Married to the Cape: Adam West, Batman and Signature Roles on the Small Screen

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Introduction

In his autobiography, Adam West writes that his strong connection with his starring role in Batman (ABC, 1966-1968) brought him “joy and heartache and frustration with many stops in between”\(^1\). Indeed, West represents an extreme example of a performer associated with a particular character, his career being largely defined by the effects of a single televisual part. Writing after the actor’s death in June 2017, Javier E. David echoes this, observing that the actor struggled after Batman’s cancellation because he “found his career defined by the cape and cowl he once donned”\(^2\). However, whilst this comment is characteristic of a tendency to think of West’s career in terms of inertia, his interdependence with a specific role need not be understood as a uniformly limiting relationship. For example, Will Dunham’s obituary notes that the actor’s identification with Batman also carried more positive connotations, meaning that the role “was both a blessing and a curse for him”\(^3\). As Dunham suggests, West embodies not just the ambivalences of being associated with a signature TV role, but also the advantages. Therefore, the various effects of his flagship televisual part on his star image provide the basis for a reframing of current star theory. To argue this, this article proposes a new category of televisual stardom, described by the term ‘signature role TV star’, evaluating West as an archetypal example of this type of performer.

1. Television Stardom

In some respects, theorising West as a star runs counter to influential arguments that historic eras of television were inherently unsuited to facilitating stardom. John
Langer⁴, who posits that television established a ‘personality system’ that differs markedly from cinema’s star system, helped steer debates in this direction. For Langer, significant differences exist between cinematic stars and television personalities:

Whereas stars emanate as idealizations or archetypal expressions, to be contemplated, revered, desired and even bluntly imitated, stubbornly standing outside the realms of the familiar and the routinized, personalities are distinguished for their representativeness, their typicality, their ‘will to ordinariness’, to be accepted, normalized, experienced as familiar [original emphasis].

In an analogous fashion to Langer, John Ellis situates stardom as a predominantly cinematic phenomenon, suggesting that “[i]t may well be that a similar creation of stars is impossible for broadcast TV⁶”. Throughout his argument, he utilises Roland Barthes’⁷ concept of the ‘photo effect’, by which still photography indicates the prior existence of a specific visual field. In Ellis’s view, television differs from cinema because it does not participate in the photo effect due to its intrinsic immediacy. Consequently, the medium cannot “produce a play between the ordinariness and extraordinariness of its performers⁸”, meaning that someone appearing on television contrasts with a film star because they are not seen as a paradoxical figure. Instead, a television performer signifies “as a known and familiar person⁹”.

Langer and Ellis’s positions have been endorsed by other scholars¹⁰, yet significant interventions have challenged their theories. For instance, Deborah Jermyn¹¹ identifies the need for new theoretical models through which to examine American television’s relationship to contemporary stardom. In her analysis of Sex and the City (HBO, 1998-2004) lead actress Sarah Jessica Parker, Jermyn indicates that “[t]he hierarchy once headed by cinematic stars has apparently shifted as glamorous names from film, TV and other arenas feature alongside one another as equal objects of desire and public interest¹²”. She links this to several evolutions, including the reach and kudos of modern American television and broader shifts in celebrity culture. For Jermyn, this new paradigm provides the foundation with which to engage with the ordinary/extraordinary discourses of stardom in relation to a television performer. Due to older theories seeming “increasingly fragile¹³”, she argues that the concept of television’s ‘personality system’ must be revised, asking whether it is “time to revisit the notion that stardom ‘proper’ (i.e. as it has come to be constructed in a cinematic context) must emerge from a succession of separate roles?¹⁴”.

However, the notion of a star being overwhelmingly associated with a signature role is arguably just as relevant to those TV performers who came before Parker. Whilst American television still enjoys a reach that no other nation can rival, this hegemony was especially strong during the 1960s and 1970s. Domestically, the main networks could command upwards of ninety percent of the viewing audience during this period, but this number fell as competitors became more established, standing at less than seventy percent by the end of the 1980s¹⁵. Concurrently, other countries’ broadcasting systems were also characterised by scarcity of provision¹⁶, with imported American series being a popular scheduling choice in western countries such as Britain¹⁷. Parallel to this, national and international syndication became an important factor in terms of consolidating a television star’s image, as it was during the 1960s and 1970s that television repeats became, in Derek Kompare’s words, “the ideal product of U.S. commercial television¹⁸”, offering stability in an unpredictable programming environment. Taken together, these factors solidified the bond between a television
star and their roles, meaning that earlier stars were likely to be principally defined by their connection to a flagship part in the eyes of a mass audience.

To address Jermyn’s question about whether a star image can be theoretically constructed from a single role, this article engages with Richard Dyer’s pioneering star studies methodology. A film star’s persona, according to Dyer, forms a complex totality with a chronological dimension, with the public typically encountering a star’s constructed image via a range of media texts. Through this concept, known as the “structured polysemy”, audience members “can select from the complexity of the image the meanings and feelings, the variations, inflections and contradictions, that work for them”. Similarly, the effects of a famous role on a TV star’s career can be observed through the characters they play and across a range of paratextual materials, indicating that Dyer’s concept remains relevant in this context and can be utilised to interrogate Jermyn’s statement that “a TV star is likely to have a longer and more particular association with a specific role than is the case of a cinematic star”. Where this interrelationship becomes the dominant factor in a star’s image, the term signature role TV star can be employed, to describe an actor whose image is primarily defined by their appearance as one particular character on a television series. West typifies this because his association with Batman remained a constant factor in his stardom, albeit in ways that changed over time. By focusing on several significant aspects of his image, namely his onscreen appearances, publicity artefacts and criticism and commentary materials, this article outlines various dynamics that converge to shape a certain kind of television stardom.

