Superheroes and the Bush doctrine: narrative and politics in post--9/11 discourse
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Chapter 3: Superheroes in the Postmodern Metropolis

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

This is most evident in films from the 1920s and ‘30s, by which time international cinema had embraced a predominantly narrative form, and during which time Hollywood’s introduction of the star system deliberately
transformed the human actors and actresses populating its screens into superhuman images that seemed to exist on an altogether different level of reality. The same logic soon came to apply to representations of the modern city on film, as their quintessential modernity was exaggerated into a spectacle in its own right, the most obvious example from early cinema certainly being Fritz Lang’s *Metropolis* (1927). In Lang’s influential film, the representation of the film’s eponymous metropolis serves as the film’s main spectacle, continuously overshadowing the narrative that takes place within this futuristic environment. Urban space in this “terrifying if simplistic vision of a twenty-first-century totalitarian society” is defined by its mechanistic, advanced technological character that systematically dehumanizes its “robotlike workers” (Cook 114). A similar logic is evident in *Sunrise: A Tale of Two Humans* (dir. F.W. Murnau, 1927), in which the contradiction between urban life and provincial life is dramatized through a distillation of all the decadence and dehumanizing technology associated with “the city” into a condensed, geographically unspecific metropolis that provides the antithesis of “natural” country life.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The 9/11 attacks and their resulting impact on global tourism, and most particularly tourism to New York, gave added urgency to this ongoing project of presenting the city as an attractive consumer product. The American film industry responded to the cultural trauma of 9/11 by postponing the releases of action films now deemed inappropriate, such as Collateral Damage (dir. Andrew
Davis, 2002) and Sidewalks of New York (dir. Edward Burns, 2001) (Cadorette, n. pag.). In many films that were released in the months following the attacks, footage containing the World Trade Center buildings was digitally altered in order to avoid the “potentially trauma-inducing” effect of being confronted with shots of the Twin Towers, whose destruction had so visibly affected the skyline (Spigel 119). Examples of digital alteration of footage shot before the attacks includes comedies such as Zoolander (dir. Ben Stiller, 2001) and Serendipity (dir. Peter Chelsom, 2001), while several major television series, including Sex and the City (HBO, 1998-2004) and The Sopranos (HBO, 1999-2007), swiftly removed shots of the World Trade Center from the montage sequences in their opening credits.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

A second noteworthy detail is the way in which the festival in Times Square is represented by highly contradictory images that combine the spectacle of a quintessentially metropolitan setting with the reassurance of provincial camaraderie, tradition, and public safety. As the camera descends into the crowd assembled on this alternate Times Square to find Spider-Man’s alter ego Peter Parker taking pictures of the festivities, the first image we pick out via his camera’s viewfinder is one of two young women dressed in what appears to be some kind of European traditional costumes (figure 3).
In the background, a group of Chinese women is visible, similarly outfitted in traditional wear, which is supposedly occasioned by this festival’s vague notion of world unity, a term otherwise left unexplained in the film. The short sequence of shots meant to illustrate this bewildering interpretation of world unity is however strongly overshadowed by the on-stage performance by Macy Gray, whose real-life celebrity and status as an international mainstream hip-hop superstar gives this World Unity Festival an unmistakable flavor of American corporate entertainment. Aesthetically, the pop music track being performed here creates a sense of dissonance with the traditionalism of the costumes worn by members of the audience, as well as the absence of the kind of security measures without which such a public appearance would be unthinkable. What this strange collection of confusing contradictions and exaggerations does seem to try to represent is the notion of the “global village,” a term first introduced by Marshall McLuhan in the early 1960s, and later re-appropriated more metaphorically to describe the globalizing effects of the Internet and the World Wide Web.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Both the trompe l’oeil designs of comic book splash pages emphasizing exaggerated plays on perspective and the effects-driven action set pieces of the superhero film illustrate this point most strongly. *Superman: The Movie* and *Spider-Man*, each in its own way a genre-defining popular success, went to great lengths to foreground the sequences in which the protagonist moves through the city in superhuman ways. “You’ll believe a man can fly” was the tagline for *Superman*, spearheading an elaborate publicity campaign that strove to communicate the notion that realistic illusions had been created for this film; *Spider-Man* adopted a similar strategy, releasing numerous Electronic Press Kits and television specials that again focused on the film’s groundbreaking visual effects. 3

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

In the third and final section of this chapter, I will examine the question whether this structure also holds true for Spider-Man’s dialectical opposite: the dystopian urban jungle of Gotham City in The Dark Knight. As the only post-9/11 superhero movie as of this writing to surpass Spider-Man’s financial success, The Dark Knight combined the popular appeal of one of the most familiar superhero characters with the critical prestige of an acclaimed independent director and a much-discussed emphasis on “realism” and topical issues. Given this different background and context, the following section will seek to answer not only the question to what extent The Dark Knight presents an alternative to the symbolic short circuit of Spider-Man, but also to analyze the different ways in which this other film was embraced immediately as a vital part of 9/11 discourse.
The Threat of Postmodern Finance: Dystopian Terror in Gotham City

Unlike the glossy capitalist playground of Spider-Man’s New York City, The Dark Knight presented a very different urban environment for its superhero protagonist to inhabit and protect, which is part and parcel of the gothicism inherent in the Batman character’s aesthetic tradition. But unlike the preceding Batman films (including its direct predecessor Batman Begins), The Dark Knight emphasizes from the very beginning that its depiction of Gotham City is not the
“densely stylized urban forest of inky comic-book noir” based on an exaggerated, film noir-influenced version of New York City (Emerson n. pag.). Instead, it utilizes helicopter shots of downtown Chicago to a previously unknown degree, thereby eschewing the exaggerated aesthetics that had made earlier Batman films so instantly identifiable as “comic book movies” without any connection to an exterior reality.

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

*Figure 5: A more “realist” Gotham City: Chicago in The Dark Knight*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

**Conclusion**

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

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

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

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