

ROMANCING THE SHADOW

THE BATMAN (MATT REEVES, 2022) OR THE EXILE OF DARKNESS

by Lorenzo Marras

«Speak, too, you too, speak! [...] Be there. But do not separate the no from the yes. Give meaning to your saying: give it the shadow. [...] True is the one who speaks shadows.
Paul Celan¹

«Hope is not in laughter and fullness. Hope is in tears, in risk, and in their silence».
André Neher²

«Fear is a tool. They think I'm hiding in the shadows. But I am the shadows».
The Batman, 2022



¹ «Sprich auch du [...] Doch scheide das Nein nicht vom Ja/ Gib deinem Spruch auch den Sinn: gib ihm den Schatten [...] Wahr spricht, wer Schatten spricht». P. Celan, *Sprich auch du* (1955). The epigraph, intentionally not literal, is by the author.

² «L'espoir n'est pas dans le rire et dans la plénitude. L'espoir est dans les larmes, dans le risque et dans leur silence» in A. Neher, *L'exil de la parole. Du silence biblique au silence d'Auschwitz*, Paris, Seuil, p. 256. The translation is by the author.

INTRO

Batman is a cultural icon, a complex character, and a phenomenon that has permeated American popular imagination for more than eighty years in various iterations and across different media. Each of these iterations reflects not only the sensibility of the authors who have worked on it, but also - and perhaps most importantly - the social, cultural, and historical context of its time.³ In this context, it's impossible to account for all the different forms, nuances, and symbolic layers that have characterized Batman's imagination and multiverse over the years.

Batman, in short, has assumed many identities throughout his history, sometimes entirely distinct from one another. One could describe him as a 'fluid' character. Thus, confining him to a single depiction would likely mean impoverishing his myth and charm. At the same time, every interpreter of Batman - whether in academia or the fandom world - always brings their own idea of who Batman is or should be, and this analysis is no exception.⁴

In this sense, what follows is "one" interpretation of the character, and, of course, it's not without its own shortcomings, uncertainties, and biases. Nevertheless, the author believes that, as with any myth or fairy tale, and especially as Dennis O'Neil did in his «Batbible» in the 1990s, it's possible to trace certain recurring themes, archetypal aspects, and structures through the ages, expressions, imaginary worlds, and media in which Batman has appeared. These elements allow us to define the main characteristics and expressive structures of the character and his universe.

Our focus is on what we consider the most interesting themes within Batman's narrative universe. Through the lens of his latest incarnation, and to the best of our ability, we also attempt a provisional exploration of the historical and aesthetic evolution of the cinematic Batman. **WARNING:** While we've tried to avoid major plot **spoilers**, arguments and references may still reveal some details.

SYNOPSIS

Two years spent patrolling the streets as Batman (Robert Pattinson), striking fear into the hearts of criminals, have dragged Bruce Wayne deep into the darkness of Gotham City. With few trusted allies - Alfred Pennyworth (Andy Serkis) and Police Lieutenant James Gordon (Jeffrey Wright) - among the corrupt web of city officials and high-profile figures, the lone vigilante has become the only embodiment of vengeance among his fellow citizens. When a killer targets Gotham's elite with a series of heinous schemes, a trail of cryptic clues leads the world's greatest detective to investigate the underworld, encountering characters such as Selina Kyle / alias Catwoman (Zoë Kravitz), Oswald

³ See G. Weldon, *The Caped Crusade. Batman and The Rise of Nerd Culture*, New York, Simon & Schuster, 2016 (Ebook Edition).

⁴ On the issue of a «Batman canon» see K.K. Durand's *Batman's Canon: Hybridity and the Interpretation of the Superhero* in K.K. Durand and M.K. Leig (eds.), *Riddle Me This, Batman! Essays on the Universe of the Dark Knight*, McFarland & Company, Jefferson-London, pp. 81-92.

Cobblepot / alias The Penguin (Colin Farrell), Carmine Falcone (John Turturro), and Edward Nashton / alias The Riddler (Paul Dano). As evidence begins to lead him closer to the solution and the scope of the criminal's plans becomes clear, Batman must forge new alliances, unmask the culprit, and bring justice to the abuse of power and corruption that have long plagued Gotham City.⁵

«Trailer The Batman»

(RE)INTRODUCING THE BATMAN

«The Riddler: When is a man a city? When it's Batman or when it's Gotham? I'd take either answer. Batman is this city. You have to understand that».⁶

«Gotham City, though not directly based on a specific city, represents any American city. Gotham also has the malleability to represent any temporal moment so that it may reflect real-world concerns and threats. The various depictions of Gotham City throughout the Batman franchise effectively tap into present day cultural anxieties, and, through time, the franchise has notably represented particular cultural and historical moments».⁷



Le catene della colpa (*The Chains of Guilt*). Thus, through the Italian title of Jacques Tourneur's classic (*Out of The Past*, 1947), one could ironically describe the latest cinematic incarnation of Batman by Matt Reeves and portrayed by Robert Pattinson as the Dark Knight. This time, in contrast to Christopher Nolan's previous Batman film

⁵ [Official Warner Bros Pictures Synopsis](#). All images featured in the essay, unless otherwise indicated, are Jonathan Olley/TM & © DC Comics 2021, Warner Bros. Entertainment Inc © 2021. All Rights Reserved.

⁶ N. Gaiman, *When Is a Door: The Secret Origin of The Riddler*, in *Secret Origins Special*, DC, 1, 1989.

⁷ E. McCrystal, *Gotham City Living. Social Dynamics in The Batman Comics and Media*, London-New York, Bloomsbury, 2021, p. 1.

series with Christian Bale as the lead actor,⁸ Pattinson's Batman is undeniably dark and occasionally brutal. Darkness and shadows are the essence of his character, a constant presence that he embraces and draws strength from. It's not something he can simply don and doff like a mere «costume».

Considering the revered status of [Nolan's trilogy](#) within the fandom, which many, though not the author, consider the best interpretation of the character,⁹ Reeves faced the

⁸ In this context, we do not consider Zack Snyder's portrayal of Batman with Ben Affleck as lead actor (in [Batman vs. Superman: Dawn of Justice](#) [2016] and [Zack Snyder's Justice League](#) [2021]). This decision isn't based on expressive value but rather stems from our view that this Batman belongs to a different continuity, specifically that of the Justice League. That being said, despite the numerous issues and the turbulent history surrounding both the films and the character's development, we find Snyder's version to be a compelling non-canonical «interpretation» of Batman. This interpretation explores a Batman who has lost his way, slowly descending into the darkness he has always fought against. This portrayal draws significant inspiration from Frank Miller's controversial reimagining of Batman in the 1980s, which itself faced some misconceptions.

These controversies, notably those directed at Tim Burton's Batman in 1992, revolve around the shift in Batman's stance regarding the possibility of «killing» criminals. It has become a canonical rule that Batman not only abstains from using firearms but, more importantly, «does not kill.» This principle of Batman refraining from taking lives was explicitly defined in the «Batbible» of the 1990s, overseen by Dennis O'Neil, who served as the «group editor for the company's Batman titles» from 1986 to 2000. This document served as a foundational guide that every author involved in the Batman universe had to adhere to under his guidance.

⁹ As far as possible, within this analysis, we aim to elucidate why, contrary to popular opinion, we do not perceive Christopher Nolan's trilogy as a wholly successful representation of Batman. Regrettably, a thorough examination of this topic would necessitate an entire parallel essay, so we will confine ourselves to some brief observations. The primary issue lies with *The Dark Knight* (2008) and *The Dark Knight Rises* (2012). In an endeavor to deconstruct Batman's mythology in a «hard» and «realistic» manner, heavily influenced by the style of the [TV series «24»](#) and the moral ambiguity of its protagonist, Jack Bauer, these films reshape Batman into something distinct from his various incarnations. This transformation results in the loss of many facets that have traditionally defined his psychology, iconography, and mythology. While *Batman Begins* (2005), with its numerous references and citations from the Batman universe, maintains its identity as a definable Batman film, the subsequent two installments introduce a more intricate and elusive interpretation. It's essential to note that this doesn't imply that they cannot be appreciated as exceptional films in their own right. However, for us, they do not truly encapsulate the essence of Batman, at least not in the manner we find most captivating. Far too frequently, the quality of a film is conflated with the quality of its adaptation, as exemplified by Todd Phillips' exceptional «Joker», which presents a truly unique portrayal of the Joker character. In the films from 2008 and 2012, the removal of elements considered «imaginary» and «comic» from Batman's character and imagery is deemed a sign of quality and «maturity.» This transformation, to the delight of fans, bestows upon Batman a sense of gravitas. However, we do not share this perspective. In Nolan's films, Batman often comes across as merely an ordinary individual leading a typical social life, who chooses to don a bat costume to assist the police in combating criminals. In this regard, from our perspective, *The Dark Knight* stands as an excellent movie, albeit «not» a film about Batman. Similarly, Heath Ledger's nihilistic portrayal of the Joker is commendable (though not exceptional), but it isn't quite the Joker we know. Why the name Joker, one might wonder, when this Joker is consistently and unrelentingly serious, devoid of jokes, laughter, or pranks? Some might argue that Nolan aimed to distance his Joker from the traditional comic book character, and indeed, one could paraphrase a famous slogan from the extensive marketing campaign for *The Dark Knight* by asking, «Why so serious?». The discourse shifts when discussing *The Dark Knight Rises*. This film not only fails to appear as a portrayal of Batman but also falls short in terms of its execution. The plot is poorly written, and, in this instance as well, the portrayal of the villain, Bane, deviates significantly from his comic book counterpart. Instead, he seems like a derivative of Ledger's Joker, lacking the scarred visage but sporting a mask. Yet, it's worth noting that similar criticisms, albeit from different angles, could be leveled at Tim Burton's Batman. Burton's take on the character did not seem particularly concerned with staying faithful to the source material or pleasing fans, and at times, it even riled them, especially in «Batman Returns» in 1992.

challenge of introducing this new Batman, setting it apart from its predecessors, and surviving the inevitable comparisons. We firmly believe that he has succeeded admirably. Reeves has crafted a Batman who not only encapsulates much of the best elements of previous incarnations but also introduces fresh perspectives and compelling ideas, allowing this rendition to distinguish itself from the rest.¹⁰

Supported by top-tier production values, where visual design and sensory storytelling take center stage, *The Batman* by Reeves manages to deliver a Batman that is simultaneously classic and contemporary. It avoids the baroque excesses of Burton, the subversive and surreal queer elements of Schumacher, and the measured, occasionally muted, mimetic realism of Nolan.

