

Batman – a Story of Creation

It seems impossible to give a precise definition of mass culture whose origin and scope continue to be discussed¹. Especially now, in the age of postmodernism, books, films and music trends apparently intend to intensify the distinction between mass and high culture. Umberto Eco novels, David Lynch pictures, Sting music are just some of the examples of this wide current. Fortunately, some works can be easily classified and Tim Burton's *Batman* is among them. A perfect match for the mass culture category this commercially successful film was ranked third among the top-grossing American pictures of 1989 and can be treated as a standard element of a set, a representative of mass culture, as evidenced by the mass audience, electronic media, plot, character profile, and setting. Familiarity with all the qualities characterising the film does not mean that their sense has been exhausted. Watching events transpiring in Gotham City one must admit that comments about a stereotypical plot, a black-and-white distribution of values, and a lack of an in-depth psychological profile of the main characters are apt. New solutions, original tricks, and unfathomable situations are missing. Everyone understands the screen goings-on and as demonstrated by the box office viewers accept this straightforward form. The interpretation of these obvious observations, however, is far from evident and becomes such only if we accept the unquestionable nature of common verdicts about mass culture. In this light the discussed phenomenon can be seen as a field dominated by trivial entertainment based on stereotypes, banalities, and intellectual shortcuts accessible to everyone because it is subject to the rule of the lowest common denominator. Problems appear only when we perceive that all the above qualities can be evaluated in a number of ways. Amusement and entertainment do not have to be associated with indolent leisure. Ever since Huizinga's *Homo ludens* at the latest we know that ludic forms of man's activity have a deeper sense and that play and game possess surprising meanings². Similarly, the importance of stereotypes, unambiguity, and the use of continually the same clichés cannot be unambiguously prejudged. These traits are degrading only when originality determines the significance of the text. Cultures of the "ludic type", however, attached greatest value to a precise recreation of traditional patterns. In realities of this kind efforts made to attain duration and repeatability were the most obvious technique for accomplishing this state.³ Cultures representing the discussed category showed little esteem for change and innovation. One of the unquestionable successes of ethnography was demonstrating that, despite this attitude, other people were capable of living just as successfully as we do. In other words, otherness should not be in any way associated with inferiority.

Mass culture is most frequently treated as a lower form of elite culture and not as a separate and original world. The history of ethnography shows how the life

of the rural population, interpreted in a similar manner, generated inappropriate convictions about its style of thinking and experiencing. With all their differences these distant worlds have certain common elements. Being strata of the same Western culture and due to geographic, historical, and emotional proximity they seem to be easier to fathom. In both cases it is difficult to maintain a distance important for their interpretation. The Poleszuk and Hutsul peoples or the Tatra Mts. highlanders were once treated as "lesser brothers" but not as residents of another continent. Similarly, sports spectators, pop music fans and commercial cinema enthusiasts do not exist in a space of their own. This is why the reality of people roaring at stadiums, whirling in concert halls, or excitedly following the adventures of Bond and Batman is not a goal in its own right but only a means to comprehend such phenomena as manipulation, mass communication, kitsch, and degradation of high culture models. First and foremost, it is supposed to justify an essentially ideological thesis: the common is by its very nature inferior to the elitist, leading to highly important social consequences.⁴

We shall assume that a portrait of this kind is just one of possible depictions. An effort aimed at a different perspective will make it possible to treat mass culture in the manner of ethnography, i.e. by keeping a certain distance to our knowledge, predilections, and common sense. Let this phenomenon manifest itself in the manner of the culture of the Aboriginal Australians or the Eskimos. Finally, we should also treat such culture with the respect that we were able to muster for the others.

After this lengthy digression time to return to *Batman* and begin by breaking down its plot into significant components. Their formalisation will make it easier to reveal mutually binding relations, and once they are put back together – to emphasise the order of the whole story and its goal. Only equipped with this knowledge shall we be able to begin explaining its meaning.

The story of Batman starts with images of the city of Gotham. From a distant perspective we see a shape resembling a medieval stronghold rather than a modern

metropolis, extracted from darkness by light. This wide shot is once again used in the scene of Batman's final battle with the Joker in which Gotham City seems to be placed between the sky and the earth, with a contour similar to magic places from Disney films or tales about the wizard of Oz. Gothic, fantastic architecture will continue to accompany particularly important events. Such is the style of Batman's palace, the Joker's headquarters, and the cathedral, where decisive confrontations take place. We encounter, however, also a different picture of the city, a realistic imitation of an American agglomeration with all its dilapidation and tacky glitter. In other words, the whole film is set in two contradictory realms – fairy-tale and realistic.

