BENEATH THE CAPE AND COWL: BATMAN AND THE REVITALIZATION
OF COMIC BOOK FILMS

A Thesis
Presented to
The Honors Tutorial College
Ohio University

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for Graduation
from the Honors Tutorial College
with the degree of
Bachelor of Science in Media Arts and Studies

by
Justin Lucas
June 2009
This thesis has been approved by

The Honors Tutorial College and the School of Media Arts and Studies

___________________________
Dr. Jenny Nelson
Professor, Media Studies
Thesis Advisor

___________________________
Dr. Arthur Cromwell
Professor, Media Studies
Honors Tutorial College Director of Studies, Media Arts and Studies

___________________________
Dr. Harold Molineu
Dean, Honors Tutorial College
## Contents

Acknowledgements .......................................................... p. 4

Introduction ........................................................................ p. 5
  Why a Batman Thesis? ...................................................... p. 6
  Structural Breakdown of the Thesis ................................. p. 8

Research Methods
Overview ........................................................................... p. 13
  Structural Mythology ..................................................... p. 18
  Genre and Culture Studies ............................................ p. 23
  Continuity ........................................................................ p. 27
  Revisionism ...................................................................... p. 30

Film-to-Film Comparison
Overview ........................................................................... p. 35
  Themes of Burton’s and Nolan’s Batman ......................... p. 39
    Tim Burton’s *Batman* ............................................... p. 40
    Christopher Nolan’s *Batman Begins* ......................... p. 43
    Christopher Nolan’s *The Dark Knight* ....................... p. 49
  Music and Visualization ................................................ p. 57

Comic-to-Film Comparison
Overview ........................................................................... p. 62
  *Batman* ........................................................................ p. 64
  Christopher Nolan’s *Batman Begins* and *The Dark Knight*
    *Batman Begins* ....................................................... p. 70
    *The Dark Knight* .................................................... p. 77

Comic Book Films as a Whole ............................................. p. 84

Conclusion ........................................................................... p. 89

Works Cited .......................................................................... p. 92
Acknowledgements

I would like to thank everyone who helped make this thesis possible, but I don’t have enough room. I’ll try my best anyway. Thanks to Dean Fidler and Mama Jan for giving me the go-ahead to do the biggest paper of my life on comic books. Enjoyment is key to good learning, so thanks for always letting us have fun. Thanks to Kathy White and everyone else in the HTC Office for helping me figure out how this thing is supposed to look. Thanks to Dr. Art Cromwell for guiding us along the way in TCOM. At this juncture, I can’t imagine a more convivial Director of Studies. Thanks to Dr. Jenny Nelson for agreeing to be my tutorial professor so many times, for taking on this project with me as my thesis advisor and for talking me down when this thesis looked like WAY too daunting of a task. Special thanks to Dan Aldridge, Editor Supreme, for putting in so many hours fixing this thing with the perfect mixture of harshness and jocularity. Thanks to all the great friends that have built into my life these past four years; there are too many of you to name on one page. Thanks to my parents, Clyde and Teri Lucas, for helping me stay afloat with cash, cookies and calls throughout my tenure at Ohio University. Thanks to my fiancé, Brittany Hughes, for keeping me sane through the thesis process. And finally, thanks be to God, who makes even the greatest superhero look weak in comparison. I hope you all enjoy.
Introduction

Superheroes are back and better than ever. Admittedly, most people would say that they never left, but the critical disdain and public apathy with which they were treated during the 1980s and early 90s left them skulking in the shadows of popular culture, relegated to the cultural backwash of cult followings. What an ignominious fate for a group of characters that so fascinates the human spirit. While he may not have envisioned the Green Lantern or Martian Manhunter in his studies, Nietzsche was consumed by the idea of an Ubermensch, a person who defied both the natural and moral laws of humanity to better the lives of all. More overtly, Joseph Campbell was drawn to that central narrative that runs through all good stories, a Hero's Journey, a quest for peace. To him, Superman found an outlet in every story; a superhero by any other name is still super. From the most respected scholar to the simplest student, the idea of supermen and women filled our dreams in childhood and embodied our hopes in adulthood. Yet because the public desires for quality and realism were not being matched by the creativity of the presenters, comic book superheroes and comic book films in particular had lost their superhuman grip on society.

Thus, superhero films fell into the fog of cultural apathy, where the quality of work created could not live up to the expectations of the masses. And while the shadows may be a natural habitat for characters like Batman, it
is certainly not where publishers, writers and filmmakers wanted such powerful cultural icons to languish. It would take not only the strongest but also the most human superhero to pull comic book films back from the brink, and that combination could only be found in the dark and gripping tale of the Batman. Interestingly enough, Batman has led the Charge of the Fight Brigade out of the society's doldrums not once but twice, first with Tim Burton's masterful standard of gothic filmmaking *Batman* and more recently with Christopher Nolan's hyper-realistic envisioning of the Caped Crusader in *Batman Begins* and *The Dark Knight*. Over the years, Batman has been a fan favorite in the superhero realms, and his characterization has fluctuated from over-the-top camp to near-criminal violence. This varied continuity, coupled with his salvation of the superhero film industry, makes him the most important and interesting subject within the field and puts him at the heart of comic book film studies, and this study in particular.

**Why a Batman Thesis?**

Comic book study is not in itself a new phenomenon. I have seen panel-by-panel breakdowns of comic books. I have seen frame-by-frame analyses of films. What I have not seen is a study of how the two concepts have merged into one medium: the comic book film. Like McLuhan's concept of rearview mirrorism, although every new medium comes out of an older one,
they should not be confused with one another (McLuhan, 1964). In this sequel-heavy era of filmmaking, new visualizations come implicitly from synthesizing old stories into a new format, and no one seems to be studying how this has occurred in the sudden wealth of comic book films. The canon of Batman films seems a natural starting point in such a study because of their importance in re-imagining the genre. First, the Tim Burton Batman movies revitalized an otherwise lackluster and dying subgenre called "superhero movies" in the 80s. More recently, the Christopher Nolan Batman movies have managed to break box office records while also veering the whole comic book/superhero film genre in an intriguing direction: toward dark, brooding and hyper-realistic character pieces, an interesting angle for men flying around in their underwear. Then there is the personal significance. Batman as a character has always been my favorite superhero, and I reveled in the chance to look into the psyche of the Bat and see what reflects back about me and the society I represent.

Certainly some of the Batman movies strayed away from the original Batman storyline. I wanted to know how, where and why that happened. Each of the movies has its own niche. Some are simply unbearably, some have a Gothic moodiness, some are camp for camp's sake, and some really comment on humanity as a whole. Interestingly, the ones that follow the Batman comic book story most closely are those that say the most profound
things about society in general. When we see Gotham City as a microcosm of our own world, with all its contradictions and eccentricities, we truly start to connect with the character. I think Batman walks that line of realism best because his self-sacrifice, self-training and lack of superpowers make him as normal as any super-billionaire playboy who saw his parents gunned down at an early age could feel to us. So to summarize, I'm writing this thesis to my fellow scholars who want to see how the pieces of the Batman mythology have been sutured together from comic book script to silver screen. We want to know why Batman is who he is on both the page and the film, and we want to understand what has changed from one to the other and why. This is for scholars researching comparative media; this is for semiotic analyzers of film and comics alike; this is for Batman fans who want to see how their favorite character has changed for better and for worse in a new medium; and this is for me, because I want to know what twisted part of my psyche makes a ruthless, violent vigilante like Batman so darn fascinating to a mild-mannered media studies undergrad like myself. I am apparently not the only one... just the only one to look into it.

**Structural Breakdown of the Thesis**

This project attempts to synthesize everything Batman—and in a way, everything superhero—from the past 70 years into one composite source of
information. Sifting through decades of writing, reviews and research and filtering them all into a singular idea means that some things necessarily must be passed over for the sake of streamlining. So while there is much to be said about the Jungian ramifications of superheroes and the fine line they tread between good and evil, or each protagonist's place in Campbell's pantheon of Heroes on a Journey, this project will focus only briefly on those aspects. Instead, I will focus more on the source-to-source comparison of comic books and films and how a story like Batman's moves from medium to medium, from writer to director, from page layout to cinematography. Everyone sees superheroes in a slightly different light, and the medium in which they are portrayed greatly affects how each artist can tell the Batman story, so there is a rich opportunity for comparison from one medium to another.

There is also a great opportunity to see how artists within the same medium can take the same story, the same character, and yet create such diverse final products. Here, we must look at the motivation that drives each director and writer, and often that motivation toward creativity can be seen in studying the creation itself. Director Christopher Nolan had a different vision than director Tim Burton. They both had the same raw materials to work with, a Batman canon and continuity from which each director could pull different aspects of the Dark Knight's psyche. Yet, they each came up with completely different takes on the subject at hand. Why? Certainly, they were not
unaware of all that came before, so there must have been a conscious effort to move away from the known quantities of Batman's story and to add their own twists on the same story that has existed since 1939. That is the brilliance of the knowledge community: the ability to maintain a single storyline while still seeing it from different angles. Those different views of the same thing then insert themselves back into the community and become a part of the canon in their own right. Everything is interrelated: the first comic books, the early television movies, the graphic novels, the films. Everyone is telling the same story about the same character, yet everyone's story skews slightly different, shedding new light on an old tale. There is both a necessary call for novelty and an inherent dependence on the story material that has come before. That is what this paper will focus on: that strange convergence of telling the same story again and again, where it is new every time because of the medium through which it is portrayed and the artist who portrays it.

In particular, this paper will look at how comic books and films have been studied in the past. Because of the breadth and depth of comic book history, most researchers look at only one aspect of the media. For example, some studies looked at how psychoanalysis could illuminate the characters of comic books and their films. Others looked at the history of superhero storytelling, from the Golden Age to the Silver Screen. Still others studied how comic books affected the sociology of readers, creating a comic book
subculture completely immersed in the infinitesimal details of their favorite heroes. All of this research has found pieces of the puzzle regarding what makes superheroes tick, but it has yet to be applied in a comparison of comic books and the films that they inspire. Just as comic books films are based on the stories that come before, so my research flows from those that came before, and the first part of my paper is thus an homage to that past.

From there, I will jump to the present and compare how different Batman films have treated the material of the Batman mythos. While storytellers must necessarily share certain aspects of the story, each film and filmmaker focuses on certain parts of the Batman's story, and this portion of the research will point out what parts are focused upon and why. Why is Christopher Nolan's Batman so much darker than Joel Schumacher's version? How does Nolan's take on the Joker compare to Tim Burton's vision? More importantly, what motivated each of these storytellers to focus on the things they did? These comparisons will shed light on the filmmaking styles, the writing and the characterizations used by each director to see how the same character Batman can appear so different based on subtle changes in the director's adaptation.

One major factor in the differences between films is how each director approached the ongoing continuity of the Batman comics. Comparing comics with the films they have spawned will prove useful in seeing what parts of
Batman's story were integral to Batman's characterization. Each director paid his own level of attention to detail in telling the Batman story as it "really happened" according to the comics, and it is important to understand why certain things changed in the move from comic book to film. To do so, I will look at the comic books that most influenced the filmmakers and compare the comics and graphic novels to their analog in the films. This will shed new light on the adaptation process and how directors attempt to be both original in their creativity and faithful to the stories that have come before them.

In the end, all of these disparate cords of thought must be joined together to describe why Batman in particular has arguably proven to be the most important superhero to move from comic book to movies. In comparing the theories of past researchers to the media comparisons made necessary by the many film adaptations of Batman comics, I plan to explore some conclusions about the themes, production values and characterization in Batman storylines that make them ideal entertainment for our fluid culture. Batman has existed in one medium or another for 70 years, and over that time, his story has weathered difficulties in both his world and ours, from poor writers to a political uprising against comic books in general. In all things, Batman has remained a constant guardian on the superhero horizon, and he continues today to shape the focus and future of comic books and comic book
films. Thus, in the final portion of this paper, I shall explicate how and why he is still changing the landscape of comic books and their films to this day.

RESEARCH METHODS

Overview:

As with all media, the study of comic books and comic book films allows myriad research methods to deconstruct the meanings behind each panel and gutter, frame and edit. However, since the comic book film phenomenon is relatively new in its popularity, many researchers have yet to streamline their research styles into distinct avenues of study. Because film draws ideas from such a wide variety of disciplines, researchers in comic books and film have compiled a diverse collection of methods for defining what makes the four-color world tick. Geoff Klock, in the introductory chapter of his book *How to Read Superhero Comics and Why*, breaks these methods down into several overarching categories before adding his own theory to the mix. (Klock, 2002)

Perhaps the earliest approach to theoretical comic book research was to consider the psychological and sociological constructs within the texts to discover a single overarching story or character type at the core of each superhero tale. Klock calls this category “structural mythology,” which includes the works of social scientists and psychologists like Carl Jung, Sigmund Freud and Joseph Campbell to the psyches of superheroes. In these
works, the Supermen became Ubermensch, superwomen became projected psychoanalytic fantasy, and every hero took the same journey time and again. It was the dawning of a new era in media research as, for the first time, the world deemed comic books to have intellectual merit. Granted, structural mythology in some ways meant that the merit of comics was based solely on their comparisons to existing narrative theories rather than on their own commentary on how the world operates, but at the very least, this early study of superhero theory and mythology opened up the study of comics as a legitimate form of research. Comic book writers had often meant for their works to be a reflection of society as a whole, characters elevated to the heights of man’s hopes pitted against antagonists from the depths of his existence. It was more than just a spurious portrayal of good vs. evil as a simple binary opposition; it was reality reflected in colorful panels for the world to consider and enjoy, and structural mythology was the most popular research method for bringing this intelligent reflection to light.

