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Epic and Genre: Beyond the Boundaries of Media

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In the classic *Star Trek: The Next Generation* episode "Darmok" (1991), Captain Picard, played by Patrick Stewart, is trapped on a hostile planet where he must cooperate with Dathon, the captain of an alien ship whose language is based entirely on cultural metaphors. Meaningful communication between the two captains succeeds only when Dathon recounts one of his culture's epic tales, that of "Darmok and Jalad at Tanagra," which he has contrived for Picard and himself to re-enact on the planet; afterward, Picard reciprocates by telling the mortally-wounded Dathon the story of "Gilgamesh and Enkidu at Uruk." Stewart later recalled that shortly after the episode aired, a college professor sent him a letter pointing out that more people had just learned about the myth of Gilgamesh in that one broadcast than had ever heard it in all of history to that point. ("Mission Overview") This curious intersection between the traditional epic and popular culture in the postmodern era speaks to the persistence of epic literature, despite the fact that no genre has been eulogized as long, as often – and yet with as much apparent futility – as the epic.

It is from a conventional understanding of the epic, as the story of a hero in the mould of a Gilgamesh or an Achilles, whence comes the belief that the genre is antiquated and irrelevant. Yet in recent years, there has been a greater popular, if often superficial, interest in works that are considered "epic" in some way. Even scholars of traditional epic literature have noted this interest; in her Preface to *The Cambridge Companion to Epic*, Catherine Bates observes that the epic genre

> is constantly being updated and revived for a modern audience, a flood of new, often celebrated, translations making the texts newly available and accessible to a general readership, while cinematic remakes and the perpetuation of epic motifs in contemporary blockbusters and computer games ensure that the form remains ever present in the popular consciousness. (ix)

Popular epics are now predominantly linked with "new" media.[1] They can range from Dan Sinker's *The F***ing Epic Twitter Quest of @MayorEmanuel*, a print collection of a two-thousand-post Twitter feed, which periodicals such as *Wired* and *The Economist* have mooted as "the first real work of digital literature" (A. T., "Twitter and Epic Poetry"), to a variety of video games, from the galaxy-spanning *Mass Effect* series to the flighty *Kirby's Epic Yarn* or *Disney's Epic Mickey*. Although there have been a few critical efforts to conceptualize the epic beyond its literary roots, these have been limited in their scope or success. A more nuanced, historically-grounded and trans-media understanding of the epic would allow us to see how this type of cultural production is manifested in differing and unexpected social contexts, not least in our own. In turn, such an understanding would bring added depth to aesthetic criticism of complex popular media, the narratives of which often rely on their audience's consumption of, and interpretive facility with, a number of complementary media forms. In what follows, I will draw from the most notable discussions of the epic genre to outline a theory of epic criticism which synthesizes the insights of these earlier formulations in such a way that they can be equally applicable to any narrative medium, while remaining precise enough to explain the epic as a genre that fulfils a specific cultural role. From there, I hope to point toward the way in which such a theory might help us better understand the resurgent popularity of the "epic" across multiple narrative media, and further identify some of the new challenges that arise in critiquing the creation and circulation of such stories.

A Brief Sketch of Epic Criticism

Epic, of course, comes from the Greek *epos*, and throughout the history of literary criticism in the West, the genre has been inextricably linked with Homer and Ancient Greek civilization. The earliest surviving analysis of the epic as such[2] is Aristotle's *Poetics*, and this text remains one with which critics of epic must grapple because of its remarkable influence. For Aristotle, epic poetry – understood mostly as the *Iliad*, but including other works traditionally in the Homeric corpus – was the highest form of narrative literature, notable for its "seriousness"; in Aristotle's view, this seriousness was taken over in Ancient Greek culture by the advent of tragic drama, which added some new elements (different poetic meters within the same work, for instance) while narrowing the narrative focus (i.e., adhering to the three "unities" of time, place, and action). Yet epic continued to excel at conveying scope and grandeur in an elevated style:

> Epic poetry has, however, a great – a special – capacity for enlarging its dimensions … owing to the narrative form, many events simultaneously transacted can be presented; and these, if relevant to the subject, add mass and dignity to the poem. The Epic has here an advantage [over tragedy], and one that conduces to grandeur of effect, to diverting the mind of the hearer, and relieving the story with varying episodes (24.4)

The idea that the "epic" and "heroic poetry" were interchangeable concepts became commonplace in classical antiquity. Ennius and, most famously, Virgil provided examples of Latin epics for the Romans of the late Republic and Empire. Even Lucretius' *De Rerum Natura* and Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, whose didactic or anti-heroic styles displayed a certain generic anarchism at the level of content, aspired to be epics on formal grounds and, lacking a better category for them, they have been accepted as such ever since.

As with much else from antiquity, the strong link between the epic as a thematic genre and the epic as a poetic form was picked up by Renaissance thinkers when they

imitated the classics. Sir Philip Sidney, in *An Apology for Poetry* (1595), calls "Heroical" poetry, namely long narrative verse in the style of Homer, "the best and most accomplished kind of Poetry" (119). Sidney argues that because poetry is, according to him, ideally an imitation of the true state of things, then verse that exalts the deeds of the likes of Achilles, Cyrus,[3] Aeneas, Turnus, Tydeus, and Rinaldo[4] "teacheth and moveth to the most high and excellent truth." (119) Aeneas, predictably, is held especially high as a moral exemplar. Meanwhile, Torquato Tasso, in *Discourses on the Heroic Poem* (1594), says epic poetry is "most excellent" (6) because it is "an imitation of a noble action, great and perfect, narrated in the loftiest verse, with the purpose of moving the mind to wonder and thus being useful" (17) for readers "to raise their own minds to its example" (5). As the author not only of the *Discourses*, but of the epic *La Gerusalemme Liberata*, Tasso was a "Renaissance man" both in the traditional sense of someone who excelled at diverse endeavours, as well as being quite typical of his time in his (mostly) deferent attitude toward Aristotelian authority. The Renaissance's imitation of the classical epic ideal reached its zenith with John Milton, whose work was arguably the most successful and memorable of those trying to square Christian theology with the style and form of classical authors, most notably Virgil.

Just as ancient epics themselves served as examples that long defined the genre, classical commentaries played an equal part in bolstering these views. Aristotle's framework endured, and had a number of lasting effects on analyses of epic that followed. Three of his observations are of particular importance: the first was the idea that the epic as such is a "dead" genre, a view that led to the distinction between the primary or oral epic (i.e., Homer) and the secondary or written epic (Virgil et al.); the second was the

idea of the high quality of the epic's language; the third was the idea of the great scope allowed by the episodic, paratactic structure of epic narrative. Remarkably, this rudimentary framework of epic genre theory persisted for over two millennia, and still has some force, even though Aristotle's discussion of Homer depends very much on the historical context of the sixth through fourth centuries BC. (Nagy 27) Only the arrival of the modern novel, a literary genre with its own contingent and problematic history, would permanently disrupt Aristotle's schema; this was because the novel, although formally very different from the classical epic, often shared or even took over many of the same thematic and socio-cultural functions.

