Superheroes and the Bush doctrine: narrative and politics in post--9/11 discourse
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Chapter 2: 9/11, Historical Trauma, and the Postmodern Subject

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

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

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

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

These superhero films share the focus on trauma narratives that is evident in the 9/11 novels discussed in this chapter, and similarly confirm the implication that the attacks of 9/11 were a form of historical singularity that had caused a legitimate form of cultural trauma. But unlike the characters in the 9/11 novels, whose response to this traumatic experience is defined by a sense of paralysis, trauma in the superhero narrative instead acts as a catalyst for action. The experience of trauma in popular culture is thereby reconfigured as a call to action that enables the transformation from victim to hero. Unlike the more critical reflections on 9/11 discourse found in the “high culture” of the 21st-century novel, popular culture thus seems to play a defining role in the development of 9/11 discourse as an ideological tool that unites seemingly contradictory cultural notions.
9/11 and the Construction of National Trauma

The world was this as well, figures in windows a thousand feet up, dropping into free space, and the stink of fuel fire, and the steady rip of sirens in the air. The noise lay everywhere they ran, stratified sound collecting around them, and he walked away from it and into it at the same time. (DeLillo, Falling Man, 4)

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

**Falling Man: Language Games in Postmodern Limbo**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

9/11 Trauma and the Superhero Film

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

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

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

**The revisionary superhero narrative**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

*Figure 2: Orientalist stereotype Ra's al Ghul in Batman Begins.*
charismatic Caucasian mentor, Ducard (Liam Neeson).

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

These connotations come to the fore when Bruce Wayne arrives at the League of Shadows’ headquarters, where he undergoes his combat training in *Batman Begins*. These headquarters are set in a temple in a remote Asian mountain range (figure 3), resembling the headquarters of terrorist organization Cobra in GI Joe comics, which are described as “designed architecturally to resemble a temple hidden in a Himalaya-like region” (Norlund 8). Like Cobra’s leader, Ra’s Al Ghul is also “a terrorist personality [portrayed] as a disingenuous religious leader, suggest[ing] that no terrorist or religious leader is authentically devout” (ibid.). This connection between terrorism and Eastern mystical religion is made explicit in the film by the League’s headquarters’ resemblance to a temple (figure 3). It is further solidified by the presence of signifiers such as Buddha figurines on prominent display in the first interior shot. Bruce Wayne is

Figure 3: The League of Shadows’ temple-like mountain headquarters.
successfully recruited, trained, and indoctrinated by the League of Shadows, but later rejects the organization when he is assigned the task of executing a criminal as a required rite of passage. Wayne decides to turn against the League’s absolutist ideology, immediately thereafter making his separation complete by blowing up the temple where he has undergone the training that will later make him a superhero.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Batman: We can bring Gotham back.
Gordon: What about escalation?
Batman: Escalation?
Gordon: We start carrying semi-automatics, they buy automatics. We start wearing Kevlar, they buy armor-piercing rounds.

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

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

**V for Vendetta: the terrorist superhero**

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

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

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

![Figure 4: Overhead shot of V cooking breakfast, followed by medium shot of V.](image)

![Figure 5: Identical overhead shot of Deitrich, followed by medium shot of his kitchen.](image)

moment of crisis. Both men, in fact, serve her the same dish for breakfast,
framed in a sequence of identical shots (figures 4-5), while Deitrich jokingly
claims that he is the masked V.

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

Evey’s re-living of this childhood trauma is followed by her capture and torture, for which the government first appears to be responsible, but which is later revealed to have been masterminded by V. The sequence of Evey’s capture, imprisonment, and torture makes up an extended part of the film, which again departs from the source texts in ways that establish further connections to 9/11 discourse.
One of the most controversial issues in the post-9/11 War on Terror has been the detention of “enemy combatants” in the American prison facility of Guantánamo Bay, where individuals suspected of terrorism have been detained without official charges, and without recourse to the rights they would be granted on American soil. Images of prisoners clad in orange jumpsuits, with black bags over their heads, became instantly recognizable signifiers that were circulated throughout the mainstream news media, and were adopted by protesters to signify their solidarity with human rights interests (figure 12).
One of the film’s most obvious references to current events and 9/11 discourse is the filmmakers’ decision to copy the iconic orange prison garb and black bags for Evey’s imprisonment sequence (figure 13). After supposedly being arrested on charges of terrorism, the innocent Evey’s torture, solitary confinement, and inhumane treatment transforms the narrative into an allegory that references the imagery associated with 9/11 and the War on Terror. Unlike the book, which contains no such iconic references to the current affairs of its own historical period, the film thus invites readings that draw on ideological perspectives pertaining to these images. As Nicholas Xenakis points out in his article on the adaptation of Moore’s graphic novel, “the scenes with black hoods, torture and
the Quran appear to be more from the front page than a speculative tale of ‘what ifs’” (138). Instead of the form of political satire found in the book, the film is thus pulled into the realm of “liberal fantasy” (ibid.), catering to a genre audience to which it delivers an unambiguous tale of crowd-pleasing heroism and spectacular action, along with a heavy-handed liberal agenda that supposedly elevates the film to the level of topical commentary.

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

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

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

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

Figure 15: V’s first attack on London (Moore and Lloyd 14)
Tchaikovsky’s *1812 Overture*, an act visualized in the film as a spectacular – and victimless – fireworks display. This act is in fact a conflation of two separate scenes from the book, in which V first blows up the Houses of Parliament (figure 15) and later targets the Old Bailey.

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

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

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

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

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

**Conclusion**

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

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

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

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

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