"Why So Serious?"
Threat, Authoritarianism, and Depictions of
Crime, Law, and Order in Batman Films

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A B S T R A C T   A N D   A R T I C L E   I N F O R M A T I O N

Drawing on research on authoritarianism, this study analyzes the relationship between levels of threat in society and representations of crime, law, and order in mass media, with a particular emphasis on the superhero genre. Although the superhero genre is viewed as an important site of mediated images of crime and law enforcement, cultural criminologists have been relatively quiet about this film genre. In addressing this omission, I analyze authoritarian themes (with an emphasis on crime, law, and order) in the Batman film franchise across different periods of threat. My qualitative content analysis finds that authoritarianism themes of fear and need for order and concern about aggressive action toward crime are more common in Batman films during high-threat periods. I also find that criticism of authority figures is more prevalent in Batman films during high-threat periods, which challenges previous research on authoritarianism as well as the alleged conservative media bias toward police.

Although a number of scholars have studied depictions of crime and law in the superhero genre, these analyses have been largely limited to comic books (Adkinson, 2008; Phillips & Strobl, 2006, 2013; Vollum & Adkinson, 2003) and television (Kort-Butler, 2012, 2013). Film has largely been overlooked when it comes to representations of law and order in the superhero genre, despite the unprecedented commercial success (and endless sequels, spin-offs, and reboots) that the genre has been experiencing for quite some time. This omission is important because

film adaptations can make significant departures from their comic book source material (Weiner, 2012).

In analyzing cinematic representations of crime, law, and order in the superhero genre, this study looks at the role that threat plays in structuring such representations. In the same way that changing social conditions and political discourses helped to create a shift in how Americans think about crime and punishment (Hagan, 2010), so too can such conditions affect depictions of crime, threat, and justice in mass media (Cavender, 2004). Given that media influence perceptions of crime and the justice system (Elsass,

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Schildkraut, & Stafford, 2014; Kort-Butler & Hartshorn, 2011) and can reflect cultural concerns (Ryan & Kellner, 1988), it is important to know more about how media represent crime, law, and order. Accordingly, this study looks at how threat relates to the construction of crime and justice in superhero films. More specifically, this study explores the relationship between periods of threat in the world and representations of Batman as gritty and authoritarian or campy and humorful. Put differently, this article attempts to apply the Joker's "Why so serious" question from *The Dark Knight* (2008) to the entire Batman film franchise.

This study is organized as follows. First, I review the literature on representations of crime and the legal system in mass media, and argue that research on authoritarianism helps explain the role that threat plays in these representations. Second, I argue why the superhero genre—and Batman in particular—is an appropriate place for analyzing the relationship between threat, authoritarianism, and mediated representations of crime and the legal system. Third, I discuss findings from my analysis of these themes in Batman films across different levels of threat. Finally, I discuss the relevance of these findings to research on crime and media.

Literature Review

Scholars have regularly criticized mass media for its depictions of crime and law enforcement. Scholars often dismiss the television police drama as a politically conservative genre (Nichols-Pethick, 2012, p. 8). Law enforcement is often shown favorably in mass media (Cavender & Deutsch, 2007, p. 78), and the violation of civil liberties is shown to be an occasionally necessary (albeit unsavory) way of obtaining justice (Donovan & Klahm, 2014; Eschholz, Mallard, & Flynn, 2004). Consistent with this alleged conservative bias, these programs tend to downplay the structural factors behind crime and instead emphasize that criminals are greedy and vengeful (Gans-Boriskin & Wardle, 2005) and require punishment, not rehabilitation (Rapping, 2003).

However, if we take a broader historical perspective, we can see more heterogeneous depictions of crime and law in mass media. The gangster films of the 1930s featured "lower-class men, crude and uneducated, shooting their way to riches, fame, and misfortune" (Rafter & Brown, 2011, p. 107). The gangster genre—with its outlaw protagonists fighting against clumsy and often corrupt cops—can be seen as an expression of frustration with society's economic and political institutions during the Great Depression (Gianos, 1998). During the counter-culture 1960s, Hollywood celebrated outlaws and rebels who often fought against oppressive, unjust societies in such films as *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967), *Cool Hand Luke* (1967), and *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* (1969; see generally Cavender, 2004; Ryan & Kellner, 1988). Additionally, crime dramas during this period often featured socially-minded defense attorneys that protected the under-privileged and wrongfully accused (Rapping, 2003).

However, representations of crime and authority would soon take on a new tone. Hagan (2010) notes that American thinking on crime in the late 1960s shifted from focusing on social reforms and rehabilitation to mass incarceration and stiff penalties. This changing view of crime also appeared to be mirrored in mass media. Crime on both television and film moved away from the courtroom to the police station and from celebrating outlaws to celebrating renegade cops (Rapping, 2003). This mediated backlash against rising crime rates and the free-spirited 1960s is exemplified by *Dirty Harry* (1971), a film that emphasized the burden that civil liberties and liberal judges put on police trying to fight crime in their gritty, urban cities (Rafter & Brown, 2011; Rapping, 2003; Ryan & Kellner, 1988). Nichols-Pethick (2012) argues that this change in mediated representations of crime and the legal system was "dictated" in part by concerns over rising crime rates (p. 73). More recently, cable television programs like *The Sopranos* (1999-2007), *Dexter* (2006-2013), and *Breaking Bad* (2008-2013) encourage audiences to relate to the criminal protagonist, which harkens back in some ways to the gangster films of the 1930s.

Threat and Authoritarianism

The psychological concept of authoritarianism can help us better understand these changing discourses on crime and the legal system in mass media. Although criticized for their Freudian-derived theorizing and methodology, the basic tenets of authoritarianism as originally formulated by Adorno, Frenkel-Brunswik, Levinson, and Sanford (1950) remain largely intact. One consistent characteristic of authoritarianism is a tendency to uncritically obey authority figures. This obedience is termed *authoritarian submission*, defined as "a high degree of submission to the authorities who are perceived to be established and legitimate in the society in which one lives" (Altemeyer, 1988, p. 2). Sources of authority include the legal system, political leaders, and the military (Altemeyer, 1988), and authoritarianism is empirically linked to more positive affect toward police officers (Larsen, 1968; Oliver, 1996). Obedience to authority is also captured by Feldman and Stenner's (1997) measures for authoritarianism, which regard attitudes toward child-rearing, such as the importance of a child showing respect for elders

(vs. thinking for oneself), obeying parents (vs. being responsible for one's own actions), and following the rules (vs. being curious).

Authoritarianism's link with fear is also underscored by the fact that individuals that score high on authoritarianism are more likely to agree with the following statement: "Any day now, chaos and anarchy could erupt around us" (Altemeyer, 2006, pp. 54–55). This fear of social disorder and demagogues (and trust in authority figures) is illustrated by one of Altemeyer's (2006) measures for authoritarianism: "It is always better to trust the judgment of the proper authorities in government and religion than to listen to the noisy rabble-rousers in our society who are trying to create doubt in people's minds" (p. 11). Authoritarianism's link with fear is noted by Hetherington and Weiler (2009), who state that "in sum, authoritarianism is fundamentally motivated by a desire for order and a support for authorities seen as best able to secure that order against a variety of threats to social cohesion" (p. 41).