As comic books came to the fore of academia, researchers began to dig more deeply into comics’ past to discover how they had developed and what hidden knowledge was stored in the ancient back copies of the popular characters of the day. Klock refers to this research as “cultural histories” of comic books, peering into the earliest reaches of a story’s arc to better understand how it works now. In most cases, this kind of historical research
does not theorize the motives of a superhero but simply traces his or her lineage back to its earliest form. Cultural histories pay special attention to things like the authorship of a particular character, how that author affected or amended the characterization of that superhero story and how the superhero has passed through each author and grown over time. For example, a cultural history of Captain America probably would not examine the psychological status of the Captain as a representation of American “might makes right” mentality. Instead, it would trace how that character has developed over the years: born in World War II as a propaganda piece for American pride, he remained quiet until the 1960s when the Vietnam War reinvigorated the character’s while at the same time making him question the country for which he stands (Goulart, 2004). In short, cultural histories interrogate the stories that over time have built a character into the superhero he or she is. The histories do not necessarily pass judgment on these developments but merely lay them out for other researchers to analyze. Cultural histories demonstrate how a fictional history can be just as complex and enlightening as a real one.

Klock also describes a category he calls “cultural studies,” a level of research that does not look as closely at the text itself as it does the world’s response to that text (Klock, 2002). This research can include aspects from the production process, the texts themselves and the way in which the audience interprets each new level of the story. Understanding how the public
reacts to a new character or a particular plot twist in a story is crucial to comic book publishers and media trend watchers who must continue to create novel books and films for the fan base without ignoring the storied histories. In this way, comic books are more in tune with their fans than any other medium.

With a month’s time between each new edition in a comic books series, publishers and researchers have time to analyze how the readership responded to the previous story and then address that reaction directly in the next book. This application of cultural studies allows creator’s more control of their medium. By using the interregnum between issues to better understand the expectations of their audience, the creative minds behind a story can shape it to most effectively reflect that fan base.

On a broader scale, cultural studies tracks the trends of the industry, which in turn reflect the trends of society as a whole. For example, comic books have often been criticized for their use of violence and sensuality to entice readers. However, if comic books act as a reflection of society, then the levels of sex and violence within their colored pages do nothing more than show society’s tolerance for those self-same things. If the readership is deeply offended, research will discover this between writings, and the story will change accordingly. It is a self-policing system, and cultural studies stands as a research method that can consider both how issues are portrayed within the context of the story and how issues are received and acted upon by the
industry and by society. This study of trends within comic books is so important to society that Alan Moore pays homage to it in his seminal graphic novel *Watchmen*. In it, superhero Ozymandias makes his fortune by tracking the trends of culture in commercial advertisements, then buying and selling stock based on those trends. In a subtle way, Moore is winking at the great power inherent in the cultural study of supposedly “childish” comic books. It may not necessarily make us all rich, but it does provide the world with a wealth of knowledge about what we consume and who we are because of it.

On top of these three categories, Klock adds a fourth way of studying comic books: literature review. He specifically wants to move away from structural mythology because it compares all superhero comics to one singular story, as if they cannot stand on their own. As he quips in his Introduction, “this study will not conclude that Superman, Batman and Wonder Woman are the thousand-and-first, -second and -third faces of Campbell’s monomythical ‘Hero with a Thousand Faces’” (Klock, 2002). Instead, Klock uses the rest of his book to comment on the poignancy of writing and art in some of the best-reviewed comic books of the last thirty years. In his study, he traces the superhero’s historical journey from the classical period into the more recent revisionist period. It is not, however, a cultural history either. While it does follow a specific trajectory through the history of comics, *How to Read Superhero Comics and Why* is far from a simple recording of what has
happened previously. It is a deep and probing attempt to discover the key moments in comic books that have shaped superheroes into what they are today. Klock does this by focusing on each comic book as its own story, its own work of art, and studying them with the care and reverence that other researchers have used to divine the meanings in Chaucer, Shakespeare and Jane Austin. In short, his research method is simply to study the great works of comic book literature as literature and to generalize the meanings and trends of all current comic books from his critiques.

**Structural Mythology:**

While Klock may not have been a fan of Joseph Campbell's Monomyth theory, all the caped crusaders of the comic book world fall directly under the purview of Campbell's study. Perhaps because the correlation is so obvious, many researchers have traced each superhero's journey along Campbell's Hero's Journey. Superheroes, particularly those that come from the Golden and Silver Ages of comic books, offer up the perfect combination of preternatural abilities and very human ideals, morals, and lifestyles. From Superman's miraculous birth and flight to earth to Bruce Wayne's trials and tests in preparing to become the hooded vigilante Batman, comic book heroes give us a "modern mythology," as Richard Reynolds says, where the natural and supernatural meet in one group of uncanny individuals, Superman as
Apollo and Hercules, Batman as Athena and Mars (Reynolds, 1994). Comic book writers themselves are not ignorant of this comparison, and they strengthen their works with references to the mythologies of old in the heroes of the new. Hawkman, for one, is a specific iteration of Egyptian mythology. At the utterance of the word "Shazam," Billy Batson becomes Captain Marvel, a superhero with the "power of Zeus, the courage of Achilles and the speed of Mercury.” Even more overt is the superhero Thor, whose mighty hammer comes directly from halls of Valhalla and Norse mythology. All of these can and have been broken down to their monomythical roots, and the idea of a single storyline threaded through all the fictions of the world has garnered much popular interest based on works by Joseph Campbell and Russian theorist Vladimir Propp (Campbell, 1968; Propp, 1968). However, while this monomyth informs us about how we view continuity and our expectations for characters, it is far from the only way in which superhero stories can develop. Just as there are many heroes' journeys to dissect, many other research methods inform our current academic view of comic books.

Another popular methodology for superhero study looks less at the characters' storylines and more into the inner workings of their minds. Researchers like James Iaccino and William Indick look at structural mythology not from a physical standpoint but as a reflection of society's psychological tendencies (Iaccino, 1998; Indick, 2004). Turning the combined
works of Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung on the psyches of superheroes provides us with interesting feedback on the ideologies of both creators and consumers of comics. It is from this psychoanalysis that we get the notions of superheroes as complex cognitive organisms rather than cut-and-dry visions of "truth, justice and the American Way." Iaccino for example views Batman as a representation of multiple neuroses: voyeurism, fascism, fetishes (Iaccino, 1998). Much confusion exists about which identities each character wants to put forward, which face should be shown in which circumstances. Guilt is also an overarching theme in many comic book heroes. Because of their life situations, these characters are a result of more than just overdeveloped muscles but overdeveloped superegos as well. They believe that only they can stop the death of loved ones, and that a failure to do so falls on their mighty shoulders alone. Superheroes represent for us an external vision of the internal struggle between superiority and inferiority, complexes that everyone feels in one way or another. In short, we as consumers of superhero lore use these characters as vessels into which we can project our own fears, loves and goals. Understanding this psychological transferal of emotions is of great use in understanding both the characters within superhero narratives and the people who embrace them. Thus, forays into the sociological and psychological realm of superheroes help facilitate a better understanding of comic book media as a whole.
One can also combine the two realms—Campbell's Monomyth and the psychoanalysis of characters—to find what archetypes and themes run through the core of each superhero story. The superhero and hero's journey archetypes have been set in stone since Campbell's *Hero with a Thousand Faces*, but certainly the hero isn't the only focus of so broad a story arc, nor are all superheroes created equal. Some, for example, fit more of an anti-hero archetype like The Hulk and Batman, who borrow from characters like Frankenstein’s Monster and Dracula respectively (LoCicero, 2008). There are times when consumers have difficulty separating these characters' ids and superegos. While we understand that the primal instincts of the Hulk are being used to bring about "good" by destroying the "bad guys," we also understand that such actions like crushing someone's head in with a car would definitely be deemed wrong in any other situation. So there is a disconnect between what we know is right and good (our superego) and what we want to see happen based on our biases and urges (our id). We also see the archetype of "villain" as an obvious representation of the id—uncontrolled, lawless, allowed to do whatever it pleases until suppressed by the ego or superego. So when Batman is ruthlessly pummeling the Joker, we get both a rush from knowing that the "bad guy" is getting what he deserves, but if we stop and think about it, we also have an understanding that this form of punishment is beyond what we would allow under any normal circumstances.
The villain is obviously a representation of the id, but why then is the superhero also appealing to our baser senses? The superhero then acts as a dual representative of the superego and the id, the good and the evil in society and in our own personalities. It is this contrast of characters and archetypes that draws us into the story, and it is important for us to realize what is taking place in order that we better understand why it is happening.

One final theory used quite a bit in studying media is that of Marshall McLuhan and his idea that the "Medium is the Message" (McLuhan, 1964). McLuhan put forward that we should look first and foremost at the medium in which an idea is broadcast. Only then can we understand how the message is connecting with the audience, what it is trying to convey and how best we can use it to our advantage. Perhaps the most important reason to include this theory in a study of comic book films is because there are multiple versions of media under scrutiny here, and each gives a reflexive look at all prior media. Each medium is intrinsically related to and dependent on the medium that came before it, and nowhere can this relation be seen more clearly than in comics. The genius of graphic novels like The Dark Knight Returns is that they use one medium (comic book panels on page) to represent other broadcasting formats like television news. There is a direct representation of what has gone before as portrayed by a medium that has itself been around for centuries. How does one show on paper what happens on a television
set? Not only how can we project the idea but why? What does it add to the storyline to be able to represent other media formats? By conglomerating them, we have the potency of multiple formats all coming from one source. Graphic novels, then, can loose both the power of the printed word and a representation of moving images and sound as well. Taking it a step further, movies are then made out of graphic novels, and we have even further layering of media representations. A film can now show a shot of a television broadcast that is based on a twelve-frame set of pictures used in a graphic novel that are in turn referencing a fictional television broadcast of the superheroes. This could go to yet another level with the creation of a graphic novelization of the film itself or the creation of fan fiction based on the characterization put forth in the movie. Each level of media is self-reflexive and intertextual, which allows stories to form about the same superheroes across multiple genres, created by different authors and written at different times. This knowledge community then expands to include the consumer as well, who can then also take part in the creation process. Thus, McLuhan's theory may very well find its most convincing evidence in this relatively new genre of comic book films.

**Genre and Cultural Studies:**

Another take on superheroes comes from researchers like Mila Bongco,
who have taken the framework of genre and cultural studies and applied it to comic books. These researchers examine the structural elements that make up the superhero stories as a whole and the recognizable patterns therein (Bongco, 2000). Genre then becomes a framework of archetypes that helps readers connect with a storyline based on experience with similar (but not the same) materials. They begin with the idea that all works grow out of previous works and the rules created for those genres; thus genres work as a set of traditions and rules that bind together a particular style of creation. Superhero comics, for example, can be fairly simple and repetitive in their narrative structure because that is what people expect. Writers cannot make a superhero story where the superhero does not have anyone to fight, so publishers have to keep trotting out similar story lines to keep people happy. However, these rules are fluid, so new mediums and stories can bend, break or specifically heighten certain parts of a text that make it a part of a "genre". The "codes" by which genres are created and sustained change as readers become more knowledgeable of the medium’s norms. When everyone understands the rules, then writers can start making variations. Thus, genres are also flexible systems that represent the mutual expectations of author and audience.

In comics, those expectations shift quickly and frequently to remain culturally relevant. Since comics are published in short bursts at regular
intervals, they can negotiate and reflect the world’s changes in real-time, meaning that the atmosphere in which each comic is published fuels expectations of the genre. Captain America’s popularity ebbed and flowed with the tides of war, faring well at the end of WWII, falling from favor between wars, and again gaining social currency when Vietnam began. There is a strong intertextuality in comics as well, particularly because the short stories require elaborate histories developed in chunks over time. Because characters from one series and one publisher can be easily crossed over into other series, major events become a part of the histories of each character involved. In other words, lots of information about a character is disseminated in little doses for long periods of time, meaning that everything new has to play off of expectations that have arisen very recently in the story arc. For comic book writers, the month-long interval between publications gives them time to receive reader feedback, learn what expectations have arisen and tailor the continuing saga to either enforce or break those expectations in a very short turnover time.

This indirect control of reader response then puts the reins of direct control into the hands of each specific writer and artist in a series. The characterization of a protagonist by a particular author enters irrevocably into the canon of that character's psyche and the perception with which he or she is viewed. As such, authors and artists have the opportunity to move their
characters and in fact, the whole genre of superhero stories into a new realm with each storyline. Frank Miller’s writing in the *Daredevil* series of comic books and later in the Batman canon forced superheroes onto a more realistic stage. There, superheroes became suddenly more human, devolving from near-invincible demigods into confused, frightened and very real people carrying the world’s hopes and sins on their sagging shoulders. In this new world, the ink on the once black-and-white cartoon panel ran grey in the gutters of the page, washing with it the simple quips and easy solutions of early comics. Instead, superhero comics portrayed more realistic, contradictory situations where the superhero actually had to make a choice about right and wrong rather than just doing the obvious. We can see this shift happening again as comic books move *en masse* to film. Christopher Nolan’s interpretations of the Batman series and the recent release of the *Watchmen* adaptation have propelled comic book films irrevocably into uncharted and murky moral territory. Yet, by studying the evolution of the stories themselves, we find that this change is to be expected. The films are simply following the paths of the graphic novels from which they spawned. Comic book films are growing up.

