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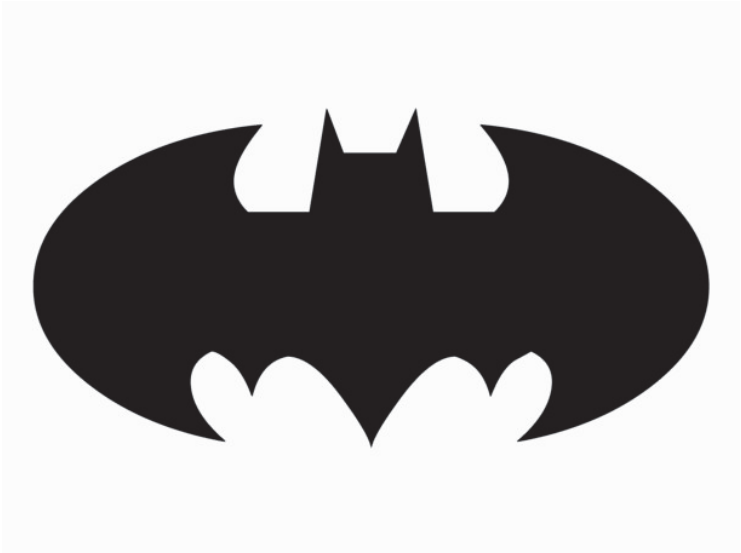
University of the Witwatersrand Master of Arts by Research

Batman: Arkham Asylum – A Cultural Icon Seen Through the Looking Glass



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DECLARATION STATEMENT

I declare that this dissertation is my own unaided work and that all sources have been accurately reported and acknowledged. It is being submitted for the Master of Arts degree at the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg and it has not previously in its entirety or in part been submitted at any university in order to obtain an academic qualification.

_____

David William Smith
March 2016

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Abstract

This dissertation examines how particular combinations of image and text in sequential art reflect specific social, historical and political contexts. The analysis of how meaning is constructed is done through consideration of three iterations of the Batman superhero character, and argues for an eventual postmodernisation of the character.

The first case study presented is the original version of Batman as it debuted in 1939, which naturally established much of the substance from which later depictions would take their cues. The second case study used is the "camp" 1960s TV series starring Adam West, which was influenced by the highly restricted Batman comics under the Comics Code Authority established in 1954. The main case study, and the central focus of this dissertation, is *Batman – Arkham Asylum* (1989), a graphic novel by Grant Morrison and Dave McKean, the latest of the three iterations, which represents the eventual disruption of the enforced or constructed harmony evident in the earlier versions of the character into a fracturing and fragmentation both of the world and the self. It is a version of Batman that privileges the interiority and psychological complexity of the character, representing a culmination of the 1980s shift toward a more mature audience with its incorporation of horror, violence and mental turmoil. These three examples are compared and contrasted, showing how each constructs a particular meaning using its own unique combination of image and text.

Having established a historicity for the character and having constructed an argument for how Batman as a cultural icon echoes shifts in society, the focus of the dissertation is transferred to a deeper analysis of *Arkham* and attempts to trace more explicitly its status as a postmodern text by examining its fragmentary nature, its use of intertextuality and how meaning in *Arkham* is constructed in the mind. Following this, an exploration of the central theme of madness in the graphic novel is provided in order to show how the work both critiques the representation of madness in fiction as well as how the liminal setting of the asylum functions as part of the postmodernisation of Batman by creating a "landscape of madness" where irrationality and the uncanny dominate reality, in contrast to the logical, "left-brain" treatment of Batman which had become common prior to *Arkham Asylum*.

The analysis of the three iterations is shaped by WTJ Mitchell's theories on image-text relationships and additionally by the principles of sequential art outlined by Scott McCloud. The postmodern theoretical framework is informed by John Docker's explorations of fragmentation, intertextuality, inversion and the Carnivalesque. Additionally, the writings of Lillian Feder and Michel Foucault will inform the discussion of madness in *Arkham*.

Key words: **Sequential Art, Batman, postmodernism, asylums, inversion, boundary-crossing, madness in fictive works, heurism, image & text**.

Introduction

"I see now the virtue in madness, for this country knows no law nor any boundary. I pity the poor shades confined to the Euclidean prison that is sanity. All things are possible here and I am what madness has made me. Whole. And complete. And free at last." - Amadeus Arkham, *Arkham Asylum*, 1989.

The Dark Knight. The Caped Crusader. The World's Greatest Detective. These epithets all belong to one of popular culture's most recognisable characters: Batman. The distinct cowled likeness of the character has become so firmly embedded in the public imagination that Batman has grown beyond his comic strip origins into a 20th Century cultural icon, with film and cartoon adaptations as well as novels, radio dramas, video games, toys, T-shirts and an almost endless amount of merchandise carrying his unique iconography. One does not need to be a reader of the comics to know about Batman or the fictional world he inhabits. He has become, to use the terminology of visual culture theorist W. J. T. Mitchell, a "living image" (2005: 10), a meta-picture with a life all his own outside of the medium of sequential art. Mitchell regards images as quasi-agents which reflect our own human desires back at us; they are complex objects which occupy multiple positions and identities during their "life-spans" (2005: 47). This dissertation will argue that over the past 77 years Batman has acquired a host of "identities", each with their own attendant attributes and functions within the time periods they were produced for. Images (as well as texts) are not always produced in the same way or under the same conditions, and thus I will argue that each version of Batman uses the combination of image and text differently according to the needs of its creators and the public it is created for. Using three case studies to demonstrate these shifts in aesthetics and characterisation, I will attempt to show how there has been a noticeable move towards postmodernisation and an eventual disruption of established conventions and a re-evaluation of the Batman character, culminating in works like *Batman – Arkham Asylum: A Serious House on Serious Earth* (1989) by Grant Morrison and Dave McKean, the central case study of this dissertation.

In order to establish that the changes occurring within Batman comics over the years reflect the particular social condition of their respective eras, it will first be necessary to establish a theoretical framework within which my argument can be situated. Thus the first chapter of the dissertation will introduce the theorists I have used as secondary sources as well as provide an explication of the theoretical concepts I will apply to my case studies. As an interdisciplinary study, it is crucial to define a concept-based methodology of this kind.

Above, I briefly mention W. J. T. Mitchell and his theory of "living images". Mitchell's text, *What Do Pictures Want?* (2005), examines the powerful responses humans have towards images by treating images as complex individuals with inner drives of their own. Mitchell attempts to "sound the idols with the tuning fork of critical language" (2005: 8), neither attempting to demystify images nor approach with them with false notions of animism. I will perform a similar analysis of Batman comics using some of Mitchell's theories on the way images change and perpetuate themselves over time, the way images reflect desire at their viewers and the "double consciousness" people have towards images, simultaneously acknowledging that they are not alive and yet at times behaving as if they were (2005: 7). Scott McCloud's theories on the visual iconography of comics are useful for this dissertation, particularly his theories on time, sound, colour, line, panel structure and realistic vs iconic representation. For example, the "cartoon-like" style of the early Batman comics has quite a different emotional affect to the distorted, expressionistic visuals of *Arkham*, making each suitable for different audiences respectively. A short description of each relevant theory will be distilled into a system of critical tools which can be applied to each iteration of Batman as a way of seeing how they each function as forms of sequential art. Additionally, Will Brooker's extensive study *Batman Unmasked: Analyzing a Cultural Icon* (2005) is useful for both establishing a historicity of Batman comics by looking at the socio-political conditions at the time of their creation and for informing a discussion of how Batman has become a cultural icon in a complex relationship with his readers.

Having defined my theoretical framework in the first chapter, giving me a conceptual "utility belt" of ideas with which to work, in the second chapter I apply these theories to three iterations of Batman. In the process I will establish a historicity of the character and how depictions of him have shifted over time in relation to society, and in doing so illustrate my central claim of an eventual postmodernisation and disruption of established conventions within the comics. A contextualisation and detailed study of each iteration will be provided, with a discussion of how/why the socio-political conditions of the time influenced each respective depiction and how they reflected a particular historical moment through their portrayal of the same character as he changed over several decades. The conceptual models defined in the first chapter will be employed to show particularly the differing ways in which the combination of image and text can result in alternate yet interrelated productive complexities.

The first example used will be the original version of Batman as he debuted in 1939, and I will discuss the influences which went into the construction of this unique character and I will additionally track some of the early alterations which took place in the first few years of publication, such as the introduction of Robin and the formation of Batman's moral code. The second iteration used as a case study will be the "camp" Batman of the 1960s, which was constrained by the rigid Comics Code Authority introduced in 1954 and so resulted in a more light-hearted, child-friendly tone. This version of Batman influenced the highly successful 1966-68 *Batman* TV series starring Adam West, which in turn influenced the comics and defined a conception of the character which has had a lasting impact on popular culture still seen today.

Finally, the third case study used will be the sombre, morally grey "Dark Knight" Batman of the 1980s. During this time Batman was redefined by a series of seminal works which embraced a mature, psychologically complex Batman plagued by self doubt and trauma, which its authors saw as a return to the noir origins of the character. This gradual reinvigoration resulted in a more postmodern Batman, which destabilized the earlier iterations through fragmentation and self-reflexive questioning, and which I contend is exemplified through works like *Arkham Asylum*. This once-off story takes place outside of the overarching Batman meta-narrative and presents a complete disintegration of the psyche by placing the protagonist inside an asylum, creating a surreal "landscape of madness" through prose and artwork, where the stability of reality is discarded in favour of irrationality and mysticism, which echoes the postmodern belief that meaning is constructed in the mind. By traversing such psychological terrain, Batman is confronted by his own traumatic experiences and made stronger by the "trial" which Arkham represents, emerging from the ordeal with a more fluid understanding of madness less defined by strict binaries.

Having established a historicity for Batman stories as a continuum of aesthetic and ideological shifts, the third chapter examines *Arkham Asylum*'s postmodern characteristics in more detail by performing a close reading of the graphic novel's structure as well as its constituent parts. This will be achieved by mapping the development of the narrative and Batman's passage through the asylum, which simultaneously reflects his inner psychological journey. The parallel narrative of secondary protagonist Amadeus Arkham will also be discussed, as well as how the two narratives interweave at several key points and eventually wind to a climax, diverging once again with drastic changes for both central characters. The

complex, multi-layered meanings present in the narrative will be subjected to scrutiny and some of the major symbols will be examined and their overall effect evaluated. Major characters in the text will be analysed, as well as the roles they play in the narrative and what they represent more broadly. The so-called "Feast of Fools" image will be used as a working example which illustrates some postmodern characteristics of *Arkham* and how it exemplifies these fractured qualities of this graphic novel through its usage of both visuals and text. The theoretical models established in the first chapter will be applied to this image in more rigorous detail than the panels discussed in the second chapter in order to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the way in which *Arkham* can be read as a radical postmodernisation of sequential art in superhero comics. Additionally, *Arkham*'s inter-texts (Lewis Carrol, Philip Larkin, *Psycho* and others) will be analysed, provoking a discussion of how they inform our understanding of the text and its many interpretive possibilities.

The fourth and final chapter of the dissertation explores in more detail the psychological nature of the text and how it uses the trope of the madhouse as a microcosm of humanity and the 20th Century preoccupation with interiority and questions surrounding mental health. Lillian Feder, in her book *Madness in Literature* (1980), traces the representation of madness in fictive works over the centuries and posits that the depiction of madness is in essence a self-reflexive way of looking at society. This will be combined with Michel Foucault's study of the history of insanity in *Madness and Civilization* (1961), as well as the work of psychiatrist Travis Langley and his book *Batman and Psychology* (2012), which explores the sanity of the Batman character in his many portrayals. In addition, the trope of horror is used by *Arkham* to turn the asylum into a place of liminality and the uncanny, and so Julia Kristeva's writings on abjection in *Powers of Horror* (1982) will be employed to illuminate this process. If fictive representations of madness can be read as projections/reflections of society and Batman can be depicted as psychologically troubled, as in *Arkham*, then perhaps my argument for Batman as a "mirror" for society has some merit.

Finally, a synthesis of the various ideas explored throughout the paper will be formed in order to frame an argument for the role of *Arkham* in the reinterpretation of the Batman character and how it has shaped the course of subsequent Batman publications. Part of my argument will be that the emerging trend in the 1980s for reinterpretation lead to a questioning of the role of superheroes in comics and a creative shift towards exploring their extremely *human* anxieties.

Chapter 1: Methodology

Robin: "Where'd you get a live fish, Batman?"
Batman: "The true crimefighter always carries everything he needs in his utility belt, Robin."
- *Batman* TV Series, 1966.

Before embarking on the analysis of the primary texts, it will be useful to first describe the theoretical parameters of the study. This chapter therefore sets out a list of readily defined concepts which can be applied to my case studies, a conceptual "utility belt", if you will. In her book *Travelling Concepts in the Humanities* (2002) Mieke Bal warns of the potential pitfalls endemic to an interdisciplinary study such as this, but also explores the intellectual "fortune" gained from such ventures (Bal 2002: 4). According to Bal, the key to success here is to adopt a *concept-based* methodology, one which makes use of a "discipline neutral" set of terms, rather than relying on the sometimes restrictive or rigid methodologies of the parent disciplines (Bal 2002: 5-7). It is also important to approach a cultural object on its *own terms* rather than first surrounding it with a framework which disallows this object its own voice (Bal 2002: 8-9). As a medium with both textual and visual properties, sequential art naturally finds useful parallels with both English and Art History, but I would contend that the medium also demands to be addressed on its own terms due to the unique properties it possesses which arise from the *combination* of image and text. Thus, this chapter attempts to draw on established theories to construct an adequate methodology which adheres to these principles.

It will be important to establish which theoretical concepts will inform our understanding of the way sequential art, and moreover, Batman comics, behave and interact with the viewer. For this purpose I have elected to use concepts which relate directly to their inherent characteristics. For the behaviour of pictures I draw upon the writings of W. J. T. Mitchell, who is a leading voice in the field of visual studies – itself a transdisciplinary field with no specific parent discipline. Mitchell engages with images on their own terms by asking: *What Do Pictures Want?*, which he uses as the title of an extended study of the complex nature of images as quasi-agents which acquire "living" qualities due to the desires we project onto them (2005: xvii). Through a discussion of these principles I hope to make the position that Batman is an example how images and texts take on a certain *vitality*, one which we as humans can provide. For a discussion of sequential art it will be necessary to examine its unique characteristics, something which author Scott McCloud achieves in great detail with his text *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art* (1993), a work which itself is composed

entirely of sequential art, directly illustrating the ways in which the medium functions. McCloud's study is applicable to almost any form of sequential art, and so an explication of some of his theories here will provide a number of concepts which can be used throughout this dissertation. By understanding how the "language" of which comics are composed operates, this knowledge can be applied to various iterations of Batman to see how they operate individually as well as in relation to one another. As this dissertation progresses, it should become apparent how *Arkham*'s turn to expressionistic representation and disruption of the conventional features of comics makes it a postmodern rendering of Batman.

Having examined the behaviour of Batman comics over time, it will be further necessary to examine *why* aesthetic shifts in an ongoing publication would occur. To this end this chapter briefly looks at how socio-political conditions can affect creative works such that each particular depiction reflects a specific historical moment. Will Brooker's *Batman Unmasked: Analyzing a Cultural Icon* (2005) is an extended study of the signifier of Batman and its meanings across a wide number of texts and historical periods. Regardless of period, Brooker's focus is always on the factors which govern the interpretation of the character within each cultural moment, the purpose of his study being the reasons why our culture has become so firmly embedded with Batman as an icon of the modern world. While specific examples from Brooker will be cited in the second chapter of this dissertation, some general observations can be drawn here, to be applied to each of my case studies in turn. One aspect which I discuss in detail in this chapter is Brooker's study of the publics who consume Batman objects, the fans. Coupled with Michael Warner's theory of "Publics and Counterpublics", this may illuminate some of the reasons for regular change in the way Batman is depicted, if one can draw a link between the fans and the cultural object they interact with. If such a link can be drawn, it is possible to begin to form an argument for how comics have experienced an attendant postmodern shift in accordance with the general attitudes expressed by society and art in the latter half of the 20th Century.

Theory of Images: What do Batman Comics Want?

Batman does not exist. This is the opening statement of Dennis O'Neil's preface to Travis Langley's book *Batman and Psychology: A Dark and Stormy Knight* (2012: 1), which will be cited again in chapter four. O'Neil goes on to discuss how although Batman certainly is not real, we sometimes behave as though he is. The fictive superhero has become so firmly

embedded in the cultural consciousness that he occupies the status of virtual public figure. W. J. T Mitchell makes use of a similar idea in his book *What Do Pictures Want? : The Lives and Loves of Images* (2005). Through the use of an extended conceit, that images possess living qualities, Mitchell constructs a thought experiment wherein the fundamental nature of image-making is examined. Mitchell acknowledges throughout the work that such a standpoint sounds dangerously like superstition, an animistic view of the world which is pre-modern in attitude (2005: 28-9). Nonetheless, Mitchell feels there is much to be gained from asking the question all the same, taking the position that this animistic view is still practiced unconsciously today and is endemic to our understanding of the world (Mitchell 2005: 30). According to Mitchell, we possess a double-consciousness towards images and objects: no sane person truly believes that such objects are animated and yet there are resonances with living beings which surface some interesting observances about human nature. Images possess a hidden power, an uncanny ability to influence and "speak" to us; they provoke an emotional response from us and they often demonstrate an ability to perpetuate themselves (Mitchell 2005: 35 & 53). Consider the behaviour of children and their toys: to the child, their belongings are "alive", and frequently treated as such, not just by children but also by their parents. Propaganda posters incite us to either patriotism or hatred of the ideology they represent. A popular image is disseminated further, acquiring changes along the way, perhaps through parody or refinement or even re-appropriation. Images can thus be said to resemble life-forms (Mitchell 2005: 52).

So then what do images want? Moreover, what do Batman comics want? In the case of the latter, as shall be observed in the next chapter, this is largely dependent on the version of Batman in question. If it can be observed that there has been change in Batman comics over time, then it follows that the different versions of Batman must surely have different desires. In the case of the images, too, there is no definitive answer. However, in both cases there are some commonalities to be found. It seems impossible that an image may possess desire, and yet the idea of desire is inseparable from images. Image-making is an outlet for the desires of the artist and simultaneously desire is also a by-product of image-making, as images provoke desire in others (Mitchell 2005: 57). It is, of course, impossible that images hold any desires of their own, and furthermore images possess no "power" apart from that which we give them. If pictures possess any living qualities then those attributes are contingent on human intervention. Pictures act as "echo chambers" for human thought: absorbing our desires and reflecting them back at us (Mitchell 2005: 27). By exploring the thought experiment of living

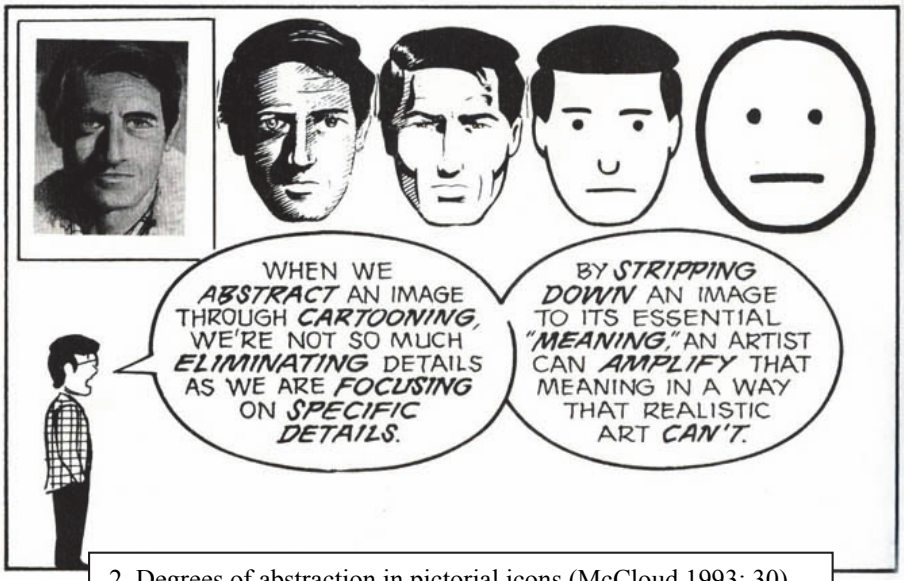
images we are in fact exploring our relationality to them. If we accept this model then the same applies to Batman: the comics variously reflect differing sets of desires imposed on them by people. These desires work on a number of levels, and as stated before, depend largely on context and the specific iteration in question. These desires are also subject to change over time. For example, the early comics of the 1930s and 1940s were printed cheaply on low-quality paper. In their original context they "want" to be read several times and disposed of, but now in the 21st Century those same comics are priceless as collector's items, their ephemeral materials making them even more valuable. However, it could be argued that all Batman comics possess a few core desires regardless of context.

On a surface level, Batman is a commodity, and so the comics want to be sold and traded and distributed. In essence, they want to propagate and reach as wide an audience as possible. The comics encourage this by their serialised nature: each is usually a numbered part of an ongoing story and so the reader is invited to acquire the next issue to continue the process of reading. This is also reflected by the nature of comics as *sequential*, by their very nature they invite participation from their audience, as each panel leads to the next in an ongoing sequence, much like the written word. On a deeper level, like any narrative text, Batman wants the reader to be enthralled, to enter his world and be immersed. This is accomplished in different ways, but ultimately it is the *experience* which the comic wishes to impart upon the reader. The willing suspension of disbelief required for this immersion is arguably easier with Batman since the character differs from other superheroes in that he has no fantastical powers, he is merely a human (albeit one with extraordinary resources and talents) living in a world not too divorced from our own. Many (but certainly not all) versions of Batman seek to highlight this connection, and perhaps this is one reason Batman is so readily spoken of as a living person: he does not exist in our world, but according to the internal logic of the narrative he conceivably could.

The Invisible Art of Comics: Sequential Art as Language

In *Understanding Comics* (1993), Scott McCloud posits that sequential art is a "language all its own" (17). According to McCloud, comics inherently possess qualities of both language and pictures, they are "at once both but also neither" (1993: 17). McCloud briefly explores the pictorial origins of writing and its gradual move towards abstraction, resulting in the arbitrary system of signs we use today to delineate meaning. Like writing, pictorial icons can

be used as a form of "vocabulary", and while words are completely abstract, pictures vary in their level of abstraction and the degree to which they resemble their subject (McCloud 1993: 27). Inserted below is the scale McCloud uses to measure abstraction, with photo-realism at one end of the scale and iconic "cartoon" style art at the other extreme:



2. Degrees of abstraction in pictorial icons (McCloud 1993: 30).

As McCloud explains in the above panel extract, abstraction in pictures represents an amplification of the essential meaning through simplification of details, making such pictures more like icons or symbols (1993: 30). In a way, this makes cartoons closer to words in their abstract representation of meaning and so allows for a greater efficiency in communicating ideas and concepts in exchange for a loss of detail. McCloud suggests that this is perhaps why people respond so well to cartoons. One reason for this is their *universality*, their versatile ability to conform to any number of faces, rather than just one. Another is the fact that humans maintain an awareness of their face even if they cannot see it themselves, and that this awareness is only a simplified sense of overall position, like a cartoon. Because of these two reasons it is therefore easier to project one's identity onto an iconic image or cartoon (McCloud 1993: 36). Even more realistically rendered sequential art, such as superhero comics, tends to have at least some elements of cartooning, and true photo-realism is rare. Examples from across the range can be found in Batman comics, from the primarily cartoon-like style of the early 1940s used by Batman creator Bob Kane (who began his career drawing cartoon-style funny animals), to the far more realistically rendered artwork of the 1970s and 1980s, which emphasised life-like atmosphere and mimesis in an attempt to make Batman's adventures look more plausible.

Both extremes have their advantages, and as McCloud reminds us, a simple style does not necessarily equate to a simple story as seemingly basic elements combine to create a complex whole (McCloud 1993: 45). Most artists make use of a variety of styles even in a single comic, such as Frank Miller, whose artwork in *The Dark Knight Returns* (1986) was primarily realistic but also contained grotesquely disproportionate hands and feet for some characters. Dave McKean, the artist behind *Arkham Asylum*, is cited by McCloud as an example of an artist who has experimented with nearly every possible style of art in his lifetime, constantly employing new methods and even incorporating other media into his artworks (McCloud 1993: 30). Regardless of the style used, however, iconographic forms like sequential art demand audience participation to make them work, and (drawing on Marshall McLuhan) McCloud states that there is no life in comics except that which is projected onto it by humans (McCloud 1993: 59), reinforcing the notion already discussed above that images of all kinds are capable of absorbing desire.

