Holy Terror, Batman! *Frank Miller's* Dark Knight *and the Superhero as Hardboiled Terrorist*

by Daniele Croci

> *[J]ust when it seemed like we knew the situation and everything was going to be fine, those airplanes flew into those buildings and things got very strange in New York.* – Frank Miller (Eisner, Miller, and Brownstein 2005: 312)

In a 2003 interview, American graphic novelist Frank Miller claims, "I long ago determined that a character like Batman can only be defined as a terrorist if his motto is striking terror." (George and Miller 2003: 110) Once put in historical perspective, this remark on his latest (at the time) interpretation of the character gives an idea on the

scale and depth of Miller's archetypal revision, but also on the cultural influences which have engendered it.

My work here aims at analysing this process of artistic, literary and cultural reconceptualization. In this regard, it can be argued that one of the primary strategies employed by the author since the 1980s entails the hybridization of the character's latent hardboiled motifs with a narrative on/of terrorism. In the meantime, the superhero, one of the most resilient archetypes of American popular culture, is historicized and framed into a verisimilar postmodern scenario. Thus, while its inherent modernity is challenged, complex ethical and political interrogatives are raised. Eventually, Batman's reformulation as reaction against the perceived crisis of American identity produces a moral impasse, which requires the articulation of a precise legitimating ideology.

Frank Miller (1957-) is one of the most revered and controversial figures of the comics establishment: artist, writer, and lately film director, he can be deemed the American response to the so-called "British Invasion" (see Morrison 2012: 188).[1] The analysis shall take into account three Batman graphic novels, written and drawn by Miller, composing a "*Dark Knight* macrotext" that spans over twenty years: *The Dark Knight Returns* ([1986] 2002a), its sequel *The Dark Knight Strikes Again* (2002b), and *Holy Terror* (2011). As a matter of fact, *Holy Terror* is not a Batman tale, but an original superhero graphic novel starring a broody vigilante (and Batman lookalike) known as The Fixer. It was originally conceived as a Batman miniseries to be published under DC Comics, until the author changed plans in 2010.

After a brief introduction of the primary texts, the central part of the analysis considers the ways in which these graphic novels appropriate aesthetic and narrative elements from the culturally received notions of terrorism. In particular, this mode of representation is to be framed within a larger, conscious effort toward historical and cultural relevance in superhero comics, started at least in the 1970s (Morrison 2012, 149–152). In the following decade, Miller and his peers "engaged in different but equally powerful ways with the late 1980s zeitgeist" (Baetens and Frey 2015: 81).

[1] The term denotes a whole generation of English, Scottish and Irish authors who have played a major role in the process of literary and artistic sophistication of American mainstream comics since the 1980s. The "invasion" includes highly influential figures like Grant Morrison, Alan Moore, Neil Gaiman, Dave McKean, and many others (see also Baetens and Frey 2015: 88-89; Restaino 2004: 332). As Miller himself wryly remarks, "[W]e had our own little British invasion […] in the eighties and nineties, when these cocky Brits came sauntering in, irreverent to the material, and really shook things up". (Eisner, Miller, and Brownstein 2005: 121)

The third and last part addresses the narrative and semiotic modalities in which the texts reinvigorate and reinterpret the lurking Golden Age links to pulp, hardboiled novels.[2] Miller's indebtedness to classic hardboiled novelists (mostly Dashiell Hammet and Raymond Chandler) is widely acknowledged by critics (Scaggs 2005: 63; Bongco 2000: 190; Klock 2002: 29), and the author himself claims to have been a Mickey Spillane reader in his youth (George and Miller 2003: 109).[3] Furthermore, this section attempts to construe the mutual interaction of those two sets of influence. It can in fact be argued that these graphic novels employ the hardboiled mode as structural framework to renegotiate the dichotomy between the *villain-terrorist* and the *hero*. As these categories become increasingly blurred, the relationship between heroism, law and justice is further problematized. In the end, the process reinforces and historicizes the idea, arguably inherent to superheroic narratives, "that justice is something that can exist quite apart from the legal system" (Bainbridge 2007: 460). This separation determines a crisis of legitimacy, which is dealt with through different (cultural, historical and literary) stratagems – the failure thereof renders the hero dramatically "unsympathetic" (Wandtke 2007: 99).

This analysis develops on the notion of "revisionary superhero narrative" as theorized by G. Klock (2002). The author identifies Miller's *The Dark Knight Returns* (hereinafter *TDKR*) and Alan Moore's *Watchmen* (Moore and Gibbons 1986) as the first historic(al) instances of "strong poetic revision through misprision" (Klock 2002: 16) in American mainstream superhero comics.[4] In other words, these highly influential mid-eighties graphic novels engage in a process of literary and artistic refashioning, aimed at countering the generic expectations of the readers. Thus, in approaching assumptions stratified within decades of gargantuan continuity, revisionist authors attempt to renegotiate well-established *formulae*. As Bongco points out, *TDKR*'s (and we might add *Watchmen*'s) "novelty and consequent success lie more in the radical way it eroded the traditional superhero genre from within the genre" (2000: 170). This implies not only the rejection of undesirable aesthetic/narrative features, but also the foregrounding of "submerged aspect[s] of comic book tradition" (Klock 2002: 39). For *TDKR*, this includes violence, politics, psycho-sexual subtexts, and also "[taking] the myth back to its macabre 1930s origins, while at the same time giving it a cynical 1980s sensibility" (Sabin 1993: 87).

[2] The expression Golden Age of American comics normally indicates the period between 1938 (birth of the Superman character, which popularized the comic book as editorial format) and the early fifties (Restaino 2004: 132; Sabin 1993: 144). The same very years which saw the rise of the great American pulp P.I. novel.

[3] "I was reading Mickey Spillane when I was 13, and that was some pretty racy stuff."

[4] Klock draws end elaborates his idea of "poetic revision through misprision" from several works of Harold Bloom, like The *Anxiety of Influence* (1973) and *A Map of Misreading* (1975).

