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# Supes, Inc.: Episodic Television Drama *The Boys*, Antiheroism and Society of Performance

## ABSTRACT

In this study, we would like to address the issue of antiheroism in relation to the popular episodic television drama *The Boys* (Amazon Prime Video, since 2019). The television antihero is discussed quite frequently, but more often in a rather general manner than based on specific case studies. The study outlines the related terminological axis and then applies the individual theoretical frameworks to a specific episodic television drama that presents an axiologically and morally determined conflict between fictional characters of superheroines and superheroes and their counterparts, ordinary citizens, direct or indirect victims of amoral decisions made by people with superhuman abilities. As we believe, applying the given body of knowledge to the selected television drama via a case study allows us to explain the contemporary understanding of antiheroism in relation to fictional characters with superhuman abilities and, at the same time, outline the specific aspects of so-called society of performance on basis of theoretical reflection on the issue, followed by a qualitative content analysis of the episodic television drama *The Boys* focused on its selected narrative and discursive aspects.

## KEY WORDS

Antihero. Episodic Television Drama. Superhero. *The Boys*. Society of Performance.

# 1 Introduction

At present, stories involving superheroines and superheroes are a well-established part of media culture, possessing exceptional commercial potential. Audiences are able to encounter them in many different shapes and forms, via generically diverse media products – especially in the sphere of audiovisual media production. The first two decades of the 21<sup>st</sup> century certainly witnessed the increased popularity of feature films, i.e., blockbusters depicting superheroines and superheroes, but this development trend actually reaches far beyond the boundaries of cinematic production. The viewer can also seek and consume a variety of episodic television dramas which offer their audiences non-traditional and, in a way, more controversial variations of superheroic characters. We also have to acknowledge that the outlined creative tendency is especially relevant in terms of original production offered by Internet-distributed television providers, e.g., Disney+, Amazon Prime Video, HBO Max or Netflix. Episodic dramas that are – directly or indirectly – associated with already established and highly profitable movie franchises; for example, Marvel's *WandaVision* (Disney+, 2021) or *The Falcon and the Winter Soldier* (Disney+, 2021) are immensely popular, along with other television shows which obviously define and present their main protagonists with superhuman abilities as antiheroic. We may mention the episodic television dramas *Loki* (Disney+, 2021) or *The Boys* (Amazon Prime Video, since 2019); we intend to address the latter in detail.

The aim of the study is to reflect on different forms and variations of antiheroism which are related to the episodic television drama *The Boys*. The given product presents a morally questionable group of superheroic protagonists. Due to their repulsive acts or at least controversial decisions and opinions, these characters are confronted with the anger and contempt expressed by a group of common people, including victims of superheroines and superheroes' indifference and misconduct. The television drama in question thus deliberately violates the ordinary conventions of stories about superheroism. Even though these often present a wide variety of character flaws associated with superhuman individuals in order to diversify the considerably exhausted narration schemes, they eventually tend to emphasise these characters' clearly apparent humanistic qualities. However, the episodic television drama *The Boys* purposely ignores this strategy, depicting superhumans as calculative and mentally disturbed individuals who abuse their exceptionality for their own benefit, regardless of the serious social consequences of their actions. It is necessary to mention that the TV show is one of the most successful original products of the company Amazon Prime Video to date. In September and October 2021, the second season of *The Boys* reached a massive streaming viewership of 891 million minutes a week, becoming as successful as the most watched products offered by Netflix, Amazon Prime Video's direct competitor.<sup>1</sup> The given data suggests that the target viewers are interested in this particular portrayal of superhumanity. It is thus not too surprising that Amazon Prime Video plans to further utilise this episodic drama to establish a multifaceted media franchise. The first two seasons will be followed by new episodes (scheduled to be released in summer 2022) and also by a formally autonomous animated series titled *Diabolical*, which intends to focus on the business with superheroic figures, specifically on teenage superheroines and superheroes crossing all the existing moral, sexual and physical boundaries in order to sign lucrative contracts.

The discussed issue refers to the need to re-evaluate the existing concepts of antiheroism in relation to superheroic characters, who have usually been considered as fictional protagonists protecting the weak and helping those who need to be saved. However, the axiological relativism present in *The Boys* and the amoral acts of most of its protagonists lead us towards a theoretical

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<sup>1</sup> TASSI, P.: *'The Boys' Ratings Are So Strong It's Challenging Netflix's Top Hits*. Released on 2<sup>nd</sup> October 2020. [online]. [2022-01-10]. Available at: <<https://www.forbes.com/sites/paultassi/2020/10/02/the-boys-ratings-are-so-strong-its-challenging-netflixs-top-hits/>>.

reconsideration of the available body of knowledge. This theoretical framework is then applied to the analysed television drama with an ambition to determine the nature of these new trends in audiovisual production centred on superheroism. Our theoretical reflection on the relevant problems employs multiple strategies of logical reasoning – analysis and synthesis, comparison, giving examples and inductive and deductive reasoning. The second part of the study offers a set of empirical findings. A case study focused on the episodic television drama *The Boys* aims to offer a qualitative interpretation of the portrayed characters and their relationships based on a narrative and discourse analysis. The individual parts of the analysis reflect on the presence of antiheroism in *The Boys* and the television show's ability to depict the principles of so-called society of performance, as determined and explained by the philosopher Byung-Chul Han.<sup>2</sup>

## 2 Antiheroic Superhero and Society of Performance

Audiovisual works involving superheroines and superheroes have become significant bearers of secularised myths associated with late modern culture of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Malíček even notes that contemporary media culture is, as a whole, strongly dependent on creation of late modern myths.<sup>3</sup> Radošinská sees film and television stories about superheroines and superheroes as refined, visually attractive entertainment sources based on 'recycled' themes and heavily standardised narrative structures. Their popularity is conditioned by the presence of physically attractive people possessing abilities that reach way beyond what a common person is capable of.<sup>4</sup> Considering the related body of knowledge in the field of psychoanalysis, Malíčková et al. argue that superheroism represents, at least in terms of psychoanalytical reasoning, the highest grade of heroism that can be experienced by our *psyche* while establishing and creating Self.<sup>5</sup> Dantzler claims that the primary reason why superheroines and superheroes are so popular lies in their ideological roots. Their stories are usually built upon universally comprehensible narrative formations which reflect Christian and Jewish allegories in relation to American cultural values and mythological elements present in contemporary art.<sup>6</sup> Based on these fundamental ideological aspects, the current popularisation of superheroic stories in the sphere of television production may be explained not only in the context of the dynamic development of Internet-distributed television services, but also in terms of today's tendency to utilise the principles of episodic storytelling in feature film production. Considering Berger's opinions on iteration and schematisation of media content and the extent of redundancy present in current media production, we have to agree with the author's claim that this trend has established a new aesthetic framework of episodic production.<sup>7</sup> As a result, the same topics and ideas are applied repeatedly, across diverse types of media. Creating multiple sequels to feature films that no longer possess an autonomous narrative value, i.e., using the principles of seriality (that is, episodic storytelling) thus leads to seamless and smooth adoption of these specific narrative schemes in the field of episodic television production.

The contemporary scholarly reflection on superheroines and superheroes necessarily considers the ideological, thematic and production-related convergence that blurs the once clear boundaries between the form and content of film and episodic television drama. Many renowned

<sup>2</sup> See: HAN, B.-C.: *Vyhořelá společnost*. Prague : Rybka Publishers, 2016.

<sup>3</sup> MALÍČEK, J.: *Vademecum popkultúry*. Nitra : UKF, 2008, p. 54-55.

<sup>4</sup> RADOŠINSKÁ, J.: *Teoretické aspekty filmov o superhrdinoch*. Trnava : FMK UCM, 2018, p. 14.

<sup>5</sup> MALÍČKOVÁ, M. et al.: *Obrazy hrdinu v kultúrnej pamäti*. Nitra : UKF, 2017, p. 11.

<sup>6</sup> DANTZLER, P.: Multiliteracies of the MCU: Continuity Literacy and the Sophisticated Reader(s) of Superhero Media. In CHAMBLISS, J. C., SVITAVSKY, W. L., FANDINO, D. (eds.): *Assembling the Marvel Cinematic Universe: Essays on the Social, Cultural and Geopolitical Domain*. Jefferson : McFarland & Company, 2018, p. 18.

<sup>7</sup> BERGER, A. A.: *Popular Culture Genres*. London : Sage Publications, 1992, p. 48-49.

media professionals, actresses and actors are equally interested in both of these production spheres; the presumption that episodic television dramas are, compared with film production, automatically qualitatively and aesthetically inferior is no longer valid. The industrial convergence of these once separate production fields is significantly deepened by (nowadays very common and commercially interesting) application of the principles of franchise filmmaking. Schatz defines the term “franchise filmmaking” as a complex way of building a narrative universe. The original storyline expands and unfolds; this process results in a number of mutually interconnected tales which aim to enrich, follow and/or extend the previously existing stories. This narrative principle necessarily leads towards intensifying target audiences’ emotional ties, but not to a specific segment of a story, but rather to a narrative universe comprised of the individual stories.<sup>8</sup> In other words, similar narratives are naturally episodic, which makes them strikingly similar to ‘traditional’ episodic television dramas in terms of both their form and content. Acknowledging this fact, Eco reminds that consumption of episodic entertainment involves a considerable number of different opportunities to perceive and interpret already popular stories and standardised narrative structures that differ from each other, but only slightly, on basis of irrelevant details.<sup>9</sup> Given that, we may claim that film stories centred on (or at least associated with) superheroism are a serialised kind of audiovisual media production which utilises creative strategies typical for episodic television dramas. In other words, most movies about heroines and heroes are meant to continue, some of them becoming trilogies or full-fledged film sagas, other moving to the small(er) screens, i.e., to the field of episodic television production.

