

**THE DARK NIGHT:
REPRESENTING URBAN ANXIETIES
IN CONTEMPORARY SUPERHERO FILMS**

**A THESIS
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MASTER OF ARTS**

**By
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August 2011**

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ABSTRACT

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The comic book superhero is one of the most important cultural products of the United States. From the second quarter of the 20th century on, the iconic and allusional images of the larger-than-life superheroes in colorful costumes took over not only the pages of comic books, but also occasionally, and recently quite frequently, the big screen. Due to the changing tone of the superhero narratives over time and with the help of special effects that enable directors to imagine broader cityscapes, the concept of city, which has always been a fundamental element in superhero comics, gained even more importance on film. This study aims to overview the aesthetics of urban spaces in recent superhero films, as well as the relationship they build with the elements of the city. Additionally this study will investigate and bring together thoughts on the after-effects of the September 11, 2001 attacks on New York City as one of the possible reasons of the ‘superhero boom’ of the last decade, and ultimately reach the conclusion that the position of the superhero films towards both urban crime and international terror can be classified as ambiguity.

Keywords: Superhero, City, 9/11, Ambiguity.

ÖZET

‘KARANLIK GECE’: SON DÖNEM SÜPER KAHRAMAN FİLMLERİNDE KENTSEL ENDİŞELERİN TEMSİLİ

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Süper kahramanlar, Amerika Birleşik Devletleri’nin en önemli kültürel ürünleri arasında yer alır. Yirminci yüzyılın ikinci çeyreğinden itibaren, renkli giysileriyle insan üstü işler başaran süper kahramanların ikonik ve metaforik imgeleri çizgi roman sayfalarını işgal etmenin yanında, beyaz perdede de son zamanlarda özellikle artan bir sıklıkla kendilerine yer buldu. Süper kahraman anlatılarının zaman içinde karanlıklaştıran/ciddileşen yapısından ötürü ve yönetmenlerin daha yaratıcı şehir manzaraları yaratmalarını sağlayan özel efektlerin sayesinde, süper kahraman çizgi romanlarında hali hazırda temel bir yeri olan şehir kavramının sinemada daha da önem kazanması mümkün oldu. Bu çalışma son dönem süper kahraman filmlerindeki kentsel alanların estetiğini ve şehrin ana öğeleriyle süper kahramanın doğası arasındaki ilişkiyi gözden geçirmeyi amaçlamaktadır. Bunun yanı sıra, bu çalışma son on yılda gerçekleşen ‘süper kahraman patlaması’nın olası sebeplerinden biri olarak 11 Eylül 2001’de New York’ta meydana gelen saldırıların etkisini araştırarak ve bu konudaki görüşleri bir araya getirecek, ve çağdaş süper kahraman filmlerinin hem adi suçlar hem de uluslararası terör karşısında edindiği duruşun belirsizlik üzerine kurulduğu sonucuna varacaktır.

Anahtar sözcükler: Süper kahraman, Kent, 11 Eylül, Belirsizlik.

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1. INTRODUCTION

One of the trends that dominated the Hollywood cinema of the 2000s and 2010s (so far) is the superhero film. Based on the characters of superhero comic books, these films broke box office records regardless of whether they received critical acclaim or not.

On closer readings, it can be realized that these films, besides being products of popular culture aimed at entertainment, do have several comments to make on the hierarchies of power, on the corruption of cities, on the state of men in surveillance societies and other similar topics relating to the contemporary, postmodern life.

To ardent followers, or to those who at least take this phenomenon of American popular culture seriously, this might have occurred as no surprise. After all, the superhero comics have always reflected the anxieties of urban societies. They sometimes did this in the form of propaganda (as they did in during the World War II), and sometimes just in the opposite direction, by offering their criticism (as they did during the late 1960s).

Such discussions must be taken with the same level of seriousness in the case of filmic adaptations. With the passing of time, owing to several reasons that will be discussed later in this study, the superhero comics fell from the great popularity they once had and almost became a subcultural medium. On the contrary, the characters of these comics firmly established their places as icons in popular culture. While few people might know what Superman is involved with in the latest monthly issue, the image and idea of Superman is fixed in the minds of Americans and world citizens alike. This was further reinforced by the medium of film, and now it can be argued that the superhero film is the new superhero comic book.

1.1. Purpose of the Study

Jörn Ahrens and Arno Meteling (2010) note that since its first days, the American comic book has had a firm relationship with the urban contexts, and add that,

There is undoubtedly a link between the medium of comics and the big city as a modern living space. This emphasizes the need to investigate how specifically urban topoi, self-portrayals, forms of cultural memorizing and variant readings of the city (strolling, advertising, architecture, detective stories, mass phenomena, etc) are on the one hand being incorporated in comic books, and the need to investigate if comics have special competences for capturing urban space and city life and representing it aesthetically because of their hybrid nature consisting of words, pictures and sequences on the other. (p. 5)

This study serves multiple purposes: first I aim at a more general view and try to draw a panorama of the recent “superhero renaissance” by comparing it with the past and trying to define its place as a staple of popular culture (Coogan, 2006). Merging such ideas with the landscapes of fictional and real American cities from the pages of comic books and the sequences of films is useful in order to comprehend the

interactions of the superhero with his urban surroundings, and the city with its sometimes adored and other times unwanted savior.

My aim is also to show how the hybrid subgenre of superhero films relates to the contemporary world order in its own way, particularly the event of 9/11. While doing this, the films of this genre might sometimes act on over-patriotic or over-sentimental tones, as well as trying to be politically correct, which they are expected of. But generally, the films I analyze in this study are somehow similar because they reach to and are able to deliver such messages to millions of people both at home and abroad. Additionally and more importantly, it should be noted that while these differ in many aspects from each other, one predominant defining characteristic that can be applied to all of them is the ambiguous stance these films take for the current events and contemporary world order. This is the perspective this study takes and defends.

Around 35 superhero films have been released since 2000. Among those, my priority was to look at whether they represented urban life in many aspects, and I eliminated those that did not. I then also eliminated films such as *Daredevil* and *Fantastic Four*. While these films are based in an urban environment all through or at least most of their narratives, their representations are not as sophisticated or multi-layered as the ones I am primarily working with. This is to say that I primarily looked for films, which made commentary on current issues, rather than sticking to the superhero narrative alone. The recent Batman films *Batman Begins* (Christopher Nolan, 2005) and *The Dark Knight* (Christopher Nolan, 2008) had to be on my list both for a discussion of the famous Gotham City and for the post-9/11 implications these films had. I had to include the Spider-Man films for that latter reason too, to evaluate the response coming from the people of a city, which constantly suffers from the minor

crimes of common criminals and the larger villains, such as Spider-Man's supernatural enemies. I also included *Superman Returns* (Bryan Singer, 2006) and finally *Watchmen* (Zack Snyder, 2009); the former for its analogies of the city as the world itself, and the latter for the ideas of an alternate history and an alternate city it is based on.

Since some of the films I am analyzing in this study are dated only a few years earlier, apart from consulting several books, I also occasionally used Internet sources, such as articles and reviews on the websites of newspapers or independent blogs, when necessary.

1.2. Basic Terminology

For ease of reading and to minimize confusion, I would like to introduce some of the terms that will be used throughout the study:

Superhero is obviously the term that presents the most challenge here. Our familiarity with popular culture can lead us to have a distinct idea of a superhero when the word is mentioned: It is possible that the first image to come to mind would be a flying man in spandex costume and a cape, and it is not an incorrect image. However, it is generally considered to be a little more complicated than that, as illustrated in a question by Jason Dittmer: "For instance, if Batman is a superhero despite not having any superpowers, then why not Jason Bourne (who only lacks a costume) or Sherlock Holmes (who only lacks a secret identity)?" (Dittmer, 2009). The author's suggestion, then, is to emphasize a more general picture: "Costume is one solution, but "superheroes are defined less by their type of costumes than by the type of narrative in which they exist." This means that the superhero can be defined

by a multiplicity of traits, which are listed by Mila Bongco, as features repeated countless times in superhero stories: “a) aberrant of mysterious origins, b) lost parents, c) man-god traits, d) a costumed, secret identity, e) difficulties with personal and emotional relationships, f) great concern for justice” (Bongco, 2000). This short, concise list alone can be used as a base to explain the motivations, methods and aims of the various American superheroes, which are surprisingly both alike and very different from each other.

Note that in the features above, ‘great concern for justice’ has been listed, but it is not accompanied by traits such as ‘model behavior’ or ‘strong moral values’. While these may be valid to describe the characteristics of a classic hero like Superman, it does not always apply to the contemporary superhero, who does not keep himself from breaking a few rules once in a while in pursuit of justice (or a few jaws). This is the *vigilante* and it is an important concept in both understanding the contemporary superhero and the contemporary superhero film.

Comic is a graphic medium in which images convey a sequential narrative. The term derives from the mostly humorous early work in the medium, and it serves as a general term while talking about the comic strips, comic books, limited series and graphic novels.

Comic strips are mostly humorous sequential drawings arranged in interrelated panels to display brief humor or form a narrative. They mostly appear in newspapers and other periodicals.

Comic books are magazines, which are published monthly, or weekly and they are made up of comics. Comic books are in continuity with much larger series, and their overall span may be years, even decades.

Limited series are also monthly comic books, but they are not part of a larger title and its continuity. The issues of limited series deal with specific narratives, and the narrative ends with the last of the issues. *Watchmen* can be an example of limited series; it is published for twelve issues, and the narrative has no prior or later connections to other comic books or series.

Both limited series and comic book issues, which form a storyline, can be assembled in the form of *graphic novel*. Graphic novels tend to cover one story only in its entirety, and it has the basic novel components, a beginning, middle and an end. They are considered to be belonging to a higher art form in the medium of comics, however this is always open to debate.

1.3. Summary of the Chapters

In Chapter 2, I first provide a chronological history of the American superhero comics. The purpose behind this is to familiarize the readers with the contexts in which superheroes were created or changed, as well as with the development of the industry and other conditions which help create today's understanding of a contemporary superhero film. I choose to give this historical account in two parts in order to strongly emphasize the notions of classical and contemporary superhero.

I then talk about some of the complications of adapting a superhero narrative onto the screen and give opinions from the famous names in the industry for purposes of comparison. This chapter ends again with a chronological history of superhero films and commentary on their present situation.

In Chapter 3, I begin with a detailed account of ‘supercities’. Since city is such an important concept in superhero narratives, it is only normal that these urban spaces have been designed with meticulous care by different artists and filmmakers over the years, and have been attributed a lot of meaning. I focus on the three most important supercities, the fictional Metropolis and Gotham City, and the real-life New York City. Then I give examples of filmic genres, which seem to have inspired the designs of superhero cities in recent film.

Next, I move on to the analyses of the films that I have chosen. While doing this, I abstain from providing very detailed plots unless the specific details of the plot are directly related to the concept of the city, or in other words, the city is one of the main characters (as is the case with *Batman Begins*). After these analyses, I do further investigation of the urban-related concepts in the films, by focusing on three themes: the first, and the largest, is the aftermath of 9/11, both on superhero comics and on superhero films. The other two themes I consider are the use of media and the organization of law.

2. UNDERSTANDING THE SUPERHERO

*For me it all started in 1938,
the year when they invented the super-hero [sic].*

The quote above is from the supplemental section to the issue #1 of *Watchmen* (Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons, 1986-87), the biography of the character Hollis Mason, the retired 'Nite Owl', in which he writes of how he decided to become a vigilante. What he is referring to, as the invention of the superhero, is perhaps a literal phenomenon that occurred in the real world, as well as the fictional one of *Watchmen*: In 1938, the first issue of *Action Comics*, written by Jerry Siegel and drawn by Joe Shuster, was released, introducing Superman, unarguably the most iconic of all superheroes, and featuring his first ever adventure.

Alan Moore's New York City, in which Hollis Mason and others (whom soon join forces as the superhero team 'Minutemen') emerge as self-made crime fighters, is contaminated with moral corruption and crime waves. No wonder why the series' writer Alan Moore chose to cite Superman as a primary source of influence for this fictional character, Mason, existing in an alternate history. After all, the conditions that caused the band of the quasi-superheroes to come alive at the end of the 1930's

are identical to those which caused Superman, and then dozens of others of his kind, to come alive. Leaving aside *Watchmen's* alternate take on history (which supposes that superhero comic books have gone extinct since there is no need for them due to the existence of real-life superheroes), this chapter will focus on the history of the comic book superhero, the transformations he went through in time and his transition to screen.

2.1. Origins and the Classic Superhero

Superhero comics were not the first instances of American comics. By the late 1930s, the American comic strip had been published for four decades. From the 1840s on, translated European strips and humorous American cartoons and illustrations (which consisted of single panels and cannot be considered strips) were published (Gabilliet, 2009). In 1896, the comic strip *Hogan's Alley* was published in the newspaper *World*, introducing an early icon of the American scene, the Yellow Kid. The creator was “considered the father of modern comic strips” since he “was the first to use panels and speech-balloons together, and introduced color to the strips” (Knowles, 2007). The early comic books were recollections of such newspaper strips, “with neither original material, nor an extended narrative featuring one character” (Wolk, 2008). While most of these recollections were humorous, themes such as adventure and detective mysteries were in time introduced, to be mentioned here shortly.