Having discussed basic pictorial representation, other aspects of the vocabulary of comics will now be explored, so that during the analysis carried out in Chapter 2 it will be possible to see which versions of Batman embrace convention and which iterations experiment with and break these conventions. Related to pictorial representation is the use of line, shape, colour, scale, style and medium to express emotion or to depict the five senses using the pictorial plane. As with all visual art there are a wide number of techniques and styles available to artists within the realm of comic art (McCloud 1993: 123). Line, for example, can be used to convey calm feelings through smooth, clear pen strokes as well as anxiety through shaky, disjointed lines – as well as other emotions (McCloud 1993: 125). These can be combined by the artist in various styles, such as the bold lines, sharp angles and heavy use of black favoured by artists like Bob Kane during the early years of Batman to create a grim, noir but straightforward style which was targeted at a younger audience. Contrast this with the later style of the 1980s, which favoured a jagged, raw line-work which was popular with a more adolescent audience. *Arkham* was released during this time, but differed from its contemporaries in the use of expressionistic, distorted lines which convey feelings of madness, anxiety and horror. McCloud relates that this latter style is rare in comics, but can be used to depict a character's inner state of being, best suited to stories with a psychological focus, more appropriate for enhancing characterisation than plot (McCloud 1993: 132). Such an expressionistic style can be used on both characters and/or background, and the reader more often than not will project the feelings of horror or lunacy they associate with this

distortion onto the characters in the story (McCloud 1993: 132). While this may result in a loss of clarity visually, the authors can correct this through the use of words accompanying the imagery, working with the picture to convey a particular mood (McCloud 1993: 133).

Colour is another aspect which affects the overall impact of comics, with the ability to alter the way images are received by the viewer. In comics however, the full spectrum of colour took a long time to be fully incorporated due to the dual limitations of technology and commerce (McCloud 1993: 187). Although colour printing was available in the early 20th Century the costs were too high for publishing companies and printing methods limited in their capability, and so the "four-colour" or CMYK method was used (McCloud 1993: 187). Colour could only be achieved by mixing cyan, magenta and yellow, while black was used for outlines. This technique had its limitations, and colours could only be printed flat. Artists compensated for this by making use of the primary colours for the costumes of superheroes like Batman, and while the expressive range of this method may have been limited it meant that certain colours became iconic for some characters (McCloud 1993: 188), such as blue, yellow, grey and black for Batman, which has now become his signature colour palette. Advances in printing technology have allowed for a much greater depth of colour in comics, and works like *Arkham Asylum* have made full use of the potential allowed by these developments. *Arkham* was printed on high quality paper, and colour is used expressively throughout the work by McKean to create a vibrant surface which resembles a fever dream in its intensity at points while at others utilising dull tones for more subdued, detached scenes.

While the above theories can apply to most visual art, there are some traits which are distinctly part of the language of comics. Word balloons and panels are two such features, and both can have a subtle impact on the way we read a comic. Thus it may be useful to take stock of some of their capabilities. Word or thought balloons are probably the most recognisable icon used by comics, and their basic function is to attempt to reproduce sound in a purely visual medium (McCloud 1993: 134). Word balloons are extremely versatile, and variation in their shape and texture allows artists to distinguish specific voices or replicate expression, from whispers to screams to frenzied speech and many more (McCloud 1993: 134). Some comics give particular characters their own unique word balloon styles, allowing them to show that a certain character is speaking even when that character is not present in a frame. Similarly, it is well known that onomatopoeic sound effects are often illustrated in sequential art through words with stylised font, such as "BIFF" for a punch or "BLAM" for a gunshot, in an attempt to replicate such sounds for the reader, adding a dramatic impact

which has become a signature of superhero comics, and which has been parodied by other media like the 1966 *Batman* TV series.

McCloud says that if visual iconography is the language of comics then panels comprise its grammar (McCloud 1993: 188). The panel itself is in many ways overlooked, but may be sequential art's most significant icon. Of its own accord it possesses no fixed meaning, nor is its meaning fluid, but rather the panel functions as a standardised general indicator of division in space or time (McCloud 1993: 98-9). The flow of time is achieved by what McCloud calls "closure", the act of looking at an arrangement of parts and perceiving the whole. This is what happens between panels, where the reader takes the disjointed moments represented by panels arranged in sequence and connects them in their mind, inviting unprecedented audience participation (McCloud 1993: 67). The frame of a panel crops an image, thereby delineating what the reader can see, and also where the eye will travel by placing objects in relation to the readers' view by manipulating the distance and angle (McCloud 2006: 20). Thus the artist can control the flow of space and time in a comic by manipulating panel structure and placement, and creative violation of the conventions of panels can have some intriguing results, as we shall see with *Arkham*.

From the above we can thus infer several things about the nature of sequential art. While the visual iconography which comprises the language of comics has a number of core principles it is a versatile medium and artists can manipulate its iconography to achieve any number of aesthetic styles, meaning it is suitable for depicting virtually any subject in a variety of ways. Secondly, sequential art by its nature demands a great level of audience participation in the act of reading, and the effectiveness of a comic is thus predicated on the interpretive abilities of the reader, much like the written word. Sequential art, like all visual artforms, is capable of mimesis and representation, but sequential art also has qualities of the written word in their shared ability to symbolically portray concepts. In a way this means that sequential art functions as a fluid yet intuitive form of language. It combines features of both image and text to form a rich and layered complex matrix that simultaneously images and narrates the story. Words can be used to augment or enhance the meaning of an image, and vice-versa. Both have the potential to be direct and immediate in meaning or to be elusive and open to interpretation. Thus, when reading a Batman comic one must be mindful of the various ways in which image and text combine in the production of meaning.

Bat-fans and the Influence of the Public

Thus far this chapter has explored the visual characteristics of sequential art and images, but differences in these qualities and in artists' stylistic choices and decisions cannot alone account for changes in style for Batman comics. Thus it is necessary to explore the historical facets of the comics in order to account for shifts in the aesthetics detailed above. Will Brooker's book *Batman Unmasked: Analyzing a Cultural Icon* (2005) contains extensive contextualisation of historical conditions affecting the creation and interpretation of Batman comics during the first 60 years of publication. Much of the historical examples Brooker discusses will be used in more detail in the next chapter, applied to each case study as necessary. However, there is one dimension to Brooker's work that will be introduced here, since I believe it applies to the creation of Batman comics as a whole. This is the complex relationship between those who produce comics and those who consume them, the fans and other "publics" which interact with the cultural object that is Batman. First an explanation of publics will be provided, and then an argument will be raised that suggests a connection between the desires of fans and the way comics are produced, with the understanding that it follows that since fans change with time their changing desires would thus reflect their specific social contexts. By allowing the audience a "voice" in the creation of comics, the attitudes and needs of each generation can thus partly be reflected through the comics' specific portrayal of Batman.

Thus I would argue that the process of change within Batman comics has as much to do with the individuals who create Batman as it does with the readership who purchase the comics. This dedicated readership forms what Michael Warner refers to as a 'public', a complex term which he discusses at great length in his essay *Publics and Counterpublics* (2002). Warner makes a distinction between *the* public and *a* public, in which the more common association with the term refers to the general populace in its totality, and in which his more nuanced term refers to a group which defines itself in relation to a text (Warner 2002: 66). For Warner, a public in the latter sense is a necessarily complex term which is subject to contradictions and intricacies depending on the context involved, which can at times be confusing but, as Warner asserts, also allows for great depth of interpretation and flexibility (Warner 2002: 66). A public which constructs its identity in relation to a text is firstly a self-created space of discourse which is predicated on the act of discourse itself (Warner 2002:

68), and which is perpetuated by individuals who need at least nominal participation to be considered part of that public.

This interaction by members of a public through discourse brings together strangers, even if the relations they share are indirect (Warner 2002: 75). The discourse of these publics is at once personal, since an individual may read it with intimate resonance, yet at the same time one understands that it is addressed to an audience of strangers, since the author cannot know who the ultimate consumer of the text may be (Warner 2002: 76). Furthermore, Warner states that "The existence of a public is contingent on its members' activity" (Warner 2002: 88), and so a public requires active participation in order to perpetuate itself successfully through circulation, attracting more participants and thus paving the way for future discourse (114). This means that the exact constituent members of a public are forever in flux as old participants leave (either permanently or temporarily) and new participants acquire an interest and perhaps circulate the discourse themselves. Additionally, there are inevitably limitless variations of the same public, delineated by "modes of address, style and spaces of circulation" (Warner 2002: 117), meaning that although a public may be loosely associated they may not necessarily be homogenous. There are thus many different publics who define themselves as fans of Batman: There are the older "dedicated" fans who have retained their interest in Batman into adulthood, comprising a small minority yet one with a notable critical voice. There are the younger fans, who perhaps more often encounter the character through cartoons initially and only interact with the comics later in life, if at all. Then there are the more casual fans, who may for example enjoy Batman movies or video games but may or may not read the comics, and are less likely to engage critically with any particular rendering. These of course are only a handful of examples, lacking the nuance which in reality applies to a wide variety of groups with varying levels of interaction with the publics they loosely comprise.

In fact, the term 'fans', is just as nuanced as publics. This word, which is derived from the word fanatic, emerged in the 20th Century and most commonly refers to a subculture of people who are more or less devoted to a text or activity, be it books, TV series or even sports. In relation to comics, fans can be devoted to comics in general or more often to specific publications or characters, known as 'fandoms' in the common parlance. Will Brooker devotes a chapter to this topic in *Batman Unmasked* (2005), discussing at length the fascinating and complex interaction between the authors of comics and the fans who read them, a back-and-forth rapport which at times vacillates between mutual dependence and

animosity as publishers attempt to both appease their fans as well as turn a profit (250). As defined above by Warner, publics necessarily require some form of participation among members, and for comics this interaction became prominent in the 1960s with the emergence of so-called 'fanzines' or fan-magazines.

With the establishment of a few, small fanzines during 1960, DC editor Julius Schwartz envisioned a network of fans, connected by their mutual interest. From February 1961 the regular letter-columns which appeared in comic books now bore the addresses of the fans who had submitted letters. This allowed fans to begin widespread communication with one another in a far greater capacity than had otherwise been possible (Brooker 2005: 250-1). Notable fanzines of the time like *Alter-Ego*, *Xero* and *Batmania* provided a platform for debate, discussion, trading of comics and the organization of conventions. Whereas before these fans had been isolated, they now had a community of like-minded individuals with which to share their passion for Batman and other comics, leading to the formation of publics which now defined their identity explicitly through this interaction (Brooker 2005: 252).

Not only were fans now interacting with each other, they were also interacting with the makers of the comics themselves. Letter-columns gave fans a voice which provided input for authors, and the establishment of the very first New York Comic-Con in 1964 set a new precedent in the life of comics when Spiderman artist Steve Ditko made a guest appearance. Batman co-creator Bill Finger, among others, appeared at the second Comicon, and since then subsequent conventions have seen the arrival of other artists, writers and editors and the introduction of comic book signings, sketch sessions and discussion panels, which allow fans to pitch questions for their favourite authors to answer in person (Brooker 2005: 253). Sometimes, in rare cases, talented fans were hired by companies like DC and Marvel to come and work for them. This meant that fans could become authors, and thus the barrier between the two began to dissipate ever more rapidly (Brooker 2005: 253). As an example, Grant Morrison, writer of *Arkham Asylum*, is one such fan-turned-author, who claims in the script included with the 15th Anniversary Edition of *Arkham* that DC's *Justice League* title (starring Batman) had turned him into a "rabid teenage comics fan", inspiring him to make a career out of writing comics. In 1986 Morrison approached DC with two scripts for comics he had planned, one of them being *Arkham*, and was subsequently hired.

At the time of the early 1960s, some syndicated comics publishers were still keeping their creative teams a mystery, DC included. Bob Kane, creator of Batman, was given exclusive

credit for all Batman comics, even when he had retired. This lead to a remarkable practice among fans of attempting to deduce the identities of the various creative talents involved in the production of specific issues of the comic (Brooker 2005: 254). Brooker provides a number of examples from letter-columns, like the one included below:

> "I am somewhat mystified about the inker. I think it's Infantino himself, with a slightly modified style, yet certain parts look like the work of Murphy Anderson, or even John Giunta." – Kenneth S. Gallagher, *Detective Comics* #336, February 1965.

Brooker suggests that it is possible that in the process of observing details like idiosyncrasies of style and individual technique, these fans may have fancied themselves as emulating Batman, who is renowned for his detective skills (Brooker 2005: 255). Regardless, the publishers encouraged this practice by responding to the letters with indications of how correct these guesses were, and took it further by inviting the readers to guess the identity of authors in upcoming issues (Brooker 2005: 256). Once the practice of acknowledging all creator credits became standard practice for the industry, these letters matured from simple attempts to deduce the authorship of particular comic book issues to comprehensive analytical discourse on the very nature of sequential art. Readers of comics had come to desire and expect a certain level of complexity and quality from the material that was being published (Brooker 2005: 259). Formulaic plots with a short term resolution, characteristic of early comics, were no longer enough to satisfy the demands of the fan-base which was consuming these comics and taking an active interest in the content that went into them, as well as the specific authors who were creating this content.

Brooker makes the claim that: "The boundaries between comic author and fan, writer and reader, have always been thin and often dissolve completely" (253). Comics are one medium in which the publics that interact with the cultural object in question are able to voice their opinions about what subject matter is being produced. Traditionally, letter-columns have provided this outlet but in more recent years online forums serve the same purpose, providing an area for discourse where the fans can engage in discussion with one another as well as the creators of the comics themselves. Companies like DC can use this public space as a sounding board for ideas to find out what the fans are looking for. The extent of the influence fans actually have on Batman comics is difficult to fully quantify but they nonetheless are afforded the opportunity to create this discourse which not only brings together like-minded individuals but also enables them to reveal their prevailing opinions about the way comics are

made. Some gifted fans may even grow to become the creators of Batman comics themselves and so personally define the next version of the Dark Knight.

Sequential Art as Mirror?

Having explored various theories and defined several useful concepts, it is possible to make some preliminary conclusions about the topic of this dissertation. It is already becoming clear that sequential art is a medium which invites a close level of participation from its audience. All images are able to exert a subtle influence over human beings, at times even giving the appearance of possessing a form of vitality. This is only possible because we as humans are irrevocably invested in images, projecting onto them our own feelings and desires. We thus alter them, propagate them or even destroy them, unconsciously acknowledging their ability to stir our emotions all the same. Popular images like Batman are proliferated, over time entering visual culture and even becoming iconic, acquiring resonance beyond their original context and creators, becoming "living images" with their own vitality.

Sequential art takes this a step further; by its very nature it encourages participation from the reader, due to the way meaning is transmitted by the "language" of comics. They contain iconographic qualities, able to represent concepts and ideas efficiently, and through their sequential nature they invite involvement in a narrative. Comics speak to the reader on a personal level, and more broadly they create discourse through the interaction of the publics which consume them. Fan groups can even indirectly affect the way comics are produced through this critical discourse, and at times become part of the authorship which produces them. All of the above seems to suggest that Batman comics have the potential to speak to a generation, as well as speak on its behalf – a mirror which evolves even as society changes.

While the above discussions have gestured towards an analysis of Batman comics, the methodology in this chapter has not yet been put into practice fully, and so the next chapter will see these theories at work through some practical examples. Only by demonstrating the different ways iterations of Batman interact with the reader and by situating them within a historical context will it be possible to account for these aesthetic shifts as well as come to understand their significance.

Chapter 2: The Many Masks of Batman

> "Morrison writes the Dark Knight as a double paradox: a sullen misanthrope devoted to protecting others and a resolutely human figure who nevertheless can perform the impossible. Crucially, Morrison understands that Batman is never a single character, but rather a host of Batmen: a wealth of possibilities existing behind that costume, cowl and symbol." – *Justice League of America* July 1998, letter-columns page.

Having established a concept-based methodology from which to work, this chapter aims to systematically apply these concepts to three prominent iterations of the Batman character from different moments in his publishing history. The objective is to show that Batman possesses a number of core traits which remain more or less fixed, yet he is also malleable and can be portrayed with manifold representations, some of which contradict others or pay homage to, or parody previous representations, almost like a series of "masks" which can be moulded over the core "persona". There is thus no "true" or "pure" Batman, but rather "a host of Batmen" (Brooker 2005: 259-60), to use the quote above. Over the course of this chapter the different versions of Batman are subjected to analysis using the concepts already defined, examining the formal qualities of each and how they each use the language of sequential art to convey a different message, one that is rooted in the historical contexts out of which they arise. Thus examples from each iteration are provided in the form of panel extracts which exemplify the qualities for which each Batman is known, and some contextualisation accompanies each in order to better understand the circumstances which led to their creation. Thus it will be possible to demonstrate not merely that these shifts occur, but more importantly *why* they occur. Ultimately I make the argument that *Arkham Asylum* represents a postmodern fragmenting of previous versions: a Batman seen through the looking glass darkly.

The three iterations of Batman used are as follows: The original Batman as he debuted in *Detective Comics* during 1939 and the major developments enacted during the early years which effectively defined the core traits by which the character is now recognised. The next example used is the Batman of the 1960s, which had experienced enforced changes brought on by the Comics Code and resulted in a more light-hearted rendering. William Dozier's 1966-68 *Batman* TV serial is examined, because despite the fact that it is not a comic it heavily influenced the comics due to its success and it is Adam West's portrayal of Batman from this time which is most famous, rather than the comics themselves.

The final version of Batman I examine here is the darker, morally ambiguous Batman of the 1980s. During this time DC felt the character needed to be reinvigorated and so a series of works published during this time by specially selected authors each offered a creative deconstruction of Batman. By 1989, this process resulted in *Arkham Asylum*, which took the trend for psychological complexity being portrayed by the contemporary Batman to the next level by traversing the landscape of madness, using the trope of the madhouse as its setting. The content as well as form of *Arkham* challenged the contemporary view of Batman, positioning itself as a fully postmodern rendering of the character.

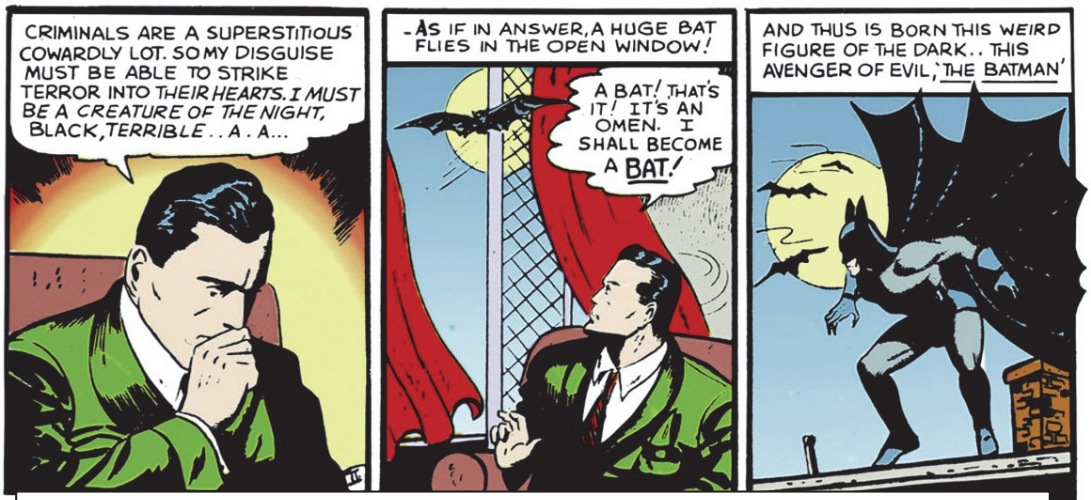
1930s/40s: Origin of the Bat-Man

Improvements in printing technology during the mid-18th Century allowed unprecedented distribution of mass media and the eventual introduction of comic strips into newspapers during the late 19th Century. There is much to be said about this complex period of comic history, but for the purposes of this study I will focus on the origin of the superhero comic. A more comprehensive overview is provided by Roger Sabin in his work *Comics, Comix and Graphic Novels* (1996), which I have used as reference material in this chapter. According to Sabin, by the early 20th Century comic strips had become a lucrative enterprise, and had begun to branch out into various genres, and by the 1930s and 1940s action and adventure comics had started to appear (1996: 44). Written primarily for young boys aged 8-12, these comics contained tales of dashing heroes, intrepid explorers and hard-bitten detectives, among other suitably "masculine" subject matter which had been eminently popular in the pulp fiction magazines of the early 1920s and 1930s (Sabin 1996: 44). Works like *The Phantom* (1936) and *Prince Valiant* (1937) paved the way for superheroes, who would make their official debut in 1938 with *Action Comics #1*, featuring the now iconic Superman, who was an instant success and eminently popular with young children.

National Periodicals, later renamed DC Comics, wished to replicate this success with another superhero, and so owner Vince Sullivan challenged young aspiring cartoonist Bob Kane to create "another superman" (Porter in O'Neil 2008: 86-7). Kane would later claim he had developed the basic concept of "the Bat-Man" over the course of a weekend and had produced the first prototype sketches, but it was only after he consulted his friend Bill Finger that the now-familiar look of the character was properly fashioned. Finger, whose name was

frequently omitted from publications of the comic for several decades (Sabin 1996: 61), was the first writer, while Kane produced the original artwork.

Batman's original depiction reflected the personal tastes of the two creators, and early comics are notable for their grim atmosphere, evocative of film noir and German Expressionist cinema. Kane had also been a fan of Douglas Fairbanks' *The Mark of Zorro* (1920), while Finger was an avid reader of hardboiled detective stories and science fiction pulp magazines, and was inspired by the earlier masked adventurers the Phantom and the Shadow (Borsellino in O'Neil 2008: 138). Additionally, Finger suggested that they make the character a detective like Sherlock Holmes, and from the very beginning the art of ratiocination or deductive reasoning has been a core aspect of Batman stories. What resulted from this combination was a unique character with a great appeal to youngsters of the 1930/40s, and Batman quickly became even more popular than Superman soon after his first appearance in *Detective Comics* #27, May 1939 (Sabin 1996: 58).



3. Panels from *Detective Comics* #33 (November 1939), explaining the character's motivations for adopting his bat-based iconography.

It was during the first year of publication that most of the core traits of Batman were defined. From the outset he was established as a man of great physical and mental prowess who used his gadgets and detective skills to wage a personal war on crime. In the first comic featuring Batman his alter-ego Bruce Wayne is introduced, a wealthy bon-vivant who provides the perfect alias by presenting himself to the public as an idle and frivolous playboy. The above three panels in sequence come from *Detective Comics #33*, published in November 1939. In this story Wayne's motivations for becoming Batman are revealed: as a young boy he witnessed the murder of his parents in an alleyway, an essential part of the character's mythos

which has never been altered. Batman had already been strongly established through Finger's writing as an ambiguous figure in the stories preceding this one, which regularly describe him as "eerie" or "weird" through narration accompanying the images.

As can be seen above, his appearance reflected this, inked in heavy black and grey with liberal use of shadow. As in the above panels, bats are often used in these early comics by Kane to create an eerie, almost supernatural atmosphere, as well as to visually echo Batman's costume/iconography by invoking his namesake. In the panel extracts above and below the full moon is featured, giving these scenes an ominous quality. The style of Kane's early art is comprised of bold outlines with even, clear pen strokes. There is a mix of cartoon elements and realistic proportion and shading in the appearance of characters, placing this style in the middle of McCloud's degrees of pictorial abstraction (See Chapter 1). Panel grids are usually neatly laid out in these early comics, though at times Kane resorts to using arrows to indicate panel flow where the sequence is not clear, a slightly jarring effect. Some images from this time resemble early horror films like *Nosferatu* (1922) in their depiction of Batman's silhouette thrown across moonlit rooms and rooftops, giving Batman an aura of mystery and dread (See below). These characteristics effectively make Batman a "creature of the night", a loner who stalks the rooftops in the same manner as a vampire. This makes the earliest iteration of Batman more of an anti-hero than a straightforward hero. He takes on the threatening appearance of evil in order to combat evil.



4. Above – Batman as eerie ambiguous figure (*Detective Comics* #29 November 1939).

Above, Wayne reveals that this was a deliberate choice, that by adopting this menacing persona he would be able to "strike terror into [the] hearts" of the "superstitious" and "cowardly" criminal underworld. Wayne is inspired by the appearance of a bat flying into his

study, a scene which has been revisited multiple times throughout the history of Batman comics, especially during the 1980s, and this moment of inspiration is referenced in works like *The Dark Knight Returns* (1986), *Year One* (1987) and *Arkham Asylum* (1989). The icon of the bat was chosen by the creators for its sinister connotations, and reflected in the character's appearance by the use of ears attached to his cowl and a billowing cape with scalloped edges to evoke the wings of a bat. W. J. T. Mitchell would refer to this as a "totem", the adoption of an icon from the natural world which is not idolised but rather expressly conflated with identity (Mitchell 2005: 98-101). In this way Batman "becomes" a bat in order to fight crime, and his iconography reflects this totemic projection of identity into a symbol, and it is this symbol and its presence in popular culture by which we now instantly recognise Batman. This early depiction of Batman is notable in that he was a vigilante who was wanted by the police and he is often shown narrowly escaping capture by the law. Later authors like Dennis O'Neil and Frank Miller would return to this conception of the character as loner and marginal figure, and the version of the character from his first year thus contained the roots of many "darker" re-imaginings over the years. The basic conception of Batman had been formed, with the exception of two essential changes which would take place in 1940, both due to pressure from the readership.

