Gothic Masculinity, Filiation and Affiliation: Frank Miller's Batman

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This essay focuses on Batman's masculinity, relationships and the configurations of the family. As its principal texts it chooses the now-cult Frank Miller’s revisioning of Batman in Batman: The Dark Knight Returns (1986, hereafter TDKR), Batman: The Dark Knight Strikes Again (2001-02, TDKSA), Batman: Year One (1987, BYO) and All Star Batman & Robin the Boy Wonder (2005-08, ASB).

In BYO Miller’s text opens with an image of a Bruce Wayne whose body is partially obscured - we see his grimacing face, his legs and one palm, the chair on which he sits seems to be dripping - by the huge shadow cast by a batwing. The accompanying text reads: 'he will become the greatest crimefighter the world has ever known … it won’t be easy'. The superimposition of the batwing on the ordinary-clad Bruce Wayne symbolizes the entire Batman mythos: of haunting. But this mythos, I suggest, is also complicated by a troubled masculinity in Miller’s re-creation. And it is this troubled masculinity that the present essay explores. It first discusses Batman’s ‘Gothic masculinity’ arguing that this masculinity is an anxious and apparitional one, produced through a tension between the surface or ‘cool’ masculinity of Bruce Wayne and the haunted interiority of Batman. The second part of the essay demonstrates how Miller’s revisioning of Batman’s relationships exhibits a clear folding of ‘filiation’ into ‘affiliation’.

Batman’s Gothic Masculinity

Examining representations of masculinity in early nineteenth century America, especially in the writings of Washington Irving, David Anthony, adapting the work of Toby Ditz, argues a case for a
'gothic masculinity'. This gothic masculinity is constituted by 'concepts of male selfhood, one centered less and less around an interior form of self-possession and "inner being," and increasingly contingent upon a commodified and frequently "elusive" form of reputation' (2005: 115). Anthony attributes this form of masculinity to a shift in nineteenth century American economy that disempowers the men (116). But what is interesting is that recent commentaries on the Gothic have also drawn attention to the surface versus interior tension inherent to the genre. Allan Lloyd-Smith in his essay on postmodernism and the Gothic suggests that both discourses foreground an aesthetics of the surface rather than depth (196: 6-8). Catherine Spooner's gloss on this argument claims, in contrast, that alongside the fascination with surface, contemporary Gothic reveals a 'pull towards interiority' (Spooner 2006: 27).

Such a vision of conflicted Gothic masculinity, of interiority at odds with the outward appearance/reputation, of the aesthetics of the surface versus the psychological fears/anxieties, might well be a description of Batman's masculinity. Nathan Tipton in his account of gender in Miller's work offers an analysis suggesting such a Gothic masculinity, even though he does not use the term:

What are readers to make of an older man who is often described as a socialite, a confirmed bachelor, or a millionaire playboy with a propensity for adopting young boys as his "wards?" Eccentric? Definitely. Dangerous? Probably. Homosexual? Arguably. (2008: 321)

I will first forward two propositions in order to explore this Gothic masculinity of Miller's Batman:

(i) Bruce Wayne's is the masculinity of the surface, an apprational or 'cool' masculinity,
(ii) Batman, who lurks under Wayne's surface, is the tortured masculine interiority.
Miller's revision of the masculinity theme proceeds through specific routes. He first paints a masculinity that is all surface: fashion, playboy routine, wealth, 'cool'. He then proceeds to reveal a deeply haunted Batman lurking beneath the 'cool' masculine. It is the dynamic between these two forms - surface cool versus haunted interiority - that constitutes Batman and his Gothic masculinity. It is not either Wayne’s fashionably smooth surface or Batman’s tortured, fractured interiority but the constant play between the two that Miller draws attention to.

