

**Griffith Law Review Student Essay Prize Winner**  
**UNBALANCING JUSTICE**  
**Overcoming the Limits of the Law in *Batman Begins***

*Timothy D Peters\**

From *Star Trek* to *Star Wars*, popular culture is replete with images and signs of what might be called theological 'bad infinity' — that is, a law of endless binarism, of recurrent dualities of good and evil, the one (Anakin Skywalker) turning into the other (Darth Vader). I want to interrupt this disseminatory flow, in order to investigate how this essentially 'pagan' cosmology — of replicating balance, of law's symbolic harmony — is challenged, even undone, by an alternative, radical 'Christian' theology as embodied in the figure of Batman-as-Christological type. In so doing, I will 'use' popular culture (specifically *Batman Begins*) to propound a theology, as well as legality, of 'the Real,' drawing upon such sources as Slavoj Žižek, Alain Badiou, and Joseph Campbell.

### **Introduction**

Since his origin as a DC comic, Batman has been a cult figure of pop culture. The victim of a childhood trauma sending him into the depths of his soul to return as a bat bent on revenge, Batman has had many faces and permutations — not unlike what Joseph Campbell would call 'a hero with a thousand faces'. But it is only in his most recent permutation in the 2005 film *Batman Begins* that his concerns turn both jurisprudential *and* theological questioning the nature of 'justice and the law'. For in this film he is no longer simply the subject of psychoanalysis (the victim of childhood trauma playing out his fantasised revenge) but one who questions what true justice is and then breaches what Žižek calls the 'pagan cosmology' that institutes so much of what is called justice. For in pop culture especially, but also society more generally, there is a continual reinterpretation and balancing of the theme of justice, pitting right against wrong, good against evil. This is evident nowhere more clearly than in the *Star Wars* movies. There the balance of the 'Force' is theological; the basis of all that is living — spiritually, emotionally and physically. Anakin becomes Darth Vader; good becomes evil in a never-ending attempt of balance. But the analysis goes even further. For *Star Wars* engages us not only with the ultimate cycle of paganism but also the 'letting go' of what Žižek would term 'Western Buddhism'. Such a letting go of the

---

\* Griffith University Law/Commerce Graduate; Research Assistant, Socio-Legal Research Centre; PhD Candidate, Griffith University.

‘stressful tension of capitalist dynamics’<sup>1</sup> — of the rapidly accelerating changes in technology — is what forms the perfect ideological basis for ultra-capitalism. Batman thus enters into this realm — of the predomination of good and evil as continual balance, of the letting go of the ‘mad dance’ of technology — breaks with, and subverts it. He, as Christ did upon his arrival, breaches this balance, throwing it off-balance and short-circuiting its societal basis. This is not to bring a justice of balance but a justice of love, eradicating evil and fighting it on all sides; not as the reverse of evil but as a true force of change — jurisprudentially, culturally and theologically.

This paper seeks to explore such a development at the following theoretical intersections: jurisprudence, cultural studies, theology. In the first two sections I look at the two situations into which Batman-as-Christological type enters: that of balance and that of law. Thus the first section analyses the ‘myth of popular culture’ with regard to Joseph Campbell’s arguments regarding myth and its constant repetition: the fight between good and evil. A particular focus will be the aforementioned *Star Wars* movies, works of Campbell’s greatest student, George Lucas. Subsequently I will look at the place of law prior to the introduction of a subversive Christological type. The third section will then focus on Batman’s breach of these two situations: his unbalancing of justice; his overcoming of the law. I will then discuss the possibility of ‘justice unbalanced’ in the fourth section and conclude with an analysis of the material engagement that Christ and Batman invoke. So prepare the popcorn and the sodas and sit back and enjoy the ride as we enter, once again, the realm of the Bat-cave, the Bat-mobile and now Bat-justice!

### **Myth and ‘Pagan Cosmology’: Balance, Justice and Western Buddhism**

In 1939, Bob Kane, following the success of Superman (created a year before), developed the costumed crime fighter Batman.<sup>2</sup> Since then the myth of the ‘bat-man’ has undergone numerous and varied permutations and incarnations including the 1960s TV show,<sup>3</sup> the 1980s development of *The Dark Knight*<sup>4</sup> and the numerous movies — beginning, of course with Michael Keaton in Tim Burton’s 1989 *Batman: The Movie*.<sup>5</sup> These multiple permutations of the ‘bat-man’ over the last 70 years draw resonances with Joseph Campbell’s *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*.<sup>6</sup> There Campbell puts forth an argument regarding the similarity (and consistency) of myth by developing the notion of the ‘monomyth’ — the always the same, ‘shapeshifting yet marvellously constant story ...’<sup>7</sup> His work consists of two components: the ‘adventure of the hero’;

<sup>1</sup> Žižek (2001), p 12.

<sup>2</sup> Batman first appeared in *Detective Comics* #27, May 1939.

<sup>3</sup> *Batman* (1966–68).

<sup>4</sup> Miller (1986).

<sup>5</sup> *Batman: The Movie* (1989). See also *Batman Returns* (1992); *Batman Forever* (1995); and *Batman and Robin* (1997).

<sup>6</sup> Campbell (1973).

<sup>7</sup> Campbell (1973), p 3.

and the 'cosmogonic cycle.' The 'adventure of the hero' is made up of three stages: the departure/separation; the initiation; and the return. Let us briefly explore these phases.

### *Campbell's 'Adventure of the Hero'*

The 'departure' consists of either a cosmic call of the hero where destiny summons him/her to move beyond the current known situation and to cross the first threshold into the realm of the unknown;<sup>8</sup> or a journey inwards into the 'belly of the whale,' the hero being swallowed by the unknown.<sup>9</sup> Both these figures represent self-annihilation and release from the ego, where the hero is dead to time and returns to the World Womb/Navel or Earthly Paradise (all of which are the 'uncreate-imperishable' which is consistent throughout all the contraries of phenomenality).<sup>10</sup> This 'departure' is followed by the 'initiation', which involves the breaking through into a source of power via passage through a number of tests and trials that purify the self.<sup>11</sup> These tests result in the hero discovering that he and his opposite are in fact one and the hero assimilates his opposite (his own unsuspecting self).<sup>12</sup> This discovery results in either the meeting with the goddess (the universal mother) or atonement (that is, at-one-ment) with the father. Here the universal mother represents the whole round of existence (the life of everything that lives, the death of everything that dies, the unity of the good and the bad both as personal and as universal),<sup>13</sup> the meeting of which purges the spirit and opens the mind to the 'inscrutable presence which exists' not as 'good' and 'bad' but 'as the law and image of the nature of being' — the totality of the universe and the harmonization of all pairs of opposites.<sup>14</sup> Atonement with the father, on the other hand, brings together good and evil with the conjunct of the image of mercy and grace with justice and wrath — the energy behind these pairs of opposites being 'one and the same'.<sup>15</sup> The father represents the ogre aspect of the victim's own ego and thus atonement consists of the 'abandonment of the attachment to ego itself'.<sup>16</sup> Thus the meeting with the goddess/atonement with the father brings the hero to apotheosis, or deification, where the hero gains the ultimate boon — the miraculous energy-substance that is alone the imperishable. Here, the movement to immortality is the process of enlarging the pupil of the eye so that the body will no longer obstruct the view.

---

<sup>8</sup> Campbell (1973), p 58.

<sup>9</sup> Campbell (1973), p 90.

<sup>10</sup> Campbell (1973), p 93.

<sup>11</sup> Campbell (1973), p 101.

<sup>12</sup> Campbell (1973), p 108.

