

**NEW WORLD UTOPIA ELEMENTS IN CHRISTOPHER NOLAN'S *THE DARK KNIGHT* TRILOGY****Bhakti Satrio Nugroho**

Universitas Gadjah Mada, Indonesia

*bhakti.landt@gmail.com***Abstract**

This paper aims to analyze the representation of New World Utopia elements in one of the highest grossing movie franchises, Christopher Nolan's *The Dark Knight* Trilogy which consists of three movies *Batman Begins* (2005), *The Dark Knight* (2008) and *The Dark Knight Rises* (2012), all of them directed by Christopher Nolan and written by David S. Goyer. In this movie franchise, the depiction of American utopia elements can be seen clearly by looking at the plots, characters and other supporting data. By using Stuart Hall's Representation Theory, this analysis explains the representation of New World utopia elements in Christopher Nolan's *The Dark Knight* trilogy. The representation of these elements can be found in the form of the rule of law, beloved community, liberalism and populism. This American popular narrative consists of American values and ideologies which can be accepted not only by American audience but also worldwide audience.

**Keywords:** Christopher Nolan, *The Dark Knight*, New World utopia, popular culture.

**INTRODUCTION**

Christopher Nolan's *The Dark Knight* Trilogy is a movie trilogy adapted from superhero comic book which tells the story of Bruce Wayne, a billionaire who lives in Gotham City and acts as a superhero vigilante under the name Batman. Nolan's *The Dark Knight* trilogy consists of three movies; *Batman Begins* (2005), *The Dark Knight* (2008), and *The Dark Knight Rises* (2012) which are directed by Christopher Nolan and written by David S. Goyer. According to Box Office Mojo, the first movie, *Batman Begins* grossed \$375.2 million in 2005 which was quite remarkable for superhero movie at that time because that particular genre was not really popular and common. The second movie, *The Dark Knight* grossed \$1.005 billion. Furthermore, this second instalment was considered as one of the best films of its decade and one of the best superhero films of all time by many film critics including Metacritic (Dietz, 2010). It was nominated for eight Academy Awards for the 81<sup>st</sup> Ceremony in 2009. In fact, Heath Ledger who played Joker won for Best Supporting Actor. The third instalment *The Dark Knight Rises* was released in 2012 and grossed \$1.085 billion worldwide and became one of the highest grossing superhero movies of its time.

Overall, Christopher Nolan's *The Dark Knight* trilogy grossed around \$3.48 billion with the production budget credits at \$585 million. The popularity and high financial success of Nolan's *The Dark Knight* trilogy is based on the popularity of Batman as a comic book character himself.

In modern era, Batman is seen not only as a comic book character but also as popular culture icon which is recognized around the world. Pearson and Uricchio in their book titled *The Many Lives of the Batman: Critical Approaches to a Superhero and His Media* explain that the presence of Batman is beyond his comic book origin. It has massive cultural impact within American society and even abroad in modern era. The events such as the release of the 1989 version of *Batman* and the high demands of his merchandise brought the Batman to the forefront of public consciousness (Pearson et al, 1991, p. 1). Moreover, in the sixtieth anniversary of Batman, *The Guardian* wrote,

"Batman is a figure blurred by the endless reinvention that is modern mass culture. He is at once an icon and a commodity: the perfect cultural artefact for the 21st century." (Finkelstein et al, 1999)

As mentioned before, it means that the existence of Batman is not only a mere comic book character in the American society but also as product of commodity and modern cultural artefact. That is why the release of Christopher Nolan's *The Dark Knight* trilogy is such a huge success because the popularity of Batman itself is more than a comic book tale. In fact, the presence of the previous Batman movies, TV series and animated series also helped the popularity of Nolan's *The Dark Knight* trilogy.