Moreover, we must consider the ways in which those repurposing practices actualize and connote the character, while elaborating new subtexts. The revisions "trade so heavily on the 'history' of the heroes—not only the shifting canon of their stories, but the tacit and continually redefined sense of each character's symbolic meaning as well" (Cates 2012: 836). In this regard, Miller's works stage the tension between the intrinsic modernity of a character conceived in the late thirties and the postmodern crisis of metanarratives.

THE *DARK KNIGHT* MACROTEXT [5]

Both a mid-eighties satire and dystopian novel, *TDKR* is set in a near future crime-ridden America on the verge of a nuclear war with the Soviet Union. Superheroes do not exist anymore (with the notable exception of Superman serving as government lackey), and an aging Batman/Bruce Wayne decides to "return" from his retirement to wage a personal war against crime and chaos. As he starts his crusade, he meets the opposition of a senile President Ronald Reagan, ending in a physical confrontation with Superman. Grant Morrison points out how TDKR "rebranded the Batman story as a violent operatic myth of eighties America […]. Miller's Wayne embodied the self-made American: ascendant, free, and accountable to no authority – yet haunted by guilt." (2012: 190)

The influence of *TDKR* in the history of both genre and medium is paramount. Critics agree on considering it part of the 'holy trinity' of works published in 1986, the so-called "Big Three" (Baetens and Frey 2015, 74), that indelibly reshaped the public perception of comics. *TDKR*, *Watchmen* and Art Spiegelman's *Maus* "had in common their large scale, their quality and above all their adult nature" (Sabin 1993, 91). With hindsight, their importance is probably best understood in relation with the engagement of (a new) audience. As Sabin suggests, "[t]he effect of *Dark Knight* and *Watchmen* was thus not to revolutionize comics, as has often been supposed, but to introduce a new readership to these 'graphic novelistic' possibilities." (1996: 165).

Serialized between December 2001 and July 2002, *The Dark Knight Strikes Again* (hereinafter *DKSA*) was marketed as direct sequel to the original classic. The graphic novel further explores the proactive path introduced in the previous work: it narrates

[5] An expanded version of the macrotext would also include two other Batman graphic novels that have only been written (and thus not drawn) by Miller, i.e. the critically-acclaimed *Year One* (1987), with David Mazzucchelli, and the much criticized *All-Star Batman & Robin - the Boy Wonder* (Miller and Lee 2008). As of this writing, a third chapter of the Dark Knight canon is being serialized. *Dark Knight III: The Master Race* is co-written by Miller and Brian Azzarello, and illustrated by Andy Kubert. (2015).

the exploits of Batman as underground freedom fighter, who seeks the help of old, fallen superheroes to overturn a corrupt and totalitarian government – once again supported by Superman. While the plot and themes are somehow similar, the execution could not be more different. Defined by its own author "[n]ear parody" (George and Miller 2003: 108) and "a romp" (110), *DKSA* is a colourful and hypertrophic postmodern extravaganza. It was welcomed with mixed (to negative) reviews, mostly criticizing the disappointing caricatural art style and the overblown narrative (Murphy 2008: 5–6; Klock 2008: 36).

Scholars identify the graphic novel as authorial reaction against the overwhelming influence of the predecessor, "responsible for a host of serious imitators who took from the book only violence and 'adult' themes, resulting in a lot of pretentious nonsense" (Klock 2008: 40). Eradicating the realism in favour of campy absurdity, *DKSA* attempts to (re-)revise the (already subversive) tropes that have been institutionalised since the late eighties: "the new series violates many of the conventions established in the first series and the maxims about superheroes Miller developed in interviews since the 1980s" (Wandtke 2007: 98). As the author himself suggests, "every once in a while, you've got to take a deep breath and realize that you're doing something intensely silly, and then go back to the operatic." (George and Miller 2003: 108).

When still in gestation as a Batman comic, *Holy Terror* (hereinafter *HT*) was defined by Miller "a piece of propaganda," [in which] Batman kicks al Qaeda's ass" (Miller, quoted in Goldstein 2006). The novel is set in a fictional North American city called Empire City (modelled after both New York and Gotham City), and follows a couple of vigilantes (The Fixer and Burglar Cat, i.e. Batman and Catwoman) during and after a series of Islamist terrorist attacks. The tone is hectic and grim, while the black-and-white art resembles the *noirish* chiaroscuro abstraction displayed in the *Sin City* series (Miller [1992] 2005). This aesthetic shift suggests that *HT* relinquishes the bright playfulness of *DKSA* to exacerbate the political tone of the previous story-arc, while the protagonist anti-hero exudes grotesque hypermasculinity.

Even before its actual release, *HT* has been harshly criticized for its alleged islamophobia (Dar 2010). It must be added that such accusations have been associated to Miller's categorical stance on 9/11: "[w]e've had this horrible thing happen, and we've got to retaliate and we need retribution and we need to solve a global problem" (George and Miller 2003: 114). Darius attempts to frame the display of racial stereotypes by suggesting links to 1940s propagandistic superhero comics, of which *HT* is supposed to be a modern reinterpretation (2011a). Miller, for one, seems to indulge in bold political incorrectness: "I think that comics are at their best when they are provocative, and their outlaw nature is what I want to seek out in them" (Eisner, Miller, and Brownstein 2005: 178).

Despite the obvious stylistic and narrative differences, these three graphics novel can arguably be identified as *oppositional* narratives, meaning that they share the idea of *reacting* against a perceived establishment, or a historical discontinuity. Reaganism, 9/11, or the state of the superhero genre are polarized as crises that need to be addressed by an uncompromising (anti)hero. In this sense, Miller's Dark Knight engages in a dialectical confrontation with the historical and cultural *zeitgeist*, expanding the generic notion of the superhero as remedy to "the perceived deficiencies in society" (Bainbridge 2007: 456). In the process, his very heroic *ethos* is increasingly questioned: "in order for the character to work, he has to be a force that in certain ways is beyond good and evil. […] it's very clear to me that our society is committing suicide by lack of a force like that." (Miller in Thomson 1985: 61). It is here argued that two powerful and recognizable narratives, terrorism and the *hardboiled* novel, provide the ground for this subversive, Nietzschean refashioning.

