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# Debating the war on terror in entertainment cinema: the politics of spectacle in *Batman v. Superman: Dawn of Justice* (Zack Snyder, 2016)

Hervé Mayer  
Université Paul-Valéry Montpellier 3

This article on the 9/11 subtext of entertainment cinema and the politics of spectatorship in *Barman v. Superman: Dawn of Justice* (Zack Snyder, 2016) could fit either in the "Audiences and fandom" theme (the construction of engaged spectatorship by entertainment media) or the "Minorities, race and gender tackled as entertainment" theme (post-9/11 affective politics as debated in entertainment media) as outlined in the conference CFP. This contribution would perfectly fit in any collection of articles with a wider focus on the politics of entertainment cinema.

## Abstract

Researchers working on the political dimension of cinematic entertainment either understand big budget production as intentionally apolitical or ideologically conservative. On the one hand, the economic logics of the entertainment industry would prevent films from advertising political views. On the other hand, the political power of mass media would work to strengthen existing institutions and manufacture consent. Taking the example of a contemporary blockbuster, *Batman v. Superman: Dawn of Justice* (Zack Snyder, Warner Bros., 2016), this paper intends to reorient the debate on the political dimension of entertainment by exploring cinematic spectacle as a dynamic political arena engaging the viewer. Met with bad reviews for its lacking story and pointless visual outbursts, *Batman v. Superman* was nevertheless one of the global successes of 2016 for the American film industry. In its contemporary figuration of the confrontation between two historic American superheroes, it dynamically opposes two conceptions of national heroism and the protective use of force, while deliberately grounding those conceptions in the affective memory of 9/11. In doing so, the entertaining movie engages the viewer in the politics of the war on terror. Shifting back and forth from Batman's to Superman's evolving viewpoints on how best to defend humanity, the film does not so much advocate one specific discourse as it constructs an experience of citizenship for the viewer, who is asked to envisage various positions and position himself within a dynamic political debate. Such experience is both intellectual and physical. It is not only conceptualized through the narrative construction of the film, but it is also embodied through the use of film spectacle itself, which reconfigures political affects by grounding the discursive tensions of the war on terror in the viewer's body. The physical experience of fear and violence, victimization and retaliation, boundaries violated and limits pushed off deepens and redefines discursive positioning, thus fully participating in the political dynamics of entertainment cinema. If, as some have pointed out, post-9/11 American politics is characterized by its affective logics, then spectacular films constitute a mirroring arena that resonates with, responds to, and contributes to shape, the political affects of the war on terror. But, as suggested by the example of *Batman v. Superman*, they do so critically, inviting viewers to engage both intellectually and physically in a public debate rather than serving them consensual views or a dominant ideology.

This paper focuses specifically on a detailed analysis of *Batman v. Superman's* introductory sequence, which dramatizes the film's exploration of loss, fear and power and raises questions of truth and the reliability of images. Such close reading serves to deepen and enrich existing interpretations of *Batman v. Superman* and of entertainment cinema in general

by revealing a complex fabric of narrative confusion, affective politics and reflexive cinema that invites the viewer to embrace an active, critical position. The sequence is analyzed from three different perspectives that are extended to a thematic analysis of the film. The first is the creative confusion established at the outset of the film, which locates the unfolding drama in a semantically unstable and deceptive filmic world. The second perspective deals with the affective politics of 9/11, revolving around the question of rebuilding a narrative coherence from the experience of loss and fear. The third perspective is the metanarrative dimension of the sequence and the ways in which it critically engages the viewer's perception of filmic reality. If the first two perspectives grapple with the allegorical dimension of the film as a direct commentary on post-9/11 American politics, the third perspective discusses how the spectacular film provides an embedded narrative of the making of political choices.

### Biography

Hervé Mayer is Senior Lecturer at the Université Paul-Valéry Montpellier 3 and is a member of the research group EMMA. His research focuses on the construction of political discourses and identities in film, in areas such as the definition of state power, the use of state violence, and the representations of race and gender. He is the author of a dissertation on the lasting influence of the frontier myth in American cinema, as well as co-editor of *Construction/Déconstruction de l'altérité dans le monde anglophone* (Presses de Nanterre, 2017) and author of *La Construction de l'Ouest américain dans le cinéma hollywoodien* (Atlande, 2017). He wrote articles on the politics of American cinema in *CinémAction* and the online publications *FilmJournal* and *LISA*.