Furthermore, for many film critics, the release of *Batman Begins*, the first instalment of Nolan's *The Dark Knight* trilogy in 2005, created a legacy for the superhero genre in Hollywood movies in early in the new millennium. *Batman Begins* received generally positive reviews with critic after critic pointing out how unique the film was compared with the Batman and other superhero films that came before it. In fact, its presence also helped to grab many people's attention for other superhero movies for their release. In this case, the successful release of Sam Raimi's *Spider-Man* franchise in 2002 could not be followed by other superhero movies such as Mark Steven Johnson's *Daredevil* in 2003 which received bad criticism by many

film critics and audiences. In fact, during this period, many believed that the only superhero movie which could make profit was *Spider-Man*. However, this assumption of many critics was denied by the release of *Batman Begins* in 2005 and it was followed by *Iron Man* in 2008 which then became the first instalment of Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU) franchise. Then, the success of *Batman Begins* in 2005 was followed by two movies: *The Dark Knight* in 2008 and *The Dark Knight Rises* in 2012.

Since Christopher Nolan's *The Dark Knight* trilogy became popular culture, the consumption of this movie franchise is massive not only within American society but also in worldwide scale. Its popularity became a phenomenon which can be proven by massive fan base sites on the internet, the high grossing of movie tickets and its merchandises. In fact, *The Dark Knight* (2008) met with foreign box office success which earned \$25 million in China. It was a remarkable milestone for the China market because it had not become particularly receptive to Hollywood films at the time (Stone, 2019). In the perspective of popular culture theorists, these moviegoers around the world including China were hegemonized. As Antonio Gramsci says in Dominic Strinati's book titled *An Introduction to the Theories of Popular Culture* that popular culture and narrative is closely related to hegemony which focuses on the consumption certain popular culture,

“For Gramsci, popular culture and the mass media are places where hegemony is produced, reproduced and transformed; they are institutions of civil society which involve cultural production and consumption.”  
(Strinati, 2004, p. 172)

This statement shows that popular culture such as Nolan's *The Dark Knight* trilogy and the mass media are the places where cultural hegemony existed. In this case, the mass media which brought the products of dominant culture can influence to the subordinate culture which includes the cultural production and consumption. That is why, Nolan's *The Dark Knight* trilogy was wildly accepted in any foreign countries which have different culture such as China.

Meanwhile, as popular narrative, within the story itself, Nolan's *The Dark Knight* trilogy offers the audiences with similar plot of previous Batman movies. However, it consists of a more humane version of Bruce Wayne and interesting detective and crime motifs. In this case, Bruce Wayne / Batman is depicted as a superhero who does not have super human body like any other superhero plots but he is helped by his advanced technology and his wealth to fight crime in corrupted Gotham City. It provides a more rational concept of superhero for its audiences. In fact, Bruce Wayne's tragic life as a son of billionaire which drives him to fight for his city can attract many fans and new audience because of its originality of Batman's origin story. Furthermore, Batman in Nolan's *The Dark Knight* trilogy also represents American values. Thus, this research discusses the representation of Ostendorf's New World Utopia elements within Nolan's *The Dark Knight* trilogy by answering these three main questions: how does Christopher Nolan's *The Dark Knight* trilogy represent the elements of New World utopia? And why are those New World utopia elements within Christopher Nolan's *The Dark Knight* trilogy liked and adored by its massive and worldwide audiences?

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

This paper uses representation theory explained by Stuart Hall. Moreover, this research aims to look for the representation of Berndt Ostendorf's New World utopia elements which is explained in his journal entitled *Why is American Popular Culture is So Popular? A View from Europe* and some other related theories are used to support the argumentation.

Meanwhile, to analyze this American popular narrative, this research uses textual analysis as methodology which, as media theorist Alan McKee puts:

“Textual analysis is a way for researchers to gather information about how other human beings make sense of the world. It is a methodology—a data-gathering process—for those researchers who want to understand the ways in which members of various cultures and subcultures make sense of who they are, and of how they fit into the world in which they live” (McKee, 2003, p. 1).

It means that textual analysis is used as methodology in analyzing popular culture and narrative. Alan McKee further explains that this method focuses on the text of popular narrative as a source of interpretation which is made by people who consume them. In this case, text means “whenever we produce an interpretation of something’s meaning – a book, television program, film, magazine, T-shirt or kilt, piece of furniture or ornament – we treat it as a text” (McKee, 2003, p. 4). Therefore, texts, in this case, do not solely mean words because it is something that we make meaning from. It means that textual analysis as methodology is not only limited in the texts but also in meaning beyond the real meaning. In other words, texts can be understood as sign which works both denotatively and connotatively.

