**Superheroes and Nazis: Re-Examining the Legacy of World War II in Eric Kripke’s *The Boys***

**ABSTRACT**

The television adaptation of *The Boys* (2019-present), originally a comic book series written by Garth Ennis (2006-2012), has garnered attention for its graphic violence and satirical treatment of the superhero genre. *The Boys* engages with a number of critiques of the superhero genre and its tropes, one of which is the recurring presence of a Nazi supervillain. This article links *The Boys* to previous examples of comic books and screen adaptations which feature Nazis or similar fascist organisations, such as *Captain America*, *Superman* and *X-Men*. In particular, it argues that *The Boys*’ status as a subversive superhero narrative impacts the portrayal of Nazism in new ways, further troubling the distinction between superhero and supervillain and providing insight into contemporary cultural concerns. Through its representation of the superhero origin story and the Nazi character Stormfront, *The Boys* draws upon memories of World War II in order to condemn the rise of fascism in the 21st century. Despite this ostensibly worthy goal, it is also important to consider criticisms of this type of representation of the historically specific atrocities of World War II, the role of exploitation and its resulting reception by viewers.

**KEYWORDS**

Superheroes; comics; television; satire; World War II; Nazism

**INTRODUCTION**

*The Boys*, originally a comic book series written by Garth Ennis (2006-2012), which has more recently been adapted to television by showrunner Eric Kripke (2019-present), is one of the latest additions to the immensely popular superhero genre. While *The Boys* comic book series was certainly popular in its own right, beginning its first volume with DC imprint WildStorm before moving to more independent publisher Dynamite Entertainment, the television series sits firmly within the mainstream as an Amazon Original which has performed well by all accounts. Reports on its viewing figures, though imprecise due to the methods of collecting streaming data, suggest that viewership was so high for the second series that *The Boys* broke Netflix’s previous dominance over the streaming ratings (Porter, 2020). Similarly, its critical reception began strong and has climbed with each series according to platforms such as Rotten Tomatoes (2022). It would certainly be possible, then, to consider *The Boys* solely in terms of its financial and critical success and the continuing role of the superhero genre in the contemporary film and television industry. But as Terence McSweeney (2020: 9) argues, not only is the superhero genre notable for its prolificacy and profitability, but it ‘is also worth studying [because] the genre has been able to reflect the times in which it is made and the social, political, and ideological factors that shape them in palpable ways’. I would suggest this is especially pertinent to *The Boys* as it is not a simple continuation of the superhero narrative but instead a satirical take on the genre. Indeed, those who praise the series often do so for its condemnation of previous superhero representations, or as one critic writes, its ‘expert deconstruction of superhero stories’ (Dessum, 2019). It is therefore worth combining a consideration of *The Boys*’ production and reception context with a thematic analysis in order to explore the superhero genre anew through *The Boys*’ scathing critique.

As an explicitly satirical superhero story, to the extent that Joseph Zornado and Sara Reilly (2021: 200) describe it as ‘anti-superhero’, *The Boys* overtly engages with previous superhero representations. The series draws attention to many themes and tropes in the genre, but this article will focus on how *The Boys* builds upon a strand of superhero texts which engage with the legacy of World War II. From this perspective *The Boys* can be profitably situated amongst previous examples of comic books and screen adaptations which feature Nazis or Nazi-related fascist organisations, such as *Captain America*, *Superman* and *X-Men*, in order to build upon previous scholarly work which has interrogated the superhero genre’s relationship with Nazism, fascism and Holocaust representation. In particular, this article will focus the majority of its analysis on the second series of *The Boys* which introduces the character Stormfront and reveals her Nazi origins. *The Boys*’ satire of the superhero genre and biting commentary on the contemporary political and cultural context of the US is on the nose, to say the least, and its representation of a Nazi ‘supe’ in 21st-century America is no different. As such it has prompted a number of popular journalistic responses considering its representation of fascism such as in *ScreenRant* (Elvy, 2020) or *Pop Matters* (Glover, 2020). Attention will be paid to the series’ context as adaptation, its depiction of Nazi science and human experimentation, contemporary fascism and social media, the representation of gender, and the series’ reception. Ultimately, *The Boys*’ status as a subversive superhero narrative impacts the portrayal of Nazism in new ways, providing an important case study through which to re-examine the representation of Nazism in the superhero genre more broadly.

