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## MOVIE REVIEW

What *Batman* Is Everyone Watching?

# Batman

*Back to the dream caves.*

I started a joke, that started the whole world crying\*...

Bat first, let's take a look at the sociological phenomenon of Batman's astonishing popularity...hold it! Isn't it possible to *just review the movie*, and keep the potential value of the film completely separate from its effect on the public, its economic and political impact, its influence on the weather? Well, actually, no. It *would* have been possible to review the movie qua movie *before* its explosion into "le phenomene sociologique" (as Francois Truffaut dubbed the UFO incident in *Close Encounters*). But this plebeian film critic didn't get into the previews with a press pass; no, being a man of the masses, he watched the ol' Caped Crusader down in the trenches with the general public, and by that time it was too late to keep separate the solitary phenomenon of a shining bubble from the billows of popularity in which the film of froth was subsequently swamped. So first of all, one must ask with a little Marvin Gaye pivot: what's going on?

Does anyone seem to recall how, not too long ago, preview audiences watching the trailer for Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner* became wildly anticipatory for the film's release on the basis of the fantastic cityscapes etc. (with which, incidentally, the *Batman* matte-work has now been often compared) only to leave the picture high and dry shortly after its premiere by a word-of-mouth and general critical disclaimer that the movie was too "murky"? Well, hey, Dudes; just seven years after, it seems neither critics nor audiences are so uniformly sensitive toward the merely "murky". For not only is *Batman* a deliberate *noire* film, of a richly miasmal murk that makes *Blade Runner* twinkle like a Christmas tree; it is often cruel and mean-spirited (don't start up on your dear reviewer yet—this isn't even the criticism) in much the same way that Paul Verhoeven's *Robocop* was peculiarly remorseless in its pursuit of the gratuitously nasty. In case you haven't thought about it, what becomes of Jerry Hall's model face, the death-mask dressup in which it's all done replete with a litter of photographed wardead gassed into closeup grimaces of risus sardonicus, leaves a tinge of cyanic green about the gills much like the chemically-altered epidermis of the Joker's complexion; and the accompanying "mirth" which Nicholson's performance squeezes in a milk of ambiguity out of the audience, is almost in schizoid dissociation from the necrotic breath breathed off the screen.

This is hardly the kind of fare which audiences have "traditionally" made boxoffice champions—by comparison the "horrors" of *Jaws* was a jack-in-the-box, while *Raiders* and *E.T.* were positively ingratiating. Nor is it really possible to write off the public's record-breaking response solely to the Pavlovian conditioning of pre-film hype and saturation merchandising; for at best the gates jump open to a fast start under pressure of such periodic campaigns. If there isn't something in the "product" itself to sustain enthusiasm to a snowball surge and induce the very necessary *repeat business*, the genuine "phenomene sociologique" does not automatically ensue (witness the De Laurentiis campaign for *King Kong*, or even the merchandising putsch for *Star Wars III*, which comparatively "sagged" at the boxoffice after an opening burst primed with the powder of pure anticipation).

But what is there in *this* Bat-product? Don't misunderstand the question; it does not imply the film has no merit—indeed, such a question doesn't really address the *merit* of the film at all. The question of actual merit would lead us to declare that *Blade Runner*, for example, was a wonderful movie; but one of the things which distinguished it as "wonderful" was the powerfully dark, lethally dense atmosphere of its view—precisely the characteristic which at the time was said to "turn the public off". The real question here, if properly understood, admits to a Mystery. We're standing in the presence of a wildly popular Sphinx.

For one thing, consider: Warner Bros., the producer of the film, was reported to be in desperate straits and conceived *Batman* as the means of bailing itself out, not only out of the boxoffice doldrums but the wrecking yards of receivership. Now, when you are deliberately planning a vehicle which has to hit critics and audiences in such a way as to make an initial splash and subsequent tsunami on the magnitude of nine figures and rolling, simply in order to tread, you would suppose that conservatism and strict adherence to precedent would be the key. You'd think that computer-averaged, statisti-

cally-researched *actuarial compromise* would be the watchword. Imagine sitting in on the executive foreplay to such an ultimate conception.

