

The Batman. Dir. Matt Reeves. Screenplay by Matt Reeves and Peter Craig. Perf. Robert Pattinson, Zoe Kravitz, Colin Farrell, and Paul Dano. Warner Bros. Pictures, 2022.

To anyone who pays attention to the movies, reboots and sequels are nothing new. Yet it feels like the percentage of new films that are remakes/sequels/reboots is currently at an all-time high. *The Batman* (2022), directed by Matt Reeves and starring Robert Pattinson, falls right into this trend. Thus far, there have been eight films based on *Batman* in three distinct timelines, not including some old film serials and the crossovers like *Batman v. Superman: Dawn of Justice* (Zack Snyder, 2016), which introduced Ben Affleck as Bruce Wayne. It should also be said that, for comic books, this trend is nothing new; retelling and updating origin stories and characters with new artists and writers has deep roots in comic book culture, making superheroes a kind of apotheosis of both the narrative as structure and the character as archetype. This tendency toward reinvention of course leads us to the question: what new take on the title character could *The Batman* possibly offer? Quite a bit, apparently.

This rendition of the character created by Bob Kane and Bill Finger for DC Comics in 1939 is not quite a new origin story; rather, we enter the story in year two of Batman's existence. The film follows Batman (Robert Pattinson) as he, with the help of Commissioner Gordon (Jeffrey Wright), investigates a series of murders claimed by the Riddler (Paul Dano), an enigmatic figure prone to leaving clues for our hero to follow. In typical style, the Riddler is always one step ahead and leads the Batman to revelations about the interconnected relationship between organized crime in Gotham and the city's ruling class, including some that touch Wayne personally. Along the way, Batman meets and is helped by Selina Kyle (Zoë Kravitz), who is searching for answers about the murder of her friend. Batman fights his way through the levels of corruption until he, and the audience, become privy to the Riddler's overall, terrible plan.

Screenwriters Matt Reeves and Peter Craig take for granted that the audience already knows the traditional beginnings of Bruce Wayne's transformation into the superhero without powers; mentions are made of the death of his parents and lip-service is paid to the fact that Wayne's bat-inspired vigilantism is a continuation of his father's projects to reform a crime-ridden Gotham City, but those events are left mostly off-screen. As such, this version differentiates itself from the Christopher

Nolan trilogy in which *Batman Begins* (2005) details the story of what might be called Wayne's radicalization. This new portrayal leads to another interesting difference: in previous iterations of the character played by Michael Keaton, Val Kilmer, George Clooney, and Christian Bale, all navigated their identities with some ease, embodying the darkness of Batman and the flippancy of the playboy billionaire with almost no overlap. In *The Batman*, however, Robert Pattinson's Bruce Wayne is a traumatized, damaged human who cannot simply turn the bat off when he removes his costume and dons his tailored suit. The loss of his parents is very real to this Wayne, and his trauma is not a thing of the past but a fact of his life. This, then, is what drives Pattinson's Wayne: pain and loss and fear. In this light, Batman fully realizes the radicalized reality that would be necessary for such a character to spend his nights beating thugs bloody.

The first two WB Batman films, produced between 1989 and 1992, were considered much darker than the Adam West series from the 60s and were frequently compared to Frank Miller's vision of Batman in his graphic novel *The Dark Knight Returns*. The next two films returned to something closer to the older slapstick style, tinting the violence through bright colors (Robin's suit and The Riddler's bright green leotard being good examples) and gimmicky set pieces (who can forget the infamous bat-card?). The *Dark Knight* Trilogy from Nolan brought back a more serious portrayal of violence and its effects on the body, but this was filtered through Hollywood-chic martial arts stylization that invariably cleans up the fighting into a choreographed dance. *The Batman* continues this trend towards ever grittier portrayals of violence and drops all pretenses. Between Dano's serial-killer portrayal of the Riddler and Batman breaking bones, using weapons like baseball bats, and taking shotgun blasts to the chest at close range, this film assaults the viewer with a kind of violence that cannot be ignored nor downplayed as comical. Instead, the violence Pattinson's Batman inflicts on the criminal underworld of Gotham, which includes Colin Farrell's Penguin and John Turturro's Carmine Falcone, is clearly a product of the trauma Wayne has yet to fully understand and cope with. This ferocity points back to the edge on which this Batman walks between the hero and the villain and gives us one of the most powerful moments in the film when his tagline, "I am vengeance," is appropriated by one of the Riddler's henchman. While this dichotomy has in some ways always been a part of the character, traditionally the Batman has approached the line rather than fully straddled it as he appears to be here. The trauma Wayne lives with, that he tries to funnel into making the city a safer place, makes it difficult for him to