A similar opposition dominates the characters appearing in the story. On the one hand, there are portraits of average people: officials, thieves, policemen, and journalists driven by everyday feelings of anger, jealousy, greed, love, and curiosity. Their qualities have a human dimension. The two lead protagonists are completely different, endowed with extraordinary talent and superhuman power. They do not contest for the sake of a concrete advantage but battle for the way in which the surrounding world is to exist. The dimension of the clash is thus cosmic and not human. The fact that they belong to a different category is emphasised in a multitude of ways. They have masks instead of faces, move in a unique manner, and their costumes, just as their abilities allow them to stand out from the rest of the crowd. This disparate ontological status is also underlined by their origin: in dramatic circumstances one metamorphoses into Batman and the second transforms from a gangster into the mad Joker. The names of the characters stress their mediatory nature. The way Batman and the Joker exist on the border of the twilight and fairytale zones makes it possible to shift the plot from one dimension to the other. Without this opening it would be impossible to solve the situation encountered in Gotham City, the site of a battle waged by two forces, neither of which is able to prevail. The appearance of superhuman powers is a consequence of this state of things, with Batman and the Joker representing the forces in question. Take a closer look at the two characters in an attempt at their definition. Batman is cloaked in black while the Joker wears the multi-hued clothes of a clown. The former flies, the latter prances. Batman is a brilliant inventor, and his nemesis – a remarkable chemist. The home of the former is bright and orderly, while the latter resides in gloomy clutter. One thing is obvious; the two opposites can reveal their meaning only in a mutual relation. The Joker creates Batman, who, in turn, is the main force making it possible for his adversary to rise to unequalled prominence. Opposing elements, after all, not only determine each other but also require the presence of the other. The fact that they compete for the same woman also acts as structural justification. Due

to their close connection everything within the range of the interests pursued by A must also attract B, his counterpart.

The film's plot begins with a sequence in which Batman becomes involved with one of the sides in a conflict raging in the city. Logically, the Joker soon appears, opts for the opposing party and the clash takes on a different dimension.

The whole story can be divided into three parts, the largest presenting the main characters. This exposition makes it possible to understand the causes and meaning of the duel between Batman and the Joker, which constitutes the second part. Finally, the last brief section portrays the city after Batman's victory. The bright daylight, the delighted faces of the people, and their declarations confirm the belief that evil and insanity have been defeated and if they were to return, HE, the great defender, shall return too. This scene is the complete opposite of the first sequences. Recall the darkness, chaos, violence, anxiety and fear that created the opening scenery of the whole story. If we describe the initial state as chaos and the final one as order (later we shall try to prove that there are good reasons to use these terms), then the whole event can be presented within a scheme of the rite of passage. Note that a lion's share of the film contained between the extreme states can be accurately characterised by referring to the middle phase of the rite of passage, i.e. transition. The extraordinary trials and tribulations experienced by the protagonists, the astonishing characters and powers, the different space-time are important for the phase of transition, a stage of trials that need to be overcome to achieve the desired new state. The structure of the rite of passage builds the film's narrative plan, and the logic of this event attributes qualities and functions to its characters. Although the procedure in question has affected the world of Gotham representing the whole reality-cosmos, it is portrayed by the battle waged by two symbolic characters, Batman and the Joker.

What do the characters dominating this motion picture symbolise? What truth does their conflict manifest, and what is its connection with the rite of passage? Before we start answering these questions we need to make a certain observation. The symbolic significance of any element is connected with its place in a structure and emerges from this location, which opens it up in a certain direction though it is impossible to say that meaning is unambiguously determined by a given place. The symbolic dimensions of Batman and the Joker are obvious. After all, they collect and magnify the features of their environment, reveal hidden truths, and overcome ordinary measures and conditions. These are the properties of a symbol.⁵ The mask acts as a detail continuously manifesting the other dimension of the main characters' existence. The mask is a means of stopping time and escaping the accidental and changeable. The

mask manifests the permanent and the unchangeable – the essence. Its presence signals a shift from the field of history and psychology into the realm of ontology.⁶ The path to this dimension followed by the cruel and cynical gangster Jack Napier leads through a vat of acid. In this terrifying welter a man dies and a mask – the Joker – is born. The acid that accompanies the transformation is deeply meaningful. According to M. Lurker in his *Dictionary of Biblical Images and Symbols: The effect of acid (...) became a symbol of impinging – particularly evil – upon the surroundings.*⁷ In other words, right before our eyes the human evil of Napier was etched into pure evil, with the Joker becoming its carrier. His character and actions represent the very essence of evil.