The outlined attractiveness of superheroism is associated with the significant amount of importance we tend to ascribe to the ephemeral and unreal idea of ‘superhumanity’. Reflecting on this problem, Stableford notes that today’s media audiences are fascinated by the motives of superhumanity and immortality. Moreover, this fascination involves fantasising about ‘latent superhumanity’ that is especially typical for teenagers, i.e., the primary target group of science-fiction. According to the author, this adolescent dream about discovering and exploring one’s own (as yet hidden) superhuman abilities is subject to calculative decisions of media producers, resulting in a surge of stories in which heroines and heroes find out who they truly are and abandon their ordinary lives in favour of assuming secret identities. The entertainment industry thus offers these characters as ‘a cure’ for existential discontent and anxiety, as a means of escapism.<sup>10</sup> However, the episodic television drama *The Boys* partly modifies this communication strategy, precisely because its story is not primarily designed for teenagers. Heroines and heroes appearing in the TV show are allegedly born with their superhuman abilities, but later it is uncovered that their superhumanity results from unauthorised lab experiments on selected newborns. However, those possessing superhuman abilities do not acknowledge this fact (some of them are not even aware of it) and consider themselves as ‘the chosen ones’, as individuals destined to success, fame, wealth and admiration of ‘the ordinary mortals’. Almost none of them hides their true identity. Along with many other expressions of bad temperament typical for the individual figures, this shared character trait defines the drama’s protagonists as antiheroines and antiheroes.

Malíček reminds that, considering our conventional understanding of what is moral and what is immoral, practically all heroic figures of contemporary popular culture could be defined as antiheroic.<sup>11</sup> According to Radošinská, the increasing popularity of antiheroic behaviour results from the sociocultural framework of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Thus, axiological orientation of hypermodern

<sup>8</sup> SCHATZ, T.: New Hollywood, New Millennium. In BUCKLAND, W. (ed.): *Film Theory and Contemporary Hollywood Movies*. New York, London : Routledge, 2009, p. 32-33.

<sup>9</sup> ECO, U.: *Meze interpretace*. Prague : Karolinum, 2005, p. 109.

<sup>10</sup> STABLEFORD, B.: *Science Fact and Science Fiction: An Encyclopedia*. New York, London : Routledge, 2006, p. 509.

<sup>11</sup> MALÍČEK, J.: Hl’a, popkultúrný hrdina. In MALÍČEK, J., MALÍČKOVÁ, M., ZLATOŠ, P.: *Zborník o populárnej kultúre: Popkultúrný hrdina vo virtuálnej realite*. Nitra : UKF, 2008, p. 24.

man is expressed within the processes of transforming the hero(ine) archetype, turning this role model worthy of admiring and following into superheroic and antiheroic characters who are funny to watch and utterly indifferent towards the once firm ideas of morality and noble-mindedness. Not only superheroines and superheroes, but also practically all late modern heroic figures lack a unique set of values or beliefs. However, they are still able to stand out and attract our attention, because they possess superhuman abilities, technological, economic and/or material superiority, along with the capability of assuming a leading position and the tendency to solve problems or conflicts by acting violently.<sup>12</sup>

The term “antihero” has many different (sometimes contradictory) definitions. Danesi’s explanation of “antihero” defines such a character as an archetype included in a story “*who lacks the traditional qualities of the adventure-story hero*”. The antihero is typically a coward; some antiheroes might be clumsy, unskilled and often express comedic or ironic traits. The author also underlines the fact that “*the emergence of the antihero as a stock figure is seen by some critics as evidence that pop culture is a pastiche culture, mixing the heroic and the antiheroic, myth and irony, legend and satire, and thus breaking down the classic narrative categories drastically*”.<sup>13</sup> In contrast, Lotz replaces the term “antihero” with a seemingly less provocative expression “flawed protagonist”, claiming that the term refers to a character who is mentally unable to fulfil its heroic role.<sup>14</sup> Malíčková et al. explain that our current understanding of antiheroism is based on reception practices typical for popular culture. “Antihero(ine)” is, on the one hand, a binary opposition against a hero(ine), i.e., their adversary personifying evil. However, on the other hand, “antihero(ine)” may be a heroic character with a morally problematic profile. To put it differently, the authors argue that many antiheroic protagonists are heroines and heroes who are, at the same time, bad people.<sup>15</sup> If an antihero(ine) opposes a hero(ine), it is common to see that they are not so different from each other, at least at the beginning. There are many different examples of antiheroines and antiheroes who originally worked with the main protagonists and/or were their friends. The conflict begins when the antihero(ine) uses dangerous and extreme ways to fulfil their goals. These acts and methods then inevitably change their thinking and personality. As a result, a conflict between the hero(ine), the antihero(ine) and the society is established.<sup>16</sup> The outlined definitions also suggest that antiheroism is a complex, multifaceted communication phenomenon and thus, we have to reflect on it in a complex way, by applying various points of view.

Bruun Vaage explains that in fact, “*the intended effect of engaging with an antihero story is to both like and dislike the antihero*”.<sup>17</sup> Therefore, the spectator feels conflicted about the antihero, as intended by the story’s creators. However, as the author suggests, there are also several groups of viewers who see the antihero as a heroic character, because they truly believe in the morally problematic values the antihero stands for. Moreover, some of them also fail to reflect on the implications of the antihero’s unacceptable actions, i.e., they are unable to understand how extreme, dangerous and socially disturbing these actions would be if experienced personally (in real life). In other words, antiheroic figures are often perceived as sympathetic despite their numerous character flaws. As noted above, some antiheroines and antiheroes assume antagonistic roles. On the other hand, the audiences tend to root for them especially when they are situated in the position of ‘the good person’ who fails to represent

<sup>12</sup> RADOŠIŇSKÁ, J.: *Teoretické aspekty filmov o superhrdinoch*. Trnava : FMK UCM, 2018, p. 19.

<sup>13</sup> DANESI, M.: *Concise Dictionary of Popular Culture*. Lanham, Boulder, New York, London : Rowman & Littlefield, 2017, p. 19-20.

<sup>14</sup> LOTZ, A.: *Cable Guys: Television and Masculinities in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*. New York : New York University Press, 2014, p. 61-63.

<sup>15</sup> MALÍČKOVÁ, M. et al.: *Obrazy hrdinu v kultúrnej pamäti*. Nitra : UKF, 2017, p. 42.

<sup>16</sup> RADOŠIŇSKÁ, J.: *Obraz superhrdinu v súčasnej filmovej tvorbe*. In PETRANOVÁ, D., MAGÁL, S., PLENCNER, A. (eds.): *Vrtieť psom: Metafora s médiách. Megatrendy a médiá 2013*. Trnava : FMK UCM, 2013, p. 111.

<sup>17</sup> BRUUN VAAGE, M.: *The Antihero in American Television*. New York, Abingdon : Routledge, 2016, p. XVI, 91.

the axiological framework we perceive as 'moral'. According to Plencner, antiheroic figures often strive to obtain something which does not belong to them, nor it should. Thus, their claims are illegitimate. While trying to obtain whatever they desire, they are able to do almost anything. These 'everyday heroic figures' then have to face their own failures, but still hope that eventually they will experience their moments of fame and glory. The recipient subconsciously sympathises with them. Antiheroic characters tend to be charismatic and if they are not, their popularity largely results from the recipient's intrinsic moral superiority over such protagonists.<sup>18</sup> Plencner also argues that some antiheroic figures are modelled so suggestively and attractively that they are admired by their audiences regardless of their amoral behaviour. This capability allows them to represent the darker aspects of human nature.<sup>19</sup> We may presume that antiheroic characters are much more than villains whose actions need to be condemned. In fact, these figures are strategically created, able to establish emotional connections with their audiences despite representing immoral ideas and acts; often just because antiheroines and antiheroes are entertaining, charming, witty and cynical. Mišíková has a similar opinion, seeing antiheroic figures as morally volatile characters the audiences tend to sympathise with.<sup>20</sup> It is necessary to underline that at least some antiheroic protagonists do not want to represent evil; in many cases they desire to do good (or rather to fulfil their idea of doing good), but the ways in which they solve conflicts are amoral, undignified, twisted. Antiheroines and antiheroes are deeply convinced that they are right, accepting no other perspective. They also tend to use any means necessary, ignoring all possible consequences others may experience as a result of these deeds.<sup>21</sup> This character trait is obvious in relation to most (not only superheroic) figures present in the episodic television drama *The Boys*.

According to Malíčková et al., we can observe at least three different variations of antiheroines and antiheroes. The first model is represented by the **fundamental** antiheroism. This concept involves antagonists, i.e., villains, figures who personify a moral code which is in sharp contrast with everything the main protagonist stands for. In order to succeed, the main character has to eliminate, defeat, destroy this evil. Fundamental antiheroines and antiheroes do not want, cannot and will not change. They are convinced that their views are the right ones; they face no existential dilemmas, and thus are 'complete'. Their moral code is different than ours. None of their acts are chaotic or random; they see their own goals as 'moral' just because they have no true moral code.<sup>22</sup> In the episodic television drama *The Boys* this concept is best represented by the character of Homelander, the leader of The Seven, a morally compromised group of elite superheroines and superheroes. The authors further explain that the second variation consists of **latent** antiheroines and antiheroes. These people encounter a wide spectrum of different reasons why to become amoral and/or violent. However, we tend to 'forgive' them, because they often regain their moral consciousness and change, or at least question, their immoral behaviour. This kind of antiheroism is thus temporary and volatile. Latent antiheroic figures fail repeatedly; when confronted by diverse existential pitfalls and fears, they react by becoming antiheroic. Yet, this does not mean that they do not fight back; on the contrary, they continuously oscillate between good and evil, knowing that one has to become monstrous in order to defeat 'true' monsters. Therefore, some of these characters are tragic, unable to accept the past.<sup>23</sup> Billy Butcher, the main character of the television drama *The Boys*, is a fitting

<sup>18</sup> PLENCNER, A.: I. Archetyp hrdinu. II. Súčasný obraz hrdinu. In MATÚŠ, J., PRAVDOVÁ, H. (eds.): *Médiá na prahu tretieho milénia*. Trnava : FMK UCM, 2006, p. 73-74.

