TOWARDS A PARALOGICS OF TEXTUAL TECHNOLOGIES
BATMAN, GLASNOST AND RELATIVISM IN CULTURAL STUDIES

I  Meaning Politics

It is widely believed in contemporary cultural studies that popular culture is "political" (see for example Fiske, *Understanding Popular Culture*). Under the influence of a certain reading of poststructuralism, however, this term "political" has taken on a particular inflexion. It is far from being either the popular version of the political (as in party politics and the rest) or the version one finds in almost any variety of political science. It constitutes its own peculiar (relatively esoteric) conception of the political — despite the fact that its "object domain" is, putatively, everyday life. Accordingly, the political is not to be read on the surface of a text; it may not even be registered within its covers at all. Instead, the political is assumed to be made up of "effects," particularly those which are said to produce certain kinds of human subject. After Althusser and Pêcheux, it's widely assumed that the way in which a text "interpellates" or "hails" a reader is somehow responsible (in part, along with other textual effects) for what kind of "political" subject that reader can be (Althusser, "Ideology"; Pêcheux, "Discourse"). In this way, the domain of political resistance is shifted in a subjective arc — with readers being asked by critics to redirect their reading practices, to refuse "dominant modes" of texts' subject-productive strategies and to read with other, more local, agendas. Thus Fiske, for example, has Australian Aborigines making "Third World understandings of Rambo," constructing Rambo as a Black (via his camouflage) who seeks vengeance against Whites, read by most others as Indo-Chinese (166).

No doubt this could, sometimes does, and perhaps should occur. But local instances alone cannot guarantee any general statement about textual meaning. At the extreme, such identifications of local "transgressions" with global political changes lead to a fatuous idealism. Thus:

Madonna's videos contain complex intercultural critiques. When she grabs her crotch on-stage, the social order is effectively transgressed.

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When Rambo destroys Indo-Chinese peasants, no doubt he *can* be read as destroying white cultural hegemony. When Madonna plays with her crotch, no doubt she can be read as playing with patriarchal domination. But there is no logic in the world which will (in the strict sense) identify the former terms with the latter. Everything else suggests otherwise — and therefore that there has to be a limit to the idealism of contemporary cultural studies. Without such a limit, cultural theories can indefinitely
constitute their own empirical objects, at will — and therefore provide always already perfect ways of analysing the objects they, themselves, constitute. In some audience research, for example, the selective construction and a priori understanding of an investigated “minority” community (women, Blacks, gays, for instance) lends itself to political-moral positionings which are unassailable whether or not the research has any other recognisable value. Critiques of such work (on, for example, methodological grounds) can always be deflected by returning to such self-evidently moral terrains. Out of this, paradoxically, comes a research orthodoxy which, at the extremes, does little but reproduce what it always already knew, regardless of any “evidence.” Below, we refer to this in terms of a new totalisation which only appears to have relativistic justifications.

What is most problematic with this revival of what Eagleton once called “the Readers’ Liberation Movement,” in an essay entitled “The Revolt of the Reader,” is its imprecise conception of the political — a conception which occasionally provokes the slogan that “everything is political,” and which consequently leaves the political with no outside, no other and hence (on some theories) no meaning. And so, at the same time, this totalisation of the political obviates any critique of its own position. Since poststructuralism effectively rendered any concept of reality (apart from “reality-effects”) illicit, it is as if the “referent” of a sign, an expression or a text, rather than being “deleted” or “forgotten,” should simply be transformed from being an autonomous empirical “object” into being a socially constructed political “effect” (see, for example, Coward and Ellis).

But just as traditional realism neglected the textual, swamping the domain of interpretation with a constant but easy barrage of “what really exists,” so this recent “politician” movement swamps the same domain with a singular textual correlative — albeit a subtler and finer one. The result, the textual practice, however, is similar: any text becomes inspectable for a relatively singular, general process of effectivity. Something is still hidden “behind” the text — but one is no longer supposed to find “the real world” there. For “the world” is held at one remove by constructional effects. Yet there is a quite plausible argument according to which those very constructional effects have simply taken up residence in the place vacated by the real. Accordingly, the “form” of the theory remains the same; only the “contents” have been adjusted to cope with a supposedly postmodern world fraught with indeterminacy, undecidability and the rest.

The grounds for objection against the extremes of relativism which we are attempting to mount here do not assume that those extremes are mistaken. The objection is not that they neglect some kind of obvious and overt political world, made of materials directly available to the senses; it is not that we require a return to a magic-Marxist version of the real, and so on. In fact, far from it. The grounds for the objection are quite relativist in their own right, but in another sense. First: it may be that relativism in contemporary cultural studies, by working to expand rather than
contract textual meanings, actually instantiates a particular form of textual technology which it could be investigating rather than simply repeating (a point discussed later). Second: the way in which relativism is currently interpreted and used in cultural studies leads to certain meanings of the term “political” being cut off — the term is, perhaps paradoxically, contracted rather than expanded. The political becomes monolithic. Not that the supposed “political effects” of popular cultural texts are considered all to point in the direction of a general political orthodoxy, a single class or power structure and so forth — for, as we have seen, the more open and subversive the reading, the greater its celebration by the new idealists. “Monolithic” has a different meaning altogether here; it points to the singular theoretical-analytic procedure whereby the critic reads of or infers from a text its possible reading-effects, its modes of interpellation and so forth. The underlying generalising statement (in the sense Foucault develops in The Archaeology of Knowledge, 79-117) has shifted from the impulse to connect any text with its “objective correlative” to the parallel impulse to connect it with its “subject-produtional effectivity.” Our objection is no more and no less to the singularity of the impulse in each case. Hence: relativism.\(^4\)

The implied criticism of the political should not be taken as an argument against “political readings” as such. Rather it is an argument for a view of politics closer to the classical Aristotelian and Machiavellian tradition. In its unreconstructed form, this tradition conceives the domain of politics, the polis, as the “natural habitat” of social beings, the species-appropriate mode of being in the world — much as forests are to bears and water to fish.

[M]an is by nature a political animal, it is his nature to live in a state. He who by his nature . . . has no city, no state is either too bad or too good, either sub-human or super-human. [M]an is a political animal in a sense in which a bee is not . . . . [F]or the purposes of making man a political animal . . . [nature] has endowed him alone among the animals with the power of reasoned speech. (Aristotle, The Politics 28)

Politics is therefore the highest expression of social moral purpose. At the same time, for Machiavelli, it is also a technical mode of rational calculation.\(^5\) Such a mode of calculation may be the means by which social moral purposes are concretely realised or by which specific interests antagonistic to such purposes arise.

