Obviously, a lot of noise surrounded *The Dark Knight Rises*, starting with the hype and anticipation. Then came the extreme reactions to some early negative reviews. And then the midnight-screening mass shooting in Colorado appropriately redirected attention to important matters.

The deaths of 12 people and the injuries to dozens more in that Colorado movie theatre on July 20 highlighted that neither a movie nor Batman is anywhere near as important as human lives.

Yet the arts are still integral to our existence, and whatever you think of Christopher Nolan's trilogy as films, these movies will stand as key markers in the lives of many millions of people and in the movie business, and they will be viewed as reflections of their cultural and political time. Like the original trio of *Star Wars* movies, we can already see them as significant pop-art artifacts.

For those reasons alone, Nolan's Batman movies deserve close scrutiny. They also reward inspection and consideration, as the writer/director has conceived and executed them with a rigor and density unusual to blockbusters. (Expect spoilers, although I've tried to be circumspect about late developments in *The Dark Knight Rises* until the final section.)

What might not be obvious to those only casually familiar with Batman is how thoroughly Nolan has bent the DC Comics universe to fit his ideas, respectful but not beholden. His choice of villains and how they interact are indications of the writer/director's thoughtful approach to the series. In 2005's *Batman Begins*, he turns Ra's al Ghul into Batman's first mentor and a father

figure (and combines him with another existing character, Ducard), and then makes Scarecrow a co-conspirator in the plot to destroy Gotham. In 2008's *The Dark Knight*, the Joker creates Two-Face both literally and, through a bedside conversation, psychologically. And in *The Dark Knight Rises*, Bane is an adherent of Ra's al Ghul's corruption-purging absolutism.

Spend some time exploring the comic-book histories of many people found in the movies – not just the major villains, but everyone from Lucius Fox to Selina Kyle to the mob bosses to corrupt cop Flass to mugger Joe Chill – and you'll begin to appreciate the care with which Nolan has constructed the films and connected the characters, and the extra resonance he's able to generate as a result. In a way, Ra's al Ghul begets Batman, who begets the Joker, who begets Two-Face. Bane and Batman are nearly brothers, yet they are visual negatives of each other – light and dark, hulking and sleek; on their heads, Bane exposes what Batman covers, and vice versa. (And this repeats a contrasting-mask motif from the climax of *Batman Begins*.)

Yet the series is also surprisingly rich in other ways, and *The Dark Knight Rises* recasts the trilogy in moral and mythic terms while (probably intentionally) undermining attempts to read it politically.

Corruption as Political Outlook

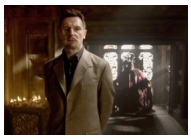
Nolan has said the movies' references contemporary and historic – terrorism, mass surveillance as a response, and the French Revolution, to name just a few – are *merely* references, not indicative of a larger political agenda or philosophy: "We throw a lot of things against the wall to see if it sticks. We put a lot of interesting questions in the air, but that's simply a backdrop for the story. ... It's just telling a story."

Some critics have still considered the series' philosophy and world view and deemed them murky or vague, or alternatively found evidence that they support or critique some current policy or another.

I've done some of the latter, but – with the benefit of perspective – I now disagree on all counts. The politics ain't pretty, but they're pervasive, persistent, largely consistent, and deeply cynical: Citizens lack the will and power to change a rotten system, yet those with the will and power are rotten, too.

Gotham features at least six distinct levels of corruption, each represented by characters in *Bat man Begins*
. There's the street-level criminal at the bottom, personified by the man who kills Bruce Wayne's parents, followed by mundane organized crime, in the form of Tom Wilkinson's powerful but very ordinary mob boss. On the corporate level, we have Rutger Hauer's Wayne Enterprises CEO, more concerned about public relations than public safety. And we have the bought-and-sold public servants, in the form of Mark Boone Jr.'s cop and a judge, who ensure that all of the above can operate with relative impunity. In Nolan's vision of Gotham, the wicked control everything, and it is in that context that Batman is born. (Or one could say that those who control
become
wicked – a subtle distinction that might better align the statement with the series' outlook.)

Above those pedestrian evils – which operate only for survival or profit – are the more-traditional superhero foils. There's the deranged, in the person of Scarecrow; he's the only villain in *Batma n Begins*
whose purpose appears wholly evil, because he doesn't have a core philosophy or a long-term profit motive.



