A great deal has been made of a post-9/11 world, where security concerns ring loudly around the globe and fears of "the next inevitable attack" are rampant. Much scholarship in Popular Culture—analyzing media content, performances, television, films, and other cultural products and phenomena—and other fields have rightly been dedicated to these fears and threats, as the anxieties that accompany them are most certainly worthy of attention. As the years go by and the initial shock of 9/11 wears off, however, there appears to be a post-post-9/11 tone circulating, a waning of gut reactions to continual acts of violence around the globe. But between the continuation of psycho-political security fears (found everywhere from the stage to political rhetoric to the big screen to the proverbial morning coffee’s accompaniments in the forms of newspapers, television, and radio broadcasts) and the simultaneously dying concern for these fears are violent echoes, bloody ripples in the pond, like embassy attacks, school shootings, the continuing wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and a myriad of other violent acts that serve as visceral reminders of the strains that flow, shape, and tear the surrounding world and within.¹

One such echo was the April 2007 shooting at Virginia Tech (VT). After this terrible event a storm of sympathy for the VT community ensued on the part of virtually all universities across the United States and in other parts of the world. Impromptu and fixed communities instantly identified with, sent condolences to, and prepared for such an event to occur closer to home. Much of this identification with the
victims and institutions immediately impacted by this shooting was shaped through media coverage, particularly television news coverage. Major media outlets—primarily CNN, ABC, NBC, CBS, and FOX—started their mad scramble to discover who Seung-Hui Cho, the shooter, was, and to snatch him from anonymity. In the process to understand who or what the perpetrator of this act of violence was, various governmental authorities and media outlets necessarily dug through his history and, most importantly, his mental health records, for these appeared to be the actions of a madman, at least as madness is institutionally defined in the contemporary United States.

And in the intricate global milieu since 9/11, a virtually countless number of artistic representations of—and reactions to—the anxieties of this historical moment have cropped up, including changes and shifts in long-standing popular culture forms. One such artistic representation being created while the VT shooting took place was the 2008 film *The Dark Knight*. Perhaps the greatest achievement of *The Dark Knight* was not its staggering box office figures or eye-popping special effects, but rather its layered story in which the classic paradigm of order versus chaos is played out on the surface, and the unconscious logic of both sides of that dichotomy merge with viewers on a more profound and troubling level.

Surely a reading of this film consistent with previous readings of its predecessor, *Batman Begins*, and other films and cultural products/phenomena focusing on post-9/11 conservatism is needed, but here a somewhat different approach is taken. In recreating, rewriting, interpreting, and unfolding this portrayal of the Joker, a collaborative effort between director Christopher Nolan, the now-deceased actor Heath Ledger, and the team of writers responsible for it, *The Dark Knight* taps into the tensions and fears noted above. Indeed, just as Batman and other comic icons adapt to the historical circumstances they both reflect and help shape, so too is the case with their villains (Brooker 10). But the most unsettling and efficacious characteristics of this Joker, as opposed to others throughout the Batman franchise, is that the unwanted logic behind the character taps into something the audience cannot completely write off as psychosis. It is this danger—this attraction to the chaos he represents—that institutions temper, control, segment, and attempt to defuse. Institutions, in this calibration, refer to schools, churches, governmental authorities and their auxiliaries, media, hospitals, and many other communal bodies iden-
tified and analyzed within Michel Foucault's calibration of governmentality, including self-governance (Burchell, Gordon and Miller 87–104). These institutions—and governance in general—give their subjects both real and necessarily unreal senses of order, control (and in many cases a [sub]conscious and spiteful lack thereof), inclusion (which necessitates exclusion), and an abstract civic currency called freedom (accompanied by the sacrifice, or spending, of that freedom for "safety"). But what happens when these institutions are breeched, when this sacrifice of individuality for the communal is betrayed, when governance fails, and when the social veneer starts to crack and the shoddy stitching becomes visible? It gives access to the living contemporary webs of meaning and cultural anxieties in this opaque, constantly changing, and combustive world.

