Superheroes and the Bush doctrine: narrative and politics in post-9/11 discourse

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Superheroes and the Bush Doctrine

Narrative and Politics in Post-9/11 Discourse

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Introduction

On 18 February 2002, the cover of German weekly news magazine Der Spiegel featured American president George W. Bush and his four most prominent cabinet members depicted as comic book superheroes and action movie icons like Batman, Rambo, and Conan the Barbarian. The headline read: “Die Bush Krieger: Amerikas Feldzug Gegen das Böse” (“The Bush Warriors: America’s Crusade Against Evil”). As the Bush administration was at the time attempting to generate European sympathy for its plans to invade Iraq, the editors of Der Spiegel, a prominent European weekly news magazine, expected a response from the White House. The telegram they received, however, was hardly the outraged indictment they had been preparing for. The U.S. ambassador visited the editorial office to report that “the President was flattered,” and subsequently ordered thirty-three poster-sized enlargements of the cover for the White House (Lawrence and Jewett 2003: 43). Apparently, the idea that there was anything unflattering about the depiction of American heads of state as bloodthirsty action movie icons and vindictive superheroes was completely alien to the Bush administration, nor was the caption “America’s crusade against evil” perceived as in any way derogatory or offensive.

This bizarre anecdote illustrates how strongly popular culture and politics have become interwoven forms of discourse in the postmodern cultural landscape. The gap that lies between the parodic intention of the cover’s design on the one hand and its reception as a form of compliment on the other shows not only that
popular entertainment is strongly connected to forms of ideological and political discourse, but even that political identity has reached a point where it has come to define itself on the basis of fictional characters like Rambo and Batman. Following the attacks of 9/11, the strongly neo-conservative American government seized an opportunity to reinvigorate older notions of national identity that revolve around a strict duality of good and evil. Drawing on rhetoric that was shaped during the 20th-century wars against fascism and communism, the Bush administration swiftly labeled its new enemies in similar terms as an “Axis of Evil,” launching a War on Terror that would become epochal in the way it ushered in the new historical periodization of pre- and post-9/11.

As this new form of cultural and political discourse took shape, American popular culture saw the emergence of narratives and genres that reflected these shifts. The most prominent of these is clearly the rise of the superhero movie as the dominant genre in 21st-century Hollywood cinema. For although there had been minor superhero film cycles before, the subgenre did not become a stable and repetitive entity until the “post-9/11 era.” Over thirty high-profile Hollywood films featuring superhero characters were released in the period 2002-2008 alone, with the most successful franchises dominating the annual box office worldwide. While it would be an exaggeration to claim that the rise of the superhero as a popular trope in American entertainment media was directly caused by the attacks of 9/11, there is a strong sense of interplay between this era’s cultural-ideological concerns and the kinds of narratives we find in the superhero movies that became so popular in that time. As authors such as Susan Jeffords have argued in their analyses of 1980s action cinema and its relationship to Reagan-era political discourse, tracing the sometimes uncanny forms of correspondence between political rhetoric and fantasy narratives in popular culture can help us understand how these narratives contribute to our cultural landscape, and how we situate ourselves as individual subjects within it.

The central concern of this study is the analysis of this intersection between American politics and entertainment, focusing on the superhero figure as a potent placeholder for the conflicting fantasies, anxieties and desires that typify the years
of the George W. Bush presidency. I will argue that distinctions between fact and fiction, news and entertainment, and the real and the virtual have become increasingly problematic in the post-9/11 years, as the conflation of politics and entertainment took on forms even more extreme than during the Reagan era. This continued erosion of once stable boundaries points towards the hypothesis that the 9/11 attacks have caused an intensification of cultural attitudes and perspectives associated with postmodernism as our “cultural dominant” (Jameson 1991: 4). As contemporary critical theorists such as Fredric Jameson and Slavoj Žižek have argued, the political and cultural shifts that have occurred in the aftermath of 9/11 represent a continuation of the cultural dominant of the late 20th century, but with a heightened awareness of the many crises resulting from globalized capitalism and virtual economies.

Within this arena of “the global village,” American forms of entertainment have become more dominant than ever, with Hollywood’s branded commodity franchises appearing routinely across a wide variety of platforms, ranging from video games and comic books to international theme parks and social networking sites. This larger framework of global commodity culture set the stage for the 21st-century renaissance of the superhero figure as the most dominant trope in postclassical cinema. On the one hand, the commercial success and sustained appeal of characters like Batman, Superman and Spider-Man can be related to their iconic status as pop-cultural figures with physical features and narrative themes that are instantly recognizable to millions of consumers around the world. In a fully globalized cultural economy, it obviously makes sense for multimedia conglomerates to invest in recognizable and marketable brands that fit easily into multiple paradigms such as the summer blockbuster movie, role-playing games, toy production, etc.

But besides their status as global brands and narrative franchises with built-in audiences, superheroes are also strongly associated with American politics and ideology. Their rise to the foreground of international popular culture during the years of the George W. Bush presidency must therefore be considered also in terms of their ideological content and the genre’s connections to American culture and history. For example, Superman has fought countless battles in the name of “truth,
justice, and the American way” for over eight decades. While neither these words nor the character’s appearance have changed substantially over that time, the content signified by the slogan has of course shifted frequently, and sometimes quite radically, as the general definition of what constitutes “the American way” has undergone numerous ideological revisions. As superhero characters like Superman have recently been embraced with such abandon by global audiences, the question how this reflects upon attitudes towards post-9/11 American politics and the War on Terror becomes unavoidable, especially when one considers that the Bush administration’s efforts to act out just such superheroic fantasies of “punishing evildoers” and defeating an “Axis of Evil” were simultaneously met with so much hostility by the international community.

Given this highly charged conflation of ideology and commodity culture, a neomarxist critical theory perspective offers a vantage point that provides appropriate theoretical tools and concepts to articulate this complex cultural process. Contemporary critical theory offers the vocabulary to describe and analyze texts that function both as commodities and as the bearers of ideological agendas. And as neomarxist critical thinking has developed beyond the strict historical materialism that automatically brands popular culture as the heavily fetishized by-product of a single dominant ideology, figures like Žižek, Mark Fisher, and David Harvey have provided models for a more nuanced and productive form of cultural analysis without losing the edge of political and ideological criticism. By repeatedly asking the question to what extent contemporary popular culture offers not simply mass indoctrination, but also the possibility of a more multifaceted engagement with complex and contradictory cultural anxieties, this dissertation therefore also provides an opportunity to question some of the assumptions behind this theoretical framework and the Marxist tradition that informs it.

This form of critical engagement is not limited to a (neo-)Marxist point of view, but relates as well to other forms of postmodern theory. Figures such as Jean Baudrillard, Jean-François Lyotard, and Michel Foucault did not define themselves as strict Marxists, and have each on various occasions even distanced themselves explicitly from the Marxist tradition. However, any work of contemporary critical
theory must offer some form of engagement with their contribution to critical theory, and on the ways in which their definitions of the postmodern relate to those of other critical voices. This dissertation therefore incorporates aspects of their theoretical vocabulary as well, seeking out crosscurrents that connect their various perspectives on (post)modernity to those of other theorists.

The inclusion of a wider selection of theoretical perspectives is important not only because this broadens and extends our definition of postmodern cultural theory, but also because the intermedial and interdisciplinary nature of the project requires the incorporation of a larger variety of theoretical tools, and a further-ranging vocabulary. As this dissertation seeks to trace forms of cultural discourse that extend beyond any single text, genre, or medium, many of the case studies included in these chapters fall outside the superhero genre, and even in some cases outside the traditional realm of popular culture altogether. The inclusion of analyses of literary texts, television series, and political speeches constitutes an attempt to support the claim that my conclusions are similarly valid beyond the superhero films that make up the project’s main corpus.

These analyses have been organized into five chapters, the first of which establishes the connection between 9/11, the superhero movie genre, and theories of postmodernism. In this chapter, I first develop a perspective on 9/11 not as an historical event, but as a cultural-ideological construct that makes up a Foucauldian discursive formation. Using the 9/11 telethon as a first example, I argue that 9/11 is most accurately understood as a discursive formation that enables a culturally and historically specific set of statements, assumptions, and contradictions, which are subsequently (mis)interpreted as a form of common-sense truth. The second part of the chapter then offers an engagement with the framework of postmodern theory, using Fredric Jameson’s influential work as a starting point, and explains how these theories of the postmodern can be related firstly to the discursive formation of 9/11, and secondly to the narratives of (super)heroism that immediately became wrapped up in this form of cultural discourse.

The central focus of the first chapter is thus the development of an explanation why 9/11 discourse and superhero narratives came to be associated with each
other so quickly and so emphatically. My hypothesis suggests that both discourses are informed by the “crisis of agency” that has transformed the postmodern subject into a passive spectator whose options frequently appear to be limited to the consumption of spectacular commodified images. Both the public representations of 9/11 and the 21st-century superhero films relate to this anxiety in similar, ambiguous ways. They provide attractive, even sublime images of spectacular destruction, presented within a binary narrative framework of battles between good and evil, while reducing the individual viewer paradoxically to the role of passive consumer. The chapter ends with a close analysis of the film Superman Returns (dir. Bryan Singer, 2006), which brings together the three elements described earlier in the chapter as they intersect in this text: 9/11 discourse, postmodern theory, and the superhero narrative.

The following four chapters then focus on four specific minimal units of ideological discourse that underlie the connection between politics and popular culture in post-9/11 America. These four central topics are defining elements in both 9/11 discourse and in the superhero movie genre that dominated the Hollywood box office in the period 2002-2008. By describing these topics one at a time and relating them first to wider cultural forms of discourse, and then to one or more specific superhero narratives, these chapters demonstrate the workings of ideology through popular culture. Since none of the superhero narratives in question makes any explicit reference to the attacks of 9/11 or their aftermath, it is essential to illustrate how these films nevertheless offer audiences ways of engaging with contemporary politics and ideology by offering symbolic and metaphorical representations that manifest themselves “either as pseudoidea—a conceptual or belief system, an abstract value, an opinion or prejudice—or as a protonarrative, a kind of ultimate class fantasy about the ‘collective characters’ which are the classes in opposition” (Jameson 1981: 72-73). In other words, the “protonarratives” of the superhero movies offer an ideologically informed cultural fantasy that is disguised as a fantastical form of modern mythology.

The roundabout way in which all these films make veiled but unmistakable references to such issues must be related to the central role of trauma as an
essential element of 9/11 discourse. The second chapter therefore focuses on the ways in which trauma narratives came to be “naturally” associated with the 9/11 attacks, and how other forms of cultural discourse illustrate and strengthen this association. In order to establish the chapter’s main argument on the presence of trauma as a fundamental aspect of 9/11 discourse, the first section offers an analysis of the 9/11 novel. This prominent literary genre has played a leading role in formulating cultural responses to the attacks and their aftermath. My case studies of Don DeLillo’s *Falling Man* (2007) and Joseph O’Neill’s *Netherland* (2008) show how such novels frame these recent historical events from the context of the trauma narrative, repeatedly relating the historically specific trauma of 9/11 back to earlier moments of historical rupture, resulting in the fragmented contemporary culture of postmodernism.

The second section of the chapter then extends this argument to the superhero movie genre, using the films *Batman Begins* (dir. Christopher Nolan, 2005) and *V for Vendetta* (dir. James McTeigue, 2006) to demonstrate how these fantasy narratives incorporate similar forms of trauma narrative to symbolically represent recent historical events and larger cultural anxieties. Although these texts from the domain of popular culture display a more ambivalent, less critical attitude towards 9/11 discourse and the Bush administration’s War on Terror rhetoric than the “high culture” approach of the 9/11 novels, both types of text ultimately confirm the assumption of trauma in response to 9/11 as a “natural” common response such an event. This cultural response is problematic not only because it again presents complex geopolitical problems in terms of narrative conflicts that pitch good against evil, but also because this continuous emphasis on the traumatic impact of 9/11 enhances the status of the attacks on New York City to that of a singularity in which the United States automatically adopts the role of the innocent victim.

The third chapter then establishes how popular entertainment played an important role in the reestablishing of the global metropolis as an attractive and marketable commodity after the impact of the 9/11 attacks on the tourist industry. This chapter first investigates the relationship between the cinema and modern representations of the modern city, developing the argument that cinema has been
instrumental in articulating a sustained cultural fantasy of metropolitan life. In this section, I trace the historical development of the dialectical way in which the cinema and the city have coexisted symbiotically throughout the twentieth century, culminating in the successful rebranding of the global metropolis as a tourist commodity and shared public fantasy in the 1990s.

The second section of this chapter analyzes the film Spider-Man (dir. Sam Raimi, 2002) and its rebranding of post-9/11 New York City as an attractive form of global village, defined in terms of commercial logos, corporate culture, and cultural nostalgia. The postmetropolis of Manhattan is articulated in this film and its sequels as a utopian space in which the subject regains a sense of agency through the disembodied jouissance of the digital avatar, thus emphasizing the virtual character of postmodern subjectivity. The third and final section of this chapter offers a reading of The Dark Knight (dir. Christopher Nolan, 2008) as Spider-Man’s dialectical counterpart, presenting the postmetropolis as a dystopian “world without rules” where the forces of virtual capital threaten the antiquated sense of order associated with earlier forms of entrepreneurial capitalism. I argue that the character of the Joker, presented within the context of the film as a fundamental threat to our way of life, is defined most strongly by his association with postmodern, virtual forms of capital and subjectivity. But although these two films seem to function in opposite ways, both representations of the postmetropolis after 9/11 revolve around attitudes that are fundamentally nostalgic, and that are strongly informed by traditional mechanisms of social discipline and ideological control.

These mechanisms of power are the subject of the fourth chapter, in which I develop and expand Michel Foucault’s definition of Jeremy Bentham’s Panopticon as the archetypal metaphor for modern forms of normative subjectivity. Foucault’s definition of panoptic forms of power is supplemented from within the context of post-9/11 surveillance culture by the concept of the Synopticon. For while panoptic control depends upon the notion of the few watching the many, contemporary theorists have emphasized how this process is simultaneously dependent upon processes of the many watching the few. This chapter first develops this theoretical framework, and then applies it to a case study of post-9/11 popular narratives. In
order to establish not only that the topic of surveillance has been a successful and highly visible ingredient of popular culture in the 21st century, but also that it has been represented in a variety of contradictory ways, the second section of this chapter provides case studies of the television series 24 (Fox Television, 2001-2010) and The Wire (HBO, 2002-2008).

The third and final section of this chapter then applies these insights to elements from popular superhero narratives. The first example comes from the graphic novel Watchmen (1986), in which panoptic forms of control are associated explicitly with a critical representation of corporate power and global capitalism. Further examples from The Dark Knight and Iron Man (dir. Jon Favreau, 2008) illustrate not only how the post-9/11 superhero film often represents a fantasy of social and economic mastery, but also that panoptic mechanisms are now increasingly represented in the form of physically embedded technologies that transform the superhero figure into a high-tech cyborg. This cyborg figure paradoxically represents once again the desire to return to a nostalgic form of patriarchal order, even as the technologies that make this transformation possible are the product of the postmodern culture they react against. These postmodern anxieties about globalized capitalism, virtual identities, and the death of the subject are translated metaphorically into narrative threats that represent an overwhelming threat that frequently contains a strong element of apocalypticism.

The fifth and last chapter is dedicated to this strain of postmodern thinking, locating its pervasive emphasis on “end of history” theories both in 9/11 discourse and in the superhero narrative. Through their continuous media representation as exceptional singularities, the 9/11 attacks have consistently been described in terms of their similarity to disaster film imagery, giving spectacular form to the larger cultural concern that our world is under attack, and an apocalyptic catastrophe may occur at any time. In this chapter, I first establish the historical connection between apocalypticism in popular cinema and the historical crises and fears they have articulated. I will develop and illustrate the argument that fantasy genres such as the monster movie have provided audiences with a site where they can negotiate these larger fears from within the relative safety of deliberately
unrealistic and fantastical genre fiction.

Moving on to the post-9/11 era, I then draw a comparison between the Cold War anxieties that informed the 1950s monster movie and 21st-century popular culture, such as the disaster film *Cloverfield* (dir. Matt Reeves, 2008), which operates within the genre tradition of the classic monster movie, but which also establishes explicit connections to anxieties that are specific to the post-9/11 era. My final case study in this chapter is a thorough analysis of the first season of the television series *Heroes* (NBC, 2004-2009), with a specific focus on the apocalyptic threat it repeatedly stages in connection to a 9/11-like attack on New York City. Bringing together numerous familiar narrative elements of the superhero tradition from an explicit post-9/11 context, *Heroes* illustrates the intersection of trauma, panoptic social control, postmetropolitan life, and the absolute hegemony of global capitalism that has come to define 9/11 discourse and the contemporary superhero movie.

The genre of the superhero movie will make up my central case study, but before offering a detailed analysis of the connections between this genre and 9/11 discourse, the following section will first introduce and define in more detail the development and multiple genealogical connections of the genre, in order to provide the necessary context and background for the chapters that follow.

**The Superhero Movie Genre**

The superhero has been a very visible part of popular culture since Superman appeared on the pages of the first issue of *Action Comics* in 1938. After this character’s immediate breakthrough success, “costumed superheroes became the defining fantasy of comic books” (Wright 14), soon also extending into other popular narrative media like radio and film serials. As John Shelton Lawrence and Robert Jewett have argued in their influential book *The Myth of the American Superhero*, this figure’s roots can be traced back to older forms of American popular fiction, most notably cowboy figures like The Virginian, and the heroes of pulp novels from the 1920s and early 1930s.

In their interdisciplinary and thoroughly researched analysis, they focus their
work on the governing narrative structures they recognize in the wide variety of texts they have analyzed for this study. In their conclusion, they strongly criticize the superhero figure for the anti-democratic agenda this archetype represents. They summarize the superhero's basic narrative model as follows:

A community in a harmonious paradise is threatened by evil; normal institutions fail to contend with this threat; a selfless superhero emerges to renounce temptations and carry out the redemptive task; aided by fate, his decisive victory restores the community to its paradisical condition; the superhero then recedes into obscurity. (6)

In their reading, the fact that these narratives systematically represent elected officials and other "normal institutions" as inept (or worse) makes the superhero figure more politically and morally problematic than the trope of the Campbellian hero archetype, which they identify as a similar structuring archetype. They interpret Campbell's monomyth as a narrative paradigm that is molded "according to rites of initiation, in which persons depart from their community, undergo trials, and later return to be integrated as mature adults who can serve in new ways" (ibid.). As narrow and problematic as this reading may be, it provides a useful starting point for their structuralist analysis of the narrative formulas that underlie many incarnations of this kind of popular narrative. And although their study focuses on a particular brand of superhero narrative to the exclusion of other comics series that are more politically and ideologically complex, their main argument does hold true for the basic formula that provides the building blocks for many superhero narratives in American pop culture.

These characteristics are certainly easy to recognize in many of the superhero films that have come to dominate the summer blockbuster season in Hollywood since 2002. From the record-breaking success of Spider-Man onwards, the "superhero movie" has become a subgenre of postclassical Hollywood cinema with recognizable basic features and all but guaranteed commercial appeal. With a history as long and convoluted as that of the superhero figure, any single attempt to define the figure's "essential" characteristics is destined to fail. Therefore, for the purposes of this thesis, I will limit my analysis to the superhero as a concept that unites a large number of popular texts generically in contemporary film and
In order to better understand this group of texts and the way in which they relate to each other, some further discussion of the notion of genre in popular film is first necessary. As Rick Altman has noted in his book *Film/Genre*, genre theory faces many kinds of problems, especially because the term “genre” itself “inconsistently refers to distinctions derived from a wide variety of differences among texts: type of presentation (epic/lyric/dramatic), relation to reality (fiction versus non-fiction), historical kind (comedy/tragedy/tragicomedy), level of style (novel versus romance), or content paradigm (sentimental novel/historical novel/adventure novel)” (11). The conceptual difficulty he describes may be based on the tradition of literary genre theory, but as his book illustrates so vividly, these categories apply equally to film genre theory, where they even take on additional levels of complexity.

In an attempt to address these problems and offer constructive, academically sound ways of understanding and applying the term to contemporary media studies, Altman’s book introduces the “syntactic/semantic/pragmatic approach” (208-10). As unwieldy as this term may be, Altman’s influential concept has proved extremely useful to the contemporary cultural critic because it takes into account the vast web of intertextuality that connects individual texts with each other in complex ways. This web is especially intricate for the 21st-century superhero movie phenomenon, as the films in question seem to cater deliberately to multiple audiences simultaneously. On the one hand, this makes them extremely typical of postclassical Hollywood cinema, which relies heavily on pre-sold franchise properties and “the replication and combination of previously successful narratives” (Maltby, 37). On the other hand, these highly accessible, recycled texts are also deceptively complex due to the ways in which they combine audiences, media, technologies, and genres.

According to Altman, genres should not be considered stable categories, nor can their boundaries be distinguished by analyzing single texts, or even large groups of similar texts. Genres are defined neither by producers nor by consumers of texts, but through the complex process of interaction between constantly changing groups of interacting users. Genre theory, therefore, requires an approach that:
addresses the fact that every text has multiple users;
considers why different users develop different readings;
thorizes the relationship among those users; and
actively considers the effect of multiple conflicting uses on the production, labeling, and display of films and genres alike (Altman 214)

In order to make productive use of a generic term such as “superhero movie,” it is thus far more important to consider how, why, when, and by whom this term is used than to attempt any kind of text-based analysis that would help us forge a theoretical definition of a superhero.

Following Altman’s approach to the concept of genre, this dissertation will employ the term “superhero movie” as a genre that is recognized as such by general audiences. Although Lawrence and Jewett’s work suggests that one might expand the term to include a large number of other texts, my work will remain limited to those popular narratives that are immediately identifiable as such on all three of Altman’s levels: semantically (by the appearance of costumes, superhuman powers, etc.), syntactically (narratives in which heroes save cities/worlds/communities from destruction by evil), and pragmatically (texts that are written and talked about as part of an existing superhero genre). One could argue that several other narrative cycles and genres, from James Bond to Jason Bourne and Jack Bauer, could in many ways be seen as types of superheroes, especially at the syntactic level. But since they lack the semantic elements that make them instantly identifiable as such, they are rarely identified as superhero movies by audiences at the pragmatic level.¹ And it is precisely this interaction between producers, consumers, and texts that produces the concept of genre as a useful category in cultural studies.

An early example of this complex interaction between producers and consumers of popular culture is the 1980s blockbuster *Batman* (dir. Tim Burton, 1989). This picture was presented as a deliberate “franchise reboot” of a superhero

¹ Altman introduces this problematic in relation to *Star Wars* (dir. George Lucas, 1977) and debates surrounding its generic identity: “When *Star Wars* took American theatres by storm, many viewers recognized in its structure the familiar epic configuration of the Western. In fact, some critics described *Star Wars* as a Western. Their desire to integrate this film into the corpus of the Western did not hold sway, however, for the general tendency of genre theorists and the popular audience alike is to recognize genre only when both subject and structure coincide” (24).
narrative: a new film that reorders and reinterprets narrative and aesthetic elements from the ongoing history of a character with more than seventy years of comic book chronology, radio serials, and a well-known, highly popular television show. A film such as this has four main groups among its target audience: “‘Long term fans of the comic books,’ ‘Short term fans,’ ‘Fans of the television series’ and ‘Audiences who were not fans of Batman in any sense’” (Brooker 279). During pre-production and early test screenings, it turned out that the group of casual filmgoers was “by far the single most important audience group in terms of the film’s treatment, script, casting, promotion, marketing and commercial success” (ibid. 280). The reason why big-budget Hollywood films in such cases are tailored for audiences with the least investment in the comic book character is that comic books have been little more than a niche market for the past decades, in which best-selling books “are fortunate to approach sales of 100,000 copies per issue” (Wright 293).

For a studio summer tentpole movie to recoup its high production and marketing costs, it is abundantly clear that movies based on comic book superhero characters must find their primary audience outside this limited group of avid fans. However, with the growth of convergence culture and the increasingly vocal presence of fan groups via the internet, Hollywood studios have learned that the success of contemporary film adaptations of these properties has indeed become dependent in part on the approval of these smaller fan communities. And after the disappointing financial returns and fan communities’ lukewarm reception of the costly, heavily promoted Hulk (dir. Ang Lee, 2003), producers have attempted to appease these active groups by applying new strategies, like exclusive previews of upcoming projects and celebrity attendance at comics and science-fiction conventions. As Marvel president Avi Arad puts it in an article about San Diego comics convention Comic-Con: “These fans love their movies and heroes like no other [...] And they’re very savvy with the computers. Word about your product gets out very quickly. If you can make a good impression here, your movie has hope” (Bowles n. pag.).

Henry Jenkins has demonstrated in his research that fan culture has in recent years developed into an audience group whose tastes and preferences are taken into
account to some degree by the producers of films based on their beloved characters and narratives. His book *Convergence Culture* proposes that the development of the internet and other new media from the late 1990s onward has changed the media landscape, shifting the power balance away from the large media conglomerates and closer to said fan communities. According to Jenkins, these fans “reject the idea of a definitive version produced, authorized and regulated by some media conglomerate. Instead, fans envision a world where all of us can participate in the creation and circulation of central cultural myths” (267). Whether Jenkins’ optimistic view holds entirely true or not, it is clear that the large shifts that have occurred in the way popular media texts are produced, distributed and consumed have changed many aspects of this complex process. And whether the way in which fan communities are now addressed by media producers signifies a true change in the nature of commodification and consumerism, or simply a new kind of hegemonic marketing that successfully renegotiates the relationship between producers and consumers while leaving the basic system intact, it seems clear that the rules of the game have indeed changed over the years.

What these shifts point to in any case is an increased complexity in the ways in which popular culture functions. Catering simultaneously to many different audiences and establishing numerous, increasingly intricate connections to a wide variety of other texts, the films that make up this subgenre provide a good example of 21st-century multimedia franchises. According to Thomas Elsaesser’s description of the “New Hollywood,” three elements may be considered central to an understanding of contemporary American commercial filmmaking: “first, a new generation of directors (sometimes called the ‘Movie Brats’), second, new marketing strategies (centred on the blockbuster as a distribution and exhibition concept), and third, new media ownership and management styles in the film industry” (1998: 191). Of these three central elements, Elsaesser singles out the second, also known as “High Concept” filmmaking, as the most crucial. In short, the New Hollywood’s most distinctive feature is its marketability as a branded, recognizable commodity, which helps explain why the superhero, as a distinctive commercial icon and brand name with proven mass appeal, has managed to fit so comfortably into the mold of
postclassical Hollywood in the digital age.

It is however only one aspect of a cycle of films with many connections to other texts, genres and associations. For in order to come to terms with the superhero movie as a recognizable genre, it is first necessary to understand its complicated genealogical relationships to other genres, texts, and film cycles. Perhaps the first association for most audiences is the connection to the original superhero comics: a point of view that would lead us to regard these films as adaptations of printed texts. But since we have already established that comic book fans make up only a small segment of the superhero movie’s envisioned audience, their status as adaptations of existing texts, figures or narratives is often misleading, especially because the films usually jettison most details from the “original” stories and their long and convoluted narrative chronologies. Besides this problematic connection to complex and often contradictory narratives, the superhero film cycle has also attempted to sever or at least obfuscate the links to a culturally disparaged medium by assigning directors and actors with established critical appeal.²

A second prominent element in their genealogy is these films’ relationship to the action movies of the 1980s, analyzed so thoroughly by Susan Jeffords in her book *Hard Bodies: Hollywood Masculinity in the Reagan Era*. In the popular action films that became iconic for both the politics and the film culture of the United States in the 1980s, actors like Sylvester Stallone, Arnold Schwarzenegger, Mel Gibson, and Jean-Claude van Damme exemplified the “hard-bodied” image of masculinity that would have such far-reaching impact on American cultural life. These films about indestructible white male action heroes “provided a narrative structure and a visual pleasure through which consumers actively responded to and constructed a U.S. popular culture” (Jeffords 12). And although the action hero as a Hollywood cinema trope is hardly unique to any historical or political era, we do see

² This “tradition” dates all the way back to *Superman: The Movie* (Richard Donner, 1978), for which producers Alexander and Ilya Salkind hired established author Mario Puzo and celebrated Method actors Marlon Brando and Gene Hackman in order to finance their envisioned film project: “By getting Mario Puzo of course the movie immediately started to exist” (Ilya Salking, qtd. in *Look, Up in the Sky! The Amazing Story of Superman* (dir. Kevin Burns, 2006)).
that such figures take shape historically in specific ways that “indicate something about what kinds of stories mainstream audiences [...] find pleasurable” (ibid. 22) at a specific juncture in cultural and political history.

A similar argument structures my approach to the superhero movie genre, which has dominated the George W. Bush era in the same way that the hard-bodied action hero dominated the mainstream American film culture of the Reagan years. Extending Jeffords’ thesis that successful popular entertainment both visually and thematically reflects prevailing discursive formations of their period, the connections between these film cycles become increasingly obvious. She explains this process by elaborating on the two different levels at which audiences simultaneously experience these narratives:

Film theorists have established that the pleasures of cinema are deeply rooted in psychological, emotional, and personal pleasures, that audience members are able to establish diverse forms of identification with characters and scenarios on the screen. What [this] suggests is that this relationship with the characters and events on the screen can function to promote mass unity as well. In such terms, the cinematic narrative offers two ways to a feeling of “mastery”: at the level of plot, in which the hard-body hero masters his surroundings, most often by defeating enemies through violent physical action; and at the level of national plot, in which the same hero defeats national enemies, again through violent action. (Jeffords, 27-8)

This focus on a combination of “hard-bodied,” invincible heroes alongside narratives and imagery that are very strongly associated with American nationalism indicates how strong the connection is between this 1980s cycle of Hollywood films and the 21st-century cycle of superhero movies. Both main aspects—hard-bodied (masculine) invincibility and the idea of “national plots”—are represented even more strongly in superhero movies than they were in box office hits like Rambo: First Blood Part II (dir. George P. Cosmatos, 1985), Commando (dir. Mark L. Lester, 1985) and Lethal Weapon (dir. Richard Donner, 1987). Firstly, the bodies of superheroes are even more indestructible than the muscle-bound icons of the 1980s, either because of superhuman powers (Superman, Spider-Man, The Fantastic Four), or thanks to the elaborate body armor that also makes up their iconic costume (Batman, Iron Man). Secondly, superheroes benefit from their long association with nationalist iconography, represented in many recent films on two
different levels.

The first level at which the presence of “national plots” in superhero movies can be recognized is through the presence of visual elements such as shots in which the main character poses momentarily before an American flag. This overt association between the superhero protagonist and the American flag has been a generic motif in the comics and their film and television spin-offs throughout their history. Once-popular characters like Captain America and Uncle Sam embedded American nationalist iconography into their costumes and character design, while Superman is traditionally pictured either holding an American flag, or posing in front of one (figure 1).

For instance, Spider-Man ends with an extended shot of its hero swinging between the skyscrapers of New York City, ending with a pose atop a flagpole prominently bearing the American flag. This deliberate association between the superhero figure and the American flag is prominent throughout many superhero franchises, including the entire Spider-Man film trilogy (figure 2). This final sequence in Spider-Man adds nothing to the film at a narrative level. Hermeneutically speaking, the plot has reached its end, and the closing shot serves no purpose besides its function as an iconic coda to solidify its associations with national plots. Similarly, Hancock (dir. Peter Berg, 2007) foregrounds its hero’s status as a signifier of national identity through the main character’s continuous visual association with numerous depictions of bald eagles. Simultaneously, the

![Figure 1: Superman posing before the flag on the cover of Superman #53 (March 1991).](image1)

![Figure 2: The superhero posing before an American flag in Spider-Man 3.](image2)
narrative level presents stories that invite comparison with the protagonists as embodiments of national identity: in the aforementioned *Hancock*, the hero is initially perceived as a well-intentioned but irresponsible juggernaut who must come to terms with the fact that he has become unpopular.

But at the same time, the subject of physicality brings us to a third major genealogical element of the superhero movie: digital cinema. The point has often been made that comics authors have no budget constraints to limit the scope of their fantastical, action-packed storylines, whereas film versions had traditionally been burdened by the huge expense of mounting photographic special effects through techniques like stop-motion animation, model work, and optical compositing. With the development of CGI (computer-generated imagery) throughout the 1990s, producing photorealistic visual effects on a previously unimaginable scale soon became not only feasible, but also increasingly affordable. By the time that *Spider-Man* was released in 2002, its “computer-generated special effects produced jaw-dropping scenes of web-swinging that would have been impossible to capture several years earlier” (Wright 292). This newfound ability to create “realistic” renderings of comic book fantasies became a crucial aspect of the superhero movie's success as a genre, with each new release accompanied by promotional efforts that strongly emphasized the technological breakthroughs that had facilitated the creation of these state-of-the-art visual illusions.

However, one of the consequences of this ontological shift was a paradoxical step away from the hard-bodied action heroes that had preceded these cinematic men in tights. For whereas the 1980s action film tended to place a strong emphasis on the physicality of the male body and its “physical prowess,” played by actors that underwent “extensive body-building for the part” (Jeffords 28), the superheroes’ bodies are usually not only hidden beneath the body armor of their elaborate costumes, but are even entirely replaced by digitally created avatars in most of the crucial action scenes. When the camera follows Spider-Man in dizzying unbroken shots as he swings through the streets of Manhattan, the audience is certainly aware that this is not a death-defying act undertaken by star Tobey Maguire or any of his stunt doubles, but that it is an uncanny moment of digital trickery. And although the
shot may look photorealistic, it is continuously flaunting its own “virtuality” by offering up sights and camera moves that would be impossible for any physical camera to register.

New media theorist Lev Manovich was one of the first academics to discuss the shifting paradigm that applies to the ontology of digital cinema. In his article “What is Digital Cinema?”, he states convincingly that “cinema can no longer be clearly distinguished from animation. It is no longer an indexical media technology but, rather, a sub-genre of painting” (1995, n. pag.). He argues that film had previously been defined in terms of its indexical relationship to observable reality, mechanically capturing traces of indexical traces of a previously existing world. But now that computer-generated imagery has developed to the point where it is no longer discernable from live-action footage, these indexical images have become mere “raw material to be manipulated by hand: animated, combined with 3-D computer generated scenes and painted over” (ibid.). The explicit paradigm shift denoted by this change, grounded in technological and aesthetic developments, has far-reaching implications for the way representations of the human body are depicted in filmic fantasies.

A crucial distinction to make here is that “computer-generated imagery is not an inferior representation of our reality, but a realistic representation of a different reality” (Manovich 2001: 202). Not only does this notion of a “different reality” intersect with many scholarly definitions of typically postmodernist concerns in literature (e.g. Brian McHale’s influential study Postmodernist Fiction), but also with the world of superhero narratives. The notion of an alternate reality that is similar to our conceptions of the real world in some ways but crucially different in others has been a mainstay of the genre from its very beginnings. Bradford Wright’s cultural history Comic Book Nation effectively traces how these texts have continuously reflected shifting cultural, political and social values, with the Marvel series perhaps offering the most complex formulations of a truly parallel universe. Comic book examples of this kind range from the bestselling special issue of Superman from 1978 in which he takes on Muhammad Ali in the boxing ring, to superheroes and supervillains appearing together at Ground Zero right after the
attacks of 9/11 in a special issue of The Amazing Spider-Man (figure 3).

Figure 3: Spider-Man at Ground Zero (Straczynski, n. pag.).

Such examples of historical figures or events making appearances in the fictional alternate universe of a comic book publisher’s otherwise isolated narrative world has been described in terms of “structural continuity” by Richard Reynolds in his book Superheroes: A Modern Mythology: “structural continuity … embraces those elements of the real world which are contained within the fictional world of the superheroes, and (for the truly committed) actions which are not recorded in any specific text, but inescapably implied by continuity” (41). Paradoxically, the effect of these minor irruptions of history into this otherwise unhistorical form of narrative continuity is not so much to make the world of the superheroes more real than it is to make the real world less so. As Reynolds cogently observes, “while this process does not exactly abolish history from superhero comics, it does divorce the superheroes’ lives from their historical context” (ibid. 44). Reynolds’ description of superhero narratives as a modern form of mythmaking thereby conforms once again to the perspective of the postmodern theorists cited earlier, as their ongoing virtualization of history effectively removes itself and its readers from the flow of
time.

These parallel notions of alternate reality at the narrative level and the ontology of digital cinema at the representational level have fed back into each other in the postclassical blockbuster, with its strong emphasis on genres like science-fiction and fantasy. Rather than situating fictional narratives within the context of a particular historical period and location, these genres instead represent entire alternate realities that either exist side-by-side with a recognizable contemporary historical context (e.g. the Harry Potter franchise), or which develop fantastical realms that are presented as existing entirely separate from human history (e.g. the Star Wars and The Lord of the Rings franchises). Superhero narratives straddle these two categories uncomfortably, creating an alternate world that in many ways follows the familiar trajectory of human history, while in others presenting their stories as entirely fantastical and explicitly unhistorical.

By drawing on the iconography and themes of contemporary public and political discourse, while also situating their narratives in an explicitly fantastical realm, superhero films as a specific mode of narrative may even be related to the genre of romance literature, as defined by literary critic Northrop Frye. In his book Anatomy of Criticism, Frye makes a distinction between various narrative modes based on the extent to which the hero of the narrative exists at a level specifically defined as either above, below, or equal to “normal man.” For a genre that defines its traditional protagonist as a figure who exists at a superior level by definition, this categorization seems particularly appropriate to understanding the superhero figure. Frye describes the hero of romance as existing “in a world in which the ordinary laws of nature are slightly suspended” (33, emphasis added). This slight suspension is entirely germane to any reading of the superhero genre as a narrative mode, as it must draw simultaneously on specific references to historical periods and locations, while also allowing for fantastical elements to play a crucial role in the narrative.

This complex intertwining of two different and contradictory modes of reference has ideological repercussions for the way these texts are decoded by audiences. As Fredric Jameson observed so memorably in his analysis of this type of
text and its ideological subtext, the genre "does not involve the substitution of some more ideal realm for ordinary reality [...], but rather a process of transforming ordinary reality" (1981: 97). In other words: fantastical narratives such as the superhero genre offer models for interpreting our own world and its history that serve to systematically de-historicize the events to which they refer. By representing historical conflicts metaphorically as part of a battle that takes classical narrative categories as its basic components and presents catastrophe as an attractive form of spectacle to be safely consumed by passive spectators, the genre provides an affirmative view that denies its audience both understanding of history and any sense of agency within it.

This critical perspective on the genre is also what binds together the main genealogical strands I have discussed above: what the superhero movie's transtextual ties to comic books, 1980s action films, and digital ontologies have in common is a similar disconnect from history. While the science-fiction paradigm that is closely associated with the superhero figure implies that the genre's narratives offer representations of possible futures, I suggest instead that these films actually articulate a present based on continuous references to the past. The discourse that makes up the post-9/11 superhero movie is therefore defined by the way it combines re-tellings of familiar narratives and characters with new themes, motifs and aesthetics that are strongly informed by forms of discourse related to ongoing historical events.

Having now contextualized and outlined the contours of the popular movie genre that makes up the core of this study, I will now also identify the various fields in which this dissertation attempts to intervene. As this project deals primarily with the intersection between ideology and (popular) culture, the first point of academic reference is clearly the field of cultural studies. In the broadest possible sense, the totality of my research has indeed been anchored by the traditions of critical theory and Marxist literary criticism that together inform the larger project of cultural studies. But because my primary objects of research derive from several different media and require not only detailed textual analysis, but also substantial historical grounding, my case studies also involve media theory, literary theory, film history,
and philosophy. Finally, since the texts that make up my corpus may be described as the exponents of American culture, this project’s overarching interest in the topic of America’s role within the context of globalized capitalism also connects my research to the larger project of American Studies. Thus, by combining rigorous textual analysis of films, comics, literary texts, and political speeches, my research project strives to be as fundamentally interdisciplinary as the figure of the superhero it investigates.

In doing so, my dissertation adds to the ongoing debate about the nature of contemporary American culture, and its ideological relationship to history, politics, and postmodern philosophy. Given the project’s grounding in the field of cultural studies, my starting point is the work of critical theorists like Fredric Jameson and Slavoj Žižek, whose contributions to this field have been similarly interdisciplinary, and who have provided valuable conceptual tools for conceptualizing and articulating the connections between narrative and politics that are my main point of interest. It branches out in individual chapters however into fields of more specific contemporary inquiry, such as surveillance studies, trauma theory, urban theory, and –obviously—9/11 studies.
Chapter 1: 9/11 and Popular Culture – The Discursive Formation of the Superhero

The terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001 were more than a mere historical event. Their impact was experienced as the kind of epochal singularity that created a sense of historical rupture. In the decade that has followed, the term “post-9/11” has become commonplace as an indicator of a politics, an ideology, and a western culture that has redefined itself in terms of new discourses of power and identity. These cultural shifts are not only evident in the political discourses and media representations of the attacks and the many forms of response they have triggered, but also in popular genres that reflect changing attitudes in audience tastes and preferences. The superhero is a figure that came to dominate the 21st-century Hollywood blockbuster in ways that feed into such discourses about the contradictions and anxieties of the “post-9/11 world.”

In this chapter, I will first propose the notion that 9/11 should be understood and conceptualized more as a form of discursive formation than as a moment in history. It functions as a system of statements defined by recurring themes and complex relationships that unite them at a number of levels and that reach across many different media and forms of public discourse. I will establish this by drawing upon examples from popular culture as well as from political discourse, both of which employ the same vocabulary, using similar themes and contradictions. I will relate these examples to Foucault’s description of discursive formations as conceptual frameworks that enable ways of talking and thinking about the world, and thereby can be described more accurately as creating and transforming reality rather than describing it. In the case of 9/11, I will argue that these discursive formations altered the public’s perceptions of reality to the extent that it could be described as a new kind of Foucauldian episteme, redefining the contours of what can be thought and said about the world and our own sense of subjectivity in it.

I will then relate this general framework to the specific genre of the superhero movie, which I will define generically as principally constituted by the cycle of
Hollywood films that have appeared since 2001, but which function within an intermedial and intertextual web that includes related texts in television and popular literature. I will argue that this subgenre of postclassical Hollywood film is constituted by a similarly complex network of connections to previous discursive formations, along with parallel disassociations with that past, and that it has contributed to the central episteme of 9/11 discourse, especially in the way these narratives offer fantasies of agency to postmodern viewers locked into passive consumer positions.

The third and final part of this chapter will then support the connection between 9/11 discourse and the superhero movie genre by offering a case study of the films Superman Returns (dir. Bryan Singer, 2006). This successful Hollywood blockbuster will serve as my first major example of the ways in which 9/11 discourse has informed the narrative structures and visual iconography of the 21-century cycle of superhero movies. My analysis of three key sequences in the film will show how the historical events of 9/11 have been metaphorically reframed in popular culture as visually spectacular commodities that transform the anxieties caused by the attacks and the resulting War on Terror into narratives of heroism and last-minute rescues from disaster.

Contradictions of 9/11 Discourse: Heroism, Victimization, and the Cultural Politics of Exceptionalism

“We’re going to try and do something.” That was the message sent by some very American heroes with names like Sandra Bradshaw, Jeremy Glick, Mark Bingham, Todd Beamer, and Thomas Bennett. They found themselves aboard the hijacked flight 93 that went down in Somerset County, PA on September 11, 2001. They witnessed the brutality on board and somehow summoned the strength to warn us and take action. United they stood, and likely saved our world from an even darker day of perhaps even more unthinkable horror. Since that day, millions of us everywhere of all ages, races, creeds, have asked ourselves “What are we to do?” In their heroic undying spirit, we all feel the need to do something, however small, symbolic, to honor those remarkable heroes among us, those who have fallen and those still standing, united. Those of us here tonight are not heroes. We are not healers, nor protectors of this great nation. We are merely artists and entertainers, here to raise spirits, and, we hope, a great deal of money. We appear tonight as a simple show of unity to honor the real heroes and to do whatever we can to ensure that all their
families are supported by our larger American family. This is a moment to pause and reflect, to heal and to rededicate ourselves to the American spirit of one nation indivisible.

The above words were spoken live on television by actor Tom Hanks on the evening of September 21, 2001. It was the first of many short speeches delivered by a host of Hollywood stars during a telethon organized to raise money for the American victims of the attacks of 9/11. Entitled *America: A Tribute to Heroes*, the two-hour program was broadcast live and without commercial interruptions on over 320 national broadcast and cable networks, and picked up that same day by broadcast networks in 210 other countries and innumerable radio stations (Spigel 134). Famous actors reading out eulogies alternated with popular musicians ranging from Stevie Wonder to Céline Dion, all performing suitably mournful and/or patriotic selections from their best-known work.

Coming just ten days after the terrorist attacks that would become a defining moment in 21st-century cultural and political history, it is hardly surprising that the tone during this star-studded media event was relatively understated and “respectful,” its organizers deliberately avoiding the garish style commonly associated with this type of fundraiser. Nor is it very remarkable that it was broadcast without commercial interruptions, a choice that functions along with this kind of cross-media saturation as an indicator of the event’s status and importance. Like the general American media response in the first weeks directly following 9/11, the telethon was presented to viewers in terms of its exceptional nature: “the everydayness of television itself was suddenly disrupted by news of something ‘alien’ to the usual patterns of domestic TV viewing” (Spigel 120-1). The exceptional way in which the media coverage of 9/11 set itself apart from those normal patterns of news and entertainment reflects and strengthens the perception
of 9/11 as a singularity, which was already being established ten days after the attacks, when the telethon was broadcast.

The concept of the singularity as a recurring phenomenon in American history is known as exceptionalism, or “the idea that the United States is a chosen nation, a country whose history and unique mission in the world defy comparison” (Vågnes 62). This paradigm clearly informs the telethon speech quoted above, with its references to “very American heroes,” “larger American family,” and “one nation indivisible,” while continuously defining the ways in which 9/11 was presented as a narrative without precedent. Media commentators continuously repeated the notion that 9/11 was a historical singularity, “arguing that the attacks had hurled Americans into a new world, a new era. The mantra was ‘this changes everything’” (Rozario, 180). Paradoxically, this emphasis on exceptionalism has a well-documented tradition in American cultural history, where it has defined “the collective response of almost every generation, to almost every major event, in American history” (Vågnes, 63).

What is more interesting to note, looking back after many years of what has become the “post-9/11” era, is just how quickly the central concepts and contradictions were defined that would come to appear so natural in the years that followed. It is therefore worthwhile to analyze the telethon’s opening words in more detail, as a close reading of this short text can help understand how quickly the central ideas associated with 9/11 were introduced into public discourse. The first thing that strikes us is that the central concept—also clearly indicated by the telethon’s title—is that of “the hero.” As in this

![Figure 2: Superman admires the “real heroes” on the cover of DC Comics’ commemorative publication 9/11: September 11th 2001.](image)
opening speech, a great deal of cultural and political discourse surrounding 9/11 is concerned explicitly with the canonization of these new hero figures that were suddenly recognized in firemen, policemen and rescue workers. Almost to the point of hyperbole, the familiar aesthetics and iconography of comic books and Hollywood action blockbusters were put to use in order to enshrine the new “real heroes” as equal to, or perhaps even greater than, the fictional figures that had previously been most strongly associated with that term. A sudden proliferation of comic books and special commemorative publications occurred directly after the attacks, each of which contributed to the canonization of policemen and firemen as “our real heroes” (figure 2).

This point comes through immediately when Hanks identifies these new heroes by listing several specific, “very American” names, “like Sandra Bradshaw, Jeremy Glick, Mark Bingham.” These new heroes are placed in direct opposition with terms like “brutality” and “unspeakable horror.” This small speech act, which seems on the surface a straightforward description, does however perform a crucial function, as it is explicitly relating recent events to the public in strictly narrative terms. This is significant because it constitutes a moment in which an historical event is defined on the basis of narrative tropes and popular media, instead of the other way around: American victims and survivors are consistently described in terms of absolute goodness, while the perpetrators are presented as the embodiment of true evil. After so many years of exposure to eerily similar scenarios in untold numbers of Hollywood action films, it was easy to think that America had “suddenly encountered an Evil which fits the most naive Hollywood image: a secret organization of fanatics who fully intend, and plan in detail, a terrorist attack whose aim is to kill thousands of random civilians” (Žižek 2004: 75). As Žižek’s words illustrate, reality was thus defined on the basis of fictional tropes, rather than the other way around.

This reduction of a large-scale event to the level of mini- or even micro-narratives typifies Lyotard’s perspective on the cultural shift evident in the postmodern condition. For not only are “the grand narratives of national unity that sprang up after 9/11 […] more performative than sincere” (Spigel 138), but the
news coverage that dominated the American networks after the attacks focused continuously on individual tales of personal tragedy. Epitomized by the barrage of personal memories and intimate revelations recounted in the 9/11 telethon, the repeated use of this kind of micro-narrative creates an instant and irrefutable logic behind the events, because “narrative knowledge does not give priority to the question of its own legitimation and [...] certifies itself in the pragmatics of its own transmission without having recourse to argumentation and proof” (Lyotard 27). The reduction of historical meaning to familiar narrative categories therefore has the advantage of not only being easily digestible, but also of providing “a sense of righteousness even while justice has not been achieved in reality, and even while many people feel completely alienated from and overwhelmed by the actual political sphere” (Spigel 131).

Returning once more to the telethon opening, Hanks states explicitly that “those of us here tonight” (i.e. the celebrities who usually play the roles of heroes in popular narratives) “are not heroes,” thereby further re-shifting our new understanding of these familiar terms. They are “merely artists and entertainers,” appearing “as a simple show of unity to honor the real heroes” (emphasis added). It is important to note here that Hanks connects the celebrities’ presence to the explicitly financial goal of the fundraiser, for spending money is defined as the only course of action viewers open to viewers as a response to the events of 9/11. As the speech points out, “we all feel the need to do something”: the impulse to be prodded out of the passivity that so strongly characterizes postmodern culture is thus recognized. But as everywhere else in late capitalism, the only course of action remains that of commodification, for both categories—hero and villain—are consistently presented as “other.” Heroes are named, identified, and canonized, while villains are named in similar yet opposite terms. The audience however falls outside of both categories, and is defined only in its role as consumer. This approach towards the audience’s perceived frustration at its lack of agency fits in perfectly with president George W. Bush’s later policy of urging Americans to embrace their patriotic roles as consumers, and “Get down to Disney World in Florida” (Neuman n. pag.).
An historical moment that could have served any number of purposes, depending on the terms in which political and cultural discourse would define it, was thereby immediately defined by a set of terms that would ensure continued passivity as a result: this was “a moment to pause and reflect, to heal and rededicate ourselves” rather than a time to question and challenge the assumptions about the way these events were represented. This approach fit in perfectly with other media depictions of the attacks thus far, as “the saturation of everyday life with uniform images of the second plane crash, the firebomb, and the towers’ collapse was transformed itself into the uncontested meaning of the event, foreclosing on historical awareness and seeming to preempt any questioning impulses that might have placed the attacks in a broader critical perspective” (Heller 7). Rather than understanding this approach in terms of any conspiracy theory masterminded by an evil political administration, it may be more fruitful to see this response again as part of a pervasive trend in American culture that emphasizes the country’s exceptional status. Media representations of 9/11 and its American historical context therefore “were radically selective and simplified versions of the past that produces a kind of moral battlefield for ‘why we fight’” (Spigel 129).

Following this generally well-received telethon broadcast, similar projects soon sprang up across numerous media, all emphasizing a similar perspective on these core concepts: Marvel Comics’ special commemorative issue of original work by a who’s-who of major-league comics authorship was titled *Heroes: The World’s Greatest Super Hero Creators Honor the World’s Greatest Heroes – 9-11-2001* (figure 2), depicting members of the police force and fire department while adopting the aesthetics and iconography of superhero comics;
online auction site eBay was flooded with 9/11 memorabilia, like commemorative casino chips picturing a baldheaded eagle and captions like “September 11, 2001 – In Honor of Our American Heroes”; and World Trade Center (dir. Oliver Stone, 2006), the only Hollywood film to focus explicitly on the attack on the eponymous Twin Towers, devoted its running time to the heroic survival of its two protagonists trapped under the rubble at Ground Zero, its poster and trailer bearing the tag line “A True Story of Hope and Survival.”

