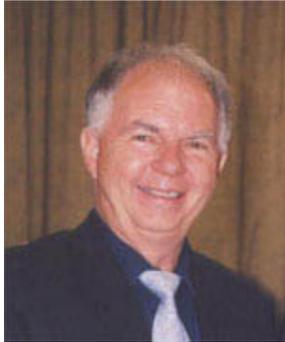




TRANSCRIPT



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Cinema

Batman – The Dark Knight

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The new Batman movie – *The Dark Knight* – has an apt title containing a built-in play on words. The caped crusader's suit of armour is, of course, black rather than shining silver like the knights of old. Hence Batman is a *Dark Knight*. But, if you remove the letter "k" from the word "knight" the title of the movie begins to suggest that audiences are in for a gloomy night and, possibly, even some nightmares. This, too, is an appropriate indication of what is to come.

The Dark Knight is indeed a dark movie which plunges down and down into an exploration of moral dilemmas in the manner of a Shakespearean tragedy. And, even though one of the main characters is called *The Joker*, don't expect any comic relief. Even the ironic quips of Bruce Wayne's long-suffering man-servant which lightened-up the previous Batman movie are now gone. Michael Caine is there once again as the Butler, but his time on screen seems to have been reduced and the movie is the poorer for this. It's all very serious stuff and, as we have come to expect, a far cry from the Batman of old.

The movie features well-contrived dramatic tension, explosive energy and excellent performances by all of the cast, but it's by no means a piece of pleasant entertainment and if you are considering seeing it you need to prepare yourself for a long and gruelling experience. However, it's certainly a movie for our times. It's a cleverly-constructed, searching allegory about the War on Terror.

The opening image draws the audience into this concept. The sequence establishes a sun-bathed cityscape and then carries us closer and closer to a glass-walled office building as if we are riding in the pilot's seat of one of the nine-eleven suicide planes. And the villainous *Joker* is a kind of Osama bin Laden in clown make-up. He's the epitome of evil: totally devoid of morality. He shambles through the movie like a sinister ringmaster, orchestrating threatening situations which not only place lives at risk but which are also deliberately and mischievously structured to challenge the moral certitude of his opponents. His motivations are simplistic and satanic. He is a contemporary Mephistopheles drawing his greatest delight from manipulating his victims into situations in which they themselves become the vehicles of their own damnation.

And Gotham City is a fertile playground for this devil in disguise. Corruption, in many forms, infests the city like a deadly virus. Mobsters plan their evil deeds at board meetings like business executives, while their opponents on the police force eye each other with a demoralising suspicion because so many of the policemen are themselves corrupt. Most of the action takes place in the mythical city of Gotham which becomes a metaphor for any major world city potentially afflicted by terrorism. The spectres of Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo Bay lurk behind the walls of its prisons and torture sequences highlight the corrupting effects which result from fighting evil with evil.

The movie is sprinkled with frighteningly familiar hostage situations including some in which the last words of terrified hostages are recorded on amateur video. Images such as these seem to have come straight out of an Al Jazeera news service.

These are just a few examples of how our own troubled times have provided a rich source of inspiration for the Nolan brothers, Christopher and Jonathon, who wrote the screenplay. The result of all this is that *The Dark Knight* is a much more sombre movie than its predecessor – *Batman Begins* – which was also written by the Nolans and, like this one, also directed by Christopher Nolan. Christian Bale again pulls on the cloak as Batman and produces a convincing rendition of the conflicted caped crusader.

However, it is the late Heath Ledger's portrayal of The Joker which gives this movie its edge and its definition. The Joker's character is written as a study in psychosis and, in putting on the sloppy clown make-up, Heath Ledger seems to have climbed inside the skin of this terrifying monster. Ledger dips into the Method actor's paintbox to bring this awful creature to fearsome life and much of his dialogue is delivered in the manner of a madman engaged in a continual mumbling conversation with his own inner demons. His malevolent eyes are lifeless – recalling the deadpan thrill-killers of Kubrick's *A Clockwork Orange* – and his mouth is constantly chewing as if he can almost *taste* the effects of his evil deeds. Heath Ledger has been touted for a posthumous Oscar for this role and I think the Academy will find it hard to resist making this award.

However, despite this great performance and all of the other spectacular visual effects of *The Dark Knight* I felt that the most awe-inspiring element of the movie was its background music. As with *Batman Begins*, the music for *The Dark Knight* is the creation of German composer Hans Zimmer, and the music is truly magnificent and exciting. Great swirls and waves of orchestral sound provide an unseen magic carpet upon which Batman swoops through the concrete canyons of Gotham City. The music is full of portent and laced with notions of vengeance and menace.

Its inspiration is palpably Wagnerian: dark music for a movie with dark themes. Hans Zimmer came to prominence with his score for the hit movie *Rain Man* twenty years ago. Since then he has produced an enormous body of work and seems to have taken on the mantle of the other great German-born composers who left their stamp on Hollywood movies during the forties and fifties. At just fifty-one years of age, Hans Zimmer's ability still seems to be on an upward trajectory. His score for *The Dark Knight* is ideally suited for the all-enveloping surround-sound of a well-equipped picture theatre. It's worth the price of admission just to go and have a listen.

But the totality of *The Dark Knight* makes it worth the price of admission in any case. It's a spectacular, creatively-crafted descent into chaos. I gave it three and half stars.

Bye for now – see you in the back stalls.

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