The first major change was the introduction of Robin the "Boy Wonder" in *Detective Comics* #38 in April of 1940. Writer Bill Finger felt that Batman needed someone to exchange dialogue with, and artist Bob Kane additionally felt that a younger character would provide greater audience identification by providing readers with a "junior Batman" which they could more easily relate to (Brooker 2005: 56). The editor, Jack Liebowitz, felt that Batman was stable and needed no changes, and agreed to let Kane and Finger put the character into a single story only. As it transpired, the readers immediately took to Robin and Issue #38 of *Detective Comics* sold double what the previous issues had (Brooker 2005: 59). Due to the encouragement offered by the sales figures it was decided to make Robin a permanent feature. Like Bruce Wayne, young Dick Grayson lost his parents to crime, and was taken in by Wayne as his legal ward and his protégé.

In a sense Batman now had a son or little brother to take care of, and the authors manifested this in some changes to his depiction. He was drawn less threatening in appearance, as seen below, with more blue ink rather than black used in his costume and smaller, less "demonic" ears on his cowl. Batman and Robin would engage in banter and puns became a common part of their speech: "Have a seat gentlemen! There's room on this one for two!", says Batman as

he swings a chair into two thugs in a 1940 story (*Batman* #1 1940). Robin himself introduced a brighter colour palette to the comic with his costume comprised of red, green and yellow. Batman comics immediately lightened in tone, but there was still one major problem: his use of guns.



5. Left – Batman holds a smoking pistol (*Detective Comics* #33 November 1939). Right – Batman's new moral code and modified look (*Batman* #2 Summer 1940).

Exactly one year after his first appearance Batman was now so popular that his own eponymous title was launched, and whereas previously Batman stories appeared alongside comics about detectives and policemen the character now had his own comic title filled exclusively with Batman adventures. The first issue, *Batman* #1 contained a story where Batman used the machine guns on his "Bat-Gyro" to eliminate a number of chemically mutated thugs (Brooker 2005: 60). Up until this point Batman had on occasion killed other enemies: In his first appearance he punched a criminal into a vat of acid, saying: "A fitting end for his kind". He had also broken another criminal's neck with a kick and killed some vampires by shooting them with silver bullets as they slept (*Detective Comics* #27/#30/#32 1939).

Perhaps because of the presence of Robin in the comics the incident with the machine guns provoked an angry response from fretful mothers who wrote letters to National Periodicals saying they felt Batman's use of guns was "deplorable" and served as a poor example to the

young boys who were their primary readership at the time (2005: 59-60). This prompted an immediate change, and the editorial director of National Periodicals admonished Finger, instructing him that from then on the character would never kill or carry a gun again (Brooker 2005: 60). Thus Kane and Finger introduced Batman's famous policy that guns are cowardly, and he now directly urged his readers to reject firearms outright, as can be seen in the above panel taken from the very next issue (*Batman* #2 1940: 37). This is an early example of censorship within Batman comics, in this case induced by fan reaction and editorial constraint. This is also an example of how Batman would eventually come to be perceived as a strong moral compass, a protective father figure who was seen by young children as a positive role model (Brooker 2005: 60).

Already it is possible to see how Batman has been moulded by the readership and society, even at this early point. It is also possible to see how this early version contained the different seeds for later versions of Batman. The ambiguous Batman of the early issues would be revisited in later years, and the moral code of Batman which was established shortly after set the tone for decades to come. There is also an element of light-hearted play present in the early comics featuring Robin, which has also been revisited numerous times in Batman's publishing career. Most importantly however, the basic template had been formed, with the character's fictional biography, skills, equipment, setting, supporting cast and iconography defined – elements which have remained constant regardless of aesthetic shifts.

1960s: Censorship and Camp Batman

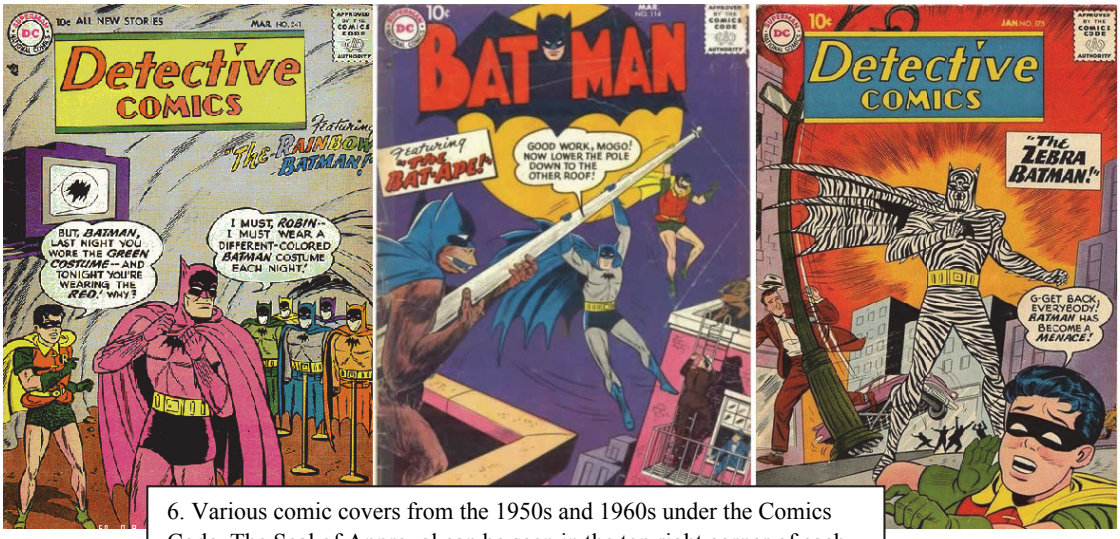
The next major change took place during the 1950s when Dr Fredric Wertham's influential book *Seduction of the Innocent* (1954) proposed the controversial idea that comics lead to delinquency and sexual deviancy (Hajdu 2008: 209). This resulted in an uproar among parents in America and several court cases were made against comics publishers, culminating in the infamous self-imposed Comics Code Authority of 1954, initiated by the comics publishers themselves in order to avoid further backlash (Sabin 1996: 68). Wertham's scathing criticism of comics was primarily directed at horror titles with their predilection for gory violence as well as liberal depictions of scantily-clad women (Brooker 2005: 144), but Batman was not exempt from this metaphorical witch hunt. In his book Wertham accuses the Batman comics not of violence, but rather of promoting homosexual behaviour through Batman's relationship with his young ward Robin.

Dr Wertham saw the relationship as deviant and the domestic arrangement being "like a wish dream of two homosexuals living together" (Brooker 2005: 103). Wertham interviewed several young men who admitted to having had erotically charged fantasies about Batman rescuing them, and this as well as the lack of female love interests in the comics was used by Wertham as "evidence" for the presence of homoerotic undertones in Batman and Robin's relationship (Brooker 2005: 126). During the 1950s, even more so than today, homoeroticism in media was considered damaging to young, impressionable boys (Brooker 2005: 102), at a time when McCarthyism had lead to the rise of ruthless practices of identifying and eliminating perceived threats to the decency of the American family unit (Brooker 2005: 117-18). Communism, homosexuality and delinquency were all part of the same discourse of fear and censorship which urged parents to take action, leading to the eventual establishment of the Comics Code Authority in 1954 (Brooker 2005: 143).

The backlash the Comics Code would have on the sequential art world was immense. Comics that did not bear the Comics Code "seal of approval" could not be published. Many smaller companies did not survive the new ban on violence and sexual imagery, and several genres such as crime and horror were cancelled entirely (Sabin 1996: 68). Larger companies like Marvel and DC Comics survived by adapting to the strictures of the Code, and this resulted in "safe", child-friendly subject matter. For superheroes this meant that violence was restricted to brawls that contained no death and no depiction of blood (Sabin 1996: 69). For Marvel this posed few problems, since their publications mostly conformed to these restrictions already, but DC was forced to lighten the tone of some its titles, Batman included. While Batman himself was already no longer a killer, as mentioned above, some of his more homicidal enemies were considerably violent. The Joker had killed almost 20 people in his first four appearances alone and had continued the trend since then, so under the Code he would be forcibly reduced to a harmless prankster, more prone to practical jokes than murder. Additionally, in order to dispel rumours that Batman and Robin were gay DC introduced first Bat-Woman and later Bat-Girl to act as their respective love interests in *Detective Comics* #233 (1956) & *Batman* #139 (1961) (Brooker 2005: 145-6).

Thus the Batman of the 1950s and 1960s is characterized by a light-hearted tone and a notable playfulness in both form and content. By this time Bob Kane and Bill Finger were no longer the creators behind Batman, and the new authors would experiment with the addition of fantastic and sci-fi elements into the comics (Levitz in Pearson 2015: 16), as seen below in stories like *The Zebra Batman*, where Batman is transformed by a super-villain named Zebra-

Man into a "magnetic menace". Batman's crime fighting partners expanded to include Ace the Bat-Hound, the Bat-Mite and Mogo the Bat-Ape (Beatty 2005: 127, see below), among others. The subject matter of Batman and other superheroes' adventures was altered drastically, and became more whimsical in nature. The visual depiction of Batman became more iconic and cartoonish, with bold but straightforward lines and less focus on detail. This places the Batman of this era somewhere between McCloud's third and fourth degrees of abstraction in pictorial icons, a simplified style more attractive to younger readers since the simplicity makes reader identification easier. Additionally, the palette became far brighter and reflected the playfulness of the new tone, as can be seen in the cover of *The Rainbow Batman* story, featured below. By 1965 however, sales of *Batman* and *Detective comics* were becoming poor, until the TV series aired in 1966, followed by a spin-off feature film in 1968.



6. Various comic covers from the 1950s and 1960s under the Comics Code. The Seal of Approval can be seen in the top right corner of each.

William Dozier, executive producer of the show, first encountered Batman comics in early 1965, and this is perhaps one reason that the TV show most closely reflected the style of Batman which had been in vogue at the time (Brooker 2005: 185). *Batman* aired one year later in 1966 to instant success, with Adam West in the lead role as Batman and Burt Ward as Robin. The show was notable for its Pop Art sensibilities, with its use of flat, bright colours as well its direct borrowings from popular culture, in this case the comic books themselves (Levitz in Pearson 2015: 17). Below can be seen a series of images which appear to be lifted straight from the comics but in fact come from the title sequence of the TV show, showing Batman and Robin rendered in a cartoonish style, with angular outlines and flat four-colour tones, beating up similarly cartoonish henchmen with accompanying onomatopoeic BAM! and ZOK! sound effect bubbles. This title sequence acts as a framing device for the show,

deliberately placing it in relation with its comic book source. The show never positions itself as "real life", by watching the show we are effectively being pulled into the brightly coloured world of comics. These sensibilities are present throughout the show, from Adam West and Burt Ward's vividly coloured costumes to the incorporation of the same sound effects into the show's fight scenes (See below). An exaggerated punch from Batman would be accompanied by a BAM or OUCH superimposed over the live action footage, directly referencing the comics by using one of its most recognisable visual icons.



7. These two images both come from the 1966 *Batman* TV show. Right – Title sequence. Left – Still image from Ep. 5 *The Joker's Wild* (Dozier 1966).

This gives the show an air of theatricality, which was emphasized by the acting and dialogue, filled with puns and word play. In the 5th episode, *The Joker is Wild* (1966), Joker escapes from prison using a giant spring, eliciting the response: "The Joker has been sprung from the pen!", playing off the dual associations of the word spring. Robin's response to this news is "Holy Jack-in-the-box Batman!", an example of Burt Ward's now infamous signature phrase always consisting of the structure: "Holy [subject] Batman!", and a play on The Joker's nature as a clown. Batman's reply to this is: "Ingenious. Only The Joker would think of something like that", delivered in Adam West's characteristic tone of grave seriousness. The playfulness seen in the comics of the time was reflected in the humour of the show, with its over-the-top performances from guest actors playing the iconic villains from the comics to the wacky gadgets used by Batman, like the Shark-Repellent Bat-spray used in the feature film (Dozier 1968). These features, in combination with the garish colours of the sets and costumes has lead to the show being labelled "Camp", a term made famous by Susan Sontag in her essay *Notes on Camp* (1964). Sontag writes: "#41 - The whole point of Camp is to dethrone the serious. Camp is playful, anti-serious [...]" (1964). In light of this, the TV show

can be seen as ironic and possibly as a parody of the seriousness of the earlier Batman film serial of the 1940s, which itself had been based on the darker themed comics of the day.

The 1966 series was highly successful, and after the first few episodes aired the sales of comics also increased drastically (Brooker 2005: 179). This saved the Batman comics from cancellation (Brooker 2005: 179), and also resulted in a self-reflexive adopting of many of the show's stylistic cues. Whereas the onomatopoeic sound effects had always been present in the comics they now became more pronounced, and other elements from the show found their way into the comics, such as Robin's exclamations of "Holy [subject] Batman!", as well as the alliterative speech style adopted by the show's villains (Brooker 2005: 185). In fact, the comics would go so far as to establish a direct continuity with the show, such as in *Batman* #183 when Batman makes a reference to the "Batusi", a dance made famous by Adam West's Batman (Brooker 2005: 185).

As a more direct example of this cyclical intertextuality: in the above mentioned episode of *Batman*, *The Joker is Wild*, The Joker makes his own utility belt to counter Batman's one, which is an idea lifted more or less unchanged from a 1952 comic, *The Joker's Utility Belt* (*Batman* #73). Some time following the episode, National Periodicals published a comic reprinting the earlier 1952 story, but with a cover reference to Cesar Romero, the actor who had played Joker in the TV show. The comic thus deliberately sets itself up in reference to the TV series, establishing a link between the two mediums. If one accepts the labelling of the TV show as a parody of the comics then this means that the mimicking of the TV show constitutes a self-reflexive act of gentle self-parody. Returning for a moment to the methodology laid out in the previous chapter, McCloud states that a more iconic/cartoon appearance is an act of amplification through simplification. Thus a more cartoon-like representation of Batman is also a way of reducing Batman to a basic concept, and so the show's portrayal can thus be seen as a representation of the *idea* of Batman, in the same way that Andy Warhol's Brillo boxes were a representation of autonomous mass production and marketing (Mamatas in O'Neil 2008: 48). If this is true, then Dozier's *Batman* TV show relies on the image of Batman being instantly recognisable, which itself is perhaps a sign that Batman had by the 1960s already moved beyond his native medium to become something more, a cultural icon which had already been embedded in the public unconscious. If Batman in this context has symbolic meaning and associations, what are they?

I have already asserted that the characterization of Batman is malleable and has been adapted to the times, but it is interesting to note that Adam West's Batman, with his old fashioned moralistic ways, appears somewhat out of place during a time when America was divided by issues of racial tension and the conflict of Vietnam, a war which was not supported by the people. As Brooker notes in *Batman Unmasked*, the TV show makes no reference to contemporary news and seems almost oblivious to the turmoil raging in the country during the 1960s (2005: 229-30). In fact, the quaint values of Adam West's Batman, insisting that Robin does up his seatbelt even when travelling only a few blocks, and his amiable relationship with the police, seem more at home in the 1940s rather than at a time when protestors were facing the real police in a confrontational manner with riots (Brooker 2005: 230). As Brooker notes, this was probably due to the fact that the American people desired a reprieve from the tension facing their country at the time. Batman was "like Disney", in that the show and the comics provided some escapism through their surreal, innocent style and the assurance that figures like Batman represented the safety of the American public (Brooker 2005: 230). In the second part of the same episode of *Batman* referred to above, in response to the crime wave initiated by Joker and his new utility belt, a news reporter says:

> In this hour of peril and need, perhaps all our prayers are best summed up by my small son Harold, just eight years old, kneeling beside his little bed, hands clasped reverently before him. He said: "God bless mommy, and God bless daddy, and please, Batman, whoever you are beneath that mask, please save us". – *Batman* TV series, Ep. #5 *The Joker is Wild* pt. 2 (Dozier 1966).

This quaintly parochial scene has a profound effect on West's Batman. Robin shortly afterward tells him: "Sometimes I think people expect too much from us, [...] We're only human!" Batman responds by saying: "All too true Robin. But try telling that to little Harold beside his bed." In essence, the TV show tells us that the American public in the show derives a sense of safety from the existence of heroes like Batman, and the evoking of the familial unit and good Christian values (like praying before bedtime) seems in keeping with the values of McCarthy era America, where the sanctity of family and safety of the public became the driving force behind every political move to oust threats to these ideals. Perhaps then, Batman in this era was seen as a symbol of safety and moral rectitude. Given its predilection for Camp and humorous undertones, it is likely that the TV show intended this to be read as social satire, gently mocking McCarthyite America's obsession with old-fashioned

Puritanical values and keeping America safe from perceived threats both from within and without.

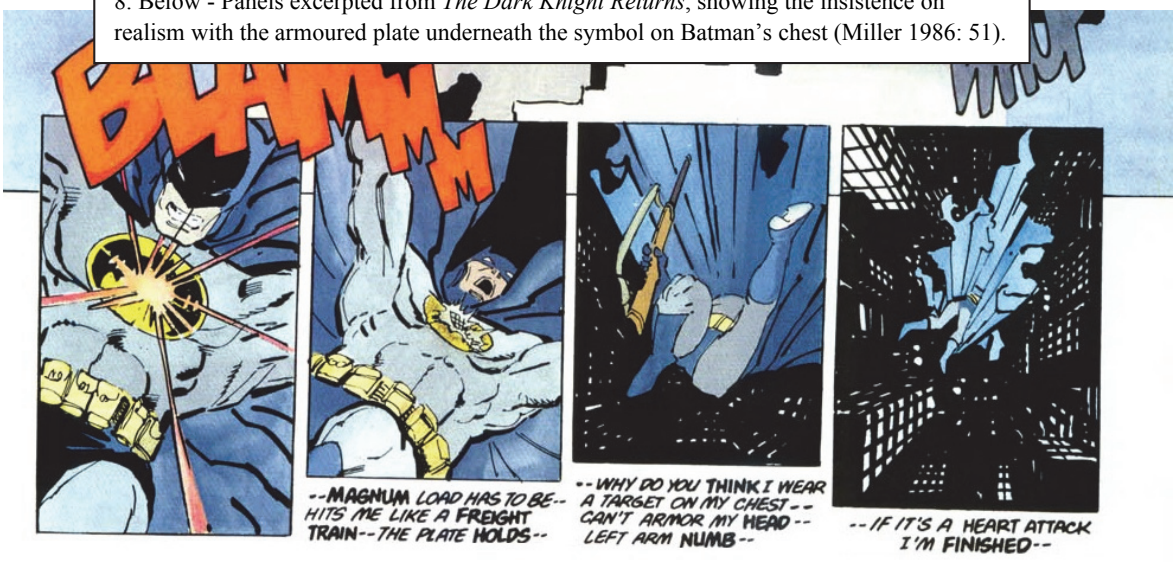
Despite the Camp associations attached to Batman during this time, the popularity of the show had a major impact on the public. Thanks to the 1966 TV serial, Batman merchandise became a multi-million dollar industry (Brooker 2005: 215). Soundtrack albums, dolls, lunchboxes, pens, water pistols and even Batman themed bread were among the thousands of merchandising gimmicks available, and all almost exclusively marketed at younger fans (Brooker 2005: 212). This phenomenon became known as "Batmania" (Brooker 2005: 211), and caused the proliferation of the image of Batman throughout the world as well as America. This was also the time period during which the fans of Batman congregated themselves into organised publics, as discussed in the previous chapter. Batmania brought more fans to the comics, and the widening fan-base also now had a voice in the creation of the comics. This voice would only continue to gain purchase in the next two decades as fans of Batman grew up to become the creators of Batman. As the generation matured, so too did the portrayal of Batman. Following a progressive slackening of the Comics Code he moved from moralistic father figure to subversive anti-authoritarian vigilante.

1980s: The Dark Knight and the Rise of the Graphic Novel

By 1970 the TV show's popularity had waned, and with it the popularity of Batman comics. The character had come to be seen as whimsical and so DC Comics (as the company began calling itself) once again deliberately embraced a darker adaptation of Batman, which the new Batman writer Dennis O'Neil felt was more in touch with the character's pulp/noir origins (Levitz in Pearson 2015: 17). Partnered with artist Neil Adams, who favoured realism in his visual representation of Batman, O'Neil decided to remove many of the far-fetched and quirky elements which had been common in the two previous decades (Anders in O'Neil 2008: 20). O'Neil felt that since the character had no fantastical powers he worked best when placed in a realistic context, and the new version of Batman emphasised his role as a detective who relied on his wits and intelligence, which made the character both more serious and more down to earth (Levitz in Pearson 2015: 17). By this time the Comics Code began to relax its control over content within comics, and it slowly became more acceptable to depict violence and other adult themes, so long as the comic was branded "Adult Content" or similar (Sabin 1996: 158).

This was partly because DC Comics had realised that an older audience had more disposable income than children, and they shifted away from their traditional target market to engage an older audience of 16-25 year olds, who had grown up reading the comics and now sought a more mature rendering, one with psychological complexity less fixated on binaries. This practice reached a peak in the 1980s with a far more grim and menacing version of Batman. To this end, DC began searching for new talent to fulfil these requirements, offering unprecedented authorial rights and control over material as an incentive. Frank Miller was one such writer, who personally felt that "For [him], Batman was never funny" (Brooker 2005: 173), and so chose to depict a more serious version of the character.

8. Below - Panels excerpted from *The Dark Knight Returns*, showing the insistence on realism with the armoured plate underneath the symbol on Batman's chest (Miller 1986: 51).



The Dark Knight Returns (1986), written and drawn by Miller, takes place in a dystopian possible-future and depicts an aging Batman who has retired from crime-fighting but is forced to take up the mantle once again to save an anarchic Gotham City from itself (Sabin 1996: 162-3). Not long after, Miller would also write the highly influential *Batman: Year One* (1987), which focuses on the first year of Batman's career, showing the progression of a young Bruce Wayne as he develops the Batman persona with much trial and error. Both works saw Batman return to the early conception of the character as a vigilante, wanted by the police and an enemy to the establishment. Following the trend established by O'Neil (Levitz in Pearson 2015: 18), Miller placed an emphasis on details which made the character seem more realistic, as can be seen in the above panels excerpted from *The Dark Knight Returns*, where Batman's internal monologue reveals that the bat symbol on his chest hides an armoured plate, which Batman cites as the reason for the placement of the insignia as an

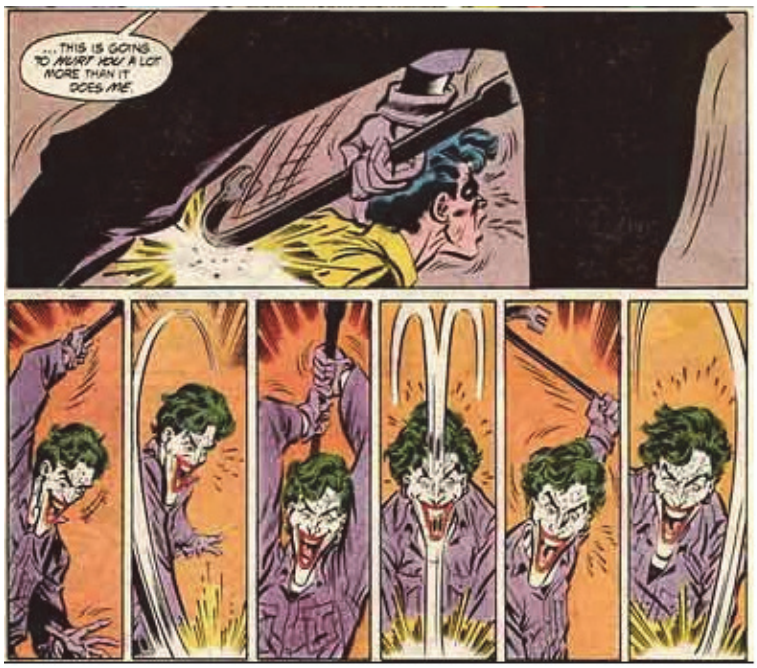
obvious “target”, a practical choice rather than a merely decorative piece of iconography. There is an emphasis on Batman’s internal monologue, much like the hardboiled detective fiction which had inspired the earliest version of the character: “*Magnum* load has to be.. hits me like a *freight train*.. The plate *holds*.. Why do you think I wear a target on my chest.. Can’t armor my head..” (See above).