Furthermore, in his book *Representation: Cultural Representation and Signifying Practice*, Stuart Hall defines,

“Representation connects meaning and language to culture.... Representation is an essential part of the process by which meaning is produced and exchanged between members of culture” (2003, p. 17).

It means that representation connects meaning and language to culture which produces a produced meaning and is exchanged among members of certain society. In short, representation can be understood as a way to produce meaning. Therefore, the same understanding toward a sign within society creates good process of representation. It means that during the process of representation, it needs same cultural background knowledge. As Hall adds,

“Member of the same culture must share concepts, images, and ideas which enable them to think and feel about the world in roughly similar ways, they must share, broadly speaking, the same “cultural codes”. In this sense, thinking and feeling are themselves “system of representations” (2003, p. 17).

By this explanation, thinking and sensing are part of system of representations. This system of representations needs same understanding of languages, concepts, images, and idea, which then called as cultural codes. In short, as a theory, representation is used to interpreted texts in order to produce meaning. In this context, meaning is dialogue that can be produced with the help of its creator and its audience.

In Hall's representation theory, there are three approaches to deliver the meaning. First, in reflective approach, meaning is thought to lie in the object, person, idea or event in the real world. and language functions like a mirror, to reflects the true meaning as it already exists in the world. Second, the intentional approach means the imposition of the creator's meaning on the world through the language. Third is constructionist approach which constructs meaning by using representational systems such as concepts and signs (Hall, 2003, p. 24-25). These approaches are used to produce meaning on the text.

The concept of Ostendorf's New World utopia elements relies on the historical birth of American society. Unlike in Europe, many American popular cultures were created by cultural differences within American society and spirit of egalitarianism which are able to provide many elements within society to create a new culture. Berndt Ostendorf explains that American popular culture is very different with Europe and any other countries. In fact, the success of American popular culture is in what Ostendorf calls as *overall design* which is that of a consciously constructed, liberal and popular New World utopia. This utopia consists of many American-designed engines such as the rule of law, the beloved community, liberalism, and populism.

The first American overall design is rule of law and habeas corpus which lay upon the historical root of American people. In this case, Ostendorf explains that "the American dissidents (immigrants) attacked the British king for the breach of these "ancient English rights" (2001, p. 346). In definition, rule of law and habeas corpus are interpreted as the power of democracy and republicanism which oppose the monarchial tyranny. This belief is represented by the law, court, sheriff, police etc. in many popular literature and culture. Ostendorf puts it "behaviors, and its ethos supports the right of the individual to break when necessary "bad" law and to take the "good" law into his own hands" (p. 346). The second New World utopia element is beloved community which roots to the idea of a protestant-republican beloved community that was conceived in the spirit of a morally sanctioned dissent and subsequently stabilized by voluntary associations of like-minded individuals. Historically,

there is a sense of belonging and togetherness for each American people as community to respect and protect each other as it was manifested in The Mayflower Compact of 1620, the first model for a voluntaristic communitarian contract of dissenters (immigrants) (p. 348). The third New World utopia element is liberalism which divides the market and of the self which roots to the traditions of the French and Scottish during the Enlightenment. It lies upon a keen sense of universal civil rights with a laissez-faire economic order which translated to popular culture as individual agents, their individualized desires and their quest for autonomy, on the one hand, and to the evolution of a culture industry and mass market (Ostendorf, 2001, p. 350). The fourth New World utopia element is populism which emerged from historical fact of United States as a young republic, with the formation of the new political and social establishment. It consists of Jacksonian movement characteristic, which is a deep distrust of anything exalted, elitist, and hierarchical (Ostendorf, 2001, p. 349). Thus, these four elements of American or New World utopia are the main elements to help the popularity of American popular culture.