SUDDEN HOLES IN SPACE AND TIME

A preliminary analysis suggests that *TDKR*'s representation of terrorism is achieved through a process of (what we could define) 'centrifugal repurposing'. It means that *Batman* villains are reconfigured to display traits normally associated with culturally-defined notions of terrorism and terrorists.[6] This deviation functions as a departure from the core of the characters' generic features, ossified over decades and hence well-known by readers. Moreover, this aesthetic divergence can be interpreted as a microcosm of Miller's larger revisionist attempt.

Each of the three main antagonists of the graphic novel (excluding Superman) display at least one different 'terrorist' trait. The first villain we encounter is a new character (not belonging to the *Batman* canon), i.e. the anonymous leader of the *Mutants*, the criminal gang which oppresses the city. Even though it is not clear whether the group's name indicates a literal mutation, the Mutant Leader is a Lombrosian aberration represented as a monstrous figure with razorblade teeth. He makes his first, televised appearance soon after Batman's comeback, which endangers the gang's control on the city: "appropriating the media-savvy tactics of contemporary "evil others" such as Osama bin Laden, [the mutant] leader delivers a brutal video-taped warning, directed at the city fathers" (Finigan 2010: 28). The critic is right in

[6] Interestingly enough, the words terrorism and terrorist are never used in the graphic novel.

identifying the cultural antecedent. Here, we might add, the association of a terrorist technique with street gangsters – normally extraneous to these procedures – triggers an unsettling association. The words of the leader are rough and intimidating:

> We will kill the old man Gordon. His women will weep for him. We will chop him. We will grind him. We will bathe in his blood. I myself will kill the fool Batman. I will rip the meat from his bones and suck them dry. I will eat his heart and drag his body through the streets. Don't call us a gang. Don't call us criminals. We are the law. We are the future. Gotham city belongs to the mutants. Soon the world will be ours. (*TDKR*, 44)

As Kaveney suggests, "[t]he Mutant leader talks less like a criminal than like a barbarian warlord" (2008: 149). Nevertheless, this does not imply verbal sloppiness, as the speech displays a precise rhetorical strategy. The brief sentences, the repetitions (as "we will") and the use of consonance ("eat his heart and drag his body through the streets") convey a cadenced, haunting tone. The corporeal references ("blood", "meat", "heart"), on the other hand, are meant to counterbalance Batman's metaphysical, symbolic value. The lexical choices combine sadism with anxiety about women and the rule of law ("we are the law"), both identified as weak, privileged targets of the chaotic rampage of 1980s American street-crime. Legality, and the constant re-negotiation with justice, is again confirmed an issue central to superheroic narratives (see Bainbridge 2007).

However, the most relevant feature at work here is semiotic. In this passage, and for the whole duration of the novel, "Miller replaces conventional comic book panels with representations of television screens" (Wandtke 2007: 92). Readers are thus presented with news reports, televised messages, and talk shows. These screens serve as a Greek chorus commenting on the events narrated, while different interpretations of Batman's actions are disputed: the main character is alternately described as "ruthless, monstrous vigilante, striking at the foundations of our democracy" (*TDKR*, 65) and "a symbolic resurgence of the common man's will to resist…a rebirth of the American fighting spirit" (41). These screens – after *DRK* crystallized as one the author's distinctive stylistic features – represent and mediatise the moral impasse that leaves the novel unresolved. As Wandtke suggests, "[m]edia outlets are depicted […] as unwittingly supporting the move away from concepts such as good and evil" (2007: 92).

The second and third – classic, this time – antagonists in the graphic novel are former D.A. Harvey Dent (i.e. Two Face) and the Joker, "who threaten Gotham with terrorism and mass murder" (Finigan 2010: 23). In a sequence that uncannily forecasts real events, Two Face broadcasts a pirate TV message threatening to detonate a city landmark: "I stand here atop Gotham's beautiful Twin Towers, with two bombs capable of making them rubble. You have twenty minutes to save them. The price is five million dollars. I would have made it two – but I have bills to pay…" (*TDKR*, 50)

The Joker, on the other hand, remains somehow more faithful to the 'chemical' roots of the primordial Batman canon (see Morrison 2012: 21).[7] The villain murders with "deadly smile gas" (*TDKR*, 131) the host, guests and audience of a talk show (The David Endocrine Show) – in which he is invited to promote his own psychological and social rehabilitation (*TDKR,* 126-129). Later on, he slays a group of children in a fairground through poisoned cotton candy (140), before being hunted down by Batman.

These two antagonists respectively epitomise traditional, bombing attacks and biochemical terrorism. We might add that *TDKR* villains (Joker, Two Face and the Mutant Leader) all share a privileged relationship with television – as both ideological and physical space. This common trait exemplifies the historical trend by which, in the latter half of the twentieth century, "television became the primary medium for the terrorist story, and brought the anxieties generated by terrorist acts to a fever pitch." (Scanlan 2001: 12). Domestic screens started to be perceived as mediatised arena in which symbolic production is disputed: "[a]s terrorists grew more savvy [sic] about television, they threatened to take control away from broadcasters." (ibid.)

However, this technological appropriation is to be framed in the wider context of the novel's use of media outlets. Discussing the much-debated *liaison* of terrorism and television, A. Houen warns against critical simplification: "terrorism and media coverage have been compounded all too effectively, but […] public opinion and government policy can play a part in the dynamic, too, making the symbiosis all the more unstable. […] [T]he notion of a binary symbiosis is problematic." (2002: 12). In *TDKR*, the "symbiosis" is further destabilised by the satirical intent that underlies the representation of TV screens. The voices and opinions, including the terrorists' and President Reagan's, grow into an undistinguishable white noise obfuscating real events. When not engaged in downright deceit, the chorus attempts and fails to rationalize the larger-than-life feats of Batman and his rival Superman. Thus, the terrorist-induced anxiety is debunked as another instance of ideological warfare, and as hyperreal fantasy against which heroism collides.

