From Flying Man to Falling Man: 9/11 Discourse in *Superman Returns* and *Batman Begins*

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From their first appearance in the comics of the 1930s, superheroes have always served overtly political causes: since their breakthrough as champions of the working man, battling exploitative employers, irresponsible mine owners, and other unsavory capitalist figures, characters like Superman and Batman have retained their familiar iconic appearance but have shifted ideological positions several times over the course of their seventy-odd year existence. Given the fact that the most radical redefinitions always took place during periods of ideological conflict between the United States and its political enemies, it would make sense to investigate whether the attacks of 9/11 and the resulting War on Terror have had a similar repositioning effect. This question may be considered even more relevant when one considers that the superhero has become an increasingly dominant figure in popular culture over the past decade.

With examples ranging from Golden and Silver Age comic book heroes like Spider-Man, the Incredible Hulk, the Fantastic Four and Iron Man to more recent, even alternative creations like Hancock, Hellboy, and the characters from the multimedia phenomenon engendered by the TV show *Heroes*, superheroes now make up a larger part of our popular media landscape than ever before. Nor does these characters' connection to political rhetoric form a one-way street: in the political speeches of the Bush administration, we have witnessed the return of comic book terminology associated with the binary opposition between good and evil that dates back to World War II, e.g. the rehabilitation of the bizarrely chosen misnomer 'Axis of Evil' to describe whichever nation states are currently singled out as 'our' enemies:

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

But while comic books during the 'Long War' against fascism and communism clearly served as a form of government propaganda and therefore fulfilled a clear-cut hegemonic purpose (in the Gramscian sense), we have so far failed to see our contemporary superhero figures join the fight explicitly and sock Osama in the jaw, as Captain America famously did to Hitler on the cover of his very first issue. Indeed, overt references to 9/11 and the War on Terror have been relatively rare in superhero comics.

Similarly, most superhero films have steered clear of any specific mention of the 9/11 attacks and their social and political aftermath, even in films that take place in post-9/11 New York City, such as the Spider-Man and Fantastic Four films. But although explicit references to this decade's most politically and culturally defining events and their after-effects have been absent on the surface of new superhero films, we find metaphoric and symbolic representations aplenty. Significantly, the debate surrounding the blockbuster phenomenon *The Dark Knight* (Christopher Nolan, 2008) dealt not with the question whether it was in fact about the War on Terror, but on what it was saying about it. Whether films such as these actually offer a coherent critical or political perspective on current events or simply "pluck out bits of cultural flotsam opportunistically," as David Bordwell has maintained, it seems evident that these narratives also serve as vehicles for metaphorical representations of contemporary conflicts and debates. This roundabout way of dealing with national trauma falls conforms in fact with Cathy Caruth's use of trauma theory to explain the indirect ways in which trauma victims use narrative to engage with personal trauma, like sexual abuse, or historical trauma, such as the Holocaust.

Following this line of thought, this paper offers an investigation and analysis of how the events of 9/11 have been transfigured and re-visualized in recent superhero films. My main case studies in this essay are *Superman Returns* (Bryan Singer, 2006) and *Batman Begins* (Christopher Nolan, 2005), two reboots of major superhero

franchises that are notable not only for the fact that they feature the two most iconic and enduring superhero figures, but also because they mark a transition in the superhero film genre. For unlike earlier superhero blockbusters that spearheaded franchises of diminishing returns, such as *Superman: The Movie* (Richard Donner, 1978) and *Batman* (Tim Burton, 1989), these 21st-century revisions managed to draw in new audiences by attracting directors who brought their independent auteur credentials to bear on the project. On top of this, these films are also the first to draw heavily on Frank Miller and Alan Moore's celebrated wave of graphic novels that are most famous for deconstructing the classical superhero archetypes in the late 1980s.

Those highly influential comics, which have been generally recognized as a critical response to the neo-conservative policies of the Reagan-Thatcher era, were the first to draw critical and academic attention to superhero comics. The major themes in *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns*, *Batman: Year One* and *Watchmen* include issues such as the problematic morality and legality of superhero figures, the manipulative role of the mass media in contemporary society, and an ambiguous investigation of how real-world superheroes would most probably affect the flow of world history adversely. But although the popularity of these comics was certainly a factor in Warner Brothers' decision to launch a Batman film franchise, the themes from these books somehow failed to appear in superhero film adaptations until after 9/11.

