

From Oswald to Oswald: The Penguin's Contradictory Discourse of Gender Swap and Femme Fatale in *Batman: Caped Crusader*

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Abstract

Film is one of the media that has become an ideological machine either to maintain or resist dominant reality. The animated series *Batman: Caped Crusader* (Timm, 2024) which was released last August shows the ability of film to challenge dominant gender ideology through alternative discourses. The latest superhero comic adaptation features Penguin, an antagonist character usually represented as a male gangster, gender-swapped by the series creators to a female. Although the movie brings new perspectives on women's position in society, it also gives rise to a contradictory discourse where the character remains positioned as a villain, like in the concept of femme fatale. Through Norman Fairclough's critical discourse analysis, I uncover the underlying issue behind the gender swap and its contradictory femme fatale aspect in relation to the socio-political context at the time of the series' release. The findings show that scenarios, dialogues, and visual elements in the series are able to present alternative gender discourses amid an increasingly politically polarized society. Unfortunately, these discourses become less effective as it is still tied to the femme fatale formula which generates the notion that to be dominant, women have to be positioned as antagonistic figures towards male protagonists.

Keywords: film, gender swap, femme fatale, alternative discourse, contradiction

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Introduction

Film is considered an ideological machine that reproduces power structures (Storey, 2009), but also a powerful tool to influence power dynamics using its symbolic and material aspects that shape people's logic and inflict subversive thinking (Chen, 2024). In *Batman: Caped Crusader* (Timm, 2024) animated series, film serves its role as a medium that counters reality construction by swapping the gender identity of Penguin, one of the most popular antagonists in the Batman lore. Instead of showing a middle-aged man wearing a black-magician hat that carry an umbrella-turn-gun with a swaying gait, Penguin is portrayed as a female gangster with two sons in the newest animated adaptation. The character's real name is also changed from Oswald Cobblepot to Oswalda Cobblepot.

Gender swapping is one of many steps taken to show inclusive representations. However, this representation is not without problems. Characters are usually only changed based on their biological sex, not their traits. The efforts are then only seen as merely a political strategy to better align with social justice movement. In the case of Penguin, the gender swapping is ineffective as she still positioned as antagonist. This then intersects with the concept of the *femme fatale* in noir films, where antagonist women become the source of men's own paranoia. Most female characters were still positioned as opponents of the male protagonist, where good behaviors of women are practiced by men and negative behavior of men are practiced by women (Xu, 2024).

Efforts to present gender equity in adaptations are often caught in a contradiction between loyalty to the source material and the demand to be relevant in changing social landscape. Therefore, this study is important to explore how alternative discourses try to emerge amidst the contradictions of old discourses that are still maintained. *Batman: Caped Crusader* deserve to be included in discussions on how media content should show representations that are not half-hearted in sparking that social change. Using Norman Fairclough's critical discourse analysis, this article aims to uncover social discourses hidden in mediums such as films. Critical paradigm is used to make this article a relevant source that able to initiate the public's critical thinking towards texts, instead of accepting it as absolute reality.

Literature Review

In a male-dominated film industry, female characters are still underrepresented. The research on the portrayal of female characters in 100 top grossing films of 2019 conducted by Lauzen (2020) shows that even though the percentage of female protagonists rose by 9 percent (31 percent in 2018 to 40 percent in 2019), most of these films are still dominated by male protagonist with 43 percent. This research also shows that popular films – which are distributed by prominent film industries – are likely to show male protagonists with a percentage of 57 percent. Another research by Sá et al. (2023) shows there were only 20.8 percent of 260 popular films that featured women as the main protagonists. Most of female characters that appear in popular films are also trapped in stereotypical narrative where women are more likely to be the main character in the romance, horror, and musical genres, while male characters are associated with sports, war, and science fiction (Gala et al., 2020; Lauzen, 2020).

Gender swapping from male characters to female considered a form of alternative representations. It is become an important issue related to gender relations in society dominated by men and masculinities. However, Oulton (2024) dismissed the term “gender-

swap” and proposed the term “sex-swap,” as it describes the reality that the characters’ transition only changes the biological sex rather than their constructed gender traits, just as Penguin who is still considered a villain. In this case, gender swap effort only appears as a political strategy to show inclusivity (Jenner, 2023) without actually trying to create authentic characters and alternative discourses.

