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# The Dark Knight's Dystopian Vision: Batman, Risk, and American National Identity

Jeanne Cortiel and Laura Oehme

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## 1. Introduction: American National Identity and Dystopian Risk Fiction

- <sup>1</sup> In 1839, John L. O'Sullivan defined America as "the Great Nation of Futurity," supplying the young republic with a rationale and a justification for its unimpeded expansion, and with a forward-looking narrative center for a unified national identity.<sup>1</sup> American cultural history has been significantly shaped by visions of the future, both in their utopian and dystopian modes (cf. Roemer 14). In the 20th century in particular, the success and crisis of America's future-oriented cultural narrative has pushed its utopian dimension to fully reveal its dystopian underside, while its orientation towards the future remained intact. The anticipation of possible negative consequences of collective action has thus shifted even further towards the center of America's cultural identity, in both its affirmative and self-critical expressions. The DC comic book superhero Batman, whose existence spans the larger part of the 20th century, has probed this critical underside of American culture since 1938, but it would take Frank Miller's darker, more complex Batman character in *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns* (1986), *Batman: Year One* (1987), and *Batman: The*

*Dark Knight Strikes Again* (2001-02) and his more distinctly noir vision of Gotham City to fully express the dystopian in its critique of contemporary American culture. There is also a particular pattern to the darkness in Miller's Dark Knight that points beyond both the comics medium and superhero fiction towards fundamental questions concerning the crisis of American national identity at the turn of the millennium. It is our argument in this essay that Frank Miller's *The Dark Knight Returns* and its sequel *The Dark Knight Strikes Again*, commonly referred to as DKR and DK2, are grounded in the notion of global risk, a specific type of anticipation that sees the impending disaster as a matter of both probability and uncertainty.

- 2 Sociologist Ulrich Beck has identified and analyzed this culture of anticipation as the "world risk society," which is characterized by the aftermath of such iconic events as the nuclear catastrophe in Chernobyl in 1986, the year DKR was first published. Beck argues that in addition to its disastrous effects on the environment and people of the region and beyond, the Chernobyl disaster also contaminated social life and political action, indeed almost all public institutions – expert systems, hospitals, the social security system, political parties and the national self understanding – with different forms of more or less controversial non-knowing (116).
- 3 This state of non-knowing, or the inability to know, has characterized the sense of risk ever since. Chernobyl and similar cataclysmic disasters demonstrated the failure of institutional risk management on a global scale. Another major transformation in the perception of global risk, Beck claims, occurred in September 2001. It is revealing to note that DKR was published in 1986 and the first issues of DK2 came out in 2001: Although there is no direct correlation between these catastrophes and the publication of the two texts – both of which were conceptualized before the catastrophes happened – both of these texts clearly hit the nerve of the cultural milieus that produced the meaning of these catastrophes and reflect on what it means to operate as an individual and as a nation in the world risk society. In this cultural context, the successes of technological development promise health, wealth and security but paradoxically also increase the sense of risk and existential uncertainty. Resonating with this precise sense of uncertainty, Miller's Dark Knight faces not only superhuman criminals, but also a society that fails to

adequately respond to the risks that threaten its existence. When the superhero was rearticulated as a deeply conflicted character in the 1980s by artists such as Frank Miller (but also Alan Moore and others), dystopia thus incorporated a culturally complex engagement with risk, and as such became an integral part of the superhero mythology.<sup>ii</sup>

