Masks of Infamy:

The About-faces in Christopher Nolan's *The Dark Knight*

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When, from one group to another, the plastic form [of the mask] is preserved, the semantic function is inverted. On the other hand, when the semantic function is retained, it is the plastic form that is inverted.

Claude Levi-Strauss, *The Way of the Masks*

[The] emotions I perform through the mask (the false persona) that I adopt can in a strange way be more authentic and truthful than what I assume that I feel in myself.

Slavoj Žižek, *How to Read Lacan*

In Tim Burton's *Batman* (1989), the opening credits sequence maps the contours of what appears to be some undecipherable structure, the camera sliding along its walls, curves, and grooves, which turn out to index the chest symbol of the film's title character. This sequence suggests that this sign, or rather the idea for it, emerges from a center, as it traces out the canals, cavities, ridges, sockets, and nerves of the splanchnocranium or facial skeleton. The stylization of Gotham City in the film—a strange mixture of the Gothic, Expressionist, and Art Deco—also suggests that its grotesqueness rises from the spirit of its vain consumerist citizens, its corrupt officials, and its Mafioso industrialists. These sets find their counterpart in Batman's costume, which is also animalistic, anthropomorphic, and steely-robotic all at once. It too contains a centre, reclusive millionaire Bruce Wayne (Michael Keaton), who, as one youngster in the set-up to the film's first action scene suggests, can right the "wrong direction" that Gotham society is taking. In contrast, Christopher Nolan's *The Dark Knight* (2008) eschews the notion of a centre, no one truly inhabiting the character's costume or its symbolic vesture. In this update, everything wears a mask, and the film implies that there is nothing under these masks. As Renata Salecl makes clear, "when the subject sacrifices his desire to the Ideal, when he completely subordinates himself to symbolic identity and takes on a symbolic mask, it is in this mask that

one can discern his desire" (11). As desire traverses our symbolic identities, it undergoes a continuous deformation, transcoding the qualities of the flesh and stretching them into such "externalities" as our moral ideals, spatial ensembles, ideological coordinates, aesthetic sensibilities, and social outfits. The desire of the characters in *The Dark Knight* remains mobile, acentric, and indeterminate, impossible to neatly situate or describe in somatic or representational terms alone. The masks these characters wear rather span these terms and thus carry the stamp of their topological relation to the face.

Take Batman (Christian Bale), for instance. His costume functions in three ways: first, to cover Bruce Wayne's face, to mask his *identity*; then to shield his flesh, to mask his *vulnerability*; and finally to terrify his enemies, in other words, to mask his *humanity*. Moreover, Batman growls rather than speaks, and speaks only to flatly deliver imperatives or convey information of a rather serious nature. This voice is also a mask[i], yet another form of image-management, as it serves to contrast the insipidities and supercilious tone coming from Bruce Wayne's mouth. Unlike Michael Keaton's take on the character, full of anguish and self-obsession in and out of the costume, Christian Bale's Bruce Wayne is the costume of Batman rather than its centre, its aloof, careless, and womanizing appearance a stratagem to make Gotham think it impossible that this man, despite his resources and traumatic adolescence, might ever entertain such vigilante ambitions. An objection to the claim that *The Dark Knight* de-centres its subject might suggest that Bruce Wayne's interactions with associates like Alfred Pennyworth (Michael Caine) or Lucius Fox (Morgan Freeman) index or reveal his "real character." However, these scenes show us that this "real" Bruce Wayne is only the most real-seeming mask in the film: this normal, thoughtful side to the character, free from maladjustment or social dysfunction, masks the inhuman drive and the unnatural ability to fight multiple criminals at once despite nagging injuries and mental strain. Unlike in Burton's film, where the symbol rises out of an "inner nature," in Nolan's film "inner nature" is merely another symbol, a supplement to a chain of identities (superhero-rake-everyman). The mask, then, as it shields Batman's face from trauma, re-contours the "inner nature" of the *skeletofacial*, turning the skull inside out so that this mask terrifies enemies, as it exoskeletally suggests the *Totenkopf* or *memento mori* underneath the face it covers.