It comes to your attention that it's DC Comics' 50th anniversary of *Batman*; you immediately recall the popularity the t.v. series briefly enjoyed in the '60s. So far so good. You'd assume the thing to do would be to swiftly wed those facts to some "formula" derived from basic elements of the top ten moneymakers of all time (in other words, break into the Spielberg/Lucas safety-deposit vaults where the celluloid Rosetta Stone is kept). But Nooooooooo. Somehow, inexplicably, you decide to do *Batman* as film noir. Somehow, inexplicably, you pass up Schwarzenegger and Stallone for...Michael Keaton? Somehow, inexplicably, you decide, whether consciously or unconsciously, to make *Batman* all about— *poison!*

For yes, that is what this *Batman* is ultimately about. It's about poison. It breathes poison. (Back off; this isn't the criticism either.) It has, altogether, the frozen grin of the Deathshad sporting crossbones-clavicle on a bottle of thallium. The great "body" of Gotham City, looking like an hallucinatory New York out of Lang's *Metropolis*, is backed up, trash impacted, plugged with industrial and human debris so that the ordinary anonymity and impersonal austerity of mountainous metropolitan architecture takes on the dun-dead visage of an anatomy text coldly viewing viscera of some constipated Alien. "What this city needs, is an enema," the Joker observes quite cogently—after all, it's not for nothing Batman's dossier on Jack Napier notes his high intelligence; it's the implicit *statement* being made by that intelligence in the design of its demented plot, that holds the secret dream-key to the whole movie.

## In The Bladder Of The Joker's Boutonniere

For one can have no quarrel with *what* the Joker perceives, from the summit of his murder-acquired suite. The city is certainly dying of its own unassimilable waste; mankind is already all-but-trashed. Such "high" intelligence looking down from the imperious remove of its money insulated viewpoint, can't be faulted in the ice-edge of its vision. Intelligence that technically elevated, perceives correctly—with a great deal more incisiveness than the middling muddle being meditated by the fume-addled masses below.

No, one can't fault the clarity of vision; the city *indeed* needs an enema. Yet the *conclusions* which are drawn from the counsel of such an intelligence operating entirely *without a heart* are indeed utterly insane. First of all, how did the City *become* so contaminated? The very mind that observes how "backed up" it is, had a direct hand in the proceedings. The movie starts out, after all, with an investigation of racket-control in the chemical industry. We see there's no effectual *policing* of the offending businesses, since it's quickly demonstrated that law-enforcement (in the form of a noir homage to Welles' Captain Vargas in *A Touch of Evil*) dances to industry's tune, serving its requirements—and both the tune and the requirements are equal to Money. Indeed the culprit isn't immune to the conditions he causes; the over-the-edge dementia giving fatal cyanic tinge to the Joker's cortex as well as to his complexion comes about as the result of a perfect stroke of justice: he plunges into a bile-green vat which serves to freeze the flesh of severed facial nerves into a perpetual grinning mask. It is the *very logic* of that cold intelligence weighing everything on the scale of money, which backs up on itself and floods its own bloodstream with the poison it propagated everywhere. Having fouled itself with such cold objectivity, its worship of the aloofness purchased by—and characteristic of—a power without heart, it comes to *love that poison for its own sake*. The poison has *become* its bloodstream. What everyone else seems to *die from*, has transmogrified into the Joker's life-juice. He feeds on it. Take note.

What, one must ask, is the audience *watching* when it views the Joker's "plot" unfold? What does the audience come back and back in a ritual summer compulsiveness to *see*, when the Joker is shown going about his blissful business mixing poisons and mortal toxins into the hairspray and foundation makeup of a populace quite equal in implicit identity to the multitudes packing the theater-houses? And the *secret*—the secret of all that poison! How indeed does the Joker *do* it? For one can never be sure which product will contain the clownish surprise! It is only Batman, Batman alone, who figures it out: it's in the *combination*. No spray or lipgloss alone may do it (remember?); but several such products in *combination* may suddenly react, and the ghoulish result leaves a dead newscaster on the live airwaves set stiff in sardonicus midway through some tragic item.

## The Sound Of No-Face Laughing

Something here should sound vaguely familiar; **for the filmmakers are only reporting on the real-life formula**. The toxic effects from which everyone—on a world-wide scale presently suffers, aren't just the peculiar high-tech demons of identifiable byproducts that can be duly isolated; the poisons that are smelted and packaged, refined and harvested, ejected and ingested incessantly through the sum-total of industrial living, work such thorough subversion of the immunology system (and in the process produce such unique and resistant ailments) owing to a synergistic interaction that simply couldn't be accomplished by each operating independently, i.e. in the manner of the standard linear model which main-

stream medicine insists on imposing so as to focus on "the" reductive cause, the isolated irritant. Due to the same blinders which have served over time in accelerative synthesis of items for limited/profitable use or specialized effect, **neither official science nor mainstream medicine have yet developed theoretical eyes adequate to view the dilemma in its proper dimension.**

It's for this reason the Joker, underworld master and crime czar of the Industrial Chemistry-set, can impart his lethal humor with invisible panache, with utterly silent and undetected effect. Only Batman seems able to see the *gestalt*, the Way of combination and synergistic reinforcement; everyone else appears to be looking in hypnotic left-brain fashion for the isolated factor, the irreducible particle, the underlying "entity".

