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***Batman*: screen adaptation and chaos**

- what the archive tells us

KEYWORDS

Batman

screen adaptation

script development

Warren Skaaren

Sam Hamm

Tim Burton

ABSTRACT

Warner Brothers' efforts to launch the Caped Crusader into his own blockbuster movie franchise were infamously fraught and turbulent. It took more than ten years of screenplay development, involving numerous writers, producers and executives, before Batman (1989) was green lit with Tim Burton in the director's chair. Even then, battles continued to rage over the material, and redrafting carried on throughout the shoot. Warren Skaaren was the script doctor brought in by the studio to rescue the project. His role has been a matter of conjecture and controversy. This article explores Skaaren's personal archive stored at the University of Texas at Austin to shed new light on what transpired in the final phases of pre-production and the tussles that went on even as the cameras rolled. It analyzes the contribution of Skaaren and others in shaping the screenplay, questions some of the myths that have grown up about the script, and argues for the importance of the production to screenplay studies as a particularly well-documented example of a highly complex, even chaotic adaptation which nevertheless resulted in a commercially and critically successful film.

INTRODUCTION

In August 2013, I spent two and a half weeks examining documents relating to the screenplay development of Tim Burton's 1989 film *Batman* in the Harry Ransom Center at the University of Texas at Austin. *Batman* offers a rich case study for any scholar of the screenwriting process – more than ten years in gestation, heterogeneous source material, competing story concepts, multiple drafts and writers, extensive reworking during production. The chaotic history of the project has been common knowledge more-or-less since the film's release, but I was intrigued to see what new light the extensive Ransom archive could shed on it. I was especially fascinated by Burton's claim that, despite the expenditure of all that time and creative effort, the script was incoherent by the time he was shooting it (Salisbury [1995] 2000: 70-80). If that was true, how was it allowed to happen, and how did *Batman* survive to become such a commercial and critical hit?

I was led to *Batman* by my interest in "ghosting," which I have previously defined as "the process by which a key collaborator's input into a screenplay's evolution can leave a residue long after that collaborator has moved on, or more importantly long after that input fits the evolving concept" (Lyons 2011: 257). Obviously, this has a textual theory aspect to it, connected to the idea advanced by Steven Price and others that successive drafts of a screenplay contain traces of the drafts that preceded them, and that the screenplay, though in a sense invisible to the audience, retains a presence in the completed film (Price 2010: 43-53). This in turn links to the metaphor of the palimpsest, the term used in adaptation studies to describe the impressions left by one form as it is transformed to another (Price 2010: 53-4), and I will return to this shortly. But it was my experience as a screenwriter and screenwriting teacher rather than as an academic that initially brought me to the significance of 'ghosting'. Years of creative practice have made me aware that turning a story idea around in mid-development can be immensely challenging, even when problems with it have been clearly identified and agreed on. While detecting the layers in a palimpsest may excite the textual scholar, the professional screenwriter is inevitably more preoccupied with erasing or obscuring unwanted elements during redrafting and replacing them with better ones. But in the heat of battle, when production pressures are intruding, it can be particularly hard to detect and exorcise the demons haunting a script.

The Ransom Centre archive provides a rare opportunity to scrutinise 'ghosting' within the context of a Hollywood blockbuster movie, through the Warren Skaaren papers donated to the Center shortly after Skaaren's early death at the age of 43 in 1990. Warren Skaaren is not a familiar name even to film critics or historians, but he was one of the most highly sought after Hollywood script doctors of the 1980s. His credits included *Top Gun* (1986), *Beverly Hills Cops 2* (1987), and *Beetlejuice* (1988). By the end of the decade he had become the go-to guy the studios looked to if a screenplay needed fixing. It was to him whom Warner Brothers turned just before the start of filming to try and rescue the *Batman* script.

Among the 68 catalogued boxes of his records now held at the Ransom Center, there are seven exclusively devoted to *Batman*, including successive drafts of the screenplay by Skaaren and others, script analyses, outlines and treatments, notes of meetings and phone calls, memos and faxes, on-set revisions and shooting schedules, personal journals, memorabilia, press cuttings and marketing material, and – most illuminating perhaps in terms of ascertaining authorship – documents relating to the final arbitration over writers’ credits. Though numerous other writers were involved in development, the *Batman* screenplay was officially credited to Sam Hamm and Warren Skaaren from a story by Sam Hamm, the significance of which I will come to in due course. Other boxes in the archive include additional files relevant to *Batman*, as well as useful background material on Skaaren’s life and career.¹

This wealth of evidence yields a detailed draft-by-draft record of the screenplay’s evolution, including minute changes to individual lines and scenes, revealing whose hand bore an imprint on each dramatic moment and to what extent. It also paints a vivid and colourful picture of the development and production processes as a whole, with intimate insights into working methods of the creative team, the interventions of the studio executives, the interpersonal relationships, debates, discussions and conflicts, deadlines, and the logistical and budgetary limitations they faced. It illuminates Skaaren’s private feelings about the project and his role within it, his creative intentions, how he negotiated each revision made to the script, and where he had to compromise. It also reflects the way that the long history of *Batman* in all its manifestations came to bear on creative decision-making, as well as the influence of diehard *Batman* fans.

All told, this is fertile ground for a rounded understanding of the byzantine tangle of threads that led to the film Burton and his collaborators had to stitch together. My approach to the material here is to analyze it as a case study of a highly complex, dynamic screen development project. This follows Steven Maras’s belief that screenwriting is not only embodied in objects like scripts or films, but can be viewed as a practice that ‘draws on a set of processes, techniques and devices,’ and one that may be subject to any number of institutional or industrial pressures and constraints (Maras 2009: 11). However, since much of the Skaaren archive consists of drafts and partial drafts of the screenplay, these are crucial evidence in understanding the processes, techniques and devices that produced them. From the perspective of scholarship, this gives them an ‘existence’ or ‘after-life’, as Price puts it (Price 2013: 89) – a significance which many of them, as temporary moments in a fast-moving picture, may not have had at the time.

¹ References to the Warren Skaaren Papers in this article are in a format consistent with the Harry Ransom Center inventory: e.g. WS Papers 2.4 (i.e. Box 2 Folder 4). See ‘References’ below for the weblink.