In this paper, I aim to demonstrate how the above themes are addressed in different but related ways in *Superman Returns* and *Batman Begins*, and how both films draw explicitly on imagery and motifs associated specifically with 9/11 in order to imbue familiar icons and narrative tropes with new relevance. I will show how both films display ambivalent attitudes towards the narrative traditions of the superhero genre from which they are derived, simultaneously reaffirming the essential genre tropes and traditions and introducing new elements that establish connections to a contemporary, specifically post-9/11 American context.

The Superhero Trope

In their extensive work on the subject of twentieth-century popular mythology embodied by American superheroes, John Shelton Lawrence and Robert Jewett have established how these modern myths are clearly distinguishable from the classical heroic archetypes as defined by Joseph Campbell. Unlike the hero of classical Campbellian mythology and Propp's structuralist analysis of folk tales, a figure who

sets out to venture into a world of supernatural wonder to become a man and ultimately return to his community, the myth of the American superhero always seems to revolve around an invincible figure saving a helpless community from danger. According to Lawrence and Jewett, one of the most problematic aspects of this quintessentially American narrative paradigm is its implication for democratic ideals and institutions: without exception, the superhero figure, embodied by a diversity of characters ranging from cowboys like the Virginian to supermen like John Rambo, is forced into action by the ineffectual nature of democratic institutions. With only incidental exceptions, police officers, lawyers, judges, and politicians are portrayed as irredeemably corrupt, bureaucratic and incompetent. The superhero figure is called upon to cleanse this helpless community of sin through his use of redemptive violence. His task accomplished, the savior ultimately rides into the proverbial sunset, leaving the community to its own means once order has been restored, at least until the next crisis appears on the horizon.

This narrative formula has obvious advantages within the comic book culture industry, as hero archetypes such as these can come to the rescue of an infinite number of communities in crisis. And because there are no clear ideological elements contained within the formula, it makes the superhero figure extremely adaptable to changing political and social values: a free-floating signifier ready to be mobilized and take up arms against whichever kind of threat its age presents. *Comic Book Nation,* Branford Wright's book-length study of American comics, clearly demonstrates how adaptable these figures have proved themselves to be throughout nearly a century of their history as icons of popular culture.

The final defining characteristic in Lawrence and Jewett's definition of the superhero figure is the fact that he is never rewarded for his deeds. The superhero must remain celibate, unlike the classical heroic archetype, who is rewarded with a bride, both as an indicator of the community's normative heterosexuality and of implied maturity. For not only would any kind of romantic or sexual commitment conflict with the superhero's ability to operate independently, any reward might also imply that his actions were not entirely motivated by altruism. And it is precisely this altruistic nature that has allowed for superhero figures to function as metaphorical embodiments of American national policy and identity. The fact that he uses superior physical force only to defend an imagined 'greater good' made the superhero a convenient symbol for postwar American interventionist policy. These flag-waving

figures range from the most literal embodiments of nationalist iconography like Captain America and Uncle Sam to more recent attempts to create similar icons in figures like *24*'s Jack Bauer, an indestructible superhero for our own era.

"Truth, Justice, All That Stuff…"

Few superheroes have consistently embodied aspects of American identity as long or as successfully as Superman has. As the first major figure in popular fiction to combine mythological elements with superhuman abilities that made him virtually indestructible, he was also the first of the Golden Age comics icons to cross over successfully into other media: from the 1940s Max Fleischer cartoons to post-war B-movies, and from radio serials to the popular 1950s television show. But it wasn't until his appearance in *Superman: The Movie* (Richard Donner, 1978) that he would become the ubiquitous figure that would help define post-classical blockbuster cinema.