2. Onscreen appearances

West’s iteration of Batman is a noteworthy chapter in the superhero’s long history. The programme is based on the eponymous comic book character who was created by artist Bob Kane and writer Bill Finger in 1939. Following the initial success of the character in print, Batman crossed over into cinema when he was depicted in film serials released by Columbia Pictures in the 1940s. However, sales of the comics fell after the Second World War, until events served to reassert the superhero’s prominence in the 1960s. Principally, this is linked to ABC’s Batman series, which debuted on January 12th, 1966. As expected, the programme concerns the crimefighting exploits of millionaire Bruce Wayne (West) and his youthful ward Dick Grayson (Burt Ward), who strive to keep Gotham City safe from villainy under the guise of their alter egos, Batman and Robin (see Figure 1). Batman became a significant cultural phenomenon, with the term ‘Batmania’ being coined to describe its popularity, which led to a plethora of merchandising being produced, as well as an upturn in sales for the Batman comics and the release of an accompanying feature film (Leslie H. Martinson, 1966) between the first and second seasons of the television series. This period also saw West enjoying the trappings of widespread renown, including appearing on the cover of Life magazine and being received by the Pope.

The actor’s contributions were pivotal to Batman’s status as “the first television program to tap into the increasingly strong undercurrents of ambivalence about postwar American culture”, such tensions relating to, for example, the contemporaneous civil rights and women’s rights movements. Correspondingly, Batman’s topical ambivalence is an important underpinning aspect of West’s star image,
in keeping with Dyer’s view that star images function “in relation to contradictions within and between ideologies, which they seek variously to ‘manage’ or resolve”. More broadly, West’s star image is notable for its complex blend of ordinary and extraordinary attributes, which ensures that he represents an exception to Ellis’s aforementioned view that performers known for historic forms of television are not associated with this tension.

Figure 1: Burt Ward as Robin and Adam West as Batman

Related to this is Batman’s calculated polysemic approach, which meant that the programme was able to navigate the strained currents of American culture by presenting crime narratives that facilitate a multiplicity of readings. On the series’ mixed address to viewers, producer William Dozier attributes this to a moment of inspiration he had after being asked to work on the series:

I had just the simple idea of overdoing it, of making it so square and so serious that adults would find it amusing. I knew kids would go for the derring-do, the adventure, but the trick would be to find adults who would either watch it with their kids, or to hell with the kids, and watch it anyway.

Batman’s overarching approach aligns the series with camp, this being a sensibility which “is alive to a double sense in which some things can be taken”. Moreover, the programme has an affinity with the pop art movement of the time, which revelled in “cartoonish characters, cheap industrial tools, gimmicky special effects, a flattened-out and exaggerated sense of color, repetitious imagery, and factory-like production”. For instance, whilst Batman is narratively formulaic, it is distinguished by aesthetic flourishes such as a vivid colour palette, garish sets and onomatopoeic onscreen text (see Figure 2). The series’ combination of predictable storytelling with a stylistic approach informed by camp and pop art can be understood as part of the series’ general interplay between the ordinary and the extraordinary, which also finds expression in West’s image.
Ellis associates the ordinary/extraordinary dichotomy with a star’s publicity materials, yet he also states that film narratives provide “still some element” of this binary. Given his lifelong association with Batman, such diegetic oscillation is especially important to West’s image, in line with Edgar Morin’s view that a fictional character’s “exceptional qualities are reflected back on and illuminate the star”. However, whereas in narrative terms West embodies an extraordinary superhero, in other ways he is notable for the sense of ordinariness he projects. For instance, Matt Yockey discerns significance in the series’ casting of eminent stars as villains, including Liberace, Zsa Zsa Gabor and Tallulah Bankhead, in that their familiarity “informed the show’s collapse of the boundary between the public and the private”. At the same time, West and Ward’s relative anonymity outside of the programme helped engender viewer identification with their characters. Prior to being cast in Batman, West had already accrued several years’ acting experience, with his most substantial early role occurring in the third season of The Detectives (ABC, 1959-1961; NBC, 1961-1962), a police drama in which he became one of a trio of younger co-stars paired with the programme’s veteran lead Robert Taylor. However, his fame was limited compared to the popularity he experienced when Batman was on the air. In terms of West’s image, therefore, the higher profile of Batman’s guest stars accentuated his ordinariness for contemporaneous viewers, while in other respects his superhero character is noteworthy for his extraordinariness.

Integral to this paradox is West’s personification of the lead role. If, as Ellis posits, a cinematic star image is made complete through “the synthesis of voice, body and motion”, then the actor’s televisual star image is exemplified through his idiosyncratic performances on Batman. Comments from Dozier validate the importance of his contributions, with the producer remarking that West “had an immediate and
very intelligent insight into what we were trying to do. He grasped the duality of this thing immediately\textsuperscript{13}. In his book, West further suggests that he was aware of the necessity to convey the series’ productive contradictions through his performance, noting that he had to give Batman “a touch of mystery. And, at the same time, he had to be funny\textsuperscript{13}”. Primarily, West achieves this through his distinctive line readings. Whereas Dozier apparently felt that the character’s voice patterns should be “staccato, wooden, and straight-ahead\textsuperscript{40}”, West thought that “Batman should muse and connect his ideas and sentences fluidly\textsuperscript{41}”. The actor prevailed in this disagreement, with his vocal delivery as Batman characterised by sudden changes in cadence and emphasis, especially when he makes an investigative breakthrough. Meanwhile, by delivering ludicrous dialogue in an unremittingly serious fashion, West makes Batman appear unfailingly moralistic to the point of absurdity\textsuperscript{42}.