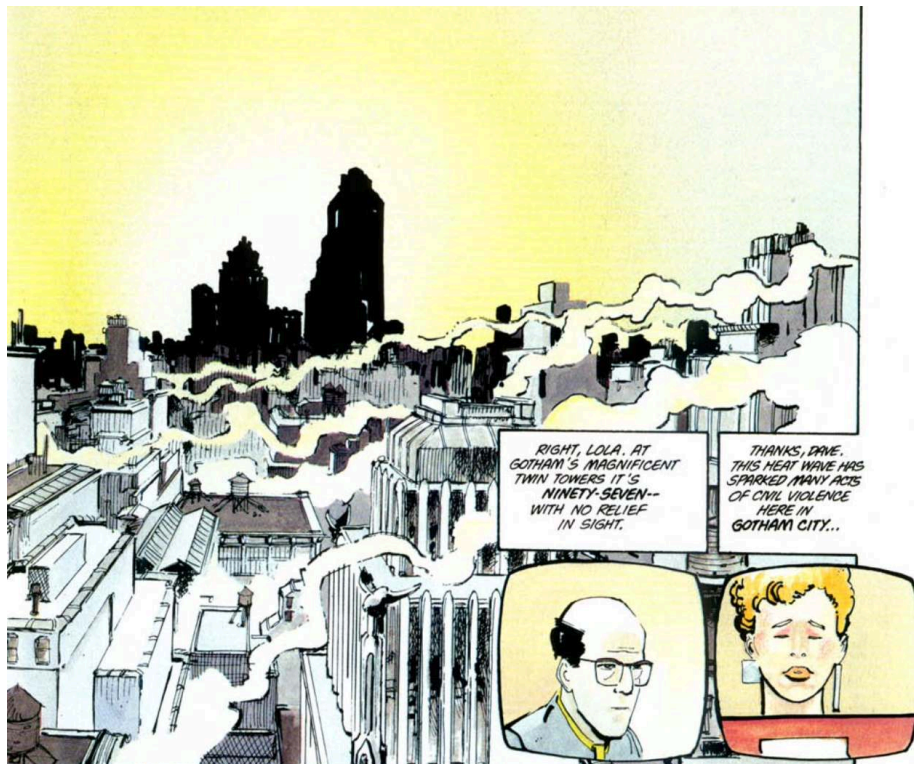
- 4 DKR was reissued with the collected publication of DK2 in 2002, which placed both texts in the context of the reinvention of American national identity after 9/11. Our focus here lies on these editions since their simultaneous publication intensifies the Dark Knight's active participation in the discourse of risk at the turn of the millennium. Furthermore, reading them in this context joins themes in existing scholarship on Frank Miller's Dark Knight series that have so far remained disconnected, specifically its dystopian and utopian dimensions, its edgy revision of gender issues in superhero comics, and its scathing media critique.<sup>iii</sup> Our focus on risk connects this existing scholarship with an analysis of national, racial, and gender identities to show the specific ways in which Miller's Dark Knight series signals a transition in American national identity that has taken shape since the 1980s.
- 5 DKR and DK2 can thus be seen as key texts not only in the history of comics but also in the development of the superhero myth within the narrative of American national identity. It is our contention here that Miller's DKR begins a deliberate engagement with how the sense of global risk shapes social cohesion at the height of the Cold War, which DK2 then brings to the twenty-first century. As such, they are part of what we would like to introduce as *risk fiction*, that is, fictional engagements with and expressions of global risks that are the products of late modernity.<sup>iv</sup> While dystopia focuses on the effects of limiting social structures (usually totalitarian) on the individual (Booker and Thomas 65), risk fiction emphasizes the effects of collective action on the future of the community. In particular, there are three levels of risk representation in DKR and DK2 which make this pair of texts straddling the turn of the millennium particularly interesting as examples of dystopian risk fiction: (1) the representation of Gotham, the Batcave, and finally the globe as *apocalyptic riskscape*s that prefigure and stage catastrophe, (2) the *individual risks* the superhero and supervillain characters take in their inconclusive struggle over these spaces, and (3) the

satirical representation of print, television and online *media* as a critique of their role in *discourses about risks*. Miller's Dark Knight series thus uses the superhero figure to tackle fundamental pressures put on key American cultural narratives, addressing their entanglement with risk, technology, and biblical notions about the end of the world.

## 2. Risksapes: Apocalypse and Icons of Shared Risk

- 6 American foundational narratives, in particular the related notions of manifest destiny and the frontier, are structured by time through their clear future orientation, but they are simultaneously preoccupied with control over space and through this control, as Dana Nelson and others have argued persuasively, forge a link between citizenship, national identity and white masculinity. Sociologists have begun to analyze such spatial control in terms of risk: "[t]he spatial dimension is essential for the social construction of risk, including risk governance and moral judgements [sic] about risk taking and risk distribution" (Müller-Mahn, Everts, Doeverspeck 202). In the following section, we will show how specific places/spaces in Miller's DKR and DK2 not only contribute to the anticipation of future catastrophes, but also revise and critique the dystopian dimension of national manhood as fundamentally antidemocratic element (Nelson ix) in American national identity. The focus here is on the representation of three of the most prominent places/spaces in the books, namely Gotham City, the Batcave, and the Earth. While DKR envisions Gotham as an apocalyptic city and explores what effects the threat of a nuclear attack has on it, DK2 turns toward the different threats of terrorism and so-called future technologies such as robotics, nanotechnology, and genetic engineering.<sup>v</sup> Moreover, DK2 complements the city space with the underground space of the Batcave and a perspective on the Earth from outer space, bringing a new spatial scale to risk in the narrative: The tremendous increase in magnitude hints at the ways in which the dystopian dimension in DK2 is not limited to the city of Gotham but references the global dimension of cultural risk perception.