Another important aspect of authoritarianism is *authoritarian aggression*. Authoritarians favor strong punishment for people who break social and legal customs (Adorno et al., 1950; Altemeyer, 1988, 2006). Moreover, authoritarians are more supportive of vigilante forms of violence, so long as authority figures give them permission (Altemeyer, 1988). The link between authoritarianism and aggression has been studied in various ways. For example, individuals high in authoritarianism are more supportive of capital punishment (Stack, 2003) and stronger sentencing in general (Altemeyer, 2006). Authoritarianism is also positively associated with self-reported sexual aggression in men (Walker, Rowe, & Quinsey, 1993).

Although authoritarianism is a psychological disposition (e.g., Adorno et al., 1950; Altemeyer, 1988), its manifestation can be facilitated by external conditions. For example, Milgram's (1963) "shock" experiments revealed that obedience and aggression toward others can be enhanced by institutional settings and close proximity to an authority figure. Zimbardo's (2007) Stanford Prison Experiment found that a prison setting and basic props (e.g., batons, uniforms) led to "security guard" aggression toward the "prisoners."

Another external factor that promotes authoritarianism is threat. *Threat* has been operationalized by authoritarianism scholars as a downward economy (Doty, Peterson, & Winter, 1991; Rickert, 1998), rising crime (Doty et al., 1991; McCann, 2008), and fear about the 9/11 terrorist attacks (Hetherington & Suhay, 2011). Scholars argue that latent authoritarian attitudes are made salient when people must respond to uncertainty and threat (Duckitt & Fisher, 2003; Feldman & Stenner, 1997; Lavine, Lodge, & Freitas, 2005). According to Stenner

(2005), authoritarianism is not a "static property of the individual psyche" (p. 326) but instead is activated by perceptions of threat. In support of this model, McCann (2008) finds that conservative states (which were viewed as being more authoritarian to begin with) were more likely to increase death sentences and executions in response to threat, while liberal states were not.

Several studies also find that high-threat periods are linked to more authoritarian content in mass media. Sales (1973) tested whether periods of economic threat (e.g., unemployment, disposable income, consumer price index) and social threat (e.g., crime, assassinations, war) were associated with more authoritarian themes in media. In support of this hypothesis, Sales (1973) found that the protagonists in comic strips from the 1930s (high-threat years) tended to be more physically powerful than those in the 1920s (low-threat years). Threat and authoritarian themes have also been identified in television. Jorgenson (1975) found that economic threat (e.g., unemployment, consumer price index, economy listed as most important issue in the country) was linked to more authoritarian content in prime-time television, which was operationalized as when "the protagonist was cast as a tough and powerful authority figure who maintained law and order" (p. 1153). Similarly, Doty and colleagues (1991) found that periods of economic and social threat were positively associated with television programs from 1978–1988 that featured characters who were "physically powerful or control great power" (p. 632).

Research on authoritarianism and the superhero genre is mixed. Kort-Butler (2012) found that superhero television cartoons provide dispositional explanations of crime and show greedy, vengeful criminals, which fits with authoritarians' unsympathetic view towards criminals. Peterson and Gerstein's (2005) study of authoritarianism in Marvel comic books found more authoritarian aggression (operationalized as panels featuring violence and threatening gestures) and authoritarian submission (reverse-coded as critical depictions of the government) during high-threat periods, although authoritarian submission was only of marginal statistical significance. In contrast, superhero television cartoons tend to show the legal system as being ineffective and corrupt (Kort-Butler, 2013), and recent superhero comic books often focus on corruption within the government and legal system (Phillips & Strobl, 2006, 2013).

The mechanism behind threat and authoritarian media content is unclear. This link could be the result of increased authoritarian attitudes in writers and/or an attempt by them to appeal to the increasingly salient authoritarian attitudes of their audiences during high-

threat periods (Peterson & Gerstein, 2005). Authoritarians tend to prefer media content centered on "physical conflict" like action movies (Peterson & Pang, 2006, p. 457), which may in part explain the proliferation of post-9/11 blockbuster superhero films. Another possibility is that writers are responding to more authoritarian rhetoric from public figures during threatening times. Regardless, high-threat periods arguably provide more fertile ground for authoritarian content to be created, approved by media owners, and resonate with audiences, which in turn could lead others to emulate these successful works. As threat subsides, the inspiration and cultural resonation (and hence sales) of authoritarian content would in turn decline.

Our understanding of authoritarian content in mass media is limited by medium and methodology. Research on authoritarianism in mass media is largely limited to print (comic strips and comic books) and network television; the medium of film is unstudied. Second, these studies have tended to be general in nature (e.g., prime-time television, Marvel comic books), rather than focusing on a particular comic book character or television series. Third, studies of authoritarianism in mass media have typically been quantitative content analyses, which have led to calls for qualitative follow-ups for a richer understanding of these representations (Peterson & Gerstein, 2005). To address these limitations, this study uses a qualitative analysis of authoritarian themes in the Batman film franchise. The number (nine) of films and time period (1966–2012) over which the films were released allows analysis of different films across varying periods of threat. However, before moving on to the study's methodology, it is necessary to discuss the relationships between the superhero genre, authoritarianism, and Batman.

Superheroes and Authoritarianism

The superhero genre contains several qualities that are relevant to authoritarianism. Knowles (2007) argues that superheroes are savior figures and thus are most popular during "times of national stress" (p. 111). In Kantor's (2013) documentary *Superheros: A Never Ending Battle*, comic book writer Larry Hama noted that superheroes are typically about "vengeance" rather than "jurisprudence." Indeed, punishment is a consistent theme in superhero comic books (Phillips & Strobl, 2006). Comic books tend to create a rigid "us" versus "them" mentality between the moral superheroes and amoral villains, a mindset also characteristic of authoritarianism (Peterson & Gerstein, 2005).

Although lacking special powers, Batman shares many characteristics with mythical heroes as well as conventional comic book superheroes. Joseph

Campbell (1968) notes that the "child of destiny" (p. 326) often encounters early challenges (such as being an orphan), and later encounters the assistance of a special angel or animal. Batman's origins fit this narrative fairly well, as Wayne is orphaned through the murder of his parents and decides upon his identity after spotting a flying bat, which is described as an "omen" (Kane, 1990, p. 67). Like many other superheroes, Batman is separated from his parents, values justice over the law, and has an alter ego (Reynolds, 1992, p. 16). According to comic strip historian Rick Marschall (1990), the non-superhero vulnerability of Batman "seizes our attention, affection, and loyalty" and helps us "share his contempt for the rotten sorts who lurk in the shadows" (p. 6).

Batman's world is in many ways authoritarian, being full of danger, uncertainty, and the need to restore law and order. Batman's world represents "the realism of urban crime," and is "full of dark alleys, dangerous streets, and corruption" (Vollum & Adkinson, 2003, pp. 98–99). Batman's war against crime can be read as "an emotive…vendetta" (Morrison, 2012, p. 26), as it was the murder of Bruce Wayne's parents that led him to become Batman. This vengeful aspect of Batman is often apparent, despite his general aversion to killing criminals. For example, in the animated direct-to-video *Batman: Under the Red Hood* (2010), Batman admits, "A day doesn't go by when I don't think about subjecting [the Joker] to every horrendous torture he's dealt out to others...and then end him." Batman is also an interesting study in authoritarianism because he—like other superheroes—deals with issues of law and order (Phillips & Strobl, 2013). Batman often has an uneasy relationship with authority figures (Vollum & Adkinson, 2003, p.101) and had been periodically hunted by the police before becoming officially recognized as an ally of the Gotham Police Department in the early 1940s (Fleisher, 1976). Batman has periodically returned to fugitive status, notably when he was hunted by the U.S. government in the graphic novel *The Dark Knight Returns* (Miller, Janson, & Varley, 1996).