It should therefore not be surprising that Mikhail Bakhtin explicitly took Aristotle's genre theory as a starting point when trying to make sense of the novel. In his seminal essay "Epic and Novel," Bakhtin says that "Aristotle's poetics, although occasionally so deeply embedded as to be almost invisible, remains the stable foundation for the theory of genres" – that is, until the arrival of the novel, in the face of which "genre theory must submit to a radical re-structuring." (8) For Bakhtin, the epic is the product of a monological culture, closed off in the past, "complete" in that sense, and therefore exhibiting "epic distance."[5] The novel, conversely, concerns itself with life that is contemporaneous with its audience, is dialogic, and is still evolving. "It is precisely laughter that destroys the epic," stresses Bakhtin, as the familiarity that comes from laughter is what removes distance. (23) In other words, when heroes are revealed as ridiculous within a living culture, they cannot be epic. Bakhtin felt that the Hellenistic period marked the advent of the novel, and he cites the Socratic dialogues and Menippean satire, as well as the Hellenistic romances, as evidence of the collapse of epic in ancient

times. Bakhtin saw this phenomenon of the subversion of serious culture at work again during the Middle Ages, and the meta-historical nature of his schema is important to note when trying to develop a theory of epic that can be applied with equal facility across different cultures and media.

Although Bakhtin does not make the distinction clear, here he is obviously talking about the long, heroic epic poem when he uses the term "epic." This underlying categorical assumption is not without problems, however. It is equivalent to claiming, for instance, that "tragedy" is a "complete" and "antiquated" genre upon which Aristotle has already had the last word. This is undoubtedly true if one means tragedy of the particular sort performed in 5th-century BC Athens, but such a claim is highly dubious if interpreted generally, as it would exclude everything from *King Lear* to Akira Kurosawa's *Ran*. Thus Bakhtin's formulation falls into difficulty when confronted with hybrids like the mock-epic,[6] or when it must account for the continued, if diminished, production of traditional epics devoid of all irony. Treating Bakhtin's categories as cultural dominants, rather than as absolute forms, may alleviate such concerns to a degree. In any event, we can see in twentieth-century classicist and medievalist criticism the lingering reliance upon traditional formulations. For example, A. R. George makes the case that *The Epic of Gilgamesh* "falls into the category 'epic' because it is a long narrative poem of heroic content and has the seriousness and pathos that have sometimes been identified as markers of epic." (1) Likewise, in *A Muse for Heroes*, William Calin provides a long catalogue of features that he describes as still, traditionally, attributed to the epic:

> It is normally in verse, of some length, in the narrative mode, fictional but based on history or legend; … It treats on a grand scale a martial, heroic subject, manifests artistic coherence because it concentrates on a single

6

central hero or event of national significance, contains stylized "episodes,"
and is grounded in the supernatural. (5)

Still more recently, Helen Lovatt makes the almost offhand observation that "epic, as we all know, is about gods, kings and heroes, battles and journeys." (5) Yet these standard criteria still primarily apply to the heroic epic poem (no doubt a subset of the epic, if it is not itself the epic) modeled on the *Iliad*. Moreover, such ideals were still prevalent even in the time of Bakhtin's laughing medieval yeomen, regardless of whether the old-fashioned epic was during the Middle Ages more a reactionary genre serving as fodder for mockery by an ascendant, novelistic sensibility, or whether it was a legitimate cultural artifact serving its own particular subculture – that is to say, a literate aristocracy.

Bakhtin's view was rather idiosyncratic and contrarian for its time; it was more conventional during the nineteenth and early twentieth century to think of the novel as having arisen only after the advent of printed books and the subsequent formation of a "reading public" some two hundred years earlier, in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. From this theoretical position, the novel had simply replaced the epic as the pre-eminent means of "serious" literary expression in the early modern period – not unlike what, according to Aristotle, Sophoclean tragedy had done vis-à-vis the Homeric epic. G. W. F. Hegel's *Aesthetics*, based on lectures given in the 1820s and published after his death, illustrates this belief about the novel in Hegel's wide-ranging discussion of the epic. Although he predictably holds up the Homeric poems as the most perfect examples of the genre, Hegel discusses and categorizes a wealth of other related works, such as Indian epics or medieval chansons, which are for Hegel admirable yet deficient in various ways when compared to the *Iliad* or *Odyssey*. But the situation

is quite different with the novel, the modern bourgeois epic.[7] Here we have completely before us again the wealth and many-sidedness of interests, situations, characters, relations involved in life, the background of a whole world, as well as the epic portrayal of events. But what is missing is the *primitive* poetic general situation out of which the epic proper proceeds. (1092)

The "general world-situation" required for the epic, on the other hand, is one in which a kind of national wholeness has already developed in a given society, but which still predates the development of abstract institutions and laws that are removed from daily life. Hegel's view is thus very much that the epic "proper" results from a very particular historical situation that is defined by the individual's relationship to the rest of his world. For Hegel, none of the particular things, such as food, shelter, and tools, that man needs for his "external life"

> should have been only dead means of livelihood; on the contrary he must still feel himself alive in them and with his whole mind and self, and therefore give a really human, animated, and individual stamp to what is inherently external by bringing it into close connection with the human individual. Our modern machines and factories with their products, as well as our general way of satisfying the needs of our external life, would from this point of view be just as unsuitable as our modern political organization is for the social background required by the primitive epic. (1052-1053)

The Hegelian perspective was expanded most famously by Georg Lukács, who, in *The Theory of the Novel*, identified an expression of the whole of lived experience as the aim of both the epic and the novel. The epic, Lukács claimed, "gives form to a totality of life that is rounded from within; the novel seeks, by giving form, to uncover and construct the concealed totality of life." (60) Lukács saw the "age of epic" as the time before men had discovered "interiority," before they could thus be alienated from themselves; one such "happy" time (29) was the Greece of Homer. Here Lukács echoed the idealized, primitivizing, and perhaps even patronizing, view of Ancient Greece

common in 19th-century German thought – not only in Hegel, but in Goethe and Schiller and even in Marx, who counted the classical Greeks as part of the "historical childhood of humanity," even as he declared the epic impossible in the era of industrial publishing and industrial war-making alike (111). Since the epic is no longer possible in the modern era, the novel, Lukács seems to imply, takes over the function that the old poetry once performed.