The Joker features as the main villain in *Batman* and *The Dark Knight*. In the first film, Jack Napier (Jack Nicholson) falls into a vat of chemicals that somehow discolour his skin and

twist his mouth into a smile. These disfigurements, though, even as they caricature the superhero associations of the mask, also function to disguise the centre of this character: Bruce Wayne manages to access Napier's crime records and psychological profile, and this information, more than indicative of the "inner nature" responsible for the madcap antics, clothing, and dialogue of this character, resituates the Joker at the centre of Batman's own inception. Wayne reminisces, concocting a phantasmatic scenario of Napier murdering his mother and father on their way out of a movie theatre, the ultimate re-elaboration of a "screen memory[ii]". In Nolan's film, though, a more ferocious Joker (Heath Ledger), self-describing as an "agent of chaos," wears masks with no such psychological or autobiographical depth underneath them. This Joker, who uses "war-paint," constructs the mask as superficial, a stylistic contrivance rather than some conceivable outcome of a near-fatal accident.

The film refuses to authorise an "origin story" for this villain. When about to carve a smile into a victim's face, the Joker often asks, "Wanna know how I got these scars?". For example, while sticking a switchblade down a mobster's throat, he narrates this story:

> My father was... a drinker. And a fiend. And one night he goes off crazier than usual. Mommy gets the kitchen knife to defend herself. He doesn't like that. Not one bit. So— me watching—he takes the knife to her, laughing while he does it! Turns to me, and he says, "Why so serious, son?" Comes at me with the knife... "Why so serious?" He sticks the blade in my mouth...

Later in the film, though, while accosting Rachel Dawes (Maggie Gyllenhaal), Gotham's assistant district attorney, the Joker fabricates a different account of the scars:

> So I had a wife, beautiful, like you, who tells me I worry too much. Who tells me I ought to smile more. Who gambles and gets in deep with the sharks... Look at me! One day, they carve her face. And we have no money for surgeries. She can't take it. I just want to see her smile again. I just want her to know that I don't care about the scars. So I stick a razor in my mouth and do this...

The scars themselves thus come to function as masks, in the Nietzschean sense of demanding another mask on top of them[iii]. As a different sort of mask, more a theatrical device, they draw attention to the circles of the eyes, the whiteness of the skin, and the contraction of the mouth, and thus as *myofacial* retrace the expressions of the mimetic muscles. This "mask" enables the Joker to try on multiple origins, extending the efferent motor functions of these muscles to make

even criminal acts seem conducive to a wide grin, while mocking at and decentralising such ideas as "self," "causality," or "truth." *The Dark Knight*, through the figure of the Joker, more than re-qualifies the content of the origin story; rather the film unmasks its fundamentally fictive, multisemic, unreliable nature. In doing so, it makes radically eccentric one of the staples of the superhero genre; the origin story factors in *Batman* and such other films as *Superman* (1978), *Spider-Man* (2002), *Hellboy* (2004), *Iron Man* (2008), and Nolan's own franchise reboot *Batman Begins* (2005). *The Dark Knight,* in fact, calls into question the authenticity of the first film's title and narrative. It renders that film as more than a retelling of the title character's origins; it renders it as another "mask," covering up the fact that it is as unreliable, context-driven, and "made up" as any of the Joker's dramatic asides.

The Dark Knight differs from these origin stories on the surface, though, since its Gotham City seems utterly realistic, with transnationals dotting the skyline and *noir*-ish slums, tenements, and alleyways creeping alongside them. This urban realism too is a mask, though. Gotham City and Hong Kong, where an important narrative device and action set-piece occur, wear each other's cultural trappings. The Joker, for example, walks in on a meeting of Gotham crime-lords as they teleconference with a Chinese accountant wanting to secure their collective assets. The mise-en-scène re-creates the criminal atmospheres of such East Asian comic adaptations as *Oldboy* (2003) and *Ichi the Killer* (2001). Batman tracks the accountant to Hong Kong, whisking the captive away from Chinese authorities with a skyhook. The entire scene occurs in the skyscraper of the LSI Holdings Corporation, the resemblance of its stealth, surveillance, and telecommunication technologies to those of Wayne Enterprises suggesting that, under the rule of global capitalism, Gotham City and Hong Kong function reciprocally as each other's mask. As Andrew Sarris notes in a review of the film:

> Yet at a time when all social systems are veering toward moral bankruptcy, […] Gotham City is presented for the first time in Batman movie history as a city with global connections, and not merely as a self-contained abstraction of a city with its own hermetically sealed morality and innocence. (2)

The Dark Knight transitions from an action set-piece in a car multi-storey that showcases Batman's expertise in martial arts to a scene with LHI trying to negotiate a deal with Bruce Wayne and Lucius Fox. These scenes obviously consist of "global connections" while also

motioning towards the "abstraction" of the conceptual status of the "city," a reminder that the mask often functions to deceive.

In *On Belief,* Slavoj Žižek argues that the mask represents the correlative of feces, in that these two objects take over one's inner nature, exteriorizing something from the subject that seems alien to it. In short, the mask assumes "a life of its own" even as it compels certain modes of conduct out of its wearer (62). Batman exemplifies the subject's "extimate" relation with the mask, which, as the mark of such "external compulsion," can only assume consistency in relation to an "inner formless body" (63). When *The Dark Knight* drops the fighting technique of Hong Kong action films into a Western-style urban shootout in the car deck, it dislocates the origin, usage, and conventional meaning of these cultural forms, which require someone "formless," such as Bruce Wayne, to at once contain them and still embody their appearance. In the film, then, the mask, or rather this technique, does not take over Batman's inner nature so much as it denatures this character, marking its "self" as always multiple and elsewhere. Similarly, the Gotham or otherwise metropolitan cityscape represents the mobilisation, rather than the site, of multinational interests. Gotham is more a *vector* than a *centre* of commerce, much as the mask sets forth the *transitivity* of cultural styling, not neatly its *concentration*, meaning that it extends to every facet of this character who can remove the costume, but never the mask[iv].

The scene in the Wayne Enterprises meeting room with the Chinese delegate makes this connection more concrete. In it, Wayne sleeps through the meeting and after it informs Fox that the deal is off owing to LHI's dodgy financials. This feint, itself another mask, suggests the eccentricity and the simultaneous convergence-divergence of this character's identities: the useless multimillionaire displaces on site the global citizen and the vigilante crime-fighter, those "satellites" that nonetheless direct this scene to its ethical and narrative resolution. The mask, then, while it dissimulates as "realistic," in its relation to Gotham and Hong Kong also functions as an expansive net of relays, rather than as some colonizing agent (which necessarily implies something intrinsic to colonize). To track down the Joker, Batman taps into the city's communications network, transforming its signals into sonar-driven computer simulacra of the actions and locations of everyone there. This scene, which at first seems one more mask, the digital mockup of urban space, more significantly exposes what the streets of Gotham and the commercial districts of Hong Kong conceal: the information web or net that remains "everywhere and nowhere," structuring the transit and activity of men, money, and materials

from relays in constant circulation, who are themselves without any determining centre. The "real" Gotham only masks its own digital modelling, the computer systems simulating, assessing, calculating, and controlling its traffic flows, asset shares, and structural redesigns. *The Dark Knight*, then, does not merely mask or screen the city's modern internationalist realities; its special effects suggest that the city *is* these effects, *is* really only another composition of computer-generated images.

Of course, the "wiretapping" in the film seems an overt reference to one of the controversies of the George W. Bush regime: the codification of the right of federal agents to monitor the communication channels of terrorist suspects without first obtaining a court warrant. Andrew Klavan in *The Wall Street Journal* describes the film as "a conservative movie about the war on terror" that dramatises "the values and necessities that the Bush administration cannot seem to articulate" (A15). Its script at times certainly seems to valorise this doctrine. Outside of its fairly overt references to wiretapping and domestic terrorism, for example, a voiceover in the film asks the viewer to take "faith" in the symbolic efficacy and rightness of its title superhero, metaphorically nominal of the "superpower" status of U.S. foreign interventionism: "Sometimes the truth isn't good enough, sometimes people deserve more. Sometimes people deserve to have their faith rewarded." Of course, the 2003 State of the Union speech also manipulatively sentimentalises "the goodness and idealism and faith of the American people" (5). Still, David Bordwell cautions against such "Zeitgeist" readings of the film, claiming them misconstructions of the cinema's relation to current events, since its mainstream offerings during any one release season cover a number of topics meant to draw in viewers multilaterally from different cultures, class sectors, and sensibilities. In fact, analogies with the Bush administration underestimate or fail to consider Lucius Fox's disgust over Batman's invasive use of surveillance technologies. He tenders his resignation from Wayne Enterprises over it, effective upon the Joker's apprehension. *The Dark Knight*, though, more than suggests in this scene the violation of a democratic social contract; it speaks to a near Kantian notion of moral duty, where the subject makes the Law the imperative of its desire over and above its more appetitive or "pathological" interests. In a sense, since this desire seems clearly unattainable to the subject, it comes to take the very substance of desire as its desire, as Alenka Zupančič observes:

