Superheroes and the Bush doctrine: narrative and politics in post–9/11 discourse
Hassler-Forest, D.A.

Citation for published version (APA):
Eigen Beheer

General rights
It is not permitted to download or to forward/distribute the text or part of it without the consent of the author(s) and/or copyright holder(s), other than for strictly personal, individual use, unless the work is under an open content license (like Creative Commons).

Disclaimer/Complaints regulations
If you believe that digital publication of certain material infringes any of your rights or (privacy) interests, please let the Library know, stating your reasons. In case of a legitimate complaint, the Library will make the material inaccessible and/or remove it from the website. Please Ask the Library: http://uba.uva.nl/en/contact, or a letter to: Library of the University of Amsterdam, Secretariat, Singel 425, 1012 WP Amsterdam, The Netherlands. You will be contacted as soon as possible.
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.

Figure 1: Promotional artwork for America: A Tribute to Heroes.
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.
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. [...] He 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
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 personae 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
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.