



**INSTITUTIONEN FÖR  
SPRÅK OCH LITTERATURER**

# **THE ADAPTATION CYCLE OF COMIC BOOKS AND CINEMA:**

**Authorship, Intermediality and Fidelity in Batman  
Adaptations**

**Nicola Camoglio**

---

Essay/Degree Project:	Master's essay, literary specialisation, 30 credits
Program or/and course:	EN2M10
Level:	Second cycle
Term/year:	VT2023
Supervisor:	Marius Hentea
Examiner:	Maria Olaussen
Report nr:	

# Abstract

**Title:** The Adaptation Cycle of Comic Books and Cinema: Authorship, Intermediality and Fidelity in Batman Adaptations

**Author:** Nicola Camoglio

**Supervisor:** Marius Hentea

**Abstract:** This thesis explores the adaptation process from comic books to cinema, by leveraging theoretical frameworks found in the modern field of adaptation studies. The focus lies primarily on film adaptations of Batman, one of the most famous and well-regarded characters from the comic book medium. Through the exploration of a selection of Batman adaptations, the thesis explores notions of authorship, authorial intention, canon, thematic fidelity and the concept of geneticism. Having been adapted multiple times over the years since his 1939 debut, Batman is ripe for exploration in the field of adaptation studies. Many visionary directors such as Tim Burton, Joel Schumacher and Christopher Nolan have left their mark on the character, with a series of wildly different adaptations that highlight the importance of authorship, while also establishing an extensive intermedial network between source material, adaptation and authorial intention. By building upon the methods delineated by Bryant and Bruhn, the thesis explores the role of each director as an auteur and adaptor, whose work is placed within a larger lineage of versions of a story. The modern frameworks of the study highlight the importance of a more nuanced understanding of fidelity, which is fundamental when approaching comic book characters, whose canonical features do not stem from a single source text, but from decades of stories authored by a plethora of writers and pencilers.

**Keywords:** *Batman*, *The Dark Knight*, Tim Burton, Joel Schumacher, Bruce Timm, Christopher Nolan, Adam West, authorship, adaptation, intermediality, adaptive revision, dialogism, geneticism, fidelity

# Table of Contents

1. Introduction .....	1
2. Initial Success and Adaptations .....	10
3. Batmania and Controversy .....	17
4. Good and Bad Objects .....	29
5. Resurrection and Aftermath .....	43
6. Conclusion .....	57
Bibliography .....	61

# 1. Introduction

Created by Bob Kane and Bill Finger, the character of Batman debuted in 1939 on the pages of Detective Comics (published by National Comics, now known as DC Comics). The crimefighting alter-ego of billionaire orphan Bruce Wayne has been a cultural behemoth for the better part of the century, his humble origins in comic books cultivated into a multi-billion dollar franchise across different media. Other characters and locations from his fictional world, such as Robin the Boy Wonder, Alfred, and The Joker, as well as the setting, Gotham City, have grown to be instantly recognisable on their own. Having appeared with great success in seventeen feature films since the 1960s, fourteen of which as a lead character, and in countless animated series and direct-to-video films, live-action series and video games, Batman fits into the category of characters “whose meanings long ago escaped the anchorage of whatever 'original' text brought them into being, and whose identity is no longer inseparably tied to an individual author [...] but exists somewhere above and between a multiplicity of varied and often contradictory incarnations, both old and recent, across a range of cultural forms from computer games to novels” (Brooker 2001, 9). The character has transcended his origins as a pulp character and has become an icon, “sharing with Robin Hood, Dracula and Sherlock Holmes a cultural existence which has to a large extent been freed from its roots in an original text” (Brooker 1999, 185). Unlike those characters, whose origin is nonetheless fixed on a limited range of source texts, Batman not only evolves “but more importantly, he multiplies [as he] appears in a wide range of texts and media” (Soltysik Monnet 2012, 96). The ecosystem surrounding Batman is primed for an in-depth analysis focusing on film adaptation and the peculiarities of the two-way relationship between comic books and cinema.

As a medium in which the stories featuring a given character are published regularly over decades, without a clear end in sight, comic books and their later development into the graphic novel represent a fascinating and challenging medium to explore in regards to adaptation. The history of the medium, and by extension that of Batman as one of its most popular products and exports, is tightly interwoven with intertextual and intermedial concerns. Unlike in literature, where we can identify a single novel or a series of novels by a specific author as the source material and original version of a story, the canonical features and attributes of a comic book world are built over years by a large number of writers, artists and editors. Similarly, whereas for film adaptations the source material tends to be a finite

text, the nature of comic books as an ongoing and constantly evolving medium makes any discussion of fidelity more complicated than it would be in a binary novel-to-film scenario. As such, the very notion of a canonical representation is extremely contentious, controlled and steered not only by publishing houses and the artists working therein, but also by corporate owners, and greatly influenced by heavily invested fanbases. The presence of countless versions of a character results in a fractured audience, in which one's ideal and canonical version of a character may differ greatly from that of another reader.

Therefore, theoretical complications around canon, fidelity and authenticity are further compounded by the "role of fan agency, and fan identification with favorite franchises, [which] means that changes within adapted texts raise concerns about fidelity to the source material, which is often of greatest concern to dedicated fans of a franchise" (Grant and Henderson 10). While this has been a reality for decades, the rise of the Internet has further embittered the relationship between the audience and the people creating the stories, as it has allowed fanbases to coalesce into united fronts. Although cinema and comic books share visual and narrative elements, the core audience of the latter engages with the material over greater periods, which results in greater protectiveness of the source material, which "means that fidelity may have even greater importance in the comic-to-film adaptation process than in others" (ibid). Consequently, "typical fan-cultural assessments of cross-media adaptation between movies and comic books are [...] less engaged with process than they are with product because, for many fans, the issue of fidelity still resonates powerfully" (Hoxter 140). The highly stylised artistic component of comic books further complicates matters of adaptation, as the demands of fidelity go beyond story and characterisation and cross into the visual dimension, as audiences expect adapted characters to be visually identical to their pencilled and inked counterparts. Nevertheless, it would be naïve to approach the creation of comics as a fully independent artistic entity, as the intermedial impact of adaptations and the audience response have often reflected back onto the comics and changed them. This back and forth is best exemplified in the case of Batman, due to his early success as a character on film and television and the repercussions this success has had on the originating medium.

Unlike other characters, whose portrayal always tends to adhere to a very rigid depiction, lest the character be unrecognisable, Batman has been portrayed in a myriad of different ways, both in printed form and on screen, ranging from dark, gritty avenger to campy, colourful crimefighter. This variation is the product of many factors, some artistic and some business-driven, over a long period. The versatility in the character's portrayal broadens

the scope of adaptation and how we can broach the question of whether there can be one, if any, definitive version of the character. Furthermore, when adapting from an originating medium that publishes new stories regularly, we can observe how the adaptations have, in turn, influenced and changed the source material, creating a constant intermedial conversation that blurs the traditional directionality between the original and the adapting medium. Yet to accept the versatility of the character's depiction as a simple reality is to ignore key behind-the-scenes aspects of its history, as the amount of control exerted by select figures in attempting to create a 'canonical' version of the character has penalised and demonised specific iterations in favour of others. Batman is not merely a character in stories, the rights of which are sold and result in an adaptation. Batman is a global brand, a massive entertainment conglomerate that its owner, Warner Bros., has a vested interest in protecting. That translates to safeguarding the brand's 'integrity', with studio machinations that steer its direction and accepted representations. This angle will be fundamental in aligning the relatively undisturbed notions of adaptations that typically accompany a study of this type with the business forces that control a character's depiction in diverse forms of media.

Consequently, questions of authorship, creative freedom, fidelity, intermediality and intertextuality become the foundations on which the research will be erected. The character of Batman has attracted some of the cinema's greatest visionaries from the last thirty years, directors such as Tim Burton, Christopher Nolan and, presently, Matt Reeves. Due to the starkly singular visions of these auteurs, and even the highly disputed ones of other directors such as Joel Schumacher and Zack Snyder, the discourse around the adaptations has evolved into a constant comparison between not only the source materials and the adapted works but between one authorial version against another, in a way that mirrors the way different writers and artists are pitted against one another in the discourse focusing on the comic books. Additionally, the most disputed adaptations, those helmed by Schumacher and Snyder, are the ones that received the most studio meddling and interference, which raises further questions about authorship and adaptation.

Each Batman adaptation, although invariably touted in its marketing as the most faithful to the source material yet, has always taken drastic liberties with the material, handpicking select narrative or structural elements from the source while creating new stories that are immediately attributable to the filmmaker behind them. Being 'true' to the source material raises further questions, as fidelity should not be reduced to a one-to-one transference of either text or image from one medium to another, despite that being the definition of fidelity in

the minds of general audiences. As proposed by James Harold, there are two main distinct senses of fidelity: story fidelity and thematic fidelity (2018, 89). In a film adaptation, “thematic fidelity, but not story fidelity, is an aesthetic merit, [as] merely preserving the story from one medium to another does not typically involve an aesthetically significant accomplishment, whereas preserving a theme across different media does” (ibid 89). Instead of closely following a given story from the comics, the adaptations have instead attempted to ground the character of Batman and his world in their respective modern contexts, reflecting the cultural and sociopolitical facets of society at the time. Nevertheless, each adaptation can be read also as a reaction, a rebuttal or a rebellion from an adaptation that precedes it, either due to the perceived failure of a given film in the eyes of either its devoted audience or the public at large, or by the criticism of activist groups that protested the antecedent film’s contents. These films are not created in a vacuum, and from Tim Burton’s 1989 *Batman* up to Matt Reeves’ 2022 *The Batman* we can observe this reactive movement. Therefore, the discourse around adaptations of the character becomes layered and tangled in a myriad of factors that prevent a straightforward discussion about authorial intent and fidelity, or lack thereof. Authorship is either enabled or tainted by the administrative power of a company controlling and protecting its brand.

To explore questions of adaptation, authorship and intermedial confluence, this essay will focus on the singular adaptive vision of each director and the effects of corporate influence on it and, in turn, on the originating medium. The depiction of Batman and Gotham City in each version seen on the big screen will provide us with a look at how the authors use the character to represent and comment on the cultural and sociopolitical realities of their time, rather than adapting any specific story, while also responding to the perceived wrongs of previous adaptations. Simultaneously, the control exerted by the forces holding ownership of the character will accompany this analysis, tracing a path that shows the complications of adaptation of a global brand and how one medium ultimately influences the other to maintain the ‘canonical’, or most successfully marketable, version of the character. This examination builds upon my previous research on the relationship between literature and cinema in the context of adaptation, where I focused on the cinematic versions of *The Shining* and *Doctor Sleep*, novels by Stephen King, respectively adapted by Stanley Kubrick and Mike Flanagan. Disregarding the fidelity-led approach, long a staple in the adaptation studies field, my research has embraced intertextuality, performance, authorship, and sociocultural perspectives as the ideal methods through which to examine adaptation. I frame adaptation as a

quintessential space for intertextuality, the distinctive feature of which “is its emphasis on adaptation as a centre rather than a congruence” (Leitch 2012, 100). This perspective, in contrast to the dualistic novel-to-film method, embraces the possibilities of the medium and identifies adaptation as performance rather than interpretation. Through the optics of performance, adaptations can be defined as works that “treat their forbears as performance texts, whether or not those forbears were originally so intended” (ibid 99), leading to the performance text being identified “as a recipe for a new creation rather than a court that has issued a restraining order anticipating any possible infractions by future realisations” (Leitch 2012, 99). This study will avail itself of two specific concepts, John Bryant’s adaptive revision and Jørgen Bruhn’s dialogic two-way process, as the theoretical basis on which to explore adaptation between comic books and cinema, while also expanding on these concepts as they are repurposed in a different context of adaptation.

Bryant’s notion of adaptive revision is grounded in the following definition: “An originating writer or adaptor appropriates a borrowed text and, by ‘quoting’ it, essentially revises it and therefore adapts it, though in an intertextual and necessarily partial rather than comprehensive way” (48). Furthermore, “if adaptation is to achieve its proper textual legitimacy, we need a broader conception of geneticism in which the notion of work embraces all versions of a text, including sources and adaptations, and the creative process is extended to include all forms of revision, both authorial and cultural” (47). Geneticism, in the literary context Bryant employs it, refers to the lineage of a work, with its different versions and interpretations all being connected and expanding upon the same core story or concept, rather than as points of divergence from a single originating source. Although those are some grounding features of his work, it is paramount to take into consideration the distinctions that Bryant proposes, as “the meaning of any adaptation is essentially a measuring of the critical distances between and among adaptive versions” (48), whereas “interpretation is the analysis of the strategies of revision perceived in the making of these textual distances” (ibid). Bryant’s writing focuses on the traditional literature-to-film binary, and the re-adaptation of Herman Melville’s 1851 novel *Moby Dick*, arguing that “adaptors generate new versions of the text and thereby re-author the work, giving it new meaning in new contexts, and in some degree drawing out in sharper delineations the originating author’s original intentions” (ibid). Although the dynamics are more complex in the two-way adaptation process between comics and cinema, it is factual that “adaptation takes us into a specialized arena in which reading and interpretation are themselves embodied in a revision of the originating text, [where]



adaptors are ‘revising readers’ who enact their interpretations, not through criticism, but by altering the material text itself through quotation, allusion and plagiarism” (50). In this essay, Bryant’s theories will be of assistance in carving out and delineating the specificities of each adaptation which, although interconnected, “possess distinct textual identities” (48), embracing the view of adaptation “as both a transgression of the originating work and a liberation, [and] like any form of liberation, the adaptor’s sense of empowerment can infuriate or delight” (50).

Bryant’s concepts of adaptive revision and geneticism will be further expanded through Jørgen Bruhn’s dialogic two-way process. Whereas Bryant’s concepts can be applied directly, Bruhn’s are incompatible with the comic book medium while still providing a framework through which to approach the research. Rather than following the ‘one-way transport’ from source material to film, Bruhn explains that “when claiming that the adaptive process works ‘both ways’, we mean that not only are aspects of the novel transmitted, of course, into the film [...] even the novel changes [in light of the adaptation], it alters appearance and may be interpreted in new ways [...] Adaptation is a negotiation that takes place across the preliminary borders of the two (or more) works included in the process” (76). But it is with a seemingly inflammatory statement that he explains that “when a scriptwriter or a director has turned the lifted or loaned parts of a source text into a new, aesthetic text, the original text has been changed” (72). If approached superficially, this stance and the evolution of Bruhn’s argument could be perceived as an affront to the tenets of certain corners of adaptation studies. But this approach finds a companion in the notion of textual narcissism, wherein an unquestionable superiority is afforded to the source text, in regards to which Bryant explains further that “the integrity of the original exists only in the concrete and material particulars – the words on the first edition page or its variants in subsequent authorized editions – that constitute the textual identity of the originating version” (55). While admitting that the methodological change he advocates is hard to establish within conventional analytical frameworks, Bruhn immediately clarifies that, indeed, “the text – the amount of words in the novel, for instance – will of course be identical after the adaptation” (72). The crux of his perspective is built upon two basic ways in which the source texts may be altered as a result of adaptation. The first, relating to editorial and authorial changes, such as those made to the cover of the originating text after the release of the film, is of relative disinterest to this study. The second, a very large category that includes a multitude of interpretations, relates to changes in readers’ reception. Bruhn, like Bryant, focuses on the literature-to-film adaptation

process. But in the case of a study of adaptation between comics and film, his proposed methodology finds an even greater degree of application and effectiveness. The success of the cinematic adaptation of a comic book not only affects the audience's perception of and expectations for the source text, both in its existing and future form, but also the originating medium itself in a very active way. In applying the dialogic two-way process to the relationship between films and comics, Bruhn's framework is pushed further. Unlike comic books, literature is an allographic medium where "there simply is no place to go and 'steal' from the original; the only possible manoeuvre is to copy (parts) of an earlier text" (ibid 72). In the case of comic books, there are indeed visual elements from which to 'steal' for the adaptations, just as the changes to the source material go beyond paratexts and readers' perception, actively affecting future publications in order to embrace, or reject, successful aspects of the adaptations.

Both concepts are particularly relevant in a study focusing on adaptation between comic books and cinema due to the intermedial conversation between original and adapting medium. These theoretical approaches are greatly complicated by a dynamic often missing when addressing the traditional discourse around adaptation: studio and audience interference. It is fundamental to take into consideration the role of Warner Bros in the adaptations due to its interference and control over the specific vision of some directors and its' steering of the proverbial ship towards a certain representation of the character in the case of others. The control over the character retroactively affects how the world of Gotham City is portrayed and developed in the comics, as well as highlighting, or suppressing, characters based on their successful, or abysmal, portrayal in the feature films. There can be no analysis of adaptation between comics and cinema without considering how the "process is informed both by the corporate context and by the nature of the product" (Hoxter 140).

Due to the enormous amount of media centred on the character of Batman released over the past 80 years, my research will feature a careful selection of comics and adaptations. The comics and graphic novels that will be examined will ground the various 'canonical' versions of Batman in the texts, so that their reflections on screen may be better analysed. As such, Bob Kane and Bill Finger's initial run from 1939 and 1940 will be examined, as it establishes the groundwork for the mythology of the character and his world. Furthermore, key graphic novels published over the character's history will be explored, such as Alan Moore and Brian Bolland's *The Killing Joke*, Frank Miller and David Mazzuchelli's *Year One*, Frank Miller's *The Dark Knight Returns*, Jeph Loeb and Tim Sale's *The Long Halloween*. On the film side,

the research will focus on specific portrayals of the character, as presented over various projects by a singular vision. As such, the study will look at Tim Burton's *Batman* and *Batman Returns*, Joel Schumacher's *Batman Forever* and *Batman & Robin*, Christopher Nolan's *The Dark Knight* trilogy as well as *Batman: The Animated Series* and its feature film expansion *Mask of the Phantasm*. Although the sheer amount of texts and paratexts may appear overwhelming, they are all relevant in tracing the interwoven nature of the character's evolution across different media over decades.