<sup>19</sup> PLENCNER, A.: Filmový hrdina s mesianistickými črtami. In *Communication Today*, 2013, Vol. 4, No. 2, p. 37.

<sup>20</sup> MIŠÍKOVÁ, K.: Čierny (anti)hrdina v tieni podozrenia. In *Kino-Ikon*, 2007, Vol. 11, No. 1, p. 88-98.

<sup>21</sup> PLENCNER, A.: I. Archetyp hrdinu. II. Súčasný obraz hrdinu. In MATÚŠ, J., PRAVDOVÁ, H. (eds.): *Médiá na prahu tretieho milénia*. Trnava : FMK UCM, 2006, p. 73.

<sup>22</sup> MALÍČKOVÁ, M. et al.: *Obrazy hrdinu v kultúrnej pamäti*. Nitra : UKF, 2017, p. 43-44.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 44.

example. Once confronted with his wife's presumed death, he is determined to avenge her by trying to kill Homelander, the fundamental antihero who is allegedly responsible; however, not only Homelander, but also any other superheroic figures affiliated with him. As determined by Malíčková et al., the third type of antiheroism is **pragmatic**. This concept is used most often, but it is also the least interesting one in terms of morality. While fulfilling their objectives, pragmatic antiheroines and antiheroes do not consider whether their behaviour is moral or not, even though they do know the difference. If they think it is necessary, they do not hesitate to lie, cheat or kill. In other words, these individualists always favour their own ambitions over the generally accepted value frameworks, regardless of any possible consequences (that do not directly affect them). Aiming to achieving their goals as quickly and efficiently as possible, they know too well that violence is usually the easiest way how to do so.<sup>24</sup> In *The Boys*, pragmatic antiheroism is personified by Madelyn Stillwell, a top manager who does not hesitate to lie and manipulate to preserve her position. Using Homelander's deviations against him, Stillwell tries to control the superhero and inconspicuously motivates him to pursue her own goals. As most pragmatic antiheroes, even Madelyn Stillwell is, in the end, perceived with a certain degree of empathy, as she does not handle her manipulative strategy well and is exposed to the repulsive behaviour of the fundamental antihero Homelander.

Unlike feature films, episodic television dramas may present antiheroic figures more extensively and ambiguously. Bandirali and Terrone explain this fact by saying: "*The main characteristic of the television antihero is the possibility of going from being good to bad to good and bad again.*" In contrast, cinematic antiheroes can oscillate between the two states, but eventually have to choose one.<sup>25</sup> To put it differently, the episodic nature of television dramas allows them to present antiheroic protagonists in more surprising and unexpected ways. Scheg and Girardi see this tendency as a result of systemic changes in the television industry: "*In recent years, television shows have grown tremendously in scope, graphics, and viewer expectations. To retain viewers a show must have mystery, intrigue, and, typically, plot twists no one ever saw coming.*" That is why we look for relatable characters with many mental layers who react believably in their unique fictional situations.<sup>26</sup> Given that, antiheroic figures are often perceived as more interesting, multidimensional, able to diversify the story and differentiate it from similar narratives included in other episodic television dramas. Mittell remarks that many complex television series share one particularly important trait, "*the narrative prominence of unsympathetic, morally questionable, or villainous figures, nearly always male*". The author further explains that the term "antihero" may not be applicable per traditional literary definition. However, it has become "*the common cultural moniker for this style of characterisation*".<sup>27</sup> As noted by Damico and Quay, antiheroism is "*the signature characteristic of early 21<sup>st</sup>-century television dramas*". The rise of the TV antihero reflects the cultural *zeitgeist* of the new millennium. However, 'antihero fatigue' has become evident over the last decade, which is why other types of antiheroic figures have evolved, including women and married couples.<sup>28</sup> For example, we may say that Carrie Mathison, the main character appearing in *Homeland* (Showtime, 2011 – 2020) is most definitely a pragmatic antiheroine. In the case of *You* (Netflix, since 2018), which explores obsessive and compulsive behaviour, heavy stalking and erotomania, we can identify an antiheroic married couple – Love and Joe who both oscillate between fundamental and pragmatic antiheroism.

<sup>24</sup> MALÍČKOVÁ, M. et al.: *Obrazy hrdinu v kultúrnej pamäti*. Nitra : UKF, 2017, p. 45-46.

<sup>25</sup> BANDIRALI, L., TERRONE, E.: *Concept TV: An Aesthetics of Television Series*. Lanham, London : Rowman & Littlefield Publishing, 2021, p. 95.

<sup>26</sup> SCHEG, A. G., GIRARDI, T.: Introduction. In SCHEG, A. G., GIRARDI, T. (eds.): *Hero or Villain? Essays on Dark Protagonists of Television*. Jefferson : McFarland & Company, 2017, p. 3-4.

<sup>27</sup> MITTELL, J.: *Complex TV: The Poetics of Contemporary Television Storytelling*. New York, London : New York University Press, 2015, p. 142.

<sup>28</sup> DAMICO, A. M., QUAY, S. E.: *21<sup>st</sup>-Century TV Dramas: Exploring the New Golden Age*. Santa Barbara : ABC-CLIO, 2016, p. 93.

Brost claims that the popularity of (television) antiheroism is not surprising *per se*. According to the author, it can be credited to a variety of different circumstances such as the increasing availability of a wide spectrum of programming options spread across various media. 'Traditional' broadcasters now have to face competition from streaming services that are not obliged to comply with the same content restrictions and regulations. Moreover, viewers have so many different options to watch whatever they like that television producers are willing to seek *niche* audiences and further explore their economic viability.<sup>29</sup> Nochimson notes that the term "antihero" is well suited to the concept of "TV 2.0" which evolved in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Episodic television dramas associated with this '2.0 upgrade' are (allegedly) more socially responsible, representing a diverse variety of races, ethnicities and genders. However, many of their antiheroic characters are charming former criminals "*who band together to save ordinary people from the abuses committed by the rich and privileged*". In fact, television antiheroism refers to a villainy with no discontinuities, fragmentations or paradoxes. Antiheroines and antiheroes are either eccentric outsiders in conflict with a problematic social structure or they have to survive in an almost corrupt society, which makes them appealing and interesting.<sup>30</sup> Expressing a similar opinion, Lotz argues that the wide acceptance of television antiheroines and antiheroes indirectly results from considerable character depth that has emerged as an attribute of episodic television production in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Many episodic television dramas involve important backstories saying more about their characters, which adds growing complexity to their behavioural patterns and acts: "*Profound character depth increasingly became a hallmark of a subset of television storytelling.*"<sup>31</sup>

Bruun Vaage explains that this development trend is related to the growing economic importance and cultural prominence of quality TV, also called high-end television. High-end TV tends to be much more surprising and edgy than 'traditional' (linear, network) television which needs to appeal to mass viewers. In order to appear distinctly different from regular TV, quality TV offers thought-provoking complexity and a wider spectrum of antiheroic characters to more specialised, sometimes even *niche* audiences.<sup>32</sup> It is necessary to mention that the adjective "high-end" is, as Nelson writes, derived from the media industry's general tendency to indicate that such a product is expensive and that it possesses high production values. However, this kind of television drama is, above all, multi-layered and generically hybrid, able to appeal to audiences situated beyond its primary target market.<sup>33</sup> Following the same line of thought, Petridis sees the current surge of television antiheroism as a result of the rise of quality television: "*American quality television regenerated the medium and reinvented the norms of the audiovisual narrative (...) One of its innovative norms was the establishment of the antihero archetype as a leading character of a show.*"<sup>34</sup> Bandirali and Terrone argue that the antihero phenomenon may be explained from multiple perspectives, understanding it as a viable production strategy associated with the episodic television drama. As they explain, an audience-oriented approach is particularly important, since today's television viewers are not predominantly families who

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<sup>29</sup> BROST, M. J.: *The Anti-Heroine on Contemporary Television: Transgressive Women*. Lanham, Boulder, New York, London : Rowman & Littlefield, 2021, p. 5.

<sup>30</sup> NOCHIMSON, M. P.: *Television Rewired: The Rise of the Auteur Series*. Austin : University of Texas Press, 2019, p. 211-212.

<sup>31</sup> LOTZ, A.: *Cable Guys: Television and Masculinities in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*. New York : New York University Press, 2014, p. 52.

<sup>32</sup> BRUUN VAAGE, M.: *The Antihero in American Television*. New York, Abingdon : Routledge, 2016, p. XVI.

<sup>33</sup> NELSON, R.: *State of Play: Contemporary 'High-End' TV Drama*. Manchester, New York : Manchester University Press, 2007, p. 2. Remark by the authors: The term "quality television" was first coined by Thompson. His publication *Television's Second Golden Age* was published in 1996, stating that "*quality TV is best defined by what it is not. It is not 'regular' TV*". See: THOMPSON, R. J.: *Television's Second Golden Age. From Hill Street Blues to ER*. New York : Syracuse University Press, 1996, p. 13.

<sup>34</sup> PETRIDIS, S.: "In Need an Antiheroine": Female Antiheroes in American Quality Television. In SCHEG, A. G., GIRARDI, T. (eds.): *Hero or Villain? Essays on Dark Protagonists of Television*. Jefferson : McFarland & Company, 2017, p. 82.

regularly gather in front of the TV screen: “*Conversely, in contemporary communication, a successful product is characterised by its ability to create strong conflicts (...) it is no longer important how many people gather in front of the screen to watch a series, but how many are discussing it.*” Thus, antiheroines and antiheroes, being morally flawed characters, are able to divide people’s opinions, which inevitably leads to intensive (especially online) discussions on their morality and likability.<sup>35</sup> In other words, antiheroic figures do not exist to represent messages concerning (im)morality, but rather to represent the audiovisual stories they appear in and make them more interesting.