All of these examples, as diverse as their media, authors, and audiences might be, continuously re-emphasize two major points related to the events of 9/11: first, that the United States as a nation had been the innocent victim of these attacks; and second, that in spite of this victimization, its survivors had been instantly identified as national heroes. This tendency of pop culture texts to focus so specifically on a combination of American heroism and victimization from late 2001 onwards is strong and widespread enough to constitute a Foucauldian discursive formation that extends far beyond the borders of texts that deal explicitly with the events of 9/11. According to Foucault, such discursive formations come into existence whenever “between objects, types of statement, concepts, or thematic choices, one can define a regularity (an order, correlations, positions and functionings, transformations)” (2002: 41).

Foucault’s definition of discourse emphasizes the structured nature of perceived reality, presenting as “natural” something that is fundamentally defined by deliberate choices that enable us to conceptualize a topic, but which also serve as “as mechanisms of power in their own right” that “attempt to control what can be said, in which ways, by which speakers” (Collins 1989: 85). In Foucault’s analysis of the discursive nature of modern life, he has focused on subjects such as medicine, incarceration, and sexuality, which he has reinterpreted as discursive constructs that have been successfully represented as natural rather than cultural. He has argued that such discursive formations can be observed and defined wherever similar kinds of regularity coalesce around a given central topic.

It is important to distinguish clearly between Foucault’s definition of the discursive formation and the classical Marxian notion of dominant ideology. Rather
than viewing postmodernity as a system in which a single monolithic political-ideological agenda is represented through all forms of mass culture (described metaphorically by Jim Collins as the “Grand Hotel theory”), a Foucauldian perspective focuses instead on the de-centered nature of contemporary existence. However, these competing discursive formations continue to produce particular forms of subjectivity through various forms of interpellation. Therefore, by providing the tools and vocabulary to conceptualize any given topic, and therefore one’s subjective position in relation to it, these discursive formations are fundamentally ideological in an Althusserian sense: “all ideology has the function (which defines it) of constructing concrete individuals as subject” (qtd. in Collins 1989: 40).

One of the best-known and influential applications of the discursive formation is the way Edward Said defined Orientalism as a form of Foucauldian discourse: the concept that “without examining Orientalism as a discourse one cannot possibly understand the enormously systematic discipline by which European culture was able to manage—and even produce—the Orient” (2004: 3). And although the discourse of Orientalism obviously has a much longer history than that surrounding 9/11, the discourses related to 9/11 obey similar rules of formation that makes it essential to understand the term first and foremost as a form of discourse. These rules of formation, which Foucault has defined as “conditions of existence (but also of coexistence, maintenance, modification, and disappearance) in a given discursive formation” (2002: 42), are generally complex, but are easy to identify in the case of 9/11 discourse, which has centered so strongly on a group of concepts and contradictions that together form a cohesive group of statements.

As Foucault explains, larger discursive formations come into being through the systematic appearance and continued use of such groups of statements (ibid. 129). Together, these groups of statements come to make up an archive, which ultimately determines “that all these things said do not accumulate endlessly in an amorphous mass, nor are they inscribed in an unbroken linearity, nor do they disappear at the mercy of chance external accidents” (ibid. 145-6). It is this systematic quality of the archive that enables discursive formations to appear, related to earlier ones but also
transformed by the specificity of the statement level. The level of the archive is therefore “that of a practice that causes a multiplicity of statements to emerge as so many regular events, as so many things to be dealt with and manipulated,” thus becoming “the general system of the formation and transformation of statements” (ibid. 146).

This process can be seen at work in the Bush administration’s immediate public response to 9/11, most notably in the president’s radio address to the nation shortly after the attacks, on September 15, 2001:

> This is a conflict without battlefields or beachheads, a conflict with opponents who believe they are invisible. Yet, they are mistaken. They will be exposed, and they will discover what others in the past have learned: those who make war against the United States have chosen their own destruction. Victory against terrorism will not take place in a single battle, but in a series of decisive actions against terrorist organizations and those who harbor and support them.

As J. Maggio argues in his analysis of presidential rhetoric in response to 9/11, “Bush tries to disassociate traditional war from the ‘new’ war against terrorism. However, in the same words he is associating the attacks with an act of war against the United States. [...] [H]e is also disassociating the ‘new’ war from the old-style wars. This is a double act of rhetorical and hermeneutic sovereignty” (826-7). This double act shows how an individual statement refers back to an existing discursive formation, from which it simultaneously draws its meaning while setting itself apart as a new, separate set of statements that will come to make up its own archive. Not only does this example illustrate how strongly 9/11 discourse was defined both by referencing statements associated with existing discursive formations, but that the simultaneous disassociation from those statements contributed to forming a new, particular kind of discourse. This reveals how discursive formations do not enter the world fully formed, but develop out of existing forms of discourse that are reconstructed and repurposed to fit new kinds of context.

One particularly telling example of how swiftly 9/11 was transformed from a collection of historical events into a discursive formation with a clearly identifiable political-ideological agenda is the film release of *Black Hawk Down* (dir. Ridley Scott, 2001). Many other action films saw their release indefinitely postponed in the
aftermath of 9/11, on the grounds that Hollywood’s high-gloss brand of destructive fantasy was suddenly deemed inappropriate or even offensive. But the release of this war film, originally scheduled for late spring 2002, was moved ahead by its studio after the attacks as it was “rushed into theaters in December 2001” to capitalize on prevailing public sentiment in America as the War on Terror began to take shape (Markovitz 9).

Since the film’s subject matter is the embarrassing military defeat suffered by American elite troops in Somalia in 1993, one might wonder in what sense the release of a big-budget action film about these events would be any less insensitive in the traumatized cultural climate directly following 9/11. But a brief analysis of the film, as well as its immense commercial success, does seem to bear out the studio’s highly profitable decision. For unlike the much more balanced account found in Mark Bowden’s book, on which the film was based, Ridley Scott’s immaculately produced movie jettisons all but the most basic explanation of the reasons behind the armed conflict pictured in the film, instead focusing entirely on the American soldiers’ subjective experiences in the thick of the battle. With political and military policy conveniently reduced to the briefest of text captions that bookend the undeniably exciting nonstop barrage of gunfire and bloodshed, the film’s actual import is summed up by main character Scott Eversmann (played by Josh Hartnett) in the film’s closing scene:

I was talking to Blackburn the other day, and he asked me “What changed? Why are we going home?” and I said “Nothing.” That’s not true either; I think everything’s changed. *I know I’ve changed*. You know a friend of mine asked me before I got here; it’s when we were all shipping out. He asked me “Why are you going to fight somebody else’s war? What, do you think you’re heroes?” I didn’t know what to say at the time, but if he’d ask me again I’d say no. I’d say there’s no way in hell. *Nobody asks to be a hero.* [pause] *It just sometimes turns out that way.* (emphasis added)

Either unable or unwilling to comprehend the complex social, political and economic reasons behind American military policy and his own role in this specific intervention, the character defines the experience (and therefore the film’s perspective on the entire narrative) as something that has no meaning beyond its effects upon the individual: the only thing that has been changed by the experience...
is himself. Therefore, the characters who died in the film were the victims of unfathomable forces beyond anyone’s control, allowing the events to leave in their wake only two kinds of subjects: victims and heroes. By focusing exclusively on the soldiers’ individual experiences of these events, they are simultaneously de-historicized and de-politicized, leading to an evacuation of meaning and context. The enemy responsible for the American bloodshed on the battlefield is defined only by his otherness, strongly informed by Orientalist stereotypes like religious fundamentalism—assassins on the street screaming out “Allah-u akbar!”—and non-Western ethnicity—only one of the American soldiers is African-American, while the Somalis, most of whom are seen only from a distance, have dark skin that functions as a strong visual contrast to the white American soldiers. Therefore, traumatic military conflict from the American point of view is presented as unavoidable, with reasons that remain unfathomable, in which Americans are both innocent victims and heroic protagonists.

These examples seem to bear out the most pessimistically-minded postmodernist theorists, such as Fredric Jameson and François Baudrillard, and their central thesis that postmodernist (popular) culture serves first and foremost to sever the public’s active connection with history by offering up continuous representations of events that are deliberately made unhistorical. These simulations, or, indeed, simulacra, do indeed “endow present reality and the openness of present history with the spell and distance of a glossy mirage” (Jameson 1991, 21). These words apply equally to the way in which the 9/11 telethon broadcast was presented, from its non-stop array of world-famous celebrities reading out pre-scripted speeches from the teleprompter, to the on-camera phone banks manned by Hollywood stars such as Jack Nicholson, Al Pacino, and Whoopi Goldberg. The repeated close-ups of celebrities talking on the phone make one wonder to what extent the possibility of speaking directly to a movie star was presented as extra motivation to the presumably star-struck viewers.

The emphasis placed on these images of such familiar faces, far removed from the daily life of the American middle class, strongly consolidates the way the images of the attacks themselves were so quickly sensationalized in the media. The sublime
imagery of the fireball striking the south tower (figure 4), the amateur footage of the airplane striking the building, and the videos of panic-stricken pedestrians running away from a billowing cloud in downtown Manhattan were spectacular images with automatic appeal to audiences for whom their similarity to so many effects-laden Hollywood blockbusters has been so widely quoted: the experience of seeing the attacks (for all but a few, on television) was “famously described by eyewitnesses, television commentators and viewers across the country in terms of its filmic qualities” (Rozario 6). This widely-discussed cinematic quality established the strong connection between postmodern film culture and the events of 9/11 that similarly informed the redefinition of “heroes” and “villains” discussed previously.

The spectacular nature of the attacks therefore helps explain the exceptional impact those images had on contemporary culture and history. In his 1967 collection of theses *The Society of the Spectacle*, Guy Debord defined postmodernity and late capitalism in terms of its spectacular nature: “the spectacle is capital accumulated to the point where it becomes image” (24). He has argued that the spectacle in its postmodern incarnation “erases the dividing line between self and world, in that the self, under siege by the presence/absence of the world, is eventually overwhelmed” (153). With the continuing development of late capitalism, Debord’s manifesto only seems to have gained in relevance, with imagery of 9/11 epitomizing his thesis that the spectacle has come to form “the very heart of society’s real unreality” (13). This Debordian perspective on the spectacular

![Figure 3: The spectacular, film-like nature of 9/11 imagery (image source: anonymous online resource).](image)
image as a free-floating commodity, separated from its connection to anything it represents besides abstract capital, has been embraced by many in the ongoing debate on 9/11 and postmodernism.

Contemporary cultural theorists such as Jameson, Baudrillard, and Žižek have developed this notion further in some of the most influential work on 9/11 and its significance to contemporary Western culture. Although there are important differences between their perspectives on 9/11, what they have in common is their shared emphasis on the instant process of commodification that took this “effect of the Real” (Žižek 2002: 10) and instantly transformed it into a form of “collective delirium” (Jameson 2002a: 298). Their reading of 9/11 thereby leads us to a compelling paradox. For on the one hand, the event created the illusion of historicity and periodization with the introduction of the term “post-9/11” and the ubiquity of the phrase that “nothing would ever be the same again.” This notion, which has become a fundamental element of 9/11 discourse, is an obvious fallacy, because as Jameson has pointed out, “it is important to remember that historical events are never really punctual […] but extend into a before and an after of historical time that only gradually unfold, to disclose the full dimensions of the historicity of the event” (ibid. 301). On the other hand, 9/11 discourse has systematically sealed off any true sense of historical awareness or agency, as its status as familiar spectacle forced us to experience it “as a nightmarish unreal spectre” to be repeated ad nauseam (Žižek 2002: 19).

In order to better understand this central paradox, it is important to look in more detail at the ways in which 9/11 discourse fed into pop culture, and how narratives in contemporary popular genre fiction reflected and extended its fundamental themes and dichotomies. One of the traditional interpretations of superhero fantasies as part of 20th-century popular culture is that of the male adolescent wish-fulfillment fantasy, with Marvel heroes such as Spider-Man and the Hulk most notable for providing symbolic points of reference for teenage boys. But with the wider, more diversified audience demanded by the postclassical Hollywood film, the popularity of the 21st-century superhero movie must be understood in terms that extend beyond any particular gender- or age-based demographic. The
next section of this chapter will therefore connect the genre of the superhero movie, as outlined in the introduction, in terms of its connection to postmodern theories of agency and subjectivity.

**Superheroes and Theories of the Postmodern**

In his novel *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay* (2000), author Michael Chabon develops an alternate history of the Golden Age of comic books, emphasizing the connection between the Jewish roots of the first superhero comics authors and the fantasies of agency and empowerment that their omnipotent protagonists embody. And although Chabon’s novel relates this desire to engage with fantasy figures of cultural and physical empowerment to the specific historical context of Nazi Germany and the Holocaust, his narrative offers more general ways of thinking about the enduring popularity of superhero figures in the context of (post)modernity, especially when we connect this desire to contemporary theories of postmodernism.

In coming to terms with the concept of postmodernism, a problem that surfaces immediately is the question which definition of the term to follow, as there are so many radically divergent theoretical perspectives on the concept. These theories of the postmodern range from the Marxian pessimism of Fredric Jameson, Terry Eagleton and Slavoj Žižek to the far more optimistic cultural theory of figures like John Fiske, Henry Jenkins and Jim Collins. Additionally, the term “postmodernism” has also been defined from within the context of literary criticism (Paul de Man’s “The Resistance to Theory”, Brian McHale’s *Postmodernist Fiction*), historiography (Michel Foucault’s *The Archaeology of Knowledge*), and philosophy (Jean Baudrillard’s *Simulacra and Simulation*, François Lyotard’s *The Postmodern Condition*). And although several of these interdisciplinary perspectives on the concept of postmodernism are in many ways compatible, there are obviously also many that are strongly contradictory. It is therefore crucial to make some explicit choices on what kind of general framework to adopt for this project.
As the first section of this chapter has clearly indicated, my perspective on historiography is directly inspired by Foucault’s definition of “discourse” as a structuring element in the postmodern condition. And indeed, several Foucauldian concepts will remain fundamental throughout this dissertation, ranging from his definition of the panoptic carceral society to his productive concept of “power/knowledge.” But Foucault’s theoretical concepts do not help us come to terms with the specifics of postmodernity as a specific historical period, with distinguishable and describable features. When dealing with the question to what extent postmodernism can also be applied as a period, and whether cultural analysis can help us identify its limits, we must look elsewhere.

The theorist whose work I have found best suited for this project is Fredric Jameson, the neomarxist critic whose work on postmodernism in the 1980s was among the first major theoretical definitions of the term, and who is still among the most influential voices in the field. Although his staunchly Marxist position has come under attack from later critics who argued for a more positive view of postmodern culture, there are several reasons why the Jamesonian perspective can still be considered most fruitful for this project. The first reason is the volume of work Jameson has produced since he first tackled the subject in his 1984 essay “Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism.” Over the course of the past twenty-five years, he has continued to publish books, articles and collections that have developed and refined his theoretical views on the cultures of postmodernism and (post)modernity. The second reason is the systematically interdisciplinary approach he has adopted throughout this work. From the aforementioned essay onward, he has continuously drawn on literature, film, television, architecture, and fine arts to illustrate the broader cultural framework he is describing. This is particularly helpful to my research project, as it gives me a model to trace similar connections between diverse texts and media. Thirdly, Jameson’s definition of postmodernism first appeared in response to the historical period of the 1980s, when Anglo-American culture was framed from within the context of a strongly neo-conservative political sphere. With the return of this neo-conservative political dominant in the early 21st century, which is the period this
dissertation deals with most specifically, this critical perspective on postmodern culture seems fitting, while the renewed interest in Marxist theory in recent years should also be evident.

In his first major work on postmodernism, Fredric Jameson defines the term as a cultural dominant connected to a periodization of developments in capitalism that is represented in every aspect of contemporary life, from literature and film to architecture and fine art. Similarly to the more optimistic perspective of Jim Collins, Jameson defines postmodernism as a form of cultural logic that leaves room for “coexistence with other resistant and heterogeneous forces which it has a vocation to subdue and incorporate” (1991: 159). But this de-centered quality of the postmodern experience is something that Jameson understands as a cultural movement that reflects the developing logic of late capitalism, in which the normative values of modernism have been eroded to the point of complete non-existence. The totalizing force of social and cultural reification leads him to rethink the concept of the public sphere, and its new ways of producing subjectivity:

The emergence of a new realm of image reality that is both fictional (narrative) and factual (even the characters in the serials are grasped as real ‘named’ stars with external histories to read about), and which now—like the former classical “sphere of culture”—becomes semiautonomous and floats above reality. (ibid. 277, emphasis added)

This separation between postmodern subjective experience and the historical reality that defines it is reflected in a sense of cultural alienation that is radically different from the kind associated with high modernism. This new form of alienation is conceptualized as a loss of historical bearings, in which “present reality has been transformed into a simulacrum by the process of wrapping, or quotation” (ibid. 118). Jameson locates the reason for this cultural development in the structure of late capitalist society, “where exchange value has been generalized to the point at which the very memory of use value is effaced” (ibid. 18). This erosion of use value is another way of understanding the development from modernism to postmodernism as one in which normative stability is lost, and hierarchical values are problematized.
Both the cause and the effect of this Jamesonian interpretation of postmodernism are relevant to understanding the pervasive popularity of the superhero as a particularly enduring cultural artifact in that very period of late capitalism. The inescapable logic of commodification, in which everything is transformed into a branded product with a defining and quantifiable market value, is instantly recognizable in the branded nature of the superhero. Not only does the range of diversely branded superhero figures and narratives directly reflect the competitive nature of the commodity-based market, but it also serves as an example of Theodor Adorno’s well-known concept of pseudo-individualization: a range of mass-produced commodities, the basic identical nature of which is disguised by the emphasis on smaller-scale differences that are used to interpellate distinct audiences.

The successful application of this form of cultural logic is most easily identifiable in the ways in which fan culture has developed along lines of strict allegiance to specific branded commodities, which are then paradoxically used as tools for social and personal identity formation. For example, superhero fan culture tends to define itself in terms of its allegiance to individual characters, which are often perceived as representing radically different worldviews and perspectives. The oft-repeated difference between archetypal characters like Superman and Batman can therefore be better understood in terms of similarity rather than opposition: “what is individual is no more than the generality’s power to stamp the accidental detail so firmly that it is accepted as such” (Horkheimer and Adorno: 94). In the context of superhero figures and the fan cultures surrounding them, the “accidental detail” can be interpreted as the iconic features that distinguish superheroes from each other visually and thematically, which is also what has made them so readily identifiable as branded commodities with serialized multimedia franchises.

The other central aspect of Jamesonian postmodernism, which can be generally understood as the effect of this form of cultural logic, is that of “a new depthlessness” that has led to a “weakening of historicity” (Jameson 1991: 6). The resulting gap between the variously de-centered forms of postmodern subjectivity
and the individual subject’s ability to relate to what Jameson describes as “real history” has led to a new relation between the imagined self and the subject’s lived experience:

The postmodern must be characterized as a situation in which the survival, the residue, the holdover, the archaic, has finally been swept away without a trace. In the postmodern, then, the past itself has disappeared (along with the well-known ‘sense of the past’ or historicity and collective memory). (ibid. 309)

This lack of historical bearings can be related to Baudrillard’s theory of the hyperreal, which defines postmodern life as a form of simulation; to Lyotard’s description of the collapse of the master narratives, with a strong focus on the dissolution of ideology in its modernist sense; or to what Žižek sums up as “the virtualization of our daily lives” (2002: 19), which again highlights the unreal quality of contemporary western existence. What they all share is a perspective that foregrounds the highly discursive nature of contemporary life, and the resulting crisis of human agency.

**Postmodernity and the Crisis of Agency**

The subject’s crisis of agency crisis is linked specifically to the onset of modernization, and is already evident in the high modernism of the early 20th century. In this sense, postmodernism should be understood not so much as the opposite of modernism, but rather as its logical successor, and dialectical counterpart. Jameson has done the most extensive work in relating the terms “modernism,” “modernization,” and “modernity” to each other in all of their intricate complexity, and proposes that “modernism is characterized by a situation of incomplete modernization,” which leads us to arrive at the conclusion that “postmodernism is more modern than modernism itself” (1991: 310). What we recognize as being typically postmodern is therefore characterized by the way the object in question embodies aspects of a previous modernity, but more—and therefore differently—so.
A theory of postmodernism such as this is based on a Marxian periodizing hypothesis that sees the superstructure—of which culture is a part—following and reflecting a base that is defined by the historical development of capitalism. There is clearly a danger involved in this kind of historical materialism and its tendency of homogenizing historical periods that are in reality hugely complex and diverse. However, Jameson carefully avoids suggesting the existence of a teleological history underlying these movements by emphasizing the fact that these terms should be understood as “cultural dominants” that allow for “the presence and coexistence of a range of very different, yet subordinate features” (ibid. 4). In this context, a Jamesonian theory of modernity and postmodernism is particularly helpful because it views larger cultural shifts as taking place in a historical continuum, rather than a historiographical view based on sudden ruptures and clean breaks with the past, which have informed some other theories of postmodernism.

The dialectical perspective on modernity he adopts, defined as a narrative category rather than a philosophical or historical one (Jameson 2002b: 40-41), helps us understand the seemingly contradictory relationship between the cultural dominants of modernity and their ambiguous relationship to historical moments we have come to associate with rupture. Since “any theory of modernity must both affirm its absolute novelty as a break and at one and the same time its integration into a context from which it can be posited as breaking” (ibid. 57), the use of terms like “postmodernism” and “post-9/11” are revealed as discursive notions that enable cultural narratives of simultaneous rupture and continuity. The dialectical nature of the discursive formation of 9/11, as suggested earlier in this chapter, confirms this perspective on cultural movements as reflections of this larger narrative of modernity, to which we can easily relate the narrative categories it has introduced as well as the contradictions and anxieties it has redefined.

By reading 9/11 discourse as another element of the cultural dominant of postmodernism, and therefore as symptomatic of the logic of late capitalism, it becomes easier to relate the aforementioned crisis of agency back to it, and start isolating the distinct elements that have informed the development of this discursive formation and connecting it to identical motifs in the superhero movie.
First, I will develop the dialectical way in which the superhero genre embodies the cultural anxieties caused by this crisis of human agency in postmodernity. Second, I will identify the four central themes or “nodes” that demonstrate the intricate connections between 9/11 discourse and the superhero movie.

Any critical understanding of contemporary popular culture from a Marxian point of view must be dialectical in its focus on the fact that it is inherently contradictory. An obvious example is the way in which Hollywood film has traditionally provided narratives that offer the triumph of the individual over the system, while simultaneously reaffirming the ideological status quo by leaving intact the very system over which the subject supposedly triumphs. This dialectic also functions at another level in the subjectifying force of popular culture: while constituting subjects through interpellation, the audience is simultaneously framed through and removed from the character on the screen, who functions as the basis for audience identification while also remaining fundamentally “other.” Or, to put it in the terms used by Walter Benjamin, the character on the screen remains part of the “cult of the movie star,” defined by its fundamental “commodity character,” while the “cult of the audience” constitutes viewers as consumers, perpetually distracted by this ongoing process of consumption (Benjamin 33).

There are several reasons why the superhero figure can be seen as an especially strong example of this kind of distinction: not only can the superhero as a generic figure take on numerous “pseudo-individualized” forms as variously branded characters and franchises, but within the narrative chronology of a single superhero protagonist, numerous movie star personas can be utilized as the character is played by various actors. Therefore, whether Superman is signified on the screen by George Reeves, Christopher Reeve, Brandon Routh, or an animated cartoon figure, the character remains relatively consistent and instantly recognizable. The logic of limited consumer choice seems particularly inescapable in these situations, as consumers are encouraged to voice their preference for a specific version of any of these characters, just as one distinguishes other basically identical commodities within generic categories from each other on the basis of brands and their association with “lifestyle choices.”
In his influential analysis of “The Myth of Superman,” semiotician and literary theorist Umberto Eco focused on the ideology represented by this popular icon, and how it relates to the crisis of agency associated in his article with industrialization and modernity:

In an industrial society [...], where man becomes a number in the realm of organization which has usurped his decision-making role, he has no means of production and is thus deprived of his power to decide. Individual strength, if not exerted in sports activities, is left abased when confronted with the strength of machines which determine man’s very movements. In such a society the positive hero must embody to an unthinkable degree the power demands that the average citizen nurtures but cannot satisfy. (14)

As Eco points out, part of the attraction of the ongoing narrative of Superman in serialized comic books revolves around the notion that any American “secretly feeds the hope that one day, from the slough of his actual personality, a superman can spring forth who is capable of redeeming years of mediocre existence” (15). Part of the enduring popularity of these narratives therefore lies in the way they appeal via identification to cultural fantasies of overcoming the crisis of agency that is in so many ways fundamental to late modernity.

But although superhero narratives have been able to attract audiences with their fantasies of powerful super-humans, the dialectical nature of this dilemma cancels out any actual engagement with it. For the superheroes depicted on the page or on the screen provide fantasies that offer the illusion of momentary escape from the powerless nature of the modern subject, but do so in ways that are defined by their fundamental removal from historical reality (tellingly encapsulated in the term “super-human”). This contradiction is recognizable at the narrative level as well, where characters like Batman, who are made attractive by the rebellious non-conformism of their vigilante behavior, actually do “little to destabilize accepted notions of justice” (Collins 1989: 33). Even characters that are supposedly defined by their ability to break free of existing systems and ideologies are thus continuously made a part of the very systems from which they offer the illusion of escape.
Of Myths, Mythologies, and Superheroes

This ideological function of superhero narratives, which has traditionally reaffirmed the dominant ideology of patriarchal capitalism, leads us to redefine their status as cultural myths. In recent years, it has become commonplace to refer to characters like Superman and Batman as “modern myths” that may be read as contemporary counterparts to classical mythic figures like Prometheus or Odysseus. This assumption has become widespread not only in the mainstream media, but also in academic work on superhero narratives: from works like Lawrence and Jewett’s The Myth of the American Superhero and Our Gods Wear Spandex to the many studies tracing Superman’s Jewish roots, including edited collections such as Disguised as Clark Kent: Jews, Comics and the Creation of the Superhero, and Up, Up and Oy Vey: How Jewish History, Culture and Values Shaped the Comic Book Superhero. It may however be more productive to refine the broad term “myth” along Barthesian lines, and to identify the tradition of the superhero figure as a signifying system “that transforms meaning into form” (Barthes 1972: 131).

In his article on Superman, Eco already voiced specific objections to the classification of superhero figures as mythological, basing his argument on the formal qualities of these narratives. He makes a clear distinction between “traditional figures of classical and Nordic mythology” and “the figures of messianic religions” on the one hand, and the figure of the contemporary superhero on the other (15). For whereas truly mythical figures derived their status from the fact that their stories had taken place irrevocably and incontrovertibly in the past, the narrative of a character like Superman continues to unfold in the present, following the narrative logic of the modern novel:

The “civilization” of the modern novel offers a story in which the reader’s main interest is transferred to the unpredictable nature of what will happen and, therefore, to the plot invention which now holds our attention. The event has not happened before the story; it happens while it is being told, and usually even the author does not know what will take place. (15)

The result of this is the absence—once again—of a normative structure: a narrative yardstick by which behavior can be measured reliably. In Eco’s analysis, the
perpetual unfolding of the narrative establishes what he describes as “a paternalistic pedagogy, which requires the hidden persuasion that the subject is not responsible for his past, nor master of his future” (19).

This de-politicizing, de-historicizing force that Eco relates to the narrative structure of the Superman comic book serials seems to point directly toward Roland Barthes’ definition of the concept of myth. In his elaborate discussion of what he defines as the semiological system of cultural mythologies, Roland Barthes focuses on the way in which signs can present themselves as natural, thereby camouflaging their political and ideological nature:

> In passing from history to nature, myth acts economically: it abolishes the complexity of human acts, it gives them the simplicity of essences, it does away with all dialectics, with any going back beyond what is immediately visible, it organizes a world which is without contradictions because it is without depth, a world wide open and wallowing in the evident, it establishes a blissful clarity: things appear to mean something by themselves. (Barthes 1972: 143, emphasis added)

This Barthesian definition clearly fits the way in which superhero narratives operate as systems whose function it is “to empty reality” (ibid.) and thereby to create representations that are forms of depoliticized speech. Although Barthes would later come to abandon the structuralist approach that informs this semiotic definition of myths, the concept also connects to Foucault’s later perspective on the discursive nature of constituted reality. For in both definitions, the emphasis is placed squarely on how language and other signifying systems present as natural that which is socially, ideologically, and politically constructed.

It is easy see how Barthes’ highly influential structuralist perspective on mythologies as semiotic mechanisms in contemporary culture would ultimately lead to the development of Foucault’s poststructuralist term “discourse.” The key shift that has occurred in the move from “myth” to “discourse” can be related to the development from modernism to postmodernism, which I have previously described in terms of the move from a hierarchically ordered, normative culture to one that is experienced as fundamentally de-centered. And although this break is clearly paradoxical, since we have already noted previously that the postmodern should be understood as that which is “more modern than modernism itself”
(Jameson 1991: 310), one of Jameson’s four “maxims of modernity” also holds that “no ‘theory’ of modernity makes sense today unless it comes to terms with the hypothesis of a postmodern break with the modern” (2002b: 94).

So although it is important to employ the Barthesian definition when applying the term “myth” to the traditional superhero narrative, it becomes in turn more productive to substitute the more flexible concept “discourse” when analyzing the specifically postmodern genre of the 21st-century superhero movie. For the traditional superhero narrative made up part of a cultural landscape that was defined in terms of relatively stable oppositions (e.g. “high” versus “low” culture, historical myth versus popular narrative) where a term like “dominant ideology” could be applied somewhat less problematically than it could in the context of postmodernism. The contemporary superhero movie however is situated within a more complex, de-centered range of discourses, where the stability of these oppositions has been challenged, if not entirely obliterated.

In the specific case of superhero narratives, this destabilization can be recognized clearly in the wave of “graphic novels” that appeared in the mid-1980s. Authored by figures such as Alan Moore and Frank Miller, DC Comics published a selection of superhero narratives that were “packaged for adult readers, and printed on expensive paper in a ‘prestige’ edition” (Weiner 33). Although this industry move was a strategic development intended to expand the medium’s market, and therefore its profitability, one of the result was a redefinition of the comic book medium’s position within the cultural hierarchy. Works such as Watchmen (1987) and Batman: The Dark Knight Returns (1986) “expanded the literary possibilities of the superhero genre” by introducing themes, styles and motifs associated with high literature (Wright 271): familiar characters like Batman were reintroduced in a more ambiguous context, and the narratives tended to emphasize the political, moral, and philosophical issues that were previously merely hinted at in the superhero tradition.

But although this successful, much-discussed group of texts remains most celebrated for its socio-political perspective on the superhero genre, their historical influence on the later development of the medium is indicative of the de-centered
nature of postmodern discourse. For instead of the introduction of the “graphic novel” leading to a new, stable category of literature, usage of this term quickly broke off into various definitions that were often even contradictory. One influential aspect of these texts was that they included more graphic violence than traditional comic books, leading to a strong trend in publishing towards more violent and graphic subject matter, with a strong emphasis on “brooding and ruthless vigilante superheroes” (ibid. 277). For publishers, the publicity generated by these texts paved the way to new distribution formats, as collections of previously published installments of superhero comics were re-packaged and marketed as “graphic novels.” For other audience groups, the term referred to the developing subgenre of mainstream comic books that were presented in terms of their literary ambitions, and which included a diverse collection of texts ranging from Art Spiegelman’s *Maus* (1986-1991) to Neil Gaiman’s ten-volume series *The Sandman* (1989-1996).

But despite this apparent fracturing of stable signification, with a term like “graphic novel” an example of the way in which meaning can be splintered into various distinguishable uses, Jameson points out that “a system that constitutively produces differences remains a system” (1991: 343). What this statement indicates is not that all meaning is lost in postmodernity, or that texts and utterances can no longer be understood as part of a larger system that constitutes subjects in terms of power. It does however mean that our analysis requires a shift of perspective from the classical, normative oppositions to a field of competing discourses that “turns the play of differences into a new kind of identity on a more abstract level” (ibid.). The process through which subjectification takes place is therefore no longer defined in terms of a simple binary opposition of dominant versus resistant ideology, but as a more complex field of competing discourses in which identity formation then takes place.

It is within this competing field that we can start looking at ways in which different discursive formations align themselves together and draw meaning from each other. As I have established in the first section of this chapter, the discursive formation that constitutes “9/11” established a distinct form of cultural and political rhetoric that drew from existing archives of historical narratives (e.g. World War II,
Pearl Harbor) and categories drawn from fictional genres (e.g. heroes and villains), but did so in distinct ways that quickly developed a stable vocabulary and archive. This form of discourse has developed through bilateral relationships with ongoing cultural discourses, like for instance that of the 21st-century superhero movie. These forms of discourse intersect not at the level of representational structures, as any mention of actual historical events related to 9/11 is carefully avoided in all of these films. Rather, they combine and conjoin in the specific themes they develop as structuring concepts for the way they offer up specific and recognizable narratives, images, and characters.

Now that both the concept of 9/11 discourse and of the superhero movie genre have been described and discussed in general terms, the following section will demonstrate how the two coalesce and converge in a specific example. As my first case study of a post-9/11 superhero movie, Superman Returns is a fitting example, not only because this film revived the oldest and most archetypal superhero figure in popular culture, but also because Superman has been associated throughout the second half of the twentieth century with American values, signified by his enduring mission to fight for “truth, justice, and the American way.” My analysis will focus on how this contemporary superhero film draws on generic and genealogical precursors that make up an archive associated with the past, while simultaneously transfiguring and repurposing those elements by incorporating developing forms of contemporary discourse associated with 9/11.

**Superman Returns: “Truth, Justice, All That Stuff...”**

Few superheroes have consistently embodied aspects of American identity as long or as successfully as Superman. As the first major figure in popular fiction to combine mythological elements with superhuman abilities that made him virtually indestructible, he was also the first of the Golden Age comics icons to cross over into other media: from the 1940s Max Fleischer cartoons to post-war B-movies, and from radio serials to the popular 1950s television show. But it was only with the character’s appearance in *Superman: The Movie* (dir. Richard Donner, 1978) and its
three sequels that he would become the ubiquitous figure that would help define not only post-classical blockbuster cinema as a commodity, but also provide a template for later superhero movies.

It is relevant to note that this first true A-list superhero film franchise, made up of four films that appeared from 1978 to 1987, was so lucrative during the Reagan era. Like so many other popular films from this decade, the series displayed a strong tendency towards nostalgia from its very start. Throughout the films, we see jaded, cynical feminist Lois Lane being won over by Superman and his alter ego Clark Kent as the embodiment of the traditional values of a more innocent, less complicated age. Like Back to the Future (dir. Robert Zemeckis, 1985), Happy Days (American Broadcasting Company, 1974-84), and many other popular films and TV shows from the early 1980s, this film seeks the answers to the post-Watergate, post-Vietnam sense of malaise in the romanticized patriarchal values of the 1950s. As defined by Fredric Jameson, these nostalgia films serve to de-historicize the postmodern present by continuously referring back to a glorified past that never truly existed in the first place. Superman: The Movie fits the bill perfectly, as the past to which it refers is nothing short of a postmodern pastiche of elements from fondly remembered cultural artifacts from the early years of American mass entertainment and commodity culture.

Given the resurgence of superheroes in blockbuster cinema since 2001, the character’s return to the cinema screen soon became all but inevitable, especially when one considers the fact that the American president at that time adopted the Reagan era as the very model of political and economic policy. Following several abortive attempts to re-imagine Superman in a radically updated guise, he finally appeared in the 2006 summer blockbuster Superman Returns. But instead of the originally envisioned update, this franchise reboot proved to be an exercise in nostalgic one-upmanship. In a strangely Baudrillardian twist, Singer’s picture goes out of its way to recreate the experience of the 1978 film, thereby fashioning itself into the ultimate simulacrum: an identical copy of a copy without a true original. For if we can safely establish that Superman: The Movie cannot be considered an
“original” in any sense of the word, the fact that *Superman Returns* enshrines it as its nostalgic object of desire becomes doubly odd.

From its opening credits, which re-use the earlier franchise’s rousing orchestral score, to the casting of Brandon Routh first and foremost for his uncanny resemblance to Christopher Reeve, this 21st-century blockbuster seems overtly nostalgic for the pre-9/11 days of 1950s-inspired Reaganomics. In a remarkable plot twist, the film updates the Superman chronology with the notion that Superman abandoned earth (or rather: America) “five years ago,” which works out as the year 2001, upon which Lois Lane published the Pulitzer Prize-winning editorial “Why the World Doesn’t Need Superman.” Returning at the start of the film from his self-imposed exile, the first thing Superman does is watch TV, which shows us news footage familiar from recent conflicts in the Middle East. The prospect is tantalizing: will Superman take it upon himself to assist in the War on Terror now that the film so clearly links his return to America’s current sense of failure and abandonment?

Surprisingly, however, this idea is jettisoned almost immediately, serving only to establish a sense that things have gone badly wrong in his absence. Superman’s return is made known to the world by his last-minute, media-friendly rescue of an airliner that was about to crash into a sold-out baseball stadium in a scene that serves as the movie’s first major action set-piece while simultaneously offering up a remarkable rewriting of 9/11. The potent image of an airliner hurtling with seemingly unstoppable momentum towards such an archetypically American landmark on a sunny day is eerily reminiscent of that moment of national trauma. The crucial difference is that Superman uses his death- and gravity-defying power to stop the plane before it wrecks havoc on this stadium that so clearly embodies an iconic American pastime. The location also turns this remarkable last-

![Figure 4: The audience applauds narrowly averted disaster in *Superman Returns*.](image)
minute rescue operation into a moment of sheer spectacle that is immediately followed by rapturous applause, thereby managing to turn a moment of disaster and trauma into a celebration of heroism (figure 4).

This rewriting of calamity is typical of the way in which popular culture relating to 9/11 has relegated the events to representations voided of all historical meaning. The specificity of the baseball stadium as the location for this climactic thereby functions at two different levels. Firstly, it embodies the basically spectatorial nature of postmodern culture, with the crowd functioning as surrogates, or even virtual duplicates, of the movie audience watching the spectacle unfold in a movie theater, which is conditioned to mirror the virtual audience’s thrilled response. Secondly, the choice for a baseball stadium as the site for which the crashing aircraft is headed avoids the potentially “traumatic” eruption of historical reality within this fantasy film. With baseball embodying a strongly transhistorical sense of “American-ness,” it activates associations of nostalgia that reach into a hazy past defined in terms of “innocence” rather than class, politics, or ideology. As in the earlier example from Black Hawk Down, this causes an evacuation of historical meaning, in which the experience is defined in terms only of an inexplicable yet highly spectacular threat, which is narrowly avoided in this case through the use of a superior force that leaves the audience thoroughly impressed, adequately entertained, but fundamentally powerless.

Superman’s reintroduction is followed by a number of scenes detailing his successful efforts to stop the enemies of capitalism from robbing some of New York’s largest banks. Combining in his actions and general demeanor the nation’s vaguely formulated ideals along with the power and the mandate to enforce them, he seems to embody Althusser’s dual notions of ideological and repressive state apparatuses conveniently rolled into one. Superman’s final challenge in the film is once again to save Metropolis from an attack by arch-villain Lex Luthor, who seeks to create a new continent in the middle of the Atlantic.

The creation of this continent causes shockwaves that surge through the recognizable streets of Manhattan, shattering skyscraper windows as the tall buildings of Metropolis teeter and sway realistically, their occupants and passers-by
alike helpless in the face of their predicament. Generically speaking, this part of the narrative is nothing short of a requirement for the Superman franchise, referring back not just to the original *Action Comics* panels, which were based “more than anything before it [...] on the destruction of New York City” (Page 92), but also to the iconic Fleischer brothers animated shorts, which “give one the sense that the city is a fragile vessel, constantly under attack, crashing, breaking, bending” (ibid. 98).

Much of the pleasure in *Superman Returns* results from the film’s determination to satisfy these expectations, providing new spectacular imagery of Superman dashing around the city in a number of last-minute rescues that update the visual effects while remaining true to the basic narrative formula.

But images of New York City under attack can no longer be perceived as they were before in texts that were created after 9/11. Especially given the amount of attention that has been devoted in special tributes and throughout pop culture to the disappointment that superheroes had been powerless to stop those real-world attacks, a surprise attack on Manhattan in a new Superman film can only be read through the prism of 9/11 and the many wish-fulfillment fantasies we have encountered since. This strange dissonance between the unavoidable associations with recent history and the Jamesonian “perpetual present” of postmodernism that typifies this sequence in generic terms is one of the most interesting theoretical issues raised by *Superman Returns*: how can this film simultaneously de-historicize while drawing its significance from clear references to historical events?

This paradox comes into sharper focus when Superman finally confronts his nemesis in the middle of the surreal landscape of Luthor’s newborn continent, where he discovers that his extraordinary powers have unexpectedly abandoned him. In a scene that has outraged avid Superman fans more than any other, the character faces his harshest moment of defeat. In this

![Figure 5: Superman tumbles down Luthor’s cliff: flying man becomes falling man.](image-url)
desolate continent that seems eerily reminiscent of the familiar photos of the rubble at Ground Zero, he is beaten savagely by Luthor's henchmen, strangely noticeable for being the only ethnically diverse group in the film, and finally stabbed in the back by the villainous mastermind himself. He stands up to face his attackers, but teeters and falls powerlessly off the edge of an immense precipice. In what may be the film's most provocative image, the following shot shows “flying man” transformed into “falling man” (figure 5).

Few images have been as disturbing a summation of America’s sense of helplessness and defeat as those of the people falling or jumping from the towers after the attack, and literary works such as Jonathan Safran Foer’s *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* (2005) and Don DeLillo’s *Falling Man* (2006) deliberately mobilize this icon of national disempowerment as a potent metaphor.

> [W]e are all, DeLillo suggests, in free fall. The plots, myths, institutions we once relied on to provide meaning and purpose are suspended. Our idols have fallen too: “God is the voice that says, ‘I am not here.’” (Kauffmann 372)

But not only must Superman experience this fall from grace along with the American public; he must also somehow reverse time—as he did in the finale of *Superman: The Movie*, and which is another narrative motif we can recognize in several of the 9/11 novels—and change the past in order to rectify the future. And indeed, after his inevitable moment of messianic resurrection, he lifts up the whole of Luthor’s new continent into space, and playing on the film’s innumerable references to Atlas, Milton, and oblique Christian symbolism, saves mankind by bearing the weight of the world for us, before plummeting once more back into the streets of Metropolis.

Superman, the picture seems to say, remains the embodiment of America’s true spirit, and he must return in order to relieve the country from the burden of the past by ridding the nation of the trauma of 9/11. Through its reliance on nostalgia for its hero’s Reagan-era incarnation, Singer’s film suggests that the answer to our current problems lies—once again—in a return to the values of an earlier era of illusory innocence and purity. But rather than appealing directly to sentimentalized visualizations of Eisenhower-era Americana, Singer’s film seeks this coveted sense
of security by enshrining 1980s superhero blockbusters, themselves already postmodern nostalgia films, as the object of ultimate desire.

_Superman Returns_ can thus be understood as an attempt to find new relevance for familiar popular icons by investing their narratives and iconography with the strongest elements of 9/11 as a discursive formation: by restaging the actual attacks as spectacular attractions that rewrite them as victimless last-minute rescues free of history or context, the film’s narrative bridges the conceptual gap between heroism and victimization. By transforming recent historical events that were experienced without historical or geopolitical context into wish-fulfillment scenarios, a narrative framework is provided that leaves the historical vacuum intact while providing a heroic fantasy of sacrifice and redemption.

This form of symbolic narrative embodies ideology in the Althusserian sense at its clearest: as “a representational structure which allows the individual subject to conceive or imagine his or her lived relationship to transpersonal realities such as the social structure or the collective logic of History” (Jameson 1981: 14-15). By drawing on the iconography and themes of contemporary public and political discourse while situating their narratives in an explicitly fantastical realm, these superhero narratives provide legitimizations of ideological perspectives in ways that are similar to those of romance literature. As Fredric Jameson observed so memorably in his analysis of this type of text and its ideological subtext, this genre “does not involve the substitution of some more ideal realm for ordinary reality [...], but rather a process of transforming ordinary reality” (ibid. 97). In other words: films like _Superman Returns_ offer models for interpreting our own world and its history that serve to systematically de-historicize the events to which they so obviously refer, transforming reality into a fantastical work of fiction. By representing 9/11 metaphorically as part of a battle that takes familiar narrative categories (“hero,” “villain,” “victim,” “climax,” “dénouement,” etc.) as its basic components, the genre provides an affirmative view that denies its passive spectator any sense of historical agency.
Conclusion

In this chapter, I have introduced the concept of 9/11 as a discursive formation that is defined and structured by the cultural associations and contradictions that surround it rather than by any historical event assumed to reside in its core. The assumptions about its status as a moment of rupture, re-shaping history into pre- and post-9/11 periods, actually draw on a surprisingly coherent collection of statements that together make up a discursive formation, or even something we might term a new episteme. As my examples have shown, these statements about the conflicts, characters, images, and events that make up the western understanding of 9/11 have much in common with forms of contemporary popular entertainment, drawing on cinematic imagery and narrative clichés to give meaning to historical events.

This definition of historical events on the basis of film culture and other fictional patterns connects strongly to postmodern theory, and its focus on the increasing virtualization of daily life. Drawing on the work of several major contemporary theorists of postmodernity, I have developed a theoretical framework that emphasizes the crisis of agency that is fundamental to postmodern forms of subjectivity. Rather than an end to the postmodern condition, as many critics were so quick to describe the effect of 9/11 as “the end of irony,” the discourses that have coalesced around the topic of 9/11 instead demonstrate a resurgence of the elements of postmodernism that have caused neomarxist theorists to define it as the cultural logic of late capitalism. This logic extends to the cultural uses of 9/11 at every level, from the instant branding of the event as a commodity with market value to the elements from pop culture that informed political speeches and media rhetoric.

Following this line of thought, I have argued that the popularity of the superhero movie cycle in the years after 9/11 is best understood as a reflection of these shifting public anxieties, carrying within them the same basic cultural assumptions as well as the contradictions that inform other post-9/11 forms of discourse. Although these films contain no explicit reference to recent historical events, they draw on the collections of images and statements that have defined
9/11 discourse, thereby creating a fascinating cultural short circuit in which fiction defines our comprehension of history, and subsequently redefines itself on the basis of this form of virtualized and “unreal” historical perception.

The case study I have discussed in this chapter illustrates clearly how such popular texts incorporate elements that make their relationship to 9/11 discourse quite obvious in spite of the fact that they contain no literal reference to historical events. Instead, these films produce symbolic fictions that act out wish-fulfillment scenarios while also illustrating the most basic contemporary anxieties. In this way, films such as *Superman Returns* treat their audiences to the kind of spectacular imagery they found so disturbingly attractive in the media representations of 9/11, while orchestrating the narrative in such a way that the catastrophe is ultimately averted and transformed into a symbolic moment of victory instead. As I have argued throughout this chapter, this approach leaves the viewer stranded in an endlessly self-reflexive feedback loop of postmodern unreality, in which popular narratives act as a force that de-historicizes the events to which they refer, trapping the subject in a perpetual present of commodification and passivity.
Chapter 2: 9/11, Historical Trauma, and the Postmodern Subject

On September 12, 2001, ABCnews.com published “Blow to the Psyche: Americans Will React With Fear, Anger—Danger for Some.” According to this article, the destruction of the World Trade Center had already been dubbed an “Attack on America” and journalists were seeking the advice of mental health specialists concerning its effects on America’s “psyche.” One specialist cited in this article argued that “the trauma of the tragedy will be hard to escape regardless of physical distance from the wreckage in New York or Washington D.C. People who saw it or were part of it will obviously experience some trauma….. [T]rauma is experienced vicariously by those who are some distance away.” (Trimarco and Depret 31)

As the above example illustrates, trauma was one of the first public concerns associated with the events of 9/11. The attacks had been planned and staged for maximum media saturation, their impact grossly enhanced by the fact that a worldwide audience watched the situation unfold on live television. This created a sense of immediacy that contributed to the sense that everyone watching the images on a television or computer screen was directly involved with the attacks, and therefore equally traumatized by them. The sense of cultural trauma that resulted from the attacks therefore stood in no proportion to the number of people that had been physically present, or who had friends or relatives among the victims.

The first section of this chapter will examine how 9/11 discourse constructed a sense of national trauma by relating the events to familiar narratives of national and personal trauma. I will argue that this trauma is neither natural nor authentic, but is rather derived from media representations that serve specific socio-political agendas. Besides using trauma theory and the existing interdisciplinary work on 9/11 discourse, this section will also draw examples from contemporary literature that have addressed the cultural impact of the attacks, specifically the celebrated 9/11 novels Don DeLillo’s Falling Man and Joseph O’Neill’s Netherland (2008), to illustrate how existing narratives of historical trauma have been mobilized repeatedly in reference to 9/11.

In the second part of this chapter, I will look at the way in which post-9/11 superhero movies draw from a similar vocabulary, using trauma narratives as a
structural motif to present their protagonists as victim/heroes. Drawing on two examples from the 21st-century superhero movie cycle, *Batman Begins* and *V for Vendetta*, I will argue that the emphasis on re-developing so-called origin stories for familiar characters and new protagonists is connected to wider discursive formations that forge direct connections between trauma and heroism. Unlike earlier superhero narratives, the post-9/11 cycle of films foregrounds the notion of trauma and victimization as motivation and defining characteristic for the superhero protagonists. This makes them relate to historical trauma in the same ambiguous way as the post-Vietnam action films of the 1980s, such as the Rambo cycle: the hero is given his identity through his experience of historical trauma, and subsequently indulges in wish-fulfillment scenarios that reverse the events responsible for this trauma, thereby creating a circular form of logic that allows history to unwrite itself.

These superhero films share the focus on trauma narratives that is evident in the 9/11 novels discussed in this chapter, and similarly confirm the implication that the attacks of 9/11 were a form of historical singularity that had caused a legitimate form of cultural trauma. But unlike the characters in the 9/11 novels, whose response to this traumatic experience is defined by a sense of paralysis, trauma in the superhero narrative instead acts as a catalyst for action. The experience of trauma in popular culture is thereby reconfigured as a call to action that enables the transformation from victim to hero. Unlike the more critical reflections on 9/11 discourse found in the “high culture” of the 21st-century novel, popular culture thus seems to play a defining role in the development of 9/11 discourse as an ideological tool that unites seemingly contradictory cultural notions.
The world was this as well, figures in windows a thousand feet up, dropping into free space, and the stink of fuel fire, and the steady rip of sirens in the air. The noise lay everywhere they ran, stratified sound collecting around them, and he walked away from it and into it at the same time. (DeLillo, *Falling Man*, 4)

Now that I, too, have left that city, I find it hard to rid myself of the feeling that life carries a taint of aftermath. This last-mentioned word, somebody once told me, refers literally to a second mowing of grass in the same season. You might say, if you’re the type prone to general observations, that New York City insists on memory’s repetitive mower—one of purposeful post-mortem that has the effect, so one is told and forlornly hopes, of cutting the grassy past to manageable proportions. (O’Neill, *Netherland*, 2)

Don DeLillo’s *Falling Man* and Joseph O’Neill’s *Netherland* have both been recognized as key texts within the literary phenomenon dubbed the “9/11 novel.” Critics were quick to see the connection between a diverse collection of contemporary works of literature, applauding the way in which American authors no longer “shied away from real-world events” and “have taken up the subject of the terrorist attacks and their effect on the New Yorkers who lived through them” (Miller 32). This tentative genre, which also includes works such as Jonathan Safran Foer’s *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close* (2006), Philip Roth’s *Exit Ghost* (2007), John Updike’s *Terrorist* (2006), Salman Rushdie’s *Shalimar the Clown* (2005), and Ian McEwan’s *Saturday* (2005), is made up of fictional narratives by celebrated English-language authors, each of which is defined by its attempt to come to terms with the events of 9/11 and their repercussions on contemporary life, culture, and politics.