[7] "From the very beginning, Batman habitually found himself dealing with crimes involving chemicals and crazy people, and over the years he would take on innumerable villains armed with lethal Laughing Gas, mind-control lipstick, Fear Dust, toxic aerosols, and 'artificial phobia' pills".

TDKR's discourse on terrorism is particularly relevant once related to the representation of the larger historical context.[8] The novel incorporates several aspects of mid-eighties America, like the issue of street-crime, and the strained relationship with the Soviet 'Evil Empire'. For instance, a territorial dispute between the United States and Russia over the fictional island of *Corto Maltese* (an homage to Italian cartoonist Hugo Pratt) resembles the 1983 invasion of Grenada. Another minor subplot revolves around an American Army general selling weapons to gangsters for profit, a crime which forecasts the 1986 Iran-Contras affair. Even President Reagan is satirised as an inept buffoon who ignores American internal problems in favour of a detrimental rivalry with the Soviets.[9] These "pretty bad losers" (163) eventually launch a nuke that, though deviated in the desert by Superman, turns America into a cold wasteland. Eventually, the internal terrorist threats are superseded by the conventional, almost reassuring communist menace. The novel thus articulates the tension between the traditional and the rising, post-Cold War era scenario, according to the principle for which "society explains the conflicts within itself by constructing an object (an outsider like the Jew) against which to define it" (Wandtke 2007: 90).

The historical discontinuity requires a new enemy, a new discursive formation (i.e. terrorism) to strengthen the national narrative. In the same years of *TDKR*, E. Said writes:

> As a word and concept, "terrorism" has acquired an extraordinary status in American public discourse. It has displaced Communism as public enemy number one, although there are frequent efforts to tie the two together. […] And it has imported and canonized an ideology with origins in a distant conflict, which serves the purpose here of institutionalizing the denial and avoidance of history. In short, the elevation of terrorism to the status of a national security threat […] has deflected careful scrutiny of the government's domestic and foreign policies. (Said 1988: 149)

[8] *TDKR*'s historicity and discourse on terrorism have arguably influenced a highly influential 1988 Batman story-arc entitled *Death in the Family* (Starlin and Wolfman [1988] 2011). In this sometimes clunky storyline, the Ayatollah Khomeini even appoints the Joker as UN ambassador for Iran.

[9] The Reagan satire, and *TDKR*'s wider relationship with American mid-eighties culture are examined in Corey (2012) and Custagliola (2014). The former identifies Batman as product of Reaganism and embodiment of trickle-down economics, while the latter identifies Batman's crisis as contrast between older, ideas of capitalism (like Theodore Roosevelt's euergetism) and the neoliberal dismantlement of the idea of society.

The tension between revisionary narrative, genre and historical relevance is also at the core of *The Dark Knight Strikes Again*'s representation of terrorism. *TDKR*'s sequel adopts, develops and even subverts the *formulae* established by the original, and the grim realism is replaced by a colourful and cartoonish playfulness. In line with the famous Marxian adage, history turns into parody: whereas *TDKR* attempts to substantiate the superhero, and to construct it as 'real' antithesis to the ideological smokescreen, its sequel surrenders to the senselessness of an ironic, overwhelming hyperreality (see Wandtke 2007: 98–104).

Therefore, the novel takes the form of a camp pantomime that nonetheless expands the utopian/dystopian motifs introduced in the predecessor (see Murphy 2008). This dialectic is suggested in the very first page, in which the new American president (later revealed to be a hologram designed by the evil masterminds and *de facto* dictators Lex Luthor and Brainiac) quotes the opening words of Charles Dickens's *A Tale of Two Cities*: "The state of the union is strong – stronger than it has ever been. Truly, *these are the best of times*" (*DKSA*,15, emphasis added). In this context, Batman and his allies (both old superheroes and young former street gangsters) are violent and morally ambiguous freedom fighters attempting to subvert the totalitarian government. As the Dark Knight proclaims, "we aren't here to rule. We aren't here to bring chaos or anarchy. We're here to end the reign of the criminals" (*DKSA,* 183). The determined attitude of the vigilante – "no more skirmishes. No more compromises" (*DKSA,* 47) – is even criticized by his friend and colleague Barry Allen (The Flash), who accuses Batman of "dragging kids into your holy war!" (*DKSA,* 145). Naming strategies are also applied by the government and media, which label the hero and his Batboys (sic) as "foreign terrorists" from "a rogue nation" (*DKSA*, 34). This idea anticipates the outcome of the process of generic contamination, namely the suspicion that the (anti)hero himself might be a terrorist. As we are going to see, in the contemporary scenario the hero's role and legitimation are increasingly questioned.

In an interview, Miller describes how the 2001 attacks directly influenced the creative process. The first two chapters of the graphic novel were serialized soon after the strikes, while the third (and last) was written and drawn in the immediate aftermath: "[i]t was, 'Let's play with this stuff and let's have some really fun parody.' And then 9/11 happened, and I had just run a flying Batmobile into a skyscraper and blown up downtown Metropolis. I hit the bricks." (George and Miller 2003: 110). The author is here referring to two passages of the second chapter, which (once again) uncannily anticipate near-future historical events. In the latter, a robot-monster controlled by Brainiac razes Gotham City in order to lure Batman out of his hideout. This particular sequence employs a confusing and expressionist artstyle to convey the hectic sense of urban catastrophe (*DKSA,* 143-144). Later on, in the third chapter, we

are shown the utter wreckage of the aftermath, the depiction of which is clearly influenced by the images of Ground Zero popularized by the media (185-191).