*TDKR* opens with numerous instances that paint a particular surface masculinity of Bruce Wayne: he is 'awful big' as the muggers note (13). Then Alfred, noting Wayne's excess drinking comments:  

I'm hoping that the next generation of the Wayne family shant face an empty wine cellar ... though given your social schedule of late, the prospects of their being a next generation ... (21)

Selina Kyle calls him to say 'I'm lonely' (26). *BYO* shows a younger Bruce Wayne being solicited by Holly, a child-prostitute under the protection of Selina (who will eventually become Catwoman, and Batman's now-on-now-off love) who anticipates Wayne's surface masculinity as playboy millionaire when she says: 'you know what I hate most about men, skunk? ... never met one' (10). In *TDKR* Jim Gordon is having a drink with Wayne after Batman's retirement and comments:  

Remember ... that playboy routine... you with your ginger ale, pretending it was champagne, fooling everybody. (12)

In *BYO* when the Gordons visit the Wayne mansion Bruce puts on his playboy routine, pretending to be drinking heavily in the company of a girl whose name he isn't sure of (80). Jim Gordon comments to his wife that 'any man who'd wear a cape - and it's a cape, not wings ... and hunt criminals might go pretty far to keep his secrets' (81). In *ASB* a semi-clad Vicki Vale mourns the absence of the
'man of steel' in Gotham when the door bell rings. It is Alfred, Bruce Wayne's butler who announces 'Young lady, Bruce Wayne requests your presence … Would you be available tonight?' (unpaginated). This is followed by panels showing Vale trying to get dressed, as she chants just one line 'I'm having a date with BRUCE WAYNE' (unpaginated, emphasis in original).

Having sketched a surface masculinity with the Bruce Wayne exterior of a fashionable, wealthy male-in-demand Miller proceeds inwards to reveal Wayne's haunted psyche. Immediately after the phone call from Selina Kyle in TDKR suggesting an imminent sexual encounter between her and Bruce Wayne, what we find a panel with Bruce Wayne's face marked with an 'X' - the shadow of the window bars (26). And then, frighteningly, a bat with fangs bared bursts in through the window on the same page. Suddenly, it is not the millionaire playboy of Kyle's fantasies we are looking at, or thinking of. For, Miller forces us to move from the 'cool' masculinity to a haunted one on the same page. The Dark Knight has just returned. The shift from a cool, desirable masculinity of Wayne to a haunted, grim one of Batman occurs on the same page.

By the late 1960s, Tim Nelson argues, there were deeper ambiguities and paradoxes about certain ideas of masculinity in America, and these were visible in the superhero comic genre (2004: 251). Philip Orr has argued that, 'compelled by a transitory personality, Bruce Wayne/Batman finds satisfaction only in a post-structuralist war against stable identities', which includes unstable sexual identities and unstable sexual relationships (169-170). It is not, as Orr seems to think, an unstable sexual identity that Batman presents but something anterior to this: an unstable gender identity.

Gothic selfhood, David Anthony has proposed, is 'built up on the radical contingencies of modern social and market relations rather than the stable foundations of rank or property' (115). In Miller these 'contingencies' are of crime-fighting, masquerade and role-playing.
It is a form of *apparitional* masculinity, based on the *ghostliness* of a playboy (who is never fully available for socializing, dating or marriage, since he is busy getting dressed up as a bat and beating up criminals, or spends time perched on a gargoyle overlooking Gotham) and a *theatrical* persona (who is never 'unmasked'). Between the roles, both *insubstantial* (since both Wayne and Batman are really personae, not persons), untraceable, unquantifiable, lies the apparitional masculinity of Batman. Following Anthony's suggestion that in nineteenth century America, male selfhood is based less on self-possession than on an elusive form of reputation (115), I propose that the apparitional masculinity of Batman is apparitional because it is based not on a strong sense of self (since Batman is a haunted being) but on a mysterious reputation: who is Batman? Where does Bruce Wayne disappear? Gothic masculinity is this apparitional masculinity, born entirely out of the surface versus depth dynamic.

This Gothic masculinity oscillating between surface and interiority is, I further propose, the consequence of drag. Indeed, drag is what produces Batman's Gothic masculinity. Kathy Gentile notes, via Judith Butler, that drag is the construction of hyperbolic gender (2009: 17). Judith Butler has argued that 'drag is subversive to the extent that it reflects on the imitative structure by which hegemonic gender is itself produced and disputes heterosexuality's claim on naturalness and originality' (1991: 125). Batman's tortured psyche that Miller underscores throughout (his nightmares, for starters) is masked under the 'cool' masculinity of Wayne. Wayne represents the social surface of the haunted knight. If, as Gentile and Butler argue, drag results in a hyperbolic gender, we can easily see the dynamic of surface versus interiority playing out in the Wayne/Batman persona as creating a hyperbolic masculinity.