Nevertheless, the ultimate object of the study is not the documents but the screenplay evolution that can be inferred from them. This is squarely in line with the methodologies of French genetic criticism, which seeks to capture and describe the essence of a writing process through ‘the concrete analysis of the material traces left by that process’ (Ferrer and Groden 2004: 11). As Macdonald and Price have pointed out, genetic criticism has become an especially useful tool in screenwriting research, particularly with regard to collaboration and adaptation, which makes it highly relevant here (Macdonald 2013: 183-86; Price 2013: 94)². Meanwhile, the notion of ‘traces’ returns us to both ‘ghosting’ and the palimpsest. Rosamund Davies informs us that the term ‘palimpsest’ originally referred to ‘the phenomenon whereby text erased from ancient parchments and overwritten with new text would make a ghostly reappearance years later, through a process of oxidization’ (Davies 2013: 164). However, she reminds us that in screen adaptation – and by extension screenplay development generally – script drafts do not necessarily chart a simple chronological progression from initial iteration to finished film. She suggests that that the definition of ‘palimpsest’ could be extended to encompass a more entwined structure of interwoven documents, facilitating ‘an understanding of the multi-layered and intertextual properties of the screenwork itself’ (Davies 2013: 176). As we shall see, this idea of non-sequential cross-pollination is peculiarly appropriate to *Batman*, and not only because of the vast complexity of its comic book source.

In fact, the aesthetic implications of adapting comic books into a movie have no more than a marginal role in this article. For reasons that will become apparent, the Skaaren papers reveal more about adaptations of material already existing as screenplays, rather than in comic strip form. Besides, Will Brooker has written extensively and eloquently on the subject of screen adaptations based on original Batman stories and characters (Brooker 1999, 2000, 2012). His ‘Batman: One Life, Many Faces’ (1999) remains an important intervention within adaptation studies for identifying, among other things, the multiple appropriations from cinema in the early Batman comic strips, the influence of corporate ambition and Batman fans, questions of authorship, and the tension between continuity narratives and those that offer exceptions to accepted Batman tropes³. It is not my intention to critique his excellent work, but instead to complement it by providing nuanced insights into the screenplay process behind a film that, for all its idiosyncrasies and quirks, created a newly “official” and “dominant” version of Batman for a generation of cinemagoers (Brooker 1999: 193).

² For an introduction to genetic criticism, see the influential anthology edited by Deppman, Ferrer and Groden (2004).

³ Brooker acknowledges a debt to Umberto Eco’s seminal chapter on comic book heroes, ‘The Myth of Superman’ (1979: 107-124). Eco dissects the way in which the essentially repetitive nature of comic book series requires writers to invent and reinvent within tightly fixed conventions.

THE DARK KNIGHT REVIVED

The story behind the making of *Batman* goes back to the late 1970s, when a young lawyer-cum-comic strip writer, Michael Uslan, secured the screen rights and began hawking round a script called 'The Return of the Batman' about the middle-aged Caped Crusader coming out of retirement for a series of final adventures (Scivally 2011: 145-49). The project was taken up by producers Jon Peters and Peter Guber (Griffin and Masters [1996] 1997: 164-65) and finally found its way to Warner Brothers, who were keen to repeat the success of their *Superman* franchise which launched in 1978. But this was a bad era for Batman, whose credibility was at a low ebb, having failed to recover from the jokey image created by the 1960s television series. BLAM! KERPOW! HOLY SMOKE, BATMAN! Readers of a certain age will remember it well.

Uslan's vision, shared by Warners, was to restore the character to a darker, more sombre, more adult Gotham City, reminiscent of the one created by Bob Kane and Bill Finger in the original comic books from 1939 (Collinson 2012: 66)⁴. But finding the right tone proved difficult. The task of reviving Batman had to contend with the many different lives and representations the character had been given over the years. Initially conceived as a Zorro-like figure inhabiting a Gotham City influenced by gangster movies and German expressionism, The Dark Knight turned in the 1940s into a hunter of evil Nazis and oriental villains. He was then sanitised in the 1950s into a kind of all-American hero fighting anything from alien invasion to litter dropping. The Pop Art-influenced 1960s TV series caused a sensation by transforming Gotham into a camp and garish romp, full of knowing winks towards the gay undercurrents of men in tights and Batman and Robin's supposed homo-erotic relationship. But the novelty value was short-lived and, despite the best efforts of the comic book creators to rejuvenate the title, by the early 1980s Batman was in something of a creative slump (Reinhart 2013: 80-91). Meanwhile, the comic book fans, a small group but a passionate and influential one, demanded what they perceived to be a return to the true spirit of the very earliest tales, perhaps best described as a black carnival or playfully demonic circus populated by exotically masked and costumed baddies like the Penguin, the Riddler and Catwoman.

However, the challenges of adapting Batman were not just those of aesthetic or emotional register. What story would the film tell? As Brooker has shown, there is no one fixed dominant text of Batman in the sense that there is with *The Lord of the Rings* or even *Dracula* (Brooker 1999: 185-86). Batman is more like James Bond, although even with 007

⁴ Uslan and his business partner, Benjamin Melniker, would eventually be sidelined from *Batman*, but were credited as executive producers, titles they have been given on every Batman movie made by Warners since (Scivally 2011: 160-61, 225-26).

there is a series of original novels on which the early films were loosely based. Through the thousands of comic stories, films, television series – both animated and live action - graphic novels, toys and computer games, Batman exists as a contemporary mythos based on a certain set of recurring narrative elements and conventions, which are rearranged and refashioned by each generation, and indeed each author. So which text or texts were the film-makers to use? And by whom? Unlike Bond or Sherlock Holmes, Bruce Wayne is not associated with a single established author. Many writers, artists, even pencillers and letterers have left their imprint on Batman comic books. So have Batman's fans.

Technically owned by Time Warner and DC Comics, the Caped Crusader is such a shared and familiar part of global popular culture that mass participation and interactivity have become part of his resonance and enduring appeal. Some of my first scripts as a boy, if you can call them 'scripts,' were little Batman plays performed by me and my friends for our parents⁵, while these days the internet allows for the proliferation of unofficial Batman narratives that help to feed the Batman legend. Even in the pre-web era of the 1970s and 80s, there were platforms for fanbase participation from comic conventions to fanzines and Batclubs, and letters would pour into DC Comics monitoring, critiquing and condemning storylines (Parsons in Pearson and Uricchio 1991: 86).