<sup>13</sup> Campbell (1973), p 114.

<sup>14</sup> Campbell (1973), pp 114–15. The Hindu Cosmic Mother, Kali, is the perfect representation of this universal mother.

<sup>15</sup> Campbell (1973), p 146.

<sup>16</sup> Campbell (1973), pp 129–30.

‘Immortality is then experienced as a present fact ...’<sup>17</sup> Thus the mind ‘breaks the bounding sphere of the Cosmos to a realization transcending all experiences of form — all symbolization, all divinities: a realization of the ineluctable void’.<sup>18</sup>

The final phase of the hero’s adventure involves the ‘return’ via a ‘magic flight’ (either a triumphant return or a comic pursuit), bringing back the life-transmitting boon/trophy and the crossing of the return threshold.<sup>19</sup> This return from the mystic realm to that of the common day poses the problem of accepting as real the passing joys and sorrows, banalities and noisy obscenities of life.<sup>20</sup> The problem revolves around maintaining the cosmic standpoint in the face of immediate earthly pain or joy.<sup>21</sup> Here the hero has been blessed with vision transcending the scope of normal human destiny, giving him a glimpse into the essential nature of the cosmos.<sup>22</sup>

According to Campbell, the goal of myth is to effect a reconciliation of the individual consciousness with the universal will, leaving behind the life of ignorance. This is effected through a ‘realization of the true relationship of the passing phenomena of time to the imperishable life that lives and dies in all’.<sup>23</sup> This is where the cycle of the hero, according to Campbell, forms part of the second element of myth — the ‘cosmogonic cycle’ — for everything must die and only birth can conquer death. Therefore there must be a recurrence of birth to nullify the recurrences of death.<sup>24</sup> The cosmogonic cycle involves the harmonisation of opposites and a totality of the universe, submitting it to the law and image of the nature of being.<sup>25</sup> Thus there arrives a balance of opposites — between mercy and justice, grace and wrath, good and evil, right and wrong — behind which there is an energy that is one and the same.

### ***Batman Begins* and the Pagan Notion of Justice as Balance**

Here it could be argued that all of the permutations of the ‘bat-man’ fall into this harmonious structure, where there is a recurrent cycle, a continuous battle between good and evil, but where both the superheroes and the super-villains seem to have much in common. Such mythological references are made explicit in the most recent permutation of Batman in Christopher Nolan’s 2005 *Batman Begins*.<sup>26</sup> There Batman (played brilliantly by Christian Bale) engages

<sup>17</sup> Campbell (1973), p189.

<sup>18</sup> Such an understanding is reflected by a Tibetan Lama’s reply to an understanding Occidental visitor: ‘From one point of view all those divinities exist, from another they are not real.’ Campbell (1973), p 190.

<sup>19</sup> Campbell (1973), pp 195–96.

<sup>20</sup> Campbell (1973), p 216.

<sup>21</sup> Campbell (1973), pp 223–24.

<sup>22</sup> Campbell (1973), p 234.

<sup>23</sup> Campbell (1973), p 238.

<sup>24</sup> Campbell (1973), p 16.

<sup>25</sup> Campbell (1973), p 114.

<sup>26</sup> *Batman Begins* (2005).

specifically with the notions of Justice as Balance. Ducard (aka Ra's Al Ghul, played by Liam Neeson) proclaims this notion: whenever a civilisation reaches the pinnacle of its decadence, a return to harmony is required; where a forest grows too wild, a purging fire is inevitable and natural. Such is the notion of the cosmic realm of justice and balance, where evil must be balanced by good, wrong by right.<sup>27</sup> This is explicitly the cosmogonic cycle (involving the eternal recurrence of society and the circular death and rebirth of the divinity) that Campbell discusses.<sup>28</sup>

At first glance, *Batman Begins* also plays out Campbell's mythological model of the hero. Bruce Wayne, forced by guilt and anger over the death of his parents, overcome with his desire for revenge, leaves his place in Gotham City and embarks upon a quest to seek the means to fight injustice. Thus he engages in a departure and separation from the world he knows, engaging in the numerous trials that learning the ways of 'the criminal' involves. Then Ducard turns up, the mystical giver of help, inviting him to train with the League of Shadows to become their leader. This offer is accepted and Wayne learns their ways. Here, in one sense, he also gains 'atonement with the father' (both his real father, by facing up to the truth of his death, as well as the father figure of Ducard). He is then about to be given the boon of the honour to lead the men of the League of Shadows upon performing the final test of justice. However, at this point he rejects the notion of justice without trial, the pagan (and also karmic) notion of harsh, violent, rational justice, and flees with the skills he has learnt. It could be argued that the rest of the movie (following his magic flight — literally in the Wayne family jet) is the return of the hero to teach the world about what he has learnt.

However, it is at this point, I would argue, that something else occurs. The rejecting of the notion of justice as balance, the calling for a 'proper' trial of the man claimed to be a murderer, is a break with the cosmogonic cycle that Campbell proclaims. As such, this Batman (as opposed to all his previous permutations, those also engaged in the continuous battle of good and evil, in the fight against the Joker, Riddler, Two-face, The Penguin, etc) performs the function of Christ by breaking with the pagan notion of justice as balance and, as we shall see, the postmodern ideology of 'Western Buddhism'.

### Popular Culture as the New Mythology

While Campbell creates a strong argument for the oneness of all mythology of the past, today mythology has taken on a new meaning. As referred to above, the many faces of the Bat-man, in their various forms, have engaged some of these mythological notions (with the continuous battle between good and evil in which the various incarnations of Batman and his super-villains engage). Thus it could be argued that, with the further development of the various mediums of popular culture, mythology has relocated itself to another realm of 'texts'. One could over-simplify such a development by arguing boorishly that all movies are made up of only one (or a few) plots, but the implications of

<sup>27</sup> Žižek (2000), p 118.

<sup>28</sup> Žižek (2000), p 118; Campbell (1973), pp 26–27.

such a movement are far more dramatic. If Campbell is right in arguing that mythology has previously been that which helps us understand the unconscious, then perhaps what has occurred in today's age of science and with the 'doing away' of mythology is a shifting of mythology into the realm of fiction and fantasy via the various mediums of books and movies. For throughout these mediums (and in all their variations — short stories, movies, TV series, advertisements and, in particular for our purposes, comic books), there are recurring themes that develop. This is particularly so within the realm of the superhero movie which has experienced a resurgence in recent times (with movies now including not only the recurrence of *Superman* and *Batman* but also *The Incredible Hulk*, *The Fantastic Four*, *Daredevil*, *Catwoman*, *Spiderman*, *X-Men*, *The Phantom* as well as the less well-known *Blade*, *Elektra*, *The Incredibles*, and *The Powerpuff Girls* — saving the world before bedtime). There the battle of good and evil is one that is continuously played out. Richard Reynolds has examined this turn to the mythologic in regards to comic books, where many of the themes conform to Campbell's model.<sup>29</sup> It is logical that such a development would also continue with the making of superhero movies. Such a combination today (the superhero movies and the development of myth in comic books), however, results in a theological bad infinity of recurrent battles between good and evil, with evil never ultimately being conquered. Such a bad infinity is referenced in *Batman Begins* with the League of Shadows and Ducard's obsession with justice as balance. However, this bad infinity, I would argue, finds its epitome in a slightly different realm: *Star Wars*. There, of course, George Lucas explicitly references Joseph Campbell as an influence on his work.<sup>30</sup>

*Star Wars*, a series of films built around a futuristic (though past) technologically advanced universe with blasters, spaceships, energy shields and giant space stations, is at first glance one of the least likely places to look for mythology, let alone a discussion of theology and legal theory. However, at a closer look, there is an intentional and specific creation of 'the mythological' throughout *Star Wars*: specifically the religion of 'the Force' and the Jedi order. As Master Yoda puts it:

Life creates it, makes it grow, its energy surrounds us, and binds us.  
Luminous beings are we, not this crude matter. You must feel the Force  
around you, between you, me, the tree, the rock, everywhere.<sup>31</sup>

Such an all-encompassing life-force is what develops the mystique of *Star Wars* and creates its true mythological potential. Perhaps this is why the movies have done so well, why they have so much resonance for us in a day when such mythology has tended to be overcome or uncovered by science and technology.

