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Gazing into an Abyss... [Review of:] Michał Chudoliński, *Mroczny Rycerz Gotham. Szkice z kultury popularnej* (Kraków: TAiWPN Universitas, 2023, pp. 381)

Abstract: This review concerns Michał Chudoliński's book *Mroczny Rycerz Gotham. Szkice z kultury popularnej* [The Dark Knight of Gotham. Sketches from Popular Culture], which was published in 2023 by the TAiWPN Universitas publishing house. The publication is a mono-graphic study of the universe centreed around the character of Batman. The reviewer as-sesses the way in which the author has achieved the research objectives, brings the research methodology of the transmedia texts analysed closer, paying particular attention to the inno-vative treatment of the problem of deviance in the context of comic characters.
Keywords: Batman, universe, Dark Knight, deviance, Chudoliński.

> He who fights with monsters might take
> care lest he thereby become a monster.
> And if you gaze for long into an abyss, the
> abyss gazes also into you
> Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche,
> *Beyond Good and Evil*

The TAiWPN Universitas publishing house recently published Michał Chudoliński's book *Mroczny Rycerz Gotham. Szkice z kultury popularnej* [The Dark Knight of Gotham. Sketches from Popular Culture]. This is a noteworthy

item for at least several reasons. For the first time on the Polish market there has appeared a monographic study of the universe centred around the character of Batman, the titular Dark Knight of Gotham. Which in itself is already a highly ambitious undertaking, since it requires the researcher to be familiar with many cultural texts from different media that deal with the adventures of Batman, although they always constitute a new, original variation on his fate. It seems that in this wealth of adaptation forms only true lovers, die-hard fans of the Man-Bat can orient themselves. And undoubtedly the author of this publication belongs to this group, as the cover suggests. On its wing, next to the description of the author there is a drawing by Łukasz Jagielski, depicting Michał Chudoliński in the style of comic book characters. The right-hand side of the author's face hides under a Batman mask; the other leaves no doubt as to whom we are dealing with. The face cut in half metaphorically illustrates the duality of the author's role. On the one hand, there is fan worship, the temptation of the pleasure in impersonating Batman, to put on his mask for at least a moment and have fun. After all, popular culture is supposed to provide reading pleasure. However, the purpose of the research and its nature require a distance to be maintained, which becomes a guarantor of scientific objectivity. I think this is how this coquettish gesture of the author towards the reader can be interpreted. Chudoliński – like Bruce Wayne – balances between two worlds, the private and professional spheres, on the border of scientific and popular science reading, revealing and veiling his reading preferences. But not to worry, *Mroczny Rycerz Gotham. Szkice z kultury popularnej* [The Dark Knight of Gotham. Sketches from Popular Culture] is a collection of essays in which both comic books and films are subjected to in-depth interpretation, conducted with the use of apparatus from philological and cultural studies.

As I have already mentioned, cartoonists, screenwriters, editors, producers and directors who base their work on the character of Batman are not bound by the conventions of the series, which would dictate that the continuity of storylines be maintained, i.e. that each realisation of the Dark Knight's adventures constitute a separate, independent work. Paweł Bohuszewicz points out that this creative freedom is not limited either by genological qualifications (by shooting *The Dark Knight*, Nolan transgresses the rigid framework of superhero cinema towards political cinema), or by the medium in which it is told (by creating *Arkham Asylum* Morrison and McKean transgress the framework of comic books towards *graphic novels*), or by belonging to so-called popular culture.[1] With Umberto Eco's insights in

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[1] Original: "nie ograniczają ani kwalifikacje genologiczne (kręcąc *Mrocznego Rycerza*, Nolan przekracza sztywne ramy kina superbohaterskiego w kierunku kina politycznego), ani medium, w ktorym zostaje opowiedziana (tworząc *Arkham Asylum* Morrison i McKean prze-

mind,[2] made in the now classic *Superman w literaturze masowej. Powieść popularna: między retoryką a ideologią* [Superman in Mass Literature. The Popular Novel: Between Rhetoric and Ideology], it is not difficult to see that the comic books of Miller, Nolan, Morrison and McKean are as popular as they are highly artistic.