Figure 1



Heatwave in Gotham (DKR 11)

- 7 Miller presents the city of Gotham in an alternative 1980s as a dystopian space saturated with crime, corruption, and despair. With Batman in retirement, all superheroes but Superman banned from Earth, and the Cold War at its peak, Gotham's inhabitants experience themselves as "damned" in religious terms (Miller, DKR 12). Catastrophe in general and nuclear apocalypse in particular, as Theo Finigan has argued, appear inevitable (37). This sense of impending apocalypse is highlighted by the weather conditions depicted in the panels. For instance, the heat wave at the beginning (DKR 11, 14) with its "apocalyptic sun" (Finigan par. 7) foreshadows the nuclear catastrophe that in the end even Superman cannot prevent. These establishing shots, showing the apocalyptic city with its changing weather conditions throughout DKR, serve as visual metaphors that generate an underlying sense of foreboding and thus contribute to the anticipation of an inevitable catastrophe. Moreover, the dystopian depiction of Gotham in DKR sketches a larger, global risk scenario that transcends the boundaries of the city and the nation. At the beginning of DKR (cf. particularly 11, 14, 27) the establishing shots of Gotham open the horizon to decentralize the narrative world, pointing beyond the city toward a global risk

perspective. Thus, they push the recurring skyline of the city beyond dystopia, turning it into a riskscape<sup>vi</sup> that itself signifies impending global catastrophe.

- 8 In DK2, by contrast, the city is visually almost completely absent; it is merely one of the places in which catastrophes become manifest. In correspondence with the major threats of its cultural moment, this text incorporates terrorism as a global phenomenon, the immediate effects of which find local expression as they are directed at a specific city. The city as iconic riskscape, as presented in DKR, is displaced by the claustrophobic, womb-like world of the Batcave (cf. Finigan par. 20) and an outer-space perspective on the Earth as a whole in DK2. The sequel thus moves from the specific city representing a global phenomenon as paradigmatic example to a universalism that draws on key icons of shared risk: the fetus in the womb and the blue planet. These icons invoke a global consciousness of shared risk that has generated a new sense of community transcending the nation, as Sarah Franklin, Celia Lucy, and Jackie Stacey convincingly argue in *Global Nature, Global Culture* (2000). These scholars read photographic images of the living fetus swimming precariously in the space of the womb and images of the blue planet from outer space as contemporary “collective global images” that are expressions of “new forms of universal human connection” based on a sense of shared risk (26).

Figure 2



Batman in the fetal position (DK2 198)

- 9 However, this iconography of shared risk is transformed when Miller invokes it in his Dark Knight series. In DK2, Batman is depicted floating in the fetal position in his cave, connected to a machine—and his digital avatar—through technological umbilical cords (Miller 198). This image is a visual citation of Andy and Lana Wachowski's *The Matrix* (1999), both suggesting adult human males deprived of their individuality by machines. Although the Batcave is primarily the place of physical recovery and retreat in DKR and DK2, its graphic depiction and connection to childhood trauma also establishes it as space of uncertainty. Like the womb in Lennart Nilsson's images of the fetus, the cave is confined by darkness but visually limitless at the same time (Miller, DKR 87, 92f, 161). Thus, the cave metaphorically extends the narrative world of Miller's Dark Knight graphic narratives by an "invisible," unimaginable, and dark interior dimension.

Figure 3



The Batcave (DKR 87)

- 10 Images of the globe from outer space, on the other hand, expand the scope of the visible to the perspective of space travel, activating another major icon of shared risk (Franklin, Lucy and Stacey 27) that is surprisingly similar to visual representations of the fetus before birth. The first images of the “blue planet” were already taken by astronauts in the late 1960s; since then, their iconic use has undergone a perspectival shift from representing visual control over the planet to signifying its fragility and susceptibility to risk after the 1980s.

Figure 4



Superman, Lara, and the blue planet (DK2 247)

- 11 In DK2, images of the Earth from outer space clearly contribute to the perception of the whole planet as a risk space. For instance, in the first splash page showing a full body shot of Superman, the image of the globe in the background is juxtaposed to Superman's verbal anticipation of "calamity. Atrocity. Genocide" as consequence of Batman's resistance to the authorities (36). While the cave is associated with the conflicted underground utopianism of Batman, the globe as it is envisioned in DK2 represents the extraterrestrial perspective of Superman, Supergirl, and Green Lantern. Batman himself occupies the precarious riskscapes of the city and the cave, while the extraterrestrial superheroes take a position outside. However, Superman, while contemplating the planet from what seems like a position of power, expresses doubt about his course of action: "What exactly shall we *do* with our planet, Lara?" (Miller, DK2 247). The outer-space perspective on the globe visually suggests these superheroes' complete control, but the accompanying spoken text suggests uncertainty. This uncertainty directly corresponds with the cultural milieu of 2001-02, when DK2 was first published, and we would suggest that the simultaneous reissue of DKR in 2002 also places the earlier text in the direct context of the more global outlook of DK2.

Both texts generate a deliberate tension between the urge to re-establish or maintain control over the city, the cave, and the globe as risk spaces and the ultimate failure to accomplish such control. Since masculinity in the major narratives of national identity is largely dependent upon control over space, the dystopian vision of DKR and DK2 also signals a fundamental crisis in this masculinity, which both texts tackle by showing the superhero's body at risk.