If West’s acting factors into the series’ interplay between the ordinary and the extraordinary, this is also suggested by the split subjectivity of Bruce Wayne and Batman. Whilst Wayne may be seen as an extraordinary figure due to his enhanced social status, the programme serves to downplay this by positioning his life as relatively unexciting compared to his adventures as Batman. Meanwhile, the porous boundary between Wayne and his superhero alter ego is an integral part of the series in general, which is encapsulated by a sequence in 'Ice Spy' (Season 2 episode 59). In this instalment, Gotham City is threatened by Mr. Freeze (Eli Wallach), who plans to build a superweapon. Having kidnapped a scientist, Mr. Freeze contacts the police with several demands, including that Bruce Wayne reads a statement live on television. This request prompts Chief O’Hara (Stafford Repp) to contact Wayne at home, as Commissioner Gordon (Neil Hamilton) simultaneously attempts to reach Batman. Gordon’s call to Batman comes through first, with Wayne answering whilst adopting the superhero’s strident tone. Almost immediately, the Wayne Manor house phone rings, which Dick answers. Wayne (as Batman) excuses himself momentarily from the call with the Commissioner, speaking to Chief O’Hara as Wayne, his voice noticeably less clamorous, as underscored by West’s divergent interpretation of the line ‘Mr. Freeze wants what?’ on both calls. Wayne’s attempts to contain the situation are complicated when O’Hara suggests that, by putting both phones at police headquarters together, he could make arrangements directly with Batman. Thereafter, Wayne alternates between the Batphone and the regular Wayne Manor phone as he holds a conversation between his separate identities, with West shifting his vocal inflection, posture and facial expression appropriately as the discussion ensues. In no other scene in the series is the dichotomy between the ordinary and the extraordinary more intensely realised in West’s performance (see Figure 3).
Another aspect contributing towards West’s complicated star image is the pairing of Batman and Robin, which can be interpreted as akin to a closeted homosexual relationship. Sasha Torres notes that “in a culture that sees the nuclear family as the proper route to normative gender and sexual identity, Batman representation’s insistence on [...] alternative familial configurations raises real questions about the possibility of straight masculinity for its characters⁴³”. In the case of the 1960s series, Will Brooker points out that its campiness ensured that existent readings of Batman and Robin as homosexual lovers circulated more widely⁴⁴. While the actors’ embodiment of the characters positions Bruce/Batman as an avuncular surrogate father figure to Dick/Robin, the series’ narrative framework serves as a frequent reminder of their atypical familial arrangement, which can be understood in terms of there being a “homologous relation between having a secret identity as a crime fighter and having a secret identity as a closeted homosexual⁴⁵”. Elsewhere, *Batman* evades homoerotic readings on a textual level by indicating that the onerous demands of crimefighting preclude romantic attachments or by occasionally demonstrating the heterosexual appeal of its lead characters to women. Batman’s inability to develop a romantic relationship, for fear of disclosing his secret identity, aligns West with Ellis’s description of a star as a figure “at once ordinary and extraordinary, available for desire and unattainable⁴⁶”.

A further facet of the programme’s ordinary/extraordinary binary is that Batman may appear to viewers as a reassuringly straightforward crimefighter or as an exaggerated parodic figure, following Dyer’s interpretation that star images function for audiences “according to how much [they speak] to us in terms we can understand about things that are important to us⁴⁷”. As noted, Batman is portrayed as unfailingly serious, with the Caped Crusader’s upright attitude carrying contradictory connotations. An illustrative example of this occurs in the series’ first episode, ‘Hi Diddle Riddle’ (Season   

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1 episode 1), in which Batman’s investigation takes him to a trendy discotheque. Upon entering the nightclub, Batman strides casually towards the bar as onlookers stare. In this full shot, he is central in the frame, with the camera angle showcasing West’s relaxed movement as well as the changing expressions of the customers. The next shot also positions him as a pleasurable spectacle, as Molly (The Riddler’s accomplice, played by Jill St. John) is shown in a close-up looking towards Batman, her smile and her open mouth suggesting attraction. His extraordinariness is reinforced when a female dancer notices his presence and exclaims, ‘Gleeps, it’s Batman!’, and when an attractive staff member eagerly offers to take his cape. This is soon undercut by the humorous dialogue, Batman’s ludicrousness coming to the fore when he refuses a waiter’s offer of a prominent table on the grounds that he ‘shouldn’t wish to attract attention’, before further advancing to the bar in his full superhero regalia to order a glass of orange juice. Molly strikes up a conversation with Batman and asks him to dance, the close-ups of West and St. John connoting a mutual desire. After drinking his (drugged) orange juice, the pair dance enthusiastically to upbeat ‘mod’ music, with Batman at one point shown facing the camera in a medium shot, gyrating his hips and moving his fingers across his eyes in a V-formation (see Figure 4).

Figure 4: Batman dances in Hi Diddle Riddle

The sequence epitomises a broader sense that West embodies a paradoxical figure, as it alternately showcases both Batman’s stylish extraordinariness, by constructing him as a desirable celebrity figure, as well as his staid ordinariness, signalled by prudish dialogue and a tame choice of drink. West is pivotal to this, because the scene is reliant on the effectiveness of both his physicality and his vocal delivery to successfully activate the conflicting meanings aimed at juvenile and adult audiences. Furthermore, according to the actor, the sequence was largely the result of his improvisation:

[As written], the Batusi was a nondescript dance that simply enabled Batman to move among the revelers. I felt it should be a little more than that, and I worked it
out on my own, made it a singular moment of madness inspired by the ongoing debate in the media about whether drug use was mind-expanding or debilitating. I wasn't trying to make a social statement: I just felt it would be funny and abstract to have Batman slightly out of his well-trained mind, losing control as a result of the drug.