And lastly there's Ra's al Ghul, an invading warrior who believes, perhaps correctly, that cities need to be torched every now and again to be healthy; that idea gains traction as it becomes increasingly clear that Batman is facing a depth and breadth of corruption in Gotham that no person, no matter how strong, can overcome.

Outside of the street criminal, these types reappear in the remainder of the series. The mob boss is replaced. Wayne Enterprises, in *The Dark Knight Rises*, is the target of parallel plans

that give new meaning to the phrase "hostile takeover."
The Dark Knight
makes clear that Jim Gordon isn't merely a rarity; he might literally be the only honest cop in the city. The fall of Harvey Dent suggests that anybody can be corrupted. The Joker is Scarecrow taken to an extreme, a freelance terrorist instead of one employed in a larger mission. And, of course, Bane's primary goal in the final movie is to finish the job that Ra's al Ghul didn't in the first.

This seemingly hopeless vision might be a reflection of Nolan's world view, or it could merely a be a comic-book-style construct. Regardless, the effect is to make any throughtful political reading of his series both dystopian and elitist.

There are precious few "little people" in these movies, and throughout it's clear that ordinary citizens lack the tools to fix Gotham through peaceful democratic or economic channels.

Even before the appearance of Batman or any of his foes in *Batman Begins*, organized crime rules the city, and the conventionally powerful are effectively powerless. The philanthropy and public works of Bruce Wayne's billionaire father – a healer by trade – only go so far, and the "great" man and his wife are gunned down by Chill in an alley.

On the political and justice-system fronts, the aggressive sweeps of Harvey Dent and Jim Gordon in *The Dark Knight* promise only temporary relief and are explicitly noted as abuses of law-enforcement power.

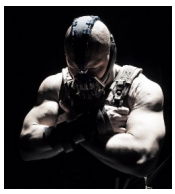
In terms of public policy, the Dent Act actually clears Gotham (between the second and third movies) of organized crime, but it's premised on a lie – that a rogue, masked vigilante murdered the gleaming, upstanding district attorney. And just as Batman's surveillance techniques at the end of *The Dark Knight* are clear violations of privacy and civil liberties, the new law – whose mechanics are never articulated – presumably achieves security through the further erosion of rights.

The basic philosophy at work is spun by Harvey Dent: "When their enemies were at the gates, the Romans would suspend democracy and appoint one man to protect the city." Yet many of Gotham's enemies come from within, and even its "saviors" are sullied or venal.

If we view Batman, Gordon, and pre-Two-Face Dent as heroes, we're asked essentially to accept the well-intentioned but problematic actions of self-appointed, appointed, and elected guardians without question. Yes, Batman might have blown up your car and listened to your phone call, but he's looking out for your best interests. Your shoplifting cousin might have been locked up for 10 years in Dent's name after an illegal search, but it's for the public good.

Which brings us to *The Dark Knight Rises*' revolutionary references. As has been widely noted, the trilogy's conclusion casts itself in Occupy and class-warfare terms. Selina Kyle whispers threateningly into Bruce Wayne's ear about the coming "storm" that will wreak havoc on the rich, while Bane promises to return Gotham to its citizens and points to the stuffed prisons as proof of the oppression by the ruling class. You could say they make some valid complaints.

Yet even setting aside the issue of whether we should pay much attention to the political views of criminals who wear a unitard and a scary mask (respectively), this rhetoric of upheaval is almost *prima facie* self-serving and invalid in *The Dark Knight Rises*. As has often been the case throughout history, the populism here thinly disguises a grab for treasure and power.



So the grassroots revolution is actually an armed coup, and when war does come, it's one trained army against another in a street fight, Batman's cops charging Bane's criminals in the winter sun and flitting snowflakes.

This daylight battle highlights that Nolan's Batman movies have primarily dealt with oligarchical and authoritarian structures and militant responses. There are regular references throughout the series to the people of Gotham (and their aggregate character), but it's an abstraction to the arbiters of their fates – be they forces largely for good (Batman) or evil (Ra's al Ghul, the Joker, Bane). Key public officials conspire to evade the spirit of the law, working toward a "common good" without regard for individual rights. The movies promote a blithe collectivism, with the goals and means defined by those (evil, deeply flawed, corrupted, or corruptible) people with money, political power, or cool weapons.