[The] ethics of desire is the ethics of fidelity to a […] fundamental lack that introduces a gap between the Thing and things, and reminds us of the fact that beyond all ready-to-hand objects, there is "someThing" which alone would make our life worth living. (240)

The rather quotidian displays of the Gothamites on Fox's computer monitors thus function as masks of the moral law that Batman must traverse in order for it to dovetail into such an ethics of desire.

At first glance, this scene asks the viewer to make a similar gesture in condoning this character's actions, which squares the mask, the Law, the images on the screen, and the digital skins on the monitors as instances of the *dermatofacial*, each concealing the inner from the outer, or "someThing" among many things. The film thus contains several Batman impersonators, civilians who wear the costume and sympathise with its ethic—as one of them tells the Joker, Batman's "a symbol that we don't have to be afraid of scum like you"—although none of them in the slightest resembles the strength, intelligence, resourcefulness, or resilience of their inspiration. However, this interpretation refigures Bruce Wayne as an "original," as the arbiter of the costume's ethical meaning. As Zupančič argues, though, the moral law insists as a form rather than a set content, remaining stable in the face of contingencies even while it de-centres subjective experience, always requiring the subject to act as if it were to thereby universalise its choices. She writes that although the universal "achieves its determination" through the ethical subject, it also achieves its substance as an ethics of this subject's fantasy, so that "we cannot deny all ethical dignity to someone who is ready to die (and to kill) in order to realize [this] fantasy" (61-2, 254). Batman thus refuses to offhandedly murder the Joker, even though such as act might seem sensibly utilitarian, since doing so means desiring everyone in Gotham to resort to such violent expediencies. The citizens on the screens certainly represent a "moral duty" worth fighting for, owing to their smallish interests, not despite them, making the universal itself a mask for the right to chase down our individual desires in our own individual spaces. The film's overtures to the Bush doctrine must also function as a mask, not for its more critical or subversive agenda so much as for the dubiousness of whatever the universal "rewards" for complying with the demands of moral duty. Batman's symbolic wager calls on Gotham to freely choose such service, which amounts to following the course of their desires in reclusive spaces where they can cause no significant trouble[v]. In short, *The Dark Knight* does not condone "state of emergency" complaisance or demonstrate any real ambivalence to it. It wears current events to

enlist the viewer's desires in the service of the cinema, at once to shut out "dutiful" involvement in the ethicopolitcal scene and to compel re-seeing it from its own eyeholes. After all, the cinema shares something in common with the mask, in that once inside them everything else around the corners of our eyes darkens.

A serious misimpression of *The Dark Knight* comes about if we describe in such Kantian terms Batman's refusal to allow the Joker to fall from a skyscraper under construction to his death, as in Burton's film, where the Nicholson version falls from a cathedral. Harvey Dent (Aaron Eckhart), the district attorney who turns into the villain Two-Face when the Joker disfigures the right side of his body, restructures the opposition of moral duty to pathological interest in the film in three ways. First, the name Two-Face connotes a mask, a deceptive appearance concealing ulterior motives. He represents Batman's obverse as Gotham's "White Knight." The superhero's moral strength commutes into Gothamites' self-involvement, which rich socialite and gossip columnist darling Bruce Wayne typifies. Harvey Dent reverses this commutation, confusing ruthless careerism with moral duty and thus earning the nickname "Two-Face" as an Internal Affairs operative. His alter ego in turn sacrifices reputation, comfort, and institutional sanction in summarily executing the maniacs, corrupt officers, and vigilantes responsible for the unsafe condition of Gotham's streets. His death inspires Batman to assume another mask, this time culpability for these extralegal deeds, for two reasons: for moral ones, so that Harvey Dent remains a White Knight in the eyes of citizens, and also for more pathological ones, so thenceforth criminals will fear the Dark Knight as fully capable of murder.

