Playing with Batman

(De-)Constructing Transmedial Characters in THE LEGO BATMAN MOVIE

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Abstract

This paper explores the role of three core principles in the construction and deconstruction of transmedial characters: irony, plasticity, and playfulness. By using the LEGO BATMAN MOVIE as its central case study, it is argued that the film offers a meta-perspective on the divergent and inconsistent media history of the Caped Crusader—one that invites recipients to play with the various building blocks of his character. The essay also analyzes the narrative and aesthetic means by which the film addresses the materiality of Lego bricks, the intertextuality of various media franchises, and the role of recipients as potential constructors or master builders. By that, it is suggested that the film is not only a tribute to Batman as a transmedial icon, but also an exploration of the importance of the core principles mentioned above in the construction and deconstruction of characters across media.

INTRODUCTION: THE ONE AND ONLY BATMAN?[1]

"Sir, I have seen you go through similar phases in 2016 and 2012 and 2008 and 2005 and 1997 and 1995 and 1992 and 1989—and that weird one in 1966."
"I have aged phenomenally."[2]

Theoretically speaking, characters with a long media history are a complicated matter. Film scholar Jens Eder defines characters very broadly as "identifiable fictional beings with an inner life that exists as communicatively constructed artifacts"[3] and if they exist within a more or less stable and coherent storyworld, different incarnations across media could be understood as one and the same ("glocal transmedia characters").[4] If those characters have been modified and/or expanded on over time, however—for example, Sherlock Holmes, Peter Pan, or Batman—they might appear in familiar and yet often separate storyworlds without any continuity between them. In other words: It seems more like they all *refer* to the same character without plausibly being one and the same. Thon speaks here of "global transmedia character networks,"[5] indicating that there is not one all-encompassing ideal representation of a character that is shared over time and across audiences. Instead, there are multiple interconnections between different incarnations, establishing links that may strengthen some core characteristics, but also often add new aspects or modify certain elements (for example displacing Sherlock Holmes into New York in ELEMENTARY,[6] or turning Peter Pan into an adult in HOOK).[7] In this context, Roberta Pearson speaks of several more or less stable core elements as

1 This contribution is based in part on chapters of Hanns Christian Schmidt's book *Transmediale Topoi. Medienübergreifende Erzählwelten in seriellen Narrativen*, Marburg: Büchner 2020; but it is a largely revised and expanded version of these sections.

2 Alfred Pennyworth and Bruce Wayne, THE LEGO BATMAN MOVIE (AU/US/DK 2017, D: Chris McKay)

3 Eder, Jens: "Understanding Characters," in: *Projections* (no. 4) 1 (2010), pp. 16-40.

4 Jan-Noël Thon distinguishes between "local work-specific characters," "glocal transmedia characters" and "global transmedia character networks." See: Thon, Jan-Noël: "Transmedia Characters: Theory and Analysis," in: *Frontiers of Narrative Studies* 5 (2019), pp. 176-199, p. 171.

5 Ibid.

6 ELEMENTARY (US 2012-2019, CBS)

7 HOOK (US 1991, D: Steven Spielberg)

"established character templates"[8] that define a character's recognizable attributes on the one hand and a need for the producers to keep each new incarnation innovative and interesting on the other.

Although we mostly treat characters as intersubjective concepts, we might imagine them differently depending on individual experiences and knowledge. To speak of intersubjective qualities for a character is to create a hypothetical mental model for an assumed ideal recipient.[9] In the case of transmedial character networks, even divergent textual incarnations[10] may converge within the mind of the recipient to an individual—possibly still contradictory—mental model of the character. The recipients may be aware of facts about production contexts that explain certain contradictions and still be able to imagine a character as a coherent fictional being, an entity that somehow still 'functions' or 'works well' regarding the particular story at hand. Thon refers here to Kendal Walton's "principle of charity"[11] that recipients apply to solve—or rather, to cognitively smooth out—such conflicts.

The difficulty to locate an 'origin' for such characters highlights several problems that are inherent to the understanding of fictional characters: What are characters, where do they live, and what makes them 'alive' in the first place? We may be tempted to see a character as something created by textual representation and mainly fulfilling textual functions (being the hero, the villain, the sidekick, and so on). However, once we get to know them, we can think of Batman, Sherlock Holmes, or Peter Pan independent of their textual incarnations. We may even know about them, without ever reading, watching, or playing a media artifact that represents them (children may know about Darth Vader, for example, from images of school backpacks or lunch boxes). Other characters, such as Hello Kitty or

8 Pearson, Roberta E.: "'You're Sherlock Holmes, Wear the Damn Hat!': Character Identity in a Transfiction," in: Paola Brembilla/Ilaria A. De Pascalis (eds.), *Reading Contemporary Serial Television Universes: A Narrative Ecosystem Framework*, New York, NY: Routledge 2018, pp. 144-166, here p. 150.

9 Eder, Jens: Was Sind Figuren? Ein Beitrag zur Interdisziplinären Fiktionstheorie, Paderborn: mentis 2008, p.65.

10 As common in cultural theory, we understand text as "any set of signs which can be read for meaning" (Chandler, Daniel/Munday, Rod: "Text," in: Chandler, Daniel/Munday, Rod (eds.), *Oxford Dictionary of Media and Communication*, New York, NY: Oxford University Press 2011, pp.429-430, here p. 429.