exercise the restraint we expect of our heroes, and Pattinson embodies that dark side of superhero vigilantism with an engaging and emotional performance.

This sense of moral darkness is reflected in the overall aesthetic of the film. Where in previous versions Bruce Wayne's scenes often offered a reprieve from Batman's melancholy, *The Batman* allows viewers no such light. The film is dark. Here, Gotham City is the noir, urban landscape turned up to eleven. If the shadows are Batman's domain, then, in this film, shadows and darkness are a major part of the viewer's experience. Yet there is a kind of beauty to the film, a dream-like quality that puts the audience directly inside Batman's mind and gives them access to his vision of the world. Through this juxtaposition of the beauty of the cinematography and the grittiness of the characters and action, the audience is shown a world in which symbol is everything. We see, in a way not previously explored, that Wayne, for whom the symbol of the bat is a tool by which he forces meaning into a meaningless world, is drowning in the symbols he sees. He is in some ways trapped by them and the power they hold over his life. Signifier and signified collapse in the character of Wayne, who cannot detangle his sense of self from the trauma that drives him into costume. As such, Batman, rather than being an alter ego or even his true self, is instead the embodied reality of the trauma, the signifier brought to independent life in and of itself. For scholars and teachers that look at or use popular culture, this rendition of the Batman offers fruitful ground for the exploration of the ways in which signs and the world they are meant to represent often bleed into one another in ways that are difficult to deconstruct. Be it the concepts of justice or vengeance, the memories of his parents, or the costume he uses to protect himself from a world he does not understand, Wayne's world is one of layers and layers of meaning and a beautiful one at that.

Is the film perfect? No. There are some underdeveloped ideas and threads that get lost in this three-hour attempt to do so much with this character that audiences have seen so many times. Additionally, while Dano, Kravitz, and Wright all give powerful performances that update their characters to the times – Dano's portrayal of the Riddler as an online extremist is especially interesting – there are times they are not given quite enough time to fully shine through in the film. Kravitz's Catwoman especially begs more development and screentime as does the character's relationship to power and the elite. Yet this film does something that is perhaps becoming rarer and that I am coming to appreciate more: it takes *risks*. Where the film could have followed established formulas, this iteration instead opts to offer something new, and it is mostly successful, achieving something like the

sublime in a way that feels uncommon for a superhero movie. This alone is worth the runtime and makes *The Batman* a must-watch for fans of both the character and cinema itself.

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The Last Duel. Dir. Ridley Scott. Screenplay by Matt Damon, Ben Affleck, and Nicole Holofcener. Perf. Jodie Comer, Matt Damon, Adam Driver, and Ben Affleck. Walt Disney Studios Motion Pictures, 2021.

Adapted by Matt Damon, Ben Affleck, and Nicole Holofcener from Eric Jager's 2004 book, *The Last Duel: A True Story of Trial By Combat in Medieval France*, director Ridley Scott's *The Last Duel* recounts the story of the rape of Marguerite de Carrouges (Jodie Comer) in 1386. On the surface, this based-on-true-events film is a medieval "he said, she said" account of what really happened, but it is much more layered than that. Much like *Rashomon* (Akira Kurosawa, 1950), *The Last Duel* unfolds in three parts, each telling the same story but from a different perspective.