More specifically, what unites these texts beyond the level of their shared reference to 9/11 as a moment that has shaped our understanding of contemporary culture and history (or lack thereof) is their shared focus on the issue of personal, cultural and national trauma. In order to apply the term “trauma” productively within the context of its use in literary texts, I will first define this term as related to literary narrative in the work of trauma theorists such as Cathy Caruth and Shoshana Felman. In their body of work on trauma
theory, they have argued convincingly for the connection between literature and psychoanalysis because both are “interested in the complex relation between knowing and not knowing” (Caruth 3). Caruth expands this relationship between fictional narratives and personal memory by pointing out that it is “at the specific point at which knowing and not knowing intersect that the language of literature and psychoanalytic theory of traumatic experience precisely meet” (ibid.). The application of psychoanalytical theory to fictional texts (whether in literature or from other media) therefore plays a role not only because these texts, like personal memory, are invested in similar epistemological questions, but also and especially because mediated fictional texts play a crucial role in the construction of cultural memory. Following Jameson, we can even make the claim that texts combine with each other to form an archive of cultural memory that provides our only point of access to the “Lacanian Real” of history (Jameson 1981, 20).

This conception of the trauma narrative is evident in both of the quotes that opened this chapter, each of which strongly emphasizes the way in which the memory of traumatic events not only extends into recollections of the past, but affects our perception of the present and the future as well. The discursive activity of constructing a coherent narrative of the past is therefore an essential dialectical component of identity formation and the establishment of the postmodern subject. In these novels, the traumatic events of 9/11 appear to have challenged the characters’ experience of time as a linear force, transforming it into a warping of both time and space that causes them to lose their temporal and geographical bearings. This is visible in different ways in these novels, from DeLillo’s character being described as “walking away from it and into it at the same time” to O’Neill’s protagonist relating his explicitly subjective construction of reality to an active discursive process described metaphorically as “cutting the grassy past to manageable proportions.”

The traumatic nature of the events that cause this sensation of temporal and geographical dislocation can be understood through Freud’s definition of the term “trauma,” which Caruth employs as follows:
The term trauma is understood as a wound inflicted not upon the body but upon the mind. But what seems to be suggested by Freud in Beyond the Pleasure Principle is that the wound of the mind – the breach in the mind’s experience of time, self, and the world – is not, like the wound of the body, a simple and healable event, but rather an event that [...] is experienced too soon, too unexpectedly, to be fully known and is therefore not available to consciousness until it imposes itself again, repeatedly, in the nightmares and repetitive actions of the survivor. (3-4)

This definition of trauma as something experienced “too unexpectedly to be fully known” coincides with the exceptionalism associated with 9/11 discourse, as discussed in more detail in the previous chapter. The continuous depictions and discussions of the attacks as singular events without warning or precedent solidified their wider traumatic impact, along with the marked absence of attempts to produce narratives (both fictional and non-fictional) that could have established a political-historical context for them. For as Caruth argues, the required “rethinking of reference is aimed not at eliminating history but at resituating it in our understanding, that is, at precisely permitting history to arise where immediate understanding may not” (11).

The importance of introducing historical awareness in coming to terms with traumatic events is especially noteworthy in the context of the earlier discussion of postmodernism: as a cultural dominant that is experienced as Jameson’s “perpetual present” (1998, 119) or as what Paul Virilio defines as “monochronic” (1997, 28). The lack of any historical bearings, not only in postmodernist culture at large, but also specifically as part of 9/11 discourse, strengthened the sense of public trauma that developed into such a strong characteristic of the events’ aftermath. This feature of 9/11 discourse has become increasingly evident when looking not only at political discourse, but also at contemporary cultural life. My focus in this section will therefore be on the ways in which these two novels, as examples of contemporary cultural discourse, present a perspective on 9/11 as a moment of trauma that requires the development of historical reference in order to make some form of personal understanding possible. For the protagonists in both novels, the necessity of a
sense of historicity is the only strategy for dealing with the anxiety they experience as a result of the attacks.

Falling Man: *Language Games in Postmodern Limbo*

With his reputation as America’s eminent, most celebrated postmodern author established by novels like *Libra* (1988), *Mao II* (1991), *Underworld* (1997), and especially *White Noise* (1985), it seemed inevitable that New York resident Don DeLillo would reflect on the epochal event of the early 21st century in his work. Having already explored the unreal nature of postmodernity and the seemingly inevitable nature of catastrophe in *White Noise*, DeLillo’s first published response to 9/11 came in the form of an essay in *Harper’s* entitled “In the Ruins of the Future: Reflections on Terror and Loss in the Shadow of September.” In this early essay, which was among the earliest nonjournalistic responses to [9/11], DeLillo immediately emphasized the confusion between actual trauma and its mere representation (Abel 1236). Following the postmodern logic of the Baudrillardian simulacrum and the dissolution of reliable signification, DeLillo’s literary response to 9/11 can be summarized as follows:

> Present-day attempts to imagine a (traumatic) event’s sense cannot operate exclusively on the level of the event’s content (the representational what) without attending to the *rhetorical* mode of representation, the ethical how. Or rather, what DeLillo shows [...] is that what an event means is always shot through with how it appears. (ibid.)

This emphasis on the representational aspect of any event over and above its contents permeates DeLillo’s earlier work, a typical example being the Most Photographed Barn in America from *White Noise*: a barn that is itself no longer visible, because “once you’ve seen the signs about the barn, it becomes impossible to see the barn” (DeLillo 1985: 12). The question how the author would therefore respond to the events of 9/11 in the form of a novel added strongly to the keen sense of anticipation that preceded the publication of *Falling Man* in 2007.
The novel’s critical reception, however, was marked by a general sense of disappointment, with the New York Times review describing it as “tired and brittle” (Kakutani, n. pag.) and other reviewers accusing the author of pretentiousness and nihilism. Like many other reviews, Kakutani’s article lavished praise on the scenes from the novel that recreate the main character’s recollections of his experiences inside the World Trade Center during the attack. These sections of the book, which bookend the fractured larger framework of the text, emphasize the horrific details of the character’s memories, thereby providing a spectacular recreation of what it may have been like to experience the events from the inside of the World Trade Center.

This emphasis on the individual experience of the attacks has been the dominant one in representations of 9/11: either from the outside, as a global media event, in the “where were you on 9/11” category; or from the inside, with books and films striving to provide various kinds of representation of the attacks. The former category can be recognized in much of the immediate media response to the attacks, with its endlessly insistent repetition that the nation had suffered an unprecedented and hugely traumatic attack, and these attacks “formed a ‘wound’ on the collective psyche of all Americans, causing trauma and requiring particular sorts of healing” (Trimarco and Depret 30).

The widely held notion that one did not have to have been present at the events in order to be traumatized by them coincides with Thomas Elsaesser’s perspective on the thoroughly mediated ontological status of historical events. In his article “‘Where were you when...’ or ‘I Phone, Therefore I Am,’” analyzes the paradigm shifts associated with forms of subjectivity and their relation to technological developments in postmodernity: “History happens, and we, it seems, even more than needing to know why it happened, want to reassure ourselves of our co-ordinates in space and place when it happened” (121). The latter category is omnipresent in narrative representations of 9/11, from the dramatic moment-by-moment recreations in bestselling books like 102 Minutes: The Untold Story of the Fight to Survive Inside the Twin Towers and The 9/11 Report to Hollywood feature films World Trade Center and United 93 (dir. Paul
Greengrass, 2006). Often explicitly stating that they wish to avoid political partisanship, these texts instead focus strongly on recreating the experience of the event, thereby providing narratives that are crucial to sustaining the shared sense of trauma for events that were only experienced directly by very few.

*Falling Man* explores these issues by bringing together characters that have experienced the events directly with others who feel traumatized by the events, but who face a seemingly unbridgeable gap between themselves and the actual survivors. The opening and closing passages that narrate the attacks so viscerally therefore also serve to develop an elaborate contrast with the parts of the book that take place after the attacks, which are marked by stilted, highly stylized dialogues and terse descriptions, which often take on a robotic quality:

“When did it happen?”
“About an hour ago.”
“That dog,” he said.
“I know. It was a crazy thing to do.”
“What happens now? You’ll see her in the hall.”
“I don’t apologize. That’s what happens.” (123-4)

The traumatic impact of the attacks seems to have created a rupture that has immobilized the characters, and for which several sustained metaphors are employed in the text. The most obvious one is the performance artist who appears throughout the novel, recreating the well-known photograph of a man falling from one of the burning towers. The artist suspends himself upside down from large structures all over New York, and is encountered by the main characters in the novel at several key points, bringing back “those stark moments in the burning towers when people fell or were forced to jump” (33).

As in the photograph, the artist remains caught in limbo, his inevitable end infinitely postponed as it is rewritten into a perpetual present that is made uncannily literal.

This same sensation of metaphorical suspension can also be recognized in the group of Alzheimer patients described in the novel, whose therapy consists of writing exercises as they slowly lose their individual memories, while their “truth was mapped in slow and certain decline” (125). This group of amateur
writers, attempting to come to terms with the world through the reconstruction of personal memories, are easily related to the symbolic figure of the falling man, and therefore to 9/11 discourse: “like Alzheimer’s patients, all we can do is watch in suspense for what is ever-impending” (Kauffmann 372). In a novel that deals explicitly with the traumatic loss of historical bearings caused by the trauma of 9/11, both the necessity and the futility of such a writing project become paradoxically obvious, even as words themselves seem to have lost their power of signification: “the witness wonders what has happened to the meaning of things, to tree, street, stone, wind, simple words lost in the falling ash” (DeLillo 2007: 103).

This last quotation especially emphasizes the crisis of signification that is attributed here to the events of 9/11, which seem to have severed the once stable ties between signifiers and signifieds. The crisis he experiences is remarkably familiar from the theoretical debate surrounding the term postmodernism, and its much-discussed “bombardment of signs” (Collins 1989: 331). However, in the context of the 9/11 novel, this ongoing crisis is rediscovered via the traumatic effect of the 9/11 attacks, where the author of the trauma narrative continuously struggles to employ “simple words” while their meaning has been “lost in the falling ash” (DeLillo 2007: 103). The main characters who have survived the attacks and whose trauma lies specifically in the “ongoing experience of having survived it” (Caruth 7). They struggle to regain a sense of structure and stability in their lives, only to discover a larger trauma, which turns out to be the destabilizing and decentering effect of the crisis of postmodernism.

According to Lyotard, this historical trauma is the very thing that defines the postmodern condition, as twentieth-century history has demolished our belief in the “grand narratives of legitimation – the life of the spirit and/or the emancipation of humanity,” thereby reducing all knowledge (both narrative and scientific) to the level of the language game (Lyotard 51). These language games are evident at numerous levels within Falling Man, with the most obvious example being the way in which character interactions seem to break down at
the very level of verbal communication:

“Forget God. These are matters of history. This is politics and economics. All the things that shape lives, millions of people, dispossessed, their lives, their consciousness.”

“It’s not the history of Western interference that pulls down these societies. It’s their own history, their mentality. They live in a close world, of choice, of necessity. They haven’t advanced because they haven’t wanted to or tried to.”
(DeLillo 2007: 47)

This exchange illustrates the incommensurability of the positions held by the two characters engaged in a discussion aimed at clarifying the terrorists’ reasons for the attack. As in virtually all other discussions between characters in the novel, no progress is made in reaching a consensus in this matter due to the absence of any larger system or structure of knowledge that makes it possible to (literally) make sense of history. What DeLillo’s text thereby seems to suggest is that the general lack of a shared system of signifiers has led to an even more radical breakdown of the symbolic network after 9/11. Rather than signaling an end to the crisis of postmodernism, as many other critics have suggested, the events of 9/11 rather seems to have caused an intensification of the crisis of postmodernity.

This lack of any center, of any normative characteristic of language, science or history, causes the characters in the various 9/11 novels to search for stable structures in a world that seems suddenly bereft of any such stability. In Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close, child protagonist Oskar finds structure in the systematic search for the solution to an arbitrary mystery; Ian McEwan’s Saturday finds structure in the established forms and paradigms of high modernist literature; and in Falling Man, protagonist Keith’s post-traumatic search leads him inexorably towards the ritualized nature of the poker game:

The dealer skimmed the cards over the green baize, never failing to announce the name of the game, five-card stud, even though it was the only game they now played. The small dry irony of these announcements faded after a time and the words became a proud ritual, formal and indispensable, each dealer in turn, five-card stud, and they loved doing this, straight-faced, because where else would they encounter the kind of mellow tradition exemplified by the needless utterance of a few archaic words. (DeLillo 2007: 99)
As Keith ultimately moves from the agreed-upon rules of this ritual social gathering to the anonymous, anti-social abyss of Las Vegas and organized gambling, DeLillo’s text makes explicit not only the Lyotardian “language game” that defines the postmodern condition, but also its connection to late capitalism. In short: if Keith’s trauma after the attacks corresponds to his traumatic discovery of the crisis of the decentered postmodern subject, then his initial turn towards poker as a rule-bound game constitutes his tentative embrace of the arbitrary language game, and the initial sense of stability this seems to offer. His later disappearance into the casinos of Las Vegas subsequently represents the subject becoming wholly overwhelmed by the complete hegemony of capitalism, into which all other systems of signification ultimately collapse and disappear.

A second way in which *Falling Man* illustrates the incommensurability of language games is at the level of the text itself, and its radical tonal shifts between the rich, vivid prose style in which it describes the attacks, the lyrical mode adopted for the narrative of one of the plane hijackers, and the dry, terse style in which the posttraumatic daily lives of the protagonists are narrated. The resulting text is a fractured whole: a novel that draws on its metaphorical images of falling men and memory loss to sketch out a cultural climate that is defined by its lack of direction and its existence in a Jamesonian perpetual present. But where DeLillo draws on historical precedents like the Baader-Meinhoff group and the specificity of postmodernity’s historical wasteland, other authors have faced this crisis by drawing on some of the classic texts of modernist literature in order to address that same governing anxiety. Ian McEwan’s *Saturday*, for instance, is an explicit adaptation of Virginia Woolf’s modernist text *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925), following a day in the life of an educated but indecisive London resident to chart his interior life as he tries to make sense of his life post-9/11. Similarly, Joseph O’Neill’s *Netherland* adopts F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby* (1925) as a model for tracing out the contours of a post-9/11 landscape.
Netherland: A Postcolonialist Gatsby

Like *Falling Man*, O’Neill’s book dramatizes the experience of the 9/11 attacks and the resulting sense of cultural and historical displacement by tracing the resonance those events have on a businessman living in lower Manhattan, and who finds his life in disarray afterward. In his struggle to restore a sense of order and coherence in a life that seems to have “become disembodied” as he is “lost in invertebrate time,” *Netherland* protagonist Hans van den Broek finds a form of solace in the stable structure of the game of cricket (O’Neill 28). Just as *Falling Man* developed the metaphor of the poker game as an exercise in “testing the forces that govern events” through the arbitrary nature of chance within a strict pattern of explicit codes and rules (DeLillo 2007, 96), *Netherland* adopts the game of cricket as a metaphor for experiencing post-9/11 reality. But unlike the nihilism implied by the endless and meaningless games of poker into which Keith’s character gradually disappears, O’Neill’s use of a rule-bound game points towards a more humanist perspective, where the rules of the game are defined as a moral ideal, “a lesson in civility” (O’Neill 13).

This representation of cricket as a game that embodies a form of moral idealism is however more complex, as it is specifically introduced as a sport practiced exclusively by non-whites. The white protagonist is an anomaly within the ethnically “other” teams that are allowed to play their sport in America “as a matter of indulgence” while they are made to feel invisible, which is “nothing new, for those of us who are black or brown” (ibid.). The general failure to follow these rules of civility outside the cricket field is identified by the narrator-protagonist as well, as he casually observes that his own shared prejudices confine the people he encounters there to his “exotic cricketing circle, which made no intersection with the circumstances of my everyday life” (16). But meanwhile, every character he encounters throughout the novel is identified as an ethnically “other” immigrant from third-world nations: from the taxi drivers he engages in casual conversation with to Danielle, the dark-skinned woman with whom he has a sexual encounter that takes an unexpected turn, as he follows her request to physically abuse her with his belt:
I was not shocked by what I saw – a pale white hitting a pale black – but I did of course ask myself what had happened, how it could be that I should find myself living in a hotel in a country where there was no one to remember me, attacking a woman who’d boomeranged in from a time I could not claim as my own. I recall, also, trying to shrug off a sharp new sadness that I’m only now able to identify without tentativeness, which is to say, the sadness produced when the mirroring world no longer offers a surface in which one may recognize one’s true likeness. (111, emphasis added)

As this sequence illustrates, there is a fundamental friction between the Dutch protagonist, a character whose ancestors founded New Amsterdam within the context of European colonialism, and the contemporary reality of a Western city populated by immigrants from other former European colonies. Bereft of reliable ways to make sense of his surroundings after 9/11 and its crisis of signification, the explicitly coded structure of a game like cricket provides him not only with a coherent set of rules, but also with a new understanding of the American dream: “I cannot be the first to wonder if what we see, when we see men in white take to a cricket field, is men imagining an environment of justice” (116).

As in Falling Man, the trauma of 9/11 therefore leads the novel’s protagonist (and thereby the reader) to the discovery of a larger trauma that points towards a wider socio-historical context. In DeLillo’s work, this larger trauma is the erosion of meaning that typifies postmodernity, the inescapable logic of which causes Keith to retreat into the nihilism of organized gambling in the casino. In O’Neill’s novel, the larger trauma is that of colonialism, his protagonist’s various encounters in post-9/11 New York revealing to him “tantalisms that touch on the undoing of losses too private and reprehensible to be acknowledged to oneself, let alone to others” (116). It is typical of the trauma narrative that this larger trauma is never perceived directly by protagonist/narrator Hans, as this “history can be grasped only in the very inaccessibility of its occurrence” (Caruth 18).

This inaccessibility of actual history is evident through the intricate layering of trauma both inside the text itself and in its intertextual connection to
The Great Gatsby, the modernist novel most famous for the way it addresses the concepts associated with the American Dream on the basis of socio-economic class. Not only is Netherland's narrative modeled after F. Scott Fitzgerald's novel in the way it provides a narrator whose views of the world are altered through his fascination for an eccentric dreamer whose reach exceeds his grasp; it also adopts elaborately stylized, lyrical prose that contrasts with the grim truths faced by the narrator as the doomed romantic dreamer's ideals are shattered by the relentlessly corrupting sphere of capitalism.

But rather than breaking with the modernist disillusionment of Gatsby, Netherland develops it further by extending its logic to a 21st-century world of globalized capitalism. If Fitzgerald's novel suggests that the American Dream of individualism and self-improvement is tainted from the start by the class inequality perpetually sustained by capitalism, O'Neill's text makes explicit the colonialist roots of this impossible ideal, along with its post-/neocolonialist repercussions. One of the most frequently quoted passages in The Great Gatsby offers a lyrical description of the promise held by “the new world” as it was perceived by the original settlers in the book's closing paragraphs:

And as the moon rose higher the inessential houses began to melt away until gradually I became aware of the old island here that flowered once for Dutch sailors' eyes—a fresh, green breast of the new world. Its vanished trees, the trees that had made way for Gatsby's house, had once pandered in whispers to the last and greatest of all human dreams; for a transitory enchanted moment man must have held his breath in the presence of this continent, compelled into an aesthetic contemplation he neither understood nor desired, face to face for the last time in history with something commensurate to his capacity for wonder.

And as I sat there, brooding on the old, unknown world, I thought of Gatsby's wonder when he first picked out Daisy's light at the end of his dock. He had come such a long way to this blue lawn, and his dream must have seemed so close he could hardly fail to grasp it. But what he did not know was that it was already behind him, somewhere in the vast obscurity beyond the city, where the dark fields of the republic rolled on under the night.

Gatsby believed in the green light, the orgastic future that year by year recedes before us. It eluded us then, but that's no matter — tomorrow we will run faster, stretch out our arms farther... And one fine morning ——

So we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past. (Fitzgerald 189)
This oft-quoted passage relates Gatsby’s doomed romantic quest to the eternal but futile desire to return to a past in which the physical landscape of America could be perceived as an Edenic, virginal domain that held infinite rewards for those willing to seek out their fortunes there. What is suppressed—or merely implied—by this vision is the fact that the very establishment of the European presence in this “New World” was a part of the larger project of European imperialism and colonialism.

When O’Neill’s protagonist therefore marvels at the same “ancient” American wilderness described by Nick Carraway in The Great Gatsby as one by which he is “startled” at its ability “of cancelling out centuries” (O’Neill 56), his own cultural heritage leads him to investigate this history of colonialism, “because I knew next to nothing about the ancient Dutch presence in America” (58). The first thing he comes across in this casual research is a poem in a historical collection of Dutch nursery rhymes from colonial times, containing the following lines:

‘Down to the riverbank, Mijnheer, his guests, and all the slaves went trooping, while a war whoop came from all the Indian braves...
The slaves with their whale lanterns passing to and fro,
Casting fantastic shadows on hills of ice and snow.’ (58)

The jarring effect of the casual mention of slaves and “Indian braves” within the context of this supposedly innocent nursery rhyme points the protagonist in a very specific direction as he attempts to restructure his daily experience of his life and surroundings after the traumatic, rupturing experience of 9/11.

As he perceives New York with new eyes, all the time wondering “what exactly had happened to the unanswerable, conspiratorial place [he’d] found years earlier,” his experience of the city is increasingly defined by his continuous encounters with postcolonialist immigrants:

Arabs, West Africans, African Americans hung out on the sidewalks amongst goods trucks, dollies, pushcarts, food carts, heaped trash, boxes and boxes of merchandise. I might have been in a cold Senegal. (66, emphasis added)
This new kind of reality he is faced with is that of New York's colonialist roots, which the destabilizing experience of 9/11 has now made newly accessible to his perception. As in *Falling Man*, the trauma of the attacks as perceived by a New Yorker leads the character (and the reader) on to a larger, structural trauma, while Hans van den Broek is “borne back ceaselessly” into a past that is revealed to be defined by colonialism. The conceptual space newly opened up to him grants him a perspective on the riches of modernity that is similar to Walter Benjamin’s definition of the historical materialist view, in which “the cultural treasures he surveys have an origin he cannot contemplate without horror. They owe their existence not only to the efforts of the great minds and talents who have created them, but also to the anonymous toil of their contemporaries” (qtd. in Žižek 1989: 154). For both characters, therefore, 9/11 is experienced as a traumatic disruption of the familiar safety of modernity, requiring them both to redefine the contours of their daily environment.

This forced renegotiation of signification as a crucial element of the trauma narrative is best explained by Žižek's appropriation of Jacques-Alain Miller’s definition of the Lacanian Real, as “a traumatic encounter which ruins the balance of the symbolic universe of the subject” (Žižek 1989: 192). If pre-9/11 life in New York, the capital of (post)modernity, is experienced as a safe, structured, and familiar environment, this translates in Lacanian terms into a symbolic order that allows the characters to consider themselves subjects within it. This is exactly how Žižek described the attacks in his collection of 9/11 essays *Welcome to the Desert of the Real*: as an event by which New Yorkers were suddenly awakened into “real reality,” just as the character of Neo in *The Matrix* (dir. Wachowski Brothers, 1999) comes to realize that “the material reality we all experience and see around us is a virtual one” (Žižek 2002: 15). The 9/11 attacks within the context of both these narratives then indeed function as a “traumatic disruption” of this order, which can “only afterwards be logically constructed as a point which escapes signification” (Žižek 1989: 193).

The fact that the disruption itself—and thereby the trauma it has caused—can only be constructed after the fact and will therefore always elude direct
signification is particularly helpful in coming to terms with the way the main characters in the two novels discussed here respond to this trauma. In both texts, the crisis caused by the events of 9/11 causes the protagonist to retreat from the city of New York, which is subsequently rediscovered and re-experienced as a space defined by an even stronger historical trauma than the attacks they have themselves experienced (either directly or indirectly) and survived. Both characters then seek refuge in the structured nature of games: the ritualized repetition of poker in Falling Man, and the “moral angle” of cricket in Netherland (O’Neill 204).

In both texts, the game represents a world in which the postmodern subject is able to regain some form of agency:

But the game had structure, guiding principles, sweet and easy interludes of dream logic when the player knows that the card he needs is the card that’s sure to fall. Then, always, in the crucial instant ever repeated hand after hand, the choice of yes or no. [...] It belonged to him, this yes or no. (DeLillo 2007: 211-2)

However, neither character is described as finding this alternative a satisfactory choice. Keith’s descent into a gambling addiction and his physical retreat from his family life in New York is described explicitly as a form of flight from the traumatic memories that plague him to a space where “no flash of history or memory that he might unknowably summon” can intrude (ibid. 225). The idealistic green of the cricket field in Netherland is abandoned exactly because it is revealed to be tainted as well by its dependence on gambling and organized crime, presented in the novel as forces of capitalism that support the continued existence of postcolonialist socio-economic inequality. So although they are able to construct other, more fleeting types of symbolic order through the participation in organized games and sports, the Lacanian Real that has erupted into this order paradoxically remains “an entity which does not exist but has nevertheless a series of properties” (Žižek 1989: 193). Neither character is therefore able in the end to restore the disrupted symbolic order of the old familiar world, which is now described as “pre-9/11” in hindsight.

Many of the central elements from these two books are easy to recognize
in other well-known 9/11 novels: the interest on relating the events of 9/11 to larger moments of 20th-century historical trauma, from the postcolonialist issues at stake in the province of Kashmir (in Salman Rushdie’s *Shalimar the Clown*) to the WWII bombing of Dresden (in Jonathan Safran Foer’s *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close*); the tendency to seek solace in a game-like activity governed by a clear set of rules (Oskar’s alphabetic search in *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close*); and most particularly, the emphasis on trauma as the overriding response to the events of 9/11. This has contributed to a wider form of discourse in which it has become commonplace to refer to 9/11 as a moment of rupture that has been experienced as traumatic to such an extent that it has proved to be culturally, historically, and even ontologically disorienting.

This pervasive presence of the notion of trauma has thus come to inform 9/11 discourse in a way that mirrors the structure of this discursive formation at more than one level. Firstly, by establishing trauma as a seemingly natural part of public discourse related to 9/11, and even as one of its defining characteristics; secondly, by functioning dialectically as an affect that is simultaneously both a singularity and entirely informed by reinterpretations of previous historical events; and thirdly, in its hegemonic ability to interpellate subjects on the assumption of a shared (Western) sense of trauma.

In order to better illustrate the ideological function of 9/11 discourse, it is necessary to expand slightly on my previous Althusserian definition of ideology and the process of interpellation. Drawing on Lacanian psychoanalysis, Slavoj Žižek employs the term *point de capiton* (“quilting point”) to explain the way in which the criticism of ideology functions along two complementary procedures:

- one is *discursive*, the “symptomal reading” of the ideological text bringing about the deconstruction of the spontaneous experience of its meaning – that is, demonstrating how a given ideological field is a montage of heterogeneous “floating signifiers,” of their totalization through the intervention of certain ‘nodal points’;
- the other aims at extracting the kernel of *enjoyment*, at articulating the way in which – beyond the field of meaning, but at the same time internal to it – an ideology implies, manipulates, produces a pre-ideological enjoyment structured in fantasy. (Žižek 1989: 140)
The first procedure is clearly similar to the postmodern perspective on the
decentered nature of contemporary life and the discursive field in which
signifiers like “9/11” are connected to groups of statements that come to make
up the discursive archive. But it is the second procedure that functions as a
Lacanian quilting point that succeeds in re-establishing a stable point of
departure that grounds this discourse in an ideological position that functions
hegemonically.

The use of the trauma narrative as a way of representing 9/11 is just such
a quilting point that anchors a reading of these historical events in the domain of
individual, subjective experience. This creates the “enjoyment” Žižek refers to: a
surplus value that appeals directly to the subject, who is then able to relate to
the events through the prism of personal media memory and narrative
imagineations of trauma. It is precisely by these mechanisms that a form of
discourse that is inherently political and ideological is able to masquerade as
something that is universal and natural: “the stake of social-ideological fantasy is
to construct a vision of society which does exist, a society which is not split by an
antagonistic division, a society in which the relation between its parts is organic,
complementary” (Žižek 1989: 142). In other words: the use of trauma narrative
as a fundamental part of 9/11 discourse seeks to restore a sense of wholeness
by locating moments of rupture that are experienced at the level of the subject,
and which must therefore also be restored or sutured at the individual level.

If the 9/11 novel has an explicit relationship both to 9/11 and to the form
of the trauma narrative, a further step is required before we can identify the
ways in which the combination of these two concepts can be identified in the
genre of the superhero movie. The trauma narrative emerged as a noticeable
narrative paradigm in superhero comics in the late 1980s, with the wave of
“graphic novels” that brought critical and cultural recognition to the comics
medium. Adaptations of these works first appeared within the superhero movie
genre with the release of the films Batman Begins and V for Vendetta. The next
section of this chapter will therefore illustrate how the themes from these works
connected most explicitly to notions of trauma were re-appropriated in these films from the context of 9/11 discourse.

**9/11 Trauma and the Superhero Film**

*Remember Pearl Harbor* (dir. Joseph Stanley, 1942) was the first Hollywood film to offer a fictionalized depiction of the attack on Pearl Harbor, and it appeared within a year of this “day of infamy.” Although the crowds may not have rushed to see this particular low-budget B-movie, cinema screens were soon awash with propaganda films meant to encourage American audiences to support the war effort. At this time in history, American popular culture was universally aligned to a single cause, which was reflected not just in feature films and cartoons, but also in comic books, which “never wavered in their support for the war effort” (Wright 54). World War II marked that “rare convergence of interests between publishers, creators, readers, and government policy” (ibid.) that would not only provide that burgeoning medium with many of its most enduring characters, but that would help to define the ways in which comic books would develop an ongoing relationship with political and social conflicts in the following decades.

But Hollywood has proved much more reluctant to fictionalize the events of 9/11 in commercial feature films. Unlike the American comic book industry, which was quick to publish issues in which superheroes like Spider-Man and Captain America make brief appearances at Ground Zero, none of the major Hollywood film studios released a film about the attacks until 2006. Even then, the premieres of *United 93* and *World Trade Center* were surrounded by controversy. The ensuing public debate centered on the question whether it was appropriate for a fictionalized film to recreate events that had caused such an intense national trauma. The common perception is that any Hollywood film would trivialize the experience by transforming authentic trauma into a commercial product, or as Adorno would describe this process: “making it too accessible by turning it into yet another saleable commodity” (qtd. in Storey 51).
Although one might raise the obvious Frankfurt School objections to this commodification of “authentic” experience, it is more likely that the American film industry has been hesitant to address the events of 9/11 head-on because it had been recognized so explicitly as a moment of deep national trauma. Psychoanalytic film theory, and more specifically trauma theory, offers a viable explanation for the fact that popular cinema has only made cloaked references to these events until very recently. As defined by trauma theorist Cathy Caruth, the term trauma should be understood as a mental wound that “is experienced too soon, too unexpectedly to be fully known” (3-4). Therefore, by watching films that offer an indirect representation of the 9/11 attacks, it becomes possible for viewers to give meaning to events that were too sudden and traumatic to be understood as they occurred.

In this part of the chapter, I will demonstrate how two post-9/11 Hollywood films featuring superhero narratives, both of which were adapted from highly influential and well-known graphic novels, can be read first and foremost as texts that engage directly with debates surrounding the American national trauma of 9/11. By comparing and contrasting the films *Batman Begins* and *V for Vendetta* with each other as well as with the texts upon which they were based, I aim to illustrate how both films refer explicitly to cultural discourse post-9/11, and how they encourage viewers to relate the moral choices presented in these narratives to real-life contemporary social and political discourse. Both films feature protagonists who are portrayed from within the superhero tradition, and both address the problem of redefining the relevance of superheroes in a post-9/11 environment defined by notions of personal and national trauma. I will argue firstly that these films present a new kind of superhero narrative that draws heavily on the graphic novels that appeared in the late 1980s, thereby presenting a break with previous superhero films. Secondly, by pointing out key differences between the films on the one hand and the graphic novels on which they were based on the other, I will demonstrate how the films refer explicitly to 9/11, and do so from within the paradigm of the trauma narrative. And thirdly, by providing a close analysis of
key sequences in both films, I will show how the films incorporate elements that reflect on the nature and causes of 21st-century terrorism.

The revisionary superhero narrative

*Batman Begins* and *V for Vendetta* were both based on graphic novels that were published in the late 1980s, when comic books came of age in a bid for cultural and literary legitimacy. Controversy surrounds both films' relationship to their source material: while *V for Vendetta* was certainly based explicitly on the comic book series that was published as a single-volume graphic novel in 1989, author Alan Moore had his name removed from the credits, stating that in his opinion the story had been “turned into a Bush-era parable by people too timid to set a political satire in their own country” (Moore 2006: n. pag.). The plot of *Batman Begins* on the other hand is not drawn from any single work, but instead combines specific characters, props and events from Frank Miller’s graphic novels *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns* and *Batman: Year One*, alongside more diverse influences from the Batman comics continuity. Although Frank Miller has no screen credit in the film, *Batman Begins* clearly “us[es] his work without invoking his name” (Newman 21) and has been the most frequently cited direct influence in the film’s development and reception.

Geoff Klock has described those works as “revisionary” superhero narratives in his book *How to Read Superhero Comics and Why*. The key texts identified by Klock as revisionary superhero narratives are both Batman books by Frank Miller, and Alan Moore’s *Watchmen* and *Batman: The Killing Joke* (1988). He argues that these works constitute a movement (in which we could easily include *V for Vendetta* as well, since it appeared in the same period and has a similar approach to the superhero figure) that marks the point at which superhero comic books made the transition from “mere” popular culture artifacts to literature. Central to his theory is the idea that these authors successfully deconstructed the superhero narrative in multi-layered texts that problematize the extensive narrative history that has come to define the
American comic book tradition.

*Batman Begins* and *V for Vendetta*, both highly successful blockbuster action films produced and distributed by a major Hollywood studio, achieve a similar effect for the figure of the superhero in cinema. As Klock writes, “central to understanding the revisionary superhero narrative is the re-imagining of origins” (Klock, 50), which is at the very core of both these films: *Batman Begins*—as its very title suggests—deals entirely with the creation of a new origin story that connects the character’s childhood trauma to the ensuing danger of recruitment by a terrorist organization, while *V for Vendetta* goes even further in its depiction of a superhero character who views terrorism as a legitimate means towards political change. Previous superhero movies have followed the example of mainstream comic books by including a “political dimension, usually supporting whatever hegemonic discourse (most often conservative) the decade at hand had to offer” (Klock 39). I will argue that these two post-9/11 superhero films forge a connection between the effects of personal trauma and ideological discourses related to social and political change.

**Batman Begins: the “Othering” of an American Hero**

*Batman Begins* offers a 21st-century retooling of an indestructible Golden Age superhero that is similar in many ways to that of *Superman Returns*, as discussed in the previous chapter. But as the title indicates, this superhero “reboot” comes with a different kind of twist. For rather than the only moderately revisionist continuation of an existing chronology and an established film franchise, Nolan’s film presents itself as an origin story: it reinvents its already familiar character for a contemporary audience by re-sorting, re-shifting, and re-defining narrative elements that make up the character’s long and contradictory history.

Drawing heavily on elements from Frank Miller’s late-1980s graphic novels *Batman: Year One* (1987) and *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns*, the latest franchise re-establishes its protagonist as a troubled, reluctant hero operating in a murky,
gritty Gotham City far less stylized and visually fantastical than its previous screen incarnations. *Batman Begins* was released in the summer of 2005, not long after the first two Spider-Man and X-Men features had re-established the superhero film’s viability as a box office force, and many Hollywood studios rushed their own superhero franchises into production. But more than any of the previous films in this genre, Nolan’s film builds on themes and imagery strongly associated with 9/11 and its aftermath.

Unlike *Superman Returns* and its repeated restaging of familiar catastrophes with triumphant heroic endings, *Batman Begins* provides a different kind of avenue into 9/11 discourse and iconography. The film reintroduces Bruce Wayne as an embittered young man, deeply traumatized by the death of his parents. In the previous four Batman films, which appeared between 1989 and 1997, Batman was portrayed as a figure who fought crime in league with the police force as a masked vigilante, his dual identity the direct result of the trauma suffered by the murder of his parents. The first and third films in the cycle, *Batman* (dir. Tim Burton, 1989) and *Batman Forever* (dir. Joel Schumacher, 1995) included flashbacks to this moment of trauma from which the hero’s dual identity and heroic identity resulted. But Batman’s motivations and his commitment to justice were never questioned, neither by himself nor by other characters. His actions conformed to the traditional superhero paradigm, in which “the villains are concerned with change and the heroes with the maintenance of the status quo” (Reynolds 51). Thus, in the Batman universe, an eccentric villain like the Joker traditionally attempts to change the way the world is organized, while Batman successfully fights to keep it the same. This explains why the predominant view of the superhero has always been that of the politically and socially conservative.

His status is raised in these films from violent, proto-fascist vigilante to unquestioned agent of morality by means of the “Bat-Signal,” the beacon used by the police whenever the superhero’s aid is required. Rather than the “brooding psychopath” of the graphic novels *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns* and *Batman: Year One*, Batman was portrayed as the “square-jawed law-enforcer of earlier comics,” and in *Batman & Robin* (dir. Joel Schumacher, 1997) even as a
character resembling “the camp, pop-art figure of the classic 1960s TV series” (Sabin 87). These films, like almost every other superhero movie to emerge from Hollywood in the past twenty-five years, certainly benefited from the fact that the acclaimed work of Moore and Miller brought with it a renewed public interest in superhero narratives. But their narratives fall without exception in the realm of the “Silver Age” in the history of American comics that presented straightforward, non-ironic superhero narratives.

*Batman Begins* focuses much more strongly on the issues of childhood trauma and morality, firstly by making it clear how thin the line is that separates Batman’s vigilantism from the ideology of a terrorist organization. The first part of the film is dominated by flashbacks to Bruce Wayne’s childhood trauma, whose traumatic impact is underlined by the fragmented nature of the images, as quick cuts seem to impose themselves on Wayne’s adult point of view. The establishment of the loss of his parents and Wayne’s hysterical fear of bats is then followed by a sequence about his self-imposed exile in an unidentified mountainous region in Asia. While there, seeking an outlet for his trauma-induced grief, Wayne is approached by Henri Ducard, who entices him to join a secret society called the League of Shadows. Ducard has little trouble convincing Wayne to join his organization:

> **Bruce Wayne:** What makes you think I need a path?
> **Henri Ducard:** A vigilante is just a man lost in the scramble for his own gratification. He can be destroyed, or locked up; but if you make yourself more than just a man, if you devote yourself to an ideal, and if they can’t stop you, you become something else entirely.

The above exchange is crucial to the post-9/11 rewriting of Batman’s origin story in more explicit terms of trauma narratives as a mobilizing factor. The film’s opening scenes had previously emphasized two moments of childhood trauma as crucial to Batman’s later identity: first, the young Bruce Wayne’s experience of falling down a well, where he is frightened by a large group of bats; and second, the murder of his parents after his fear of bats caused them to leave an opera performance prematurely.
Wayne’s failure to avenge his parents and the ongoing trauma of their deaths causes him to feel a strong disconnect from Gotham City, which is experienced by him as a crime-ridden, despairing environment, much like the protagonists of *Falling Man* and *Netherland* experience New York as an alienating urban environment after the trauma of 9/11. But in Wayne’s case, he learns from Ducard that he can use his traumatic experience as a way to break free of his feelings of immobilization: the murder of his parents motivates him to fight crime, while his traumatic fear of bats provides him with the symbolic status that will make him “more than just a man.”

The film compounds its connection to 9/11 discourse by illustrating how trauma can easily lead to the kind of radicalization associated with postmodern terrorism. As disillusioned and disoriented as the traumatized young Wayne feels, he is easily taken in by Ducard, who provides him with an ideological perspective that seems to suit his personal agenda, along with a paternal authority figure to replace the loss of his actual father. The discovery of Wayne’s “true” identity as Batman, to which this origin story must inevitably lead, is thus associated explicitly with trauma narrative on the one hand, and with the re-establishment of the Law of the Father on the other, as a form of symbolic order is reconstituted by Wayne’s induction into Ducard’s League of Shadows.

Once he joins the League, Wayne receives extensive training in martial arts and new, mystical forms of awareness, derived from the intake of mysterious drugs. This makes him an effective unit in a terrorist organization bent on maintaining order in the world by punishing societies it deems overly decadent and/or corrupt. What makes this training sequence remarkable, and what sets it apart from previous superhero film narratives, is the fact that a clear process of “othering” takes place. As Edward Said argued in his seminal work *Orientalism*, the West has tended to identify itself as separate from the East by using simplistic dichotomies (e.g. scientific vs. mystical, rational vs. irrational) that justify viewing entire populations as inherently “other” from a Western “us.” This kind of thinking has allowed for reductive statements about the nature of terrorism that cast the perpetrators of the 9/11 attacks as “an irrational ‘Other’”
bent on destroying the West” (Norlund 3).

The reinvention of Batman as a character who learned his skills in the Far East also represents a clear departure from Miller’s graphic novels and established comic book continuity: *Batman: Year One* includes panels that show Bruce Wayne in training to become Batman, all of which visibly takes place on the grounds of Wayne Manor (figure 1). This is significant for the fact that as much as Miller’s graphic novel represents a revisionary approach to the character’s roots, Batman/Bruce Wayne remains firmly anchored within Gotham City (and therefore within the US), as are the threats from which he must defend the city. *Batman Begins* on the other hand frames the character’s beginning from a very specific foreign context.

This new addition to the Batman origin story is relevant for how it establishes a deliberate connection between its representation of villainy and its relationship to the American city. If previous Batman narratives offer dramatizations of urban spaces as environments that foster crime and perversion, *Batman Begins* trumps this interior threat by introducing a far more serious danger from outside. Organized crime in this film’s Gotham is introduced as a problem that is endemic to the inherently corrupt postmodern city, but is quickly marginalized and overshadowed by the Orientalist threat that is presented in terms familiar from Samuel Huntington’s “Clash of Civilizations” theory.

Huntington’s notion, which he first introduced in a *Foreign Affairs* article in 1993 and later developed in his best-selling 1996 book, gained much ground as part of the public debate after the attacks of 9/11, which has been frequently cited as evidence of Huntington’s perspective on contemporary global conflicts:
It is my hypothesis that the fundamental source of conflict in this new world will not be primarily ideological or primarily economic. The great divisions among humankind and the dominating source of conflict will be cultural. Nation states will remain the most powerful actors in world affairs, but the principal conflicts of global politics will occur between nations and groups of different civilizations. The clash of civilizations will dominate global politics. The fault lines between civilizations will be the battle lines of the future. (Huntington 22, emphasis added)

Huntington’s strong emphasis on cultural difference as the defining force in current and future conflicts has contributed heavily to the post-9/11 perception that Islamism is directly to blame for current perceived threats against Western freedoms, with examples of this kind of discourse extending so far as Martin Amis’s notorious suggestion that Islam is responsible for the inconveniences of post-9/11 airplane travel, grumbling that “the age of terror … will also be remembered as the age of boredom” (77).

*Batman Begins* contributes directly to this problematic form of discourse by presenting its world along lines of an ideological conflict similar to Huntington’s clash of civilizations: the League of Shadows corresponds directly with the terrorist cell structure associated with Al Qaeda and its extremist agenda, while its Orientalist representation in the film trades in cultural stereotypes without connecting its roots to any specific nation state. Wayne proves susceptible to the temptations of a fundamentalist terrorist group led by arch-villain Ra’s Al-Guhl, who may not be portrayed as a Middle-Eastern Muslim, but whose appearance and attitudes answer to all the classical stereotypes that make him the archetypal Orientalist enemy of western values (figure 2). This sect leader, played by Japanese actor Ken Watanabe, is later revealed as an empty figurehead meant to distract from the actual villain: Wayne’s
charismatic Caucasian mentor, Ducard (Liam Neeson).

Like *Iron Man* (dir. Jon Favreau, 2008), the television series *24* (20th Century Fox Television, 2001-2010), and many other popular 21st-century narratives, *Batman Begins* trades casually in familiar Orientalist stereotypes, only to make a last minute about-face that recasts the film’s most aggressive father surrogate as the true source of evil and villainy. What on the surface would appear to be politically correct efforts to avoid suspicion of racist stereotyping could actually be regarded as a more troubling type of oblique racism than that of pre-9/11 action movies—from *Into the Night* (dir. John Landis, 1985) to *True Lies* (dir. James Cameron, 1994)—in which the villains were rabid Arab caricatures. For not only do these post-9/11 pictures put the patronizing stereotypes to unquestioning use in order to establish the antagonist’s otherness, but the initial villain’s unmasking as a red herring robs the character of agency in the narrative, thereby effectively removing the stereotype’s narrative power without dissolving the negative connotations that ultimately continue to define it.

These connotations come to the fore when Bruce Wayne arrives at the League of Shadows’ headquarters, where he undergoes his combat training in *Batman Begins*. These headquarters are set in a temple in a remote Asian mountain range (figure 3), resembling the headquarters of terrorist organization Cobra in GI Joe comics, which are described as “designed architecturally to resemble a temple hidden in a Himalaya-like region” (Norlund 8). Like Cobra’s leader, Ra’s Al Ghul is also “a terrorist personality [portrayed] as a disingenuous religious leader, suggest[ing] that no terrorist or religious leader is authentically devout” (ibid.). This connection between terrorism and Eastern mystical religion is made explicit in the film by the League’s headquarters’ resemblance to a temple (figure 3). It is further solidified by the presence of signifiers such as Buddha figurines on prominent display in the first interior shot. Bruce Wayne is
successfully recruited, trained, and indoctrinated by the League of Shadows, but later rejects the organization when he is assigned the task of executing a criminal as a required rite of passage. Wayne decides to turn against the League’s absolutist ideology, immediately thereafter making his separation complete by blowing up the temple where he has undergone the training that will later make him a superhero.

Wayne’s rejection of the League of Shadows and its agenda becomes even more evident when he exchanges his Eastern ninja garb for high-tech American military armor, which he re-appropriates and transforms into his superhero costume. Thus, by portraying Bruce Wayne as someone who is indoctrinated by a terrorist organization, this revisionist superhero narrative and its re-imagining of Batman’s origins breaks explicitly with the character’s established tradition of facing “a different and independent villain each issue, since a variety of them reside in Gotham City” (Norlund 2). Making the film’s use of trauma narrative even more problematic, the film suggests that other members of the League have experienced traumas similar to those suffered by Bruce Wayne. But unlike the sole enlightened American recruit in this cell, the ethnically “other” members are apparently far more easily indoctrinated and brain-washed.

For although he is at first taken in by the group’s charismatic and elusive leader, Batman balks at the League of Shadows’ true purpose: a large-scale attack on Gotham City. The League’s motivation, which sounds remarkably similar to the oft-quoted “they hate our freedoms” rationale with its emphasis on New York City as the pinnacle of decadence:

Gotham’s time has come. Like Constantinople or Rome before it the city has become a breeding ground for suffering and injustice. It is beyond saving and must be allowed to die. This is the most important function of the League of Shadows. It is one we’ve performed for centuries. Gotham... must be destroyed.

The League’s plot to destroy Gotham City, Batman’s fictitious city of residence since 1941 that “for all intents and purposes is still New York, and more specifically Manhattan” (Brooker 48), ultimately involves an attack that is to culminate in the destruction of Wayne Tower, Gotham’s skyline-defining skyscraper and the symbolic and infrastructural heart of the city. The similarity to recent real-world
events could hardly be more obvious. As genre film expert Kim Newman has
described the similarity between the film’s main narrative and the attacks of 9/11 in
his article “Cape Fear,” Gotham City is attacked “by a fanatic eastern sect with a
charismatic but impossible-to-catch figurehead which is bent on crashing a mode of
transport into a skyscraper to trigger an explosion of panic that will destroy society”
(21).

Rather than offering a literal allegory that restages the events of 9/11 to
which *Batman Begins* refers, the film does cast its hero as the city’s (partial)
savior. In a fevered frenzy of wish fulfillment, the attack is averted at the last
possible moment by Batman, who succeeds in stopping the train with the help of
future police commissioner Gordon, once again reinforcing Batman’s alignment
with the police force. But unlike previous Batman films and most other
superhero movies, Batman’s victory over the villain is not complete: part of the
city has fallen victim to the terrorist attack, and crime is still rampant
throughout the city. Wayne Manor has been burnt to the ground, and the last
shot we see of Bruce Wayne (without his Batman costume) is of him and Albert
walking through the smoking ruins.

In the film’s final scene, Batman meets Gordon on a rooftop, and their
exchange emphasizes the ambiguous mixture of hope and loss that summarizes
the film’s narrative:

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Batman: We can bring Gotham back.
Gordon: What about escalation?
Batman: Escalation?
Gordon: We start carrying semi-automatics, they buy automatics. We start
wearing Kevlar, they buy armor-piercing rounds.
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Instead of the usual signature shot of the superhero’s silhouette atop a
skyscraper, watching over the city’s well-being like a gargoyle, *Batman Begins*
ends with one of the film’s key villains Scarecrow on the loose, and with the
introduction of Batman’s best-known nemesis The Joker as the next case for the
Dark Knight to pursue. This lack of formal closure can be read to reflect the
current situation of American post-9/11 trauma, which the film addresses
without offering a resolution. Rather than engaging in the usual reductionist answers prevalent in American popular culture and political speeches about how terrorists simply “hate ‘freedom and democracy’, they irrationally want to ‘kill Americans’” (Norlund 4), *Batman Begins* actually incorporates a modest form of ideological debate.

But while the film’s incorporation of Eastern tropes and figures as components in the superhero’s identity and toolkit introduces an element of “othering” into the basic formula, the film’s depiction of Orientalist stereotypes as figures motivated by irrational evil remains deeply problematic, feeding back into a more general form of discourse on the terror associated with the “Other.” The revelation that the true leader of the terrorist cell is not the Fu Manchu-like Ra’s Al Ghul, but the Caucasian father figure of Ducard may imply that the actual threat facing the West resides within our own colonialist history, but it simultaneously robs the oriental Other within the film of any agency in the narrative. While *Batman Begins* therefore succeeds in addressing the cultural fallout of 9/11 and the public wish to indulge in trauma narratives to act out wish fulfillment scenarios, it still does so in a way that reaffirms many of the cultural assumptions and preconceptions that maintain and support the ongoing sense of impasse.

**V for Vendetta: the terrorist superhero**

Many of the same issues recur in *V for Vendetta*, in which one trauma victim teaches another a terrorist ideology, but this film offers an entirely different kind of resolution. In the film, based on the graphic novel by writer Alan Moore and artist Dave Gibbons, masked superhero figure V introduces himself to Evey, the film’s main protagonist and the primary focus for audience identification. The introduction is made through an act of terrorism: he proudly orchestrates the blowing up of a public building in London. As the film progresses, Evey is educated by V, ultimately leading to her embracing his view that terrorist acts can be a legitimate form of protest.
The building is a symbol, as is the act of destroying it. Symbols are given power by people. Alone, a symbol is meaningless. But with enough people, blowing up a building can change the world. (emphasis added)

Throughout the film, the media are portrayed as government-controlled propaganda tools that help maintain control over the population through fear. Every act of resistance is reported as a terrorist act against a government that purports to keep the population safe from perpetual danger by maintaining a regime of fear that includes measures like an evening curfew and a quarantine zone that makes all areas outside the city off-limits for regular citizens.