West’s statement is telling, as it provides an indication that he was an active participant in Batman’s sophisticated engagement with the cultural zeitgeist, able to locate the precise register within which the programme’s straddling of ideologies would work most effectively. As Dyer describes, some stars may embody values regarded as alternative or subversive, though the narratives in which they appear “tend to recuperate rather than promote the rebellion they embody”. West is an intriguing example of this, because while Batman’s narrative structure reinforces his virtuousness in the face of villainy, its camp tone concurrently provides opportunities for him to satirise patriarchal values and, at times, enact oppositional ones.

Following Batman’s cancellation in 1968, West’s career faltered, providing a classic indication of Dyer’s assertion that a star’s success “may be short-lived or a psychological burden”. He was unable to parlay his television fame into a lasting career as a mainstream leading man, despite starring in films such as The Girl Who Knew Too Much (Francis D. Lyon, 1969) and Hell River (Stole Janković, 1974). Meanwhile, to make ends meet during the 1970s and 1980s, he made personal appearances as the Caped Crusader at such events as “fairs, conventions, rodeos, car shows (with the Batmobile), and circuses”. In West’s words, he “felt like I was whoring it, and digging myself deeper into a hole to boot”. Though his immediate post-Batman attempts to establish a distinct onscreen image were unsuccessful, West’s roles were more effective when he embraced the overriding association with his former role. He augmented his signature role connection through various parts that evoked his history, including his lead role in Lookwell (NBC, 1991), in which he plays the star of a cancelled TV show who believes he has the skills to fight crime in real life. A similar knowingness is evident in his touching guest turn in an episode of Batman: The Animated Series (Fox Kids, 1992-1995), in which West plays Simon Trent, the aging lead of a fondly remembered superhero series. In a plethora of programmes, including The Big Bang Theory (CBS, 2007-2019), West played exaggerated versions of himself, often in scenarios which referenced his earlier success as Bruce Wayne. Meanwhile, his role as Mayor Adam West in Family Guy (Fox, 1999-2003; 2005-present) provides a variant on this trend (see Figure 5). West portrays himself as eccentric and possibly psychotic, but references to Batman are typically avoided, which critic Alissa Wilkinson describes as “a kind of recurring joke by omission”. By embracing opportunities to make self-deprecating appearances, West was able to finally turn his ongoing association with Batman to his advantage. His distinctive comic presence represented a new phase of his screen persona that played down the staid normality he embodied as Bruce Wayne at the same time as it amplified the inherent ludicrousness he displayed as Batman.
In addition, West returned to his role as Batman in other texts after the 1960s, including a live-action special and several animated productions. However, his latter-day roles in Batman narratives generally represent a selective use of his persona, because of, variously, a partial evocation of the complex meanings of the ABC series or an incomplete recreation of West’s embodiment of his signature role. For example, the actor’s vocal delivery is often stentorian in the 1970s cartoon series *The New Adventures of Batman* (CBS, 1977), lacking the dynamic range that characterises his performances on *Batman*. Similarly, the 1960s series’ particular blend of adventure and parody is not replicated in the cartoon, which is more juvenile in nature compared to the earlier programme. For example, episodes regularly end with a ‘Bat-Message’ scene in which Batman and Robin didactically discuss the lessons that can be learned from their adventure. Therefore, *The New Adventures of Batman* harnesses the steadfast moralising related with West, without attaching the satirical level associated with *Batman*.

West and Ward returned to their signature roles again towards the end of the 1970s, in *Legends of the Superheroes* (NBC, 1979). This production, which comprised two one-hour live-action specials, represents an ensemble piece which teams Batman and Robin with other DC Comics protagonists. Overall, *Legends of the Superheroes* is ignominious, with the episodes having an inexpensive feel due to being shot on videotape, whilst West’s autobiography suggests that the production was rushed, with scenes “shot even faster than we’d done the original *Batman* series”56. The episodes aim for an overtly comic register, therefore West employs a broadly humorous style of acting that contrasts with his more deadpan approach from the 1960s. For instance, he delivers lines such as ‘We should always obey our traffic laws’ with a broad grin, his facial expression belying the steadfastness Batman typically exhibits. Likewise, the balanced ambivalence of *Batman*, through which West’s character could be seen as an affirmation or an implicit critique of hegemonic values, is less evident, because the narrative framework of *Legends of the*
Superheroes is designed solely to generate laughs. For this reason, *Legends of the Superheroes* provides an interesting contrast to *The New Adventures of Batman*. Whilst both productions utilise West in a selective fashion that only sporadically evokes his 1960s heyday, the former foregrounds Batman’s ludicrousness, which the latter plays down. Neither approach, however, is entirely successful, further suggesting that the calculated polysemy of *Batman* is significant to the effectiveness of West’s embodiment of the superhero.

Appropriately, therefore, the animated films *Batman: Return of the Caped Crusaders* (Rick Morales, 2016) (see Figure 6) and *Batman vs. Two-Face* (Rick Morales, 2017) assiduously replicate the defining hallmarks of the classic series, such as the pop art aesthetic. Despite this, West’s performance represents a distracting aspect of both films. Although the animation presents his character as being around the same age as in his original interpretation, the actor sounds unmistakeably like an elderly man, which generates a level of discordance. Nevertheless, the films’ loving recreation of the milieu of the classic ABC series demonstrates that West’s stardom remains forever bound to a landmark television programme. While his various reprisals of his signature role are less significant to West’s overall image than the 1960s series, they signal that the meanings pertaining to his interpretation of Batman vary in different contexts.

Figure 6: Batman and Robin investigate in 2016’s *Batman: Return of the Caped Crusaders*

### 3. Publicity

As Jermyn points out, it is not only the changing nature of television production that contributes to the splintering of traditional star hierarchies, but also that of “those intertexts that help construct stardom”, such as publicity articles. Whilst this has ramifications for contemporary performers, the recirculation of star images through paratexts also has implications for actors from other eras. Although historic television figures are said to traditionally appear “in subsidiary forms of circulation [...] mostly during the time that the series is being broadcast”, West was interviewed relatively frequently after *Batman* ended, largely because of the continuing popularity of the 1960s series. If, as Dyer states, the significance of publicity materials are that they are
“often taken to give a privileged access to the real person of the star\textsuperscript{59}, in West’s case this is squarely linked to his interrelationship with his signature role. Once his connection with Batman is taken into account, the actor’s star persona pivots, in publicity texts, on an ordinary/extraordinary paradox that fluctuated over time.