The representations of female as villain create a contradiction shown in the concept of *femme fatale*. It is a narrative concept that often appear in *noir* films, a type of films that began to develop after World War II by exploring moral ambiguity and existential crisis among its characters (Conard, 2006). Generally, the protagonists in *noir* films are men who experience alienation, moral dilemmas, and anxiety with such expressions like skepticism, paranoia, and even fear (Kožul, 2023). The *femme fatale* usually presented as the culprit of this paranoia, symbolizes male fantasy, but also becomes the only character that represents an effort to break male dominance (Piotrowska, 2019). Unfortunately, this representation is only shown briefly. Towards the end, the *femme fatales* are still defeated by man who seeks to restore masculinity’s control over the world. Thus, women are symbolized as active and strong individual, but they also experience reductions of their personality by only built as characters that use their beauty to gain benefits from male figures.

Research Methods

This research was conducted using the *Critical Discourse Analysis* (CDA) method, which analyzes language not only from its linguistic aspects, but also its relation to social practices and contexts (Eriyanto, 2001). Fairclough's CDA concerns on three analytical dimensions: text, *discourse practice*, and *sociocultural practice*, that gives attention not only from the gender or feminist perspective, but also the society as a whole interconnected issue. Thus, the scope of analysis is more holistic and able to connect discourses with social change, as well as highlighting forms of resistance within. In the context of film as popular culture, the interaction between film texts and social structures is very important.

I used qualitative approach to analyze the scenes in the first episode of *Batman: Caped Crusader* series entitled *In Treacherous Waters*, the one and only appearance of the Penguin throughout the whole 8 episodes. After the text analysis was carried out, I continued the process of analyzing news articles containing interviews with series producers to strengthen the analysis on the discourse practices and social practices section. In addition, I also used several literatures such as news articles and scientific writings that were able to provide a clear picture of the socio-political dynamics in United States when this series was made.

Results and Discussion

Text Analysis

Powerlessness of Men in the Face of Woman

The first scene of episode 1 shows a man named Clarence tied to a chair during an interrogation. He appears to be one of the workers in the “boss” family business who is suspected of leaking the family’s secret plans. In the scene, Clarence is extremely afraid and tries to convince an executioner to believe his words. His fear of the “incoming danger” is amplified after one of the executioners says, “Sure Clarence, but the boss would like to have a word with you anyway.” The executioners then left him while at the same time, a shadowy

figure of a woman wearing magician's hat appears, holding an umbrella whose tip turns sharp just like a bayonet.

The discourse of gender swap can be seen from how gender transition also changes the gender power relations. The scene shows woman as bosses or leaders who have higher positions than their male workers. Right from the first scene, audience has been exposed by the alternate discourse for men's powerlessness in front of the woman. However, the discourse of *femme fatale* appears when woman who is shown to practice the "evil" side of male characters who are dominant and powerful over the opposite sex.

Courage Against Male Power

Scene 3 shows two crucial characters, Batman/Bruce Wayne and his servant Alfred Pennyworth discussing the latest crime that deliberately targets the buildings owned by crime boss Rupert Thorne. The dialog between the two characters shows the courage of the unknown gangster, but actually refers to the Penguin. "Someone's declared war on Thorne, but they're covering their tracks," Batman said. "That would suggest there's a crime boss we don't know about. One who's bold enough to take on Rupert Thorne," Alfred responded.

This dialog implicitly concludes Penguin's courage as a gangster against Rupert Thorne's business empire. Bruce Wayne and Alfred's conversation shows the impression of a woman who dares to fight against male domination. The discourse of *femme fatale* puts Penguin as a strong woman who represents efforts to break male dominance and women passivity. However, the way she does her work is still represents the bad nature of men.

Cabaret Contradictions

Scene 7 shows Penguin performing a *cabaret* show and dancing to music in the lounge of her ship, Iceberg. But, the audience of her performance are mostly men. Despite not wearing clothes that are identical to female stereotypes (revealing clothes with flashy colors), this scene still shows Penguin as the object of the audience's gaze. After the dance is over, she even says some flirting words to some of the male audience members.

The gender swap discourse instead plunges Penguin back into the stereotype of female characters in the *noir* films which utilize their beauty to trap men. This plot brings back the old representation that reproduces the patriarchal system. Thus, the discourse of *femme fatale* in this scene is more evident and the representation contradicts the actual objectives of gender transition.

The Cold-Blooded Woman

In scene 8, Penguin is shown as a cruel and cold-blooded character who punishes her own son by putting him in a locked safe box and throws it into the sea. This punishment is carried out due to the accusation that Aaron, his younger son, leaked his illegal business secrets. In the scene 10 it is revealed that her older son Ronnie is the actual whistleblower. In regards of this new fact, Penguin doesn't regret killing Aaron. She even says her wicked views out loud, "Do you have any idea what this means?." which Iggy then speculatively answered, "That Thorne got you to kill the wrong son?" Penguin then shouted back, "No! It means that brat's gonna squeal about the whole operation!"