Under such public gaze, with so much at stake commercially and doubt surrounding the creative approach to take, it is hardly surprising that Warners were gripped by indecision despite their desire to exploit their property. Tom Mancias, the *Superman* screenwriter, delivered a script in 1983 which focused on Bruce Wayne's and Dick Grayson's origins as the Dynamic Duo, and various directors like Joe Dante (*Gremlins*) and Ivan Reitman (*Ghostbusters*) were attached to the project (Scivally 2011: 149-52). But the screenplay's similarities to *Superman*, both in structure and tone, failed to satisfy the studio. No fewer than nine other writers attempted rewrites, including Batman comic book writer Steve Englehart, whose stories Mancias had drawn on, all to no avail (Collinson 2012: 67-68). Eventually in a desperate effort to find something different, Warners offered the project to Tim Burton, then a hot 20-something director with a quirky, visual style fashioned in his first movie, *Pee-Wee's Big Adventure* (1985), which had grossed \$41 million from a budget of \$6million (Scivally 2011: 155). Burton turned to Julie Hickson, a collaborator from his days as a Disney animator, to write a 43-page treatment based on Mancias's structure. But it was only when he was teamed up with Sam Hamm, a lowly Warners staffer and comic book fan with little screenwriting experience, that a decisive breakthrough for the project was made (Scivally 2011: 157-58).

Retaining only the merest traces of Mancias's narrative, Hamm re-imagined Bruce Wayne as a troubled figure tortured by the murder of his parents, and his alter-ego Batman

⁵ To this day, my younger sister bears me a grudge for preventing her from playing a part in one of these playlets because she couldn't do an American accent. She was four years old.

as a shadowy vigilante and creature of the night. This was timely. The script landed on executives' desks shortly after the comic book conceptualisation of Batman had been revolutionised by the publication of Frank Miller's *The Dark Knight Returns* in 1986. The cult success of Miller's graphic novel, later reinforced by Alan Moore's similarly gloomy *The Killing Joke* in 1988, gave Warners confidence that the public was ready for a darker, post-punk onscreen Batman (Reinhart 2013: 91-98). The film was green lit in April, 1988, on the basis of Hamm's third draft of the script and the surprise box office success of Burton's second film, *Beetlejuice*. But there were problems. Despite the studio's faith in the screenplay, they still felt it was not ready for shooting, and Hamm's further involvement was curtailed because of an American screenwriters' strike. With filming due to start at Pinewood Studios near London in the autumn, Burton was already in the UK by early summer and hired a British writer, Charles McKeown, to help him polish the script.

McKeown had good credentials. He had worked on *Brazil* (1985) and *The Adventures of Baron Munchausen* (1988) with Terry Gilliam. But the draft he and Burton delivered on 15 August and revised by 25 August still did not convince the executives. With elaborate sets, expensive gadgets and special effects already under construction, rehearsals due to start on 24 September, principal photography scheduled for 10 October, and Jack Nicholson - slated to play the Joker - yet to give script approval, Warners begged Warren Skaaren to come onboard. Skaaren, who had previously turned the job down, finally accepted, no doubt attracted by the \$750,000 fee plus one per cent of gross (contract, WS Papers 7.12), and the chance to act as a caped crusader to an 'at risk' project. He had a good working relationship with Burton, having co-written *Beetlejuice*, but what was to follow, almost inevitably given the pressures, would put both men under the most intense strain.

Here is a flavour of the atmosphere on set caused by problems with the screenplay, from an interview Burton gave in 1995:

Everyone thought the script was great, but they *still*⁶ thought it needed a total rewrite. Obviously it was a big movie, and it represented an enormous investment by Warners, so I understood why we had to make it right. But what made the situation worse was there was all this fuss about making the script better and suddenly we were shooting. There were so many changes and fixes that it was like unravelling a ball of yarn. It gets to a point where you're *not*⁷ helping it any more. We were shooting a scene leading up to the bell-tower and Jack's walking up the steps, but we didn't know why. He said to me that day, "Why am I going up the steps?" And I said, "I don't know, Jack. We'll talk about it when you get to the top."

⁶ Salisbury's italics

⁷ Salisbury's italics

(Salisbury [1995]2000: 78)

The Gotham Cathedral bell-tower sequence is the dramatic climax of the movie. So the allegation here is quite extraordinary – that there had been so much tampering with the script that the leading man in one of the most expensive pictures ever made to that date was on set shooting the final scene, completely confused as to his character’s motivation. And the director could not help either.

There is plenty of evidence that the impression given by Burton here is accurate, and he is not simply exaggerating to draw sympathy or inflate his importance in view of the subsequent success of the film. Gary Collinson records how producer Jon Peters was reluctant to entrust a potentially lucrative franchise to a young director on his first big feature, and continually interfered with both script and production, eventually provoking an angry confrontation with Nicholson (Collinson 2012: 74). Mark Reinhart shows how Peters ordered and mapped out the rewrite of the bell-tower sequence himself against Burton’s wishes, to extend and intensify the final showdown between Michael Keaton’s Batman and Nicholson’s Joker (Reinhart 2013: 107). The revision required the construction of a 38 foot model cathedral at a cost of \$100,000, despite the shoot already being in over-run (Scivally 2011: 168). Then at the last minute, Peters hired stunt doubles as the Joker’s heavies to maximise the action mayhem, and much of the sequence had to be improvised on set (Griffin and Masters [1996] 1997).

THE BAT FILES

My task in Texas was to see whether the Skaaren papers confirm this picture of confusion, and if so what more could they reveal. Given the resources of the Ransom Center, here is what I was hoping to discover:

- a. How could the screenplay have reached the set in such an incoherent state, given the massive profile of the project and the high financial and creative stakes involved?
- b. Who if anyone could be said to have authored the screenplay? Or, to put it more precisely, what contribution did the numerous individuals involved make?
- c. Finally, what contribution could an analysis of *Batman* make to screenplay theory and/or adaptation studies?

