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The Tragic Case of Inbetweenness

A review of the book: Tomasz Żaglewski. *Neon Knight Forever: The Legacy of Joel Schumacher's Batman Duology* (London–New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2024), 143 pp.

Abstract: Tomasz Żaglewski's book is the first monograph written by a Polish academic on the film adaptations of the Batman comics. The book is divided into three parts. The first part deals with the 1990s reception of the films *Batman Forever* (1995) and *Batman & Robin* (1997) directed by Joel Schumacher. In this chapter, Żaglewski lays the foundations for his examination of the figure of the Neon Knight in Schumacher's films. In the second chapter, he analyses the director's concept of the "living comic," also sometimes presented as the "living animated film," which was constructed as an alternative to Tim Burton's dark aesthetic of his two previous movies from 1989 and 1992 (*Batman* and *Batman Returns*). The third part of his monograph deals with the categories of cultural memory, the role of nostalgia in popular culture and the key role of online communities in digital comics culture.

Keywords: *Batman Forever*, *Batman Returns*, *Neon Knight*, adaptation, Joel Schumacher, Tomasz Żaglewski

From Iron Curtain to the Bat-verse

Tomasz Żaglewski' s book is the first monograph written by a Polish academic on the film adaptations of the Batman comics. The book is divided into three parts. The first part deals with the 1990s reception of the films *Batman Forever* (1995) and *Batman & Robin* (1997) directed by Joel Schumacher. In this chapter, Żaglewski lays the foundations for his examination of the figure of the Neon Knight in Schumacher's films. In the second chapter, he analyses the director's concept of the "living comic," also sometimes presented as the "living animated film," which was constructed as an alternative to Tim Burton's dark aesthetic of his two previous movies from 1989 and 1992 (*Batman* and *Batman Returns*). The third part of his monograph deals with the categories of cultural memory, the role of nostalgia in popular culture and the key role of online communities in digital comics culture.

The author begins his study with a personal introduction reminiscent of the forewords of well-known scholars such as Lynda Williams or John Fiske and John Hartley to their classical monographs *Hard Core*[1] and *Reading Television*.[2] Żaglewski recalls his childhood behind the Iron Curtain, where comics and other popular culture texts were rare and luxurious artefacts of Western culture. This outsider perspective is not just a nostalgic figure of speech, but a very deliberate method used in some fragments of his book. Right at the beginning of the study, it becomes clear that Żaglewski is close to both the spirits of the Francophone school of art criticism and (already directly addressed in the text) the British tradition of cultural studies. In addition, the author, who is an associate professor at the Department of Cultural Studies at Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań, skilfully combines methods from comics studies, film studies (box office analysis, close reading of some scenes and film images) with a broader cultural perspective. In his study he includes not only films, video games and comics, but also various paratexts from social media (e.g., memes) as well as statements from experts and fans on platforms such as YouTube or Twitter. Such an approach proves that the Polish researcher carefully traces the transformation of culture, technology and media and rightly treats them as an integrated system that depicts important social phenomena.

What Żaglewski is primarily interested in, however, are the processes of canon formation and people involved in the various forms of activity associated with this phenomenon (which he calls gatekeepers and controllers). This kind of focus on the mechanisms of norm-setting is indeed close to cultural studies. And although we do not find here any direct references to the popular, classical field theory of Pierre Bourdieu, which formed the basis for comics and fandom studies,[3] or to the concept of discourse often related to the research of Michel Foucault,[4] the spirit of both perspectives hovers over all the material presented in the monograph.

Moreover, the ghosts of an excellent knowledge of semiotics and semiology (of Umberto Eco's works on the incarnations of myth and the expected connections to some concepts of Jorge Luis Borges, see: Żaglewski, 27) as well as the spectres of Saussure and Peirce materialise here in the form of "floating signifiers" derived from Tony Bennett and Janet Woollacott's study of James Bond's "capacity to adapt

1. Lynda Williams, *Hard Core: Power, Pleasure, and the "Frenzy of the Visible"* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1999).

2. John Fiske, John Hartley, *Reading Television. New Accents. Second Edition* (London, New York: Routledge, 2003).

3. See, for example: Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste.* Trans. by R. Niece (London, New York: Routlegde & Kegan Paul, 1979).