"The Truth according to Jean de Carrouges" details the account of Marguerite's husband Jean (Matt Damon), who sees his former friend, Jacques Le Gris (Adam Driver), as an evil man who has stolen everything from him, even his wife. He swears vengeance on Le Gris and uses his wife to enact his retribution. "The Truth according to Jacques Le Gris" is Le Gris's account of what happened between him and Marguerite. Le Gris pities Carrouges as a simpleton but comes to admire Marguerite. Le Gris does not believe he raped Marguerite because she seemed to reciprocate his advances. To him, her cries were playful, much like the other women he has slept with. "The Truth according to Marguerite" is Marguerite's account of what happened. The audience is meant to believe that her account is true because "The Truth" in this chapter's title lingers (Mears, 2021). Marguerite retells events of the assault and finishes the film with how events played out, leading to the last duel between Carrouges and Le Gris.

The irony, however, lies in the quote “there is no right; there is only the power of men.” Despite this being a story of what happened to Marguerite, she is overshadowed by men and religion. This move even manifests in the framing of the film: while she waits her turn for Carrouges and Le Gris to finish their side of the story, Marguerite’s account is interrupted when Carrouges challenges Le Gris to a duel. The court, who heavily rely on God’s ruling, is about to dismiss the case due to the friendship between Le Gris and the priest Pierre d’Alençone (Ben Affleck), when Carrouges, blinded by rage and looking to save face, challenges Le Gris to a duel without thinking about what this action could do to Marguerite. A trial by combat is considered a fair verdict because God will protect the honest man against the dishonest one. Should Carrouges die in the duel, he will be seen as a hero trying to defend his wife and will be praised for it while Marguerite will be burned for lying. If Carrouges kills Le Gris, he will still get all the glory while Marguerite lives (Jager, 2021). Because of this overshadowing, Marguerite has even less control of her fate than she did before.

According to Damon, at the time in which the film is set, “a woman was considered property. Property of her father, and then eventually property of her husband,” (Mears, 2021). Scott expresses this idea using Carrouges’ horses; Carrouges loves Marguerite, but sees her as his property, not unlike one of his horses. This idea is further articulated through similarities between Marguerite and Carrouges’ mare. Marguerite’s assault is foreshadowed when her husband’s pure white mare is raped by a black horse. When the mare becomes pregnant, Carrouges locks her in a stall, though Marguerite later frees her. This foreshadowing symbolizes how Marguerite was treated after the attack. Carrouges keeps her away from the world, to avoid tarnishing his trinket, but when Marguerite is attacked and becomes pregnant herself, he punishes her. While Marguerite is not kept in a stall like the mare, she is nevertheless isolated from the public because no one believes her. Ultimately, it is up to Marguerite to free herself by seeking justice for her attack.

This film brings to light how subjectivity and perspective blur black-and-white thinking to comment on how society has remained somewhat stagnant regarding women’s agency. This film echoes the #MeToo movement when Marguerite’s mother-in-law scolds her for causing a scene and reveals that the same thing happened to her when she was younger, just as it has happened to many women, both at that time and in the present. This parallel illustrates why women, even today, often do not speak up about assault. According to Comer, “this story is very relevant

because this problem hasn't gone away. So, I think we all definitely felt a real duty of care when approaching the subject matter" (Green, 2021).

The final battle, while gruesome, is not the worst part of the film. The silencing of Marguerite is what really makes this story impactful, especially when considering how it mirrors the modern #MeToo movement. Carrouges's pride gets the better of him as he, after learning of his wife's attack, immediately orders her to get on the bed so that he may also force himself upon her and thus ensure that Le Gris is not "the last man who knew her." Marguerite is further dehumanized since her assault is seen as a property crime against Carrouges, who does not care that she was attacked but instead is upset that his wife was attacked.

With each retelling of the same story, viewers come to understand how patriarchal privilege has allowed toxic masculinity to thrive. Because of their friendship, d'Alençon was going to use his power to reward Le Gris without considering whether the latter had indeed raped Marguerite. In the end, Le Gris loses the duel not because Marguerite told the truth, but because Carrouges bests him in combat. Although Marguerite is ultimately found to be telling the truth by the time the credits roll, justice remains unserved.

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