It is relevant to note that this first true A-list superhero film franchise, made up of four films that appeared from 1978 to 1987, was so lucrative during the Reagan era. Like so many other popular films from this decade, the series displayed a strong tendency towards nostalgia from its very start: throughout the films, we see jaded, cynical feminist Lois Lane being won over by Superman and his alter ego Clark Kent as the embodiment of the traditional values of a more innocent, less complicated age. Like *Back to the Future* (Robert Zemeckis, 1985), *Happy Days*, and many other popular films and TV shows from the early 1980s, this film seeks the answers to the post-Watergate, post-Vietnam sense of malaise in the romanticized patriarchal values of the 1950s. As defined by Fredric Jameson, these nostalgia films serve to de-historicize the postmodern present by continuously referring back to a glorified past that never truly existed in the first place. *Superman: The Movie* fits the bill perfectly, as the past to which it refers is nothing short of a postmodern pastiche of elements from fondly remembered childhood comic books and TV serials.

Given the resurgence of superheroes in blockbuster cinema since 2001, the Man of Steel's long-awaited return to the silver screen soon became all but inevitable, especially when one considers the fact that the American president at that time adopted the Reagan era as the very model of political and economic policy. Following several abortive attempts to re-imagine Superman in a radically updated guise, he finally appeared in the 2006 summer blockbuster *Superman Returns*. But instead of

the originally envisioned update, this franchise reboot proved to be an exercise in nostalgic one-upmanship. In a strangely Baudrillardian twist, Singer's picture goes out of its way to recreate the experience of the 1978 film, thereby fashioning itself into the ultimate simulacrum: an identical copy without a true original. After all, if we can safely establish that *Superman: The Movie* cannot be considered an "original" in any sense of the word, the fact that *Superman Returns* enshrines it as its nostalgic object of desire becomes doubly odd.

From its opening credits, which re-use the earlier franchise's rousing orchestral score, to the casting of Brandon Routh first and foremost for his uncanny resemblance to Christopher Reeve, this 21st-century blockbuster seems overtly nostalgic for the pre-9/11 days of 1950s-inspired Reaganomics. In a remarkable plot twist, the film updates the Superman chronology with the notion that Superman abandoned earth (or rather: America) "five years ago," which works out as the year 2001, upon which Lois Lane published the Pulitzer Prize-winning editorial "Why the World Doesn't Need Superman." Returning at the start of the film from his self-imposed exile, the first thing Superman does is watch TV, which shows us news footage familiar from recent conflicts in the Middle East. The prospect is tantalizing: will Superman take it upon himself to assist in the War on Terror now that the film so clearly links his return to America's current sense of failure and abandonment? And given Kal-El's well-documented roots in Jewish culture, how would he attempt to solve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict?

Surprisingly, however, this idea is jettisoned almost immediately, serving only to establish a sense that things have gone badly wrong in his absence. Superman's return is made known to the world by his last-minute, media-friendly rescue of an airliner that was about to crash into a sold-out baseball stadium in a scene that serves as the movie's first major action set-piece while simultaneously offering up a remarkable rewriting of 9/11. The potent image of an airliner hurtling with seemingly unstoppable momentum towards such an archetypically American landmark on a sunny day is eerily reminiscent of that moment of national trauma. The crucial difference is that Superman uses his death- and gravity-defying power to actually stop the plane before it wreaks havoc on this stadium that so clearly embodies an iconic American pastime. The location also turns this remarkable last-minute rescue operation into a moment of sheer spectacle that is immediately followed by rapturous

applause, thereby managing to turn a moment of disaster and trauma into a celebration of heroism.

9/11: Reshaping Heroism

As paradoxical or even contradictory as this moment in the film may seem, it fits in perfectly with a wider form of cultural discourse that has been dedicated to rewriting the events of 9/11 as an emblem of heroism rather than of defeat. The first major 9/11 fundraiser, a star-studded telethon broadcast worldwide a week after the attacks, was already titled *Heroes: A Tribute to America*, featuring a host of mournful pop icons alternating with Hollywood stars commemorating the acts of heroism that occurred on that day; Marvel Comics' special commemorative issue of original work by a who's-who of major-league comics authorship was similarly titled *Heroes: The World's Greatest Super Hero Creators Honor the World's Greatest Heroes – 9-11-2001*, and depicted members of the police force and fire department using the aesthetics and iconography of superhero comics; and *World Trade Center* (Oliver Stone, 2006), the only Hollywood film to focus explicitly on the attack on the eponymous Twin Towers, devoted its running time to the heroic survival of its two protagonists trapped under the rubble at Ground Zero, its poster and trailer bearing the tag line "A True Story of Hope and Survival."