In Ellis’s view, the tenor of publicity articles about television personalities “is more concerned with discovering if there is a personality separate from that of the television role than it is with the paradox of ordinary-but-extraordinary\textsuperscript{60}. Conversely, articles about West published during Batman’s initial run do often generate such a contradiction when they focus on the differences between him and his signature role. For instance, Bob Thomas addresses West’s real personality by situating him at opposing poles to the superhero he plays:

Batman is the square’s square; Adam West is hip. Batman lives in a manor that looks left over from a George Arliss movie; Adam West has a pad at Malibu Beach. Batman spends most of his time in the company of his ward Robin. When not working, Adam West is often accompanied by a local chick. You see, there is a difference\textsuperscript{61}.

Whereas Thomas presents West in a favourable manner, elsewhere the star is situated as ordinary by comparison to Batman’s extraordinariness. Such a juxtaposition is evident in Duane Valentry’s profile of the star:

There’s this fellow who wears a cape, who can’t go anywhere without being mobbed, with youngsters climbing all over him and adults gaping.
And there’s the other fellow – tall, with horn-rimmed glasses, who can go just about anywhere and never cause a ripple\textsuperscript{62}.\footnote{In other ways, though, the same article plays up West’s extraordinariness, discussing his range of adventurous hobbies such as motorcycling, referring to his Malibu Beach ‘bachelor pad’ and picturing him at the helm of a sailboat. Meanwhile, West himself is quoted on his identification with Batman, noting that “people greet me as Mr. West instead of Batman more and more all the time”\textsuperscript{63}.}

Nevertheless, the constricted distinctions between West and his signature role became increasingly pertinent after Batman was cancelled in 1968, serving to illustrate the extent to which his stardom is defined by the “elision of star as person and star as image\textsuperscript{64}”. Discussions of his later career are often tinged with a sense of ordinariness, which is typically coupled with a focus on his past achievements, which are framed, in various ways, as extraordinary. On this point, a 1972 article in the Lincoln Journal Star is characteristic of how the advantages and disadvantages of signature role stardom informs publicity for other projects, which is significant because publicity is “the place where one can read tensions between the star-as-person and her/his image, tensions which at another level becomes themselves crucial to the image”\textsuperscript{65}. The article begins in this fashion:

Think of Adam West and you think of Batman. That’s the trouble.
His Batman image seriously hurt his acting career but the series – Bom! Pow! – made him famous and provided enough money to tide him over in style.
“It’s tough to escape an identification as massive as mine was,” said West. “Things are beginning to happen, but it’s been a long way. You hang in there, keep struggling and don’t let the Bat thing kill you.”\textsuperscript{66}

In this excerpt, West’s current circumstances are positioned as suboptimal, yet his prior success still resonates. While he expresses a guarded optimism about the former situation turning around, he also displays a level of ambivalence about his career heyday. Meanwhile, the article’s framing rests upon the disparity of fortunes West has
experienced since his Batman heyday, as it simultaneously reiterates the closeness of identification said to be responsible for his present circumstances.

Over time, West proactively embraced his connection with his signature role, situating himself as an elder statesman figure in terms of the history of the character. On this point, West frequently distanced his incarnation of Batman from newer versions, as evidenced by a statement he made regarding Tim Burton’s 1989 Batman film in the Atlanta Constitution: “I guess we’ll see [...] if people prefer the Classic Coke or the new stuff”.

On other occasions, West employs equivalent linguistic strategies regarding subsequent Batman films, telling Jim Abbott after the release of Batman Returns (Tim Burton, 1992) that “[t]hey have their vision – dark, kinky, nihilistic, violent – for whatever reason. We continue to have ours, which has worn very well for millions of viewers over the years”. Meanwhile, after the release of The Dark Knight (Christopher Nolan, 2008), the second film in a grim trilogy, West frames his version of the character in opposition by foregrounding its lighter attributes, stating that “they have their Dark Knight – I’m the Bright Knight”.

With such rhetorical flourishes, the actor exhibits an uncanny ability to distance himself from new incarnations of his signature character whilst legitimating his own interpretation of the role. By doing so, he signals how continuing associations with his flagship series are related to the alterable iconicity of the Batman character.

In later years, West’s star image is increasingly defined by his intergenerational appeal. Frequently, the actor reflects on his longevity by highlighting Batman’s mixed address to viewers:

When you were a kid, you saw things that you were caught up, swept away with, and then as you get older, you see the absurdities and the gags and the puns and the more adult kind of content. That really sort of keeps it fresh, and you know if you have good memories of something when you’re growing up, it becomes important.

By highlighting some of the diverse meanings that the programme generates, West provides a plausible explanation for Batman’s longstanding appeal, in a manner that also underlines how his own image is polysemantic. At other times, West associates the durability of his stardom with the direct personal influence the series had on many of its fans:

I have dozens of people who come up to me and say, “Mr. West, I wouldn’t be a doctor, a plumber or an astronaut if it weren’t for you and that show.” I get three generations... the boomers and their kids and sometimes their parents or their kids’ kids. People say, “Little Jimmy’s first word was...” I say, “Mother?” They say, “Batman.” So what can you do? You just go along with it, because you understand it and we’re all human.

In this comment, West suggests an ordinary/extraordinary paradox related to his enduring popularity, because he articulates both the extraordinariness of his continuing stardom, in that he has appreciative fans from several age groups, and its ordinariness (‘you understand it and we’re all human’).