As noted above, it is appropriate to date the birth of the comics superhero to that of Superman. The emergence of the archetypical character was aided by crime-ridden streets and a world order at stake, threatened by certain powers at the brink of World

War II. However, it is worth mentioning here that the superhero comic books also found generic inspiration in other kinds of comics and novels, namely detective and mystery comic strips and pulp novels, which were also born out of the chaotic urban atmosphere. It would not be wrong to suggest that the birth, rise, fall and other phases of these different genres, which deal with the themes of crime and justice, go hand in hand with American history in the 20th Century. When the financial crisis, also known as ‘Black Tuesday’ hit the stock market in Fall 1929, the fate of the next American decade was decided. The 1930s were politically, culturally and socially marked by the ‘Great Depression’ and its aftermath; the country was affected as a whole. Millions of jobs, farms and stores, and families were lost. Unemployed people from rural areas migrated to cities, where the situation was no better. Organized crime was already widespread, mainly due to the Prohibition¹, and petty crime rate arise due to the unemployed on the street. In *Our Gods Wear Spandex*, comics historian Les Daniels is quoted, who wrote: “The rise of superheroes like the Shadow, Doc Savage, Spider and the others coincided with the downfall of public figures in the Depression.”, therefore marking it as a “historical necessity” (Knowles, 2007). The ‘superheroes’ Daniels was referring to are not from comic books, but from the pulp novels, appearing consecutively in the first half of the decade. Some of the pioneering/iconic superheroes bear physical, characteristic or methodical resemblances (most of the time in a quite obvious way) to these characters, which had superpowers, colorful costumes/masks, detective skills and high technology gadgets. On the other hand, there were detective strips. A famous example is *Dick Tracy* (1931), which was based on the eponymous detective and was inspirational for the superhero genre both because it was “complete with sci-fi elements and

¹ Between 1919 and 1933, the production and sales of alcohol beverages was banned by the senate. This period is known as the Prohibition.

outlandish villains” and because it derived its source material from the city of Chicago and its crime scene.

While the concept of a superhero is today familiar to everyone who has watched TV or read a newspaper, be they interested in popular culture or not, it must be kept in mind, within the context of the 1930s and despite the other genres that somehow introduced supernatural characters, that a flying crime fighter originally from space was not an easy figure to understand, appreciate and follow vehemently. This was the hardship that Jerome Siegel and Joseph Schuster had to deal with for a couple of years before DC Comics finally agreed to publish this superhero story, and the rest quickly followed: in a year, there were fifty comic book titles, and in three years this number was multiplied three times, and superheroes were the dominant theme (Wolk, 2008):

Stan Lee² of Marvel Comics remembers the time when a variety of superheroes were being introduced almost every week as publishers sought out to launch a superhero that would capture the readers’ imagination like Superman, Batman or Captain Marvel did. “It seemed that unemployed costumed heroes were turning up almost daily at the Marvel office, and more loitered in the streets of Manhattan”. (p. 96)

This marked the beginning of the Golden Age of comics. Since this categorization will be referred to later in this text as well, it is necessary to explain what is meant by this term. Rather than a figure of speech I am using, this is the name given to the first section of an informally established history. This categorization is not merely a periodical listing, but also a thematic one. The period between the years of 1938 and 1955 is known as the Golden Age, between 1956 and 1969 as the Silver Age, 1970 and 1979 as the Bronze Age and finally, from 1980 on is called the Modern Age

² Stan Lee is a living history of comic books. He is the creator of, among many others, very important titles such as *Spider-Man* and *Fantastic Four*, the film adaptations of which will be covered in this thesis.

(Misiroglu, 2004). While the categorization applies to the general history of American comics more or less, the superhero subgenre is the major determinant. The years that are provided here, of course, can merely be approximations, decided by certain publication dates or other historical phenomena, relating to the comics world. Therefore, it would be similarly correct to claim that, for example, the Golden Age ended around the beginning of the 1950s. The ‘demotion’ of ranks from Golden to Silver and to Bronze can be taken quite literally since the Golden Age stood for a premium phase when superhero comics were read by half of Americans and sold much more than major newspapers on army bases (Knowles, 2007). The sales rates and the interest of the readers somehow fell regularly and thematic focuses and narratives changed in those latter periods. The Modern Age, as the name suggests, deals with the contemporary superhero, who, in many ways, was adapted to the modern world and was, in return, received by it.

One of the main reasons why the Golden Age, and the first half of the 1940’s in particular, was such a glamorous time for superhero comics can be related to the Second World War. While today’s superhero, as represented both in the comic narratives and the feature films, tries to keep a safe distance from the two dominant sides of the American political scene (to the point of being ambiguous³) and even more so from foreign affairs, Superman and those who followed fought against the Nazis and the ‘Japs’, and protected national pride in their adventures during the war. In fact, their fight against Hitler and the Nazis started even before America’s involvement with the war. The fact that Superman, called ‘champion of the oppressed’ in *Action Comics* #1) (Misiroglu, 2004), was created during the rise of the

³ This point will be elaborated in Chapter 3.

National Socialist Party in Germany, and by artists of Jewish descent, gives room for speculation, that this superhero has not only emerged to solve the problems of Metropolis, but also to serve as the allusion or as the ideal of a worldwide savior. In *Our Gods Wear Spandex*, the following commentary is made, supporting any possible correlations to religion further: “At his core, Superman is a Messiah in the Biblical tradition, who can also be seen as a metaphor for American Jewish assimilation. (...) Les Daniels notes that Siegel ‘must also have been aware of the analogies with Jesus’, pointing out that Superman was ‘a man sent from the heavens by his father to use his special powers for the good of the humanity’” (Knowles, 2007, p. 122). Another important superhero of the Second World War, Captain America (to be mentioned in detail soon) also had the ultimate motivation of providing benefit on a larger scale: “Captain America’s publisher, Martin Goodman, resolved as early as 1938 that he would use his pulp empire as an anti-Hitler propaganda vehicle” (Knowles, 2007, p. 131).

After Superman’s success with the American reader, as illustrated in Stan Lee’s words a few paragraphs above, tens of superheroes and their respective storylines/comic books appeared. When this intersected with the war, the road was even more easily paved for the creators of those comics and for readers who were hungry for more ‘saviors’. Of the countless titles, today relatively few survive (that is, continue to be published) or are still recognized within popular culture (whether or not they continue to be published). Along with Superman, one superhero that not only survives, but also comes to mind as the embodiment of the superhero concept, is Batman. Created in 1939, only a few months after Superman, Batman would also constitute an example to how a superhero can be adapted and transform in time; and

his filmic representations will be discussed in length in this thesis. Wonder Woman, created in 1942, is still the most prevalent of superheroines⁴. The Flash, Green Lantern, Green Arrow, Green Hornet, the Sub Mariner are among those who are familiar to today's audience either as ongoing titles or via their film adaptations. Previously mentioned here, Captain America, as his name suggests, is probably the most patriotic superhero. Captain America not only fought America's enemies during the Second World War, but he went on to fight 'commies' during the 1950s, corruption in the late 60s and 70s, and finally terrorists in the post-9/11 period (Knowles, 2007). Shortly, the abundance of superheroes in the aftermath of Superman's initial success can be best explained as a matter of correct timing to fulfill the society's increased need for saviors against the world's 'supervillains'.

However, with the end of the war, such problems seemed to have been solved and readers started to drift away from the genre: "After the war, superhero comics soon lost two things: its servicemen readers and Nazi/Japanese villains" (Wolk, 2008, p. 97). Without those real-life archenemies, dozens of superheroes were literally unemployed. Another factor that led to this was the rise of subgenres such as horror, crime, pirate and western comics which offered graphic violence and somber themes. Amazing it may sound when compared to the numbers during the wartime, but Superman, Batman and Wonder Woman were the only three heroes who "came through without a break in publication during the lean years of the early 1950s"

⁴ The concept of a female superhero, and the situation of females within superhero comics in general, are not easy to talk about. Keeping in mind that "[t]he superhero field was about ninety-percent male, which seemed to be about the same demographics as the readership of most superhero comics" (Reading Comics, p. 97), it is clear to see that superheroines (and female sidekicks) were designed simply as female counterparts, or even as male fantasies. This approach could be finally challenged in the Modern Age, thanks to *X-Men* comics, among others, by its relatively equally proportioned male-female ratio in the group. Apart from *X-Men* and other minor examples, it is viable to think that when one speaks of a superhero, it is very likely that they are mentioning a male, white character. This thesis occasionally uses the pronoun 'he' in place of the word 'superhero' with these considerations in mind and the films that are studied here do not have superheroines as central figures.

(Wolk, 2008, p. 98), the reason for which may be the status of these heroes as pioneers. A minor solution was to direct the propaganda power of the superheroes, previously directed against wartime enemies, towards anxieties of atomic and nuclear war, and the Red Scare.

A groundbreaking event in the history of American comics happened in the middle of the 1950s, which ultimately affected the superhero genre in a positive way, despite the harm it caused to the industry. Psychiatrist Dr. Frederic Wertham claimed that comics were among the mass media images which led children and teenagers to violent behavior in his 1954 book *Seduction of the Innocent* (Knowles, 2007). Wertham was also concerned about superhero comics by giving examples of “kids who jumped off of rooftops as if they were Superman”, or by claiming that superheroines were “the exact opposite of what girls are supposed to be” and that the master-apprentice relationship of Batman and his young sidekick Robin promoted homosexuality (Wright, 2003). While the themes of comics and their effects were already issues of debate, Wertham’s book definitely sparked even more discussions and oppositions both in the government level and in the public opinion. This eventually led to several senate hearings where publishers of the horror and crime comics had to defend their publications. This situation resulted in the formation of the Comics Magazine Association of America and the ‘Comics Code’ they passed in the Fall of 1954 (Wright, 2003).

In its terms, this code was an equivalent of the Hays Code (1934) that brought restrictions on American cinema, in that it strongly banned sexuality and violence and advocated conservative moral values. The main difference was that the Comics

Code was a self-implemented application of censorship. Passing the Comics Code meant that a comic book could be stamped with the famous CMAA seal on its front cover. While this was not compulsory, the seal was usually the only way to reach major distributors (Wright, 2003). Therefore the publishers, whether they liked it or not, had to submit their material to the Association before publication. This was the case for many genres. The ‘gruesome’ comics, on the other hand, were immediately terminated since many of their characteristic elements were strictly forbidden.

An overall result to the comics industry was, of course, public dislike and the dropping sales numbers. The Golden Age was now over. However, the superhero comics somehow managed to benefit from this situation. Some of their biggest generic rivals were now down and did not pose a threat for their sales. But the other, and perhaps more important, advantage that the superhero comics had was related to the era in which they would soon re-invent themselves. In *Comic Book Nation*, Bradford W. Wright (2003) explains the conditions which made the Silver Age:

Between 1956 and 1967, an American Cold War consensus engulfed American culture, cracked and then disintegrated amidst the movement for civil rights, dissent over the Vietnam War, and a youthful rebellion against a variety of authorities and cultural norms. As comic book makers negotiated the often conflicting pressures of self-censorship, political culture and market demands, a compromise emerged in reluctant superheroes who struggled with the confusion and ambivalent consequences of their own power. Heroes like Spider-Man helped keep code-approved comic books relevant and profitable in the age of television and rock-and-roll, a prospect that had seemed quite unlikely only a few years later. (p. 180)

An alternative way to call the Silver Age heroes is the ‘Science Heroes’ (Knowles, 2007). Indeed, some of the famous titles created in the Silver Age years take their power from science – the heroes are born as a consequence of the scientific

developments and the villains are those who abuse science and technology. When many of the previous elements were banned, the creators were forced to “dig deep into the recesses of their imaginations to capture their readers’ attention” (Knowles, 2007, p. 136).

The Silver Age ‘formally’ started with the reincarnation/reboots of DC Comics heroes, Flash in 1956 and Green Lantern in 1959: the former turned into a police scientist and the latter into a test pilot. The powers of these characters in their Golden Age roots were somehow explained by magic or supernatural events, but now there was a rational turn. Meanwhile, the old and reliable heroes, Superman, Batman and Wonder Woman were brought once more into attention, with the launch of the super team, Justice League of America, as well as adaptations into cinema and television. The *Batman* television series, in particular, was an adaptation that was (and for certain reasons, still is) spectacular, both with its pros and cons⁵.

The biggest contribution of the Age to the comics world, however, came from Marvel Comics. In the first half of the 1960s, writer/editor Stan Lee and artists Jack Kirby and Steve Ditko created such famous characters and their respective titles as the Fantastic Four (1961), the Hulk (1962), Thor (1962), Spider-Man (1962), Iron Man (1963), X-Men (1963) and Daredevil (1964). These superheroes and superhero teams were in many terms different from the aforementioned giants of the industry. There were times when they felt like monstrous outcasts to the society (as is the case with Hulk and the Thing of the Fantastic Four), or when they felt the need to question what their true identity was, or whether they were more harmful than

⁵ This series will be discussed later in this chapter.

beneficial to the society. The teenage Spider-Man was pictured to be contemplating why he, as a super-powered being, had to put his private life away and save people (hence the famous slogan, “with great power comes great responsibility”). These worries and questions were never seen before. Especially college students identified with the heroes because they were outcasts, they were “against the institution” (Wright, 2003). One student loved Spider-Man because he was “beset by woes, money problems, and the question of existence. In short, he is one of us.” (Wright, 2003) In polls, students even “ranked Spider-Man and the Hulk alongside the likes of Bob Dylan and Che Guevara as their favorite revolutionary icons”. (Wright, 2003) Such novelties and reaction made these new comics popular among college campuses and other circles of counter-culture. Being aware of that popularity, Marvel also included current events in the comic books. These elements gave way to a series of comic book heroes who were much more humanlike and ‘hip’ than their Golden Age predecessors, but were still heroic enough to be admired. In a scene in *Spider-Man 2*, his Aunt May tells the university freshman Peter Parker – the alter ego of Spider-Man- that he does “too much – college, a job, all this time with me... You’re not Superman, you know.” And indeed, he is not.

This was a new step in the history of American superhero comics: Now their target audience was not only children, teenagers, loyal fans or people looking for small, harmless entertainment in the ‘funnies’; groups of people deemed to be frivolous and unsophisticated in general. Instead they were defining their place in the revolutionary atmosphere of the 1960s. They were becoming a part of the new phenomenon called youth culture, a culture that consumes fast, stands up and rebels almost by nature, and defines what is fashionable and what is not.