In terms of previous research, the seminal writings of Linda Hutcheon, contained in her *A Theory of Adaptation*, and Thomas Leitch, in a variety of essays, alongside the concepts outlined by John Bryant and Jørgen Bruhn, provide the groundwork for the modern field of adaptation, upon which the specific frameworks are built. Conversely, there is not a vast amount of writing on the adaptation of comic books that is pertinent to this study. Whereas Batman has been examined extensively in pop culture and media studies, studies on adaptation, whether focused specifically on the character or the medium of comic books at large, are rather scarce and most often tend to broach the subject with a fidelity-led approach that is rather limited. Nonetheless, the writings of Will Brooker, one of the world's foremost Batman and pop-culture historians, will provide great insight and background information on many relevant historical perspectives on adaptation and authorship across different media. Another key source for the study is the 'Bat-Bible', a document authored by Dennis O'Neil, arguably one of Batman's all-time greatest comic-book writers and the group editor for all of the Batman family of titles at DC Comics for decades. The Bat-Bible served as the blueprint and guide for Batman stories of the 1980s and 90s, an internal document for comic book depictions that nonetheless became an intermedial canonical guideline for the representation of the character across media. Lastly, a large number of specialised industry articles, behind-the-scenes materials and interviews with authors, filmmakers and other key figures involved in the films and the comics will provide additional context and background information in order to carry out a more in-depth examination.

The question of authorship within the genetic lineage of a work throughout its different versions and how that eventually shapes a unique form of canon is the central concern of the thesis. Although the research will focus primarily on the adaptations released from 1989 on, the decades preceding the release of Tim Burton's first modern Batman film will be presented at the start of the research in order to provide greater context to the cultural status of the character and the initial instances of intermedial communication and influence between

audiovisual media and comic books. From there, the examination will progress chronologically through the cinematic history of the character and the parallel paths of comic and adaptation, focusing each section on a specific era of cinematic adaptation and the relevant questions of authorship, performance, influence, corporate interference, geneticism and dialogism.

## 2. Initial Success and Adaptations

Before venturing deeper into this essay's examination of Batman adaptations and the authorial and intermedial concerns surrounding it, it is paramount to introduce the Batman story world. Batman is the alter ego of Bruce Wayne, the orphaned heir of the most influential family of Gotham City, a large American metropolis ridden with crime and corruption. After seeing his parents, Thomas and Martha Wayne, murdered in front of his eyes as a child, the traumatised Bruce takes an oath of vengeance, swearing that no other child should ever suffer a similar fate. Bruce spends years training his body and mind to become a force to be reckoned with, while also using his family's company, Wayne Enterprises, and his inherited fortune to take on important causes and help the city of Gotham. Inspired by the fearful imagery of a bat, Bruce dons the mantle of Batman to strike fear into the city's criminals and protect the innocent. Aided in his crusade by Alfred Pennyworth, the Wayne family butler who becomes his surrogate father, Gotham's Commissioner James Gordon and an extended "Bat-family" of fellow crime fighters, the world of Batman has grown exponentially across different media in the eight decades since his first comic book appearance. In this first section, crucial context will be provided about Batman adaptations, their relationship to the source material and the discourse surrounding them, in order to lay the foundation for the examination to follow.

Batman's audiovisual journey began with an eponymously-titled fifteen-episode Columbia serial shown in film theatres in 1943, a mere four years after the character was introduced in the pages of Detective Comics by Bob Kane and Bill Finger. Released at the peak of the character's initial period of popularity shared with Superman, the other mainstay of DC Comics, and at the height of the World War II conflict, the serial was little more than a propagandistic vehicle. Although Kane and Finger's comics of the time occasionally presented Batman and Robin fighting Nazis and other caricatured Axis rivals, they were not the main antagonistic focus, as mobsters and other costumed villains were also featured regularly. But the serial's version of Batman operated as a secret government agent, whose main opponent was Dr. Daka, a Japanese villain whose attempts "to brainwash American citizens into Axis zombies owed far less to any specific Batman story than to the wider contemporary discourse of anti-Japanese propaganda" (Brooker 1999, 187). Despite an initial success that led to a follow-up series, the modern status of Columbia's *Batman* is that a long-ignored adaptation. Its racially offensive depiction of the Japanese belonged to a "relentless monologue of images and slogans treating [them] with a pathological disgust which even the

Nazis were spared” (ibid 188) and was decried already in the 1960s, when the show was screened in all-night marathons and Sunday matinees to mainly young, liberal audiences (ibid 189). Although there is little artistry and authorial voice to be addressed, the serial’s firm grounding in its historical period and its related sociopolitical concerns serves as the first instance of what will become an important way to approach all subsequent adaptations: Batman and his world as a means to explore a cultural moment.

Despite the criticisms levied against it in the 1960s and the waning popularity of the character and the comics sales, the re-release of the serial proved successful enough to convince screenwriter Lorenzo Semple, Jr., to start development on a new adaptation. The iconic *Batman* television series, starring Adam West and Burt Ward, ran on ABC from 1966 to 1968. *Batman ’66*, like the Columbia serial before it, was an expression of its cultural moment with its embrace of camp and Pop Art. The series went on to become a massive hit, so much so that “the first [comic book] issue of Batman published after the TV show's debut sold a phenomenal 98% of its 1,000,000 print run” (Brooker 2001, 179). Furthermore, the immediate success of the show prompted the studio to quickly finance and produce a feature film, the full-length theatrical debut of the character. 1966’s *Batman* was released in theatres a mere two months after the last episode of the television series’ first season aired and became a moderate box-office hit. The TV show's campy portrayal of Batman’s world would become the general audience’s main reference point for the character for decades to come. Most importantly, the first instance of cross-pollination between the source material and an adaptation can be traced to *Batman ’66*, with comic book editor Julius Schwartz and the show's producer William Dozier as the key figures behind it. The power dynamics between DC and the show’s producers reveal a mutually advantageous collaboration. On the comics side, we can see that “DC kept a close rein on the TV series continuity, and forbade transgression of the character's rules [that] pertained more to the fundamental Batman template than to issues of style, dialogue and tone, [such as:] the TV Batman had to remain upright and moral, he was not permitted to use a gun, and he was not allowed to kill or cause the death of another” (ibid 186). Although “DC had not signed away the rights to their character and his representation, and were not legally bound to accept whatever changes Dozier proposed”, the Batman comics were at risk of shuttering, while the show was a hit from its very premiere. As such, it is fair to assume that “the increased continuity between TV series and comic book would have had significant benefits for DC in terms of attracting and maintaining an increased readership” (ibid 187), which led to the adaptation of many of the

show's distinctive tonal and stylistic features into the serialised publications. Furthermore, at the express request of Dozier, the character of Barbara Gordon, the second Batgirl, was introduced in the comics ahead of her debut in the show, while Bruce Wayne's butler Alfred Pennyworth was reintroduced, despite having been killed off in the comics.

Although the show's campy tone is often seen as a 'corruption' of the comic book, it is important to note that "the comic books of the early 1960s had already embraced elements of comedy, dual address and self-consciousness, and had exhibited Pop and camp tendencies before the TV series was even in development" (ibid 186). In no way should the television series be seen as "at best a misguided interpretation and at worst a betrayal of the character," as it has "more than superficial roots within the comic texts of the period" (Brooker 1999, 189). Factually, *Batman '66* is a fairly faithful adaptation of the stories from the Golden and Silver Ages, but in the context of comic book adaptation discourse, faithfulness to the 'wrong' version equals a perceived lack of fidelity. The criticism levied at the show will present itself numerous times throughout the following decades, with its homophobic tones masked under the guise of a preference for the dark iteration of the character and the belief that any interpretation that strays from such a portrayal be apocryphal. But this homophobic rhetoric did not stem solely from audiences, as it has earlier textual bases in a much-discussed, and later criticised, text by Fredric Wertham. Published in 1954, *Seduction of the Innocent* focuses on the corrupting influence of horror and crime comics on their young readership. In it, Wertham asserts that Batman and Robin's adventures have homoerotic tones.

At the time, the text resulted in a wide-reaching discourse that questioned the contents of comics. The comic book medium, then mostly aimed at children and believed to feature a family-friendly nature, came under heavy scrutiny, which resulted in the publishers doing whatever was necessary to steer away from controversy. In Batman comics, examples of this can be seen in Alfred Pennyworth being written out of the comics, as three bachelors living together in a mansion was seen as suspicious - as well as the introduction of Batgirl, a female member of the Bat-family, and an aunt to Bruce meant to replace Alfred. Unsurprisingly, the introduction of a character from whom Wayne and Grayson have to hide their secret identities does not undercut the homosexual readings. While Wertham's supposed purpose may have been a warning against homosexuality, these readings of the comics were not well-known to the general public. The four pages Wertham devoted to the topic had the inverse effect of greatly amplifying, for better and worse, the popularity of this reading. The text came to be mocked viciously by all sides of the ideological spectrum in later years, but its legacy has

sparked a complicated discourse with many ramifications. As discussed by Brooker, “Wertham's description of [the characters] may seem heavy-handed and based on stereotype: but images of gay men in 1954 were heavy-handed and stereotyped, and these were the images received and internalised not just by heterosexuals but by gay men themselves” (2001 110). The moral uproar generated by Wertham’s text, coupled with the spring 1954 US Senate Subcommittee hearings focused on the relationship between comics and juvenile delinquency (Brooker 2001, 143), ushered in the creation of the Comics Code Authority in September 1954. Based in part on the Hays Code, cinema’s censorship body, the Code was formed by the Comics Magazine Association of America as a means to avoid government regulation. As a self-regulated body, adherence to it was not compulsory as it was not mandated by law, but it was respected due to the assurances that it granted advertisers and retailers in terms of content.

The Code led to the Silver Age of comics, with a sunnier and more innocuous Batman going on science-fiction and fantasy adventures that attempted to separate him neatly from the perceived issues that led to the very creation of the Code. Yet the introduction of characters and elements meant to diminish the gay readings eventually made them even stronger and ultimately served as the basis for what would become *Batman* '66. Upon closer inspection, there is a naiveté to the interactions between Bruce Wayne and Dick Grayson in the Golden and Silver Age stories that, when examined through a modern perspective, could be interpreted as homoerotic just as easily as fraternal. Nevertheless, what is most pertinent for this essay is the response to the text from the comics fandom and even comics book historians as “almost universally negative —even personally vehement— [with] “readings [that] frequently mobilise a subtle, or sometimes blatant, homophobic prejudice in their efforts to decry Wertham's interpretation of a homoerotic relationship between Batman and Robin” (Brooker 2001, 101). This reaction lays the foundations for the issues surrounding the accepted versions of the character and the deep-seated problems with which adaptations have to contend.

Up until the disastrous release of the feature film *Batman and Robin* in 1997, *Batman* '66 was considered the de-facto ‘bad object’ by much of the fandom and many comic book writers and artists, whose work would expressly distance itself from the TV show and aim to return the character to Bob Kane’s dark ‘original vision’ (Brooker 1999, 189) of a pulpy vigilante that bears guns and kills. It bears mentioning that Kane is often cited by authors and filmmakers as the sole original vision because co-creator Bill Finger went uncredited until



2015. Despite Finger's crucial contributions to the Batman mythos, such as designing the iconic look of the character, coming up with the names of the hero's alter ego Bruce Wayne and Gotham City, in addition to co-authoring several characters such as Robin, Catwoman and the Joker (McMillan 2015 Web), he was excluded from the initial deal that Kane negotiated with National Comics editor Vin Sullivan in 1939 (Nobleman 2012, 10). However, the original vision of the character to which many refer lasted less than a year, until the character of Robin was introduced in 1940. The introduction of Robin, who quickly became a pivotal part of the Batman story world, was the result of the first wave of censorship to hit the comic book medium, which was condemned as too violent by commentators. Faithfulness to the source material is a complex matter in the context of adaptations of comic books, as it has more to do with the cultural capital of a given iteration than with any notion of 'respect' towards the source material. As such, *Batman '66* is accused of being unfaithful because it does not adapt the iterations that fans consider ideal and canonical, while also embracing the homoeroticism that, in their eyes, left a long-lasting stain on the character.

Matters of authorship are further complicated when we consider that every Batman story until 1964 was signed "Bob Kane", even though he had been employing ghost artists throughout the fifties and sixties (Eury and Kronenberg 2009, 17), which grants further credence to Finger's crucial, but initially uncredited, contributions to the character's creation. Due to Kane's contract at DC, much of this information would remain only a rumour for decades. It was Carmine Infantino, the influential artist who updated and rejuvenated Batman in the sixties, who first insisted that Kane's signature be left off his work, "and shortly afterwards the names of individual writers, artists, even pencilers and letterers, began to appear [...] enabling fans to identify the style of a favourite creator and in turn encouraging those creators to develop their own 'take' on the character" (Brooker 1999, 192). Authorship in comics, and specifically around Batman, started evolving, from fans expressing their preference for the style of specific artists in the seventies to the way that different writers' interpretations of the character would start gaining ever greater notoriety in the mid-to-late eighties. These evolving approaches were bolstered by two specific institutional changes: the move to a "direct distribution market", that being comics being sold in a network of dedicated shops rather than drug stores, grocery stores, and newsstands (Johnson 2013, 79), and the introduction of royalties, which "significantly contributed to both the formation of a dedicated comics fandom and the creation of a 'stardom' within comics authorship" (Brooker 2001, 260). As explained by Dennis O'Neil, one of the most iconic Batman writers and later DC

editor, “the business people at DC were coming to believe that the direct market [...] would create a body of knowledgeable readers [...] who would care about good material and would notice bylines... if that's the case, it's just good business to reward the creators who produce higher sales” (qtd. in Boichel 1991, 15). As a result of the direct market, “by 1982 both DC and Marvel were forced to institute royalty payments that led to the creation of a comic book writer/artist star system” (ibid 15).

Consequently, these new views on authorship and the direct market “transformed the content needs of the industry by regularizing distribution and creating a niche market” that promoted the “intensification of seriality and continuity between comic titles [...] with] the potential to generate loyal customers” (Johnson 2013, 79). Ultimately, this proved to be a foundational moment in the industry for the creation of a highly vocal and loyal fanbase and the establishment of some of the most influential voices in the history of Batman. Creators like Frank Miller, Alan Moore and Grant Morrison penned some of the most defining stories to feature the character, later bolstered by the introduction of the graphic novel publication format. Miller has become the author most often cited by directors as the comic-book inspiration for their films, due to the two seminal stories, depicting Batman at both the start and end of his career, *Batman: Year One*, pencilled by David Mazzucchelli, and *The Dark Knight Returns*, which he wrote and drew himself. His dark and violent take has come to supplant any mention of Kane’s “original vision”. Yet, Miller fits neatly in the category of creators with a very narrow view of how the character should be portrayed and with a conservative notion of how fidelity should work in that regard. According to Miller, “the translation from the comic book to film or television has suffered the more it’s gone away from the source material” (*Shadows of the Bat* Documentary 2005). His views, aligned to those of the fandom, harness the supposed lack of fidelity to the source material as tantamount to a lack of quality.

With these considerations in mind, Dennis O’Neil’s “Bat-Bible” (1989) proves to be a fundamental paratext in the assessment of who Batman is ‘supposed’ to be. O’Neil and artist Neal Adams represent one of the most influential writer-penciler duos to ever grace comic book panels. Their body of work can be identified as the tipping point, in the 1970s, to more mature writing and artful characterisation for Batman. Operating as an official internal guide from O’Neil’s appointment to DC Comics editor until the end of his tenure in 2005, his “Bat-Bible” served the purpose of guiding different creative teams in unifying and standardising the representation of the character across many concurrent publications, while still allowing

the creators to bring their individual spins. O'Neil outlines the ground rules of Bruce Wayne, his allies, enemies, and Gotham City, but most importantly he details the fundamental tenets of Batman's characterisation. Although he touches on aspects such as Batman's physical prowess, his intelligence and other such aspects, O'Neil's descriptions of his moral and ethical core are of particular interest to this study:

[Batman] is tough, but not brutal. He uses violence willingly and often, but never to excess, and never with pleasure. He does not enjoy it. And he never kills. Let's repeat that for the folks in the balcony: Batman never kills. The trauma which created his obsession also generated in him a reverence for that most basic of values, the sacredness of human life. If he was not consumed with the elimination of crime. [...] He is compassionate. His determination to stop crime is exceeded only by his compassion for crime's victims. He can never forget that once he was a small boy weeping over his murdered parents. (Web)

Coming back to Miller's considerations about fidelity and his depiction of the character in his two highly acclaimed graphic novels, there are important distinctions to make. Although *Batman '66* may be perceived as unfaithful, the Batman portrayed by Adam West does fulfil most of O'Neil's criteria, including the one about violence. Miller's Batman, on the other hand, while abiding by the 'no-kill rule' (which will become a pivotally contentious point in the discourse around the character) is undoubtedly a brutal character, whose use of violence is ruthless and efficient. Miller's stories exist as standalone tales that are not canonical, separated from the mainline continuity of the monthly publications. His excesses and infidelities are forgiven due to their degree of separation from the main canon and for being a dark portrayal of the character. Despite *Batman '66's* faithfulness, its light tone will always be criticised as a perceived lack of fidelity. These considerations further highlight the flimsy and limited understanding of fidelity that is held by authors and audiences alike, especially when it is harnessed as criteria for the successful depiction of a character originating in the comic book medium.