Related to West’s durability is his popularity at conventions, where he regularly participated in Batman cast reunion sessions and publicised upcoming projects. Although he appeared at such events for decades, the wider status of conventions shifted over time, with Comic Con events now treated seriously by film studios and covered regularly in the press. For West, his signature role TV stardom suited the milieu of pop culture conventions, where celebrities often enact “a hybridized actor/
character performance of identity”

According to Liam Burke, the actor enjoyed an extraordinary stature at major events, with his report on the 2011 San Diego Comic-Con beginning with the statement that “[f]ans walk the same red carpet as Harrison Ford while Francis Ford Coppola hands out Edgar Allen Poe masks and Adam West is king”. The exalting of West in this context is representative of the mutability of his signature role stardom, which intensified over time in line with broader shifts related to popular culture. As Glen Weldon comments, “[t]here’s no longer just nerds like me who love Batman and things like him. The entire cultural context around him has changed”.

### 4. Criticism and Commentary

Another area where such fluctuations are relevant to West’s image is the criticism and commentary produced about him. In terms of critical esteem, West was a maligned or neglected figure through much of his life before later years saw his reputation being positively reappraised. Relevant to this is the standing of his Batman series in general, which has occupied a shifting place in discourse about the superhero. In Janet Staiger’s view, “once you recognize the variability of responsible readings, texts are no longer frozen in the time of their production”. Accordingly, comparing reactions to Batman over a number of years elucidates the manner in which critical responses to the series, and to its lead actor, have been produced historically. Charting this also aligns with Dyer’s view that distinctions must be made between revisionist criticism about a star and contemporaneous analysis. As Bill Boichel indicates, the programme was originally popular with mass audiences, but it often “did not appeal to the increasingly organized and vocal Bat-fans”, many of whom regarded it as an insufficiently reverent adaptation of the comic books. Meanwhile, critics often regarded Batman as passé during the 1970s and into the 1980s, leading Lynn Spigel and Henry Jenkins to state that it once occupied an “uncomfortable position within the traditional canon of television art”. Nevertheless, the programme has increasingly been praised in more recent years, as has West’s take on the part. This is exemplified by Rob Sheffield’s view in Rolling Stone that the star is the only Batman actor to have “truly defined the role”.

When Batman was originally broadcast, West was generally seen by newspaper critics as an appropriate fit for the lead role, although the extent to which his lead performance was noted in reviews was varied. In his discussion of the first episode, Gerry Coffey hails West, stating that he was “perfectly cast as the incredibly brave and delightfully fatuous hero”. Likewise, Bob Smith declares that the programme’s makers “found the ideal Batman in Adam West”. If these reviews suggest West’s centrality to Batman’s appeal, other writers offer more qualified praise. An illustration of this comes from John Heisner, who acknowledges that West and Ward “performed with the gusto necessary for their roles” before he singles out Frank Gorshin’s villainous turn as The Riddler as the most memorable aspect of the opening episode, advising viewers that “it’s worth watching if only to catch him”. Meanwhile, Paul Jones writes approvingly about the series’ likely appeal to both knowing pop art enthusiasts and children without mentioning West at all.

As discussed, West’s stardom faded during the 1970s and 1980s. During this era, many of his new projects failed to achieve critical recognition or commercial success, at a time when analytical reassessments of Batman had not begun in earnest. Where his
performances in new projects were appraised, they often reinforce a sense of the actor as an outmoded screen presence. In reference to the sex comedy *The Happy Hooker Goes Hollywood* (Alan Roberts, 1980), for example, Jon Marlowe states that West and fellow television star Phil Silvers get “the rare chance to show the world how they’ve grown inept as well as old”\(^8\). Reviews of the horror film *One Dark Night* (Tom McLoughlin, 1983) provide further examples of West’s abilities and star status being denigrated. As a case in point, Eric Fielding comments that viewers “can tell this is a rather low-budget (and quality) film when the ‘big name star’ is Adam ‘Batman’ West\(^6\)”\(^9\). Such allusions to West’s diminished star status tend to function (implicitly or otherwise) in relation to his signature role on a television programme that was often disparaged at this point in time.

However, Spigel and Jenkins discuss how readings of the *Batman* series changed markedly by the end of the 1980s\(^8\). As Staiger observes, “variations among interpretations are not random but have connections - usually uneven - to available discourses and interpretive strategies\(^8\)”. In the case of *Batman*, earlier anxieties about the programme, relating to factors such as disputes over its suitability for younger viewers, eventually “vanished from popular memory\(^8\)”. Correspondingly, the 1960s series maintained a popular standing around the world through prolific television repeats, thereby providing regular “opportunities for thinking about a decade that is out of focus but still part of our collective and autobiographical past\(^8\)”. Thus, West’s critical standing relates not just to his post-*Batman* projects, which were often unsuccessful, but also to regular reappraisals of his signature series. Whilst *Batman* occupies a changeable position in the broader discourse about onscreen superheroes, an increasingly common factor over time is an identification that it represents a televisual landmark. A characteristic example of this trend is Craig Brown’s 1993 review in *The Times*, which describes the programme as “in many ways a fore-runner of more self-consciously arty series such as *Twin Peaks*\(^9\)”\(^9\).

