Superheroes and the Bush doctrine: narrative and politics in post-9/11 discourse
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Chapter 4: The Panoptic Superhero: Surveillance, Control and Visibility in Post-9/11 Popular Culture

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

Superman Returns (emphasis added)

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

24: Heroic Narratives of Post-9/11 Surveillance

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Both main concerns raised within the narrative context of 24 as “the Official Cultural Product of the War on Terror” are therefore largely dispelled by a form that favors actions over consequences, and a series of narrative choices that dispels the potentially problematic illegality of Bauer’s renegade methods. The ideology represented by 24 thus offers a compelling embodiment of the double logic of the Panopticon and the Synopticon. The panoptic power
represented by CTU, with its elaborate surveillance technology working alongside its legal mandate to apprehend and punish individual subjects, is legitimized by the synoptic role it plays as a popular text in mass culture: “the synoptic helps justify the panoptic, which in turn provides some of its most telling images” (Lyon 50).

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Batman: Beautiful, isn't it?
Lucius Fox: Beautiful. Unethical. Dangerous. You've turned every cellphone in Gotham into a microphone.
Batman: And a high-frequency generator-receiver.
Lucius Fox: You took my sonar concept and applied it to every phone in the city.
With half the city feeding you sonar, you can image all of Gotham. This is wrong.
Batman: I've got to find this man, Lucius.
Lucius Fox: At what cost?
Batman: The database is null-key encrypted. It can only be accessed by one person.
Lucius Fox: This is too much power for one person.
Batman: That's why I gave it to you. Only you can use it.
Lucius Fox: Spying on 30 million people isn't part of my job description.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

**Panoptic Power and Neoliberalism: Visibility and Power in Watchmen**

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

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

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

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

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

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

![Figure 11: A New York MTA advertisement calling on the public's synoptic powers (2009).](image)

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Figure 12: Adrian Veidt before his panoptic wall of monitors.
multinational corporation strongly associated with the visual motif of his panoptic surveillance device (figure 12).

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Figure 16: The exotic Troll Market in *Hellboy II: The Golden Army*.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

**Conclusion**

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

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

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

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