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## The Geopolitics of The Dark Knight

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## The Geopolitics of The Dark Knight

### Abstract

As the Israeli military intensified its violence in Gaza in late 2023, Christopher Nolan's new movie *Oppenheimer* began to gain Oscar buzz. This essay analyzes one of Nolan's previous films, his Batman blockbuster *The Dark Knight*, in relation to Israeli and American military violence in the Middle East. To justify their enhanced military violence the Israeli government, just as the American government did during the Bush-era War on Terror, deploy the geopolitical script that exceptional measures must be taken to defeat the penultimate evil of the radical Islamist terrorist. I analyze *The Dark Knight* as if it were a social science essay which has as its thesis statement the argument that the state of exception is justified to protect society from the 'other' in the form of the terrorist. I will demonstrate how Nolan, unlike an academic essay, makes his argument by using cinematography, dialogue, sound, narrative structure, and character development. While Nolan masterfully uses the tools of his medium, the argument itself that the film makes is wrong when applied to the real-world applications of Iraq and Gaza. Ultimately, I frame Christopher Nolan's *The Dark Knight* as a geopolitical essay, funded by Hollywood corporate-capital, that argues in support of the War on Terror waged by the American and Israeli militaries.

### Keywords

Geopolitics, Political Geography, War on Terror, Film Studies

## Introduction

In this article I analyze Christopher Nolan's superhero blockbuster *The Dark Knight* (2008) as if the movie was an academic social science essay in which the filmmaker makes a geopolitical argument that supports both America's past initiatives in its War on Terror and Israel's ongoing genocide in Gaza. Unlike a traditional academic paper, I will demonstrate how Nolan makes his geopolitical arguments using cinematography, dialogue, sound, narrative structure, and character development. With *Oppenheimer* winning Best Picture at last year's Oscars, Nolan has been the subject of recent media attention and critical praise. Just as Nolan's newest film *Oppenheimer* reveals the director's centrist-moderate if not slightly conservative politics so too does his earlier superhero flick *The Dark Knight*.

As Nolan's biopic on the American Prometheus began to get awards buzz in late 2022, the Israeli government began to intensify the violence of its occupation in Gaza. Israel's recent advances into Gaza have been defined by the use of violent strategies that violate Palestinians' human rights and are illegal according to the standards of international law. When charging Israel with genocide the government of South Africa pointed to offenses that include indiscriminate bombings, the targeting of critical infrastructure like hospitals, attacking foreign aid workers, mass arrests with no due process, the rape of Palestinian women, and the cutting off of electricity and water to the civilian population (ICJ: 2024).

The Israeli government and their allies have justified their violence since October 7<sup>th</sup> by arguing that the threat of Hamas inside Palestine represents such an evil terrorist force that the group must be eradicated through any means necessary, no matter how many civilians might die. The threat of Hamas, as this ultimate evil, is seen to justify the Israeli government using tactics that are exceptional to what is allowed by international law. Early plans to build luxury housing in Gaza and internal Israeli political strife put doubt as to whether defeating Hamas is the only motivating factor behind this aggression. However, the purpose of this essay is not to answer why Israel has increased aggression into Palestine but rather to understand the script justifying it: that the terrorist is such an evil threat that it must be wiped out by whatever means necessary, even if it means violating international law.

This script is not new but rather was the organizing drama of the Bush era War on Terror in Afghanistan and Iraq. After 9/11 the Bush Administration portrayed Al Qaeda- and by extension the entire Middle East and all Muslims- as the ultimate evil who are motivated by only a hatred of America and freedom and so must be defeated by any means necessary (Gregory: 2004). The Bush Administration justified illegally invading sovereign nations, arresting foreign internationals without due process, torture in facilities like Guantanamo Bay, indiscriminate bombings, and increasing mass surveillance even on their own citizens all in the name of defeating this ultimate evil. As the war continued and it became clear that American policy had no clear strategic goals, popular criticism about these exceptional tactics arose. It is in this context of rising critique of American policy that Nolan began developing his Batman movie *The Dark Knight* in 2005 which was subsequently released in 2008. *The Dark Knight* has since been widely discussed by academics as an allegory for the post-9/11 world (Ip: 2011; Baxter: 2011; Pheasant-Kelley: 2013; Avery: 2023). My specific focus in this essay is discussing how Nolan's film makes the same geopolitical argument as the Bush and Netanyahu Administrations: that this

state of exception is justified because this Other, in the form of the terrorist, is so-purely evil and motivated only by hatred that it must be destroyed by going outside the bounds of what the law allows.

It might seem bizarre to argue that a Hollywood blockbuster could be an important act of geopolitics. Social scientists have become increasingly receptive to studying visual mediums as relevant empirical data for macro-sociological change (Sontag: 1977; Deleuze: 1983; Harvey: 1989; Mirzoeff: 1999; Shapiro: 2009; Dittmer: 2013). Specific to the connection between film and geopolitics, Shapiro's (2009) *Cinematic Geopolitics* discusses how militaries have adopted visual technologies used by the movie industry for battlefield simulations, surveillance, and for drone strikes. However, Shapiro's (2009) text is more about the revolutionary potential of cinema as a medium to advance our collective political imaginings and is rooted in the writings of philosophers like Deleuze and Ranciere. This article is more focused on how movies like *The Dark Knight* can be important acts of geopolitics that function similarly to academic social science essays. Given the power of the film industry in contemporary global society, I am examining how Hollywood corporate-capital can produce movies that support the interests of imperial power and generate widespread support for American military interventions. My argument is not a discussion in poststructural philosophy but is instead rooted in the scholarly disciplines of political geography and international political economy as well as the non-academic writings of industry screenwriters. In this article I frame Christopher Nolan as a geopolitician and *The Dark Knight* as an act of geopolitics and I do so using the literature on critical geopolitics.