## **RESEARCH METHOD**

This research uses qualitative method due to its emphasize on the qualities of entities, processes and meanings that are not experimentally examined or measured in terms of quantity, amount, intensity or frequency (Creswell, 2009, p. 175). Therefore, qualitative method emphasizes on the researcher's interpretation towards the data which is useful to translate the meaning and symbol with the object of analysis. Moreover, based on the research purposes and objectives, this research uses technique data analysis to classify and to arrange the data (Mahsun, 2005, p. 253), which include (1) data selection, (2) data interpretation, and (3) data conclusion.

## **FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

In this part, the researcher analyzes New World utopia elements in Christopher Nolan's *The Dark Knight* trilogy. Those representations of New World utopia elements within this trilogy including narration, dialogues, and other representations can be used as evidence to support the argumentations. To ease the comprehension,

this discussion is divided into four: rule of law, beloved community, liberalism, and populism.

### **Rule of Law**

In Ostendorf's journal entitled *Why is American Popular Culture is So Popular? A View from Europe* (2001), one of the main New Utopia elements that exist in American popular products including popular narrative is "rule of law. As Ostendorf says,

"To wit, the rule of law entered the American design of a well-run republic on a consenting and dissenting note that proved to be effective in the creation of individual legal self-confidence and of rights talk" (2001, p. 346).

In other words, the rule of law can be translated as the authority and influence of law in society, especially when viewed as a constraint on individual and institutional behavior (Gamer, 2009, p. 1448). It celebrates the power of democracy and republicanism which represented by the law, court, sheriff, police etc. In popular culture and narrative, Ostendorf further explains that many American popular culture and literature depict law as part of their main plot. Therefore, court scenes are constitutive of its plots, and the sheriff has over time become a regular of national central casting (p. 346). In Christopher Nolan's *The Dark Knight* trilogy, the depiction of rule of law can be seen in entire sequel of the trilogy including in *Batman Begins* (2005), *The Dark Knight* (2008) and *The Dark Knight Rises* (2012).

In *Batman Begins* (2005), there are many representations of "rule of law" which can be seen throughout the movie. In this first instalment of *The Dark Knight* trilogy, the image of Gotham law enforcements such as police and lawyers becomes very influential plots. In the early years of Batman's adventure, Gotham City became one of the corrupted cities in United States. Many police and other law enforcement figures such as district attorneys and Chief Administrator of Arkham Asylum. In this context, they associated themselves with the biggest Mafia in the city, Carmine Falcone by protecting drugs trading and other criminal acts. On the other hand, there are only few uncorrupted police and law enforcement officers left in the city such as Commissioner James Gordon and district attorney Rachel Dawes, who is also Bruce

Wayne's childhood friend and girlfriend. They work to support Batman / Bruce Wayne saving Gotham society from corrupted tyranny. Moreover, Batman acts by ignoring "good law" as vigilante. In this context, corrupted law enforcements that associate themselves with Carmine Falcone Mafia represent "bad law" in Ostendorf's term while the uncorrupted law enforcements such as James Gordon and Rachel Dawes represent "good law". The conflict that arises between both sides becomes the main plot in entire story. It means that the idea of "rule of law" as the element of New World utopia exists within the first movie which is represented by the conflict among Gotham law enforcements.

In the sequel, *The Dark Knight* (2008), the writer introduces Joker as the main villain who terrorizes Gotham City with his sadistic jokes. The other main villain, Harvey Denver / Two-Face who previously became Gotham district attorney, is also introduced as the main plot of the story. In this context, the second instalment of *The Dark Knight* trilogy still focuses on rule of law plot which tells about how the law enforcements work in Gotham City with help of Batman as vigilante. This plot continues to the third instalment *The Dark Knight Rises* (2012) which introduces other villains, Bane and Talia al Ghul. The story still concerns to law enforcements, Commissioner Jim Gordon and young policeman, John Blake (reveals as Robin, Batman's sidekick in the comic books. In the end of *The Dark Knight Rises*, both parties engage in massive conflict after Bane's rebellious party takes of the government system in Gotham City.