The Skaaren papers do more than corroborate the screenplay chaos. They expose the scale and depth of it, providing proof of continual and extensive rewriting right up to and including the final few days of photography, creating uncertainty for director, actors and everyone else on set. The final draft of the bell-tower sequence, dated 14 January 1989 and

assembled by the production office⁸, presumably for shooting and/or other production purposes, is a splicing together of Skaaren's radical revisions (mid-to-late December 1988) of his own production draft (6 October 1988) based loosely on Hamm's third draft (29 February 1988) and Burton's and McKeown's version (August 25 1988), together with eleventh hour rewrites done on set by McKeown under Peters's instruction (6 January 1989). Read literally from the pages, with inserts in buff, gold, pink and other colours⁹, this bodged together amalgam of different people's work, containing numerous last minute changes to action, running order and dialogue with input from the actors, includes two major narrative continuity problems. The chief love interest Vicki Vale appears as if by magic at the top of the 30-storey high cathedral without explanation as to how or why. This is a cut-and-paste mistake caused by copying in text from early drafts, in which Vale is left by Batman at the cathedral door, rather than using Skaaren's final revision based on an idea he developed from 10 December onwards of the Joker taking her captive and forcing her at gunpoint up the tower (arbitration statement, WS Papers 7.16). Whether it contributed to the on-set confusion or not, at least this error did not find its way into the movie. The sequence was shot with Vale in it, as Peters wished. But, as I will show later, a more serious piece of narrative inconsistency, this time involving dialogue between Batman and the Joker, was filmed and did make the final cut. No wonder Burton and Nicholson were lost.

So how could this witch's brew occur? Self-evidently, the roots of the problem lie in green-lighting the project before the studio had a script they felt was ready. Of course, in Hollywood, there is nothing unusual in that. The reasons were presumably to do with the availability of Nicholson, Burton and Pinewood Studios, as well as innumerable investment and tax issues which we can only speculate about. What is clear from the Skaaren papers is that Burton felt he had the trust of the producers to fix the script with McKeown. A fax sent by Burton attached to their 25 August rewrite suggests his complete confidence in it, and gives no hint that he might be overruled. However, the studio thought otherwise, and on 29 August they activated the Batsignal. Lucy Fisher, Warner Brothers Executive Vice President of Production, called up Skaaren, and Fed-Ex'd him the draft with a terse accompanying note: 'Dear Warren. [...] We love the movie. But we need you' (note, WS Papers 2.3). All the urgency of 911.

⁸ Co-producer Chris Kenny appears to have had technical responsibility for the running reassembly of the working masterscript as each new rewrite came in (fax to Kenny, WS Papers 4.5). There is no evidence that he had a direct hand in putting together the 14 January draft, which was clearly produced under considerable stress.

⁹ Standard industry practice to indicate late script changes.

BATMAN – CHRONOLOGY OF SCREENPLAY DRAFTS AND REVISIONS*

October 20, 1986	First Draft by Sam Hamm
March 6, 1987	Revised First Draft by Sam Hamm
February 29, 1988	Third Draft by Sam Hamm
August 15, 1988	Third Draft by Sam Hamm, revised by 'unnamed writer' (Tim Burton/Charles McKeown)
August 25, 1988	Fourth Draft by 'unnamed writer' (Tim Burton/Charles McKeown)
September 15, 1988	Draft #1 by Warren Skaaren
September 21, 1988	Draft #2 by Warren Skaaren
September 28, 1988	Draft #3 by Warren Skaaren
October 4, 1988	Draft #4 by Warren Skaaren
October 6, 1988	Draft #5 by Warren Skaaren
December 14, 1988	Fifth Draft by Sam Hamm and Warren Skaaren (inc. Skaarens' revisions)
January 6 & 14, 1989	Revised pages including the bell-tower scene (Charles McKeown)
January 14, 1989	Final Script (Fifth Draft) by Sam Hamm and Warren Skaaren (inc. McKeown's revisions)

*Titles of drafts correspond with listings in the Harry Ransom Center inventory.

WARREN SKAAREN - THE CAPED CRUSADER OF SCRIPTS

The portrait of Warren Skaaren that emerges from the archive is one of an energetic, talented and contradictory character. From a humble, blue collar background in Minnesota, he majored in Fine Art and Sculpture at Rice University in Houston. A lifelong liberal, his early political ambitions led him to work for a conservative state governor of Texas. This put him in a position to help set up the Texas Film Commission, subsequently becoming Director in his mid-twenties, and spending several years promoting film production in the lonestar state, working closely with talents like Clint Eastwood, Robert Redford and Sam Peckinpah. Of Hollywood but not in Hollywood, he would continue to live in Texas for the rest of his life.

His early efforts as a screenwriter were very human in scale, often based on true life or journalistic stories. Although most of those scripts were never filmed, he clearly acquired through working on them a high-level appreciation of Aristotelian structure and character. This together with his political understanding of the industry eventually brought him to the attention of Hollywood, and his reputation soared after his last minute rewrites for *Top Gun*, which effectively stopped Tom Cruise from walking away from the show. This was the mid-1980s, the era of the rise of the script 'doctor' or 'analyst,' which went hand-in-hand with the emergence of cinema as a corporate business run by MBAs, lawyers and accountants looking to develop blockbusters and hit franchises in the wake of *Star Wars* (1977) and *Raiders of the Lost Ark* (1981). It was the decade when studios took greater creative charge of their movies in an increasingly profit-orientated environment, and required screenplay experts to help them exercise control over scripts (Biskind 1998: 401-05).

Skaaren, aged 42 by the time of *Batman*, was an accomplished writer with an original and mischievous spark, but his special talent was as a production problem solver. As his agent Mike Simpson said after he died,

He had no equal in that area, of being to come in and take a chaotic situation, and a script that doesn't work[...]where actors are hired and the director's in place and the movie's gonna start shooting in 10 weeks and there's chaos reigning, and fix it, and just do it overnight.