All of these texts, as diverse as their media, authors, and audience might be, continuously re-emphasizes two major points related to the events of 9/11: first, that the United States as a nation had been the innocent victim of these attacks; and secondly, that in spite of this victimization, it had made heroes out of its survivors. This tendency of pop culture texts to focus so specifically on a combination of American heroism and victimization from late 2001 onwards is strong and widespread enough to constitute a Foucauldian discursive formation that extends far beyond the borders of texts that deal specifically with the actual events of 9/11. Discursive formations come into existence whenever "between objects, types of statement, concepts, or thematic choices, one can define a regularity (an order, correlations, positions and functionings, transformations)" (Foucault 2002, 41).

One particularly telling example of how swiftly 9/11 was transformed from a collection of historical events into a discursive formation with a clearly identifiable political-ideological agenda is the film release of *Black Hawk Down* (Ridley Scott, 2001). Unlike many other action films that were immediately shelved in the aftermath

of 9/11 on the grounds that this particular brand of destructive fantasy was suddenly deemed inappropriate and possibly offensive, the release of this war film, originally scheduled for late spring 2002, was quickly rushed ahead to December 2001.

Since the film's subject matter is the embarrassing military defeat suffered by American elite troops in Somalia in 1993, one might wonder in what sense a big-budget action film about these events would be any less insensitive to release in the traumatized cultural climate directly following 9/11. An analysis of the film, as well as its immense commercial success, however does bear out the distributor's decision. For unlike the much more balanced account of Mark Bowden's book, on which the film was based, Ridley Scott's immaculately produced movie jettisons all but the most basic explanation of the reasons behind the armed conflict pictured in the film, focusing instead on the American soldiers' experience in the thick of the battle. With political and military policy conveniently reduced to the briefest of text captions that bookend the undeniably exciting nonstop barrage of gunfire and bloodshed, the film's actual import is summed up by main character Scott Eversmann (played by Josh Hartnett) in the film's closing scene:

> I was talking to Blackburn the other day, and he asked me "What changed? Why are we going home?" and I said "Nothing." That's not true either; I think everything's changed. *I know I've changed*. You know a friend of mine asked me before I got here; it's when we were all shipping out. He asked me "Why are you going to fight somebody else's war? What, do you think you're heroes?" I didn't know what to say at the time, but if he'd ask me again I'd say no. I'd say there's no way in hell. *Nobody asks to be a hero*. [beat] *It just sometimes turns out that way*. (my emphasis)

Either unable or unwilling to comprehend the complex social, political and economical reasons behind American military policy, this specific intervention and his own role in it, the character defines the experience (and therefore the film's entire narrative) as something that is meaningless beyond its effects upon the individual: the only thing that has been changed by the experience is himself. Therefore, the characters who died in the film were the victims of unfathomable forces beyond anyone's command, allowing the events to leave in their wake only two kinds of subjects: victims and heroes. By focusing exclusively on the soldiers' individual experiences of these events, they are simultaneously de-historicized and de-politicized. The enemy responsible for the American bloodshed on the battlefield is defined only by its otherness, informed by Orientalist characteristics like religion –

assassins on the street screaming out "Allah-u akbar!"—and ethnicity –only one of the American soldiers is African-American, while the Somalis, all but a rare few of which are seen only from a distance, have dark skin that functions as a strong visual "bad" contrast to the "good" white American soldiers. Therefore, traumatic military conflict from the American point of view is presented as unavoidable, with reasons that remain unfathomable, in which Americans are both innocent victims and heroic protagonists.

These examples, and many others besides, seem to bear out the most pessimistically-minded postmodernist theorists, such as Fredric Jameson and François Baudrillard, and their central thesis that postmodernist (popular) culture serves first and foremost to sever the public's active connection with history by offering up continuous representations of events that are deliberately made unhistorical. These simulations, or, indeed, simulacra, do indeed "endow present reality and the openness of present history with the spell and distance of a glossy mirage" (Jameson 1991, 21). These words apply equally to *Superman Returns* and its deliberately unrealistic representation of such events, especially as pictured in the airliner sequence first described above.

