The Bomb in (and the Right to) the City: *Batman*, *Argo*, and Hollywood's Revolutionary Crowds[1]

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Introduction – Staging Logical Revolts

In a recent article on *The Wire*, Fredric Jameson observes that everything we need to know about the ideological contours and limits of a given historical and social conjuncture can in some sense be deduced from the way it imagines or fantasizes about (on film) the moral imperfections, excesses, and contradictions it generates: its "bad guys" (Jameson 2010: 368). From vaguely middle-eastern terrorists to serial-killers, pedophiles, and extra-terrestrial invaders, the villain is a point of absolute foreclosure – an abject subject, a kind of inverted *ideal-Ich* with which it is impossible to identify without shattering the frame of one's ethical, political, or cultural horizon.

   In the following, our argument will both converge with and depart from that of recent analyses of two Hollywood blockbusters from 2012 in which revolutionary movements or

uprisings figure in the background, as diegetic triggers, of the plot: *The Dark Knight Rises* and *Argo*. While perhaps not exactly constituting little more than "bad anti-OWS propaganda," as David Graeber suggests (2012: unpaginated), the much-vaunted third installment of the *Dark Knight* trilogy, the "Batman for the 99%," is indeed a confused, if not reactionary, knot of ideological contradictions. However, following Lacan's insight that *la vérité surgit de la méprise* (truth erupts out of error, distortion, misunderstanding), such contradictions might more productively be read as symptomal points of pressure where repressed narrative knowledge seeps back into the domain of visibility and intelligibility.

As Slavoj Žižek puts it in his reading of "Batman's Politics," the blockbuster is the ideal terrain for mapping out the ideological and political predicaments of our time (Žižek 2012: unpaginated). Without disqualifying Žižek's reading of Bane as a terrorist in the rather more revolutionary Jacobin tradition, our hypothesis is that a different reading may be possible: namely of Bane as a way of figuring, or imagining, the unstoppable, destructive force of capital. *Argo*, a political espionage thriller that took home an Oscar for best picture, is a tale of how the CIA and Hollywood joined forces in 1979 to thwart Iranian revolutionaries and smuggle Americans out of the Canadian embassy.[2] Now, while *Argo* generally falls into the sort of Occidento-centric clichés of the "Oriental other" (violent, irrational, unstable, religious fanatics incapable of assuming an ironic distance between the ethical substance of community and individual interiority, etc.) which make the film easy prey for Saidian critique, its final moments suggest something like the reality of the ideal, or a revolutionary narrative for "the people". In the wake of the Occupy Wall Street, Arab Spring, the *Indignados*, and many other global popular uprisings, it is probably not so surprising that Hollywood blockbusters would be so pre-occupied with the question of (collective) oppositional politics or representations of the "masses". Indeed, our argument here will focus on an allegorical content in these films, rather than on filmic form *per se* (which is not to say, however, that the formal devices of film are not central to the functioning of filmic allegory). Our view is that Hollywood is occupied by a revolutionary energy that it nevertheless disavows by its very representation of revolutionary agents. It is probably no great surprise that, in both *Argo* and *TDKR*, the "people" is represented as an unintelligibly chaotic mass. Looked at

"awry," as it were, through the genealogical lens of representations of the "people" in philosophy (Hegel, Kant, Rousseau) and literature,[3] both films may have more in common than meets the eye (other than the fact that the "spy" may be just another fantasy of the "super-hero").[4] In the following pages, we will begin by claiming that what the Batman films are "about" is really not so much the central character of the title, but rather about social relations in a city torn apart by misery, crime, and extremes of poverty and accumulation of wealth and social power – in a word, by the contradictions of capital (contradictions which we will attempt to locate and read, especially in *The Dark Knight Rises*, in the light of David Harvey's concept of the "right to the city"). We will thus consider how questions such as the crises of capitalism, or violence and collective political action, legitimacy, and conflict are (often contradictorily) staged in order to locate a deictic dimension in the otherwise fantastical, escapist/distancing genre of the ("super-hero") blockbuster. In a word, what we find in both films, despite the formal ways in which they appear to explicitly disqualify collective struggle by reducing it to the object-less irrationality of violent acting-out, is a staging not only of our own time and situation, but, ultimately, of what the French poet Arthur Rimbaud might call a "*révolte logique*" (a logical revolt).