Lukács's analysis is important for the present discussion because it goes beyond Hegel in exploring the relationship between the epic hero and his community. "It is traditionally thought," Lukács notes, "that one of the essential characteristics of the epic is the fact that its theme is not a personal destiny but the destiny of a community" (66). He is referring to the old category of the "national" epic, which follows the model of the *Aeneid*, although the type of nationalism in question referred to a more nineteenth-century sensibility. Lukács, however, is able to extend this idea, and claims that the epic hero is the community itself (66). Thus he is able to reconcile Dante Alighieri, whose "hero's lived experience was the symbolic unity of human destiny in general" (69), and who was long an anomaly as a poet of undeniably epic scope and caliber having no interest in martial shenanigans whatsoever, with a more traditional understanding of epic.

Yet Lukács, who is more interested in the novel as a successor to the epic than the epic as such, says perhaps not enough about the crucial distinction between the epic as form (heroic verse), and the epic as something beyond mere form, though he seems to have an implicit understanding of the difference between the two. Lukács is right to stress, in response to earlier commentators, that "[it] would be superficial – a matter of a mere artistic technicality – to look for the only and decisive genre-defining criterion in the

question of whether a work is written in verse or prose" (56). Yet he himself sows confusion when he uses paradoxical phrases like "[t]he epic and the novel, these two major forms of great epic literature" (56) or "the epic individual, the hero of the novel" (66). Lukács must mean something else by epic here, beyond the formal or even socio-historical function of epic poetry proper. He, like Bakhtin, implies but does not articulate a trans-historical genre of epic that can somehow include both Homeric epic and the modern novel. How one defines the epic as a genre or "mode," which encompasses the heroic verse epic, yet also finds room for the same sort of "totality" in other literary forms, appears to be the real crux of the problem of categorization and analysis.

By the middle of the twentieth century, critics seem to have a more nuanced approach to the epic. In "Odysseus' Scar," the celebrated first chapter of his *Mimesis*, Erich Auerbach touches upon epic theory in his comparative analysis of the *Odyssey* and the Book of Genesis. As with Bakhtin and Lukács, Auerbach demonstrates an implicit dissatisfaction with nineteenth-century categorizations, but, at the same time, he only shows a passing interest in reformulating them – the epic genre is not his primary concern. Auerbach cites an epistolary exchange between Goethe and Schiller on Homer, and agrees with the German Romantics that there is a "retarding element" in the Homeric poems (5); Auerbach's main contention in his own work is that the Homeric style remains all "foreground," an absolute present devoid of suspense (7). Yet Auerbach is careful to point out that this style is a feature of the *Odyssey*, but is not necessarily a feature of epic itself:

> Both Schiller and Goethe raise Homer's procedure to the law of epic poetry in general, and Schiller's words quoted above [that Homer's goal is "already present at every point in his progress"] are meant to be universally binding upon the epic poet, in contradistinction from the tragic.

Yet in both modern and ancient times, there are important epic works which are composed throughout with no "retarding element" in this sense but, on the contrary, with suspense throughout, and which perpetually "rob us of our emotional freedom"—which power Schiller will grant only to the tragic poet. (5)

What these other "important epic works" may be, Auerbach does not make immediately clear, although it is apparent elsewhere in his writing that the book of Genesis must be included in Auerbach's conception. For instance, even as he sets Homer and the Bible in diametric opposition, Auerbach states that the Old Testament is written in an "equally ancient and equally epic style" as the *Odyssey* (7), and that the story of Abraham's sacrifice of his son "certainly deserves the epithet epic" (11). Both are vastly disparate literary representations of reality, reflecting the differences in the societies in which they were composed, compiled, and written, but both are fundamentally epic. Although Auerbach does not explain what "epic" actually means for him, let alone construct a theory of epic, here he does provide an explanation of how the generic term has come to be misused. Auerbach says that the "foregrounding" effect of Homer is "the actual source of the conception of epic which they themselves [Goethe and Schiller] hold, and with them all writers decisively influenced by classical antiquity" (5). The danger is to mistake the classical epic as the only model for all subsequent epics, instead of a particular instance of the genre that was determined in part by its own cultural milieu.

Northrop Frye's *Anatomy of Criticism* is also suffused with a wide-ranging view of epic not unlike Auerbach's. It is significant that this critical trend should appear in comparative literary studies around the middle of the last century, as this process of critical expansion anticipates the need in our own digital age for a further critical expansion into comparisons between media. But Frye, more concerned with the

underlying systematization of literary criticism as a whole in his book, does not look so far ahead; despite having much to say about the epics of the Western tradition, he does not delve too deeply into the problems of epic criticism. Frye is, however, quite aware of the problems that have arisen when trying to define genres: "We complained in our introduction," he writes, "that the theory of genres was an undeveloped subject in criticism. We have the three generic terms drama, epic, and lyric, derived from the Greeks, but we use the latter two chiefly as jargon or trade slang for long and short (or shorter) poems respectively" (246). For Frye, "the purpose of criticism by genres is not so much to classify as to clarify … traditions and affinities, thereby bringing out a large number of literary relationships that would not be noticed as long as there were no context established for them" (247-48). Frye posits a theory of genres in which the basic and ideal "genre" of the epic's transmission is from a reciter to an audience. Even epics that, in practice, were immediately written down and not always read aloud, such as the *Aeneid* and *Paradise Lost,*[8] nevertheless assume this ideal of oral transmission. Frye subordinates the epic as such to what he calls the "Encyclopaedic form": this becomes one way, for instance, to explicitly reconcile the Bible and Homer as epics, as Auerbach's discussion of the two only implies. It is no coincidence that at the same time that Frye was making these connections, Eric Havelock was arguing that the poems of Homer must be understood as having been "conceived and intended to be a kind of social encyclopedia." (31)

Perhaps more instructive for our present purposes is not Frye's theory of genres but his theory of modes, since his definition of genre is concerned more with the manner in which a work is presented than its formal or modal features. Frye outlines how fictions

can be classified by "the hero's power of action," and the third of his five classifications is defined as follows:

> If superior in degree to other men but not to his natural environment, the hero is a leader. He has authority, passions, and powers of expression far greater than ours, but what he does is subject both to social criticism and to the order of nature. This is the hero of the *high mimetic* mode [Frye's italics], of most epic and tragedy, and is primarily the kind of hero that Aristotle had in mind. (33-34)

Frye hereby presents a way to define the epic that no longer shackles itself to the poetics of verse: *War and Peace*, for example, can be an "epic novel," and Lukács' term need no longer appear self-contradictory. The relationship between the protagonist and his world, the scale of that relationship, and the protagonist's range of action are more important than the particulars of that action or the form by which that action is mediated and narrated. Though Frye does not go so far as to pose them, his relational way of looking at the epic hero only prompts new questions: why then not an epic opera, or an epic film? Or for that matter, what about an epic comic book or an epic video game?[9]