Superman's reintroduction is followed by a number of scenes detailing his successful efforts to stop the enemies of capitalism from robbing some of New York's largest banks. Combining in his actions and general demeanor the nation's vaguely formulated ideals along with the power and the mandate to enforce them, he seems to embody Althusser's dual notions of ideological and repressive state apparatus conveniently rolled into one. Superman's final challenge in the film is once again to save Metropolis from an attack by arch-villain Lex Luthor, who seeks to create a new continent in the middle of the Atlantic.

His actions cause shockwaves that surge through the recognizable streets of Manhattan, shattering skyscraper windows as the tall buildings of Metropolis teeter and sway realistically, their occupants and passers-by alike helpless in the face of their predicament. Generically speaking, this part of the narrative is all but a requirement for the Superman franchise, referring back not just to the original *Action Comics* panels, which were based "more than anything before it […] on the destruction of New York City" (Page 92), but also to the iconic Fleischer brothers animated shorts, which "give one the sense that the city is a fragile vessel, constantly under attack, crashing, breaking, bending" (ibid. 98). Much of the pleasure in

Superman Returns results from the film's determination to satisfy these expectations, providing new spectacular imagery of Superman dashing around the city in a number of last-minute rescues that update the visuals while remaining true to the basic formula.

But images of New York City under attack can no longer be perceived as they were before in texts that were created after 9/11. Especially given the amount of attention that has been devoted in special tributes and throughout pop culture on the disappointment that superheroes had been powerless to stop those real-world attacks, a surprise attack on Manhattan in a new Superman film can only be read through the prism of 9/11 and the many wish-fulfillment fantasies we have encountered since. This strange dissonance between the unavoidable associations with recent history and the Jamesonian "perpetual present" of postmodernism that typifies this sequence in generic terms is one of the most interesting theoretical issues raised by this film: how can this film simultaneously de-historicize while drawing its significance from clear references to historical events?

This paradox comes into sharper focus when Superman finally confronts his nemesis in the middle of the surreal landscape of Luthor's newborn continent, where he discovers that his extraordinary powers have unexpectedly abandoned him. And it is here, in a scene that has outraged avid Superman fans more than any other, that this iconic embodiment of truth, justice and the American Way faces his harshest moment of defeat. In this desolate continent that seems eerily reminiscent of the familiar photos of the rubble at Ground Zero, he is beaten savagely by Luthor's henchmen, strangely noticeable for being the only ethnically diverse group in the film, and finally stabbed in the back by the villainous mastermind himself. He stands up bravely to face his attackers, but teeters and falls powerlessly off the edge of an immense precipice. In what may be the film's most provocative image, the following shot shows 'flying man' transformed into 'falling man': Few images have been as disturbing a summation of America's sense of helplessness and defeat as those of the people falling or jumping from the towers after the attack, and literary works such as Jonathan Safran Foer's *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* and —obviously—Don DeLillo's *Falling Man* deliberately mobilize this icon of national emasculation as a powerful metaphor.

> [W]e are all, DeLillo suggests, in free fall. The plots, myths, institutions we once relied on to provide meaning and purpose are suspended. Our idols have fallen too: "God is the voice that says, 'I am not here'" (Falling Man 236). Like Alzheimer's patients, all we can do is watch in suspense for what is ever-impending. And one man keeps popping up—like a puppet or a mime—to remind New Yorkers of the catastrophe. He calls himself Falling Man, a performance artist who appears unexpectedly around Manhattan, suspended from various structures, dangling upside down from a harness, dressed in suit and tie. (Kauffmann 372)

But not only must Superman experience this fall from grace along with us; he must also somehow reverse time—as he has been known to do before, and which is another narrative trait we can recognize in several of the 9/11 novels—and change the past to save our future. And indeed, after his inevitable moment of messianic resurrection, he lifts up the whole of Luthor's new continent into space, and playing on the film's innumerable references to Atlas, Miton, and Jesus Christ, saves mankind by bearing the weight of the world for us, before plummeting once more back into the streets of Metropolis.