Contact information : [hermayer@gmail.com](mailto:hermayer@gmail.com) or +0033 7 83 43 36 56.

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## Article

Reviewing Zack Snyder's first Superman film, *Man of Steel*, for *Vulture* in 2013, Kyle Buchanan noted the 9/11 references punctuating the film and wondered: "Is It Possible to Make a Hollywood Blockbuster without Evoking 9/11?"<sup>1</sup> Buchanan went on to mention other examples such as *Star Trek into Darkness*, *World War Z*, as well as earlier films such as *War of the Worlds*, *The Avengers*, or *Transformers: Dark Side of the Moon*. 9/11 is everywhere in popular spectacular cinema, a feeling that is shared and fueled by a number of studies on the effects of 9/11 on action, epic or fantasy film.<sup>2</sup> Zack Snyder's second Superman film, *Batman v. Superman: Dawn of Justice*, makes clear from the start that it is no exception. Its second sequence offers a reenactment of *Man of Steel*'s climatic battle of Metropolis, the 9/11 moment of the film when Superman fights against General Zod at great cost for the city's landscape and its inhabitants, but this time the battle is seen from the viewpoint of an earthling, the businessman Bruce Wayne, amidst clouds of dust, struggling to save his employees from the collapse of his own Wayne tower. This action sequence registering the danger and chaos of the city's destruction at ground level provides the initial setting of Batman's feud against Superman that occupies the film. In the rest of the movie, Batman and Superman both embody differing but complementary aspects of the United States' war on terror. Batman is the dark side of intelligence services and extralegal violence, while Superman is the public face of government intervention beyond American borders.

What initially strikes the viewer in this film is how both those positions are being questioned in a parallel narrative that alternately embraces Batman's and Superman's perspective. From Bruce Wayne/Batman's viewpoint (Ben Affleck), we see the destructions of the battle of Metropolis and the unaccountability of Superman's exercise of power. From Clark Kent/Superman's vantage point (Henry Cavill), we see the savage and terrorizing aspects of Batman's fight against crime. This would be very interesting politically if the producers had decided to salvage the confusion surrounding the question of right and responsibility and what measure of force is vindicated in the fight against terror. But a scrupulous viewer comes to know quite early in the film that the criticisms leveled at each other's methods are carefully orchestrated by an omniscient mastermind: scientist and company owner Lex Luthor (Jesse Eisenberg). The most questionable aspects of counterterrorism policies (Superman's actions evoking the American bombings that kill civilians abroad; Batman's actions that echo the torture and summary execution of suspected terrorists) are attributed to Luthor's backdoor manipulations. Both Batman and Superman are eventually vindicated, Batman redeeming his xenophobic hatred of the alien Superman and Superman quieting popular doubts about the selflessness of his own actions, when they fight side by side the genetic deformity Doomsday unleashed by Luthor. If this conclusion fits the economic bill of a blockbuster's seemingly uncomplicated narrative on paper, reviewers have been unhinged by what they could not always characterize as a deeper, willful narrative confusion.

Some, like Richard Broody of *The New Yorker*, saw a straightforward political allegory of Democrats v. Republicans, with Batman surprisingly standing for the Democrats in his

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<sup>1</sup> Kyle Buchanan, "Is It Possible to Make a Hollywood Blockbuster without Evoking 9/11?", *Vulture*, June 13, 2013. url: <http://www.vulture.com/2013/06/hollywood-blockbusters-cant-stop-evoking-911.html>

<sup>2</sup> For example, Frances Pheasant-Kelly, *Fantasy Film Post 9/11*, Palgrave MacMillan, 2013; Aviva Briefel *et al.* (eds.), *Horror After 9/11: World of Fear, Cinema of Terror*, University of Texas Press, 2013; Paul Petrovic (ed.), *Representing 9/11: Trauma, Ideology and Nationalism in Literature, Film and Television*, Rowman&Littlefield, 2015; and Terence McSweeney (ed.), *American Cinema in the Shadow of 9/11*, Edinburgh University Press, 2016.