Epic Form and Historical Context

And yet some formalism at the textual level is required, lest "epic" balloon into a category so inclusive it loses all distinctive utility. Another criterion for the epic that seems to transcend particular contexts is that any work, to be epic, must be as complex and as serious as possible within the affordances of its particular narrative medium. To extend Frye's observations, we might say that not only must the epic describe a particular relationship between the hero and his or her world, but there must also be an analogous relationship between the epic narrative text and its own real-life world, a relationship that

mirrors the first. Or, to put it in the terms of formalist narratology, not only must the *fabula* (the story) be epic, but the *syuzhet* (the telling of the story) must be "epic" too. As Pierre Bourdieu points out (53-55), genres are in constant flux in the "field of cultural production" and the status of particular works or authors is determined partly by their "position-takings" within that field in relation to the other works and authors; these positions thereafter influence the positions taken by works and authors that will follow. On a broader scale, this occurs between media forms too, as they jockey for cultural supremacy within a dialectical logic of remediation (Bolter and Grusin 45). This is no less true for the epic as it is for other genres, although the process of creative one-upmanship is perhaps more pronounced among works that aspire to epic status precisely because they must supplant or subsume their rivals in this way to succeed as epics.

Franco Moretti's *Modern Epic* identifies some aspects of this process of formal competition and experimentation. Moretti examines a number of "world texts" of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, from Goethe's *Faust* to Gabriel García Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. Each of these works is, Moretti asserts, a "flawed masterpiece" or even a "semi-failure" (5) because of its inherently experimental nature.[10] This accounts for the often-prodigious length of such texts, and suggests why they are almost never read, despite their status as literary monuments. What is interesting is that Moretti argues that during the nineteenth century, the "age of the novel," much of this epic experimentation did not occur in the novel, with the exception of *Moby-Dick*, and Moretti also tentatively extends his analysis beyond the purely literary medium, in a perceptive chapter on Wagner's *Ring* cycle. Thus we can see elements of "novelistic" subversiveness, in the Bakhtinian sense, operating in fictional narratives that are outside

14

both the formal conventions of the traditional (heroic-poetic) epic and the traditional (realist) novel during the modern era. However, Moretti's heuristic model is perhaps at once too broad – nearly any work that is sufficiently large, and even boring, can be a "world text" from this perspective – and too narrow – the model seems to have room only for the most rarefied epics.

Juggling so many shifting definitions of concepts like "epic" and "novel" across different traditions and within different socio-historical contexts is difficult, and speaks to the underlying challenge of generic classification. But it must be remembered that this is a perennial problem – genres were elastic even for the Greeks, and here we can return to the genesis of the epic as a critical category for illumination. Gregory Nagy points out that between Homer and Aristotle, the term "epic" (*epos*) had a number of different meanings, and insight from these semantic shifts sheds light on how the same processes work in modern commentators such as Bakhtin, Lukács, Frye, and Moretti. In Homer's time, the word *epos* was one half of a linked pair with *muthos*; when the two terms were understood in relation to each other, *muthos* was marked, referring to a long, public and authoritative speech-act, and *epos* was unmarked, a shorter, less "performative" kind of speech. Thus the *muthos* was the "epic" of the Homeric bard, while the *epos* was an instance of less formal speech contained within the *muthos* (25); in other words, the recitation of the Homeric poem itself was considered an instance of *muthos*, whereas the recitation of a speech in the first person within that poem was an *epos*. When *epos* was not linked with *muthos*, however, it could mean a song as performed – i.e., rhythmic poetry – and between the Archaic and Hellenistic periods this meaning was strengthened when *epos* was no longer paired with *muthos* at all. *Muthos* came to mean primarily

"story" or "myth", in contrast with truth (*aletheia*); *muthos* and *epos* both shifted from being markers of a performance context to being qualitative categories of narrative content. Nagy adds that

> In our own contemporary usage of the English words *epic* and *myth*, we see indirect reflexes of the later semantic specialization of *epos*, and of the later semantic specialization of *muthos*. As parallels to English *epic* and *myth*, we may look back and compare Aristotle's use of *epe* (the Attic form of *epea*) in the sense of epic and of *muthos* in the sense of myth as "plot." (26)

These subtle semantic shifts demonstrate the dangers of universalizing Aristotle's formulations, applying them indiscriminately outside their historical context; and Nagy takes Bakhtin to task specifically, saying that even the *Odyssey* seems more appropriate to Bakhtin's own idea of the novel, not the epic. More importantly, though, Nagy recognizes the distinction between the epic of an oral, folkloric tradition (what we would loosely call "myth"), and the epic of performance (the poem *qua* epic), as well as the "gap between the notional totality" of the former and the "practical limitations of epic in actual performance." (28) Moreover,

> if indeed epic can be realized informally as well as formally, it becomes the ideal multiform, accommodating a variety of forms. I draw attention to the inclusiveness, the notional wholeness of Homeric poetry. Here is a genre that becomes a container, as it were, of a vast variety of other genres … a medium of discourse that sees itself as all-embracing of the society identified by it and identifying with it. (28-29)

The epic has indeed become a super-genre, in the sense suggested by Nagy and Moretti, which, while continuing to include such traditional martial epics as the *Iliad*, has the theoretical flexibility to include other formal and thematic genres. Historically, this begins more or less with the novel, but the process, crucially, never stopped with Dickens or Dostoevsky; the epic super-genre can, and I believe by its very nature must, also

encompass the variety of new narrative media which began to appear at the end of the nineteenth century – film and comic strips, followed later by comic books, television, video games, and so on.[11] The genre clearly becomes "remediated" (Bolter and Grusin 45) within a hierarchy of media forms, and it is clear even in day-to-day discourse that there can be different "levels" of epic in popular understanding (especially since "epic" has experienced a minor renaissance as a colloquialism). However, without an examination of the details or implications of this process, even popular notions, let alone critical analysis, can become confused. The failure to distinguish different kinds and characteristics of "epic" is what mars some of the current attempts at a trans-media approach, especially in film studies.[12]

Toward a Genre Theory of Epic

Norman Fairclough's critical discourse analysis offers a model for overcoming this problem, and his emphasis on genres as discourses within a social context accords nicely with Nagy's stress on genre as a type of speech act. Fairclough suggests that genres can be thought of at three different levels of abstraction: these are pre-genres, disembedded genres, and situated genres. (68) Within this framework, epic can function in combination with other genres at the level of a pre-genre, encompassing even predominantly non-discoursal activities and events, as when we talk about an "epic battle." Epic can function at the level of a disembedded genre, which, though less abstract, can encompass more than one type of practice; an example would be "epic narrative," which, though clearly discoursal, is broad enough to encompass a variety of media. Finally, the

epic can function at the level of a situated genre, specific to a discoursal context; this would be the epic oral poem.

