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Spectacular Repression: Sanitizing the Batman

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□—*Batman Forever* is a mass-mediated public text crafted in response to a perceived need to "sanitize" the Batman by resolving the psycho-sexual ambiguities that define him. The textual resources mobilized toward this end consist primarily of simultaneously presenting potentially ameliorative archetypal forms and stripping these forms of their ameliorative potential. The resulting text is a paradigm of managed meaning, denying its own polysemy and thus making itself unavailable to its audiences as "equipment for living." *Batman Forever* may seem, to some, more palatable than its predecessors, and *Batman* may seem more sane, but this text offers a particularly insidious form of repression—*Batman* is a cultural artifact rendered culturally useless through excessive demystification.

IN 1954, Frederic Wertham characterized comic books as a *Seduction of the Innocent*. Their lurid sex and graphic violence, he argued, were symptoms of a popular culture that made all manner of delinquency attractive to young people. In particular, Wertham observed that "only someone ignorant of the fundamentals of psychiatry and of the psychopathology of sex can fail to realize a subtle atmosphere of homoeroticism which pervades the adventures of the mature 'Batman' and his young friend 'Robin.'" Among the seductive aberrations Wertham (1954)

noted were that Bruce Wayne and Dick Grayson "live in sumptuous quarters, with beautiful flowers in large vases" and that "Batman is sometimes shown in a dressing gown," leading him to conclude that the comic "is like a wish dream of two homosexuals living together" (pp. 189-198). Fueled in part by Wertham's book, the United States Senate began investigations, hearings were held, books were burned, and "comic books, once the province of childhood fun and escapism, were being used as fodder for a censorship battle that emulated the self-serving smear tactics of Senator McCarthy" (Vaz, 1989, p. 44). To protect itself both from the bad press and the inevitable economic effects of this attack, the comic book industry developed a self-policing document called the "Comics Code Authority," a set of moral standards by which the writers and artists would force their characters to live.¹

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Tim Burton's 1989 *Batman* film and his 1992 sequel, *Batman Returns*, precipitated attacks of their own and resulted in some similar self-policing. Anita Busch (1995), in *Variety*, reports that Burton's films were so dark and violent that parents' groups lashed out at the studio, its product licensees and its promotional partner, McDonald's Corp. Marketers cringed and retailers bristled as Batman product moved slowly off shelves; McDonald's, the largest fast-food chain in the world, changed its film promotional strategy after criticism (p. 1).

While Manohla Dargis suggests the problem was that "somehow the whip-wielding Catwoman, psychotic Penguin, and too-dark knight didn't fit tidily enough on hamburger wrappers" (1995, p. 41), the concerns of Warner Bros. spokespeople echoed the public-relations fears of comics producers a generation ago. Dan Romanelli, for example, Warner Bros. worldwide consumer products president, fretted that "we knew we had a problem. We knew that people felt the last film was kind of dark" (Busch, 1995, p. 147). As Busch puts it, "Warners faced the terrifying prospect that its most profitable franchise ... was devolving from mainstream entertainment into a depraved cult attraction" (1995, p. 1).

Joel Schumacher was hired to replace Burton, and a year before the film went into production, Warner Bros. engaged in a strategic campaign to sanitize the Dark Knight, making him more kid-friendly and wooing back corporate sponsors in the process.² Michael Smith, senior vice-president of Warner Bros. worldwide creative advertising, described the revised public image: "We wanted to reflect the fun and color" (Busch, 1995, p. 147). To effect the revision, Batman's sexuality must be singled out for particular treatment because his requisite insanity and his sexual ambiguity are intimately connected. While Bruce Wayne has squired all of Gotham's most eligible women — Wertham calls Wayne a "socialite" (1954, p. 190) — Batman is rather narrowly interested in bashing bad boys. The two parts must remain separate for Batman to continue to preserve the well-ordered psychic chaos of Gotham City because he must be able to transgress its repressive barriers (Terrill, 1993, p. 332; DeBona, 1997, p. 56); as Philip Orr puts it, "a unique characteristic of Batman is necessary: an unstable sexual identity and, by relation, unstable sexual relationships" (1994, p. 170). Schumacher was optimistic about the dilemma, noting that the goal was "to make it dark enough to be Batman, but light enough to be a living comic book" (Busch, 1995, p. 147). But resolving the dilemma by fusing both parts of the Wayne/Batman personality into an unambiguously heterosexual whole would erase the Batman.

Of course, this essay is not intended mostly as a lament. Rather, this essay reads *Batman Forever* as "symptomatic," in the sense identified by Thomas B. Farrell (1980) as a mode of criticism in which the critic reads public texts, especially films, as "emblems of modern social consciousness" (pp. 303-304).³ That is, the critic reads contemporary culture from these texts by exploring the inventional resources patterns and forms through which meaning might be made of experience such texts offer to their readers. The critic examines, in Kenneth Burke's terms, the ways in which such texts might function as "equipment for living" (1941/1967, pp. 293-304). This is not to say that it is the *intent* of these texts to function this way. Modern mediated public discourse is produced for any number of reasons, including, perhaps, an auteur's desire to supply a

particular set of inventional resources to an audience. Whatever their intent, in contemporary culture such discourse does comprise a considerable portion of the available means through which experience might be given meaning. A critique of the 1989 *Batman* film (Terrill, 1993) relied up these assumptions, arguing that the film presents Gotham City as a communal projection of a fractured American psyche, and that the film invites the audiences to image Batman as a model through which to manage this fragmentation. Batman represents a contemporary archetypal image of the collective *Self*, fragmented because modern life requires a schizophrenic subject reluctant to pursue psychic integration. The film functions as equipment for living because it presents its audiences with "an attractive, if Faustian, bargain" — the audience can continue to avoid the "hard work that psychic maturity demands" if they accept themselves as "terminally unbalanced, psychologically disintegrated individuals" (Terrill, 1993, p. 334).