Hollywood Occupies Gotham

In a sense, the basic plot structure of the Batman trilogy was never really about the tortured psyche of a billionaire playboy working through the childhood trauma of the violent death of his parents by dressing up in a bat costume by night to fight (and produce, as the familiar Foucaultian axiom runs) crime.[5] It could be amusing, if admittedly a bit facile, to submit Batman to a sort of wild psychoanalysis. Bruce Wayne, in this scenario, would figure as a kind of psychotic, working through the loss of paternal authority/the phallus (the *nom du père* is blazoned across a sky-scraper at the heart of the city in the first installment of the trilogy, after all) by identifying with his reviled phobic object. In his analysis of Little Hans, the phobia of being bitten by a horse who would fall down – and the motif of the fall is cortical to the "origin" story of Batman – revealed to

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Freud the role phobias played in the Oedipal complex as narratives for imposing order and containing the traumatic real of desire.[6]

To be sure, the tortured psychodrama of a melancholic billionaire undeniably forms the surface content of Christopher Nolan's *Batman* series. At the level of what we might call its absent narrative center, however, this film series has always been about two, interrelated dilemmas. First, crises in the institutions of the democracy: the press (which the Joker manipulates to carry out his plan of mayhem; the social welfare state (hospitals and schools); endemic corruption and dishonesty amongst elected officials and the police (*the* overriding theme of all three films); and, finally, the problem of popular sovereignty itself – that is, the theme, or question, of vigilante violence as a kind of exception to democratic rule of law. Perhaps, as Chris Boge noted in a recent conference at the Birkbeck Institute, this is why, in the second film (released in the aftermath of the NSA spying scandals of the latter part of the Bush administration), Harvey Dent appears to be citing Rousseau's discussion of dictatorship, the suspension of law and the state of exception in ancient Rome (Boge 2012: unpaginated). When asked, "Who appointed the Batman?" Dent quips: "We all did, all of us who stood by and let the scum take over our city" (a city we might take in a broader sense as the *polis*).[7]

These themes are inextricably interwoven, however, with a second, intractable dilemma to which Nolan's cinematic work only really alludes but which constitutes its invisible core: the crises of capitalism. We shall return to this hypothesis, but before we turn to the representation of "the people" in *The Dark Knight Rises*, consider the following thread running through the trilogy, and which seems to support our hypothesis that, at some disavowed level of narrative knowledge, the *Batman* films are about the contradictions between democracy and capital. In *Batman Begins*, the "League of Shadows" discovers a force vastly more efficient in its destructive capacity than, say, fires or plagues: capitalism; in *The Dark Knight* an international bank based in Hong Kong, in an eerie anticipation of the HSBC scandal, launders money for the mafia all while doing "respectable" business with the Wayne Corporation; finally, in the third film,

the impoverishment of the masses drives them, with more than a little help from Bane, to the creation of a revolutionary Commune.

So with whom can we, and with whom must we not, identify in *The Dark Knight Rises*? Who is the "bad guy"? The most obvious answer is Bane, the hulking villain who seizes control of Gotham city, unleashes a wave of anarchy, breaks Batman's back and has him imprisoned in a pit, and threatens Gotham with nuclear annihilation. Of course, this is standard Hollywood fare; any alternative to capitalism or parliamentary regimes is invariably and nebulously referred to as anarchy – *an-archos* in the strict sense of the absence of law as such (above all, the absence of private property and due legal process). Whence the spooky scenes of the wealthy being expelled from their mansions and brought before revolutionary tribunals – tribunals no doubt meant to evoke the French Terror's *comité de salut public*, and which are presided over by Hollywood's iteration of Saint-Just: the Scarecrow. (Let us resist the temptation to read too much into this choice of character, but suffice to say it may be something like an ideological parapraxis: the Scarecrow holds the key to unlocking and exploiting his victims' deepest fears. It may after all be only too fitting that such a character would represent revolutionary justice.)[8] Then there is Miranda Tate/Talia Al Ghul, of course. The problem here is that, in its final moments, the film actually invites the spectator to explicitly identify with these two figures by (narratively and visually) suturing our point-of-view with that of the "villains": Bane is at heart little more than the familiar trope of the misunderstood monster, who sacrificed life and limb to rescue (the ideal of) an innocent child from the daily hell of the prison in which he languished. (In a flashback scene to this episode, furthermore, the camera adopts the point of view of the child – revealed to be none other than Miranda Tate/Talia Al-Ghul – looking down upon her savior as he is overwhelmed by a swarm of prisoners who were ostensibly seeking to violate the little girl.) If in the final analysis our sympathy for, if not identification with, the devil is elicited all-around in *The Dark Knight Rises*, who is ultimately the "bad guy" in Nolan's *DKR* – the point of torsion which the films imaginary and ideological structure forecloses as a position of spectatorial sympathy? The answer, at first glance, seems simple: the people.

