

Articles

oN thE eDGe

By Gary McMahon

What has no power, no money, and can
bite your fucking head off?

A member of the underclass who snAp!

AHA! AHaHaHaHaHaHaHaH!

In *Batman* folklore, villains' psyches are twisted like car wrecks, with a history of powerlessness before excruciating injustice that will one day and for evermore make them ... SnAp!

After that, they are driven by massive resentment, uncompromising vengeance and the madness that comes with ... Being Right!

Scarecrow! The Mad Hatter! Poison Ivy! Catwoman! Penguin! Two-Face! Clayface! Sensitive citizens turn themselves inside out with ostracised angst and then turn schizophrenia into an art form and a lot of fun, with more poetic justice than your average poet.

The Joker, the model for ex-Prime Minister Tony Blair's *I-can't-believe-I'm-getting-away-with-this*

portcullis grin, is perhaps the *only* super-villain who is demonstrably psychopathic. The Riddler gets obsessive-compulsive disorder but that's *normal* in consumer culture. The rest are so sensitive they can't stand another minute of the system that tore them apart.

Hugo Strange is a fiendish scientist who turns the rich and famous of Gotham into mindless zombies in the militant 1970s.

Sounds reasonable.

Marvel, who rival Batman's DC Comics, fostered a similar criminal psyche, with scientific



JACK NICHOLSON
AS THE JOKER IN
BATMAN (1989)

aberrations. Contempt for the system is the common cause. Monastic in seclusion and vocational dedication to a *fuck you* kind of chaos, comic-book villainy, and the film adaptations, are the gleeful catharsis for every grievous stress in the audience.

The super-villain's retribution is called terrorism now – devastating the metropolis infrastructure, kidnapping Gotham City Mayor or bumping off a billionaire, and then hijacking the airwaves to spread the word with a sick joke or a barmy riddle.

Recently a psychiatrist in a Texas army base, 'a military processing centre,' killed 13 soldiers and wounded 30 more.

JACK NICHOLSON AS THE JOKER IN BATMAN (1989)



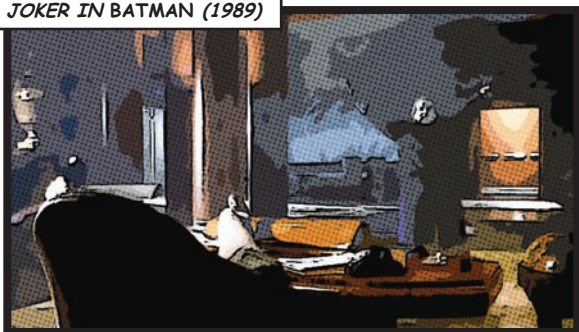
TONY BLAIR AS BRITISH PRIME MINISTER (2003)

I-can't-believe-I'm-getting-away-with-this

BLAM



JACK NICHOLSON AS THE JOKER IN BATMAN (1989)



This wasn't in a comic-book, by the way, this was in the newspapers: this was real life calling!

The psychiatrist was sedated in hospital custody, and his replacement waited by his bedside to ask him, when he came round, *What the fuck got into you?*

May I hazard a guess?

He snApPeD!

The psychiatrist, a major, was scheduled for deployment to Iraq, 'and appeared to be upset about that', said Texas Senator Kay Bailey Hutchison.

This may have been the one act of crystal clarity in the major's life, the one action that made perfect sense, to him, as opposed to all the routine acts of madness against his own interests and the interests of the common man demanded of him by the system every day of his life.

No investigation would bring that out. Psychiatry is a purely personal affair. Ever since the 1980s, when it was announced that 'there is no such thing as society', the effects of the system on people has nothing to do with the psychiatric evaluation of a personality that sSnNaAPs.

The mind boggles.

There are, within our crooked, crippled and psychopathic system, such victims of the



EDWARD NORTON AS BRUCE BANNER IN THE INCREDIBLE HULK (2008)

Dignity can be demolished like a Grade 1 listed building if it gets in the way, and your rights are invalid if you outlive your usefulness to market forces. One day, on the edge between being exploited and being discarded, there is a feral whiff of a short circuit, a last straw going up in smoke, and SsNnaApP! 'What a day!'

I'm amazed these single instances are not multiplied by buckling basketloads of put-



There's a part of me that can just take so much... and then, no more.

One day, on the edge between being exploited and being discarded, there is a feral whiff of a short circuit, a last straw going up in smoke, and SsNnaApP! 'What a day!'

upon psyches, pushed to the edge and over into an avenging alter ego that churns up every bitter pill they've had to swallow, the Jungian shadow of repressed rage and fear and distress surfacing like psychic molten lava, en masse, like Arkham Asylum escapees looking for vengeancevengeancevengeance, terrorismterrorism.

In 2005, the levees broke in New Orleans, the U.S. government looked the other way, and Scarecrow took it out on Gotham City water supply in *Batman Begins*: "Boo!"

In fact, there are enough SsnAaAp's to strain medical resources, with this difference: when the fuse blows, when the bough breaks, when the resilience snaps, it doesn't explode, it simply implodes (and then the rest of us don't feel so bad). It turns in on itself and shuts down.

It's called a nervous breakdown, and it's all the rage.

In 2008, the capitalist economy had a nervous breakdown of its own, and as treasuries tossed a coin over what to do next, Two-Face flipped in *The Dark Knight*: "The world is cruel, and the only morality in a cruel world is chance."

The latest way that governments treat nervous breakdowns is to get them back to work right away. Positive re-branding, in the land of Positivia,¹ reframes being sick as being able, being in debt as liquid capital, and recession as the dark before dawn, translating weaknesses as strengths to erase the negative statistic.

Riddle me this: When are the terminally ill alive and well?

When they are branded as indefinitely eligible for work!

And so even dying is denied in the conversion of negative to positive statistics. There is



'What a day!'



TOBEY MAGUIRE AS SPIDERMAN
IN SPIDERMAN 3 (2007)

...a nervous breakdown is no longer a refuge from the system...

no asylum in sickness any more. Cancer will be sentenced to Community Service. Sanctuary is a defiled concept: no haven in church, no respect for the Geneva Convention, no reverence for truth, no trust in justice, no day of rest, no relief for the dispossessed, no mercy for the sick. There are doctors among us who are as ready to serve the state as Dr Mengele once was, with the same contempt for vulnerability. They are as keen as the government to ignore the core message of the central nervous system that is in meltdown.

Here is the message that the central nervous system emits loud and clear by breaking down: ENOUGH!

Pushed, filed, stamped, indexed, briefed, debriefed and numbered. People in nervous-breakdown mode have ceased trading: they want no further transactions with the system. They cannot pretend anymore: they are all out of denial. It's the total rejection of society, and the next best thing to suicide. And suicide is the alternative to mass murder, the apocalyptic vengeance that super-villains have in mind.

And since a nervous breakdown is no longer a refuge from the system, since the victim of a breakdown can expect to see his psychiatrist these days not in a confidential clinic but in

an office in his local employment centre, the options for those about to flip are paired down to suicide or mass murder. It's the toss of a coin in the world of Two-Face. •

TOPER GRACE
AS VENOM IN
SPIDERMAN 3
(2007)



It's the toss of a coin in the world of Two-Face.

Contributor details

Gary McMahon is the author of *Camp in Literature* (2006, McFarland) and *Kurt Vonnegut and the Centrifugal Force of Fate* (2009, McFarland).

Endnotes

1 **Positivita**: Liverpool poet Gerry Potter's term for senseless positivity that flies in the face of the facts.