Undergraduate Honors Communications Thesis Paper

The Boys Warning About Unchecked Capitalism

Megan Fournier

University of Denver

Introduction

The Avengers, the X-Men, and the Justice League; these are the names of some of the best-known superhero teams. Now more than ever, superheroes have been taking the world by storm (find source). It is only natural that, with the recent superhero craze, more superheroes and superhero groups are being created. Hence, the creation of *The Boys* by Erik Kripke, an Amazon Prime TV show that upended superhero tropes with its initial release in July 2019. Based on the comic book series of the same name by Garth Ennis and Darick Robertson, *The Boys* follows a vigilante group as they band together to try to take down superheroes who abuse their powers. Unlike the popular superhero groups that are good to their very core, the superhero group in *The Boys* called The Seven are rotten to the core, with a shiny exterior to fool the public. This show takes a deeper and darker look into the ever-present question of what would happen if superheroes were real. Specifically, the show uses the corruption of America's capitalist system to show the dark reality of what could happen if superheroes existed. Therefore, this analysis uses Marxist criticism to look at the way *The Boys* reflects the danger of power when it comes to unchecked capitalism.

The Boys uses a dark, whimsical way to show how easy it is for power to be abused. It illustrates how people with money and influence can manipulate others into believing they have power when they do not. This show is seen as controversial since it does not beat around the bush when it comes to *anything* (find source). Filled with dark comedy, nudity, heavy gore, explicit language, and touching on several triggering topics, *The Boys* is not for the faint of heart. Yet, since the show is so uncensored in its way of showing topics, it really emphasizes its points and does not try to shy away from the harsh realities of its own world and ours.

This show fits its original context as it specifically mentions socio-political events that were happening around the time of its airing date. This show is rather reactive to things that are happening nowadays within pop culture and politics. There are a lot of pokes at things within *The Boys,* such as the infamous Kylie Jenner Pepsi ad, the Gal Gadot celebrity music video to "Imagine," as well as Disney+ ads (find source). The show doesn't shy away from being highly satirical of big companies and the things that consumers blindly eat up. And they do not shy away from poking fun at both political sides, making satire from the ultra-right with things such as "white-genocide," to making fun of the ultra-left with the "Girls Get it Done" campaign. Not to mention most, if not all, of season four was a parody of the Trump campaign and the election. With the introduction of Truthbomb, a clear parody of alt-right podcasters and personalities, to the faction of Starlighters, a parody of the alt-left, throwing their faith behind a person they barely know. They even poke fun at both the alt-right and alt-left when they throw themselves into violence and attack each other, continuing the cycle of violence that they claim to try to debase.

To perform a Marxist critique of *The Boys,* I will first synthesize the prior research on power, money, and critical rhetoric before explaining my method of Marxist analysis and rhetorical critique of media texts. Finally, I offer the themes of mega-corporation, power, capitalism, and manipulation from the show that ultimately illustrate the danger of power when it comes to unchecked capitalism.

Power And Money

To begin, I examine research on how power in the hands of big corporations can easily go wrong. Specifically, within America, the concept of capitalism is the basis of almost everything

we do, along with democracy (find source). However, the basic principle of democracy is the moral danger of power and the tendency of it to corrupt. If people begin to accept the notion of leaders' moral superiority by weakening suspicion of those in power, corporate leadership runs the risk of weakening democracy (Hoopes, 2011, p.125). The show illustrates that when people pin their frustrations on the government, they must also take into account the influence of big corporations. People cannot let corporations get off the hook just because they are in the private sector, because "In a democratic society, corporate social responsibility is everyone's business" (Hoopes, 2011, p.155).

With gaining power, one must also gain money. So, in the way that corporations are structured, it encourages everyone in the cycle to gain more profit that they can spend for their own self-interest. In doing that, people become ignorant about the benefit of others (Chomsaeng, 2020, p.6). When people are so focused on their own financial gain and power, they are blinded to what is actually good for the people or what is morally right. But what is it that makes these companies gain this amount of power and money? And money always translates into power, especially for big corporations.