From *pöbel* to *peuple*

Not "the people" in the sense of there being an ontologically constitutive hiatus at the level of the nomination "the people" and the various, varied, different individuals who are interpellated by that name that prohibits us from identifying any *one* singular subject (a Sovereign) that could be said to incorporate the people and its general will but which all the same allows us to arrive at a sort of "count of the uncounted" (the site of democracy, as Claude Lefort points out, is an empty one).[9] Rather what we find explicitly disqualified as so much revolutionary *phonè*, or noise, opposed the *logos*, or reason, of the law and the rationality of the state is a figure which the philosopher Jacques Rancière calls the *demos*: that is, the "insult," first used by Plato in *The Republic* to describe those who have no right to be considered as the equals of their "betters," in which Rancière locates the subject of the political as such (2005). In *TDKR*, the Hollywood apparatus is merely citing a "traditional" trope which conflates revolutionary upheaval with storms, tempests, and the swirl of confusion tradition which we can find not only in Dickens' *A Tale of Two Cities* (which the director and screenwriter both cite as an influence for the film), but also in nearly every 19th-century French description of revolutionary action, from Chateaubriand to Flaubert in passing by Zola and Victor Hugo (who, in *Les Misérables*, divides the "peuple" into the good poor and the *ochlos* – the dangerous classes of the urban *lumpen*, a sort of incorporation of noise associated with the barricades of the 1848 June uprising). In *TDKR*, the people are imagined along lines similar to Cruikshank's counter-revolutionary caricatures at the time of the French terror. It imagines politics as crime – which may just be the node at which *TDKR* reaches a nadir of contradiction between story and situation, and where a fissure through which a return of the repressed takes place, both at the level of narrative and at the level of political theory (a point we'll come back to in a moment).

TDKR's crowd is the mob as blood-thirsty, capricious rabble unleashed on the city, if not on civilization. A form of collective action reduced to sheer, illegitimate, violent lashing-out (of divine violence, as Walter Benjamin might put it) that the film, in one of its many explicit moments of ideological orientation invites us not to desire. As a mob ransacks a high-end apartment, out of which an elderly couple is led by armed guards

(a scene clearly meant as a kind of citation of every imaginable Hollywood representation of totalitarian injustice), Selina Kyle/Catwoman's *lumpen* companion turns to her and essentially asks her the age-old Jacobin question: "Isn't this what you wanted, baby?" (i.e., "Do you want The Revolution without *revolution*?")

The scene gives a kind of formal legibility to the subject of cinematic capital: at the individual level, desiring change, and even engaging in illicit acts of surplus appropriation (i.e., cat-burglary) are all fine and well. Once things take a turn towards collective revolutionary action, the only posture to adopt is one of melancholic inward withdrawal, of passive spectatorship if not refusal and isolation from the excess of the multitude. Selina Kyle/Catwoman, though a criminal herself, embodies at this moment a form of paradoxical resistance both to capitalism (it was she, after all who warns Bruce Wayne that the "storm" of class struggle was on the way) and to alternatives to capitalism. She represents, in other words, a form of resistance that is wholly compatible with capital and its various disciplinary apparatuses created to manage what Michel Foucault aptly terms "illegalisms" (cf., *Surveiller et punir*).

Still, to paraphrase Marx, the very hallmark of a revolutionary situation is the desperate isolation of its actors (1978: 131). Political, social, and economic alienation is the name of the game, as it were. We might adopt on this ideological limning the perspective of *verneinung* – that is, the Freudian name for an operation of both negation and preservation of an ideational content. At the very moment when the film explicitly evokes the twin-questions of (the meaning and stakes of) collective revolutionary action and (*our*) desire, perhaps we ought to ask ourselves if this is not *precisely* what we wanted. There is no great aesthetic or political originality in representing the people *qua* revolutionary agents as criminals: this is something of an *ur*-trope in political thought stretching back to Plato, especially general in the aftermath of the enlightenment and the successful bourgeois revolutions in Europe and the United States. One is inclined to respond: of course revolutions are illegal. As Kant spells out in his "Essay on Perpetual Peace" – not coincidentally written at the time of the French Revolution – no political constitution can contain within it a right to rebellion, to overthrow the state and a sovereign. When faced with rebellion, the state is totally justified in decreeing a kind of

sacer esto upon the heads of insurgents. They can *rightfully* be put to death as bandits seeking to commit the ultimate crime: to destroy the law upon which a given order is founded as such.

What *TDKR*, and the whole Hollywood super-hero genre, *must* scotomize is Kant's insight contained in the second part of this reflection on revolution. That is, while a revolution may never be legal, once it is successful, "the head of State will fall back into his position of subject, and not undertake a counter rebellion" (Kant 1897: 31; Douzinas 2012: unpaginated). In other words (and this a point that David Graeber nicely states in his essay on the *Batman* trilogy), a revolution may be a sort of lawlessness, but when successful, it is precisely the sort of crime upon which the law is (*illegally*) founded. Cat-woman's problem, and Nolan's too, is not just that she is incapable of imagining – or perhaps desiring –a successful revolution. The whole film is in some sense blind to its crucial insight that some revolts are, as Rimbaud put it in one of his more (unintentionally) Hegelian moments, "logical revolts" – that is, not just probable when certain inequalities become too intolerable, but also justified, reasonable.

