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Frank Miller and His Retroactive Influence on Representations of the Graphic Novel

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Table of Contents

1. Introduction 1

2. "You mean like pornographic?" – Comics and the Rise of the Graphic Novel 4

2.1 Comics – A Medium and Its Emergence 5

2.1.1 Early American Comics History – An Overview 7

2.2 The Graphic Novel 10

3. Frank Miller and His Retroactive Influence on a Genre 14

3.1 Frank Miller 14

3.2 Miller's Influence on the (Perception of a) Genre - Retroactivity 17

3.2.1 Retroactivity – A Concept and Its Journey 18

3.2.2 Turning Around the Temporal Logic 20

4. A Multimodal Social-Semiotic Analysis of Frank Miller's Work 23

4.1 Various Panels – One Framework: A Social-Semiotic Approach to Multimodality 24

4.1.1 Multimodality 25

4.1.2 Social-Semiotic Theory 27

4.1.3 From Theory to Practice: Frank Miller as the Sign-Maker 29

4.2 A Close Reading of *The Dark Knight Returns* and *Sin City: The Hard Goodbye* 31

4.2.1 Understanding Comics – of Panels, Gutters, and Speech Balloons 32

4.2.2 *The Dark Knight Returns* – Figure 1 *'Falling'* 33

4.2.3 *The Dark Knight Returns* – Figure 2 *'A Chase in the Air'* 40

4.2.4 *The Dark Knight Returns* – (From Figure 2 to) Figure 3 *'Tumbling Like Lovers'* 52

4.2.5 An Excursion: Unreliable First Person Narration 55

4.2.6 *Sin City: The Hard Goodbye* – Figure 4 *'Marv Approaching'* 58

4.2.7 *Sin City: The Hard Goodbye* – Figure 5 *'Observing and Preparing'* 60

4.2.8 *Sin City: The Hard Goodbye* – Figure 6 *'Marv Attacks'* 62

5. Towards a Definition of Darkness 68

5.1 Dichotomies 68

5.1.1 Silhouettes 71

5.2 Contradictions 74

5.2.1 Unreliable First Person Narration in Sin *City: The Hard Goodbye* 75

5.3 Parallels to Hard-boiled Detective Fiction and Film Noir 78

6. Representations of 'Darkness' in Movie Posters 82

6.1 *Frank Miller's Sin City* (2005) 83
6.2 *Batman Begins* (2005) and *The Dark Knight* (2008) 85
6.3 *Captain America – The First Avenger* (2011) 87
6.4 *V for Vendetta* (2006) 88
6.5 *Watchmen* (2009) 89
7. Conclusion 91
8. References 94
9. Table of Illustrations 99
10. Acknowledgement Images 100
11. Appendix 101
11.1 Illustrations 101
11.2 Abstract (German) 111
11.3 Curriculum Vitae 113

1. Introduction

"The reading of the comic book is an act of both aesthetic perception and intellectual pursuit" (Will Eisner).

Comics and graphic novels have long stepped out of the shadows of childhood and adolescence. Academic discourse has started to embrace this medium more than two decades ago and has not released, but rather held it closer, ever since. The quite recent emergence of the field of Comic Studies – in the wake of Cultural Studies' engagement with 'lived experience' and practices of 'everday life' – only emphasizes that. Universities around the globe dedicate increasing resources to Comic Studies. They are not only taught at US universities[1], but are also widespread in Europe, where even Master degrees are offered[2]. But comics have come a long way. Even a *Pulitzer Prize*[3] lies in the recent past of the turbulent medium, which has developed social and cultural acceptance. Comics and graphic novels can now be found in bookshops between crime-fiction and non-fiction books. This is doubtless – at least to some extent – owed to the fact that three of the twenty all time highest grossing movies in the US are adaptations of graphic novels[4]. The general success of movie adaptations of graphic novels and the corresponding franchises has, since the new millennium, lead to a heyday of the medium and considerable sales figures with it. What I find intriguing, however, is the lack of diversity in the public representation of such a diverse genre. If one is to regard visual representations of different graphic novels on movie posters, websites, book covers, or other realms of the public sphere, it is quite obvious that parallels and strong similarities are employed. So, how come these representations all seem to aim at the construction of less diverse and more homogeneous identities of the graphic novel and their characters?

After some preliminary research, the question after the source of these hegemonic representations, which manifest themselves in, what I see as, a particularly 'dark' approach,

[1] A prominent example for such an institution would be the University of Florida.
[2] Since 2011 at the University of Dundee, Scotland/UK.
[3] In 1992 Art Spiegelman's *Maus – A Survivor's Tale* was awarded a Pulitzer Prize Special Award.
[4] http://boxofficemojo.com/alltime/domestic.htm (01/04/2012).

arose. Tracing said source led me to engaging more closely with graphic novels and authorship, where I soon encountered one of the stars of comics writing and drawing, Frank Miller. Miller turned out to be a promising subject of analysis, since he is not only regarded one of *the* graphic novel authors, but also openly influenced directors and writers in their approaches to film-making. What is more, he provided the sources for various adaptations and also tried his luck as a director. Therefore, Frank Miller is going to serve as the starting point for my analysis. I am going to analyze his role as an author of graphic novels and more importantly his style, in order to show how he influenced the representation of a whole genre, dominant in the mainstream. I will pay specific attention to this style, which I see in the creation of 'Darkness', a concept composed of various factors that will be discussed and thoroughly laid out in the course of this thesis. I will work multimodally in my approach to Miller's style, scrutinizing his use of semiotic resources across various modes in a close-reading in order to identify his distinctive take on graphic novel writing and drawing. Then, these stylistic elements will be traced into the public sphere and it will be shown how they manifest themselves in movie posters of graphic novel adaptations released over the last years.

Section 2 will provide an introduction to the topic of comics and graphic novels, giving a historical overview of the development of a medium, with a special focus on the United States. Not only will this section lay out what the term 'comics' signifies, but it will also aim at clarifying what the frequently used term 'graphic novel' refers to. Section 3 will be dedicated to the main subject of analysis of this paper: comic author Frank Miller. A short biography will help to demonstrate Miller's development as an artist, as well as his main influences. We will then be concerned with the concept of 'retroactivity' as originally developed by Sigmund Freud and adapted for the context of adaptation studies by Monika Seidl, which will serve to explain how Frank Miller gained the popularity and status he now holds – not by being an originally creative and ingenious new artist, but by activations of his art and style over time. We will, then, in Section 4, be concerned with the close reading of Miller's work. Before, however, it will be necessary to comment on the theoretical approach undertaken in the analysis. This is why the beginnings of this section will serve to elaborate on the multimodal social-semiotic approach taken. These two, recurrently connected theories will be reviewed and their importance in the analysis explained. The greater part of

this section will deal with the analysis of Miller's graphic novels *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns* and *Sin City: The Hard Goodbye.* They will be analyzed in terms of structure, composition, and other semiotic resources, laying open Miller's 'dark' approach to graphic novel writing and his motivated acts of sign-making. After having laid the foundations for a description of what constitutes Frank Miller's style, we will, in Section 5, define this concept of 'Darkness' – which is seen based on three main aspects – as the most important stylistic element used by Miller. Finally, Section 6 will give a glimpse of how the previously defined concept of 'Darkness' and with it Frank Miller's influence on the representation of a genre can be traced into one of many, but certainly one of the most important, domains of the public sphere .

2. "You mean like pornographic?" – Comics and the Rise of the Graphic Novel

This little in-joke[5] playing with the mix-up of the adjectives 'graphic' and 'pornographic' seems to be rather wide spread in the circles of scholars devoting themselves to the study and analysis of comics, sequential art, and graphic novels. The little play on words, frequently found in relevant literature and presented in an anecdotal way, seems to be rooted in a time (not even thirty years ago) when graphic novels were not merely close to being considered a literary genre. The whole genre (or rather medium, as will be shown in the further course of this paper), had not attained the – in the eyes of critics, scholars, and the public – necessary maturity to break the chains of cultural normativity, as it were. Still seen more in a Leavisite light, than accepted as an artefact of 'culture with a capital C', F.R. Leavis's comments on popular fiction and its offering of "addictive forms of 'compensation' and 'distraction'" (Storey 18) spring to mind when regarding the position of comics before the late 1970s and early 1980s:

> This form of compensation [...] is the very reverse of recreation, in that it tends, not to strengthen and refresh the addict for living, but to increase his unfitness by habituating him to weak evasions, to the refusal to face reality at all (qtd. In Storey 18).

The joke does still work, but one would probably be hard pressed to find a librarian still having trouble with the term 'graphic novel'[6]. This statement is, of course, prone to tempt academic fate, since a definition of the term 'graphic novel' or 'comics' is not as straight forward as one might expect, but subject to academic controversy, especially since the late rise of interest in this fascinating (new) genre.

What follows will be the attempt to give an overview about the history of comics, sequential art, and graphic novels. I will give a brief historical account in order to show the development of this art form, while collecting and presenting different scholarly positions

[5] I first stumbled upon the joke in Arnold 2003, where I decided to borrow it from.
Cf. Arnold 2003: ""You mean like pornographic?" queried the startled librarian when I asked for help researching articles about graphic novels".

[6] In the USA this development can be seen owed to books such as Stephen Weiner's 1999 *100 Graphic Novels for Public Libraries.*

and answers to the questions what comics and graphic novels are and wherein their differences lie.

2.1 Comics – A Medium and Its Emergence

"What is comics?" Usual answers to this question would probably result in a collection of names of well-known comic book characters such as *Superman, Garfield,* or *The Peanuts;* and if not that, then probably something along the lines of "childish", "colourful", "easy to read", "I read them in the newspaper sometimes", or even "a waste of time". Scott McCloud[7] points out that for most people 'comic book' meant: "crude, poorly-drawn, semiliterate, cheap, disposable kiddie fare" (3). Needless to say that such generalizations are foremostly made by those who are either not entirely interested in comics (any more) or who never really had any contact with them. To avoid that straight from the beginning it is important to understand and thus define what is meant by 'comics'. So, one crucial distinction has to be made right away: the one between comics and cartoons. McCloud clarifies that they are not the same thing: "one [cartoons] is an approach to *picture-making* – a *style*, if you like – while the other [comics] is a *medium* which often employs that approach" (21).

Comics is, therefore, a medium that has – in one way or the other – existed for a long period of time. This is Stan Tychinski on the history of the medium comics:

> Since the days of prehistoric man, people have been telling stories by using pictures instead of prose. From the cave paintings of the Cro-Magnon Men to the hieroglyphics of the Ancient Egyptians, graphic storytelling has been used as a popular means for communicating thoughts and ideas (n.p.).

Others, like Elaine Martin, speak of its origin in ancient Egyptian tombs with their "combination of sequential drawings and hieroglyphic lettering" (170) and Trajan's Column; and while Douglas Wolk mentions the rather wide-spread belief that the Swiss artist Rodolphe Töpffer "was the first cartoonist in the modern sense" (29), Scott McCloud argues

[7] McCloud's book *Understanding Comics* is among the most cited when it comes to the analysis of comics. It does also stand out from other works on the topic, since it is written (and drawn) in comics-form itself. The author is the protagonist of the book, addressing readers in speech balloons and leading them through the book.

that the Bayeux Tapestry, a 230 feet long tapestry detailing the Norman conquest of England in 1066, can be seen as comics' predecessor. This tapestry, which was created in the 11th century, is an example of "sequential visual narrative and therefore counts as comics" (Wolk 29).

As becomes quite clear from this short overview already, comics – or at least what different critics account for as comics – have quite diverse a history. It is, therefore difficult to give a precise historical account of their emergence. But even if this task were an easy one, one would have to wonder if it is also sensible. I would like to answer this hypothetical question drawing on comics aficionado and critic Douglas Wolk who proposes a solution to this 'problem' that fits the scope of this paper perfectly: "The comics form has a long distinguished history, and I would like to propose [...] ignoring a lot of it" (29). The broad focus here will rather lie on the more recent history of comics and sequential art (say from the 1920s onwards) than on historical processing and the development of the medium.

Before continuing with some of the (selected) history of comics let us take another look at Scott McCloud, one of the pioneers of Comics Studies, and comic-author, legend and icon of the comics world Will Eisner to see how definitions of 'comics' can be approached. McCloud's notorious definition of comics is as follows: "Juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence intended to convey information and/or to produce an aesthetic response in the viewer[8]" (9). Eisner usually speaks of 'sequential art', applied in comic books and comic strips[9]. While critic/artist McCloud seems to settle for the metaphorical sea of the medium, artist Eisner focuses on the vessel, as it were. Nevertheless, they share the most distinctive features in their definitions: the intentional arrangement and juxtaposition of images in order to convey a narrative, to transport an idea.

These definitions alone should hint at a 'justification' for scholars' recent interest in Comics Studies as well as the achieved academic consideration[10]. Not only does the medium comics unite the two strongest forms of narrative: written text and image, it also establishes a new

[8] One point of critique of McCloud's definition is his omission of single-panel comics.
[9] Cf. Eisner 1994.
[10] It should be added that such 'justifications' are probably no longer required today. However, the topic of inclusion of graphic novels into academic discourse was quite passionately disputed in the 1990s and early 2000s, when the majority of literature used here was published.

set of rules and conventions which make its full utilization possible and accordingly position it inside the academic discourse. *Pulitzer Prize* winning comics-artist Art Spiegelman comments on the position of comics in the context of cultural reception and acceptance:

> Many otherwise literate people, even those who have long since crossed the high-low divide and welcomed comic strips [...] into the canon of twentieth-century cultural achievement – right up there next to Picasso's paintings and Joyce's novels— remain predisposed against comic *books*. Of course, most comic books really *are* junk, just as our parents said, but so is most painting and literature (n.p.).

2.1.1 Early American Comics History – An Overview

Since this paper's main focus will be on comics and graphic novels by an US American author, the brief historical overview to follow will mainly deal with the United States and leave aside Japan or parts of Europe like Belgium or France, where comics reached high status and popularity early on in their history.

Comic books have an over eighty-year history in the USA. The first comic book was in all probability published in 1934 (even though opinions differ on this topic), containing "a random collection of short features" (Eisner 7), under the name *New Funnies*, created by M.C. Gaines. The same year, the first original comic book *Detective Dan* was published. Not too popular first, which was to a certain extent due to artists' lack of skill and real interest in their work, comic books finally experienced an enormous raise in readers' interests when *Action Comics #1* starring a certain *Superman* was published in April 1938. Only one year later, in spring 1939 *Batman* made his first appearance in *Detective Comics #27,* created by Bob Kane. These superheroes - Batman,

> Superman and his fellow 'mystery-men' paved the way for the comic book's Golden Age, and a vast array of costumed heroes, detectives, cowboys, and the like flooded the newsstands. During the 1940's comic books sold millions of copies, and to readers of all ages, including many adults (Tychinski n.p.).

This so called 'Golden Age'[11] of American comic books began around 1938 "when the earliest regular 10 cent comic books appeared" (Wolk 7), and started gaining enormous

[11] 'Golden Age' as well as 'Silver Age' are terms used by comic book collectors to refer to the above mentioned periods.

popularity not only with children, but also partially with grown-ups and especially soldiers becoming regular consumers. Not to forget that teenage spending-power in the 40s was relatively high. Especially in the years after the end of World War II teenage spending power rose to "a mainstay in the US economy" (Osgerby 28). The 1940s saw the US youth market "even more galvanized" (31) by the labour demands of the post-war period.

However, the mid-1950s comic book scene saw dramatic changes that should end the 'Golden Age' in only a few months. A rising fear of juvenile delinquency, fuelled by the new medium TV[12], caused comic books to fall victim to the allegations of causing juvenile delinquency. William Osgerby comments on the *zeitgeist:*

> In the United States, the sense of optimistic promise that had characterized many popular images of youth toward the end of World War II gave way to a growing sense of anxiety during the 1950s. Juvenile crime became a particular cause for concern and by the mid-1950s America was gripped by the perception that delinquency was spiralling out of control. [...] Fears were further fuelled by a torrent of media exposés in magazines, newspapers, and newsreels, all purporting to depict a wave of juvenile crime frighteningly new in its severity (43).

Not surprisingly, and especially due to parents' interventions, sales began to drop. The 'Silver Age' of comics started with the introduction of the *Comics Code* in 1954; a catalogue setting moral and ethic standards for the industry, it was released by the *Comics Magazine Association of America (CMAA)* and turned out to be a "commercial disaster for American comics"[13] (Sabin 163). Comic books wearing this seal were therefore 'safe to read' for children and teenagers (cf. Wolk). The consequences "eventually led to the stagnation of comic books in the United States as publishers bounced from genre to genre, always looking for the next big trend. "American comic books changed, they became "increasingly known as children's fare starring cartoon characters and buffoonish super-heroes, particularly after the Batman TV series debuted in 1966" (Tychinski n.p.).

The 1966 Batman series is, as a matter of fact, worth making a brief digression. The public reception of the cultural icon[14] *Batman* was (and is probably still to some extent) influenced

[12] Cf. Spiegelman: "Television almost killed what remained of comics in the mid-fifties".
[13] "Genres were virtually destroyed, particularly, [..], creators left the field to work elsewhere and entire companies were forced out of business. The number of titles dropped from around 630 in 1952 to 250 in 1956, while the readership plummeted from around 60 million to below 35 million over the same period" (Sabin 163).
[14] Cf. Brooker 2000.

by the 1966-68 ABC[15] TV-series *Batman*, starring Adam West and Burt Ward. *Batman* can be considered the first TV adaptation of Kane's Batman, since it drew on the comic books and their main and secondary characters as well as on "settings, iconography, and visual style" (Brooker 2000, 185). The series was an enormous success in the beginning, later on losing its audience due to repetition in storylines and a general lack of creativity on the producers' end; and today obtaining cult-status. The series does contain numerous overt comic (book) elements. Batman is portrayed as a pedantic clown only able to turn his head when twisting his whole torso, sporting a cape being far from sophisticated. Robin is presented as the jumpy sidekick, constantly using phrases like "Holy Jets!", "Holy Fourth Amendment!" or "Holy Contributing to the Delinquency of Minors!". In addition, one must not forget the oversized tableaux, copied from the style of comic books, laden with "OOF! POW! BANG!" (ibid. 191) appearing during fight-scenes. That is why "hardcore" fans of Batman as well as critics of the series were not too positive about it. The show was considered a parody of Batman and the producers were blamed for making fun of him. What is more, ABC's *Batman,* which has been widely considered "camp" ever since, added a considerable amount of fuel to the already blazing fire of Batman's and Robin's supposed homosexuality. Still, the show was successful, whereas the Batman comic books of the mid-60s were "in severe danger of folding" (ibid. 186). This consequently led to their subtle re-branding and –marketing (see ibid. 187). The comic books were moving closer towards the TV series in terms of dialogue and visual representation, also containing advertisements for the TV series. But, no matter how much influence TV had on the comic-books, DC did not allow any transgression of Batman's rules; he had to remain moral, was not allowed to use guns, to kill anybody or cause their death (ibid. 187). When *Batman* was finally cancelled at the beginning of 1968, the TV show was gone, but its influence on the comic books, (as well as on the public perception of Batman) was far from that.

[15] "The rise of American teen TV was the result of broadcasters' attempts to pull in advertisers through developing new program formats that would appeal to young audiences. This was especially true of the ABC network, which began broadcasting in 1948" (Osgerby 38).

2.2 The Graphic Novel

After the drop in popularity comics underwent in the period after the introduction of the *Comics Code* and, connected therewith, the beginning of the somewhat rather unglamorous *Silver Age* of comics, processes – yet unnoticed – were underway that should help comics to regain its strength, once and for all. In order to fully grasp these developments and changes, it will be helpful to take a look at a few factors in the production of comics, which paved the way for the emergence of what was about to become the most successful form of comics the medium had experienced in a long time: the graphic novel.

The 1950s "had left their mark on the mainstream comics industry" (Sabin 171). The harsh restrictions concerning any form of violence, sex, crime, and social relevance restrained comics artist immensely in their creativity as well as in the way they were able to act out their jobs. This, accordingly, lead to the growth of a comics underground. Sabin sees this as "an outpouring of all the 'unsound' ideas bottled up since 1954" (171). Underneath the surface of mainstream comics were, thus, smouldering ideas opposed to these suppressing hegemonic structures, and only waiting for the right opportunity to erupt. It was also a time for artists and publishers to think outside the box, as it were. Independent comics companies were advancing from the 70s onwards and the motivation to re-think certain ways in which comics were made was quite high: it was important to find out whether decisions made were solely based on habit or not (Wolk 7-8). Among these important decisions was the issue of publishing. During the 1970s and 1980s, two "institutional shifts" took place and contributed to "both the formation of a dedicated comics fandom and the creation of a "stardom" within comics authorship" (Brooker 2000, 260): direct sales and royalty payments. The direct market still is the dominant distribution network for North American Comic books. It meant that instead of distributing comics to newsstands, publishers like *Detective Comics (DC)* or *Marvel* could sell their comic books straight to specialist comic dealers, on a non-returnable basis, but discounted. This way, fans received their comics faster, and in better condition. The emergence of this market "serve[d] the needs of comic book fandom" (ibid. 260). With the establishing of this market, companies like *DC*, who had paid their artists by flat rates per page until then, and were now faced with competing companies

offering better conditions for their artists in order to enter the market, had to introduce royalty payments and shared ownership rights to creators of comics.

Most importantly, among all other developments taking place at that time, the 1970s saw what Elaine Martin calls "a new 'subgenre' [of comic books] […]: the graphic novel"[16] (170). It is often stated that Will Eisner's *A Contract with God* (1978) is credited with being the first graphic novel. It is not surprising, though, since the diversity of the genre has been repeatedly stressed, that Will Eisner is not the inventor of the graphic novel, which had already been around for quite some time, when Eisner came along. What Will Eisner did do, however, was using the term for marketing purposes and so making it appear on the cover of one of his projects in big letters. Here is Eisner on the "birth of a term" (as quoted by Arnold n.p.): "[The phrase] 'graphic novel' was kind of accidental," Eisner said. While pitching the book to an important trade-book editor in New York, says Eisner, "a little voice inside me said, 'Hey stupid, don't tell him it's a comic or he'll hang up on you.' So I said, 'It's a graphic novel'".

So, graphic novels did not "grow up" in the 1970s and 80s, they clearly have a history exceeding this time frame. Nevertheless, the term graphic novel "entered common parlance" (Sabin 235) in 1986, which is owed to the fact that 'The Big 3', three "convention rupturing comics" (Wolk 8) appeared. What is often called the 'adult comics revolution'[17] represented a move out of the underground and into the mainstream for comics. Frank Miller's *The Dark Knight Returns* showed a very different – a cynical, hardened, brutal and old – Batman in an extraordinarily drawn satire (cf. Wolk 9); Art Spiegelman's *Maus: A Survivor's Tale* is Spiegelman's attempt to deal with his father's experiences during the Holocaust and to come to terms with their complicated relationship; and Alan Moore's and David Gibbons's *Watchmen,* a politically motivated superhero comic, "demolished the entire idea of superhero adventures, galvanized mainstream comics" (Wolk 8). Roger Sabin comments on the unexpected effects of the release of these graphic novels:

[16] On the point of the graphic novel being a 'subgenre' of comics I do not agree with Martin. It is a highly unfitting term, because it suggests a certain form of hierarchy. However, comic books and graphic novels have to be seen interlocked and interdependent rather than being subjected to hierarchic structures motivated by the desire to make the generic shoe fit.

[17] See Sabin 176.

> The Big 3 [...] received coverage in all major periodicals, including *Time, Newsweek,* and even the *Wall Street Journal. Dark Knight [Returns]* featured on the *New York Times* best-seller list for thirty-two weeks, while *Maus* won the American National Book Award for biography. All the major press publications reported the 'Comics Grow Up' story, and there was also significant radio and TV coverage. [...] PR and advertising played a major role: a DC advertisement featured in many magazines proclaimed 'You outgrew comics – now they've caught up with you!' (176).

Sabin further elaborates that the number of specialist shops went up to around 4,000 at this time, catapulting the 'graphic novel' a huge step forward. Apart from these specialists, bookshops took up comics (Waldenbooks and Dalton's were the major ones in the USA), and public libraries followed suit. In addition, they also attracted the attention of various book publishers (such as Doubleday, Pantheon and Warner Books) (ibid. 176-8).

These three graphic novels became the standard against which not only later comic books, but also aspiring artists were measured. The success of the authors of 'The Big 3' also lead to a shift of interest and consumption preferences: away from the importance of comics characters and towards the importance of comics authors. Creators were the selling point, not characters (Wolk 8). It was not so important anymore to get the latest copy of *Spiderman* or *Batman,* it was 'the new Stan Lee' or 'the latest Miller' readers were interested in. This was a development that could be equally recognized on the covers of graphic novels, where authors' names were featured prominently from now on. Of course, a major part of this hype was due to the marketing of the aforementioned 'Big 3' as 'graphic novels':

> The term had several advantages from a publicity perspective. First, it was used as a device to mark them out as something new, to distance them from the childish connotations of the word 'comic'. By the same token it hopefully elevated them to the status of novels. Second, it had the added advantage of associating them with the European comics scene, where album-format comics had long been culturally respectable and read by all ages. Third, it was even suggested that the graphic novel might be the next stage in the evolution of literature, and could take over from the novel entirely. The novel was dying, it was argued, while at the same time forms of visual communication were growing (as was shown by the popularity of video games, and advances in the technology of Virtual Reality). Graphic novels therefore fitted neatly into a 'self-evident' historical progression: they were, in the fashionable phraseology of the time, 'literature for the post-literate generation (Sabin 92).

Nevertheless, it would not only be unjust, but certainly wrong to dismiss the success and the lasting effect of the development of the graphic novel in the 80s as a clever publicity trick;

way too great was and still is the influence 'ur-graphic novels' had on today's artists and their works.