The confusion, or at least the lack of specificity, in terminology noted earlier in the works of various critics occurs when a situated genre is expanded to include practices on greater levels of abstraction – in other words, when it becomes "disembedded." We have seen how "epic" once meant only a certain type of epic oral poem, but was later expanded to mean narrative in the epic mode; as such, it could then be re-embedded in other linguistic forms (prose), and even other media (comic books, films, video games,
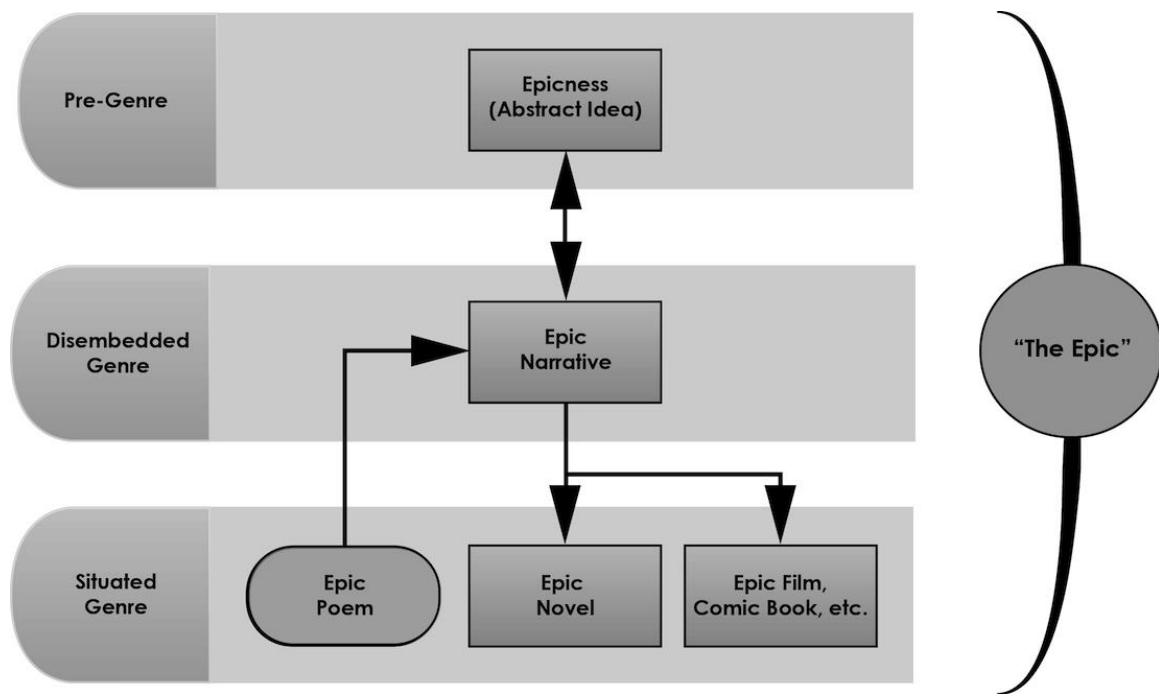
etc.). This process is illustrated in Figure 1. This also explains the similar confusion over terms such as the "novel": though Bakhtin had in mind long prose works when he discussed the novel, he was in fact analysing the genre at the disembedded level (i.e., as a narrative mode). Bakhtin's particular way of conceiving "seriousness" and "distance" could just as easily apply to media such as film and television; one could interpret the shift from the studio system to the "new" Hollywood of the 1970s analogously with

18

Bakhtin's shift from epic to novel.[13] Examining the process of dis- and re-embedding of genres can also go some way to explain attempts to classify problematic, "monumental" works in other media not generally known for being epic in the sense of films such as *Spartacus* or *Ben-Hur*. For example, HBO's *The Wire* has been described as "novelistic," but in the sense of an "epic novel" explicitly along the lines of *War and Peace* or *Moby-Dick* (Mittell 429); here elements of both epic and novel have been situated anew in the specific media genre of the episodic television drama.

For the present purpose of articulating a genre theory of epic we have a number of productive ideas: the Aristotelean notions of epic seriousness, quality, and expansiveness; Lukács' insights into the role of the community; Frye on the heroic range of action; Bakhtin and Moretti, with some Bourdieu, on the epic in relation to its literary universe; Nagy and Fairclough's communicative, performative, and above all mutative understanding of genre. The task now is to weave all these theoretical strands into the fabric of a tent under which all epics might be gathered. We can summarize by defining the epic as a disembedded genre of a totalizing work of narrative; it aspires to a qualitatively elevated style, and its themes look beyond individual concerns to those of a community. Although primarily fictive, the epic's narrative must draw upon and allude to a greater body of symbolic material, which might variously be mythic, fictive, or historical. This greater narrative corpus we may call, extrapolating from Nagy, the mythos, of which the epic strives to include as much of as possible – but never can. This explains the encyclopaedic tendency of epic, as noted by Moretti, Frye, Havelock, and others. The epic aspires either to represent or to create a totality, to encapsulate an entire culture, and to be the definitive expression of its subject. Thus the epic is invariably an
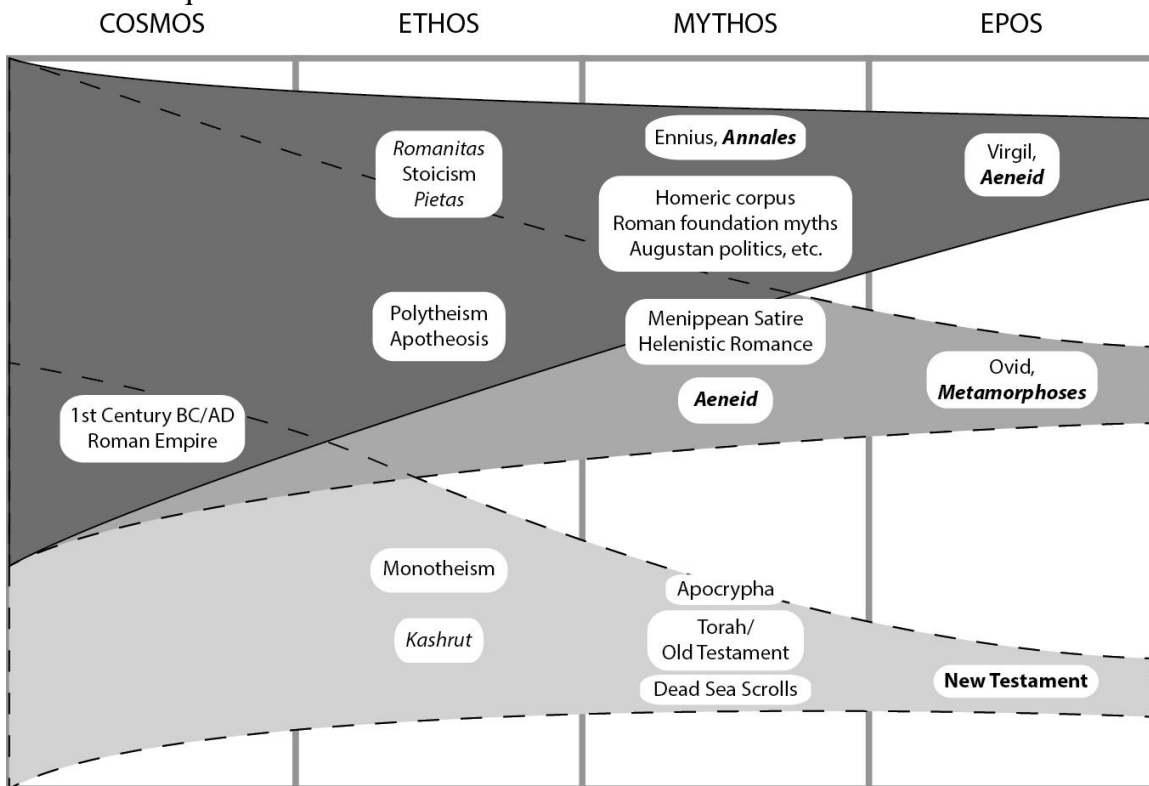
epic "of" something: *The Wire* is the epic of West Baltimore as much as the *Aeneid* is the epic of Augustan Rome.

