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Luke Arnott, *The University of Western Ontario*

Supervisor: Nick Dyer-Witheford, *The University of Western Ontario*

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Doctor of Philosophy degree in Media Studies

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NARRATIVE EPIC AND NEW MEDIA: THE TOTALIZING SPACES OF
POSTMODERNITY IN *THE WIRE*, *BATMAN*, AND *THE LEGEND OF ZELDA*

(Thesis format: Monograph)

by

Luke Arnott

Graduate Program in Media Studies

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

The School of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies
The University of Western Ontario
London, Ontario, Canada

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Abstract

Narrative Epic and New Media investigates why epic narratives have a renewed significance in contemporary culture, showing that new media epics model the postmodern world in the same way that ancient epics once modelled theirs. It demonstrates how the epic genre recurs across different cultures and subcultures, even as each instantiation of the epic remains unique to its particular society.

The dissertation draws upon genre theory from critical discourse analysis and from observations made by various critics about the epic's status as a literary "super-genre," which encompasses as many other kinds of narrative as it can. It extends genre theory to explain how works of epic scope emerge from new media as well. The dissertation develops a framework for defining epics that balances textual analysis with attention to the social processes of narrative representation, production, and reception. This model outlines the formal continuities of the epic's field of cultural production while accounting for historical change and differing cultural contexts.

The following texts are analysed in depth: the HBO drama *The Wire* (2002–2008); works adapted from *Batman* comics, specifically the *Dark Knight* film trilogy (2005–2012) and the *Batman: Arkham* video game series (2009–2015); and Nintendo's *Legend of Zelda* video game series (1986–2013). Related books, films, comics, and video games furnish supporting evidence, while the reception of these works is gauged in journalism and scholarship, as well as in popular sources (blog postings, fan fictions, etc.).

After showing how *The Wire*, *Batman*, and *Zelda* relate to their cultural contexts as epics, *Narrative Epic and New Media* addresses the implications for epic theory in light of current cultural production. In particular, *The Wire*, *Batman*, and *Zelda* all demonstrate the new understanding of space and cognitive mapping that critics have seen as essential to theories of postmodernity, especially those that examine how the features of fictional narratives model lived experience in society. The dissertation ends with an argument in favour of a more "flexible" formalism, which can better account for the disembedding of generic forms.

Keywords

Epic, Genre theory, Postmodernism, The Wire, Batman, The Dark Knight, The Legend of Zelda, Nintendo, Comic Books, Video games, David Simon, Christopher Nolan, Shigeru Miyamoto

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Introduction

This dissertation is an attempt to account for the continual presence of the epic as a narrative genre that – its origins in the oral poetry of antiquity notwithstanding – persists into the present “postmodern” era, and that does so in a variety of new media. I will argue in what follows that these postmodern epics must be understood through a revision of traditional genre theory, one which is better able to take into account the greater variations in subject matter, form, and medium that are now increasingly abundant. This theory must explain two seemingly opposing phenomena: first, that there has been a continuous popular and scholarly fascination with the epic, underpinned by a tacit understanding that certain films, comic books, and video games, among other media texts, are contemporary epics of some kind; and, second, that there are nevertheless clear and fundamental distinctions to be drawn between these texts, as well as the social and artistic contexts within which they are produced, and the literary works that have long been considered epics in the traditional sense.

Regarding the first point, I maintain throughout this work that all epics have in common a desire among their creators and audiences to represent a totality, to encapsulate the social world of a particular culture within an over-arching narrative. As for the second point, I go on to argue that the epic is in fact a kind of super-genre that has been disembedded repeatedly from its original social context, and re-embedded or situated in new ones. These processes are always situated historically, and must be contextualized as such, but they do not necessarily follow a predictable or teleological path or development.

Defining genres is necessarily a structuralist endeavour. Yet unfashionable as it may be, classification remains vital because it is, at its core, a definition of terms and concepts, and without such definitions, critique becomes impossible – indeed, arguing over terms and conducting criticism have been inextricable at least since Plato and Socrates. Moreover, genres constantly evolve as the expectations of cultural producers and audiences change over time, and generic schema must necessarily play catch-up. My examination of epic genre theory therefore tries to better explain not only why the epic seems to persist, but also why it comes in new forms and media; at the same time, my discussion of theory is hopefully framed to anticipate future directions that large-scale, totalizing narratives might take.

To give one example: the narrowest definitions of the epic have presented it as a primarily martial, and implicitly masculine, narrative genre. Many contemporary epics contain strong vestiges of this tradition, and those discussed in the chapters that follow – *The Wire*, the *Dark Knight* trilogy, *The Legend of Zelda* – are no exception. Urban policing, comic-book vigilantism, and sword-and-sorcery questing are all paramilitary activities, conducted by predominantly male protagonists (and, it should also be noted, presented by predominantly male writers, directors, and so forth). But when we consider epic as a genre that has been reembedded in contemporary media, we can see that women’s roles within the narrative have subtly progressed with the times even as they also reflect the real-life limits of that progress. Within *The Wire*, for instance, the characters are disproportionately male, but the women who do appear are dedicated police officers, crusading lawyers, or homicidal street toughs with equal credibility. Meanwhile, new popular works of epic scope, such as the *Hunger Games* trilogy, challenge some of the assumptions of older generic conceptions about female agency within the epic even as they continue to trade in violence. An updated framework of genre theory would recognize the moderate gains represented in such works, while also accounting for works of epic scale, in whatever medium, that go further away from traditional definitions, such as Linda Medley’s *Castle Waiting* comic book series. And I should add that a solid theoretical foundation for genre is just as important for rejecting the frivolous use of generic terms.¹

A robust re-examination of genre theory not only can help contextualize new representative content, but it can also help us grapple with new narrative media. The case studies, and their paratexts, described in the chapters that follow come in many different digital and analogue media, from novels to video games. They are treated herein as equally capable of generating epics, when considered on their own terms. However, how media are viewed culturally is another matter, and, as I will argue, the extent to which a particular medium is valorized within a culture or subculture can vary a great deal – usually in relation to how long the medium has existed. Of the works considered here, theatrical feature films clearly have the

¹ Such as the claim – to pick one particularly spurious instance – that the mediocre James Bond film *Octopussy* (1983) is nevertheless a “woman-centred epic” (Santas 124).

longest cultural pedigree, so it should come as no surprise that the movie version of a particular narrative is felt to be more “epic.” However, as other media, such as television shows and video games, get greater and greater narrative ambitions, they can challenge older media’s predominance as the preferred vehicle for certain kinds of stories, whether those are epic or otherwise. Genre theory that accounts for this re-embedding within newer and newer media forms can help track this process. It can also show us how newer media incorporate older media for added legitimacy, such as the increasing inclusion of feature film-quality production values, budgets, and personnel on TV and in video games. For these reasons this dissertation focuses specifically on the epic’s most recent re-embedding within the complex, technologically-implicated multimedia narratives of postmodernity; these contemporary epics are valuable objects of study not only because of their current popularity, but also because they can most starkly test a theory that seeks to be as equally applicable to ancient poetry as it is to digital video.

I want to stress at the outset that this work is neither an attempt to praise, nor to condemn, any particular version of the rather nebulous concept of “postmodernism”; rather, I follow David Harvey and Fredric Jameson’s diagnoses of postmodernism as a “condition” or “cultural logic.” As such, postmodernism can be treated as set of structural and representational tendencies that reflect and reinforce contemporary socio-economic conditions: these include, for instance, an elision of the differences between formerly discrete cultures, the rise of increasingly hybrid identities and subjectivities, the spread of cultural materials throughout a globalized world, and the disintegration of a shared sense of historical time. This is not to say that these features have appeared in cultural productions in the last few decades exclusively, but instead that now they tend to be more prominent. (After all, even *The Mikado* meets many criteria of certain definitions of a postmodern text.) Critics such as Harvey and Jameson make a compelling case about how such postmodern features, found in popular media, can be correlated to the evolution of transnational capital – yet one need not be a Marxist to agree about the trends, as, for instance, Harold Innis’ laments about the West’s dangerous bias in favour of space over time have long demonstrated. Postmodernism is therefore important not only because it describes, however imprecisely, the features of the current cultural moment, but it is also vital to deal with if one is to argue, as I shall throughout what follows, that the epic is in fact thriving within a postmodern culture.

Moreover, I believe that Jameson's discussion of cognitive mapping is particularly productive in this context. The concept of the "cognitive map" was first developed by psychologist Edward Tolman in the 1940s, and it was picked up by other disciplines in the following decades. It appears to have come into vogue in the 1980s, not only in Jameson's work, but also, for example, in Robert Jackall's classic study *Moral Mazes*, in which cognitive mapping is used to describe how corporate managers keep track of their shifting social and hierarchical relationships. Thus the cognitive map seemed to fulfil a function that conventional representation appeared less and less capable of doing as the postmodern era entered into full swing. For Jameson, cognitive mapping is the key to any possible "political art" in postmodernism, because such mapping can, at least in principle, begin to make sense of the enormous complexity of contemporary culture and social organization. *The Wire*, the *Dark Knight* trilogy, and *The Legend of Zelda* each contribute – in similar ways, even if their particular perspectives are unique – to our mental maps of life in the early twenty-first century.

Therefore, the success with which the epic has now been re-embedded in film, television, comics, and video games reflects the genre's ability – in this instance by cognitively mapping mimetic as well as abstract representations of space – to grapple with many of the concerns and problems of the contemporary world. These include the exponential growth and fragmentation of cultures and subcultures; fundamental shifts in the size and scale of the world as it is experienced subjectively; and the various political, economic, social, and technological issues that have come to the forefront in our era of transnational capital. The ways in which certain "postmodern" epics, considered in the pages that follow, demonstrate the processes by which the epic genre can adapt to these changed circumstances, while also sharing features with the ancient or medieval epic, shows how earlier critics of the epic were mistaken to consider it an outmoded or reactionary genre. The culmination of this critique is an argument for what I will call "flexible formalism": this is an analytical stance that examines the epic genre across its historical variations by focusing not exclusively on content, but rather on the persistent, analogous relationships between the inner parts and the outer world of works which aspire to epic status. Of course, any critic of the epic must recognize that epic criticism of this sort tends to mirror the totalizing project of its subject; it is not just criticism of epic, but criticism that is itself epic, and in this way it constitutes

another dis- and re-embedding of the genre, in this case from narrative fiction to critical discourse.

The first chapter of the dissertation begins with an overview of epic criticism, briefly touching on some of the analytical trends ranging from antiquity to the modern era. It examines the theoretical contributions of, among others, Aristotle, Mikhail Bakhtin, Georg Lukács, Erich Auerbach, Northrop Frye, Franco Moretti, and Gregory Nagy. Building on certain commonalities between these approaches, and supplemented by elements of Norman Fairclough's critical discourse analysis, I suggest a theory of epic that examines narrative epics at four levels of symbolic content, which I call the epos, the mythos, the ethos, and the cosmos. The epos corresponds to the media text itself, the mythos to its precursors and paratexts, the ethos to the representative range of its imaginary, and the cosmos to the social totality it ultimately tries to encompass.

The next three chapters deploy this theoretical apparatus, each focusing on a particular case study. Chapter two examines the HBO television series *The Wire*, created by David Simon and Ed Burns, which was originally broadcast in five seasons between 2002 and 2008. It demonstrates why *The Wire* has been felt to be such a critical success, making it an epos in a qualitative sense. Next, the chapter lays out the televisual and journalistic texts that enrich *The Wire*'s mythos. It examines the conditions that allow the show's "realistic" characters to nevertheless operate within a convincingly heroic ethos. Finally, it examines how *The Wire* is used by popular and academic audiences alike to make sense of their social world, particularly the changes being wrought to urban spaces at the turn of the millennium.

Chapter three takes as its object the *Dark Knight* trilogy of feature films directed by Christopher Nolan: *Batman Begins* (2005), *The Dark Knight* (2008), and *The Dark Knight Rises* (2012). It considers the films as a unified epos not only on such superficial criteria of running time and box-office success, but also in its technological sophistication and the acclaim garnered by Heath Ledger's portrayal of the Joker. The chapter details how the films draw upon and synthesize the vast mythos of previous *Batman* comic books and adaptations in other media, before showing how the *Dark Knight* trilogy fits into an ethos that overlaps with, but does not completely subsume, other versions of Batman. The chapter concludes

with a discussion of the *Dark Knight*'s complicated relationship with real-life political strife and terrorism, before examining how it too models postmodern urban spaces, in this case via Gotham City, a fictionalized version of New York and other American cities.

Chapter four deals with the *Legend of Zelda* video game series, whose instalments have been released regularly on a variety of Nintendo consoles beginning in 1986. It argues that the series has, by a number of criteria, been considered at the forefront of video game narrative and gameplay: the original NES game and its landmark sequels can therefore each be considered an epos in its own right. The chapter outlines the various eclectic sources of the series' mythos, with some attention to how Nintendo curates the *Zelda* canon. Next, it explores the representational limits of the *Zelda* games, showing how their ethos intersects with issues of gender and race in gaming. The chapter concludes by examining the extent of *Zelda* fandom and how that fandom interprets the games in the context of the larger world; it furthermore argues that, despite its feudal window-dressing, the *Zelda* series is far more instructive insofar as it cognitively maps and measures postmodern space and time.

Chapter five begins with a summary of how the theory of epic, as outlined in chapter one, applies to each case study, and how all three case studies demonstrate certain continuities as postmodern epics. The chapter goes on to argue that the deployment of this theoretical construct may be considered an instance of "flexible formalism," a critical stance that, while remaining attentive to the "close reading" of text, images, and sound in multimedia epics, nevertheless looks beyond content when examining structural affinities. The flexible formalist must pay attention to the analogous relations between sets of parts, rather than simply matching parts themselves. Finally, the chapter, and the dissertation, concludes by admitting the practical limitations of epic criticism within the current burgeoning contemporary mediascape; it notes the irony that flexible formalism must also possess the self-reflexivity to recognize and account for the totalizing ambition of critique itself.

Chapter 1

1 The Epic

No genre has been eulogized as long, as often – and yet with as much apparent futility – as the epic. Monumental tales such as the *Epic of Gilgamesh* are among the oldest surviving texts of any sort, narrative or otherwise; indeed, these totalizing works which seek to encapsulate, if not encompass, an entire culture or history were perhaps felt by those who committed them to stone or to clay tablets to be the most important and worthy of writing down. It is both ironic and fitting, therefore, that in some cases epic narratives are the last artistic remnants of civilizations long since disappeared. In the case of the poems attributed to Homer, the epic is not only a link to the long-gone social world of an oral culture, but also the foundational text of a newly literate society; the epic becomes a cultural touchstone that overshadows so much of what has come before. Although the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* are epics of an archaic Greece that was already at a cultural remove even from classical and Hellenistic Greece, and although the Homeric epics are even further removed from the life of later “western” civilizations, they hold a special place in the western tradition for their influence on what the epic was for so long thought to be.

It is from this conventional understanding of the epic, as the story of a hero in the mould of a Gilgamesh or an Achilles, whence comes the belief that the genre is antiquated and irrelevant. Yet in recent years, there has been a greater popular, if often superficial, interest in works that are considered “epic” in some way. Even scholars of traditional epic literature have noted this interest; in her Preface to *The Cambridge Companion to Epic*, Catherine Bates observes that the epic genre

is constantly being updated and revived for a modern audience, a flood of new, often celebrated, translations making the texts newly available and accessible to a general readership, while cinematic remakes and the perpetuation of epic motifs in contemporary blockbusters and computer games ensure that the form remains ever present in the popular consciousness. (ix)

Popular epics are now predominantly linked with “new” media. They can range from Dan Sinker’s *The F***ing Epic Twitter Quest of @MayorEmanuel*, a print collection of a

two-thousand-post Twitter feed, which periodicals such as *Wired* and *The Economist* have mooted as “the first real work of digital literature” (A. T., “Twitter and Epic Poetry”), to a variety of video games, from the galaxy-spanning *Mass Effect* series to the flighty *Kirby’s Epic Yarn* or *Disney’s Epic Mickey*. Although there have been a few critical efforts to conceptualize the epic beyond its literary roots, these have been limited in their scope or success. A more nuanced, historically-grounded and trans-media understanding of the epic would allow us to see how this type of cultural production is manifested in differing and unexpected social contexts, not least in our own. In turn, such an understanding would bring critical depth to aesthetic criticism of complex popular media, the narratives of which often rely on their audience’s consumption of, and interpretive facility with, a number of complementary media forms. In the rest of this chapter, I will survey some of the most important discussions of the epic genre, and from there outline a theory of epic criticism which synthesizes the insights of these earlier formulations in such a way that they can be equally applicable to any narrative medium, while remaining precise enough to explain the epic as a genre that fulfils a specific cultural role. This theoretical base will then point toward the case studies that will illustrate and test the theory in subsequent chapters.

1.1 A Brief Sketch of Epic Criticism²

Epic comes from the Greek word *epos*, and throughout the history of literary criticism, the genre has been inextricably linked with Homer and Ancient Greek civilization. The earliest surviving analysis of the epic as such³ is Aristotle’s *Poetics*, and this text remains one with which critics of epic must grapple because of its remarkable influence. For Aristotle, epic poetry – understood mostly as the *Iliad*, but including other works

² Some portions of this section are adapted or expanded from my Master’s thesis, “The Epic Lineage of the *Aeneid*, *Grettis saga Ásmundarsonar*, and *Star Trek: First Contact*” (2008).

³ Plato’s dialogues also discuss Homeric poetry repeatedly, though only in passing; Plato’s interest in examining epic as literature for its own sake, or conducting what we would term “cultural studies,” appears negligible, a fitting attitude for a philosopher whose “Socrates” would banish poets from the ideal state because their fanciful stories cannot be reconciled with truth. Eric Havelock argues persuasively that Plato’s hostility to Homer comes from the non-abstract, particularizing epistemology which oral poetry represented and propagated.

traditionally in the Homeric corpus – was the highest form of narrative literature, notable for its “seriousness”; in Aristotle’s view, this seriousness was taken over in Ancient Greek culture by the advent of tragic drama, which added some new elements (different poetic meters within the same work, for instance) while narrowing the narrative focus (i.e., adhering to the three “unities” of time, place, and action). Yet epic continued to excel at conveying scope and grandeur in an elevated style:

Epic poetry has, however, a great – a special – capacity for enlarging its dimensions ... owing to the narrative form, many events simultaneously transacted can be presented; and these, if relevant to the subject, add mass and dignity to the poem. The Epic has here an advantage [over tragedy], and one that conduces to grandeur of effect, to diverting the mind of the hearer, and relieving the story with varying episodes (24.4)

The idea that the “epic” and “heroic poetry” were interchangeable terms became commonplace in classical antiquity. Ennius and, of course, Virgil provided examples of Latin epics for the Romans of the late Republic and Empire. Even Lucretius’ *De Rerum Natura* and Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, whose didactic or even anti-heroic styles and unconventional subject-matter challenged generic conventions, nevertheless aspired to be epics on formal grounds, such as scope and meter; without a better category in which to place them, they too were accepted as epics.

Renaissance thinkers, when they in turn imitated the classics, reinforced the strong link between the epic as a thematic genre and the epic as a poetic form. In *An Apology for Poetry* (1595), Sir Philip Sidney says that “Heroical” poetry, namely long narrative verse in the style of Homer, is “the best and most accomplished kind of Poetry” (119). Sidney argues that because poetry is, according to him, ideally an imitation of the true state of things, then verse that exalts the deeds of the likes of Achilles, Cyrus,⁴ Aeneas, Turnus, Tydeus, and Rinaldo⁵ “teacheth and moveth to the most high and excellent truth.” (119) Aeneas, predictably, is held especially high as a moral exemplar. Meanwhile, Torquato

⁴ I.e., Cyrus the Great as described in Xenophon’s *Cyropaedia*.

⁵ The legendary Christian knight Renaud de Montauban, who appears in Boiardo’s *Orlando Innamorato* and Ariosto’s *Orlando Furioso*, and elsewhere.

Tasso, in *Discourses on the Heroic Poem* (1594), says epic poetry is “most excellent” (6) because it is “an imitation of a noble action, great and perfect, narrated in the loftiest verse, with the purpose of moving the mind to wonder and thus being useful” (17) for readers “to raise their own minds to its example” (5). As the author not only of the *Discourses*, but of epic works such as *La Gerusalemme Liberata*, Tasso was a “Renaissance man” both in the traditional sense of someone who excelled at diverse endeavours, as well as being quite typical of his time in his (mostly) deferent attitude toward Aristotelian authority. The Renaissance’s imitation of the classical epic ideal, however, reached its zenith with John Milton, whose work was arguably the most successful and memorable of those trying to square Christian theology with the style and form of classical authors, most notably Virgil.

Just as ancient epics themselves served as examples that long defined the genre, classical commentaries played an equal part in bolstering these views. Aristotle’s framework endured, and had a number of lasting effects on analyses of epic that followed. Three of his observations are of particular importance: the first was the idea that the epic as such is a “dead” genre, a view that led to the distinction between the primary or oral epic (i.e., Homer) and the secondary or written epic (Virgil et al.); the second was the idea of the high quality of the epic’s language; the third was the idea of the great scope allowed by the episodic, paratactic structure of epic narrative. Remarkably, this rudimentary framework of epic genre theory persisted for over two millennia, and still has some force, even though Aristotle’s discussion of Homer depends on the historical context of the sixth through fourth centuries BC. (Nagy 27) Only the arrival of the modern novel, a literary genre with its own contingent and problematic history, would permanently disrupt Aristotle’s schema; this was because the novel, although formally very different from the classical epic, often shared or even took over many of the same thematic and socio-cultural functions.

Mikhail Bakhtin took Aristotle’s genre theory as a starting point when trying to make sense of the novel. In his seminal essay “Epic and Novel,” Bakhtin argues that “Aristotle’s poetics, although occasionally so deeply embedded as to be almost invisible, remains the stable foundation for the theory of genres” – that is, until the arrival of the

novel, in the face of which “genre theory must submit to a radical re-structuring.” (8) For Bakhtin, the epic is the product of a monological culture, closed off in the past, “complete” in that sense, and therefore exhibiting “epic distance.”⁶ The novel, conversely, concerns itself with life that is contemporaneous with its audience, is dialogic, and is still evolving. “It is precisely laughter that destroys the epic,” stresses Bakhtin, as the familiarity that comes from laughter is what removes distance. (23) In other words, when heroes are revealed as ridiculous, they cannot be epic. Bakhtin felt that the Hellenistic period marked the advent of the novel, and he cites the Socratic dialogues and Menippean satire, as well as the Hellenistic romances, as evidence of the collapse of epic in ancient times. Bakhtin saw this phenomenon of the subversion of serious culture at work again during the Middle Ages, and the meta-historical nature of his schema is important to note as we try to develop a theory of epic which can be applied with equal facility across different cultures and media.

Although Bakhtin does not make the distinction clear, here he is obviously talking about the long, heroic epic poem when he uses the term “epic.” This underlying categorical assumption is not without problems, however. It is equivalent to claiming, for instance, that “tragedy” is a “complete” and “antiquated” genre upon which Aristotle has already had the last word. This is undoubtedly true if one means tragedy of the particular sort performed in 5th-century BC Athens, but such a claim is highly dubious if interpreted generally, as it would exclude everything from *King Lear* to Kurosawa’s *Ran*. Thus Bakhtin’s formulation falls into difficulty when confronted with hybrids like the mock-epic,⁷ or when it must account for the continued, if diminished, production of traditional epics devoid of all irony. Treating Bakhtin’s categories as cultural dominants (cf.

⁶ Cf. the “distance” described by Bakhtin’s contemporary, Walter Benjamin, as part of the “aura” of the artwork. Both see this distance as part of the process of establishing and maintaining a literary or artistic canon, with its attendant links to social hierarchy. Elsewhere (“Eduard Fuchs”), Benjamin scorns the “epic element in history” in which artistic productions exist in an “empty time” divorced from contemporary society.

⁷ Such forms could easily be interpreted as dialogical; but this presents a new difficulty, namely, determining at what point the influence of multiple “voices” is no longer mere intertextuality but full-fledged polyphony. Even hoary old epics like the *Iliad* are, as currently understood, far less unified in their authorship, and therefore less monological, than Bakhtin may have believed.

Jameson 1991), rather than as absolute forms, may alleviate such concerns to a degree. In any event, we can see in twentieth-century classicist and medievalist criticism the lingering reliance upon traditional formulations. For example, A. R. George makes the case that *The Epic of Gilgamesh* “falls into the category ‘epic’ because it is a long narrative poem of heroic content and has the seriousness and pathos that have sometimes been identified as markers of epic.” (1) Likewise, in *A Muse for Heroes*, William Calin provides a long catalogue of features that he describes as still, traditionally, attributed to the epic:

It is normally in verse, of some length, in the narrative mode, fictional but based on history or legend; ... it treats on a grand scale a martial, heroic subject, manifests artistic coherence because it concentrates on a single central hero or event of national significance, contains stylized “episodes,” and is grounded in the supernatural. (5)

Yet these attributes primarily still apply to the heroic epic poem (no doubt a subset of the epic, if it is not itself the epic) modeled on the *Iliad*. Moreover, such ideals were still prevalent even in the time of Bakhtin’s laughing medieval yeomen, regardless of whether the old-fashioned epic was during the Middle Ages more a reactionary genre serving as fodder for mockery by an ascendant, novelistic sensibility, or whether it was a legitimate cultural artifact serving its own subculture – that is to say, a literate aristocracy.

Bakhtin’s view was rather idiosyncratic and contrarian for its time; it was more conventional during the nineteenth and early twentieth century to think of the novel as having arisen some two hundred years earlier, following the advent of printed books and the subsequent formation of a “reading public.” From this position, the novel had simply replaced the epic as the pre-eminent means of “serious” literary expression in the early modern period – not unlike what, according to Aristotle, Sophoclean tragedy had done vis-à-vis the Homeric epic. G. W. F. Hegel’s *Aesthetics*, based on lectures given in the 1820s and published after his death, anticipates this trajectory for the novel in his wide-ranging discussion of the epic. Although he predictably holds up the Homeric poems as the most perfect examples of the genre, he discusses and categorizes a wealth of other related works, such as Indian epics or medieval chansons, which are for Hegel admirable yet deficient in various ways when compared to the *Iliad* or *Odyssey*. But the situation

is quite different with the novel, the modern bourgeois epic.⁸ Here we have completely before us again the wealth and many-sidedness of interests, situations, characters, relations involved in life, the background of a whole world, as well as the epic portrayal of events. But what is missing is the *primitive* poetic general situation out of which the epic proper proceeds. (1092)

The “general world-situation” required for the epic, on the other hand, is one in which a kind of national wholeness has already developed in a given society, but this wholeness still predates the development of abstract institutions and laws that are removed from daily life. Hegel’s view is thus very much that the epic “proper” results from a very particular historical situation that is defined by the individual’s relationship to the rest of his world. For Hegel, none of the particular things, such as food, shelter, and tools, that man needs for his “external life”

should have been only dead means of livelihood; on the contrary he must still feel himself alive in them and with his whole mind and self, and therefore give a really human, animated, and individual stamp to what is inherently external by bringing it into close connection with the human individual. Our modern machines and factories with their products, as well as our general way of satisfying the needs of our external life, would from this point of view be just as unsuitable as our modern political organization is for the social background required by the primitive epic. (1052-1053)

The Hegelian perspective was expanded most notably by Georg Lukács, who, in *The Theory of the Novel*, identified an expression of the whole of lived experience as the aim of both the epic and the novel. The epic, Lukács claimed, “gives form to a totality of life that is rounded from within; the novel seeks, by giving form, to uncover and construct the concealed totality of life.” (60) Lukács saw the “age of epic” as the time before men had discovered “interiority,” before they could thus be alienated from themselves; one such “happy” time (29) was the Greece of Homer. Here Lukács echoed the idealized, primitivizing, and perhaps even patronizing, view of Ancient Greece common in 19th-century German thought – not only in Hegel, but in Goethe and Schiller and even in

⁸ Here I follow Fusillo (32) and Cunningham (11) in modifying T. M. Knox’s translation of this key passage: Knox renders “*Roman, der modernen bürgerlichen Epopöe*” as “romance, the modern popular epic,” when clearly the terms “novel” and “bourgeois” are more appropriate both to the letter and the context of the original German.

Marx, who counted the classical Greeks as part of the “historical childhood of humanity,” even as he declared the epic impossible in the era of industrial publishing and war-making (111). Since the epic is no longer possible in the modern era, the novel, Lukács seems to imply, takes over the function that the old poetry once performed.

Lukács’s analysis is important for its exploration of the relationship between the epic hero and his community. “It is traditionally thought,” he notes, “that one of the essential characteristics of the epic is the fact that its theme is not a personal destiny but the destiny of a community” (66). Lukács is referring to the old category of the “national” epic, which follows the model of the *Aeneid*, although the term itself referred to a more nineteenth-century sensibility. However, he extends this line of thought, claiming that the epic hero is the community itself (66). Lukács thereby reconciles Dante Alighieri, whose “hero’s lived experience was the symbolic unity of human destiny in general” (69), and who was long an anomaly as an outstanding poet of undeniably epic scope having no interest in martial subject matter, with a more traditional understanding of epic.

However, Lukács does not make the crucial distinction between the epic as form (heroic verse), and the epic as something beyond mere form, though he seems to have an implicit understanding of the difference between the two. Lukács is right to stress, in response to earlier commentators, that “[it] would be superficial – a matter of a mere artistic technicality – to look for the only and decisive genre-defining criterion in the question of whether a work is written in verse or prose” (56). Yet he confuses matters when he uses paradoxical phrases like “[t]he epic and the novel, these two major forms of great epic literature” (56) or “the epic individual, the hero of the novel” (66). Lukács must mean something else by epic here, beyond the formal or even socio-historical function of epic poetry proper. He, like Bakhtin, implies but does not articulate a trans-historical genre of epic that can somehow include both Homeric epic and the modern novel. How one defines the epic as a genre or “mode,” which encompasses the heroic verse epic, yet also finds room for the same sort of “totality” in other literary forms, appears to be the heart of the problem of categorization and analysis.

By the middle of the twentieth century, critics seem to have developed a more nuanced approach to the epic. In “Odysseus’ Scar,” the first chapter of *Mimesis*, Erich Auerbach touches upon epic theory in his comparative analysis of the *Odyssey* and the Book of Genesis. As with Bakhtin and Lukacs, Auerbach demonstrates an implicit dissatisfaction with nineteenth-century categorizations, but, at the same time, he only shows a passing interest in reformulating them – the epic as such is not his primary concern. Auerbach cites an epistolary exchange between Goethe and Schiller in which they discuss the works of Homer, and he agrees with the German Romantics that there is a “retarding element” in the Homeric poems (5); Auerbach’s main claim in this chapter is that the Homeric style remains all “foreground,” an absolute present that is devoid of suspense (7). Yet Auerbach takes pains to point out that this foregrounding is a particular feature of the *Odyssey*, and is therefore not necessarily a feature of epic itself:

But both Schiller and Goethe raise Homer’s procedure to the law of epic poetry in general, and Schiller’s words quoted above [that Homer’s mimetic goals are “already present at every point in his progress”] are meant to be universally binding upon the epic poet, in contradistinction from the tragic. Yet in both modern and ancient times, there are important epic works which are composed throughout with no “retarding element” in this sense but, on the contrary, with suspense throughout, and which perpetually “rob us of our emotional freedom”—which power Schiller will grant only to the tragic poet. (5)

Auerbach does not make clear exactly what these other “important epic works” are in this context, although it is apparent elsewhere in Auerbach’s writing that the biblical stories must be included in his definition. For instance, even as he sets Homer and the Bible in diametric opposition, Auerbach maintains that the Old Testament is written in an “equally ancient and equally epic style” as the *Odyssey* (7), and that the story of Abraham’s sacrifice of his son Isaac “certainly deserves the epithet epic” (11). Both are vastly disparate literary representations of reality, reflecting the differences in the societies in which they were composed, compiled, and written, but both are fundamentally epic. Although Auerbach does not explain what “epic” actually means for him, let alone construct a definitive theory of epic, here he does provide an explanation of how the term has come to be misused. Auerbach says that the “foregrounding” effect of Homer is “the actual source of the conception of epic which they themselves [Goethe and Schiller] hold, and with them all writers decisively influenced by classical antiquity” (5).

The danger is to mistake the classical epic as the only model for all subsequent epics, instead of a particular instance of the genre that was determined in part by its own cultural milieu.

Northrop Frye's *Anatomy of Criticism* also presents an implicitly wide-ranging view of epic not unlike Auerbach's. It is significant that this critical trend should appear in comparative literary studies around the middle of the last century, as this process of critical expansion anticipates the need in the digital age for a further critical expansion into comparisons between media. But Frye, more concerned with the underlying systematization of literary criticism as a whole in his book, does not look so far ahead; nor does he delve deeply into the problems of epic criticism, despite having much to say about various epics in the Western tradition. However, Frye is certainly aware of the problems that have arisen when trying to define genres:

We complained in our introduction that the theory of genres was an undeveloped subject in criticism. We have the three generic terms drama, epic, and lyric, derived from the Greeks, but we use the latter two chiefly as jargon or trade slang for long and short (or shorter) poems respectively. (246)

Frye goes on to say that "the purpose of criticism by genres is not so much to classify as to clarify ... traditions and affinities, thereby bringing out a large number of literary relationships that would not be noticed as long as there were no context established for them" (247-48). Frye presents a theory of genres in which the basic and ideal "genre" of the epic's transmission is from a reciter to an audience. Even epics that, in practice, were immediately written down and not always read aloud, such as the *Aeneid* and *Paradise Lost*, nevertheless assume this ideal of oral transmission. Frye subordinates the epic as such to what he calls the "Encyclopaedic form": this becomes one way, for instance, to explicitly reconcile the Bible and Homer as epics, as Auerbach's discussion of the two only implies. It is no coincidence that at the same time that Frye was making these connections, Eric Havelock was arguing that the poems of Homer must be understood as having been "conceived and intended to be a kind of social encyclopedia." (31)

Perhaps more useful for examining the epic is not Frye's theory of genres but his theory of modes, since his definition of genre is concerned more with the manner in which a

work is presented than with its formal or modal features. Frye describes how narratives can be classified by “the hero’s power of action,” and the third of his five classifications is defined as follows:

If superior in degree to other men but not to his natural environment, the hero is a leader. He has authority, passions, and powers of expression far greater than ours, but what he does is subject both to social criticism and to the order of nature. This is the hero of the *high mimetic* mode [Frye’s italics], of most epic and tragedy, and is primarily the kind of hero that Aristotle had in mind. (33-34)

Here Frye suggests a way to define the epic that is no longer shackled to the poetics of verse: a book like *War and Peace* or *Moby-Dick*, for example, can be considered an “epic novel,” and therefore Lukács’ term need no longer be self-contradictory. The relationship between the protagonist and his world, the scale of that relationship, and the protagonist’s range of action are more important than the particulars of that action or the form by which that action is mediated and narrated. Although Frye does not go so far as to pose them, his relational way of looking at the epic hero raises further questions: why not an epic opera, or an epic film? Or for that matter, what about an epic comic book or an epic video game?

1.2 Epic Form and Historical Context

And yet some formalism at the textual level is required, lest “epic” balloon into a category so inclusive it loses all distinctive utility. Another criterion for the epic that seems to transcend particular contexts is that any work, to be epic, must be as complex and as serious as possible within the affordances of its particular narrative medium. To extend Frye’s insights, we might say that not only must the epic describe a particular relationship between the hero and his world, but there must also be an analogous relationship between the epic narrative text and its own real-life world, a relationship that mirrors the first. Or, to put it in the terms of formalist narratology, not only must the *fabula* (the story) be epic, but the *syuzhet* (the telling of the story) must be “epic” too. As Pierre Bourdieu points out (53-55), genres are in constant flux in the “field of cultural production” and the status of particular works or authors is determined partly by their “position-takings” within that field in relation to the other works and authors, and these positions influence the positions taken by works and authors that will follow. On a

broader scale, this occurs between media forms too, as they jockey for cultural supremacy within a dialectical logic of remediation (Bolter and Grusin 45). This is no less true for the epic as it is for other genres, although the process of creative one-upmanship is perhaps more pronounced among works that aspire to epic status precisely because they must supplant or subsume their rivals to succeed as epics.

Franco Moretti's *Modern Epic* identifies some aspects of this process of formal competition and experimentation. Moretti examines a number of "world texts" of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, from Goethe's *Faust* to Gabriel Garcia Marquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. Each of these works is, Moretti asserts, a "flawed masterpiece" or even a "semi-failure" (5) because of its inherently experimental nature.⁹ This accounts for their often-prodigious length, and for the fact that they are almost never read, despite their status as literary monuments. Interestingly, Moretti argues that during the nineteenth century, the "age of the novel," much of this epic experimentation did not actually occur in the novel, with the exception of *Moby-Dick*, and Moretti also tentatively extends his analysis beyond the purely literary medium, in a perceptive chapter on Wagner's *Ring* cycle. Thus we can see elements of "novelistic" subversiveness, in the Bakhtinian sense, operating in fictional narratives that are outside both the formal conventions of the traditional (heroic-poetic) epic and the traditional (realist) novel during the modern era. However, Moretti's heuristic model is perhaps at once too broad – nearly any work that is sufficiently large, and even boring, can be a "world text" from this perspective – and too narrow – the model seems to have room only for the most rarefied epics.

Juggling so many shifting definitions of concepts like "epic" and "novel" across different traditions and within different socio-historical contexts is difficult, and speaks to the underlying challenge of generic classification. But it must be remembered that this is a perennial problem – genres were elastic even for the Greeks, and here we can return to the genesis of the epic as a critical category for illumination. Gregory Nagy points out

⁹ This echoes T. E. Lawrence's observations about *Moby-Dick*, which Edward Said notes in his introduction to the Vintage edition of that novel.

that between Homer and Aristotle, the term “epic” (*epos*) had a number of different meanings, and insight from these semantic shifts sheds light on how the same processes work in modern commentators such as Bakhtin, Lukács, Frye, and Moretti. In Homer’s time, the word *epos* was one half of a linked pair with *muthos*; when the two terms were understood in relation to each other, *muthos* was marked, referring to a long, public and authoritative speech-act, and *epos* was unmarked, a shorter, less “performative” kind of speech. Thus the *muthos* was the “epic” of the Homeric bard, while the *epos* was an instance of less formal speech contained within the *muthos* (25); in other words, the recitation of the Homeric poem itself was considered an instance of *muthos*, whereas the recitation of a speech in the first person within that poem was an *epos*. When *epos* was not linked with *muthos*, however, it could mean a song as performed – i.e., rhythmic poetry – and between the Archaic and Hellenistic periods this meaning was strengthened when *epos* was no longer paired with *muthos* at all. *Muthos* came to mean primarily “story” or “myth”, in contrast with truth (*aletheia*); *muthos* and *epos* both shifted from being markers of a performance context to being qualitative categories of narrative content. Nagy adds that

In our own contemporary usage of the English words *epic* and *myth*, we see indirect reflexes of the later semantic specialization of *epos*, and of the later semantic specialization of *muthos*. As parallels to English *epic* and *myth*, we may look back and compare Aristotle’s use of *epe* (the Attic form of *epea*) in the sense of epic and of *muthos* in the sense of myth as “plot.” (26)

These subtle semantic shifts demonstrate the dangers of universalizing Aristotle’s formulations, applying them indiscriminately outside their historical context; and Nagy takes Bakhtin to task specifically, saying that even the *Odyssey* seems more appropriate to Bakhtin’s idea of the novel, not the epic. More importantly, though, Nagy recognizes the distinction between the epic of an oral, folkloric tradition (what we would loosely call “myth”), and the epic of performance (the poem *qua* epic), as well as the “gap between the notional totality” of the former and the “practical limitations of epic in actual performance.” (28) Moreover,

if indeed epic can be realized informally as well as formally, it becomes the ideal multiform, accommodating a variety of forms. I draw attention to the inclusiveness, the notional wholeness of Homeric poetry. Here is a genre that

becomes a container, as it were, of a vast variety of other genres ... a medium of discourse that sees itself as all-embracing of the society identified by it and identifying with it. (28-29)

The epic has indeed become a super-genre, in the sense suggested by Nagy and Moretti, which, while continuing to include such traditional martial epics as the *Iliad*, has the theoretical flexibility to include other formal and thematic genres. Historically, this begins more or less with the novel, but the process, crucially, never stopped with Dickens or Dostoevsky; the epic super-genre can, and I believe by its very nature must, also encompass the variety of new narrative media which began to appear at the end of the nineteenth century – film and comic strips, followed later by comic books, television, video games, and so on.¹⁰ The genre clearly becomes “remediated” (Bolter and Grusin 45) within a hierarchy of media forms, and it is clear even in day-to-day discourse that there can be different “levels” of epic in popular understanding (especially since “epic” has experienced a minor renaissance as a colloquialism). However, without an examination of the details or implications of this process, even popular notions, let alone critical analysis, can become confused. The failure to distinguish different kinds and characteristics of “epic” mars some of the current attempts at a trans-media approach, especially in film studies.¹¹

1.3 Toward a Genre Theory of Epic

Norman Fairclough’s critical discourse analysis offers a model for overcoming this problem, and his emphasis on genres as discourses within a social context accords nicely with Nagy’s stress on genre as a type of speech act. Fairclough suggests that genres can be thought of at three different levels of abstraction: these are pre-genres, disembedded genres, and situated genres. (68) Within this framework, epic can function in combination with other genres at the level of a pre-genre, encompassing even predominantly non-

¹⁰ The transition from the oral epic poem to the written epic poem, inherently lost to history, is from this point of view the first instance of remediation. It also, crucially, allowed the first medium-based expansion of the epic’s scope; as Milman Perry and Albert Lord’s research showed (Lord), the compositional range of the oral bard could not match that of “Homer,” compiled as his texts likely were from the oral tradition.

¹¹ See Santas and Burgoyne as examples.

discoursal activities and events, as when we talk about an “epic battle.” Epic can function at the level of a disembedded genre, which, though less abstract, can encompass more than one type of practice; an example would be “epic narrative,” which, though clearly discoursal, is broad enough to encompass a variety of media. Finally, the epic can function at the level of a situated genre, specific to a discoursal context; this would be the epic oral poem.

The confusion, or at least the lack of specificity, in terminology noted earlier in the works of various critics occurs when a situated genre is expanded to include practices at greater levels of abstraction – in other words, when a genre becomes “disembedded.” We have

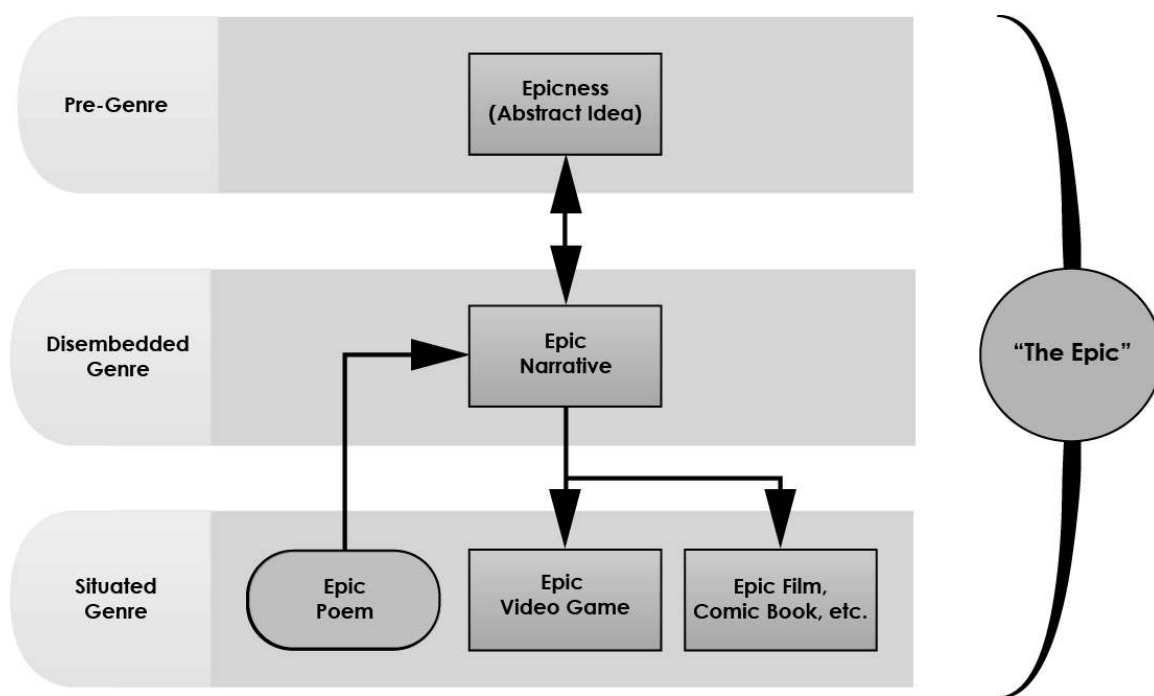


Figure 1. Levels of Genre.

seen how “epic” once meant only a certain type of epic oral poem, but was later expanded to mean narrative in the epic mode; as such, it could then be re-embedded in other linguistic forms (prose), and even other media (comic books, films, video games, etc.). (Fig. 1) This also explains the similar confusion over terms such as the “novel”: though Bakhtin had in mind long prose works when he discussed the novel, he was in fact analysing the genre at the disembedded level (i.e., as a narrative mode). Bakhtin’s particular way of conceiving “seriousness” and “distance” could just as easily apply to

media such as film and television; one could interpret the shift from the studio system to the “new” Hollywood of the 1970s analogously with Bakhtin’s shift from epic to novel.¹² Examining the process of dis- and re-embedding of genres can also go some way to explain attempts to classify problematic, “monumental” works in other media not generally known for being epic in the sense of films such as *Spartacus* or *Ben-Hur*. For example, HBO’s *The Wire* has been described as “novelistic,” but in the sense of an “epic novel” explicitly along the lines of *War and Peace* or *Moby-Dick* (Mittell 429); here elements of both epic and novel have been situated anew in the specific media genre of the episodic television drama. There will be much more to say on this particular work in the next chapter.

For the present purpose of articulating a genre theory of epic we have a number of productive ideas: the Aristotelean notions of epic seriousness, quality, and expansiveness; Lukacs’ insights into the role of the community; Frye on the heroic range of action; Bakhtin and Moretti, with some Bourdieu, on the epic in relation to its literary universe; Nagy and Fairclough’s communicative, performative, and above all mutative understanding of genre. The task now is to weave all these theoretical strands into the fabric of a tent under which all epics might be gathered. We can summarize by defining the epic as a disembedded genre of a totalizing work of narrative; it aspires to a qualitatively elevated style, and its themes look beyond individual concerns to those of a community. Although primarily fictive, the epic’s narrative must draw upon and allude to a greater body of symbolic material, which might be variously mythic, fictive, or historical. This greater narrative corpus we may call, extrapolating from Nagy, the *mythos*, of which the epic strives to include as much as possible – but never can. This explains the encyclopaedic tendency of epic, as noted by Moretti, Frye, Havelock, and others. In this way the epic aspires either to represent or to create a totality, to encapsulate an entire culture, and to be the definitive expression of its subject. Thus the epic is

¹² It is perhaps not entirely coincidental that what is popularly considered the classical film epic (of the sword-and-sandal and other varieties) flourished at height of the studio system, presented with all the pious solemnity of a Cinemascope spectacle.

invariably an epic “of” something: *The Wire* is the epic of West Baltimore as much as the *Aeneid* is the epic of Augustan Rome.

1.4 Four Levels of the Epic’s Symbolic Content

This attempt at totality can never be complete, as it would require a Borgesian, full-scale map of the world. However, we can fruitfully plot such attempts at epic-construction

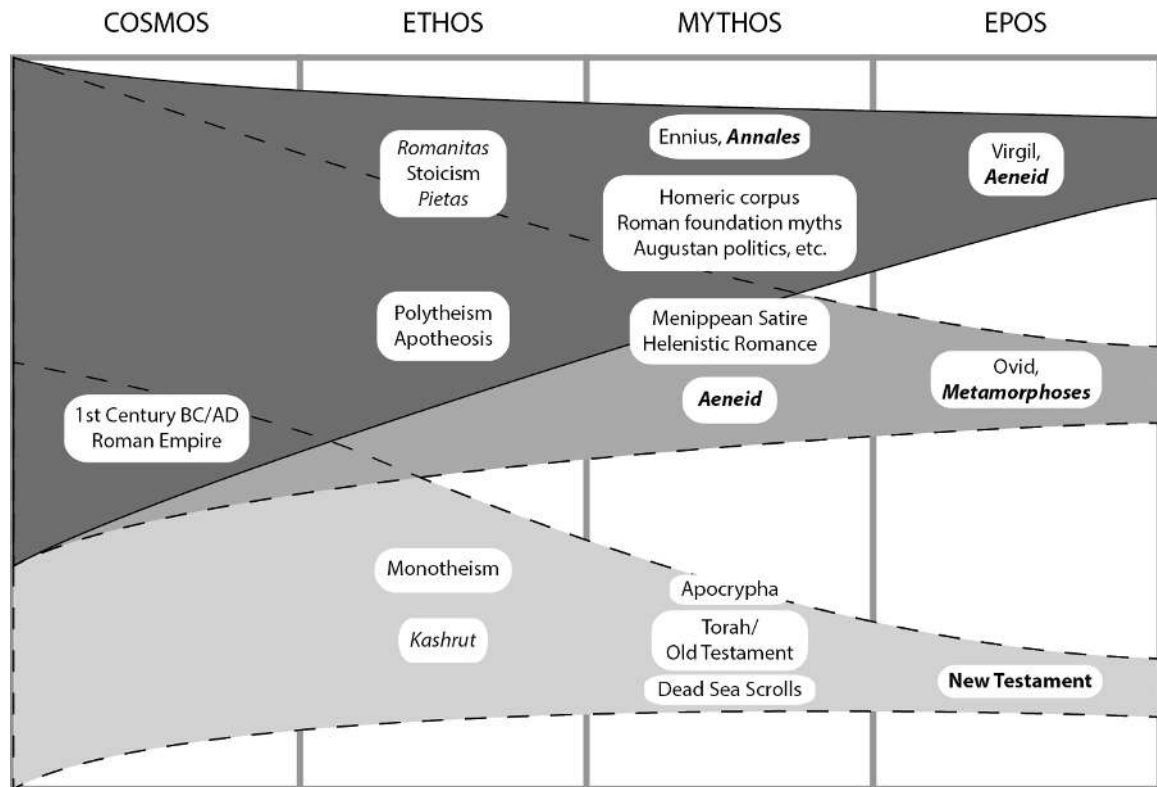


Figure 2. Levels of the Epic's Symbolic Content.

across four distinct levels of symbolic content (Fig. 2); whatever specific content each particular narrative epic encompasses determines what kind of epic it is, as well as its relationship to other cultural productions and its relationship to its culture as a whole.

First, there is the epic as it is generally understood, or what we may specifically call the analytical level of epos; this is the narrative work itself (of whatever medium), which is constructed in such a way as to fulfil (or attempt to fulfil) certain formal criteria: namely, that it is highly complex and cohesive relative to comparable works in the same medium. It is regarded as “high quality,” and these formal criteria are specific to the affordances of

the work's particular medium and production context. Thus the “bigger” and “better” a work is, relative to its peers, the more “epic” it is.

Next, there is the mythos; this comprises the other narrative works from which the epos draws, or with which it must otherwise contend. Where the level of epos is primarily formal/textual, that of the mythos is historical and paratextual. Crucially, once an epos is published or otherwise circulates, it then becomes part of the mythos for all works that follow: if it is successful, it becomes a definitive version with which subsequent works must come to terms. The relationship between the *Aeneid* and Ovid's *Metamorphoses* is a paradigmatic example. Ovid, a generation after Virgil, set himself the task of composing an even more ambitious epic (the history of the world from its creation up to the deification of Julius Caesar); this naturally included the story of Aeneas's flight to Italy, but focused on rather different story elements. That an epos can be contained within the mythos of another epos means that this model is fractal, and can operate on various scales simultaneously.

The third level of symbolic content is the ethos, defined as the range of possible representations, both within the world of narrative fiction(s) and within the given society of the epos. This is an expansion of the concept of the “urban ethos,” originally defined by Adam Krims as “a set of possible representations of cities within Anglophone music of the developed world” (xxxviii) and their limits (3–4); Krims himself suggests that the urban ethos is applicable beyond the medium of music, “encompassing much expressive culture and design” (xxxv), and that is how I wish to adapt it here. The ethos, as the level between the literalism of media texts and external reality, is also the realm of ideology in the Althusserian sense, as the gap between the world and our understanding of it.