4. See, for example: Michel Foucault, *Archaeology of Knowledge and the Discourse on Language*, trans. A. M. Sheridan Smith (New York: Pantheon Books, 1972).

to the ever-changing needs and demands of the readers or creators" (Żaglewski, 20). Finally, some hidden inspirations by the Eastern European sources of formalism and structuralism (with roots in Wladimir Propp and Michael Bakhtin's works on myths and legends) are revealed in the analyses of "endless narrative permutations" (Żaglewski, 26). Readers from Poland will also notice that the author sometimes uses ideas developed in his earlier books only published in his home country.[5]

However, most of the research theories applied here have a strictly transnational, well-known pedigree. John Fiske's strategies of encoding/decoding and negotiation as well as Walter J. Ong's second orality serve as an introduction to Henry Jenkins, Andrew J. Friedenthal's "strategy of retcon transmedia games" and Ulric Neisser's concepts, which play a crucial role in Żaglewski's close readings (altogether with many other inspiring academic tropes).

A Picnic at the Roadsides of the Batman Studies

It is easy to spot that Żaglewski's main goal is to fill some important gaps in "Batmanology" related to the disregard of Joel Schumacher's 1995 and 1997 film duology by many academics and film and comic fans. The author begins his investigation with some quotes from Kevin Feige's article in which he claims that the opinions on the low artistic value of Schumacher's Batman films led to the crucial changes in Hollywood's strategies of adapting superhero comics into movie productions (Żaglewski, 1). The key words here are the categories of "perception" and "misperception" of the main characteristics in the comic style. The author shows that the unconventional aesthetics and conceptual unseriousness of Schumacher's films (un)initially supported a trend towards dark, pseudo-realistic productions started in Bryan Singer's *X-Men* films (2000, 2003). Żaglewski notices that after a re-evaluation of this pattern in Christopher Nolan's dark post-noir adaptations, there was a significant backlash that led to more recent Marvel productions such as James Gunn's *Guardians of the Galaxy* trilogy (2014, 2017, 2023) and Taika Waititi's *Thor* duology (2017, 2022). In this way, the legacy of Schumacher's vision, often accused by scholars and critics of an inappropriate comedic contribution (Żaglewski, 2), allowed for the opening of a new branch of the comic book film genre that was open to much more colourful worldbuilding and, also ready (to quote a joke by Żaglewski) "to make Batman funny and colourful again" (Żaglewski, 2).

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5. Tomasz Żaglewski, *Kinowe uniwersum superbohaterów: analiza współczesnego filmu komiksowego* (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, 2017); Tomasz Żaglewski, *Superkultura: geneza fenomenu superbohaterów* (Kraków: Universitas, 2021).

The Polish scholar pays attention to some gender contexts of Schumacher's Batman legacy, in a polemic with Richard Fink (Żaglewski, 5–6), demonstrating that the gay context can apply not only to queer Batman, but also to the character of Spiderman, for example. The author intends in his further "close readings" to convincingly prove that such an approach goes beyond "the infamous rubber nipples, cite inferior one-liners and silly catchphrases provided by the absurdly cartoony villains," and will allow to overcome critical discussions about "the dominance of style over substance, the not-so-ambiguous gay subtext, the essential lack of some serious tones in the story, etc." (Żaglewski, 4). Finally, Żaglewski provides an introduction to further research into the actual relevance of the Schumacher duology in the 21st century and its influence on the film industry when adopting comic book storytelling for cinema, television and streaming platforms.

Liminal Batman, Further Explorations and the Zeitgeist of American 1960s

The first chapter explores the foundations of Batman's neon knight incarnation. Firstly, the author focuses on some less popular Batman figure incarnations, such as Pink Batman, building a vision of floating, liminal character of this character. After that, in discussing the impact of the infamous 1966 ABC series (Żaglewski, 28), Żaglewski refers to the technological change that accompanied the introduction of colour television in the United States. Rainbow Batman led to trends such as the softening of violence (Żaglewski, 35), which led to a diversification of male violence and the emergence of hip Bat-Dad characters (Żaglewski, 38).

On the one hand, it is a pity that in the section on camp relationships, the author did not mention Warhol's legendary lost film *Batman Dracula* (1964) or Jack Smith's famous performance from the film *Camp* (1965), with the scene of Batman coming out, which is sometimes cited in analyses of queer superhero strategies[6] (cf. Angell, 182). On the other hand, it is important to mention that during his analyses of less popular or sometimes even "dead end incarnations" of Bat figures Żaglewski is fully aware that the legacy of Frank Miller's *Dark Knight Returns* comic album is being treated as the "bible for understanding the character" among fans and scholars, but he rightly suggests looking at the margins and examining whether these alternative approaches really destroy the core of the hero.

For sure, the author seems to be closest to Kevin Durand's opinion on the hybrid nature of the comic book canon, who claims that there is "no final, sacred

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6. Callie Angell, "Batman and Dracula: The Collaborations of Jack Smith and Andy Warhol," *Criticism* 56, no. 2 (2014), 159–186.