### 3. Edgework: Individual Risk-Taking and the Crisis of Masculinity

- 12 The superheroes' collective failure to regain control and order is partially counterbalanced by voluntary risks taken by individual superheroes. In taking such risks, the superheroes generate what we would term "risk masculinity," a masculinity that replaces control over external space with control over the body in situations of extreme risk. Such risk masculinity is performed by placing the body in life-threatening danger, on the edge of human capabilities of endurance and survival, and recovering physical safety through exceptional skill and reliance on "gut feelings." This new masculinity, like frontier masculinity before it, depends on risk, but unlike frontier masculinity, it is not dependent upon establishing control over space. It is ultimately, as we will show, not even dependent upon the individual male body but passes on within the community of risk-takers between antagonists and from mentor to mentee.
- 13 Superhero characters in general, and Batman specifically, have served to bridge the emotional gap between the sense of shared, communal risk and individual risk-taking behavior. This relationship is crucial to the central function of the superhero as agent and superhero fiction as genre in the way in which popular culture has responded to and participated in global risk discourse. Although the relationship between individual risk-taking and shared global risk has not received much sustained attention so far, the sociological analysis of high-risk behavior in edgework theory provides a starting point for identifying precisely how Miller's Dark Knight narratives defines this relationship. Batman has always been a liminal character suspended between the human and the superhuman, social as well as psychological normalcy and deviance (Wonser 215), dystopian social realism and the fantastic. The

sociology of voluntary risk taking in edgework theory (cf. Lyng 1990; Lyng 2004; Lyng 2005; Lyng 2008) has struggled with the question how the rise of individuals seeking to experience life-threatening risks in sports, crime, but also in rescue operations and the military can be explained in terms other than individual psychological needs. Edgework, the social work performed by individuals in extreme sports such as BASE jumping or skydiving, is positioned against "center work" performed by individuals working in advanced corporate capitalism. Edgework thus posits a correlation between individual risk activities and the economy of late modernity and provides a conceptual angle for the social function of individuals seeking mortal danger in their free time or in their work.

- <sup>14</sup> The recent move of edgework research toward looking at the ways in which risk regimes intersect with gender regimes (cf. Laurendeau) is particularly productive for the reading of superhero narratives as modern revisions of the classic frontier narrative, in which voluntary risk taking mobilizes notions of masculinity. Miller's rearticulation of the Batman character in the Dark Knight series emphasizes the pleasurable tension between control and loss of control provided by individual risk-taking. DKR begins with a one-page sequence in which Bruce Wayne competes in a car race. This first page not only establishes the regular four-by-four grid that will structure most of the pages of this volume (cf. Kofoed, "Breaking"), it also introduces a new quality to the Batman character that allows him to perform masculinity as something that is accomplished in risk-activities that literally take him to the edge of death. Bruce Wayne overrides the car's computer controls and not only manages to survive but also to emerge as in control: "I'm in charge now and I like it" (Miller, DKR 10). It is possible to read this version of Batman as another iteration of the American monomyth as John Shelton Lawrence and Lawrence Jewett define it in their *The Myth of the American Superhero*, and to see Batman's repeated recovery from almost fatal hand-to-hand combat as "regeneration through violence" (Slotkin), as Theo Finigan does (par. 21). Mike Dubose's reading connecting DKR with the political crisis of the 1980s and Ronald Reagan's inability to sustain a coherent and credible image as a vigilante hero is also convincing. However, both of these readings do not go far enough in explaining the specific intervention accomplished by Miller's Dark Knight series. DKR does take up the frontier narrative and engages with contemporary political

culture, but more importantly it highlights the superhero's function in the imagination of the American version of advanced modernity. This version again is characterized by an anticipation of the future that is shaped by risk consciousness—a risk consciousness that ultimately transcends the scope of the nation. The sociological theory of edgework, and the notion of the gendered risk regime that it has generated, help to identify precisely how this transformation takes place between DKR and DK2. Although there is no direct connection to the main plotline, the first scene depicting the car crash during the competition prefigures DKR's (as well as DK2's) engagement with technology, masculinity, and their connection between individual and global risk.

Figure 5

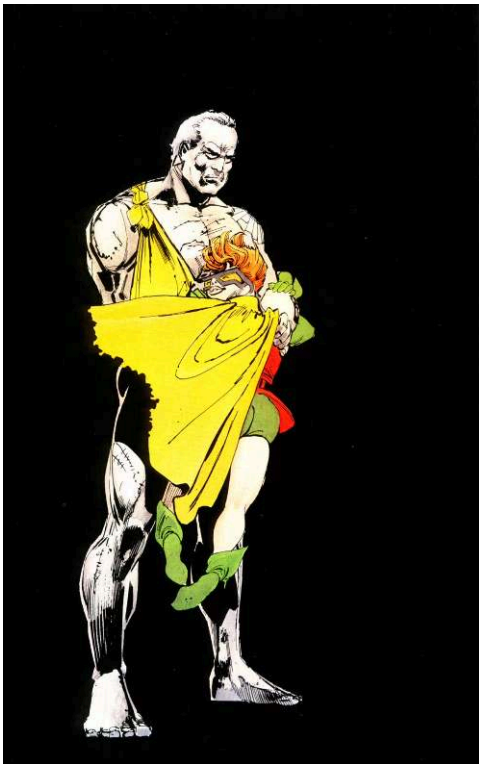


Batman and the Mutant Leader (DKR 99)