If *Batman* is regarded more favourably in later years, then another aspect of this is that retroactive commentary increasingly situates West as a pivotal component of the series’ appeal. Often, this is tied to events which provide a new justification for critics to write about it, including releases on new platforms. Upon the release of the programme on DVD and Blu-ray in 2014, George Bass describes West’s superhero as “the definitive Caped Crusader; the only screen Batman to fully appreciate the inherent zaniness of a man choosing to fight crime by dressing up as a bat\(^2\)”\(^9\). In Bass’s view, West “played the part of millionaire Bruce Wayne like a dad collecting his son from the disco\(^9\)”, which contributes to the series’ position as “one of the most enjoyable TV shows of all time\(^9\)”. Zaki Hasan is even more ardent in his praise for West, claiming that his “canny take on the character, with his absolutely earnest delivery of outrageous dialogue, was inarguably the crucial ingredient in pulling off the delicate balancing act by producer William Dozier […] between high camp for the adults and high adventure for the kiddies\(^9\)”. If the star’s critical standing was more secure at this time than it had been previously, this is due not to venerated new performances, but to the reissue of his signature role series from many decades earlier. Such variability is a distinctive facet of signature role TV stardom, which can be seen both in terms of stasis and change.

West’s death in 2017 prompted a close focus on the star’s accomplishments, with memorial coverage reflecting a wider acceptance of his significance to the *Batman* franchise. As characterized by Jeffrey M. Blum, West’s “long career as a television and feature player had its apotheosis in the role of Batman, bringing to life a decades-old icon of 1960s juvenile television”\(^9\). The programme’s enduring popularity is a testament to West’s iconic status, as captured in *The Late Show with Stephen Colbert* where Colbert states: “I learned to read by watching *Batman*. *Batman* is why I was able to read, and it was because of you, sir”\(^9\).
character’s enduring appeal. For Jack Bernhardt, West’s Batman is not only “the most fun, it is also the most subversive and truthful Batman we can hope to ever witness”.

In this reading, the inescapable ludicrousness of the 1960s series conceals a challenge to traditional moral values, in a manner that more serious contemporary superhero narratives cannot replicate:

So thank you, Adam West, for being the most relevant Batman. At a time when the world is crazier than ever, we need more of his camp Dada-esque, universe-challenging performances, that make us question our own moral compass, not these simplistic grey and gritty reboots, even if they have a smattering of jokes here and there.

West’s significance to depictions of the Caped Crusader is further referenced by Weldon, who suggests that, whether regarded positively or negatively, “the show, and West’s performance in particular, are the reason anyone’s talking about the character of Batman today”. Matt Zoller Seitz also affirms this, positing that “West’s Batman/Bruce Wayne is, and will always remain, the single most important screen incarnation of the character, for better or worse”.

The notion of West as both an ordinary and an extraordinary figure is also pertinent to coverage of his death. In a general sense, this applies to the commonplace references to the star as someone who experienced both great renown and extended career downturns. This is exemplified by Mike Barnes’ obituary, which notes that West “was at the pinnacle of pop culture after Batman debuted in January 1966, only to see his career fall victim to typecasting after the ABC show flamed out”. In addition, Rob Hoerburger suggests West’s fundamental ordinariness by emphasising his humanity, stating that his portrayal of Batman “showed us that occasionally we need our superheroes to be a little more like us”. A less standard instance of West being regarded as a paradoxical figure is evident in Luke Y. Thompson’s memorial:

While Adam West [was] best known for puncturing nearly every stereotype of the classically stoic superhero, somehow it was impossible to see him as a mere mortal, vulnerable as all human beings are to the passage of time itself. [...] The news that one of our first great TV superheroes was felled by a short bout with leukemia hardly seems possible; surely there was some magically medical Batspray, or a way he could “Bif! Zap! Pow!” his way out again. It was not to be.

On the one hand, Thompson posits the prospect of West perishing as unbelievable given his invariable escapes from peril on Batman, yet this is juxtaposed with the sad acceptance of his passing away. This figurative framing of the actor’s demise invokes notions of extraordinariness and ordinariness in an imaginative fashion, which again signals how these contradictory tendencies are important to West’s image.

Conclusion

Regarding Jermyn’s suggestion that a contemporary star image can be theorised from a single televisual role, this analysis supports the notion that this is also applicable across a broader chronological timeframe. Dyer’s concept of the structured polysemy is a suitable methodological prism through which to approach this, albeit this is challenging, in some respects, when it comes to a star whose signature role series was cancelled after less than three years and who did not achieve many high-profile leading roles thereafter. Due to this, the notion that “[t]he star phenomenon consists of everything that is publicly available about stars” takes on a new importance.
Whereas a broad range of starring roles, and accompanying intertexts, are likely to be significant in the case of a renowned film star, when it comes to West many of the most pertinent commentary materials relate principally to his signature series, which become pivotal to unpacking the specifics of how his image shifted.

Although the actor’s persona remained principally tied to one role he played, this developed through several stages of adjustment as his career continued. He therefore represents an emblematic example of a signature role TV star, because his association with Batman remained a continuous variable throughout his life. West’s example indicates that the profile of such stars can be summarised as follows. Generally, signature role TV stars are not considered to be at the peak of hierarchies of stardom, especially in historic cases. Admittedly, signature role TV stars may find the parameters of their career delimited by their flagship characterisation, which might interfere with their attempts to transition to other modes of stardom. Despite this, their images may be notable not just for their constancy, but also for their fluidity. Though the signature role is predominantly associated with the series where it originated, often the star embodies the part in other texts and the characterisation becomes a source of intertextual resonance in parts that are nominally unrelated. For the actors who become associated with a signature role, there may be considerable opportunities to reflect on the character through retroactive paratexts, which serve as an adjunct to their star image. In this regard, signature role television stardom need not be seen solely in terms of stasis, but rather as a dynamic process oriented around a durable core.