This creates a binary opposition in which the government is established as unambiguously evil (a first departure from the far more complex graphic novel), and V's resistance to this government as therefore implicitly good. Evey, who initially does not question the status quo and who is employed by the government-controlled television station, is abducted and imprisoned by V after saving his life. During her imprisonment, she grows increasingly intimate with V, although this intimacy develops into a relationship that is paternal rather than romantic. Like Bruce Wayne, who is also surrounded by “a superfluity of Fathers” in *Batman Begins*, Evey is indoctrinated by this “hyperstitional mentor-guru” to change her perception of the world around her and to undergo a form of conditioning that will allow her to follow in this mentor's footsteps (Fisher 2006: 3). Both films therefore offer as their primary targets for audience identification characters that are defined by the authorities within the film as terrorists, thereby questioning the definition of this demonized term from a different perspective and foregrounding its discursive nature. While *Batman Begins* quickly establishes clear margins that redefine such concepts from a context of trauma and crisis, *V for Vendetta* moves more radically towards the undermining of the ways in which such terms are discursive constructs that are often the result of government control, media spinning, and explicit propaganda.
Another similarity between the two films is the presence of a sympathetic police detective investigating the case. James Gordon has been Batman’s loyal ally throughout most of the character’s history, operating from within a police force that has been portrayed as corrupt and incompetent. In *Batman Begins*, Gordon (Gary Oldman) is specifically presented as a lone man of integrity, unwilling to accept bribes in a department fraught with corruption. Similarly, in *V for Vendetta*, Finch (Stephen Rea) realizes that the police force he works for is irredeemably corrupt, ultimately leading him to condone Evey’s destruction of the Houses of Parliament. Also like Wayne, Evey has another father figure who functions as a “maternal carer”: Deitrich (Stephen Fry) mirrors V in the way he is portrayed visually within the film frame and in his caring for Evey following a moment of crisis. Both men, in fact, serve her the same dish for breakfast, framed in a sequence of identical shots (figures 4-5), while Deitrich jokingly claims that he is the masked V.

However, unlike Bruce Wayne, who rejects his mentor as a father figure, instead embracing the unconditional love offered by butler and maternal care-giver Albert, Evey witnesses her maternal care-giver Deitrich falling victim to
the regime in a way that directly mirrors the childhood trauma of the loss of her real parents. This is where the politics of V for Vendetta move beyond the moral middle ground of Batman Begins. For whereas Bruce Wayne rebels against his conditioning, re-appropriating his training and costume in order to press “Gothic Fear into the service of heroic Justice” (Fisher 2006: 4), Evey comes to an entirely different conclusion: she moves from skepticism to self-discovery and—finally—a regained sense of agency thanks to the tutelage of father figure V, motivated directly by moments of trauma that are re-staged repeatedly and which compel her to take action. In a scene that serves as a re-enactment of her traumatic memory of losing her mother, Evey witnesses Deitrich beaten, bound and hooded as she hides under the bed (figures 6-11).

Evey’s re-living of this childhood trauma is followed by her capture and torture, for which the government first appears to be responsible, but which is later revealed to have been masterminded by V. The sequence of Evey’s capture, imprisonment, and torture makes up an extended part of the film, which again departs from the source texts in ways that establish further connections to 9/11 discourse.
One of the most controversial issues in the post-9/11 War on Terror has been the detention of “enemy combatants” in the American prison facility of Guantánamo Bay, where individuals suspected of terrorism have been detained without official charges, and without recourse to the rights they would be granted on American soil. Images of prisoners clad in orange jumpsuits, with black bags over their heads, became instantly recognizable signifiers that were circulated throughout the mainstream news media, and were adopted by protesters to signify their solidarity with human rights interests (figure 12).
One of the film’s most obvious references to current events and 9/11 discourse is the filmmakers’ decision to copy the iconic orange prison garb and black bags for Evey’s imprisonment sequence (figure 13). After supposedly being arrested on charges of terrorism, the innocent Evey’s torture, solitary confinement, and inhumane treatment transforms the narrative into an allegory that references the imagery associated with 9/11 and the War on Terror. Unlike the book, which contains no such iconic references to the current affairs of its own historical period, the film thus invites readings that draw on ideological perspectives pertaining to these images. As Nicholas Xenakis points out in his article on the adaptation of Moore’s graphic novel, “the scenes with black hoods, torture and

Figure 12: Protesters against Guantánamo Bay prison dressed in the iconic garb. Photo by Keith Ivey (Creative Commons license)

Figure 13: Evey imprisoned, shaved, and clad in orange jumpsuit and black bag.
the Quran appear to be more from the front page than a speculative tale of ‘what if’s” (138). Instead of the form of political satire found in the book, the film is thus pulled into the realm of “liberal fantasy” (ibid.), catering to a genre audience to which it delivers an unambiguous tale of crowd-pleasing heroism and spectacular action, along with a heavy-handed liberal agenda that supposedly elevates the film to the level of topical commentary.

But what sets this film apart from most other films in this genre is its use of trauma narrative to legitimize a process of radicalization rather than to condemn it. The narrative moment that serves as confirmation of this point is Evey’s transformation after her realization that the traumatic experience of Guantánamo-like incarceration had been inflicted on her by V in order to make her experience his own trauma. Her transformation is visualized when she walks onto the rooftop in the rain, her arms spread towards the sky. The shots in the film recreate the panels in the graphic novel, albeit with one major difference: they are intercut with flashback shots of V as he emerged through fire out of his own prison, his arms similarly raised upwards. In the book, no such connection is made within the panels. By creating these graphic matches in the film’s editing (figure 14), underscored by the complementary backgrounds of fire and water, the viewer is unsubtly made to understand that Evey has now become the same as her captor, and can fulfill her destiny by stepping into his shoes.

![Figure 14: Graphic matches establishing the connection between Evey and V.](image)

What is most remarkable about this moment is that it acts out a celebration of the much-maligned cultural buzzword “radicalization,” as Evey’s moment of true
catharsis arrives when she is able to fully embrace the “terrorist’s” point of view by undergoing the same trauma that had shaped his heroic identity. Unlike the process undergone by Bruce Wayne, who is initially sympathetic to the League of Shadows’ radical agenda, but who rejects this perspective once he is faced with its true implications, Evey comes to accept V’s ideological viewpoint entirely, as both characters now share identical traumatic memories. When reading both films as explicit reflections upon the notions of trauma and terrorism in a post-9/11 world, *V for Vendetta* thus seems to embrace the notion that terrorist action against the state is a legitimate form of protest under the right circumstances.

This notion of becoming the superhero/terrorist informs the film’s climax, which is not only the point where it veers off most dramatically from *Batman Begins*, but also from the graphic novel upon which it was based. Similarly to Bruce Wayne in *Batman Begins*, Evey was traumatized at a young age by the death of her parents, who were in her case arrested and killed by the government. She too requires the guidance of a father figure/mentor to transform her grief and anger into a form of power that will allow her to become an agent of justice, or even a kind of superhero. She is first introduced to her mentor in a familiar superhero trope. When Evey is assaulted in a dark alley by a group of nefarious hoodlums (identified here as government agents), the Batman-like masked and cloaked V, who is seemingly invincible, dispatches her attackers and leads her to safety. He also invites her along as a spectator to his first terrorist act in the film, as he blows up London’s Old Bailey to
Tchaikovsky’s 1812 Overture, an act visualized in the film as a spectacular – and victimless – fireworks display. This act is in fact a conflation of two separate scenes from the book, in which V first blows up the Houses of Parliament (figure 15) and later targets the Old Bailey.

The graphic novel ends with the eruption of citywide anarchy after the prime minister’s residence is blown up by the underground train carrying V’s corpse. This is entirely unlike the climactic explosion that destroys the Houses of Parliament at the end of the film. For while the film depicts a peaceful conclusion in which a mob of spectators, all clad in V’s Guy Fawkes mask and hat, come together to witness the spectacular explosion, the blowing up of Downing Street that ends the book is witnessed only from afar from the point of view of two individual characters (figure 16), while the mob that rampages through the city is portrayed as violent and anarchic (figure 17).

Figure 16: Two perspectives on the explosion of 10 Downing Street (Moore and Lloyd 262, 264)
In the same way that the endings of the two films differ, so does their message veer from the revisionary framing of Batman as a former terrorist who turns against his own organization to Evey's acceptance of an ideology that condones terrorist acts as legitimate forms of protest against an illegitimate government.

When comparing the two films and the way in which their finales represent political change, there are some obvious similarities, but also some notable differences. The most crucial similarity is both films' reliance on a highly masculine superhero figure whose intervention is required in order to affect political change in a troubled society. Without the assistance of Bruce Wayne in *Batman Begins* or the intervention of V in *V for Vendetta*, individual subjects are clearly unable to act, or even to understand the true nature of their predicament. Also, both superhero figures rely primarily on physical violence to make their points and restore the tarnished community. A third obvious similarity is the fact that in both films, the perspective of the ordinary citizen is represented by a child character, shown in both cases to be the sole believer in the hero's good nature amongst a skeptical, easily misguided population.
The choice to have the larger-than-life heroes and villains played by adults while the ordinary citizenry is represented by children fits in perfectly with the form of “infantile citizenship” described by Lynn Spigel in her analysis of the way in which the media narrated the events of 9/11 to the American audience “as if they were children, or at best, the innocent objects of historical events beyond their control” (128). This makes these two films in particular, and the superhero genre in general, so ideologically problematic, as all sense of political and historical agency is systematically removed from its audience. For not only are all forms of social change attributed to messianic superhero figures, but the ordinary subject’s position is reduced within the film’s narrative universe to that of an awe-struck, helpless child.

This point however also brings us to a noteworthy difference between these two films. For where the population of Gotham City is literally reduced to a psychotic, paranoid mass during the climax of *Batman Begins*, the citizens of London are granted a more active role in the final moments of *V for Vendetta*. The former suggests that ordinary subjects should not interfere with political issues, leaving them either to benevolent capitalists like Bruce Wayne and his father, or else to well-armed vigilante figures whose actions offer militarized support for the understaffed police force. The latter film on the other hand proposes that hero figures ultimately rely on the support of the population, and that only through a process of enlightening ideological re-education will they find the courage to rise up against a tyrannical government.

However, the action that is presented as revolutionary at the end of *V for Vendetta* is presented as a spectacular display of fireworks that reduces the masses once again to passive spectators, gazing up at the symbol of their liberator who has already taken violent action against the villainous oppressors. The fascination with which the amassed audience gazes up at the destruction (in spectacular slow-motion) of the Houses of Parliament is uncannily reminiscent of the enthralling nature of the collapse of the World Trade Center. But again, the images are rewritten in this film to conform to a narrative of heroic triumph,
the destruction refashioned a symbolic form of spectacle from which all traces of trauma have been skillfully erased.

**Conclusion**

This chapter has focused on the issue of trauma as a fundamental aspect of 9/11 discourse, identified first in the genre of the 9/11 novel, and subsequently in the post-9/11 superhero film. In both media, the emphasis is very strongly on individual trauma, and how this relates to larger political-historical events. In both 9/11 novels I have discussed, *Falling Man* and *Netherland*, the traumatic effects of having experienced the events of 9/11 disturbs the sense of balance and coherence that had previously made them able to function as individual subjects. I have argued that their individual sense of trauma represents the wider cultural trauma associated with 9/11, while the characters’ subsequent discovery of larger traumatic disruptions represents the desire to establish a form of historical context that has so far been lacking. In the two films discussed in the second section, the sense of post-9/11 trauma is represented metaphorically, the notion of a larger trauma seemingly taken for granted as superhero figures are made responsible for restoring a sense of political order and social coherence.

Although these very different texts, each in their distinct media with their own audiences and narrative conventions, provide very different perspectives on 9/11 and the notion of trauma and historicity, what they share is their consistent foregrounding of the notion of trauma as a natural consequence of these events. Whatever the individual conclusions that readings of these texts may offer, their trauma narratives reaffirm the cultural consensus that trauma after 9/11 is indeed a natural and understandable response, and that its singular nature has disrupted our sense of history, our sense of coherence, and even our sense of identity. The degree to which the novels’ suggest a more critical perspective than that of the two Hollywood films reaffirms some of the traditional expectations of high versus low culture: literary works are expected
to provide a challenging view, while pop culture is associated with uncritical reproductions of the status quo.

But as my analysis has illustrated, the cultural landscape of postmodernism is somewhat more complex than these prejudices would hold. For although both novels are—in my reading—critical to some degree of the cultural representation of 9/11 as a traumatic historical singularity, much of this is implied rather than argued, and neither text provides a narrative that places the trauma of 9/11 in a comprehensible historical context. This failure to articulate the larger crisis (or group of crises) that underlie these trauma narratives supports Jameson’s thesis regarding our inability to create a cognitive mapping of the postmodern landscape. My analysis of two superhero films subsequently demonstrates on the other hand that although Hollywood versions of 9/11 trauma narratives remain ideologically problematic in the way they consistently reduce individual subjects to passive audiences, they also contribute to this larger discussion in interesting ways. Not only do they provide narratives that emphasize the constructed nature of cultural and political discourse by redefining highly charged signifiers like “terrorist,” but there is also some variety in the ways in which they represent contemporary issues from within the context of fantasy genres.

For while Batman Begins offers a narrative that introduces the post-9/11 motif of an Eastern threat to the safety of Gotham City, the superhero easily rejects the process of radicalization to which his childhood trauma had made him vulnerable. He is therefore able to re-establish a direct and deeply conservative line of patriarchal heritage that helps him avert the attack on the city’s skyscraper, thereby transforming the film’s representation of 9/11 discourse into a confirmation of American heroism and victimization. V for Vendetta shares many narrative components with Batman Begins: it too features a protagonist whose childhood trauma has made her susceptible to forms of ideological indoctrination. But in this case, the process of radicalization, which is explicitly connected to 9/11 discourse through the use of numerous visual references to current events, is fully legitimized. For while the character of V
remains an ambiguous figure in the graphic novel, his violent actions in the film are fully justified by his unquestioned (super)heroic status in the adaptation.

But although these two films thus provide differing political agendas, both films ultimately rewrite the attacks as a moment in which the audience (both in the film and in the cinema) is defined by its consumerist passivity. The films’ most problematic aspect therefore seems to be one that they share with the American mainstream news media, as they both participate in the general attitude of “infantile citizenship” towards their audience.
Chapter 3: Superheroes in the Postmodern Metropolis

Superheroes are vehicles of urban representation; they embody perceptual paradigms. Through the vehicle of the superhero, as through cinema and sociology, one recovers the city as new and shifting ground. Urbanism was defined as a way of life by sociologist Louis Wirth in 1938, the year that also saw the appearance of Superman. Superheroes exist to inhabit the city, to patrol, map, dissect, and traverse it. They are surprisingly proper guides to these cities of change: invulnerable yet resilient and metamorphic, they hold their shape. (Bukatman 222)

As Bukatman’s above words illustrate, the figure of the superhero is inextricably interwoven with the landscape and architecture of the modern city throughout the second half of the 20th century. As “vehicles of urban representation,” they have embodied popular fantasies of navigating the daunting environment of the metropolis, both glorifying the American city as a utopian space and expressing anxieties about the dangers associated with it. The attacks of 9/11 affected the popular fantasies and fears associated with New York City as the archetypal modern metropolis, which in turn influenced its representation in popular culture. This chapter will therefore investigate how the contradictions of the post-9/11 metropolis have come to inform the 21st-century cycle of superhero movies.

From Spider-Man (2002) onwards, superhero movies have repeatedly addressed the trauma of 9/11 in ways that seem contradictory, but which are clearly not mutually exclusive: first, by de-historicizing the present through a re-creation of a New York City in which 9/11 never happened; and second, by providing narratives in which catastrophic threats against New York City are narrowly averted, thereby re-writing this history as one of triumph instead of defeat. These narratives serve as representations of a multitude of contemporary anxieties relating to globalized capitalism, the death of the subject, the absence of historicity in postmodern culture, and the increasing virtualization of life in the contemporary global city. But due to the superhero’s association with the skyscraper landscape of urban modernity, the popularity of superheroes since 9/11 can also be interpreted as a way of reconstituting a
sense of individual agency and movement within the urban environment by presenting the city as a spectacular site that celebrates De Certeau’s “unlimited diversity” by allowing for “space to move” (qtd. in Bukatman 210-211).

The first section of this chapter will develop the notion of the American metropolis as a quintessential locus of modernity by first providing a brief historical overview of the mutually beneficial relationship between cinema and the modern city. The emergence of the first superhero characters in the late 1930s drew heavily on this symbiotic connection, further transforming the concept of the metropolis into a fantastical environment of excitement and adventure. From its inception, the superhero genre has consistently relied on urban settings for all its main action and conflicts. Representations of the city within the genre have always been dialectical in two different ways: firstly, by presenting the city as the dialectical counterpart of a more innocent, provincial country (e.g. Superman’s Smallville vs. Superman’s Metropolis); and secondly by contrasting the utopian urban fantasies with dystopian ones (e.g. Superman’s Metropolis vs. Batman’s Gotham City). This section will draw on Jameson’s thesis that this binary distinction is illusory, serving in both instances to reaffirm the city ideologically as a space that represents the indestructibility of capitalism. I will extend this argument into the contemporary realm of digital cinema, in which both the city and the body are replaced by virtual signifiers, thereby creating a dramatic ontological shift that follows the virtualization of capital in the post-Fordist economy of contemporary finance.

The second part of this chapter will develop the notions pertaining to the utopian city in the post-9/11 superhero film by applying these concepts to the Spider-Man trilogy (dir. Sam Raimi, 2002, 2004, 2007). Working from the hypothesis that these films are part of a wider cultural discourse that sought to reconstitute the city as a utopian consumer space after the cultural trauma of the 9/11 attacks, this section will draw on contemporary urban studies to theorize the development of Soja’s postmetropolis as a way of conceptualizing “new postmodern forms and patternings of urban life” (188). Within this context, I will reintroduce Walter Benjamin’s theory of the modern urban *flâneur* as a way
of understanding the continued attraction of a figure like Spider-Man: anonymous, disembodied, and freely “browsing” through the arcade-like environment of New York avenues.

The final part of this chapter will offer a more detailed analysis of the dystopian city as represented in *The Dark Knight*. Functioning as the counterpart to the New York of Spider-Man and Superman, this film creates an opposite image that functions paradoxically as the “utopian” films’ ideological twin, with the superhero functioning as the patriarchal savior of the city’s failed utopia. Pulling together many of the diverse threads introduced earlier in the chapter, this last section will focus on the character of the Joker in *The Dark Knight*, and how his influence inside the film and his popularity outside it relate to fundamental aspects of 9/11 discourse and its wider context of globalized capitalism.

**Film and the City: Fantasies and Fears**

The city and the cinema have been symbiotic signifiers of modernity throughout the twentieth century, during which film has been “constantly fascinated with the representation of the distinctive spaces, lifestyles, and human conditions of the city” (Shiel 1). Not only did the modern city provide the settings, the imagery and the cultural conflict on which early cinema capitalized so eagerly, early examples including the Lumière brothers’ urban shorts *L’Arrivée d’un Train à La Ciotat* and *La Sortie des Usines Lumière* (1895); but the cinema also developed a specific image of the city beyond the bustling, photogenic hive of urban activity that made the city more than merely a geographical location. Instead, it became an image of a largely dystopian urban space “of an undifferentiated ‘city’ which is either unidentifiable with any actual place or only loosely so” (Nowell-Smith 101).

This is most evident in films from the 1920s and ‘30s, by which time international cinema had embraced a predominantly narrative form, and during which time Hollywood’s introduction of the star system deliberately
transformed the human actors and actresses populating its screens into superhuman images that seemed to exist on an altogether different level of reality. The same logic soon came to apply to representations of the modern city on film, as their quintessential modernity was exaggerated into a spectacle in its own right, the most obvious example from early cinema certainly being Fritz Lang’s *Metropolis* (1927). In Lang’s influential film, the representation of the film’s eponymous metropolis serves as the film’s main spectacle, continuously overshadowing the narrative that takes place within this futuristic environment.

Urban space in this “terrifying if simplistic vision of a twenty-first-century totalitarian society” is defined by its mechanistic, advanced technological character that systematically dehumanizes its “robotlike workers” (Cook 114). A similar logic is evident in *Sunrise: A Tale of Two Humans* (dir. F.W. Murnau, 1927), in which the contradiction between urban life and provincial life is dramatized through a distillation of all the decadence and dehumanizing technology associated with “the city” into a condensed, geographically unspecific metropolis that provides the antithesis of “natural” country life.

By the end of the 1930s, this kind of representation reached what may be its most telling example of the modern urban fantasy, as Dorothy in *The Wizard of Oz* (dir. Victor Fleming, 1939) is instructed to “follow the Yellow Brick Road” towards the Emerald City. The first distant view of its towers in the distance instantly communicate “something important about the skyscraper skyline—and still more about its uncanny power to affect us” (Sanders 94). The film’s narrative is structured around Dorothy’s fantastical journey from a Kansas farm to the magical Emerald City that “suggests the very real passage from country to city undertaken by millions over the past century” (95). This specific historical context, related to the Depression-era wave of migration from the country to the city, resulted in a phantasmic cinema-image of the metropolis (most specifically: New York) that became curiously unhistorical, representing a physical embodiment of the abstract promises of capitalism rather than any actual city. Indeed, many postmodern philosophers, from Baudrillard to Žižek, have argued that these kinds of images have in fact come to define or even replace the reality
of urban life: “the ultimate truth of the capitalist utilitarian despiritualized universe is the dematerialization of ‘real life’ itself, its reversal into a spectral show” (Žižek 2002: 14).

This spectral city is the environment in which the superhero figure was first introduced in the comics of the 1930s, and which continued to develop throughout the twentieth century. Just as the cinema developed the modern metropolis simultaneously as a utopia and as a dystopia, the popular superhero narratives in comic strips also presented urban space as an exciting, dangerous, and quintessentially modern setting. As Jameson helpfully notes, “the city ... is thus available for anti-Utopian and dystopian functions fully as much as for more properly Utopian ones” (2005: 161). In order to understand the apparent contradiction between these two co-existing perspectives, it is important to embrace the notion that rather than functioning as mutually exclusive opposites, utopian and dystopian fantasies can also be viewed as each other’s dialectical counterparts in the sense that most dystopias are presented very specifically (and crucially) as failed utopias. Any form of dystopia therefore depends upon a concept of utopia for its very existence.

This dialectical reading of utopian/dystopian phantasmic urban environments in popular narratives is particularly relevant to the superhero figure, as the coexistence of utopian and dystopian representations of the modern city explains the complementary nature and the enduring popularity of the two longest-running superheroes: DC Comics’ Superman and Batman. Both Superman’s Metropolis and Batman’s Gotham City are thinly veiled versions of New York City that together dramatize the ambiguous nature of the modern city. The Metropolis of Superman is traditionally presented in quasi-utopian terms as the urban space that benevolently complements provincial Smallville, where evil is punished, and where order is consistently restored. Gotham City on the other hand has existed throughout Batman’s long history as a film noir-inspired dystopian urban jungle, its police force eternally overwhelmed by endless crime waves, its claustrophobia further emphasized by the absence of any pastoral spaces of refuge outside its city sphere.
The duality of urban spaces extends beyond these two figures’ traditions, infusing most mainstream superhero narratives with a similar dialectic. For many superhero chronologies, the Gotham/Metropolis structure resulted in a choice for a similarly utopian or dystopian version of New York City. For Marvel Comics, which became the only publisher to challenge DC Comics’ absolute hegemony over the comic book industry in the early 1960s, this duality informed the introduction of main characters who “resided in New York City rather than mythical locales like Metropolis and Gotham City” (Wright 207). Instead of the black-and-white morality and simple binary structures of the traditional superheroes, Marvel’s hugely successful comic book series like The Fantastic Four, the X-Men, and Spider-Man allowed for additional nuances, as this “introduction of ambiguity into the vocabulary of the comic book superhero fused the disorientation of adolescence and the anxieties of Cold War culture into a compelling narrative formula” (215). The ambiguity of these narratives involved the introduction of antiheroic characters who were often misunderstood by the public and persecuted by the government, while the version of New York City they inhabited functioned as a more pliable backdrop that can resemble Metropolis or Gotham as the narrative circumstances require.

But in spite of their setting within a city that is somewhat closer to historical reality and the incidental appearance of select historical figures and events within their narrative continuities, the Marvel characters and chronologies and their “New York City” environments remain as fundamentally unhistorical as their DC Comics counterparts. What is most relevant here, especially from the perspective of this chapter and its focus on urban studies, is the complete absence of political or historical change in any of these narratives. With so much attention in superhero comic books devoted to the concept of continuity, it is precisely the decades-long accumulation of incident that has culminated in their oft-evoked status as modern myths, as described by Richard Reynolds:
Continuity, and above all metatextual structural continuity, is the strategy through which superhero texts most clearly operate as myths. [...] The continuity of the individual character, and the relationship of that character with the entire “universe” which they inhabit, provides a guarantee of the authenticity of each individual story. (45)

The strange tension that exists between this accumulation of events and the resulting forward movement of history on the one hand, and the systematic absence of any form of political change or even sustained character development on the other may be considered typical of the culture industry in general, and of the superhero genre in particular.

In that sense, it is fruitful to investigate the binary division that separates superhero characters into agents of the law on the one hand, assisting the police and deliberately upholding the status quo, and their “outlaw” counterparts on the other: “heroes that fail to conform to the conservative ideology—heroes that are often seen as terrorists to the societies that they are a part of, but to the reader, existing outside of the fictional world, the truth of their heroic actions is better understood for the struggle that it is” (Wolf-Meyer 501). Interestingly, many superhero characters are divided across these categories in a way that seems largely identical to the utopian/dystopian separation discussed above in relation to their urban environments, Superman constituting the archetype for the conservative “agent of the law” superhero, and Batman embracing the position of the outsider, repeatedly misunderstood by society as a vigilante or even a criminal.

Part of the public appeal of the “Silver Age” Marvel characters like Spider-Man, X-Men and the Incredible Hulk was their lack of control over their powers and their frustrations over their sense of being marginalized and misunderstood by the world around them. Their immediate connection with rising American youth culture and adolescent issues that were increasingly part of the public debate ensured that “the young, flawed and brooding antihero became the most widely imitated archetype in the superhero genre since the appearance of Superman” (Wright 212). But although mainstream superhero comics in the 1960s and 1970s did offer some reflection of changing social and political
values, their narratives hardly followed the implications the protagonists’ superhuman abilities would have on actual human history, theology, and politics. Essentially remaining conservative, apolitical figures, popular characters like Spider-Man “endorsed liberal solutions to social problems while rejecting the extreme and violent responses of both the left and the right” (235). In an increasingly polarized country, superheroes on the page thereby “worked to preserve what remained of the vital center” (ibid.).

But given the superhero figure’s obvious potential to radically alter the social structures and beliefs that inform the world as we know it, the question to what extent these characters and the urban landscapes they inhabit can represent some kind of utopian impulse or offer any noticeable level of political engagement becomes quite pertinent. Historically, we may briefly summarize the mainstream superhero’s position as one of overwhelming conservatism: neither Metropolis nor Gotham City, nor indeed Marvel’s alternate New York City, has undergone any discernible changes beyond the level of aesthetics in over seventy years of comics history. Like the superheroes themselves, adapting to changes in fashion and crossovers into other media but never aging or altering the course of human history, mainstream superhero comics in general seem to embody key aspects of the Jamesonian “perpetual present.”

Only in the brief wave of superhero comics by Alan Moore and Frank Miller in the late 1980s do we see the explicit introduction of more progressive politics and ideology into the superhero universe. The arch-conservatism of popular superhero figures is moved to the foreground, with the city within these works setting the stage for something resembling the utopian impulse. The main characters of Watchmen (1987), Batman: The Dark Knight Returns (1986) and V for Vendetta (1989) are no longer separated from the forces of history in these works: “these superheroes, unlike those of fantastic worlds and abilities, are caught up completely in ideology” (Hughes 548). In Watchmen, the dystopian version of New York City in which the narrative takes place is radically different from that of Marvel, or even that of Gotham City. The text develops an elaborate alternate history of post-WWII America in which the first appearance of a man
with superhuman powers (the Superman-inspired Dr. Manhattan) has far-reaching consequences for politics and theology. In his first unpublished outline for the *Watchmen* project, author Alan Moore described the world he envisioned as follows:

> For one thing, I’d like the world that the [...] characters exist in to be at once far more realistic in conception than any super-heroes the world has been before, and at the same time far different to our own world than the worlds as Earth One, Earth Two or Marvel Earth. To see what I’m trying to get at, you have to try and imagine what the presence of superheros would actually do [to] the world, both politically and psychologically.

> Imagine, for the sake of argument, that Captain Atom was one of the first heroes with actual super powers to appear on the world we’re dealing with. [...] What would his appearance do to the world psychologically ... the actual manifestation of a real being with powers similar to a god? Would there be widespread feelings of inadequacy in people who had suddenly realized that even if they did their best and became the best long distance runner in the world, Captain Atom was always going to be faster and stronger and cleverer? Or would there be a sudden blossoming of crank religious groups who worshipped superheros? How would the media respond to such an attractive and presentable image? Would they try to buy the rights from super heros to the manufacture of dolls and lunch-boxes in their image? Would religion be altered by the sudden inarguable presence of demonstrably real superbeings? (Moore, qtd. in Gibbons 3)

Even if the conclusion of *Watchmen* does not point towards a way out of this dystopian alternate present, the text’s emphasis on the ways in which the existence of actual superheros would alter human history makes it the rare exception to the generally unhistorical nature of popular narratives.

Frank Miller’s *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns* paints a similarly dystopian portrait of American history gone wrong. Its story, existing outside the general continuity of the decades-long Batman series, introduced a radical reinterpretation of the figure of Batman as an “aging crypto-fascist accompanied by a female Robin” (Wright 271). But the point on which the text diverges most strongly from traditional depictions of Gotham City is in its revolutionary implications. Rather than his usual position as stalwart defender of justice, Miller’s Batman is presented here as the leader of a group that intends to overthrow the neo-conservative government. What our decadent world of consumerist postmodernity requires, the text suggests, is a traditional,
masculine autocrat who is willing to mobilize the public sense of disillusionment and disgust into a movement of cleansing violence. The evident failure of liberal democracy demands that the reluctant patriarchal authority figure of Batman return to restore order and save the city from itself.

For all the text’s problematic fascist implications, its focus on the superhero figure’s historical and political implications is similar to that of *Watchmen*, with the dystopian city again functioning as the emblem of a corrupt, diseased society. But whereas *Watchmen*’s violent climax constitutes a Pyrrhic victory at best, the destruction of New York grossly overshadowing the nuclear apocalypse that may (or may not) have been narrowly averted, Miller’s resurrection of the Batman trope reflects a desire for absolute control, both of narrative and of history: “Batman’s imposition of control over the chaotic streets of Gotham City cannot be seen as distinct from Miller’s imposition of control over Batman’s chaotic narrative tradition and intertexts” (Klock 49).

The superhero text that takes this notion the farthest is Alan Moore’s *V for Vendetta*, its Batman-inspired protagonist martyring himself for the revolution within “a complex dystopian tale driven by the fear of an entirely different government” (Segal 47). The narrative takes place in London after England has suffered a minor nuclear Holocaust, after which a fascist regime has taken over control of the country. The text’s London setting, totalitarian government, and ubiquitous surveillance clearly reference George Orwell’s classic dystopian novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949). But unlike Orwell’s doomed protagonist Winston Smith, Moore’s superheroic V does actually succeed in overthrowing the regime, moving the city from a state of totalitarian oppression to complete anarchy in the comic’s closing panels (see previous chapter).

The difference between the book’s ending and that of the movie, in which the people of London rise up together, all masked and cloaked as V, and engage together in the revolutionary act of watching a fireworks display, is relevant from the present context of urban environments and the utopian imagination: “Moore tapping into a profound, and very European, line of thinking about totalitarianism in which people ... decided that freedom from tyranny was found
in the individual,” whereas the film adaptation “instead decided that the key to freedom rested with the ‘people’” (Xenakis 137-8). This telling difference, which we may apply to the superhero figure in general and its sustained focus on the isolated figure of the extraordinary subject, can be easily related to Antonio Gramsci’s thoughts on the utopian claims of the Russian Revolution:

> Events [leading to utopia] do not depend on the will of a single individual, nor on that even of a numerous group. They depend on the wills of a great many people, revealed through their doing or not doing certain acts and through their corresponding intellectual attitudes. And they depend on the knowledge a minority possesses concerning those wills, and on the minority’s capacity to channel them more or less towards a common aim, after having incorporated them within the powers of the state. (Gramsci 46)

As a genre that is “wholly concerned with the [utopian] process and unconcerned with the results,” superhero comics deal mostly with narratives “that reveal the inability to achieve utopia, regardless of rationale” (Wolf-Meyer 501). Apart from rare exceptions like the texts noted above, the superhero genre as a whole actually does seem to follow Gramsci’s logic in its conservative adherence to what it assumes is the “wills of a great many people”: due to the “conservative nature of the interpretive community that is comic book fandom,” the utopian goals implied by the superheroic protagonists are consistently “dissipated in the construction of the narrative” (Wolf-Meyer 512). The political aspect of any utopian impulse is thereby lost, with the economic concerns of the audience-based economy “contaminating utopia and imprisoning the readership in a self-imposed, conservative paradigm dependent upon hegemonic capitalism and the position of difference (subculture) that this allows comic book readers” (ibid.).

The question then becomes to what extent the post-9/11 superhero movie follows this same kind of narrative logic: does its nature as a commodified global franchise prohibit it from yielding any kind of utopian imagination within its depiction of the postmodern metropolis? Has the developing vocabulary of 9/11 discourse opened up a passage towards a more politicized form of popular narrative? Are there large differences between contemporary superhero films
and the ways in which they present dystopian or (semi-)utopian urban environments? In order to answer these questions, the next two sections of this chapter will offer analyses of the two most successful post-9/11 superhero film franchises, which can be organized into those two categories: first, the semi-utopian global village of New York in the Spider-Man trilogy; and second, the “world without rules” of The Dark Knight’s dystopian Gotham City.

**The Post-9/11 flâneur: Spider-Man At Play in the New Global Village**

All the animals come out at night - whores, skunk pussies, buggers, queens, fairies, dopers, junkies, sick, venal. Someday a real rain will come and wash all this scum off the streets.

*Taxi Driver* (dir. Martin Scorsese, 1976)

In Hollywood films of the 1970s and 1980s, New York City as the archetypal representation of the postmodern metropolis was generally portrayed as a depraved, destitute and dehumanized environment. In *Taxi Driver*, Travis Bickle’s wish for a “real rain” that would “wash all this scum off the streets” expressed more than a psychopathic Vietnam veteran’s delusional revenge fantasy. It fed directly into a larger public discourse in American culture that perceived the city as the emblem of moral decline, with New York City’s Times Square forming a kind of ground zero for the waves of pornography that were threatening traditional American values.

Petrie, 1981), *Prince of the City* (dir. Sidney Lumet, 1981), and many others. Outside of the Hollywood mainstream, genres like blaxploitation and grindhouse cinema seemed entirely dedicated to propagating the image of the postmodern metropolis as an overpopulated hell on earth, defined by its high levels of prostitution, pornography, and drug abuse. These films presented an image of the city that confirmed the public perception of the metropolis where “soaring crime, social crises, and countless municipal strikes were causing a precipitous decline in the quality of life” (Sanders 371).

In the 1990s, this dominant image of New York as the epitome of urban decay began to change. Times Square, which for many years had represented the very worst aspects of metropolitan life, was transformed from a notoriously seedy conglomeration of porn theaters and decrepit tenement buildings dominated by prostitutes, pimps, homeless people, and drug dealers into a child-friendly tourist attraction. Republican mayor Rudolph Giuliani saw an opportunity to attract investors and clean up the city’s image by adopting a zero tolerance policy and getting rid of what were considered undesirable elements in Times Square. By the mid-1990s, Times Square was dominated by corporate franchises and revived Broadway theaters. And although this “Disneyfication” of Times Square was criticized by some, it met with instant success as a marketable commodity on the tourist market.

As the international image of New York City has been shaped throughout the twentieth century by its representation in Hollywood cinema, the city’s new policy also included tax measures to attract filmmakers to Manhattan. This resulted in a new wave of mainstream pictures that presented the city as an attractive, safe, and romantic environment. Influential films that helped restore the city’s positive image around this period included romantic comedies such as *Sleepless in Seattle* (dir. Nora Ephron, 1993), *While You Were Sleeping* (dir. Jon Turteltaub, 1995), and *You’ve Got Mail* (dir. Nora Ephron, 1998). On television, the sitcom genre had meanwhile moved from suburban environments focused on the suburban family, from *Leave it to Beaver* (CBS, 1957-63) to *Family Ties* (NBC, 1982-89) and *Growing Pains* (ABC, 1985-92), towards the urban settings.
of social and collegial networks, such as *Seinfeld* (NBC, 1990-98) and *Friends* (NBC, 1994-2004). Although these popular television series, like many of the aforementioned films, were produced and shot almost entirely in Hollywood studios, they all included generous amounts of second-unit shots and stock footage of the New York skyline that served to idealize and domesticate New York City as the natural setting for romantic fiction.

The irony is that as the number of popular film and television productions set in an attractive city environment increased, the vast majority of these productions was actually produced in cities that provided cheaper production facilities, like Los Angeles and Vancouver. The image of New York presented in these films is therefore a phantasm of “New Yorkness” sustained mostly by an imaginary sense of what this urban space signifies. This imaginary version of the city fits urban theorist Edward Soja’s definition of the postmetropolis, a term he has elaborated into six complementary discourses that together define postmodern urban life. Each of these six discourses is summarized by its title, which emphasizes one specific aspect of the postmodern city:

1. **FLEXCITY**: on the restructuring of the political economy of urbanization and the formation of the more flexibly specialized post-Fordist industrial metropolis.
2. **COSMOPOLIS**: on the globalization of urban capital, labor and culture and the formation of a new hierarchy of global cities.
3. **EXOPOLIS**: on the restructuring of urban form and the growth of edge cities, outer cities, and postsuburbia: the metropolis turned inside-out and outside in.
4. **METROPOLARITIES**: on the restructured social mosaic and the emergence of new polarizations and inequalities.
5. **CARCERAL ARCHIPELAGOES**: on the rise of fortress cities, surveillant technologies and the substitution of the police for *polis*.
6. **SIMCITIES**: on the restructured urban imaginary and the increasing hyperreality of everyday life. (190)

Although all six of these discourses intersect in complex ways to make up the entirety of the conceptual postmetropolis, individual discourses are also helpful to answer specific questions raised by representations of urban life. So while Soja’s discourse of carceral archipelagoes will be revisited and developed further in the next chapter, the virtual film-image of New York alluded to above
is best described “as Simcity, a place where simulations of a presumably real world increasingly capture and activate our urban imaginary and infiltrate everyday urban life” (194). Drawing on Baudrillard’s definition of the simulacrum, Soja argues that these imaginary versions of the postmetropolis have in fact come to precede and define the reality, “more than ever before shaping every aspect of our lives, from who and what we vote for to how we feed, clothe, mate and define our bodies” (ibid.).

Soja’s “Simcity” discourse of the postmetropolis thus emphasizes the imaginary version of a city like New York that effectively supersedes and overrules any physical experience of it. According to his definition, the imaginary urban environment we encounter in forms of public discourse such as advertising and popular narratives has become strong enough to overshadow the city as a physical space with its endless complexities and teeming diversity. This discourse seems most convincing when applied to filmic representations of the city, which connect strongly to the way New York is represented as a recognizable brand within the tourist industry.

The increasing commodification of this imaginary New York as a viable product on the international tourist market fit into a larger trend of major cities (re)branding themselves as commercial products with tourist appeal. This was supported by an international wave of films that helped to resuscitate the city’s image as an appealing, clean, and safe environment. The French and British film industry swiftly followed Hollywood’s strategy with a range of successful films, dominated again by the romantic comedy genre, that helped restore the image of the postmodern metropolis as a romantic global village: *Four Weddings and a Funeral* (Mike Newell, 1993), *Notting Hill* (Roger Michell, 1999), and *Le Fabuleux Destin d’Amélie Poulain* (Jean-Pierre Jeunet, 2001).

The 9/11 attacks and their resulting impact on global tourism, and most particularly tourism to New York, gave added urgency to this ongoing project of presenting the city as an attractive consumer product. The American film industry responded to the cultural trauma of 9/11 by postponing the releases of action films now deemed inappropriate, such as *Collateral Damage* (dir. Andrew
In many films that were released in the months following the attacks, footage containing the World Trade Center buildings was digitally altered in order to avoid the “potentially trauma-inducing” effect of being confronted with shots of the Twin Towers, whose destruction had so visibly affected the skyline (Spigel 119). Examples of digital alteration of footage shot before the attacks includes comedies such as Zoolander (dir. Ben Stiller, 2001) and Serendipity (dir. Peter Chelsom, 2001), while several major television series, including Sex and the City (HBO, 1998-2004) and The Sopranos (HBO, 1999-2007), swiftly removed shots of the World Trade Center from the montage sequences in their opening credits.

But the Hollywood film that immediately became the focus for much of the debate surrounding New York and post-9/11 depictions of the city and the towers was Spider-Man. This long-awaited and extremely high-profile superhero comic adaptation was finally green-lit by Sony Pictures after the box office success of more modestly budgeted superhero movies Blade (dir. Stephen Norrington, 1998) and X-Men (dir. Bryan Singer, 2000). The film went into pre-production in late 2000, with a release date scheduled for summer 2002, and teaser posters and trailers appearing in the summer of 2001 to create awareness for the next summer’s major blockbuster. In both parts of this publicity campaign, the World Trade Center was featured prominently. The teaser trailer presented a mini-narrative separate from the film proper, with bank robbers fleeing in a helicopter only to find themselves caught in a huge web between the Twin Towers; and the poster presented a close-up of Spider-Man’s mask on the side of a towering skyscraper, the towers of the WTC reflected in the eyepiece of his mask (figure 1). Both parts of the publicity campaign were immediately withdrawn following the events of 9/11.
One of the remarkable aspects of this poster is that it strives to include some of the most recognizable landmarks of Manhattan—the Empire State Building and the Chrysler Building strangely repositioned as if they stand directly opposite each other—while also emphatically combining the modernist architecture of “classic” New Yorkness with the sheer, reflective surfaces of postmodernism. The glass-panel walls from which Spider-Man seems to contemplate the rest of the city dominate the frame, even as we realize that these impossibly tall and
vertiginous skyscrapers do not, indeed, could not exist in any physical or historical reality. But even as this virtual postmodern landmark dominates the frame, its diagonal perspective bearing down threateningly on those older monuments, the modernist spire of the Chrysler Building is also reflected and thereby reconstituted upon its sheer glass surface. The postmodernism of Spider-Man’s Simcity has thus managed to incorporate the spectre of modernism, both now co-existing uncomfortably within the new paradigm of the postmetropolis.

The teaser poster and trailer also both illustrate to what extent the character and the city had grown intertwined in the public imagination, with the superhero signifying a desire to successfully navigate the imposing vertical landscape of the global metropolis. And although a decision was ultimately made not to remove the World Trade Center from two shots in which they appear very briefly in the background of the actual film, some other changes were made that would identify its “post-9/11 fervor”: a climactic battle scene between the hero and his nemesis the Green Goblin now saw the interference of a group of New Yorkers coming to Spider-Man’s aid while yelling “You mess with one of us, you mess with all of us!” (Travers, n. pag.). This connection between the film and New York City was emphasized again and again by most reviewers, who consistently mentioned 9/11 in connection with the film. The consensus among reviewers and commentators was that the film amounted to a “towering tribute to New York” that restored some of the city’s recently tarnished image (Wloszczyna, n. pag.). The debates surrounding these decisions naturally added to the film’s publicity, further establishing the character’s association with a particular image of New York City and making it one of the first major Hollywood productions post-9/11 to revitalize the city’s image as a commercial brand.

Nowhere in the film is this more evident than in its first major set piece, which takes place in an exaggerated version of the new “Disneyfied” Times Square. Although the scene takes place in Manhattan, all of the footage in the film is made up of digitally composited amalgams of three separate practical
sets, computer-generated elements, and a digital background plate of the actual Times Square. This location is employed within the narrative of the film to host the “World Unity Festival”: a corporate-sponsored outdoor concert headlined by hip-hop superstar Macy Gray and embellished by many oversized balloons that resemble the floats in New York’s annual Thanksgiving Day parade.

Figure 2: Composite image of a “Disneyfied” Times Square in Spider-Man.

Some details about this scene are worth pointing out. First of all, there is the bricolage evident in the construction of this location in the film. Several of the
“making of” features on the film’s DVD release emphasize the tremendous complications and costs involved with creating the illusion of a coherent space out of several highly diverse elements (studio soundstages, outdoor sets on the studio backlot, CGI elements, and location-shot background plates). Rather than a consistent recreation of the actual Times Square environment, the plot required several substantial changes, including the addition of a chic Park Avenue-style hotel dominating the square on the eastern side of Broadway, the removal of several buildings and structures, and the widening of the space of the square itself to allow for the concert stage and resultant crowd scene. Because of this composite nature of this setting, the cumulative effect during the climactic action scene that takes place here is best understood via Jameson’s definition of “postmodern hyperspace”:

“This latest mutation in space [...] has finally succeeded in transcending the capacities of the individual human body to locate itself, to organize its immediate surroundings perceptually, and cognitively to map its position in a mappable external world. It may now be suggested that this alarming disjunction point between the body and its built environment [...] can itself stand as the symbol and analogon of that even sharper dilemma which is the incapacity of our minds [...] to map the great global multinationals and decentered communicational network in which we find ourselves caught as individual subjects.” (Jameson 1991: 44)

The jumble of spatially incoherent images that makes up this World Unity Festival sequence does not only fit the above description as a literal embodiment of “hyperspace.” Meanwhile, it also offers its own kind of visual mapping of “great global multinationals” in the exaggerated presence of branded billboards, even more imposing and spectacular than in real life, and in the corporate sponsoring that made this event possible at the level of the narrative. The inevitable large-scale destruction that ends this scene is brought on by Norman Osborn (played by Willem Dafoe), the former corporate CEO driven mad by scientific experimentation and the loss of his patriarchal position of power. As he kills off the members of his board of directors, who have used the opportunities afforded them by the new principles of post-Fordist finance capital to take over the company, this can be read as an expression of the
paradoxical desire to see this frustratingly “decentered communicational network” brought down before our eyes.

The point here is not that the footage of Times Square in this scene constitutes an artificial representation of an actual location. It is rather that Times Square in its remodeling and rebranding has been defined as fundamentally artificial, and that the garish, balloon-filled amusement park pictured in the film does not represent the location so much as it articulates it. In a Baudrillardian sense, this image of a “hyperreal” Times Square comes to (re)define our understanding of the “real” Times Square, thereby making the reproduction superior to the original (about which one might now legitimately ask whether it even exists at all outside this overdetermined phantasmic image).

A second noteworthy detail is the way in which the festival in Times Square is represented by highly contradictory images that combine the spectacle of a quintessentially metropolitan setting with the reassurance of provincial camaraderie, tradition, and public safety. As the camera descends into the crowd assembled on this alternate Times Square to find Spider-Man’s alter ego Peter Parker taking pictures of the festivities, the first image we pick out via his camera’s viewfinder is one of two young women dressed in what appears to be some kind of European traditional costumes (figure 3).

![Figure 3: Traditional wear at the World Unity Festival in Spider-Man](image)
In the background, a group of Chinese women is visible, similarly outfitted in traditional wear, which is supposedly occasioned by this festival’s vague notion of world unity, a term otherwise left unexplained in the film. The short sequence of shots meant to illustrate this bewildering interpretation of world unity is however strongly overshadowed by the on-stage performance by Macy Gray, whose real-life celebrity and status as an international mainstream hip-hop superstar gives this World Unity Festival an unmistakable flavor of American corporate entertainment. Aesthetically, the pop music track being performed here creates a sense of dissonance with the traditionalism of the costumes worn by members of the audience, as well as the absence of the kind of security measures without which such a public appearance would be unthinkable. What this strange collection of confusing contradictions and exaggerations does seem to try to represent is the notion of the “global village,” a term first introduced by Marshall McLuhan in the early 1960s, and later re-appropriated more metaphorically to describe the globalizing effects of the Internet and the World Wide Web.

Although the World Unity Festival of *Spider-Man* would seem to fit the generally-applied utopian notion of the term “global village” perfectly, its McLuhanesque origins in fact contradict the idea popularized and commodified in the 1990s. Contrary to popular opinion, the author’s original conception of the global village does not suggest any kind of ideal notion of benevolent and unified global capitalism. As McLuhan himself explained, it never occurred to him that uniformity and tranquility were properties of this Global Village. In fact, the concept instead “insures maximal disagreement on all points, because it creates more discontinuity and division and diversity under the increase of the village conditions” (McLuhan, qtd. in Stearn 314). Films like *Spider-Man* embody this contradiction in a dialectical manner: revealing first the desire to stage the postmodern metropolis as a more traditional, even provincial community (in terms quite similar to the visual vocabulary of post-classical urban romantic comedy), only to be followed by the inevitable destruction of those very images.
and concepts. This seems once more to prove Matthew Wolf-Meyer’s point that
the superhero genre tends to focus on narratives that “reveal the inability to
achieve utopia, regardless of rationale” (501).

Within the context of a film that was immediately interpreted as part of a
wider form of 9/11 discourse, the fantastical scenes of blissful metropolitan
utopia followed immediately by destruction on a massive scale help us
understand some of the seeming contradictions that are featured so prominently
in Spider-Man and other post-classical Hollywood films like it. On the one hand,
these films, which are themselves branded commodities produced for the global
marketplace, present a glorified image of a (semi-)utopian late-capitalist
metropolis, offered up to its consumers as a digitally enhanced spectacle that
becomes an attraction in its own right. And on the other hand, the genre
conventions guarantee scenes of equally spectacular destruction, generally
framed within the context of just such “global catastrophes” that embody those
“nightmarish visions” that interrupt the postmodern crisis of agency.

This crisis and its resulting sense of immobilization is not merely the result
of the “death of the subject” and the decentering qualities of the postmodern
turn discussed in chapter one: it is also fundamentally connected to the
experience of the modern city. As theorized by Georg Simmel in his 1903 essay
“The Metropolis and Mental Life,” “the reaction of the metropolitan person … is
moved to a sphere of mental activity which is least sensitive and which is
furthest removed from the depths of the personality” (12). This desensitization
of the metropolitan subject results in a fundamental attitude of “blasé-ness,”
which Simmel develops in more detail as follows:

The essence of the blasé attitude is an indifference toward the distinctions
between things. Not in the sense that they are not perceived, as is the case of
mental dullness, but rather that the meaning and the value of the distinctions
between things, and therewith of the things themselves, are experienced as
meaningless. They appear to the blasé person in a homogeneous, flat and grey
colour with no one of them worthy of being preferred to another. This psychic
mood is the correct subjective reflection of a complete money economy to the
extent that money takes the place of all the manifoldness of things and expresses
all qualitative distinctions between them in the distinction of how much. (14)
The archetypal metropolitan attitude theorized by Simmel is therefore the product not only of the architecture of the modern city and the separation from the more “natural” traditions of rural life, but also, and perhaps more fundamentally, of the “complete money economy” that defines modern capitalism. In the same way that Dorothy follows a metaphorical Yellow Brick Road towards a simulacrum of New York City whose emerald glow reflects the green color of modern, abstracted money, the metropolis embodies the abstractions of modern capital in a way that is both visually spectacular and internally contradictory.

This is the point where Simmel’s influential reflections on modernity connect most strongly with postmodern urban theorists like Sharon Zukin, who have focused their work on the transformation of public city spaces into a heavily commodified “landscape of power” (Zukin 197). She describes the “death of downtown” in terms of a far-reaching structural transformation of city spaces: “the internationalization of investment, a shift in social meaning from production to consumption, and an abstraction ... from cultural to economic values” (201). Jameson similarly describes the spectacular forms of postmodern architecture that have increasingly come to dominate our experience of the urban environment along with its own displaced simulacrum, the shopping mall, as “mesmerizing and fascinating not so much in its own right but because it seems to offer some privileged representational shorthand for grasping a network of power and control even more difficult for our minds and imaginations to grasp: the whole new decentered global network of the third stage of capital itself” (1991: 37-8). From this perspective, the postmodern city thus functions as an intensification of the metropolitan experience theorized by Simmel, as capitalism has moved into its late, post-industrial and global stage.

The individual subject’s inability to navigate this metropolitan maze successfully gives rise to a fundamental sense of anxiety that partially reflects the decentering “crisis of postmodernity” and its alienating effects on the individual (as described in more detail in chapter 2). The superhero figure’s
defining characteristic is his power to transcend this situation, either in Superman’s ability to “leap tall buildings in a single bound” or Spider-Man’s spectacular web-slinging action through Manhattan’s skyscraper canyons. Both Simmel’s conception of the metropolis as a space made up of “homogeneous, flat and grey colour” and Jameson’s postmodern category of hyperspace are negative categories that physically overpower the individual’s body. One productive way of reading the superhero’s enduring popularity as an icon of the modern cityscape is therefore as the embodiment of this public anxiety concerning the individual’s problematic position within that urban environment: “through the superhero, we gain a freedom of movement not constrained by the ground-level order imposed by the urban grid” (Bukatman 188).