Penguin's answer reinforces her as a cold-blooded and objective character. She doesn't really care about her son and instead relies more on rational thinking. Gender transition thus revolutionizes women as objective and rational characters, much like male characters usually associated with them. However, this rationality is problematic as it relates to the murder of her own biological son. Therefore, the *femme fatale* is back in the picture.

In addition, the dressing room seems to represent the "center" of femininity. The dressing table, even though its use is genderless, is often still used to associate with the feminine image. Penguin's anger can be seen as her feminine center through the setting of the dressing room. She doesn't act outside the construct of femininity despite his cruel nature. Thus, her femininity is still explored, avoiding the need for her to appear brave and powerful which usually become the standard of male characters.

Duel Against Batman and Penguin's Successful Attack

Scene 16 becomes the peak conflict and resolution characterized by Penguin's duel fight against Batman and her success attacking the police station with her ship's cannon. Penguin's success leaves small details that are easy to miss. Before shooting the cannon, for example, she insists on shooting it herself instead of his male workers. The fight between Penguin and Batman is also intense and has a fairly long duration. Apart from the possibility enhancing the aesthetics for the ultimate battle, this details still shows Penguin as a strong female villain who is not easily defeated.

The fight between Penguin and Batman raises the discourse that gender swap succeeds in positioning Penguin as a character who is also physically strong to fight Batman. The discourse of *femme fatale* emerges through the depiction that offers an alternative to female dominance. However, at the same time, another meaning of *femme fatale* also emerges: women must become antagonists to be equal to men.

The climax of the first episode also shows Penguin's success in bombing the police station. This scenario brings up the discourse that Penguin's gender swapping puts women as characters who actually succeed in carrying out her plan. The bombing of the police station creates a strong meaning, considering that police officers are usually represent masculinity. Thus, Penguin's gender swap once again shows an alternative to women's equity, although it is also trapped in a *femme fatale* discourse that makes *gender swap* not entirely effective in bringing new perspective.

Discourse Practice

Text Production

Batman: Caped Crusader is the result of collaborative work by James Tucker and DC Comics legend Bruce Timm. In the early 1990s, Timm was a central figure who launch fan-favorite *Batman: The Animated Series* (1992-1995). Thus, *Caped Crusader* was long awaited by DC fans. Collaborating with James Tucker, Timm is again the central figure in many narrative decisions for *Caped Crusader*, including the *gender swap* of Penguin and its contradiction with the discourse on *femme fatale*. Penguin itself is an antagonist first appeared in the December 1941 issue of Detective Comics #58. The character, whose real name is Oswald Chesterfield Cobblepot, was created by Bill Finger and Bob Kane as a male gangster who has various crime scenarios.

Quoted from the Fiction Horizon website, Timm and Tucker explained the simple reason behind gender swapping move in an interview section. “One of the problems with Batman, as he is, is there's a lack of good villains. You've got Catwoman, you've got Poison Ivy, you've got Harley Quinn. But it would be really good to have more female villains” (Kraljik, 2024). Based on the interview, they didn't have any specific reason for Penguin's gender swap, besides from their assumption that Batman lacks good villains.

However, this statement contradicts Timm's previous statement at the 2021 DC FanDome event. According to Timm, *Batman: Caped Crusader* will bring some updates to stay relevant to the themes of inclusivity and representation, “The way we deal with the characters is going to be quite a bit more modern in terms of inclusivity, representation, things like that” (Trent, 2024). Thus, discourses such as *gender swap* are part of the initial plan to bring inclusivity and representation. What may not be realized is the emergence of the *femme fatale* contradiction, which clearly follows the gender swap discourse as it relates to the embedding of the female gender in antagonistic characters

Meanwhile, the voice of Penguin in the Minnie Driver series also responded to her character's gender transition,

It's believable that this bizarre, strange, larger than life character is genderless because that's the essence of The Penguin. What we are looking at is the essence of the original comics and animation. When you look at her, she's weirdly genderless, she's a creature, and I love that that's what we are exploring now. (Murray, 2024)

Driver seems to understand his role as a form of expansion of alternative discourse in the public presented through the Penguin character.