This is precisely why, despite its better efforts, *TDKR*'s "bad guy" cannot be "the people" (without, that is, a serious strain placed at the level of semantic content). Bearing in mind that Cat-woman is the only character in the film to explicitly evoke the gap between the wealthy and the impoverished in terms of a coming class-struggle, we are reminded of Hegel's take on crime and poverty from his lectures on the *Philosophy of Right*. Here, the philosopher from Iena sees crime as a provisionally restricted form of rebellion produced by poverty. The stakes of this, however, do not merely include finding adequate solutions to the problems of poor people breaking the law.

> When the standard of living of a large mass of people falls below a certain subsistence level – (…) necessary for a member of society – and when there is a consequent sense of the loss of right and wrong, of honor and integrity in maintaining oneself by one's own activity and work, the result is the creation of a *rabble of paupers* [*Pöbel*]. At the same time, this brings with it, at the other end of the social scale, conditions which greatly facilitate the concentration of disproportionate wealth in a few hands (2008: 221).

Hegel's *rabble* thus does not merely designate the poor; it is something infinitely more disruptive: "poverty's singular combination of capacity and incapacity [which] is threatening and potentially transgressive because it marks the place of something within the process of production that could transform or destroy it" (Greaney 2008: 25). The rabble is Hegel's name for a dangerous supplement to the World Historical Spirit incarnated in the rationality of the State that could risk bringing down the whole social edifice if a proper solution is not found for the excessively glaring, intolerable contradiction of their mere existence as social rejects. In a footnote to this passage, Hegel offers a very serious qualification to his claim that the rabble is as much an economic injustice as it is a question of mental concepts and material practices (such as laziness or discipline). The absolute poverty of the rabble poses a serious problem to the rationality of the social whole to the extent that it generates subjects and positions within society whose entire function is to sign-post a senseless wrong done by one part of society to another for the sake of economic convenience:

> [p]overty in itself does not turn people into a rabble; a rabble is created only when there is joined to poverty a *disposition of the mind*, an inner indignation against the rich, against society, against the government, etc. A further consequence of this attitude is that through their dependence on chance people become *frivolous and idle*, like the Neapolitan *lazzaroni* for example. (…) Against nature a human being can claim no right, but once society is established, poverty immediately takes the form of a wrong done to one class [*Klasse*] by another (2008: 211).

As Žižek points out, we have here what we might call (*pace* Hegel himself), a Hegelian theory of insurrection (2012: 430-7). In essence, if the Hegelian postulate that the state is the actualization of the absolute rationality of Spirit is to hold in the face of poverty, then it follows that revolt against it can be justified if one's position *qua* subject in society consists in being its constitutive exclusion.[10] Such a subject, whether it goes by the name of *pöbel* or the *peuple*, may not necessarily revolt in the face of their objective conditions of misery. As Jennifer Bajorek suggests, the great arcana of capital is not *how* it brings about the present state of affairs (it does so through the "secret" of so-called primitive accumulation), but rather *why,* in the face of all this blood and injustice, it does not meet with more resistance (2008: 75). However, whether they rise up or not, such revolts are, precisely as Rimbaud (and Hegel) would have it *révoltes*

logiques. For, once society is established, the exclusion of the poor represents a form of what, following Étienne Balibar on this point, Slavoj Žižek (2008: 1-3) theorizes as objective violence (a form of violence visually codified in *TDKR* in those scenes where the high-society of Gothamite *mondains* live it up, obscenely cracking open lobster tails amidst flows of champagne, in juxtaposition with the misery of the urban masses amongst whom Cat-woman lives).

(What's Driving) The Bomb in the City?

This is where the truth in the formal distortion emerges in *TDKR*, where we get a glimpse not so much of a "bad guy" who isn't there, but which cannot *stricto sensu* be identified because, as French President François Hollande put it shortly after his election in 2012, "it" has no face. In the summer of 2012, at the height of the American presidential election, ultra-conservative talk-radio host Rush Limbaugh infamously claimed that the film constituted an insidious plot by Hollywood liberals seeking to undermine then-Republican presidential candidate Mitt Romney's odds of being elected.[11] After all, he argued, could it be *mere* coincidence that the name of the villain in *The Dark Knight Rises* was a perfect homophone for the venture capital firm the Mitt Romney ran before turning to politics, Bain Capital.

Absurd as it may patently seem, perhaps we ought to consider the sense in which Limbaugh, was right (he *was* wrong, of course, at least when it came to his paranoid fantasies about the Hollywood "Big Other"). We might read Bane-the-villain as kind of pure formalization – a fantasy giving body to an enemy which Bain Capital could also be said to represent for the working class, if not democracy: he is capital, or rather its destructive excess, personified; a world-historical force that smashes through and pulverizes barriers of all kinds, before which "all that is solid," all forms of difference, however seemingly irresistible, "melts into air," are broken like the Batman's back. This is doubtless why Bane's *faux*-revolutionary appeal to popular sovereignty and the *volonté générale* is *precisely* that of capitalism: after seizing control of Gotham during a game of football, Bane both menaces the city with annihilation and invites its citizens to

"do as you please" (*jouissez*, in superego parlance). It is precisely why the bomb being driven around the city might, or ought to be read as an allegory for our times. This inconsistency – "why," asks David Graeber, "set the city free just to blow up its citizens?" – at the level of plot in *TDKR* merely means that the bomb in Gotham circulates in the narrative economy less as a guarantee of meaning than as an appeal to interpretation (indeed, part of the plot device hinges on an ability to successfully read and track down the bomb, which is hidden in one of three identical vehicles). The point of the bomb is to function as a figure as such – that is, as an object whose meaning is not transparent.