### 3. Batmania and Controversy

Having presented the historical and cultural context of the initial Batman adaptations and the contentious discourses surrounding them, the examination can proceed with a more in-depth analysis of Tim Burton's tenure as the director of the first two modern Batman adaptations, *Batman* (1989) and *Batman Returns* (1992). Burton's strong authorial vision and the perceived infidelities of his adaptation process had an undeniable impact on the notions of auteurism that concern comic book adaptations. Mired in controversy and tasked with reinvigorating the public image of the character, Burton's movies became generation-defining portrayals of the titular character. Having grown to be appreciated as "Tim Burton films" first and Batman adaptations second, *Batman* and *Batman Returns* provide valuable insight into the notion of geneticism and the process of adaptive revision.

Despite the industry-wide changes taking place in the comic book industry in the eighties and the renewed success of the medium, Batman's popularity with general audiences had dwindled. Over thirty years would pass between his debut theatrical appearance in 1966 and his eventual return to the silver screen with Tim Burton's *Batman* in 1989. With *Batman 66's* iteration of the character firmly established as the reference point for the public and interest at an all-time low, the journey to Burton's film would end up being long and tortuous. Little movement would be made on the film between 1971, when Warner Communications Inc. acquired DC Comics, and 1979, when producer Michael E. Uslan, along with fellow producer and former MGM executive Benjamin Melniker, secured and optioned the motion picture rights, including animation ("Shadows of the Bat" Documentary 2005). A year prior, in 1978, Richard Donner's feature film *Superman: The Movie* had become a critical and commercial success that, due to its technical innovations, made the audience "believe a man could fly". Donner's film set a precedent for comic book films as potential blockbusters, as it was the first produced on a large budget and with the involvement of highly-regarded actors such as Marlon Brando and Gene Hackman. Uslan and Melniker optioned Batman "for a substantial sum of money, the equivalent of how much producers of 1978's *Superman* had paid, even though DC thought Batman was worthless as a film property" ("The Hollywood Reporter" 2019 Web). With payments due after six months and then every year until a Batman film went into production, Uslan and Melniker's mission had an urgency to it. Ultimately, it would take nearly a decade for the film to reach theatres, as the initial round of proposals for a dark, serious Batman film was turned down by every studio in Hollywood. According to

Uslan “not only did they turn us down, they basically said, this is the worst idea we’ve ever heard” (ibid Web). Furthermore, the common Hollywood practice of attaching a bona fide star to a film in development in order to attract studios was unfeasible for the producers, as reruns of *Batman ’66* were still being broadcast and, according to Uslan “there was no way a star was going to get on board with this without a full script or a director with a very specific vision as to how this was going to work” (ibid Web).

Once again, *Batman ’66*’s status as the bad object has a prominent role to play in the lead-up to the modern era and a return to the dark iteration. The representational ambivalence of the character rests on the “tension between Batman’s camp aesthetics and the Gothic characteristics of the figure; that is, between the campy smirk of the Caped Crusader and the furrowed brow of the brooding Dark Knight” (Soltysik Monnet 2012, 96). It is with this notion in mind that a pattern, one that had already emerged in the context of the source material, begins to emerge in a cinematic context. When an iteration of Batman is considered excessively camp or sunny, “the Gothic is used to return the character to a darker and more complicated figure within the narrative” (ibid 96). Yet, the camp and self-aware representations of the character will not disappear but will be relegated to specific media, such as animation or television, while the Gothic will be preserved for the most popular, and lucrative, medium. But in doing so, as Batman evolves through the decades and different iterations, a shift towards revisionist redemption takes place. As the character “passes from popular consciousness to popular memory [...] the Batman of two decades ago is somehow cleansed of all his sullyng contradictions - the censorship, the accusations, the conflicts over meaning —and rehabilitated not just as a simpler, more innocent hero but an emblem of the entire decade” (Brooker 2001, 239). This complicates the discourse greatly, “as Batman reappears through the smeary lens of nostalgia, so the 1940s or the 1960s appear around him in turn, less complicated than they ever seemed at the time [and reduce the character] to two dimensions, regarding it as either 'good' or 'bad' object, but at any rate a simple, easily graspable object” (ibid 239).

The young director who would ultimately be tasked with bringing Batman to the silver screen was Tim Burton. His propensity for the fantastical and the gothic, along with his imaginative and distinctive visual style, was on full display in his successful 1988 dark comedy *Beetlejuice*, produced while development for *Batman* was underway. Burton expressed his love for the 60s show and declared that he did not belong to “the hate school who thinks it’s blasphemous to Bruce Wayne’s memory and against everything he stood for”

("Cinefantastique" Nov 1989 Web). Nonetheless, the director found himself in a tricky position, as fans of the comics demanded a dark version of the character while general audiences familiar with *Batman '66* expected a comic picture, and in the face of a no-win scenario he "decided to take the movie in the direction [he] felt was right and remained unshaken by anything that would eventually happen" (ibid Web). In arguing that "all great larger-than-life images [...] can be explored any number of different ways, [there] is just as much room for the TV show and [Frank Miller's] *The Dark Knight [Returns]* as there is for my movie" (ibid Web), Burton acknowledged Batman's already mythologic quality and places himself within a larger lineage of narrative geneticism. The peculiarity behind his approach lies in his refutation of the paradigm present in most archetypal battles between good and evil, the bread and butter of superhero stories, in which the former represents normalcy and the status quo, while the latter represents abnormality. The director found a balance between the heavy violence and bombast of 1980s filmmaking, and the moral ambiguity of film noir from the 30s and 40s, the era during which Batman initially rose to fame. While Burton was a rising talent and an inspired choice for the job, his appointment to the director's chair and his casting of Michael Keaton as Bruce Wayne/Batman proved highly controversial. Keaton was well-known as a talented comedic actor, while Burton's first two features were bizarre comedies with macabre overtones. Additionally, the hero described in O'Neil's Bat-Bible and depicted in the comics as an imposing, masculine and traditionally handsome figure did not match Keaton's short stature, regular build and everyman looks. Reactions to his casting were very negative, with fans and commentators wondering why "anyone [would] choose a short, balding wimpy comedian to portray the Dark Knight?" (qtd. in Brooker 2001, 282), resulting in a petition against it that collected tens of thousands of signatures and made headlines (ibid 283).

The casting lies at the core of Burton's vision for Batman, which fits neatly into the director's recurrent fascination with 'freaks', saying that when looking at Keaton "he's just got those eyes and he looks crazy [...] but he also doesn't look like a superhero, he looks like a guy who would need to dress like a bat for effect" ("Shadows of the Bat" Documentary 2005). Similarly, the iconic Batsuit designed by costume designer Bob Ringwood, which would go on to set the standard for cinematic suits, was also criticised by fans before the film's release for the choice of an all-black armoured look that incorporated fake muscles and a cod-piece, rather than the traditional grey and blue fabric costume from the comics or the TV show. While expressing a predilection for Alan Moore and Brian Bolland's *The Killing*

*Joke*, Burton's unfamiliarity and disregard for comic books are well-documented (Brooker 2001, 289). By relating to the character's dualistic personality and the balance between the light and dark side, Burton explored a psychological dimension that disregarded the 'comic book logic' that explained certain canonical elements. Although theatricality has always been a core aspect of Batman's mythos, the casting of Michael Keaton as the protagonist ties directly into how the film conceptualises the Batsuit and its purpose. According to Burton, Wayne "dresses up as a bat because he wants to have an amazing visual impact [...] He's creating an opera wherever he goes to provoke a strong, larger-than-life reaction [and] he switches identities to become something else entirely, so why wouldn't he overdo it?" ("Cinefantastique" Nov 1989 Web). Consequently, the fact that Batman looks like an everyman rather than a perfect physical specimen places a greater emphasis on the need for theatricality and the inherent madness of his crusading endeavour. Perfectly expressed by Jenette Kahn, Former President and Editor at DC Comics, "Keaton captured [the traumatised and neurotic] Bruce Wayne, who you could believe could at night put on a suit and go out and fight crime" ("Shadows of the Bat" Documentary 2005). Jack Nicholson, the star chosen for the role of the Joker, acted as a counterweight to the casting of Keaton, immediately granting the project an air of legitimacy. Nicholson, a veteran actor with a notable talent for playing anger and madness, boarded the project with a plethora of demands and contractual benefits, including top billing over the actor playing the film's title character. Beyond his storied career, Nicholson's well-known grin and his recent oeuvre featuring fun and maniacal performances such as those in *The Shining* and *The Witches of Eastwick* made him a favourite fan pick for the Joker. The actor himself believed the film to be "a very strong, in every way, transitional movie about the genre and really why they wanted me in there" (ibid 2005), which would not "brighten things up for the kids."

In the lead-up to the film's release, the negativity around Keaton's casting prompted producer Peter Gruber to hastily release a music-less teaser trailer featuring footage from the then-in-production film. The move created such a positive buzz that audiences would go to theatres and buy tickets for the movies in front of which it was being shown, only to leave after having seen the trailer. This trailer and Nicholson's casting announcement are fundamental "entryway paratexts", meant to "grab the viewer before he or she reaches the text and try to control the viewer's entrance to the text" (Gray 2010, 23), as opposed to 'in medias res paratexts' which are used during or subsequently to the viewing, "working to police certain reading strategies" (ibid 23). This process is explicated by Peter Gruber:

You have to recognise that when you're making a movie you're in the selling business. From the minute the movie gestates. From the minute the movie is announced. From the minute the first comments reach the press, there is an impression about the movie. And when you have a property that is a lightning rod, like Batman, when you begin to cast a picture everybody has an opinion. ("Shadows of the Bat" Documentary 2005)

Paratexts are fundamental for the promotion of cinema and can be seen as particularly relevant in the context of adaptation, "often meticulously constructed by their producers in order to offer certain meanings and interpretations, [... creating and managing] our faith, and we consume them on our way to consuming the "film itself" (ibid 25). The paratexts surrounding the Batman ecosystem are not dissimilar to those of fellow cross-media icon James Bond, whom we approach through a "pre-existing para-/inter-textual network [that leads us to] any new Bond text with a sense of what to expect, and with the interpretation process already well underway" (ibid 34).

Ultimately, the greatest facet of the 1989 *Batman*, and perhaps the most influential besides Danny Elfman's character-defining musical score, is its Academy Award-winning production design, curated by Anton Furst, which brought to life a fantastically nightmarish Gotham City. Historically, the Gotham of the comics works as a fictional alias for US metropolises such as New York, which was the original setting of Batman stories, while "Gotham" is itself an old nickname for the Big Apple. Over the years, as the Batman publications multiplied and the city grew more and more detailed and 'lived-in', its depiction grew to incorporate more gothic elements and found its own distinct visual identity, while rarely veering too heavily into the fantastical and exaggerated. This was most evident in the Gotham of the 1970s and 1980s, as parallels to the real-life crime-ridden and mob-run New York lent it an additional layer of realism and weight. The setting of 1989's *Batman* does not resemble a real city, as the production team desired to make "Gotham City the ugliest and bleakest metropolis imaginable. We imagined what New York City might have become without a planning commission. A city run by crime, with a riot of architectural styles. An essay in ugliness. As if hell erupted through the pavement and kept on going" ("TIME" 1989 Web). Drawing from German Expressionism, Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* and Terry Gilliam's *Brazil*, *Batman*'s Gotham blends Art Deco with Gothic, Brutalism with Futurism. All this was created through miniatures, matte paintings and a massive set built at the historic Pinewood Studios lot in England. Furthermore, the cinematic Gotham is not merely a setting for the story. As a city of extremes and different styles in direct conflict, Gotham is a thorough expression of the themes at the core of Burton's film. A city of madness that can only breed



more madness, as elucidated perfectly by the hero and the villain being both “freaks.” *Batman* ’89’s Gotham shares its name and its crime-ridden nature with the comics, but it is chiefly a manifestation of Burton’s authorial and thematic intention, while also amplifying the sociopolitical concerns and fears around crime in the big cities that grew in the 1980s during the Reagan administration. In addition to being one of cinema’s most brilliantly realised locations with an influence still being felt today, Tim Burton and Anton Furst’s Gotham City marks a turning point for the depiction of the fictional city across media. The film’s version of the city quickly entered the public consciousness and easily transcended and eclipsed any version that preceded it, quickly leading the source material to adapt its juxtaposition of architectural styles in order to create an ever darker and decadent Gotham. This intermedial scenario takes a fascinating shape when approached through the lens of Jørgen Bruhn’s dialogic two-way process. Unlike in the case of novel-to-film adaptation studies, which systematically examine “the process of novels being turned into film, focusing on both the change of the content and form from novel to film and the changes being inferred on the originating text” (Bruhn 2013, 73), here the changes are not merely inferred, they fundamentally alter both the way audiences look back at past versions of the source material, in addition to altering any future iteration. Bruhn’s suggestion that “we should study both the source and result of the adaptation as two texts, infinitely changing positions, taking turns being sources for each other in the ongoing work of the reception in the adaptational process” (ibid 73) perfectly encapsulates the two-way dialogic process in the context of comics to film, and vice versa.

Produced on a then-astronomical \$48 million budget, Burton’s *Batman* debuted in US theatres on the 23rd of June 1989 to positive critical notices (despite some criticisms for its bleakness), breaking the all-time opening weekend record and proceeding to be the year’s highest-grossing film in North America and the second-highest grosser worldwide. Even before its release, anticipation had reached a fever pitch that would turn the film into a pop culture sensation dubbed “Batmania”. The film still received heavy criticism from *Batman* fan groups, who felt it to be as much of a betrayal as Adam West’s *Batman* was. Although Burton’s take could be seen as an author’s singular vision no different from the extra-canonical takes by Frank Miller and Alan Moore, the latter two were seen “as exceptional, individual takes on the character in the context of a larger comic continuity which preserved the essential 'mythos', while Burton's film was simply Batman, an 'official' version which would inevitably become the 'dominant' version for a wider audience” (Brooker 1999, 193).

Much in the way that Adam West's had before, Brooker presents the ultimate paradox for a pre-Internet Batman adaptation:

Those who insist on a close fidelity to the comic remain, and will always remain, a minority; those responsible for putting the character on screen, like Burton, [...] Warners, ABC and Columbia, cannot afford to care about the comic fans, however pedantic and vocal they may be, if they are ever to sell a product to the requisite mass audience. (1999, 197)

Unlike Richard Donner's *Superman*, which traces the origin of the character and how he came to be a superhero, Burton and screenwriter Sam Hamm do away with such a structure, further unchaining themselves from having to rely on the source material's canonical explanations. At the start of the film Bruce Wayne is already Batman, lending further mystique to how he came to be, while the origin of the Joker is instead shown. Although glimpses of Moore's *The Killing Joke* or Miller's *The Dark Knight Returns* are present in the film, such as Jack Napier falling into a vat of acid to become the Joker, only small ideas or set-ups from the source texts are incorporated in the film. It does share a degree of thematic fidelity with those graphic novels, due to its being "psychologically-based, visually and thematically 'dark', and aimed at adults as well as children" (Brooker 1999, 191), but that may have more to do with Burton's aesthetic than any fidelity to the famous graphic novels of the time.

Moreover, Burton makes two important changes to the mythos: firstly, Batman kills; and secondly, the Joker is responsible for the murder of Bruce's parents when he was a child, the nexus of the character's trauma and the canonical 'birth' of the idea for the Batman. Considering the narrative context of cinema in the late eighties, in which consideration of sequels and building interconnected universes was non-existent, the choice to tie Batman's origin with the film's villain makes perfect sense as a dramatic device. The heavy criticism it received from fans is based entirely on the fact that it departs from the source material, with a full disregard for the narrative demands of a story that is self-contained and does not have to contend with a past or future canon. The infringement of Batman's no-kill rule is supposedly a greater issue, as it goes against one of Dennis O'Neil's fundamental Bat-Bible tenets. With Bob Kane involved in the production as a consultant (more as an institutional presence meant to placate fans than in an active creative role) and frequent mentions of wanting to return to the previously discussed 'original vision' of the character, Burton firmly grounded his Batman in the pulpy era in which he originated, with the likes of Dick Tracy, The Phantom and The

Shadow (all of which would be adapted into films after the success of *Batman*). Due to the cyclical nature of art, the pulp figures and the film noirs produced in that era were experiencing a resurgence and an increased presence as influences on new films and novels. As such, Burton's *Batman* works both as a nostalgic throwback and as a complex, stoic and violent hero who fits in well with fellow eighties icons such as *Escape from New York's* Snake Plissken, John Rambo or Robocop. Ultimately, it is important to note that Burton's changes and his overall vision helped propel the character to a level of fame and success previously undreamed of, and that "purists might temper their protests with the reflection that their hero would, had he not been subjected to each of these mutations, be now far less complex, far less significant, far less rich in meaning; if indeed, that is, he had lasted this long" (Brooker 1999, 197).

Lest the making of 1989's *Batman* should appear as an idyllic production in which Burton had free rein, it must be pointed out that the film had a troubled shoot, during which the script was constantly in flux, and that the powerful influences of Nicholson and producer Peter Gruber had a notable impact on the director's autonomy. With "Batmania" in full swing after the film's incredibly successful release, Burton was quickly approached to direct a follow-up. Initially declining the offer, in order to focus on his new feature *Edward Scissorhands* and prep work for the stop-motion feature *The Nightmare Before Christmas*, Burton was eventually lured back in by the promise of more creative freedom, and development on the sequel began shortly thereafter. The resulting film, *Batman Returns* (1992), would become a distinctly Burtonian opus that was far more bizarre and disturbing than its predecessor.

