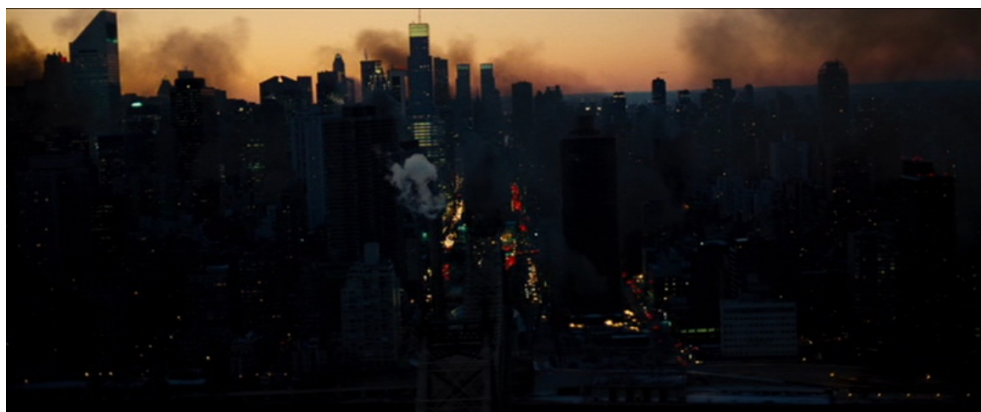# Absolute Anxiety Test: Urban Wreckage in *The Dark Knight Rises*

By James Gilmore

Warner Bros.'s "Dark Knight" trilogy—*Batman Begins* (2005), *The Dark Knight* (2008), *The Dark Knight Rises* (2012)—places the caped crusader in the center of a precarious urban space; a Gotham City constantly on the brink of desolation from forces external and internal, yet grounded in a conventionally realistic aesthetic. The climax of *Batman Begins* involves a piece of public transportation (an elevated train) being used by a terrorist group to demolish a skyscraper. The first shot of *The Dark Knight* tracks in to show a building's window exploding outward. Throughout these films, director Christopher Nolan connects superhero genre structures with ever-evolving post-9/11 anxieties tied to the threat of undoing and scarring urban space.

In Michael Phillips's review of *The Dark Knight Rises*, he calls it "more of a 164-minute anxiety disorder than a movie."[1] This description is startlingly appropriate in more ways than one. On the eve of the film's release, a midnight screening in Aurora, CO fell victim to a violent shooting spree, in effect culturally "scarring" the film.[2] In such a way, the films diegetic terrorism is tied to a startlingly real moment of terror and violence. Furthermore, the film's screenplay—co-written by Christopher and Jonathan Nolan—negates narrative coherency. An online fan video, "Everything wrong with 'The Dark Knight Rises,'" humorously charts various incongruous or unexplained elements of the narrative, such as "Blake knows Wayne is Batman because of a f*cking look on his face" and "Every available cop sent down to the sewers at once." Instead, the film suspends this logic, redirecting our attention to the effects of the visuals as they relate to a plurality of cultural fears.

The Dark Knight Rises should be considered on the logic of its images, analyzing how and why it frames iconography in relation to spectacle and cultural anxiety. The idea of the precarious city—the city under constant siege—is central to the Dark Knight trilogy, but only *The Dark Knight Rises* frames a "scarred city"; a Gotham of wreckage and rot replaying nightmarish visions of 9/11. Batman's diegesis becomes a simulacrum for our own real-life resonances with scarred cityscapes, and the film disrupts the superhero genre's tendency towards spectacle *through* this imagery.

Central to this is the recurrent emphasis of 9/11 as a televised event—as mediation. Slavoj Žižek calls the news images of burning towers and fleeing masses, "a special effect which outdid all others."[3] Jean Baudrillard similarly sees 9/11 as a spectacular nightmare, the perverse inversion of Hollywood disaster movies; terrorism relies on and disrupts "our fascination with the image."[4] Indeed, Baudrillard and Žižek are crucial thinkers for considering the ideological implications of the image after 9/11, especially in terms of how Hollywood cinema regurgitates the image event. These representations are often either reverent—the stock footage of *World Trade Center*—or spectacular—the falling plane sequence from *Superman Returns*. Representations of, and tensions between, "Spectacle" and "the Real" are at the heart of these theories.