Both the trompe l’oeil designs of comic book splash pages emphasizing exaggerated plays on perspective and the effects-driven action set pieces of the superhero film illustrate this point most strongly. Superman: The Movie and Spider-Man, each in its own way a genre-defining popular success, went to great lengths to foreground the sequences in which the protagonist moves through the city in superhuman ways. “You’ll believe a man can fly” was the tagline for Superman, spearheading an elaborate publicity campaign that strove to communicate the notion that realistic illusions had been created for this film; Spider-Man adopted a similar strategy, releasing numerous Electronic Press Kits and television specials that again focused on the film’s groundbreaking visual effects.  

But in spite of the “cinema of attractions” aspect shared by both films in their commercial drawing power as works of visual spectacle, there is also a fundamental difference between the Superman of 1978 and the Spider-Man of 2002. For whereas the former relied on photographic effects like optical

3 As Slavoj Žižek has observed about the public’s ever-growing fascination with these “making-of” films: “far from destroying the ‘fetishist’ illusion, the insight into the production mechanism in fact even strengthens it, in so far as it renders palpable the gap between the bodily causes and their surface effect” (1997: 129).
compositing for its visual illusions, the 21st-century blockbuster is the product of digital cinema. And although the commercial rhetoric surrounding computer-generated imagery systematically focuses on the previously unheard-of scope and detail of the resulting special effects, the replacement of the human body on the screen by a digital avatar has far-reaching ontological consequences. Just as money “loses its material presences and turns into a purely virtual entity” in the postmodern world of late capitalism, so does the human figure in these films lose its hold on the viewer, increasingly replaced by digital doubles (Žižek 1997: 131).

As Lev Manovich has argued, the rise of digital cinema has radically altered our perception of the very nature of the film medium, as it has shifted from the indexicality of the photographic trace or footprint (Bazin 18) to the concept of “a particular case of animation which uses live action footage as one of its many elements” (Manovich 1995: n. pag.). This paradigmatic shift in our theoretical conception of film connects to the ongoing crisis of agency that is so strongly associated with contemporary theories of postmodernism. As the human body is increasingly replaced on the screen by photorealistic digital doubles, this crisis of agency becomes increasingly complex. For if the utopian promise of the Internet and the new media was one of increased freedom of expression and a regained sense of agency for the postmodern subject, the filmic representations of such subjects are more and more frequently digital creations without any ontological connection to the human body.

Unlike the most celebrated scenes in Superman: The Movie, in which the audience experiences the illusionistic jouissance of seeing actor Christopher Reeve perform superhuman feats, most similar scenes from Spider-Man feature a masked protagonist who has no physical existence outside of the digital realm. Even though the character's spectacular ability to transcend the physical limitations of the contemporary city dweller provides a pleasing fantasy of empowerment, the fundamentally non-human ontological status of the character on the screen simultaneously short-circuits the experience. The visual effects become an attraction in their own right: not of the human body’s ability to
navigate or even overcome the overwhelming urban spaces of (post)modernity, but of modern technology’s ability to create such astonishing images. As Scott Bukatman has observed about just such flights of fancy in the introduction to his book *Matters of Gravity: Special Effects and Supermen in the 20th Century*: “the phenomenologic of these tactics constitutes an embodied, kinetic incursion, a means of remapping the subject (as a trajectory) onto the spaces of industrial and electronic capitalism” (3).

The transformation of the subject from a physical being into a digital “trajectory” through the abstract spaces of postmodern capitalism is the key notion in Bukatman’s description of the superhero’s representational implication. Not only does it connect the superhero figure back to Simmel’s modern city-dweller, and onward to Benjamin’s figure of the *flâneur*, both of whom traverse the city with an attitude marked by indifference. Besides the “indifference toward the distinction between things” experienced by city dwellers in early modernity, later culminating in Jameson’s indecipherable hyperspaces of postmodern architecture, the other central aspect of mental life in the metropolis remains that of “blasé-ness” (Simmel 14). This quintessentially metropolitan attitude is the result of an “incapacity to react to new stimulations with the required amount of energy”: the modern city dweller feels forced to withdraw from involvement in daily life that would be possible in a “more peaceful and more stable milieu” (ibid.). Simmel’s description of blasé-ness was further extended by Walter Benjamin in his development of Baudelaire’s figure of the *flâneur* as a semi-somnambulist figure who walks along the streets and arcades of Paris, impervious to intrusions of reality:

Boredom is a warm gray fabric lined on the inside with the most lustrous and colorful of silks. In this fabric we wrap ourselves when we dream. We are at home then in the arabesques of its lining. But the sleeper looks bored and gray within his sheath. And when he later wakes and wants to tell of what he dreamed, he communicates, by and large, only this boredom. For who would be able at one stroke to turn the lining of time to the outside? Yet to narrate dreams signifies nothing else. And in no other way can one deal with the arcades—structures in which we relive, as in a dream, the life of our parents and grandparents, as the embryo in the womb relives the life of animals. (Benjamin 2002: 399).
Superhero figures occupy a similarly dualistic position towards this fundamental boredom that defines our perception of life in the metropolis. On the one hand, characters such as Spider-Man and Superman seem to embody the opposite of the *flâneur*, always moving through the city with a clear sense of purpose, without any interest in the idle pursuit of commodities or social forms of exchange. The superhero persona’s garish costume likewise contrasts with the drabness of the three-piece business suit that serves as the *flâneur*’s costume, even as it camouflages its wearer’s identity in similar ways. Meanwhile, the superhero’s everyday alter ego acts as a parody of ordinary human existence.

But on the other hand, the superhero’s extraordinary ability to transcend the limitations of everyday life also functions dialectically as the phantasmic escape from “capitalist realism,” the compelling term introduced by Mark Fisher as an alternative to Jameson’s definition of postmodernism (Fisher 2009: 7). The superhero’s powers, which consist either of supernatural physical abilities (Superman, Spider-Man) or of a fantasy of unlimited capital (Batman, Iron Man), make him a figure of empowerment and agency in a world of subjects defined by their very lack of just such empowerment and agency.

The continued popularity of these figures is to be understood by way of this structural contradiction, which is exactly what makes these superhero fantasies such deliberate ideological constructs. These narratives present their heroic protagonist a role model, often citing the banal cliché that “one man can make a distance,” while the impossibility of the superhero figure functions as “a filler holding the place of some structural impossibility, while simultaneously disavowing this impossibility” (Žižek 1997: 98). The structural impossibility in this case would be the existence of a utopian metropolitan environment within the system of capitalism of which it is perhaps the strongest, most recognizable signifier, while the disavowal resides in these films’ determined resistance to dwell upon the actual reasons for the social problems casually represented in these pictures. In other words: the superhero movie suggests that the
postmodern metropolis would be a happier, safer place if there were a force that could operate outside the bureaucracies that cripple the enforcement of the law.

At the same time, the fantasy embodied by these films as ideological constructs “teaches us how to desire” both a specific representation of this glorified urban environment and the excessive enjoyment that is the result of the main character’s overcoming the limitations of the postmodern subject’s crisis of agency. This excessive enjoyment as a form of pure Lacanian jouissance is most evident in the web-swinging sequences in Spider-Man, which demand to be read in terms of excess. Not only does their obtrusive foregrounding of the use of digital visual effects draw them into Tom Gunning’s category of a postclassical “cinema of attractions”:

This kind of cinema attracts the spectator to the spectacle of its technology, but, at the same time, aims at the fantastic element and transfers the attraction of the technology toward the diegetic. This is particularly evident in the sequences shot with the so-called “spider-cam” which is constantly showing its own virtuosity while being completely subjected to the recording of the extraordinary acrobatics of the hero. The technological device exhibits itself while highlighting, above all, the extraordinary action of the diegesis offering throughout these bewildering moments a double attraction (the attraction of the film and the attraction of the dispositif). (Tomasovic 315)

As Tomasovic argues, these sequences do indeed provide a “double attraction,” sustained both by the viewer’s interest in the diegetic world of the film and in the dispositif of movie consumption as an attractive and pleasurable process. But the attraction on display here is also doubly excessive: not only as a visual experience that is meant to overpower and bewilder the viewer’s sensory apparatus, but also as a deliberate form of narrative excess. The most obvious example is featured at the end of all three Spider-Man films, where the viewer is treated to a final virtuoso “spider-cam” shot of the hero’s spectacular traversal of the city. These final sequences occur after the causal chain that constitutes the causal chain that makes up the diegesis has been concluded and narrative closure has been achieved: a spectacular coda that celebrates both the superhero’s jouissance and the audience’s excessive enjoyment of the spectacular imagery that is so prominently on display.
What the audience is being “taught to desire” here is therefore once again fundamentally contradictory: on the one hand, the fantasy of the protagonist’s ability to overcome the limitations of an intensely commodified late capitalist urban landscape in which the individual consumer has little or no agency; and on the other hand, a form of enjoyment that essentially reduces the viewer once again to a passive consumer of the images that provide a fantasy of escape as spectacular scenes of mass destruction reduce this urban hyperspace to rubble. The semi-utopian imagination of the postmodern city in films like *Spider-Man* therefore fails to provide any real sense of relief from or even critique of the post-9/11 metropolis.

In the third and final section of this chapter, I will examine the question whether this structure also holds true for *Spider-Man*’s dialectical opposite: the dystopian urban jungle of Gotham City in *The Dark Knight*. As the only post-9/11 superhero movie as of this writing to surpass *Spider-Man*’s financial success, *The Dark Knight* combined the popular appeal of one of the most familiar superhero characters with the critical prestige of an acclaimed independent director and a much-discussed emphasis on “realism” and topical issues. Given this different background and context, the following section will seek to answer not only the question to what extent *The Dark Knight* presents an alternative to the symbolic short circuit of *Spider-Man*, but also to analyze the different ways in which this other film was embraced immediately as a vital part of 9/11 discourse.
Unlike the glossy capitalist playground of *Spider-Man*’s New York City, *The Dark Knight* presented a very different urban environment for its superhero protagonist to inhabit and protect, which is part and parcel of the gothicism inherent in the Batman character’s aesthetic tradition. But unlike the preceding Batman films (including its direct predecessor *Batman Begins*), *The Dark Knight* emphasizes from the very beginning that its depiction of Gotham City is not the
“densely stylized urban forest of inky comic-book noir” based on an exaggerated, film noir-influenced version of New York City (Emerson n. pag.). Instead, it utilizes helicopter shots of downtown Chicago to a previously unknown degree, thereby eschewing the exaggerated aesthetics that had made earlier Batman films so instantly identifiable as “comic book movies” without any connection to an exterior reality.

Its use of real locations, especially the prominence of the glass-and-steel postmodernist architecture of central Chicago and Hong Kong, connects the film’s familiar superhero paradigm to a different kind of visual realism, while also setting itself apart from the use of location footage and background plates in the Spider-Man franchise. For although both films prominently feature recognizable imagery from actual metropolises, the selection and use of this footage reflects a radically different interpretation of what such an urban environment signifies. As I have demonstrated in the previous section of this chapter, Spider-Man inhabits a city that is branded on every conceivable level: from the literal branding of the billboards and consumer products that litter the film’s squares and avenues to the extended branding of New York City itself as an attractive and spectacular commodity for the tourist market.

In Christopher Nolan’s Batman films, Gotham City still functions as “a sort of exaggerated contemporary New York” (Nolan, qtd. in “Gotham Rising”), but its
imagery reveals a conception of the postmodern city in which both the ubiquitous branding of late capitalism and the lively bustle of city life are notably absent. The Spider-Man and Superman films all emphasized the liveliness of public city space in several concrete ways: by including numerous shots of crowds moving along the busy Manhattan avenues, by placing their superhero protagonists among those crowds repeatedly (figure 6), and by adopting the lively newsroom atmosphere as a metaphorical condensation of this dynamic public space. By contrast, *The Dark Knight* consistently offers shots of city avenues that are either entirely devoid of public life, or in which the crowds are presented specifically as organized and controlled, thereby foregrounding order and discipline over the freedom of public urban space (figure 7).

![Figure 6: The superhero among the city crowds in *Spider-Man* 3](image)

![Figure 7: Orderly crowds and empty sidewalks in *The Dark Knight*](image)

This difference relates back to the difference between utopian and dystopian imaginations of the city as described earlier in this chapter, with Spider-Man’s
Manhattan representing the metropolis as a lively, attractive environment in which the superhero counteracts the occasional calamity. Batman's Gotham City on the other hand presents the urban landscape as a far more apocalyptic environment, constantly plagued by terror, civil unrest, and the constant failure of its democratic institutions. Ways of thinking how these different types of urban environment and the narratives that take place within them relate to the films' ideological implications are best approached from the perspective of the following quotation:

As always, the way to understand ideology is not to ask “what does the film think,” nor “what can I think through the lens of this film,” but “what does thinking ‘with’ the film prevent me from thinking.” They are not interested in making “arguments” …, their job is to reinforce premises. Not because their creators have malicious intentions, but because it is important for their financial backers and consequently for them to ensure that those premises remain profitable. For example, the baseline pessimism and dependency that supports big-screen violent fantasies along with the notion that it is “easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism” is comforting, enabling to all kinds of fantasies, and serves as ground zero for a set of trained assumptions about the world, along with the opinions, laudatory, apologetic, or critical, derived from them. This is one definition of “popular.” (Vu n. pag.)

The strength of this perspective on how to decode popular texts from an ideological point of view is that it demonstrates that these texts should not be interpreted as cohesive statements of ideology, but as mechanisms that reflect ideological assumptions by providing narratives that systematically limit the viewer’s choices.

This approach may be viewed as a sensible strategic choice for a text that is deliberately produced as a commodity that requires a large audience to render the required profit: “Hollywood movies are usually strategically ambiguous about politics. You can read them in a lot of different ways, and that ambivalence is more or less deliberate” (Bordwell n. pag.). But in spite of this room for strategic ambiguity, which applies most strongly when attempting to read these texts as literal political allegories, their narratives tend to limit our options in systematic, highly controlled ways. Productive interpretation must therefore include not only what is on the screen, but also (and perhaps especially) what
has been omitted, as “we can locate the trace of pernicious ideology not in the choices themselves but rather in what the authors choose to leave off the menu” (Pistelli n. pag.).

In the narrative of *The Dark Knight*, the citizens of Gotham City are faced with a series of binary choices that leave no room for alternatives. This binary narrative logic is embodied most explicitly by the central conflict presented by the film between its protagonist and its primary antagonist: Batman stands for order, and the Joker stands for chaos, while all the characters that seem to fill in the middle ground are swiftly eliminated from the playing field. The central division between the two main characters goes beyond the Manichean binary of good vs. evil that is so familiar from the (post)classical Hollywood film; instead, it introduces the Joker as the embodiment of a paradigm shift that forces the other characters to redefine their definitions of these terms. While attempts are made within the narrative to make sense of the Joker’s actions, all such efforts are consistently contradicted at several key points in the dialogue, by the Joker himself as well as by other characters:

Albert: Some men aren’t looking for anything logical, like money. They can’t be bought, bullied, reasoned or negotiated with. Some men just want to watch the world burn.

The Joker: Do I really look like a guy with a plan? You know what I am? I’m a dog chasing cars. I wouldn’t know what to do with one if I caught it. You know, I just... do things.

Harvey Dent: The Joker’s just a mad dog.

These none-too-subtle descriptive statements are confirmed at the visual level as well, for instance in the much-discussed scene where the Joker burns up a mountain of money, and by the mechanics of the plot, which endow the Joker with an almost supernatural ability to predict and disrupt even the most ingenious plans that are laid out against him. These narrative choices have encouraged critics and audiences alike to interpret *The Dark Knight* as an allegorical representation of America’s Bush-era War on Terror, in which the Joker “can very easily stand in propagandistically for ‘America’s enemies’”
(Pistelli n. pag.), and which conservative critics have described as “a paean of praise to the fortitude and moral courage that has been shown by George W. Bush” (Klavan n. pag.).

As superficial as these readings of the film as a literal political allegory are, they do illustrate the strong tendency among critics and audiences alike to interpret the film as a topical text that reflects contemporary political and ideological choices and dilemmas rather than a fantastical alternate universe without any bearing on a perceived form of “reality.” Rather than simply adopting the purely binary narrative mechanisms of the film and projecting them onto an external geopolitical reality, we must therefore strive to reveal the more complicated ways in which The Dark Knight encourages such readings and seals off others.

With the Joker defined so explicitly as a new form of an irrational, essentialist evil, the “good” for which Batman stands can remain much more loosely defined (as can the definition of “order” as opposed to the Joker’s “chaos”). As the embodiment of patriarchal capitalism, he can even be presented within the narrative as a reluctant avenger who uses his repressive forces of violence only when all other options have consistently failed. What is therefore most interesting to note here is that these “other options” in fact hardly figure in The Dark Knight’s narrative universe at all:

The moral is as old, and as conservative, as Hobbes: we can live in a wild, murderous wasteland or a lawless, authoritarian police state. It doesn’t matter which of these options the film presents as more appealing or fun; all that matters is that no other options—e.g., left-wing anarchism, participatory democracy, decentralized communism, democratic socialism etc.—present themselves. (Pistelli n. pag.)

Part of the Batman universe’s myopic devotion to capitalism is seemingly endemic to the character’s basic conception. For since Bruce Wayne must depend wholly on his billionaire status to maintain his alternate crime-fighting persona and pay for his arsenal of technological gadgets, vehicles and costumes that define him as a superhero, Batman’s superpower may indeed be defined as capital in the most literal sense. As the heir to his father’s fortune and CEO of
multi-billion dollar corporation Wayne Enterprises, Bruce Wayne has a clearly defined interest in sustaining the status quo of patriarchal capitalism, which is illustrated so vividly by the main plot of *Batman Begins*.

As Mark Fisher has pointed out in his article “Gothic Oedipus: Subjectivity and Capitalism in Christopher Nolan’s *Batman Begins,*” the name of the hero’s father is literally synonymous with the name of capitalist enterprise, thereby establishing both aspects as fundamental to the symbolic order that defines the hero’s worldview. In the film’s narrative, the Fordist corporate empire of Wayne Enterprises is threatened by a hostile take-over in the form of post-Fordist finance capital, represented in the film by the character Earl (played by Rutger Hauer). The rise of speculative, virtual capital that has taken place in the years since Wayne Senior’s demise is reflected by the social and economic downfall of Gotham City, thus neatly forcing Bruce Wayne to take up the predetermined role he had previously abandoned:

*There is no doubt that the film poses finance capital as a problem that will be solved by the return of a re-personalised capital, with ‘the enlightened despot’ Bruce taking on the role of the dead [father] Thomas. It is equally clear ... that *Batman Begins* is unable to envisage an alternative to capitalism itself, favouring instead a nostalgic rewind to prior forms of capitalism. (One of the structuring fantasies of the film is the notion that crime and social disintegration are exclusively the results of capitalist failure, rather than the inevitable accompaniments to capitalist “success.”) (Fisher 2006: n. pag.)*

*Batman Begins* therefore nostalgically re-establishes the dominance of this more conservative form of patriarchal capitalism by successfully challenging the threatening appearance of postmodern finance capital.

As the sequel *The Dark Knight* begins, Wayne/Batman’s efforts to rebuild Gotham City appear to be successful on both levels: nighttime criminals are shown to have become reluctant to take to the streets out of fear of Batman, while the visual splendor of the modern high-rises and office buildings that represent Gotham in this film suggest that the economy has similarly improved as Wayne’s neo-Fordist corporate empire has flourished. But once more, the
hegemony of this reactionary form of patriarchal capitalism is challenged, in this case by what the film’s dialogue ironically refers to as “a better class of criminal.”

The Joker is introduced in the spectacular opening scene, in which he orchestrates a bank heist with his gang of clown-faced henchmen. What sets this sequence apart from similar scenes in crime films like *Heat* (dir. Michael Mann, 1995) is the fact that the Joker’s crew eliminates each gang member as soon as his task has been carried out: “The boss told me when the guy was done, I should take him out. One less share, right?” This strategy reflects the kind of logic based on short-term individual gains over long-term benefits that typifies the dangers of neo-liberalism and finance capitalism: gang members are dispatched as soon as the execution of their particular skill-set has been carried out, thereby literalizing the logic of neo-liberalism’s infamous “disposable workforce” (Petras and Vieux 2594).

Although this dog-eat-dog “world without rules” of *The Dark Knight* sets itself apart from the honorable crooks in the aforementioned *Heat*, we may easily point out that the Joker’s modus operandi actually follows the paradigmatic changes implied by Mann’s film to their logical conclusion:

One of the easiest ways to grasp the differences between Fordism and post-Fordism is to compare Mann’s film with the gangster movies made by Francis Ford Coppola and Martin Scorsese between 1971 and 1990. In *Heat*, the scores are undertaken not by Families with links to the Old Country, but by rootless crews, in an LA of polished chrome and interchangeable designer kitchens, of featureless freeways and late-night diners. All the local color, the cuisine aromas, the cultural idiolects which the likes of *The Godfather* and *Goodfellas* depended upon have been painted over and re-fitted. (Fisher 2009: 31)

What is remarkable is that the other crime bosses in Gotham City, who are similarly challenged by the appearance of the Joker and his methods, are presented entirely along the lines of the old-school “crime families,” their identities defined by ethnicity, dialect, and “Old Country” traditions. On the basis of the scene in which Gotham’s three major “crime families” meet to discuss their plans, they consist of three easily recognizable groups: the old-fashioned Italian gangsters led by Salvatore Moroni (played by Eric Roberts); an African-
American gang headed by “Gambol” (played by Michael Jai White); and an Eastern-European faction of drug dealers led by an unnamed, heavily accented gangster identified in the credits merely as “The Chechen” (played by Ritchie Coster).

Unlike the Joker’s seemingly inexhaustible resources, both human and otherwise, these more traditional crime families are easily out-maneuvered, both by Batman and by the new kind of competition represented by the Joker. The crime families’ central concern throughout the film is their floundering ability to keep track of their money. It is relevant to note here that the gangsters’ financial resources, unlike those of Batman or the Joker, are distinctly visualized as cash money, and “money is, to be sure, not the same as capital, as Marx tirelessly and vigorously reminds us” (Jameson 2005: 230). Bruce Wayne can of course rest assured that money remains irrelevant for someone with his kind of capital at his disposal:

Big business, the so-called ruling class, has projects and ideologies: political plans for future change, in the spirit of privatization and the free market. But the mass of people who either desperately need money or are in a position to make some and to invest, do not themselves have to believe in any hegemonic ideology of the system, but only to be convinced of its permanence. (ibid. 229)

The criminals of Gotham City on the other hand clearly depend upon physical access to actual money, and must therefore rely on unsavory Asian finance capitalists like the duplicitous and cowardly Lau (played by Chin Han). After having demonstrated his tactical superiority in the scene where he interrupts their meeting, the Joker ultimately demonstrates the conceptual chasm that separates them by burning the gangsters’ money (figure 8). Paradoxically, the Joker’s grasp of the virtualization of money that defines one central aspect of postmodernity brings him conceptually closer to his nemesis Batman, who consistently adopts the persona of the wasteful billionaire playboy whose financially irresponsible behavior reflects a similar disdain for money.
The Joker, identified within the film as an explicit symbol for the abstract yet threatening concept of chaos, may therefore be read more productively as a signifier for the disposable workforce of post-Fordist capitalism. Both the anxiety and the obvious attraction that have been produced by the figure of the Joker in this film are therefore better understood as a metaphorical embodiment of our ambivalence in the face of post-Fordist, globalized capitalism:

> The slogan which sums up the new conditions is “no long term.” Where formerly workers would acquire a single set of skills and expect to progress upward through a rigid organizational hierarchy, now they are periodically required to re-skill as they move from institution to institution, from role to role. (Fisher 2009: 32)

With the traditional crime families of Gotham City thus representing “the hierarchical Fordist structure” of the outdated age of entrepreneurial capitalism, the Joker’s gang signifies the “network-based form of organization” that has come to define postmodern finance capital (Žižek 2009: 52). Neither the old-school crime gangs nor the liberal-minded representatives of democratic government (District Attorney Harvey Dent and assistant D.A. Rachel Dawes) are able to challenge the rise of the Joker and the new kind of criminality he represents.

The film’s continued emphasis on the other characters’ inability to grasp the Joker’s true motivation makes sense in the context of a historical period that
seems to lack the vocabulary to describe with any accuracy the larger cultural and economic shifts that ultimately define postmodernity. The political rhetoric that has played such an essential role in the debates that make up 9/11 discourse relies heavily on the stability of the nation state in terms derived from twentieth-century historical events. In his incisive analysis of the key speeches given by president George W. Bush in the first twelve months after 9/11, J. Maggio’s article “The Presidential Rhetoric of Terror: The (Re)Creation of Reality Immediately after 9/11” explains how the president drew on such historically specific notions of citizenship and statehood to define those events:

Bush’s term “Axis of Evil” itself employs unique rhetoric. First, it creates ... a “condensation symbol” for the complex web of anti-American governments and networks. Hence, one does not need to analyze the complex structures or causalities of separate nations and/or groups. ... Second, it associates these regimes and groups with one of the United States’ greatest enemies, the Axis Powers of World War II. ... And third, by equating these countries with the “Axis”—as well as the biblical notion of “evil”—Bush defines the regimes as inherently our enemies. (830)

But as many cultural, political and economic theorists have repeatedly pointed out in recent years, the notion of the nation state as the basic constitutional order of Western societies has grown increasingly outdated, and “there has been increasing recognition for the fact that ... we are entering the transition from one constitutional order to another—from the nation state to the market state” (Bobbitt 86). This has resulted in a widespread if understandable sense of confusion as to the motivation of the enemies in the ongoing Wars against Terror.

The lack of any generally convincing geopolitical narrative in the wake of the 9/11 attacks therefore led to the kinds of questions that are dramatized in The Dark Knight. As I have argued in the preceding paragraphs, the Joker represents the threatening aspects of decentralized, virtual finance capitalism in a fully globalized free market. His widespread appeal and cultural impact can therefore be understood as a helpful metaphor for wider cultural anxieties related to the aforementioned transition from nation state to market state:
The emergence of the twenty-first century market state is the principal driver of the Wars against Terror. The same forces that are empowering the individual and compelling the creation of a state devoted to maximizing the individual’s opportunity are also empowering the forces of terror, rendering societies more vulnerable and threatening to destroy the consent of the individual as the essential source of state legitimacy. (Bobbitt 85-86)

In his book *Terror and Consent: The Wars for the Twenty-First Century*, historian and political theorist Philip Bobbitt connects the rise of terrorist groups like Al Qaeda to the economic developments that have led to the creation of the market state, that postmodern, decentralized form of statehood that also fits the familiar post-Marxist definition of global capitalism. While cultural and political discourse on 9/11 and the continuing Wars against Terror have emphasized the religio-ideological conflicts that seem to typify this conflict on the surface (as in Samuel Huntington’s “clash of civilizations” thesis), Bobbitt argues that Al Qaeda is in fact the product of the very postmodern capitalism that presents itself as its binary opposite: “it is becoming increasingly clear that Al Qaeda is not only a reaction to globalization but that it is a manifestation and exploitation of globalization” (Bobbitt 83). Like the division between Batman and the Joker, the absolute difference between postmodern multicultural liberalism and global terrorism is therefore similarly illusory.

The fact that “the unifying element among the groups to which Al Qaeda outsources its elements is not a mystical, retrograde form of Islam” (ibid.) but the methods of an outsourced, networked corporation helps us understand why the Joker was interpreted by so many as “a perfect reflection of their view of Al Qaeda” (Ackerman n. pag.). Indeed, it is hardly a coincidence that connections have been made between the phenomenal appeal of the Joker and the rise to power of 21st-century neo-liberal politicians like Berlusconi:

Beneath [Berlusconi’s] clownish mask there is a mastery of state power functioning with ruthless efficiency. Even if Berlusconi is a clown without dignity, we should therefore not laugh at him too much—perhaps, by doing so, we are already playing his game. His laughter is more like the obscene-crazy laughter of the superhero’s enemy from a Batman or Spiderman movie. To get an idea of the
nature of his rule, one should imagine something like the Joker from *Batman* in power. (Žižek 2009: 50)

But if the Joker represents the most unsettling aspects of post-Fordist capitalism and the development of the market state, to what extent does Bruce Wayne/Batman and his relentless quest to end the Joker’s reign of terror constitute an alternative?

As in *Batman Begins*, the protagonist’s struggle is propelled by his desire to restore the Fordist patriarchal symbolic order that symbolizes the older age of entrepreneurial capitalism. The worldview represented by the superhero in this film can therefore be defined as fundamentally reactionary and regressive, the dramatic conflict between protagonist and antagonist revolving around the question whether this older worldview has become obsolete or not. As the Joker explains: “I’ll show you: when the chips are down, these ‘civilized’ people, they’ll eat each other. You see, I’m not a monster—I’m just ahead of the curve.” In the most literal sense, Wayne/Batman as the descendant of entrepreneurial patriarchal values represents a fantasy of the past that revolves around notions of patriarchal hegemony. The Joker meanwhile proudly proclaims a future of fundamentalist neo-liberal dogma: “The only sensible way to live in this world is without rules.”

Tellingly, this central conflict culminates in an impasse, as Batman succeeds in staving off an attack in the form of a bizarre social experiment, but leaves the Joker suspended in mid-air, still alive to fight another battle. The Joker’s line “This is what happens when an unstoppable force meets an unmovable object” typifies the predicament their allegorical battle between two varieties of capitalism represents. And although Batman has seemingly won this battle, the Joker’s voice has succeeded in overwhelming that of his diegetic nemesis both inside and outside the text. For even as the Joker’s character hangs upside-down during his final scene, suspended by Batman from one of Gotham’s skyscrapers, the camera slowly turns as well, seemingly obedient to the Joker’s perspective. Meanwhile, outside the diegetic world of the film, it has similarly been the Joker’s character and point of view that has been celebrated most
widely, from the ubiquitous tagline “Why So Serious?” that spearheaded the film’s successful viral PR campaign to the universal celebration of Heath Ledger’s performance.

**Conclusion**

In neither of the two representations of the postmodern metropolis discussed in this chapter, from the semi-utopian Manhattan of *Spider-Man* to the hyperreal dystopia of *The Dark Knight*, does there appear to be any way out of the impasse of late capitalism beyond the continued appeal of nostalgia. In both cases, this appears to be a nostalgia for the older, Fordist forms of capitalism, represented in *Spider-Man* by the romanticized modernist skyscrapers as Manhattan, and in the Batman films by Bruce Wayne’s ability to maintain the symbolic order of patriarchy and entrepreneurial capitalism in his corporation of Wayne Enterprises.

In both these imaginations of urban space, the decentering effects of postmodernity are presented primarily as threats to identity and public safety, with the superhero in both cases struggling to regain a sense of masculine identity and tradition in the absence of an actual father. In the Spider-Man films, there seems to be a stronger sense of ambiguity towards the virtualization of capital and the new digital ontology associated with it: the excessive *jouissance* of the “Spider-Cam” scenes, both for the protagonist and for the viewer, illustrate the liberating potential implied by those paradigmatic ruptures. However, the main narratives of all three films ultimately settle on the duties of patriarchy, summed up by martyred father figure Uncle Ben’s mantra-like commandment “with great power comes great responsibility.” Likewise, several of the villains featured in the trilogy (Green Goblin, Venom, The Sandman) are all in different ways the victims of their own inability to successfully navigate the treacherous waters of finance capitalism.

Christopher Nolan’s Batman films are more straightforward in their critique of globalized capitalism, represented by a city space that functions along
traditional dystopian lines: as “a prophetic warning about the new repressivities of what replaces [the old order]” (Jameson 2005: 198). But even more than in the Spider-Man films, the only alternative presented here is that of a regressive return to the patriarchal principles of Fordist capitalism. The problematic ideological agenda shared by these films is camouflaged by a strong emphasis on spectacle and on a previously unsuspected psychological depth for these superhero characters.

Like many other post-9/11 superhero movies, the Spider-Man and Batman films appear to humanize their comic book protagonists and “dwell in detail over the uncertainties, weaknesses, doubts, fears and anxieties of the supernatural hero, his struggle with his inner demons, his confrontation with his own dark side, and so forth” (Žižek 2009: 43). The danger that resides in this humanization is that it distracts from the fact that most superhero characters continue to carry out the same ideological function in the limitation of narrative options their worlds tend to represent. As the Joker tells Batman in their final dialogue in *The Dark Knight*: “I think you and I are destined to do this forever.” The dramatic deadlock between the two therefore points yet again towards our inability to imagine a world without capitalism: “the widespread sense that not only is capitalism the only viable political and economic system, but also that it is now impossible even to imagine a coherent alternative to it.” (Fisher 2009: 2). The films’ failure to articulate a world that offers an alternative to our own is therefore indicative of the larger cultural failure to imagine viable alternatives to capitalism.
Chapter 4: The Panoptic Superhero: Surveillance, Control and Visibility in Post-9/11 Popular Culture

Superman: Listen; what do you hear?  
Lois Lane: Nothing.  
Superman: *I hear everything.* You wrote that the world doesn’t need a savior, but every day I hear people crying out for one. 

*Superman Returns* (emphasis added)

Whether the superhero is presented within his diegetic world and narrative tradition as the explicit enforcer of government policies (e.g. Superman) or as a lone vigilante whose costumed crime-fighting is only truly understood by the reader (e.g. Spider-Man, Batman), the superhero figure functions in both cases as the embodiment of ideological values of discipline and control. Moreover, the superhero represents a form of power that is consistently centered around his abilities that make him able to observe the general public: Superman uses his super-hearing and X-ray vision, Batman perches gargoyle-like atop skyscrapers, using his technologically sophisticated gadgetry to monitor the inhabitants of the urban jungle, and Spider-Man relies on his supernatural “Spidey-sense” to alert him of impending crime or danger.

This “panoramic and panoptic gaze” (Bukatman 188) that is meant to act as a deterrent for criminal behavior embodies the principles of Bentham’s Panopticon, which was adopted by Michel Foucault as a synecdochic image for the invisible form of social control exerted on the subject by the various institutions of modernity. As legislation, political rhetoric and public debate have increasingly focused on issues surrounding surveillance after 9/11, the Panopticon and Foucault’s “carceral society” have re-emerged as dominant theoretical paradigms in contemporary discourse. The sustained popularity of the superhero in post-9/11 popular culture therefore raises several important questions: are today’s superhero figures the embodiments of hegemonic ideological control? If they do indeed represent forms of ideological discipline, then what kinds of ideological values do they represent? Can they also be convincingly interpreted as sites of resistance that provide models of social
difference, heterogeneity, and individual agency? And perhaps most
importantly: what can these seemingly contradictory aspects of superhero
discourse teach us about the politics and ideology of post-9/11 popular
culture?

In order to answer these questions, this chapter will examine the panoptic
elements in the 21st-century superhero film. The first section of this chapter
will develop and apply the Foucauldian definition of the Panopticon as an
emblem of discipline and control within modernity, with special attention to
the ways in which his central concepts have been further developed and
expanded in the context of post-9/11 surveillance studies. As I have done in
previous chapters, I will first use examples from outside the superhero movie
genre to demonstrate the wide-ranging influence of 9/11-discourse in
American popular culture. In this chapter, I will illustrate this framework by
juxtaposing the TV series 24 (20th Century Fox Television, 2001-2010) with The
Wire (HBO, 2002-2008). Both these shows deal extensively with the issue of
contemporary surveillance culture from within the context of popular genres.
And while 24 presents us with a James Bond-like superhero figure in the form
of indestructible superspy Jack Bauer, The Wire uses the police procedural
narrative to foreground the political and ideological realities of surveillance
culture. These examples will illustrate the theoretical concerns more clearly,
while also demonstrating the contradictions that exist within the wide
spectrum of popular narratives and the various ideological perspectives they
represent.

The second section of the chapter will argue that the most popular
superhero narratives in contemporary culture revolve around just such
methods of centralized panoptic control suggested by Foucault and expanded
in the post-9/11 surveillance society. My main case studies in this section will
be The Dark Knight and Iron Man, both of which foreground issues of
surveillance and control in terms of public safety and security. Finally, the third
section of this chapter will offer examples of popular entertainment that
question or even challenge hegemonic forms of panopticism by offering
superhero narratives that resist such categorization. My central case studies in this concluding section will be the graphic novel *Watchmen* (1986) and Guillermo del Toro’s films *Hellboy* (2004) and *Hellboy II: The Golden Army* (2008), which provide different ways of questioning and problematizing the ideological paradigms associated with the superhero figure from within the framework of blockbuster cinema.

Throughout the chapter, my focus will be on the complex and often contradictory ways in which issues of visibility and surveillance are related to state control, social discipline, and normative behavior throughout popular culture. Rather than arguing simply that these texts function as an extension of top-down control of “dominant ideology” associated with classical Marxist theory, this chapter will show how popular culture offers a wider range of ideological choices that allow some space for negotiation and resistance. The questions this chapter will raise will therefore deal with the extent of this suggested range of options: can popular culture function as a viable site of resistance against dominant forms of political discourse? In what ways do forms of popular entertainment encourage readings that connect their narratives to specific historical events and the forms of discourse they generate? And to what extent does a late capitalist product such as a Hollywood superhero film franchise allow room for ideological criticism of the very form of commodity culture it represents?

**Foucault and Surveillance Culture: Panopticon and Synopticon**

In *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, Michel Foucault argues that the central institutions that have come to define Western modernity have been based on the model of the prison: factories, schools, hospitals, mental institutions, and government bureaucracies form an immense virtual network that rigorously document and regulate the individual subject: “is it surprising that prisons resemble factories, schools, barracks, hospitals, which all resemble prisons?” (Foucault 1995: 228). As he develops his frightening central image of
a society “in which the carceral circles widen and the form of the prison slowly diminishes and finally disappears altogether,” the most important effect on the individual is that of a fully internalized sense of discipline (298). This discipline is the direct result of the ubiquity of such methods of control and observation, all of which are legitimized by the concurrent development and standardization of penal law, “authenticated by the ‘sciences,’ and thus enabled … to function on a general horizon of ‘truth’” (256).

The best-known and most extreme example of this form of institutionalized disciplinary power is surely Jeremy Bentham’s Panopticon: the architectural penal experiment that placed prisoners in cells distributed across the exterior of a massive spherical structure, with a tower in the middle from which an invisible observer can view each prisoner in every cell at any time (figure 1).

Figure 1: Remains of the abandoned Presidio Modelo prison in Cuba. 
Source: commons.wikipedia.org
Fundamental to the operation of this system of control is firstly the fact that the individual prisoner never knows whether he is being observed or not, and secondly that the observing guard has no actual power as an individual, as he is merely a small and anonymous part of a larger system. As a conceptual, easy-to-visualize synecdoche for the de-centered power structures that make up (post)modern Western life, the Panopticon clearly illustrates how such power networks produce and subsequently legitimize forms of individual subjectivity along lines of discipline and control:

Hence the major effect of the Panopticon: to induce in the inmate a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power. So to arrange things that the surveillance is permanent in its effects, even if it is discontinuous in its action; that the perfection of power should tend to render its actual exercise unnecessary; that this architectural apparatus should be a machine for creating and sustaining a power relation independent of the person who exercises it; in short, that the inmates would themselves be caught up in a power situation of which they are themselves the bearers. (201)

The individual subject’s complicity in this conceptual device that creates and sustains power relations constitutes a break with the earlier tradition of sovereign power being executed by force of public display: “the public execution … has a juridico-political function. It is a ceremonial by which a momentarily injured sovereignty is reconstituted” (48). With the onset of modernity, this process was transformed from the sovereign’s earlier right to inflict spectacular forms of arbitrary punishment on the bodies of individual subjects into an institutionalized and juridically inscribed form of discipline, “an ever-open book rather than a ceremony” (111).

The swift transformation of modern Europe into forms of carceral society was a crucial element in the ongoing development of capitalism, which became both the force behind these changes and the product created by them. For on the one hand, the capitalist model with its central concepts of profit and industrialization led to new forms of power, as it became “more efficient and profitable in terms of the economy of power to place people under surveillance than to subject them to some exemplary penalty” (Foucault 1980: 38). On the
other hand, the adoption of these models of profitability, automation and efficiency for penal law, surveillance and incarceration further enforced the institutionalization and naturalization of capitalism as a grounding concept at all levels of society.

As Foucault emphasizes, the forces that defined these specifically modern forms of power, discipline, and subjectivity were not so much the imposition of a malign force from above as they were the introduction of systematic processes that were internalized by the public and legitimized by various forms of scientific discourse:

In thinking of the mechanisms of power, I am thinking rather of its capillary forms of existence, the point where power reaches into the very grain of individuals, touches their bodies and inserts itself into their actions and attitudes, their discourses, learning processes and everyday lives. The eighteenth century invented, so to speak, a synaptic regime of power, a regime of its exercise within the social body, rather than from above it. (Foucault 1980: 39)

The adoption of panoptic forms of modern power as a mechanism that operated from within the social body rather than from above it is relevant for an appropriate definition of contemporary discourses of surveillance within this context. The popular perception of surveillance may still revolve around the top-down exercise of state control in the Orwellian sense, with a dictatorial government strictly monitoring individual actions for possible transgressions. But Foucault’s use of the term is actually closer to the “reality TV” paradigm of Big Brother (CBS, 2000-present) than it is to that of the ubiquitous telescreens of Nineteen Eighty-Four (1949). The power mechanisms he describes have moved beyond the exclusive domain of the state apparatus into other areas that are not directly controlled by government operations, but that ultimately still function as a disseminated network of control:

I do not mean in any way to minimise the importance and effectiveness of State power. I simply feel that excessive insistence on its playing an exclusive role leads to the risk of overlooking all the mechanisms and effects of power which don’t pass directly via the State apparatus, yet often sustain the State more effectively than its own institutions, enlarging and maximising its effectiveness. (Foucault 1980: 72-73)
With the development of computer systems that made the circulation and ubiquitous institutionalization of data a central part of economic and social practices by the late 20th century, Foucault’s theoretical construct of panopticism as a complex modern power mechanism already seemed to gain in relevance. The concurrent development of surveillance technology, increasingly the domain of corporate interests rather than government institutions, meanwhile gave new form to Bentham’s controversial views on the disciplinary power of invisible observation. Indeed, the American shopping mall with its omnipresent CCTV cameras was soon recognized as the most literal kind of postmodern Panopticon; and as the infrastructure and architecture of urban centers was subsequently reverse-engineered to mirror and absorb the contained, privatized public spaces of the shopping mall, “the panoptic technology of power has been electronically extended: our cities have become like enormous Panopticons” (Koskella 292).

Whether such broad claims about the carceral nature of contemporary urban life are more substantial than paranoid hyperbole is a legitimate question. As the previous chapter has indicated, the postmetropolis must be recognized as a complex phenomenon rife with internal contradictions. While surveillance has developed to the point of near-ubiquity in a postmetropolis like London, the city can also be considered a space the individual subject is still free to traverse and explore, certainly to a greater extent than was the case in pre-modern communities. In *The Practice of Everyday Life*, Michel de Certeau adopted a point of view that contradicts Foucault’s notion of panoptic control by focusing on how the city allows the individual subject an unprecedented degree of freedom of expression and of movement:

>The act of walking is to the urban system what the speech act is to language. ... Walking affirms, suspects, tries out, transgresses, respects, etc., the trajectories it “speaks.” All the modalities sing a part in this chorus, changing from step to step, stepping in through proportions, sequences and intensities which vary according to the time, the path taken, and the walker. These enunciatory operations are of an unlimited diversity. (De Certeau 388)
Although this perspective counterbalances the carceral logic of Foucault's panopticism, it has failed to provide a convincing response to surveillance culture. A problem here is that the postmodern subject seems to lack the ability to create a “cognitive mapping” of the opaque, convoluted nature of contemporary urban spaces (MacCabe, qtd. in Jameson 1992: xiv). One major concern in contemporary urban theory and surveillance studies does indeed concern the extent to which the postmetropolis is experienced as a panoptic, disciplinary space. As public spaces are increasingly privatized and corporate interests remain the driving force in the commodification of both actual cities and their spectacular representation in popular entertainment, the public anxiety related to panoptic forms of surveillance and control is easy to understand. But the term “panoptic” requires some further development in order to understand how it relates to city life and its many different representations.

Firstly, Foucault’s original use of the term suggests a basic powerlessness in the face of the rigorous discipline imposed by the panoptic mechanism that strips the individual subject of any ability to resist it. Not only does this concept therefore require to be reinterpreted in light of Foucault’s later writing on bio-power and its notion that power inherently produces forms of resistance; it also demands more nuance in order to seem appropriate in the context of postmodernism and its more fluid, mobile forms of subjectivity. In order to introduce a dialectical element into the power dynamic of panopticism, Thomas Mathiesen and David Lyon have argued for the necessity to incorporate the complementary concept of “synopticism”:

The few may well watch the many, as they do in surveillance situations of constantly increasing magnitude, but this does not mean that the many no longer watch the few, as Foucault suggested in his analysis of the demise of public executions and other punitive spectacles. Indeed the same communication and information technologies today permit an unprecedented watching of the few by the many—mainly through television—as well as an unprecedented watching of many by the few through visual surveillance and dataveillance of various kinds. (Lyon 42)
The addition of the "synopticon" as a theoretical concept that expands our understanding of panopticism in the context of 9/11 discourse is all the more essential when examining the crucial role played by popular representations of both urban spaces and panoptic mechanisms within them. As the previous chapter argued, audiovisual representations of city spaces are better understood as articulations of said spaces than as representations of physical realities. These images seem to function along the logic of Baudrillard's precession of simulacra, as the phantasmic images of city life shape our conception of these cities at least as much as the actual cities shape such representations (Baudrillard 2001: 1733). Therefore, just as these images of contemporary urban space give shape to a public understanding of them, so do the characters that inhabit these narratives contribute to our shared discourses on forms of subjectivity that are possible within them. When we seek to apply the theoretical concepts of panopticism and synopticism to contemporary popular narratives, we do so in order to chart the complex ways in which these concepts inform these narratives, thereby contributing to the ideological choices they represent.

David Lyon has demonstrated how the popular 21st-century television genre dubbed "reality TV" embodies the double logic of the surveillance society. In programs like Big Brother, the synoptic effect is that of the many (i.e. the television audience) watching the few (i.e. the contestants). This process seemingly represents the opposite of Foucault's definition of panopticism, with the few (i.e. the guards) watching the many (i.e. the prisoners). But rather than canceling each other out, the two instead serve to legitimize each other. As Lyon argues, the 24-hour surveillance embodied by forms of entertainment such as Big Brother is not presented as an invasion of privacy that has even the remotest negative effects on the subjects under observation. For not only do the participants engage in the complex dispositif of surveillance, exhibitionism, and scopophilia willingly, but they even appear to benefit from it through the accumulation of financial gain, celebrity, and social status. The implicit ideology
of this type of television is therefore that panoptic surveillance is beneficial rather than dangerous.

24: Heroic Narratives of Post-9/11 Surveillance
But reality TV is not the only popular entertainment genre that embodies this double logic of the panoptic and the synoptic. As surveillance emerged as a central topic within 9/11 discourse, it has increasingly come to structure fictional television narratives as well. The first season of real-time spy thriller 24 was conceived, written, and produced before the 9/11 attacks occurred, but was not broadcast until November 2001, making it the first TV phenomenon to capitalize explicitly on post-9/11 anxieties. This shows that the issues that would very quickly come to be defined as central elements of 9/11 discourse after the attacks were already present before, but had not yet been identified as central points of public concern and political debate. Once the first season, with its super-heroic government agents racing against the clock to avoid a terrorist attack, became phenomenally popular, subsequent seasons confirmed the series’ explicit connection with ongoing issues in the War on Terror by foregrounding topics such as the (il)legality of torture, Islamic fundamentalism, ethnic profiling, and surveillance technology. The show’s subject matter thus connected it consistently to the discursive formation that was swiftly transforming recent historical events into a way of speaking and thinking about the world, its protagonist Jack Bauer (played by Kiefer Sutherland) swiftly establishing himself as the indestructible superhero who embodied American fantasies of mastery and revenge in the War on Terror.

As with Big Brother, the choice for a particular narrative form represents specific ideological choices and limitations. Reversing the 24-hour surveillance of participants that is subsequently edited into a half-hour selection of moments that follow familiar dramatic patterns, 24 edits its action to simulate the passage of real time as narrative time progresses. This illusionary formal device has the benefit of offering a sense of immediacy and dramatic urgency to
a spy narrative that runs the risk of seeming hackneyed, contrived, and implausible. As the clock ticks away the minutes of every hour-long episode directly before and after each commercial break, events, complications, and action sequences rush towards the next cliffhanger moment, deliberately leaving the viewer little opportunity to reflect on the reasons behind the ongoing events. Beyond the somewhat obvious ideological questions raised by the series’ formal characteristics, this formal device can also be viewed as the prototypical embodiment of the broader values of neoliberalism. In his article “Fox and Its Friends: Global Commodification and the New Cold War,” Dennis Broe argues convincingly that the show’s formal characteristics reflect a perception of the world that perfectly replicates the basic principles of globalized capitalism:

The corporatization of time and space can be seen in the basic formal organization of *24*. The program takes place in real time; each segment shows a clock that marks the passing not only of the hour of the episode but of the series as well. Each twenty-four-episode season tells one ongoing story that plays out over a single day. Advertising time is figured into the space the space of the hour ... Locales shift continually, usually among four spaces, and each segment begins and ends with a four-way split screen, tracking the different elements of the story. Narrative time is submitted to the rigors of the clock, similar to that of the global markets, with their tightly run periods of trading. ... Narrative flow thus expresses the flow of capital. (Broe 100)

In addition to the genre requirements of surprise and suspense being met by the show’s distinctive formal features, the organizing logic that underlies its organization of time and space thus reflects that of global capitalism, of which the Fox Network is one of the best-known corporate embodiments.⁴

Throughout the consecutive seasons of *24*, the narratives are organized around the headquarters of fictional counterterrorist unit CTU, where the heroes (as well as the occasional traitor) race against the clock to avoid an impending catastrophic terrorist attack. Its entire plot defined by the “ticking

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⁴ In addition, *24*’s real-time formula, along with its iconic visual motif of the recurring digital clock, can be seen as a typical branding device that contributes to the series’ success as a recognizable global entertainment commodity.
time bomb scenario,” the logic of the series is based on the fact that there is never any opportunity for thought or reflection. Indeed, superheroic protagonist Jack Bauer is constantly reminding other characters of the urgent time constraint with repeated lines like “There’s no time to explain!” His narrative thereby comes to embody the purely intuitive action of the morally superior superhero figure. Empowered by his position within a well-funded government espionage organization and equipped with advanced surveillance technology, Jack Bauer functions as an ideological legitimization of panopticism that conveniently strips the concept of its more unsettling implications.

First among these is the de-centered, invisible form of power that is produced by the panoptic machinery of ubiquitous surveillance technology. Foucault emphasizes the fact that the invisible observer whose presence at the center of this device can be literally anyone, and that his reasons for adopting this role are equally immaterial:

It does not matter who exercises power. Any individual, taken almost at random, can operate the machine…. Similarly, it does not matter what motivates him: the curiosity of the indiscreet, the malice of a child, the thirst for knowledge of a philosopher who wishes to visit this museum of human nature, or the perversity of those who take pleasure in spying and punishing. (Foucault 1995: 202).