- 15 This is to say that Miller's Dark Knight faces the crisis of modernity by bringing gender to the test through edgework, thus putting pressure on masculinities central to the superhero narrative. Batman's four antagonists successively reference four such versions of masculinity that have turned destructive: Two-Face is a middle-class bureaucrat who turns against the law, the mutant leader a rough, brutish rogue whose power lies in his physical strength, the Joker is a decadent intellectual gone mad, and Superman a paternalistic protector devoted to a social order that turns out to be false. The edgework performed by each of these characters in confronting the Dark Knight both connects them with him and highlights their demise. For example, when Batman rescues Harvey Dent, alias Two-Face (Miller, DKR 52-55) from an unknown detonation and a free fall the two end up in an embrace that Jenee

Wilde reads as a “queer moment” (117), but that remains firmly rooted in a world of masculine exchange between two fellow edgeworkers. Two-Face’s ultimate defeat points to the breakdown of the legal system as well as rational, middle-class masculinity. Similarly, Batman pays his respects to the mutant leader’s abject, obliquely raced (Finigan par. 3) lower-class masculinity, representative of “a newer generation of monsters” (Kaveney 149), but ultimately is able to neutralize this masculinity by defeating it. When Batman combats the brute monster, visual distinctions between the two disappear, they become physically alike (see DKR 99) and – confirming this transfer of power – the mutant army accepts Batman as their leader. The Joker’s demise, then, signals the failure of science to provide reliable knowledge that would order the universe. Finally, Batman faces Superman (Miller, DKR 190-96) and Superman’s failure to remain invincible destabilizes classic mid-Western American masculinity and through this destabilization evokes the failure of democratic institutions. American masculinity has always restored itself in voluntary risk-taking, but in DKR the achieved control turns out to be imaginary or even spurious. More importantly, however, each of the defeated antagonists is himself an accomplished edgeworker, who uses his abilities to disrupt (or attempt to restore) the social order that has produced his physical and mental disfigurement; each thus emerges as a product of the problems of modernization: The bureaucrat turns into Two-Face, who leaves justice up to chance, the charismatic working-class leader becomes the brutal warlord, and the product of corporate institutionalism defies all order and meaning as the Joker. Even Superman sinks into anti-utopian despair and serves a corrupt government. Over the course of DKR, the Batman character remains victorious even in his (staged) death by both rejecting versions of masculinity and absorbing their edgeworking potential into his new persona as underground leader.

Figure 6



Batman with Carrie (DKR 92)

- <sup>16</sup> However, Batman does not accomplish this by himself. In Book Two of DKR, a female admirer, 12-year-old Carrie Kelly, enters the scene as the new Robin by rescuing Batman from hand-to-hand combat with the mutant leader. In the confrontation with the Joker, Carrie/Robin takes on Batman as her mentor in the craft of edgework. Much has been made of the introduction of a female Robin in comics scholarship. Nathan G. Tipton situates the character in DKR (and DK2) in the context of the “gay” debate around Batman and Robin, arguing that “Miller’s gender troubling of Robin [is] an interesting, if ultimately failed, experiment” (334f). Jordana Greenblatt argues more convincingly that in DKR, Carrie as Robin has the function of enabling Batman’s development as a hero. Her introduction as second character on the splash pages, according to this argument, serves to create Batman as a unitary subject (par. 19). These pages indeed have a key function in establishing Batman’s transforming masculinity and in focusing on his spectacular body, massive, powerful, and towering next to Carrie even when he is wounded (DKR 92, 114, 142, 169). They show him in physical control over the riskscape of the city, only to show him losing this control in the battles that follow. These splash pages also become successively darker,

serving as a record of his changing masculinity after each triumphant but physically costly battle. Batman's mentoring relationship with Carrie as Robin parallels his visual transformation: he begins as a powerful example of apparent superhuman masculinity and muscular overgrowth but is physically destroyed and ultimately killed in his final showdown with Superman only to be resurrected as the leader of a revolutionary army of adolescents.