Wayne's playboy is the drag that Batman puts on, just as the masked knight is the drag that Wayne takes recourse to. In both performances, there is a sexual relationship in the offing: Catwoman for
Batman and Selina Kyle, Vicki Vale for Bruce Wayne. There is, in other words, no way of determining which form of drag produces the sexual relationship. Batman dresses up as Bruce Wayne (and has sexual conquests), even as Bruce Wayne (un?) dresses to 'become' Batman. At an early moment in TDKR Carrie Kelley, who will metamorphose into Robin, is rescued by Batman from the mutants - and she refers to Batman’s masculine appeal: 'He’s a man ... about twelve-feet tall...' (34).

Jim Gordon’s reference to the role-playing and pretence (as opposed to the Joker’s constant emphasis on Batman’s homosexual tendencies towards young boys in Arkham Asylum and numerous other works - see Brooker 2000, chapter Two) in TDKR only underscores the thematic of drag. Thus it is neither the well-muscled body of Batman nor the wealthy Alpha male of Bruce Wayne that represents his 'true' masculinity, but the dynamic between the two that produces it.²

The Wayne role is the drag that presents a 'cool' masculinity of the superhero, and the Batman role is the drag that produces the haunted masculinity of the millionaire. Jeffrey Brown reading the superhero body writes:

While the superhero body represents in vividly graphic detail the muscularity, the confidence, the power that personifies the ideal of phallic masculinity, the alter ego - the identity that must be kept a secret - depicts the softness, the powerlessness, the insecurity associated with the feminized man. (2001: 174)

But Brown assumes that the powerlessness and softness of the alter-ego is genuine. What I want to argue is that this 'softness' of the alter-ego is itself drag, a role-playing, as Bruce Wayne demonstrates.

There is one further piece of evidence about the dynamic that produces the overall masculinity of Batman. Wayne is just a millionaire playboy. But Batman is a detective, with a deep knowledge in
forensics, chemistry and physics. 'Drag' here I take to mean more than just a costumed role-playing. Drag in the Wayne/Batman scenario is the constant interplay between the socialite Wayne and the sophisticated detective Batman. Writing about the Vision superhero Tim Nelson proposes that the inconsistency of spandex-clad muscled hero and the intellectual that Vision really was reflected the 'sophisticated anxieties of the audience, while still conforming to the muscular type' (253-4).³ This argument, I believe, works equally well with Batman. Batman's Gothic masculinity is precisely the tension between the surface masculinity of wealthy playboy and the masculine interiority of the sharp detective. This suggests, of course, that the masculinity of and in Batman is an uncertain, anxious one, constantly alternating between the two drag forms.

**Dark (Knight) Relations**

To say that Batman originates in the traumatic death of Bruce Wayne's parents is really to state a truism.

Richard Reynolds points out that the superhero 'often reaches maturity without having a relationship with his parents' (1992: 16). Maurice Horn famously described superheroes as possessing a 'mythical ontogeny', where a notional family and lineage still exists (1976: 80). Practically every cult superhero has suffered the loss of a family/member. Batman, the most famous of these, spends his lifetime mourning the death of his parents. Superman of course grows up on earth, away from his biological parents on Krypton. Spiderman loses his Uncle Ben and as a result embarks upon a career of fighting crime. In the case of the Fantastic Four a family of sorts exists anyway, since Johnny and Susan Storm are siblings and Reed Richards marries into the family.

A 'mythical ontogeny' is created when the superhero is relocated from her/his biological family into another one. The superhero comic in fact relies on this relocation. Alfred Pennyworth (Batman), the Kents (Superman) and Aunt May (Spider-man) offer the infant/
young superhero-to-be a family, and a set of acceptable origins. This surrogate family has a crucial role to play in the identity-making process of the superhero. Reynolds, however, addresses only one component of the superhero's filial/familial identity – that of origins. In Miller's Batman it is not any mythical ontogeny, birthing or origins alone that trouble us, it is the horizontal relationships into which Batman seeks to fit in or escape from that are crucial as well.