Critical geopolitics, a subdiscipline largely pioneered by O'Tuathail (1996), advances a different notion of geopolitics with a different meaning than the term often is inscribed with in more conventional IR scholarship. Instead of seeing geopolitics as a chess match between the great powers, O'Tuathail (1996, 196) defines geopolitics not as a coherent object to be analyzed but instead as a "practice." Following O'Tuathail (1996, 196), this paper uses the term "geopolitics" to refer to a practice "where geographical knowledge was combined with political imperatives...to envision and script global space." For example, Fox News does geopolitics when they frame Iraq or Palestine as filled with evil terrorists who hate freedom. Geopolitics is a practice that people or institutions do when they infuse the world, and places within it, with politically charged narratives, meanings, and arguments. Defining geopolitics as a practice of writing global space, O'Tuathail (1996, 249) calls for a "critical geopolitics" to emerge with an aim to "document and deconstruct" how these writings formulate and serve the dominant interests of the powerful. This essay is a work of critical geopolitics because its purpose is to document and deconstruct how *The Dark Knight* aids imperial power in waging the War on Terror.

As a diffuse practice, it is possible that a filmmaker like Christopher Nolan could be an important geopolitician and produce works that further the geopolitical narratives spun by the powerful. O'Tuathail (1996) even refers to geopolitical narratives as "scripts" because of the narrative-building that has taken place in justifying projects like the War on Terror. What I suggest in this essay is that the process of writing a geopolitical script and a movie script might not be so different. However, this requires a different way of understanding movies.

Film and television screenwriter Robert McKee (1997) in his book *Story*, a text widely credited as establishing the rules of the modern blockbuster, frames a great screenplay as a discussion of ideas or as a “living metaphor.” To McKee (1997) it is the writer’s job to express a truth, to say ‘life is like this,’ or present what he calls a “controlling idea.” The controlling idea functions like a thesis statement in an academic paper, it is an argument about the nature of human life or society that organizes how the author structures the work. Yet the plot of a script, McKee (1997) explains, “does not express ideas in the dry, intellectual arguments of an essay.” To McKee (1997) “master storytellers never explain. They do the hard, painfully creative thing- they dramatize.” To dramatize means to express the controlling idea- the thesis statement- not by explaining but to express that truthful statement through images, dialogue, narrative structure, and through the choices characters make. Throughout the plot of the script the audiences watches the characters make choices- some which support the controlling idea and some which go against it. This back and forth between the merits and weaknesses of an argument happens until the climax, which is an irreversible action taken by the protagonist that asserts the statement about life the film is working to make.

The point I am making is that great works of filmmaking, even superhero movies like *The Dark Knight*, are not always motivated by just the pursuit of mass entertainment, of mindlessly stimulating the audience’s dopamine. Rather great works entertain by presenting arguments about the nature of life and society. The thesis statement of *The Dark Knight* is that the state of exception is justified due to the inherent evil of the Other, in the form of the terrorist. The script of *The Dark Knight* echoes the geopolitical script used to justify the War on Terror and the post-October 7<sup>th</sup> escalation of violence in Gaza.

My use of the state of exception comes from the work of political philosopher Giorgio Agamben (2003). Agamben begins with the well-established idea in political philosophy that the sovereign is “he who decides on the state of exception,” who decides when the juridico-political norm will not be applied. Largely based off a political arrangement of the ancient Roman Republic, the academic idea of the state of exception refers to a process by which the democratic norms of society are overruled so that one man can be granted emergency powers allowing him to go outside the bonds of the law as necessary to defeat the threat opposing them. In the contemporary context, the state of the exception refers to when governments like the United States or Israel violate international, or even their own, laws to defeat their opponents.

The idea of the “Other” or “othering” has become central to political geography since Edward Said’s *Orientalism* (1976). How Orientalism functions is that the “self” defines itself as the opposite of an “other”, the West is produced discursively as everything a supposedly inhumane Middle East is not (Said: 1976). The process of Orientalism strips historical context and agency from the Oriental subject to the extent that, for example, the Middle East becomes understood less as a region of diverse peoples and cultures but instead as a homogenous Islamist enemy of the West. A geopolitical script began to be written around the line “Why do they hate us?”; why would the people of the Middle East hate the liberal democratic West? (Gregory: 2004, 20-24). This script answers that this ‘Other’ hates ‘us’ because they are ‘uncivilized’, ‘savage,’ filled with hatred, and motivated by religious aspirations of waging a global jihad to kill all infidels (Huntington: 1996; Gregory: 2004). In American society, the terrorist has become the ultimate other, differentiated from more conventional geopolitical actors like nation-states because such

radical groups have no motivation other than to destroy western civilization. Everything America and Israel is meant to represent, at least in geopolitical scripts written by the corporate media outlets, like freedom, liberty, equality, justice, and civilization- the Other in the form of the terrorist is not.

In the geopolitical scripts of the Bush Administration, the Netanyahu government, and *The Dark Knight*, the state of exception, with its illegal and unethical tactics, is justified because society is threatened by a purely evil enemy that must be eradicated. Nolan does an excellent job at writing his essay by expertly dramatizing his arguments. The Joker represents the terrorist other, a villain who has no greed or motivation other than to destroy society and cause suffering. The character of Bruce Wayne or the Batman represents the state of the exception, a vigilante crime fighter who is under no democratic oversight. Like the Bush Administration in the 2000s, Batman uses illegal tactics that are not normally accepted like extraditing foreign nationals, using enhanced interrogation techniques, and conducting mass surveillance on his own citizens. Gotham's District Attorney Harvey Dent represents the normal politico-judicio legal order- doing things the right way, the American way. By having these three characters interact, Christopher Nolan (2008) is having a metaphorical discussion about the merits of the idea of the state of the exception. When the Batman stops the Joker from ruining Harvey Dent's legacy, restoring the people's faith in their governing institutions, Nolan communicates in the climax of his film that the exception is justified to defeat this other terrorist. In the final seconds of the movie Batman races offscreen with Police Commissioner Gordon calling the caped crusader "a silent guardian, a watchful protector, a Dark Knight." Nolan argues that his audience should see the use of exceptional powers as guarding and protecting society, even if our knight in shining armor is a more ethically questionable hero.