**A HISTORY OF SUPERHEROES VERSUS NAZIS**

To begin, it is worth re-treading the history of superheroes and Nazis to date. The two have been intertwined from the outset, for Liam Burke (2019: 2) notes that ‘although there is little agreement on the earliest example of a superhero, Superman’s first appearance on the cover of *Action Comics* #1 in 1938 is often credited with codifying and popularizing a character type that was ideally suited to the challenges of the time’. This places the advent of the comic book superhero just before World War II began. Comic book writers and artists of the time chose to engage with the turmoil surrounding them, and thus it was not long before existing superheroes such as Superman were depicted triumphantly fighting Nazis, ‘with Joe Simon and Jack Kirby introducing their new hero, Captain America, by having him punch Hitler on the jaw almost a full year before the United States entered the war’ (Burke, 2019: 4). This explicit opposition between superheroes and Nazis has prompted some to consider the role of Jewish artists in creating the comics, such as Joanne Pettitt (2019: 161) who writes that ‘while the plight of the Jews was being ignored around the world, these artists sought to take on the Nazis on their own turf’. Others have focused on the role superheroes played more widely, with Burke (2019: 4) positing that ‘these superpowered symbols are often enlisted to comprehend, even mollify, social anxieties’. Edward B. Westermann (2020: 595) similarly argues that ‘these early rhetorical and pictorial assaults against Nazism were aimed at winning the war against Hitler’s Germany (and Imperial Japan) by generating popular support within a Manichean framework of good battling against evil’. Though those such as Bence Kránicz (2020: 238) have observed a Western bias in superhero scholarship and argued that ‘all nations, ethnicities and cultures create their own superheroes’, the specific context of World War II and the earliest comic book superheroes are seen to be entangled, irrevocably shaping the superhero genre through its propagandist roots.

The depiction of Nazis has persisted within comics such as *Captain America*, which despite periods of declining popularity and breaks in the publication has been successfully revived. Throughout its publication history, *Captain America* has continued to include the recurring threat of fictitious organisation Hydra and its roots in Nazism. However, Neal Curtis (2020: 48) argues that the opposition between Captain America and Hydra has been represented in different ways at different points, for ‘despite the enormous amount of ideological work that comics do in support of an ideal image of America, they also periodically evoke the uncanny sense that the familiar language of patriotism and nationalism hides a dark side by pitting Captain America against a variety of zealous doubles’ including a fascist ‘Hydra Cap’. New series, such as the *X-Men* comics which were created post-World War II, have also engaged with the threat of Nazism. As another Marvel series Westermann (2020) observes that there have been crossovers of the X-Men battling Hydra, but *The Uncanny* *X-Men* also introduced Jewish character Katherine Anne “Kitty” Pride, Dachau survivor Gabrielle “Gaby” Haller, and there have been backstories situating Magneto and Wolverine in Auschwitz and Sobibor respectively. With different iterations led by different creators the resulting engagement with American nationalism and the tragedies of World War II has clearly varied. It can even vary within each issue, as Westermann (2020: 600) considers a potentially contradictory message in a 1982 issue of *The Uncanny* *X-Men*:

Magneto’s literal crushing of [Nazi villain] Strucker and his Stormtroopers and his acquisition of confiscated gold originally taken from the Jewish people seem to constitute a defining victory, however his triumphant exhortation of homo superior as Lords of the Earth evokes disquieting parallels to the Nazi’s rhetoric of a master race.

These contradictions thus result in complex critiques, especially of those comics which explicitly represent the Holocaust. Pettitt (2019: 164-165) considers a potentially positive response by noting that ‘the commitment to remember is certainly well-intended’, but she ultimately suggests that comics such as *X-Men* or *Superman* ‘fall short of offering a sufficiently nuanced account of the atrocity’. There is thus an increasing ambiguity to analyse in these superhero comics post-World War II, whether it is through the figure of the anti-hero or explicit engagement with memories of the Holocaust, for these comics’ approaches to representation are not necessarily able to address the topic with adequate care.