One of the first commendable decisions made by the creators of *The Batman* is their choice not to revisit the tragic death of Bruce Wayne's parents. They also refrain from dwelling on a complete origin story. Instead, the film presents us with a Batman who is not yet fully mature, not entirely in control of his abilities, and most importantly, still struggling with his 'fury' and thirst for revenge. He has not yet mastered the art of channeling these emotions into tools of true justice and, by extension, hope. This transformational arc lies at the heart of Reeves' film: the journey from vengeance to hope, from vigilante to hero.

The crucial distinction lies in Burton's figurative, imaginative, and derealizing expressionism, which, despite its deviations from the textual sources, somehow managed to remain "faithful" to the poetics and aesthetics of the comics. It also delved into various facets of the character and his mythology. In contrast, we believe that Nolan's hyper-realistic deconstruction of the Batman myth, despite peppering the films with fan-service references (particularly in *Batman Begins*), seemed to drain much of the mythological and archetypal enchantment from Batman's world. It transformed him into a "guy" who occasionally takes on the role of a vigilante, facilitated by his access to prohibitively expensive high-tech equipment that others cannot obtain. This transformation is exemplified in a moment from *The Dark Knight* in 2008 when Batman responds to a would-be imitator by saying: «*I'm not wearing hockey pads*». To us, Burton, while not strictly adhering to the letter of Batman, remained faithful in spirit on many occasions, offering viewers food for thought. Nolan, on the other hand, despite offering fans numerous literal "quotations," references, and Easter eggs that align with Batman's letter, appears to have betrayed its spirit (both of the character and the logic of villains and comics in general) with the 2008 and 2012 installments. These films entertained many viewers but left little room for deeper contemplation, presenting a Batman filtered through the lens of Jack Bauer from "24". For further exploration of the Joker within Batman's story world, see R. M. Peaslee and R. G. Weine (eds.), *The Joker: A Serious Study of The Clown Prince of Crime* (University Press of Mississippi, Jackson, 2015), and M. Smith, *And Doesn't All the World Love a Clown? Finding the Joker and the Representation of His Evil*, in K. K. Durand and M. K. Leig (eds.), *Riddle Me This, Batman! Essays on the Universe of the Dark Knight*, pp. 187-200. Additionally, consider C. Richardson, *Batman and the Joker: Contested Sexuality in Popular Culture*, Routledge, London-New York, 2021.

¹⁰ Nick Winstead sought to illustrate how Christopher Nolan's portrayal of Batman, characterized by its "macho" attributes, was not merely a reaction to Tim Burton's more surreal take on the character. Instead, Winstead argued that Nolan's approach aimed to strip Batman of any queer undertones, with the intention of making him more appealing and relatable to a predominantly heterosexual mainstream audience. This was accomplished through an emphasis on hypermasculinity, adherence to heterosexual norms, and the introduction of a plot-altering love triangle, ultimately positioning Batman as a representation of heteronormativity. N. Winstead, *As a Symbol I Can be Incorruptible: How Christopher Nolan De-Queered the Batman of Joel Schumacher*, «The Journal of Popular Culture», 48, 2015, p. 573.



Batman: The Killing Joke, DC Comics, 1988. Written by Alan Moore, Artwork by Brian Bolland, John Higgins, Richard Starkings. © DC Comics.

The guilts, as we were saying, those of one's own, of one's family, and of one's community; the guilts, the sins, one could well say of an entire city. Guilts that are committed, concealed, and that often are endured, sometimes even unconsciously. As previously mentioned, the film's central theme revolves around the delicate interplay between truth and lies. It delves into the increasingly elusive boundary between truth and opinion, half-truths and falsehoods, hidden realities, and pre-fabricated or pre-mediated «ready-made truths». These pseudo-truths are often willingly embraced because we may not genuinely wish to confront the actual truth. Perhaps we opt not to acknowledge the consequences of our actions, both for ourselves and others, in order to maintain the status quo within our own lives and within society as a whole.

These are truths that we suppress or construct as “rationalizations” to craft a narrative that allows us to coexist with

ourselves and move forward.

The Batman also explores the weight of guilt, especially when it remains “suppressed” and hidden in the shadows of our unconscious. It highlights how attempts to discharge, conceal, or falsify guilt only serve to intensify it. The past, when burdened with unresolved guilt, can easily become an inescapable ‘black hole.’ The more we try to bury, forget, or distance ourselves from it, the more it exerts its pull on us. After all, one of the signs of madness is the complete severance of ties with the past, treating it as a perilous, disconcerting, and anxiety-inducing realm best kept at arm’s length, as aptly illustrated, perhaps not coincidentally, by the Joker in [Alan Moore and Brian Bolland’s ‘The Killing Joke’ \(1988\)](#).

In this regard, *The Batman*, much like other cinematic interpretations of the Dark Knight, also aims to serve as a reflection of its contemporary historical context, its *zeitgeist*, its darker facets, and its ‘pathologies.’ As Benedetto Croce aptly put it, even in Batman, genuine history is always contemporary history, constantly merging different «horizons», as described by Gadamer.¹¹

Tim Burton’s *Batman* was a manifestation of the fears and anxieties prevalent during the 1970s and 1980s (Era of Alienation, Anxiety Era, 1989-1992). Joel Schumacher’s version emerged during the euphoric post-1989 ‘end of history’ period, coinciding with

¹¹ B. Croce, *Teoria e storia della storiografia*, Napoli, Bibliopolis, 2007, p. 12; H. G. Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, Continuum, New York, 2006, pp. 299-306.

the rise of new computer and communication technologies (Era of Hope & Joy, Idealism Era, 1995-1997). Christopher Nolan's Batman became a symbol of the fears stemming from global terrorism after 9/11 (Terror/Risk Era, Realism Era, 2005-2015).¹²

On the other hand, Matt Reeves' Batman reflects an era marked by uncertainty, deception, and disorientation, dating back to 2016. This period can be characterized as the «[post-truth](#)» era, rhetoric and sensationalism take precedence over the reality of facts, and, thanks to the pervasive ubiquity of media, they shape and define what constitutes facts. Meanwhile, distinctions between true and false and between truth and opinion become primarily emotional and subjective matters, mere opinions, while objectivity appears increasingly irrelevant (Era of Post-Truth, Deceitfulness Era, 2016-2022 and ongoing).¹³

During this era, communication technologies, once promising a new global and participatory enlightenment in the 1990s, transformed truth and reality into something elusive and ambiguous in the 2010s. They became subject to emotional interpretation, embodying the essence of radical postmodernism and relativism. This paradigm shift negated the value of objective facts, giving rise to a platform for pseudo-truths, half-truths, and personal opinions (often within [echo chambers](#)), sometimes even inciting hatred (hate speech). In this environment, truth assumed a secondary role, isolating individuals within themselves rather than fostering encounters with others or the “risk” of engaging with diverse perspectives.

¹² In this instance as well, we believe that some of the critical concerns stem from Christopher Nolan's decision to re-envision Batman in a realistic manner, drawing clear references from the context of the 2000s and the post-9/11 era of the war on terror. By opting for this approach, Nolan, in essence, relinquished the more exaggerated and comic book elements typically associated with the villains. Consequently, he was compelled to portray each of the three main antagonists in his trilogy as terrorists, framing the primary threat as a “terrorist” menace. While this approach may have been effective to a certain extent in the first film of the trilogy, *Batman Begins* (2005), we contend that transforming the Joker and Bane into terrorists in the strictest sense of the term during the 2000s was a regrettable choice. This decision often carried an explicit ideological undertone, replete with explicit ethnic and/or religious references, which typically deviate from the usual style of Batman storytelling. While it's true that in every hero's myth, the protagonist is called upon to defend their country from external threats and combat the forces of “chaos” that threaten social order, in Nolan's Batman, this conflict assumed a more specific, literal, and immediate connection to our contemporary world. Batman was effectively cast as the champion of the (neo)liberal West in the fight against global terrorism, often rooted in “Eastern” origins. For a more comprehensive examination of the sociocultural and political dimensions of Nolan's Batman within the context of the 2000s: W. Brooker, *Hunting the Dark Knight: Twenty-First Century Batman*, I.B. Tauris, London, 2012; W. J. Berger's analysis, *Deconstructing Batman's Legitimacy: The Radical Political Critique of Christopher Nolan's Batman Cycle* in D. K. Picariello (ed.), *Politics in Gotham: The Batman Universe and Political Thought*, Palgrave Macmillan, London-New York, 2019, pp. 57-74. Furthermore, regarding the challenges and ambiguities posed by a “realistic” portrayal of Batman, one disconnected from the logic of its “imaginary world” and thrust into confrontations with threats directly linked to contemporary geopolitical realities, consider J. Serra's exploration in *Batman versus Al-Qaeda*, «Futures», 39, 2007, pp. 768-772. Serra delves into Frank Miller's controversial intention to craft a Graphic Novel wherein Batman decides to confront Al-Qaeda and challenge their “culture,” effectively aligning himself with explicit political motives. Some of the issues Serra identifies in this endeavor resonate with various aspects of Nolan's films.

