



GOTHAM CITY: BEYOND BATMAN

The city beyond darkness

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KEYWORDS

Gotham City
Batman
Arkham
Semiosphere
Urban Identity
Visual Culture
Transmedia

ABSTRACT

In 1941, the world of superheroes welcomed Gotham City, a metropolis that has become one of the most iconic fictional locations, to the point of having different representations in the three main entertainment centres: comics, films, and video games. Even so, there is no single idea of how Batman's city should be portrayed. In that sense, this research aims to analyse the different narrative, visual, and symbolic elements that make up the aesthetics and atmosphere of Gotham City, in order to determine the configuration of its symbolic identity based on Christopher Nolan's trilogy, "The Dark Knight Returns" and "Batman: Year One" comics, and the Arkham saga. The methodology used was oriented toward qualitative research with a descriptive, non-experimental scope, from which qualities and characteristics of Gotham were identified, such as: dark, doomed, lustful, among others.

Received: 15 / 04 / 2026

Accepted: 18 / 07 / 2026

1. Introduction

Gotham City, as the main setting of the Batman universe, has been represented in various media such as comics, films and video games, where it has taken on visual, symbolic and narrative forms that vary according to the format. This research presents a different perspective on Gotham City, separating it from the typical image of being Batman's city. In this sense, it is important to understand how the construction of urban identity can be understood from the perspective of visual culture, the semiosphere and the concept of the city.

These representations not only shape its atmosphere and aesthetics but also influence the perception of its urban identity. However, there is no accurate and unique description of the distinctive elements that define Gotham in each medium or how these contribute to its symbolic construction. Therefore, it is necessary to analyse these resources comparatively in order to understand the configuration of the city as a unique and mutable narrative space. In line with the above, the aim is to define the distinctive elements in the representation of Gotham City in the comics *The Dark Knight Returns* and *Batman Year One*, Christopher Nolan's trilogy, and the Batman: Arkham video game series, through the recognition of variables that determine urban identity in different narrative media. The first part describes the visual culture of Gotham City through an aesthetic analysis of these representations in order to understand the structure of its urban atmosphere.

The second section identifies the semiosphere by studying narrative signs and codes in different media to analyse their impact on the representation of the city. Finally, the image of the city is recognised on the basis of spatial and symbolic elements that allow the construction of urban identity in each narrative format. The cross-sectional comparison between the three media reveals aesthetic constants such as darkness, architectural verticality, spatial fragmentation, and common narrative structures, such as moral opposition, the figure of the vigilante, the city, and the character, while recognising significant differences in the way each work models the city according to its own expressive logic.

2. Theoretical Framework

Gotham City is configured differently; it derives from the creation of its own atmosphere and urban identity, and to understand this, it is necessary to take into account three important variables: visual culture and semiotic systems, Yuri Lotman's semiosphere, and the meaning of the city itself. The articulation between these authors allows us to analyse how urban representations function from complex texts that generate meanings, structures, and interpretations based on their visual form, narrative logic, and cultural inscription.

2.1. Peirce and reality as a triad

According to Charles S. Peirce's philosophical semiotics, reality is organised into three ontological categories that allow us to understand how signs are produced and articulated in culture: firstness, secondness and thirdness. Each one, in its own way, comprises a different and interesting level of complexity, so much so that they do not depend on each other, but rather are elements that function interdependently to create reality.

- Firstness is the domain of the possible, of pure qualities, of what has not yet been realised. For example, the dark colour or sense of mystery that permeates Gothic images can be understood as primary impressions.
- Secondness corresponds to the factual, to phenomena that occur, to the relationships between concrete elements. At this level, the visual and the narrative materialise in recognisable elements such as buildings, characters or actions.
- Thirdness involves interpretation and mediation; it is the logical and structural dimension that links the sensible with the experiential, the abstract with the concrete. This is where

the receiver intervenes, decoding the sign and giving meaning to the object and its representamen.

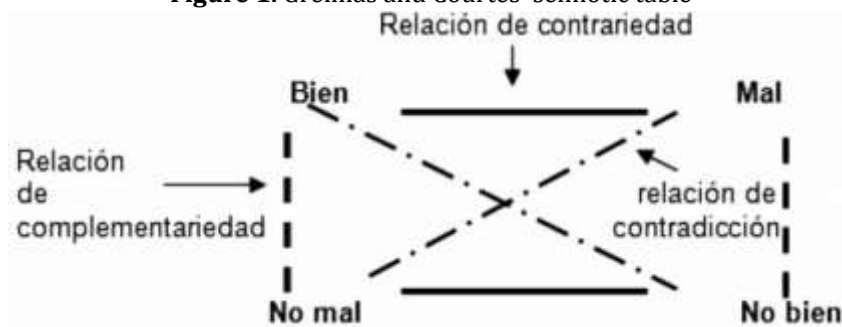
Therefore, the triadic process dominates the analytical and interpretative arrangement of reality from the human thought system. This can describe the global situation of things as qualities (Firstness), or in their real action (Secondness), or as entities governed by laws and ends (Thirdness). Zecchetto (1999) points out that these categories function simultaneously and interdependently, allowing for a complex reading of cultural signs. In the case of Gotham City, these three dimensions coexist: the visual (firstness), the narrative (secondness) and the symbolic construction (thirdness). These dimensions are articulated to generate an urban image full of meanings. A clear example of firstness can be found in the visible darkness that the city conveys; for secondness, we find corruption and crime, which are ever-present; and for thirdness, the city is represented as a symbol of social chaos. All of this contributes to the dark atmosphere.