---

<sup>29</sup> Reynolds (1994).

<sup>30</sup> See Henderson (1997), pp 4–12.

<sup>31</sup> *Star Wars: Episode V — The Empire Strikes Back* (1980).

### Žižek and Western Buddhism

Žižek provides us with a different picture of these related themes (Campbell's unification of mythology, Batman's balance and Lucas's permeation of technology with 'the Force') in relation to ultra-capitalism and what he terms 'Western Buddhism'. Žižek notes that it is at the very moment that the 'European' technology and capitalism have triumphed worldwide at the level of the 'economic infrastructure' that:

at the level of 'ideological infrastructure' the Judeo-Christian legacy is threatened in the European space itself by the onslaught of the New Age 'Asiatic' thought, which in its different guises from the 'Western Buddhism' ... to different 'Tao,' is establishing itself as the hegemonic ideology of the opposites in today's global civilization.<sup>32</sup>

Western Buddhism is presented as the remedy to the stressful tensions of capitalist dynamics. It allows us to retain inner peace by 'uncoupling'. However, Western Buddhism in fact functions as the perfect ideological supplement to global capitalism. The problem of today's global capitalism, according to Žižek, is that of 'future shock' where one is not able to build the most elementary cognitive mapping at a fast enough rate to cope with the 'dazzling rhythm of technological development and the social changes that accompany it'.<sup>33</sup> Things are simply moving too fast.

Rather than trying to escape into old traditions, Taoism or Buddhism provides a coping mechanism that works so much better:

instead of trying to cope with the accelerating rhythm of technological progress and social changes, one should rather renounce the very endeavour to retain control over what goes on, rejecting it as the expression of the modern logic of domination.<sup>34</sup>

Rather, one should 'let oneself go' and drift along, retaining an inner distance and indifference to the 'mad dance of this accelerated process'.<sup>35</sup> Such a distance, however, is based on the insight that 'all this social and technological upheaval is ultimately just a non-substantial proliferation of semblances which do not really concern the innermost kernel of our being'.<sup>36</sup> Thus Žižek argues that the meditative stance of 'Western Buddhism' is 'arguably the most efficient way, for us, to fully participate in the capitalist dynamic while retaining the appearance of mental sanity'.<sup>37</sup>

This development of 'Western Buddhism' is a significant issue for Žižek. Rather than forming part of the traditional *symptomal* mode of ideology (where

---

<sup>32</sup> Žižek (2001), p 12.

<sup>33</sup> Žižek (2001), p 12.

<sup>34</sup> Žižek (2001), pp 12–13.

<sup>35</sup> Žižek (2001), p 13.

<sup>36</sup> Žižek (2001), p 13.

<sup>37</sup> Žižek (2001), p 13.

the ideological lie which structures our perception of reality is threatened by symptoms qua ‘returns of the repressed’ — cracks in the fabric of the ideological lie),<sup>38</sup> it operates as a *fetishist* mode of ideology (which operates as the inverse of the symptom). Here Žižek contrasts the constructive power of the symptom with the constructive power of the fetish. While the symptom is the ‘exception which disturbs the surface of the false appearance, the point at which the repressed Other Scene erupts’, the fetish is what enables us to sustain the unbearable truth.<sup>39</sup> Fetishists are thus ‘thorough realists’ as they are able to accept things exactly the way they are — as they can cling to their fetish which cancels the full impact of reality.

Western Buddhism is such a fetish, enabling you to fully participate in the:

frantic pace of the capitalist game while sustaining the perception that you are not really in it, that you are well aware how worthless this spectacle is — what really matters to you is the peace of the inner Self to which you know you can always withdraw ...<sup>40</sup>

*Star Wars* is the science fiction, mythological example of such a fetish. For the technological (and political) development and change of such a society (where organisations such as trade federations — stand-ins for capitalist transnational corporations — have been given political power) is comparable *par excellence* to the ‘mad dance of capital’ in which we ourselves engage. The resonance that *Star Wars* has with us is not only its development of the mythological ‘Force’ but the way ‘the Force’ operates in a similar fashion to Western Buddhism as the fetish that enables the engagement. The fact is that *Star Wars* teaches us how to survive our engagement with technology (a particularly appropriate occurrence, considering the time of its release — the middle of one of the most rapidly advancing periods of technology — and its use of ground-breaking technological special effects).

The central argument of this paper, therefore, examines the way in which Batman breaks into the middle of all these notions. But before examining such a break, we need to investigate another realm: the law.

## **The Law and Its Limits: Legal Justice — an Act of Balancing**

### *A Broken System*

The legal system in *Batman Begins* is broken. The paradox represented by the discussion of the legal system is one of claiming its status while requiring

---

<sup>38</sup> Žižek (2001), p 13.

<sup>39</sup> Žižek (2001), p13. Here Žižek gives a comparative example of the death of a beloved person. In such a case, the symptom is a result of the repression of the death (by trying not to think about it) but the trauma (of the death) returns in the form of the symptom. In the case of the fetish, however, I rationally accept the death but cling to the fetish (that feature which enables me to disavow the death).

<sup>40</sup> Žižek (2001), p 15.



something else to give it that status. Rachel Dawes (played by Katie Holmes), the female district attorney, argues for the validity of the impartial system of the law. Here she distinguishes between justice and revenge: 'Justice is about harmony, revenge is about making yourself feel better.' She claims that Wayne needs to put aside his own feelings about the case (the release of his parents' murderer) and rely on the impartial system. Yet at the same time she is perfectly aware that the system requires more than simply the law. She argues that, in order for there to be justice, there is the need of 'good people' like Wayne's parents who will 'stand against injustice'. Thus there is a requirement of that which is beyond to add to the law. It requires good people to uphold it. The law is dependent on those instituting and supporting it. It is not the universal or abstract notion which it lays claim to. It is dependent, and in Gotham it is in disarray, with judges and cops having been paid off by the mob boss Falconi.

### *Law's Limits: The Prohibition–Transgression Dialectic*

However, the problem with the law is that it requires and institutes transgression. Here St Paul's notion of the law is particularly insightful where he argues that the law does not have the ability to save or bring freedom. Transgression of the law is particularly and specifically anticipated by its system, enshrined in the very presence of the rules and prohibitions. As Paul argues, without the law, sin/transgression is not known. It is the instituting of law that makes sin known.<sup>41</sup> Žižek argues, however, that the:

superego dialectic of Law and transgression does not lie only in the fact that Law itself invites its own transgression, that it generates the desire for its own violation; our obedience to the Law itself is not 'natural,' spontaneous, but *always-already mediated by the (repression of the) desire to transgress the Law*.<sup>42</sup>

Obedience to the law is instigated out of a 'desperate strategy', fighting against our desire to transgress it. The more vigorously we *obey* the law, however, the more we bear witness to the pressure of the desire to sin because our focus remains on the law itself. Thus the prohibition–transgression dialectic of the law catches us in its grasp, something we cannot escape by either obedience or transgression. Thus the law becomes that which enslaves.<sup>43</sup> The movie *I, Robot*<sup>44</sup> evidences specifically the constricting, enslaving capacity of the law.<sup>45</sup> However, *Batman Begins* evidences its simple

<sup>41</sup> Romans 7:7.

