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Batman's new adversary, the Penguin, played by Danny DeVito in "Batman

Returns," is not just a deformed man, half human, half-Arctic-beast. He is a Jew, down to his hooked nose, pale face and lust for herring. No, Mr. DeVito's not Jewish, but that's just it: Man in penguin costume, Christian in Jew face.

"Batman Returns" is not anti-Semitic. But the director, Tim Burton, repeatedly uses imagery and cultural stereotypes that are rooted in Judeo-Christian culture. Mr. Burton relies on these allusions to give historical depth and mythological resonance to his unreal technological extravaganza. And he depicts the Penguin as one of the oldest clichés: the Jew who is bitter, bent over and out for revenge, the Jew who is unathletic and seemingly unthreatening but who, in fact, wants to murder every first-born child of the gentile community.

The film is not a biblical allegory. It is a fantasy of good versus evil in which good is the indisputable victor. But it draws on the depiction of good and evil in the Western world as a conflict between Christian and Jew, between the doctrine of the Old Testament and the teachings of the New.

Even the comic strip rendered large cannot avoid these symbols -- they worm their way into fairy tales and fantasy, reality and virtual reality. The biblical allusions and historical references woven into the plot of "Batman Returns" betray a hidden conflict between gentile and Jew.

The movie opens with shots of distressed parents of a child who is not quite right. The baby is kept in a cage where it ignores the ornate Christmas tree and stalks a kitten through the wood slats of its prison. The parents take this child, a sort of beastly Tiny Tim, to a small bridge in an icy wood. They dump the black wicker carriage into the river, and the camera follows the basket downstream. The Penguin is Moses, Moses in black, the anti-Moses.

For the remainder of the film, Christian and Jewish images are apparent, if somewhat overwhelmed by the Gothic sets, gangster costumes and stylized speech. The Penguin's underground den, a cavern of ice and toxic waste, is a modern version of the last circle of Dante's hell. His umbrellas that transform into bayonets, machine guns and helicopters are Moses' magic staff. The flipper

hands he holds at his chest are Moses' hands, which in Exodus become "leprous as snow."

As a mayoral candidate, the Penguin claims he will save Gotham from corruption and violence. The Penguin feigns assimilation into society and gains the citizens' trust for a time. But eventually even the ignorant masses understand this false prophet for what he is, a primordial beast who seeks retribution, "an eye for an eye." This Old Testament saying is heard in different forms throughout the movie. It is not the way Jews govern themselves, but it is the way others have perceived Judaism.

The conspiracy against Gotham begins when the Penguin teams up with Bruce Wayne's adversary, the corrupt businessman Max Shreck. This Jewish-sounding name is borrowed from the actor who played the first bat-man of the silver screen, the vampire in F.W. Murnau's 1922 film "Nosferatu." What better partner for the Penguin in his fight against Batman than the vampire Jew.

The Penguin blackmails Shreck with an artful presentation of toxic waste, a severed hand and shredded documents: the Penguin-Jew is a bargaining maven. The pact is sealed, and the Penguin and Shreck become brothers in crime, a Moses and Aaron team gone sour. In Tim Burton's fantasy, Aaron is Moses' campaign manager, press agent and image consultant.

Max wants only power, but the Jew who has suffered wants to punish others for the crime that was committed against him. The Penguin pretends to be searching for his parents, seeking reconciliation, but he no longer cares about his own lineage. He seeks a greater destruction, a kind of Armageddon instigated by the orphan-Satan-Moses himself.

He spends long hours in the archives compiling lists of first-born sons. Though clearly a reference to the final plague in Exodus, it is also an echo of the accounts of Nazis and anti-Semites throughout history as well as reinforcing the myth that Jews drink the blood of gentile children. The Penguin's evil plan is the enactment of a paranoid notion that Jews' effort to preserve their heritage and culture is a

guise for elitist and hostile intentions.

Compounding the Jewish question in "Batman Returns" is the film's music. Mr. Burton's dense kaleidoscope of shiny rings, dark rivers and bird boats, underscored by composer Danny Elfman's use of leitmotifs, altered chords and chromatic progressions, makes indisputable the influence of Richard Wagner.

Mr. Burton's horde of penguins are like Wagner's aquatic elves, the Niebelungen. The Penguin-Jew-villain is also Wagner's Alberich from "Das Rheingold," wheezing uncontrollably, scheming from the murky banks and escaping to his underground cavern.

The Penguin sails the sewers in a giant rubber duck, a parody of the "Schwan der Schelde" from Wagner's "Lohengrin." Though Wagner was, of course, an anti-Semite, the music -- dark, passionate and mysterious -- is not in itself anti-Semitic. But in the context of this movie, with its Jew-monster, Hitler's appropriation of Wagner's operas and the composer's own politics re-emerge.

"Batman Returns" takes place at Christmas time. The Christmas tree, the lights and the mistletoe serve a thematic purpose. They represent the Christian ethic, which will save Gotham City (and New York, Los Angeles and Chicago) from the false ideology of the Penguin.

Denied his own birthright, the Penguin intends to obliterate the Christian birth, and eventually the whole town. His army of mindless followers, a flock of ineffectual birds who cannot fly, is eventually converted to the side of Christian morality. They turn against the leader who has failed to assimilate. In the final scene, Batman articulates the distinctly Christian moral of this film: "Merry Christmas and good will toward men . . . and women."

The Christian ethic, like the faces beneath the heroes' masks, is eventually revealed. Batman and Catwoman put their costumes on and rip them off. They are both marginal and integrated, freaks and functioning citizens.

But the Penguin's mask is no disguise. It is his face, his deformity, his ethnicity.

And Tim Burton has his own mask. His movie is cloaked in extravaganza, fantasy and allusion. Behind the multimillion-dollar movie set is old fear and prejudice. Moses becomes Satan, Jew becomes vengeful and Christian faith conquers all.

Since the Judeo-Christian tradition provides many of our myths, we should be careful not to let our fiction turn one faith against the other. There is enough of that in real life.