Having discussed the history and the emergence of the graphic novel at length, we shall end this overview on some final definitions. Roger Sabin (235-6) lays out three different kinds of graphic novels. The first kind, Sabin mentions, is close to what the name 'graphic novel' might imply. It is "a one-shot book-form publication involving a continuous comics narrative, of a scope that is longer than a normal comic" (235). In terms of production, the publication goes without prior serialization. The second kind can be described as a "'pre-serialized' work, which is to say that it appears in sections in an anthology comic before being collected into a volume" (235). Finally, the third and probably most common kind applies to American comics and involves "what can be called 'a section of comics continuity'" (236). Important here is that the creator "has consciously worked towards the longer framework" (ibid.). Once more, see Roger Sabin sum up the essence of the graphic novel:

> A graphic novel can be a complete story or a collection of linked short stories (or any variation in between) – either published as a self-contained whole, or as part of a longer continuity. The key to the concept is that it has to have a thematic unity. To put it another way, a graphic novel is a comic in book form, but not all comics in book form are graphic novels (for instance, by our definition, a collection of self-contained newspaper strips does not qualify as a graphic novel and nor does a collection of *Superman* comics that are not part of a finite story). Creatively speaking, the expanded scope of the graphic novel opens up all sorts of possibilities. It can allow for greater character development, more complex plots, more detailed scene-setting and the generation of mood. Quantitatively, therefore, the form can have properties that a regular comic lacks, and the skills required to produce one are subtly but distinctively different (236-7).

3. Frank Miller and His Retroactive Influence on a Genre

This section deals with one of the aforementioned authors of 'The Big 3'of comics, Frank Miller, in greater detail. Comics-aficionados, collectors, experts, or even casual readers might argue that there are far more interesting artists in the comics field who deserve a hightened amount of attention. Even though they might be right (beauty surely *is* in the eye of the beholder, after all), Frank Miller is certainly one of the most important, if polarizing, authors in the field whose influence on the comics genre has been immense, as will be seen later. What follows will be a short overview of Frank Miller's life, his work, and his style. A biographical approach will be rather useful here, since it will be argued that Miller's social capital is the reason for his motivated acts of sign-making in the creation of his graphic novels[18]. Not only does a synopsis of Miller's life tie in well with the historical overview of comics, it will also give an initiating glimpse of his style and the first hint of an answer to the question why an analysis of his work might prove insightful in several aspects. As will be seen, Miller's personal as well as professional development are of high interest for the development of his distinctive style which arguably changed the way a vast number of readers and fans perceived graphic novels.

3.1 Frank Miller[19]

Frank Miller was born on January 27 in Olney, Maryland, and grew up in Montpelier, Vermont. Being one of seven children, Miller always considered himself an outsider and started to retreat into a fantasy world of comic books early on. During his adolescence he broadened his horizon towards film (especially Alfred Hitchcock and film noir in general) and detective novels. Miller comments on his interests in an interview with Mark Salisbury: "I had other interests which collided with my interest in comics; primarily detective novels as I got a little bit older. The real classics: Chandler and Hammet, Charles Willeford and Jim Thompson" (187). Soon, Miller moved to New York and settled in the infamous Hell's Kitchen

[18] More on this matter is to follow in Section 4.

[19] The biography of Frank Miller is based on information provided on: http://movies.yahoo.com/movie/contributor/1808682942/bio (01/12/2011), http://www.starpulse.com/Actors/Miller,_Frank/Biography/ (01/12/2011), and http://www.tribute.ca/people/frank-miller/14302 (08/12/2011).

neighbourhood, where he started to work on fan publications – the big city and rough neighbourhood doubtless exerting their influence on the developing artist Miller. After his first publication towards the end of the 1970s, Miller started to do freelance work for *DC Comics*, before attaining regular employment at *DC's* biggest competitor, *Marvel Comics*. At *Marvel* he drew some minor titles, before at the age of 21 winning the chance to work on the publication *Daredevil.* His take on the character, especially "with his kinetic depiction of the athletic, street-fighting hero and his diligently detailed, yet stylized depiction of the grim and gritty side of the hero's turf, Miller's own Hell's Kitchen neighborhood"[20] impressed fans and led to Miller soon taking over the comic as writer and artist. *Daredevil* stayed successful for years, attracted a great number of fans and also meant a first step towards the creation of a regular Frank Miller fan-base.

After several collaborations with important comics artists, Miller had established his position in the field. He left *Marvel Comics* in the early 1980s and moved to Los Angeles. It was then, at the beginning of the 80s, that the two aforementioned institutional shifts were about to be completed: direct sales and royalty payments. With the establishment of a direct market, DC was, by 1982, forced to introduce these very royalty payments as well as ownership rights for creators, which led to star artists and writers of comic books as Boichel (qtd. in Brooker 2000, 261) states[21]. When DC aimed at increasing their steadily lowering market share in the early 1980s, "highly lucrative contracts were offered to the most popular comic book creators" (Brooker 2000, 262). DC was looking for somebody to rejuvenate and, in a way, reinvent, their famous characters like Batman; people with individual visions. They found such an individualist in Frank Miller, who started working on the graphic miniseries *Ronin* for *DC* in 1983. Again, Miller, whose *Ronin* was an almost obsessive one man project, created a hugely successful comic. This success seemed to have given *DC* the necessary trust in Miller to bestow upon him the task to work on one of their most famous characters: Batman. *DC* had already started to change the rather camp image of the 1960s Batman in

[20] http://movies.yahoo.com/movie/contributor/1808682942/bio.

[21] These developments gradually rendered the *Comics Code* useless. In 2001 *Marvel* announced that they would not have their comics checked against the guidelines of *CCA* and in 2011 the two last remaining, big comics publishers, *DC Comics* among them, announced their retreat from the *CCA.*

the late 1970s, but Miller's *The Dark Knight Returns* exceeded expectations. Will Brooker sees Miller's *DKR*, as already suggested, as one of the most important works of this genre:

> *Dark Knight [Returns]* embodied the genre's tightening-up into a masculine, muscular form, perfect for the key market of heterosexual teenage boys and young men who wanted superheroes they could finally be proud to admire, comics they could read in public. It was a heavy duty mother of a vehicle itself, crushing the old jokes about caped crusaders and Boy Wonders, powering through expectations and prejudices, and planting, a reinforced new Batman in the ruins, staring anyone down who dared mention Adam West (2007, 40).

The Dark Knight Returns did not only shape the material appearance of comic books (see ibid. 41), it also was Miller's vessel to overcome the flood of ridicule and scorn that had washed Batman and Robin away from the shore of seriousness a decade before. Miller brought Batman back into a serious, more adult context where he – according to Miller as well as to a vast fan-base which received his work extraordinarily well – belonged. Miller continued his work on Batman with *Batman: Year One* (1987) and could be convinced to make excursions to the film genre, writing the screenplay for *RoboCop 2* (1990) and also the third part of the series (1993).

In 1992, Miller released one of his best known – if not *the* best known – works *Sin City,* which he once more wrote, drew and published himself through an independent comic publisher. In this series, Miller abandoned his samurai-superheroes, replacing them with extremely hard-boiled characters lacking sympathy for anyone, dangerous women and men with a past full of regrets and violence; all of them living in a world without hope in desperate need of the very superheroes Miller had ceased to create for the time being. The style Miller employed in his art was surely very important too. He almost exclusively uses black and white; colours are only sparsely used to highlight violence effectively. Mark Salisbury comments on the essence of Frank Miller's *Sin City:* "[it] stunningly combines Frank Miller's dark, stylised artwork and stripped-down dialogue with his love of hard boiled, violent pulp fiction" (180).

During this time, Miller also created *300*, a rather cinematic take on the historic battle of Thermopylae in the Spartan wars of 480 BC where a Spartan army of 300 men fights until the last man to defend a mountain pass, dripping machismo and, of course, violence. After the new millennium had arrived, Miller's career in cinema started to take off. His comics

Daredevil, as well as the spin-off *Elektra* were made into movies in 2003 and 2005. Both were not received too well, in critical terms as well as in their box-office performances. This led Miller back to working on comics and can also be considered the reason for his repeated refusal before accepting director Robert Rodriguez's plea for collaboration on an adaptation of his *Sin City* series. After turning down the offer several times, Miller finally accepted in 2005 and the result was an enormously successful, visually impressive adaptation that transferred Miller's story from comic book to the movie screens almost panel by panel[22]. An adaptation of Miller's *300*[23] followed in 2006 and was also successful at the box-office, even though not too popular amongst critics and broadly parodied. In 2008, Miller directed the adaptation of Will Eisner's comics-classic *The Spirit*, which flopped. In 2011, Miller attracted more attention furiously attacking and insulting the *Occupy Wall Street m*ovement on his website[24] than with his continued work on Batman.

3.2 Miller's Influence on the (Perception of a) Genre - Retroactivity

Frank Miller is doubtless – as can be deduced from his biography – a highly important figure in the world of comics and their creation. His importance is, however, not solely founded in his unprecedented creativity, artistry or craftsmanship, even though these factors do play a role far from unimportant. Miller is particularly interesting for the present analysis, because of how his texts[25] have been used by filmmakers: to draw inspiration from his artwork, his style, or his narratives in order to re-invent characters or to create adaptations; or simply as an original to adaptations. Still, the use of Miller's work as a "template" is only part of the jigsaw puzzle he and his canon form in popular culture. Accordingly, posters, advertisements, movie-trailers, all of these cultural texts were influenced by Miller's style and ideas and thus strongly contribute to the way of representation of (selected) comic characters, comics and graphic novels, and therefore the genre as a whole. The result is that Frank Miller is retroactively given a certain authority in the field of comics, and especially in

[22] One should not forget to mention the huge array of Hollywood stars partaking in the adaptation, like Benicio del Torro, Mickey Rourke, Bruce Willis, Elijah Wood, Jessica Alba, Michael Madsen, and many more, who did not harm the film's chances of success.
[23] Directed by Zack Snyder and starring Gerard Butler.
[24] http://frankmillerink.com/.
[25] The term is used in its widest sense, in the context of a Cultural Studies approach, here.

the field of comic authorship, he might not have possessed originally. In the elaboration of this thought I will draw on the model of retroactivity, as developed by Monika Seidl, which will not only provide us with fruitful ideas, but also offer a way to establish Frank Miller as one of the biggest influences on today's perception of graphic novels.

3.2.1 Retroactivity – A Concept and Its Journey

The concept of retroactivity was, as mentioned above, developed by Monika Seidl in the context of adaptation studies, where her point of departure lies in taking a different approach to the widespread idea that there is no adaptation without a source. According to Seidl, the concept of retroactivity "helps to turn that logic around and shed some new light on the concept of an adaptation" (Seidl 2003, 59). In her model, she turns the temporal logic around and argues that an original only exists, and thus means due to its later activations. Hence, the nature of the model proposed is circular, with an adaptation as the point of arrival as well as of departure, which is important, since moving backwards is an element necessary if the temporal order is to be reversed (cf. Seidl 2010, 154-5). What is suggested here is a certain amount of space reserved for movement inside the concept. The concept's focus lies on various aspects of "doing" and not of "understanding"; the question of interest is 'what do adaptations do to an adapted text?' (ibid. 156). Within this framework, Seidl sees the adapted text as meaning potential, "a virtuality that needs activation and actualisation in order to become effective[26]" (ibid.). The meaning potential of source texts is, then, renewed by adaptations, focusing on topics and discourses that were not paid any attention by contemporaries of the source text[27] (ibid. 159).

A concept so firmly rooted in, and dedicated to, temporality is bound to have bonds to a discipline devoted to the effects the past exerts onto the present. In our case, retroactivity has 'travelled' from Psychoanalysis. The use of the term 'travelled' for this concept is not arbitrary, however, but draws on the idea of *Travelling Concepts in the Humanities* as

[26] Monika Seidl uses „virtuality" in the Deleuzian sense, positioning the "source text" "as a reality and not as a dormant entity that awaits realisation", as opposed to the concept of "Virtualität" described by Roman Ingarden and used by Wolfgang Iser in his reader response theory, where virtuality "signifies the literary work, which is seen as being constituted by two aspects or poles, the artistic and the aesthetic one" (Seidl 2010, 157).
[27] Seidl mentions a feminist reading of Jane Austen as an example.

defined by Mieke Bal in her eponymous book. Bal's most basic assumption is that "interdisciplinarity in the humanities [...] must seek its heuristic and methodological basis in *concepts* rather than methods" (2002, 5). The definition of concepts, Bal follows up to elaborate on extensively, is summed up by Neumann and Tygstrup as 'tools of academic discourse' that make discussion and exchange possible "on the basis of a common language" (1). Bal is not interested in whole theories (in her book), but shifts her focus to concepts, which she refers to as "miniature theories" (2002, 22). The implications are self-evident: concepts are more flexible than theories and more likely to transgress disciplinary boundaries or historical periods (cf. Neumann and Tygstrup 2). Bal (2009, 13) even sees concepts "naturally prone to travel". As they travel, they establish 'contact zones' (Neumann and Tygstrup 3), where different disciplines meet. All of this hints at the necessity of a conscious engagement with where concepts come from and where their destination lies. Seidl does what Neumann and Tygstrup see as essential when engaging with travelling concepts, she "map[s] both their transfer from one academic context to another", as well as she identifies "the transformations which emerge through [...] processes of transfer" (3). Still, these processes of transfer need to be initiated. Concepts do not travel by themselves, the processes involved are "complex and multilayered" (ibid. 5). But once they travel, "they acquire new meanings and at the same time serve as analytical tools for specific analytical questions posed" (qtd. in Seidl 2010, 158), which is a point where Seidl particularly draws inspiration from Bal.

Retroactivity in its essence is established as deriving from psychoanalysis. Seidl makes us aware that, like psychoanalysis, which is interested in the effects of the past on the present, her model "aims at coming up with a new articulation of past, present and future when it comes to adaptations" (159). Sigmund Freud used the term "retroactivity" to refer to "delayed action as a typical feature of neurotic and hysteric causality" (160). In Freud's view, memory played a crucial role in the context of neurosis; he saw the importance in its analysis not lying in focusing on what was remembered, but in the ways of remembering: a shift away from the cause toward the process itself was paramount to his view of psychoanalysis. Seidl picks up this idea and points out the parallels to her model of retroactivity in the context of adaptation studies. By shifting the focus from the adapted text toward the adaptation, she sees a starting point for further analyses. Here is Seidl summing up her

thought: “Thus, in the light of Freudian psychoanalysis, the adapted text no longer has the status of a stable entity, it rather resembles a virtuality that requires activation to become effective” (161).

Parallels do not end here, however. Just as Freud assumes a certain temporal distance between, and accordingly separation of, the trigger event and the neurosis itself, adaptation studies has – according to Seidl – to account for the movement between an original and its adaptation, “namely the particular adaptations over time” (161). So, the concept of retroactivity reverses the temporal order, while maintaining its focus on the explanation of causality (cf. 160). In this concept, the earlier event is not a trigger for the later event, but the earlier event does only exist because of the later one, as it were. One can, then, adhere to the assumption that meaning is by no means essentially inherent in an *ur-text* or an original. Meaning is re-created, re-negotiated, and re-produced by the activations of a text, “accumulated over time and performed in specific contexts” (161).

3.2.2 Turning Around the Temporal Logic

In the brief synopsis of Seidl’s model of retroactivity, we have learned that an original, a source text, only exists and therefore means because of its later activations. In what follows, I am going to apply this model analogically to author/artist Frank Miller to put under scrutiny his position as *the* “father” of the graphic novel. I will not be considering a specific work of Miller’s canon, or explore how adaptations of his graphic novels changed readers’ perception of the original. Not only would this undertaking be rather difficult – one has to bear in mind that characters like Batman were not created by Miller, nor was he the first or the last to interpret him[28] (even though his interpretation created an impressively sustainable effect), but neither is it within the scope of the present analysis. My analysis does not have its focus on adaptation studies; they should rather be considered means to an, not entirely extrinsic but different, end. What will be examined is how adaptations, inspired by Frank Miller or with Miller as a template so to say, have helped to increase Miller’s popularity. What is more, they bestowed upon Miller a certain status; the status of

[28] Most important Batman authors include Jeph Loeb, David Mazuchelli, Alan Moore, or Tim Sale.

an artist whose take on graphic novels is not only leading, but approaching hegemonic in today's representation of graphic novels.

In relation to Seidl, it is not going to be the focus on Miller's comics and graphic novels like *Ronin, Daredevil, Batman: The Dark Knight Returns, Sin City,* or *300* serving as the starting point for further analyses, but their recent adaptations. It is safe to say that the on-screen realizations of graphic novels have been having their hey-day in the course of the last decade. This list of selected titles shows some of the most successful ones (films with any connection to Miller in bold): ***Daredevil*** *(*2003), ***Batman Begins*** (2005), ***Sin City*** (2005*), V for Vendetta* (2006), *Blade I-III* (1998-2004), *Hellboy & Hellboy II* (2004 & 2008), ***300*** (2007)*,* ***The Dark Knight*** (2008), ***The Spirit*** *(*2008*)*, *Iron Man & Ironman II* (2008 & 10), *Watchmen* (2009), *Kick-Ass* (2010), *Thor* (2011), *Captain America: The First Avenger* (2011), *The Green Lantern* (2011). As the list indicates, Miller did have his hands in many of these adaptations, several times even as a director. His name reached a wider audience for the first time in 2005, when *Sin City*, or rather *Frank Miller's Sin City* was released. With the release of this film, Miller betook himself into the widespread "tradition" of adaptations drawing attention to themselves as adaptations. Just like Francis Ford Coppola's *Bram Stoker's Dracula* or Kenneth Branagh's *Marry Shelley's Frankenstein, Frank Miller's Sin City "*openly announced its relationship to other works" (Hutcheon 7). Adaptations of Miller's work such as *Daredevil* or *Elektra* had been in cinemas before, but it was not until the success of *Sin City* that the wider public[29] became aware of his existence. Along with that came further information about the creator in the wake of the movie's success. As a result, Miller was knowingly connected to his prior work.

Drawing a connection to Miller's earlier work – his take on the caped crusader Batman in particular – is not a straightforward task, however. That is due to the aforementioned diversity of the comics-character Batman. The various meanings attached to Batman have strongly differed since his emergence in the 1930s. There has never been what Stuart Hall calls a necessary "belongingness" (in Chen and Morley 141) of any meaning to him. There is

[29] As opposed to regular readers of graphic novels and aficionados of Miller's work.

also no unity[30] in the discourses attached to Batman, but rather a varying "articulation of different, distinct elements which can" (ibid.) and also have been re-articulated over time. This was due to different artists and their approach on comic writing, as well as different activations over time in different contexts (cf. Seidl 2010, 161). Hence, one can only extract certain elements of an artist's interpretation of the character and examine in how far they influenced adaptations. An undertaking that is probably difficult as Linda Hutcheon thinks, since we will deal with a "style" rather than with settings or contexts, which is arguably subjective and quite difficult to discuss (10). It is, nevertheless, Miller's style that is of interest here; a style that has not only (retroactively) made him famous, but also contributed to the general public perception of graphic novels.

Miller is not to be considered a trigger for the popularity of films like *Sin City,* he is the effect. His importance of today, he owes to what has happened to his creations over the years; for him and his status it was – to paraphrase Seidl – important what happened between the adapted "style" and its adaptation. The "particular adaptations over time" (2010, 160) were what manifested Miller's status. Tim Burton was the first film director to be inspired by Miller's dark approach in his 1989 *Batman* and its sequel *Batman* Returns (1992), as is repeatedly stated. After Joel Schumacher failed to convince either critics or fans with his dark, but pop-artsy interpretation of Batman in the 1990s, Christopher Nolan opened his own Batman canon, drawing inspiration from Miller story-wise[31] in *Batman Begins*, and revealing openly in the second part *The Dark Knight*[32] the already suspected influence of Miller's *The Dark Knight Returns.* By the time Nolan's films were released – and had cashed in enormously at the box-offices[33], Miller had also experienced a huge success, which manifested itself again in a further heightening of his status. What had started with *Sin City*[34]*,* found its way into audiences'/consumers' minds, step by step: Frank Miller's status as a highly important artist/creator of graphic novels had been established, his name becoming

[30] See Stuart Hall's definition of 'unity': "The 'unity' which matters is a linkage between that articulated discourse and the social forces with which it can, under certain historical conditions, but need not necessarily, be connected" (in Chen and Morley 141).
[31] The story of *BB* is based on the cooperation of Frank Miller and David Mazzucchelli in *Batman: Year One.*
[32] Which is to be continued with the final part of the trilogy *The Dark Knight Rises* in 2012.
[33] *Batman Begins* grossed over 370 Mio. $ worldwide and *The Dark Knight* even turned out to be the most successful adaptation of a *DC Comic* ever, grossing over 1 Billion $ worldwide (www.boxofficemojo.com).
[34] By the end of 2005, the year the film was released, five of Miller's *Sin City* graphic novels were in the top 10 of the Year-End 2005 Sales Charts; *The Hard Goodbye* occupying the first place. (http://www.newsarama.com/marketreport/05Year_End.html, 12/12/2011).

synonymous with a dark approach to graphic novels and their adaptations, which gave audiences a face and a name to put to this ominous phenomenon of darkness that seemed to adhere to graphic novels. It was not only Miller, but also his vessel, his medium, the graphic novel that gained popularity due to his success. Not only did graphic novels experience a rise in popularity, one daresay that they made another huge step toward general acceptance, maybe even starting to place down the label of "literature for the post-literate generation", as Sabin (92) muses.

What becomes obvious here is the reversal of temporal logic, inherent to the model of retroactivity. Frank Miller doubtless is one of the more influential artists in the comics field, but when considering the development of comics and graphic novels originally, it would be presumptuous to credit him with being the main influence of such diverse a genre. This is exactly why it does pay to "turn the logic around" and to consider later activations of Miller's work. By doing so, we can see that the process of adapting Miller's approach/style is what was really important for the role he plays in today's popular culture. There are few comics artists so popular, or said to have been as influential as Miller. Clearly, the status Miller holds now (and which is retroactively ascribed to him as having been possessed since the beginning of his career) only exists because of how he has been culturally utilized, as it were. Miller's meaning has been subject to re-creation and re-production due to the later activations of his style and his works in general.

Since we have repeatedly referred to Miller's style in this last section, it will be the aim of the sections to follow, to dissect his style, and his approach employed in his graphic novels as well as relevant influences to his work. Particular attention will have to be paid to the analysis of 'Darkness'[35] which seems to play the most important role in Frank Miller's approach to comics/ graphic novels.

[35] As the inverted commas indicate, the concept of 'Darkness' which has been used quite loosely so far, will have to be analyzed and defined to a larger extent in due course.

4. A Multimodal Social-Semiotic Analysis of Frank Miller's Work

4.1 Various Panels – One Framework: A Social-Semiotic Approach to Multimodality

We have established that comics are a medium not only relying on the juxtaposition of pictorial and other images (cf. McCloud 9), but also on other parts of its "vocabulary" (ibid. 47), such as words. But also less obvious elements of the vocabulary of this language called comics are more than relevant in their analysis: colour, applied in single panels and whole pages, or the composition of panels, pages, and images are among the most essential modes that provide useful information in the analysis of comics and sequential art.

One of the most distinctive characteristics of comics is the employment of various modes. Image, words, colour, as well as layout or composition are resources for meaning-making. It is by the interaction and interrelation of these different modes that meaning is produced in comics. We need, therefore, focus on more than just images, or just words. Employing an approach with one such focus only, would not only *not* do this medium the deserved justice, it would simply be inaccurate. That is why it is vital to approach the analysis of Frank Miller's graphic novels in such a way that all of the employed modes can be taken into account. I will, therefore, base my undertaking on two pillars, whose combination has flourished over the last years: social-semiotics and multimodality. Social-semiotics will provide me with the tools to analyze signs according to the intention of a sign-maker who carries out – shaped by cultural and social norms – motivated acts of sign-making in order to produce and shape meaning following his/her intentions. Multimodality, which is, as the name clearly suggests, concerned with more than one mode, applies to the field of work. Multimodal research provides different possibilities to analyze meaning-making resources, as well as apt approaches towards the constitution of modes. Hence, a multimodal social-semiotic analysis does seem promising when dealing with such a multilayered medium as comics. The following introduction into the approach taken in the analysis shall serve to consolidate the theory applied later on.

4.1.1 Multimodality

It is essential to note that multimodality does primarily apply to a field of work. As Gunther Kress notes, "anyone who works multimodally needs to be clear what theoretical frame they are using, and make their position explicit (2010, 54)". One is therefore only able to exploit multimodality's full potential, in its combination with an apt framework. There are manifold possibilities to carry out multimodal analyses. Apart from the social-semiotic frame multimodality is approached with in this paper, there are two other main perspectives within the field: a systemic functional approach (multimodal discourse analysis), and multimodal interactional analysis (see Jewitt 2009b, 28). In our case, the academic 'tool of choice' will be social-semiotic theory and our main reference point thus the approach taken by Gunther Kress, who, over the last two decades has dedicated his work to the development of a social-semiotic approach to multimodality. Together with Theo van Leeuwen, Kress has taken as his main inspiration and starting point the systemic functional grammar of Michael Halliday who argued that texts need to be understood as complex signs. Their work in *Reading Images – The Grammar of Visual Design* (1996) provided a framework "to describe the semiotic resources of images and analyse how these resources" fulfil the three Hallidayan metafunctions, employing a social-semiotic multimodal approach (Jewitt 2009b, 29). Kress and van Leeuwen showed how "choices of visual semiotic resources can be used to communicate ideologies and discourses" (ibid.). Even though their approach started out rather rigidly, employing relatively fixed viewpoints and conceptualizations, it has not only opened the door for multimodal work in combination with social-semiotics since, but has also been further developed and widely loosened. Especially Gunther Kress did (and still does) a great amount of research, moving towards contemporary communication in his latest work, with a close look at new media and new affordances of new modes.

According to Gunther Kress (2010, 79) mode is a "socially shaped and culturally given resource for making meaning", and following Jewitt multimodality

> describes approaches that understand communication and representation to be more than about language, and which attend to the full range of communicational forms people use [...] and the relationships between them (2009a, 14).

Modes do also strongly differ in so far as they offer different potentials for meaning-making, as well as for realizations, from culture to culture: the same images are used differently to express different ideas in different parts of the world; also the use of writing or colour as semiotic resources differs strongly between cultures (cf. ibid. 80). Multimodality is based on the assumption that meaning is not only produced and shaped by one single mode, but focuses on the connection and interrelation of several, different modes. It assumes that all modes are culturally and socially shaped and are therefore used to carry out social functions (Jewitt 2009a, 15). Multimodal research consequently provides different possibilities to analyze meaning-making resources and how they are used to make meaning (ibid. 14).