11 J. Thon: "Transmedia Characters," p.185.

Uncle Sam, may even exist without any memorable text-based narrative connection at all (as pre-narrative character or "kyara").[12]

As Essri Varis points out, fictional characters, then, are in general a bit like Frankenstein's monster: dead and constructed through artificial elements until they are struck by a spark of life.[13] Varis' metaphor emphasizes the role of the recipient in reviving such characters. In this sense, we—as audience members—take over the role of Doctor Frankenstein, animating characters from a potentially unlimited pool of source materials and letting them live again in our imagination. Hence, the necessity to distinguish between the *textual representations* (Figuren*dar*stellungen) of a character and the *mental representations* (Figuren*vor*stellungen) in the recipients' mind:[14] as 'communicatively constructed artifacts' characters can be seen equally as textual elements and abstract concepts imagined by an audience.[15]

With the example of the Lego Batman, we would like to propose another metaphor to better understand characters across media—or, quite literally, add another building block to this concept. In the Lego Franchise, Batman appears to be a more or less coherent glocal transmedial character. However, he already lived through an impressive history of representations in different media. Those representations appear as points of connection—the different links that Thon points out, not unlike the stud-and-tube-system of Lego bricks—and invite us to playfully rebuild the character in our minds. In this sense, we do not become a mad scientist like Frankenstein, but rather a master builder; not only constructing, but also constantly *deconstructing* Batman's image. This is highlighted in the opening quote of Bruce

12 Cf. Wilde, Lukas R.A.: "Kyara Revisited: The Pre-Narrative Character-State of Japanese Character Theory," in: *Frontiers of Narrative Studies* 5 (2019), pp. 220-247.

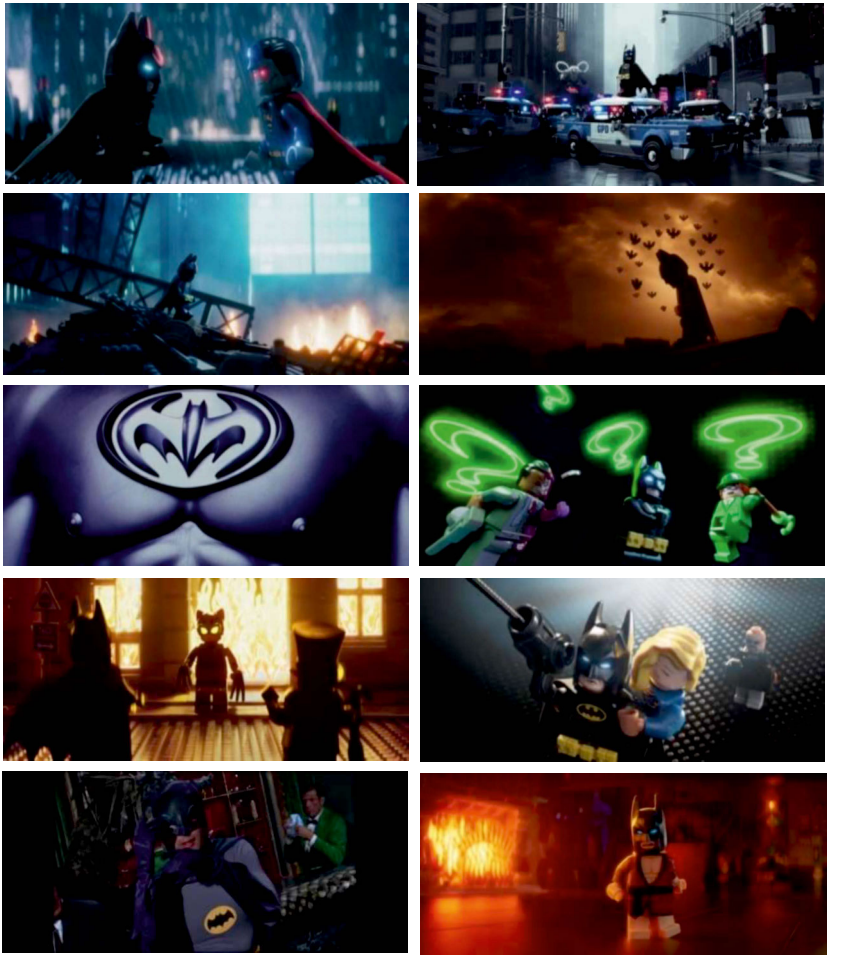
13 Cf. Varis, Essi: "The Monster Analogy: Why Fictional Characters Are Frankenstein's Monsters," in: *Substance* 48 (2019), pp. 63-86.

