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'The Dark Knight Rises' and the franchise fades

Sr. Rose Pacatte | Jul. 21, 2012 NCR Today

I had been looking forward to ?The Dark Knight Rises? for months. Of all the comic-books-into-movies I like director/writer Christopher Nolan?s interpretation of the DC comic character that first appeared in 1939. The second film of Nolan?s franchise, ?The Dark Knight? (2007), is possibly the best sequel ever. It?s mature and deep. I was hoping for another film just as good.

Then I woke yesterday morning to the news of the midnight shooting in a theater showing ?The Dark Knight Rises? at a multiplex in Aurora, Colorado. As of this writing 24-year old suspect James Holmes is alleged to have shot 71 people; twelve people have died so far.

The film begins in violence, continues in violence, ends in violence. Several scenes feature someone, usually the dark figure Bane (Tom Hardy) and his henchmen, spraying people with semi-automatic guns. And no one bleeds. Not really. People, well, characters, do die but it?s a fantasy video game on a big screen a la? ?Transformers?.

I have so many questions.

To obtain the coveted Motion Picture Association of America?s PG-13 rating movie studios sterilize the violence by removing the consequences: they eliminate blood and most of the pain. This rating technique deepens the disconnect between reality and story in films even further. The MPAA says their content analysis criteria for the ratings are set by what parents want, expect. What is the cumulative influence of violent movies with no consequences on young teens? Comic books and their movies are fantasy, yes. But the heroes are mostly sympathetic, despite their costumes, and we care about what happens to them. But in movies they get hurt, practically die, and get up to walk again and join in the next battle. Are the moral dilemmas and the violent non-sanguine solutions to conflict in this genre of film really so benign?

What was James Holmes thinking? He is said to have dyed his hair red and claimed to be ?the Joker? (played by the above mentioned 2007 film). ABCs online news is reporting (Friday 3:10pm PT) that Holmes ?allegedly entered the movie auditorium wearing a ballistics helmet, bullet-proof vest, bullet-proof leggings, gas mask and gloves. He detonated multiple smoke bombs, and then began firing at viewers in the sold-out auditorium?? It sounds like he is Bane in a scene from the movie.

This is not the review I hoped to write. The context is forever changed.

The Story

It has been eight years since the Joker (Heath Leger) last caused havoc in Gotham and is killed. In the conflict Bruce Wayne/Batman (Christian Bale) is believed to have killed the city?s ?beloved? two-faced DA Harvey Dent (Aaron Eckhart). Bruce retires, becomes a recluse, and Wayne Enterprises verges on bankruptcy. A new threat to the city appears: a disfigured masked man, a mercenary, Bane (Tom Hardy). He has connections to Bruce and is determined to bring him down.

Bruce decides to come out of retirement after his old friend and butler Alfred (Michael Caine) admits that he had burned Rachel?s last letter instead of giving it to Bruce. They part ways. (Rachel was Bruce?s girl friend, played previously by both Katie Holmes and Maggie Gyllenhaal). Bruce seeks out Fox (Morgan Freeman), who heads WE and is the keeper of Batman?s vehicles and costumes. But Fox has bad news. The nuclear reactor they had developed for peace could fall into the wrong hands. Bruce asks Miranda (Marian Cotilliard), who heads a save-the-world non-profit, to take over WE. Big mistake.

Now the police commissioner, Jim Gordon (Gary Oldman), is about to admit turning against his friend Bruce Wayne when Harvey was killed. He decides to wait, however, and is shot and hospitalized.

Police Office Blake (Joseph Gordon-Levitt) was an orphan who benefited from living at a boys home supported by the Wayne Foundation. He is a stalwart soul who admires Batman. Gordon makes him a detective and the two work together to help thwart Bane.

But there is another threat, a traitor, working to bring down Batman, law and order, and the people of Gotham.

To complicate matters even further Selina/Catwoman (Anne Hathaway) appears on the scene. She makes a deal with Bane and betrays Batman to him to achieve her own ends.

Bane steals the reactor and is determined to detonate it knowing the explosive zone is 6 miles large. He says he is liberating the people of Gotham. Bruce comes back from a terrible beating and imprisonment by Bane, to save the day.

Here?s what I think

?The Dark Knight Rises? is good enough though the storyline seems thin, a little better than a retread, and the special effects tinny. I guessed who the traitor was.

Yet at just under three hours running time ?The Dark Knight Rises? completely fills the time. But there?s too much ?Transformer? action going on. We?ve see these kinds of scenes over and over and over in summer movies. The plot is straightforward and the addition of Bane, Miranda, and Blake make the plot interesting though not so different from previous scenarios. But ?The Dark Knight? provided so much more than this new film in terms of exploring humanity. Then the writing was brilliant and as we all know, Heath Leger?s performance garnered a posthumous Oscar for his role. Here Bane is pretty much a cardboard character.

?The Dark Knight Rises? hits all the marks for a superhero film and follows the Batman template. Christian Bale is proficient and getting a little long in the tooth for the role that seems to be ending along with Christopher Nolan?s involvement in the franchise. Michael Cane is brilliant as always as is Morgan Freeman. Anne Hathaway?s Catwoman, well, I think she just may return. Tom Hardy is a terrific actor but his facemask, as important as it is as a symbol to parallel his evil persona with Batman?s flawed heroism, rendered his performance forgettable. For all we know someone else could have done his talking for him.

I don?t think I am giving anything away to Batman aficionados to say that Joseph Gordon-Levitt has the making of a beloved character that has not yet appeared in Nolan?s batcave. His _ _ _ _ _ Blake was really good. Whoever makes the next Batman movies, well, he or she should be grateful because Nolan has left the door wide open for a new batch of dark battles.

It is interesting that a priest, Fr. Reilly (Chris Ellis), heads up the boy?s home in the film. The character does not appear in Nolan?s earlier Batman movies. And I think I saw a painting of St. Thomas Aquinas, O.P. (1225 ? 1274) hanging in Bruce?s mansion. Hmm. Can anyone confirm?

Did anyone else catch it when Alfred mentioned sipping ?Fernet Branca? when he vacationed in Rome? In the 1970s, when I was stationed as a young nun in New York, I used to accompany one of our older Italian sisters to the Fratelli Branca warehouse near Houston Street to pick up donated bottles of the high octane distilled bitters (amari). Put a little of this stuff in your espresso and you will know no pain ? and your stomachache will be gone, too. Funny what they put in movies.

At the end of the day, this anticipated movie-going experience for me is forever tarnished by the shootings in Aurora.

What is the responsibility of filmmakers who tell these stories? If the audience is mature enough, perhaps there is no problem. But what about the vulnerable among us? A well-adjusted person would not do what James Holmes is alleged to have done. Somehow it made sense to him. Finding out just how may help us, as a story-telling people, to find new ways to communicate that are truthful.

Even in real-life kind of movies, if a baby is born and the studio wants to get a rating that will allow for as broad a ticket-buying audience possible, filmmakers may use a little chocolate sauce to ?suggest? the reality of blood in birth. Are these restrictions about the grown-ups and their issues or the children?

Taking blood out of depicted violence is not the answer; it?s not normal to visit such violence upon others without the consequence of flowing blood. The more distance, actual or visual, that there is between perpetrator and victim in any equation, the easier it is to commit more violence.

I have so many questions.

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