Genre studies of superhero comics and films can lead us to more general questions about society based on patterns found in the media. This is where the field of cultural studies comes in. If we the consumers have at least
an indirect control of the stories’ themes and structures, then the final product also indirectly reflects our unexpressed opinions, hopes and fears. Comic books, like other mythologies, fictionalize what we as society would like to see in an ideal world. So, when our superheroes take the law into their own hands and bend, if not break, our usual codified rules against violence, coercion and using force against one another, is this a comment on the unavoidable problem with man-made laws? Is it a tribute to the fact that we as humans have at least some sense of a universal, internal sense of justice, right and wrong? In our minds, should things be as black and white as many superheroes make it? These are some of the questions raised by studying the patterns of the superhero genre, and they help to inform a comparative study of the comics and films in that genre by showing what expectations society has on these kinds of media.

**Continuity:**

The way we understand comic books and comic book characters is intrinsically shaped by our understanding of each character’s story. Over years and years of character and story development, many things about the personae dramatis may change: who they work with, the things they do, the people they meet, outfits, jargon, equipment, et cetera. However, there are also things that are considered inseparable from the character’s persona.
Even as characters develop over time, they still bear an indelible resemblance to most prior appearances. This consistency over the course of a story is known as "continuity," and it is extremely important to understanding the world of superheroes. In his book *Super Heroes: A Modern Mythology*, Reynolds delineated three kinds of continuity implicit to the comic book universe—serial continuity, hierarchical continuity, and structural continuity (Reynolds, 1994). Each has its importance to understanding how people connect with comic book heroes, whether on the page, the television or the movie screen.

Serial continuity is concerned with keeping the character/characters consistent with previous storylines. This allows different authors to tell a new story about a character or situation while keeping constant, subconscious track of all the history of the story including intertextual references, story arcs and characters’ psychological reactions in a given context. If any of these points change, it must be explainable to the audience, or it must be acknowledged as a major shift in the character’s history. In other words, the rules of the genre and of the character cannot be ignored without breaking the continuity. Sometimes, revision of a story line is exactly what the author wants to do, but it must be done explicitly and with an understandable reason.

Hierarchical continuity is a comparative study of characters and stories across the realm of comic books. In this, all superheroes are informally "ranked" on varying scales against all of other superheroes, and this
understanding shapes how and if certain characters can work together ideologically as a group. For example, Superman is stronger than Batman, Batman is perceived as smarter than Superman, and Green Arrow is more liberal than both of them. Effort can also be enumerated; Batman, who has no superpowers, is perceived to put in more effort than Superman, who has a plethora of them. Non-superhuman people are not included, even important characters in the story arc (Commissioner Gordon, Alfred, etc.) While it may seem arbitrary, this process has serious use for helping comic book writers decide how a particular action or pairing in their work will be received.

Structural continuity may be the most vague of the three. It is concerned with the unanswered, unwritten but understood gaps within superhero storylines. For example, because Superman has a father, he must naturally have a grandfather as well. Therefore, this kind of "fill in the blank knowledge" makes up a Bingo game for fans to play, trying to learn everything there is to know about their favorite characters and the stories in which they live. Also under structural continuity is the expectation of "real life." Because we inhabit a real world and the superhero characters supposedly inhabit the same world, we expect current events, the laws of physics and human nature to apply for anything in question. Thus, unless otherwise specified, structural continuity allows us to assume that gravity still exists, normal people have normal lives that they try to lead, governments try to run countries, and the
authors can exist as a part of that world. So, Superman can be imagined fighting Muhammad Ali or discussing plot points with the comic book author because they supposedly live on the same planet at the same time. This also creates the idea of ownership and eras in comic book writing. Since authors are considered a secondary part of the continuity, the understanding of the series is broken down according to who is/was writing or drawing at the time of each story. Thus, we have "Moore's Batman" and "Miller's Daredevil" as opposed to other versions to show that the writer has a direct effect on how the character is understood and how the continuity has been shaped. These authors are immortalized because they were entrusted with the continuity of a beloved character and stayed true to the previous continuity while taking the character in new directions.

**Revisionism:**

Revision in comic book characters has proven crucial to how readers understand themselves and the stories they read. According to Matthew Pustz in his study of *Comic Book Culture*, the storytelling of superheroes has followed the natural course from basic morality tales to complex social commentary in its seventy-odd years of popularity. As Pustz puts it, the superhero genre has developed just as every other literary genre before it has gone, from "primitive [Superman] to classical [Spiderman] to revisionist
Starting with the Golden Age of comics in the late 1930s and 40s, comic book superheroes represented a persona who could overcome all adversity and take the world by storm. However, he also had a secondary identity, one that allowed him to blend into a crowd. This is where we get the idea of the "real" person, like Clark Kent, being the Alter Ego to the character's true personality, in this case Superman. This thought process reversed, however, in the Silver Age, what Pustz refers to as the “classical” era. Here, the "real" persona was the main character in the action and only reluctantly did they take on the mantle of superhero. The important similarity between these characterizations is that these two egos, the "normal" and the "superhero," are separate and distinct. Each stands for a different aspect of a character's life, and each held different possibilities and disparate problems.

This understanding changed though with the evolution of a third aspect of superhero stories: the revisionist or postmodern take. Here, the ego and alter ego characterizations are merged, indistinct and confused. Often there is an internal struggle for the character in deciding which persona he will choose as his true "face." This confusion also manifests in his actions, which are often uncertain, unrealistic or contradictory. A perfect example of this disorientation is seen in the *Watchmen* character Rorschach. Rorschach has become so ingrained in his superhero alter ego that he can no longer separate it from his actual identity. He refers to his mask as his "face" and becomes
erratic when forced to separate the two. Revisionism can be applied as an interpretation of pre-existing characters as well. Part of the appeal of Christopher Nolan's Batman films is his interpretation of Batman as a man uncertain of his true persona: the billionaire playboy Bruce Wayne or the guardian vigilante Batman. These two personifications, Rorschach and Batman, are among the most important pieces in the development of the revisionist movement in comics, and that development is derived from two specific works: Frank Miller's *The Dark Knight Returns* (1986) and Alan Moore's *Watchmen* (1986-87).

*The Dark Knight Returns* and *Watchmen* work as the beginning of revisionist superhero stories, bringing out the brooding lethality of what superheroes do, not hiding behind the assumption that all must be "good" to achieve good. Is killing a single villain to save many innocents "good"? This dilemma is at the heart of revisionist comics. They act as a beginning rather than an end of questioning. What if an entire government was set up with the same authority and role that superheroes have? It would get the job done, perhaps, but it would have no checks and balances. Just as Batman is his own authority, so would such a government be. To go against it would be illegal and punishable as such, however the state deemed. In the comics, a lethally sharp Batarang in the head is as viable as a non-lethal bolo around the legs. If a nation governed in the same fashion, would it still be deemed viable
(Wandtke, 2007)?

Another issue raised by revisionism is whether we have not become over-fascinated by the idea of vigilante justice. If a justice system ran on the personal feelings of a single entity, it would no longer be justice but tyranny instead. In classical comic books, the entirety of justice falls on the whim of a single person, something that outside the comic books we will not abet. So, what is its allure in the four-color pages? Perhaps it is because of the understood boundaries of the genre that we allow this to occur. If we assume that the superhero, no matter what his flaws, always has the best motivations and ends in mind, then we feel safe and happy with the idea of him crushing iniquity however he can. In comic book superheroes, we see people doing impossible things, and we choose to suspend reality even more by saying that these people would do another impossible thing by always doing what is right in the end, by always putting the good of the world ahead of vengeance, pride, love, hate, fear, etc. We are fine with our superheroes being slightly flawed, but only because we understand that in the end, when the decisions matter, they will always be perfect.

That is why we need the revisionist comics. They subvert that expectation as juvenile, optimistic to a fault and evasive. Through comics, we attempt to foist all responsibility for a short time on a near-perfect being that will save a world that we ourselves cannot seem to fix. Superheroes are our
escape, our patriotism, perfection where we cannot be perfect. Revisionist comics like *Watchmen* take away that escapist notion and point out that there can be neither perfect people nor easy solutions. The unfortunate truth is that we have to make hard choices to right the wrongs in the world, and the deconstructionist comics prove it to us by tearing down the perfect facade in our imaginary worlds and showing the rot beneath. If comics are truly a reflection of our culture, then revisionist authors say they need to show a world where there is no simple fix. We look to the superhuman to fix what we cannot fix as humans, and the point of revisionism is that those supermen are still just men women in a messed-up world. This new run of superhero comics is depressing because it demands us to put our superheroes in a real world, with real problems and dying innocents and bad guys who don’t surrender in the face of insurmountable supermen. When the bad people would rather take as many lives with them than take the fall themselves, the inconvenient truth is that we want, we *need* a superhero that will take them down no matter what the psychological or even physical cost. That is what we have always celebrated in superheroes. That is why we love vigilantes. The only difference today is that the curtain has been pulled back, and if we force ourselves to look, we can see the carnage, the loss of life and innocence that our vigilante supermen necessitate.
FILM-TO-FILM COMPARISON

Overview:

Tim Burton's Batman films re-imagined the superhero role not as one with impossible superhuman powers but as the story of a man who has trained himself beyond the reach of normal men to combat the evil that threatens his city. The audience didn't want poorly animated superpowers or notoriously fake looking muscles, but a sincere look at how a real person would act if thrown into an extreme situation. Burton's Batman moved all superheroes from the realm of camp, schlock and sensationalism into reality. He unmasked Batman and allowed him to be Bruce Wayne so that the audience could see what makes a superhero choose to be super. While Richard Donner had taken a step toward this in 1978 with *Superman*, Burton brought it home with a gritty realism to his set design and a film noir visual sensibility. He brought the human element back into the word "superhuman."

What Christopher Nolan did to reignite the superhero genre was quite similar to Burton's tactic. With the advent of computer visual effects, superheroes in 21st century films could finally do all of the things that the audience imagined them doing, and filmmakers jumped on this development with vigor. Comic book films became a strong and continual cash cow for the movie industry, and the stories and effects became increasingly spectacular. However, this trend started a slide back toward the sensationalism that Burton
had worked so hard to suppress. The films had become a spectacle and a phenomenon in and of themselves without a comparable level of focus on the characterization that had drawn people to superheroes in the first place. Audiences were certainly entertained by displays like a levitating Golden Gate Bridge or explosive displays of mutant powers, but they were no longer enthralled by the story.

Nolan wanted to get back to the storytelling of superheroes that had birthed the genre and believed that this could be done without sacrificing visual brilliance. He did so by going back to the roots of the character, studying the comic books and bringing to life some of the ideas that had shaped the character of Batman into the terror of the night that he later became. From this study came *Batman Begins*, an almost scholarly look at the birth of the Batman and the scenarios that created the Caped Crusader. Realism is a key to understanding the character, and as such, Nolan focuses much of his storytelling not on the character Batman, but on his alter ego Bruce Wayne. There is an utter realism to his story—when Bruce falls, he gets hurt; when he is cut, he bleeds. Nolan makes the superhero more heroic by making him not more "super" but more human, and the masses responded overwhelmingly. He then directs that same hyperrealism at Batman’s archenemy, the Joker. If humanity could explain why a man stalks the city at night in a cape and cowl, then perhaps it could explain the anarchical glee of a
violent sociopath like Joker. Thus, *The Dark Knight* was born, and through these two movies, the pendulum of comic book films had again swung heavily in favor of a gritty, dark, and above all, realistic world of superheroes. Like Burton, Nolan changed the landscape of comic book films by pointing out a new way to the horizon and then blazing a trail himself.

While Burton and Nolan have created the seminal Batman stories in the realm of film, that is not to say that other storytellers have not tried their hands at a Batman movie. In the era between Burton and Nolan's respective debuts, director Joel Schumacher took the reigns of the Batman franchise...and subsequently crashed that Batmobile into a wall. Schumacher's Batman films lost ground in terms of realizing the gritty realism already established in the minds of the audience. They also tended to stray much further from the character continuities set forth in the comic books than did other Batman movies. Schumacher's spectacle-driven Batman films were a study in garish pastels applied to a character who is himself a study in the sundry shades of black.

Certainly, such a portrayal of Batman was not without precedence. Emotionally and visually, it harkened back to the more light-hearted Batman comics of the 1950s and the schlock-filled television series of the 60s. However, as Richard Reynolds observes in his study of superhero mythology, the strongest and most resonant interpretation of a character often becomes
the definition of that character against which all portrayals before and after are compared (Reynolds, 1994). This filter is the perceived epitome of how Batman should be understood, and all other portrayals are subconsciously run through this filter to see how they measure up. Burton's Batman had done what producer Michael Uslan had hoped; it had subsumed the old versions of Batman and replaced them with a more powerful, more real example. This is the atmosphere in which Schumacher inherited the Batman franchise, and in trying to revert to a representation of the character perceived as "weaker" and non-continuous with the dominant portrayal, Schumacher alienated his audience, both critical and popular. So while the movies themselves are entertaining, the fan community and the critical community alike shunned the films for losing sight of the vision set forth in previous films. It was not until 8 years later that Christopher Nolan was able to approach the material again without fear of popular backlash toward the Batman character.