14 J. Eder: *Was Sind Figuren?*, p. 64.

15 James Phelan even suggests three possible perspectives for a better understanding of characters and their modes of action: the mimetic, the synthetic, and the thematic sphere of a character. The mimetic sphere addresses the character as an imagined 'fictional person' with an inner life, the synthetic sphere addresses the character as a 'textual element' consisting of words and images, the thematic sphere addresses the cultural 'function' of the character as a symbol or metaphor for other abstract concepts. (Cf. Phelan, James: "Narrative as Rhetoric and the MTS Model," in: Clark, Matthew/Phelan Matthew (eds.), *Debating Rhetorical Narratology: On the Synthetic, Mimetic, and Thematic Aspects of Narrative (Theory and Interpretation of Narrative)*, Columbus, OH: The Ohio State University Press 2020, pp.146-148.

Wayne's butler Alfred in THE LEGO BATMAN MOVIE, establishing a narrative link between specific live-action adaptations of Batman and the Batman of THE LEGO BATMAN MOVIE (see Fig. 1-10).

Figures 1-10 (left to right and top to bottom): BATMAN V SUPERMAN (2016), THE DARK KNIGHT RISES (2012), THE DARK KNIGHT (2008), BATMAN BEGINS (2005), BATMAN & ROBIN (1997), BATMAN FOREVER (1995), BATMAN RETURNS (1992), BATMAN (1989), BATMAN (1966), THE LEGO BATMAN MOVIE (2017)



In 2016, Zack Snyder introduced us to arguably the grimmest big-screen adaptation of this character with BATMAN V SUPERMAN;[16] a gritty continuation in the style of the already quite 'dark knight' established by Christopher Nolan's trilogy in 2005, 2008, and 2012.[17] The trilogy was preceded by Joel Schumacher's BATMAN FOREVER[18] and BATMAN & ROBIN,[19] in 1995 and 1997 respectively, a flashy, camp-infused version of the superhero, in which not least George Clooney's 'nipple suit' left a lasting impression in the popular imagination. And in 1989 and 1992, while not strictly speaking the first time Batman came to the big screen, Tim Burton directed the billionaire in a bat costume in the first two full-length Hollywood feature films.[20]

Most of these cinematic incarnations of Batman exist separately from each other—for example, there is no continuity between the Batman who adopts Dick Grayson as his sidekick Robin in 1995's BATMAN FOREVER and the following DARK KNIGHT trilogy by Christopher Nolan.[21] Moreover, the selected examples present Batman as oscillating between his dark and gritty origins and more carnivalesque or even camp incarnations that are often associated with his goofy sidekick Robin.[22] A prime example for the latter is the 1960s TV series BATMAN[23] and the accompanying movie BATMAN: THE MOVIE,[24] which is here referred to as Batman's "weird phase." The comment devalues the camp aspects of Batman and thus plays into recent interpretations of Batman's comic book origins as mainly 'dark and gritty'—quite ironically because THE LEGO BATMAN MOVIE in itself is a rather silly and campy incarnation of the Caped Crusader. In addressing the rather disparate history of Batman, the movie shows an awareness of the

16 Batman V Superman: Dawn of Justice (US 2016, D: Zack Snyder)

17 BATMAN BEGINS (US/UK 2005, D: Christopher Nolan); THE DARK KNIGHT (US/UK 2008, D: Christopher Nolan); THE DARK KNIGHT RISES (US/UK 2012, D: Christopher Nolan)

18 BATMAN FOREVER (US 1995, D: Joel Schumacher)

19 BATMAN & ROBIN (US 1997, D: Joel Schumacher)

20 BATMAN (US/UK 1989, D: Tim Burton); BATMAN RETURNS (US 1992, D: Tim Burton)

21 The trilogy only pays a subtle tribute to the infamous sidekick, by revealing at the very end that one of the supporting characters, John Blake, is actually called 'Robin' John Blake.

22 Brooker, Will: Hunting the Dark Knight: Twenty-first Century Batman, London: I. B. Tauris 2012.

23 BATMAN (US 1966-1968, ABC)

24 BATMAN: THE MOVIE (US 1966, D: Leslie H. Martinson)

contradictions between the different representations of Batman and their perception in public discourse. Or, to put it differently: "Every fan knows Batman's origin story,"[25] as journalist Charlie Jane Anders writes in her review of the LEGO BATMAN MOVIE, not meaning the one about the murder of Bruce Wayne's parents, which he witnessed as a young child:

> "I'm talking about the tale of a gritty urban vigilante who was created in 1939, only to be mercilessly watered down into kid-friendly fluff, culminating in a hyperkitschy 1966 TV show. Ever since then, the story goes, brave creators have fought to make the Dark Knight dark again."[26]

Which version is considered to be the 'right' one is primarily a question of marketing, rhetoric, and the interests of the respective licensors who will advertise 'their' version of the character accordingly.

As we will see, something decidedly playful is taking place here: The meta-perspective of THE LEGO MOVIE franchise—consisting of THE LEGO MOVIE,[27] THE LEGO MOVIE 2: THE SECOND PART,[28] THE LEGO BATMAN MOVIE, and THE LEGO NINJAGO MOVIE,[29] as well as various media tie-ins, such as digital games and comic spin-offs—plays with the potential cognitive dissonance between a mental image of Batman as an incoherent global transmedial character network created by several distinct medial incarnations and Batman as an 'ideal' singular character that exists only for the glocal storyworld of the Lego universe. This aspect of playfulness highlights how we make sense of such characters, especially when they are contextualized within a long media history: Instead of searching for a unifying, unbreakable 'core' of traits and a heterogenous backstory, we engage in a propositional stance, creating 'what if'-scenarios. As media culture constantly adjusts and modifies the template of the characters like Batman, our mental models of them are by no means monolithic, but rather plastic—in the literal sense of the word.