2.2. Narrative semiotics: Greimas and the structure of meaning

Within the field of structural semiotics, one of the most influential contributions is the actantial model developed by Algirdas Julien Greimas, who defines it as "one of the possible principles of the organisation of the semantic universe" (Greimas, 1971, p. 266). This tool seeks to identify the fundamental narrative functions that underlie any story, beyond the proper names of the characters or the medium in which it is expressed.

Unlike other approaches that focus on the content of the narrative, Greimas' semiotics starts from the assumption that meaning is not produced spontaneously but is reformulated and organised on the basis of deep structures that operate in cultural objects. In this context, semiotics does not produce new meanings but rather clarifies existing ones and structures the components of the story in an intelligible way. Its interest is focused on how narrativity is constructed, that is, on the logical support that underpins any type of story. This is a crucial idea for understanding the articulation of Gotham City's identity.

Figure 1. Greimas and Courtés' semiotic table



ResearchGate: Victor Pueyo, 2012.

Greimas' semiotic chart, for its part, is a logical scheme that allows us to represent the relationships of opposition, contradiction and implication between different terms or values that organise the semantic universe of a narrative. It is structured around four main positions distributed across two axes: an axis of opposition (horizontal), which opposes two terms (e.g. good/evil, order/chaos), and an axis of contradiction (diagonal), which contrasts each term with its negation. The vertical lines represent the implications between terms. Through this square, one can visualise the internal tensions that shape a text or cultural phenomenon.

These components are not simply linguistic or grammatical, but can be translated into values, beliefs, ideologies, or symbolic properties of semiotic objects. Thus, in the case of Gotham City, the semiotic square can be applied to analyse the fundamental dichotomies that structure its universe: justice vs. corruption, hero vs. villain, fear vs. hope, defeat vs. victory. These oppositions constitute the semantic field in which the urban narrative of Gotham City is inscribed.

Additionally, Greimas proposes that any narrative scheme can be reduced to the tension between two subjects struggling for an object of value, whether material, symbolic or ideological. This central conflict activates the narrative journey and justifies the actions of the characters within a system of roles (subject, object, helper, opponent, sender, recipient). In the case of Batman, for example, his role as subject is determined by his quest for justice (object of value), constantly confronted by opponents who embody chaos or the perversion of social order.

Finally, it is important to note that this narrative logic is based on an immanent dimension: it does not depend on elements external to the story but emerges from the cultural value system in which it is inscribed. For this reason, the actantial model and the semiotic framework are particularly useful for analysing cultural products that condense social tensions, as Gotham City does in the different versions of the Batman universe.

2.3. Mirzoeff and visual culture as an interpretative framework

Contemporary human experience is deeply mediated by the visual. Nicholas Mirzoeff (2015) points out that everyday life is increasingly visual and visualised, which means that images not only accompany our existence, but also structure, interpret and give meaning to it. In this sense, visual culture is not limited to the study of art or graphic media but encompasses all visual events in which individuals seek information, pleasure or meaning through visual technologies.

In the postmodern context, visual culture has established itself as an analytical strategy for studying the genealogy and symbolic functions of cultural objects from the consumer's perspective. This proliferation of the visual has been so decisive that cinema and television, particularly in the United States, have become one of the main sectors of cultural export globally, consolidating a hegemonic aesthetic that shapes the perception of space, morality and identities. In the case of Gotham City, this perspective is essential: its representation varies according to the medium, but it maintains a consistent atmosphere thanks to the recurrence of visual resources such as darkness, architectural verticality, low colour saturation and the use of contrasts.

Although print culture has not disappeared, the visual has acquired a centrality that profoundly transforms the modes of production and reception of meaning. Postmodern visual culture, then, is characterised by being a fluid interpretative structure, centred on how individuals and groups respond emotionally, symbolically, and cognitively to visual media.

From this perspective, Gotham City should be analysed as a complex visual experience, whose atmosphere and identity emerge from a combination of graphic, cinematographic and interactive resources. Its architecture, lighting, colourimetry and scenic design not only set the scene for the narratives but also expand and redefine them. The different visual representations of Gotham allow us to construct a symbolically charged urban image that is recognisable across formats and whose aesthetic coherence reinforces its power as a cultural icon. Thus, analysing Gotham from the perspective of visual culture involves understanding how its urban identity is constructed through aesthetics and how the viewer or player responds emotionally to these visual stimuli. The image of the city is not neutral: it conveys ideology, values, memories and even visions of the future.