(Althusser 109) The ethos is therefore the space within which the very definition of what constitutes a “legitimate” narrative or medium within a particular social context is contested. To continue with examples from the Roman epic, the ethos would include such ideas as the overarching importance of *pietas*, *mos maiorum*, and a polytheistic worldview; the monotheism of Judaism, in contrast, would be fundamentally incompatible with the ethos of Virgil or Ovid's work. (see Fig. 2 again) An epos is successful insofar as it is in harmony with the possible range of symbolic representation

of the culture of which it is a part; it is “determined” (cf. Raymond Williams) by its culture, but also reproduces (and hence helps evolve) the symbolic limits of that culture. A work can be especially “epic” in this sense if it anticipates this determination by creating narrative representations that do not previously appear in the mythos (and are therefore “original”) but are nevertheless wholly consonant with the ethos.

Finally, the broadest level of analysis is the cosmos, or the “totality” of which Lukács and others spoke in relation to the epic; the epos represents (or is believed to represent) a significant totality. As with the mythos and the ethos, the cosmos is also fractal, in that we can conceive of various different scales of totality as required, defined by a particular time and place; the greater this totality, the more “epic” the work is. The cosmos is therefore the level of culture as it is broadly understood. For example, the Roman Empire of the first century AD can be thought of as the totality, the cosmos, of Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*; it clearly includes within itself the Jewish and other “Oriental” cultures within and neighbouring the Empire that nevertheless do not fully conform to the ethos of the *Metamorphoses*, but it totally excludes, for example, Imperial China. Contrast this with the Orientalism of *Moby-Dick*, for instance, which does include China within its cosmography (Ahab’s harpooner, the Parsi Fedallah, wears a Chinese jacket). The size of the cosmos is therefore a function of the limits of human experience within a particular social context and the extension and dilution of that experience via media. An epic can be an epic of an entire civilization, or of a small subset of a particular society. The former is, for obvious reasons, much harder to create successfully, and is usually more greatly valorized as a result.

This fourfold framework can therefore account for epics based on real history or on “real” belief (e.g., the religious cosmology of *The Divine Comedy* or *Paradise Lost*); it can likewise be used to describe epic works that build upon a purely, and self-consciously, fictional mythos (as in the case of fantasy novels), or even epics that predate and create their own unique mythos. Thus *Star Wars* becomes the epic of the *Star Wars* mythos, which is only fleshed out *after* the 1977 film; likewise, *The Lord of the Rings* is the epic of Tolkien’s Middle-Earth even as it establishes the history hinted at in *The Hobbit* and fleshed out in posthumously published works such as *The Silmarillion*. This

“bootstrapping” epic is, in fact, the predominant type of epic within “post-modernity” or “hyper-reality,” though of course epics are still possible based on contemporary life (e.g., *The Wire*) or on historical life (e.g., Patrick O’Brien’s Aubrey-Maturin novels). While Fredric Jameson is correct to note that one feature of postmodernism is its superficial treatment or ignorance of history (1991, 66-67), the proliferation of fictional mythoi from which epics now tend to be drawn is also a function of the sheer amount of “universes” available. This does not rule out a “fragmentation” of contemporary culture; indeed, it can be seen as a fragmentation of the cosmos from which any particular epos can arise. Where the cosmos was once small and self-contained, it is now far more wide-ranging in space and time, at the cost of being more porous and subject to local variation, depending on the subculture. This is indicative of the problem of sheer scale: under current conditions, there are now far too many mythoi for any one person to know more than a handful with the degree of competency required to appreciate, let alone create, an epic based on one. I will return to some of these issues in the conclusion.

This framework also leaves space to consider power and political economy: not only do epics jostle for pre-eminence within traditional mythoi, as happened with the inheritors of Homer, but now we must contend with the question of which mythoi are privileged as part of the overall “culture,” and the ways in which that privilege is itself contested. Of course, evidence of this process exists at least as far back as Augustus’ patronage of Virgil, and it would be naïve to think that political power has only been a factor shaping epics for the last two thousand years; Akkadian and Babylonian kings may well have found it just as politically expedient to foster the compilation of legends of their putative ancestor Gilgamesh. But just as the “bootstrapping” epic does appear to be a relatively new phenomenon, the increased role of commodification should not be downplayed in the creation and maintenance of that phenomenon: contemporary regimes of intellectual property mean that whole mythoi are excluded from unauthorized use in derivative works,¹³ necessitating the creation of *new* fictional universes – which can in turn be

¹³ With the exception of fan fiction and similar phenomena; beginning with the “slash” fiction of *Star Trek*, these have been increasingly tolerated and even encouraged by rights holders so long as the derivative works are not profitable.

closed off and licensed out for profit by authors, authors' estates, or corporations. This has particular importance to epics whose stories are told in the new media of the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries – film, television, comic books, and video games.

In the next three chapters, I will apply this theoretical framework to a number of new media texts of this type; while demonstrating that they can indeed be considered epics, I will point out how they intersect with these issues along the way, and I will suggest what implications that holds for the creation, circulation, and reception of epics in a postmodern world.

Chapter 2

2 *The Wire*

The blurb on the back of *The Wire*'s twenty-three-DVD box set makes the bold claim that "from the corruption of City Hall to the battered streets of Baltimore, *THE WIRE: THE COMPLETE SERIES* is an urban epic that critics have declared the greatest dramatic series ever." This hardly proves that the show is "epic," but it can serve as a point of departure to interrogate how such a claim, and others like it, can be made, accepted, and reproduced.¹⁴ *The Wire*'s epic status is a very particular piece of both popular wisdom and marketing chutzpah, inscribed on a very particular artefact, the "complete series on DVD", which speaks to the state of television and television criticism in the first decade of the twenty-first century. If my theory of epic can be applied to such a televisual text – and if *The Wire* is not some kind of epic, it is difficult to imagine what other TV show would be – we would expect it to fulfil certain formal qualities as an epos. If it is considered to be the "greatest" show on television, there must at least be qualitative evidence within the show itself. More importantly, though, *The Wire* must draw upon a mythos of narrative material, recasting that material within a coherent and socially-legitimated ethos. How great a part of the broader culture these mythical and ethical elements represent will give some indication as to the breadth of *The Wire*'s cosmos; this will suggest how we can situate *The Wire* in relation to epics in other media and from other cultural moments. Important in this process are the ways in which, according to the logic of *The Wire*'s narration and to the arguments made by its creators and fans, *The Wire* represents the totality of postmodern life.

¹⁴ Grudging acknowledgement of claims of the series' epic status is typified by Fredric Jameson's comment on *The Wire*'s huge cast of characters: "a work of this kind challenges and problematizes the distinction between protagonists and 'secondary characters' (or stars and 'character actors'), in ways most often described, I guess, as 'epic' (*War and Peace*, *Gone with the Wind*) – a characterization that does not help to underscore what may be a historical development in the evolution of this kind of plot". (Jameson "Realism and Utopia in *The Wire*" 359)

2.1 *The Wire* as Epos

The Wire was created by David Simon and Edward Burns, and its first season of thirteen one-hour episodes aired on HBO between June and September 2002. Pitched by Simon as a reimagining of the television police procedural, *The Wire*'s first season depicted the formation and work of a police detail charged with investigating a sophisticated drug-dealing operation in West Baltimore. Subsequent seasons were broadcast in 2003, 2004, 2006 and 2008; each season focused on a different theme (the unionized port, civic and police-departmental politics, primary education, and the press), while tracing and elucidating the links between these social milieux and the street-level drug trade. The titular wiretap plays a role in each season's main criminal case; it takes on a new form each time in response to changing tactics and technologies although, especially in later seasons, the wiretap's direct connection to the multiple expanding storylines wanes.

The Wire's total episode count of sixty episodes is rather low by the standards of network television dramas,¹⁵ and is not particularly remarkable by the standards of the HBO model. However, *The Wire* was from the beginning insistent on a radically serial approach to narrative that is far more difficult to sustain than the narrative form of a traditionally episodic series. Comprehension of episodes' plot is heavily dependent on knowledge of earlier episodes, and this requirement continued and intensified across the seasons, so much so that *The Wire* became notoriously inaccessible for those who tried to watch it partway in, or, worse, out of sequence. The series must therefore be considered a unified whole and, as such, it is a remarkably coherent and lengthy work within its medium of televisual/filmic drama.

This coherence is particularly impressive considering what is often referred to as *The Wire*'s "narrative complexity," generally meaning the sheer number of characters and storylines that are presented concurrently. Since this term can be misleading (Mittell 2009, 435), I will digress here briefly to clarify it from a narratological perspective. The

¹⁵ It is almost certainly too few episodes for syndication, which traditionally requires about 100 or more episodes to be viable; HBO's *Sex and the City* (at 94 episodes) became the network's first syndication success story (Dempsey).

staging of *The Wire*'s many plots – what would in the formalist sense be referred to as its *syuzhet* – is not, narratologically speaking, complex at all. Jason Mittell notes that *The Wire* is much more “conventional in its aesthetics than other serialized programs” (2012, 26) on HBO and on other networks. The conventions that make up the show's style, which some observers mistake for “realism,” are in fact primarily based on the “classical Hollywood” style of film narration. Generally, such narration “tends to be omniscient, highly communicative, and only moderately self-conscious. That is, the narration knows more than all the characters, conceals relatively little (chiefly ‘what will happen next’) and seldom acknowledges its own address to the audience.” (Bordwell 160) *The Wire*'s particular stylistic variations on this are twofold: first, it hews more radically to objective narration than most mainstream dramas, eschewing voice-overs, flashbacks, captions, and the like; for instance, the only flashback in the entire series “is a brief cutaway of D'Angelo recognizing William Gant in the pilot episode, a moment that Simon still regrets, citing it as mandated by HBO to ensure viewer comprehension.” (Mittell 2012, 26) Second, *The Wire* refuses to follow the classical Hollywood tendency toward redundancy in the *syuzhet*, the “functional, significant repetition” (Bordwell 57) of plot points in, for instance, expository dialogue. This results in “productive confusion” (Mittell 2012, 26), forcing the viewer to pay close attention and expend far more interpretive effort than he or she may be used to in order to understand what is happening. This lack of redundancy is what makes *The Wire*'s storytelling seem “complicated”; but this is perhaps better characterized as narrative efficiency or density, rather than complexity.¹⁶ In any event, the rejection of subjective and redundant stylistic techniques is what makes the series seem at the same time far more “realistic” than its peers and yet also more radically innovative. Both stylistic strategies make *The Wire* stand out in its overall quality.

¹⁶ Many other television shows have amassed much more complicated storyworlds; those of the various *Doctor Who* or *Star Trek* series – or, for that matter, many daytime soap operas – are much larger and complicated than that of *The Wire*, and can be just as daunting for the uninitiated. The difference is that, because of the lack of narrative redundancy, *The Wire*'s episodes condense more of the show's *fabula*.

Further adding to *The Wire*'s complicated sense of "realism" is the show's rejection of what David Simon and his collaborators felt to be the excesses of the contemporary television police procedural. In Simon's oft-quoted 2001 memo pitching *The Wire* to HBO executives, he lays out the qualitative ambitions of his project:

The argument is this: it is a significant victory for HBO to counterprogram alternative, inaccessible worlds¹⁷ against standard network fare. But it would, I will argue, be a more profound victory for HBO to take the essence of network fare and smartly turn it on its head, so that no one who sees HBO's take on the culture of crime and crime fighting can watch anything like *CSI*, or *NYPD Blue*, or *Law & Order* again without knowing that every punch was pulled on those shows. For HBO to step toe-to-toe with NBC or ABC and create a cop show that seizes the highest qualitative ground through realism, good writing, and a more honest and more brutal assessment of police, police work, and the drug culture – this may not be the beginning of the end for network dramas as industry standard, but it is certainly the end of the beginning for HBO. (Alvarez 34)

To that end, Simon and his co-creator Ed Burns – both Baltimoreans outside of the television mainstream – drew on their own experiences in that city's police, press, and educational system. Other writers were hired to fill the gaps in Simon and Burns' experience and, in a number of cases, to bring not only new avenues of urban research to the show but cultural capital and prestige as well. These included noted crime novelists, such as George Pelecanos, Richard Price, and Dennis Lehane, whose oeuvres focused on the underclass in northeastern American cities (Washington DC, Jersey City, and Boston, respectively) facing problems similar to Baltimore; and journalists such as Bill Zorzi and Rafael Alvarez, who had worked with Simon at the *Baltimore Sun* and brought insider knowledge from their own experiences – in the case of Zorzi, covering city politics, and in the case of Alvarez, working as a merchant seaman in a family of port workers.

The "counterprogramming" instinct of *The Wire*'s creators extended to other production personnel; specifically, practitioners of a certain kind of non-"Hollywood" feature film were recruited. These included acclaimed "auteur" directors such as Canada's Clement Virgo and Poland's Agnieszka Holland. Holland's direction of three episodes in

¹⁷ i.e., like the maximum-security prison in *Oz*, or the "postmodern" mafia of *The Sopranos*.

particular is often cited as evidence of the high qualitative standard of the series and, therefore, as evidence for arguments that the episodes justify close reading (cf. McNeilly); notably, Holland would go on to direct episodes, including the pilot and finale, of Simon's follow-up HBO series *Treme*. Long-time film producer Robert F. Colesbury produced the first two seasons of *The Wire*, and is credited by Simon and company as setting the visual tone of the series; after his untimely death during the production of the third season, he was memorialized in a police wake for the minor character, Ray Cole, he had played as a cameo on the series. Colesbury's image (as Detective Cole) also appeared in the title sequence of the latter three seasons, a tribute of added significance considering the importance of photography's diegetic role within the series as a deliberately choreographed *memento mori*. (Farber 434)

Much has been made of *The Wire*'s attention to detail in various promotional and popular discourses, and the "craft" attitude evidenced from the show's producers, writers, and directors apparently was a strong motivation for "below the line" personnel as well. For instance, Jen Ralston, the supervising sound editor throughout *The Wire*'s run, aspired to the level of sonic sophistication found in feature films, a complexity not always found on network television. According to her, television is "sonically flat," but movies – and by extension a show like *The Wire* that aspires to a status on par with auteur cinema – aim for a surround-sound immersion in "a deeper world with a pace that isn't dictated by commercial breaks." Ralston, when looping background conversations, paid close attention to the colloquialisms and accents to achieve "a scale of detail that many movies don't even bother with these days." (Alvarez 298)

At many other levels of production, locals were hired to lend a further aura of authenticity and make the production as definitively "Baltimorean" as possible. The series' art director, Vincent Peranio, and its Baltimore casting director, Pat Moran, are both natives, and worked in other Baltimore-based film projects (by John Waters and Barry Levinson; Alvarez 175). Moran routinely cast locals in many supporting roles, or as extras. *The Wire* was also known for featuring not only production personnel, such as Colesbury, in cameos, but also prominent politicians (e.g., former Baltimore mayor Kurt

Schmoke), police officers (e.g., former Baltimore police commissioner Edward T. Norris), ex-cons (drug kingpin Melvin D. Williams), and the like.

The Wire's attention to the use of music was less consistent during its five seasons, but again, there is evidence of a clear ambition for authenticity and cultural depth. Each season's title sequence used a version of Tom Waits' "Way Down in the Hole" as a theme song, and the choice of singer/arrangers was seen as a comment on that season's overarching theme; indeed, according to one reading, the theme song created a small but significant space for spirituality and the Black Church, which *The Wire*'s plots otherwise marginalized in favour of its realist/naturalist logic. (Peterson 461)¹⁸ In keeping with the purported realism of the show, the title sequence (and the season-ending montages) contains the only notable instance of extra-diegetic music. However, the source music played in the first three seasons was not Baltimore-based, and this omission was noted as "a critical misstep for a show so invested in keeping faith with its self-imposed standards of musical realism." (Brown 442) Only after local musicians and producers, out of fondness for the show, released a series of mixtapes called *Hamsterdam* (named for Major "Bunny" Colvin's experimental free-zone from *The Wire*'s third season) did music supervisor Blake Leyh source local music for the show's soundscape. Thus the producers' wariness of what they saw as stereotypical hip-hop culture does not, despite the arguments of some critics (cf. Brown, Peterson), constitute a convincing case that the musical element was a wilful blind spot in *The Wire*'s tapestry of authenticity.¹⁹

The commitment to narrative density and qualitative superiority from a wide range of writers, actors, directors, and production personnel is, I would argue, a vital factor in how *The Wire* positions itself as an epos, the epic story of Baltimore. It is this positioning, moreover, that sets it apart from equally well-made television shows, of which there have

¹⁸ James Braxton Peterson's critique neglects the ongoing role of the Black Church in plotlines of the latter seasons (i.e., the interventions of the Ministers and of the Deacon at the levels of municipal politics and community organization, respectively); however, these actions are presented from a practical and material, not a spiritual, point of view.

¹⁹ Indeed, in David Simon's follow-up series with HBO, *Treme*, black musical culture and real-life New Orleans musicians are a primary focus.

been a growing number in recent decades. How successful this positioning has been within the field of American television is clear from the fact that it is already a commonplace of academic criticism on *The Wire* that any discussion of the series must point out that it is regarded as “the greatest American TV show ever made”; similarly, any survey of the hyperbolic praise of the popular press and commercial critics would be merely perfunctory.

Before moving on, though, it is important to address some of the other claims about what *The Wire* “is” in a formal sense, and how such claims complicate but ultimately complement the show’s status as an epos. Specifically, *The Wire* has in both academic and popular discourse been variously referred to as a postmodern tragedy and a televisual novel, sometimes even in the same context. Such views are understandable, especially since they often refer to statements made many times by key production personnel, including David Simon himself. Simon speaks of how *The Wire* is not “Shakespearean” like other HBO shows, but rather “steal[s] instead from an earlier, less-travelled construct – the Greeks – lifting our thematic stance wholesale from Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides to create doomed and fated protagonists who confront a rigged game and their own mortality.” (Alvarez 384) Simon had, in fact, read all the Greek tragedians between the production of *The Wire*’s second and third seasons (Love 487). The fatalism of *The Wire* has also been remarked upon, and the fact that such claims have some naïve, *prima facie* validity have led to their uncritical championing by some, even though we should be very hesitant in accepting Simon’s pronouncement at face value (Kelleter 49). For example, Simon’s suggestion that Greek culture has been “less-travelled” than Shakespeare, suggests a superficial understanding of Western culture of a piece with *The Wire*’s crooked State Senator Clay Davis waving around a copy of “Prometheus Bound” by Aeschylus (whose pronunciation Davis mangles as “A-silly-us”). (5.7) There are, of course, many tragic story arcs in *The Wire* – those of the corner boys Duquan Weems and Randy Wagstaff, for instance – but there are also just as many arcs in which characters prevail despite their obvious flaws – such as Davis or Herc – and which are decidedly comic or even farcical in nature. Clearly, the series as a whole explodes the Aristotelean

unities of time, space, and action. There are indeed deliberate formal and stylistic resonances of tragedy²⁰ in the staging of some of *The Wire*'s action, and the series has been compared to the Oresteia (Love 494); but televisual spectatorship is not the same as the Greek theatre, and these links are primarily analogic (497). What can be called tragic in both media operates at the abstract level of pre-genre (i.e., the general idea that “bad things happen to good people, and there’s nothing you can do about it”).

Similarly, Simon has from the beginning made the claim that *The Wire* can be likened to a novel, comparing the series’ pacing to *Moby-Dick* on a number of occasions:²¹ “in the first couple chapters, you don’t meet the whale, you don’t meet Ahab, you don’t even go aboard the Pequod,” Simon recalls. “All that happens is you go with Ishmael to the inn and find out he has to share a room with some tattooed character. Same thing here [in the pilot episode of *The Wire*]. It’s a visual novel.” (Alvarez 23) Never mind that many of Melville’s chapters are little more than a page or two; what is significant is that Simon (and those who follow his lead) always seem to have a particular kind of novel in mind, specifically a nineteenth-century novel. *The Wire* is often compared to the work of Dickens, for example, both in scope and in its social outlook; yet more perspicacious, and less Anglo-centric, critics have noted the series’ debts to other sprawling novelistic oeuvres of the period, such as the works of Honoré du Balzac and Emile Zola. (The plays of George Bernard Shaw have, to my knowledge, have been completely overlooked in these comparisons, despite their being closer to *The Wire* than the novels of Dickens et al. both in their narrative form – drama – and in their preachy socialism.) In chapter one, I noted how problematic a term “the novel” has been in the history of literary criticism, and grafting it wholesale onto 21st century American television creates far more classificatory problems than it solves. What is important is not that *The Wire* is “like a Dickens novel” – any more than it is “like a Greek tragedy” – but that it shares elements in common both with a particular kind of novel, as well as a particular kind of drama. These elements are,

²⁰ For a good discussion of these, see Chris Love, “The Greek Gods in Baltimore”; Love’s knowledge of the Ancient Greek originals distinguishes his analysis from other efforts.

²¹ Not just in the introduction to *The Wire: Truth Be Told*, quoted here, but, for instance, during a 2006 Museum of Television & Radio panel session included on the season 3 DVD release of *The Wire*.

unsurprisingly, those that fall under my definition of epos: a narrative scope that is prodigiously large, a telling that is valorized in style and technique, and themes of importance to a community or society. That *The Wire* does this while simultaneously supporting claims about its pedigree with Sophocles or the Victorians in fact confirms its epic aspirations: we have already seen how epics even within the same medium must either subsume or supplant earlier works, and how this process occurs when these works are remediated into new narrative genres and media (Bolter and Grusin). The epic is totalizing, and critics agree that *The Wire* is nothing if not a totalizing narrative enterprise.²²

The question is not if *The Wire* is the best show ever broadcast (an impossible claim); rather it is why *The Wire* is regarded as demonstrably better, when many of the same actors, directors, writers, producers, and so on, have done equally lauded work on other television series (especially, but not exclusively, for HBO).²³ This is due, in addition to *The Wire*'s technical excellence, to the remarkably large mythos from which the series draws its material.

2.2 The Mythos of *The Wire*

The Wire's mythos, unusually for a (non-spin-off) television show, contains a large body of earlier works in a variety of media; it is not just comprised of Baltimorean lore woven into a mediated narrative for the first time. David Simon and Ed Burns had collaborated on a number of projects before creating *The Wire*, and key elements of *The Wire*, including its totalizing worldview and many of its narrative minutiae and anecdotes, have their genesis in those projects. Simon had first met Burns while working as a journalist at the *Baltimore Sun* in the 1980s, and Simon later spent a year (1988) observing Burns' fellow homicide detectives in the Baltimore police department. Simon's account was later

²² See, *inter alia*, the nods to totality in Kennedy and Shapiro (2, 148, 150, 152), Kelleter (30, 36), Anderson (87, 91), and Hsu (523). La Berge has a more nuanced discussion in passing about totality and *The Wire*, esp. vis-à-vis Lukács' work (548 and ff. 8, 19, 24).

²³ The connections are too numerous to list here, though suffice it to say that there is significant overlap between such shows as *Homicide: Life on the Street*, *Oz*, *The Corner*, *Treme*, and *The Wire*.

published as *Homicide: A Year on the Killing Streets* (1991). Crucially, the case upon which the first season of *The Wire* was later based occurred shortly beforehand, and it is mentioned in passing in *Homicide*:

[Detective Harry] Edgerton's detachment from the rest of the unit was furthered by his partnership with Ed Burns, with whom he had been detailed to the Drug Enforcement Administration for an investigation that consumed two years. That probe began because Burns had learned the name of a major narcotics trafficker who had ordered the slaying of his girlfriend. Unable to prove the murder, Burns and Edgerton instead spend months on electronic and telephone surveillance, then took the dealer down for drug distribution to the tune of thirty years, no parole (Simon 55).

Much of the material from *Homicide* informs *The Wire*'s depiction of police culture, and the repeated arguments which *The Wire* makes – most often through the mouths of characters such as McNulty, Freamon, and Daniels – in favour of in-depth investigative work are found there as well. According to Simon, Burns and Edgerton had argued at the time that because many of the murders in Baltimore in the 1980s were linked to the drug trade, a systematic, long-term investigation into the city's organized drug traffickers was the best way to reduce and even prevent the violence; the prevailing ad hoc approach to homicide investigation could therefore not address the problem at the systemic level. According to Simon, "it was a persuasive argument," although not everyone in the police department agreed. Other police officers from *Homicide* found more direct homage in *The Wire*. The most prominent and meta-textual of these is the character Jay Landsman, the sergeant in charge of supervising McNulty, who was named for the same Sergeant Jay Landsman who appears in *Homicide*, and shares his namesake's sense of off-colour humour (though not his physical resemblance). The real Landsman would later be cast in a recurring role on *The Wire* as Lieutenant Dennis Mello, second-in-command of the Western District under Major Colvin. Moreover, a large amount of Baltimore police department lore finds its way from Simon's book into the series. Among the many details from the world of *Homicide* to be included in *The Wire* are found in passages in which, for instance, homicide detectives trick a suspect into believing that the office photocopier is a lie detector, or which repeat folk wisdom about the famous local dumping ground for murder victims, Leakin Park:

Police department legend includes one story, apocryphal perhaps, in which a class of trainees searching one quadrant of the park for a missing person was reminded by a Southwestern District shift commander, with tongue planted in cheek, that they were looking for one body in particular: “If you go grabbing at every one you find, we’ll be here all day.” (Simon 77)

Fittingly, when homicide detectives on *The Wire* are searching Leakin Park for the bodies of murders they suspect the Marlo Stanfield gang of committing, it is Lester Freamon, the repository of institutional memory, who relates the anecdote nearly verbatim from Simon’s reporting fifteen years earlier:

I remember when I was a cadet, I was up here on a cadaver search. Instructor gets on the radio to say we’re looking for one body in particular. “If you go grabbing every one you see, we’ll be here all day,” he says. (4.5)

Ed Burns collaborated with Simon on his second book, *The Corner: A Year in the Life of an Inner-City Neighborhood* (1997), and, just as with *Homicide*, significant parts of *The Wire*’s mythos are derived from that earlier work. Observations about the nature of the drug trade, unsurprisingly, make up many of these narrative recyclings: take for instance “Everything else in this world” aside from illegal drugs “gets sold without store clerks and customers getting killed behind it” (Simon and Burns 331), which is refashioned into dialogue for McNulty (1.2), and which D’Angelo Barksdale paraphrases in the following episode. (1.3)

Those critics who do acknowledge the narrative debt that *The Wire* owes to its predecessor works seldom note the extent of these intertextual intersections, and, in an ironic reversal of *The Wire*’s valorisation of novels, they often valorise the television series over the nonfiction books. For instance:

It’s tempting to see *The Wire* as *Homicide* plus *The Corner*, but in at least one way the TV show is greater than the sum of those two excellent books. Using the tools of TV drama, such as long shots of characters framed against a waterfront in transition from blue-collar redoubt to a drug depot and site of renovated housing for service professionals, *The Wire* delivers the sense of the economic and political big picture that Simon and then Simon and Burns were unable to sketch convincingly in prose. Where the otherwise admirably disciplined nonfiction books reveal a weak point, resorting to the purple-dictioned generalities of a bad metro columnist whenever faced with task of putting the spiraling negative effects of the war on drugs in a larger historical context (“We can’t stop it.” Paragraph.

“Not with all the lawyers, guns, and money in this world,” and so on), the fictional TV show delivers sharp-edged analysis with the tools at its disposal: framing, editing, and resonant lines of dialogue voiced by characters about whom we care. (Rotella 125)

There are a few things to note here: first, there is a confusion about what constitutes the “tools” of particular narrative media: framing, editing, and long shots are of course not exclusive features of “TV drama,” but characterize nearly all cinema and television; the use of such basic techniques hardly constitutes “sharp edged analysis.” Moreover, while Rotella (not unjustifiably) bemoans Simon’s prose as the sometimes “purple-dictioned generalities of a bad metro columnist,” he fails to note that the “resonant lines of dialogue” that are held to be a much better vehicle for Simon and Burns’ moralizing are, as noted earlier, frequently lifted directly from one of the earlier books. One more example, about Baltimore’s public consumption law from *The Corner*, should suffice:

The paper bag does not exist for drugs. For want of that shining example of constabulary pragmatism, the disaster is compounded. ...

For the police working these ghetto posts, the public consumption law posed a dilemma: You could try to enforce it, in which case you’d never have time for any other kind of police work; or you could look the other way, in which case you’d be opening yourself to all kinds of disrespect from people who figure that if a cop is ignoring one illegal act, he’ll probably care little about a half-dozen others.

But when the first wino dropped the first bottle of elderberry into the first paper bag – and a moment of quiet genius it was – the point was moot. (Simon and Burns 158–159)

In the third season episode “All Due Respect” (3.2) Major “Bunny” Colvin, who will shortly go on to institute a doomed effort to reform drug enforcement in the Western District, addresses his officers with a speech about the public consumption law that closely follows the logic and vocabulary of the original passage:

But the law is the law: Western cops rolling by, what were they goin’ to do? If they arrested every dude out there for tipping back a High Life, there’d be no time for any other kind of police work. And if they looked the other way, they’d open themselves to all kind of flaunting, all kind of disrespect. This is before my time when it happened, but somewhere back in the ‘50s or ‘60s there was a small moment of goddamned genius by some nameless smokehound who comes out of the Cut-Rate one day, and on his way to the corner he slips that just-bought pint of elderberry into a paper bag. ...

There's never been a paper bag for drugs ...

There are other, subtler echoes from *The Corner* that make its way into *The Wire*. I have mentioned, in the discussion of *The Wire*'s sound design, that the use of versions of Tom Waits's song "Way Down in the Hole" for each season's titles became one of *The Wire*'s stylistic trademarks. Some have commented on *The Wire*'s de facto theme song (e.g., Peterson), but among the many hermeneutic readings,²⁴ a more likely connection to Simon and Burns' work on *The Corner* has, to my knowledge, gone unnoticed. "Way Down in the Hole" was an early favorite with the production team for use as the show's theme; Simon later recalled that he had been looking for a song that captured "the mood of a broken world" (Alvarez 250). Indeed, the song had a unique pedigree: released on Waits's 1987 album *Frank's Wild Years*, it had been written for a play of the same name, staged in 1986 by Chicago's Steppenwolf theatre company, and which "tells the story of Frank, a used furniture salesman, who is almost happily married but experiences the situational trap of his modern working-class/middle-class station in life." (Peterson 473) The track therefore has thematic and temporal significance, appearing about the same time as Simon's *Homicide*. One possible reason behind the song's selection is the fact that the phrase "in the hole" has a strong link to the West Baltimore drug culture as depicted in *The Corner*: it is both a place and a "name brand":

Perfectly isolated, the back alley that runs between Mount and Vincent on the south side of Fayette has long been known as the Hole. In the service of that brand, Black Beauty walks a tight circle on Mount Street, barking in mindless repetition, like a mating bird left lonesome in spring.

"In the Hole. In the Hole. In the Hole." (Simon and Burns 39)

The significance of "branded" drugs is discussed elsewhere in *The Corner*, and a subtle updating occurs in various episodes of *The Wire*, with corner-boys hawking packages with street names like "Pandemic" and "Swing State" (during seasons that take place

²⁴ Peterson, under the alibi of intertextuality, provides a plethora of interpretations, claiming that "down in the hole" conjures up, among other things, escaped slaves along the Underground Railroad hiding in kilns (468). These connections, to my mind at least, seem on the whole to be too tenuous to be credible beyond Peterson's own personal reading; it is unlikely that anyone not heavily read in African-American studies, let alone a 1990s street addict dropout, would come to the same conclusions.

during bird-flu scares and election years, respectively); with such attention to this particular detail it is possible that there was at least a subconscious connection made between Waits's song and the drug culture in which Simon and Burns had immersed themselves.

The influence of *Homicide* and *The Corner* is therefore more pervasive than has been recognized to date. Yet the mythos from which *The Wire* draws its epic narrative is even more complex than that, as both books were adapted for television; these adaptations not only served as a kind of production-side “warm up” for Simon and some of his collaborators, but they also left traces within the diegesis of *The Wire*. *Homicide: A Year on the Killing Streets* was adapted into a fictionalized series on NBC with the more prime-time-friendly title *Homicide: Life on the Street* (1993-99). Simon wrote a few teleplays for the series, and in its later seasons he gained experience as a story editor and producer. This apprenticeship allowed him to make what Simon called “an improbable and in many ways unplanned transition from journalist/author to TV producer” (Alvarez 384) during the 1990s, after his employer, *The Baltimore Sun*, was “bought and butchered” (Alvarez 383) by the Times-Mirror Company, which was in turn later bought by the Tribune Company. Executive produced by Barry Levinson and Tom Fontana (the latter of whom would go on to create the first HBO drama series, *Oz*), *Homicide* was a critical success and hailed as one of the most authentic police procedurals on American television up to that time. Yet network television was not free from corporate pressure for self-censorship, as the show's producers struggled against requests from network executives for more “life-affirming moments” (“Never mind,” Simon later recalled, “that the show was called *Homicide*, as head writer and executive producer Tom Fontana repeatedly liked to point out”; Alvarez 13); such experiences clearly shaped Simon's views of network television and its limits, and influenced his memo pitching *The Wire* to HBO, cited above.

Homicide's Baltimore setting put it in the same universe as *The Wire*, even if the latter series was not a direct spin-off. *Homicide* shared a number of crossover episodes with *Law & Order* (another NBC stalwart) during the mid-1990s, and *Homicide* regular Richard Belzer would go on to play the same character, Detective John Munch, on the

Law & Order spin-off *Law & Order: Special Victims Unit*, and elsewhere. Notably for *The Wire*'s mythos, Belzer appeared in a cameo in the fifth season episode "Took" (5.7). Although Belzer is not explicitly identified as Munch in dialogue, he is sitting in a police-frequented bar telling the bartender how he himself once owned a bar – just as Munch had during the run of *Homicide*. Moreover, this exchange occurs as *Baltimore Sun* city editor Gus Haynes, played by Clark Johnson, enters the bar to meet a police source. Johnson had been a regular on *Homicide* as well, and his character, Meldrick Lewis, had been co-owner of the same bar as Munch. (Johnson's involvement with both *Homicide* and *The Wire* extended to the production side as well: he directed a number of episodes of both series, including both the pilot and the series finale of *The Wire*.) Such crossovers are not uncommon in other "genre" television series (most notably science-fiction), but are far more rare in police procedurals. That *The Wire* has such a large amount of fictional narrative in its mythos to draw upon, in addition to the already unusually-large non-fictional material from Simon and Burns's books, can only add further weight to the show's status as a televisual epic.²⁵

Following the end of *Homicide*'s run, Simon's next television project was an adaptation of *The Corner*. Simon and Burns's book was closely adapted as a six-part miniseries which aired on HBO in 2000. *Homicide* (and *The Wire* after it) often featured characters that were composites of real people, but *The Corner* went a step further, featuring dramatizations of events Simon and Burns had witnessed and actors playing real, named people. Directed by Charles S. Dutton, the miniseries used a realist, pseudo-documentary style to depict a year in the lives of drug addicts in West Baltimore; it focused specifically on the McCullough family, and some of them appeared at the end of the series, looking back at the events that had taken place in 1993. No characters from *The Corner* appear within the fictionalized world of *The Wire* or other shows. However, the

²⁵ Surprisingly, *The Wire* does not even contain the most ironic or in-joke mention of Detective Munch. In an episode (1.5) of the BBC crime drama *Luther* (2010–), Detective Chief Inspector John Luther asks his partner to call a Detective Munch who works in the Special Victims Unit in New York. DCI Luther is played by British actor Idris Elba, whose breakout role was Stringer Bell on *The Wire*. A close second would be Richard Belzer's appearance as Munch in a 1997 episode ("Unusual Suspects," 5.3) of *The X-Files*, which features flashbacks of Mulder and the Lone Gunmen being arrested in Baltimore in 1989.

miniseries featured many actors who would return to play featured roles in *The Wire* (most notably Clarke Peters and Lance Reddick); more importantly, *The Corner* brought Simon together with many of the key production personnel who would later work on *The Wire*, including producers David Mills, Nina Kostroff Noble, and Robert F. Colesberry: having moved from *Homicide* to *Oz* on HBO, Tom Fontana provided an entrée for Simon at that network. (Alvarez 14) Simon later recalled that “Looking past *The Corner* even before it aired, I thought about what it was that I still wanted to say about the drug war, about policing, and, ultimately, about what was happening in the city where I lived.” (Alvarez 16) Thus *The Corner* was seen by many involved as being of a piece with Simon’s earlier work, a “microcosm” probing the “human dimension” of greater policy problems (Alvarez 16). Even with three Emmy awards for *The Corner*, Simon had to struggle to get HBO executives to support *The Wire*; without *The Corner*, book and miniseries alike, it is doubtful that *The Wire* would ever have been made.

The Wire would thus become the culmination of fifteen years of related projects, inheriting a variety of narrative connections established long before its first scene was shot. Contra criticisms like those of Rotella excerpted earlier, *The Wire* is, seen from this broader perspective, very much the culmination of *Homicide* and *The Corner* when one takes into account how much each predecessor had already contributed to *The Wire*’s mythos. Surely Simon and company’s work on *The Wire* is prefigured by these projects in a way far more significant than for most television shows, even those similarly hailed by critics and audiences alike. For comparison, one need only consider how little, to cite a contemporary example, David Chase’s previous experience producing *The Rockford Files* and *Northern Exposure* prefigures *The Sopranos*.

2.3 The Ethos of *The Wire*

If *The Wire* has the quality of an epos of American television, and if it in turn draws upon a formidable mythos of fictional and non-fictional narrative, what is the ethos of the series? Recall that, within the context of the epic framework outlined in chapter one, “ethos” refers specifically to the range of representations possible within the epos and mythos. This analytic level is important not only because it helps define what sorts of narrative representations one might expect to find in a “postmodern” epic like *The Wire*,

but also because it reveals correspondences and overlapping modes with other, older epic narrative forms; these correspondences and modes accordingly demonstrate some unrecognized links with other epics and, perhaps more significantly, they complicate some of the ideological assumptions behind *The Wire*'s presentation of "realism."

Clearly, *The Wire*'s ethos centers around contemporary urban issues, with a particular focus on the structural intersections of a variety of official and unofficial institutions. These complex intersections, and the density of the narrative material, are, as already suggested, greatly responsible for the show's purported sense of authenticity and realism. Although events such as a state budget meeting or union strike are not depicted within *The Wire*'s five seasons, clearly such representations are part of the program's ethos in a way that, say, super-powered 1960s teenagers or brawling Klingons are not. On the other hand, as Kelleter has observed (47), *The Wire* takes great pains to avoid even references to fictional narratives within its diegesis, most especially televisual ones;²⁶ the series' "realist" ethos strongly resists all elements of fantasy. This limitation to the ethos is therefore not entirely realistic in the strictest sense – clearly people do watch television, read novels, and so on – although it can be partially explained as a side effect of Simon and company's radical rejection of previous television representations of police culture or the criminal underworld. For instance, Simon has justified casting British actors such as Dominick West and Idris Elba because they didn't simply mimic the cops and criminals found on American TV; Ed Burns made a similar argument vis-à-vis hip-hop culture when casting the corner boys of *The Wire*'s fourth season. (Brown 444)

Conversely, other elements that do fall within the ethos of *The Wire* are not necessarily realistic; they are at least determined by other considerations. As a show in the HBO model, *The Wire*'s seriality and repudiation of such conventions of commercial television as the five-act dramatic structure is not particularly unique, nor are its signifiers of "adult

²⁶ Most significantly, *The Wire*'s characters seem to inhabit a world where no one watches police procedurals on television (even though, as we shall see, criminals and police in the "real" world do indeed watch *The Wire*). The few references to any fictional criminals or police are from genre film, such as when McNulty muses about whether the SWAT team thinks "it's Tony Montana up there" in Barksdale's office (1.12), or when Herc speeds around the drug corners while playing the theme from *Shaft* on his car stereo (3.1).

drama”; it has (at least in its first season) what has been called “the obligatory HBO tittie bar shot” (Alvarez 55), in addition to some arguably-gratuitous nudity in its occasional sex scenes.

For the purposes of epic criticism, however, we can focus on the correspondences between traditional heroic narratives and *The Wire*. The series clearly has a number of recurring and regular characters who are heroic, despite the conventional description of *The Wire* as highly realistic; indeed, many of the vignettes and plotlines that are often praised by viewers and critics as “realistic” are upon reflection quite exaggerated. In this instance it is especially useful to recall Northrop Frye’s concept of the “high mimetic mode”; it is one “in which, as in most epics and tragedies, the central characters are above our own level of power and authority, though within the order of nature and subject to social criticism.” (366) *The Wire* presents characters such as Lester Freamon, Jimmy McNulty, and Howard “Bunny” Colvin – all, significantly, “real police” as opposed to “humps” – very clearly in this way. Stringer Bell, of whom McNulty sees himself as the nemesis, plays a similar role in the drug underworld; Tommy Carcetti likewise in municipal politics; Omar Little among street gunmen; and so on.

It should also be noted that the female characters in *The Wire*, although fewer in number, are also depicted effectively in the high mimetic mode. This represents a departure from the traditional epic that reflects – to a point – shifting demographics in the production and reception of contemporary television. Shakima “Kima” Greggs starts the series as an expert narcotics detective, before transferring to homicide and the Major Crimes unit; she is involved in some capacity in the cases from each season of the series.²⁷ Rhonda Pearlman, the Assistant State’s Attorney who shepherds the various wiretaps cases through the legal system, is also highly competent and ambitious, and ends the series as a judge. And, on the other side of the law, Felicia “Snoop” Pearson, one of Marlo Stanfield’s enforcers, proves to be as efficient and cold-blooded an assassin as any man.

²⁷ On the other hand, Kima Greggs is here perhaps a symptom of what might be called “Uhura syndrome”: since Greggs is not only a female police detective, but also black and gay, her inclusion ticks a number of progressive boxes even as the show’s characters remain predominantly male and, excepting Omar and the closeted Rawls, straight.

But Detective McNulty is perhaps the series' archetype of the heroic ethic – if the burgeoning world of *The Wire* can be said to have a main character, it would be him. Despite McNulty's character flaws – alcoholism, insubordination, infidelity – he is always presented as a supremely gifted police detective, and much during the course of the series is made of the fact that McNulty becomes the most self-destructive when he is prevented from doing what he considers to be real police work. As Sergeant Landsman tells him at McNulty's mock wake, "When you were good, you were the best we had." (5.10) He is therefore, following Frye's formulation, superior to other men, but not to his environment – for the logic of *The Wire*, in which bureaucracy and other institutional structures constrain action, necessitates that no individual can resist the greater societal structures indefinitely, and that success at playing "the game" often comes when one goes along with those systems. Whether this is, as some critics have remarked (e.g., Kennedy and Shapiro 162), indicative of a kind of ultimate fatalism in *The Wire*, or whether it is more in keeping with actual lived experience than with the Horatio Alger strain of American mythology, is perhaps only a matter of perspective. What is important is the relationship of the "hero" to his social and material world; he is the best at what he does, but he is not superhuman.

This does not necessarily clash with the technique that David Simon and his collaborators use in basing *The Wire*'s characters and plots on real events. In McNulty, most especially in his pursuit of the wiretap (after which the series is of course named), there are clear echoes of Ed Burns' work on the wiretap of the 1980s, mentioned in *Homicide*, and upon which the particulars of *The Wire*'s first season were explicitly based. Although, as Ruth Barton points out (222), McNulty stands out as a caricature of Irish-American identity in a show that otherwise takes pains to upend American racial stereotypes, many of his stereotypically "Irish" antics can be traced back to another detective from *Homicide*, Sergeant Terry McLarney. McLarney, like McNulty, rounds off finished cases with binge drinking both at Kavanaugh's Irish pub and at various deserted, late-night spots around town; both McLarney and McNulty were veterans of the Western District before coming downtown to the homicide division. However, such activities are complicated because it is difficult to isolate them causally: does even McLarney act "Irish" because of descent, or because it is an expected part of police culture, or both? Barton cites Tom Wolfe's

1987 novel *The Bonfire of the Vanities* for its description of how all American cops have become “Irish”; in *Homicide*, appearing only a few years later, Simon uncannily paraphrases this feeling when he describes Baltimore police detectives’ paradoxical mixture of racism toward inner-city blacks with respect for middle-class black police officers: “they were cops and therefore, whether they knew it or not, they were all honorary Irishmen.” (Simon 526) Regardless of McNulty’s complicated performativity, the fact that his backstory and his actions within the narrative of *The Wire*’s five seasons are so overdetermined is what elevates him from the low mimetic of comedy – acting “like the village drunkard in some early Irish novel” (Thompson 45) – to the high mimetic of epic and tragedy.

Each one of the personalities upon which McNulty is modeled – Burns, McLarney, the stereotypical Irish cop – has experiences that are realistic insofar as they actually happened; they are plausible. What makes McNulty overdetermined is that each of these experiences is unlikely on its own; but when they are all presented as happening to one police detective within a few years, that character must be read as being within a more heroic mode of signification. Ed Burns had a career case when he brought down Melvin Williams with a wiretap; McNulty has multiple career cases, one nearly every season. He directly instigates, pursues, and is instrumental in completing investigations into the Barksdale drug organization (seasons one and three), into the murders of prostitutes in the port (season 2), and into the murders committed by Marlo Stanfield and his lieutenants in the vacant row houses (season 5). That not all the perpetrators involved in these cases were brought to justice (thanks to untimely death or lucky escape) may make the arcs more “realistic” than ones in which all the guilty go to jail, but that realism is tempered by the astronomical odds against all these remarkable events happening in close succession.

Of course, not all of *The Wire*’s story arcs are based primarily on real-life events. But only some of these fictional arcs came into criticism for being unrealistic during and after the show’s run, and those that did were arguably more plausible than those that did not. What accounts for the difference may be a disjuncture between what kinds of plotlines audiences recognize as legitimate parts of *The Wire*’s ethos. For example, McNulty’s

scheme in *The Wire*'s final season, in which he concocts a fraud about a serial killer who targets Baltimore's homeless so that McNulty can get the police resources he needs to convict Marlo Stanfield, marked what some critics saw as a melodramatic turn away from the "realism" of the previous seasons; the depiction of the *Baltimore Sun* newsroom's complicity in the fraud was likewise critiqued as score-settling with David Simon's previous employer, and therefore unconvincing as an exposé of media institutions. (La Berge 550, 564) *The Baltimore Sun*'s own review, not surprisingly, was critical of the scenes about journalists; while the portions of the plot involving police had "never been stronger," the depiction of the newsroom, the paper's television critic wrote, devolved into journalistic shop-talk with fact and fiction "mashed up in the confused manner of docudrama." (Zurawik) But we have seen how *The Wire*, from the very beginning, liberally blended fact and fiction, featured non-actors in bit parts, and put pedantic editorializing in the mouths of its characters. Moreover, McNulty's impersonation of a serial killer was far from any real-life police scandal, while there had been numerous reporting scandals at major newspapers in the years leading up to *The Wire*'s final season in 2008.²⁸ The depiction of Scott Templeton's repeated fabrications in that season, and his enabling by the (fictionalized) bosses at *The Baltimore Sun*, is presented in a manner no more or less "realistic" than the previous four seasons of police activities when compared with real-life events.

Major Colvin's "Hamsterdam" experiment in season three is another instance of a far-fetched plotline that, nevertheless, has not been criticized as "unrealistic." This is because it still fits inside the possible representations of *The Wire*'s worldview, just like McNulty's creation of the serial killer; it is the sort of story one would expect to see on the series. In this arc, Major Howard "Bunny" Colvin, commander of the Western District, tells his officers to corral all the drug dealers and addicts into three safe zones where they will not be arrested for drug crimes; the plan is to keep the drug trade away from the rest of the corners. The idea is for the safe zones to become like Amsterdam, an

²⁸ Some of the most famous cases included those of Stephen Glass at *The New Republic* and Jayson Blair and Judith Millar at *The New York Times*.

allusion for which the corner boys have no referent, so they quickly garble the name into “Hamsterdam.” The plan works – though not without some friction – until the police bosses find out what Colvin has been up to. The unauthorized experiment is shut down once it becomes politically convenient, and Colvin is forced into retirement with a reduction in rank (and therefore in pension as well). Like the fifth-season serial-killer plot, the Hamsterdam arc was not based on any real incident. It was a kind of dramatized thought experiment that Simon introduced, inspired by the suggestion of drug decriminalization that had derailed the career of 1980s Baltimore mayor Kurt Schmoke. Indeed, Ed Burns made clear that the creation of a free zone, in which drug possession, use, and low-level trafficking would be permitted, had never been tried by any American police department, and Simon later recalled that Burns, as a former police officer, had been the one to point out many of the social and public health problems such a scheme would quickly present; these were incorporated into the episodes. (Alvarez 205)

The character of Colvin, like McNulty, operates within the high mimetic mode; he is presented as having superior institutional knowledge and professional courage than most of the other police officers in the series – especially the high-ranking ones – but that superiority cannot save him or his well-intentioned experiment in the long run. The pattern is even repeated in the fourth season, when Colvin, after proving too ethical for a private security job, takes a position advising a university-funded research project investigating corner boys’ behavior problems at school. Despite showing results, the project is shut down by school administrators. It is even established in dialogue that Colvin had been McNulty’s mentor when the latter had been assigned to the Western. (3.5) Significantly, Colvin is shown mentoring other young officers under his command, most notably Ellis Carver, whose career over the course of *The Wire*’s five seasons sees him mature from a narcotics officer focused on “jacking up” dealers with petty “street rips” to a lieutenant who appreciates the value of long-term investigations and cultivating police informants. Colvin is therefore presented as “real police,” all the more so because he is, within *The Wire*’s narrative, also a trainer of and mentor to “real police” like McNulty and Carver.

And yet there are limits to the range of *The Wire*'s possible representations, especially considering the state of real-life policing and race in the United States generally, and even in Baltimore specifically. The instances of Irish stereotyping noted earlier, though obviously less troubling, are symptoms of the same limitation, a failure to consider the racial assumptions underlying the show's ethos. It would be unfair to blame Simon and his colleagues for failing to anticipate the increasing instances of police shooting unarmed black men and boys that characterized 2014 and 2015, and which gave rise to the Black Lives Matter movement. And yet most of the violence in *The Wire* is black-on-black, with little consideration given to institutional racism or the long legacy of race relations in America. The social ills that the series critiques are always examined through the lens of poverty and corruption, to the exclusion of how these problems might intersect with, and be amplified by discrimination. Police malfeasance, in particular, is constantly depicted in *The Wire* as the result of apathy, incompetence, and bureaucratic inertia – rarely malice or outright criminality. And yet such criminality exists: the death of Freddie Gray at the hands of Baltimore police in April 2015 shows how far the gap can be between the “real police” the series presents and the (literally) real police on the streets of contemporary Baltimore. Equally telling is the fact that, in the wake of the protests that followed Gray's death, David Simon and other veterans of the show called for citizens to stop rioting and press for institutional reform (Rios), a stance seen as rather tone-deaf considering the recent white-on-black police violence, such as the death of Eric Garner in New York, in which police officers had been officially exonerated.²⁹ *The Wire* has been praised for its colour-blindness in refusing to racially stereotype its characters; but this positive attribute can at the same time become a negative one if the show, so concerned with social issues, overlooks the racial animus that still exists.

Treme, David Simon's follow-up series to *The Wire*, also stands as an illuminating counter-example regarding these questions of what modes of representation are and are not compatible with *The Wire*'s ethos. *Treme* (2010–2013) is set in the New Orleans

²⁹ If there had been any doubts about Simon's position of privilege, his appearance in an official White House video, having a one-on-one discussion with Barack Obama about current events in Baltimore, should put them to rest.

neighborhood of the same name a few months after Hurricane Katrina, and follows a loose collection of musicians, small business owners, professionals, and chefs as they struggle to rebuild their lives and community in the aftermath of the storm. The series features some of the same writers and directors from *The Wire*, and some regular actors as well (most notably Wendell Pierce and Clarke Peters), and shares many of the same thematic concerns as Simon's other projects: a focus on the particularities of local urban experience, cynical critiques of government bureaucracy and free-market urban renewal schemes, and so on. Moreover, *Treme* shares with *The Wire* a commitment to featuring non-actors playing themselves in cameo roles: these are primarily musicians and chefs, but also include local political figures – former New Orleans City Councilman Oliver Thomas, for example, plays a fictionalized version of himself; both resigned in the wake of a bribery scandal (Walker). *Treme* also uses the familiar trope of having its characters cross paths in both likely and unlikely ways; for example, in one episode (1.9) trumpeter Delmond Lambreaux and chef Janette Desautel narrowly miss each other at a New Orleans party; they later meet while waiting for a flight to New York, and again a few months later at a New York City bar (2.4). The connections recall, for example, the way McNulty and Alma Gutierrez nearly cross paths at an all-night drug store in *The Wire* (5.3) before their characters meet “officially” when McNulty gives the *Sun* crime reporter information on his bogus serial killer. *The Wire*'s catchphrase “It's All Connected” might easily apply to *Treme* as well, although the latter series' connections are perhaps somewhat less convincing because of its more porous treatment of space; we will have opportunity to examine *The Wire*'s spatial relationships in depth shortly.