When Burton was being courted, there had been a script developed by Sam Hamm, screenwriter of the first film, that was a direct continuation of the 1989 story, characters and tone. But Burton was "severely disappointed in this approach and wouldn't [sign on] until Warner Bros promised, in Hamm's words, to let Tim make a 'Tim Burton movie,' as opposed to a *Batman* sequel" ("Dan of Geek" 2019 Web). Co-producer Denise Di Novi argued that "if you look at the first film and compare it to his other movies, you'll see that only about 50% of *Batman* was Tim. We've had much more creative control this time, so I'm sure it'll be a lot closer to 100%" ("Cinefantastique" 1992 Web). Burton was intent on doing something different, while also disregarding the opinions of comic book fans, general audiences and the

sponsors who had promotions connected to the movie. According to screenwriter Daniel Waters, “[they] never had those conversations [... and they] were really just about the art. [They] surprisingly got very little directives from the studio” (“Shadows of the Bat” Documentary 2005). Daniels further recounted:

I wasn’t even given directives by Tim Burton — just that he didn’t want *Batman Returns* to have anything to do with the first *Batman*. To be honest, I’m not a fan of Tim Burton’s first Batman. We didn’t have any loyalty to past histories of the Catwoman or Penguin characters either. We did absolutely our own thing. [In the first Tim Burton Batman] there’s a character played by Robert Wuhl, a reporter, who I really couldn’t stand. I wanted to have a scene in *Returns* where he gets crucified against the Bat Signal. But Tim Burton said, “No. Don’t bring up the first one at all. Just do something completely different.” (“Vulture” 2022 Web)

The changes to the narrative world would be all-encompassing, starting with Gotham City itself. Due to Anton Furst’s unavailability, Burton reunited with his *Beetlejuice* collaborator Bo Welch to find a new visual identity for the film’s setting. While sharing roots in German Expressionism with its predecessor, Welch’s Gotham shifts to an even darker and oppressive form, embracing “ a lot of neo-fascist world’s fair architecture overlaid on an old U.S. city” (“Cinefantastique” 1992, Web). Furthermore, Welch’s designs create a Gotham where verticality and the illusion of massive spaces are juxtaposed with a heightened sense of claustrophobia, in which the “closely packed city landscape extends endlessly into the horizon. Buildings, doorways, windows -- all are vertical to the extreme. There is a sense of decay everywhere” (“The New York Times” 1992, Web). Burton and Welch do away with stylistic continuity in a way that would be considered criminal in the source material, where consistency is preferred and encouraged.

Of the many changes introduced in *Batman Returns*, the diminishment of Batman’s role as compared to the villains’ prominence is of great importance. Daniel Waters’s plan for Batman was to give him more lines and monologues, which aligned his iteration with Alan Moore’s verbose and single-minded crusader, but Keaton disagreed, asking him for the extra lines to be removed. Having already played second fiddle to Nicholson’s towering performance, he had realised “how powerful the suit was in terms of an image on-screen, [so he] just used it” (“THR” 2017, Web), deriving greater freedom from not being the true lead character, despite his being the titular character. In *Batman Returns*, “the key to Keaton’s take on the character was always a slight bemusement as if he were a spectator in his own

franchise—a strategy that works when the villains are worth the price of admission” (“The Ringer” 2022, Web). Furthermore, Burton and Waters amplified the air of madness in the character, pushing his lack of adherence to the “no-kill rule” even further. Batman is not merely killing criminals the way most pulp vigilantes would, as an unfortunate consequence of his crusade for justice; in *Batman Returns*, he liberally murders, and with deranged pleasure. Waters justified this change by arguing that “the times are darker, so you have to make your character darker” (“Dan of Geek” 2019, Web), even if he had previously decried the senselessness of some of the violence, saying that “if he’s going to kill somebody, it better be worth it. It should mean something. So, when he’s killing people in a devil-may-care way, it’s a little grating” (“THR” 2017, Web).

With Burton’s Batman being pushed to the limit and with the introduction of Catwoman and the Penguin, rogues well-known to the general public from *Batman ’66*, Burton doubles down on his fascination with “freaks,” firmly pushing their characterisation into a grimy and perverse realm that their originating textual counterparts lack. While Nicholson’s Joker was given a name, Jack Napier, and a past as a mobster that distanced him from his comics origin, the process through which he became the Joker and the conception of the character itself are fairly in line with the originating character. In the source material, Catwoman is a cat burglar and romantic foil for Batman, while the Penguin is a gangster figure of diminutive stature and aggrandised criminal ambitions - but the characters we see in *Returns* are squarely Burton’s creations, sharing only cosmetic similarities to their comics counterparts. Along with Batman’s depiction of madness, the director creates a bizarre triumvirate of characters with mirrored psychological trauma. Burton could not see the appeal of the Penguin’s comic book version, labelling him “just this guy with a cigarette and a top hat” (qtd. in “Dan of Geek” 2019, Web), without a clear psychological profile. Burton’s version, portrayed by Danny DeVito, becomes a repulsive mirror for Bruce Wayne and Batman, “a child of wealth who lost his parents when he was abandoned in the sewers on Christmas Eve like a freak show version of Moses” (ibid Web). Similarly, Burton conceives his Selina Kyle/Catwoman, played by Michelle Pfeiffer, at an intersection between the highly sexualised femme fatale of the source material and the powerful feminist discourse of the nineties. Her journey from lowly secretary who is repeatedly wronged by her male superiors, until murdered and magically brought back

for revenge, is codified as that of a fairy tale princess which lends the film a supernatural edge that pushes its dark allegory even further.

*Batman Returns* is chiefly a Tim Burton film, rather than a Batman adaptation. It is an examination of the madness and the futility of the main character's crusade, where the villains are the de-facto protagonists with arcs that expose the titular character's failures. Therefore, the film's climax and denouement are not about concluding Batman's arc, but rather the fulfilment of the villains' arcs. Batman defeats Penguin, only to expose that his nemesis represents the same demons he fights within, while Selina chooses her independence over any supposed happy ending with Bruce, as he would just be another man who would wrong or control her. While the villains are vanquished and Batman succeeds in his mission, the ending is far from a happy one, as the film wraps up its deconstruction of madness, trauma and supposed heroism that happens to feature characters marginally resembling those from DC publications. Burton and Waters go as far as making the theme of the film explicit during the final confrontation between the Penguin and Batman, by having the former affirm to the latter: "You're just jealous because I'm a genuine freak, and you have to wear a mask" (*Batman Returns*, 1992), to which Batman admits a degree of truth. Despite its quirks and gonzo comedy, the thematic darkness and the operatic quality cultivated by Burton in *Batman Returns* render it one of the most mature, distinctive and darkest entries in the cinematic Batman lineage, going beyond any of the iterations in the source material.

Despite the greater creative liberties granted to Burton, there were dynamics at play in the making of *Batman Returns* that highlighted how the impact of *Batman 89* had changed the industry and birthed the notion of the 'franchise'. At this point, Batman could build off the first film's Batman and be marketed with great ease, but Burton's gloomy and dark aesthetics began to clash with the many partners and sponsors that the sequel had amassed, "threatening the family-friendly potential and ancillary revenues of [the] movie" ("The Ringer" 2022, Web). Burton has been vocal about the complications deriving from business interference in the project:

I remember sitting with some people from McDonald's that wanted to know what The Penguin was going to look like, "Because we want to get our wrappers ready." And then I had to answer we had to make the film first and did not know yet what he was going to look like. And the fact is that they weren't going to like the way he was going to look anyway. He doesn't really fit in the Happy Meal mode. You get a lot of things like that

when you enter the bigger budget things and it's quite unpleasant ("Batman-On-Film" 2008, Web)

Produced with a considerably larger budget than the first film, *Batman Returns* debuted in US cinemas on 19 June 1992. Although it broke several box-office records and grossed over \$250 million, it did not manage to repeat the success of *Batman 89*, which had grossed over \$400 million. Similarly, the critical and audience responses to the sequel were more measured, with the violence and the sexually suggestive content highly criticised by family associations, prompting a heavy backlash against McDonald's, which was one of the film's partners ("THR" 2017, Web). Although a screenplay draft for a Burton-helmed third film was written, the controversy soured both Burton and the studio bosses, who "received thousands of letters from parents complaining the movie had scared their children" (ibid Web) on the prospect of his return. Eventually, Burton decided to step down, leaving the studio in a position to pursue a more family-friendly (and merchandise-oriented) version of the character. Once Burton left, Keaton followed suit, and the studio handed the reigns of the franchise to director Joel Schumacher.

## 4. Good and Bad Objects

The relationship between Burton's films and the long-lasting influence of *Batman '66* shows a more complex conception of geneticism, one that deals with the reactionary update of an earlier text with a distancing operation meant to modernise it. In order to deepen the analysis, this section examines two Batman adaptations that are fundamental in their influence on the intermedial future of the Batman story world, albeit for different reasons; *Batman: The Animated Series* and Schumacher's live-action *Batman Forever* (1995) and *Batman & Robin* (1997). The animated series has come to be valued as the ultimate "good object" for Batman versions across all media, while Schumacher's version has become the franchise's new "bad object." Although the existence of both versions is owed to the Burton films, the reasons behind their creation vary, with the animated series being commissioned in response to the initial success of 1989's *Batman*, while *Batman Forever* was moulded as a reaction to the controversies stemming from the adult-oriented contents of *Batman Returns* (1992).

Shortly after the relatively disappointing release of *Batman Returns* and before Joel Schumacher took the baton from Burton as the franchise's new director, Batman found great success and even greater cultural relevance in a different medium: serialised animation. *Batman: The Animated Series* debuted in primetime on the Fox Network in September 1992, lasting 85 episodes aired over three years. The series is recognised today not only as the greatest superhero cartoon ever made, regularly topping most rankings, but as one of the greatest animated shows in history. Unlike other shows that attained cult status after the end of their original broadcast, *Batman: The Animated Series* was an immediate triumph, beloved by comics fans and general audiences alike while recording high ratings and winning Emmy awards. *B:TAS* received a theatrical feature-length expansion titled *Batman: Mask of the Phantasm* in 1993, and it is impossible to address the animated feature without first exploring the television series and its impact. While its immense success would go on to redefine the character of Batman and the medium of serialised animation, *The Animated Series*'s path to the small screen shares some of the same complications that plagued the journey of Tim Burton's *Batman* to the silver screen.

Whereas the last live-action iteration of Batman to hit screens before Tim Burton's film was Adam West's, the character had appeared in poorly made animated shows throughout the



1970s and 1980s, in some cases voiced by West himself. This cemented the light and campy version of the character as the most recognisable one for adults and children alike, and it was the reason why a dark Batman had long been seen by movie producers as an absurd proposition. In serialised animation, it was not merely a dark Batman that was impossible to make it was any dark material at all. By the 1980s, the golden era of short-form animation spearheaded by Disney and Warner Bros in the 1940s and 1950s was a distant memory. The industry of televised animation was going through a dark period in the 1980s, during which almost all of the shows produced were highly formulaic and very children-oriented Sunday morning cartoons. According to Paul Dini, writer on *B:TAS* and one of the all-time great Batman authors, the three networks operating at the time “had a very skewed vision of what they felt kids wanted to see, so it’s all shows about kids and kid issues [...] pretty much dedicated to [ages] 2 to 11” (“Heart of Batman” Documentary 2018). Furthermore, it was a time of heavy supervision, both internal and external, due to the watchful eye of the networks’ Broadcast Standards & Practices departments, Parent Teacher Associations, as well as Congressional hearings. Alan Burnett, one of the most important figures behind *The Animated Series* who at the time was working on Hanna Barbara’s final incarnation of *Super Friends* (a show featuring Batman, Superman and other DC Comics superheroes), recalls having to make inoffensive action-adventure shows “where the action would be so toned down [due to Broadcast Standards & Practices pressure] that you could hardly call it an action show” (ibid 2018). The animated shows would be produced cheaply and with regularly recycled assets, due to the fact that their focus was not on qualitative storytelling or entertainment. At the time, shows were often commissioned as extended advertisements for already existing toy lines, as was the case for He-Man and GI Joe, or to capitalise on brands that had debuted theatrically.

Due to these issues, the field of serialised animation was creatively bankrupt and overdue for a rejuvenating movement. Between 1989 and 1990, a perfect storm of occurrences provided the ideal scenario for the creation of *Batman: The Animated Series*. The newly established Warner Bros Animation department, willed into existence by Steven Spielberg and led by Jean McCurdy, had recently found great success with *Tiny Toon Adventures* (a spin-off of the historic Warner Bros Looney Tunes characters). With Batmania in full swing after the release of Tim Burton’s first film, the studio set its sights on an animated Batman show to be aired on the Fox Network, which hosted the cultural juggernaut *The Simpsons*. Storyboard artist Bruce Timm and background artist Eric Radomski, both of

whom had worked on *Tiny Toon Adventures*, separately presented their ideas with the hope of being hired on the project as artists. Their ideas impressed McCurdy, who took a big chance and handed them the project not merely as contracted artists, but rather as co-creators and producers (“Vulture” 2017 Web). The pairing of Timm, who identifies Adam West’s show as the ‘gateway drug’ to being a lifelong Batman fan (“Heart of Batman” Documentary 2018), and Radomski, who was not a comic book fan but had loved Burton’s *Batman*, created an ideal balance of different perspectives on character and background design. Timm’s streamlined and elegant character designs harkened back to the timeless Fleischer Brothers’ theatrical Superman cartoons of the early forties as well as to comic book giants like Jack Kirby, Alex Toth and Will Eisner. Radomski’s striking backgrounds, heavily inspired by Burton’s Gotham during early development, were realised through the unorthodox process of painting vibrant colours on black paper, resulting in a high-contrast look with deep, inky blacks that called to mind the chiaroscuro of noirs and German expressionism. With near-total artistic freedom and the addition of writers Paul Dini and Alan Burnett, the development team set out to produce a type of television show that was entirely unheard of at the time. The series was mature in terms of characters, tone and themes, not intended only for the youngest demographic, with a dark visual palette that linked it to both Burton’s first film and a plethora of noir films. The team’s mantra is explicated in Dini’s belief that “when entertainment is done well, it works on a level for kids and adults [and becomes] something that is embraced and carried throughout the years” (“Heart of Batman” Documentary 2018).

In its initial stages, the project was undoubtedly indebted to the Tim Burton movies, with which the team had a love/hate relationship. Even though the show owed its existence to the success of the movie and there were parallels to be found between the two in certain design aspects, Timm "made it clear to Jean [McCurdy] when [they] first got the gig that [he] didn’t want to make the TV show just a spin-off of the movie [... he] wanted the show to be unique” (Timm, 2012, 38). The Animated Series promptly established its uniqueness with one foundational aspect: its version of Gotham City. The same retro and deco elements employed by Burton and Furst are present in *B:TAS*’s Gotham, but while theirs “was a deliberately ugly, brutal take on the futuristic design, [Timm and Radomski] wanted more of a pure, old-fashioned kind of art deco” (ibid 38). The team gravitated toward a darker take on old New York Art Deco, which "birthed this timeless feel, where it felt very authentic in a ’40s setting, but it was contemporary storylines that we were telling [in which] we could see mobsters and ’40s vehicles and dirigibles — and yet Batman had technology that was way beyond that time

period” (Radomski “Vulture” 2017 Web). Timm and Radomski’s Gotham City was stylish but dangerous, and as they “did not want the series to visually date itself, as many cartoons do when they try too hard to ground themselves in contemporary culture, [their Gotham] could be identified as twentieth-century America, but it was impossible to pinpoint it to an exact decade” (Dini & Kidd 1998, 32). This visual approach to the city’s architecture and overall feel has come to be known as “Dark Deco”, which has, in turn, made *The Animated Series’* Gotham and its timelessness into key factors in the show’s enduring popularity. This Gotham City is a perfect expression of the show’s raison d’être: a refutation and a reaction to the bright, sanitised animation landscape of the eighties.

Indubitably, the episodic nature of a television series shortens the medial distance between the source material and the adapting medium, in turn providing far more opportunities to experiment with genre and tone, as well as decades of comic book stories to draw from or to adapt with direct story fidelity. In a process relatively similar to Burton’s, the production team looked back at Kane and Finger’s ‘original vision’, while also taking from Neal Adams, Frank Miller, Alan Moore, and all the other great writers and artists that had had an impact on Batman over the years. Most notably, the show’s production team looked back to the films that inspired the initial run of Batman comics helmed by Kane, Finger and Jerry Robinson, bringing the cycle of influence and appropriation to full circle. As explained by Brooker:

Creator Bob Kane’s revelation [of Batman] came, he claims, from a Leonardo da Vinci sketch of a man wearing a bat-like flying machine, but among his other sources were the 1931 film *The Bat Whispers*, Bela Lugosi’s *Dracula* and Douglas Fairbanks’ performance in *The Mark of Zorro*. Of the supporting cast, the scarred ex-actor Clayface - real name Boris Karlo - was based on Lon Chaney’s role as *The Phantom of the Opera* (1926), and Catwoman on Jean Harlow in the film *Hell’s Angels* (1930). More generally, the urban milieu of the early stories [...] paid homage to the gangster cycle of the early 1930s - what Jules Feiffer identified as “that Warner Brothers fog-infested look” (1999, 185).