The author's words also imply a slight shift of tone in the last part of the graphic novel. The third chapter tries in fact to strengthen the satirical tone, somehow diminished in favour of parody, "by folding together Batman's agenda with [a] quickly developed satire of Bush's administration" (Wandtke 2007: 105). Although the newly elected (at the time) president is not portrayed, Republican cabinet members like Donald Rumsfeld (Secretary of Defense) and John Ashcroft (Attorney General) are ridiculed as inept and moralist. Soon after Luthor's fall and Batman's victory, Rumsfeld claims "I'm just telling you folks we got no idea what the heck is going on out there – but we've got everything under control" (*DKSA*, 245). Ashcroft, on the other hand, points out that "The Department of Justice will not rule out the option of the death penalty in the disposition of these self-proclaimed 'heroes' with their bulging crotches and their conspicuously ample breasts and their firm, youthful, rounded buttocks" (246).

In the immediate aftermath of 9/11, Ashcroft – member of the "far-right wing" (Schumer 2001) – was responsible for many strong counter-terrorism measures like the *Patriot Act* (Borgognone 2013: 292). As libertarian, Miller employs the satirical cartoon mode to voice his concern about the alleged liberticidal drift, while his judgment on Batman becomes increasingly ambiguous. The archfiend Lex Luthor derides him for his unwilling complicity: "You forced our hand. The way things were, our old on power was more tenuous than it appeared. Now we've got all the excuse we need to do what we should've done at the get-go" (*DKSA*, 216). Later, we are informed that the president authorises "the utilisation of 'any and all military force' – to confine domestic unrest" (219).

In the end, however, *DKSA*'s satirical intent is thwarted by the novel's substantial lack of closure. The social and political critique of the "critical dystopia" (Murphy 2008: 17) is not counterbalanced by a clear sense of purpose. As Wandtke suggests, "after defeating Lex Luthor and Brainiac, the superheroes seem only to be pranksters with no leadership strategies to offer as an alternative to the new Rumsfeld/Ashcroft approach" (2007: 105). The graphic novel literally ends with an interrogative, i.e. Superman asking his daughter "What exactly shall we do with our planet, Lara?" (*DKSA*, 248)

Whereas *DKSA* can be said to represent the chaotic – even euphoric – climate of the immediate post-9/11, *Holy Terror* (2011) is the reactionary, extreme depiction of a decade of cultural anxiety.[10] Narrating a single, long terrorist attack, the graphic novel overturns the representational paradigm established by *TDKR*. While the latter takes comic-book villains and endows them with realistic 'terroristic' traits, the former depicts Al-Qaeda members in a cartoonish, stereotyped manner (*HT*, 78). Therefore, *HT* remains true to its declared nature of propaganda comic, portraying enemies as racialized, grotesque caricatures (see Darius 2011a) – even though well-organized as (literally) underground secret society of infiltrates. In this regard, the novel's representation of terrorism is hybridised with narrative patterns of the "anti-conspiracy thriller" (Scaggs 2005: 117–121).

HT explores and expands the strategies elaborated by the antecedents in the representation of urban catastrophe. The bombs explosions (for instance on page 34), in particular, are depicted as instantaneous events which eschew the medium's sequentiality, covering the semiotic and narrative space of a full page. The detonations thus recreate those "unexpected solutions of continuity, sudden holes in space and time" described by Joseph Conrad in *The Secret Agent* ([1907] 1990: 105; also analysed in Houen 2002: 43). In addition, Miller overload the pages with nails, razorblades, debris, rain, even fingerprints. These particles and fragments serve both as "sensory diegetic images" and "hermeneutic images" (Duncan 2012: 43–44) which convey the chaotic entropy of the terrorist act.[11]

HT also reintroduces media outlets and images as commentary. The events are constantly interrupted by (variously caricatural) close-ups of real-world politicians (all the major heads of states are depicted), political commentators, and common people. In stark contrast with the other two texts, however, those faces are not given speech captions or balloons. Their muteness epitomises the monological approach of the narrative, by which the role and actions of the antihero are not to be discussed or contested. The reason is that 9/11 is here seen as a historical discontinuity so profound that only a brutal, instinctive reaction is permitted. Whereas the other two works open up to negotiation and dialogue, even through the lens of satire, *HT* articulates a Machiavellian necessity through an unchallenged, disturbingly ultraviolent anti-hero.

[10] The original title *Holy Terror, Batman!* was meant to parody the campy 1966 *Batman* TV series, in which Robin (played by Burt Ward) would constantly utter his holy-*something* catchphrase exclamation. Besides that, the title situates the novel at the core of a meaningful intertextual nexus: among several texts titled in that way, we can in fact identify a dystopian novel by H.G. Wells (*The Holy Terror*, 1939) and a 1991 Batman dystopian graphic novel describing the United States as corrupt theocracy (*Batman: Holy Terror*, Brenner and Breyfogle 1991).

[11] "*Sensory diegetic images* show the physical reality of the world of the story. These are primarily images of what can be seen". On the other hand, "*Hermeneutic images* do not represent either the physical or mental reality of the fictional world; they are not meant to be part of the diegesis. These images are the author's commentary on the story" (Duncan 2012: 43-44, emphasis in the original).