But *Treme* differs radically from *The Wire*, despite these similarities, when one considers its characters' relation to each other. All are presented as “average,” though distinct and often highly talented, members of the community; there are no figures in the high mimetic mode of McNulty, Freamon, or Colvin. Jenette Desautel, for example, is a highly skilled chef, but although *Treme* singles her out as an example of a type, she is presented as only one among many top chefs active in the culinary worlds of New Orleans and New York. It is unclear whether there is any qualitative difference – beyond the proverbial matter of taste – between her and other chefs, since in the ethos of *Treme*

there is no culinary version of the distinction between humps and real police as there is in the ethos of *The Wire*.

2.4 *The Wire* and Its Cosmos I: Audiences

What now remains to be examined, after the epos, mythos, and ethos of *The Wire* is its cosmos – the scope of the series' relationship to a wider community or sub-culture, in this case, the self-identified group of *Wire* viewers and fans. It is difficult to get a clear picture of this group, as the show lacks an active fan club or similar organization that might track audience interest in depth and across time; however, we can begin to reconstruct the reception of the series via contemporary journalism, allusions in other narrative media, and in analyses of fan forum postings (LeBesco) and even scholarly critiques. (Kelleter)

More broadly, it is also important to examine to what extent *The Wire*'s imagined totality maps onto the lived experience of its viewers during and after its original broadcast. These relationships – between the show, its audiences, and the world – can be summarized from a certain point of view as the difference between the show's "realism" and the world's reality. *The Wire*'s audiences and the various ways in which the show has been received, interpreted, and championed as a televisual epic of a very particular kind provide an indication of this difference. Fans of the show are surprisingly diverse (LeBesco 220; *The Wire* Bonus), although this diversity follows some clear patterns that demonstrate that *The Wire* is not evenly representative of any class, ethnicity, or other demographic. *The Wire*'s audience is also spatially fragmented in a manner that, as I will argue below, is typical of the new media epic; the ways in which *The Wire* works to reconstitute a contiguous representational space reflect this. Whereas narrative epics of the past sought to totalize temporally – and here the *Aeneid* remains the classic example – *The Wire*, like the other epics of the postmodern under consideration here, seeks to totalize spatially. Even as the series is very much concerned with a certain sense of history, this sense is secondary to its treatment of space; significantly, it is a highly localized sense of history, in which a quasi-historical Baltimore is meant to stand in for other localities. *The Wire*'s relationship to its cosmos is further complicated by the fact

that it not only reflects postmodern notions of space but that it is seen to do so, and is accordingly acclaimed for that very reason, by a significant portion of its audience.

The Wire was never a huge ratings success when first broadcast, but it quickly became a critical and cult favorite. It therefore benefits from a popular (if limited) following as well as from the legitimization conferred by a range of opinion leaders in the press, policy circles, and academe. It has become the *Citizen Kane* of television series, in that it is the default answer for what constitutes “the greatest show ever made.” For example, in an episode of the action-comedy series *Burn Notice* (6.6), when recurring character Barry, a money launderer, is pinned down by gunmen, he lists *The Wire* among the items on his unfulfilled “bucket list.” “I can’t die,” he says. “I’ve never climbed Kilimanjaro, I’ve never seen *The Wire*, I’ve never even had a four-way!” On the one hand, such claims (especially Barry’s) are not made without some irony, but on the other, they do point to a self-perpetuating pattern that is an indicator of cultural capital. If enough people proclaim that the series is the best, eventually it is accepted as such, precisely because that is how such status is attained. Whether that status is maintained over time requires legitimization from other sources than, say, the writers of other television programs; not enough time has passed since *The Wire*’s end to assess its long-term status.

Nevertheless, there are indicators that *The Wire* attracted a diverse following in a short amount of time. Its fans include police officers, who admire its anti-*CSI* style of realism, and who nod knowingly at *The Wire*’s exposure of inter-departmental politics and dysfunction.³⁰ It is likewise embraced by urban professionals, such as social workers and lawyers, whose work intersects with the criminal justice system (*The Wire Bonus*); the series even cultivated an audience among the urban poor living in neighborhoods very similar to the West Baltimore corners, who would, despite limited funds, subscribe to HBO to watch the series during its original run. (*The Wire Bonus*) Nor were actual criminals immune to the show’s lure, as they found themselves depicted not unsympathetically within the representational universe of *The Wire*. This led to some

³⁰ I first watched *The Wire* on DVDs borrowed from a friend who is a Toronto police officer.

rather bizarre connections between sides in the drug war: for example, one case in Queens, New York, in the early 2000s involved cocaine dealers copying the Barksdale operation's counter-surveillance techniques; Queens police officers, themselves watching *The Wire*'s early seasons as it was broadcast during their three-year investigation, would even overhear spoilers from the show as they listened in on the wiretaps of the gang's conversations. (Hsu 509) More generally, *The Wire* grew its viewership thanks to a greater proportion of African-American characters than was to be found on most other television programs, and its resistance to portraying ethnic and racial stereotypes (with the exception, as Barton notes, of "Irishness"). Omar Little, the shotgun-toting, stash-house-robbing bandit, became a fan favorite not least because he, as an openly gay black man living on the corners, serves as an exemplar of *The Wire*'s approach. Kathleen LeBesco, in an analysis of HBO.com's *Wire* fan forums and discussions surrounding the death of Omar late in the series (5.8), concludes that the viewers posting to the forum represented a "diversity of stances and opinions, from economically liberal would-be sociologists to socially conservative survivors of the streets, and everyone in between." (220) LeBesco points out that Omar serves as a kind of agent provocateur (217), and that not all fans of the show approve of him (especially his sexuality); but they do seem to admire his "code" and extraordinary street smarts – he is, we must recall, another character from the series clearly depicted in the high mimetic mode. Nor does membership in *The Wire*'s fandom necessarily mean wholesale acceptance of David Simon's politics, since not all of those commenting on HBO.com read *The Wire* "as a polemic on the American Dream, and they content themselves with commentary on the high quality of the acting, writing, and direction in the show, or its realism." (LeBesco 229) Perhaps the most famous fan of Omar is Barack Obama, no stranger to the complexities of racial identity in America, who cited *The Wire* as his favorite television show during the 2008 U.S. presidential campaign. Obama was quick to note that his preference for Omar was "not an endorsement. He's not my favorite person, but he is a fascinating character." (Alvarez 38)

The Wire's fandom is fragmented even across national boundaries, in spite of the series' relentless localism; this is perhaps a testament to the success of Simon's ambition that the systemic problems thematized within *The Wire*'s narrative arcs can be generalized and

apply equally to other cities within the post-industrial West. For instance, *The Wire* has been well received in Britain, not least because of its British stars. Zadie Smith (herself a fan of *The Wire*³¹) captures this in her 2012 novel *NW*, set in and around the Caldwell council estate in North West London – the British equivalent of “the projects” in America. In the section of the novel (172) called “Box Sets,” Smith describes how the social circle of Natalie, who had changed her name from Keisha after escaping a council house and becoming a lawyer, obsesses over *The Wire*:

Everybody in both Natalie’s workplace and Frank’s [Natalie’s husband] was intimately involved with the lives of a group of African-Americans, mostly male, who slung twenty-dollar vials of crack in the scrub between a concatenation of terribly designed tower blocks in a depressed and forgotten city with one of the highest murder rates in the United States. That everyone should be so intimately involved with the lives of these young men annoyed Frank, though he could not really put his finger on why and in protest he exempted himself and his wife from what was by all accounts an ecstatic communal televisual experience. (Smith)

In a review of *NW* for *Harper’s* magazine, Christine Smallwood notes the irony of a novel “about a wealthy black woman from a tower block whose life is crisscrossed with crack and crime and who refuses to watch *The Wire*” even as that novel “refuses to name *The Wire*.” (88) *The Wire* had, already by the end of its run in 2008, so permeated British popular culture that politicians were adding to the irony by name-dropping the series in the least appropriate contexts. *The Economist* noted, with tongue somewhat in cheek, one such instance that “has now conclusively killed *The Wire* as a subject of self-congratulatory thirty-something conversation.” In August 2009, then-shadow home secretary Chris Grayling said, in a speech criticizing Labour policy on crime and urban violence, that *The Wire* “used to be just a work of fiction for British viewers. But under this Government, in many parts of British cities, *The Wire* has become a part of real life in this country too.” (“Bagehot”) The remarks provoked ire from a number of sources chafed at the comparison between the gun violence of urban America and the problems of British cities; the BBC even responded with a comparison of crime statistics from

³¹ Dominick West tells the story of meeting Smith while walking down the street near his London home. “She raved about *The Wire* ... I sputtered something gauche like ‘Oh ... thanks very much, I love you too,’ and hurried stupidly away.” (Alvarez 486)

Baltimore and roughly comparable cities such as Manchester and Liverpool. (Yates) As *The Economist* concluded, Grayling “hadn't watched too many episodes of The Greatest Television Programme Ever Made [sic] – as so often seems to be the case when politicians raid culture to make their points.”³² (“Bagehot”) After all, “enticingly hip as it is,” *The Wire* posits solutions to problems of policing and drug enforcement that are diametrically opposed to Tory policy: it is all but certain “that the Tories would not regard the fifth series [i.e., season] as a happy model for the coming Age of Austerity.” (“Bagehot”)

Another notable instance of *The Wire*'s eclectic reception and reuse within popular culture is the work of Joy DeLyria and Sean Michael Robinson, whose parodic blog post “‘When It’s Not Your Turn’: The Quintessentially Victorian Vision of Ogden’s ‘The Wire’” went viral in 2011. “When It’s Not Your Turn” is a faux-literary essay about a Victorian serial novel, written by one Horatio Bucklesby Ogden, with the same name as the HBO series:

The Wire began syndication in 1846, and was published in 60 installments over the course of six years. Each installment was 30 pages, featuring covers and illustrations by Baxter “Bubz” Black, and selling for one shilling each. After the final installment, *The Wire* became available in a five volume set, departing from the traditional three.

Bucklesby Ogden himself has most often been compared to Charles Dickens. Both began as journalists, and then branched out with works such as *Pickwick Papers* and *The Corner*. While Dickens found popularity and eventual fame in his successive work, Ogden took a darker path. (DeLyria and Robinson)

The essay transposes the TV series into Victorian England, taking David Simon’s claims that *The Wire* is like a nineteenth-century novel to satirical extremes – covering “The Dickensian Aspect” (the name of episode 5.6) as though doing so were a literal

³² One is reminded of Mitt Romney’s appropriation of the *Friday Night Lights* slogan “Clear eyes. Full hearts. Can’t lose.” during his 2012 presidential campaign. Peter Berg, who developed the NBC TV show from his 2004 film, accused Romney’s campaign of being “clearly not aligned with the themes we portrayed in the series”; the only comparison between Romney and the show, according to Berg, was in the character of the fast-talking booster Buddy Garrity, “who turned his back on American car manufacturers selling imported cars from Japan.” (Belloni)

imperative. The parody was later expanded into a book, *Down in the Hole: The unWired World of H. B. Ogden*, which was published in time for *The Wire*'s tenth anniversary. *Down in the Hole* is structured as a series of essays on themes from "Ogden's" *Wire*, interspersed with excerpts from the book itself – these consist of verbatim dialogue from the TV series wrapped in ersatz Victorian prose. For example, here is an excerpt from the staging of the famous "fuck" scene (in which Bunk and McNulty examine a murder scene while only communicating via variants of that word) from the episode "Cold Cases" (1.4):

Knowing that Mr McNulty would share in his disgust, Mr Moreland referred Mr McNulty to the sketches. "Motherfucker," said Mr McNulty, indicating by this succinct phrasing his understanding as to the work that would be required in order to make sense of the sketches and the heinous nature of the crime. (DeLyria and Robinson 10)

The essays that introduce this and other parody excerpts are presented in the vein of English literary scholarship, and touch on all the usual topoi of criticism: class, subjectivity, mediation, and so on, as thematized by each "volume" of *The Wire*. The introduction to *Down in the Hole* by Princeton professor "Henry Flowers," author of "The Excruciating Agony of Influence" and a thinly-veiled caricature of Harold Bloom, makes it clear that the book pokes gentle fun not only at *The Wire*, but at scholarly reception of the series and at academic criticism generally. Whether *Down in the Hole* mistakenly equates, as does Simon, *The Wire* with Dickens in a "facile, cocktail-party insight" (Miller) as the basis of its parody, or whether it winks at the comparison – my suspicion is the latter, though the joke gets old before the book ends – the fact that it is aimed at an audience of what seems to be undergraduate English Lit majors is significant, and touches upon the last social group who find that *The Wire* speaks to them as an epic of postmodernity.

This audience is social scientists, professors of film and television, and other members of academe. In the few years since the show's conclusion, *The Wire* has inspired at least two collections of scholarly essays (Kennedy and Shapiro, and Potter and Marshall), special editions of scholarly journals (e.g., *Criticism*) and conferences specifically about the series, as well as a number of undergraduate courses; its presence in other, less formal

venues of scholarly discourse, have been even more numerous, if harder to trace. Frank Kelleter, in his excellent critique of academic reception of *The Wire*, found some “200 publications from newspapers, Internet sources, and academic venues” in the period from 2006–2010. (61, n. 2) There have been more in the meantime, including, of course, the present work. Kelleter sorts these many discussions of *The Wire* into a number of types of varying critical utility: first, “competitive duplication,” in which authors use claims from discussions in the press or on the Internet to justify *The Wire*’s greatness; these in turn usually repeat “isolated self-descriptions of the show, relying on David Simon’s interviews, HBO public relations material, and other journalistic pieces.” (40) We have already discussed some of the pitfalls of these approaches in the context of the fallacy of authorial intent – in other words, the mistake of taking Simon’s claims as gospel; these discourses are important, however, as evidence that such pronouncements are valued and that, through repetition, they become self-legitimizing. Kelleter’s second category is “downward identification,” or the tendency of academic writers to “accept the show’s invitation to identify with its underclass characters and continue the emotive work of *The Wire* into scholarship.” (44) This is often accompanied by an explanation or excusal of the writers’ social advantages vis-à-vis some of the show’s characters. Academics feel the need to justify their discussions of Omar Little or Stringer Bell in a way that they never would regarding, say, Tommy Carcetti – indeed, the fact that the latter character hasn’t inspired nearly as much commentary reveals that *The Wire* humanizes drug dealers and street bandits in a way that may not apply to opportunist politicians, even when those characters’ personalities and motivations are presented as equally complex. The third category Kelleter identifies is that of “activist concern,” or the minority of readings that, instead of praising *The Wire*, criticize its exaggerations; however, Kelleter points out that most of these counter-narratives still take Simon as the authoritative source of textual meaning, and therefore invert the stances of “competitive duplication” readings without stepping back from that binary. (49) “Activist concern” narratives feel that *The Wire* is problematic simply because it does not accurately depict those academics’ understanding of reality, when in fact that is not the job of *The Wire* or of any other drama. Such criticisms therefore depend on the same assumptions as the most celebratory sociological receptions of the show, which treat *The Wire* as an unmediated document of

anthropological fieldwork. The fourth category is “upward recognition,” the desire of some researchers to map *The Wire* onto a capital-T Theory that is “highly dependent on the charisma of individual master-thinkers” (51–52) such as Foucault, Deleuze, Baudrillard, or Debord. Kelleter sees these as “tautological” (52), decrying the use of a Foucauldian reading, for instance, to prove the series’ basis in Foucauldian concepts or themes. Finally, Kelleter identifies scholarly discourses that strive for “analytical dislocation,” which “disarticulate commonplaces in favor of critical redescriptions, breaking habits of meaning-making by making them explicit.” (55) This is where Kelleter situates his own efforts (and where I would hope to situate mine). While Kelleter sees specialists in American television studies as uniquely equipped to critique claims of the series’ greatness that rest on comparisons to older media such as novels, he notes that “it seems evident that British, Irish, and Australian scholars are more likely than American scholars to challenge the self-images of *The Wire* or set them in dialogue with the series’ other involvements.” (59) Only those English-language academics outside the American center have begun to question the work that American writings on *The Wire* do in relation to the wider culture.

The most provocative analysis along these lines is “Policing the Crisis: Why We Love *The Wire*,” by Rebecca Bramall and Ben Pitcher. The essay examines the appeal of *The Wire* to socially liberal audiences, especially British academics working in the humanities and social sciences. Like Kelleter, Bramall and Pitcher explode some of the analytical clichés that have cropped up in scholarship on *The Wire*, but they also offer some new observations about academic desire. Regarding the first point, Bramall and Pitcher return to Omar as an exemplar. “To those of us schooled on anti-foundationalism, social constructionism and performativity,” they write, “Omar stands as a confirmation of our theoretical precepts: it is almost as if his character were written as an example for the opening lecture of Queer Theory 101.” (87) While they rightly acknowledge that Omar’s character was not necessarily planned in this way,³³ they make a compelling case for the

³³ Omar had originally been intended as a short-lived character, but the popularity of Michael K. Williams’ portrayal led to his survival until near the end of the final season (Alvarez 316). Another indicator of this is

appeal of Omar as coming from structures of a particular desire for “good” or “progressive” representation. (88) Regarding the second point, the particularities of academic desire, Bramall and Pitcher posit that the (diegetically oft-frustrated) ideal of police work in *The Wire* serves as an analogy for idealized academic practices. The Major Crimes detail functions most successfully when it is allowed to account for complexity and context in its surveillance of various institutions and social structures, and the detail uses the same “interdisciplinarity” and equal opportunity of which much is currently made in academe:

Greggs, Freamon, Sydnor, McNulty and the others represent an assemblage of a range of competences and specialisms; they bring their own disciplinary knowledges to elucidate their subject. They also figure the “progressive” staff composition idealized, but rarely achieved, in higher education: the detail is a multicultural, intergenerational, poly-sexual, gender-equal and cross-class collaboration. (90)

Bramall and Pitcher go even one step further, arguing that, at least in their own instance of *Wire* fandom, the detail represents British cultural studies at “the moment of its crystallization, the moment when it grasped the conjunctural totality of the social”: the work conducted in the 1970s at the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies. Specifically, the nostalgia for the cultural moment of *Policing the Crisis: Mugging, the State, and Law and Order* (1978), the CCCS’s most influential work, is implicated in the pleasures of *The Wire*, with Stuart Hall transposed onto Lieutenant Cedric Daniels. The same neoliberal mindset – the subordination of research/investigation to “business”/“austerity” – that shuttered the CCCS in 2002 is felt by academics to subvert the work done by police and researchers alike. Thus *The Wire*, in a remarkable act of interpretive conflation, appears to deal with generally “postmodern” subject matter and themes in its narrative exegesis while at the same time modeling a certain ethical understanding of that same condition of postmodernity.

that the Christian name of “Snotboogie,” whose murder provides the memorable anecdote that opens *The Wire*’s pilot episode, is also Omar – clearly a generic name in the early days of the series.

2.5 *The Wire* and Its Cosmos II: Postmodern Space

This modeling recalls the work of David Harvey, which intersects the fictive and real-life universe of *The Wire* along a number of highly provocative axes. The first of these is the very concept of “postmodernism,” which, in *The Condition of Postmodernity*, Harvey goes to some length to try to define. As he and others have long noted, the term is a confused one, as postmodernism has been used in a wide range of disciplinary contexts and with various levels of approval. Whether it represents simply an amorphous style or a periodizing concept, a fundamental rupture with modernism (and earlier forms) or a revolt within modernism itself (Harvey 1989, 42), postmodernism is clearly felt to be important to contemporary life; it is, as Fredric Jameson argues, the “dominant cultural logic.” (1991, 6) Some of its features include the rejection of theoretical meta-narratives, the embrace of endless plays of signification, and the erosion of historicity; most importantly for a discussion of *The Wire*, however, is the postmodern understanding of space and its complicity with current capital flows. Harvey argues that postmodern aesthetics prioritize space over time, a shift in cultural practices that is informed by political-economic changes (207) – the speeding-up of capital flows that has in effect annihilated space as an obstacle to exchange and appropriation. The global West has developed what Harold Innis had called a space bias, and this bias has only increased profoundly even since Innis lamented it in the midpoint of the last century. *The Wire* resists the aesthetic dominant of postmodernism in many ways to varying success – its contested claims to realism, noted above, make it a kind of throwback, and its deliberate pace and rejection of temporally fragmented techniques of flashback, for instance, can be seen as an attempt to reclaim linear time. But the world of *The Wire* is very much caught up in contemporary urban spaces and architecture, which are seen by both Harvey and Jameson as the leading indicators of postmodernism; more so than art gallery installations or the films of Wim Wenders or David Lynch, it is the changes wrought to the spaces in which people live that have had the greatest material effects.

Harvey lived in Baltimore for many years, from the late 1960s through the 2000s, and wrote often about the decline of the city in the context of geography and political economy. His work, along with that of fellow Johns Hopkins professor Giovanni Arrighi,

is a touchstone for political economic critique of *The Wire* (vid. Kennedy and Shapiro). Although he has not weighed in on the series (as has Fredric Jameson, for instance), Harvey is familiar with *The Wire* and the applicability of its system of representation to other urban transformations (Schapira and Backer). Conversely, if published interviews and media appearances are any indication, David Simon and his collaborators do not seem directly aware of Harvey's work, and yet *The Wire* echoes Harvey with uncanny precision. For instance, in more than one analysis of the changes wrought by gentrification in Baltimore (Harvey 1989, 78; 2001, 157), Harvey focuses on the coach lamp as a metonym and a marker of urban gentrification. Among the features of postmodern architecture, according to Harvey, is an ironic, non-parodic reuse of past architectural forms; the "standard coach lamp" harkens back to the colonial period in America, even as such signs of "rehabilitation" are stripped of all historical context and "often assume almost exactly the same serial monotony as the modernism they were supposed to replace" (1989, 78). Harvey provides photographs (Fig. 3) of the fronts of renovated Baltimore townhouses with rows of such generic coach lamps in sharp perspective; many of these are in the newly gentrified area around "Federal Hill," near the formerly working-class port and Inner Harbor.

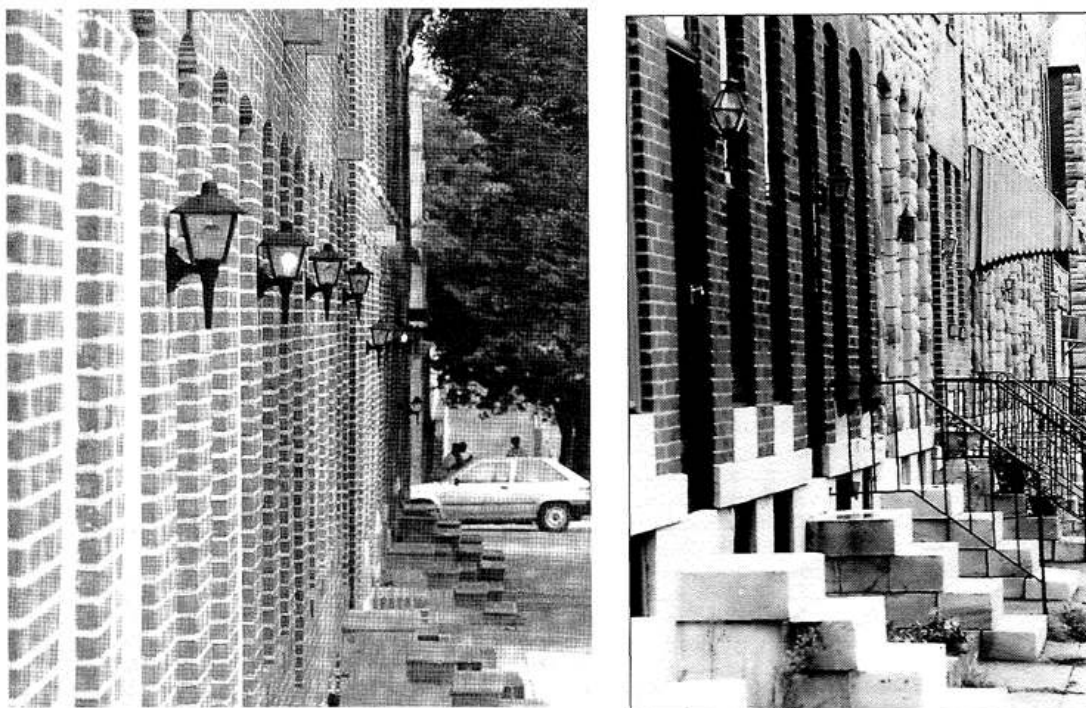


Figure 3. Images of Baltimore Coach Lamps.

In the fifth episode of *The Wire*'s second season – which focuses on the decline and fall of the fictionalized International Brotherhood of Stevedores – Harvey's coach lamps reappear. Nick Sobotka, nephew of the president of the stevedores' union, has been trying to find a house for his young family. In one scene, Nick tours a house that his aunt had once owned; Nick points out to the realtor that the area, now being touted as Federal Hill, was then known as Locust Point. After the realtor tells him the asking price, he realizes that the neighborhood is no longer affordable. As Nick, his girlfriend, and their young daughter step out of the house and back onto the street (with the ironic remark that "Maybe we should rent"), the shot is framed just as Harvey's photographs, with a row of identical coach lamps along the newly-renovated facades. A BMW, naturally, is also parked outside to accentuate the point. (Fig. 4)



Figure 4. Still From *The Wire* (2.5).

The changes wrought to conceptual space are also important to postmodernism. Harvey discusses the importance of maps in constructing and, in turn, reflecting and reproducing Renaissance and Enlightenment thought (1989, 245–254), and he cites de Certeau and Bourdieu when describing the totalizing aspects of maps (252–253). Once again we are back to the paradox of a media form which constantly tries to represent a totality that can never be complete – what the epic tries to do for literature and its narrative heirs, the map tries to do for geography. *The Wire*, as a totalizing narrative, also uses a kind of cartography and encourages its viewers to conceive of its cosmos in terms of maps. For one thing, the “objective” point of view of the series’ realist cinematography – and the often-uncritical reception of its realism as such – is an analogue of the detached perspectivism of Renaissance maps, which Harvey notes (246). It is no accident that the open-air drug markets of West Baltimore that Simon and Burns chronicle in *The Corner* are depicted not only in prose, but also with a detailed map of all the relevant sites

traveled by the McCullough family during the year in question. (Fig. 5) The “corner” is therefore, as Harvey says of the Ptolemaic globe, possible to be represented as “a knowable totality.” (246)

The Wire may not come with a ready-made map tucked into its boxed DVD set, but maps figure prominently within the show’s diegesis, especially in the production of knowledge about Baltimore and the city’s inhabitants. For example, in season two, McNulty uses

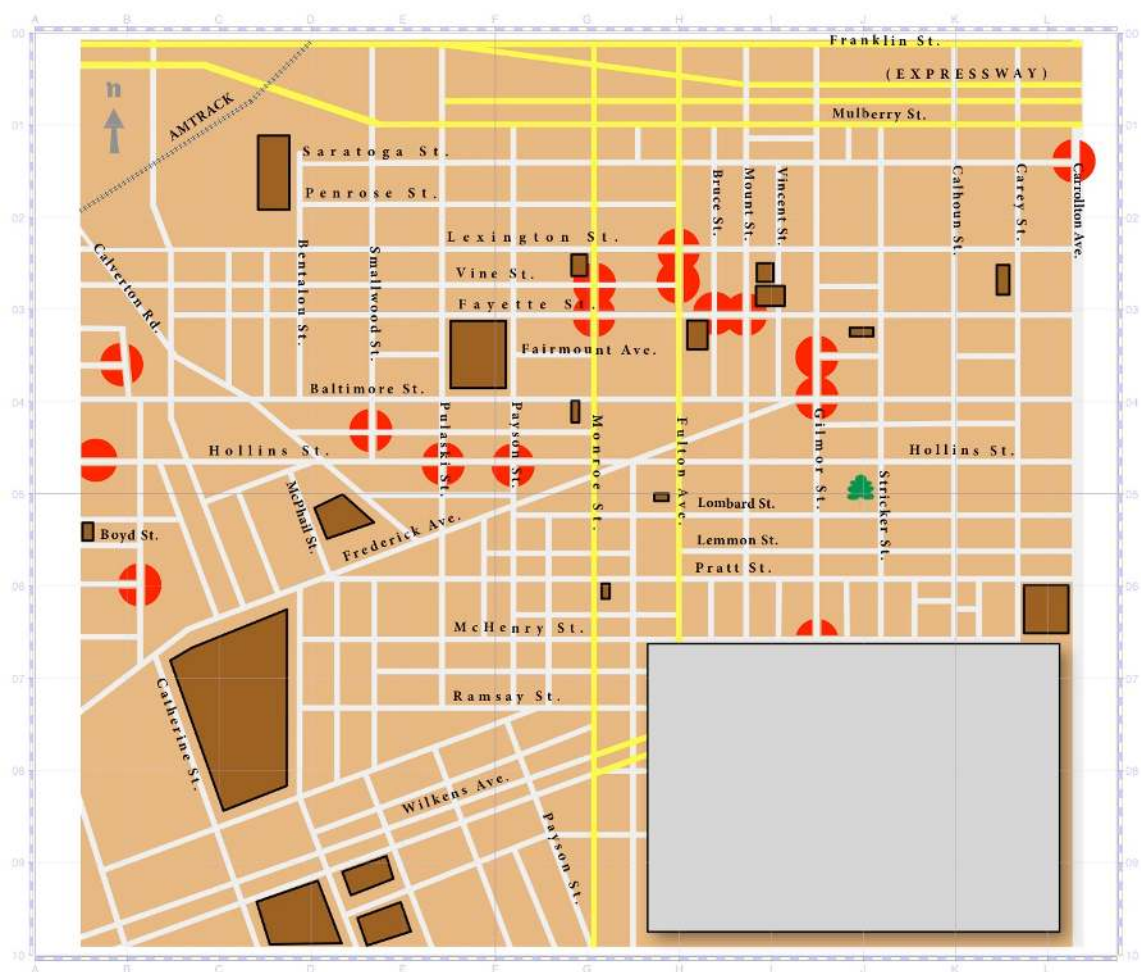


Figure 5. Map of West Baltimore Drug Corners.

tide charts to locate the spot at which a corpse, which he had fished out while exiled to the police department’s Marine Unit, first entered the water; he then uses this superior knowledge of interdepartmental politicking to change the jurisdiction of the murder and force the unwanted investigation back onto Major Rawls’ City Homicide Unit. (2.1)

Precise mapping techniques recur as a measure of McNulty and company's power in their police investigations many times, such as when they track the GPS technology on Vondas's cell phone (2.10) or crack the clock code that Marlo Stanfield uses to arrange face-to-face meetings with his lieutenants. (5.9) Outside *The Wire*'s diegesis, it is ironic that the show's fans use similar techniques to apprehend its narrative totality: for example, WikiVoyage.org features maps of seven sections of Baltimore as part of "*The Wire* Tour," an itinerary of the show's many local shooting locations; these are collected on one overall map of Baltimore City. (Fig. 6) The quest to map Baltimore begins with the street map of one neighborhood in *The Corner*, and by the time of *The Wire*, the process has grown exponentially to include all sorts of maps that cover overlapping terrain; it thereby mirrors the increasingly dense, centrifugal plotting of *The Wire*'s narrative action and its addition of more and more social and geographical settings. This cartographic and dramatic expansiveness is perhaps indicative of both the endless striving to represent a complete whole and the very futility of that striving.

Thus *The Wire* and its mythos (*The Corner* etc.) are complicit in what is commonly understood as mapping; but what of mapping and the postmodern? The key here is that the series uses a multiplicity of maps for different purposes, each with its own end; it is a totality of maps. Indeed, *The Wire* itself can be read as a kind of "cognitive mapping," a concept which Fredric Jameson introduces in his *Postmodernism: Or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. Originally developed as a psychological concept, the "cognitive map" has become a tool wielded in a variety of disciplines; already by the mid-1980s, it was being used to understand a number of conceptual and social spaces, such as corporate bureaucracies. (Jackall 135) For Jameson, as for Harvey, space is one of the fundamental categories that must be interrogated in any analysis of the postmodern; Jameson claims that spatial issues are the "fundamental organizing concern" of "a model of political culture appropriate to our own situation" (51). The aesthetic of this postmodern culture is one of cognitive mapping.



Figure 6. The Wire Tour Map.

Jameson refers to Kevin Lynch's classic of urban geography, *The Image of the City*, as a discussion of the "alienated city"; here, however, it would be useful to go back to Lynch's original (which does not use the Marxist term alienation as such, though it certainly describes a similar phenomenon) to better grasp Jameson's understanding of cognitive mapping. Lynch posits that cities have a certain legibility or "imageability," a property of all physical objects which leads them to evoke an image in the minds of individual observers. (9) From the perspective of Lynch's urban planning, the clearer the image is, the more orderly and navigable an environment will be. Lynch then applies this theory to an analysis of central areas of Boston, Jersey City, and Los Angeles, comparing the urban spaces with descriptions of them from interviews with local residents. Lynch found that when interviewees were asked to describe their respective cities, the mental

maps that resulted reflected each city's imageability: a city's image was therefore clearer when residents could all name many of the same physical features and relationships between such categories as landmarks, paths, edges, and nodes. When residents described different features with different spatial relationships, imageability was accordingly lower. The difference was most clear when Lynch schematized these descriptions in a series of maps, although Jameson points out that what Lynch's subjects are doing is in fact "precartographic," aligning more with the itinerary than with the map as such. (Jameson 51–52) Nevertheless, Jameson finds Lynch's ideas useful precisely because his "images" are not quite mimetic in the older sense of ideologically-driven "representation," and because the concept of imageability can be extrapolated into non-physical spaces such as social space. Cognitive mapping, then, not only outlines itineraries in the manner of Lynch's subjects, but it also "in the broader sense comes to require the coordination of existential data (the empirical position of the subject) with unlived, abstract conceptions of the geographic totality." (Jameson 52) At the same time, it recognizes "that there can be no true maps" because of the fundamental difference between representational codes and the outside world. For Jameson, if there is ever to be a political form of postmodernism, the practice of cognitive mapping on both spatial and social scales will be an important part of it. (54)

Whether or not such cognitive mapping as Jameson hopes for is even possible, it is clear that *The Wire* represents a step toward this, even though, as some critics have noted, it is far from perfect. Bramall and Pitcher, for instance, argue that the series only appears "to set out a cognitive map of contemporary social life," but that this is only a reflection of *The Wire*'s audience's own "yearning for social legibility." (88) Alberto Toscano and Jeff Kinkle take a somewhat broader stance on the subject, beginning, like Jameson, with the acknowledgement that representing the vast complexities of contemporary global capitalism may not even be possible. However, they also recognize that "attention to visual and material mediations also shows *The Wire* to be a very reflexive study on what modalities of mapping and representation are bearers of effective knowledge." The case board is one such tool of mapping that goes beyond the more traditional mapping discussed earlier. In *The Wire*'s early seasons, the detail uses a large bulletin board to "map out" the police's knowledge of the various organizations under surveillance, and

thereby to build the case. Under the curation of paper-chasing detectives such as Lester Freamon or Roland “Prez” Pryzbylewski, the names and photographs of criminals and persons of interest are plotted and connected, along with geographical locations such as known meeting places or front businesses. Importantly, though, the case board is incomplete, and must rely on other abstract mapping techniques for its true meaning – the legal paperwork of affidavits, court records, and the like; public records such as property deeds, articles of incorporation, and so on; even the records of the wiretap itself, which log the times of calls and classify them as “pertinent” or “non-pertinent.” The case board is implicitly contrasted with other “debased” methods of abstract representation (Toscano and Kinkle): this includes, most famously, the whiteboard in the homicide division, which reduces crimes to the name of a corpse, written in black or red to signify whether the case has been closed or not. But, contra Toscano and Kinkle, the whiteboard is perhaps more valid than that: not only because it clearly represents actual practice (much is made of it in the book *Homicide*), but also because the information it collects and represents is not false, only deficient. The danger, *The Wire* seems to suggest, is to interpret the whiteboard as the police “brass” does, as the only map that matters, a willfully reductive act from which comes all the misguided obsession with “juking the stats.” Instead, knowledge, and hence the power to employ or to resist various social structures, comes from the use of a variety of mapping techniques in concert, the epistemological blind spots of each compensated for by the others in a kind of postmodern triangulation. Likewise, watchers of *The Wire* are aided in their understanding of the show’s dense plotting when they interpret it through this particular lens. Franco Moretti has argued (2005) that maps and other abstract spatial representations of narrative material can bring new understanding to the study of literature, and this is certainly applicable to newer media forms such as cinema/television (and, as I will show in the following chapters, to video games as well).

Toscano and Kinkle wonder whether *The Wire*’s additive technique of cognitive mapping would ever improve its (or its audience’s) understanding of postmodern totality. If the series could, like some Borgesian thought-experiment, continue indefinitely, chronicling a new institutional construct in each season, would it ever get closer to representing “reality” and making it comprehensible? This is of course the paradoxical desire behind

the epic as a narrative form: the epic must include everything, and keeps trying, despite the representational limits of its medium. For Toscano and Kinkle, the gaps in the police detectives' knowledge "between the street gang and the world of international finance is an epistemological limit shared by [*The Wire*] itself," and those gaps are of particular importance because of the role of international finance capital in the development of Baltimore and other cities like it. However, though the failure to make the connection "could obviously be seen as a failure of *The Wire*'s aesthetic of cognitive mapping, it can also be seen as an inevitable aesthetic and epistemological barrier." (Toscano and Kinkle) At this point, a return to Kevin Lynch's concept of the city image is instructive, for just as "imageability" underpins Jameson's discussion of cognitive mapping, it also anticipates some of these very problems.³⁴ The "images" described by Lynch's urban subjects were never complete in themselves: instead, "rather than a single comprehensive image for the entire environment, there seemed to be sets of images, which more or less overlapped and interrelated." (85) The "shifting image" – or perhaps what might be called the meta-image – consisted of different levels conceived at difference scales, and also fluctuated depending on cyclical changes from day to night, or between seasons. The image of the city also changed over time, to reflect physical changes in the environment (the rapid development of Los Angeles was a particular culprit among the three urban spaces Lynch analyzed).

Change – in a sense the very definition of the passage of time – is where *The Wire*'s fault lines as a totalizing project become apparent. The more the series "works over" the same conceptual space, layering one map over another in an attempt at something like cognitive mapping, the greater the danger of its becoming detached from current experience. Thus there is a curious "temporal lag" to many of *The Wire*'s details and preoccupations: while critics have noted the series' nostalgia for a Fordist compact between labour and capital that might never have existed as *The Wire* idealizes it, they

³⁴ Lynch's book, written in the late 1950s, is typically modernist in its stress on formalism and large-scale urban planning; yet it anticipates postmodern ideas when it describes the fragmentation of urban experience, the psychic dislocation of citizens, and the great increase in the speed through which citizens traverse their environments, leading to a new understanding of geographic scale – what Harvey would later call the annihilation of space through time.

have been less attentive to how the “present” of this supposedly realistic series is caught up in the past as well. For example, a viewer could be forgiven for thinking that the Barksdale gang’s use of pagers in *The Wire*’s first season felt rather archaic even during its original broadcast in 2002. The reason for this is that the details of the case were taken from Ed Burns’ wiretap case from the early 1980s. Other elements from *The Wire*’s rich mythos are similarly displaced, though they do not usually appear as particularly dated. It is fitting that, even as *The Wire* is felt by many academics to mirror their hopes for a process of cognitive mapping, it must make the same trade-offs that any researchers make: the depth of factual detail comes at the necessary cost of timeliness, notwithstanding the extra considerations of the lag between the conception of television episodes and their production and broadcast or distribution.

Such problems are necessarily glossed in *The Wire*, and this accounts at least in part for the slight ahistoricism of the show (and perhaps of the ahistoricism of the postmodern epic in general). The fact that nothing seems to change in the world of *The Wire* has been cited as evidence of the “fatalism” of Simon and company, although I would side with critics who stress the cyclicity of the series instead. (Kinder 81; Kelleter 50) The most striking example of this trait appears in the last episode of the series, called “-30-”.³⁵ McNulty and Freamon’s fraud with the fake serial killer has been exposed, partially compromising the evidence from the wiretap. McNulty and Freamon are forced into retirement, but avoid criminal charges; Mayor Carcetti becomes governor of Maryland; Marlo Stanfield avoids prison, but is banished from “the game”; and so on. The cyclicity comes from the way in which character archetypes are replaced: Detective Sydnor becomes the new McNulty, Dookie becomes the new Bubbles, Michael becomes the new Omar, Marlo becomes the new Stringer Bell, and so on. (Kinder 81; Kelleter 50) Thus while the roles in *The Wire*’s polity are reproduced in a way that seems to suggest an inexorable fate – there will always be junkies, there will always be violent gangsters, crooked politicians, ad infinitum – the particular characters prosper or suffer without any

³⁵ -30- is journalistic copy shorthand for “the end,” appropriate for the finale of series whose final season focused on newspaper media.

regard for what they might “deserve.” Indeed, many commentators have noted the fact that Bubbles and McNulty “go home” in the end. This makes the finale seem “highly satisfying and life affirming” to these viewers (Kelleter 50), perhaps all the more so because Bubbles and McNulty had been perhaps the most long-suffering and self-destructive characters over *The Wire*’s five seasons. If one were inclined, they might even be interpreted as prefiguring possible outcomes for the characters that replace them. In any event, the technique of “systemic closure” (Kinder 81) is even prefigured in previous season finales, ending as they do with musical montages and the sense that rewards and punishments are doled out with little regard for personal merit, even as “life goes on.” Here is the escape hatch for *The Wire*’s realism: the fates of characters remain plausible even as they are displaced into an ahistorical future.

The Wire’s (partial) detachment from time, and its constant reworking of space (both real and conceptual) might explain why it can be compared fruitfully to the video game medium, which is marked by similar processes even when it operates within a narrative mode. It is not insignificant that perhaps the most interesting academic reading of *The Wire* follows these lines. Jason Mittell’s essay “All in the Game: *The Wire*, Serial Storytelling, and Procedural Logic” proposes a counter-reading to the conventional *Wire*-as-novel argument, positing instead a *Wire*-as-video-game reading in its place. “If novels typically foreground characterization and interiority in ways that *The Wire* seems to deny,” Mittell writes, “video games highlight the complexity of interrelated systems and institutions that is one of the show’s strengths.” (432) Thus *The Wire* can be seen as the television equivalent of the “God game” or simulator along the lines of the 1989 classic *SimCity*. Each season of the show unfolds as a new iteration of “the game,” in which different “what if” questions are posed, and then run through the simulator, so to speak, to see how the variables will play out within the system – at least, the system as constructed by the logic of the show. Kelleter is correct to see Mittell’s reading as a kind of thought experiment (58), since Mittell himself is quite careful not to push this line of argument too far: he still sees the series as, first and foremost, “a masterful example of television storytelling” (433). After all, the thematic motif of “the game” can (and has) lead to some rather facile comparisons between televisual and ludic media, and making that link without due caution risks committing the same errors as those who too readily

compare *The Wire* to a Victorian novel. What is important here is that *The Wire* not only represents various features of postmodernism in contemporary life, but that it also does so in a way which can itself be interpreted as postmodern because it exhibits some of the most significant attendant features of postmodernism.

The Wire's procedural logic, its cognitive mapping, its modeling of liberal desire, all situate the series within a contemporary, "postmodern" cosmos, even as its ethos harkens back to earlier forms, such as realist cinema, and nostalgia for earlier social structures. *The Wire* draws upon a mythos of fictive and historical narratives matched by few if any television dramas, and it aims to do so in qualitative terms that no competing work can match. Therefore, both despite and because of its protestations of postmodern relevance, the earliest form of all to which *The Wire* harkens back is in fact the totalizing mode of the narrative epic.

Chapter 3

3 The *Dark Knight* Trilogy

In the spring of 2008, posters depicting then-Senator and Presidential Candidate Barack Obama began appearing around Los Angeles. They depicted Obama with clown makeup and a scarred grin; incongruously, the word “socialism” was written below the image. The posters attracted national attention, thanks to the widespread recognisability of, and media hype surrounding, both Obama and the character of the Joker, as portrayed by Heath Ledger, in Christopher Nolan’s highly anticipated film *The Dark Knight* (2008). It is from this peculiar intersection of cultural signifiers that I wish to interrogate the relationship between the Batman phenomenon and the epic genre as it manifests itself in postmodernity. The Obama-Joker posters demonstrate that the *Dark Knight* trilogy, of the three case studies under consideration here, has the broadest cultural resonance, attracting the most “mainstream” audience over the longest period of time; and, therefore, the Batman franchise has been invoked for wildly divergent political ends, and these contestations of meaning have continued right up to the present.

Despite the narrative density and acclaim of *The Wire*, even it is relatively limited in the scope of its epos and mythos; Batman provides a much greater challenge for analysis. Batman narratives have been in continuous production since 1939, appearing in thousands of comic books, over a dozen feature films and serials, multiple television series, as well as novels, video games, and so on; and this only includes officially-sanctioned narrative material. Fan fictions and comics, as well as merchandising spin-offs, make it impossible to put a definite number to the amount of Bat-material in circulation for the past seventy-five years. With such a staggering mythos, it is not surprising that there is no one epic of Batman; instead, there are many jostling for dominance. One of the goals of this chapter will be to demonstrate how the scale and scope of narrative material creates problems peculiar to postmodern epics, and how these problems intensify the processes by which different variations of Batman narrative are legitimated or suppressed.

I will argue that Christopher Nolan's *Dark Knight* trilogy is one particular epic of Batman, paying special attention to Heath Ledger's portrayal of the Joker in the eponymous middle film of that series. The trilogy aspires to, and largely succeeds at achieving, the high level of technical and artistic accomplishment required of an epos; likewise, it is a remarkable synthesis of many disparate elements of the Batman comics mythos, a combination which could very well be interpreted as postmodern. Nevertheless, a complete synthesis is likely impossible, as an analysis of the *Dark Knight* trilogy's ethos makes clear; and here other landmark adaptations of Batman characters, such as Tim Burton's *Batman* (1989) and the *Arkham Asylum* video game series (2009–), will be contrasted with the *Dark Knight* trilogy to see how the range of possible representations of Batman has oscillated, and been deployed to varying political ends, in different decades. Finally, the Obama Joker poster provides an entry point into the cosmos which Nolan's films try to totalize: it is a cultural context in which discourses of politics and terrorism have come to the fore, and in which concerns over the mapping and control of space have outweighed a sense of historicity. In the *Dark Knight* trilogy Gotham City becomes a stand-in for the contemporary American metropolis, and the particular way Nolan's films represent the fictional city amounts to a cognitive map of twenty-first century urban experience.

3.1 The *Dark Knight* Trilogy as Epos

The *Dark Knight* trilogy consists of three feature films directed by Christopher Nolan: *Batman Begins* (2005), *The Dark Knight* (2008), and *The Dark Knight Rises* (2012). The trilogy is hardly the first cinematic treatment of Batman: in addition to four previous films released by Warner Bros. between 1989 and 1997, Batman has appeared in *Batman: The Movie* (1966), released by Twentieth Century Fox, and in film serials released by Columbia Pictures in 1943 and 1949. There have also been a number of animated Batman features, one of which, *Batman: Mask of the Phantasm* (1993), received a theatrical release. However, the *Dark Knight* trilogy is clearly the most ambitious series of Batman motion pictures to date, and also has the most continuity from a production standpoint. All three films were directed by Nolan, were written by the same team (in all three Christopher Nolan, Jonathan Nolan, and David S. Goyer received either

story or screenplay credit), and featured many of the same cast and crew members – most notably, Christian Bale portrayed Batman/Bruce Wayne, the first actor to play the part for more than two films. The plots of the trilogy’s three films are closely linked; although their narratives are not serialized to the same extent as those contemporary television series that follow the HBO model, the *Dark Knight* trilogy is not episodic like previous Batman films, where each story stands on its own with little connection to other entries in the series. As a result, it is reasonable to treat the three films as a cohesive unit, as one particular epic of Batman – or perhaps better yet, as one epic of the fictional Gotham City – much as *The Wire*’s five seasons function as one overarching narrative of Baltimore.

At the most basic level, the *Dark Knight* trilogy qualifies as an epic because of its length – both in the sense of its diegetic narrative and, more superficially, its running time. Nolan’s three films cover the entire career of Batman, from young Bruce Wayne’s first fear of bats – which in this version of the origin story leads indirectly to his parents’ murder – to his disappearance and retirement some thirty-two years later. In this way, the *Dark Knight* trilogy is a totalizing narrative, establishing a reasonably coherent timeline that leaves little room for other Batman narratives which might contradict it: indeed, the events of *The Dark Knight* are meant to take place about a year after Bruce Wayne’s return to Gotham and his first appearances as Batman in *Batman Begins*. In *The Dark Knight Rises*, on the other hand, it is established that Batman has not been seen in Gotham for eight years, his last confirmed sighting having occurred at the end of *The Dark Knight*. Therefore, the so-called “Nolanverse”³⁶ allows only a small amount of diegetic time that is narratively unaccounted for and eligible for further depiction of Batman’s adventures. As for their non-diegetic length, the films each have a running time of over two hours, to a total of about seven and a half hours; this puts the *Dark Knight* trilogy’s length well above the average feature film, and more akin to a television miniseries or similarly cohesive (and in their own way, epic) film trilogies such as *The Lord of the Rings* or *Star Wars*. The estimated \$585 million price tag (IMDB.com) of the

³⁶ I.e., the universe of Christopher Nolan’s Batman films. Such portmanteaux have become rather common when a director or other prominent figure is linked to particular rebooted or quasi-canon texts (c.f. the “Shatnerverse” and “Abramsverse” of *Star Trek* novels and films, respectively).

three films, on the other hand, puts the *Dark Knight* trilogy far above such competitors in terms of capital investment, though it should be noted that each film is generally in keeping with the current cost of producing a summer blockbuster film in the 2000s. Such figures are necessarily speculative, due to the inconsistency or outright lack of publicly-available information and the opaque nature of Hollywood film financing and accounting. (Garrett)

Yet length and lavish spending are not enough – an epos must also aspire to, and be thought to achieve, a level of qualitative greatness to be remembered as an epic, regardless of its particular medium. Frank Miller’s seminal comic *The Dark Knight Returns* was notable not only for its radically bleak reinterpretation of Batman, but also for the quality of its presentation. It was first published as a four-part miniseries in 1986 in a prestige full-colour format of muted watercolours (by Miller’s then-wife, Lynn Varley) instead of the cheap, four-colour format typical of most comics of the era, and it helped sustain the “graphic novel” boom of the 1980s. Likewise, Christopher Nolan’s films were made with the intention of surpassing previous superhero films in technical virtuosity. For example, *The Dark Knight* was the first Hollywood theatrical release to be filmed in IMAX – although earlier films had been upconverted for projection onto IMAX screens, only shorter movies such as nature documentaries had employed the cameras used by the format, which, though capable of capturing extraordinary visual detail, are far larger and noisier than conventional film cameras, and use up film stock at a much faster rate. Filming in IMAX is therefore far more expensive, and imposes certain formal limitations (such as shorter takes and the need to dub audio in postproduction). Nolan had wanted to shoot some of *Batman Begins* in IMAX, but could only get studio support to use the technology in *The Dark Knight*, shrewdly arguing to Warner Bros. executives that the unprecedented IMAX action sequences in the film could be an added selling point and audience draw (Heuring). *The Dark Knight* contained less than thirty minutes of IMAX footage, but *The Dark Knight Rises* set a new record with over an hour, or nearly half, of the film shot with IMAX cameras.