Recently, television scholars have discussed the notion of “antihero” quite extensively. However, only a small portion of these discussions and publications also focus on the female antihero (that is, antiheroine). Hagelin and Silverman explain that if a female character should be positioned as antiheroic, she has to defy the norms of civilisation: “*And yet, the very fact of her gender transforms this dynamic. For women are not expected to rescue society, as men are; they are expected to showcase it, to demonstrate its values and commitments.*” Thus, many female television characters are often mischaracterised as antiheroic just because they occasionally renounce the conventional ideal of femininity. ‘Antiheroines’ are often depicted as apathetic mothers, avaricious schemers, bellyaching nags and pursuers of their own sexual gratification. In addition, they can be deeply narcissistic, which seems to be a problem for a patriarchal society that wants women to remain selfless and that regards narcissism, as a character trait, as “*an especially damning female pathology*”. However, as the authors explain, ‘antiheroic’ female characters essentially affirm the values of late capitalist society instead of disturbing them, despite the ways they represent unconventional womanhood. Moreover, most of them embrace marriage, family, heterosexuality, feminine performance and consumerism. This category includes seemingly antiheroic television characters such as Carrie Bradshaw from *Sex and the City* and its recent sequel *And Just Like That...* (HBO, 1998 – 2004, sequel since 2021) or Piper Chapman from *Orange Is the New Black* (Netflix, 2013 – 2019). Therefore, “true” antiheroines need to destabilise the society they live in or at least try to do so, like Cersei Lannister in *Game of Thrones* (HBO, 2011 – 2019) who repeatedly expresses her resistance to the *status quo*.<sup>36</sup>

According to Hagelin and Silverman, most truly antiheroic female television characters are either childless or lose their children during the course of the series, like Cersei Lannister or Daenerys Targaryen, another prominent female protagonist of *Game of Thrones*. Thus, this absence of motherhood allows the antiheroine to reject the standards of female virtue and decorum. To put it differently, it is obviously easier for these characters to refuse their social responsibility (that is, to break the law, drink, kill, pursue sexual pleasure, etc.) if they are childless. Strangely enough, fatherhood may redeem the male antihero in the eyes of the viewer, making him more sympathetic – because the audiences are effectively reminded of his ties to humanity. However, if an antiheroine neglects or abandons her child(ren), the spectator perceives this decision as unforgivable. Regarding race, the current antiheroine is predominantly white, because white women are traditionally expected to represent idealised civilisation. Thus, their unwillingness or refusal to comply with the *status quo* is perceived as much more problematic than in case of, for example, African American antiheroines. Television antiheroines are products of contemporary feminist ideology, showing their physical prowess, professional success and resistance to male authority. However, they often do not seek justice, but rather vengeance, greed, pleasure and self-promotion. And, in the end, they are rarely successful.<sup>37</sup> One of the very few examples of ‘successful’ television antiheroines is Ally Mayfair-Richards

<sup>35</sup> BANDIRALI, L., TERRONE, E.: *Concept TV: An Aesthetics of Television Series*. Lanham, London : Rowman & Littlefield Publishing, 2021, p. 94.

<sup>36</sup> HAGELIN, S., SILVERMAN, G.: *The New Female Antihero: The Disruptive Women of Twenty-First-Century US Television*. Chicago, London : The University of Chicago Press, 2022, p. 1-7, 14.

<sup>37</sup> Ibidem.

in *American Horror Story: Cult* (FX, 2018), a lesbian woman who, amongst other criminal acts, does not hesitate to poison and murder her unfaithful spouse while seeking vengeance for adultery and full custody of the couple's son.

The trend of female antiheroism on television has existed for more than two decades. Pinedo claims that the figure of the female antihero (antiheroine or the difficult woman) is related to the male antihero of serial narratives crafted by Home Box Office (HBO) in the late 1990 and then adopted by other cable channels after 2000. The antiheroine's pattern has shifted from the side-lined wife of the antihero (*Sopranos*, HBO, 1999 – 2007), through the pathologized female antihero (*Homeland*, Showtime, 2011 – 2020), the female and male antihero collaborators (*House of Cards*, Netflix, 2013 – 2018), to the normalised female antihero (*Marvel's Jessica Jones*, Netflix, 2015 – 2019) and, eventually, the difficult woman hero who transgresses the norms of femininity unapologetically and systematically (*Sex/Life*, Netflix, since 2020).<sup>38</sup> In the latter case, which is a bit outstanding because the drama's main character is a mother of two children, we are able to see a rather unflattering portrayal of a housewife who is trapped between her uncontrollable urge to seek a troublesome former lover and trying to keep her family together – the very same family she is destroying methodically with her behaviour.

The general appeal of television antiheroism, male and female, is certainly financially convenient. According to Bruun Vaage, the television spectator often perceives the antihero(ine) as morally preferable partly due to the episodic drama's long-term economic viability. The long duration of a commercially successful television series may lead to the effect of partiality, which means that the drama's loyal viewers establish long-term alignment with the antiheroic figure included in the story: *"The spectator is blinded by familiarity with him, and perceives other as morally worse."* However, the audiences do not merely sympathise with the antiheroic protagonist; the character's 'bad sides' offer enjoyable attractions as well. One of these attractions is the fact that acting immorally often allows such a character to be in power. Thus, the viewer may favour *"the enjoyable experience of empathising with someone in power (...) In addition, watching those whom we perceive as even morally worse than the antihero get what we feel they deserve, is inherently gratifying for us as pro-social punishers."* In other words, many television antiheroes may be perceived as pro-social agents of justice/vengeance who keep us safe by eliminating criminals and deviants. Good people do not have to worry about them, because they only kill, threaten or otherwise confront individuals who are, at least from our point of view, much worse than they are.<sup>39</sup> Damico and Quay express the same opinion, explaining this contradictory perception of television antiheroes in relation to Dexter Morgan in *Dexter* (Showtime, 2006 – 2013) and *Dexter: New Blood* (Showtime, 2021 – 2022). The character's methodical approach to murder (his 'trophy' collection, taking a drop of the victim's blood) might be deplorable, but the viewer still feels a strange allegiance to him, because his actions might be seen as a twisted, yet logical desire for justice (Morgan only kills other serial killers). Moreover, the spectator is well aware of the character's numerous moments of self-doubt.<sup>40</sup> In this case it is also remarkable that the viewer may keep justifying Dexter's actions just because he is a father who would protect his son Harrison under any circumstances, which partly redeems him in the viewers' eyes.

Nowadays, some television antiheroines and antiheroes cross any of the remaining boundaries between antiheroism and villainy. Stewart reminds that many of them are mafia bosses, other are serial killers or meth producers. HBO's 2014 episodic drama *True Detective* crossed an important line as well, portraying homicide detectives Rustin Cohle and Marty Hart as antiheroes 'inside the law system'. The drama is, above all, a psychological study of two

<sup>38</sup> PINEDO, I. C.: *Difficult Women on Television Drama: The Gender Politics of Complex Women in Serial Narratives*. Abingdon, New York : Routledge, 2021, p. 2-4.

<sup>39</sup> BRUUN VAAGE, M.: *The Antihero in American Television*. New York, Abingdon : Routledge, 2016, p. 90.

<sup>40</sup> DAMICO, A. M., QUAY, S. E.: *21<sup>st</sup>-Century TV Dramas: Exploring the New Golden Age*. Santa Barbara : ABC-CLIO, 2016, p. 92.

morally flawed policemen. Cohle is depicted as a philosophising outsider, not as a tough man. Hart, on the other hand, represents toxic masculinity expressed through adultery, mendacity and indifference. Much like watching the mentioned homicide detectives, seeing superheroes as antiheroic characters is particularly interesting as well, because we are usually “drawn to antiheroes specifically because they are not superhuman and do not have entirely virtuous qualities”. Thus, it is even more important to understand television characters who are definitely superhuman, but still antiheroic, maybe even villainous, like Homelander in *The Boys*.<sup>41</sup>

As we believe, morally flawed heroic and superheroic figures present in *The Boys* cross any remaining boundaries between antiheroism and villainy due to the fact that they exist in a greedy and impersonal corporate environment established by the conglomerate named Vought Industries. Thus, their public image and behavioural patterns can be interpreted in terms of Byung-Chul Han’s “society of performance”. All superheroic characters accompanying Homelander are practically ‘owned’ by Vought; their public engagements are strictly regulated by ‘employment contracts’ with the given enterprise, even though most of the time they are presented more like celebrities and movie stars than public guardians and warriors. Han’s publication *The Burnout Society* explains that transformation of all interpersonal relationships to the form of ‘employment contracts’ inevitably leads to the need to fully comply with the expectations of the ‘employer’ and achieve the best possible ‘performance’.<sup>42</sup> In this particular case, the ‘contracts’ involve attractive looks, eye-catching displays of superhumanity and charismatic image; that is why Homelander and his companions are admired by most ordinary people. The author’s musings about “the society of performance” help us explain why many superheroic protagonists depicted in *The Boys* express various traits of antiheroic behaviour. Han claims that the most serious problem “the society of performance” has to face is so-called systemic violence. This type of violence is not violent in the primary sense of the word. However, it can be characterised by the constant pressure individuals have to endure – our surroundings, like managers and employers, force us to increase our performance, to put up with more work than ever before and flexibly move across various specialisations. This kind of violence is not physical; it is intangible and thus hard to realise, suppress or resist. The society of performance leads us to the compulsive effort to succeed, stand out, maximalise our performance. In fact, it is a highly sophisticated system, because while trying our best to succeed, we do not tend to think that this pressure is external.<sup>43</sup> For instance, the young superheroine Annie January (better known as Starlight) in *The Boys* partly abandons her ideals and character traits while trying to fulfil the expectations of her employer, Vought. Even though Annie is first introduced as a compassionate person with moral integrity, she later expresses multiple antiheroic tendencies. The superheroine is well aware of the fact that if she fails to fulfil her anticipated role, she will be immediately and smoothly replaced by another attractive young woman who will take on the position of a superhuman beauty destined for a show business career.