Text Consumption

The gender swap move didn't go well with the audience reception which mostly consist of Batman fans. Disapproval from audience dominated the comment section in Prime Video's X account. For information, Prime Video is the latest Batman series' distributor. One of those harsh comments can be found in @realJacobAirey account, which stated,

PUT A CHICK IN IT AND MAKE HER GAY AND LAME! Dang, they cast Minnie Driver and instead of using her talent for someone like Catwoman, Silver, Nocturna, we get this lame gender swap. What a waste of talent. Batman has a plethora of female villains. This was unnecessary. (Trent, 2024)

This comment shows a strong rejection to gender swapped Penguin. Airey argued that Batman doesn't really lack of female villains, making the Penguin gender shift unnecessary. He also highlights the least comfortable where Minnie Driver's brilliant work used only for gender swapped character. Meanwhile, a similar but harsher comment came from @JasonCr19525171 who stated, “Stop f***ing doing this bulls**t. There are plenty of good characters that women play in the Batman series and there is no reason to do this gender swap crap. I can guarantee I will not watch this show” (Trent, 2024).

The account's owner expressed his frustration over the producer's move to gender swapping Penguin which deemed to have failed to see the potential of other female villains. Blog writer

Tronix (2024) from *bwspotlight.com* also expressed his concern with Penguin's gender swap by stating,

Cobblepot was still Oswald, not Oswalda, and I still can't believe 's an actual name. I looked it up for the show review, and it just sounds like a made-up name, doesn't it? He was never a woman, or genderless, or anything else you want to use to own people with something you clearly have nothing about. We're talking about superhero geeks here. They're less forgiving than Congress when it comes to that nonsense. (Tronix, 2024)

The blogger insisted that Penguin's gender transition is absurd and can provoke anger from Batman fans. He explained that superhero fans tend to be loyal to the source material of adaptation and usually triggered when the adaptation changes many aspects of the original.

However, Asraff (2024) there was still some enthusiasm from the audience. On Culture Cave's X account, a positive reaction from @lepslair account was spotted in negative-dominated reactions, stated "Minnie Driver? Hell yea!" Another positive reaction also came from @PromptlyAI_YT account, "Really? That's a new one. No worries. I like Minnie Driver. Sure she does a fine job." While both of these comments refer more to the appreciation of the Penguin voice actor Minnie Driver, the expression from the used phrases still show an optimistic reaction to the latest Penguin adaptation.

Sociocultural Analysis

Situational

Batman: Caped Crusader series was released in August of 2024, the year characterized by political turmoil in US. The criminal charges against President Donald Trump further polarized two major political movements, conservatism and liberalism. US political polarization also can't be separated from the series of crisis starting all the way back from the death of George Floyd, racist-motivated mass shootings, leading to the attack on Capitol Building by Trump's fanatics.

This chain of events led to Executive Order known as DEI (Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion). Signed by former US president Joe Biden in 2021, the order enforces federal institutions to promote equal opportunity in workforce. DEI focuses on representation, fairness, and also recognition employees' value without discriminatory towards certain background (Arsel et al., 2021; Schneid, 2025) that this order is an issue oriented towards procedural and distributive justice in institutions. According to a 2023 Pew Research Center study, 52 percent of US adults said they attended DEI training or meetings at work, while 33 percent stated that their company had a staff member designated as a DEI promoter (Ellis, 2025).

The increasing acknowledgement of DEI affected the creative media. Penguin's gender swapping can be concluded as one of the implementations of DEI, as Bruce Timm stated that he wanted to enrich his latest series with updated characters based on issues of inclusivity and representation (Trent, 2024). Unfortunately, the position and traits of Penguin that remain unchanged as an antagonist eventually become *femme fatale*, making this effort of implementing DEI miss its objectives.

Institutional

Prior to the series' release, DC Comics and their studio producer-distributor Warner Bros. (WB) had gone through various crises that led to low levels of satisfaction from *fans* and audiences in general. One crisis that probably had the most media attention is the interference of the studio in the production of *Justice League* (Snyder, 2017). This controversy led to *#ReleaseTheSnyderCut* movements among DC fans for WB to release the original director Zack Snyder's version of the film before heavily edited to be in tune with the studio and stakeholder's vision. The other case would be the crimes committed by the superhero Flash actor Ezra Miller, which charged with under-aged grooming and fans choking (Roundtree, 2023).