Lastly, it is important to note that it is perhaps thanks to Marvel's creations of a new superhero that the chaotic, self-questioning narratives of the Modern Age came to being, which then inspired the comic book movies of this past decade. However, before discussing the Modern Age, we must mention what happened between 1970 and 1979. Just like the Golden Age, the end to the Silver Age came at the end of the 1960s, when sales and revenues dropped significantly compared to the mid-decade rush. Marvel's fast rise to domination thanks to the new, groundbreaking characters on the one hand and DC's sustained prosperous profile owing to the wildly successful *Batman* television series on the other were the two factors that carried comic book readership to high numbers (albeit never as high as the Golden Age figures) (Wolk, 2008). But after this climax, sales dropped once again, and superhero comics would soon once again find themselves in a state of having to adapt to the demands of the age in order to survive.

2.2. The Contemporary Superhero

The Bronze Age of comic books is what could be regarded as a transition phase or a preparation period for the upcoming revolution, the Modern Age. It was a chain of sporadic events, rather than an overall mood, that defined the Bronze Age. The portrayal of current events within the stories continued and even increased, considering that the large part of the beginning of the 1970s was dominated by the Vietnam War's effects. Iron Man stopped fighting communists and turned instead to domestic, social issues. Spider-Man voices his doubts about the necessity and even the legitimacy of the war (Wright, 2003). Meanwhile, Marvel also launched the first ever African-American superhero ('The Falcon'). One groundbreaking event

happened when, in a 1970 issue, Spider-Man saved people from their drug-using habits. The story was no doubt in an anti-drug tone, but since it was strictly forbidden by the Comics Code to mention drugs, the issue could not receive an authorization seal. Nevertheless, Marvel published the issue, distributors bought copies and eventually the comic sold well. This led to a wave of excitement within the industry and some revisions in the code were made, adapting it to the moral values of the time. Allowing the portrayal of corrupt police and other governmental institutions and the presentation of moral ambiguity were among the changes that were made (Wright, 2003).

As Marvel Comics brought these themes into the comic books and led these changes, DC did not stay behind, and introduced the *Green Lantern/Green Arrow* series. The union of the two superheroes was a successful attempt to bring two opposing values together. The former hero had been a patriotic, right wing symbol since his incarnation while the latter was known for his leftist approach. The series “immersed its superheroes in the social and political issues of the times: racism, poverty, political corruption, the ‘generation gap’, the plight of Native Americans, pollution, overpopulation and religious cults” (Wright, 2003, p. 227).

In a nutshell, the superhero of the 1970s certainly had more awareness than he had in the previous decades. Yet while this involvement with contemporary problems and the subsequent lifting of the strict rules off the Comics Code attracted attention, the industry suffered from financial crises. This is when a fandom culture of superheroes emerged. Previously comics readership in America, as indicated elsewhere in this study, was an activity shared by millions of people, who were mostly children or

young teens. However this mass activity was now displaced by a special sense of readership and even identification. Bradford W. Wright relates the emergence of the specific fan cultures to the fact that the youngsters of the 1970s “faced a world that was more confusing than ever before” and were therefore “lost”, in alcohol and drugs, in religious cults, or in “the fantasy world of superhero comic books” (Wright, 2003). Jean Paul Gabilliet (2009) writes that this was a combined outcome of “the penetration of television sets” into homes and “the uninterrupted erosion of expenditures on the periodical press relative to other mass media.” (p. 204-205). These members of the fan cultures approached comic books with expertise, they chased older and antique issues and they were eager to meet each other (in conventions and comic book stores) to discuss and criticize comics. These fans were not children, but rather late adolescents and young adults. The target audience was certainly shifting and this attitude was further reinforced by the ‘suggested for mature readers’ notice that many comic books had on their covers in the 1980s.

Aware that they now have an audience of fans who knows about the intricacies and shortcomings of the heroes, the comics industry worked to satisfy the demands of these sophisticated readers. This led to a generation of ‘auteur’ writers and artists who freely used their dark imagination to create a chain of some of the most remarkable superhero stories. It is the two primary superhero texts that define the Modern Age: *Batman: the Dark Knight Returns* (Frank Miller, 1986) and *Watchmen*. The former is the story of the middle aged and retired Batman in a very violent, chaotic Gotham City. He decides to return to being a vigilante for the city but finds out that he is not so welcome anymore, and has to give crucial decisions throughout the story. This was a four-issue limited comic and it was quickly deemed as a

masterpiece. Other Batman stories in similar tones were released both by Miller and other writers and artists in the following decade. The immediate impact of the grim, self-doubting narrative in *The Dark Knight Returns* was to be seen in Tim Burton's *Batman* (1989) and *Batman Returns* (1992). Eileen Meehan has claimed that with *The Dark Knight Returns*, the company "essentially test marketed a dark reinterpretation of Batman with an adult readership". This dark reinterpretation proved to be very long lasting.

The latter comic, *Watchmen*, is also a limited series comic of 12 issues. The storyline featured the members of a dispersed group of aged superheroes in a Cold War background in 1985. In the alternate history that Alan Moore, the series' writer, created, the Vietnam War was won, Nixon is still president, and the Cold War with the Soviets is more intense than it has ever been. The superheroes that Moore created are flawed and morally ambiguous: Dr. Manhattan's extraordinary powers probably even surpass those of Superman's – yet he has no compassion for mankind. The young Nite Owl II is reminiscent of Batman – only, he shows signs of impotence. The others of the group have these imperfections too. And the New Yorkers hate them. In several panels, it is possible to see a question painted on a wall by protesters: "Who will watch the Watchmen?" Derived from the question asked by many ancient thinkers including Socrates and Juvenal, "Who will guard the guardians?", this question emphasized a need to reconsider superheroes in a postmodern world, and as later series in the 1990s and the contemporary superhero films show, it did, at least to some extent.

These two series above have solidified the place of the term ‘vigilante’ in superhero comics. The distinction between a superhero and a vigilante is also important in order to understand the dynamics of the heroes in contemporary film. The superhero never forgets that his actions are under law and order, but the vigilante may forsake these in his (usually solitary) pursuit of justice. The superhero never kills, but the vigilante might.

In the 1990s and 2000s, the wave brought by *The Dark Knight Returns* and *Watchmen* continued to be exercised by other writers. The identities and pasts of the famous superheroes were reconsidered, as well as the need for them. In efforts of revitalizing the superheroes, other ways were also employed by the companies such as publishing new titles (such as Marvel’s ‘Ultimate’ titles) that restarted the superheroes’ stories from issue one: “The return to a ‘first issue’ similarly aimed to arouse the interest of a new generation of young readers living in a culture of instant gratification who were less motivated, in contrast to their parents and grandparents, to become ardent consumers of series that were now more than a quarter of a century old” (Gabilliet, 2009, p. 102).

Nevertheless, the comics readership has not managed to reach the glamorous days of the Golden Age. While there is certainly a comics literacy (that is not only American, but worldwide) which has been boosted by the blockbuster films based on the superheroes, the commodification of these characters in all media and all forms possible, and their establishment with popular culture, this is not the case for comic book readership. Bradford W. Wright (2003) argues that “comic books are losing

their audience not because they have failed to keep up with the changes in American culture but because American culture has finally caught up with them” (p. 284).

We will argue the implications of the 9/11 on the comics while discussing the films in Chapter 3.

2.3. Problems in the Filmic Adaptation of Superhero Texts

At first glance, film and comics share some characteristics. Not only are they both visual and sequential ways of story telling, but also they became the two phenomenal arts of the 20th century, making big impacts on popular culture; they are made for mass consumption (Lefèvre, 2007). Hans-Christian Christensen notes that the relationship between cinema and comics is “natural” since “comic strips, with their popular cast of characters and ready-made situations, with almost the same plot development as the movies of the day, provide an easy visual source.” (Christiansen, 2000, p. 106) Opinions on whether there are considerable parallels differ in the comics industry insiders: Will Eisner⁶ said “Films were really nothing but frames on celluloid, which is really no different from making frames on a piece of paper. Doing *The Spirit* was no different to making movies” (Hughes, 2010), while Dave Gibbons⁷ opposed the idea of similarity, saying “A comic’s script looks a bit like a film script, and comic art looks a bit like storyboards, but there is no sound in a comic book and no movement. Also, with a comic book the reader can backtrack, you can reach page 20 and say ‘Hey, that’s what that was all about in that scene on page 3’ and then nip back and have a look” (Hughes, 2010). This “natural” but disputed relationship

⁶ Influential comics writer and artist. Eisner’s impact on the American comics industry is so profound that today the most prominent annual comics award in USA is named after him.

⁷ Artist for *Watchmen*.

between cinema and comics is somehow further complicated as, since the initial years of the genre, there have been many attempts at making live-action film adaptations (as well as animation films and TV and animated series) of every successful superhero title. This again is a controversial topic: On the one hand, writer Frank Miller was co-director for the film adaptation of his graphic novel *Sin City*; so not only was he approving an adaptation, but he was directly involved with the process. On the other hand, when asked about the adaptations of his graphic novels, Alan Moore⁸ simply said “I force myself not to have an opinion [on the adaptations]. Those feature films do not resemble my books. If they are good films, it’s the merit of the directors. It has nothing to do with me. Likewise if the films are mediocre” (Lefèvre, 2007, p. 4) When the views of these quoted writers/artists are combined, it can be understood that, rather than being simply an issue of adapting the physical elements from one visual way of narration to the other, this is a matter of converting media; since, as Douglas Wolk puts it, “comics are not a genre, they’re a medium” (Wolk, 2008). Pascal Lefèvre (2007) lists the problems peculiar to the cinematic adaptation of comics as such:

These characteristic differences of the two media become enacted as the four adaptation problems of (1) the deletion/addition process that occurs with rewriting primary comics texts for film; (2) the unique characteristics of page layout and film screen; and (3) the dilemmas of translating drawings to photography; and (4) the importance of sound in film compared to the “silence” of comics. Given these problems, perhaps the central question about filmic adaptation of comics is not, “how faithful/respectful to the comic the film will be,” but rather, “how least dissimilar to the comic can the film be?” (p. 3-4)

Lefèvre (2007) concludes his article on comic book adaptations with the following deduction: “Given these differences, perhaps we should not be too purist concerning

⁸ Next to *Watchmen*, some of Moore’s other best work have also been adapted into films.

adaptations and accept that a work may inspire a creator in another medium. If we look at an adaptation, we should forget –for a moment- about the original work and evaluate the newly created work on its own merits.” (p. 12)

Whether such a solution is capable of overcoming all problems of adaptations and their receptions is uncertain. Bearing in mind that most superhero titles have created quite faithful fandom cultures, it is clear that even the best (in cinematic terms) of films may not satisfy the die hard fans if, for instance, some details to the original story are omitted or changed for the sake of a two-hour screenplay or the casting of actors seems unsuitable. However, most of these films, especially those in the post-*Superman* (Richard Donner, 1978) era, are blockbusters and they (even when they are not critically acclaimed) attract a body of audience that multiplies the number of comic book readers many times: Upon its release in July 2008, *The Dark Knight* (Christopher Nolan, 2008) made over a billion dollars in the international box office, attracting around 22 million audiences (“‘Dark Knight’ breaks box office record”, 2008). Meanwhile, the monthly *Batman* comic book sold around 103,000 copies in August 2008 (“August 2008 Comic Book Sales Figures”, n.d.) (which certainly was a big rise from the 11,000 in May 2008: “May 2008 Comic Book Sales Figures”, n.d.)⁹. Obviously, very few of the audience members showed interest in the comic itself while the rest took the film as a single story or a sequel to *Batman Begins* (Nolan, 2005). These figures can, then, bring another question: Who are the superhero films made for, the readers of the series (be they faithful or occasional) or the standard multiplex audience who view these films perhaps with little prior

⁹ There are, at a time, as many as ten different Batman titles that are published on a monthly basis. Within the specified periods, none of these titles sold drastically more or less than the one mentioned above.

knowledge of the extensive universe of the hero and as they would watch any other action/adventure/science fiction blockbuster?

Of course, before making such inferences, one also has to admit that comic book readership might not necessarily be the only way of having knowledge about and/or loving a superhero. Readers of graphic novels and limited series and viewers of animated series may also be considered fans, as well as anyone who is faintly familiar with American popular culture. And naturally, these adaptations too generate new fan bases, which follow the superheroes in this new medium. The ‘Comic-Con’s (comic book conventions) now attract more participants with the superhero film and TV series events, rather than the comic book events. However, the superhero narrative, for reasons mentioned above, might change so much in the film that this new fandom has different ideas about the story or the characters. A good example is given by Derek Johnson, who writes how the originally short, hairy and unattractive character Wolverine was played by tall, muscular and attractive Hugh Jackman in *X-Men* (Bryan Singer, 2000) and the following two sequels *X2* and *X-Men 3* [as well as his own prequel *X-Men Origins: Wolverine* (2009)] and how this new Wolverine “became a template for the construction of brand identity” in the post-2001 series of X-Men comic books: the team members’ 40-year-old yellow uniforms are switched into those that resemble the black ones in the film, Wolverine’s previously unrequited love is now actualized (Johnson, 2007). Another example is the character of the Joker portrayed by Heath Ledger in *The Dark Knight*. While the Joker, Batman’s archenemy, has always been favored by people and was previously incarnated with success by Jack Nicholson in *Batman* (Burton, 1989), this 2008 version of the villain created a craze around him, gaining more sympathy than

other characters. This might be due to the filmmaker's intelligent portrayal of the character, or due to Ledger's sudden death before the release of the film. In any case, this particular Joker became more famous than the film's main character, the hero.

In the final analysis, the best way to treat films adapted from, based on, or inspired by superhero comics is to treat them as a single cultural product, but to remember that they are based in an extensive history. Superheroes are now a long-established part of American popular culture and any source material that they would provide is bound to create distinctive discourses. This is the approach that this study will take in its analysis of the visual landscapes of the films.