Due to the industrial arrangements of American television of the 1960s and 1970s, the category of stardom that West occupies arguably encompasses a range of other notable TV stars from this era. For example, whereas Batman’s unique attributes are pivotal to generating the ordinary/extraordinary interplay that frames its lead actor’s image, comparable dichotomies can be discerned in the personae of other actors associated with fantastical programmes. Consequently, such figures as Lynda Carter, known for the title role in Wonder Woman (ABC: 1975-1977; CBS: 1977-1979), and William Shatner, who played Captain Kirk in Star Trek (NBC: 1966-1969), are obvious candidates to be analysed as signature role TV stars. Therefore, although the analysis in this article reflects the specificities of West’s career, the results present a framework for considering other TV stars that can be extended or problematised as required.

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YOCKEY, Matt, Batman, Detroit, Wayne State University Press, 2014.

NOTES


8. Ellis, Visible Fictions, p. 105.
12. Jermyn, p. 73.
23. Jermyn, p. 82. Though Dyer does not consider television in any detail, he does state his belief that his methodology “is broadly applicable to […] other kinds of star”. Dyer, Stars, p. 3.
24. This category replaces Dyer’s category of ‘films’, to reflect the fact that West’s image is not predominantly associated with cinematic narratives.
25. The serials are titled Batman (Lambert Hillyer, 1943) and Batman and Robin (Spencer Gordon Bennet, 1949). While they are not generally held in high esteem, they are notable because they employed tropes, such as voiceover narration and cliffhanger endings, that the ABC television series subsequently applied.
26. West appears in his Batman costume on the front of the issue of Life released on March 11, 1966. Meanwhile, he was invited to meet Pope Paul VI at the Vatican in May 1967 as part of World Communications Day, an event which had been established by the pontiff.
29. On the importance of the ordinary/extraordinary binary to stardom, a notable overlap exists between Ellis’s theory and Dyer’s. For instance, the latter refers to the significance in publicity materials of the dialectic of “the stars-as-ordinary and the stars-as-special”. Dyer, Stars, p. 43.
32. Spigel and Jenkins, p. 175.
35. Yockey, p. 70.
36. In the case of Ward, meanwhile, his role as Robin represented his first acting job.
37. Ellis, *Visible Fictions*, p. 93.
39. West with Rovin, p. 60.
40. Ibid.
41. Ibid.
42. For example, in ‘True or False Face’ (Season 1 episode 17), Batman states that only a devious criminal would ‘callously park in front of a fire hydrant’.
45. Torres, p. 331.
46. Ellis, *Visible Fictions*, p. 91.
48. West with Rovin, p. 80.
50. Dyer, *Stars*, p. 44.
51. West with Rovin, p. 194.
52. West with Rovin, p. 195.
53. West appears in Season 1 episode 18, ‘Beware the Gray Ghost’.
54. West appears in Season 9 episode 17, ‘The Celebration Experimentation’.
55. Alissa Wilkinson, “7 times Adam West played ‘Adam West,’ and it was great”, Vox [online], 2017, https://www.vox.com/culture/2017/6/10/15776584/adam-west-cameo-30-rock-
57. Jermyn, p. 83.
58. Ellis, *Visible Fictions*, p. 106.
63. Ibid.
introduced a new soft drink formula, but after an adverse reaction from the American public the original flavour was reintroduced several months later, now branded Coca-Cola Classic.


78. Spigel and Jenkins, p. 174.


83. Ibid.


87. Spigel and Jenkins, p. 196.

88. Staiger, , p. 211.

89. Spigel and Jenkins, p. 193.

90. Ibid.
93. Ibid.
94. Ibid.
97. Ibid.

ABSTRACTS

Influential theoretical paradigms posit that television is unlike cinema because it creates personalities rather than stars. Conversely, Deborah Jermyn challenges prior theories through analysis of Sarah Jessica Parker’s image, suggesting that it may be time to revisit the notion that true stardom needs to be associated with a range of different roles. However, though this is pertinent to contemporary figures, it is also relevant to those who came earlier. In particular, American television stars of the 1960s and 1970s were likely to be defined by their connection to a flagship part, due to a variety of factors that helped cement such associations.

By theorising star status for someone linked with a single role, a distinct form of televisual fame comes into focus. To argue this, this article proposes a new category of stardom, described by the
term ‘signature role TV star’. It evaluates Adam West, best known for his leading role on Batman (ABC, 1966-1968), as an archetypal example. Despite its initial popularity, Batman was cancelled after three seasons and West was unable to develop a lasting career as a mainstream leading man, meaning that his signature role remained the defining aspect of his stardom. Nevertheless, his image acquired productive new inflections over time, especially once his screen persona amplified the ludicrousness he displayed as Batman. Therefore, West embodies not just the ambivalences of being associated with a signature TV role, but also the advantages.

Un paradigme théorique influent postule que la télévision diffère du cinéma parce qu’elle crée des personnalités plutôt que des stars. À travers une analyse de l’image de Sarah Jessica Parker, Deborah Jermyn a questionné ce postulat, en suggérant notamment la nécessité de dépasser l’idée selon laquelle une « véritable star » doit s’illustrer dans une variété de rôles différents. Si son argumentation porte sur des formes de célébrités contemporaines, elle peut également être appliquée à des stars plus anciennes, notamment aux stars de la télévision américaine des années 1960 et 1970, qui étaient particulièrement susceptibles d’être associés à un rôle phare pour diverses raisons.

Accorder le statut de star à un acteur lié à un seul rôle permet de mettre en évidence une forme distincte de célébrité télévisuelle, que cet article explore à travers l’exemple archétypal d’Adam West, connu pour son rôle principal dans Batman (ABC, 1966-1968). En dépit de sa popularité initiale, la série a été annulée après trois saisons et West n’a pu développer une carrière durable en tant qu’acteur de premier plan. Par conséquent, l’association de l’acteur avec le rôle de Batman est restée l’aspect déterminant de sa célébrité. Néanmoins, son image a acquis de nouvelles inflexions au fil du temps, de sorte que West incarne non seulement les inconvénients, mais aussi les avantages de l’association à un unique rôle.

INDEX

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