

Batman: Critical Reception of the Hollywood Blockbuster

Batman (1989), directed by Tim Burton, captivated the American public with its sensational production design and dark visual intensity. However, the film's critical reception conveys a less enthusiastic response, suggesting a disjunction between critical and public expectations for blockbuster films. Applauding *Batman*'s production design and orchestral soundtrack, critics Vincent Canby and David Robinson both reproach the film for its erratic screenplay and mindless characters. *Batman* employs an awe-inspiring visual style to attract its audience, ultimately substituting spectacle for narrative consistency, a concession that is reflected by its disparaging critical reception.

Vincent Canby's article "Nicholson and Keaton Do Battle in 'Batman'," published in *The New York Times* on the day of *Batman*'s release, June 23, 1989, praises the film for its massive scale and visual style while admitting that little lies beyond its impressive façade. From the movie's opening scenes, Gotham City is presented as a nightmarish metropolis with evil radiating even through its dismal, looming architecture, reflecting the vision of production designer Anton Furst. Canby credits Furst's work as having a "Langian intensity," comparing *Batman* to Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* (1927), though he concedes that, unlike the antagonistic Dr. Mabuse, the analogous role of the Joker "simply isn't up to the apocalyptic grandeur of the décor" ("Nicholson and Keaton Do Battle"). Furst's vision exists with a magnitude that dominates the film, yet Canby argues that this strength fails to manifest itself in other elements of the movie, leaving the plot and its characters to flounder mindlessly. He emphasizes that undeveloped plot points like Gotham City's bicentennial celebration are introduced "like phantoms hoping to take

shape,” but these ideas are discarded before fully materializing (“Nicholson and Keaton Do Battle”). Canby poignantly concludes, “‘Batman’ is a movie without any dominant tone or style other than that provided by Mr. Furst” (“Nicholson and Keaton Do Battle”). While *Batman* succeeds in creating an engrossing visual aesthetic to convey the ominous nature of its setting, Canby contends that it neglects the crucial components of story and character that are necessary to merit a positive critical reception.

In *The Times* article “A Big Hit with a Straight Bat,” David Robinson writes that *Batman* achieves a uniquely dark, sinister tonality through its production design and musical score that endeavors to fill the void left by an inadequate screenplay. Similar to Canby, Robinson offers a critique on the consistency of the film’s characters, noting that they “come and go in an unpredictable way” (“A Big Hit”). Where Canby calls Michael Keaton’s Batman a “wimp,” Robinson voices a similar interpretation, describing the character’s portrayal as a “smaller-than-life Batman” (“A Big Hit”). Nevertheless, he maintains that the screenplay, while noticeably imperfect, serves its essential purpose of staging multiple, escalating confrontations between our hero and the villain. Furthermore, Robinson points out that “Stories were never the strong point of Batman: what mattered were the incidents... and the visual fantasy,” and the latter is where Burton’s movie particularly excels (“A Big Hit”). Thanks to the contributions of Furst and composer Danny Elfman (who Robinson dubs the stars of the production), the film is able to present an audiovisual style that harkens back to its equally gloomy comic book ancestor. Robinson credits the film as it “reverts to the original spirit of Batman... to the darker, less camp character of Batman’s early days” (“A Big Hit”). Thus, while *Batman* is inhabited by an occasionally incomprehensible script, some film critics will appreciate

the key role that its music and visuals play in giving a dark (and nostalgic) feeling to the film.

Despite mixed reviews from critics, *Batman* enjoyed remarkable success both nationally and abroad. With a budget of \$50 million, it reaped \$250 million domestically (Perren, 35). This substantial box office return is a success that, when contrasted with the unfavorable reactions of film critics like Canby or Robinson, elucidates the blockbuster's role in the national film industry. Eileen Meehan explains, "mass-produced culture is a business, governed by corporate drives for profit" (49). This means that a blockbuster like *Batman* is a production aimed not for a respectable critical reception but rather for a wider, more lucrative public reception. Susan Hayward draws from the work of Geoff King when she argues that "Hollywood's driving mission is to make money and that in its 'desire to appeal to a mass-market [it] is likely to produce a degree of built-in incoherence and conflicting demand' " (62). This conflicting demand she attributes to a tension between spectacle and narrative consistency (62), which is precisely the criticism provided by Canby and Robinson. While they value the film for its artistry and major production design, both critics observe that the quality of its narrative seems to have been compromised as a consequence of appealing to a wider audience.

The divergence between critical reception and audience reception can be explained by regarding *Batman* as a product of the American culture industry, whose principal intention is to earn a profit. Taking advantage of an intriguing visual style to attract a larger audience is typical of the Hollywood blockbuster, and consequently, Canby describes *Batman* as having "the personality not of a particular movie but of a product, of something arrived at by corporate decision" ("Nicholson and Keaton Do

Battle”). The implication of *Batman*’s huge box office success in 1989 is that blockbusters are productions tailored to target an expansive audience, and even those that receive unfavorable critical reception are potentially boundless sources of revenue. Yet, film critics like Canby and Robinson welcome *Batman* for its pervasive, darker aesthetic but bemoan that it possesses little to distinguish itself fundamentally from the average Hollywood moneymaker.

Works Cited

Batman. Dir. Tim Burton. Perf. Michael Keaton and Jack Nicholson. Warner Bros., 1989.

Canby, Vincent. "Nicholson and Keaton Do Battle in 'Batman'" *The New York Times* 23 June 1989. Web. <<http://movies.nytimes.com>>.

Hayward, Susan. *Cinema Studies: The Key Concepts, Third Edition*. New York: Routledge, 2006.

"“Holy Commodity Fetish, Batman!”: The Political Economy of a Commercial Intertext." *The Many Lives of the Batman: Critical Approaches to a Superhero and His Media*. Ed. Roberta E. Pearson and William Uricchio. New York: Routledge, 1991. 47-65. Print.

Perren, Alisa. "Sex, Lies and Marketing: Miramax and the Development of the Quality Indie Blockbuster." *Film Quarterly* Winter, 2001-2002 55.2: 30-39. *JSTOR*. Web. <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/1213686>>.

Robinson, David. "A Big Hit with a Straight Bat." *The Times* [London] 10 Aug. 1989, 63469th ed. *LexisNexis Academic*. Web. <<http://www.lexisnexis.com>>.