Such interrogations can be extended to 21st-century superhero adaptations. Like many others, Zornado and Reilly (2021) note that there has been a marked resurgence in the 21st century as more and more superhero comics have been adapted to the screen, and thus we find Nazis and superheroes meet again in *X-Men* (2000), *Captain America: The First Avenger* (2011) and their respective sequels, reboots and cinematic universes. Even those superhero films which avoid explicit representation of the Nazis sometimes allude to the horrors of World War II, as in *The Eternals* (2021) which received some popular criticism (Tait, 2021) for its attempt to explain why its superheroes did not try to avert the Holocaust whilst contradictorily inserting its heroes into the tragedy of Hiroshima. With these 21st-century examples have therefore come renewed discussion of how and why superheroes and Nazis are depicted together, and how this relates to their wider cultural and socio-political context. This can be linked to wider discussions of why characters such as Captain America have featured so prominently in the 21st century, with many scholars connecting the superhero resurgence to a post-9/11 context. For instance, Jeffrey A. Brown (2017: 2) posits that:

In the traumatized post-9/11 climate, superhero movies provide a reassuring fantasy of America’s ability to withstand terrorist attacks, often metaphorically rewriting the tragedy of that horrible day. Superheroes also act out a comforting nostalgia for a simpler time, a less conflicted perception of America as not just a nation but an ideal, when the good guys were easy to spot and the bad guys were always defeated.

This interpretation links back to the conflict between superheroes and Nazis as it suggests that the Nazis, with their extreme ideology and recognisable iconography, are both easy to spot and a historical example of ‘bad guys’ being defeated. Yet not all scholars agree that 21st-century superhero narratives are reassuring and nostalgic for US audiences. Annika Hagley and Michael Harrison (2020: 4) argue that the filmic Captain America ‘was written into an extremely circumspect and thoughtful post 9/11 set of narratives in which he constantly questioned the past and present behavior of America’. Once again this extends to *Captain America*’s treatment of World War II and challenges the sense that superhero films have clear ‘good guys’ and ‘bad guys’ epitomised by Allied and Axis powers. I would argue that these differing perspectives are evidence that superheroes have, post-World War II and increasingly in the 21st century, attempted to engage with moral quandaries by blurring the opposition between superheroes and villains. The genre’s recurring representation of superheroes alongside Nazis is part of this complexity, which has the potential to comment on both America’s history and its contemporary context with varying results.

NAZIS AGAIN: *THE BOYS* AS CASE STUDY

Into this political climate and saturated world of superheroes entered *The Boys*, challenging everything that had come before. Amongst the targets of *The Boys*’ satire is the capitalist superhero company, represented through the fictional corporation Vought International in a clear parallel to Disney and Marvel’s cinematic universe and merchandising. The series also takes aim at corporate policies which seek to profit from inclusion without addressing structural inequalities, as explored through Queen Maeve’s sexuality and African American character A-Train, and connects to the #MeToo era via heroine Starlight. It is perhaps unsurprising, then, that *The Boys* also takes aim at the idea of ‘good’ superheroes versus Nazis by including the characters Homelander and Stormfront. It is useful to acknowledge Ennis’s comics as source for the adaptation, for while the television series is not entirely faithful to the comics (and while this article is not interested in upholding any hierarchies of adaptation in which fidelity is valued above all else) it does draw upon them for its Nazi sub-plot. Indeed, *The Boys* was not Ennis’s first time approaching the subject matter and in his previous, equally controversial, series *Preacher* (1995-2000) Ennis included a storyline depicting Adolf Hitler attempting to escape from Hell. Where *Preacher* draws upon the Gothic and Western genres and the figure of Adolf Hitler to deliver a ‘religious satire; treatise on gender politics; [and] philosophical meditation on the nature of good versus evil’ (Kitson, 2007: 72), *The Boys* comics utilise the superhero genre and its fictional Nazi character to explore some of the same concerns and add new areas of cultural critique.