<sup>42</sup> Žižek (2000), p 142.

<sup>43</sup> See Galatians 3:21–25 where St Paul discusses the law's role as a custodian, such as a slave or tutor that would guard and keep a son until he was an adult. As such, the law is that which keeps us as a tutor until faith came. See also Peters (2005), p 25.

<sup>44</sup> *I, Robot* (2004).

<sup>45</sup> I have investigated this further elsewhere: see Peters (2007).

impotence. Any notion that the law will provide freedom or justice is false, for the law is an empty shell. It can only condemn and attack; it cannot construct or bring justice for it relies on transgression for its sustenance.

Furthermore, the law is found to be only a limiting substance. After Batman has provided Falconi to the police (with everything required to put him away), the Police Commissioner still argues against him. He argues that no one takes justice into their own hands in his city and that Batman must be stopped. Thus the law fails to recognise the one who is operating for true justice, fighting against the evil that has overtaken the city. The police force is corrupt, being paid off by the mob boss, yet anyone who takes the law into their own hands will not be tolerated — even if they do the police's job for them and capture the criminals! The law operates blind, unaware of what it is actually doing.<sup>46</sup>

### *Law as Cosmic Law*

Finally, the law is also that which operates in the realm of balance — the receiving of one's 'just deserts' for their action. The notion of punishment for breach or transgression of the law is one that brings back into alignment the balance of justice. Thus, when Campbell talks about the universal law or the cosmic law, it is also that which reinstates justice. This aligns the law and the pagan notion of balance — the one operating the same as the other — to the point where they are the same. However, as Paul explains, the law is not able to give life.<sup>47</sup> Thus the alignment of the cosmic, global order of paganism with the life-giving force, for Paul, is false. It *also* engages in such a dialectic — the breaching and reinstating of justice — that traps and imprisons. It cannot give life; it cannot be that which provides the hero, or anyone, with the boon and freedom that it proclaims.

## **Subverting the System: Batman, Law and Justice**

### *Life Outside the Law*

As the law cannot give life, it is a mistake to assume that the cosmic law is a life-giving force. For Paul, life must come from outside the law (which we understand as both the legal system and the cosmic law). This, of course, is where Batman operates. It has long been held that Batman is a vigilante operating outside the realm of the law, but in *Batman Begins* this goes even further, as Batman also operates *outside the cosmic law*. He disengages with both the human law (operating beyond the police, and the legal system, etc) *and* the cosmic law by refusing the punishment of justice (refusing the executioner-type stance of the League of Shadows in relation to both the accused murderer in the mountains and Gotham City). As such, his life, his

<sup>46</sup> Alain Badiou (2003), p 84 points out that the letter of the law operates blindly, without thought, as if under the power of automatism.

<sup>47</sup> Galatians 3:21.

constitution as a subject, comes from beyond the law (that is, as Alain Badiou argues, beyond the governing principles of the set).<sup>48</sup>

### *Stars Wars, Technology, Batman*

Let us return to *Star Wars* for a moment. The real success of *Star Wars* is not its interesting storyline or its futuristic/science fiction quality but, as discussed above, the mythic nature of its story. The value of this myth in *Star Wars* is that it teaches us how to engage with technology — that is, the way to use technology but to remain distanced from it. In *A New Hope*,<sup>49</sup> Luke, flying his X-Wing fighter through the trench in the Death Star, is encouraged to ‘let go’ and trust his feelings by the voice of Obi Wan Kenobi. Thus we are given a glimpse of how to deal with excessive technology: by the use of a highly advanced fighter ship but by shooting without the aid of computers. This notion of letting go of the technological development (the belief that the computer could not hit the target, or that the shot was impossible, but using mythic dimensions it *is* possible) is the true notion of the Taoist/Buddhist ethic. Thus, by letting go of the technology — that is, the destructive power of technology (epitomised by the Death Star) — of the horror of its reality, we can destroy its destruction.

In this sense it is not surprising that Batman, the superhero based completely on technology, is actually able to bring this break, intervention *and rupture* with the circular oppressive nature of Western Buddhist postmodernism. Batman is the one *who does not* resort to the spirit (ie the eternal life-giving ‘force’ or its equivalent), or to super-powers, to achieve his ends but *engages and uses technology* — thus we have grappling guns, bat-mobiles, electronic cloth, and so on.<sup>50</sup> He breaks this notion of the letting go and starts from a point beyond it, understanding that technology is only a tool to achieve certain ends. Technology is thus reinscribed into its proper place as a servant of society, not as the development of society itself. The notions of *The Matrix*<sup>51</sup> style virtual reality, where the machines are ruling us, is done away with along with the mythic notion of AI and computer automation, of the droids and the ‘fetishisation’ of technology that ensues.

### *Breaking the Balance Between Good and Evil*

The perpetuation of this mythic recurrence, whether it be the Force, balance or justice (symbiotic relationships, karma or yin and yang) is broken by Batman. For in such notions, the balance between good and evil comes out of the notion that good and evil *are the same thing*. That one is merely a reflection of the other (night is a reflection of day, yin is a reflection of yang, etc), which means

<sup>48</sup> For Badiou it is the intrusion into this set of the truth-event (for Paul the Christ-event) that is what is able to develop a universal singularity and break the power of the current situation: Badiou (2003), p11.

<sup>49</sup> *Star Wars: Episode IV — A New Hope* (1977).

<sup>50</sup> For an examination of the ‘science of Batman’, see Gresh and Weinberg (2002), pp 33–45.

<sup>51</sup> *The Matrix* (1999).

that any change towards the good is also, in one sense, a change for the bad. And is this not the mistake of the Jedi Council in the *Star Wars* prequel, where they believed that ‘the one’ who would balance the Force was going to do so for good? In fact, Anakin did it by becoming the epitome of evil (Darth Vader) — that is how the Force was balanced.

This is also the notion of Shyamalan’s *Unbreakable*,<sup>52</sup> where there is the belief that if someone is born into society with a weakness, then there must be a person born into society with a corresponding strength. Such a circular notion appears to be one that we cannot break; it becomes a theological impasse — that there is no good without evil, or no joy without sickness or suffering. However, this impasse *is* broken by Batman and Christ. Christ enters and breaks this balance; Batman breaks the ‘justice’ of the world. It is only in what could be considered the ‘unjust’ religion that we find this break because it is in Christianity that we simply *do not get what we deserve*. It was while we were sinners that Christ died for us.<sup>53</sup> This notion is what is able to uncouple us from the circular balance of justice. We are uncoupled from justice by the very fact that Christ does *not* demand of us the just end. He thus enters to provide life (and life abundant).<sup>54</sup> It is an abundance of life, not one that invokes death. Death is overcome, and not seen simply as a part of life or a part of the journey — part of the circle, the eternal death and rebirth of incarnation or the entering of the bliss of nirvana:

by breaking with the pagan notion of cosmic Justice and Balance, Christianity also breaks with the pagan notion of the circular death and rebirth of the Divinity — Christ’s death is *not* the same as the seasonal death of the pagan god; rather, it designates a *rupture* with the circular movement of death and rebirth, the passage to a wholly different dimension of the Holy Spirit.<sup>55</sup>

### *Breaking the Cosmogonic Cycle*

Thus the continuous story of the hero is also broken, along with the cosmogonic cycle. This is done by a gesture of *separation* in which there is a ‘clinging to an element that disturbs the balance of All’. Thus, as Žižek argues, the pagan criticism of Christianity as ‘not deep enough’ (that it fails to grasp the primordial One–All) misses the point:

---

<sup>52</sup> *Unbreakable* (2000).