article.<sup>3</sup> But most critics rejected the film as a failure on the grounds of it lacking the depth of political commentary, deeming it either empty or confused. In the *Washington Post*, Alyssa Rosenberg wrote of the “insane, incoherent politics” of the film and urged viewers not to take it seriously.<sup>4</sup> Intending precisely to take this film seriously, this article seeks to unpack the origins and political implications of what may rather be labeled creative confusion. Despite negative press reviews, the film was a popular success at the box office (among 2016’s ten most successful films both on domestic and international markets). For another reviewer, Matthew Rosza for *Salon.com*, it is precisely the confused but engaging political subtext of the film that can explain such a discrepancy between critical and popular receptions.<sup>5</sup>

### Focus on the opening sequence

To try and understand how the product of an entertainment industry might critically explore the affective politics of 9/11, this article focuses on a detailed analysis of the film’s introductory sequence, which set the stages for the creative confusion at the heart of the film’s political commentary. If the 9/11 scene of the battle of Metropolis provides a starting point for Batman’s confrontation with Superman, the narrative’s ground zero is located in a more intimate yet essential trauma that dramatizes the film’s exploration of loss, fear and power and raises questions of truth and the reliability of images. This introductory sequence is constructed as a parallel editing that alternates between, on the one hand, the young Bruce Wayne (Brandon Spink) running away from his parents’ funeral to stumble into a cave filled with bats and, on the other, the flashback revealing the murder of Bruce’s parents (Jeffrey Dean Morgan as Thomas Wayne and Lauren Cohan as Martha Wayne) that provides the film’s traumatic inception.

The sequence is dense, packing many of the visual and narrative themes of the film, as is often the case in Snyder’s movies (one can think of the opening credits of *Dawn of the Dead* and *Watchmen*, or the montage sequence at the beginning of *Suckerpunch*, which share visual elements with *Batman v. Superman*’s opening). It will be approached here from three different perspectives that are extended to a thematic analysis of the film. The first is the creative confusion established at the outset of the film, which locates the unfolding drama in a semantically unstable and deceptive filmic world. The second perspective deals with the affective politics of 9/11, revolving around the question of rebuilding a narrative coherence from the experience of loss and fear. The third perspective is the metanarrative dimension of the sequence and the ways in which it critically engages the viewer’s perception of filmic reality. If the first two perspectives grapple with the allegorical dimension of the film as a direct commentary on post-9/11 American politics, the third perspective discusses how the spectacular film provides an embedded narrative of the making of political choices.

### Creative confusion

*Batman v Superman* opens with a voice-over<sup>6</sup> that laments the loss of a Golden Age and introduces the fall (from the Garden of Eden, from innocence, from power) as a structural

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<sup>3</sup> Richard Broody, “‘Batman v. Superman’ is Democrats vs. Republicans”, *The New Yorker*, March 29, 2016.

<sup>4</sup> Alyssa Rosenberg, “The insane, incoherent politics of ‘Batman v. Superman: Dawn of Justice’”, *Washington Post*, March 25, 2016.

<sup>5</sup> Matthew Rosza, “‘Batman v. Superman’ isn’t a flop: a superhero movie that questions absolute power is tailor made for 2016”, *Salon.com*, March 29, 2016.

<sup>6</sup> Voice of Bruce Wayne/Batman (Ben Affleck): “There was a time above. A time before. There were perfect things, diamond absolutes. How things fall. Things on earth. And what falls... is fallen.”

theme of the film. Falling leaves in the fall season, falling snowflakes and sparks, falling shells and pearls, falling bodies further associate the fall with death, loss and fear. The trite theme of the fall and subsequent rise of a hero was already central to the Batman trilogy of Christopher Nolan, who was executive producer on *Batman v. Superman*. Here, it serves to introduce a number of motifs for the film. The voice-over surprisingly characterizes the Golden Age as a time “above”, which is in opposition to the darker sub-regions of suppressed emotions and rampant criminality that define Batman’s actions in the film, as the viewer comes to understand. The crucial opposition between above and below, heaven and earth, sky and ground, that distinguishes Superman from Batman is here introduced from the perspective of Bruce Wayne, who painfully witnesses firsthand as a child, and will later learn to fight off with questionable measures, the dark realities of the criminal underworld. The reversal of the above/below moral coordinates, which is dramatized in the sequence by an inversion of the filmic image in a shot of Bruce running away from the funeral, is echoed later in the film in the painting of heaven and hell hung on the wall of Lex Luthor’s apartment, and turned upside down by Luthor come the end of the film. In the introduction of this visual theme, Snyder weaves the first of several disturbing associations of Batman with Lex Luthor, but the inverted image of Bruce also works to question the seemingly clear distinction of above and below posited by the narrative voice.

