Batman: How the Knight Went Dark
(2008)

In this, the so-called summer of the anti-hero, *Batman: The Dark Knight* seems categorically predestined. As some may have noticed over the last twenty years or so, the dark knight is a dark hero, and when the new *Batman* shares the film season with the likes of *Hancock* and the *Hulk*, the interpretive trend seems irresistible. No doubt commentators will remark yet again on Batman's brooding demeanour, his unprincipled measures, and the arbitrariness of his justice, all of which flout the examples of Superman, Jesus, and any other philanthrope pop culture finds lame. The coolest heroes, it now seems, must battle bigger demons inside than out, a situation which Hellboy—a demon himself—has taken as far as it can go. Batman is and will always be special among those self-absorbed figures our cynical age suffers to call heroes, but the foundations of the Dark Knight are hardly so superficial as the season's generic tag.

Batman: The Dark Knight continues along the line of *Batman Begins* (2005), and though it maintains some core elements of the *Batman* franchise, its postmodern exploration of good and evil owes more to the morality porn of the *Saw* films than to anything else. The villains spend all their time setting up elaborate tests of human virtue, the Joker once calling "their morals, their code….a bad joke." One of the victims of these experiments is Harvey "Two-face" Dent, who tells Batman, "you thought we could be decent men in an indecent time." The juxtaposition of epic and realism is sloppy at best, and ultimately the film spends so much time blurring ethical categories that it ends up with nothing to say about them.

The film is succeeding handsomely, however, and the themes that keep *Batman* a sure thing are owed largely to one writer. Though *Batman: The Dark Knight* is the sixth Batman film in nineteen years, it is the first to evoke the title of Frank Miller's groundbreaking comic series that entrenched the hero's trademark persona. A comic-book icon since the eighties, Miller is best known for the film adaptations of two of his other projects, *Sin City* and *300*, both of which exemplify the desolation of the hero in a corrupt system. His champions gaze into the darkness and are fired by it; their suffering is messianic, their actions equally self-assured. Moral relativity is not lost on Miller; he is aware that what some might call individual anarchism, others consider a benevolent dictatorship. A sympathizer with Ayn Rand's objectivist philosophy, he locates the redeeming force of humanity within individuals, not organizations, and like Rand, prefers to illuminate his protagonists from both above and below. He isolates them, strips them to the core—as in *Robocop*, a franchise with which Miller has also worked, he dissects the hero down to the brainstem and sees all else as artifice.

Batman began as a dark figure in 1939, but by the time Miller got to him in 1986, he was suffering from the hangover of the late-sixties' television series. The *thwacks*, tights, and "holy somethings, Batman" form a character schism to this day, but it was Miller who finally carved them off. Three years before the fall of the Berlin Wall, *The Dark Knight Returns* introduced a Cold War West to a new kind of good guy. He was entirely grim—dismal and unrelenting—and he was alone. Whereas our war with the Soviets eventually ended, his had continued into the new millennium, and the United States has become crippled by a combination of military absorption abroad and socialist navel-gazing at home. Even by itself, this dichotomy of extremism on both sides of the political spectrum distinguishes *The Dark Knight Returns* from the usual comic-book fable. The Joker is declared cured and released from the *Arkham Home for the Emotionally Troubled*; Commissioner Gordon is replaced at the helm of the Gotham police by a woman in her

thirties. The streets have become a breeding ground for psychopaths, and Superman become a stooge for the military establishment.

More importantly—and this is where the continuing use of Miller's Batman seems exploitative and shortsighted—is that the hero of *The Dark Knight Returns* is over fifty years old. At the start of the series, Bruce Wayne has not worn the costume for over a decade, and a generation has come of age with no memory of Gotham's former protector. Nearly mugged himself, he seems resentful but resigned, and as Miller distributes ruinous news reports and complacent television interviews among the panels of Wayne's own narrative, it becomes clear that Batman's personal problems are the least of his concerns. When at last the Dark Knight resurfaces, it is in a seizure of obligation. "You cannot stop me," the voice tells Wayne, "not with wine or vows or the weight of age…" The hero's single-mindedness is highly unprofitable for professional thought-sifting, which is doubtless why critics tend to endorse more nuanced figures. Nevertheless, Batman's struggle with himself is over in the course of a single page, and with a man almost twice the age of every portrayal who has since borrowed from his tortured example. What has become the core of the Dark Knight as we know him derives from Miller's hypothetical—and now impossible— timeline, a 'what if' that has become an 'is.'

There are likely many reasons why Miller's Batman has only partially been imported by the mainstream, but this does not change the fact that the transplant has severely distorted his *modus operandi*. His world was a crucible of nuclear brinkmanship, and he was just one grumpy, old man with something left in the basement. No powers, not even his prime. Not *Rocky*, but *Rocky Balboa*. Beowulf. Nestor. George Foreman, in 1994. Without these contexts, the Dark Knight just seems some pissy billionaire playboy, a Paris Hilton with smokebombs and a sense of *noblesse oblige*. Something more akin to Daniel Craig's *James Bond* with the solemnity of Daniel Day Lewis's character in *There Will be Blood* would certainly be more faithful than the juiced-up Brit currently at the helm.

Alas, Batman is too much of an all-ages draw; he sells Doritos and little toy cars at McDonalds. Miller's *The Dark Knight Returns* would make an excellent film, but Hollywood doesn't have the guts to reproduce the figure whose blood it has transfused. He's just too… dark. As the gray-haired Bruce Wayne tells Superman in the closing pages of the series, "we could have changed the world. Now look at us. I've become a political liability. And you…you're a joke." So much for the Justice League.