<sup>53</sup> Romans 5:6–8.

<sup>54</sup> See John 10:10 where it says: ‘The thief comes only to steal, and kill, and destroy; I came that they might have life, and might have it abundantly.’

<sup>55</sup> Žižek (2000), pp 118–19.

Christianity is the miraculous Event that disturbs the balance of the One-All; it is the violent intrusion of Difference that precisely *throws the balanced circuit of the universe off the rails*.<sup>56</sup>

As Žižek points out, this is also how Christ's statements dealing with the logic of revenge and the law work. That is, instead of the re-establishing of the balance of justice (as also demanded by the law), we get notions of turning the other cheek, and when one asks for your cloak, give him your shirt as well.<sup>57</sup> This is not masochism or stupid humility, but a way of disengaging and interrupting '*the circular logic of re-establishing balance*'.<sup>58</sup> Such a notion overcomes the pagan and Buddhist notions of balance, of letting go, of disengagement — turning the other cheek is not an inner distancing of oneself from the situation by saying: 'I will turn the other cheek as what happens to me does not matter, it is only part of the game of society.' Rather, it is an actual intrusion, a breaking of that which is 'normal' *for we do not engage in the 'correct' reaction* — 'I will turn the other cheek as a direct response to you for what happens to me *does* matter but what I do in response *matters all the more*.' This notion also intrudes and overcomes the law. For what is the law if not a tool of justice designed to return the balance. As the DA, Rachel Dawes, in *Batman* says, 'justice is about harmony ... that is why we have an impartial system.'

### The Possibility of Justice Unbalanced

#### *The Violence of Love*

The incredible power of the Christ-event is thus not a set of good teachings or a moralism regarding a way of life. Rather, it is that which enables us to break with the pagan notion of balance, the binding regulation of the law and the nothingness of 'letting go'. In contrast to Buddhism, Christianity is not a passive religion. Rather, at its centre is a violent intrusion of love. The way this overcomes the law (and in a sense we can also view this as the way to also overcome the cosmic law, or even karmic law<sup>59</sup>) is by subsuming it all into the notion 'Love your neighbour as yourself'.<sup>60</sup> It is love which can fulfil the law, breaking both its prohibition and the desire to transgress that it invokes.<sup>61</sup> For the law operates as an act of difference, rejecting those who are not under it and accepting those who are.<sup>62</sup> It inserts a division, and it cannot remain universal; it cannot apply to all.<sup>63</sup> This is where the Christian notion of love is

<sup>56</sup> Žižek (2000), p121.

<sup>57</sup> Matthew 5:38–42.

<sup>58</sup> Žižek (2000), p 125.

<sup>59</sup> For an interesting discussion of the way Buddhist law invokes the ethical notion of karma as a tool of governance, see De Silva Wijeyeratne (nd).

<sup>60</sup> Romans 13:9; see also Matthew 22:39.

<sup>61</sup> See Romans 7:7 and Žižek (2000), pp 147–48.

<sup>62</sup> This was especially so for the Jewish culture into which Christ entered.

<sup>63</sup> Badiou (2003), pp 41–43.

able to overcome this limitation and *actually be for all*.<sup>64</sup> It, as Paul notes, breaks down the differentiations between Jew and Greek, male and female, slave and master, and so on.<sup>65</sup>

### *Tibet and Obsession with 'the Other'*

Let us look, for a moment, at Žižek's argument regarding Tibet. He argues that Tibet has become a central reference in today's 'spiritual imaginary', that place which is the 'last shelter of ancient Wisdom'.<sup>66</sup> However, while the West is absolutely obsessed with Tibet, Tibetans could not care less about anyone but themselves:

What was and is ABSOLUTELY foreign to Tibet is this Western logic of desire to penetrate the inaccessible object beyond a limit, through a great ordeal, against natural obstacles and vigilant patrols.<sup>67</sup>

Tibetans are extremely self-centred. For them, Tibet is the centre of the world. What is different in the European civilization is its ex-centred nature, its obsession with the 'lost object-cause of desire', that which is out there in a forbidden exotic place.<sup>68</sup> Thus Žižek argues that:

Colonization was never simply the imposition of Western values, the assimilation of the Oriental and other Others to the European Sameness; it was always also the search for the lost spiritual innocence of OUR OWN civilization.<sup>69</sup>

Thus the lesson to be learnt from the Tibetans is this: 'If we want to be Tibetans, we should forget about Tibet and do it HERE',<sup>70</sup> because Tibetans are *not* obsessed with the Other.

Žižek takes this argument further in a discussion about the envy of both the 'moral majority fundamentalists' and 'multiculturalist tolerance'. He argues that, in the face of the moral majority fundamentalists (those who are really involved in an envious hatred of the Other's excessive *jouissance*), and the multiculturalist tolerance of the Other's otherness (sustained by a secret desire for the Other to *remain* 'other' and not become too much like us), it is only the

---

<sup>64</sup> See Žižek (2000), p 120.

<sup>65</sup> Galatians 3:28.

<sup>66</sup> Žižek (2001), p 64.

<sup>67</sup> Žižek (2001), p 67.

<sup>68</sup> Žižek (2001), p 68.

<sup>69</sup> Žižek (2001), p 68. It would be interesting to compare these notions of colonisation with St Paul's missionary expansionism. Paul, while preaching the gospel, does not force his own Jewish law on others. Rather, he becomes 'all things to all men'. Thus Paul, in his diasporic mission-making, is *not* searching for spiritual innocence that has been lost; rather, he is invoking a universal: the work of love.

<sup>70</sup> Žižek (2001), p 67.

authentic radical fundamentalist who maintains a *truly* tolerant attitude towards the Other. Žižek points out that it is the authentic fundamentalists that get along very well with their neighbours because they are centred on their own world and not bothered by what goes on out there amongst ‘them’. Here a contrast can be made in *Batman Begins*. For it is the League of Shadows that, at first glance, would appear to stand in for the Tibetans. They have their temple up in the mountains. They engage in an almost monastic training and devotion to Eastern notions (justice as balance, harmony, etc). However, the point at which we become aware that this is not in fact the same as Tibet, where Ra’s Al Ghul is not a stand-in for the Dalai Lama, is when we realise that the League of Shadows *is completely obsessed with the Other*. They are continuously worried about Gotham and their ‘sins’. They are entangled with *their* corruption (this has always been their obsession — whether it is with Constantinople, Rome or London). Thus the League of Shadows, in fact, is a stand-in for the moral majority who are completely obsessed with, and hate, the Other’s excessive *jouissance*. And Batman, in the end, takes the authentic radical fundamentalist position. Batman, in fact, is the one who is willing to provide a chance for all, to provide for all *direct* access to a universal — that of love. Remember that it is his compassion which incurs the break with the rational Justice of the League of Shadows.

#### *The Logic of Desire vs The Work of Love*

The League of Shadows is in fact involved in a logic of desire — either the desire for the actual *jouissance* of Gotham (which seems dubious, given the stance of the movie) or the desire for ‘true’ justice. That is, if I cannot have this *jouissance* — if I cannot gain what I desire — then no one else can either! For the League of Shadows is obsessed with a loss: the pure society. Žižek places such a loss in connection with the paradox of symbolic castration as constitutive of desire. The object has to be lost in order to be regained on the inverse ladder of desire regulated by the Law. But symbolic castration is the loss of something one never possessed. Thus the desire for the civilisation that the League of Shadows has *is for a civilization that never existed*.<sup>71</sup> Its ‘returning to balance’ misses the point that such actions *do not in fact bring balance*.

