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Do Some Men Just Want to Watch the World Burn?
Narratives of Fear and the War on Terror in *The Dark Knight Trilogy*

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**Abstract:** The *Dark Knight Trilogy*, directed by Christopher Nolan, while at first glance a mere fantasy story about a costumed crime-fighter, hold a much deeper meaning as the films examine the government constructed War on Terror. The authorities who hold power over Gotham City continually attempt to maintain control but are thwarted by various “villains”, serving as direct and indirect representations of real world terrorists and terrorism groups. Because of the terrorists’ innovative and technologically advanced methods, the authorities and, by extension Batman, resort to continually new and often questionable means of exerting power to maintain seemingly legitimate control, justifying it as “Part of the Plan.” The governmental authorities attempt to keep Gotham as a football-loving American city identified as “Self” while characterizing the villains as “Others.” With Batman in a morally uncertain middle ground, the films provide an exploration of how authority legitimizes itself in a constantly changing political landscape.

**Keywords:** The Dark Knight, Power, War on Terror, State Authority, Anarchy

Christopher Nolan’s *Batman Begins*, *The Dark Knight*, and *The Dark Knight Rises*, are collectively the second highest grossing superhero franchise and have all received very high critical acclaim (Hughes 2012). They brought a new narrative to the Batman franchise and with it a much darker and more serious tone than any previous installment. These films, however, do not just provide an entertaining story for audiences; they provide a realistic post 9/11 narrative and incorporate many themes pertaining to the study of the politics of fear and the War on Terror. The “Villains” in the three films illustrate the ways in which terrorist activities impact the American psyche and how these villains become alienated and classified as the threatening “Other.” Further, through all three films, the morally compromised vigilante character of Bruce Wayne/Batman, serving as a state agent, illustrates the complexity of the government’s response to new fears introduced by terrorist activities. The state tries both to combat and manipulate the fears of its citizen. The films, inspired by Frank Miller’s re-imagination of Batman in the 1986 graphic novel *The Dark Knight Returns*, extend Miller’s Reagan era fear of governmental control to a meditation on the role of the state in both creating and combating the fears of citizens in the twenty first century War on Terror (Fisher 2006).

The three films in the *Dark Knight Trilogy* challenge and reinforce the narratives of the War on Terror. The villains in the films provide both a direct illustration of the War on Terror, with the terrorist group “The League of Shadows” and Bane, as well as teach allegorical lessons through the Scarecrow, Maroni, and the Joker. Clearly, in *The Dark Knight Rises* Bane’s actions and attitudes as well as his “strange, foreign” past invoke audience perceptions of a terrorist mastermind. The notion of terrorists
“hating us for our freedom” is emphasized through Bane bombing and hijacking a football game, a symbolic traditional American pastime. The fictional organization “The League of Shadows,” present in all three films, but especially in *Batman Begins* and *The Dark Knight Rises* is organized very similarly to actual terrorist groups such as Al-Qaeda, as it is not linked to any state and operates independently across many countries. While “The League of Shadows” in some ways parallels a more typically Western threat by its vast material resources and global influence, the organization’s Asian base in *Batman Begins* and Middle Eastern prison in *The Dark Knight Rises* clearly demonstrate its foreign affiliations and stereotypically terrorist tactics. Criminal leaders such as the Joker or Bane who might otherwise appear “Western” are always shown with their face hidden. Terrorist fears are also invoked with an enemy seemingly unperturbed by fear and motivated solely by destruction. As Alfred explains to Bruce Wayne about the Joker in *The Dark Knight*, “Some men aren’t looking for anything logical like money. They can’t be bought, bullied, reasoned, or negotiated with. Some men just want to watch the world burn” (*The Dark Knight* 2008). Alternately, the films also challenge many accepted notions regarding the War on Terror, through Batman acting as a state agent. His actions are not always clearly justified and he is often working against the law in order to stop the terrorists. The films also depict corruption in all levels of government, which allows crime and terrorism to prosper.

All three films, particularly *The Dark Knight*, intentionally serve as allegory for the War on Terror. This is common post 9/11 as Hammond, in reference to *The Dark Knight* and other films observes: “both visually and thematically, these different films mediate the experience of terrorism and war, offering spectators a ‘safe’ way of experiencing death and destruction” (Hammond 2011, 11). The film uses many images and plot points to suggest semblance to the War on Terror, but the film keeps these allusions somewhat hidden. Pheasant-Kelly (2011) explains,

> The very nature of a fantasy film such as *The Dark Knight* means that it is impossible to integrate such potent images fully – they remain visually discrete, essentially inassimilable, belonging instead to historic and traumatic reality ... In response to extreme events, *The Dark Knight* draws directly on 9/11 imagery, indicating how for some viewers fantasy film may contribute to the mediation of traumatic memory. However, in *The Dark Knight* these images remain visually discrete from the film’s storyline and are potent stimuli to traumatic memory (240).

This can be illustrated through countless examples from the film, directly portraying events and symbols of 9/11 and the War on Terror. Some of these include portraying the destruction of the hospital in a similar light as the twin towers; the two ships rigged with explosives paralleled with the two planes; and even the orange clad Blackgate prisoners comparable to Guantanamo Bay detainees. In wider reference to the War on Terror, the film shows the questionable surveillance techniques used by Batman as comparable to methods used by the government.