Clarity is the second, politically meaningful element characterizing this Golden Age, a time of “diamond absolutes”, located in the idealized picture of a loving family and childhood innocence, but also in the 1980s Cold War years of Reagan when good and evil were allegedly clear<sup>7</sup>. The narrative of *Batman v. Superman* unfolds in a world where the identification of evil is unstable and where the goodness of public actions is questioned from multiple perspectives. The theme of a confusing world is introduced at the film’s start.

The first image is that of a coffin punctuated by a low beat of extradiegetic music, which announces the serious tone of the film, but the narrative seems suspended in time by the soundtrack, which strikes the same note on the piano in a repetitive pattern. The musical theme starts only with the first images of the flashback, indicating that this traumatic memory – Bruce witnessing the murder of his parents – is the inception of following developments, the starting ground of future actions. The tragic recollection of the murders, filmed in slow motion and emerging from successive fades-to-black that evoke the darkest depth of memory, is paralleled with Bruce’s breaking off the linear funeral procession to flee alone in the woods, the close-up tracking shot of the boy penetrating the resilient vegetation literally dramatizing the experience of going through a difficult emotion. Sensitivity is heightened by the selected diegetic sounds of breath, rustling leaves and branches in the Bruce narrative, while slow motion, facial close-ups, raking focus and echoing sounds serve to foreground the fear, coldness, injustice, despair surrounding the death of Bruce’s parents in the flashback. The parallel editing accelerates as both narrative lines collide in the simultaneous falls of Bruce and Martha Wayne’s bodies, in the Bruce narrative and the flashback respectively. The young boy reaches the bottom of despair as he relives the stunning realization of his parents’ vulnerability, his tough, masculine father reduced to a helpless gesture and muffled whisper, his courageous, enduring mother weakly struggling for her dying breath. Here is the image of powerlessness in the face of aggression, that of Bruce’s parents, and that of Bruce himself, now orphaned at the bottom of a pit. This feeling of powerlessness, we later learn from Bruce’s butler, Alfred, sometimes turns good men cruel. Lex Luthor is one of those men. Bruce Wayne/Batman may be another.

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<sup>7</sup> The time setting is given away by the movie being played at the local theater in the flashback sequence: *Excalibur* (John Boorman, 1981), which is one of Snyder’s favorite films.

## The affective politics of 9/11

At stake then, is Bruce's reaction to that loss, with its concurrent fear and powerlessness, a theme that is at the heart of the film's post-9/11 politics: how can one act reasonably when one is forced to react to an aggression that caused emotional distress? Are affects (the way we emotionally respond to our environment) a reliable ground for action? This question is all the more resonant with the viewer's political present as 9/11 has been described by one political scientist as "the somatic pivot of American geopolitics",<sup>8</sup> the traumatic event that gave rise, or at least amplified, a form of politics based on affects.<sup>9</sup> The film leaves some room for thought on whether this is a solid ground for political decision making. First, when the bats help Bruce to rise out of the cave and into the light, the viewer witnesses the reversal of fear into empowerment that traditionally characterizes the Batman figure, a reversal that was already connected to the theme of terror and how to terrorize the terrorists in Christopher Nolan's trilogy. The first close-ups of Bruce's frightened face when he discovers the presence of bats, and the heightened diegetic soundtrack of Bruce's breathing and the bats' insect-like squeaking are temporarily hushed before a reverse-shot of the cave shows the bats invading the frame in a noisy commotion of high-pitched screams. The movement of bats towards the camera further serves to draw the viewer into Bruce's experience of terror. This terror is nonetheless immediately turned into an awesome experience of empowerment as the bats surround Bruce in a circular and upward movement, elevating him from the ground and carrying his body to the surface and the light. The sequence is awesome but it is also disturbing for various reasons: for one, it clarifies the dreamlike status of Bruce's narrative when the boy's foot leaves the ground, which is a revelation to the viewer and a betrayal of the film's reliability as a narrative (discussed in more details below). The rising musical theme, the eeriness of the event, the stark composition of darkness and light turn this moment into the mythical birth of a hero, but the scene retains a troubling dimension: the bats retain their valence as repulsive animals, the pit is confined, dark and gloomy, and most of all, the boy is surprisingly quick in shifting from fear to empowerment and he is questioningly at ease in his new position as Lord of the underworld. This new power drawn from loss and fear, as well as the traumatized child wielding it, may be of too dark a nature to produce peace and resolution.

