ANNA WRÓBLEWSKA: WHO – OR WHAT – IS BATMAN? HAS HE BECOME A SYMBOL OR ARCHETYPE?
WILL BROOKER: Of course, there are many different valid answers to this question – whether we interpret it as asking about Batman as a fictional character, or a commercial property, a media franchise, a set of mythic narratives or a combination of all these and more.

AW: IT WOULD BE POSSIBLE TO SIMPLY DEFINE BATMAN LITERALLY IN TERMS OF A FEW KEY TRAITS, AS I DO IN BATMAN UNMASKED: HE IS BRUCE WAYNE (USUALLY), HE HAS NO SUPERPOWERS (USUALLY), HE IS VERY RICH AND FIGHTS CRIME USING TECHNOLOGY AND INTELLIGENCE, BECAUSE HIS PARENTS WERE KILLED WHEN HE IS YOUNG.
WB: But we could also answer ‘Batman is Christian Bale’, or ‘Batman is a solitary avenger’, ‘Batman is a camp, inherently ridiculous figure’, ‘Batman is a media property owned by Warner Bros and DC Comics’, ‘Batman is the lead character in an animated cartoon’ – and all these answers would also be true, in different ways.

That is, they would be partially true, but not give us the full complexity of Batman.

My own view, therefore, is that it is most useful to see Batman as a ‘mosaic’ – a cultural icon comprised of different facets, some of them contradictory. At different times, we see different sides of the same figure from different angles, and they reflect the society, institutions and the audiences of different historical periods.

Thus Batman is all of those things and has been all of those things over 74 years, but some of his meanings will be foregrounded more than others – made more visible – at each particular time, while other meanings are held back, contained or repressed.

AW: EACH AUTHOR OR DIRECTOR CHANGES BATMAN IN HIS OWN WAY AND EMPHASIZES DIFFERENT ASPECTS OF BATMAN’S PERSONALITY. MAYBE BATMAN HAS BECOME JUST A SYMBOL OF FIGHTING EVIL AND INJUSTICE? OR, MORE IMPORTANTLY – GOD OF REVENGE, SEEKING COMPENSATION FOR TRAUMATIC CHILDHOOD EXPERIENCES?
WB: I don’t think Batman has become ‘just’ anything. With every year that passes, more stories contribute to the overall, overarching myth and concept of ‘Batman’, and Batman becomes more complex rather than less. He does not become simpler with time: his multiplicity increases, he becomes more diverse.

Each new interpretation does not replace the last, but adds to the body of stories that already exists.

We could think of it as a kind of sketchbook: each new artist might try to erase the previous drawing of Batman, but in fact the traces still remain, so over time a portrait builds from many drawings. Some aspects – that he is an orphan – will be true in almost every depiction of the character, so we might see those as darker, firmer lines. Other aspects – that he has science fiction adventures – are invoked less frequently, so those are more like ghost outlines, only relevant to certain stories.

So, yes: Batman could be considered as an embodiment of revenge, but that is only one of his aspects. He could be considered as dedicated to reliving and exorcising his childhood experiences, but again, that would not be the whole picture.

AW: COULD BATMAN EXIST WITHOUT BRUCE WAYNE? NIGHTWING USED TO BE HIS REPLACEMENT AND EVERYTHING WORKED OUT. BUT HISTORY OF BATMAN, HIS ORIGIN, MOTIVATION, EVEN STYLE OF WORKING IS INSEPARABLY CONNECTED WITH BRUCE WAYNE. MAYBE BATMAN IS ONE OF BRUCE’S ASPECTS OF PERSONALITY, LIKE IT WAS PRESENTED IN MILLER’S THE DARK KNIGHT RETURNS?
WB: I personally think Batman could exist without Bruce Wayne, in more than one way.

Firstly, Batman could feasibly drop the ‘Bruce Wayne’ persona and simply
become Batman all the time, every hour of the day. He could abandon any pretence at a civil­lial life, and any illusion of being a playboy. He would just be a billionaire vigilante, without any ‘secret identity’.

Secondly, many stories have explored the idea that Batman will continue after the death of Bruce Wayne. Some depict a Batman of the far future – others simply show his son, or a young man from the next generation, taking on the role and responsibilities of the Batman.