Only "Batman" sees it; he alone can figure it out. And why?

## The Unbelievable Unevenness Of Bat-Opposites

By way of addressing ourselves to just that question, we should find it interesting that more than one "major" reviewer of *Batman* objected to the apparent imbalance in the respective portraits of Bruce Wayne and the Joker; the rictus-riddled Napier, they objected uniformly, was "explained" in his villainy far more thoroughly than the filmmakers apparently saw fit to "explain" the eponymous hero! But is this really so much a justified criticism, as it is a simple failure (common to critics) to take the actual story-premise into consideration on its own terms? **Batman is the hero of this piece;** after all, fellows, the movie is named after *him*. And in the *story*, he's a very mysterious figure to Gotham's denizens. What motivates him to "good" (if it is *indeed* good) is not at all self-evident, nor is it supposed to be. In the *story*, he's an enigma. In contradistinction to this the Joker, evil as he is, is hardly an enigma. The only "mystery" hovering about him is *how* he does it, not *why*.

No one really has any question about Negativity. It is taken for granted. Its cold self-serving is easy to assess. The filmmakers are—at least instinctively—correct. There is no mystery about this. Evil isn't just *banal*; it's actually more *understandable* to present sensibilities soaked in the neglect of wanton self-poisoning, than is the motivation or even the *nature* of good. (Remember, half the city thinks Batman sucks the blood of his criminal "victims", making the latter more implicitly sympathetic than he is.) Negativity is all too easy to come by; brooding, infantile self-serving is an all-too-easy reaction to the impasse created on all levels by that Negativity. No, Bruce Wayne's persona is *not* explained adequately by his remark "bats are survivors". Nor is it supposed to be. Since he's the focus of the movie in the explicit form of an enigma, he represents a *challenge* to the viewer to *understand*. All the clues are plainly given. We know he "turned to crime-fighting because he witnessed the brutal murder of his parents"; but we have to dig into the Dream Psyche of this epic screen-symbolization in order to understand the *extravagant dissociations* in linear logic and developmental motivation involved in becoming a bat. (Well, have you ever considered what it *takes* to become a bat?) We must note then that bats "see" at night by a radar guidance-system. Analogically, Bruce Wayne "sees" into the machinations of evil (the "nightside") in a way no one else seems able. In another sense, the interior self-luminance or intuitive "moonglow" of a higher-dimensional intelligence is baffling to the common mind; that mind views the workings of such an intelligence as an impenetrable darkness, a perfectly opaque Mystery. Bruce Wayne is associated symbolically with precisely that darkness; he alone apprehends the 'non-linear' means by which the Joker creates his deadly effect, because *he too* operates in the dark!

In this sense, then, the filmmakers show us that Batman and the Joker operate upon the same, rarefied plane at opposite poles of the vertical divide; they are of comparable "high intelligence". They are a match in much the way that Holmes and Moriarty were a match, respectively untouchable at their parallel summits, each alone and apart in the wisdom-perfection of his particular polarity. (If there happened to be a crowd-packed continent of distance between them it would inevitably be as if the crowd mysteriously thinned, dreamily dispersed all the while they drifted unerringly together—nothing in the world really existing to effectually intervene, each being the sole real test of the other's verity unto utter death—so that the one was, alone, the other's warrant as *unequalled distillate of the premise for which he stood*.) This was brought symbolically alive, not *only* in the film (since the film draws on the background established in the comic), but especially on screen since the Wayne manor is portrayed as so immense, so foreboding and austere even Bruce seems uncomfortable in it at times—yet he corrects Vicki Vale that some of it is *very much* "him". In this way we see a definite parallel; we are led to draw an *inference* in the case of Bruce Wayne, where we were shown explicitly the imperious self-isolation of Napier. Batman is, in the perfection of his own polarity, as isolated by its comparative uncommonness as the Joker is isolated, by preference, in the uncommon coldness of his heart. Just consider for a minute: is Batman a "regular guy", a "man of the people"? Even *Superman* seems more gregarious and "connected" by comparison than Bruce Wayne.