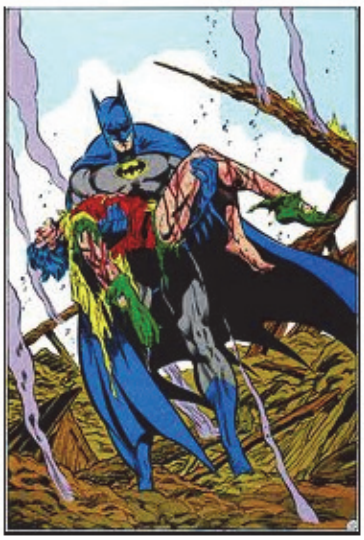
Miller writes Batman as cynical and cantankerous, obsessed with his own mortality and failing youth in one work, and in the other he writes Batman as anxious and naive, unsure of his abilities. Both versions exhibit psychological depth and moral ambiguity for the character, effectively making him more human and fallible. Miller’s art in *Dark Knight Returns* emphasizes detail and the intricacy of the lines show off Batman’s physique and the contours of objects in each panel. Also, the colouring (done by Lyn Varley) uses muted, recessive shades of grey and dark blue, moving away from the bright colours of earlier Batman comics and giving the art a grim, serious feel. Even the yellow of Batman’s utility belt is pale and muted, contributing to the atmosphere of seriousness in the graphic novel. This dour, robust look makes Batman more imposing and the world which he inhabits more physical and threatening, closer to the grim realities of everyday life.

This style became common in the 1980s as other artists imitated and borrowed from Miller’s work, leading to the overall shift towards a more serious characterisation. DC created the so-called “prestige” publishing format for the two above-mentioned works, effectively giving rise to the popularity of the graphic novel as a self-contained comic book narrative (Anders in O’Neil 2008: 21). No longer were these stories printed on cheap disposable paper but rather on high quality photo paper. They were bound with a spine like books rather than stapled together, and additionally would now even be available in hardcover editions – a far cry from the newspaper strip origins of comics. All of the above was an effort to make Batman more appealing to an older audience, by providing self-contained narratives closer to novels and marketing them as “serious” literature. This cynical desire possibly arose out of the social conditions of the period, an uncertain decade characterized by the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the ending of the Cold War (Wurtz 2011: 556).

Miller was not the only writer to explore a more mature rendition of Batman during the 1980s. Alan Moore and Brian Bolland collaborated on *The Killing Joke* (1988), which explores the hitherto unexplained origins of The Joker, presenting a possible picture of the man he was before his famous plunge into a vat of chemicals: an unsuccessful comedian

trying to support his wife and unborn child. This sympathetic portrayal of The Joker is then undermined by his kidnapping and brutal shooting of Batgirl/Barbara Gordon through her spine, leaving her paralytic and ending her career as Batgirl. This controversial graphic novel was soon followed by the notorious *A Death in the Family* storyline published in the mainstream *Batman* title from 1988-1989, written by Jim Starlin and drawn by Jim Aparo. In this story, the second Robin, Jason Todd (the first Robin, Dick Grayson, had since become an adult and struck out on his own as Nightwing), would be beaten to near-death by The Joker and then left to die in a warehouse filled with bombs (See below). In an unprecedented example of the influence of the readership, fans were given the option of saving or killing Todd by calling a 50c hotline and placing their vote (Sabin 1996: 165). By a small margin of votes it was decided that Todd would die, and subsequent mainstream Batman storylines like *A Lonely Place of Dying* (1990) showed a grief-stricken Batman who blamed himself for Todd's demise and was becoming less effective as a crime-fighter because of it. It was during this time of darkness and revision that *Arkham Asylum* (1989) was published, written by Grant Morrison and with artwork by Dave McKean.





9. Below and left: The grim realism of the 1980s. Images from *A Death in the Family* (Starlin & Aparo 1989-1990).

During the years under the Comics Code, many independent artists began self-publishing their own underground "comix" (the x signifies x-rated), which in contrast to the restrictive mainstream comics included open depiction of violence, sex and drugs (Sabin 1996: 92). The comix also creatively explored the limitations of the medium of sequential art, and some artists and writers began their comics careers in the underground, like Scottish writer Grant

Morrison who debuted in the experimental magazine *Near Myths*. Morrison, according to Douglas Wolk in *Reading Comics* (2007), is interested in overtly metaphysical narratives which explore the ways in which language creates the images which humans transform into narratives (258). Many comics written by Morrison explore this interest in the nature of reality, such as the *Animal Man* series of 1988-1990, in which the protagonist eventually discovers that he inhabits a two-dimensional world of paper and ink, and that all of his actions are controlled by "the Writer", a shadowy figure which turns out to be Morrison himself. Dave McKean, also of the UK, was an art school graduate who, as previously mentioned, has experimented with many different visual styles over his career and has also incorporated elements like collage, pen/ink, pastel, oil painting and photography into his sequential artwork. Once DC had accepted Morrison's proposal for a graphic novel it was decided that these two men should be paired in order to bring the unusual work to life. Both make use of experimentation in their work, pushing artistic boundaries and testing the limits of sequential art. This creative disturbance of convention is partially why *Arkham Asylum* is so different from its contemporaries, presenting itself as a postmodern reading of Batman.

Subtitled *A Serious House on Serious Earth*, *Arkham Asylum* broke new ground for the Batman mythos by exploring his sanity, the boundary which usually separates Batman from his most deranged foes. In *Arkham Asylum* Batman is not the hyper-realistic rendering found in other comics from the 1980s, with sculpted muscles and equipped with gadgets for any situation; instead, he is reduced to "a wraithlike figure tormented by inner demons" (Brooker 2005: 40). The premise of the narrative is that the mental institute where Batman's foes are routinely incarcerated, the eponymous Arkham Asylum for the Criminally Insane, has been seized by its resident rogues gallery of dangerous inmates on April 1st, All Fools Day. Their only demand is that Batman be turned over to them in exchange for the release of the hostages they have taken. Batman crosses the threshold into the Asylum, which is given an uncanny mien of horror and the building itself is portrayed as possessing a malign *genius loci*, an animistic spirit and character of its own, turning the location into an entity which feeds on the madness of those within and where the rule of logic is discarded in favour of the irrational and the abject (See chapter 4). Batman's journey through the asylum becomes a journey through his own psyche, as the interior world of the mind is conflated with the exterior world.

> "Afraid? Batman's not afraid of anything. Its *me*. *I'm* afraid. I'm afraid that the Joker may be *right* about me. Sometimes I... question the rationality of my actions. And I'm afraid that when I walk through those asylum gates... When I walk into Arkham and the doors close behind me... It'll be just like coming home." – *Arkham Asylum*, p. 10.

The above quote highlights some of the primary concerns of *Arkham*. Here, Batman confesses to long-time friend Commissioner James Gordon that although Batman the symbol can never show fear, the man he is underneath the mask (Bruce Wayne) does indeed feel fear, and the thought of entering Arkham scares him because he worries that he may actually belong there, which would possibly invalidate his status as a hero. The status of the asylum as a place outside the borders of reality and normality is hinted at here, the gates being spoken of by Bruce as a boundary which separates the asylum from the rest of the world in more than just a physical sense. Thus the asylum creates a landscape of madness, a physical space where mental turmoil is externalised, in keeping with the postmodern conception that meaning is subjectively created in the mind.

This is not *Arkham*'s only postmodern feature. The artwork in *Arkham* visually reinforces the narrative's interiority through a breakdown of traditional sequential art elements. Firstly, in opposition to the neat line work and bold outlines of previous iterations, *Arkham* is drawn in an expressionistic style which visually evokes the inner turmoil of the characters (See below). The pen lines are either erratic and roughly textured or disappear completely beneath the oil paint which McKean frequently uses instead of traditional ink. This elimination of the bold outlines generally associated with superhero comics creates a visual disruption of reality, a break from the neatly defined corporeal world in which most superhero stories take place and an engagement with the unconscious world of dreams. *Arkham*'s expressionistic style does not neatly fit the degrees of abstraction (realistic vs iconic representation) defined in the previous chapter, but adds a third element: abstraction of the pictorial plane. McCloud defines expressionistic sequential art of this kind as an attempt to present art not as faithful representation of life or as iconic "cartoon" but rather as a work of artifice (McCloud 1993: 51).

This expressionistic style is exemplified by the broad brushstrokes employed by McKean, seen in the below panel extract on Joker's face and hair. Batman is reduced to a shadow, where only his silhouette is depicted in solid black paint or ink, even in scenes where other characters standing near him are not depicted in shadow. This can be observed in the below

image where a young woman is standing close to Batman and yet only her features are clearly visible, while Batman is ambiguously rendered in black paint, the long ears of his cowl resembling demonic horns. This painterly style, as well as McKean's incorporation of photography and collage, reveals the pictorial plane to a degree, and thus presents Arkham not as a faithful rendering of reality but as an image which revels in its nature *as a picture*.



10. Above – Three panels in sequence from *Arkham* (p. 19), illustrating the expressionistic style used throughout the majority of the graphic novel.

Arkham also challenges prevailing notions of sequential art through its creative reworking of conventional word balloons and panel structure. Many characters in *Arkham* are given a unique style of word balloon by letterer Gaspar Saladino: for Batman black balloons with white text are used, giving his "voice" an ominous tone. Maxie Zeus is given electric blue balloons with Greek style font. Joker has no balloons for his dialogue; instead, it is rendered as erratic and jagged red text which "floats" in the air. This is perhaps to reinforce the notion that Joker refuses to adhere to any boundaries, by making his dialogue seem wild and unrestrained. Conventional panel structure is similarly creatively violated throughout *Arkham*. Usually the panel structure is rigid and neatly structured, as with most sequential art.

However, at key moments in the narrative the panel borders dissolve or change colour to reflect a "breakdown" happening in the scene.



11. Above – Panel extract from *Arkham* (p. 34), showing the breakdown of order through the disruption of traditional panel structure.

For example, in the above panel extract the mocking laughter of The Joker begins in the penultimate panel on the page and then continues into the final frame, showing an extreme close-up of Joker's face. The white panel borders dissolve into a frenzy of spattered red ink, and the borders additionally "bleed" off the page, an effect described by Scott McCloud as giving the impression that time is no longer bound by the panel's rigidity, thus allowing the scene to linger in the mind of the reader afterward (McCloud 1993: 103). This "breakdown" of order is contrasted by the image of Batman's head slumped forward as he leans on the desk where he is seated, the word "Stop" in his word balloon is written in tiny white letters, giving the impression that his voice in this panel is quiet and subdued. The Joker's subsequent laughter is jumbled and the letters are far larger than those of Batman, suggesting a chaotic and clamorous sound, reinforcing the breakdown through accompanying text. This extract shows a moment of vulnerability for Batman in the text, where The Joker has demanded that Batman be subjected to a word association test, one which conjures up images in Batman's mind of his parents' murder, putting his mind in a fragile state. This psychoanalysing of Batman by his enemies is part of *Arkham*'s objective of questioning the stability of Batman's sanity and forcing him to come to terms with the trauma which shaped him.

Batman as Living Image

This rendering of Batman as uncertain and plagued by psychological doubt is a marked departure from previous depictions of the character. *Arkham Asylum* was part of the 1980s trend in Batman comics of reinterpretation. Seeking to abolish the lingering image of Batman as comical and absurd, DC Comics brought in new writers and artists who re-imagined the character in a much more sombre, realistic way. However, this process of reinventing the image of Batman did not abolish or overwrite previous incarnations, but rather introduced a multiplicity of identities for the character. Returning to the idea of Batman as a living image introduced in the beginning of this dissertation, the popular conception of Batman is not a singular, set image but rather a composite of the many varying portrayals of the character over time. Batman had already become so embedded in the public consciousness by the time of the 1980s that even then it was not unusual to talk about Batman as a real person, while simultaneously retaining awareness of his fictional status. In the introduction to *The Dark Knight Returns* Frank Miller relates how during the process of creating the series he often felt that "[Batman] was the real boss. As he was quick to assert, Batman has a personality and purpose all his own, a definable core" (1986: 8). Miller's rendering of Batman was subjective, but nonetheless this belief in Batman as a living being reveals something striking about the *vitality* of the character, that underneath the various interpretations lies a quasi-living "core" which remains constant and speaks to us as readers.

Batman does possess some core traits: a) he is invariably a masked crimefighter with bat-based iconography, b) the shooting of his parents by a mugger caused him to take up this role, c) he uses both his physical and mental capabilities as well as his vast resources to fight crime and d) he maintains a dual existence as idle playboy Bruce Wayne. However, the specifics of Batman's characterization and visual depiction and other details such as the tone and atmosphere of the stories are subject to variation and change. Thus, the overall meta-picture of Batman is one which includes all depictions, some of which contradict others or make reference to earlier versions. The 1960s Camp Batman was not forgotten, and even though DC attempted to move away from this whimsical and playful depiction, the Adam West Batman had already indelibly entered the realm of popular culture. By introducing a darker version of Batman, itself a return to the early noir origins of the character, DC was in fact broadening the number of possible interpretations. *Arkham Asylum* added to these competing narratives by exploring the idea of a psychologically troubled Batman.

In recent years DC has embraced this plurality and recent depictions of Batman self-reflexively draw upon the entire history of the character. The relatively recent animated series *Batman – The Brave and the Bold* (2008-2011), takes a far more light-hearted approach to the character, regularly featuring parody and references to the more whimsical renditions of Batman from the 1950s and 1960s, as well as self-reflexive commentary on the nature of Batman and how the same character has been embodied in different but valid ways over the years. In the comics too, this has been the case. Scott Snyder and Greg Capullo, the current writer/artist team responsible for producing Batman, have a tendency to pay homage to earlier versions of the character in the artwork as well as the narratives of their comics. *Arkham Asylum* too has been revisited by the recent series of video games loosely based on the premise of the graphic novel.

Therefore, it can be persuasively argued that Batman is an open signifier with a number of interpretive possibilities, all the while retaining a stable "core" which can be modified to fit these various styles. Furthermore, Batman is not rooted in any specific period or portrayal, but rather exists in flux as a "host of Batmen", each depiction being apposite to its social context, and I would contend that this flexibility is the reason for the character's longevity. At times, it is possible to see a correlation between the desires of the fans and these shifts in aesthetics and characterization, as each Batman is adapted to the changes experienced by society. However, I would not like to suggest a neat, teleological view of history through this periodization. Rather, I would like to emphasize that these shifts are gradual and organic, often developing over the course of years or even decades and I think there can probably be found some overlap in the various periods of Batman's history. The examples I have chosen for this chapter merely represent easily defined moments from the continuum of Batman comics that demonstrate the qualities most associated with the period in question. It is also difficult to fully quantify the extent of the influence which society has on the representation of Batman, but I would nonetheless argue that there is certainly an observable relationship between the two. Batman is a reflection of society just as society has been influenced by Batman, his likeness(es) and iconography having become part of the world of visual culture, a living image with a variety of countenances. *Arkham* shows us a dark reflection of that image, one seen through the lens of the irrational and the dreamlike, a Dark Knight for the postmodern moment at the close of the 20th Century.

Chapter 3: The Feast of Fools

Black Mask: "I say we take off his mask. I want to see his *real* face.
Joker: "Don't be so predictable, for Christ's sake! That *is* his real face. And I want to go much *deeper* than that." - *Arkham Asylum*, p. 30

Thus far this dissertation has attempted to construct an argument for a historicity within Batman comics, with different periods displaying particular qualities which can be seen as having been influenced in some ways by the readership and social conditions. As discussed in the previous chapter, Batman as a living image has come to occupy multiple positions and identities over the years while nonetheless retaining a core set of characteristics which remain largely consistent. I have made the claim that this protean nature is one of the character's strengths, and that this is why Batman has remained in publication for so long. I have also asserted that during the 1980s there was a noticeable shift towards a darker, more psychologically complex Batman, and moreover that this focus on interiority was part of a postmodernisation of the character, exemplified by works like *Arkham Asylum*. However, thus far I have mostly given a descriptive account, focusing on the context out of which *Arkham* arose. This chapter now engages with the text more closely, embarking on an analysis of this graphic novel's structure by looking at its constituent parts in more detail. Postmodernism embraces heterogeneity, plurality and difference of opinion (Docker 1995: 115), and fittingly there are also many kinds of postmodernism. Thus if *Arkham* can be said to be a postmodern form of Batman then it will be necessary to establish which kind/s of postmodernism the work embodies.

This chapter looks at various aspects of *Arkham Asylum*, arguing for the postmodern sensibility of the text. First, the structural and narrative qualities of *Arkham* are described and critiqued, along with an analysis of some of the primary characters. The complex interplay between past and present in the text creates a fragmented, non-linear sense of time, and this chapter discusses some examples of how time is distorted in the graphic novel and the implications of this distortion. The primary characters in *Arkham*, most of them traditional Batman villains from mainstream comics, are similarly subjected to some creative distortion in *Arkham*. Each villain becomes representative of a particular facet of Batman's psyche, highlighting the text's emphasis on interiority and identity through a merging of self and other. This chapter discusses how a combination of the structure, the narrative and the characters within *Arkham* are thus used to turn this story into an arguably postmodern

creative questioning of the Batman character. First I discuss the fragmentary structural qualities of *Arkham*'s narrative, and then I turn to an analysis of one particular panel from the text, the so-called "Feast of Fools". This complex double-page image encapsulates, in my mind, the overarching concerns of this graphic novel and here I subject it to a thorough visual analysis in order to reveal the way postmodern concerns are enacted visually in the intricately layered and dreamlike artwork of *Arkham*. The methodology established in Chapter 1 is here utilized with greater detail and critical focus, in order to fully understand the way *Arkham* uses both image and text to deliver a postmodern rendering of Batman.

Part of postmodernism is the tendency for deliberately placing a text in relation to other existing texts to produce intertextual readings, and so I also here provide a discussion of the inter-texts which *Arkham* draws upon. In particular I use the examples of Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland* (1865) and Philip Larkin's poem *Church Going* (1955). Both of these examples are explicitly referenced in *Arkham*. Lewis Carrol quotes are used to frame the story, and themes from his works are present throughout *Arkham*. Additionally, *Arkham* takes its subtitle *A Serious House on Serious Earth* from a line in Larkin's poem and it is my view that both of these texts share some interesting parallels with *Arkham*. Finally, I draw upon Bakhtin's notion of the Carnivalesque, as discussed by John Docker in *Postmodernism and Popular Culture* (1995), and apply it to *Arkham* in order to demonstrate how the strategy of inversion present throughout this graphic novel, exemplified by the Feast of Fools panel, serves to overthrow previously understood notions of Batman as rationalistic and realistic, as portrayed during the 1980s.

Narrative Structure of Arkham

As already mentioned, the premise of *Arkham* is that a riot has broken out on April Fool's Day at the Elizabeth Arkham Asylum for the Criminally Insane, the infamous mental health facility where the majority of Batman's "Rogues Gallery" of villains are kept confined whenever Batman apprehends them. The inmates, led by The Joker, have taken the staff hostage and have but one demand:

> Batman: Joker! Are you there? What do you want?
>
> Joker: Well *hello*, Big Boy!
>
> Batman: Don't waste my time Joker. Just tell me what it is you want.
>
> Joker: Oh I think you can guess... We want *you*. In here. With us. In the *Madhouse*. Where you *belong*. -*Arkham Asylum*, p. 6-7.

With some apprehension, Batman accepts, and what follows is an account of his journey through the asylum and the attendant trials and tribulations that he must face before he can end the riot, restore order and return to Gotham. However, the story of *Arkham* is actually two narratives bound up together and linked thematically as well as literally at several key points. While at one level we are presented with the "present day" story of Batman, we are also given a history of the asylum through the chronicle of its founder, Amadeus Arkham. Communicated to the reader through excerpts from Arkham's journal (*Arkham* p.1), his tragic tale both informs and at times mirrors that of Batman's, albeit separated from it by a period of nearly 70 years. In this way, Amadeus (first name used to distinguish between the asylum and the man) becomes a secondary protagonist, with clear parallels between his story and Batman's, yet ultimately it is the contrasts between the two which serve to inform our understanding of the two characters and how the graphic novel embodies their opposing ideals. The two narratives are presented to the reader in fragments interspersed with one another, so that both stories develop almost simultaneously, eventually winding to a climax where the stories collide. This creates a non-linear, distorted sense of time in the graphic novel. The events of Amadeus' life come to affect the present day narrative; they are the catalyst for the series of events leading to the riot that brought Batman to the asylum, in turn impacting the events of Arkham's life through the unique way in which time works in the graphic novel. Past influences present just as present influences past in a cyclical pattern.

It is Amadeus' childhood which acts as the prologue to the story, with a young Amadeus bringing his mentally ill mother some refreshments. Several major themes are established from the outset, such as the idea of Amadeus 'haunting' the house, "[feeling] little more than a ghost haunting its corridors" (*Arkham* p.1), the house itself being a self-contained microcosm separated from the outside world as well as the proliferation of symbolism which is found throughout the graphic novel. From here the story begins to alternate between the twin narratives, showing the respective plot developments of Amadeus' past and Batman's present. Shortly after the first scene with Amadeus Arkham we are shown the familiar, present day world of Gotham City, rendered in grey sepia tones devoid of colour, and the iconic Bat-Signal is shown as a giant strobe light which projects a bat onto the night sky whenever Gotham needs Batman. Quickly the premise of the narrative is established, with Gotham City Police Commissioner Gordon providing exposition for the reader by explaining the situation at the asylum to Batman. The inmates' demand is made clear and Batman agrees to their terms, and soon after enters the asylum by crossing a perimeter of salt, which we are

later told is intended to imprison evil spirits. These events are fragmentary, with images of Batman entering the asylum grounds interspersed with panels providing the exposition. The narrative then switches back to the past, the two linked by the use of text. Batman tells Commissioner Gordon that he fears entering the asylum because he worries it will be "[J]ust like coming home" (p. 10), and then overleaf the next image shows Amadeus coming home to his family manor, which will one day become the asylum which bears his name. This device is used many times throughout *Arkham* in order to provide a link between the alternating narratives. This way, although the narrative is not strictly linear, the transition between the two is made less jarring for the reader. Additionally, perhaps to highlight the temporal dislocation between the two stories, the panels of Amadeus' tale are often placed above images of clocks and gears, visually suggesting the passage of time (See below).



12. Above: Pages 11 and 12 of *Arkham*, showing an extract from Amadeus Arkham's chronicle. Note the presence of clocks shown behind the irregular panel layout.

This pattern of alternating between the two narratives continues throughout the text, with Batman entering the asylum where we are introduced to the major characters who have significant roles in the narrative as well as the minor bit players who mostly serve as obstacles for Batman to overcome. The hostages are freed, but two of the Arkham staff

willingly remain behind in the asylum, ostensibly out of a sense of duty. One is Charles Cavendish, the current administrator of the asylum, who is established as a would-be authoritarian figure now stripped of his power and humiliated by The Joker, who alludes to Cavendish's "guilty secret" which is only revealed at the climax of the story: Cavendish is the one who allowed the inmates to break free after being driven insane by Amadeus' journal. The other is Dr. Ruth Adams, a psychotherapist who functions as something of a foil to Batman. While Batman sees the inmates as dangerous criminals, Adams sees them as misguided souls who can be cured by the system, even though at times the system uproots their sense of identity. She is instructed by The Joker to provide Batman with a word association test, which conjures up images of his parents' murder, leaving him in a vulnerable mental state. Joker then declares a game of hide-and-seek, setting up the rest of the narrative and the series of trials which Batman must overcome.

Amadeus Arkham's tale reveals that he decided to convert his old family manor into an asylum after his mother committed suicide with a pearl-handled razor in 1920. Amadeus, who works as a psychotherapist, feels pity for those suffering from mental illness, "Men whose only crime is mental illness, trapped in the penal system with no hope of treatment. My course is clear" (*Arkham* p. 14). However, Amadeus' life begins to unravel as the house takes its toll on his sanity and the tragic loss of his family leads to him having a complete mental breakdown. This is foreshadowed many times in Amadeus' chronicle, such as when Amadeus is admiring his newly acquired clown fish and is reminded of the French name for the recipient of an April Fool's Day joke, *poisson d'Avril*, or "April fish". He then experiences "an inexplicable frisson of déjà vu", before receiving a telephone call to say that his patient Martin "Mad Dog" Hawkins has escaped confinement (p. 37-8). Amadeus tells the men on the phone that it is not his problem, and then returns to spending time with his wife and daughter. Shortly afterwards Amadeus says of his daughter "I almost wish she need never grow up" (p.38). These occurrences all prefigure the violent rape and murder of both Amadeus' wife and his daughter by Mad Dog, an event which takes place on April 1st 1921, making Amadeus the recipient of a cruel April Fool's joke (p. 48-50). This event is also foreshadowed earlier in the text when Amadeus first returns to his family home in 1920, and during the night he spends there a dog is said to bark, "on an on through the whole restless night". Further foreshadowing is provided when Amadeus relates to the reader that his daughter Harriet had been having nightmares soon after moving into the old house, and he discovers a crayon drawing of a two-headed dog (p.31). Additionally, during the Feast of

Fools (see below) one of the voices says "Oh Daddy, make him stop! He's hurting me! The dog's hurting me!" (p. 22). Each of these three examples uses the signifier of a dog to invoke Hawkins' epithet "Mad Dog", and so the proliferation of these hints slowly builds up a sense of foreboding in the reader's mind, subtly warning them of the great violence that is to come.