The bleakness of the series under Nolan flows directly from this. *Batman Begins* asks the audience to decide among crime-ridden streets, a safer community cleaned up by the unaccountable Batman, and destruction.
The Dark Knight
pits terrorism against a surveillance state.
The Dark Knight Rises
contrasts the status quo of strictly enforced peace with revolution followed by military occupation.

These are easy calls, but they're menus of extreme and false choices. If these movies have anything relevant to say in political terms, it's a trite generalization about power and means and circumstances compromising ideals.

Portraits in Hypocrisy

This motif is the thread that connects the vast majority of the characters in Nolan's trilogy, and it's far more compelling on an individual level than a societal one.

The key here is to get past each person's stated justifications for behavior and instead focus on the actions themselves – and through that process to see (most of) them as hypocrites. Two-Face wasn't merely a quickly and easily dispatched villain in *The Dark Knight*; he's the whole damned enterprise personified.

So yes, the Joker verbally advocates anarchy and chaos ("Do I look like a guy with a plan? ... I just *do* things"), but he executes complicated strategies that nearly require predictable behavior. In public, Bane talks like a revolutionary for the downtrodden, but he is a political and corporate terrorist who, once he seizes power, functions as a totalitarian ruler. (Sadism is his true philosophy.) Selina Kyle steals from the rich, but it's clear early and explicitly that she's more skilled opportunist than hardened redistribution-of-wealth ideologue.

And then there's the Dark Knight himself, who says the right things about doing good and has two related rules (no deliberate killing, no handguns) that can't begin to disguise his disregard for life, limb, and property. That he restates those governing principles to Selina as they forge a bond of convenience is an expert illustration of self-delusion; Batman clings to these effectively arbitrary strictures to reassure himself that he is different from his enemies. Selina, like Ra's al Ghul and the Joker before her, rightly sees this as a flaw as much as a virtue.

So if you're looking at any of the *words* of the iconic heroes or villains for guidance on how to interpret these movies, yes, they will come off as politically vague, or more accurately contradictory. Arguably the sagest line in the entire trilogy warns against putting too much stock into speech or ideas or philosophy or motives: "Some men just want to watch the world burn."

Even the "decent" characters can be said to be phonies.

Jim Gordon has himself become two-faced (if conflicted), praising Dent in the new movie while wanting to tell the truth about him. His hypocrisy, in the two *Dark Knight* movies, is couched in pragmatism: He works with crooked cops because that's all there are, and the lie does more good than harm.

He is, in that sense, more weak that duplicitous, and he has plenty of company. As the Dark Knight's source for technology and arms, Lucius Fox is sly, charming, and fully likable, but he's a go-along-to-get-along guy. His objection to Batman's surveillance masks his assent – and he'll agree to it just this one time. The loyal butler Alfred speaks truth (actually, "troof") and sense and wisdom to his young charge, but his interest is personal rather than ethical, and – like Fox – his nature is fundamentally deferential. (The dignified portrayals of Gary Oldman, Morgan

Freeman, and Michael Caine go a long way toward burying the reality that all three characters are, at core, sycophants, getting thrills on Batman's capetails.)

Nolan has in the series offered a few contrasts – but they come with major caveats. Ra's al Ghul and the League of Shadows have a cogent, coherent philosophy, but it of course judges society as a whole and places no value on individual human life or action. Rachel Dawes came close to being a credible moral voice, but her relationships with Bruce and Harvey represented conflicts of interest.

All of this suggests that the trilogy grew from a seed of misanthropy. But with the addition of one character, *The Dark Knight Rises* forcefully re-frames Nolan's Batman movies in personal moral terms rather than socio-political ones. And therein lies tenuous hope.

This conceptual construct was certainly suggested by *The Dark Knight*, filled with quandaries of situational ethics. The Joker can be seen as
a
moral – he faults Batman for those pesky rules – but he also seems genuinely curious about the choices people make. Will Batman let people die to protect his identity? Will he choose to save Harvey or Rachel? Will either set of boat people blow up the other? How many people will try to murder a nobody to save a hospital? Will anybody stop them? And the self-made luck of Dent's two-headed coin – in which he was clearly responsible for the outcome – was with Two-Face replaced by genuine chance; does that somehow absolve him?