A contemporary reconstruction of the Aristotelian/Machiavellian conception of the political would tie moral questions to questions of meaning, and modes of rational calculation to questions of specific social practices. It would in effect be a theory of politics as a theory of social meaning. While with Derrida we must concede that meaning is indeterminate in principle (that is, no signification can be tied to a definite, singular, once-and-for-all object or meaning), it nevertheless remains the case that specific communities’ interests require them to operate upon that “in-principle” indeterminacy in quite determinate ways. (Though, to be sure, those determinate ways may happen to
include the promotion, by a community, of a sign's indeterminacy.)

By "community" we mean specific civic fragments, constituting (and
equally constituted by) communicative exchanges which are relatively
peculiar to them. At one extreme would be esoteric communities, such
as a hermetic religious order which is all but impregnable from the
outside; at the other extreme would be highly non-specific communities,
with very broad self-conceptions of membership, such as TV audiences,
and so on. Given this array of possibilities, the notion of "interests" is
necessarily a fuzzy one which cannot be rendered by a general theory of
interests, such as one might find in Habermas (Knowledge and Human
Interests) or Hindess (Political Choice and Social Structure).

Interests must consequently be non-predictable except in general
outline, and available in their specifics only upon a piecemeal and local
inspection. This effectively rules out grand theories of cultural production
and cultural consumption. It puts the onus instead upon a discursive
analysis of particular actor networks, technologies of textual exchange,
circuits of communicational and textual effectivity, traditions of exegesis,
commentary and critical practice — to name only a few. In such an
analysis, a "popular art" text such as a comic would be inspected not so
much for its "intratextual" properties as for its specific uptake by and within
a community with respect to its conditions and limits of interpretative
possibility.

Thus textual meaning is neither so definite as to be readable from the
surface of the text nor so indefinite as to be without socially limiting
conditions. Where normative and singular readings are made, these are
not sacrosanct or definitive meanings but specific techniques of "uptake"
—and the same applies equally to deliberately dispersive readings, namely
such things as postmodernist celebrations of polymorphousness and
difference. (The concept of uptake is obviously a provisional one here;
for it is impossible to imagine a sign, an expression, or a text existing in
some state prior to its uptake. Signs are always already taken up.) As an
initial hypothesis we can imagine an array of social practices extending
from an unrealisable, fully limited semiosis on the one hand to an equally
unrealisable, totally unlimited semiosis on the other (see Eco, Limits 23-
43). The question of the political is identical with the empirical location
of any specific instance on this array, which we refer to as a text's
"indexical potential." And this is so because any such location will be the
effect of specific material practices "upon" a text rather than of the text's
"intrinsic" properties. (We take this cue from Eric Michaels in, for
example, "A Model of Teleported Texts.")

Rather than general theories it should now be obvious that we wish
to recommend a piecemeal attention to material instances of, to invoke
a shorthand, "information handling," and therefore to reading and
writing technologies, or, in another terminology, language games.6 In
saying this, we wish to indicate a domain of analysis constituted, to be
sure, by material practices but which at the same time does not run
counter to a "discursivist" or "textualist" orientation. (Grounds for this
can be found in the work of Michel Foucault and in its uptake; see for
example, O'Regan; Prow). In fact, if we are correct in our theorisation of the “political” in terms of a nexus between meaning and social action, the two are inseparable. To understand the meaning of, say, a TV text we would need to “follow the actors” (and not just those on screen), much as Latour “follows” scientists and engineers in Science in Action. By looking at how people handle this TV text, from its inception, via its dissemination, through to conversations about it in a living room, and beyond, we are thereby looking at what should properly be called its meaning. The conditions (the limit/ range) of how this happens, in any specific case, we take to be what is called “the political.”

Taking this perspective will enable us to see what is generally posed as a competition over the meaning of the work and its correct interpretation in as many available ways of apprehending it. Our research question could be reduced to this: what are the limits and range of that availability in any given case? We want to turn a contestation over theories and types of meaning into a topic for empirical analysis, oriented to actual cases of limits and ranges of meaning(s). Here the notion of a limit/ range, taken together, implying both actional constraint and actional enablement, and both the “protection” of familiar meanings as well as an “openness” to others, would be (in its practical instantiations), as we have said, coterminus with the political — or with what Eco (after Peirce) calls the “Habit” (see Eco, Limits 39, where the Habit is defined as “the disposition to act upon the world”). This would imply attention not only to what are traditionally conceived of as “audience readings” but also to the meanings generated in the processes of production, exhibition, distribution, regulation, sales and so forth. Moreover it implies a position close to Eric Michaels’ inflexion of “audience research” which does not contrast audience meanings (as a matter of principle) with disseminating structures (as Fiske believes it does); nor does it counterpose close attention to audiences and their viewing settings against textual analysis (see the “Essays After Eric Michaels” which make up Continuum 3:2).

By comparison with this “limit/ range” model, cultural studies’ relativism is conservative (monolithic). To get a purchase on this we want to return to Harold Garfinkel’s notions of indexicality and recipient design and some of the upshots of Bruno Latour’s inspection of scientific documentation. Garfinkel argues that while all linguistic expressions are indexical — that is, while their meanings will depend on social situations of usage — “pure” indexicality rarely emerges in situ since local actors work on indexical expressions so as to limit the relevant fields of meaning. Although indexicality can never be repaired in any complete and perfect sense, such that expressions become “objective,” it is possible to consider social practice in terms of the everyday accomplishment of relative repair on indexicals, an accomplishment for which texts may be specifically designed. In a similar way, Latour argues that while all statements or expressions are open to a degree of indexicality or indeterminacy in principle, specific communities work hard, in and as their professional and lay practices, to narrow the bandwidth of any expression’s plurality of readings, setting limits to protect it from intrusion and polysemy.
Scientific communities, in particular, invest a great deal of their self-identity in monitoring a body of textual knowledge as it is disseminated. Not only do they ensure that only certain publics can access it — so that, for example, it alters and changes into a different generic pattern once it is popularised — but they also ensure that certain procedures must be followed in order for a reading to constitute a competent reading. The classic instance of this is when a scientific statement must be worked through (for example, by “using” it to reperform a laboratory procedure) in order for “what it means” to be evident. Less concrete instances occur in mathematics where, for example, certain calculative manipulations must be able to be made before the reader can move from one stage of a theorem’s proof to another.

