

THE DARK KNIGHT RISES

Directed by Christopher Nolan
Produced by Christopher Nolan, Charles Roven, and Emma Thomas
Distributed by Warner Brothers Pictures
Released in 2012

A strength of the first two Christopher Nolan-directed Batman movies has been their believability. The Joker wears make-up—it's not his skin that is chalk white. Batman has a jaw-dropping arsenal—but he has a sympathetic scientist at the mammoth Wayne Enterprises as his quartermaster. The most fantastic idea has actually been The League of Shadows, a pseudo-terroristic organization older than most nations. Interestingly enough, however, the League is necessary as Bruce Wayne's true alma mater. It helps explain Batman's fighting skills and sheer indefatigability. So if there's one utterly fanciful, but necessary, element to these first two films, it's probably the League.

So as we arrive at the third film there's a chance the series could run off the rails. It won't devolve into camp, à la Joel Schumacher, but it might get overloaded with contrived dramatic twists—and a discordant villain. The Joker did not have super-powers, but it would be difficult to accept another antagonist with a bizarre appearance and modus operandi—an antagonist like The Riddler.

With the death of actor Heath Ledger there was no way Nolan could revisit that character without alienating the fans. The League was left unmentioned in *The Dark Knight*, and that omission presented a golden opportunity. Once Nolan decided to build on what was already there—the League, Harvey Dent's meltdown, Alfred Pennyworth's deception, and (always) Bruce Wayne's faith in the people of Gotham—a story emerged. It stands on its own, builds on concepts from the preceding films, and subverts the lessons of *The Dark Knight*. We learn that we cannot outrun lies (the Harvey Dent and Rachel Dawes problems), that not fearing death is actually detrimental to concerted heroic action, and that we never really knew Ducard/Ra's Al-Ghul. But Batman is not giving up on his conviction that he cannot, will not kill his enemies, despite his near-defeat in *The Dark Knight*.

The style of the film is more akin to *Batman Begins*, with flashbacks scattered throughout the narrative, a renewed focus on Gotham City's poverty, and a large portion of the film taking place in the Orient.

While there is much in the film that is unusual, believability is not sacrificed. Batman has a vertical-take-off flying machine and Wayne Enterprises has perfected a large-scale fusion reactor. Though Nolan and company thereby flirt with science-fiction, we must remember that we're in an alternate universe here (Gotham City looks just like New York City, so, therefore, New York City does not exist in Batman's world [but it does in ours]). Moreover, they are also, perhaps, four years ahead of the audience (since four years separate the release dates of *The Dark Knight* and *The Dark Knight Rises* but eight years have passed in the on-going story).

Bane is a ferocious villain whose motivations are a touch-too obscure. In the end, it seems that he's not as eager to destroy Gotham as he is to make Miranda happy. He fell in love with her when she was a child and has been following her like a puppy dog ever since. But he

is, basically, a very strong guy who knows how to manipulate and intimidate (he intimidates more than the Joker and manipulates less). His appearance is bizarre, but it's not because he likes dressing flamboyantly—he's got some kind of vague medical problem. And since the intensity of belief and willingness to sacrifice of *The League of Shadows* have already been accepted, we don't have to suspend our disbelief—we already did that with the first film!

As far as the other antagonist is concerned, Catwoman is handled with great restraint. She is only referred to as 'The Cat.' She is not fetishized, parodied, nor sensationalized. But neither is she allowed to take over the film. And while she's not a villain she's not even really an antagonist (but helps keep the audience unsuspecting of the comparatively benign and reasonable Miranda Tate). She's tough as nails, seductive, and adroit as any feline, but the scene when she discovers that Daggett has scuttled the Disappear Stick is what makes her character work. For once she is speechless, and we know, as Bruce soon would, that there is more to her than meets the eye.

Another aspect of the movie that works well is the class warfare element. When the criminals takes over Gotham with the police trapped under ground, people are killed and property is stolen and destroyed. What is striking is that the usurpers are characterized as not only greedy, but *wasteful*. When Miranda and Jen tour the trashed apartment of one of the dispossessed, we are surprised to see that no one is living there. So not only were its rightful occupants left to their own devices (if not murdered), the place was ransacked and now houses no one.

We see the same phenomenon when material aid or weapons are distributed to hard-luck cases in the Mid-East or Africa. Money is squandered, food doesn't reach the poor and starving, and weapons are used injudiciously, quickly falling into disrepair because of laziness and ignorance. Other kindnesses fall prey to the callous. After Saddam Hussein was defeated, but before the Iraq insurgency geared up, American soldiers of the 3rd Infantry Division spent days building a soccer field in downtown Fallujah. After they left, insurgents ripped the field apart, depriving the local kids of a good place to relax. "What kind of people loot dirt?" an American soldier asked. America struggled to win hearts and minds in Fallujah partly because the city harbored 70,000 unemployed men, and everyone demanded that America restore the city's infrastructure. Lacking sufficient money, cultural awareness, and time in this, an anti-Western redoubt long considered by Iraqis themselves as a cultural backwater, America had no choice but to fight when four security operators were mutilated and hanged from a local bridge several months later (inspiring a similar scene in *The Dark Knight Rises*).

In Gotham the rich, for all their callous indifference to others' sufferings, managed their property well, exercising good stewardship over all they had been blessed with. The rebellious rabble, however, squander and destroy everything they touch, proving that Gotham really is a cesspool not worth saving.

St. Augustine, reflecting on his squandered youth, concluded that his most serious sin was the product of envy. He and his fellow ne'er-do-wells trespassed in an orchard, carrying away armfuls of unripe pears—not to eat, but just for the thrill of stealing. Augustine writes, "It was foul, and I loved it; I loved to be lost, I loved my rebellion—not that to which I was rebelling, but my rebellion itself did I love. My shameful soul was [...] not seeking anything with disgrace but disgrace itself."

A promise of redemption for the city was evident in the ferry quandary that boomeranged on a flummoxed Joker in *The Dark Knight*.

In *The Dark Knight Rises*, police Captain Foley is the focus of redemption. He's short-sighted, venal, and cowardly. Even Jim Gordon can't get him to fight for his city. But then Batman returns and sets the bridge aflame with his logo. This inspires a rather desultory cop to don his dress blues and lead his brother officers into battle.

So if Foley can change then Gothamites *are* worth saving...but only because Bruce Wayne inspires them to live generously and fearlessly.

And here we encounter the great irony of the trilogy. Bruce Wayne believes in Gotham City. He fights for it, just as his father fought.

And as Thomas Wayne's death once forestalled Gotham's demise and galvanized city leaders to make incremental changes, so Batman's death inspires Gotham to live up to the example of its fallen hero.

Batman *is* dead. But Bruce Wayne lives.