Another qualitative criterion informing the *Dark Knight* trilogy is its commitment to a certain kind of “realism.” This is defined rather differently from the realism of a series

like *The Wire*, which, as we have seen, strives to achieve a documentarian aesthetic by combining a radical implementation of classical Hollywood narration with social-realist plots and characters. For Nolan, Batman is “realistic” in that he is a superhero without super powers, and exhibits a remarkably complex psychology for the genre (Brooker 2012, 90-91). Indeed, the exploration of mental states is a recurrent motif in Nolan’s non-Bat films, which include *Following* (1999), *Memento* (2000), *Insomnia* (2002), *The Prestige* (2006), and *Inception* (2010). However implausible Batman may be, he must, by this logic, be at the same time relentlessly, radically possible. (It is hardly a coincidence that E. Paul Zehr’s book *Becoming Batman: The Possibility of a Superhero* was published soon after the release of *The Dark Knight* in 2008.) Whether this means that Batman’s personality must be as grim and “gritty” as he is portrayed in Nolan’s trilogy is debateable (cf. Brooker 2012, 91), but for Nolan, one implication of this realism-as-technical-possibility is that whatever action is filmed should be performed without the use of camera tricks or computer generated imagery. Batman’s iconic costume and gadgetry, from his cape and cowl to his vehicles, likewise not only had to be achieved via live action, but also had to have a specific, plausible origin and rationale, often coming from military research and development (Toh 129). For instance, Will Brooker explains how *Batman Begins*’s production notes go into conspicuous detail about the real-life capabilities of the new “Tumbler” Batmobile (which, tellingly, is never referred to as the “Batmobile” in dialogue):

The emphasis is on Nolan’s use of a “real” vehicle rather than a digital version; its specifications and powers are genuine, just as [Christian] Bale’s increase in muscle was solid and worked-for, rather than bulked up with a costume. The camera car is described in very similar terms ... which further blurs the boundaries between “real” and “fiction,” and in doing so flatters both sides. The gritty “reality” of Batman’s world is emphasized, while the film production in turn is given a sense of Batman-like, heavy-duty technological innovation. (2012, 94-95)

Brooker argues that this hyper-masculinity, both in Nolan’s approach and in the end result that appears on the screen, constitutes a repression of the campier or more fantastic Batman texts that have come before – in particular, the queer readings of Batman that can be traced back to psychiatrist Fredric Wertham’s discussion of Batman comics in his 1954 book *Seduction of the Innocent*. (2000, 103) This is certainly convincing, and we

will return to this topic when examining the ethos of Batman, and how it is contested, later on. Yet for the present purpose of analysing the *Dark Knight* trilogy as an epos, the specific political agenda of what previous versions of the narrative are or are not valorized is not necessarily important. We must remember, as Pierre Bourdieu makes clear, that all authors and their texts take up positions within the ever-shifting field of cultural production: the Nolan Batman films are no exception, in that they were made in recognition of the “field” of Bat-texts and -authorship, and their very appearance necessarily changes the relationship of the previous texts to each other, as well as to the new films. Let it suffice here to note that, as outlined in chapter one, one of the defining criteria of an epos is that it demonstrates this process to a more self-conscious and heightened degree than other narrative genres. The narrative of the epos is totalizing precisely because it suppresses whatever material it cannot include within its *fabula*. Moreover, this position-taking of Nolan’s films occurs not only with regard to Batman, but to his entire world. The *Dark Knight* trilogy was not filmed on the vast studio soundstages of its predecessors, opting instead for the “real” streets of New York, Chicago, and other cities; its aesthetic is that of a crime thriller, rather than gothic fantasy or hyperbolic camp. Explosions in the films were “real,” not added as CGI, and stunt-work was performed physically on the set, though some live-action stunts had to be redone digitally in post-production. (Brown) The eschewal of post-production digital effects in favour of as much live-action stunt-work as possible can therefore be seen as an ironically legitimate strategy for achieving grandeur and exceptionality in an era of ubiquitous computer-generated imagery.

“Realism” informed not only the strategies of capturing real-life visuals, but also real-life sounds that occurred on set during production. Heath Ledger’s performance as the Joker in *The Dark Knight* was emblematic of this commitment to verisimilitude. Lovell and Sergi note an especially striking instance of this, in the scene in which the Joker crashes Bruce Wayne’s fundraiser for Harvey Dent. At one point, a clanging noise can be heard in the background – “possibly the result of someone dropping inadvertently something on the floor” (32) – and Ledger’s naturally startled, though still in-character, reaction to this on-set accident is clear: “in a film where precedence is given to capturing the live performance of the actors, Heath Ledger in particular, it [the shot] is not removed but

worked around.” (32) Moreover, the auditory aspects of Ledger’s performance are given deference within the sound mix of the film; this is a strategy that highlights this particular performance of the Joker as qualitatively important, and also as more “realistic” than previous versions – and within the *Dark Knight* trilogy’s logic the realism of “liveness” and qualitative achievement are reciprocal. The quest for live sound means that Ledger’s

constant sucking, licking, lips smacking [*sic*] is perfectly captured on the film’s soundtrack (it is truly extraordinary that little ADR [additional dialogue recording] went on, testament to the quality of the live recordings). Ed Novick was the sound mixer in charge of production sound on the film, and the planning of the scenes where the Joker is in.^[37] Ledger’s awareness of and use of his voice are a wonder to behold in their own right: he reportedly spent a month in a hotel room preparing for the part, and found voice training to be the most difficult thing. But there are clear signs of a very specific strategy, as Nolan remembers: “I remember Heath calling up while I was working on the script and talking about ventriloquist’s dummies, about having a voice that was high and low.” (Lovell and Sergi 32)

Christopher Nolan’s description of Ledger’s heroic efforts at portraying the Joker are typical of discourse surrounding *The Dark Knight*, all the more resonant after his sudden death before the film’s premiere. Hyped or fetishized as it may be, Ledger’s commitment to the role is far more in keeping with that required of the epos than the commitment of Cesar Romero, who famously refused to shave his moustache to portray the Joker on television and in *Batman: The Movie* (1966).

Similarly, the Joker’s “jokey” nature was consciously deemphasized by Nolan and members of his production team responsible for costume, make-up and hair design (Lovell and Sergi 33): gone are the more clown-like aspects from his previous incarnations in comics and on screen, such as the acid-squirting flower, the electric joy buzzer, and the deadly Joker venom. Instead, the Ledger Joker prefers guns, knives, and explosives because “they’re cheap.” But even with the comparatively banal crimes of theft and murder, the Joker is a criminal whose ambition is on an epic scale: he robs from

³⁷ A thirty-year veteran of film and television, Novick was nominated for an Academy Award for his work on *The Dark Knight*, and subsequently won an Oscar, as part of the same production team, on *Inception* (2010).

mobsters with impunity, assassinates prominent city officials, and terrorizes all of Gotham through an extraordinarily complex web of extortion, media manipulation, and booby-traps. This interpretation of the character tries to define the Joker very differently from his previous cinematic incarnations. As Roz Kaveney points out, the Batman and Joker of Tim Burton's 1989 film and of the stylistically similar *Batman: The Animated Series* (1993-1995) had become definitive for the generation that preceded Christopher Nolan's trilogy. We will examine the differences between these texts in the following section on the *Dark Knight* trilogy's ethos; but for now I will note that there are signs that the Ledger Joker has become definitive in a similar way for the 2000s. Much attention is often paid to how films based on comic books mine that medium for their inspiration, but less on how films just as often give back to comics; in the case of Batman, this has arguably been going on since the 1940s.³⁸ (Brooker 2000, 89-90) *The Dark Knight* clearly does this in the case of the Joker.

For instance, Brian Azzarello and Lee Bermejo's graphic novel *Joker*, published in October 2008, presents a story that is unrelated to *The Dark Knight*; however, the visual depiction of the Joker is clearly inspired by the Ledger version, with a "smile" made by facial scars. Even more significant is a storyline in *Batman: Confidential* #7-12 (Sept. 2007-Feb. 2008), published concurrently with the production of Nolan's *Dark Knight*. In this incarnation, the Joker begins as "Jack," a criminal genius bored with robbing banks, but who is suddenly inspired when Batman appears in Gotham. In one early encounter with Batman, Jack has his mouth cut by one of Batman's batarangs, giving him his demented grin; only later does Jack fall into a chemical bath, which, in this retelling, is perpetrated by mobsters in a failed hit. At the climax of the story, Jack, now the Joker, confesses to Batman, "I didn't know what to do with myself till a man put on a mask and called himself Bat." The *Batman: Confidential* origin borrows equally from the Joker origin in Burton's *Batman* (in which Jack Napier falls into the chemicals after being set up by mob boss Carl Grissom) and Nolan's more "existential" non-origin of *The Dark*

³⁸ Brooker points out that the 1943 Columbia Batman serial helped establish the physical characteristics of Alfred, Bruce Wayne's butler, and was the first to name his secret, subterranean headquarters (as the "Bat's Cave").

Knight (in which the Joker creates himself in response to Batman's advent in Gotham). These instances of the Ledger Joker's influence on contemporary comics demonstrate not only the privileged status of the blockbuster film in relation to other media, but suggest coordination between design choices made to reinforce that status. The Ledger Joker's image was an integral part of *The Dark Knight*'s marketing campaign, even before Ledger's death (Brodesser-Akner), and promotional sites like WhySoSerious.com were using it by the autumn of 2007; it is more than likely that DC Comics editors, artists, and writers were instructed to incorporate Ledger-like Jokers around this time to boost awareness of the upcoming film.

Ledger's portrayal is also emblematic of the acclaim that the *Dark Knight* trilogy garnered from audiences and critics. The performance won an Academy Award for Best Supporting Actor, though Ledger's untimely and well-publicized death in January 2008 may have influenced the win; certainly there had already been "reverent yet inescapably ghoulisish chatter about a posthumous Oscar" (Brown) long before *The Dark Knight* was released. In total, Nolan's trilogy won two Oscars and was nominated for an additional seven (all but one of these for *The Dark Knight*); it surpassed the total Academy Award nominations of all other Batman films combined, as well as being nominated for or winning numerous other awards. In addition, the films scored highly on popular Internet ratings aggregators Rotten Tomatoes and Metacritic, again outdoing previous Batman films. According to Box Office Mojo, the trilogy's worldwide box-office gross was \$2,459,818,404, with *The Dark Knight* and *The Dark Knight Rises* both earning over \$1 billion each in that total. Considered separately, the latter two films in the trilogy are among the most profitable superhero/comic book movies released to date (on par, adjusted for inflation, with the windfall studio profits reaped by *Batman* in 1989); if the Nolan series is considered as a whole, it is among the top-grossing film trilogies ever released.³⁹ Adding up review scores and box-office receipts is admittedly a crude way of

³⁹ For the sake of comparison, the original *Star Wars* trilogy grossed approximately \$2.7 billion in theatres, and the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy grossed approximately \$2.9 billion (both figures adjusted for inflation; Box Office Mojo). These figures include re-releases, however, making it even more difficult to rank profits in absolute terms.

measuring a film's ultimate value; however, just as budgets in the hundreds of millions of dollars are indicative of producers' and studios' expectations for a particular project, profits that are commensurate with and wildly exceed such expectations are an indicator of their fulfilment. As Eileen R. Meehan notes in a political-economic discussion of Tim Burton's *Batman*, box office returns are more dependent upon word-of-mouth between audiences than upon the profits from spin-off merchandise; an especially long theatrical engagement, necessary for box-office record-setting, eventually depends "on the film itself, its ability to resonate with our experiences and visions, and to tap into the conflicting ideologies through which we make sense of social life." (61)

Only time will tell what place the *Dark Knight* trilogy has as an epos within the greater Batman mythos in the decades to come. As the following sections will make clear, that mythos has already grown too big to admit only one epos – but it is hard to deny that the *Dark Knight* trilogy is a significant epic of the Batman, if not the most dominant one of the 2000s.

3.2 The Batman Mythos and the *Dark Knight* Trilogy

The number of Batman stories published in comic books is staggering. Before DC Comics reset the numbering of its monthly series in September 2011, *Batman* had reached 713 issues, and *Detective Comics* (in which Batman had first debuted in 1939 and soon became the star character) had reached 881. When annuals, special issues, graphic novels, spin-off series and the like are taken into account, the number of comics in which Batman has appeared since 1939 easily numbers in the thousands. Even if all these stories had a uniform treatment of Batman and other characters – which they do not – it would be impossible for any one film or series of films to adapt even a fraction of them. And yet all these must be considered as part of the mythos of the *Dark Knight* trilogy if the films are indeed epic according to the present theory. The sheer scale of this previous narrative material – a function of how many people work on creating it, and over how long a period – is a particular problem for contemporary epics, and in this regard Batman is paradigmatic.

However, the *Dark Knight* trilogy does attempt to adapt many notable Batman narratives, something which most previous Batman films and television series generally shied away from (*Batman: The Animated Series*' adaptation of "The Laughing Fish" from *Detective Comics* #475, and the animated feature *Batman: Mask of the Phantasm*, loosely based on *Batman: Year Two*, are notable exceptions). Christopher Nolan and the other screenwriters of the series combined elements from many "classic" Batman stories to create an unprecedented synthesis; however, it is vital to stress that even this effort leaves out vast swaths of Batman lore, despite the claims of exhaustiveness made by Nolan and his collaborators, and of comic book veterans such as DC editor-in-chief Dennis O'Neil, in many of the promotional materials associated with the series. "The source for *Batman Begins* is – contrary to what the interviews suggest – not the entire, unwieldy mythos⁴⁰ of the character from 1939–2005," as Will Brooker argues, "but a far more selective tradition." (2012, 59) *The Dark Knight* and *The Dark Knight Rises*, though outside Brooker's survey of sources for the Nolan films, also fit this pattern, as we shall see presently.

Batman Begins, as would be expected of a retelling of Batman's origins, draws most liberally from the Batman mythos. Bruce Wayne's motivation to don the cowl of the Batman after the murder of his parents, Thomas and Martha Wayne, occurred very early in the character's publication history – a mere six months since his debut, in *Detective Comics* #33. This first explication, "conveyed with perfect economy in twelve elegant panels," (Brooker 2000, 55) was occasionally excerpted from the original, unrelated story for which it served as a prelude, and reproduced in other Batman comics. But more often, the broad strokes of Batman's origin were redrawn anew, with a host of variations.

As Pearson and Uricchio note, "writers have repeatedly returned to the scene of the crime and restaged the origin much as it 'happened' in 1940 [sic]". The previously anonymous killer was revealed to be Joe Chill, who was then revealed to be in the employ of Joe Moxon; more recent continuity of the 1990s returns to the notion that the murder was a senseless mugging, the editors having realised

⁴⁰ Brooker is using this word in the popular, conventional sense, not in the specialized sense that I am using throughout these pages.

that Batman's war against crime can find no satisfying conclusion in the punishment of a single individual. Meanwhile almost every self-contained Batman graphic novel since Frank Miller's *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns* of 1986 has sought to tell the same story again, with a fresh angle or treatment. Miller reduced the origin to a series of fragmented silent flashback panels, the visions of gun barrels and bullets breaking up finally into a mosaic of pearls ... and Denny O'Neil, having extended the telling of Bruce's teenage years to involve FBI training and Zen Buddhism, wryly restaged the primal moment with the Waynes as ice statues and Joe Chill as a murderous snowman. (Brooker 2000, 55)

So while the "essence" of Batman's motivations has stayed remarkably consistent for decades – he fights crime to avenge the murder of his parents – the details and emphases of each retelling in the mythos differ. If *Batman Begins* is to be considered the first part of a cinematic epos of Batman, it should attempt to incorporate as much of this material as possible: and so it does. In the film, Bruce's parents are gunned down by Joe Chill, as in *Batman* #47 (1948); even the motif of Martha Wayne's broken pearl necklace, a strong metonymy for both wealth and death, recurs from *The Dark Knight Returns* (it also featured in the flashback scenes in Tim Burton's *Batman*). Bruce discovers what will become the Batcave through a childhood fall, just as he does in Dennis O'Neil's "The Man Who Falls" from *Secret Origins* #1 (1989); moreover, after he commits himself to fighting crime, the Bruce of *Batman Begins* travels the world as he does both in "The Man Who Falls", and in "Shaman," the first story of *Legends of the Dark Knight* (#1–5, 1989), which was also written by O'Neil. Bruce is trained by the assassin Henri Ducard in *Batman: Blind Justice* (1989), and in *Batman Begins*, Ra's al Ghul assumes that alias when he grooms Bruce for the League of Shadows. Nevertheless, just as in many of these predecessor stories some details of the origin of Batman vary for the sake of narrative unity, so too does *Batman Begins* rearrange details to suit its thematic and narrative needs. For instance, in a number of retellings, the Waynes are gunned down while walking home from a screening of *The Mask of Zorro*, while in *Batman Begins*, they are killed after leaving the opera. The performance in question is of Arrigo Boito's *Mefistofele*, and when "dark birds on wires descend, flapping" (Nolan et al. 2012), Bruce

is reminded of his terrifying fall into the Batcave; his panic prompts the family's early exit and makes Bruce feel personally responsible for the resulting tragedy.⁴¹

Batman Begins also draws on a number of Batman comics that established details of Batman's early career and the state of Gotham City during that time. Frank Miller and David Mazzucchelli's *Batman: Year One*, first appearing in four parts in *Batman* #404–407 (1987), and Jeph Loeb and Tim Sale's miniseries *Batman: The Long Halloween* (1996–1997) and *Batman: Dark Victory* (1999–2000) were the most influential in this regard. These comics depicted such events as Bruce Wayne's early attempts at crime-fighting before donning the mask of Batman, the development of his relationship with then-Lieutenant James Gordon, and the first appearance of the Joker, ominously presaged by a Joker playing card – a scene which closes both *Year One* and *Batman Begins*. The appearance of crime families led by Carmine Falcone and Sal Maroni, and the general state of police corruption in Gotham, are also elements in *Batman Begins*, and to a lesser extent, *The Dark Knight*, which were adapted from these comics.

Batman's "rogues gallery" is perhaps the most famous in comics, and the *Dark Knight* trilogy includes many of the most famous Batman villains, as well as some lesser-known ones. In addition to the Joker – whose place in the Batman mythos will be covered in greater depth shortly – there are Jonathan Crane, aka The Scarecrow; Harvey Dent, aka Two-Face; and Selina Kyle, aka Catwoman. All these have been regular Batman villains since the early 1940s, and their adaptation for the *Dark Knight* trilogy is roughly in keeping with their depiction in the comics; though some elements spill over from Loeb and Sale's two series, these villains are not tied to the storyline of any particular issue, and their motivations are often streamlined into the narrative needs of Nolan's films. For example, Two-Face's comic-book origin usually runs as follows: during his trial, the gangster Sal Maroni throws acid into the face of District Attorney Harvey Dent, who is disfigured and driven insane by the attack. In *The Dark Knight*, it is the Joker who is responsible for kidnapping and disfiguring Dent in a fiery explosion. However, Maroni,

⁴¹ The opera is often misidentified as Strauss' *Die Fledermaus*, for obvious reasons.

as mentioned earlier, plays a supporting role in the film, and an early scene – as both homage and narrative red herring – shows how Dent avoids a courtroom assassination attempt by one of Maroni's henchmen.

Other major antagonists in the *Dark Knight* trilogy are more recent additions to the Batman mythos. Ra's al Ghul, instrumental in Bruce Wayne's training and subsequently the mastermind behind the Scarecrow's (literal) terror attack on Gotham in *Batman Begins*, first appeared in *Batman* #232 (June 1971). He was a recurring villain in *Batman* and *Detective Comics* in the early 1970s, and these appearances were later reprinted in *Tales of the Demon*. In classic continuity, Ra's is a centuries-old international criminal mastermind, leader of the League of Assassins, who believes that humanity is a blight on the Earth; only a drastic culling of the species will bring the planet back into "balance." In his physical strength, cunning, and vast wealth, he is presented as a darker counterpart to Bruce Wayne, and Ra's often attempts to recruit Wayne as his heir. Complicating this relationship is Talia al Ghul, Ra's' daughter, who is in love with Wayne yet shares her father's nefarious goals; in the graphic novel *Son of the Demon* (1989), she and Bruce Wayne even have a child, who is secretly given up for adoption. Many details from these comics are loosely, but still recognizably, adapted in *Batman Begins* and in *The Dark Knight Rises*. For instance, in the films Ra's is leader of the League of Shadows, and seeks to destroy the "decadent" civilization that Gotham represents; Ra's claims to have been doing this for centuries. Although Ra's dies in a crashing monorail at the end of *Batman Begins*, he appears as an apparent hallucination in *The Dark Knight Rises*, claiming to be immortal; when a delirious Wayne objects – "I watched you die" – Ra's replies that "There are many forms of immortality." This alludes to the comics, in which Ra's is practically immortal, thanks to periodic rejuvenations in so-called "Lazarus Pits." Talia, under the alias of Miranda Tate, plays a major role in *The Dark Knight Rises*; she inherits the leadership of the League of Shadows, and vows revenge upon Batman for the death of her father. She also has a sexual relationship with Bruce Wayne, who only finds out her real motivations and identity at the film's denouement.

Bane, Talia's protector and co-antagonist of *The Dark Knight Rises*, has an even more recent comic-book pedigree. His first appearance was in *Batman: Vengeance of Bane* #1

(1993), which served as a prelude to the much-touted *Knightfall* story arc. *Knightfall* was modelled upon the *Death of Superman* arc which had preceded it in 1992, and Bane, like Doomsday in the Superman series, was created with the express purpose of “breaking” a superhero.⁴² Unlike the rampaging Doomsday, however, Bane had a complex backstory in the comics, which served both as inspiration for much of the plot of *The Dark Knight Rises* as well as a clever misdirection for Batman fans familiar with the mythos. Bane, the son of Batman villain Edmund “King Snake” Dorrance, was raised in a brutal prison on a fictional Caribbean island and, after becoming the test subject of a super-soldier program, escaped to Gotham City to pit himself against the Batman. In the film version, Batman believes that Bane is the son of Ra’s al Ghul, who has similarly escaped from the prison in which he was born and raised to attack Gotham; only at the end is it clear that Talia was the child who had escaped from the prison in which Bane had served as her protector. Nevertheless, some aspects of *Knightfall* are adapted in the film very closely: the scene in which Bane says “I will break you” before breaking Batman’s back across his knee is right out of the comics. Other notable elements from the Bane storyline in *The Dark Knight Rises* are clearly inspired by other landmark narratives from Batman comics. The reappearance of Batman after many years, as well as his faked death at the end of the film, are drawn from *The Dark Knight Returns*; the sealing off of Gotham from the outside world, leaving it in control of Bane and other criminals, is strongly reminiscent of *Batman: No Man’s Land*, another title-crossing story arc from the late 1990s. In the original, it was devastation from a plague and earthquake that led to Gotham’s isolation, not the threat of a nuclear bomb, as in *The Dark Knight Rises*. There will be more to say about *No Man’s Land*, and the treatment of urban space in it and the Nolan films, in the section dealing with the *Dark Knight* trilogy’s cosmos.

⁴² These “event” arcs, a semi-regular phenomenon in comics since the 1980s, crossed over similar titles (e.g., *Batman* and *Detective Comics*) in an effort to boost sales as well as to publish more parts in less time – for example, two or three dozen issues over the course of a year. They would invariably be reprinted in trade paperbacks after the initial run. As such, they also aspire to epic status, although the compressed publication schedule, the gimmicky story premises, and the uneven quality from coordinating so many writers and artists, often keep these from being accepted as landmark efforts by critics and fans.

But first, we must return to the sources in the Batman mythos that inform the depiction of the Joker in *The Dark Knight*. In the Joker, one of Batman's oldest and most popular foes, the same processes of adaptation from disparate Batman comics that is clear from such villains as Ra's al Ghul and Bane takes place, only on an even greater scale.

Keeping this in mind is especially important because the Heath Ledger portrayal was seen as highly original, and it is true that the narrative elements in *The Dark Knight* are not as obviously synthesized from specific comic book stories as they are in *Batman Begins* and *The Dark Knight Rises*. Nevertheless, there is noticeable continuity between the Ledger Joker and the comics Joker; the difference is that there are so many Joker stories from which to choose, that any particular interpretation within one epos, no matter how artistically coherent and laudable, can only include so much. Ledger's "Joker diary," the assembly of which helped the actor prepare for the role, contained not just method-style scrawling and clippings of generic clown iconography, but at least one panel from "The Laughing Fish." (McFarland) A selective tradition is once again at play, as Nolan and company were working from a set of Batman texts curated by Dennis O'Neil and other old hands at DC Comics.

In *Batman* #1 (1940), the Joker first appears as a macabre killer who uses a mysterious toxin to kill the wealthy targets of his extortion scheme; the corpses of the Joker's victims have their faces contorted in a grin that mirrors the Joker playing card he leaves behind as his trademark.⁴³ No mention was given of the Joker's origin, a significant fact since critics of *The Dark Knight* would later note that the lack of an origin for the Ledger Joker was one of his most striking features (e.g., Kolenic 1027). It would be over ten years before the "classic" Joker origin story appeared in *Detective Comics* #168's "The Man Behind the Red Hood" (1951). In this issue, Batman revisits the decade-old case of the mysterious, never-identified robber known as the Red Hood, so-called because of the perfectly smooth, featureless helmet he wore when committing his crimes. Readers learn at last that after robbing the Monarch Playing Card Company, the Red Hood had escaped

⁴³ This first appearance of the Joker's grin was inspired in turn by the prosthesis worn by Conrad Veidt in the silent classic *The Man Who Laughs* (1928).

Batman by swimming through a vat of toxic chemicals. This turned his hair green, his skin white, and his lips red. Inspired by the playing card he now resembled, the Red Hood renamed himself the Joker and began a second criminal career.

This origin inspired Alan Moore and Brian Bolland's graphic novel *The Killing Joke* (1988), in which the Joker begins as a failed comedian. He becomes the Red Hood for one night only to support his wife, who is expecting their first child. Even after her sudden, meaningless death (she is electrocuted while testing a baby-bottle heater), mobsters force him to go through with the job, stealing the payroll of a chemical plant. The robbery goes wrong, and the Red Hood falls into the chemicals as before. But in the new version the Joker's psychological motivations are explored much more fully. His disfigurement, compounding his domestic tragedy, is what drives him insane.

The most obvious departure of the Ledger Joker, therefore, is that he has not had his skin and hair discolored in some accident; instead, he wears clown makeup as a kind of "war-paint," as one of his henchmen calls it early in *The Dark Knight*. Todd McGowan notes in "The Exceptional Darkness of the Dark Knight" that "the status of the Joker's make-up throughout the film reveals that its function is not one of hiding a true identity ... instead his make-up hides the fact that he has nothing to hide." There is no chemical bath, no Red Hood, only scars extending from the sides of his mouth. Anthony J. Kolenic, in "Madness in the Making," makes much of the fact that the Heath Ledger Joker, unlike most other appearances of the character in comics and film, is presented without a backstory or "a narrative, for the viewer to grasp the character, often involving a transitional moment when he is baptized into chaos." (1027) The accounts the Joker gives in the film about "how I got these scars" differ significantly, which Kolenic reads as "simply him furthering chaos, or, perhaps as how that chaos becomes efficacious; the differing accounts can be read as the refusal of narrative, accountability, governmentality." (1027) Kolenic and other critics of *The Dark Knight* have understood that characters like Batman and the Joker have been adapted to "the historical moment as certain aspects of their iconic personae are foregrounded and others pushed back." (Brooker 2000, 10)

Yet the process is perhaps more complex than that, as the Joker's origins in the comics have been less consistent than some commentators seem aware or acknowledge; moreover, many elements of the Ledger portrayal are actually in keeping with these earlier versions, which are often deliberately contradictory or vague. The 1994 graphic novel *The Batman Adventures: Mad Love*, created by Bruce Timm and Paul Dini in the style of *Batman: The Animated Series*, is an instructive example. *Mad Love* explores the bizarre relationship between the Joker and his girlfriend/sidekick, Harley Quinn. Through flashbacks, Timm and Dini reveal that before she became Harley, Dr. Harleen Quinzel had been an ambitious resident treating the Joker in Arkham Asylum. Expecting every manipulative explanation for the Joker's criminal insanity except the obvious one, she had fallen in love with the psychotic clown when the Joker told her how "My father used to beat me up pretty bad." But, near the end of *Mad Love*, Batman reveals that the Joker's sob story is a lie. "He's got a million of them, Harley. Like any other comedian, he uses whatever material will work." Although *The Dark Knight* eschews the Red Hood origin of *The Killing Joke*, other elements of that seminal depiction of the Joker also remain in the film, most notably the extended meditation on the symbiotic relationship between the Joker and Batman. This is clear in scenes in which Batman interrogates the Joker in a holding cell in both the comic and the film. Batman and the Joker also keep fighting to a draw in *The Killing Joke* as self-consciously as they do in *The Dark Knight*, in which the Joker observes, "This is what happens when an unstoppable force meets an immovable object." Frank Miller's *The Dark Knight Returns* takes their love/hate relationship to a similar extreme, having the Joker call Batman "darling,"⁴⁴ and there are strong echoes of this when, in *The Dark Knight*, the Joker confesses to Batman, "You complete me." Miller's Joker even wears makeup, just like the Ledger Joker.

With the Joker, Batman, and other characters in the *Dark Knight* trilogy coming from so many sources, sources which sometimes conflict with one another, we see some of the details of the process of adaptation between media in a way that is perhaps clearer than

⁴⁴ The Joker also calls Batman "darling" in Grant Morrison and David McKean's graphic novel *Arkham Asylum* (1989), which has also been the subject of discussions about Batman and the Joker's relationship vis-à-vis camp and homosexuality. (cf. Brooker 2012, 128; Medhurst 161)

when dealing with a single text (e.g., a novel) being adapted into another (e.g., a film). As Linda Hutcheon points out, when prose is adapted into performative arts such as “stage and radio plays, dance, opera, musical, film, or television” (35), issues of medium specificity often arise. But unlike the adaptations of *Homicide* and *The Corner* discussed in the last chapter, the adaptation of comics to film is not as problematic in this regard due to the greater affinity between the two media – after all, the storyboards used to plan film sequences are merely another form of what Will Eisner and Scott McCloud call sequential art. It seems that, in comics-to-film, there are two broad elements of adaptation at work: narratological and semiotic. In other words, adaptation from comics to film seems to be a matter of repurposing, on the one hand, one or many *fabulae* (the depiction of action or events), and, on the other hand, one or more kinds of representation (the visual appearance, sound, and so on). Thus the plot (*syuzhet*) of *Batman Begins*, for instance, can be seen as an adaptation and synthesis of a number of separate events (*fabulae*) described in comics; the Joker as portrayed in *The Dark Knight* can be seen as the assembly of particular signs (purple suit, joker card, clown-like grin) associated with earlier versions of the character. This also demonstrates the need, when evaluating postmodern epics, to pay equal attention to the signification of a variety of visual and auditory media. But in each part of the *Dark Knight* trilogy, much is left out by necessity, even as the disparate elements are made into an ethically coherent whole, and this is partly where the creativity of the adaptation must lie.⁴⁵ With that in mind, we can now turn to an analysis of the particular ethos – the possible range of representations – of the *Dark Knight* trilogy and where it overlaps, and more importantly, where it diverges from other epics of Batman, and what the implications might be.

3.3 Ethos: One Dark Knight, Many Batmen

The vast mythos of Batman narratives cannot be contained in any one adaptation on account of its sheer size. But no one work can encompass all the possibilities of Batman

⁴⁵ “One way to think about unsuccessful adaptations is not in terms of infidelity to a prior text, but in terms of a lack of the creativity and skill to make the text one’s own and thus autonomous” (Hutcheon 20-21); this explains why the *Dark Knight* trilogy, despite its cherry-picking from the Batman mythos, is good, while meticulously “faithful” comics-to-film adaptations such as *300* or *Watchmen* are far less interesting.

because many of these conflict. In the previous section, I focused on the similarities between the *Dark Knight* trilogy and its predecessor works; here, I will turn to the ways in which Nolan's films are fundamentally different in their representative logic from certain other Batman narratives. Of particular interest are the Tim Burton films and *Animated Series* of the late 1980s and early 1990s, as these were clearly the most successful filmic adaptations of Batman before *Batman Begins*. They are also useful because they contain enduring versions of the Joker that contrast sharply with Heath Ledger's portrayal. Moreover, if we consider these filmic predecessors to the *Dark Knight* trilogy as similar attempts at totalizing, epic narratives of Batman, each must have its own ethos that may not be compatible with the ethos of other Batman epics – or better yet, the ethos of Batman as a metanarrative. Even at this level of representational possibility, the *Dark Knight* trilogy reveals the limits of a totalizing epic and the terrain upon which different ideologically-motivated “visions” of Batman contest for legitimacy.

In his analysis of the first year of Batman's publishing history, Will Brooker outlines a basic template of the character that fits nearly every permutation of Batman, even though the details of each point are not closed to contestation. (2000, 42) First, “Batman is Bruce Wayne, a millionaire who dresses in a bat-costume and fights crime” (42); second, “he has no special powers but is very fit and strong, and very intelligent” (46); third, “he lives in Gotham City” (47); fourth, “he fights villains like the Joker” (49); fifth, “he fights crime because his parents were killed when he was young” (53); and finally, “he is often helped by his sidekick, Robin” (56). This framework constitutes the ethos of the Batman metanarrative in its broadest strokes, and each instantiation can focus more or less on particular points: for instance, there is great variety in the Robin role, from the classic Dick Grayson version, to very broad reinterpretations of the sidekick, such as Carrie Kelley in *The Dark Knight Returns* and John Blake in *The Dark Knight Rises*.

Historically, the variations of the Batman ethos can be plotted along a spectrum from the “dark, gritty” Batman to the “rainbow, camp” Batman, although these poles are never inseparable, and from a certain point of view even depend on one another for their definition. (Brooker 2012, 215-216) Uricchio and Pearson come up with a similar framework of the Batman's “key components” (186-187), although they maintain that the more extreme permutations of the formula threaten to fracture the character completely.

At this point, revisiting Northrop Frye's high mimetic mode will help to articulate the relationship between the ethos of the Batman metanarrative and the ethoi of particular Batman epics. Batman is, in the generic parlance of comic books, a superhero; but as Christopher Nolan, Tim Burton, and others before them have long realized (Brooker 2012, 90-91; Uricchio and Pearson, 183) Batman is conspicuous in the genre for his lack of "super powers." Brooker's second criterion for describing the essence of Batman – "he has no special powers, but is very fit and strong, and very intelligent" – is of course another way of saying that he is "superior in degree to other men but not to his natural environment" (Frye, 34). If characters such as Superman or Wonder Woman are practically Olympian, Batman is more in keeping with Odysseus – the most cunning and resourceful of men, but still very much a mortal man. (One of Batman's common epithets is "The World's Greatest Detective," and in the comics Ra's al Ghul consistently addresses Batman as "Detective.") Even the camp Batman, the Adam West version of the 1960s, is presented in this high mimetic mode. He and Robin repeatedly decipher the most absurdly convoluted clues, clues that leave the police constantly baffled. In the TV episode "The Joker is Wild," for instance, Commissioner Gordon intones to Chief O'Hara, "If it is the Joker that we're up against, that Clown Prince of Crime, there's only one man who can handle this – I don't have to tell you who!" And when Batman and Robin "deduce" the Joker's plan, Gordon groans, "Oh, Chief, why didn't we think of that?" "Me hat's off to you, Batman," adds Chief O'Hara. Similarly, in *Batman: The Movie* – in which, notably, it is pointed out that Batman and Robin are duly deputized members of the police, not vigilantes – the Dynamic Duo are depicted as superior to all other men but not to nature (or at least the laws of nature as they operate within the film's campy logic). At the climax, Gordon telephones Batman to see if he and Robin have succeeded in reconstituting the dehydrated remains of the Security Council of the "United World Organization." "With all modesty, commissioner," intones Batman, "if we can't, heaven knows who can." "Truer words were never spoken," Gordon replies.

The "realist" ethos of the *Dark Knight* trilogy is therefore more limited than the overall ethos of the Batman megatext; as we have seen in the analysis of the films as an epos of Batman, a serious treatment of the some of the inherent ridiculousness of the Batman premise pervades the enterprise. Batman is played straight, and this is apparently a

corporate dictum: in recent years, DC Comics and Time Warner have “refused permission for and threatened legal action against representations and discussions of a gay Dynamic Duo” (Brooker 2012, 218). But deliberate attempts to suppress a competing, “campier” ethos of other Batman texts extend beyond the more politically and ideologically contentious issues of LGBT rights and representation. For instance, the *Dark Knight* trilogy does not shy away from the kind of absurd superweapons that one would expect in a lesser Bond film – witness the microwave emitter of *Batman Begins* or the fusion bomb of *The Dark Knight Rises*. Unlike the Penguin-shaped nuclear submarine of *Batman: The Movie*, or the giant freeze-gun of *Batman and Robin*, however, such devices are rationalized as stolen research and development products of Wayne Enterprises, and, like the militarized tech of the Batsuit, Batmobile, and the rest, they are presented as scientifically plausible, if not quite possible.

This serious realism also pervades the mise en scene of the Nolan Bat-films, in great contrast to the range of urban representation seen in the earlier films against which, as a new Batman epos, the *Dark Knight* trilogy must implicitly compete. For while Batman invariably lives in Gotham City, what Gotham City looks like, and the logic of its geography, reflects the particular ethos of particular Batman adaptations. Long before the first Batman comic book, “Gotham” was a nickname for New York City,⁴⁶ and early Batman comics clearly intended Gotham to be read as New York – indeed, some of the first comics referred to Batman’s base of operations explicitly as New York, which was later fictionalized to give the setting a broader appeal. (Brooker 2000, 48) Once Gotham City was established as a city distinct from, but often analogous to, New York, different Batman narratives emphasized different aspects of it. For instance, the Gotham City of the 1960s Batman TV series and film played up the etymological link to foolishness: as one reviewer later recalled, “aged seven, I knew that Gotham City was really New York, but only much later did the penny drop: it’s also the City of Fools.” (qtd. in Brooker 2000, 199)

⁴⁶ The epithet can be traced back to Washington Irving, who in the early 19th century used the name in satires of New York society; Gotham, Nottinghamshire, was traditionally known in English folklore as the City of Fools.

The seriousness of *Batman Begins*, *The Dark Knight*, and *The Dark Knight Rises* has no place for a “foolish” Gotham; but more than other filmed Batman narratives, it presents an urban ethos most like a “real” New York. The trilogy was filmed in Chicago, New York, and similar cities (such as Newark, NJ, and Pittsburgh, PA), without much attempt to disguise the fact. This is in clear contrast to the most successful previous film epic set in Gotham, Tim Burton’s *Batman* (1989). There Gotham City was conjured up on studio lots, with the help of models and matte paintings, as a nightmarish warren of ominous Art Deco and crumbling Gothic architecture that defined Batman’s home for a generation. German Expressionist film had been one of the early influences on Batman creators Bob Kane and Bill Finger, and the Gotham committed to film five decades later returned to these aesthetic progenitors. As Roz Kaveney points out,

what Burton ... achieve[d], by hiring Anton Furst as [production] designer, and through wonderfully gloomy cinematography – which fed back into the comic almost as much as the film took from it – was a sense of Gotham City as a concrete place and a state of mind. Bob Kane took Gotham’s name from traditional representations of New York as a city of fools, but Burton, like others before him, saw that the Gotham of the comics was essentially a Gothic creation, and he went with what that gave him ... it looks like the *idea* of a Batman movie.” (240)

In retrospect, the ethos of Burton’s *Batman* (and its variation in *Batman Returns*) has become legitimated as a worthy interpretation; certainly in comparison with the derision heaped upon the Schumacher-directed entries in the series, Burton’s version looks like a “good object.” (Brooker 200, 299) But this was by no means clear immediately surrounding the film’s release. Jim Collins notes that *Batman* introduced stylistic “juxtapositions that are ‘foreign’ to the Batman myth” with its intertextual citations not only from comic books, but horror and suspense films, nineteenth-century Gothic novels, and medieval architecture. (1991, 168) The “Gothic” aspect which Kaveney praises above is far less prevalent in the comics than she suggests – after the first few issues of *Batman* in the late 1930s, when Batman fought vampires and the like (cf. *Detective Comics* #32-33), and especially after the introduction of the restrictive Comics Code Authority in the mid-1950s, the Gothic overtones of Batman were erased, only to re-emerge in the 1980s as part of a concerted effort to bring Batman back to his “roots.” (Brooker 2000, 285) That Gotham must be Gothic is little more than an etymological

accident, albeit a self-perpetuating one reinforced by the *Batman* film itself. Among the many Gothic tropes in *Batman*, Collins notes

the explicitly Gothic dimension of the cathedral's ornamentation and interior, as well as the Wayne Mansion and the chemical plant that resembles a Gothic castle more than a factory, the mise en scene that visualizes Batman as a menacing figure from "the darkness," the suggestion that he is a blood-drinking vampire, the doppelganger relationship between the hero-villain, the use of the woman (specifically the control of the woman's body) as the embodiment of their conflict, the very self-conscious invocation of Gaudi's Sagrada Familia Cathedral in Barcelona. (Collins 1991, 168-169)

At the same time, the Gotham City of *Batman* is rife with visual signifiers of urban decay, including

its deserted warehouse districts, garbage strewn alleys, lurking shadows, dilapidated buildings, abandoned construction sites, and tiny people lost in dark, deserted streets loomed over by grotesquely embellished skyscrapers. As a line from the *Batman* script, repeated endlessly in the film's publicity, put it, Gotham City looks "as if hell had erupted through the sidewalks." This representation of Gotham certainly gives a compelling image of late twentieth-century urban decay, as any New Yorker can attest ... (Uricchio and Pearson 206)

The Gothic elements notwithstanding, such signifiers were common in the science fiction and fantasy films of the 1980s and early 1990s. Visions of drug-fuelled gang violence escalating to the level of urban warfare were particularly notable during this time, even in superhero comics, though the latter perhaps not to the hyperbolic level of Hollywood movies.⁴⁷ Variations on the ethos of urban decay and street gangs carried over into Burton's sequel *Batman Returns* (1992). *Batman: The Animated Series* (1993–1995) continued the representation of Gotham City along similar lines, with its "Dark Deco" style (achieved by using backdrops painted on black paper); the series stressed a 1930s aesthetic more strongly than the Burton films, which did have some Art Deco elements, while retaining much of the contemporary anxieties over deteriorating city life.

⁴⁷ *Blade Runner* (1982) and *Robocop* (1987) are emblematic examples; later films such as *Predator 2* (1990) and *Demolition Man* (1993) went, in retrospect, to comical extremes in portraying the very near future of 1997 and 1996 respectively.

Clearly, the ethos of Nolan's Gotham in the *Dark Knight* trilogy differs greatly from the Gotham of the early 1990s. Gone are the elements of Gothic fantasy, or the grotesque mannerism of gigantic statuary; instead, the trilogy's cityscape is populated with white-collar criminals in skyscrapers just as much as with gangsters on the streets. Corporate boardrooms provide the setting for more scenes than any gauche super-villain's themed hideout. Part of the difference comes on account of the *Dark Knight* trilogy's greater attention to economics and globalization: as Uricchio and Pearson note, in *Batman*, while crime is endemic in Gotham, the film pays scant attention to the social causes of crime (206), whereas in *Batman Begins*, the murder of Bruce Wayne's parents is explicitly presented as a side-effect of poverty brought on by a severe financial depression. In *The Dark Knight*, Gotham's underworld launders money via a Hong Kong accountant, Lau, whom Batman kidnaps.

Thus on the surface, the real skyscrapers, the greater attention to economic motivations, suggests that Nolan's Gotham is far more a stand-in for the real New York City than earlier efforts; and yet just as Burton's Gotham, for all its fantasy, still conjured up a 1980s New York, Nolan's Gotham, for all its "realism," still has its elements of science fiction and fantasy – perhaps even naiveté. For instance, the brand-new monorail in an early flashback sequence in *Batman Begins* not only provides a striking example of a skyline a world removed from that of the Burton and Schumacher films, but is also presented as Wayne family largess. "People less fortunate than us are enduring very hard times," Thomas Wayne tells young Bruce. "So we built a new, cheap public transportation system to unite the city, and at the center ... Wayne Tower." The quaint idea that such a massive public works project could be conceived and completed in prompt response to a recession, even with the unlikely support of a wealthy citizen, is quite literally something out of Disney World. Equally implausible is the sequence in *The Dark Knight Rises* where Bane breaks into the Gotham stock exchange with his well-armed thugs and thereby accesses Bruce Wayne's accounts and bankrupts him. As Lucius Fox explains,

It seems you made a series of large put options on the futures exchange. Verified by thumb print. The options expired at midnight last night. Long term we may be

able to prove fraud, but for now ... you're completely broke. And Wayne Enterprises is about to fall into the hands of John Dagget.

There is some ambiguity in these lines whether Bane, in Wayne's name, is buying or selling "put options," which are, in essence, contracts agreeing to sell assets at a certain price by a certain deadline. (Davidson) Some commentators think that the puts have been confused with calls (O'Brien), but, whatever the details of the manipulation, even a casual observer must wonder why trading was not immediately suspended once the attack was made, or why trades were simply not cancelled. Nor are biometrics – in this case, the use of Wayne's fingerprints – used for such transactions (Davidson), although this detail is at least consistent with the plausible future tech of other elements in the *Dark Knight* trilogy. How Wayne's personal bankruptcy affects his position vis-à-vis Wayne Enterprises is even more confused; as one legal commentator put it, "We can see how the plan to bankrupt Wayne was supposed to work, but we don't think it would. But we're not even sure how this part of the plan was supposed to work." (Davidson) So for all the ethos of location shooting and the rest, the "realism" of Gotham City in the *Dark Knight* trilogy remains an aesthetic choice that has more to do with supplanting the previous representations of the city in cinematic treatments of Batman than it does with accurately depicting a twenty-first century American metropolis.

Were the Joker ever to break the fourth wall and ask "Why so serious?" of the *Dark Knight* trilogy, this need to differentiate itself from the cinematic Batmen of the early 1990s could be one answer. It is ironic that the Joker in *The Dark Knight* acts as a foil to the earnest seriousness of the Nolan films and, when compared to earlier portrayals of the Joker, as the embodiment of that same serious realism. We have already seen how embedded the Joker is within the mythos of the Batman metanarrative, with his alternate and contradictory origin stories. What must be noted here in addition is that the ethos of the Joker is equally broad, even within the comics, making a definitive version that encompasses all those possibilities a representational impossibility. Over the decades, the Joker has wielded nearly every weapon imaginable, from the conventional – crowbars, machine guns, nuclear missiles – to the bizarre – acid-squirting lapel flowers, electric joy-buzzers, spear guns, exploding cigars, and his trademark Joker venom. His crimes range from the mundane, such as robbing banks, to the absurdly satiric, such as

murdering civil servants when he is unable to copyright fish with Joker-grins. He is invariably presented as Batman's archenemy, and as such he is a villain in the high mimetic mode: in "The Laughing Fish," for instance, he asks, "What fun would there be in humbling mere policemen?" as he protects the secret of Batman's identity. "I am the greatest criminal ever known," he proclaims, "and for anyone else to destroy the Batman would be unworthy of me!" Even in the 1960s TV series, as noted earlier, his only match is Batman, and he appears in the most episodes (tied with the Penguin) and is among the "Fearsome Foursome" teaming up against the Dynamic Duo in *Batman: The Movie*. The Joker's exceptional status is further emphasized by the fact that he commits numerous "marquee" crimes in the DC Comics continuity, from the crippling of Batgirl Barbara Gordon in *The Killing Joke* to the murder of Jason Todd, the second Robin, in *A Death in the Family* (1988), and the murder of Commissioner Gordon's wife Sarah at the end of *No Man's Land*. In the "Elseworlds" epic *Kingdom Come* (1994), in which aged and withdrawn future versions of Superman and Batman must contend with a new generation of superheroes, the Joker is even revealed to have been responsible for the death of Lois Lane.

The Joker, as portrayed by Jack Nicholson in *Batman*, is part of an ethos that incorporates many of these possibilities. He murders random Gothamites with the Joker venom (called "Smilex" in the film), fries one gangster with an electric joy-buzzer, kills another with a sharpened quill to the jugular, and shoots still others with handguns – but he also carries an oversized-barreled revolver and another from which a "bang" flag pops out. He has a Joker-branded entourage of goons, Joker-cars, and even a Joker helicopter. He has the "classic" white skin, green hair, and red grin from the chemical bath, and wears a purple suit in keeping with the Joker of the comics – but he also sports other flamboyant fashions, such as a top-hatted mime outfit, or a purple beret when he presents himself as "the world's first homicidal artist." Not only is transformation of the criminal Jack Napier into the Joker presented as a by-product of Batman's activities, a young Napier – in a deliberate break from comics continuity – is revealed to have been the murderer of Bruce Wayne's parents, once again stressing his outsized importance to the Batman mythos.

At the time of *Batman*'s premiere, the Joker was seen as a highlight of the film: many of the theatergoers interviewed by Bacon-Smith and Yarborough in "Batman: The Ethnography" focused on Nicholson's "fantastic" (101) and "classic" (111) performance. "The viewers brought the discussion back to Nicholson's character in spite of the interviewer's efforts to divert it to other characters of the movie." (111) Early previews of *Batman* had seemed to receive an ambivalent reaction from audiences; according to one of Bacon-Smith and Yarborough's interviewees, a DC Comics employee, this could be attributed to a lack of understanding about how well Nicholson's Joker encapsulated the ideal ethos of the character from the comics:

I was like looking at him, and "oh my God, that's a Jim Aparo Joker drawing" I shake my head, and there's a Brian Bolland.⁴⁸ He's amazing, he's all Jokers in one, you know? I mean, he captured the thirties, forties, sixties, seventies, eighties, all of them all in one, without doing massive research. He just became part of it, and I was going, 'wow, the Joker film,' because the Batman, he's a smaller role, you know. (103)

This success, interestingly, apparently glossed over some of the incongruities in this version of the Joker. For example, despite early criticism that Michael Keaton was the wrong physical type to portray Batman, little seems to have been made about the fact that the comic-book Joker was invariably younger and lankier than Jack Nicholson. The reading that the Joker in *Batman* was "a characterization enacted with venomous camp" (Medhurst 162) appeared to be a minority view, and it is perhaps only from later comparison that Nicholson's interpretation comes off as "hammier" than Heath Ledger's. (Brooker 2012, 29)

The Joker of *The Dark Knight* downplays many of the aspects that made the Joker of *Batman* distinctive both at the time of the latter film's release, and in retrospect. In an effort to fundamentally distinguish the character from the earlier incarnation(s), if not be the definitive interpretation, the film constructs an ethos within which the Joker is new,

⁴⁸ Jim Aparo was a regular *Batman* artist from the early 1970s to the early 1990s, and illustrated the landmark *Death in the Family* and *Knightfall* storylines. Brian Bolland illustrated *The Killing Joke*, as well as the cover of *The Greatest Joker Stories Ever Told*, an anthology released to coincide with the *Batman* film.

but still recognizable. Part of this process, as the previous section demonstrated, consists of picking specific parts of the established mythos of the Batman metanarrative to re-present: the clown visage, the Joker “calling card,” and so on. Other possibilities are suppressed: for instance, previous Jokers, while hardly eschewing conventional weapons, showed a preference for the use of bizarre, circus-themed instruments of mayhem. The Ledger Joker, on the other hand, presents himself as “a man of simple tastes,” preferring gunpowder, dynamite, and gasoline. Many of the other semiotic markers for “Jokerness” have been similarly altered; and yet these alterations fit a recognizable ethos because they fulfill a similar function within the logic of the Nolan films that the suppressed markers had fulfilled in earlier incarnations. Thus the clown “war paint” and ambiguous facial scarring seem like a significant departure from chemically-bleached skin, but the face of the Joker, whether in *Batman* or *The Dark Knight*, invariably serves as an instrument of theatrical terror.⁴⁹ Overriding local television stations with cheesy commercials for Smilex conjures up the same chaos-inspiring paranoia within the representational logic of *Batman* as sending out al Qaeda-style amateur video of hostages and ultimatums does in *The Dark Knight*. When the Ledger Joker proclaims, “This city deserves a better class of criminal,” his observation simply translates the Nicholson Joker’s line “This town needs an enema!” from the fantasy-carnival ethos of the Burton films into an idiom more suited to the techno-realist ethos of Nolan’s trilogy. However different his methods and symbolism, *The Dark Knight*’s Joker has the same ultimate goal as his predecessors: complete control over Gotham City, achieved by taking over the established underworld and – for it amounts to the same thing – by victory over Batman.