Batman Forever presents no such bargain. Whereas the 1989 *Batman* film might have presented its audience with a peculiarly attractive invitation, *Batman Forever* offers an unambiguous rebuff. Thus, earlier assumptions—and the assumptions of symptom criticism in general—must be revisited. Not all mediated texts are available as "equipment for living," and in particular, some may deploy the myriad resources of modern mediated public discourse to close themselves against such cultural uses. That is, some such texts might be occupying the space reserved for public discourse in American culture without providing the explanatory, ameliorative, or potentially empowering inventional resources that such discourse has in the past. A film such as *Batman Forever*, then, may be particularly insidious, for it presents potentially ameliorative archetypal forms but then immediately denies access to their symbolic depth.

The body of this essay begins by explicating the often-tacit assumptions that underlie "symptomatic" criticism, especially as those assumptions relate to the presentation of archetypes in contemporary public discourse. Then, the analysis passes twice through the text; the characters are divided into two categories, and the argument develops through a cycle of explication and deconstruction within each category. In each case, *Batman Forever* is read through the assumptions of "symptomatic" criticism, noting narrative, symbolic, and mythic resources presented to the audience; then the essay argues that the spectacular and explicit management of meaning mobilized by the film undermines this presentation. In studying the first group of characters, the interest is in the way that the potentially productive contrast between Batman and his plainly insane *enemies*, especially the Riddler, is neutralized through bombast. Next, this therapeutic potential of Batman's relationship to his *friends* is explored, especially that involving his love interest, Chase Meridian, which is purged by its own self-analysis. This work remains predominantly within a Jungian framework, both because doing so facilitates framing this critique as an extension of the earlier Jungian analysis (Terrill, 1993) and because Jung offers a particularly rich vocabulary for discussing the presentation of archetypal images in contemporary public discourse. However, as the argument develops it borrows from other theoretical vocabularies, particularly toward augmenting Jung's rather sketchy discussion of homosexuality as it relates to the presentation of archetypes.⁴

Mysterious Archetypes

Barry Brummett (1985) explains that "discourse serves people as equipment for living" if it "articulates, explicitly or formally, [their] concerns, fears, and hopes" and if it "provides explicit or formal resolution of situations or experiences similar to those which people actually confront, thus providing people with *motives* to address their dilemmas in life" (p. 248). The text must be familiar enough for an audience to recognize in it their concerns and conflicts, but at the same time strange enough to encourage an ameliorative re-engagement with social life. Thus, such texts both pull and push on their audiences, enacting a form of "mystery" which arises when there is *strangeness* and at the same time the hope for *communion* (Burke, 1969, p. 115). Such texts simultaneously reveal and conceal (Burke, 1969, p. 120; Blankenship, 1989, p. 141), attaining a productive polysemy through their inherent contradictions.

One of the ways that public texts can provide this interpretive living equipment is through the presentation of archetypes. As William Rueckert (1963) notes, Burke conceives of archetypes as "capable of being expressed in an almost infinite number of different specific forms" (pp. 98-99). Burke's sense of archetype resonates with that described by Carl G. Jung, especially in his later writings, in which he "distinguished between the archetype as form and the culturally influenced archetypal images which are expressed in motifs that allude to an underlying form" (Young-Eisendrath & Wiedemann, 1987, p. 36). In Jung's terminology, the culturally-determined image of the archetype presents the "familiarity" that might invite identification, while the underlying form presents the "strangeness" of the archetype—those aspects initially hidden from the culturally-instantiated viewer and therefore containing the possibility for insight. The inherent "mystery" of archetypes encourages the process through which a mass text is made available as equipment for living, inviting the audience both to identify with the text and to make use of the text in the beneficial interpretation of their lives.

Batman Forever denies any such mystery by seeking to repair the essential fissures in Batman's personality through an obsessive self-reflexivity that does not court an audience but instead repels it. The archetypes presented are fixed in their denotation, forfeiting their polysemy and thus their availability as equipment for living—the preferred reading of this text is claustrophobically over-determined, minimizing an audience's ability to locate within it "social relations and identity" that resonate with their particular life experiences (Fiske, 1984, p. 404). *Batman Forever* is a spectacle, inviting *sight* but denying *insight*, bringing to the surface its own deep structure, and rendering its mythic elements uselessly translucent, demystified through display.

The relationship between sight and insight in *Batman Forever* is illustrated in the opening sequence which is saturated with references to eyes, sight, light, and portals. Batman is dangling from a helicopter at the end of a long chain. In an attempt to dislodge him, the villain Two-Face steers the chopper through a gigantic and brightly-illuminated billboard in the shape of an eyeball. Batman somehow survives the explosion of shrapnel and sparks to climb aboard the helicopter and blind the pilot by spreading a cape across the windshield. Two-Face kills the helicopter pilot, spraying blood across the inside of the windshield, and points the helicopter toward a huge statue

reminiscent of the Statue of Liberty holding a torch in Gotham's harbor. Meanwhile, Batman breaks into the helicopter and punches Two-Face in the eyes. Before Two-Face makes his escape, he yells to Batman, "See ya!" The helicopter, with Batman still on board, first destroys the statue's eyes and then the rest of its face before exploding in a slow-motion fireball. Batman manages to escape death by making prolonged, slow-motion plunge deep into the waters at the statue's feet. When he surfaces, he gasps deeply and gazes back up at the statue's faceless and smoldering head. The entire dizzying sequence takes about a minute. This sequence establishes themes through which this text might orient a reader toward a preferred and potentially useful reading—the need for insight, the healing though painful destruction of the persona, and the deep immersion which is an archetype of cleansing rebirth—but it comes at such a speed, and with such barrage of explosions and jump-cuts, that the viewer is instead *disoriented*. The connotation of the "eye" images is symbolically inverted so that rather than emphasizing active self-knowing they encourage passive viewing. This scene, like the movie it introduces, invites spectation rather than introspection.