In the case of Batman comics and films, the evidence for this filter theory is stark. Whereas *Batman Forever* acts as a simple episode in the long line of *Batman* lore, Burton's *Batman* attempts to codify a new and causal continuity for Batman's archenemy the Joker, and Nolan's *The Dark Knight* (and, to a lesser extent, *Batman Begins*) enacts a retroactive continuity, setting up Joker's back-story as purposely enigmatic and nebulous. In this way, we see the progression of Batman's enemies from simple opponents
necessary for the story's conflict to fiends with a strong connection to the hero but little to no connection to the Batman's historical continuity. At the end of this progression, we have Nolan's Joker and Two-Face as complete characters, at once embracing the history that created each while also reinterpreting it in a light that makes the characters even more intrinsic to the Batman mythos. *Batman Forever* tells us precious little about its masked malcontents, merely showing the audience that they are indeed the evil that needs to be stopped. Burton's *Batman* considers the possibility that good and evil are intrinsically interconnected. And Nolan's *The Dark Knight* brings that dark duality to full light, first through Two-Face's fall from grace and sanity, and second, through the Joker's twisted yet strangely lucid take on the interplay of ambiguous moral impulses in all humanity. Like Frank Miller's graphic novel *The Dark Knight Returns* did for comic books, Nolan's interpretation casts new light on all stories that have come before it, magnifying their strengths and weaknesses alongside this new analysis. Even though there are points in the continuity that logically cannot fit, this new vision still seems complete and correct, the collation of 70 years' writing that still manages to exceed the sum of its parts.

**Themes of Burton's and Nolan's Batman**

In an interview, Michael Uslan, executive producer for all six modern Batman films, said that he had met three true geniuses in his lifetime, and two
of them were Tim Burton and Christopher Nolan. (M. Uslan, public presentation, January 24, 2009). These men have been the bookend directors in the Batman film canon thus far and have both revolutionized how we look at the filming of a superhero story. Both men have worked in other film genres, but arguably, their most lasting work has come in telling tales about the Dark Knight's vigilante trials and tribulations. It sets itself up perfectly as a typical “fanboy” debate: who is the best Batman director? Certainly, this research cannot settle that debate for all time, but setting their work in that same type of diametric opposition does help to tease out the important themes and contributions each has made to the Batman mythos. What follows is a brief look at three of those films: Tim Burton's Batman, and Christopher Nolan's Batman Begins and The Dark Knight. It seems best to compare these specific films because they all focus on the early years of Batman's crime fighting career and contain elements of the same story: the death of Bruce's parents, the creation of the Batman alter ego, the introduction of the Joker as Batman's nemesis. By looking at what these directors share in terms of content, we can see what they have changed and how they have shaped the character into the Caped Crusader of today.

Tim Burton’s Batman

As the first film credit to the modern Batman franchise, Tim Burton's
*Batman* gave an unparalleled look at the eponymous hero, for the first time bringing the Gothic sensibility of the Batman persona to a broader audience. Such a persona had existed for years in the comic books but had not yet been exhibited to the mass market. Overnight, the film portrayal became the primary filter through which Batman would be viewed for the next decade. It was the baseline for comparison, and as such, it is difficult to pinpoint things that were particularly different about the portrayal without retroactively comparing it to future productions. Certainly, it had a novel stylistic look and feel in comparison to the far-silier television show and its subsequent made-for-TV film. However, as compared to other silver screen adaptations of the Dark Knight, *Batman* was peerless among the superhero films of its age. Only by using is as a basis by which we view other later interpretations can we see what strength lay in this original film.

One aspect of *Batman* that changed the characterization was to change the title by which the character was referred. Unsure of what to make of him, both criminals and cops alike in the film began calling Bruce Wayne's alter ego "The Batman." By simply adding a definite article to the proper name Batman, Burton takes the normal and shifts it gently but firmly toward the unknown. "The Batman" signifies a level of “otherness,” abstractly separating the character from the other characters in the film. He is misunderstood, distrusted and treated as animalistic, obscure and unknowable. People fear
“The Batman;” they know neither his identity nor his agenda, so they mark him through language as aberrant. This minute change in title has carried through to all the subsequent films, and Christopher Nolan, who understands the psychological element so well, used it almost exclusively in his films. The character of Batman is by his very nature removed from society by difference and by choice, and as such, his name should reflect that dissonance. Interestingly, this dehumanizing element makes him all the more fascinating by revealing his struggle for his own humanity.

Other portions of the original Batman prefigure the later films in both visual and narrative style. Some of the most iconic shots in Nolan's The Dark Knight are direct references to scenes from Burton's film. Both films feature Batman's archenemy The Joker as the main villain, and their portrayals viewed side by side show the respect paid from one director to another. In one scene in The Dark Knight, The Joker (played by Heath Ledger) crawls from the twisted truck he has just crashed and stumbles blindly toward the Batman, who is racing at him on a motorcycle. Psychotic and unfazed, the Joker walks right at the oncoming hero, tauntingly shouting, "Come on. HIT ME. I want you to do it" (Nolan, 2005a). It is powerful and seemingly original writing, the anarchist in Joker pitted against the moralist in Batman... just as it was powerful and original writing for Burton's Joker (played by Jack Nicholson) to look to the skies as Batman swooped in on him with the guns on his jet
blazing and mutter, "Come on. Come and get me” (Burton, 1989). Both Batmen failed to kill their respective Joker in their lethal game of chicken and crashed their vehicles around him in the process, leaving open the possibility of a climactic rooftop battle for both films. Nevertheless, as always, Nolan tips his hat in homage to the past, then blazes a trail to his own retelling of the story. Where Burton's Joker tumbles headlong to his death from atop one of Gotham's tallest buildings, Christopher Nolan saves his Joker from the same demise through a timely capture by Batman. Burton's portrayal signified the end of fighting and "justice" done, Nolan provides the ambiguity of right and wrong and the never-ending continuation of struggle between good and evil. Ledger's Joker puts it best: "You truly are incorruptible, aren't you? I think you and I are destined to do this forever” (Nolan, 2008). A darker reflection on life, but perhaps a more realistic one.

**Christopher Nolan’s *Batman Begins***

As the title suggests, Christopher Nolan's *Batman Begins* focuses on the creation of the Batman persona by billionaire orphan Bruce Wayne of Gotham City. He starts by re-imagining the key point in Bruce's childhood that pushed him toward the life of a superhero: his parents’ murder. When Bruce's parents are murdered in Tim Burton's film, they are leaving a screening of the film *The Mask of Zorro*, a reference to both traditional continuity and to early
radio drama characters like Zorro and The Shadow, after whom Batman creator Bob Kane patterned his superhero. In comparison, Nolan shows the family leaving an opera performance of *Mefistofele*, a very important change (Nolan, 2005a). While it retroactively changes the continuity of the Batman storyline, it also makes a profound statement about Batman’s Faustian bargain to do good. In a way, Batman curses himself with his worst fears (an inability to be close to people, the deaths of those he loves, and of course bats) as penance for his parents’ deaths, deaths for which he blames himself since he made them leave the opera early.

Nolan has also said that he wanted his Batman to be a self-made superman. In other words, he did not want there to be even a reference to other heroes in the universe in which he situates his Batman tale. So while he recognized the importance of the *Mask of Zorro* reference to the creation of Batman’s psyche, Nolan did not want there to be a precedent of heroism in Bruce’s world after which he could model his rise to superhero status. His Batman had to build himself into a hero on his own terms, and showing Bruce’s self-invention of a new identity required a sacrifice not only by the character but by the director as well. In other words, Nolan specifically and deliberately changed the Batman continuity to better explain why Batman is so infatuated with justice against all evil, not just those who have directly wronged him (Boucher, 2008).
Still, throughout *Batman Begins* and part of *The Dark Knight*, Batman's main targets are those who wronged him first: the man who killed his parents, then the man who hired him, then the coworkers, collaborators and competition of that mob boss in turn. So, while Nolan left the main action of Batman's beginning the same, i.e. seeing his parents gunned down before him, he intrinsically changed the very essence of *why* Batman continues to fight. The Batman of Bob Kane, Tim Burton, Joel Schumacher and many others was at times a one-dimensional character, called to do right because he had witnessed a brutal wrong in his childhood. In some cases, his was a quest for vengeance; in others, an archetypical quest for good. Nolan's Batman draws on the darkness of writers like Frank Miller and Alan Moore to suggest Batman's thirst for justice as a self-flagellating, life-long act of penitence, a continual attempt to rid himself of the guilt he feels for his parents' deaths. Batman’s guilt complex makes him a psychoanalyst’s dream patient, and his complexity makes him the seminal tragic superhero of all times.

Essentially Freudian, *Batman Begins* is at its heart a story of father figures, figures in Bruce's life that have been lost, betrayed, saved, found and killed. Throughout the course of the film, Bruce develops relationships with such figures at all turns: his true father, Thomas Wayne, shown in childhood flashbacks; his martial arts mentor Ra’s al Ghul; his ever-supportive butler Alfred Pennyworth; the enigmatic inventor Lucius Fox and the backstabbing
Wayne Enterprises CEO William Earle. The narrative also works as a battle between those father figures, both physically and in Bruce’s mind. In the past, Ra’s al Ghul attempted to destroy "corrupt" Gotham through economic factors, but Thomas Wayne unwittingly stood in his way by trying to save the city through philanthropy. In a way, al Ghul was responsible for killing Bruce’s parents by causing the economic depression that spawned the man who killed them. In turn, Bruce was taught by the same man who plotted his parents' and Gotham's demise. In the end, Bruce had to decide between father figures and took his father's place in thwarting al Ghul’s plan of destruction. To do so, Bruce had to destroy the last material legacy of his father's benevolence in the face of Gotham's corruption: a citywide monorail system. Batman destroys it and metaphorically inherits his father's mantle as protector and beneficiary of Gotham. He lets go of his father and his past to kill the false father figure and save the present, the ultimate in Oedipal reversals.

Running parallel to this father figure interplay is a third paternal constant—the voice of friend and servant Alfred who acts as Bruce’s conscience and voice of reason. Whereas in other film interpretations of Batman, Alfred acts as a comic foil to Bruce’s youthful excesses and reckless abandon, Nolan situates Alfred in the gritty realism of *Batman Begins* as caretaker to a vengeful, confused and troubled orphan trying to make a difference in his world. Veteran actor Michael Caine offsets this emotional
turmoil with the perfect interpretation of the butler as servile but honest, an "old soul" with a perfect balance of wit and gravity in every situation. His part is integral to the identity creation story because without his guidance, it would be impossible for Bruce to keep up appearances and even out the conflicting paternal voices of Bruce's dead father and the taxing martial arts master Ra's al Ghul. Alfred raises Bruce from youth to adulthood, and in the end, he is the father figure that Bruce ultimately decides to follow. As Bruce’s conscience, he gives Bruce an ultimatum about self-restraint that becomes the maxim of Batman's character: “You're getting lost inside this monster of yours...for Thomas Wayne, helping people wasn't about proving anything to anyone, including himself...what you're doing has to be beyond that. It can't be personal, or you're just a vigilante." Perhaps in emulation of Alfred, we begin to see the self-sacrifice Bruce is willing to make in the name of Batman, a sacrifice that will come to full fruition at the end of The Dark Knight when he takes the blame for the city's death and corruption upon himself. Jim Gordon's attempt to show gratitude to the Caped Crusader at the end of Batman Begins encapsulates the idea of justice as Batman’s only reward: "'I never said thank you.' ‘And you'll never have to'” (Nolan, 2005a). It is a life statement that could fit Alfred just as well as it does Batman.

A final theme coursing through the lifeblood of Batman Begins is that of justice versus revenge and how it applies to the idea of being a man versus
being a legend. At its moral basis, justice is in the hands of God, while revenge is taking that judgment and putting it in the hands of mere man. However, as the film points out, if that man becomes more than a man, becomes a legend like Ra's al Ghul and his League of Shadows assassins, then he also become a rightful arbiter of justice and judgment. Without saying it, Nolan nods to the godlike status of superheroes making decisions about good and bad and what is truly just. In turn, he balances Ra's al Ghul's beliefs in a fascist but "benevolent" ruler with Rachel and Alfred's belief in justice as a decision out of the hands of a single man and put into the hands of a system. A man choosing what is punishable and what is right is revenge; justice requires a god, and even immortality and legend like that of Ra's al Ghul cannot make him such a deity.

In this, Nolan quietly questions the foundation upon which Batman is based: a vigilante who fortunately fights for "good" through acts of violence we would usually count as "bad."

Batman's obsession with control and order, his disregard for civil rights and his use of violence to force others, though often criminals, into submission to his will point to comic book's [sic] (sometimes alluring) flirtation with fascism. Illegal, physically violent coercion plays a role in all superhero stories; it is practically a genre convention. Miller questions its role, highlighting an aspect of those narratives in which every reader has, perhaps unwillingly, participated (Klock, 2002).