Note that this does not mean that scientific texts are intrinsically “closed” in Eco’s sense (Role of the Reader). (Indeed, we want to show that “opening” and “closing” are not intratextual properties so much as social practices which are operable, in principle, on any text. In fact, the terms “opening” and “closing” best refer only to tendencies of those social practices — rather than, say, to “types” of them.) No text can, in principle, be closed in any ultimate way — just as no expression’s indexicality can be completely deleted as a practical possibility. Other uses and other meanings could, under certain conditions, be provided for it. But remaining at the level of principle ignores the fact that those “certain conditions” may be impossible in a particular form of life; it ignores the material practices that surround the dissemination of (say, scientific) texts; and it ignores the fact that certain texts are clearly recipient designed in order to meet the requirements of practical “closings.” There may be an “unsatisfiable programmatic distinction and substitutability of objective for indexical expressions” (Garfinkel), but this is not to say that the attempt is never made in practice. In fact, Derrida has argued that the (unsatisfiable) attempt to do so — that is, to anchor expressions to absolute contents — has been the underlying impulse of all Western thought, an impulse which (on its own self-understanding) could eventually lead the objective contents of the world to manifest themselves in their absolute absence, outside thought and language (Derrida, Of Grammatology). Unfortunately, a good deal of critical theory after Derrida has concentrated only on the negative (“unsatisfiability”) aspect of this hypothesis, neglecting a descriptive study of the positive material practices by which specific communities have sought to delimit the indexical range of their signs, expressions, texts and so forth. In this sense, it is possible to be thoroughly Derridean in terms of the indefiniteness of meaning in principle while, at the same time, investigating the limits in practice imposed in the face of this indefiniteness (even, at the extreme, in denial of it) according to particular Habits.

On the other side of this limit, however, lies another which remains largely undocumented. At present it must be only a suspicion which would run as follows: if some texts are recipient designed in order to be read within communities which have an impulse to close off the indexical range of their readings, there are others which are designed and deployed
in the opposite direction; namely, to meet a community requirement that they be read under the impulse of indeterminacy. The idea is quite a radical one if it extends into the domain of the popular and beyond, say, the postmodern novel, a form which clearly operates within a reading/writing technology which valorises the instability of textual meaning. This would mean more than the trivial assertion that popular song lyrics (again, for example) are constructed so as to involve “ambiguity.” It would mean that the ensemble of textual practices from which a popular “phenomenon” (that is, a phenomenon such as Madonna or Rambo — and hence neither album/film, nor character, nor “real world” personage) was constructed would be constructed in such a way as to achieve its mass status by being left open to a multiple range of interpretations. The thesis would be: mass culture is mass culture as such because it is designed to be read, and comes to be read, polyvocally — which includes “subversely” — since masses are not unified but consist of diverse but highly numerous collections of reading technologies. Popularity is a function of textual “corruptibility.” (Rather obvious examples of popular texts which appear to be designed for this kind of uptake would be the TV series Twin Peaks and the film Total Recall.) Esoteric culture on the other hand, instantiated by some (but not all) scientific reading and writing technologies, is designed in the opposite direction. Its effectiveness is a function of its relative stability. However, “corruptibility” and “stability” are no more than shorthand for specific corrupting and stabilising actions. More accurately, we should look to the specific kinds of corrupting and stabilising actions at work in particular instances of these “cultures.” Relatively esoteric cultures will handle corruption and stabilising in ways which are distinct from “popular artistic” formations. Concrete nexuses between these “tendencies” are not always linear or straightforward; for example, the so-called “stabilising” tendencies of science may be the basis for the remakings of our world via new technological forms.

If this were the case, then the discovery of multiple subversive readings for Rambo, Madonna or shampoo adverts (albeit in the extreme, by communities which are regarded, macro-politically, as minorities — Aborigines, teenage girls, gays) (Foss, 23-26) would be no discovery at all. It would merely be a reiteration of a kind of industrial design (a reading/writing technology on language game whose very social cohesion or “habit” is provided by a normative indeterminacy and instability). What would be radical would be paradoxically for some, be an “aestheticising” or “textualising” (a rendering polyvocal and unstable) of esoteric texts, circulating in communities whose existence requires the maintenance of normatively singular readings of which mass cultural texts would not necessarily be an example; along with an equally paradoxical closing off of the meanings of texts in communities which permit or require the maintenance of normatively plural readings and disparate circulations. It would perhaps be to de-linearise some scientific modes of production and consumption and to divest some popular modes of their semantic spread. Or in a slogan: one interpretation for Rambo;
many for Planck’s constant.11 That would seem to work against the grain of a particular couple of dominant reading/writing technologies and forms of recipient design in the two relevant “industries” — celebrating neither interpretative singularity nor interpretative indefiniteness as a monolithic principle (or as the “foundation” of a theory of meaning), but working directly against whichever tendency appeared to prevail in any given case. (Then there would be the question of whether only directly opposite readings were subversive. Indeed, it might be argued that the continuation of a line through 180 degrees is more maintenance than subversion.) In any case, the pressing task remains an empirical one: namely discovering the in situ political operations of reading/writing communities.

One needs to be cautious here not to conflate the scientific with the will to singular meanings or the popular with the will to meaning diversity. The two do not map so clearly. For example, there can be considerable interpretative range for some natural science objects such as the structure of the human immuno-deficiency virus. Indeed as Gilbert and Mulkay show, even apparently settled areas of scientific agreement may be, as it were, “forced” by a particular scientific community, when even a brief inspection of the materials shows a diverse range of understandings in practice (112-40). Terms used in the humanities and social sciences (“discourse,” “politics,” “meaning,” “desire,” “pleasure,” and so on, not to mention “sentence,” “person,” “market,” “city”) are highly susceptible to this process of forced consensus. If anything, an ethnography of communicative exchanges between semioticians would no doubt reveal an even greater range of conceptual flux than practitioners would avow. By the same token, popular texts can be handled in such a way as severely to delimit their indexical potential — witness tele-evangelism. Immediately below, in the analysis of a popular comic, moreover, we show how a relatively open range of designed meanings reaches a limit at certain points where competent readers, for certain passages, have available an equally relatively narrow bandwidth of interpretability. The investigation to follow is an illustration only of the investigative procedures we have advocated above. That is, it is based on a two year “ethnography” in which one of the investigators became a participant-observer of and in a local community of readers. In this sense, while the investigation appears “textualist,” this is only to the degree that the community in question is itself a decidedly “textualist” community, given the almost tautological and definitive importance to it of comics not as inert books but as carefully interpreted texts such that interpretations are intelligible with reference to community based competencies. Hence our “findings” are necessarily findings from within that community and not stipulations about absolute potentials and limits for reading the comic form as such.
II Closing Openings

One site of presumed “pleasure” and readerly intervention is the comic book, a popular cultural text par excellence. Comics are assumed to open up a space in the more restricted networks of official domains of literacy by combining a major visual element with a minor verbal one — but, at the same time, they are presumed to be possible “vehicles” for socio-political modes of discourse. For example, William Gibson writes of the “graphic novel” version of his cyberpunk novel, *Neuromancer*.