2.4. Lotman's semiosphere: the Gothic as a space that generates meaning

Yuri Lotman, semiotician and cultural theorist, introduces the concept of the semiosphere as the space in which all meaningful processes within a culture occur. This semiosphere is organised as a hierarchical structure, in which each element is a whole in itself, but also part of a higher-order system. In turn, these elements contain smaller parts that function as autonomous systems. Thus, each text or cultural unit can be understood as a microcosm within a broader cultural totality. In this structure, each text is both an autonomous whole and part of a larger system, allowing new meanings to emerge through its insertion into broader communicative networks.

One of Lotman's key postulates is that text possesses semiotic heterogeneity, which gives it the ability to generate new messages when inserted into different communicative structures. In other

words, the same text can acquire different meanings depending on the context in which it is read or the cultural system to which it belongs. This characteristic makes it a dynamic generator of meaning, rather than a static container of information.

Lotman even argues that text can precede language, in the sense that certain symbolic configurations can anticipate and stimulate the creation of new sign systems. This occurs when, for example, a visual representation or an urban narrative introduces semiotic elements that have not yet been linguistically codified but have a profound impact on culture.

Within the semiosphere, Lotman also proposes three fundamental concepts:

- The semiotic person: The subject who produces or interprets signs, always within a given cultural framework.
- The core and the periphery: The core represents the most stable, normative and socially accepted signs within a culture, while the periphery houses new, marginal or experimental signs, from which semiotic innovation can emerge.
- The receiver: A key figure in the communication process, as it is the receiver who re-actualises the meaning of the text based on their own experience, knowledge and cultural expectations.

In the analysis of Gotham City, these elements allow us to understand how the different representations of the city (comics, films, video games) function as texts within the semiosphere, and how each one, depending on its format and era, contributes new meanings and reinterpretations to the collective urban imagination. The city, as a cultural sign, becomes capable of generating new meanings through its continuous reinterpretation and reconfiguration in different media languages. It is important to note that, in order to analyse Gotham from a visual culture perspective, it is necessary to understand how its urban identity is constructed through aesthetics, and how the viewer or player responds emotionally to these visual stimuli. The image of the city is not neutral: it conveys ideology, values, memories and even visions of the future.

2.5. How do cities communicate?

A city cannot be reduced to a simple accumulation of buildings or infrastructure. Its essence lies in the people who inhabit it and in the physical, social and symbolic boundaries that they themselves establish within their living space. In this sense, each city has a distinctive identity, determined by factors such as its climate, topography, architecture and historical origins. It is this combination that makes a city recognisable and distinct from others. However, not all the characteristics that constitute a city are necessarily positive. Marginalisation, inequality and deterioration are also part of the urban imagination and shape its collective meaning.

From a functionalist perspective, Edward Glaeser (2011) argues that a city is, above all, a machine for wealth creation, insofar as it concentrates talent, innovation and resources that boost the economy. Even in contexts of poverty, living in a city offers more opportunities for development than in rural areas, making the urban environment an engine of social mobility.

Furthermore, a true city offers its citizens the freedom to be what they want to be. This principle is related to the open, diverse and multifunctional nature of urban space. However, since the first classical cities, elites have feared the power represented by the organised multitude. Throughout history, they have attempted to exercise symbolic and material control over urban space, limiting its capacity for transformation from below.

2.6. Lynch's image of the city

Urban identity arises from the differentiation of its parts and the clarity of the connections between them. According to Kevin Lynch (1960), every functional urban area has a structure, however minimal, that gives it coherence and recognition. This structure is based not only on the physical layout of the space, but also on the symbolic meanings that individuals attribute to each place.

Lynch introduces the concept of environmental image, understood as the generalised mental representation that a person has of the physical environment around them. This image is the product of both immediate sensation (what is seen, heard, smelled) and the memory of previous experiences, making it a perceptual and emotional construct.

Analytically, an environmental image can be divided into three fundamental dimensions:

- Identity: That which distinguishes a place and makes it recognisable (Example: Arkham Asylum).
- Structure: The spatial organisation of the city and its legibility (e.g. different districts that reflect the social strata in Gotham City).
- Meaning: The symbolic, historical, or emotional value that certain spaces acquire for individuals or groups (e.g., the alley where Bruce Wayne's parents died).

From this perspective, analysing a city like Gotham involves studying how its spaces construct identity, how they are structured visually and symbolically, and what meanings they evoke in the audience through the different narrative languages in which it is represented. Gotham City, as a narrative space, not only has a recognisable geography, but also conveys emotions and ideologies through its visual layout. From dark alleys to oppressive skyscrapers, the city is configured as an entity with its own character, whose image is as powerful as the hero who inhabits it.

