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Dramatic Example: Spectacle, Theatricality, and Performance in Christopher Nolan's The Dark Knight Trilogy

Patrick Joseph Caoile
Seton Hall University, caoilepa@shu.edu

DRAMATIC EXAMPLE: SPECTACLE, THEATRICALITY, AND PERFORMANCE IN CHRISTOPHER NOLAN'S *THE DARK KNIGHT TRILOGY*

Patrick Joseph Caoile

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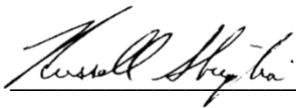
Russell Sbriglia, Thesis Advisor

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Donovan Sherman, Second Reader

Abstract

The political implications of Christopher Nolan's *The Dark Knight Trilogy* have been noted by many scholars and commentaries, the majority of whom view the trilogy specifically through the lens of September 11, 2001 and its aftermath. As Jacques Derrida notes about 9/11, the "maximum media coverage . . . spectacularize[d] the event" (qtd. in Stubblefield 3). In Nolan's trilogy, Batman's crusade to save Gotham from its criminals and villains takes on similarly spectacular qualities, as Gotham City becomes "ground zero" for acts of terrorism, vigilantism, and theatricality. Rather than engaging in a strictly political analysis of these films, this thesis focuses on the theatrical, spectacular, and performative implications of *The Dark Knight Trilogy*. I use Bertolt Brecht's and Antonin Artaud's writings on theatre to foreground the theatricality that permeates the trilogy's setting, characters, and themes. Furthermore, I draw on Mikhail Bakhtin's study of carnival to reinforce the idea that Gotham City functions as a site of spectacle and social upheaval in these films. Lastly, through an examination of the intersection between performance, gender, and disability studies, I expose how the Dark Knight establishes an ideal of hypermasculinity, superior physicality and able-bodiedness, and immense accumulation of wealth and resources, all of which limits rather than inspires the participation of Gotham's body politic. This thesis ultimately explores the varying degrees to which Batman and his rivals use dramatic examples to shock Gotham's citizens out of apathy and to encourage their active participation in either saving or destroying Gotham City.

Introduction

  This thesis was written in the spring semester of 2020 when universities and society at large were faced with the virus known as COVID-19, or the novel coronavirus. Early on, many Americans viewed the virus with ambivalence and, in some cases, even apathy, scrutinizing the media—news, social, and otherwise—for "hyping up" and sensationalizing the circumstances surrounding it. However, as more and more Americans felt its symptoms and were treated and diagnosed, it became clear that the virus had come a long way from its country of origin and set foot on American soil. From the 24-hour media coverage and the political responses and debates to the frenzied scenes of everyday citizens rushing to stores and supermarkets, COVID-19 has highlighted the more systemic problems in our socioeconomic and sociopolitical schema, from issues of healthcare and education, and from Wall Street to small businesses. Is the coronavirus the "dramatic example" that can shake people out of apathy? Can society be held accountable and responsible for upholding, or overturning, its structures and foundations when faced with the threat of destruction?

  Christopher Nolan explores such questions in his "dark-and-gritty" interpretation of the Batman franchise. While parallels have been made to events such as 9/11 and the Occupy Wall Street movement, the coronavirus pandemic presents a new frame of reference for situating Nolan's *The Dark Knight Trilogy* nearly a decade after its conclusion. Indeed, *Batman Begins*— the trilogy's first installment—presents us with a weaponized, hallucinatory fear toxin with origins from an unspecified country in Asia. While hallucination is not one of the coronavirus's immediate symptoms, the pandemic has certainly resulted in a number of fears among citizens, businesses, and society at large. "You'll see. I'll show you," the Joker warns Batman in *The Dark Knight*. "When the chips are down," he continues, "these civilized people . . . they'll eat

each other" (*The Dark Knight)*. This prophecy, however, does not come to fruition until the

trilogy's conclusion, *The Dark Knight Rises*, when Bane leads a revolutionary movement against

the city's wealthy and powerful. Under Bane's dominion, Gotham becomes a no man's land, a

city isolated from the outside world while the city's socioeconomic and political infrastructure is

dismantled from within. All three Batman films point towards the fears and anxieties that are

ever-present in contemporary American society, especially in the wake of COVID-19, a virus

which experts say originated from bats.

What we find in these films and the reality echoed in disaster events like 9/11, the Great

Recession of 2008, and the coronavirus pandemic (though this is not to equate these events) is a

kind of spectacle, one mediated through the media and experienced by society. Guy Debord

writes of the spectacle that it "is not a collection of images; it is a social relation between people

that is mediated by images" (2). What we watch on screen has direct social ramifications. Take,

for example, television news media's coverage of Americans rushing to grocery stores and

supermarkets during the pandemic. Yet, as Debord also points out, the spectacle need not be

screened either, for all of "life is presented as an immense accumulation of spectacles" (2). By

contextualizing *The Dark Knight Trilogy* as a series of films that interrogate the spectacles of

disaster continually plaguing modern American society, I argue that Gotham City itself is a site

of theatricality and carnivalesque spectacle, with Batman and his nemeses as the main actors

who attempt to convert its citizens' apathy as mere spectators into social action and

responsibility, thereby turning them into citizen-performers.

In previous cinematic incarnations of Batman, Gotham City evokes an unreality through

its exaggerated Gothic aesthetics. For example, James Charles Mak observes how Tim Burton's

Gotham was "appropriately Gothic. . . . It was a city of graveyards and gargoyles, alleys and

asylums. The opening shots of Gotham City expose a city as nightmare" (1). Whereas Burton's Gotham was the embodiment of nightmares and frightening fantasies, Nolan's Gotham City reminds us of the real world and the everyday. Mak writes, "it is the ordinariness of [Nolan's] Gotham City that is meant to terrify us. . . . [T]he setting and city introduce the fear that this could happen to us, this could very well be in the city we live in" (3). But the "ordinariness" of Nolan's Gotham is no less theatrical; in fact, ordinary cities are theatrical models in their own right. Beyond the architectural structures of the theatre, Bertolt Brecht asserts that theatricality "can be seen at any street corner" (121). Antonin Artaud, too, observes that audiences have found the theatrical "not upon the stage . . . but in the street" (76). Both Brecht and Artaud find the theatrical in the everyday, where the real conditions of society take place. In this way, Nolan's Gotham City exudes theatricality which allows for spectacle to take place.

Theatricality does not merely connote entertainment spectacle. There is also an affective quality in all theatricality. However, there is certainly a disjuncture between Brecht's and Artaud's respective approaches to theatre and its social reaches, as Neil Kenny points out that "Artaudian theatre is seen as an apolitical, mystical instrument for whipping up collective emotions, in contrast to the Brechtian forum for rational, political debate" (169). Brecht uses "the street scene" as a model for his epic theatre, through which a bystander on the street plays both spectator and actor in reenacting a car accident. Brecht models theatre after a tableau of society, which is appropriate, for he also asserts that "one of [epic theatre's] functions is to change society" (Brecht 41). For Brecht, the theatrical form is a means for social reform, "[through which] producers and actors work to build up a performance involving many difficult questions - technical problems, social ones" (128). On the other hand, Artaud does not aim to ask social questions but more so "cosmic, universal" ones (Artaud 123), a theatricality that "impel[s] men

to see themselves as they are, it causes the mask to fall, reveals the lie, the slackness, baseness, and hypocrisy of our world" (31). Artaud finds his theatre of cruelty, not in a scene depicting society, but in a plague where "all social forms disintegrate" (15). He calls the plague "a social disaster" and "a total crisis after which nothing remains except death or an extreme purification" (27, 31). Rather than social re*form*, Artaud seeks to disrupt form: "And if there is still one hellish, truly accursed thing in our time, it is our artistic dallying with forms, instead of being like victims burnt at the stake, signaling through the flames" (13). Neil Kenny best summarizes this comparison between Artaud and Brecht, stating, "Artaud longs for a revolution in reverse, a 'régression dans le temps' which will restore man to the state of original purity which existed prior to Western civilization, whereas Brecht professes the Marxist belief in progress and in the potential usefulness of technology" (Kenny 171). Bertolt Brecht and Antonin Artaud have different methodologies and goals in mind for theatre. Nevertheless, both Brecht's and Artaud's theatricalities evoke an urgent sense of affect on both actors and spectators, a sense of social reformation on one end and existential purification on the other. Their respective viewpoints provide us with certain definitions of 'dramatic example' and bring context to the inherent theatricality found in Nolan's Batman films.

Furthermore, the use of performance and spectacle for social change can be found in the medieval festival of carnival. Citizens would engage in exaggerated roleplay, food, and festivities that mocked luxury and status. As Mikhail Bakhtin notes, "carnival celebrated temporary liberation from the prevailing truth and from the established order; it marked the suspension of all hierarchical rank, privileges, norms, and prohibitions. . . . The utopian ideal and the realistic merged in this carnival experience, unique of its kind" (10). With costumed vigilante heroes and stylish radical villains, Gotham increasingly takes on a carnivalesque theatricality. To

varying degrees, this eccentric cast of characters demands all of Gotham's participation in fundamentally changing Gotham's infrastructure, either for better (in the case of Batman) or for worse (in the case of the villains). While Bruce Wayne seeks to inspire citizens to take up an active role in ridding Gotham of crime and corruption through his performance of Batman, villains such as Ra's Al Ghul, the Joker, and Bane enact spectacles of terror and violence to destabilize society and decimate Gotham entirely. So, when the Joker tells Batman of the "Battle for Gotham's soul," it is not only a battle between hero and villain but a battle between social reform and social dissolution. It is through these carnivalesque performances that social change and action is made possible. It is through carnival that Brecht's and Artaud's respective theatricalities are employed outside of the theatre and on a social scale.

Despite all his obstacles and challenges, Batman ultimately wins in this theatrical battle on the stage of Gotham; however, though he defeats the villains and stops their attempts to destroy the city, he fails in including all of Gotham in participating in his performance of heroism. As a billionaire playboy with superior physical prowess, Batman upholds an ideal of heroism that no other citizen can obtain or participate in. Brecht writes, "The artist has been using his countenance as a blank sheet, to be inscribed by the gest of the body" (92). As the superior actor, Bruce Wayne/Batman uses his imposing body, wealth, and resources to perform his status, his hypermasculinity, and his able-bodiedness. As Michel Foucault notes in *Discipline and Punish*, "the body [is an] object and target of power" (136). One aspect in which Bruce/Batman asserts this power is through his exaggerated performance of heteromasculinity. As Judith Butler writes in her seminal essay "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution," "gender is instituted through the stylization of the body and, hence, must be understood as the mundane way in which bodily gestures, movements, and enactments of various kinds constitute

the illusion of an abiding gendered self" (519). Batman demonstrates peak physical performance that is not only superior to everyday citizens but also to his disfigured and disabled supervillains. As Rosemarie Garland Thompson points out in *Extraordinary Bodies*, "forms of corporeal diversity acquire the cultural meanings undergirding a hierarchy of bodily traits that determines the distribution of privilege, status, and power" (6). If the standard for heroism requires one to be wealthy, conventionally masculine, and extremely physically fit, then not everyone can rise to the heroic occasion. As both Bruce Wayne and Batman, the Dark Knight 'upstages' all other players and dominates the stage. Despite his carnivalesque superheroics, Batman fails in his mission to empower Gotham's citizens.