Therefore, in this trilogy, plot which focuses on the conflict between law enforcements and criminals represent American rule of law. In this case, the law is seen as constrain of the main villains to gain their authority in Gotham City such as Carmine Falcone, Joker and Bane. On the other hand, good law which represented by law enforcements always wins in the end of the conflict. In this case, the "bad law" must be defeated by "good law" with the help of Batman. Meanwhile, Batman seems to ignore the law by conducting his own method of implementing justice. As it has already said above, the use of "rule of law" in American popular narrative and culture is to celebrate the democracy and republicanism which could not be applied in Old World back then. It represents the spirit of young America as nation and country.

However, in *The Dark Knight* trilogy, this element of New World utopia seems turn into dystopia

In this movie franchise, the crimes come from the broken and corrupted system of democracy and republic in Gotham City. Some villains such as Ra's al Ghul and Bane condemn this corrupted city and act by themselves to rule it with their own system, in this case, socialist system. It means that the idea of democracy and republic also creates problem like in monarchy in United Kingdom. That's why, Christopher Nolan's *The Dark Knight* trilogy does not only represent rule of law as the element of New World utopia but also depicts the dark side of "rule of law" which creates dystopia. Thus, by looking at Stuart Hall's representation theory, the plot which consists of conflict between law enforcements and criminals can be considered as sign or representation of one of New World utopia elements, "rule of law" which then becomes dystopia because it can also create problem and conflict in modern society. It is reflective approach of producing meaning because, in this case, the director reflects "rule of law" as it is already happened in real world.

Moreover, the popularity of Nolan's *The Dark Knight* trilogy as superhero / detective narrative can be explained by some factors. The popularity of Batman as a comic book character which can be considered as an icon, commodity and perfect cultural artefact for the 21st century (Finkelstein et al, 1999). Then, it is supported by the popularity of other American popular narratives especially movie and TV series mostly which consist of this element of New World utopia, rule of law. In this context, American movie and TV series which consist of law enforcement story become very popular. Some TV series such as *Law & Order* (1990-2010), *NYPD Blue* (1993-2005), *The Wire* (2002-2008), *Law & Order: Criminal Intent* (2001-2011) can attract many American audiences even until today. In this case, the popularity of those TV crime dramas helps the popularity *The Dark Knight* trilogy because the original story of Batman is combination of both superhero and detective story. In fact, those "rule of law" popular narratives teach moral values to the audience. According to Rafter (2006), crime and detective drama / film such as Nolan's *The Dark Knight* trilogy are categorized as "morality plays" which feature struggles between good and evil between heroes who stand for moral authority and villains who challenge that authority. That

is why, it can be understood why this trilogy becomes very popular not only in America but also worldwide because it can be universally accepted by worldwide audience since it consists of moral value of good thriving against evil. Thus, this New World utopia element helps the popularity of *The Dark Knight* trilogy that attracts many of its worldwide audiences.

### **Beloved Community**

Beloved community as explained in Ostendorf's *Why is American Popular Culture is So Popular? A View from Europe* (2001) is a sense of belonging and togetherness for each American people as community to respect and protect each other as it was manifested in The Mayflower Compact of 1620, the first model for a voluntaristic communitarian contract of dissenters (immigrants) (Ostendorf, 2001, p. 348). It is a philosophy that emphasizes the connection between the individual and the community which exists since the beginning of American history. In *The Dark Knight* trilogy, the representation of this second element of New World utopia can be seen clearly in some scenes and plots of the story.

Although Gotham City is considered as a corrupted district, many main characters such as Bruce Wayne / Batman, Rachel Dawes, Commissioner Jim Gordon and John Blake / Robin, stand to protect this city from many villains who terrorize this city. It means that there is spirit of communitarianism because they want to protect each other. Moreover, in the third movie *The Dark Knight Rises* (2012), after Bane takes over and rules the city with socialist government, the police unite together to fight them with the help of Batman in the final scene (Nolan, 2012: 02:11:48-02:22:32). In this scene, the police forces prevent the city from nuclear bomb. Beside their duty as law enforcements, it shows that as they want to protect other Gotham citizens from devastated effect of nuclear bomb. By looking at Stuart Hall's representation theory, this dramatic scene can be categorized as a sign or representation of beloved community (communitarianism) which becomes part of American (New World) history. It is constructionist approach of producing meaning because the director, in this case, constructs meaning to be understood by its audiences by sign that can be seen in some scenes above. Thus, it shows that Christopher Nolan's *The Dark*

*Knight* trilogy consists of the element of New World utopia in the form of beloved community (communitarianism).