These are some of the ways in which the Joker’s ethos is defined within the diegesis of *The Dark Knight*. But it is also important to consider how the film’s extra-diegetic elements seek to establish a distinct representational logic for the character (and, by similar means, other characters as well). For example, the meticulous sound design has

⁴⁹ McGowan observes, as noted earlier, that the Ledger Joker’s “make-up hides the fact that he has nothing to hide”; what is interesting is that makeup plays an analogous role for the Nicholson Joker as well. He uses “flesh-colored” makeup in a number of scenes after falling into the vat of chemicals: in the last of these, when going on television to announce his appearance at the Gotham City anniversary parade, he makes the ironic claim that “I can be theatrical” but “I have removed my make-up.”

already been mentioned as one aspect of the *Dark Knight* trilogy contributing to its epic aspirations; we can likewise now turn to the films' musical score as another determining factor in the trilogy's ethos. Hans Zimmer and James Newton Howard collaborated on the scores for *Batman Begins* and *The Dark Knight*, with Zimmer taking sole credit for *The Dark Knight Rises*; in any event, the style of the trilogy's soundscape is clearly Zimmer's, whose particular brand of melodically-sparse, ostinato-heavy techno-bombast has been a staple in Hollywood action films since the 1990s. Zimmer has inspired many imitators/collaborators, and has been known to give co-credit on his scores quite freely – indeed, *The Dark Knight* score had originally been disqualified for a best original score Oscar because it “had listed a music editor, a sound designer and an arranger as a way of rewarding the people who worked with them on the massive project.” (Goldstein and Rainey); Zimmer successfully lobbied for the score to be considered regardless, arguing that it was “stylistically cohesive”. (Goldstein and Rainey)

Significantly, Zimmer was responsible for the parts of *The Dark Knight* score representing the Joker (Howard, conversely, scored music for Two-Face). The Joker's musical signature in film and television has usually signified the carnivalesque elements of the Joker's ethos, his “evil clown” persona. Not surprisingly, Nelson Riddle's music on the 1960s *Batman* series introduced the Joker with a staccato phrase not unlike the horn on a clown car. In Danny Elfman's score for *Batman*, the Joker has no single leitmotif, but the character is associated with waltz textures and the melody from the 19th-century parlour song “Beautiful Dreamer.” Similarly, Shirley Walker's theme music for the Joker from *Batman: The Animated Series* represented him with a distinctive, music-box waltz tune; Joker episodes often incorporated the theme with other offbeat combinations, such as hip-hop accordions (“The Last Laugh”), farting tubas (“The Joker's Favor”), or even 1970s variety-show orchestrations (“Christmas with the Joker”).

Hans Zimmer's theme for the Joker in *The Dark Knight* constitutes a complete break from this representative tradition. According to Lovel and Sergi,

the theme relies on one note, which has come to be referred to as “the note”, on which a remarkable array of distorted ascending tones, variations of volume (especially sound dynamics, with sound going from low to high volume within

the space of a breath), and variations of frequency (employing the full frequency range, from the extremely high to the almost inaudible low) are built to form a disconcerting effect. (31)

This theme was hailed as daring and terrifying by some reviewers; others concluded that it was strictly speaking more of a sound effect than proper music, and, though effective, that the theme was over-thought to the point of one-dimensionality. “Zimmer toiled for three months with the theme for the Joker,” writes the editor of soundtrack review site Filmtracks.com, “and, in the end, he took a two-note motif and condensed it down to one note.” (Clemmensen) Whatever one’s judgment on the effectiveness of Zimmer’s musical treatment of the Joker, and his and Howard’s soundscape of the *Dark Knight* trilogy as a whole, it clearly represents an attempt at a distinctive ethos (and is also example of Adam Krims’ “urban ethos” in the narrower sense, discussed in chapter one). It might even be possible to see the Joker’s theme as auditory evidence of the contradictions inherent in the Nolan films’ techno-realist ethos; “serious,” over-intellectualized music cannot escape the fact that in cinema any non-diegetic sound, let alone the longstanding convention of a composed score, is artifice.

Thus in its music, as in so much else, the *Dark Knight* trilogy attempts to fashion a new ethos that sets itself apart from other Batman films even as it insists on fidelity to the greater ethos of the Batman metanarrative. The kind of Batman, Joker, or Gotham City appropriate to the Nolan films operates within a different representational logic than those characters and social spaces found in the Burton films. And yet each was felt to capture its zeitgeist, and did so because whatever its semiotic variations – in acting style, mise en scene, plot devices, and sound design – each Batman adaptation that succeeded as an epic fulfilled a similar function of mapping and interrogating its greater cultural moment. This function is the key to understanding the relationship between the *Dark Knight* trilogy and the lived experience of those for whom it has significant meaning.

3.4 The *Dark Knight* Trilogy and Its Cosmos I: Terror and Audiences

The Nolan Batman films have a very different relationship to their cosmos than other Batman adaptations, not least because popular conceptions of the nature of that wider

world have shifted considerably between the 1960s and 1980s, and again between the 1980s and 2000s. In this section, I will show how fans, critics, and intellectuals have felt that the *Dark Knight* trilogy models and reflects their contemporary cosmos; this has occurred in particular in the context of American political conflicts. The films clearly try to address issues such as vigilantism, state power, and terrorism, and their success at this can be gauged by the wide variety of people who have used the films to understand, or even rationalize the perpetration of, violent crime.

Reception of the *Dark Knight* trilogy in both popular and intellectual circles focused on issues of state-sponsored as well as extra-legal violence; discourses on the films as “comic-book movies,” which had surrounded the 1960s and 1980s Batmen, were all but silent. For one thing, this was a natural result of the very success of films like *Batman*, and the glut of films based on comic book superheroes that were released, beginning around 2000, gave the genre a new legitimacy.⁵⁰ For another thing, the attacks of September 11, 2001 and the natural disasters, military adventurism, and economic upheaval in the decade that followed shifted the expectations of even the least-discerning filmgoer about how crime and “super-villainy” are represented in popular media. Scenes of Mr. Freeze stealing “ice” (i.e., diamonds) while aided by goons on skates were even more out of step with the times than they had been in 1997. In the *Dark Knight* trilogy, Nolan and his collaborators linked Batman and his self-declared war on crime far more strongly with advanced, military-grade technology than he had ever been (with, perhaps, the notable exceptions of *The Dark Knight Returns* and *Kingdom Come*); his adversaries throughout the three films are more recognizably “terrorists” than their previous incarnations. In turn, the trilogy has generated a greater body of discourses on “serious” topics than most other comic-book adaptations. Yet these responses came from all sorts of audiences, and the readings were varied. Some accepted and even championed the ideological implications of the trilogy; others critiqued it, either as an apology for

⁵⁰ In the 1980s and 1990s, most superhero comic-book films were either *Superman* or *Batman* sequels. Beginning with *X-Men* in 2000, a new wave of films based on Marvel comics were produced, creating prolific *X-Men*, *Spider-Man*, and *Avengers* franchises, amongst others. Only a few (e.g., *The Punisher*, *Catwoman*) were critical or commercial flops. Successful adaptations of non-superhero comics also began appearing, such as *Ghost World* (2001), *The Road to Perdition* (2002), and *A History of Violence* (2005).

security-state policies or as an indication of the contradictions inherent in such policies; still others simply latched onto the iconography of the *Dark Knight* trilogy to express general unease with the status quo, on occasion with violent results.

Terror pervades *Batman Begins*; fear is the organizing principle behind the first film of the trilogy, and we have already seen how Nolan and Goyer refashioned the Batman mythos in order to make Bruce Wayne's fear of bats the catalyst for his parents' death – the same fear which is then turned against criminals. Thus the distinction between Batman's extra-legal crusade and the methods of his enemies is already blurred, and only accentuated when Ra's al Ghul and the Scarecrow literally “weaponize” fear in their plot to destroy Gotham. Justine Toh notes that this ambiguity regarding who are considered heroes and villains runs through *Batman Begins* (and into *The Dark Knight*); specifically, Bruce Wayne receives much of his instruction in martial arts – and fear-inspiring theatricality – at what is “essentially a terrorist training camp” (133) run by Ra's al Ghul and the League of Shadows, who “bear more than a passing resemblance” to Osama bin Laden and al Qaeda. (132) The Gotham City/New York parallel takes on an added, ominous meaning here.

The Dark Knight was interpreted even more strongly within a post 9/11 framework than its predecessor. Will Brooker, having made a survey of popular press reception of this film, notes that

Of the 44 reviews of *The Dark Knight* I examined in this study, 22 referred to the film's political implications, ranging from direct identification and detailed discussion of imagery and themes relating to 11 September 2001 and the subsequent “war on terror”, to a passing recognition that the film describes Joker as terrorist. (2012, 199-200)

What is even more remarkable is range of interpretations of the film; some saw it as a vindication of the Bush/Cheney neoconservative policies used to prosecute the war on terror, while others saw it as a clear rebuke of those same policies. (Brooker 2012, 200-203). Predictably, these readings tended to sort themselves along ideological lines: in a

much-cited⁵¹ op-ed in *The Wall Street Journal*, Andrew Klavan claims that *The Dark Knight* “is at some level a paean of praise to the fortitude and moral courage that has been shown by George W. Bush in this time of terror and war.” Like the Zack Snyder film based on Frank Miller’s *300*, Nolan’s film “is a conservative movie about the war on terror ... making a fortune depicting the values and necessities that the Bush administration cannot seem to articulate for beans.” Typically, this and other apologia tended to gloss over the ambiguities of the film in an effort to claim it on behalf of “Hollywood conservatives”; similarly weak arguments were made of other war-themed films of the time that were not explicitly left-leaning (cf. Birkenstein on right-wing efforts to rehabilitate *Master and Commander: The Far Side of the World* in this way).⁵²

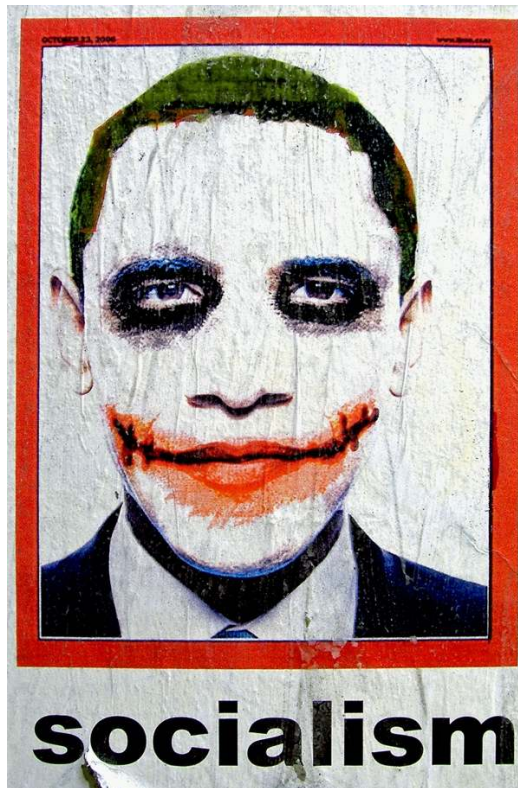


Figure 7. Obama "Socialism" Poster.

Alas, being a Bush apologist circa 2008 was a rather thankless task:

The blogosphere responded with refutations: Batman seeks to surrender power, rendition and brutal interrogation yields unreliable information, checks and balances temper technofascist surveillance, Batman accepts pyrrhic responsibility for Dent’s cop-killings. (Treat 106)

Conservative appropriation of the *Dark Knight* trilogy (and the eponymous middle film in particular) was not limited to a comparison of plot to policy. Even the film’s visual symbols were caught up in the discursive flux, and on this point the Obama “socialism” posters that appeared in Los Angeles in early 2008 serve as a telling example. First, a photograph of

⁵¹ Brooker, McGowan, and Treat all single out Klavan’s article as an example of a conservative defense of the film.

⁵² “If Lucky Jack can help America effect [an endless and just] war, then this is what the right will try to make him do, sound argument or not.” (Birkenstein 80)

Barack Obama had appeared on the cover of the October 23, 2007 issue of *Time* magazine alongside the caption “Why Barack Obama Could Be the Next President.” A college student from Chicago, Firas Alkhateeb, used Photoshop on the cover to give Senator Obama a Ledger-style Joker grin and makeup, and then uploaded it to Flickr in January 2008, where it drew scant attention for two months. “Then the counter exploded after a still-anonymous rogue famously found his image, digitally removed the references to *Time* magazine, captioned the picture with the word ‘socialism’ and hung printed copies around L.A., making headlines.” (Malcolm) (Fig. 7) From there, the “socialism” image went viral, coming as it did heading into a summer in which Obama would be hyped as the Democratic nominee for President, and Heath Ledger’s portrayal of the Joker would be hyped in the upcoming *Dark Knight*. (Brodesser-Akner) The author of the



Figure 8. "Joke" Poster.

“socialism” poster remains unknown; Alkhateeb, for his part, was identified over a year later. In an interview, Alkhateeb claimed that he was making no political statement with the Photoshopped image, although he followed politics and was generally ambivalent about Obama. (Malcolm) The image, as an unfocused parody, therefore began as an expression of general disillusion; a similar phenomenon could be seen in parodies of the famous Shepard Fairey poster of Obama, which depicted a portrait of the Ledger Joker in the same style over the word “Joke” instead of “Hope.” (Fig. 8) The appropriation of such iconography in the “Socialism” variant poster is, rather than ideologically

ambivalent, ideologically incoherent; yet it does demonstrate once again that some aspects of *The Dark Knight* resonated with conservatives groping for ways to express their fears and anger as the Bush era came to a close and its failures became apparent.

Left-wing critics, especially in academe, were also keen to interpret the films of the *Dark Knight* trilogy as commentary on the geopolitical issues of the post-9/11 world. Not surprisingly, they came to very different conclusions than the neoconservatives. Tod McGowan, for instance, examines the deeply ambiguous nature of the “state of exception” explored in *The Dark Knight*, both with respect to the actions of fictional vigilante superheroes and American policy. His reading of Nolan’s film, drawing on such diverse philosophers of law and morality as Kant, Hegel, Nietzsche, and Žižek, agrees that *The Dark Knight* certainly presents the need for heroic action outside the rule of law, but questions that a comparison between Batman and Bush would vindicate the latter.

The lesson for our real world exceptions is thus a difficult one. Rather than being celebrated as the liberator of Iraq and the savior of U.S. freedom, George W. Bush would have to act behind the scenes to encourage charges being brought against him as a war criminal at the World Court, and then he would have to flee to the streets of The Hague as the authorities pursue him there. (McGowan)

This is something that is impossible for a politician to do, as the character of Harvey Dent/Two-Face demonstrates. *The Dark Knight* shows that “there is no hero without a mask – and, more specifically, without a mask of evil. As Slavoj Žižek puts it, ‘The properly human good, the good elevated above the natural good, the infinite spiritual good, is ultimately *the mask of evil*.’” (McGowan) The seeming purity of Dent’s motives, his ability to do good without resorting to wearing a mask, is shattered by personal trauma; in this way Batman, as a symbol, is presented as a true hero.

McGowan’s invocation of Žižek is especially interesting, as Žižek’s diverse writings are found to be particularly useful for academic commentators on the Nolan films. In the quotation above, McGowan cites Žižek’s *Violence: Six Sideways Reflections*; Shaun Treat argues that the Nolan films illustrate “the fetishistic denial of cynical reason in Late Capitalism theorized by Slavoj Žižek” in such works as *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (1989) and *Tarrying with the Negative* (1993). Similarly, Tina Beattie writes that “shortly after seeing [*The Dark Knight*] I read Slavoj Žižek’s essay, ‘Whither Oedipus?’ (contained in his book *The Ticklish Subject*), and I was struck by the resonances between Žižek’s theory and Nolan’s film.” She goes on to argue that *The Dark Knight* illustrates the link that Žižek makes between modern tragedy and political terror; the scene in which

the Joker forces two ferries full of Gothamites to act out an explosive-rigged variation on the Prisoner's Dilemma is singled out in particular as staging the kinds of terrifying choices Žižek thinks we are forced to make in the "second Enlightenment." (Beattie)

Paul A. Taylor goes even further in *Žižek and the Media*. He has a lower opinion of the Batman films, writing that "at first glance" they "are superficial, fantastical movies based upon escapist comic books and distant from 'serious' socio-political issues." (160) Whatever value *The Dark Knight* or *Batman* may have in presenting a Gotham City that is critical of contemporary capitalism – in its depiction of urban decay, political corruption, and so on – is negated by the films' refusal to provide a radical solution. "We lose focus upon the ideological effects of form by over concentrating upon nominal content." (169) Taylor goes perhaps too far in the other direction, ignoring differences in content as he inexplicably conflates Burton and Nolan's films under the same "neo-Gothic aesthetic"⁵³ – doubtful, as preceding sections of this chapter have made clear. Only a Žižekian reading, Taylor argues, reveals the significance of Batman films: they are "embodiments of capitalist ideology in the very guise of non-ideological ephemera." (160) "The film form itself" reproduces ideology (in this case, bad capitalist ideology) – but Taylor does not specify exactly what he means by "form," which is all the more problematic because he only focuses on the very "nominal content" he earlier decries. There appears to be some aesthetic determinism at work in such critiques – there are "good" plots and "bad" plots, and because the Batman mythos is premised upon Bruce Wayne's position as a noble capitalist, any Batman film is necessarily reactionary. In any event, Taylor sees Batman villains like the Joker as figures who reveal the uncomfortable truths behind the capitalist system; he then compares the Joker's role vis-à-vis Gotham City to Žižek's role vis-à-vis cultural theory:

To explore the interrelationship between the abstract and the real, masks and social reality, Žižek uses jokes and apparently facetious examples from the mass media, but whilst the Joker, portrayed so demonically by Jack Nicholson and

⁵³ He specifically refers elsewhere in the chapter to *The Dark Knight's* "obviously dark Gothic aesthetic." (162) Cf. the discussion of the origins of Gotham and Gothic above, in which I demonstrated that the two have no etymological connection.

Heath Ledger, has a passion for violence that merely represents the flip-side of capitalism's "creative gales of destruction", Žižek is a joker with a deeply serious political point. (175)

Žižek himself has weighed in on the *Dark Knight* trilogy on more than one occasion, thereby legitimating some of this critical application of his theories (though not justifying some of the lamer flights of fancy, such as Taylor's concluding paean to Žižek as "the theory-hero Gotham doesn't deserve" and "the dark knight of the dark night of the soul," 175). In "Good Manners in the Age of Wikileaks," Žižek notes that in one diplomatic cable out of the trove published by Wikileaks in 2010, Vladimir Putin and Dmitri Medvedev are referred to as Batman and Robin. This is "a useful analogy" (beyond being evidence of the Batman metanarrative's influence) because, as Žižek argues, this means that Julian Assange, as the leaking villain, can be read as the Joker. *The Dark Knight's* "take-home message is that lying is necessary to sustain public morale: only a lie can redeem us. No wonder the only figure of truth in the film is the Joker, its supreme villain." The film presents a rationale for grounding civilization on a lie, a theme which Žižek traces back to classic westerns such as *Fort Apache* and *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance*, and Žižek attributes *The Dark Knight's* "extraordinary popularity" to a "renewed need for a lie to maintain the social system." The Wikileaks scandal exposes the deceptions necessary to maintain the current system – or, more precisely, Žižek argues that the power of the scandal is that it no longer makes it possible to pretend not to know what everyone already knew, a "tactful" or "gentlemanly" deniability.

Žižek reflects further on the *Dark Knight* trilogy in "The Politics of Batman," with a special emphasis on *The Dark Knight Rises* and the figure of Bane as a "revolutionary" leader. Mainstream film critics made much of the similarities drawn between the "people's" uprising orchestrated by Bane and the Occupy Wall Street movement. But for Žižek, Bane is remarkable because he is motivated by unconditional love (for Talia al Ghul, aka Miranda Tate, who plots to take revenge upon Batman for the death of her father and to complete his plans to destroy Gotham City). Because of this, Bane is for Žižek a revolutionary in similar ways to Jesus Christ and Che Guevara, becoming a figure far more nuanced than either an earnest champion or lazy caricature of the Occupy Wall Street movement, as other contemporary critics have claimed. Žižek denies that

such an “external” critique of the film is sufficient. This is certainly true, as mapping Bane onto the occupy movement, notwithstanding the philosophical issues Žižek himself raises, has some serious textual problems. First, any arguments in favor of the Occupy parallel must contend with the plot’s obvious basis on the French Revolution(s): there are clear comparisons to be drawn to the Terror, barricade-storming, show trials, and the like. Co-writer Jonathan Nolan has stated that these were inspirations, and the quotation from *A Tale of Two Cities* at Bruce Wayne’s “funeral” at the end of *The Dark Knight Rises* provides a strong textual corroboration. Moreover, production on *The Dark Knight Rises* well predates the September 2011 occupation of Zuccotti Park in lower Manhattan; the script had been completed by January 2011 and principal photography had already begun the following May. (de Semlyen) The most that can be claimed is that, in the wake of the 2008 financial collapse, Nolan and company responded to the same general feeling of unrest which eventually motivated the Occupy movement, but that the similarities between the protests which erupted before the film’s release and the events of the film were serendipitous. What is significant, though, is not that the film was intended as a representation of the Occupy movement, but that it was interpreted as such. To return to Žižek’s analysis, we must recognize the immanence of Occupy within *The Dark Knight Rises*:

In *The Dark Knight Rises*, people power is here, staged as an event, in a significant development from the usual Batman opponents (criminal mega-capitalists, gangsters and terrorists). ... Bane’s authenticity has to leave traces in the film’s texture. This is why *The Dark Knight Rises* deserves close reading. The event – the “People’s Republic of Gotham City”, a dictatorship of the proletariat in Manhattan – is immanent to the film. It is its absent centre. (2012)

The *Dark Knight* trilogy is also caught up in discourses of domestic terrorism, especially with gun violence in America. In “Madness in the Making,” Anthony J. Kolenic compares the representation of the Joker with the case of Seung-Hui Cho, perpetrator of the mass shooting at Virginia Tech in April 2007. Kolenic notes that considering the Joker’s lack of a consistent backstory (“narrative”) in *The Dark Knight* and elsewhere can expose societal fears about the lack of governmentality. (1034) Media attempts to frame Cho “worked to give him an identity that can be grasped and held accountable” (1025), in contrast to the Joker’s representation in the film, which denies the viewer such

reassurances. In particular, Kolenic points to Cho's self-conscious attempts to control the way in which he would later be portrayed within the genre of school-shooting news coverage:

Cho understood the power of brand establishment, evidenced by his sending between his attacks the aforementioned media packet to NBC, which contained twenty-five minutes of video, forty-three photographs in a number of violent and armed poses, as well as twenty-three pages of writing. (1034)

The selective broadcast of these materials by NBC and other major American networks in the days following the shootings came under heavy criticism, and newsroom policies were quickly revised to censor the materials for fear of “glorifying” Cho or disrespecting the victims and their families. (1035-1036) Kolenic does not make the connection between Cho's attempts at media-savvy self-branding and the Joker, but it is worthwhile to recall that the Joker in *The Dark Knight* uses the same tactics (sending videos to TV stations), and, as mentioned earlier, media manipulation has been one of the Joker's tactics in 1989's *Batman*, and in the comics before that.

The connection between the *Dark Knight* trilogy and gun violence went from theory to fact at a midnight screening of *The Dark Knight Rises* in Aurora, Colorado in June 2012. James E. Holmes, a neuroscience graduate student, entered the theatre during the film with a number of weapons, shooting seventy people; twelve died either in the theatre or later in hospital. Holmes, arrested by police at the scene, had dyed his hair red and reportedly referred to himself as the Joker. (Associated Press) The shooting prompted new debates about gun violence, and the role of guns within the Batman mythos in particular. *New Yorker* contributor and historian Jill Lepore noted that in a few early *Batman* comics, Batman used guns to kill (even if his victims were vampires and monsters). Published amid the first superhero craze, these early issues were caught up in what was neither the first nor the last “moral panic” over representations in popular fiction. In response, DC Comics established an editorial advisory board “consisting of people like psychologists and English professors” and hired a new editorial director, who instructed Bob Kane to remove the gun from his next *Batman* story.

Maybe it was a simple demurral to the critics, but the disarming of the Dark Knight reads like a concern about the commonweal, a deferral to an accepted and important idea about the division between civilian and military life. Superheroes weren't soldiers or policemen. They were private citizens. They shouldn't carry concealed weapons. Villains carried guns. The Joker, introduced in the spring of 1940, carried a gun, and sometimes two. (Lepore)

Lepore points out that Batman's origin story, in which his parents are gunned down by a mugger, was published in the wake of this editorial direction, and she connects such attitudes to "a time when the private ownership of firearms was considered a proper matter for government regulation." (Lepore) Nor is this the first instance in which Batman was marshaled as an example in the wake of gun violence. For example, the apparently random 1990 gun murder of John Reisenbach, son of a Warner Bros. marketing executive, while he made a call in a Greenwich Village phone booth, inspired the publication of a special one-shot Batman comic book issue, *Batman: Seduction of the Gun*, in early 1992. (Proceeds of sales were donated to the foundation set up in Reisenbach's name.) The story concerned Batman's effort to shut down a violent gang, and Robin's going undercover in a high school in "the projects" in an attempt to protect the gang's target, a young girl who is ultimately gunned down despite their efforts. Not surprisingly, the storytelling is uneven: the comic abounds in early-1990s racial clichés, and a lack of subtlety in communicating the message leads to some rather clumsy scenes (such as Commissioner Gordon's impotent diatribe against a Gotham City gun company executive, or Alfred Pennyworth's spontaneous recital of teenage gun suicide statistics); and yet when the comic makes the point that the catalyst for Batman's existence was gun violence, and that more than anyone Bruce Wayne is "well aware of just what guns do," *Seduction of the Gun* rises briefly above propaganda. *Batman* assistant editor Jordan B. Gorfinkel prefaced the letters page of *Batman* #493 by stating that

Never before in my many years of reading – and now, writing – comic-book letter columns have I ever witnessed so profound a response to one story than I have for *Batman: Seduction of the Gun*. Readers were alternately touched and outraged, saddened and angered by John Ostrander's and Vince Giarrano's story of guns and school children.

Judging by the readers' responses reprinted in *Batman* #493 and #494, polarization on the issue was intense. On the one hand, some fan letters lauded the story and art and even

shared their own horror stories of gun violence; on the other, some letters critiqued the assumptions the comic made and even expressed a feeling of having felt cheated by the revelation (at the end of the comic) that proceeds from the comic's sale were going to support gun control efforts. The comic may be dated and largely forgotten now, but the arguments it generated could well be indistinguishable from those made for and against gun control measures twenty years later.

One final bizarre twist linking the *Dark Knight* trilogy to American gun violence came in the wake of the shooting at the Sandy Hook elementary school in Newtown, Connecticut, in December 2012. Internet conspiracy theorists were quick to note that press kits for *The Dark Knight Rises* had contained maps of an area of Gotham called "Sandy Hook" marked as containing "Strike Zone 1" (Carlson); in the film itself, Commissioner Gordon points to a map of the city in which "Sandy Hook" is legible. This is pure coincidence, as Sandy Hook is a common place name⁵⁴ and has been established in the comics since the late 1990s as the southern island in the archipelago that makes up Gotham City. This did not stop conspiracy-monger Alex Jones' Infowars.com from claiming that this was evidence of a "predictive programming" campaign in the service of "occult magic." (Infowars.com) Clearly, narratives of Batman and, in particular, the Nolan films' depiction of the Dark Knight and his terrifying enemies, speak to the anxieties and fears of the wider world – even if the meanings attached to them are sometimes wildly contradictory. Ironically, this last example of "batty" conspiracies, linking literal mapping and the imaginative space of Gotham, indicates a possible way to square such discrepancies.

⁵⁴ There is a Sandy Hook barrier spit on the New Jersey coast, south of Brooklyn, NY, as well as over half a dozen towns with the name in the United States and Canada. It appears to be a coastal equivalent to benignly suburban names like "Shady Acres." Predictably, conspiracy theorists were earlier quick to note the connection between Sandy Hook, NJ, and Hurricane ("Superstorm") Sandy, which hit the state in October 2012.

3.5 The *Dark Knight* Trilogy and Its Cosmos II: The Space of Gotham

Clearly, “Gotham City” as it is constructed within the *Dark Knight* trilogy and elsewhere becomes an attempt to cognitively map – or, better yet, a series of attempts to map – the totality of contemporary urban life in America. No single map of this kind can be complete. For instance, *Batman* editor and “Bat-bible” author Dennis O’Neil once characterized the difference between the home bases of Batman and Superman thus: “Gotham is Manhattan below Fourteenth Street at 3 a.m., November 28 in a cold year. Metropolis is Manhattan between Fourteenth and One Hundred and Tenth Streets on the brightest, sunniest July day of the year.” (qtd. in Boichel 9) In other words, even the total representational possibilities of Gotham cannot quite capture everything about the real New York City, although Gotham is a useful construct that can help us navigate some attributes of the spaces it conjures up. Moreover, the methods by which this mapping occurs in recent Batman narratives, including but not limited to the *Dark Knight* trilogy, reflect elements of “postmodern” mapping described earlier with respect to *The Wire*. Maps, charts, databases, and so on are increasingly necessary to understand Batman’s storyworld. Likewise, control over cognitive maps of Gotham and attempts to close off physically the space of the city become thematic motifs in Nolan’s films and in contemporaneous Batman comics.

It is quite suggestive that critical discourses about Batman along these lines begin in the 1980s. Jim Collins cites Kevin Lynch’s concept of “imageability” as a way to understand “the cultural terrain of the contemporary crime fighter” through an “assemblage of conflicting images” (177), images which consist of an amalgam of visual and literary narrative techniques. Collins seems to come across the concept independently of Fredric Jameson, as Jameson’s use of Lynch vis-à-vis cognitive mapping gets no mention despite Collins’ writing a few years after Jameson; also, Collins’ argument that imageability must be revised “somewhat” to fit the contemporary context appears to differ from Jameson’s interpretation:

The terrain of *Dark Knight [Returns]* and *Watchmen* appears endlessly “imageable” in that it can be envisioned any number of ways: It becomes *legible* –

comprehensible, manageable – not in one totalizing picture, but in a cluster of images that reveal its discursive discontinuity. The imaging of contemporary environments, then, must begin by recognizing the ways in which it already has been framed; the terrain consists of a set of physical characteristics as well as a set of frames in which our successful negotiation of the former depends entirely on our developing a “competence” in understanding the latter. (Collins 177)

This in some ways seems to be close to how I described cognitive mapping in *The Wire*, that is, as the simultaneous use of a variety of mapping techniques in an effort to grasp an otherwise unrepresentable totality. However, Collins appears concerned in this passage only with the interpretation of different visual and organizational codes within the comic book itself: these include not only the conventions of sequential art (panels, speech balloons, etc.), but also those of other media forms, such as fake newspaper clippings or police reports in *Watchmen*, or TV newscasts in *The Dark Knight Returns*, which began to appear in the more sophisticated graphic novels of the time. These are formal concerns, and it is doubtful if such bricolage was ever particularly hard to comprehend (at least by the 1980s), as Collins suggests. Also, Collins either misreads Lynch’s original, in which imageability is explicitly made synonymous with “legibility” and “visibility in a heightened sense” (Lynch 9) – imageability is by definition comprehensible – or this is a needless revision to make the concept mean what it had already meant in the first place. In any event, while this gets tantalizingly close to connecting Batman comics with cognitive mapping, it falls short of relating the content or form of comics with the wider world.

The occasional foray into cognitive mapping via Batman continues up to the present, though without much of an increase in clarity. Paul A. Taylor, for instance, sees the Joker in *The Dark Knight* as operating in opposition to cognitive mapping. “The Joker’s justification of chaos vividly illustrates,” in addition to theories of Žižek and Lacan, “Fredric Jameson’s (1992) notion of *cognitive mapping* – a phrase he uses to convey a sense of the need to develop conceptual aids with which to orient ourselves within the discombobulating fluxes and flows of postmodern consumer society.” (161) For Taylor, the Joker disrupts social conventions and expectations for radical political ends. This applies not only to his portrayal by Heath Ledger, but also the earlier version by Jack Nicholson, whose “Debordian *dérive*” at the Flugenheim Museum in *Batman* is “perhaps

the single most memorable example of the Joker's iconoclasm." (162) Taylor is on to something when he sees the Joker's importance as a figure who challenges received truths, but when he claims that "part of the Joker's unsettling impact is due to the way he disrupts the postmodern mode of cognitive mapping by which we self-deludedly accommodate ourselves to the systemic distortions of life under capitalism" (163-164) something has gone awry – the symptoms of late capital are confused with Jameson's suggested cure. For Jameson, cognitive mapping is the politicization of the postmodern aesthetic (Jameson 1991, 54), not the rationale by which we depoliticize the iniquities of capital.

Again, it is more important to look at how the Joker and other characters relate to the cosmos of the *Dark Knight* trilogy, not just how he operates within that fictional narrative; but some confusion is understandable because it is precisely that operation which must serve as a metaphor that relates to the real world. The ways in which the Joker's representation in the films stimulates and critiques discourses of terrorism, outlined in the previous section, are one way of doing this. Another is looking at the Joker's (and other characters') relationship to the space of Gotham City as such. It is a cliché of superhero comics that just as the hero has a base of operations (The Batcave, Superman's Fortress of Solitude, etc.), the villain often has a hideout too, which can be as personalized as that of his nemesis. The Joker has had a "Ha-hacienda" in the comics and film and TV appearances of varying degrees of elaborateness. In more recent Batman narratives, the Joker has been more "deterritorialized," striking from no location in particular, and his relationship to urban space is part of the terror he creates. For instance, in the *Gotham Central*⁵⁵ story arc "Soft Targets" (#12-15), the Joker uses random sniper attacks before Christmas to terrorize the city. Even though the police and Batman are unable to find him, the Joker turns himself in; this turns out to be a ploy to get people out on the streets again so that the Joker can set off a bomb in a toy store. The Joker therefore can only be located when it suits his purposes, showing his freedom from and mastery

⁵⁵ This award-winning series, running from 2003-2006, focused on the lives and work of detectives in the Gotham City Police Department's Major Case Unit. It reads rather like a successful transposition of *Homicide* into the DC universe.



Figure 9. Map of Gotham City.

over spatial regulation. In *The Dark Knight*, the Joker also allows himself to be captured by police, and appears and disappears at will. It is also significant that control over the Joker, and the removal of him as a threat, is treated as spatial containment within Arkham Asylum, while his ability in the comics to break out whenever he pleases confirms this logic even as it establishes the Joker's superiority over it. This is especially important in the video game *Batman: Arkham Asylum* and its sequels, as we shall soon see.

The treatment of Gotham more generally has taken a spatial turn since around the mid- to late-1990s in the Batman comics. The cross-title story arc *No Man's Land*, mentioned earlier regarding its influence on *The Dark Knight Rises*, is the turning point. In the wake of an earthquake (and other city-wide disasters before that), Gotham is sealed off from the rest of America, and the citizens remaining are left to fend for themselves. Districts of the city are controlled by various gangs, supervillains, police, and by Batman and his allies, and the reclaiming of territory from anarchy and crime serves as one of the major themes of the series. *No Man's Land* established a specific, mapped geography of Gotham which has

been adhered to with relative consistency ever since (Fig. 9). Once again, the parallels with Manhattan are clear; Gotham is a coastal port built on a north-south archipelago that is connected to the mainland by a series of bridges. (These and other landmarks are named after prominent writers and artists who have worked on Batman comics since the 1930s.) This plan also serves as the basis for urban geography in the *Dark Knight* trilogy, as can be seen, for example, in the “Sandy Hook” map from *The Dark Knight Rises*.

That Gotham has become an island, or series of islands, is an illuminating development if we are to consider fictional narratives as a kind of representational experiment, isolated from the totality of lived experience, but still connected in some way, and subject to multiple articulations. (Consider once again the idea, suggested by Mittell, of the seasons of *The Wire* as a series of re-iterations of “the game” played out with different variables.) The courses these representations run each become one possible layer on a cognitive map of our world. Once again, the work of Fredric Jameson is instructive here, especially his writings on the idea of Utopia in science fiction and its connection to political projects. The science fiction genre, in its depiction of utopias and dystopias alike, is especially suited to this kind of mapping; it is no coincidence that the literary genre’s growth roughly parallels the social disruption of industrialization and post-industrial organization, nor is it coincidental that Batman narratives have for decades skirted the edges of science fiction – recall the scientific plausibility of the *Dark Knight* trilogy’s technological ethos. For Jameson in *Archaeologies of the Future*, a new global Utopia, such as the one posited by Yona Friedman in *Utopies réalisables*, must still be represented since “representability, or the possibility of mapping, is a very significant matter for practical politics” (221). Jameson describes how Friedman’s utopian vision requires absolute mobility between non-communicating communities as well as the substitution of public work in place of taxation. The best way to imagine this in spatial terms is as a chain of islands:

I therefore propose a more accessible or visualizable form of this imagined global system, about which we must remember that its novelty as a Utopian mechanism consisted in the non-communicability or antagonism inherent in its component parts, a novelty which had the immediate effect of excluding rhetorics of communication, multiculturalism and even empire (in the recent sense of Americanization). In this spirit, I propose to think of our autonomous and non-

communicating Utopias – which can range from wandering tribes and settled villages all the way to great city-states or regional ecologies – as so many islands: a Utopian archipelago, islands in the net, a constellation of discontinuous centers, themselves internally decentered. At once this metaphorical perspective begins to suggest a range of possible analogies, which combine the properties of isolation with those of relationship. (221)

Gotham-as-archipelago seems to work as a small-scale, representational version of this same utopian principle: a way to imagine and map possible social arrangements. In Jameson's discussion of the utopian archipelago, communities must be related – insofar as people must have the ability to move between them as they like; but the communities must be isolated too, so that they can evolve into distinctly different possibilities – mobility between identical choices would be meaningless. Likewise, if the visions of Gotham are to have utility as maps of urban possibilities, they must strike this balance between closure and porousness. They must connect to real lived experience to some extent, for if they were purely fantastic, they would have no practical or political use. But they must also be isolated, geographically within the fiction, and also conceptually, as fiction per se; this serves to encourage greater experimentation and to hedge against disaster if the experiment fails.

To date, when Gotham has been used in this experimental way, it has been in a negative sense. Some disaster or villain closes off the city as a means of positing an urban dystopia. Significantly, in each film of Nolan's series the bridges to the mainland are raised, destroyed or blocked: in *Batman Begins*, the island of The Narrows, the location of Arkham Asylum, is cut off by raising the bridges; in *The Dark Knight*, the Joker engineers his ferry-borne Prisoner's Dilemma by threatening that the "bridge and tunnel crowd" will come to harm if they try to leave Gotham by those means; and in *The Dark Knight Rises*, as we have seen, Bane's control of the city is effected by destroying the bridges outright in a move inspired by *No Man's Land*. Gotham serves as a metonym for urban living, as the centre of the world whose ruin, according to Ra's al Ghul in *Batman Begins*, will necessarily be the ruin of our civilization, if the city can be totalized as a self-contained whole. That the absolute limits of this whole are realized geographically, as opposed to temporally (Gotham's history remains much more fluid and vague), is indicative of the real world from which this fictional one comes. Thus while a kind of

cognitive mapping is not required to understand these filmic or comic-book texts in a formal sense – the vast majority of Batman comics and films, pace Collins, are narratologically straightforward – in order to understand the significance of the events being narrated, there is a greater need to understand and map the imagined space in which they take place.

Nor, finally, is this trend limited to the recent Batman films. I want to consider by way of conclusion, and by way of segue into the next chapter, the recent Batman video games *Batman: Arkham Asylum*, *Batman: Arkham City*, and *Batman: Arkham Origins*.⁵⁶ The *Arkham* series is notable because it demonstrates some of the same epic tendencies in its own medium as the *Dark Knight* trilogy does in film; it also serves as early evidence of the cultural capital of the films in the way that the games tacitly acknowledge some of the films' stylistic innovations. The *Arkham* series also exhibits to a greater extent possible than the films or comics the relationship between postmodern spaces and narrative epics in new media.

Arkham Asylum was released in 2009 to much acclaim. The premise is quite similar to the classic 1989 graphic novel *Arkham Asylum: A Serious House on Serious Earth*, written by Grant Morrison and illustrated by David McKean (although Morrison and McKean do not receive any in-game story credit). The Joker has taken over Arkham Asylum, and Batman must battle and explore his way through the gothic grounds in order to stop his arch-nemesis. Along the way, Batman encounters many members of his rogues' gallery; some are on the loose, like the Joker, while others, still locked up, have cameo roles. In addition to the main storyline which the player enacts, Batman must solve puzzles left by the Riddler and, by finding artifacts, unlock dossiers and recordings which provide added backstory – an effective attempt at merging what Lev Manovich considers the “natural enemies” of narrative and database in one medium (225).⁵⁷ *Arkham City*, the 2011 sequel,

⁵⁶ The final game in the series, *Batman: Arkham Knight*, is scheduled for release in June 2015.

⁵⁷ Marie-Laure Ryan suggests some specific conditions under which database and narrative can be reconciled; these include using familiar storylines, modular narratives, foregrounding setting, and transparent design (2006, 149), all of which are present here.

picks up some time after the events of the first game: the former warden of Arkham, Quincy Sharp, has been elected mayor of Gotham City, and has turned a part of the city into a walled super-prison patrolled by private security. Batman infiltrates “Arkham City” in an attempt to discover the real motivations behind this draconian policy, and it comes as no surprise that Sharp has been manipulated by Batman’s old enemies, including Professor Hugo Strange and Ra’s al Ghul. *Batman: Arkham Origins* (2013) served as a prequel to this new continuity, depicting Batman’s first clash with the Joker on Christmas Eve as the catalyst for the segregation of Gotham’s criminally insane on Arkham Island.

The *Arkham* games combine elements of the more successful Batman representations that we have discussed earlier. For example, the series’ mise en scene most closely resembles that of the Nolan films, with its realist urban squalor and hyper-rationalized bat-tech.



Figure 10. Arkham Asylum and Gotham City.

Nick Arundel and Ron Fish’s music for the first two games blends stylistic features from both the Nolan and Burton films: the rhythmic, string-based ostinato recalls Hans Zimmer’s music, while the motifs are reminiscent of the alternately brooding and triumphant choral melodies of Danny Elfman’s music.⁵⁸ Many of the voice actors from

⁵⁸ Nick Arundel’s title theme for *Arkham City* is perhaps the clearest example of this: it begins with a brass phrase expanded from the two-note motif for Batman from the *Dark Knight* trilogy, and crescendos with a phrase similar to the ascending major chord which begins Batman’s theme in (and finishes the finale of) the 1989 film.

Batman: The Animated Series reprise their roles in the games, most notably Kevin Conroy as Batman and Mark Hamill as the Joker (though both were replaced by other actors to play the younger characters in *Origins*). The scripts for *Arkham Asylum* and *Arkham City* were both written by Paul Dini, one of the main writers on *Batman: The Animated Series*, who also has extensive writing credits on various Batman comics. Unlike the video game adaptation of *Batman Begins*, the *Arkham* series relies on narrative material from the comics, not the films, with its large cast of heroes and villains closely hewing to established continuity. However, the storyline is epic in the way that it forecloses other narrative possibilities: for instance, a number of the main characters are killed off by the end of *Arkham City*, most notably the Joker.

Significantly, Arkham Asylum in the game is set on an island close to Gotham City proper (in the earlier comics, Arkham was usually in a country setting outside the city, not unlike Wayne Manor). (Fig. 10) The relocation to a kind of psychiatric Alcatraz is



Figure 11. In-game Map of Arkham Island.

necessary both because of the narratological demands of the premise (Batman must be isolated from outside aid and so on) and the technological demands of the video game medium (“open world” games must inevitably constrain players within a limited space while giving the illusion of a greater space beyond; cf. Harpold on “recapture”). *Arkham City*’s walled-off slums-cum-prison performs the exact same function in structural terms – it is in effect an island – even if its in-game rationale is rather more farfetched. *Origins* expands the gameworld further, with the playable space consisting of two large islands, one of which will be the future site of Arkham City, connected by a long bridge. In all the games, the player must engage in a kind of cognitive mapping in order to progress through and complete the story. First, mapping in the literal sense takes place: as the player explores Arkham Island or Arkham City, the in-game map expands, aiding navigation and automatically marking locations and goals. (Fig. 11) This is common in most contemporary open-world games. In addition to this, though, the *Arkham* series also requires that players examine their environment through two kinds of third-person view: Batman’s regular vision, and “detective mode,” a kind of combination x-ray vision, infrared, and heads-up display.⁵⁹ Coincidentally or not, detective mode rather resembles the cell-phone sonar imaging Batman uses to find the Joker at the climax of *The Dark Knight*. Thus no single way of looking at Batman’s surroundings is sufficient, whether it is in finding hidden entryways, or in tracking and disabling multiple enemies. Moreover, the blending of these playing modes seems far less contrived than in other games, not least because the logic behind Batman’s premise (a hero in the high mimetic mode, both physically and technologically) is so congruent with such a treatment of space and the hero/avatar’s movement within it. When the various viewing modes are considered in addition to the repeated referral to maps, it becomes clear that something akin to Lynch’s “imaging” or Jameson’s cognitive mapping is at work: it is the representation of a totality, intelligible only in discrete, incomplete, and yet complementary semiotic systems. The conquest of space is the ultimate goal – the game is complete when the

⁵⁹ This kind of switching between viewing modes, none exhaustive in itself, goes back in video games at least to *Super Metroid* (1994), and was very pronounced in the *Metroid Prime* trilogy (2002-2007). (Arnott 2015)

player has visited, inspected, and mastered every environment. The implications of this will become clearer when we move on to examine the spatial elements of the *Legend of Zelda* video games.

The *Dark Knight* trilogy may not be able to embody the domination of space to quite the same extent as the *Arkham* series – film is, after all, among the most temporally-constrained media. Yet, as much as their medium allows, the films exhibit the same tendencies of postmodern representation. More importantly, what the *Dark Knight* trilogy represents seems, more so than the video games, to speak to contemporary concerns: urban life amid global capital; terrorism, both foreign and domestic; the politics of culture. These issues are mapped via a techno-realist ethos that distinguishes itself from many of the previous Batman narratives in film, comics, and elsewhere; some elements of the trilogy's predecessors, such as the camp and queer elements, are repressed, even as the films retain what their creators and corporate caretakers believe to be the core elements of the Batman mythos. The fact that the *Dark Knight* trilogy has been seen as such a qualitative success – and that its influence is already apparent in the successor narratives which at the same time work to displace it – makes its narrative an indisputable epos of Batman.

Chapter 4

4 *The Legend of Zelda*

When *The Legend of Zelda* was released for the Nintendo Entertainment System in 1987, it came in a gold-coloured cartridge, a stark contrast to the default grey plastic of other NES games. The game, already a hit in Japan, was thereby marked as something special, like the golden treasure so often sought after in the fantasy tradition from which *Zelda* traced its origins. This marketing choice also proved commercially apt: *The Legend of Zelda*'s total sales have been estimated at 6.5 million copies, the first Nintendo game to sell over one million units. Moreover, *Zelda* spawned over a dozen sequels in the next twenty-five years, many of which have, in popular and video game industry press, consistently topped lists of the best games of all time. The series, taken as a whole, has sold tens of millions of copies.⁶⁰

I have already looked at some of the game-like themes and connections that intersect *The Wire* and various *Batman* narratives, but the *Zelda* series affords an opportunity to analyse a “bootstrapping” epic: the *Zelda* games are not based on any particular book, comic, television program, or film (although they have in turn spawned spin-offs in many of these media). In one sense, this analytical progression to video games from books and film complements these earlier discussions; but in another sense, *The Legend of Zelda* represents an inverse of this project's earlier objects of study. *The Wire* and *Batman* clearly tell stories, but about subjects and settings that are not conventionally thought of as epic; *Zelda* takes for its subject some of the oldest tropes of heroic questing, but does so in a medium about whose storytelling merits there remains some doubt. In what follows I will show how *The Legend of Zelda* and its sequels, most notably *The Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time* (1998), are landmarks in the history of video games generally, and of the adventure game genre in particular. This genre, which blends action and role-playing within a complex story-world, is ideal for evaluating the possibilities of totalizing

⁶⁰ Promotional material for the recent Symphony of the Goddesses concert tour points out that the *Zelda* series has grossed “more than *Avatar* and *Titanic* combined.”

narrative epics within the video game medium. The *Zelda* games have, from the beginning, been technically innovative and culturally pervasive; unlike the adult-oriented games that appeal to “hardcore” gamers and regularly spark moral panics, *The Legend of Zelda* and its sequels have espoused an ethos that is less aggressive and thereby appeals to gamers of diverse ages and both sexes. At the same time, the *Zelda* series demonstrates the same “postmodern” approaches to the construction and signification of space as *The Wire* and *Batman*.

4.1 Preamble: Games, Storytelling, and Space⁶¹

Before examining the *Zelda* series in depth, it is first necessary to deal with the topic of storytelling in video games. Unlike the criticism of more mature media such as literature and film, there has been until quite recently little consensus as to whether video games are a legitimate storytelling medium. This is understandable: not only are video games (especially “modern,” i.e., technologically sophisticated ones) no more than a few decades old, but the majority do not tell stories in any meaningful sense. The ratio of story-games to non-story games is generally lower than the ratio of fiction to non-fiction books, or dramatic to non-dramatic film. This has led to some of the reductionism that characterized the scholarly debates pitting “narratologists” (those arguing for a story-based understanding of games) and “ludologists” (those who stressed play-based interpretations); for instance, some would try to read compelling storytelling and “authorship” even in games where this was doubtful (such as in *Ms. Pac-Man*; cf. Zimmerman 2003), while on the other end of the spectrum, others would deny the importance of storytelling in any video game at all (Eskilinen et al., 2004). But video games are too numerous, and purposefully remediate (cf. Bolter and Grusin) too many older media of communication, for such absolutism to hold up in the face of specific examples. No one could plausibly claim either that all books must be novels, or that all books must be encyclopaedias, even though print is a simpler and less technologically-implicated medium than even the crudest 8-bit console cartridge.

⁶¹ Much of this section will be appearing, in slightly altered form, in a forthcoming article in *Games and Culture* (Arnott 2015).

A more helpful approach to the problem of storytelling in video games is suggested by Marie-Laure Ryan in *Avatars of Story*. Ryan proposes a scalar notion of “narrativity” that blurs the boundaries between what constitutes a narrative and what does not; from this perspective, the definition of a story “becomes an open series of concentric circles that spell increasingly narrow conditions and that presuppose previously stated items, as we move from the outer to the inner circles, and from marginal cases to the prototypes.” (7) Ryan lists eight conditions of narrativity, and these are grouped under four “dimensions”: spatial, temporal, mental, and formal/pragmatic (9). Her ultimate goal is to develop a medium-free theory of narrative, which for Ryan means moving beyond the idea that stories are primarily verbal and instead realizing that they are cognitive constructs. Furthermore, Ryan posits an open-ended list of narrative modes, arranged predominantly as binaries of marked and unmarked terms; these include the familiar fiction/non-fiction pair, as well as others that have added import for analysing the narrative of games, such as scripted/emergent or representational/simulative. Thus even when a video game, or other “new” medium, falls clearly within a narratologically unmarked category (such as “simulation”), under this scheme it still demonstrates some narrativity or “storiness” – what remains to be determined is the nature and the extent of that narrativity.

Steffen P. Walz’s *Toward a Ludic Architecture* conducts a similarly expansive discussion about games as such, comparing some of the main conceptual frameworks posited in games studies research since the late 1990s. In a useful chart (118) he summarizes eight “approaches” used by ludologists: these include the locative, representational, programmatic, dramaturgical, typological, perspectivistic, qualitative, and form-functional/form-emotive. Later, he attempts to subsume most of these approaches (excepting the qualitative), and two others (technological and phenomenological), into a greater framework for analysing and designing games, which he considers to be fundamentally constituted as kinetic human practices in space. (131-132) It remains to be seen how successful this ambitious framework will be; but Walz’s schema is noteworthy because of its emphasis on space – a concept whose fundamental importance should by now be clear even outside of games – and because it sees such concepts as “story” and “game” as theoretically-equal dimensions of a greater gamespace. Implicit in this view, I believe, is an assumption that the preferred method and approach to research on any

particular game should be tailored to the genre of game and to the purpose of the inquiry. For example, a locative approach to studying a schoolyard game of hopscotch would clearly be more fruitful than a technological approach, just as a programmatic approach to *Guitar Hero* would reveal more than a dramaturgical one. From this point of view, the use of a broadly narratological and semiotic approach – particularly in keeping with Ryan’s “narrativity” – does not constitute an argument that such a method represents an ideal, middle-ground method applicable to all games; it is instead one of many, but one which is best suited to a particular game or game-like practice.