In *The Boys* comics, the Nazi character is also called Stormfront, a hulking man at times depicted wearing a cape emblazoned with a swastika. Indeed, his Nazism is obvious and commented upon, as in *Herogasm #1* (2009) where one character crudely remarks to Stormfront ‘you see what a sweet fucking deal we’ve got here Stormfront? There’s no way you’re going to tell me you got pussy like this when you were a villain’. As Stormfront is depicted in the same panel wearing a cape with an eagle crest resembling the Reichsadler it is clear that his beliefs have not changed, only his status from villain to hero. Stormfront is also shown speaking in German and frequently uses racial slurs against other characters such as Mother Milk and The Woman. In this sense Stormfront is comparable to the Nazi characters Westermann (2020: 600) observes in *The Uncanny X-Men* issue ‘Gold Rush’ where ‘less importance is placed on the strict historical or linguistic accuracy of such symbols, but instead on their function as symbols of “Germanness” or “Nazism” rather than genuine historical or linguistic artefacts’. As a minor character in *The Boys* comics I would argue that this symbolic shorthand is the extent of Stormfront’s development, making him a one-dimensional villain or even caricature of Nazism. In contrast, the television adaptation of *The Boys* includes Stormfront as a central character in its second series and makes a number of interesting changes in the process.

In the television series, the mockery of superheroes is established in series one by connecting Vought International, and its most famous superheroes collectively called ‘The Seven’, to concerns surrounding capitalism, nationalism and political corruption. The corruption of Vought is reframed, though, in the first episode of series two. In the denouement of this episode, Vought CEO Stan Edgar tells Homelander that Compound V, the serum which turns humans into superheroes, was actually the product of a Nazi experiment. It is revealed that founder Frederick Vought was a Nazi working in Germany until he was ‘spirited away’ in 1944 and pardoned by the Allies so that he could continue his research in the US. This story makes an obvious reference to Operation Paperclip in which the US employed a large number of German scientists and engineers immediately after World War II. This operation has been the subject of public outcry, for as Brian E. Crim (2018: 5) writes, ‘beginning in the mid 1980s, investigative journalists […] revealed that hundreds of Paperclippers actively supported the Nazi Party or its affiliates, including the SS, and a smaller number participated in some of the worst war crimes of the Holocaust’. A moment in history notable for the US acting covertly and controversially, *The Boys* thus links its Nazi sub-plot to Operation Paperclip in order to create a similar sense of distrust in US institutions. This sense of secrecy and corruption introduced by Stan Edgar is then compounded by *The Boys*’ use of cliffhangers and plot twists throughout the rest of the second series, slowly revealing that not only was Vought a Nazi but superhero Stormfront was Vought’s wife and has used Compound V to survive into the 21st century under a number of different guises whilst maintaining her Nazi ideology. In series two episode six she reveals her past to Homelander by sharing photographs of herself with Heinrich Himmler and Joseph Goebbels, explicitly stating that ‘we are in a war for the culture’ and that fighting this racist war is the superhero’s ‘true destiny’. Nazism is thus central to *The Boys*’ subversion of previous superhero narratives as all superheroes become tainted by their Nazi origins and the intention from which they were created.

Moreover, that superheroes in *The Boys* are created via a serum links back to the discussion of superheroes, Nazis and eugenics which has been at stake when discussing superhero origin stories in *Captain America*, *X-Men* and *Superman*. Between these texts, and sometimes within these texts, there are different explanations for the existence of superheroes in which they are either born naturally or created unnaturally. As Evan Hayles Gledhill (2016: 33) explores, the *X-Men* films in particular use the nature of their superheroes and the context of Nazi concentration camps to explore ‘uncomfortable biopolitical themes’. In these films, Nazi eugenics draws attention to constructs of normality and desirability, and wider society’s view of genetic mutants as outside the norm is further juxtaposed with some mutants’ view of themselves as biologically superior. Moreover, both characters who are born mutant and those born non-mutant are subject to being ‘cyborgized and weaponized through the use of prostheses and surgical intervention’ (Hayles Gledhill, 2016: 33) in ways connected to Nazi human experimentation. In *The Boys* it is explicitly said that Vought was appointed to Dachau in 1939 where he ‘enjoyed a ready supply of human subjects’, a depiction of superheroes as scientific creations which similarly connects to the abuses perpetrated upon concentration camp inmates by Nazi ‘doctors’. This connection emerges not only through Edgar and Stormfront’s narrations but is also visualised through Stormfront’s secret superhero facility. In series two episode six, before her confession to Homelander, Stormfront is shown overseeing experiments on imprisoned test subjects. A bank of CCTV screens reveals sparse cells and inmates in psychological and physical distress, one vomiting acid into a bowl. When one inmate refuses to comply with further tests Stormfront leaves him to be incinerated by fellow supe Lamplighter. Although Hayles Gledhill shows that there has already been some nuance in the representation of eugenics and human experimentation in the superhero genre, by examining this episode of *The Boys* we can observe an even more pronounced critique of those who might simplistically romanticise the superhero origin story.