The process of desire is caught in the logic of ‘this is not that’ and ‘thrives in the gap that forever separates the *obtained* satisfaction from the *sought-for* satisfaction.’<sup>72</sup> Ducard explicitly references this when Wayne argues that he is going to destroy millions of lives:

Only a cynical man would call what these people have lives, Wayne.  
Crime, despair, this is not how man was supposed to live ... You are

<sup>71</sup> For, in Christianity, we are not to look to a utopian, idealised civilization in which we can love our neighbour as ourselves. Rather, it is in today’s broken civilisation that we are to engage in such love.

<sup>72</sup> Žižek (2001), p 90.

defending a city so corrupt we have infiltrated every level of its infrastructure.

Is this not the argument that ‘this is not that’? Here, the corruption and decadence of Gotham is not how man was supposed to live. That which we have (the good people that may still be there) is not enough in regard to the ‘just’ civilisation that Ducard wants. Wayne, however, is the one who sees that there are still good people there, that Gotham can still be saved. This is the acceptance of love, for love is not desire and is thus able to overcome (the cosmic) law and its desire. Love is what fully accepts that ‘this is that’. Žižek gives the example that love is what knows that what I love is the very thing that is in front of me:

the woman with all her weaknesses and common features IS the Thing I unconditionally love; that Christ, this wretched man, IS the living God.<sup>73</sup>

Hence Wayne knows that this is the way man lives. That Gotham, with all its corruption, is still able to be saved. This is truly the Christian notion (and again the break with justice), for it is ‘while we were still helpless, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly’.<sup>74</sup> And again: ‘But God demonstrates his love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.’<sup>75</sup> This is the notion that Christ did not come for the righteous, *but for the unrighteous*, that love is for that which is not deserving of love and it is that actually through love that that which is unlovable becomes worthy of love. This is not engaging in the perverse temptation in which we ‘love the lowest outcast *because he is the lowest outcast*’<sup>76</sup> and secretly wanting him to *remain* so (in the same way that the tolerant multiculturalist *wants* the Other to remain Other). Such a move does not actually ‘unplug’ from the social hierarchy in the way Christ invokes but maintains it (though in an inverse state).<sup>77</sup> Rather, the believer sees the appearance of the Other but is also able to see the dimension that ‘shines through’ that appearance. They see the ‘goodness in the other where the other himself is not aware of it’.<sup>78</sup> Žižek argues that Christianity goes even further, invoking us to ‘hate the beloved out of love’<sup>79</sup> — that is, to hate the dimension of the beloved’s inscription into the socio-symbolic structure as part of the very love for him/her as a unique person. In one sense, we do not hate what they do (the corruption, the evil, the drugs, etc) but love them as the unique person in the midst of all that. And this is so, for Batman does not love

<sup>73</sup> Žižek (2001), p 90. See also Isaiah 53:2–3.

<sup>74</sup> Romans 5:6.

<sup>75</sup> Romans 5:8.

<sup>76</sup> Žižek (2000), p 125.

<sup>77</sup> Žižek (2000), p 125.

<sup>78</sup> Žižek (2000), p 128.

<sup>79</sup> Žižek (2000), p 126.



Gotham because of its corruption, abuse, and so on, but rather engages with it, hating its inscription in the socio-symbolic structure, yet loving it beyond this.

This does not mean that Batman's unplugging (as a direct expression of love or compassion) is an escape 'into an idealized Romantic universe in which all concrete social differences magically disappear'.<sup>80</sup> Rather, as Kierkegaard points out, 'love believes everything — and yet is never to be deceived'.<sup>81</sup> Mistrust, on the other hand, 'believes nothing and is nevertheless thoroughly deceived'.<sup>82</sup> The cynic who mistrusts is the one who misses the efficiency of the appearance itself (however fleeting, fragile and elusive it is). The true believer (the one who loves) sees the goodness of the other and the dimension shining through the appearance. Such a focus on the appearance, however, does not renounce transcendence where we fully accept the physical human person since that is all there is.<sup>83</sup> Rather, transcendence is not abolished but rendered *accessible* as it shines through the very 'clumsy miserable being that I love'.<sup>84</sup>

Is this not the deception that blinds Ducard? Racing along in the train, Ducard misses the fact that Batman has no intention of stopping the train — that he is using the force of the train to destroy (via Sergeant Gordan blowing out the train track) the plans of destruction. In contrast, it is the point of love in which Wayne is not deceived — the moment at which he becomes aware of the atrocity of the League of Shadows is always the point of compassion or love (initially in the mountains when he refuses to become an executioner, and subsequently at his mansion when in conversation with Ducard).

#### *Choosing the Impossible: The Act of Free Choice*

This argument brings us to a discussion of the ethical act and the free choice that can arise out of this break that occurs. Such an act is the one that consciously changes the coordinates of the situation in which it is present. This references Lenin's distinction between 'formal' and 'actual' freedom (as mentioned by Žižek). An act of 'actual freedom' is one that dares to break the seductive power of symbolic efficiency (the power of the law, or the set or situation that is put before me). Lenin's response is, then, that:

the truly free choice is a choice in which I do not merely choose between two or more options WITHIN a pre-given set of coordinates, but I choose to change this set of coordinates itself.<sup>85</sup>

Such an example of this choice can be given by Batman's initial break with the League of Shadows. At the point when he is being told he must demonstrate his commitment to justice by executing a murderer, he is also told (for his own

<sup>80</sup> Žižek (2000), p 127.

<sup>81</sup> Kierkegaard (1972), pp 182–83; cf Žižek (2000), p 127; 1 Corinthians 13:7.

<sup>82</sup> Žižek (2000), p 127; Kierkegaard (1972), p 193.

<sup>83</sup> Žižek (2001), p 90.

<sup>84</sup> Žižek (2001), p 90.

<sup>85</sup> Žižek (2001), p 121.

sake) that there is no turning back. Thus, at this point, it would appear that Wayne has no option. Yet, instead of succumbing to the pressure to execute, his compassion forces him to do something else. And he thus goes on and fights the League, escaping and returning to Gotham. This coincides with Žižek's point that the act of 'actual freedom' is the choice of the impossible, acting as if the choice is not forced.

However, the true example from the film is in the final scenes when Batman and Ducard are fighting on the train. Batman manages to overpower Ducard, and it looks as if he is about to kill him. At this point, Ducard invokes the forced choice — 'at last you have learnt to do what is necessary'. Batman is given no choice but to kill him, which would in fact invoke justice and the circular notions of the system. However, Batman reformulates these coordinates and, instead of taking the forced choice, he acts as if the choice is not forced. He chooses the impossible: 'I won't kill you, but I don't have to save you.' Such a decision is one that reincorporates and reinstates the break, for it does not engage in the circular notion of balance, of the cosmogonic cycle, of that which is 'necessary'. And here once again we find that it is Batman who invokes the break. Such a break does not occur in the closed symbolic structure of *Star Wars*. For, in *Revenge of the Sith*,<sup>86</sup> Anakin is not able to 'choose the impossible'. When standing over Count Dooku (having fought and overpowered him), he is being invoked by Palpatine to kill him. This is once again the forced choice. However, Anakin is not able to transform the situation by acting as if the choice is not forced: he kills Dooku. This is why it is Batman who is able to bring this break that Žižek seems to want from Anakin.