As it is explained above that the spirit of communitarianism is within American society since the beginning of their history which is rooted in The Mayflower Compact. This New World utopia element helps the popularity of most American movies to be consumed by their worldwide audiences. In this case, it represents the spirit of solidarity and togetherness which exists almost in every culture, not only in United States. This New World utopia element is considered as universal value that can be accepted for many cultures. That is why *The Dark Knight* trilogy is liked and adored by worldwide audience, not only by Batman comic book fans but also new audiences who did not know about Batman as comic book character before. Thus, the element of communitarianism in *The Dark Knight* trilogy can also be considered as a universal value that can be accepted for its audiences, not only in Western culture but other cultures. Hence, it helps the popularity of this trilogy itself and marks legacy in superhero and detective movie.

### **Liberalism**

Liberalism is the heart of American society since their early history. It is a belief which came from traditions of the French and Scottish during the Enlightenment. It lies upon a keen sense of universal civil rights with a laissez-faire economic order which translated to popular culture as individual agents, their individualized desires and their quest for autonomy, on the one hand, and to the evolution of a culture industry and mass market (Ostendorf, 2001, p. 350). In short, this belief emphasizes on the individual's rights which means to separate between state and private. It consists of philosophical ideology called "free will" which means the ability to act at someone's own discretion (freedom towards life) (Timpe, 2016). In simple definition, this philosophical term means that human can control the life that they want even though it might violate social norm or even law. Therefore, liberalism becomes an important aspect of American society which can be easily seen in many popular narrative and culture. In *The Dark Knight* trilogy, the obvious representation of liberalism in the story can be seen in the main character itself, Bruce Wayne / Batman.

In this story, Batman acts as a vigilante who often ignores the due process of law in overcoming crime in Gotham City. One of the most obvious representations of Batman is when he decides to interrogate Joker. In this famous scene, he brutally assaults Joker in police interrogation room since Joker does not answer Commissioner Jim Gordon's questions (Nolan, 2008: 01:27:13-01:30:38). As Ostendorf said, American popular culture and narrative often portray the protagonist who acts as individual agent. Although Batman works in good side, he disobeys process of law by conducting his own method of upholding justice. Moreover, Batman also disobeys law by kidnapping and bringing back Lau, a corrupt Chinese LSI Holdings accountant Triad boss to Gotham City since Lau is in Hong Kong which is outside of Gotham jurisdiction territory (Nolan, 2008: 00:34:10-00:37:30). He also attacks Chinese local polices in "his own justice way". In superhero genre itself, the main characters usually hide their identity and do not cooperate with the police in overcoming crimes even though they both work in same good side. However, Batman's method is way more extreme than usual superhero because he does not hesitate to fight the police if they block his way of justice. Thus, by understanding those scenes, it shows that the main character, Batman, represents the element of New World utopia in the form of liberalism. In this case, he acts as individual agent who works outside law. In this case, the meaning is presented by constructionist approach of producing meaning because the director, in this case, constructs meaning to be understood by its audiences by signs which shows Batman disobeying the law.

Like many other American popular superhero and detective movie, *The Dark Knight* trilogy consists of the spirit of liberalism which celebrates as American core value. Liberalism or simply called as the spirit of liberation is reflected not only in American culture but their law and economic system and become fundamental part of American life. That is why it becomes one of important value in American society which is transferred to many other cultures by their popular culture. In this case, *The Dark Knight* trilogy worldwide audience can easily accept this value that depict in this movie because of the dissemination of democracy doctrine around the world. Liberalism itself is closely related to democracy because it supplies the foundation of almost all contemporary political thinking (Graham, 1992, p. 149). After

the end of Cold War, democracy and capitalism become the world's dominant political and economic ideology. Furthermore, democracy became a manner of collective self-validation for countries hoping to gain international respect: when democracy was seen as an important value, political structures began adopting the value (Kjell, 2000, p. 26). Therefore, many American popular narratives which consist of liberalism as New World utopia element will be easily accepted by worldwide audiences who mostly came from democratized countries. Thus, it explains why this trilogy becomes one of the highest grossing superhero movies all the time.