Defining Critical Rhetoric

In defining critical rhetoric, I draw primarily from McGee (1990). His notion of critical rhetoric suggests that rhetoric is not just about persuasion, but also delves into power dynamics, ideology, and resistance (Condit, 2009). This critical rhetoric challenges the more traditional notions of texts having fixed meaning, instead arguing for rhetoric as a tool for constructing social realities. He advocates for more of an audience-centered view of rhetoric where the meaning of a text is fluid and partly constructed by the public (McGee, 1990). This makes

critical rhetoric rooted in the idea that rhetoric itself is inherently tied to ideology and power. Rather than look at mere persuasion, critical rhetoric looks to uncover the ideological forces that are shaping societal discourse.

Mckerrow is equally central to my definition of critical rhetoric. He affirms McGee's 1990 view that critical rhetoric moves beyond traditional rhetoric and integrates the way discourse sustains or challenges existing power structures (Mckerrow, 2009). Rhetoric itself is used as a tool to construct social reality. He emphasizes that rhetoric is not just theoretical, but that it has a practical dimension that calls for active resistance against dominant ideologies (Mckerrow, 2009). Rhetoric is an active force in shaping public consciousness, reinforcing or contesting existing social norms. Traditional rhetoric may focus just on effectiveness, but critical rhetoric demands engagement with issues of justice and oppression. Therefore, critical rhetoric is a key tool needed to investigate *The Boys* take on capitalism in America.

Marxist Theory and Cultural Critique

Marxist Criticism comes from Karl Marx himself and is an important way to understand texts in everyday life. As Marx puts it, "Material force can only be overthrown by material force; but theory itself becomes a material force when it has seized the masses" (Wasson, 1972, p.172). This is ever important as it shows the importance of pop culture in an ever-changing society. Yes, pop culture is entertainment, but it is also used to challenge societal norms. Through criticism, people gain tools and insights that make them challenge long-standing intellectual establishments, such as capitalism and big corporations. It gives oppressed people the tools to begin to fashion their own liberation as well as the liberation of others. (Wasson, 1972, p.172).

Next, I provide an overview of Marxist theory and cultural critique. (Sentence here with citation about traditional Marxist categories). Laclau's 2016 post-Marxist theory is a response to the limitations of traditional Marxist categories. It primarily takes issue with the base-superstructure model, which he sees as deterministic and outdated. Instead, he focuses on the political construction of meaning through discursive struggles (Schou, 2016). Laclau creates a concept of "globalized capitalism;" (Laclau, 2005, Chapter 4) that challenges the idea of capitalism as a purely economic system. He instead views it as a heterogeneous system of power, where economic, political, and cultural forces interact contingently (Laclau, 2014). This perspective takes the economy and decenters it as the sole determinant of social relations, but it does not dismiss its importance. This accounts for the other factors besides economics that come into play when critiquing mega-corporations and capitalism.

Thus, I will conduct my analysis through the lens of Marxist Criticism. When analyzing with Marxist Criticism, I primarily "draw on Marx's theories (regarding class, power, and ideology) in analyzing the rhetoric of popular culture" (Brummett, 2022, p.166). This is clearly well-suited to analyzing The Boys as it draws upon the ways the show portrays power within the modern American capitalist society.

The media is seen as a key site for the production and cycle of discourses that sustain a capitalist society. Here, Laclau's 2014 discourse theory can be used to analyze how media constructs and embeds certain ideologies' potential to challenge a capitalist society and contribute to the development of radical democratic politics. By meshing Laclau's insights with Marxist analysis, media studies can better address the cultural and ideological sides of contemporary capitalism.

Finally, Cloud (2016) talks about the role that intellectuals and students have to play in mediating class consciousness, but how, ultimately, workers must lead the struggle against capitalism. This is due to their unique position in the productive process, which is integral to the base structure of capitalism. The workers are important in the structure, so analyzing their role and ideologies is important within the frame of cultural critique and Marxism. The moral rhetoric in politics often serves the interests of the ruling class. Morality is instead shaped by class interests and historical contexts (Cloud, 2003). Therefore, Marxist materialism provides a better framework for understanding morality as a product of class struggles than other approaches.

Rhetorical Critique of Media Texts

Rhetorical critiques are situated in the contextual fields used to make sense of the rhetorical texts. A contextual field may be the theory one uses to understand a text, the social-cultural context surrounding a text, or the history or genealogy that either anchors or situates the text temporally in some way (Ono, 2019). Karl Marx's materialist conception of history argues that human culture and consciousness are shaped by material production and social relations. It explains how ideology arises from material conditions but does not always reflect them transparently. Instead, ideology can distort or obscure social realities, creating a "false consciousness" that benefits ruling classes (Ono, 2019, p.3).