¹³ See M. Gudonis, B. T. Jones (eds.), *History in a Post-Truth World: Theory and Praxis*, Routledge, New York-London, 2021. On the specific genesis of the “post-truth politics”, see E. Alterman, *When Presidents Lie: A History of Official Deception and its Consequences*, Viking, New York, 2004; P. Osborne, *The Rise of Political Lying*, Simon & Shuster, London-New York, 2005.

Consequently, truth became a fluid concept, held captive by the influence of information and the rapid pervasivity and ubiquity of (breaking)news often driven by their emotional impact and immediate effects. A world characterized by pseudo-truths is a slippery one, where nothing remains solid, and ambiguity and shadows dominate, even if they manifest as fleeting glimpses of light.

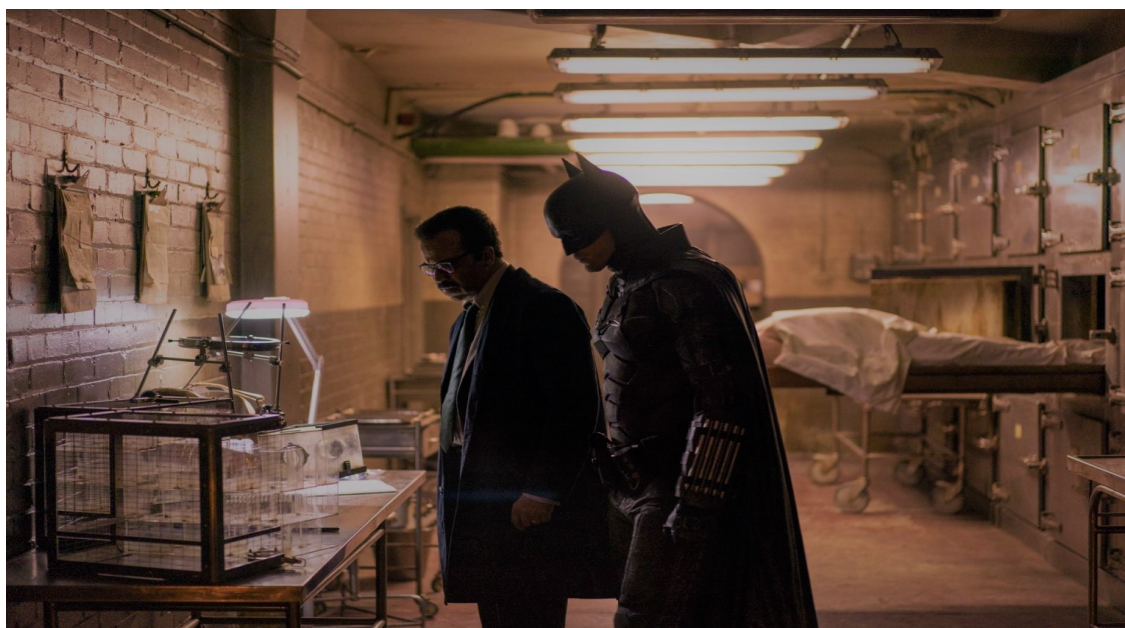
In this context, *The Batman* has been deliberately crafted as an essentially Noir film, a term one must approach with care, particularly in its original sense. The Noir genre, which left an indelible mark on American cinema in the 1940s, ushered in significant stylistic innovations. To the extent that the Noir of the 1940s is a cinematic style more than a film genre, one in which lighting and/or cinematography take on the appearance of an art form. As is well known, noir found its privileged formalization starting from films like *Stranger on the Third Floor* (Boris Ingster, 1940), *Citizen Kane* (Orson Welles, 1941), or *The Maltese Falcon* (John Huston, 1941), to be fulfilled starting from the mid-1940s in works like *Double Indemnity* (Billy Wilder, 1944), *Violence* (Gordon Wiles, 1946), *The Big Sleep* (Howard Hawks, 1946), and precisely *Out of the Past*.¹⁴

This Noir aesthetic also played a pivotal role in shaping the character of Batman during the early 1940s.¹⁵ Batman emerged not merely as a superhero but as a detective in a corrupt and morally adrift world. It was a world where opaque half-truths prevailed, where deviant criminality had become the norm, and where the boundaries between good and evil were blurred like revolving doors.¹⁶ In this Noir-style depiction of Gotham, as envisioned by Reeves in *The Batman*, no one truly remains innocent, and nearly everyone bears some level of guilt. For this very reason, in *The Batman*, the “crime syndicate” is not solely a union of (super) criminals; it serves as an embodiment of Gotham itself.

¹⁴ In this context, it is unfeasible to provide even a concise overview of the genesis, structure, and conventions of American Noir in the 1940s, given the extensive bibliography available on the subject. Pertaining to recent discussions of Noir and the transformative cinema of the 1940s, we would like to reference the following texts: D. Bordwell, *Reinventing Hollywood. How 1940s Filmmakers Changed Movie Storytelling*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago-London, 2017; W. Park, *What is Film Noir?*, Bucknell University Press, Lanham-Plymouth, 2011; J. Naremore, *More Than Night. Film Noir in Its Contexts* (Updated and Expanded Edition), University of California Press, Berkeley-Los Angeles-London, 2008. M. A. Vieira, *Into the Dark. The Hidden World of Film Noir. 1941-1950*, Running Press, Philadelphia, 2016. For a deeper exploration of the style and utilization of light and shadow in the highly contrasted black-and-white visuals characteristic of much of Noir cinema, John Alton's seminal 1949 work *Painting with Light* remains an indispensable resource: J. Alton, *Painting with Light*, University of California Press, Berkeley-Los Angeles-London, 1995.

¹⁵ And more precisely, the one with the darkest tones released between 1939 and 1943. See L. Daniels, *Batman: The Complete History*, DC Comics, New York, 1999; G. Weldon, *The Caped Crusade. Batman and The Rise of Nerd Culture*, 1: Origin and Growing Pains (1939–1949). The monumental M. L. Fleisher's *The Encyclopedia of Comic Book Heroes*, Volume I: Batman, Collier Books, New York, 1976, still remains essential today. For an “update” of Fleisher's encyclopedia: R. Greenberger, *The Essential Batman Encyclopedia*, Del Rey, New York, 2008.

¹⁶ On the crime/detective film genre between the 1930s and 1940s, see F. Mason, *Hollywood's Detectives. Crime Series in the 1930s and 1940s from the Whodunnit to Hard-boiled Noir*, London-New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2012.



JAMES GORDON & BATMAN IN «DETECTIVE MODE»

In *The Batman*, as in any exceptional Noir film, where darkness and corruption hold sway, the true (co)protagonist (or antagonist?) is undeniably the city itself.¹⁷ It assumes the roles of both a nurturing mother and a malevolent stepmother to its inhabitants, becoming a mutual externalization of their alienation, their disarray, and their anxieties. In the end, every *Dark City* gives rise to its own «monsters» and these monsters, in turn, breed more monsters, perpetually reshaping the city's contours in a relentless spiral where malevolence never slumbers, somehow ensnaring everything and everyone.

It is in this sense that Noir has often served, if not primarily, as a platform for social criticism, adopting the guise of socio-cultural commentary rather than a straightforward detective narrative—a kind of sociological and existential mystery. This criminal plot, in contrast to the conventional «[whodunit detective fiction](#)», frequently centers on not merely identifying the perpetrator of a crime (sometimes evident from the outset) but delving into the motives behind their actions, exploring what drove them to be who they

¹⁷ In a film noir, the city should always be interpreted as a “living” entity, one that encapsulates a cynical, dark, occasionally desperate, and despairing, as well as morbid and unsettling vision of the world. It's a vision where “evil” isn't solely the product of the malevolence of isolated individuals, but rather a manifestation of the same sociocultural “system” in which it thrives. In some instances, within the realm of noir, even existence itself appears tainted. In other words, in a noir narrative, corruption becomes an inherent element, personified by the city itself. The city assumes the role of a synecdoche for society, taking on the semblance of an absent protagonist, or perhaps a perpetually present protagonist precisely due to its absence. It's not coincidental that even Batman's adventures unfold in the most notorious corners of the city—its slums, port areas, during the night, and along isolated streets traversed by the lowest rungs of society. After all, wasn't Joseph von Sternberg's *The Docks of New York* (1928) one of the precursors of the noir genre? This film, which can be seen as a bridge between the tradition of German expressionism and noir, foreshadowed many of its formal characteristics. Incidentally, von Sternberg's *Underworld* also exerted some influence on the emergence and structure of the noir style in the 1940s. For further exploration of the role of the “city” in the noir style/genre: N. Christopher, *Somewhere in the Night. Film Noir and the American City*, Berkeley, Shoemaker and Hoard, 2006; A. Silver, J. Ursini, L. A. *Noir. The City as Character*, Santa Monica, Santa Monica Press, 2005; M. Shiel, *A Regional Geography of Film Noir. Urban Dystopias on and off Screen*, in G. Prakash (ed.), *Noir Urbanisms. Dystopic Images of the Modern City*, Princeton-Oxford, 2010, pp. 75-103.

are. It may reveal that the “real” culprit is, in part, the social system they represent or have fallen victim to. It underscores the notion that, ultimately, we are all, to some extent and concurrently, both guilty and victims, where a portion of us is good, and another part is tainted. In many cases, we must grapple with this reality, learning to coexist with ourselves and our shadows. Consequently, classical Noir often struggles to delineate with precision the boundaries between good and evil.

