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PAST SHOCK

“The Dark Knight” and “WALL-E.”

by David Denby

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Heath Ledger and Christian Bale in Christopher Nolan's new Batman movie.

In the new Batman film, “The Dark Knight,” many things go boom. Cars explode, jails and hospitals are blown up, bombs are put in people’s mouths and sewn into their stomachs. There’s a chase scene in which cars pile up and climb over other cars, and a truck gets lassoed by Batman (his one neat trick) and tumbles through the air like a diver doing a back flip. Men crash through windows of glass-walled office buildings, and there are many fights that employ the devastating martial-arts system known as the Keysi Fighting Method. Christian Bale, who plays Bruce Wayne (and Batman), spent months training under the masters of the ferocious and delicate K.F.M. Unfortunately, I can’t tell you a thing about it, because the combat is photographed close up, in semidarkness, and cut at the speed of a fifteen-second commercial. Instead of enjoying the formalized beauty of a fighting discipline, we see a lot of flailing movement and bodies hitting the floor like grain sacks. All this ruckus is accompanied by pounding thuds on the soundtrack, with two veteran Hollywood composers (Hans Zimmer and James Newton Howard) providing additional bass-heavy stomps in every scene, even when nothing is going on. At times, the movie sounds like two excited mattresses making love in an echo chamber. In brief, Warner Bros. has continued to drain the poetry, fantasy, and comedy out of Tim Burton’s original conception for “Batman” (1989), completing the job of coarsening the material into hyperviolent summer action spectacle. Yet “The Dark Knight” is hardly routine—it has a kinky sadism

in scene after scene, which keeps you on edge and sends you out onto the street with post-movie stress disorder. And it has one startling and artful element: the sinister and frightening performance of the late Heath Ledger as the psychopathic murderer the Joker. That part of the movie is upsetting to watch, and, in retrospect, both painful and stirring to think about.

“The Dark Knight,” which was directed by Christopher Nolan (who also made “Batman Begins”) and written by Nolan and his brother Jonathan, is devoted to perversity. Bruce Wayne, attempting to bring order to Gotham City, has instead provoked the thugs. The mob is running rampant, and they’ve infiltrated the police department. The Joker, who doesn’t care for money and wants only the power to sow chaos, intimidates everyone, including the gangsters. Wayne and the noble Lieutenant Jim Gordon (Gary Oldman) decide to get behind the new D.A., Harvey Dent (Aaron Eckhart), and set him up as Gotham’s crime-fighting hero. Batman even thinks of retiring. But the Joker won’t let him; he *needs* him, as someone to play with. An anarchist by philosophy, the Joker uses terrorist methods (bombs, bombs, bombs), and he has an enormous advantage over the principled Batman—he’s ruthless. So the Joker taunts and giggles, and Batman can only extend his wings.

It’s a workable dramatic conflict, but only half the team can act it. Christian Bale has been effective in some films, but he’s a placid Bruce Wayne, a swank gent in Armani suits, with every hair in place. He’s more urgent as Batman, but he delivers all his lines in a hoarse voice, with an unvarying inflection. It’s a dogged but uninteresting performance, upstaged by the great Ledger, who shambles and slides into a room, bending his knees and twisting his neck and suddenly surging into someone’s face like a deep-sea creature coming up for air. Ledger has a fright wig of ragged hair; thick, running gobs of white makeup; scarlet lips; and dark-shadowed eyes. He’s part freaky clown, part Alice Cooper the morning after, and all actor. He’s mesmerizing in every scene. His voice is not sludgy and slow, as it was in “Brokeback Mountain.” It’s a little higher and faster, but with odd, devastating pauses and saturnine shades of mockery. At times, I was reminded of Marlon Brando at his most feline and insinuating. When Ledger wields a knife, he is thoroughly terrifying (do not, despite the PG-13 rating, bring the children), and, as you’re watching him, you can’t help wondering—in a response that admittedly lies outside film criticism—how badly he messed himself up in order to play the role this way. His performance is a heroic, unsettling final act: this young actor looked into the abyss.