Read metaphorically as the unstoppable destructive *drive* in a pseudo-revolutionary force, as a bubble that ultimately will pop and wipe out the city/community; read perhaps even as a symptomal inscription of *speculation* on real estate (which car is it in, which neighborhood is hot?), the bomb circulating around Gotham city might be simply understood as signposting the problem that David Harvey, following Henri Lefebvre, conceptualizes as "the right to the city". That is to say, the centrality of the urban process to the stability of capital as well as the worker's right to enjoy the fruits of her labor, to participate fully in the life of the human-species being – a life not only of work and of transformation of the lived environment in order to satisfy needs, but also, as Marx put it, the life of human creativity and capacities, of play, of desires and purposeless leisure, of science, art, and critical thinking. For Lefebvre, the right to the city refers to and instantiates an actual, radical right to the urban space, to society as such; a right that is not contingent upon the economic capacity to "consume" the spectacle of the urban. It thus nominates a political right cutting broadly across social and ontological condition (available to proletarian as to capitalist, to the old as to the young, to women as to men, etc.).

For his part, David Harvey crucially demonstrates that this right to the city necessarily entails a struggle over the surplus generated by capital thanks to the productive and destructive dynamics of what Harvey posits as capital's cortical enigma: the "urban process," designating on the one hand the complex means through which capital recourses to urbanization, or urban transformation projects (from Haussmann's

Paris in the aftermath of the massive economic crises in the late 1840s to present-day China), to temporarily resolve its internal contradictions, temporarily stabilize itself and advance the economic and ideational interests of the bourgeoisie. On the other hand, it also designates the violence of primitive accumulation, or the dispossession of the poor, whether it be of the few assets they possess or, more fundamentally, of the right to live in an integrated urban space which they themselves produce and which, in producing the surplus necessary for the continued accumulation/expansion of capital, is so central to the viability of capital as a social mode of production in the first place (Lefebvre 1996: 147-59; Harvey 2012: 3-27). The bomb circulating aimlessly around the city, figuring the very *drive* of capital as a frightening drive of accumulation for its own sake, consequences be damned, is intimately linked to perhaps the fundamental question of our time: that of the "the right to the city" designating a political situation, an economic process, and a potentially revolutionary agent – that is, the "ex-timate" proletarian, at once excluded from the space of the city and central to capital. Seen in this light, contemporary class struggle not only becomes legible in the *Dark Knight Rises*, it constitutes the film's unavoidable, if disavowed, grammar.

"Fictitious" Capital – The Reality of the Virtual

TDKR's scene in the Gotham stock market (filmed on Wall Street, no less) is more than a simple pretext for a run-of-the-mill block-buster action sequence involving motorcycles, summer-saulting police cars and impressive CGI explosions. Rather, it forms a moment of the film's veracity. After storming the Gotham stock-market, Bane and his henchmen are smugly informed by an imprudent trader that "there's no money here – [they] won't be able to steal anything". To which Bane retorts: "Then why are you here?" And in the space of a few minutes, using nothing but a portable computer and a virus, Bane manages to wipe out the entire fortune of Wayne Enterprises (a multinational company which, if it existed in extra-cinematic reality, would no doubt be too-big-to-fail – we are meant to understand that Bane's virus would no doubt trigger a world-wide crisis in capital accumulation). Crucially, there is no way for anyone to tell if what transpired was a crime or a legitimate stock transaction. Confronted with the

potentially very real ravages of abstract, virtual financial transactions, the spectator thus has the impression not so much of watching a film, but of briefly gazing into a *speculum* that refers us back to our own extra-diegetical situation, where indeed it is all too frequently impossible to distinguish between market speculation and a crime wave,[12] and where the operations of so-called fictitious capital have real effects on "the people" in a truly mind-warping variety of forms: labor discipline and the human wreckage of mass unemployment; the loss of social services; asset theft in the form of raided (or obliterated) pensions and 401Ks and disappearing health care benefits; the ravaging of the commons, etc.