Accordingly, the twenty-seventh issue of "Detective Comics" from 1939, in which Batman made his debut in the story *The Case of the Chemical Syndicate*, functions as a pratext, source material, or, as Adam Regiewicz hints, inspiration providing an opportunity to tell an interesting story.[3] For more than eighty years, artists have been reaching for the character of Batman, the alter ego of millionaire Bruce Wayne, and trying to tell his adventures in their own way, according to the requirements of a given medium. And Batman is everywhere: in cinema, animation, computer and board games.

Michał Chudoliński reflects on the phenomenon of this character: What is it that means that the archetypes portrayed in Batman-related media have such a strong impact on successive generations of pop culture consumers?[4] Referring to the most important texts of Batman mythology in the spheres of comic books and film, he tries to find an answer to this question. To do so, he analyses the most important Batman stories, as he explains, viewed and read through the prism of a Western mind steeped in psychoanalysis, especially the theories of Sigmund Freud and Carl Gustav Jung.[5]

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kraczają ramy komiksu w kierunku *graphic novel*), ani przynależność do tzw. kultury popularnej." Paweł Bohuszewicz, "Uczłowieczanie superbohaterów we współczesnej kulturze popularnej" [The Humanization of Superheroes in Contemporary Popular Culture], in *Mit – Literatura – Tajemnica. Fantastyczność i cudowność* [Myth – Literature – Mystery. Fantasticality and Marvelousness], eds. Waldemar Gruszczynski, Tomasz Ratajczak, and Bogdan Trocha (Zielona Góra: Uniwersytet Zielonogórski 2013), 74.

[2] Eco wrote that the pleasure of narrative, as we have come to know, comes from the repetition of what is already known: the cyclical repetition that takes place both within a single literary work and in a whole series of works, in a series of cross-references from novel to novel. Adherence to this rule is the very essence of the popular novel and can in no way be considered a defect in it. See Umberto Eco, *Superman w literaturze masowej. Powieść popularna: między retoryką a ideologią* [Superman in Mass Literature. The Popular Novel: between Rhetoric and Ideology], trans. Joanna Ugniewska (Kraków: Znak 2008), 95–96.

[3] Adam Regiewicz, *Literatura i media. Korespondencja sztuk* [Literature and Media. Correspondence of the Arts] (Częstochowa: Wydawnictwo Naukowe im. Stanisława Podobińskiego UJD, 2023), 164.

[4] Original: "Co sprawia, że archetypy ukazane w mediach związanych z Batmanem tak mocno oddziałują na kolejne pokolenia konsumentów popkultury?" Michał Chudoliński, *Mroczny Rycerz Gotham. Szkice z kultury popularnej* [Gotham's Dark Knight. Sketches from Popular Culture] (Kraków: TAiWPN Universitas, 2023), 11.

[5] Cf. Chudoliński, *Mroczny Rycerz Gotham. Szkice z kultury popularnej*, 11.

It should be added that the collection in question is the fruit of Michał Chudoliński's work as a film and comic critic. And, although the material collected consists of expanded versions of the author's texts, previously published in various magazines – thanks to the clearly defined research objectives, the methodology adopted and consistently conducted interpretations – the book constitutes a coherent whole. The author systematises knowledge about Batman in the humanities (sociology, psychology, philosophy), meticulously notes the state of academic research related to the Batman universe, referring to both Polish and English-language texts. Particularly noteworthy, however, is Janina Scarlet's willingness to introduce the viewer to psychotherapeutic practices, proving that texts about superheroes can be effectively used to treat trauma and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

The book consists of seven chapters, accompanied by an *Introduction,* in which the author defines the purpose of his research, justifies his motives and reveals the texts that have been an important inspiration for him. In addition, he presents himself as a man immersed in the world of comic characters, which have largely shaped his sensibility.

