

Synthesis: an Anglophone Journal of Comparative Literary Studies

No 6 (2014)

Acting (on) the Text: the Case of New Media



Brooker Will, Hunting the Dark Knight: Twenty-First Century Batman.

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doi: [10.12681/syn.16181](https://doi.org/10.12681/syn.16181)

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Will Brooker. *Hunting the Dark Knight: Twenty-First Century Batman*. London and New York: I. B. Tauris, 2012. Pp. 256. \$ 13.16 (Pb.)

In *Hunting the Dark Knight: Twenty-First Century Batman* (2012), Will Brooker, author of the cultural history of Batman, *Batman Unmasked* (2000), argues that to approach Batman¹ as one thing is to imprison and impoverish a character, a network of meanings and a diverse, long-standing pop culture icon. Viewing Batman as one thing is to ignore that he is a character, a brand and a myth. To this end, Brooker views all Batman texts, authors, and production studios as a matrix of cross-platform production, operating in dialogue with other current incarnations and previous versions. The book's five chapters focus on the Batman of the 21st century, and explore the structures which appear to dictate future possibilities for the text. Chapters One and Two adopt the discourses of authorship and adaptation in order to situate Christopher Nolan's films within the Batman matrix. What emerges as paramount in Brooker's study, is the notion of dialogue that attends to a variety of meanings and interpretations. Chapter Three focuses on the "real" persona that is tied to Nolan's films in juxtaposition with issues of fidelity, thus questioning the persona's "real" status. The reader's role is also highly significant as she or he ultimately constructs and collages a Batman from all the pieces of this cultural mosaic. Chapters Four and Five focus on the Batman/Joker relationship as seen in *The Dark Knight* (2008) and emphasise the ambiguity of meaning, as the reader is the ultimate scriptor and author, editor and compiler of all different and diverse traces into a single, complex figure. Brooker juxtaposes the notions of author, intertextuality and adaptation with the matrix of cultural production, both as a Batman fan and as an academic.

In Chapter One, popular culture is viewed as governed by networks of production and consumption, interpretation and communication;² both producers and receivers play a role in holding cross-media matrix stories together. Focusing on director Christopher Nolan, Brooker negotiates the meaning and role traditional authorship continues to play in contemporary discussions around the director, the extent to which this figure has shifted as well as other figures and forces that are potentially authoring the text. The author is considered to be a cultural function, whose ultimate role is decided by the power structures within pop culture, thus resulting in a form of branding. By becoming a brand, the author can imprint both value and meaning on a text. Based on paratextual features of *Batman Begins* (2005), Brooker establishes that Nolan is rarely connected as an author to the film. A connection is not made between

his directorial creativity and the meanings assigned to the relevant Batman text because Nolan has not yet become an authorial brand. Instead, Nolan's role as author is downplayed; he is seen more as an editor of existing texts and meanings. As a result, the only way to attribute value and meaning to the film is by establishing a degree of fidelity with previous Batman films from the same matrix, such as Tim Burton's and Joel Schumacher's. It appears as though the author figure is overthrown, thereby granting more interpretive power to the production studio and the audience. Nolan is ultimately acknowledged as a brand, thus fully acquiring the state of authorial function in *The Dark Knight* (2008), and in *Inception* (2010). As a result, his style, interpretation and contribution to the Batman matrix are asserted and reaffirm the author's continuing power in pop culture. As the role of the author evolves towards creative and collaborative authorship, and the author ultimately retains a voice within the network of pop culture production.

Reaffirming the continued existence of the individual auteur, the second chapter draws a connection between adaptations and the author. In a reading informed by Robert Stam, Julia Kristeva and Mikhail Bakhtin, Brooker employs dialogism in order to foreground that the meaning of the text is not found in the text *per se* but in the relationships, and the dialogues about the text(s). Brooker notes four distinct differences between Nolan's Batman and conventional adaptations in order to highlight the matrix-like nature of the Batman franchise/brand/mythos. He takes into consideration the status of comic books in relation to cinema;³ the challenge of adapting from a vast archive instead of a single text; how translation from one medium to another occurs, as well as the implications of producing not one but multiple texts. As Brooker has put it in "Batman: One life, many faces" (1999), unlike Tim Burton who sought to address a mainstream audience ultimately ignoring Batman fans, or Joel Schumacher whose camp aesthetics was not welcome by fans, what becomes evident is that Nolan, as a director/author, also undertook the role of scribe, alongside long-time fan and co-writer David S. Goyer. Ultimately, the authors are allowed heterogeneity but within certain parameters: Nolan and Goyer were led, or rather instructed towards certain source material which does not therefore constitute a single ur-text. Given Batman's long history, the palimpsest nature of the matrix, and the expectations of both producers/studio and audience/fans, the writer/director/author was instructed to aim for textual fidelity. As a result, the studio/producers procured specific source material to the authorial team and then a comic book-esque tactic of selective collage was implemented where essential aspects of the character were transferred so as to ensure fidelity at least with the "dark" notion of Batman.⁴

Similarities and differences were sought between Nolan and previously “authored” Batman texts so that *Batman Begins* could find its place within the matrix. This matrix, according to Brooker, aims at maintaining a balance between repetition/familiarity and original/innovative inventions and the dynamic relation between the two. A stable agent regarding meaning-making is the Bat-logo. A symbolic element of the Batman brand, the Bat-logo holds the vast mythology and archive network that consist of multiple authored texts, which display both similarities and differences. This grants fans the ability to move within the Batman matrix and respectively locate various sub-brands which are anchored by the author’s name in connection to the larger Batman concept.⁵ However, while the film’s promotion insisted on fidelity, Brooker points out that the film was always a collage of sources, which then entered the matrix and became a source for other sources.