Nolan makes an abstract argument and I have no interest in arguing in the abstract, I only insist that the real-world applications of this geopolitical script are wrong and have led to devastating consequences for millions. Nolan's geopolitical script is an argument made in the abstract, devoid of the historical context or cultural specificity needed to accurately understand American and Israeli policies against terrorist groups. However, by removing all historical context and cultural specificity, Nolan is writing his geopolitical script exactly like the American and Israeli governments. Gregory (2004, 20-24) argues that the American and Israeli geopolitical scripts about terrorism grant themselves an innocence that does not match with the historical record. An American geopolitical script did emerge around the phrase "why do they hate us" to justify a war against the Islamist terrorist (Gregory: 2004, 20-24). Gregory (2004) titled his book *The Colonial Present* with the explicit aim to demonstrate that contemporary relations between America and the Middle East did not come out of nowhere but rather are set by centuries of imperial exploitation. Many American political commentators have referred to Cold War US interventions as directly contributing to the rise of Al-Qaeda and the Taliban, calling these terrorists "our own Frankenstein" and that America's policies "spawned a monster" (Gregory: 2004, 45-46). Similarly, current Israeli geopolitical scripts act as if Hamas arose out of nowhere to strike on October 7<sup>th</sup> and has no motivations other than to just kill civilians. Yet this narrative ignores the long-term historical imperial relation between Israel and Palestine. Not mentioned is Netanyahu's decades long support for Hamas so that Palestinian resistance would be divided (Finklestein: 2018). Critical scholarship arguing against Israel's geopolitical scripts position Hamas as part of a historically-produced Palestinian resistance that violently opposes the decades

of apartheid occupation that the Israeli government has subjected Gaza to (Finklestein: 2018). What mainstream geopolitical scripts call terrorism critical scholars might call oppressed people resisting their oppression. Without justifying terrorist attacks on innocents, it is simply wrong and irresponsible for geopolitical scripts to write terrorist groups as if they did not emerge from relations of imperialist exploitation. The terrorist that Nolan presents to the audience is the terrorist that dominant geopolitical scripts imagine themselves fighting against: pure evil that blindly hates freedom and civilization.

Similarly, geopolitical scripts arguing for the state of the exception during the War on Terror act as if the US or Israeli militaries are Batman. However, unlike the American and Israeli militaries, Batman is actually effective at defeating terrorism and minimizes the damage he causes as much as possible. After two decades with American troops in the Middle East the threat of radical Islamist terrorist groups did not decline. Hundreds of thousands of civilians were murdered in the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, cities are bombed or drone-struck relatively indiscriminately, and innocent people have been arrested and tortured with no trial or release. These factors push Gregory (2004) to describe US strategy as waging a “war of terror” instead of “on terror” against innocent Iraqi civilians. Similarly, estimates suggest that 70% of the victims of Israeli airstrikes in Gaza since October 7<sup>th</sup> have been women and children (Mordechai: 2024). Christopher Nolan presents a narrative in which the exception stops the criminal threat and saves lives, while radical scholarship would frame American and Israeli military action as a continuation of a long imperialist history that continues to murder innocent civilians. “But a different message had to be designed for American and British audiences,” Gregory (2004, 198) explains, “because it was not politically expedient for them to see this as a war of terror.” As Gregory (2004, 198) explains in the excerpt below.

*In order to advance from the grounds for killing into the killing grounds themselves, imaginative geographies were mobilized to stage the war within a space of constructed visibility where military violence became - for these audiences at least - cinematic performance. I do not say this lightly. There were endless previews and trailers: drama at the Security Council, drumbeat scenarios of the conflict to come. The action movie mythology summoned up by the White House created heroes out of protagonists who not only broke the law - always to achieve a greater good - but who were above the law.*

I am positioning *The Dark Knight* as part of this “action movie mythology”, as one of the many media images produced in support of the War on Terror. Understanding the film as a dramatized essay, *The Dark Knight*'s controlling idea is that the state of exception is justified and necessary to defeat the threatening Other terrorist who threatens civilization's survival. The movie makes its arguments on an abstract plane, removed from the historical context of the actual cases where this geopolitical script is applied. Given that mainstream foreign policymakers are similarly historically blind, I am suggesting that American and Israeli geopoliticians envision themselves as waging the kind of struggle shown on screen in *The Dark Knight*. After all these powerful geopoliticians have written the same script, or rather scripts with the same thesis.

I will now discuss how Nolan writes his geopolitical essay through cinematography, dialogue, narrative structure, and the actions of characters. First, I will discuss how Nolan frames the Joker

as the terrorist, the ultimate Other that the ‘normal’ juridicio-political order must face. Then, I will show how Nolan uses Batman as a metaphor for the state of the exception. Through the Batman’s interactions with the Joker and Harvey Dent, who is meant to represent the very best of the status quo, Christopher Nolan is writing a dramatized essay on the state of the exception. Given the content matter and the year it was released, it is fair to say Christopher Nolan is writing a dramatized geopolitical essay about the War on Terror. Nolan’s argument is well-made, yet it is still wrong.

### **The Joker as the Terrorist: Some Men Just Want to Watch the World Burn**

This frame of the Joker shown below takes place about 90 minutes into the movie. The Joker has been arrested and is currently being interrogated by Police Commissioner Jim Gordon. The interrogation itself is framed in a straightforward way, cutting back and forth between over the shoulder (OTS) shots between the two characters. However, the differences between the two OTS shots is how Nolan gives the audience information about the character of the Joker.



As we can see, Commissioner Gordon has a light shining on him while Nolan chooses to have the Joker shrouded in complete darkness. Of course, these shots communicate that the Joker is



evil while Gordon is good. Yet there's another message here. The Joker is not threatening to the authorities of Gotham just because he is evil. The other villains threatening Gotham, like the mob for example, murder and rob for the specific goal of making money. The Joker is different than other villains because the clown prince of crime seems to have come out of nowhere, out of empty space from the void. The Joker has no name, face, family, identity, or humanity. As I will later discuss, the Joker has no motivations or material desires, he just cause as much suffering and pain for as many people possible. The Joker just only wants to watch the world burn. This character is given no history or context. The Joker is different from other threats because he appears out of nowhere, has no motivation or strategy, and is driven only by the desire to destroy.