Villainous Contrasts

In the 1989 *Batman* film, the Joker represented Batman's *shadow*, "the 'negative' side of the personality, the sum of all those unpleasant qualities we like to hide" (Jung, 1983, p. 87). As Batman's *doppelganger*, the Joker reinforces Wayne/Batman's functional schizophrenia through his own dysfunctional madness. In *Batman Forever*, there are two villains, and in an exponential progression, the bifurcation of each of these characters is contrasted to the essential unity of the Dark Knight. In both cases this contrast relies on a rhetoric of display, and in the case of the Riddler, the contrast itself is thereby undermined.

The first to appear is Two-Face, formerly District Attorney Harvey Dent; half of his face was disfigured by acid, and the disfigurement seems to have soaked through his skull. He is, he tells us, "always of two minds about everything" and so relies on the toss of a coin, with one side pristine and the other disfigured, to make his decisions. Whereas Batman's entire purpose is to maintain order, Two-Face inhabits a world ruled, as he explains in the first scene of the film, by "luck-blind, stupid, simple, doo-da, clueless!" Where Wayne/Batman presents two different public *masks* — *personas*, in Jung's terms — Two-Face's public mask itself is split. He is completely conscious of his dual personality; he refers to himself in the second-person plural and sharing his split-decor pad with a pair of women named Sugar and Spice. Wayne and Batman are split between consciousness and the unconscious, a light-dark duality that together suggests the possibility of psychic wholeness, but Two-Face presents an irreparable split of consciousness itself without access to the compensatory unconscious elements. Quite literally, the character lacks depth; Brian Lowry (1995) notes that Tommy Lee Jones, who plays Two-Face, "has little to do and lets his gruesome makeup do all the acting" (p. 77; Kroll, 1995, p. 54). The relationship between Batman and Two-Face establishes a recurring contrastive logic. Two-Face's duality is ineffectual, superficial, and aggressively exhibited, while Wayne/Batman's is functional, fundamental, and artfully suppressed. In the end, Batman defeats Two-Face by exploiting his dependence on his coin. Two-Face dies because his two sides

cannot be reconciled, and Batman survives because his can.

The Riddler is a more complex and problematic character. He is puzzling and contradictory, as fits the name of his alter ego, Edward Nygma, and appears to represent a special form of the shadow, the *trickster*. Jung (1969) notes that the trickster figure is an "approximation to the savior" (p. 256), and Nygma/Riddler seems motivated throughout the film to approximate Batman, Gotham's schizophrenic savior (Terrill, 1993). When Nygma and Wayne meet for the first time, Wayne asks for Nygma's name; breathlessly, Nygma answers "Bruce Wayne." He later tells Wayne that the two of them are "two of a kind." Both Bruce Wayne and Edward Nygma are brilliant inventors, and Nygma's apartment-decorated, like his cubicle at work, with many pictures of Bruce Wayne-is dark and cave-like.

When he sees Bruce Wayne at a party, Nygma seems to revel in the appearance of his superiority, or at least in his superiority of appearance, even though he is dressed exactly like Wayne: "Bruce, old man," he gloats, "the press were just wondering what it feels like to be out-sold, out-classed, out-coifed, and generally out-done in every way?" As they talk, Nygma mirrors Wayne's mannerisms and removes his glasses in imitation of Wayne. This subtle reference to sight is significant, for just as Two-Face drags Batman through a giant eyeball in the film's opening scenes, the Riddler also pulls Batman toward insight-befitting his role as an archetype of transformation (Lundquist, 1991, pp. 22-27). His repeated claims that he wants to "solve the biggest riddle of them all: Who is Batman?" hint at this role. Throughout the film, he restrains Two-Face's homicidal impulses by explaining that "if you kill him, he won't learn nothin'."

A trickster is foolish and "often plays malicious jokes on people, only to fall victim in his turn to the vengeance of those whom he has injured" (Jung, 1969, p. 256). The final trick the Riddler tries to perpetrate on Batman proves to be his own undoing. In a game-show grotesque, the Riddler dangles Wayne's love interest (Chase Meridian) and Batman's side-kick (Robin) high above a "watery grave." Riddler warns Batman that he cannot save them both, but his object doesn't seem to be to kill Wayne/Batman but to heal him-to see if "Bruce Wayne and Batman [can] ever truly co-exist." The Riddler drops his hostages through a long dark tunnel to the sea below, but Batman *is* able to save them both. The Riddler is foiled, and Batman is sympathetic: "Poor Edward. I had to save them both. You see, I'm both Bruce Wayne and Batman. Now, not because I have to be, but because I choose to be." Wayne is able to manage his madness, but Nygma can't manage his; Nygma is a *mere* approximation of the savior. We last see Nygma in an insane asylum proclaiming that he is Batman. Perhaps there has occurred some sort of healthful transference so that Batman is sane because he has integrated those repressed elements of his psyche represented by the Riddler. The contrastive logic of the text, however, suggests a simpler alternative-Wayne is sane because Nygma isn't.