In chapter three, Brooker focuses on the aesthetic of realism that is characteristic of Nolan’s Batman films, and draws a distinction between Nolan’s “real” Batman, Burton’s “gothic” Batman and Schumacher’s “campy” Batman. As an instance, or a particular type, Nolan’s Batman emerges as a result of selection from within the matrix of representation and interpretation. Focusing on the issue of realism, Brooker explores the Foucauldian logic behind the voice of power in each contextual situation. A dominant trend in the selection of source material was in favour of an adult, noir-esque, heterosexual, masculine, “real” Batman whose essence remained true to the incarnation of certain authors and was ultimately opposed to the “campy” style of the 1960s television series as well as to Joel Schumacher’s renditions. In essence, the meaning of Batman is being locked down. Paradoxically enough, the “camp” manifestation continues to hauntingly come back by way of comparison. Essentially, the allegedly monolithic Batman and the prevailing meanings attached to him are disrupted when juxtaposed to his carnivalesque counterparts. Consequently, in Chapters Four and Five, Brooker emphasises that Batman is essentially an amalgam of different forms where all Batman texts exist and interact within a matrix across media. Brooker suggests viewing these texts as utterances that exist in a relationship with other texts and utterances, unable of cancelling them out, and, for this reason, are defined through their differences. As a result, the dialogic interplay is extended and may alternate, or even trump, the unified language, or voice, that seeks to impose a particular line of texts, authors, meanings and interpretations. Production studios maintain their power by controlling the Batman brand, the official canon of the Batman matrix, as well as the sources assigned for the reboot of the franchise. Thus, meanings and interpretations appear to be governed by discourses acting within the

relative context of the Batman matrix. Batman is embedded in popular culture: he has attained a myth-like status and each individual story is an expression of an archetypal whole. While the Batman matrix may appear to guide audiences in the interpretation and meanings of Batman, the greater myth as well as any unaccounted gaps can easily be taken up by both authors and fans thus subverting the power play. The fluidity of power play is evident in the relationship between Batman and the Joker. In the fifth and final chapter, Brooker employs Derrida's thought and advocates that the relationship between Batman and the Joker is a shifting spectrum of unsettled paired terms that are caught up in an ongoing process of change and interpretation. Thus, Brooker sees the representation and meaning of the characters as always deferred and constantly being formed. Consequently, to impose binary distinctions on fluid intertextualities essentially fixes and locks down meanings at a specific point and further aims to exclude other aspects of the network and spectrum. Evidently, binary distinctions point towards a hidden agenda, which serves a certain purpose, and raises questions regarding who benefits in this context, and how to negotiate the meaning of Batman since as readers we are enmeshed in this larger context.

Essentially, Brooker attends to the instability of oppositions and the spaces inbetween where dialogue can commence, meanings can be challenged, and interpretations negotiated, thereby doing justice to the complexity of the character instead of opting for a monolithic singularity. What is unique in Brooker's book is the faith he bestows upon the reader. By divulging the power structures of production, the oscillating power of the author, and the complexities of cross-media matrixes, Brooker invites readers to consider through a renowned pop cultural icon the broader issues of cultural power and meaning in franchises, cultural icons, and cultural production at large. As such, Brooker makes a valuable contribution in the area of film, cultural and textual studies alike.

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¹ See Roberta E. Pearson and William Uricchio's *The Many Lives of the Batman: Critical Approaches to A Superhero and His Media* (1991).

² See also Derek Johnson's PhD dissertation *Franchising Media Worlds: Content Networks and the Collaborative Production of Culture* (2009), which examines the media franchise culture of the past 30 years re-affirming that Intellectual Properties have been deployed across media platforms. Johnson argues that these media franchises are not homogeneous brands but socially networked worlds where heterogeneous cultural, creative and economic interests collide.

³ A useful reference is *Film and Comic Books* (2007), edited by Ian Gordon, Mark Jancovich and Matthew P. McAllister.

⁴ A better understanding of the production studio's choice in source material can be reached by referring to Geoff Klock's "The Bat and the Watchmen: Introducing the Revisionary Superhero Narrative" in his *How to Read Superhero Comics and Why* (2006).

⁵ A relevant essay is Derek Johnson's "Will the Real Wolverine Please Stand Up? Marvel's Mutation from Monthlies to Movies" in *Film and Comic Books* (2007).