The media itself does not merely reflect reality but actively constructs it by shaping meanings and reinforcing dominant ideologies (Hall et. al., 2018). Hall's article discusses how media representations align with capitalist interests, presenting the economic system as natural and inevitable. Language and symbols used in media reinforce existing power relations that further make capitalism appear as the supposedly natural order. The media has power because it

shows how signs and symbols are able to contrast social meaning that can show representation of class, race, and gender that can serve to reinforce or go against the dominant ideologies (Hall et. al., 2018). This shapes how people understand their social positions.

Analysis

The Boys is a show that people can look at as a warning. The whole show relies on the use of the big corporation, Vought, abusing its power and being the true ruler of America and even the world. The Boys shows this through an anti-corporation and anti-capitalist point of view. Vought is the corporation in the series that manages all of the superheroes and asserts their power and influence over not just the masses, but also governments. Vought wants to have control over everything as long as it will bring in a profit. This is not far off when America is also run by these big corporations. Politicians get funding from them, and they are able to push their own personal agenda through the power and money they have. People are naturally greedy and want more even when they have enough, and this show shows that.

Although this show is whimsical and about superheroes, it is not over-dramatized and far off when it comes to the truth about what Vought is and how it is operated. Not only does Vought own The Seven, which are the biggest superheroes in the world, but they also own and operate film studios, streaming services, news outlets, an amusement park, multiple restaurant chains, and more. Through the show, we see that Vought weaponizes something that people always adore: celebrities, specifically their superheroes. In this, the superheroes become the tools for Vought to gain money and social power. In demonstrating this, Vought makes it so that “People can look around and see them everywhere as a part of their life and all of that means money” (Chomsaeng, 2020, p.16). In this world, the focus on the superheroes is not to save the world, but to be marketing ploys to give Vought more money. It is a fundamental poke at Marvel, DC, and

other classic superhero comics that show that if superheroes did exist, it'd be for good, and everyone would do it out of the goodness of their heart. These comics are fiction just as much as The Boys is, but The Boys brings a different twist in showing that nobody is inherently good. That humans are controlled by greed and power, whether they are normal or superhuman. They show that capitalism will inherently take over anything that is powerful and that will make companies money.

No matter where someone could go in the series, chances are Vought already has someone in it. Vought owns the media; its puppets are inserted into government, and its superhero celebrities control the public will. When it comes to Vought, everything is disposable as long as it doesn't give them money, including their own superheroes, because they can just build and create a better one.

When it comes to power, the megacorporation has most of it, even trying to usurp governments by trying to get its superheroes into the national army, therefore privatizing even war. However, Vought knows that to keep its power, they have to keep the public under control. To do this, they manipulate the masses to think that they have their own will and that every choice they make is theirs and is not influenced by Vought. They influence public faith by making films that trick people into seeing supes as heroes regardless of their actions. Every element of every single superhero and Vought itself is stage-managed, all faked for profit. When someone challenges them, their fans turn them into public enemy number one. Vought has the public under their thumb, and nobody can do anything about it. If anyone tries to fight back like our gang of protagonists, they are immediately taken down and dealt with. Vought faces no repercussions.

As the series goes on, the audience finds out that Vought created Compound V, a substance that is what created superheroes in the first place. When this is exposed and the public is shocked, Vought is able to do what every corporation in America does when it is exposed. They take it, and then they twist it into something to make more profit. They begin to tell the public lies about super-terrorists to promote dosing cops with Compound V. Even the face of the company and the top superhero, Homelander, was created in the Vought labs. He was raised in a laboratory cell with no parents and no outside world connection, his only use being to help Vought create more money and secure their power. Their goal is then exposed as they want to monopolize public and private security, along with every other industry on Earth.