This section examines the range of relationships Batman engages in, including that of the family. Two prominent strands mark the space of the familial in the Batman universe: that of filiation and affiliation. By the former I intend to gesture at the paternal line of Batman's haunting, identity, role-playing and location. By the latter I indicate the non-paternal identity which constantly dovetails into the filial. Together filiations and affiliations mark the 'family' of Batman.

**Filiations**

Bruce Wayne and Batman are both troubled by their filial relations and filial roles. I argue that the filial is an unstable space not only because Bruce/Batman keeps recalling his father but because he tries repeatedly to fit himself into a filial relationship with others, and fails.

A monster is a being with superpowers who/that could, theoretically speaking, use his powers against mankind. But this anxiety, it appears, is alleviated to a considerable extent by personalizing the anti-crime campaign in the case of Batman and Spider-man - *they do this because they have lost their families to crime*. By locating the powers and the character itself within the family, the superhero comic book humanizes the superhero but it also socializes him. Guilt, compassion and responsibility in the superhero - traits that drive him to fight crime and ensure justice in the world - are traits instilled through a process of socialization, which occurs in or through the family. Thus the family remains the framework within which the superhero is not only born, but made. It mitigates the threat of the solitary individual
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whose powers might disrupt rather than reinforce the social order. A mythical ontogeny offers the superhero respectability and structures of socialization through which he acquires those qualities that help him serve the society better. It also erodes the possibilities of the superhero functioning as a maniacal individual. And this is where Batman’s absence of a fulfilling filial relationship, or mythical ontogeny, marks him out as different from Superman, Spider-man or other superheroes.

In Miller’s BYO the first visual locates the boy Bruce within the filial and familial relationships: the boy sits between the corpses of his parents (unpaginated). This sets the tone for the book as Miller sets about pulverizing us with the image of the haunted boy who grows up into the haunted knight. Soon after, when the story actually starts we are told that Bruce is ‘the twenty-five-year-old heir to the Wayne millions’, thus underscoring the filial and familial location. The Wayne millions serve as a synecdochic reminder of the Wayne people, his parents, who are no more. In any case, the Wayne family’s numerous trusts and charitable work are what keep the playboy Bruce busy and in the public eye.

In TDKR there are a number of both gynaecological and birthing images that serve to demonstrate the centrality of the family and filial relations in the making of Batman. Very early in the story we are told that ‘it’s been forty years since he [Batman] was born … born here’ (13, emphasis added). The reference is to the street where his parents had been killed. The street is at the ‘root’ of his haunting filiation, the topos of the family’s history (along with the Wayne mansion, as we shall see later). Later, in a full-page panel finally announcing the return of the Dark Knight, Miller uses the gynaecological and birthing registers again:

I’m a man of thirty … of twenty again. The rain on my chest is a baptism. I’m born again. (TDKR 34)

Batman’s problematic filial role vis à vis Robin has been the
subject of considerable debate. He teaches Robin various skills, sets examples and norms as a father should (he functions, Carsten Fogh Nielsen suggests, as a 'moral exemplar', 2008). Yet this father-son image is, Nathan Tipton points out, overlaid with images of homosociality and homoeroticism (Tipton 2008).

Then, when Miller does a 'gender troubling' (Tipton 327), by making Robin a girl in TDKR he also problematizes, rather seriously, the nature of the filial role of Batman. In a particularly problematic visualization in TDKR we are shown Robin wrapped up against a semi-clad Wayne standing up, her child-like body, with the sharp curves of her bottom sticking out as she grasps Wayne, with his white hair (a father-figure?), her legs off the ground (92). That she is a girl and a child is something Alfred draws Wayne’s attention to (TDKR 93). When Batman tells Robin ‘I will not tolerate insubordination' (TDKR 115), he is asserting his moral role as teacher and pater.

In ASB he adopts Robin, but the entire tale subverts the filial for the affiliation theme. Miller suggests, disconcertingly, that Batman kidnaps Dick Grayson after his (Grayson’s) parents are killed. Batman’s first remarks to the traumatized boy are anything but father-like: ‘On your feet soldier ... You’ve just been drafted into a war’ (ASB, unpaginated). Recalling the girl child wrapped against the semi-clad body of Batman in TDKR we see here a quivering Dick Grayson suspended in the air, legs kicking, held in Batman’s grip as Batman pronounces these words that would determine Grayson/Robin’s fate for ever afterwards. Later Batman’s thoughts are of a kidnapping: ‘I’ve just kidnapped a traumatized youngster’ (unpaginated). By the time we get to Miller’s All Star Batman & Robin the Boy Wonder Batman the father-figure is submerged completely under a darker, grimacing, threatening guardian whose bat-cave functions less as a place of refuge for the young Dick Grayson than as a juvenile correctional facility or military camp.

