

CHRISTOPHER NOLAN'S GOTHAM CITY AND GLOBAL CINEMA SPACE

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A number of postmodern theorists have discussed a sense of what Marshall McLuhan calls the “global village”, where the transnational and socially diverse nature of the world comes to appear more fully within the Western cultural dominant.¹ For Fredric Jameson and others, this leads to a commonly described notion of postmodern fragmentation, in the subject’s interaction with globalization as well as with typical urban environments.² Despite this, contemporary narrative works that are concerned with exploring a notion of the city regularly remain beholden to certain tropes inherited from nineteenth-century realist texts, whose rational, Enlightenment values are obviously at odds with this postmodern sense of fragmentation. The paradigmatic example of the realist city is perhaps the London of Charles Dickens. In *Bleak House* (1853) along with many other classical realist novels, the city often takes on a number of formal characteristics: it can appear as a self-contained entity which can be described in the terms of its ‘character’; as an organizing device in which to contain the narrative; and as a more complex series of interrelated social groups and districts which it is the author’s task to map.

Raymond Williams sees these notions of form, social mapping and characterization as being inherently combined in the London novels of Dickens in this manner: “Dickens’s ultimate vision of London . . . lies in the form of his novels: in their kind of narrative, in their type of characterization, in their genius for typification.”³ These evocations of the city can usually be tied to literary realism’s supposed aim to represent all aspects of the culture it chooses to fictionalize. In *The Historical Novel* (1947), Georg Lukacs will ascribe a Marxist valence to this kind of operation, whereby the urban environment allows for “opposing social forces to be brought into human relationship with each other”⁴ through the representation of differing classes of character. The purpose of this essay will be to investigate ways in which contemporary films, such as the recent trilogy of Batman films directed by Christopher Nolan, attempt to reconcile a realist depiction of the city with a larger sense of the global, within a generic form whose approach to the geographical is increasingly fragmented.

In Fredric Jameson’s work, the type of social mapping Lukacs sees in the realist novel is viewed as continuing in the depiction of the postmodern city within certain types of generic literature, particularly Raymond Chandler’s canonical novels. For Jameson, the mapping ability of Chandler’s detective Philip Marlowe becomes a new variant of the nineteenth-century novel’s ability to represent the social totality:

Los Angeles is already a kind of microcosm and forecast of the country as a whole: a new centreless city, in which the various classes have lost touch with each other . . . If the symbol of social coherence and comprehensibility was furnished by the nineteenth-century Parisian apartment house (dramatized in Zola’s *Pot Bouille*) with its shop on the ground floor, its wealthy inhabitants on the second and third, petty bourgeoisie further up, and workers’ rooms on top . . . then Los Angeles is the opposite, a spreading out horizontally, a flowing apart of the elements of the social structure . . . Since there is no longer any privileged experience in which the whole of the social structure can be grasped, a figure must be invented

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who can be superimposed on the society as a whole, whose routine and life-pattern serve somehow to tie its separate and isolated parts together.⁵

Jameson sees a number of other types of postmodern media following these tropes: *The Wire* (2002–2008) and its extreme focus on Baltimore’s social institutions, or the Utopian science fiction worlds of Kim Stanley Robinson, are two such examples.⁶ At the same time, a number of contemporary contexts drive the realist depiction of the city into other formal and strategic iterations. Given the relatively brief running time of conventional feature films, these types of vast examinations of class and type are less common in cinema, and cities appear more simply as ‘setting’. The network narratives of certain Richard Linklater and Robert Altman films are one formal solution, however, offering labyrinthine expositions of specific cultural groups within their urban environments, albeit often at the expense of typical realist character development. Meanwhile, a variety of television police procedurals use the city as a limiting device, containing the action locally, as well as serving to differentiate one show from the next in the marketplace.

But elsewhere, we can see a development in contemporary cultural material that depicts an increasingly dislocated, transitory and globalized sense of geographical and cultural space. Contemporary action films in particular, as represented by films in the *Transformers* series, the numerous “Marvel Cinematic Universe” comic book adaptations, or Guillermo Del Toro’s *Pacific Rim* (2013), often disregard a coherent sense of space. When the films stay inside America they seem to transition between a series of anonymous highways, secret scientific bases and suburban settings with little sense of location or distance. Mark Bould discusses this kind of dislocation in *Transformers’* (2007) construction of geographical and urban space related to the fictional Mission city, “which seems to be both twenty miles from the Hoover Dam and in California, with parts of a Los Angeles skyline and at least one building from Detroit.”⁷ This can be contrasted with the extreme spatial containment of previous examples of the genre, such as the early *Die Hard* films. At the same time, there is often a series of international locations built into these narratives, depicting a variety of recognizable landmarks, and urban or provincial environments, contributing an additional sense of fragmented global space.