The name is our first hint: a joker tells or plays jokes; a joker is also a playing card that can replace any other card. He exists outside the accepted order, which he scorns. Gaudy clothing, clownish gestures, dancing and music are signs of a carnival, a reality of confusion, toppled hierarchies, and incessant changes. As befits a representative of the carnival the Joker is always play-acting, pretending, emphasising the conventional and impermanent character of all order. All his efforts are aimed at multiplying the absurd. Smylex is the name of his weapon, a bizarre gas that makes people abandon their character and, rendering them absurd, reveal the equally absurd nature of reality. The headquarters of the demonic jokester are an abandoned chemical plant, where various colours, smoke, and shapes mix. This is exactly the way in which the seat of the madcap king of the carnival, opposing everything that is simple, distinctive and defined, should look. The Joker utters the same truth in a variety of ways. The essence of evil is chaos, which has to end in death, non-existence. This is why the victims of Smylex die smiling and the entire Gotham population is supposed to perish in a culmination of carnival frenzy.

Only another force can successfully oppose the power of entropy and nothingness, and Batman is its carrier. Similarly to his antagonist he too experienced initiation in the face of death changing the ontological dimension of his existence. Hence the mask in which he appears at all the more important moments. As in the case of the Joker his name draws us closer to the secret of his power. Batman is literally a bat-man but also the one who serves. The ability to fly and the night (bat qualities) are prominently displayed. The protagonist, cloaked in uniform black, descends from the sky and disappears into an abyss.

The symbolism of bird qualities – flight and wing – is extensive⁸ and almost always related to spirituality and mediatoriness. The meaning of Batman's bird-like features becomes clearer thanks to the relation with the Joker. The latter sticks to the ground, slithers (his moves are highly characteristic), is colourful and changeable, and kills with poison, venom. In a word – a snake, a

great chthonic symbol. The fact that he multiplies chaos is connected with his bond with the earth that contains everything but in which nothing has yet been crystallised. A battle between a bird and a snake is a frequent medley of symbols, with the serpent representing the subterranean world, the earth, and evil, and the bird – the sky, air, and goodness.⁹ What is the principle of goodness represented by Batman? A bat and blackness usually reveal night, unhappiness and death. Nevertheless, they can also symbolise a severe, ceremonial and lofty order contrasting with the one in which we exist.¹⁰ The blackness of Batman's costume and its unchangeable and uniform character become meaningful only in the context of his enemy's outfit. The latter denotes changeability and chaos, and the former – duration and clarity. Obviousness and loyalty also distinguish the relations between Batman and people. His friendship with an old valet is unquestionable and his love survives all tests. As befits a winged creature he features considerable intelligence and numerous talents, which inspire the creation of precise constructions and devices. Batman is building a well-ordered, clear space. The objects he uses are nothing more than materialised order, also represented by good manners and elegance. Our protagonist destroys the criminal world because by breaking the law the latter subverts the constancy of order – the essence of goodness. In other words, Batman's activity in all fields can be reduced to a common denominator: he creates, intensifies, defends and expresses order. Batman himself is order, just like the Joker is chaos.

Two forces confront each other in Gotham. Evil-impermanence-chaos-death, on the one hand, and goodness-loyalty-order-life, on the other hand. It is worth noting that the opposing nature of the characters symbolising these states does not exclude their considerable closeness. They share the feat of crossing the boundaries of human measures and possessing powers not of this world. Batman and the Joker do not serve the sides involved in the Gotham-set conflict but rather represent the cosmic dimension of the clash. The scope of their duel is emphasised by corresponding time and place. The final, decisive round is staged on a tower summit in the course of festivities. A cosmic confrontation occurs during a fiesta, when everything simultaneously dies and is born, and in a place linking heaven, earth and netherworld. Once again chaos, aiming at domination, falls into an abyss. Order, i.e. existence, triumphs.

The presented story emulates an obvious example and *via* the scheme of a magical fairy tale it refers to the heroic myth. The tale about a hero saving the world is a version of the cosmogonic myth, the core of every mythology.¹¹ The connection between this sacred story and the rite of passage discernible in *Batman* is also intentional. Each *rite de passage* is a revival of creation, the latter's update. The rite uses a different language to present the same truth, which evokes myth. An analysis

