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Everything has been done before, nothing is original

BATMAN Films



Introduction

For this essay I intend to look at why superhero films keep getting re-made or re-invented and in particular the Batman films. So why is this genre of film so popular that the film studios keep churning them out?. This is what I intend to investigate and look at. I will also write why I think Batman films are still popular today in 2011.

Batman TV Series & Film

I remember sitting down at home on a Saturday morning and watching Batman on Channel 4 in the 1980's. Back then Batman was more camp and slapstick comedy with Adam West playing the role of Bruce Wayne/Batman alongside Burt Ward who played his sidekick Robin. Each week I would tune in to watch the crime fighting duo battle against the master criminal minds of the Joker, The Penguin, The Riddler and Catwoman and many more to protect Gotham City. Each week the crime-fighting duo would thwart these master criminal minds plans, but only once they had been in a fight with them. At the end of each show there used to be a fight between the duo and the criminals. This was done in a slapstick way every time someone was hit big cartoon graphics saying "Bam!", "POW!" and "Crrr-Rash!" flashed up across the screen to indicate they had been hit. For along time that was how Batman was portrayed on tv and in comic books.

Batman (1989)

This all changed however in 1989 when Batman came back to the big screen with a bang. Gone were the tight grey tights and campness of the 1960's tv series and film. This time around Batman was portrayed as a darker character with an armoured body suit. The 1989 film was directed by Tim Burton and distributed by the Warner Bros Studios. Tim Burton cast Michael Keaton for the role of Bruce Wayne/Batman. Burton and Keaton had worked together before in their 1988 film Beetlejuice that Burton had directed. Burton chose Keaton for the part not only because they had worked together before but Kaveney (2008:p236) he wanted Batman's costume to be bigger than the man inside the costume. Burton wanted an actor who could play the role in such a way that know one would ever suspect Bruce Wayne of being Batman and because Michael Keaton wasn't that big in size he was ideal for the part. Compared to Adam West's portrayal of Batman which was camp and over the top Keaton's portrayal of Batman was more dark and edger that that of before. Yes I liked watching the Batman tv series when I was younger but when I first saw this new Batman at the pictures in 1989 I soon forgot about the tv series. I was a fan instantly not only because of Keaton's performance as Batman but because of Jack Nicholson's magnificent performance as the Joker. Back in the 1960's tv series the Joker was played by Cesar Romero and I liked his portrayal of the Joker but Nicholson's performance was far more convincing. Kaveney(2008:p238) says:

“The result is certainly magnificent in its way: Nicholson has a gift for the sinister and the demonic and for making a line as innocent as ‘Haven’t they heard of the healing power of laughter?’ something wondrously appalling”.

I just thought he was the right man to play that part and that came across on screen. For me and many others Nicholson’s performance as the Joker made the film the hit it was at the box office. Batman (1989) grossed \$42, 705, 884 in the USA and £2, 058, 159 in the UK in its opening weekend at the box office.

How did the 1989 version of Batman compare to that of the 1960’s Batman?

Well to start Batman’s costume in the 1960’s tv show and film was very plain and tight fitting and looked like the Batman costume that appeared in the comics at that time. The costume worn by Adam West in the 1960’s was dark blue and grey with flashes of yellow on it. His body suit was a tight-fitting material with dark blue leather pants over the top of it. His cape and mask were also dark blue and he wore dark blue boots and gloves. Over the top of his pants he wore his yellow utility belt which contained his gadgets and gizmo’s. Attached to his chest was his bat emblem which was yellow and black.

Batman’s 1989 costume was considerably different to that of its 1960’s counter part although it did keep some aspects of what had come before. The costume worn by Micheal Keaton in the 1989 Batman movie was more like body armour than that of its predecessor. This costume was all black apart from the bat emblem and yellow utility belt. Gone were the tight-fitting pants and body suit these had been replaced by an armoured chest panel that was moulded to make him look muscular. This costume was also in leather but didn’t look as camp as the 1960’s costume. Another thing that is noticeable are the sets in the 1960’s film the sets are vibrant in colour and show off the style we associate with the 1960’s. Compared to the 1989 sets which are a lot darker and more gothic. In fact according to a passage in Kaveney (2008:p240)

“Burton, like others before him, saw that the Gotham of the comics was essentially gothic creation, and he went with what that gave him”.