In 24, a team of experts operates the surveillance technology that provides easy access to virtually any kind of information, from telephone conversations to individual subjects’ geographical location based on GPS data. This team is made up of sympathetic characters defined on the one hand by specific, highly professionalized skill sets, and on the other by interpersonal relationships familiar from other television narratives centered around the workplace (rivalries, flirtations, comic relief, etc.). By the series’ presentation of CTU’s main office as a familiar, recognizable central location populated by a stable group of sympathetic characters, 24 gives surveillance technology a comforting human face, reassuring its audience that those in control of the apparatus are skilled professionals with the best intentions.
The second problematic implication of this kind of surveillance culture concerns the possibility of those in power abusing it, and this anxiety is indeed frequently addressed in 24. As in most popular narratives in the spy thriller genre, much of the series’ narrative suspense is based on the notion that someone within the team is in fact a mole who is abusing his or her power inside the organization to assist the enemy. While some characters therefore become suspects at various points in the narrative, others—most notably Jack Bauer—remain beyond reproach, and the mole is rooted out before the season ends. The representation of the observer in charge of the panoptic machinery is therefore one that functions in terms of familiar narrative patterns and devices, and in which order is systematically restored.

With the threat of abuse of power by those with bad intentions thus dispelled by the self-regulating nature of the CTU team, another concern that is repeatedly raised by Jack Bauer’s exploits is that of illegal action carried out by those in a position of power with good intentions. But in this regard, the narrative game is rigged, and the audience is consistently reassured that CTU's investigative efforts are directed only towards those who deserve such attention. When the innocent are unrightfully surveilled, detained, or even tortured, this is shown to be the result of enemy manipulation, not the systemic abuse of power: “[tortured] CTU employees are portrayed as victims and they survive, while the tortured terrorists are always guilty and often die” (Catherine Scott 11). The fundamental efficacy of “enhanced interrogation techniques,” GPS tracking, and ubiquitous surveillance is demonstrated in every season by the mere fact that Jack Bauer and his team do indeed manage to avoid catastrophe and save the world on a weekly basis.

Both main concerns raised within the narrative context of 24 as “the Official Cultural Product of the War on Terror” are therefore largely dispelled by a form that favors actions over consequences, and a series of narrative choices that dispels the potentially problematic illegality of Bauer’s renegade methods. The ideology represented by 24 thus offers a compelling embodiment of the double logic of the Panopticon and the Synopticon. The panoptic power
Hassler-Forest

represented by CTU, with its elaborate surveillance technology working alongside its legal mandate to apprehend and punish individual subjects, is legitimized by the synoptic role it plays as a popular text in mass culture: “the synoptic helps justify the panoptic, which in turn provides some of its most telling images” (Lyon 50).

This is not to say that popular narratives such as 24 leave no room for ideological negotiation, or even for what Stuart Hall would describe as negotiated or even oppositional readings. In such readings, the audience is aware of and able to understand “both the literal and the connotative inflection given by a discourse but [decodes] the message in a globally contrary way” (Hall 1999: 517). Indeed, there are clearly “complex ways in which people negotiate and reconcile their political identity and media preferences when they are in tension with one another,” as is often the case with 24 and its diverse global audience (Tenenbaum-Weinblatt 383). This is partly due to the long-running serialized form of a series like 24, which inherently accrues a certain level of ideological polysemy as it continuously introduces new issues, surprise reversals, and moral debates. But given the highly consistent range of ideological choices reflected by this series’ narrative and form, and its universally recognized conservative viewpoint, it would make more sense to speak of this text in terms of its Gramscian “common-sense” reception:

It is precisely its “spontaneous” quality, its transparency, its “naturalness,” its refusal to be made to examine the premises on which it is founded, its resistance to change or correction, its effect on instant recognition [that] makes common-sense, at one and the same time, “spontaneous,” ideological and unconscious. (Purvis and Hunt 479)

Just as Stuart Hall explained how a “common-sense” reading of the 9/11 attacks came into being “through the repeated performance, staging or telling” of one particular narrative (Procter 67), a general, common-sense reading of 24 quickly emerged that saw it as a series that focused exclusively on the fundamental necessity of an aggressive government policy to combat seemingly non-stop terrorist threats, and to legitimize every conceivable form of action
taken against them. Although negotiated or oppositional readings of the show may still be possible, this common-sense response to 24 has come to define its position in public and political discourse.

American conservatives have therefore tended to defend the show in terms of its politics, with major political figures such as Homeland Security Secretary Michael Chertoff praising Jack Bauer “for his gut-wrenching efforts to make the best choices from a bad set of options” (qtd. in Catherine Scott 1). Liberal American politicians on the other hand have emphasized the lack of correspondence between the show’s premise and the realities of contemporary counterterrorism: “[Bill] Clinton, a self-professed fan of 24, ... argued that the ‘ticking bomb’ scenario, which occurred regularly in 24, rarely happened ‘in the real world’” (Tenenboim-Weinblatt 368). With the political hawks describing the series as an honest depiction of contemporary realities and the doves emphasizing its lack of realism, both sides clearly recognize its central position within this debate and its constant interplay with forms of political and ideological discourse.

Therefore, whether it was perceived as a politically charged fantasy that addresses anxieties about terrorism in a post-9/11 environment or as a formally inventive spy thriller that is enjoyable in spite of its political implications, 24 quickly became the clearest example of popular culture taking up a central position within 9/11 discourse:

In the case of the torture debate, for example, proponents of torture used 24 as evidence that supported torture, whereas opponents of torture presented the show as either a fantasy that had no bearing on the actual effectiveness and morality of torture or, alternatively, as being a cause of positive attitudes toward torture or even of actual interrogation techniques. (ibid. 382)

Both sides of the debate thus serve to demonstrate the extent to which the complementary functions of the Panopticon and the Synopticon operate successfully within contemporary popular culture. Whether they are being criticized or defended, the panoptic privileges and technologies that empower
Jack Bauer within the series are regarded by both sides as being legitimized by the show’s synoptic quality, with the many of the audience watching the few.

The implicit legitimization of the benefits of panoptic surveillance is grounded in the double logic that makes Jack Bauer and his CTU staff members a subject within this very process. Not only are they on display at the metatextual level as a character in a weekly TV drama, but they are also under constant video surveillance within the narrative itself: “everything that goes on in CTU takes place under the watchful eye of surveillance tapes” (Catherine Scott 8-9). Like most technological elements that feature prominently in 24, this form of panoptic surveillance can be both beneficial and obstructive to the protagonist and his main goals. Access to security tapes can reveal the identity of a mole within CTU (as occurs in season 1), but it can also pose a hindrance when Bauer finds himself forced to operate as a free agent, setting aside the rules of the organization while still getting the job done. Although it is clear from this narrative that surveillance technology can be a benefit as well as a hazard, its ubiquitous nature is never questioned.

But even though 24 may be considered a typical example of the important role played by popular narratives in legitimizing a “common-sense” view of surveillance, torture, and ticking bomb scenarios in the War on Terror, we must also acknowledge that popular culture texts may also be used as sites of negotiation or even of resistance within that hegemonic field. An example of a television series that deals with similar issues of surveillance, civil rights and politics in post-9/11 American culture is The Wire. While addressing many of the same public anxieties and political debates as 24, this series’ form and content seem to encourage audiences to question and even challenge the naturalizing “common-sense” narratives that make up a large part of 9/11 discourse.
The Wire: Articulating the Limitations of Panoptic Power

Like 24, the central narrative conceit of The Wire revolves around the use of surveillance as a means to apply and subsequently enforce power. Each of the series’ five seasons is focused on a Baltimore police investigation that relies heavily on various forms of electronic surveillance (the eponymous ‘wire’ in its many forms):

The "wire" that gives the programme its name is a bugging or wire-tapping device, fundamental to the narrative of each one of The Wire’s seasons. It is the main technological means of secret intelligence gathering, sought and deployed by the police to listen to, identify and decode the telephone messages circulating between drug dealers. In this respect, The Wire presents itself as a police procedural, centred on the detective work involved in juridically justifying and then deploying the bugging technology required. (Kraniauskas 25)

But unlike Jack Bauer, the police investigators of The Wire are constantly forced to deal with various kinds of limitations: budgetary cuts, legal requirements, technical imperfections, bureaucratic inefficiency, and characters’ personal boundaries. The series thereby sets itself apart from most of its generic peers because it consistently “foregrounds technological underdevelopment and uneven distribution, educating its viewers into a culture of everyday police bricolage and ingenuity, very different from the hyperbolic scientific know-how of CSI and its many imitators” (ibid.). The “hyperbolic scientific know-how” Kraniauskas identifies in CSI applies equally to the near-omniscient powers of Jack Bauer and his team at CTU, for which The Wire offers a stark form of contrast.

This alternate approach casts a different light on the issues at stake in the narrative. Firstly, the cat-and-mouse game between investigator and criminal as they continuously attempt to outwit each other, which can be seen as a basic requirement of the police procedural genre, is framed within an altogether different kind of context. Without the rigorous formal constraints of the “ticking bomb scenario” that structures 24 and many other popular police procedurals, the narrative of The Wire allows room to explore in detail the social, economic
and political circumstances that institutionalize certain forms of illegal behavior:

*The Wire*'s principal interest lies in the way in which the conflicts inside the state apparatus are mirrored—across the wire—within the criminal, drug-dealing community it portrays and its political economy. This includes not only the influence of the police on the illegal, subalternized capitalist economy, but also the way in which the latter, through bribery, loans and money-laundering underwrites upper echelons of the local state and economy through the circulation of its accumulated capital - at which point it becomes finance capital. (ibid. 30)

Instead of the terrorist cell headed by a brilliant but psychotic mastermind that is repeatedly revealed as the antagonist in *24*, the investigations in *The Wire* point towards wider forms of political corruption and social injustice that end up marginalizing large parts of the urban population, thereby severely limiting the individual's options and perpetuating the status quo. The form of continuous crisis it represents is thereby crucially distinct from that of the War on Terror rhetoric espoused by *24*, in which the state apparatus is seen waging a dedicated battle against the forces of evil, from which it emerges victorious at the end of every season. *The Wire* suggests that the true crisis at the core of this anxiety is that of globalized capitalism, its self-sustaining logic reproduced not only within the state apparatus, but also mirrored exactly by the criminal organizations “and their hostile yet symbiotic relationship with the state and neoliberal institutions” (Kinkle and Toscano n.pag.).

Moreover, the War on Terror is presented at key moments in *The Wire* as a political priority after 9/11 that actually impedes the exercise of the kind of police work that would benefit those in most direct need of assistance. The state attorney generals and the FBI both lack the budget and the political mandate to prosecute organized crime as it appears at a local level, forced instead to engage in an endless (and seemingly fruitless) pursuit of terrorist organizations. If *24* represents a fantasy world in which the war on terror is won week after week by the representatives of state power, *The Wire* counters
this with its strong emphasis on the realities of political decision-making on the one hand, and the practical limitations of police surveillance on the other.

Secondly, where 24 is continuously invested in presenting actions and forms of empowerment (often in the most literal sense), The Wire has a far greater interest in depicting consequences and forms of marginalization:

_The Wire_ explores the constraints and potentialities of a lo-fi form of detection, carried out for the most part with visibly outdated technology: the wire-tap. ... Partiality and segmentarity, rather than omniscience, determine both the specificities of the wiretap and the manner in which it can be regarded as an internal model of the show’s own epistemology. The activity of surveillance does not provide some kind of untrammeled vision but requires an elaborate and inevitably partial search - partly because ... one of the effects of the “surveillance society” is a surfeit of information that, without principles of selection, generates indifference. (Kinkle and Toscano n. pag.)

The 24-hour time restriction on 24’s structural conceit allows little time for reflection as characters rush headlong from one incident to the next; and since each of the show’s eight seasons is focused on its own ongoing crisis, the repercussions of earlier actions are relegated to the sidelines as soon as the new action begins to unfold. Functioning within a historical vacuum of perpetual crisis, the worldview represented by the series thus strongly resembles that of Bush-era 9/11 discourse, in which the public lives in continuous fear of future attacks, while previous crises remain singularities without a coherent historical or geopolitical context.

_The Wire_ on the other hand frames each event within the context of a debate about its legal consequences. Illegal wiretapping for instance would defeat its own purpose, as the resulting evidence would be inadmissible in court. The same logic applies to character development throughout the five seasons of The Wire, as it repeatedly demonstrates that the successful prosecution of a criminal offers neither the investigator nor the target the kind of definitive closure we tend to associate with the narrative climax of a police thriller. Instead, it shows how late capitalism and its post-Fordist deindustrialization of the American postmetropolis is endemic to the ongoing criminalization of an increasingly privatized economic system.
What these two television series therefore demonstrate is neither that popular culture provides any single perspective on surveillance as part of 9/11 discourse, or alternatively that Foucault’s carceral society is the only theme that connects otherwise diverse types of popular texts. What they do illustrate is that there exists a wide variety of ways in which popular culture has responded to elements of political discourse in narrative form. Many of the differences between 24 and The Wire can be easily related to the networks that finance and broadcast them. The Fox network, which broadcasts 24, caters to an audience that is both quantitatively and demographically different from that of the more high-brow subscription-based cable channel HBO, which produces and broadcasts The Wire. Although it may be impossible to quantify the influence on public discourse both series have had, the articles, reviews, and prominent forms of political debate they have triggered show that they are frequently interpreted on the basis of their politico-ideological message, even when they are viewed as an unrealistic form of fantasy.

Based on its ratings and its iconic status in contemporary culture, 24 may be legitimately described as far more typical than The Wire of the problematic ways in which most popular culture texts contribute to contemporary political and ideological discourse. However, we should note first of all that its reception is not defined by the series’ implications, nor should one suggest that The Wire will automatically be perceived as its cultural or political opposite. In many ways, The Wire is as much a commodified product of late capitalism as 24, its logo serving as a branding device for any number of commercial spin-off products, from soundtrack albums and DVD box sets to T-shirts and coffee mugs. The comfortable co-existence of both seemingly oppositional texts within the broader spectrum of popular commodity culture therefore again illustrates Žižek’s point that free choice in postmodernity has become illusory. For as both choices discussed in the preceding pages are ultimately defined by their status as consumer commodities, their ideological implications become secondary. Postmodern subjects come to define “free choice” on the basis of a preference
for a particular commodity, while “the conditions in which they must make it render the choice unfree” (Žižek 2005: 118).

However, even the most entrenched defenders of Adorno’s conception of pseudo-individualization as the defining characteristic of mass media will have taken note of the fact that popular culture has increasingly become a site for active debate rather than passive consumption. With conservative politicians referring to Jack Bauer as an ideal solution to the threats of global terrorism and president Obama singling out *The Wire* as “his favorite show,” popular culture cannot be ignored as a part of wider cultural and political discourse (Cooligan n. pag.). Now that I have established the superhero as one of the dominant figures in post-9/11 popular narratives, the following section will focus on the complex ways in which surveillance culture and panoptic society has been featured in superhero narratives in film and graphic novels.
Discipline and Control in the Post-9/11 Superhero Film: The Panoptic Superhero Cyborg

Figure 2: Batman’s controlling gaze over the city in a promotional image for *The Dark Knight*.

As the preceding section of this chapter has demonstrated, the role played by popular culture in the legitimization of panoptic surveillance as a natural and necessary part of contemporary public life relies as much on the Synopticon as it does on the Panopticon: the notion of the few watching the many is given dramatic form within the mass media narratives in which the many watch the few. In the case of *24*, the character of Jack Bauer provides a fantasy figure whose clearly defined persona can serve to alleviate anxieties about the potential abuse of such power. Not only does his character dispel concerns about the decentered nature of power by providing “a masculinity compatible
with globalization” (Catherine Scott 20); the narrative also consistently demonstrates that his intuitive responses are justified.

Superheroes in post-9/11 Hollywood cinema frequently perform a similar role. Many of them are easy to read as attempts to address public anxieties related to agency and masculinity in a decentered postmodern world in which the new enemies have incorporated the logic of late capitalism and the market state. In the previous chapter, I argued that the figure of the Joker in *The Dark Knight* should be interpreted as a metaphorical embodiment of this specifically postmodern economy that requires the chaos of destructive capitalism and the flexibility of a permanent disposable workforce. In this chapter, I will examine more closely how superheroes utilize their panoptic powers to counterbalance these threats, and how they are thereby transformed into a form of this panoptic machinery, their bodies literally inscribed by the surveillance technology they utilize. For my case studies, I will draw again on sequences from *The Dark Knight*, alongside the hugely successful *Iron Man*, which bears many remarkable similarities to the post-9/11 Batman franchise.

The superhero arose as a vital part of American popular culture in the 1930s, alongside the development of the metropolis in its modernist twentieth-century form of geometric glass-and-concrete buildings and architectural designs that attempted to remove all traces of bourgeois nineteenth-century cityscapes. The modernist ambitions of transforming the proliferating chaos of nineteenth-century urbanization into a transparent, multifunctional environment gave architectural form to the desire to control urban space. As Jim Collins explains in his description of the utopian aspirations of modernist architecture: “by changing structural conventions one could alter consciousness and produce social change, even if the inhabitants of these glass towers were unable to comprehend the political significance of these radical innovations” (1992: 329.). The imposing skyscrapers of Manhattan and Chicago that arose in the 1920s and 1930s thereby embodied the heroic modernist quest for power through order, transparency, and visibility.
The superhero figure as a permanent emblem of this modernist urban landscape and its utopian aspirations therefore became the pop-cultural figure most easily associated with the forms of power and control implied by the architecture of the International School. The two archetypal superheroes of comic books’ Golden Age, Batman and Superman, each patrol the city in their continuous efforts to provide a sense of safety and order for its citizens, while neither figure can truly be considered an inhabitant of the city he safeguards. Both Batman’s residence at Wayne Manor and Superman’s arctic Fortress of Solitude suggest a strong connection to the older traditions of aristocracy and its pre-modern forms of patriarchal power. These superhero archetypes and their many descendants thus represent not only a fantasy of overcoming the obvious limitations of the human body within the physically and mentally overpowering vertical landscapes of the modern metropolis; they can also be read as the literal embodiments of modernist aspirations, reframed from within the context of popular culture.

If the original ascendance of superheroes in the 1930s and 1940s thus constituted a popularized and more easily accessible incarnation of modernist visions of urban order and control, the superhero’s popular resurgence in post-9/11 mass culture indicates a paradoxical nostalgia for older imaginations of the urban environment. As I argued in the previous chapter, the superhero movie genre strives to present the postmetropolis as a coherent space in which modernist and postmodernist architecture coexist comfortably, while both social and architectural contradictions are subsumed by the superhero’s panoptic, controlling gaze. Part of the attraction of these narratives therefore resides in the fantasy they offer of a postmodern urban environment that is made safe by the more traditional forms of power associated with an earlier form of capitalism.

While *Batman Begins* offers the most obvious examples of this desire to re-establish entrepreneurial capitalism when faced with the threat of globalized terrorism, *The Dark Knight* elaborates in more detail how this power can be exercised and maintained, and how strongly the exercise of this kind of
power has come to rely on panoptic forms of surveillance. Christopher Nolan’s second Batman film foregrounds issues of visibility and the implied empowerment of the gaze at several levels, the first of which is encapsulated by the film’s aesthetics. Its predecessor Batman Begins offered the traditional Gothic presentation of a Gotham City that seemed all but impossible to master: “a city askew, defined by angular perspectives, impenetrable shadows, and the grotesque inhabitants of its night” (Bukatman 203). The Dark Knight however presents a vastly different way of conceiving the postmetropolis, which is here depicted as a public space defined very strongly in terms of visibility.

This shift is obvious from the opening scene with its helicopter shot that provides a spectacular, panoramic view of downtown Gotham City. The shot displays the city in broad daylight, the blue morning sky visible in the vast reflective surfaces of one of the many postmodern high-rise office buildings of downtown Chicago. The use of high-definition IMAX film stock for all such panoramic shots of cityscapes in the film further emphasizes the importance of visual detail on prominent display throughout. The larger film stock employed by IMAX cameras yields an image in which one can distinguish far more detail than is possible in standard 35mm film projection. Unlike Batman Begins, which was shown on IMAX screens in prints that had been blown up from 35mm negatives, the imagery of The Dark Knight provides an overwhelming amount of visual detail that becomes an important part of the value of the film as a commodity.5 Indeed, much of the film’s promotional material focused on both the visual rewards and the technical challenges of its extensive use of IMAX technology:

The reality is that you see every little detail — that piece of camera tape down the street in the frame, the one you don’t normally worry about, had to be removed. We had to condition everyone on the crew to a higher level of

5 This not only applies to the film’s theatrical run and its use of IMAX screens; its also translates to its position in home video technology, with its 2008 Blu-ray release setting a sales record for the high-definition digital video format that remained unchallenged until the home video release of Avatar (dir. James Cameron, 2009) in April 2010 (Fritz npag.).
discipline, especially [production designer] Nathan Crowley and his team. Everyone had to be meticulous. (cinematographer Wally Pfister, qtd. in Heuring, n. pag.)

The foregrounding of the city as a visible and therefore manageable and controllable space is evident not only in the numerous panoramic shots of Chicago and Hong Kong, but also in the prominence of shots that frame the city as a space that is visible from the windows of locations and characters associated directly with state power. In scenes that take place in the offices of the District Attorney, the police commissioner, and the judge, enormous windows frame similarly spectacular and panoramic views of the city's downtown area. Bruce Wayne, while awaiting the reconstruction of Wayne Manor after it was burned down in the previous film, has moved into the penthouse of Chicago’s Trump Tower, where one notices that his easy chair offers a controlling view of the city that lies both physically and metaphorically at his feet (figure 3).

![Figure 3: Bruce Wayne observing the city from his penthouse in *The Dark Knight*](image)

In contrast, characters who are ethnically or economically marginalized are shown in locations that are confined, without a view of the panoptic city that seeks to exclude them, momentarily safe from the controlling gaze they wish to elude. The black, Italian and Chechen criminal gangs meet in isolated, low-ceilinged environments such as parking garages and basements, where they
seek to avoid the threat of exposure. Benevolent power is thus systematically associated with transparency and visibility, while illegal and subversive activity is associated with confined, enclosed spaces and the desire to elude visibility.

The thematic importance of the film’s high-definition aesthetics is further compounded by the narrative’s increased focus on the importance of visibility, data visualization, and surveillance technology towards its climax. In one of the film’s most-discussed scenes, Bruce Wayne reveals to Lucius Fox (played by Morgan Freeman) that he has modified his “sonar cell phone” technology to create a device that will allow him to listen in on all of Gotham City’s cellular telephone network:

Batman: Beautiful, isn't it?
Lucius Fox: Beautiful. Unethical. Dangerous. You’ve turned every cellphone in Gotham into a microphone.

Batman: And a high-frequency generator-receiver.
Lucius Fox: You took my sonar concept and applied it to every phone in the city. With half the city feeding you sonar, you can image all of Gotham. This is wrong.

Batman: I've got to find this man, Lucius.
Lucius Fox: At what cost?

Batman: The database is null-key encrypted. It can only be accessed by one person.
Lucius Fox: This is too much power for one person.

Batman: That’s why I gave it to you. Only you can use it.

Lucius Fox: Spying on 30 million people isn’t part of my job description.

As this quote illustrates, the surveillance technology on display here goes beyond the mere eavesdropping on telephone conversations: the screens of his surveillance device make it possible to “image all of Gotham.” The array of screens that makes up the surveillance device closely resembles the familiar walls of CCTV surveillance camera screens that are monitored by security guards in shopping malls, office buildings, and any number of other public and private spaces that make up the postmetropolis (figure 4).
The notion of ubiquitous surveillance as a means of enforcing social control is addressed by Edward W. Soja in the fifth of his six discourses that together make up his definition of the postmetropolis (as discussed in the previous chapter). Drawing on the work of Mike Davis, he describes the discourse of the city as Carceral Archipelago as follows:

> The globalized post-Fordist industrial metropolis, with its extraordinary cultural heterogeneity, growing social polarities and explosive potential, is being held together largely by “carceral” technologies of violence and social control, fostered by capital and the state. (194)

As Soja points out, it is important to emphasize that this perspective on the postmetropolis as a carceral archipelago where individual subjects have been reduced to the status of prisoners must be understood as only a partial discourse on the contemporary city. Without his other five discourses to add nuance, perspective, and the necessary diversity, our understanding of the carceral postmetropolis becomes too much like the kind of top-down exercise of state power associated with the classic Orwellian dystopia.

The fictional postmetropolis of Gotham City in *The Dark Knight* however represents a way of imagining the city without any need for such complexities.
Like most other popular narratives, it is free to draw on just one or two concepts associated with the postmetropolis and allow this to largely define the way the urban environment is presented diegetically. As in 24, surveillance technology thus becomes a powerful tool of empowerment and virtual omniscience that makes literally the entire city and its inhabitants visible on surveillance screens. Its panoptic function grants an empowering omniscience to the user of this surveillance device, and although the dialogue indicates a token sense of disapproval and moral outrage, Batman’s use of this technology is legitimized by the fact that he employs it to successfully track down and apprehend the Joker and his gang, who have previously proven to be unusually successful at eluding other investigative methods; and Batman’s moral responsibility is ultimately reconfirmed by the fact that he destroys the device after having used it. This moment has been interpreted by some as a form of legitimization for the Bush administration’s controversial policies: “Like [George W. Bush], Batman sometimes has to push the boundaries of civil rights to deal with an emergency, certain that he will re-establish those boundaries when the emergency is past” (Klavan n. pag).

This form of empowerment by way of panoptic surveillance technology moves beyond its traditional twentieth-century form, as it is extended outside the traditional surveillance monitors and is physically embedded in Batman’s costume. After using the imaging device to pinpoint the Joker’s location, Batman is able to gain the upper hand during the resulting fight by feeding the input from the sonar device directly into his mask (figure 5). He thereby replaces his actual field of vision by the visualized data that renders the building he enters literally transparent, like a three-dimensional blueprint or a videogame environment (figure 6). This technological ability provides him with a form of mastery and control over the chaotic situation that supersedes the attacking police force’s misreading of direct visual information. Because the gang members have exchanged costumes with their group of hostages, only Batman’s panoptic use of data visualization technology makes him able to interpret the situation correctly and take the appropriate kind of action.
The incorporation of Batman’s imaging technology into the costume that defines his identity transforms him into a kind of cyborg: “a hybrid of machine and organism, a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction” (Haraway 150). Donna Haraway’s essay “The Cyborg Manifesto” envisioned the cyborg as a semi-utopian “creature in a post-gender world,” liberating the subject from the traditional binary divisions that have served as the conceptual tools of oppressive militarism and patriarchal capitalism (151). However, most cyborg-like figures that have appeared so prominently in postclassical Hollywood, from *The Terminator* (dir. James Cameron, 1984) and *RoboCop* (dir. Paul Verhoeven, 1987) to *Iron Man* and *The Dark Knight*, fulfill little of their
revolutionary potential as described by Haraway. Instead, they seem to function as technologically enhanced versions of the hard-bodied icons of masculinity from the Reagan era as described by Susan Jeffords:

Where the Rambo films were structured to leave audiences desiring the externalized strength of Rambo’s national hard body, RoboCop invites audiences to desire a protective figure who not only can enforce the law ... but who can wield it fairly and faithfully, without corruption or compromise. The system, such desires whisper, is already in place. All we need are a few good (white) men to make it work. (117-8)

In many ways, Batman in The Dark Knight represents the cyborg as an image of empowered masculinity similar to that of RoboCop, but politically even more problematic. It goes so far as to suggest that the technologically-enhanced superhero is in fact free to disregard the laws he is expected to uphold whenever he decides that circumstances demand it. Just as Jeffords relates the popular narratives of the 1980s to the political and ideological discourses of that era, it is easy to read this current wave of popular heroes as similarly supportive of post-9/11 American government policy. Nowhere in the films under discussion is this more evident than in the superhero’s appropriation of surveillance technology.

But as Batman’s costume integrates high-tech imaging software as an effective tool of panoptic empowerment, its use in the film meanwhile severs an important link between the character and his audience. For as soon as Batman activates the imaging technology, it covers off his eyes, leaving only the actor’s mouth and chin as a recognizable part of the human face, and precluding the film’s use of effective eyeline matches. Without visual access to an actor’s face, audiences are notoriously reluctant to empathize with characters; it therefore came as little surprise that this particular sequence was singled out for criticism by many fans and reviewers.

Iron Man, another superhero film in which the protagonist wears a costume that denies us access to the actor’s face, found a way to visualize the near-complete incorporation of similar technology without sacrificing the expressiveness that makes the character a recognizable and sympathetic
human subject. For once billionaire playboy Tony Stark (played by Robert Downey Jr.) dons the suit that transforms him into the super-powered cyborg Iron Man, the film inserts close-ups that show Stark’s face inside the suit, operating a complex Graphical User Interface before his eyes (figure 7).

![Image of Tony Stark controlling the GUI of his suit in Iron Man.](image)

Tony Stark’s skillful operation of the suit’s GUI with what appears to be a combination of voice control and eye movements shows the extent to which this kind of flawless, “natural” operation of advanced technology represents a popular fantasy of postmodernity. The film continually cuts back and forth between these close-ups of Stark’s face surrounded by dynamic GUI elements, external shots of the Iron Man suit in action, and the character’s point-of-view shots. These POV shots vary from views of the data visualization offered to Stark by his suit’s computer system, which are similar to the videogame-like visuals in *The Dark Knight* (figure 8), to photographic images enhanced by crucial computer information.
The use of data-enhanced images is the more prominent in *Iron Man*, as it reveals the full extent of this popular cyborg fantasy, in which organic perception and technological data have become not merely inextricably intertwined, but also—and crucially—mutually beneficial and empowering. In one spectacular action sequence, Iron Man intervenes in an Afghan village where a massacre is about to occur. When faced with multiple terrorists who have taken the innocent villagers hostage, the computer system that is embedded in his costume automatically differentiates between the guilty and the innocent, making Iron Man able to target only those who supposedly deserve to be killed (figure 9).
The impressive functionality of this system and its obvious effectiveness illustrates the strange logic of postmodern American warfare. Slavoj Žižek has described our fantasies of this kind of “clean war” as that of “the Colin Powell doctrine of war with no casualties (on our side, of course),” or therefore even as “war without war” (2004b n. pag.). Like the uncanny images of smart bombs flying down the chimneys of target buildings in the first Gulf War, or the “Shock and Awe” tactics of the Rumsfeld doctrine in the more recent military conflict, Iron Man’s use of high-tech weaponry to resolve the asymmetrical conflicts of the War on Terror is depicted as something that is possible without civilian casualties. In spite of the film’s surface rejection of the military-industrial complex, as Tony Stark comes to realize that the weapons his company manufactures can also be used by terrorists, Iron Man’s ideal soldier is presented as a cyborg figure who has incorporated this military technology into his outfit and made it into an essential, even natural part of his physicality.

Such fantasies of masculine empowerment through the subject’s transformation into a technologically enhanced cyborg are not limited to the fantastical narratives of comic books and Hollywood action films. The U.S. Army’s infamous 2001 advertising campaign that adopted the slogan “An Army of One” tried to draw in new recruits on the basis of exactly this kind of image (figure 10).

The text that accompanies the advertisement’s photograph of a lone futuristic soldier, all but anonymous in the heavily armored and helmeted costume he is wearing, runs as follows:
What you see is a Soldier system that gives me 360° vision in pitch black. Makes me invisible to the naked eye. Lets me walk up a mountainside. And run in a desert. You’ve never seen anything like me. But don’t worry. They haven’t either. I AM AN ARMY OF ONE. And you can see my strength.

As this advertisement illustrates so vividly, the ideal 21st-century military is here imagined as an invincible figure whose complete control of advanced technology grants him the opportunity to “become a high-tech superhero in the army” (Lawrence and Jewett 2002: 200). This kind of superheroic figure therefore vividly illustrates Žižek’s description of war without war, in which military conflict is presented not merely as a war without innocent victims, but as a virtual experience that resembles a videogame, undertaken by soldiers who operate as invincible, completely self-sufficient cyborgs.

Both Iron Man and Batman are thus archetypes for the real-world fantasy figure associated with postmodern warfare. They each appropriate high-tech military equipment and surveillance technology as ways of enhancing their bodies, and then employ these abilities to stave off the threatening advances of post-Fordist capitalism. Tonal differences aside, *Batman Begins* and *Iron Man* feature identical plots, with their billionaire protagonists transforming themselves into superheroes by first building their own suit, then using their abilities to keep the villain from selling off their fathers’ companies. This makes their position as fantasy representations of the postmodern subject once again contradictory. On the one hand, they embrace the possibilities offered by the virtual, technologically enhanced body that is the product of postmodernism, while rejecting on the other hand the perceived threats of a virtual, post-Fordist economy that itself generates these fluid, more “virtual” forms of identity.

This extreme ambivalence concerning the individual subject’s position in a technologically advanced postmodern environment is typical of many contemporary popular narratives. *The Matrix* is perhaps the most frequently cited text in that regard: “on the one hand, reduction of reality to a virtual domain regulated by arbitrary rules that can be suspended; on the other hand, the concealed truth of this freedom, the reduction of the subject to an utter
instrumentalized passivity” (Žižek 1999, n. pag.). Žižek’s quote here explains how these narratives dramatize public anxieties about the contradictions inherent in postmodernism without ever truly resolving them: simultaneously nostalgic and future-minded, liberating and oppressive, reactionary and subversive, they offer an illusory and momentary escape from the passivity associated with the postmodern subject.

As fantasy archetypes and even role models, these characters’ use of surveillance technology and its incorporation into the superhero’s very body is therefore entirely emblematic of the panoptic/synoptic double logic that informs the post-9/11 surveillance society. The superhero figure legitimizes the use of panoptic and controlling forms of surveillance due to the fact that his actions are always revealed to be justified by the narrative’s outcome; this justification meanwhile becomes all the more effective by the superhero’s visibility, both as a cultural icon (Batman as metatextual celebrity) and as a public figure within the diegesis (Bruce Wayne as a billionaire celebrity in Gotham City; Tony Stark’s public revelation of his “secret identity” with his closing line “I am Iron Man”, etc.).

This ideologically problematic way of imagining the postmodern subject via popular superhero characters is most typical for the genre, just as 24 is most typical for the conservative politics of the post-9/11 spy thriller. But just as The Wire demonstrated that there is also room within the wider context of television culture for alternative ideologies that question the dominant perspective, there is also some space within the superhero movie genre for texts that challenge the politics of surveillance culture. The third and final section of this chapter will investigate popular texts that provide an alternative point of view. Alan Moore’s graphic novel Watchmen focuses on the ways in which panoptic technologies are used for abusive forms of power, while Guillermo del Toro’s Hellboy franchise offers ways of reading the superhero as a figure that embodies difference, otherness and more ambiguous forms of subjectivity. The focus in this concluding section will remain that of visibility and surveillance as a form of social control, seeking to investigate to what
extent popular culture can successfully adopt an ideological position that resists the unrelenting political conservatism of the culture industry.

Panoptic Power and Neoliberalism: Visibility and Power in Watchmen

As the previous section of this chapter has demonstrated, the most typical superhero films answer to the cultural logic of most contemporary popular narratives, using the protagonist’s unquestionable heroic status as a legitimization for the panopticism of the post-9/11 surveillance society. Whether the superhero’s panoptic abilities are (super)natural, as with Superman’s X-ray vision, Spider-Man’s “Spidey-sense,” and Daredevil’s acute hearing, or technological, as in the cyborg-like bodily enhancements of Batman and Iron Man, the fact that the narratives consistently demonstrate that masculine power figures use such abilities only for good serves as justification for their existence and may contribute to their public acceptance.

The resulting form of legitimization is the result of the synoptic mechanism that works in tandem with that of the Panopticon: it is just as important that the many watch the few as the repeated representation of the few watching the many. Part of this effect resides in the superhero’s highly visible presence within the films, where even his most secret actions are laid bare before the spectator’s gaze. Although Batman plots many of his operations in secret, unbeknownst to the Gotham City police or to the wider public, the films nevertheless make all his actions spectacularly visible, while the Joker’s plots are not. Such films thereby explicitly come to associate transparency and visibility with concepts such as order, justice, and heroism, while the absence of visibility is associated with chaos, criminality, and terror.

This systematic form of signification offers yet another example of the workings of the Barthesian myth and its second-order semiological system: by showing a diegetic world that appears internally coherent, “a world wide open and wallowing in the evident,” these texts suggest that the same logic applies to real-world ideology (Barthes 1972: 143). If a large part of post-9/11 political
discourse is centered on the legitimization of panoptic surveillance as a necessary means to combat terrorism, one way to view the resulting operations of popular culture in response to this is via the Barthesian myths it develops and propagates. And like the required visibility of the superhero character both within these texts and on the metatextual level, these myths are similarly explicit about their own visibility:

Myth does not deny things, on the contrary, its function is to talk about them; simply, it purifies them, it makes them innocent, it gives them a natural and eternal justification, it gives them a clarity which is not that of an explanation but that of a statement of fact. (ibid.)

But even though most popular culture, from 24 and CSI to The Dark Knight and Iron Man, does function along such predictable lines of dominant Barthesian mythology, my earlier discussion of The Wire demonstrated that there is also room for alternative perspectives in postmodern popular culture. And although it certainly seems to be the case that “big-budget comic book films are usually more alike than different,” there is also some space within the post-9/11 superhero movie genre for characters and narratives that challenge this dominant paradigm (Seitz n. pag.).

The importance of establishing such counter-narratives within the domain of popular culture arises from the problematic social consequences of contemporary panoptic and synoptic surveillance culture. One such element is the increased marginalization of groups and individuals that are presented and perceived as “other,” and therefore find themselves singled out for surveillance by controversial post-9/11 measures like the Patriot Act. Racial profiling is one such policy that has been the subject of much debate during the War on Terror, and one in which the combination of panoptic and synoptic mechanisms has played a dominant role. On the one hand, panoptic surveillance software has been developed to single out subjects whose appearance fits a particular cultural and ethnic model associated with modern-day terrorism (i.e. young males of Arab or North-African descent). On the other hand, there have been sustained government efforts in North-America and Western Europe to
mobilize the general public as a synoptic form of surveillance, the many being asked to report any form of unfamiliar or suspicious behavior (figure 11).

With surveillance and panopticism therefore occupying such a pivotal role both in 9/11 discourse and in popular culture, the need for narratives that question or challenge the cultural myths that continuously inform these assumptions increases. And although such sites of ideological resistance are quite common in the “high culture” of fine art and literature, these texts not only have a more limited audience, they also generally offer a form of commentary that is explicitly politically charged, drawing attention to aspects of social and political discourse from the institutional safety of the art gallery and the museum.

Popular culture on the other hand draws attention away from its ideological
implications, presenting itself as entertainment based on familiar cultural myths that are masquerading as “natural.”

The problematic moral, ethical and ideological implications of the superhero figure’s panoptic powers were first foregrounded in mainstream comics in Alan Moore’s work of the late 1980s. While previous superhero comics had sided automatically with the protagonist, even if characters like Batman and Spider-Man were wrongly perceived by the public as dangerous vigilantes, *Watchmen* (1986) develops Juvenal’s phrase “Who Watches the Watchmen?” into a deconstruction of the values inscribed in the superhero tradition. His graphic novel develops a detailed alternate history of post-World War II America in which costumed superheroes are a part of daily life rather than a comic book fantasy.

By explicitly problematizing the superhero characters’ relationship to ideology and the State Apparatus, *Watchmen* thereby sets itself part from its long line of comic book predecessors. Because the traditional superhero represented an unchallenged form of ideological order, its politics left no room for explicit ideological debate. With the protagonists safely enshrined “on pedestals as champions of justice and perfection, their creators also positioned them outside of the realm of ideology” (Hughes 546). For as the narrative reveals the characters’ various motivations for donning a costume and fighting crime, the book’s superhero characters become far more explicitly immersed in ideology:

Superman, Batman, Green Lantern, and the rest of the traditional good guys become superheroes for some intrinsic responsibility, but the brood in *Watchmen* choose to do it for much more mundane reasons—money, power, fame, or to promote their own ideology. (ibid. 548)

Unlike the countless superhero teams that have populated mainstream comics for decades, the group of costumed characters in *Watchmen* do not pursue a single ideology that thereby naturalizes the worldview presented by the narrative. Instead, these characters are better understood as distinct embodiments of diverse ideological positions:
Rorschach is a radical conservative, Dr. Manhattan is a conservative, Silk Specter indifferent or neutral, Dan Drieberg [sic] a liberal, and Veidt a radical liberal; The Comedian’s politics, while rather conservative in nature, are representative of the American public … The narrative can then be read as a conflict between ideologies rather than conflicts between characters. (Wolf-Meyer 508)

While each of the main characters in Watchmen therefore clearly illustrates one problematic aspect of the superhero myth, the issue of social control by way of surveillance is most explicitly represented by that of “radical liberal” Adrian Veidt, the villainous mastermind whose actions drive the plot forward, and who brings about the apocalyptic destruction of New York City in the book’s final chapter.

Like all but one of the superhero characters in Watchmen, Veidt has no supernatural abilities. His athletic prowess is the result of physical self-improvement courses, his millionaire status is the product of the successful commercial exploitation of his own superhero celebrity, and even his legend as “the world’s smartest man” is suggested to be his own doing:

Entering school, I was already exceptionally bright, my perfect scores on early tests arousing such suspicion that I carefully achieved only average grades thereafter. What caused such precociousness? My parents were intellectually unremarkable, possessing no obvious genetic advantages. Perhaps I decided to be intelligent rather than otherwise? Perhaps we all make such decisions, though that seems a callous doctrine. (Moore 1986: 11; 8)

Not only does Veidt’s character present the most explicit embodiment of the Nietzschean “Übermensch” as someone who “simply overcame humanity, [who] transcended the bounds yoked upon him by culture and achieved his genetic potential” (Wolf-Meyer 498); he is also the text’s most compelling indictment of neoliberalism, with his position as powerful CEO of a
multinational corporation strongly associated with the visual motif of his panoptic surveillance device (figure 12).

Veidt uses his wall of television screens in two distinct ways: as a tool to monitor the full range of television’s multiple broadcast images simultaneously, and as a device to monitor his own surroundings by way of CCTV surveillance cameras. Both these uses revolve around power and control, with the panoptic screens giving him the ability to decode messages that remain indecipherable to others who lack this all-seeing perspective.

The first scene that introduces Veidt’s wall of TV screens illustrates how his interpretation of subtext and subliminal imagery on television gives him an advantage as an entrepreneur and venture capitalist:

Adrian Veidt: Hm. Let me see… First impressions: oiled muscleman with machine gun… cut to pastel bears, valentine hearts. Juxtaposition of wish fulfilment violence and infantile imagery, desire to regress, be free of responsibility…
This all says “war.” We should buy accordingly.
Servant: But… Sir, we have never bought into munitions…
Adrian Veidt: Of course not. You’re ignoring the subtext: increased sexual imagery, even in the candy ads. It implies an erotic undercurrent not uncommon in times of war. (Moore 1986: 10; 24)

Even as a device that merely monitors the images of broadcast television, the fact that his panoptic machinery displays the images side-by-side rather than consecutively grants him a form of mastery over the situation. The kind of neoliberal capitalism Veidt represents is therefore immediately associated with panoptic forms of control. As a figure who so obviously represents a form of capitalism that uses its power to profit financially from any given situation, Veidt’s utopian ideals, along with his incorporation of the Nietzschean Übermensch, are revealed as a destructive force against which even the super-powered Dr. Manhattan can offer no defense.

Later in the narrative, when the other superhero characters converge on his headquarters in an attempt to foil Veidt’s plan, he employs these same screens as a surveillance device that gives him control over the developing situation. As Rorschach and Nite Owl move towards his headquarters in what is
meant to be a surprise attack, the screens that reveal their approach from every conceivable angle demonstrate that the plan is doomed to failure, and that even their attack was an essential part of Veidt’s omniscient scheme (figure 13).

Figure 13: Adrian Veidt observing the approach of his attackers.

Whether Veidt is using his wall of screens to monitor and interpret the cultural signals of broadcast television or to track the movements of other characters via surveillance cameras, his use of panoptic technology is therefore consistently associated with the exercise of power. More specifically, the fact that Veidt “acts more like a businessman than a hero-type” establishes the text’s most explicit criticism of the neoliberal politics that had come to define the decade in which Watchmen was published (Dubose 926). What has occurred in the postmodern shift from nation state to market state is not so much that the neoliberal agenda of late capitalism has subverted the established order, but that it has come to supersede it, taking the place of the establishment while forcefully eradicating its former institutions. Placing faith in icons like the clean-cut, attractive, and wildly popular Veidt, as the book suggests, is “to give up responsibility for our lives and future to the Reagans, Thatchers, and other ‘Watchmen’ of the world who [were] supposed to ‘rescue’ us and perhaps lay waste to the planet in the process” (Wright 273).
*Watchmen* therefore may be read as a popular text that criticizes the assumptions that underlie the superhero myth and its ideological implications. It establishes a connection between the politics of the superhero figure and the neoliberal political agenda that defined the economic policies of the 1980s, employing the structural motif of panoptic forms of control in its representation of corporate power. The book does so from within the context of mainstream superhero comics in a limited series published by DC Comics, which had ironically been conceived originally as a platform to rebrand a range of characters DC had recently purchased from Charlton Comics in a corporate buyout (Wright 261-2).

If *Watchmen* stands as a clear example of a popular culture text critiquing the ideological framework that informs and largely defines its own narrative tradition, its use of panoptic devices is presented in terms of explicit power relationships. An example of a popular film franchise that offers an alternative way of employing the superhero to conceptualize these issues is director Guillermo del Toro’s *Hellboy* (2004) and its sequel *Hellboy II: The Golden Army* (2008). Rather than presenting the superhero as a figure whose use of panoptic devices to enforce power is ideologically problematic, the Hellboy films develop a very different perspective on the issue of power and surveillance. Both films present narratives and imagery that revolve instead around issues of difference, marginalization, and minority groups’ right to forms of visual representation.
The “Freaks” of Hellboy: Representing the Marginalized

Maybe it’s the cold wind that chills you to the bone.
Or the strange rumblings beneath the city streets.
It’s the unnerving sense that there’s a world around us we cannot see.
It’s not your imagination.
This world is very real. And it’s very, very angry.

(Narration from the Hellboy II: The Golden Army trailer, emphasis added)

Based on Mike Mignola’s alternative comic book superhero, a property of independent comics publisher Dark Horse, Del Toro’s two Hellboy films offer an unusual blend of diverse elements. Both pictures were financed and distributed by major film studios, and offer the kind of action-oriented spectacle that is typical of postclassical Hollywood action franchises, with regular explosive battle scenes that are similar to “levels in a videogame” (Newman 2004: 51). Also, the films play on audiences’ familiarity with the superhero and fantasy genres, establishing their protagonist as “one of comics’ big kids in non-human bodies (like the Thing, the Hulk or Swamp Thing)” who is the reluctant employee of a secret government organization that keeps the world safe from numerous fantastical monsters and doomsday scenarios (ibid.). Very much an amalgam of diverse yet familiar elements, writer-director Del Toro describes Hellboy as “something that combined the superhero/action genre with a much more human approach, and at the same time had the trappings of a great Gothic fantasy” (qtd. in ‘Hellboy’: Seeds of Destruction).

But unlike the superhero movies based on characters with decades-long histories as mainstream popular icons, the Hellboy films are not preoccupied with a nostalgic desire to re-establish the hegemony of white, patriarchal, entrepreneurial capitalism. As the voice-over from the trailer indicates, the Hellboy films are about the “world around us we cannot see”: a hidden world that eludes the panoptic power associated with visibility, and one that is presented in terms of its visual richness and cultural diversity rather than its implied threat to any social or political order. If the transparency and panoptic
visibility of the worlds of *The Dark Knight, Spider-Man, Iron Man* and *Superman Returns* ultimately result in a reactionary sense of cultural and ethnic homogeneity, the *Hellboy* films instead foreground characters that are excluded from such a world, and their resulting desire to reclaim visibility in the city they inhabit.

The issue of visibility is central to most superhero narratives. By dressing up in costumes, the traditional superhero character clearly sets himself apart from normality, causing the ordinary citizens of the metropolis to stop, stare, and point (“Look, up in the sky…”). In that sense, the superhero trope is a way of dramatizing the desire to stand out from the crowd and take on a more performative identity within a culture of postmodernity that is defined by the death of the subject (as I have discussed in more detail in chapter 1). However, most mainstream superheroes alternate between the garish performativity of their costumed personas and the relative anonymity of normative contemporary identity. Whether their transformation is a voluntary choice involving a change of costume (e.g. Batman, Superman, Spider-Man) or the more involuntary transformation of the protagonist’s body (e.g. The Incredible Hulk, the Human Torch), the character’s identity remains grounded in forms of white heterosexual masculinity. 6

For *Hellboy*, his appearance as a superhero is inextricably connected to his natural physical appearance. As the literal spawn of Satan, brought into our world as the result of paranormal experimentation by the Nazis during World War II, *Hellboy* (played by Ron Perlman) is a red-skinned demon who files down his horns in an attempt to “fit in,” and whose granite forearm and supernatural origins grant him unusual physical powers. With features so radically different from normality, *Hellboy*’s overwhelming desire in both films is to gain public acceptance and receive recognition as a heroic crime-fighter in

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6 The character Thing from the Fantastic Four is a notable exception, and the most obvious reference point for *Hellboy*, as the permanence of his transformation into a rock-like monster was consistently presented as traumatic.
spite of his unusual skin color and exotic appearance. The government, as represented in the film by the Bureau for Paranormal Research and Defense, insists on keeping his existence a secret, continuously denying rumors of his existence based on blurry photographs and YouTube videos. The main challenge that defines Hellboy’s character arc in the films is thus defined by issues of visibility, representation, and social acceptance of non-normative subjects.

This focus extends to the other main characters in the films, both of whom feel similarly challenged and excluded by the normative workings of their society. These other two characters that make up the superhero team are Liz (played by Selma Blair) and Abe Sapien (played by Doug Jones): Liz has the supernatural power of a pyrokinetic, able to start fires by force of will, and Abe Sapien is a sophisticated, highly literate amphibian with telepathic abilities and effete diction and mannerisms. Flashback scenes in the first film establish how Liz has been ostracized by her peers for being a “freak” since early childhood, and is shown to have retreated into institutionalized care resulting from her depressing sense of marginalization. Abe Sapien is similarly cast as a marginalized figure in two ways: his amphibian physique requires him to wear a special breathing apparatus to survive outside of water, while his more effeminate demeanor offers an alternate model of heterosexual masculinity that counterbalances Hellboy’s more macho male persona.

Although none of these characters is literally presented as the member of an established real-world minority group, the fact that they are all perceived by other characters as “other” opens them up to numerous metaphorical readings in exactly that way. Their reluctant supervisor Tom Manning (played by Jeffrey Tambor) points out Hellboy’s marginalized, socially unacceptable status as “freak” to him on several occasions:

This whole thing is a farce, because in the end, after you’ve killed and captured every freak out there - there’s still one left: you.
Del Toro’s only previous superhero film, *Blade II* (2002), is one of the rare examples of a black protagonist within a genre in which minority superheroes have been few and far between. And while the Hellboy films focus strongly on their characters’ strengths and abilities, they are emphatically shown as socially marginalized characters that are ostracized by their peers and rejected by society. As the representatives of power and authority within the films make use of their unique abilities while insisting that they also remain hidden from the public eye, the films open up a space for identification with forms of identity that are either marginalized or completely excluded from most other superhero movies.

The importance of popular franchises that embrace models of social and ethnic diversity in the contemporary landscape of globalized transmedia narratives was emphasized by Henry Jenkins in his book *Convergence Culture*. In his analysis of the fan cultures surrounding the Harry Potter universe, Jenkins has shown how these fan groups flourished as “people of many different ethnic, racial and national backgrounds (some real, some imagined) formed a community where individual differences were accepted” (180). Although the Hellboy films may primarily address a different audience demographic than the Harry Potter stories, their strong focus on “otherness” gives the film franchise similar strengths in how it is able to address minorities in a more inclusive manner.

A direct comparison with Batman and Iron Man provides a telling illustration. As I have shown in chapter two, Christopher Nolan’s cinematic reboot of the Batman film franchise introduced an “othering” of its superhero in *Batman Begins*, as Bruce Wayne is trained and indoctrinated by an Orientalist eastern sect. But as the narrative progresses, Wayne quickly comes to reject this environment and the kind of cultural and ethnic identity it implies, instead incorporating his experience into a self-made form of assembled subjectivity that is based on high-tech American military equipment and the re-establishment of patriarchal order. In an almost identical manner, Tony Stark in *Iron Man* builds his first suit of high-tech armor while the prisoner of Afghan
terrorists, which he will later modify into a more sophisticated kind of military technology.