A STORY FOR THE 21st CENTURY?

Importantly, by depicting a ‘superhero’ who was a Nazi during World War II and is still living today, *The Boys* not only looks backwards but connects the past to our contemporary context. Once again, this creates connections with other superhero media produced since World War II which continue to engage with Nazis, prompting questions about how and why these media do so. For instance, Pettitt (2019: 158) analyses the 1998 *Superman* #80-82 comics which depict a fascist villain evolving through different guises, from alien priest to Nazi Generalkommissar to American neo-Nazi, suggesting that these issues attempt to show ‘how the memory of the Holocaust may be transported through history’ and ‘attest to the emptiness of the “never again” rhetoric that is so often associated with the Holocaust’. In *The Boys* the reason to represent a Nazi supe in the 21st century is as clear as any of its other satirical messages – it is critiquing a contemporary American society in which neo-Nazism and fascism is alarmingly prevalent. A rise in explicit neo-Nazism, or at the very least its increased visibility, has been noted by those such as Jason Lee (2018: 9) who writes that in the 21st century ‘recorded incidences of Neo-Nazi attacks were increasing even before the rise of Donald Trump, and globally the popularity of neo-Nazi related groups was growing in a variety of forms in different nations’. Andrew Jones (2019: 102) concurs that since 2014 in particular the ‘Alt-Right’ has seen a populist swell ‘providing support for the election of Donald Trump and, through affiliates, the election of various Far-Right Eurosceptic parties across the EU’. When considering the shift between *The Boys* comic books and the adaptation, the election of Trump has clearly influenced some of the changes, including the depiction of Homelander as a ‘Trump analogue’ from the very outset according to Kripke (VanArendonk, 2022). Stormfront as literal Nazi is part of this allegory as she wins over Homelander with her promise of power, appearing at rallies and all over the press with her pledge to ‘keep America safe again’.

Equally important, then, is *The Boys*’ depiction of Stormfront’s fans. Represented via on-screen social media messages and as audiences at the rallies, a devoted faction supports Stormfront throughout series two and three. The representation of Stormfront’s fans on social media is perhaps the most pointed and unique aspect of *The Boys*’ critique, for although several superhero narratives can be said to engage with anxieties about technological developments, none are as forthright about the impact of the internet and its use by the Far-Right. *The Boys* frequently uses the visual technique of reducing the screen ratio to mimic a phone through which various characters livestream their actions with ‘likes’ and comments flowing in. Although its satire is often simplistic, here *The Boys* engages with a complex area of contemporary culture as Stormfront at first seems a sympathetic character calling out Vought’s media manipulation. She arrives on a video shoot where Homelander and Maeve are pretending to be on the front-line supporting US troops, and uses her Livestream to unveil this propaganda. Within the next few episodes, though, her hateful ideologies become clear and her ‘truthful’ message about media manipulation soon starts to resemble the Far-Right’s mistrust of ‘liberal’ media outlets. An audience who may at first have appreciated Stormfront’s candid attitude and apparent resistance against Vought are thus prompted to reflect on how they had been won over by a fascist character, and how swiftly anti-establishment rhetoric might be turned against different targets.