Superheroes and Threat Over Time

Representations of Batman—and comics in general—have not been static; they often reflect broader anxieties (or lack thereof) in society. The superhero comic book industry was created during the Great Depression (Wright, 2001) and exploded in popularity through such characters as Superman (1938), Batman (1939), Captain America (1941), and Wonder Woman (1941). In some ways mirroring the rebellious gangster films, it was during this period that

Batman carried firearms, casually killed (and threatened to kill) criminals, and fled the police.

The end of the Great Depression and World War II—and the threats that they represented—created a new environment for superheroes. Batman writer E. Nelson Bridwell (1971) notes that by the end of the 1940s, "costumed heroes were dropping like flies" (p. 14). The economically prosperous 1950s often had Batman far-removed from fighting the criminal underbelly and instead involved in science-fiction adventures (Morrison, 2012). According to legendary Batman comic book writer Dennis O'Neal (1999), such escapades "were appropriate for a cheery, generally optimistic America" (pp. 7–8). In the mid-1960s, camp became popular in Batman and the broader culture and provided a light-hearted critique of authority and icons (Jones & Jacobs, 1997, p. 99). Indeed, Batman comic book writer Grant Morrison (2012) argued that this version of Batman was "an establishment joke" during the "antiauthoritarian times" of the 1960s, where "the superhero was one more uptight Republican patsy to be mocked" (p. 335).

Superhero comics became darker in the so-called Bronze Age (1971–1980) of comics (Coogan, 2006; Romagnoli & Pagnucci, 2013). This period was marked by increases in crime, American's loss in the Vietnam War, Watergate, and economic decline. Comics during this time were characterized by darker characters and storylines and disillusioned superheroes (Romagnoli & Pagnucci, 2013; Wright, 2001). The 1970s saw a "grim, post-camp Batman" which emphasized the tormented side of Batman and the gothic qualities of Gotham (Jones & Jacobs, 1997, p. 178) and saw a return in style to Batman's earliest comics, with Batman fighting against street crime (Morrison, 2012, p. 362).

Following the Bronze Age of comics was the Dark Age or Modern Age (1981–1993), which was also very dark in tone (Phillips & Strobl, 2013; Romagnoli & Pagnucci, 2013). This was a difficult period in American history, which included record levels of crime as well as economic recession. The Dark Age was characterized by "gritty" stories and characters, such as Frank Miller's "crypto-fascist' Batman (Wright, 2001, p. 271), who pledges to abandon his code against killing criminals, saying, "Tonight I'm taking no prisoners." This period also sees the death of Batman's sidekick, Robin (Jason Todd), the paralysis of Batgirl (at the hands of the Joker), Batman having his back broken by the villain Bane, and the rise of Azrael, Batman's temporary, murderous replacement.

This gritty and highly lucrative period of comic books gave way to financial struggles. Jones and Jacobs (1997) observed that the comic book market went into "free fall" in 1994, with sales falling by a third between 1994 and 1995 and falling an additional 50% in 1996 (p. 363). Superhero-themed movies and television shows also had poor commercial performances (Jones & Jacobs, 1997, p. 363). Arguably, this was not a particularly hospitable time for the superhero genre, given that national violent crime rates dropped nearly 15% between 1993 and 1996 according to the Federal Bureau of Investigation's Uniform Crime Reporting Program. Moreover, as with the post-World War II era, the mid-1990s saw the removal of an arch-enemy (the Soviet Union and communism) and a booming economy. However, comic books did not go away, and again they took a dark turn after 9/11, with storylines that often featured supervillains prevailing over the superheroes (Morrison, 2012, p. 362).

As we can see, Batman and superhero comic books in general have changed a great deal both in popularity and tenor. Moreover, we can see that these shifts in tone are often accompanied by political, economic, and social threat. To better understand how levels of threat are related to representations of authoritarianism, law, and order in the superhero film genre, this study focuses its attention to the Batman film franchise. Based on the literature review, this study puts forth the following hypotheses:

H1: High-threat period Batman films will exhibit greater fear about social disorder and danger than low-threat period Batman films.

H2: High-threat period Batman films will emphasize the use of aggression in pursuing justice more than low-threat period Batman films.

Given the mixed findings on representations of law enforcement and authority figures in media during threatening times as well as in the superhero genre in general, this study also poses the following research question:

R1: How are authority figures represented in Batman films across different periods of threat?

Methodology

Methods and Data

The initial categorization of films into different periods of threat was modeled on Peterson and Gerstein's (2005) classification system. Peterson and Gerstein (2005) classified 1978-1982 and 1991-1992 as high-threat periods, with 1983-1990 as a low-threat period, which maps unevenly upon the "Dark Age" of

superhero comic books (1981-1993) identified by scholars, which saw the rise of antiheroes and gritty graphic novels (Phillips & Strobl, 2013; Romagnoli & Pagnucci, 2013). This study uses Peterson and Gerstein' (2005) typology (which is based on social and economic indicators of threat) because the researcher is most interested in establishing when threat was greatest in society, whereas the "Dark Age" moniker refers to the style of storytelling within comic books. Using Peterson and Gerstein's (2005) typology means that *Batman* (1989) is a low-threat period film, while *Batman Returns* (1992) is a high-threat period film. Although they did not have indicators for beyond 1992, Peterson and Gerstein (2005) went on to speculate that the high-threat period "probably ended around the time Bill Clinton took office and the economy expanded" (p. 892) and later reemerged following the 9/11 attacks. In light of these remarks (and the fact that 1966 was marked by low-levels of crime and unemployment), I classify *Batman: The Movie* (1966), *Batman* (1989), *Batman Forever* (1995), and *Batman & Robin* (1997) as low-threat period films, and I classify *Batman Returns* (1992), *Batman: Mask of the Phantasm* (1993), *Batman Begins* (2005), *The Dark Knight* (2008), and *The Dark Knight Rises* (2010) as high-threat period films.

To assess the validity of these classifications, I use indicators for crime and unemployment during the start of shooting for each film. For crime, I use the Federal Bureau of Investigation's Uniform Crime Reporting Program for the year filming started. For the economy, I use unemployment rates from the United States Bureau of Labor Statistics for the month and year that filming started. The starting filming dates for all but two of the films come from Reinhart (2013). The filming of *Batman Forever* was listed as the middle of 1994, so June was selected as the month of shooting. The starting filming date for *Batman Returns* comes from Burton (2006). The starting animation date for *Batman: Mask of the Phantasm* comes from Dini and Kidd (1998), who state that production was rushed and finished within a year. Given that the film was released in December of 1993, I use the unemployment rate for January of that year.

Given that perceptions of crime can be influenced by media and thus diverge from actual crime rates (Lowry, Nio, & Leitner, 2003), I also account for perceptions of crime and the economy. To measure perceptions of national crime, I use the question "Is there more crime in the [United States] than last year?" from the *Sourcebook of Criminal Justice Statistics*, which was asked by Gallup. I also use a question from the American National Elections Studies (ANES) on whether respondents thought that the economy had "gotten worse" over the last year. The data for 1988, 1990, 1992, 1994, 1996, and 2004 come from the

ANES time series. The data for 2006 come from the ANES Pilot Study, while the data for 2010 come from the Panel Recontact Study, and all of the ANES data that I use are weighted. Finally, I also measure consumer confidence for the year and month that filming began for each movie with the University of Michigan's Consumer Sentiment Index. The results can be seen in Table 1.