But what is a mode? An answer to this imposing question – going beyond the obvious: image, music, and writing – can be gained from Kress who sees two aspects of mode (2010, 87). He distinguishes between a social definition, where what counts as mode is a question of social decisions and agreements among a community and a formal definition, which will be the more interesting one, in our case. This is Kress on the formal criteria of mode: "Formally, what counts as mode is a matter of what a social-semiotic theory of mode requires a mode to be and to do" (ibid.). The requirements of a mode are therefore linked with Michael Halliday's semiotic approach. In *Language as a Social Semiotic,* Halliday identifies three "metafunctions" of language that are always "generated simultaneously and mapped onto one another" (112) and that provide people with their experience of the world. In social semiotic theory, any communicational resource has to fulfil these three functions (cf. Norris 2004, Jewitt 2009a, 2009b, Kress 2009, 2010). The *ideational* function – being able to represent states, actions, and events, "going on" in the world; the *interpersonal* is concerned with social relations, especially of those engaged in communication; the *textual* function refers to the relevance of context, representing both other functions "coherent internally and with their environment" (Kress 2009, 59). These three functions are always present in any mode, they are a prerequisite. If music, layout, design, or the like, meet these requirements, they can be considered – and thus analyzed as – modes[36]. Jewitt notes that "multimodal approaches take up the concept of the metafunctions and apply them to *all* modal resources" (2009b, 24).

[36] Since I will deal with various modes in my analysis, it would be far too time consuming to proof each mode's fulfilment of the three metafunctions. Whenever writing, colour, layout, or the like is treated as mode further

Working multimodally is specifically apt when analyzing graphic novels, especially since different aspects of meaning can be carried in various ways by each of the modes, as hinted at before (Jewitt 2009b, 25). Comics is a complex medium, not only employing one, but a variety of different modes apart from language and writing, such as images, colour, words, layout, etc. All of these modes do not only contribute to meaning, but also carry different affordances. It will, thus, be necessary to examine these different modes and their interrelation in order to achieve satisfactory results in the following analysis.

4.1.2 Social-Semiotic Theory

By now, it is a widely spread position that social-semiotic theory and multimodality are inseparably interwoven. Gunther Kress (2010, 105) even goes as far as stating that social-semiotic theory can be regarded as a "fork with two prongs": one being the semiotic, the other the multimodal prong. As already mentioned, social-semiotics is interested in all forms of meaning. The "core unit" (ibid. 54) of semiotics is the sign – a combination of form and meaning – and the primary focus of a social-semiotic multimodal analysis is the social process of sign-making. However, in social-semiotics, the term 'resource' is widely used instead of sign, since it "avoids the impression that 'what a sign stands for' is somehow pre-given, and not affected by its use" (van Leeuwen 3). The term 'semiotic resource' is one of the key terms in social-semiotics, deriving from the work of M.A.K Halliday who introduced the widespread idea that the grammar of any language is not to be seen as a code, but as a 'resource for making meaning' (192). Van Leeuwen extends the idea to the 'grammar' of other semiotic modes and defines "semiotic resources as the actions and artefacts we use to communicate" (3). As Jewitt and Oyama argue, social-semiotics does not only involve the description of semiotic resources, but is also concerned with the interpretation of what people "say and do with, [say], images" (138). Once, semiotic resources have been established, "it becomes possible to describe [their] semiotic potential" (van Leeuwen 4), their potential for making meaning. It is not only this potential for making meaning that is

on, it can be taken for granted that it fulfils the necessary requirements and has been thoroughly examined against Halliday's metafunctions.

important, however. The focus is more on affordances, which involve meanings not yet expressed in addition to those that have already been introduced into society (ibid. 5).

Clearly, social-semiotic theory is interested in meaning, in all its forms (Kress 2010, 54). Gunther Kress comments on the role meaning plays in social-semiotics:

> Meaning arises in social environments and in social interactions. That makes the social into the source, the origin and the generator of meaning. In the theory here, 'the social' is generative of meaning, of semiotic processes and forms, hence the theory is a *social*-semiotic one (ibid.).

It is Kress too, who argues that sign-making is "what distinguishes social-semiotics from other forms of semiotics" (ibid. 55). As he further argues (ibid. 54), signs are always *made* – they are motivated and the relation of form and meaning is everything but arbitrary. Both, form and meaning are subject to the interest of a sign-maker.

These two terms, arbitrariness and motivation, are unmistakably linked to Ferdinand de Saussure and Charles Sanders Peirce. While in the Peircean account the reader/ the interpreter, becomes the maker of new signs, the maker of meaning which is always based on prior signs, Saussure rules out individual action. His sign-system is stable, greatly influenced by social power. In his view, the relation between signifier and signified is arbitrary and bound by convention (Kress 2010, 63). While Saussure's model is based on the learning of social rules, however, the focus of the following analysis will be the agency of the sign-maker who uses resources that those around him know, to make signs communicating the intended meaning (ibid.). This is summed up by Kress, who states that

> A social account of meaning based on the significance of the agency of individuals, is entirely at odds with a conception of an arbitrary relation of form and meaning, established and held in place by convention (ibid.).

The production of motivated signs does not in any way affect sign-makers, or limit their agency to any extent. The sign-maker's interest is the only limitation – and certainly a highly interesting one, come to that. Every sign-maker is a product of their "own social history, their present social position, and their sense of their social environment" (Kress 2010, 69)[37], which is acted out in the production of signs: be it in the preferred way of representation or

[37] This idea bears close resemblance to Pierre Bourdieu's concept of "social capital". See Bourdieu 1983.

communication, in the shaping or reshaping of cultural resources, producers of signs shape them according to their histories.

4.1.3 From Theory to Practice: Frank Miller as the Sign-Maker

One could probably argue that the title of this sub-section is lacking an "almost", since the analysis is yet to be commanced. Before getting into medias res, however, let us take a look at how Frank Miller's position can be included in the proposed framework. I will, in accordance with Gunther Kress and his strong emphasis on human agency in sign-making, focus on Frank Miller as an ideal sign-maker, an ideal author[38]. I am aware of the fact that a focus on the reader of graphic novels would be as justifiable, since it is readers who have to decode whatever message they find encoded in a text according to their reading positions. However, I am in this paper far more interested in reading the signs created by Frank Miller as I see them to be intended. I will, thus, focus on taking, what Stuart Hall (2007) refers to as, a preferred reading position, seeing Miller as the encoder of a message. After all, a social-semiotic approach to multimodality is concerned with the interest of a sign-maker, and interest manifests itself in the choice of semiotic resources. It is therefore crucial to interpret theses choices, to find out what role they play in the creation of a message, and in how far they reflect the cultural and social origins (cf. Jewitt 2009b, 31).

In the selected parts of Miller's graphic novels which will be subject to analysis, it is Miller who selects words, creates images, and colours his work. He uses all of these semiotic resources to communicate and to represent his ideas. His main goal is to activate meaning potential and affordances in his readers. In order to achieve this goal, he sets various acts of sign-making. Thus, Miller 'earns' the status of a sign-maker. He shapes signs according to his ideas and so manages to create his very own version of what graphic novels (in his eyes) are supposed to be like. According to Kress, the interest of a sign-maker "arises out of his/her (physical, affective, cultural, social) position in the world, vis-à-vis the object to be represented" (2010, 70), hence reflecting his position. This is true for Miller, who, in his work, focuses on the creation of what will be called 'Darkness' in the further course of this thesis; a concept that is multimodally constructed via visual aspects, textual aspects,

[38] Just like an ideal reader, who puts forward his arguments as universally valid in the analysis of a text.

compositional aspects, as well as iconic parallels to film-noir[39]. This 'Darkness' will be seen as the main message Miller wants to convey in his graphic novels. A message that has sustained influence on today's adaptations, which draw inspiration from Miller in their dark approaches to film-making as well as the advertising of the films and the creation of a dark 'aura' surrounding graphic novels in general. Miller's motivated acts of sign-making did, in fact, have such impact that they retroactively assigned him the status of something close to the 'father of the graphic novel', and bestowed upon him a status he might never have reached, as we have seen in section 3.2.

Every representation is, of course, selective. Gunther Kress rightly states that "what the sign-maker takes as criteria determines what she or he will represent about that entity" (2010, 70). The same is applicable to Miller. Batman had been present on comic and TV stages for more than four decades, before Miller took up his work on him. So, Miller, especially when working on this comic hero, had to dedicate his efforts to parts of the entity – partly because of what was in the realm of possibility, but also because of his interest. Miller's own social history, his present social position at the time of writing, as well as his sense of social environment (cf. ibid. 69) flowed into his orchestration of his graphic novels. It is rather safe to assume that his interest in detective fiction and film noir, as his biography shows, did have its fair share in that.

The goal now is to identify the acts of sign-making Miller consciously uses in his approach to graphic novel writing and drawing. A close reading of whole pages, panels, and single elements on pages will show how Frank Miller achieves to create an approach to graphic novels that is very special, if not unique, indeed. When conducting a similar analysis of movie posters overtly establishing a connection to Frank Miller's graphic novels, it will become obvious how the particular adaptations over time have not only bestowed Miller with a special status, but also firmly anchored 'Darkness' in the representation of graphic novels in the mainstream.

[39] A thorough definition will be given at a later stage, in Section 5.

4.2 A Close Reading of *The Dark Knight Returns* and *Sin City: The Hard Goodbye*[40]

Apart from providing an analysis of various selected passages of Frank Miller's graphic novels, this section will function as an introduction to the most basic terms of the Visual Grammar, developed by Gunther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen[41], which will be used throughout the entire analysis. In addition, I will also introduce the most important terms and concepts in the analysis of comics.

One of the most essential assumptions Kress and van Leeuwen base their grammar on is the role of composition. Composition is "the way in which the representational and interactive elements are made to relate to each other, the way they are integrated into a meaningful whole" (Kress and van Leeuwen 176). They establish that the placement of elements bestows upon them specific information values in relation to each other (ibid.). These information values are one part of three interrelated systems that link the representational and the interactive meaning of images to each other (cf. 177ff.). Apart from the already mentioned information value, the other systems are salience and framing. While information value is concerned with the placement of elements and what different parts of the image carry information-wise (different information values are attached to left and right, top and bottom, centre and margin), salience is used to describe the elements created and positioned to attract viewers' (or in our case readers') attention (realized by factors such as placement in the foreground or background, size, colour, etc.). Framing helps us to establish whether or not parts of images are connected and thus belong together. It is essential that in a multimodal ensemble like comics we treat the meaning of the whole not as the sum of the meaning of its parts, as Kress and van Leeuwen (178) put it, but that we look at the way the parts interact with and influence each other to form meaning entities in accordance with the sign-maker's intention. In how far these systems interrelate and what role they have in the production of meaning will be made clear in the following analysis.

[40] The examples from the graphic novels I chose for my analysis were selected because I see them to be representative of Miller's style. They are either snap-shots of stylistically recurring elements, or were selected due to their importance in the graphic-novels, and the stylistic weight they carry accordingly.
[41] In: *Reading Images – The Grammar of Visual Design* (1996).

4.2.1 Understanding Comics[42] – of Panels, Gutters, and Speech Balloons

I first think it necessary, however, to introduce the most important and basic terms essential for an analysis of comics in this thesis. Apart from explaining these terms, I will apply them to work my way from the whole page to single panels, covering the space between them in the process, towards single images and other interesting elements on the page. My path will lead me from the largest unit on the page to the smallest; from the meta-panel, the biggest frame, to the smallest frame on a comic page: the panel. I will, in the analysis of my examples, examine the structure of selected pages and parts of the composition according to the terms of comic analysis to show how comics are composed (structurally), before closely scrutinizing single frames as well as their relation to each other, and especially their composition, through a social-semiotic lense. So, let us start with the "fundamental characteristic" (Saraceni 5), the most important unit of a comic, the panel.

A panel is the smallest, framed unit on a comic page. Saraceni defines as one of the most important characteristics of comics that they are organized "into sequential units, graphically separated from each other" (5). This also distinguishes comics from cartoons, which consist of one panel only. Scott McCloud does also highlight the importance of the panel. For him, the panel border is a guide through time and space for the reader (102). "The panel acts as sort of general indicator that time or space is being divided" (ibid.). According to Will Eisner, who also refers to panels as frames or boxes, they are part of a creative process:

> The fundamental function of comic (strip and book) art to communicate ideas and/or stories by means of words and pictures involves the movement of certain images (such as people and things) through space. To deal with the *capture* or encapsulation of these events in the flow of the narrative, they must be broken up into sequenced segments. These segments are called panels or frames (38).

As important panels seem to be, they are not the sole entity of interest in the analysis of comics. Almost more attention than to the panels themselves has to be paid to the space between panels, which is referred to as the gutter.

[42] The term is borrowed from Scott McCloud's 1993 eponymous book.

The gutter is such an important element, since it is the space containing what happens between the single panels (cf. Saraceni 9). Readers' imagination is required to fill the gaps left behind by missing elements in order to reconstruct the story. As Scott McCloud puts it: "In the limbo of the gutter, human imagination takes two separate images and transforms them into a single idea" (66). The artist's ability to "gauge the commonality of the reader's experience" (Eisner 38) is of highest importance here. Eisner and McCloud both mention a phenomenon inseparably connected: closure. Closure is referred to by McCloud as "the phenomenon of observing the parts but perceiving the whole" (63). It is by closure that readers make sense of, say, a hand releasing a baseball in one panel and a bat hitting the ball while the crowd is cheering in the next frame. Scott McCloud sums up closure as follows: "[...] the reader's deliberate, voluntary closure is comics' primary means of simulating time and motion" (69).

One further, generic, element of high importance in comics and graphic novels is the speech balloon. It is usually positioned inside panels, which is what distinguishes the balloon from the caption (cf. Saraceni 9-10), and not always a separate entity. Will Eisner defines the balloon as a "desperation device: it attempts to capture and make visible an ethereal element: sound" (26). Eisner also comments on the way, speech balloons function to characterize protagonists, stating that they were soon given "the task of adding meaning and conveying the character of sound to the narrative" (ibid.). Apart from that, sound effects are of high importance when it comes to realizing sound in comics, as will be shown at a later stage.

4.2.2 *The Dark Knight Returns* – Figure 1[43] *'Falling'*

The first example to provide us with more insight into different aspects of the structure and composition of Frank Miller's work is Figure 1. On this page, taken from *The Dark Knight Returns (DKR)*, we see Batman in full combat firing a grapnel from a rifle in order to hold on to a helicopter and avoid dying as well as trying to catch his antagonist Harvey Dent, aka Two Face. The page functions as a meta-panel. It fills out the whole page of the comic book, there is no frame, and no panel outlines are employed. The page-filling image captures a moment

[43] For the images see Appendix, Section 11.1.

of short duration. Batman tries to save his own life, while chasing Harvey Dent. The use of a total page is applied in order to set the mood, rhythm, and climate, which is especially useful with fast-paced activity (cf. Eisner 72)[44]; and the activity depicted in Figure 1 does certainly fulfil the criteria for fast paced – Batman in free fall, a helicopter rising in the air, and the firing of a rifle. The actions depicted in the panels on the following three pages accordingly happen inside the main narrative the meta-panel Figure 1 constitutes (cf. Eisner 74). Figure 1 shows "a critically important detail of the story in the middle of a swiftly moving narrative" (ibid. 75) and so manages to set the theme for the actions to come, framing them inside a smaller part of the narrative, as it were.

The function of Figure 1 as a meta-panel does not only set the mood for things to come, but frames them topic-wise. Various discursive markers locate the whole Figure in the discourse of war. The presence of a heavily armed helicopter, as well as a rifle in the centre of the page should usually suffice to set the discursive formation of war as the dominant theme, but adding to that – and so drawing readers even further into engaging with said discourse – is an obvious bullet hole in the centre of the suit of the most salient character on the page, Batman, revealing body armour which makes the point exceedingly clear: the protagonist is a warrior, he is willing to fight, and there is no room for doubt, let alone escape. These discursive markers function as a means of semiotic orientation which is about "social navigation semiotically done" (Kress 2010, 117). While the genre 'graphic novel' already fulfils this function and orients readers "as to what social situation they are in" (ibid.), the elements connected to war – the dominant discourse in this case – function as said factors of social navigation. Orientation is closely connected to, but independent of, what is referred to deixis by Kress (ibid. 117 ff.), which is used to identify processes directing participants' attention to certain events or aspects of the social and physical world. The helicopter, for instance, has a deictic function in so far as it directs readers' attention at the fact that the actions depicted are taking place in dangerous heights.

[44] Its function is very similar to that of a 'splash page' in comics. Eisner explains splash pages as follows: "The first page of a story functions as an introduction. What, or how much, it contains depends on the number of pages that follow. It is a launching pad for the narrative**,** and for most stories it establishes a frame of reference. Properly employed it seizes the reader's attention and prepares his attitude for the events to follow. It sets a 'climate'"(62).

Returning to one of the most prominent discursive markers in Figure 1, Batman's rifle, more than one function ascribed to it can be observed. The rifle functions as a narrative vector. Vectors are employed to connect things, people, and participants in general. "When participants are connected by vectors they are represented as doing something to or for each other" (ibid. 59), also referred to as narrative vectors which "serve to present unfolding actions and events" (ibid.) which is the case here, in contrast to conceptual vectors. Batman is the actor, the participant, from which the vector departs, doing something to the goal, the helicopter. Actors often are the most salient participants (which is also true in this case as will be seen). Batman is thus represented as taking on the helicopter in a fight man versus machine. The actor, Batman, is superimposed over the goal, the helicopter, which already hints at the outcome of the fight and Batman's superiority.

The just mentioned superiority is particularly owed to Batman being the most salient participant on the page. The scene, represented in something approaching a medium-close-shot is shown from a low angle which makes Batman seem "imposing and awesome" (ibid. 140). He is the participant depicted as being in a position of power. Not only does this angle create a general superiority which indicates that Batman possesses the power to defeat a helicopter, but it also puts him in a position of power and dominance in relation to the reader. He, this man-mountain of a super hero, heavily muscled, and with teeth gritted, makes readers feel weak and in need of his protection; a task he is, as a matter of fact, depicted being occupied with on the same page. Batman's position – falling, halfway between the helicopter and a sky scraper – constitutes quite an unusual position for the reader, and therefore enforces Batman's salient position as well as his position as a hero – being able to go places no one else is able to go (and survive). What further contributes to this position is the tilted horizon visible in the bottom-left corner of the page. The skyline of Gotham City is shown at an angle here, which results in the disintegration of readers' point of reference of a 'normal', horizontally aligned, perspective. The change of perspective to an odd angle also emphasizes the chaotic feel of the page. Another factor that adds to his high degree of salience is the information value Batman is endowed with. He is positioned on the top left, covering the top half of the page. See Kress and van Leeuwen on the significance of the use of the horizontal axis:

> When pictures or layouts make significant use of the horizontal axis, positioning some of their elements left, and other, different ones right of the centre (which does not, of course, happen in every composition), the elements placed on the left are presented as Given, the elements placed on the right as New (180-1).

For something being presented as given implies that it is already known to the viewer, and thus constitutes "an agreed upon point of departure for the message" (ibid. 180). An overly masculine Batman, armed and ready to fight therefore is the point of departure for the intended message (as well as part of the message itself one might say). A motivated act of sign-making positions this representation of a superhero as the dominant one. Miller establishes this – his – version of Batman as the status quo. By additionally positioning his hero on the top of the page, he also makes use of the top-bottom structure dominant in Western visual semiotic, which embraces the realm of order and hierarchies (cf. 191). Being on the top of the page supports Batman's dominance and importance, as well as it creates a certain contrast to the helicopter in the lower half. The hero's salience is also supported by perspective: Batman is given a higher degree of salience since he is closer to the reader and hence leaving the helicopter in the background. Also, due to his appearance on the top left of the page, he appears 'heavier' owed to an asymmetry in the visual field (202).

A further important element contributing to Batman's salience (on the page) is the use of colour – or, one could argue, the lack thereof. The predominating colours of Figure 1 are dark ones: black, dark blue, as well as different shades of grey dominate the visual landscape. The only brighter elements which, by their colour alone, catch readers' attention are part of the Bat-Suit: the torn emblem on his chest as well as his utility belt shine bright in the surrounding darkness. We can see that colour is used as a resource for making meaning on this page. It is a mode playing an important role in the realization of the meaning potential of the page. First of all, the use of bright yellow once more increases the salience of the hero. The bright highlights in the surrounding darkness draw the attention to Batman almost immediately. He is what is important on the page, no room for doubt is given. Second, the colour yellow (functioning as a device of semiotic orientation) reminds readers of the bat symbol, one of the most symbolic signs in the history of comics, probably. Even at first glance associative connections are formed with the 'Caped Crusader' and his various articulations. In addition, one must note that areas of high tonal contrast – like the

borders between black and white or in this case black and yellow – do certainly increase the salience of elements (202). This shows once more that in composition, higher or lesser degrees of salience are achieved by different semiotic resources. Salience constructs a certain hierarchy of importance among elements, selecting some as more important than others (cf. 201). However, "salience is not objectively measurable, but results from complex interaction, a complex trading-off relationship between a number of factors" (202) such as size, tonal contrast, placement in the visual field, perspective, as well as cultural factors such as cultural symbols, all of which we have seen.

The main elements of the spatial composition on the page – Batman and the helicopter – are connected by overlapping. It is by their obvious connection that the two elements are presented as one single unit of information (cf. 203). This juxtaposition of man and machine is realized by the vector the rifle in the protagonist's hand forms. The vector of the actor overlaps with its goal and so creates an informational unit. Both, the rifle as an extension of Batman's arm, and the helicopter so further contribute to the discourse of war dominant on the page. Readers are guided towards this juxtaposition and the resulting conclusions primarily by the vector they encounter in Batman's arm. This is assuming that readers start their reading experience with the most salient element of the page. Reading paths in media such as comics are not strictly coded since they are no linear texts, and the reading path on this page is even less likely to be strictly coded, since we are confronted with a meta-panel instead of several smaller panels. However, the less obvious guidance readers seem to get from the sign-maker's side, the more likely they are to start reading at the most salient element (although this is probably guidance in itself). Even though a choice of reading path seems to be offered here, it is not a real choice. The point of departure of the message clearly is Batman, there are not too many alternatives considering perception, really. It seems that his aggression, his hyper-masculinity and his general presence dominate the page and thus form the only possible starting point for readers.

Considering the images in Figure 1 it is notable that their realization is quite specific. They are no abstractions or symbolic renderings (cf. McCloud 144), but detailed depictions of the actions taking place. The only human on the page is drawn with great attention to detail – from his facial expression to the outlines of his extremely muscular body and his weapon. The clarity the images show seems to explain the absence of speech balloons, captures or

sound effects on the page. As Scott McCloud notes: "When pictures carry the weight of clarity in a scene, they free words to explore a wider area" (157), or in this case free them altogether, since the pictures carry a lot of (representational) weight. It is generally vital for comics that images are able to evoke emotional and sensual responses in readers, which is supported by McCloud (cf. 121). Images do not only achieve this goal by the actual depiction of whatever it is they seek to represent, but also by the way of craftsmanship. Whether it is in drawings, paintings, or comics, all lines seem to carry expressive potential (cf. ibid. 124). In Figure 1, the lines do carry affordances. Generally, the lines are quite dynamic in terms of their direction. They vary in thickness and consistency. Usually we have thick outlines (of Batman's body for instance), but finer lines defining contours and the like, but there is no consistent pattern to be spotted. The character of the lines is more consistent. The lines are uneven, sometimes ragged and strongly visible. They seem savage, even deadly at times. What can be observed here is the interrelation of two modes, colour and drawing, both contributing to meaning. The dark colours dominating the page in combination with the characteristic of the lines do not only create an atmosphere of danger, but also add to the notion of chaos depicted in Figure 1.

After having now taken a look at the most important and promising semiotic resources used in this example and how they were used in the composition of the page, it is now time to consider the affordances that underlie these different acts of sign-making. Doing so, I will not only summarize my findings, but also be able to lay out Frank Miller's intentions as well as his aimed at representations more clearly.

It has been made clear that Batman is the most salient element in Figure 1, meaning that he is the agreed-upon point of departure for a message. But what exactly constitutes this message? Miller sees the message in a 're-invention' of Batman. His representation of the superhero is dominant. What he has created and decided to have printed on the page *is* Batman, nothing else and surely nothing less. It is a certain idea Miller has of his graphic novel character; how he has to look, how he has to act and what he has to stand for, inside the possible boundaries[45]. And he uses the semiotic resources culturally available to him and

[45] Denny O'Neill, editor of multiple *DC Comics* Batman titles, set such boundaries in his *Batbible,* a manuscript containing eight components that constitute the main features of Batman, notably written almost 60 years after the first publication of Batman (quoted in Brooker 2000, 36).

socially made (cf. Kress 2010 54ff.) to realize these ideas. One of Miller's most important tools in this process is the use of oppositions. He thrives on a new articulation of a superhero who has long since found his way into collective memory[46] carrying certain more or less fixed attributes. Miller has a vast knowledge of how Batman has been perceived in the past; how the traditional conception of the 'Caped Crusader' as a man driven by his traumatic past but also by a sense of righteousness and empathy has become the dominant one. So, what he does is to use his knowledge to turn readers' expectations around and to contradict them. He does not give his audience what they expect: an emphatic, but strict law abiding supporter of the executive. He presents them a hyper-masculine, ruthless, and brutal vigilante, far past his prime, driven by anger and hate.

A highly significant element in Miller's re-invention is the hyper-masculinity he bestows upon his protagonist. Miller's Batman is huge, a "man-mountain" of a Batman, as Will Brooker (2007, 35) calls him. Tall, strong, and heavily muscled, his physique seems to outshine his more than mature age; all of that being even reinforced by the choice of perspective from below. The torn yellow emblem on Batman's chest, does because of the colour's high degree of salience, highlight this broad, muscular part of his body. His utility belt fulfils a similar function, highlighting not only a narrow, equally muscular mid-section, but also what lies below the waist. There is also the fact that he carries a huge rifle, which constitutes a phallic symbol par excellence, emphasizing the over-masculinity in an exceedingly explicit manner. Even if a rifle is sometimes just that, a rifle, *this* rifle is, referring to Freud, *not*.

Apart from drawing attention to Batman's overly manly attributes, the yellow parts of his suit do fulfil further functions. The torn bat sign on his chest draws attention to what lies underneath – body armour. It fulfils a so called deictic function, directing readers' attention to a specific element (cf. Kress 2010, 117). This glimpse of the Kevlar vest is, apart from being a very strong discourse marker, a crucial signifier of change. By the destruction of one of the most symbolic signs in the world of comics – a sign that stands for the good, but righteous hero who punishes criminals, but is still concerned about their rehabilitation and

[46] The concept is used as defined by Maurice Halbwachs 2006. He sees memory dependent on group memberships. His conception refers to publicly available social facts; the active past that forms our identities (cf. International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences).

believes in their ability and will to change – Miller destroys the traditional idea of Batman and buries it under a massive new conception. He reveals a new identity of Batman, engaging with the dichotomous idea of old versus new. An aged Batman needs to take new measures to fight an evil stronger than ever before. That is why he has to leave his old self behind and engage in new methods. The softer character traits, as well as any traces of humanitarianism and philanthropy are erased. Aggression and ruthlessness are the new credo of the hero. The aforementioned very explicit discourse markers that establish the connection with war do not leave any room for interpretation or doubt. This Batman, Miller's Batman, is different. He is serious and he is dangerous and he is aggressive – something that equally manifests itself in his facial expression already.