To explain this relationship between this world and those created and continued in popular culture forms, some of the same tensions and methodologies present in Will Brooker's telling examination of Batman and his cultural power in *Batman Unmasked: Analyzing a Cultural Icon* are employed. Brooker studies the "complex matrix of appropriation between advertising, Pop art, television and comics...[locating] Batman's place in this network" (16). This article aims to analyze certain aspects of the Joker particularly, but some of the underpinnings present in *The Dark Knight* as a whole that have a hand in the negotiation for power between media, security apprehensions, Popular Culture, and the creation of narratives.

Both the major media's psychological creation of Cho after the VT shooting and the creation of the Joker have much in common when considered in terms of institutional breech. The portrayal of the Joker in 2008's *The Dark Knight*, who is terror incarnate—a true domestic terrorist—and the major media's psychological characterizations of Seung-Hui Cho following the VT shooting expose a distinct discomfort with the deal struck between communities and the individuals that comprise them that privileges governmentality. The Joker denies a narrative or an easily identifiable defect to blame for the creation of his identity. Instead, the film turns the conflict between order and chaos back on the audience by keeping the Joker anonymous, and by keeping him anything but neutralized. The media scramble to create Cho after VT, however, worked to give him an identity that can be grasped and held accountable. Narrative, key to understanding flows and departures—as well as genre—in popular culture also has a manifestation in
American news coverage, and the construction of Cho after the shooting is the creation of such a narrative. It is this narrative that *The Dark Knight*’s Joker denies the viewer. Perhaps a more conventional reading would align an action narrative that does build a narrative for the villain, like the many iterations of Joker before this one, with Cho, but the absence of such a narrative in a popular culture product in this contemporary global amalgam proves to be far more telling. Providing a case in this world where a narrative is created—that of Cho—and the photo negative, so to speak, that is Gotham City and the un-narrative behind this particular Joker—where a narrative is denied—allows for a more complicated examination of the role the creation of a narrative plays both within media coverage and other institutional rituals as well as within popular culture phenomena like *The Dark Knight*.

To find defect, to have something or someone made accountable, becomes paramount in reifying institutional strength, and these tensions are present both in the film and the coverage and psychological characterizations of Cho. Popular culture became a tool in both a fictive account and in this lived, shared reality to package and deny chaos, to galvanize governmentality and to convince the viewer—particularly of the VT shooting coverage—that these are acts of psychosis that can subsequently be accounted for, named, managed, and fixed. The main difference is that *The Dark Knight* denies the viewer these luxuries, where the media creation and coverage of Cho succeeded in packaging him as an outlier whose unwanted illogic and subsequent actions were not only detestable but unworthy of sympathy or a place in governmental order. Where Cho saw himself as an institutional victim, he was made into—of course largely by his own actions, but also partially by the selective coverage of major media outlets—a monster that could be held accountable and expelled as such, the viewer is denied this narrative grasp in *The Dark Knight*’s Joker.

There have been as many interpretations of the Joker as there have been opportunities to write, draw, or screen him, and the graphic and filmic representations of Joker have ranged from the maniacal and insidious to the downright corny. But most incarnations of the Joker have provided the reader a classic birth (perhaps rebirth) story in which the roots of his identity are made known to the reader or viewer. Whether it is the result of a previous entanglement with Batman or a chemical vat, a high-profile shark like Jack Napier or a previously unknown low-level criminal like The Red Hood, there is always a
back-story, a narrative, for the viewer to grasp the character, often involving a transitional moment where he is baptized into chaos. But *The Dark Knight*’s Joker denies this genesis. In fact, this Joker works to discourage a usable past by providing the viewer (and other characters in the film) multiple differing accounts of his scarring and becoming the Joker. Bewilderingly, the film introduces the Joker with no identification, tailor-made clothing, and his traditional clown make-up (though perhaps in this interpretation it is a bit more disturbing than prior applications), alluding to an identity behind an identity that is covered and inaccessible. At separate points in the film—when he is in positions of power—the Joker gives accounts of how he was scarred. The accounts differ, intentionally on his part, which can be read as simply him furthering chaos, or, perhaps as how that chaos becomes efficacious; the differing accounts can be read as the refusal of narrative, accountability, and governmentality.