When we follow Bane into Gotham's stock-market, in other words, we are for a fleeting moment reminded that we ourselves are living with Gotham-like levels of inequality, with a chasm between the haves and the have-nots unlike anything seen since the 1920s and with no real sense of a political alternative capable of cutting the Gordian knot entangling, as the saying goes, the interests of Main Street in those of Wall Street. Whence the exchange between a working-class cop who sees no reason – given that he keeps his savings under his mattress – to save a bunch of market speculators and one of those self-same traders who reprimands him with a sort of hyper-condensed lecture on monetary policy. Since the start of 2008's Great Recession – comparable, according to Paul Krugman, to the beginning of the Great Depression in the scope of wealth it wiped out –nearly all of the economic growth produced has been appropriated by the top 1% (while the 99% have seen a general loss of 40% of their wealth), a class which has access to 50% of all available assets, and has seen a 281% growth in their income over the past 40 years while the rest of the populations has seen real wages stagnate since the 1970s and the first wave of neoliberalism (Krugman 2012: unpaginated; Noah 2013: unpaginated). Indeed, when the images of Gotham in all its conjunctive splendor and misery flicker on the screen, we are of course not just enjoying a fantasy of justice play out; we are always also contemplating our *own* historical and political situation. That is, a situation of scandal and tragedy so far-reaching and so massive that one finds oneself daydreaming of super-heroes sweeping to the rescue – since, as "too big to jail banks" suggest, we clearly can no longer

envisage the democratic institutions of civil society doing the job – if not indeed of revolution.

There's a lesson for our times to be drawn from *The Dark Knight Rises*, despite its vulgar reduction of the people and of collective struggle to lawless violence and animal appetites. On occasion, it cannot help demonstrating that the people of Gotham are right to revolt, to demand another social order and other social relations – that it is only a matter of time before the bomb in the city goes off, and that anti-capitalist struggle is therefore, as Jodi Dean suggests, the horizon of our time (Dean 2012). In some rudimentary if awkward sense, the conclusion to the *Dark Knight* trilogy even alludes to this revolutionary horizon: unless the final shot of Bruce Wayne and Selina Kyle on the terrace of an Italian restaurant is to be understood as the pure fantasy of Wayne's butler (a possibility undermined by the visual dialectic of the shot-counter-shot), Batman ultimately fakes his death, disappears, and leaves his vast fortune and country mansion to those figures *par excellence* of Dickensian dispossession, the orphans of Gotham City. Problematic as its underlying celebration of wealth and philanthropy may be – for it suggests that the gap left by the disinvestments of social institutions ought to be filled by the *largesse*, by the social consumption of wealthy donors – Nolan's *Batman* can't help but end (but perhaps this merely points to our own failure of imagination, our own ideological blind-spots) with the idea of a philanthropy without philanthropists, suggesting ultimately that the truly *heroic* thing to do is to use the surplus towards the ends of justice and equality.

Conclusion: A Brief Word on Liberating Narratives and Revolutionary Plots in *Argo*

It's by a strange sort of twist that the opening scenes of Ben Affleck's Oscar-winning *Argo* involve a staging of the modern American bogey-man/villain *par excellence*, the Islamic (in this case, Iranian) Other that recalls the very first (extant) tragedy written in the West: Aeschylus' *Persians*. The Aeschylian tragedy in sum stages the aftermath of the disastrous defeat of Xerxes' navy, signaling the dawn of Athenian ascendancy, and

the political form of democracy in the Mediterranean world (tragedy, whether in Ancient Greece or 21st-century Hollywood, has always been a tale told about the *polis* and its irresolvable contradictions). It is well-known that in his utopian plan for the perfect city, Plato banished theatre and poetry. Why the philosopher did so is a subject we cannot hope to resolve here, but if we consider *Persians* as an exemplary Attic tragedy, perhaps this banishment makes some sense. After all, the problem with poetry and tragedy is one of *ek-stasis*: of a decentering compassion, empathy, or solidarity with the characters on stage who either happen to be breaking every conceivable law gluing together the social edifice (Oedipus, Electra, Antigone, etc.) or with foreign enemies, "bad guys," with whom one must simply not identify if one is to continue considering them as sub/inhuman barbarians (e.g., the disconsolate Persians whose civilization was brought low by the Greeks).

By way of some concluding thoughts, let us offer the following hypothesis: the real interest of *Argo* emerges in the final scenes of the film. It has to do, in final analysis, with a similar intersection of mimesis, and the political problems raised by recognition and solidarity with the oppressed (other). It has to do, in other words, with what we might call (borrowing slightly from Rancière's lexicon) a "cinematic politics": that is, not with the politics of such or such actor/director, but with the very way in which the circulation of images and narratives signpost a text's relationship to the contradictions of its historical, political, and ideological context, creating and revealing as *aesthetic* contingencies virtual images of a world/system where everything and body is in its place, and then playing disruptions of this "natural" order.

It is no complex task to draw aesthetic and political connections between Affleck's film and its socio-political context amidst a presidential campaign where the press increasingly took to comparing the incumbent Democratic president (i.e., Barack Obama) to a hapless Jimmy Carter, long a signifier of clumsy political cluelessness in the American media. It's doubtless no great coincidence that for some time the so-called neo-con wing of the American political establishment has been screeching about the necessity of bombing, *inter alia*, Iran (the contemporary American political conjuncture, in other words, vouches for Affleck's *bien-pensant* liberal bona fides,

despite *Argo*'s objectively politically and ethnocentrically triumphalist tone). In the opening scenes, a montage of metonymic snippets of the (American) nightly news documenting the Iranian revolution functions as a kind of cinematic "reality effect" (to borrow Barthes' term). Largely, and necessarily one might suppose, left out of the picture, or reduced to the strict minimum necessary for audience comprehension, is the context behind, and the complexity of, the Iranian revolution.