"Oh, Boy—You're in for a Show Tonight, Son": Gotham as Theatrical Carnival

"Is it not this especially the case of Venice?" queries Henri Lefebvre, "Is this city not a theatrical city not to say a theatre-city—where actors and the public are the same in the multiplicity of their roles and relations?" (236). Can we not say the same for Nolan's Gotham City, a city in which costumed heroes and villains perform spectacles of action, violence, and terror? A city that "seizes" its citizens through the "spontaneous theatricalization of encounters" (Lefebvre 113)? In a parked car, two boys pretend to shoot guns with their hands, pointing to where Batman will suddenly appear on his motorcycle, guns blazing. The Joker's clown-masked thugs zipline from one building to another, as if in the circus. By night, criminals run scared, as Batman's appearance is signaled by spotlight. These examples paint Gotham as some kind of theatrical attraction, a public site of extraordinary happenings. Lefebvre and other theorists have noted the spectacular and theatrical aspects of urban, everyday life. Bertolt Brecht finds the theatrical in the street scene, in which a bystanding witness simultaneously performs the role of

actor and spectator in describing the scene of a car accident (Brecht). Antonin Artaud, too, articulates how "a public that shudders at train wrecks, that is familiar with earthquakes, plagues, revolutions, wars," finds the theatrical in real-world occurrences (75). If "All the world's a stage," as Shakespeare writes, then Gotham becomes a stage for these superhero spectacles. What Nolan's trilogy does, however, is examines how this city-stage becomes 'ground zero' for the "battle for Gotham's soul" (*The Dark Knight*)—a battle defined by the constant struggle between passive spectatorship and active participation. As Bruce Wayne articulates, "People need dramatic example to shake them out of apathy" (*Batman Begins*). Both Batman and his villains strive to include citizens 'in the action,' through civic duty, on the one hand, and through literal acts of criminal, revolutionary violence on the other. In this way, Gotham increasingly becomes, in addition to a theatrical site, a carnival. As Mikhail Bakhtin defines it, "Carnival is not a spectacle seen by the people; they live in it, and everyone participates because its very idea embraces all the people" (7). Nolan's *The Dark Knight Trilogy* ultimately illustrates how Gotham City undergoes a certain theatricalization into carnival, a stage upon which all citizens can be both actors and spectators.

Throughout the trilogy, Gotham City becomes the epic theatre. In his summation of Bertolt Brecht's writings on the epic theatre, Walter Benjamin describes the epic theatre as "the filling-in of the orchestra pit. The abyss which separates the actors from the audience like the dead from the living, the abyss whose silence heightens the sublime in drama and whose resonance heightens the intoxication of opera" (1). If the role of the epic theatre is to rid the theatre of the boundary between audience and stage, to elevate the stage to the "public platform" and "exhibition area" (Benjamin 1-2), then cannot the theatre—its architecture and place—be demolished? Can the domain of the theatrical expand beyond the confines of the theatre and be

encapsulated by an entire city? According to Brecht, the epic theatre "can be seen at any street corner":

> an eyewitness demonstrating to a collection of people how a traffic accident took place. The bystanders may not have observed what happened, or they may simply not agree with him, may 'see things a different way'; the point is that the demonstrator acts the behaviour of driver or victim or both in such a way that the bystanders are able to form an opinion about the accident. (121)

For Brecht, the eyewitness plays the role of both spectator and actor: a spectator who has witnessed the scene of the accident, and an actor who performs the various characters and actions that have played out during the accident. "The demonstrator need not be an artist," Brecht continues, yet "His demonstration has a practical purpose, intervenes socially," the criterion that also distinguishes the epic theatre from the opera (122). Antonin Artaud, in his manifesto on the theatre of cruelty, expresses the same desire to do away with formal architecture in favor of a theatrical space in which "A direct communication will be re-established between the spectator and the spectacle, between the actor and the spectator, from the fact that the spectator, placed in the middle of the action, is engulfed and physically affected by it" (96). He states, "We abolish the stage and the auditorium and replace them by a single site, without partition or barrier of any kind, which will become the theater of the action" (Artaud 96). Thus, theatricality finds a way out of the theatre and into the public sphere. Everyday citizens and everyday happenings within a city take on a theatricality unto themselves.

With all this in mind, it is entirely fitting that the very origins of Christopher Nolan's Batman begin at a night at the opera. In *Batman Begins*, the opera—as it is in reality—is presented as a social function for Gotham's wealthy and powerful. The opera depicted in the film

is Arrigo Boito's *Mefistofele*, a retelling of the Faustian myth. The theatre is packed with the

bourgeoisie in elegant black dresses and tuxedos, among them the Waynes, the most prominent

family in Gotham. The bourgeois spectators are entranced by the performance of the Devil on

stage, his demonic minions in bat costumes and attire. It is a spectacle for the rich, a *feast for the*

eyes, to reiterate Brecht's critique of the hedonistic, culinary opera (Brecht 35). Though those in

attendance may be the most wealthy and powerful of Gotham, their power is not necessarily

exercised for all of Gotham, as the rest of its citizens are neither entertained nor enriched by the

same luxuries. They are hungry and starving, willing to kill for food and money. "The drug is

irreplaceable," Brecht writes of the opera, a hallucinatory venue for Gotham's rich and powerful

to distract themselves from the harsh reality of crime and poverty plaguing their city (41). Brecht

continues, "The pleasure grows in proportion to the degree of unreality" (36). Apart from the

Waynes, Gotham's aristocrats refuse to use their influence to save their city, leaving corrupt

cops, petty criminals, and mobsters like Carmine Falcone in charge of keeping Gotham in ruin.

The opera serves to maintain this status quo, an "apparatus [that] goes on fulfilling its function"

(Brecht 35).

The opera shares a synecdochic relationship with Gotham City: the apathetic quality of

the spectators reflects the apathy of Gotham's citizens at large. In fact, as Annette

Schimmelpfennig notes, Gotham is a "gender regime" and "capitalist society [that] favours . . .

hegemonic masculinity . . . because, according to the Gothamites, it guarantees the reproduction

of men who can secure the city with their economic potency" (4, 6). Men of certain wealth,

power, and status—Bruce Wayne included—maintain and perpetuate the socioeconomic

structure and class divisions of Gotham City. Rachel Dawes points out the apparatus at work in

Gotham spearheaded by mob boss Carmine Falcone when she tells Bruce, "As long as [Falcone]

keeps the bad people rich and the good people scared, no one'll touch him" (*Batman Begins*). If the city itself becomes a theatrical stage, then Brecht's critique of the opera allows for a critique of the city and its systematic structures. If "[O]ne of [the epic theatre's] functions is to change society," as Brecht declares, then Batman's adoption of theatricality is an appropriate means of dismantling the system of crime, corruption, and oppression at work in Gotham (41).

It is precisely this mission that strikes one particular Gotham citizen—Bruce Wayne. Although the opera *Mefistofele* has no effect on its wealthy spectators, it causes a visceral reaction in the young heir apparent of the Wayne family. The grotesque acrobatics of demons and devils dancing and twirling in circles triggers memories of Bruce's traumatic experience of falling into a cave full of bats. Nolan intercuts the hallucinatory, nightmarish production on stage with scenes from Bruce's fateful fall. While *Mefistofele* may be a distraction to the rest of the Gothamites, the opera becomes far too real for the young Bruce Wayne. For him, the stage is not merely a stage, but demonstrates how the "Epic theatre, then, does not reproduce conditions but, rather, reveals them" (Benjamin 5)—in this instance, the stages reproduces Bruce's traumatic fear of bats. In many ways, this experience takes on a theatricality more in line with Antonin Artaud's theatre of cruelty. Much like Brecht, Artaud calls for a renovation of the modern theatre. Artaud similarly criticizes the theatre that perpetuates "a self-styled elite" and "the idolatry of fixed masterpieces which is one of the aspects of bourgeois conformism" (74, 76). Both Brecht and Artaud agree that the theatre must have an affective quality to it, that audiences must be engaged by the happenings on stage and have lasting reactions that reverberate outside the walls of the theatre. For Brecht, the epic theatre is a didactic one through which spectators ought "To discuss the present form of our society [in order to] change society" (Brecht 41). For Artaud, the theatre of cruelty must

act upon us. . . . In the same way that our dreams have an effect upon us and reality has

an effect upon our dreams, so we believe that the images of thought can be identified

with a dream which will be efficacious to the degree that it can be projected with the

necessary violence. (Artaud 85-86)

"Can we go?" Bruce pleads to his father Thomas Wayne, "Please" (*Batman Begins*). *Mefistofele*

conjures the "necessary violence" and traumatic weight of Bruce's encounter with the bats in the

cave. The performance on stage gives way to primal, "pure forces" that Artaud speaks of in his

theatre of cruelty, "directly affecting the organism and, in periods of neurosis and petty

sensuality like the one in which we are immersed, of attacking this sensuality by physical means

it cannot withstand" (81-82). Thomas Wayne, noticing his son squirming in his seat with a

visceral reaction of fear and shock, agrees to leave, leading his son and wife out of their seats and

into the world outside, the gritty, dirty reality of what comes to be known as Crime Alley.