The results from Table 1 suggest that threat from crime was fairly similar between the low-threat and high-threat periods. Low-threat period films like *Batman* and *Batman Forever* were created during high levels of crime and concern about crime having gotten worse; indeed, these numbers are actually *higher* than for the post-9/11 high-threat period films. This is consistent with Peterson and Gerstein's (2005) original findings, where some of the low-threat periods actually had higher crime than the high-threat periods. Overall, the high-threat period has a slightly larger violent crime rate average (566.98) than the low-threat period (552.70). Perceptions of crime getting worse are actually higher in the low-threat period (80.67%) than the high-threat period (72%). However, it must be noted that data for one of the low-threat period films (*Batman: The Movie*) are missing, and given that it was filmed during the lowest crime rate of any of the movies in this sample, it is likely that perceptions of crime were also relatively low, and might have otherwise brought down the average score for the low-threat period.

In contrast, economic threat is a clear differentiator between the low-threat and high-threat periods. The average unemployment rate in the high-threat period is significantly higher (6.68%) than in the low-threat period (5.13%). The average percentage of respondents who thought that the national economy had worsened over the last year was also much higher in the high-threat period (58%) than the low-threat period (25%). Finally, the average index score for consumer confidence was also lower in the high-threat period (86.82) than in the low-threat period (93.33).

Peterson and Gerstein (2005) also considered broader events that were not easily captured by statistics (e.g., the L.A. riots after the Rodney King beating, the fall of communism, the Gulf War) when they classified periods of threat. It is consideration of these "impressionistic measures" (Doty et al., 1991, p. 630) that strengthens the argument that the post-9/11 films are in a high-threat period. Following 9/11, news media focused heavily on the "war on terrorism" (Griffin, 2004), and concerns about terrorism were high. A *Newsweek* poll released on March 20, 2004—the same week during which filming started on *Batman Begins*—found that 66% of respondents thought that it was either somewhat or very likely that terrorist attacks would be launched against "major

Table 1: Objective Indicators and Perceptions of Crime and the Economy Across Periods of Threat

	Violent Crime	Crime Worse Than a Year Ago	Unemployment Rate	Economy Worse Than Last year	Consumer Sentiment Index
Low Threat					
Batman: The Movie (April, 1966)	220.00	NA	3.8%	NA	NA
Batman (October, 1988)	640.60	84% (1989)	5.4%	31% (1988)	94.10
Batman Forever (Middle of 1994)	713.60	87% (1993)	6.1%	28% (1994)	91.20
Batman & Robin (September, 1996)	636.60	71% (1996)	5.2%	17% (1996)	94.70
Low-Threat Average	**552.70**	**81%**	**5.13%**	**25%**	**93.33**
High Threat					
Batman Returns (September, 1991)	758.20	84% (1990)	6.9%	74% (1990)	83.00
Mask of the Phantasm (January, 1993)	747.10	87% (1993)	7.3%	72% (1992)	89.30
Batman Begins (March, 2004)	463.20	53% (2004)	5.8%	45% (2004)	95.80
The Dark Knight (December, 2006)	479.30	68% (2006)	4.4%	45% (2006)	91.70
The Dark Knight Rises (May 11, 2011)	387.10	68% (2011)	9.0%	54% (2010)	74.30
High-Threat Average	**566.98**	**72%**	**6.68%**	**58%**	**86.82**

The dates are for when shooting for each film began. Violent crime rates comes from the Federal Bureau of Investigation's Uniform Crime Reporting Program, perceptions of crime are from the Sourcebook on Criminal Justice Statistics (asked by Gallup), unemployment comes from the Bureau of Labor Statistics (for the date/year that shooting began), and perceptions of the economy getting worse come from the ANES. The Consumer Sentiment Index comes from the University of Michigan.

U.S. cities, buildings, or national landmarks between now and the November election" (para. 8). An *Associated Press/AOL* poll released December 22, 2006—during the start of filming for *The Dark Knight*—found that 60% of respondents thought that it was somewhat or very likely that the United States would experience a terrorist attack in 2007. Finally, a *CBS News/New York Times* poll released May 4, 2011—the month during which filming began for *The Dark Knight Rises*—found that 69% of Americans thought that it was somewhat or very likely that there would be an act of terrorism in the United States within a few months. On top of these concerns about terrorism, the United States was also involved in wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. Taken together, these findings support the validity of this threat typology.

To better understand the relationship between more threatening periods and representations of law and order, this study uses a qualitative content analysis of authoritarian themes in Batman films. The coding

of each film was derived from the literature on authoritarianism, as well as using the same type of open-coded, qualitative content analysis found in other studies on crime, law, and order in mass media (Adkinson, 2008; Kort-Butler, 2012, 2013; Phillips & Strobl, 2006). Qualitative coding is a reiterative process (Altheide, 1996; Saldaña, 2013), and the themes analyzed in this study were refined with additional viewings.

This coding was aided by three broad categories drawn from research on authoritarianism. One of the themes I coded for was *Fear and Need for Order*. When coding for this theme, I looked for representations of social instability, demagoguery, crime, and a lack of morality in society, all of which Altemeyer (2006) links to authoritarianism. Attention was also paid to the overall aesthetic and mood of the film, such as whether it was suspenseful, serious, and shot in dark lighting.

The second authoritarian theme that was coded for was *Authoritarian Submission*. Peterson and Gerstein (2005) operationalized authoritarian submission as comic book panels that demonstrated "greater respect for national authority by avoiding storylines where the integrity of government representatives was questioned" (p. 890). In addition to including such officials (e.g., the military, politicians), the current study expanded this measurement by also accounting for representations of members of the criminal justice system (e.g., police, lawyers, and judges). In general, coding of this category focused on the extent to which authority figures were moral, trustworthy, effective, and/or helpful to Batman.

The final theme of authoritarianism that was coded for was *Authoritarian Aggression*. As noted earlier, authoritarian aggression is associated with support for capital punishment (Stack, 2003) and restricting civil liberties (Hetherington & Suhay, 2011). This coding looked at the methods employed by the protagonists (e.g., Batman, Robin, Commissioner Gordon) to pursue justice, with special attention paid to their violence, legality, efficacy, and perceived legitimacy. Subsequent viewings of the films centered on if characters were conflicted over being aggressive, if their aggression was questioned by others, or if such aggression was treated instead in a more cartoonish fashion like Gerbner's (2012) "happy violence," where violence is "cool, swift, and painless, and always leads to a happy ending" (p. 240).

Results

Fear and Need for Order

Batman films released during high-threat periods tend to exhibit underlying anxiety about flawed publics that are prone to being manipulated by villains. In *Batman Returns* (1992), Oswald Cobblepot (also known as the criminal "the Penguin") boasts about his demagogic abilities, saying, "I play this stinking city like a harp from hell." The public is also shown to be easily manipulated when the villainous industrialist Max Shreck is able to captivate a crowd with a clichéd, seemingly insincere speech about "world peace and unconditional love wrapped in a big bow." The specter of the mob turns up when Batman is attacked by a group of citizens who think that he murdered the Ice Princess, as well as when the Penguin is pelted with fruit when his deceit of the public is exposed by Batman.