Our hypothesis is supported by several narrative and aesthetic means, which are decidedly 'meta': The first means lies in the ironic meta-approach to Batman as a character, for example, in the intertextual backreferences to Batman's diverse

25 Anders, Charlie Jane: "Fun Batman or Dark Batman? Hell, Why Not Both," in: Wired, February 10, 2017, https://www.wired.com/2017/02/fun-batman-vs-dark-batman/

26 Ibid.

27 THE LEGO MOVIE (AU/US/DK 2014, D: Phil Lord/Christopher Miller)

28 THE LEGO MOVIE 2: THE SECOND PART (AU/US/DK 2019, D: Mike Mitchell)

29 THE LEGO NINJAGO MOVIE (US/DK 2017, D: Charlie Bean/Paul Fisher/Bob Logan)

audio-visual media history as we just described it above. The second one lies in the meta-reference to its constructional foundation; Lego bricks as something both plastic and 'sticky'; an additive and malleable material that is both meant to be played with in games of make-believe and a construction toy made for building something new out of already existing material. The third one lies in the prominent role of the recipients as potential 'constructors' or master builders, as well as of the Lego world and of popular characters such as Batman. This is addressed in the movie franchise as a form of metalepsis, a stylistic device that highlights the construction of the text itself. These three means will be identified and elaborated on through a formal close reading of selected parts of the film.

IRONY: (BAT-)MAN IN THE MIRROR

As the historian Michael Saler notes in his 'pre-history of virtual worlds,' the early visitors of the first modern literary storyworlds, such as the one of Sherlock Holmes, often used the distancing means of irony to avoid completely losing themselves in the fiction in an escapist way.[30] Saler sums up this approach as "being delighted without being deluded"[31]—and goes on by describing how a potential "colonization of the imagination"[32] by serially produced stories may have taken place as early as in the 19th century. Saler outlines the powerful effect irony as follows:

"[B]y the Edwardian era of the 'New Imperialism' the imagination had become domesticated as a topographic space awaiting colonization; by the mid-twentieth century imaginary worlds were readily available as places of prolonged mental habitation. [...] Adults could now reside safely within carefully mapped geographies of the imagination without compromising their reason [...]—because the necessary distinction between fantasy and reality was securely reinforced through the distancing power of irony."[33]

30 Cf. Saler, Michael: As If: Modern Enchantment and the Literary Pre-history of Virtual Reality, Oxford: Oxford University Press 2012.

31 Ibid., p.12.

32 Eder, Jens. "Transmediale Imagination," in: Julian Hanich/Hans Jürgen Wulff (eds.), *Auslassen, Andeuten, Auffüllen*, Leiden: Brill 2012, pp. 205-237, here: p. 230, trans. by VO/HCS.

33 M. Saler: *As If*, p. 29.

He claims that early 'super fans' of characters like Sherlock Holmes—which also included cosplayers (*avant la lettre*) and eager writers of fan fiction—were both emotionally involved and, at the same time, keenly and jokingly aware of the artificiality of their object of interest. On a certain level, this approach is similar to our case study: THE LEGO BATMAN MOVIE is downright infused with a particular blend of self-aware, tongue-in-cheek self-parody. In addition to that (and as was already demonstrated at the beginning), THE LEGO BATMAN MOVIE not only heavily relies on the audience's knowledge of its titular hero, but also makes the knowledge of his malleability a de facto condition for the unfolding of its metareflexive potential. In other words: The Lego Batman is not simply another incarnation of the Dark Knight—who is often not as dark as certain fans and certain marketing strategists would like him to be. Rather, he serves as a figurative crystallization point of *ironic commentary* on the character. Given that Batman has been a fixture of popular culture for over 75 years, it is understandable that researchers such as Brooker would dismiss attributions such as "'truth' and 'fidelity'"[34] as meaningless in relation to Batman. As the already mentioned flashback scene shows, in the character of the Lego Batman are all—and simultaneously none—of the screen adaptations to date intertwined. Thus, highlighting the individual building blocks that apparently could be attached to and removed from the character at will.

When we look at the more or less stable parts of Batman's transmedial character template—his outward appearance, mental properties, social situation, and essential parts of his biography—the Lego Batman takes these attributes to extremes. In many aspects, this particular Batman ends up being a reservoir for just about every gag ever made about the character—"[A] sort of greatest-hits of Batjokes."[35] Out of Batman's intelligence and athleticism grows such an inflated ego that even his voice-controlled computer responds to the command "overcompensate!"; the billionaire lifestyle is maintained in a Hugh Heffner-reminiscent bathrobe and with a plate of microwave lobster in the swimming pool; and the starting point of Batman's character arc (his fear of allowing a normal familial bond again after the traumatic loss of his parents) finds a reflection in his symbiotic relationship with the Joker, who wants nothing more than to finally be accepted by Batman as his favorite enemy.