(WS Papers, Memorial Service video 1991)

That is what he did with *Batman*, as the archive demonstrates. His job was to take over a project teeming with ghosts from the 50 year history of Batman and ten years of screen development, and not only exorcise them, but provide a new way through the mist. Within 24 hours of Fisher's call, he produced a detailed written analysis of the 25 August draft. The following day (31 August), no doubt in shock from developments, Burton faxed Skaaren seventeen pages of studio notes from London, and the two men spoke on the phone about production 'givens' and the creative approach (Datebook Diary, WS Papers 2.31). Another

day later, Skaaren sent off his first redraft outline, then flew to Los Angeles for a meeting with Warners executives, followed by another over at Jack Nicholson's house. It emerges from the documents that a lot of the focus in Burton's and McKeown's work on the script had been centred on beefing up Nicholson's role, presumably in order to secure the star's involvement which was still not certain. Other than that, the 25 August draft was, in Skaaren's view, a wonderful series of rich visual moments and cinematic setpieces, rather haphazardly strung together in a loose narrative that lacked underlying structural shape and character development¹⁰. 'A bunch of beautiful flowers without a bowl to hold them in,' as he says wryly in a handwritten note (meeting notes, WS Papers 2.15).

For the next week, Skaaren, back at home in Austin, worked round the clock pumping out successive new outlines. He shared them at least daily with Burton and with producers and executives, responding to comments while trying to negotiate his own concept for the story within the rigid production parameters that already existed and couldn't be undone because of cost. In addition, he was working with fixed ideas that had been set in Burton's head over the course of two years of development, and expectations from Nicholson of an even juicier part. I am emphasising the pressure Skaaren was under because you often get the sense when screenwriting is talked about by critics and film historians that it is a calm, logical, reflective process that progresses in a linear if not always successful way from one draft to the next. In Reinhart's recent *Batman Filmography*, in an otherwise accurate account of the development of *Batman*, he gives the impression that the changes Skaaren made to the screenplay were purely creative and well in place before casting and production were underway (Reinhart 2013: 104-05). On the contrary, Skaaren was operating within huge constraints, as much sorting out production problems as tightening the story. His ideal notion of how the script could be improved was boxed in very quickly by set design considerations and expensive action sequences already in advanced stages of preparation, as well as Burton's reluctance to adapt and shift. From the outset, his work was negotiation and compromise.

This is particularly evident in the radical changes he wanted to make to the story immediately after the mid-Act 2 climax to re-set the plot and raise the dramatic stakes for the second half of the film. His instinct was to escalate the Joker's campaign of chemical terror on Gotham City (outline, WS Papers 2.18), but he quickly realised that Burton was too closely wedded to a humorous scene in which The Joker confronts Wayne and Vale in Vale's apartment to be shaken from it (phone notes, WS Papers 2.21). So he shrewdly directed his powers of persuasion towards other battles he thought more important, and more possible, to win. An example was cutting Robin from the film entirely, a tough thing to sell to a studio

¹⁰ This might be characterized as 'typical Burton'. Salisbury ([1995] 2000: 114) points out that Burton's critics repeatedly accuse him of an 'inability to tell a coherent story' and of 'sacrificing the narrative for the sake of the visuals'.

bent on setting up a franchise and developing the Batman brand (Reinhart 2013: 105). Previous writers including Hamm had been obliged to incorporate the Boy Wonder, but Skaaren saw that the role was undercooked. Dick Grayson/Robin did not appear until the final act, and was introduced in an extravagant acrobatic setpiece involving the death of his parents. This held up the main narrative and detracted from the focus on the Batman/Joker rivalry¹¹.

Given the state of the script and the imminence of the shoot, it was better for the ghost of Robin to be excised completely, Skaaren argued (arbitration statement, WS Papers 7.16). He won and was ultimately proven right. The decision would later receive much comment, as if it had been a cleverly masterminded strategy to enhance the sense of Batman's melancholy isolation and denote a clean break from the TV show (Brooker 2012: 119-23). The truth, however, is that it was another fix made in haste to rescue the screenplay, save money and bring the production in on schedule, whatever other virtues it may have had. This is a good example of how genetic criticism can expose aspects of screenwriting that a film, or even examination of screenplay drafts, cannot. Skaaren, though a hired hand, is revealed as an independent thinker, capable of challenging the studio on even their most deeply held commercial instincts, even if it was ultimately to their benefit. This has an interesting bearing on our understanding of the script doctor's role, and counters the simplistic view repeated by some critics, guided by the ideology of the auteur-director (Collinson 2012: 74), that Skaaren's input was unhelpful to Burton and was only there to serve corporate interests.

BAT FANS AND COMMERCIAL PRESSURES

On 6 September, following another set of comments from Burton, Skaaren faxed his final draft outline to the studio. They were delighted. 'Genius! Let's go with it!' Peters said (phone notes, WS Papers 2.27).¹² Skaaren was asked for a full first draft by 15 September. He agreed, but warned that, with the amount of new material he was trying to work into Hamm's version, the new draft might well be rough and overlong. Phone conversations continued throughout the following week with Burton, Nicholson and other parties. Matters were further complicated by the arrival of another ghost from the past – a living one this time – in the shape of a letter from Batman creator, Bob Kane (WS Papers 2.29). To Skaaren's surprise, Kane said he had been hired as a consultant to the movie, evidently a PR

¹¹ In a handwritten note dated September 1, Skaaren observes 'Big Robin Issue' (Motivation chart, WS Papers 2.15)

¹² Elsewhere Skaaren records that Peters 'couldn't believe his eyes' and says that he will use the script as a 'prototype' for young writers (Datebook Diary, WS Papers 2.31)

move by Warners designed to keep the comic book fans onside. Kane also said he had been talking to Nicholson, and had a few suggestions to make about some of the sequences. One of these – involving the Joker wiping out his mobland rivals with poisoned champagne rather than crazed, energy-escalating gunfire - horrified Skaaren, particularly as Kane said he had Nicholson’s approval for it. He faxed Burton immediately to tell the director to head it off at the pass. ‘BE PREPARED IF JACK BRINGS IT UP, FOR SOME REASON, TO QUASH IT FAST. YOU DON’T NEED TO RESPOND TO ME ABOUT THIS. JUST BEAR IT IN MIND¹³’ (fax, WS Papers 2.30). This is a rather different response to Kane than the one Skaaren expressed in public, describing the Batman creator’s interest in the script as ‘nice’ (Scivally 2011: 162).