The fear of social immorality, disorder, and manipulative villains is also present in the high-threat period post-9/11 films. According to Bruce Wayne in *Batman Begins* (2005), Gotham is consumed by "apathy" and run by "the criminals and the corrupt." The villain Ra's al Ghul agrees, stating, that Gotham has reached "the pinnacle of its decadence." Ra's al Ghul disperses a fear-inducing hallucinogenic gas so that he can "watch Gotham tear itself apart through fear." The mob-like quality of the Gotham public is further emphasized when a group of citizens (hallucinating that Batman is a monster) begin to swarm and brutally attack Batman. Authoritarianism's fear of disorder is also embodied by the Joker in *The Dark Knight* (2008), who views himself as "an agent of chaos" and argues, "When the chips are down...these civilized people—they'll eat each other." To prove his point, the Joker successfully gets citizens to attempt to kill an innocent man in order to prevent a hospital from being detonated.

Social disorder and demagoguery take on a decidedly class-based antagonism in *The Dark Knight Rises* (2012). For example, when an investor says to the villain Bane, "This is a stock exchange. There's no money you can steal," Bane caustically replies, "Really? Then why are you people here?" Later, when Bane seizes control of Gotham, he exclaims, "We take Gotham from the corrupt! The rich! The oppressors of generations who have kept you down with myths of opportunity. And we give it back to you...the people." Selina Kyle (Catwoman) also adds to the class warfare rhetoric, warning Bruce Wayne, "You're all going to wonder how you ever thought you could live so large, and leave so little for the rest for us." Thus, as with *Batman Returns* (1992), *Batman Begins* (2005), and *The Dark Knight* (2008), *The Dark Knight Rises* (2012) features the villain(s) largely succeeding in manipulating the public.

Despite the darkness, there are also moments of humor in the high-threat period films. There is comic relief when a passerby sees the Batmobile and says, "Nice ride" in *Batman Begins* (2005). Also in *Batman Begins*, Wayne gives his expensive coat to a homeless man, and later tells the man (as Batman), "Nice coat." In *The Dark Knight* (2008), there is a comical moment when Batman surprises Commissioner Gordon by quietly exiting during the middle of their conversation. In *Batman: Mask of the Phantasm* (1993), the Joker pats a female robot in an abandoned amusement park and asks, "What do you say, hon? Feeling the old electricity tonight?" However, these scenes are the exception rather than the rule, and they generally avoid undercutting or displacing the overall seriousness and darkness of the films.

As expected, the Batman movies released during low-threat periods feature less pronounced themes of *Fear and Need for Order*. The suspense and dark atmosphere of the high-threat period films are replaced in the low-threat films with comedy and brightly lit sets. The humor in these films actively undercut any

real sense of danger, almost as if to reassure audiences that nothing too scary will occur. For example, in *Batman: The Movie* (1966), Batman is trying to dispose of a large lit bomb. However, this potentially tense episode is instead played solely for laughs, with Batman having to avoid a mother and baby, a marching band, and a raft of paddling ducks ("Some days you just can't get rid of a bomb."). In *Batman & Robin* (1997), the seriousness of Gotham and its residents being turned into ice by Mr. Freeze is undercut because the film turns the sequence into a gag by focusing on a dog turning into ice while urinating on a fire hydrant. The displacement of potential suspense is also seen in the film when Poison Ivy's control over Batman and Robin through love pheromones is reduced to a silly dating bidding war between the two heroes, with the punchline being the use of Batman's credit card ("Never leave the cave without it."). *Batman Forever* (1995) comes closer to tapping into the type of fear associated with the high-threat period films with the Riddler's "Box" (a three-dimensional television that displays audiences' desires), which exploits society's hedonism and drains its intelligence. However, in this film, society is turned into listless, dim-witted couch potatoes, rather than an angry, violent mob. Overall, the low-threat period films generally lack the rampant crime, public unrest, and manipulative demagogues that characterize the high-threat period films.

The main outlier of the low-threat period films regarding *Fear and Need for Order* is Burton's *Batman* (1989). In this film, Batman contends with scrutiny from the public (many people think that he is "as dangerous as the Joker") and the press ("And all of Gotham is wondering what to make of Batman. Friend or foe?"). Later in the film, the Joker preys on the public's rampant materialism when he promises to disperse 20 million dollars during a street parade. During the parade, we see citizens jaywalking and greedily pawing at the money being tossed into the streets (a journalist captions the scene, "Gotham's Greed"). The crowd of people fawn over the Joker, laughing at the Joker's insults of Batman and enthusiastically screaming "You!" when he asks, "Who do you trust?" Moments later, the public is punished for its poor judgment when the Joker unleashes a deadly gas on the crowd. Also, although the film uses humor, it is often morbid and paired with violence, and thus feels much less cartoonish and light-hearted than the other low-threat period films. For example, the Joker sings, "Oh there'll be a hot time, in the old town tonight" as he electrocutes a man to death with a joy buzzer, declares, "The pen is truly mightier than the sword" after killing a man with a quill pen, and puts on glasses when pleading with Batman (to no avail) to not kill him ("You wouldn't

hit a guy with glasses on, would you?"). Taken together, H1 is supported, as the high-threat period Batman films did exhibit greater fear about social disorder and danger than the low-threat period Batman films.

Authoritarian Submission

Although many high-threat period Batman films share an authoritarian obsession with social order, this was not necessarily coupled with authoritarian submission. Indeed, many of the films released during high-threat periods were sharply critical of the police and law enforcement. In *Batman Returns* (1992), Catwoman contemptuously disposes of two security guards too awe-struck to arrest her ("Always confusing your pistols with your privates."). In *The Dark Knight* (2008), Batman tells Commissioner Gordon that he needs more time to conduct forensics before the police "contaminate" the crime scene. *The Dark Knight* also shows a cop willing to murder an innocent man in order to prevent a hospital from being blown up by the Joker (the cop's wife was currently hospitalized), a prison guard showing disregard for a prisoner in physical pain, a detective attempting to beat up a handcuffed, seemingly defenseless Joker in prison, and the Gotham SWAT team nearly inadvertently killing hostages disguised as criminals. In *The Dark Knight Rises* (2012), Detective Foley consistently makes erroneous decisions, such as mistaking a robbery for a hostage crisis, ignoring evidence of a sewer-dwelling army, and accidentally leading the entire Gotham City Police force into a trap. The film also provides a cynical view of political leaders, as Commissioner Gordon says that the President's vow to stand alongside Gotham during a time of crisis ("People of Gotham, we have not abandoned you.") actually "means we are on our own."

In addition to ineptitude, the high-threat period films feature depictions of corruption in the legal system. In *Batman Returns* (1992), the anti-hero Catwoman says that it would be "naïve" to hand over wealthy industrialist Max Shreck to the authorities, saying, "The law doesn't apply to people like him…." Police corruption is a big theme in *Batman Begins* (2005), with the mob controlling police officers and judges (as well as unions and the mayor), and the villain Ra's al Ghul claiming, "[Gotham is] so corrupt we have infiltrated every level of its infrastructure." Even Bruce Wayne calls Gotham's legal system "broken." Corruption is also a problem in *The Dark Knight* (2008), where there is constant unease on whether the cops can be trusted, and District Attorney Harvey Dent is ultimately kidnapped by police officers.