But if any exchanges can serve to unlock some of the underpinnings of *The Dark Knight*’s Joker, one is certainly the sister-scenes where Alfred Pennyworth (Michael Cain), Bruce Wayne’s (Christian Bale) sagacious butler, recounts for Wayne’s instruction a parable from his time in Burma:

Alfred Pennyworth: When I was in Burma, a long time ago, my friends and I were working for the local Government. They were trying to buy the loyalty of tribal leaders, bribing them with precious stones. But their caravans were being raided in a forest north of Rangoon by a bandit. We were asked to take care of the problem, so we started looking for the stones. But after six months, we couldn’t find anyone who had traded with him. One day I found a child playing with a ruby as big as a tangerine. The bandit had been throwing the stones away.
Bruce Wayne: Then why steal them?
Alfred Pennyworth: Because he thought it was good sport. Because some men aren’t looking for anything logical, like money. They can’t be bought, bullied, reasoned or negotiated with. Some men just want to watch the world burn.
[Later in the film] (Bruce Wayne: Did you ever catch that bandit in Burma?)
Alfred Pennyworth: Eventually, yes.
Bruce Wayne: How?
Alfred Pennyworth: . . . we burned the forest down.
Aligning the Joker with his experience, Alfred is saying that this thief in Burma lived outside of reason and governed narrative. This is, at its very core, the denial of accountability and of a grasp with which the Joker can be controlled, named, unhinged, and discarded. Of course it is made to look like chaos, and to be set apart from the world of reason that Batman stands for and dedicates his existence to serving, but it also serves to separate the viewer from any sense of control over the Joker. It was this process that Nolan and company worked to exploit and make known, and major media and stakeholders work to control, shape, and exert as they shape a perception of Cho. Alfred works to contextualize the mind of the Joker for the viewers, and yet the character remains intentionally enigmatic, supported by his many other denials of governmentality throughout the film (gestures like symbolically burning his half of a mass of money in front of the numerous other crime bosses that control the seedy underbelly of Gotham). *Batman Begins*, and this film as a continuation of it, is about making a narrative—and a realistic one at that that takes place very much in this world, instead of adhering to an inhabitation of a world tangentially like this one—and a heritage story in a contemporary reality of Bruce Wayne becoming Batman. This origin story—this detailed branding of Batman—allows the viewer to intimately know Bruce Wayne/Batman through these films, making the denial of this origin in the Joker character all the more powerful, distancing viewers from the Joker as viewers draw closer to the origins and developing narrative of this Batman.

Summarizing Batman as a cultural icon in terms of Ian Fleming’s James Bond (particularly the later film adaptations) Brooker states, “Even James Bond’s resurrection in *Goldeneye* was notable for its critique of Bond’s outdated Cold War values, his sexism countered by a female M and proto-feminist Girls. As such, they serve a similar function to Batman, adapting with the historical moment as certain aspects of their iconic personae are foregrounded and others pushed back” (10). Indeed, just as Bond and his affiliates as well as Batman adapt to different cultural conditions and are used to shape, as well as reflect, them, so too is the case with their prospective villains. In the Bond world characters as different as the nefarious Dr. No and Alec Trevelyan are reflections of their contemporary scenes, respectively, and the tensions that surround them. Controlling technology—both technologies that existed in a Cold War mentality as well as imaginative techno-
logical possibilities—defines much of the Bond mythos as well as the world of Batman because of their shared lack of superpowers, which lends itself to a particularly corporeal and inhabitable feel accompanying these heroes as well as their villains.