Therefore, in the sections that follow I propose to deploy concepts and analytical methods that seem best suited to understanding a game such as *The Legend of Zelda*. These include, first, the representational or mimetic; this, in other words, is a semiotic approach that seeks to identify visual and auditory signs and decode their meaning, both within the confines of the game itself and with respect to the game’s greater context. Second, there is what Walz terms the dramaturgical approach, or what we might recognize as narratology as such; this involves analysing the story and how it is told within the game. Finally, there is the form-functional approach, which seeks to understand how the functions of a particular game are spatially relayed. The savvy reader will recall that variations of these techniques have already been prefigured and tentatively deployed in the preceding chapters on *The Wire* and *Batman*, as needed.

But even these categories must not be absolute; they often overlap, especially in a technologically-intensive medium like video games. For example, Walz’s definition of the representational approach is derived from the work of Espen Aarseth, who, coming from a literary background, argues that the relationship between the mimetic properties of gamespace and the real world is an allegorical one. (2007) On one level this is certainly true. But at the same time, there are conceptual approaches that arguably do the opposite – instead of focusing on the mimetic, or what might loosely be called the “surface” elements of a particular gameworld, critics such as Alexander Galloway stress the need to interpret the game’s procedural system, its underlying algorithm, to uncover what he calls its “allegorithm” (91). This is certainly more appropriate for a game such as *The Sims* – compare Wark’s (26-50) allegorithm-based analysis with the narrative-based analysis of

the same game proffered by Pearce (2003, 150-152). In this way, the allegory of a game becomes more apparent in a form-functional approach. And yet there are still other games in which an allegorical understanding depends precisely on the equal intersection of representation and narrative on the one hand as well as the formal game-system on the other – this might include the controversially ambiguous endings of *Braid* or *Mass Effect 3*. Therefore, it seems best to follow Ryan and Walz by treating narrative as a categorical subset of game analysis, one which may not always be the most important element of every game, but cannot be ignored when dealing with games that are explicitly designed in such a way that playing the game actuates a specific story, and beating that game is a means to finding out how the story ends.

I have argued elsewhere (Arnott 2012; 2015) that such games might be analysed as examples of “imperative storytelling.” I developed this concept in an effort to understand the functional and structural similarities between two disparate works that blended narrative and gaming: George Perec’s 1978 novel *Life a User’s Manual*, and Jonathan Blow’s 2008 video game *Braid*. In their own descriptions within and about these works, I found that both Blow and Perec employed a similar kind of rhetoric, a semiotic system of communicative overtures from a puzzle-maker to puzzle-solvers, based on the spatial relation of objects not only within the texts (i.e., the diegetic space of game and novel) but also within their meta-textual features (the arrangement of chapters, graphics, extra-diegetic pictographs, etc.). These narrative games could be allegorized both in terms of surface-level mimesis, but also in terms of their procedural structure. Spatial relationships are in both cases crucial in communicating to the player/reader not only how to actuate/read *Braid* and *Life* on a “literal” level, but also in suggesting richer meanings on a “metaphorical” level as well. This spatial “text” which puzzle-solvers “read” is not a description of actions or situations, analogous to the grammatical indicative mood; nor is it a prediction or speculation of what will happen, a kind of future tense or even a subjunctive mood (cf. Mackey, 2008). It is, rather, a rhetoric based on instruction or command.

The rhetoric of “imperative storytelling” is most apparent in puzzle games, although it is also quite evident in adventure games with puzzle-elements, such as the *Legend of Zelda*

series. Will Wright, designer of *SimCity* and *The Sims*, has compared the elements of *Zelda* games to a kind of grammar that, like nouns and verbs, is learned as the gamer acquires objects to manipulate and deploy within game spaces. (Grenville, 155) For their part, games scholars have recently paid more attention to how virtual spaces are “read” (e.g., Huber 2009; Murray 2012), and I believe that the extension of this literary metaphor is not inappropriate considering that “reading” texts and geographical landmarks alike seems to involve the same cognitive processes. (Murray 2012, 166)

This is therefore an approach that considers a certain subset, or cluster of genres, of video games to be deliberately designed, and ascribes primary authorship to those who design and program the algorithm; narrative elements are likewise planned by the game designers and are relatively consistent and stable on each playthrough.⁶² This is in contrast to certain strains of ludological fundamentalism that would argue that video games are, at heart, about player agency and control – that players themselves are the prime engines of game narratives. Players are instead enacting what the game’s designers have already planned for. Even fully player-driven stories in video games can never approach the amount of freedom present in real life (Lebowitz and Klug 2011, 235). There is always some mediation between the player and game designer, giving the latter greater agency – or, following Murray (1997), the player’s agency is trumped by the designer’s authorship. A possible exception might be board games such as *Dungeons and Dragons*, in which a “dungeon master” (i.e., a moderator) improvises parts of the story and game world in response to the actions of the other players. But this, crucially, requires a live person:

Although it’s technically possible to have a human moderator filling a DM-type role in a video game, the need for one moderator per player (or player group) and for the moderator and player to be on at the same time makes it highly impractical for commercial games. In addition, unlike in *D&D*, where the players can go anywhere and do anything that they and the DM can think of, *a player in a video game can’t go anywhere that wasn’t previously planned for and modelled and*

⁶² This does not deny the possibility of hacks, or other significant alterations to particular games; however, these changes occur, strictly speaking, outside the original program, creating a new game in which the same fundamental relationship between the designer/author and the player/audience is reproduced.

can't do anything that the game's programming doesn't allow for. (Lebowitz & Klug 2011, p. 236, emphasis added)

Although story-games do not comprise a majority of video games, those games that do exhibit considerable narrative aspirations disproportionately do so in an epic mode. The construction of vast storyworlds that – while always pushing the boundaries of computer or console hardware (not to mention the logistical, organizational, and temporal limits of design and production) – are inevitably enclosed and totalizing is a feature of many such games. Many if not most fail to find a long-term audience because they fall short of their ambitions in some way, whether due to technical problems, such as poorly-designed or executed interfaces, or creative ones, such as cliché-ridden plots or unimaginative mise en scenes. We must keep in mind that falling short in this way is the fate of most narrative endeavours, regardless of their medium: otherwise the successful epic would not be so valued. *The Legend of Zelda* and its many sequels can be considered as epics because they achieve this qualitative success, and an analysis of representative games from the series from an “imperative storytelling” approach will hopefully make this clear.

4.2 *The Legend of Zelda as Epos*

For a narrative work to be considered a successful epos, according to the theoretical framework I have been developing, it must demonstrate qualitative excellence in a way that makes it the definitive telling of its particular story. However, video games in general make it harder to evaluate this criterion than other, older media because of the continual technical advances being made: what was once state of the art becomes, within only a few years, hopelessly outdated. Many games become unplayable as their original cartridges, controllers, and paraphernalia break down, unless newer computer operating systems or game consoles are made backwards-compatible via emulation software. Arcade games of the 1970s and 1980s, whose circuitry and programming was designed on an ad hoc basis, suffer from this problem particularly. Thus there is a further problem of longevity, and this is often reflected in the present-minded “best games of all time” lists that are a perennial staple of the popular video game press. To offset these challenges, I will place *The Legend of Zelda* (and some of its more notable sequels) within a specific historical context of video game technology and the evolution of the

medium's design principles, and show how, via emulation, re-releases, and evolving critical opinion, older *Zelda* games resist the inevitability of obsolescence to a far more successful degree than most of their contemporaries. This will hopefully show why the games were so lauded at their original release and why their influence is still being felt in contemporary games.

When *The Legend of Zelda* was first released in Japan in 1986, "adventure" video games were only a few years old. The genre had two foundational games: *Colossal Cave Adventure*⁶³ (1976), a text-based game designed by William Crowther and Don Woods that allowed players to explore a fictionalized version of the Mammoth Cave in Kentucky; and *Adventure* (1979), a game designed by Warren Robinett that was partly inspired by *Colossal Cave Adventure*, but featured crude graphics-based mazes representing the interiors of fantasy castles. The former was a precursor to the popular but short-lived genre of text-based computer games, such as *Zork!*, and also paved the way for Multi-User Dungeons (MUDs) (Aarseth 1997, 100), as well as other games and experiments that sought to create spaces with a combination of literary techniques and computational, non-linear structures such as hypertext. The latter game accomplished similar spatial constructions as *Colossal Cave Adventure*, but did so with a graphic interface and simple iconography; as such, its innovations directly prefigure *Zelda*.⁶⁴

Adventure was released on the Atari 2600, and was the first action-adventure game released on a home console. Many of its "firsts" are not related directly to the adventure game genre (such as the first "Easter egg," a hidden onscreen credit for Robinett, to be discovered); but others were crucial for the development of game storytelling as the arrangement and movement of objects in space. First, *Adventure* pioneered the use of multiple, connected screens that cut from one to the next in what would later be known as

⁶³ In its many later iterations for various computer systems, the game was often retitled, confusingly, *Adventure*.

⁶⁴ Aarseth argues that the shift from textual to graphical representation of space was "natural and inevitable" (102), and posits *Rogue* (1980), an ASCII-based dungeon-exploring game, as a kind of missing link between text-based and graphics-based adventure games, and other dungeon-mapping games such as the seminal first-person shooter *Doom* (1993).

a “flip-screen” perspective; this made the game “the first to take advantage of cinematic conventions to orient the player in the game’s diegetic world.” (Robinett, vii) It was also the first game to feature “graphical, portable objects on-screen ... that a player-character could pick up, use and drop.” (Robinett, vii) Finally, the game’s “enemies,” three dragons and a bat, were the first to feature different movement patterns for the same type of enemy (in the case of the dragons) and different movement “states” (agitated and not agitated) for one enemy (the bat); this innovation represented the simplest possible differentiation of “characters,” but was progress nonetheless.

However, *Adventure* remained very crude, both in terms of its technological valences and its narrative techniques. The story was a simplified quest for an “enchanted chalice” (Robinett had originally intended this to be the Holy Grail, but Atari had it changed for marketing purposes; Robinett, xiii). At any rate, most of the signification of the minimal *fabula* was to be found in the game’s instruction manual and box art; there is almost no indication of the details within the gameplay itself. The entrance screens for the game’s three castles are perhaps the only graphically intelligible instances of mimesis in *Adventure*; the dragons look rather like quacking ducks, while the player avatar is merely a square a few pixels across. Most of these features are the result of the extremely limited hardware of the Atari 2600: the system had only 128 bytes of RAM, while the game itself fit on a cartridge holding 4096 bytes of ROM. Indeed, some of the crudeness of the graphics stemmed from deliberate choices on Robinett’s part to facilitate the best gameplay design under the circumstances. The square avatar, for example, was intended to make it easier for the player to navigate in the game space, without any corners that could get caught on walls. (Robinett, xiv)

The Legend of Zelda improved on these skeletal gameplay mechanics; its historical significance is that *Zelda* represented a number of technical milestones that were fully capitalized upon in the design of the gameplay. *Zelda* pioneered the adventure game state of the art in 1986 analogously to the way *Adventure* had done so seven years earlier. Moreover, *Zelda* was at the forefront of Nintendo’s rapid rise to dominance in the video game console market of the mid-1980s; no small part of this was due to technical savvy, spurred by Nintendo President Hiroshi Yamauchi’s desire to use ruthless business tactics

to maximize the abilities of the Famicom/NES while keeping down costs. Nintendo's research and development teams were able to design new chips to be included in game cartridges that augmented the meagre processing power of the console system itself. One such innovation were MMCs (Memory Map Controllers), which allowed new graphic abilities, such as diagonal scrolling, and general improvements such as more and faster objects moving on the screen simultaneously. (Sheff 42-43) One of the first games to utilize these MMCs was *The Legend of Zelda*. *Zelda* was also the first game cartridge to feature a battery backup, allowing games to be saved (without a password⁶⁵) partway through. This in turn opened up the possibility of a much larger gameworld once players no longer had to complete a game in one sitting.

For these reasons, *The Legend of Zelda* marked the very beginning of a time when video games on a home console could have players actuate a compelling story without having to look at the box art to decode the crude shapes on the screen. *Zelda* was also the product of an "auteur" approach to game design that was (and still is) rather rare in the industry. The early innovators at Atari, for example, received no official credit for their creations – *Adventure*'s Easter egg was arguably a proto-"hacktivist" (Jordan and Taylor 1) act of resistance to Atari's policy.⁶⁶ Other early 1980s game companies, most notably Electronic Arts (EA), recruited talented designers by promising star treatment as "artists" in response to their disgruntlement with Atari (Sheff, 228-229), but within a few years EA devolved into the familiar pattern of exploitation, as capitalist managers stamped out the early hacker ethos. (Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter, 38-39) Nintendo, on the other hand, had remained a traditionally Japanese, family-run business for a century, and was run as a quasi-benevolent dictatorship by the mercurial Yamauchi. Although he never played any video games himself, Yamauchi had a knack for picking winning concepts and realized that the key to business success for the Famicom/NES was a catalogue of

⁶⁵ Another MMC game, *Metroid*, had a password save system that revealed the limits of that technique. Due to the amount of game state variables that needed to be saved, *Metroid*'s passwords were twenty-digit-long alpha-numeric jumbles that could only be generated after the player died.

⁶⁶ Warren Robinett described the secret room in which he hid his creator credit as "the meta-game I was playing with Atari management. They had the power to keep my name off the box, but I had the power to put it on the screen." (xviii)

great games, not just fleeting advantages in hardware (Sheff 39). Yamauchi did not let business or marketing concerns dictate research and development policy; the Nintendo “star system” may not have been as public as in contemporary American companies, but it survived much longer.

Among the first of these stars was Shigeru Miyamoto, who has become one of the most famous game designers in history. Miyamoto had a background in fine arts and performance, and had been hired by Yamauchi in 1977 even though at the time there was no position at Nintendo for which he was clearly suited. After a few years as an apprentice and staff artist, Miyamoto was despatched to refit one of Nintendo’s arcade games which had failed in the American market; the new game he designed was *Donkey Kong* (1981), which became one of Nintendo’s first great successes and a landmark of game design. (Sheff, 46-48) Miyamoto solidified his reputation with *Mario Bros.* (1983) and *Super Mario Bros.* (1985), with the latter game becoming a massive hit on the Famicom/NES. Miyamoto’s next project was *The Legend of Zelda*, and it allowed Miyamoto to develop the ideas of spatial exploration which were inspired by his childhood memories and which had been prefigured in some gameplay elements of *Super Mario Bros.* For example, the dungeons of *Zelda* were inspired by “the memory of being lost amid the maze of sliding doors in his family’s home in Sonebe” (Sheff, 52), while the “overworld” was inspired by Miyamoto’s childhood wanderings in the countryside without a map, where he would delight in stumbling across and exploring natural features such as lakes and caves. (51) Another key figure contributing to *Zelda* was composer Koji Kondo. Kondo’s first major game score had been written for *Super Mario Bros.*, and as with that first blockbuster, Kondo’s *Zelda* melodies became classics. Both Miyamoto and Kondo have stayed with Nintendo their entire careers, and have been closely associated with both the *Mario* and *Zelda* series from the beginning; this continuity will be especially important when we consider the *Zelda* sequels later on.

The Legend of Zelda’s story is the classic quest at its most rudimentary: a young hero must defeat an evil monster to rescue a princess. Although *Zelda*’s mimetic world is a vast improvement on earlier games such as *Adventure* – its hero looks like a little elf, monsters and objects are easily identified, and the topography of trees, lakes, mountains

and the like are recognizable as such – this inaugural *Zelda* game remains very crude in its storytelling, if we are to focus on traditional signifiers. During gameplay, the only written text consists of brief declarations from old men in caves or merchants offering wares; even these are hindered in their efficacy at communicating basic information to players by the clumsy Japanese-to-English translations that were typical of the era. The scrolling information that comes after the game’s title screen contains an explanation of the motivations in a similarly crude vein:

The Legend of Zelda. Many years ago Prince Darkness “Gannon” stole one of the Triforce with Power. Princess Zelda had one of the Triforce with Wisdom. She divided it into “8” units to hide it from “Gannon” before she was captured. Go find the “8” units “Link” to save her.

A list of items that will come in handy during the quest follows. But what is significant is what ends the title sequence: a little figure of Link holding a sign that reads, “Please look up the manual for details.” For the game’s printed instruction manual contains a much fuller version not only of the play mechanics, but of the story-setup as well. In the manual’s introduction, players are told that the land of Hyrule has been invaded by an army led by Ganon, who has stolen the Triforce of Power. Princess Zelda, keeper of the Triforce of Wisdom, split it into pieces, hid them, and instructed her nursemaid, Impa, to find a hero to defeat Ganon; when Ganon learned of this, he imprisoned Zelda and sent his henchmen after Impa. Just as Ganon’s forces caught up with Impa, she was saved by a “young lad” named Link, who, after Impa has told him what has been going on, resolved to recover the pieces of Zelda’s Triforce so that he can defeat Ganon. The tips and strategies that follow are illustrated by full-colour drawings of Link rescuing Impa, meeting with merchants, exploring labyrinths, and battling monsters. In this way, *The Legend of Zelda* is still transitional; the game makes a heroic effort to get the most out of the technological constraints of the medium’s state of the art, but it is clear that its storytelling ambitions are too great for the NES hardware. At the same time, its “plot” is basic and familiar enough that its outlines can be followed exclusively through the gameplay.

Similarly, *Zelda* is transitional in its imperative storytelling, the way in which the game design communicates to the player how he must actuate the narrative of the quest.

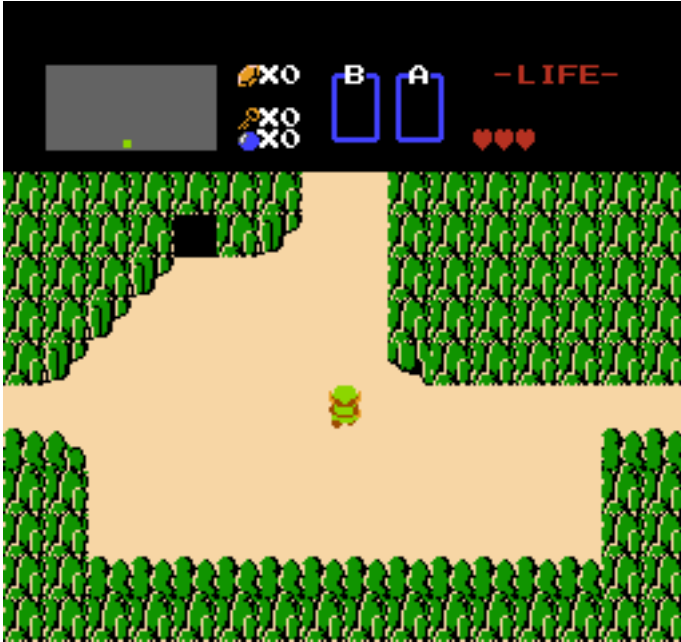


Figure 12. Opening Screen of *The Legend of Zelda*.

Consider the opening screen of the Overworld (Fig. 12): when the player begins a new game, Link is standing in an empty grove, with paths leading north, east, and west; there is also a cave near the northern path. This topographic configuration is quite deliberate: the player is meant to guide Link into the cave, where an old man gives Link a sword.⁶⁷ If the player decides to ignore this first overture and explore the screens beyond this first one, he will encounter enemies that will

quickly kill him unless he has acquired the game's basic weapon. Next, Link is meant to find the first dungeon. The player has more latitude to explore, but he will eventually come across certain barriers, passage beyond which requires items he has not yet discovered. Travelling beyond the immediate area of the first dungeon will also mean encountering stronger enemies, which will likely kill Link unless he has acquired more strength and more powerful weapons. The game is designed in such a way to guide the player where he needs to go. But just as with the textual elements of the story, this is barely sufficient: there is no explicit in-game instruction of direction (the old man in the first cave does not offer any helpful advice such as "head to the lake to find the first piece of the Triforce"), and it is easy to get lost, because, while there is a map on the game screen, it consists of a big grey rectangle with a blip indicating the current screen's location relative to the entire Overworld.

⁶⁷ The old man's exhortation – "It's dangerous to go alone! Take this." – has become the basis of an internet meme.

The instruction manual, as before, provides a clue that the designers recognized that more is required than the game itself can allow. After explaining the gameplay mechanics, the manual provides “The complete strategy for getting to Level 1”. This includes an explanation about how to get the sword, and then directions through the forest to the lake where the first labyrinth can be found; screenshots are also included, as is a detailed map of the six-screen-by-five-screen area between the entrance to the first level and the entrance to the second, indicating where Link must go after he has explored and conquered the first labyrinth. Moreover, included with the original cartridge was a map of the entire Overworld (Fig. 13), with the areas encountered early in the game filled in in detail, while other, later areas were left as blanks so that players presumably could fill in each screen as they explored, backtracked, and progressed. Like other innovative games of the era (notably the original *Metroid*), *Zelda* was sophisticated enough technically to present a geographically complex (if mimetically simplistic) gamespace, but its

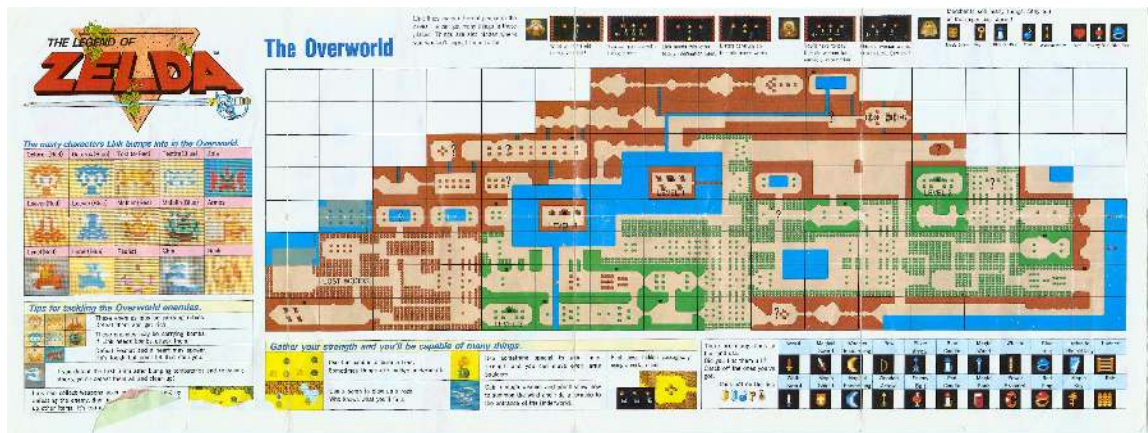


Figure 13. Printed Overworld Map of *The Legend of Zelda*.

technology was still limited insofar as it had to rely on media outside the game itself – the instruction manual, player-drawn maps – to fully actualize its gameplay and story.⁶⁸

These problems would become moot once console technology caught up to the narrative ambitions of the *Zelda* series. *The Legend of Zelda: A Link to the Past*, released on the

⁶⁸ The instruction manuals for *Final Fantasy* (1987) and the NES version of *Ultima IV: Quest of the Avatar* (1990), for instance, go even farther than *Zelda*: both contain dozens of pages of extensive walkthrough information and maps, and run up to eighty pages.

Super Nintendo Entertainment System in 1992, was the third game in the series and marked the return of Shigeru Miyamoto. (Another team had designed *Zelda II: The Adventure of Link*, a side-scrolling platformer that, while still a commercial success, took the series in gameplay directions that would not be pursued in the sequels.) *A Link to the Past* had the same top-down viewpoint, and the same basic gameplay as the first *Zelda* game. This time, the features that were immanent in the original were at last fully realized: cutscenes with plenty of text-based (and well-translated) dialogue fleshed out the backstory and Link's interactions with other characters all along the way; the arrangement of Overworld obstacles was much clearer and the progression between acquiring the necessary items to unlock new areas seemed much more natural; and the onscreen maps were detailed enough (and featured marked objectives) that players no longer had to make their own maps to keep from getting lost. Although *A Link to the Past* did not break the sales record of the original *Zelda*, its qualitative success can be seen in the fact that it inspired numerous sequels that hewed closely to the gameplay template that it perfected. Most of these were for Nintendo's handheld game devices, beginning with *The Legend of Zelda: Link's Awakening* (1993) for the original Game Boy, as well as numerous other games⁶⁹ for subsequent handheld consoles up to the present day: most recently, Nintendo has released a direct sequel to *A Link to the Past* called *The Legend of Zelda: A Link Between Worlds* (2013), for the Nintendo 3DS handheld system.

The next, and arguably last, sequence of *Zelda* games expanding their narrative world came in the late 1990s with the advent of three-dimensionally-rendered polygon graphics. As before, Miyamoto's *Mario* series led the way on the Nintendo 64 console with *Super Mario 64* (1996); the first *Zelda* entry on the console came two years later with *The Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time*. *Ocarina of Time* was still very much overseen by Miyamoto, although the dungeons, for example, were designed by Eiji Aonuma, who would go on to direct later instalments in the series. (Kent) It proved to be a success surpassed only by the original *Zelda*, and once again this was due to its ambition in

⁶⁹ These included *Oracle of Ages*, *Oracle of Seasons*, *The Minish Cap*, and *Four Swords Adventures*, which was a multiplayer crossover using both the Nintendo GameCube and the Game Boy Advance.

telling the most complex story, in the best way possible, given the technological constraints of its era. *Ocarina* solved a number of technical problems in ways that have become standard for modern video games: for example, it introduced a lock-on targeting feature that made aiming attacks while moving in three-dimensional space intuitive, while using a simple, context-sensitive control scheme for the controller's buttons. *Ocarina*'s long, cinematic cutscenes enabled characters such as Link, Zelda, and Ganon to be better defined from the perspective of conventional dramaturgy, and its time travel mechanism allowed players to control Link both as a child and as an adult in a compelling variation of the "two worlds" gameplay mechanic that had recurred in the *Zelda* games since *A Link to the Past*. However, for the purposes of demonstrating *Ocarina*'s importance as an epos of imperative storytelling, I will focus less on methods borrowed from such media as film, and instead concentrate on how *Ocarina* exemplifies and innovates the signification between design and players that is particular to the video game medium, and its relation to cognitive mapping. This can be seen not only in *Ocarina*'s way of using space to communicate to players visually, but, even more innovatively, in the way the game deploys auditory cues in space.

First, we can look at *Ocarina*'s masterful use of visual space by seeing how it builds on the techniques outlined in the above discussion of its predecessors. Like many other *Zelda* games, one of the first tasks the player must guide Link into completing is equipping a sword and shield. In *Ocarina*, Link begins in a woodland village inhabited by elf-like people called Kokiri; like all the other villagers, Link has his own companion fairy, called Navi. Navi tells Link that he must visit the Great Deku Tree, which grows just outside the village. The village can be explored in three dimensions, but, crucially, it is also represented on a top-down map schematic that appears as part of the heads-up display on the game screen. In this way the game design signals to players where Link must go through the combination of two representations of space: recall that this is in essence the same process that occurred even in the original *Zelda*, although due to technical limitations the map element was mostly separate from the game itself; *A Link to the Past*, meanwhile, contained the map within the game, but that map was not as locally detailed, nor was it rendered simultaneously and overlaid with the main game space.

When Link attempts to take the path leading to the Great Deku Tree, he is blocked by a Kokiri who demands that Link acquire a sword and shield before he will be allowed to pass: these items are to be found somewhere in the village. Once again, the key to overcoming this first obstacle of the game is to “read” the main game space in tandem with the onscreen map (Fig. 14). The map shows that the village is mostly open space, but there is a hidden area in the southwest corner with a series of narrow passageways.



Figure 14. Screenshot from *Ocarina of Time*.

The map itself signals that the player should examine that area, and once directed there, he will find a small opening in the wall which leads to the area indicated on the map, and within this area lies the sword. Once Link is equipped – and the player trained in this kind of cognitive mapping – he can proceed to the Deku Tree, within which lies the first of many dungeons to explore and conquer.

Throughout *Ocarina of Time*, space is also made to signify through music and sound effects. Composer Koji Kondo used MIDI technology to create an integrated score for

Ocarina that flows smoothly, depending on Link's position. Karen Collins notes that though "critics may have disparaged the MIDI audio, in terms of advancing a dynamic approach to game sound, Nintendo was leagues ahead of its competitors in the console domain." (71) Each area has its own musical soundscape, and "dynamic scoring" allows smooth transitions as the player crosses from one environment to another. Approaching enemies triggers a "danger" cue, which fades out again if the player defeats the nearby enemies or moves far enough away; the score then returns to the original cue for that particular place (Collins, 126). This same structure is repeated writ large with *Ocarina of Time*'s level "bosses," who have their own theme music. Music and imagery thereby reinforce each other algorithmically, mimicking the techniques of film scoring, as "the application of this safety/danger binary in the fluid schematic of the three dimensional space of Hyrule exhibits the complexity and richness of this fictional space." (Whalen 2004)

Ocarina of Time, as its title suggests, puts further emphasis on music with the inclusion of a magical ocarina, whose use allows Link to "warp" to different areas, and even travel through time, depending on the melody played. Moreover, these melodic themes can be heard in the game places in question, working, as Zach Whalen points out, "like Wagner's leitmotifs in reverse." (2004) Whereas in Wagnerian opera, a stationary audience would hear a theme associated with a particular character when he or she would enter the space of the stage, *Ocarina*'s auditory innovation allowed a mobile player/avatar to hear a theme associated with a particular place in the gameworld as he or she moved through it. Patterns of sound effects and music formed an auditory map with both stable nodes as well as moving objects: in the case of the "danger cue," this is the spatial design signalling to the player that there is an enemy approaching. With *Ocarina*, Kondo was able to treat game music as a unified composition, "with each song within the game as part of a larger complete work," (Collins, 90) something that had not been possible in earlier console generations due to extremely limited memory capacities and other technical constraints. (Collins, 27)

The console *Zelda* games that followed *Ocarina of Time* hewed closely to its innovations and, with the exception of the development of motion controls for *The Legend of Zelda:*

Skyward Sword (2011), these did not feature any great changes in gameplay technology.⁷⁰ However, the first release for the Nintendo GameCube, *The Legend of Zelda: The Wind Waker* (2003), deserves mentioning on aesthetic grounds. It was one of the first major console releases to consciously eschew mimetic realism in its graphics; instead of making its visuals as “realistic” as possible within the processing and display constraints of the time, *Wind Waker*’s developers decided upon a cel-shaded aesthetic, making the game’s 3D environments and characters appear in the style of a hand-drawn cartoon. The choice was highly controversial; some fans believed it made the game look childish (Otero). But as one reviewer noted upon *Wind Waker*’s release,

The sad truth is that the mainstream audience may, with no understanding of the technology required to realize the style, shrug *Wind Waker*’s visuals off as primitive. However, players with keen eyes and an appreciation for the art of making games will know that Nintendo has not only created a hugely stylistic world down to every last detail, but also pushed the power of GameCube to do so. (Casamassina)

Others, including game designer Will Wright, welcomed the move and went on to praise the game highly. (Grenville, 155) Time appears to have vindicated this position: *Wind Waker* has, according to commenters in the game press (Otero), aged better visually than its contemporaries (or indeed *Ocarina of Time*) because of its non-mimetic aesthetic. In the decade since *Wind Waker*’s release, the video game ecology has shifted away from the “hard-core gamer” aesthetic of graphics above all else, and casual games for mobile platforms, geared toward demographics beyond teenaged boys, have made “cartoony” graphics far more acceptable. (Juul 13-16, 2010) Notably, the *Wind Waker* aesthetic was replicated in sequels⁷¹ for the Nintendo DS, much the same way that *A Link to the Past* had been extremely influential on the early generations of handheld *Zelda* games. In a final ironic twist, *Wind Waker* became the first *Zelda* game released in high definition as an updated version for the Nintendo Wii U.

⁷⁰ *The Legend of Zelda: Twilight Princess*, released for both the Nintendo GameCube and the Wii in 2006, featured some motion control on the release for the latter console, but it lacked the precision of *Skyward Sword*, which was developed specifically for use with the Wii’s Motion Plus accessory.

⁷¹ These included *The Legend of Zelda: Phantom Hourglass* (2007) and *The Legend of Zelda: Spirit Tracks* (2009).

Such “ports” and rereleases are another indicator of the lasting quality of certain video games, and the landmark entries in the *Legend of Zelda* series have seen multiple rereleases over the years. The original *Legend of Zelda* was available to play as an in-game unlock in *Animal Crossing* (GameCube, 2003), and was later included – along with *The Adventure of Link*, *Ocarina of Time*, and *Majora’s Mask* – on a GameCube compilation disk *The Legend of Zelda Collector’s Edition* (2003). *The Legend of Zelda* and *The Adventure of Link* were released together on one cartridge for the Game Boy Advance in 2004, and most of the *Zelda* games for Nintendo, Super Nintendo, and Nintendo 64 were released on the Virtual Console shop for play on the Nintendo Wii and Wii U. In addition, *Ocarina of Time* was converted into stereoscopic 3D for rerelease on the Nintendo 3DS in 2011, followed by its sequel *Majora’s Mask* in 2015. Of course, the phenomenon of rereleases must be weighed with economic considerations: it would be naïve to suggest that Nintendo’s primary purpose here is to celebrate the efforts of Shigeru Miyamoto, Eiji Aonuma, and their collaborators or to benignly introduce such classics to “a new generation of gamers.” And yet the fact that these rereleases of games that are over one or two decades old continue to sell cannot be attributed solely to aggressive marketing or to bundling with new hardware. Few other series have had such a consistent presence; and even those with a comparable back-catalogue of rereleases – such as the long-running *Final Fantasy* series – have seen their titles extensively overhauled in terms of graphic presentation, controls, and content tweaks. Nintendo’s firm corporate control has lent a kind of stability to the *Zelda* franchise, where other groundbreaking game series, such as *Ultima*, have been hampered by developer woes and intellectual property conflicts.⁷² While Nintendo does not regularly make detailed sales figures available for individual titles, the total sales of games in the *Zelda* series to date is estimated at close to 70 million copies.⁷³

⁷² Origin Systems, Inc., the series’ original developer, was bought by Electronic Arts in 1992, and closed down in 2004. Some of the trademarks were retained by the series’ creator, Richard Garriott, aka “Lord British”, after the sale; this is why EA’s recent iOS remake/sequel to *Ultima IV*, *Ultima Forever: Quest for the Avatar* (2013), features a “Lady British.”

⁷³ Molina gives the official series total of 62 million right before *Skyward Sword*’s release in late 2011; that game’s sales were approximately 4 million, putting the total somewhere in the high sixties. This also

Finally, the *Zelda* series has consistently been well-represented on various fan- and industry press lists of the greatest video games ever made. It would be difficult and rather tedious to try and parse all such attempts at ultimate rankings, not least because they tend to lack the proper balance between historical perspective and current trends. As discussed above, changing technological standards remains a complicating factor in the evaluation of video games generally. We may take as representative the 2013 instalment of GamesRadar.com's 100 Best Games of All Time, which presents something approaching a reasonable logic of selection:

Our list ranks the best games to play today, and that's also why we refresh this list every year. Games like *GoldenEye* might be historically important, but they're not necessarily what we'd pick up and play right now. Also, for franchises with several outstanding entries (we're looking at you, Mario), we've selected only the best entry, while also drawing a distinction between 2D and 3D permutations. (GamesRadar Staff)

On the GamesRadar list, the *Zelda* series is the only one to appear twice in the top ten: *A Link to the Past*, representing the 2D *Zelda* games, comes in at number nine; *Wind Waker*, representing the 3D titles, is in fifth place.⁷⁴ The rationale for these choices takes into account the quality of the games on their own terms, as well as historical reasons, many of which are in accordance with what I have argued above: *A Link to the Past* is praised for establishing the core gameplay of the franchise (“not a single [other *Zelda* game] would be worth a bean without the core framework polished and perfected in *A Link to the Past*”), while *Wind Waker* narrowly beats out *Ocarina of Time* (whose traditional status as one of the highest-ranked games is taken for granted) because of its aesthetic choices (“Its visual style and the light-hearted feel that goes with it make it the most welcoming of every game in the series while still being suitably epic.”).

does not include recent releases such as *A Link Between Worlds* and *The Wind Waker HD*, although press reports indicate that bundling the latter game with the Wii U has increased sales of that console.

⁷⁴ On the most-recently updated version of GamesRader's list, *A Link to the Past* has dropped to nineteenth place, while *Wind Waker* has risen to second place overall.

Surely, all the games in the *Legend of Zelda* series are “suitably epic” in the weak sense, that they all present a quest narrative in which good battles evil on some kind of global scale. But it is equally clear that at least certain installments of the series – not surprisingly, roughly corresponding to each generation of video game console – are epic at the specific level of epos, as outlined at the outset of this dissertation. *The Legend of Zelda*, *A Link to the Past*, *Ocarina of Time*, and *Wind Waker* all tell the epic quest tale as thoroughly as they can within the technological constraints of their time, and have been acknowledged as significantly advancing the state of the video game art. It is likely no coincidence that these more influential epics of the *Zelda* series have been on the home, rather than handheld, systems made by Nintendo; the “big screen” is another factor associated with epic, not unlike the valorization of film over television before the advent of the home theatre. Indeed, the construction of clearly navigable space has always been essential to the success of the *Zelda* games, something more easily pioneered on a television than on a Game Boy. In the video game medium, and especially in narrative games that employ imperative storytelling techniques, spatial issues are even more inextricable with the narrative than they have been in “postmodern” television, film, or comic books. But before examining the implications that *Zelda* has for postmodern space, we must first look at how the exemplary installments in the series totalize more traditional narrative elements.

4.3 Mythos: Legends of Zelda

It is unlikely but apt that the name of the damsel in distress, and by extension the name of the game series as a whole, should be inspired by the wife of an American novelist. Shigeru Miyamoto recalled that as he was developing the first game, a PR planner at Nintendo suggested the name *Zelda* – from *Zelda Fitzgerald* – for the princess; Miyamoto liked the name, and since he wanted to call the game “The Legend of something” it became *The Legend of Zelda*. (Miyamoto et al., 2) As for the hero, “We named the protagonist Link because he links people together,” Miyamoto would later write. (Miyamoto et al., 2) The *Zelda* series is peppered with such in-jokes and odd, cross-cultural borrowings, and in that way the games furnish evidence of those theories of postmodernism that see it as an aesthetic of de-historicized pastiche. The fact that the

narrative material which accrues in the *Zelda* series is fantasy-based, and mostly from previous *Zelda* games, shows that it, even more than works such as *The Wire* or *Batman*, is exemplary of what I have called the “bootstrapping” epic – an epic that, instead of taking “real” history or legend as its subject, creates that backstory as it goes along. And yet, as the example of *Zelda Fitzgerald* shows, this can never be absolutely divorced from real culture – the American cultural influence on post-war Japan, and vice-versa, is a deep undercurrent of Nintendo’s success.⁷⁵ This section will begin by tracing some of these odd and accidental connections, before looking at the processes by which narrative elements are developed and built upon in each succeeding *Zelda* sequel. After that, I will examine efforts to reconcile the stories of all the *Zelda* games into one overarching narrative structure, and the ways in which this has been supplemented in media beyond video games.

From the very beginning, the *Zelda* series integrated elements from obscure popular culture references, Japanese and American alike, with a distinct preference for already-established Nintendo characters from other games. Nintendo’s marketing savvy since its entry into the US market in the mid-1980s is well-known, including the company’s deliberate use of Mario as a mascot, and the cynical promotion of Nintendo characters in cartoons and otherwise-forgettable films such as *The Wizard* (1989) or *Super Mario Bros.* (1993). But the accretion of narrative fragments into the games began earlier, and continued parallel and autonomously from larger marketing directives: in other words, material from earlier Nintendo games often crept into *Zelda* games out of designers’ whimsy. For instance, examination of the Japanese instruction manual for *The Legend of Zelda* reveals that some of the enemies Link fights in the game are from earlier Nintendo releases, a fact obscured by translation errors in the English localization. The “Digdogger” boss in *Zelda* is meant to be a giant version of the sea-urchin enemies in *Clu Clu Land*, an early Nintendo arcade game which was later ported to the NES in 1985. Likewise, the “Manhandla” boss was meant to be the same creature as the “piranha

⁷⁵ The works and corporate strategies of Walt Disney, for instance, were templates for Yamauchi and Miyamoto, especially in the creation of the wildly successful *Mario* franchise. (Kline et al., 125-126)

plants” which pop out of the pipes in *Super Mario Bros.* (Mandelin, “Instruction Manuals”) In the Japanese release of *A Link to the Past*, one item was originally called the “MC Hammer,” after the then-popular (c. 1991) American rap star; this in-joke was renamed the “magic hammer” in the US release, likely in order to avoid legal problems. (Mandelin, “MC Hammer”)

This trend reached its apogee in *The Legend of Zelda: Link’s Awakening*, the first handheld Zelda game, which was released for the Game Boy in 1993. *Link’s Awakening* began as an unauthorized side-project by some of the design team that had made *A Link to the Past*.⁷⁶ As designer Takashi Tezuka recalled in a panel discussion with fellow designers Toshihiko Nakago and Eiji Aonuma and current Nintendo President Satoru Iwata, “We’d do our regular work during normal work hours, and then work on it sort of like an afterschool club activity.” (“Iwata Asks”) The informality of the project, not to mention the crude monochrome graphics of the Game Boy, gave Tezuka and the others license to throw in all sorts of references that would not (for legal and bureaucratic reasons) be possible in later games, certainly not within the contemporary complexities of game production. “Cameo” appearances of Nintendo characters continued, especially from the *Mario* franchise: in addition to a Mario doppelganger, there were enemies such as chomps, piranha plants, and goombas, and even a doll modeled after the dinosaur Yoshi from *Super Mario World* (1991). Another enemy was modeled after Kirby, the cute, voracious blob who would go on to be a popular character from third-party developer HAL Laboratories. Iwata recalled, “About that time, Kirby was still just a fledgling character, so I think people thought that it was an honor to have him appear in a *The Legend of Zelda* game.” (“Iwata Asks”) The English-language localization added more in-jokes, such as the line “burn, baby burn” from The Trammps’ song “Disco Inferno.” (Mandelin, “You Got Disco in My Zelda”)

⁷⁶ Takashi Tezuka and Toshihiko Nakago became known along with Shigeru Miyamoto “as the ‘Kansai Manzai,’ or Western Japan Comedy Trio” after having collaborated with *Zelda*’s creators on the earliest titles in the series. (Sloan, 54)

Nevertheless, the appropriation of a wide variety of narrative fragments in *Link's Awakening* proved to have more significance to the epic sweep of the *Zelda* series beyond obscure fanboy allusions. The unlikely influence of *Twin Peaks* was one reason for this. Tezuka recalled that David Lynch's groundbreaking television series, popular in Japan at the time, made him want to craft an environment not unlike the eponymous small town, which he felt was populated with "suspicious types" ("Iwata Asks"). The constraints of *Link's Awakening's* topography – an island smaller than the Hyrule of earlier *Zelda* games – forced him to reflect on the details of that space. "I wanted to make something that, while it would be small enough in scope to easily understand, it would have deep and distinctive characteristics," Tezuka explained. During the same discussion Iwata mused that when "events occur at a well-known location ... background elements come into clarity," an approach to designing spaces that he felt could still be seen in much more different, and more recent, Nintendo gamespaces such as *Wii Sports Resort's* Wuhu Island. ("Iwata Asks") In retrospect, the *Zelda* designers came to see *Link's Awakening* as a turning point in the series as far as developing a compelling story and a fully-fledged world; in the game, Link is shipwrecked on a mysterious island and must, through the by-then well-established Overworld-exploration and dungeon-conquest gameplay, awaken the "Wind Fish," a kind of flying whale creature whose dreaming has created the island world. *Link's Awakening* may not have represented an important technological or gameplay milestone after *A Link to the Past*, but it set the tone for the way in which the *Zelda* series would accumulate and recombine narrative elements, and how these would be deployed within a contained and consistent world.

While tone and whimsical details in the *Zelda* mythos came from a wide range of sources, most of the narrative elements are developed within the series itself. In this way the later, landmark *Zelda* games such as *Ocarina* or *Wind Waker* constitute "bootstrapping" epics; they primarily gather their mythos not from real history or unrelated fictional media, but from the interior fictional history of their own series. It would take far too much space, and be rather tedious, to trace all the ways in which this is accomplished in the *Zelda* series; instead, we can consider the development of one particular class of characters that have appeared in many of the games: the Zora. In the original *Legend of Zelda*, Zoras (mis-transliterated in the game manual as "zolas") were

the only aquatic enemies, who popped out of lakes to spit fireballs at Link, and they returned in somewhat different form in *Zelda II: The Adventure of Link*. Beginning with *A Link to the Past*, Zoras are associated with specific regions, such as Zora's Waterfall; while they are still enemies to be avoided, there is a King Zora who sells Link an item, Zora's Flippers, which allow him to swim in deep water. In *Ocarina of Time*, Zoras are presented as a fully-fledged society that live in Zora's Domain; in addition to meeting their king, Link rescues his daughter, Princess Ruto, from inside the belly of the Zora's patron deity, Lord Jabu-Jabu. In *Oracle of Ages*, it is revealed that there are two types of Zoras, the more aggressive River Zoras and the more peaceful Sea Zoras, explaining why the creatures had shifted from being foes to friends as the series had progressed to that point. In *Majora's Mask*, Link can use a Zora Mask to assume the form of Mikua, a famous Sea Zora musician, and swim quickly through the water like a fish or dolphin. This ability is similarly acquired in *Twilight Princess* when Link encounters Zoras in that game who give him the Zora Tunic. In *Wind Waker*, which is set in the distant future after *Ocarina of Time*, the spirit of a long-dead Zora named Laruto appears to guide Link; the Zora people have in the meantime evolved into a race of anthropomorphic birds called the Ritos. What is also interesting is that the narrative elements here can be interpreted as fulfilling a formal function regarding Link's relationship to the gamespace in each *Zelda* game: encountering or aiding the Zoras often rewards Link with the ability to traverse the gameworld more quickly, by means of waterways or similar devices such as whirlpool "warps"; ironically, the Zoras have evolved into birds in *Wind Waker* – the game in which the land of Hyrule has long since flooded, leaving only islands – precisely because Link now travels in his own sailboat. In that game it is control over the winds that delimits Link's movement through space. The most recent *Zelda* console title, *Skyward Sword*, was supposed to have a race that "closely resembled" the Zora, only was more primitive, in keeping with the game's setting in the distant past relative to the other *Zelda* games, but this idea was ultimately dropped. (Miyamoto et al., 48)

Similarly, the music of the series, composed primarily by Koji Kondo, builds upon previous installments while maintaining continuity from game to game. Most famously, the theme for the Overworld in the original *Legend of Zelda* (also known as "Above Ground" or "Hyrule Field") recurs in many of the sequels in some fashion, although

Kondo was careful not to repeat the same title theme for each game. Much in the same way that the “cultures” of characters like the Zoras developed with each new game, the musical cues take on deeper significance as they are repurposed throughout the series. For instance, the cue “Meeting the Maidens” in *A Link to the Past*, used for the maidens (of whom Zelda is one) whose power has sealed away Ganon, becomes “Zelda’s Theme” in *Ocarina of Time*; “Zelda’s Lullaby,” a simplified version of the melody, which Zelda teaches to Link, is used as a kind of musical shibboleth identifying members of the Royal Family of Hyrule or their most trusted messengers, and playing the lullaby allows Link access to secret areas and other benefits. “Zelda’s Theme” becomes a traditional leitmotif in many of the sequels, playing either when Zelda appears in some connection with the greater *Legend of Zelda* mythos (as when Zelda is revealed to be the reincarnation of the goddess Hylia in *Skyward Sword*), or when some character is associated with Zelda (such as when the pirate girl Tetra is revealed to be a descendant of Zelda in *Wind Waker*). Thus the techniques of Wagnerian opera or fantasy film scores (most notably those of John Williams or Howard Shore) give an added depth to the narrative world of *Zelda* that is rare in games; the *Zelda* scores are also properly bootstrapping in that, just like *Star Wars* or *The Lord of the Rings*, they are composed exclusively for the series and are not explicitly connotative of music from other unrelated works.⁷⁷

In this way the *Zelda* series maintains a remarkable, and yet not quite iron-clad, continuity. The *Zelda* games are in many cases both remakes and sequels: they are remakes in the sense that they retell the same basic quest story, with innovations in gameplay design and technological sophistication; but they are also sequels in the sense that the storyworlds and the details of Link’s adventure are explicitly set in a different era of the distant past or far future (e.g., *Skyward Sword* or *Wind Waker*) or continue from the quest of an earlier game (e.g., *Link’s Awakening* or *Majora’s Mask*). In this way the mythos of the series is enormous, dwarfing such other best-selling and long-running video game franchises such as *Final Fantasy* or *Grand Theft Auto*, whose storyworlds are

⁷⁷ One counter-example of this might be Hector Berlioz’s *Symphonie Fantastique*, which, while developing the *idée fixe*, a precursor to Wagner’s leitmotif technique, also contains motifs from Church music such as the *Dies Irae*.

generally discontinuous from game to game; but *Zelda*'s mythos is also not as intricately consistent as that of the *Mass Effect* franchise, whose releases plot action in extraordinary detail across the main trilogy and various spin-off games and related media. Attempts to reconcile all the legends of *Zelda* have kept fans busy for years, although the publication in 2012 of *Hyrule Historia*, a twenty-fifth anniversary retrospective and art book chronicling the series, provides an attempt at retroactive continuity from official Nintendo sources, including designers Shigeru Miyamoto and Eiji Aonuma. The book's chronology, which includes all but a few of the more obscure spin-off games, begins with the following disclaimer:

This is an introduction to the history of Hyrule, told chronologically, which weaves together the numerous *Legend of Zelda* stories. Is it a legend? Is it an accurate history of a cycle of rebirth? There is evidence that the story of the *Legend of Zelda* begins with *Skyward Sword*. Up to this point, the legends of *Zelda* have been surrounded by myth and mystery, but now, with the help of the following information, you will be able to discover for yourself the real history of Hyrule. (68)

Hyrule Historia then posits a timeline that squares the sometimes-contradictory backstories of the main *Zelda* games in a way that is more familiar from science fiction than fantasy – alternate realities that are the result of the paradoxes of time travel. *Ocarina of Time* is the game that marks the split into three separate timelines, and in this way it is once again valorized as one of the most important *Zelda* games in the mythos. In one reality, the hero Link is defeated, leading to a timeline that includes the events of the early *Zelda* games released for the NES, SNES, and Game Boy. In another reality, Link is triumphant and returns to the childhood era from which he first set off; this timeline includes *Ocarina*'s immediate sequel, *Majora's Mask*, as well as *Twilight Princess* and *Four Swords Adventures*. The last reality is spun off from the "adult era" of *Ocarina*, which leads to the events of *Wind Waker* and its Nintendo DS sequels *Phantom Hourglass* and *Spirit Tracks*. Just as within the *Batman* mythos there were many different, seemingly contradictory Batmen, there are countless possible Links in the *Zelda* mythos. The difference is that they are not mutually exclusive:

The heroes of these chronicles all share the name Link. These Links might have been the same person, a series of familial descendents [*sic*], or a number of heroes

with different names entirely. The Links of certain eras may also have been named after the legendary hero. Hylian princesses bearing the name Zelda have also appeared throughout the history of Hyrule. It is likely that the name was handed down through the generations. (Miyamoto et al., 68)

The Link of *Ocarina* is called the Hero of Time, a title that is quite apt considering the relationship between space and time that develops in the series, and which I will argue later on is emblematic of the kind of postmodern totalizing which is not uncommon in video game epics. For now, suffice it to say that the advantage of casting the games as both sequels and remakes marks a deliberate strategy in mythos-management on the part of Nintendo, which allows as much continuity as possible to give the series greater narratological depth, while at the same time leaving enough flexibility to leave openings for an indefinite number of sequels.