Four Levels of the Epic's Symbolic Content

This attempt at totality can never be complete, as it would require a Borgesian, full-scale map of the world. However, we can fruitfully plot such attempts at epic-construction across four distinct levels of symbolic content; whatever specific content each particular narrative epic encompasses determines what kind of epic it is, as well as its relationship to other cultural productions and its relationship to its culture as a whole. Figure 2 illustrates these levels, with the relationship between Virgil and Ovid; the New Testament is included as well as a kind of "control," or counter-example, as it is roughly contemporaneous.

First, there is the epic as it is generally understood, or what we may specifically call the analytical level of epos; this is the narrative work itself (of whatever medium), which is constructed in such a way to fulfil (or attempt to fulfil) certain formal criteria: namely, that it is highly complex and cohesive relative to comparable works in the same medium. It is regarded as "high quality," and these formal criteria are specific to the affordances of the work's particular medium and production context. Thus the "bigger" and "better" a work is, relative to its peers, the more "epic" it is.

Next, there is the mythos; this comprises the other narrative works from which the epos draws, or with which it must otherwise contend. Where the level of epos is primarily formal/textual, that of the mythos is historical and paratextual. Crucially, once an epos is published or otherwise circulates, it then becomes part of the mythos for all works that follow: if it is successful, it becomes a definitive version of the narrative mythos with which subsequent works must come to terms.

COSMOS	ETHOS	MYTHOS	EPOS

Romanitas
Stoicism
Pietas

Ennius, **Annales**

Virgil,
Aeneid

Homeric corpus
Roman foundation myths
Augustan politics, etc.

Polytheism
Apotheosis

Menippean Satire
Helenistic Romance

Ovid,
Metamorphoses

Aeneid

1st Century BC/AD
Roman Empire

Monotheism

Apocrypha

Kashrut

Torah/
Old Testament

Dead Sea Scrolls

New Testament

The relationship between the *Aeneid* and Ovid's works is paradigmatic here. Ovid's early treatment of Virgilian material came in the *Heroides*, particularly its seventh letter, that of Dido to Aeneas. Dido's presence among the poem's women scorned is not especially noteworthy, since over a dozen pairs of quarrelling lovers of generally lesser literary-mythological distinction fill out the work. The exceptions, such as Paris and Helen, get fuller treatment – a letter each (16 and 17, respectively). What is of interest is how much Ovid's treatment depends upon Virgil's account of the legendary material: the

entire letter, "written" in the short space between Aeneas' departure from Carthage and Dido's suicide, is in keeping with the events Virgil describes in the first four books of the *Aeneid*; lines 81-96 of *Heroides* 7, in particular, read like a Virgilian précis. Not only does Dido describe the death of Aeneas' wife Creusa at Troy in accordance with *Aeneid* 2, she confirms that Aeneas was the source of her knowledge, as he had been in Virgil.[14] Thus *haec mihi narraras* ("you had told these things to me," 7.85) could just as easily have been spoken by Ovid himself, addressing Virgil, even as he puts those words in the mouth of Dido addressing Aeneas.

When Ovid set himself the task of composing an even more ambitious epic (the history of the world from its creation up to the deification of Julius Caesar), his treatment of Virgilian material in the "little *Aeneid*" of *Metamorphoses* 13.623-14.582 naturally included the story of Aeneas's flight to Italy, but focused on rather different story elements. Even so, as Ovid metamorphosed the action of the *Aeneid*, expanding previously minor episodes and skipping lightly over those[15] given greater importance in his predecessor's work, he did so "without radically altering the original narrative version in the *Aeneid*" (Papaioannou 10). Whether this shift in emphasis is due, as earlier criticism would have it, to a sense of inferiority on Ovid's part when treating the Virgilian subject (2-3) or to a "well-concealed expression of literary erudition" (3) does not matter when assessing the *Aeneid*'s stature as an epos in sense I am arguing for here. However Ovid and his own successors approached the *Aeneid*, it remained the defining expression of the story of Aeneas, as evidenced by the very fact that those successors could not avoid addressing it. The fact that an earlier epos can be contained within the

mythos of another, later epos means that this model is fractal, and can operate on various scales simultaneously.

The third level of symbolic content is the ethos, defined as the range of possible representations, both within the world of narrative fiction(s) and within the given society of the epos. This is an expansion of the concept of the "urban ethos," originally defined by Adam Krims as "a set of possible representations of cities within Anglophone music of the developed world" (xxxviii) and their limits (3–4); Krims himself suggests that the urban ethos is applicable beyond the medium of music, "encompassing much expressive culture and design" (xxxv), and that is how I wish to adapt it here. The ethos, as the level between the literalism of media texts and external reality, is also the realm of ideology in the Althusserian sense, as the gap between the world and our understanding of it. (Althusser 109) The ethos is therefore the space within which the very definition of what constitutes a "legitimate" narrative or medium within a particular social context is contested. To continue with examples from the Roman epic, the ethos would include such ideas as the overarching importance of *pietas*, *mos maiorum*, and a polytheistic worldview; the monotheism of Judaism, in contrast, would be fundamentally incompatible with the ethos of Virgil or Ovid's work. (see Fig. 2 again) An epos is successful insofar as it is in harmony with the possible range of symbolic representation of the culture of which it is a part; it is "determined," in the sense defined by Raymond Williams (87), by the limits and pressures of its culture, but an epos also reproduces (and hence helps evolve) the symbolic limits of that culture. A work can be especially "epic" in this sense if it even anticipates this determination by creating narrative representations

23

that do not previously appear in the mythos (and are therefore "original") but are nevertheless wholly consonant with the ethos.