I would contend that the strong presence of foreshadowing in the narrative is fitting for the purposes of this particular story because of the unique representation of time within *Arkham*. Past and present intermingle freely, and so the use of foreshadowing emphasizes this nature by making the barrier between the parallel narratives more malleable. This boundary between past and present is blurred in other ways throughout the narrative, with the present regularly intruding upon the past and altering the course of events, in turn impacting the "future" in a circular relationship. At first these intrusions are small, such as when Amadeus finds a joker playing card on the floor (*Arkham* p. 22), or more visceral as when Amadeus "hear[s] laughter from a cell [he] know[s] to be empty" after the asylum has been completed but not yet opened (*Arkham* p. 31). Both of these occurrences seem to suggest that Amadeus' world is being invaded by the future, in these two cases by The Joker, who is known to leave his namesake playing cards at the scenes of his crimes, and who is also known for his manic laughter. Conversely, characters in the present reference the "local folklore" which says that Amadeus Arkham's ghost is said to haunt the hallways of the asylum (*Arkham* p. 16); this occurrence is possibly an intrusion of the past on the present, since Amadeus is given to roaming the hallways of the house after the death of his family "like a spirit condemned to retrace its own steps forever" (*Arkham* script p. 44). This connection comes to a head at the climax of the narrative, when both stories collide and intersect, with Batman and Amadeus both entering the "secret room" of the asylum, which was originally Amadeus' mother's room.

Batman, ever the detective, discovers this secret room by following a blood trail left by Cavendish and Dr. Adams, who Cavendish has taken as a hostage. Batman confronts Cavendish, realising that he is responsible for the riot, and he tells Batman to read Amadeus' journal, having marked the place for him (*Arkham* p. 78). The journal relates how Amadeus, through the use of psychotropic mushrooms, unlocked the repressed memory of killing his mother, which we are told was because of a gigantic bat which tormented her (Arkham p. 80). Amadeus saw the bat too, in the same room where Batman is currently standing, suggesting that it is Batman's presence in the asylum which drove Amadeus and his mother

insane through yet another haunting from the future. Cavendish has come to the same conclusion, and he tells Batman that he is responsible for "feeding" the asylum by regularly bringing insane villains to it (*Arkham* p. 83). Amadeus' "longed-for revelation" (p. 78) that he killed his mother and that the bat was what drove her mad makes him realise that "[m]adness is born in the blood. It is [his] birthright. [His] inheritance. [His] *destiny*" (p. 82).

Arkham chooses madness as his inevitable fate and embraces it, eventually becoming a patient within his own asylum after he tries to kill his stockbroker. Batman's encounter with Arkham's journal changes him as well, but with a more positive outcome. He says to Dr. Ruth Adams: "Arkham was right; sometimes it's only madness that makes us what we are" (p. 91). Batman accepts that madness is part of being human, and that one's anxieties and inner demons can be overcome, just as he has overcome his own. He is then able to defeat his final opponent, the asylum itself – a symbolic victory over psychic turmoil. Then, after confronting Joker and the other inmates, Batman is finally able to leave the asylum and return to Gotham City, once again depicted in cold sepia.

Analysis of Major Characters

Arkham thus reflects a postmodern sensibility through the fragmentary nature of the narrative structure and the distorted representation of time within the graphic novel. This is also achieved through the representation of Batman and his Rogues Gallery within *Arkham*. The Rogues themselves also become part of the structure of the narrative by each presenting a unique challenge to Batman as he moves from room to room within the asylum, overcoming these foes where necessary. Each of these encounters is made complex by the thematic and visual representation of the accompanying foe and the mental or physical challenge they present to Batman, often communicated through multifaceted visuals interlaced with meaning relevant to the particular encounter as well as the overarching structure of the plot as a whole. Morrison states in the script included with the 15th Anniversary Edition that each foe is made to represent an aspect of Batman's fractured psyche (*Arkham* script p. 36), and often modifications are made to the representation of familiar characters in order to better serve the needs of the story.

For example, in the encounter with Mad Hatter (*Arkham* p. 59-60), normally a benign and (mostly) harmless character with a peculiar obsession with hats (Beatty 2005: 112), he is now instead shown as a paedophilic "acid casualty" who expounds to Batman his understanding of

reality, somehow incorporating into it his disturbing obsession with adolescent blonde girls. Batman neither speaks nor acts during this bizarre meeting, and it ends as abruptly as it begins, with Batman staring into a looking glass at his own reflection as Mad Hatter's room suddenly materialises and then afterward disappears. However, the encounter itself is laden with meaning and resonance. On the surface Mad Hatter is talking about child molestation, but his words contain some surprisingly pertinent details. For example, Hatter says (talking about little girls): "To know them is to know myself." Two panels later he says: "Sometimes... Sometimes I think the Asylum is a *head*. We're inside a huge head that dreams us into being." "Perhaps it's *your* head Batman. Arkham is a *looking glass*. And *we* are *you*" (*Arkham* p. 60). All of the above constitutes a heuristic meaning; arguably the entire text is about knowing oneself. Through his interaction with his enemies Batman comes to know himself better by confronting the various parts of his psyche. Hatter's comment about the asylum being a head reinforces the theme of interiority within the text by making the narrative not just a journey through a mere building but also through the unconscious.

This notion is repeated several times throughout, such as when Amadeus Arkham calls the asylum "[T]he maze that dreams" (*Arkham* p. 62), or during his mushroom-induced psychotropic trip when he thinks to himself "[T]he house is alive and trying to *communicate* with me" (Arkham p. 68). The "looking glass" reference is one of many *Alice in Wonderland* references and once again reinforces the notion of engaging with one's reflection in the construction of identity. Mirrors feature prominently in *Arkham*, and there are at least nine separate references to mirrors scattered throughout the narrative, both textual as well as visual. Additionally, the notion of a head dreaming the characters into being could also be interpreted as a self-reflexive allusion to the fact that these characters have literally been dreamed into being, since they are fictional personages created through imaginative processes - though in fact they have been created by various minds rather than just one. In his essay on *Arkham* titled *Out There In The Asylum* (2011) James Wurtz also comments on this possibility (568), and goes even further, noting that the image accompanying Hatter when he speaks of the asylum as a head shows a "phrenological analysis of the human mind", dividing a diagram of a head into a number of rooms filled with people, each representative of one aspect of the human psyche (Wurtz 2011: 562). Thus, this mental journey of self-discovery is enacted through Batman's physical journey through the building, an externalisation of his passage through his own mind.

Mad Hatter's intoxicated musing that Batman's enemies represent dark reflections of the Caped Crusader is most appropriate when applied to The Joker. The character has gone through almost as many changes as Batman, and like Batman his characterisation also tends to reflect contemporary attitudes (Anders in O'Neil 2008: 27-29). In *Arkham*, as in most Batman comics, The Joker represents the opposite of Batman, his distorted mirror image. The Joker embodies inversion in this text, the reversal of all of Batman's traits. Batman's arch-nemesis appeared very early on in the comics, in *Batman #1* (1940). Within two pages the character is immediately established as both disturbed and deadly, using a patented "Joker Venom" which kills its victim with a seizure and causes their facial muscles to twist into a rictus grin (reprinted in DiDio 2008: 5). Joker's identity is not revealed in his first appearance, and in fact has never been fully revealed in the comics, despite Batman's best efforts to uncover it.

From that day onward, the maniacal "Clown Prince of Crime" would go on to become Batman's most persistent and most hated adversary. Over the years The Joker would closely reflect the same changes taking place in the Batman comics. During the 50s and 60s under the Comics Code he went from murderous psychopath to harmless prankster (Anders in O'Neil 2008: 28), with such evil schemes as turning Gotham's water supply into "Jokerjelly" (Dozier 1967). Once the Comics Code was lifted, he returned to his sinister origins and became a killer once more. In fact, during the 1980s the character's depiction became truly psychopathic, casually crippling Batgirl with a bullet through her spine and taunting her father with nude photos of her in *The Killing Joke* (1988). As mentioned in Chapter 2, he also murdered Jason Todd, the second Robin, in *A Death in The Family* (1988-89). *Arkham* was written while the latter storyline was being published, and in the story Joker sarcastically asks Batman how the "Boy Wonder" is doing (*Arkham* p. 20), possibly a subtle allusion to Todd's recent death. In *Arkham* The Joker's protean nature over the decades is given an explanation by Dr. Ruth Adams:

> […] We're beginning to think it may be a neurological disorder, similar to Tourette's Syndrome. It's quite possible we may be looking at some form of super-sanity here. A brilliant new modification suited for urban life at the end of the twentieth Century. Unlike you and I, the Joker has no control over the sensory information he's receiving from the outside world. He can only cope with the chaotic barrage of input by going with the flow. *That's* why some days he's a mischievous clown, others a psychopathic killer. He *has* no real personality. He creates himself each day. - *Arkham Asylum* (1988) p. 27-28.

Adams' theory allows for all previous interpretations of The Joker character to plausibly exist in the same world, giving the character a multiplicity of identities, never fixed and constantly

changing. This makes the *Arkham* representation of Joker effectively postmodern by embracing plurality of meaning and allowing for contradiction and ambivalence (Docker 1995: 115). Additionally, Adams' reference to the "chaotic barrage of input" which Joker receives is reminiscent of the modernist/postmodernist attitude that modern society is inundated with images and information through mass culture, which Baudrillard described as being like an "obscene", "pornographic" invasion of the mind, an interface which overwhelms the receiver, eliminating their individuality (Docker 1995: 104). Joker copes with this torrent of information by adapting to it, making it part of his personality.

In *Arkham* The Joker acts as a trickster figure rather than an outright antagonist to Batman, greeting him when he enters the asylum and walking him to the door and bidding him farewell when he leaves, as though the two were old friends: "Good luck out there... in the Asylum. But just remember, there's always a place for you here" (p.100). According to James Wurtz, whose essay on *Arkham* takes its title from this line, this also makes Joker a "gatekeeper" (2011: 566), since he does not venture into the asylum with the other inmates to search for Batman. Morrison states in the script that he intended for The Joker to be the primary representation of inversion in the text. Visually he is the polar opposite of Batman, his design replete with vibrant colours, while Batman is reduced to a shadow lurking in the periphery of most of the frames in which he appears. Batman is hunched, rigid and paranoid whereas Joker is expressive, dynamic and confident. Where Batman is depicted in *Arkham* as sexually repressed, Joker constantly makes sexual remarks about Batman and other characters, such as his first words to Batman when he arrives at the asylum: "It's salt. Why don't you sprinkle some on me, honey?" (p. 17), or his cry of "Kiss me, Charlie! Ravish me!" to Cavendish (p. 23). Morrison had hoped for McKean to invest the character with a dark magnetism:

> He projects an absolute confidence that confers on him a bizarre kind of attractiveness and sexuality. It is the attraction of the perverse and the forbidden. The Joker personifies the dark irrational side of us all. – *Arkham* script p. 12.

This makes Joker a suitable antagonist for Batman, since he is an exemplar of rationality while Joker represents the irrational. Their rivalry thus arguably becomes symbolic of the dichotomy between the conscious mind and the subconscious. This rivalry often hinges on the tests which Joker creates for Batman, usually to see if he can force his old adversary to

finally snap. Batman is well known for his refusal to kill, and so by allowing Joker to live on and continue his endless killing spree he becomes partially responsible for all the deaths (Anders in O'Neil 2008: 31). Even after crippling Batgirl/Barbara Gordon and killing Jason Todd, Batman still refuses to kill Joker. Every writer of Batman stories has consistently maintained this moral principle for the character, because this is what essentially separates him from the criminal who killed his parents. If Batman killed The Joker, nothing would remain to stop him from killing all other criminals as well. Yet The Joker continually taunts the Dark Knight: "They could [...] line the bodies head to toe on the ground in delightful geometric patterns like an endless June Taylor dancers routine – and it would never be enough. No, I don't keep count. But *you* do, and I love you for it" (Miller 1986: 140). For The Joker, Batman's existence defines his own, because mocking him with the dead and trying to force Batman to break his iron will gives Joker the drive to go on living (Anders in O'Neil 2008: 31-2). In *Arkham*, he tests Batman in a different way, by forcing him to participate in the Feast of Fools and enter the asylum and subsequently pass through the trial and initiation that the asylum represents. In this way the inverted, Carnivalesque world of *Arkham* is what allows Joker to be the one to inadvertently bring about the most good by ultimately making his arch-nemesis stronger.

Harvey Dent, also known as Two-Face, is another character with whom Batman shares a unique relationship in the text. In *Arkham* the character is given a sympathetic treatment by Morrison, and is presented as having been severely impaired in his ability to function due to the treatment he has recently been subjected to by Dr. Ruth Adams. The character is as famous for his unique double visage as he is for his trademark silver dollar, which is scarred on one side and unblemished on the other, a reflection of Two-Face's own disfigurement and obsession with all things binary. Harvey Dent is usually depicted as having originally been district attorney for Gotham, and is often also said to have once been a close friend of Bruce Wayne, as well as an ally of Batman, but after Dent's face was scarred by acid (see below) he was so traumatised that he developed the Two-Face persona and became a super-villain with a warped sense of justice. All of Two-Face's major decisions are determined by a coin toss, and if the scarred side lands upright he will usually commit acts of evil or violence, or acts of mercy if the unscarred face is upright. This thereby absolves him of any blame in his own eyes, and thus he feels that the outcome is just and fair, something which allows him to reconcile his criminal acts with his innate sense of justice (Langley 2012: 175). While the Dark Knight leads a double life as Bruce Wayne and Batman, Two-Face instead embodies a

dual persona at all times through his binary appearance. In *Arkham* Dent thus becomes representative of duality, as well as the main vehicle for sympathising with those who suffer from mental illness, in contrast to violent figures like The Joker. Usually Dent is portrayed with confidence and charisma, a forceful character who sees the world in binaries and abides only by the law of chance and the flip of his trademark coin. In *Arkham* however, Dent has suffered from debilitating "iatrogenesis" due to the severe behaviour modification he has been subjected to. According to Travis Langley, author of *Batman and Psychology* (2012), this term refers to when the condition of a patient is worsened by treatment rather than improved (177). When Batman sees Dent's condition he is shocked and even sympathetic, "to see his old enemy brought so low" (*Arkham* script p. 18). Ruth Adams explains that Dent's famous silver dollar has been confiscated and replaced first with a die and more recently with a pack of tarot cards, effectively giving him six and seventy-eight options for any given decision, respectively (*Arkham* p. 25).



13. Above: Harvey Dent's transformation into Two-Face, this version of the character origin from a 1971 newspaper strip.

Thus, according to Adams, Dent is slowly being cured of his obsession with duality, giving him a "completely functional judgemental facility" (*Arkham* p. 25). Instead, as Batman notes, the therapy has "effectively destroyed the man's personality", and he is unable to make even simple decisions like going to the bathroom (p. 26). In fact, after soiling himself he is not even sure if he feels bad or not. This version of Dent has experienced such debilitating iatrogenesis that he has completely lost his agency. Fittingly for Dent, this serves a dual purpose for the narrative. Firstly, it forms part of Morrison's critique of institutionalism, something which is prevalent throughout *Arkham*. Through Dent, Morrison queries the notion that therapy is always beneficial, and furthermore that insanity can be understood empirically, which is something that postmodern theorists like Foucault and Anti-Psychiatrists like R. D. Laing were critical of (Laing 1960: 18). Joker voices this critique when he says to Cavendish: "Enough madness? Enough? And how do you measure madness? Not with rods and wheels and clocks surely?" (*Arkham* p. 23).

The second function of Dent's broken psyche is that it allows Batman to altruistically help him regain his agency by returning his coin. Even though Two-Face has been Batman's enemy for years, he is also a victim in his own right and so Batman feels obligated to help him. In the final scene, through the simple act of returning his coin, Batman makes Dent responsible for determining his fate, and Dent responds to this gesture by tricking the other inmates into letting Batman go, temporarily overcoming his usual dependency on the coin and demonstrating that he is capable of making decisions on his own. The last character we see in the closing pages of *Arkham* is not Batman but Two-Face, and he knocks down the house of tarot cards he has been building, echoing the words of Alice from Lewis Carroll: "Who cares for you? You're nothing but a pack of cards" (*Arkham* p. 120). In Carroll, these words are spoken by Alice when she "[has] grown to her full size [again]", and she dismisses the card people and awakens from her dream, only to be reminded by her sister that it was just a dream (2007: 146-7). For Two-Face, he has similarly regained his former mental stature and symbolically overcome the institutionalisation he has undergone by comparing it to a pack of cards. By invoking *Alice in Wonderland*, the methods used on mental patients are compared to an illusion, a pretence that can be torn down and overcome through personal growth. Perhaps Morrison aims to suggest that Batman is not the only one who can overcome his inner conflicts. Two-Face does not leave the asylum, but it is implied that he, and by extension other mental patients, are not beyond hope.

Each of Batman's foes in *Arkham* thus serve significant roles in the narrative by variously reflecting parts of Batman's psyche and testing his capabilities. Of the above examples, Mad Hatter questions Batman's notion of reality, Joker acts as Batman's opposite – an inversion of all that Batman represents while Dent gives the reader a sympathetic view of mental illness and acts as a test of Batman's mercy and willingness to accept madness as part of human nature. Mad Hatter's musings bring into focus the idea that reality is subjective, and our experience of life is driven by our need to understand the world and our place within it. The Joker functions as the exemplar of the irrational in the narrative and the need to acknowledge that life is filled with contradiction and ambiguity, and that one must accept this capacity for difference and competing narratives. Dent shows us that one's personal problems can be solved with personal growth and agency rather than invasive exterior forces.

Additionally, Dent's condition in *Arkham* acts as a critique of psychotherapy, by showing how some treatments can make a patient's mental illness more difficult to overcome rather than reverse it, a theory held by R. D. Laing in the 1950s and 1960s, and which gained prominence in the 1980s with postmodern theorists like Foucault. In his book *The Divided Self* (1960), Laing posits that part of the problem with psychopathology is the failure to recognise a patient as another human with their own world view through a process of depersonalization (21), and although in *Arkham* the fictional Dr. Adams claims to sympathise with Dent, she sees no problem with the damaging effects of her behaviour modification therapy, saying to Batman: "Sometimes we have to tear down in order to re-build" (Arkham p. 26). These traits arguably lend *Arkham Asylum* a postmodern sensibility, by embracing a fractured sense of identity and rejecting the notion of a single, ordered hegemonic view of the world. By the end of the narrative Batman embraces this plurality and chaos, accepting its function and yet not allowing his sanity to be destroyed by this revelation as Amadeus Arkham did. Ultimately Batman leaves the asylum cleansed by these experiences and with a more nuanced understanding of a postmodern world.

Panel Analysis of The Feast of Fools

Thus far I have examined the role of *Arkham*'s structure as well as some of the major characters in making this graphic novel a postmodern representation of Batman. Next I turn to a visual analysis, in order to show how *Arkham* differs from other Batman texts in its use of the language of sequential art. In contrast to traditional Batman adventure comics, and

written in reaction to the realistic visual portrayal of the character during the 1970s and 1980s, the narrative of *Arkham* is an exploration of the unconscious mind and plays out in a dreamlike fashion, making it more about Batman's psyche. Lucy Rollins makes a similar claim in her book *Guilt and the Unconscious in Arkham Asylum*, saying that due to the surreal aesthetic provided by Dave McKean's artwork the narrative "becomes an experience of the unconscious rather than a depiction of it" (1994: 4). Morrison and McKean invest the work with multiple interconnected layers of mythology, religion, psychology, popular culture, folklore and occultism, until the work is saturated with symbolic resonance. James Wurtz makes the argument that the success of this complexity hinges on the interpretive ability of the reader, and invites them to subject each page to their own subjective search for cohesion, drawing them into the narrative and thus making the experience of reading the text dreamlike and otherworldly (Wurtz 2011: 568-9). Perhaps nowhere else in the text is this more apparent than the 'Feast of Fools' (p. 21-22), which I have selected for close analysis. This complex picture, spread over a double page, is demonstrative of the multifaceted inter-weaving of signs and signifiers which this text is laden with, and achieves this in a number of ways, as discussed below.



14. Above: The Feast of Fools double page spread. (*Arkham* p. 21-22).

The story of *Arkham* begins in the familiar territory of Gotham City, in panels devoid of colour and drawn in a rough, "sketched" manner (See left). Batman then travels to Arkham Asylum, which is depicted in ever-increasing vivid colours and much more detailed, complex images. This has the effect of making the transition from the rational world to Arkham more explicit, and the transition is only truly realised in the Feast of Fools image. Shortly after Batman arrives outside the asylum and is greeted by Joker, he is ushered inside and the very first glimpse we are given of the interior is the Feast of Fools, which visually marks the point where as Morrison says, "[w]e are now outside logic" (*Arkham* script p. 13).



15. (*Arkham* p. 10).

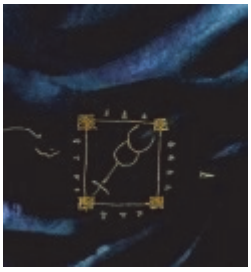
As seen above, the foreground of the central frame is dominated by a back view of the figure of The Joker, executed in vivid pastel with a shock of lime green hair, with his arms spread wide, welcoming Batman to the Feast of Fools. From his posture it is clear that we are in his domain now, where he is the master. In contrast to the fairly rigid panel structure of most (but by no means all) comics, the leftmost panel covers part of The Joker's elbow, and his right arm intersects the frames of two panels to the right of the page, creating a continuous flow from one image to the next, visually suggesting "labyrinthine paths of madness" (Zurier 1991: 102) as well as creating movement in the picture by forcing the eye to scan the veritable bombardment of images presented here. Frame composition is an extremely important aspect of sequential art, and the medium shares many similarities with film in this regard. Scott McCloud makes such a comparison in his work *Making Comics*, and says that although there are differences, this is a useful metaphor as it allows the comics writer to guide the readers' attention by treating the frame as "the reader's camera" (2006: 24). The frame crops an image, thereby delineating what the reader can see, and also where the eye will travel by placing objects in relation to the readers' view by manipulating the distance and angle (McCloud 2006: 20).

The Feast of Fools acts like an 'establishing shot', and, as in film, by using a wide view the graphic novel is able to give the reader a wealth of information about this scene (McCloud 2006: 22-3). We are shown a vision of total inversion and chaos as the full impact of the inmates' revolt becomes clear. The central panel shows a banquet which is attended by

inmates and captured asylum staff, both a reference to Lewis Carrol's Mad Hatter's Tea Party as well as a parody of the Last Supper as it is usually represented in Christian iconography. A murdered security guard dangles from the chandelier in a travesty of the "Hanged Man" Tarot card, whilst inmates clamber across the table as well as under it, wearing eclectic costumes which merge beast and man. Surreal depictions of eyes and a clock floating alongside arcane symbols populate the image, further encouraging the idea that this Feast takes place outside of logical boundaries. Here the reader is confronted by a confusing flood of imagery and words, but it is nonetheless unambiguously communicated that by stepping into this chaotic realm, Batman has effectively "fallen down the rabbit hole" and left the world he knows behind.

In addition to framing a scene, panel shape and flow can also affect the ways in which we read sequential art. Sequential art's framed composition also allows for creative violation (Zurier 1991: 101), and in *Arkham Asylum*, one panel bleeds over into another, creating the sensation that time has become distorted. Usually panels in a comic will be separated by a narrow white gap, known as the 'gutter', and while this feature is present in *Arkham Asylum* it is at times creatively altered, such as in the Feast of Fools where the leftmost frame is separated from the rest of the panels by a jagged, irregular gutter, which continues along the length of the entire page, resulting in a very unconventional panel shape. The rightmost panel 'grid' of the double page is also highly irregular, and each "panel" has a unique border, ranging from a stylized pattern in one to another which resembles a torn paper edge (reminiscent of collage) in another, many of which are interrupted by other panels or objects, shapes and pen strokes. This irregular treatment of what is considered a standardized trope of sequential art reinforces the underlying theme of madness in the work by literally defying the "boundaries" of comics' internal logic. This double page spread is not the only example of creative violation of panel borders in *Arkham*, as can be seen in the battle late in the narrative between Batman and Killer Croc (p. 71-78), in which the scene begins with standardised, rigid white panel borders/gutters, which become more irregular and erratic in shape as Croc arrives and become more crooked as the physical contest builds to a climax.

The central positioning of The Joker in the Feast of Fools and his confident stance highlights his position as 'Lord of Misrule': he is welcoming Batman to *his* feast, in a place where he dominates and is in total control. Usually their conflicts take place within Gotham City, where Batman feels at home among the rooftops and back alleys where he is the dominant



force and where The Joker must live in fear of reprieve and arrest by the Law. In the Asylum it is Batman who is the fugitive, and shortly after the Feast The Joker declares a "little game of hide and seek" (p. 39-40) where Batman must run and evade capture by the inmates in the state where it is Chaos that rules. Floating around the Feast of Fools are a number of arcane symbols inked in gold, and superimposed on The Joker's back is the astrological/alchemical symbol for Mercury (shown above left), representative of the messenger deity of the Roman pantheon. This symbol fits well with The Joker's 'mercurial' and unpredictable personality, indicating a volatile character whom Arkham psychotherapist Dr. Ruth Adams describes as having: "[N]o real personality. He creates himself each day. He sees himself as the Lord of Misrule, and the world as a theatre of the absurd." (p. 28).