Even when not corrupt, many of the authority figures in high-threat period films tend to be dismissive or hostile toward Batman. In *Batman Begins* (2005), the police commissioner refers to Batman as "some asshole in a costume," and it is suggested that the police dislike Batman because they are "jealous" of his effectiveness. At the beginning of *The Dark Knight* (2008)*,* Commissioner Gordon says, "Official policy is to arrest the vigilante known as Batman on sight." *The Dark Knight* further separates Batman from the legal system by having the Joker tell Batman, "Don't talk like one of them. You're not. Even if you'd like to be. To them, you're just a freak— like me." This antagonism towards Batman in high-threat period films is highlighted by the fact that all five of these films show the police trying to arrest Batman, and police deliberately open fire and wound Batman in *Batman Returns* (1992) and the animated *Batman: Mask of the Phantasm* (1993). Batman is also forced to physically attack the Gotham SWAT team in order to protect hostages in *The Dark Knight* (2008).

It is worth noting that *The Dark Knight Rises* (2012) is somewhat of an outlier among the high-threat period films in that it also provides positive depictions of authorities. One of the main protagonists is a cop (Robin Blake) who goes on to become Batman's heir apparent. Moreover, the film features a climactic, heroic battle featuring the Gotham police force fighting alongside Batman (thus linking Batman closely with the police). The film also grants a heroic death scene to Detective Foley, which helps to redeem some of the mistakes this character made earlier.

Although the focus of this section is on representations of the legal system, depictions of other authority figures also deserve mention. Many the Batman films critique political actors, particularly in the high-threat period films. *Batman Returns* (1992) shows the villain Oswald Cobblepot (the Penguin) instructing his gang to terrorize Gotham so that he can wage a cynical, tough-on-crime political campaign to become mayor ("Oswald Means Order"), which the film explicitly likens to the Reichstag Fire. In *Batman Begins* (2005), Batman's ally Lucius Fox says that the American military decided against equipping its soldiers with a type of body armor (the kind favored by Batman), claiming, "Bean counters didn't think a soldier's life was worth 300 grand." *Batman Begins* also suggests that the American military illegally developed a weapon designed to release chemicals into the air (which is later used against Gotham by a villain). In *Batman: Mask of the Phantasm* (1993), Councilman Arthur Reeves (who received payments from the mob earlier in his life) demands that Batman be arrested. In *The Dark Knight Rises* (2012), the mayor contemptuously refers to Batman as "a murderous thug."

Again, we see important differences when we look at authoritarian submission in the low-threat period films. Contrary to Peterson and Gerstein (2005), these Batman films actually exhibit *more* authoritarian submission. For example, *Batman: The Movie* (1966) opens with the following written statement: "WE WISH TO EXPRESS OUR GRATITUDE TO THE ENEMIES OF CRIME AND CRUSADERS AGAINST CRIME." The warm relationship between the police and Batman (and his sidekick Robin) is evident throughout the film, with police officers respectfully removing their hats when they see Batman, Commissioner Gordon pointing out that Batman and Robin are "fully deputized agents of the law," and Robin telling the press, "Support your police. That's our message." *Batman Forever* (1995) and *Batman & Robin* (1997) also show Batman working openly with Commissioner Gordon, rather than having to operate as a fugitive like in the high-threat period films.

The critiques of authority figures tend to be decidedly more light-hearted, sporadic, and fleeting in the Batman films released during low-threat periods. In *Batman: The Movie* (1966), an admiral accidentally sells a submarine to the Penguin, which is played for laughs when he is lightly scolded by Batman. Similarly, the film depicts the United World (an obvious reference to the United Nations) as being completely ineffective, but the scenes feel more like a joke than a biting critique. In *Batman Forever* (1995), the villain Two-Face declares, "Babies starve, politicians grow fat, holy men are martyred, and junkies grow legion. Why? ... Blind, stupid ... luck!" However, this criticism does not resurface in the film, and only seems to be there in order to provide an explanation for Two-Face's gimmick of having to flip a coin to make decisions. *Batman & Robin* also shows a brief shot of the "Un-United Nations" (a group of mysterious evil countries), which includes a highly decorated American military official. However, as with the criticism of elites in *Batman Forever* (1995), this is never mentioned again, and thus plays more as a visual gag than a substantive critique. In general, the criticisms of authority found in these films are neither sustained nor substantial, and they usually serve as sources of humor, rather than important plot points.

Burton's *Batman* (1989) is again the outlier among the low-threat period films. In this film, Jack Napier (who later becomes the villain the Joker) shrugs off District Attorney Harvey Dent's threat of cracking down on crime, saying, "If this clown could touch [crime boss] Grissom, I'd have handed him his lungs by now." The police force is also shown as being clueless, with District Attorney Harvey Dent responding to a question about Batman as being the stuff of "ghosts and goblins." Like the high-threat

period films, *Batman* also shows the police attempting to arrest Batman, as well as a corrupt Lieutenant Max Eckhardt receiving cash bribes from crime boss Carl Grissom. Political officials are also shown as being inept, such as when Mayor Borg insists on spending lavishly on a parade for the city's 200th anniversary, only to have District Attorney Harvey Dent note that, "We may be celebrating in bankruptcy court. This festival is $250,000 in the red and we haven't seen one balloon."

Some of the Batman films also critique economic elites. *Batman Returns* (1992) features the villainous businessman Max Shreck, whom the film repeatedly suggests has more *de facto* power in Gotham than the mayor, and who is bent on selling Gotham a defective power plant. In *Batman Begins* (2005), CEO William Earle controversially steers Wayne Enterprises into military technology (a board member mentions, "I don't think Thomas Wayne would have viewed heavy-arms manufacture as a suitable cornerstone for our business."), and later tries to keep Bruce Wayne out of running his father's business. In *The Dark Knight* (2008), Lau is a Chinese CEO that works with the mob. In *The Dark Knight Rises* (2012), construction company owner John Daggett works with the mercenary and terrorist Bane.

Although not the focus of this analysis, Bruce Wayne is also an economic elite. Overall, Wayne's wealthy status seems to be critiqued more in the high-threat films. Wayne's persona can be indirectly seen as a critique of wealthy elites, as he deliberately tries to appear to be a vain, wealthy playboy in order to mask his serious crime-fighting activities. For example, in *Batman Begins* (2005), Wayne's butler Alfred suggests that Wayne can better disguise his secret identity by acting like a rich person, saying, "Drive sports cars, date movie stars, buy things that are not for sale." In *The Dark Knight Rises* (2012), a journalist mocks an injured Bruce Wayne (although he did not realize it was Wayne) exiting an expensive car, saying, "Another stiff that can barely climb out of his sports car." In *Batman Returns* (1992), the villain Max Shreck mocks Wayne for his privileged background. This type of critique is also seen in the low-threat period film *Batman* (1989), when the reporter Alexander Knox claims that rich people like Bruce Wayne are "odd" because they "can afford to be," and calls Bruce Wayne "Bruce Vain" after seeing that he owns a large mirror. On the other hand, Wayne is also shown to be a responsible owner prohibiting the manufacture of unethical products (*Batman Forever*) and providing valuable services through Wayne Enterprises (*Batman & Robin*), and the Wayne family is shown engaging in valuable philanthropic acts (e.g., *Batman*, *Batman & Robin*, *Batman Begins*, *The Dark Knight Rises*). However, Wayne's orphan-status,

obsession with crime-fighting, solitary nature, and indifference towards fame and materialism all work to position him as an outlier among the wealthy class. In terms of the research question, high-threat period Batman films consistently depict authority figures more negatively than low-threat period Batman films, particularly political representatives and law enforcement.