Like other generically and ideologically similar audiovisual works, the episodic television drama *The Boys*, the object of our follow-up analysis, portrays superheroic figures as people whose sole existence and social value is expressed by money. This results in the further marginalisation of ‘real-life heroism’ and *de facto* degrades its existence. Supported and shaped by “the society of performance”, these quasi-heroic protagonists fully adapt their behaviour to the given circumstances, which are unattainable for ordinary people. Their mutual conflicts are usually resolved by graphic violence. Therefore, these flawed, distorted heroic images are subject to psychological narcissism and intense individualisation.<sup>44</sup>

<sup>41</sup> STEWART, R.: Editor’s Introduction. In PETERS, F., STEWART, R. (eds.): *Crime Uncovered: Antihero*. Bristol, Chicago : Intellect Books, 2016, p. 3-5, 13-15.

<sup>42</sup> HAN, B.-C.: *Vyhořelá společnost*. Prague : Rybka Publishers, 2016, p. 221-222.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 17-25, 65.

<sup>44</sup> See: RADOŠINSKÁ, J.: *Teoretické aspekty filmov o superhrdinoch*. Trnava : FMK UCM, 2018, p. 43.

### 3 Methodology

The present case study is focused on the episodic television drama *The Boys* (both already released seasons consist of eight episodes), specifically on different models of antiheroic behaviour depicted in the story. The individual categories of antiheroines and antiheroes are specified on basis of the taxonomy proposed by Malíčková et al.,<sup>45</sup> i.e., the selected protagonists are divided into three types of antiheroism – fundamental, latent and pragmatic. The analytical framework included in the case study is inspired by the essential principles of narrative and discourse analysis. Reflecting on the characters' behavioural patterns and the ways they act in different situations allows us to obtain a set of qualitative data which is further elaborated based on discursive interpretations of depicted antiheroism in terms of the principles of so-called society of performance. According to Rusňáková, narrative analysis is always followed by synthesis of the acquired knowledge. This means that synthesis of the obtained qualitative findings allows us to interpret and compare the findings. The given methods of inquiry are clearly dominated by inductive reasoning.<sup>46</sup> The synthesis of the knowledge resulting from narrative analysis intersects with the procedures of discourse analysis; thus, we work with simultaneous triangulation of two different analytical approaches.

The discourse analysis is inspired by sociologically oriented analysis of context (i.e., we are interested in the cultural aspects of the conflicts, plotlines and messages included in the analysed episodic drama).<sup>47</sup> This analytical strategy reflects on various questions associated with the social, cultural and other aspects influencing the audiovisual work's thematic structure and meanings. We also intend to define and interpret the analysed episodic drama's coherence, or rather its morally controversial nature.<sup>48</sup> Discourse analysis gives us the opportunity to discuss the moral and value-based controversy of the TV show in question, helping us to uncover a complex network of social meanings and a set of (possibly) alternative interpretations of media content.<sup>49</sup> More specifically, we utilise Rose's tradition of discourse analysis. As noted by Sedláková, this particular tradition is able to identify and examine the strategies of social production of images, letting us determine their social position.<sup>50</sup> In other words, using the given analytical approach helps us to explain the connections between antiheroic behaviour of the episodic drama's protagonists and the sociocultural situation associated with hypermodern society. The aim of the case study is to identify different forms of antiheroism in relation to specific characters, along with the ways in which *The Boys* reflects the principles of performance society that are the driving force of the drama's narrative. As explained above, the given objective is fulfilled based on narrative and discourse analysis. Acknowledging the study's aim and purpose, we seek answers to the following research questions:

*RQ1: Which forms of antiheroism are present in The Boys and which characters represent them?*

*RQ2: Which traits of performance society are related to public activities of superheroines and superheroes in the episodic television drama The Boys?*

<sup>45</sup> MALÍČKOVÁ, M. et al.: *Obrazy hrdinu v kultúrnej pamäti*. Nitra : UKF, 2017, p. 43-46.

<sup>46</sup> RUSŇÁKOVÁ, L.: Naratívna analýza a jej miesto vo vedeckom diskurze mediálnych štúdií. In RADOŠINSKÁ, J. et al.: *Empirické aspekty filmov o superhrdinoch*. Trnava : FMK UCM, 2019, p. 53.

<sup>47</sup> See: POLÁKOVÁ, E., SPÁLOVÁ, L.: *Vybrané problémy metodológie masmediálnych štúdií*. Trnava : FMK UCM, 2009, p. 80-81.

<sup>48</sup> BUČKOVÁ, Z.: Diskurzívna analýza ako nástroj poznávania stereotypizácie filmových superhrdinov. In RADOŠINSKÁ, J. et al.: *Empirické aspekty filmov o superhrdinoch*. Trnava : FMK UCM, 2019, p. 232-233.

<sup>49</sup> HENDL, J.: *Kvalitativní výzkum. Základní teorie, metody a aplikace*. Third Edition. Prague : Portál, 2008, p. 267-268.

<sup>50</sup> SEDLÁKOVÁ, R.: *Výzkum médií. Nejužívanější metody a techniky*. Prague : Grada Publishing, 2014, p. 456.

## 4 Results

Like most other audiovisual media products focused on characters with superhuman abilities, the examined work is a loosely accurate adaptation of the comic book series of the same name. We can consider Billy Butcher, a seemingly common man who hates all superheroes, to be the main protagonist of the episodic TV drama *The Boys*. The main conflict is based on Butcher's long-term and persistent initiative aimed at publicly revealing the amoral nature of superheroic figures and, ideally, participating in their physical elimination (termination). His main binary opposition is Homelander, the generally accepted and well-liked leader of superheroines and superheroes who work for Vought Industries. Proud and stubborn, Butcher intensifies his conflict with Homelander by building his own group of loyal followers – 'the boys', positioning himself as the leader of the revolt against the seemingly unattainable and untouchable superheroic figures protected by a conglomerate operating in the fields of show business, advertising, marketing, but also militarism. The conflict between Billy Butcher and Homelander develops in the presence of other characters; virtually each of them exhibits certain antiheroic tendencies, albeit in different ways and for different reasons. The following part of the text serves to categorise the individual protagonists in terms of the theoretical frameworks discussed above.

### **Fundamental Antiheroism: Homelander, The Deep, Translucent, Stormfront**

The group of fundamental antiheroines and antiheroes is practically limited to people with superhuman abilities. Most of them are male characters who are convinced of their own superiority and uniqueness. While realising their goals and desires, they know no moral constraints and express no doubts. Homelander, The Deep, Translucent and Stormfront represent misanthropic figures without any moral principles. Each of them suffers from a set of mental disorders and sexual deviations.

Homelander, who is one of the key protagonists of *The Boys*, is a crooked caricature of other superheroes known from comics, films and television stories – specifically DC's Superman/Man of Steel and Captain America created by Marvel. A clear connection between the two mentioned superheroes and Homelander is also evident with regard to his iconographic elements, i.e., details of his superheroic clothing he wears permanently (style, colours). Homelander even shares a part of his superhuman abilities with Superman – he is immensely powerful, able to fly and has a destructive laser sight that overcomes any physical obstacles. The character often uses the latter ability to satisfy his voyeuristic urges, most often while secretly watching the Vought manager and his boss, Madelyn Stillwell, with whom he shares an unhealthy relationship. Like Captain America, Homelander publicly appears to be an unwavering patriot and supporter of the 'American way of life', a God-fearing titan of conservative values. He constantly emphasises these beliefs during his speeches and public appearances, assuming a position of an honest and admirable philanthropist. However, Homelander's public image is just a well-crafted pose, a kind of mask under which this psychopath with no empathy and social intelligence hides very efficiently. In case anyone tries to prevent him from fulfilling his goals, he does not hesitate to intimidate or kill the opponent. Like many other highly intelligent and functional psychopaths, Homelander can be perceived as charismatic and friendly, easily gaining the attention of others. However, the character's infantile nature is evident during his private communication with Stillwell, who is the source of his deviant sexually motivated addiction. Homelander, a product of laboratory experiments, grew up without parental authority and looks for a kind of surrogate mother in Stillwell. Being a middle-aged woman, Stillwell eventually decides to become a mother. Homelander loathes her infant son and his emotional infantility is fully manifested when he is unable to suppress the manifestations of his Oedipus complex and repulsively seeks Madelyn's 'motherly' attention.

Homelander is extremely focused on preserving his position of power in relation to The Seven, a prominent group of superheroines and superheroes affiliated with the Vought Industries, who are favoured by the media and celebrated by most ordinary people. If Homelander identifies any signal that may lead to disrupting his employer's public image and/or economic performance, he reacts brutally and with no remorse (for example, he does not hesitate to murder a local politician who does not support Vought's operations while the victim is aboard a private jet, and does not care about other people present inside the plane who will die as well). Since this psychopathic superhero is often manipulated by Madelyn Stillwell, he reacts extremely when he is forced to acknowledge this fact; preserving his stone-cold, calm demeanour, Homelander murders Stillwell and does not care that she is a single parent of a toddler, not does he care that she used to be his confidant.

The second season situates Homelander into a new role – he finds out that Butcher's wife Becca, a victim of Homelander's sexual assault who was presumed to be deceased, is alive and lives with Homelander's son named Ryan. However, the protagonist is unable to fulfil his newfound role of a father, at least not in an acceptable manner. Although he seems to do anything to gain his son's attention and affection, this father/son relationship is as pathological as the rest of Homelander's social ties. Homelander cannot accept the fact that his son is raised to become a common child without superpowers and forces him to fly or use the laser sight. When confronted with the fact that Ryan is no psychopath and that the boy experiences trouble while trying to cope with Homelander's presence and popularity, the superhero reacts violently, ignoring Ryan's panic and confusion. Although Homelander's reputation is disrupted due to controversial public speeches unveiling a part of his true nature, he still possesses enough charisma to fascinate his fans and supporters. His position of power also attracts other members of The Seven, most notably Translucent, The Deep and Black Noir; the latter is a quiet, blunt and brutal murderer.