Batman himself is visually reduced to a shadow, an absence rather than a presence. Morrison informs us in the script that he wanted Batman to appear stiff and rigid, his posture that of a man "constantly on the defensive", the type of person who has an obsessive, controlling personality. Morrison envisions him as a scared little boy who has made his body into "[A] fortress of flesh, bulwarked against the ravages of a merciless world" (Script p. 5). Morrison describes this version of Batman as "armoured, uncertain and sexually frozen", though he also makes it clear that this is strictly for the purposes of this narrative. McKean however, chose to depict Batman in an expressionistic style, and instead of making him stiff and upright he chose to make Batman more "hunched and ambiguous" (Script p. 5). The result of this collaborative effort is a Batman who at times can only be seen because he is the darkest object within each frame (as is the case with the Feast), and even melds seamlessly with the shadows in certain places in the text. He is more often than not depicted as a mere silhouette, though to even the average reader of Batman comics is instantly identifiable by the unmistakeable outline of his cowl, with its sharply pointed ears and the flowing, scalloped cape which envelops him. Usually only his teeth are defined, as an angry, stark white snarl contrasted with the shadow that is the rest of him. Rendered in black, grey and blue – the traditional colours of Batman – he becomes an inhuman figure of darkness and gloom. However, because we are aware of the inner conflict Batman is facing, and because his posture suggests anxiety and psychological distress, this monstrous visage seems more like the "armour" with which he has tried to protect himself, a defence mechanism which has

"made [him] terrible at the cost of his humanity" (Script p. 5). He has become fear itself so that he will not be afraid.

The Feast of Fools is riddled with a plethora of intertextual references which appear as 'tailless' word balloons rendered in a variety of fonts. This was intended by Morrison to represent the cacophony of the inmates' voices as a scene of chaos unfolds before Batman. Among the voices are quotes such as: "No room! No room!"; one of the Mad Hatter's famous lines from the tea party in Lewis Carrol; "…well.. a.. a boy's best friend is his mother" (*Psycho* 1960); "Millions of Robins!" (*Blue Velvet* 1986); "Dictator of the Rats" and "Charlotte Corday Charlotte Corday" (*Marat/Sade* 1964) and "All the King's Horses", a line from the *Humpty Dumpty* nursery rhyme. These quotes highlight some of the recurring themes of the text and link it to literature, cinema, theatre and even traditional folklore.

For example, Morrison states in the comic script that he chose the line from Hitchcock's *Psycho* for its connotations of 'the dead mother', 'the bad house' and insanity. Like Anthony Perkins' character in Norman Bates in *Psycho*, Amadeus Arkham also takes on the identity and gender of his dead mother by wearing her clothes. After the murder of his family he walks the halls of his home in his mother's wedding dress and refers to himself as "the dragon's bride, the son of the widow" (*Arkham* p. 82). Several word balloons in the Feast make reference to *Marat/Sade* (1964) by Peter Weiss, a "play within a play", which is set in an insane asylum and performed by the inmates. Like Arkham, the play problematizes the divide between sanity and insanity by having sane actors portray insane asylum inmates who in turn portray sane characters (Embler 1969: 421). Additionally, as stated before, one of the voices in the Feast of Fools cries: "Oh Daddy, make him stop! He's hurting me! The dog's hurting me!" This is meant to represent the voice of Harriet Arkham, who at this point would have been dead for almost 70 years. This represents one of the previously mentioned intrusions from past to present, and additionally links the Feast image to the narrative of Amadeus Arkham, even though he does not explicitly appear in this panel.

Marketed to an audience with greater disposable income than teenagers (Zurier 1991: 102), graphic novels such as *Arkham* are usually printed on high quality paper which allow for luxuriant colours, and also allow artists to experiment with mediums previously not widely used in comics (Zurier 1991: 102). *Arkham* does contain classic pen and ink drawings but also includes rough pencil sketches, etchings, pastels, painting, airbrushing and even makes use of colour photographs, often on the same page – some of which are illustrated by the

Feast of Fools picture featured above. This combination of various and diverse mediums further emphasizes the themes of madness and boundary-crossing found in the work by creating a 'hallucinatory' (Zurier 1991: 102) visual breakdown of the margins between these mediums, seamlessly blending their different aesthetic qualities in an intricate pastiche - a feature which is characteristic of McKean, who is always searching for new ways to experiment artistically (McCloud 1993: 56). This is augmented by Morrison's writing style which adds cerebral depth to the work through suggestive word play, evocative dialogue and the extensive usage of references to existing works (discussed below). This pastiche and the chaotic surfaces of the art is emblematic of postmodernism, with its propensity for intertextuality and nature as fragmentary.

While all of the above visual analysis is at once illuminating and highlights the primary concerns of the text as well as the intention of the author, one must remember that while an author may have particular meanings they wish to communicate, images are not static nor univocal. Keith Moxey makes this argument in his essay, *Making Genius*, which forms a chapter of his book *The Practice of Theory* (1994). Images, Moxey contends, are composed of a series of signs that possess meaning according to the socio-historical circumstances of the viewer (Moxey 1994: 114). Interpretation is an active process which is influenced by the specific context in which an image is viewed, and the circumstances which went into its initial creation should be considered in relation to the contemporary viewing of the subject.

This means that although it is interesting to consider *Arkham Asylum* with the accompanying notes by Morrison in the script, one must be aware that the text must be regarded in its own right, independent of these notes. Moreover, the reader may not ascribe the same meaning to the images that Morrison intended, according to their own knowledge and experiences. For this reason, I have attempted to provide a formal visual analysis that examines the narrative as it appears on the page, and thus while I have included many of Morrison's quotes I have also approached the text from the perspective of sequential art theory. As I have extensively discussed, *Arkham* is laden with an excess of interrelated signs and symbols which permeate the text, endlessly linked and reworked to reinforce a set of key themes, such as madness, trial and initiation and the search for identity. Some images, like the Feast of Fools, can be scrutinized endlessly for hidden meanings and references.

In *Making Genius*, Moxey discusses how the works of the fifteenth Century Netherlandish artist Hieronymous Bosch, whose paintings the Feast resembles, are similarly complex, their

surfaces flush with possibilities for investigation (1994: 111). Moxey puts forward the idea that while it is tempting to endlessly postulate about the mysterious signs present within the work of Bosch, he feels that this mystery is a deliberate construction of the artist so that the surfaces of his works rather obfuscate the meanings they contain, denying the works a singular knowable or specific reading (Moxey 1994: 113). Similarly with *Arkham*, although Morrison has extensively explained the symbols and signs he wanted McKean to include in the artwork, I would contend that the complex surfaces presented by panels like the Feast of Fools invite the reader to construct their own meanings for the text. Morrison acknowledges in the annotated script of the 15th Anniversary Edition that much of the intended meaning of the work would possibly be lost on casual readers but that it hadn't negatively impacted critical reception of the graphic novel, and that even though the reader may miss the association of the Vescica Pisces with Christ or the Moon Tarot card with trial, he believes that people respond emotionally to certain signs whether or not they immediately recognise them, with some ancient signs carrying subconscious association that is deeply rooted in the human psyche (*Arkham* script p. 51). Whether or not one grasps the precise meanings and references, is perhaps immaterial; it is rather the structure of the panel that throws the viewer into the chaos, along with Batman. The complex, sign-laden surface produces a powerful overall effect of mystery and dire portent.

It could be said that the function of this effect in *Arkham* could be that it reinforces the notion that reading the text becomes "an experience of the subconscious", as argued by Lucy Rollins in *Guilt and the Unconscious in Arkham Asylum* (1994). Rollins says that *Arkham* is constructed in such a way that it is made to seem like a dream, saying that the text is laden with "the impression of dense layers of meaning, symbol on symbol, most of which we can never consciously explain but which nevertheless communicate and disturb—as do our dreams" (7). This instability of meaning, leaving the surface of an image open to interpretation, embodies some of the concerns of postmodernism, which forwards the notion that reason is subjective and essentially incapable of fully explaining reality. Thus *Arkham*, in contrast to the more realistic treatment given to Batman comics during the 1970s and early 1980s, embraces this essentially unknowable reality by capturing this instability visually and subjecting the depiction of Batman to a complexity which allows for a greater range of interpretive possibilities than previous incarnations. If life, according to postmodern theory, is conflicting and subjective, then *Arkham* thus offers a version of Batman which is similarly subjective, the meaning of which can be elusive or even contradictory at times.

Inter-texts of Arkham

As discussed above, one of Arkham's primary features is the complexity of the images found within and the many symbols and layers of meaning which give these images a mysterious quality, inviting investigation from the reader and causing the eye to linger on each panel. Morrison drew upon a wide range of signifiers and symbols when writing *Arkham*, both textual and visual, and McKean's artwork takes the suggestions provided by Morrison and adapts them into a graphic novel which seems at times to invoke the subconscious and the dreamlike. At times, this graphic novel makes explicit reference to other existing works, some of which are mentioned above. As discussed already, the success of these intertextual references hinges on the interpretative power of the reader, but I would nonetheless like to discuss some of these texts in more detail in order to illustrate some of the qualities which *Arkham* ascribes to by invoking them. There are many such references in *Arkham*, such as *Psycho* discussed above. However, I have selected two texts which I feel capture some of the essence of *Arkham* and which provide useful material for discussion. The first is Lewis Carrol's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865), which is referenced directly several times throughout *Arkham* with both visuals and text. The other, Philip Larkin's poem *Church Going* (1955), is only directly referenced by the subtitle of *Arkham*, and yet I feel is nonetheless significant because it thus appears in the title of the graphic novel and so establishes a parallel with the poem from the outset. Below I provide a brief comparison of these two texts with *Arkham*, as well as some discussion of how such inter-texts can possibly strengthen the messages of the narrative, as well as support my argument for Arkham as a postmodern text.

Quotes from Lewis Carroll (*nom de plume* of Charles Lutwidge Dodgson) appear as both prologue and epilogue to *Arkham*, appearing on the pages before and after the narrative, respectively. These are two of several references to Carroll's writing found in *Arkham*. The Mad Hatter's Tea Party, as already mentioned, is visually and textually referenced in the Feast of Fools. Other overt references can be found in the characters Batman meets: as discussed above, the Mad Hatter is one of the enemies which Batman encounters in the narrative, and the twins Tweedle-Dum and Tweedle-Dee also appear in one panel. Mad Hatter, depicted as a drug-addled pervert with an obsession with little girls, appears in a scene which visually references Lewis Carrol. Hatter also quotes from the book, repeating the poem recited by his namesake: "Twinkle twinkle little bat, how I wonder what you're at". Hatter

also compares the asylum to a looking glass, which seems to refer to the second book written by Carroll, *Through the Looking Glass* (1871). The twins, which appear in the background of one panel as two large men in straitjackets whose heads are connected by wires, are described by Morrison in the script as intended to represent the left and right spheres of the brain (*Arkham* script p. 22).

Both the Hatter and the Tweedle twins already existed as themed villains in Batman comics long before the publication of *Arkham*, which explains their presence in the asylum. Mad Hatter, known as Jervis Tetch, is usually depicted as a small man with a large head who collects hats, with Batman's cowl representing the ultimate "hat" to be acquired. Similarly, Dumfree and Deever Tweed believe themselves to be the real-life incarnations of the Lewis Carrol characters and plan their crimes around excerpts from the books. Morrison uses these already existing characters in *Arkham* to reinforce the Lewis Carroll theme that runs through the work.

I would argue that the primary reason for this comparison to Carroll is the idea of a protagonist who enters a world of nonsense logic where the ordinary rules of reason and order are ignored, and who must go on a journey through the subconscious to arrive at the real world once again. Alice chases a white rabbit down a hole, where she falls into a world where plants and animals talk and wear clothing, where flamingos and hedgehogs are used to play croquet and where one's shape is subject to transformation and change. In Wonderland, Time, personified as an entity (Carroll 85), is subjective and can flow freely or not at all, as in the case of the Mad Hatter and March Hare, eternally stuck in a never-ending tea-time. Alice awakens at the end of the book, only to discover that the whole adventure was in her head. In *Arkham*, Batman enters a world where the rules of logic and time are similarly disregarded, and in which normal values are subverted. This journey is implied several times to be a journey through Batman's psyche, with imagery that can be said to be dreamlike, and at the end Batman returns to the ordinary and familiar world of Gotham. This comparison uses the recognisable visual tropes of a story which most people in the Western world are familiar with, and so the associations which it draws upon can readily be deduced by the reader. As the title of this dissertation suggests, *Arkham Asylum* is essentially Batman seen through a distorted looking glass, a psychological journey into the mind where one must confront one's own sanity. This is highlighted by the quote used as a prologue for *Arkham*, an exchange between Alice and the Cheshire Cat:

> "But I don't want to go among mad people," Alice remarked.
>
> "Oh, you can't help that," said the Cat: "We're all mad here. I'm mad, you're mad."
>
> "How do you know I'm mad?" said Alice.
>
> "You must be," said the Cat, "or you wouldn't have come here."

These lines are suitable for *Arkham* for several reasons. First, they invoke at the outset the theme of madness which *Arkham* is concerned with. Alice says that she does not wish to go among mad people, which invokes the old stigma which people hold towards the mentally ill, as being threatening or uncouth. In the beginning Batman does not wish to go among mad people either, partly because of the danger associated with his enemies and partly because he fears he may belong with them in the asylum. This is also invoked by the line: "You must be, [...], or you wouldn't have come here." According to the Cheshire Cat, Alice is already mad because she is in Wonderland, and in the case of *Arkham* this line implies that Batman would only go to the asylum if he did belong there. Another quote from Lewis Carrol is used as an epilogue to the text: "And is not that a Mother's gentle hand that withdraws the curtains, and a Mother's sweet voice that summons you to rise?". This line invokes the image of a mother awakening a child from sleep, and in the case of *Arkham* represents the return to the waking world after the nightmarish experiences of the asylum. Ultimately, drawing on Lewis Carroll highlights *Arkham's* preoccupation with interiority and the search for meaning in a world which defies interpretation.

This search for cohesion and meaning in a world of unreason is echoed somewhat by the decision to include a line from Philip Larkin's poem *Church Going* (1955) as the subtitle for *Arkham*. In Larkin's poem the speaker is a cyclist who arrives at an empty church and ventures inside. The speaker displays some disdain for churches, but nonetheless confesses that they possess a numinous and reverent quality which cannot be ignored. The speaker calls the verses from the open bible on the lectern "hectoring" (line 14), and reflects that the visit was "not worth stopping for" (line 18). The speaker ponders why they stopped there, "Wondering what to look for; wondering, too, When churches will fall completely out of use" (line 21-22). How this might relate to *Arkham* is a matter which requires some deliberation. Larkin's poem deals with churches, and more abstractly, religion, and in *Arkham* there are many references to the divine. In the Feast of Fools (see above) the Last Supper is visually referenced, as is the Crucifixion. When Batman feels weakened by the word-association test he stabs his palm with a shard of glass, and later during the battle with Killer Croc Batman is

impaled through his side by a spear, both of these examples invoking the traditional wounds of Christ. During the final moments of his life Amadeus Arkham says: "It's finished. It is finished", perhaps echoing the words of Christ before he died on the cross (John 19: 30).

> A serious house on serious earth it is
> In whose blent air all our compulsions meet
> Are recognised and robed as destinies.
> And that much can never be obsolete
> Since someone will forever be surprising
> A hunger in himself to be more serious
> And gravitating with it to this ground
> Which he once heard was proper to grow wise in
> If only that so many dead lie round.
>
> – Philip Larkin, 1955.

While this does present a strong possibility for the inclusion of the line from Larkin, I would contend that there could be a different reason. This line comes from the final stanza (Shown above) of the poem, where the speaker says: "A serious house on serious earth it is, in whose blent air all our compulsions meet, Are recognised, and robed as destinies, And that much can never be obsolete." The speaker is saying that even if churches fell into disuse they would never lose their power to move the human spirit, and thus we will always need churches. Perhaps Morrison is saying that we will always need asylums as a place of healing. Asylums present a "serious house" where important questions of identity and meaning can be asked. *Arkham* seems to offer a critique of modern psychiatry and depicts the asylum as a place of horror, but in the end Batman does acquire some personal growth, and it is shown that other characters like Two-Face can also find some meaning in the apparent chaos of life through the cleansing power of the asylum. The journey through the asylum is harrowing, but the result is positive. Thus I would argue that this reference to Larkin acts as a reminder that mankind will always need a physical space where madness can be explored and healed, just as mankind will always need churches.

Arkham as Carnival

These inter-texts reinforce the notion of Arkham as a place existing outside the boundaries of logic, a harrowing place of nightmare which nonetheless possesses the power for healing and

transformation. Additionally, as discussed above, the journey through the asylum is compared to a journey through the subconscious, reinforced by the visual symbols, the complexity of the imagery as well as its expressionistic style and also through the depiction of the major characters and the portrayal of time as non-linear. All of these qualities combine to create a graphic novel which displays many qualities which could be said to be postmodern. *Arkham* is a text where meaning is never secure and where identity is multiple and subject to change. *Arkham* eschews a single, unified and cohesive narrative in favour of a split narrative which allows for plurality and difference of interpretation through the complexity of its images, which each reader will apply their own subjective meanings to. There is however one more aspect of *Arkham* I wish to discuss which I feel would strengthen this argument as well as explain how this preoccupation with anarchy and inversion is helpful to a text like Arkham, and that is Bakhtin's concept of the Carnivalesque.

John Docker, author of *Postmodernism and Popular Culture* (1995), begins his book by tracing the development of Modernism and the reaction it provoked which lead to the rise of postmodernism in architecture, literature, art and intellectual thought. The final section of the book deals with Bakhtin's notion of the Carnivalesque, which Docker says can be summarised as a festive subversion of societal values which has ancient roots but can still be applied as a creative mode to today's popular culture (1995:162). I wish to make the argument that this mode can be similarly applied to comics and sequential art, as is the case with works like *Arkham*. According to Docker, Bakhtin was a proponent of the idea of heteroglossia, which is the complex interaction of "multi-voiced" forces in culture systems, resulting in a more complex view of history, language and society (1995: 171). Traditionally, during times of Carnival, the ordinary hierarchies of society were overturned and class as well as gender roles were temporarily reversed, allowing for parody and self-mockery (Docker 1995: 179). One of the most significant historical examples which Bakhtin uses is the Feast of Fools. This festival, popular in France during Medieval times, was celebrated primarily by schoolmen and lower clergy, and took the form of parodies of sacred rituals and festivals (Dock 1995: 173). A "clownish", mock-pontiff was chosen to preside over the Feast of Fools, and revelries included disrobing, drunken orgies and banquets, obscene gestures and masquerades (173).

Virtually all of these characteristics can be found in the Feast of Fools in *Arkham*. In the central part of the image there is an orgiastic banquet taking place, and cups and plates are clearly visible strewn across the table (Morrison had originally intended for a blood-smeared

wedding cake to be part of the image). Inmates clamber across the table in various states of undress or in eclectic costumes, some of them brandishing weapons. Some appear to be wearing masks and others possess distorted facial features, so that the viewer cannot be sure who is masked and who is not. Balloons fill the air and bodies hang from the roof like grisly decorations, giving the scene a macabre festivity. As discussed above, a multitude of voices fill the room in a visual cacophony, with speech bubbles containing lines like: "Blood and… oranges?"; "Who killed Bambi?"; "Some say God is an insect" and "Einstein was wrong! I'm the speed of light cracking through shivery atoms and God the sky whirls and withers like a melting rainbow!" (*Arkham* p. 21-22). These unrestrained utterances and the raucous flurry of movement on and around the central table give the scene an atmosphere of excess and wild *jouissance*, recalling the mood of the historical Feast of Fools in Medieval times as well as Renaissance carnival, where masks and costumes played an essential role in festivities of this kind (Docker 1995: 175).

According to Bakhtin, masks and "masking" were an important part of Renaissance carnival, and during such times identity experienced a state of flux as men and women wore each other's clothing; the wealthy wore common garb and various "monstrous" costumes were worn (Docker 1995: 175-6). Most significantly though, The Joker fulfils the role of the "clownish abbot", the "Lord of Misrule" who leads the festivities. The Joker acts out the traditional role of the Fool, which Bakhtin says has been part of culture for thousands of years (Docker 1995: 199). The Fool is not a "realist", psychological character; "their being coincides with their role" (199), as is the case with The Joker who is said to possess no real identity and who acts unpredictably as he creates his personality each day, ranging from harmless prankster to murderous clown. Bakhtin also says that Fools do not possess a singular, fixed meaning and instead represent a general refutation of or resistance to authority and unified truth (Docker 1995: 217-8). Docker sums this up best when he says that the Lord of Misrule and other clown figures allow the audiences for whom they perform "[T]o ponder not a definite conclusion but an anarchy of values (1995: 204). Fools are thus at times positive figures for their ability to make light of authority figures (like Batman) and their ability to "unmask" and tear down the pretences of society. However, the Fool or clown figure is not necessarily always a figure of good, and these figures are often perceived as hostile outsiders, possessed at times of mystical but threatening powers and "devilish" or "sinister" qualities (Docker 1995: 217-218). This is certainly true of The Joker, who casually murders a security guard as the punch-line to a lengthy joke (*Arkham* p. 39-40), and who also

threatens to gouge the eyes out of a hostage in order to bring Batman to the asylum, the latter example turning out to be an "April Fools' joke" not meant in earnest (*Arkham* p. 21).

The purpose of this Carnivalesque atmosphere in *Arkham* is to present a view of the world which is ambivalent and accepting of apparent contradictions, exuberantly denying stability and coherence in society, identity and truth (Docker 1995: 185). *Arkham* takes the established order of the world and overturns it. The inmates run the asylum, and Batman's usual position of authority is undermined by The Joker's position as Lord of Misrule. In the majority of Batman comics since the character's introduction Batman has always been portrayed as the dominant force in his fictional city of Gotham. He chose his bat-themed iconography to inspire fear in criminals and portrayals of Batman from Adam West to Frank Miller's Dark Knight have all embraced this dominance, situating Batman as a powerful force of justice and moral rectitude.

In *Arkham* Batman is reduced to an uncertain figure, constantly on the defensive and hunted throughout the asylum, a place where is he is the fugitive and there is no law to which he can appeal for stability. In the world of Carnivalesque subversion in *Arkham* it is The Joker who brings about positive change by testing Batman, who up until the end of the narrative remains furtive and lost. Similarly, Two-Face also decides of his own choosing to help Batman by pretending that his coin flip has decided that Batman may walk free at the climax. Also, like the Feast of Fools and Carnivals of history the inverted state of Arkham is only temporary, lasting only for a single day. The prevailing system of order is restored at the end of the narrative and Batman returns to Gotham as SWAT teams storm the asylum to return the inmates to their cells. Subsequent portrayals of Batman would maintain the "realist" attitude which had become popular, but *Arkham* had shown how a creative questioning or subversion of values could allow both creators and readers to see Batman in a different way. As briefly mentioned in Chapter 2, this has lead to a general embracing of plurality in Batman comics, the realisation that a cultural icon like Batman is subject to multiple identities which can accept contradiction and difference while retaining the same core qualities. This effectively makes *Arkham Asylum* a postmodern work of sequential art, making use of the Carnivalesque creative mode to experiment with established notions of Batman in a text which surfaces the complexity of identity.

Chapter 4: Through the Looking Glass

"My movements through the house have become as formalized as ballet and I feel that I have become an essential part of some incomprehensible biological process. The house is an organism, hungry for madness. It is the maze that dreams. And I am lost." – Amadeus Arkham, *Arkham Asylum* p. 64.

In the previous chapter I made use of an extended close analysis of *Arkham Asylum* and its inter-texts in order to substantiate my claim that this graphic novel represents a postmodernisation of the Batman character. The fragmentary nature of the narrative and the densely layered artwork "[R]eproduces the jumble of memory, sensory experience, language, image and fantasy that characterises our dreams" (Rollin 1994: 6), combining to create a hallucinatory psychological landscape, an exteriorisation of the unconscious. This uncertainty of meaning therefore situates *Arkham* in the postmodern paradigm through a fracturing of the conventional image of the Batman character. This chapter investigates how this paradigm is used to deconstruct the role of Batman as guardian of normative values by presenting a version of the character that is psychologically troubled. *Arkham* uses the literary/artistic trope of the madhouse to provide a liminal or transitional space where Batman's sanity is subjected to questioning by blurring the boundary which separates him from his enemies.