The adaptation’s episodic approach is important in developing these themes gradually, for as Zornado and Reilly (2021: 205) suggest, ‘the long-form fantasy narrative allows the kind of storytelling accomplished in *The Boys* and how it manages to reﬂect on itself as reﬂective fantasy’. Indeed, this self-reflective approach to nationalistic superheroes and the contemporary media landscape builds towards the opening of series two episode seven. In this opening a white fan repeats a daily routine of watching Stormfront on every screen possible, hearing repeated propaganda about terrorists ‘flying over our borders’, concluding with him murdering an innocent Asian man who he accuses of being a supervillain. *The Boys* thus uses its Nazi superhero and her fans to illustrate the trajectory of fascism, racism and conspiracy theories, in particular suggesting that social media is a dangerous breeding ground for radicalisation. Although Stormfront was the character name given in Ennis’s source material, and at that time the neo-Nazi website of the same name was well established, it is the television series which truly connects the character to this online space. Indeed, Kripke has been very vocal in interviews about the intent of this representation, stating that fascism ‘couches itself in very savvy, friendly terms to attract young people […] hate doesn’t come at you with a big neon sign that says, “Hey, we’re hate.” They come at you in pretty insidious and attractive packages because they know how social media works’ (Maas, 2020). The sense that this is an area of interest for Kripke is evident in his previous show *Supernatural* (2005-2020), for the episode‘The One You’ve Been Waiting For’ represents Hitler being revived in the 21st century and being amazed by the power of the smartphone: ‘it’s like having a tiny Goebbels in my pocket’ he exclaims. In *The Boys*, Kripke explores this potential once again, but through Stormfront he considers a new figurehead of fascism.

The message that fascism spreads through ‘insidious and attractive packages’ is the reason Stormfront is at first introduced as a sympathetic character, but is also potentially the reason the character is gender-flipped from a man in the comics to a woman in the television series. Kripke’s thoughts on the attraction of fascism and the power of online spaces are often given in response to questions about Stormfront’s gender-flip from comics to screen (e.g. Hurley, 2020), suggesting that a fascist woman is intended to be surprising to the audience. To consider Kripke’s gender flip charitably, he seems to be anticipating the audience’s gendered preconceptions rather than putting forward his own, and the resulting characterisation of Stormfront sits within a complex cultural web in which superheroes and villains are often coded through gender. As Carolyn Cocca (2020: 1-2) argues, ‘for the last 75 years, female superheroes have been much less numerous, much more often stereotyped, much more often sexualised and much less likely to drive the action than their male counterparts’. The Nazi also has a highly gendered history on screen informed by figures such as the eponymous *Ilsa, She Wolf of the SS* (1975), in turn based on real historic figure Ilsa Koch, with the filmic Ilsa having become ‘a mythic representation of the cinematic Nazi, coded both in terms of sexual fetish and historical horror’ (Kozma, 2012: 61). *The Boys* seems highly aware of its gendered representation, though more so in relation to the superhero genre, for within the narrative Stormfront is depicted as highly critical of Vought’s treatment of women. For example, she criticises a misogynistic script for a film about The Seven and walks out of a ‘Girls Get It Done’ advertising campaign as she argues that it is hollow virtue signalling. Yet this feminist attitude sits alongside her racism, and while the series does not take much time to acknowledge the overtly misogynistic attitudes displayed in online fascist spaces such as the Stormfront website, it does draw attention to the problem of white feminism. As Cocca (2020: 2) continues, when female superheroes have existed they have ‘also been mostly white, cisgender, non-queer and non-disabled’, and Stormfront as Nazi epitomises this singular form of representation. Stormfront is a monstrous villain, but in the world of *The Boys* where superhero and supervillain are interchangeable and critiques of ‘toxic masculinity’ (Zornado and Reilly, 2021: 206) abound, her gender is not stereotyped in a traditional way. Rather, the audience’s assumptions about gender and fascism are used to upend the narrative and create a more nuanced (though not fully explored) portrait of non-intersectional feminism.