## Like A Bat Out Of Heaven

There is another side to this same observation: and it's here that we *can* clearly locate the means of distinguishing between the Caped Crusader and his greasepaint nemesis. There were those who (for example) objected to the last scene of the movie, preferring they'd simply cut to close at the point where the limousine pulls from the curb with Vicki Vale in the back seat on her way to meet Wayne. What such objection misses, because it doesn't operate on the same Ever-ready Saf-teries, is that the closing shot shows something as specific and important as anything that went before: we've seen that Bruce is as susceptible to love as anyone—after all, he's the one with the *open* heart; but we're emphatically shown that personal pleasure and private love-life must forever "take a backseat" in the committed breast of "Batman" (whatever that may be in its *still* mysterious darkness, hmrrn?). For we see him, in the end, outlined on a rooftop against the night sky upon which glows, across a great full moon, the Batman insignia cast cloudward by the citizens' searchlight he'd given Gotham (and, in that giving, so sealed the primacy of his "eternal vigilance"—for, as he'd told V.V. earlier, "it seems no one else can do it").

## The Same As *Devoue Devoyer*

Between Batman and the Joker, then, the assessment of the situation is much the same. What certain critics labelled their "similar insanities", thus inferring that their positions to either side of the positive/negative ledger were arbitrary, is in fact a shared clarity of vision (which certainly *looks* mad from the midline muddle of majority consciousness, clinging to the conventional wisdom as if those preformed media-ingots could keep them afloat; what is *in fact* mad is adamant adherence to the mirage of rotted standards festering openly outside the workday gates of the leaking power plant, the be-fouling factory next to which the school ground strangely bubbles with some indescribable ooze; what is *in fact* mad is fearing for the loss of jobs and a diminished tax-base when your children's hair is dropping out, and they bathe in the broth of bone cancer). Within such a similar "clarity of vision", however, the Joker is quite without peer in his dementia. His *response* to the spreading vapors of anti-life enshrouding the city (to which his own loveless activity has contributed) is to *become* it. His unique answer to the predicament, only abetted by his having fallen into the vat, is just an extension of the general way in which he was always moving but blown-up monumentally (and drawn to its logical extreme) by the exponent of cumulative effect—just as the general miasma propagated by sanctioned outlawry of the chemical companies is a gross materialization of "the Joker's" own morbidly self-serving psyche.

The filmmakers, again whether by design or "guided accident", are showing something very important here that deserves a closer look. **The Joker's "solution" to the encroaching atmosphere of death, is to *become it*.** This is an acceleration of the whole predicament to another level, the addition of the dimension of *consciousness, of intent*. Note: the ghastly green entrepreneur who runs the factories and mills and vats of ubiquitous death, is not some myopic personality, a "guy just like me" only insufficiently informed; he is not someone who simply has to be educated to the inevitable consequences of a short-sighted activity; he isn't someone operating on compensatory psychological mechanisms, or the reversible tack of rationalization. He isn't someone Lear-like in his preference for bad counsel or who simply refuses to see. He *sees* all too clearly; distorted perception is not his problem, nor is anything which can answer to some adjustive correction, the blandishments of reform. **He loves what he does: do you hear this for what it is?** This is the only way, ultimately, to account for the militarists and manufacturers who insist with the relentlessness of golems on secretly or openly irradiating the food you eat as well as the food your children and their own children eat. No explanation, no matter how reasonable by the logic of profitable self-interest, can otherwise adequately assess the character of the coolness with which the public's provided rationale for oxidizing its already devitalized foodstuffs; no exposure of complex plots to benefit, by loophole, from the "fallout" of private plutonium manufactory (no matter how factually firm) can account for the dimension of stark-staring madness behind it all. No, the "problem" of contemporary life has to be faced according to the real proportions informing it; and by measure of that scale it has to be confessed that the Joker—not your amenable Uncle Jack—showing money like Wall Street tickertape on the fume-filled streets of Gotham is clearly in charge of the Show. The Joker, then, beholds the unmistakable face of Death and decides to lead its Parade; Batman, on the other hand, while certainly seeing the same thing is hardly on the same, "insane" wavelength, as some critics have suggested, since from the beginning it's demonstrated that his intent is toward the protection and awakening of all the slumbering citizens, alerting them as well as the "opposite element" to the clear terms of the situation. And how does he do that? "Tell them about me," he commands a cringing hood he's cornered on a rooftop: get the word around, make them think—and think again.

