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Dark Knight Mania: It Ain't Heath; It's The Batman

Posted July 21, 2008 | 05:48 PM (EST)



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Here's the truth about *The Dark Knight's* record-breaking box office. The only surprise would have been if the latest Batman movie DIDN'T have a massive opening weekend. Almost no other franchise in US movie history can claim the opening weekend hysteria generated by Bruce Wayne and the Caped Crusader. Not that you'd know it reading the traditional media.

The *New York Times* quoted Warner Bros. disingenuously **claiming to be delightfully**

surprised. "It just took on a life of its own," said Dan Fellman, Warner's president for theatrical distribution. "You never expect anything like this."

And the Associated Press quoted a usually reliable box office analyst as follows: "The average opening gross of the last five *Batman* movies is \$47 million. This tripled that, and for a reason," said Paul Dergarabedian, president of Media By Numbers. "A big part of that was the Heath Ledger mystique and a phenomenal performance that absolutely deserves the excitement surrounding it." (Dergarabedian ignores how huge those opening numbers were for their time.)

The goofiest line of all? *The New York Times* writing, "That the film's opening took on an event status that previous *Batman* movies never quite achieved apparently owed something to its strong presence in IMAX format."

Huh? Is Cieply so young he doesn't remember the absolute hysteria surrounding Tim Burton's *Batman* and another acclaimed, memorable Joker (as embodied by Jack Nicholson)? And IMAX is negligible hype: **the movie grossed \$6.2 million on 94 IMAX screens.** Assuming a third of that gross is the IMAX surcharge (roughly \$12 a ticket instead of \$8, which is a very rough estimate), that means playing in IMAX meant *The Dark Knight* grossed an extra... wait for it... \$2 million.

Out of \$158.3 million total gross. Big whoop. Warner Bros. wasn't surprised and the big opening weekend wasn't just because of Heath.

Here's the truth: ignoring the [Adam West quickie from 1966](#), the [Batman franchise has released six movies](#). FOUR of them have set the [all-time opening weekend box office record](#). The only two that didn't were the deservedly maligned *Batman & Robin* in 1997 and the acclaimed reboot *Batman Begins* in 2005 which made this film's success possible.

That's right. Four times out of six, a *Batman* movie has set or reclaimed the title for Biggest Opening Weekend Of All Time. [No other franchise in history](#) comes close to that record. Not *Star Wars*. Not *Harry Potter*. Not *Spider-Man*. Not *The Lord Of The Rings*. No one. Here are the figures:

Batman (1989) grossed \$40.3 million its opening weekend, an all-time record. (And since I was wearing my Batman Underoos to opening day, that's event status in my book.) It held the record until...

Batman Returns (1992), which grossed \$45.6 million. That movie was topped by *Jurassic Park*, which grossed \$50.1 million in 1993 and held the title until it was one-upped by...

Batman Forever (1995), which grossed \$52 million. It held the record until *The Lost World: Jurassic Park* took it back in 1997 with \$72 million and held the crown until *Harry Potter* arrived on the scene in 2001. Records have fallen ever since with numbing regularity, thanks to a huge number of multiplexes that can show a movie like *The Dark Knight* on staggered showtimes on four or five or even all of their available screens. (Ironically, DVDs have made movies so omnipresent that people who spend the money at the movies want it to be an event; hence the drive towards round-the-clock screenings on opening day and get-there-first hysteria for fans.)

As for [Heath Ledger](#), he was an exceptional actor but not yet a movie star. And no one becomes a huge box office draw simply by dying. This isn't an insult to Ledger; it's a compliment and a plea to remember him as an artist. Prior to *The Dark Knight*, his biggest opening weekend was his breakthrough role in *A Knight's Tale* way back in 2001. (I'm not counting his supporting turn in *The Patriot* since that was clearly Mel Gibson's movie and Ledger was along for the ride.) Most people were not ghoulishly turning out to see *The Dark Knight* because Ledger had died tragically young. They were turning out because the franchise was always a monster draw, the movie was getting the best reviews of any Hollywood film so far this year (along with *Wall-E*) and the buzz about Ledger's performance (just like the buzz about Jack Nicholson's performance in 1989) was icing on the cake.

And don't freak out when the box office drops by 70% or whatever next weekend. That's to be expected. In fact, the *Batman* franchise has almost always been about huge opening weekends and quick drop-offs. (I'd say it's because all of the movies -- until now, arguably -- have been unsatisfying.) Yes, the 1989 edition became the [6th top grossing movie of all time in the US](#) (behind *Star Wars*, *ET*, *Return of The Jedi*, *The Empire Strikes Back* and *Jaws*.) But the next two set opening weekend records and yet didn't even come close to breaking into the Top 10 of All-Time Top Grossers. Still, with *The Dark Knight's* nihilism so in tune with a bleak economic forecast and seemingly never-ending war overseas, perhaps this one will turn the tide. One bold prognosticator insisted *The Dark Knight* would NOT beat *Titanic's* \$600 million record in the US. (That's always a safe bet.) But if it drops by less than 60% in its second weekend, \$400 million+ is very likely and *The Dark Knight* should put Batman right back in the Top 10 of all time for the first time in 20 years instead of just an opening weekend phenomenon. (Interestingly, the *Batman* franchise has always been a poor draw overseas -- only the hated *Batman & Robin* grossed more outside the US than in it. That could turn around too.)

So let's remember Ledger as a talented actor whose best work was ahead of him, not as some sort of perverse trivia question. And anyone who is surprised by the opening weekend hysteria for *The Dark Knight* simply doesn't know their box office history..

To read more on Huffington about the franchise and Ledger, you can ponder [Joshua David Stein's](#) thoughts on the movie's moral bleakness, catch [Alex Remington's](#) rave review, [Erik Lundegaard's](#) reappraisal of the earlier flicks (including *Batman Forever*), [Charles Karel Bouley](#) and [Kim Morgan](#) on Ledger's performance, and [Hugh Hamilton](#) on the movie's political significance.

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Well hate to tell you, but...The Dark Knight grossed 24mil..TODAY. MONDAY. That it all....

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Why say "hate to tell you?" Unlike others who make crazy predictions based on a day or two of box office, I said you should look closely at the second weekend numbers. It appears (given the terrific box office on Monday) that The Dark Knight might very well drop 60% or less its second weekend, which would mean it is well positioned to become only the 8th film in US history to gross \$400 million+. Since it's arguably the best reviewed Hollywood movie of the year and I'm a huge fan of Christian Bale, I couldn't be happier for it. That doesn't change the fact that the Batman franchise has traditionally been an opening weekend phenomenon with no follow-through. This looks like the first one since 1989's Batman to be an honest to goodness smash hit.

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