American-state geopolitical actors also found the terrorist to be particularly threatening relative to other more conventional enemies. British military historian Sir John Keegan (2001, quoted in Gregory: 2004, 172) described the 9/11 terrorist attacks as "Arabs, appearing suddenly out of empty space like their desert raider ancestors, assaulted the heartlands of Western power, in a terrifying surprise raid and did appalling damage." This notion of appearing out of "empty space" is a powerful way for mainstream geopolitics to differentiate terrorist groups from other geopolitical threats they may face, like enemy nation-states. As Sir John continues,

*Westerners fight face to face, in stand-up battle, and go on until one side or the other gives in. They choose the crudest of weapons available, and use them with appalling violence, but observe what to non-Westerners may well seem curious rules of honour. Orientals, by contrast, shrink from pitched battle, which they often deride as a sort of game, preferring ambush, surprise, treachery and deceit as the best way to overcome an enemy.*"-Quoted in Gregory (2004, 59)

According to this dominant geopolitical view, unlike the nation-state, the terrorist has no fixed territory or space from which it organizes its military activities. Rather, in this mainstream geopolitical framing, the terrorist appears "suddenly out of nowhere" attacking not through conventional warfare but through "ambush, surprise, treachery and deceit." Ambush, surprise, treachery, and deceit refers to what we in American society commonly understand as terrorist attacks. Repeated hijacks, bombings, suicide bombings, and surprise attacks by disguised assailants have been perpetrated by cells connected to Islamist terrorist groups since 9/11. Whether through suicide bombing, infiltrating through disguise, or complex heists with a masked gang, the film situates the Joker as operating in the same way as 'the terrorist' singled out by American geopolitics as the target of the War on Terror.



Gregory (2004, 248) explains that the American geopolitical structure used discursive “strategic moves” to position the terrorist as the ultimate other, an enemy so illogical and dangerous they must be destroyed by any means necessary. These moves are identified by Gregory (2004, 248) as locating, opposing, casting out. *The Dark Knight* through Nolan’s directorial gaze applies all 3 to the Joker.

First, both the Islamist terrorist and the Joker are located by the geographical script within the urban city. Gregory (2004) explains that the American geopolitical machine framed the war against the terrorist as a struggle waged within the city. Cities like Baghdad, Gregory (2004, 201) explains, became defined “a space of objects” filled with mazelike buildings and alleyways but devoid of people. Their opponents and the civilians in cities like Baghdad were then rendered as objects within a maze-like city by the American military, which better allowed the Bush Administration to justify urban bombings (Gregory: 2004). Instead of bombing people, the American military present itself as invading [an objectified city](#).

The opening shot of *The Dark Knight* is a wide shot of Gotham City’s skyline, what is actually the high-rises of downtown Chicago. In that same shot Nolan then zooms in on one specific building. As the camera is still zooming, we see a crash come out of one of its windows. The next shot then shows one of the Joker’s men inside the building, what amounts to a masked terrorist, who had shattered the window by opening it. The shot clearly tells us this terrorist threat is in the humanless object city, and it also serves another function related to the War on Terror.

This opening shot also communicates that the threat or villain of the movie is within Gotham City as opposed to an external enemy. The zoom in exaggerates this point for the audience, telling the viewer the enemy lies deep within, in places we cannot find. Gregory (2004, 259) explains that in the War on Terror “the homeland had to be defended not only against the enemy without but also the enemy within.” If the terrorist emerges out of empty space then that raises the possibility that attacks of this kind can take place within the borders of America. After all, the 9/11 attacks were carried out by pilots who trained to fly airplanes in America, specifically in Venice, Florida. This understanding that America had to be protected from potential terrorist threats within then justified the increased domestic government surveillance and securitization implemented in bills like the PATRIOT Act. The film uses a strategy of locating in the city similarly to geopolitical narratives on the War on Terror to communicate to its audience that the villain in this movie is a threat from within society.

Second, both the Bush Administration and Christopher Nolan strategically discursively oppose the villains in their scripts to such an extent that the terrorist is characterized as an irrational hateful Other motivated only by pure evil. Gregory (2004, 249) defines “opposing” as the discursive means through which the American geopolitical machine reduced the war on terror to a conflict between Civilization and barbarism. This strategy of opposing refers to how the dominant geopolitical script of the War on Terror frames America as “called to take up arms against the gathering forces of darkness: of Evil incarnate” (Gregory: 2004, 249). The terrorist is singled out in this script as pure evil because they are seen, unlike politically opposed nation-states guided by legible geopolitical goals, to have no cause or motivation. Emerging out of “empty space,” out of “nowhere,” can refer to more than the disguised physical space from a surprise terrorist attack can occur from. The American geopolitical machine in their scripts justifying the War on Terror present a terrorist who is devoid of any historical or socio-cultural context, other than to frame Islam as evil. President George W. Bush said before a joint session of Congress in 2001 referring to Islamist terrorists “American’s are asking, why do they hate

us?” This question of why “they” hate “us” is classic orientalism Gregory (2004, 20-24). By presenting an Other- a terrorist guided by evil and hatred of civilization- America can project itself as its mirror opposite, one of pure innocence. However, this American innocence in reference to the Middle East never existed but rather their relationship is defined by centuries of imperial exploitation (Gregory: 2004).

Many critics of the War on Terror attempted to make this more historical argument but were largely silenced as, because Gregory (2004) argues, attempts to explain the 9/11 attacks by situating them in the long colonial history of the region were condemned as justifications by the American geopolitical machine. With the legacies of imperial history off the table of discussion, the American media instead peddled the script that Islamic culture was to blame for the terrorist attacks. As Fareed Zakaria said in 2001 *Newsweek* about Al-Qaeda “they come out of a culture that reinforces their hostility, distrust, and hatred of the West- and of America in particular. This culture does not condone terrorism but fuels the fanaticism that is at its heart” (quoted in Gregory: 2004, 22). The geopolitical script about terrorist groups like Al-Qaeda and the Taliban was then one that their actions were simply “determined” by the nature of the culture of their religion and region (Gregory: 2004, 23). This discursive strategy of opposing enabled the American geopolitical machine to frame the terrorist- and by extension both all peoples in the Middle East and all Muslims- as barbaric enemies who are motivated by nothing but a natural pre-disposition to hating civilization. Opposing the terrorist in this way allows the American geopolitical machine to, in their scripts, cast off the historical context of their enemy and present them as irrational pure evil.