Another noticeable difference was The Batmobile. In the 1960’s tv show and film the Batmobile was more like a car that had just had bits added to it. In fact the car they used was according to the website http://batman.wikia.com/wiki/Batmobile_1960s_series was a Lincoln Futura which they modified and turned into the Batmobile. According to the website http://www.batmobilehistory.com/1966_batmobile.php

“The Futura worked perfectly as a Batmobile as it had many “bat” features built into the design already, such as the long fins and bubble canopies. According to Barris, he further enhanced the theme by converting the nose into an integrated bat mask, a first for the car. He also opened the wheel wells, and modified the Futura’s fins into subtle bat wings by extending their leading edges into doors and scalloping the trail edges. Once bodywork was complete, the car was painted and gloss black with red trim to accentuate the various lines of the car”.

One thing that is also a feature of this Batmobile is its rear rocket thruster. This also appears on the 1989 Batmobile however that is the only thing that remains from the 1960’s version. This new Batmobile is a lot different to what had come before. According to the website http://www.batmobilehistory.com/1989_batmobile.php Tim Burton and production designer Anton Furst.

“Wanted the car to be unlike any previous incarnation, a combination of brute force and classic design aesthetics. In his design, Furst managed to capture the essence of a Batmobile while providing all new design elements. The bat-mask was gone entirely from his design. In its place, the nose featured a large jet turbine intake flanked by sweeping, mandible like front fenders. Cold air intakes for the afterburner were mounted ahead of the rear fenders. The rear of the car had a rounded, heavy look that was influenced by cars of the 1930”.

So this new Batmobile was a lot more advanced than its predecessor. This can also be said of most of the things that appeared in the 1989 Batman movie because times had moved on and technology was more advanced to that of the 1960’s.

Batman Returns (1992)

After the success of Batman (1989) Burton and Keaton returned with Batman Returns in 1992. Batman Returns starred Michael Keaton once again as Batman and starred Danny Devito as the Penguin and Michelle Pfeiffer as Catwoman. This film was darker than the 1989 film. The opening of this film is Kaveney (2008:pg240)

“Pure Burton and might almost have been an out-take from Edward Scissorhands (1990) or one of Burton’s stop-motion films: the hideously deformed child that will grow up to be the Penguin is abandoned by his upper crust parents, themselves no oil paintings, and dropped neatly in a cradle into one of Gotham’s rivers, where he is swept away into an underground world of sewers and concrete caves that serve as their meeting points”.

After defeating the Joker in his last outing Batman comes up against the Penguin in this follow up film. The Penguin played by Danny Devito is a warped and deformed character that wants to be accepted by the people of Gotham into their society. Also starring alongside him is Christopher Walken who plays Max Shreck. Max Schreck is a corrupt businessman who tries to help The Penguin become Mayor of Gotham and they try to make Batman look bad to the people of Gotham. Also starring in this film is Michelle Pfeiffer who plays Selina Kyle/Catwoman. Selina according to Kaveney (2008:pg242) is:

“Almost a caricature of the good secretary with the hopeless life, saying, ‘Hi honey, I’m home’, like Lucy Ricardo every night she returns to a flat empty except for knick-knacks, mirrors, soft toys and clothes. Sanity has given her no identity, she is the daughter of a demanding mother and the secretary of a monstrous boss, and the only relationship she has is with her cat. When she is thrown to her death, it’s the cats of Gotham who revive her, in a scene that makes no literal sense, but who cares?. She is the spirit of female vengeance and the cat and she are also suddenly bizarrely sexual, whether in the leatherette costumes she makes for herself or in the identity of Selina, which has now become even more of a mask for the real her than Bruce Wayne is by now for the Batman”.