2.4. A Short History of Superheroes on Screen

The adaptation of superhero narratives to film and TV is almost as early as the introduction of the comics they are based on. Batman, in 1943, and Superman, in 1948, along with other superheroes, were made into 'movie serials' in several chapters: "In these serials, audiences would see a chapter each week of an unfolding action narrative, usually drawn back by chapter-ending cliff-hangers" (Gordon, Jancovich & McAllister, 2006, p. 110). With the tagline "A hundred times more thrilling on the screen!" on the poster of *The Batman*, it was made clear that superheroes would continue to be source material for film – and television too. When the movie serial format was abandoned with the proliferation of the TV in American homes, superheroes consequently started to appear on TV. Between 1952 and 1958, Superman, and between 1966 and 1968, Batman had TV series. The latter, especially, caused a fandom around that time known as 'Batmania' and is still a much talked about cultural phenomenon in comics history. The camp aesthetics of

this series and the film based on it (*Batman*, 1966) gave way to discussions about possible homosexual implications of the character and his young sidekick Robin. The tone of the series and the film is noteworthy for purposes of comparison with the recent and current adaptations. Wonder Woman, Spider-Man and Hulk also has TV series of their own in the 1970s.

With Richard Donner's *Superman: The Movie* (1978), the superhero film evolved. Until then, the superhero films were cheaply and sloppily-made, and were not taken seriously. With a cast that included Marlon Brando and Gene Hackman as supporting actors (alas, their names were written above Christopher Reeve, Superman/Clark Kent) and a script written by a famous author of the time, Mario Puzo, this film targeted the A list and it became a blockbuster. Critics like Roger Ebert praised the film and listed it as one of the best films of the year¹⁰. Jean-Paul Gabilliet (2009) claims that the positive reception of this film highlighted the flaws the superhero films and series so far – called by him as “fiascos” (p. 79). Then it could be argued that superhero films were able to deliver the “hundred times more thrilling” stories that they promised from the beginning, starting with *Superman*. Between 1980 and 1987, three sequels were made, though none of those reached the first film's popularity.

However, the change did not come so quickly. It took a decade for another visionary and respectable superhero film to arrive. Tim Burton's *Batman* (1989) and *Batman Returns* (1992), as mentioned before in this study, both satisfied fans and attracted the attention of other audiences. Among many other things, these films can be

¹⁰ Rogerebert.suntimes.com

remembered by their gothic, characteristic urban design, bearing symptoms of an approach which we can safely call 'Burtonesque' after two decades. The two following films by Joel Schumacher, *Batman Forever* (1994) and *Batman & Robin* (1997), however, did not have such a positive effect on the franchise. In contrast with Burton's work, these films toned down the dark atmosphere around the superhero. Especially the latter film's bad jokes and campy tone reminiscent of the 1966 *Batman* caused it to receive negative reviews.

The breakthrough in superhero films came in the early 2000s with the release of *X-Men* (2000) and *Spider-Man* (2002). The massive popularity of these films and their immediate effect on popular culture prompted the producers to act. Since then, there has been an exponential rise in the number of films released every year.¹¹ In return, the effect on popular culture has been profound. As argued before in this study, it is now possible to mention a new kind of comics fandom. But artistically too, the subgenre has reached heights previously unimagined. Today a superhero film can be an Oscar contender, as in the case of Christopher Nolan's *The Dark Knight* (2008) in the Academy Awards 2009 nominations. The near future, at least the present decade, of superhero films look even brighter. In the previous section, numbers concerning comic book sales were given. Comic book publishers are evidently also aware of this decline and are turning themselves into studios, as noted by McAllister, Gordon and Jancovich (2006):

Increasingly, comic book companies see themselves in the character-licensing business (at the very least) and perhaps even more specifically in the filmed entertainment industry. (...) Marvel Entertainment has moved into film development and production, after years of poor returns on licensing revenue from external studio-produced films based on their properties. In what has been called by a trade journalist "one of the most radical business-model

¹¹ The filmography section at the end of this study may be a partial guide to the numerous films that were released in the last ten years.

overhauls in Hollywood history" Marvel is redefining itself as "an independent film studio" that makes its own movies (111).

There is a short, animated sequence at the beginning of every Marvel Studios film: The pages of a comic book are turned very fast as various Marvel characters seem to be almost jumping out of the book. Additionally, the creator behind virtually every prominent Marvel superhero, Stan Lee, has a cameo in nearly all films, playing a postman or a passer-by. There seems to be enough material (provided by hundreds of storylines by the efforts of dozens of writers and artists through the decades) for future trilogies, reboots and cross-overs. This abundance itself would provide another reason to study the intricacies of the superhero film.

2.5. Genre-bending

What is called the superhero genre in comics is more or less a definite concept. What is called the superhero subgenre in cinema or the superhero film is not as much. The somber, highly appraised *The Dark Knight* has very few in common with the gaudy, badly reviewed *Fantastic Four*, except the fact that both films are based on comic-book characters. On the axis of categorization that is art film vs. genre film, the superhero pictures certainly fall on the side of the genre film; but what genre? This question has no exact answer for one can see traces of science fiction, action, crime-thriller, film noir/neo-noir, and fantasy as well as themes of romance (even as a major driving force) and comedy (mostly in the form of a comic relief character or tongue-in-cheek humor, and sometimes as deadpan) among the many popular American genres in these films. While the films do not fail to play by the generic conventions, they are never among the iconic examples of the genres they borrow from. Therefore, the best way to explain the interplay of genres in these films would

be to claim that they have affinities with the said genres, rather than adapting a genre altogether. This affinity happens through the employment of narrative and visual elements.

Among such visual elements is the city. Stylistically, the designs of the supercities on recent cinema have occasionally borrowed some of the characteristic and defining features of the above mentioned genres. The first I will exemplify here is film noir. This genre emerged in the post-World War II United States, and generally speaking, it found influence in the popular hardboiled detective novels of the time, as well as post-war anxieties, centered around morally ambiguous characters and almost always set in dark, chaotic American metropolises. Paul Schrader notes that film noir "is not defined, as are the western and gangster genres, by conventions of setting and conflict, but rather by the more subtle qualities of tone and mood" (Schrader, 2003, p. 231).

As the quote above illustrates, one way of approaching film noir now is taking it as an aesthetic and stylistic path. Nicholas Christopher (2006) comments on encountering the noir aesthetics in contexts beyond that of film noir:

Today, even in pulp, cartoonish renderings of the American city, such as comic books, dime-store thrillers, or even the mass-market *Batman* extravaganzas, the city is rendered as a noir grotesque: Batman's Gotham (as in *Gothic*) City and Superman's technicolor, chaotic Metropolis are quintessential noir cities, with all the trimmings – ever-nocturnal, crime-ridden, corrupt, economically polarized and rife with demons. The modern noir city is a no-holds-barred playground for criminals, deviate types, vampires and out-right freaks (the Penguin, the Joker, Brainiac¹²) – a Capital of the Night, where the forces of sex and death intertwine. (p. 63-64)

¹² The first two are famous enemies of Batman and the latter one is a villain in Superman stories.

The science-fiction factor is not to be forgotten. The designs of the utopian/dystopian cinema cannot help but pay homage to the films that defined and set the example for those uneasy, futuristic visuals: *Metropolis* (1927) and *Blade Runner* (1982). In the 1990s, *Dark City* (1998), a merger between neo-noir and sci-fi, joined those. Typical of these films are high, inhumane buildings, a caricaturized, distorted vision of future and a combination of extreme elements such as heavy rain, bright, colorful lights which contrast the darkness around, a general feeling of clutter. Sometimes there is even direct reference to these films: In such a reference to *Blade Runner*, a corrupt police officer buys ethnic food from a street vendor under very heavy rain in the middle of the night.

Then there is the disaster film. Susan Sontag (1965), in her article “The Imagination of Disaster” makes the following comment:

Certainly, compared with the science fiction novels, their film counterparts have unique strengths, one of which is the immediate representation of the extraordinary: physical deformity and mutation, missile and rocket combat, toppling skyscrapers. The movies are, naturally, weak just where the science fiction novels (some of them) are strong – on science. But in place of an intellectual workout, they can supply something the novels can never produce – sensuous elaboration. In the films it is by means of images and sounds, not words that have to be translated by the imagination, that one can participate in the fantasy of living, through one’s own death and more, the death of cities, the destruction of humanity itself. (p. 101)

While Sontag penned her article in particular reference to the sci-fi films of the 1950s, it is possible to see in this quote a universal comment on the sci-fi films of Hollywood of all ages. Bukatman mentions the term “aesthetic of astonishment” and says on the relation of disaster/action cinema with the new technologies that “Special effects emphasize real time, shared space, perceptual activity, kinesthetic sensation, haptic engagement, and an emphatic sense of wonder. The impact of these spectacles

has only been redoubled in the era of IMAX, ridefilms, and a range of new, immersive theme park attractions and other themed environments” (Dittmer, 2011, p. 120).

Lastly, both because it is in the nature of superhero narratives, and thanks to the highly developed special effects and a blockbuster audience that demands faster images and louder sounds, there is a certain element of action cinema in the superhero subgenre. On the visual characteristics of action cinema, Robert Langford (2006) writes:

In simple iconographic terms the action blockbuster does have some reliable constants, most of which relate to the spectacular action sequences that are an immutable feature of the genre. Sky-high orange fireballs, vehicles and bodies pitching, often in slow motion, through plate-glass windows, characters diving and rolling across wrecked interiors, either under the impact of rapidly fired bullets or to escape from them; automatic pistols and large-calibre portable weaponry like grenade launchers, death-defying stunts, these are all immediately recognisable attributes of the action blockbuster. (p. 234)

Because they are fit enough to take it or their supernatural powers enable them to heal their wounds quickly, superheroes are frequently in battles. Superheroes rarely die in films, and when they do, they are always brought back to life somehow. This naturally makes room for elements of action cinema, as superheroes fight with their villains on rooftops, save their love interests as they fall from skyscrapers, stop buildings from falling apart and so on.

There is also always the problem of collateral damage caused by the actions of the superheroes. This is perhaps not so much perceived on comic book pages, but definitely noticeable in film: As they try to act fast to save a victim or catch the villain, the heroes accidentally crash into trucks, break windows, set automobiles ablaze (of course, miraculously no one gets hurt). In a *New Yorker* article, the author

criticizes *X-Men 3* for “its emphasis on explosions rather than character development” (Gordon, Jancovich & McAllister, 2006).

3. GOTHAM, METROPOLIS, NEW YORK: FILMS AND THE CITY

3.1. Super(hero) Cities: On Paper and On Film

*Metropolis is New York in the daytime;
Gotham City is New York at night.*
Frank Miller

Superheroes, at times, might come from space and make it their battlefield, hail from humble suburbs, or reside in deep desert areas for their research. Nevertheless, it is the urban settings, the many reflections of the American metropolis, which is essential to the superhero narrative and makes the superhero part of the American myth. In their introduction to *Comics and the City*, Jörn Ahrens and Arno Meteling (2010) argue that urbanity lies in the roots of the American comic tradition, the comic strips of the late 19th and early 20th centuries that were published in newspapers: “Common to all these strips is that the characters are influenced by the incredible speed of life in the New York City metropolis and that speed determines the rhythm of the city’s newspapers and comic strips” (p. 4). They also explain how, in time, the concept of the city became even more essential to the medium, particularly in relation to the pioneering superheroes:

When the new format of the comic book was established as an independent publication, new characters filled the new comic books with life such as (...) Superman, who inhabits Metropolis and Batman, who fights crime first in Manhattan (1939) and, from 1941 on, in Gotham City. Various distinctive comic book series at the end of the 1930s thus explored the city as living space and origin of modern myths. In particular, the characters of the superhero comics and the detective comics delved deep into the aesthetic, atmospheric, and scenaristic possibilities of the city. From then on, the city acted even more as the foremost setting for comics in all genres and stylistic variants. The city functioned as an important plot element, even an atmospheric, and symbolic protagonist, and suddenly became the focus of attention in many genres. (p. 5)

As emphasized in the excerpt, the big American city often constitutes a starting point for the superhero, as in the case of Batman, whose parents are killed by a common mugger in a back alley of Gotham City before his eyes, or Spider-Man, whose uncle is murdered in front of New York City library by a thief that he did not bother to stop in the first place. But the narrative does not stop there, since these cities, with their violent and anonymous crime scenes which lead to the emergence of the superhero later become the cities they protect. While the superhero cities have been depicted in many ways by various artists over the years, among with other characteristics of superhero narratives, film as a medium has enhanced the strong bond between the hero and the city, sometimes by creating exclusively designed and enormous studio sets, sometimes by shooting on location and therefore including real streets and famous landmarks, by almost always using special effects and all in all, by creating a three-dimensional space for the heroes to operate.

Very concisely, it can be stated that, in terms of shaping urban landscapes for the adventures of their superheroes, the two major publishing companies, DC and Marvel, have taken two different paths that somehow arrive at the same point and

that point seems to be New York City, no matter in what way it is depicted. Richard Reynolds (1994) in *Super Heroes: A Masked Mythology* writes:

New York draws together an impressive wealth of signs, all of which the comic-reader (of the 1940s or the 1990s) is adept at deciphering. It is a city which defines all cities, and, more specifically, all modern cities, since the city itself is one of the signs of modernity. (...) New York is a sign in fictional discourse for the imminence of such possibilities –simultaneously a forest of urban signs and an endlessly wiped slate on which unlimited designs can be inscribed – (...) and cyclical adventures of costumed heroes as diverse as Bob Kane’s *Batman* and Alan Moore’s *Watchmen*. (p. 19)

But the main difference in reaching that common factor, what I defined above as diverse paths, comes from their treatment of realism: DC locates its major superheroes in fictional metropolitan centers, while all prominent Marvel heroes are based in real-life New York City. This is not unusual since it is historically evident that the two publishers do not share exactly the same idea of a superhero, as illustrated in Chapter 2. Therefore it seems only normal that Marvel’s imperfect, socially aware heroes would live in the harsh and diverse realism of New York City, instead of the fictional cities designed for the flawless, larger-than-life heroes of DC. However, before taking these assumptions as facts, the following questions must be discussed. The first is, whether Gotham City and Metropolis¹³ are substantially different from New York City; and the second is to what extent New York City in Marvel’s narratives is realistic.