Brooker makes it clear that “the first years of the Batman’s history—since the introduction of Robin in 1940—are characterized by consistency rather than malleability; a surprising discovery, and one which I explain through the institution-strengthening concept of ‘establishing a brand.’ During the Second World War, then, Batman did not adapt to the patriotic propaganda monologue which surrounded him as readily as many popular histories make out; rather, it seems that his writers—in both comic books and film serials—adapted the war context to suit the established template of the character” (16). There are strains of both consistency and malleability in The Dark Knight’s Batman, though he is not the character primarily studied here. One departure from earlier Batmans (Batmen?) is—as opposed to Brooker’s calibration—the absence of campiness, leading to an evident directness and access to today’s alleged global realities. Batman has been fighting terrorists of one stripe or another for decades, and to thrust such a reading upon him in a post-9/11 world does not seem to fit in any clean or consistent manner, though such a reading would not be completely unfounded by any means, as this Joker may embody terror in more concrete terms than the vast majority of previous Jokers. But what is consistent with Brooker’s reading is that this Batman does not abandon traditional Batman features of darkness and opacity to be juxtaposed with a dark and opaque Joker, quite the opposite in fact. In this way this Batman is incredibly consistent with earlier incarnations and, particularly, other incarnations of Batman in graphic novel form that run concurrently with (and some that preceded) Batman Begins and The Dark Knight.

Just as Batman did not carry the institutional banner during World War II, so too does this Batman refuse to be clearly aligned with contemporary US governmental culture and policies, though there are certainly many instances where this could be countered (including the very notion that once he is no longer necessary he will quit vigilantism, a theme consistent in these films as well as in—theoretically—political rhetoric surrounding American foreign policy following 9/11). A particularly telling scene for such a reading involves Bruce Wayne developing a project using sonar—admittedly, this may indeed be a
veiled but necessary nod to camp and the Batman of the 1960s—and
cell phones to image the city, a technological power he hands to Lucius
Fox, altruistically programming it to destroy itself after this one use.

Far more telling in Brooker's analysis, however, is the notion of
"establishing a brand." This is, as Booker points out, crucial to the
creation of Batman as a cultural icon, allowing Batman to live on in
twenty-first-century mythos, free of Bruce Wayne's self-governance or
the commercial interests that drive the graphic and filmic reinventions
of Batman and his world. *The Dark Knight* mirrors the necessity in
American—and, arguably, global—cultures of establishing a brand,
which is at least parallel to giving a permanent and telling origin and
reinforcing it through reiteration. This is, again, what is provided by
*Batman Begins*—and *The Dark Knight* as a continuation of it—for Bat-
man and what *The Dark Knight* denies viewers in this calibration of the
Joker. It is precisely this brand power that binds institutionalization
together—whether it is commercial or governmental—and is chal-
lenged in a post-9/11 world, while institutions attempt ritualistically
to reinforce the narrative brand power, as this historical moment—as
things fall apart, as Chinua Achebe might say—requires it.

As important as not knowing where the Joker comes from—in
learning who he is—is not knowing where he is going or what his
future is. In that way the entire trajectory of his narrative is obscured.
Similar to the explanation provided by Alfred early in the film is a
scene where the Joker visits Harvey Dent (Aaron Eckhart) in the hos-
pital and, essentially, creates Two-Face:

Joker: [to Harvey Dent/Two-Face] Do I really look like a guy with a
plan? You know what I am? I’m a dog chasing cars. I wouldn’t know
what to do with one if I caught it. You know, I just . . . do things.
The mob has plans, the cops have plans, [Lieutenant] Gordon’s got
plans. You know, they’re schemers. Schemers trying to control their
little worlds. I’m not a schemer. I try to show the schemers how
pathetic their attempts to control things really are. So, when I say
. . . . Ah! Come here. When I say that you and your girlfriend was
nothing personal, you know that I’m telling the truth. It’s the
schemers that put you where you are. You were a schemer, you had
plans, and look where that got you. I just did what I do best. I took
your little plan and I turned it on itself. Look what I did to this city
with a few drums of gas and a couple of bullets. Hmm? You know
. . . You know what I’ve noticed? Nobody panics when things go
“according to plan.” Even if the plan is horrifying! If tomorrow I tell
the press that, like, a gang banger will get shot, or a truckload of soldiers will be blown up, nobody panics, because it's all part of the plan. But when I say that one little old mayor will die, well then everybody loses their minds! Introduce a little anarchy. Upset the established order, and everything becomes chaos. I'm an agent of chaos. Oh, and you know the thing about chaos? It's fair!