Trickster figures, while almost uniformly male, are often sexually ambiguous.⁶ The Riddler presents this ambiguity and thus reinforces Wayne/ Batman's heterosexuality through another instance of contrastive logic because the Riddler is sexually ambiguous, Wayne/Batman isn't. The Riddler

flirts with Two-Face when they first meet, and during their joint crime spree he wears a tiara while counting their stolen money. In almost every scene that the Riddler and Two-Face share, they also share a warm embrace. Nygma does suggest that Chase Meridian would be a "grand pursuit," but when he dances with her, his gaze follows Bruce. Later, when the Riddler has Meridian chained and helpless, he taunts her but does not touch her. Unlike the Joker, whose interest in Vicki Vale was unabashedly sexual — "I'm of a mind to make some moogie" he says when first he sees her picture — the Riddler's is interested in Meridian is only bait for Batman. When Wayne brings the Riddler's first communique to Meridian for analysis, he tells her that someone has been sending him "love letters," and they both assume that the unknown sender is male, marking the Riddler as a man "obsessed" with another man.

The Riddler steals every scene in which he appears, drawing the gaze of the audience, but it is not quite a theft. Scenes featuring Batman are always edited so that the audience participates in the scene — "sutured" into the action through shot/reverse shot combinations that invite the audience to position itself within the scene as a seeing but unseen character (Silverman, 1983, pp. 201-202). Scenes featuring the Riddler, in contrast, defy this classic Hollywood formula by displaying him in monologue. At the Riddler's birth in Nygma's apartment only the camera and Nygma are present. Later, while he destroys the Batcave, the Riddler is alone; there is no other character present, and there is no shot/reverse shot logic. The audience is simply confronted by the Riddler performing on a stage. He is the object of the collective (male) gaze, not of any character in the narrative, and this is the position in classical Hollywood cinema generally occupied by women (Mulvey, 1986, pp. 203-204). Jim Carrey's campy performance as the Riddler further ambiguates that character's sexuality because, at least since Susan Sontag's (1966) classic "Notes on Camp" (p. 290), camp has been associated closely with a male homosexual aesthetic (see also Babuscio, 1977/1993; Bergman, 1993, p. 5). Several reviewers note the camp sensibility of *Batman Forever* (Travers, 1995, p. 114; Rafferty, 1995, p. 80), and John Simon (1995) specifically refers to the Riddler as a "campy menace" (p. 55). Sontag (1966) has suggested that "the essence of Camp is its love of the unnatural: of artifice and exaggeration" (p. 275; see also Bergman, 1993, pp. 4-5). Jack Babuscio (1993) notes that two of the key characteristics of Camp are incongruity and exaggerated theatricality (pp. 20-24). The Riddler is perhaps Batman's most unnatural movie foe because he springs fully-formed from the overheated brow of Edward Nygma rather than as the result of some skin-scarring disaster (the Joker), malignant birth (the Penguin), or weird feline resurrection (Catwoman). And Carrey's performance is a study in artful exaggeration. Near the end of the film, Carrey uses his super-human powers to throw his voice in an omnipotent display. "Was that over the top?" he asks Batman, "I can never tell." Throughout the film, Carrey's Riddler operates close to the summit.

Jack Kroll (1995) describes his Riddler as a "baroque super-wacko" who turns "psychopathology into a manic ballet. His high-tech mad scientist cavorts like a nut Nijinsky and twirls his can like a cheerleader from hell" (p. 54). Similarly, David Denby (1995)

notes that "Carrey does intricate, snaky things with his long-waisted body that evoke, of all things, the photographs of Nijinsky as the faun" (pp. 50-51). The comparisons to Nijinsky are significant given Christopher Isherwood's (1956) sentiment that camp is "the whole emotional basis of the ballet" (p. 106). Camp's emphasis on style and aestheticism fits the Riddler's impassioned fascination with images and public personae as does Sontag's (1966) discussion of androgynous, "swooning, slim, sinuous figures of pre-Raphaelite painting and poetry," and "the triumph of the epicene style" (pp. 277-280). But when Batman defeats the Riddler at the end of the film and pairs off with Chase Meridian, it is the triumph of an integrated and unambiguous heterosexuality over effeminate disintegration.

The Riddler's appropriation of camp, however, is undermined by an explicit and demystified rhetoric of display. Jeffrey Nelson (1995) has argued that ambiguity in the form of paradox might present "a troublesome feature for the audience but in the end can enrich the viewers by urging them to see concepts in new and thought-demanding ways" (p. 63). Ambiguous, polysemic, and paradoxical presentations of sexuality can be useful as potentially emancipatory equipment for living because they illustrate "life situations which appear to be contradictory" creating a productive "tension in the audience's mind" (Nelson, 1985, p. 56). Camp, in other words, relies for its rhetorical effect on the mysterious push and pull of polysemy, the agonistic clash of the familiar and the strange. The Riddler, however, is so over-the-top that his spectacular performance denies the required *pull*; he's completely strange. He does not seduce the audience, inviting their identification, but instead insists upon his own distance by inhabiting exclusively his own surface.