Dick Grayson actually made a very good Batman, quite different to Bruce Wayne but entirely successful (both in his career, and as a character). In Nolan’s recent movie, we saw Robin John Blake inherit the role at the conclusion.

Obviously, Batman as we now know him has to have a great deal of money, technology and ability – but anyone who had trained under Bruce Wayne (so, anyone who had ever been Robin) would inherit the arsenal and the equipment, and would have the necessary skill level.

We might argue that Batman needs childhood trauma as motivation, but Dick Grayson also watched his parents murdered, for instance – it would not be impossible for a new Batman (a Batman who was not Bruce Wayne) to also have that kind of deep-seated urge for justice.

I see no real reason why someone like Barbara Gordon couldn’t become Batman in future. She has the skills, the motivation, the experience and the access to Wayne’s weaponry, technology and environment. She would be a different type of Batman; but then, there have already been many different types of Batman.

AW: WHAT IS SPECIAL ABOUT BATMAN IN COMPARISON WITH OTHER SUPERHEROES?

WB: He is a human being with no special abilities. He represents what humans can achieve if they push themselves with enough determination and commitment: he is a normal man, but he walks with gods (Superman, Wonder Woman, Flash, Green Lantern, Martian Manhunter) and they actually fear him.

We could suggest that he’s an Olympic-level athlete, one of the world’s best martial artists, a great detective and an inventor. We could suggest that his real ‘super power’ is his huge fortune.

But I like the interpretation that Batman’s real power is this: he thinks of everything, and he never, ever gives up.

Superheroes tend to become more complex and dark characters, they have been getting similar to Batman, who once used to be an exceptional character. Even Superman adaptation by Zack Snyder, judging by teasers, seems to be more realistic and moving.

Yes, I can’t say I am enthusiastic about this trend.

After the publication of Watchmen in 1986, a lot of comic book writers and artists tried to copy Alan Moore’s style by making superheroes ‘dark’ and ‘gritty’. Most of those attempts were shallow and empty, and they quickly became boring.

I think the trend towards ‘Nolanisation’ will also become tiresome very quickly. I don’t think we need every superhero to be soul-searching and grim, having deep emotional conversations with his father and losing his faith. The whole point about Batman is that he exists in a network with other, brighter, lighter superheroes. Batman is often dark and cynical, but in contrast to Superman’s optimism and idealism. If you make Superman dark and cynical too, you have lost that relationship and sense of distinction.

AW: WHY WAS BATMAN POPULAR IN THE 30s, WHEN A DIFFERENT TYPE OF HERO WAS PROMOTED? HE NEITHER FIT THE PATTERN OF A HEROIC AND PATRIOTIC HERO, NOR Fought FOR AMERICAN SOCIETY, LIKE SUPERMAN OR CAPTAIN AMERICA. DID ADULTS TAKE A STRONG LIKING TO HIM? OR DID READERS IN GENERAL NEED SOMETHING INNOVATIVE?

WB: This is more relevant to the 1940s, after the United States entered the war. It is true that Batman didn’t fit the usual model of patriotic military hero, and I’ve suggested in Batman Unmasked that he could have had a different appeal to readers during that period – that perhaps he carried a kind of nostalgic value.

While the world was at war, Batman’s stories were still very much in a 1930s style – gangsters, Gotham City, costumed criminals. Life went on in Gotham as it had during the previous decade – as if time had stopped sometime in 1933, around the time of the classic gangster movies.
I can imagine that young soldiers might have enjoyed reading adventures that had nothing at all to do with Hitler, Japan or the global conflict, but were still stuck in an old-fashioned, repetitive cycle that reminded them of home and confirmed that things were still going on as normal.

AW: WHAT IS BATMAN’S FUNCTION, WHAT MAKES HIM THE MOST LONG-LIVED URBAN LEGEND AND THE MOST COMPLEX SUPERHERO?
WB: I think what makes Batman long-lived is his complexity, and above all his adaptability as a character – the fact that he has changed with the times, varied with each new decade, travelled across multiple media and remained somehow relevant to each new generation.

Batman is a story, or myth, that resonated in 1939 and still seems contemporary and meaningful in 2012. Different aspects of the character and his story are brought to the front, and others are pushed to the back: in the 1960s, for instance, the camp aspect was foregrounded, whereas in 2008, Christopher Nolan highlighted Batman’s role as a containing, controlling force against the terrorist anarchy of Joker.