The Fixer (Batman's lookalike) is therefore represented as trigger-happy, hyper-masculine psychopath who indulges in torture (82-83) and mass murder, which he defines "postmodern diplomacy" (79).[12] After the first bombs explode, he claims

> All my life, there's been something wrong. Something missing. A sense that everything I'm seeing all around me isn't entirely true. That this seemingly ordered world of laws and logic and reason is nothing but a shroud. A chimera. A mask. But every once in a long while, the mask falls away. Every once in a long while, the whole world makes perfect sense. The world reveals itself. I am peace. And at war" (*HT*, 69-70)

Later on, while preparing for the counterattack against the terrorist conspiracy (whose fifth column includes a drunk Irish dynamiter, just to add another stereotype), he claims, "I've spent my whole life getting ready for tonight" (94). All these words express the ontological uncertainty of apocalyptic fiction, as in H.G. Wells's scientific romances and short stories, in which "the eruption of the unexpected [suggests] the precariousness of what currently passes for reality."(Draper 1987: 26)[13]. This form of anxiety produces the terrorist act (in particular 9/11) as a quasi-religious moment that pierces the veil of contemporary, postmodern apathy. As Baudrillard famously states in *The Spirit of Terrorism*,

> Throughout the stagnation of the 1990s, events were 'on strike' […]. Well, the strike is over now. Events are not in strike any more. With the attacks on the World Trade Center in New York, we might even be said to have before us the absolute event, the 'mother of all events', the pure events uniting within itself all the events that have never taken place." (2003: 3–4)

Terrorism is here conceptualised as hyperbole, as an event which goes beyond definitions and interpretations (see Houen 2002: 5). The logical corollary is that "[9/11] attacks were thus felt to be so excessive that combating then was taken to be a matter that exceeded the bounds of law" (id.: 6) However, this does not impede the questioning of the hero's legitimacy. In fact, the very clash between the historical discontinuity and the graphic novels' narrative structure triggers a crisis that eventually determines *HT*'s aesthetic failure. Whereas *TDKR*, and to a certain extent

[12] Miller's (questionable) artistic need for having a superhero character willing to use firearms is arguably one of the reasons he decided to abandon the Batman franchise in favour of an original character.

[13] Quite interestingly, the link between terrorism and H.G. Well's scientific romances is analysed by A. Houen, who mentions *The War of the Worlds* as an apocalyptic tale in which "London is terrorized by 'Martians' with sophisticated technology and weaponry" (2002: 32).

DKSA, manage to propose a viable heroic *ethos*, the third instalment collapses under its own propagandistic, objectivist pretensions.

Therefore, in order to understand the ways in which these different revisions of Batman relate to postmodernity, we must scrutinize the narrative model that informs them, and which influenced at the character's creation in the late 1930s: the hard-boiled novel.

I, THE BATMAN

Miller's appropriation of the "hard-boiled formula" (Cawelti 1976: 139) can be dissected as thematic, aesthetic, and stylistic cross-media contamination.

From a formal standpoint, the novels widely employ captions to replicate the Private Eye's inner monologue, also mimicking the quintessential *film noir* voice-over. The sentences are brief, and the language is the "tough, laconic American vernacular" (Scaggs 2005: 57) of Philip Marlowe and Mike Hammer. The soliloquy is here further disarticulated by the actual division in text boxes, which fragment the pace of the staccato prose (glaring examples can be found in *TDKR,* 39, or in the whole opening sequence of *HT*). In this regard, Miller's most interesting formal innovation concerns the use of different focalizations. While classic hard-boiled narratives only present a single autodiegetic narrator, i.e. the P.I., these three graphic novels allow other characters (both allies and villains) to express their thoughts through differently coloured (*TDKR*) or differently shaped (*DKSA*) captions boxes.

In addition to the primary texts, we can take into account the authorial intent as elaborated in theoretical writings, comparing Raymond Chandler's manifesto *The Simple Art of Murder* (1950) with a 1985 interview with Miller, right before the publication of *TDKR*. The authors scrutinise the state of the genre they feel they belong in, both lamenting the artificiality which detaches the narratives from the real world. Chandler in fact claims

> If it started out to be about real people [...], they must very soon do *unreal things* in order to form the *artificial pattern required by the plot*. When they did unreal things, they ceased to be real themselves. They became puppets and cardboard lovers and papier mâché villains and detectives of exquisite and impossible gentility. (1950, emphasis added)

Miller, on the other hand, 35 years later makes a rather similar point:

> When I was preparing the Batman proposal, I developed a lot of my attitude toward the character and my idea how he could […] be written so that you didn't have to continuously *screw with reality and bend it around, to keep him in character*. (Thomson 1985: 63 emphasis added)

This complex dialectic between realism and fictionality is most visible in the representation of the spatial dimension. In this regard, Cawelti identifies "the special role of the modern city as background" as "[o]ne of the most important aspects of the hard-boiled formula" (Cawelti 1976: 140). The graphic novels adhere to this definition, describing a "threatening and alienating urban setting" (Scaggs 2005: 55–56) which articulates in three different ways: *TDKR* presents a crime-ridden mid-eighties scenario that, just like Dashiell Hammett's Poisonville, is "ripe for the harvest" ([1929] 2000a: 500);[14] in *DKSA*, we find an Orwellian dystopia in which in the P.I. is reshaped as freedom-fighter; *HT* portrays a New York-like North American city under the attack of Al-Qaeda terrorists. As Miller suggests,

> By portraying the city in somewhat more realistic terms, and showing much more than I ever have of the way I think things actually happen in society, and why they happen, I want to show that the idea is good and strong and valuable. (Miller in Thomson 1985: 60).

Again, we can compare his words to Raymond Chandler's:

> [Hammett] wrote at first (and almost to the end) for people with a sharp, aggressive attitude to life. They were not afraid of the seamy side of things; they lived there. Violence did not dismay them; it was right down their street. […]. But down these mean streets a man must go who is not himself mean, who is neither tarnished nor afraid. The detective in this kind of story must be such a man. He is the hero, he is everything. He must be a complete man and a common man and yet an unusual man. (1950)

It is interesting to note that, while the primary scenario is invariably urban, *TDKR* reinstates the geographic tension between city and suburbs typical of Chandler's novels (Chomko 2013) through brief scenes set in Bruce Wayne's mansion. This dualism mirrors the dialectic between superhero and civilian persona, while placing the character in an interstitial position. Batman can therefore embody both the

[14] More than novels by Chandler, Cain or Spillane, Dashiell Hammett's *Red Harvest* ([1929] 2000a) should be identified as model for Miller's Dark Knight macrotext. Rather than concentrating on a murder and the investigation, *Red Harvest* describes in fact a vigilante who attempts to eradicate "crooks and grafters" (475) from a crime-ridden community. The malapropism (from Personville to Poisonville) has arguably influenced Miller's *Sin City* (from Basin City) as well.