As befits an archetypal image bent on the destruction of a carefully-crafted *persona*, the Riddler is obsessed with surface appearances. Nygma's invention of the Riddler is largely a search for an impressive image, illustrated by his trying on various names and costumes through the use of a computer. This can be contrasted with Batman's "origin" story as it is presented in this film, in which he sees a bat in a cave and realizes that "the figure in the dark was my destiny." Wayne chooses the bat because it resonates with a dark rift in his own psyche; Nygma chooses the Riddler because he likes the suit. When Two-Face crashes Nygma's party and turns it into an "old-fashioned, lowtech stick-up," Nygma is outraged: "We could have organized this," he laments, "planned it — pre-sold the movie rights." He also suggests that Two-Face's entrance isn't as good as Batman's: "The difference? Showmanship." While the Joker's relationship to the repressed fantasies of the citizens of Gotham was implied, the Riddler's is made visually explicit. He has invented a device that generates fantasy images based upon the secret longings of its wearer, all the while siphoning the hapless victim's intelligence to the Riddler through a glowing green vapor trail. The therapeutic potential of a *trickster* figure is in its ability to bring into the consciousness of a modern individual peculiar primitive impulses that are not understood and, thus, are goads toward understanding (Jung, 1969, p. 267). The Riddler can't perform this function because he can offer no depth. His ambiguous sexuality might call Wayne/Batman toward a more

productive understanding of his own sexual bifurcation and thus toward a more genuine psychic integration, but the Riddler's ambiguity is only skin deep. He provides the citizens of Gotham easy access to their unconscious, but only as a source of pleasure, not growth. Everything is externalized facade, and whatever productive paradox the Riddler might present is irretrievably entombed. Perhaps this is why some reviewers suggest that "underneath *Batman Forever's* glossy camp is a classic male fantasy" (Bowman, 1995, p. 60), or that "there's nothing liberating, hip, or campy about *Batman Forever*" (Denby, 1995, p. 51). When we can see it all so clearly, insight is neither provided for nor motivated.

Excessive Therapies

While the villains in *Batman Forever* work to manufacture art integrated hero through a rhetoric of contrast, Chase Meridian, Dick Grayson/Robin, and to a lesser extent Alfred the butler, all conspire to lure Batman toward psychic health—and Batman is an unusually willing patient. Whereas the Riddler's compensatory potential is eviscerated through display, the lure presented by Robin and Meridian is deactivated through self-explanation. In other words, insight itself is spectacularly displayed.

Dick Grayson represents what Marie-Louise von Franz (1981) calls a *puer aeternus*, a perpetually youthful boy.⁷ Such figures often are characterized by "a fascination for dangerous sports, particularly flying and mountaineering" (p. 3). When young Grayson first meets Wayne, Grayson is a trapeze circus performer and throughout the film demonstrates his skill at both sailing through the air and at climbing (especially with ropes). He's also fond of motorcycles—though he does wear a helmet. Most importantly, Grayson/Robin aids the Riddler in affirming Wayne/Batman's heterosexuality, though through identification rather than contrast. The *puer* archetype is usually manifested at one or the other end of a sexual-orientation polarity, and Robin is most vehemently heterosexual.⁸ By displaying the signs of heterosexuality himself, Robin clarifies Batman's sexual orientation. At one point, before he is "Robin," young Grayson takes the Batmobile out for a spin, and when he passes a group of hookers on the sidewalk, "he adopts a Latino-hipster mode: 'Ju want to take a ride in my love machine, bay-bay?'" (Travers, 1995, p. 115). Moments later, he rescues a damsel from a street gang; after having been rescued, the damsel succumbs to Grayson's Batman impersonation and asks, "Doesn't Batman ever kiss the girl?" Grayson does kiss her, the soundtrack swells, and he allows afterward that he "could *definitely* get into this superhero gig."

The impersonation is important because through this substitution the clarification of Batman's sexual orientation is more than merely implied. Later, at the party, Grayson is shown emerging with an attractive blonde from an apparently supine position behind the bandstand. Peter Travers (1995) notes that "O'Donnell, looking buff in his buzz cut and ear stud, gets to show more sexual bravado than allowed by his straight-arrow roles" in previous films, but also suggests that "subversive humor keeps bubbling under the surface" (pp. 114-115). He notes that when he first sees young Grayson in his Robin suit, for example, Batman pauses to eye the built-in nipples and bulging codpiece, and asks "Who's your tailor?" That these two men can share such mildly homoerotic humor and then clasp hands as partners

against crime might only reinforce their mutual heterosexuality.

The identification of Grayson/Robin with Wayne/Batman is emphasized. The murder of Grayson's parents parallels the murder of Wayne's own parents, and Robin's *puer*-like refusal to plant his feet firmly on the ground where he can come to terms in a mature way with his parents' death is perhaps intended to contrast with Batman's willingness in this film to repair the split in his personality that was precipitated by witnessing his own parents' death. While gazing at a photograph of his own family, Wayne even seems momentarily confused by the symmetry, absent-mindedly saying that *he* killed Grayson's parents; later, Wayne tells Grayson that "we're the same." Their close association enables Grayson/Robin to invite Batman toward self-awareness — Robin represents, after all, an archetype of "life, death and resurrection" (von Franz, 1981, p. 1), a figure, like Peter Pan, who can function as a guide toward repressed facets of oneself. Robin's two primary functions in the plot are either to save Batman (by hoisting him upward while suspended from ropes) or to get himself trapped so that Batman has to rescue him (and learn something about himself in the process).

However, when Wayne tries to dissuade young Grayson from becoming a junior Batman, he reveals a level of self-understanding that renders Grayson's influence moot. Batman explains:

"It will happen this way. You make the kill, but your pain doesn't die with Harvey [Two-Face]. It grows. So you run out into the night to find another face, and another, and another. Until one terrible morning you wake up and realize that revenge has become your whole life. And you won't know why."