But as the Waynes step out of the private space of theatre and into one of Gotham's back

alleys, both Brecht's and Artaud's theories of theatricality still hold true, as they enter a new

scene and stage in which they themselves are the performers. "Wallet, jewelry," approaches a

disheveled, desperate Joe Chill, "fast!" (*Batman Begins*). It is a tense moment, as Chill reveals a

handgun from underneath his coat and points it at Bruce and his parents. Thomas Wayne

complies, handing over his wallet, assuring Chill and also his family that "it's fine." But when

Chill suddenly shoots his gun at Thomas and then Martha Wayne, the theatrical veil of the

opera—its ability to uphold the illusory distraction for the bourgeois—breaks and Gotham's first

family is confronted by the stark, socioeconomic realities set in place by the "apparatus." As Joe

Chill runs off into the night, the young Bruce Wayne falls to his knees in tears, watching his

mother and father die in front of his eyes. Much like the scenes from the opera, this scene

"attack[s] by physical means [one] cannot withstand" (Artaud 81). The Waynes' murder becomes "a theater in which violent physical images crush and hypnotize the sensibility of the spectator seized by the theater as by a whirlwind of higher forces" (Artaud 82-83). The stage scene, the street scene, and now the crime scene are all one and the same. The trauma of Bruce's fear of bats, the trauma of his fear of the opera, and the trauma of his parents' murder are compounded and, after his training under Ra's Al Ghul, compel Bruce to take on a theatricality of his own, the creation of Batman. This is where Artaud's specific theatricality differs from Brecht's in that, whereas Brecht shows an "apparent faith in social revolution" through theatre, Artaud shows that "No socio-economic revolution can transform these rock-bottom conditions of existence, this [submission to necessity] which Artaud names [cruelty]" (Kenny 182-183). The Waynes are subjected to this cruelty, not necessarily out of violence, but of a "matter which invades even the clearest testimony of the senses [and] invites them to take, in the face of destiny, a superior and heroic attitude they would never have assumed without it" (Artaud 32). Bruce himself embodies Artaud's theatre of cruelty, a spectre of brute force and darkness who dominates the streets of Gotham City, his stage, in the name of justice. Through Batman, Bruce Wayne performs Artaud's cruelty. In the same way that Joe Chill brought about a theatrical awakening in himself to take action on behalf of his city, Bruce now claims "to fight injustice. To turn fear against those who prey on the fearful" (*Batman Begins*).

Theatre's affective qualities and real-world repercussions, whether through addressing social concerns by way of Brecht or creating a sensory experience that breaks through states of apathy and normalcy by way of Artaud, echoes the utopian ideal of Bakhtin's carnival. In medieval and Renaissance Europe, the festival of carnival would subvert social roles in comic mockery:

Civil and social ceremonies and rituals took on a comic aspect as clowns and fools,

constant participants in these festivals, mimicked serious rituals such as the tribute

rendered to the victors at tournaments, the transfer of feudal rights, or the initiation of a

knight. . . . [This] marked the suspension of all hierarchical rank, privileges, norms, and

prohibitions [where] The utopian ideal and the realistic merged. (Bakhtin 5-10)

There is an element of performance and play here, as peasants roleplayed in aristocratic decorum

and engaged in excesses of food and festivities otherwise absent in their normal, everyday life.

Bakhtin also draws a clear distinction between the architectural space of theatre and the theatrical

space of carnival: "In fact, carnival does not know footlights, in the sense that it does not

acknowledge any distinction between actors and spectators. Footlights would destroy a carnival,

as the absence of footlights would destroy a theatrical performance" (7). Carnival is theatre-in-

practice, doing away with footlights, the stage, and the orchestral abyss. Bakhtin writes, "In the

world of carnival all hierarchies are canceled. All castes and ages are equal" (251). In the festival

of carnival, there is no abyss between actor and audience, as everyone participates.

Nolan presents a Gotham City that becomes increasingly carnivalesque. It is a city full of

"corrupt bureaucrats" and "criminals [who] mock society's laws" (*Batman Begins*). The official

is made unofficial, and vice versa. As cops, lawyers, and judges present themselves as law-

abiding citizens in court, they are at the same time on the payroll of the mob. In *Begins*, Carmine

Falcone points out to a vengeful Bruce Wayne, "Look around you. You'll see two councilmen . .

. a union official, couple off-duty cops . . . and a judge. I wouldn't have a second's hesitation of

blowing your head off in front of them. Now, that's power you can't buy. That's the power of

fear" (*Batman Begins*). In *The Dark Knight*, as Falcone is behind bars, the mob "turned to a man

they didn't fully understand" in the Joker, a clown and jester, furthering Gotham's descent into

carnival (*The Dark Knight*). And in *The Dark Knight Rises*, the carnival reaches its peak in the social upheaval led by Bane. Dr. Johnathan Crane, better known as the psychiatrist-turned-villain "Scarecrow," presides as a judge, sentencing Gotham's rich and powerful to either "Death or exile!" (*Rises*). Carnival bridges the gap between theatre and society, the stage and the audience. Gotham City becomes a theatrical, urban carnival.

Nolan's *The Dark Knight Trilogy* brings superheroics to the street level, the everyday theatricality of city life amidst the exaggerated theatricality of Batman and his villains. Theatricality, though found within the domain of the theatre, finds ways to seep into the everyday structures of the city and society, be it on a street corner or in the back alley of an opera house. Gotham City sets the scene for its superheroic spectacles as its ordinary citizens become spectators to extraordinary performances. Gotham's individual parts, too, become theatrical spaces that exhibit the epic theatre; from the city's entertainment, sports, and municipal functions, Gotham puts on a show. Although these sites—the opera, the football stadium, and the civic parade, among others—seemingly keep citizens in a state of apathy, both Batman and his rivals such as Ra's Al Ghul, the Joker, and Bane, strive to break the theatrical veil to embolden Gothamites into taking action, to become actors themselves on the stage of Gotham City.

"Some People Just Want to Watch the World Burn": The Spectre and Spectacle of Terrorism

If Gotham is a stage and site of theatricality, then how do Batman and his villains harness and employ this theatricality? For Brecht, epic theatricality calls for "a clear social function . . . with far-reaching social objectives" beyond the domain of the theatre (128). Artaud similarly advocates for "a spectacle . . . of direct action [to] turn upon the preoccupations of the great mass

of men" (87). Together, Brecht's and Artaud's theatricalities are more so calls to action rather than simple entertainment; they are dramatic examples that leave drastic effects on the individual's mind, body, and senses. Theatricality's social utility is further demonstrated in the festival of carnival, which, as Bakhtin suggests, was a spectacle "universal in scope," one in which "all and everyone" participated, creating a social utopia through roleplay and celebration (11). Nolan's cast of characters shares in this philosophy of dramatic example and social upheaval to varying extents. Bruce Wayne describes his mission as becoming an incorruptible "symbol" and "dramatic example" that will inspire and "show the people their city doesn't belong to the criminals and the corrupt" (*Batman Begins*). The villains, too, become dramatic examples in their own right. Ra's Al Ghul seeks to destroy Gotham as a punitive example of a corrupt city beyond saving. The Joker puts Gotham's citizens in "social experiments" that force them to make life or death decisions that test their moral beliefs. Bane leads a coup d'état and establishes a lawless, dystopian no man's land in Gotham. Their acts connote disasters such as 9/11 and movements such as Occupy Wall Street, which James Gilmore attributes to the "terror as spectacle" ideas of Slavoj Žižek and Jean Baudrillard in their respective works *Welcome to the Desert of the Real* and *The Spirit of Terrorism* (Gilmore). In addition, I argue, the villains perform spectacles of disaster and terrorism that, to some extent, demonstrate a social upheaval reminiscent of Bakhtin's carnival.

  Batman Begins, apart from being Batman's origin story, illustrates how a corrupt city can be easily destroyed from within. Despite the foreign agents of the League of Shadows led by Ra's Al Ghul, the true downfall of the world's "greatest city" is a result of the naivety and apathy of its political leaders, law enforcement, and everyday citizens. As previously noted, mob boss Carmine Falcone controls Gotham's criminal underworld through the power of fear and whose

influence towers over corrupt cops, councilmen, and judges. Of course, Falcone himself has someone to fear and answer to, whether it's Dr. Crane or the man at the top, Ra's Al Ghul. The theme at the forefront of *Begins* is fear, and for much of the film Gotham's worst fears are kept in the shadows, in the poverty-stricken neighborhood of the Narrows (the name itself evokes social fragility). But this fear of criminality and poverty cannot be kept at bay for so long. Reminiscent of Edgar Allan Poe's "The Masque of the Red Death," fear enters Wayne Manor and walks among the wealthy in attendance at Bruce Wayne's birthday party. Ra's Al Ghul and his terrorist cult burn down Wayne Manor while, outside, the city is engulfed by a fear toxin that causes all of Gotham—politician, policeman, and average citizen—to "tear itself apart through fear" (*Batman Begins*). Gotham City becomes a stage, indeed, in which everyone is united in mutual destruction.

Ra's Al Ghul is the master of theatricality and leader of the League of Shadows. Indeed, Ra's Al Ghul himself states that "Theatricality and deception are powerful agents . . . in the mind of your opponent" (*Batman Begins*), a line which Bane, as Ra's Al Ghul's successor, later echoes in *The Dark Knight Rises*. In addition to martial arts, the League of Shadows becomes a group trained in the performing arts—as if the League is a militant "acting" troupe as well. It is through this training in costumes and performances, theatricality and deception, that the League is able to infiltrate society, government, law, and the police. Although Ra's Al Ghul mocks Bruce in his wardrobe as a caped crusader—as he quips upon seeing Bruce in his Batman costume for the first time, "You took my advice about theatricality a bit . . . literally" (*Batman Begins*)—Ra's and the League's plan to disseminate fear toxin via the sewers and metro system is quite theatrical in its own right. As Michael Marano writes in "Ra's Al Ghul: Father Figure as Terrorist," "Ra's again plays on modern anxieties. He's the head of a shadowy international

organization hidden in the mountains of central Asia who, at the climax of the film, seeks to overthrow an established social order by driving a multi-passenger transportation device into a skyscraper in the heart of a major American city" (81). These events, as Marano and others have pointed out, are analogous to the events of September 11, 2001, when the terrorist leader Osama Bin Laden and al-Qaeda targeted well known civic sites such as New York's Twin Towers and Washington D.C.'s Pentagon in public displays of destruction intended to inflict fear in the American public. Here, Ra's Al Ghul targets Gotham City's symbol of unification, Wayne Tower, as fear is quite literally dispersed as a toxin.

In some ways, Ra's employs the theatricality of both Brecht and Artaud. If the role of epic theatre is to represent and reveal real "social conditions" (Benjamin 4), then Ra's and the League do so. There is indeed a social utility in their various plots to destroy cities such as Gotham. Their philosophy lies in the generative power of a blank slate that comes after destruction. The League believes not in the reparative power of justice, law, and the penal system, but in the complete ridding of the world of cities such as Gotham, who have 'lost their way,' so to speak. Ra's Al Ghul's decoy, a substitute double who conceals and speaks on behalf of the League's true leader, states, "Gotham's time has come. Like Constantinople or Rome before it, the city has become a breeding ground for suffering and injustice. It is beyond saving and must be allowed to die. This is the most important function of the League of Shadows. It is one we've performed for centuries. Gotham must be destroyed" (*Batman Begins*). The specific use of "function" and "performed" here is striking, that in such a terrorist group, an element of performance and theatricality is necessary in destroying a city. Ra's very much intends it to be a show and spectacle, as he iterates to Bruce: "Tomorrow the world will watch in horror as its greatest city destroys itself" (*Batman Begins*). It is not meant to be an example for Gotham and

its citizens to stand up against corruption and criminality, as Batman intends with his mission; rather, the city's destruction is an example for the rest of the world, as "Gotham is beyond saving" (*Batman Begins*). Ra's theatricality is indeed a theatricality of instruction, but not for the people within the spectacle, but without. It is also a theatricality of cruelty, à la Artaud; as the fear toxin takes effect, prisoners run loose in the streets while cops such as Flask, induced in the hallucination, can't tell the difference between criminal and civilian. It is indeed a "mass spectacle . . . of tremendous masses . . . the people pour[ing] out into the streets" (Artaud 85). If the theatre of cruelty is shaped by primal, elemental forces, then all of Gotham faces the "oldest and strongest emotion of mankind" in fear, as H.P. Lovecraft articulates in *Supernatural Horror in Literature* (Lovecraft).