The series invokes the politics of fear and fear plays an enormous role in the plots of each film. This plot and thematic point is established in *Batman Begins* where fear plays a massive role in the development of the characters. Bruce Wayne explains to Alfred that he chose to take on the identity of Batman because he is afraid of bats, citing a childhood trauma. Further, the villains the Scarecrow and...
Carmine Falcone both understand the importance of fear as a weapon. In speaking to Bruce Wayne, Falcone, a mob boss, speaks of the power of fear as the highest power attainable, and, because he holds that power, he can continually control crime in Gotham City. The Scarecrow even further symbolizes the importance of fear as “Dr. Jonathan Crane, the Scarecrow, is a corrupt ‘expert in fear’ who induces his victims’ greatest fears through the administration of psychoactive substances, using a hessian sack as a disguise and gas mask” (Kane 2011, 359). These two villains show the important role fear plays in the world of the films and that of the audience.

Fear is also used widely to depict the difference between the villains (the Other) and Batman and the state. In many circumstances, these definitions are fairly clear; however, in The Dark Knight, the definitions of Self and Other become very blurred. While “self” is generally a reference to American values and Democracy, the Other is most commonly a reference to all who fit the vague definition of a Terrorist. A primary reason for the blurred definitions is due to the transformation of District Attorney Harvey Dent into the villain “Two-Face.” The primary villain, The Joker, is very obviously considered as the Other in order for a deeper meaning to come through. Pheasant-Kelly (2011) observes “The characterization of the Joker as Other alludes to terrorism, where creating a politics of fear through ‘maintaining a “discourse of danger” is a key function of foreign policy’, often through the socially constructed fear of an alien ‘Other’” (241). Each of the three key players in The Dark Knight – Batman, the Joker, and Harvey Dent/ Two-Face – serve as a reflection of one another while also serving as each other’s “raison d’être.” Without villains to capture and prosecute, Batman and Dent serve no purpose, while it is clear in the film that the Joker is intentionally provoking Batman to the point of his capture. All three, like both governments and terrorists, rely upon fear to maintain their power.

Harvey Dent’s transformation to a murderous, revenge-bent criminal, exactly what he originally stood against, complicates the narrative. Batman sees this change but at the end of the film convinces Commissioner Gordon to blame Two-Face’s murders on him, so that Dent could still be seen as a hero, while Batman is publicly seen as the Other. Batman realizes that Gotham needs Dent to be seen in a positive light, whereas the Batman could fill the void and serve as the outcast. This dilemma is seen in reality as well, when seemingly normal people perform terrorist acts, it becomes difficult for society to accept it, so they attempt to find something that differentiates the terrorist as a monstrous “Other.” People must convince themselves that these criminals and terrorists are somehow alien, rather than accepting what Hannah Arendt (1963) calls “The Banality of Evil.”

These fears of the Other lead to people accepting otherwise problematic government activities, such as intrusive surveillance, to combat the perceived dangers. Surveillance is most prevalent in The Dark Knight where, through hacking cellphones, Batman is able to gain sound and image data for all of Gotham City. He then uses this technology to help capture the Joker and his accomplices and save several hostages. The problem, however, as pointed out by Lucius Fox, is that this technology is “wrong” and “too powerful for one man” (The Dark Knight 2008). Nevertheless, Fox agrees to aid Batman and use it for the one particular situation. Still, the power Batman holds clearly shows how this surveillance technology is wrong and that the current surveillance climate around the world has gone too far. It is very interesting how well this film continues to hold up in light of recent discoveries about the extent to which the general public is being monitored. Many believe that current methods of surveillance are intrusive and are not necessary on a general scale. Despite the fact that it was necessary for Batman in the film, what resonates in this film is
the amount of power these new data technologies have and how few people have access to it. Although the American government would not accept this, some would argue Edward Snowden is serving as a moral conscience, just as Lucius Fox does in the film.

As well as the dual ideas about the use of surveillance, the films often deal with corruption in government offices, and the way in which people and organizations are characterized as “terrorist.” *The Dark Knight* deals with the notion of an enemy totally without fear and demonstrates the inability of the police, and even Batman himself (acting as a state agent) to contend with such an enemy while respecting the country’s own laws. Although fictional, the character of The Joker does raise the question of how to respond to such an adversary. Further, in *Batman Begins* and *The Dark Knight Rises*, issues arise questioning the motivations of terrorists. The terrorist group in both films, the “League of Shadows”, believes that Gotham’s corruption is beyond saving and are motivated by what they consider the common good. This brings to the fore the motivations of real-life terrorist groups who may have misguided but real moral convictions and cannot be reduced to Others who “just want to watch the world burn.”

Christopher Nolan’s *Batman* film series provides a contemporary update on a crime-fighting character. The dark and dual nature of the Batman character and the allegorical nature of his adversaries allow insight into terrorism and the complexity of the current War on Terror. Through the films, Nolan is able to invoke stereotypical images and fears about terrorism, but also ask questions about the governmental policies regarding these threats.
Bibliography


DAVID BROOKS has recently completed a BA in Political Science from Huron University College and is currently studying business at the Ivey Business School. He enjoys examining inter-connections between business, government, and cultural productions.