Of the many intriguing paths for analysis the above passage provides, most integral to this study is that the Joker sees himself as one who simply "does things," like a "dog chasing cars," free of a narrative not only in the past, but also in the present and future. Of course, he is turning Harvey Dent—scheming, as it were—but he is selling Dent on a particular fairness attached to a world where no one is scheming, where narratives are not written or followed, and where identities are denied; the Joker cracks open a door in Harvey's mind of an anarchic utopia. The Joker goes on to explain the danger of adhering to governmentality, describing a world where even the most horrifying acts and events are tolerated as long as they adhere to the provided narrative. Clearly he aligns chaos with a brand of fairness, altruism, and purity as an alternative to this institutionality, which somehow makes it right and without alternative in his mind, not unlike Cho in that respect. Further, and particularly important in this current mixture of strong global forms of governmentality and both justified and unjustified resistances to them is this Joker's ability to create panic and disrupt social order from within and with very low-scale technologies.

Although many of the simultaneously waxing and waning post-9/11 anxieties cannot and should not be thrust upon diverse works of popular culture, in this case anxiety of the ease with which destruction can occur is hit home by the Joker's comment that he can create a disruption in narrative and governmentality itself with "a few drums of gas and a couple of bullets." And as real as that fear may be, and as directly as this film may point to it, primary of these post-9/11 fears and tensions is the anxiety of accountability in a world where fear of breeches in safety and national borders by amorphous and virtually anonymous small groups is created, carried, and extended, particularly those considered "within." This includes terrorist organizations, but also domestic terrorists and other individuals who mean to upset social order by means of violence, like Seung-Hui Cho, for any number of reasons and, occasionally, what appears to be a lack thereof. Concerning the relationship between uncertainty and large-scale violence such as
terrorist attacks, Arjun Appadurai comments that, “such violence could be viewed as a complex response to intolerable levels of uncertainty about group identities” (88). Appadurai later restates, by asking, “What does social uncertainty have to do with terrorism? The link is that terrorism works through the tools of uncertainty” (92). Contextually, Appadurai is talking about global processes that create massive inequities, as borders of various kinds are permeated and subsequent—and often ethnically based—large-scale violence as well as cellular terrorism. But it is this unknowability and uncertainty of identity that—in the case of the Joker—is foregrounded, exposing this anxiety through the denial of such an origin story, feeding into and exploiting this contemporary fear. This relationship is also exposed in the creation of a narrative for Seung-Hui Cho and the immediacy with which one was unearthed, labeled, and shaped.

Andrew Martin and Patrice Petro, in Rethinking Global Security: Media, Popular Culture, and the “War on Terror,” analyze television, popular film, images, and other media as they interact with a post-9/11 environment largely concerned with anxieties and fears about global security and the so-called war on terror. The authors analyze how governing bodies employ “strategic fictions” that carry these fears and anxieties through popular culture forms to buttress institutional/governmental power and keep society—the term society, though used loosely by the authors in this volume, is meant in their applications as society/ies in the United States at large—“moving forward,” aligning time with progress and modernity and technology with freedom. Perhaps, then, we can think of the coverage of Cho and the VT shooting as a strategic nonfiction, although the nonfiction designation does not necessarily mean that the coverage hinges on facts or a complete understanding of them. One author even argues that the national security strategy of the United States itself is predicated upon the kinds of narratives and story telling found in Hollywood films like The Sum of All Fears and others (15). This is structurally similar to the argument here: reality is following the trajectory of a popular fictive plot because it sets a narrative standard—a lived literary narrative—for reality to align with and diverge from. The same is true in the case of focusing on Cho within the media frame of madness and entering his history from retrospective analysis of his violent acts through the lens of understanding him as a psychopath. Genre, narrative, and brand identities spill from fiction to reality and back again; this process is true both in
the major media coverage of Cho and also in *The Dark Knight*. Again, the Joker character embodies the denial of such a narrative, which works not only to set him apart from previous Jokers, but other modern calibrations of reality as quantifiable, calculable, and extricable.