### **Populism**

The last element of New World utopia which explained by Ostendorf is populism or the power of common man which emerged from historical fact of United States as young republic, with the formation of the new political and social establishment (p. 349). In other words, populism can be seen as the idea of "the people" as a morally good force, and often juxtapose this group against "the elite" as corrupt (Mudde, 2004, p. 541). It lies on the belief of American exceptionalism which stands against Old World tyranny. In this case, United States (New World) and its people are always considered as young and different compared with Old World (Europe). It sees "the elite" as tyranny which should be overcome by "the people". The representation of this belief can also be seen in Christopher Nolan's *The Dark Knight* trilogy.

In *Batman Begins* (2005), for instance, Bruce Wayne / Batman, who just arrives from his exile world, and has not gained his full wealth yet, tries to take Carmine Falcone Mafia down by using his physical strength and advance technology. In fact, Falcone Mafia also work with corrupted Gotham polices who conducting obstruction in Falcone Mafia cases. In this context, Bruce Wayne is threatened by Falcone Mafia and other corrupted Gotham polices, which represents the corrupted tyranny of the elite, to stay away from their massive and organized heroin business.

By using Stuart Hall's representation theory, this plot implication can be categorized as representation of American populism. Batman and other few characters such as Commissioner Jim Gordon and Rachel Dawes, represent "the people" while

Falcone Mafia and corrupted Gotham police represent “the elite” which is untouchable before the arrival of Batman. It is constructionist approach of producing meaning because the director, in this case, constructs meaning to be understood by its audiences by sign of both opposition parties: the people and the elite. Thus, it can be concluded that these binary groups, which oppose each other, is the form of representation of populism in Christopher Nolan’s *The Dark Knight* trilogy. As in the end of the story, “the people” is represented by main protagonist characters such as Bruce Wayne / Batman, Rachel Dawes and Commissioner Jim Gordon overcomes the corrupted tyranny which is Falcone Mafia and corrupted Gotham polices.

Furthermore, populism, in this context, may implement the concept of American exceptionalism which often imagines America as young when it is compared to Europe. Moreover, as one of the most powerful countries in the world, America always represents power which can be seen by their technological advances. It means that the popularity of American movies such as *Mission: Impossible* franchise, *Fast and Furious* franchise, and other Hollywood movies, represent the exceptionalism of American civilization which cannot be compared to other civilization including Europe. Therefore, the representation of this America’s image helps the popularity of many superhero and science fiction movies because the audiences mostly expect the modernity and advances technology when they came to watch this kind of movie. In this case, *The Dark Knight* trilogy, the populism which represented in American exceptionalism attracts many audiences because they want to be amazed by this New World utopia element within *The Dark Knight* trilogy. For instance, many audiences who come from developing countries expect to see American technological advances when they watch Batman movie because Bruce Wayne character is known for his advance technology to fight crime in Gotham City. Thus, this populism element within *The Dark Knight* trilogy is able attract many audiences around the world.

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, New World utopia elements which are explained by Ostendorf in his journal entitled *Why is American Popular Culture is So Popular? A View from Europe* (2001) can be seen in the Christopher Nolan’s *The Dark Knight* trilogy.

Those New World utopia elements are rule of law, beloved community (communitarianism), liberalism, and populism. First, some plots which consist of conflict between law enforcements and criminals can be considered as sign or representation of rule of law. In this case, the popularity of those TV crime dramas helps the popularity of this trilogy because the original story of Batman is combination of both superhero and detective story. In fact, crime and detective narrative are “morality plays” which feature struggles between good and evil between heroes who stand for moral authority and villains who challenge the authority.