*The Dark Knight* presents an othered terrorist in the form of the Joker who is distinguished from the other villains in Gotham City because he has no motives other than to destroy the fabric of society and cause suffering. After the opening shot of the film in which we zoom into the terrorist threat within the city, Nolan introduces the Joker in the opening sequence of scenes. We watch a heist bank robbery being pulled off by thugs who work for the Joker, all wearing clown masks. In the clip below, a banker who was shot during the robbery cries out to one of the masked criminals: “the criminals in this town used to believe in things. Honor. Respect. Look at you. What do you believe in huh? What do you believe in?” The masked criminal then takes off his mask, revealing that [he is actually the Joker](#).

Nolan is conveying a message about the Joker by introducing the character in this way. The Joker’s mask is basically a meaningless farce, he takes off one clown face to reveal another. Unlike the Batman who has a secret identity behind his mask there is nothing underneath the Joker, the character is given no context or personal story. As Commissioner Gordon says later on in the film about the Joker, “no matches on prints, DNA, dental, clothing is custom, nothing in his pockets but knives and lint. No labels, no name, no other alias.” Nothing guides the Joker’s actions, as he says later in the movie “do I really look like a guy with a plan?”

The only real guiding logic for the Joker’s actions is presented by Alfred about an hour into the movie in a conversation with Bruce. The Batman is attempting to figure out what motivates the Joker so that he can figure out what the villain plans next. Yet Alfred argues that the entire line

of Bruce's reasoning, trying to uncover a logical reason for this terrorist's emergence, is misguided.

*Wayne: "Criminals aren't complicated Alfred. We just need to figure out what he's after".*

*Alfred: "With respect Master Wayne. Perhaps this is a man you don't fully understand either."*

Alfred then tells the story from "a long time ago" about his time working as a soldier for the British colonial government in Burma. Alfred and his platoon were tasked with hunting a bandit who was stealing valuable gemstones from state convoys. After months of hunting in the jungle they never found the bandit. Yet later on, Alfred saw a child playing with a jewel "the size of a tangerine" revealing that the bandit had not been keeping his prize for himself but instead giving it away. Bruce then asks, if not motivated by greed, why would the bandit steal? Alfred then responds with:

*Alfred: "Well because he thought it was good sport. Because some men aren't looking for anything logical like money. They can't be bought, bullied, reasoned, or negotiated with. Some men just want to watch the world burn."*



While Alfred says this line of dialogue, we see from Bruce's POV the above image of the Joker. This shot is from a home-made video made by the Joker that he broadcasts on television to make his demands. This type of home style video clearly represents the kind of video a terrorist might make to voice their demands if they captured a hostage. In this clip however we see the Joker gleefully laughing, enjoying how evil he is. The Joker is a character who is motivated only by the desire to burn the world.

However, Alfred's story about the bandit is very flawed. There is an extensive sociological literature on banditry in colonized spaces which could explain why a Robin Hood like colonized subject might plunder from state cargoes (French: 2011). Also, Alfred's point of view on this matter as a colonial military officer is inherently biased. As a part of the colonial machine, it is



easy to see why Alfred might not interrogate the colonial-historical context underpinning this interaction of banditry and instead dismiss his enemy as some mindless barbarian. As the colonizer hunting the bandit, it serves Alfred's interest to disregard the historical context and see his enemy as pure evil.



The point that the history of the Joker does not matter is driven home further by Nolan with the metaphor of the villain's scars on his mouth, pictured above. Before the Joker kills his victims, he tells them a story of how he got his scars. Yet the origin story of himself that he tells changes every time. First, he tells his victim that his abusive father gave him his scars. Then he tells another victim that he cut himself after his wife left him. The point Nolan is making is that it does not matter how the Joker got his scars, he is an irrational evil villain. This point by Nolan is eerily similar to how the geopolitical scripts underpinning the war on terror disregard the history of American intervention in the Middle East as setting the stage for radical Islamist groups to emerge and instead see their enemy as inherently evil.

The Joker further extrapolates on his philosophy of being evil for evil's sake in a conversation with Harvey Dent later in the movie. The Joker says to Dent, "I'm an agent of chaos. Oh, and you know the thing about chaos? It's fear." This character presents himself as a terrorist motivated only by the desire to create fear and terror among the population:

*Joker (to Dent): "You know what I am? I'm a dog chasing cars. I wouldn't know what to do with one if I caught it. You know? I just do things. The mob has plans, the cops have plans, Gordon has plans. You know, they're schemers. Schemers trying to control their little worlds. I'm not a schemer. I try to show the schemers how pathetic their attempts to control things really are."*

Third, Gregory's (2004) use of the term "casting out" referred to how the American geopolitical machine discursively casted out the terrorists, all people in the Middle East, all Muslims, and even to a certain extent the American public from the rights and protections guaranteed by international law. In other words, by locating the terrorist and then painting that figure as the

ultimate opposition, the American geopolitical machine then removes any juridical-political rights the victims they kill in pursuit of this enemy may have. By ‘casting out’ the people of the Middle East a state of exception is created where the American military can use whatever illegal tactics necessary to defeat the threat that this script pens as the most villainous evil. After Alfred tells Bruce how the Joker just wants to watch the world burn, the Batman asks his Butler how they stopped the bandit. Alfred responds that he and platoon burnt the jungle in Burma to the ground. Alfred used exceptional and severe tactics to finally defeat this bandit enemy. As I will discuss in the next section, Batman is the state of exception. The metaphor Nolan conveys is that the Batman’s exceptional practices are justified because the Joker is just so evil and threatening that he must be defeated by any means necessary. Likewise, just as the Bush Administration did in the 2000s, the Israeli government and its allies now justify ongoing violence in Gaza by arguing that the absolute evil that is Hamas must be eliminated no matter the cost.