Authoritarian Aggression

Batman films released during high-threat periods tend to focus more on themes of authoritarian aggression, even if they ultimately advocate against aggressive action. A few films focus on the darker impulses crime fighters must resist. In the animated *Batman: Mask of the Phantasm* (1993), Wayne's former fiancé suggests to him that his quest as Batman is motivated in part out of a desire for vengeance. Similarly in the film, Wayne's butler Alfred says, "Vengeance blackens the soul, Bruce. I always feared you would become that which you fought against." *Batman Begins* (2005) shows Bruce Wayne attempting to shoot his parents' murderer (Joe Chill) during a parole hearing. However, Wayne later heeds the advice of his butler Alfred, who warns, "It can't be personal, or you're just a vigilante."

The low-threat period film *Batman Forever* (1995) also focuses on the theme of vigilante revenge and thus is an outlier among the low-threat period films. In this film, Dick Grayson (Batman's future sidekick, Robin) wants to avenge the murder of his own family by killing the villain Two-Face. However, Wayne—obviously having experienced the same demons—warns Grayson that murder will only increase Grayson's pain and lead him down a dangerous path. Ultimately, Grayson follows Batman's lead, attempting to arrest Two-Face rather than kill him.

Some of the high-threat period Batman films also show that following the law can become an obstacle to obtaining justice. Batman is able to intimidate a corrupt cop by threatening to drop him off a building in *Batman Begins* (2005). Also in the film, a citizen criticizes Batman by saying, "You can't take the law into your own hands," but is countered by another that says, "Well, at least he's getting something done." The idea that one may need to break the law for a higher good is also seen in *The Dark Knight* (2008) when a mobster refuses to be intimated by Batman and betray the Joker (despite the fact that Batman deliberately dropped him from a building, resulting in broken bones) because he knows about Batman's code against killing ("You got rules. The Joker, he's got no rules."). Still, Batman is willing to push some rules in the film, savagely beating up the Joker while in custody during an interrogation and using surveillance technology to

spy on all of Gotham in order to capture the Joker (which his assistant Lucius Fox calls "unethical"). Aware of the danger of this technology, Batman has Fox destroy it once the Joker has been captured.

The need to work outside the law to get justice is also expressed in *The Dark Knight Rises* (2012), where Commissioner Gordon argues that sometimes "rules aren't weapons anymore. They're shackles, letting the bad guy get ahead." This is why Gotham needs people like Batman, who can "plunge their hands into the filth, so that you can keep yours clean." *The Dark Knight* also shows Batman forbidding Catwoman to kill criminals ("No guns. No killing"), but Batman is later saved when Catwoman shoots Bane ("About the whole no guns thing. I'm not sure I feel as strongly about it as you do."). Although these exchanges between Batman and Catwoman are largely played for humor, they do underscore Gordon's comment about rules being "shackles." It is perhaps telling that this focus on rules, surveillance, and interrogation occurs most in the post-9/11 films.

The low-threat period films feature aggression towards criminals, but the films do not dwell on the implications of this violence. The fight scenes in *Batman: The Movie* are meant to feel cartoonish and are captioned with words like "BAP" and "KAPOW." Batman not only deliberately kills several criminals in *Batman* (1989), but he also deliberately and matter-of-factly kills the Joker ("I'm going to kill you"), whom in this film is portrayed as having killed Bruce Wayne's parents. *Batman & Robin* (1997) also undermines the seriousness of violence by playing Three Stooges-style sound effects when Mr. Freeze throws police officers into a column.

It is worth noting that the high-threat period film *Batman Returns* (1992) also downplays the implications of aggression. Like *Batman* (1989), *Batman Returns* is directed by Tim Burton, and the film shows Batman deliberately killing criminals. In *Batman Returns* (1992), Batman deliberately kills at least one criminal while fighting, and the sympathetic anti-hero Catwoman deliberately kills Max Shreck because he had earlier tried to kill her. However, there is an absence of satisfaction, remorse, or introspection from Batman or Catwoman leading up to and following the killings, and audiences are not really encouraged to think about the legal or moral implications of these killings. Like the other low-threat period films, the violence in *Batman Returns* largely resembles Gerbner's (2012) "happy violence." Despite the low-threat period outlier *Batman Forever* (1995) and the high-threat period outlier *Batman Returns* (1992), the high-threat period films do in fact meditate more on the benefits and consequences of aggression, which supports H2.

Putting the Batman Film Franchise in Perspective

To better understand the overall differences between the films across periods of threat, I coded for the presence/absence of "Fear and Need for Order," "Corrupt Political or Criminal Justice System Authority Figures" (Authoritarian Submission—reverse-coded), "Police Attempt to Arrest Batman" (Authoritarian Submission—reverse-coded), and "Protagonist Torn Over Breaking Laws" (Authoritarian Aggression). Only one low-threat period film (*Batman*) of the four (25%) featured "Fear and Need for Order," "Corrupt Political or Criminal Justice System Authority Figures," or "Police Attempt to Arrest Batman." Only one low-threat period film (*Batman Forever*) of the four (25%) showed "Protagonist Torn Over Breaking Laws." In contrast, all of the high-threat period films exhibited "Fear and Need for Order." Three high-threat period films (*Batman: Mask of the Phantasm*, *Batman Begins*, *The Dark Knight*) out of the five (60%) featured a corrupt political or criminal justice system authority figure. All of the high-threat period films also show the police trying to arrest Batman. Finally, four of the five (80%) high-threat period films show Batman, Robin, or Commissioner Gordon being tempted to break laws (*Batman Returns* is the exception). If we look at the entire franchise, we can see that six of the films contained "Fear and Need for Order" (67%), three of the films contained "Corrupt Political or Criminal Justice System Authority Figures" (44%), six of the films contained "Police Attempt to Arrest Batman" (67%), and five of the films contained "Protagonist Torn Over Breaking Laws" (56%). The results are presented in Table 2.

Table 2: Authoritarian Themes in Batman Films Across Periods of Threat

	Fear and Need for Order	Corrupt Political or Criminal Justice System Authority Figures	Police Attempt to Arrest Batman	Protagonist Torn Over Breaking Law
Low-Threat Period Film				
Batman: The Movie				
Batman	X	X	X	
Batman Forever				X
Batman & Robin				
Low Threat Total	25%	25%	25%	25%
High-Threat Period Film				
Batman Returns	X		X	
Mask of the Phantasm	X	X	X	X
Batman Begins	X	X	X	X
The Dark Knight	X	X	X	X
The Dark Knight Rises	X		X	X
High-Threat Period Total	100%	60%	100%	80%
All Films Total	67%	44%	67%	56%

One way to assess the impact that Batman films had on audiences at the time of their release is to evaluate their commercial performance at the American box office. This approach can be useful in letting us see if films with certain types of messages about crime, law, and order were more commercially successful than others. The American gross box office receipts for *Batman: The Movie* come from the imdb.com, while the American gross box office receipts for the other films come from the-numbers.com. I use usinflationcalculator.com to adjust these figures for inflation in 2015 dollars. The five highest grossing films were *The Dark Knight* ($589,433,780.34), *Batman* ($477,756,672.77), *The Dark Knight Rises* ($464,439,218.41), *Batman Forever* ($287,279,404.64), and *Batman Returns* ($276,161,434.64). With the exception of *Batman Forever*, these are dark films filled with officials who are often antagonistic toward Batman or corrupt. Many of these films (except *Batman* and *Batman Returns*) also show the main protagonists torn about breaking the law in order to pursue justice. In short, many of the best-selling Batman films show both authoritarian fears about social disorder, some sympathy (even if ultimately rejected) towards authoritarian aggression, and critical depictions of officials and the criminal justice system. Overall, the high-threat period films also had higher gross box office receipts ($317,893,272.95) than the low-threat period films ($236,538,781.33). The results are in Table 3.