Clearly, Wayne *does* know why he dresses up like a bat and bashes bad guys in the night; as noted, he even tells why he chose the bat as his signifier. He's fully aware that an obsessive desire for the revenge of his parents' murder has taken over his life, and he chooses to continue. There is no work for Grayson to do here, no repressed childhood that needs to be recovered, because Wayne understands himself perfectly well already.

Alfred, Wayne's butler, probably has too much to do keeping Wayne Manor and the Batcave spic-and-span to pursue women for himself. He does, however, fulfill his function as an archetypal *wise old man* and continually prods Wayne/Batman toward the required compensatory psychic elements (Jung, 1969, pp. 36-37; Terrill, 1993, p. 328).

He prepares both the food that initially entices Grayson to stay at Wayne Manor and the Robin suit that catches Wayne's eye. He also goads Batman toward Chase Meridian by telling him that she is "just what the doctor ordered" because "she seems lovely and wise." When Batman continues to resist, he again urges him to "go to her, tell her how you feel." In the final scene of the movie, Alfred is grandfatherly, watching approvingly over the incipient family formed by Wayne, Meridian, and Grayson.

Alfred seems to recognize Chase Meridian's importance, but her function in the plot would be difficult to miss. It is, to begin with, broadcast by her name. According to Jung, the *anima* is an archetype that functions as a man's guide to the unconscious; she seduces him, and through his *pursuit* of her, he discovers aspects of his personality that he would, perhaps, prefer not to think about. She is Janus-faced, for she leads a man toward and across the *line* that

divides one realm from the other (Wehr, 1987, p. 55). Meridian seems particularly well-accredited for this job because she is a doctor who specializes, we are told, in abnormal psychology and multiple personalities. Batman assures her that he reads her work and that he finds it "insightful." The relationship between a man and his anima is characterized by what Jung (1969) calls a "syzygy," an archetypal pairing of male and female wherein two parts, whole unto themselves, are joined into a greater unity (p. 65). The opening dialogue between Batman and Meridian suggests this sort of relationship between the two of them as they finish each other's thoughts. Regarding Two-Face, Batman begins to explain, that "a trauma powerful enough to create an alternate personality leaves the individual ...," and Meridian finishes the sentence, "... in a world where ordinary rules of right and wrong no longer apply. Like you." The last two words focus her analytical powers on him, where they remain for the rest of the film.

Meridian seems a particularly potent *anima* figure because she attracts both Wayne and Batman toward a single point. This is in contrast to Vicki Vale, Wayne's *anima* in the 1989 film, who is attracted to the two sides of the Dark Knight but toward whom both Wayne and Batman seem ambivalent at best. In *Batman Forever*, when Wayne first enters Meridian's office, the camera angle places Wayne over her right shoulder and a framed picture of a bat over her left, as though she may be able to help keep these two figures in balance. During their conversation, Wayne notices the bat. "Oh, that's a Rorschach," she explains, "An ink blot. People see what they want." Wayne then shifts his attention to a small doll in a box on her desk. It is bifurcated, half white and half black, a perfect representation of the Wayne/Batman dual psyche. Meridian explains that "she's a Malaysian Dream Warden" and that "some cultures believe she protects you from bad dreams." She asks if Wayne needs one, and he denies it, but he immediately asks her out. While Meridian's office is characterized by an exaggerated vertical linearity and a rather severe institutional spareness, her apartment is a dark, curved, womb-like space replete with mandala-like symbols. Like Vicki Vale's apartment in the 1989 *Batman* film, Chase Meridian's abode is a space that encourages psychic integration.⁹ Indeed, it almost demands it. The room is steeped in the potentially healing *anima* archetype, haunted in every shot by female faces and, like her office, by bats. The walls are traced with reddish branching figures that recall perhaps both a placenta and the veins of extended bat wings. Her kitchen door frames a rounded, bat-eared cupboard. As Batman begins to tell her about some peculiar dreams he's been having, he is interrupted by a sound that is at first the screeching of bats but is then the whistling of a tea kettle. While Meridian prepares the tea, Wayne notices a pile of clippings about Batman on her desk. "All right," Meridian admits, "I think he's fascinating."

Meridian is attracted to both Wayne and Batman, and aggressively pursues them both throughout the film. Early on, Meridian summons Batman to the rooftops where she attempts to seduce him. He doesn't put up much resistance, and their relationship might well have been consummated there in the shadow of the Batsignal had not Commissioner Gordon interrupted them. Later, she invites Batman to come to her apartment for a midnight tryst, and

he does. Here is a Batman clearly heterosexual, eager to seek his *anima*; the dark side of Bruce Wayne is at least as interested in kissing pretty girls as in beating bad boys. Both Wayne and Batman are attracted to Chase Meridian; both halves seek wholeness through a relationship with the *anima*. Meridian discovers that Wayne and Batman are one and the same by comparing their kisses.

Jung thinks that if "the coming to terms with the shadow is the companion-piece to the individual's development, then that with the anima is the masterpiece" (1940, p. 78; 1971, p. 156). Confronting the *anima* is difficult and dangerous because the *anima* stands at the threshold of the unconscious, luring the self through a passage that requires the rejection of the carefully—crafted persona, and therefore represents "a test of courage and more than that—a test by fire of all a man's spiritual and moral forces" (Jung, 1940, p. 78-79). Like the Riddler, however, Chase Meridian presents no such difficulties and no such tests; she brings all of Batman's repressions effortlessly to the surface. Denby (1995) notes that she "breathe[s] all over" Wayne/Batman as though she "had nothing better to do" (p. 50). She doesn't.