"marginal, rebellious aspect of the [hard-boiled] hero" and its natural antithesis, i.e. the "world of wealth, corruption and violence" (Cawelti 1976: 145) which inhabits the suburbs.

Being part of conflicting social spheres, the (super)hero is in a privileged position to decipher the riddle of "these mean streets". And, moreover, to resist the physical and psychological pain without "going blood-simple like the natives" (Hammett [1929] 2000a: 584). As Scaggs suggests, "the private eye […], in many ways, is defined by his ability to both inflict, and stoically endure, physical punishment" (2005: 64). In Miller scenarios, the Dark Knight is in fact repeatedly beaten, wounded and harmed, and his body displayed in an almost fetishist manner. Subverting the cartoonish violence of classic superheroic tales, in which blood and serious injuries were absent, the hero progressively shows the impact of his anti-crime crusade. In particular, in *DKSA* (225, 233) the battered face of the hero becomes a grotesque mask that renders him almost unrecognisable.

Another feature of the hard-boiled mode appropriated by Miller concerns "the often strained relationship between a private investigator and the police" (Irwin 2006: 185) and, more generally, between the vigilante and the law. This implies that "the detective [is] forced to define his own concept of morality and justice, frequently in conflict with the social authority of the police." (Cawelti 1976: 143) Similarly to the Continental Op, Sam Spade or Philip Marlowe, Batman conflicts with corrupt, inefficient police forces that moreover consider him a "public menace" (*TDKR*, 116).[15] *DKSA* exacerbates the hostility, presenting the Dark Knight as terrorist and a threat to national security. In *HT*, The Fixer even orders the killing of the city police commissioner, who is allegedly working for the terrorists: "I've been on his trail for months. He's rotten. […] He's one of them. He misdirected every squad car in town. He left us wide open" (94).

The contrast between hero and authorities derives from the former's inability to sanction the system of corruption and clientelism of the latter. Furthermore, this conflict serves as microcosm for the relationship between the P.I. and the surrounding environment, often resulting in tormented ontological incompatibility. In this sense, Batman's claim "the world only makes sense when you force it" (*TDKR*, 192) mirrors Sam Spade's "My way of learning is to heave a wild and unpredictable monkey-wrench into the machinery. "(Hammett [1929] 2000b, 89). The hard-boiled detective is thus a champion of "independence and self-sufficiency, inherited from the frontier hero, that contributes to the hostility […] for the forces of law and order." (Scaggs 2005: 60).

[15] With the notable exception of Commissioner James Gordon, a trusted ally who shares Batman's commitment to justice.

We may add that he attempts to resolve inner and outer conflicts through this "self-sufficiency", elaborating a moral fantasy by which he comes to embody the law. We can therefore identify a *leitmotiv* that starts with *Red Harvest* – "don't kid yourselves that there's any law in Poisonville except what you make for yourself" (Hammett [1929] 2000a: 551) –, continues with Spillane's *I, the Jury* – "The law is fine. But this time I'm the law and I'm not going to be cold and impartial." ([1947] 2015: 4) – and finds its logical conclusion in Miller's *TDKR* – "Tonight, *we* are the law. Tonight, *I* am the law." (emphasis in the original, 173)[16]

However, once confronted by the harsh realities of the "mean streets", this proactive stance complicates the hero's ethical position. Describing the main character of *Red Harvest*, Scaggs claims

> While the Op's [intentions have] superficial parallels with the moral righteousness and the desire for justice that characterise the frontier hero, he is as guilty and amoral as the gangsters and corrupt city officials that he exposes and helps to murder. The justice that he seeks is a vigilante justice". (2005: 63)

The shift towards vigilantism produces an anti-hero that is virtually indistinguishable from the criminal he is supposed to fight. In Miller's graphic novels, this implies the deconstruction of the binary dichotomy between hero and villain. Thus, the ethical tension is resolved by the hero appropriating the same mind-set and attitudes of the terrorists he opposes. In other words, by the hero becoming a terrorist himself. Confronting Two Face, who has just attempted to detonate Gotham's Twin Towers, Batman hesitantly says "I see him…I see…I see…a reflection" (*TDKR*, 55).

Therefore, we go back to the Miller's initial claim, i.e. that Batman is "essentially a terrorist who just fights the right enemy." (Miller quoted in Bainbridge 2007: 466). The character himself confirms this interpretation in *DKSA*: after having assaulted and humiliated the dictator Lex Luthor, he asserts "Striking terror. Best part of the job." (110)[17] This postmodern and 'terrorist' reformulation of the "mix of (super)heroism and 'criminalism' [that] is a culmination of Bat-Man's raison d'être" (Murphy 2008: 16) finds fertile ground in the superhero genre.

The archetype in fact shares with the (culturally-received notion of) terrorists several traits, like the need for secrecy and secret identities, and the disposition towards conspiracy. In addition, in Miller's reformulation we can identify a tension towards operatic, spectacular performativity, and to violent act that, exactly like

[16]Batman's remark uncannily recalls the Mutant Leader's televised message analysed before ("We are the law. We are the future").

[17] It must also be noted that the idea of *terrorizing* has been inscribed in the character since the very beginning. In a 1939 comic book, the first narrating Batman's back-story, Bruce Wayne claims that "Criminals are a superstitious cowardly lot. So my disguise must be able to *strike terror* into their hearts." (emphasis added, Fox and Kane [1939] 2005, 63)

terrorist attacks, are meant to produce social repercussions. If in *TDKR* Batman claims that the street crooks "have to be defeated. Humiliated" (97), the ultraviolent psychopath The Fixer considers torture as a viable strategy to extort information and to induce a state of psychological submission (*HT*, 82).