Translation is a peculiar business, particularly for monoglot novelists who find themselves in print in languages they know they’ll never learn to read. . . . The edition in front of you is something else: it’s been translated into a language I can read, one I’ve known for a long time. Walt Kelly taught me to read. I was having trouble, in school, with reading; my mother, for some reason, decided the thing to do was to read to me from *I Go Pogo*. It worked. Soon I was reading myself to sleep with Albert and Pogo, unaware that I was simultaneously absorbing mega-doses of Mr Kelly’s gently savage political satire. It probably had something to do with the pictures.

(Introduction, *William Gibson’s Neuromancer*, n.p.)

Considering the comic as a “translation” is a very interesting metaphor since it requires that there be a (visual/verbal) language of comics into which, for example, a text originally composed in another language can be shifted. It suggests, then, a specific language community which writes and reads this language — yet one for whom any description of that community would be relatively “transparent” to it. That is, community membership is open to anyone with eyesight, a dollar and a local newsagent. Unlike many communities (bio-chemists, for example) it does not make interactive contact with other members obligatory — though it does provide for it in the form of readers’ pages, comic conventions and fanzine exchanges. To this extent, under certain circumstances, it could allow any member a relatively unconstrained range of possible readings — that is, readings which need not be checked against any community consensus. However, when readers do engage in exchanges of this kind, more concrete community competences may form, in order to check, extend, or even constrain the range of possible readings. Such membership-repair and gatekeeping functions make reading technologies a matter of public record. We assume the same would be true for a wide range of TV and film audiences.

Moreover, it is possible to identify in certain New Wave comics a definite recipient design towards this indeterminacy — starting with the “underground” comics of the 1970s — many of which have now been bought by the big comic stables, particularly Marvel. A case in point is *Groot: The Wanderer* (Marvel) where narratorial voices and narratorial characters (as well as the writers in “Groot-grams,” the almost obligatory letters page) practically compete to be more uncertain than each other as to what may or may not be happening within the non-standardly-
arranged frames, and also within the community of readers itself. Thus, from "Groo-grams":

A few months ago I was captured by a small group of Iranian terrorists, and forced to write a letter to Groo (God bless him). In it I praised Groo (may he rest in Peace), saying really odd things like "Make me Groo." I actually think it was a quite humorous letter. This is why I knew it would not see print. I don't believe a funny letter has ever appeared in Groo (as a matter of fact, nothing funny has). Now that I have been released, I can write of my own free will, and correct the errors of the Iranians. (Make me Groo.) Groo is not funny, he is stupid. He doesn't wear pants. Do you find a cat on Groo's head, on the cover of issue #20 funny? I don't. Mulch is stupid too. Note I asked my brother to write this for me (that's me), so he'll probably stick parentheses all over the place, in places they should not be (make me Groo). So until my brother actually writes a real letter to Groo (may he rest in peace), instead of putting little messages all through this Groo letter (make me Groo). Hasta Luego.

Joel Pierce
N.K., Rhode Island
P.S. Please print this letter twice.

(Groo the Wanderer (Marvel Comics), 2. #68 (Aug 1990): 31)

The letter is printed twice. The limits, in Groo, are paradoxically thus: everything is allowed except a literal reading.

Clearly, then, the comic genre involves a textual and disseminatory economy which, at one extreme, can be highly laissez-faire. Subversive readings, in the Fiskean sense, abound, are encouraged, even required. Thus, for Tony Bennett: "Batman 1989 was, above all, a self-consciously double-levelled Batman calling for a similarly double-levelled reading response" (ix). But, as we want to show below, this polymorphous hermeneutic can, if extended into a general principle, be quite politically problematic. A case in point is some recent developments in the Batman texts themselves; developments which are perhaps more subtle and convoluted than the term "double-levelled" can adequately capture.

Batman has changed a good deal in the last three to four years — some readers even dating this change to the early 1970s (see Feldman 23). It barely resembles the simplistic mock-warfare between the outrageously wooden Batman-and-Robin (on the side of good) and a variety of comic crims (Catwoman, Riddler, Joker, etc.) which was so successfully satirised in the 1966 Batman TV series (with Adam West and Burt Ward), complete with "Holy this" and "Holy that" from Robin and plenty of ZAPs and POWs. In a move which both influenced and was influenced by the Batman movie, directed by Tim Burton, the Batman character ceased to be the Caped Crusader and became The Dark Knight. (Another feature of the change has been the crediting of multiple "authors" on the front covers of each comic. Credits are usually given for "Script," or "Writer," "Penciller" and "Inker.") Eventually the phenomenon diversified into a number of different forms, including the Detective Comics series (allowing
a slightly weirder set of possibilities to prevail), and a highly adult spooker called Legends of the Dark Knight, as well as the "standard format" Batman comics themselves. Total outlay for anyone keeping up with this range of comics (which frequently cross over and continue each other's stories — or even spill into other comics altogether, as in the celebrated Batman/Judge Dredd crossover) is $US42.00 per annual subscription, with a slightly higher cost if bought each month on the news stands. The current multiplier for Australian dollars in the comic trade is 1.7 and rising. The publishers of all Batman comic varieties, DC Comics Inc., is a wholly-owned Warner Brothers company. Perhaps more importantly, there exist massive generic differences between the various formats which is, in itself, an instance of dispersal. This difference and dispersal suggests quite distinct readership trajectories, both at the level of (some) formats and between them. Here it should be remembered that comic books had their origins in the daily newspaper comic strips; that they were initially aimed at quite a different audience; that the heyday of comics was during and after the Second World War, with comics designed for the "sex and heroics" market of troops on active service who took easily to the portable, disposable and quickly consumed comic artform; that it was only in the 1950s that comics came to be thought of as a kids' product (largely under the influence of social psychology and its interest in "juvenile delinquency"); so that, since the seventies, it has been an uphill battle for comic writers and publishers to re-establish the "original" adult market. In this sense, the use of the epithet "kidult" is only appropriate to comics as one possibility among many. DC Comics, for example, used to include (inside front covers) a catalogue entitled "DC List This Week," with each publication followed by a code showing its "quality" and its "audience." The "legend" to the list included the following types: "Standard Format," "New Format," "Deluxe Format," "Available at Select Outlets," "Prestige Format," "Graphic Novel," "Collected Edition," "Suggested for Mature Readers." (Although the legend and the list were included in almost every publication, this particular version is from Skreemer, #4 (Aug. 1989) which is, itself, marked "Suggested for Mature Readers."\)