¹³ Gotham and Metropolis are only two of DC’s fictional cities. Most other DC superheroes have a “X City” of their own. However, since my ultimate intention is to trace the filmic representations, analyzing such other places is not necessary since Batman and Superman are the only DC heroes who have had recent major film adaptations. *Watchmen* is a third DC franchise that had an adaptation and will be covered in this thesis, but it is set in NYC, rather than a fictional city.

3.1.1. DC's Cities

Gotham City and Metropolis have been drawn and designed dozens of times, both in comic books and in films, and each time with different functionalities, atmospheres and aesthetics. The locations of these cities as well as their characteristic features have always been ambiguous. Nevertheless, it can be claimed they are loosely or largely based on New York City more than any other North American city. Part of the problem here lies with NYC's dominance as the ultimate urban setting in American popular culture. While there are other cities with the same characteristic features –large population, high level of crime, diverse culture, impressive skyline-, it is usually hard not to be reminded of NYC at first glance due to the 'wealth of signs' it carries as quoted above. Sometimes writers/artists and directors change this or at least attempt to – intentionally, by reflecting their eclectic visions (Tim Burton's *Batman* (1989) has visual elements from the 1930s, 1950s and 1980s together), or, involuntarily, simply due to their choices of shooting locations. Additionally, fans and close readers are sometimes able to find similarities or direct references to other cities as trivia within the drawings and scenes. This also has to do with the continuity in the DC universe. Within this continuity, sometimes NYC is mentioned in dialogues as a neighboring city to Gotham or Metropolis, or another American city; other times, it (and all other American cities) is never mentioned and is in a different realm from the superhero cities. The fact that these two major superhero cities have been filmed on location in New York various times adds even more to the confusion¹⁴.

¹⁴ Starting from the 1966 version of *Batman*, for exterior shots of several big buildings, the NYC locations have been used.

Nevertheless, at least for Batman, the claim that his home city is based directly on NYC is safer to make, at least by looking at the intentions of the comic's creators from various decades. Similar to the quote by writer/artist Frank Miller that is the epigraph to this section, writer Dennis O'Neill (1995) said "Batman's Gotham City is Manhattan below Fourteenth Street at eleven minutes past midnight on the coldest night in November" (p. 344). Yet another definition for Gotham is "New York's alter-ego" (Dawson 2004). Director Christopher Nolan calls the city "New York on steroids" ("Bat Out Of Hell", 2004). Will Brooker (2001) writes in *Batman Unmasked* that Batman operated from locales referred to as 'Metropolis', 'downtown Manhattan', 'New York' for the first two years before the writers moved him to Gotham City (p. 49), as also mentioned in a quote above. Batman's co-creator, Bill Finger, explained the reason behind the transfer to Gotham City:

Originally, I was going to call Gotham City 'Civic City'. Then I tried Capital City, then Gotham City. Then I flipped through the phone book and spotted the name Gotham Jewelers and said 'That's it, Gotham City'. We didn't call it New York because we wanted anybody in any city to identify with it. Of course, Gotham is another name for New York. (qtd. in Reynolds, 1994)

The name 'Metropolis' is much more generic, after all, it is a term for mega-cities. A number of North American cities, from Toronto to Cleveland, have been cited as the inspiration behind it. Yet the various representations of Superman's Metropolis have often lacked the ever-changing quirkiness of Gotham City, which has been, at different times as well as simultaneously, gothic, steampunk, futuristic, and grimly realistic. Maybe as its name suggests, Metropolis is the ideal example of the American urban life, it is the perfect, contemporary city. Built around a center, it features clean-cut streets and well-defined districts, representing the careful and artificial design of many American cities across the country.

But Superman is not originally from Metropolis. Born in the planet Krypton, he is dispatched to the isolated, friendly town of Smallville¹⁵, which is a generic example of the American communities, but this time of the American countryside. The dichotomy between Metropolis and Smallville is hard not to see. Kal-El from Krypton becomes Clark Kent in Smallville, only to later become Superman in Metropolis. The latter metamorphosis would be impossible to take place in Smallville because there, Clark has very limited means of exercising his power. It is the dynamics and potential of the city that turns his own potential energy to kinetic energy.

Therefore Superman (and his extraterrestrial and small-town alter-egos) is originated in a multiplicity of locations. In need of isolation or escape, he finds refuge in the ‘Fortress of Solitude’, located in the Arctic, or occasionally in other unpopulated areas of the world, thus adding one more place to his list. Most of his archenemies are extraterrestrial beings like him, and their conflict is with Superman, not the people of Metropolis; and their ultimate goal is to rule the world or destroy it altogether. All these factors explain Superman’s service to Metropolis as a matter of sense of mission, rather than loyal, emotional attachment.

Batman, on the other hand, is born, raised and solely based in Gotham City. His ‘rogues’ gallery’ consists of freakish, mutated, insane criminals and members of the mafia (who are good matches to his detective skills and lack of superpowers), and, in contrast to Superman’s enemies for whom the control of Metropolis is only a starting

¹⁵ The ongoing TV series *Smallville* places both Smallville and Metropolis in the state of Kansas, within a few hours of driving distance. In other Superman narratives, the town is again usually placed in Kansas, yet its approximation to Metropolis varies.

point, these foes are interested in Gotham City alone. And Batman's protection of the city is perhaps even more than a result of his attachment. Nolan's two films may shed further light on this: The death of his parents, who, as represented in *Batman Begins*, are benefactors of Gotham City, is the initial motivation for Batman to begin his mission. However, in the sequel *The Dark Knight*, this tragic event seems to have lost its power in Batman's motivations, as he never mentions his parents. Instead, he is told by his love interest Rachel Dawes that while a day may come when Gotham no longer needs Batman, the day that Bruce Wayne himself will no longer need Batman may never come (*Batman Begins*, 2005). For the most part, Batman is (self-) identified and intertwined with Gotham, a city that may not necessarily be needing it¹⁶. This complex psychology is further analyzed and defined as a paradox by William Urrichio who notes that "the city represented remains ideologically skewed, locked forever by the origin story into a place of property crime, where the extraordinarily wealthy Bruce Wayne obsessively disguises himself as Batman to combat the most trivial of transgressions" (Ahrens and Meteling, 2010). A less elaborate but similar explanation is made by the quizzical villain, the Riddler: "When is a man a city? When it's Batman or when it's Gotham. I'd take either answer. Batman is this city. That's why we're here. We're trying to survive in the city. It's *huge* and contradictory and *dark* and funny and threatening" (Gaiman, 1989).

It must also be kept in mind that just as the tone and themes of superhero stories have changed through time (mostly towards a more pessimistic and darker side), the designs of urban settings have also been reset and rebooted. The Gotham City of the 1960s, for example, bears little resemblance to the dark city that the Batman stories

¹⁶ This sentiment was voiced in *The Dark Knight* and it is going to be elaborated in a later section.

of the 1980s and forth were set in, a fact evident not only in comic books, but also in the camp atmosphere of *Batman* (1966): In the few aerial shots and establishing shots that Gotham is shown, the city looks like a middle-scale one; the weather is sunny and people are happily strolling the streets or having picnics; the highest of the buildings downtown is much smaller than today's standard American skyscraper. The exterior scenes of this film were shot in Pasadena, California, as opposed to the Manhattan or Chicago exteriors that the later films used. Since the film takes place during day rather than night, this film is unable to exhibit the glamorous views of the city's jungle of tall buildings lit with electric light. Christopher Nolan, director of the more 'realistic' *Batman Begins* and *The Dark Knight* made the following comments about the atmospheric differences between various adaptations:

Previous movie versions created a world so exotic that Batman naturally fit in. I felt there was this odd cinematic gap – no one had taken Batman on as a *realistic* character. Batman is, after all, a mortal guy. Even the Gotham of the comics, of all the comic locations, while certainly heightened and exaggerated, still reflects people's very real worries about their own society. What hadn't been done, for better or worse, was the notion of an extraordinary man in an ordinary world. (Bainbridge, 2010)

In the next section, Nolan's two takes in interpreting Batman, and even more importantly for our purposes, his urban space will be taken as a case study to illustrate some points.

3.1.2. The Contemporary Gotham City: Terror and Realism

Batman Begins (Christopher Nolan, 2005) is the film that rebooted the Batman franchise. Despite the four contemporary feature films that preceded it, which, at most, included this sequence as a flashback, this is the first film that deals largely

with the origin story of the superhero, the interpretation of which has differed in details in the works of different writers and filmmakers: The young Bruce Wayne witnesses the death of his wealthy parents, Thomas and Martha, from the handgun of a common mugger at a back alley of Gotham City. In Nolan's version, though, Bruce may be said to cause these deaths indirectly, the guilt and anger of which he suffers from for a long time: Early in the film, he falls into a cave in the garden of his family's manor and obtains a fear of bats upon meeting several in the cave. When he later goes to the opera with his parents, he is scared, thinking he sees bats, and wants to leave. And when they do, they come across the mugger. Another addition that Nolan brought is a long account of how Bruce, in his twenties, trains himself physically and psychologically to eventually become Batman. He trains with the League of Shadows in the snowy mountains of Bhutan, and when Ra's Al Ghul, the leader, gives him the task of destroying Gotham City since it is very corrupt and it will never come to order again, Bruce burns down the temple and kills the members.

The Gotham City he turns to is a city of extremes. On the one hand is a golden city that shines with the legacy of Thomas Wayne's philanthropy, and on the other is poor, chaotic slums (named the Narrows), crime-ridden docks, mob-ridden streets. Earlier in the film, on the eve of the murders, the Wayne family travels to the opera with the multi-level monorail that Thomas Wayne has built who proudly explains to Bruce: "Gotham's been good to our family, but the city's been suffering. People less fortunate than us have been enduring very hard times. So we built a new, cheap, public transportation system to unite the city." (*Batman Begins*) At the center of this centralized system, he goes on to say, is the Wayne Tower. Higher than neighboring buildings and impossible to mistake for the family's name is visibly written on it, this

building is not only the headquarters of a multi-million business corporation, but also the city's symbol of prosperity that stands to prove for the "less fortunate" that things can always be good again. The message here (that will be repeated with more emphasis later in the film) is that if the Wayne Tower falls, everything falls.

The Narrows, on the other hand, is the exact opposite of this bright, idealistic picture. The design chosen for this neighborhood is an eccentric one: From a long shot, it looks like the favelas of Rio. Poor, hopeless people live in shanty apartments and on the streets, which look like Hong Kong, accompanied by never-ending, miserable rain, while the mob rules in underground restaurants, entertaining corrupt government officials. Seeing these and an encounter with the head of the mob, Falcone, in the first place make Bruce run away to Asia and ultimately join the training.

To make matters worse, Arkham Asylum is situated on the same island as the Narrows. This asylum, as a locale, has been as important as Gotham City in the Batman saga for it is a prison for the freakish enemies of Batman, rather than an institution for the mentally disturbed.

Contrasting these is the Wayne Manor, which stands in a safe distance from the city. This helps Bruce Wayne, the playboy/heir, to give the illusion of a carefree, hedonistic life on the one hand, and Batman to keep his countless warfare tools and maintain his secret identity on the other. Filmed in a castle in the green, peaceful English countryside, the six-generation old Wayne Manor stands for nobility, tradition and old money.

The main conflict between Batman and his enemies grows to be an exponential one as there is a certain hierarchical order among them. When Bruce becomes Batman

upon returning to the city, the first criminals he fights with are the common muggers on the streets, some of whom are involved with the mafia. Then he starts to trace the mob which is headed, of course, by Falcone. When Falcone is caught, his unseen collaborators want to arrange that he is sent to Arkham Asylum instead of prison, and a psychiatrist meets him for that purpose. The psychiatrist turns out to be an employer of the unseen collaborator as well, and he violently manipulates Falcone's mind by spraying a gas on him, which makes him see horrible images and become paranoid permanently.

Finally, it is revealed that the psychiatrist, who goes by the name of Scarecrow, works for Ra's Al Ghul. Who Bruce had left to die in the temple was only a fake Ra's. The master plan has been this: The raw materials for Scarecrow's toxic gas has been smuggled in with the help of Falcone. The fear gas is processed in the basement of the Arkham Asylum by inmates and it is going to be added to Gotham's water supplies. Ra's explains that the financial crisis had been brought by the League of Shadows. While Gotham's people suffered from the poverty and high crime rate brought about by the crisis, they survived it somehow, thanks to people such as the Wayne family. When this plan of economic destruction did not work, the next plan that the League of Shadows had was to destruct the city through fear and paranoia. The motivation behind this is stated by Ra's Al Ghul, when Batman warns him that he is going to take millions of lives:

Only a cynical man would call what these people have "lives," Wayne. Crime. Despair. This is not how man was supposed to live. The League of Shadows has been a check against human corruption for thousands of years. We sacked Rome. Loaded trade ships with plague rats. Burned London to the ground. Every time a civilization reaches the pinnacle of its decadence we return to restore the balance. (*Batman Begins*)

The members of the League of Shadows release the convicts at Arkham and intoxicate the people of the Narrows. When the police raise the bridges, the citizens and the convicts are stopped from crossing to the main part of the city. This is the last we see of the Narrows. Ra's Al Ghul also burns the Wayne mansion down. In return, however, Batman ultimately stops him from reaching the water mains under the Wayne Tower and intoxicating all of the city's water. To do this, however, he crashes and destroys his father's monorail on purpose, and has also presumably killed Ra's Al Ghul. Gotham, "the world's greatest city" in the words of Ra's, is saved at great costs.

