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In the first in a series of articles reflecting on Christopher Nolan's Batman Trilogy, Nikolai Blaskow explores audience responses to The Dark Knight.

At a film night recently I was surprised to see audience reactions split three ways on *The Dark Knight*, the second of Christopher Nolan's trilogy. The audience was diverse but the split was largely generational: including members of the Pre-World War II generation, Baby Boomers, and Gen Y/Next Gen.

The overwhelming reaction of the first "Pre War World War II" group was one of almost unanimous rejection: several couldn't follow the story; some found the theme of violence and pessimism overwhelming, defining it as an example of the kind of anarchy our civilization will descend to if we do not change the way wealth and resources are distributed in the world (one man actually left half way through); others were indifferent.

As Simon Parke notes in his London Church Times Review of *The Dark Knight*, "Batman has come a long way from the comic book hero who went "Kapow!" and saved a grateful Gotham City with little sign of personal trauma... Now he is a darker figure." (No.7788, 22 June 2012, p.12)

The second largely baby boomer group just didn't 'get' the film at all ('I found it impossible to follow', 'a totally unbelievable script and surreal characters'). One person in that demographic group was puzzlingly defensive when I made the comment, that my Year 10 students by and large not only understood the film but relished the challenge of engaging with it in their ethical studies class. His reaction, 'None of us are in Year 10, and are way past their curriculum', came as a complete surprise.

The third younger group loved the film, admired its dialogue, and the powerful way in which the issues of systemic corruption were confronted and its refusal to kowtow to black and white absolutes.

Of course, not all my teenage students responded the same way. While most enjoyed the film as entertainment, and could locate where the ethical issues arose, some found it difficult to articulate how these were reflected in our society. (Despite their teacher giving guidance with the help of documentary excerpts like the interview with Secretary of State MacNamara in *The Fog of War*, and Noam's Chomsky *Power and Terror* to mention just two.)

So where does that leave us?

Nolan (who is English) says he wants to trouble us as well as entertain us. Hence in the last of the Trilogy *The Dark Knight Rises* he raises the spectre of revolutions. His thesis is that the destabilizing of society can happen anywhere and everywhere, so why not in modern United States (or Great Britain or Australia)?

Nolan's Batman Trilogy is not two hours of popcorn and escapist fun. This Batman is an anti-hero: a fallen messiah - *"Why's he running, Dad?"* asks the Commissioner's son. *"Because we have to chase him... we'll hunt him because he can take it. Because he's not our hero... he's a silent guardian, a watchful protector... a dark knight"*, is his father's enigmatic response.

But the message is clear: "transcend your fears, and put them to work for you", as reviewer Simon Parke put it.

Maybe that's why many of my Year 10s have seen *The Dark Knight* and *The Dark Knight Rises* five times, and keep coming back for more.

By The Reverend **Nikolai Blaskow**

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Comments

Nikolai, It is very interesting to see the different generational responses to the film. I wonder what lessons we can draw from this for ministry?

Made by Jeremy Halcrow on Fri 11 January 2013