Each episode was conceived as a half-hour version of those “Warner Brothers fog-infested” gangster films, with the dark painterly quality of the animated frames aligning them with many cinematic artefacts and paratexts, such as matte paintings and old film posters. While “Hitchcock was kind of a guiding light for how to tell a clean visual story [and] for how to deliver mood with camera” (Goodman, “Heart of Batman” Documentary 2018), it was the team’s embrace of film noir, not just visually and stylistically but thematically, that elevated the series’ narrative. In focusing on villains as sympathetic characters who felt wronged and

wanted vengeance, the show harnessed one of noir's most fundamental thematic traits about the lingering darkness in society. Just as Burton had done with his movies, *B:TAS* added a psychological dimension and pathos even to the silliest and gimmick-driven villains, whose depiction was later incorporated in the source material, aligning their canonical printed versions with those of the animated series. The power of its storytelling lies not in the world-ending stakes typically present in superhero stories, but rather in the realism with which it constructed its low-scale character-focused drama. The show regularly spotlighted regular citizens of Gotham and turned them into protagonists, showing a plethora of perspectives on Batman and his actions. Journalist Scott Mendelson perfectly encapsulates why the show is still so resonant and effective:

The series wasn't "adult" because it was the darkest, most serious, and most violent afternoon animated show of its time. *Batman: The Animated Series* was adult in nature by virtue of its intelligence and its frank dealing with genuinely adult subject matter. The show's plots concerned divorce, patent law, insurance fraud, homelessness, class prejudice, age discrimination, typecasting, prison abuse, animal testing, and all manners of mental illness. Its stories revolved not around alien invasions or doomsday scenarios, but around the stuff that real life is made of (2018 Web).

Bruce Timm, Alan Burnett and Paul Dini followed up *Batman: The Animated Series* with two more Batman shows and established the highly acclaimed DC Animated Universe, a series of interconnected animated shows collectively lasting over a decade, that introduced equally revered interpretations of other characters such as Superman and the Justice League superhero group. Kevin Conroy and Mark Hamill, respectively the voices of Batman and Joker in *B:TAS*, went on to reprise their roles in the rest of the DC Animated Universe as well as in other animated shows, films and video games for over three decades, becoming the definitive voices of the characters.

*B:TAS* exists in a complex and entangled space of adaptation, where it retains both story and thematic fidelity to the source material, while also introducing many new characters and implementing massive changes to the characterisation of well-established figures (that would typically be seen as criminally unfaithful). *The Animated Series* shows that when there is a strong artistic vision behind changes to canonical aspects, the audience will accept them and even embrace them. The authorial vision behind it perfectly captures the spirit of the source material while also operating as a starkly independent entity with the power to react to previous adaptations and the freedom to revolutionise. All of these considerations carried over

to *Batman: The Mask of the Phantasm*, released in US theatres on Christmas Day 1993, between the first and the second season of the animated series. Initially planned as a home video release, the success of the series led the Warners brass to shift its platform to theatrical. Although it posted poor box-office results due to poor marketing, it has since been hailed as one of the best theatrical Batman features. Unlike Burton's movies, *Mask of the Phantasm* tells a story focused squarely on Bruce Wayne, exploring the origins of the mythos within the narrative boundaries of the animated series, while also being the rare Batman feature film that introduces new, original characters in prominent roles, rather than repurposing or barely adapting previously existing ones. The many distinct qualities that have made the film so respected and acclaimed build on the narrative and stylistic frameworks established by *B:TAS*. Therefore, its accomplishments are an extension of those of the animated series, and as such, it is only fair that the compounded legacy of the two entities should be discussed as one, resulting in the ultimate "good object", considered by many to be not only the best Batman adaptation but the best version of Batman to grace any medium (Brooker 1999, 197).

The criticisms levied at Burton's films for distancing the newest mainstream portrayal of the character from the textual counterpart were entirely absent in the discourse surrounding *B:TAS*, despite the many revolutionary changes the series made to many characters' backstories and their portrayals. The continued reverence and the lasting impact of *Batman: The Animated Series* led to its long-standing status as "the Internet fan groups' "good object" against which the screen incarnations are compared" (ibid 197). Staying on television screens throughout the 1990s and 2000s thanks to reruns and the expansion of its narrative and thematic modus operandi to the wider DC Animated Universe, *B:TAS*'s towering cultural presence was juxtapositional to that of Schumacher's theatrical duology and its replacement of *Batman '66* as the new "bad object" in the eyes of both fans and audiences.

Selected in June 1993 by Warner Bros, with Burton's blessing, to helm *Batman Forever* (1995), Joel Schumacher was a veteran director with nine films under his belt and close to two decades of experience in the industry. Even though he was not a critical darling, his films always played very well with audiences and have gone on to be reappraised and considered cult films in recent years. Schumacher entered the film industry as a costume designer, later moving on to writing and directing, and had a strong eye for flair, style, and, most importantly, casting, becoming responsible for launching the careers of many future stars.

While Schumacher's films had always featured an incredibly kinetic style and high-contrast cinematography balancing shadows and vibrant colours, which was well-aligned with Warner Bros's intention to move the Batman franchise into a more bombastic realm, he was far from being a journeyman director or a director of children's films. His eighties features alternated between romantic comedies and psychological horrors, while his nineties oeuvre featured one grim John Grisham legal thriller and *Falling Down*, a ragingly dark satire starring Michael Douglas. As a homosexual man with a vested interest in societal issues, his films were thematically complex and layered, and:

It would certainly be possible to follow an interest in beautiful, death-marked youth through Schumacher's earlier movies to *Batman Forever*, to trace the homoeroticism in *The Lost Boys* and the fanciful gothicism of *Flatliners* through to *Batman and Robin*, or to ask why the issues of race so evident in *Flatliners*, *Falling Down* and *A Time to Kill* are so strikingly absent in Schumacher's Gotham (Brooker 2001, 294).

Despite the incredibly harsh criticisms aimed at him in later years, which always reduced and diminished his career to the missteps of 1997's *Batman & Robin* (and *Batman Forever* to a lesser degree), Schumacher's career was rich and versatile, which made him an inspired choice to take over from Burton.

Burton and his team had taken great pains to distance their movies from the colourfulness of the comic books and the television show of the 1960s, while Schumacher was tasked with cautiously nudging them back towards levity. What many commentators tend to forget in their assessment of Joel Schumacher's tenure is that the director saved the franchise from the massive public relations controversy that surrounded *Batman Returns*. Batman was seen as a damaged brand, resulting in little involvement from marketing partners and sponsors during development, and rather low expectations for its success by the studio. Schumacher had a clear vision for what he wanted to make, perfectly encapsulated in two definitions: he saw the film as "a pop culture opera" and "a living comic book" ("Charlie Rose Interview" 1995). The director embraced select elements of the sixties TV show and Burton's two films, but his main influences were the Batman comic books. Further distancing his approach from Burton's notorious distaste for the source material, Schumacher carried out extensive research, going back to the comic books he adored as a kid as well as catching up with the modern stories, finally distilling their core attributes to "color, great graphics, exciting action sequences and humor" ("Variety" 1997 Web). Coincidentally, Schumacher's

energetic and vivid vision coincided with the stylistic excesses of the nineties, propelled by the ever-growing influence of music videos and MTV. In describing the workings of the Academy Award-nominated cinematography of the film, director of photography Stephen Goldblatt explained:

For the lights, I didn't use normal rigging. [...] I had a concert lighting guy and his crew. Now what that means is I could adjust the color and the intensity, the direction and the diffusion of each lamp without having to go to each lamp. They were all fed down to consoles on the stage floor. We could move very, very quickly. The conventional way could have taken days. It gave it that rock 'n' roll comic book look. ("THR" 2015, Web)

Designed by Oscar-winner Barbara Ling, the Gotham City of *Batman Forever* is a logical extension of Schumacher's concept of the "living comic book". Ling's Gotham is a fantastical place that shares the same architectural influences as Burton's Gotham but refutes the ugliness of Furst's and the oppressiveness of Welch's. Old buildings sporting Art Deco and German Expressionist influences stand side by side with futuristic skyscrapers, gigantic statues of Greek inspiration and a multicoloured layer of Tokyo-influenced neons and spotlights. In its design, the audience can trace how it once could have looked like Burton's Gotham, before hitting a real-estate boom that brought it into a new century. It is a Gotham where past and present, darkness and light, can and do co-exist — which is thematically representative of the cultural moment during which the movie was made. As a result, *Batman Forever* can be appreciated as "a rather faithful hybrid of the 1950's "square" Batman and the 1970's Caped Crusader era, with a dash of Dick Sprang surrealism thrown in" (Mendelson 2015, Web). The gaudy side of the film is embodied by the exaggerated sets, eye-popping production design and cinematography, and the big, explicitly comical and campy villains, which captured the 1940s and early 50s era of Batman comics. Its other side, the one that keeps the tradition of drama and darkness, is most fascinating.

Although the film certainly spends plenty of time on its villains, it is the first live-action incarnation of the films to focus much more heavily on Bruce Wayne and Batman. Its exploration of his origins, guilt, psychology and trauma is much more in line with the character's comic book origin, *Batman: The Animated Series* and Frank Miller's *Batman: Year One*. Miller's name, having now fully supplanted Kane's, emerges once again, his *Year One* graphic novel mentioned explicitly by Schumacher as his favourite and as the story he had initially wanted to adapt ("Shadows of the Bat" Documentary 2005), only for it to be

turned down by Warners in favour of a script with broader appeal. The exploration of Bruce Wayne's psyche, as seen in the theatrical cut of *Batman Forever*, is ultimately a truncated version, as many of the key scenes pertaining to it were left on the cutting room floor, despite the fact that the script was built around this theme ("Shadows of the Bat" Documentary 2005). These cuts made the film less dark and lessened the overall impact of Bruce's character arc, but they are worth addressing to show that Schumacher's intention originally leaned darker, but still striving to find a balance between different tonalities. Bruce's arc is inextricably tied to an important introduction that *Forever* makes to the cinematic saga: the live-action debut of Dick Grayson/Robin.

Schumacher's knowledge of Batman was inseparable from Robin, as the so-called "dynamic duo" was inseparable in comics for decades, until the titular character's return to darkness in the 1970s. It should come as no surprise that the type of film Schumacher made is a reflection of the stories he read as a child. Furthermore, his handling of Dick Grayson's origin is quite close to the comic book counterpart, aside from a narrative conjecture that had also been used in Burton's 1989 *Batman*. While in the comics the death of Grayson's parents, who are trapeze artists at the circus, is caused by a disgruntled low-level mobster, the film has the villain Two-Face, played by Tommy Lee Jones, as the responsible party. Whereas the Graysons' deaths in the comics are caused by their trapeze lines being sabotaged, the film gives them a much more heroic departure. Two-Face holds the circus hostage with a bomb rigged to explode and demands that Batman, whom he assumes is in the audience (correctly, as Bruce is there), reveal himself. Bruce does not hesitate, standing up and revealing his alter-ego. But as the crowd panics, his revelation goes unheard, and Two-Face proceeds to murder Dick's parents and brother. Shattered by the revelation that his family is dead, Grayson is given a vengeful drive that aligns him with Bruce's own path and experience with the Joker in Burton's film, although the reference is never made explicit to keep continuity between different iterations as vague as possible. Robin's presence in the film is fundamental to Bruce's character arc, as Bruce believes that his inability to stop Two-Face was directly responsible for the Graysons' deaths. This ties to the sense of guilt he bears for forcing his unwilling parents to take him to the movie theatre on the fateful night that they were murdered. The parallels between the two characters are a storied aspect of the source material,



and Schumacher balances the textual fidelity to Robin's origin story with the thematic fidelity to both the Silver and Bronze Age periods.

There are greater changes to be found in *Forever*, with Bruce Wayne no longer being a 'freak' himself (as he had been in Burton's world) or depicted as an everyman. With Keaton's departure, Val Kilmer was cast as the titular character, aligning the cinematic version with the one familiar to readers and outlined in O'Neil's Bat-Bible. Kilmer's Batman is handsome, well-trained, stoic, charming, more empathic, and open to the occasional one-liner or a smirk (though not Keaton's deranged sort). Technically, he also abides by the canonical 'no-kill rule' — depending on whether one ultimately considers his tricking of Two-Face in the climax of the film as the cause of the villain's demise. Kilmer's iteration is far closer to *The Animated Series*' depiction of the character than to Burton's, which the fandom had heavily criticised before release. Yet, in terms of audience reception, the extravagant side of *Batman Forever* seems to always outweigh the dark one, often resulting in its being bundled with *Batman & Robin* as joint franchise killers, despite *Forever* being a fairly different film than its follow-up. *Forever* is packed with Schumacher's typical stylistic flair, while paying lip service to certain Burton visuals, such as the flashbacks showing Bruce's parents' murder evoking the camera angles and cinematography choices made by Burton in his original 1989 film. The colourful and campy elements re-introduced by Schumacher in *Forever*, but greatly expanded in 1997's *Batman & Robin*, led to a quick nostalgic revisionism of Burton's 1989 film and the discourse surrounding its original release, turning it into a 'good object'. This is a symptom of the auteurist discourse that emerged after *Batman* and *Batman Returns*. The controversy around Burton, the initial uproar against Keaton and the adaptational infidelities were long-forgotten and pardoned, and any film following Burton's entries would be weighed against them, in terms of artistry and authorship. Schumacher's films are not appraised by what they are, but rather by what they are not: just as "*Batman* and *Batman Returns* are Tim Burton films before they are adaptations of any comic, [...] *Batman Forever* and *Batman and Robin* define themselves firstly as 'not Tim Burton' films" (Brooker 2001, 299).

Fan reception notwithstanding, *Batman Forever* opened on 16 June 1995 to mixed reviews but great audience response, scoring the biggest opening weekend of all time and going on to gross close to \$350 million, considerably more than *Returns*. The film was an unexpected success and the few sponsors that had signed on reaped great rewards, which led

to Warners promptly signing up Schumacher for another movie. The director had long been reluctant about taking on sequels, but he and *Forever* screenwriter Akiva Goldsman were eventually persuaded. The turn-around on the sequel was quick, and *Batman & Robin* would be released in theatres a mere two years after *Forever*. A two-year cycle for a blockbuster is quite expeditious, and to make matters more complicated, after completing *Forever* Schumacher and Goldsman went directly into production of *A Time to Kill*, another John Grisham adaptation, before returning to *Batman & Robin*. Schumacher's hope for his second feature was to make a darker film, and as the sheer grimness of the Grisham adaptation made between *Forever* and *Batman & Robin* demonstrates, there is no doubt he could have. But the studio had other plans, and the director embraced a "bigger, better" mentality that doubled down on the choices that he believed made *Forever* such a smash hit, just as Burton had with *Returns*, a choice for which he has taken full responsibility, never blaming the studio or the producers ("THR" 2011, Web). Despite Schumacher taking the blame for the movie's shortcomings, *Batman & Robin* "represents the most cynical aspects of the studio system when it comes to making a movie" ("Den of Geek" 2019 Web). For *B&R*, the studio's desire to keep the movie more family and child-friendly led to sponsors and merchandising partners being involved from the earliest meetings, letting them "be involved in how the Batmobile was going to look, how Batman's gadgets were going to be" according to producer Peter MacGregor Scott ("Shadows of the Bat" Documentary 2005). The studio leaned heavily in a direction that prioritised the making of a movie that was more "toy-etic": "when you have something in the movie they can make toys out of" ("Hollywood Reporter" 2017 Web). This exacerbated the quick development and production times, as everything that was to be designed for the film had to be delivered in advance to the toy makers for them to make moulds. Any assessment of *Batman & Robin* as a film has to contend with its existence being motivated almost solely by a desire to sell ancillary products.

It is relevant to point out that this essay does not seek to re-evaluate *Batman & Robin* in terms of its quality, or relative lack thereof, but rather to re-contextualise its impact and its reception. *Batman Forever* playfully nods at *Batman '66* through a few jokes and some of its pantomimic inclinations, but *Batman & Robin* fully embraces the tonality of the series and becomes a de-facto big-budget adaptation of it. Gone is the dark conception of Batman and Bruce Wayne as a counterbalance to the campier, comical elements. *B&R* embraces the old

“bad object” and pushes its perceived crimes even further, effectively becoming the new “bad object”. The sheer scale of the big-budget production design and cinematography of *Batman Forever* comes across as the loud but grandiose vision of a director, while *Batman & Robin*’s bigger and “toy-etic” approach makes most of the film’s locations look like over-lit and cheaply produced play-sets. One more immediately apparent flourish that makes the connection between *B&R* and *Batman ’66* inescapable is the persistent use of the Dutch angle, a tilted camera angle that has its origin in German expressionist cinema and is meant to communicate unsettledness. The angle was popularised in *Batman ’66*, usually in conjunction with the villains to show they were “crooked”, and Schumacher implements it extensively across the film, far more than he had in *Forever*. The director’s approach is one of near-total tonal, thematic and stylistic fidelity to *Batman ’66*. But in terms of story fidelity, it adapts one important storyline from the ultimate “good object”, *Batman: The Animated Series*. *B&R* features villain Mr. Freeze, played with bombast by Arnold Schwarzenegger, whose origin and motivations are nearly identical to those introduced in *The Animated Series*.