2.7. The city behind the city: Chicago in the shadow of Gotham

At the intersection of semiotics, visual culture and urbanism, David Harvey's thinking allows us to broaden our understanding of Gotham City beyond its aesthetic or symbolic character. While authors such as Peirce, Lotman and Greimas help to decipher the signs, meanings and narrative structures that make up Gotham's identity as a fictional city, David Harvey allows us to read this configuration from a critical perspective of urban geography. Thus, the city is not only the setting for heroic narratives, but also an entity riddled with inequalities, the privatisation of fear and the segmentation of space. To the dominant visual culture described by Mirzoeff, Harvey adds the question: Who produces these images? Whose interests do they serve and what exclusions do they generate? And while Lynch proposes that the environmental image is constructed from subjective experience, Harvey contributes the notion that this experience is conditioned by economic and political structures. This articulation between the symbolic and the material allows us to analyse Gotham City as a semiosphere in tension, where the hero's narrative is framed in an urban space fractured by neoliberal logic.

In the case of Christopher Nolan's trilogy, the visual construction of Gotham City finds a direct reference in the city of Chicago. This decision was not purely aesthetic: Chicago provides a particular symbolic density, derived from its history marked by organised crime, political corruption and the imposing architecture of its skyscrapers. Thus, Gotham City acquires a sense of verisimilitude and contemporary urban criticism. As David Harvey (2012) points out, modern cities reflect tensions inherent in late capitalism, and Gotham, through its resemblance to Chicago, embodies that conflict between vertical progress and underground moral collapse. This similarity highlights the physical and oppressive nature of the city as an active 'urban character' within the narrative. This association reinforces the realistic, grey and dirty aesthetic that defines Gotham.

3. Results

By comparatively analysing the three main media (comics, films and video games) and cross-referencing them with the perspectives and postulates of the authors, the following results are identified:

3.1. The city as an autonomous character

Gotham City moves from being a backdrop to acting as a narrative subject with its own identity: it conditions actions, creates conflicts and participates in the formation of meaning. According to Lotman, the city functions as a "text" within a semiosphere: it has codes, zones (core/periphery)

and the capacity to produce new meanings when inserted into different discourses; therefore, it can "speak" and generate autonomous interpretations.

According to Lynch's thinking, urban elements (routes, landmarks, edges) not only provide physical orientation, but also act as features of urban personality; a well 'imageable' city can behave like a recognisable character. And even, when crossed with Peirce's third dimension, the city achieves narrative agency when the receiver interprets it as more than just matter: its meaning is completed by interpretive mediation (interpretant) that converts visual and narrative signs into will or character.

We can see this in *Batman: Year One*, where from the first pages the city appears as a decaying organism; the descriptions and vignettes not only show buildings, but they also show a collective voice of Gotham: corruption that breathes, spaces that push towards violence, a city that self-destructs from within. *Batman Begins*, the start of Christopher Nolan's trilogy, reinforces this with the division between the slums (the part of the city where Arkham was located and where characters such as Carmine Falcone and the Scarecrow himself had their trafficking base) and the financial centre: the city structures the characters' options; it is not neutral. While one of the districts has large buildings and even the imposing Wayne Tower, the other part has street food stalls, old buildings and is even the part of the city where it rains most of the time, reflecting Gotham's symbolic fracture between power and marginality, where the opulence of the centre coexists with the precariousness of the slums, reinforcing the idea of a divided city in constant social tension. In *Arkham City*, the mechanics of the game itself force the player to learn "the rules of the city": closed streets, controlled areas, informal laws that mean the city dictates how you survive and even tells the player what to do through large signs such as the Bat-Signal.

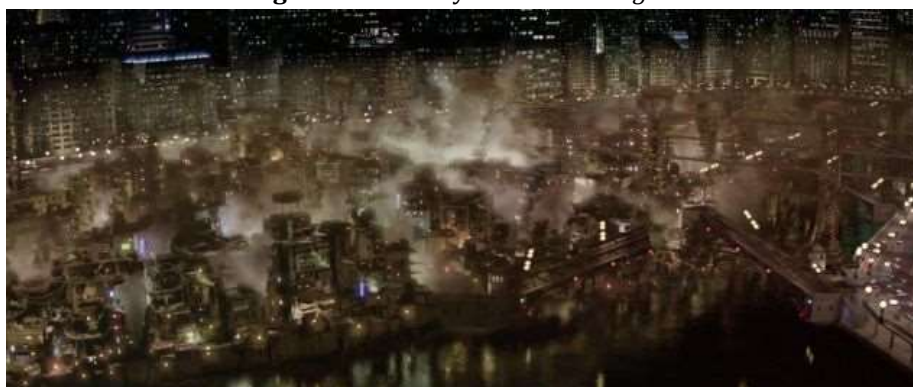
3.2. The aesthetic face of Gotham

A common feature in the different representations of Gotham City is the persistence of certain visual motifs that shape its identity: the almost perpetual darkness, the verticality of the buildings and the spatial fragmentation. From Mirzoeff's perspective, these motifs are not mere decorations, but part of a visual repertoire that structures the way the audience perceives and experiences the city. In other words, they constitute a shared visual grammar that, although it varies according to the medium, ensures that the urban atmosphere is immediately recognisable.