We can certainly attribute this development of these “global” blockbusters to economics, whereby Hollywood films are increasingly conceived with international markets in mind. *Pacific Rim*, for example, while considered a failure in America, went on to become successful globally, particularly in China and Japan, becoming “the rare English-language film in history to cross \$400 million while barely crossing \$100 million domestic.”⁸ A recent practice has also begun to emerge whereby “mid-to-big-budget films are finding ways to court Chinese government approval [with] scenes and moments and dialogue inserted entirely to ingratiate an American film with one specific market.”⁹ These situations can be seen in the context of Paul Grainge’s work on the *Lord of the Rings* and *Harry Potter* films. Grainge discusses how: “[i]n a textual and industrial sense, both franchise examples lend themselves to discussion about the globalization of film. They ask questions about the nature of internationally exportable products and genres, about the mix of international finance, marketing and labour that underpin high budget studio movies, and about the commercial life of bankrolled blockbusters as they circulate and are consumed, as global brands.”¹⁰ Ongoing franchises, broad generic categorization, and attempts to appeal to transnational audiences are all factors that have become increasingly prevalent in comic book movies in particular.

In other ways it is curious that film adaptations of comic books are at the forefront of this globalizing development, given that their heroes have traditional homes, confining their fight against evil to one city:

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Superman resides in Metropolis, Spiderman in New York, Judge Dredd in Mega City Two, and so on. These urban environments can again be seen as formally limiting devices, containing the hugely destructive and fantastic action of the comic books within a fictionalized city that has little sense of the larger world. Batman's Gotham City is one such example, with a diverse set of conventions appearing in the multitude of adaptations over Batman's seventy-four year history. The city appears as a major consideration for many famous iterations of Batman, such as the influential graphic novels of Frank Miller, as well as Tim Burton's two films. Gotham, besides being depicted traditionally as dark, raining and crime ridden, also has its own official map and an accepted set of landmarks that interpreters might reference. Furthermore, the city has a dense fictional history explored across the comic titles, where narratives have dealt with its founding, its architectural history, and its place in historical events such as the American Civil War and American Revolution. Tied into all these elements are notions of intertextuality, with Gotham traditionally being thought of as a fictionalized New York.¹¹

Batman is also an interesting example in that he ostensibly follows in a line of detectives, of which Chandler's Marlowe is our paradigmatic example. Batman first appeared in the publication *Detective Comics*, and his skills as a detective (as well as some of the social mapping that Jameson sees as coming from this type of operation) are often a component of Batman narratives. Batman's character interacts with many different types of social institutions and criminals, while his alter ego Bruce Wayne moves amongst the business and upper class. Christopher Nolan's recent series of Batman films reinforce the detective component and foreground Gotham as a city with an economic and social history, as well as making significant characters out of police officers, politicians, lawyers, white collar businessmen, criminals of varying social class, wards of the state, and so on.¹² Bruce Wayne's status as a billionaire orphan is used to inscribe a sense of social responsibility that the rich have to the poor within the films' plots.

Despite being a hugely profitable capitalist organization that covertly develops all sorts of violent military technology, the family company is primarily depicted as working in the health sciences, conducting research into renewable energy, as well as being immensely charitable. These themes are introduced through the guilt Bruce Wayne feels in relation to his parents' deaths, and part of his hero's quest will be to live up to the tenacious humanitarianism and positive social influence of his father. Across the three films, Batman's various nemeses will all contain a component of social analysis that challenges the Wayne family's charitable capitalist model. In *Batman Begins* (2005), The League of Shadows' stated intent to destroy Gotham is framed within a philosophy that sees violent action as a way of bringing the moral corruption of the upper class into check. In *The Dark Knight* (2008), the Joker's plans revolve around a notion of chaos and anarchy, and his aim is most often to deconstruct the liberal ideology of Wayne and his upper class counterparts, in order to demonstrate the more base instincts of society.

In *The Dark Knight Rises* (2012), Bane, although ostensibly continuing the League of Shadows' mission to destroy Gotham, wishes to start a revolution where the old economic and class structures have been eradicated, inevitably alluding to the Occupy movement, but also to older Marxist ideas. It is in these moments that the films give their traditional plots of 'good versus bad' a certain amount of conceptual depth. However, even if the various villains' manifestoes are charismatic and interested in social change, they are also ultimately depicted as misguided, violent and inevitably evil.¹³

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Elsewhere, the films' attempts at social analysis are formally neutered by their necessary veneration of Bruce Wayne. A slippage inserts itself into the ideology of these films at a very early stage, in order for these themes and Bruce Wayne's development to work together. As the character Rachel Dawes lectures