Although the superheroes are the ones being the face of the company and world peace. They are not like that in real life. These superheroes model what some see as what old Hollywood celebrities indulge in, including sex clubs, drugs, getting involved in shady money deals, and, on the worst side, murder, rape, and sexual assault. But these superheroes are able to get away with all of this because Vought has enough money and power to cover it up. They do not care about actually doing good; they will do whatever needs to be done to keep people silent and keep their image up. In the show, the audience often sees these superheroes as the true villains, but the truth is that there is a much larger villain that is just some normal person in a suit sitting at the head of Vought Corporation. It is this person, this corporation, that is the true villain of this show; the superheroes are just their weapons.

Vought is a mix of real modern corporations. Their profitability is seen as an overall moral good. They are powerful beyond imagination. It's a mix of every terrible thing that modern corporations do in plain sight, and as an audience, people can hate and criticize Vought without realizing that stuff like this is happening all of the time in America and around the world today.

The Boys may be a fun, gory show, but it is trying to warn people about the bigger threats of capitalism that could crumble us all one day if their power continues to go unchecked.

Even though The Seven are supposed to be a crime-fighting team that is supposed to save the world and America, they do not seem to be doing a lot of it. Any of the crime-fighting they do turns out to be carefully prearranged media stunts with actors and crews to help boost the superheroes and, in turn, boost Vought's profits. Even the women are forced into more sexual superhero outfits as they think it will help boost profits and get higher ratings. When the character Starlight is fed up with the corporation and exposes Vought for its corruption, she is told directly by another superhero, "You don't f*** with the money." This shows that under Vought and big corporations, nothing matters- not intelligence, nor ability, just who can produce the most wealth for the company. Even those with superhuman abilities are forced to fear the monopolies and capitalist structures around them

Season four is no different from the rest when it comes to its messaging, although it really drives in the topics from before even more. In season four, we see the further downfall of Homelander, the main superhero of The Seven. Plagued by intense narcissism, toxic masculinity, and a severe need for attention, he starts to break down even more this season. In this season, Homelander takes the mantle of the embodiment of the alt-right. In his own version of the 2020 election and the January 6th insurrection, the audience sees parallels between our own world and theirs. Homelander finds himself becoming a more political figure and icon than ever before. It presents a satirical and radical version of the events in our world to wake up the audience to what we are witnessing. When the audience is disgusted with Homelander's actions, the show calls on the audience to examine the monstrosities happening in our own world. The more power Homelander gains, the more out of control he becomes, and the more he is able to abuse what he

has. This is supposed to be a direct parallel to what happens when power corrupts and ends up in the wrong hands. This is not a very subtle parallel to President Trump and his own follies. Specifically, Trump supports mega corporations and their CEOs, such as Elon Musk, Mark Zuckerberg, etc. This gives him more power, but also reinforces the power of those mega corporations. While The Boys warn against mega-corporations and the consequences of their power, Americans can see these consequences happening in real time, with things such as Elon Musk being able to create his own task force, DOGE, within the government.

Within this season, they also introduce a new character, Sister Sage. Sister Sage in this season is a standout character. Someone who is detached from the emotions of the character's motives and plays the bad side for the sole purpose of gaining money, power, and proving that she can. She is the personification of the behind-the-scenes, calculated string-pullers of the mega-corporations and political figures. She conveys the soulless algorithmic evil of the systems locking in society into this capitalistic, power-hungry world. She is the intellectual who balances Homelanders' insanity. She is the one playing on his instability and using it as a tool to gain more power for him and, consequently, herself. She is personified as the teams and structures that allow the cycles to happen, that allow power to corrupt, and she doesn't care about emotions, just power and money. She is the ruler behind the ruler, the true mastermind in this season, and a further look into the fact that everything is not what it seems.

In this season, four shines a light on the audience that the audience themselves are willing accomplices in this toxic, ultra-capitalistic cycle. How audiences are so quick to blame others without looking at their own role within society. It calls into question people's own personal ideologies and the misconceptions about truth in the modern era from both sides. As people, we perpetuate the same cycles of hate and self-interest and give in to the most monstrous impulses in

pursuit of power and belonging. As a people, we are complicit in the society that gives birth to people like Homelander. This shows how the show tries to shine a light on all of us, calling out everybody, and trying to wake us up to realize what can happen if we keep power unchecked, if we give in to our impulses and society in pursuit of proving our own made-up ideologies. This show is dark, graphic, and takes things to the extreme, but it is these extremes that the show hopes will wake up the audience and let them heed the warning against unchecked power and capitalism.

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