It is through cruelty that Ra's uses fear as a deterrent for other cities to fall into the same state of corruption. There is no redemption for Gotham, which is why it must be destroyed. This is "Justice," according to Ra's: "Crime cannot be tolerated. Criminals thrive on the indulgence of society's understanding" (*Batman Begins*). There is no room for compassion or trial; any attempt at "understanding" or even reforming the criminal is obtrusive to the League's true project of eradicating crime from society or, in the most extreme cases, eradicating the world of societies such as Gotham, whom they deem to be beyond saving. This is a pre-modern concept of justice; as Foucault notes in *Discipline and Punish*, these practices of execution and punishment-as-spectacle have mostly disappeared throughout the nineteenth century (10). Although Foucault presents the turn towards new punitive measures focused on redeeming "the soul" through "acts in depth on the heart, the thoughts, the will, the inclinations," the League of Shadows reduce the criminal to "a subjected body . . . obtained by the instruments of violence [and] ideology" (16, 26). Here, too, is a disjuncture from Brecht's epic theatricality, according to which

demonstrations "should have a socially practical significance" and the actor/spectator "undergoes a positive change of function" (Brecht 122). By disregarding habeas corpus and inflicting the immediate death penalty, Ra's leaves no room for "socially practical significance" and "positive change." For Ra's, the criminal lost the ability to act when "he tried to take his neighbor's land and became a murderer" (*Batman Begins*).

When Bruce Wayne is tasked with the execution of the criminal in order to complete his initiation into the League, he finds the immediate death penalty appalling, insisting, "I am no executioner" (*Batman Begins*). In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault writes of execution, "the punishment was thought . . . to make the executioner resemble a criminal, judges murderers, to reverse roles at the last moment, to make the tortured criminal an object of pity or admiration" (9). This resemblance between punisher and punished contributed to the gradual disappearance of punishment-as-spectacle from the public stage in the modern world. Bruce's disagreement with the League demonstrates the League's regressive, outdated concept of justice compared to Bruce's progressive, redemptive justice. "It separates us from them," Bruce says of compassion, a delineation between hero and criminal. He does not kill criminals, such as the shady businessman Lau, whom he captures in Hong Kong then surrenders to Gotham City Police (with "*Please deliver to - Lieutenant Gordon*" written across his chest). Nor does he kill the maniacal Joker—even after all the atrocities and deaths he has caused, including the death of his beloved Rachel Dawes—surrendering him to the SWAT team instead (*The Dark Knight*). Bruce finds that, though he may inflict pain and physical suffering against his enemies, his philosophy lies in "no guns, no killing" (*Rises*) and he places his faith in reparative justice and the law. In small part, this philosophy proves true when Lau testifies, and this leads to the arrest of "549 criminals at once" (*The Dark Knight*). Cat burglar Selena Kyle, too, becomes a hero in saving Gotham City

from Bane's nuclear bomb; this, of course, is only possible because Bruce gives her the tools and opportunity to do so (*Rises*).

If Ra's and the League of Shadows believe in the complete eradication of criminals in order to maintain and restore balance to the world, then the Joker, in *The Dark Knight*, puts this "balance" to the test. The sequel once again shows the fragility of Gotham City, though it expands to include all of Gotham and not just the Narrows. The city seems to be free of the fear instilled by Carmine Falcone now that he's been put behind bars, though the mob remains with his successor Salvatore Maroni. Instead, the criminals fear Batman. To some petty criminals, he's a myth. But for the mob who is struggling to hold onto their power and money, Batman is very much a threat. Enter the Joker, who lays out this new status quo: "A year ago these cops and lawyers wouldn't dare cross any of you. . . . I know why you're holding your little group therapy session in broad daylight. I know why you're afraid to go out at night. The Batman. He's shown Gotham your true colors" (*The Dark Knight*). The mob's hold over Gotham is weakening, while at the same time Gotham's "White Knight" Harvey Dent has led the fight against crime and corruption, first as an investigator for Internal Affairs—where he earned the nickname "Two Face"—and then as the new district attorney. But the Joker has come to disrupt this status quo by manipulating both Dent and Batman. While he admits to Batman being "truly incorruptible," the Joker succeeds in corrupting Harvey Dent's righteous faith in the law, as Dent seeks vengeance against those responsible for the death of Rachel Dawes (*The Dark Knight*). In this way, the Joker is Batman's opposite; while Batman believes in the criminal's redemptive potential through the law, the Joker presents a perversion of this, that the law embodied in Harvey Dent can become criminal. There is no "balance" or justice, whether by Ra's Al Ghul's or Batman's standards; there is only chaos. And the Joker is "an agent of chaos" (*The Dark Knight*).

Though not as elaborate as Ra's Al Ghul's plan to destroy Gotham via fear toxin, the Joker's methods are theatrical in their own right; after all, the Joker himself is a master performer. Just as Ra's al Ghul uses "cheap parlor tricks to conceal [his] true identity" through his guise as Henri Ducard (*Batman Begins*), the Joker "wears a cheap purple suit and makeup" (*The Dark Knight*). Whereas Ra's may be the master showman of his League carnival, the Joker is the jester, as depicted on his calling card. If Gotham is a carnivalesque stage, then the Joker fits right in. As Bakhtin notes, "Another essential element [of carnival] was a reversal of the hierarchic levels: the jester was proclaimed king, a clownish abbot, bishop, or archbishop was elected at the 'feast of fools,' and in the churches directly under the pope's jurisdiction a mock pontiff was even chosen" (81). As jester, the Joker is able to traverse these "hierarchic levels" that form the foundation of Gotham, the levels in place to maintain social order and balance. In the opening sequence, he disguises himself behind a clown mask and pretends to be one of the henchmen; upon taking off his mask, he reveals a face covered in clown make-up, another layer of performance. At the parade and ceremony for Commissioner Loeb, the Joker dresses up in police uniform, this time without his clown make-up and with his facial scars shown clearly. The Joker easily navigates and infiltrates both criminal and judicial positions through his various costumed performances. Unlike Ra's, the Joker shows no regard for justice, whether by punitive or redemptive measures. What the Joker shows through these performances is that "justice" is just as malleable as the identities he puts on. While the Joker's schemes seem to target the triad that is Bruce/Batman, Harvey Dent, and Gordon, what is really at stake here is "the battle for Gotham's soul" (*The Dark Knight*). By corrupting Dent's and Batman's heroic images, the Joker shows how anyone can perform the role of jester—the district attorney becomes a criminal and

the vigilante hero becomes public enemy number one. It is this descent into a chaotic carnival—

the upheaval of all hierarchical levels of Gotham's society—that the Joker plans for the city.

The Joker advocates for all of Gotham's participation in the spectacle, much like Batman,

who seeks to inspire citizens to stand up against the criminal and the corrupt; but the Joker is no

hero. There are still notes of 9/11 attributed to the Joker, just as many have drawn parallels

between Ra's al Ghul and Osama Bin Laden in *Batman Begins*. In "*The Dark Knight*'s War on

Terrorism," John Ip argues that "the film's depiction of controversial counterterrorism measures

is better seen as a critique rather than as an approval of the Bush Administration's war on

terrorism" (229). Ip, among others, particularly points out the parallel between Batman's extreme

vigilantism and George W. Bush's exceptional policies regarding the practices of rendition,

torture and coercive interrogation, and surveillance. If Batman is Bush leading this war, then the

Joker is the embodiment of terror, specifically, the terror of urban disasters such as 9/11:

> In particular, certain motifs—the Joker's grainy homemade videos, cell phone-detonated
>
> human bombs, burnt-out remains of buildings swarming with rescue workers—give the
>
> film a distinctly post-9/11 aesthetic. The Joker himself presents as a terrorist figure who
>
> intimidates, threatens and inflicts violence and mayhem upon a civilian population in
>
> furtherance of his anarchic ideological purpose. (Ip 213)

The Joker indeed has a purpose. Just as the events of 9/11 were not random at all—for many

New Yorkers, the second plane crashing into the towers very much confirmed this—the Joker's

seemingly random acts of violence are not random at all. Despite his words to a disfigured

Harvey Dent, "Do I really look like a guy with a plan? . . . I just *do* things," his spectacles of

terror and violence are coordinated attempts to "show the schemers [such as the mob, cops, and

Gordon] how pathetic their attempts to control things really are" (*The Dark Knight*, my italics).

He targets a bank, a symbol of finance, to destabilize the mob's source of wealth. He targets a civic parade for Commissioner Loeb's funeral, attempting to assassinate the mayor. And he targets Gotham City General Hospital, another social institution and symbol of society's functioning. This contradicts Brecht's epic theatricality; whereas Brecht advocates for social reform, the Joker rejects all semblance of society in general. "Introduce a little anarchy," the Joker philosophizes, "and everything becomes chaos" (*The Dark Knight*).

Though the Joker uses terrorism as a means to achieve this state of carnival where there is "no separation of participants and spectators [and] Everybody participates," it is not at all "the utopian realm of community, freedom, equality, and abundance" that Bakhtin anticipates (Bakhtin 9, 265). The Joker's terrorism presents us with a theatricality of cruelty, one in which man finds "his utopian sense of life and matter" as "the spectator, placed in the middle of the action, is engulfed and physically affected by [the spectacle]" (Artaud 92, 96). By attacking such public sites, the Joker involves all of Gotham's city in the spectacle. But he also wants them to engage in the action—to turn them from passive observers into active participants. He puts out a hit on Coleman Reese to keep him from revealing Batman's identity, enlisting the help of average citizens; "Why should I have all the fun?" the Joker provokes them (*The Dark Knight*). One citizen attempts to shoot him outside a building, while another attempts to ram Reese's police escort with a truck. A police officer, too, partakes in the "fun," pointing his shotgun towards Reese even when tasked with protecting him. Should these citizens fail to kill Mr. Reese in cold blood, the Joker threatens to blow up a hospital. With the help of Bruce Wayne, the citizens fail and Mr. Reese is saved. Later, the Joker kidnaps a bus full of doctors and patients, covering their faces with clown masks and duct-taping guns to their hands. As the Joker's real henchmen dress as doctors, SWAT teams from a building across are ready to shoot at the

innocent doctors and patients, unaware that they've been duped by the Joker's switching of their costumes and uniforms.