Media coverage and creation of narratives is not limited to school shootings. Examining media coverage of 9/11, Fritz Breithaupt notes that “the media themselves responded to the attack by creating that which they perceived as the outcome of the attacks: ‘a trauma.’ At the same time, the media recommend themselves as therapist, as the agent of national healing. Obviously the impulse behind this staging of therapy is something other than therapy” (67). In other words, the media, according to Breithaupt, create, diagnose, and provide the cure for events such as these as a ritualistic response: one that serves over and over to bolster and reify institutional and political strength. Having media sources pick and create an organizing principle necessarily leads to the exclusion of other practices, reactions, sentiments, and conditions. Similarly, creating a narrative for Cho—one of mental illness—is a parallel construction to organizing September 11th around the narrative of “trauma.” And again, it is this construction of a narrative that *The Dark Knight* denies in its portrayal and adaptation of the Joker, exposing the anxieties that necessitate such a creation.

Analyzing how popular culture products and particularly major media outlets interact with post-9/11 tensions and anxieties, Amy Reynolds and Brooke Barnett suggest that “CNN created a powerful visual and verbal frame with its coverage by arguing to viewers that the events of September 11 comprised an act of war so horrific that immediate military retaliation was not only justified but necessary” (86). This is not unlike the Joker’s anecdote about even the horrific processes housed within the narrative being tolerated simply because they are in the narrative. Using the language of Media Studies and Media Sociology, Reynolds and Barnett argue a claim that is parallel to my own: that a narrative is being constructed—similar to their creation of a media frame—that dictates the flow and shape of media content. Where for Reynolds and Barnett the media creation of the necessity for immediate military retaliation is a ritualistic—borrowing from Breithaupt—show of institutional and political strength, so too is it in the case of the VT shooting.

One particularly telling means of creating a narrative form of an accountable Cho was the choice to air censored and condensed clips of
his videos after the shootings occurred. Startlingly, Cho speaks at length in recordings he sent to NBC between his attacks about the ways that he had been tormented “inhumanly” by society instead of the other way around, like Alfred contextualizes that the thief had tormented governmentality. Gotham paints the Joker as a madman, a self-proclaimed agent of chaos, and extends this anti-, or, nonnarrative of anonymity and opacity. But it is exactly this that major media attempted to correct in creating a narrative of a psychopathic Cho.

Cho understood the power of brand establishment, evidenced by his sending between his attacks the aforementioned media packet to NBC, which contained twenty-five minutes of video, forty-three photographs in a number of violent and armed poses, as well as twenty-three pages of writing. In Philip Auslander’s *Liveness: Performance in a Mediatized Culture*, he states that, while discussing rock music, it “is designed for reproducibility and is therefore always already inauthentic, even when played live” (84). If this is applied to the case of Cho and his attack at VT, as well as his sending of these materials to NBC, it becomes clear that, at least potentially in his mind, this attack was built for reproduction, staged to be seen: an authenticity contingent upon acknowledgment and dissemination. This is a notion supported by much of the news coverage and reactions to it. Auslander continues, suggesting, “Our current concepts of proximity and intimacy derive from television. The incursion of mediatization into live events can be understood as a means of making those events respond to the need for televsional intimacy, thus fulfilling desires and expectations shaped by mediatized representations” (159). Indeed, the narrative Cho attempts to build through these materials is very much enmeshed in this understanding. His attack was for spectacle, to disrupt governance; it was staged for TV because that is what authenticity, to Cho, looked like. The camera (which reproduces) is not only part of it, but is what makes it real. As noted earlier and evidenced by Martin and Petro, portions of this reality—in their calibration, foreign policy particularly—often follows the trajectories/narratives provided or reflected by popular culture forms. In the case of Cho, he is not following a specific narrative from popular culture necessarily, but is instead continuing the mediatized understanding—the creation and continuation of narrative—of school shootings and how they are perpetrated and by whom. Because they are so routinely televised and have become a part of American popular culture and indeed global culture to some extent, his sending materials
to a major network implies the knowledge that he will be built into the history of school shootings, operating as one actor—shaping and reflecting a narrative—that remains consistent and also diverges from the school shooting genre.