Filiations also work to trouble Batman when it comes to the
other members of his 'family'. In *TDKR* Alfred (himself a father-like figure – especially as played by Michael Caine in Tim Burton's film *Batman Begins*) comes down to find Wayne in the bat-cave, brooding. We need to pay some attention to the house where filiation is centered, for it is not what it seems.

The Wayne mansion is vintage Gothic. Its cavernous space recalls the labyrinths of the conventional Gothic. But this cavernous space is the epicenter of Wayne/Batman's familial relations: this space is part of his family's history, but also the space where he recalls 'relations' like Robin, whose costume is preserved in the Batcave. Alan Lloyd-Smith has proposed that 'the Gothic heritage becomes Heritage Gothic', where the 'use of conventional tropes are legitimized simply through previous practice' (cited in Spooner 34). But there is more to the 'heritage Gothic' than Lloyd-Smith recognizes. 'Heritage' is inextricably linked to inheritance and therefore, families, lineages and invented traditions. Bruce Wayne inherits the Wayne manor, wealth and the tradition of philanthropy from his illustrious family. It is the inherited wealth that facilitates his transformation into Batman, and it is the inherited sense of justice and 'doing good' that drives him toward crime-fighting. Overlaying this inheritance is the haunting memory of his parents, symbolized in the house/home itself (haunted houses are, of course, the staple of Gothic and horror fiction where, in many cases, the haunting is related to the family as death, disease or madness). There is one more complication: Batman treats Robin (Jason Todd) as his surrogate son, and therefore inheritor of the tradition of fighting crime. Robin's death terminates a lineage and, as in the case of his own parents (the Waynes), Robin's memories are also centered in the cavern in the form of the costume. The 'heritage Gothic' is both, the pride and trauma of his inheritance and the horror of recall (of his family's death, of Robin's death). By centering the 'heritage Gothic' in the neo-primitive cave that lies underneath the family home, the Batman theme of filiation and inherit-
ance is spatialized. The haunting memories are all the more troubling because the inheritance - and filiation - itself becomes a matter of anxiety. Hence we understand Alfred’s comments as directed at memorializing, haunting and inheritance: 'It's the spirits, I suspect, tends to make one sentimental', and noting that Robin’s (Jason Todd, the second Robin) costume is preserved there, adds, 'hardly the hour of antiques, is it?' (20). That Batman is troubled by memories of not only the death of his parents but also that of Jason Todd (whose death in TDKR is prophetic, since his death is described in *Batman: A Death in the Family*, that appeared two years after *TDKR*) suggests the power of filial and familial relations.

**Affiliations**

Filiations constitute only one component of the complicated familial set-up of Batman. Affiliations build on, substitute for and supplant the familial here. They also enable a reaching beyond the monomaniacal, solipsist and sociopathic 'condition' that is Batman.⁵

A new form of kinship and family, based on ideology and mutual support, marks the connections between Batman, Robin, Nightwing, Catwoman, Oracle and others in the 'Batman family'. The 'political family' as we could think of this form of affiliation, is one based on work, an ethical concern and a larger social role. The superheroes are tasked with saving humanity from various crises and catastrophes. While Batman, like all superheroes, takes to crime-fighting because of a filial-familial cause, he, like all of them, sustains it because of a larger social concern, and one in which the affiliation plays a strong sustaining role.

It is not adequate for Miller’s complex unraveling of Wayne’s tangle of relationships to merely treat him as the heir to the Wayne millions. After referring to his family/filial relations in *BYO*, in the very next panel – shaped like a TV screen (a favourite Miller device, which he used to such devastating effect in *TDKR*) - Bruce is described by the news anchor thus:
We'll keep you posted on Gotham's richest - and best looking - native son… (3)

Miller has relocated Bruce away from the filial-familial into something more: he is now the *city's son* itself. He has transcended the filial even as he is now the *city's son*, and hence responsible to the city-as-parent: this is now his *affiliation*.