In *The Batman*, Gotham City personifies precisely this concept: “a grim and squalid world”, perpetually shrouded in an oppressive urban aesthetic. Furthermore, within the DC Comics Storyworld, Gotham has consistently embodied the antithesis of Metropolis (Superman’s «sunny» city). Over the years, it has evolved into the prime stage for portraying the ambivalence inherent in the American soul (and of every American) – the dual nature of the “American Dream”, exposing its darker and less innocent aspects. It symbolizes the shadow that eternally characterizes human duality, a facet that cannot be ignored indefinitely. Sooner or later, one must confront it, peer into their past (not only chronologically but primarily psychologically), and confront it, traverse it, sometimes even embrace it. In Gotham, darkness and shadows are intrinsic facets of the social system’s essence and existence itself. Consequently, at times, they should be courted rather than avoided because they might reveal themselves as a resource, rather than a curse, or perhaps even a gift, as Mary Oliver eloquently suggests in «The Use of Sorrow».

For all these reasons, within the Batverse’s imaginative realm, Gotham is perpetually shrouded in darkness, enveloped by rain, snow, and the haze of a city gripped by cold and humidity, much like the backdrop of countless post-industrial nightmares. It takes on an eerie, murky, and distorted aspect that mirrors the psychological and existential experiences of its inhabitants—a projection aimed at reflecting their disquiet, moral decay, and above all, their sense of alienation, their persistent status as strangers to themselves.

As depicted in numerous comic book panels, Gotham often adopts improbable angles and gothic-horror frames, frequently “crooked” and distorted. This portrayal aligns with how many characters perceive and experience the city—as a perpetually opaque externalization of their psyche, a manifestation of their inner conflicts, and the embodiment of a moral crisis that seems to spare no one. In the words of [Dennis O’Neil](#), Gotham is «Manhattan below 14th Street at eleven minutes past midnight on the coldest night in November».¹⁸ In short, Gotham is not merely a scenic backdrop but takes on the dimension of a complex and dark character.¹⁹

¹⁸ In his Afterword in the novel *Batman: Knightfall* (Bantam Books, New York, 1994), D. O’Neil further elaborated on his concept of Gotham City, which he had previously outlined in his Batbible a few years earlier. On page 344 of the novel, he provided the following description: «Gotham is a distillation of everything that’s dark, moody, and frightening about New York. It is Hell’s Kitchen. The Lower East Side. Bed Stuy. The South Bronx. Soho and Tribeca off the main thoroughfares at three in the morning. Geographically, it is a port city somewhere in the northeast with a population of approximately 7,500,000, a reasonable drive from New York. Architecturally, it is unique, and that is not a compliment. The buildings in the core of the city are grim and windowless, a legacy of the city’s founder (and Bruce’s ancestor) Solomon Wayne, who believed cities should be fortresses. After Solomon died, Gotham fell prey to robber barons and their tame politicians who made New York’s Tammany Hall look like a Girl Scout camp,

In *The Batman*, one might argue that truth can only emerge from the depths of darkness and shadows. In a world filled with preconceived truths, opinions elevated to the status of truth, illuminated by the media spotlight, social and popular consensus, and fueled by emotional imprinting, that which remains concealed in the daylight can only be unveiled – borrowing a powerful image from Freud and Wilfred Bion – by «a beam of intense darkness». Such darkness allows something obscured by the glare of illumination to shine even more brilliantly in its obscurity.²⁰

Therefore, the path to uncovering the truth in this narrative does not follow a rational investigative methodology that progresses from darkness, through fog, and ultimately arrives at light. Instead, it takes the opposite route – from light to fog, leading to darkness. In *The Batmans'* Gotham, the revelation of truth can only occur by rendering darkness conscious, by illuminating what is hidden, even within oneself, through darkness. This approach imbues the deductive process with what appears to be «necessary sadness and a subtle veil of melancholy».²¹

Contrary to the Western-Platonic tradition, shadows here are not mere illusions; they are the essential components that, in any mimetic process, unveil profound truths that

creating a tradition of corruption that continues today. It is a problem, Bruce Wayne confesses, that is beyond his powers, though the solving of it is definitely on his long-term agenda».

¹⁹ Regarding Gotham City in the Batman imaginary, see - in addition to the already mentioned E. McCrystal, *Gotham City Living. Social Dynamics in The Batman Comics and Media* - W. Uricchio, *The Batman's Gotham City™: Story, Ideology, Performance*, in J. Ahrens, A. Meteling (eds.), *Comics and the City. Urban Space in Print, Picture and Sequence*, New York-London, 2010, pp. 119-132.

²⁰ We've sourced the image from James Grotstein's remarkable book, *A Beam of Intense Darkness: Wilfred Bion's Legacy to Psychoanalysis*, Karnac, London, 2007. The referenced passage can be found on page 1: «Following an analytic session of mine, Bion, unusually for him, went to his bookshelf, pulled out a German edition of Freud's correspondence with Lou Andreas-Salomé, and translated it for me on the spot. I made instant notes about it moments afterward: 'When conducting an analysis, one must cast a beam of intense darkness so that something which has hitherto been obscured by the glare of the illumination can glitter all the more in the darkness». Although the quote from Freud/Bion is decontextualized for the sake of argument in this instance, it does not seem out of place. It's not surprising that Batman is one of the most frequently referenced characters in popular culture within psychoanalytic research due to his multifaceted, complex, and intricate personality. For further insights into the psychology of Batman, you may refer to the following sources: T. Langley, *Batman and Psychology. A Dark and Stormy Knight*, Wiley, Hoboken, 2012; R. S. Rosenberg, CreateSpace Publishing, Lexington, 2012. See also M. Brody, *Batman: Psychic Trauma and Its Solution*, «Journal of Popular Culture», 28, 1995, pp. 171-178; A. Reichstein, *Batman - An American Mr. Hyde?*, «Amerikastudien/American Studies», 43, 1998, pp. 329-350. S. K. Donovan, N. P. Richardson, *Under the Mask. How Any Person Can Become Batman*, in M. D. White, R. Arp (eds.), *Batman and Philosophy. The Dark Knight of The Soul*, Wiley, Hoboken, 2008, pp. 129-141; R. Novy, *What Is It Like to Be a Batman?*, in M. D. White, R. Arp (eds.), *Batman and Philosophy. The Dark Knight of The Soul*, pp. 167-179. In a broader context, exploring the psychotic, deviant, and alienated universe of Gotham City and its peculiar cast of «freaks» (including Batman): S. Packer, D. R. Fredrick (eds.), *Welcome to Arkham Asylum. Essays on Psychiatry and the Gotham City Institution*, McFarland & Company, Jefferson, 2020. See also P. Lytle, *The Madness of Arkham Asylum. Why Arkham May Be Doing More Harm Than Good*, in D. O'Neil, L. Wilson (eds.), *Batman Unauthorized. Vigilantes, Jokers, and Heroes in Gotham City*, Bambella Books, Dallas, pp. 109-119.

²¹ Let's take up the image from George Steiner, who in turn takes it up from Schelling. G. Steiner, *Ten (Possible) Reasons for the Sadness of Thought*, translated by S. Velotti, Milan, Garzanti, 2007, p. 14: «Torniamo però a Schelling e alla sua affermazione che una tristezza necessaria, un velo di melanconia è annesso allo stesso processo del pensiero, alla percezione cognitiva».

would otherwise remain obscured by the blinding glare of light, and therefore, if not above all, by any process (rational and conscious) of enlightenment.



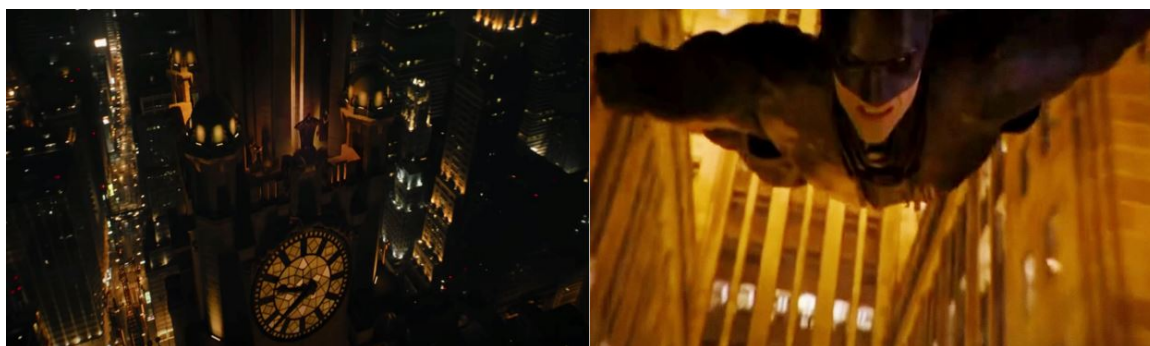
As previously mentioned, in his quest to authentically convey the various aspects of Batman's mythology and imagery, Reeves steers clear of both Tim Burton's baroque expressionism and Nolan's pragmatic, demystifying realism. Instead, he cleverly integrates these two styles, forging something entirely distinct from their sum. Reeves appears to have aimed not only to distill three decades of cinematic portrayals of Batman, commencing with Burton's grotesque expressionism in 1989 and culminating in Nolan's (hyper)hallucinatory realism in 2012,²² but also to merge them with the 'Dark-Deco' aesthetic from Bruce Timm and Eric Radomski's «[Batman: The Animated Series](#)» (1992-1995). This animated series, which also appears to echo the graphic style of the 1940s, and the Victorian hyperrealism and Neo-Gothic/Neon-Nouveau influences from Rocksteady Studios' «Arkhamverse» videogame series (2009-2015),²³ have – at the very

²² On the aesthetics (and realization) of Nolan's trilogy, see J. Duncan Jesser, J. Pourroy, *The Art and Making of "The Dark Knight Trilogy"*, ABRAMS, New York, 2012.