For me this film wasn’t as good as the first film. I think this was due to I enjoyed the first film so much and especially Jack Nicholson’s performance as the Joker. Don’t get me wrong Batman Returns is still a good film and this is proved by its opening weekend at the US box office taking in \$45, 687, 710 which is more than Batman (1989) took in its opening weekend. In the UK Batman Returns grossed £4, 307, 045 in its opening weekend which almost doubled its predecessor’s opening weekend at the UK box office.

Batman Forever (1995)

However after the success of the first two Batman movies things started to change for me. In came a new director Joel Schumacher for the next film Batman Forever in 1995. No longer was Michael Keaton playing the lead role after turning down the chance to reprise the role. This was according to the website <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0112462/faq#.2.1.5> he did not like the direction Warner Bros wanted to take the Batman franchise making them more family friendly and mainstream.

So out went Keaton and in came Val Kilmer to take over as Wayne/Batman. Schumacher cast Val Kilmer for the part because according to Kaveney (2008:pg245)

“The strength of his performance in Tombstone (1993); this is interesting because it helps to define what is peculiarly maladroit in his casting here. Kilmer was, indeed, extraordinary in Tombstone, playing, not the hero, but rather his eccentric doomed sidekick; Kilmer’s Doc Holiday is a wonderful foil to Kurt Russell’s deliberately stolid Wyatt Earp, a Southern gentleman rogue who swaps Latin tags with the Ringo Kid and mocks the cult of the quick draw with a small silver tankard. But this does not qualify him to play either Bruce Wayne, whom he makes vaguely petulant and spoiled, or the Batman, for whom he lacks the authority”.

For me he just wasn’t right for the role compared to Michael Keaton’s portrayal of Bruce Wayne/Batman. Also in this film Schumacher brought back Batman’s sidekick The Boy Wonder Robin who had not featured in the films since the 1960’s tv series and film. Schumacher cast Chris O’Donnell for the part of Robin and cast Tommy Lee Jones as Two-Face and Jim Carrey as The Riddler. Although the film was a success at the box office drawing in \$52, 784, 433 in the USA in its opening weekend and £7, 516, 864 in the UK. It was disliked by fans including myself on the Rotten Tomatoes review site it got 44% out of a 100 and Empire online’s reviewer Ian Nathan gave it 3 out of 5 stars and called it in his review Nathan, <http://www.empireonline.com/reviews/reviewcomplete.asp?FID=131447>

“Camp Bat-flick, hasn’t aged very well”.

If fans and critics thought Batman Forever (1995) was bad that was nothing compared to what followed.

Batman & Robin (1997)

In 1997 the Warner Bros Studios hit us with Batman & Robin. Because of the success of Batman Forever (1992) at the box office they thought we the fans wanted more. Even though critics and fans alike panned it Batman & Robin (1997) saw George Clooney take over the role as Bruce Wayne/Batman from Val Kilmer. Chris O’Donnell kept his role as Robin and Alicia Silverstone came aboard as Batgirl. Uma Thurman who played Poison Ivy and Arnold Schwarzenegger who played Mr Freeze played Batman’s enemies in this film. This film is over the top and as far too many one line jokes especially Schwarzenegger’s Mr Freeze he has one liner after another. According to Kaveney (2008:pg246)

“Batman & Robin tries to recapture the campy archness of the 1960’s television show, but has a catchpenny nastiness that deprives it of the innocence that went with that camp”.

For many others and me Batman & Robin was the worst Batman film of the five that had been made up to then. Critics and fans alike slated this film Empire online's reviewer Neil Jeffries gave it two stars out of five and said in his review on the website

<http://www.empireonline.com/reviews/review.asp?FID=131928>

"Camp end to a dreadful era for Schumacher at the helm of the Batman franchise. Let's hope he doesn't get his hands on it again".