The Hellboy films, on the other hand, reverse the traditions of Orientalism, in which the East is explicitly associated with the primitive and the irrational, while the West is associated with sophistication, technological innovation, and reason. Instead, the technological capabilities of the BPRD consistently prove to be largely useless against the threats that occur in the films, with Hellboy, Liz and Abe Sapien instead relying on their physical abilities to defeat their monstrous enemies. This different perspective on surveillance technology is evident not only in the protagonists’ lack of technological enhancements, but also in how the most common forms of visual representation of the Panopticon are presented within the narrative.

As in The Dark Knight, Iron Man and Watchmen, the Hellboy films feature many prominent shots of the superhero in his secret basement or cave, surrounded by a large collection of screens. But whereas these screens function as a tool for surveillance, mastery, and panoptic control in those other superhero films, the screens in Hellboy perform a very different function. First of all, the screens that surround Hellboy are not organized into an orderly bank of monitors associated with the disciplinary control of surveillance screens, but are strewn around his living room in a seemingly arbitrary fashion. And rather than presenting any kind of unified perspective, the images displayed on the screen offer a diverse selection of audiovisual content, ranging from Saturday morning cartoons and news broadcasts to home movies of Hellboy’s colleague and love interest Liz (figure 14). Rather than using his collection of screens to suggest the mastery of an all-seeing panoptic vision, his collection of various models of television sets implies the fragmentary, constructed identity of postmodern bricolage (Collins 1992: 342).
In the second Hellboy film, the use of these screens extends to a more complex form of intertextuality, as the incorporation of scenes from classic horror films begins to comment on the action. For instance, in the scene where he is rejected by Liz, the screen beside Hellboy displays the scene from *Bride of Frankenstein* (dir. James Whale, 1935) in which the creature played by Boris Karloff is similarly rejected by his newly created mate (figure 15). The use of the same kind of images from *The Wolf Man* (dir. George Waggner, 1941) and other classic horror movies in the background of several shots confirms Hellboy’s implied status as a sympathetic but publicly misunderstood “monstrous” Gothic protagonist.
This desire to establish an intertextual connection with old horror movies reflects another way in which the superhero film can indeed be identified as “post-genre,” freely mixing and matching from established generic frameworks as diverse as horror, romantic comedy, action, epic, fantasy, and science-fiction, often within a single film. More than most other superhero films, the Hellboy cycle places particular emphasis on its fantasy trappings while rejecting most of the more common science-fictional elements. Both Darko Suvin and Fredric Jameson have elaborated on the theoretical distinction between science-fiction and fantasy, framing the two genres as each other’s “generic and marketing opposite number” (Jameson 2005: 56) due to science-fiction’s reliance on speculative narratives:

Science-fiction is, then, a literary genre or verbal construct whose necessary and sufficient conditions are the presence and interaction of estrangement and cognition, and whose main formal device is an imaginative framework alternative to the author’s empirical environment. (Suvin 7-8)

The science-fiction genre is thus theorized as structurally removed from, or even opposed to the fantasy genre and “the fundamental role it assigns to magic” (Jameson 2005: 58). While most superhero films are indeed organized around “the ethical binary of good and evil” that is one of the characteristics of the fantasy genre (ibid.), the occurrence of anything like magic is generally limited to the superhuman powers of heroes and villains (which are in turn paradoxically explained in science-fictional terms: as the result of radiation, genetic mutation, etc.). The Hellboy films however draw much more explicitly on the tropes of fantasy, their diegetic world populated by all kinds of fantastical creatures such as fairies, goblins, trolls, and demons. Like the Harry Potter universe, the Hellboy films thereby reveal a hidden world of magical powers and fantastical beings hidden behind the everyday facade of postmodern urban life.

But unlike the Harry Potter series, the Hellboy films steer clear of the “Christian (or even Anglican) nostalgia particularly pronounced in Tolkien and
his fellow-travelers” (ibid.). For the secret magical world in these films is not presented as a fantasy of pre-modern Britain, but instead as a diverse mix of exotic cultures and oriental imagery. The best example of this is the Troll Market scene in *Hellboy II: The Golden Army*, in which Hellboy and his team discover the existence of a thriving bazaar hidden beneath the Brooklyn Bridge. The market’s production design incorporates visual elements from eastern Europe, the Middle East, and Moorish architecture, all of which are set within the larger context of a market that is remarkably similar to the iconic bazaars of the Middle East (figure 16). Within this setting, many of the characters wear costumes and make-up that are much more similar to Orientalist archetypes than to the wizards and elves of Tolkien and Rowling (figure 17).

![Figure 16: The exotic Troll Market in *Hellboy II: The Golden Army*.](image1)

![Figure 17: Orientalism rewritten - Princess Nuala's costume in *Hellboy II: The Golden Army*.](image2)
The kind of space represented in this part of the film corresponds to Foucault’s concept of the “heterotopia” as a place that exists in society in which marginalized and forbidden elements can reside:

There are also, probably in every culture, in every civilization, real places – places that do exist and that are formed in the very founding of society – which are something like counter-sites, a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites, all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted. Places of this kind are outside of all places, even though it may be possible to indicate their location in reality. Because these places are absolutely different from all the sites that they reflect and speak about, I shall call them, by way of contrast to utopias, heterotopias. (Foucault 1967: n. pag.)

Although this concept of the heterotopia was never reviewed for publication and thus does not belong to Foucault’s corpus of work, the 1967 manuscript that served as the basis for one of his lectures was later released into the public domain, and has become a much-discussed concept in contemporary urban studies.

As Edward Soja has emphasized in his book *Thirdspace*, the term has become central to the development of postmodern urban spaces that reject the totalizing frameworks of modernist architecture, moving instead towards a form of urban planning that emphasizes issues of difference and identity in multicultural cities. Given the superhero movie genre’s ongoing fascination with the modernist structures that impose a rigid formal sameness onto the cityscape, which is monitored and controlled by white male power figures, the need for the representation of such heterotopias within this pop-cultural realm should be evident.

For unlike the utopian context that defines the futuristic urban environments of other superhero narratives, the Troll Market heterotopia in *Hellboy II* represents what Foucault calls a “heterotopia of deviation,” where “individuals whose behavior is deviant in relation to the required mean or norm are placed” (ibid.). Although Foucault’s original use of this term referred mostly to institutions like psychiatric hospitals, contemporary urban theory has
reappropriated the term to refer to physical spaces where cultural difference can manifest itself freely. By presenting this fantastical environment as a hidden part of New York City, the film therefore not only develops a more positive way of employing Orientalist imagery that is generally associated with the threatening aspects of remote Eastern cultures; it also suggests that this kind of cultural richness and diversity is able to thrive within the postmetropolis in spaces that are not surveilled by the technologies associated with state power. Moreover, within this reversal of the more traditional ways of representing Orientalist imagery, issues of ethnicity are further complicated by having the most obvious kinds of Orientalist characters (like the veil-wearing Princess Nuala in Figure 17) portrayed by blonde-haired Caucasian cast members.

However, what remains problematic about this attempt at reversing the relationship between “us” and “them,” between “West” and “East,” and between “European” and “Oriental,” is that this reversal leaves intact the fundamental difference between the two. This may even fall into the trap of what Žižek described as “liberal tolerant racism at its purest: this kind of ‘respect’ for the Other is the very form of the appearance of its opposite, of patronizing disrespect” (2010: 46). Even if *Hellboy II: The Golden Army* therefore manages to offer a perspective on Orientalist imagery that attempts to reverse the casual racism of *Batman Begins, Iron Man*, and so many other popular texts, it still leaves the fundamental binary division that fuels the Orientalist cultural dynamic largely intact.

But in spite of this apparent inability to fully escape the basic cultural logic of the Orientalist paradigm, the Hellboy films’ playful ways of representing otherness remain infinitely preferable to the monolithic heavy-handedness of more “politically correct” popular culture perspectives on such issues. One such playful element involves the repeated “othering” of authority figures who casually reject non-normative characters as “freaks.” An example of this pattern of playful “othering” occurs in relation to gaining entrance to the Troll Market and its uncontrolled secret world of otherness. In order to be able to see the
entrance, the kind of technology the BPRD agents must employ is an elaborate headset with goggles that must be placed upon their heads in order to use them. In other words: in order to gain access to the troll market and its non-conformist world of “freaks,” the figures of power and authority must themselves transform their own appearance into that of the “other” or “monstrous” categories they wish to control through surveillance (figure 18).

![Figure 18: Surveillance technology transforming the “normal” into “other.”](image)

The third and final element that makes the Hellboy films ideologically different and ultimately more productive than most other superhero films is their treatment of patriarchal lineage and its association with discourses of predestination. The most enduring superhero archetypes systematically foreground notions of patriarchal heritage: Superman carries out the instructions of his deceased father Jor-El; Bruce Wayne uses his father’s inheritance to avenge his parents’ death; Tony Stark must restore his father’s original corporate vision to ensure the company’s future, and so on. Although many of these classic superheroes initially reject the paternal call of destiny, their narratives repeatedly dramatize the necessity that leads them to follow in their father’s footsteps, thereby reaffirming the hegemony of patriarchal power.
Such questions of patriarchal tradition and biological predestination are equally prominent narrative elements in the Hellboy films, both of which revolve around the question to what extent the protagonist’s Satanic lineage defines his identity. Characters attempting to bring about the end of mankind continuously remind Hellboy of this, emphasizing the fact that his biological identity contradicts his involvement with humanity and his attachment to his adopted human father Professor Bruttenholm (played by John Hurt). But although both films present scenes in which Hellboy is tempted to embrace this idea, he always rejects the concept of predestination in the end, in spite of the fact that the “otherness” of his skin color and appearance makes him appear alien and even monstrous to the public. As the character John Myers (played by Rupert Evans) sums up at the end of the first film:

What makes a man a man? ... Is it his origins? The way he comes to life? I don't think so. It's the choices he makes. Not how he starts things, but how he decides to end them.

Therefore, unlike most traditional characters in contemporary superhero films, *Hellboy* and *Hellboy II: The Golden Army* explicitly reject the nostalgic values of patriarchal capitalism, presenting instead a superhero figure who embodies values of otherness, self-determination, and postmodern *bricolage* as most vital to identity. As a character and popular icon, Hellboy is presented as “living proof of the nurture-over-all theory in that despite his demonic origins, his all-American upbringing has led him to feel like a real boy and act like a regular, grouchy, cigar-chomping action man” (Newman 2004: 50).

Moreover, these films employ the visual motifs and technologies associated with panoptic control in a form that challenges the questionable ways in which most popular narratives incorporate and legitimize post-9/11 discourses of surveillance. Like *Watchmen*, these films challenge the legitimacy of panoptic forms of social and political power, while opening up a safe space for otherness and diversity as essential categories with a right to public visibility and acceptance. But Del Toro’s films move beyond Moore’s critique of
neoliberal panopticism in their attempt to carve out a space for characters that
are presented in terms of their status as marginalized minorities.

The Hellboy films are not entirely unique within the superhero film genre. 
Bryan Singer’s two X-Men films for instance are often cited as narrative 
allegories for queer theory and civil rights issues, both films’ mutant characters 
“explicitly analogized to Jewish bodies, gay bodies, adolescent bodies, Japanese 
or Native or African American bodies—they are first and foremost, subjected 
and subjugated and colonized figures” (Bukatman 73). And the TV series Heroes 
has similarly foregrounded categories of ethnic and sexual diversity in its 
various groupings of super-powered characters. But within the larger 
landscape of mass culture and contemporary popular entertainment, these 
potential sites of ideological resistance remain themselves a small but essential 
minority.

Conclusion
In this chapter, I have focused on the complex and frequently contradictory 
ways in which the Foucauldian concept of the Panopticon has developed into a 
central image for the post-9/11 surveillance society. First examining how the 
complementary concept of the Synopticon can help us understand how the 
disciplinary nature of surveillance technology is represented in popular culture, 
I have demonstrated how popular narratives are not defined by the 
hypodermic model of Frankfurt School Marxist theory. Instead, there is room 
for navigation not only in relation to individual texts, but especially in the 
variety of ideological choices offered by diverse popular texts.

This room for oppositional or negotiated readings notwithstanding, there 
does appear to be a dominant reading of surveillance technologies in the most 
common popular narratives, from 24 to The Dark Knight and Iron Man. The 
ways in which these texts present a fairly consistent Barthesian myth that 
naturalizes and even legitimizes wider post-9/11 discourses relating to 
surveillance and control may indeed be described as ideologically problematic.
The ways in which popular characters like Batman and Iron Man transform the potential of Donna Haraway’s supposedly liberating cyborg into a conservative icon of masculine empowerment has troubling social and political implications, as do these films’ overt sense of nostalgia for patriarchal capitalism.

And yet, there are also texts that operate within the same context of mass media and popular narratives while striving to offer an alternate view. As I argued in my previous chapter, Alan Moore’s *Watchmen* may be read as an indictment of the neoliberalism that emerged in the 1980s, to come to full fruition in the first decade of the 21st century. His influential graphic novel not only established the problematic ideological implications of the superhero’s narrative tradition; it also illustrated how panoptic forms of power have now shifted from the state to privately owned corporations, whose interests and utopian ambitions are defined entirely by profits, and whose apocalyptic implications can no longer be avoided.

Guillermo del Toro’s *Hellboy* films also resist the dominant forms of representation associated with the Panopticon and its cinematic forms. Instead, these films focus on characters that are excluded by the normative and disciplinary powers of panoptic state control, but who feel compelled to participate in it nonetheless. These films’ excluded, exploited characters represent those who are marginalized and rendered invisible by the dynamics of post-9/11 surveillance culture, while their portrayal of slum-like markets marked by Orientalist design and ethnic diversity provide an alternate perspective on the racial profiling and social prejudices that have become dominant in 9/11 discourse. By incorporating areas that function as “heterotopias of deviation,” where marginalized cultures and ethnicities can claim their own spaces within the city, these films offer a modest but important departure from the disquietingly homogeneous cities surveilled by other superheroes.
Chapter 5: Late Capitalism and the End of the World: The Disaster Film and Apocalyptic Superhero Narratives

Watching Children of Men, we are inevitably reminded of the phrase attributed to Fredric Jameson and Slavoj Žižek, that it is easier to imagine the end of the world than it is to imagine the end of capitalism. That slogan captures precisely what I mean by “capitalist realism”: the widespread sense that not only is capitalism the only viable political and economic system, but also that it is now impossible even to imagine a coherent alternative to it. (Fisher 2009: 2)

The popular entertainments of the postmodern era have seen an ongoing proliferation of apocalyptic narrative motifs and imagery. From the science-fiction B-movies of the 1950s to the horror and disaster films of the 1960s and 1970s, and from the millennial disaster revival of the late 1990s to the superhero movies of the early 21st century, end-of-the-world scenarios have maintained a constant grip on the popular imagination. The spectacular visual effects associated with films depicting cataclysmic events ensure the marketability of films from Earth vs. The Flying Saucers (dir. Fred F. Sears, 1956) to digital cinema blockbusters like 2012 (dir. Roland Emmerich, 2009).

The audiovisual depiction of large-scale destruction can be framed most easily within the context of Tom Gunning’s “cinema of attractions” paradigm, which elevates the attraction exerted by spectacular imagery above the traditional emphasis on storytelling and diegesis. This perspective, which gained much ground in contemporary film studies alongside the rise of the postclassical Hollywood blockbuster and the development of digital cinema, certainly has relevance for the formulaic and narratively shallow disaster film, which emphasizes kinetic thrills and spectacular visual effects over elements such as character development, complex plotting, and verisimilitude.

But there is also a consistent narrative motif in these end-of-the-world scenarios that connects strongly with the postmodern condition and its public anxieties concerning the subject’s loss of agency and dwindling sense of historicity. As Frank Kermode pointed out in his classic study of apocalyptic narratives in literary history, apocalyptic fantasies offer an illusion of order and
progression by providing history with a sense of closure: hence, “apocalyptic thought belongs to rectilinear rather than cyclical views of the world” (5). Furthermore, it is an extremely flexible motif that is adaptable to a seemingly infinite range of historical periods, genres, and narrative forms:

Apocalypse can be disconfirmed without being credited. This is part of its extraordinary resilience. It can also absorb changing interests, rival apocalypses, such as the Sybilline writings. It is patient of change and of historiographical sophistications. It allows itself to be diffused, blended with other varieties of fiction—tragedy, for example, myths of Empire and of Decadence—and yet it can survive in very naïve forms. (8-9)

Among such naïve forms of apocalyptic thought are clearly the pop-cultural narratives that range across numerous genres in multiple media, including post-World War II Hollywood cinema. But perhaps most remarkable about the systemic occurrence of apocalyptic narratives in Hollywood cinema is that such popular films—with very few exceptions—ultimately show the world being saved from disaster on the eve of its destruction, frequently due to the direct intervention of a martyr figure. Such martyr figures have become increasingly commonplace in apocalyptic blockbuster films of the late 20th century, where “the Hollywood appropriation of martyrdom situates it in the larger context of the redemption of mankind” (Copier 245).

While most Hollywood films of this kind avoid explicit religious references that would run the risk of limiting the films’ popular appeal within a predominantly secularized Western culture, Biblical notions of martyrdom and sacrifice do continue to dominate these pictures. From The Poseidon Adventure (dir. Ronald Neame, 1972) to Armageddon (dir. Michael Bay, 1998), Hollywood disaster films have indulged in the fantasy of a heroic martyr sacrificing his own life to redeem a corrupt and decadent world from the very brink of destruction. The contemporary superhero movie is certainly no exception to this pattern: Superman Returns for instance represents but one of the many ways in which the genre has appropriated messianic imagery and themes in connection with such apocalyptic scenarios.
Although apocalyptism therefore makes up recurring motif in classical and postclassical Hollywood cinema, it has continuously responded to historical circumstances that have been reflected in popular genres. The 1950s cycle of apocalyptic monster and science-fiction films can for instance be read as symptomatic of wider socio-cultural fears and anxieties relating directly to the specificities of political discourse of the period:

While the science fiction of the long 1950s responds in a particularly direct and obvious way to the threat of nuclear holocaust, it is also the case that this fiction is influenced by a number of other concerns and anxieties that were crucial to the texture of American life in the decade. Indeed, these other concerns and anxieties are ultimately inseparable from the nuclear fears of the decade, the synergies among these various fears accounting for the otherwise seemingly inexplicable level of Cold War hysteria the informed American attitudes during this period. (Booker 4)

Similarly, the 21st-century cycle of superhero movies has incorporated apocalyptic imagery and motifs in ways that reflect contemporary anxieties related to 9/11 discourse and the War on Terror.

By examining the apocalyptic elements that can be identified in popular contemporary superhero narratives, this chapter will argue that these end-of-the-world scenarios reveal how one of the pervasive elements of 9/11 discourse is the false notion that we have indeed reached the end of history. These films stand as a telling example of how the absence of historicity in late capitalism triggers a desire for Kermode’s “rectilinear views of the world,” the resulting re-establishment of order, and perhaps even a promise of redemption. The disaster film acts out the wider fantasy that the world has reached the point of collapse, while promising a nostalgic sense of rebirth and renewal. This is why the disaster film connects so strongly to 9/11 discourse: the spectacular imagery of the attacks immediately led the public to understand the events as part of a postmodern culture associated with spectacular entertainments, thereby isolating the events from their socio-historical context.

But whereas many films from the disaster movie genre embody a strong sense of nostalgia for a pre-modern world, using the films’ cataclysmic events
as a kind of societal reboot, apocalyptic superhero movies display a more ambivalent attitude towards postmodernity. For while the superhero films consistently include spectacular scenes of mass destruction that define much of these films’ commodity value and drawing power, the narrative tradition of the superhero also requires that the world is saved, ensuring the preservation of a status quo that will inevitably lead to a similar challenge in the inevitable next installment. The superhero film is therefore an even better example of the kind of postmodern culture that has developed post-9/11. Instead of the repeated fantasy/anxiety of a devastating attack on New York City, these 21st-century films circulate in a culture where this has already happened, and where the conflicting desires to revisit those events while also fantasizing that they never took place creates a strange kind of short circuit. The endlessly repeated superhero cycles fulfill this antinomy: the world is both saved and destroyed, the hero both sacrifices himself and survives, the events in the films both did and did not happen.

In order to describe accurately how the superhero movie is both similar to and different from the disaster movie in the ways it reflects historically situated anxieties, the first section of this chapter will offer an analysis of *Cloverfield* (dir. Matt Reeves, 2008) that relates it to the generic tradition of the monster movie, and how such genre conventions offer the audience a sense of cultural continuity while also introducing connections to 9/11 discourse and 21st-century anxieties. In the second section of this chapter, I will then turn to the contemporary superhero genre, focusing on the first season of the popular television series *Heroes* as an example of superhero narratives incorporating aspects of apocalyptic thought from the cultural context of 9/11 discourse. Throughout this chapter, the theoretical focus will shift most strongly towards the work of Slavoj Žižek, whose use of Lacanian theory within the context of neomarxist critical thought offers the most useful tools for decoding contemporary popular texts from the perspective of cultural studies.
Disaster Movies and America’s Addiction to Catastrophe

Only a catastrophe gets our attention. We want them, we need them, we depend on them, as long as they happen somewhere else. (DeLillo 1999: 66)

The above passage from Don DeLillo’s postmodernist novel White Noise (1985) is frequently quoted in reference to the central role occupied by catastrophic imagery in the American public imagination. In response to the question why the postmodern subject finds himself so enthralled by images of large-scale devastation, the character Alfonse Stompanato memorably replies: “Because we’re suffering from brain fade. We need an occasional catastrophe to break up the incessant bombardment of information” (65).

This perspective on the postmodern desire for moments of spectacular disaster that momentarily disrupt the deadening monotony of late capitalist consumerism indicates the contradictory nature of postmodern popular culture. According to this logic, the disaster film is symptomatic of both the desire to upset the status quo, and the opposite wish to see that same balance endlessly and immediately restored. This dialectical process is typical of the perpetual boom-and-bust cycles that define the capitalist system, and it was suggested by essayist, literary theorist, and cultural critic Susan Sontag as early as 1965, in her influential essay “The Imagination of Disaster”:

Ours is indeed an age of extremity. For we live under continual threat of two equally fearful, but seemingly opposed, destinies: unremitting banality and inconceivable terror. (42)

As Sontag pointed out so accurately, the spectacular and repetitive nature of cataclysmic imagery in Hollywood films from the 1950s onward was to become a crucial moment in the historical development of postmodernism. As science-fiction and horror movies from the Cold War era offered more and more depictions of large-scale destruction, the public perception of catastrophe was increasingly defined by fantasy representations, as “movies increasingly set the standard for convincing spectacles of destruction” (Rozario 166).
The popularity of disaster movies in the 1950s and early 1960s marks a difference from the wave of science-fiction novels that had originated two decades earlier, for the films could provide a sensuous, immersive engagement with the apocalyptic imaginary that was shaping the episteme of the burgeoning postmodern era. Unlike the more speculative, science-oriented narratives of early-20th century science-fiction novels, the Cold War disaster films offered the audience a more haptic form of involvement, allowing it to engage in a fantasy of seeing the most recognizable landmarks of the modern world destroyed and civilization brought to a sudden end. The ubiquitous nature of disaster footage in the Hollywood movies of the 1950s therefore “owed a good deal of their fascination to the therapeutic opportunity they presented for working through anxieties about the frightening prospect of global annihilation, particularly because they so consistently supplied happy endings and comforting resolutions” (Rozario 168).

The persistent appearance of such endings, in which humanity is saved and the status quo restored, may be seen as simultaneously necessary and wholly redundant: a formal necessity on the one hand because of Hollywood films’ reliance on a Production Code that was restrictive and repressive in the way it embodied a strict system of self-censorship for the film industry, and on the other because studios were wary of providing entertainment that audiences would find potentially too upsetting.7 Yet paradoxically, the happy endings may also be viewed as redundant generic requirements that were of little or no interest for audiences whose enjoyment of these films was obviously dictated entirely by the prospect of visual effects sequences of mass destruction.

While it has become commonplace to interpret these films’ fantasy plots featuring alien invasions, atomic mutation, and identity theft as metaphorical representations of anxieties related to the threats of nuclear warfare,

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7 An example of the latter form of self-censorship is the Cold War classic Invasion of the Body Snatchers (dir. Don Siegel, 1956), for which the studio decided to bookend the film in postproduction with scenes that largely dispel the film’s apocalyptic implications.
communism and McCarthyism, more recent studies of these film genres have focused on the way they articulated and acted out wider resentments against modernity itself, and the complex relationship with capitalism they seem to represent. If the period of late or globalized capitalism has indeed ushered in an era in which the Baudrillardian simulacrum has usurped our perceptions of reality, then “the postmodern culture of calamity may well be defined by a collision or collusion between the apocalyptic and the hyperreal” (Rozario 188).

In the history of the disaster film, this collision/collusion started with the cycle of science-fiction films of the 1950s, beginning with When Worlds Collide (dir. Rudolph Maté, 1951), including the “paranoia subgenre” of The Thing from Another World (dir. Christian Nyby, 1951), Invaders from Mars (dir. William Cameron Menzies, 1953), and the aforementioned Invasion of the Body Snatchers (dir. Don Siegel, 1956), and culminating in the widespread popularity of the monster movies with visual effects produced by Ray Harryhausen: The Beast from 20,000 Fathoms (dir. Eugène Lorié, 1953), It Came from Beneath the Sea (dir. Robert Gordon, 1955), Earth vs. The Flying Saucers (dir. Fred F. Sears, 1956), and 20 Million Miles to Earth (dir. Nathan Juran, 1957).

**The Dialectics of the 1950s Monster Movie**

Harryhausen’s monsters offered audiences a productive way of engaging with the dialectical view of (post)modernity that is embodied by the disaster film as the product of a mass culture in which “everything becomes a spectacle, that is, essentially non-participatory” (Lefebvre 337). The resentments and anxieties concerning the breakdown of the distinction between the natural and the cultural, the modernist opposition that was being challenged by the swift development of technology and commodification in the 1950s, were acted out in these films by monsters wreaking havoc on the major American cities that represented modern progress most explicitly. Whether the monster in the film took the form of a giant lizard, a gargantuan octopus, or the monstrous yet
endearing alien “Ymir” from *20 Million Miles to Earth*, the creatures represented a primitive, peculiarly innocent force of nature that came to respond violently and spectacularly to the arrogance of modern humanity. These films thereby came to perform “valuable, if problematic, therapeutic work for a modern people living in a world of constant turmoil and turbulence, in a world haunted by violence” (Rozario 188).

This contradictory desire to see resentments against modernity from within the context of narratives that systematically restored the upset balance indicates some of the doubleness that is so typical of the historical period of the 1950s. The schizophrenia that critical theorists such as Fredric Jameson and Deleuze and Guattari have described as an essential characteristic of postmodernism may be witnessed here: “the overt doubleness of American culture in the 1950s can ... be taken as a reflection of the increasing hegemony of capitalism in the decade, as the last remnants of agrarian alternatives to capitalism were swept from the American scene once and for all” (Booker 4).

Just as Marx argued that the Hegelian form of dialectical analysis was necessary in order to chart the complexities and contradictions of capitalism, an analysis of American Cold War popular culture should be similarly dialectical in nature in order to recognize the embedded contradictions that fuelled this cultural period.

Indeed, the Hollywood disaster films of this era present us with such overwhelming contradictions that their narrative logic becomes a form of shorthand for dialectical thought: the films’ entire *raison d’être* is the depiction of apocalyptic imagery, yet they must present narratives of historical redemption; the imagined communist threat is allegorically represented in the form of mind-controlling aliens that transform American citizens into a homogeneous mass, while American commodity culture of the period represents exactly this kind of cultural homogeneity; the destructive monsters provide a form of therapy for postmodern audiences that lack a sense of agency, while this “therapeutic activity” takes the form of a passive consumer spectacle that Lefebvre and Debord defined as essentially non-participatory,
emerging precisely at “the historical moment at which the commodity completes its colonization of social life” (Debord 29). If the popular culture of the 1950s can thus be interpreted as a symptom of this historical moment in which we see the beginning of late capitalism and an incipient postmodernism, it could be rewarding to compare the features of this period’s allegorical disaster films with more recent texts that share the same genre tradition.

One way of coming to terms with shifts and possible ruptures in ideological values over time is by examining similar texts and focusing on the ways in which they represent the dialectical values of continuity (in the form of stable intertextual genre conventions) and change (in the form of modifications to the formula that connect to historically specific reading positions). One of the traditional ingredients of the disaster movie genre is the hero’s vocation as a scientist. As Susan Sontag pointed out, the typical disaster movie “opens with the scientist-hero in his laboratory, which is located in the basement or on the grounds of his tasteful, prosperous house” (43). The protagonist thereby represents not only the traditional Enlightenment values of scientific knowledge and rational thought, but also the ideological values associated with white heterosexual patriarchy, his female assistant an important but subservient accessory in his ongoing investigation. This formula holds true for all the key texts mentioned above: the paleontologist-hero of The Beast from 20,000 Fathoms; the doctor-hero of Invasion of the Body Snatchers; the rocket scientist-hero of Earth vs. The Flying Saucers; the marine-biologist-hero of It Came From Beneath the Sea; the medical scientist-hero of 20 Million Miles to Earth; and so on.

Not only is the scientist-hero instrumental in saving the world from whatever attacking force is featured in these disaster films; his cooperation with the American military also represents the successful operation of the military-industrial complex associated with post-WWII America. In one sense, the narratives of 1950s disaster movies thereby dramatize the successful cooperation between the government and the enlightened individual, often overcoming initial conflict and/or misunderstandings to rise together and
overcome seemingly insurmountable odds. At the most superficial symbolic level, these narratives therefore seem to offer thinly veiled metaphorical representations of American superiority, always in the form of explicitly masculine and patriarchal fantasies of mastery.

Although this kind of “common-sense” interpretation does indeed hold true at the most basic narrative level, the monster movies of the 1950s do simultaneously provide an altogether different level of engagement that runs counter to what one may call the “dominant ideology” of this surface meaning. For although the scientist-hero is nominally the protagonist and therefore theoretically the primary locus of audience empathy and identification, he is simultaneously a more ambiguous representation of the “one who releases forces which, if not controlled for good, could destroy man himself” (Sontag 46). The protagonist thereby stands not only for the positive aspects of scientific progress and Enlightenment values, but also for the destructive powers associated with nuclear power, thereby ultimately making him responsible for the disasters that take place in the film. In other words: the protagonist occupies a position that could be interpreted as that of dramatic antagonist with equal conviction.

Meanwhile, the monster that functions as the picture’s nominal villain may also be said to be the film’s actual protagonist-hero, and the prime source of audience interest. Like the eponymous main character in archetypal monster movie *King Kong* (dir. Merian C. Cooper, 1933), the stop-motion animated creatures in the 1950s cycle of monster movies constitute “a narratively centralised special effect … whose singular nature not only forms the basis for the diegetic story, but also supports a meta-narrative about spectacular display” (North 66-67). In marked contrast to the bland, interchangeable leading men who portray these films’ scientist-heroes, the spectacular monsters in the 1950s disaster movies are colorful, larger-than-life characters, given forceful and distinctive personalities. Indeed, their longevity within fan culture and genre film history derives from the creature effects more than anything else in these films. Even the film posters’ design usually emphasizes
the dominance of the creature over the human characters in the film, who dwell in the margins as the monster overshadows every other aspect of the image (figure 1).

Figure 1: 20 Million Miles to Earth and its central monster protagonist.

With hero and villain thus seemingly occupying opposite yet interchangeable roles in the genre, the monster movie provides an opportunity for viewers to navigate between these two positions. Rather than limiting the viewer's options to a binary choice between good and evil, these films provide a deceptively complex interface through which the dialectical nature of capitalism is clearly reflected: the scientist-hero/villain embodies Jameson's notion that "capitalism is at one and the same time the best thing that has ever happened to the human race, and the worst" (1991: 47). This helps us understand why the disaster film became such a ubiquitous genre within the cultural dominant of
postmodernism, as it reflects most accurately how we must view “the cultural evolution of late capitalism dialectically, as catastrophe and progress all together” (ibid.). Even if the films themselves are commonly perceived as hollow, superficial forms of postmodern spectacle, the contradictions that exist at every level of their structure make them quintessentially symptomatic of postmodern culture.

**Cloverfield and the Post-9/11 Disaster Film**

From a psychological point of view, the imagination of disaster does not greatly differ from one period in history to another. But from a political and moral point of view, it does. (Sontag 48)

Like most genres, the disaster movie with its end-of-the-world scenarios has gone through numerous cycles, each of which reflects different aspects of historical shifts in social habits, political discourse, technical innovation, and film viewing and distribution practices. While it is problematic to suggest that every disaster movie cycle of automatically denotes a wider sense of socio-political unrest in American culture, it is nevertheless possible to relate changes in political and moral values from one cycle to another to public issues and anxieties from their individual historical periods. As Susan Sontag implies in the above quotation, the imagination of disaster within this popular genre reflects wider social concerns about the nature of (post)modernity and the individual subject’s lack of agency within it.

In its ambivalent treatment of apocalyptic imagery and narratives, distinct cycles in the disaster movie genre’s history can be related to political and ideological values of their periods. For instance, just as the 1950s cycle of monster movies reflects concerns about the Atomic Age, the post-WWII rise of consumerism, and the loss of individual identity this cultural shift entails, the late 1990s “millennial” cycle, spearheaded by the success of *Independence Day* (dir. Roland Emmerich, 1996), represents the contradictions of the fully globalized capitalism of Clinton’s post-Cold War “Pax Americana.” Throughout
this cycle, which also includes films like *Deep Impact* (dir. Mimi Leder, 1998) and *Armageddon*, the focus is placed squarely on America’s leading role in world politics, willing to sacrifice a martyr figure to redeem the world (e.g. Randy Newman in *Independence Day*, Téa Leoni in *Deep Impact*, and Bruce Willis in *Armageddon*) while a benevolent, patriarchal American president succeeds in unifying the world and directing a global response to the cataclysmic event at hand.

When the 9/11 attacks occurred, the popular genre of the disaster movie immediately took up a pivotal role within the forms of public discourse that would come to define the event. Many commentators, including *New Yorker* film critic Anthony Lane, emphasized the film-like qualities of the attacks:

“People saw—literally saw, and are continuing to see, as it airs in unforgiving repeats—that day as a movie” (qtd. in Rozario 177). And while the spectacular images of the destruction of the World Trade Center buildings were repeated endlessly, the public response to the problematic way in which these images seemed so familiar from countless disaster movies created a strangely contradictory response. On the one hand, there was a public outcry against Hollywood images that sensationalized mass destruction, as “numerous critics summarily declared that the attacks … had brought about the ‘end of irony’” (Spigel 120). But this was simultaneously contradicted not only by the public’s addiction to the ceaseless repetition of these images, but also by a widely shared private interest in the disaster movies that were publicly deemed unacceptable: “even while industry leaders were eager to censor out trauma-inducing images of any kind, video outlets reported that when left to their own discretion consumers were eagerly purchasing terrifying [disaster films] like *The Siege* and *The Towering Inferno*” (ibid.).

This contradictory relationship with 9/11 and its problematic connection with the spectacles of the disaster movie genre confirms Slavoj Žižek’s explanation of the unreal qualities of the attacks and their imagery:
What happens at the end of this process of virtualization ... is that we begin to experience “real reality” itself as a virtual entity. For the great majority of the public, the WTC explosions were events on the TV screen, and when we watched the oft-repeated shot of frightened people running towards the camera ahead of the giant cloud of dust from the collapsing tower, was not the framing of the shot itself reminiscent of the spectacular shots in catastrophe movies, a special effect which outdid all others, since—as Jeremy Bentham knew—reality is the best appearance of itself? (2002: 11)

This Baudrillardian reversal of real and representation, of authenticity superseded by simulation, clarifies this apparent desire to revisit the disaster films that had defined the spectacle of catastrophe for us, as this allows us to measure the “reality” of the 9/11 footage by the yardstick of the “fantasy” of the disaster film. Using Lacanian theory to illuminate the importance of fiction in our understanding of reality, Žižek employs the notion of “traversing the fantasy” as a way of negotiating our fears and desires without having to confront them directly: “we should be able to discern, in what we experience as fiction, the hard kernel of the Real which we are able to sustain only if we fictionalize it” (ibid. 19). In other words: the fantastical representations of spectacular apocalypse do not truly represent an escapist flight from reality into the realm of fantasy and entertainment; at a more fundamental level, they act out a perverse desire to see this drive fulfilled, while the problematic implications of this desire are inoculated by the emphatically non-realist trappings of the genre film.

Therefore, whether they deal with the anxieties caused by the Cold War and its threat of nuclear annihilation or by 9/11 and the threat of global terrorism, monster movies function as sites where audiences can negotiate these issues therapeutically within the safety of a text and a genre that confronts these fears indirectly. Matt Reeves, the director of the post-9/11 monster movie *Cloverfield*, acknowledges this perspective on the genre in his audio commentary from the film’s DVD release:

> From the beginning a lot of people were saying: “... Does it have this 9/11 angle to it?” And in a certain sense I was always aware that it did, in that it felt like it was a way of dealing with the anxieties of our time ... Genre movies ... deal with very real anxieties that people have. That’s why they’re effective. Godzilla came
out of that whole A-bomb nightmare for Japan, and the idea of this terrible, unfathomable destructive force ... and all the anxiety that came out of the atomic and nuclear age ... So that was always the entry point for our movie. But then we felt that once you call up those feelings, I think genre films enable you to approach those feelings in a safe environment, and to experience them, but in the safety of ultimately knowing it’s a giant monster movie.

In many ways, the “9/11 angle” to which Reeves refers in *Cloverfield* is all too obvious. For while the film establishes itself in the generic tradition of the disaster movie by forging intertextual connections with the classic Ray Harryhausen monsters, it repurposes the genre’s familiar narrative and visual tropes as an extension of contemporary post-9/11 culture.

Both notions, of generic continuity and of contemporary relevance, were foregrounded in the film’s influential publicity campaign. The first item to appear in that campaign was the film’s teaser trailer, which showed handheld video footage of a going-away party that is interrupted by a mysterious crash, followed by television news reports of “a thunderous, roaring sound” in New York City. The partygoers then ascend to the roof of their Manhattan downtown loft apartment, from where the video camera captures footage of a spectacular explosion between the skyscrapers of the Financial District. After everyone runs downstairs, they find panicked crowds rushing up the street, away from the disaster area, one of whom yells out clearly: “I saw it. It’s alive! It’s huge!” The teaser trailer reaches its climax as the head of the Statue of Liberty comes soaring down the avenue to land in the middle of the street right before the camera, ending with the text captions “From Producer J.J. Abrams” and “In Theaters 1-18-08,” separated by a shot of one of the partygoers saying directly to the camera: “It’s going to be the best night ever.” Released in July 2007, this teaser trailer did not include the film’s title, thereafter spearheading a viral publicity campaign that encouraged curious viewers to seek out hints about the upcoming film across various online media sources.

What the teaser trailer thus immediately established was not only the subjectivity and immediacy of the digital-video aesthetic associated with 9/11 and its various media representations, but also the tradition of the monster
movie (“It’s huge! It’s alive!”) and the resulting nature of the film as defined primarily by its entertainment value (the metatextual comment “It’s going to be the best night ever!”). Besides the associative connections between the handheld digicam conceit with the endlessly recycled 9/11 footage, most of which was filmed by non-professionals on the streets of Manhattan during the attacks, the film re-stages iconic images from 9/11 from within the safety of its own monster movie context.

The first example occurs when the main characters leave the apartment building to discover what is happening, and the monster’s approach is heralded by a billowing cloud of dust and rubble. This spectacular wave of destruction sends the crowds assembled on the street running in panic towards the camera in an uncanny recreation of some of the most familiar 9/11 images (figure 2), the only difference being the bright daylight of the actual disaster footage, while most of Cloverfield takes place at night.

![Figure 2: Panicked crowds in Cloverfield (left) and in Manhattan on 9/11 (right). (Image source: 911review.com)](image)

Similarly, the immediate aftermath of this initial attack in the film shows the streets of downtown Manhattan as a dust-covered wasteland, enshrouded in an eerie, sudden silence that follows the crashing noise of tumbling skyscrapers. The survivors shuffle down the street with dazed expressions and ashes in their faces and hair, while sheets of paper float around in the air and settle slowly on the streets around them (figure 3).
These obvious symmetries largely shaped the critical response to the film, with reviewers and audiences alike immediately voicing the film's uncanny appropriations of 9/11 imagery. Dubbing the film's nameless monster “Al-Qaedzilla,” Village Voice film critic Nathan Lee was one of many writers to observe that “street-level 9/11 footage would fit seamlessly into Cloverfield's hand-held, ersatz-amateur POV; the initial onslaught of mayhem, panic, plummeting concrete, and toxic avalanches could have been storyboarded directly from the CNN archive” (n. pag.).

Given the fact that Cloverfield's multiple and deliberate articulations of 9/11 discourse were equal to (if not larger than) its disaster movie genre trappings, the film's enormous critical and commercial success may testify to an audience readiness to engage with these issues within the relative “safety” of its explicit monster movie context. Hollywood films that have presented aspects of the 9/11 attacks in a more literal way (such as United 93 and World Trade Center) were surrounded by a great deal of controversy, and attracted only a fraction of Cloverfield's blockbuster-sized audience. An often-heard complaint was that audiences were still too traumatized by the attacks to confront a cinematic recreation of the events directly, thereby once again foregrounding the traumatic aspects of 9/11, as discussed previously in chapter 2. These films’ narratives provided little more than abstract tales of heroic American
martyrdom aimed at transforming a passive and victimized America into an image of active and capable masculinity.

This general lack of a coherent geopolitical narrative to contextualize the attacks has been frequently discussed and criticized in studies of 9/11. As Kevin Rozario has argued in his book on the cultural history of American disasters, “the events of September 11 were converted into a human-interest story, into a commodity that could generate substantial profits for commercial news organizations” (194). With the bombardment of spectacular images and sentimental human-interest narratives about individual victims, the attacks were presented within a historical and political vacuum that reduced complex issues into familiar patterns of heroes and villains:

The entertainment media and apocalyptic theology both tend to present politics and morality in black-and-white terms, treating the world as a place where “innocence” is always imperiled and where retribution is demanded against violators of virtue. Both discourses privilege the sentimental and favor personal morality over political knowledge to such an extent that complexity can begin to feel like the last refuge of fools and the corrupt. (ibid. 200)

This simplistic reduction of historical events into ready-made generic binary patterns conforms once again to Lynn Spigel’s description of “infantile citizenship,” as I have developed previously in chapter 2. With the mass media coverage presented in ways that are both sensational and sentimental, while entirely lacking in historical or geopolitical understanding, both the news footage and Hollywood’s cinematic depictions of 9/11 patronize their viewers as if they were children. This position helped the American public adopt a role of victimized exceptionalism “that allows adult viewers comfortably to confront the horrors and guilt of war by donning the cloak of childhood innocence” (Spigel 128).

Cloverfield incorporates several elements of this a-historical media response to 9/11 as well, firstly by re-staging familiar representations of those catastrophic moments as an unforeseeable attack by a nameless, unidentifiable monster. In an inspired break with genre traditions, Cloverfield offers no explanation for the monster’s actions, or even any indication of its origins.
Unlike the traditional scientist-hero of the disaster movie, the protagonists of *Cloverfield* are young “neo-yuppies” with no idea of the nature of the events they encounter. But the fact that there is no central voice of authority represented within the narrative maintains the protagonist’s ambiguous position in the film. For just as the unforeseen consequences of technological progress made the scientist-hero at least partially responsible for the impending apocalypse, it is here the ignorance and incompetence of these new global capitalists that is to blame for our current predicament. As Nathan Lee suggests, a subversive reading of *Cloverfield* may indeed be the most compelling one:

> With its emphasis on corporate infrastructure and the unimaginative consumer class that enables it, *Cloverfield* makes for a most satisfying death-to-New-York saga. Which is to say, the fatal flaw of Drew Goddard’s script—shallow, unlikable heroes—can be flipped to an asset: death to the shallow, unlikable heroes! (n. pag.)

Furthermore, while this oppositional reading of the heroes’ traditional dual role of protagonist/antagonist certainly applies within this post-9/11 cultural context, the monster’s similarly dialectical nature may be equally convincing. As in the Ray Harryhausen films of the 1950s, the monster acts out wider resentments against (post)modernity in ways that allow viewers to indulge in such fantasies indirectly.

As the film’s poster illustrates, the monstrous attacks on New York constitute *Cloverfield’s* quintessential attraction: the notion of a post-9/11 New York under attack from a mysterious creature is the sole focus of the poster’s design.
While the image on the poster recreates familiar images of the attack that showed downtown Manhattan from the water, enormous smoke clouds rising from the Financial District (figure 4), it adds the tag line “Some Thing Has Found Us” as its sole indication of the force behind this destruction.

With the film’s monster so literally described by the term “Some Thing,” one is even further tempted to view the monster as the embodiment of the Lacanian Thing (“Das Ding”): the lost object of desire and jouissance that must be continually re-found, perpetually representing the unknowable “abyss/void of the Other beyond every empathy and identification” (Žižek 2010: 312).

Cloverfield’s monster posits the threat to the city precisely in the form of this “unknowable void” that acts out our own repressed fantasies:

The monster thus comes to represent a far more accurate embodiment of how 9/11 was given form in the media, and therefore of the way it was experienced by the public. Unlike the more literal recreations of the attacks, post-9/11...
disaster movies like *Cloverfield*, *War of the Worlds* (dir. Steven Spielberg, 2005), and *Children of Men* (dir. Alfonso Cuarón, 2006) offer more productive ways of “traversing the fantasy” of 9/11. The fundamental ambiguity of genre cinema perfectly accommodates the “Janus-like structure” that is required of such a fantasy: “simultaneously pacifying, disarming (providing an imaginary scenario which enables us to endure the abyss of the Other’s desire) and shattering, disturbing, inassimilable into our reality” (ibid.: 15-16).

In direct contrast with the human-interest media depictions of 9/11 and the sentimental Hollywood features that frame the attacks in terms of heroism and victimization, the post-9/11 disaster film fully embraces the antinomies of contemporary culture. Unlike the monster movies of the 1950s, there is no happy ending that restores the former status quo, nor is there a return to pre-modern fantasies of an Edenic agrarian society. Moreover, the traditional representatives of political authority and scientific progress, which were still such a strong presence in the late-1990s disaster movie cycle, are strikingly absent, leaving the individual subjects to fend for themselves in a catastrophic situation they fail to understand, and in which those traditional authority figures may well be implicated.

These issues will be further developed in the second section of this chapter, in which the apocalyptic scenarios of the superhero movie cycle will be discussed in relation to the overthrowing of the Lacanian symbolic order, and the crumbling faith in the existence of the Big Other in postmodernity. By relating the apocalyptic motifs of the popular television series *Heroes* to this form of Lacanian analysis, I will establish a connection between the symbolic relevance of such narratives and the context of capitalist realism that informs them.
9/11 and the End of History

Each apparent movement of history brings us imperceptibly closer to its antipodal point, if not indeed to its starting point. This is the end of linearity. In this perspective, the future no longer exists. But if there is no longer a future, there is no longer an end either. So this is not even the end of history. We are faced with a paradoxical process of reversal, a reversive effect of modernity which, having reached its speculative limit and extrapolated all its virtual developments, is disintegrating into its simple elements in a catastrophic process of recurrence and turbulence. (Baudrillard 1994: 10-11)

What we may be witnessing is not just the end of the Cold War, or the passing of a particular period of postwar history, but the end of history as such: that is, the end point of mankind’s ideological evolution and the universalization of Western liberal democracy as the final form of human government. (Fukuyama 4)

Of the many genres incorporated and appropriated by the “post-genre genre” of the superhero movie, the disaster film is certainly one of the most obvious. Most superhero movies directly invoke the threat of an impending apocalypse; most feature narratives that are structured around set pieces that foreground spectacular visual effects of mass destruction; and most feature a superhero-versus-supervillain dynamic that functions in a similarly dialectical way as the ambivalent scientist/hero-versus-monster binary of the classic disaster film.

Just as the previous section of this chapter demonstrated that the historical development of the disaster film reflects both continuity and change in relation to its cultural context, so does the superhero movie as a popular film genre that began to take shape in the late 1970s, when the cultural logic of postmodernism had taken hold, but which did not become a sustained cycle until its most vital characteristics took shape as part of 9/11 discourse.

Previous chapters have argued that 9/11 discourse and that of the superhero figure both revolve around central themes of trauma, the postmodern city, and panoptic surveillance. The fourth and final element that binds these two discourses together within our contemporary Foucauldian episteme is that of apocalyptism and end-of-the-world scenarios.

The systematic occurrence of such apocalyptic motifs in the most popular forms of contemporary entertainment strongly suggests a connection with the
absence of historicity proposed by theorists such as Jameson and Žižek. The attacks of 9/11 were presented and publicly experienced in a historical vacuum, which led to a new set of public anxieties of which these films are clearly symptomatic. The superhero movie cycle offers a way to mobilize the contradictory desire to see spectacular images of mass destruction repeated over and over from the safety of a genre that allows for such endless repetition. For as one of the superheroes in *The Incredibles* (dir. Brad Bird, 2004) comments with obvious irony: “No matter how many times you save the world, it always manages to get back in jeopardy again!”

The perpetual threat of the world coming to an end takes many forms in the superhero movie, ranging from the “moral apocalypse” represented by the post-historical, post-ethical world of *The Dark Knight*, to the more traditional last-minute postponements and/or reversals of the world’s destruction, from Superman turning back time in *Superman: The Movie* to the successful containment of corporate greed run amok in the *Spider-Man* trilogy. As with the disaster film, the structural logic of these films embodies the contradictory desire to witness the physical destruction of the world while also seeing it saved by way of the traditional “happy ending” of the Hollywood blockbuster.

This desire to see a spectacularly physical apocalypse may be read as a symptom of the logic of the postmodern condition, which has been repeatedly described in terms that suggest that we have entered an era that exists outside of the continuity of history. From the utopian claims of Francis Fukuyama to the hyperbolic cultural pessimism of Jean Baudrillard, the tendency to identify our age as the “end of history” has been a pervasive, unifying element among otherwise highly diverse and often contradictory postmodern theorists. But whatever their political or theoretical views, they do also have in common their emphasis on establishing a connection between the current state of global capitalism and the wider sense of cultural apocalyptism they describe:

The global capitalist system is approaching an apocalyptic zero-point. Its “four riders of the apocalypse” are comprised by the ecological crisis, the consequences of the biogenetic revolution, imbalances within the system itself
(problems with intellectual property; forthcoming struggles over raw materials, food and water), and the explosive growth of social divisions and exclusions. (Žižek 2010: x)

But whether we follow Žižek’s claim in stating that our system is indeed “approaching an apocalyptic point,” or Baudrillard’s thesis that “history, meaning and progress are no longer able to reach their escape velocity” (1994: 4), the apocalyptic imagination of superhero movies offers a way of dramatizing such irresolvable contradictions. It is therefore less important to define what kind of “post-historical” thinking they represent than it is to emphasize how such texts act them out in a way that leaves intact their fundamental incommensurability.

One popular superhero text that focuses strongly on an impending apocalypse from the context of post-9/11 culture is the first season of the television series Heroes. Not only did this phenomenally successful television narrative bring together numerous strands of the superhero genre, but it did so in a way that was typically postmodern in its use of intertextuality, hyperconsciousness, and self-reflexivity. This makes it an ideal case study not only for the complex ways in which popular culture mobilizes and enacts the circular motion of late capitalism, creating a self-sustaining feedback loop that refers back endlessly to itself; but this closed circle is repeated on another level in the narrative of Heroes’ first season, in which we find that its repeated use of apocalyptic threats ultimately resides in a temporal short circuit that offers an uncanny example of the “post-historical” aspects of contemporary culture.
Heroes: Reversing the Flow of History

In recent days, a seemingly random group of individuals has emerged with what can only be described as “special” abilities. Although unaware of it now, these individuals will not only save the world, but change it forever. This transformation from ordinary to extraordinary will not occur overnight. Every story has a beginning. Volume One of their epic tale begins here...