The Joker's last "social experiment," however, is perhaps his most diabolical. There are two ferries, one full of innocent civilians and the other full of convicted felons. The Joker has rigged both with explosives and has given both ferries the detonator to the other's bomb. One must blow up the other; otherwise, by midnight, the Joker will detonate both. The civilians take part in a voting process, while the prisoners wait it out, having already "made their choices [to] murder and steal" (*The Dark Knight*). The majority votes to blow up the prisoners' ferry, but only one civilian is willing to "get their hands dirty." This is one of a few moments in which Nolan depicts citizens in active engagement and decision making. Stephen Engelkamp notes how "This scene demonstrates how a democratic procedure may lead to a legitimate, yet immoral decision" (45). By voting, this social experiment becomes a form of synecdoche, a stand-in for the "social experiment" of American democracy; it is a demonstration of Batman's hope for inspiring Gotham's citizens into civic participation. For a moment, it seems as if the emboldened civilian will carry on the League of Shadows' twisted and archaic philosophy "to do what is necessary" by killing the criminals who have lost their will and right to "act." But he refuses at the last moment, affirming Batman's faith not only in the law but also in its opportunity for redemption; the civilian does not become the criminal by becoming an executioner. One of the prisoners on the other boat affirms this by taking the detonator and throwing it out the window. This specific prisoner's crime is unidentified, but despite his orange jumpsuit, the prisoner demonstrates that—in this moment of dramatic spectacle—he, too, can be heroic. "This city just showed you that it's full of people ready to believe in good," Batman stresses to a disappointed Joker (*The Dark Knight*).

But the Joker doesn't admit defeat; his plan to make Gotham a carnival in which roles are subverted succeeds in the corrupted symbol of Harvey Dent, his "ace in the hole" (*The Dark Knight*). The anarchy and chaos of Joker's carnival are avoided, however, if only temporarily. Batman tells Gordon, "But the Joker cannot win. Gotham needs its true hero" (*The Dark Knight*). The two of them agree on a lie in order to preserve Dent's symbol of lawful hope: Batman takes the blame for Harvey's murder spree of vengeance and additionally takes the blame for Harvey's death. In *The Dark Knight Rises*, this lie comes to fruition. Eight years after *The Dark Knight*, Bruce Wayne has retired as Batman and secluded himself in Wayne Manor. The mob and most of its criminals have been locked up due to the Harvey Dent Act, which denied them parole. "It's peacetime," a congressman says; this idyllic Gotham is reiterated by officer John Blake, who quips that "Pretty soon we'll be chasing down overdue library books" (*Rises*). However, these eight years of peace are merely "borrowed time" according to Bane, the new leader of the League of Shadows who has returned to "fulfill Ra's Al Ghul's destiny" of destroying Gotham (*Rises*). Bane infiltrates Gotham, recruiting the city's most vulnerable and working in the shadows of the sewers until his revolutionary siege of the city above. He makes use of Bruce Wayne's armory, including a machine designed to create sustainable energy only to be repurposed into a nuclear bomb. Bane exposes Gordon and Batman's lie at the end of the previous film and puts on the performance of a revolutionary, Robespierre-esque figure, plunging Gotham in its own reign of terror in which prisoners are freed, the wealthy are stripped of decorum, and the poor enjoy the "spoils of war." Unbeknownst to all citizens, however, the nuclear bomb will go off regardless. In appearance, Bane and his revolution demonstrate a theatricality similar to Brecht's social reform and Bakhtin's social utopia; in reality, he means

only to destroy all of Gotham, its stage, actors, and spectators of high and low, politician and laymen, officer and criminal.

As a member of the League of Shadows, or at least a diverging sect (as Bane was excommunicated by Ra's), Bane shares in the same aspects of theatrical terrorism that Ra's evokes in *Batman Begins*. He is a foreign entity, born in a prison in an unspecified Asian country (in *Rises*, the aesthetic is more reminiscent of the Middle East) which is described as "hell on earth" (*Rises*). This fear of the foreign terrorist is also embodied in the character of Miranda Tate, one of Bruce's love interests and whose true identity is Talia al Ghul, the daughter of Ra's and Bane's beloved. Her character may specifically be read as a metaphor for immigrant xenophobia or even homegrown terrorism. When Bane announces that he has given the nuclear bomb's detonator to an ordinary citizen, it is Talia who reveals that she "may not be ordinary" but she is indeed a "citizen" (*Rises*). The League of Shadows, too, have abandoned their ninja-aesthetic for a more militaristic attire of army vests, utility belts, and combat uniforms, reminding us again of a post-9/11 world. As James Gilmore writes in "Absolute Anxiety Test: Urban Wreckage in *The Dark Knight Rises*," "[the film] is keenly aware of how 'the spectacle of terrorism' has become 'the terrorism of spectacle'; of how Hollywood's penchant for destruction can no longer be rendered as absolutely pleasurable in a world where similar chaos can suddenly realign urban landscapes" (Gilmore). Gilmore points out how the film opens on a plane heist in which the CIA seemingly captures Bane's mercenaries, an apparent act of rendition, only to find out that—like the Joker in the opening bank heist of *The Dark Knight*—Bane is one of the henchmen. The final step in Bane's master plan is "crashing this plane with no survivors," again alluding to the 9/11 event (*Rises*). The most obvious visual allusion to 9/11 comes a little over halfway through the film, when Bane begins his revolution by a series of explosions through

Gotham City. In the montage of bridges and streets, a cityscape of New York City is shown with a still-under-construction Freedom Tower, the new World Trade built on top of the rubble of the Twin Towers. As Gilmore concludes, "From our spectatorial position, the film is indeed an anxiety test, summoning the iconographies and fears of a post-9/11 urban milieu without necessarily purging them or building to a catharsis" (Gilmore).

On the surface, these spectacles of terrorism seem to invite Gotham citizens to take part in the action, much like the Joker and his "social experiments." Though it may be peacetime up above, Bane has recruited Gotham's poorest and most vulnerable into dismantling the city's infrastructure from the underground sewer system (a metaphor for Bane's dismantling of Gotham's *social* infrastructure from within). Beat cop John Blake investigates the disappearance of an orphaned boy and discovers his dead body; when he asks the boy's younger brother what he was doing in the sewers, the younger brother states, "A lot of guys been going down the tunnels when they age out. Say you can live down there. Say there's work down there" (*Rises*). Bane appeals to Gotham's lowest class, pitting them against the wealthy and powerful and using them as tools for destroying Gotham from within. But Bane also takes advantage of the wealthy, such as business tycoon John Daggett, whom he kills after he's made use of his resources in planting explosives throughout the city's concrete. As Bane remarks, "Your money and infrastructure have been important till now. . . . I'm Gotham's reckoning, here to end the borrowed time you've all been living on. . . . A necessary evil" (*Rises*). He recruits Selena Kyle, before her turn as hero in the third act, to steal Bruce Wayne's fingerprints to authenticate a series of trades during his attack on the Stock Market. Bruce loses his majority shares of Wayne Enterprises, ousting him from his own company. Bane plays on the class conflict already inherent in Gotham, a theme that pervades the whole trilogy.

It is through these public displays of disaster that—much like the Joker in his attacks on banks, civic parades, and hospitals—Bane invites all of Gotham to engage in a carnivalesque social upheaval. He begins his revolution in a quintessential, American social institution and function that also serves as a site of spectatorship and theatricality in its own right:

> At the Gotham City football game, the importance placed on the national anthem takes on many meanings: It is a symbol of the Nation, a collective inscription of ideology, but also a performance. . . . The spectacle of the football game—a site of pleasure—has been converted into a site of terror, just as smoke and bombs similarly erupt across Gotham, imbuing the aerial shot with a look of horror. (Gilmore)

It is during this "performance" and "spectacle" that Bane formally invites citizens to "take control of your city!" (*Rises*). In a punishment-as-spectacle moment, reiterating the League's pre-modern philosophy of execution articulated by Foucault, Bane executes nuclear physicist Dr. Pavel, the only man who can disarm the nuclear bomb presented as the "instrument of [Gotham's] liberation." He makes known that a citizen has already taken part in the "liberation" movement, as "the identity of the triggerman is a mystery. . . . This anonymous Gothamite, this unsung hero, will trigger the bomb" (*Rises*). Of course, as already noted, this triggerman is Miranda Tate aka Talia al Ghul, part of the ruse of inspiring Gotham into action only to destroy the entire city in the nuclear blast. At the storming of Blackgate Prison, Bane reiterates his call to action: "We take Gotham from the corrupt. The rich. The oppressors of generations who've kept you down with the myth of opportunity. And we give it to you, the people. Gotham is yours - none shall interfere. Do as you please" (*Rises*). Almost instantaneously, Gotham's citizens react with the fervor as described by Artaud, "in the agitation of tremendous masses, convulsed and hurled against each other" (85). They drag the aristocrats from their lavish penthouses and "cast

[them] into the cold world the rest of us have known and endured," fulfilling Selena Kyle's threat to Bruce Wayne of the coming storm: "You and your friends better batten down the hatches, because when it hits you're all gonna wonder how you ever thought you could live so large and leave so little to the rest of us" (*Rises*). Ra's al Ghul and the Joker prophesy similarly: Ra's in his statement, "Create enough hunger and everyone becomes a criminal" (*Batman Begins*) and the Joker in his, "When the chips are down, these civilized people . . . they'll eat each other" (*The Dark Knight*). But, again, Gotham descends into a carnivalesque dystopia rather than a Bakhtian utopia. Gotham's most vulnerable are huddled indoors running out of food and supplies; the police force is trapped underground, if not hunted down up above; and a ticking time bomb inches closer to the city's total dissolution.

The various villains of Batman's rogues' gallery employ their own dramatic examples of terror and disaster. They target public institutions, the symbols that uphold hegemonic, normative society (banks, hospitals, parades, sports stadiums, the stock market) in order to invite Gotham's citizens to take part in dismantling "the system." While they seemingly enact "real innovations [that] attack the roots"—as Brecht advocates for in innovating the opera through epic theatre—Ra's, Joker, and Bane have no real intention of social reform, but more so social destruction (Brecht 41). The performances of social upheaval and subversion—district attorney turned murderer, convicted felon turned hero, impoverished citizen turned wealthy aristocrat— have no meaning outside of their performances; by the trilogy's conclusion, we return to a status quo with no real change: Batman defeats the villains and the carnival ends. Nevertheless, in including citizens in their acts of spectacle, the villains demonstrate a more extreme devotion to theatricality than that of Batman's. "Everybody participates" in the villains' carnival (Bakhtin 265). On the other hand, when Batman gains a following of copycat vigilantes wearing hockey

pads, Batman is quick to stop them and exclude them from performing acts of vigilante heroism. It is this hubris and hero complex, the exclusion of others in the action, that results in the unfulfillment of true carnival.