²³ We refer to the video games developed by Rocksteady Studios featuring Batman from 2009 to 2015 and based on the Arkham mythology (referred to as the Arkhamverse): [Batman: Arkham Asylum](#) (2009), [Batman: Arkham City](#) (2012), and [Batman: Arkham Knight](#) (2015). Additionally, we should include the prequel, *Batman: Arkham Origins*, released in 2013, which was developed by Warner Bros Games Montreal. For a retrospective on the influential aesthetics of the Arkhamverse: D. Wallace, *The Art of Rocksteady's Batman: Arkham Asylum, Arkham City & Arkham Knight*, Abrams, New York, 2015. To further explore the visual design of "Batman: Arkham Knight," [it is possible to watch a video that highlights](#) its sensory storytelling and color palette. All of these elements in *The Batman* appear evident not only in the new costume, which bears a striking resemblance to the one worn by Batman in *Batman: Arkham Knight* (and was also similar to that of "Batman: Arkham Origins"), but also in the dynamics of hand-to-hand combat, the design of certain criminals, the atmospheres of Gotham (especially those reminiscent of *Arkham Knight*), and the overall visual storytelling. For instance, in the very first fight of *The Batman* (the one where he introduces himself as "I am vengeance"), the criminals he faces, those with white-painted faces and Joker-style lipstick, seem reminiscent of the "Henchmen" of the Joker in *Batman: Arkham Asylum* (cf. D. Wallace, *The Art of Rocksteady's Batman*, p. 125). Furthermore, the dynamics of this same fight and the audio effects of the punches appear to reference [one of the game's combos](#), known as the "Beat Down," [involving powerful blows in rapid succession and a final, violent downward blow once the opponent is on the ground](#). Additionally, in one of the film's early scenes, we witness Batman entering a crime scene and facing reprimands from some policemen for his presence. Commissioner Gordon defends Batman, asserting that he can be there because he's with him. A similar scene is actually present in *Batman: Arkham Asylum*, where Batman is criticized by guards and doctors for being at Arkham.

least, from our interpretative perspective – exerted a significant influence on numerous expressive aspects within *The Batman* extending beyond mere visuals.²⁴

In his endeavor to reconcile Batman's disparate cinematic interpretations, Reeves, as previously noted, leans on the character's noir roots. Noir, effectively defined by Paul Schrader as an 'exciting combination of realism and expressionism,' possesses the unique capacity to transform "the entire world into a sound stage, projecting unnatural and expressionistic lighting onto realistic settings".²⁵ In this context, *The Batman* adeptly echoes elements of Burton's "nighttime" expressionistic and abstract style while incorporating facets of Nolan's (more) diurnal, (hyper)mimetic and "concrete" approach.²⁶ In a continuation of the psychoanalytic parallel discussed earlier, one might even argue that Reeves sought to actualize his version of Batman by casting «an intense beam of darkness» onto Nolan's rendition.



Gordon comes to his defense, emphasizing that if there's one person who can be there, it's Batman. Moreover, shortly thereafter, we see Gordon accompanying Batman to the crime scene, with the shots appearing reminiscent of those in the video game when Batman, under the perplexed gazes of other guards and assistants, follows the guards who are escorting the Joker to his cell. Lastly, consider the color palette in *The Batman* which often leans toward dark purple and orange/amber tones, resembling some of the colors from *Batman: Arkham City* and *Batman: Arkham Knight*, especially the orange/amber tones found in Kan Maltic's sketches for "Arkham City." These were meant to emphasize «the presence of industrial pollution but were toned down in the final game» (D. Wallace, *The Art of Rocksteady's Batman*, p. 136). In the industrial pollution hazard scale, orange indicates level 3 (out of 5): «unhealthy for sensitive groups," meaning "harmful for active children and adults, as well as individuals with respiratory diseases, such as asthma, who should limit prolonged outdoor activities». Hence, one of the reasons why a city like Gotham is "nocturnal" is because in an "orange" air saturation situation, one should: «Limit daytime driving; Reduce vehicle idling; Refuel vehicles after dusk; Avoid overfilling your gas tank; Avoid congested periods; Use water-based paints; Use public transit or carpool».

²⁴ Apart from these references to Batman's transmedia multiverse, among the film references, the most evident ones include Alex Proyas' *The Crow* (1994) and David Fincher's *Seven* (1995).

²⁵ P. Schrader, *Notes on Film Noir*, in B. K. Grant (ed.), *Film Genre Reader III*, Austin, University of Texas Press, 2003, p. 233.

²⁶ We use the term "diurnal" because Christopher Nolan chooses, on multiple occasions, to depict Batman in his costume during daytime scenes or in broad daylight. While there have been some daytime versions of Batman, as previously mentioned, it is true that the reason for their limited appeal (aside from the explicitly pop version of the 1960s TV series) becomes evident to us: a character who typically operates at night, perhaps in the midst of a heavy downpour, donning a black costume and cloak, can effectively leverage the cover of darkness to his advantage, thereby instilling fear and psychological intimidation. However, the same principles do not apply during the day, particularly in a hyper-realistic setting like the one envisioned by Nolan. In such a setting, Batman would not only lose all these advantages but could easily be mistaken for someone dressed up in a cosplay outfit. It goes without saying that in *The Batman* and in our view, appropriately so, Batman rarely appears during the daylight, at most during twilight or dawn.

In this regard, Reeves seeks to establish this connection right from the prologue, where the character is (almost perfectly) introduced, and the description of Gotham is so masterfully interwoven that it becomes almost indistinguishable whether he is referring to the city or Batman.²⁷ This “intro” appears to underscore the possibility of a profound relationship of mutual influence between Batman and Gotham, a circular and reciprocal relationship. Reeves accomplishes this through the expert use of dark purplish and golden/amber hues, brilliantly captured by cinematographer Greig Fraser, who aptly earns the moniker of a “visual psychiatrist”. This effect is further enhanced by the superb [“visual sounds” composed by Michael Giacchino](#), which evoke an unsettling sense of impending doom and perpetual mystery. Both the music and the chromatic & lighting choices serve as the aesthetic leitmotifs throughout the entire film.

As the Riddler conveyed in his origins story crafted by Neil Gaiman in 1989, a sentiment we also referenced at the outset of this section,²⁸ Gotham is not merely an extension of Batman; Gotham is Batman, and vice versa. Consequently, the overarching theme that permeates the entire film is the idea that unveiling the truth about Gotham is inseparable from unmasking the truth about Batman, and, conversely, revealing the truth about Batman is tantamount to exposing the truth about Gotham.

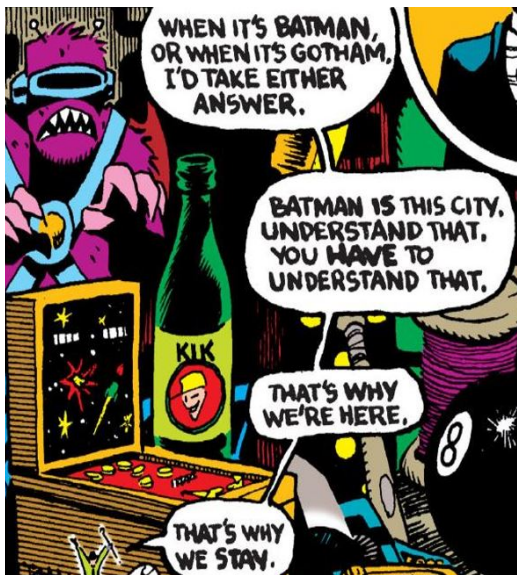
²⁷ We use “almost” because Matt Reeves constructs a scene that initially captures the essence of Batman’s psychology, as encapsulated in the quote «They think I hide in the shadows. But I am the shadows». However, it’s worth noting that this portrayal is almost contradicted when Batman confronts a gang of criminals. While it is true that Batman does not merely hide in the shadows but embodies the shadow itself, the choice to reveal his presence so directly and emerge from the shadows slowly to face the criminals with “smoking punches”, reminiscent of Inspector Harry Callahan, doesn’t seem to work as effectively as it should. While this portrayal emphasizes the character’s angry, brutal, and vengeful nature (certainly not “good-natured” in this incarnation), it also contradicts the idea announced only moments earlier that during the two “nighttime” years, he “became a shadow.” If this were the case, Batman should have struck the criminals, at least the first ones, without being seen, seemingly appearing out of nowhere, catching them off guard, and disappearing before the others could even notice him. This would have instilled genuine terror in them. The choice to confront them directly would have made more sense if this scene depicted Batman’s very first attempts to fight crime (when he didn’t yet have his costume), rather than a confrontation after two years of activity with the costume in its final form and many of its famous gadgets. In many origin stories, such as the excellent 1993 animated film [Batman: Mask of The Phantasm](#) by Eric Radomski and Bruce Timm, Bruce Wayne carries out his initial missions without his costume, confronting criminals directly. During these encounters, although he often succeeds in defeating them, Bruce Wayne often emerges battered. These early experiences opened his eyes to the need to change his strategy because direct confrontation was not the most effective tactic when facing numerous and cunning criminals. Thus, the idea of a “terrifying” costume and gadgets emerged, enabling him to act like a shadow, to be a shadow, without having to confront enemies directly and instilling fear in them because they wouldn’t know precisely where he would strike. In this sense, similar scenes in [Batman Begins](#) and [Batman vs Superman](#) worked much better in depicting Batman’s evolution in this regard. Moreover, the hand-to-hand fights in *The Batman* just like those *Batman vs Superman*, even in this case were heavily inspired by Rocksteady’s “Arkham” video game series.