Opening text crawl from Heroes (episode 1: “Genesis”)

The weekly television series Heroes premiered on September 25, 2006, its pilot episode drawing 14.3 million viewers, making it NBC’s most successful drama series debut in over five years. Throughout its first season, the series maintained this level of popularity, its success further compounded by numerous spin-offs in the form of countless comic books, novelizations, and other forms of licensed merchandising and fan fiction. Although the following three seasons would see a dramatic decrease in the show’s popularity, ultimately leading to its cancellation in 2010, Heroes was for a time a popular phenomenon that brought together several strands of the ongoing superhero movie cycle. It incorporated the superhero genre’s cultural association with discourses of fandom and subcultures, while extending this paradigm to become more deliberately inclusive in its attempt to appeal to multiple socio-demographic groups. Moreover, by incorporating elements from the superhero’s narrative genealogy (most notably from the X-Men series and from Watchmen), it offered a re-reading of the genre through the prism of post-9/11 culture.

As with the post-9/11 disaster film Cloverfield and its complex interaction with its genre traditions on the one hand and the historical specificities of its own cultural context on the other, an analysis of Heroes becomes productive by focusing on the ways in which it follows certain familiar genre tropes, while explicitly breaking with others. This combination of continuity and change can provide insight into the ways in which discursive formations do not emerge out of a vacuum, fully formed, but draw on an established archive of historically
determined material that functions as “the general system of the formation and transformation of statements” (Foucault 2002: 146). By viewing 9/11 as a discursive formation that draws on an established archive that “forms and transforms” groups of statements and thereby potentially alters the episteme of our discursive reality, one must also emphasize this aspect of simultaneous change and continuity. As Foucault explains in his archaeological approach to the differentiation of discursive formations:

To say that one discursive formation is substituted for another is not to say that a whole world of absolutely new objects, enunciations, concepts, and theoretical choices emerge fully armed and fully organized in a text that will place that world once and for all; it is to say that a general transformation of relations has occurred, but that it does not necessarily alter all the elements; it is to say that statements are governed by new rules of formation, it is not to say that all objects or concepts, all enunciations or all theoretical choices disappear. (ibid. 191)

This Foucauldian perspective on how historical change must be viewed as a process in which continuity and genealogy play as great a role as change and revolution is particularly helpful when using popular genres to chart shifts in cultural discourse. Another way of countering the “shock doctrine” associated with the seemingly abrupt and world-changing events of postmodern disasters is Fredric Jameson’s emphasis on historicity, and how “historical events are never really punctual” (2002a: 301). So although the popular texts themselves may be said to reproduce the logic of late capitalism and the “perpetual present” that isolates audiences from any actual engagement with history, a closer analysis of the interaction between such texts, their place in relation to genre history, and their relationship to their own historical context can teach us about the functioning of ideology within them.

Like the superhero movie genre and many other popular 21st-century narratives, Heroes may also be said to inhabit a space that is “post-genre.” It follows the postmodern logic of a television series like Twin Peaks, firstly because it no longer approaches its audience “as a homogeneous mass, but rather as an amalgamation of microcultural groups stratified by age, gender, race, and geographic location” (Collins 1992: 342). In Heroes, this is expressed
not only through the show’s large group of protagonists, who are made up of a
diverse selection of characters that allow for interpellation along lines of gender,
etnicity, age, nationality, and subculture, but also through the interweaving of
various popular genres. Just as other 21st-century television series such as 24, Lost (ABC, 2004-2010), and Battlestar Galactica (Sci-Fi Channel, 2003-2008)
each offer similarly diverse postmodern genre texts, Heroes combines elements
from fantasy, science-fiction, action, and superhero genres within the episodic
framework of the weekly television soap opera. This polysemy of genres and
characters makes the series accessible to a wide variety of distinct audience
groups, each of which can be interpelled by one or more aspects of the series.

Another aspect of Heroes that makes it fit Collins’ definition of typically
postmodern television so neatly is the series’ repeated use of “generic and tonal
variations” in its treatment of the diverse genres it incorporates:

At one moment, the conventions of a genre are taken “seriously”; in another
scene, they might be subjected to the sort of ambivalent parody that Linda
Hutcheon associates with postmodern textuality. These generic and tonal
variations occur within scenes as well as across scenes, sometimes oscillating on a
line-by-line basis, or across episodes when scenes set in paradigmatic
relationship to one another (through the use of the same character, setting, or
soundtrack music) are given virtually antithetical treatments. The movement in
and out of parodic discourse is common in all of the episodes. (ibid. 345-6)

Collins’ description of Twin Peaks applies equally to the postmodern bricolage of
Heroes, which opens up the same kind of space to navigate between various
viewer positions: from melodramatic sincerity to ironic detachment, and from
parodic hyperconsciousness to immersive forms of intertextuality, often within
a single scene. The pair of characters most strongly associated with this extreme
kind of tonal fluidity are the series’ duo of Japanese characters Hiro Nakamura
(played by Masi Oka) and Ando Masahashi (played by James Kyson-Lee).

These two characters most directly embody the subculture of comic book
fandom, responding to the events around them with a full awareness of the rules
and conventions of exactly the kind of genre fiction they inhabit. As their highly
coded form of discourse illustrates, both characters belong to a specific
subculture of comic book fandom that Matthew Wolf-Meyer has described as a Foucauldian “discourse of comics”:

Comic book fandom is a subculture predicated upon its language of difference, which relies, in part, upon continuity similar to Foucault’s critique of the theoretical construction of history with a vocabulary of names, places, and events particular to the community, employed within the culture to communicate, and outside of the culture to promote itself as culturally important while retaining difference. This continuity, and the knowledge of this continuity […], is an essential component of the discourse of comics. (499)

As representatives of this specific subculture, the characters present an obvious entry point into the series for audiences who recognize and appreciate this “discourse of comics.” When Hiro first discovers that he has supernatural abilities, the two characters repeatedly engage in detailed discussions of familiar superhero figures such as Superman and Spider-Man in order to determine their next course of action. This explicit acknowledgment of the series’ relationship to ongoing genre traditions performs several functions at once: it establishes character in a way that makes these figures easily relatable by viewers who share their perspective on cultures of comic book fandom; it signals the text’s awareness of its own position within a specific form of popular culture; and it establishes a relationship towards older superhero traditions that is both respectful and gently parodic.

But unlike most explicitly self-reflexive characters in these types of hyperconscious texts, Hiro and Ando do not merely comment on the ongoing action around them, but also participate actively and sincerely in it. In many ways, Hiro can in fact be viewed as the series’ main protagonist, as he simultaneously discovers the narrative’s basic rules for the audience and gives new form to the traditional superhero (with Ando as the classic sidekick figure). The character’s continuous oscillation between the roles of fan/genre expert and increasingly competent superhero figure makes Hiro a particularly successful audience substitute for viewers who recognize and share his discourse of comics fandom, and for whom he therefore offers both a “realistic” character and the traditional adolescent fantasy of developing one’s own superpowers.
On the other hand, an all too exclusive focus on Hiro as protagonist might have limited the series’ audience to viewers who felt comfortable and familiar with the kind of discourse these two characters represent. For as likely as it is that fans of the show might single out Hiro (who was indeed the most popular character among internet fan communities) as the “hero” of *Heroes*, he shares both equal screen time and narrative prominence with several others, who could just as easily be identified as central characters within the ensemble cast. Each of these other characters provides a different audience segment with a point of identification (and hence: ideological interpellation) in the text: Claire Bennet (played by Hayden Panettiere) represents a strong female teenager from rural Texas; Peter Petrelli (played by Milo Ventimiglia) represents a feminized, sensitive postmodern embodiment of masculinity; Matt Parkman (played by Greg Grunberg) represents the more traditional form of masculinity of the blue-collar working man; Niki Sanders (played by Ali Larter) represents both sides of the phantasmic female sex object (alternately submissive and aggressive); and so on.

While each of the numerous lead characters in *Heroes* can therefore be viewed as possible points of identification for a diversified and explicitly heterogeneous postmodern audience, they can also function as multiple points of entrance simultaneously. Claire for instance can be embraced by teenage girls as a sympathetic way of dramatizing issues they recognize and identify with, such as family conflicts, social issues, and the character’s drive towards self-mutilation; but at the same time, her scenes can be enjoyed by male audiences as a pleasurable, heavily eroticized depiction of the culturally fetishized cheerleader sex fantasy. The series’ employment of such a diverse cast of characters in prominent roles thereby constitutes another viable postmodern strategy of appealing directly to a large variety of individual subcultures, lifestyles and audience groups simultaneously.

Meanwhile, the main narrative of the first season of *Heroes* frames these multiple and fluid forms of postmodern subjectivity within a cultural context that foregrounds specific ideological choices. As with so many superhero
narratives, the larger story arc deals with the threat of an apocalyptic crisis that must be averted, and with which a group of individuals with supernatural abilities are ultimately charged. In this sense, Heroes is very much a part of a form of genre continuity that connects it explicitly with other similar superhero movies and narrative franchises in other media.

The most obvious parallels are firstly with the X-Men series, which became a lasting favorite among comics book fans from the 1960s “Silver Age” onward, and which was among the very first of the 21st-century cycle of superhero movie blockbusters; and secondly with Alan Moore’s influential graphic novel Watchmen, numerous structural elements of which are copied or mirrored in the first season of Heroes. As in X-Men (dir. Bryan Singer, 2000), the protagonists of Heroes discover that some form of genetic mutation/evolution has endowed them with superhuman powers that generally conform with those of the most familiar superhero characters (e.g. invulnerability, physical strength, invisibility, pyrokinesis, the ability to fly, etc.). As in X-Men, this discovery leads the characters towards concerns about how they will be perceived by others, while government organizations seek to regulate and contain them. And as in X-Men, the sympathetic characters move towards working together in a collaborative team in order to save the world from a looming apocalyptic threat.

But Heroes also sets itself apart from its genre roots by eschewing some of the more iconic motifs associated with the superhero tradition. First among these is the series’ total abandonment of the superhero costume. In recent films like X-Men and Hancock, superhero characters regularly expressed a parodic form of self-reflexivity by commenting sarcastically on their costumes, offering the viewer a form of ironic engagement with these traditional genre elements. Nevertheless, most films in the post-9/11 movie cycle maintained the semantic genre motif of the costumed vigilante. In Heroes, this tradition is jettisoned completely, as the eponymous heroes work together without the apparent need to organize themselves into a costumed band of crime-fighters.

In one sense, this can be understood as another way of making the series more accessible to audience groups that are excluded by the discourses of
fandom and subcultures that have limited the superhero’s appeal to particular socio-demographic groups. By abandoning the most visually garish iconography associated with the genre and its ghettoized culture of adolescent males, the series’ treatment of more or less identical narrative material is thus rendered more formally “realistic,” and thereby opens itself up to new audiences. Meanwhile, the traditional cultures of fandom were offered the opportunity to embrace the series’ “innovative” way of presenting superheroes more realistically, while seeing their own form of discourse reaffirmed by the show’s many sly references to other superhero authors and characters, and by its sympathetic treatment of fan culture.

The ideological implications of the characters’ lack of costumes however warrant further investigation and a more detailed theoretical analysis. The tradition of the costumed superhero, like so many other genre elements, would appear to be contradictory. On the one hand, the eccentric costumes seem to offer “ordinary” modern subjects like Clark Kent, Bruce Wayne or Peter Parker a performative mode of standing out from the crowd: their iconic tights, capes and logos brand them with an identity that establishes them as unique individual subjects. The superhero’s costume thus comes to function as a mask that makes it possible to overcome the limitations of free-floating postmodern subjectivity and to successfully enact a form of masculine authority. This points however towards the other side of the costume’s inherent paradox, which is that the costume simultaneously functions as a uniform that by its very definition robs the individual subject of his unique identity, transforming him into a part of a Symbolic order that points directly towards the world of “the big Other.”

“The Big Other” in Post-9/11 Superhero Narratives

In Lacanian terms, the Symbolic order represents the structuring aspect of language that is associated with the “law of the Father” and which allows individual subjects to experience the world as coherent and organized. Although this Symbolic order is—like language itself—riddled with gaps and
inconsistencies, it allows the individual to imagine the existence of this “big Other” that functions along lines of “fetishistic disavowal.” As Žižek explains this concept in his book *The Ticklish Subject*, it involves the classic Lacanian disavowal strategy of “*je sais bien, mais quand même*...” (“I know very well, but still…”). The strongest example Žižek provides of this is the figure of the judge, who is treated with respect not because of the way this individual person is perceived (i.e. as a normal man with the usual abundance of human flaws and inconsistencies), but because “it is the Law itself which speaks through him” (389).

This imagined “big Other” as the fantasmatic embodiment of an operational and effective symbolic order therefore comes to represent the existence of a coherent socio-symbolic reality that structures our daily reality. The problematic nature of postmodernity is now that the individual’s faith in this “big Other” has come to collapse:

The problem today is not that subjects are more dispersed than they were before, in the alleged good old days of the self-identical Ego; the fact that “the big Other” no longer exists implies, rather, that the symbolic fiction which confers a performative status on one level of my identity, determining which of my acts will display “symbolic efficiency,” is no longer operative. (399)

The dissolution of this public belief in “the big Other” can be stated in numerous ways within the framework of postmodern theory. It is evident in one form in Jean-François Lyotard’s postmodern condition of the collapse of the Grand Narratives. It is recognizable in Jean Baudrillard’s development of the simulacrum as the contemporary short-circuit of signification that prevents us from engaging with Reality. It informs Foucault’s description of the Panopticon as a modern emblem of power, occupied by an “empty center.” And it informs Fredric Jameson’s definition of postmodernism as a cultural dominant that blocks the individual’s experience of historicity.

While all these critical theorists of postmodernism share this concern for how individual subjectivity takes shape within contemporary culture, Žižek’s
use of Lacanian theory brings them together in a way that helps explain not only how this relates to politics and ideology, but also to apocalyptic narratives:

Fredric Jameson’s old quip holds today more than ever: it is easier to imagine a total catastrophe which ends all life on earth than it is to imagine a real change in capitalist relations—as if, even after a global cataclysm, capitalism will somehow continue... We may worry as much as we want about global realities, but it is Capital which is the [Lacanian] Real of our lives. (Žižek 2010: 334)

As the nation state developed into the market state, and entrepreneurial capitalism became a “virtual,” post-Fordist capitalism, the symbolic fiction of “the big Other” came to dissolve, and the symbolic function of the father was increasingly undermined. Popular apocalyptic texts are thus clearly symptomatic of this form of anxiety, staging on the one hand a return of the symbolic mandate of patriarchal figures, and on the other an apocalyptic threat that provides the final telos so crucial in allowing our acts to be properly located and accounted for.

To return now once more to Heroes in order to illustrate this theoretical perspective, our first observation must be that the secret organization that tracks individuals with special powers and seeks to control them is led by Noah Bennet (played by Jack Coleman). Bennet is one of several prominent father figures in Heroes, his character defined most strongly by his conflicting responsibilities as a father on the one hand and as a secret agent tracking down superheroes on the other. Like the three other most prominent patriarchal figures in this season, Linderman (played by Malcolm McDowell), Chandra Suresh (played by Erick Avari), and Kaito Nakamura (played by George Takei), Bennet’s character is associated most emphatically with mysterious organizations that secretly control and organize the major characters and events throughout the narrative.

As the main protagonists struggle throughout the season’s narrative arc to solve the mysteries they encounter, their moments of revelation repeatedly involve the discovery that their own father had been secretly orchestrating and monitoring their actions from the start. Their struggle (like that of Batman,
Superman, and Iron Man) therefore comes to revolve around the question how to deal with these father figures, and to what extent their individual destinies have been pre-defined by the authority their patriarchal power represents. The series’ diverse range of characters demonstrates a variety of strategies for dealing with this anxiety: from Hiro’s full acceptance of the patriarchal order to Claire’s decision to accept her adopted father’s decision to sacrifice his own identity for her.

But while many of the series’ subplots feature benevolent fathers, the key character representing this conjunction of patriarchy and capitalism is that of Daniel Linderman, the most malevolent father figure in the series, whose leading role within “the Company” along with his prominence as CEO of a powerful multinational corporation establishes an explicit link between the figure of patriarchal authority and capitalist enterprise. As politician/superhero Nathan Petrelli’s surrogate father figure, Linderman explains in the following dialogue from episode 20, “0.07%,” how his plan to destroy New York City constitutes an attempt to re-establish a socio-symbolic order that functions like the inherently frightening “big Other”:

**Linderman:** People need hope, Nathan.

**Nathan Petrelli:** An explosion of that magnitude would destroy half the population of New York City like that. [snaps fingers]

**L:** There’s six and a half billion people on the planet. That’s less than 0.07%. Come on, that’s an acceptable loss by anyone’s count.

**NP:** By anybody’s count?

**L:** Look, I said people needed hope, but they trust fear.

**NP:** This is crazy.

**L:** This tragedy will be a catalyst for good, for change. Out of the ashes, humanity will find a common goal, a united sense of hope, couched in a united sense of fear. And it is your destiny, Nathan, to be the leader who uses this event to rally a city, a nation, a world. Now you look deep into your heart. You know I’m right.
Linderman’s revelation of the nature of his scheme casts a new light on the season’s overarching narrative. Throughout the preceding eighteen episodes, the protagonists had been struggling to avoid the destruction of New York City, of which they had been forewarned by various visions of the future. Following the series’ mantra “Save the Cheerleader, Save the World,” the main characters came to band together against what appeared to be the main villain: the former watchmaker Sylar (played by Zachary Quinto), who has been murdering other characters with powers in order to steal them and make them his own. Once it has been established that New York will be destroyed by a nuclear explosion caused by a mysterious “exploding man,” the general assumption among the characters has been that Sylar will be responsible for this, and is therefore the one who must be stopped.

The above scene thus changes both the characters’ and the viewers’ understanding of the mechanisms that drive the plot. Firstly, this development establishes a direct connection with Alan Moore’s *Watchmen*, in which the character of Adrian Veidt also reveals that he is responsible for the deliberate destruction of New York City as an attempt to restore balance to the world and thereby avoid a global apocalypse. Like Veidt, Linderman is also portrayed as the embodiment of global capitalism, his corporation a ubiquitous presence throughout the many levels of the narrative. But whereas Adrian Veidt was a
member of the central superhero team in *Watchmen* and therefore a generational peer of the other protagonists in the story, Linderman functions as a surrogate father figure who thus clearly represents a patriarchal figure whose relationship to Nathan Petrelli is classically Oedipal. Like the figure of Ducard in *Batman Begins*, he provides a false father figure who must be resisted and ultimately defeated in order for the superheroic son to establish his own position in the patriarchal order.

The other main difference between Daniel Linderman and Adrian Veidt involves the outcome of their apocalyptic plots. For whereas the destruction of New York in *Watchmen* is orchestrated in a way that precludes any form of resistance (as explained in more detail in chapter 4), the similar disaster in *Heroes* is narrowly avoided. And yet, one of the series’ most confounding contradictions is the ambiguous, even contradictory nature of the disaster. Just as the classic disaster film provides both spectacular images of mass destruction and a last-minute happy ending that transforms the apocalypse into a redemptive new beginning, *Heroes* repeatedly shows both the explosion and its aftermath in various forms, from the garish “future-vision” paintings to CGI footage of skyscrapers falling before a billowing dust cloud (figure 6).

![Figure 6: Visions of the destruction of New York in Heroes.](Image)
Unwriting the Past: The Historical Vacuum of 9/11

The strange ambiguity in the series’ representation of this central moment of apocalyptic spectacle revolves around Heroes’ participation in 9/11 discourse. As I have argued in previous chapters, central elements within this form of discourse are constituted by the attacks’ singularly traumatic effects, the resulting emphasis on cultures of surveillance and panoptic control, and a redefinition of the global postmetropolis (signified by New York City) as the “Ground Zero” of postmodern culture and identity. The apocalyptic narrative of Heroes brings these elements together, firstly, by presenting the deeply traumatic aftereffects of an attack on New York; secondly, by introducing numerous organizations (both private and government-controlled) that secretly govern characters and events via panoptic control; and thirdly, by equating the destruction of the postmetropolis with the end of the world (an alternate, more accurate wording of the series’ catchphrase would have been “Save New York, Save the World”).

Episode 20, “Five Years Gone,” establishes these elements, and thereby the season’s relationship to its historical context of 9/11 discourse, most dramatically. In this installment, Hiro and Ando accidentally travel five years forward in time, finding themselves in a future in which the attack they were trying to prevent has already occurred. In this future New York, both the city and the series’ other protagonists are portrayed as physically and emotionally scarred: downtown Manhattan is still in ruins, slowly undergoing reconstruction; the government has developed into a totalitarian form of police state; terror suspects and “illegals” are routinely tortured by state agents; and the surviving main characters have become cynical and embittered. Within this dystopian environment, Hiro works together with his future self to mobilize the other protagonists and assemble a team that can send him back in time to prevent this future from happening.
This narrative device, familiar from popular Reagan-ear time-travel narratives such as The Terminator (dir. James Cameron, 1984) and Back to the Future (dir. Robert Zemeckis, 1985), involves a complex relationship between the text and its historical context. For example, Back to the Future juxtaposes its narrative present of the mid-1980s with the clearly superior past of the 1950s, while The Terminator offers a similar indictment of postmodernity by revealing that its present will lead inevitably to an apocalyptic future. Heroes demands to be historicized in a similar way, especially because its first season (and this episode in particular) represents a post-9/11 New York as the kind of future that must be avoided at all costs.

This becomes most explicit as “Five Years Gone” reaches its climax during the ceremony to commemorate the five-year anniversary of the explosion that devastated the city. In this scene, Nathan Petrelli (who is President in this alternate future) ascends a podium constructed at Ground Zero, the scene’s staging an obvious recreation of George W. Bush’s commemorative speech on the occasion of the five-year anniversary of the 9/11 attacks (figures 7 and 8).

![Figure 7: The presidential podium at Ground Zero in Heroes.](image-url)
Figure 8: The view from the presidential podium at Ground Zero in *Heroes*.

Not only is the mise-en-scène an uncanny reminder of the real-world events organized at Ground Zero in New York City after 9/11; Petrelli’s speech also echoes the familiar War on Terror rhetoric that came to define post-9/11 American politics:

> My fellow Americans, fellow New Yorkers. Please let us take a moment to remember the men, women and children who were taken from us five years ago: five bells for the five years of sorrow. [A bell tolls five times]

Sacrifice: something we are all too familiar with. We’ve all lost, we’ve all mourned, and we’ve all had to become soldiers—heroes—protecting one another from the great danger. This is a battle none of us wanted. One that we entered with a heavy heart, knowing that the enemy was ourselves. We’ve won battles the world over, not only against those that would do us harm, but against poverty, reclaiming the environment…

But we do not forget the price that we’ve had to pay, the laws that we’ve had to pass to keep our citizens safe, to preserve our way of life.

In connection with Petrelli’s earlier dialogue with Linderman, in which the latter argued that the attack would bring the people together in “a united sense of hope, couched in a united sense of fear,” his later speech demonstrates that this goal was never achieved, and has led instead to a culture of fear and a “battle that none of us wanted.” As in previously discussed examples such as *Batman*
Begins and Superman Returns, the narrative therefore comes to revolve around finding a way to retroactively avoid the traumatic events of 9/11, thus restoring the socio-symbolic order that had been disrupted by them.

What is therefore most problematic about Heroes, as well as the many other superhero narratives that deal with this central concern, is that this repeatedly involves the attempted restoration of the big Other and the patriarchal symbolic order for which it stands. When these narratives reject father figures, it is because they are revealed as inauthentic, even perverse embodiments of patriarchy who use their status to point the heroic protagonists in the wrong direction (e.g. Ducard in Batman Begins, Obadiah in Iron Man, Magneto in X-Men, etc.). Unlike the authentic fathers, who consistently represent values associated with modernist, entrepreneurial capitalism, these false figures of patriarchy are explicitly aligned with postmodern, global capitalism, which is thereby identified as the apocalyptic threat that has already occurred, and which yet must somehow be avoided.

Paradoxically, this final interpretive step, which reveals the true threat behind the false, empty father figure, ultimately short-circuits the ideological framework that informs these postmodern narratives. For if the fear of the monstrous cause of the apocalypse in the disaster movie, in Heroes as well as in Cloverfield, is the Lacanian Thing (“das Ding”) that points towards what lies in the unknowable void of the Other, the source of this Thing must ultimately be found within oneself. It constitutes the excess within the subject that triggers the drive towards jouissance:

The subject of drive is grounded in a constitutive surplus — that is to say, in the excessive presence of some Thing that is inherently “impossible” and should not be here, in our present reality — the Thing which, of course, is ultimately the subject itself. (Žižek 1999: 371)

What seems like a strange contradiction here, locating the unknowable void of the Other within the subject itself, makes more sense when we start applying this to the narratives in the examples discussed previously in this chapter. For in
all cases, the story logic creates a short circuit that interrupts the process of othering, pointing back towards the subject itself.

In the dialectical structure of the 1950s disaster film, the formal protagonist is traditionally the scientist-hero, joining forces with the military in order to fight off the apocalyptic threat of some monstrous Thing that is wreaking havoc on the modern city. But as I have discussed in the first section of this chapter, what initially appears to be an inhuman monster turns out to be the result of human scientific experimentation, making the scientist-hero ultimately responsible for its actions. Furthermore, the monster in these films provides the central point of audience interest in the film, its destructive capabilities embodying our own unleashed sense of jouissance as it acts out our secret fantasies and allows us to revel in spectacular images of mass destruction.

_Cloverfield_ incorporates many elements of continuity as part of this genre tradition, from its spectacular set pieces of New York City under attack by a giant visual effect to its small group of protagonists on an impossible mission to rescue one of their own from the creature’s onslaught. But the film’s departures from genre conventions tell us a great deal about historical processes, changes in ideology, and the postmodern dissolution of older notions of “the big Other.” For whereas the socio-symbolic order associated with patriarchal traditions was always restored at the end of the 1950s disaster film, _Cloverfield_ ends in a vacuum, the image fading to black as the final two protagonists perish in Central Park. If the monster represents a threat to the existing symbolic order, then this film is remarkable for the way in which it deliberately rejects the notion that this order will always be restored.

Similarly, the change of perspective from that of the traditional scientist/hero to a small group of young “neo-yuppies” is significant. For not only does this limit our perspective to that of individual subjects undergoing the experience without the resources to contextualize it or explain it; this also demonstrates how our notions of “the big Other” have shifted from an archaic belief in scientific progress towards the invisible, all-encompassing power of global capitalism. If the traditional disaster film therefore acted out anxieties
relating to the increasingly problematic perceptions of Enlightenment values in the atomic age, then we can see how *Cloverfield* corresponds uncannily with similar anxieties relating to the status of capitalism in the postmodern risk society:

What happens today, with the “postmodern” risk society, is that there is no “Invisible Hand” whose mechanism, blind as it may be, somehow re-establishes the balance; no Other Scene in which the accounts are properly kept, no fictional Other Place in which, from the perspective of the Last Judgement, our acts will be properly located and accounted for. Not only do we not know what our acts will in fact amount to, there is even no global mechanism regulating our interactions — this is what the properly “postmodern” nonexistence of the big Other means. (Žižek 1999: 412)

This perspective on the structure of the postmodern disaster film, in which disastrous events are presented as kinetic, frightening experiences without explanation or the traditionally redemptive resolution, clearly connects with Žižek’s compelling description of the postmodern nonexistence of the big Other. At the same time, the fact that the protagonists of *Cloverfield* are presented as near-caricatures of postmodern capitalists illustrates how this shift has relocated responsibility for disaster to the ongoing crisis of late capitalism. In this perpetual present of postmodernity, our lack of historical bearings has reduced all such events to mere commodities: “in a world bereft of historical bearings even the most awful events inevitably offer themselves up as pure spectacles” (Rozario 6-7).

Moreover, the logic of the subject as the very source of the monstrous Thing is compounded by our libidinal investment in the phantasmic images of mass destruction. Indeed, the perverse notion that the attacks of 9/11 were exactly what America had asked for has found resonance in many forms and levels of narrative and theory. In *Falling Man*, one character argues that the towers of the World Trade Center already represented such fantasies of destruction:

“But that’s why you built the towers, isn’t it? Weren’t the towers built as fantasies of wealth and power that would one day become fantasies of destruction? You built a thing like that so you can see it come down. The provocation is obvious.
What other reason could there be to go so high and then to double it, do it twice? You are saying, Here it is, bring it down.” (16)

Similarly, Žižek is one among many theorists who have noted the uncanny resemblance between the sublime imagery of the 9/11 attacks and a late capitalist culture fueled by fantasies of self-destruction:

The fact that the September 11 attacks were the stuff of popular fantasies long before they actually took place provides yet another case of the twisted logic of dreams: it is easy to account for the fact that poor people dream about becoming Americans — so what do the well-to-do Americans, immobilized in their well-being dream about? About a global catastrophe that would shatter their lives — why? This is what psychoanalysis is about: to explain why, in the midst of well-being, we are haunted by nightmarish visions of catastrophes. (Žižek 2002: 17)

This ambiguous relationship towards these “nightmarish visions of catastrophes” also informs the narrative logic (or lack thereof) in the first season of Heroes, which similarly becomes easier to understand once we locate the source of this (self)destructive drive within the subject. The main narrative, centering on the explosion that will destroy New York City, follows a causal chain of events that is initiated by “future Hiro’s” appearance before Peter Petrelli, instructing him to avoid disaster with the words “Save the Cheerleader, Save the World.”

The curious narrative bootstrapping of “future Hiro” and his initial appearance to Peter Petrelli in episode 5, “Hiros,” is mirrored by “present Hiro” and his trips into the future. As early as the second episode, he accidentally time-travels a month forward in time, where he witnesses the explosion as it occurs, while his extended stay in the future New York of five years after the disaster in episode 20, “Five Years Gone,” makes up a crucial episode in his “hero’s journey”: not until he witnesses for himself the lasting and traumatic repercussions of the explosion is he able to develop the necessary skills and motivation to travel back in time to avoid it. As in Batman Begins, Superman Returns, and Spider-Man, Heroes thus comes to relate explicitly to the historical events of 9/11 once again as an overwhelmingly traumatic singularity that
eludes symbolization, and from which the only escape comes in the form of historical regression.

This is perhaps the key reason why the superhero genre has proved so popular in post-9/11 popular culture: it has provided images and events that offer viewers the opportunity to “traverse the fantasy” that underlies our fascination with the 9/11 attacks while keeping intact the historical vacuum that contributed to the cultural trauma they caused. As archetypal examples of postmodern commodity culture, the superhero franchises offer endlessly adaptable templates for mass entertainment that mobilize the quintessential antinomies of postmodernity: its worlds are constantly being destroyed, yet never end; its characters have long and complex histories, yet they never age; and an absolute dividing line between good and evil is constantly being established, only to be re-defined as historical circumstances alter popular conceptions of what is most fearsome. Like the other superhero films that have dominated popular culture franchises after 9/11, Heroes brings together the strands of apocalyptism and postmodern culture that have come to define our period of capitalist realism.

While Hiro’s main narrative therefore reflects the contradictory position the 9/11 attacks have taken up historically as an exceptional moment that was experienced outside of any form of socio-political context, Peter Petrelli’s character arc comes to embody the disturbing paradox that the cause for this crisis lies within ourselves. Peter’s power as a superhero is his ability to absorb other characters’ powers, which makes him an obvious symbolic representation of the endlessly adaptable formlessness of capitalism:

[Capitalism] is a system which is no longer governed by any transcendent Law; on the contrary, it dismantles all such codes, only to re-install them on an *ad hoc* basis. The limits of capitalism are not fixed by fiat, but defined (and re-defined) pragmatically and improvisationally. This makes capitalism very much like the Thing in John Carpenter’s film of the same name: a monstrous, infinitely plastic entity, capable of metabolizing and absorbing anything with which it comes into contact. (Fisher 2009: 6)
And while Peter Petrelli’s “infinitely plastic” nature therefore symbolically represents some of the most fundamental aspects of capitalism, it should come as no surprise that the central villain Sylar has exactly identical powers: like Peter, he incorporates the abilities of other characters. The only difference is that Peter adopts others’ powers by simply coming into contact with them, thus embodying the myth of benevolent capitalism as a painless, “natural” development, whereas Sylar takes those powers by force, his violence an uncanny reminder of the monstrous destruction inherent in the capitalist system.

If we therefore identify Peter Petrelli as one of the series’ nominal protagonists and Sylar as his main antagonist, we come to recognize how Heroes’ seemingly contradictory logic in fact perfectly reflects both the central antinomies of postmodern capitalism and the post-9/11 structure of global terrorism. For not only does Heroes repeat the typical ambivalence of the disaster film towards its protagonist; it also suggests that both sides in the War on Terror are part of the same system, and that they use identical methods to achieve opposite goals. In his book Terror and Consent: The Wars for the Twenty-First Century, Philip Bobbitt explains how contemporary market state terrorism is radically different from the older forms of nation state terrorism:

In the twenty-first century, terrorism presents a different face. It is global, not national; it is decentralized and networked in its operations like a mutant nongovernmental organization (NGO) or a multinational corporation; it does not resemble the centralized and hierarchical bureaucracy of a nation state. ... It will operate in the international marketplace of weapons, targets, personnel, information, media influence, and persuasion, not in the national arenas of revolution and policy reform. (84)

Bobbitt’s insightful analysis of the nature of 21st-century terrorism thus emphasizes how forces such as Al Qaeda, which are consistently presented as the polar opposite of Western democratic values, at a deeper level in fact operate according to the same logic that drives the “states of consent” of liberal democratic multiculturalism. As in the narrative logic of the disaster film, the
monstrous Other that threatens and attacks us is thus revealed as emanating from the very same subject that sees it as an absolute challenge to its identity.

While it would go much too far to describe a television series like *Heroes* as an insightful critique of the contradictory logic of late capitalism after 9/11, its narrative patterns and seemingly incoherent causal logic do reflect the ideological frameworks and historical short-circuits of the series’ cultural-historical context. Within the post-9/11 narratives of *Cloverfield* and *Heroes*, we can thus identify what Slavoj Žižek has described as the postmodern nonexistence of the big Other: on the one hand, the lack of strong patriarchal order that allows the characters to frame the ongoing events in a coherent, meaningful context in *Cloverfield*; on the other hand, the desire to find a way to restore the very same patriarchal order, acted out by the multitude of father figures that secretly orchestrate the events in *Heroes*. In both instances, popular culture texts can be viewed as a symptom of the cultural dominant of post-9/11 discourse, and also as a helpful illustration of contemporary critical theory.

**Conclusion**

This fifth and final chapter has dealt with the theme of the apocalypse in theories and narratives of postmodernism. As a popular film genre that has maintained a central position throughout post-World War II cinema, the disaster film has been the quintessential embodiment of the apocalyptic imaginary. The first part of this chapter therefore related this genre to its cultural context of Cold War American culture and emerging discourses of consumerism and postmodernism. By focusing on the dialectical structure that informs the unusual protagonist-antagonist dynamic of the classic monster movie, I have demonstrated how such popular narratives can function as a site that allows audiences to engage in these ambivalent symbolic narratives by negotiating between opposite positions, the fluid movement between the two corresponding with postmodern theories of more fluid, unstable forms of subjectivity.
My analysis of post-9/11 disaster movie \textit{Cloverfield} then illustrated how genre cinema can respond to shifts in the cultural context while also maintaining continuity through its adherence to certain stable conventions and genre traditions. Like the Cold War disaster films and the public anxieties they address, \textit{Cloverfield} and the post-9/11 disaster film incorporates similar hostilities and concerns towards postmodernity, while articulating them from within the safety of seemingly apolitical genre fiction. The film’s obvious connection with 9/11 imagery and discourse however reaffirms not only how the historical events were experienced as a monstrous, unforeseeable singularity, but also how the “Thing” that carries out the attacks emerges from the postmodern subject itself, creating a feedback loop that makes the audience the victim of its own crime. The double nature of the text is meanwhile further compounded by the fact that the films that act out these anxieties are themselves consumer commodities that make the spectator complicit. This circular motion thus constitutes a Möbius strip that maintains the absolute hegemony of capitalist realism with all its obvious contradictions.

Turning to the superhero narrative of the television series \textit{Heroes}, the second section of this chapter first explained how the disaster film and its genre traditions have been successfully appropriated by the “post-genre genre” of the superhero movie, its plot usually presenting a world under the constant threat of annihilation. This tradition structures the first season of \textit{Heroes}, which revolved around a devastating attack on New York that is presented as both inevitable and yet still avoidable. Like \textit{Cloverfield}, the series incorporates numerous visual and thematic references to 9/11, contributing similarly to a form of discourse that frames the attacks from a wider context of apocalypticism and trauma.

But unlike \textit{Cloverfield}, which follows Žižek’s theory of the postmodern nonexistence of the big Other to its unremitting end, \textit{Heroes} continuously attempts to restore this dissolved socio-symbolic order by foregrounding powerful father figures who structure and orchestrate the narrative world the other characters inhabit. Like most post-9/11 superhero films, \textit{Heroes} therefore
not only contains many explicit connections to 9/11 discourse and contemporary ideology, but it also seeks the answers to the contemporary crises of late capitalism in a regressive attitude. By offering fantasies of traveling back in time, it aligns the successful avoidance of the 9/11 trauma with the return of patriarchy and the re-establishment of a coherent symbolic order.

But like the superhero films discussed in previous chapters, the big Other that represents stability and patriarchal order in *Heroes* is related systematically to corporations and other forms of capitalist fantasies. The ubiquity of such organizations, and the way in which they have so obviously superseded older forms of authority like that of the nation state, seems to confirm once again the familiar adage that it has become easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism. Indeed, the popularity of superhero and disaster films in contemporary culture suggest that we have a strong desire to see the world end repeatedly, as long as the capitalist system that produces these entertainments remains intact to keep producing these spectacular fantasies.
Conclusion

During the final days of the George W. Bush presidency, after Barack Obama had roundly defeated Republican candidate John McCain in the 2008 elections, Der Spiegel revisited the 2002 “Bush Warriors” cover that had sought to parody the superheroic rhetoric with which the government had started the War on Terror. The cover image that I referenced in the opening passages of my introduction portrayed prominent members of the Bush administration as comic book superheroes and action movie icons. Of those original five politicians, only Bush, Dick Cheney, and Condoleezza Rice remained; Colin Powell had abandoned the stage, leaving behind an empty Batman suit, and “Rumsfeld the Barbarian” is visible only as a battered, muscular arm, symbolizing his ignominious departure from the Bush cabinet. The remaining “warriors” are bruised and battered after six years of seemingly fruitless and increasingly unpopular wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, the president whose popularity had soared in the wake of 9/11 now serving as the punchline to a bad joke. Fittingly, the cover’s design mirrors that of an aging movie poster, a banner across it announcing the “end of the engagement.”

This magazine cover is but one of many cultural indicators that the end of the George W. Bush presidency signaled the end of an era. Just as the 2001 attacks had created the illusion of an historical rupture that now divided history into pre- and post-9/11, the 2008 elections were presented again in terms of their epochal
qualities. But as events in the subsequent years have shown, Fredric Jameson’s truism that “historical events are never really punctual” and that cultural life does not turn on a dime continues to hold true (2002a: 301). The cultural anxieties that fuelled 9/11 discourse are not removed by a change in government, for their roots lie neither in the supposed trauma of the attacks themselves nor in the ongoing military conflicts and government policies that followed them. As the case studies in this study have shown, the deeper cause of these symptoms is located in the system of global capitalism and commodity culture that makes up the Lacanian Real underlying these fantasies.

It is therefore not surprising that the utopian fantasy of a post-racial, non-partisan America that informed Barack Obama’s successful presidential campaign has not materialized under his actual administration. Indeed, the rhetoric and aesthetics of his campaign depended on the very same cultural logic that is so often associated with the neoliberal policies of his predecessor: from the icons and slogans that transformed the candidate into a marketable brand to the superheroic fantasies that quickly accumulated around his public persona as a near-messianic figure with comic book appeal (figure 2).

The superhero movie genre meanwhile has maintained its central position within contemporary popular culture, providing images and events that offer viewers the opportunity to traverse the fantasy that underlies our fascination with the 9/11 attacks while keeping intact the historical vacuum that contributed to the cultural trauma they caused. Even as critical voices continue to predict that the now ten-year-old phenomenon of the superhero movie must now finally be nearing its end, companies like

Figure 2: Obama as superheroic figure on the cover of Amazing Spider-Man #539 (January 2009).
Marvel and DC/Warner are in fact successfully transforming themselves from comic book publishers to multimedia conglomerates on the basis of their ongoing superhero chronologies. Individual films in established franchises increasingly serve as platforms to publicize upcoming ventures, like for instance the critically disparaged but commercially successful Iron Man 2 (dir. Jon Favreau, 2010). And while attempts are also made to reinvigorate the genre with fresh approaches such as Kick-Ass (dir. Matthew Vaughn, 2010) and Scott Pilgrim vs. The World (dir. Edgar Wright, 2010), their general lack of commercial success seems to confirm the absolute hegemony of the superhero genre as a form of commodity culture that trades exclusively in repetitive formulas and astronomic budgets.

As an ongoing indicator of shared cultural anxieties and public fantasies, the superhero movie would thus seem to indicate that little has changed since the establishment of the 9/11 episteme as outlined in the first chapter of this study. The dramatic contradictions that continue to define American culture, its dominant role in global politics and entertainment, and the popular methods of symbolically representing its role in the global arena still result in an intensely polarized national culture. The postmodern erosion of the boundaries between history and representation, politics and entertainment, and the real and the virtual, has resulted in a situation in which the terms of the political debate are now defined primarily by television personalities like Glenn Beck, Sean Hannity, Jon Stewart, and Stephen Colbert. The Tea Party movement may be the most alarming manifestation of this kind of hyperreality, its resolute, intensely nostalgic embrace of comic book vocabulary identifying new heroes and villains as in the self-evident moral logic of a superhero narrative.

The four central themes discussed in this study also continue to suture the gap between fiction and history by providing fantasies that disguise their ideologically defined contours. The subjects of trauma, the city, panoptic surveillance, and apocalyptism that I have described individually in the preceding four chapters remain the central nodes around which forms of contemporary subjectivity are constructed. Just as the events of 9/11 did not constitute a moment of historical rupture, the end of the George W. Bush presidency has not ushered in a sudden
change in the social and cultural vocabulary. For just as 9/11 discourse can be viewed as an intensification of the crises of postmodernism, the issues surrounding the presidential elections and the Obama administration revolve around the same issues that make up the Lacanian Real of globalized capitalism.

All the attempts to enter into a bilateral form of communication between the United States government and Islamic states notwithstanding, the dominant narrative of American selfhood remains that of the traumatized victim: the “common-sense” history of 9/11 is still repeated over and over again as one of a trauma narrative in which an evil aggressor had attacked a self-evidently innocent larger “us.” As I argued in my chapter on the trauma narrative as the first essential theme in 9/11 discourse and superhero narratives, both “high literature” and popular culture have contributed strongly to the natural association of 9/11 with issues of both personal and national trauma, most notably by the repetition of traumatic experience as the motivating force behind every heroic origin story.

In my second chapter, I argued how crucial the public imagination of the postmetropolis remains within contemporary cultural discourse. Ongoing social and political debates on immigration and city planning illustrate vividly how threatened people feel by the idea of Islamic culture being associated with the public perception of a Western metropolis, like for instance New York City. This may be due in large part to the way in which popular culture in the 21st century has presented New York as a site that is defined by its abundance of corporations and available commodities instead of by any noticeable variety of cultures and ethnicities. While films such as Spider-Man have contributed to the successful rebranding of Manhattan as a safe and attractive global village shortly after the terrorist attacks, these films focus have systematically rearticulated the postmetropolis as a playground for identities firmly anchored in forms of white, heterosexual masculinity.

The third chapter focused on issues of surveillance and visibility, emphasizing the notion that the superhero figure in most cases functions as the embodiment of panoptic forms of discipline and control. As my chapter on panoptic discipline and post-9/11 surveillance culture has shown, most superhero narratives transform surveillance technologies into sympathetic human form. Benign authority figures
are systematically associated with the visible, while those that seek to avoid surveillance and public visibility are associated with danger and evil. This form of narrative logic implies that dominant (visible) forms of identity are inherently superior over those that lack representation, as the latter are automatically associated with forces that seek to pervert or disrupt the “natural” order. Most forms of popular narrative thus ultimately help to legitimate the panoptic and synoptic forms of coercive discipline and normative behavior associated with 9/11 discourse and the Bush doctrine.

Finally, the fourth theme I developed dealt with the topic of apocalyptic narratives, and the postmodern tendency to perceive our own time as being at the end of history, or even beyond it. As the many obvious examples from Cold War popular culture illustrate, the cultural fascination with visually spectacular end-of-the-world narratives has been a relatively stable element in the post-WWII cultural vocabulary. As a growing number of critics point out, this fascination for apocalyptic imagery is perhaps better understood not so much as the literal representation of fears related to the threat of nuclear annihilation, but more as the result of the postmodern crisis of agency. The anxieties caused by the systemic hegemony of capitalism and commodity culture seem to create a desire for narratives that give history a nostalgic “reboot,” restoring a lost sense of identity and community that is then associated with pre-modern forms of culture and subjectivity.

Although this study has shown that there are also instances in which the superhero figure has lent itself to negotiated readings of contemporary culture, the overwhelming majority of narratives and characters analyzed here points toward a more problematic worldview in which the nostalgic desire for an earlier form of modern capitalism is accompanied by patriarchal forms of authority. These figures display an attitude towards other cultures and ethnicities that is usually patronizing at best, and openly racist at worst. And although these franchises certainly provide the individual subject with a site where the contradictions of postmodernity can be negotiated metaphorically from within the safety of an unrealistic, allegorical context, it does so in a way that is entirely dictated by the text’s status as a branded commercial commodity.
Het onderwerp van dit proefschrift betreft de manier waarop de Amerikaanse politiek samenvloeit met de populaire cultuur. De centrale figuur in deze studie is de superheld, die fungeert als een symbolische belichaming voor de conflictierende fantasieën die de jaren van het presidentschap van George W. Bush in de VS typen. Ik beargumenteer in dit proefschrift dat het onderscheid tussen feiten en fictie, nieuws en vermaak, en reëel en virtueel in het tijdperk dat volgde op de aanslagen van 11 september 2001 steeds moeilijker te maken is, naarmate politiek en entertainment zelfs nog meer met elkaar versmolten raakte dan tijdens de Reaganjaren. Deze erosie van voormalige begrenzingen duidt op mijn hypothese dat de aanslagen van 9/11 tot een intensivering van de cultuur van het postmodernisme hebben geleid. Zoals theoretici als Fredric Jameson en Slavoj Žižek hebben betoogd, vertegenwoordigen de politieke en culturele verschuivingen van na 9/11 niet het eind van het posmodernisme, maar juist een voortzetting ervan, echter wel met een groter bewustzijn van de vele crises die voortkomen uit het globale kapitalisme en virtuele economieën.

Binnen deze global village is de Amerikaanse populaire cultuur internationaal gezien meer prominent dan ooit geworden, naarmate succesvolle commerciële franchises uit Hollywood zich over steeds meer verschillende media hebben verspreid. Binnen deze allesomvattende cultuur van producten en herkenbare merknamen werd de superheld in het eerste decennium van de 21e eeuw de dominante figuur in de postklassieke cinema. Aan de ene kant kan het succes van iconische figuren als Batman, Superman en Spider-Man gekoppeld worden aan hun herkenbaarheid als striphelden, waardoor een grote diversiteit aan producten succesvol in de markt gezet kan worden. Maar superhelden worden ook sterk geassocieerd met Amerikaans politiek en ideologie. Hun opmars in de periode 2002-2008 moet daarom ook bezien worden vanuit hun ideologische inhoud en de manier waarop het genre is verbonden aan de Amerikaanse cultuur en geschiedenis. Dit verband werd nog evidentier tijdens het presidentschap van George W. Bush,
aangezien het politieke vertoog van zijn regering gretig gebruikmaakte van terminologie die duidelijk ontleend was aan de figuren en verhalen van de actiefiguren en superhelden uit de Hollywoodfilm.

Om de onderliggende thema’s die de superheldenfilm en 21e-eeuwse Amerikaanse politieke vertogen met elkaar verenigen vanuit een theoretisch kader te benaderen, is dit proefschrift verdeeld in vijf hoofdstukken die elk een centraal thema centraal stellen. In het eerste hoofdstuk wordt het verband tussen postmoderne theorie en de vertogen rondom 9/11 nader toegelicht en uitgediept. Daarmee wordt mijn theoretische kader van neomarxisme en *critical theory* toegepast op de mediavertogen die naar aanleiding van 9/11 werden geproduceerd, alsmede de superheldenfilms die snel erna verschenen. Het tweede hoofdstuk gaat nader in op het onderwerp van traumatheorie, en beargumenteert dat verschillende media actief bijdroegen aan het idee dat de getraumatiseerde reactie van het publiek op de aanvallen van 9/11 niet alleen normaal, maar ook natuurlijk was. Ik ondersteun deze argumentering eerst met een analyse van enkele literaire voorbeelden uit het Amerikaanse genre van de “9/11 roman,” en vervolgens met verschillende voorbeelden uit de superheldenfilm, waarin deze thema’s op een vergelijkbare manier naar voren komen.

Het derde hoofdstuk heeft als thema de traditionele relatie tussen de superheld en de (post)moderne stad, die in de jaren na 9/11 een nieuwe invulling kreeg. Na de aanval op New York moest het imago van deze stad als centrum van het globale kapitalisme en aantrekkelijke toeristenbestemming opnieuw worden gedefinieerd, en de superheldenfilm heeft daar een belangrijke rol in gespeeld. In de film *Spider-Man* (Sam Raimi, 2002) zien we de postmoderne stad als virtuele speeltuin voor de superheld, die in zijn vluchtduiken door de metropool een belichaming wordt van de postmoderne *flâneur*. Deze problematische visie van de hedendaagse stad wordt verder uitgewerkt in het vierde hoofdstuk, waarin het thema van sociale controle en toezicht centraal staat. Aan de hand van het theoretisch model van Michel Foucault geef ik hier een concrete invulling van het panopticisme binnen de context van de post-9/11 cultuur, en gebruik ik voorbeelden uit de films *The Dark Knight* en *Iron Man* om aan te tonen hoe...
superhelden vaak in de eerste plaats toezichthouders zijn die de dominantie van blanke, patriarchale homogeniteit veilig stellen. De dreiging binnen deze films komt aan de andere kant steeds van postmoderne vormen van sociale en economische identiteit, waartegen de superheld een aartsconservatieve strijd aangaat.

Het vijfde en laatste hoofdstuk brengt de voorgaande thema's samen door het gegeven van apocalyptische verhalen in de postmoderne cultuur centraal te stellen. Door steeds opnieuw het einde van de wereld als centraal gegeven te gebruiken, wordt dit niet alleen gekoppeld aan een specifieke invulling van de stad als centraal punt van de postmoderne maatschappij, maar worden ook de begrippen van macht, toezicht, en trauma opnieuw benadrukt en bij elkaar samengebracht. De verbinding van deze thema's in de superheldenfilm weerspiegelt niet alleen het dominante element van “het einde van de geschiedenis” uit de postmoderne theorie; het laat ook zien dat deze thema's op een regressieve manier binnen deze fictieve kaders wordt geplaatst, en een fantasie komen te belichamen die het publiek loskoppelt van een besef van historiciteit, waarvoor in de plaats een nostalgic en patriarchale droomwens komt te staan.

Tezamen vormen deze hoofdstukken een analyse van de thema's die aantonen hoe sterk de Amerikaanse populaire cultuur verbonden is met ideologische en politieke kwesties, juist in genres zoals de superheldenfilm die op de oppervlakte juist weinig of geen verband lijken te hebben met de geschiedenis, en die doorgaans worden gezien als onrealistisch escapisme. Ik beargumenteer in dit proefschrift dat dit escapisme juist altijd een ideologisch geladen vorm aanneemt die het dominante politieke vertoog van de Bush-regering impliciet ondersteunt en naturaliseert. De meeste superheldenfilms vormen daarmee een belangrijk en zeer problematisch onderdeel van een mondiale populaire cultuur die specifieke Amerikaanse ideeën en belangen uitdraagt.


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