The Dark Knight Rises is keenly aware of how "the spectacle of terrorism" has become "the terrorism of spectacle"[5]; of how Hollywood's penchant for destruction can no longer be rendered as absolutely pleasurable in a world where similar chaos can suddenly realign urban landscapes. In the first hour of the film, the mercenary Bane both crashes an airplane and shoots up Gotham's stock exchange—dual images of the most significant events of the first decade of the 21st century: The 9/11 attacks and the 2008 financial meltdown, respectively. This first half arouses a variety of anxieties quite consciously, compounded by the high audio levels of the gunfire and Hans Zimmer's percussive score. *The Dark Knight Rises* also recognizes the importance of the aerial shot for representing the city. From above and from a distance, the city is itself a spectacle—many shots in the first hour are at night, showcasing the city's luminescence—but we can also denote its rigidity and the angularity of its building and its streets. Before his first near-fatal confrontation with Bane, Batman stands in front of the city, foregrounded against both the buildings and the setting sun. It is a heroic image *par excellence*, the superhero as both civic defender and stoic outside observer. (See Figure 1)

Figure 1.

While this discussion does not have the space to adequately account for the complexities and contradictions of "the city" throughout *The Dark Knight Rises*—indeed, a discussion of class representations and spaces, the difference between corporate offices and

The Dark Knight Rises—indeed, a discussion of class representations and spaces, the difference between corporate offices and slums, would further explicate many ideas embedded in the film—I would rather emphasize the most emblematic sequence, wherein Bane detonates his explosives and sets into motion the second half of the film. The first half summons up a series of anxieties while questioning the continued validity of Batman, while the second half turns the film into a thoroughly urban thriller in which only Batman can re-stabilize our constant anxiety.

Crucially, the city must be understood as a microcosm for the Nation, a site where the conflicts and anxieties of a broader collective are condensed and bounded. Gotham City, then, is both a simulacrum of New York City and a broader, more abstract representation of America itself: fraught with violence and disparity. At the Gotham City football game, the importance placed on the national anthem takes on many meanings: It is a symbol *of* the Nation, a collective inscription of ideology, but also a performance. The choice to have a small boy perform the anthem underscores the relative naiveté and innocence of Gotham's collective, while also standing in stark contrast to the digital, disembodied voice of Bane. The cheers following "the land of the free" are painfully ironic given Bane's subsequent plan to effectively "free" Gotham by shredding its legal auspices.

More than calling our attention to how Gotham is simulacra for New York and for America, this sequence magnifies the "terror as spectacle" ideas of Žižek and Baudrillard. The montage of the explosion sequence alternates shots of the football field collapsing, the police being crushed in the tunnels beneath Gotham, and aerial shots of city streets and buildings exploding. As such, the sequence calls attention to the inherently spectacular nature of the image while consciously problematizing the pleasures associated with spectacle. The simultaneous bombing of the football field and the city at large show the two images as intrinsically interrelated, as replications on varying scales. The spectacle of the football game—a site of pleasure—has been converted into a site of terror, just as smoke and bombs similarly erupt across Gotham, imbuing the aerial shot with a look of horror. (See Figure 2 and Figure 3) And yet, there is an undeniable third layer to this. Aerial shots of Gotham show it is an island, connected to other areas of land via bridges. Though much of the film was shot in Pittsburgh, the camera frames these aerial shots to make it resemble New York City to a stunning degree. (See Figure 4)

Figure 2.

Figure 3.

Figure 4.

Further, the destruction of Gotham is a *mediated* spectacle. Not only does Bane take the referee's microphone—effectively determining the rules of his new game—but his image is reflected on the stadium's Jumbotron, at a military observation center, *and* in the news reports Bruce Wayne is forced to watch from his vaguely Middle Eastern jail cell—a location that certainly has geopolitical implications, associating Bane with terrorist stereotypes that still dominate mediated representations of the region.

There is perhaps no other moment in the film that encourages such strong identification with Wayne, who is more or less locked into his spectatorial position. (See Figure 5) The first half of *The Dark Knight Rises* summons a series of anxieties only to focus them onto the scarred cityscape, a city that is not only ruinous and empty, but also a city under threat of imminent nuclear annihilation.

Figure 5.

From this point forward, the film's images pronounce the city as *scarred*. Military planes fly around the perimeter of the city as smoke continues to billow out of it. (See Figure 6) Commissioner Gordon and Detective Blake drive through a darkened city at night —a direct contrast to the sea of police lights that flood more or less the same city street during the chase for Batman in the first half of the film. Tanks roll through city streets occupied by few or no pedestrians. Government agents are hung from construction cranes and broadcast on television "for the world to see." While the countdown to the bomb's detonation becomes the most important narrative element of the second half of the film, and thus gives the climax a precise sense of narrative time, any real sense of time seems elliptical until Bruce Wayne's return to the city—these events are staged as sort of a continuous montage, an accumulation of social order's breakdown.