Superman, the picture seems to say, as the embodiment of America's true spirit, must return to relieve the country from the burden of the past by ridding the nation of the trauma of 9/11. Through its reliance on nostalgia for its hero's Reagan-era incarnation, Singer's film seems to propose that the answer to our current problems lies – once again – in a return to the values of an earlier era of innocence and purity. But rather than appealing directly to sentimentalized visualizations of Eisenhower-era Americana, Singer's film seeks this coveted sense of security by enshrining 1980s superhero blockbusters, already postmodern nostalgia films, as the object of ultimate desire.

Batman Begins

Batman Begins offers a similar 21st-century retooling of an indestructible Golden Age superhero, but as the title indicates, with a different kind of twist. For rather than *Superman Returns* and its only moderately revisionist continuation of an existing chronology and an established film franchise, Nolan's film presents itself as an origin story: it reinvents its already familiar character for a contemporary audience by resorting, re-shifting, and re-defining narrative elements that make up the Caped Crusader's long and contradictory history.

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

Unlike *Superman Returns* and its repeated restaging of familiar catastrophes with triumphant heroic endings, *Batman Begins* provides a different kind of avenue into familiar 9/11 discourse and iconography. The film reintroduces Bruce Wayne as an embittered young man, deeply traumatized by the death of his parents. Still suffering from the loss of his father as a young adult, Wayne proves susceptible to the temptations of a fundamentalist terrorist group led by arch-villain Ra's Al-Guhl, who may not be portrayed as a Middle-Eastern Muslim, but whose appearance and attitudes answer to all the classical stereotypes that make him the archetypal Orientalist enemy of western values. This sect leader, played by Japanese actor Ken Watanabe, is later revealed as an empty figurehead meant to distract from the actual villain: Wayne's charismatic Caucasian mentor, Ducard (Liam Neeson).

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

These connotations come to the fore when Bruce Wayne arrives at the League of Shadows' headquarters, where he undergoes his combat training in *Batman Begins*.

These headquarters are set in a temple in a remote Asian mountain range, recalling the headquarters of terrorist organization Cobra in GI Joe comics, which are described as "designed architecturally to resemble a temple hidden in a Himalaya-like region" (Norlund 8). Like Cobra's leader, the head of the League of Shadows, Ra's Al Ghul, is also "a terrorist personality [portrayed] as a disingenuous religious leader, suggest[ing] that no terrorist or religious leader is authentically devout" (ibid.). This connection between terrorism and Eastern mystical religion is made explicit in the film by the League's headquarters' resemblance to a temple. It is further solidified by the presence of signifiers such as Buddha figurines on prominent display in the first interior shot. Bruce Wayne is successfully recruited, trained and indoctrinated by the League of Shadows, but later rejects the organization when he is assigned the task of executing a criminal as a required rite of passage. Wayne decides to reject the League's absolutist ideology, defining a subtle but crucial difference between revenge and justice, terror and fear. He immediately thereafter makes his separation complete by blowing up the temple where he has undergone the training that will later make him a superhero.

Wayne's rejection of the League of Shadows and its ideology becomes even more evident when he exchanges his Eastern ninja garb for high-tech American military armor, which he reappropriates and transforms into his superhero costume. Thus, by portraying Bruce Wayne as someone whose childhood trauma has made him vulnerable to recruitment and indoctrination by a foreign and therefore "Other" terrorist organization, this revisionary superhero narrative and its re-imagining of Batman's origins breaks explicitly with Batman's established tradition of facing "a different and independent villain each issue, since a variety of them reside in Gotham City" (Norlund 2). This break with tradition, relocating the main threat from inside Gotham to a sectarian rebel militia in the Far East, is the first element that connects *Batman Begins* with 9/11 discourse, a connection that is further developed in the narrative once Ra's Al Ghul's scheme becomes clear.