Batman as a vigilante is essentially doing something illegal to bring about
good. Thus, the only thing that separates him from the bad guys is his willingness to hold back, his desire for order and our opinion as the audience that his use of force and brutality is more socially acceptable than his opponents’ use thereof. In our reading of Batman, the ends must justify the unsavory means, or else we would have a hard time seeing him as the hero.

Everything, then, in the Batman continuity is about legacy: the legacy of Gotham's most benevolent citizen (Thomas Wayne) passing his mantle to his son as protector of the city; the legacy of Harvey Dent as Gotham's White Knight even when he dies a traitor and a killer; the legacy of Batman as the Dark Knight, a vigilante who uses terror to control the criminals and faces the wrath and fear of the general populace as a result. At its ultimate end, it is the legacy of good and evil and deciding where that line is drawn. As Alfred tells an injured and homeless Bruce, "'The Wayne legacy is more than bricks and mortar’...’Why do we fall, sir? So that we can learn to pick ourselves up’” (Nolan, 2005a). Such is the legacy of Thomas Wayne, passed on to Bruce as Batman and in turn to those who consider the story of an ordinary man like Wayne the epitome of a superhero.

**Christopher Nolan’s *The Dark Knight***

*The Dark Knight* features in essence three leads, all of whom have been portrayed in Batman movies that have come before: Batman, The Joker
and Two-Face. Within this triumvirate are represented all of humanity in a way. Batman, while sometimes ruthless, represents the unshakable good in mankind. The Joker is the essence of unflappable, uncaring evil; apathy and maliciousness rolled into one. Two-Face, however, is the everyman, and his journey from being Harvey Dent to becoming Two-Face represents the fall of man, the ambiguity that leads to evil and the degradation of intentions from noble sacrifice to self-absorbed malcontent. Each member in turn represents a portion of the others. At times, the Joker can represent the fear and apathy of all mankind, while Batman can take on Harvey’s wavering belief in where the line is drawn between right and wrong. In some ways, the Joker is the most concrete of characters, the surest in his chosen course of action. So to fully understand The Dark Knight, it is necessary to look at each of these characters and see how they impress their characteristics upon one another.

Just as in Batman Begins, there exists in The Dark Knight the question of moral ambiguity in Batman’s actions. The Dark Knight refers to this struggle with the use of cell phones to track the Joker. It is an invasion of rights and privacy, but it must occur at least once to save Gotham. The question remains whether necessity justifies the utilization of such a tactic. The film affirms the choice by making it necessary to catch the Joker, but it also shows it in a negative light by letting Lucius Fox (the representative of the normal, non-superhuman people) act as Batman’s conscience by destroying the device
once it has outlived its purpose. By showing both the positive and negative effects of the action, Nolan leaves the question of morality for the audience to decide. *The Dark Knight* studies this question more in-depth when Harvey Dent attempts to walk the same aggressive path of justice that Batman does, only through legal means. When he finds that such methods of justice have failed in the hands of men, he takes it upon himself to fix the system, first by allying himself with someone outside the law (Batman), then by allying himself with the evil that he originally swore to fight (The Joker) and finally by becoming that evil himself (Two-Face). He compares himself to the Caesars, men who took dictatorial control in times of trouble to save the city from external evil. "Either you die a hero, or you live long enough to see yourself become the villain" (Nolan, 2008).

As many critics have claimed, *The Dark Knight* is as much a treatise on the Joker as it is a Batman story, but in some ways, such a treatment is necessary for a character that acts as both antithesis and mirror for the story's protagonist. The Joker is truly the philosophical opposite of The Batman, yet they were each conceived through very similar circumstances, victims of past tragedy that shaped their identities and futures into a grotesque caricature of reality. The point of the Joker’s twisted character is to show how minutely different his experiences are from those of the Batman and yet how much difference they have made. At its core, the entire Batman saga boils down to
a battle of wills between these two characters. One chose to turn tragedy into triumph over evil, the other chose to become the evil that created him. Thus, the whole of the Batman continuity is an epic allegory to the power of free will in humanity. By externalizing the continual struggle between help, harm, and the proximity in which they lay to one another, Christopher Nolan uses Batman to exalt the human choice of good as the chief of all virtues.

In comparison to his portrayal in other Batman movies, the Joker of The Dark Knight is far more malignant in many ways. Cesar Romero played the character as a gleeful but childish prankster in the 1960s television show, the opposite end of the spectrum from Heath Ledger's twisted genius of a Joker in The Dark Knight. A more apt comparison comes from the grotesqueness of Jack Nicholson's mugging portrayal in Tim Burton's Batman. In that film, the Joker was a product of revenge and excess, sinister but over-the-top in his colorful outfits and mocking schemes. He is raw and emotional, but he is still a blunt object when compared against the subtle machinations of Ledger's character. No, the combined genius of Heath Ledger and Christopher Nolan sculpted the Joker of The Dark Knight into an antiauthoritarian nightmare worthy of the comic books whence he spawned. This Joker personally plants grenades in hands of innocent bank victims, never speaking, simply doing what he enjoys. He is a quiet, anarchic planner despite all his claims to the contrary. The only thing that is random in his violence is who gets killed. The
fact that the how is planned makes the randomness of the killings more chilling. The sadistic fun is in the implementation of a working plan, of which killing is only a part. Psychological control/fear and a love thereof are at the root, while joy and humor are found in watching the unplanned parts play out. In a way, the Joker's persona is the archetype upon which Watchmen's The Comedian is based: the power people have in life is minimal at times, and people are willing to tear themselves apart for what little bits of control they have, only to find that they didn't have any in the first place. That is the twisted "joke" that makes the Joker laugh and everyone else fear that he is right.

Of course, one point of The Dark Knight is that not everyone will give in to that fear, that fight for control. Normal people, though not as smart as the Joker, can find solace when things go uncontrollably wrong. As one character tells the Joker, "Batman is a symbol that we don't have to be afraid of scum like you" (Nolan, 2008). This is a justification at the very soul of Batman's origin and existence, but it is delivered weakly by a man about to die at the hands of the Joker, a man that Batman and his idealism cannot save. Instead of offering hope, this quote proves that the symbol of Batman is not enough to stop wrongdoing and that the man beneath the cowl is unable to enforce the fear appeal that goes with the suit. Joker wants to prove that everyone is as psychologically scarred as he is, that they will all push for the control that he has, a control that Joker understands is lacking in all mankind. The Joker is a
personification of the duality in human nature, just like Harvey Dent. He has to have everything worked out in detail so that his plans will work, but he also relishes in the fact that plans are far from foolproof, that "one bad day" or any single event can make "everyone lose their minds." He is a picture of both the perfect Machiavellian schemer and the anarchic, random serial killer, a caustic combination of a man with the power to plan and the uncontrollability to go off at any moment.

In this regard, Two-Face and Joker are mirrors of one another. Two-Face's crimes are utterly and fully by fate in the duality of the flip of a coin, and the Joker's killing is balanced delicately by his intellectual need for control and the nihilistic understanding that he has little. All of this is reflected in Batman, a man who can react to, but never control, the evil in his city. He must stand for order, but not to the degree of fatalism patterned by Two-Face. Batman is completely reactive, and as such, he cannot control where evil will strike. He can, however, control how he attempts to fight it, the exact opposite of Joker, who can plan his attacks to a tee but cannot fully control the turnout. The two counter each other on the most basic philosophical level: nihilism versus inherent morality. Yet, while both deal with the fickleness of frail humanity, Joker's mindset only allows for negative unpredictability. All he sees in people is the potentiality for evil, and he plans accordingly. He cannot understand the potential for good, and that potential is the one factor that Batman tries to find
in Harvey Dent, in Commissioner Gordon and in all humanity.

Joker is specifically not a fighter; he is an opportunist when he must be, but he is really the brains behind the organization, not the muscle. He does not need to be. Instead he is incredibly manipulative and Machiavellian, a point that comes up again later when it’s said that the Joker "attracts people" of the schizophrenic and paranoid type, the "easily manipulated." The idea is that criminals on the whole are mentally broken or dumber than the average human being, but if they have a highly intelligent aberrant like the Joker as a leader, then the lesser criminals will be attracted to this controlling power to the point of suicidal loyalty. In a way, the Joker acts as a metaphor for the criminal element in general but terrorism specifically. We fear most "a man which we don’t fully understand," a controlling element that is intellectually equivalent but so morally disparate that he is rendered inexplicable. Both sides seek to force the other into a mold similar to their own, and both find the other completely recalcitrant. As such, we see what we want to see and learn what we want to learn, but to paraphrase Nietzsche, in some ways we need both the Batman and the Joker in our communal knowledge. We want someone to be above the law, doing the things we wish we could do, both good and bad, and we project ourselves into these Ubermensch characters to make it possible.

In comparison, Harvey Dent claims to be the criminal vigilante Batman,
taking his reputation as "The White Knight" and soiling it by making him appear to be "Two-Faced." In a way, Harvey envies Batman as Batman envies Harvey. They complement each other, each wanting what the other has. Batman is prepared to unmask himself and put the city in the hands of Dent, the "White Knight," because he is a hero with a face. But Bruce doesn't understand that Harvey is dependent on him in the same way the Joker is dependent on his mindless cannon-fodder goons: Dent is the fallible, guilt-riddled brains and face of Gotham who can only do his job with Batman as his unseen menacing muscle. In a superb visual irony, Dent is the face of hope for Gotham and for Batman, and that broad-jawed visage is the first and most public casualty in the Joker's scheme. Harvey claims the name of Batman so that the real Batman will remain free to fight crime, but his reputation becomes in turn that of the vigilante. He receives the accolades and in part makes the Batman name reputable, but at the same time, he loses face, first metaphorically and then overtly. Harvey's reputation is the very thing that Batman was clinging to as his last hope at being normal, of putting his parents' death and the destruction in Gotham behind him. With Harvey claiming himself as a criminal, he undoes all the things that he has worked for: the mob will go free, he'll lose his position as DA, and Batman will have no one to depend on as a more legitimate successor. Both are working toward a similar cause, but their solutions work at cross-purposes, to Harvey’s detriment. In
this regard, the true Batman saves face and remains to fight another day at the expense of Harvey's life. At the end of the film, Batman takes this theme to heart, taking upon himself the untrue but necessary role as Harvey Dent's killer so that others like Commissioner Gordon can continue to fight the legitimate fight against crime, while he, the Batman, will fight criminals as the
criminal he is, now in both action and in the public eye.

Both Two-Face and the Joker then act as visual references to Batman's inner struggle. They reflect not only Batman's opposite but also what Batman stands for as a symbol. He is incorruptible. He is above the law in his vigilante, Ubermensch way, willing and able to go outside the rules to make Gotham safe. He is the perfect meshing of flawed and flawless: a perfect, incorruptible symbol of justice played by a broken, all-too-human man, and as such, he can do whatever it takes to protect the good. He is a law unto himself and one that endures whether he is hated or loved, the "outcast," as Alfred says, that everyone needs. Bruce hoped to find it in anyone but himself, but with the corruption of Harvey Dent and the death of Rachel, he discovers that he is the only one who can be that symbol.

Music and Visualization

Certain aspects of storytelling in the Batman canon are only available to specific media—for example, the use of music. While it is certainly possible to
imply sound and background noise on the written page of a comic book, to do so takes an overt effort, one that draws attention to the sound itself, making it the centerpiece rather than the accoutrement. Granted, in some cases, this focus can be by design, as with the agonizing "CRUNCH" of a henchman’s nose, written in blood from panel to panel across the gutter. It can even be used for humor, as with the much-caricatured "POW! SPLAT!" of the 1960s television series, but the written word cannot simultaneously capture these effects and the continual atmosphere-enhancing quality of a rich movie score. Just as importantly, each film has an opportunity to tell a different story through its music, and within the Batman movie canon, the music has gone a long way in furthering the purpose of the films they represent.

In Tim Burton's first Batman film, the enigmatic Danny Elfman composed the score, continuing a long-running partnership for this director/composer team. As executive producer Michael Uslan has explained, the original Batman movie was a work ten years in the making, an attempt to wrest the Batman persona back from the campy, humorous Adam West portrayal of the 1960s (M. Uslan, public presentation, January 24, 2009). Uslan wanted a serious Batman that would connect with people as a real character with a darker back-story that explains why a man no different than any other would run around the city at night as a protector of justice. It was a re-branding of an old character, recreating it in the image that many believed
to be more faithful to Batman's original conception. However, from a movie standpoint, it was also the creation of a new brand. By moving into a different medium, Batman gained a new life, a blank canvas on which his persona could be imagined again. It was at this intersection of branding, re-branding and continuity that Elfman composed his "Batman Theme."

The purpose of the score for the first Batman film was to give the character a stronger, more menacing feel while still remaining catchy. The simple riff at its core had to resonate with the audience and become attached to the character as an aural code that said, "This is what Batman sounds like." It had to erase from the common perception the idea of quips and puns and spinning logos and create a new voice. The soundtrack had to be overt and memorable, at times drawing attention to its motif and refrain as a reminder to the audience that this was a newer, stronger Batman, just like the music.