### **Batman: You Either Die a Hero or Live to See Yourself Become the Villain**

In reference to the previously discussed scene where Police Commissioner Gordon is interrogating the Joker, the one in which Nolan chooses to present the villain as surrounded by empty darkness, the scene pivots when the government official exits and the Batman enters. In a telling set of images, as seen in the clip below, it is [the Batman who brings the Joker into the light](#).

In this scene the audience watches as, when conventional methods fail, the police officer leaves and hands over authority over this criminal to the Batman who then immediately begins using enhanced interrogation techniques. The Batman slams the Joker’s head onto the table before questioning him and later in the scene is just wailing on the villain throwing punch after punch. The Joker, knowing the Batman will enter next, even asks while Gordon is exiting “the good cop bad cop routine?” Gordon then responds, “not exactly.” Not exactly is the accurate way of describing the Batman because he is not just a bad cop, he has no connection to the democratic and legitimate institutions of government whatsoever. Batman is an outside exceptional power granted authority by the state to deal with an unconventional enemy they cannot defeat. The Batman’s use of illegal tactics is justified because the enemy, the Joker, is seen as so irrationally evil that he must be defeated through any means necessary. Throughout the course of the movie, the Batman extradites foreign nationals, uses enhanced interrogation techniques, and illegally conducts mass surveillance on millions of people- all strategies used by the US Military in the War on Terror. The Batman functions as a metaphor for the idea of the State of the Exception. After all the premise of the Batman is that he is a vigilante crimefighter, which is illegal. The fundamental act of putting on the mask and becoming the Batman shows how the character is inherently exceptional from the bounds of the law.

*The Dark Knight* explains the concept of the state of the exception quite well. About 25 minutes into the movie Bruce Wayne and Harvey Dent discuss the ethics of a vigilante crimefighter like the Batman. Bruce, not wanting to give away his secret identity, criticizes the Batman as an unelected official yielding great power who has no accountability to the public. Harvey however defends the Batman, explaining that the caped crusader is doing a public service, fighting in a way no one else will during this state of emergency Gotham faces.

*Dent: "Gotham's proud of an ordinary man standing up for what's right."*

*Natascha: "Gotham needs heroes like you- elected officials, not a man who thinks he's above the law."*

*Wayne: "Exactly. Who appointed the Batman?"*

*Dent: "We did. All of us who stood by and let scum take control of our city".*

*Natascha: "But this is a democracy, Harvey."*

*Dent: "When their enemies were at the gate, the Romans would suspend democracy and appoint one man to protect the city. It wasn't considered an honor. It was considered a public service.*

*Rachel: And the last man they asked to protect the republic was named Caesar.*

*He never gave up that power."*

*Dent: "Well, I guess you either die a hero or you live long enough to see yourself become the villain."*

The film defines the state of exception as when the institutions of democratic governance fail to defeat a threat so one man, an exception, who is given the authority to go outside the law to achieve victory is granted power or takes it for himself. The character of Harvey Dent even uses the example of Ancient Rome that the academic literature uses to justify the concept of the exception. Dent's line "you either die a hero or live long enough to become the villain" also justifies the exception's past and future actions. It is described as if the exception had no choice other than to emerge to defeat this villain and that if the exceptional circumstances became permanent then that process was simply inevitable.

Nolan presents the Batman as the exception from the protagonist's first scene in the film. Just as the Joker's opening scene ties the villain to the other (taking off the mask to reveal a clown makeup) Batman's first presentation to the audience illustrates him as an exceptional figure. In this scene, Nolan cleverly contrasts Batman not with the state but with other ordinary people not connected to the government who are trying to fight crime. These ordinary people, inspired by the caped crusader, are even wearing Batman costumes as they try to [stop mobsters from conducting arms deals](#).

Relating to the clip linked above, Batman fights both mobsters and the faux-Batmen, tying them all up for the police to come and arrest. One of the faux-Batmen, outraged asks "what gives you the right? What's the difference between you and me?" How is the Batman more justified in fighting crime through illegal methods than they are? We can see that the faux-Batman is just a well-intentioned ordinary man, wearing only a bullet proof vest. The real Batman then justifies himself because he is "not wearing hockey pants" as he descends down into his tank that can climb buildings and shoot rockets. Essentially, Batman's justification is that he does what he does because he can and they cannot. Nolan introduces the Batman as exceptional from the law and from Gotham's other citizens because he is the only one who can effectively respond to the criminal threat facing city. While Joker is introduced as a uniquely horrifying kind of threat, Batman is presented as a necessary evil and/or flawed hero.

After this introduction, the first half of the movie is about the working relationship between Batman and Harvey Dent, Gotham's new District Attorney. While Batman is a metaphor for the



exception, Harvey Dent represents doing things ‘the right way.’ Harvey Dent is introduced in the courtroom prosecuting a mob boss through the proper legal mechanisms. When an attempt on his life is made in the courtroom Dent responds with, “carbon fiber, 28 caliber, made in China; if you want to kill a public servant Mr. Maroni you should buy American.” To quote a line from another DC comic book, Harvey is meant to represent “truth, justice, and the American way.” In contrast to the exception Batman (the Dark Knight), in the words of Police Commissioner Gordon, Harvey Dent is Gotham’s “White Knight”- the pure good contrasted with the unclear ethics of a vigilante crimefighter. Harvey Dent is widely seen as Gotham’s “white knight” because he is the one public servant who is incorruptible and who has the competency to make the governing institutions legitimate again in the eyes of the populace.



In the first half of the movie Dent and Batman- the juridicio-political norm and the exception- effectively work together to defeat the mafia, who are a more traditional opponent a crime fighter would face relative to the Joker. Batman flies to Hong Kong to extradite and return the US the mob’s financier, the character Lau. Lau escaped Gotham to Hong Kong in the first place because that city is “outside Dent’s jurisdiction.” Yet as the Joker says to Lau when he first escapes, “the Batman has no jurisdiction.” Batman does what Dent cannot do; he kidnaps Lau from his home-nation. The Batman does not need a warrant or to acknowledge Lau’s home government. Batman’s kidnapping of Lau is eerily similar to how in the War on Terror the US military has kidnapped and arrested foreign nationals, with no warrant or evidence that they are actually a terrorist, to then be detained in prisons like Guantanamo Bay.