## Does "Blind As A Bat" Ring The OP Cathedral Belfry?

Having heard certain critics' objections to other aspects of the movie, one can only inquire as to what said critics might possibly have been watching—in most cases it isn't even a *matter* of interpretation (the proper forum for differing) but of simply seeing what's up *on the screen*, and so noticing an actual point the filmmakers were trying to put across at precisely the place of blind objection. For example, one critic carped about the illogic of motivation or behavior, citing the scene in which the Joker showers money over packed Gotham streets in his night parade of poison-filled balloons; when the Joker

is forced to stop, deprived of his balloons by the Batmobile, why—demanded the critic—doesn't the crowd jump the Joker and beat the tar out of him?

Apparently the evidence of the senses is not enough for this mystic critic, who conjures away in one question the quite visible fact that the crowd is depicted, half-gassed like ambulatory zombies from *Night of the Living Dead*, still groping for the money! Doesn't it seem as if a specific point is being made here? Rather than the "illogical motivation" of flawed filming, the world disclosed upon the screen *this* reviewer saw was pointedly populated by dying humanoids clutching—out of the sheer automaticity of undissuadable habit—for the last-gasp buck. In fact this scene was a very telling '80s update of the '60s *Magic Christian* (remember the Terry Southern adaptation, with Peter Sellers and Ringo Starr?) in which that eccentric billionaire and "Grand Guy, Guy Grand" threw tons of money into a boiling vat of pig excrement in the middle of the city, after which the cosmopolitan citizens dutifully dived with squeals of oinkish delight. It is noticeable (and so most-probably registers an intentional point) that in the comparable *Batman* scene the crowd-noise is subdued; the filmmakers distinctly resisted the most obvious sort of depiction in which the volume would be turned full-blast in amplification of every greedy grunt and salacious cheer of the marching multitudes. Rather, it seems as if the crowd is already zombified before the poisonous jets are discharged; everyone has already absorbed a couple decades of death-dust, so that the game-show grovel after the dollars is now sheer reflex. *This* crowd is running on *toxified memories* of piggishness. It doesn't "turn upon" the Joker and his men for the simple reason it doesn't *see* who poisoned everyone, although the culprits are right in the open; and it doesn't care. The last fog of semi-conscious life is fixed on the down-floating dollar bill. (This seems to be a pretty major point not to have noticed!) The whole ethos of the movie in fact is epitomized quite neatly during the scene in which the Joker, Prince of Philistines, is trashing a museum-fill of paintings; he sprays a portrait of Founding Father Washington with a dollar sign, thereby rendering George-the-first much more cozily familiar.

## Go Figure *These* Figures

So why, then, are the crowds coming back and back to see *this* of all movies—and especially one itself so caught in those contradictions of "going for the gold" which it paints in pigments of purest caustic (what Bruce-Wayne/rapid-fire-computerhead might sort the several ravages wreaked upon the ecosystem in the manufacture of but a single line of those plastic, batwinged products being hawked to a public which sits down daily to a whole other gospel subliminally preached in the murky streets of Gotham?). I

As Jack (Kerouac) once said, "everybody knows everything". At least, *everybody unconsciously* knows everything. It is not too difficult to suppose, then, that (in light of the present 11th hour crisis of the entire life-support system of this world) the actually peculiar, fiscally unsafe choices made by the creative and executive powers in charge of bringing us the 50th-anniversary celebration of *Batman* as well as the unprogrammatically "programmed response" of the public, reflects a submerged-obsessive acknowledgment that what has actually been captured here—face-off between Batman and his grinning nemesis included—is a documentary.

What happens when (rather than sink the maximum millions into a serious "epic" such as—in days gone by—the filmization of *Ben Hur*) the studios choose to sink comparable inflation dollar millions into the filmization of a comic strip, is that you end up with a documentary. In noir.

Oh yes; and the *criticism*; where is your friendly reviewer's actual, promised criticism? Okay, here it is: is it necessary to stick those little merchandising leaflets into *your hands* in exchange for your ticket when you enter the theater? Couldn't they just leave them on a rack near the aisle entrance where you could take one if you *wanted*?

## So: Does *Batman* Have Gong Fu?

One last thing: you've got to ask yourself—does *Batman* have Gong Fu? Yes, it oozes it—like the butter one doesn't get on one's popcorn—and especially Nicholson's noir homage to Richard Widmark's classic giggling psycho Tommy Uddo in *Kiss of Death*; if you think your local *T-Bird* critic is reading such intention into it, take a look again at the hat and trenchcoat Jack N. wears as Jack Napier; and notice also how Widmark-like is the actor employed to play the *young* Jack Napier.

*Batman* \*\*\*\*