In the process of this shift in markets and genre-alteration, Batman has worked alone, without Robin, for most issues, Dick Grayson having graduated to superhero status in his own right, as Nightwing, and Jason Todd having been savagely murdered by the Joker — though, throughout 1990, each issue has worked through a long process of grooming an indecisive Tim Drake for Robin-hood. This move towards the lone individual has brought with it a new brooding and existentially self-doubting Batman — a "new man" unsure of his position in the world, reflecting on his own possible cowardice in hiding behind a mask, considering his closeness to the underworld, even coming to think of time to time that he is responsible for the very existence of certain criminals by virtue of being the paradigmatic agent of law enforcement, and thus constituting a space of opposition, a challenge to the one who would be the equal and opposite ultimate criminal. Accordingly the
graphics have changed from the earlier schematic comic-book heroics and towards a graphically "realist" representation of "unreal" Gothic horror. The paradigm is less the detective (though a highly distorted version of it remains in the Detective Comics variation) and more the Dostoyevskian existential protagonist, contemplating good and evil as abstract concepts. At the same time, the official cultural "level" of the stories has been upgraded from a situation in which practically no intertextual references were required to one almost teeming with external points of contact, literary, cultural and political. In the previously mentioned issue of DC's Skreemer (#4), the story begins with the following reflection: "I am intrigued by the philosophy of Giovanni Vico, who suggested that history is a giant wheel, with four segments or ages... Each segment divided by the voice of God, the sound of thunder, a fall..." (2, ellipses and stress in original). At page 6, the stream-of-consciousness narration picks up on Finnegans Wake, and so on. In Batman #454, the Riddler — now transformed into a psychopath and carrying out an ancient American curse left in (or as!) the city itself by a late eighteenth-century coven of secret occult worshippers, including no less than Thomas Jefferson himself — leaves a trail of moribund babies across the grid of Gotham City. Tracking them across the computerised map in the Batcave, with the aid of densely hermeneutic clues left behind each time the Riddler escapes, Batman begins to ponder the latest message: "Only one left, a little boy crawler. You'll find lots of him, though shorter and taller." While Batman is stumped, Alfred the Butler reflects as follows: Alfred: Lots of him? Lots? Lots, as in an auction, perhaps? As in The Crying of Lot 49? Batman: What's that? Alfred: A novel, by Thomas Pynchon, one of your American writers. Rather good, actually, though I'm more of an Anthony Burgess man myself. Batman: Very interesting Alfred. I'm feeding in details of where the Riddler's clues have led us so far. Maybe there'll be a pattern. (Batman #454 (Sept. 1990): 3) Even more self-reflexive than this, however, was the three-part Detective Comics sequence (#622-24) which investigated the radical effects on Batman of the introduction of a Batman comic to Gotham City. The sequence's covers were covers from the comic-within and it included long full-page reproductions of the bizarre meta-Batman, complete with sub-Brechtian details of comic composition, layout and drawing techniques. But for all this readerly latitude, there's a bottom line, a point where the text closes off interpretation, a limit beyond which any reader who is to remain competent has only a single line of interpretative choice. And this is precisely at the point of the comics' articulation with macro-politics. There is a prefiguring of this in the initiation of Tim Drake (later to become the third Robin) into self-reliant crime fighting. His first, self-chosen, assignment begins with his emerging position as a computer hacker on the side of the law. He tracks down a young computer
"criminal" (the Moneyspider) who is siphoning off millions of small amounts from corporate bank accounts and crediting them to Third World countries. Tim busts the Moneyspider in his room in a juvenile correction centre — a room complete with a large red circled "A," issues of Black Flag, Bakunin, etc. The boy's real name is "Anarky," which is in fact a reprise, Anarky having appeared as a villain in an earlier issue. As the boy is taken away he screams back at Tim: "Capitalist scum! Running dog lackey of the imperialist warmongers. The people know your face! We won't forget! When the revolution comes, you're first on the list!" (#620: 21). (A British reader, Paul Richmond, adds: "you can't let that threat go unfufilled"; "Detective Comments," Batman Detective #624 (Dec. 1990): 24).

Almost all the new Batman adversaries are seen to have positive characteristics, and this is also true of the revamps: the Riddler is now highly intelligent, if psychopathic; the Joker is subtly witty, even though his jokes bear a strong relation to his bizarre unconscious, and so on. But the adversaries of American capitalism have no positive features. In this sense, the bottom line in interpreting Batman comes when any kind of American self-identity is threatened. The reader, whoever he or she may be in any other sense, is always and without fail "interpellated" as an imaginary American — if only for the duration of the reading. But, in an important sense, that Americanité — since it is supposed to be distributed across the whole social body of at least one nation — can only get its self-understanding from the outside, from another imaginary which is specifically not American. Hence a totally deheroised Other has to emerge, diegetically, from time to time — one with all the marks of the Outside. Perhaps since Gorbachev, America (and even more so Batman's America) has had a cultural crisis in this respect: no clear, legitimate and strongly marked Other from which American self-identity can emerge; in its place only a string of smaller others, a loose thread for that identity to hang on to — South Africa for a while (Lethal Weapon II), Japanese trading markets (Punisher comic), Saddam Hussein for another few months (Indiana Jones, forthcoming) and so on (see McFoul, "What's Left").