The asylum's liminal nature is emphasized in *Arkham* by turning the asylum into a place of the uncanny and the abject. The asylum is compared at several points in the story to "an organism, hungry for madness", as in the quote above. Arkham is not only a madhouse in the traditional sense of the term but also a semi-living "mad-house", a family home which has not only been converted into a mental asylum but is also a place where madness has become part of the building itself. This abjection is extended to the inmates, who, as I have already argued, variously reflect aspects of Batman's psyche. To explain this, I use Julia Kristeva's interpretation of abjection developed in her essay *Powers of Horror* (1982) to show how this abjection is a strategy used to unsettle or erase boundaries in the text. The blurring of sane/insane, self/other, home/asylum, living/inanimate, mental/physical, reality/dream and past/present in the text creates a liminal or threshold space where traditional boundaries are disturbed and where nothing is ever clear or singular in meaning, in keeping with the postmodern sensibility of *Arkham*.

The final part of this chapter deals with the portrayal of insanity in *Arkham*. Madness in fiction and in art has long been conceptualized spatially through the trope of the insane

asylum (Gilbert 1996: 19). This asylum space prompts an exploration of inner psyche, and this preoccupation with interiority is used by Morrison and McKean to create a fractured characterisation of Batman. In *Arkham*, "Batman's confrontation with his own abnormality is potentially damaging to his psyche" (Wurtz 2011: 562), and complicates his position as a superhero. Travis Langley offers an extensive psychoanalysis of Batman in his book *Batman and Psychology – A Dark and Stormy Knight* (2012), which attempts to answer the question of whether or not Batman is insane by looking at the overall trends set by Batman stories over the decades. However, this psychoanalytic approach is problematic for the purposes of my study because it assumes a unified psyche by which to evaluate Batman, who, as I have asserted, has been subject to multiple, sometimes contradictory identities over the years. Furthermore, although a fictional character may present the illusion of psychological depth, as is the case with Batman in *Arkham* and similar works, this depth is nonetheless predicated on the false understanding that there are "hidden" aspects of a character's psyche that can be revealed through psychoanalysis.

Rather than following Langley's psychoanalytic reading of Batman, this chapter attempts to understand the role that madness plays in *Arkham* by approaching the text from a literary and artistic perspective. I thus draw upon the writings of Lillian Feder, who has discussed the portrayal of madness in fictive works, including some of the differences between real insanity and fictional representations of it. Additionally, Michel Foucault's history of insanity, *Madness and Civilization* (1961), provides a useful study of the power relations between society and the insane, particularly embodied in the exclusionary nature of the asylum. Foucault has argued for the importance of giving the insane their own voice through the use of expressive mediums like art and literature, and in this chapter I assert that sequential art is able to do this through the combination of image and text. Moreover, since Batman has been malleable enough to respond to and reflect changing social conditions over time, I also assert that *Arkham* uses the signifier of Batman to explore the human need to understand our inner psyche.

The Maze That Dreams – The Asylum as Liminal Space

The Elizabeth Arkham Asylum for the Criminally Insane made its publication debut in 1974, as "Arkham Hospital" and was soon established as a holding facility for the mentally unsound members of Batman's Rogues Gallery. DC comics writer Jack C. Harris borrowed

the name from the works of horror writer H.P. Lovecraft and his fictional town of Arkham Massachusetts, an eerie "witch-cursed [and] legend-haunted" place (Lytle in O'Neil 2008: 109-111). Later, Arkham's history was expanded by writer Len Wein for the 1985 edition of *DC's Who's Who*, which briefly described the life of the asylum's founder, Amadeus Arkham, and how his family had been tragically murdered by Martin "Mad Dog" Hawkins. This would lead to Arkham being incarcerated in his own asylum after he experienced a mental breakdown. According to Grant Morrison, this small entry was what originally inspired him to write *Arkham Asylum* (Script p.1). From these gloomy origins, Arkham Asylum would grow – through successive stories - to become the second most famous residence in Gotham City, after Wayne Manor. Apart from some tangential mentions in 1970s Batman stories, Arkham rarely featured significantly until Morrison and McKean's graphic novel made it the site of one of Batman's adventures (Lytle in O'Neil 2008: 109-110). The asylum is regularly portrayed as being ineffective at its intended purpose of treating the insane, and as Batman says to Ruth Adams: "[I]t's hard to imagine [the] place being conducive to anyone's mental health" (*Arkham* p. 26).

The main problems with the facility are summarized by Paul Lytle in his essay *The Madness of Arkham Asylum* (2008) as: "the inmates are running the asylum"; "the inmates are running away from the asylum" and "the people running the asylum should be inmates" (111-14). I have already discussed the mental breakdown of Amadeus Arkham, founder of the asylum, as well as the delusional behaviour of administrator Charles Cavendish, but these are far from the only examples of Arkham staff going insane in Batman stories. Harleen Quinzel, aka Harley Quinn, The Joker's on/off girlfriend, is described as having started her career at Arkham as Joker's psychologist, which resulted in her forming a dependency complex on him as well as her subsequently becoming a clown-themed super-villain like him, as in the 1994 *Batman Animated Adventures* episode *Mad Love* (Langley 2012: 145-6). Dr. Jonathan Crane/Scarecrow, who briefly appears in *Arkham*, as well as Dr. Hugo Strange, Dr. Alyce Sinner and Dr. Jeremiah Arkham (the nephew of the founder) are all ex-Arkham staff members who became deranged super-villains (Langley 2012: 136).

Both Paul Lytle and Travis Langley cite the example of Warren White, a fraudulent criminal who pleas insanity in *Arkham Asylum: Living Hell* (2004) so that he can avoid being sent to state prison. What transpires is that he is tormented and even mutilated by the other inmates by being left in a freezer until his ears fall off from frostbite, ultimately leading him to

become the Batman villain Great White Shark (Langley 2012: 131), (Lytle in O'Neil 2008: 117). Before entering Arkham, White was an ordinary sane criminal, but the asylum eventually takes its toll on his mind and he goes insane. This is a harsh inversion of the purpose of an asylum: instead of a place of relief and healing for the mentally unwell it is a place which actively deteriorates the sanity of those it houses. This could be seen as a critique of the role of asylums in society, considering that by the time of the 1970s and 1980s many of the shortcomings of asylums were well known, thanks to the writings of intellectuals like R. D. Laing and Michel Foucault, among others, something which I discuss in more detail below. In the fictional world of Batman comics, this negative view of asylums is manifested in Arkham, which is intended to house and treat insane super-villains. This ultimately fails however, since they inevitably escape and enter Gotham City, there to be captured by Batman and returned to the asylum to begin the cycle anew. In fact, Paul Lytle states that the asylum itself is in effect one of Batman's greatest enemies (Lytle in O'Neil 2008: 118).

This idea is given literal expression in the 1989 *Arkham* graphic novel, where the eponymous asylum is treated as being a malignant entity with its own consciousness, another foe to be overcome in the narrative. As with the quote at the beginning of this chapter, the asylum is often compared to an organism which feeds upon the madness of those within it, a "maze that dreams" (*Arkham* p. 64). The building possesses its own "incomprehensible biological process" by which it sustains itself. Amadeus Arkham remarks that he can feel the house trying to communicate with him (*Arkham* p. 70), and during his mushroom-induced trip he sees doors opening and closing, with keyholes bleeding as he passes them while the house calls his name over and over (*Arkham* p. 75). This uncanny representation of a mental institute unsettles the normal understanding of a building by blurring the ordinary dichotomy of object and subject, as well as reinforcing the negative perception of asylums by making it a place of horror. These and other dichotomies are blurred in *Arkham* to create a liminal space, that is, a position which exists between two categories and is defined by the opposition of those categories (Meyers 2008: 80). This liminal position exceeds the boundaries of the opposition, and results in a new position that embodies both categories at once and yet also neither, necessitating the use of sometimes paradoxical terms to delineate that threshold space (Meyers 2008: 80).

By assigning the asylum living characteristics like biological processes, such as "feeding" and the desire to communicate, boundaries are eroded in *Arkham* between "living" and

"inanimate" things. As in the examples above, the asylum is attributed various qualities normally associated with living organisms, giving the building a semblance of "life". This concept has been used in other fictive works, such as with the haunted houses of Stephen King's *The Shining* (1977) and Shirley Jackson's *The Haunting of Hill House* (1959). This makes *Arkham* part of a tradition of malevolent, semi-sentient houses, and it can thus be said that Arkham is not merely a madhouse in the sense of an asylum but moreover it is a "mad-house", a house gone mad. As mentioned in Chapter 1, W. J. T. Mitchell explores the personhood of objects in his book *What Do Pictures Want?* (2005), and he cites the work of Neil Harris and his book *Building Lives* (1999), wherein Harris compares buildings to organisms with their own unique physiology, saying that we often treat buildings as if they are able to absorb the qualities and vitality of their inhabitants (Mitchell 2005: 14). During their "lives" buildings can become majestic and distinguished, or run down and "shabby", in the same manner as aging humans. Harris also says that abandoned buildings often seem "haunted" by the memory of their inhabitants, taking on corpselike qualities (Mitchell 2005: 14). In the same manner, Arkham Asylum absorbs the insanity of its inhabitants, causing the building to become saturated with madness. Present-day administrator Charles Cavendish echoes this notion when he accuses Batman of feeding the "hungry house" by repeatedly bringing insane super-villains to the asylum (*Arkham* p. 94). In this text the house/asylum is bestowed with the qualities of sentience and insanity, disturbing the boundary between living beings and inanimate objects, creating a space which straddles the borders between them.

Insane asylums have often been used to spatialize madness in fiction, existing as a marginal space physically separated from society and the home, and this separation is at times conceptualized as a boundary between the "world" of the sane and that of the insane (Gilbert 1996: 21). In *Arkham* the space of madness is merged with the domestic space through Arkham Asylum's previous existence as a family home. The asylum is frequently called a house throughout the graphic novel, subtly reminding the reader that it was originally the Arkham family manor before its conversion into a mental health facility in 1920. In this graphic novel, "home" and "the asylum" become one, blurring the ordinary distinction between them. The asylum and home are no longer separated into "this world" or "that world", resulting in a liminal space existing somewhere between the two. Morrison plays with this distinction with two specific lines spoken by The Joker. When Batman enters the asylum doors initially Joker says: "You're in the real world now" (*Arkham* p. 20), and at the end when Batman leaves the asylum Joker's last line to him is: "Enjoy yourself out there. In

the asylum" (p. 100). As noted by James Wurtz, this last line in particular complicates the division of "out there" versus "in here" by re-situating the outside world as the space of insanity (Wurtz 2011: 557). Thus the reader must evaluate where the asylum truly lies.

Amadeus Arkham calls the asylum "the maze that dreams". This is another way in which sentience is conferred upon the house, but it also reinforces the notion that the house is representative of the human mind. As argued in Chapter 3, Batman's physical journey through the asylum is compared in the text to a mental journey into his psyche. By exploring the inner rooms of the asylum, Batman explores his own mind through the foes he encounters and the personal revelations he has along the way. By getting lost in this "maze", as Amadeus Arkham claims has happened to him (p. 62), one has effectively become lost in their own mind, throwing their sanity into disarray. For Amadeus Arkham, the asylum is also expressly conflated with his psyche and identity. During his final moments as an inmate in the asylum he founded, he lays dying upon the floor of his cell, thinking to himself: "I'm *Arkham*. I'm *Home*. Where I belong" (*Arkham* p. 90). There is possibly a double meaning present here, since man and building share the same name, and Arkham's statement of "I'm home" could mean that in his eyes he is not merely home in the physical sense, he is now part of the house. The margin between the mad-house and Arkham's mind has dissolved, and he has embraced his own insanity, becoming liberated in the process: "All things are possible here, and I am what madness has made me. Whole. And complete. And free at last" (*Arkham* p. 89). Arkham has transcended any feelings of confinement, and instead his insanity has freed him from the "Euclidean prison" of sanity or rationality (p. 88). For Arkham, the dissolution of boundaries which the asylum embodies provides liberation in a physical/mental space where "[a]ll things are possible".

Rather than become part of the mad-house, Batman finds a different form of liberation which nonetheless also involves the dissolution of boundaries. At the climax of the story Batman attacks the house with an axe, which is shown to have blood vessels like an organic being (See below), once again bestowing living qualities on the building (*Arkham* p. 95-6). Batman symbolically destroys the front door of the asylum (See below), and drops the axe at the feet of Joker, "like a challenge" (Arkham script p. 63). At this point "Batman's conquest of the mental space of the Asylum manifests itself in the demolition of the house itself" (Wurts 2011: 560). Batman has resolved his inner conflicts by integrating the unconscious and the irrational into his being, emerging victorious from his inner journey. Additionally, by

destroying the door of the asylum, the physical threshold between the asylum and the outside world, Batman has symbolically destroyed the separation between sanity/insanity, inside/outside, and mental/physical. Batman is liberated by this elimination of borders and it no longer matters whether he belongs in the asylum or not, since there is no longer a boundary separating the asylum from the outside world.



16. Above – Batman's psychic victory is enacted through his destruction of the asylum and its doors. This is reflected in the dissolution and violation of panel borders in the double page spread (*Arkham* p. 95-6).

This dissolution of boundaries is reflected in the artwork, as can be seen in the above image showing a double page spread from *Arkham* (p. 95-6). The panels are primarily dominated by black, contrasted with deep, arterial red, suggesting great violence as Batman hacks apart pipes and the door of the asylum, which crashes open on the next page overleaf (p. 97). The pipes which Batman destroys are depicted as partly organic, with red paint spattered across some panels in a visceral representation of gore. The irregular panel borders reflect the destruction of boundaries visually through their dissolution. The leftmost panel borders showing Batman are rigid and white, becoming more jagged and rough as the reader's eye

scans the page. As Batman hefts the axe in one panel, the blade violates the panel border, which becomes broken and jagged, as if the axe has damaged it. The rightmost panels showing Batman have completely irregular panel borders, in some cases only barely visible. Meanwhile, the panels showing the inmates' reaction to this destruction have rigid red borders, which are often used in *Arkham* at moments of violence or intensity. The inmates panic, blaming Joker for bringing Batman to the asylum, whom Black Mask describes as "too dangerous!" to be in there with them. Joker himself also looks nervous, his eyes wide and his characteristic smile nowhere to be seen with the lower half of his face hidden in shadow. Here, there is a role-reversal as Batman seems more like a lunatic, while the inmates are alarmed by his wild mania. Visually Batman's dominance is reasserted over the inmates as well as the asylum, and McKean reflects the destruction of boundaries in this scene through the violation of sequential art's conventional borders.

The dysfunctional mental institute Arkham Asylum, often lurking on the periphery of Batman stories, has become a defining feature of the Batman mythos. The asylum, which is typically depicted in an extremely negative light, virtually becomes a character of its own in the 1989 *Arkham* graphic novel. In this text the asylum is assigned living characteristics, effectively blurring the line between living being and inanimate object. Many other lines are also blurred in *Arkham*, resulting in a liminal space where preconceived notions are dissolved and the ordinary binary oppositions of reality are collapsed. Spatial boundaries between inside/outside, home/asylum and mental/physical are eliminated, and the asylum thus occupies a space somewhere between these established borders. In Chapter 3 I discussed how the temporal boundary between past and present is also violated in *Arkham*, in addition to the border between reality and dreaming. These dissolutions of borders are represented in the text both with words and images, and the conventions of sequential art are often creatively distorted in order to underpin this notion of boundary crossing. The ways in which this is used in *Arkham* are explored in more detail below, but essentially it creates a liminal space in which the Batman character and the superhero genre in general can be subjected to creative revision and questioning, as part of the postmodern paradigm shift experienced by society at the end of the 20th Century.

A House of Horror – Arkham and the Abject

I have already explored several ways in which boundaries are obliterated in *Arkham*. As argued above, the dissolution of established borders turns the asylum into a liminal space existing between polarities. However, there are other ways in which boundaries are disturbed in this graphic novel through the use of abjection. Julia Kristeva, a primary proponent of the concept, defines abjection in her lengthy essay *Powers of Horror* as the mental and physiological reaction of simultaneously being repulsed yet enticed by something, "as tempting as it is condemned" (1982: 1). Paraphrasing from Kristeva, the abject is that which causes a sense of repugnance and loathing in a subject because it upsets them, usually because it reinforces the materiality of the real world. The prime example would be corpses, because they represent the inevitability of death, and the ultimate dissolution of the self. A corpse is a subject that has become an object, but because it was once alive it provokes feelings of curiosity and attracts our gaze while also repelling it, "it beckons to us and ends up engulfing us" (Kristeva 1982: 4).

The abject is defined not by its content alone but by its position in relation to understood borders created by the Symbolic Order, which can be summarized as inherited societal norms (Kristeva 1982: 65). Therefore, a breakdown of these borders results in fear and revulsion, and that which we define as abject or horrifying is merely that which lies outside of these borders, in a liminal space between the "self" and the "other" (Kristeva 1982: 65). Abjection is used throughout *Arkham* to create a sense of dread and revulsion by unsettling these boundaries, making the reader's experience of the asylum a space of horror. The text is rife with instances of horror; with rape, mutilation, cannibalism, bloodshed and other bodily violence portrayed visually in the graphic novel or referred to with text. However, one of the primary ways in which abjection is used in the text is through the portrayal of the inmates, whose sometimes horrifying or bizarre bodies can disquiet the reader and thus disturb the distinction between self and other. Two scenes from *Arkham* in particular invoke this sense of bodily horror, each exemplified by the antagonist who Batman encounters in that scene. The first is the meeting with Clayface in the "Tunnel of Love" (*Arkham* p. 53-4), and the other is the scene with Maxie Zeus in the Electroconvulsive Therapy room (p. 65-8).

Clayface is a being so repulsive that in the post-script analogues he describes himself as: "Not born. Shit into existence. Tumor abortion baby." His skin weeps pus and he bleeds from open sores, his touch causing the paint on the walls to melt and run (See below). Skin is

important for personal purity because it represents the essential "boundary of biological and psychic individuation" (Kristeva 1982: 101). Clayface shambles naked through the asylum corridors, his appearance the incarnation of what Kristeva calls the "Waste-body, Corpse-body", which she describes as "blurred between the inanimate and the inorganic, a transitional swarming, [...] undistinguishable from the symbolic" (1982: 109), and so we are repulsed by Clayface because his body seems to be composed of "transitional matter"; he has no separation from this matter which is normally ejected from the body. He resembles a corpse and so blurs the line that separates us from our own eventual death, even more so because he is *not* a corpse, he is a living being whose liminal existence makes mockery of the symbolic order upon which our ideas of cleanliness, and containment, rest.

Worse still, Clayface claims he wants to share his disease with others (*Arkham* p. 54), and tries to touch Batman, who responds with violence. Batman, who is responsible for maintaining our sense of order and morality in the text, would then embody Kristeva's notion of Symbolic Order here, and his revulsion and loathing becomes our own as Clayface reaches out to violate the sanctity of Batman's body with his diseased touch. Batman rejects Clayface just as our social conditioning teaches us to reject the abject and the impure as "abomination" (Kristeva 1982: 109). Visually, McKean depicts Clayface with green-tinged, rotting skin, and the surface of his skin seems slimy and wet. In fact, the impact Clayface has on the reader relies heavily on the visual aspect, and text in this scene is sparing. Nonetheless, the word bubbles of Clayface are given a unique texture by letterer Gaspar Saladino; the bubbles appear misshapen and are the yellowish colour of phlegm, subtly reinforcing the revolting effect of Clayface in this scene (See below).

As with many other characters in *Arkham*, this is not the definitive version of Clayface, who is in fact a super-villain whose body possesses extraordinary clay-like properties, being malleable and soft enough for him to alter his form at will. There have been several characters in Batman comics named Clayface, in fact, but this one is most likely Preston Payne, the third individual to bear this moniker, due to the fact that from *Detective Comics* #478 (1978), just a decade prior to *Arkham*, he was established as the contemporary version of Clayface, with the unique ability to cause anyone he touched to melt (Beatty 2005: 117). Moreover, Payne was forced to touch others and cause them to liquidise in order to survive, and was portrayed as mentally unstable, keeping a mannequin in his cell in the asylum which he thought of as his lover. In the scene immediately following the encounter with Clayface,

two department store mannequins can be seen in the foreground (p. 55), likely a reference to Preston Payne's "lover". Morrison transforms Payne's need to touch others into a metaphor for sexually transmitted diseases, "AIDS on two legs, [...] the fear of what lies beyond the curtain in the Tunnel of Love", and Batman's repugnance for Clayface becomes representative of Batman's fear of sexuality (*Arkham* script p. 36).



17. Above left – Clayface shambles through the asylum, his liminal nature embodied through his diseased, corpselike appearance (*Arkham* p. 53). Above right – Maxie Zeus, shown in the bottom middle panel clutching a barrel filled with waste (p. 66) .

The other scene from *Arkham* which highlights the use of the abject within the text is the encounter with Maxie Zeus (p. 65-8). While similarly using the idea of the unclean to evoke revulsion in the reader, this scene approaches the idea differently and so takes on a new list of associations. Whereas Clayface resembles a walking corpse, something inherently abject, Maxie Zeus signifies the divine, which is the antithesis of the abject (1982: 109). Zeus, who suffers from a severe case of "delusional disorder of the grandiose type" (Langley 2012: 32), believes himself to be the Greek god of lightning, and so resides in the Electroconvulsive Therapy room, where he can surround himself with electricity. In the encounter, Zeus variously describes himself as "The Lord thy God", "Lord of ECT" and "God of Electric Retribution", and in a ritual gesture shows Batman a wooden barrel surrounded by flies, the

contents of which can be guessed at but are not explicitly shown (See above). Zeus refers to the contents as the "gift of [his] body. Divine. Fertile", and furthermore tells Batman to "Eat. Drink. This is [his] body. This is [his] blood" (Arkham p. 67-8). It is thus implied that Zeus has stored his faecal matter in the barrel, believing that since he is a god his waste is therefore holy, attributing special powers to it.

Other than emphasizing Zeus' delusional mind, this irreverent gesture also serves as a perversion of the natural order. Faeces is discussed by Kristeva as integral to the abject since food nourishes the body but leaves it as faeces and thus signifies that which never ceases to be apart from the body, a permanent loss (Kristeva 1982: 108). As the body's primary way of externalising its impurities, expelling faeces thus represents a ritual expulsion, a continual process of abjection. This means that this transitional matter is the antithesis of spiritual sublimation, and by extension divine law (Kristeva 1982: 109). The fact that Zeus has saved his faeces is repugnant enough to arouse our revulsion, but the fact that he attributes divine, Eucharistic qualities to it, and even invites Batman to consume it, is nothing short of profane. This gesture subverts the accepted dichotomy of abject and sublime by associating the divine with filth. Moreover, the normal nutritive value of food is made abhorrent by committing the taboo of consuming that which has already been separated from the body. Visually, Zeus is depicted quite differently to Clayface, the panels in which he appears being lit up with striking shades of electric blue (See above). His skin is the same blue, giving him an otherworldly, divine appearance, complemented by his austere, wizened face. Wires protrude from his head and body, presumably linking him directly to the ECT machine, which he shocks himself with while speaking to Batman, causing his body to light up with electricity. Thus the abject in this scene is communicated through text and the things Zeus says, contrasting with his majestic, unearthly appearance.

Above I mention how corpses embody abjection because they represent a subject which has become an object. *Arkham* reverses this by making the asylum an object which has become a subject, a different kind of abjection which is no less disturbing. This uncanny conception of a house as a living entity violates our understanding of the Symbolic Order which governs our world and additionally plays upon pre-modern animistic superstitions which nonetheless linger in the collective unconscious. Thus the breakdown of established order through the uncanny representation of the asylum depicted in *Arkham* evokes horror in the mind of the reader, compounding their perception of the asylum as a bad object. Additionally, the above

examples of inmates characterized by abjection are important because these too compound the negative/horrifying perception of the asylum. As stated previously in this dissertation, the enemies Batman encounters in *Arkham* are as much a part of the building as they are part of the narrative, with each inmate becoming representative of a part of Batman's psyche. The abjection of both building and the occupants serves to further unsettle boundaries in the text.

Among Mad People

There are thus numerous ways in which boundaries are destabilized in this graphic novel, resulting in the creation of a liminal space in which meaning is never fixed. In *Arkham*, the conventional boundaries which delineate various dichotomies are collapsed, resulting in a new space which lies between them. In each case this space embodies both polarities, yet is paradoxically neither. This threshold or liminal space opens up new possibilities for interpretation, where preconceived notions about the world can be subjected to creative questioning. This is contiguous with the postmodern paradigm, which is defined by plurality of meaning and embraces contradiction and paradox. During the late 1980s the Batman character experienced a postmodern shift, of which *Arkham Asylum* was a part, and this graphic novel creatively explored the possibility of Batman being insane by placing him within an asylum, the spatialized representation of madness.