In Peircean terms, this dimension belongs to firstness, as it involves immediate impressions that precede any narrative action. In *Arkham Knight*, for example, the player is immersed in a city defined by constant rain, neon glare and the sounds of sirens, which convey a sense of hostility even before entering combat. Similarly, Frank Miller's *The Dark Knight Returns* uses extreme contrasts of light and shadow in its vignettes to make the reader feel the oppression and weight of the city immediately.

At the same time, these elements have an urban legibility function in the sense proposed by Lynch: skyscrapers, bridges and motorways allow us to organise our spatial experience of the city and communicate its internal hierarchies. In Nolan's trilogy, urban photography, with its marked difference between the financial centre and the slums, fulfils precisely this role, allowing the viewer to orient themselves on a symbolic map where each area expresses a social condition. In this sense, the verticality of towers such as those of Wayne Enterprises expresses power and concentration of resources, while the slums convey marginality and abandonment.

Figure 2. The alleys in *Batman Begins*



Batman Begins: Christopher Nolan, 2005.

Together, these aesthetic constants function as shared codes that sustain Gotham's visual identity across different media. At the same time, they reveal how each medium modulates perception: comics through graphic contrast, cinema through realistically filmed architecture, and video games through sensory immersion. In this way, the dark, the vertical and the fragmented end up being features that allow us to understand how the city constructs its narrative atmosphere.

3.3. Three languages, one city

Although Gotham City retains recognisable aesthetic codes, its representation changes depending on the medium that expresses it. Lotman explains that within the semiosphere, signs acquire value according to the system that contains them; therefore, what may function as a symbol in a comic book becomes verisimilitude in cinema and experience in video games.

In comics, such as *Year One*, Gotham is condensed into a symbol of structural corruption. The economy of the comic strip and the graphic language enhance this allegorical condition: the city is not just a setting, but a metaphor for the moral state of its institutions. In Nolan's films, on the other hand, filming in real locations such as Chicago lends verisimilitude to the urban space. The city does not seem invented, but possible, which opens the door to more direct socio-political readings, such as the relationship between organised crime, terrorism and inequality. Finally, in the *Arkhamverse* video games, interactive logic turns the city into an experiential space: walking its streets, solving puzzles, or facing enemies in different districts transforms Gotham into a true narrative labyrinth, where the city itself becomes a test for the player.

Mirzoeff helps us understand this difference by pointing out that each visual technology has its own grammar: the comic strip condenses symbols, the cinematic shot creates realistic atmospheres, and interactive 3D rendering enables immersion. In turn, according to Greimas, narrative functions are reorganised according to the medium: in comics, the reader deciphers a myth; in cinema, the viewer becomes a moral witness; and in video games, the player assumes the role of an active subject who faces the city as a challenge.

Figure 3. Gotham City train terminal



Batman: Year One: Frank Miller & David Mazzucchelli . , 1987.

Comparatively, this variation shows that Gotham is a mutable narrative space: its features are the same, but they are reinterpreted according to the medium that displays them. Thus, the symbolic, the plausible and the experiential constitute three complementary ways of inhabiting and understanding the city.

3.4. Between corruption and inequality

Another cross-cutting aspect in the representation of Gotham City is its socio-political charge. The city is configured as a space traversed by structural tensions: institutional corruption, spatial inequality and the privatisation of security. From Harvey's critical reading, these dynamics reflect processes typical of the contemporary capitalist city: unequal accumulation of resources, concentration of power and control of urban space through fear.

In *Year One*, the corruption of police and politicians is not a backdrop, but specific narrative events that form the basis for the interpretation of decadence (secondness in Peircean terms). Similarly, *The Dark Knight Rises* presents Bane's occupation of the city as a class struggle, literally in spatial terms: borders are established with the destruction of bridges, territories formerly belonging to the rich and powerful are taken over, and control of the city is redefined, exemplifying Harvey's reading of urban dispute. In video games, *Arkham City* concentrates criminals and villains in a walled territory that operates as a social experiment: there, the resources of power (weapons, criminal hierarchies, illegal economies) are concentrated in a manner analogous to what Glaeser describes about cities as poles of talent and innovation, albeit inverted in a perverse way.

Specifically with *Arkham City*, we find countless examples that support this theory. For example, Hugo Strange always keeps his base of operations in Wonder Tower or in the best locations in the city, spaces that also enjoy the best security with the Tyger forces. High-ranking criminals such as the Joker or the Penguin are found in their own headquarters: the Joker is in the imposing Sionis Industries steelworks, while Cobblepot is in his iconic Iceberg Lounge club. Similarly, several villains such as Bane, Poison Ivy, Black Mask, and Killer Croc himself have their lairs, but in less recognisable locations. And then there are the characters who wield less power within the sphere of this prison, who must constantly move around or have no fixed place to stay.