Bruce Wayne on his social responsibility to the fate of the city, the economic struggles of the people living in the Narrows (the digitally constructed shanty town slum that appears predominantly in *Batman Begins*) are attributed to the mob boss stereotype of Carmine Falcone. Dawes claims, "this city is rotting. . . . Falcone floods our streets with crime and drugs, preying on the desperate. . . . Falcone may have not killed your parents Bruce, but he's destroying everything they stood for."¹⁴ Here, despite a thematic interest in social structures, the investigation of systemic corruption and economic history buckles: *Batman Begins* attributes the plight of the lower class to an archetypal gangster boss whom Batman will be able to dispense with, rather than a sense of a mode of production or superstructure.

Meanwhile, the films' attempts to render the city as a functional, believable space is in a somewhat antagonistic relationship to cinematic conventions, with the technique of cutting between scenes inevitably leading to a fragmented sense of space and continuity. Marc Boumeester describes how a film like Gus Van Sant's *Elephant* (2003) is able to map a high school and its surrounding suburbs both socially and spatially by reinforcing the sense of time and interconnectivity within a carefully defined setting. However, most films cut between these environments, fragmenting our sense of space.¹⁵ This is very different to the sense of Philip Marlowe, driving through Los Angeles and describing the act of crossing from one type of social area to another in *The Big Sleep* (1939), for example.

In certain moments the Batman films attempt this type of operation, such as in the scene described above where Rachel Dawes drives from a featureless urban environment into a subterranean area populated by the homeless, or in shots of the city that display the Narrows area on the edge of a more affluent city skyline. Elsewhere however, this component of the films is undermined or problematized by other kinds of cinematic or generic structure. For instance, *Batman Begins* gives us a sense of Gotham as Chicago, but the series occasionally reverts to a more traditional sense of Gotham as New York, particularly for certain elements of the plot to occur in *The Dark Knight Rises*. And the series uses a number of locations for its various landmarks, leading to contradictory senses of the city's geography: Wayne Manor, Bruce Wayne's residence, was filmed at a location in the English countryside, and the sense that this property is well outside the urban environment is one such disruption. A film such as *Transformers: Dark of the Moon* (2011) presents its environments as a number of visually disparate set pieces, intentionally discarding visual or spatial coherence in favour of cinematic intensity. The choice to depict Wayne Manor in a way that gestures towards the Batman films' generic contemporaries here proves somewhat incompatible with the effort to create a cohesive environment.

This notion of the city is further complicated by the way it interacts with a larger sense of the global. Compared with Tim Burton's earlier film adaptations for example, where Gotham is its own self-enclosed universe with a uniformly gothic style and there is no suggestion of an outside world, the Nolan films make several excursions to both real, named places, such as Florence and Hong Kong, or less specified places, such as the Middle Eastern landscape and primitive prison of *The Dark Knight Rises*. In these moments, the films again try to reconcile a more traditional notion of the city with the generic form of the global action blockbuster.

The episode in *The Dark Knight* involving corrupt Asian businessmen and Batman's mission to Hong Kong reads as a concession to the foreign set-pieces found in its generic counterparts, but also potentially adds another nuance to its mapping of Gotham. Here the film makes a gesture towards detailing a sense

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of worldwide economic relations and dependencies that are notably absent from the limiting aspects of localised detective stories. However, the instability of this cinematic city and the way its global (along with its technological, ideological and historical) components are barely able to coalesce comes to

something of a climax in the final film, where all of the bridges and tunnels leading in and out of Gotham are destroyed, in order for the film's villain Bane to hold the "entire" city hostage. Here, despite *Batman Begins'* more overt sense of Gotham as Chicago, the city once again transforms, effectively becomes the isolated island of Manhattan. This formal conceit becomes symptomatic of the cinematic and conceptual difficulties the films find in asserting the city as a cohesive identity.

For Jameson, *The Wire* and Philip Marlowe offer necessary and convincing maps of the metropolitan environment. But for a contemporary mapping project of social totality it seems as if an interaction with the global nature of late capitalism is essential, in order to reach beyond the confines of a singular city and embrace a larger network of relationships. Nolan's films display ways in which this type of operation might be problematic on a number of levels: the attempt to map a large fictional city is fraught by cinematic convention, and the social elements are compromised by the heavily ideological frameworks used to construct them. The films' various excursions into international space offer the opportunity for a more thorough sense of global capitalism and its relationship to the modern metropolis, yet this component of the series can only intermittently be developed within the scope of the films.