When they first meet, Meridian tells Batman that "I could write a hell of a paper on a grown man who dresses like a flying rodent." There is a sense in which an actual paper written about this film is rendered redundant by the film's own self-analysis. Meetings between Wayne/Batman and Chase Meridian are narrated in an psycho-analytical discourse through which any possible depth is immediately flattened and displayed; there is no sub-text because the theoretical/psychological underpinnings of the plot are exhumed.

One of these is the emphasis on masks and *persona* that governed the logic of the first two *Batman* films. For example, Meridian tells Batman that it is a "pity I can't see behind the mask." In response, Batman reminds her of a key element of the relationship between these films and their audience: "We all wear masks." The self-referentiality is even played for small laughs, such as when Batman explains that "I don't blend in at a family picnic," and Meridian insists that "we could give it a try. I'll bring the wine—you bring your scarred psyche." Later, in Meridian's apartment, Wayne tells her that his dreams of his parents' death are now beginning to come to him during the daytime. She reassures him by saying that he is describing "repressed memories, images of a forgotten pain that's trying to surface." It's happening already, and Meridian can watch.

Like Grayson/Robin's superfluous ministrations to Wayne/Batman's psyche, Meridian's excessive psychologizing is itself redundant. Batman seems to understand himself perfectly well already. When Meridian complains to Bruce that he won't let her come close to him emotionally, he displays this self-awareness: "I guess we're all two people," he explains. "One in daylight and the one we keep in shadow." Not only is the resolution of the fundamental division in the Wayne/Batman character overdetermined and simplified through display, it's unnecessary.

Conclusion

Responding to a need to sanitize the Batman, *Batman Forever* presses its hero toward sanity at every turn. However, the effort required to make him an acceptable corporate emissary renders him useless as equipment for living, flattening the polysemic potential of

archetype. Considerable effort is expended toward disambiguating Wayne/ Batman's sexuality, both through contrast with the Riddler and identification with Robin and Meridian, culminating ultimately in a hysterical display of heterosexuality that actually renders genuine psychic integration impossible. The villains bring everything to the surface in a dazzlingly anesthetic spectacle, and the compulsive self reflexivity of Robin and Meridian not only renders them useless to Batman, but the entire process useless to the audience.

Psychic integration is not pleasant work. This was the message of the 1989 Batman movie (Terrill, 1993) too much effort expended toward putting on a happy face results only in continued psychic chaos. In this film, with theory and motive displayed pristinely on the surface, Bruce Wayne becomes a passive observer to his own individuation. The ink blot in Meridian's office that Wayne recognizes as a bat is quite clearly a bat; to see it, Wayne-and anyone else-has merely to look. In this film, the process of *insight* is masked by an emphasis on *sight*. Sight is outwardly directed, focused on the other, and can, by its very nature, provide information only about the appearance of things. Insight is inwardly directed, focused on the self, and provides information that is not available merely by looking. In *Batman Forever*, the constant display renders Wayne/Batman incapable of insight; he is blinded to the difficult necessity of psychological work. The therapeutic potential in the film is likewise nullified through this constant display; the audience cannot make use of Batman's mythic refurbishing because the film instructs the audience to be passive observers.

Several scholars have called for critical media research that makes a more vigorous attempt to take audience responses into account.¹⁰ This approach is also taken below. The experience of watching *Batman Forever* is difficult to describe, and representative reactions by popular reviewers might substantiate claims about its lack of invitational potential. Travers (1995), for example, describes the film as "a thrill-packed joy ride that knocks itself out to please — so much so that it often threatens to collapse from plot overload." He goes on to note that even "the violence, being cartoony and affectless, has no weight or consequence" (p. 114). Denby thinks that "the picture is not only kid stuff in the worst sense of the phrase — jangled, repetitive, obvious, and emotionally empty — but quite *intentionally* all these things." Richard Corliss (1995) thinks that "the only thing Schumacher and his scrupulous craftsfolk forgot to give the movie was life — the energizing spirit of wit and passion that makes scenes work and characters breathe." "The plot?" Corliss continues, "Umm, we've forgotten it ... but we know there was a lot of it. Lots of characters, too" (p. 79). Richard Alleva (1995) wonders, "How does one discuss *Batman Forever*? There's no there there" (p. 21). "Time Warner ... really is depraved," Denby asserts, "though not in the sense that Senator Bob Dole meant. Warner Bros. is depraved because it wants to kill movies and replace them with sheer selling" (pp. 50-51). Simon (1995) strikes an ironic note, saying that "Batman Forever achieves what other comic-book adaptations have long vainly striven for: the condition of total, seamless nonsense — in terms of penetrability, absolute zero" (p. 55). Denby perhaps expresses the reaction of many: "After

a while, my attention went dead, and I could have been watching from the other side of the grave" (p. 51).¹¹ The constant barrage of color, noise, and self-revelation repels, not only by focusing attention at the surface but also by denying access to anything else. There can be no polysemic reading of this text because it is impossible to engage; its strategic monosemy has evidently succeeded in locking down resistance. This film is intended not to *present* but to *prevent* its own therapeutic use.