Figure 4. Sionis Industries Steelworks



Batman: Arkham City: Rocksteady Studios, WB Games Montréal, 2011.

These political and economic tensions not only enrich the plot but also define the way the city is interpreted as a narrative space. What Harvey explains as unequal accumulation translates into Nolan's urban fragmentation; what Peirce identifies as acts of corruption is shown in the *Year One* comic strips; and what Glaeser observes as concentration of resources is reflected in the *Arkham City* experiment. Taken together, these readings reveal that Gotham is not only a fictional setting, but a critical representation of the modern city and its contradictions.

3.5. Between corruption and inequality

In narrative logic, Gotham operates as the object within Greimas' actantial scheme: it is what is fought for and whose fate organises the roles of the characters. In *The Dark Knight*, for example, the city becomes the political and moral object: Batman, as the subject, seeks to preserve the idea of a safe and dignified space, while the Joker and systemic corruption function as opponents who seek to degrade it. The city, in this sense, is not just a setting, but the very value that is at stake in the conflict. The same applies in the other two parts of the trilogy: on the one hand, Ra's Al Ghul wants to destroy the city because of its corruption, while Batman believes that the city can still be saved. Both fight for the fate of the city, the same argument we have in *The Dark Knight Rises*, where Batman tries to stop what he buried several years ago to save his city.

The basis of Nolan's trilogy is precisely that: turning Gotham City into a character whose soul (as the Joker mentions) must constantly be fought over. An object of value that is not possessed once and for all but rather takes on new meaning with each confrontation. If we apply Peirce's perspective, this "object" is not only physical, but also interpretive. What is being attempted to be saved is not only Gotham's infrastructure, but also the trust of its citizens. This reading is confirmed in *Year One*, where the object to be recovered is institutional legitimacy: the possibility of rebuilding the city through justice in the face of endemic corruption. This is why, despite their different methods, Gordon and Batman end up engaged in a single purpose: to recover the city.

Figure 5. Batman over Gotham City

The Dark Knight Rises: Christopher Nolan, 2012.

Thus, reading Gotham as an object in the actantial scheme reveals how the city articulates the roles of the narrative actors. Batman only exists as a subject because the city, in its multiple meanings, functions as the object of value. In this dynamic, the urban struggle is not for buildings or streets, but for meanings: order, dignity, trust, or memory.

3.6. Three ways of inhabiting Gotham: symbol, allegory and experience

The interpretation of Gotham varies according to the medium and the receiver. With Peirce's thirdness, we can see that the final meaning depends on the interpretant: that is, on the context and experience of the audience. In *Year One*, readers tend to read the city as a founding myth, a metaphor for the corruption that legitimises the emergence of the hero. Here, the comic offers a reception oriented towards the symbolic and mythologising.

In Nolan's films, however, the reception is charged with political plausibility. *The Dark Knight Rises* allows critics and viewers to interpret Bane's takeover of the city as a commentary on social inequality and the fragility of institutions in late capitalism. Lotman helps us see this: each cultural context enables new reinterpretations within the semiosphere, which explains the diversity of political interpretations generated by the trilogy.

For its part, in the *Arkhamverse* video games, the reception takes on an immersive and emotional character. The player not only observes the city but inhabits it. As Mirzoeff proposes, the affective response is central: the fear, adrenaline, and power of flying over Gotham in *Arkham Knight* and *Arkham Origins* make the city incarnate in each player's personal experience. Here, the reading is neither symbolic nor political, but bodily and affective. Both games achieve this in a more accurate way. While in *Arkham Asylum* the city can only be observed from a distance without being able to interact with it, and in *Arkham City* only a fragment specially designed to show what a city controlled by villains and urban decay would look like is accessible, the other two titles offer the possibility of exploring Gotham in its entirety. Each bridge, alleyway and skyscraper becomes a concrete sign (Peirce and secondness) that supports an immediate and physical reading: the player not only understands the city but feels it and puts it to the test.

Figure 6. Batman looking out over Gotham City from Arkham Asylum



Batman: Arkham Asylum: Rocksteady Studios Feral Interactive, Playcast-Media, 2009.

In this way, the city no longer functions as a fixed symbol or political commentary, but as an experiential space that places the player as the narrative subject. Following Lotman, the semiosphere is updated in an interactive way: the same Gotham that in the comic book condenses a myth and in the cinema sustains a political allegory, here is reinterpreted as a field of action in which the receiver is a co-producer of meaning. Each gaming experience generates a different interpretant (Peirce and thirdness), as no two journeys are identical: the way the player navigates the city, which places they explore first, how they deal with fear or violence, gives rise to unique reinterpretations of the urban environment. Thus, the video game turns Gotham into a mutable narrative space, whose identity is constructed in the immediate experience of the receiver.