Figure 6.

Batman's return then represents the movement away from the realistic to the symbolic. Much as Detective Blake marks the city walls with small Bat symbols despite the protestations of his allies—"put your faith in something a little more real"—Batman marks his own return by igniting a fire in the shape of his Bat symbol. Our desire for symbolic action is expanded into the film's climax, where the real city streets become the site of a symbolic battle between the police and Bane's army—between forces of law and forces of terror. Batman's ultimate defeat of Bane and Talia al'Ghul suggests a *reconversion* of the "terrorism of spectacle" back into the "spectacle of terrorism"—when Batman flies the atomic bomb *just outside* the six mile blast radius before it detonates, a series of shots of onlooking children (and police officer John Blake) transform the bomb's explosion into a spectacular—and importantly, safe—event. (See Figure 7)
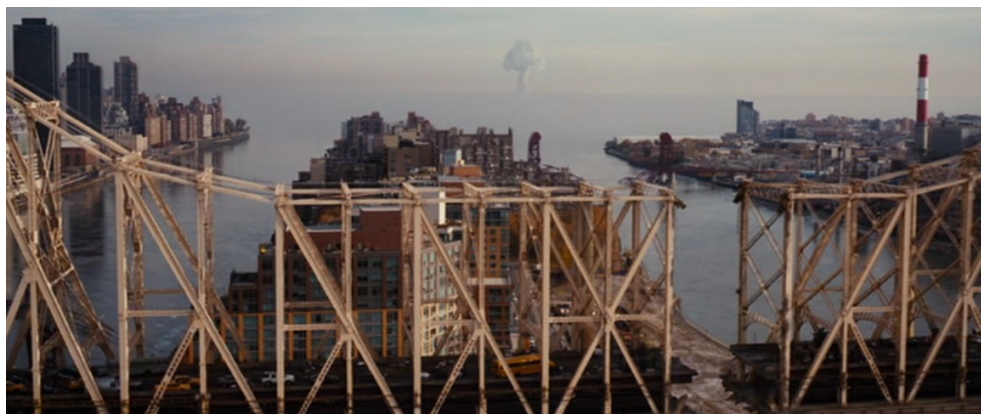

Figure 7.

The Dark Knight Rises foregoes a wholly comprehensive narrative in favor of exploring the ramifications of representing scarred urban spaces in post-9/11 cinema. While the Dark Knight Trilogy can be said to summon memories of 9/11 throughout its visuals, its set pieces, and its dialogue, none seem to prey on discomfort to the degree of this third film. *The Dark Knight Rises* mediates urban spaces as a series of simulacra, decrying the pleasurable possibilities of the superhero genre. From our spectatorial position, the film is indeed an anxiety test, summoning the iconographies and fears of a post-9/11 urban milieu without necessarily purging them or building to a catharsis.

The problem the film presents, in a much broader sense, is the *impossibility* of overcoming the anxieties of the first decade of the 21st century as we navigate the second decade. Even while the film acknowledges class disparity, economic crime, and a spectacularized, if perverse, version of the Occupy Movement, it continues to regurgitate to darker degrees the images of 9/11. Paired to this are movies like *The Avengers* (Marvel, 2012) that turn scarred cityscapes into inconsequential combat zones, where car crashes and falling debris are incorporated into the pleasure, rather than the terror, of the spectacle.

The Dark Knight Rises is thoroughly concerned with how the superhero film mediates urban spaces, and how our cultural experience of terrorism *as mediation* affects our spectatorship. As such, the film steers our way towards important considerations of how to reconcile the superhero's cultural negotiations against its inherent trappings of escapism and fantastical spectacle.

NOTES

1. Michael Phillips, "'Dark Knight Rises': A 'Knight' to fray the nerves," Chicago Tribune, 17 July 2012, Accessed 31 Jan. 2012.
2. CinemaSins, "Everything Wrong With the Dark Knight Rises In 3 Minutes Or Less," Accessed 30 Jan. 2012.
3. Slavoj Zizek, Welcome to the Desert of the Real, Verso (Brooklyn, NY: 2004), 11.
4. Jean Baudrillard, The Spirit of Terrorism, Verso (Brooklyn, NY: 2002), 28.
5. Jean Baudrillard, ibid, 30.

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