Chapter one *Narodziny legendy* [Birth of a Legend] outlines the circumstances of Batman's creation. The author draws attention to the relationship between Bob Kane and Bill Finger, insisting that Finger's creative contribution to the Batman character be duly honoured. Chudoliński takes an anecdotal look at the controversy surrounding the birth of the legend. Bob Kane, who is credited as the creator of Batman, is portrayed as a shrewd celebrity, minding his own business and taking advantage of the work of ghost-writers, including Finger, an extremely talented, but lifeless cartoonist. This duo – two Jews sharing a similar fate, the former with a talent for business and the latter with a talent for drawing – seemed to be an ideal arrangement. Unfortunately, Kane, as Chudoliński notes, consistently included an unambiguous caption in the footer of his increasingly popular and recognisable comics: "Batmana stworzył Bob Kane"[6] [Batman was created by Bob Kane]. Of course, it is difficult not to acknowledge Kane's contribution to the development of the character, the problem being that at the meeting with the editor of Detective Comics, during which the new hero was introduced, Kane went alone and did not say a word about Finger and his ideas, which he was so eager to use. Bill Finger agreed to become a ghost-writer; he created anonymously. And although he was one of one of the best screenwriters of the Golden Age of American comics[7] (1938–1956), he passed away in poverty, abandoned by everyone. To this day, Chudoliński says, for those interested

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6   Chudoliński, *Mroczny Rycerz Gotham. Szkice z kultury popularnej*, 28.
7   Chudoliński, *Mroczny Rycerz Gotham. Szkice z kultury popularnej*, 32.

in comics, Finger's character is a symbol of the misfortunes of creators who do not care about copyright. Ironically, the Batman story was created in the shadow of a fraud….

The second chapter *Wprowadzenie do batmitologii. Dzieje medialne i znaczenie Batmana w kulturze popularnej* [Introduction to Batmythology. The Media History and Significance of Batman in Popular Culture] is an attempt to reconstruct the history of Batman considered in the context of changing mores, various political and economic aspects, additionally taking into account the changing aesthetic needs of the audience as a result of media development. Chudoliński takes a close look at the various iterations and realisations conceptualising the Batman character. He reveals the mechanisms that govern the universe, which make it grow at a rapid pace and seize more and more new areas. The path followed by Batman and which is transferred from comic book pages into the world of transmedia leads through the first comic books influenced by pop-art aesthetics, to the TV series broadcast in colour by the American channel ABC in the 1960s (with Adam West in the title role), Burton's and Schumacher's films and the Batman '66 series created at a high artistic level by Jeff Parker, up to Frank Miller's *magnum opus* – according to Chudoliński – the best Batman story. *The return of the Dark Knight* started a fad for graphic novels that attracted the attention of older audiences.

In the second chapter, the author also accounts for the damaging publications of psychiatrist Fredric Wertham, who, on the basis of his medical experience, tried to prove to the public that stories about superheroes deprave young people, are a source of violence and the cause of pathological behaviour. And they even promote homosexuality, as exemplified by Batman's relationship with Robin.[8] Some of these stereotypical beliefs are still in place today. Wertham's abuses and misinterpretations eventually led to "a media crusade against comic books in America, through which the market was censored".[9] The 1950s saw the establishment of the Comics Code,[10] which would

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[8] Wojciech Lewandowski wrote about this in a publication also referred to by Michał Chudoliński. See Wojciech Lewandowski, "Opowieści z cenzorskiej krypty. Komiksowa panika lat pięćdziesiątych dwudziestego wieku na przykładzie "Tales from the Crypt"" [Tales from the Censor's Crypt. Comic Panic of the 1950s of the Twentieth Century on the Example of "Tales from the Crypt"], in *Groza i postgroza*, eds. Ksenia Olkusz, and Barbara Szymczak-Maciejczyk (Kraków: Ośrodek Badawczy Facta Ficta, 2018), 246–247.

[9] Chudoliński, *Mroczny Rycerz Gotham. Szkice z kultury popularnej*, 46.

[10] On August 17, 1954, the Association of Comic Book Magazine Publishers (Stowarzyszenie Wydawców Magazynów Komiksowych) was founded, which established the Comic Code Authority responsible for making recommendations on the compliance of comic books with the Association's recognized Comic Code. See Wojciech Lewandowski, "Opowieści z cenzorskiej krypty. Komiksowa panika lat pięćdziesiątych dwudziestego wieku na przykładzie "Tales from the Crypt"," 249.

significantly affect the fate of Batman, making him a character straight out of *science fiction* cinema. This is the time of the implementation of bizarre ideas and crazy stories; it will suffice to mention, following Chudoliński, such creations as 'batmałpa' (Bat-monkey) and 'batdziecko' (Bat-baby). However, had it not been for this "period of shame", perhaps Batman would have ceased to exist. The author puts forward the thesis that the 1950s and 1960s were a point of reference for subsequent creators and contributed later to the formation of the ideal archetype of the Dark Knight.[11]