Batman timeline," or Grant Morrison's thesis that the flexibility of this fictional character (Żaglewski, 19) is a great example of how every canonical universe will be reinterpreted or deconstructed sooner or later. In such a perspective, pink, rainbow, cute and neon variants of Batman are just as important as steampunk, cyberpunk or even mediaeval incarnations of this character in the abyss of the transmedia machine.

And for some Batman fans, Jim Beard's explanation proving that the original description of Batman's origin does not include the element of darkness might be a hard bite to swallow, especially considering that most comic book scholars favour the traumatic vision of the Dark Knight, which allows them to easily apply some psychoanalytic interpretations. For me, the academic journey Żaglewski took me on was fascinating and highly inspiring – from the deep dive into the "bright and happy Silver Age crusader" (Żaglewski, 24), to some "rainbow" incarnations of Batman, and up to the socio-cultural contexts of the fandom wars between Batman Prime and the pre-Neon Knight mutations of that character.

Into the Neon-verse: Queering Batman, Deconstructing Darkness

The second chapter focuses on an in-depth reading of Schumacher's "camp noir style." Żaglewski focuses first on Schumacher's filmography, trying to find some stylistic coherence in most of his works (which is quite a difficult task). The director's bisexual orientation is one of the leitmotifs for the concept of sexual openness and the strategy of "queering batman" (Żaglewski, 52–53), which here serves to question heteronormativity and emasculation (an idea already explored in Schumacher's opus magnum from 1993 – *Falling Down*). Other films such as *The Lost Boys* (1987), or *Flatliners* (1990) or *8 mm* (1999) are also perceived here as transgressive narratives with encroaching heroes. *Tigerland* (2000), with Colin Farrell, in particular seems to be an important case for Żaglewski, due to the liminal territories of its narration and "liquid creation" of the main character's model (Żaglewski, 56–57). Finally, the author counters the image of Schumacher as a craftsman rather than an artist, presenting a conscious visionary who took Batman adaptations into "the most absurd and visually extreme realms" (Żaglewski, 59). At the outset, Żaglewski devotes considerable attention to the Tim Burton duology, emphasising that his two Batman films are in fact two very different projects, in some ways echoing some voices calling for the director of *Beetlejuice* (1988), particularly in his second film from 1993, to rather use characters of his own invention.

Certainly, the author provides ample evidence that Schumacher was determined to create his personal vision of a vivid comic book experience with neon aesthetics, a strange "psycho disco […] where Frankenstein meets Las Vegas" (Żaglewski, 69). Simplification aside, he decided to ask the question of whether Batman can be happy. To expand on this last point, Żaglewski, among others, points out the differences in the soundtrack (Żaglewski, 94–95). He refers to the romantic tone of the ballads promoting both films – Seal's "Kiss from the Rose" for *Batman Forever* and R. Kelly's "Gotham City" from *Batman & Robin* which is further proof of a tone change in the Hollywood strategies of adapting comic books into movie format.

This kind of transformation also influenced the merchandising industry which is the point of Żaglewski's studies as well. The author reports that American parents were concerned about the grotesque mood in Tim Burton's *Batman Returns*. It was an excellent chance for Schumacher, who did not understand the sadness of this vision either. In contrast, he proposed a radically different vision of his Gotham City and its weird inhabitants, and his first film was very well received by children, which also pleased toy producers and fans who started to craft their own artifacts (Żaglewski, 79–87). Finally, both Burton and Schumacher's cinematic universes are analysed from the transmedia potency in the forms of different video game adaptations that Żaglewski describes not only from a culture studies scholar perspective, but also as an experienced player (Żaglewski, 84–87).

The concluding themes of the research presented in the book are detailed at the end of the second chapter. It is about Batman's self-acceptance in the context of overcoming the trauma that plagues him and about the transition from male hero to Bat-Dad persona, which has already been mentioned in the passages on camp themes in comic book adaptations about this character and is also taken up again in the last, third part of the book.