Finally, the broadest level of analysis is the cosmos, or the "totality" of which Lukács and others spoke in relation to the epic; the epos represents (or is believed to represent) a significant totality. As with the mythos and the ethos, the cosmos is also fractal, in that we can conceive of various different scales of totality as required, defined by a particular time and place; the greater this totality, the more "epic" the work is. The cosmos is therefore the level of culture as it is broadly understood. For example, the Roman Empire of the first century AD can be thought of as the totality, the cosmos, of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*; it clearly includes within itself the Jewish and other "Oriental" cultures that nevertheless do not fully conform to the ethos to the *Metamorphoses*, but it totally excludes, for example, Imperial China. Contrast this with the Orientalism of *Moby-Dick*, for instance, which does include China within its cosmography (Ahab's harpooner, the Parsi Fedallah, wears a Chinese jacket; 254). The size of the cosmos is therefore a function of the limits of human experience within a particular social context and the extension and dilution of that experience via media. An epic can be an epic of an entire civilization, or of a small subset of a particular society. The former is, for obvious reasons, much harder to create successfully, and is usually more greatly valorized as a result.

This fourfold framework can therefore account for epics based on real history or on "real" belief (e.g., the religious cosmology of *The Divine Comedy* or *Paradise Lost*); it can likewise be used to describe epic works that build upon a purely, and self-consciously, fictional mythos (as in the case of fantasy novels), or even epics that predate and create

their own unique mythos. Thus *Star Wars* becomes the epic of the *Star Wars* mythos, which is only fleshed out *after* the 1977 film; likewise, *The Lord of the Rings* is the epic of Tolkien's Middle-Earth even as it establishes the history hinted at in *The Hobbit* and fleshed out in posthumously published works such as *The Silmarillion*. Moreover, the fact that the epic genre has been reconfigured as part of such large narrative "franchises" and newly situated within complex, digital media speaks to the specific instantiations of genres within a postmodern aesthetic and globalized capitalism. Fairclough argues that the "disembedding of genres is a part of the restructuring and rescaling of capitalism," (69) and while the process clearly predates modern capitalism and is not necessarily capitalistic as such, dis- and re-embedding genres can be one axis along which capital accumulation can proceed. This can be seen in the notion of what might be called the "bootstrapping" epic, which, instead of using a long-established mythos, creates a new narrative "universe" out of whole cloth or assumes such a universe that may or may not be filled in later. This is often less a result of wanting to create something wholly original (especially since rehashing a recognizable mythos usually generates more predictable returns) than it is a way to avoid licensing another author or corporation's intellectual property. For example, the *Mass Effect* video game series and its derivative novels, comics, and the like, do this quite deliberately (Bissell 112-113). The desire to create vast works that incorporate as much narrative material as possible thereby comes up against a kind of "enclosure" of symbolic material within a culture. The old rural commons were physically finite, and, once they were enclosed, no more land was available for common use. The terrain of culture, on the other hand, has in theory no limit on the symbolic material upon which aspiring creators might graze; when in practice that material is

25

enclosed, artists, writers, and the like are forced to create distinctly new material. This helps explain and exacerbate the increased fragmentation of cultures under postmodernism. At the same time, intellectual property regimes determine who is authorized to draw upon these enclosed narrative mythoi, whose work is canonical and whose is apocryphal, and whose version is allowed to be distributed for profit. For instance, I argue elsewhere (Arnott) that the *Batman: Arkham* video game series sets out to be an epic based on the vast comic book lore of the Batman franchise; yet Time Warner, the parent company of DC Comics, is notoriously jealous of its intellectual property rights. It is very telling that two separate academic books on the subject of Batman fandom, spanning more than twenty years (Pearson and Uricchio vi; Brooker 218), go out of their way to complain about how DC refused to grant permission to reprint images from decades-old Batman comics; this is in spite of the fact that it would not deprive DC of any possible profit. It is because the costs of a lawsuit – win or lose – against the overwhelming resources of corporate America would shutter any academic publisher that they acquiesce, even though such reprinting constitutes fair use for the purposes of criticism under U.S. copyright laws.

Intellectual property disputes are not the only concern; we must also take into account the problems of scale in an absolute sense. Just as there has been a great increase in the amount of narrative material in circulation, there are also far more people involved in the creation of new media epics. Television series and motion pictures have always needed scores, if not hundreds, of people working in a wide range of creative and support capacities for months on end to produce a few hours' drama; console video games have not had sole designer-programmers since the early 1980s, and while artisanal games still

26

get made and sometimes achieve success, commercial games that present epic narratives require hundreds of thousands of man-hours to complete. It would seem that novelistic prose, among the least "mediated" of media, remains the only medium in which it is still possible to have a sole author. Patrick O'Brien's Aubrey-Maturin series, or J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* (and their assorted apocrypha and marginalia) are good examples of this in the last century. The *Harry Potter* series has also been mooted as epic (Bridge 188); whatever the literary merits of J. K. Rowling's books, the series also exemplifies the last vestiges of traditional "authorship" among such franchises. Even these epics represent decades of work from their respective authors, and when they are invariably licensed and adapted into feature films, video games, and other spin-off narratives, it becomes still more difficult to isolate authorship in the manner of auteur theory. As such, all those working to create these epics have increasingly large mythoi to master – whether that involves ploughing through back issues of *Detective Comics* or consulting glossaries of Klingon or Elvish – and so the fragmentation becomes further entrenched. It will be interesting to see, in a century or two, how many of these complex storyworlds survive, or if they will suffer the same fate that traditionalists have feared are befalling the classics of the Western canon; and if they too fade away, one might wonder whether the final irony will occur, that even they will have a dwindling cohort of defenders, bemoaning the loss of these new classics in favour of even newer cultural productions.

Finally, the problem of scale poses challenges for criticism itself. In fact, this has always been a problem vis-à-vis the epic: the amount of study required to achieve competency in any one cultural tradition precludes an in-depth understanding of others,

and this is not helped by fact that, traditionally, even epic poetry has been seen as the culmination of the life's work of the poet. This was certainly the case with, for instance, Virgil, Dante, and Milton, and the amount of effort they put into preparing their masterpieces is well documented. We can only speculate about the efforts of "Homer" or anonymous medieval redactors, but their works demonstrate no less dedication of time and energy into mastering their craft and traditions. It is difficult enough to fully understand the works and cultural contexts of any one of these, much less understand them in considerable depth within the context of a greater Western tradition. Moreover, fully understanding them while simultaneously mastering epics outside of the Western tradition, such as the *Bhagavad Gita*, becomes even more exponentially difficult, if it is humanly possible at all.