But it was hard to feel confident in reading that movie, in large part because both the Joker and Two-Face were insane and savage. It also lacked shape, increasingly entropic as a reflection of its villains, neither with an endgame.

With the whole trilogy in front of us, though, the task becomes a little easier. *The Dark Knight Ri ses*
mimics

Batman Begins
in sinister plot, theme, and three-act structure; they are clear (and clearly intentional) contrasts to the disorder of the middle chapter. The Joker and Two-Face
raise
philosophical questions but cannot resolve them; the bookend movies provide some answers.

In *Batman Begins*, Ra's al Ghul was the voice of dubious moral certainty that Batman rejected – but only with his line-item veto. The hero drew a line at killing, and the result was two distinct but equally troublesome codes, radically different in methods and aims but still substantially similar: one unclouded but evil, the other gray but good.

In *The Dark Knight Rises*, Joseph Gordon-Levitt's John Blake becomes the unambiguous, unencumbered, self-righteous, and *righteous* moral authority that the series had – by design, I think – lacked. He recalls the idealism of a younger Bruce Wayne without the revenge jones or self-loathing, and he has the elementary decency of a younger Jim Gordon. Like Bruce, he's an orphan; like Gordon, he's a cop.

And he correctly sees both of them as moral failures; for all the good they've done, they've also caused great harm, and their hands are, as he says, "plenty filthy."

Unlike Alfred – who's motivated more by love than virtue, and whose gentle *Rises* confrontation with Bruce is phrased hypothetically – Blake speaks truth to power, and he's the most clear-eyed person in the series, a conscience nagging people who haven't just crossed a line; they're so far
past
the line that they can barely remember the other side.

And he walks the talk. Late in the movie, he foolishly but bravely risks his life in an effort to clear a blockade of Gotham's remaining bridge. He stands up for others, without compromising his ideals.

The Dark Knight Rises – indeed, Nolan's whole trilogy – cautiously casts its lot with Blake.

Batman, while still capable of heroic deeds, is at core a lost cause and irredeemably damaged – as is Bruce Wayne while Batman darkens his door.

Blake, though, looks like he might be a white knight, the kind of hero Gotham needs rather than deserves.

That probably sounds familiar. After all, Harvey Dent looked incorruptible, too.

You'd be smart, then, to be skeptical that Blake represents an ultimate triumph of virtuous purity over evil (or equivocal goodness) in the series. These stories, after all, tend to repeat themselves.

Born (and Re-Born) in Hell

Just as *The Dark Knight Rises* clarifies the whole in moral terms, it also makes evident its mythic ambitions beyond the obvious arc of the hero's journey.

Most tellingly, there are either three or four Batman resurrections in *The Dark Knight Rises* – depending on how you choose to count.

First is his return after an eight-year hiatus – which in functional and public terms represented his death. Third (or third and fourth) are the separate resurrections of Bruce Wayne (the man) and Batman (the symbol, in the form of Blake) after their apparent demises.

In between is the most physical and direct treatment of the idea, with Batman (nearly) killed, imprisoned and (psychologically) tortured in a below-ground Hell, and finally rising to save Gotham. Aside from Batman taking his sweet time returning to the world of the living, the path is reminiscent of the Apostles' Creed, in which Jesus "was crucified, died, and was buried; he descended into Hell; on the third day he rose again from the dead ... ."

Superheroes – and especially Superman – have long been seen as Christ figures, and from its title to its returns from the "dead," *The Dark Knight Rises* appears to impose that connection on Batman. Aside from the savior similarity, the comparison is knotty – but worth exploring.

Remember that there's never a point-for-point match between Christ and Christ figures; artists appropriate aspects of the New Testament story that (consciously or not) interest or speak to them. Nolan and his co-writers aren't equating Batman to Jesus; they're stripping out central Christian ethos and messages (forgive, turn the other cheek, and the like) to leave elemental power struggles – not just between (intertwined) good and evil, but between salvation and death and between Father and Son.

Let's start with the problems. Batman is in no way a representation of goodness in a Christian sense. Rather than being sent down from the heavens, he was (figuratively) born at the bottom of a well – the underworld – in *Batman Begins*. He can be said to have horns. So the parallels are rough, and Batman might more closely resemble some other reborn god (a regular motif in mythology).