While WB still deep covered by crisis, they held an online event called DC FanDome in 2021. This event is intended to be a celebration of DC Comics audio-visual content where various project announcements and movie trailers are released to general audience. *Batman: Caped Crusader* was one of the projects announced. In 2022, the merger of Warner Bros' parent company WarnerMedia with Discovery brought new strategy for the studio's superhero content management while at the same time restoring the dispute between DC fans and the studio. It was in January 2023 that DC Comics superhero films finally reappeared with a new franchise plan called DCU (DC Universe) which will really focus on developing interconnected *superhero* stories under the label DC Studios. In addition, DC also announced another content franchise called DC *Elseworld* which will accommodate superhero stories outside the official DC Universe franchise, of which the animated series *Batman: Caped Crusader* is a part.

The fresh start presented by DC Comics seems to show how DC Comics and WB as industry are now more committed in telling interconnected story and also being actively involved in presenting inclusive representation. But the realization of this new-found inclusivity seems to lack thoroughness. The gender swapped Penguin might just fall back to only in swapping sex rather than gender, resulted in the final product where Penguin instead become a *femme fatale*.

Social Dimension

The emergence of the superhero comic books and their adaptation to the screen in late 1940s reflected the prevailing gender role which saw men in a central position as the embodiment of progress and rationality. As social revolutions occur globally, superhero principles present a transition in female characters that become powerful rather than dominated by men (Kasiyarno et al., 2023). The emergence of female superheroes such as Ms. Marvel, Batgirl, and Supergirl are some efforts conducted by comic artist and media industry to represent gender relation that increasingly moving towards inclusivity and multilayered storytelling. Female superhero adaptations such as *Supergirl* (Szwarc, 1984), *Elektra* (Bowman, 2005), and the series *Ms. Marvel* (Arbi & Fallah, 2022) are also beginning to appear and gaining global attention.

However, there are people who also criticize this movements and associate it with the *woke* culture. *Woke* actually related to racial awareness and anti-racism struggles by black community, first appeared in the 1938 protest song Scottsboro Boys (Cammaerts, 2022). But over the past few years, the use of "*woke*" expands to also represent other marginalized groups such as women and the LGBTQ+ community. The *woke* itself is still debated by both conservative groups and public in general. According to Allen (2023), *woke* has gone through

misappropriation in social media and instead referring more to person that overreacting and insincerely concerned with social justice issues. The movement has privileged the weakest social communities, turning them into political movement with fundamentalist tones which see the whole society as power struggle (Madrid Gil, 2023). Conservatives on the other hand perceive *woke* as an attempt to impose progressive overreaction through “liberal media.”

The gender swapped Penguin in *Batman: Caped Crusader* can be considered emerging in a polarized society. People who adopt both liberal and conservative political ideology in the US are increasingly clinging to the polar ends of their respective ideologies, causing continuous conflict without any tendency towards moderation. The debates around *woke* culture overshadows Penguin’s gender swapped adaptation, which then seems to be forced in order to implement liberal agenda. The goal of presenting alternative gender representation to the general audience, isn’t optimally realized. In addition, the discourse of *femme fatale*, which is one of the tropes that maintained the established masculinity domination, also creates contradictions on the series’ initial discourse.

Conclusion

As we look deeper, the gender swapped Penguin actually shows the effort taken by producers Bruce Timm and James Tucker to redefine the legendary villain in modern and inclusive society. Penguin now represents women as strong characters who are able to rationally holds business control, just as men are often constructed based on gender-associated traits. Although she only appears in first episode, her character leaves a bold impression by putting forward an alternative gender discourse.

However, this adaptation can’t be separated from the concept of *femme fatale*. Gender transition does not necessarily change Penguin’s role as an antagonist. This backfires on DC Comics, which plunges the institution back into the female antagonist narrative of old *noir* films. Women only hold the central role temporarily before finally being defeated by the male hero. The contradiction of these two discourses also becomes an obstacle in presenting alternative gender representations through the concept of DEI, as it is also related to the *woke* culture labelling and affected the increasing polarization of society. The effort to bring inclusivity by featuring alternate gender in popular media is still caught up in *status quo*.

The development of popular content and its adaptation has always been tied to the socio-political conditions at the time of their release. These contents are crucial to reproduce or challenge dominant ideologies. Although I have tried to present the findings comprehensively using Fairclough's critical discourse analysis, this article still has some limitations, such as the analysis which is only conducted on one episode in the series. Thus, the findings in this study are not able to represent the comprehensive gender discourse of the entire series. Several female protagonists and antagonist in the series are also not the object of study because they do not include in gender swap discourse, even though their presence shows a strong gender discourse. Therefore, more critical discourse research is needed in the complex study of popular culture texts as well as the production process. This is so that media content products do not give contradictory social discourses.

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