AW: A FEW VOICES APPEARED, THAT THE NEWEST BATMAN ADAPTATION PRESENTS CONSERVATIVE BELIEFS – THERE IS A BILLIONAIRE PHILANTHROPIST, WHO SACRIFICES HIMSELF AND SAVES THE CITY. DOES BATMAN REPRESENT SOME VERSION OF THE AMERICAN DREAM?
WB: I think Batman is, on one level, inherently conservative: he is a billionaire who is able to carry out his ‘war on crime’ because he is rich, and chooses to improve crime rates in the city (for the most part) not through supporting social change or by funding worthwhile projects, but by hitting petty criminals and pursuing a small group of costumed psychotic villains.

It is inherently conservative to ‘fight crime’ by beating up small-time thugs rather than asking what turned those working people to crime and what could be done to improve their situation – it is also inherently conservative that Batman essentially created his own villains and regularly locks them in an asylum from which they regularly escape.

Arkham Asylum is essentially a dark mirror of Wayne Manor for the villains, at the other side of the city. They check in one day, and check out the next, as if it was a hotel.

Batman does not want to change the city. He wants the status quo to stay as it is. He does not want to win the ‘war on crime’. He just wants to fight the ‘war on crime’, forever. So he is essentially preserving a system that benefits him, and disadvantages many other people.

In this light, Batman, in the real world, would be more like Donald Trump than Christian Bale.

AW: WHAT DO YOU THINK ABOUT THE ROLE OF WOMEN IN THE BATMAN UNIVERSE? BRUCE WAYNE TREATS WOMEN AS SEXUAL OBJECTS, ON THE OTHER HAND HARLEY QUINN, POISON IVY AND CATWOMAN ARE INDEPENDENT CHARACTERS AND SELF-ESTEEMED WOMEN. STILL, AREN’T THEY SOMETIMES LIMITED TO BEING SEXUAL OBJECTS?
WB: I think it is extremely disappointing. I don’t feel that the role of women in the Batman universe is particularly bad compared to the role of women in superhero comics more broadly, but I do feel the representations of women in Batman stories are extremely limited and weak.

It would be possible to see Catwoman, Ivy and Harley as independent, strong characters, but I think you are right – they
are constantly sexualised in a way that male characters are not.

The way Batgirl has been treated is particularly disappointing to me, and I think she is wasted character who could be written very differently.

AW: YOU HAVE EMPHASIZED MULTIPLE TIMES THAT BATMAN CREATES THE MOST INTENSE AND LONG-LASTING RELATIONSHIPS WITH MEN, E.G. ROBIN OR JOKER. WHY IS IT SO? WHAT ABOUT RELATIONSHIPS WITH TALIA AND HIS SON OR SELINA, WHOM BRUCE WAYNE MARRIED IN THE 50s? IS THIS STILL VALID AFTER THE RELEASE OF “THE DARK KNIGHT RISES”?

WB: It’s true that Batman’s relationship with Selina is important, but this is really the one significant relationship he has with a woman. I don’t regard Talia as a particularly important character, overall: she has only been in the mythos since the 1970s, and I don’t think she has a very interesting role.

Why does Batman primarily have relationships with men? I think perhaps because he is emotionally stunted. He never really grew up in the conventional way. He is still fixated on his mother, whom he idealises, and we could imagine that sees women as either princesses to be rescued and protected, or as fallen women – ‘whores’ – to be punished (or perhaps rescued).

I don’t think Bruce Wayne really developed through puberty in a healthy manner. I think he is still at the point where he prefers and is much more comfortable with male company. He doesn’t know how to have women as friends – to him, they are either trophies, sexual conquests or symbols.

It’s revealing that he is never even friends with Selina – they are either enemies or lovers, or married. He doesn’t know how to handle female friendship.