34 W. Brooker: *Hunting the Dark Knight*, p. xi.

35 Robinson, Tasha/Adi Robertson/Chaim Gartenberg: "Question Club: The Lego Batman Movie's Original Content, Smart Humor, and Endless Recycling," in: *The Verge*, February 13, 2017, https://www.the verge.com/2017/2/13 /14600838/question-club-lego-batman-movie-robin-batgirl (accessed: 03.04.2020).

In the larger context of the story presented, however, it is surprising that shortly after a completely revved-up opening sequence we witness a much calmer passage. This becomes all the more powerful through the contrast of its ordinariness: The vast, deserted lair of the Batcave echoes the masked vigilante's voice several times over; we watch Batman reheat his microwave meal for minutes in a dark kitchen, see him watching the romantic comedy JERRY MAGUIRE[36] alone in his home theater and finally witness how he becomes engrossed in the family photos in the entrance hall of his mansion. Here, he is surprised by his butler Alfred, and the self-reflexive scene described at the very beginning of this article takes place.

This passage and the inserted scenes (Fig. 1-10) make it clear that, surprisingly, this very meta-Batman provides the film with much more emotional realism and personality than we've been used to from other film adaptations of the character to date (quite unlike, say, the Snyder or the Nolan films, which portray Batman as decidedly one-sided between anger and a self-imposed sense of duty). The focus here is no longer (only) on saving the world or Gotham City, but at least provides believable hints about the character's inner life and emotional states—treating Batman more like a 'fictional person.' With this blend of irony and emotional realism, we are presented a parody of the character, but one that foregrounds its usual artificiality by contrasting it with something new.

PLASTICITY: LEGO BRICKS AS TOPOI OF MEDIA CULTURE

At the end of the movie, Batman is finally able to overcome his inner conflict when he sees his friends in danger, acknowledges the importance of social connections (his own connectivity), and finally allows emotional bonds. Nevertheless, at the last second, the Joker's bomb detonates, causing the Lego base plates on which Gotham City is built to drift apart—but Batman manages to prevent the worst with an idea: "We're gonna stick together. Literally." In the process, the Lego figures athletically pile on top of each other, using their bodily fitness to form a 'human' chain to hold the two panels together and eventually reunite them.

36 JERRY MAGUIRE (US 1996, D: Cameron Crowe)

Figure 11: Joker and the other villains and Batman and his friend each turn themselves into a Lego chain connected in the middle by Batman and Joker joining hands

Source: THE LEGO BATMAN MOVIE.

As we see in this scene (Fig. 11), the irony mentioned earlier is closely interlinked with the materiality of the depicted scenes. The representation of Lego bricks evokes not only a very specific audiovisual style between CGI, actual film footage, and stop-motion-aesthetics that serve as a foundation for many Lego-specific jokes but also provides some interesting theoretical insights that become central for our understanding of transmedial characters. Lego bricks are a malleable material that enables a variability in form—due to its materiality—or rather its plasticity, to be more precise. The general aesthetic of the material plastic is summarized, for example, by Roland Barthes in his collection *Mythologies* in the following way:

> "So, more than a substance, plastic is the very idea of its infinite transformation; as its everyday name indicates, it is ubiquity made visible. And it is this, in fact, which makes it a miraculous substance: a miracle is always a sudden transformation of nature. Plastic remains impregnated throughout with this wonder: it is less a thing than the trace of a movement."[37]

But Lego bricks are even more than just building blocks made of plastic. As a fundamentally additive technology, each Lego component offers two essential properties: (1) They can be combined to construct a distinct shape or object and (2) provide connection points that make either more material appliable or lets the builder take away material without 'breaking' the foundational building substance, i.e., the brick. While other plastic objects in Barthes' sense are sculptural

37 Barthes, Roland: *Mythologies*, New York, NY: Hill and Wang 2011[*1957], p. 79.

'traces of movement' frozen in time, Lego bricks provide a technical means to dissolve the trace of movement again— transforming its forms possibly ad infinitum. The reason for this is simple: All Lego bricks are based on a patented interlocking binding system, meaning that all Lego bricks manufactured since the very first one are compatible with each other. New pieces can always be added; existing Lego worlds can be rebuilt and extended, destroyed and rebuilt again. By that, Lego bricks by design highlight the very idea of interconnectivity with other elements, a built-in seriality brick by brick (by brick…). As Gauntlett points out:

"The LEGO System, as commonly understood, refers to the idea that any LEGO element, or any LEGO set, is not an isolated or complete object, but comes with the potential, and the promise, that it is part of a much larger whole. The system of interconnecting studs and tubes, patented by the LEGO Group in 1958, means that any LEGO object can be connected with others and almost endlessly extended."[38]

This serial interconnectivity as well as the malleable plasticity of the material make the Lego models we build with our hands quite similar to the mental models we build in our minds, whenever we imagine fictional characters and their worlds. To further explain: According to literary scholar and writer Umberto Eco, whenever we engage with the world of a text, we are constantly creating further possible world designs based on obvious probabilities. Eco puts it this way:

"[W]hen the fable tells the reader 'x performs such an action,' she will suppose: 'and because every time x performs such an action that takes the outcome y, so will'—this is the conclusion—'the action of x take the outcome.'"[39]

Thus, the readers enter into a "propositional stance" in which they explore various "hypotheses about world structures."[40] To illustrate this, Eco chooses another metaphor—which is, the act of playing a chess game:

38 Gauntlett, David: "The LEGO System as a Tool for Thinking, Creativity, and Changing the World," in: Mark J. P. Wolf (ed.), *LEGO Studies: Examining the Building Blocks of a Transmedial Phenomenon*, Hoboken, NJ: Taylor and Francis 2014, pp. 189-205, here p. 190.