²⁸ A story that also serves as an origin story for the Riddler in *The Batman* and it’s likely that Matt Reeves took this into account. It’s worth noting, furthermore, that this could equally be a reference to the famous Pop/Camp TV series from the 1960s, which made its debut on January 12, 1966, with an episode (“[Hi Diddle Riddle](#)”) featuring the Riddler as the main antagonist. In that episode, the Riddler forces Batman to decipher another message in the first riddle, just as in *The Batman*. Additionally, it was precisely the 1960s TV series that elevated the Riddler ([played by the histrionic and iconic Frank Gorshin](#)) to the same rank as Batman’s archenemies, on par with the Joker or the Penguin. Prior to this, the Riddler had been classified as a second-tier villain and had only made a few appearances in the comics.



THE RIDDLER'S SANCTUARY

The convergence between Batman and Gotham is explicitly illustrated in *The Batman* particularly in the scene where Catwoman asks Batman to run away with her. However, she quickly realizes that such a notion is impossible because he is already “taken”, “booked” (“Who am I kidding? You’re already spoken for”) – spoken for by Gotham, which occupies his thoughts with unwavering fixation. Regardless of his occasional “diurnal” appearances, Batman can ultimately be viewed as monomaniacal, unable to live, or more accurately, exist, outside of Gotham, “divorced” from the city. This concept is excellently conveyed in *The Batman*.



Secret Origins Special (Volume 2), 1, DC Comics, 1989. Written by Neil Gaiman, Artwork by Mike Hoffman, Kevin Nowlan, Tom McCraw, Todd Klein, ©DC Comics.

In portraying this aspect of Batman’s duality, Reeves touches upon another captivating facet. Just as Batman is intrinsically intertwined with Gotham, the same dynamic extends to the relationship between Batman and Bruce Wayne. In this intricate interplay of dual identities, Batman isn’t a character (Bruce Wayne) who ‘now and then’ dons the Batman persona; he is always Batman. In essence, Batman is not Bruce Wayne’s “secret” identity or a disguise, but rather, Bruce Wayne serves as Batman’s concealed, camouflaged persona. Batman comes to realize that to genuinely embrace his true self, he can only do so by concealing it behind a mask, Bruce Wayne’s mask. This becomes even more true in a society that has made deceit, hypocrisy, lies, and appearances an ontology of social being, the defining features of social existence.

In this regard, Reeves has taken this Bruce Waynes' aspect – at the very least, in his youthful incarnation – to an extreme, to the extent that the distinction between the two personas, a recurring theme in the character's history (typically depicting a hedonistic playboy Bruce Wayne in contrast to the serious and dark Batman), becomes nearly indiscernible. It suggests, indeed, that Bruce Wayne isn't merely an individual who occasionally adopts the Batman persona; he is Batman, even in moments when he isn't garbed in the iconic costume. He is unable to find a life or purpose outside of his ceaseless battle against crime, fully aware that this battle can never truly reach its conclusion.²⁹

BECOMING THE BATMAN: UNMASKING THE (POST)TRUTH

"In fact, although we also place reason high, we do not believe, for example, that anyone is virtuous, or a hero, or generally a great man purely because of reason; indeed, we do not even believe, according to the well-known expression, that humanity perpetuates itself thanks to reason. Only in personality is there life; and every personality rests on a dark foundation that must therefore also be the foundation of knowledge." Friedrich Schelling, 1809³⁰

²⁹ Here, in our opinion, one of the criticisms of Nolan's Batman emerges, namely that he really appears as a guy who dresses up as Batman to avoid being recognized, not because he "is" Batman. Hence the curious "fairytale" ending of "The Dark Knight Rises" (2012), in which Bruce Wayne seems to suggest the idea of stopping his mission as Batman, leaving Gotham and the role of vigilante to travel the world with Catwoman, as if he is capable of having a real involvement and real intimacy with a woman (something that only happened in the parallel reality of Earth-Two in 1955). "Curious" precisely because, at least in our opinion, there cannot be a Bruce Wayne without Batman as there cannot be Batman without Gotham City, outside of it, except in a parody and/or an action comedy for younger audiences, such as *Lego DC Comics Super Heroes: Justice League - Gotham City Breakout* by Matt Peters and Melchior Zwyer in 2016. In more recent comics, however, Catwoman, at the moment of marrying Batman (in «*Batman* #50» of 2018), decides to leave him standing on the day of the wedding; this is because she understands that Batman cannot exist without his darkness: «You are an engine that turns pain into hope. If we're happy... and we could be so happy... [...] I kill that engine. I kill Batman. I kill the person who saves everyone. And how can I do that?». On the contrary, at least according to the reading we want to bring forward, Burton's choice in *Batman Returns* to show Bruce Wayne appearing at a party in a mask without a mask was perfect; "without a mask" for others, because in reality, he wore his true mask, that of Bruce Wayne; the same was true of Selina Kyle in the same scene. In the final anti-climax of the same film, Catwoman perfectly describes the impossibility we mentioned above when she says to Batman: «I would love to live with you in your castle... forever, like in a fairytale. But I couldn't live with myself. So don't pretend that this is a happy ending». The same goes for Batman, as Reeves showed in *The Batman*. He could never leave Gotham and run away with Catwoman because he could live with Selina, but he could never live with himself. There can't be a Bruce Wayne who isn't Batman, and there's no Batman who isn't Gotham City, outside of Gotham City. Lastly, among the truly interesting things in Schumacher's *Batman Forever* (1995) is a truly emblematic scene that perfectly captures the subject at hand. In it, the Riddler does a sort of brain scan on Bruce Wayne, and the only thing that appears is a bat, indicating that Bruce Wayne's true nature, his psyche, is that of Batman, which is not a costume he wears when he has to "go to work." On the impossibility, for Batman, of retiring and abandoning his crusade, see C. Roberson, *Why Doesn't Bruce Wayne Retire Already?!*, in D. O'Neil, L. Wilson (eds.), *Batman Unauthorized: Vigilantes, Jokers, and Heroes in Gotham City*, pp. 99-108. On Batman's relationship with the institution of "marriage," see: <https://www.dccomics.com/blog/2021/09/17/holy-bat-trimony-the-dark-knight-and-marriage>. Many of the features of Batman's psychology – and not just his attitude toward romantic relationships, but also, and above all, his relationship with darkness – were excellently highlighted, albeit in a parodic form, in Chris McKay's 2017 animated film, *The LEGO Batman Movie*.

³⁰ «In effetti, per quanto anche noi collochiamo in alto la ragione, non crediamo tuttavia per esempio che qualcuno sia virtuoso, o eroe, o in generale un grande uomo per la pura ragione; anzi non crediamo neppure che, secondo la nota espressione, il genere umano si perpetui grazie alla ragione. Solo nella personalità c'è

“However, we do not become enlightened by imagining figures of light, but by making the darkness conscious.” Carl Gustav Jung, 1945³¹



Identifying the fundamental structure of Batman’s characterization and his relationship with Gotham constituted just two pieces in defining the character and mapping out his transformative journey. The next, possibly pivotal, step was determining how to characterize the antagonists. In the iteration of Batman chosen for exploration, these antagonists could not merely serve as reflections of a city and society in decline, marked by coldness, unhealthiness, and pervasive darkness, as discussed earlier.

In Batman’s imaginative realm, antagonists take on an added dimension. They function as dark mirrors through which Batman can perceive aspects of himself, representing the embodiment or projection of what he may be or has the potential to become, at least in part. In this dialectical sense, Batman, while battling his enemies, also confronts his own inner darkness. It could be argued that Batman is, in a way, “drawn” to his “enemies” because they resemble a part of himself, not so different from him, as they are also “victims” or societal outcasts. As Catwoman mentions in the same film, they are like “strays” («I have a thing about strays»)³².

Furthermore, many of Batman’s often grotesque adversaries share a common trait with him – they are exiles within themselves. In numerous iterations, Batman grapples with

vita; e ogni personalità riposa su un fondamento oscuro che deve quindi essere anche fondamento della conoscenza» [Denn so hoch wir auch die Vernunft stellen, glauben wir doch z. B. nicht, daß jemand aus reiner Vernunft tugendhaft, oder ein Held, oder überhaupt ein großer Mensch sey; ja nicht einmal, nach der bekannten Rede, daß das Menschengeschlecht durch sie fortgepflanzt werde. Nur in der Persönlichkeit ist Leben· und alle Persönlichkeit ruht auf einem dunkeln Grunde, der also allerdings auch Grund der Erkenntniß seyn muß]. F. W. J. Schelling, *Ricerche filosofiche sull’essenza della libertà umana e gli oggetti ad essa connessi*, trad. it. G. Strummiello, Milano, Bompiani, 2007, p. 273.

³¹ «Man wird aber nicht hell dadurch, daß man sich Helles vorstellt, sondern dadurch, daß man Dunkles bewußtmacht». C. G. Jung, *Der philosophische Baum*, in C. G. Jung, *Studien über alchemistische Vorstellungen, Gesammelte Werke 13 Band*, Olten Und Freiburg Im Breisgau, Walter-Verlag, 1988³, p. 286.

