



Warner Bros.

Knight Terrors

Batman's selling tickets—and a muddled political message about the paranoia of our age and the politics of fear

BY R. C. BAKER

Remember how nervous we were pre-Y2K, how worried the whole world was about apocalypse at the hands of incompetent (or was it malevolent?) Microsoft engineers? Oh, how innocent that millennial run-up to the prosperous tail end of the 20th century seems today. Back then, Batman's most feared nemesis was Jack Nicholson, his familiar, hedonistic rictus beaming through the Joker's whiteface. Never really scary, the Batman franchise of the late '80s through the '90s featured a gaggle of bankable stars thrill-riding through gorgeous set designs.

Post-9/11, we live with the fear of actual terrorist attacks, heightened by our nation's flailing reaction to them, a murky muddle of good vs. evil spotlighted by everybody's favorite summer blockbuster, *The Dark Knight*. In a recent NPR interview, when asked whether the escalating chaos engulfing Gotham City at the hands of a murderously anarchic Joker might be a metaphor for the roller-coaster violence in Iraq, director Christopher Nolan demurred: "Hopefully, there's stuff in the movie that resonates, but we try and be a little accidental with that."

"Accidentally like a martyr," as Warren Zevon would say. Heath Ledger's sui generis terrorist sparks *The Dark Knight*'s enthralling cinematic pyrotechnics; his Joker sports a mendacious autobiography, a criminal organization as proficient as any Bond villain's, and so little concern for money that he gleefully burns a huge pyramid of cash. Offering visceral insights—"I'm an agent of chaos, and you know the thing about chaos? It's fair"—the Joker believes so fervently in his cause of splendiferous anarchy that he wears a DIY suicide vest to a meeting of criminal war-

lords. Possessed of a full complement of grotesque tics—stabbing tongue worrying labile lips, makeup that's half Droogic, half black-metal corpse paint—he terrorizes the populace, broadcasting a hand-held jihadi-style video in which he forces a Batman copycat to confess his transgressions prior to execution. The Joker's weapons (rocket-propelled grenades, gasoline bombs, cell-phone detonators) are cribbed from an unconventional warrior's handbook, but it's his willingness to cross over the lines of conventional warfare by targeting civilians or using them as human shields that drives Christian Bale's ramrod-straight, if emotionally wobbly, Batman to use every trick on his utility belt to end the carnage.

We've always cheered on this benevolent psychopath, confident that his crusade against crime—forged in his murdered parents' blood and carried on with their bequest of honest billions—will be fought within the bounds of civilization, if at its most brutal frontiers. Batman needs no gun, only his superbly trained body, brilliant mind, and non-lethal gadgets to bring cowardly thugs to justice. But the Joker proves a malignant wild card that turns the entire city into a war zone. With the rules in flux, what surfaces is tit-for-tat torture: the Joker threatening to carve up guests at a dinner party if they don't reveal the whereabouts of crusading District Attorney Harvey Dent; cops looking the other way as the Dark Knight administers a righteous beat-down to the cackling mastermind; moral linchpin Dent first threatening to shoot a suspect and then, later, horribly mutilated and deranged with grief, embarking on an extra-judicial killing spree.

When Batman drops an informant from a fire escape, we can perhaps view the act as battlefield excess—the physical coercion of combatants with potential knowledge of ticking time bombs. But when we see our hero silhouetted against the remains of bombed buildings, with smoke, blackened girders, arcing water, and heroic firemen in the background,

Heath Ledger's jihadi Joker

there's no doubt we're at Ground Zero, and the ante's been upped. As on that unforgettable day in 2001, the citizens congregate before screens, watching live reports and news crawls, and soon the bridges and tunnels are being swept for explosives and the National Guard has begun herding the populace out of the city.

And that's where the movie asks America a question: Will you sacrifice your privacy, accept surveillance of every phone call, as if you were a villain, in order to snare terrorists? Bruce Wayne's sage tech genius, Morgan Freeman's Lucius Fox, threatens to resign over his employer's localized version of the Bush administration's real-life Total Information Awareness program (renamed Terrorism Information Awareness in 2003, and long embroiled in congressional battles). But when the Joker sets out to prove that we are his equals in our capacity for evil by providing two sets of hostages with the means to kill each other to save themselves, Fox reluctantly

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agrees to its one-time use. Ultimately, the People, including a group of hardened jailbirds, prove the Joker wrong, refusing to yield to the law of tooth and claw even if their lack of savagery might cost them their lives. (The director has placed this scene on two river ferries, driving home the point that we're all in the same boat.)

In the end, we have Batman, desperate to be better than his nemesis. But after enduring horrible sacrifices (his beloved ex-girlfriend is one of the Joker's victims), the Dark Knight agonizes over whether he's become too much like his enemy.

Sound familiar?