This interlude is just a small example of a wider set of distractions the film-makers had to contend with: the expectations of self-appointed protectors of the Batman legend and their attempts to assert an influence. The way the studio became jittery about a campaign by comic fans to denigrate the casting of Keaton as the eponymous hero has been well documented elsewhere, and generally lies outside the scope of this article (Brooker 2000: 284-85; Scivally 2011: 170-71). In short, fans assumed wrongly that the choice of Keaton signalled a lightweight comedy approach to the material. Warners were swamped with 50,000 letters of complaint. This prompted an article on the front page of *The Wall Street Journal*, and the outcry would continue throughout the period of the shoot until Peters put out a \$400,000 trailer demonstrating the film’s darker approach (Collinson 2012: 75).

If Skaaren was troubled by the Batfans, it is not greatly evident from his notebooks. But he could not help but be conscious of Warners’ commercial hopes for the film. One of the principal reasons for the studio getting him involved was to move the script away from some of Hamm’s gloomier, introspective moments, and enhance the more entertaining idea of Batman as action hero, with more gadgets and setpieces involving the Caped Crusader in costume, fighting crime. To that end, Skaaren increased the screen time spent on Batman’s action sequences, adding more detail and visual humour, with special attention to the Batmobile. He re-engineered the sub-plot of reporter Archie Knox trying to uncover Batman’s true identity, which in Hamm’s earlier drafts was short-circuited when Wayne was revealed halfway through. Skaaren also worked closely with Nicholson on building up his character, developing the idea that the Joker, in a previous life as mobster Jack Napier, was responsible for murdering Wayne’s parents when Bruce was a child.¹⁴ This was a departure from the comic book ‘Origin of Batman’ story which makes Joe Chill the killer, and would

¹³ Skaaren’s capitals

¹⁴ Scivally (2011:161-2) and Reinhart (2013:105) repeat the common belief that Skaaren originated this idea, but it first appears in the August 25 revision by Burton and McKeown (Fourth Draft, WS Papers 1.7; studio notes 2.4).

later offend Batman fans (Collinson 2012: 76).¹⁵ However, it bound together the fates of the two adversaries with greater intensity, personalising their antagonism and creating symmetry in the movie's narrative spine. With the further addition of quotes from Nietzsche suggested by Nicholson¹⁶, Skaaren developed the Joker into a part befitting of a major Hollywood star. It may or may not have been Nicholson who came up with the much-quoted murderous mantra 'Ever dance with the devil in the pale moonlight?', but Skaaren would later lay claim to it (arbitration statement, WS Papers 7.16).

SKAAREN'S DRAFTS

Despite all the pressures, Skaaren duly delivered his full draft revision on the promised date, to be greeted, despite all his earlier pleas, with consternation by the studio. It was 140 pages long. It had lost tension. It added yet more noughts to the bloated budget. Burton, plainly upset and worried, refused to respond to Skaaren directly, claiming he was too busy (meeting notes, WS Papers 2.15). He faxed his notes via the studio instead. He had begged Skaaren not to 'cut too deep' and not to be, in his words, 'too literal' (phone notes, WS Papers 2.17). But in his eyes that is exactly what his friend had done. On 18 September, only six days before the start of rehearsals in London, at what seems to have been a difficult meeting with Warners in LA, Skaaren jotted down on his pad: 'I never want to go through this again.' It is possible that this is a dialogue note, but it is tempting to read it as a private cry of despair (meeting notes, WS Papers 2.15).

Skaaren was asked to cut ten pages. Over the following week, he cut 27. This settled the studio's nerves, and by 28 September he had produced yet another draft. He then flew to London to work on the script in rehearsal with Nicholson, Keaton and Sean Young, who had been cast in the part of Vicki Vale. What is very revealing from the archive is that Burton was effectively sidelined from script development at this point. It is Skaaren who worked with the actors on the scenes, answering to Peters and executive Mark Canton in script meetings, while the director was elsewhere preparing the shoot with his brilliant scenographer Anton Furst, costume designer Bob Ringwood and the rest of the creative team.

Principal photography started on 10 October. The following day, Skaaren flew back to America, where he had urgent business writing a script for Tom Cruise. He touched down at JFK Airport to receive a message that Young had fallen off a horse in rehearsal, broken her

¹⁵ For other departures from established Batman convention, see Brooker (2000: 287-94)

¹⁶ For a detailed account of Nicholson's contribution to the realisation of the Joker, see Scivally (2011: 165-67). As well as collaborating fruitfully with Skaaren, Nicholson was supportive of Burton throughout the shoot.

arm and was out of the movie (letter to Young, WS Papers 5.13). Ironically, the scene would later be cut. Kim Basinger was swiftly enlisted to take her place. This had script implications, and Skaaren had to go back to London to rewrite the Vale part for the new actress. Basinger's interpretation of the role was very different, and the process was further complicated by the fact that she did not get along with Keaton and began a romantic entanglement with Peters (Scivally 2011: 181). Such are the trials of the screenwriter's life. The significant point for us here is that, during this period, while reworking Basinger's scenes with Keaton and Nicholson, it occurred to Skaaren that Vale should be present at the climax of the film. In earlier drafts, as we have seen, she was abandoned outside the cathedral. But Skaaren began to feel, no doubt under the influence of Peters, that it would heighten the drama and bring the love story to a better conclusion if he could work her into the bell-tower scene (arbitration statement, WS Papers 7.16). This was merely the beginning of what would become the most chaotic phase of rewriting.

THE BATTLE OF THE BELL-TOWER

The rewritten sequence, instead of being a straight fight to the death between Batman and the Joker, became about Batman rescuing Vale from the Joker's clutches. As we have seen, this was how it was filmed, though - in an example of reverse ghosting - the new plotline was largely absent from the running masterscript (final script, WS Papers 6.3). By the time Burton was preparing to shoot the scene in early 1989, the young director was ill and exhausted. Skaaren was back in America for good. But Peters continued to demand revisions to make the action more exciting, so McKeown was brought in to deliver them, redrafting the bell-tower sequence on 6 January. In the midst of this mayhem, the official script ended up as a loose collage of different drafts and revisions. There is no knowing what pages Burton actually had in front of him on set, but a rogue interchange between the Joker and Batman, derived from an earlier draft by Skaaren, got through to the edit and made no narrative sense.