The subject of the third chapter *Żart, który się ziścił. Zabójczy żart wczoraj i dziś* [The Joke That Came True. The Killing Joke of Yesterday and Today] is the story of the Joker, an instalment of Alan Moore and Brian Bolland's cult story. Interpreting The Killing Joke of 1987, the researcher reflects on the theme of freedom. Batman and the Joker represent two different understandings of freedom. Both experienced a tragedy that had a colossal impact on their lives. However, their reaction to the traumatic event was already quite different. The comparative analysis outlined in this chapter is bolstered by the texts of Jean Baudrillard and is an interesting character study. Chudoliński asks the age-old question: where does evil come from? And surprisingly, he looks for the answer in the Joker. He gives a voice to a madman who is convinced that all it takes is "one bad day"[12] for a man who until now was regarded as honest enough (such as Commissioner Gordon) to transform into a villain. In light of this theory, the line separating Batman from the Joker is no longer so clear. Perhaps, that is why in the final scene of the comic Batman laughs at the Joker's absurd joke….

It is no coincidence that the fourth chapter *W stronę psychoterapii* [Towards Psychotherapy] is devoted to a graphic novel by Grant Morrison and Dave McKean, *Arkham Asylum: A Serious House on Serious Ground*, published in 1989. Characterised by a neurotic, dreamlike, and often surreal atmosphere, the story deals with the fears of the Dark Knight. From beneath Batman's costume emerges a frightened boy, who still has the image of a bandit shooting at his parents before his eyes. Bruce will do anything to ensure that the Crime Alley tragedy never happens again, but what motivates him to act, what allows him to transform into Batman – the guardian of Gotham – at the same time every night there is the threat of falling into madness. Chudoliński aptly recalls Batman's conversation with Commissioner Gordon in this context:

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[11] Cf. Chudoliński, *Mroczny Rycerz Gotham. Szkice z kultury popularnej*, 48.

[12] Chudoliński, *Mroczny Rycerz Gotham. Szkice z kultury popularnej*, 79.

I'm afraid. I'm afraid that the Joker is right about me. Sometimes … I doubt the rationality of my actions. And I'm afraid that if I cross the walls of Arkham… that when I go inside and the door slams behind me, it will be like going home.[13]

Ja się boję. Boję, że Joker ma co do mnie rację. Czasami… powątpiewam w racjonalność swoich działań. I boję się, że jeśli przekroczę mury Arkham…, że kiedy wejdę do środka i zatrzasną się za mną drzwi, to będzie jak powrót do domu.[14]

From this point, the psychological analysis of the character begins. Morrison leads Batman to confront his own shadow,[15] trusting that only in this way will he avoid psychological degradation. Batman, forced by the Joker to intervene in a hospital for the insane, must face his fears and confront his guilt.

Chudoliński takes a close look at the formation of Batman's psychological consciousness, looks into the dark recesses of his psyche, and finally sees in the superhero the archetype of modern man. The historical and literary context slowly gives way to the psychological and sociological optics adopted later in the book. Quoting excerpts from the works of Travis Langley and Janina Scarlet, the author draws attention to the whole current of psychotherapy using pop culture. This thread will be developed in Chapter 6 *Psychologia versus Batman* [Psychology versus Batman], which precedes the sketch *Batman – manifestacja postmodernizmu* [Batman – A Manifestation of Postmodernism].

According to Chudoliński, in order to be able to understand the modern Batman it is necessary to look at his relationship with postmodernism, which he does in Chapter 5. In this aspect, the theme of the metropolis is taken up. Gotham City is a place that drives its inhabitants crazy,[16] it is a space of carnival masquerade, demonic clowns and creatures straight from the mediaeval bestiary.[17] The city's pastiche-based architecture reveals a postmodern

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[13] Grand Morrison, *Full Script and Notes*, in Grand Morrison, and Dave McKean, *Arkham Asylum. A Serious House on a Serious Earth – 15th Anniversary Edition* (New York: DC Comics, 2004), 136. Quoted in Chudoliński, *Mroczny Rycerz Gotham. Szkice z kultury popularnej*, 111.