A three-part serial in March, April and May of 1990 (Batman #445-47), "When the Earth Dies," took the unusual step of removing Batman from Gotham City and from America altogether. This is not unprecedented: the four part Detective series, "Rite of Passage," involved Batman in a trip to the Caribbean to hunt out the voodoo leader called The Obeah Man; but it is unusual in the sense that recent Batman lore has been attempting to establish the hero as an extension of the city. In the "Dark Knight/Dark City" sequence (#451-54), particularly, Batman's brooding and doubtful interior is directly and explicitly mapped on to Gotham's own deep and murky history. "When the Earth Dies" opens with Batman fighting the Slasher, a serial killer who uses power tools to carve up his victims. (The Slasher sets up a classic ambiguity for the new Batman; his aim is to carve up the city's "vermin," but when Batman comes to inflict justice upon him, the Slasher himself is referred to, directly, by Batman, as "vermin".)
The opening reads: 

[Batman] knows this city. He knows every street, every intersection, every back alley, every sewer, every tunnel. All of Gotham is his city. Not just the Upper East Side Park Row brownstones, or the midtown business district, or the downtown financial areas. The Black and Spanish ghettos, the parks filled with transients, the Bowery with its addicts, they are part of his city too. And they are also his to protect. (#445:1)

Hence the scene is set for a connection between Batman, hence Gotham, hence America, and its other — so that there is a complex chain of associational signification, allowing multiplicities and diversities, particularly at the points where connotative and meta-significative shifts occur. As a wealthy capitalist, Bruce Wayne, Batman flies to the USSR, ostensibly to aid the ailing economy by starting a branch of Wayne Enterprises there. His real but secret mission, however, is as Batman. The conceit is that any enemy of Glasnost is an enemy not just of the USSR (“Russia” throughout the comic) but of Bush’s new world order. The enemy, in this case, has a previous connection with Batman. In an earlier sequence, “Ten Nights of the Beast,” America had been threatened by a KGB agent — the KGBeast — trying to assassinate the US President. Naturally Bats gets to sort him out. Early on in “When the Earth Dies,” a Soviet official explains to Commissioner Gordon that the Beast was (has been reinterpreted as?) a “renegade” (#445:5). It turns out that the Beast now has a protégé, the NKVDemon, whose mission is to kill the top ten men in the Gorbachev régime because of their Glasnostian crimes against true Marxism (sometimes called “Stalinism” in the comic, though the Demon mostly seems to idolise Lenin).

Again, the Demon has none of the positive characteristics of Batman’s American adversaries. He’s a monster of huge proportions, complete with a whole armoury of weapons in his Hammer-and-Sickle utility belt, a red devil’s mask with horns, over-sized incisors and a wicked line in overdone Boy-Meets-Tractor Marxism. At first meeting, as they fight, he continues to talk, drooling all the while: “The Beast trained me, American. He fed me special steroids, making me stronger than any man. . . . My skin was hardened, my nerves partially deadened so I cannot feel pain. I am virtually impervious to harm” (#445:18). This old USSR, incarnate in one who is barely a man but also more than a man, fights dirty. It takes steroids to give it unfair advantage in competition. It has no real human sensations. Its end is to destroy America (Batman) and any means will justify that end. At the same time, it is shown to take a perverse pleasure in being and doing all this.

Batman (to the Demon): I don’t fight for the thrill of battle. And I don’t fight unless there’s no recourse. (#445:19)

However, the Demon gets away when Batman calls in Soviet police reinforcements. He gets away because, in a repetition of the issue’s opening words, now applied to villain rather than hero, “He knows this city. He knows every street, every intersection, every back alley, every . . . ” In this sense, the repetition puts the Demon, more squarely than any
other previous adversary, in direct opposition to Batman in “content,”
while sharing his structural position within an inverted America. It is to
this extent that a very narrow range of readings — perhaps even a single
reading — is available. To read any aspect of the Demon positively,
against the comic’s recipient design, against the Batmanian language
game, is to move beyond the realm of readability. The Demon marks a
clear limit, not to be transgressed by any Batfan or any American. It tells
by negation clearly where and who one must be. The only alternative is
not to read; or to read from within another community. (The fly-leaf to
Pearson and Uricho’s The Many Lives of the Batman informs the reader
that no original graphics from the comic have been reproduced in the
book: DC Comics withheld permission, because the cultural studies
readings of Batman in the book did not correspond with “their” Batman.)

It may be possible for someone to read the Demon’s prayer before his
portrait of Lenin (#447.7-8) ironically, subversively and so forth, against
the comic’s clear designation of it as within the genres of madness:

Vladimir Ilyich Lenin, you shaped our world which that . . . that
man [Gorbachev] seeks to ruin. You pointed out the truth which
he corrupts into lies. You showed us the way which he seeks to
change. I look at our world and ask if we are better today than we
were, and my answer is no. Once we were a happy people, now
we are depressed. Once we firmly held an empire in our mighty
hands. Now we permit that empire to flee us and rush toward the
decadent West. Now this, Vladimir, this is the new world they
want to begin on your birthday — this world which will merge
East and West. Which will force us to forsake our proud heritage.
All the glory you sought for us, Vladimir, all the greatness you
aspired to — all that makes us unique and strong; that pretender to
your greatness seeks to destroy. I strike on your day, Vladimir Ilyich
Lenin, I strike in your name. And in your name we shall triumph.

To read it with irony is possible in principle — simply because of the
truism that any text can be so read, because of the underlying indexicality
or indeterminacy of every sign, expression or text, or because one must,
according to one’s morality. But it is inconceivable to read it this way and
keep reading or following as a bona fide Batman aficionado. One position
likely to produce a subversive reading would be that of an “outsider,” an
expert in cultural studies, perhaps, who would then have to give up all
pretensions to inside knowledge and to an emic approach to social
practice (both of which are mainstays of contemporary cultural studies). It
could be the case, for example, that there is evidence outside the comic
text to the effect that a sizeable section of the Soviet population want
something other than traditional Marxism, Gorbachev or American
capitalism. But there is no space for any such alternative in any competent
reading of Batman. The nearest we get is Vicki Vale (the “love interest”)
turning up coincidentally in Moscow on a photo-journalism assignment.
Her conversation with Bruce Wayne runs thus:

Vicki: Beautiful country filled with beautiful people. And they’re
nothing like what I expected.
Bruce: How's that?
Vicki: Different value system. We assume everyone is motivated by personal achievement, but here there really is a sense of group effort. No classes. No distinctions. They'd be uncomfortable with someone like you... And at this point Vicki is condemned out of her own mouth:
Vicki: ...someone like you — an ordinary citizen with incredible wealth.
Bruce: They'd get used to it. I certainly have. (#447: 9-10)
That is, the text cannot tolerate any statement beyond a certain point in the chain of "reasonable" doubts, the chain of semiotic inferencing which is also the social-political range of the Batman language game. The game's whole understanding of the world, its taken for granted foundations, cannot be taken beyond this point of not-dubbing (cf. Wittgenstein, On Certainty). It is not a paradox, in terms of this text, to speak literally of "an ordinary citizen with incredible wealth" and, thus, to have it assumed that, post-Glasnost, any Soviet citizen could be one, and (presumably, human nature being what it is) "they'd get used to it."
This limit, the point at which any sensible reading of Batman must reach zero degree, was unacceptable to a number of Batman readers. Making the limit so clear, not defining it by negation, not leaving its exact coordinates in suspension, marking it with such an inelastic and "cheesy" villain — speaking, perhaps, what all Batman fans knew but never needed to say — appears to have removed a degree of subtlety from a readership which has increasingly come to accept indeterminacy as a principle of reading, in fact as a principle of textual realism. (While ethnomethodology, for example, has discovered the commonsense embargo on stating the obvious, it has not considered the possibility that what constitutes the obvious, in some cases, can be normatively indeterminate.)
I've just read BATMAN #446. I've always enjoyed Marv's stories [Marv Wolfman, writer], but I have a quibble. The NKVD doesn't exist anymore; it was a forerunner of the KGB (others included the Cheka, the GPU, the MVD, and the MGB) that existed as such from 1943 to 1946. I never got to read "Ten Nights of the Beast," so maybe I'm missing something important about the origin of the Beast and the Demon. Still, it seems like you've fallen victim to Cheesy Villain Name Syndrome (along with Horns on the Villain's Head Syndrome)... Of course, mine aren't the only tastes you're catering to, but I wish you'd avoid the temptation to have these ridiculous costumed super-villains. I prefer BATMAN to DETECTIVE partly for its greater realism, and the generally close correspondence between Bruce Wayne's world and ours...
Michael Boydstun
Austin, TX. (#451: 24)
What we appear to have been arguing for in this paper is not just a
rethinking of cultural studies relativism but also an anti-deconstructive
move, in so far as we have been arguing for a limit (in practice) to the
indeterminacy of textual meaning (in principle), for an actional limit to
the indefinite play of signifiers, for a social limit to the open texture of
reading and so on. But there is a sense in which our notion of limits is
deconstructive—a sense quite different from the way in which the term
is used either by its detractors (traditional literary critics) or by those
who celebrate it as a kind of idealist freedom. It is a sense which we take
to be only a little distinct from Derrida’s. On this account, deconstruction
would require a practical situation of texts within the dominant and
minoritarian modes of their production and consumption, taking account
of their institutional recipient design (which must always be more than
and different from authorial intention) and the modes by which they are
disseminated and circulated within specific language games or
technologies of reading and writing. In Eco’s shorthand: their “habits”
—which may have to be acknowledged as a practical, empirical domain
of socio-logics. (Without this move, cultural studies is condemned to
move directly from a priori conditions to speculative (or utopian)
possibilities without visiting the empirical. While this, to be sure, avoids
empiricism, it ignores a crucial area of investigation. In fact, it cedes the
territory of the empirical to the empiricists.) Of particular importance
here would be an investigation of the textual, machinic, interactive,
human and non-human means by which specific communities, at specific
socio-historical conjunctures, either control or else leave open the
hermeneutic possibilities of the texts within their purview.

We can grant to previous deconstructionisms the idea that all signs
are potentially unstable, that they always already contain the potential to
be adestined, to arrive in unforeseen and unforeseeable places. But this
general, overarching and in-principle indeterminacy has no guarantee or
logical hold over the actions which are taken in the face of it. In practical
contexts, communities may (according to quite specific and well-known
historical conventions) exploit a sign’s instability. This tactic can be
called “differential dispersal.” On the other hand, another community
may—with the same, or a different sign—attempt to hold its semantic
plurality in check, attempting to achieve a temporarily stable consensus.
This tactic can be called “repetitional transferral.” In either case, the
attempt may or may not be successful. Particular circumstances will
decide this; circumstances which, as Derrida would acknowledge, cannot
be known in advance. The “habit” of differential dispersal would have,
at its necessarily unrealisable extreme, complete semantic chaos. The
opposite impulse to repetitional transferral would have, as its necessarily
unrealisable extreme, complete semantic linearity, absolute meanings.
In this sense, neither can be completable, or perfect. And any instance we
wish to look at or analyse will be, at most, an approximation to one or
other of these extremes. (For the distinction between difference and
transference see McHoul and Wills 150-57.) In any case, it appears to be possible for unquestionable and infinite semantic proliferation to be approached; or on the other hand, for a final and ultimate meaning to be approximated. But either way, there is only an approach and/or an approximation. Extreme indefiniteness of meaning (where meaning goes its way despite the rest of the world, obliterating it with a paradoxically singularising textualism) is no more practically attainable than extreme definiteness (where meaning maps directly on to the world, disclosing it and so disappearing as discourse). Nevertheless, there is a difference between these tendencies, habit-types, impulses, technologies or genres of life forms. The difference between them is social, political, historical and, in these senses, material. A material difference, consequently, separates any semantic difference/dispersal from any semantic transferral/repetition. We must remember here that both forms are forms of social practice. In practice, differential dispersal and repetitonal transference are simply means, or socio-logics, by which meanings become socially definite — whether semantically definite or indefinite.