³² A theme, that of the mutual determination between Batman and many of his grotesque antagonists, explicitly recurring since the release of the aforementioned *The Killing Joke* by Alan Moore/Brian Bolland in 1988.

and suffers from this internal division, the double bind of good and evil that defines him and shapes his identity. The specific antagonists inhabiting Gotham also serve to remind him that while he may need to embrace his darkness and integrate it to fully realize himself and fulfill his mission, he must never allow it to overcome him. Doing so would risk his descent into madness, turning him into one of the very lunatics he has always opposed.³³

As is well known, in the Burtonverse of Batman, and in particular in *Batman Returns* (1992), it was decided to radicalize this aspect to the point of making Batman almost a supporting character in his own film (some, in fact, wondered if the correct title should not perhaps have been *Catwoman*), with the antagonists losing their aura of “enemies,” because all of them (Batman, Catwoman, and the Penguin) are “losers” (“all fucked”), lost, that is, in their own split (in the sense of Freud’s «Spaltung»),³⁴ unable to really govern it, and thus unable to make it an effective defense mechanism. On the contrary, as previously mentioned, in Nolan’s *Batman*, the antagonists are portrayed more traditionally as straightforward adversaries, resembling characters one might encounter in a *James Bond* or *Mission Impossible* film.

In this context, Reeves endeavors to achieve a synthesis. While Batman’s initial adversaries were ordinary gangsters, it swiftly became apparent that to make these antagonists compelling, they needed to be stylized, transformed into grotesque, eccentric, and authentic counterparts of Batman himself – an array of «freaks».³⁵ Hence, the notion of portraying them as outcasts, not only endowing them with the appearance of being estranged from themselves and their city but also making their very existence a form of exile, dictated by the pervasive darkness that perpetually envelops them.

³³ As is known, it was Zack Snyder who proposed a tired, angry Batman who (perhaps) has crossed the line between hero and criminal in *Batman v Superman* of 2016, making a resigned Bruce Wayne say: «We’re criminals, Alfred. We always have been, nothing’s changed». The intentions were interesting, the result much less so, at least in the confusing version of the film released in theaters, with a missing 30 minutes of footage that was essential for the narrative coherence of the film. After all, the path of Batman in “*Batman v Superman*” is similar to that of Reeves’ *Batman*: (re)discovering his true self and not (completely) turning into what he has always fought against, even redeeming himself. The infamous “Martha Dilemma” served precisely this purpose, as a transformative turning point, when at the crucial moment, the image evoked by the name Martha makes him aware on the one hand of Superman’s humanity, and on the other that what he was about to do went against everything he had fought for and would have made him a killer like the one who had killed his parents and whom he could now redeem himself from, that is, “a criminal”. Unfortunately, the scene as it was realized did not work and, in most cases, was not understood, arousing more laughter than emotion and participation. But this was also the risk of Snyder’s gamble: not to give fans the version of their favorite characters they expected, but to find two characters who were not “funny” and who raised more questions than answers, complicated and tormented, “fallen” and “broken,” who are often disheartened and just as often fail, appearing more human than superhuman. A gamble that, at least from a commercial and popularity standpoint, was clearly lost, and one that Reeves, we believe, also had to contend with.

³⁴ See J. Laplanche, J-B. Pontalis, *Enciclopedia della psicanalisi*, G. Fuà (a cura di), Roma-Bari, Laterza, 1981, pp. 544-547.

³⁵ See also L. Daniels, *DC Comics. A Celebration of the World’s Favourites Comic Book Heroes*, New York, Watson-Guptill, 2003, pp. 38-39.



THE BAT AND THE CAT

It's not coincidental, then, that even in *The Batman* – as it was, to a degree, in Tim Burton's 'Batman Returns' with the character of [Max Shreck, portrayed by Christopher Walken](#) – the real 'monster,' the most 'evil' and unsettling figure, is perhaps the most "normal" one: mafia boss Carmine Falcone. On the contrary, each of the three "freaks" – Catwoman, the Riddler, and the Penguin – possesses qualities that, as Burton often noted about his villains, don't truly cast them as "enemies".³⁶ In this film, much like in Nolan's interpretation, Catwoman appears to have entirely shed her past as the «Empress of the Underworld». Even her ambiguity regarding whether she aligns with Batman or plays the role of his "foe", constantly wavering between the two positions, is largely set aside. In this incarnation, she collaborates with him from the very outset, without hesitation.

Zoë Kravitz embodies the role flawlessly, but we believe that the necessity to maintain the film within the confines of a [PG-13 rating](#), along with the unwritten yet notably influential constraints of the 2010s/2020s regarding the portrayal of female characters in a manner that could be even vaguely construed as "negative" has limited the opportunity to showcase many of the characteristics that have rendered Catwoman one of the most iconic and beloved figures in comics. Most notably, it prevents her from evoking the authentic "erotic" tension that has consistently been one of the essential and recurring elements in her relationship with Batman over the years. This tension was explicit with [Julie Newmar in the 1960s](#) and approached the explicit limits of Fetish/Bondage imagery with [Michelle Pfeiffer in 1992](#).

³⁶ «I like Batman, I like Catwoman, I like The Penguin, I like their world. It's a good canvas of characters. I like their duality. And the thing that I really liked about *Batman* as a comic book property was that they're all fucked-up characters – that's what's so beautiful about them. Unlike other comics, they're just all fucked, the villains and Batman. But that's also part of the problem – I never see these people as villains. Tim Burton, in M. Salisbury (ed.), *Burton on Burton (Revised Edition)*, London, faber and faber, 2008³ (Ebook edition), *Batman Returns*.



AN AFFLICTED BRUCE WAYNE AND AN HISTRIONIC PENGUIN

On the other hand, the Penguin is granted something akin to an origin story, presented through Nolan's realistic lens, which lacks any particular stylization to the extent of even forsaking his most iconic distinctive feature: umbrellas. In this episode, he is transformed into a genuine gangster. An almost unrecognizable Colin Farrell, however, delivers a histrionic performance, bordering on the endearing, as he provides the Penguin with the film's only, so to speak, "light" moments. This choice might be an acknowledgment that the Penguin initially, in the 1940s, emerged as an essentially "comic character".

Lastly, we have the Riddler, who in *The Batman* explicitly takes on the guise of the Dark Knight's antithesis and appears as an avenging angel, determined to mete out justice for the sins of an entire city. Reeves opts for a portrayal that contrasts sharply with the character's two most well-known and overtly cartoonish incarnations – [Frank Gorshin in the 1960s](#) and [Jim Carrey in 1995](#). Instead, he draws

inspiration from the «[Zodiac Killer](#)», rendering the Riddler more aligned with the portrayal of [John Doe by Kevin Spacey](#) in David Fincher's *Seven* (1995). In this case, the remarkable Paul Dano masterfully embodies the concept of madness lurking within the shadows of the most mundane normality and within the routine of everyday life.

Through its antagonists and the continuous stream of revelations, Reeves' film takes on the role of a Batman phenomenology, shedding light on Gotham's dark underbelly, the unexpected connections between its inhabitants, and the Wayne family's secrets.³⁷ The culmination of these revelations occurs during the face-off with the Riddler, presenting Batman with the most challenging truth to accept - a truth that reveals what 'the' Batman represents, who he truly is, and, more importantly, who he could become.

In the end, could Batman and the Riddler be equals, two sides of the same coin? Both have experienced the pain of loss, both hide behind masks to reveal their true selves, both combat the crime and corruption plaguing Gotham, and both yearn for a better future for the city. However, it's in this moment, when Batman faces the possibility of remaining as he is – a vigilante teetering on the edge – that he is unmasked. Not by revealing his true identity as Bruce Wayne but by exposing the innermost truth about Batman, his darkest

³⁷ Reeves takes up this non-canonical aspect from the three volumes of the graphic novel [Batman: Earth One](#) by Geoff Johns and Gary Frank (2012, 2015, 2021).

and most perilous nature. It becomes evident what he could become if he doesn't confront his pain, anger, and inner turmoil and find the delicate balance that many of his adversaries have lost.

In the end, Batman's most formidable adversary, and perhaps the most challenging to confront, is himself - that shadowy side of his persona that could engulf him entirely if left unchecked. There is a deleted scene that has surfaced online ([viewable here](#), though recommended only after watching the film), in which Batman visits Arkham prison to seek assistance from another renowned villain in unmasking the Riddler. However, the response he receives isn't what he anticipated. Instead, he is informed that this particular case fascinates him more than others, and he feels inexplicably drawn to it. Simultaneously, he experiences a deep-seated fear because he recognizes that he isn't so different from the Riddler. He even feels a sense of envy towards him. The scene encapsulates the notion that: «You two have so much in common ... masked vengers...so he's even more righteous...are you afraid he makes you look soft. I think you don't really care about his motives. Whether he loves or hates you, I think somewhere deep down you're just terrified because you're not sure he's wrong, you think they deserved it...you think they deserved it». Regrettably, this compelling scene didn't make the final cut of the film, which we believe might have benefited from its inclusion. Although it might have appeared somewhat redundant in light of the narrative's progression, it would likely have added depth to the film's storytelling.

In any case, it is within the clash of revelations with the Riddler that we begin to see the emergence of what we hinted at earlier regarding Gotham's societal dynamics: Gotham is the crucible that births its own monsters, and these monsters, in turn, shape Gotham, continuously redefining it. Indeed, *The Batman* unveils a complex web of causality. Gotham “created” Batman, and Batman ‘created’ the Riddler. However, the Riddler plays a part in “creating” the new Batman, who, in turn, sets the course for a transformed Gotham. It doesn't take long – as glimpsed in brief scenes introducing potential future antagonists – for this reshaped Gotham to reconfigure and generate new threats, new monsters.