When Batman accuses the Joker of murdering his parents, the Joker responds 'I was a kid when I murdered your parents.' But the Joker is unaware that Batman is actually Bruce Wayne, and has no way of knowing who his parents were. It was not hard for audiences and critics to spot this glaring error, and Burton and his writers have tended to take the blame for it (Reinhart 2013: 118). However, in Skaaren's 6 October draft, the Joker unmasks Batman before the interchange (WS Papers 4.9), and in his 12 December rewrite Batman verbally reveals his identity (WS Papers 6.1). The problem lay in McKeown's last minute revision, but the root source of it was Peters's long-held resistance to Wayne ever being recognised by his nemesis (studio notes, WS Papers 4.1). The producer had his eye on a long-running franchise in which the Joker might return. In a clear case of 'ghosting',

commercial pressures to change the story led to continuity confusion, in which the essence of Skaaren's dialogue was erroneously retained.

Of course, the retrogressive gender politics of the switch to a George and the Dragon scenario hardly bears pointing out. It was an all-male creative team concocting a male fantasy, and The Beauty and the Beast stereotype was exacerbated on camera by having Basinger dressed in virginal white. Interestingly, Skaaren was aware of these difficulties and his revisions of the bell-tower sequence as well other scenes in the movie show him trying to mitigate their excesses to some extent. From the outset, he was concerned about Hamm's conception of Vale as a 'weak, passive and unmodern heroine' (arbitration statement, WS Papers 7.16). Though she was allegedly a prize-winning photo-journalist with foreign war experience, he noted, she failed to undertake 'a single independent, self-motivated journalistic act' in any of Hamm's drafts (arbitration statement, WS Papers 7.16). So it was in keeping with his wish to provide her with 'motivation, spunk and determination' that he deepened her relationship with Wayne/Batman and made her central to the action. Unlike Hamm, who saw no role for her at all in the bell-tower, he has her fight back against the Joker until she is neutralised:

She KICKS JOKER in leg. He steps back in shock.

VICKI

Get away from me you pervert!

JOKER doubletakes.

VICKI

You're a creep, a lousy lover, a bad dresser and you stink
like a snake cage.

JOKER

You think I won't cut you?

VICKI

I think you kill weak things and I'm not weak. I'm tired of your
garbage.

JOKER slashes her with the knife, cutting a swatch of hair from her head. SHE SCREAMS.

(12 Dec revision, WS Papers 5.13)

Contrast this with the later McKeown revision, which, revealing Peters's imprint, has
Vale/Basinger distracting her gaudily-attired assailant with her sexuality and feminine wiles:

VICKI looks desperate. Behind the JOKER she sees BATMAN. She looks back at the JOKER.
She presses up against him and starts to stroke his back and legs.

VICKY

(very sexy)

You say such beautiful things...

...you're so strong...

(she gets even more amorous)

...and I love purple...

VICKI drops to her knees in front of the JOKER (out of shot), leaving the JOKER with a blank
look on his face.

(6 Jan revision, WS Papers, 6.2)

The difference could hardly be starker. We have two quite distinct conceptions of Vale in
the bell-tower – Skaaren's and Peters/McKeown's – though only the last of them found its

way to the screen. However, tracing the scene back to the Hamm's original versions, we see there is a relationship. Without Skaaren's reworking, Vale would not have been in the sequence at all, and her structural function in McKeown's rewrite is virtually identical. What changes is the tone. Skaaren's attempt to give her some dignity is replaced by smutty schoolboy humour, though the outline of his conception is still there¹⁷. Meanwhile, the movie as a whole is haunted by yet another Vicki Vale – the one Skaaren began to develop with Sean Young. That version of the character certainly continued to haunt Skaaren, for whom Young was 'my Vicki Vale...smart, brave, eagle-eyed, and beautiful' (letter to Young, WS Papers 5.13). He was never fully convinced by Basinger, and it is hard to believe he would have approved of her doll-like performance in the bell-tower, the victim of Nicholson's manic serenading and psychotic jokes.

In fact, jokes and comic book violence are the main additions of the McKeown rewrite, which tightens Skaaren's dramatic action but follows its basic shape. Images like the joke shop 'chattering teeth' running across the floor, after Batman punches the Joker in the mouth, are not there to develop narrative so much as punctuate it with visual surprise. The impression that the sequence was increasingly conceived as a series of fragmented moments is given by a page entitled 'IDEAS FOR FIGHT'¹⁸ added at the end of McKeown's revision, providing four action vignettes without indication as to how or where they would be inserted in the scene (arbitration statement, WS Papers 7.16). All this is a long way from the gothic tones of Hamm's envisioned denouement, in which the Joker plunges to his doom after being overwhelmed by a screeching swarm of bats. Yet two iconic images lifted from Hamm's original draft continued to bookend the sequence, leaving their indelible mark. As he enters the cathedral, Batman is described as a 'RAGGED BLACK GHOST'¹⁹ framed in the doorway, a picture retained in both the final script and the film. Similarly, in both, the sequence ends with a slow zoom down onto the prostrate body of the Joker until, in Hamm's words, 'his FACE FILLS THE SCREEN'²⁰, the familiar chilling grin still intact' (Hamm first draft, WS Papers 1.1). In the mayhem of elements from multiple drafts that make up the bell-tower, Hamm's initial conception retains its eerie presence.

¹⁷ This analysis follows Davies's idea of the palimpsest, which holds that, rather than total metamorphosis, redrafting involves "superimposition of one layer over another [that] both reveals and conceals" (Davies 2013: 176).

¹⁸ McKeown's capitals.

¹⁹ Capitals in all drafts.

²⁰ Hamm's capitals.

AUTHORSHIP AND CARNIVAL

For all his interference, Peters's overall management of the project could hardly be faulted. Neither could his commercial flair. Trailed by an unprecedented multi-media merchandising campaign that whipped up a new Batmania, *Batman* opened on June 23 1989 to a phenomenal response. It made \$43.6 million in its first weekend, smashing the previous record of \$29.4 million set by *Ghostbusters II* (1989), and became the first film to break \$100 million in ten days. It went on to be the highest grossing American movie of 1989, earning \$251.2 million, and amassed \$411.4 million from worldwide sales (Collinson 2012: 75-76). The critical reception was also largely enthusiastic. Even committed Batfans were won over, if begrudgingly. For the first time, a dark, psychologically-complex Batman emerged from the shadows of television kitsch and cult comic book obscurity to grab the attention of a mass global audience.