Moreover, since the White Knight and the Dark Knight represent two sides of the same coin, their relationship recasts that of Batman and the Joker as two ends of the same face-card. In their climactic fight, Batman catches the Joker from falling and holds him upside-down. Strangely, though, the subsequent close-up of the Joker frames him right side -up. He succeeds, we might infer, in turning Gotham and the film's globalist imaginary upside-down. After all, at one moment in the film the Joker sets afire a stack of money ironically in the shape of a skyscraper. More than a terrorist or an anarchistic agent of chaos, though, the Joker mocks Batman's inability to *let go*, exposing the Law's symptomatic or obscene desire *not to* eliminate the criminal as its driving force. Whereas the Joker in the scene seemingly wears an expression of sheer elation, Batman wears one of anguish and consternation. What if, once again, though, these expressions were masks of each other? In this case, the Joker's smile must at the same time

appear to the careful viewer as upside-down, as a frown of displeasure, since Batman frustrates the Joker's desire to make Gotham's two Knights over into his own murderous images. Batman, whom the film also frames right side-up, must then also appear to smile vexatiously to the Joker. His restraint certainly does not make the Law into some absolute or transcendental form, as it at once mocks and confirms the Joker's thesis that

> This is what happens when an unstoppable force meets an immovable object. You are truly incorruptible, aren't you? Huh? You won't kill me out of some misplaced sense of self-righteousness. And I won't kill you because you're just too much fun. I think you and I are destined to do this forever.

The course of their dialogue, though, contradicts the surface contradiction of "self-righteousness" with "fun," when the Joker informs Batman, "I took Gotham's White Knight, and I brought him down to our level." This scene thus takes the self-abnegating desire for moral order and "brings it down" to an ultimately sadistic taking of satisfaction (away) from others. The incomplete skyscraper, the setting of their dialogue, stands in for Two-Face, "the real Harvey Dent" on whom the Joker stakes "the battle for Gotham's soul." It suggests the Law in its radical incompleteness requires an obscene supplement and vice versa, and also that it must remain this way since it motions towards the solipsistic enjoyment of its subjects, which, as the computer surveillance system shows us, rebounds on to the intersubjective, even if through the mediation of a screen.

Two-Face finally de-authenticates the Joker-Batman relation as a thematic opposition of chaos and order. He flips a trademark coin so as to make decisions: its undamaged face side dictates a merciful resolution to a conflict, whereas its other side, with scars resembling Two-Face's own disfigurement, dictates a deadlier one. If Batman channels chaos into making a duty out of restoring order to the city, and the Joker order into the romanticisation of chaos, then Two-Face represents their synergy in the mode of *chance*. He thus embodies one of the internal contradictions of the capitalist adventure, namely the economic measurement of the ultra-dynamic and always chancy forces that determine market rates, shareholder confidence, and money values, estimates vital to corporations like LHI, Wayne Enterprises, and Warner Bros. Cornelius Castoriadis argues that the study of economics, even though it cannot account for all those variables that affect the circulation of wealth, nonetheless functions to rationalise capitalism and to make it seem scientific and critiques of it wrongheaded (56). He further argues