4.2.3 *The Dark Knight Returns* – Figure 2 *'A Chase in the Air'*

Throughout the whole graphic novel *DKR,* mostly rectangular panels are employed, and Figure 2 is no deviation from this norm. The page consists of ten panels – eight smaller ones of equal size grouped in fours, and two long ones covering the width of the page. The four panels on top and in the middle of the page form a frame for the long panel 2.5, while the two wide panels (2.5 and 2.10) at the same time frame the four panels (2.6-2.9) in the lower half of the page. At the top, the non-frame[47] hints at unlimited space and marks a transition from the previous meta-panel in Figure 1 to the actions happening in the air. This non-space, which in the top part of the page also forms the 'gutter' – the space between the panels – allows readers to "connect these moments and mentally construct a continuous, unified reality" (McCloud 67), referred to as closure. The two groups of four panels are superimposed over the non-space as well as over the underlying, broader panels (Figure 2.5, 2.10); they are meant to "convey a time-focus necessary to the narrative" (Eisner 48). The actions portrayed in the four panels are of fast succession – Harvey Dent firing a gun and falling out of the helicopter – the single images transformed into an idea by closure in the

[47] "The non-frame speaks to unlimited space. It has the effect of encompassing unseen but acknowledged background. The use of a structural panel frame reinforces the reader's memory of the setting. In a non-frame, the reader again supplies the background" (Eisner 45).

gutter. The limited space between the panels suggests that the actions are happening fast; the physical connection to the broad panels shows interconnectedness.

If we now take a closer look at the individual panels, it becomes clear that the shape of panel 2.5 is very consciously selected, since the shape of panels does make a difference in our perception of time, as McCloud (101) notes. Longer/wider panels, therefore, indicate not only that more time has passed, but also reinforce the illusion of height. Both these notions are supported by the panel covering the whole length of the page, not leaving any non-space. It is also worth mentioning, that the open panel in Figure 2.5 produces a sense of timelessness (cf. McCloud 102), slowing the preceding action panels' pace and endowing the actions depicted with a sense of delay and suspense, accordingly. Again, the next sequence of panels consists of four action-laden rectangular panels of the same size, superimposed on the broad panels below and above. The scene depicted by the four panels is presented as a close-up, focussing on short, action-filled scenes with gaps to be filled by the reader. The contrast to the aforementioned wide panels becomes even more apparent by them framing the actions shorter in duration.

In *Understanding Comics*, Scott Mc Cloud does not only suggest paying close attention to panels and the space between them, he also comments on the different transitions that underlie panels which are connected inside a sequence. According to McCloud (70), the majority of panel-to-panel transitions can be placed in one of six distinct categories: moment-to-moment, action-to-action, subject-to-subject, scene-to-scene, aspect-to-aspect, and non-sequitur transitions. These different transitions make use of closure in different ways. The transitions between the first four panels, 2.1 – 2.4, are realized as moment-to-moment transitions; they require relatively little closure and emphasize the fast-moving actions depicted in the four panels. The second group of four panels, 2.6 – 2.9, are moment-to-moment transitions, too. Although the high degree of action visible is partly obscured by the 'thought-rectangles' of the narrator – Batman – very little closure is demanded of the reader. The framed narration does therefore function to heighten the demand for closure, covering what little can be seen and attempting to strengthen the sense of chaos conveyed in this short sequence.

Since we are, in this example, dealing with a classic comic page – composed of several panels of different size – let us pay specific attention to framing, one of the most valuable semiotic resources in visual analysis. As Kress (2010, 149) sees it, "frames and means of framing are essential for all meaning-making in all modes". Frames are of highest importance as meaning-making resources. They provide us with the knowledge what to combine and what to separate, they tell us what to consider or not and what to ex- or include. Frames and framing devices are therefore crucial (means for meaning-making) in all modes, indeed - be it in sentences where punctuation marks function as framing devices altering meaning dependent on their selection and position, images, or graphic novels where panels are the dominant devices used, frames "shape, and present the world according to the interest of those who frame" (ibid.). "As each mode has its specific means for framing, a social semiotic theory of multimodality is required to elaborate these means" (ibid. 150). The examples for frames are manifold across different modes. From the aforementioned punctuation marks in written sentences, panels in graphic novels, curtains in the theatre or a TV announcer's simple nod of the head at the end of a programme, all of these framing devices each have their special meaning potential, which, again, differs not only from mode to mode, but also from culture to culture (cf. Kress 2009, 2010, Kress and van Leeuwen). So, each device allows the production of meaning in its very own way. The degree of framing plays another important role. Elements of a composition can be strongly or weakly framed; the framing may be employed more or less obviously (cf. Kress and van Leeuwen 203), which may also result in a changing degree of salience of framed elements. The stronger the degree of visual framing, the more an element is presented as a separate unit of information. In reverse, the more closely elements are connected, the more they tend to merge into single units of information. Connectedness, however, cannot solely be achieved by conjoint framing, but also by vectors, or by other graphic elements for instance (cf. ibid. 203-205).

The page in Figure 2 is divided into ten panels: two groups of four smaller panels each, and two wider panels covering the width of the page in between form, what can be referred to as, the pattern ABAB. The panels containing the actions depicted on the page are very regular. They are of almost equal size and aligned next to each other divided by the same amount of space in between panels. Also, the actions never transgress the outlines of the panel, everything is contained inside its borders. These rectangular straight edged borders

"are meant to imply that the actions contained therein are set in the present tense" (Eisner 44). Since the actions depicted are framed so regularly, a certain rhythm is introduced on the page. Figure 2 is the right page of a double spread it forms together with Figure 1. Considering its connection to Figure 1, the notion of rhythm is especially interesting. As we have noted, Figure 1 did fulfil the function of a 'splash page', setting a certain theme as well as the mood for events to come. Now the 'real' action is to be introduced. According to Eisner, "the sudden introduction of a large number of small panels brings into play a new 'beat'" (32), which is what happens in this example. In panels 2.1 – 2.4, referred to as 'transition panels'[48], events start to take their course, and the chase proceeds towards its peak. Even though the action sequence starts on the left side of the double spread, the pace of the action is quite slow at first. Readers have time to take in what unfolds on the page. Since they are confronted with only one large meta-panel instead of several smaller ones, it is by far easier to gain a quick overview of the situation and to observe the action depicted in detail. When turning their attention to the next page, something new happens, events start to become more chaotic and a change of rhythm and pace takes place. Now, readers cannot rest on their passive positions, but have to assume active roles, since that is what the (smaller) panels, and especially the gutter in between, demand. The four transition-panels show actions realized as moment-to-moment transitions and thus require relatively little closure; meaning that readers have to increase their reading tempo in order to match the pace of the actions unfolding on the page. This "sheer novelty of the interplay between the contained space and the 'non-space' (the gutter)[49] between the panels", as Eisner points out, "also conveys a sense of heightened significance within the narrative structure" (49). The heightened significance of the narrative structure does in this case manifest itself in the heightened pace of events. Considering these points, one can see that rhythm

> [d]oes not just provide some kind of formal structure, some kind of scaffolding to keep the text from collapsing, or some kind of cement to keep it together. It also plays and indispensible part in getting the message across (van Leeuwen 181).

[48] The term refers to these panels' function to establish a transition from the page in Figure 1 to the page in Figure 2. They are located in some kind of 'structural limbo', since they do have a connection to the page before as well as to the following panels, but yet lack certain connecting features. They are superimposed over the blank page, its non-space, which stands for a lack of connection, as well as they show a different pattern of thought-boxes which are not positioned inside the panels, but capture-like on top of them. The four panels will therefore stay largely unregarded for the time being.

[49] And it *is* a novlety here, since the page before did not make use of said interplay.

The rhythm changes towards a slower pace in panel 2.5, which, by its width creates not only the illusion of height, but also that of actions' longer durations. The same pattern continues in panels 2.6 – 2.9, followed by a long panel in 2.10, again. Leaving the aforementioned transition-panels aside, one can see that the two long panels also frame the four short panels 2.6 – 2.9. This 'physically' present framing on the page signifies a frame on the layer of narration, as well. While the long panels show the longer actions of swinging through the air, a close-up is used to give specific, crucial, details on what is happening in the process. After the vital moments have been presented in the close-up, the narrative main frame is 'activated' again by a visual return to the wide frame 2.10. One can also see that the rhythm is not only dictated by the shape of panels, but also by how the actions inside the panels are shown.

Apart from the frames enclosing the actions on these pages, a second kind of frame is to be found: thought boxes/rectangles are positioned inside panels and frame the narrator's thoughts. The shape of these frames also has its significance as a meaning-making resource, as will be seen.

Considering panel 2.5, it is obvious that it is the first of two wide panels on the page. It shows Harvey Dent, having just released his grip on the helicopter, falling towards his certain death from a great height, Batman swinging towards him. This panel is a vivid example of how meaning can be carried by several interconnected modes. It includes composition, images, 'text as text' and 'text as graphic entity', as well as framing in the creation of meaning. The panel is divided into three thirds, lengthwise. The first third (which is the one on the left) is assigned to Harvey Dent, the two remaining ones are associated with Batman as well as his thought-boxes. As mentioned, this panel is overlapped by four panels on top and another four on its bottom, forming several points of connection. Its shape has already been discussed: the panel's length emphasizes the duration of actions, as well as the illusion of height, which is especially important in this panel since the characters are depicted engaged in a fight taking place at least hundred metres above the ground. Said panel is not only interesting in terms of shape, but also considering its spatial composition. The most salient element therein is Harvey Dent, falling head first. It is owed to perspective that he is

the largest element on the panel; and he is positioned on its left side. His position on the left makes use of the information value of given and new. Dent is, therefore, presented as given: he is falling – what readers saw coming in the preceding panels – and he is, with high probability, going to die. Yet, on the right we can see the silhouette of Batman; far less salient since he is not only smaller than Dent due to his position in the background, but also because of his position on the right. Hence, he is given the information value of 'new'. He constitutes something readers do not know yet, and whatever it is Batman might be doing has to be paid special attention (cf. Kress and van Leeuwen 181).

Also originating from the left is a vector formed by the rope attached to the grapnel fired from Batman's rifle. Initially, the vector leading from the top-left of the panel to its bottom right guides readers' reading path. It is used to direct their gazes. When following the line that signifies the rope, readers have to cover a relatively big visual distance; only the rope and the dark sky are visible in the otherwise empty space in between. This enforces the notion of passing time and adds suspense to the seemingly calm atmosphere of the scene, as well as functioning as a means of delay. When, finally, the origin of the vector is discovered and Batman identified as the actor and Dent as the goal, readers will necessarily come to the conclusion that he is going to save Dent. An element of surprise is created that way by the sign-maker, due to the deliberate inversion of compositional elements. Batman swings towards Dent from right to left, instead of left to right, thus contradicting dominant conventions and so evoking uncertainty in the reader, concerning the outcome of the situation. The delay achieved by the visual space is used to keep readers in the dark as to how the situation is going to be resolved. This also works, because the words in this panel fulfil only an additive function, amplifying the pictures rather than explaining the outcome of the situation (cf. McCloud 153). The text does not give anything away, does not help readers to gauge how the depicted conflict will be resolved.

Writing and text are particularly interesting in the multimodal ensemble of panel 2.5, since meaning is created by more than one semiotic resource here. Not only is the information conveyed by the text itself important, but also its spatial position, composition and function as graphic entity play an important role. Treating the thought-boxes as graphic entities first, it can be noted that the first one, positioned on top of the panel is realized as a long rectangle. It is considerably longer not only than any one on the same page, but also than

any average thought rectangle throughout the whole graphic novel. Again, this functions as a means of enforcement of the duration of actions in the panel as well as a marker of delay, thus mirroring the shape of the whole panel. The thought-box is clearly visible due to the colour contrast between the background of the panel and the box and it is positioned centrally. Its position is not only perfectly central in the two thirds of the panel we have ascribed to Batman before, but also relatively so in relation to the whole panel. It is this position that gives it a function close to the heading of the page. Moving to the narrative level, the information is given in a rather matter-of-fact way: "It takes nearly a **minute** to fall from this height. And despite what you might have heard, you're likely to stay conscious all the way down[50]" (Miller *DKR* 53). The information given is conveyed in a calm manner, no exclamation marks, or other punctuation that could point at a bad or violent temper are used. Also, the rigid, ordered, and even(ly spaced) letters (regarding the text as a graphic entity) function to support the factual tone.

In this first utterance, one word is stressed by the use of bold typeface. The importance of the interplay of two modes first manifests itself in the word "**minute**", realized in bold. Graphically, the bold word has the highest salience, catching the reader's eye first and being perceived as the strongest constituent of the clause. Naturally, the effects transcend the borders of one mode. The effect is perceived on the narrative level as well as on the visual-graphic level. The duration of the fall is stressed by the introduction of a time frame that is extensive, considering the duration of such an action. A message that is conveyed by all the modes employed in the panel, but by different resources. The second utterance is contained by a small thought rectangle in the bottom-right part of the panel and positioned right next to the silhouette of Batman. The physical proximity to Batman suggests his close connection to the utterance and is used to reveal the character's deepest, inner, thoughts, as it were: "Thoughts like that keep me warm at night" (*DKR* 53); thoughts that are cynical to the core. In this thought-box readers are again confronted with a contradiction to their expectations. Once more, Miller plays with readers' alleged knowledge and lets Batman utter harsh, and brutal thoughts that speak of an indifference to the world. These thoughts, due to the position of the box inside the panel having very little salience, can be seen as an afterthought; something that is not to be revealed to readers until the end of the panel and

[50] For the original typeface, which is of high relevance here, see Figure 2.

is, among other narrative devices, used to sow the seeds of doubt concerning Batman's intentions.

Moving on to panels 2.6 – 2.9, one of the most important, if rather subtly conveyed, underlying themes that can be assigned to these panels is that of 'chaos'. As a matter of fact, this theme can be seen as underlying the whole double spread, as has been hinted at in the analysis of Figures 1 and 2 so far. The notion of chaos is supported by various factors. The lack of order (which in itself constitutes a definition of chaos one might argue) is one of the most apparent ones. Since the actions/events depicted are taking place in the air, the usual frames of reference readers have considering order are rendered useless or turned around, and their spatial orientation is affected. This is, first of all, owed to the perspective chosen, since the suggested proximity to the action makes it only possible to capture short glimpses of images, never the entire actions taking place. Apart from that, people are falling through the air while firing weapons in free fall; all of this happening enormously fast. Altogether, one could affix the label of an 'exceptional situation' here, I daresay.

Something else, adding to the chaos on the page and in the panels is a steady change of rhythm, a change of pace. A culmination of events is depicted in panels 2.6 – 2.9. Here, chaos is shown at its peak. The close-up employed in the four panels is used to amplify that. The closer the viewer is the more immediate the actions are perceived and the more intimate the relationship to the depicted scenes becomes. It also proves increasingly difficult to identify any details (which in the present example is not only due to visual proximity and the resulting limited view, but also to the minimalist rendering of the figures) in the panels. The representation of unfolding actions is reduced to silhouettes and it is hard, almost impossible to distinguish between the characters, Dent and Batman; the only hint at identification being the white bandage covering Dent's face. They are both visually realized in a highly indexical fashion – only parts of them are visible in each panel and they are mostly reduced to a black mass covering almost the entire panel. As a result readers lose every last trace of orientation. It is almost impossible to determine each character's position, much less which way is up and which is down, adding to the notion of chaos considerably.

What is more, the little that can actually be seen is additionally covered by the thought-boxes superimposed over the pictures. By this direct juxtaposition, they form a strong

counterpoint to the images. As in panel 2.5, the boxes are perfectly rectangular, with straight lines and a certain rigidity to them. Another similarity is to be found in their salience. This time, salience is not only achieved by the strong colour contrast, but also by the boxes' size in relation to the panels and the space they cover therein. These large and very dominant thought-boxes form the dichotomous position of order in contrast to the chaos unfolding inside the panels. Batman's thoughts are – on a visual level – presented as calm, calculating, and collected. The thought-boxes do not change in terms of form or contained typeface; neither do the lines start to lose their rigidity. The intended message that underlies these representations is meant to be read as Batman being a strong, calm antipole to the ruling chaos, solid as a rock and willing as well as able to face whatever the world has in store for him. Once more, the bold typeface has to be noted. This time it carries an even clearer message. Even without reading the whole text, it becomes obvious that the bold words are located inside a specific discourse – that of a crime scene and a violent death. Words like "**bone, corpse, fingerprints, dental records"** (*DKR* 53*)* signify essentials in the identification of a body not identifiable by 'normal' means, presumably due to disfigurement and serve as discursive orientation devices.

As far as sound is concerned, there is another subset, apart from captures, when it comes to how it is conveyed (McCloud 116) in comics: sound effects. Sounds like "Blam Blam" (panel 2.1), are providing panels with an onomatopoetic soundscape. When employed, the use of these sound effects is far from structured. They cover large parts of whole panels (cf. 2.1, 2.2), scattered wildly over the images. The tilting of the letters and the writing's ragged outlines create what Eisner (61) calls the "subliminal" effect, where the intention of the artist lies therein to let the reader feel the shattering of glass or the firing of a gun, giving more weight to these actions in the process. These sound effects dominate the panels in Figures 2.1 and 2.2, but never transgress the panel borders. The sound captures are positioned inside the panels, they accompany single moments of actions and do not function to bridge gutters or to lead into another part of the action. While the sound captures stay framed, they do vary in size in order to convey louder or quieter noises and speech. Here, in the production of sound, the use of big, often protracted letters, can be noted. The graphical value of words can, as Saraceni puts it, be exploited "because letters are not usually typed, but handwritten" (20). Naturally, words are also perceived as graphic entities, they can, to

put it bluntly, “be looked at as well as read; their meanings derive from their visual as well as from their verbal value” (Saraceni 22). The speech “balloons” in Figure 2 are, in these cases, rather speech-frames, -boxes, or -rectangles, no actual balloons. The absence of balloons is due to the fact that there is no speech, only thoughts of the first-person narrator who is sharing them with the reader. The ‘thought-boxes’ are very structured, they stand entirely rigid in terms of form, while they do vary in length.

Another point worth observing is the combination of words and pictures. McCloud presents several categories concerning their combination. One category that is repeatedly used in Figure 2 is ‘picture specific’, where “words do little more than add a soundtrack to a visually told sequence” (153). This does apply to the sound effects employed in Figure 2.1 and 2.2 – the firing of a gun accompanied by “Blam Blam” – for instance. Further categories which are employed here are additive (words amplify or elaborate in pictures or vice versa) or interdependent (being the common type, where words and pictures collaborate to transport an idea which would be impossible to convey by neither alone) (McCloud 153-155). The former category can be observed in Figure 2.5, the latter in Figure 2.9.

Since the intermodal relationship of words (as more than just graphic entities) and images does play an important role not only in this Figure, but in comics in general, let us take a closer look at in how far panels 2.6 – 2.9 are a vivid example for the “intersemiotic semantic relationships between images and language” (Unsworth & Cleirigh 151), an academic field originally paved by Roland Barthes. In *Rhetoric of the Image* Barthes elaborates on anchorage and relay, two “functions of the linguistic message with regard to the (twofold) iconic message” (274). According to him, the linguistic message “is a technique to fix the floating chain of signifieds in such a way as to counter the terror of uncertain signs” (ibid.). In anchorage, text has the selective function of avoiding some meanings and choosing others. The linguistic text has the function of control, pinning down the meaning of an image. Relay, on the other hand, is less common in fixed images. Here, text and image “stand in a complementary relationship” (ibid. 275), as can be seen in the aforementioned panels. It is not image that illustrates the text, but rather “the text which amplifies the connotative potential of the image” (Storey 96).

According to Unsworth and Cleirigh, however, relatively little academic work has, on a more specific level, so far addressed "how the visual and the verbal modes interact to construct the integrated meanings of multimodal texts" (151). In an insightful approach, they draw on several linguistic models and employ parallels to linguistics in an attempt to make further progress considering the topic. One promising deployment of such a model, they mention, is the relation to MAK Halliday's system of interclausal relation, which is concerned with the nature of semantic linkage between clauses and how it can expand a clause's meaning in three different ways: elaboration, extension, and enhancement (cf. 153). For our example, it is extension that proofs promising (analogously), since in extension one clause adds meaning to another. That is the case here. A situation with two feasible outcomes is depicted in the four panels: either Dent is going to fall to his certain death, or Batman is going to safe his antagonist's life. By means of extension, one possible outcome, the death of the villain, is elaborated on; information is added to the images by language. The images only show the rough outlines of what readers have to identify as a hand-to-hand fight between the two characters, and thus remain relatively vague in respect to how the fight develops. It is the narration that points toward a bad ending for Dent (until the last frame of the sequence). Since modes interact, the information on the textual/narrative level provides images with a heightened sense of urgency. This emphasizes that "although the meaning-making affordances of image and text are very different, they interact synergistically in the construction of meaning" (154). On the other hand, images can also have the function of visualizing language elements. This idea is also touched upon in Unsworth and Cleirigh's discussion. They mention "intermodal possessive identification", where "the image visualizes additional participants not explicit in the language elements. The image visualizes the (unverbalized) things (parts) that compose the identified participant" (ibid.). The images in the four panels, 2.6 – 2.9, thus form a point of reference for the information contained in the thought-boxes, a 'precondition', so to say. They visualize what might lead readers to think that what is suggested on the narrative level in one mode is in fact realized on the visual level in another mode, and thus truly happening. This is to say that the scenes taking place in the panels visualize what is not explicit in the thought-boxes: a fight that might have a fatal outcome.

Another factor in this intermodal relationship is that language has a decoding function (ibid. 159-161). The images in panels 2.6 and 2.7 are hard to identify in so far as they do not show events clearly and in great detail, but rather employ abstract renderings. What the images really show is only made slightly clearer later in panels 2.8 and 2.9. Hence, the whole sequence is difficult if not impossible to decode for the reader by images alone, and could be only misleadingly so without the application of language. So, the narrative elements (in the form of text) applied by Miller, the sign-maker/author, are to "supplement what can be provided by the reader for *de*coding (glossing) the image" (159). Readers' initial inability to fully decode the acts of meaning-making, even though they do have an idea of what is unfolding in the first panels due to their prior experience of the text, is finally overcome by the narration in panel 2.10, where the utterance "I have to **know**" (*DKR* 53) decodes the message formed by the close-up of three hands: it signifies Batman's ' good intentions. Until then the sequence's suspense is maintained. What adds to this is that Miller does not keep with conventions. His re-articulation of Batman, his new representation of an even darker hero, prevents readers from conclusions that would have been all too obvious in different, earlier, interpretations of their favourite comic book hero.

It has been discussed before how tension and suspense were created in panels 2.6 – 2.8. So let us now turn to the panel where the resolution of this tension commences. The short sequence portrayed in the four panels is partially resolved in its last panel, 2.9. It is noticeable that one is confronted with a situation of high importance and significance by considering the close-up of hands employed in the panel, since close-ups are usually used to signify the importance of the elements in focus. Here, both of Batman's arms and hands, as well as Dent's outstretched arm form the centre of attention. The focus on Batman's limbs signifies the outcome of his thought process and accordingly the decision over his antagonist's life or death. At the same time the scene is used to question, in how far he has really transgressed readers' frames of reference. Has he turned into a cold-blooded killer, or is there still some of the 'old' Batman in him?

In terms of semantic linkage, elaboration is employed here[51]. What happens on the narrative level clarifies if Batman's hands do actually reach for the falling Dent or if they do

[51] Cf. McCloud on the additive combination of words and pictures (153).

not. Even though Batman does finally save him, the words which show his motives do not correspond to readers' frames of reference. The hero does not save the villain out of philanthropy or even mercy – this word does not seem to be part of his lexicon – he has selfish reasons. He wants to "**know"**, the crucial word highlighted, again.

The absolute release of tension finally follows in panel 2.10. The rhythm is slowed down again by the use of a long panel and the change of distance to the reader by the employment of a (very) long shot. The decreasing proximity and the accordingly increasing distance from the events also adds to the feeling of calmness. Nevertheless, the scene depicted in the panel still gives off an air of danger; it appears threatening. This is partly owed to the very prominent gargoyles positioned in the centre of the panel. They are placed here to lead the reader towards associations with dark, gothic churches and surely, since gargoyles are attached to the highest spots of buildings, they are used to reinforce the notion of height. What is more, the gargoyles frame Batman in their midst and so bestow upon him the same aura of danger and threat they are endowed with themselves. This is even amplified by the visual parallels that are drawn between Batman and the figures: his waving cape resembling the gargoyles' wings and thus creating an iconic parallel.

4.2.4 The Dark Knight Returns – (From Figure 2 to) Figure 3 'Tumbling Like Lovers'

A pattern similar in structure to the one employed in Figure 2 continues in Figure 3. Two panels filling the width of the page frame eight smaller, rectangular panels in the middle of the page. Once more, some of the smaller panels are superimposed on the broad ones, thus forming a link between the two spaces of action: indoors and outdoors. The 'action panels' (3.2 – 3.8) are employed as shot-reverse shot, switching from the action inside to the action outside. The different size of panels functions to represent the different aspects of duration and perspective: the further the helicopter moves away, the smaller the panels become. The blank/white page in the background does, once again, provide a non-frame. Firstly, representing the air-space outside and secondly, giving more weight to the distance covered by the helicopter. Apart from that, the page is divided into two parts by the large white space. First, Batman and Harvey Dent crash through the window fighting. This covers about one third of the page. Then, one third of the page is covered by a white non-frame

'containing' (or providing the background for) all other images. This division of the page does serve two functions: it separates the events into two parts – the crash through the window and the events outside – and it simultaneously links them, showing their connectedness and setting them into relation to each other. We can therefore say that the white space covering the third third of Figure 3 functions as a vast gutter, demanding a high degree of closure from the reader. Readers have to strain their imagination and collaborate with the author, as it were, in order to simulate time and motion. In this Figure, panels 3.2 – 3.9 which depict what in cinematic terms is referred to as shot-reverse shot, are connected by subject-to-subject transitions. They "take us from subject to subject while staying within a scene or idea" (McCloud 71) and demand a rather high degree of reader involvement. What these transitions demonstrate is that panels are always related to each other. As McCloud puts it: "By creating a sequence with two or more images, we are endowing them with a single overriding identity and forcing the viewer to consider them as a whole" (73).