The Deep, or Kevin Moskowitz, is one of Homelander's closest associates, even though the men are not close friends and they do not particularly like each other. Anyway, Homelander cares about The Seven's public image and The Deep's repulsive actions influence this image significantly. The Deep is a physically attractive young man who is, on the other hand, also mentally unstable and short-tempered. His membership in The Seven is conditioned and driven by his handsomeness and the ability to charm women. Like DC's superhero Aquaman, The Deep is able to spend an unlimited amount of time under water, given the fact that he has gills on his chest, carefully hidden underneath his costume. This young man with no empathy often and gladly uses his attractiveness in order to gain women's attention; the initial contact is usually quickly followed by The Deep's sexual advances (ideally, these women do not tend to protest, because they perceive the superhero's pretended interest in them as flattering). However, The Deep eventually encounters Annie January, also known as Starlight, who is disgusted and horrified by his harassment. As the young woman is not afraid to publicly discuss her experience with The Deep and uncovers his true personality in front of the media, the superhero is no longer a member of The Seven and his new posting is second-rate, located in a rather 'inferior' part of the United States. This change of the previous paradigm is orchestrated by Madelyn Stillwell who always protects Vought's public image and the enterprise's corporate identity at all costs.

Being supercilious and narcissistic in his nature, The Deep expresses a certain range of empathy towards aquatic animals instead of people. Multiple scenes focused on the character involve absurd moments when he talks to lobsters, dolphins or whales, using inappropriate or straightforwardly offensive language (one of his superhuman abilities is the ability to communicate with aquatic fauna). The true extent of the protagonist's inner emptiness and insecurity is obvious in the scene when he is sexually violated by a woman. Convinced that this casual acquaintance is interested in him and that he is in control of the situation as always, The Deep is attacked; the woman focuses her attention on his carefully hidden gills, inflicting both pain and humiliation upon him. Trying to rebuild his reputation, The Deep later joins a sect

called the Church of the Collective. His initially redeeming motivation (to learn how to accept and love his own body, especially the gills, and treat women with respect) is quickly replaced by more acquisitive and calculative objectives. The Deep even marries a fellow believer named Carol in order to acquire a new reputation of a faithful and loyal husband, even though he barely knows his wife and does not even like her. Convinced that the Church will help him to return to The Seven, the protagonist eventually finds out that the true purpose of the sect he joined is diametrically different. Corrupt and manipulative himself, The Deep blames the organisation for using psychological manipulation and unfair business practices.

Fundamental antiheroism is also typical for Alex Hassell, alias Translucent, who is initially another member of The Seven. This vulgar, arrogant and excessively self-confident middle-aged man is able to become invisible. His superhuman repertoire also includes unbreakable skin, so it is quite problematic to physically hurt him in any possible way. Translucent is presented as Homelander's companion and servile admirer. While experiencing any crises or critical moments, he expects that Homelander will return this faked affection and protect him. Very much like Homelander, Translucent is a shameless voyeur. While invisible, he often lurks around female bathrooms and spies on women's most intimate moments without their knowledge or consent. His deviation is complicated by the fact that he has to be completely naked in order to turn invisible. Translucent's path is crossed by Billy Butcher and his companions, which also means that the plot includes numerous bizarre attempts to harm him in any way possible. Even though Butcher's 'boys' spend a lot of time by testing truly creative methods of taking a person's life, the only strategy that actually proves to be useful is also the most humiliating one – Translucent is killed by an explosive device placed inside his rectum. Paradoxically enough, Vought's managers and employees are not too concerned about their superhero's well-being; what makes them angry is the negative publicity related to the suddenly missing member of The Seven.

The second season of the episodic drama introduces a new fundamentally antiheroic character – Stormfront, formerly known as Liberty, whose real name is Klara Risinger. The superheroine initially replaces Translucent, also becoming Homelander's rival/challenger and later his sexual partner. She is able to manipulate with electricity and weaponize electrical energy. While using electricity as a murderous weapon, Stormfront also creates electrical fields in order to 'fly', or rather levitate. When introduced to the public and fans of The Seven, she portrays herself as a confident and rebellious feminist, a champion of all suppressed women who questions male leadership and its legitimacy and efficiency. However, the viewer quickly finds out that Stormfront is a violent, racist woman, a person who acts crudely and sarcastically. While she keeps insulting, criticising and humiliating Vought's employees, her rivalrous relationship with Homelander takes a different turn. Acknowledging that Stormfront is as violent and heartless as he is, Homelander is attracted by Stormfront's heinous actions (she uses her position in The Seven to commit a series of unpunished racially motivated murders). The superheroine also seeks sadistic encounters and violence excites her sexually. While Homelander briefly tries to redeem himself in the eyes of the viewer by becoming a father figure, Stormfront does the same by talking about her past. It becomes clear that she was a real Nazi back in the 1940s; however, she also used to be a loving wife and mother and all her relatives are already dead, because she ages very slowly. She is a skilled actress and has no trouble coping with contemporary social norms, means of communication and cultural frameworks in order to conceal her true age and identity. Homelander's son Ryan is an important source of Stormfront's interest; she sees Homelander and his son as her potential new 'family', even though she is no longer capable of true love and affection. That is why the superheroine attacks Ryan's biological mother, Becca Butcher. All the identified personality traits of the mentioned characters are outlined in Picture 1 below.



**PICTURE 1:** *Characteristics of fundamental antiheroines and antiheroes*

Source: own processing, 2022.

### **Latent Antiheroism: Billy Butcher, Hughie Campbell, Starlight, Queen Maeve, Kimiko**

The most significant portrayal of latent antiheroism in *The Boys* is associated with the character of Billy Butcher, a peculiar and eccentric man who despises all superheroines and superheroes. Once a loving husband, Butcher blames superheroic protagonists for his wife Becca's sudden disappearance and presumed death. Given that he saw camera footage strongly suggesting that Homelander had raped his wife, Butcher aims to avenge Becca's death by pursuing, attacking and, if possible, killing any superheroine or superhero he can get his hands on. Butcher keeps repeating that all superheroic figures are morally corrupt and they should be feared and hated. Butcher's hatred is, however, primarily centred on the one who destroyed his family and changed his life forever, (presumably) the mightiest superhero, Homelander; i.e., the superhuman person who is strictly protected, hard to wound and ultimately violent. Doing anything in his power to kill Homelander and compromise the Vought Industries, Billy Butcher uses his companions, their personal tragedies and abilities to fulfil these particular objectives. That is why he seeks and befriends Hughie Campbell, a traumatised young man whose girlfriend was murdered senselessly by a rapidly running superhero; right in front of him. Butcher later uses Hughie's friendship with the superheroine Starlight, a new member of The Seven, to get closer to Homelander. While planning his next moves, Butcher contacts some of his former companions, 'the boys'; a paranoid criminal and gunrunner called Frenchie and a former military man Marvin Milk, also known as 'Mother's Milk', now a model husband and father. Butcher's bravery, straightforwardness and cynicism are in sharp contrast with his recklessness related to the effort to destroy Homelander. As a latent antihero, Billy Butcher often fails to fulfil his ultimate purpose and decides to save his companions' lives instead; Frenchie, Mother's Milk and Hughie are his true friends and while watching the ultimately important moments of Butcher's conflicted decision-making, the viewer is able to see certain glimpses of the protagonist's past personality and true nature. Butcher's mistrustfulness, cynicism and personal vendetta repeatedly collide with his tactical thinking, humanity and the remaining bits and pieces of his empathy. In fact, this character is, above all, tragic and broken.

What ultimately re-humanises Butcher is the moment when he actually finds out that his wife Becca is alive and hidden, along with her (and Homelander's) son Ryan. That is partly why Butcher's reunion with his wife turns out to be awkward and conflicted. The character lies to his wife about accepting Ryan and his willingness to raise the boy as his own; instead, Butcher

intends to hand Ryan over to Vought and live with Becca as they used to, as a childless couple. Nevertheless, his remaining humanity comes back to light when he decides to protect Ryan from Homelander and Stormfront. Even though Becca Butcher does not survive this violent confrontation, Butcher eventually embraces the role of a father to fulfil his wife's dying wish. Moreover, not only Butcher feels obliged to respect Becca's desperate last request, he is also driven by his hateful conflict with Homelander; by 'adopting' and protecting Ryan, Butcher is able to rob Homelander off the most precious aspect of his life – his son and heir to his extraordinary powers.

Butcher's newest companion and ideological counterpart is Hughie Campbell. Originally a loyal fan of all superheroines and superheroes working for Vought, Hughie sees his fiancée die absurdly and violently. The young woman is smashed into pieces by Reggie Franklin, or rather A-Train, supposedly the fastest superhero in the world (while running, A-Train collides with Campbell's girlfriend and devastates her body without even slowing down). Intelligent, sensitive and nervous Hughie expresses naivety which remarkably counterbalances Butcher's rigidity; unlike Hughie, Butcher has enough experience and tragic moments behind him to mock Hughie's faith in people and justice. Hughie finds it very hard to accept that most of the superheroines and superheroes he used to admire so much are, in fact, cruel and indifferent towards any 'collateral damage', i.e., the personal tragedies and victims they often leave behind when using their superhuman abilities. Hughie Campbell's antiheroism lies in his hesitancy and lack of determination. This ordinary man was raised by a cautious, restrained father; after the experienced personal tragedy, he suffers from posttraumatic stress disorder, facing surges of anger followed by panics and hysterical fear. Hughie's anger is largely associated with A-Train's ignorance and mockery; the superhero barely recognises the fact that a young woman is dead because of him, seeing the tragic event as an interesting story to share with other superheroic figures. Vought offers Hughie an insignificant financial compensation in exchange for his discretion; however, he sees this proposal as an expression of cynicism, disrespect and disdain. He cannot understand how the involved people can think and talk like that about a human being who was so close to him.