We have already discussed the extremes of this difference, using as examples the strategies of some esoteric communities (such as scientists) as against other communities or audiences which have less of an investment in closing down the socio-semantic options in “their” field. This approaches the extreme difference hypothesised above — and in any actual case of reading technologies, we will find tensions and temporal shifts within these perimetric spaces, and perhaps at even further removes from them. However, at any given point, one should not be prepared to sacrifice, in the name of a dogmatic relativism, the possibility that there will be (enforced and practically applied) limits to the play of signification. The location of limits (especially when a reading technology’s self-understanding is normally one of polyvocalism) seems very clearly to us to be as “deconstructive” as the (more vulgar) location of polymorphous semantic possibilities in a reading technology which once seemed non-contradictory or monovocal. And it is certainly more deconstructive than the mere celebration of the fact that some communities make (consequently conservative) repetitions of certain texts’ available polysemy. If a reading technology or paradigm is manifestly pluralistic and open (especially according to its adherents’ own programmatic statements), then a narrow deconstructionism can only celebrate it — leaving its normative order effectively untouched, unsuvelted, in perfect order as it stands. The location of limits can therefore be as subversive as the deliberate opening up of potential meanings — but only under certain circumstances (and depending, perhaps, on the ethical impetus of one’s analysis). Moreover, those circumstances have to be carefully worked through, weighed and judged, and above all located in the spaces of their micro and macro histories and politics.
1 On the problem of "constituting the object" in the social sciences, see Watson.
2 A still more radical notion exists in Wittgensteinian discussions of textual meaning (see Malcolm). Thompson and Rout argue persuasively, in a similar vein, that "nothing is hidden" in many popular films and that they should be seen instead as so many surface effects.
3 See McHoul, "Taking the Children," which looks at the political consequences of forgetting the referent, in the case of photographic analysis.
4 That the real is always developing, never fixed, always driven by social textual practices and, accordingly, represented today only in quotation marks, does not mean that it can be dispensed with as a category: on the contrary its developmental nature and possibilities are perhaps the central topics of the social sciences and humanities.
5 This is no more clearly instantiated than in the historical shifts which the term "popular" has undergone, alternating between an emphasis on "from the point of view of the people" (carrying a sense of moral purpose) to "from those seeking favour or power from them" (carrying a sense of rational calculation). See Williams 198-99.
6 "Information handling" is shorthand, since, on Wittgensteinian grounds, it is clear that not all utterances are in the particular language game of information.
7 While Eco thinks of Habit as what closes closed texts, there is no problem with thinking of it, at the same time, as what opens open texts. The problem with Eco's formulation is that he locates the Habit as a product of discourse which nevertheless limits the interpretability of the very discourse which produces it. (This is effectively his solution to the problem of unlimited semiosis.) In this formulation, Habit looks like a "real" array of community dispositions which can only limit (acting upon texts which have "openness" or "closedness" as intrinsic properties). The concept might be more useful if it were also considered to have "range" as well as "limits."
8 See Myers 141-92 on processes of popularisation in science, and on a parallel question, the translation of science into humorous genres, see Gilbert and Mulkay, 172-87.
9 There are some empirical grounds for suspecting that popular texts can be designedly indeterminate in this sense. See Rout, for example, who argues, in "Todorov Among the Gangsters," in terms of (moral) judgements rather than interpretations (though there is a clear relation between these areas). He writes: "The gangster film solicits my judgment, but it cannot make that judgment itself. The call for judgment is an attribute of what we understand as popular art. Popular works are always asking audiences to make up their minds. Judgment may not be required of, let us say, avant-garde work... but in popular work of all sorts judgments are demanded. This is why so much popular art deals with questions of morality. But it is also why no one knows for certain which popular artworks are 'good' and which 'bad'" (110-11).
10 This process is already in train in the form of "deconstructionism." See, for example, Derrida's painstaking reopening of Husserl's idea of the Pythagorean Theorem which, he (Husserl) argued, "exists only once, no matter how often or even in what language it might be expressed. It is identically the same in the 'original language' of Euclid and in all 'translations'" (Edmund Husserl's "Origins of Geometry" 72).
11 Sometimes given as 6.63 x 10^-34 Js (Joule seconds) and other times as 6.626 x 10^-34 Js. But by "interpretation" we do not just mean the mathematical value of the expression. See Barrow, as against Walker.
12 With this subtitle we are, in part, marking our investigation as
complementary to an earlier one which showed that the quite material point at which a telephone conversation comes to be "closed" is by no means fixed in advance or, indeed, at the very moment of its performance. Conversationalists can rework a closing so as to have it heard retrospectively as (having been only) a pre-closing. In this sense, even the meaning of a closing can be open. What we want to show, by contrast, is that the most "open" of textual practices has to come to an end somewhere. See Schegloff and Sacks.

13 On the distinction between opacity and transparency of community descriptions, see Quine, and Coulter. An opaque description of a community is one which that community would readily recognise and accept as a true version; a transparent description is the opposite - one which is only recognised and accepted as true by outside observers. Somehow, intuitively, it always seems as if the terms should be reversed.

14 For example, readers of DC's recent Star Trek comics have been informed, following quibbles about continuities between the comics and other generic versions of Star Trek, that there is a canon (inside which continuity takes place) and an apocrypha (which may formally depart from it). In issue #13 (Oct. 1990), comics editor Ron Greenberger announced that "Gene Roddenberry [the originator of Star Trek] prefers to consider the filmed episodes and films Star Trek fact and everything else Star Trek fiction. That is the one reason few, if any, of the comics and novels refer to previous novels or comics - that is by Gene's and Paramount's request" (26). A similar reading condition appears in issue #15 and Greenberger suggests that readers who are unhappy with it should "drop Paramount Licensing a line" (25).

15 Stock Batman print versions also include a range of one-offs in hardcover (Arkham Asylum, Batman 3-D, Batman Archives, Batman Bride of Demon, Batman Daily, Batman Digital Justice) and paperback (Batman Murders). Total price for this selection is SUS 134.65.

16 See Batman #457 (Dec 1990) for Tim's formal emergence as the revamped (third) Robin who has recently become the main hero of the new Robin comic (DC Comics, Jan-May 1991).

17 This is particularly problematic for non-American readers - and parallels the confusions of the off-shore Hollywood cinéphile. See Martin.

18 Batman writer Alan Grant says "I find it easier to write Batman than any other figure, probably because I like him so much. It's not hard because you don't have to make him the center of every story, he's more of a presence. To me the stories are as much about Gotham City as they are about him" (Nutman, "One Man's Psychotics," 20).

19 It would be interesting, for example, to see how relativist cultural studies could square the Demon's prayer with the following discussion of the complexities of political targets for comic writers: "There is a great deal of mind control which is coming from the liberal rather than the conservative camp. It's very easy to do the usual corporate villains, dyed-in-the-wool Reaganites. It's a very easy target, but it has been done to death. I have a basic reflex action that when I see a sacred cow I shoot, and having had a few run-ins with censors, discovering that most of them declare themselves liberal, I found a whole new area that hadn't been tapped." Frank Miller (originator of the Dark Knight version of Batman) interviewed in Nutman, "Miller's Crossing," 24.

20 Kathryn Hume, for example, associates deconstruction with "destabilizing structures," "disintegration and fragmentation," "silence"; decon-
structionists, she complains, "function so as to discredit assumptions about system and order; to shake faith in analysis; to deny the romantic concept of individual as entity; to explode literary assumptions about organic unity and generic convention; and to decondition us of our modernist habit of reading for hidden meanings" (Pynchon’s Mythography 2-3).

The location of limits, in the Kantian tradition, is known as "critique." In more recent times, the term "paralogy" has been used to cover this critical practice (see Lyotard, "The Differend, the Referent, and the Proper Name"). Hence the title of this paper.

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