One theme central to the whole of Figure 2, which is continued in Figure 3, is that of life and death. Death, and particularly a violent death is the main theme on the narrative level, as the discussion of Figure 2 has shown so far. Panels 2.6 – 2.9 particularly focus on Batman's internal struggle and whether or not his enemy should be allowed to live. Also, the visual level is not short of representations of elements and actions related to life and death. From the firing of a rifle in Figure 1, to a fired gun in panels 2.1 and 2.2 and the melee in panels 2.6 – 2.9, all of them signify the timeless dichotomy. One can therefore see that one of the most essential dichotomies in wo/man's history also forms the theme of Figure 2 and Figure 3. The juxtaposition of life and death, of Eros and Thanatos, is to be first experienced in panel 2.5.

The consideration of Eros and Thanatos inevitably suggests a Freudian approach to the reading of these panels. In *Civilization and Its Discontents,* Freud elaborates on the two 'drives' inherent in humans. According to Freud, "there are differences in human behaviour that ethics classify as 'good' and 'evil'" (60), but the reality behind this he sees in the fact that humans are everything but gentle creatures. They are full of aggression, sexual as well as economical (cf. Ibid. 60-61). Wo/man, following Freud, is "a savage beast" (61) that does not even think about sparing his own kind. Freud traces the human condition back to the

existence of two drives, Eros and Thanatos, the love and the death drive[52], aimed at "aggression and destruction" (71). These drives never appear in isolation, always differently alloyed, but never isolated. The struggle of these drives (inside wo/man) for Freud constitutes, "the essential content of all life", "humanity's struggle for existence" (74-75). And it is wo/man's aggression that poses the greatest threat for civilization. Figures 2 and 3 can be read as metaphorical representations of this idea. The struggle between good and bad is underway in Figure 2. The chaos we have dealt with before seems to be rooted in the aggression equally lived out by criminals like Dent, but also by the hero, Batman. While Batman in this struggle of oppositions represents Eros, the drive for life and hence the 'good', and Dent the drive for death and destruction, it is clear that Batman also unites these two drives in him. He cannot separate them since they are essential to humanity, as Freud notes, but he is able to overcome the urge to give in to his drive for destruction completely, as is shown in the multimodal ensemble of panels 2.6 – 2.9. While in panel 2.5, Eros and Thanatos, represented by hero and antagonist, are still separated, which is strongly represented by the empty (visual) space between the two, they start to merge in the sequence shown in panels 2.5 – 2.9. A temporary (visual) oscillation of the drives is to be experienced in Figure 2. The relative calmness and peace resulting in the union of the two opposing forces is also represented by the change of rhythm and the shape of the panel, which have been discussed before. All of this is continued on the next page in panel 3.1. In this panel, the violent embrace of Batman and Dent, too, symbolizes the embrace, and therefore an oscillation of said drives. On the textual level, the simile "We tumble like lovers" (*DKR* 54) emphasizes the oscillation. The smaller action panels 3.2 – 3.9 that follow, temporarily rupture the union until the explosion in panel 3.10 finally unites Eros and Thanatos again. This merging of the two drives has finality to it. It signifies the end of the fight between the two main characters, as well as the return of order. The omnipresent aggression has culminated in a violent explosion only to let the hopes of a restoration of peace and civilization rise like a phoenix from its ashes. A metaphor created by the interplay of different modes to signify not only the dichotomies connected to Miller's Batman, but also to the world surrounding him.

[52] "Beside Eros then there was a death drive, and the interaction and counteraction of these two could explain the phenomena of life" (Freud 70).

4.2.5 An Excursion: Unreliable First Person Narration

In the initial analysis, the role of narration has been stressed already. Since it does play an important role in so far as it decodes and elaborates on images, and it constitutes motivated acts of sign-making, it is worth considering it now, in order to incorporate the findings into the following analyses. Especially promising in this context seems the concept of unreliable first person narration. Not only does it help us to identify different ways suspense and uncertainty are evoked in the reader via narration, it will also give us insight into what the effects on readers are. The use of Batman as an unreliable first person narrator, as which he doubtless functions in our examples, is especially interesting, since the juxtaposition of Batman and unreliability form a novelty in the lexicon of ardent (and less ardent) *Batman* readers and thus add one more stone to the wall of uncertainty, as it were.

When dealing with first person narration in general, unreliable narration is an important and useful concept. Not only because readers' interpretative strategies and the interaction between text and reader have to be taken into account, but also because first person narrators are not objective narrators, and are therefore not to be fully trusted. I will start my excursion about unreliable narration by giving a brief summary of how the concept has been perceived and defined traditionally, followed by explaining in how far it is helpful in the analysis of Frank Miller's graphic novels.

Any conception of narrational unreliability that has been developed or used until today, has to be seen rooted in Wayne C. Booth's conception, ever since the term was coined in his 1961 work, *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (cf. Nünning 1998, Nünning 2008, Allrath 1998, Allrath 2005). According to Booth (160), a narrator can be called "*reliable* when he speaks for or acts in accordance with the norms of the work (which is to say the implied author's norms), *unreliable* when he does not". Even though Booth's conception has been cited and used extensively over the years, it is "far from unproblematic" (Allrath 2005, 67), especially because of the "ill-conceived concept of the implied author[53]" (ibid.). Ansgar Nünning (2008, 33) does not only find the definition, but the concept of the implied author "vague and

[53] Gerald Prince gives a definition of the *implied author* in his *Dictionary of Narratology: "*the author's second self, mask, or persona as reconstructed from the text; the implicit image of an author in the text, taken to be standing behind the scenes and to be responsible for its design and for the values and cultural norms it adheres to. The implied author of a text must be distinguished from its real author" (42).

tautological". He sees it as "neither necessary nor a sufficient standard by which to determine a narrator's […] unreliability", the main reason for that being that it "lacks precision: it can refer to the author, to the text itself and to the reader" (Nünning 2008, 36). Since Nünning's ideas form the foundation of the argumentation relevant in our case, I will equally refrain from using the rather imprecise and controversial concept of the implied author.

Nünning, as mentioned before, does not see the traditional conception of the unreliable narrator as sufficient any more. His revised conception of unreliable narration is rooted in cognitive models, and frame theory. His point of departure can be seen in the assumption, that it is in fact the reader who decides on the reliability of the narrator. Nünning suggests that we need "[…] einen Bezugspunkt außerhalb der geschlossenen Welt des Textes […], um die Frage der Glaubwürdigkeit oder Unglaubwürdigkeit stellen zu können" (1998, 19). A 'Bezugspunkt' that can, in the case of graphic novels, often be found in the images corresponding to the narration, since we cannot assume a self-contained entity when dealing with a multimodal ensemble. He emphasizes his argument by explaining that textual signals are not sufficient to identify a narrator as unreliable, which is why it is sensible to incorporate Nünning's approach into the analysis of graphic novels. Such signals can serve as starting points for identification[54], but it is extra-textual factors such as frames of reference dominant in a certain society that provide readers with the 'tools' to identify an unreliable narrator. These frames of reference form the basis for a certain strategy of interpretation: *naturalization*, which makes the understanding of a text possible (cf. Nünning 1998, 61ff.). Nünning (2008, 46) explains the process of naturalization of a text as bringing it into relation with "a type of discourse or model which is already, in some sense, natural or legible". We arrive at conclusions, he further argues (ibid. 46), through the naturalization of texts, using what we know about human history and psychology; even though we might not do so consciously at all times.

Unreliable narration, or rather its reception, can, in Nünning's opinion, be explained "as the reader's attempt to resolve ambiguities and textual inconsistencies" (Allrath 2005, 74).

[54]See also Nünning (1998, 29): "Im Rahmen der kognitiven Theorie von unreliable narration kommt Textmerkmalen lediglich Signalwirkung zu; letztlich hängt es vom Rezipienten ab, in welcher Weise textinterne Widersprüche oder Unstimmigkeiten im Rezeptionsprozeß aufgelöst werden".

Readers compare the information provided by the narrator with their own values, beliefs, and frames of reference, "die sich auf Erfahrungswirklichkeit bzw. das in einer Gesellschaft vorherrschende Wissensmodell beziehen[55]" (Nünning 1998, 30), or with specific literary frames of reference, "die Einfluss darauf haben, wie Unstimmigkeiten im Rezeptionsprozeß aufgelöst werden und die Glaubwürdigkeit eines Erzählers in Zweifel gezogen wird" (ibid. 29). Discrepancies between these extra-textual norms and the text are then explained by "interpreting them as the result of the narrator's distorted perspective" (Allrath 2005, 74). The utterances of the character provide readers with additional layers of meaning. When the reader finds out about textual oddities as a result of unreliable narration then, the already acquired information serves as a certain advantage:

> Hat der Leser die mangelnde Zuverlässigkeit des Erzählers anhand bestimmter [...] Signale durchschaut, dann erhalten aufgrund dieses Informationsvorsprungs die Aussagen des Erzählers eine diesem nicht bewusste und von ihm nicht beabsichtigte Zusatzbedeutung (Nünning 1998, 17).

In our case readers are presented several pieces of information at the same time. On the one hand, there is what the narrator is conscious of, and what he wants to tell; on the other hand, at the same time, the utterances of the narrator contain implicit additional information.

The main reason why Nünning's model is mentioned and used here, is his particular focus on frames of reference. There is no doubt that there are aspects in his conception that are not effective or even applicable when dealing with graphic novels. Their generic characteristics do (already) set them apart from somewhat self-contained literary genres like novels or other, traditional, forms of narration which are not part of a multimodal ensemble. But still, the narrative employed in graphic novels can be, if not wholly at least to a certain extent, considered through the lense of Nünning's ideas, as it were. What he shows us is that readers do react (in certain ways) if they identify something as being amiss or out of place with respect to the narrator. In the examples in panels 2.6 – 2.9, readers are bound to perceive Batman's perspective as distorted. His detailed, even gruesome reflection about the impact a fall from great height might have on the human body speaks of a morbid mind, to say the least. Readers have naturalized their picture, their version of *a* Batman, as has

[55] Nünning (cf. 1998, 30) further specifies these frames of reference: "allgemeines Weltwissen; das jeweilige historische Wirklichkeitsmodell; explizite oder implizite Persönlichkeitstheorien; moralische und ethische Maßstäbe; individuelle Werte- und Normensysteme".

been repeatedly argued throughout this thesis. It is a picture, though, that strongly deviates from the one Miller paints on the narrative level. Readers' frames of reference "beziehen sich auf das in einer Gesellschaft vorherrschende Wissensmodell" (cf. Nünning 1998); a 'Wissensmodell' that does not at all include *this* – a morbid, dark, and therefore unreliable – Batman. So, Batman's utterances do, due to their lack of reliability, which mainly consists of contradictions to frames of reference, (start to) change readers' perception of the hero. Once, readers have realized it, they might start to "wander" the text again[56], searching for clues and answers as to when or how this happened or whether they have just misinterpreted the signs, but they will only find this 'distorted' perspective throughout Miller's graphic novel – more than a hint at the fact that the re-articulation of a cultural icon has taken place or is at least in progress.

4.2.6 Sin City: The Hard Goodbye – Figure 4 'Marv Approaching'

I will now turn to examples of Miller's work in *Sin City*[57]. The pages exemplifying Miller's use of structure and composition here, are taken from a crucial point in the graphic novel. Marv, the protagonist, has just identified the killer of his beloved Goldie who lives at what is fittedly called 'The Farm', an uncanny farmhouse in the middle of nowhere. He has formed a plan to hunt down the killer, Kevin, a supernaturally fast and silent cannibalistic young man, and is approaching his hideout.

Figure 4 shows Marv rushing through the undergrowth, covertly approaching his target. Readers are not given a time frame or any hint at the duration of events. This silent panel does only provide us with the capture of one moment in a longer period of time. As to the duration of the actions, the panel – free of any captions, sound effects, or speech balloons – does not offer any clues, which adds to the lack of information concerning the amount of time passed and produces a certain sense of timelessness (cf. McCloud 102). This page, although quite similar to Figure 1, does not function as a meta-panel. We are not confronted with a "full-page frame" (Eisner 63), but rather with a large panel, covering almost the entire page. The actions depicted in the panel do neither oscillate with the page, nor do they take

[56] For an elaboration on the concept of the "wandering viewpoint" see Iser 1978.
[57] Whenever 'Sin City' is used, this refers to the first volume of the series: *Sin City: The Hard Goodbye.*

up its entire space. They are framed by the outlines of the panel. Figure 4 provides a 'splash page', hence functioning as an introduction for the part of the story about to commence. What is represented here is – to put it into Eisner's words – a "critically important detail of the story in the middle of a swiftly moving narrative" (75). These 'splash-pages', Miller repeatedly employs in *Sin City,* are generally used to mark a caesura, as it were. Since the plot of *The Hard Goodbye* is notably complex, Miller marks the beginning or rather the advent of certain narrative strands by big images/panels catching readers' attention, drawing them further into the narrative and slowing the pace of the narration, only to pick it up after the turning of the page.

As the analysis of the page-structure of Figure 4 shows, the size of said panel functions as an introduction to a crucial part of the story. This introductory function is not only realized by the 'splash-page', but also by the interplay of compositional elements. The most salient element on the page is Marv, the protagonist. He is positioned in the bottom part of the panel, his shape presented as a silhouette against white background[58], and moving from left to right. His high degree of salience is achieved through the very strong colour contrast of his black silhouette on the white background. Apart from that, attention is drawn to Marv by the fact that he is framed between two palm trees, intertwining and thus forming a framing device. His position in the lower third of the panel – which tends to be informative and practical (cf. Kress van Leeuwen 186) – speaks of his determinedness and thus goes hand in hand with the way his thoughts are represented in rigid thought-boxes on the following pages, as has been shown. The panel is also full of movement and action. Marv moves from left to right – in accordance with reading conventions of Western visual semiotic – from a given state of safety towards a new, most probably, dangerous one. This movement towards uncertainty and awaiting danger is supported by the palm tree forming a vector towards the right, and pointing in the direction Marv is headed. The combination of this vector and the protagonist moving in the same direction bestows upon the page a transitional meaning. Figure 4 is the right page of a double spread and a turning of the page will inevitably lead to the continuation of events. The connection of these elements provides a deictic function, marking the way to this continuation. Movement and action are, of course, also suggested by Marv's coat floating behind him while running.

[58] More on silhouettes and their function in Miller's oeuvre in Section 5.1.

The panel Figure 4 constitutes is also an example for what is not only present, but dominant throughout the whole graphic novel *Sin City* - yet further representations of dichotomies. On the one hand, the panels mostly contain extremely fast paced actions and a great amount of movement (obvious not only in Figure 4, but even more so in Figures 5, and 6 in particular), on the other hand, this almost chaotic content is juxtaposed with the extremely ordered, calm, and rigid structure of the panels and sometimes even the notion of timelessness, panels like the one in Figure 4 provide. One can therefore argue that this dichotomy between an extremely ordered structure and the chaotic events depicted in the panels leads to feelings of unease, uncertainty and trepidation in readers, apart from once more signifying the opposition of chaos and order.

4.2.7 *Sin City: The Hard Goodbye* – Figure 5 *'Observing and Preparing'*

The page in Figure 5 is divided into two large frames of equal size. The space covered by one large panel on the preceding page is thus virtually divided into two equally sized parts, which leads to an increased pace of action and a gentle change in rhythm. The first panel gives readers a first glimpse of the protagonist's destination, through his eyes presumably. Marv has arrived and is surveying the landscape, preparing to execute his plan. The second panel shows Marv at his actual preparations, straining razor wire in the darkness. At the same time he prepares for the imminent battle, readers are prepared for the unfolding actions by the structure of the page. The increase of pace on the page is slight, but perceptible. Further emphasis is put on the fact that events are about to commence in the second panel on the page. Marv's breaking out of the confines of the panel seems to hint at further actions.

The first panel of Figure 5 has – to use a filmic term – the function of an establishing shot, giving and overview of the scene and the area. Readers experience the scene through Marv's eyes, who takes in his surroundings and surveys the scenery, while probably sitting or lying on the ground, which is suggested by the use of perspective from below. The use of perspective does not only help readers to identify with the protagonist and experience the scene from his point of view, it also puts them in a position lacking power. The position of the reader as a spectator from below, inside the panel "evokes a sense of smallness which stimulates a sensation of fear" as Eisner argues (89). This is used to show 'The Farm' as

uncanny and sinister and to evoke or emphasize feelings of anxiety (which the protagonist equally experiences to a certain extent).

The only example of rather sparsely applied sound effects to be found in Figure 5 is the use of the sound 'Keek' to hint at something that is not yet present in the first panel. This emphasizes feelings of suspense. Readers are confronted with a view at 'The Farm', the sound effect foreshadowing something that does not take place inside the panel. Readers' imagination might play some tricks on them before the source of sound is revealed: the straining of razor wire in the second panel. Here, the sound effect 'Keek' is used again. First, to link the two panels, and second to provide picture specific information (McCloud 153), functioning as a soundtrack "to a visually told sequence".

Panel 5.1 is divided into thirds lengthwise. The first two thirds show nothing but the surroundings, as well as the outlines, of 'The Farm', the third part of the panel sheds light on Marv's intentions – conveyed in the mode of writing: "I'm gambling that none of them think I'm dumb enough to come after them. That they told Kevin to sit tight and figured I bugged out of town" (*Hard Goodbye* 165*).* Composition-wise, more weight is given to the image of the farm. Being visible, not obscured by thought-boxes or sound captions and positioned on the left, allows the image of the farm where a murderer is about to be murdered himself eventually, to take its effect on readers.

The second panel clearly focuses on the strength and wits of Marv, who, due to his hyper-masculinity, fills out almost the entire panel. Again, perspective (from below) is used to endow him with an air of strength, power and, of course, masculinity. The thought-boxes in this panel are positioned in the left corner of the panel, informing readers of what he is doing, right away, due to the information value and salience of the left side. In this case, writing does way more than just giving simple explanations. It also plays a vital part in the characterization of Marv, also adding to his already established unreliability. Sentences like: "I got to be careful with the razor wire. I love this stuff. It cuts through meat and bone like it was butter" (*Hard Goodbye* 166) serve to exemplify that. Not only is the juxtaposition of these two panels a source of suspense, it also functions to show the fight of 'bad' (5.1) versus 'not that bad' (5.2), i.e. what passes as 'good' in *Sin City.* The outcome of this fight, however, is already hinted at in the second panel of Figure 5. Seemingly breaking the

confines of the panel by the oscillation of the white space underlying the panels on the page and the white representation of grass in the panel, Marv's position of power and strength is highlighted. According to Eisner (46), allowing the actor to break the confines of the panel leads to a display of power and threat. In this case, it is 'evil' that is threatened, it is safe to assume. Again, Miller presents an overly manly hero, who is not to be stopped, come what may.

4.2.8 *Sin City: The Hard Goodbye* – Figure 6 *'Marv Attacks'*

The whole page in Figure 6 is, first of all, highly interesting as far as its structure is concerned. What becomes almost immediately obvious is the extreme rigidity and the geometrical accuracy of the panels. The page consists of eight panels of partly varying size. The panel on top and the one on bottom are of equal shape and size. They have the same height as all the other panels on the page, but are wider; covering the length of the frame inside the page, where the panels are positioned. Between them, panels 6.1 and 6.8 frame six other panels, which are symmetrical in shape. Panels 6.3 – 6.6 are rather small panels of equal size. They divide the length of the top or the bottom panel by four. Underneath them, panels 6.6 and 6.7 are each twice as wide as the other four panels, which results in the symmetrical shape. The panels in Figure 6 are not only shaped in proportion to each other, they are also very evenly spaced. The space between single panels is very limited, hinting at fast paced events and demanding relatively little closure from readers. The wide panels – 6.1 and 6.8 – both represent the actions of longer duration and also function to frame the events portrayed on the page. The stakeout in panel 6.1 forms the beginning of the page; the beginning of Marv's attack, by throwing a petrol bomb in panel 6.8, the end. So, the two long actions frame the shorter ones in between. The actions in panels 6.2 – 6.7, which are of short duration, show what happens between the longer actions. The different size of the panels is used to introduce a different rhythm and to re-set the pace on the page. A long watch in panel 6.1 is followed by rapid, close observations in panels 6.2 – 6.5. The result of these observations is shown in panels 6.6 and 6.7: the protagonist lights a gas canister and takes off to throw it towards his target. Both steps are realized in panels wider as 6.2 – 6.5 and signify a duration longer than that of the events before.

In general, the shape of frames is used here to contribute to the atmosphere of the page as a whole (cf. Eisner 46). Not only are the events depicted on the page, in accordance with the whole theme of *Sin City,* cruel and brutal, they are also oppressive. This notion is supported by the varying amount of space the panels provide. Wider panels alternate with narrower ones which adds to the feelings of anxiety and trepidation, since "a narrow panel evokes the feeling of being hemmed in – confinement, whereas a wide panel suggests [...] space in which to move – or escape" (Eisner 89).

Panel 6.1 is the first panel on the page as well as one of two longer ones used in its composition, framing the actions depicted. This panel shows the beginning of the events that are about to take place on the page. Marv is positioned in the middle of the panel, framed between two trees, waiting. The length of the panel emphasizes the duration of his wait, as has been shown before. Its shape does, additionally, lead to the creation of claustrophobic feelings. These feelings are triggered by the big protagonist squatting in a proportionally narrow panel, almost trapped between the two trees functioning as framing devices. The razor wire in the foreground does not only lay emphasis on feelings of claustrophobia and unease and functions as a discourse marker for war and violence, it also forms a vector. The 'V' shape of the wire, open to the right and departing from the left of the panel towards the right suggests departure and movement on Marv's side.

A further, interesting, point is the abstraction of characters, which is a common stylistic tool in Miller's *Sin City.* Miller repeatedly uses rather simplified images, moving away from 'the real' towards more iconic renderings. This is what McCloud refers to as "amplification through simplification" (30). He argues that by abstracting, comic book authors are not eliminating details, but rather shifting the focus to specific details. Considering this, one might argue that Miller therefore uses abstraction less as a tool that enhances readers' identification with characters, but more to lay the focus on the blurred boundaries between good and bad or order and chaos; hence highlighting the importance of dichotomies in his approach, once more.

Marv's thoughts are given in a rectangular thought-box in the top left corner of the panel and are therefore bound to stand at the beginning of readers' reading path. The longish shape of the thought-box is used to support the message conveyed in the mode of writing

visually. This way, the process of waiting: "[...] I wait and watch the house" (*Hard Goodbye* 167*)* is visualized by the connection of the two modes. The combination of words and images in this multimodal ensemble is, according to McCloud (153), duo-specific, which means that both words and pictures send essentially the same message.

The row of panels 6.2 – 6.5 forms the fastest paced succession on the whole page, consisting of four panels of equal size. What is obvious at first glance is the visual similarity of the panels on the left and on the right margin. Panel 6.2 forms the left border of the page, panel 6.5 the right border. These panels are used to draw attention not only to the imminent fight of Marv versus Kevin, but on a more general level, of good versus evil. Marv – representing 'good' – is not only positioned on the left margin, which is used to endow him with readers' trust, it is also a motivated choice on Miller's side to realize Marv in white against a black background, thus signifying his positive role. Kevin, who represents 'evil', is reversely realized in black and on the right margin of the page. This first juxtaposition of opposing forces foreshadows their approaching confrontation.

The first close-up, in panel 6.2, is used to zoom in on Marv's face, or rather the left half of his face, and his thought process. While only one half of his face is shown in the close-up, the other half appears to be formed by panel 6.3, creating an entity with panel 6.2. This is done to signify his thought process, to show readers what he sees, as well as what he thinks at the same time. His right eye is, on the visual level, substituted with the picture it captures. Marv's gaze in this image leads readers to follow his gaze. Its deictic function draws readers' attention to its recipient. Another factor that hints at these two panels forming an entity is the lack of actual thought-boxes. The writing used to convey the protagonist's thoughts is not contained by rectangles, but loosely superimposed on the background. This lack of rigid borders shows his emotional involvement, and a hint of fear. The heightened degree of emotional involvement becomes particularly obvious in panel 6.2, since the writing is positioned in the middle of Marv's forehead, physically close to the part of the body associated with thoughts. As soon as he spots his antagonist, his thoughts become more ordered, he regains his focus and concentration – which is represented by the re-introduction of thought-boxes and their function as framing devices of his thoughts.

Zooming in closer again in panel 6.4, it is finally possible to see what the protagonist has been waiting for. Already having been hinted at by the presence of a dot of light in panel 6.3, Kevin's presence is now perceptible. The suspense and anticipation built by this technique of delay in panel 6.3 is now partially resolved and the antagonist revealed. Kevin is framed inside the window in panel 6.4, which on the one hand evokes claustrophobic feelings in readers and on the other presents him as a single unit of information**:** not only is he the dangerous enemy, but also a loner. Panel 6.5 finally shows him in a close-up, putting the full weight of importance on him.

Panel, 6.6, which is positioned on the left, shows a close-up again. The focus is on a crucial detail in the context of the page and the events to follow: the lighting of a canister filled with petrol. The transition from Kevin in panel 6.5 to the canister in panel 6.6 demands a rather high degree of closure from readers, they have to connect the proverbial dots and arrive at the necessary conclusions immediately. The fast paced activities do not leave ample time for readers' imagination to transform the separate images into one idea (cf. McCloud 66). The high salience of the contrast between black and white, as well as the high degree of salience of the white canister against the black background, is in this panel used to draw attention to the canister and the rag hanging out of it. What is new for the reader – the fact that Marv is igniting the rag – is to be seen on the right side of the panel.

Panel 6.7 is full of action and movement, again. The frontal view on Marv at full speed puts the emphasis on his strength and the aura of danger surrounding him. Tension is built up in this panel, only to be released in the following panel, 6.8. Here, Marv – realized as a white silhouette – is throwing the burning canister from left to right. The direction of the canister hints at a transition towards the unknown that is to follow. Since one does not know what is going to happen before turning the page, tension is built up again. Feelings of uncertainty and the imminent approach towards something new are supported by the vector Marv's arm forms. His arm, as well as the fence both point towards new actions to be experienced on the next page.