The second critical element that complicates the affective politics of the film is the ending narration and transition to the next scene, which projects moral confusion onto the narrative development of the film. When the viewer hears the words "in the dream, they took me to the light. A beautiful lie" pronounced on the ending moments of Bruce's rise to the light, the narrative voice confirms the status of the sequence as a dream, identifies itself as an older Bruce, and confirms the association of Batman with darkness, but it fails to identify what belied this dream of light and what the real destiny of Batman is. The ensuing fade-to-white transition to a title setting of the next scene ("Metropolis, Mankind is introduced to the superman") points to Superman as embodying the darkness Batman will have to face. And this next scene, which is the battle of Metropolis seen from the ground-level perspective of human victims, confirms that assumption when it ends with Bruce's vengeful look at Superman. With Batman wrongfully turning his ire on Superman, we are told that emotional

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<sup>8</sup> Gearóid Ó Tuathail, "'Just Out Looking for a Fight': American Affect and the Invasion of Iraq", *Antipode*, vol. 35, n° 5, November 1, 2003, p. 859.

<sup>9</sup> See Sean Carter and Derek P. McCormack, "Film, geopolitics and the affective logics of intervention" (*Political Geography*, vol. 25, n° 2, February 2006, pp. 228-245) and Todd H. Hall and Andrew A.G. Ross, "Affective Politics after 9/11" (*International Organization*, vol. 69, n° 4, fall 2015, pp. 847-879).

reaction to catastrophe can be tragically misguided, and that loss and fear are no reliable grounds for a just and balanced exercise of power.

There is even a third element that retrospectively questions the use of violence as a response to a threat, and that is Bruce's father trying to hit their aggressor, a movement that triggers the opponent's first deadly shot. Fans of Batman know that Bruce's parents have to die, so if Thomas Wayne can die as the defiant, masculine man that Snyder seems to favor since *300* (2006), it is all the better. But in the narrative economy of this film, one may wonder what would have happened if Bruce's father had not tried to punch the aggressor, if he had tried to reason with him, as another version of Thomas Wayne did in *Batman Begins* (Christopher Nolan, 2005). Preemptive strike may not be the best answer to a threat, something the viewer best remember when Lex Luthor later speaks of building a weapon against Superman as a deterrent, or when Batman himself decides to kill Superman because "if there's even a one percent chance that he is our enemy, we have to take it as an absolute certainty". Absolutes may not be that desirable after all, despite what the introducing voice-over would have the viewer believe.

By developing an embedded metaphor of 9/11 based on the affects of loss, fear, and empowerment in a filmic world characterized by narrative confusion, the opening sequence of *Batman v. Superman* therefore dramatizes the limits of post-9/11 affective politics, when a story of national reconstruction is grounded on trauma and terror. But the sequence is also revealing of the critical intentions of the film at a metafilmic level, when it reflexively foregrounds the constructed nature of what the viewer, who is also a citizen, accepts as factual reality.