While the majority of Stormfront’s character development takes place in series two, it is important to examine her decline and death in series three and the consequences this has for *The Boys*’ representation of fascism. In the finale of series two Stormfront is defeated (interestingly after a showdown with Maeve, Kimiko and Starlight, further complicating the series’ engagement with feminism as Stormfront proves a great threat due to her gender while strong female characters also prove to be her downfall) and she is presumed dead. However, in series three episode one it is revealed that she survived, but is severely burnt and injured. While a television screen in her hospital room plays footage of persistent ‘Stormchaser’ fans who continue to support her, Stormfront is represented as meek and compliant during Homelander’s visit. He whines about being made to publicly apologise for his actions and she offers sexual acts to make him feel better, but when she tries to discuss the Aryan Übermensch mid-act he rebuffs her: ‘how many times do I have to tell you, we don’t need a fucking master race, I’m the master race, that’s the point’. He leaves her distraught and begging, and in the next episode she commits suicide off-screen on Homelander’s birthday. The effect of this storyline is an ambiguous one, as on one hand her death serves as impetus for Homelander’s ensuing emotional state and may be considered primarily in terms of this narrative function. But another interpretation could consider that, rather than being defeated in a blaze of glory akin to a martyr, Stormfront more gradually disappears. She is brought back briefly only to show that her powers and platform are largely taken away from her, and Kripke is able to dispose of her without providing any great moral victory to any other character. This interpretation suggests that Stormfront is undermined but so is her ‘defeat’, especially because Homelander becomes the new figurehead for her previous supporters. He only rejects Nazism by name, not its principles, and is happy to adopt Stormfront’s fans, creating a nihilistic portrait of a society which will easily take up the reigns of fascism once again.

CRITICISM AND RECEPTION

Despite the justifications for evoking the memory of World War II offered by the makers of *The Boys*, there remain some criticisms to be considered. Indeed, Brian E. Crim (2020: 9) argues that ‘one can condemn vulgar and trivial abuses of Holocaust representation while highlighting genuine and often inspired horror and SF films and series’, which is an interesting turn of phrase when considering the tone of *The Boys*. It is a series which constantly tries to be shocking, utilising dark humour and extreme violence throughout. This extends to its depiction of Stormfront’s Nazism as she brutally murders characters such as Kimiko’s brother Kenji, while the test facility she oversees is shown to be creating superpowers which range from the gruesome ability to crush human bodies to the absurd ability to extend a penis into a long tentacle. While there is often an intent behind the shock and gore to alert viewers to societal injustices, this is not always the case, and is arguably an exploitative mode of entertainment which could fall into the category of ‘Nazisploitation’. Pettitt’s (2019: 161) criticisms that ‘the memory of the Holocaust is being passed down to subsequent generations in a mythologised form that has little to do with its historical roots’ may also apply here, particularly because *The Boys* does not emphasise the Nazis’ anti-Semitism and the atrocities committed against Jews. Instead, the majority of Stormfront’s racism is directed at African American and Asian characters. Anti-Semitism is a more prominent point of discussion in extra-textual interviews with the actor who plays Stormfront, Aya Cash, as she reflects on her own Jewishness (Aminosharei, 2020), a contrast which has not gone unnoticed by viewers (Geisinger, 2020). The lack of prominence in the narrative itself creates a parallel to Pettit’s observations about *Superman*, where she concludes that ‘by attempting to show the universal application of the Holocaust, the story does […] end up downplaying the specificity of the Nazi genocide’. The very act of connecting World War II to contemporary politics is a contestable one, especially so when the impact on Jewish communities is not considered. Thus, even in taking such a self-reflective and critical approach to the superhero genre and previous nationalist representations, *The Boys* is still an ‘imperfect’ forum (Westermann, 2021: 609) through which memories of Nazi ideology and atrocities are being explored.

As these critiques demonstrate, many considerations of the representation of Nazism in superhero and other fictional narratives centre not just on what should or should not be depicted, but connect this to the dangerous potential of interpretation when there is a real historical precedent involved. These critiques focus on the most appropriate way to educate viewers about the atrocities of the past, and the risk of trivialising atrocities such as the Holocaust. With *The Boys* justifying its approach to Nazism through the series’ condemnatory attitude, the makers seem to be relying on their message being clear for viewers, yet not only is this not accepted by all scholars as sufficient justification for evoking the past, but the reception of the creators’ perspective cannot be guaranteed. It is important to remember that each fan will approach media with their own specific worldview, and although *The Boys* aims the majority of its satire at fascism, it does depict its fascist villains as charismatic characters providing entertainment, shock and gore, in addition to including jokes about liberalism. There is therefore some space for Far-Right fans to interpret the show in their own way and align themselves with characters who seem so obviously abhorrent to left-wing fans. This aspect of the reception was the subject of increased popular criticism (e.g. Tassi, 2022) following series three episode five due to the depiction of supe Blue Hawk killing African Americans in a ‘direct allegory for police brutality’, triggering Far-Right fans to reconsider him and other characters they had initially liked. In particular, they had liked Blue Hawk’s attitude towards ‘justice’, feeling that he made ‘pretty good points’ until he murdered a number of unarmed African Americans. In a disturbing parallel to the series, this community expressed themselves through a subreddit, further illustrating the power of social media and *The Boys*’ own potential to be taken up by fascists online. While reports have largely been of fans emulating Homelander rather than Stormfront, it does seem to provide proof that representing fascism in popular culture can lead to the opposite response to that intended.