The panels in Figure 6 are not only composed differently, they also offer a variety of different panel-connections. The transition from panel 6.1 to 6.2 is realized as a subject-to-subject transition. Readers are brought closer to Marv, presented with a close-up of his face

in panel 6.2. The next transition from this panel to 6.3, however, is an aspect-to-aspect transition. Such a transition "bypasses time for the most part and sets a wandering eye on different aspects of a place, idea, or mood" (McCloud 72), which is the case in this example. The attention is shifted from Marv's face towards the house where Kevin hides; everything still connected by the characters' shared presence in the same place, close to each other. Panels 6.3 and 6.4 are connected by aspect-to-aspect transitions too, panel 6.4 showing a different aspect of the panel preceding it. We then observe the use of subject-to-subject transitions between panels 6.4 and 6.5, while panels 6.6 – 6.8 are connected by action-to-action transitions. What these transitions achieve, applied and related to the phenomenon of closure, the gutter, and of course the panels themselves, is bestowing structure upon whole pages. That way, meaningful entities are created by what can be named a collaboration of artist and reader (the agency originating from the artist's side, surely). These entities are vital in the production and reception of meaning as well as in the realization of meaning potential and its 'deciphering'. Information in panels can be only conveyed visually. "But between panels, none of our senses are required at all. Which is why all of our senses are engaged" (McCloud 89).

Summing up the analysis of Frank Miller's style in *Sin City,* it is rather obvious, considering his decision to fully omit colours and opt for a black and white representation*,* that *Sin City* is exemplary for a quintessentially dark approach to graphic novel writing, as far as iconography is concerned. Not only black and white, but also Miller's iconic rendering of characters as well as his extensive use of silhouettes – more thoroughly discussed in section 5.2 – play an important role. Hand in hand with that goes his strong focus on dichotomies. It has been shown that he uses the juxtaposition of highly structured pages and their eventful, chaotic content to present dichotomies, to draw readers' attention to the binary nature of the world and the characters he created. Miller also repeatedly draws on the dichotomy of good versus bad, especially in the representation of his characters which shows parallels to *DKR*. As is the case with his Batman in *DKR*, the main character in *Sin City: The Hard Goodbye* is an equally over-masculine, dominant alpha-male, ready and willing to defeat whatever or whoever steps in his way.

As will be seen in section 5.2, Miller also uses the introduction of a new genre, the hard-boiled graphic novel, to take his approach in *DKR* one step further and to contradict readers'

frames of reference even more strongly. Not only does he achieve that by the introduction of a new discourse into the world of comics and their heroes as well as his use of unreliable first person narration (see Section 5.2), but also by creating a claustrophobic atmosphere, full of suspense and anticipation – resembling film noir in that respect.

5. Towards a Definition of Darkness

We have in the last section dissected Frank Miller's style, as well as his approach to comic writing by identifying various acts of meaning-making across several modes. It is now time to collect, review and also to extend these findings and to put forward a definition of how the concept 'Darkness', that constitutes a vast part of Miller's style and accordingly his influence on today's representation of a whole genre, is composed. We will, for the sake of completeness and clarity, therefore, trace the roots of this retroactively produced 'genre marker' back not only to Miller's *The Dark Knight Returns*, but also to his popular graphic novel *Sin City,* which will also serve to identify how 'Darkness' is produced.

The attempt at a definition of 'Darkness' presented here is composed of more than just considering the absence of light (even though this does form a part of it). Therefore, 'Darkness' in this sense must not be taken literally. Even though we will partly be concerned with the absence of light, dark streets, and dark moods, the concept will go beyond the incorporation of visual aspects. However, it has to be clearly noted that this paper does not have as its goal to give an essentialist definition of 'Darkness', with a validity far beyond the borders of this paper. Although this might surely be the case, it is not among my aspirations, which solely lie in the conceptualization of a working definition. The approach taken sees 'Darkness' as a combination of several factors. What unites them, though, is that all of these factors can be ascribed to motivated acts of sign-making. I see 'Darkness' originating from three main pillars, as it were: Miller's selection and his focus on the use of dichotomies, his attempts to contradict readers' experiences and knowledge of comics/graphic novels and known characters, and the close parallels to hard-boiled detective fiction, as well as film noir.

5.1 Dichotomies

Dichotomies are an essential part of almost all graphic novels and indispensable in superhero comics. The struggle of good versus bad, and especially secret identities as means of deceit are vital to the genre (of superhero comics). Not only do famous superheroes like Batman and Superman have their day-life alter egos, Bruce Wayne and Clark Kent, their

superhero personas are also constructed strongly contradicting their real life character traits: Wayne overtly being the always welcomed, smart billionaire, and Kent the somewhat shy journalist. But as we will see, these dichotomies are not only essential in the creation of superhero personas, they also form a crucial part of 'Darkness'. Miller is generally not too subtle concerning the use of dichotomies. He makes use of the most essential oppositions, and is rather explicit in how he employs them. Reading his use of dichotomies on a deeper level, nevertheless, shows that strong contrasts can deconstruct and thus blur boundaries.

In my working definition of 'Darkness' I see Miller's use of dichotomies as essential. Presenting the theoretical justification for this viewpoint, however, is not as straightforward a task as it might seem. I would like to give a more differentiated account, with its focus not only on one possible explanation – which will also do the topic of dichotomies justice – but one that rests rather on the development of various lines of thought and concepts, and so somehow reflects the thought process involved in my attempt at a satisfactory explanation.

As a starting point, I want to consider Claude Lévi-Strauss's structuralist approach towards myth. Since Lévi-Strauss sees myths structured in terms of binary oppositions, I will deal with Miller's take on graphic novels analogously. Lévi-Strauss approaches myth as relational. He assumes a necessity inherent in human beings to always have a point of reference in order to be able to define and make sense of the world. Hence, we make meaning by dividing our world into "mutually exclusive categories" (Storey 90), such as dark/light, death/life, order/chaos, good/bad, etc. So, if we want to, for instance, define death, we, therefore, have to hold a notion of what life is. Pursuing this line of argument, meaning in Lévi-Strauss's eyes is "a result of the interplay between a process of similarity and difference" (ibid.). That Lévi-Strauss's methodology can be usefully employed in the analysis of cultural texts has, for example, been shown by Will Wright, who uses Strauss's approach to further develop his structuralist ideas in the analysis of the Hollywood Western (cf. Storey 90 ff.). Wright's focus, as opposed to Lévi-Strauss's, is not on mental concepts and structures, but on presenting "a symbolically simple but remarkably deep conceptualisation of [...] social beliefs" (qtd. In Storey 90). Wright's idea shall only be mentioned rudimentary here since it shows an interesting take on Lévi-Strauss's approach in so far as it draws attention to the narrative power that is assigned to dichotomies. They serve not only as relational means of

conceptualization, but as means of representing social beliefs, which clearly enforces the connection between cultural text and reader.

What can be gained from these conceptualizations, is an identification of the importance of dichotomies in multimodal ensembles such as the graphic novel, and, in our case, especially Frank Miller's work. He makes use of the most elementary dichotomies in human history, juxtaposing them in various ways by applying various modal meaning-making resources and hence drawing on various modal affordances. Life and death, darkness and light, chaos and order, these binary oppositions are accentuated by Miller in a fashion exceedingly clear. From a structuralist position, this is essential in the production of meaning, since everything is defined by relation to its counterpart, as it were. Apart from that, not only narrative power, but also representational power is gained from the obvious employment of dichotomies.

This structuralist approach, however comprehensible, shall not suffice here and rather be extended. Lévi-Strauss's approach has been challenged and discussed over (since now quite some) time, and as well as Miller uses dichotomies as an essential tool of creating boundaries, difference and defining characters and situations, they can also be seen as being used as a means for deconstruction. Postmodern critic and scholar Jean-Francois Lyotard, speaks of a certain "incredulity towards metanarratives[59]" (qtd. in Storey 132). The absence of metanarratives (also referred to as 'grand narratives'), which Lyotard sees essential for the postmodern condition, accordingly leads to the absence of a hierarchic system organized in terms of inclusion and exclusion, and homogenizing forces; as well as it leads to the presence of a system of diverse discursive practices instead (cf. Lutter 54, Storey 132). The collapse of such a system of in- and exclusion (through deconstruction) brings with it the collapse (and deconstruction) of clearly divided binary oppositions. So, what we are confronted with here, is a duality in itself. On the one hand dichotomies are of quite high importance and, therefore, used as meaning-making devices; on the other, they draw attention to their own collapse and this way bring to light a somewhat less straightforward narrative and a more complex approach to story and characters. Now, characters and

[59] Storey (132) defines them as "[…] frameworks which seek to tell universalist stories".

narrative cannot be perceived in metaphorical black and white any more, different shades of grey have to be taken into account by readers.

5.1.1 Silhouettes

One can trace this phenomenon back as being represented by Miller's frequent use of silhouettes (see Figure 7). Not only are they frequently employed in *DKR*, but particularly *Sin City* is full of them. A vast part of the graphic novel is realized in silhouettes or silhouette-like shapes, with black and white the only colours utilized throughout the whole work.

The use of silhouettes and in how far they point at the deconstruction of dichotomies is something Monika Seidl is concerned with in her article about the James Bond silhouette as the visual representation of the 'mobile signifier' Bond. Even though I do find her (following) arguments very convincing, I would like to argue even more strongly in favour of the 'dual character' of the silhouette in terms of its ability to function as a static entity enforcing the notion of binary oppositions, as well as drawing attention to its mobility[60].

We have now briefly established the importance of the static characteristics of silhouettes. By way of strongly representing dichotomies, they draw attention to the 'two worlds', or 'two realms' even, that are so important in Miller's work. And the borders between those realms can also be rather clear cut and thus easy to transgress or maintain. But, as Seidl argues, the silhouette itself collapses the dichotomy of surface and depth (cf. 2011, 42); and thus an observation that goes beyond the surface of the silhouette in Miller's graphic novels reveals that the deconstruction of dichotomies is of great importance. It is, according to Seidl (ibid. 40) one of the most essential qualities of a silhouette, to dismantle dichotomies. Silhouettes can draw attention to the fact that characters are not simply good or simply bad, that there lies something in between, something more complex and worthy of exploration, which is particularly true when it comes to the perception of the (anti-)hero in graphic

[60] The notion of the silhouette as signifier of ‚stability' is also covered in the article; still, the focus of the article is more on the mobility of silhouettes.

novels[61]. So, by working with dichotomies through silhouettes, Miller does not only focus on the co-existence of said two worlds or realms, but also presents complex characters.

A silhouette is, as a matter of fact, created by the perfectly simple interaction of light and shade; an interaction which is not so simple after all, as Monika Seidl demonstrates (ibid.). Seidl draws the inspiration for her work with silhouettes from the art of African-American artist Kara Walker. Walker works with paper cut-outs of usually life-sized, black figures on white background, presented in the form of cycloramas; dealing with racial stereotypes in her work[62]. In Seidl's view, the nature of the silhouette can be seen as lying in the "formal oscillation between dichotomies, such as "both there" and "not there", black and white, positive and negative, surface and depth as well as body and shadow" (ibid. 41). When opposing pairs constantly oscillate as is the case with silhouettes, this points towards mobility and flux, which accordingly leads to the collapse of dichotomies (ibid.). That is also due to the emphasis silhouettes draw to themselves by over-emphasizing boundaries such as black and white. It is not only the over-emphasis of boundaries that calls for their deconstruction, but also their oxymoronic status (cf. ibid. 41-42). Here is Monika Seidl on the oxymoronic characteristics of the silhouette and how it achieves the dismantling of the dichotomy of black and white:

> Looking at silhouettes from this perspective [that they are usually mounted in black upon a white surface] means that the black cut-out works like the positive in photography, and what is left is a white negative. The transitional status here works as follows: what functions as the positive, which is traditionally associated with light, has the colour black, and what functions as the negative, which is traditionally associated with darkness, has the colour white (ibid. 42).

However, there are even more paradoxes, as well as transitional states involved:

> The black positive, the silhouette, can only be produced by a light source. This means that silhouettes produce blackness only through whiteness, meaning the light source (ibid.).

Miller also uses the 'oxymoronic status' of silhouettes to create even more oxymorons, as it were. In *Sin City* he turns the 'logic' of silhouettes around several times; creating white positives and black negatives (Figure 8).

[61] For a thorough discussion of the conception of heroes and anti-heroes in graphic novels, see Steiner 2011.
[62] For an analysis of Kara Walker's art and her background, see Seidl 2006.

In doing so, he strongly draws attention to the binary character of the silhouette, in the process emphasizing dichotomies, once again. The steady shift of black and white as signifiers of positive and negative blurs the boundaries between the two realms as much as it draws attention to them.

The transitional status of silhouettes can also be found in the dichotomy of chaos and order, which is remarkably present in Miller's work. The worlds Miller presents are full of chaos, as we have seen represented on the visual, as well as on the narrative level. A world where chaos is so omnipresent can only be dealt with by remarkably strong characters. Characters that possess the abilities to re-introduce order and to re-establish the status quo – or something close at least. So, on the one hand this reinforces the position of the "hero" in *DKR* or *Sin City:* strong and capable. On the other hand, again, the very explicit juxtaposition of chaos and order can be read in the sense of what silhouettes signify, a reinforcement as well as deconstruction of dichotomies. By positioning his characters in the middle of chaos and thus presenting them as the ones responsible for the restoration of order, or in the middle of 'good' and 'evil', and drawing no clear boundaries, he emphasizes a transitional status, a status of change adhering to them. This way, Miller manages to represent, and in due course manifest, changes in the genre too: be it the re-articulation of an already well established superhero in *DKR*, or the introduction of an extremely hard-boiled approach to graphic novels in *Sin City.* This speaks of a transition from old to new in terms of generic characteristics, which is also thematized in the graphic novels themselves. Batman in *DKR* is old himself, having to deal with a changing world, a world that is so very different to how it used to be when he was at his prime, even more eaten away by crime now; and *Sin City* having as one of its main topics the death of the old, so that young life can prosper, and the righting of past wrongs.

The aforementioned characters of extraordinary strength, that Miller presents, are equally created by the (over)use of dichotomies. Miller's characters do not only function in terms of classic binary oppositions, he does not present typically male or female characters with all the hegemonic articulations attached to them. What he does is creating dichotomies inside dichotomies, I would like to argue. He does not see it as sufficient to make use of simple male or female characters, he provides them with hyper-masculinity or hyper-femininity (Figure 9). Perspective, as well as the application of several semiotic resources, as we have

seen in Section 4, are what is used to create these representations of (super)hero, or femme fatale[63].

5.2 Contradictions

All of what has just been discussed also serves to heighten readers' sense of uncertainty and unfamiliarity, and thus contributes strongly to the definition of 'Darkness'. How Miller achieves to contradict readers' experience is another important factor in its conceptualization.

Let us first consider Frank Miller's work on Batman in *DKR.* What is intriguing here, is how Miller creates a new approach to the, until then dominant, articulations of Batman and thus challenges them. The representations of Batman before Miller, as a good-natured, righteous assistant to law enforcement, have lead to their internalization; and accordingly, these representations have been naturalized as the dominant discursive formations attached to Batman. What constitutes this aspect of 'Darkness' is how Miller managed to introduce his own, successful, representation of an already popular comic hero and also, in a way, contradicted the discourse of what was, until then, possible in graphic novels.

Miller emphasizes his new take on the classic comic hero by introducing an older Batman. The character has aged and life has made him bitter. Since new times require new strategies, Miller provides these strategies for his version of Batman. He links him to a new discourse, the discourse of war, which is mainly achieved by visual elements as we have seen before. We have shown in how far Batman's appearance resembles that of a warrior – which is also connected to the established hyper-masculinity. His use of weapons, his attire, as well as his equipment, all of that adds to the discursive formation aimed at by Miller. What enhances the notion of a warrior fighting crime, rather than a masked man motivated by righteousness, is the explicit language – drawing parallels to crime scenes and violent deaths, as well as his bitter, gritty, and most cynical tone and attitude; not to forget his pessimistic world view. Never before would Batman have thought twice about saving an

[63] A critique of the stereotypical representation and enforcement of gender stereotypes – at least in *Sin City* – would be more than called for, but also go far beyond the scope of this paper.

enemy. What we have also noted, is that unreliable first person narration plays an important part in how Batman is perceived. The unreliability he is attested with is one of the main tools, Miller employs to change readers' perception of the hero. By presenting a character constantly contradicting their frames of reference, the feeling of unease and uncertainty is evoked and continually re-activated in readers.

After having recapitulated what was collected about Batman in this respect, let us move on to Miller's *Sin City.* Most of what has been mentioned before, regarding Miller's contradictions of readers' frames of reference, is also true for *Sin City.* What is more, Miller takes everything one step further in this later work. One main difference lies in the fact that this graphic novel is original, it is not a new take on an already existing character or series, but something entirely new. Since this is the case, Miller cannot fall back on readers' existing knowledge of prior articulations of characters or on their experience of the subject. That is why he introduces a new discursive formation into the world of mainstream graphic novels: the hard-boiled graphic novel. As will be seen, this genre shows most explicit parallels to the literary genre. Men are as over-masculine as possible, women femmes-fatales par excellence, as Figure 9 shows. The language is explicit, and violence is even more so. Also, the characters are cynical and hardened to the core. This approach to graphic novel writing does in itself contradict readers' experience and knowledge of the genre. Even after graphic novels like *DKR* have lead to new forms of naturalizations and changed frames of reference, *Sin City* manages to exceed and thus transgress these frames, once more. A promising example can be found in the way unreliable first person narration is employed in Sin City, far more explicitly than in *DKR.*

5.2.1 Unreliable First Person Narration in Sin *City: The Hard Goodbye*

The main character in *Sin City: The Hard Goodbye* is Marv, an extremely hard-boiled, barely human 'creature' of superhuman strength and overly muscular physique. He is a loner, marked by life, and with a somewhat ominous past. After Goldie - a woman he has met the same night - is murdered in his arms after a night spent together, and he is blamed for the deed, he sets out to avenge her death and to redeem himself. As the story unfolds, people are tortured, murdered, and cannibalized, while parts of Marv's past are indirectly revealed,

identifying him as an unreliable first person narrator. It is this 'second story' that adds considerably to the notion of 'Darkness'.

Since the graphic novel makes use of the affordances of more than one mode to convey meaning, Marv's unreliability is of course enhanced by his strength and appearance, which both transgress the confines of humanity. The focus will here, however, be on the narrative level. In general, graphic novels do not leave ample room for elaboration and detail on the textual/narrative level. A considerable amount of information is not given explicitly (which is not necessary since the resources of more than one mode are available), which means that readers have to become even more active in the process of reading. What sounds challenging and demanding is exactly that, but also an important source of the reader's pleasure. If all knowledge were obvious, if readers were able to extract every detail directly from the text, the pleasure of reading as well as the often evoked feelings of unease and suspense would be destroyed (Mortimer 290). This is referred to as "the second story". Armine Kotine Mortimer provides an excellent synopsis of what it comprises:

> The second story is completely imbedded in the first, and it is necessary to the complete intelligibility of the first. The discovery of the second story, parallel to the discovery of the first, requires a competent reader willing to shed his innocence to achieve this end, for in order to find a secret, one must first believe that a secret exists and that it is secret because it is unavowable. Thus we may perhaps affirm that any second story will refer to something better left unsaid – an adulterous love affair, murder, incest, perversion (282).

Especially when confronted with an unreliable narrator like Marv in *Sin City: The Hard Goodbye*, the amount of information provided by the narrator is not only extremely limited, but also is the content not completely to be relied on. According to Nünning (2008, 37), readers have to "read between the lines". The second version of events, the second story, is usually constructed by implicit additional information the narrator gives. Filtering out this information is everything but an easy task for the reader. Mortimer (290) observes that, "sometimes to bring a story to light is to adopt the role of a detective. The reader must bring to its reading not only a superior recall, but also a store of knowledge of a specific kind".
Marv's narration is full of gaps and blanks (cf. Iser, Holub, Freund). Readers can only "fill in the absent […] by acts of interpretation" (Freund 145), and "this interpretation constitutes the process of interaction", as Iser states (qtd. in Freund 146). Only small signals point

readers in the right direction and shed light on some rather vague pieces of information, such as Marv's mentioning of his 'condition'[64] support readers in the construction of the second story. There is a multitude of such examples to be found throughout the story: "No point in playing good citizen, either. Sin City Cops have had their hands on me before. This time they won't make the mistake of letting me live" (*Hard Goodbye* 16) or "No it'll be loud and nasty, my kind of kill" (ibid. 28*).* In both these utterances, the main character gives implicit pieces of information, such as having a criminal history or being used to killing. The unreliability of the first person narrator can, of course, due to the semiotic resources of the graphic novel be also portrayed in a far more obvious way, as is the case in Figure 10. The hero of the story chasing an enemy with an axe, accompanied by a speech balloon filled with the sounds of laughter is arguably as obvious as it gets.

We can therefore establish that the unreliability of the main characters does play an even larger role in the production of 'Darkness' in Miller's *Sin City.* Miller presents a story with a protagonist who is explicitly unreliable and from the beginning of the graphic novel is not to be fully trusted due to what he reveals about himself in the 'second story'. This is how Miller introduces the concept of a hard-boiled, violent protagonist, not worthy of readers' trust, into the discourse of graphic novel production. This in combination with a storyline that can be seen as transgressing (mainstream) readers' frames of reference[65] is how he once more contradicts his readers' knowledge of a genre as well as its – for the mainstream acceptable – characteristics, in the course creating a fair amount of what is subsumed under the concept of 'Darkness'.

[64] "It's my own fault and nobody else's that I got confused. I would've been alright if I took my medicine when I should have. I've been having so much fun I forgot to take my medicine. *That wasn't Goldie back there. Goldie is dead and that's the whole reason I've been doing what I've been doing.* I forgot to take my medicine. When you've got a condition it's bad to forget your medicine" (*Hard Goodbye* 83*).*

[65] A transgression achieved by a storyline evolving around criminals, cannibalistic teenagers and an army of highly armed prostitutes.

5.3 Parallels to Hard-boiled Detective Fiction and Film Noir

The final 'pillar' of our conception of 'Darkness' will be, considering Frank Miller's biography and his passion for hard-boiled detective fiction and film noir, seen in stylistic parallels to these genres, he employs. His approach to graphic novel writing is strongly influenced by writers like Dashiell Hammett and particularly Raymond Chandler. On the visual level, Miller draws on the style and iconography of film noir, which has its roots in hard-boiled detective fiction. The employing of said parallels is most obvious in *Sin City.* With his series, Miller introduces the genre of the hard-boiled graphic novel into the mainstream with all it entails. But traces of the hard-boiled novel and film noir can also be found in *DKR.* So, let us first undertake a brief synopsis of these genres.

The term hard-boiled detective fiction refers to a literary genre enormously popular in the US in the 1920s and 30s. Authors like Dashiell Hammet, Raymond Chandler, James M. Cain or Robert B. Parker started to increase their fame by having their short stories published in so called pulp magazines (the best known among those magazines can be considered *The Black Mask*). All of these authors, according to Gene Phillips (2), "reinvented American prose before the war by somehow desentimentalizing it". They did not see the city as a bright place of progress, but "a squalid sewer where death was hiding in the alley" (ibid.). Linda Cahir gives a very compact synopsis of the genre:

> Central to this tradition are plots constructed around lies, double-dealings, betrayals, and misinterpretations. Often cruel and brutal, the world, as presented in these works, is always uncertain, an environment which compels the protagonists to find their way through mazes of duplicity. Unable to be certain of the authenticity of any facts that emerge and necessarily wary of all people, the protagonists are deeply cynical and hardened. They live alienated from a society they know to be corrupt (204-5).

What is true for both, *DKR* and *Sin City: The Hard Goodbye* is that the protagonists are indeed both cynical and very much hardened. They do also live – both in their own way – alienated from a corrupt society. In so far, Miller's Batman as well as Marv do both meet the requirements for being the heroes of hard-boiled fiction novels. But these are not the only indicators. Miller draws his inspiration strongly from Raymond Chandler and his Philip Marlowe mysteries in particular. This manifests itself, apart from the characterization and

representation of the protagonists, in the style of narration Miller employs as well as in further parallels to his model novelist Chandler. He establishes very obvious intertextual links between his own work and Chandler's, naming the first part of the *Sin City* series *The Hard Goodbye* and its third part *The Big Fat Kill.* Not only are these titles clear allusions to Raymond Chandler's *The Long Goodbye* and *The Big Sleep*[66], they are a message in themselves. These titles, since based on the original ones, but taken further in terms of intensity and brutality when changing 'long' to 'hard' and 'Big Sleep' to 'Big Fat Kill', increase the notion of an even stronger 'hard-boiledness'. Furthermore, Miller uses a narrative style similar to Chandler's, employing a first person narrator, both in *DKR* and *Sin City* alike. Let us consider these three passages from *DKR, Sin City: The Hard Goodbye* and Chandler's *The Long Goodbye* to show how similar the (indirect) characterization of the protagonists works:

You've got rights. Lots of rights. Sometimes I count them just to make myself feel crazy. But right now you've got a piece of glass shoved into a major artery in your arm. Right now you're bleeding to death. Right now I'm the only one in the world who can get you to a hospital in time (*DKR* 45).

There isn't much better in life than a smoke when you haven't had one in a while.Like after a movie or after church…I just murdered a priest… (*Hard Goodbye* 76*).*

'I couldn't figure you,' I said. 'Why it was worth your time to come up here and ride me. Then it got monotonous. All tough guys are monotonous. Like playing cards with a deck that's all aces. You've got everything and you've got nothing. You're just sitting there looking at yourself. No wonder Terry didn't come to you for help. It would be like borrowing money from a whore' (Chandler 92).

All these quotes speak of cynical, hardened men, not afraid of their counterparts, world-weary to the core and self-assured. In the examples taken from Miller, the characterization of the protagonists, going beyond the hyper-masculine appearance, happens rather strongly in one single mode, like it is the case in the (obviously) mono-modal novels of Chandler. Of course, the interrelation of text with other modes like image or composition enforces these characterizations and is an important tool Miller uses to overdraw Chandler's hard-boiled characters in his own conceptualization of them.