A BEACON OF HOPE

Batman comes to the realization that he can be more than just a vessel for revenge; he can become a symbol of hope for Gotham, a beacon of light in the darkest of times. He

can offer a way out of the shadowy abyss in which people, whether by choice, necessity, or chance, find themselves dwelling. This transformation is beautifully depicted in a striking aerial shot, where Batman becomes a «beacon of hope», with Gotham's citizens turning to him, the dark knight and creature of the night, as their guide toward the light. It appears as though Gotham has truly embraced Batman as its protector. And so, unlike in other metropolises, hope in Gotham seems to be attainable only through an intense beam of darkness. The circle seems to have closed: over the course of the long Halloween weekend – the events unfolding between October 31st and November 6th – Batman has evolved from a symbol of fear into a symbol of hope.³⁸ He achieved this by confronting his own inner darkness and converting his pain into wisdom. However, to achieve this transformation, he had to let go of the past. Batman came to understand that revenge alone could never alter what had transpired, neither for him nor for Gotham, nor for anyone else. To truly break free from the past and the supposed guilt it carried (indeed, to “come out of the past”), he needed the courage to face it head-on, to unmask it, and to delve beyond the veil of pseudo-truth that concealed it. Only then could he render those chains that had bound them all nearly intangible.³⁹

³⁸ Among the comics used as a reference, in addition to Frank Miller and David Mazzucchelli's *Batman: Year One* from 1987, what has inspired *The Batman* the most is Jeph Loeb and Tim Sale's *Batman: The Long Halloween series* from 1996-1997 (as well as its follow-up by the same authors, *Batman: Dark Victory* from 1999-2000), which tells of the “end” of Gotham's criminal underworld, targeted by a killer who wants to eliminate them all. Both have been adapted into equally - and even if simplified, excellent - animated versions: *Year One in 2011* directed by Sam Liu and Lauren Montgomery, and *The Long Halloween in 2021*, divided into two parts and directed by Chris Palmer.

³⁹ «L'uso psicologico del termine “colpa” non va confuso con quello giuridico o morale. Il concetto psicologico di colpa descrive la presenza irrazionale di un senso di colpa soggettivo (o della convinzione di essere colpevole) o di una colpa obiettivamente presunta (o dell'addebito di compartecipazione alla colpa). [...] L'elemento essenziale dell'isteria è una dissociazione cosiddetta sistematica, un allentamento degli opposti che d'ordinario sono strettamente congiunti tra loro, un allentamento che a volte giunge a provocare una vera e propria scissione della personalità, vale a dire una situazione in cui realmente la mano sinistra non sa quel che fa la destra. Di solito è presente anche una stupefacente ignoranza dell'Ombra: si conoscono soltanto i propri buoni motivi, e quando i cattivi non possano più esser negati, compare allora il “superuomo e il signore” senza scrupoli che si crede nobilitato già soltanto dalla grandezza della sua meta. Non conoscere l'altro lato di sé porta a una grande insicurezza interiore: non si sa bene chi siamo, ci si sente inferiori in qualche punto, senza però voler sapere dove, e con questa nuova inferiorità si accresce ulteriormente quella già esistente [...] Con l'occultamento della verità non si può curare né l'isteria di un individuo, né quella di un popolo. [...] Neppure il soggetto più folle è completamente matto. Un certo numero di funzioni rimane integro in lui ed egli può perfino presentare periodi di assoluta normalità. E quanto più questo sarà vero per l'isteria, che non presenta null'altro che esagerazioni ed eccessi, da un lato, e indebolimenti o temporanee paralisi in funzioni di per sé normali, dall'altro! L'isterico, nonostante il suo stato psicopatico, è pressoché normale [...] Ognuno dovrebbe veramente scoprire da solo il modo di affrontare questa visione terrificante. Non è davvero cosa da poco riconoscere la propria colpa e il proprio male, e nulla si guadagna a perdere di vista la propria Ombra. L'essere consapevoli della propria colpa presenta infatti il vantaggio di porsi nella posizione di poter cambiare e migliorarsi. È noto che gli elementi che permangono nell'inconscio non si modificano mai, poiché è solo nella coscienza che si possono apportare correzioni psicologiche. La coscienza della propria colpa può diventare dunque il più potente stimolo morale. In ogni trattamento della nevrosi occorre individuare l'Ombra, altrimenti non è possibile alcun cambiamento (il che non costituisce del resto una scoperta tanto nuova!)» [«The psychological use of the term ‘guilt’ should not be confused with the legal or moral use. The psychological concept of guilt describes the irrational presence of a subjective sense of guilt (or the belief of being guilty) or of an objectively presumed guilt (or the attribution of shared guilt) [...] The essential element of hysteria is a so-called systematic dissociation, a loosening of opposites that are ordinarily closely linked to each other, a loosening that sometimes leads to a veritable splitting of the personality, that is, a situation in which the left hand does not really know what the right hand is doing. Usually, there is also a stunning ignorance of the Shadow: only one's own good motives are known, and when the bad ones can no longer be denied, then the

And thus, the story draws to a close, with Batman and/or Gotham determined to leave the past behind and embark on a different path, always mindful, however, that even though this ‘case’ has been solved «criminals never sleep [...] and things will get worse before they get better».

The Batman, then, seems to suggest this as well, that in order to be able to move beyond one's own past, one must have the courage to “look at”(and not just “see”) the truth; especially that one hidden in the deepest darkness of one's own heart, and distinguish it from the many prepackaged/premeditated pseudo-truths that keep people chained, especially to themselves.⁴⁰ Ultimately, it highlights the futility of remaining confined within the glittering facade of convention, a constraint that ensnares people within the prison of ignorance and hypocrisy.

Moreover, it becomes evident that distancing oneself from one's past doesn't inherently resolve anything; distance provides no safeguard against the passage of time. To confront one's past, one must, at times, learn the art of silence and solitude. It involves opening one's eyes «sull'arcano cielo dell'ombra» («on the arcane sky of shadow») and descending into the depths of the self.⁴¹ There, one endeavors to (co)exist

unscrupulous “superman and lord” appears who believes himself ennobled already by the greatness of his goal. Not knowing the other side of oneself leads to great inner insecurity: one does not know who we are, we feel inferior in some point, without wanting to know where, and with this new inferiority, the already existing one is further increased [...] With the concealment of truth, neither the hysteria of an individual nor that of a people can be cured. [...] Not even the craziest subject is completely insane. A certain number of functions remain intact in him, and he can even present periods of absolute normality. And the more true this is for hysteria, which presents nothing but exaggerations and excesses on the one hand, and weakening or temporary paralysis in functions that are in themselves normal on the other! The hysteric, despite his psychopathic state, is almost normal [...] Everyone should really discover for himself the way to face this terrifying vision. It is not really an easy thing to recognize one's own guilt and evil, and nothing is gained by losing sight of one's Shadow. Being aware of one's guilt has the advantage of being in a position to change and improve. It is known that the elements that remain in the unconscious never change, since it is only in consciousness that psychological corrections can be made. Consciousness of one's guilt can thus become the most powerful moral stimulus. In every treatment of neurosis, it is necessary to identify the Shadow, otherwise no change is possible (which is not, after all, a new discovery!)». C. G. Jung, *Dopo la catastrofe* in C. G. Jung, *Civiltà in transizione. Vol. 2: Dopo la catastrofe*, trad. it. M. A. Massimello, Torino, Bollati Boringhieri, 1986, p. 14, pp. 26-27, p. 29, pp. 35-36. Jung, in this writing, addresses the problem of the Germans' relationship with “guilt” after World War II. See also C. G. Jung, *La lotta con l'ombra*, ibid, pp. 57-67. It goes without saying that in the “framework” here in question, we mean by “hysteria” what Freud defined as anxiety hysteria, that is, a neurosis in which the main symptom is phobia, and which is not necessarily linked to explicit somatic symptoms, where the «mysterious leap (almost disconcerting, rätselhafte Sprung) from the psychic to the somatic, from the mind to the body» is made, and of which Freud always speaks in the seventeenth lecture of the General Introduction to Psychoanalysis ([consultable here, the passage is found on p. 265](#)). See also J. Laplanche, J-B. Pontalis, *Enciclopedia della psicanalisi*, pp. 278-279.

⁴⁰ We mean by “pre-mediated” truth news and facts that are still to come and are anticipated through the media in order to prepare the public in advance for a reality that does not yet exist, where the boundary between what will be and what will be “pre-mediated” becomes particularly thin. Regarding the concept of “premediation,” although used by the author in a slightly different sense, we could also say that it has been remediated: R. Grusin, *Premediation: Affect and Mediality after 9/11*, Palgrave Macmillan London-New York, 2010.

⁴¹ Let's take up the beautiful image from Antonia Pozzi, *La porta che si chiude*, 1931: «E poi, /dietro la porta per sempre chiusa, /sarà la notte intera, /la frescura, /il silenzio. /E poi, /con le labbra serrate, /con gli occhi aperti /sull'arcano cielo dell'ombra, /sarà– tu lo sai – /la pace». (Antonia Pozzi, “The closing door”,

with darkness, engaging with it in a gentle, respectful whisper, through silence, pain, and tears.

Because ultimately, at the end of the viewing of *The Batman*, of this «box full of darkness» expertly crafted by Matt Reeves and his collaborators, do you leave the theater with the strange sensation, paradoxical only in appearance, that yes, perhaps all this darkness has truly been a gift.



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1931: «And then, /behind the door forever closed, /it will be the whole night, /the coolness, /the silence. /And then, /with your lips closed, /with your eyes open /on the arcane sky of the shadow, /it will be/- you know - /peace”»)