Batman & Robin (1997) grossed \$42, 872, 606 in the USA at the box office in its opening weekend. It screened on 2, 934 screens in the opening weekend compared to Batman (1989) that screened on two screens and took \$42, 705, 884 in its opening weekend at the box office. So why was this? In my mind it was because the first two films were darker and not so light hearted compared to those that followed them.

Batman Begins (2005)

After the disappointments at the box office of Batman Forever and Batman & Robin no more Batman films were planned for release. However this changed in 2005 when Batman Begins hit cinema screens worldwide. Taking over as director for this new Batman movie was Christopher Nolan who had directed Memento (2000) and Insomnia (2002). In this new Batman movie we the audience are taken back to the beginning and shown how Bruce Wayne became Batman.

For this new reincarnation of the Batman franchise Nolan hired Christian Bale to play Bruce Wayne/Batman. Playing alongside Bale was a stellar cast of actors that included Michael Caine who played Wayne's Butler Alfred and Morgan Freeman who played Lucius Fox who is basically the man that runs Wayne Enterprises for Bruce Wayne. Also in this film Liam Neeson plays Henri Ducard. Ducard is Wayne's trainer and he is the man who teaches Wayne his martial art skills and how to fight. However it later turns out that Ducard is in fact one of Batman's greatest enemies Ra's al Ghul. Another well-known actor starring in this film is Gary Oldman who plays police sergeant Jim Gordon who later down the line becomes Commissioner Gordon. Apart from Ra's al Ghul Batman comes up against another villain in the shape of The Scarecrow who is played by Cillian Murphy.

This film for me is more like Tim Burton's Batman films because it is a lot darker than those made by Schumacher and gone have the one-liners. Its not so light hearted and camp like the films he made. This film was a huge success at the box office grossing \$48, 745, 440 in its opening weekend in the USA and £4, 427, 802 in the UK on its opening weekend. Batman was back and here to stay.

The Dark Knight (2008)

After the success of *Batman Begins* (2005) Nolan came back with *The Dark Knight* in 2008. *The Dark Knight* followed on from where *Batman Begins* ended. At the end of *Batman Begins* Gordon shows Batman a joker playing card so we the audience already know that *The Joker* is coming back. Once again Christian Bale plays the role of Wayne/Batman and Michael Caine and Morgan Freeman return. Gary Oldman is also back playing Gordon with Aaron Eckhart onboard playing Harvey Dent and later in the film Two-Face. However the main star of this film is the late Heath Ledger who plays the role of *The Joker*. For me Jack Nicholson's performance as *The Joker* in *Batman* (1989) would be hard to top but Ledger's performance did top it in my eyes and the critic's eyes. Matt McAllister a film reviewer for Total Sci Fi said of Ledger's performance McAllister, (2008), <http://www.totalscifionline.com/reviews/2268-the-dark-knight>

"But The Dark Knight was always going to be Heath Ledger's movie. Believe everything you've heard. His Joker is truly phenomenal, darker, funny, furtive, intense and utterly terrifying. This is the antithesis of a pantomime villain, with Ledger burning up the screen like James Dean's crazed cousin".

For many others and me this is the best Batman film to date. Christian Bale is outstanding as Bruce Wayne/Batman but the star of this film is Heath Ledger as *The Joker*. This film was a huge success at the box office and blew the previous *Batman Begins* (2005) out of the water grossing \$158, 411, 483 in its opening weekend in the USA and £11, 191, 824 in the UK in its opening weekend.

Conclusion

For me everything has been done before, nothing is original however the films and the actors performances get better each time the films are made apart from those made by Schumacher. So with another Batman film planned to hit the screens in 2012 Batman is still as popular as ever. So why'll this is the case the movie studios will keep churning them out because they know the Batman franchise will draw audiences into the cinemas and make them money. So my conclusion is yes everything has been done before, nothing is original but as long as audiences keep going to see these films the studios will keep making them or re-making them because they know this genre of film is still popular. So why'll this is the case you can expect to see more Batman films made in the future.

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