In short, Gotham does not have a single stable meaning. Its significance multiplies depending on the receiver and the medium: myth in comics, socio-political commentary in cinema, and direct affective experience in video games. All with the aim of showing how the city is configured as a mutable narrative space, capable of adapting to each form of mediation and each type of reception, without losing the core identity that makes it recognisable. In this way, the analysis demonstrates that Gotham's strength lies precisely in its plasticity: it can be a symbol, a political stage, or a field of action, and in all cases, it maintains its role as the epicentre in the construction of the Batman universe.

3.7. From Arkham to the alley of crime

Gotham is organised around a symbolic topography that combines recognisable landmarks, narrative routes and the tension between the core and the periphery. Lynch helps us understand how these elements give the space its identity and legibility. In *Arkham Asylum* and *Arkham City*, the asylum and the walls function as central landmarks that condense memories of violence and madness, making them inevitable in the construction of the player's mental map. Above all, the asylum, even though it is located outside the city, is a fundamental part of the recognition of the city and its dark nature.

Lotman complements this with the notion of core and periphery: in *Year One*, the opposition between affluent districts and degraded neighbourhoods structures the urban semiosphere. The core appears as a space of institutional power, while the periphery is home to crime and marginal innovation. Something similar occurs in *Batman Begins*, where the straits become a symbolically charged peripheral territory: their marginality explains both the emergence of fear and the fertile ground for the experiments of villains such as Ra's al Ghul.

In addition, specific places, such as Wayne Manor or Crime Alley (where Bruce Wayne's parents were murdered), function as nodes of personal and collective significance. This is where Peirce's secondary nature comes into play: specific events that, when repeated, become charged with

symbolic value and anchor urban memory. The city is not only mapped geographically, but each landmark becomes a sign laden with history and emotion. In this way, Gotham stands as a semiotic network of places and trajectories. Its landmarks are condensers of identity, memory and narrative.

Figure 7. Batman in the alley of crime



Batman: Arkham City: Rocksteady Studios, WB Games Montréal, 2011.

3.8. Fascination, terror and hope

The atmosphere of Gotham is shaped by an affective economy: a circulation of emotions that mobilises characters and legitimises actions. According to Mirzoeff, visuals not only convey information, but also produce emotional responses that condition interpretation. This is the case in *The Dark Knight*, where the Joker's actions generate both fascination and fear, creating an atmosphere of anarchy and chaos in the city itself that even manages to destabilise the viewer, almost to the point of thinking that their own city is being threatened by the clown.

In the Arkham video games, the affective economy is intensified by Peirce's primacy: siren sounds, incessant rain, or sudden shadows produce immediate impressions that predispose the player's experience even before rational interpretation. This atmospheric design generates sustained anxiety and reinforces the feeling of inhabiting a hostile space, even constantly activating the game's detective mode to ensure that there are no threats nearby.

In *The Dark Knight Returns*, collective fear becomes a motivating function in Greimas' sense. Batman's return cannot be understood without this climate of urban terror that demands a response. Here, fear is narrative currency: it mobilises the hero and legitimises the need for his intervention. A city that, after a long period of peace, declines once again with the resurgence of evil thanks to the appearance of mutants and their deployment throughout Gotham with a wave of crimes and atrocities, generates a feeling of collective unease. A representation of the city as a vulnerable organism, where fear not only threatens social stability, but also becomes the driving force behind heroic action and the catalyst for Batman's return.

Figure 8. Bruce Wayne walking among the decay of Gotham City



The Dark Knight Returns: Frank Miller, 1986.

In all cases, the city produces emotions that structure the narrative. Fear, hope, and fascination are not secondary: they are the very engine that defines which actions are justified and which urban discourses are accepted. In this way, Gotham functions as both a setting and an emotional device that guides the reading: the struggle is not only for the city, but through it, as a condensation of collective values, tensions, and passions.

3.9. Same core, different faces

Despite the differences in medium, Gothic maintains a recognisable identity thanks to a shared semiotic core. Lotman explains this with the semiosphere: there are minimal codes (night, rain, corruption, asylum, surveillance) that circulate and are re-signified in each media update. These codes guarantee continuity, even though their form varies according to the format.

In *Year One*, these codes appear in a purely symbolic state: the city as a metaphor for absolute corruption. In Nolan's trilogy, the same codes are adapted to the urban realism of Chicago: skyscrapers and bridges at night function as persistent visual codes, as Mirzoeff points out. In *Arkham Knight*, these same elements are incorporated, but in the service of interaction: the city is not only observed, but explored and controlled, which intensifies its power as a sign.

Figure 9. Gotham City in Arkham Knight



Batman: Arkham Knight: Rocksteady Studios, Feral Interactive, Iron Galaxy Studios, 2015.