Back in Dent’s custody Lau then cooperates against the mafia, providing information so valuable that it leads to the arrest of nearly all organized crime members in Gotham. This victory, coupled with the promise of Harvey Dent, allows Batman to finally consider what he has always wanted, to be able to retire and Gotham still be safe without him. In Bruce’s words “Gotham needs a hero with a face” and Harvey Dent, as an actual public servant solving crime the legal way, could be the White Knight. After all, in theory, [the state of the exception is supposed to be temporary.](#)

Yet it is at this moment when the Joker starts to attack. As seen in the clip above, Harvey Dent and the Mayor are gloating over their accomplishments when suddenly a hanging corpse comes

crashing down outside their window. As Harvey Dent looks out the window, we see the threat Gotham now must face.



The corpse is one of the faux-Batmen from the beginning of the movie who has now been murdered by the Joker. This image of the Joker inside of Batman armor could be Nolan sending multiple messages. One, this image speaks to how there is an implicit degree of evil in the exception. Batman's very existence is illegal, he uses whatever means necessary even if not ethical to accomplish his goals, and he is not accountable to any democratic oversight. Second, Nolan is communicating that the Joker is a different kind of threat that can only be stopped by the Batman. The rest of the movie is about how the Batman responds to the Joker's various secret and surprise terrorist attacks that target innocent civilians and powerful individuals.

As the Joker causes more mayhem in Gotham, Batman uses progressively more unethical tactics to defeat this villain. Batman's interrogation of criminals gets more aggressive throughout the movie, to the point where he seriously injures mobsters while questioning them on the Joker's whereabouts. Batman's use of illegal and ethically questionable tactics culminates at the end of the movie when he deploys a network of mass surveillance.



Bruce Wayne, through his family corporation that manufactures weapons, develops a network of mass surveillance that hacks into the cell phones of all 30 million Gotham residents to find where the Joker is hiding in the mazelike city. By hacking into these 30 million cell phones Batman uses these devices as sonar readers. By having so many cell phones feeding constant audio, Batman is able to use this sonar device practically as a security camera of the entire city. Lucius Fox, Batman's accomplice and the CEO of his family corporation, feels that Bruce has gone too far.

*Wayne: "Beautiful, isn't it?"*

*Fox: "Beautiful, unethical, dangerous. You've turned every cell phone in Gotham into a microphone."*

*Wayne: "And high frequency generator-receiver."*

*Fox: "You took my sonar concept and applied it to every phone in the city. With half the city feeding you sonar you can image all of Gotham."*

*Wayne: "I have to find this man Lucius."*

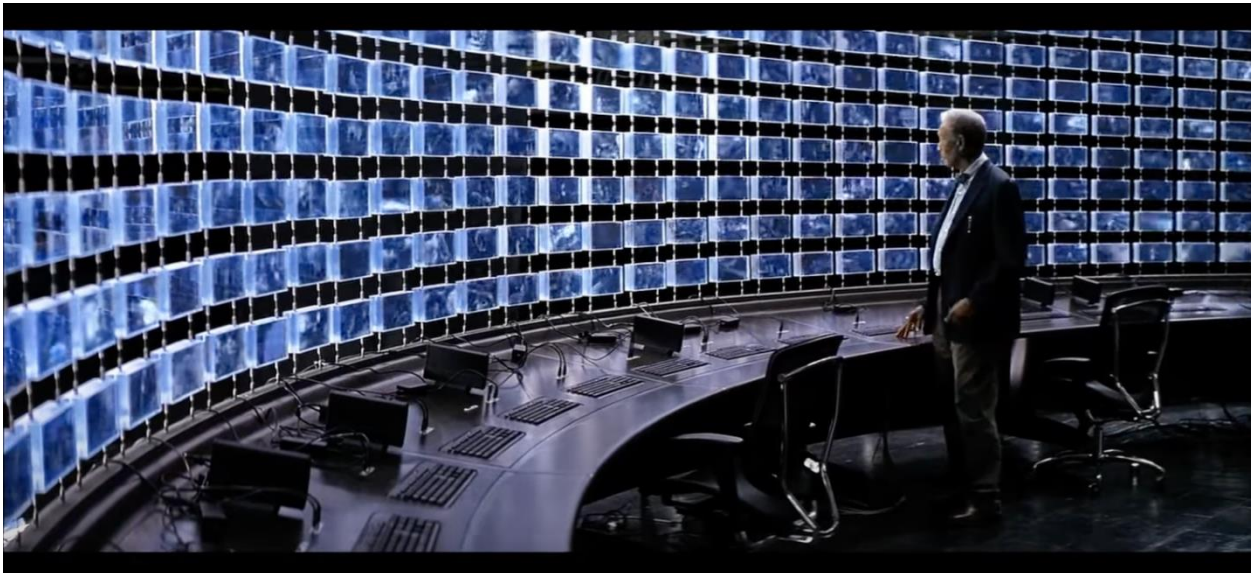
*Fox: "At what cost?"*

*Wayne: "The database is null-key encrypted. It can only be accessed by one person."*

*Fox: "No one should have that kind of power."*

*Wayne: "That's why I gave it to you. Only you can use it."*

*Fox: "Spying on thirty million people wasn't in my job description."*



Bruce and Fox are in essence debating the ethics of the state of the exception. Fox argues that for one man to have this much power is unethical in democratic society no matter the justification. Bruce uses the argument that underpins this essay: that the Joker is such a menacing terrorist that he must be stopped by whatever means necessary no matter how unethical. Batman's use of this spyware has obvious parallels to the unconstitutional intensification of surveillance of the daily lives of Americans after 9/11 initiated by bills like the PATRIOT Act. The American state recites the geopolitical script that this surveillance is justified to find and defeat potential terrorist

threats. Both the Batman and the Bush Administration justify their respective states of exception in which they go outside the bounds of the law by stressing the threat of the enemy.