An auterist argument would no doubt mark this down principally as Burton's achievement. Brooker, for example, mounts a case for the film being Burton's *Batman*, although he qualifies this by contextualising it within wider discussions that encompass Hollywood marketing, media and public perception, and 'discourses of creative authorship' that give status to 'personal vision' (Brooker 2000: 289-94). There is no question that the young director's original take on the material was instrumental to *Batman* seeing the light of day or, rather, the dark of night. But as we have seen, the creative process was much more plural and complex. Neither screenplay nor film was the result of a singular imagination. The screen idea was more like a patchwork of materials from numerous talents, overseen if not fully controlled by Peters. To extend Skaaren's metaphor, this was no simple bowl of flowers. Burton and Hamm provided the roses, Skaaren the receptacle. Peters then rearranged the bouquet adding ribbons, balloons and glitter, and gave the whole lot to Nicholson to deliver to the audience, wearing a clown's mask.

The consequence of this ordered chaos was a movie more like a circus than a drama – an artfully constructed series of showpieces, often in wildly clashing styles. Nowhere was this more evident than in the music, where Danny Elfmann's Wagnerian score collided with a duo of tracks by Prince, at the time a Warner Brothers artist. The two numbers accompanied big theatrical entrances by the Joker, and were included on Prince's *Batman* album, released at the same time as the film as part of the media hype. Burton was never happy about having to incorporate them. He thought that Prince's funk-rock would be anachronistic and date the movie, and he failed to integrate it into the Gotham soundscape, or so he felt. (Salisbury [1995] 2000: 81). But arguably the mismatch was in keeping with the post-modernist MTV-age video promo grammar of the movie, in which transmedia eclecticism, pastiche and recycled cultural debris were all part of the film's appeal. It revelled in aesthetic playfulness and irreverence, much to the delight of the audience. They were looking for thrills and excitement, not *War and Peace*.

The way audiences responded to sensational moments as opposed to the unfolding storyline was captured by observational researchers in Philadelphia at previews prior to the film's release (Bacon-Smith with Yarborough 1991: 90-116). The experience was closer to carnival than generically consistent narrative drama. It was, perhaps, a good match of content and style. As Brooker has pointed out, the world of Batman owes a lot to folk carnival, a Bakhtin-like feast of parodic rituals in no way to be confused with high art (Brooker 2012: 134-77). Aside from its show-stopping sequences, such as the one in the city's museum where a gang of goons desecrate the art works choreographically to a ghetto-blastar backbeat, the film's evocation of carnival is made explicit in the Joker's triumphant festival parade²¹.

Batman may look pantomimic and dated now, but in capturing the structure and feeling of carnival at its most grotesque, it caught the spirit of its times. It was like a big bang of energy releasing fragments of popular culture, crashing them together and hurling them at the cinema screen. Jim Collins identified this riot of hypertextuality in his analysis of the bell-tower sequence soon after the film came out. Recognising the likeness of Anton Furst's Gotham Cathedral to Gaudi's Sagrada Familia Cathedral in Barcelona, he wrote:

Where Gaudi's Cathedral is a repertoire of architectural styles, the narrative structure of *Batman* is founded on a hybrid repertoire, calling up and/or abducting motifs from cinematic and non-cinematic texts alike – comic books, Hollywood films, nineteenth century novels, medieval architecture, etc.

(Collins in Pearson and Uricchio 1991: 169)

As one of the first directors to filter "junk culture through an art school sensibility" (Gelb 1989: 9), Burton was uniquely equipped to deliver a film in that register. It launched one of the greatest franchises of all time. It would be another 25 years before Christopher Nolan turned the Batman legend into a coherent realist film noir mystery thriller with his trilogy *Batman Begins*, *The Dark Knight* and *The Dark Knight Rises* – and even that, as Brooker's full-length book on recent interpretations of Batman shows us (Brooker 2012), is open to considerable debate.

²¹ Annalise Di Liddo points out the theatricality inherent in comic books, particularly in the work of Burton's favourite Batman author, Alan Moore (di Liddo 2009: 163-68).

CONCLUSION

So what do we learn from all this in terms of adaptation and screenplay theory? Clearly turning a superhero legend into movie is unlike adapting a novel, not just because of the daunting narrative freedom and popular expectations associated with legend, but also the commercial pressures coming from the studio. In the case of the *Batman*, these forces led to a hugely protracted development process, and a frequently changing and expanding writing team. As a result of this prolonged turbulence, the script was haphazardly bolted together rather than composed in an organic fashion. As we have seen, it was never fully finished, and not just in the sense that a screenplay is only a blueprint for a movie. It was never finally locked off on the page. Nevertheless, despite or perhaps because of its messy history, *Batman* found a form that suited its dime-a-copy source material. This was no orderly, linear evolution from daft to draft, arriving at perfection, with a methodical removal of demons and ghosts. It was evolution subject to chaos theory, full of random interventions and unexpected foldback. But the creative power released by that instability made a carnivalesque movie hybrid that was unprecedented and quite unique.

The way a screenplay morphs into a film has famously been compared by Jean-Claude Carriere to the caterpillar's transformation into a butterfly (Carriere 1995: 150). But if *Batman* was a butterfly, it was a very odd, ill-shapen one interbred with moth, beetle, humming bird and, dare I say, fruit bat. Mapping its DNA completely would be a highly complex matter, not just because of the sprawling scale of the Batman mythos, but also the entangled nature of the screen development itself. But it is precisely that complexity, and the unusual richness of the archive available to us, that make the film interesting to screenplay scholarship.

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WARREN SKAAREN: INVENTORY OF HIS PAPERS

All references to the Warren Skaaren Papers included in this article correspond with the Harry Ransom Center inventory, which can be found at <http://norman.hrc.utexas.edu/fasearch/findingAid.cfm?eadid=00123>. Accessed 2 May 2015.

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