Originally introduced in the comics as Mr. Zero but re-named Mr. Freeze in his first appearance in *Batman ’66*, the villain was one of many zany stock villains with a specific gimmick, which in his case is a freeze-ray gun. When *Batman: The Animated Series* introduced its Mr. Freeze in the Paul Dini-penned Emmy-winning episode *Heart of Ice*, it presented him as a cryogenics scientist trying to find a cure for his wife’s rare disease. When an act of corporate greed causes an accident in his laboratory, the scientist is exposed to chemicals that change his body and only allow him to live at sub-zero temperatures. Portrayed with a monotone bravado voice by Michael Ansara, the supposedly emotionless Mr. Freeze was the most emotional of villains, a figure of tragedy that propelled the television series’ popularity at the start of its original run and was adapted back into the comics as the character’s canonical origin. Although Schwarzenegger’s character has the same origin and follows much of the same plot, his maniacal cackling and incessant use of ice puns render his portrayal opposed to the one of the television series. The depiction of the character was widely criticised for its perceived infidelity, perfectly elucidating the difference between story and thematic fidelity, as the film’s adherence to the former, often most demanded by fans, was happily ignored due to the film’s thematic fidelity to the campiness of *Batman ’66*. Similarly, the depiction of Batman as a smirking crime-fighter is clearly aligned with Adam West’s,

especially as Val Kilmer was replaced by then-rising talent George Clooney, whose comedic charm is fully on display. For all the hate that Clooney received for his performance, it bears mentioning that for a long time, his Batman was the only one to strictly adhere to the no-kill rule, until 2022's feature film *The Batman*. Furthermore, Clooney's Batman is one of the most honourable, purely empathetic versions of the character to ever grace the screen, as evidenced in the film's closing scenes. As Mr. Freeze lies, defeated, Batman offers him the chance to help save Alfred, who has over the film developed a less severe form of the same disease as Freeze's wife Nora, and to continue his research and rehabilitation in prison. The villain is neither a freak nor a rival to kill; he is a human who can be brought back from the brink, whose value Batman recognises due to his adherence to a code that values life above all. The scene is a rare glimmer of qualitative storytelling in a film that is built, almost beat for beat, on a structure identical to that of *Batman Forever*, but with little to none of the qualities that made the previous film work.

Opening on 20 June 1997, *Batman & Robin* garnered abysmal reception by critics and audiences alike, ultimately grossing less than \$240 million, a franchise low-point, on an astronomical budget estimated between \$120 and \$160 million. The film's cast and its director were lambasted for making one of the worst blockbusters of all time. The movie's ultimate failure is not due to the campiness or the colourfulness of the film, but to its narrative shortcomings, its unfunny humour and the palpable feeling that it is a toy advertisement more than it is a film. Yet, the discourse around the film has focused on its similarities with *Batman '66* as the cause of its failure, thereby conflating its real faults with the homophobic discourse that has been following the character for decades. The source of the homophobic discourse can be traced to a true first for the franchise: Schumacher's filming of Bruce Wayne and Batman as a sexual object, rather than the typical aspirational symbol of straight manliness. Schumacher frames Val Kilmer's and George Clooney's Bruce Wayne and Chris O'Donnell's Dick Grayson, in and out of the costumes, as gorgeously as Nicole Kidman's Chase Meridian, Bruce's love interest in *Forever*, and Uma Thurman's Poison Ivy, *Batman & Robin*'s femme fatale. The armoured look worn by Keaton was replaced by anatomically correct costumes, inspired by the classical beauty of Greek statues. The suits worn by Batman and Robin in the eponymous film have the distinction of featuring nipples on them, an infamous detail that is often used as a shorthand to ridicule the film, although it had already appeared without

controversy on their suits from *Forever*. Similarly, in the brief montages showing the characters ‘suited up’ after the opening credits, Schumacher inserts shots that linger on the characters’ buttocks, a choice similarly chastised as something that would never appear in a similar montage sequence in Burton’s films. Perfectly in line with his “living comic book” conception of the films, Schumacher’s explanation for this choice was that “in comic books, they draw very beautiful, anatomically perfect people, in very alluring costumes, and we owe that to the audience, [but] I will take responsibility for casting and glorifying beauty and sexuality” (“Shadows of the Bat” Documentary 2005). There is nothing inherently abhorrent in Schumacher’s design choices, which celebrate the exaggerated and highly stylised bodies of the comics. It is the fandom’s ever-present fear of queerness that elevates these choices to unspeakable crimes that justify the film’s failure. Schumacher’s career never truly recovered after the debacle of *Batman & Robin*, and over the years he was hounded by questions about the film, eventually telling fans: “If I disappointed them in any way, then I really want to apologise, [because] it really wasn’t my intention, my intention was just to entertain them” (ibid). Schumacher’s apologies are the result of a cruel discourse that focused on cosmetic features rather than on any aesthetic choice meriting criticism. Ultimately, screenwriter Akiva Goldsman perfectly summarises the cyclical nature of characters like Batman, James Bond, Robin Hood and others who have transcended their original texts:

We were doing exactly what you’re supposed to do [...] with icons, [which] is contort them. The reason that comic books survive over time is that the characters are durable and they are afforded different realisations. They’re different lenses through which to see the world. They change and are changed, by the world, by the time, by the historical moment that they are in. And without those aborted and perhaps less successful bends and twists, you’ll never get *The Dark Knight Returns* [...] We yearn for something old made new spectacularly.” (“Shadows of the Bat” Documentary 2005)

Goldsman explicates the process that would lead the franchise from the misfire of *Batman & Robin* to Christopher Nolan’s *The Dark Knight* trilogy, its absolute peak.

## 5. Resurrection and Aftermath

Having explored the status of *Batman: The Animated Series* and Schumacher's two Batman films as good and bad objects, respectively, in this section the focus will shift to the next, and most important, live-action iteration of Batman: Christopher Nolan's *The Dark Knight Trilogy*. One crucial difference between Nolan's Batman films and those of his predecessors lies in their interconnectedness. Burton's and Schumacher's movies are relatively disconnected one-off stories that share similar aesthetics but have little narrative impact on one another. Nolan's trilogy, on the other hand, features standalone narratives that share a cohesive nature, stylistically and narratively, to build a three-film character arc with a clear beginning, middle and end. While the duologies directed by Burton and Schumacher required a greater degree of separation in their analysis, Nolan's trilogy is easier to address as a single unit that evolves over three instalments. Consequently, the chronological approach taken in previous chapters is eschewed here in favour of a more cohesive thematic approach that examines the trilogy as a whole.

In the period following *Batman & Robin*'s franchise-killing release, Batman remained in the public eye thanks to the continued success of Bruce Timm's DC Animated Universe, but it would take eight years before his return to cinemas in a live-action film. In the years between Schumacher's second film and *Batman Begins* (2005), many directors tried their hand at developing Batman films. A third Schumacher film that would move the franchise back into dark territory was canned, while attempts were made by talents ranging from blockbuster maestro Wolfgang Petersen, who was planning a violent Batman and Superman crossover film, to then-novice filmmaker Darren Aronofsky, who was developing a wild deconstructionist take with *Batman: Year One* writer Frank Miller. No project ever moved past the initial development phases. While Batman languished in development hell, other comic book films such as Bryan Singer's *X-Men* and Sam Raimi's *Spider-Man* picked up the mantle and garnered critical and commercial success, showing the potential of the genre while greatly dialling back the excesses of the Batman films of the nineties. Christopher Nolan, then a young director who had set the indie world ablaze with his sophomore feature *Memento* (2000) and was coming off the success of *Insomnia* (2002), was tasked with rebooting the franchise in 2003 by Time Warner. The director's pitch, and the reason it moved forward, was antithetical to *Batman & Robin*, the memory of which was still vivid for audiences. The caustic reception to *Batman & Robin* cast a long intertextual shadow on any new iteration of

the character, which would be tasked with the challenge of redeeming the character in the eyes of audiences and critics alike. The choice and the announcement of Nolan, an auteur and a storyteller, as the figure spearheading the project represents a crucial initial paratext to calm the audience's fears that there may be a repeat of the earlier excess.

In taking on this gargantuan task, Nolan settled on an approach that would go on to define his tenure with the character and its massive impact on blockbuster filmmaking, driven by an operating word: "grounded". Schumacher had embraced the self-consciousness of comic books as a medium "that does not stress credibility and verisimilitude, as is the case with film, but rather confidently manifests its artificiality in the drawings that constitute its visual part" (qtd. in Ioannidou 2013, 233). Nolan's grounded and gritty vision stands as directly opposed to Schumacher's. All-encompassing in its reach, Nolan's approach was meant to root the world of the character in realism and therefore distance it as much as possible from the fantastical elements of Schumacher, Burton and the comics. In doing so, many of the comic book elements featured in previous films, such as the stylised depictions of Gotham, the colourful villains and the inherent absurdity of some of Batman's gadgets and assets, are omitted. Nolan's story world shows the audience not only Bruce Wayne's journey to becoming Batman but also how he came to obtain or create many of the character's signature features. Structurally, *Batman Begins* follows the template set by Richard Donner's *Superman* in order to build the character's origin, which is then amplified by Nolan's auteurist character-driven indie background. One of the greatest strengths of Nolan and David S. Goyer's script for *Batman Begins* is its focus on Bruce Wayne, rather than Batman, which Nolan achieved by repurposing material from a Howard Hughes biopic he had been writing.

The screenplay features two full character arcs for Bruce: the first covers his journey from lost soul to conquering his fears and learning how to become a powerful symbol, while the second is about defining who Batman is and what he stands for. Pointedly, the first full appearance of Wayne in the proper Batman suit does not occur until the film's mid-point. Devoting the first half of the narrative to the journey of Bruce Wayne proves to be the film's most brilliant choice. In developing a strong and character-driven narrative core, Nolan immerses the audience fully in his grounded world and strips the film of any hint of the fantastical (and consequently, any association with the fantastical of past films). He then gradually builds up to the revelation of a fully-costumed Batman that fits within the realistic parameters erected by the film. The grounding of the fictional world of *Batman Begins*

extends to a philosophical stance made in the world-building of the film: superheroes do not exist. As Nolan put it:

If Bruce knew of Superman or even of comic books, then that's a completely different decision that he's making when he puts on a costume in an attempt to become a symbol. It's a paradox and a conundrum, but what we did is go back to the very original concept and idea of the character. In his first appearances, he invents himself as a totally original creation. [...] It would have given a very, very different meaning to what Bruce Wayne was leaving home to do and coming back home to do and putting on the costume for and all the rest. We dealt with on its own terms: What does Batman mean to Bruce Wayne, what is he trying to achieve? ("Los Angeles Times" 2008, Web)

This change is never addressed explicitly, but it is evident in a small alteration to a key detail of Bruce's origin, which is even featured in Burton's first Batman film. In most depictions of the night when Bruce's parents are murdered, the family finds itself in the dark and fateful Crime Alley after leaving the cinema, where they have just watched a Zorro film. Zorro was a clear early inspiration for Bob Kane and Bill Finger, and this little homage has accompanied many versions of Batman's origin across different media. Nolan replaces the Zorro screening with a performance of the Faustian opera *Mefistofele*, infusing it with the symbolism of bats. This establishes a deeper connection between the symbol of the bat and the fateful night of Bruce's parents' murder, while also creating an additional degree of separation from the character's comic book origin and any specific source of inspiration. The deconstructionist implications of a character in a film watching another film would diminish the director's commitment to grounding the fictional world in a pristine narrative context unencumbered by earlier sources of inspiration.

The villains, who had often been the narrative core of previous films, are reduced to supporting characters complementing Bruce's journey. Nolan's choice of Ra's Al Ghul, mob boss Carmine Falcone and the Scarecrow as the antagonists of *Batman Begins* feels very pointed. As iconic villains who were yet to make their live-action debut, their use avoided any kind of comparison to earlier versions or any preconceived audience notions. Furthermore, all of the characters already had a stronger basis in reality in the source material, making their transition into Nolan's grounded realm relatively straightforward. Of the three, the character with the most fantastical background is Ra's Al Ghul, the centuries-old leader of an international terrorist organisation who is recurrently resurrected in the healing springs of the so-called Lazarus Pit. His character remains mostly unchanged, but the mystical attributes of



his backstory are altered and replaced with a system of deception that configures “Ra’s Al Ghul” not as a near-immortal figure, but rather as a title that is passed down.

In keeping with the film’s intended status as a serious character piece, Nolan assembled a prestigious cast befitting a heavy drama production, comprised of Oscar winners, genre icons and beloved performers, putting into place an additional paratextual and intertextual matrix meant to illustrate the filmmakers’ intention to make a serious, mature film. Leading that cast as Bruce Wayne is Christian Bale, a versatile actor best known for playing serial killer Patrick Bateman in *American Psycho* (2000). Its dramatic ambitions did not translate into a film that would be inappropriate for certain audiences, as Nolan “always knew [he] wanted it to appeal to a wide range of ages, [though] not the youngest kid obviously” (“TimeOut London” 2005 Web). In removing *Batman & Robin*’s target audience from the equation, *Begins* was promoted as a film for adults and young viewers alike. Coupled with the highly-publicised love that Nolan professed for Frank Miller’s *Year One* and other seminal stories, “marketing and hiring for the film announced that this movie would be a ‘return’ to the brooding noir aesthetic and sensibility of Batman” (Gray 2010, 132). Upon its release, *Batman Begins* represented the closest textual adaptation of the story and thematic elements of Miller’s work, complemented by elements from lesser-known comics issues that detail the training of Bruce Wayne and the origin of Batman, released between the seventies and the nineties. In particular, Nolan draws from Dennis O’Neil and Dick Giordano’s 1989 story *The Man Who Falls*, a comic story that traces the origins of the character and Bruce Wayne’s early life. Nolan’s Batman is in many ways moulded from the tenets outlined in the Bat-Bible, with a prominent inclusion in the narrative of the character’s no-kill rule. With that said, the no-kill rule is seemingly betrayed in the film’s climax as Batman, in his final confrontation with Ra’s Al Ghul, clumsily argues that he “does not have to kill [Ra’s], but he does not have to save [him],” letting the villain plummet to his death. Disregarding the definitions of “killing” and “letting someone die”, it is then unsurprising that O’Neil, as the author of the Bat-Bible, considered *Batman Begins* to be “the best of the live-action Batman films, by a wide margin” (“Batman-On-Film” 2006, Web).

Looking past its textual inspirations, *Batman Begins*’ greatest debt besides Nolan’s own Howard Hughes script is owed to the long-lasting James Bond film franchise. The choice is apt, as Bond is another character who has famously transcended the source material to become an institution across media. The Bond films were the team’s “guiding light in terms of how the geography of a film can enhance the feeling of scale” (Shone 2020, 173), particularly

in the way that *Batman Begins* mirrors the massive scale and globe-trotting nature of the Bond films, as the film takes Bruce on a long journey of self-discovery before his return to Gotham. Nolan's self-professed love for the Bond franchise is apparent in *Begins*, and its influence would become even clearer in his later films *Inception* (2010) and *Tenet* (2020). In order to show how Bruce obtains much of the gear and tools for his crusade, Nolan reimagines the role of Lucius Fox, a Wayne Enterprises executive that amounted at best to a secondary player in the comics, as that of Q from the James Bond films, the figure in charge of providing Bond with his gadgets and customised vehicles. Nolan points out that "there was also such a clear influence of Fleming from the gadgets Bob Kane had given Batman that we felt we could repay the favor by having a Q-like figure in the character of Lucius Fox" (Shone 2020, 174). Many of Nolan's updates, exemplified here by his treatment of Lucius Fox, have been since adopted by the source material, launching an era of greater realism in the storytelling meant to align the cinematic iteration with the source material.

The development and release of *Batman Begins* is the locus of an intertextual conversation with previous versions of the character and the audience's perception of them. In distancing his film from the previous iterations and the more cartoonish and illogical aspects of the source material, Nolan mounts an operation that seeks to legitimise *Batman Begins* as a piece of cinema, rather than as the derogatory "comic book film" label that is often bestowed upon adaptations. Released on 15 June 2005, *Batman Begins* received the franchise's best reviews, a great response from the public and went on to gross \$370 million, which put it as the second-highest-grossing Batman film (unadjusted for inflation). While its box-office success was modest by the standards of the mid-2000s, its cultural impact was felt widely. It not only reinvigorated the character of Batman across media and redeemed him in the eyes of audiences, but it also served as the template for a plethora of other gritty and grounded reboots for dormant intellectual properties, none of which were able to re-capture *Begins'* critical and commercial success. When considering the success of *Batman Begins* and Nolan's authorial view, it is imperative to confront the issue of studio interference. As starkly authorial, for better or worse, as the previous directors' visions had been, they always had to contend with and bend to the heavy involvement and influence that Warner Bros exercised in the making of the films. Nolan, though, was given near-total carte blanche by Warner Bros. As such, addressing his authorial voice is a much more direct and easily attainable proposition, as the level of leeway afforded him on *Begins* grew to total artistic freedom for the rest of the trilogy, something previously unheard of in the context of the Batman franchise.