Žižek argues that *Revenge of the Sith* failed, as it did not show how Anakin's attachment to his loved ones (his mother and Amidala) resulted in a break with the balance invoked by the Force.<sup>87</sup> However, in circumspect, *Revenge of the Sith* is the perfect conclusion of Lucas's religion of the Force. For, according to Žižek himself, the Force (like Campbell's cosmogonic cycle) is that which enables us to engage with the advancements in technology, the rapid dance of capital. As such, it cannot be within this cycle that the break can occur. Anakin's attachment to Amidala is *not* that of love but the narcissistic attachment: lust, selfishness and desire. Notions of the Force require the reflection of good in evil and evil in good. Thus, when the Jedi believe that Anakin is there to fulfil the prophecy, to bring balance to the Force, they miss the fact that this act of balancing would actually come from the dark side. We are set up throughout the entire saga to believe that the good side is to be desired and the dark side is to be feared. But, as Campbell shows us, the good side and the dark side *are in fact the same*. Thus Žižek's argument that the main hero of *Star Wars* is Christological (ie Anakin's virgin birth, the prophecy proclaiming his coming, his entry into a distant, out-of-the-way world) misses Campbell's influence on Lucas. For Campbell, the virgin birth

---

<sup>86</sup> *Star Wars: Episode III — Revenge of the Sith* (2005).

<sup>87</sup> Žižek (2006), pp 102–03.

of Christ is just another virgin birth in the midst of many.<sup>88</sup> Thus Lucas is not referencing the Christian mythology, but mythology in general, and to relate it specifically to Christ misses the point. The adventure of the hero is the one that works in the midst of the balance of good and evil, one reflecting the other.

This is why it is only Batman who can bring this break and not Anakin/Darth Vader. Anakin's attachment and, as Žižek points out, semi-ethical stance is what in fact keeps him contained — because Amidala operates as his fetish to maintain the construction of the pagan world around him. Batman, on the other hand, rejects this fetish via love and compassion. Anakin never gained love<sup>89</sup> and thus could not bring the break that Žižek desires. For Anakin is not rejecting a choice that he *knows* would provide him with benefit (it being better for him to return to the good side) as an ethical act to maintain his consistency.<sup>90</sup> Rather, his choice is one that acts out of his own desire and pride — to accept the path of the good side would require admitting that he was wrong, accepting the penalty of the order. Thus, in reality, it is Batman's decision that is purely ethical, that maintains the consistency of his choice. For at the moment of the end it would seem logically and even desirable to (enact his vengeance by the act to) kill Ducard, this man who has caused so many problems. In reality, however, Batman maintains his choice *not* to invoke justice. He does not play the same game that Ducard does. Thus his decision not to kill but not to save invokes both an ethical choice that is also the choice of actual freedom that rearranges the coordinates of the choice. This is what makes Batman the true Christological figure (despite the lack of a virgin birth, prophecy, and all the elements of Christ's story). Such a figure is one who is able to break the pagan justice and the balance the law requires in order to go beyond it. The saving act that he invokes is one born, in the same way as Christ, out of a love that is for all.

### Conclusion: Bat-Justice Invoking the Material

#### *'It's Not Who I am Underneath, but What I Do Defines Me'*

In one of the final scenes of *Batman Begins*, a strange complexity arises. Wayne is looking through the remains of his now burnt-down mansion and Rachel arrives. A discussion follows where we discover that Rachel had never given up on the relationship she had had with Wayne earlier:

I never stopped thinking about you, about us, and then, when I heard you were back, I started to hope ... Then I found out about your mask ... this is your mask. Your real face is the one the criminals now fear. The man I loved, the man who vanished, he never came back at all.

<sup>88</sup> Campbell (1973), pp 311–14.

<sup>89</sup> It could be argued that this is possibly due to the Jedi law preventing him from engaging in a relationship with a woman. Such a prohibition invokes the law's dialectic, which prevents him from actually loving (as he gets caught up in the obey/transgress orientation).

<sup>90</sup> See Žižek (2006), p 103.

Maybe he's still out there somewhere. Maybe one day, when the world no longer needs Batman, we'll see him again.

This reference to the mask is interesting because Wayne immediately thinks she is talking about his Bat-mask (as he revealed himself as Batman to her earlier). But her point is not a reference to the Bat-mask but rather the fact that the face the criminals now fear is Wayne's own (that which they cannot see). Having come to the realisation that the man she loved is no longer there, she is still longing for him. Thus she is desiring something beyond the man that is now before her. This seems to be in direct contrast to her earlier provocation of Wayne. Upon meeting him after he came back (discovering him in the presence of two super-models), Wayne tries to tell her that there is actually more to him than this apparent superficiality. Her response challenges this notion of the something more: 'Bruce, deep down you may still be that same great kid you used to be, but it's not who you are underneath, it's what you do that defines you.' Thus Rachel invokes the material — that hard, stupid element that is simply there, that can be seen and felt and its effects measured. She does away with any humanist desire for the 'real person' inside (under the layers of social masks — and in this case real masks) and points to the fact that who you are is defined *exactly* by what you do. Later in the movie Batman fully encapsulates this by proclaiming again that: 'It's not who I am underneath, but what I do defines me.' This turn to the material is particularly interesting in regard to the mythological nature of much of the film. It creates a particular contrast between the Eastern Buddhist mythology of Ducard and the Western Christian materialism of Batman. Let us investigate this a little further.

### *Challenging the Void*

Campbell argues that the meaning of religious practice is that:

the individual through prolonged psychological disciplines, gives up completely all attachment to his personal limitations, idiosyncrasies, hopes and fears, no longer resists the self-annihilation that is prerequisite to rebirth in the realization of truth, and so becomes ripe, at last, for the great at-one-ment. His personal ambitions being totally dissolved he no longer tries to live but willingly relaxes to whatever may come to pass in him; he becomes, that is to say, an anonymity. The Law lives in him with his unreserved consent.<sup>91</sup>

This summation of religious practice aligns itself with the Asiatic notion of the Cosmic Law and the primordial Void. However, our hero, Batman, is in disjunct with this notion. For Batman does not give up his attachment to his personal limitations (remember that Ducard views Wayne's compassion as a weakness); he does not give up attachment to his hopes and fears (he maintains his desire to fight evil and injustice and to save Gotham); he resists the self-

---

<sup>91</sup> Campbell (1973), pp 236–37.

annihilation (by rejecting the choice in front of him which would force him to give up his autonomous decisions). Batman does not engage in a great at-one-ment. He violently refuses to relax and allow whatever may come to pass in him and he certainly does not become an anonymity. It can be seen how Ducard and the League of Shadows do, in one sense, become an anonymity as they are barely heard of; their actions are unknown (though the consequences are known). But Batman certainly does not engage with this. Batman becomes known. In fact, he becomes famous. And is not this the same with Christ? While the Buddha found his way to nirvana via the private, dignified act of meditation, Christ's death on the cross was a public, humiliating act. Christ became famous. Thus it makes sense that Batman becomes well known, that he does not step back in the anonymity of the League of Shadows and the anonymity of justice.