Figure 7



Batman with Carrie (DKR 114)

- 17 By the end of DKR, Batman has neutralized the edgeworking skills of his symbolically charged antagonists, partially integrating them into his new persona. The visual contrast and emotional contact with Carrie further transforms his now tentative performance of superhero masculinity. In DK2, he deploys these skills, which enable large-scale organization, cooperation, and the rejection of traditional order. Leaving behind a rigid linkage between his identity as superhero and a rigid commitment to order and control, he is able to pass on responsibility to Catgirl, and together they manage to recruit former Justice League members, each in turn representing a transfer of knowledge and skills from the realm of modernity to the world of edgework and reflexive modernity: the Atom, the

Flash, Elongated Man, Plastic Man, the children of Hawkman, and Green Arrow contribute natural science, engineering, mobility and flexibility, biological sciences, and revolutionary cunning. Edgework is primarily performed by Batman's mentees, Catgirl and the "Batboys," and it is Catgirl's body that absorbs most of the violence and physical pain throughout. Her major nemesis is Dick Grayson, the former Robin, who sets out to torture her to death. On a larger scale, however, the group of superheroes confronts a single, monstrous antagonist: Lex Luthor, who has taken control over the world by deploying three key technologies of the risk society, namely nanotechnology, biotechnology, and robotics/AI. DK2 thus moves to engage fully with global risk, completing the movement from a focus on petty crime to a focus on global threat represented by Lex Luthor and his fellow villain Brainiac. Arguing with the Flash, Batman exclaims "[w]e *blew* it, Barry! We spent our whole *careers* looking in the *wrong direction*! I hunted down *muggers* and *burglars* while the real monsters took power *unopposed*!" (Miller, DK2 145).

- 18 It is helpful to see this intervention in the context of what Ulrich Beck calls "tragic individualization," which he sees as a by-product of the successes of advanced modernity (55). Since risks cannot be controlled by existing institutions in the contemporary moment, the responsibility defaults back to the individual (Beck 54). However, the individual lacks knowledge of the precise nature of the threat as well as authority to enforce decisions. DKR pushes the Batman character to face precisely this tragic responsibility through edgework. At the moment that the superhero becomes vulnerable to the risks he takes, his action becomes edgework in the sense that it puts him in the space between certainty and uncertainty, control and loss of control, life and death. The superhero as edgeworker is not the redeemer who is able to neutralize risk, he or she engages the world at risk and embraces its uncertainties. The Dark Knight series highlights the ways in which edgework allows masculinity to fall apart and remain mobile, even to the point of giving up its ties to maleness. It is ultimately Carrie, Batman's edgework mentee, and Lara, Superman's daughter, who become the most effective workers of the global risk space. Miller's DKR and DK2 thus engage with risk discourses in envisioning apocalyptic riskscape as icons of shared global risk, bridging this global risk with the tragic transference of responsibility to the

individual through the edgeworking superheroes whose failing masculinity is partially displaced by the more effective, mobile power of the younger female superheroes.

#### 4. Manufactured Non-Knowing: Media and the Staging of Global Risk

<sup>19</sup> DKR and DK2 engage with transforming risk discourses in the late twentieth century not only in representing city space as riskscape and in turning superheroes/villains into edgeworkers, but also by introducing a self-reflexive critique of how risk is produced through the media. Beck defines the world risk society as a “non-knowledge society” in which non-knowing is not the lack of knowledge or the unavailability of information, but rather the result of scientific research and technological development that proliferates competing, incompatible knowledges and new unknowns. As Beck claims, “living in the milieu of manufactured non-knowing means seeking unknown answers to questions that nobody can clearly formulate” (115). It is the “staging” of large-scale disasters like Chernobyl, 9/11, or Fukushima in the media which displays them in the service of risk discourse – evoking the incalculable risk of even larger catastrophes to come. DKR and DK2 engage this dynamic in a specific, and partially self-reflexive, context: they address the ways in which the media, particularly television and the Internet, stage risk in the tension between knowing and non-knowing. In particular, both texts juxtapose media images that anchor the narrative present in the historical mid-1980s and early twenty-first century respectively<sup>vii</sup>, featuring recognizable versions of Ronald Reagan, David Letterman, and Dr. Ruth Westheimer (cf. Blackmore 43; Harris-Fain 153), with the fantastic elements of the superhero genre. On one level, the graphic narratives satirize and critique the media for its spurious representation of the narrative world; on another level they show how the media does not falsify risk so much as stage it in a way that is symptomatic of the unresolved tensions between competing knowledge and withheld information.

<sup>20</sup> The development of the non-knowledge society as Beck defines it crucially depends on the relationship between individual experiences of risk and media discourse that determines how risks are communicated and which risks count as “real.” Miller’s Dark Knight series unravels

precisely this relationship. DKR makes the split between media images and the narrative world visible by using two different panel shapes: the regular, rectangular panels and panels shaped like television screens. Paradoxically, the television screens point to the historical “reality” of the contemporary film audience (on reader address in DKR cf. Kofoed, “Breaking” par. 1), while the other panels reside in the world of fantasy and science fiction, the world of superheroes and of an imagined dystopian futurity. DK2 takes the critique of the media a step further by eliminating the visual distinction between media images and images of the narrative world: all the panels are rectangular, regardless of whether they represent actions in the narrative world or their representation in the media. Strikingly, the contrast and confrontation between Batman and Superman in DK2 serves as a structural analogy to the ways in which media report (perceived) risks. There is extensive reporting on the supposed activities of Batman, and many reports clearly conflict with the way in which Batman is represented in the panels. As D.T. Kofoed notes, “[t]he television transmits the superhero, but cannot contain either the heroic narrative or image” (“Breaking” par. 8), meaning that Batman is never actually shown on television and the “factual” reports do not do justice to his actions. Even the spectacular battle between Superman and Batman in DKR is based on the inability to know, and the “revelation” of the civil identity of Batman just disguises – or opens up – another universe of non-knowing (Miller, DKR 197). In DK2, no one has enough information to make informed decisions. Information is exchanged, but worthless, disregarded or misinterpreted. Even communication between Superman and Batman fails: “I tried to tell you. But you wouldn’t *listen*” (Miller, DK2 36).