Another aspect of character creation tied integrally into the changing of perception was the Batman logo, in this case a yellow badge with a dark bat burnt into the center. This symbol became the ubiquitous representation of the new Batman and was in fact a worldwide marketing and fashion phenomenon at the release of the film. In Uslan's words, "I saw the Berlin Wall fall in 1989, and one of the first people I saw come through was a kid in a Batman cap. That's when I knew we'd made it" (M. Uslan, public presentation, January 24, 2009). More importantly, in the opening credits of the film *Batman*, these two
branding aspects are combined to set the mood: Elfman's deep and chilling theme swelling to a crescendo as the camera cuts along the hard, sharp, ambiguous lines of the Batman symbol. In the first minute of the movie, without actors, without dialogue, without story, the character of Batman has been reborn in a way that cannot be duplicated in comic form.

Where Tim Burton's *Batman* was the rebirth of a hero, Christopher Nolan's *Batman Begins* was in a way a resurrection. The film series had apparently died an ignominious death at the hands of the critical and popular flop *Batman and Robin*, a film that hearkened back to the lighthearted camp Batman of the 50s and 60s. Audiences had found what they wanted in the darker portrayal of Batman, and the return to childish puns left them betrayed. Therefore, when Nolan was tasked with bringing the Dark Knight once again to his dark roots, he called upon composers Hans Zimmer and James Newton Howard to aid in the aural re-branding process. The combination is an interesting choice, with Zimmer known most for his powerful, brass-heavy arrangements like *Pirates of the Caribbean* and Howard known for his introspective works for films like *The Sixth Sense*. From a directorial standpoint, however, the decision makes sense. By combining the different composer styles, the score echoes the growing disparity between Batman's two personas: the superheroic Batman and the conflicted and very human Bruce Wayne. While the first Batman score needed to be overt, to make a
statement, Zimmer and Howard needed to create subtle realism.

To this end, the composers collaborated for a work that underscores the story without drawing attention to itself. Each track within the score is titled after a genus of bat, for example *Vespertilio* or *Myotis*, and the score itself exhibits an equal level of sophistication. The softly relentless throbbing of strings and percussion represents both the continuous flap of bat's wings and the relentless pursuit of justice found in Bruce Wayne's nature. It is subtle but resolute, at times unremarkable by design. Another concept within the score is that of tension, represented by the monotone of a razor blade drawn across a single, screeching cello string. As the tension rises in a scene, so too does the volume and intensity of the note. It stands the hair on end while still focusing attention on the action, not the music. In contrast to the well-known Elfman theme, the composers specifically decided to have no catchy, "singable" riff so as not to distract from the narrative, and their score achieves its ends just as thoroughly. Since *Batman* represented the rebuilding of a character, it required Elfman to deliver a strong, memorable auditory cue to be associated with the new, gothic feel. Nolan’s films then brought this character into a more understated reality where heroism and humanity are ever more indistinguishable and enmeshed. Music is at the core of these stories, making the transition from comics to film a necessary one for the Batman character arc.
COMIC-TO-FILM COMPARISON

Overview:

Another thought from producer Michael Uslan is that every Batman film represents a specific era of Batman comic books (M. Uslan, public presentation, January 24, 2009). *Batman* was a return to the roots of the character, to the dark and somewhat murky origins of the Batman persona presented in Bob Kane's original tales of "the world's greatest detective" in the late '30s and early '40s. Tim Burton then went to the opposite end of the spectrum with his film sequel *Batman Returns*, focusing on the grotesque imagery and more violent themes of Batman in the 1990s comics. When director Joel Schumacher took the reins of the Batman franchise, the films began to creep into a more family-friendly, comical era. *Batman Forever* then represents the more jocular era of the '40s and '50s, when the audience looked to comic books as an innocent escape from the fear they experienced in that post-war era. Comics were an attempt to return to that ideal safety of childhood, and storylines during this era aided that mindset. This societal need for silliness culminated in the '60s with the Batman television series, forever synonymous with the much-derided onscreen representation of sound effects. Adam West's portrayal of Batman was an almost complete about-face from the earlier darkness exemplified by the character. This is the era represented in Schumacher's second film, *Batman and Robin*, a movie that tried unsuccessfully to return superheroes to that idyllic and simple way of life.
but met with fervent objections from critics and fans alike. As a result, the Batman franchise was silent for a number of years, and many believed that the story had run its course. Then a relatively little-known director proposed a resurrection of the Batman character, and the world of superheroes came alive again.

Christopher Nolan's Batman in part defies Uslan's idea that each film has its own distinct period of influence. While it could certainly be argued that this iteration of the character draws much of its literary continuity from the graphic novels of the 1980s, it is also a very modern interpretation of the struggles faced by a hero in the here and now. This Batman is a product of past glory from great writers like Frank Miller and Alan Moore, but he is just as much the creation of the present, reshaped into something new and different in the mind of Christopher Nolan. The modern Batman is an amalgamation of all the continuity that has come before, perhaps the first characterization based on a specific and complete understanding of the comics that have evolved the character from 1939 to now. The respect shown in *Batman Begins* and *The Dark Knight* to the prior comic book interpretations of Batman is palpable, and this honor makes Nolan's Batman the most well-rounded representation of the character thus far. Details flow from stories throughout the comic book continuity, and where things do change in the storyline, the director first pays homage to that which has come before. Thus, the newest
Batman is not only a visualization of a particular period of Batman comics but a conglomeration of all the important parts. He is the realization of the Batman of 1939, of 1986, and most poignantly, of today.

**Batman**

One distinguishing characteristic of *Batman* is that it is the only film to treat the origin story of Batman's arch-nemesis The Joker. Where *Batman Begins* shows Joker simply bursting into Gotham's criminal element "with the terrifying randomness of a drive-by killer" (Gleiberman, 2008), Burton's *Batman* shows the audience the intimate details of the character's back-story and how they interplay with the life of young Bruce Wayne, the future Caped Crusader. Yet, while the storylines for the different films coincide well enough on the surface, the true bone of contention comes when the Joker represented in *Batman* is compared against nearly 70 years of comic book lore. Herein lies a problem that cannot be covered up simply with a new makeup job and a brilliant performance by Jack Nicholson. The film changes the character, changes his story and thus changes how the movie fits into the ongoing history of Batman in general.

In Tim Burton's film, The Joker begins life as a high-level enforcer in Gotham's organized crime syndicate. Second in command to mob boss Carl Grissom, future Joker Jack Napier has a pretty good deal going on screen… but already there is are several telling discrepancies in the Joker's story that
comic book fans would find problematic. First is the creation of a new crime boss, one never mentioned in the comic books and graphic novels. Admittedly, the addition of Carl Grissom could be explained away as merely a single crime lord in a city seething with many such characters, but the naming of the man that would be Joker is a big undertaking for a first-time Batman presenter like Burton. In almost seven decades of Batman lore, the Joker has never been called anything but "The Joker." When arrested, he is always booked as "Name Unknown," an aspect of his character that adds to his personal mystery, his wraithlike ability to be indescribable, peerless, unclassifiable. So to not only claim naming rights to such an age-old character, but then to kill that same character within the span of two hours would seem unthinkable to any savvy comic book fan. However, these are mere pittances in comparison to the larger change in continuity, the one that retroactively alters seventy years of history between the Joker and the Dark Knight.

The idea of retroactive continuity is not unheard of in the world of comic books, nor is it always considered a bad thing. In essence, the term refers to a change in the current storyline of a character or characters that fundamentally renders false or irreconcilable certain portions already codified in the characters' continuity. For example, if one author suddenly decided that Batman should be African-American, such a change would be completely
irreconcilable with the rest of the Batman story that had been written up to that point. It is the changing not of a previously assumed fact, or a missing point in a character's structural mythology, but of an irreversible truth within the telling of a story. That is the alteration in question with Burton's retelling of the Joker's origin.

Since the beginning of his story, the creation of the Batman character was a result of his parents' senseless murder in Crime Alley, a decaying street in inner city Gotham (Kane and Finger, 1939). They were attacked by a desperate small-time crook named Joe Chill, and in the ensuing violence, Bruce's parents were shot and killed. Bruce was only a boy at the time, but from the moment of seeing his parents gunned down, he knew that he would fight the injustice that ran rampant in the streets of his city. Thus was born the concept of Batman. Later in his life, Bruce would contemplate finding and murdering Joe Chill for the crime he had committed those many years ago, but he chooses in the end to let the justice system do its job, refusing to answer a killing with another killing. This boundary of non-lethal violence became a foundation of Batman's psyche, one that could only be crossed under the most extreme circumstances and even then at the cost of some bit of Bruce's humanity.

In parallel, the Joker began life as a comedian and crook, as described most clearly in Alan Moore's comic book *The Killing Joke*, itself an attempt to
bring together all the jagged pieces of Joker lore (Moore, 1988). In Moore's
telling, the Joker took on a single job wherein he and a gang would steal
money and industrial secrets from a local chemical plant. However, the group
was ratted out, and the police and Batman intervened in the middle of the
heist. In the ensuing panic, the Joker fell into a vat of the chemicals and was
presumed dead. Granted, this is only one of several possible origin stories for
the Joker, but the most important aspect is that the Joker of this continuity had
no dealings with Bruce Wayne as a child, and similarly, no dealings with
Batman until that night in the chemical factory. There was no mention of any
mob bosses, no Carl Grissom and no Jack Napier. All of these discrepancies
combine to make Tim Burton's vision of the Joker so incongruous.

In Burton’s *Batman*, it is Jack Napier, not Joe Chill, who kills Bruce's
parents before his eyes. And years later, when boss Carl Grissom sends Jack
to the chemical factory, it is Batman who makes him fall in the pool of acid.
Admittedly, Batman tried his best to save Jack, but he somehow did not yet
know that this was his parent's killer (in this continuity). So, Burton has
reworked the entire back-story of both the Joker and Batman to fit within the
realm of his own story, one that squares the two opponents against one
another in a fight to the death from origin to ending. Truly, it is a poetically
ingenious bit of writing that makes both lead characters responsible for the
creation of each other's alter ego. Batman could not save Napier from his fall
into the chemical solvent, and thus the Joker blames the Batman for his appearance, his loss of a normal life and his insanity. However, by making the Joker the unknowing assassin of the future Batman's parents, we now have an even more intimate interplay of characters in each player's origin. Unfortunately, while it is a brilliant piece of work, it is impossible to mesh with the original Joker storyline. Thus, we are met with a problem of whether this story can be seen as a canonical tale of the Batman or whether director Tim Burton, as smart as he is, was completely ignorant of the continuity into which he was entering.

Unquestionably, Burton was at least aware of the expectations for a Joker back-story because he since said that *The Killing Joke* is "the first comic I've ever loved" (Moore, 1988). Perhaps then he was trying to avoid any reference to prior Batman work. Burton himself refutes that possibility within the film by including a piece of comic book art ostensibly created and signed by Bob Kane himself, the original Batman author. The inclusion of this joking caricature is the director's acknowledgment of the debt that he owes to those who have come before him in the comic book realm. It seems then that Tim Burton deliberately changed the continuity of Batman by re-imagining the Joker's origin and his early ties with the Wayne family. Given his respect for Alan Moore's work, he may have done so for the very reason that Moore wrote *The Killing Joke* in the first place. Moore attempted to compile all of the
scattered and sometimes contradictory stories of the Joker's beginning into one concise and understandable story. Burton then may have used his film as a way of adding to that pantheon of Joker tales, accenting the fact that we may never know which is the true story of his origin. Burton's retelling makes an interesting parallel between the two leads’ creation stories, but it seems too big of a change in continuity, especially when coupled with the abrupt killing of Joker, Batman's necessary and most representative mirror. In comics, the soul of a superhero cannot die; it is merely re-imagined in a new form. The same must be said for supervillains. They are as much a part of the equation of good vs. evil as the hero, and as such, it is not within one author or illustrator's power to do away with such an integral aspect of the continuity. So as wonderful as the film Batman was for reintroducing a true, realistic Batman to the populace at large, it is nearly impossible to situate the movie in the historical continuity and structural mythology of the character... and maybe that is by design.

**Christopher Nolan's Batman Begins and The Dark Knight**

While Burton's Batman made only indirect, indistinct references to specific Batman comics, choosing to rely more on the overlying story arc of Batman rather than particular episodes, Christopher Nolan's Batman movies are at times taken word for word from some of the most celebrated graphic novels of all time. Everything about Nolan's movies exudes reverence and
awe for the characters he is shaping and molding to his will. It seems obvious simply from watching the films that he and his brother, screenwriter Jonathan Nolan, are deeply knowledgeable about their character's history, back-story and continuity. Moreover, the brothers have acknowledged that certain comics from within the Batman canon were crucial to the production of the most recent Batman films, for both the visualization and the creation of characters. This is a brief overview of the many ways in which that literary world has broken through to the silver screen.