The notion in the above quote of ceasing the attempt to live (so that we can allow whatever may come to pass) is also something that Christ and Batman refuse. When Christ is standing before Pontius Pilate, he makes it perfectly clear that Pilate only has the authority to put him to death because it is given to him. He stands as a direct challenge to the Roman Empire and to Pilate's authority.<sup>92</sup> He is certainly not ceasing to live, simply giving himself up to whatever may happen. Rather, he stands there purposefully, knowing full well that he will be going to the cross and knowing exactly what he is doing. In a similar fashion, Batman knows full well what he is doing. He does not cease to live and, despite the continuous call of justice for him to stop, he carries on by fighting the League of Shadows. Furthermore, the call of Christianity is not an absence of living but rather a *living in Christ* — that is, a living of life from the point of Christ's action and intrusion in the world.<sup>93</sup>

### *Law vs the Subject*

The final line of Campbell's quote above (in relation to the religious individual) becomes particularly relevant: 'The Law lives in him with his unreserved consent.' This complete submission to the Law destroys any notion of the subject. It is a complete submission to the totality of the cosmic law — that is, the Asiatic notion of the void. For the cosmic and totalising law, the universal round and the Asiatic void are all one and the same. This notion is the end result of the harmonisation and balancing of opposites. Its belief is that behind all the opposites is an energy that is one and the same — that is, beneath all the fragile, deceptive appearances that constitute our reality is the harmony of opposites, the life-energy, the void (or, as pointed out by Yoda, the Force). Batman's (and Christ's) material engagement stands in direct opposition to this notion of the Asiatic void. Rather, ordinary reality is in fact

<sup>92</sup> See John 19:11. This point and passage is indebted to Andrew Peters and a seminar he conducted entitled 'Heirs of the Kingdom and Suffering,' Brisbane, 24 October 2006.

<sup>93</sup> This can be compared to the way Alain Badiou discusses the notion of fidelity to the event where, consequent upon the event, we think the situation in terms of, or 'according to', the event: Badiou (2001), p 41.

hard, inert and stupidly there.<sup>94</sup> For Batman, as we observed above, is the one who does not resort to the spirit or super-powers. He does not reach into the beyond to find any boon, any life-giving elixir, he does not 'let go of his feelings' (as Anakin Skywalker does) to achieve his ends. Rather, he is fully engaged with the materiality of his task — the work of compassion and love. Thus we cannot equate Buddhism's passive peace with Christianity's violent love. Buddhism's universal peace<sup>95</sup> is *not* the same as Christ's universal love.

As Žižek points out, the insight of Western Buddhism is that 'all this social and technological upheaval is ultimately just a non-substantial proliferation of semblances which do not really concern the innermost kernel of our being'.<sup>96</sup> However, the Christian 'unplugging' is *not* the inner contemplative stance of Western Buddhism. It is not a process of inner distancing but rather 'the active *work* of love'.<sup>97</sup> This work of love is what brings about the alternative community. Is this not why Christ told his followers:

'A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another, even as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this all men will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another.'<sup>98</sup>

It is the material work of love that makes the difference in Christianity. This is not saying that there is no transcendence or that there is no spiritual realm. Rather it is that our spirituality *should work itself out in the material*. The Christian can be seen via his works of love. Christian spirituality is not a separation from or disengagement from the world but a full engagement with it, breaking it from its designated position, striking against the place in society (or the cosmos) that has been designated to us and stretching beyond it into the change which the event of Christ invokes — access to the universality of Christ *and its subsequent effects in the world*.

#### *The 'End': The Work of Love that Effects Change*

This is what Batman truly shows us and calls us to. Rather than wiping out the evil as an act towards balance, an elimination of that which is there and then disappearing, we are to work *within* the set or situation. We are to orientate within what is there, the materiality of this existence, so to evoke change. For it is neither the full acceptance of our place in society nor the wiping away of it in disgust that is the Christian call that Batman plays out, *but it is the desire to bring change*. This is the radical change of the political Christian subject. It is not the balance of the law that demands recompense for sins. Rather, the Christian subject steps in and unbalances it — forgiving the unforgivable, loving the unlovable, and accepting the unacceptable. Christ allows beggars,

<sup>94</sup> Žižek (2000), p 128.

<sup>95</sup> See Campbell (1973), p 159.

<sup>96</sup> Žižek (2001), p 13.

<sup>97</sup> Žižek (2000), p 129.

<sup>98</sup> John 13:34–35.

prostitutes and frauds to enter into the chambers of the king as not only sons and daughters *but heirs* of his kingdom.<sup>99</sup> This is the reality and radicalness of Christianity. This is what provides its difference against both capitalism and its ideological support of Buddhism. This is also what rages against the pagan and societal institutions of caste. For it does not matter whether you are Greek or Jew, slave or free, male or female — all can enter in. Batman thus enters into the pagan world of balance, breaking down such a notion of justice, destroying the power of the cosmogonic cycle and overcoming the law. This is why, today, with the proliferation of postmodern Western Buddhisms, the multiplication of new mythology and the excessive regulation (and corruption) of the law, Batman/Christ calls us to the material work of love and compassion that will reorient the situation, engage with its materiality and *unbalance its justice*.

## References

### Secondary Sources

- Alain Badiou (2001) *Ethics: An Essay on the Understanding of Evil*, Peter Hallward trans, Verso.
- Alain Badiou (2003) *Saint Paul: The Foundation of Universalism*, Ray Brassier trans, Stanford University Press.
- Joseph Campbell (1973) *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, Princeton University Press.
- Roshan De Silva Wijeyeratne (nd) 'Speculating on the Possibility of a Buddhist Law of State in Classical Theravada Buddhism', Griffith Law School, Griffith University, Brisbane (unpublished paper on file with author).
- Lois H Gresh and Robert Weinberg (2002) *The Science of Superheroes*, John Wiley and Sons.
- Mary Henderson (1997) *Star Wars: The Magic of Myth*, Bantam.
- Søren Kierkegaard (1972) *Works of Love*, David F Swenson and Lillian Marvin Swenson trans, Kennikat Press.
- Frank Miller (1986) *The Dark Night Returns*, DC Comics.
- Andrew Peters (2005) *Holiness Without the Law*, AE & LA Peters Outreach Enterprises.
- Timothy D Peters (2007) 'Allusions to Theology: I, Robot, Universalism and the Limits of the Law' 11 *Law/Text/Culture* forthcoming.
- Richard Reynolds (1994) *Superheroes: A Modern Mythology*, University Press of Mississippi.
- Slavoj Žižek (2001) *On Belief*, Routledge.
- Slavoj Žižek (2000) *The Fragile Absolute — or Why is the Christian Legacy Worth Fighting For?*, Verso.
- Slavoj Žižek (2006) *The Parallax View*, MIT Press.

### Films and TV Series

- Batman and Robin* (1997) directed by Joel Schumacher, Warner Bros; DVD, 2005.
- Batman Begins* (2005) directed by Christopher Nolan, Warner Bros.

---

<sup>99</sup> Galatians 4:7.

*Batman Forever* (1995) directed by Joel Schumacher, Warner Bros; DVD, 2005.

*Batman Returns* (1992) directed by Tim Burton, Warner Bros; DVD, 2005.

*Batman: The Movie* (1989) directed by Tim Burton, Warner Bros; DVD, 2005.

*Batman* (1966–1968) TV series, USA, Directed by Robert Butler and James B Clark, written by Stanley Ralph Ross and Charles Hoffman.

*I, Robot* (2004) directed by Alex Proyas, Twentieth Century Fox.

*The Matrix* (1999) directed by Wachowski Brothers, Warner Bros.

*Star Wars: Episode III – Revenge of the Sith* (2005) directed by George Lucas, 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox.

*Star Wars: Episode IV – A New Hope* (1977), directed by George Lucas, 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox.

*Star Wars: Episode V – The Empire Strikes Back* (1980) directed by Irvin Kershner, 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox.

*Unbreakable* (2000) directed by M Night Shyamalan, Buena Vista International, 2000.

All biblical references are to the *New American Standard Translation*.