that "systems of simultaneous equations" work in this economy exactly as a "disguise of scientific exactness" that masks an "endless succession of changing imbalances" (61). Two-Face, more than embodying such "imbalances," represents the structural affinities of this science with its underside, the violence, avarice, and threat of collapse that often makes market speculation as contingent as flipping a coin. His characterisation also fleshes these structural affinities out, with the White Knight the face of sociocommercial self-correction and Two-Face one of shocks, ethical shortcuts, and inner conflicts. The two faces of Two-Face together resemble a sort of comedy-tragedy mask. They function more so as a mask of infamy, as a constant reminder of Two-Face's flaws, errors, and moral failures, and thus as an instrument of chastisement. His mask animates the *neurofacial*, marking certain twists in the subjectively relative state of embodiment. Its dystonic exterior registers more than facial spasms, cramps, and soft tissue injuries; it registers the face's deviation from a centre, its momentary freedom from the usual surface appearance of things. All three characters, Two-Face, Batman, and the Joker, reflexively and mutlilocally represent the masks of capitalist, micropolitical, and technological development. At the same time, we must take care not to reduce the film to ideological mystification or false consciousness, which simply adds another mask to the very notion of a mask, a fantasy of its "base" meaning.

This essay therefore wears its own mask: it is not an exercise in the deconstruction of *The Dark Knight*, the cinema, or even the face, as though there was no ontological specificity to any of them. While it does not argue for the face's empirical givenness[vi], it also does not simplistically and unoriginally define the face as a Nietzschean mask, a crust of interpretations inconstant to the "spirit" of a text. In spite of its equivocal functions, the mask images the very redundancy of faciality[vii], as an accent or compass of its anatomisation. *The Dark Knight* suggests that the mask repositions the skeletal, the integumentary, and the neuro-muscular, those annexes for signification, subject-formation, and the symbolic manifold of the flesh. The masks in the film altogether comprise the topofacial, their flatness mapping into the three-dimensionality of globalist, ideological, and intrabodily space. The flesh, the screen, those spaces —each operates as the other's facelift, much as the masks of the characters in the film remain fungible, their smiles always invertible into a frown, their frowns always capable of changing into a smile once again.

[i]Endnotes

[ii] Few commentators on the film notice that Christian Bale seems to imitate Clint Eastwood's gravelly voice in *The Dark Knight*. This manner of speaking, along with making certain wisecracks throughout the film, makes Batman more of a parodist than the Joker, who in contrast seems rather somber, taking advantage of any opportunity to make up some distressing story about his roots as a sociopath.

[ii] Sigmund Freud defines such scenes as "displaced memories from which the essential element has for the most part been omitted" (119). They do not seem to emerge from an indiscernible centre, though, as they rather take on form at the moment of their arousal (126).

[iii] In *Beyond Good and Evil*, Friedrich Nietzsche famously writes, "Every profound spirit needs a mask: even more, around every profound spirit a mask is growing continually, owing to the constantly false, namely *shallow*, interpretation of every word, every step, every sign of life he gives" (51). In this way, every opinion waxes into "a hideout, every word also a mask" (229).

[iv] Margaret Morse theorises three features of "nonspace," the exchange of virtuality and actuality and the derealisation of everyday experience and representational space. Specifically, these features include its displacement from its own surroundings, its dislocation from the nodes of orientation in a cityscape or countryside, and its disengagement from the reality of face-to-face contact (197-200). Therefore spaces like malls or freeways operate as "vectors," "channels of motion" that subjects experience as relay-points rather than destinations (199). *The Dark Knight* and many contemporary action films enlarge this notion, applying it to their entire diegetic universes, their representational systems, or their insecure referential anchors in social reality.

[v] A November 8, 2001 George W. Bush speech to Atlanta police, postal, and firefighter representatives valorises the fact that Americans "are going about their daily lives, working and shopping and playing […] going to movies and to baseball games" as "the ultimate repudiation of terrorism."

[vi] According to Paul de Man, the face appears a rhetorical construction of the infant subject, involving the synecdochic assemblage of its features, eyes, ears, nose, mouth, and so forth (92).

[vii] Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari dispense with the Freudian transposition of the sex organs onto the face in dreams or artistic works, arguing in *A Thousand Plateaus* that the face operates as "redundancy," with its "wall" the screen of signification and its features the rim-holes of subjectivity that together re-territorialise the rest of the body. They write, "Faces are not basically individual; they define zones of frequency or probability" and also "loci of resonance that select the sensed or mental reality and make it conform in advance to a dominant reality." They conclude that faces are at once surfaces "in redundancy with the redundancies of signifiance or frequency" and also maps in

redundancy with "those of resonance or subjectivity" (168, 170).

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