[66] Or Mickey Spillane's *The Big Kill.*

What provides the “perfect pictorial complement” (Phillips 6) for the hard-boiled fiction of Raymond Chandler and the like is film noir. Since their novels were so influential for the filmic genre, their work was also referred to as American noir fiction. It has also been widely argued (cf. Phillips, Brooke, Spicer) that film noir is defined by its stylistic unity, which makes the concept rather useful as a point of reference. Not for nothing was this emerging genre called ‘black film’. As French reviewers noted, a new mood of “cynicism, pessimism, and darkness” was creeping into American cinema (Phillips 7). What further identifies films as film noirs is a “dark, brooding atmosphere, coupled with an equally somber view of life” (ibid. 8). The society, where the plots are set in is (usually) dominated by crime. Even when good manages to triumph over evil, it is not a constant victory, but more of a temporary enhancement (cf. ibid.). Spicer concisely summarizes the characteristics of film noir:

> The label ‘film noir’ designates a cycle of films that share a similar iconography, visual style, narrative strategies, subject matter and characterisation. Their iconography (repeated visual patterning) consists of images of the dark, night-time city, its streets damp with rain which reflects the flashing neon signs. Its sleazy milieu of claustrophobic alleyways and deserted docklands alternates with gaudy nightclubs and swank apartments. The visual style habitually employs high contrast (chiaroscuro) lighting, where deep, enveloping shadows are fractured by shafts of light from a single source, and dark, claustrophobic interiors have shadowy shapes on the walls. [...] The action and characters’ faces are often lit with strange highlights or partially shadowed to create hidden and threatening spaces. Noir’s highly complex narrative patterning is created by the use of first-person voice overs, multiple narrators, flashbacks and ellipses [...]. [...] The noir universe is dark, malign and unstable where individuals are trapped through fear and paranoia, or overwhelmed by the power of sexual desire. Noir’s principal protagonists consist of the alienated, often psychologically disturbed, male anti-hero and the hard, deceitful *femme fatale* he encounters (4-5).

Turning to the parallels between film noir and Miller’s graphic novels, film noir’s iconography and visual style seem to be most promising. The dark images of cities, mostly during night time are frequently employed, as are characters who cast long shadows on deserted streets as Figure 11 shows. Miller also uses iconic citations, drawing parallels to iconic imagery of film noir, and using generic stereotypes to emphasize the connection.

The juxtaposition of stills from the 1941 film noir classic *The Maltese Falcon*[67] and panels from *DKR,* in Figures 12 and 13, shows the parallels that take readers of Miller's graphic novels back to dark detective offices of the 1930s with their Venetian blinds drawn, the light only able to penetrate darkness through the small space their slits provide, and the characteristic typeface on the door.

A further important stylistic device that is, as mentioned by Spicer above, strongly employed in film noir and also in Miller's art is the use of the chiaroscuro effect, which constructs strong contrasts (see Figure 14). In filmic terms this is referred to as 'low-key lighting', where "the use of fill lights is deliberately restricted, creating stark contrasts between the narrow areas that are harshly illuminated by the unsoftened key light, and surrounding areas obscured in deep black shadows" (Spicer 47). This lighting also stresses, of course, the notion of dichotomies that has been elaborated on before.

In both, *DKR,* as well as *Sin City,* Miller establishes close connections and parallels to hard-boiled fiction and film noir. While his use of such stylistic devices is strong in *DKR,* albeit employed more subtly, *Sin City* is more of a textbook example of the realization of the most important characteristics of the two genres, even though mostly exaggerated. Clearly, what has been discussed here forms a crucial part of Miller's construction of 'Darkness'.

[67] Based upon the novel by Dashiell Hammet, it was directed by John Huston and starred Humphrey Bogart.

6. Representations of 'Darkness' in Movie Posters[68]

I have, in Section 3, put forward the argument that Frank Miller was retroactively assigned the status of the "father" of the graphic novel and hence endowed with a special, hegemonic, status in the field of comic and graphic novel authorship. Since it is the manifestation of Miller's style in the public sphere that so strongly heightened his status and made him responsible for the representation of a whole genre, dominant in the mainstream of cultural consumption, I want to trace these manifestations into said sphere. I will, therefore, analyze movie posters of comic/graphic novel adaptations released over the last decade – adaptations of Miller's work as well as of the work of others like Alan Moore, Dave Gibbons, or David Lloyd – in order to show in how far activations of Miller's art and style, to which we have dedicated Sections 4 and 5, have over the years lead not only to the 'dark' image of graphic novels, but also to a retroactively produced, highly influential star of graphic novel writing. Movie posters seem to constitute a fitting example, since they are so present in the public sphere. Even if one does not watch an adaptation of a graphic novel (especially if one does not), one will still be confronted with the posters attached to cinemas, advertising panels, or public transport cars. As soon as campaigns for million dollar budget movies, such as the aforementioned, start, reprints of graphic novels with covers fitting the movie franchise will even pave bookshops. Apart from that, movie posters are highly interesting from a social-semiotic point of view since they exemplify translational processes. As used by Kress, the term 'translation' refers to "the most general term to name changes in representation" (2010, 124). It is used to "describe significant shifts in meaning: across genre, across modes, across cultures and across any combination of these" (ibid.). Miller's style, the 'Darkness' he creates in his graphic novels, is translated, and different modal affordances are employed to transport meaning to other modes or even other media. This is mainly achieved by transduction, which describes the process in which meaning is drawn

[68] Two different types of posters were selected for the analysis. On the one hand, the posters for *Sin City, Watchmen,* and *The Dark Knight* are theatrical, 'domestic', posters, produced for the US market, on the other hand, the ones for *Batman Begins, Captain America – The First Avenger,* and *V for Vendetta* are teaser posters. See Maly for a definition: "Teaser posters refer to posters released at a very early stage, to announce a movie and increase audience awareness early enough. They are only produced for big productions and are characterized by rather minimal Key Art design, excluding the full billing block and credits, only featuring the movie's title, a key image […] and a very vague date of release, […]; mostly a copy line is also integrated. On a visual level teaser posters often play with their task to "tease"[…]" (18).

from one mode to another (cf. ibid.). Since different modes are different entities with different affordances, this involves a re-articulation of meaning. The unreliability of a main character which is created mainly on the narrative level in a graphic novel has to be realized differently in a movie poster: by the sole use of image, for instance. Accordingly, transduction involves a change of the semiotic object. Such a change, however, can also be achieved by the process of transformation, where elements are re-ordered within the same mode (cf. ibid. 129). This will, to anticipate an example, be observable in Figure 16, where the poster for *Batman Begins* was subject to transformation in the creation of the poster for *The Dark Knight*. Here re-ordering the elements, but maintaining the modes as well as the "ontological constitution" (ibid.) took place.

The conceptualization of 'Darkness' I have put forward is built upon three pillars. I will start my analysis with the movie poster for *Sin City,* where all of these three aspects are indispensably employed in the translation of Miller's style to a new medium. In the further examples the focus will be more on selected, single, aspects of 'Darkness' and their function.

6.1 *Frank Miller's Sin City* (2005)

Advertised as *Frank Miller's* Sin City*,* the movie openly announced its relationship to another work (see Hutcheon 7). What is extraordinary about the filmic version of *Sin City* is that it stays extremely close to the graphic novel in terms of iconography. Entire pages of the graphic novel were realized in the movie frame by frame, with the result of a comic-like noir movie staying incredibly close to its source[69]. The movie poster in Figure 15 is a good example for how Miller's love for film noir and hard-boiled detective fiction has found its way into the mainstream representation of graphic novels. One is, in this poster, confronted with generic stereotypes. The men are represented as tough and hard-looking, having been pushed around once too often by life (Phillips 9), all of them carrying a gun and most of them in the process of using it. Women in this poster are reduced to their female attributes: waving blonde hair, tightly fitting, revealing outfits, and seductive gazes. Both, women and

[69] Robert Rodriguez comments on the adaptation of Miller's visual style: "And the more I looked at the book to adapt it, I realized it didn't need adapting. It's visual storytelling and it works so well on the page. I felt it should work exactly the same way on the screen" (http://movies.about.com/od/sincity/a/sincityrr032505.htm, 01/03/2012).

men are represented as hyper-feminine and hyper-masculine, which seems to be Miller's dominant viewpoint on the subject of gender representations – probably influenced by the discursive production of such gender stereotypes rooted in detective fiction of the 1920s and 30s and films of the 1940s and 50s.

Sin City has a complex story with its different strands of narration overlapping and drifting apart constantly, only to oscillate in the end. Each of the five characters positioned in the top half of the poster more or less signifies one such strand, the salience of the characters selected according to their on-screen time (which is only possible to determine after having actually seen the film, of course), and is generally high. The characters are among the most salient elements in Figure 15 due to their size in relation to the poster and their aforementioned attributes. The writing 'Sin City' in the bottom right corner, however, is, despite its position, also of high salience; the basic reason for that being its colour and size. The factual information value of the bottom half of the poster in combination with its position on the right and the according information value of 'new' denotes 'Sin City' not only as the title of the movie, it also provides a location for the events promised above. The combination of the colour red in one mode and the information the writing provides in another, which brings together 'sin' and red (working as symbolical signs reciprocally), helps to enforce the 'noir' notion and to provide a theme for the plot, as it were. Another part of the narrative is to be found next to the writing, highlighted by a source of light, visualized in what resembles an oneiric narrative prominent in film noirs[70]. What is shown are the outlines of an obviously big man, wandering down a deserted street; the image realized in a silhouette-like manner. His being framed by a circle of light and the 'bleeding'[71] of this frame into the characters above does not only connect the different narratives, but also enforces the notion of timelessness, one might attest to dream-like sequences.

What is, as already hinted at, of particular interest in this poster are the links to film noir. Iconic parallels to this filmic genre are created by the use of low-key lighting which results in the creation of large areas of shadow and darkness and the prevailing absence of light. Apart from the long shadows and areas of darkness, the pouring rain forms a clear reference to the

[70] "Noir narratives are frequently oneiric (dream-like), where every object and encounter seems unnaturally charged" (Spicer 5).
[71] McCloud (103) refers to 'Bleeds', "when a panel runs off the edge of the page", this way producing a sense of timelessness.

worlds created in film noirs. Considering these parallels, Phillips notes that "as captured on film, Chandler's bleak world was pictured in terms of shadows, darkness, and rained-on streets" (6). Even though high contrast is employed in the poster, and the lighting is rather specific, a certain amount of realism is maintained in this representation, which Phillips sees a generic convention of film noir: "Also in keeping with the conventions of film noir is an air of spare, unvarnished realism" (9). Just like film noir aimed at the creation of a "specific alienation", and to let the viewer feel "anguish and insecurity" (Spicer 9), the goal of this poster is similar. Not only is the sheer number of people pointing guns intimidating, the feeling of inferiority and a lack of power is also enforced by the choice of perspective from below. Again, this can be read as a contradiction of readers' frames of reference, a contradiction to their experiences.

6.2 *Batman Begins* (2005) and *The Dark Knight* (2008)

Christopher Nolan's Batman trilogy, which consists of *Batman Begins,* its prequel *The Dark Knight,* and its yet to be released, final part, *The Dark Knight Rises* was, as mentioned, openly influenced by Frank Miller. The movie posters are revealing examples of how allusions to Miller and his style were used in the representation of Batman in the campaign for both movies[72]. The poster for *Batman Begins* (Figure 16) is a rather simplistic one, but still points at Miller's style. Batman, covering almost the entire height of the poster, is silhouetted against a background of clouds, identifiable mostly by the signifiers of his mask and cape. He holds a position of power, which is enforced by the viewing angle from below and the clouds in the background which provide him with an almost god-like aura, floating in the air. In the lower part of the poster, the title of the film is superimposed over the bat-sign, assuming the information value of the real. The title 'Batman Begins' visualizes the 'product' (cf. Kress and van Leeuwen), it provides factual information, namely that viewers will be confronted with the beginnings of 'their' hero. This information in combination with the use of dichotomies, realized by the silhouettes, so prominent in Miller's style, hints at a complex character. The silhouette also functions to obscure Batman's features and to awaken

[72] The campaign for Nolan's movies, and especially for *The Dark Knight* was highly complex, dedicating great parts of its immense budget to groundbreaking methods across all (and particularly new) media. For an excellent synopsis and analysis, see Maly 2008.

viewers' curiosity. This, combined with the simplicity of the poster which does not provide any factual information at all – be it actors, director, or the like – is also used to evoke feelings of uncertainty. It is obvious that 'Darkness', in the sense of Miller's conception of it, does play an important part here.

Nevertheless, parallels to Miller's style are even stronger in the official movie poster for *The Dark Knight.* It is an action-laden poster, full of turbulent events. A great part of the action is realized by the flying debris caused by an explosion as well as by the flickering of flames. Batman, in this poster, stands in front of a skyscraper that appears to be partly on fire, the bat-sign formed by burning parts of the building over his head. He is the most salient element on the poster, obtaining a central position in the foreground, surrounded by a halo-like light, his posture as well as his attire catching viewers' gazes. In addition, the burning sign over his head, which also holds a high degree of salience, draws even more attention to him. Viewers' perspective from below does not only represent Batman as extremely powerful, but also functions to enforce his function as a vector (in combination with the skyscraper in the background), pointing towards the top of the poster, where its 'promise' is realized by the clause 'Welcome to a World Without Rules', thus "foregrounding an important element of the plot" (Maiorani 281). The lower part of the poster, on the other hand, is used to provide factual information on the film, such as starring actors, director, and release date.

'Darkness' manifests itself in several aspects in the poster for *The Dark Knight.* First and foremost, there are strong visual parallels to Miller's *DKR,* as Figure 17 shows. The panel taken from the graphic novel shows a broad shouldered, overly masculine Bruce Wayne from below, illuminated by only a single source of light, casting half of him in darkness. He is surrounded by waste, just like Batman in the poster is by debris. Also, the skyline of Gotham City is visible in the background of the panel, which, in the poster, is reduced to one single building. In this sense, one could speak of a visual citation by Miller and the employment of transformational processes. Second, the use of dichotomies, that is so important in Miller's conception of 'Darkness', is equally important in Figure 16. This Batman's hyper-masculinity is the first, clear example. Broad shouldered, heavily musceled, with an appearence that resembles that of a warrior, with its intimidatingly armored suit and his knife-like arm protectors, the Batman of *The Dark Knight* franchise is extraordinarily close to Miller's; all of

this is additionally emphasized by the use of perspective (from below). The proximity to Miller is only enforced by the discurive (orientation) markers of war that surround Batman, such as fire, explosions, and general destruction, which triggers associations with a further dichotomy, dominant in Miller's work: life and death. Another binary opposition that is employed in this example is that of chaos and order. The information value of the top part of the poster already sets chaos as the topic in the mode of writing. On the visual level this 'promise' is realized and supported by fire, explosions, smoke, and flying debris. Then, in the middle of it all, there is Batman, solid as a rock, the only man standing. Overly masculine, he is the strong hero, the only one in a position to withstand such enormous manifestations of chaos. Then, there is the dichotomy of darkness and light. Batman himself is mostly covered in darkness, surrounded by a 'halo' of light supposedly triggered by the explosion. The use of low-key lighting has the effect that only parts of his left side are illuminated. This is used as a metaphor for the two identities of the hero, as well as it points at a complex character. Of course, 'Darkness' is also created by the absence of light. The 'noir' notion of a dark, unstable universe with trapped individuals, present in the poster, also adding to that (Spicer 5).

6.3 *Captain America – The First Avenger* (2011)

An example with obvious parallels to *Batman Begins* and *The Dark Knight* and hence Miller's 'Darkness' is the movie poster for *Captain America – The First Avenger* (Figure 18), with its original graphic novel unconnected to Frank Miller. This poster, too, is a simplistic one. The hero – Captain America – with his head bowed, holding a shield at his feet is depicted from below, debris raining down on him. The writing in the middle of the poster – superimposed over the character – identifies the man as Captain America, the first Avenger, the lower half giving the movie's date of release. The way dichotomies are employed here bears resemblance to Miller's style, as well. As is the case in his graphic novels, and also in the poster for Nolan's Dark Knight, the hero's masculinity is stressed, if not over-stressed. First, by his muscular build and broad shoulders, second by the use of perspective from below which puts the viewer in a position inferior to that of the hero and thus in need of protection. We can also find Captain America linked to the discourse of war, realized by his

armor, a shield, and the raining debris pointing at an explosion[73]. The colours used in this poster, or rather the lack thereof, also help to set a dark mood. Concerning dichotomies, the one between order and chaos is highlighted in this poster too. The hero is portrayed as strong, calm, concentrated and completely focused in the middle of chaos signified by the rain of debris and its origin – the explosion. He does not only defy chaos, he defines himself against it, as it were. His stoicism in the middle of said chaos strongly signified by his averted gaze, is even enforced by its juxtaposition to action and movement the parts of mud and stone raining down on Captain America suggest. The only source of light seems to come from behind him through the grey clouds, illuminating the contours of his figure, but obscuring the rest of his features so that a detailed view is hardly possible. Once more, this hints at a complex character, a character having to live in two realms, by drawing on the dichotomy of darkness and light.

6.4 *V for Vendetta* (2006)

The use of light and shadow/darkness to emphasize the two worlds, a multitude of graphic novels and their heroes are concerned with, as well as their complex characteristics has become one of the most important features in the public representation of graphic novels. This also is the case in the highly successful adaptation of the graphic novel *V for Vendetta* by Alan Moore and David Lloyd. The poster, in Figure 19, shows the graphic novel's protagonist V with his back turned towards the spectator. The low-key lighting creates a chiaroscuro effect, engulfing parts of the poster and with it V, in complete darkness, while illuminating others. The prominent shadows and contrast emphasize the boundaries between darkness and light, presenting an almost silhouette-like view on the character. While the lower section of the poster does not provide anything more than the factual information such as name of the film and that it is to be released soon, the upper section holds a promise, a very rudimentary idea of what the film's topic might be. The clause "People should not be afraid of their governments. Governments should be afraid of their people." is, due to its physical proximity to V, associated with him. This has interesting

[73] User sleepykid on www.impawards.com comments on the poster: "Very striking and very comic book. I like the way the grungey mud explosion tells us it's a wartime story too" (06/03/2012).

effects in a multimodal ensemble. It adds to the notion of 'Darkness' in this poster that readers' frames of reference are subject to contradiction. Following conventions, heroes are more likely to be portrayed on movie posters than villains. What we are confronted with in this example, however, is the silhouette of an obviously masked man, who, by turning his back towards the viewer, signals that he has something to hide. Apart from that, he is carrying two daggers, also partly obscured. The combination of writing (including the transported information) and image creates an unreliable character. V is presented as more of a villain than a hero which is supported by the use of lighting as well as silhouettes, the combination of said factors pointing not only at a complex, but seemingly unreliable character.

6.5 *Watchmen* (2009)

The poster of *Watchmen* (Figure 20) (written by Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons) combines in itself the imagery of Frank Miller's superhero comics and the visual parallels to film noir, he so willingly employs. The first link to Miller is already established in the top part of the poster by announcing *Watchmen's* links to the adaptation of Miller's *300,* since they share the same director: "From the Visionary Director of '300'", it reads. This, however, is only one promise the poster offers.

The highest degree of salience is given to the characters standing in a semicircle and gazing directly down at viewers, thus living up to their name 'Watchmen', who once more find themselves in a position subjected to power of others. Also the word 'Watchmen' in the bottom half of the poster, in bright shining yellow, draws spectators' gazes. As it is the case in the poster of *Captain America – The First Avenger,* writing does not only identify the film's title, but, due to its proximity to them, also the characters, as 'Watchmen'. Another parallel to most of the aforementioned examples is the emphasis on hyper-masculinity and –femininity the characters are endowed with, which is equally employed in this poster. The poster for *Watchmen* is also drawing heavily on the visual characteristics of film noir, as the description of an archetypal noir urban scene by Higham and Greenberg shows:

> A dark street in the early morning hours, splashed with a sudden downpour. Lamps form haloes in the murk. [...] intermittent flashing of neon sign from across the street, [...]...shadow upon shadow upon shadow...every shot in glistening low-key' (qtd. in Spicer 45).

What is particularly worth mentioning is the near oscillation of genres taking place in the present example. While the iconography of the poster is kept close to that of film noir, the characters are far less homogeneous in terms of genre characteristics. Visually, they do not represent one single genre what spectators would, however, expect since characters are presented as an entity due to their disguises, the direction of their gazes, their position to each other and the connection to the salient writing 'Watchmen'. In terms of iconography, they cover super-hero comics as well as film noir, even combining these two genres; the boundaries are far from clear cut. The character on the left margin of the movie poster, Rorschach, is a manifestation thereof. Dressed in trench coat and fedora, the classic private-eye attire, his face is covered by what looks like a stained bandage. Also, the character on the right margin, named the Comedian, cannot easily be compartmentalized. He wears mask and armor (which seems rather self-made, however), but smokes and carries a gun, hence uniting in himself the characteristics of (the hard-boiled) detective and superhero. These two unconventional characters frame between them the rest of the 'Watchmen'. Since it is a rather weak form of framing, their identity as a group is stressed, but at the same time the differentiation and individuality of the single characters is maintained (cf. Kress and van Leeuwen 203 ff.). The four characters further in the background leave less room for doubt in reference to generic characteristics. The three humans are dressed in capes and armor, emphasizing mens' muscular physique and woman's bare legs and curves. Towering over them is a translucent giant who radiates 'super-naturalness'. Apart from other methods like low-key lighting, this transgression of 'generic boundaries', too, points at the omnipresent dichotomies and the meaning attached to them. Said transgression can also be read as a tool to accomplish a contradiction to readers' experiences and frames of reference accordingly and thus a resulting uncertainty that is so important in the conception of 'Darkness'.

7. Conclusion

What was shown in the analysis of these movie posters is that the most important elements which have been identified in Miller's stylistic approach to 'Darkness' have, due to activations over time, found their way into the public representation of graphic novels. Apart from the visual parallels to film noir, we have identified dichotomies and the contradiction of spectators' experience and their frames of reference accordingly, as the most important markers of 'Darkness' related to Frank Miller's work. We have approached dichotomies from two angles. On the one hand we have treated them as relational, clearly establishing binaries such as order and chaos, life and death, etc. in order to define and to emphasize each other's importance. We have then shifted our focus to the collapse of dichotomies by silhouettes and the transitional status they represent. The deconstruction of dichotomies represented by the use of silhouettes has been seen as an essential marker of 'Darkness'. What is realized with silhouettes in graphic novels, however, is only partially realized that way in the movie posters we put under scrutiny, since different media also differ in their modal affordances. We have in this respect identified the interplay of light and shadow and low-key lighting, in accordance with filmic conventions. In combination with several compositional aspects we have discussed, a contradiction to spectators' frames of reference and the creation of feelings of uncertainty have also been made obvious.

By having let the concept of 'Darkness' travel (cf. Bal) from graphic novels to movie posters, as it were, we have made its influence on the representations of the most successful graphic novel adaptations of the last years apparent, which goes hand in hand with the representation of the whole genre. From the point when a greater audience became aware of the existence of author Frank Miller, with *Batman Begins* and *Sin City,* the success of graphic novel adaptations was assigned to his style and genius (retroactively). Miller's style was therefore given generic hegemony, through its activations over time. The more he and his 'dark' interpretation of graphic novels were re-produced and re-activated, the more he became hegemonic in the public representation of the graphic novel and the more importance he was endowed with retroactively. The aim of this paper, however, has not been a praise of Frank Miller and his style. It is, in fact, the distinctiveness of his style that qualifies his work as a subject of analysis. This paper's engagement with Miller is to be seen

more in the sense of a case study; a study attempting an explanation of how the hegemonic representation of a genre can be traced back to the influence of a single artist.

I chose to proceed from the assumption that Miller's motivated acts of sign-making constitute a template for various cultural utilizations. Incorporating the sign-maker's "physical, affective, cultural, social position in the world" (Kress 2010, 70), however, also means having to be aware of the aspects worthy of critique. It is therefore important to raise awareness concerning the problematic aspects attached to Miller's hegemonic status. It is essential that his violent, machismo-soaked interpretation of characters, and especially his view on gender roles in combination with power relations and representations be read consciously and critically in order to lay the groundwork for discussion and deconstruction. Drawing on a great part of Miller's ideological approaches together with his style, in various cultural utilizations, can in the long run lead to the solidification of such problematic ideologies. Therefore, it is an important task to dedicate academic resources to said problems.

I have in my approach to Miller and his distinctive style, employed a close-reading based on a social-semiotic approach to multimodality. This is an extremely useful working method, especially when employed in critical media analysis. Regarding the interrelation of different modes, performing different kinds of semiotic work and their different affordances is particularly gaining importance in the 21st century, where the social and cultural landscape is characterized by mobility. Carey Jewitt (2009a, 3) traces this back to "changing relationships to truth and authority – in which knowledge is no longer certain, or stable, and there is an expansion in knowledge production as a domain of the elite to the masses". This change from vertical to horizontal structures in the production of knowledge is reflected by user created-content in various Web 2.0 applications[74] (cf. Bryan), which inevitably leads to a change in the social-landscape. Writing and image will soon not suffice in every-day communication, in the production and especially the reception of meaning, any more[75]. Multimodality is therefore a useful tool, with an equally promising future. The results achieved in the analysis could be fruitfully expanded by conducting an analysis of websites, Facebook-pages, applications for mobile devices, etc. By taking into account more meaning-

[74] Wikis, Youtube, social media platforms, etc.
[75] If this is still the case, at all.

making resources and the affordances of additional modes and media, we could trace the representation of the concept of ‘Darkness’ further into the public sphere and elaborate on how firmly anchored in audiences’ and consumers’ collective memory this concept is and what modal affordances are applied in the course of its solidification. This paper, however, did only provide a glimpse of the opportunities available.

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9. Table of Illustrations

Figure 1: 'Falling' 101
Figure 2: 'A Chase in the Air' 102
Figure 3: 'Tumbling Like Lovers' 103
Figure 4: 'Marv Approaching' 104
Figure 5: 'Wiring the Landscape' 104
Figure 6: 'Lighting Up' 104
Figure 7: 'Silhouettes in *Sin City'* 105
Figure 8: 'Silhouettes in *Sin City* – White on Black' 105
Figure 9: 'Hyper-femininity, -masculinity in *Sin City'* 105
Figure 10: 'Marv Enjoys Killing' 106
Figure 11: '*DKR* & *Sin City* – Dark Cities and Long Shadows' 106
Figure 12: '*DKR* and *The Maltese* Falcon – Visual Parallels' 107
Figure 13: '*DKR* and *The Maltese Falcon* – Visual Parallels II' 107
Figure 14: '*Sin City and DKR* – Low Key Lighting/Chiaroscuro Effect' 107
Figure 15: '*Frank Miller's Sin City*' 108
Figure 16: '*Batman Begins* & *The Dark Knight'* 108
Figure 17: '*The Dark Knight* and *DKR* – Visual Parallels' 109
Figure 18: '*Captain America – The First Avenger*' 109
Figure 19: *'V for Vendetta'* 109
Figure 20: *'Watchmen'* 110

10. Acknowledgement Images

These are the sources of images used in this paper. Please contact the author in case of copyright violations.