Batman has always been rigorously declared as sane, according to the requirements of the document penned by DC Editor Dennis O'Neil known as the Bat-Bible, which stipulates: "Wayne/Batman is not insane... and he never kills" (Brooker 2005: 276). In *Arkham* however, the boundary which separates Batman from his mentally disturbed enemies is subjected to questioning, presenting a radical departure from previous iterations of the character. Despite the fact that he is, in essence, a man who dresses up as a bat to fight crime, Batman's sanity is usually considered quite stable within the fictional world he inhabits. In fact, prior to the 1980s Batman's characterization was almost infallible. Even the more ambiguous, killer Batman of the early publications was never insane, and the subsequent depictions which followed strongly presented Batman as a morally upstanding father figure with virtually no character flaws. Adam West's Batman could arguably be seen as eccentric, but he is at all times perfectly rational, even in absurd circumstances. During the 1970s it became standard practice to label Batman's enemies as insane rather than merely as criminals, which necessitated the creation of Arkham Asylum in 1974 by the comics authors as a holding

facility for these mad super-villains. Originally these characters were not often specifically designated as insane and even The Joker was initially depicted in the 1940s as sociopathic but perfectly rational (Lytle in O'Neil 2008: 116).

Despite the fact that the typical representation of Batman in the comics is one of rationality, the question of his potential insanity has been raised by outside forces many times over the years, even before the 1980s (Langley 2012: 267). James Wurtz states that the Bruce Wayne character is a particularly suitable figure for psychoanalysis, especially given the traumatic loss of his parents which galvanized his adoption of the Batman persona in order to fight crime (2011: 561). There is thus a long history of applying psychoanalytic theory to the character, with scholars drawing upon Lacan, Klein, Freud and Jung (who appears briefly in *Arkham*). This interest in Batman's psyche is what prompted psychologist Travis Langley to write *Batman and Psychology* (2012), wherein he attempts to conclusively answer the question of whether Batman is insane. Langley presents a lengthy psychoanalysis of Batman and many of his major enemies, and eventually concludes that Batman is not mentally ill. Langley says that although Batman shows many of the symptoms of Post-traumatic Stress Disorder, ultimately he is too functional as an individual to qualify for the disorder (Langley 2012: 267). However, the application of psychoanalytic theory to a fictional character is a limited approach, since characters do not possess a fully-functioning set of mental faculties which can be probed meaningfully. Nevertheless, there is still a great interest in the psychology of Batman, something which Grant Morrison felt needed to be explored within the comics:

> By psychoanalysing his enemies with his fists, Batman may have hoped to escape the probing gaze of the analyst himself, but it was not to be. There was, after all, something deeply mad about Batman. - Grant Morrison (Langley 2012: 267).

This is partially what prompted Morrison to write *Arkham*, a text in which Batman's sanity is ambiguous, and in which madness is spatialized through the asylum and explored creatively. However, rather than attempt to psychoanalyse Batman, I feel it would be more appropriate to approach the character from a literary perspective, which can only be done by first establishing the ways in which real insanity differs from representations of it. Lillian Feder, author of *Madness in Literature* (1980), states that through imaginative literature (and other artistic forms) we are able to decode part of the seemingly indecipherable nature of madness (6-7). According to Feder, imaginative representations of madness are necessarily different

from real madness in that they are consciously ordered by the language of reason, in order to make them comprehensible to a reader. Through symbolic forms, metaphors, distortions and other artistic techniques the artist acts as an interpreter and translator of delirium, using the world of unreason to explore the "hidden layers" of reality (Feder 1980: 7).

This artistic conception of madness has existed since ancient times, and works from Euripides' *Bachae* to Shakespeare's *King Lear* in the Renaissance show the belief in the transformative power of madness and its propensity for self-discovery and revelation (Feder 1980: 281). The modern conception of this view of madness incorporates the idea of recognising the transcendence found within oneself rather than an exterior authority such as God (Feder 1980: 280). Foucault said that madness in art is like a mirror which reflects man's truth about himself and his inner reality (Foucault 1988: 27). Thus, any comment which a fictional representation of madness makes is relevant to mankind as a whole by scrutinizing culture and societal norms. Psychoanalysing a fictional character yields more about us as humans than it purportedly does about that character. Considering my assertion that Batman acts as a partial mirror for society, this means that engaging with Batman's sanity potentially reveals something about our culture.

Real madness is quite different from representations of it, and any analysis of a mad fictional character must bear this in mind (Feder 1980: xiii). Real insanity is difficult to fully quantify, but it can be loosely defined as an illness of the mind, a mental state in which one's behaviour and perception of the world do not conform to normative standards of rational and emotional comportment, instead governed by unconscious processes which are often beyond the control of the sufferer of mental illness (Feder 1980: 5). A simpler definition, used by R. D. Laing for schizoid behaviour specifically, is that madness is a disintegration of a person's understanding of the world and/or himself (Laing 1960: 9). A fictional example modelled on this definition would be Maxie Zeus, who believes himself to a Greek God (See above). Additionally, this dissertation uses the terms "madness", "insanity" and "mental illness" interchangeably, and it is beyond the scope of the present study and my knowledge to properly delineate these somewhat contentious terms in a clinical sense, an approach I have adopted from Emily Gilbert's article *Battles From Below: A Literature of Oppression* (1996: 20). Fictional representations may adhere to this understanding, but ultimately they are no more than a facsimile, since a real personage is infinitely more complex. In literature and art,

the madman functions as a signifier, a symbolic transformation of the human mind thrown out of balance.

The ways in which society perceives madness have changed over the centuries, but mankind has long attempted to understand and come to terms with the psychic processes of mental turmoil that plague us. The mentally ill embody this turmoil and their treatment by society over the centuries tends to reflect the shifting attitudes towards sanity and the processes by which man has tried to segregate, control or cure madness. In his seminal work *Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason* (1961) Michel Foucault attempts to trace these shifts by looking specifically at the development of institutions which have confined madness, using what Foucault calls a "monologue of reason about madness" (1988: xi, translation by Richard Howard). Beginning with the Middle Ages, and ending with the present, Foucault narrates the exclusion and occasional outright cruelty with which the insane have been treated, as well as the efforts undertaken to control and ameliorate insanity (Foucault 1988: xii). Throughout history the mentally ill have been marginalised, often being associated with the lower echelons of society: lepers, prostitutes, vagabonds and criminals (Foucault 1988: 45-7). At times the insane have even been compared to animals and treated inhumanely (Foucault 1988: 72-4). Eventually, Foucault writes, the insane were freed from their chains and the dungeons in which they had been confined, an act which he says has been romanticized (Foucault 1988: 243). The chains were instead replaced by "a series of operations which silently organised the world of the asylum" (Foucault 1988: 243), creating a system of control where physical chains were not required.

Instead, guilt and the looming threat of punishment was employed in the asylums which emerged in the 19th Century to keep the patients under control (Foucault 1988: 246). The mental patient was continually made aware of his own aberration, his alterity and otherness, transforming him into an object to be observed (Foucault 1988: 247). "Watched, judged and condemned", the madman's excesses were controlled through anxiety and shame (Foucault 1988: 267). In this new, more insidious system of controlling madness, the action of shame and humiliation on the mental patient reinforced the perceived boundary between the world of normativity and the world of the insane. According to Foucault, the primary reasons for the mass confinement of the insane have more to do with economic factors and systems of control by the authorities (Foucault 1988: 46). In the 19th Century ordinary citizens came to fear confinement and insane asylums came to be regarded with fear bordering on superstition

(Foucault 1988: 202). It is this prevailing 19th-century fear which is one reason for the portrayal of asylums in works like *Arkham* as places of horror and the uncanny. Such a portrayal draws on the fears and prejudices which society sometimes has towards the insane. However, despite these lingering prejudices man is also fascinated by madness, since it potentially lurks within the soul of everyone, and because it is believed that madness is able to expose some of the essential truths about the world (Foucault 1988: 23-4).

Thus man has also sought symbolic expression for the irrational behaviour and thoughts of madness through art, literature and other forms of expression (Feder 1980: 4). It is my position that *Arkham* is a part of this tradition, using sequential art to investigate the place of madness in society by placing the superhero within the trope of the asylum. Interestingly, Foucault speaks in *Madness and Civilization* of the close relationship once held by image and text in Medieval times for creatively representing madness, each referring to the other, "commentary here and illustration there" (Foucault 1988: 17). According to Foucault, there has been a dislocation between the plastic form of images and the descriptive form of words, and that this loss of unity means that even when they both depict madness they do so in different ways, resulting in separate meanings (Foucault 1988: 18). Sequential art runs counter to this notion, since it is able to combine qualities of both image and text, being able to both illustrate and describe at the same time. As discussed in Chapter 1, words can support the reception of an image where that image lacks specificity, and conversely the immediacy of an image can solidify the meaning of prose where the two accompany each other. Each has the additive ability to guide the meaning of the other (McCloud 1998: 154).

This means that sequential art has the potential to portray psychic turmoil by depicting the inner state of the mind on the page visually, and even a seemingly elusive or chaotic picture can be elucidated through the use of words. Contrariwise, a large block of descriptive text explaining a mental breakdown for a character can be illustrated directly with accompanying artwork. For example, in *Arkham* this combination is shown by the battle between Batman and Killer Croc (p. 71-77). At this point in the text Amadeus Arkham ingests hallucinogenic mushrooms, and he imagines that he must overcome "the Great Dragon" which dwells within his subconscious, which is also conflated with the physical space of the asylum. This "Dragon" is revealed to represent Arkham's guilt over killing his mother, a memory his mind had suppressed (p 84). Batman's fight with Croc is visually juxtaposed with Arkham's narration at this point, and the two serve to highlight and mirror each other. While Arkham's

inner conflict is communicated through the text boxes of each frame, Batman's physical conflict is depicted visually and each helps exemplify the other (See below).



18. Above – Visually Batman confronts the reptilian Killer Croc, while textually Amadeus Arkham's internal struggle with madness is described (*Arkham* p. 71-2).

For example, Arkham says: "What if I am not strong enough to defeat it?" and the image we see is that of Croc slashing Batman's face in spray of blood (See above). Shortly after this frame Batman is hoisted up above Croc's head and Arkham's caption reads: "I am borne up on a wave of perfect terror." This effect is sustained throughout this scene, with each of Arkham's quotes simultaneously describing his internal conflict as well as illuminating something about Batman's physical conflict in each frame. Killer Croc, a reptilian super-villain who suffers from a severe form of atavism, visually represents the Dragon which must be overcome. Morrison says in the script he wanted Croc to signify "[O]ur evolutionary past rising up to threaten us with destruction" (Arkham script p. 49). This alludes to the Biblical association of the Old Dragon with the Devil as well as the psychological association with the subconscious and the primal, reptilian part of the brain (Arkham script p. 49). To emphasize this notion Morrison had McKean place the image of a statue of St. Michael above the entrance to Arkham Asylum. In the narrative it is Amadeus who commissions the statue in

1920 to embody his ideal of the "[T]riumph of reason over the irrational" (*Arkham* p. 31). Batman takes the spear from the statue, using it to fight Croc. The fight thus becomes a duel between the suppressed, violent unconscious mind and the rational, lucid mind. This shows how the unique combination of image and text can amplify the meaning of a narrative, and how sequential art can be used to depict a mental conflict using visual imagery aided by descriptive text. James Wurtz has conducted a similar analysis of this scene, emphasizing the physical location of Croc at the centre of the asylum as corresponding to Amadeus' engagement with the "core" of his psyche (2011: 559).

Let us now return to the central concern of this chapter, the creative use of the asylum as a spatialized representation of madness. Asylums, physically segregated from normative society, are often thought of as separate worlds unto themselves. The asylum space is sometimes viewed through the negative prejudices which have become attached to them over the last few centuries. Arkham, as part of the hyperbolic world of superheroes, intensifies these prejudices through its special distinction as an asylum "for the criminally insane". This is not an ordinary mental hospital, it is a place specifically for those who present a danger to themselves or society. Residents there are referred to not as patients but as "inmates". Moreover, these insane criminals are also more often than not super-villains, often possessed of fantastic powers or equipment and almost always centred around a specific theme, whether it be duality (Two-Face), clowns (Joker) or Greek myth (Maxie Zeus). Batman, who has always been depicted as having a personal war on crime, has in essence traditionally been the enforcer of societal control in Gotham City. Batman regularly foils the schemes of super-villains and returns them to prison or to the asylum, from which they inevitably escape to cause more chaos. In Foucauldian terms one would thus say that Batman represents the power of authority through his "policing" of the insane criminals of Gotham City. This power relation has been thoroughly enforced as the norm throughout most of Batman's publishing career, from the noir 1940s Batman to the Camp 1960s Batman to the present. *Arkham Asylum* however, presents a radical departure in that it calls into question Batman's own sanity.

In *Arkham*, Batman is forced to go "among the mad people", and by blurring the line which traditionally separates him from his insane enemies Batman is forced to recognise in himself the same abnormality. In the liminal space which Arkham represents Batman is subjected to psychoanalysis by his enemies and the mental terrain of the asylum itself. Lucy Rollin states

that: "[b]y urging Batman into the dark places of the building, and thus into the dark places of his mind, [The Joker] becomes his psychiatrist" (1994: 8). The Joker presents Batman with a Rorschach blot test card (*Arkham* p. 28), and also forces him to participate in a word association test administered by Ruth Adams (p. 33-4). Through these acts and others the Joker becomes a "Dantean guide" for Batman (Rollin 1994: 8), and the asylum becomes a threshold space of trial and initiation, where established borders between binaries are destabilized. The boundaries between home/asylum, mental/physical, self/other and eventually sane/insane are blurred and eliminated. Batman crosses over into this liminal "Looking Glass" space, existing between the world of the sane and the insane, forcing him to engage with both his sanity as well as questions of identity. By looking into the mirror, Batman ultimately realises that: "Arkham was right; sometimes it's only madness that makes us what we are" (*Arkham* p. 94).

At the end it is only by surrendering to the whims of madness that Batman is allowed to go free and return to Gotham City. Batman returns Harvey Dent's silver dollar to him in an act of kindness, restoring Dent's agency to him and showing that true heroism is achieved not through dramatic acts like stopping a villain but rather through small acts of altruism. Dent reciprocates this with his own act of kindness, lying about the result of the coin toss so that Batman may go free. Batman has acknowledged his resemblance to his enemies but has transcended this anxiety by returning to his role as hero. It is not his sanity that makes him better than them but his inherently good qualities such as kindness and selfless sacrifice for others. The ending is somewhat ambiguous as to whether Batman is indeed insane or not, and I think that it is more accurate to say that Batman has incorporated his inner psychic turmoil into his worldview, and accepted that madness is part of being human. This is a more complex resolution than if Batman was simply declared sane because it gives Batman more depth as a character by not adhering to strict binaries.

The function of insanity in *Arkham* is thus a complex one, and it is my position that this graphic novel portrays a nuanced, multifaceted picture of insanity and its relationship to normality. On one hand, abjection and the uncanny is used to make the asylum and its inhabitants horrifying and unsettling, which shows the more unpleasant side of mental illness and draws upon the prevailing negative associations of mental asylums. On the other hand, *Arkham*'s ultimate message seems to be that madness is an integral part of human nature that allows one to come to terms with some essential truths and even reconstitute one's sense of

identity. However, I do not think that *Arkham* is a celebration of madness as a desirable mental state. Rather I would contend that the picture of madness offered by *Arkham* is a complex one, and through figures like Amadeus Arkham we are shown the tragic side of mental illness as a real world problem. Figures like The Joker remind us that there are some genuinely psychopathic individuals in the world, but others like Harvey Dent remind us that there are sympathetic cases too. The asylum itself is shown to be an uncanny place of horror which feeds on madness, but even the asylum has some positive qualities as a place of initiation and trial.

By existing between worlds, the asylum acts as a threshold space where established notions can be subjected to creative deconstruction. In this text the Batman character is used to demonstrate that psychological issues are inherently human, and that we can transcend these problems. *Arkham Asylum* thus creatively interrogates the role of the superhero, and through its complex representation of a familiar cultural icon situates itself firmly in the postmodern tradition. Additionally, this postmodern sensibility is used in *Arkham* to engage with issues of representation, dismantling preconceived notions and societal values. Foucault felt that art was the only way in which we can come to truly understand the pathos of madness through the act of representing it symbolically (1988: 288). *Arkham* draws upon this tradition of symbolic representation, showing that sequential art can also be used to creatively explore insanity. The unique productive complexities which arise from the combination of image and text allow for a representation of fictional insanity which simultaneously illustrates madness as well as gives voice to psychic turmoil through language. Considering that the image of Batman is able to variously embody aspects of society through his protean nature, it can then be argued that the character can also be used to critically engage with mental illness. Since Batman acts as a reflection of the changing face of society, it follows that he would be able to absorb and reflect the darker parts of our collective psyche.

Conclusion - Dark Knight of the Soul

This is the threshold of life; this is the threshold of death. All is doubtful, all is mysterious, all is intoxicating. Not the benign solar intoxication of Dionysis, but the dreadful madness of pernicious drugs; this is a drunkenness of sense, after the mind has been abolished by the venom of the moon. – Aleister Crowley, *The Book of Thoth* (1944).

This dissertation has examined how the cultural icon Batman has experienced a number of aesthetic shifts over the course of his "life". Batman began his existence in the pages of crime adventure comics in 1939, and now, almost 77 years later, Batman has moved beyond comics, becoming so deeply rooted in popular culture that his likeness and iconography are instantly recognisable, forming part of the language of visual icons. Returning briefly to the conceit developed by W. J. T. Mitchell in *What Do Pictures Want?*, the meta-picture of Batman has acquired a life of its own, an existence propagated through diverse media from films to video games. As I have argued, Batman's "identity" is not rooted in any specific text, but rather in the popular unconscious. Underneath the cowl is not Bruce Wayne, but us.

As argued in Chapter 2, this meta-picture of Batman contains a recognisable "core" which is nonetheless malleable enough to embody a diverse range of identities. These identities can be demonstrated to have vaguely coincided with shifts in society and the desires of the fans that consume the comics. During the 1980s the Batman character was subjected to a process of reinvigoration, with new authors and artists re-imagining Batman as a progressively darker, more psychologically complex figure. This destabilization of established tropes constituted a postmodernisation of Batman, more suited to the uncertain social climate of the late 20th Century. This instability of meaning opened up new avenues of interpretation for the character, and the works of the 1980s deconstructed various aspects of Batman, and more broadly, of the superhero genre in general. Batman went from an absurdly comedic, quaintly moralistic figure to a figure haunted by fears and insecurities. He became, in effect, more believably human. This was a more introspective Batman who could variously be old and cynical, young and uncertain or even psychologically troubled. Despite the official constraint that Batman cannot be insane, *Arkham Asylum – A Serious House on Serious Earth*, nevertheless introduced the world to a version of Batman who doubted his own sanity.

Arkham Asylum, the traditional residence of Batman's most mentally disturbed enemies, provides the perfect space in which to subject Batman's sanity to scrutiny. Insane asylums have traditionally been used to spatialize madness in fictional works, and in this graphic novel

this space is transformed into an uncanny landscape of madness where the traditional boundaries of reality, identity, alterity, time and consciousness are blurred and warped. This liminal space is, as in the quote at the start of this chapter, "the threshold of life; [the] threshold of death. All is doubtful, all is mysterious", a place where Batman must face his inner conflicts or be broken by the asylum (*Arkham* script p. 2). This preoccupation with instability manifests some of the central concerns of the postmodern paradigm, which acknowledges the uncertainty of meaning and rejects the notion of a single, unified view of the world. *Arkham* displays these concerns in a number of ways, both visual and textual.

The interaction between past and present in Arkham weaves together fragments from the life of Amadeus Arkham in the 1920s with Batman's journey through Arkham during a single night in 1989, resulting in an unusual, non-linear sense of time. Amadeus Arkham is "haunted" by various intrusions from the future, and the past haunts the present as well, destabilizing the temporal breach between them. Batman's journey through the asylum is paralleled by his inner journey, and by delving deeper into the asylum's depths he simultaneously delves into his unconscious mind, tormented by the guilt he feels over his parents' death. The rooms of the asylum are characterized by the enemies Batman encounters in each, and these enemies become representative of Batman's psyche, reflecting or inverting the darker aspects of his personality. By facing these foes, Batman is confronted by his distorted reflection and forced to accept his own abnormality. This dissolution of the boundaries between self and other, by comparing Batman to his enemies, blurs the traditional separation of good and evil in comics by showing how similar the two can be.

This complex text makes use of extensive visual and textual references to symbolism, the occult, Biblical themes, modern psychology, film, theatre, poetry and literature. These references serve to expand the interpretive possibilities of this graphic novel by forcing the reader to construct their own meanings from the barrage of symbols and fragments of text which permeate the surface of the pages, denying *Arkham* a singular, fixed meaning. This dissertation has engaged with some of these symbols, but ultimately the experience of *Arkham* is a subjective one and it is impossible to define the text solely according to any one reading of it. This is one of *Arkham*'s strengths as well its most notable weak point, since this instability opens up many interpretations but conversely detracts from the decisiveness of the text, at times making it difficult to engage with and access.

There is a strong presence in the text of references to the works of Lewis Carrol, and in effect this story becomes a tale of Batman's crossing through into the Looking Glass world of the subconscious, a dark journey down the rabbit hole of the mind. Additionally, the subtitle of *Arkham* references Philip Larkin's poem *Church Going* (1955), which highlights the text's theme of searching for meaning in an ambiguous world. These and other allusions to previously existing works give the text a sense of pastiche, using these existing works to give *Arkham* additional layers of meaning. The distorted, densely layered artwork of *Arkham* is perhaps its most striking feature, and even a cursory glance immediately tells the reader that this is a work of sequential art which is a huge departure from conventional superhero comics. McKean's intricate artwork incorporates different media into the paintings of which *Arkham* is mostly comprised to create a distorted, surreal landscape which "evokes the unconscious more fully than could any novel of words alone" (Rollin 1991: 4). Gone are the clean, bold outlines and flat colours associated with superhero comics; this graphic novel twists the familiar figure of Batman into a nightmarish being of darkness, who is notably never depicted in *Arkham* with eyes, instead reducing him to a black, horned silhouette.

The visual language of sequential art is used to enhance this distortion, and panel structure in particular is creatively disrupted in *Arkham*, with panel borders frequently violated or dissolved altogether. Panel shape and flow are also distorted, and at times the exact sequence of panels is uncertain and even confusing, compounding the text's chaotic, dreamlike qualities. Batman's dark night of the soul is thus implied to take place not in the realistic world which he usually inhabits, but rather in a dream world in which he is confronted by his inner fears. In *Arkham*, traditional preconceived notions about the world are overturned in a Carnivalesque subversion of societal values and roles. Batman, normally associated with control and the dominion of rationality, is turned into a fugitive in a land where irrationality is the dominant force. This symbolizes an inversion of the usual power relations of madness being confined and controlled by society, and *Arkham* creates a space where insanity can reign over reason, creatively blurring the perception of madness and questioning the role of the asylum in society. By the end of this physical and mental journey through the asylum, Batman has come to understand that madness is a part of human nature, and that only by accepting the illogical parts of life can we form a nuanced view of the world. Ultimately, armed with this knowledge, Batman emerges from his ordeal with his psyche not only intact but with a greater comprehension of his trauma and the role it plays in his being.

This graphic novel thus forces the reader to question their own values and understanding of the world, by forcing them to reconsider what the difference between sanity and insanity is. The portrayal of madness in *Arkham* is a complex one, simultaneously showing the tragedy of mental turmoil but not shying away from the more terrifying versions of insanity found in the world. The madman in *Arkham* is both a threatening and a vulnerable being, and moreover not quite as separated from "normal" people as one might assume. The dangerous, frightening world of madness is not a separate, external place, but rather a place within each of us. The line between "other" and the "self" becomes blurred when even heroes can be plagued by psychological issues and doubts.

Arkham Asylum thus presents a version of Batman which embraces the role of the irrational and the essential truths about selfhood which it can open up. This depiction of the Caped Crusader, beleaguered by inner conflict, is in effect a more complete, more *human* portrayal of the superhero archetype. This is perhaps more poignant with Batman than other, more fantastic superheroes, since he is effectively as human as we are, even if his limits are extraordinary. This dissertation has argued that the Batman character is able to reflect certain qualities of mankind back at us, both good and bad, and this is perhaps why the character has remained in publication for so long. Over the years, the character has become a living image, a multifaceted cultural object which at times is able to respond to and embody shifts in society and culture. If this is true, then the image of Batman which *Arkham Asylum* shows us is one seen through the looking glass darkly, a distorted reflection of our internal struggle with identity and sanity.

The grim period of Batman comics during the 1980s has had a lasting impact on subsequent portrayals of Batman. Recent movies such as Christopher Nolan's *Dark Knight Trilogy* (2005-12) took for its inspiration the *Year One* (1987) graphic novel, and the upcoming *Batman v Superman* (2016) movie seems to take its visual cues and subject matter from *The Dark Knight Returns* (1986). *Arkham Asylum* too has had an afterlife through the critically acclaimed *Arkham* video game series, which invites the player to not merely observe, but to become Batman themselves in a new dynamic with the character (Pearson 2015: 6). Moreover, the gloomy legacy of the 1980s lingers on in the pervasive "Dark Knight" representation of Batman as serious and stern, and although several recent comics and cartoon portrayals such as *Batman: The Brave and The Bold* (2008-2011) feature a more light-hearted look at the character, one wonders what the meta-picture of Batman will embody next.

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