But there are deliberate exclusions as well, apocryphal parts of the mythos that Nintendo leaves out of the *Zelda* canon. For instance, many of the *Zelda* games have been adapted into manga in Japan, and these manga have eventually been translated into English and been made available in North America. One of the first of these was a serialized, full-color adaptation of *A Link to the Past*, which was written and illustrated by Shotaro Ishinomori and published in *Nintendo Power* magazine in 1992, before being reprinted in a single volume the following year. There had also been a black-and-white manga adaptation of the game by Akira Himekawa⁷⁸ in 1991, but this was not released in an English translation until 2005 to coincide with the re-release of the game on the Game Boy Advance. The clear subordination of these manga to the games, and their publication to coincide with game releases, indicates that their creation was driven foremost by commercial concerns; *Nintendo Power*, especially, was conceived primarily as a direct marketing tool (Kline et al. 120), and in the late 1980s and early 1990s the magazine often featured short comics as another way to promote Nintendo titles to children. The adaptations of *A Link to the Past* were followed by manga versions, also by Himekawa, of most of the *Zelda* games that succeeded them; in each case, some details were changed

⁷⁸ Akira Himekawa is the pen name of two female *mangaka* (manga writer-artists) who have collaborated on many notable, non-Nintendo manga such as a new version of *Astro Boy* and *Gold Ring*, an Arabic-language manga. (Neild)

from the source games' stories and supporting characters were introduced who were never developed further in subsequent games or comics. These manga were released in Japan concurrently with the games, but were not translated officially into English until 2008, when editions began appearing in the United States and other Anglophone markets.⁷⁹

The Legend of Zelda manga tie-ins, while not canonical, do represent a certain cultural cachet in their use of talented and respected artists. But some other *Zelda* spin-offs, born of Nintendo's rapid expansion into the American market in the late 1980s and early 1990s, the company seems eager to suppress out of a kind of corporate embarrassment. These have included a *Legend of Zelda* cartoon TV series, whose thirteen episodes aired as part of the *Super Mario Bros. Super Show* in 1989. In the *Zelda* cartoon, Link is portrayed as a whiny teenager with a cloying catchphrase ("Well excu-u-use me, Princess!"), who meanders through silly plots that tend to have more to do with getting a smooch from Zelda than saving the land from villainy. In 1990, a series of *Zelda* comics were published by Valiant Comics, which hewed closely to the visual style of the cartoon. These comics were branded as part of the "Nintendo Comics System," which included other early Nintendo franchise characters such as Mario and Captain N. The naming of Nintendo's console as an "entertainment system" had originally been a tactic to distance the product from the failure of "video games" in the early 1980s (Sheff, 167), but the short-lived "comics system" and similar cynical merchandising ventures reflected Nintendo's efforts to dominate children's entertainment during its heyday at the end of that decade. Such tactics reached their nadir when the *Super Mario Bros.* movie flopped in 1993 (Sloan, 53), by which time competition from Sega (and later Sony) forced Nintendo to focus once more on video games and the so-called console wars. A side effect was an increased wariness toward licensing deals and more direct control over the brand's intellectual property, of which the *Zelda* series became a kind of flagship.

⁷⁹ Fan-made scans of the manga with English translations had been distributed on the Internet beforehand, however.

Thus some of the more embarrassing releases were left to be forgotten, all but erased from the *Zelda* mythos. Most emblematic of this was what some fans have dubbed the “unholy Triforce” of *Zelda*-branded games for the Philips CD-i system, whose advent came about from a complex intersection of technological speculation and cross-company licensing deals. In the early 1990s, when industry prognosticators envisioned “multimedia” as the future of home entertainment, Nintendo had tried to develop a CD-ROM add-on to the Super Nintendo Entertainment System; a partnership with Sony to augment the SNES failed,⁸⁰ leading Nintendo to partner with Philips next. But the subsequent failure of Sega’s Mega-CD add-on for the Genesis caused Nintendo to cancel the project, while Philips eventually went ahead with its own separate multimedia console, the Compact Disc Interactive, or CD-i. As part of the dissolution of the deal with Nintendo, Philips was granted a license to develop games based on a number of Nintendo’s franchise characters, including characters from the *Zelda* series. However, the CD-i was a console for playing interactive compact discs, not a dedicated games platform; its educational and non-gaming software sold poorly, while its games were hampered by a host of technical problems and a controller ill-designed for that purpose. (Szczepaniak 2007) Nevertheless, Philips went ahead and hired noted computer game designer Dale DeSharone to create *Zelda* titles for the CD-i. DeSharone recalled that

It was just obviously not a game system and Philips was actually very clear in telling us that they didn't believe the market for this device was games. There was a subtle hostility toward games that I noticed from the upper echelon of execs at AIM [American Interactive Media, Philips’ game-publishing subsidiary]. Philips thought that people would buy the machine for home educational purposes. This all changed after the launch of the CD-i platform because the only titles that actually sold were the game titles. (Szczepaniak 2007)

Tight schedules and a lack of funding led to the simultaneous release of two CD-i games in 1993: *Zelda: The Wand of Gamelon* and *Link: The Faces of Evil*. A third game, *Zelda’s Adventure*, was created by a different developer, Viridis, and released in 1994. *The Wand of Gamelon* and *The Faces of Evil* were both side-scrolling action games; in

⁸⁰ This eventually led to Sony’s independent development of the PlayStation, which would have huge ramifications in the 1990s “console wars.” It also marked the departure of the *Final Fantasy* series from Nintendo to Sony’s PlayStation consoles.

the former, players controlled Princess Zelda, and in the latter, players controlled Link. Despite graphics and music that were lush for their time, both games suffered from terrible play controls, confusing level design, and other technical problems. They also became notorious for their use of cartoon cutscenes that were jarringly superimposed on the game action: these sequences had been outsourced to Russian animators and the voice-acting had been done by local actors in Boston (Szczepaniak), with predictably poor-quality results. The story of the games was equally clumsy and nonsensical (for example, Link spends *The Wand of Gamelon* trapped in a magic mirror with no apparent explanation). *Zelda's Adventure*, on the other hand, used live-action video and a top-down perspective similar to the first *Legend of Zelda* and *A Link to the Past*; but it too was plagued with bad acting, sub-par design, and severe technical limitations. Its storyline was equally clumsy and forgettable (the action is set in the land of "Tolemac," which is just "Camelot" spelled backwards). Unlike *The Wand of Gamelon* and *Faces of Evil*, the in-game graphics and sound of *Zelda's Adventure* were poor even by contemporary standards. The first two CD-i *Zelda* games had a few defenders and a certain campy appeal, but *Zelda's Adventure* is considered by many to be even worse; according to John Szczepaniak in *Retro Gamer* magazine, the top-down perspective and lack of cartoon cutscenes may have bolstered *Zelda's Adventure's* reputation vis-à-vis the first two CD-i games only among those who have never actually played it. (Szczepaniak 2006, 57)

DeSharone later explained that neither Philips nor Nintendo exerted much design control over *The Wand of Gamelon* or *The Faces of Evil*: "Nintendo's only input was we ran the design document and character sketches past them for approval. They were mostly interested in the look of the Link and Zelda characters" (Szczepaniak 2006, 55) But Szczepaniak's assertion that, because of this early approval, "quite clearly Nintendo was satisfied with things" (2006, 55) is hardly convincing, especially considering the meticulous testing of the games that Nintendo developed in-house (Sheff, 184-186) during the same period. What is far more likely is that Nintendo's concern with these "contractual obligation" games licensed to Philips extended solely to the branding of the characters of Link and Zelda, who would have to appear consistently across their appearances in various media. Tellingly, the jewel-case artwork and *Zelda* logos for the

two DeSharone-led games matches the official Nintendo artwork for other early-1990s *Zelda* games, but is not consistent with the designs used in the games themselves. Clearly, Nintendo was not interested in the details of these games and, after the final products were released, was happy to let them be forgotten. It is often difficult to piece together the decision-making processes at private corporations, especially ones as insular and tightly-controlled as Nintendo, but the complete lack of any official acknowledgement that the CD-i *Zelda* games even existed is striking. Moreover, the *Zelda* brand would only be licensed once more, and under much different circumstances; the Japanese games giant Capcom was allowed to develop *Zelda* games for the Game Boy Color and Game Boy Advance, but these had much more input from Nintendo's stable of *Zelda* designers, such as Takashi Tezuka ("Iwata Asks"), and the games used the same engine developed for *Link's Awakening*. Satoru Iwata, who was president of HAL Laboratories at the time, recalled being surprised that Nintendo would let "external entities" create games in the *Zelda* franchise ("Iwata Asks"); in his current position as President of Nintendo Iwata has stressed that Nintendo will not license its intellectual property for release on non-Nintendo hardware platforms because he believes that doing so would diminish design quality. (Robinson)

Thus the *Zelda* mythos exhibits a curious mix of totalizing accretion and ruthless culling: it incorporates a surprising amount of unusual pop culture references from America and Japan, but the vast majority of its narrative material comes from the game series itself, building upon all aspects of the story and design of previous releases to a remarkable degree of "bootstrapping." And yet this process is not absolute, as the marginalization of narrative threads from certain works – games and merchandising spin-offs alike – attempts to impose the impression of a carefully curated official canon. This reveals certain tensions within the process of creating such a long-running and complex cultural production, leading to a riff on an old logical fallacy one might recast as "No True Hylian": one trademark of the *Zelda* series is that its games are of a consistently high quality; when presented with counterexamples like the CD-i games that, despite clearly featuring Link and Zelda, fail to live up to this standard, fans dismiss them as not being "real" *Zelda* games. *Zelda*'s curators at Nintendo seem unwilling to correct them (Satoru

Iwata, as evidenced by available interview material, may not even be aware of the CD-i games). Bad games, it would seem, lie outside the ethos of *Zelda*.

4.4 Ethos: The Borders of Hyrule

What, then, is included in the representational range of *The Legend of Zelda* and its many sequels? We can break this category down into roughly two types: first, the more closely mimetic elements, which include the gameworld and its fantasy trappings, and second, the formal elements, which include the type of gameplay most associated with the series and the modes of player affect that that type is felt to generate. This division is not absolute: for instance, the retelling of the classic quest archetype which each *Zelda* game presents has clear semiotic signifiers within the graphics, sound design, and so forth, but it also shapes the structure of the gameplay and the kinds of fans who are drawn to playing *Zelda* games.

In the broadest mimetic sense, the ethos of *The Legend of Zelda* is firmly situated in the tradition of modern fantasy, which, via a number of progenitors in art and literature – such as the works of Tolkien, or the Pre-Raphaelites – presents a romanticized version of the European middle ages. Indeed, the medieval romance, with its tropes of fairy-tale princesses, castles, and dragon-slaying, is one of the semiotic touchstones of the fantasy genre in literature and the adventure genre in video games; the medieval romance also, as discussed in the first chapter, intersects historically with the epic, as such works as *La Morte D'Arthur*, *La Chanson du Roland* or the *Nibelungenlied* would be seen in retrospect as providing the basis for a variety of nationalist myths. As in contemporary fantasy, the ethos of the *Zelda* series admits magic and monsters as well, hewing more closely to medieval folklore than to the typical aristocratic epics of the period, although they too were not averse to depicting supernatural elements. In the next section, I will explore some of the complications this poses for considering fantasy's, and particularly *Zelda*'s, place within a postmodern cosmos. For now, we may simply note the possibilities and the limits of *Zelda*'s representational logic, both in its broad strokes and in its many details.

The land of Hyrule is staunchly feudal and pre-industrial in its social arrangements and technology. Most travel in the *Zelda* games is done on foot, though sometimes this is augmented by riding on horseback, sailing, or, more fancifully, being carried aloft by birds. Weaponry is limited to swords and bows and arrows. But even here there are clues pointing toward not just fantasy, but ahistoricism: for one thing, there are no firearms or artillery as such in the *Zelda* games, but from the very first installment Link's arsenal includes explosives in the form of bombs with fuses. The Nintendo DS sequels to *Wind Waker* feature steamships and locomotives. On the other hand, Link's main weapon, the sword, is modeled strongly on the named swords of medieval lore, and the *Zelda* series at times borrows heavily from the Arthurian myths of Excalibur. For example, in *A Link to the Past*, Link recovers the "Master Sword" from a clearing in the Lost Woods, where it has been affixed in a stone for centuries awaiting the hero to free and wield it. This representational mash-up of pseudo-historical elements is an example of what Eddo Stern, following Umberto Eco, calls "neo-medievalism," which he sees as a recurring cultural trend most recently embodied in medieval-themed MMOs. (Stern) Similarly, Valerie Johnson, in a discussion of modern retellings of the Robin Hood myth, critiques "medievalism" – as opposed to the properly "medieval" – as a system of signification that, while using many features of the historical middle ages, distorts these features for contemporary ends and can easily be confused with an accurate portrayal of a real historical period by non-specialist audiences. (207) Clearly this process is at work here.

Adding to *Zelda*'s "medievalism" is the blend of Japanese cultural elements, both feudal and contemporary, with the tropes of European fantasy. For example, in some *Zelda* games, such as *The Minish Cap* and *Skyward Sword*, Link receives combat training in facilities resembling martial arts dojos; in *The Minish Cap* these are even explicitly referred to as such. Fishing, first available as a mini-game in *Link's Awakening*, is one popular Japanese pastime that recurs in several *Zelda* games. Insect collecting has been featured in the *Zelda* series since *A Link to the Past*; in *Skyward Sword*, the range of insects that Link can find and catch is quite large. That hobby, especially among youths, is extremely popular in Japan, and is distinct from that in other cultures for its appreciation of live insects and their role in nature; a single beetle once sold in Tokyo for \$90,000. ("Beetle Queen") Games like *Skyward Sword* and *Wind Waker* also feature

hunting down assortments of items and “collectibles,” in the form of figurines and other trinkets, as both a reflection and virtual reproduction of the kind of intense collector’s desire associated with otaku culture. (Niu et al., 713)

However, the *Zelda* games’ ethos of openness to contrasting cultural milieux only goes so far. The series takes auditory and visual material from cultural contexts outside America/Europe and Japan in a way that approaches stereotyping. For example, at one point in *Ocarina of Time*, Link travels to the desert land of the Gerudo, at the outer borders of Hyrule. The Gerudo are a race of female warriors and thieves; only once in a hundred years do they have a son, who becomes their chief. The current chief, the red-headed Ganondorf, becomes corrupted and transformed into Ganon by his theft of the magical Triforce of Power. The female Gerudo are conceptually reminiscent of Amazon warriors, though they appear as a pastiche of Arabian and North African physiology and dress, which includes stereotypical harem girl/belly dancer *bedlah* costumes, veils, and scimitars. Thus the Gerudo and their chief are already framed as strongly “other” to Link in both a visual and narratological sense.

This is reinforced in Koji Kondo’s score for *Ocarina*. The cue “Gerudo Valley” deploys musical clichés to stress the difference signalled by the visual commonplaces. The Gerudo theme is a series of quick, ascending phrases played by what sounds (in MIDI) like an acoustic guitar; it is later doubled by the sound of a trumpet. Percussion made to sound like castanets keeps time. This combination of three main parts in the cue signals a conventionally Spanish or Moorish atmosphere. When combined with the vaguely “North African” visual cues in the game’s graphics, the music helps create a representation of the fictional Gerudo valley that is explicit in its otherness, while at the same time being almost careless in its deployment of tropes from a variety of “oriental” sources. Of course, this feature of pastiche is not unprecedented, nor, as Edward Said argues, does it matter much that the geographic distinctions here are arbitrary: “often the sense in which someone feels himself to be not-foreign is based on a very unrigorous idea of what is ‘out there,’ beyond one’s own territory. All kinds of suppositions, associations, and fictions appear to crowd the unfamiliar space outside one’s own.” (Said, 54) This was also evident in *Ocarina*’s use of audio samples: for instance, the Fire Temple in the original

release of *Ocarina of Time* featured chanting male voices in the background, which sounded like a Muslim prayer. When this song was replaced with more innocuous-sounding synthesized voices in later cartridges, rumours spread that Nintendo had made the change in the wake of complaints from offended Islamic groups. Years later, GameTrailers.com analyzed the code of all the released versions of the game and revealed that the chant in question had been a commercially-available sample, also used in other games not developed by Nintendo, and that it had been changed before *Ocarina*'s first commercial release. Nintendo confirmed this via email; it turned out that the company had itself decided to replace the original background music because it anticipated the possibility of that very controversy. ("Episode 09") In the broad strokes, then, *Zelda*'s ethos combines elements of Japanese and Euro-American cultural signifiers with success, but it is less-clearly defined with regard to signifiers outside those two traditions.

At a more detailed level, we can examine the range of representation of the series' many characters. First among these is the hero, Link himself. As *Hyrule Historia* and the internal evidence of the games themselves make clear, the hero of most of the games is not the same "Link" who appears in the others. And yet the representational ethos of the *Zelda* games is quite narrow in this regard: Link is always male, between the ages of around twelve and twenty, with blue eyes and blond or fair hair. He has the pointed ears and elfin features of the Hylians or their descendants, an appearance that also has a long history in fantasy literature as well as Japanese manga. Link always wears some variation of green tunic and cap in the games, and this is often explained away within the gameworld as part of the recurring legends of the Hero of Time. For example, in *Wind Waker*, Link begins by wearing islander garb. He is given the green outfit by his grandmother, because wearing the "traditional" outfit of the Hero is presented in the game as a coming-of-age rite; when Link is subsequently caught up in the adventure after donning the costume of the Hero of Time, it is revealed as an in-game prefiguration and a real-world rationalization all at once.

A similar configuration and deployment of signifiers surrounds the titular princess Zelda. Some incarnation or descendant of Zelda appears in most (but not all) the games in the

series, and she is usually a physical counterpart to Link – also a Hylian, with blonde or fair hair, pointed ears, and so forth. Her clothing, regal gowns with Hylian symbols usually including the pyramidal Triforce logo, fulfills a similar function to Link’s green outfit as well. It identifies and legitimates her as a version of Zelda: for example, in *Wind Waker*, when the pirate girl Tetra is revealed to be a descendant of Zelda, she appears dressed similarly to the earlier incarnations. In *Skyward Sword*, Zelda is only another student at Skyloft Academy, until she is revealed to be the incarnation of the goddess Hylia, and her attire changes accordingly. Zelda also embodies some of the contradictions of Hyrule’s ahistoricist ethos: on the one hand, Zelda is often cast as the traditional, if not sexist, damsel in distress; on the other, in many of the games she takes on a more assertive, traditionally male role. In *Ocarina of Time*, for instance, she aids Link in her (admittedly male) alter-ego, the masked warrior Sheik, and her power is instrumental in helping Link defeat Ganon at the end of the game. Zelda, as mentioned earlier, is even the player-controlled character in two of the three non-canon CD-i games, and it is significant that their poor esteem among fans is not due to the use of Zelda as a protagonist. The ethos of the *Zelda* games admits assertive, active women, even if this representative possibility is only sporadically realized.

The *Zelda* series appeals to a variety of video game players, having found fans beyond the “hardcore” gaming community before that term had even reached wide currency. This can be traced in part to the elements of the *Zelda* ethos that go beyond pandering to teenage boys; this includes the mimetic representation that we have been examining, but it also applies to the gameplay structure. Although the *Zelda* series has its share of combat-based gameplay, Link’s many battles against monsters throughout his various quests is but one aspect of the gameplay, and it is mostly free of gratuitous blood and gore, for instance. All the *Zelda* games have been rated “E” for “Everyone” or “E+ 10” for “Everyone over 10” by the industry-run Entertainment Software Rating Board (ESRB), with the exception of *Twilight Princess* (which was rated “T” for “Teen”). As such, the series is considered family-friendly, and there are many instances of older family members, who might not otherwise be gamers, being introduced to *Zelda* by their children. For example, Celia Pearce describes one 32-year-old woman who “also played *Legends of Zelda* [sic] with her mom, who did not like the competitive speed-oriented

games she typically played with her dad.” (2008, 163) Indeed, *Zelda* is seen as an appropriate “mom” game; Khanolkar and McLean interview one representative gamer who denies “the uniformity of the stereotypical gamer” while still believing that not all games are for all gamers: “I mean, like, as far as like [*Legend of Zelda* and *Wii Sports*, I wouldn’t have a problem, but if [my mom] started playing, you know, *Resistance: Fall of Man*, or something like that, that’d be a little weird.” (972) *Zelda*’s exploration and puzzle-solving gameplay also lends it an ethos that appeals to a broader range of gamers, such as “casual gamers.” Game designer Nick Fortugno, in an interview with Jesper Juul, speculates that casual games stress positive reinforcement of learned gameplay, while hardcore games stress negative reinforcement; this means that games that feature puzzles rather than combat can have broader cross-over appeal. Puzzle-game structures are “not unique to casual games. I mean *Zelda* has been using a structure like that since its inception. But I think it’s the reason why *Zelda* is more accessible to non-game players than other kinds of games.” (qtd. in Juul 2010, 191)

It is perhaps unusual that a series whose hero has always been a young man or teenage boy should appeal to, among others, middle-aged women. Miyamoto and the other *Zelda* designers have noted that the very name “Link” is meant to evoke a connection between the series’ avatar and its players, and although the visual look of the hero has been remarkably constant and constrained over the course of the series, other elements are left to the imagination. For instance, the *Zelda* series has never used voice-over acting, despite the fact that this has been technically possible in console games for many years. Link’s auditory expressions are monosyllabic grunts or exclamations, and even within the dialogue scenes, which are conveyed in on-screen text, Link is taciturn and mime-like. His lack of speech may well create a kind of gap in the character for the projection of affect that might otherwise be closed off by Link’s tightly-controlled visual appearance. A Link with a predetermined look and a recognizable voice would lack this; a Link without a voice and whose appearance was customizable would no longer be

recognizable as such. This is one formal aspect in which the *Zelda* series is rather unusual, at least among contemporary game series.⁸¹

A formal aspect of Link, *Zelda*, and the rest that is far more common in video games (or at least narrative-based adventure games) is the hero's ethos of action and power. Here we may, once again, turn to Northrop Frye's high mimetic mode as a useful interpretative tool: Link is superior in ability and strength to other men (and ultimately to the monsters he defeats), but is still constrained by his environment. While he uses magical items and the like, these still obey the physics of the world of Hyrule. *Zelda*, likewise, lives up to her aristocratic status in her own abilities, and in many instances throughout the series, in her magical powers as well. What is interesting here is that the representative ethos of *Zelda* as narrative is mirrored in the formal ethos of *Zelda* as game: the player-avatar has a parallel relationship to the algorithmic logic of the game. In the adventure genre of which *Zelda* is an exemplar, the player's skill increases with each challenge that is overcome. Ideally, this occurs progressively, maintaining a state of "flow" (Csikszentmihalyi, 74), as the avatar never outclasses his on-screen enemies to a degree that would make the game too easy. The player only exerts total control over the avatar's environment (if at all) once all tasks and quests are exhausted, once every enemy is defeated. In this way the end of the game's narrative coincides with the player's complete freedom to maneuver throughout the designed gamespace. This is in marked contrast with games that facilitate a contest between one player and another (whether real or computer-controlled), as in *Wii Sports*, or simulation games that give the player godlike powers over the gamespace, such as *The Sims*.

⁸¹ Other games in which these alternatives arise present interesting counter-examples: for instance, in *Knights of the Old Republic* (2003), the player-avatar Revan speaks only through text and has fully customizable appearance; he (or she) can vary greatly between playthroughs, perhaps too much to be compelling. On the other hand, after years of silence, Samus Aran became a fully-voice-acted player avatar in *Metroid: Other M*, but this interpretation angered many fans who had felt that the new version was incompatible with the way Samus had appeared in earlier games. Commander Shepard, from the *Mass Effect* trilogy, seems to have struck a similarly effective balance as Link; however, in the case of Shepard, it is the voice (either male or female) that remains constant, while the appearance is left to the player to adjust. Cf. Marie-Laure Ryan on the appeal of "rather flat but active" characters as computer game protagonists (2006, 125).

What becomes increasingly clear is that when considering a media text of the complexity of a video game – let alone a “mega-text” such as a long-running video game series like *Zelda* – it becomes ever more difficult to separate and isolate the game’s representational fictions from larger technological and social elements. *Zelda*’s place within a wider social totality, what I have been calling its cosmos, has been implicit in its representational logics, in the players it attracts (as well as in those for whom it is felt to be appropriate), and in the multinational capitalist enterprises within which its creators work and which exert control over its future. It is to this cosmos to which I will now more fully turn.

4.5 Cosmos I: The Hermeneutics of *Zelda*

The Legend of Zelda and its many sequels are clear landmarks in the history of video games. Works that have played a similarly seminal role in older, more established media forms have had a clear record of popular and scholarly reception. However, in the case of *Zelda*, and many other video games for that matter, there are a number of challenges in evaluating how games have been received and hence how they are situated within a wider cultural context. There is no ethnography of *Zelda* fans; there is as yet no scholarly article, let alone a full-length book, devoted exclusively to any aspect of the series. And yet the *Zelda* games are mentioned again and again in passing in a wide variety of cultural contexts as fondly-remembered masterpieces. Indeed, what is remarkable about the *Zelda* series is how frequently this assessment is taken for granted among both gamers and the academics and intellectuals who study them. How popular is *Zelda*, and what does that popularity mean? Or better yet, what aesthetic or hermeneutic function does *Zelda* seem to fulfil that might account for its enduring popularity? Exactly what the *Zelda* series means to those who play its games must therefore be pieced together from the traces left in a variety of disparate sources and contexts: these can include fan analyses and discourses on internet forums, or the activities of videogame music remix communities and convention-going cosplayers; added insight might also be gleaned from reading between the lines of sales figures and marketing claims surrounding the games and related material.

As mentioned earlier, the *Zelda* series has sold somewhere around 70 million copies of the games in total over the last quarter-century. The original *Legend of Zelda*, *Ocarina of*

Time, and *Twilight Princess* have been among the top sellers, with a few million of each sold at the time of their original release. Yet these somewhat conjectural figures reveal little more than raw quantity. Anecdotal evidence of the demography of *Zelda*'s players (e.g., Pearce 2008, Khanolkar and McLean, Juul 2010) suggests the broad appeal of the *Zelda* series across both sexes and various age groups, but it is unclear what proportion of *Zelda* fans are women, or what proportion is over a certain age, for instance. It is also unknown how many of the millions buying each *Zelda* game have bought other *Zelda* games in the past, and how many will only play one game in the series.

Despite all this, it would be safe to assume that there is a significant core of *Zelda* fans. One indicator of this group, and a clue to its size, comes from the sale of the recent *Hyrule Historia* book. A somewhat odd mix of archival art, tie-in manga, and promotion of the concurrent release of *Skyward Sword*, *Hyrule Historia* would make little sense to anyone without more than a passing familiarity with *Zelda*; only a *Zelda* fan would likely read this book. First published in Japan in 2011, an English-language version of *Hyrule Historia* was announced in mid-2012, and became highly anticipated, attracting the notice of mainstream publishing press. *Publishers Weekly*, for instance, noted that pre-order sales of the book dislodged *Fifty Shades of Grey* from first place on Amazon's US sales charts. (White, 17) Even statistics such as these are somewhat obscure: Amazon is "famously one of the most tight-lipped" booksellers in America (Habash, 6), and it is interesting that *Publishers Weekly* used the specific case of *Hyrule Historia* to speculate about how many sales are required to be a bestseller on Amazon. Using figures reported from Nielsen BookScan, and augmented by some estimation to account for retailers that do not report to that tracking service, *Publishers Weekly* determined that the book sold an average of 1,050 copies per day during late February and early March 2013, with about thirty percent of that total being sold on Amazon. (Habash, 6) The title of "Amazon bestseller" therefore means the sale of a few hundred copies per day, at least during a non-peak time for book sales. And yet this still represents a significant and unexpected success, as the book sold out at a variety of outlets, including Walmart.com (Habash, 6), and the publisher increased the print run from 250,000 copies to 400,000 copies in order to meet unanticipated demand. (White, 17)

Clearly there is a significant fanbase for the *Zelda* games, even if it may not be the most vocal within the gaming community overall. *Zelda*-themed cosplayers, fans who dress up as characters from manga and anime, are a presence at large conventions not only in Japan, but also in North America, such as Baltimore's Otakon, San Diego's Comicon and Toronto's Fan Expo Canada. (Fig. 15) Such gatherings have exploded in attendance in recent years, attracting tens of thousands of fans annually; but, as with sales figures of the games themselves, there is currently no precise information on how many attendees are dedicated fans specifically of *Zelda*, or of anything else. Determining this would require resources beyond the scope of this study, and any effort at surveying such groups systematically can only be hindered by the colonization of the larger cons by the multinational corporations – Disney, Warner, Sony, etc. – whose control of intellectual property across all entertainment media have stamped out any pretence that these cons bear any resemblance to the traditional, grassroots comic book convention. However, *Zelda* fan communities that remain relatively autonomous and non-commercial can be inferred from the various competing *Zelda* wiki websites (e.g., ZeldaWiki.org, Zelda.wikia.com, etc.) and many other fan pages of varying comprehensiveness and



Figure 15. Zelda Cosplayers from Baltimore Otakon.

quality. Zelda Universe, which was founded in 2001 and claims to be the largest online *Zelda* fan community, currently lists 70,382 members on its forums, although only about a few thousand of these appear to have posted to the site in the past year. ZU has inspired other sites, such as *ZeldaInformer.com*, which was founded in 2007, by members and contributors to ZU and to VG Resource Center, another website dating back to the early 2000s. *Zelda Informer*, for its part, aspires to a high critical standard, as its FAQ page explains:

We feel [*Zelda Informer* has] something the entire *Zelda* fansite community (for the most part) lacks: Professionalism and integrity. One look at other sites, and you'll know that we are referring to the rampant fanboyism that runs through the entire community: "News" posts that are actually subliminal opinion pieces, "reviews" that praise the games (of course a *Zelda* fansite is going to like the series) and blatant anti-non-Nintendo bias. ... Our news is actually news, without biased statements seeping into them. And we aren't afraid to bitch about problems we might have with the series or its owners, because unlike every other *Zelda* site out there, we have too much integrity to do that. (About *Zelda Informer* and FAQ)

Contributors to sites such as *Zelda Informer* feel the need to go beyond simply keeping abreast of the latest Nintendo press releases or commenting on the latest *Zelda* game. Instead, many fans grapple with a shared sense that the games in the *Zelda* series constitute art, and that to play them is an affective experience that often deepens over time. One *Zelda* game with some of the most thoughtful apologists is *The Legend of Zelda: Majora's Mask* (2000), the controversial follow-up to *Ocarina of Time*. In *Majora's Mask*, Link is transported to a parallel world, Termina, in which the moon will crash into the earth in three days. While the engine and gameplay mechanics are nearly identical to *Ocarina*, *Majora's Mask* innovates with its highly unusual formal structure: using his ocarina, Link must continuously manipulate the flow of time and revisit events during those same three days in order to avert the catastrophe.⁸² *Majora's Mask* features a sense of foreboding and sadness unusual not only in the *Zelda* series, but in games generally. One contributor to *Zelda Informer* puts it like this:

⁸² The basic plot structure plays with the variation of looping events in a way most reminiscent of the *Star Trek: The Next Generation* episode "Cause and Effect" (1992) and the films *Groundhog Day* (1993) and *Run Lola Run* (1998) – ironically, since such productions have been described as game-like in their repetition of scenes until the protagonists discover the "right" outcome.

Touched by this game, I think of Termina's final moments whenever I see pink clouds at sunset. I think of the people, and remember their problems, and I feel their emotions. Anger, happiness, fear, and sadness, all at once. It's almost an unbearable feeling, and all I can do is just stand there and stare off into the sky. ... It is very rare for a game to show such emotion, let alone make the player wonder. Such things are expected of books, but never from a video game. I have spent much time thinking about the end of the world, all because of playing this game. (Halilović)

Zelda players such as Halilović seem to feel the need to argue for the aesthetic and affective merits of *Majora's Mask*, to convince those who have not played the game why they should do so. Similarly, Mia Consalvo, building on Fuller and Jenkins' early discussion of video games as travel narrative, takes a look at fan-made walkthroughs of *Majora's Mask* as indicative of these virtual tour guides. (328) She cites examples such as a gamer who "does not call his summaries walkthroughs but 'storylines' instead, and rather than refer to various 'levels' in the game, he has 'chapters' to note different parts." (329) Like many early forays into game studies, Consalvo's treatment of narratology is rather slight, but she is correct in stressing that fan-written descriptions of game action are not the narrative of the game as such (331) – they are supplemental narratives, and in this case, as with the description above, we should consider them as evidence not of *Majora's Mask's* own narrative, but of its reception, and in a sense the reproduction of its fandom.

Fans have also tried to come to terms with these *Zelda* experiences over a period of time. We have seen how the *Zelda* series has had a remarkably long history, and how subsequent games are often sequel-remake hybrids, or rereleases. But the hermeneutic efforts of some *Zelda* fans indicate that the affection felt for their gameplay experiences is not always simple nostalgia, and that greater understanding comes from reflection on older games. Again, *Majora's Mask* is a particular favourite in this regard. For instance, one fan reflects on the game nearly ten years after its release:

The first time that I played the game, I didn't fully comprehend these [dark] emotions and why I felt them. It is only with multiple play-throughs [*sic*] and another near-decade of maturity that it all makes sense. *Majora's Mask* may be rated for everyone, but I think that it is a game that is most interesting and rewarding to the mature gamer. ... I think that the true mark of a mature game is when the game makes an emotional or artistic statement that becomes all the more

nuanced with time and maturity. There are very few games that even attempt to do this, and I think that *Majora's Mask* is one of the most effective. (Gay)

Gay further reflects on the game in the historical context of the video game industry and



Figure 16. Print Advertisement for *Majora's Mask*.

Nintendo in particular. He calls the game's affective success a “fluke ... a one-time only occurrence where the wires were crossed in just the right way”;

Majora's Mask came about because of the rare artistic freedom that was granted to Eiji Aonuma at a time when Nintendo's position in the industry was falling toward its early-2000s nadir. (Gay)

In retrospect, the tone of *Majora's Mask*, with its themes of sadness and loss in the face of spectacular disaster, may have had greater resonance in the post-9/11 environment. No

critics – amateur or

otherwise – seem to have explored this connection yet, but marketing materials for *Majora's Mask*, such as an ad depicting a giant red moon about to collide with the World Trade Center and the rest of lower Manhattan (Fig. 16), serve as an eerie prefiguration of the destruction that would occur in real life only months after the game's release.

Other Zelda fans have taken their appreciation for the series and created new digital works. Unlike video games designed for PCs, the *Zelda* series has not fostered a large group of hackers and modders tinkering with Nintendo's official releases. Nevertheless,

the growth of software emulation in recent years has negated the physical obstacles of hacking original game cartridges, and there have been increasingly high-profile examples of minor hacks to *Zelda* classics, such as one in which Zelda is the player avatar and Link the one who needs rescuing. There have also been a number of more ambitious projects to create new *Zelda* games that are either variations on seminal titles in the series or entirely new storylines using similar game mechanics; most of these are little more than vapourware, but a few completed games, such as *The Legend of Zelda: Parallel Worlds* (c. 2007), using *A Link to the Past* as a template, have been released online to acclaim within modder communities.

The music of the *Zelda* series, on the other hand, has spawned a much more vibrant body of spin-off works. This is a testament to the high regard in which Koji Kondo's contribution to video game music is held. At OCREmix.org, a popular site for video game remixes which has been hosting music since 1999, *A Link to the Past* is the fifth-most remixed game, with 57 tracks currently available for download, in genres ranging from classical orchestral and jazz to hip-hop and rap. *Ocarina of Time*, the original *Legend of Zelda*, and other seminal titles also have inspired dozens of fan-made, professional-grade remixes. At least three full albums of *Zelda* remix music are also available. Only the games from the *Final Fantasy* series (composed primarily by Nobuo Uematsu, another giant in the field) appear to have inspired more musicians to create covers of their favourite in-game tracks.

The popularity of the *Zelda* music has also led to a number of concert performances over the years, both in Japan and North America; in such cases, the imprimatur of Nintendo is in evidence, and yet these spin-offs could only be profitable with support from a dedicated fan base. For instance, the *Mario & Zelda Big Band Live* performance at Tokyo's Nihon Seinekan Hall, on September 4, 2003, featured over a dozen eclectic arrangements (from big band to acapella) from the *Super Mario Bros.* and *Legend of Zelda* franchises; Kondo even made a guest appearance. More recently, Nintendo commissioned a series of concerts of *Zelda* music to mark the series' twenty-fifth anniversary in 2011 ("Nintendo Celebrates"); these proved successful enough to warrant a concert tour in the United States and Canada under the title of Symphony of the

Goddesses the following year. The tour was renewed for a second season in 2013, under the subtitle *Second Quest*, and again for a third season as *Master Quest* in 2015. In an added twist, some of the concerts have been emceed by Zelda Williams, daughter of the late comedian and actor Robin Williams (Ponce); ironically, she had been named after the game character and not Mrs. Fitzgerald.

This continuous mixture of commercial ventures with genuine popular affection for the *Zelda* series have left traces in the popular press as well. Business writers have often noted the release of major *Zelda* titles as an indicator of Nintendo's fortunes, especially when tied to the latest console. (Vincent; Molina) The series has permeated pop culture to the point now that mainstream critics – i.e., professional writers not affiliated with or publishing in the video game press – have internalized *Zelda* alternately as a source of fondness and as an object of continuing critique. Tom Bissell's recollection may be taken as representative: "the (still) impressively open-ended gameworld of Nintendo's *Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time* ... appealed to the most hairlessly innocent parts of my imagination. Ingenious, fun, and beautiful, *Ocarina* provided all I then expected from video games." (162) These writers, many of whom came of age during the rise of Nintendo in the late 1980s and early 1990s, have clearly been steeped in the *Zelda* series, but not to the point of fawning adulation. For some, a measured critique of *Zelda* is a way of establishing bona fides. Anita Sarkeesian's video webseries, *Feminist Frequency*, featured *The Legend of Zelda* in a widely-publicized, multipart segment on the prevalence of the "damsel in distress" trope in video games.⁸³ In the first video segment, Sarkeesian points out that the character of Zelda does show more depth and laudable autonomy than Princess Peach from the *Mario* franchise, and occasionally has a relatively active role in the story (such as in *Ocarina* or *Wind Waker*, as mentioned earlier). Despite these flashes of progressive representation, "all of the incarnations of Princess Zelda have been kidnapped, cursed, possessed, turned to stone or otherwise

⁸³ Despite the rather innocuous end product, Sarkeesian's project drew much derision and even online harassment from misogynist gamers when she first began raising funds via Kickstarter. The attention led to supporters pledging over \$150,000 – well beyond the \$6,000 she had originally asked for – and led to extensive coverage in the mainstream media.

disempowered at some point” (Sarkeesian). After cataloguing some far more egregious examples of sexism in video games, Sarkeesian concludes as follows:

Now I grew up on Nintendo, I’ve been a fan of the *Mario* and *Zelda* franchises for most of my life and they will always have a special place in my heart, as I’m sure is true for a great number of gamers out there. But it’s still important to recognize and think critically about the more problematic aspects especially considering many of these franchises are as popular as ever and the characters have become worldwide icons. (Sarkeesian)

Writing for Salon.com, Jon Hochschartner picks up on Sarkeesian’s approach and rhetorical tactics in an article occasioned by the fifteenth anniversary of *Ocarina of Time*. He hedges a critique of the game’s representational issues with assurances of genuine affection for *Ocarina* – the critique, he suggests, should be interpreted as “loyal opposition.” (Hochschartner) The analysis suffers from overreach: despite Hochschartner’s invocation of Karl Marx, the complaints from Kakariko village’s head carpenter about the laziness of his young workers is hardly indicative of a gameworld riven with class tensions; nor do the talking cows of Lon-Lon Ranch necessarily paper over the inherent brutality of pre-industrial domestication, as Hochschartner argues. And yet he makes similar, more sustainable points about the sexism and racial stereotyping that we have already noted earlier.

Oddly, this is the sort of representational critique one would expect in scholarly works, but *Zelda* has been overlooked by most academic researchers. Again, the problem seems to be not that the *Zelda* games are ignored, but that they are simply taken for granted. For instance, in a comprehensive textbook-style taxonomy of video game storytelling techniques, Josiah Lebowitz and Chris Klug use examples of a wide variety of story-games as “case studies,” from blockbuster hits (*Mass Effect*, *Bioshock*, multiple *Final Fantasy* games) to titles that are relatively obscure to mainstream Anglo-American gamers (such as Japanese “visual novels”). Yet the *Zelda* series is conspicuously absent, all the more so because, in a survey which Lebowitz and Klug conducted and append to their book, games from the *Zelda* series are mentioned frequently by respondents as “top game stories” (300) and “games purchased primarily for their story” (305). One notable exception to this tendency to neglect the *Zelda* series is Ian Bogost’s *Unit Operations*,

which features a discussion (albeit brief) of the series in general, and *Wind Waker* in particular. But even here, Bogost uses *Zelda* primarily as a counterexample of his analysis of *Grand Theft Auto III* and its relation to “unit operations,” that is, “modes of meaning-making that privilege discrete, disconnected actions over deterministic, progressive systems” (3) or “over global narrative progression” (19). Bogost argues that video game criticism should focus more on the way games create meaning from the interactions of their separate parts, and less on the meaning derived from those parts’ relation to a structure or hierarchy – under this logic, the representational aspects of particular games (e.g., the violence of the *GTA* series) can be waved aside as matters of secondary importance. However, this approach forces Bogost into some awkward contortions as he champions the virtues of texts that are not otherwise regarded as exemplary (such as the 2004 Steven Spielberg film *The Terminal*). As far as *Zelda* goes, Bogost concludes that *Wind Waker*

offers fewer inspirations [than *Grand Theft Auto III*] for the player to reorient his current activities and make meaningful use of those tools. The size of the world and the quantity of possible actions matters less than the significance of those actions. *Wind Waker* is still a terrific adventure game, but it fails to create the complex relations of experience found in *GTA*, even though the latter boasts no technical achievements whatsoever. (159)

It does seem at times that Bogost cherry-picks his objects here: in such discussions a game (or other text) is implied to be significant because it conforms to his particular theoretical inclinations. Ultimately, systemic meaning cannot entirely be wished away, if only because many people otherwise uninterested in scholarly debate still find meanings in systems, including, but not limited to, closed narrative progressions.⁸⁴

4.6 Cosmos II: The Hero of Space-Time

Bogost’s critique of *Wind Waker* points, at least tangentially, to the issues surrounding postmodern ideas of space; this is because the features he cites when rejecting the

⁸⁴ In a review of *Unit Operations*, Zach Whalen (2006) makes the interesting point that the structure even of his book review, as an instance of critical writing, necessarily contributes to its meaning; we may extend this to observe that *Unit Operations* itself adheres to conventional structures of argumentation even as it argues for their opposite.

importance of the *Zelda* game – its vast gameworld designed to be explored in specific, predetermined ways – are the very features that give many narrative video games the totalizing tendencies apparent in epics found in other media. These tendencies are not limited to *Zelda*, but games in the series can certainly be taken as exemplars in this regard. We have seen how deeply implicated, in a formal sense, the *Zelda* games are in processes of cartography and storytelling via the creation of designed spaces in the section on *Zelda* as epos; in this section, I will extend that analysis to show how the *Zelda* series operates more specifically as a kind of cognitive mapping. Despite its supposed fantasy setting, *Zelda* indeed reproduces the logics of the current cultural moment and in that way becomes a framework through which the real world of the games' players might be better understood. Through various representations of space, ranging from the mimetic spaces of Hylian towns to the abstract spaces of sub-menu screens, the *Zelda* games model assumptions of commercial exchange and the organization of inventories. Moreover, *Zelda* lays bare the ways in which totalized spaces are necessarily limited in any medium, and the series' attempts to totalize the same (virtual) space across multiple time periods may indicate the next logical step for the totalizing epic of postmodernity.

One objection which might be raised against a reading of the *Zelda* series as emblematic of a postmodern epic is its fantasy setting, which at first glance has little in common with the lived experience of gamers. We can see the connections between the Baltimore of *The Wire* or the Gotham of the *Dark Knight* trilogy and the realities of the urban experience of the twenty-first century; the connection between this reality and the ersatz-medieval Hyrule is not so immediately evident. Yet the mimetic world of the *Zelda* games is deeply implicated in the contemporary social world, conjured up as it is within the most advanced digital technology of its day. The virtual world of *Zelda* therefore already has an inherent irony, and it is significant that, despite its fantasy trappings, one does not find the kind of anti-industrialism in the *Zelda* games that one finds in the writings of Tolkien, for instance. Moreover, as discussed earlier with regard to the ethos of *Zelda*, we must remember that *Zelda*'s gameworld must not be confused with historical feudalism; indeed, as Fredric Jameson reminds us, the modern fantasy genre distorts and recombines seemingly incompatible historical elements in the same way. Even “in Tolkien a village nostalgia is deployed in order to authorize a baleful, more properly aristocratic vision of

the epic battle of Good and Evil quite inconsistent with the aesthetic of the peasant fairy tale.” (Jameson 2005, 61) At the same time, “history and historical change inscribe themselves in even the most ahistorical forms,” (67) and this applies no less to those forms, such as the fantasy video game, that arise in postmodernity.

Therefore, as a mega-text produced in a “postmodern” world, *Zelda* can still serve as a kind of text through which a cognitive map of that world might be drawn. One example where this was made explicit was a 2010 art project in Lethbridge, Alberta. As part of the exhibition “Drawn into Action: A Community Mapping Project”, Jarett Duncan and Lawrence Krysak rendered a map of their city as it existed in 1987 using graphics from the 8-bit Overworlds of *The Legend of Zelda* and *Zelda II: The Adventure of Link*. (Fig. 17) In their artists’ statement, the pair wrote that

Having grown-up alongside and symbiotically with video games, we felt it would be interesting to address the community of Lethbridge in terms of the forms and iconography that are so recognizable to us and our generation. We felt that the process of simplifying and re-interpreting the map in an 8-bit, *Zelda*-style would have the effect of reintroducing a sense of wonder to Lethbridge by challenging our familiarity with it. (Krysak)

Here an understanding of the real, historically-situated city is defamiliarized, but it is done so in a way that is dependent on an alternate familiarity, the nostalgia for a particular (equally historically-situated) virtual gamespace. The iconography of the *Zelda*-style map tells its viewer something more about growing up in the social imaginary of 1980s Lethbridge than a traditional map would. This kind of nostalgic practice as cognitive mapping has added significance because it points toward the ways in which fantasy signifiers, especially in games, belie rather different logics than may first be apparent.

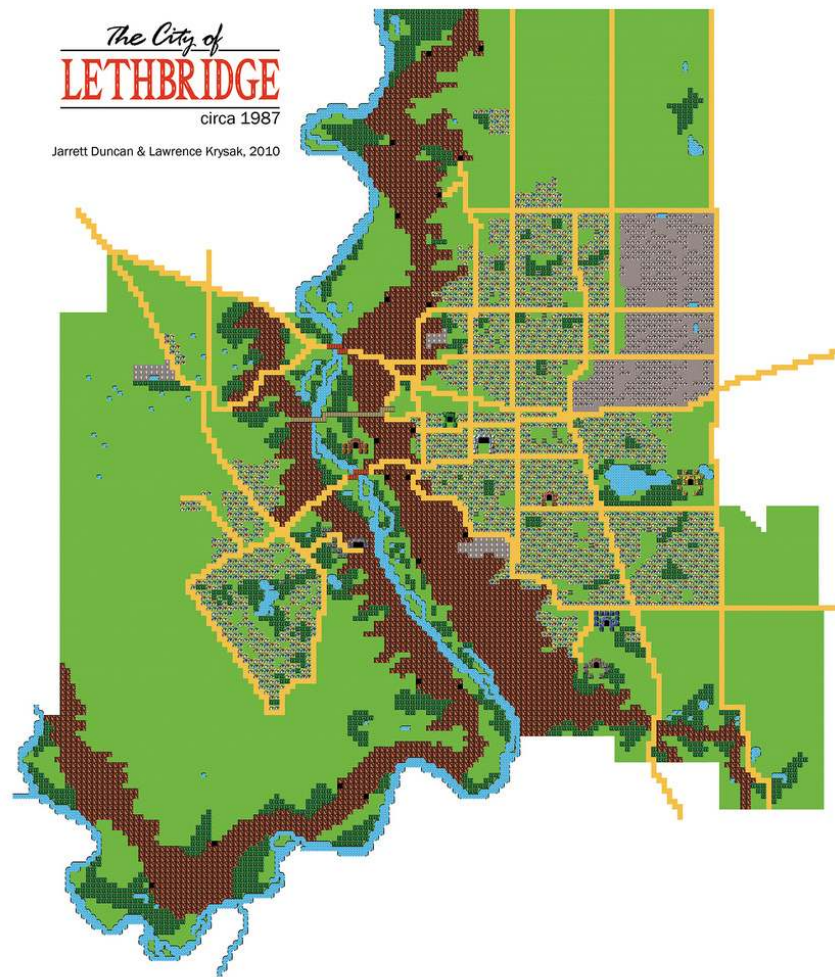


Figure 17. *Zelda*-Inspired Map of Lethbridge.

One such misleading logic is the role of magic, which as Jameson points out (2005, 66-71), is one of the defining elements of fantasy fiction. Admittedly, magic is “a facile plot device” when deployed in “the great bulk of mediocre fantasy production,” but in the best fantasy it becomes rather “a figure for the enlargement of human powers and their passage to the limit, their actualization of everything latent and virtual in the stunted human organism of the present.” (66) The use of magical powers in *Zelda* is not as prevalent as it is in other fantasy games, and even in magic-heavy games such powers rarely if ever achieve the kind of figuration for which Jameson is arguing here. Most especially within the context of digital games (and even earlier table-top board games) magic functions not as an opposite to science-fictional technologies, but rather as an

analogue. In *Zelda* and elsewhere, magic is precisely quantifiable in its essence and is profoundly rationalized in its use: magic is accumulated and spent in points or bar-graphs, in exactly the same way as a character's strength or "life." We may thus invert Arthur C. Clarke's famous dictum, that any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic, and observe that what functions as magic within fantasy or speculative fiction more often than not becomes indistinguishably cast in technological terms. Hence the Force in the *Star Wars* universe becomes subject to the biological rationalism of a "midi-chlorian count", and the essentially magical feats of telekinesis in the *Mass Effect* trilogy maintains a sheen of plausibility when explained away by the use of "biotic implants" and "dark matter fields."⁸⁵ Thus the use of magic in *Zelda* functions more as a reflection of contemporary ontological assumptions than as a rejection or critique of them.

This is evident in other, more mundane matters of representation. For instance, the shift from predominantly rural populations of the medieval and early modern period to the predominantly urban populations of the postmodern age has left its traces in *Zelda*'s gameworld. While the *Zelda* series does not have urban spaces as such, nearly every game has a town in which supplies, weapons, and items can be purchased, and which functions effectively as a self-contained city writ small; conversely, the rural areas of Hyrule are, aside from a token farm or ranch, completely unpopulated. Likewise, a cash, rather than barter, economy prevails; and although it is perhaps going too far to follow Hochschartner when he asserts that the curse on the rich family in *Ocarina*, who were turned into Skulltulla creatures on account of their greed, simply reaffirms a regime of private property, it is fair to say that the economic underpinnings of Hyrule and its environs are occluded in the series. Just as *Zelda* presents the fruits of industry with few signs of industrialization, most items to be acquired throughout Link's various quests are reified commodities that exist seemingly of their own accord, instead of as the result of specific production practices.

⁸⁵ In the *Mass Effect* series and *Star Wars* video games, these powers are represented as fillable "bars" that are functionally identical to the magic bar displays of *Zelda* and other fantasy and adventure games.