In these ways, Lukacs' and Jameson's notions of historical and social totalities, and their potential to be revealed in certain types of generic forms, are perpetually undermined in Nolan's films, as every component that would seem to offer a potential for positive Marxist analysis is serially complicated by the formal qualities of cinematic space, the generic characteristics of the global blockbuster and the capitalist nature of its hero. These films outline ways in which postmodern or post-structural problems with totalising have become obvious hurdles for contemporary cultural production that aims to map social groups, metropolitan areas or global capitalism, especially in a realist fashion. Despite the possibilities that these Batman films surely denote, it remains to be seen whether a mainstream film, or indeed any type of contemporary cultural material, has the ability to properly interrogate these problems.

ENDNOTES

1. Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1964), 3-6.
2. See Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham NC: Duke University Press, 1991); Linda Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction* (New York: Routledge, 1988); or for a historical overview of this kind of theory see Perry Anderson, *The Origins of Postmodernity* (London: Verso, 1998).
3. Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1973), 154.
4. Georg Lukacs, *The Historical Novel* (London: Merlin Books, 1962), 36.
5. Fredric Jameson, "On Raymond Chandler," in *The Critical Response to Raymond Chandler*, ed. J. K. Van Dover (London: Greenwood, 1995), 69.
6. See Fredric Jameson, "Realism and Utopia in *The Wire*," *Criticism* 52, no. 3-4 (2010): 359-372, accessed November 26, 2013, doi: 10.1353/crt.2010.0053; Fredric Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions* (London: Verso, 2005), 393-416.
7. Mark Bould, review of *Transformers* (DreamWorks movie), *Science Fiction Film and Television* 1, no.1 (2008): 165, accessed February 23, 2014, <http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/sff/summary/v001/1.1.bould01.html>.

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8. Scott Mendelson, "Pacific Rim and More Domestic 'Flops' That Became Global Hits," *Media & Entertainment* (blog), *Forbes*, February 9, 2013, <http://www.forbes.com/sites/scottmendelson/2013/09/02/pacific-rim-and-more-domestic-flops-that-became-global-hits/>.
9. Noel Murray, Tasha Robinson, and Scott Tobias. "How Asia is Reshaping American Film," *The Conversation* (blog), *The Dissolve*, December 2, 2013, <http://thedissolve.com/features/the-conversation/296-how-asia-is-reshaping-american-film/>.
10. Paul Grainge, *Brand Hollywood: Selling Entertainment in a Global Media Age* (New York: Routledge, 2008), 151-152.
11. William Uricchio describes these elements of Gotham in terms of a "performative cartography" in "The Batman's Gotham City™: Story, Ideology, Performance," in *Comics and the City: Urban Space in Print, Picture and Sequence*, ed. Jörn Ahrens and Arno Meteling (New York: Continuum, 2010), 121-123.
12. For a more detailed discussion of Nolan's interpretive choices see Will Brooker, *Hunting the Dark Knight: Twenty-First Century Batman* (London: I. B. Taurus, 2012), 74-132.
13. Dan Hassler-Forest sees the political and economic components of these films in more negative terms in *Capitalist Superheroes: Caped Crusaders in the Neoliberal Age* (Winchester, UK: Zero Books, 2012), 172-190.
14. "Not One of Your Good People," *Batman Begins*, directed by Christopher Nolan (2005; Burbank CA: Warner Home Video, 2005), DVD.
15. Marc Boumeester, "Reconsidering Cinematic Mapping: Halfway Between Collected Subjectivity and Projected Mapping," in *Urban Cinematics: Understanding Urban Phenomena Through the Moving Image* (Bristol: Intellect, 2011), 246-247.

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Christopher Nolan's Gotham City in "The Dark Knight" (2008) is almost the polar opposite of Burton's. Where Burton's city was crowded, dingy and chaotic, Nolan's does not seem especially dysfunctional at least from the outside. Filmed mostly in Chicago, this Gotham is dominated by wide boulevards and the clean lines of international-style skyscrapers. It does, in fact, look like a realistic American city, and an idealized one at that. The labyrinthine back alleys where Gotham's criminals usually fester don't seem to exist here. Gotham City is a large metropolitan American city that serves as the home of billionaire playboy Bruce Wayne, who uses his alter-ego of Batman to protect the city against organized crime. Gotham is considered the most corrupt city in the world and the darkest of America's cities, and only rumors of a Batman gave it hope. Gotham is very large, with approximately 30 million people residing on a set of 5 islands. It is also corrupt and teeming with criminals. Its architecture is a mix of different styles See more ideas about Gotham, Christopher nolan and Gotham city.Â BlÃ¼d announced to the crowd of scum packed into the cramped space beneath the city. rain and cloudy dark city. â—â™† stay you, but be a radder version âœ™â—: it's pouring and thundering and all i want to do is go outside and lay down in the rain.