> Although he is at first taken in by the group's charismatic and elusive leader, he balks at the League of Shadows' true purpose: a destructive attack on Gotham City, another alternate-universe representation of New York. This motivation, which sounds remarkably similar to the oft-quoted "they hate our freedoms" rationale with its emphasis on New York City as the pinnacle of decadence, takes a form that makes it especially objectionable to Batman. For as the plot later reveals, the attack will focus on Gotham's skyline-defining skyscraper, which is also the city's trade center and infrastructural

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

The League’s plot to destroy Gotham City, Batman’s fictitious city of residence since 1941 that “for all intents and purposes is still New York, and more specifically Manhattan” (Brooker 48), ultimately involves an attack that is to culminate in the destruction of Wayne Tower, Gotham’s skyline-defining skyscraper and the symbolic and infrastructural heart of the city. The similarity to recent real-world events could hardly be more obvious. As Kim Newman has described it in his article “Cape Fear”, Gotham City is attacked “by a fanatic eastern sect with a charismatic but impossible-to-catch figurehead which is bent on crashing a mode of transport into a skyscraper to trigger an explosion of panic that will destroy society” (21). Again, this climactic attack represents a departure from both primary sources, neither of which includes any reference to a skyscraper as a target singled out for destruction by the villain.

But since Gotham’s major skyscraper was built by the hero’s sainted father, a billionaire businessman, doctor and philanthropist, and thereby some kind of model capitalist, the attack on Wayne Senior’s phallic legacy also constitutes a direct assault upon patriarchal masculinity. Like Superman, Batman succeeds in saving the city at the last possible moment, but in this darker film, the memories of recent traumas are not lifted by a messianic hero so easily: part of Gotham is lost in the attack, Wayne Manor is burnt to the ground, and the democratic institutions continue to fail to address the problems that face them on any noticeable level. As the more recent sequel *The Dark Knight* and the public debate surrounding its many references to contemporary social and ethical quandaries illustrated, this particular comic book world is one in which post-9/11 tensions and concerns are not so much solved as they are magnified.

Conclusion

As I have demonstrated in my reading of the way these two films draw on recognizable real-world concerns, *Superman Returns* and *Batman Begins* can both be understood as attempts to find relevance for familiar pop icons by investing their narratives and iconography with the strongest elements of 9/11 as a discursive

formation: heroism and victimization. The fact that these films do so in distinctive, very different ways is obviously due in strong part to the traditions that developed them and set them apart as the two dominant superhero icons for over seventy years: Superman's garish optimism and messianic associations, and Batman's gothic skulking in the darkness of his cave.

But as different as their methods, narratives and aesthetics may be, their politics are ultimately similar in the ways in which they represent ideology in the Althusserian sense: as "a representational structure which allows the individual subject to conceive or imagine his or her lived relationship to transpersonal realities such as the social structure or the collective logic of History" (Jameson 1983, 14-15). By drawing on the iconography and thematics of contemporary public and political discourse while situating their narratives in an explicitly fantastical realm, these superhero films can be easily related to the genre of romance literature. And as Fredric Jameson observed so memorably in his analysis of this type of text and its ideological subtext, this genre "does not involve the substitution of some more ideal realm for ordinary reality […], but rather a process of *transforming* ordinary reality" (ibid. 97). In other words: films like *Superman Returns* and *Batman Begins* offer models for interpreting our own world and its history that serve to systematically dehistoricize the events to which they so obviously refer. By representing 9/11 metaphorically as part of a battle that takes familiar narrative categories ("hero," "villain," "victim," "resolution," etc.) as its basic components, the genre provides an affirmative view that denies its passive spectator both understanding and any sense of historical agency.

Both *Superman Returns* and *Batman Begins* display ambivalent attitudes towards the desire to retreat into a romanticized past on the one hand, and the wish to understand how to respond to and make sense of traumatic contemporary events on the other. In doing so, they serve as further illustration of the persistent religious, anti-democratic tendencies in American culture. But rather than utilizing this familiar narrative paradigm to recycle propaganda, both films do allow for other readings as well: *Superman Returns* through its mournful, ambivalent nostalgia, and *Batman Begins* in its more nuanced reflection on current events and ideological conundrums. And although these films demonstrate the wistful desire to resurrect our most familiar popular icons, these films also show us that we will not be able to rely on superheroes to save the world in the 21st century.

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