Ultimately, the movie argues in favor of this narrative because the Batman's plan works. Batman defeats the Joker before the bombs the clown planted can murder hundreds of innocents. However, the Joker then reveals his true plan. Earlier in the film, the Joker had murdered Harvey Dent's fiancée and burned half the DA's face off. Dent, the district attorney who is supposed represent the legal path, has decided to seek revenge by going vigilante. As the Joker says to the Batman "I took Gotham's White Knight and I brought him down to our level." Harvey Dent is even willing to threaten children as we see in the shot below where the DA is now surrounded by darkness.



The Joker's plan all along was to corrupt Harvey Dent. This plan could be very effective because if Harvey Dent is found out to be a murderer then all of the criminals he and Batman locked up in the first half of the movie would go free. The film repeatedly stresses that their conviction depends upon the view of Harvey Dent as an idealized and just figure. The governing institutions of Gotham in general would lose even more legitimacy among the populace if it was found out their most popular official was a murderer. Harvey Dent murdered five people and is about to kill Police Commissioner Gordon in front of his family. However, the Batman murders Harvey Dent before he can kill Gordon. The Batman is such an exceptional power that he acts against the state to save it.

Knowing that he is not the idealized hero Dent was seen to be, the Batman makes a decisive choice. Batman takes the blame for all the people Harvey Dent killed. As an exceptional power, if the Batman is seen as a murderer, then that has no impact on the legitimacy of the normal juridico-political structure. As the character says, "I can be whatever Gotham needs me to be." It is through this lie that the Batman finally defeats the Joker because everyone else still believes Harvey Dent was an unimpeachable hero. Nolan portrays this choice, that positions Batman now as Gotham's most wanted criminal, as an incredibly heroic act of sacrifice. To Nolan, the Batman is a specific kind of hero, a Dark Knight, an exception. The movie ends with this line from Gordon while Batman is chased by the police.

*Gordon: "Because he's not our hero. He's a silent guardian, a watchful protector, a Dark Knight."*

This final choice by the Batman and its impact of maintaining Harvey Dent's legacy very much feels like Nolan is saying that the normal juridicio-political structures need an exception to defend itself. Batman is such an exception that he does not just use unethical means he can also even act against the state and be seen as a villain in the name of restoring order. Even if he is not seen as just by the people of Gotham Nolan justifies the Batman to the audience. To Nolan, Batman is ultimately "a silent guardian" and "a watchful protector." The hero who will do bad things to save the day. There is an eerie parallel again here with the War on Terror. *The Dark Knight* was released just as criticisms of the War on Terror were growing and America's exceptional policies of torture, repression, and surveillance came to be seen as oppressive. By positioning Batman as this exception who is a hero Nolan is subtly justifying the American security apparatus in the same way. By showing the audience Batman's struggle against the Joker, Nolan presents an exception who uses emergency powers in unethical ways but is still justified because the threat is that of the Other terrorist.

## **Conclusion**

It seems as if every screen we look at, whether on social media or the nightly news, flashes images of destroyed communities, corpses, and orphaned children. With these images tends to come a narrative that the atrocities committed by the dominant military powers are justified because the enemy is exceptionally villainous. The mass murder is justified because we are told this must happen to uproot the terrorist. We, the audience, are presented a "terrorist" who has no origin story and is only motivated by a desire to watch the world burn. Mainstream geopolitical scripts argue that this villain is so barbarous, different from previous more conventional geopolitical threats, that it will not be the White Knight, who acts within the bounds of pure morality and legality, who can save society. Rather, to defeat this enemy, society is said to need a Dark Knight who deals with this ultimate Other by being just as uncivilized. I have been positioning Christopher Nolan's *The Dark Knight* as a dramatized social science essay that argues in support of this geopolitical script. Nolan's methods are cinematography, dialogue, narrative structure, and plot points.

While Nolan uses these tools exceptionally well the underlying assumptions of his argument are faulty when applied to real world examples. The groups identified as terrorist in the Middle East- while there have been horrendous atrocities committed by them- exist in the context of long-term imperial relations that exploit their communities and nation. These groups, unlike the Joker, are not motivated by just the desire to watch the world burn but rather often see themselves as struggling against oppression. The American and Israeli governments are not the morally idealistic white knights that Harvey Dent is portrayed as. These governments continue to imperially exploit in the name of capital accumulation and have used the threat of the terrorist to justify pursuing other goals, whether its proximity to natural resources or expulsing an entire ethnic community from their homeland. The American and Israeli militaries- with their tactics of indiscriminate bombing, torture, and surveillance- are not Batman. Not only are they inefficient at ending the threat of terrorism, these military campaigns are a continuation of centuries-long



imperialist relations. However, it is unrealistic for radical scholars to expect the general audience to understand this more historically informed picture of the War on Terror because popular culture is imbued with geopolitical propaganda like *The Dark Knight*.

It is crucial to critically engage with elements popular culture like *The Dark Knight* because the mediums of filmmaking and television play a growing role in how dominant interests of power communicate geopolitical messages to their general audience. “Modern life takes place on screen,” Mirzoeff (1999, 1) explains, “for most people in the United States, life is mediated through television, and to a lesser extent film.” In today’s visual culture it is in visual mediums where meanings are created and contested (Mirzoeff: 1999). The American consumer-citizen gets their news from watching television, a medium that has been tightly concentrated by emerging transnational giants like Disney, Time-Warner, and News Corp. “Control over the means of televisual experiences,” O’Tuathail (1996) argues, “is now crucial to the exercise of power and authority in the world”. The means of controlling visual experiences are not only strictly concentrated in terms of mass-newscasting but also in Hollywood blockbusters, the same media companies control both mediums. The power of visual culture in 21<sup>st</sup> century society grants Hollywood film directors like Christopher Nolan, and the corporate-capital studios that back him, to influence the opinions and attitudes of ordinary people through movies that make powerful arguments about the nature of life and society.

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