Neon is New Dark? Social Media, Fans, Nostalgia and the Dreams of Schumacher's Cut

The third, the last and the shortest chapter of the book is called *The Neon Knight Triumphant*. The author indicates here the important change of view on Schumacher's Batman duology. In 2020, the director's death triggered a wave of nostalgia on social media. To analyse this phenomenon, Żaglewski draws on Svetlana Boym's theses and underpins them with Henry Jenkins's reading of the reception of the 1966 Batman film adaptation by the fandoms of the 1990s (Żaglewski, 108). Such an attitude is characterised by Ulric Neisser's *repisodic memory*, which, in the words of Żaglewski, "describes the current mode of 'remembering' cult objects

as highly subjectivized events that involve a strong tendency to reject the potentially undesirable actual details of a particular cultural artefact. [...] According to Spigel and Jenkins, popular memory is therefore prototypical and constructive rather than specific and fixed. Even when interview participants talked about the programme [the Batman tv series from the 1960s] their descriptions were usually very general. Rather than remembering specific episodes, they recalled Batman in a repisodic manner, expressing a preference for isolated but recurring images" (Żaglewski, 108). In such a kind of *affect*, memories of attitudes towards cultural texts of the past are filtered through personal experiences, which are reinforced by a sense of nostalgia. The Polish scholar also analyses the phenomenon of directors' final cuts, that became an interesting obsession among comic movie fans, demanding not only new versions of "badly edited" Zack Snyder films but also waiting for the extended cut of Schumacher's Batman duology (Żaglewski, 117).

Moreover, in this perspective, every movie, comic book or video game mistake is "transformed into an actual advantage" (Żaglewski, 114). Żaglewski's examination of the discourse of appreciation in social media seems to fit very well with his theses, but it might also be interesting to examine how Schumacher's duology is perceived by the conservative side of the fandom, known for its attack on otherness, for example LGBT+ accents in the HBO series adaptation of the Naughty Dog Studio video game *The Last of Us*.

Sadly, the final section of the book, which deals with research into Batman fandom and statements about the renaissance of Schumacher's vision and the hauntological aspect of fans' memories of the comics and the director's work, seems to me a little too brief and cites no quantitative or qualitative research. However, I am fully aware that this is one of the most difficult aspects of the research, as many of the statements on the internet are highly affective and their authors are unlikely to want them cited in academic books.

Of Editors' Choices and a Few Minor Blind Spots

Although I consider Tomasz Żaglewski's monograph to be one of the most insightful and brilliant close-ups of comic book adaptations, there are some concerns that could be included in the second expanded version of his research.

Firstly, I had to indicate that sometimes Żaglewski treats the statements of film characters as casual comments by Schumacher about the film industry but does not reveal the extent to which the director was influenced by the scripts of his two film adaptations. The author of *Neon Knight* also tends to return somewhat obsessively to the same themes (Bat-dad, Batman's scandalous nipples) and backs up his theses with quotes that can be a bit overwhelming for the reader.

References to the most recent Batman movie to date, *The Batman* (2022) by Matt Reeves, also only appear in the last part of the book, suggesting that the author finished his book during the premiere of the latest film adaptation and decided not to link it to the previous parts, but to stick with Christopher Nolan's trilogy and probably wait for the next parts of this expanding universe to be released in theatres (Reeves's *The Batman Part II*) and on streaming platforms (e.g., recent HBO's series about Penguin) to incorporate them into the next research project.

The editorial standard is also somewhat disappointing. Although the monograph has a sturdy cover and a well-chosen and designed title page, it is a shame that it does not include images from comics, movies, or at least some fandom artwork analysed in some parts (with a great use of Jennifer Dondero's essay to the close reading of the famous "slapping Batman" meme). However, at a time when publishers are moving to the system of cheaper digital printing and wider promotion of e-books, this practise seems to be an increasingly common sacrifice for book authors to make.

The last case, which might be perceived as somewhat controversial by more classically oriented academic readers, is the long titles of the chapters, which mostly refer to dialogues from the films. This concept may not appeal to everyone, but in my opinion, it fits very well with the idea of creating a solid monograph that does not put off fans and perhaps unites both circles with a sense of humour, nota bene, which is not so common in cultural studies and which the author doses at the right moments.

Conclusions

In conclusion, I would like to strongly emphasize that the importance of the book's content and the author's considerable academic research skills should not be undermined by this final sample of my minor criticisms. The book offers valuable insights into the history and development of Batman comics and their transformations into films, tv and streaming series or video games. Furthermore, the extensive range of theories, sources, analytical methods and case studies presented by the scholar provides a solid foundation for future researchers who wish to explore previously overlooked aspects and fringe areas of Batman comics studies. Żaglewski's look at popular culture and comics offers a unique approach that combines a wide range of fan theories with a bit of quantitative research and an impressive historical knowledge of superhero culture. His monograph can serve not only as a valuable source of information on the less-studied period of Batman studies, but also as a short but concise handbook that teaches students modern ways of interpreting audiovisual culture in the age of social media and the

tendency to create alternative canons. The chronological structure, clear presentation of theses and compelling selection of theories are likely to encourage reading not only by fans interested in comics, but also by scholars who want to keep up to date with current phenomena in popular culture and ways of exploring them.

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