Nolan's creative freedom would not come without controversy in the lead-up to the first sequel, *The Dark Knight*. Intending to proceed with his process of re-invention, Nolan set his sights on introducing the first new live-action version of the Joker since Jack Nicholson's, whose version was held in high regard by fans and general audiences alike. Nolan selected Heath Ledger, a talented young actor coming off an Oscar nomination for playing a repressed homosexual cowboy in Ang Lee's *Brokeback Mountain* (2005). The reaction to Ledger's casting announcement was one of scorn and anger, paralleling the controversy surrounding Keaton's original Batman casting. While the casting of Keaton prompted fears that *Batman '89* would follow in *Batman '66*'s campy footsteps, the campaign against Ledger had much darker and more insidious undertones. Ledger's role in *Brokeback Mountain* made him the target of a massively homophobic reaction. The notion that the "gay cowboy" would be playing Batman's arch nemesis, after Nicholson no less, seemed to immediately undo all of the goodwill that the reception to *Batman Begins* had gathered. But the controversy and the studio's puzzlement did not dissuade Nolan, who proceeded as planned. In order to calm the waters and shift the consensus, December 2007 saw the release of what would become one of the ultimate paratexts to have ever swayed public opinion on a casting decision. Warner Bros debuted the 8-minute prologue sequence of *The Dark Knight* in front of the theatrical copies of *I Am Legend* (2007) shown in IMAX theatres. Featuring the bank heist sequence that opens the movie, the now-legendary prologue made two important introductions. Nolan and Ledger's version of the Joker made its public debut, along with Nolan and cinematographer Wally Pfister's use of IMAX 15-perforations 65mm celluloid, previously used only for nature documentaries and used here for the first in a narrative feature. The first close-up of Ledger's Joker was shown on some of the world's largest cinema screens and in the world's highest-resolution film format, and the result was an immediate and massive escalation of the anticipation for the sequel and Ledger's performance. As excitement for the film built, the path to *The Dark Knight*'s release was hit by tragedy in January 2008, as Heath Ledger died of an accidental overdose of prescription medication aged 28. Ledger's premature death, coupled with absurd tabloid rumours that the toll of playing the Joker had led him to heavy drug use and his eventual death, had the sad effect of boosting the profile of the film even further.

Released on 18 July 2008, *The Dark Knight* became a cultural juggernaut. In addition to being one the best-reviewed films of the year, it scored the best US domestic opening weekend in history and went on to cross a billion in revenue and become the highest-grossing

superhero film released to date. Building on the cultural impact of *Batman Begins*, *The Dark Knight* elevated movies adapted from comic books to an unprecedented level of critical regard and acceptance, effectively changing the landscape of blockbuster filmmaking. While the film was nominated for eight Academy Awards, winning two, *The Dark Knight* being snubbed for Best Film and Best Director resulted in such widespread criticism that the following year the Academy expanded the nomination slots for Best Picture from five to ten. Whereas both Burton and Schumacher had doubled down on their stylistic flourishes with their sequels, Nolan chose a different path. As different as *Batman Begins* was from most comic book films, it still featured certain structural landmarks of the genre, such as a third act featuring city-wide destruction and high stakes. Rather than making another action-adventure film with a strong focus on a single character, Nolan opted for a different genre and an entirely different structural approach, building *The Dark Knight* as a crime-thriller with a strong focus on an ensemble cast. In order to build the conflict between Batman and the Joker, Nolan drew heavily from Michael Mann's seminal *Heat* (1995), a sprawling Los Angeles-set crime saga following the intertwined lives of a career thief played by Robert DeNiro and an experienced police detective, played by Al Pacino. For the treatment of the larger ensemble, Nolan took inspiration from Jeph Loeb and Tim Sale's 1996 limited series *The Long Halloween*, effectively moving on from Miller's inescapable influence and embracing comic book stories written in a post-Burton era. Loeb and Sale's graphic novel is a crime saga that has come to be regarded as one of the defining modern Batman stories, featuring a suspenseful narrative that tracks the investigation that Batman, Commissioner Gordon and District Attorney Harvey Dent carry out in order to find a mysterious serial killer. Nolan loosely adapted structural elements of the graphic novel, interlinking them with the cat-and-mouse game from Mann's *Heat* to push the franchise in a new direction. Nolan returned to the neo-noir genre that brought him great acclaim in his three pre-*Batman Begins* features, and in doing so, Batman's original noir influences are at long last carried into the modern conception of the genre, simultaneously modernising the character and paying homage to his origins.

When it comes to the action elements of the film, the influence of James Bond is still present in the film in a structural sense, with the prologue sequence mirroring the big pre-credits openers of the Bond franchise, and with a large Hong Kong-based sequence mirroring the foreign-set missions of 007. But in comparison to *Begins*, *TDK* features fewer action pieces and a greater focus on suspense, coupled with a nihilistic edge worthy of the best noirs and personified by Joker's anarchic ethos. With Batman having had an entire film dedicated to

his origins and his arc, the choice to expand the narrative scope from a character study to a larger ensemble proves to be the right one, as the film establishes a greater thematic web. While Bruce's arc remains central to the story, other characters receive greater development and complementary arcs to Bruce's and the Joker's. Ledger's character-defining portrayal of the Joker, which would win him a posthumous Best Supporting Actor Oscar (a first for a film adapted from comic books), is an entirely different entity from Nicholson's. No origin for the character is shown, no real identity is revealed, nor does he fall into a vat of acid that bleaches his skin and turns him into a crazed villain. Ledger's Joker wears white makeup and has scars across his cheeks that draw up a grotesque smile, the origins of which he recounts in three different scenes, each time telling a different story. His look is toned down, just as his laughter takes on a more mocking and sinister edge. This Joker is a self-professed "agent of chaos" who perfectly embodies one of the film's driving themes: order versus chaos. District Attorney Harvey Dent, and his eventual transformation into antagonist Two-Face, is of central concern to the story and the ideological conflict between Batman and the Joker. Dent's initially heroic arc becomes the inverse of Bruce's from *Begins*, as his highly idealistic figure descends into a cynical and homicidal pursuit of justice based entirely on chance, decided by the flip of a coin. Nolan captures the dualistic and chaotic nature of the characters from the comic books and elevates them to an apt metaphor for the threats of self-made justice and the ever-present threat of terrorism in the post-9/11 world. Whereas previous directors had managed to capture a cultural moment with their films, each film in Nolan's trilogy captures a specific political and ideological moment in US society. By constructing antagonists that are not merely rivals, but ideological opponents to Batman's own thematic arc, Nolan inextricably links the themes to the characters to make topical commentary on society and its relationship with threats, foreign and local. The writing of Christopher Nolan, his younger brother Jonathan and David S. Goyer did not merely present generic villainous archetypes, but leveraged fears and troubles stemming from the real world in order to feed them to an audience through antagonists that, in turn, feel acutely relevant.

The thematic resonance of the first two films would carry on to the final, and perhaps most outwardly political, film of the trilogy, *The Dark Knight Rises*. Like most third chapters in trilogies, *TDKR* is arguably the weakest of Nolan's three films, but it is nonetheless a fascinating conclusion due to the sheer ambition of its narrative scope. Although the director has never revealed his original ideas for the third instalment, it would be fair to assume that the Joker would have returned had Heath Ledger not passed away. Instead, Nolan switched

gears once again and moved the trilogy in a new direction. Leaving behind the crime-thriller genre of the second film, *Rises* is fashioned as a cross between a disaster film and a historical epic, with the terrorist threat of the League of Shadows returning under the leadership of Bane, one of Batman's best-known modern villains. Nolan's depiction of Bane as a militia leader and as a tactician has a degree of thematic fidelity to the character's comic book counterpart while applying to him the same grounding process through which all other characters were re-invented. Despite his attempts to distance the film from the source material, Nolan understands how to draw from popular comic book stories as a means to placate fans while setting the foundations for a much grander story. TDKR has clear connections to two popular comic arcs of the nineties: *No Man's Land*, in which Gotham is destroyed by a powerful earthquake and abandoned by the government, and *Knightfall*, in which Bane breaks Bruce's back, putting Batman out of commission and leaving Gotham free for the taking. Speaking of *The Dark Knight Rises*' conception, Nolan notes:

It's a war film. It's a revolutionary epic. It's looking back to the grand-scale epics of the past, really, and for me that goes as far back as silent films. [...] There's an attempt to visualise certain things in this film on this large scale that are troubling and genuinely threatening to the idea of an American city. Or, to put it another way: revolutions and the destabilising of society have happened everywhere in the world, so why not here? ("Empire" 2020, Web)

The film is the culmination of the trilogy's thematic exploration of fear, anarchy, and chaos, as well as the most political film of the three. Curiously, it was the peculiar blockbuster that was claimed by both left and right-wing groups as representative of their beliefs, while in fact criticising aspects of both. Speaking on the matter, Nolan said that:

I think you have to go out of your way to look at the film and attribute to it right-wing characteristics. If anything, it's specifically left-wing. When people listen to Bane and say, 'He sounds like Donald Trump' or that Donald Trump sounds like him, well, it's about a demagogue. He's the bad guy. What was I afraid of when I made *The Dark Knight Rises* [was] demagoguery. Turns out I was right to be afraid. The film was not supposed to be political. It's not intended to be; it's about primal fears. At the time we were writing, there really was this sense of false calm; everybody thinks everything's okay, we got through the financial crisis, but there are underlying things brewing that could lead to difficult places." (Shone 2020, 323)

With these notions in mind, we can identify one specific story that Nolan liberally adapts for *TDKR*: Charles Dickens's 1859 novel *A Tale of Two Cities*. Nolan juxtaposes the backdrop of civil unrest leading to the French Revolution and the Reign of Terror of the novel against the fictional world of Gotham and the populist uprising featured in the film.

Having shown his faith in Gotham repeatedly over the trilogy, Batman performs a final act of sacrifice to save the city, establishing a parallel with the novel's Sydney Carton. Switching places with Charles Darnay, who faces execution, Carton sacrifices his life in order to save the figure that represents justice and duty for the city. In his final moments, waiting for the guillotine to strike him, Carton imagines a better future for his beloved city and its inhabitants. This passage from Dickens's novel is read by Gary Oldman's Commissioner Gordon in the film's closing minutes, at the funeral for Bruce Wayne, whom he now knows to be Batman, further cementing the connection between novel and film:

I see a beautiful city and the brilliant people rising from this abyss. I see the lives for which I lay down my life, peaceful, useful, prosperous and happy. I see that I hold a sanctuary in their hearts and in the hearts of their descendants, generations hence. It is a far, far better thing that I do, than I have ever done. It is a far, far better rest that I go to, than I have ever known. (*The Dark Knight Rises*)

Unlike most adaptations of Batman and other popular characters that are periodically re-launched, the self-contained nature of Nolan's trilogy and the specificity of his authorial view permitted him the rare opportunity to give a proper conclusion to the character's journey. In the film, the idea of Batman as a symbol dies and becomes a legend, but Bruce Wayne survives, his mission complete, free to live a normal life unburdened by his crusade. But in the closing moments of the trilogy, Nolan sets up a narrative future never meant to be made as a new film, but imagined by the audience, much like Carton imagines the future for his city in *A Tale of Two Cities*. With it, Nolan also achieves the most radical reimagining of any character featured in the trilogy: Robin.

Played by Joseph Gordon Levitt, the character is introduced early in the film as John Blake, a Gotham City police officer who is an orphan, like Bruce Wayne. Throughout the film, Blake has a fundamental role in organising the resistance against Bane's militia and his oppression of Gotham. As Bruce Wayne spends much of the film defeated and imprisoned after having been bested in combat by Bane, Blake represents the unshakeable idealism and heroism of the lead character. The partnership that forms between Bruce and Blake, who has deduced Wayne's secret identity, circles back often to the notion that Batman is just a symbol and that he could be anybody. Through this notion, *The Dark Knight Rises* brings to a close one of the thematic concerns of the trilogy, first introduced in *Batman Begins*. Nolan's grounded approach and the constructivism of showing the realistic origin of Batman's powers and his devices "is not to demythologize Batman but to allow others to mythologize

themselves” (McGowan 2012, 99). So when, in the film’s final minutes, it is clumsily explained that Blake’s middle name is Robin and that a now-retired Bruce has left him the coordinates to the Batcave, the revelation of his “true identity” actually lessens the character’s impact on the narrative. Although Nolan mixes disparate elements from the various Robins from the comics, up until the revelation John Blake is an original creation, one that does not need to be grounded in a pre-existing character. By explicitly naming him Robin, in a scene that emphasises the revelation and winks at the audience, Nolan acknowledges the character’s place in history and his relevance to the Batman story world. But by featuring the character in name only, Nolan shows the limitations of his grounded approach when it comes to certain aspects of the Batman story world. By traditional fidelity standards, Nolan’s highly unfaithful treatment of the character should have been met with far more vitriol than Schumacher’s relatively faithful depiction of Dick Grayson. Once again, the conflicting statuses of good versus bad objects override any of the typical factors through which these characters are evaluated. Despite this misstep, the film’s emotional ending had a powerful impact on audiences and it cemented the trilogy’s status as one of the most highly beloved sagas in cinema history.

The thematic complexity of the trilogy finds an even greater expression in one more dimension, crucial to Batman adaptations: Gotham City. As explained by Nolan:

Every version of Gotham that I had seen before, Tim Burton’s for example, felt very village-y, very claustrophobic, because you weren’t aware of a world outside of the city. So you feel the edges of that world. What we were determined to do with *Batman Begins* was to frame Gotham in the context of a world city, the way we think of New York. We felt that to believe in Gotham would be to frame it in terms of its global scale. (Shone 2020 178)

Unlike the fantastical cities seen in Burton and Schumacher’s films, which were highly stylised and artificially constructed cityscapes unmoored from most notions of realism, the Gotham City of *Batman Begins* and *The Dark Knight* is a heightened version of Chicago (and London, to a lesser extent), where the films were shot on location. The city’s depiction, much like the trilogy itself, is cohesive across the different films, despite the distinctive features and aesthetic choices that each film employs to reinforce its individual thematic focus, empowered by the evolution of Wally Pfister’s cinematography over the three films.

In *Batman Begins* Pfister and Nolan carry over the naturalistic indie aesthetic developed over their two previous collaborations to establish an auteurist flair that blends large settings with the intimacy of hand-held cameras. Pfister lights the nocturnal Gotham with a palette of



cold yellows and oranges that lend the city an opaque and faded sheen, a visual layer representing the corruption that permeates the film's narrative. In the choice of Chicago, a city with a long history of mafia presence and corruption, the director builds an immediate connection between some of the story threads and the real-world history of the urban centre. A key feature of *Begins'* Gotham is the Narrows, a low-rise and oppressive island neighbourhood that houses the historical Batman location of Arkham Asylum and much of the city's disenfranchised population. Constantly battered by rain and made up of tight alleys and buildings collapsing onto each other, Nolan and production designer Nathan Crowley built the neighbourhood on a soundstage and took inspiration from the rain-soaked decay of the Neo Los Angeles seen in Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner* (1982). With much of the city-based narrative taking place in the Narrows and with the addition of a computer-generated elevated train system to the Chicago skyline, the depiction of Gotham of *Begins* is the trilogy's most fantastical.

With *The Dark Knight*, Nolan leaves behind the artifice of the Narrows soundstages and takes the parallels between Chicago and Gotham to another level. With the introduction of the massive IMAX film format in the production, Nolan and Pfister present Gotham as a sprawling metropolis, "shooting the glass and steel canyons of the Chicago Loop the same way John Ford used to shoot Monument Valley, using the architecture to concretize space, and turning depth perception into an almost physical pleasure" (Shone 2020, 251). This change in the stylistic approach is a by-product of the encumbrance of the IMAX cameras, which forced Nolan, Pfister and editor Lee Smith to slow down the rhythms of the cinematography and the editing. This resulted in an abandonment of the indie aesthetic and of the fast action cutting of *Begins* and an embrace of a formal elegance that created stately images edited in an unhurried manner. The influence of 1995's *Heat*, particularly the cold tones with which Michael Mann and cinematographer Dante Spinotti uncharacteristically paint the vastness of Los Angeles, is immediately apparent in the chilly, unwelcoming hues of Pfister's colour palette. The sheer size of Gotham as filmed for IMAX, coupled with the unpredictability of the Joker's attacks, creates a feeling of constant unease in the viewer,

For *The Dark Knight Rises*, Nolan makes a big change. Opting not to shoot in Chicago again, the main locations for *TDKR's* Gotham are Pittsburgh, New York, and Los Angeles. In showing the class disparity and the desperation of this Gotham, Nolan juxtaposes the more working-class size and architecture of Pittsburgh with the iconic skylines of the two metropolises. Crafting a story dealing with revolution and the upsetting of the established

order and setting it in a Gotham that shares its look with immediately recognisable cities like New York and Los Angeles, Nolan makes a direct commentary on the real world. Even for people who have never visited them, the pop culture imagery of the two metropolises is so ingrained in the imagination that it lends them an inherent relatability. Thanks to Pfister's grandiose wide-lens cinematography, New York blends into Los Angeles and the skylines become an amalgamation that lends *TDKR's* Gotham a massive presence. Despite the city's evolution over the three films, Nolan's steady directorial hand sets firm parameters for what Gotham is meant to represent in each film, never allowing the changes to be distracting or disorienting. This design prerogative shortens the distance between the audience and the fictional world, amplifying the themes of post-9/11 terrorism, paranoia, civil unrest and corruption that Nolan makes the driving forces of his overarching narrative.