[14] Grand Morrison, and Dave McKean, *Poważny dom na poważnej ziemi*, trans. Jarosław Grzędowicz, and Tomasz Sidorkiewicz (Warszawa: Egmont Polska, 2015), non-paginated [24].

[15] This is a reference to the archetype of the shadow. In Carl Gustav Jung's theory, the shadow represents the unknown, dark side of the human personality, which, if neglected by the conscious *Ego*, can lead to destructive behaviour. C.G. Jung writes: "Everyone carries a shadow, and the less it is embodied in the individual's conscious life, the blacker and denser it is." Carl Gustav Jung, *Psychology and Religion*, trans. Richard Francis Carrington Hull (New Haven–London: Yale University Press 1992), 93.

[16] Chudoliński, *Mroczny Rycerz Gotham. Szkice z kultury popularnej*, 144.

[17] Original: "karnawałowej maskarady, demonicznych klaunów oraz stworzeń rodem ze średniowiecznego bestiarium." Justyna Hanna Budzik, *Gotham City: niesamowite czy realne?* [Gotham City: Uncanny or Real?], ArtPapier, 1.01.2009, accessed February 10, 2024, http://artpapier.com/index.php?page=artykul&wydanie=74&artykul=1725.

playing with convention. Gotham can be fairy-tale, expressionistic, surreal, combining gothic elements with the aesthetics of noir detective stories, but it always serves to show the complexity of the human psyche, after all, the city's residents are people with identity problems who love dressing up and crazy entertainment.

From this catalogue of characters, various images of deviancy emerge, to which the remainder of the book is devoted. The purpose of the research – carried out in chapters 6 and 7 – is to analyse the occurrence of deviancy in the characters appearing in the Batman film,[18] and more specifically, to try to find answers to the three hypotheses set forth regarding the type of deviancy manifested by specific characters (including Batman), the genesis of their deviance and how firmly the film's characters are rooted in modern Western civilisation.[19] The author introduces the reader to the problem of deviance, explains in detail the concept of deviance and describes its specific forms (positive, negative, primary and secondary deviance), thereby laying the theoretical foundation for the subsequent analysis of selected fictional figures. He uses methodology from the fields of psychology, philosophy and sociology. Referring to the writings of Claude Lévi-Strauss, he reminds us of the importance of the mask, which not only serves to cover and conceal, but also to reveal and unmask specific intentions and meanings.[20] In addition, it reaches back to the category of stigma, as described by Erving Goffman.[21] Thorsten Sellin's concept of cultural conflict and Howard S. Becker's typology of deviant behaviour, also become interesting points of reference. It is impossible to list here all the research tools that Chudoliński reaches for. The methodological chapter impresses the reader with its breadth and richness of the material cited.

The seventh chapter *Obraz dewiacji w filmowym uniwersum Batmana* [The Image of Deviancy in the Batman Film Universe] is a set of analyses of several selected characters from the universe, including Batman and his nemesis – the Joker, the schizophrenic Harvey Dent, Catwoman walking her paths, the queer Penguin, the Riddler, Poison Ivy and the Scarecrow. The catalogue of anti-heroes – villains, serial killers, psychopaths, nihilists – forms a wide spectrum of various deviations.

In the *Conclusion,* the author summarises his analysis, refers to the latest Matt Reeves film and once again, with some resentment, leans into the Bat-

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[18] Chudoliński, *Mroczny Rycerz Gotham. Szkice z kultury popularnej*, 140.

[19] Chudoliński, *Mroczny Rycerz Gotham. Szkice z kultury popularnej*, 140.

[20] Claude Lévi-Strauss, "Rozdwojenie i maskarada" [Dissonance and Masquerade], trans. Krzysztof Pomian, in *Maski* [Masks], vol. 1, eds. Maria Janion, and Stanisław Rosiek (Gdańsk: Wydawnictwo Morskie, 1986), 78.

[21] Chudoliński, *Mroczny Rycerz Gotham. Szkice z kultury popularnej*, 161.

man phenomenon. The book closes with a glossary of characters covering over seventy pages to help the reader better orient him/herself in the world of Batman characters.