- 21 Moreover, the sense that emerges from the television images in DKR and DK2 is that nobody, including civil institutions and the superheroes themselves, knows anything with certainty. Reports on Batman and his various antagonists turn out to be catastrophically false, although they are usually based on seemingly valid information. Contradicting expert opinions are placed next to each other and make effective action impossible. The most prominent example perhaps is Dr. Wolper, the Joker's psychiatrist in DKR, who is ultimately killed by his supposedly recovered patient, dramatizing the way in which proliferating scientifically validated knowledge leads to non-knowing (Miller, DKR 126-28). The voice of the expert is put on

display, revealing it as misguided in the very moment he emphasizes his expertise. This is thus not merely a satire of "expert opinion," as Aeon Skoble has argued (31), but a structured engagement with the tension between knowledge and non-knowing. The mysterious ending of DK2 provides another extreme example for doubtful expert opinions. When the Green Lantern appears *deus ex machina* to finally save the world, televangelists, the Pope, and an Islamic leader are shown next to "prominent scientists" in trying to explain the phenomena caused by the extra-terrestrial superhero (Miller, DK2 227). The only difference between the religious leaders and the scientists is that the scientists admit their inability to know the exact nature of the phenomenon.

- 22 The failure of government institutions to maintain order is nothing new; in fact, it is a key element of the superhero genre as Lawrence and Jewett have defined it. However, what is new in the superhero of the world risk society is the way in which the failure of experts to provide reliable knowledge corresponds with a systemic inability to make informed decisions. Miller's DKR and DK2 bring the narrative of the American superhero to the non-knowledge society, and thus participate in transforming a core element of American cultural identity. As the nuclear warhead of the Soviet Union approaches the island of Corto Maltese, for example, the media fail to acknowledge the possibility for a complete shutdown of electricity and a nuclear winter (Miller, DKR 166). Superman, the President's "little deterrent," confidently diverts the bomb, but allows it to explode over the ocean with catastrophic global consequences (Miller, DKR 168). Over the course of DKR, the media anticipate all kinds of crises, but the nuclear winter remains an unanticipated catastrophe. Here, the discrepancy between the immediate representation in the regular panels and the representation in the television panels becomes most obvious.
- 23 A link between the two editions that highlights their comment on risk discourse is provided by James Olsen's *Daily Planet* column "Truth to Power," published in lieu of an introduction in the 2002 edition of DKR. In DK2, the journalist appears in the panels literally speaking "truth to power," but no one is listening. As D.T. Kofoed has argued, "Jimmy Olsen personifies the hazard of this narrative system, as he cannot be definitively accredited with either the role of screaming bystander or media commentator; only his directed address towards the reader is certain"

("Figuration" 152). The newspaper snippets that frame both DKR and DK2 (as well as the 2005 edition of *Year One*) each frame the respective text in a different context of risk. They are vignettes highlighting the demise or absence of "heroes" and the need for them. More importantly, however, they reveal a hierarchy of news media from print to television to the Internet that constitutes less conservative nostalgia than a parallel to the history of the risk society from the 1930s to the early twenty-first century. It was primarily the print media that produced the knowledge society, and it is television and the Internet that have dismantled it and replaced it with a world saturated with risk, at least in Miller's satirical representation.

## 5. Conclusion: The Dark Knight and/in the World Risk Society

- 24 With their sustained and systematic confrontation with risk discourses, the two graphic novels DKR and DK2 can be seen as key examples of what we have called risk fiction. As our reading of Miller's two Dark Knight narratives demonstrates, risk fiction is a critical engagement with expert risk discourse that is played out in popular culture. These two texts envision a dystopian future threatened by anthropogenic apocalypse and characterized by non-knowing and indecision. This future vision addresses the two texts' respective present cultural moments through media images that participate in the staging of risk in popular media but also constitute a self-reflexive critique of this process of staging. Furthermore, the Dark Knight series capitalizes on the relationship between individual risk-taking behavior and the sense of global risk and uncertainty. Its deployment of edgework, however, is not an escape from turn-of-the century American fears and anxieties. To the contrary, this Batman absorbs these anxieties through his massive body, battling a succession of supervillains that come to represent failed versions of American masculinity. In DK2, he passes this ability on to Carrie, as Superman emerges reformed through his daughter Lara. Finally, the representations of places/spaces in the graphic narratives not only contribute to the visual anticipation of catastrophes yet to happen, but also engage critically with the need for establishing masculinity through control over space.
- 25 With their dual personalities in conflict, superheroes have always been fundamentally about identity in crisis, and