Nevertheless, shortly thereafter, Hughie shows interest in Starlight, a young superheroine crossing his path. This awkward and confused antihero, on the one hand, warns Butcher that his actions are rather extreme and illegal. On the other hand, Campbell himself murders Translucent and other people; yet, he fails to fulfil his personal revenge and even saves A-Train's life. Hughie Campbell is then forced to live on the run, and does not cope well with this new reality. His relationship with Starlight is complicated for multiple reasons, one of them being the fact that Hughie's actions are often contradictory and driven by toxic emotions. However, his relationship with Billy Butcher deepens, as it seems that Butcher sees Campbell as a younger brother whom he tends to protect and guide. Hughie eventually decides to return to 'the right path' and change things for the better 'officially' – as an assistant working at an influential politician's office.

Hughie's female counterpart is Annie January, a young superheroine nicknamed Starlight. Starlight's ability is to manipulate with light and energy; this superpower is spectacular and eye-catching, which means that the attractive woman wielding it is practically destined to a career in show business. That is why she stands out during Vought's casting and becomes one of The Seven. Naïve, but lovely Annie represents the image of an ambitious small-town girl raised in a rural part of the U.S. Despite her initial enthusiasm, she is intelligent enough to notice that her new occupation and The Seven membership only result from her youth and physical appearance; her persona is thus used as an efficient marketing tool able to popularise superheroic figures amongst teenaged girls. Starlight thus becomes a purposefully utilised role model of a superheroine setting fashion trends. Her true purpose is not to save people, but rather to promote products designed for young girls and increase their popularity. Nevertheless, she is not comfortable with a rather provocative new costume proposed by Vought's marketing specialists. The character faces not only objectification, but also a series of sexual assaults

by two different male members of The Seven – Translucent (the deviant voyeur) and The Deep (the arrogant harasser). Annie also defies her employer's commands and tries to help common women who are in danger. Starlight's highly intuitive and emotionally driven approach to her 'job' proves to be successful, because her actions gain massive (and, most of all, positive) publicity. The general public also positively reacts to her public statement regarding The Deep's sexual harassment. However, as a result, Vought has to address this scandal by removing The Deep, once a fan favourite and ladies' man, from The Seven.

More experienced and free from her previous naivety, Starlight manifests certain extent of cynicism towards other superheroines and superheroes and people in general. She becomes Hughie's friend and then his girlfriend, although only for a short time. As the story goes by, the viewer may observe Starlight's growing tolerance in relation to acts or decisions of others she once would not have accepted or let happen. For example, she is in sharp conflict with A-Train who is addicted to a chemical substance called Compound V that increases abilities and overall performance of superheroic characters. Even though Annie/Starlight does not approve of Butcher's actions and the way his associates solve problems, her sympathies towards Hughie lead to a number of morally controversial decisions she makes, including extortion and vengeance inflicted upon Vought. Whether voluntarily or accidentally, Starlight keeps cooperating with 'the boys' in order to destroy Vought. She is particularly disillusioned after finding out that superheroines and superheroes are not born like that, as she has always thought, but rather made in laboratories. This shocking revelation further disrupts her already problematic relationship with her overly ambitious and conservative mother who did everything possible to turn her into a beauty queen and superhuman 'princess'. Starlight's key role in defeating Stormfront eventually helps her to preserve the previous occupation within The Seven; however, she is torn between fulfilling her dreams (serving as a superheroine who helps the weak and endangered) and volatile loyalty towards Hughie and his friends.

The character of Maggie Shaw alias Queen Maeve represents a remarkable binary opposition to Annie January/Starlight. Her visual portrayal is partly inspired by DC's Wonder Woman. This dehumanised superheroine, also affiliated with The Seven, is older and much more experienced, which also means that she is deeply cynical and apathetic. Aware of the rules of show business and commerce, Queen Maeve is publicly presented as Homelander's life partner, even though their previous intimate relationship exists no more. This antiheroine is a one generation older version of young Annie; Queen Maeve used to be idealistic and full of energy just like Starlight. However, after years spent as a Vought employee, Queen Maeve does not express any idealism and often appears to be indifferent and bored. This experienced adult woman has always complied with her employer's commercial expectations and appears to be a balanced, elegant, perfect female version of Homelander. Queen Maeve's apathetic attitude combined with fear of retaliation are manifested practically each time she should oppose Homelander or expose his actions. She does not intervene when Homelander leaves all people aboard a falling plane without even trying to save them and then publicly confirms his interpretation of the events. Her carefully managed image of an independent woman and feminist warrior thus collides with her hidden flaws – Queen Maeve is emotionally empty, she drinks too much and it appears that she is, in fact, a lesbian. When talking to Starlight, Queen Maeve expresses certain amount of interest in her feelings and personality. However, these interactions are rather shallow and all outline the same thing – Annie is warned repeatedly that her fate will be similar to Queen Maeve's. Queen Maeve may be a superheroine, but she resembles, most of all, a tired and resigned wife who mostly observes her 'husband's' (Homelander's) unspeakable actions. Her attitude is partly conditioned by convenience, partly by misplaced loyalty and partly by fear.

When Homelander publicly unveils that Queen Maeve is a lesbian just to complicate her life and retaliate, the superheroine is forced to speak publicly about the most intimate aspects of her life. Maeve's secret female partner Elena is now exposed as well and uncomfortable with her new role. Queen Maeve has to star in kitschy motion pictures involving LGBTQ topics. Moreover,

both women have to face Homelander's ill nature and threats. These moments reduce Queen Maeve's indifference towards crimes and cruelty all round her. Her re-humanisation is marked by the moment when she decides to uncover Homelander's role in the previously mentioned plane crash. However, this decision also means that her girlfriend is no longer able to stand by her side. To her own surprise and shocking everyone around her, Queen Maeve eventually cooperates with Butcher and his 'boys' in order to eliminate Stormfront.

Kimiko Miyashiro is a tragic figure protected by Butcher and his companions, especially Frenchie. 'The boys' find her locked up in a cage like an animal, under strict surveillance. Later it is revealed that Kimiko is of Asian descent and she was taken from her family as a child. After that, she was used as a test subject – she received Compound V in order to develop superhuman abilities. Once imprisoned, abused and beaten, Kimiko is highly suspicious, secretive, but, most importantly, dangerous, unpredictable and mentally unstable. Her superhuman ability is based on enhanced physical power combined with speed; her killing is therefore feral, fast and brutal. On the other hand, Kimiko loves her brother, who possesses superhuman abilities as well, although his are notably different from hers (as children, they shared the same fate). She does not speak and uses a very specific type of sign language. Butcher's companion Frenchie is intrigued by Kimiko's presence and unclear personal history; however, she does not return his affections. Kimiko's brother is murdered by Stormfront who particularly enjoys killing non-Caucasian people. However, this act of violence is the driving force leading towards cooperation between 'the boys', Starlight and Queen Maeve. The mentioned cases of latent antiheroism are summarised in Picture 2.



PICTURE 2: Characteristics of latent antiheroines and antiheroes

Source: own processing, 2022.

### **Pragmatic Antiheroism: Madelyn Stillwell, A-Train, Frenchie, Mother's Milk, Stan Edgar**

The category of pragmatic antiheroism is primarily represented by the cynical personality of Madelyn Stillwell. This successful woman in her late forties is one of Vought's top managers responsible for public presentation of superheroines and superheroes affiliated with the conglomerate. She is able to partly regulate Homelander's psychopathic behaviour. Stillwell makes good use of the fact that Homelander suffers from the Oedipus complex; she is the object of his sexually motivated, but at the same time strangely childish feelings reminiscent of an adult man's unhealthy connection to his own mother. As a successful businesswoman, Madelyn decided to become a mother at an advanced age. Therefore, Homelander assumes the

position of an 'older sibling' who is jealous of a new addition to the 'family' and does not want to accept his presence. Stillwell has shown a great deal of calculation and sophisticated tactics on many occasions, especially during mutually unpleasant conversations with Billy Butcher about his missing and allegedly dead wife (Becca Butcher used to work for Vought). Stillwell manipulates Homelander's behaviour in accordance with her intentions, but, on the other hand, she is obviously afraid of him; given her high intelligence, she is well aware what a dangerous psychopath he is. Madelyn Stillwell seemingly acts as a capable manager, professional and loving mother, but she often uses her motherly role in order to achieve the expected career advancement. After losing control she held over Homelander's behaviour, Stillwell tries to use her intellect once again and influence the situation, but this time without success. She thus becomes an antiheroine towards whom the viewer eventually feels a certain degree of understanding and sympathy, at least because she ends up as a murdered single mother of an infant boy.

Madelyn Stillwell's sudden absence in Vought's management chain is effectively filled by the company's CEO Stan Edgar. Once ready to resign and name Stillwell as his successor, Edgar now decides to manage the company's superheroines and superheroes personally. Stan Edgar is a remarkable man who reduces his communication with other people as much as possible, focusing on business talks exclusively. Edgar is not afraid of Homelander, even though he is aware of the superhero's distorted personality and deviations. On the contrary, Stan Edgar's conversations with Homelander tend to end up with Edgar humiliating Homelander and mocking his previous actions. It is Edgar's decision to employ Stormfront and present her as a new member of The Seven replacing publicly disgraced The Deep. He does so even though it turns out that he knew about Stormfront's past and true identity. Stan Edgar is ambitious and self-confident, able to lie convincingly and deny any information which can be denied or at least challenged. When facing public outrage regarding Compound V and corporate 'production' of superheroines and superheroes, he simply blames Stillwell, who is no longer alive and thus cannot defend herself.