Seung-Hui Cho’s videos, writings, and images portray a self-proclaimed victim of institutions that he claimed supported classist and racist agendas in monolithic and one-dimensional understanding of American society. He repeatedly cited that “they” could have made it better at any point, but left him, somehow, with no choice other than to do what he did. NBC released some of his videos and photos after they were reviewed and cleared by authorities. NBC showed selections of the videos in small, teaser chunks, even though there was a relatively large amount of material that the general public could have been exposed to. The Associated Press reported “the package from Cho arrived at the [NBC] New York headquarters at 11 a.m. two days after the shooting. NBC officials sifted through the material and waited until 6 p.m. to air parts of it. ‘We hit the brake pedal,’ [network news president Steve] Capus said. NBC decided to show two minutes of 25 minutes of video, seven of 43 photographs and 37 sentences of 23 pages of written material” (AP). The focus of CBS coverage shortly became concerned primarily with mental health and how VT and other institutional sources mismanaged it in the case of Cho. In short, the blame game was in full effect, trying to find accountability and an identity, a brand, a narrative through which to understand Seung-Hui Cho. After the selections of his materials were shown, the police and other authorities, according to CBS, reported that showing his images on TV amounted to glorifying Cho, and made victims feel “victimized twice” (CBS/AP). Other accounts were also reported of viewers pleased that the videos were shown because instead of simply engaging in melancholic responses it allowed them to focus on “the enemy” (ABC News). So the clips themselves alongside the censorship of them acted as a means through which Cho was created as not only psychopathic, but to a certain extent, a villain.

Further, among the people interviewed and consulted were psychiatrists, one of which called the airing of any portion of Cho’s videos and other materials a “social catastrophe,” as it gave Cho the glorification in death he, according to the psychiatrist, was apparently seeking. NBC, MSNBC, ABC, FOX, and other major networks all saw the materials as newsworthy to some extent and the major reason these outlets chose
to air selections of the videos and other materials was, according to Capus, that people all wanted to know why Cho did what he did and these materials helped to answer that question, amounting to, in his mind, “good journalism” (AP). Of course, if that were true and in the interest of the public, why only show selections instead of the entirety of the materials? FOX later chose to pull all and any airing of Cho’s materials, stating that they had changed their mind (after much backlash from viewers and some groups). Shortly after, and in response to the alleged backlash as well, CBS and CNN newsrooms changed their policies on airing the materials to require explicit permission from their executives to air any of the content. The content was then aired in spurts, with particular contexts of mental health and occasional murmuring of “evil” surrounding the clips. Interviews were conducted with his family members both in the United States and in South Korea, roommates, professors, classmates, and others all in the context of mental health and his mental status throughout their relationships with him (CBS/AP). The airing of the videos and the subsequent intense censorship of the videos helped create a psychopathic narrative for Cho, to help understand who to blame and how. Much like narratives are established in popular culture products and phenomena, so too was one established here: a brand identity through which to understand Cho, a villain, and the narrative of this event consistent with the governmentality of this historical moment.

Tellingly, *The Dark Knight* ends with a new narrative—a different brand identity—thrust upon Batman: that of domestic terrorist. When Jim Gordon explains, in the closing moments of the film, that Batman is the hero Gotham deserves but not the hero Gotham needs “right now”—and so he will be hunted and chased by the very institutions he is dedicated to protecting—it becomes clear that a narrative turn occurs in which Batman’s brand—in Gotham City, at least—is morphed to serve a purpose of institutional strength and reification of governmental order. He is blamed for the deaths of Harvey Dent and a handful of corrupt officers, which allows institutional actors—the police and the judicial system—to operate, fills a narrative void, and affords a public grasp on his (though incorrect) identity. This is necessary because Harvey Dent, who, unbeknownst to the Gotham public, becomes Two-Face and thus betrays his role as White Knight District Attorney/legitimate savior of Gotham (the hero Gotham needs, but does not deserve), is driven into darkness by the Joker and kills a
number of corrupt figures in the film. And for systematic order to prevail in the film the squeaky-clean “died a hero” ethos must remain intact; Dent’s legitimate brand of heroism must be established for institutional reification, even if untrue. Where state violence and even some other forms can serve governance, Harvey’s violence, in Richard Slotkin’s terms, is violence that fails to regenerate and therefore must not be made known (3–24).