Batman's crisis is rooted in a personal trauma that corresponds with the dystopian aspects of his community. However, Miller's *Dark Knight* brings this crisis to a national level. This Batman thus connects the realistic and the fantastic in his own person; he links nostalgia for a more harmonious past with the vision for a better future in the midst of dystopian despair, but ultimately he gives up even this tenuous connection to the past to commit fully to the future when he pronounces his concluding riddle, facing the reader, "I was *sentimental*—back when I was *old*" (Miller, DK2 248).

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## NOTES

- i. Acknowledgements: We are grateful for the input we have received on the question of risk in popular culture from colleagues and students, particularly from Sylvia Mayer of the Bayreuth Institute for American Studies (BIFAS), Colin Milburn from UC Davis, and the anonymous reviewers of the article.
- ii. Superhero mythology and its relation to American national identity has been studied extensively. Key contributions to this scholarship include Brooker's *Batman Unmasked*, Lawrence and Jewett's *The Myth of the American Superhero*, and Coogan's *Superhero: The Secret Origin of a Genre*. However, while the relationship of the superhero genre to American national mythology is well established, and Frank Miller's *DKR* is one of the most analyzed texts in the superhero genre, its cultural function within larger risk discourses has received no critical attention.
- iii. *DKR* has been analyzed in terms of how it critiques democracy (Blackmore) and Reaganism (Dubose), how it probes masculinity (Leverenz), sexuality (Wilde), and regeneration through violence (Finigan); and DT Kofoed looks at Miller's visual framing of his television critique. *DK2*, on the other hand, has received relatively little scholarly attention to date, exceptions being Murphy, who reads *DK2* as critical dystopia, Tipton who reads it in terms of gender, and Wandtke, who reads *DK2* as postmodernist text. Will Brooker has looked at *DKR* and *DK2* in two monographs focusing on the Batman character as a cultural icon.
- iv. Risk fiction is proposed here as an umbrella term for fictional risk narratives across genres and media, including graphic narratives, literature and film. Sylvia Mayer speaks about "risk narratives" (78, 82) in a related vein in her seminal article "'Dwelling in Crisis': Terrorist and Environmental Risk Scenarios in the Post-9/11 Novel."
- v. Future technologies as we use the term here are fundamentally future-oriented technologies established in a discourse of risk (cf. Kaiser et. al., Kurzweil, Milburn), whose full potential is utopian (promising world-wide affluence, universal health, and eternal life) but whose underside is dystopian or even apocalyptic, for example in robots autonomously fighting humans (as Brainiac in *DK2*), nanobots undermining the integrity of the body (as with the Martian Manhunter and Lara, alias Supergirl, in *DK2*), genetics producing monsters rather than immortal super-humans (as is the case with Dick Grayson, the former Robin, also in *DK2*).
- vi. The term "riskycape" emerged from environmental geography in the early 1990s (cf. Gaile and Wilmott, 483; see also Heise, 774n7). We use it to refer to the places where risk is "staged" in fiction and to explore the spatial implications of risk in narrative.
- vii. Although *DK2* is set only three years after *DKR* in the chronology of the narrative world, its historical context is 2001, as signaled for example by the development of the Internet and "News in the Nude," a format that was first introduced in December 1999 (DePalma).

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## ABSTRACTS

This essay argues that Frank Miller's *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns* (1986) and *Batman: The Dark Knight Strikes Again* (2001-02) are grounded in a specific type of anticipatory consciousness that we read as risk consciousness. With their sustained and systematic confrontation of risk discourses, the two graphic narratives can be seen as key examples of what we call *risk fiction*, that is fictional engagements with and expressions of global risks that are the products of late modernity. Our focus on risk is based on Ulrich Beck's articulation of "reflexive modernity" and reveals the specific ways in which Miller's Dark Knight series signals a transition in American national, racial and gender identities since the 1980s. It is our contention here that Miller's *The Dark Knight Returns* begins a deliberate engagement with how the sense of global risk shapes social cohesion at the height of the cold war, and *The Dark Knight Strikes Again* brings this engagement to the twenty-first century. We identify three levels of risk representation in the two graphic narratives: apocalyptic riskscapes, individual risk-taking as edgework, and the staging of global risk in the media.

## INDEX

**Keywords:** 9/11, anticipation, apocalypse, comics, crisis, dystopia, edgework, frontier myth, gender, graphic narrative, identity, nuclear catastrophe, risk, risk technologies, superheroes, terrorism, uncertainty

**Mots-clés:** Batman, Frank Miller, Stephen Lyng, Superman, Ulrich Beck

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