Batman Forever is a spectacle, a cultural product not only of little use for individuals negotiating real-life exigencies but actually denying such use by audiences. Guy Debord notes this disengagement as characteristic of the spectacle, which is "inaccessible," demanding "passive acceptance" and aiming at "nothing other than itself" (1967/1983, pts. 12, 14).¹² The spectacle privileges sight, but "is the opposite of dialogue" (pt. 18). Thus, in denying interpretive access to itself a spectacle denies the possibility that audiences might find within it psychosocially useful motives, resolutions, or resistance. *Batman Forever* is particularly insidious because it relies for its rhetorical effect on flattening the polysemic potential of archetypal images. It presents these potentially powerful, ameliorative images as a lure, but denies its audience the opportunity to engage them.

Janice Hocker Rushing and Thomas S. Frenzt (1999) note the dangers of too much emphasis on Apollo, the Greek god of sight, and not enough time given to Dionysus, signifier of the "down time" necessary for insight. They refer to academic life, but what they say may be generalized to other genres of politics-democratic culture, for example, may require periodic descent into collective underworld; periodically there may be the need to confront devils and give oneself over to an orgy of mutilation because these dark Dionysian interludes enable the collective self-awareness that makes it possible to conduct civil life in the light of day. Batman is an emblem of collective ambivalence toward this necessary descent; he is read sometimes as the dark rejuvenator of democratic practice who resists Tocquevillian tyranny through grass-roots vigilante justice (Blackmore, 1991) and other times as the schizophrenic defender of the psychotic *status quo* who hurls disturbances from the rooftops (DeBona, 1997; Terrill, 1993). Perhaps neither of these readings is particularly comforting. In this film, Batman stands not as a catalyst of democratic spirit nor as a savior of collective fragmented selves, but instead shows the potential danger inherent in compulsive debunking. This impulse to drag everything into the light presents the same menace that Jonathan Alter (1998) sees in recent political events having "demythologized" national politics "in unhealthy ways" (p. 58). Stripped of their mysterious *pull*, political structures become politically useless. When the shadows are banished and the depths are brought effortlessly to the surface, potential for cultural renewal and the possibility of political engagement is forfeited. While Frederic Wertham wanted to push unsavory images out of the consciousness of young Americans, *Batman Forever* illustrates a more subtle and narcotizing repression. And it is in that sense that, as some reviewers have suggested (Bowman, 1995, p. 60; Rafferty, 1995, p. 80), *Batman Forever* sounds more like a threat than a promise.

Notes

¹ The most thorough history of Wertham and the Comics Code Authority is Amy Kiste Nyberg's *Seal of Approval* (1998). The Code is still in effect, and Nyberg includes in her appendix various versions of it.

² The most important sponsors and tie-ins all were focused on children: McDonald's "happy meals," Kenner Toys, Kellogg's breakfast cereals, and Six Flags amusement parks. While certainly Warner Bros. wanted its motion picture to be profitable at the box office, it is also clear that contemporary marketing strategies required them to be at least as concerned about the public image of the Batman "brand" as it affected the success of tie-ins and licensed products.

³ Farrell suggests that Janice Hocker Rushing's and Thomas S. Frenz's (1980) analysis of *The Deer Hunter* is a paradigm for this sort of criticism because they argue that this Vietnam film presents explanatory but conflicting warrior myths that mirror America's ambivalence toward the war (also see Rasmussen & Downey, 1991). James Jasinski (1993) reads in *The Big Chill* a dialogue between communities based on *eros* and *philia* that points out the dangers of the first-dangers perhaps particularly salient in the "dark times" of the 1980s. Also see David Payne's (1989) description of *The Wizard of Oz* as therapeutic rhetoric.

⁴ As Robert H. Hopcke (1989) [??] points out, Jung "never put forth a coherent theory of homosexuality" and "in the eighteen volumes of his *Collected Works*, homosexuality is mentioned little more than a dozen times" (pp. 6, 12).

⁵ All quotations from *Batman* and *Batman Forever* are taken from the Warner Home Video releases of these films.

⁶ Jung (1969) writes of the trickster that "his sex is optional despite its phallic qualities: he can turn himself into a woman and bear children" (p. 263).

⁷ Von Franz analyzes fairytales using a mythic/Jungian framework. I thank Janice Hocker Rushing for suggesting that Grayson/Robin represents the *puer aeternus* archetype.

⁸ That is, he occupies that end of the polarity that von Franz (1981) calls "Don Juanism" (p. 1).

⁹ "Mandala" is Jung's term for an archetypal symbol that depicts both an unbalanced psyche and the balance required for psychic health. It often is in the form of a "the squaring of a circle" (Jung, 1969, p. 357) and thus is suggested both by the linearity of Meridian's prairie-style furniture set within the curved walls of her apartment and by the contrast between her office and her apartment.

¹⁰ Celeste Condit (1989), for example, argues that "mass media research should replace totalized theories of polysemy and audience power with interactive theories that assess audience reactions as part of the full communication process occurring in particular rhetorical configurations" (p. 104). Similarly, and more recently, Leah Ceccarelli (1998) calls for a critical method that includes the "close reading of receptional fragments in conjunction with a close reading of the text" and illustrates her method by reading contemporaneous critiques of historical speeches (p. 410). Interestingly, Wertham's original study involved extended interviews with children who read comic books and the analysis of the transcripts of their responses (Nyberg, 1998, pp. 90-91; Gilbert, 1986, pp. 96-97).

¹¹ Of course, not everyone hated this movie, and many of the reviewers I've mentioned had a few good things to say about it. However, these positive comments can be divided into two closely-related categories: approval of the elimination of the disturbing darkness of the two previous films and an appreciation of the emphasis on visual style.

¹² Debord's work originally was published without pagination and is divided into numbered sections; the parenthetical references which follow refer to these sections.

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