In summary, *Mroczny Rycerz Gotham. Szkice z kultury popularnej* is a collection of interesting, context-rich analyses and interpretations, bringing the reader closer to the character of Batman. A careful study of the transmedia stories that made Batman an icon of American pop culture allowed the researcher to uncover the mechanisms that govern the comic book universe and learn about the strategies according to which the image of the Dark Knight has changed. Chudoliński looks at the Batman character in the face of World War II, against the background of social and moral changes, in the context of President Ronald Reagan's policies and in the era of political correctness. He concludes that:

> [z] Batmanem można zrobić wszystko, w każdej konwencji artystycznej oraz fabularnej. Sęk w tym, że przy tylu interpretacjach zatraca się gdzieś esencja tej postaci – człowieka ślącego światło w sercu ciemności, dającego nadzieją ludziom żyjącym w beznadziejnej sytuacji, potrafiącego przemieszczać się w sferze egzystencjalnego nihilizmu i posiadającego twardy kręgosłup moralny, dowodzącego, że zawsze można podnieść się z tego, co nas przytłoczyło – i żyć na własnych zasadach.[22]

> [with Batman you can do anything, in any artistic convention and in any storyline. The snag is that with so many interpretations the essence of this character is lost somewhere – a man who sends light into the heart of darkness, who gives hope to people living in a hopeless situation, who is able to move in the realm of existential nihilism and who has a firm moral backbone, proving that it is always possible to rise from what has overwhelmed us – and live on our own terms.]

Reading Chudoliński's book makes the reader realise how powerful the universe centred around Batman is. The number of adaptation texts, realised in various media forms, is striking. And the transformations of the character visible in recent productions, plunging Batman further and further into darkness and self-destruction, arouse bitterness. According to the author, cultural vandalism will also reach the Batman character. In the face of progressive discourse – which leads to the erasure of content considered obsolete (so-called *cancel culture*), because it does not fit in with the prevailing ideological tendencies – Michał Chudoliński's position seems invaluable. And, while it is true that "for everyone Batman is what they imagine him to be", I am grateful for this book which has brought me closer to the Batman imagined by Michał Chudoliński. At the same time, I trust that Batman, gazing into the abyss, has nothing to fear… After all, Nietzsche may have been wrong.

Translated by Anna Wylężałek and David Lilley

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[22] Chudoliński, *Mroczny Rycerz Gotham. Szkice z kultury popularnej*, 256.

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Spoglądając w otchłań…
[Recenzja:] Michał Chudoliński, *Mroczny Rycerz Gotham. Szkice z kultury popularnej* (Kraków: TAiWPN Universitas, 2023, ss. 381)

Abstrakt: Recenzja dotyczy książki Michała Chudolińskiego *Mroczny Rycerz Gotham. Szkice z kultury popularnej*, która ukazała się w 2023 roku nakładem wydawnictwa TAiWPN Universitas. Publikacja stanowi monograficzne opracowanie uniwersum skupionego wokół postaci

Batmana. Recenzentka ocenia sposób realizacji wyznaczonych przez autora celów badawczych, przybliża metodologię badań analizowanych tekstów transmedialnych, zwracając szczególną uwagę na nowatorskie ujęcie problemu dewiacji w kontekście komiksowych postaci.

Słowa kluczowe: Batman, uniwersum, Mroczny Rycerz, dewiacja, Chudoliński.

In einen Abgrund blicken…
[Review of:] Michał Chudoliński, *Mroczny Rycerz Gotham. Szkice z kultury popularnej* (Kraków: TAiWPN Universitas, 2023, 381 S.)

Abstract: Rezensiert wird die Monographie von Michał Chudolińskis Buch *Mroczny Rycerz Gotham. Szkice z kultury popularnej* [Der Dunkle Ritter Gotham. Skizzen über die Populärkultur], die im Jahr 2023 vom Verlag TAiWPN Universitas (Kraków) veröffentlicht wurde. Es handelt sich um eine monografische Studie über das Universum rund um die Figur des Batman. Es wird hier die Art und Weise bewertet, wie Chudoliński seine Forschungsziele verfolgt, sowie die Forschungsmethodik der analysierten transmedialen Texte nähergebracht, wobei das besondere Augenmerk auf den innovativen Ansatz zur Entartung der Comicfiguren gerichtet wird.

Schlüsselwörter: Batman, Universum, Der Dunkle Ritter, Entartung, Chudoliński.