_Batman Begins_

As an origin story, _Batman Begins_ relies heavily on previous Batman writings that focus on the early years of Batman's existence. To comprehend the man beneath the mask, Christopher Nolan takes the audience to a time long before Batman the superhero existed. He was tasked with creating a world where the idea of a grown man in disguise stalking the criminals of a decrepit city seemed not only justifiable, but also understandable and even necessary. He took many of his cues from two award-winning graphic novels: _The Dark Knight Returns_ and _Batman: Year One_. Both works were written by the inimitable Frank Miller, and upon their separate releases in the 1980s, they changed the face of comic book storytelling for good. These books, in conjunction with other more esoteric references to Batman lore, make up the
backbone of Nolan's Batman filmography.

*The Dark Knight Returns* (Miller, 1986) was Frank Miller's first foray into the gritty history of the Caped Crusader, and immediately, his work found a foothold with an audience already immersed in the shadowy, noir world of Gotham after dark. Nolan's film transplants Miller's tone of bleakness and struggle for identity from Batman's later years, as is portrayed in *The Dark Knight Returns*, into his inception as the Dark Knight. Where Miller's work focuses on Batman's struggle to return to power after years of retirement, Nolan's movie displays that same struggle from the beginning, a vicious scrabble to the top of the refuse that is Gotham City. One story shows the character staving off his nadir, the other, rising toward his zenith. With such heavy subject matter, it is not surprising that both Miller and Nolan supplant Batman's usual adventure- and humor-driven storylines with stories that focus on the personal trials of the characters themselves. Where other Batman comics would normally have a hopeful, venturous cadence to their mood, a brooding atmosphere follows this Bruce Wayne as he searches for identity, meaning and justice. This is not to say that this interpretation of Batman is without action or levity – these characteristics are simply toned down and bleached, tempered by the character drama that unfolds.

While character development and atmosphere are the most prominent features transferred from *The Dark Knight Returns* into *Batman Begins*, they
are far from the only similarities. Certain story aspects derive directly from Miller's work. For example, where Batman had been associated with the destruction of supervillians like The Riddler, Catwoman and the whole array of Rogue's Gallery members, Miller and Nolan focus much of their stories on a more realistic strain of evil: organized crime. While comic supervillains are visually appealing and fun in an over-the-top way, the Gotham that Batman inherits as guardian is ruled not by colorful maniacs but by the calculated cruelty of mob bosses and enforcers. Early portions of both *The Dark Knight Returns* and *Batman Begins* focus on Batman's attempts to rid his city of this true-to-life cancer. As will be seen in the analysis of *The Dark Knight*, this leaves a vacuum for more crazed criminals like The Joker to ply their trade openly. Even in *Batman Begins*, characters like The Scarecrow move their work into more aggressive avenues, assuming that the best defense is a good offense against a new threat like the Batman.

Similarly, certain props and actions from the film are derived from the panels of *The Dark Knight Returns*. While it sounds simple enough, most audience members rarely think about the necessary lethality of Batman's weapon of choice, the Batarang. In previous iterations, the Batarang had been a toy, a projectile that Batman could use to literally slap the wrists of evildoers to make them drop their weapons. Frank Miller understood that in a world where people live and die in fights, the Batarang had to be just what it
claimed to be: a weapon, and one that could do some damage. So, in *The Dark Knight Returns*, Batman's Batarangs were for the first time capable of causing pain, bleeding and death from afar in the hands of Gotham's guardian. While Nolan's Batman never kills anyone on screen via Batarang, he sharpens his new metallic missiles to a deadly point and launches them deep into the grain of a nearby plank. These are no longer the silly toys of older generations of Batman; these are weapons made for the purpose of inflicting pain.

While *The Dark Knight Returns* provided the atmosphere for Christopher Nolan's first Batman film, *Batman: Year One* gave him a script to follow. Looking at Batman's slow and steady ascendancy to police-sanctioned vigilante, both book and movie play off one another to give a fuller picture of how the man became The Bat. *Year One* (Miller and Mazzucchelli, 1988) is as much a story about Batman's inside man Jim Gordon, showing how they both climbed from the ground up in a self-sacrificing fight against the evils of the city. In fact, in a nod to the power of the book, Christopher Nolan selected actor Gary Oldman to play Jim Gordon in part because of his resemblance to the character in the graphic novel (Nolan, 2005b). Early on, the two crime fighters come to an understanding that they need each other. Batman can do from the outside what Gordon cannot from within, and Gordon can make it possible for Batman to do his job. In both the graphic novel and the film, the audience watches the two characters cautiously dance toward a partnership
with one another. The theme of authority versus strength carries easily from page to screen.

Much like with *The Dark Knight Returns, Batman: Year One* provides Nolan with a wealth of pre-established scenes and ideas from which to mine. One scene from the end of *Batman Begins* shows Batman saved by a cloud of bats called to his location by an ultrasonic symbol. Under the living cover of the bat colony, Batman makes his escape... just as he had done almost twenty years earlier in Miller's *Batman: Year One*. Another central aspect of the film is the immense public transportation system created by Batman's father, Thomas Wayne, as cheap transit for the ailing city. This prop features prominently in the very first pages of Miller's book, and its story relevance is fleshed out in Nolan's retelling of the origin tale. Scenes of a young Bruce Wayne tirelessly practicing his newly-learned martial arts skills in *Year One* are supplemented by the learning of those skills in *Batman Begins*, each retelling filling in the gaps of the other. Even the last scene of the film takes its cues from the graphic novel with a playing card joker found at the scene of a crime, a cliffhanger borrowed wholesale from the final pages of *Year One*. In short, Frank Miller had as much of a role in the shaping of Batman for the film medium as Christopher Nolan could allow without paying him. His fingerprints are everywhere, as if Nolan were giving visual citations of these earlier works. Though Miller's influence seems most prominent, his are not the only comics
that helped build *Batman Begins* into such a conglomerate of continuity.

Many other parts of the film come in part or in full directly from prior comic book lore. When Nolan's Bruce Wayne complains that he can never think of Wayne Manor as his own home, he is quoting nearly verbatim from Jeph Loeb's *Batman: Haunted Knight*: "'Wayne Manor. My Father's home. No matter how long I live here, I will always think of it as that’" (Loeb and Sale, 1996). From the same story comes the Scarecrow’s terrified rambling as Nolan’s Batman pins him to the floor of Arkham Asylum: "'Professor Crane isn't here right now, but if you'd like to make an appointment...’" From the very first Batman story, Detective Comics #27, comes the scene of a bat stuck in Wayne Manor, giving Bruce the idea for his namesake symbol (Kane and Finger, 1939). Nevertheless, the most important comic-to-film reapplication comes from a continuity strewn piecemeal through numerous books in Batman's history: the story of Ra’s al Ghul.

Christopher Nolan is the first filmmaker to treat this complicated eco-terrorist and mentor to young Bruce Wayne with a screen adaptation, and he pulls from stories throughout the long continuity to build up his characterization: *Batman: Birth of the Demon, Year One: Batman/Ra’s al Ghul,* and *Batman: Blind Guardian* among many others. By piecing together the storyline, Nolan gives us a clue into the back-story that led a rich, angry orphan like Bruce Wayne to shelter under the wing of the nearly immortal killer
and how al Ghul’s training shaped Bruce into the Dark Knight of Gotham. Ra's al Ghul chooses to train Bruce Wayne as an assassin, a path that Bruce will ultimately turn against. Most important to al Ghul’s teaching is that of immortality and fear.

In the comics, al Ghul becomes immortal by the healing powers of springs deep in the earth called Lazarus Pits. As with many other things, Christopher Nolan acknowledged that origin but disdained the supernatural immorality that it offered the character. Instead, he chose to make al Ghul’s power a more philosophical immortality, one that he passes on to Bruce. In a way, Nolan redefines legend and immortality so that he can truly present the character within the continuity without duplicating the character in all aspects. He defines an immortal as a man devoted to an undying ideal that even death cannot stop. Immortality then is a deception to make the bearer appear "more than a man in the mind of your opponents... you have to become an idea" (Nolan, 2005a). This teaching then becomes the basis for Batman's fear appeal in the image of the bat. The symbol represents fear, darkness and incorruptibility, and by becoming that symbol in the minds of criminals, Batman gains a psychological advantage over them. This perhaps is Nolan's greatest contribution to the ongoing continuity of Batman. He combines aspects from many points in Batman’s continuity, from Frank Miller's finest graphic novels to one-shots of obscure characters like Ra's al Ghul, then consolidates and
reworks them into an invigorating new concept that remains true to the original appeal of the character. *Batman Begins* is the final product of that massive amalgamation.

**The Dark Knight**

Where *Batman Begins* is Christopher Nolan's attempt to re-envision the formative early years that created Bruce Wayne's alternative persona, *The Dark Knight* is his meditation on the origin of the supervillain. In many ways, the audience of both comic books and superhero films tends to take villains for granted. Certainly, they are intriguing and entertaining personalities, but they are often so grotesquely abnormal in their thirst for vengeance or domination that the everyman cannot connect with the character. In the end, the audience understands that the good guy will defeat the bad guy, so they often have no sympathy for the devil when he meets his final fate. Supervillains can be far more necessary to the superhero narrative than simple punching bags for the hero, a point that was missing in the television show version of Batman and in the Joel Schumacher films. If there is no possibility for the villain to win, then there is no real danger, no suspense, no reality to the story, and as odd as it may seem in a story about men in tights, comics are highly dependent on the believability of their storyline. Creating verisimilitude is crucial to a superhero tale, and as such, the villains of comic book lore must be characters that the audience understand, fear and at times empathize with. That was the goal of
Nolan's second Batman film: to create adversaries that could truly test the Caped Crusader. *Batman Begins* deconstructed a superhero’s origin and his mission to bring down crime in Gotham City. *The Dark Knight* is a deconstruction of the criminal response to threats both external and internal.

Of course, Nolan did not create these supervillains, but instead borrowed liberally from several Batman graphic novels. In particular, he pulled several ideas, plot lines and visual cues from Jeph Loeb and Tim Sale's graphic novel duology *The Long Halloween* and *Batman: Dark Victory* (Loeb and Sale, 1998; 2001). Once again, Nolan proves his efficacy at creating a new story from old material, maintaining the raw emotional energy and passionate narratives of the comics while twisting the stories just enough to make them his own. Though they use many of the same characters and storylines, these tales do not run parallel but interweave, streaming tangentially away into their own narratives before returning to collide again.

Campaign slogans, props and direct quotes flow seamlessly from the page to the screen as Nolan stitches together the tale of Batman's two most sinister and reflective enemies: The Joker and Two-Face. Both characters represent themes of internal struggle, the Joker siding with anarchy, Two Face with fatalism. The realization of their characters on screen came both consciously and indirectly from comic book roots, molded artfully by Christopher Nolan and actors Heath Ledger and Aaron Eckhart. Perhaps the best way to show the
uncanny skill with which this film echoes the comics is by looking at these two villains to see how their distinct incarnations are negotiated.

Two-Face began his life in Batman comics as Harvey Dent, a hard-nosed district attorney set on saving Gotham from itself. He was willing to do anything to get his man, from bringing case material home to nearly torturing his witnesses. In *The Long Halloween*, he even jokes at a crime scene that not only did the dead men get what they deserved, that he would have given it to them himself given the opportunity (Loeb and Sale, 1998). He is far from the perfect, and both the comic and film make that clear. His campaign slogan, "I believe in Harvey Dent," comes directly from *The Long Halloween*, where it is an admitted reference to the opening line of Francis Ford Coppola’s seminal film *The Godfather*. So, what appeared a seemingly innocuous slogan can be seen as a quiet foreshadowing of the criminal depths to which Harvey will stoop. Both the comics and the film make it clear that Dent would prefer to be the beloved vigilante Batman because he could enact the harsh justice to which he is predisposed. Instead, he chooses to ally himself with the Dark Knight as a legitimate counterpart to Batman's illegal one-man army. Their meeting atop the police station in *The Dark Knight* reflects frame by frame the same rendezvous in *The Long Halloween*, with the camera movement sometimes duplicating the slow circling of huddled conversation between Batman, Dent and Captain Jim Gordon. In both cases, it is Dent who initiates
the meeting via the Batsignal, and Gordon who facilitates the talks. In many ways, the story of Two-Face as told in *The Dark Knight* owes itself expressly to the writing of Jeph Loeb. Just as importantly, Nolan takes his characters in slightly different directions than those who came before.

While Harvey Dent's story is very similar in both media, the advent of Two-Face is quite different. The classic creation of Two-Face, as seen in comics like *The Dark Knight Returns* and as referenced in Joel Schumacher's *Batman Forever*, takes place in a courtroom, where Dent tries a high-level member of an organized crime family. When Harvey approaches the stand to begin questioning the witness, the man douses Harvey's face with a toxic acid, corroding the skin from half his face and leaving him mentally scarred as well. As usual, Christopher Nolan nods his assent to this previous telling of the story by taking it and standing it on its head once again. So, when Harvey approaches the stand to question his belligerent witness in *The Dark Knight*, the witness suddenly pulls not a vial of acid but a gun on the District Attorney. Here, Nolan not only reminds the audience that he knows prior Batman continuity but also that he understands the *Godfather* references made in *The Long Halloween*. He works in a scene with a reticent witness that is just as obviously a reference to *The Godfather, Part 2* as *The Long Halloween* is to the original Coppola film. He then returns to referencing the comic book in turning Harvey Dent into Two-Face. In Jeph Loeb's comic book narrative,
Harvey nearly dies from a mail bomb sent to his home early in the story. Harvey in turn uses the distraction to put out word that he was killed in the explosion, thus allowing him to work undercover to find the criminals behind it. Nolan flips this scenario neatly in *The Dark Knight* by making the explosion itself the event that turns Harvey into Two-Face. In complement, Captain Jim Gordon fakes his own death to go undercover in trapping the Joker. All of the elements are present, but enacted by new people for different reasons.