"Batman Has No Limits": Performing Status, Masculinity, and Super-ability

As Gotham City presents itself as a theatrical site and stage, villains such as Ra's Al Ghul, the Joker, and Bane enact violent acts of terrorist spectacle that seemingly invite citizens to take part in their carnivalesque performances. Bruce Wayne shares in this invitation to citizens, as he himself takes up the cape and cowl to become an incorruptible and everlasting symbol, a dramatic example to "shake them out of apathy" (*Batman Begins*). He, too, "resort[s] to a mass spectacle" and "appeal[s] to cruelty and terror" (Artaud 85, 86) in order to "turn fear against those who prey on the fearful" (*Batman Begins*). After Bruce causes major traffic accidents and rooftop destruction with the Batmobile, Alfred points out the news coverage of the Tumbler's rampage, to which Bruce responds, "Damn good television" (*Batman Begins*). "I'm not sure you made it loud enough, sir," Alfred comments on Bruce's investigative process of uncovering fingerprints from a bullet (*The Dark Knight*). And when Bruce takes up the cape and cowl once again, Alfred expresses his disapproval of Batman's bombastic return: "You lead a bloated police force on a merry chase with some fancy new toys from [Lucius] Fox" (*Rises*). Alfred points out the chaos and havoc that Batman causes throughout the city: what's the difference between him and the supervillains who terrorize Gotham? Whereas his eccentric adversaries include citizens in the action, forcing them to act and to make choices through moral dilemmas, Batman acts alone.

"Know your limits, Master Wayne," Alfred warns. As both billionaire playboy and caped crusader, Bruce/Batman performs his own spectacles that reach theatrical and excessive heights. As Bruce says to Alfred in *The Dark Knight*, "Batman has no limits" (*The Dark Knight*). Even as threats of terrorism escalate from Ra's to the Joker and then Bane, Bruce believes he can outmatch their grandiose displays of violence and destruction with his own spectacular acts of vigilante heroism. It is through these spectacles that Bruce/Batman performs his privileged status, hypermasculinity, and super-ability. As CEO of Wayne Enterprises and an eligible bachelor, Bruce Wayne garners spotlight and stardom as the ideal heteromasculine figure and champion of capitalism—a dramatic example of Gotham's systemic problems. His superhero alter ego mimics his public persona, as Batman presents himself as physically and mentally superior to his foes. Both personas—both performances—only exaggerate the theatrical abyss between spectator and actor, as Bruce/Batman upstages all other players, supervillain and civilian alike. "Batman could be anybody," Bruce tells his successor, beat cop John Blake (*Rises*). But despite this sentiment, Bruce fails to see that this is a lie. Although he claims that his actions are to inspire the city into action, his intentions are ultimately proven false. Bruce/Batman operates not on a premise of inspiration but one of superiority and exceptionalism.

First and foremost, Bruce Wayne is a billionaire. This is the defining characteristic from which his performances as Bruce Wayne and Batman are made possible. He comes from the world of the opera, the realm of the wealthy and powerful that Brecht so criticized. Although the Waynes engage in charity and philanthropy, funding a cheap public transportation system "to unite the city," their actions do less to uplift the "people less fortunate" from poverty than strengthen their oligarchic positions of wealth, as symbolized by Wayne Tower, which stands at the center of the train system. This railway system is a metaphor, as the Waynes are at the very

center of the normative system in place at Gotham, in which citizens must rely on the generosity of the wealthy. In *Begins*, although Wayne Enterprises is culpable for the spread of Crane's fear toxin, as it is a (stolen) Wayne Enterprises microwave emitter that makes the toxin airborne, the city must still rely on the company in order to obtain its mass-produced vaccine and cure. The company seemingly escapes all blame and, despite the destruction of the railway system, continues to do well in *The Dark Knight*, so much so that Bruce helps fund Harvey Dent's campaign for re-election as district attorney—again, showcasing how the Wayne brand and privileged status is further worked into the socioeconomic and political schema of Gotham City. And in *Rises*, the Waynes' lasting legacy—and the city's lasting dependency—is made explicit in the donation of Wayne Manor to the city of Gotham for "the housing and care of the city's at-risk and orphaned children" (*Rises*). The erection of such a monument parallels the Batman statue, which also symbolizes the city's future dependency on the Batman.

Throughout *The Dark Knight Trilogy*, Bruce Wayne and company only serve to perpetuate a system that keeps the rich wealthy and in power while keeping the lower classes in their place. As much as Bruce/Batman claims to work for the good of all of Gotham, he is complicit in its apathy. "The trouble," Brecht writes, "is that at present the apparati do not work for the general good; the means of production do not belong to the producer" (35). Bruce/Batman operates from this world of the opera, the apparatus "of men who are economically committed to the prevailing system" (Brecht 34). So long as Wayne remains an enterprise at the center of Gotham, the entire city cannot be liberated from its state of apathy leading to poverty, corruption, and crime. Bruce Wayne has one goal in mind: to eradicate Gotham of its criminals and the corrupt. What Bruce fails to see, however, is that crime is a symptom of systemic poverty; Gotham will always have crime in its current state of haves and have-nots. While he makes

advances in fighting crime through the theatrical example of the Batman, he fails in elevating Gotham's poor and vulnerable as he holds onto his position of supremacy.

It is from this position of white, male, aristocratic privilege that Bruce creates his charade as Bruce Wayne and his performance as the Batman. "Who are you pretending to be?," cat burglar Selena Kyle asks him, to which Bruce responds, "Bruce Wayne, eccentric billionaire" (*Rises*). Bruce admits that his public persona is all pretend, though not entirely fictionalized. He is indeed an eccentric billionaire, but is his character ingrained in the pursuit of women, cars, and hedonism? Bruce makes it clear to his lifelong friend Rachel Dawes that "all this. It's not me. Inside, I am more" (*Batman Begins*). Rachel disagrees, stating, "It's not who you are underneath. It's what you *do* that defines you" (*Batman Begins*, my italics). Their respective views illustrate the debate between an essential identity versus a constructed identity—a debate that Judith Butler approaches in her work regarding gender performativity. Butler writes, "there is neither an 'essence' that gender expresses or externalizes nor an objective ideal to which gender aspires; because gender is not a fact, the various acts of gender creates the idea of gender, and without those acts, there would be no gender at all" (522). Regardless of what Bruce believes is "inside" him—whatever "essence" inherently resides in his character—it is ultimately the "various acts" that create his identity: it's what he *does* that defines him. It is important to note how Butler articulates that gender is neither "a radical choice or project that reflects merely individual choice," nor is it "passively scripted with cultural codes" onto the body; rather, gender resides in the liminal space in between, a push-and-pull between the individual and hegemonic culture that leaves room for "interpretation" (Butler 526). What we find in the case of Bruce/Batman is a certain "will to act" that allows him to manipulate his identity in his performances as Bruce Wayne and Batman, all made possible by his wealth and resources.

Bruce has a proclivity to use his wealth and resources to create his artificial identities and personas. Even without the trappings of his masked alter ego, Bruce's public persona already exhibits an exaggerated masculinity. When Bruce returns to Gotham after his training with the League of Shadows, he asks Alfred, "What does someone like me do?" to which Alfred responds, "Drive sports cars, date movie stars. Buy things that are not for sale" (*Batman Begins*). Throughout this exchange, Bruce has emerged from his bed with his shirt off, letting himself fall to the floor and proceeding to perform push-ups. Bruce demonstrates how heteronormative masculinity is measured by physical performance. Yet, masculinity, too, must *be a performance*, as he takes Alfred's advice to heart. In *Begins*, Bruce arrives at a hotel in a Lamborghini Murciélago ("Murciélago" is "bat" in Spanish) with two European models under each arm—a show of heterosexual masculinity. After the women take a dip into a pool meant for display and not for swimming, Bruce announces to a waiter and his table of Wayne Enterprises executives, "I'm buying this hotel and setting some new rules about the pool area" (*Batman Begins*). In *The Dark Knight*, Bruce arrives in a high-class restaurant and approaches Rachel Dawes and Harvey Dent. "Let's put a couple tables together," Bruce says; "I don't know if they'll let us," Dent pushes back; Bruce trumps, "They should, I own the place" (*The Dark Knight*). In both of these scenes, Bruce demonstrates his economic prowess in addition to heterosexual masculinity; in trumping Dent's hesitance to put the tables together, Bruce becomes the alpha male, illustrating how masculinity is measured by financial performance just as in physical performance. And in *Rises*, even with a limp and a cane in hand, Bruce Wayne makes an extravagant return to the public sphere, arriving at a charity ball with his Lamborghini Murciélago once again.

In some instances, it seems as if Batman is acting through the guise of Bruce Wayne. In *The Dark Knight*, when the Joker puts a target on Coleman Reese, who has threatened to reveal

the identity of the Batman, Bruce Wayne intervenes with his Lamborghini. A truck driver aims to ram his vehicle into Reese's police escort, only for Bruce to speed up in between the cars, saving Reese. Bruce's own acting talents are shown through his exchange with Gordon. "That's a very brave thing you did," Gordon points out. Bruce, putting on his naive playboy persona, asks, "Trying to catch the light?" "You weren't protecting the van?" Gordon asks, astonished. "Why, who's in it?" Bruce responds, oblivious; he looks over to Reese, nodding his head in mutual agreement—he's saved his life, now Reese must keep Batman's identity a secret. Bruce still utilizes his training in "theatricality and deception" even out of the Batsuit, leaning into the performance of a wealthy-straight-white male. It is through Bruce Wayne's high social class that he is able to *play (act)* into cultural codes, performing not a conventional masculinity but a hyperbolic heterosexual masculinity.