Representing the end of an immensely influential era, *The Dark Knight Rises* debuted in theatres on 20 July 2012 to a highly positive critical reception and great commercial success, wrapping up the trilogy with another billion dollars at the box office and becoming the franchise's highest grosser. Nolan's work with Batman elucidates that a strong authorial vision, holding a degree of thematic fidelity while playing fast and loose with story fidelity, will be embraced by fans and audiences alike (as long as it is not campy). In becoming the new good object as well as the one comic book adaptation that even detractors of the genre could appreciate, the impact that Nolan's trilogy has had on Batman cannot be understated. It elevated the character to a level of prestige and widespread fame even greater than the Batmania of 1989, while also launching a golden period for the character across different media. Furthermore, the trilogy has had a wide-reaching influence on comic book films and blockbusters in general. Unfortunately, it is an influence from which Hollywood studios learned all the wrong lessons, applying the gritty and grounded method to all sorts of characters and believing it would recapture the critical and commercial success of *The Dark Knight*. Most of these films were either plagued by heavy studio interference that imposed the approach and annihilated any chance of a distinct directorial vision, or they were based on a fundamental misunderstanding of why Nolan's process worked. Warner Bros. and DC Comics would make this mistake themselves in their rush to compete with the growing popularity of the interconnected Marvel Cinematic Universe films. With Marvel having cornered the market on marginally faithful and comedy-infused action-adventure films skewing to younger audiences, Warners and DC believed that the secret to their own interconnected cinematic universe would be applying Nolan's dark and gritty grounded ideas to the entirety of the DC

universe characters, to make them mature and more appealing to adult audiences. But the mature nature of Nolan's films resided in their fully-rounded naturalistic approach and in the relevant themes they tackled, not in grim and self-serious posturing. Moreover, the trilogy's achievements in storytelling, narrative maturity and high-calibre filmmaking have retroactively changed the perception of the Batman films that preceded it. As Nolan's dark and grounded take became the most popular version of the character for general audiences, Tim Burton's brand of oddball darkness was nostalgically reappraised as more comical, campier and of a piece with Schumacher's later instalments.

## 6. Conclusion

Through the exploration of the many Batman adaptations that have graced the big and small screen over the past decades, this thesis highlighted the crucial role of authorship in the process of adaptation of a character that exists in many different forms across different media and in the source material itself. Geneticism plays a vital role in the adaptation of a comic book character, both concerning the many iterations present in the source text and the cultural capital, positive or negative, of earlier adaptations. In examining the authorial visions of different directors, and the studio interference against which some had to fight, this study traces the chronological development of numerous intersecting discourses focusing on authorship, intermediality, and fidelity.

In its initial section, the study presented the historical and cultural context of the Batman source material as well as the first two instances of adaptation for the character. By providing a baseline for which representations of the character are considered canonical and which are not, the focus landed on the reception of *Batman '66* as a “bad object,” despite its textual and thematic fidelity to the disputed Silver Age era. Subsequently, the study delves into Tim Burton’s *Batman* (1989) and *Batman Returns* (1992) and their reversal of the campy image associated with Batman since the 1960s television series. Burton’s dark authorial vision delivered a Batman story world that was markedly his, removed not only from the “bad object” of *Batman '66* but from much of the source material too. The controversy surrounding *Batman Returns* leads to the following section, in which the franchise’s ultimate good and bad objects are examined. By juxtaposing *Batman: The Animated Series* with Schumacher’s live-action *Batman Forever* (1995) and *Batman & Robin* (1997), the research explicates the complex matter of fidelity in adaptations from comic books. Both adaptations show great thematic fidelity to specific eras from Batman’s printed history, but whereas *Batman: The Animated Series* follows the most canonically accepted version of the character, Schumacher’s campy movies are lambasted for their tonal allegiance to the dreaded homoerotic overtones of the Silver Age and *Batman '66*. Lastly, the thesis transitions from the failure of *Batman & Robin* to Christopher Nolan’s *The Dark Knight* trilogy, the franchise’s critical and commercial peak. Nolan’s powerful authorial voice and his grounded storytelling approach created an adaptation that was equal parts faithful and unfaithful. A perfect

evocation of the thematic core of the character, but filtered through a methodology that strips most connections to the fantastical world of the comics. Throughout these three sections, authorship and authorial intention are retained as concerns of primary importance, as they guide the intermedial relationship between source and adapting medium.

Although the main concern of this thesis was to explore how each new adaptation, with its matching authorial voice, reacts to the source texts and previous adaptations, it has also shown how each depiction of the Batman story world reflects a different cultural moment. As each new adaptation has to contend with the influence, either positive or negative, of its predecessors, it takes the character of Batman into a new era, which is reflected in the Batman story world itself. This can be seen not only in the depiction of Batman as a character but also in the depiction of Gotham City, which has ranged from the highly fantastical to the grounded and realistic. This thesis elucidated why Batman is an ideal subject for a study on adaptation, as the many iterations of the character across media create an intricate intermedial web in which source material and adaptations are in constant dialogue and influence one another.

The subject covered in this thesis is primed for further exploration, both in terms of scope and approach. In choosing to focus mainly on the versions authored by Burton, Schumacher, Nolan, and Timm, this thesis erected specific textual boundaries that disregarded many adaptations. Of the adaptations excluded, the two latest live-action incarnations will be of particular interest in future research. The first is the version played by Ben Affleck in Zack Snyder's wider DC Universe films mainly between 2016 and 2019, and the latter is the current cinematic version, portrayed by Robert Pattinson in Matt Reeves' *The Batman* (2022).

Debuting in 2013 with the Zack Snyder-directed Superman film *Man of Steel*, co-authored by Nolan and Goyer themselves, the DC cinematic universe launched with mixed results. Nolan's grounded approach that had worked with Batman would prove far less compatible with Superman. Pushing for a universe to compete with Marvel's, Warners forced Snyder to introduce a new Batman in the following movie, the atrociously titled *Batman v Superman: Dawn of Justice* (2016). Played by Ben Affleck, the DCU version of Batman was an aged, embittered vigilante who has fully transitioned to being a killer. This highly controversial version of Batman has appeared throughout the so-called Snyderverse, itself mired in a heavy conflict between authorial vision and unparalleled studio interference. Although Affleck's final appearance in the role was in 2023 and the discourse surrounding his tenure could be extensive, his iteration was deemed beyond the scope of this essay, as this

Batman never featured in a solo film, never faced any of his own villains nor was he contextualised in a sufficiently developed Gotham City. Showing no signs of slowing down, from the ashes of the DC cinematic universe rose a new live-action iteration of Batman, the darkest one yet. Portrayed by Robert Pattinson in Matt Reeves' 2022 *The Batman*, this latest incarnation shows a young, vengeful and single-minded Batman, with little to no development reserved for his Bruce Wayne persona. The film is a noir detective story that brings to theatres the investigative side of the character for the first time. Explicitly inspired by the approach of *The Animated Series*, *The Batman* balances drastic new takes of familiar characters with a strong thematic fidelity to some of the best stories focusing on Batman's psychological dimension and his detective work. As the first instalment in a new planned trilogy, entirely disconnected from any larger shared universe with other superheroes, Matt Reeves' Batman could be a worthy addition to the discourse explored in this essay, as it has the potential to become the newest "good object".

In addition to the adaptations helmed by Zack Snyder and Matt Reeves addressed in the previous chapter, the 2023 film *The Flash* represents a promising addition to future studies. Through its exploration of the multiverse, the film features three different Batman. Ben Affleck reprised the role for a final time, while Michael Keaton returned to the role for the first time since 1992 and George Clooney appeared in a quick cameo at the end of the film. The movie is ripe for examination, as the intermedial discourses that assign or detract value from specific adaptations are an integral part of the film's internal narrative and the orbiting paratexts. By widening the scope to take into consideration more recent live-action portrayals, future research could also include the animated feature *The LEGO Batman Movie* and the lesser-known animated series *Batman: The Brave and the Bold*, as well as the hugely popular trilogy of *Batman: Arkham* video games. Furthermore, a rebooted cinematic DC Universe is set to launch in 2025 under the tutelage of director James Gunn, which will introduce a new Batman and Robin in the film *The Brave and the Bold*.

The journey of Batman across many cinematic adaptations and through many authorial voices shows that Batman "is not a singular vision, a stagnant character defined by a set of checkmarks, or a property meant to remain on a pedestal in the same way Richard Donner's *Superman* (1978) has unfortunately been placed upon" (Brooker 1999, 187). For the sake of the continued health of the character, it is paramount that a breadth of different interpretations,

whether comic and campy or dark and dramatic, are welcomed and encouraged rather than rejected and labelled as aberrant corruptions of a dominant reading.

# Bibliography

- Bailey, Jason. "Don't Forget That Joel Schumacher Briefly Saved Batman." *The New York Times*. 23 June 2020. Web.
- Batman. Creator. Semple, Lorenzo Jr. USA, Greenway Productions, 20th Century-Fox Television. 1966-1968. Television Series.
- Batman. Dir. Hillyer, Lambert. USA, Columbia Pictures. 1943. Theatrical Serial.
- Batman. Dir. Tim Burton. USA, Warner Bros. 1989. Feature Film.
- Batman Begins. Dir. Christopher Nolan. USA, Warner Bros. 2005. Feature Film.
- Batman Forever. Dir. Joel Schumacher, USA, Warner Bros. 1995. Feature Film.
- Batman Returns. Dir. Tim Burton. USA, Warner Bros. 1992. Feature Film.
- Batman & Robin. Dir. Joel Schumacher, USA, Warner Bros. 1997. Feature Film.
- Batman: The Animated Series. Creators Timm, Bruce & Radomski, Eric. USA, Warner Bros. Animation. 1992-1995. Animated Television Series.
- Batman: Mask of the Phantasm. Dir. Timm, Bruce & Radomski, Eric. USA, Warner Bros. 1993. Animated Theatrical Feature
- Boichel, Bill "Batman: Commodity as Myth." *The Many Lives of the Batman*. Eds Pearson and Uricchio. London: Routledge, 1991. Print.
- Boucher, Geoff. "Christopher Nolan says his Batman doesn't play well with others." *Los Angeles Times*. 29 October 2008. Web.
- Brooker, Will. "Batman - One life, many faces" *Adaptations: From Text to Screen, Screen to Text*. Eds Cartmell, Deborah and Whelehan, Imelda. London and New York: Rutledge, 1999: 185-198. Print.
- Brooker, Will. *Batman Unmasked: Analyzing a Cultural Icon*. Bloomsbury Academic & Professional, 2001. Print.
- Bruhn, Jørgen. "Dialogizing adaptation studies: From one-way transport to a dialogic two-way process." *Adaptation Studies: New Challenges, New Directions*, Eds, Jørgen Bruhn, et al., Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 2013: 47-65. Print.
- Brunsdale, Mitzi. *Icons of Mystery and Crime Detection: from Sleuths to Superheroes: From Sleuths to Superheroes*. ABC-CLIO, LLC, 2010. Print.



- Bryant, John. "Textual identity and adaptive revision: Editing adaptation as a fluid text." *Adaptation Studies: New Challenges, New Directions*, Eds, Jørgen Bruhn, et al., Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 2013: 69-86 Print.
- Burton, Byron. "Batman Returns at 25: Stars Reveal Script Cuts, Freezing Sets and Aggressive Penguins." *The Hollywood Reporter*. 19 June 2017. Web.
- Burton, Byron. "The Battle to Make Tim Burton's Batman." *The Hollywood Reporter*. 21 June 2019. Web.
- Burton, Tim. "Tim Burton Talks Batman." Ramey, Bill "Jett." *Batman-On-Film*. 13, April 2008. Web.
- Corliss, Richard. "The Caped Crusader Flies Again." *Time Magazine*. 19 June 1989. Web.
- Couch, Aaron. "Batman Forever: The Story Behind the Surprise Hit "Nobody Really Wanted"." *The Hollywood Reporter*. 17 June 2015. Web.
- Couch, Aaron. "Batman & Robin at 20: Joel Schumacher and More Reveal What Really Happened." *The Hollywood Reporter*. 20 June 2017. Web.
- Crow, David. "Batman Returns Is The Greatest Anti-Christmas Gift of All!". *Den of Geek*. 1 December 2019. Web.
- Crow, David. "How Batman & Robin Helped Bring About the Superhero Movie Renaissance." *Den of Geek*. 20 June 2019. Web.
- Dickens, Charles. *A Tale of Two Cities*. The Project Gutenberg. 1859. Web.
- Dini, Paul and Kidd, Chip. *Batman: Animated*. Harper Entertainment, A Division of HarperCollins Publishers, New York. 1998. Print.
- Eury, Michael and Kronenberg, Michael. *The Batcave Companion: An Examination of the 'New Look' (1964-1969) and Bronze Age (1970-1979) Batman and Detective Comics*. Raleigh, North Carolina: TwoMorrows Publishing. 2009. Print.
- Finger, Bill and Kane, Bob. *Batman: The Golden Age Omnibus 1*. DC Comics. 2015. Print.
- Grant, Harry Keith and Henderson, Scott. *Comics and Pop Culture: Adaptation from Panel to Frame*." New York, USA: University of Texas Press, 2019. Print.
- Gray, Jonathan. *Show Sold Separately: Promos, Spoilers, and Other Media Paratexts*. New York University Press, 2010.
- Harold, James. "The Value of Fidelity in Adaptation." *British Journal of Aesthetics* vol. 58 no. 1 January 2018: 89–100. Web.

- Hoxter, Julian. "We Roller Coaster Through...: Screenwriting, Narrative Economy, and the Inscription of the Haptic in Tentpole Comic Book Movies." *Comics and Pop Culture: Adaptation from Panel to Frame*. Eds Grant, Harry Keith and Henderson, Scott. New York, USA: University of Texas Press, 2019: 140-150. Print.
- Ioannidou, Elisavet. "Adapting Superhero Comics for the Big Screen: Subculture for the Masses." *Adaptation* vol. 6 no. 2 April 2013: 230–238. Web.
- Johnson, Derek. *Media Franchising: Creative License and Collaboration in the Culture Industries*. New York University Press, 2013. Print.
- Jolin, Dan. "The Dark Knight Trilogy: The Complete Story Of Christopher Nolan's Batman Films." *Empire*. 19 August 2020. Web.
- Jones, Alan. "Batman - Eccentric Cinema Stylist Tim Burton On Bringing The Comic Book Legend To The Screen." *Cinefantastique* vol 20 no.1, November 1989. Web.
- Loeb, Jeph and Sale, Tim. *Batman: The Long Halloween*. DC Comics. 1996-1997. Print.
- Mallory, Michael. "Holy caped caper, IV." *Variety*. 4 March 1997. Web.
- McMillan, Graeme. "DC Entertainment to Give Classic Batman Writer Credit in 'Gotham' and 'Batman v Superman' (Exclusive)." *The Hollywood Reporter*. 18 September 2015. Web.
- Mendelson, Scott. "Why 'Batman: The Animated Series' Remains The Best Superhero TV Show Ever." *Forbes*. 30 October 2018. Web.
- Miller, Frank. *The Dark Knight Returns*. DC Comics. 1986. Print.
- Miller, Frank and Mazzucchelli, David. *Batman: Year One*. DC Comics. 1987. Print.
- Moore, Alan and Bolland, Brian. *Batman: The Killing Joke*. DC Comics. 1988. Print.
- Nayman, Adam. "The Grotesque Beauty of Batman Returns." *The Ringer*. 28 February 2022. Web.
- Nobleman, Marc Tyler. *Bill the Boy Wonder: The Secret Co-Creator of Batman*. Charlesbridge, 2012. Print.
- Nolan, Christopher. "Batman Begins press conference, part two." *TimeOut London*. 16 June 2005. Web.
- O'Neil, Dennis. "Interview: Denny O'Neil." *Bray, Gregg. Batman-On-Film*. 18 October 2006. Web.
- O'Neil, Dennis and Giordano, Dick. *Batman: The Man Who Falls*. DC Comics. 1989. Print.
- Ransome, Noel. "Twenty Years Later, Joel Schumacher Is Very Sorry About 'Batman & Robin'." *Vice*. 12 June 2017. Web.

- Reilly, Dan and Murthi, Vikram. "The Hardest Sequel I Ever Wrote: The Writers Behind Blade Runner 2049, Batman Returns, the John Wick sequels, and more on their toughest franchise gigs." *Vulture*. 27 April 2022. Web.
- Riesman, Abraham. "An Oral History of Batman: The Animated Series." *Vulture*. 9 Oct 2017. Web.
- Schumacher, Joel. "Interview." *Charlie Rose Show*. PBS. 5 June 1995. Web.
- Schutte, Lauren. "Joel Schumacher Reveals 'Batman' Regrets." *The Hollywood Reporter*. 13 October 2011. Web.
- Shadows of the Bat: The Cinematic Saga of the Dark Knight. Dir. Constantine Nadir. USA, Warner Bros. 2005. Documentary.
- Sharkey, Betsy. "Batman's City Gets a New Dose Of Urban Blight." *The New York Times*. 14 June 1992. Web.
- Shone, Tom. *The Nolan Variations: The Movies, Mysteries, and Marvels of Christopher Nolan*. Knopf. 2020. Print.
- Soltysik Monnet, Agnieszka. "Batman, the Gothic and Popular Culture: I'll Be Whatever Gotham Needs Me to Be." *The Gothic in Contemporary Literature and Popular Culture: Pop Goth*. Eds Edwards, Justin and Monnet, Agnieszka Soltysik, Taylor & Francis Group, 2012. Print.
- The Dark Knight. Dir. Christopher Nolan. USA, Warner Bros. 2008. Feature Film.
- The Dark Knight Rises. Dir. Christopher Nolan. USA, Warner Bros. 2012. Feature Film.
- The Heart of Batman. Dir. Alexander Gray. USA, Warner Bros. 2018. Documentary.
- Timm, Bruce. *Modern Masters Volume Three: Bruce Timm*. Eds. Nolen-Weathington, Eric. TwoMorrows Publishing, Raleigh, North Carolina. 2012. Print.
- Todd, McGowan. *The Fictional Christopher Nolan*. University of Texas Press, 2012. Print.
- White, Taylor L. "Batman Returns - Director Tim Burton Wins The Creative Control To Do The Dark Knight Justice." *Cinefantastique* vol 23 no. 1, August 1992. Web.