The Gotham of *Batman Begins* has a distinct level of morality. Despite the comparisons that Ra's Al Ghul makes with similar glorious cities of the past, like Rome, Constantinople and London, Gotham cannot reach the level of decadence in those cities in respective eras. The immorality of Gotham is the high crime rate, which repeatedly caricatured by the mugging and murders of Bruce Wayne's parents. However the crime inflicted on Gotham stems from the inequality between the rich and poor, and the financial crisis. In *Batman Begins*, Ra's Al Ghul says that the League of Shadows itself inflicted the financial crises upon Gotham, which eventually and indirectly lead to Wayne's parents' death. Thus, apart from the inequality between rich and poor, Gotham is not a city corrupted with decadence and extravagance like the other cities mentioned by Ra's. The most immoral thing about Gotham is the wide gap that exists between the wealthy and the poor that live in the Narrows, a neighborhood that seems to have disappeared, to never have existed in fact, in the sequel, *The Dark Knight*.

One interesting aspect of Nolan's Batman films is that there is no continuity in terms of urban design between *Batman Begins* and *The Dark Knight* (2010). At first, this is not such a strange choice: The two pairs of early Batman films made by Burton and Schumacher also had altering city designs between them. Nevertheless, for a director that is primarily known for his realist attitude, more continuity would be expected.

But the strangeness that such a decision creates comes from elsewhere: Two central features of the earlier film's Gotham City, upon which a major part of the plot was built upon, are lost: The monorail and the Narrows. They are never mentioned and it is as if they never existed at all. The transportation system that was intended to bring Gotham together is now probably replaced with an automobile-dependent society, as the queues of cars in stuck traffic in one scene signify. As for the Narrows, it might just have gone a process of gentrification or been a victim of the city's own program of social Darwinism. In consequence, also extinct are the father Wayne's samatarian ideals of an equal Gotham. This is why Batman's fight in this film is not against the poverty and injustice that Gotham's citizens have to suffer, but is rather based in causes that become too personal after a while. Justine Toh brings an alternate reading to this:

In saving the tower, yet crashing the train, Bruce/Batman establishes a fresh covenant for the post-9/11 era. His actions place more faith in political force (his vigilante identity as Batman) and sound economic management (in regaining control of his father's company) that he does in the utopian space of the train, represented by the well-meaning but weak-willed social liberalism of Thomas Wayne.

The Dark Knight starts little after its prequel ends¹⁷: At the end of *Batman Begins*, Lt. Gordon gives Batman a joker card as the clue for a new criminal. And at the

¹⁷ We understand that a few years have passed because Lieutenant Gordon's toddler has now become a boy.

beginning of the sequel, Joker is seen, terrorizing the city¹⁸. Batman's crusade in this film is against the Joker's endless tactics and plans, which he all employs with the intention of proving that everyone can be corrupt and can give up their ideals and morals, even men such as Batman (whose only rule is not to kill) and the bright, moral district attorney Harvey Dent. With the latter, the Joker ultimately wins.

Since his mansion, and consequently his 'Batcave', was burnt down in the prequel, Bruce Wayne has moved to new headquarters: The home for the playboy businessman is a glamorous city penthouse, and the home for the vigilante is the high-tech basement of a building under construction, which has the signs in front of it: "Wayne Property, No Trespassing". The extremities of Bruce/Batman's dual identities are not limited to such incidents. When Batman has to attend a 'day job', Bruce orders his butler to prepare the Lamborghini, and not the Batmobile for that would simply be not a subtle choice. Little does Bruce realize that driving a custom speed car in the middle of city traffic roughly equals the same amount of pompousness.

This is because the Gotham of this city is as 'realistic' as it has ever been. With the removal of the *Metropolis*-esque elevated train from the view, and shooting on location in Chicago, Nolan has reached an undecorated design of Gotham, which, according to the plot, hosts 30 million people. The wide avenues, the cement and grim buildings and skyscrapers are indicators of a prosper city that drives on industrialist economy, rather than the service sector, which is why the city is as plain as it can be. Since all the contemporary Batman films had eccentric urban design as a

¹⁸ I will later talk about the implications of the word "terror".

key visual (and also narrative, as in the case of this film's prequel) feature of the film, Nolan makes this choice on purpose, so as to keep attention on the dialogue-heavy screenplay.

When Batman takes on a 'foreign mission' and travels to Hong Kong to find an important criminal, Gotham City, for the first time in the Batman films, has an alternative and another urban space to compare with. In the alternate universe of supercities, it is supposed that each of them stand alone. The superheroes work for the cities, and occasionally for the world, like Superman. But between the microcosmos of the city and the macrocosmos of the world, there seems to be no other level. Most of the time it is the microcosmos alone that drives a narrative through decades. This is why Hong Kong stands in an important place, as another global city, an indicator that is especially important when one argues about superhero narratives as allusions for urban paranoias and post-9/11 terrorism. Within the plotline of *The Dark Knight*, though, Hong Kong does not go beyond being an evil twin to Gotham and a home for the 'other', who is, at this particular instance, an Asian.

3.1.3. *Superman Returns*: The City as World

While the conflicts in Bryan Singer's *Superman Returns* (2008) are not stemmed from the city of Metropolis itself, this film needs a short analysis in terms of the limited relationship it builds with urban space.

Contrary to the lengthy sequences that were set on the superhero's home planet Krypton and in his home town Smallville in the 1977 *Superman*, this adaptation does not have any scenes on this other and spends little time in Smallville – to picture Superman's return to Earth after a long while and to show the death of Clark's adoptive mother, Martha Kent.

Just like Superman is the most flawless among the other superheroes, Metropolis is the most flawless among other supercities. In fact, the city is so flawless that Superman is not seen throughout this film to be fighting any common criminals; his sole fight is with Lex Luthor, whose main intention, as mentioned before in this study, is to control the world and Metropolis just happens to be a starting point in his master plan. Aware of this, the scriptwriters have added the following line, as voiced by a narrator on television, referring to the past accomplishments of Superman: “But as this security footage from a simple deli robbery proves there's really no feat too big or too small for the Man of Steel.”

One remarkable and maybe too metaphorical scene occurs in the later parts of the film: Superman rescues the citizens from a model of earth falling from the Daily Planet building. He places the earth on his shoulders, and this scene can be seen as a metaphor to the titan from Greek mythology, Atlas: who is doomed to carry the earth on his shoulder as his punishment. While Superman receives his power only in this world and none other, it is also his burden to carry through his existence.

3.1.2. Marvel's New York City

The “notion of an extraordinary man in an ordinary world” that Nolan has referred to in a previous section defines the relationship between Marvel’s superheroes and the city they protect. As mentioned in the previous chapter, the approach that Marvel Comics took in creating some of today’s well recognized superheroes such as Spider-Man, X-Men and Iron Man was to make these characters flawed just as any other normal human being, as well as to the changing social and political atmosphere. As a consequence, the (real) identities of these heroes occasionally suffer from personal problems, like poverty and alcoholism, and social problems, like segregation. The ‘extraordinary’ personalities of these men and women are balanced by the ‘ordinary’ problems they have and the ‘ordinary’ world they belong to. This made sense considering the Silver Age vision that these superheroes were created with: “a popular culture icon for a more modern, urban America, where the new frontiers lie in rapid, revolutionary scientific advances... an ordinary city dweller whom science endows with the abilities to make a difference in a city of millions”. Stan Lee adds to this decision with the following remark:

“It should be abundantly clear that I’ve always tried to make our characters as realistic as possible, given the fact that they were living in a world of fantasy. In fact, I tried to inject reality to that world itself.... These colourful superheroes... had to live somewhere, why not let them all live in the same city? That city would be New York, because that’s where I lived and it was the one place I felt I could write about with a fair sense of accuracy.”

With these opinions, almost all Marvel superheroes made NYC their homes. While some of them operate from the center, downtown Manhattan (such as the Fantastic Four), others are based in more peripheral areas of the city, such as Hell’s Kitchen (for Daredevil) and Queens neighborhood (for Spider-Man). Even those who do not

live in the city maintain a close distance to it, such as the X-Men, who are based in upstate New York.¹⁹

Jason Bainbridge defines two functions of NYC in Marvel comics: The first of these functions is to unite the Marvel universe. By the Marvel universe, he refers to the cross-over ground of the superheroes, the cinematic reflection of which has been mentioned in the previous chapter. Therefore, keeping all characters in the same premises allows them to interact when needed and to work on their own when not. The second function is to “suture” that universe to reality, “providing a material context for these iconic forms” (Bainbridge, 2010).

Referring to DC’s policy of assigning fictional cities to its superheroes, Bainbridge makes the following comment:

In each of these [DC’s] comics New York City was given ‘a fictional veneer [which] removed the fantastic series even further from reality.’ This meant that the comic book city remained largely archetypal, a backdrop that was endlessly adaptable to the demands of the narrative. It wasn’t until 1961 that the Marvel Comics brought New York City into the foreground, rolling out a collection of characters and titles that were set *in* New York rather than inhabiting fictional cities that were simply extensions of themselves.

By referring to the DC cities as ‘simply extensions’ of the superheroes, Bainbridge also acknowledges that the relation between the hero and the city is indeed organic and mutual, the examples of which has been given in the previous section. However, this claim should not mean that a similar type of interdependent relationship and self-identification do not exist in Marvel’s narratives. In a cross-over adventure, Spider-Man says the following: “You can’t say ‘I love New York’. Tourists can love New

¹⁹ While almost all Marvel superheroes live in NYC in comics, this has not been the case in film so far. The characters that predominantly live in NYC also in their films are Spider-Man, the Fantastic Four and Daredevil, and therefore I will use only those in my arguments later in this chapter.

York. Me? Who grew up here? Who's lived here my whole life, who's crawled over every stone and swung off every cornice... I *am* New York. It's in me, in my blood" (Straczynski, 2001).

Lastly, on the topic of fictive vs. real cities, Anthony Lioi (2010) offers the following analysis, relating the cities to the identities of the superheroes:

During the Golden Age of DC Comics, superheroes lived in places that suggested real cities but never named them directly. The disguise of the city mirrored the superhero's own disguise, signaling the importance of keeping dual identities secret. The thrill of Marvel's New York was the thrill of identity unmasked, but also of shared community: Marvel's Silver Age heroes give the sense that they are just around the corner in Midtown. The collapse of the fictive and the real worlds parallels the thrill of pulling off the mask to discover someone you already know, of recognizing the hero as one New Yorker among others. (p. 152)

3.1.3. *The Spider-Man Trilogy: The City as Modern Jungle*

This section's major case study will be based on the Spider-Man films of the last decade because these films make more use of New York City than any other Marvel franchise film does. Despite the fact that there have been three films of the *Spider-Man* (released in 2002, 2004 and 2007, all made by Sam Raimi) franchise so far, since they are very alike in tone and setting (unlike Nolan's Batman films), they will be analyzed together.

The story starts off in the Queens neighborhood of New York City. Although it does not reflect the small town America spirit in the way that confined Smallville does, Queens is represented as a calm suburbia in the micro-universe that is NYC. In the background, however, is the silhouette of the city. This is best seen when the students

of the local high school, including Peter Parker and his secret love Mary Jane, are taken to the “city” –Manhattan- for a science field trip.

The two fundamental transforming events in Peter Parker’s life that eventually lead him to be Spider-Man happen in Manhattan, not in Queens. The static life of the small town is again contrasted with the ever-changing dynamics of the city. The first of these events happens when Peter is bitten by a mutated spider, which gives him his extraordinary reflexes, his climbing skills, his power as well as his ability to ejaculate webs from his wrist. Initially, the shy, nerdy Peter uses his power to defend himself against the bullies, not yet able to control it fully. He later decides to earn money and joins underground wrestling tournaments. When the manager does not give Peter his share, he in return does not bother to stop the man robbing the manager’s safe. However, in a few minutes, Peter finds out that this is the mistake of his life: Peter’s uncle Ben, who has been taking care of him with his Aunt May and who is waiting for Peter in front of the city library, dies by the bullet of the same man that Peter failed to stop. The uncle’s last words are “With great power comes great responsibility” and this is the second transforming event: Peter decides to use his powers for the good of mankind and to fight injustice.

This is how Spider-Man’s journey begins. Peter moves to the city shortly after the events above and slowly becomes a local hero as he saves the ordinary citizens from the criminals on the streets. The urban landscapes generate feasible conditions for all superheroes, but with Spider-Man, such conditions are a must for he would be unable to swing from skyscraper to skyscraper in a neighborhood or a city with shorter buildings. The image of a man screaming while he jumps from one building to

another with the help of a thin rope (web) reminds the audience of Tarzan, before the concept of a superhero, which then brings to mind the much-used metaphor of 'concrete jungle'.

The New York City in the Spider-Man films is, like Gotham, a city of dualities; however, this duality does not come from the meeting of opposite ends, such as the rich and the poor, or the order and the chaos. Rather, it is in the way people act and react. In one scene Peter Parker makes eye contact with beautiful girls walking down a sunny, cheery street, and only a few meters away a boy is being brutally beaten for his pocket money in an alley, in an uncomfortable juxtaposition that can only be characteristic of such big cities.

While Spider-Man also fights with supernatural enemies for causes that become personal, he does spend a considerable amount of time catching common criminals of whom there is a big number of, for this is a dynamic, big city. The dynamism of urban life in such small details as pizza delivery or billboard advertisements also place Spider-Man as in a different place than the superheroes mentioned above. Eventually, even old, traditionist Aunt May moves into the city, letting go of her two-storey suburban house for a small flat. Meanwhile Peter lives in a room with a broken door, sharing a toilet with his Eastern European neighbors across the hall; and Spider-Man is given the key of the city with a quite pompous ceremony that looks like a Fourth of July parade. Spider-Man does not fail that visual resemblance and stands for seconds in front of a large American flag, as he does for several times in the series.