39 Eco, Umberto: *Lector in fabula: Die Mitarbeit der Interpretation in erzählenden Texten*, München: dtv Verlag 1990, p. 149.

40 Ibid., p. 143.

"All this together—the shape of the chessboard, the rules of the game and the scenographies of the game—[…] represents a totality of possibilities that open up from the encyclopedia of chess. On this basis, the reader sets out to work out her own solution. And for this she carries out a double movement: on the one hand she considers all objectively recognizable possibilities as 'permitted' […]; on the other hand, she considers the move she thinks is the best one. [...] And therefore, finally, the world prefigured by the reader is based both on objective conditions of the network [as well as the encyclopedia of chess, VO/HCS] and on the reader's own subjective speculations about the behavior of other persons."[41]

The rules of a chess game—together with its pieces and their probable moves in specific game situations—work in a very similar way when transferred to possible world and character designs in narratives. They are—speaking in Lego terms—bricks that can be applied in a particular way to construct a certain shape, object, or model. Predictions about the course of a story, then, coincide with certain experiences of a reader who is already familiar with specific literary conventions. These conventions are then compared to the actualized situation described by the text. Now, this creates by no means a strict 'set of rules' like that of an actual chess game; instead, we extract a sense of plausibility from the text in the course of reading it. According to Eco, however, the art of a successful narrative lies in designing a scenography that has not yet been depicted based on the space of possibilities constructed in the text, but which is nevertheless within the bounds of what is deemed acceptable:

"In the second case, one will present a game situation in which the winner has dared a completely unexpected move, not yet recorded by any scenography, so that it has entered history because of its audacity and novelty, and the reader has the pleasure of having his predictions contradicted. [...] Every fable plays its own game, and pleasure decides what prevails in it."[42]

In reading a text, familiar scenarios are thus always actualized; and "[e]nactualizing a scenography [...] means, in effect, returning to the topos."[43]

In particular, the fact that Eco repeatedly mentions the term topos (from Gr. tópos: place) in his explanations is quite interesting in this context—and it can certainly be fruitfully anchored in the discourse on global transmedial character networks, character templates, and the Lego metaphor. Frauke Berndt and Lily

41 Ibid., p. 146.

42 Ibid., p. 148.

43 Ibid., p. 149.

Tonger-Erk established a similar connection in their monograph on intertextuality.[44] They understand the term topos as a "commonplace (locus communis)" that "can be realized in different media on their media-specific terms" and see a "building-block principle" at work that releases a "generative potential" through its "limitless combinatorics."[45]

Grasping the term topos ambiguously in this way may not seem conducive to scholarly debate at first glance; however, this use of the term has a certain tradition: In the ancient doctrine of their use—the ancient topics—topoi were designated both as sites for evidence, arguments, and thoughts and as such, rhetorical elements themselves. They were primarily intended to assist public speech with concrete functions (such as legal argument) and through rhetorical stylization (such as the "conclusion from the opposite (*argumentum a contratio*),"[46] but also to serve as "memory aids [...] and ornaments of speech [...]."[47] In literature, however, topoi became a "basic stock of fixed images, standing phrases, and traditional motifs,"[48] which were collected and systematized in the early modern period in "compendia, rhetoric manuals, and topoicatalogs."[49] In poetic use, topoi thus indeed become "format templates"[50] that are properly archived in cultural memory. This archive, as Berndt writes in a survey article on poetic topics, was described as mental "houses and temples" by Cicero; and Quintilian understood them as a body that can turn out "well-proportioned or monstrous" depending on the "building project."[51] In this sense, a topos can also be understood as part of an established character template in Pearsons' understanding. We would add: Topoi could as well be imagined as building blocks for mental models that are flexible, malleable, and dynamic—literally plastic.

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44 Cf. Berndt, Frauke/Tonger-Erk, Lily: *Intertextualität: Eine Einführung*, Berlin: E. Schmidt 2013.

45 Ibid., p. 223.

46 Müller, Wolfgang G.: "Topik/Toposforschung," in: Ansgar Nünning (ed.), *Metzler-Lexikon Literatur und Kulturtheorie: Ansätze—Personen—Grundbegriffe*, Stuttgart: Metzler 2008, pp.722-23, here p. 723.

47 Oestersandtfordt,Christian:"Topos,"in:DieterBurdorf/Christoph,Fasbender/Burkhard Moennighoff (eds.), *Metzler Lexikon Literatur: Begriffe und Definitionen*, Stuttgart: J. B. Metzler 2007, pp. 773-74, here p. 774.