Batman, it would seem, is haunted by his filial-familial and throughout the revisionary story arcs of the 1980s finds solace in a slew of other relationships. Batman moves from filiation to affiliation. The acolytes and assistants Batman surrounds himself with - Nightwing/Robin, Catwoman, Batgirl, Oracle - are often referred to as 'Team Batman' or 'the Batman family' (Southworth 2008: 159). This, I suggest, is an act of affiliation. When *TDKR* ends we are shown, in the final panel, Bruce Wayne/Batman deep in the caves beneath the now destroyed Wayne Manor, starting afresh (199). A new birth-chamber (which recalls the 'birth chamber' where Victor Frankenstein creates his 'monster' in Mary Shelley's classic) is being excavated - and the last line of the text, spoken by Wayne/Batman indicates a continuity of not only the birthing imagery but of life itself:

It begins here … This will be a good life … good enough. (199)

If filiation is about *roots* then affiliation suggests routes, the perambulation of a haunted figure through multiple loci, building networks of alternate, substitute or supplemental relationships: Catwoman, Batgirl, Robin, Nightwing. Indeed it could be argued that Batman constantly seeks to supplement his 'family' (as far as Miller's reinvention of Batman is concerned Bruce never leaves the shadow of his family).

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From the complicated Gothic masculinity of Wayne/Batman with its drag theme, Miller's Batman story arc redefines the superhero's family. The shift from filiation to affiliation, this essay has shown, is
the layering of Gothic masculinity with themes of inheritance, of 'political' relations and newer forms of relations. Miller makes it impossible to delineate the filial from the affiliated, just as the Gothic masculinity of Wayne/Batman is produced in the tension between surface-apparitional and haunted-interiority. Miller’s *All Star Batman & Robin the Boy Wonder* redefined Batman as 'a darker knight', but much of this creeping 'darkness' is prefigured in *BYO and TDKR*, and this has to do with the impossibility of a dominant masculinity or family motif. The Batman 'family' returns with every story arc, but it is a family that now *shares family resemblances with others*: Robin, Catwoman and even, problematically, with villains like TwoFace (in whom Batman sees, as TDKR puts it, a 'reflection') and the Joker. The (Dark) Knight's mind is a hall of mirrors where he constantly sees reflections, and refractions, of his 'family', and within every crime scene Batman sees reflected his dead family. Wherever and whenever the Dark Knight turns and returns, 'his' family (re)turns as well.

In the family vault is endless night.
Out of the family vault comes the Dark Knight.

*Notes & References*


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Understandably, this choice is programmatic. But a detailed study of the entire Batman collection within the scope of one essay would be impossible as well.

Miller also takes the ageless, physically flawless body of the superhero and subverts the convention when he gives us an aging, easily tired Batman in TDKR. Aaron Taylor has noted the shift in superhero bodies in the 1990s where, rather than the pin-up bodies of earlier age superheroes we see ‘the passive, contemplative bodies in Kingdom Come … looking the worse for wear’ (2007: 351).

Trina Robbins had argued about the hypersexualized bodies of superheroes and heroines: ‘The males sport enormous muscles, most of which don’t exist on real human beings, necks thicker than their heads, and chins bigger than the rest of their heads. Their expressions consist of gritted teeth and a permanent scowl. The females, on the other hand, possess balloon breasts and waists so small that if they were real humans they’d break in half...’ (2002, online). For a detailed, and fascinating study of the exercise regimen, muscularity, diet and strength-conditioning required to ‘become Batman’ from a biomedical point of view see Paul Zehr’s Becoming Batman: The Possibility of a Superhero (2008).

I have elsewhere drawn attention to the connection between weather, topoi and ecological themes and the Gothic in Miller’s TDKR (Nayar 2009).

Jason Bainbridge argues that superhero comics in the DC universe represent a ‘premodern ideal of law’ where it is ‘protective of community (Metropolis and Gotham) rather than individual (Luthor and Joker's) rights’ (2009: 67). Extending this line of thought one could argue that affiliations enable the superhero to move beyond the immediacy of a family trauma, relation or protector-role. Thus Batman begins with the family, but does not restrict himself to it, ever.