Conclusion

This study has important implications for research on representations of law, order, and authority, and it challenges some earlier findings on mediated images of crime and authoritarianism. As we have seen, many high-threat period Batman films depict police and the legal system in a very negative light, showing them as often being dysfunctional, corrupt, and antagonistic towards Batman. Indeed, 67% of all the Batman films show the police trying to arrest Batman. These representations of the police and legal system challenge earlier characterizations of how media often depict the legal system (Nichols-Pethick, 2012) but do largely support other work on superhero comics (Phillips & Strobl, 2006, 2013) and television shows (Kort-Butler, 2013). The fact that high-threat period films are *more* critical of authority figures and position Batman as an outsider who endures attacks from police and politicians (as well as the public) contradicts Peterson and Gerstein's (2005) finding on authoritarian submission. This difference may stem from my study's more expanded conceptualization of "authority" to include non-governmental officials, the

Table 3: United States Gross Box Office Receipts of Batman Films Across Periods of Threat

	Box Office Receipts
Low-Threat Period Film and Year of Release	
Batman: The Movie (1966)	$22,031,944.44
Batman (1989)	$477,756,672.77
Batman Forever (1995)	$287,279,404.64
Batman & Robin (1997)	$159,087,103.46
Low-Threat Period Film Average	**$236,538,781.33**
High-Threat Period Film and Year of Release	
Batman Returns (1992)	$276,161,434.64
Mask of the Phantasm (1993)	$9,250,035.30
Batman Begins (2005)	$250,181,896.08
The Dark Knight (2008)	$589,433,780.34
The Dark Knight Rises (2012)	$464,439,218.41
High-Threat Period Film Average	**$317,893,272.95**
Overall Film Average	**$281,735,721.12**

The gross box office receipts for *Batman: The Movie* come from imdb.com, while the gross box office receipts for the other Batman films come from the-numbers.com. The box office receipts were adjusted for inflation (in 2015 dollars) using usinflationcalculator.com.

use of a DC comic book superhero, and/or the use of film. While somewhat surprising, this finding is supported by research that shows that people tend to be more cynical toward authority during high-threat periods (Doty et al., 1991).

Another important finding from this study is that Batman films feature a complex blend of authoritarian themes. In general, Batman films released during high-threat periods tend to exude anxiety about chaos, a disorderly mass public, demagogic villains, and corrupt and misguided authority figures. At the same time, many of the high-threat period films depicted the protagonists as being conflicted about the use of aggressive tactics or being motivated by revenge rather than justice. Much as the 1970s Batman comics turned to the tumultuous 1930s and 1940s Batman comics for inspiration, many of the high-threat period films draw upon the darker Batman comics of the 1970s and 1980s, such as *The Killing Joke* (Moore & Bolland, 2008) and *The Dark Knight Returns* (Miller, Janson, & Varley, 1996). Conversely, films outside

these periods tend to be comedic, campy, and cartoonish. Taken together, these findings support earlier research on authoritarianism in mass media.

A few limitations of this study must be addressed. This study only looks at images of crime and authoritarian themes in Batman films. More research is necessary to see if similar patterns apply to other superheroes (such as less vigilante-themed heroes) and genres. Another limitation is that to some extent this content can be explained through a more director-based perspective. The two Burton films not only share many similarities (such as being the only films where Batman deliberately kills), but also feature the same gothic qualities associated with many Burton films. The two Schumacher films harken back to the comical, light-hearted Batman of the 1960s, while Nolan's films are marked by their relative realism and darkness. From this perspective, we can see directors playing an important role in shaping the tone of a film. However, directors do not exist in a vacuum, and they (as well as their script writers and film studios) may to

some degree reflect or at least attempt to accommodate prevailing cultural concerns (such as a preoccupation with crime and inept authorities) when creating a film. A final limitation is that typologies are never perfect, and some may argue about classifying years into different periods of threat.

One important implication from this research is that the concept of authoritarianism—with its emphasis on fear, authority, conformity, and punishment—can be useful to research in sociology and criminology. More specifically, the findings from this study find that cinematic representations of crime, law, and order in the superhero genre appear to correspond in part to changing levels of threat over time. This is not to say that levels of threat in society mechanically drive depictions in media, reducing scriptwriters, directors, media companies, and audiences into mere puppets. Instead, the general argument presented here is that perceived levels of threat seem to provide a type of environment that tends to favor the growth, development, and success of certain ideas (and media texts) over others. A number of the Batman films seem to tap into anxieties and frustrations existing in American culture about crime, the economy, and terrorism (and the inability of authorities to address them). In contrast, Batman films made during low-threat periods do not have the same reservoir of fear and anger to draw upon. As a result, the image of a brooding crime-fighter in a dangerous world is viewed more as an absurdity ripe for satire and campy portrayals. Camp's shelf life seems contingent on these happier times, as camp is just not as funny when the world is full of riots and war (Morrison, 2012, p. 334).

Despite a general scholarly consensus on how mass media depict crime, law, and order, this study finds important variations on how these topics are treated, particularly across different periods of threat. Scholars should build upon these findings by looking at how mediated depictions and public discourses on crime respond to different levels of threat in society and to what extent they tap into authoritarian themes. The increased success and ubiquity of the superhero genre across media (e.g., film, television, and digital comics) suggests a cultural preoccupation with larger-than-life heroes saving society from powerful villains, underscoring the importance of understanding their messages and how they affect audiences. It is also worth noting that DC Comics and Marvel have created self-contained, consistent universes on television and film, with different storylines and characters existing within and across films. For example, in *Iron Man 3*, Tony Stark's post-traumatic stress disorder is tied to his experiences in *The Avengers* movie. Scholars should be sensitive to how these films and television shows work together collectively, rather than simply viewing each film/television show as an isolated data point.

More broadly, this study suggests that a critical analysis of media texts can help us gain a new understanding about cultural values, public attitudes, and prevailing discourses. Mass media can both reflect and affect the public's attitudes about crime, law, and order (Cavender, 2004) and help reproduce and facilitate the rhetoric and policy goals of political elites (Jeffords, 1994; Kellner, 1995, 2010). For example, Phillips and Strobl (2013) argue that the Bush administration's rhetoric on terrorism was successful in part because it drew upon "sentiments and symbols of tough-talking Americanisms already embedded in popular consciousness through a variety of media, including comic books" (p. 219). Based on this study, threatening times are linked with cultural concerns (and media texts) about crime and chaos, corrupt and inept politicians, judges, and police, the need for strong (and arguably rogue) leaders to aggressively combat danger, and concern that it be done morally as well as effectively.

Returning to the Joker's "Why so serious" question, we see that Batman has not always been so serious, and has even made jokes at his own expense. Right now, American audiences seem to want to watch movies in which gritty superheroes restore order, justice, and hope to imperiled societies. The resurgence of the campy superhero and waning of interest in superheroes will likely come again, but at this point, Americans may be too concerned about crime, terrorist attacks, and financial crises to begin laughing at such symbols of law, order, and justice. For now, it seems that audiences want Batman (and other superheroes) to protect them, not make them laugh. If history is any indication, we will need to wait until better times before the Dark Knight can lighten up again.

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