The Joker of *The Dark Knight* is a similarly twisted take on Batman continuity, perhaps because the Joker himself has an uncertain identity throughout Batman's history. The Joker's true name is never identified in the comic books, and his origins never fully authenticated. Some stories have said that he has a dead wife, others that he was a crazed son of an abusive father, still others that he was the leader of a clown-masked gang of thieves. As hard as authors such as Alan Moore and Ed Brubaker have tried, there are accounts of the Joker's back-story that just cannot be combined. They are mutually exclusive but universally warped tales of self-mutilation and terror. With so little known about a character's back-story, and with that which is known contradictory, it seems impossible to piece together a single interpretation of the man known only as Joker. That task lay before Christopher Nolan and Heath Ledger in re-imagining the Joker in *The Dark Knight*. How do you create a new history for a character that traditionally has
As previously stated, Nolan pulled much of his inspiration from *The Last Halloween*. Similarly, Ledger specifically studied the portrayals of the psychopathic clown in works like *Batman: The Killing Joke* and *Arkham Asylum: A Serious House on Serious Earth* (Lesnick, 2007). From the conglomeration of their efforts came the brilliant idea of a Joker who did not truly care whence he came. Thus, in *The Dark Knight*, the Joker tells multiple stories about how he got the horrible scars that crease his cheeks into an eternally gruesome smile. Certainly he must know how he got the scars, but his constant retelling and changing of the story make the audience question his sanity and whether they can believe anything about who he is or what he wants. His is an inscrutable character, and that inscrutability makes him both terrifying and true to the Gordian knot of storylines as mangled as his face. As Batman's butler Alfred says, "'In their desperation, they turned to a man they didn't fully understand' [...] ‘Some people just want to watch the world burn’" (Nolan, 2008) – a perfect description for the Joker of both the screen and the comics.

The Joker also comes to represent the purity of supervillains in their totality. Certainly there are many criminals who commit crimes for power, fame, money, etc., but in the Joker, there is a purity that crosses the border between criminal and supervillain. He wants nothing more than to oppose
order and justice, the driving forces behind most superheroes. The Batman of both comics and film comes to stand for the unbreakable status quo, a standard against which the anarchic Joker has no choice but to rebel. In *The Long Halloween*, this role of pure villain is filled by Alberto Falcone, the son of a local mob boss who wants simply to prove what can be done with ingenuity used for evil, a calling that the Joker fulfills to his fullest in *The Dark Knight* (Loeb and Sale, 1998). The Joker disdains the money that he steals, instead turning it into a funeral pyre for a traitorous player in his scheme. Similarly, the money-burning scene is a reference to another scene in *The Long Halloween* where Batman and Harvey Dent set ablaze a warehouse filled with untold millions hoarded by the crime organizations (Loeb and Sale, 1998). He spites Two-Face for being a "schemer" whose highest aspiration is merely to rid the streets of the average criminals when the best action is simply to combat all of society's plans. By taking out all of the relatively humane criminals like the mobsters, Batman has created the need or possibility of supervillains, a precedent set before by Alberto Falcone.

In short, Two-Face and the Joker represent the unplanned, unstoppable evil in the world because they both believe that evil cannot be stopped. They are the unadulterated representatives of the supervillain persona. Most remarkable about *The Dark Knight* is the collating and compositing of the information necessary to take two characters so strongly rooted in historical
continuity and creating such fresh interpretations. The focus applied to detail, to character and to realism is testament to the media that came before the Batman film. At their best, this is what superhero films should be: the same story, with all the beloved parts put together into a new, remarkable whole.

**Comic Book Films as a Whole**

Another comic-to-film phenomenon that has burst from the page recently is the seminal graphic novel *Watchmen* (Moore and Gibbons, 1986). The film has been a moderate success financially, but this can be attributed to the strength of the source material, which the film mimics religiously with panel-by-panel storyboards taken directly from the graphic novel. A postmodern comic from the mind of auteur Alan Moore, *Watchmen* is itself a deconstruction of the comic book mythos as a whole, an autopsy of four-color heroism that exaggerates superhero characterization to bring out the illicit weaknesses in the Ubermensch. It seems clear that one of the superheroes that Moore specifically re-envisions is Batman. This new vision serves a dual purpose as a show of respect to Batman’s popularity and storyline but also a chance to tear that favorite character apart layer by layer. Moore takes the most admirable characteristics of superheroes—power, intelligence, strength—and twists them to see what happens when these powers are taken to their extremes. Instead of parodying Bruce Wayne in a singular, reflexive
character, Moore fragments the Batman psyche, enhances the pieces and builds an entire character around each shard. In doing so, he points out how subtly twisted Batman is and makes the audience question how they can idealize such a fallen man.

Almost all of Moore's Watchmen are without traditional superpowers. Except for Dr. Manhattan, they cannot fly, they cannot shoot lasers, they cannot slow time or perform any other superheroic tricks. Much like Batman, they are simply trained in fighting, and they get a certain rush from their nocturnal jaunts into the criminal element of the city. They are just normal human beings who don gaudy costumes to fight evil for a variety of personal reasons... and Moore wants to know why. He shatters the Batman persona into several bodies, each with its own twisted quirk. The most strongly Batman-associated character in Watchmen is the ultra-violent antihero Rorschach. One of the troubling aspects of Batman is his vigilante nature and the "necessary" force with which he dispatches evildoers. He is completely outside the law and can act accordingly at times, but his sense of justice continues to endear him to the reader. In short, the fact that Batman is above the law and sometimes even opposed to it. He is antiestablishment; he is a criminal, and still he remains a favored "good guy.” Rorschach simply takes this characterization one step further. Where Batman is a cultured moralist with a clear sense of boundaries, Rorschach is an absolutist who sees himself
as judge, jury and executioner. Batman is outside the law; Rorschach is specifically against it. He will fight anyone, criminal or cop, to get what he needs.

The similarities run strong in the medium of film as well. Recent iterations of Batman have presented his voice as guttural and animalistic, perhaps pointing out how the uncompromising superhero part of Batman's persona is gradually eclipsing Bruce Wayne, the human part. Batman's mask is as true a representation of his soul as the face of Bruce Wayne once was. In comparison, Rorschach has slipped completely into his superhero character. There is no longer any gulf between his "alter-ego" and his "superego." At his arrest and unmasking, he yells that the police, "give [him] back his face" in a primal scream of rage (Moore and Gibbons, 1986). The mask and the gravelly voice have become him in full. As he later says, there is no "Walter Kovacs" anymore, only Rorschach—a depiction not so far from that of Batman. In both comics and film, Batman often struggles with the question of ends versus means. Rorschach has no such qualms. The ends always justify the means, and in his world of absolute justice, where he alone is arbiter, Rorschach decides who deserves what punishment. Alan Moore took into consideration the oft-mentioned epithet that Batman is fascist in his delivery of justice and made his reflective character Rorschach the very definition of fascism. Rorschach, though, is not the only reflection.
Another Batman reference lies in the character Nite Owl II. Here Moore visualizes the fetishistic appeal of costumes to superheroes. An argument often raised about costumed heroes is that their outfits suggest deviant sexual activities, particularly those characters sporting shiny plastic or rough leather looks. The latex-and-leather-decked Batman again fits this category, and Nite Owl represents that physical attribute of the Dark Knight. In costume design and function, Nite Owl is a near-doppelganger for Batman, with his pointed helmet and mask, rubberized breastplate and hang-glider cape. He is the son of a wealthy financier, and he uses his inherited wealth to build a high-tech crime-fighting bunker in his basement, much like Bruce Wayne. In addition, Nite Owl represents the sexual nature of costumed heroes, attracted to the feel, the power and the presence of costumes on himself and others. His superheroism is integrated into the sexual high he gets from his suit, so much so that he cannot perform sexually without it. Batman is just the opposite: separated from society and sexuality by the responsibilities of his costumed reality. Nite Owl then represents the repressed elements of Bruce Wayne's persona looking for an outlet in his superhero self. Moore combines many of the questionable sexual elements of superhero comics into one character to show the lengths to which beloved heroes can be twisted with a vivid imagination.

A third *Watchmen* character, Ozymandias, displays the intelligence and
strength of Batman corrupted into something sinister. Naming himself from the Percy Shelley poem about Pharaoh Rameses II, Ozymandias is considered the "smartest man in the world," a power that he uses to gain incredible wealth in the financial sector. He is a direct representation of Batman's more methodical side, the "smartest man in the world" modeled lovingly after "the greatest detective in the world." Their origin tales also follow the same path: orphaned at a young age, striking out into the world in search of knowledge and strength, training in ninjutsu and other fighting arts. Yet once again, Moore takes his character one step further and makes him a Machiavellian extreme of Batman: the smartest and strongest man in the world. Ozymandias used his knowledge with grim and methodical purpose, first for monetary gain, and later for global domination as a metaphysical puppeteer of nations.

Perhaps here it is easiest to see the comparisons between the movies. In *Batman Begins*, Batman must decide between letting a prison island tear itself to shreds in order to save the rest of Gotham City and risking everything to stop the violence at its source. He chooses to put aside his own feelings and attacks the man who first taught him the martial arts, killing one to save all. Ozymandias takes this moral to extremes, setting up all his fellow superheroes to be unwitting accomplices in a nuclear game of Risk. He purposefully sacrifices the lives of “millions... to save billions” (Snyder, 2009).
In an interesting conglomeration, Ozymandias represents both the protagonist and antagonist of the Batman tale. He is the utilitarian hero Batman, willing to make the hard choice to save the world, and also the conscientious villain Ra's al Ghul, sacrificing the many to help many more. There is no question that *Watchmen* director Zack Snyder held these two characterizations in tension when filming his take on the character. Here Batman splinters into three different bodies, each exaggerated respectively from abrasive to gratuitous, from fetishistic to overly sexualized, and from utilitarian to fascist. In its own way, *Watchmen* is another Batman story, taken in a completely new direction by a brilliantly different author. Yet it also stands on its own as a reassembling of all the parts into a probing, soul-searching analysis of why we find superheroes like Batman so fascinating in the first place.

**Conclusion**

For more than forty years, superheroes have taken a flying leap from the comic book pages into other forms of media, be it television or film, and the influx of such adaptations seems to be expanding all the time. According to *USA Today*, there have been at times more than forty superhero movies in production at once (Bowles, 2008). In 2007, the combined box office take for all comic book films totaled 10% of all revenue Hollywood brought in for that year (Lieberman, 2008). Though its power over time has fluctuated like
Robin's flamboyant identity, the genre has always found a heroic way to bounce back. At the core of that resurgence has always stood the staunch guardian of the night, Batman. Over time, the story of superhero favorites has followed the same path on film as it has in comic books. Superman was the first superhero and the greatest, the original king of superheroes. Yet always stalking silently behind was the world's greatest detective, the far more realistic Batman, and over the years, this sleuthing superhero has usurped the throne of popularity from its bland and perfect monarch. The same pattern that prevailed in comic books in the 1930s and '40s has reasserted itself with the advent of comic book films. Superman again came first with his critically acclaimed film debut in the late '70s, but slowly, surely, Batman unseated him in the hearts of fans. His is a gripping, gritty reality that connects with the audience more than the fanciful frippery of Superman, and box office receipts bear this out. Batman is the new leader of the superhero genre, and under his reign, his subjects are prospering and proliferating astonishingly.

Perhaps the most important key to Batman's success is the attention to detail and continuity paid by his advisors, the directors and writers that bring Gotham City to life. Since the beginning, Batman films have been extremely conscious of the long and storied past associated with their protagonist, and the filmmakers have carefully crafted storylines that adhere to that continuity structure as much as possible. Just as importantly, where the directors have
chosen to take the character in a different direction, they have often been courteous enough to acknowledge the iterations that have come before, giving their regards to the greats while making a name for themselves in the ever-expanding canon. Christopher Nolan did this best with his films *Batman Begins* and *The Dark Knight*, bringing out the little-known back-stories of integral Batman characters while still leaving his fingerprints scattered throughout the films. He and Tim Burton each brought real humanity to their fictional lead by having Batman represent weighty themes with the perfect mix of gravitas and wit – and the crowds and critics have positively responded *en masse*. Batman has led superhero film from its early days of laughable camp into a veritable *coup d'etat* of the movie industry, garnering Oscars and accolades along the way. Most importantly, Batman has garnered respect for the genre as a whole, removing the emphasis from the superhero aspect of the story and focusing instead on the task of creating a great film experience. Just as in the comics themselves, these superheroes are now a force to be reckoned with, and as they continue to evolve over time, they will keep finding new and innovative ways to reinvent themselves to better reflect the audience of the day. That is the greatest superpower of all, shared by all superheroes—immortality that even Ra’s al Ghul would envy. Fans worldwide hope that it will always be that way.
Works Cited


Uslan, M. (2009, January 24). *Q & A Session*. Speech presented at Ohio University School of Film, Athens, OH.