The first representation of the Iranian Revolution is, revealingly, of the storming of the American embassy. It erupts, in other words, almost *ex nihilo* as an attack against the U.S. Over the course of a claustrophobic and choppy scene (rapid editing mixes here with a "riot" of ostensible POV shots), the film undermines the immediately preceding politico-historical context by placing the spectator *in* an amorphous, crushing revolutionary crowd where s/he is bombarded by anti-American images and the raucous chanting of (un-translated) revolutionary slogans (similar scenes of encountering the collective other, or the Other as a kind of monstrous collective – in a market, in a car stuck in traffic, etc. – furnish the raw material of "suspense" in Affleck's film). We are acoustically assailed by the crowd qua *phonè*; by a violent onslaught of incomprehensible signifiers unmoored from their signifieds, a fissure within speech distinct from the ratio of meaningful (political) discourse (*logos*), and a purposely disorienting, POV camera within the crowd supposed to mimetically introduce the confusion of the revolutionary mob, if not metonymically suggest that the "truth" of revolution is little more than a confusing, unintelligible riot.

Yet this thinly-veiled aesthetic (rather in the sense of *aesthesis*, of a sensational rather than a cognitive) disqualification of the revolutionary is not really the most intriguing dimension of *Argo*. In the end, what strikes the viewer is not so much that the Iranian revolutionaries are presented as sinister religious fanatics (exploiting child labor, no less, to piece together shredded embassy documents) – such representations are meant, one gathers, to function as a kind of narrative catalepse, anticipating the (Western audience's fantasy of the) dreary authoritarianism of contemporary Iran. Let us pass over the film's content proper, which is mostly a tale centered on how a spy – whose real-life ethnic alterity is elided in favor of Affleck's Boston-Irish good guy – and

some movie producers fight Washington bureaucrats as much as they do Islamic revolutionaries. The more intriguing dimension of *Argo* is, rather, its very *dénouement* – the very way by which it resolves the narrative of the film through the trope of narrative itself.

In the final moments of the film, the audience is presented with a gripping series of cross-cuts between a bureau in Teheran where the identities of the remaining embassy employees have been determined and the scene at the airport, where a member of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard has detained the group of protagonists for further questioning mere minutes before their plane is set to depart. At the very moment when it seems as though the plan to extract the "heroes" from hostile territory is on the brink of collapse, one of the members of the group suddenly begins to recount in Farsi the plot of the "film" their fictional production company had come to Iran to make. Though in many respects it is readily mapped-out territory for any film-goer remotely familiar with *Star Wars*, it would be a mistake to read this scene as one of savvy Westerners duping the naïvely unsophisticated, *uncinematic* Oriental other incapable of adopting an ironic gap between narrative and meaning. Why? The very thing that sets the group free is not the CIA *complot*, but rather the very narrative, which the film *cannot* tell: i.e., that of the Iranian Revolution not as some confusing, crypto-fascistic ethnic-theological revolt, but rather as a dimension of what philosopher Alain Badiou would term an "invariant,": a trans-historical "[i]dea of justice (…) capable of grounding a subject in history." (in Dean 2012: 280-81). *Argo* thus has a weirdly proleptic structure – at the end, we come full circle back to the (hysteric's) political question: what does the Revolution want (what story is it telling that we couldn't decipher in the beginning)? The response comes in a moment of pure, utopian recognition that the "fable" of nobodies who rise up in a galaxy far, far away to throw down an oppressive order that passes for as impersonal and irresistible as the cosmos themselves is a narrative which is at once pure science fiction fantasy (a lie) and, as Jameson would put it, a kind of weird dream, desire, or memory from the future confirming that the order of the (im)possible is not closed. We might be able to plot a path out of it. Indeed, in Jameson's account, utopian fictions are "imaginary enclaves within real social space," functioning as maps for understanding "given social realities" (Jameson 2007: 13-15).

What ironically sets the group of Americans free in 1979 Teheran is quite literally the narrative of the Iranian revolution formally transported onto an inter-galactic plane: a tale of struggle and emancipation that cuts across the particular (told, crucially in the tongue of the other) and hits the domain of a *universal* truth. What sets the Americans free is in some sense a desire for utopia. 2012 was supposed to be the year that Hollywood gave us, to gloss Walt Whitman a bit, a cinema for occupations (for Zucotti Park, for Tahrir square,etc.) – a popular cinema translating the rage of the present day and the hopes for the future. In this respect, both *Batman* and *Argo* are of course complete failures. Looked at in the right perspective, however, 2012 may just mark the moment when revolutionary struggles came, in their own distorted, exaggerated, and fragmentary ways, to (pre)-occupy Hollywood.