This potential response may be made more likely by a ‘hardcore’ superhero fandom which Aaron Kashtan (2018: 244) suggests has ‘tended to be disproportionately white, straight and male’. Some fans and creators within this demographic have contributed to an ‘exclusionary discourse’ and an opposition between what Kashtan calls ‘traditionalist’ and ‘progressive’ fans. Indeed, efforts by progressive fans and creators to diversify superhero representation have then acted ‘as a pretext for an organized anti-diversity movement, while allowing traditionalist fans to pretend they are motivated by widely accepted values […] rather than sexism, racism or homophobia’ (Kashtan, 2018: 247). Despite being satirical, *The Boys* is likely to attract some fans of the superhero genre more widely, including conservative fans. This creates an interesting comparison with a study of *The Hunger Games*, which suggested that ‘the reason that one series could be so popular with people on opposite political sides in a polarized media environment is not liberal misreading’, but ‘because of its indistinct populist appeal’ (Hill, 2018: 8). One similar example in *The Boys* is the satirical Vought International through which the target of progressive and traditionalist fans could align, despite their different motives – both might mock corporate strategies of diversification, but one does so because they seek a more systemic change, while the other does so because they want to retain their fascist homogeny. Despite Kripke’s assurances that there is just one message underlying *The Boys* there can still be spaces for varying interpretations as well as more marked misreadings. Stormfront’s line ‘People love what I have to say. They believe in it. They just don't like the word Nazi’ seems to ring true not only for Homelander but also for these traditionalist fans and their outcry on discovering Kripke’s intent, adding further weight to critiques surrounding representations of Nazism in the superhero genre.

CONCLUSION

This article has demonstrated that *The Boys* television series is explicitly interested in the persistence of Nazi ideology in the 21st century, expanding upon its source material in significant ways. In order to convey a critique of its contemporaneous context, *The Boys* looks backwards and draws upon memories of World War II and Nazi eugenics, and seeks to connect these memories to 21st-century US politics in order to warn viewers about the prominence of the Far-Right and online radicalisation. Stormfront as a female Nazi villain is the main vehicle for this message, but the depiction of her fans and Homelander emphasise the susceptibility of both those in power and the masses to adopt fascist ideologies to maintain the status quo. In so doing *The Boys* offers a critique of simplistic and nationalist stories in which American superheroes are ‘good guys’ and Nazis are immediately recognisable and vincible, and though these stories have already been challenged somewhat since World War II, *The Boys* takes such moral ambiguity to new extremes. Despite its self-aware nature, however, *The Boys* remains open to some of the same criticisms as its predecessors. It is arguably guilty of the shock and exploitation warned of by Crim due to its tone and extreme violence, or of amalgamating memories of World War II with the current context in a way which makes the Holocaust mythologised as warned of by Pettitt, even as both scholars note the positive intentions such media can have and the potential for thoughtful interpretation by some audiences. Indeed, this article has considered that the popular reception of *The Boys* includes thought-pieces raising awareness about contemporary fascism, which suggests that its positive intentions have been realised, but spaces such as Reddit also reveal that there are conservative fans of its reprehensible characters, bearing out a worst-case scenario and adding to the moral complexity of such representations. Each of these avenues of exploration could certainly be extended upon, especially as *The Boys* has received fairly limited scholarly attention as of yet, and the development of *The Boys*’ central themes in series three and the introduction of characters Soldier Boy and Blue Hawk are particularly interesting. But the aim of this article has been to situate *The Boys* in a wider fictional and cultural context and conclude that the series further complicates the recurring representation of superheroes and (or increasingly *as*) Nazis.

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BIO

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