This is a departure from earlier representations of Bruce Wayne/Batman, such as Adam West's campy, sixties Batman, Tim Burton's lonely, brooding Batman, and Joel Schumacher's queering of the character. Nicholas Winstead argues, "By transforming Batman into a symbol and letting Bruce Wayne anchor heterosexual masculinity through his love of Rachel, the queer subtext has nowhere to go but into the ether" (580). Winstead posits that, while Tim Burton's and Joel Schumacher's respective Batmen have disposable, heteronormative romances, and Schumacher's especially works to queer Batman through his "coded domestic partners" of Robin and Batgirl (whom, Winstead furthers, serves as a "beard" for the "queer union"), Nolan's Bruce Wayne has a stable, heteronormative love interest in Rachel Dawes (579). Even when Rachel dies at the hands of the Joker in his explosive schemes, and unbeknownst to him she chooses Harvey Dent over him, Bruce still yearns for her eight years after—or at least, he yearns for the notion of a stable, heteronormative "happy ending" that would ultimately make him the model of

ideal masculinity. Annette Schimmelpfennig would most likely agree with Winstead in her exploration of "Gotham's capitalist society [which] favours heteronormativity because, in their opinion, it is only through the subjugation of minorities (women, queer men, men suffering from mental illness) that the hegemonic masculinity can survive" (6). "There might be different ideas to express your masculinity," Schimmelpfennig continues, "but the only successful one is that of the 'billionaire playboy philanthropist' who has the means and the money to be a part-time superhero" (3). This wish-fulfillment of the "capitalist, straight white male dream" is fulfilled and upheld by Nolan's conclusion in *The Dark Knight Rises*, in which "Bruce Wayne [is] very much alive and with Selina Kyle [putting] Bruce's sexuality to rest with the shot of the two very happy together" in Florence, Italy (Winstead 584). But this, too, leads Bruce Wayne into another performance—one of the same heteronormative masculinity, but one of a different moniker, as Bruce Wayne is believed to have died in Gotham City in the midst of Bane's revolution. Bruce refuses to give up this capitalist masculinity, forcing him to perform an artificial and exaggerated straightness over and over again that reinforces—rather than breaks the structures of—Gotham and its problematic systems of social, political, and economic hegemony.

Bruce's superhero alter ego, on the other hand, relies not on the modern, capitalist, machismo billionaire as a model for ideal masculinity; rather, Batman takes on a more grotesque, primal excess of masculine physique and demeanor. The Batsuit itself—much like the three-piece suits he wears in his performance of Bruce Wayne—is another 'costume' in his performance of hypermasculinity. In many ways, Batman is a direct reflection of Bruce Wayne; he has the Tumbler instead of the Lamborghini, the Bat-pod rather than the motorcycle, and the Batsuit rather than a tuxedo. Batman's costume and gadgets particularly focus and exaggerate the natural, ideal body. The Batsuit imitates the Classical paintings and sculptures of Greco-Roman

and Renaissance depictions of the male form. Whereas the billionaire is clothed lavishly, the Batman is nude, showcasing his muscularity and peak bodily aesthetics. The Batman is man in his purest form, an animal (hence the nuanced nature of his name, Bat/man). In the behind the scenes footage of *Batman Begins*, Christian Bale notes how the suit gives off a "real feral look" and how Bruce "kind of ceases to be human" once he puts it on ("Creating Batsuit & Cape"). This animalistic approach to the Batman persona is quintessentially captured in Bale's deeper, mangled, more intimidating voice—which is produced through Bale's own manipulation of voice rather than the voice modulation technology used in Ben Affleck's subsequent iteration. This portrayal of Batman can be characterized as grotesque as defined by Bakhtin. In *Rabelais and His World*, Bakhtin describes the grotesque as "Exaggeration, hyperbolism, excessiveness" (303). Bakhtin speaks of the grotesque in terms of "the material bodily principle, that is, images of the human body with its food, drink, defecation, and sexual life" (18). Batman's appearance captures the "caricature" of masculinity "but a caricature that has reached fantastic dimensions" (Bakhtin 306). It is appropriate, then, that when Batman appears to the fear-toxin-induced Dr. Crane, he appears as the grotesque image of a monstrous humanoid—the distinction between mask and face diminishes, leaving behind a leathery skin and black goo dripping from the orifices of his eyes and mouth (*Batman Begins*). "[T]he main events in the life of the grotesque body," Bakhtin writes, "*the acts of the bodily drama*, take place [and] are *performed* on the confines of the body and the outer world" (317, my italics). Just as Judith Butler recognizes the importance of the body in terms of gender performance, Bakhtin too recognizes the performative nature of the grotesque body. It is these "bodily acts" that formulate identity, not some internal essence ("It's what I do that defines me," *Batman Begins*). Through Batman, heteronormative

masculinity is conflated with the grotesque; the male body in excess dominates the stage of carnivalesque Gotham.

As the prime example of heterosexual masculinity, Batman also demonstrates a superior ability of physical performance. Indeed, the man under the suit is already at his prime, as discussed before through his morning pushups. This does not mean that he is impervious to injury. In fact, he is injured consistently; "Did you get mauled by a tiger?" Alfred asks of Bruce's new scars, to which Bruce responds, "It was a dog . . . it was a big dog" (*The Dark Knight*). Alfred, as his loyal butler and surrogate father, is consistently there to patch up Bruce's wounds. Yet, though his body is covered in scars, his Batsuit covers up these markings of vulnerability and weakness. The Batsuit hides the body's imperfections, as if he is stepping into a whole new body, rejuvenated in the ideal, hypermasculine suit. In addition, the suit transforms bodily impurity into corporal perfection not only aesthetically, but also practically. Asking for an upgrade to his Batsuit, Bruce Wayne states, "I'm not talking about fashion, Mr. Fox, so much as function"—to turn his head freely (*The Dark Knight*). And in *The Dark Knight Rises*, although he parades around like a cripple on a cane, his access to the resources of Lucius Fox and Wayne Enterprises allows him to gain full leg mobility and strength through a leg brace device, despite having "no cartilage in [his] knee" (*Rises*). As Batman, Bruce Wayne embodies and performs what Rosemarie Garland Thompson calls the "normate," which is "the social figure through which people can represent themselves as definitive human beings" (8). If Batman is the dramatic example that Gotham's citizens must look up to, then citizens must also view him as a model of pure able-bodiedness. But Bruce has the luxuries of technology and leisure for exercise that allows him to reach peak physical performance, luxuries otherwise unobtainable by the everyday citizen. According to Erving Goffman, there is "only one complete unblushing male in

America: a young . . . white, urban, northern, heterosexual . . . fully employed, of good complexion, weight and height" man (qtd. in Thomson, 8). Bruce/Batman performs this ideal man through a strictly one-man show; no one else can embody the role nor participate in the performance.

Bruce Wayne/Batman's superiority, however, is purely relational to the "deviant" and "Other" embodied in his rogues' gallery. According to Rosemarie Garland Thomson,

> the meanings attributed to extraordinary bodies reside not in inherent physical flaws, but in social relationships in which one group is legitimated by possessing valued physical characteristics and maintains its ascendancy and its self-identity by systematically imposing the role of cultural or corporeal inferiority on others. (7)

In his performance of status, hypermasculinity, and super-ability, Bruce legitimizes his role as superior hero. As Batman, he imposes his "valued physical characteristics" upon the criminals, thugs, and mobsters he punches and beats on a nightly basis. His noble moral code of "no guns, no killing" only strengthens his status of physical prowess and athletic ability in apprehending his enemies; his only necessary tool in defeating his "inferior" opponents is his ideal, masculine body.

The supervillains, in particular, present Batman with the ultimate foils to his able-bodiedness. While Batman can hide his bodily scars under his suit, the Joker is forever scarred around the sides of his mouth ("Now I'm always smiling," *The Dark Knight*). This physical deformity has direct implications in both Heath Ledger's and the character's performance: he constantly licks his lips as if to stifle the pain. Bane, the villain of *The Dark Knight Rises*, must similarly suppress the pain of an asthmatic-like condition with a breathing mask ("If I pull that off, will you die?" / "It would be extremely painful," *Rises*). It is important to note that both these

handicaps are shown through the orifice of the mouth, a grotesqueness that parallels that of Batman. Harvey Dent, the disgraced district attorney, is also disfigured, burned to a crisp on one half of his body. All these villains *show* themselves deviants to the heteronormativity embodied in Bruce Wayne/Batman; they become what Thomson calls "spectacles of otherness" (8). Recall the theatrical spectacle of terrorism that these villains put on the stage of Gotham; not only are their acts spectacles, but so are their mere appearances. In "Why So Serious? Cripping Camp Performance in Christopher Nolan's *The Dark Knight*," Cynthia Barounis specifically stresses how the Joker is Batman's total opposite, the ultimate Other to the normate: "the Joker thus demonstrates the way in which a camp commitment to style over substance can bring together queer, crip, and anti-capitalist critique" (316). In his attire of flamboyantly colored suits, application of makeup, and sexually suggestive dialogue and mannerisms ("I want you to do it. Come on, hit me!," *The Dark Knight*), the Joker presents a queer foil to Batman's heteronormative masculinity. His scars present an aesthetically unideal masculinity, while he totally lacks in the physical prowess of Batman. Finally, as the Joker burns an entire pile of the Mob's money, remarking, "All you care about is money. This town deserves a better class of criminal, and I'm gonna give it to them," the Joker rejects the capitalist superiority of Bruce Wayne/Batman (*The Dark Knight*). In *Rises*, Bane shares in this "anti-capitalist critique," as he manipulates the disparity between rich and poor—mogul John Daggett as well as the poor and vulnerable—to destabilize Gotham's entire infrastructure. Thus, these supervillain foils not only further emphasize Batman's superiority in wealth, masculinity, and able-bodiedness but also reveal his obstinance to uphold hegemony.

Nolan's trilogy points towards the obscenely wealthy, straight, white male as the only one capable of being a hero. Although there is some attempt to critique this ideal and to critique

Bruce Wayne's "hero complex" and hubris, particularly in the third film *Rises*, Batman still emerges as the victor. "I've sewn you up and set your bones . . . but I won't bury you," Alfred says, alluding to what he perceives to be Bruce's increasing death wish, "I've buried enough members of the Wayne family" (*Rises*). Batman verbalizes such in his exchange with Selena Kyle: "You've given them everything" / "Not everything, not yet" (*Rises*). Bruce is always pushing his body towards its physical limits in addition to mental capacity. Only he can play hero and be the ultimate defender of Gotham City against its foreign invaders. "I'll fight harder. I always have," he asserts when pressed by Alfred, who warns him against Bane, his physical nemesis. And though Bane points out his hero complex and hubris ("Victory has defeated you," *Rises*) and outplays him by breaking his back and smashing his mask to pieces, Bruce ultimately proves that his body, after months of training and physical therapy in the prison-pit, is superior; in their rematch, Batman targets Bane's mask, proving that the villain is nothing without its aid and pain relief. Batman ultimately achieves his superior heroic status when he flies the nuclear bomb out into the bay, saving Gotham from destruction and appearing to have sacrificed himself in the explosion; however, in yet another theatrical act and sleight-of-hand trickery, Bruce successfully escapes the explosion (having fixed the aircraft's—the Bat's—autopilot system) and elopes to Florence with Selena Kyle where they take on new identities of their own, achieving both hero status and a happy ending.