But like the fully human and fully divine Jesus of *The Last Temptation of Christ*, the Dark Knight is full of internal conflict between his mortal, human self (Bruce Wayne) and his immortal, symbolic salvation role (Batman). Alfred tempts him early in
Rises
, suggesting that by keeping Batman (his sacred duty and true identity) in retirement permanently, he could create a life for Bruce Wayne (his earthly shell and mask) – just as Jesus on the cross in
Last Temptation
dreamed of a simple life as husband and father, the rest of the world be damned.

What *Rises*, Nolan, and his protagonist do, then, is create a third option. In the process of

sparing Gotham from a nuclear blast and finally "killing" Bruce Wayne's Batman, the two halves are separated and given new, divergent lives. (If the movie's carefully telegraphed ending seems a cheat, it might be because it feels *wrong* to you that Jesus – I mean Batman – can have it both ways, particularly given the series' penchant for binary, polar choices.)

This interpretation is not based solely on *The Dark Knight Rises*. The movies from the start have encouraged biblical readings.

Consider, for example, this passage from Genesis: "And God saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every imagination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually. ... And the Lord said, I will destroy man whom I have created from the face of the earth." Ra's al Ghul's plan (in *Batman Begins* and, through a surrogate, *The Dark Knight Rises*) recalls Yahweh's destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah and, earlier, humanity except for Noah. Both the Old Testament God and the League of Shadows judge us collectively.

Contrast this with Batman's idea of justice, which while similarly harsh is *individual* and – in its formative stages at least – included the word "compassion." The wicked – and, in theory, *only* the wicked – are punished under Batman, the flip side to the righteous being promised salvation in the New Testament.

In other words, these Batman movies exploit a tension similar to that between the Old and New Testaments of the Christian Bible – vengeance versus kindness.

If Batman is the (relatively) kind Christ in this reading, his spiritual father is Ra's al Ghul, whose fortress not coincidentally sat on a mountain. (In a sense, Batman was then born *both* in Heaven and Hell, and if you prefer to see Batman more as a demon than akin to Jesus, recall that Lucifer's story, in one aspect, recalls Christ's: Both were cast from above to the Earth by the Creator.)

The parent-child relationships here are defined by rejection. Ra's al Ghul, the God-figure teacher, says that killing is sometimes necessary for justice, a tenet that pupil/son Bruce Wayne rejects. (Yet Bruce also finds fault in the philanthropic philosophy of his biological father –

ineffectual and *too* kind.)

In *The Dark Knight Rises*, Talia al Ghul is also shown to have been born in Hell – and was in two instances abandoned by her biological father, Bruce's mentor – while Bane was forged there (the goodness pummeled out of him) and then rejected by God. Yet they, like Job and Christ, persevere in the Father's work, even though they perceive that He had forsaken them.

Batman, of course, spurns that mission, and there's a moment in *Batman Begins* when the very personal (rather than philosophical) animosity between Father and Son is hammered home, as the crooked cop claims to know nothing, "swear to God." We might call that a very poor choice of words, as Batman is none too fond of God: "Swear to me!"

And (speaking of the Joker), while the Christ figure is most clearly manifested in the first and third movies, some biblical allusions can be found in *The Dark Knight*. Two-Face, as duality made literal, is himself a fallen angel. You might, in the way Gotham finally turns against its savior and casts him out, hear echoes of Peter's denial of Jesus.

And recognizing that the chief adversaries in *Begins* and *Rises* are Father figures, it's not hard to see the Joker as one, too. Like God, he just
exists
– no backstory offered or needed – and his schemes are designed to stress the moral mettle of both Batman and Gotham, as the Old Testament Lord foisted cruel trials on Job and Abraham.

All of the series' primary villains – Scarecrow, Ra's al Ghul, the Joker, Two-Face, and Bane – act as (or aspire to be) God figures, testing people or executing final judgment on individuals or societies. This wasn't true for Scarecrow until, in *The Dark Knight Rises*, he presides over the city's post-revolution court system, offering exile or death.

For all of its darkness, though, Nolan's trilogy finally rejects those one-and-the-same options as Gotham's only choices. By the end of *Rises*, through its resurrections, a freed Bruce Wayne, and a new, untainted incarnation of Batman, it offers a glimmer of hope for society and its

people.