3.1.4. *Watchmen*: Closer to Dystopia

The representation of New York City in Zack Snyder's *Watchmen* (2009) deserves another place in this section: although it is based on the DC comics of the same name, it places much emphasis on realism (or an alternative realism) and is set in New York City. This movie differs from the films analyzed above in that it is a direct adaptation. The other films are based on the respective hero's past stories that span through many decades and have been rewritten and reimagined by different artists; therefore keeping loyal to the subject matter is not always a key issue since there is no single source material to be loyal to. However, since *Watchmen* the graphic novel was a 12-issue series that was created once and only once, the film version would have no chance but to be faithful to everything in the graphic novel – and it did.

In the alternate world order of the series, the group of masked vigilantes, Watchmen, is out of work, since the prolonged Nixon administration passed a law –the Keene act- that bans masked vigilantes to function. We look backwards to their predecessors, the *Minutemen*, in order to investigate the emergence of the masked vigilante concept.

The problematic viewpoint of the superheroes emerges as seeing none of the characters in *Watchmen* has super powers, apart from the one, Doctor Manhattan. He acts as a deterrent in the Cold War, for he has immense abilities, including superhuman strength, telekinesis, the ability to teleport himself or others over planetary, and interplanetary distances, control over matter at a subatomic level, near total clairvoyance, helped him to win the Vietnam War in the alternate reality for the

Nixon administration, thus prolonging Nixon's reign. An inhumanly cold scientist now, he officially works for the government, even after the ban of masked vigilantism. The name is symbolic in the most overt way, the US government names him after Manhattan Project, which makes it clear that his role as a deterrent. He has a deterministic view of the world, and during the period in which he was a crime-fighter –under the command of the government- he states that the morality of crime and crime-fighting escapes him. His altered perspective, which has shown more or less god-like, sees all human concerns pointless. The god analogies can be extracted from his character, but rather seeing him as an endless energy²⁰ –which the society desperately and interminably needs, also brings their end.

Adrian Veidt, also known as Ozymandias is the only member of the Watchmen who makes his identity public. With his genius-level intellect he is even able to deceive Doctor Manhattan into not seeing his master plan: destroying New York City in order to remove the threat of nuclear war once and for all. Veidt sees this action as a necessary evil and his calculations proves to be correct; millions of New York citizens die by Veidt's attack²¹, and the guilt is fallen on Doctor Manhattan. Finally, Nixon and news reports announce that Doctor Manhattan is responsible of the attack to New York. This creates a relative balance between the US and USSR and peace.

²⁰ With Doctor Manhattan's acceleration, the energy production has become more and more trivial in Watchmen's alternative reality. Cars work with electricity, and people simply stop and plug their cars to the sideways docks.

²¹ In the *Watchmen* graphic novel by Alan Moore, Adrian Veidt makes an alien attack possible to end nuclear threats and succeeds in creating a peaceful environment between the US and USSR. However, in the film, the alien is omitted, but it is a weapon that killed millions.

3.2. Tracing 9/11 and Its Aftermath: Terror and Solidarity

The widely used phrase “It was like a movie” still defines the tragic events of September 11, 2001 in the United States for many people. Journalist Reza Aslan notes that the constant usage of this phrase was due to both what is called a “‘cinematic vision’ – the tendency for eyewitnesses of a disaster to distance themselves from the horror of reality by viewing events as though through the lens of a camera”, and the fact that the events were “truly *like a movie* (...) It seemed as though it were plucked from a Hollywood script” (Aslan, 2010) I would add to this argument and claim that it was not only the event itself, but also the long aftermath that it brought.

It is worth remembering that while the old continents of the world were being torn down by various wars –with most of which the United States forces were involved– during the 20th century, the American mainland stood unharmed. Nicholas Christopher (2006), in his account of the close relationship between film noir and the American city, notes that the Americans witnessed the destruction of whole cities only second-hand (first through film and newsreels, then through televisions), but spent quarter of a century under the paranoia of nuclear bombs (and then of Soviet missiles) (p. 35). And consequently, they had to “deal literally and metaphysically with the hard fact that, like other city dwellers around the world, their lives and their civilization are now very much in other people’s hands” (Christopher, 2006). While the reflections of those paranoias, fears and hysteria eventually found an outlet in film noir, one of the representations of today’s paranoia’s came in superhero films.

The relationship of superhero comics to urban panic and trauma is certainly not a new one. In an early Marvel comic book from the 1940s, a big battle between a superhero and a villain results in the victory of the latter, and this villain (the Submariner) immerses the city in water. The narrator says:

They say New Yorkers have seen everything... But here's something they never saw... a mamouth [sic] tidal wave, so high it surmounts the city's tallest building, so wide it stretches from Battery to Bronx, so terrific it slams down the worlds [sic] most famous skyline as if it were built with cards (...) Goodbye Broadway! So long Times Square! Down goes the Empire State Building! (...) But the spirit of the populace stays up! Forewarned by the President to prepare for such an emergency they respond to "water raid" sirens, don diving helmets and enter water-tight shelters below the flooded subways! (Bainbridge, 2011)

This short account is somehow astonishing in the way it imagines the whole city's complete annihilation. It is definitely not the sort of fiction that would be deemed appropriate after 9/11 – at least for a while. The patriotic reactions of superheroes to the World War II and other mid-century political events have been mentioned elsewhere in this study. While such acts of patriotism were left out of the comics in the later years, especially after the Silver Age, and were replaced with contexts that related to social awareness, when 9/11 happened, superheroes did not ignore this event and produced direct responses. Bradford W. Wright noted the dual nature of this response: "The mass medium so appropriate for propaganda and star-spangled saber rattling in the 1940s now survived among a subculture raised on cynicism, irony, and moral relativism. September 11 forced comic book makers to step back and reevaluate the place of their industry in American culture" (Wright, 2003, p. 288).

At least in the cases of Superman and Spider-Man, such considerations were ignored. In the December 2001 issue of *The Amazing Spider-Man*²², the cover is entirely black. The hero stands, shocked and desperate, before the ruins of the Twin Towers. Citizens ask him where he was and how he could ever let this happen, and Spider-Man answers: "We could not see it coming. We could not be here before it happened. We could not stop it. But here we are now" (Stracynski, 2001). In a similar way, Superman feebly says in a special 9/11 story²³ "the one thing I can not do is break free from the fictional pages where I live and breathe, become real during times of crisis, and right the wrongs of an unjust world." However, "fortunately", America has its own heroes: the firefighters, paramedics and policemen.

There was, though, some tendency towards some old-school patriotism for a while, such as the release of a special issue comic book, *The New Avengers*, "a comic book being sent to soldiers around the world. The effort was part of America Supports You, a program that in time would be exposed for misspending its money on self-promotion rather than boosting morale."(Walker, 2009).²⁴

While this was the case of superhero comics immediately after 9/11, in superhero films such direct references to the event cannot be seen. The reasons behind this may be speculated. First of all, the event brought a 'trauma culture' to the lives of the Americans, at least to New Yorkers. This trauma culture resulted in certain political enforcements and a surveillance society, and eventually led to a very sensitive

²² One of the several titles under the Spider-Man franchise.

²³ *9-11: September 11, 2001 (The World's Finest Comic Book Writers & Artists Tell Stories to Remember), Volume Two*

²⁴ See "The Return of Superman" in *The Terror Dream* by Susan Faludi for more well-put analogies of 9/11 and superheroes.

understanding of the catastrophe. Seeing these reenacted on a superhero film could have brought about questions on political correctness.²⁵

Second of all, the motivations and operations of blockbuster cinema differ from those of comics. Since it is a medium (and an industry) that appeals to much larger crowds and is more about money than comics ever was, Hollywood cinema has to be more age-aware. While the Batman films and *Watchmen* may not have aimed at attracting younger audiences both by their dark styles and complex plots, the Spider-Man franchise, for instance, did target children.

Nevertheless, it would be wrong to claim that the superhero film failed in providing a response overall. On the contrary, perhaps the abundance in superhero films in the post-9/11 period itself can be taken as a direct response. This abundance has attracted the attention of several writers.²⁶

The story of the Spider-Man trailer which was released before 9/11 and was quickly removed after the event is now famous. In this particular teaser trailer²⁷, a group of bank robbers are escaping the crime scene with a helicopter until a strong force stops them and pulls the helicopter back. In the long shot, it is seen that the Spider-Man caught the helicopter in his web that is hung between the Twin Towers.

This trailer was cancelled, and instead a new scene was added to the film (Hughes, 2010, p. 283), in which curious and excited New Yorkers stand on the Brooklyn

²⁵ Films like Oliver Stone's *World Trade Center*, on the other hand, do not pose a problem for they deliver the account of the events directly and without any metaphors to superheroes.

²⁶ See Peter Coogan, J. Dittmer

²⁷ This trailer can still be found on YouTube.

Bridge, watching Spider-Man's battle with the Green Goblin. At a climactic moment, when the Green Goblin is closest to winning the battle and dropping a bus full of school children to the river, people on the bridge start throwing food at him. One man shouts "You mess with Spidey, you mess with New York!", and the other adds "You mess with one of us, you mess with all of us!".

This discourse is similar to the one employed in the Marvel Comics issue quoted above ("The spirit of the populace stays up!".) This scene takes place in the first film in the franchise, but all three films have at least one 9/11-aware scene. In the second installment, for example, there is a long sequence of action. The villain, Dr. Octopus and Spider-Man have a long fight on top of the elevated train. 'Doc Ock' finally damages the brakes of the train, sets it off its track to another track that only ends near a rift; so, if Spider-Man cannot stop the train on time, the cars full of people will fall down to the sea. Spider-Man uses all his strength but when he finally stops the train, he is consumed. Compassionate hands of the passengers carry him over their shoulders, as if he is a rock star who is 'crowd-surfing' in a concert, to lie him down. Meanwhile his mask has fallen off and the people are astonished as they look into his face and realize how young he is. Peter wakes up, realizing his mask is gone. One man tells him "We won't tell anybody" and the others nod. Spider-Man puts his mask back on, only to see Doc Ock to arrive again. Passengers stand in front of Spider-Man and tell the villain if he wants to get to the superhero, he will have to make it through them first. And the villain does so, in one second.

The way Spider-Man is loved and protected by the people has to do with the way he gains an incredible level of popularity among the public through the series. No other

hero, at least none of the others mentioned in this study, receives so much (and almost always unconditional) support from the citizens. While in the Spider-Man films the overall tone is more careful and is on the side of a constant solidarity among the New Yorkers (and Americans) without making specific references to events, allusions to the real politics are much more apparent in the Batman films. Possible resemblances between Ra's Al Ghul and League of Shadows to Osama Bin Laden and Al-Qaeda have been pointed out in several sources.²⁸ However, any possible allusions to terrorism would extend from the case of 9/11 alone to recent worldwide terrorism. Ra's Al Ghul's pawn, Scarecrow, for example, is a bioterrorist. Justine Toh (2010) talks about "the twenty-first century context of asymmetric warfare where attacks on networked urban infrastructure (water, electricity, transport) make cities particularly vulnerable to attack" and adds that the "destruction of infrastructure is only one outcome of such attack; another result is the spreading of panic and fear throughout the populace." (p. 133) Yet another mention of a terrorist comes from the film *The Dark Knight* itself. Batman's archenemy Joker is called a 'terrorist' in the film, and considering his actions that can lead to mass murder any moment, this is an apt definition. However, Joshua Feblowitz (2009) notes that despite all his evil deeds and his freak nature, the Joker had never been called a terrorist before in the Batman saga, nor had he done things at that scale. This, therefore, is the effect of the post-9/11 adjustment on him, as is there certainly such an adjustment on all other familiar characters of Batman.

Concerning a *The Dark Knight* poster and possible connotations provided both by the film and that poster, Jeff Dawson wrote (2008):

²⁸ See Justine Toh; Joshua C. Feblowitz; J.M. Tyree

New York's alter ego, Gotham City, is under attack. Bombs kill civilians indiscriminately. Panic spreads like wildfire. The perpetrator, a mysterious self-styled "agent of chaos", has no apparent motive. Holy terror! Has the new Batman flick plundered its plot from 9/11? The imagery here is blatant: firefighters framed in tableau against the smouldering rubble of Downtown; politicians cashing in on the paranoia; bound hostages used to relay demands on television; the extraordinary rendition of a foreign suspect; a crusade against an "evildoer" that turns more personal vendetta than reasoned response. Then there is the film's poster, which shows a flaming, wing-shaped hole punched through a smoking office tower. You can't disavow gratuity here — there is no such scene in the actual film.

Dawson's seemingly bizzare exclamation "Holy terror!" is a reference to the *Batman* TV series and film of the mid 1960s. Another writer, J. M. Tyree (2009), asks "Could it be that the Manichean self-image of America as fundamentally superheroic was so badly frayed that it could be questioned at the lowest intellectual price point, the summer blockbuster?"(p. 34). These writers are in slight disbelief that such a cultural commodity that had long been deemed to be nerdy and campy at times is actually capable of offering allusions to the nation's biggest trauma ever. Perhaps the writers were right to be surprised, though: Jesse Walker states, about the superhero genre, that in the post-9/11 period "a film genre that critics frequently deride for seeing the world in black and white is actually ambiguous about war, privacy, empire, and state power. It took this form as Americans, often derided for the exact same reason, grew increasingly ambivalent about the very same subjects." (Walker, 2009)

One scene in *The Dark Knight* also shows this, that Americans are occasionally ambivalent about their moral values but ultimately choose the right thing. In a climactic moment, two boats passing from one side of the city to the other are told by Joker's announcement that they have 15 minutes to make a choice. One boat is full

of civilians, and the other full of prisoners. The ‘game’ is simple: Each boat has been given the button which will explode the other boat. If both boats fail to act in 15 minutes and blow the other one, the Joker will then blow them both. There are nervous discussions in both boats for the period. In the prisoners’ boat one convict throws the mechanism to the water to the dismay of his friends, while in the other the man who says he will do it if no one else does cannot bring himself to pushing the button. Both parties wait, terrified and then nothing happens although the time has passed. Because meanwhile, Batman beats the Joker, stops him from firing the bombs, and tells him triumphantly that he will never corrupt the people of Gotham. Batman wins this round and the film earns its only optimistic moment.