of the text emphasises its connections with categories revealed predominantly in archaic cultures, in tribal, peasant, and primitive communities. Within this context it is worth recalling the opinion of Aleksander Jackiewicz who described film as tribal art ingesting myths, opened to a fairytale-like quality and to a child-like experience of the world.¹² As we have tried to show, the tropes described by the author of *Moja filmoteka* are remarkably prominent in *Batman*. It must be emphasised that despite all its advantages our example is far from unique. It is a splendidly crafted but typical sample of the action genre. Once again we are presented with a plot shown a thousand times before by using different images. Knights, cowboys, policemen, solitary saviours continue to bring up to date the ever identical scheme and recall a model that we already know by heart. The collection of texts creating the action film speaks to us about the presence of archaic phenomena and forms seemingly inappropriate for modern times. The endurance, attraction, and vitality of films founded on these old, unoriginal topics, the incessant popularity of worn out clichés incline us to believe that the stratum containing such phenomena continues to be alive and important for contemporary man. In folk cultures the cosmogonic myth, rites, power, order, and chaos were situated at the level of real, strong life, which everyday existence should imitate. This was a sacred area making it possible to understand the course of all affairs. It was not distinguished from everyday life because it encompassed it in its entirety. Everything that exists at the bottom was also represented high above. This is precisely the property of the sacral way of experiencing existence that Ricoeur discussed as the rule of suitability.¹³ Myth and ritual are techniques making possible transference to a sacral and lofty realm. History and psychology become abolished, because “at that time” only figures and archetypes act and all events are model-like. Film is another technique for halting the ordinary course of events. Darkness falls and we find ourselves at the beginning of a story. As in myths, the protagonists are strong, beautiful and good, and evil is terrifying and powerful. As in myths, truths are distinct and principles are divided, time is governed by different rules, and individual qualities are a function of the tasks that the *dramatis personae* have to implement. Indeed, stereotypes, repetitions, unbelievable plots, and unrealistic characters dominate popular movies. True - normal life and ordinary issues do not exist and challenging intellectual deliberations are absent... Instead, an exceptionally important revelation has been offered. Power, order, meaning – *haute monde* – do exist and last. Look for them and pursue them. Transcendence, in other words, the *sacrum* can be perceived and experienced. This is the sole certainty granted by frivolous film. Powerful, exemplary, truly sacred life does exist. If religion denotes predominantly contact with sacredness and the latter reveals itself through power and overcom-

ing, then mass culture has a religious dimension. The word “religion” may come from the Latin *relegere* – to frequently address, to scrupulously contemplate, to read again, *religari* – to become attached, *religere* – to choose again. Does mass culture not entail great attachment, confirmed choice and intense contacts? Do sports fans and film and music enthusiasts not display this religious attitude? The answer seems to be obvious. Mass culture continues to persistently confirm the presence of the sacred. Its theology is not particularly sophisticated and ends with the statement – t h i s i s. However banal such truth may be it is also highly comforting and necessary. Recall – we are dealing with a text. It is difficult to say whether it is understood in this way. More important, the text makes this sort of reception possible and opens to such truths as well. The horizon of its meanings includes also this noble and magnificent dimension.

Endnotes

- ¹ J. Naremore, P. Brantlinger, *Introduction: Six Artistic Cultures*, in: *Modernity and Mass Culture*, ed. J. Naremore, P. Brantlinger, Bloomington and Indianapolis 1981, pp. 1-9.
- ² J. Woźniakowski also discusses reflections concerning the meaning of play in culture: *Czy kultura jest do zbawienia konieczna*, Kraków 1988, pp. 215-235.
- ³ This issue has been tackled by, e.g. L. Stomma, *Antropologia kultury wsi polskiej*, Warszawa 1986, pp. 13-151.
- ⁴ On the “aristocratic” criticism of mass culture, its origins and the present-day condition see: S. Barańczak, *Słowo-perswazja-kultura masowa*, “Twórczość” 1975 no. 7.
- ⁵ After: P. Tillich, *Znaczenie i usprawiedliwienie symboli religijnych*, “Polska Sztuka Ludowa”, 1988, no. 3, p. 160.
- ⁶ This significance of the mask is particularly emphasised by: G. van der Leeuw, *Święta gra*, “Polska Sztuka Ludowa”, 1991, no. 3-4, p. 6.
- ⁷ M. Lurker, *Słownik obrazów i symboli biblijnych*, Poznań 1989, p. 106.
- ⁸ Information on this topic after: D. Forster, *Świat symboliki chrześcijańskiej*, Warszawa 1990, p. 225; W. Kopański, *Słownik symboli*, Warszawa 1990, pp. 342-344, 383-385.
- ⁹ W. Kopański, op. cit., p. 344.
- ¹⁰ W. Kopański, op. cit., p. 255, 53-54. D. Forster, op. cit., p. 117.
- ¹¹ Based on: M. Eliade, *Traktat o historii religii*, Warszawa 1996, pp. 403-406; E. Mielecinski, *Poetyka mitu*, Warszawa 1981, pp. 280-285.
- ¹² A. Jackiewicz, *Moja filmoteka*, Warszawa 1989, pp. 223-327.
- ¹³ P. Ricoeur, *Egzystencja i hermeneutyka*, Warszawa 1985, p. 365.