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[1] My thanks to Christian Haines for his (ever-) thoughtful and productive comments on an early version of this essay, and to Andrea Gyenge for her well-timed, encouraging remarks on Batman and capital.

[2] The fact that the plot turns around the device of a *mise-en-abyme* non-existent sci-fi film is in itself significant – for as Jameson puts it nicely, sci-fi is always in some basic sense about our failure to imagine real revolutionary rupture with the imaginary of the given, or the hegemonic. Fredric Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions* (London: Verso, 2007), pp. 1-22.

[3] Reader take note – my perspective is informed, and necessarily delimited, by my training in the analysis of 19th-century French literature. I am therefore keenly aware and would like to signal that countless other inter-textual articulations are available for analysis of these films, and more precisely for a reading of how they "frame" the people, as it were (in the sense of both setting limits around it for the sake of intelligibility and in the rather more ominous sense of a "police" operation).

[4] My thanks to Vlad Dima for this observation.

[5] Significantly, the Joker is a kind of inverted or "post-modern" Batman – one who constantly manipulates stories of origins and origination in a way that points to their essential function *qua* fantasy or "dangerous supplement". If the first *Batman* film by Christopher Nolan was (typically for an American film) epistemophilically obsessed with "primal scenes" of origins for Batman, the second film in the series proposes that such origins are polymorphous, shifting, unreliable. If anything, the Joker comes out of nowhere, but is brought onto the scene by the madness of Batman himself. Perhaps this is why, in the famous interrogation scene between Batman and the Joker, the latter tells the former: "I don't want to kill you. I need you." All this to say nothing of the fact that Bruce Wayne is physically transformed into Batman by the shadowy villain Ra's Al-Ghul, a character that Žižek reads as embodying a revolutionary vanguard "combin[ing] virtue and terror [and] egalitarian discipline fighting a corrupted empire" (Žižek 2012: unpaginated).

[6] Recall, by the way, that the climatic scene of "interrogation" between the Joker and Batman in the second film (which, retrospectively reads like an insidious apologia for "enhanced interrogation techniques – the Orwellian dysphemism for torture among the American political and media elite) could be taken as an exemplary staging of the problem of castration in which the Joker tells Batman that though he may imagine he *has the phallus* he *is not* the phallus: "You have all this strength," says the Joker as Batman pummels him "and nothing to do with it" – i.e., Batman can beat the Joker as much as he likes;

despite his supplementary gadgets, devices, physical prowess, he is impotent to stop his plan (which plays on the unreliability of the symbolic order and ultimately leaves him deprived of his feminine love-object, Rachel Dawes, in exchange for a gruesomely disfigured/castrated Harvey Dent).

[7] Indeed it is on this terrain that Nolan's *Batman* series veered into truly noxious ideological territory. If we were to translate the conclusion of the second film in the series, it would read like a transparent apologia for the Bush era of warrantless wire-tapping, torture, and the war on terror: in order to catch a "terrorist," it takes a superhero who is willing to carve out an exception to the law, and transform the entire communicative infrastructure of cyber-modernity (cell-phones, lap-tops, etc.) into a massive surveillance net.

[8] This moment reveals a fundamental misunderstanding of the meaning of the French Revolutionary Terror (but that is to be expected and is beside the point, which is to locate the form of veracity bound up with this misperception). Were a revolutionary city-state ever to be proclaimed in the name of popular sovereignty, the resistance to such an act by the State would doubtless be so overwhelmingly violent (the Paris Commune comes to mind) as to make revolutionary tribunals the sorts of which we see a perverse caricature of in *TDKR* probably inevitable, a point which Alain Badiou sees, in his recent "The Communist Idea…," as an inherent risk of revolutionary politics when confronted with counter-revolutionary force. (Badiou 2013: 1-12).

[9] See also Rancière's *Aux bords du politique* (1998: 112-29).

[10] Indeed, Marx's Hegelianism is perceptible in the more anthropological passages of the 1844 manuscripts. Here he writes, for instance, that the ideal and the material are not opposed, but implicated in one another: "[i]t is (…) necessary to avoid establishing 'society' as an abstraction over and against the individual. The individual *is* the *social being* (…). Man's individual and species-being are not two *distinct things*" "(Marx 1968: 350).

[11] http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/07/18/limbaugh-bane-dark-knight-rises_n_1681716.html. Accessed 05/15/2013.

[12] Amply documented in the pages of *Rolling Stone* by Matt Taibi. See his, "Gangster Bankers Broke Every Law in the Book," 02/14/2012; "What Wall Street Learned from the Mafia," 06/21/2012; "Bank of America: Too Crooked to Fail," 04/14/2012; "Looting Main Street," o3/21/2012; "The People vs. Goldman, Sachs," 05/11/2011.

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