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 apocalyptism.

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 apocalyptism 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
television.

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;
• theorizes 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. 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 clearly the case 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

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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
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.).](image)

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
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.