48 Ibid.

49 Ibid.

50 Berndt, Frauke: "Poetische Topik," in; Rüdiger Zymner (ed.), *Handbuch Literarische Rhetorik*, Berlin: De Gruyter 2015, pp. 433-60, here p. 441.

51 Ibid.

Thus, various analogies can be drawn between the 'construction methods' of transmedial narrative worlds and their characters as well as to the properties generally attributed to topoi. Both are structured (1) by a form of regularity or seriality that appears to be plausible according to the archived textual passages. These textual references can then (2) be constantly recombined and continued as in a modular system. As "literate readers,"[52] we learn to read and recognize transmedial topoi, such as the depiction of the Caped Crusader and his world, through our everyday media experience; and we use such topoi as building blocks to construct imaginative spaces in order to anticipate world structures and courses of action.

PLAYFULNESS: AUDIENCES AS MASTER BUILDERS

As we said in the beginning, it seems as if the Batman in THE LEGO BATMAN MOVIE represents an idealized mental image created by an avid viewer of Batman's audiovisual representations—like a remix of various building blocks. Or to put it differently, he seems as if he has fallen into a toy box and been shaken vigorously, losing some pieces and gaining some pieces in the time being. The film shows us a meta-perspective of Batman that includes an awareness of several textual representations that exist in the mind of the recipients and in this way the opening quote of this paper can be seen as an "epistemic metalepsis."[53] A metalepsis is a narrative element that transgresses the borders of the storyworld. In the example described above, Batman and his Butler possess knowledge about events that didn't happen in the local work-specific world of THE LEGO BATMAN MOVIE and are also not strictly part of the glocal transmedial world of the Lego Franchise. Both characters possess knowledge about Batman's complicated distribution history and thus appear to become part of the world of the audience.

This transgression of boundaries is not surprising in the context of the Lego Franchise as a whole. When we look at the first LEGO MOVIE, for example, we already witness a link to a world outside of the character's perceived reality: In a plot twist at the end of the movie, it is revealed that the characters in the movie are actually the toys of a young boy (the "Master Builder") and that the villain of the movie ("Lord Business") bears a suspicious likeness to his father, who threatens to glue the Lego figures together, and thus ending their existence as playful,

52 F. Berndt/L. Tonger-Erk: *Intertextualität*, p. 223.

53 Thon, Jan-Noël: *Transmedial Narratology and Contemporary Media Culture*, Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press 2016, pp. 65-66.

malleable, and creativity-inspiring beings—or as Herman calls it as "a basis for a fictional world you [the child] controlled."[54]

THE LEGO BATMAN MOVIE is a little more subtle when it comes to the inclusion of a similar framing narrative that alludes to the Lego characters as actual children's toys. Nevertheless, it can be argued that it is still there. This becomes evident when we take a closer look not only into the potential of the Lego bricks (which we did in the last section) but also its limitations. These limitations are not part of the inherent materiality and form of the Lego bricks but are part of Lego's company history. In 1999 Lego started to buy licenses from different media franchises and to sell themed packages, potentially limiting the children's imagination and further commercializing a 'creative' construction toy.[55] This practice has been broadly criticized, however, there is also an argument to be made that speaks against these commercial limitations and ascribes much more agency to the children and their practices of play:

"[W]ithout direct observation or memories it cannot be known how these toys are played with, and what worlds they may generate. Moreover [sic], as has already been indicated, once the pieces of any particular themed set are mixed up with a child or family's existing collection, all kinds of worlds can be constructed, and different kinds of knowledge, from popular media to science, are brought to bear, explored, and mixed up."[56]

Giddings indicates here that the mixing of elements from different narrative worlds might be a cornerstone of kids' play with Legos. He further identifies the 'Box' which holds the Lego bricks from different sets as the origin place for these intertextual encounters:

"'The Box' as an evocative focus for a multiplicity of memories, and the well-spring from which many LEGO play events emerge, and its collection or absorption of numerous sets, negates critique of themed sets and instructions as constraining. Not only does the box mix

54 Herman, Sarah: A Million Little Bricks: The Unofficial Illustrated History of the LEGO Phenomenon, New York, NY: Skyhorse Publ. 2012, p. 22.

55 Cf. Cross, Gary S.: *Kid's Stuff: Toys and the Changing World of American Childhood,* Cambridge, MS: Harvard University Press 1997.

56 Giddings, Seth: "Bright Bricks, Dark Play: On the Impossibility of Studying LEGO," in: Mark J. P. Wolf (ed.), *LEGO Studies: Examining the Building Blocks of a Transmedial Phenomenon*, Hoboken, NJ: Taylor and Francis 2014, pp. 241-267, here p. 264.

up initially distinct sets, it often originates in, or has incorporated, LEGO from older siblings, relatives or buildings."[57]

When we transfer these observations about Lego's marketing strategies and probable playful practices, we can see an analogy to 'the Box' in the so-called Phantom Zone in THE LEGO BATMAN MOVIE's storyworld. Like in the kids' toy box, a plethora of different characters populate this realm, detached from their own storyworld, mixed-up, and reduced to a few template sentences.