3.3. Reflections of Urban Life

While 9/11 had an undeniable effect on the representations of power dynamics and people’s response in superhero films, it is not the only factor in shaping the arguments of the films. In this section I will try to make two thematical categories and refer to two of the important elements in urban life: the first is the effect of press and media, and the second is the enforcement of law and order.

3.3.1. Press and Media

In the opening sequence of *Superman: The Movie* (1978), a voice-over reminds the audience of the (fictional) historical background in which Superman emerged:

In the decade of the 1930s, even the great city of Metropolis was not spared the ravages of the world-wide depression. In the times of fear and confusion the job of informing the public was the responsibility of the *Daily Planet*, the great metropolitan newspaper whose reputation for clarity and truth had become a symbol of hope for the city of Metropolis. (*Superman: The Movie*)

Two prominent superheroes that are mentioned in this study are journalists in their daily lives, Superman and Spider-Man. The newspaper that Clark Kent/Superman works for is, as quoted above, *The Daily Planet*. In *Superman Returns*, at the beginning of the film it is revealed that Lois Lane's article "Why We Don't Need Superman" has won a Pulitzer award. As Superman is returning to the city, there is a massive blackout, caused by the evil actions of Lex Luthor, which causes every operation in the city to halt and planes to fall. Superman saves the plane that Lois is in at the middle of a baseball field during a game. So his first action back in the city is viewed by the thousands in the field and even more watching on the television.

The news coverage of this return and the simultaneous blackout is noteworthy. At *The Daily Planet* headquarters, Lois Lane is excited to find about the mysterious causes behind the blackout and make this a new story. However, the editor assigns Lois the task of covering Superman's return as it is the biggest news in years. The blackout, ironically, is assigned to Clark Kent as it is considered secondary news. The meaning is that as long as Superman is with the people of Metropolis, there is no need to be concerned thoroughly about a blackout, or any other catastrophe.

At the end of the film Lois Lane writes another article and names it "Why We Need Superman". J. Dittmer (2009) reads this as "reinforcing the notion of the United States as a place requiring a savior, and tacitly of the world as a place requiring a United States".

Peter Parker works, on the other hand, completely out of material necessities. He takes photographs of Spider-Man and sells those to the famous tabloid of NYC, *The*

Daily Bugle. Being a photographer is the only job he can maintain while constantly running after criminals around town. He sticks his camera on a web and sets it to auto-shoot, while he is working as Spider-Man. Since no other photographer can take such clear photographs of the superhero (for obvious reasons), he is involuntarily employed by the eccentric editor of the newspaper, who boasts that his newspaper has never published fake news. Nevertheless, while this newspaper does not publish fake photographs or news articles, it does not mind manipulating public opinion with provocative titles, claiming that Spider-Man is essentially an evil character, ripping off the city without the citizens noticing it, with a style that is typical of tabloid newspapers. And surprisingly, its capacity for swaying public opinion is quite large, as exemplified in one instance in *Spider-Man 3*, when citizens look at the cover story of *The Daily Bugle* and think that their hero is indeed evil.

The media in *Watchmen* operates on the oppositions. The panel discussions on the television feature columnists or political theorists of opposite views. There are two main newspapers, *Nova Express* and *The New Frontiersman*. The former is a left-wing democrat publication, against war and against vigilantes. The latter is the brute vigilante Rorschach's favorite; it is a right-wing, anti-communist, anti-liberal newspaper. When, after the destruction of NYC, the USA and the USSR make peace, the editor complains that there is nothing for them to write anymore since everyone is overwhelmed with this new, positive status quo. Just then, the editor's assistant finds Rorschach's journal, which he had kept during the previous month and left in the newspaper's mailbox before he died, ending the graphic novel on an exciting point. However, when one speculates about the publication of such material from a vigilante that the public hated in a newspaper that no one cares about anymore, it can

be derived that probably very little attention would be paid and Rorschach's account would be covered as if it were a scandal.

3.3.2. Law and Order

A few corrupt policemen or detectives in Batman stories are almost a must. This comes from the fact that as a superhero with no super-human powers or abilities, Batman must rely on his investigation skills next to the other skills he develops, therefore he is in constant fight with ordinary crime. Nolan's films do not disrupt the traditions. The only cop that Batman trusts throughout the two films is Jim Gordon, who is first a lieutenant, then the police commissioner. Nolan even adds the detail that Gordon was the compassionate, rookie policeman who consoles the young Bruce when he is brought to the police station. In *Batman Begins*, Gordon's partner is a corrupt detective who rips off money even from the poor street vendors and overlooks the smuggling of drugs. In *The Dark Knight*, the detectives that cooperate with the mob do more harm, as they work as informants for the members of the mafia, who then directly pass the news or whereabouts of government officials to the Joker.

A bank manager exclaims while his bank is being robbed by the chaotic, anarchist Joker in disguise: "Criminals in this town used to believe in things." This belief seems to be shared by the gangsters that the Joker is cooperating with. Comprised of Italian, black, Eastern-European and Far Eastern members, the golden league of Gotham's mobsters probably present the biggest non-white community to the city. These hardboiled men are simply astonished when the Joker burns down his share of cash.

In *Batman Begins*, Batman and Gordon deal with the criminals on their own. In the one scene that is set in a courtroom, Bruce's parents' killer is given a parole. With *The Dark Knight*, there are changes and improvements in the law enforcement. In a city with such a high level of transgression, Harvey Dent, the new District Attorney, receives star status as he conducts public cases fearlessly and tries vehemently to finish the mob off. Nevertheless, he eventually gives in to the Joker's plans, and passes to the dark side, receiving his criminal nickname "Two-Face" due to the burnt half of his face.

In both the Batman and the Spider-Man films, the respective superheroes are considered to be the biggest help to the police. The Gotham Police Department is not always happy to be running for Batman's help since they regard him to be a lawless vigilante, and at the end of *The Dark Knight*, are on the hunt for him (the famous Batsignal is broken by an unwilling Jim Gordon himself). With Spider-Man, though, the New York Police Department is represented as less efficient and therefore cannot do without his help. Aware of this, Peter Parker lives with the police transmitter on all the time. Even in one of the few situations when Spider-Man is announced as persona non grata, the policeman lets him go in a building on fire to save a little girl, and leave the premises after that. After all, the policeman could not try to catch Spider-Man with the residents of the building looking at him with grateful eyes.

In *Watchmen*, the first vigilantes, the Minutemen, come directly from the police organization. In a conversation between two Nite-Owls, Hollis Mason and Dan Dreiberg, one former and the other latter, Mason explains the emergence of donning masks and costumes to fight crime:

It all started with the gangs. You know, people tend to forget that. Pirate outfits, ghosts. They thought it was funny: dress up and pull heists. As soon as we'd arrest them, they'd be back on the street. Nobody could pick them out of a lineup because of the damn masks. So a few of us cops, we get together and we figure, what the heck, we'll mask up, too. We'll finish what the law couldn't. (Moore, 1986)

As it can be seen that the criminal element in New York City has utilized mask wearing in order to hide, and the main reason was being anonymous. Just like Gotham city which has been stylized as a immensely corrupt place, *Watchmen's* New York proves to be a place where law cannot be the only way to stop criminal activity. Thus, the enforcers of the law, the police don masks and costumes to “finish what the law could not”.

This transformation of law enforcement in *Watchmen*, causes riots in the city. A relatively recent flashback to the times when Nite Owl and Comedian -who is also a masked vigilante, but with close connections to Nixon administration, and serves as a kind of assassin- were trying to suppress a police riot in the city, just before the passing of the Keene act. While the catchphrase of the film, “Who watches the Watchmen?” appears in the scene as graffiti, the rioters demand “Police to protect the people!” This attitude of the public in *Watchmen's* New York is different from Spider-Man's picturesque relationship with the public, Gotham's volatile reception of Batman as a hero or a villain. The people of New York do not see the Watchmen as villains, but rather question their legitimacy, and therefore, anarchy is not directed towards police and other traditionally opposed elements of the society, but masked heroes, who can be interpreted as the anarchy towards the order themselves.

4. CONCLUSION

Representations of the city are already in the nature of the superhero comics and they have been so for a long time. Now the contemporary superhero film genre too, as a stylistical subgenre or as a capitalist mode of Hollywood cinema, has proven its capacity of reflecting the fears and paranoias of the urban individual, as well as the collective ones of the societies, in its recent examples.

Studying superhero films is one way of studying Hollywood – or rather, the in-between, neutral, unsure status that the American cinema seems to have acknowledged recently. Just like the way the propaganda comics of 1940s are now not only outdated but also are not the expectations of most readers, high and mid-quality examples of popular contemporary American cinema can be said to be refraining from taking a certain political side (at least, explicitly) or making blunt comments on issues regarding foreign policy. Patriotism and solidarity are still themes that find their ways on to the films, albeit in more implicit ways. However, it is quite difficult to come across popular narratives that strictly belong to one wing of American politics or the other. This is largely due to the American foreign and domestic policies of the recent decade, towards which some citizens were extremely critical of and some others supportive of. Nonetheless, the general point that the

public stood on was ambiguity – a situation in which people do not know what is going on, or why it is happening.

Superhero films got their own share of this. In this respect, as I have tried to deliver in this study, ambiguity is the key factor that defines the recent superhero films. While the films I have analyzed in this study cannot be considered to present particularly critical opinions, they do take different political and social positions in their interpretations of the contemporary city and, what is more, they appropriately use allusions and metaphors in reflecting some of the current sources of unrest in the American society and the American city.

What must also be noticed is that the deductions reached in this study cannot be considered to be only limited to the films I have analyzed. Since my primary field of interest was the city, I concentrated on such representations, but in other recent films, other contemporary arguments can be found. The two films of the *Iron Man* series are reflections on American military policies and they remind the public of what has become of the military-industrial complex. The *X-Men* franchise asks what becomes of the different, or the subaltern, in a society. Even as this study is being conducted, more and more superhero projects are receiving green lights from studios which have discovered the economic and critical benefits of making such films. Assuming from the points illustrated in this study, one can assume whether the films we will see will be critical as well as entertaining is likely to be determined by the foreign and domestic policies of the United States government.

What is still left to figure out is the cause behind this aroused interest. Several times in this thesis, I tried to offer explanations, or cite those who do, in search of the reasons that caused the superhero boom. Yet this topic itself is worthy of a single study, bearing in mind that it requires a large research from audience statistics to religious myths. Chris Knowles (2007) tries to explain the occasional rise of the interest towards superheroes by relating it to religion: “The story is as old as time; we only call on our gods when we need them. When life is easy, we ignore them. (...) Likewise, we can chart the fortunes of comic-book heroes in American culture by the rise and fall of public confidence and sense of well-being” (Knowles, 2007).

As a final word, I would like to point out to several additional sources. While in this study, I have been preoccupied with resources on the history of the superhero genre and the screen incarnations of major superheroes, the literature on the aesthetics and philosophy of superheroes is extensive.

Scott McCloud’s *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art* serves as a decoder for deciphering meaning out of comics and understanding the unique visual language they use. Graphic novelist Will Eisner’s *Comics and Sequential Art*, as the title suggests, treats the medium as art and breaks down the visual elements of the medium to small pieces as to present how comics convey meaning. Robin S. Rosenberg’s *The Psychology of Superheroes* serves what the title promises and brings a psychological approach on the complex and multi-layered question of why exactly superheroes sacrifice their lives and themselves for the welfare of the society. Terrence R. Wandtke’s *The Amazing Transforming Superhero* sheds further light on how in time the superhero of the big screen has changed. Lastly, I would suggest

Paul Gravett's *Graphic Novels: Everything You Need to Know* for a comprehensive account of not only superhero graphic novels, but graphic novels of all genres, in order to understand this contemporary, fresh and unconventional take on comics.

Filmography

Primary List

Batman Begins (2005). Christopher Nolan (director, screenplay). David S. Goyer (writer).

Dark Knight, The (2008). Christopher Nolan (director, writer, screenplay, producer). David S. Goyer (writer).

Spider-Man (2002). Sam Raimi (director). David Koepp (writer, screenplay).

Spider-Man 2 (2004). Sam Raimi (director). Alfren Gough, Miles Millar & Michael Chabon (writers).

Spider-Man 3 (2007). Sam Raimi (director, writer, screenplay). Ivan Raimi (writer, screenplay).

Superman Returns (2006). Bryan Singer (director, writer). Michael Dougherty & Dan Harris (writers, screenplay).

Watchmen (2009). Zack Snyder (director). Alan Moore (story).

Secondary List

Batman (1966). Leslie H. Martinson (director). Lorenzo Semple, Jr (writer).

Batman (1989). Tim Burton (director). Sam Hamm (writer, screenplay); Warren Skaaren (screenplay).

Batman & Robin (1997). Joel Schumacher (director). Akiva Goldsman (writer).

Batman Forever (1995). Joel Schumacher (director). Lee Batchler & Janet Scott-Batchler (writers, screenplay); Akiva Goldsman (screenplay).

Batman Returns (1992). Tim Burton (director, producer). Sam Hamm (writer); Daniel Waters (writer, screenplay).

Blade Runner (1982). Ridley Scott (director). Philip K. Dick (story).

Daredevil (2003). Mark Steven Johnson (director, writer).

Dark City (1998). Alex Proyas (director, writer, screenplay, producer). David S. Goyer & Lem Dobbs (screenplay).

Fantastic Four (2005). Tim Story (director). Michael France & Mark Frost (writers).

Fantastic Four: Rise of the Silver Surfer (2007). Tim Story (director). John Turman (writer); Mark Frost (writer, screenplay).

Hulk (2003). Ang Lee (director). James Schamus (writer, screenplay) & Michael France & John Truman (screenplay).

Incredible Hulk, The (2008). Louis Leterrier (director). Zak Penn (writer, screenplay).

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