Second, some scenes which consist of uniting community such as the reuniting of Gotham polices to prevent nuclear bomb from Bane terrorist groups can be categorized as representation of beloved community. It represents solidarity and togetherness which is universally accepted for many audiences around the world. Third, Batman also represents liberalism because he acts as individual agent who woks outside the law. The dissemination of democracy as political doctrine around the world helps the popularity of many American narratives which consist of this New World utopia element. And finally, the representation of American populism can be seen in the plot of the first installment *Batman Begins* (2005) which implicates good and evil. In this case, Batman and other few characters such as Commissioner Jim Gordon and Rachel Dawes, represent “the people” while Falcone Mafia and corrupted Gotham police represent “the elite” which is untouchable before the arrival of Batman.

Moreover, populism can be translated as power of America as young nation which is imagined by their technological advances. It can attract many audiences around the world. Thus, those representations of New World utopia elements are clear evidence that Christopher Nolan’s *The Dark Knight* trilogy represent elements of New World (American) utopia. For some reason that already mentioned above, these New World utopia elements attract many audiences and help the popularity of *The Dark Knight* trilogy as one of the highest grossing superhero movies in Hollywood history.

## REFERENCES

- Creswell, J. (2009). *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches*. Los Angeles: SAGE Publication.
- Dietz, J. (2010). *Film Critics Pick the Best Movies of the Decade*. Retrieved on April 30, 2019, from, <https://www.metacritic.com/feature/film-critics-pick-the-best-movies-of-the-decade>
- Evangelista, C. (2018). *We Burned the Forest Down: 'The Dark Knight' 10 Years Later*. Retrieved on April 30, 2019, from <https://www.slashfilm.com/dark-knight-anniversary/>
- Finkelstein, D. et al. (1999). *Batman's Big Birthday*. Retrieved on April 30, 2019, from <https://web.archive.org/web/20080114031758/http://www.guardian.co.uk/g2/story/0%2C%2C314504%2C00.html>
- Gamer, B. (ed.). (2009). *Black's Law Dictionary, 9th Edition*. United States: West.
- Graham, G. (1992). Liberalism and Democracy. *Journal of Applied Philosophy*, Vol. 9, No. 2. 149-160
- Hall, S. (2003). *Representation: Cultural Representation and Signifying Practices*. London: Sage Publication.
- Kjell, G. (2000). *Nationalism and Internationalism in the Post-Cold War Era*. London: Routledge.
- McKee, A. (2003). *Textual Analysis: A Beginner's Guide*. London: Sage.
- Nolan, C. (2005). *Batman Begins*. United States: Legendary Pictures Syncopy.
- \_\_\_\_\_ (2008). *The Dark Knight*. United States: Legendary Pictures Syncopy.
- \_\_\_\_\_ (2012). *The Dark Knight Rises*. United States: Legendary Pictures Syncopy.
- Mahsun, M. (2005). *Metode Penelitian Bahasa: Tahapan Strategi, Metode, dan Tekniknya*. Jakarta: PT. Raja Grafindo Persada.
- Mudde, C. (2004). The Populist Zeitgeist. *Government and Opposition* Vol. 39, No. 4. 541-563.
- Ostendorf, B. (2001). Why is American Popular Culture is So Popular? A View from Europe. *American Studies* Vol (46) No (3) *Popular Culture*, 339-366
- Pearson, R. et al. (1991). *The Many Lives of the Batman: Critical Approaches to a Superhero and His Media*. London: Routledge.
- Rafter, N. (2006). *Shots in the mirror: Crime films and society* (2d ed.). New York: Oxford University Press.
- Stone, S. (2019). *Aquaman Will Pass the Dark Knight's Box Office This Weekend (Probably)*. Retrieved on April 30, 2019, from, <https://www.cbr.com/aquaman-dark-knight-box-office-total/>
- Strinati, D. (2004). *An Introduction to Theories of Popular Culture*. London and New York: Routledge.

*Bhakti Satrio Nugroho*

Timpe, K. (2016). *Free Will*. Retrieved on Sunday, August 28, 2016, from,  
<http://www.iep.utm.edu/freewill/>