Like most good vigilantes, at the end of The Dark Knight Batman catches his villain and, ostensibly, sends him to Arkham Asylum, or at least that is what the audience is led to believe as the Joker swings back and forth, suspended from the scaffolding of a skyscraper. Arkham’s presence makes it clear that there is a systematic acknowledgement of and place for insanity (and the intolerance of it) in Gotham (or at least on its outskirts in other graphic interpretations). Through Arkham mental health is directly addressed, but hardly resolved. It is constantly broken into and out of, causing massive panic when breeched, as exemplified in Batman Begins. Madness actually has a real and public place in the Batman world. There is an institutional expectation of transgression based on psychosis, and yet it still remains somehow shocking to the Gothamite public; this is consistent with the Joker’s earlier remark that nobody panics when events are “part of the plan,” or in this case, the narrative. Further, there is a notion in Arkham that these are not people that can be helped, although in Batman Begins these prisoner/patients are subject to treatments and doctors that—when not corrupted and preparing to drug and unleash these prisoner/patients upon Gotham City—are, ostensibly, attempting to help them somehow through treatments or other methods, whereas the reaction in the face of institutional breech is often to identify the problem, find an accusable party or entity and align it back into the modern governmental framework.

In the case of Cho, he had been admitted to a mental hospital for evaluation/observation and subsequently released. The specific mental health institution failed in some respects but also succeeded in protecting his rights to privacy, as did VT after authorities were notified of his troubling fictive works for one of his courses by a professor. Both of these institutions and numerous others were examined in response to his extra-narrative acts of violence and a number of other universities and governmental agencies/institutions created plans and preparations for such an event to occur within their premises, thus finding potential
correctives to reign in extra-narrative occurrences such as this. The control and management of his body—how and when he could engage the physical world—was not governed by external forces, which left it to his sense of self-governance, which clearly failed. The narrative of mental health allowed for this failure of body management to be circumvented and the flaw—the breech—was located in his mental state and ability to self-govern, not the institutions and governing bodies. As such, the narrative created allowed Cho—the same kind of narrative denied by the Joker—to be grasped, manipulated, held accountable, and—even after his death—punished for the greater governmental order represented in popular culture—reluctantly in many, if not all, cases—by Batman himself.

Radical behaviors and popular culture, though disparate in appearance, intersect in numerous useful and telling ways. The tools of one can, in some cases, be used to unearth processes hidden in the other that can unlock something more about this world. And whether it is radical behaviors present in popular culture expressions like *The Dark Knight* or popular culture present—in one way or another—in radical behaviors, the presence of narrative is clear, though the role it plays certainly differs. In some cases reality mirrors particular popular culture narratives and in others it is simply informed by the role narrative plays in popular culture and, subsequently, manifests itself in the matter and behaviors that constitutes everyday life as well as in the many ways that everyday life is interrupted.

Notes

1. Perhaps it is in these conditions that Will Brooker could not have predicted that Batman—and his auxiliaries—continues to exist as a twenty-first-century myth.
2. This, of course, includes everything from the biopolitical, the management of bodies, to deciding who is included or excluded based on whatever factors a particular society values and holds as socially acceptable norms, in Foucauldian terms.
3. At one point in the film, speaking to Aaron Eckhart [Harvey Dent/Two-Face], the Joker states that he is “Like a dog chasing cars . . . .If [he] ever caught one [he] wouldn’t know what to do with it.”
4. Certainly this is not only true of Batman and Bond, but potentially of a much wider array of detective fiction as well as, of course, numerous forms of popular culture in general.
5. This itself is worthy of a lengthy analysis concerning which fictions and narratives are sanctioned in governance and which are outlawed, particularly in relationship to popular culture and radical, violent acts. When the Virginia Tech shooting occurred the censorship of fiction in collegiate institutions became the topic around which much media coverage and controversy had constellated.
Works Cited


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