Batman has no limits, both as superhero performer and resource-full spectator. "What gives you the right?," one of the copycats presses Batman, "What's the difference between you and me?" (*The Dark Knight*). And while Batman cleverly banters, "I'm not wearing hockey pads," it is this difference of resources, costumes, and artillery that emphasizes the great disparity between Bruce and the rest of Gotham and allows him to become the lone, superheroic

actor. This is also true of his role as spectator. Just as citizens and criminals look up at the night sky to catch a glimpse of the caped crusader, Batman, too, spectates them in return. In *The Dark Knight*, we find Bruce Wayne returning to his underground bunker after a night out fighting crime as Batman. His secret base not only holds all his gadgets and artillery, but also a number of monitors and screens with various CCTV footage. "Look at the new district attorney," Alfred says. "I am, closely," Bruce replies. And although Bruce states that he "needs to know if he can be trusted," Alfred tries to clarify his true intentions by asking, "Are you interested in his character or in his social circle?," pointing out Rachel Dawes alongside Harvey Dent. Bruce dismisses the question: "Who Rachel spends her time with is her business" (*The Dark Knight*). At the end of the previous film, *Batman Begins*, Rachel reveals her love for Bruce, but she can't fully commit to him as long as he continues his crusade as Batman. Here, we find a clearly jealous Bruce still yearning for her, using his technology, which is intended for his crime-fighting agenda, for personal use. "I trust you don't have me followed on my day off," Alfred facetiously remarks. This conversation regarding surveillance foreshadows Batman's extreme measures to locate the Joker later on in the film. He adapts Lucius Fox's idea of using sonar as a means of echolocation into a citywide surveillance system, using the cellphone of every citizen in Gotham to find his nemesis. It is because of Bruce Wayne's wealth and resources that he is able to spectate everyone in the city—whether it is Rachel Dawes or the Joker—but no one is able to spectate him, nor anyone else, to the same extent; he is the exception.

To add on to the copycat's question of "What gives you the right?," we might also ask, "What gives you the right to others' privacy?" As John Ip observes, "This surveillance system is a clear allusion to the surveillance program run by the National Security Agency (NSA) after 9/11," which was used not only for "monitoring certain communications between people inside

the United States and overseas" but also for "other intelligence activities—likely including data-mining . . . although the full extent of the NSA's activities remains unknown to this day" (221).

Batman does not have the politically sanctioned, legal executive rights to employ such a program. Lucius Fox communicates this concern as, upon first seeing the surveillance system that Wayne has built, he responds, "Beautiful. Unethical. Dangerous. . . . This is wrong" (*The Dark Knight*). But Batman does not need to be legitimized officially. His extreme wealth and resources have already afforded him the tools and opportunity to become a vigilante; spying on the masses is not beyond his reach. In addition, though Batman is not officially recruited into Gotham's law enforcement, Gotham's mayor and police department consider him a necessary exception in order to truly combat crime and corruption, especially when the means are beyond their jurisdiction (such as when Batman kidnaps Lau in Hong Kong and brings him back to Gotham). Batman is, after all, as Gordon states, "a silent guardian, a watchful protector" (*The Dark Knight*). Batman standing atop skyscrapers overlooking the city below him is reminiscent of a prison guard's position atop a panopticon. In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault argues that modern society at large has become like the panopticon of a prison, which is "subtly arranged so that an observer may observe," and now that the "seeing machine . . . has become a transparent building in which the exercise of power may be supervised by society as a whole," one individual watches over another through a system of 'discipline' (207). This same panoptic system is still found in Gotham City, but because of Batman's extensive technological reaches, the Dark Knight becomes the center of this system of "indefinite discipline [and] interrogation without end, an investigation that would be extended without limit" (Foucault 227). By tapping into every citizen's cellphone, he is able to co-op the panoptic system into his own venue of spectatorship and oversight. Bruce/Batman *acts* through his performances of both billionaire and

vigilante, but he simultaneously *watches* over all of Gotham, whether by standing over rooftop spires or spying on millions of people through various devices. Not only does Bruce/Batman upstage all other actors, but he also 'out-spectates' all other spectators, all made possible by his privileged status and 'no limits' philosophy. Only he can traverse the boundary between stage and balcony, actor and audience. Only he can play hero.

If only Bruce can be wealthy, ideally masculine, and super-abled, how can others aspire to the same heroism as he does through Batman? If the role of true, epic theatricality and dramatic example is "the filling-in of the orchestra pit" so that spectators can take part in the spectacle, so that the audience can join the actors on stage, then Bruce fails in his mission of inspiring Gotham's citizens (Benjamin 22). He instead excludes them, only further separating the role of hero and symbolic good from the masses. Although Bakhtin provides us with a utopian society in which all citizens, from high and low, are made equal through the carnival, this carnivalesque utopia cannot exist in Gotham City. As long as Bruce/Batman remains the pinnacle of wealth, masculinity, and ability and the only one who can embody the hero and symbolic good, he excludes everyone else from participating. Only he can act for the sake of saving his city; only he can be the hero, contrary to his mantra, "A hero can be anyone" (*Rises*). Even as John "Robin" Blake takes up the mantle of the Batman in the conclusion of the trilogy in *The Dark Knight Rises*, Bruce Wayne retires having left only one inspired citizen in the role of hero while Gotham seemingly resets to the "performance" of normative socioeconomic and political hegemony. This is a departure from Frank Miller's original ending in the comics, in which Bruce forms a cult-like following of other Bat-men and allows them to participate in his war on crime (*The Dark Knight Returns*). *The Dark Knight Trilogy*, however, neither aims at nor advocates for the active participation of the masses—Gotham's citizens, as the trilogy's

conclusion suggests, will always remain passive observers to the heroism of Batman. Blake, alone, is elevated on the stage just before the credits roll.

Conclusion

Batman and his villains put on spectacles of terror, violence, and action on the theatrical, carnivalesque stage of Gotham. Their mission is to invite Gotham's passive citizen-spectators to take part in their spectacles. Ra's Al Ghul, the Joker, and Bane utilize Gotham as a carnival, not to create a social utopia, but to destroy all sense of society; there is no intention to reform society at all. Yet, their acts of terrorism still require the active participation of citizens who play a vital role in how these spectacles play out. On the other hand, while Bruce Wayne hopes to inspire citizens to engage in civic action in order to rid Gotham of crime and corruption, his privileged status as a wealthy-straight-white-male raises his heroism to an ideal that no other ordinary citizen can possibly fulfill, ultimately preventing and excluding all of Gotham from participating. Despite his political fundraising efforts for district attorney Harvey Dent, Bruce even fails in inspiring Dent himself, who descends into his own corrupt morality and abandons his faith in the law. Indeed, Bruce believes that fighting crime as Batman is enough of an inspiration, and there are instances of this, such as when both the innocent civilians and convicted felons on the ferries prove that Gotham "is full of people ready to believe in good" (*The Dark Knight*). But what Bruce fails to recognize is that crime is a result of social disparity. As Ra's at one point states, "create enough hunger and everyone becomes a criminal" (*Batman Begins*). He may have devoted years of his life to his mission as Batman, but he hasn't done much with his example as billionaire Bruce Wayne. He refuses to take Alfred's advice, "this city needs Bruce Wayne. Your resources, your knowledge" (*Rises*). Alfred urges Bruce to turn over his technology and crime-

fighting tools to the police, but Bruce remarks, "One man's tool is another man's weapon" (*Rises*). Indeed, his attempt to create a machine for sustainable energy ultimately becomes a nuclear bomb. And when he retires as Batman, he escapes to Florence with Selena Kyle, leaving Gotham behind with Wayne Manor serving as the city's orphanage, a generous gesture, yet one that does not directly address the root of Gotham's problem of poverty and crime.

Even in this moment of coronavirus, the spring of 2020, the themes of status and class conflict become apparent in discussions surrounding nonessential and essential workers, the clamor for food and resources in grocery stores and supermarkets, concerns over healthcare coverage, seismic unemployment rates, and many more "real social conditions." The disaster event of the coronavirus pandemic—the global number of deaths and diagnoses, the lockdowns enacted by nations worldwide, the uncertain pause of society and its various moving parts—have exaggerated the already present systemic problems of society and its infrastructures. While doctors and nurses, grocery store workers and delivery drivers are pronounced "heroes," some view these comments as facetious and obtrusive of true social reform rather than advocating for it. In the writing of this thesis, the foreseeable future and to what extent this pandemic will lead to real social changes are unknown. The problems presented in Nolan's Batman films are still ever-present, even in this age of billionaires. Is there a "dramatic example" to be found in all this?

Perhaps the lesson of *The Dark Knight Trilogy* can be found in Bruce Wayne's original mission statement: "People need dramatic examples to shake them out of apathy. I can't do that as Bruce Wayne. As a man, I'm flesh and blood, I can be ignored, destroyed. But as a symbol . . . As a symbol, I can be incorruptible. I can be everlasting. . . . Something elemental, something terrifying" (*Batman Begins*). Bruce's belief in dramatic example as a source of inspiration and

social change is indeed warranted—Bertolt Brecht, Antonin Artaud, and Mikhail Bakhtin say as much. Brecht calls the epic theatre "a powerful movement in society which is interested to see vital questions freely aired with a view to their solution" (76). This social inquiry may be sparked by spectacles of terror and cruelty, as Artaud writes, "Without an element of cruelty at the root of every spectacle, the theater is not possible" (99). And in regard to the performance of carnival, Bakhtin asserts, "Carnival was the true feast of time, the feast of becoming, change, and renewal" (10). The keyword here is "change." While Bruce insists that he "can't do that as Bruce Wayne," he also insists on becoming a symbol that represents the total opposite of change, that which is "incorruptible" and "everlasting." This is where Bruce's crusade as Batman falls short and why Gotham's crime and poverty persist. As the dramatic example of Batman and in his performance of a careless, hedonistic billionaire, Bruce upholds rather than abolishes the systems of oppression at work in Gotham. Bruce, believing so much in his idealistic dramatic example of Batman, refuses to address the real social conditions as the person who he is, one of Gotham's citizens. Rather than becoming the ideal example of an active citizen that Gotham so needs (without a mask), he turns 'Bruce Wayne' into a performance and alibi for his superhero alter ego. In *Batman Begins*, Bruce tells Rachel, "[You] Can't change the world on your own." "What choice do I have," Rachel replies, "when you're too busy swimming?" (*Batman Begins*). To reiterate Alfred's words, Gotham does not need Batman, "this city needs Bruce Wayne." The true example of heroism lies not in costumes, gadgets, and superheroics, but in the everyday acts of an individual citizen doing his civic duty. *You can change the world on your own.*

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