Figure 1	Image taken from *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns,* p. 52.
Figure 2	Image taken from *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns,* p. 53.
Figure 3	Image taken from *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns,* p. 54.
Figure 4	Image taken from *Sin City: The Hard Goodbye,* p. 165.
Figure 5	Image taken from *Sin City: The Hard Goodbye,* p. 166.
Figure 6	Image taken from *Sin City: The Hard Goodbye,* p. 167.
Figure 7	Images taken from *Sin City: The Hard Goodbye,* pp. 166, 13, 123.
Figure 8	Image taken from *Sin City: The Hard Goodbye,* p. 123.
Figure 9	Image taken from *Sin City: The Hard Goodbye,* pp. 7, 47.
Figure 10	Image taken from *Sin City: The Hard Goodbye,* p. 126.
Figure 11	Images taken from *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns,* p. 12 and *Sin City: The Hard Goodbye,* pp. 35, 75.
Figure 12	Images taken from *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns,* p. 96, Still from *The Maltese Falcon* downloaded from: http://www-e.uni-magdeburg.de/schleuse/brick/images/filmnoir/mise/setting_sleep.jpg (07/03/12).
Figure 13	Images taken from *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns,* p. 94, Still from *The Maltese Falcon* downloaded from http://www.annaivey.com/system/files/u3/maltesefalcon.jpg (07/03/12).
Figure 14	Image taken from *Sin City: The Hard Goodbye,* p. 83 and *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns,* p. 13.
Figure 15	Movie poster downloaded from www.impawards.com (13/03/12).
Figure 16	Movie posters downloaded from www.impawards.com (10/03/12).
Figure 17	Movie poster downloaded from www.impawards.com (10/03/12), image taken from *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns,* p. 13.
Figure 18	Movie poster downloaded from www.impawards.com (11/03/12).
Figure 19	Movie poster downloaded from www.impawards.com (10/03/12).
Figure 20	Movie poster downloaded from www.impawards.com (09/03/12).

11. Appendix

11.1 Illustrations

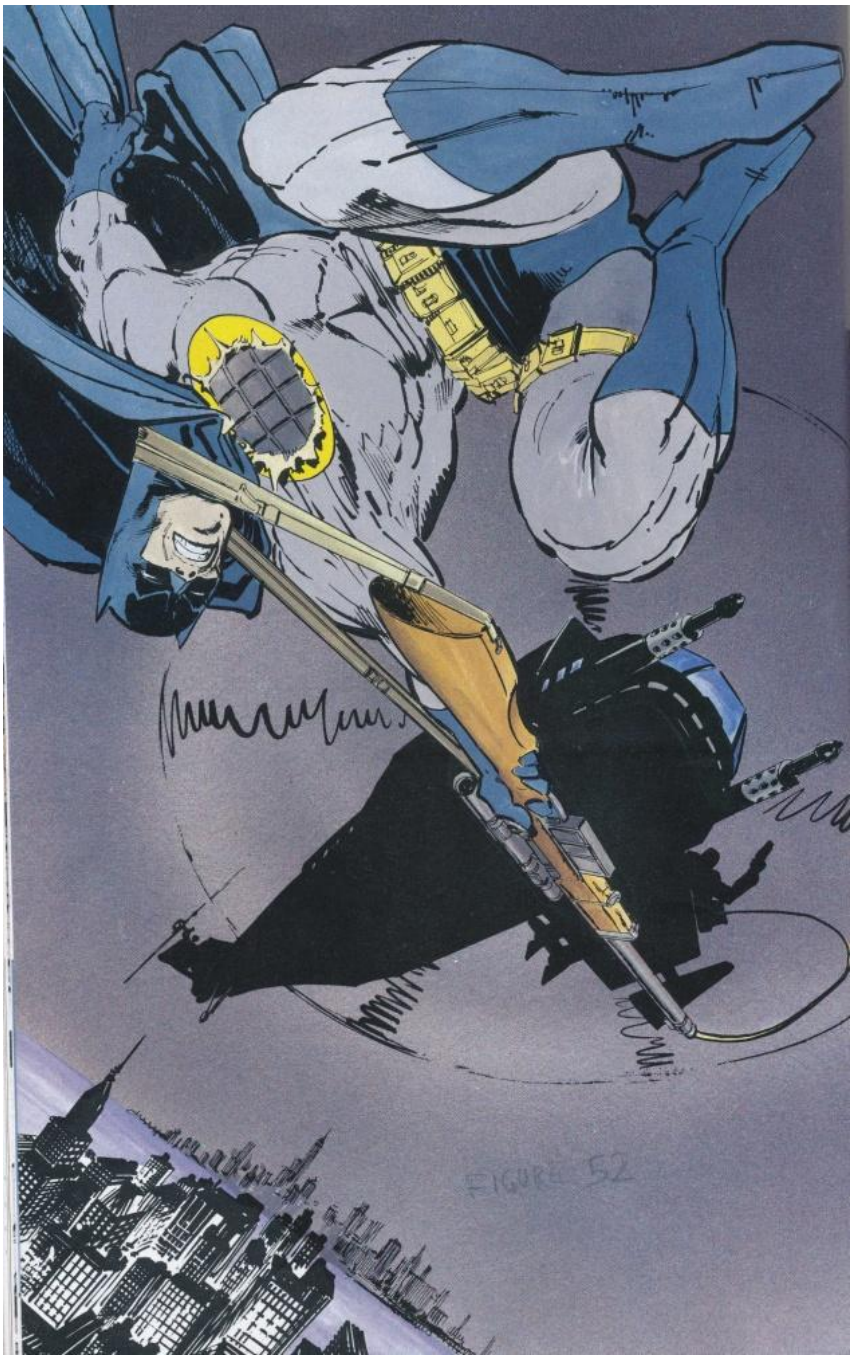

Figure 1: 'Falling'

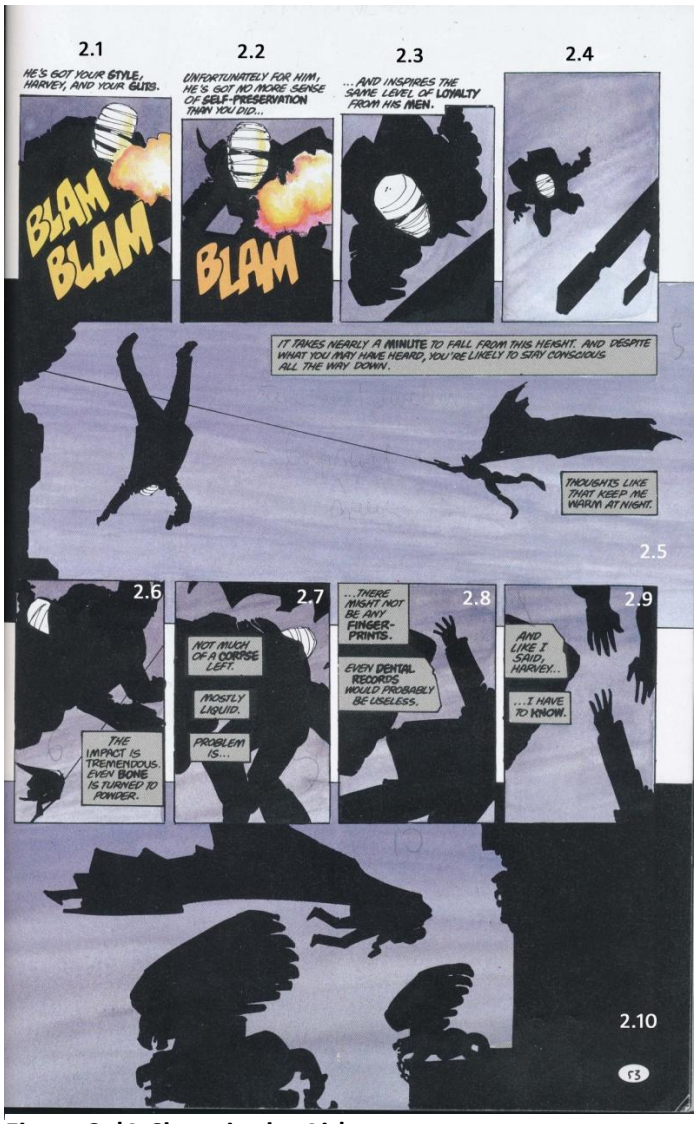

Figure 2: 'A Chase in the Air'

Figure 3: 'Tumbling Like Lovers'

Figure 4: 'Marv Approaching'

Figure 5: 'Wiring the Landscape'

Figure 6: 'Lighting Up'

Figure 7: 'Silhouettes in Sin City'

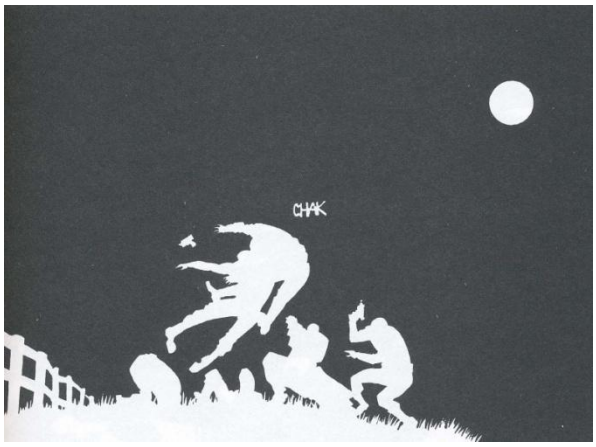

Figure 8: 'Silhouettes in Sin City – White on Black'

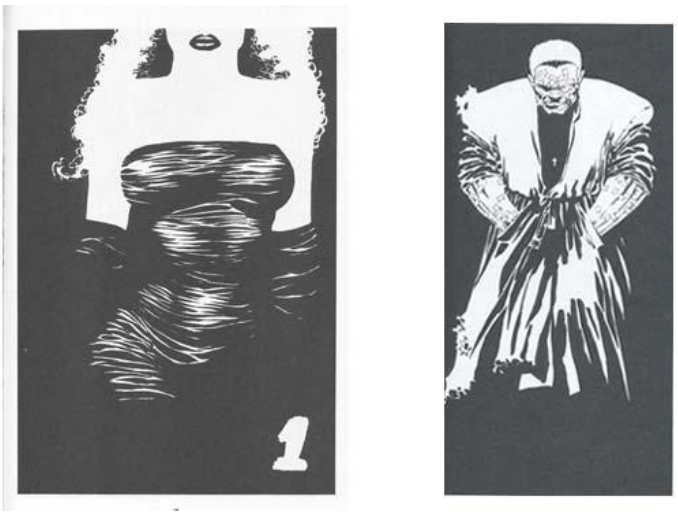

Figure 9: 'Hyper-femininity, -masculinity in *Sin City*'

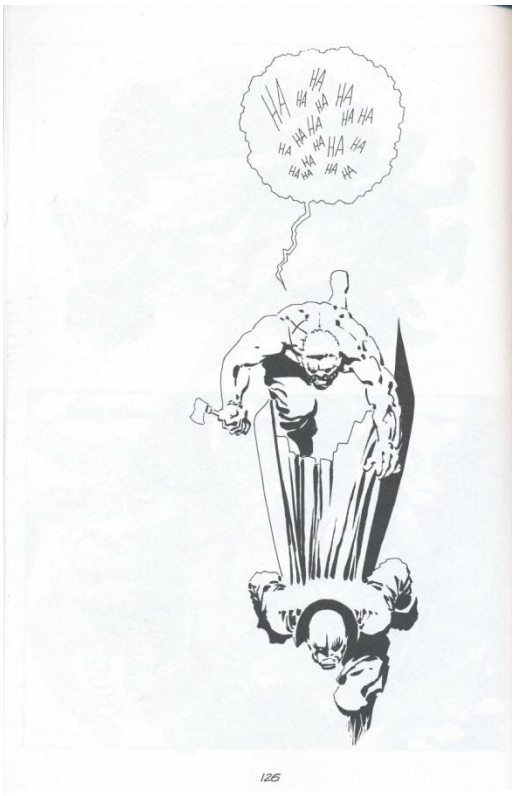

Figure 10: 'Marv Enjoys Killing'

Figure 11: '*DKR & Sin City* – Dark Cities and Long Shadows'

Figure 12: '*DKR* and *The Maltese Falcon* – Visual Parallels'

Figure 13: '*DKR* and *The Maltese Falcon* – Visual Parallels II'

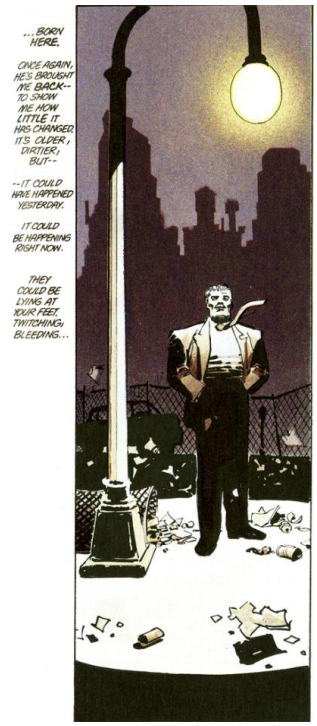

Figure 14: '*Sin City* and *DKR* – Low Key Lighting/Chiaroscuro Effect'

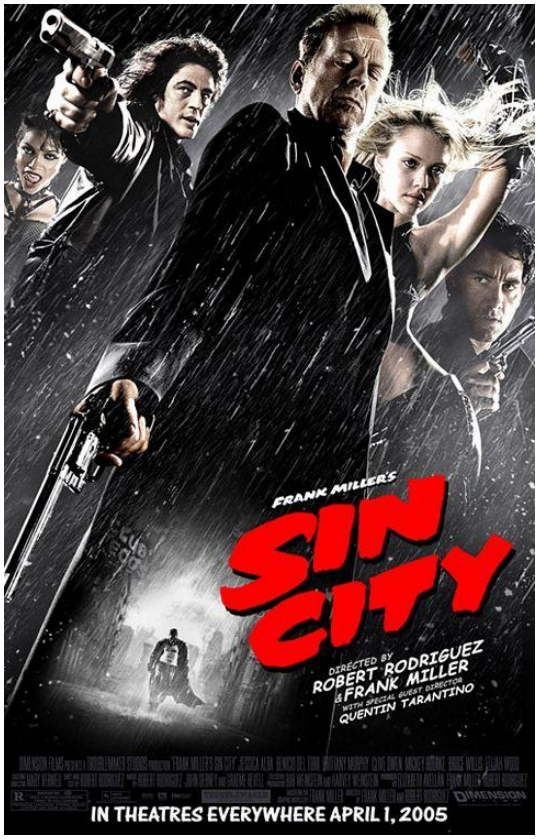

Figure 15: ***'Frank Miller's Sin City'***

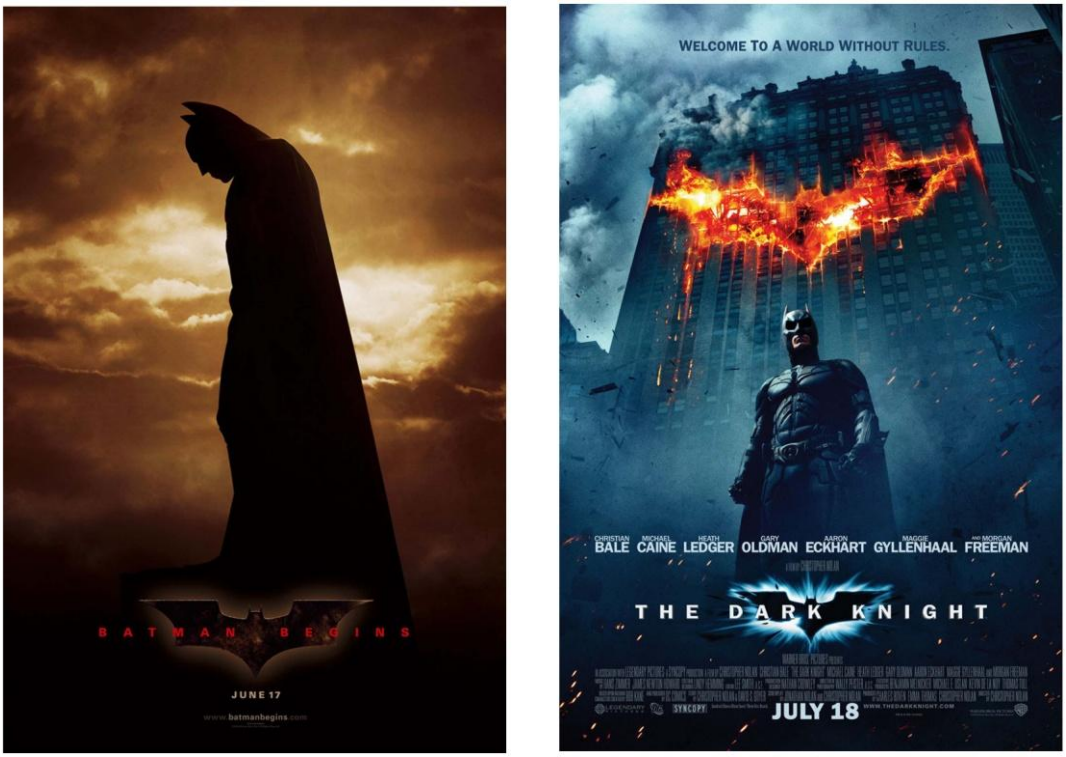

Figure 16: '*Batman Begins* & *The Dark Knight'*

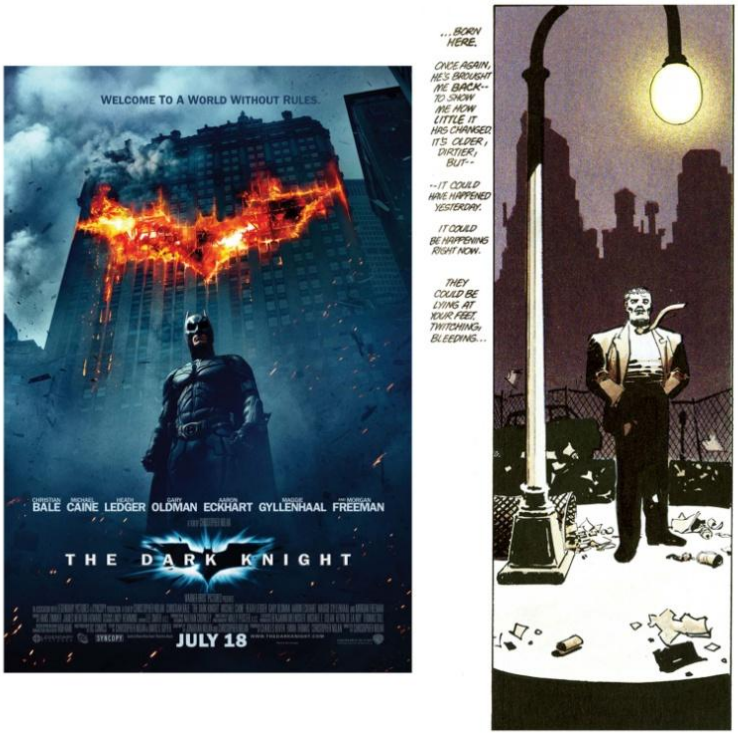

Figure 17: '*The Dark Knight* and *DKR* – Visual Parallels'

Figure 18: '*Captain America – The First Avenger*'

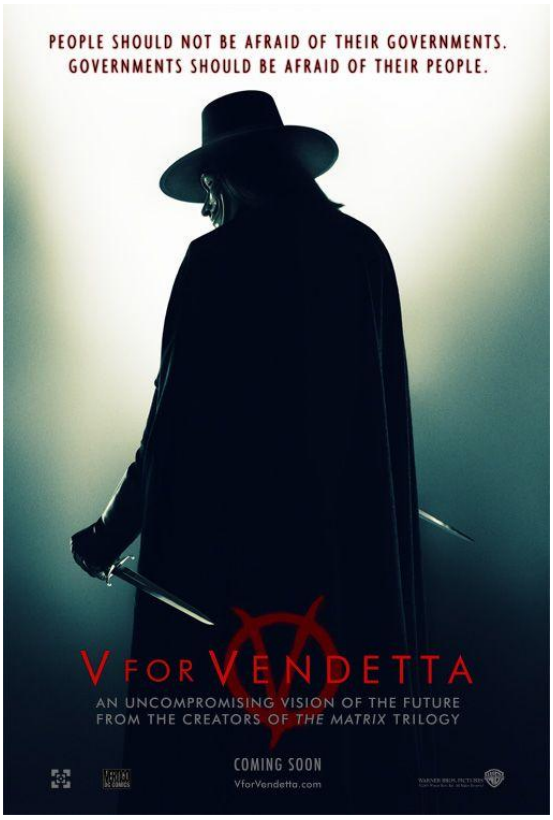

Figure 19: *'V for Vendetta'*

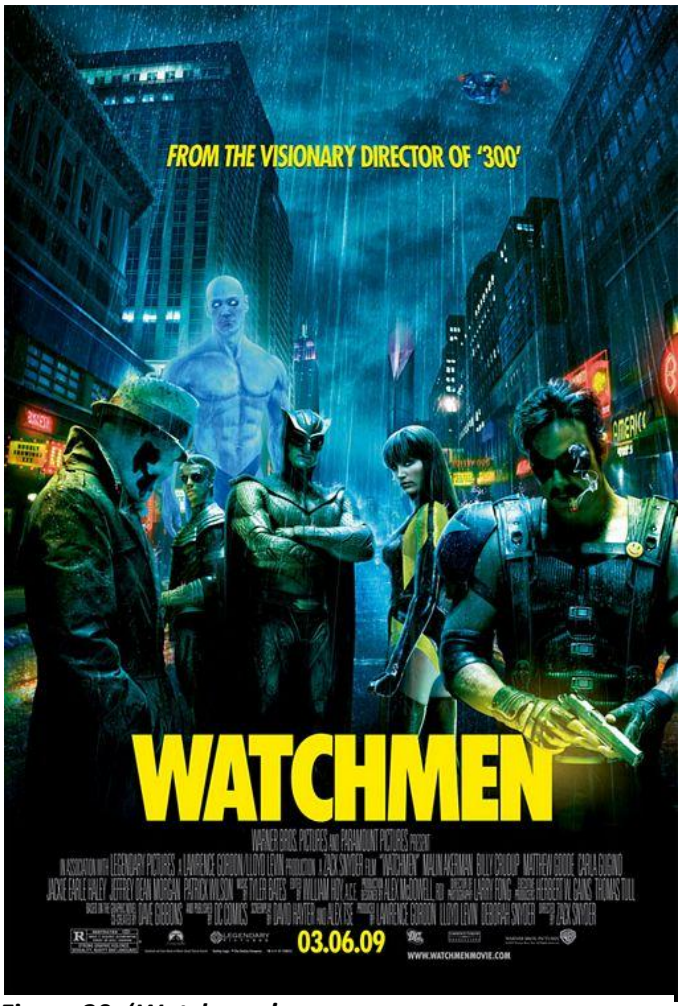

Figure 20: '*Watchmen*'

11.2 Abstract (German)

Die vorliegende Arbeit beschäftigt sich mit Repräsentationen des Genres der Graphic Novel im öffentlichen Raum. Ausgangspunkt der Analyse sind die stilistischen Parallelen zwischen unterschiedlichen Werken des Genres und deren Repräsentationen – sei es auf Buchumschlägen, Werbeplakaten oder auf Websites. Diese stilistischen Parallelen werden in der Folge in ihrem Ursprung auf das Konzept der „Dunkelheit“ zurückgeführt; ein Konzept, das im Verlauf der Arbeit ausformuliert und definiert werden wird.

Das Konzept der „Dunkelheit“ wird stark verbunden mit dem populären Graphic-Novel-Autor Frank Miller gesehen, der seinen Status als „Vater“ der Graphic Novel und seinen daraus folgenden, immensen Einfluss auf das Genre nicht originär innehat, sondern vielmehr durch ständige Reaktivierung und Zitierung seines Stils retroaktiv verliehen bekam, wie anhand von Monika Seidls Konzeption der von Sigmund Freud entwickelten, Retroaktivität gezeigt wird. Dieser Stil ist es, der im Verlaufe der Arbeit genau untersucht werden wird. Den theoretischen Rahmen für diese Untersuchung bildet ein sozial-semiotischer Zugang zur Multimodalität, der sich stark auf Gunther Kress bezieht. Ein Close Reading einzelner Seiten und Panels, sowie deren Komposition wird unter Zuhilfenahme einer multimodalen Arbeitsweise Aufschluss über die motivierten Zeichen geben, die Miller als deren Produzent setzt, um die Kreation bestimmter Bedeutungen zu erzielen. Hierbei wird besonders auf die Verbindung, sowie die Wechselbeziehung einzelner Modi eingegangen werden, die essentiell in der Bedeutungsbildung sind.

In einem nächsten Schritt werden die Ergebnisse, die aus der genauen Analyse von Millers Stil hervorgehen, zu einer Konzeption von „Dunkelheit“ herangezogen, die weit über die Absenz von Licht hinausgeht. „Dunkelheit“ stützt sich, im Sinne der in dieser Arbeit verwendeten Konzeption, auf drei Pfeiler: die häufige, gezielte Verwendung von Dichotomien, das Schaffen von Widersprüchen gegenüber der für LeserInnen dominanten Referenzrahmen, sowie den starken Bezug und die Bildung von Parallelen zum amerikanischen „hard-boiled“ Detektivroman und Film Noir.

Schließlich werden Filmplakate von Adaptionen erfolgreicher Graphic Novels des letzten Jahrzehnts analysiert, um Millers Einfluss auf die dominante Repräsentation eines gesamten

Genres herauszuarbeiten. Die Filmplakate, teils basierend auf Millers Arbeiten, teils auf derer anderer bekannter Autoren, bedienen sich deutlich der Faktoren, die als das Konzept „Dunkelheit“ konstituierend dargestellt werden und zeigen so klar, dass Millers persönlicher Stil maßgeblich an den dominanten Repräsentationen eines gesamten Genres beteiligt gesehen werden kann.

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