A-Train, or Reggie Franklin, is immensely proud of his reputation as the fastest human being alive. He appears to be overly self-confident, even arrogant. However, the superhero is an intrinsically insecure and complexed man who is afraid of any relevant competition. His concerns are mostly related to the possibility of encountering any superheroine or superhero who will be younger and faster than him. This is why he has become addicted to Compound V, the true reason why people with superhuman abilities even exist. While under the influence of the drug, A-Train loses control over his powers and behaviour, which leads to tragic death of Hughie's fiancée. A-Train is thus a despised and regrettable superheroic protagonist, the object of Hughie Campbell's vengeance. The superhero repeatedly declares his feelings towards a fellow superheroine named Popclaw, but he does not support her when it matters most and lies to her constantly. Given that, he represents ordinary people addicted to various substances who lie to their closest relatives and friends in order to borrow money or hide their addictions. A-Train's internal uncertainty leads him to the need to constantly reaffirm his value through external appreciation. He longs to be admired and maintain or improve his existing speed records. In order to achieve these goals, he is able to do almost anything – even risk his own health or kill others, e.g., his girlfriend Popclaw. Facing the consequences of his addiction, A-Train suffers a heart attack, which almost kills him. When trying to return to The Seven, even though he is unable to run as he used to and seriously ill, the character, again, does not hesitate to lie, steal and even join The Deep's sect.

Pragmatic antiheroism is also portrayed by both of Billy Butcher's old friends and companions, Frenchie and Mother's Milk. Although it is clear that Frenchie is a criminal involved in several murders and cases of weapon trafficking, he is presented as a sympathetic, funny character, although the viewer is able to see the essence of his 'work' very clearly. Given that Frenchie often communicates with gangsters and members of the organised crime, he is highly suspicious towards anything and anyone, even paranoid. He always thinks about an

escape route and follows a series of security protocols of his own making. On the other hand, Frenchie is strangely attracted to Kimiko, the victim of illegal experiments with Compound V. The protagonist sometimes expresses his regrets in association with his previous actions and decisions, but this does not change the fact that when facing a crisis, he acts intelligently and relentlessly. He is the one who discovers how to murder Translucent, whose skin is seemingly unbreakable and resistant towards all kinds of attacks, and spends a lot of time testing different weapons and instruments. When working on the most efficient solutions and exploring his talents, Frenchie does not acknowledge any moral boundaries. However, he respects a certain code related to his friends and people who helped him in the past.

A different variation of pragmatic antiheroism is represented by Mother's Milk who pretends to be a perfect husband and father, even though it is clear that his past actions are far from honourable. Being a former member of special forces, Mother's Milk cannot exactly cope with his present occupation's monotonous nature and boredom he experiences on a daily basis. This is why Billy Butcher is able to convince him to join 'the boys' once again and restart his previous 'career' filled with violence. When in danger, Mother's Milk uses his military experience – any aggressive stimulus makes him react automatically and reciprocally, i.e., violently. Like Butcher himself, Mother's Milk is driven by the need to achieve justice, or rather vengeance, because he blames Vought for his father's untimely passing. Paradoxically enough, re-joining Butcher's 'boys' endangers his wife and daughter and it is not easy for him to keep the family together and secure. Picture 3 includes the characteristics of pragmatic antiheroism present in *The Boys*.

## Pragmatic antiheroes

Madelyn Stillwell, A-Train, Frenchie, Mother's Milk,  
Stan Edgar

- cunning, cynical, manipulative personalities,
- willing to lie to preserve their reputation,
- intelligent, highly skilled,
- seemingly arrogant and confident, intrinsically complex, insecure.



PICTURE 3: Characteristics of pragmatic antiheroines and antiheroes

Source: own processing, 2022.

## 5 Discussion and Conclusion: The Boys and Ethos of Performance Society

The episodic television drama *The Boys* works with a wide spectrum of antiheroic characters. However, diverse antiheroic tendencies can be identified not only in association with the decisions and personal stories of corrupt and morally flawed superheroines and superheroes, but also in relation to their 'ordinary' counterparts – common people, victims of arrogance expressed by the individuals possessing superhuman abilities or intelligent manipulators benefitting from

superheroines and superheroes. The group of 'ordinary' antiheroines and antiheroes led by Billy Butcher is, considering our common perception of moral values, as problematic as the superheroic community The Seven, which represents indifference and arrogance of those gifted with supernatural talents (moreover, the viewer eventually finds out that these people are not chosen by God, but rather grown, created in laboratories).

Fundamental antiheroism – personified by Homelander, The Deep, Translucent and Stormfront – communicates a diverse variety of psychiatric diagnoses and deviations. However, these protagonists are still able to fascinate the viewers. Homelander is obviously charismatic and hard to overlook, The Deep is physically attractive, which automatically catches the eye, and Translucent personifies the carefully hidden desire of many ordinary people – to be able to become invisible and move around unnoticed, gaining access into heavily guarded areas or getting close to the object of one's (sexual) interest. Stormfront is first defined as a rebellious feminist popularised by social media and driven by neotribalism, but her true nature is much more pathological; she is an extremist, a Nazi. The viewers are necessarily interested in these characters' personal history and previous motivations; on the other hand, they despise these psychopaths and deviants for legitimate reasons, thereby affirming their own moral superiority.

The group consisting of latent antiheroines and antiheroes, i.e., of Billy Butcher, Hughie Campbell, Starlight, Queen Maeve and Kimiko Miyashiro, involves cynical veterans (Butcher, Queen Maeve), but also portrayals of youthful naivety and traumas caused by first confrontations with the cruel reality of adulthood (Hughie Campbell, Starlight, Kimiko Miyashiro). The tragic character of Billy Butcher is obviously centred on achieving personal vendetta hidden underneath a wider and seemingly nobler objective – the effort to purge the world from the harmful influence of superheroic figures. Traumatized Hughie would like to achieve justice in the name of his tragically deceased fiancée. Even though he obviously lacks Butcher's purposefulness and cruelty, Hughie eventually acknowledges that no morally superior decisions and legal methods will ever disrupt the *status quo* and Vought's calculative business practices which aim to consciously cover and deny all the psychopathic traits, deviations and repulsive actions of superheroines and superheroes who earn the company billions every year. Another tragic character, Kimiko, is much more careful than Hughie and deeply mentally disturbed, which results in her violent outbursts and secretiveness. Although Queen Maeve has lost her initial vision of dignified representation of femininity, along with her position of a female role model which thus continues to exist only *pro forma*, Starlight's personal story is full of youthful ideals and high expectations. However, this does not change the fact that even Starlight needs to adjust to the cruel corporate environment she now represents; the young superheroine is forced to suppress her compassion and empathy. Her ambitions are thus in clear conflict with the former ideals and she doubts whether she can (and should) be a role model for teenaged girls.

Favouring their own objectives over any conventional ideas of morality, pragmatic antiheroic figures represent rational aspects of the analysed episodic drama. Madelyn Stillwell, a highly capable and efficient manager, openly utilises Homelander's mental instability to achieve her ambitions. Stillwell might be calculative and cunning, but she chooses her strategy deliberately, mostly because these management models have proven to be most effective in the long run. At certain moments, she also expresses fear – whether for her own life or her son's safety, which inevitably arouses the viewer's sympathy towards her. Similar elements, if not sympathies, can be identified in relation to the drug-addicted superhero A-Train, an internally insecure and complex man with strong narcissistic tendencies whose characteristics include shallow emotions and constant fear of competition. Billy Butcher's companions, a former arms dealer Frenchie and a former military man Mother's Milk, can be perceived as sympathetic for their willingness to help Butcher to achieve 'justice' (or rather their shared idea of justice that is, in fact, revenge). Although Frenchie is a paranoid gunrunner and assassin, he is also a devoted protector of Kimiko. Mother's Milk embodies a relentless man with extensive military training who is ready to kill or torture, but also a devoted husband and caring father.

Vought Industries, which frames the ideological background of the story, represents and embraces the principles of performance society. The company exists within a relentless competitive environment in which people who absolutely lack moral restraint and character – people like Madelyn Stillwell or Stan Edgar – perform best. In this context, the presumed absence of empathy is not only sought after, but also highly valued and necessary. Seeing positive economic indicators as more important than anything and anyone else, the corporation does not care about the moral credit of its superheroines and superheroes, but rather about their bankability, public image and commercial potential. Members of the elite superheroic circle (The Seven) and other employees of the conglomerate with superhuman abilities are presented externally as role models for various groups of people. Homelander is a fearless and proud protector of conservative and traditional values, a patriot, lover of the ‘American way of life’. Queen Maeve is a feminist superheroine. The Deep is loved by girls and women thanks to his attractive looks and boyish charm. Starlight represents an inspirational life story of unlikely success, a positive role model for teenage girls and young women living in cities, smaller towns and rural areas. Stormfront initially portrays a rebellious and independent young woman, a cosmopolitan and sassy personality of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, which is absolutely ironic, given the fact that she is a Nazi supporter born more than a hundred years ago. The individual superheroines and superheroes are modified and ‘optimised’ with regard to the needs of the corporation. They lose their value not at the moment when they fail morally, but only when it is no longer possible to hide, or at least trivialise, their moral failures, mental disorders and unforgivable actions.

The given pressure leads superheroines and superheroes towards different kinds of actions – Starlight tries to challenge the *status quo* and publicly shares the details about sexual violence she has experienced, Queen Maeve uses her indifference and apathy as defence mechanisms and Homelander does not hesitate to do anything possible, even the most repulsive things to protect Vought’s public reputation. As a result, a complex portrayal of late modern society is created; this society piously admires and follows fictional stories involving superheroines and superheroes (‘real’ superheroic figures in *The Boys* are just as fictional as any other similar superhuman characters present in comic books or available on silver and television screens). The episodic drama thus cynically turns the generally admired (and unattainable) idea of superhumanity into a source of conflict, into a compulsive effort to succeed and dominate under any circumstances, which concerns both superheroic characters and their fans and opponents, i.e., the ordinary people.

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