In THE LEGO BATMAN MOVIE, Batman successfully utilizes a projector beam to transport the Joker to this 'notorious space jail.' In the Phantom Zone, the Joker encounters numerous familiar antagonists and tries to recruit them for his evil plans to destroy Gotham City. The twist in this movie, however, is, that these antagonists not only have nothing to do with Gotham City and the expanded Batman canon, nor can they be found in the DC universe. Rather, this scene features characters from very different entertainment franchises: A gang of Gremlins from the film of the same name;[58] Sauron in the guise of the flaming eye, complete with his tower, from THE LORD OF THE RINGS franchise; a Godzilla lookalike; the white shark from JAWS,[59] a couple of velociraptors that could have come from JURASSIC PARK;[60] the giant ape King Kong; the Wicked Witch of the East from THE WIZARD OF OZ;[61] Count Dracula; some Daleks from DOCTOR WHO;[62] Lord Voldemort from the HARRY POTTER franchise; a swamp monster from the Lego MONSTER FIGHTER toy model series; Medusa from Greek mythology; and Agent Smith along with numerous doppelgangers from THE MATRIX franchise—all in Lego guise. In the process, we hear all sorts of self-ironic comments on the characters' narrative backgrounds as typical villains (for example, Sauron asks the Joker to dye Gotham's rivers red with Batman's blood—to which the latter hesitantly responds and promptly offers Sauron lava as a more pleasing substitute instead).

57 Ibid., p. 265.

58 GREMLINS (US 1984, D: Joe Dante)

59 JAWS (US 1975, D: Steven Spielberg)

60 JURASSIC PARK (US 1993, D: Steven Spielberg)

61 THE WIZARD OF OZ (US 1939, D: Victor Flemming)

62 DOCTOR WHO (UK 1963-present, BBC One)

Figures 12-15 (left to right and top to bottom): Sauron, Voldemort, and the Daleks (THE LEGO BATMAN MOVIE)

The Phantom Zone is thereby—similar to Cloud Cuckoo Land in the LEGO MOVIE—an *οὐτόpos*, a fantastic place of the in-between, in which on the one hand the (thematically) inappropriate parts are banished from the world of Gotham City and which on the other hand, serves as the starting point of an eclectic experiment in free play. This illustrious squad of villains is unceremoniously shipped back to Gotham City by the Joker to prove finally to Batman that he is the greatest villain of all time (and to completely destroy Gotham City).

Keeping the image of the Lego box in the child's room in mind, this hodge-podge of different characters from media history can be seen as another reference to the convergence of different characters—completely independent of their respective storyworlds—within the recipients' mind. Like memory fragments, these characters are reduced to simple elements of their established character templates (topoi). This entails mostly their outward appearance transformed into a Lego-specific visual style, significant props (such as a wand for Voldemort), significant abilities (like being 'all-seeing' in the case of Sauron's eye), and some catch-phrases—which are sometimes even only loosely connected to the character in question (for example, Voldemort doesn't shout his infamous killing course "Avada Kedavra," but repeats the phrase "Wingardium Leviosa," which is one of the more harmless charms in the Harry Potter universe).

CONCLUSION

As has been demonstrated, irony, plasticity, and playfulness play a significant role when we construct transmedial characters in our minds. THE LEGO BATMAN MOVIE illustrates exactly that: It not only articulates an awareness of what distinguishes Batman as a Lego-licensed superhero, but also downright celebrates the pleasures of reception, richness of variation, communal exchange, and productive appropriation of his world.

While the core story of the LEGO BATMAN MOVIE appears to be a typical 'what if' scenario in the Batman canon, the deviations from and reflections on the canonical Batman character are significant for the study of transmedial characters. The story departs from patterns of strict serial repetition and slight variation of the character. Instead, it reflects on Batman's divergent and inconsistent media history by creating a meta-perspective on the character through the double existence as a fictional being and as a children's toy. Furthermore, by opening up existing canon boundaries between different media franchises, the movie conveys the message that deconstruction and recombination of textual material can contribute to an innovative and creative playing experience. By appropriating numerous characters from different media franchises existing boundaries can be broken down in favor of Lego-typical playfulness. Various elements can be mixed and rearranged—no matter whether they have been produced as a set by Lego or constructed from Lego bricks themselves (a King Kong, Matrix, or Godzilla Lego set does not exist, for example). The film not only articulates an awareness of what makes Batman a Lego-licensed superhero but advocates the pleasures of reception, variety, sharing, and productive appropriation of his (and in essence all fictional) world(s). In this way, the LEGO BATMAN MOVIE is both a film about Batman as a transmedial icon and an exploration of the significance of irony and plasticity for constructing and deconstructing his character. The film also makes a case for a very specific way of dealing with topoi: By playing with them. It suggests, that our approach to characters takes on an all the more fruitful turn when canon boundaries are opened up, common templates are inverted and characters from completely different storyworlds are integrated into a narrative world. These processes ultimately mirror the convergence of different media in the recipient's mental image. With its transgressive use of metalepsis, however, it is less a critique of Batman than an affectionate homage. In the end, The LEGO BATMAN MOVIE is not only a film that incorporates certain brand values of the Lego company (family and friendship) but also a meta-commentary on how interactions with fictional narratives never happen in a vacuum.

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