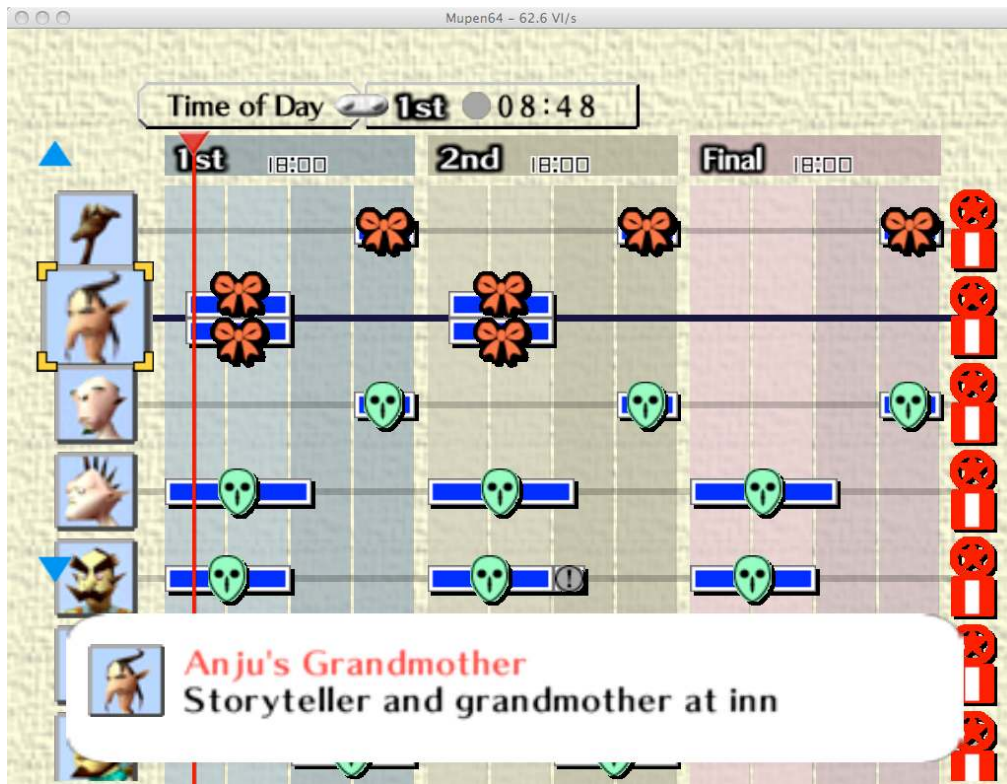


Figure 18. Bomber's Notebook Screen from *Majora's Mask*.

Moreover, the *Zelda* series reproduces the complex spaces of postmodernity in the way it fragments and reconfigures various kinds of space. Here we must remember that the mimetic representation of Hyrule is not the only kind of space that the *Zelda* games present and manipulate (and even mimetic space is complicated with a heads-up display of status bars and counters). I noted in the discussion of recent *Batman* video games that those titles can be seen as trying to reconcile Lev Manovich's binary of seemingly incompatible narrative and database forms. *Zelda* is no different: it too features map screens, inventory sub-menus, and other assorted conceptual or abstract spaces, including itineraries or checklists (such as the "Bombers' Notebook" in *Majora's Mask*, Fig. 18, without which the player would never be able to keep track of the changing space-time coordinates of the other characters and their associated side-quests). Here is another recurrence of cognitive mapping, as these games demand not only that a player master the "main" gameworld, but also develop a literacy with a variety of graphs, charts, and the like; indeed, the gameworld is of such shifting complexity that it cannot be mastered

without these conceptual and organizational aids. This steady increase of spaces within the gameworld of *Zelda* occurs amid our own growing understanding of the spaces of the non-virtual world as well. In a discussion of space in the *Final Fantasy* series, William H. Huber deploys a matrix of spatial concepts developed by David Harvey and Henri Lefebvre to show how video game spaces can be categorized within (to name a few) the absolute space of Cartesian mapping, the relative space of modern physics, or the relational spaces of memory and affect. (382) The *Zelda* series' spaces can be similarly categorized; most of Huber's examples are shared across role-playing and adventure video games (of which *Final Fantasy* and *Zelda* are comparable archetypes), if not across nearly all games.

And yet *Zelda* is perhaps unique, or at least anomalous, among games in the way it treats the relation of space and time. As the series has evolved, it has aggregated to the spatial totalizing that is the nature of large-scale narrative games an effort to subsume all time as well. Link in all his (re)incarnations is the Hero of Time; his manipulation of time in *Ocarina* and *Majora's Mask* has evolved into the conceit that the *Zelda* series extends infinitely across a fictional timeline. This extension reaches just as much into the distant future, such as in the flooded world of *Wind Waker*, as into the distant past, such as in the primordial Hyrule of *Skyward Sword*. And even so *Skyward Sword* leaves open the possibility of still greater extension of gamespace through time, and an even more granular fragmentation of time. Lanayru Desert, one of the main areas in the game, contains the remains of a still more ancient civilization, whose use of advanced technology (including robots) had led to environmental ruin. Scattered across Lanayru are "timeshift stones" which revert isolated, localized pockets back to the earlier time when the vegetation of Lanayru was still verdant and the machinery still functional. In this way *Zelda* has progressed from the "parallel world" conceit of *A Link to the Past* or *Ocarina of Time*, into a meta-space where multiple spaces from different times overlap and can be manipulated discretely.

If postmodernity, following David Harvey, is characterized by the annihilation of space through time, here, perhaps, is a template for the virtual annihilation of space across all time. The postmodern epic is concerned with the representation of space as a totality, but

it must always fall short when compared with the cosmos of the real world. This is particularly clear in video games, especially “open-world” games, in which technological and practical limitations necessarily limit the theoretically infinite space of virtual worlds. It often falls to clever design practices to keep the player within the designated bounds of these finite spaces without revealing the artificial barriers to exploration; Terry Harpold calls this process “recapture,” (93) and, as Tom Bissell points out, the *Zelda* series has long been successful at utilizing these tricks to make limited gamespace seem larger than it is. (162) But with recent entries such as *Skyward Sword*, the *Zelda* series revisits the same spaces again and again across infinite time, and by doing so makes the space of its gameworld infinite too.

And so the *Legend of Zelda* games, crafted in a medium scant decades old, exhibit formal features that are evident in all narrative epics. Many an individual *Zelda* game has been recognized as an epos, or a definitive, groundbreaking exemplar of the adventure-game genre; each further builds on and contributes to the mythos of the *Zelda* series as a whole; each accords with a specific ethos of representational possibility; and each relates to a greater cosmos, creating meaning for communities of fans and providing hermeneutic clues about the lived realities of the twenty-first century even as – or perhaps especially because – it conjures up a seemingly ahistorical land of fantasy and magic.

Chapter 5

5 Conclusions: Flexible Formalism

In the classic *Star Trek: The Next Generation* episode “Darmok” (1991), Captain Picard, played by Patrick Stewart, is trapped on a hostile planet where he must cooperate with the captain of an alien ship whose language is based entirely on cultural metaphors. At length, the alien succeeds in recounting one of his culture’s epic tales, that of “Darmok and Jalad at Tanagra,” which the two captains have been re-enacting on the planet; once communication is established, at the cost of mortal injury to the alien, Picard reciprocates by telling him the tale of “Gilgamesh and Enkidu at Uruk.” Stewart later recalled that shortly after the episode aired, a communications professor sent him a letter pointing out that more people had just learned about the myth of Gilgamesh in that one broadcast than had ever heard it in all of history to that point. (*Star Trek: TNG* Season Five) This anecdote – its intersections between the traditional epic and popular culture in the postmodern era – speaks to the persistence of epic and some of the problems associated with categorizing it, problems which this dissertation has attempted to address.

The first chapter began by observing that the epic – or at least a certain idea of the epic – has been perennially eulogized as a dead or antiquated genre. The fact that literary and cultural critics have felt the persistent need to deny the epic, of course, would lead us to suspect that there remains some aspect of epic narrative that still has an appeal or relevance. That suspicion only gets stronger when we see the many instances of popular or mass-culture novels, films, comics, video games, and so on described as “epic” by fans, reviewers, and the general public. What this dissertation has tried to do is to develop a theoretical framework within which this nebulous label of “epic” can be precisely defined, and which can be equally applicable to any narrative medium within any given cultural context. I have proceeded from the proposition that the narrative epic has persisted more or less continuously as a genre. Epics may not always be the dominant way in which stories are told within their culture, nor may they even be recognized in their own time as epics at all; yet they are always around in some form.

By way of conclusion, this final chapter will review my theory of epic in light of the case studies discussed in chapters two through four, outlining how the theory can explain why they are considered epics and what the broader implications of that classification might be; in particular, I will try to account for what distinguishes the epics that are prevalent in the “new” media of “postmodernity” as opposed to the traditional epic. The most important of these distinctions, I believe, is that contemporary epics tend to focus on the representation and the cognitive mapping of postmodern space in the high mimetic mode. This tendency is by no means absolute: ancient and pre-modern epics can and do map space, and postmodern epics can and do deal with time. However, in postmodern epics, spatial concerns are undeniably privileged in a way and to an extent that they have not been earlier.

I will also argue that this theory of epic, and its specific deployment via the case study chapters, amounts to the practice of a more flexible kind of formalism. This is an approach that downplays the search for obvious correspondences between particular stories or types of “content” – including, for instance, dicta that the epic hero must conform to certain Jungian archetypes, or that tragic heroes, for that matter, must exhibit traits from an Aristotelian checklist. Rather, a flexible formalist approach must be concerned with finding similar patterns between the organization of symbolic content within particular narrative works, such as, in the case of epic, a sense of scale and complexity and the choice of a culturally-appropriate medium to further these ambitions. In addition, the approach must be concerned with interrogating similar patterns between those particular works and the rest of the culture in which they circulate; put another way, flexible formalism must map the structure of the relationships between texts and those who produce and consume them. This will allow us to see continuities between epics that on the surface seem to be about very different things – as *The Wire*, the *Dark Knight* trilogy, and *The Legend of Zelda* undoubtedly are. Finally, I will note the practical limitations of this study, ending with a nod to what are, ironically, the inescapable limitations upon the ambitions of epic criticism in general.

5.1 A Review of the Framework of Epic Theory

If the narrative epic is a kind of genre which is just as prevalent in the “old” media of oral poetry or literature as it is in “new” media, then the formal criteria for identifying and evaluating epics must be the same regardless of the medium in which any epic tale is told. In the first chapter, I extrapolated from various epic theories a fourfold framework for organizing these criteria which seemed to fit traditional epics. This framework consisted of the analytical differentiation of the epos, the mythos, the ethos, and the cosmos, and it is the relationship of the work in question to each of these “tiers” that determined the extent to which that work was epic.

First, to be considered an epic in the specific sense argued for here, a narrative work must be an epos, an exemplary instance of storytelling. It fulfils certain formal, qualitative criteria, namely that it is highly complex and cohesive relative to comparable works in the same medium; it is regarded as “high quality.” These formal criteria are specific to the affordances of the work’s particular medium and production context. For example, *The Wire* is held up as an exemplary television series because it outclasses its peers in the very qualities considered particular to episodic television drama: ensemble acting, complex story arcs, and a certain kind of social realism. The *Dark Knight* trilogy, on the other hand, is considered a qualitative success in the related, but distinct, medium of the feature film; acting and writing must of course be fine here too, but there is an added expectation of spectacle, stunt work and special effects, and the pushing of technological boundaries which is neither as necessary nor as practical for the televisual epos.

Meanwhile, for a video game like *The Legend of Zelda* to be an epos in its medium, the excellence of the gameplay mechanics and the breadth of the explorable world become more important than achieving the depth of characterization one would expect in drama, although what elements of character and story there are in the adventure game must still be done well.

But the formal and textual properties of an epos are not the only set of factors that determine whether a narrative work is considered an epic. It must also incorporate and subsume, or otherwise allude to, as much previous narrative material as possible, which I have called the epic’s mythos. The relationship of an epos to its mythos is primarily

paratextual: in other words, one of the criteria for defining an epic is its relationship with narratives that have preceded it (and also those that follow). These narratives are often historical, but not necessarily so; the important thing here is textual history, not history as such. This solves the problem of categorizing epics that are not based on historical events; in any case, the criterion of historicity has always been problematic due to many epics' description of legendary or mythic events and personalities. Thus *The Wire* has a rich mythos not because it is explicitly based on real events, but because of the great variety of source material, which includes true-crime books, previous television series, and so on. The *Dark Knight* trilogy has little to do with "real" history, but draws upon and synthesises an enormous body of previous comics, television shows, and films, each with a complex textual history of their own. *The Legend of Zelda*, whose narrative has no direct connection to history at all, nevertheless counts among its influences a unique blend of Japanese and American archetypes and cultural flotsam, and bootstraps its own fictional world by adding to each successive sequel the narratives of previous games. Furthermore, the creation of each of these epics influences any works that follow; they necessarily occupy positions on, and by their circulation alter, what Bourdieu called the field of cultural production (53–55), and the extent to which this occurs also determines the extent of a work's "epicness." The more definitive a particular narrative work is – i.e., the more it becomes perceived as the dominant version of the particular story it tries to tell, and the more its successors must deal with that perception – the greater its success as an epic. *The Wire* thereby becomes the defining epic of Baltimore. And while the *Dark Knight* trilogy does not mean the end of Batman films, any more than *Ocarina of Time* was the last *Zelda* game, the fact that their successors must contend with the artistic and technical achievements of those works is a testament to their success.

Next, the epic must embody a certain ethos, which I have defined as the range of possible representations within the epic's culture (or sub-culture). The ethos is necessarily larger than the mythos of the epic, because the ethos contains within itself all the previous representations of the entire mythos, as well as any symbolic material that is consistent with the mythos but has yet to occur in a particular narrative. If we are to accept the Althusserian definition of ideology as the imaginary relationship we have to the real conditions of existence (Althusser 109), then the ethos, as an intermediate level which is

greater than any particular work or set of works, and yet less than the totality which those works aspire to represent, is the level at which ideology operates. The ethos of the *Zelda* games consists of, for example, an ahistorical medievalism and a less-stereotypically-male style of gameplay; but immanent within these possibilities (and occluded by them) are, respectively, the highly technological, capital-intensive production of modern video games, and the sometimes-sexist depiction of Zelda herself, who is almost never the protagonist in the games named after her. Likewise, *The Wire* has within its ethos various media stereotypes of police and criminals – recall the allusions to *Shaft* or *Scarface* – and even as these are explicitly rejected, they are at least possible; within the *The Wire*'s logic of realism they must be rejected precisely because they are possible. This too is the result of a certain ideological stance. The positioning of the “realist” Batman of the *Dark Knight* trilogy does similar work, just as the conscious suppression of parts of the established Batman mythos, such as the queer or camp elements, does this ideological work in a negative sense. The ethos is also an important analytical category because it allows us to account for the inclusion of narrative material that is “original,” that is, not taken from the already-existing mythos. Even though Bruce Wayne's fear of bats, which leads indirectly to his parents' murder in *Batman Begins*, does not appear in any of the numerous retellings of Batman's origins in the comics, it is consistent with the ethos of the *Dark Knight* trilogy precisely because it is the sort of detail that would not be out of place in a Batman comic.

Finally, we can relate the epic to the social totality within which it is created and circulated, a totality which I have called the epic's cosmos. Indeed, one of the fundamental traits of the narrative epic is that it purports to represent this totality; the degree to which any particular epos is felt to be successful at this, and the greater the totality, the more “epic” the work is. Thus we can have the epic of an entire civilization (as the epics of antiquity were often thought to be), or we can have epics that function as the representational apex of a subset of a particular society – that is, a subculture. All three of the main cases of this study operate in this latter mode, that of a more narrow slice of society: *The Wire* as an epic of Baltimore, the *Dark Knight* trilogy as an epic of superhero mythology, *Ocarina of Time* as an epic of adventure gaming. The question of how universal the old epics in fact ever were is beyond the scope of this project; but even

making the doubtful assumption that the audiences of *Gilgamesh* or the *Iliad* were completely homogenous and accepting of one, and only one, epic, it does not follow that postmodern epics, with a more fragmentary or spatially diffuse audience, have any less relevance to their communities or are any less “popular.” Identifying the profusion of epics in recent decades is less an attempt to rehabilitate popular narratives as epics than it is a recognition of the fact that there are simply orders of magnitude more people producing and consuming narratives of all sorts than have ever done so before.

5.2 Continuities of the Epic in Postmodernity

This great increase in the amount and variety of stories being told is an important phenomenon in postmodernity in general; it is of course rather fitting that this should be especially prevalent particularly in contemporary epics, as an ambitious size and scale has arguably always been a feature of the epic. I want to note here some of the corollaries to this, and their implications.

The fact that the epic genre has been reconfigured and newly situated within complex, digital media speaks to the specific instantiations of genres within a postmodern aesthetic and globalized capitalism. Fairclough argues that the “disembedding of genres is a part of the restructuring and rescaling of capitalism,” (69) and while the process clearly predates modern capitalism and is not necessarily capitalistic as such, dis- and re-embedding genres can be one axis along which capital accumulation can proceed. This can be seen in the notion of the “bootstrapping” epic, which, instead of using a long-established mythos, creates a new narrative “universe” out of whole cloth or assumes such a universe that may or may not be filled in later. This is often less a result of wanting to create something wholly original (especially since rehashing a recognizable mythos usually generates more predictable returns) than it is a way to avoid licensing another author or company’s intellectual property. I have mentioned how Nintendo’s long-running series, such as *Zelda* and *Mario*, work in this way, and there are other comparable new media epics that also set out to do so quite deliberately, such as the *Mass Effect* series (Bissell 112-113). The desire to create vast works that incorporate as much narrative material as possible thereby comes up against a kind of “enclosure” of symbolic material within a culture. The old rural commons were physically finite, and, once they were enclosed, no

more land was available for common use. The terrain of culture, on the other hand, has in theory no limit on the symbolic material upon which aspiring creators might graze; when in practice that material is enclosed, artists, writers, directors, designers, and all the other creative and technical personnel are forced to create distinctly new material. This helps explain and exacerbate the increased fragmentation of cultures under postmodernism. At the same time, intellectual property regimes determine who is authorized to draw upon these enclosed narrative mythoi, whose work is canonical and whose is apocryphal, and whose version is allowed to be distributed for profit. David Simon, Christopher Nolan, and Shigeru Miyamoto rightly deserve credit for being the driving forces behind many of the works discussed here (though not the only ones deserving of credit); but we must constantly remember that they were working within the dictates of Time Warner and Nintendo, and we have seen how these two corporations are jealous of their intellectual property rights. It is very telling that, for example, two separate academic books on the subject of Batman fandom (Pearson and Uricchio vi; Brooker 2012, 218) go out of their way to complain about how Warner Bros. refused to grant permission to reprint images from decades-old Batman comics; this is in spite of the fact that it would not deprive Warner Bros. of any possible profit. It is because the costs of a lawsuit – win or lose – against the overwhelming resources of corporate America would shutter any academic publisher that they acquiesce, even though such reprinting constitutes fair use for the purposes of criticism under U.S. copyright laws.

The tendency to “bootstrap” an epic’s mythos thus appears to be far more likely in a postmodern epic. But intellectual property concerns are not the only reason; we must also take into account the problems of scale in an absolute sense. Just as there has been a great increase in the amount of narrative material in circulation, there are also far more people involved in the creation of new media epics. Television series and motion pictures have always needed scores, if not hundreds, of people working in a wide range of creative and support capacities for months on end to produce a few hours’ drama; console video games have not had sole designer-programmers since the early 1980s, and while artisanal games still get made and sometimes achieve success, commercial games that present epic narratives require hundreds of thousands of man-hours to complete. It would seem that novelistic prose, among the least “mediated” of media, remains the only medium in

which it is still possible to have a sole author. Patrick O'Brien's Aubrey-Maturin series, or J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* (and their assorted apocrypha and marginalia) are good examples of this in the last century. Even these epics represent decades of work from their respective authors, and when they are invariably licensed and adapted into feature films, video games, and other spin-off narratives, it becomes even more difficult to isolate authorship in the manner of auteur theory. As such, all those working to create these epics have increasingly large mythoi to master – whether that involves ploughing through back issues of *Detective Comics* or consulting glossaries of Klingon or Elvish – and so the fragmentation becomes further entrenched. It will be interesting to see, in a century or two, how many of these complex storyworlds survive, or if they will suffer the same fate that traditionalists have feared are befalling the classics of the Western canon; and if they too fade away, one might wonder whether the final irony will occur, that even they will have a dwindling cohort of defenders, bemoaning the loss of these new classics in favour of even newer cultural productions.

This rapid turnover is of course in keeping with the notion that postmodern culture is characterized both by an acceleration of communications and other cultural processes, as well as by a general disregard for historical time as an organizing concept. I have shown elsewhere that time, specifically the attention given to lineages within foundational myths, is one continuity often shared between ancient and modern epics (Arnott 2008); but as *The Wire*, *Batman*, and *Zelda* demonstrate, time operates differently in postmodern epics. Even the social realism of *The Wire* has its ahistorical features, and we have seen how the histories of Gotham and Hyrule are in flux, kept deliberately vague to enable them to be updated or “retconned” as a future instalment might see fit. Meanwhile, the textual histories of these works go back at most a few decades. It is obviously too soon to tell how long they will linger in the memory of their respective sub-cultures, or in a larger, global culture; but there are signs that even as particular franchises endure, individual works may have a kind of built-in obsolescence, falling out of the mythos with the same rapidity with which they entered it.

The corollary of this disregard for time is a far greater attention to space. If the traditional epic sought to totalize across time, the postmodern epic seeks to do the same across

space. The urban spaces represented, explored and mapped within *The Wire* or the *Dark Knight* trilogy become sealed in time so that their geography can be worked over again and again; there is a constant striving to exhaust their meanings, meanings which, though infinite, seem paradoxically more comprehensible when they are contained within hermetically sealed environments. It is the kind of infinity that looks inward, rather than an infinity that looks outward. The treatment of space in video games such as *The Legend of Zelda* reflects this tendency to the greatest extent, and we have seen how even infinite time in that series is subordinated to this spatial logic. When the world has become truly global, in that there remains no more unexplored or unknown territory, no “outside,” it makes sense that imaginary or virtual spaces take on an added importance, especially in a narrative genre like the epic, which is defined by expansion, inclusion, and conceptual mastery. The creation of fictional worlds becomes a new economic frontier as much as a cultural one; the epic is ideally suited to contribute to this process and to reflect it. Insofar as they reinforce and even actively construct the prevailing order, the epics of postmodernism can be just as conservative as the old paeans to empire found in the ancient epics.

And yet the best epics – and every epos, as such, is the best in its own way – are more nuanced than outright propaganda, and therein lies the hope for positive change. For the epic is also well-suited to understand and to critique the totality of postmodern space, a space which is fragmented between the actual and the virtual, between the physical and the conceptual. This is why epics like *The Wire*, the *Dark Knight* trilogy, and *Zelda*, as part of their attempts to totalize this fragmentary space, constantly present and represent it through a variety of maps, charts, tables, and similar tools. The deployment of these graphic tools, often in concert, in a kind of postmodern triangulation, becomes a way of understanding both the actual spaces in which we live and the virtual spaces which we create within these fictions. It is Kevin Lynch’s “imageability” deployed to map the imaginary; it is a kind of cognitive mapping. For Fredric Jameson, this cognitive mapping is the first step toward fulfilling the political potential of postmodern art, because without an understanding of these symbolic systems, connected as they are to real processes, we have little hope to understand, and thus improve, the actual and exceedingly complex systems within which we live. It is an open question if, or to what extent, any postmodern

epic does this. Certainly none of the works under consideration here succeed in encompassing everything, and, as noted earlier, this is likely impossible for any epic, in any epoch.

5.3 “Flexible” Formalism

Despite the clear differences in what epics from different times and contexts prioritize, I have maintained throughout these pages that there must be some level at which the epic as a generic category transcends these circumstances. This dissertation rejects any position that assumes that the classical epic cannot be compared to or equated with the blockbuster film, that Odysseus can tell us nothing about Bruce Wayne, or vice-versa. I want to stake out a tentative theoretical outlook that would balance rigorous historicism with universalizing abstraction, and to suggest that the fourfold approach to the epic, and its deployment with regard to the case studies, can serve as an example of this effort in practice.

In the *Grundrisse*, Karl Marx asked, “is Achilles possible with powder and lead? Or the *Iliad* with the printing press, not to mention the printing machine? Do not the song and the saga and the muse necessarily come to an end with the printer’s bar, hence do not the necessary conditions of epic poetry vanish?” (111) Marx’s implied answer – no, the age of Achilles is long gone – represents the view that the epic cannot be conceived of as having existed outside its original context, although at least Marx, like Hegel before him,⁸⁶ was cognizant of the social and technological conditions that made Homeric heroes obsolete. What those who resist comparisons between the traditional epic and the multimedia texts of postmodernity do not see is that new conditions breed new heroes, new mythologies, that often come in very different material forms; they do not represent the aristocracy of archaic Greece, nor are they recounted in dactylic hexameter verse, but they remain for all that recognizably, intuitively, epic.

⁸⁶ Cf. the section from the *Aesthetics* cited in chapter one: “Our modern machines and factories with their products, as well as our general way of satisfying the needs of our external life, would ... be just as unsuitable as our modern political organization is for the social background required by the primitive epic.” (1053)

This is possible thanks to the process of “disembedding” a genre. Recall that for the Greeks of classical antiquity, most notably Aristotle, the epic genre was defined by the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*; but this was only one particular instance of the epic, defined as this structure of relations and processes, being situated within a specific historical context. This was then, to follow Norman Fairclough’s description, “lifted out of, ‘disembedded’ from, particular networks of social practices where they initially developed, and becoming available as a sort of ‘social technology’ which transcends both differences between networks of practices and differences of scale.” (68-69) In the case of epic, at least, we might question whether the Homeric corpus was in fact where the epic actually developed; it may well have constituted a re-embedding from earlier practices now lost to us. Certainly this would help account for valorized narratives that predate Homer considerably (e.g., *Gilgamesh*) or which are roughly contemporary in their compilation, but culturally separate (e.g., the Old Testament). The question of origins aside, it seems clear that there is a persistent, if not necessarily invariable, genre which we can identify as epic, which keeps re-embedding itself in new contexts, not least of which is our own.

This serves as a rebuttal to Marx’s position, and I want to stress this because Marxist critics have to varying degrees either addressed the epic directly, or have influenced approaches to the epic in the last century. In particular, Bakhtin, Lukács, Moretti, and especially Jameson, have been invoked in this dissertation’s theory, and it is important to note where it breaks with some of these precursors. The historical materialism of Marx and his followers can be a vital point of departure even for a close textual reading; yet one of the shortcomings of much Marxist critique in the cultural sphere is often an implicit assumption that cultural production neatly mirrors technological and economic development, and that these latter processes are teleological. Thus the removal of cultural material for ends utterly foreign to their original production and ideological context (i.e., disembedding) is seldom addressed, making Jameson’s efforts all the more of an exception. However, this phenomenon is not limited to modernity or postmodernity. Medieval theologians’ radical re-interpretation of the Old Testament, of neo-Platonic philosophy, and of the works of Virgil all in service of Christian doctrine are just one such instance. Coupled with this tendency is a political agenda that, however laudable its principles and goals may be, often has the error of privileging certain cultural works over

others because of their ideological or class origins. At best, this can lead to overlooking works that are made outside the dominant mode of production, or ones that deliberately harken back to one that is supposedly outmoded; at worst, the legitimacy of works that do not advance predetermined social goals can be attacked (though in fairness this is not exclusively a fault only of Marxists).

Jameson's description of cognitive mapping presents it as inextricable from the critique of multinational capital; I would play devil's advocate and suggest that perhaps even the dominant exploitative class is entitled to its own cognitive maps, which could just as easily deploy these same methods of representation to illuminating effect – at least in theory. This is something that Jameson seems to recognize in an earlier work, *The Political Unconscious*; there he argues that even the most degraded or regressive works, from the Marxist perspective, paradoxically have a Utopian element, insofar as they appeal to a certain class or group identity. (280-281) As for the epic itself, Jameson appears to accept the line of reasoning from Hegel to Lukács, described above, that the epic is dead because the Homeric model no longer fits contemporary modes of production. He tellingly provides the epic as an example of “the failure of a particular generic structure ... to reproduce itself.” (133). And yet, just as in Lukács, there is in Jameson an unconscious disembedding of the epic as a generic concept when he calls Joseph Conrad “the epic poet” of the concept of ressentiment (used in this instance to explain latent class conflicts within nineteenth-century novels). (257) Perhaps because the epic has historically been linked to the interests of the ruling class, it is has been more difficult for some to consciously recognize the emergence of the epic in more popular forms.

There is also the longstanding critique of Marxism as a “grand narrative,” raised indeed (though not unproblematically) by certain postmodernisms beginning with Lyotard. Even Jameson's nuanced critiques of cultural objects are subsumed within Marxist assumptions and priorities, and these can sometimes obscure the fundamental contradictions of any all-encompassing project, including the epic. The limitations of totalizing theory will be considered at the end. Here, though, I might point out that Marxism's wide-ranging

explanatory ambitions also make it epic. *Das Kapital* is the epos of Marxism, if the epic concept is disembedded from narrative as such and situated within political economy.

So, pace Marx, the answer to the question of why epic endures, despite the changed social context of modernity and postmodernity, is that the “powder and lead” version of Achilles might be a character like Superman: the “Man of Steel” has neatly replaced the iron-age warrior. Instead of the hero’s invulnerability coming from being dipped in the river Styx,⁸⁷ he is granted superhuman power from birth under the red sun of Krypton; in place of Achilles’ heel, his weakness is kryptonite.

Yet we must be cautious of the facile mapping of such characteristics from one work to another when they are separated by such distances in space and time; just as there is a danger in dismissing the epic outright as an impossible genre in contemporary society, there is a danger of going too far in the other direction, in embracing too many contemporary works as epic. This is the problem with strands of structuralism that merely list surface affinities between narrative materials, such as those who look for a Joseph Campbell-style “monomyth” as the organizational logic behind any and every story. Instead of listing ways in which the demigods of Greco-Roman mythology are “just like” contemporary superheroes, we must ask whether these characters function in the same way within their respective societies. This requires attention to a broader set of questions than “do they both have superpowers?” It requires attention, instead, to the events of the entire narrative, and its place in a tradition of similar narratives; to the media through which these tales are told, and how those technologies structure the telling; to who, and how many, have access to these mediated narratives.

A textual approach with this in mind might be called “flexible formalism.” This ought to recognize the necessity for a kind of formalism or structuralism – since without a coherent structure there can be no meaningful classification – but that approach must not presuppose absolute rigidity in the conceptual structure, on the one hand, nor absolute

⁸⁷ The notion that Achilles’ heel is his only weakness comes from a later tradition that postdates Homer. In the *Iliad*, Achilles is not invulnerable; he is for instance wounded in the arm by Asteropaeus, drawing blood. (21.190)

uniformity in the texts and practices held together by that structure. What is important is not so much the positive affinities between texts, but the affinities between the various relationships between the parts of each text with the text itself, between the text and other texts, and between the texts and their audiences, and, in turn, their wider world.

Consider an architectural metaphor. The final structure or form of a skyscraper is determined by many factors: the topography upon which it will stand; the technologies, materials, and money available to construct it; the knowledge of the workers and craftsmen who build it; and the aesthetic ideology, and perhaps even the whimsy, of the architect who designs it. The particular arrangement of its parts is unique, and possibly strikingly divergent from other examples of its kind, its “genre”: one need only note the differences between such famous skyscrapers as the Empire State Building and the Burj Khalifa to appreciate this fact. And whatever final form the skyscraper takes, the structure holding it together must not be so rigid that it cannot bend in the wind or withstand a tremor, otherwise it will collapse. In the same way, we should not expect every epic text to look the same. The final form depends on the “raw materials” from which it is crafted: what kinds of narrative events are privileged as appropriate for a work of such scope, the history of the culture from which and for which it is made, the available media which support it, the capital financing its production, the personal interests and particular talents of its creators. And while the structure that defines the processes and relationships between the parts of the epic must be recognizable across cultures and subcultures, some flexibility must remain to account for the natural variations of art. Stories that follow mechanistic, rigid templates are doomed, in the long run, to failure because they cannot anticipate any relevance beyond their narrow cultural moment.

In *Narratology*, Mieke Bal makes a similar point about the uses of structuralist narratology. She argues that the purpose of narratology

is not to force the text into a general model and then to conclude that the text is indeed narrative. Such a procedure has given structuralist narratology a bad name. It could at best be useful for testing doubtful cases when trying to specify the corpus. Rather, a confrontation between a concrete fabula and a general model allows the description of the structure of the fabula of the text in question to be

formulated more precisely, so that the specific structure is placed in relief and made visible. A “perfect fit” as well as any deviations from the basis model can influence the meaning of the text. (194)

“The study of genre” and “epic” could easily be substituted for “narratology” and “narrative” here. Bal’s defence of a judiciously-applied structuralism indicates that good reasons remain for the application of structuralist principles, even as structuralism and formalism have fallen out of academic fashion in recent decades. No doubt this is due as much to the “bad” structuralism that retains currency in some quarters, as to the post-structuralist critiques of the 1960s and beyond. The fundamental problem of structuralist narratology and structuralism in general – the search for abstract models with which to better understand the complexities and meanings of specific cultural productions – still remains, sometimes occluded, sometimes less so. For example, many of these problems remain unresolved in the context of video game studies; the field continues to generate debate about the extent to which narrative is present or necessary in games. Here, especially, the dangers of “bad” structuralism, and, conversely, the dismissal of all narrative content as formally equivalent are still on display. This may warrant some further explanation with particular examples, especially since it bears directly on the *Zelda* series, and I will contrast these erroneous approaches to the one I have used to look at *The Legend of Zelda*.

Lebowitz and Klug’s *Interactive Storytelling for Video Games* gives advice to prospective video-game writers that treads too close to the first problem of “bad” structuralism. They claim that video games should use the “hero’s journey” template “uncovered” by Joseph Campbell. (47) This template is supposedly

the story structure on which ancient myths and legends from around the world are based. Many early civilizations’ greatest stories such as *Gilgamesh*, *Beowulf*, and the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* make use of the hero’s journey, as do a large number of modern stories, especially when it comes to things like fantasy novels and video games. (46-47)

But in *The Hero with A Thousand Faces*, Campbell routinely forces the texts he cites into the general model: there are no consistent criteria for the selection of texts (or excerpts of texts) or the application of the theory, and context is ignored wholesale. For

instance, Campbell cites the story of Daphne and Apollo as one instance of the “refusal of the call” to adventure, an early stage of the hero’s journey: rather than submit to the advances of the amorous god, Daphne prays to her father, the river Peneus, who transforms her into a laurel tree. “This is indeed a dull and unrewarding finish,” Campbell observes (57), while ignoring the fact that the story is being retold in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, and that, as such, it comprises a few dozen lines in the first of fifteen books of epic poetry. The disregard for textual history and cultural context is even more dangerous when applied to older works, such as the *Iliad* or the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, whose circumstances of composition and compilation are less verifiable. In the case of *Zelda*, I have demonstrated the problems with overlooking the deep technological implications of fantasy-styled video games. I would add here that the *Zelda* games could just as easily be dismissed as included from the hero’s journey on the grounds of surface content: the stage of “woman as the temptress” (111) does not seem to be one the rather asexual Link ever discovers.

The opposite problem, not enough attention to the detail and context of narrative content, comes from formalism of a rather different kind. Instead of matching superficial story elements, this trend seeks to ignore “content” altogether in a kind of media determinism. Here too, video game studies, as a field in more flux than (say) film studies, becomes a battleground. Graeme Kirkpatrick, in *Aesthetic Theory and the Video Game*, argues that the significance of video games lies not in their visual or spatial components, but in their particular “form,” a sense of structured pattern that elicits pleasure; he traces this approach through the tradition of aesthetic criticism dating back to Kant and Schiller. (22-23) For him, it is the physical virtuosity required to manipulate the interface, not the exploration of a narrative world, that makes games important; Kirkpatrick likens games to dance, and claims that they cannot properly be thought of as art. Not surprisingly, Kirkpatrick sees affinities in this approach to those of Alexander Galloway and, especially, of Ian Bogost, though he goes still further in rejecting semiotic content in favour of allegorical readings of practices. But as Bogost’s comparison, discussed earlier, of *The Legend of Zelda: The Wind Waker* to *Grand Theft Auto III* makes clear, such approaches are reductive to the point where they cannot account for the meaningful differences between games of a similar type. Ironically, this is an “aesthetic” problem in

the popular sense of the word – how we can judge which games are “good” or beautiful. Literary formalism and structuralism assume that narrative, and indeed all signification, can be analysed as an ordered pattern, something overlooked by those who argue for game studies as purely algorithmic. Indeed, I would argue that the formal patterning of semiotic elements, defined not only through text and speech, but through other visual, spatial, and auditory signifiers, is often far more complex than the “dance-like” interactions of any video game. Surely this is the case with the *Zelda* series, which conveys far more meaningful content in this way than through the use of its interfaces, even though those interfaces, from the lock-on targeting of *Ocarina* to the Motion Plus swordplay of *Skyward Sword*, have often been state of the art.

Thus “flexible formalism” must not only be mindful of the shifting structures that surround the texts under consideration, but must also remain attentive to the details of the text itself. Only in this way can we grasp what Pierre Bourdieu called the artistic “position-takings” (35) within a field of cultural production, and in a more general sense, the problems of genre. The fourfold framework of epos-mythos-ethos-cosmos hopefully keeps this in mind; it acknowledges that the epic, as a genre of narrative signification, depends in its classification on both the empirical detail of texts as well as the shifting meanings that adhere to the text as it circulates over time and across space. It accounts for the changing definitions of particular genres by treating genre not so much as a categorization of static features, but as an articulation of analogous processes and relationships. Of course, even within such a system texts might have similar superficial features – if similar “raw materials” are put through similar processes, naturally the end products will be similar as well – but the point is that these features are not necessarily the most important, if they are even shared between texts at all.

Moreover, once we recognize these generic processes, we can start to see how they operate with regard to other genres of cultural production. Although outside the scope of the present work, an examination of the disembedding and re-situating of tragedy as a dramatic genre would be quite instructive – especially as, within the Aristotelian binary of epic and tragedy, it serves as a complement and counterpoint to many discussions of the epic. Modern opera, for instance, began as a very conscious attempt to re-create not

actual Greek tragedy, but the perceived dramatic seriousness of Greek tragedy in a new context; part of what opera evolved into came from misunderstandings about the details of classical Greek theatre. But it was also informed by the aristocratic milieu of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Europe; by the great advances in musical theory and the crafting of instruments in Italy, Germany, and Austria; and even by a much more sophisticated stagecraft (such as the predominantly indoor, evening performances we have long since taken for granted). Likewise, when this newly-situated genre became just as ossified, just as “classical” as the original performances it was meant to update, tragedy could be disembedded and reconfigured again. *Death of a Salesman* is perhaps the modernist *locus classicus* in this regard, and it is interesting to note that in more recent decades the tragic seems to be configured as a struggle against systemic disadvantages, where only master criminals can rise high enough for a tragic fall. Michael Corleone in the *Godfather* film trilogy, and Walter White in *Breaking Bad* fit such a paradigm, as does, not coincidentally, Stringer Bell in the first three seasons of *The Wire*.

One last structural affinity between epics that I want to address here is the range of action of characters or heroes whose stories are told within. Northrop Frye, in his *Anatomy of Criticism*, called this relationship between the hero and his world the theory of modes. Frye saw these as operating in a roughly historical progression, from the most supernaturally powerful heroes of myth and romance to the mundane everymen of comedy and farce; in this way he echoes Bakhtin’s ideas on the devolution from seriousness to laughter in vernacular literature. Frye’s “middle” mode, so to speak, was what he called the high mimetic mode, in which the hero was superior to his fellows, but not to his environment, and Frye observes that this is the operating mode of both epic and tragedy. It is no accident that the high mimetic mode seems to recur not only in classical epics, but also in the recent, new media epics under consideration here. I have noted that in *The Wire*, Stringer Bell and Jimmy McNulty operate within this mode; in the *Dark Knight* trilogy, Bruce Wayne operates within it; and in the *Zelda* series, Link (and in a sense even the player controlling him) operates within it. Thus Frye’s relational, structuralist description can be very useful in identifying and analysing the narrative possibilities of the epic, although I would differ in this regard: the high mimetic mode (in

the same way that I argue is true of the epic itself) is not necessarily a mode which is based on a particular, predictable level of historical development. Its influence may wax and wane in relation to the complete narrative output of a particular culture, but it appears to persist across periods. Similarly, elements of mythic, romantic, or realist modes crop up unevenly and unpredictably across time.

In the discussion about the *Zelda* games, for instance, I noted that the fantasy tropes of what Eddo Stern calls “neo-medievalism” are more deeply implicated with contemporary logics of representation than he and others would argue. This position is based on the observations of Umberto Eco, and it is significant that Eco argues not only that there are multiple “middle ages,” but also that these have been constantly a part of the discourses of modernity. Eco sees far more continuity between the present and this imagined past: “Modern languages, merchant cities, capitalistic economy (along with banks, checks, and prime rate) are inventions of medieval society,” (64) as are modern ideas of class conflict, ideological heresy, romantic love, and constant technological innovation of labour. Part of the reason for these continuities is that what is thought of as “medieval” is in fact cherry-picked from a thousand years of world history, so it is important to recognize this selective process as a search for a “hypothesis” of the middle ages, “as if we were setting out to fabricate a Middle Ages and were deciding what ingredients are required to make one that is efficient and credible.” (74) Strikingly, what Eco ultimately describes as the medieval condition sounds in some ways not unlike the postmodern condition theorized by Lyotard, Jameson, Harvey and many others. Eco recognizes that, for one thing, the enormous speed-up of time today is a generally new development (74); and yet the spatial fragmentation brought about by medieval pilgrimage routes anticipates the fragmentation wrought by air travel, since, in each era, disparities between modes of travel make certain far away places more accessible than neighbouring localities. Where once a pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela or Jerusalem was more common than a trip to a neighbouring town, nowadays it is easier “to travel from Rome to New York than to Rome from Spoleto” (78). But most importantly for the present argument is that the art of the postmodern and the hyper-real is, just like that of the Middle Ages,

not systematic but additive and compositive ... Today as then the sophisticated elitist experiment coexists with the great enterprise of popularization (the relationship between illuminated manuscript and cathedral is the same as that between MOMA and Hollywood), with interchanges and borrowings, reciprocal and continuous; and the evident Byzantinism, the mad taste for collecting, lists, assemblage, amassing of disparate things is due to the need to dismantle and reconsider the flotsam of a previous world, harmonious perhaps, but by now obsolete. (83)

The epic, as a totalizing narrative form, is itself “additive and compositive” and therefore well-suited to such an aesthetic, regardless of whether that aesthetic resurfaces in archaic Greece, medieval Europe, or the digital age; all these, arguably, are periods in which great shifts in media (narrative and otherwise) take place and anxieties about lost and simpler times come to the fore. The work of the epic is to make the whole of the world comprehensible again.

We must be careful at last to treat this as rather different than the crude binary of “historical context is everything” and “the more things change, the more they stay the same”: I do not believe that Eco is arguing that the middle ages and postmodernity are indistinguishable. Rather, he is saying that western society in these periods has had certain general features that recur, and understanding the reasons for these recurrences reveal things about both times that may have been overlooked otherwise. The middle ages, like postmodernity, is an analytical construct, and the practice of history must always itself be historicized. Indeed, the practice of epic criticism, formalist or not, must itself be historicized and self-reflexive, and it is with this in mind that I will now conclude with some reflections on the limitations of this dissertation.

5.4 Limitations of the Study and Theory

The size and profusion of contemporary communities claiming their own diverse epics, told in a variety of media, already imposes limitations on what this project can achieve on its own. The three case studies discussed in the preceding chapters support the theoretical apparatus, and demonstrate how a contemporary epic might be categorized and analysed in practice, but more research of this kind would have to be done to confirm the long-term utility of the theory for which I am advocating. To a more limited extent, I began doing this with premodern epics elsewhere (Arnott 2008), and in the introduction and the

case study chapters of this dissertation I have often made tangential mention of other works with significantly “epic” features. Novels such as *Moby-Dick* or *Ulysses*, though hardly lacking in scholarly attention, could *prima facie* be analysed using this approach. Science fiction television programs such as *Doctor Who*, *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine*, *Battlestar Galactica*, and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* also fit the pattern, and detailed study of these series as epics in the sense argued for here might bring greater critical depth to the scant treatments they have garnered so far (cf. Harrigan and Wardrip-Fruin 2009). The processes of creating and contesting the comic-book superhero in cinematic epics, as exemplified by the *Dark Knight* trilogy, is clearly also being played out in the *Spider-Man*, *X-Men*, and *Avengers* film franchises. Similar large-scale attempts at narrative bootstrapping to that occurring in the *Zelda* games also occurs in the *Final Fantasy* series (especially *VII* and *XIII*), as well as the *Mass Effect* trilogy. I selected *The Wire*, *Batman*, and *Zelda* as exemplary within their own media contexts, but clearly they are not alone in their attempts to perfect, subsume, and propagate postmodern narratives.

Some of these other possible postmodern epics are noteworthy because they reflect an increase in female characters in the high mimetic mode. It may also be significant that these appear perhaps with more frequency in science fiction, a genre that is often aspirational and speculative, rather than necessarily a realistic reflection of the current state of affairs – gender relations included. Captain Janeway on *Star Trek: Voyager* is perhaps the most symbolic of these characters; but the list doubtless includes Ellen Ripley from the *Alien* franchise, Sarah Connor from the *Terminator* series, or Lightning from *Final Fantasy XIII*. Also, *Mass Effect*’s Commander Shepard can be played as either male or female, despite the extra amount of work and expense required to make gender choice an option in such a large-scale game series. However, as I noted when discussing the female characters of *The Wire* and *Zelda*, the possibility of epic heroines does not necessarily mean that there will be equal representation of female characters in any one particular epic. This may be due to the fact that men are still overrepresented in the production side of cinema and games, and that even those who might be sympathetic to exploring non-traditional heroines may not always live up to expectations. For instance, Joss Whedon has been well known for championing “strong female characters” since his work on *Buffy*, but even so, his depiction of the Black Widow in *Avengers: Age*

of *Ultron* (2015) was justifiably critiqued for its regressive portrayal of female identity. But even here, there are many factors at work, including but not limited to the dictates of executives from Marvel – and by extension Disney – and to the constraints of the bloated Marvel Comics mythos, which is also the work mostly of men done many decades earlier. Investigating these phenomena further would require even more time, as well as access to records and to decision-makers that are now obscured within the corporate hierarchies of some of the world's largest multinational corporations.

In fact, this has always been a problem of epic criticism: the amount of study required to achieve competency in any one cultural tradition precludes an in-depth understanding of others, and this is not helped by fact that, traditionally, even epic poetry has been seen as the culmination of the life's work of the poet. This was certainly the case with, for instance, Virgil, Dante, and Milton, and the amount of effort they put into preparing their masterpieces is well documented. We can only speculate about the efforts of "Homer" or anonymous medieval redactors, but their works demonstrate no less dedication of time and energy into mastering their craft and traditions. It is difficult enough to fully understand the works and cultural contexts of any one of these, much less to understand them in considerable depth within the context of a greater Western tradition. Moreover, fully understanding them while simultaneously mastering epics outside of the Western tradition, such as the *Bhagavad Gita*, becomes even more exponentially difficult, if it is humanly possible at all.

Meanwhile, a greater and more diverse critical competency is required to deal with many of the epics in new media. The Wagnerian ideal of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* – the "total artwork" bringing together music, drama, design, and so on – has only grown more complex in its possibilities, as the "texts" of television, film, and video games aggregate techniques of signification and refashion prior media forms, in a process which Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin have called "remediation." (273) The totalizing impulse of the epic necessarily means that epic works are constantly at the forefront of this process. What is needed, then, is the "flexible" formalist approach towards which I have been reaching, with the ultimate goal of a *Gesamtkunstkritik*, or total art criticism, which can evaluate the component parts of these complex works on their own merits and with the

appropriate attention with relation to the whole. This dissertation reflects a small attempt at this, by taking into account not only the traditional “textual” framework of written scripts and spoken dialogue, but also the interplay of music and sound design, and the non-linguistic visual signification of costume, make-up, architecture, and the deployment of space. But those with greater expertise in these areas may yet find fault with the claims made in the preceding chapters, or at least suspect the eclecticism of a critical dilettante.

Exponentially adding to these problems is the sheer scale of the contemporary context: with eight billion people alive on Earth, and counting, there is the potential for far more epics (or any other kinds of fictional narratives) than ever before. The possible cosmos of contemporary society has enlarged considerably, even as the scale of individual human experience remains the same. The fragmentation of postmodernism, therefore, cannot be attributed entirely to an aesthetic or even a cultural motivation; there are other logistical factors at play which merit further investigation. This also has implications for the status of various subcultures, as the comparison between “Darmok” and *Gilgamesh* attests: likewise, the less-than-impressive Nielsen ratings of *The Wire*’s original broadcast look somewhat better when we consider that even an audience of a few million is far greater than the number of spectators who ever saw Shakespeare’s plays performed at the original Globe theatre – never mind the tens of millions who went to theatres on *The Dark Knight*’s opening weekend. Roughly one *Zelda* game has been sold for every man, woman, and child living in the entire Roman Empire at its height.

There is a strange irony in the fact that, just as the narrative epic tries to encapsulate within it an impossibly large social totality, epic criticism also grapples with the paradox of comprehending and representing an impossibly large totality of cultural production. In this way both the making and the understanding of epics are activities that are aspirational, inherently deficient; we may recall here Franco Moretti’s argument that epics seem always to be flawed masterpieces. And yet poets – and novelists, and artists, and directors, and designers, and programmers – keep trying. That alone should justify the attention of the theorist and critic, but criticism too can find value in aspiring to an ideal of understanding which it ultimately may never achieve. The caricature of postmodernism, in which there are seemingly no standards, no shared aesthetic criteria, a

radical levelling of all cultural values, must be avoided even as the postmodern or poststructuralist era brings to our attention the limitations and dangers of uncritical reliance on totalizing concepts. This is something that even the pioneers of current critical fragmentation understood: for instance, Derrida notes in his famous critique of structuralism⁸⁸ that “I want to emphasize ... simply that the passage beyond philosophy does not consist in turning the page of philosophy (which usually comes down to philosophizing badly), but in continuing to read philosophers *in a certain way*.” (288) No system of thought or theoretical framework will allow us to understand fully; but surely we can understand better by grappling with that fact, even as we continue to theorize, than by throwing up our hands and not even trying. Worse yet, we must not be tempted by a nihilistic theory that legitimates this refusal to grapple with epistemological paradoxes in the name of “relativism.”

What is popularly termed “relativism” ought properly to be called “absolutism” – it is after all a rejection of the idea that things can be meaningfully compared to each other, that they are instead absolutely separate. I hope that this work succeeds as a refutation of such simplistic absolutes. Even if, in a thousand years, the *Iliad* and *Gilgamesh* are still recited, while *Batman* and *Star Trek* are long forgotten, the effort to understand them in relation must have some reward. As Matthew Arnold once noted about criticism in the context of English literature, the times are few indeed in which both great artists are born and the socio-historical conditions exist to nurture them; criticism’s purpose is to recognize that rare convergence when it has happened, and to develop the intellectual tools to prepare the way when it has not. (1527-1528) And in a sense this constant striving, the reaching beyond one’s means, is indicative of the impulse to create epics that never quite seems to go away. If it appears strange to invoke Arnold, the prophet of nineteenth-century high culture, in the same breath, as it were, as Jameson and the postmoderns, I can only point out that classification and criticism of the epic genre is ironically an epic endeavour in itself; it is the re-embedding of the totalizing concept into

⁸⁸ Interestingly, Derrida recognizes two limits to totalization: not only the inherent “freeplay” of signification, but also the “classical” problem of there simply being too much empirical evidence of “infinite richness” for anyone to master. This is the problem of scale I described above.

critical discourse. *Gesamtkunstkritik* mirrors its own object of study. The eclectic inclusion of a whole host of critics, from Aristotle to Arnold, and beyond, is in the end no more or less strange than a made-up starship captain, who reads ancient Greek in his off-hours, telling the world about a legendary Akkaddian king via the electronic hearth of a television screen.

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Curriculum Vitae

Name:	Luke Arnott
Post-secondary Education and Degrees:	<p>The University of Western Ontario London, Ontario, Canada 2010-2015 Ph.D. – Media Studies</p> <p>The University of Western Ontario London, Ontario, Canada 2006-2008 M.A. – Comparative Literature</p> <p>McGill University Montreal, Quebec, Canada 2000-2004 B.A. – History and Classics (Double Major)</p>
Honours and Awards:	<p>Province of Ontario Graduate Scholarship 2011-2012, 2012-2013, 2014-2015</p> <p>Province of Ontario Graduate Scholarship with Distinction 2013-2014</p> <p>Graduate Thesis Research Award The University of Western Ontario 2012-2013</p>
Related Work Experience	<p>Lecturer The University of Western Ontario 2013-2015</p> <p>Teaching Assistant The University of Western Ontario 2006-2008, 2010-2014</p>

Publications:

Arnott, Luke. "Epic and Genre: Beyond the Boundaries of Media." *Comparative Literature*. Forthcoming, Dec. 2016/Mar. 2017.

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