#### Reflexive aesthetic and the politics of spectatorship

This third critical perspective on *Batman v. Superman* relies mostly on the confused dimension of the opening sequence in terms of narrative status: Is it a flashback? Is it a memory? Is it a dream? This status is further complicated by the embedded presence of the dreamlike memory of the Waynes' murder. The aesthetic construction of the parallel narratives is quite distinct at first sight: diegetic time vs. slow motion, diegetic sounds vs. extradiegetic music, whites and greys vs. reds and blacks. Such aesthetic choices clearly establish the Bruce narrative as a reference point of filmic reality, while the Waynes' murder narrative is a traditional flashback recollection. The difference is further marked when the end of the flashback and transition back to the filmic present is constructed as the experience of waking up from a dream: Bruce is laying on his chest, slowly raising his body off the ground, his breath labored and his eyes sensitive to the light as if emerging from sleep. The lingering presence of a dream at the moment of awakening is even conveyed by the transfer of a physical element from the flashback to the filmic present: a pearl falling through the drain of Gotham's past and landing in the pit next to Bruce's hand filmed in close-up. In the ensuing medium shot of Bruce's body on the ground, the presence of the pearl is undecidable.

The fleeting doubt about the reality of the Bruce narrative produced by the pearl motif is confirmed at the moment when Bruce's foot rises off the ground and the sequence tips into the mythical. The ensuing voice-over analyzed earlier then reveals that this scene, which was built around a dreamlike memory, was itself a "dream", ending in a misleading fashion. Not only is the factual nature of the entire scene put into critical perspective by this revelation but so is Bruce's, and the filmmakers', reliability as narrators of a 'true' story. The viewer may like this surprising twist or may be put off by it, but he cannot but feel manipulated in some

way, his willful confidence in the reality of what he sees betrayed by the masquerade of presenting fantasies as facts. In a story that laboriously explores the dire consequences of factual manipulation, here is a cautionary tale about taking mediated information, narrative and visual, at face value. This opening sequence is an example of the ways in which narrative confusion works to engage, rather than estrange, the viewer, drawing him into thinking critically on the constructed nature of facts, a position that takes on deep political resonance in the larger war-on-terror subtext of the film.

If Lex Luthor carefully orchestrates the fateful confrontation of Batman and Superman later in the film, acting as the master puppeteer of a grand narrative<sup>10</sup>, so do the filmmakers as early as in the opening scene. To the disconcerted viewer thinking back on the sequence, it appears that there were elements in the Bruce narrative hinting at its dreamlike status: a faint echo derealizing diegetic sounds, the use of slow motion on Bruce's fall into the pit, even the slight extradiegetic screeching before the first gunshot in the flashback that is echoed in the sounds of bats. But most of all, the film draws attention to its own power as a creator of worlds through its use of digital imaging. Snyder is known, among other things, for the distinctive, hyperrealistic approach to filmic images that is made possible by heavy postproduction digital work on the converted celluloid print. In films like *300*, this aesthetic intervention is most striking, with the color grade altered to bring out deep reds and blacks, the sharpened contrast delineating the men's muscles and dramatizing the film's narrative confrontation of Spartans and Persians. In *Batman v. Superman*, aside from the exhibitionist special effects required for a spectacular blockbuster production, the digital intervention on the film is less conspicuous. But the filmmakers point our attention towards the world-morphing capabilities of digital effects in one small detail that foregrounds the power of digital imaging: the leaves falling across the opening title cards of the credits. Their presence provides a transition into the narrative by anticipating the visual beginning of the story. But digital details such as those leaves, later seen falling over the funeral procession, or the snow and the sparks filling the flashback in the opening scene, are frequently used here and elsewhere in Snyder's filmography to create the illusion of reality. The fact that those realistic digital details are isolated on screen before the story commences points to their aesthetic status as illusionist authenticators and further complicates the viewer's immersive experience of the filmic world. The viewer is instantly reminded of the artificial nature of images and narratives. This concern for a critical approach to the truth gains a political resonance in the later exploration of various forms of discourses about the truth, be it political, scientific, or in the media.

As shown through the example of this introductory sequence, *Batman v. Superman* both provides a critical allegory of post 9/11 affective politics and a reflexive exploration of political decision-making by citizen-viewers. It may have an unsubtle approach as to the origins of such moral and political confusion but it succeeds in exploiting that confusion in a reflexive, thought-provoking way.

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<sup>10</sup> At a critical point in the film when Luthor forces Superman to confront Batman, he quotes the opening sentence of Vladimir Nabokov's novel *Lolita*, in which creative reflexivity and the theme of reliable narration are structural elements.