Likewise, a greater and more diverse critical competency is required to deal with many of the epics in new media. The Wagnerian ideal of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* – the "total artwork" bringing together music, drama, design, and so on – has only grown more complex in its possibilities, as the "texts" of television, film, and video games aggregate techniques of signification and refashion prior media forms (Bolter and Grusin 273) The totalizing impulse of the epic necessarily means that epic works are constantly at the forefront of this process. What is needed, then, is the "flexible" formalist approach, with the ultimate goal of a *Gesamtkunstkritik*, or total art criticism, which can evaluate the component parts of these complex works on their own merits and with the appropriate attention with relation to the whole.

There is a strange irony in the fact that, just as the narrative epic tries to encapsulate within it an impossibly large social totality, epic criticism also grapples with the paradox

of comprehending and representing an impossibly large totality of cultural production. In this way both the making and the understanding of epics are activities that are aspirational, inherently deficient; we may recall here Franco Moretti's argument that epics seem always to be flawed masterpieces. And yet poets – and novelists, and artists, and directors, and designers, and programmers – keep trying. That alone should justify the attention of the theorist and critic, but criticism too can find value in aspiring to an ideal of understanding which it ultimately may never achieve. The caricature of postmodernism, in which there are seemingly no standards, no shared aesthetic criteria, a radical levelling of all cultural values, must be avoided even as the postmodern or poststructuralist era brings to our attention the limitations and dangers of uncritical reliance on totalizing concepts. This is something that even the pioneers of current critical fragmentation understood: for instance, Derrida notes in his famous critique of structuralism[16] that "I want to emphasize … simply that the passage beyond philosophy does not consist in turning the page of philosophy (which usually comes down to philosophizing badly), but in continuing to read philosophers *in a certain way.*" (288) No system of thought or theoretical framework will allow us to understand fully; but surely we can understand better by grappling with that fact, even as we continue to theorize, than by throwing up our hands and not even trying. Worse yet, we must not be tempted by a nihilistic theory that legitimates this refusal to grapple with epistemological paradoxes in the name of "relativism."

What is popularly termed "relativism" ought properly to be called "absolutism" – it is after all a rejection of the idea that things can be meaningfully compared to each other, that they are instead absolutely separate. Even if, in a thousand years, the *Iliad* and

Gilgamesh are still recited, while *Batman* and *Star Trek* are long forgotten, the effort to

understand them in relation must have some reward. As Matthew Arnold once noted

about criticism in the context of English literature, the times are few indeed in which both

great artists are born and the socio-historical conditions exist to nurture them; criticism's

purpose is to recognize that rare convergence when it happens, and to develop the

intellectual tools to prepare the way when it has not. And in a sense this constant striving,

the reaching beyond one's means, is indicative of the impulse to create epics that never

quite seems to go away. If it appears strange to invoke Arnold, the prophet of nineteenth-

century high culture, in the same breath, as it were, as Derrida and the postmoderns, I can

only point out that classification and criticism of the epic genre is ironically an epic

endeavour in itself; it is the re-embedding of the totalizing concept into critical discourse.

Gesamtkunstkritik mirrors its own object of study. The eclectic inclusion of a whole host

of critics, from Aristotle to Arnold, and beyond, is in the end no more or less strange than

a made-up starship captain, who reads ancient Greek in his off-hours, telling the world

about a legendary Akkaddian king via the electronic hearth of a television screen.

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[1] "New" in a relative sense: not only digital media, but also mechanically-reproduced mass media that postdate the novel, such as film and comic books.

[2] Plato's dialogues also discuss Homeric poetry repeatedly, though only in passing; Plato's interest in examining epic as literature for its own sake, or conducting what we would term "cultural studies," appears negligible, a fitting attitude for a philosopher whose "Socrates" would banish poets from the ideal state because their fanciful stories cannot be reconciled with truth. Eric Havelock argues persuasively that Plato's hostility to Homer comes from the non-abstract, particularizing epistemology which oral poetry represented and propagated.

[3] I.e., Cyrus the Great as described in Xenophon's *Cyropaedia*.

[4] The legendary Christian knight Renaud de Montauban, who appears in Boiardo's *Orlando Innamorato* and Ariosto's *Orlando Furioso*, and elsewhere.

[5] Cf. the "distance" described by Bakhtin's contemporary, Walter Benjamin, as part of the "aura" of the artwork. Both see this distance as part of the process of establishing and maintaining a literary or artistic canon, with its attendant links to social hierarchy.

Elsewhere ("Eduard Fuchs"), Benjamin scorns the "epic element in history" in which artistic productions exist in an "empty time" divorced from contemporary society.

[6] Such forms could easily be interpreted as dialogical; but this presents a new difficulty, namely, determining at what point the influence of multiple "voices" is no longer mere intertextuality but full-fledged polyphony. Even hoary old epics like the *Iliad* are, as currently understood, far less unified in their authorship, and therefore less monological, than Bakhtin may have believed.

[7] Here I follow Fusillo (32) and Cunningham (11) in modifying T. M. Knox's translation of this key passage: Knox renders "*Roman,* der modernen *bürgerlichen* Epopöe" as "romance, the modern popular epic," when clearly the terms "novel" and "bourgeois" are more appropriate both to the letter and the context of the original German.

[8] In Milton's case, though, the ideal was ironically fulfilled in the very first transmission, as Milton was dictating to his amanuenses.

[9] In *How We Became Posthuman*, N. Katharine Hayles describes an experimental artificial-life computer program as "a drama that, if presented in a different medium, one would not hesitate to identify as an epic. Like an epic, it portrays life on a grand scale, depicting the rise and fall of races, some doomed and some triumphant, and recording the strategies they invent as they play for the high stakes of establishing a lineage." (229)

[10] This echoes T. E. Lawrence's observations about *Moby-Dick*, which Edward Said notes in his introduction to the Vintage edition of that novel.

[11] The transition from the oral epic poem to the written epic poem, inherently lost to history, is from this point of view the first instance of remediation. It also, crucially, allowed the first medium-based expansion of the epic's scope; as Milman Perry and Albert Lord's research showed (Lord), the compositional range of the oral bard could not match that of "Homer," compiled as his texts likely were from the oral tradition.

[12] See Santas and Burgoyne as examples.

[13] It is perhaps not entirely coincidental that what is popularly considered the classical film epic (of the sword-and-sandal and other varieties) flourished at height of the studio system, presented with all the pious solemnity of a Cinemascope spectacle.

[14] Ovid does not deny Dido some distraught embellishments: it is safe to assume that the description of Aeneas as *durus vir* ("a callous husband," 7.84) upon leaving Creusa behind did not come from Aeneas himself.

[15] Dido, for instance, is not even named directly in the four lines (14.78-81) that sum up Aeneas' Carthaginian layover.

[16] Interestingly, Derrida recognizes two limits to totalization: not only the inherent "freeplay" of signification, but also the "classical" problem of there simply being too much empirical evidence of "infinite richness" for anyone to master. This is the problem of scale I described above.

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