We are thus presented with a moral *aporia*, an impasse that (at least in the first two graphic novels) prevents from formulating a clear judgment. In *TDKR*, the moral stagnation is represented by Commissioner Gordon's monologue, which is worth reporting in its entirety:

> I'm sure you've heard old fossils like me talk about Pearl Harbor, Yindel [...] Fact is, we mostly lie about it. We make it sound like we all leaped to our feet and went after the Axis on the spot. Hell, we were scared. Rumors were flying, we thought the Japanese had taken California. We didn't even have an army, so there we were, lying in bed pulling the sheets over our heads – and there was Roosevelt, on the radio, strong and sure, taking fear and turning it into a fighting spirit. Almost overnight, we had our army. We won the war. Since then, presidents have come and gone, each one seeming smaller, weaker… the best of them like faint echoes of Roosevelt [...] A few years back, I was reading a news magazine – a lot of people with a lot of evidence said that Roosevelt knew Pearl was going to be attacked – and that he let it happen. Wasn't proven. Things like that never are. I couldn't stop thinking how horrible that would be… and how Pearl was what got us off our duffs in time to stop the Axis. But a lot of innocent men died. But we won the war. It bounced back and forth in my head until I realized I couldn't judge it. It was too big. He was too big…" (96).

This *epoché* is mirrored in the very finale of *TDKR*, which epitomises the cultural and historical discontinuity. In fact, the final confrontation between Superman and Batman – between the two conflicting worldviews – is halted when the latter fakes a stroke and apparently dies. Few pages later, Bruce Wayne is shown to be safe, crouched on the floor of his Bat-cave while instructing a group of former gangsters: "an army – to bring sense to a world plagued by worse than thieves and murderers" (199). The subversion of the narrative cliché (the hero is supposed to triumph and save the day) suggests that simpler, clear-cut *denouements* are no longer possible. Moreover, Batman abandonment of the traditional, privileged rooftop stance signifies the (post)modern "crisis of representation, stemmed in particular from the loss of an authoritative position from which to view or speak of the whole" (Brooker 1996: 45).[18]

[18] It can be argued that this *Bat-cave* ending anticipates the following, grotesque (literally 'of the grotto') developments of *DKSA* and *HT* (see Klock 2008).

Going back to Gordon's monologue, it can be added that his reference to Roosevelt explicitly establishes the ground for Batman's (re-)legitimation. Such a need is triggered by the deconstruction of the formal dichotomy between hero and villain/terrorist, which jeopardises the social role and the moral stance of the former. In addition, the process disrupts the empathic bond of trust between character and reader. As the interviewer asks Miller, "How do you reconcile those two – the terrorist being the hero?" (George and Miller 2003: 110).

We can argue that this "reconciliation" is achieved through a twofold legitimating strategy. On the one hand, the vigilante is authorised by historical connections to an imagined tradition of anti-authoritarian American heroism. In *TDKR*, the former Mutants who have switched sides and sworn allegiance to the Dark Knight name themselves "the Sons of the Batman", thus evoking of the Sons of Liberty of the American Revolution. The association between Batman and the American patriots of the War of Independence is mirrored in *DKSA*, when Lex Luthor defines the hero's followers "The Boston Tea Party" (164). Outlining a tradition that starts with the colonists and concludes with F.D. Roosevelt, the novels attempt to (re)establish a fantasy of patriotic, masculine republicanism aimed at contrasting the moral complexities of the postmodern age.[19]

On the other hand, we can identify a mechanism of romantic idealization substantiated by cultural and literary antecedents. In particular, Batman's traditional refusal to use firearms, added to the horse-riding climax in *TDKR* (in which he literally becomes both a cowboy and a 'knight'),[20] links him to figures like the London-based Russian nihilist Kravchinskii (also known as Stepniak). Similarly to Batman, this 19th century revolutionary proto-terrorist famously "chose old fashioned technologies (horse, dagger) in order to situate his act within a legal/moral and aesthetic tradition (neoclassical, Romantic)" (Patyk 2009: 765). A form of romantic ennoblement as legitimating strategy is also codified in classic hard-boiled fiction, especially in the works by Raymond Chandler. In those novels, as Scaggs points out, Marlowe "is a questing knight of romance transplanted into the mean streets of mid-twentieth-century Los Angeles" (2005: 72). For instance, a certain chivalric imagery is ironically evoked in the very first pages of *The Big Sleep*, in which the author describes the iconic "broad stained-glass panel showing a knight in dark armour rescuing a lady" (Chandler [1939] 2000: 3).

[19] We might also add the 'big stick ideology' of Theodore Roosevelt, explicitly mentioned by Miller in his comment on the aftermath of 9/11: "the wise course of an empire to take is what Teddy Roosevelt said. We've got the big stick. But now we've got to start walking soft." (George and Miller 2003: 116).

[20] The epithet *Dark Knight* has been used since a 1940 story that narrates the Joker's first appearance (Finger and Kane [1940] 2005)

In *TDKR*, elements from all those different imaginaries coalesce into a narrative and aesthetic *pastiche* that legitimates the hero's claim to moral authority. Epitomizing both the triumph and failure of superheroism within postmodernity, Batman voices the crisis of American identity at the end of the Cold War. Therefore, despite the lack of closure, and the conspicuous subversion of genre tropes, readers still manage to form an emphatic bond with the character. The novel's sequel, *DKSA,* represents the ironic, grotesque revision of the revision. It functions as a simulacrum, in which the cultural anxiety of the predecessor is resolved by a hyperreal fantasy allowing the hero to fully accept his role as "terrorist who just fights for the right enemy". This form of playful "psychological resolution" (Murphy 2008: 13) is denied in *HT*, in which the absence of legitimating strategies renders the hero utterly unsympathetic. Here, the yearning for a 'WWII-era propaganda comic' moral dichotomy produces the involuntary, ultimate deconstruction of the superhero archetype. As Darius suggests, "*Holy Terror* is a story in which, in opposing Islamic fanaticism, the Fixer becomes virtually identical to those he opposes. To some, this means the terrorists win – and indeed, this was part of bin Laden's intent with 9/11." (2011b)

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