Parts of “The Dark Knight” were shot with IMAX cameras, and if you see the movie on one of those enormously tall screens you will feel, as Batman swoops down from a building at night, as if you were falling into a canyon. It’s a giddy thrill—bring Dramamine. The rest of the movie, photographed by Wally Pfister, is sharp and clear, with shots of Gotham (i.e., Chicago) in glistening night splendor, and plentiful use of vast modernist interiors with slab floors. Yet I can’t rate “The Dark Knight” as an outstanding piece of craftsmanship. “Batman Begins” was grim and methodical, and this movie is grim and jammed together. The narrative isn’t shaped coherently to bring out contrasts and build toward a satisfying climax. “The Dark Knight” is constant climax; it’s always in a frenzy, and it goes on forever. Nothing is prepared for, and people show up and disappear without explanation; characters are eliminated with a casual nod. There are episodes that are expensively meaningless (a Hong Kong vignette, for instance), while crucial scenes are truncated at their most interesting point—such as the moment in which the disfigured Joker confronts a newly disfigured Harvey Dent (a visual sick joke) and turns him into a vicious killer. The thunderous violence and the music jack the audience up. But all that screw-tightening tension isn’t necessarily fun. “The Dark Knight” has been made in a time of terror, but it’s not fighting terror; it’s embracing and unleashing it—while making sure, with proper calculation, to set up the next installment of the corporate franchise.

Watching Pixar’s animated film “WALL-E” must be a humbling experience for other filmmakers, because it demonstrates not just the number but the variety of ideas you need to make a terrific movie. “WALL-E,” which was directed by Andrew Stanton and written by Stanton and John Reardon, has the waggish adorableness and the tripping-and-falling roughhouse of other animated films. But it’s also a work of tragic nostalgia. In the ruins of a great American city, WALL-E, a robotic trash collector and compactor, continues to go about his duties after the human presence has been blown away by billowing waves of noxious dust. Accompanied only by a cockroach, WALL-E trolls among the detritus of the vanished culture; the junk items he finds become fetishes for him. He holds

on to plastic forks, hubcaps, and Zippo lighters, and throws away a diamond ring while keeping the felt box (he likes containers). He lives in a steel garbage dump that is at once home, arcade, archeological museum, and church. Among his collection lies not a recording of “Messiah” or of Beethoven’s Ninth but a tape of the 1969 musical “Hello, Dolly!,” a movie considered lumbering and out of date when it opened. And what he watches again and again is not the famous Louis Armstrong–Barbra Streisand duet but a wan little love song, “It Only Takes a Moment”—with skinny Michael Crawford holding Marianne McAndrew’s hand—and the routine dance production number “Put on Your Sunday Clothes.” When a spaceship shows up and leaves behind a female robot named EVE, he woos her with the determination of a man possessed by a lyrical impulse. A bad old movie keeps the human idea alive in two robots.

The ironies move toward satire when the two travel to EVE’s home, a space station called the Axiom, where, it turns out, the remaining humans have been living for seven hundred years in a totalitarian paradise run by a giant big-box-store company, Buy N Large. The visual invention is both excruciatingly funny and haunting. Back on earth, the disused skyscrapers look like Utah monuments worn away by time and weather. The interior of the Axiom is clean and bright, in a style that might be called cruise-liner moderne with a serious touch of food-court classicism. Consumer capitalism, having taken complete control of life, decorates in pinks and blues—a soothing milieu for humans who are too fat to move on their own and who travel in comfortably bedded little hovercrafts in which screens, constantly switched on, stand in front of their faces. The robots on the Axiom include a fussy, muttering little droid who scarfs up any contaminating substance (such as soil from Earth), and squadrons of square-shouldered helots who try to squash the slightest sign of free will. “WALL-E” blends two kinds of science fiction—the post-apocalyptic disaster scenario and the dystopian fantasy derived from Aldous Huxley’s “Brave New World,” in which people are controlled not by coercion but by pleasure. Apparently, the movie has caused annoyance in some quarters because it criticizes the American way of life. This it does, and with suavity and supreme good humor. “WALL-E” is a classic, but it will never appeal to people who are happy with art only when it has as little bite as possible. ♦

ILLUSTRATION: FRANK STOCKTON

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