifying Harvey Dent as a public figure for heroism. Batman desires to replace his masked exceptionality with an unmasked hero who can keep the balance between law and justice. And, at first, Harvey Dent looks to be a good candidate for such a hero. In the first sequence of the film, he appears calm, innocent, and confident in all he plans to do. When the mobster attempts to shoot him in open court, Harvey maintains such an equable manner that he is able to subdue the mobster and inform the crime boss Maroni (Eric Roberts) about the mobster's gun in an even-tempered attitude: "Carbon fiber, .28 caliber, made in China. If you want to kill a public servant, Mr. Maroni, I recommend you buy American." Along with an amusing joke, he expresses his confidence in the justice that he believes in. In spite of

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8) McGowan, "The Exceptional Darkness," par 27.

all these good and positive aspects of his character, Harvey Dent is portrayed as an imperfect hero. The fatal defect of Harvey Dent's heroism in this film is his vulnerability to the loss of his values. In the same court scene, Harvey flips his coin that his father gave him. When Rachel asks him how he can leave something important to chance, he says, "I will make my own luck." Since the coin proves to be holding two identical sides, it functions as a sign that Harvey identifies his will to mission with his fortune. He is that optimistic about his life.

Harvey's optimistic attitude partly explains why he had never failed in his career before. And this same attitude is why he becomes so vulnerable when a terrible event unexpectedly happens against his own will. When he loses his lover Rachel as well as half of his face due to the Joker's conspiracy, he becomes a two-faced monster. He begins to wander around the street for his personal revenge. He threatens several cops who he thinks are involved in Rachel's death and determines whether or not to kill them by a flip of his lucky coin. The coin too has changed after his injury. The burnt side clearly marks that the two sides are now different. Harvey's act of flipping this coin for his decision regarding murder is reminiscent of the psychopathic killer Anton Chigurh (Javier Bardem) in *No Country for Old Men* (2007), who tossed his coin to decide whether he would kill the clerk of a convenience store. In fact, by using this method of chance, Harvey kills Detective Wuertz (Ron Dean) in a bar as well as the criminal boss Maroni and his men. He even holds Gordon's family hostage and threatens to kill one of Gordon's children. After becoming a two-faced man, Harvey transforms himself

from a righteous defender of law and justice into a psychopathic killer. This drastic change in Harvey Dent seems to be in parallel with the change that the Bush administration's War on Terror. The War on Terror is based on the logic that the United States are in an emergency situation after the terrorists' attack and the situation requires a variety of extraordinary actions to safeguard its people. One of these extraordinary actions is to legitimize torture as a normal practice during the interrogation of any person suspected of being affiliated with a terrorist organization. One typical torturing case was exemplified in the incidents of abuse and torture of terrorist suspects by U.S. soldiers at the Guantanamo Bay detention camp. Here we can see two aspects of exceptionality in the War on Terror: on the one hand, the Bush administration needs to set up exceptional actions of surveillance and security beyond the limit of the law; on the other hand, the administration exceptionally allows the U.S. military force to torture any suspected member of a terrorist organization in the name of justice. The former case is related to Batman's agony of making illegal use of private information for his goal of capturing Joker. The latter case is related to Harvey's transformation from good to evil. These two aspects function as two sides of a coin both in the film and the Bush administration.

It is quite evident that the symptoms of the War on Terror are inscribed in both Batman's agony regarding his ethical dilemma and Harvey's turn from a public hero into a psychopathic killer. And these symptoms certainly reflect the paranoia that American society has sometimes demonstrated. We can find a clue to these symptoms in the character of Joker. In the last sequence of the film where

Batman pushes Joker in the, Joker makes a comment on his relationship with Batman and Harvey Dent:

JOKER. Oh, you. You just couldn't let me go, could you? This is what happens when an unstoppable force meets an immovable object. You truly are incorruptible, aren't you? Huh? You won't kill me out of some misplaced sense of self-righteousness. And I won't kill you, because you're just too much fun. I think you and I are destined to do this forever.

BATMAN. You'll be in a padded cell forever.

JOKER. Maybe we could share one. You know, they'll be doubling up the rate. This city's inhabitants are losing their minds.

BATMAN. This city just showed you that it's full of people ready to believe in good.

JOKER. Until their spirit breaks completely. Until they get a good look at the real Harvey Dent and all the heroic things he'd done. You didn't think I'd risk losing the battle for Gotham's soul in a fistfight with you? No. You need an ace in the hole. Mine's Harvey.

BATMAN. What did you do?

JOKER. I took Gotham's white knight and I brought him down to our level. It wasn't hard. See, madness, as you know, is like gravity. All it takes is a little push. [Laughing]

In this last dialogue with Batman, Joker mentions the reasons that both of them cannot remove each other. From Joker's perspective, he goes along with Batman as if they were two sides of the same coin. He insists that he himself cannot be separated from Batman because they are destined to do the same fight forever. In this schema, Joker becomes an embodiment of dark power that inspires people to destroy. Complementing his evil partner, Batman becomes an

embodiment of exceptional power that inspires people to rethink the definition of justice beyond the limit of law. In this respect, both aspects, when combined together, can cause American society to experience a paranoia wherein exceptionality functions as a normal code after the Bush administration's actions in response to the 9/11 attack. And since the heroism for both Batman and Harvey Dent is undermined by the Joker's deconstruction of the hidden violence of law and justice, the Joker can be understood as a figure who symptomizes the collective paranoia of American society with respect to "the war on terror," which was done in the name of justice.



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## Abstract

# **Darker Than Night: The Joker as a Symptom of the War on Terror in *The Dark Knight***

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This essay aims to discuss the symptomatic aspects of 9/11 in Christopher Nolan's *The Dark Knight* (2008). Like its former sequel and other superhero films, *The Dark Knight* also deals with the superhero's defeat of an evil that is beyond the control of police power. However, this film shows a tendency to define good and evil in terms of their relative values rather than absolute ones. Batman (Christian Bale) is a heroic character who fights crime for justice. But on the other hand, he is frequently confronted with an anxiety that his own exceptionality as a figure outside the law might lead to the destruction of the very society that he wants to save. This anxiety is problematized in the opening scenes where Batman finds some copycat vigilantes who try to imitate him on the street. The copycat vigilantes, appearing as they do at the film's start, thus serve to frame the film in terms of the problem of extra-legal justice and force Batman to rethink his role as the defender of justice for the city. The Joker is also a problematic character. Indeed, he is the villain as well as the main cause of all the big troubles in the city. However, what differentiates him from other criminals in this film is that he does not seek an end in what he does. He enjoys burning piles of money and killing his own men without hesitation because he does not have a goal directing his criminal activity. His acts are lacking in any telos and he simply enjoys chaos. This characteristic of the Joker provides a clue to understanding him as a symptomatic character reflecting the Bush administration's "war on terror" after 9/11. Since the heroism for both Batman and Harvey Dent is undermined by the Joker's deconstruction

of the hidden violence of law and justice, the Joker can be understood as a figure who symptomizes the collective paranoia of American society with respect to “the war on terror,” which was done in the name of justice.

**Key Words**

The War on Terror, Surveillance, Super Hero, Justice, Law, Batman, Joker