Peirce helps to conclude this reading: although the representamen (the form of the sign) changes in comics, films or video games, the semiotic object is the same, a city in crisis, decadent

and symbolically charged. Transmedia continuity is ensured not because all representations are identical, but because they share that flexible semiotic core that adapts and reinterprets itself.

Gotham's transmedia identity arises from the persistence of common codes that guarantee recognition and, at the same time, from the ability of each medium to re-semanticise those codes in its own narrative language. This tension between continuity and variation is what keeps the city alive as a myth: a space that is always recognisable, but never identical, adapting to the demands of each format and each generation of recipients.

4. Conclusions

An analysis of the different representations of Gotham City leads to the conclusion that the city, far from being a mere backdrop, is a central narrative and semiotic actor within the Batman universe. Based on the contributions of authors such as Peirce, Lotman, Harvey, Lynch, Greimas, and Mirzoeff, it is evident that Gotham condenses multiple symbolic dimensions that make it an urban myth. Its function transcends that of a simple setting: it operates as a device that organises the plots, guides the characters' actions, and articulates critical readings of contemporary society.

Firstly, it can be said that Gotham maintains its transmedia identity thanks to the persistence of a shared semiotic core. Elements such as permanent darkness, institutional corruption, constant rain, Arkham Asylum, and obsessive surveillance function as minimal codes that circulate in comics, films, and video games. These codes, although adapted to each format, ensure the city's recognition in any representation and consolidate its mythical character. Lotman's notion of semiosphere is key to explaining how these elements structure a flexible but coherent narrative space, which is updated generation after generation without losing its essence.

Secondly, the study of the city reveals that its representation carries a socio-political and critical charge. Following Harvey, Gotham reflects the contradictions of the capitalist city: unequal accumulation of resources, concentration of power, institutional corruption and privatisation of security. In *Year One*, police and political corruption is a narrative fact that sustains the decadent atmosphere; in *The Dark Knight Rises*, class struggle is materialised in the destruction of bridges and the occupation of urban space; while in *Arkham City*, the fragmentation and concentration of resources in a walled territory is represented, functioning as a perverse social experiment. In this way, each medium offers a different interpretation of the same problem: the city as a territory of dispute and as a critical mirror of contemporary urban dynamics.

Thirdly, the conclusions suggest that the city is organised around a symbolic topography. With Lynch's contributions, we see how landmarks, narrative routes and memory-laden nodes — such as the alley of crime or Wayne Manor — construct collective mental maps. Added to this is Lotman's notion of core and periphery, visible in the opposition between affluent districts and marginalised neighbourhoods. These spatial contrasts not only structure the narrative but also symbolise deep social inequalities. Thus, Gotham is not only mapped in geographical terms, but also in semiotic terms: each space becomes a sign laden with history, identity and conflict.

Likewise, the research shows that Gotham functions as an affective economy. Following Mirzoeff, the visual and the atmospheric are not mere decorations, but resources for producing emotions that condition the reading. Fear, fascination, or anxiety not only affect the viewer or player, but also legitimise narrative actions. In *The Dark Knight*, the Joker destabilises both the city and the audience through chaos and terror; in *The Dark Knight Returns*, collective fear functions as a narrative motivation for the hero's return; and in the Arkham video games, Peirce's primacy—noises, shadows, rain—creates a sensory climate that keeps the player on alert. In this way, the city is experienced as an emotional space that conditions behaviour and justifies interventions.

In summary, the research concludes that Gotham's identity is sustained by a permanent tension between continuity and variation. On the one hand, there are shared codes that ensure recognition and persistence; on the other, each medium re-signifies these codes according to its specific narrative language. Comics emphasise allegory, cinema projects the city towards socio-

political realism, and video games offer an interactive experience that intensifies immersion. This flexibility explains the enduring relevance of the urban myth: Gotham is always recognisable, but never identical.

Ultimately, Gothic emerges as a metaphor for the modern city: a vulnerable organism, riddled with structural and emotional tensions, which concentrates the fears, hopes, and contradictions of urban life. Its strength lies in the fact that it is not limited to being a fictional space but rather projects the problems of real societies: inequality, violence, corruption, and fear as a driving force for control. In this sense, Gotham not only reflects decadence and chaos, but also the possibility of resistance and transformation, embodied in the figure of the hero.

In conclusion, Gotham City stands as a transmedia and cultural myth, capable of semiotically articulating narratives, emotions, and social criticism. Its permanence in popular culture responds precisely to this ability to reinvent itself without losing its essence, to function as a critical mirror of the contemporary city, and to sustain, in each medium, a unique experience of chaos, conflict, and hope.

5. Acknowledgements

This text was written within the framework of the COMTIC research group at EAN University in Colombia. I would like to thank Professor Martha Carolina Chaparro, a lecturer in the undergraduate communication programme, for guiding me on this journey and for all the lessons I have learned in writing this text.

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