WB: CRITICS HAVE STATED MANY TIMES THAT NOLAN’S TRILOGY IS A DEPARTURE FROM THE ORIGINAL IDEA OF BATMAN; THE SAME IS THOUGHT ABOUT DANIEL CRAIG’S BOND. HOW MUCH IS IT CONNECTED WITH POST-MODERNISM? OR MAYBE IS IT AN INTENTION TO REFRESH THE CHARACTER, TO REMAKE A MYTH? THIS AFFECTS BATMAN’S ENEMIES

IN PARTICULAR, THEY’RE NO LONGER MADMEN, RATHER SOCIOPATHS, TERRORISTS.

I think the Batman myth needs to be regularly refreshed and re-made, and that is why it’s survived for so long.

I don’t believe we have to find a reason for this in postmodernism. The 1940 Batman was a revised version of the 1939 Batman. The 1970 Batman was a reboot of the 1969 Batman. That is how Batman works and that’s why he remains popular.

If any particular Batman text is ‘postmodern’, it is probably Tim Burton’s 1989 film, which was released at the peak of the postmodern aesthetic of recycling, quotation and cross-referencing.

Anyone who feels Nolan’s version is an unnecessary revision of the myth should ask themselves where Batman would be if he had never been revised previously. The comic would probably have gone bust at the end of World War Two, and that would have been the end of the character.

AW: ISN’T NOLAN INCOHESSENT? HIS TRILOGY IS DARK AND REALISTIC, BUT IT ENDS RATHER OPTIMISTICALLY, SOME CRITICS SAY – TOO SWEET. BRUCE WAYNE DOESN’T DIE FOR THE IDEA, LIKE V IN V FOR VENDETTA DOES. HASN’T THE DARK KNIGHT TRILOGY BECOME INCOHERENT?
Wb: That has to be a matter of opinion. I think the Dark Knight trilogy is largely coherent, and that it fits together well – that it maintains a sense of tone, that the plot makes sense for the most part and that it has a strong feeling of beginning and ending.

If someone wants to argue that V For Vendetta is a more satisfying film than The Dark Knight, that is up to them, but I wouldn’t agree.

The idea that Batman continues after Bruce Wayne retires (whether he dies or disappears) seems effective to me, and it is a theme explored throughout Nolan’s trilogy – that Batman is more than a single person. I don’t think it matters whether Wayne dies or not: he stops being Batman and passes on the responsibility, either way.

AW: BATMAN ORIGINS FROM PULP; ATMOSPHERE OF GOTHAM CITY REFERS TO FILM NOIR. DO YOU SEE ANY PARTICULAR LITERARY INSPIRATIONS FOR BATMAN’S CHARACTER?

Wb: Batman certainly draws on other popular characters and pulp icons – the Shadow, for instance, and the Spirit. In literary terms, the closest inspiration is probably Bram Stoker’s Dracula.

AW: WHAT IS BATMAN’S RELATION WITH GOTHAM? WOULDN’T IT BE EASIER FOR HIM TO JUST LEAVE THIS CURSED CITY?

Wb: Batman’s relationship with Gotham goes back many generations, even centuries. His parents and their parents – his family and ancestors – have deep roots in Gotham.

There are a few obvious reasons why he wouldn’t leave.

1. He doesn’t want to escape, or for this situation to end. He wants to fight his war on crime forever, and this is his arena or playground. He is actually happy with the way things are.

2. He is most comfortable in Gotham. He is an urban vigilante in a dark costume. He wouldn’t work in the same way in, say, Los Angeles or Miami. Gotham suits his methods and image.

3. If he left, Joker, Two-Face, Riddler and Catwoman would follow him to the next city.

Having said that, he does leave Gotham – he has travelled in time and space, and even in the Nolan films we see his crime-fighting activities spanning the globe.

AW: WHAT CHANGES IN THE SUPERHEROES UNIVERSE, ESPECIALLY FOR BATMAN, DO YOU EXPECT CONCERNING THE CRISIS OF COMICS INDUSTRY? WILL IT FINALLY REACH ITS RENAISSANCE, BASED ON THE POPULARITY OF NARRATIVE FILMS? OR PERHAPS TV SERIES WILL BECOME THE BEST MEDIUM, WHICH WILL OVERTAKE THE GENRE?

Wb: I think the comics industry will probably grow increasingly small and become more of a minority interest. It is currently a great deal less popular and financially profitable than the movie industry and video games industry.

I think that stories about superheroes will continue regardless – they are established as a genre in films, television and video games. But we may see the end of superhero comics within the next fifty years.