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NEWS **And** NOTES

The Century 16
multiplex in
Aurora, Colo.,
following the
horrific shooting
on July 20

The Darkest Night

After the Colorado shooting, the
nation struggles with a truth more
brutal than any blockbuster.

BY JOSH ROTTENBERG

“LIKE SOMETHING out of a movie.” That’s a line we’ve gotten used to hearing from those who witness terrible and traumatic events, a testament to both the failure of words in the face of the unspeakable and the power that movies wield over our imaginations. But with the July 20 shooting rampage at a midnight screening of *The Dark Knight*



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Rises in Aurora, Colo., that claimed the lives of 12 people and injured 58 others, those words were given a cruel and heartbreaking new twist. Here was a tragedy that unfolded in an actual movie theater, a horrific inversion of the escapist superhero fantasy the audience had gathered to see.

The forces that drove 24-year-old James Holmes to allegedly enter a sold-out theater armed with an assault rifle, a shotgun, and a Glock pistol and fire indiscriminately into the crowd are still unknown—and may never be fully knowable. It's not clear whether he was drawn to the final installment of director Christopher Nolan's Batman trilogy out of some obsession with the franchise or simply because he sensed it would create a media spectacle (though there are unconfirmed reports that Holmes, whose hair was dyed red and orange, told authorities after the shooting that he was the Joker). Whatever his motives, the shooting instantly cast a pall over the release of one of the summer's most eagerly anticipated blockbusters. Warner Bros. (which, like EW, is owned by Time Warner) canceled the film's premieres in France, Mexico, and Japan. As Nolan and the film's stars issued heartfelt statements, the studio also made a substantial donation to support the victims. Speaking to EW the morning after the



Eli Collins and Susanne Peeples stand vigil during a July 22 memorial service in Aurora

shooting, the movie's composer, Hans Zimmer, was clearly distraught. "We adore our fans," he said. "We feel connected to them. It's devastating.... There is no way anything can be celebrated right now."

In the immediate aftermath of the attack, theater owners vowed to step up security, hoping to allay any fears of potential copycat attacks. The AMC chain banned audience members from carrying fake weapons or wearing "face-concealing masks." A police presence could be seen outside many

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theaters nationwide. (In the following days, a man in Arizona and one in California were arrested for causing unnerving—but seemingly harmless and unrelated—disturbances at screenings of *TDKR*.) “We never wanted the moviegoers to feel like it’s a police state,” said an officer stationed at the door of an Austin theater. “But after this incident, it’s more about giving customers peace of mind.” For some, though, like 11-year-old Ryan Waco, peace of mind was elusive. While Waco had been excited about seeing *The Dark Knight Rises* while on vacation with his family in San Diego, the wall-to-wall news coverage of the shooting changed all that. “My dad was thinking about going to the movie,” he said, “but I was kind of creeped out.” It’s hard to know to what extent feelings of fear and grief may have dampened the film’s box office performance, but in the end *The Dark Knight Rises* took in \$160.9 million, the highest opening-weekend gross ever for a 2-D release. At a screening in Los Angeles on Friday, 21-year-old Aldo Salgado expressed a sentiment shared by many devoted fans of the series: “I came here to see a movie I’ve been waiting for the whole summer. Not even the end of the world was going to stop me from seeing this movie.”

Despite such undimmed fandom and the solid box



office returns, the shooting has raised new questions about the safety of the moviegoing experience: Should theaters permanently institute heightened security measures in the hopes of preventing future tragedies? Outside a *Dark Knight Rises* screening in Los Angeles, Khristian Martin, 25, said that she, for one, supported such a move: “I think they should beef up security, period. Check people’s bags, pat people down. I used to work at a theater, and people used to bring in crazy stuff.”

But some moviegoers argue that instead of making them feel safer, ramped-up security or

Theatergoers attend *The Dark Knight Rises* in NYC amid heightened security

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metal detectors would discourage them from going to the theater in the first place. "That would ultimately take the fun out of going to the movies," said Brittany Hoagland, 25, also outside a Los Angeles theater. "No one wants the movies to become like the airport."

At a time when declining movie ticket sales have been eating into theater owners' profit margins, it's uncertain whether they can actually afford to invest permanently in significantly stepped-up security. But even if money weren't a factor, most security experts question whether things like metal detectors and bag searches in multiplexes would be an effective deterrent. "This could have happened anywhere," says Michael Coleman of AlliedBarton Security Services. "So I don't know that the answer is to implement universal policies for movie-theater venues. I don't know if there's any way in the world that this particular tragedy could have been avoided unless it has something to do with mental-health issues or governmental regulations on firearms."

Security expert Bruce Schneier, the author of *Beyond Fear: Thinking Sensibly About Security in an Uncertain World*, agrees. "There [could be] metal detectors on the front door; the guy used the back door," he says. "Metal detectors in movie theaters is

a dumb idea.... One of the problems is that we're unable to discuss real policy, because any gun discussion is so politically charged that we can't have it rationally. We as a nation are unable to have that conversation. So we talk about other things."

In addition to sounding alarms about security, the shooting provided a new flash point in the age-old debate over the level of violence in entertainment and whether images of mayhem like those in the Batman films can inspire susceptible people to commit terrible acts. No matter where one stands on that issue, for some who watched *The Dark Knight Rises* in the wake of the shooting, the onscreen

"[HAVING A POLICE PRESENCE] IS ABOUT GIVING CUSTOMERS PEACE OF MIND."

—AN OFFICER AT A THEATER IN TEXAS



Shooting suspect James Holmes at his first court date on July 23

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violence inevitably felt more distressing than it might have otherwise. “I thought about the Aurora shooting during the first hour when Bane and his thugs attack the Gotham stock exchange,” Dan Munger, 28, told EW in an email after seeing the film in Los Angeles. “The thought of those images continuing to play [in the Aurora theater] in the aftermath of what happened was chilling.” In the most disturbing inadvertent echo of the Aurora shooting, the trailer for the upcoming film *Gangster Squad*, which played before many of the initial showings of *The Dark Knight Rises*, included a scene in which armed mobsters burst through a movie screen with tommy guns blazing, killing people seated in a theater. Warner Bros. quickly pulled the trailer and, within days, decided to remove that scene from the film, necessitating reshoots and, sources say, making it unlikely that the film will be ready in time for its scheduled Sept. 7 release date.

In some respects, the Aurora shooting may have seemed like a scene from a movie. There is one critical difference: In *The Dark Knight Rises*, Batman stands as the final bulwark between order and chaos, but during those terrifying minutes in that



Colorado theater, the real heroes wore no capes or cowls. They were people like Jonathan Blunk, who pushed his girlfriend, Jansen Young, under the seats and threw himself on top of her, and Matthew McQuinn, who used his own body to shield his girlfriend, Samantha Yowler, as the bullets were flying. Both men gave their lives to save someone else's. Just regular people going to the movies at a suburban theater on a Thursday night. (Additional reporting by Carrie Bell, Jeff Jensen, Lynette Rice, Emily Rome, Keith Staskiewicz, and Karen Valby)

Director Christopher Nolan called the attack “unbearably savage,” while Christian Bale added, “Words cannot express the horror that I feel”; (right) Batman battles Bane in a scene from *The Dark Knight Rises*

Alternate Summative Assessment: WS9b

Directions: Respond to the following questions on a piece of paper and submit when finished.

- 1) Define the argument being presented by this writer. What is the article's thesis?
- 2) List 3 specific claims the writer makes in support of his argument.
- 3) Evaluate the writer's argument. Is the reasoning provided valid and the evidence sufficient? If not, where do you find fallacious reasoning? Explain your thoughts.