Transitions and Dissolving Boundaries in the Fantastic

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LIT

Cover Illustration: Silvan Luzzi

Supported by Swiss National Science Foundation
and University of Zurich

This book is printed on acid-free paper.

Bibliographic information published by the Deutsche Nationalbibliothek
The Deutsche Nationalbibliothek lists this publication in the Deutsche Nationalbibliografie; detailed bibliographic data are available in the Internet at http://dnb.d-nb.de.

ISBN 978-3-643-80185-2

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

©LIT VERLAG GmbH & Co. KG Wien,
Zweigniederlassung Zürich 2014
Klosbachstr. 107
CH-8032 Zürich
Tel. +41 (0) 44-251 75 05
Fax +41 (0) 44-251 75 06
E-Mail: zuerich@lit-verlag.ch
http://www.lit-verlag.ch

LIT VERLAG Dr. W. Hopf
Berlin 2014
Fresnostr. 2
D-48159 Münster
Tel. +49 (0) 2 51-62 03 20
Fax +49 (0) 2 51-23 19 72
E-Mail: lit@lit-verlag.de
http://www.lit-verlag.de

Distribution:
In the UK: Global Book Marketing, e-mail: mo@centralbooks.com
In North America: International Specialized Book Services, e-mail: orders@isbs.com
In Germany: LIT Verlag Fresnostr. 2, D-48159 Münster
Tel. +49 (0) 2 51-620 32 22, Fax +49 (0) 2 51-922 60 99, E-mail: vertrieb@lit-verlag.de

In Austria: Medienlogistik Pichler-ÖBZ, e-mail: mlo@medien-logistik.at
e-books are available at www.litwebshop.de

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Modern-Day Superheroes: Transgressions of Genre and Morality in *Misfits*

Dana Frei and Lars Schmeink

"Thanks to global dissemination and the cross-media phenomenon that drives entertainment media, the hero in his or her superheroic dimension has reached a level of popularity never witnessed before," Angela Ndalianis states, referring to the proliferation of superheroes in film, TV series, games, theme parks and, of course, comic books, and concludes that "the superhero has become part of the wider cultural consciousness" (4). Established in 1938 with the first installment of Siegel's Superman in *Action Comics* #1, the superhero has adapted to the needs and challenges of each society in which he[1] acts. At its most basic level, even without the *super*-prefix: "A hero embodies what we believe is best in ourselves. A hero is a standard to aspire to as well as an individual to be admired" (Fingeroth 14). The hero "has to represent the values of the society that produces him" because he functions as a representative of "the idealized vision we have of ourselves and our society [or even more pointedly,] the idealized vision the entire world has of itself" (ibid. 17, 25).

Heroism, super or otherwise, thus provides a moral compass, charting a society's norms and ethical standards. As the modern day embodiment of mythology, superhero narratives set guidelines for human social behavior, presenting "as natural and inevitable many of the social and political structures of our society" (Reynolds 24) which are truly social constructs, thus allowing us to come to terms with our social environment. Therefore, an examination of the shifts in superhero tropes and observing the ways in which they currently have "become increasingly inverted, questioned, and all out parodied" (Ndalianis 8), uncovers and reflects upon changes in contemporary society. What is it then that is disclosed, one needs to ask, when "the traditional superhero image is scrutinized, deconstructed, reconstructed, and ridiculed" (ibid.) by today's superhero narratives?

In this paper, we would like to examine one such example of modern-day superhero discourse by analyzing the therein suggested shifts within the genre's

[1] Whenever the masculine pronoun is used to, the feminine is implied without prejudice.

familiar tropes, the changing attitudes of the underlying morality portrayed in it, as well as to discuss the transitions and transgressions newly taken by the superheroes themselves. The British television series *Misfits* exemplifies the 21st century de- and reconstruction of the superhero narrative to the point.

The show premiered on UK pay-channel E4 in November 2009 and ended in December 2013 after five seasons.[2] The fantasy drama series portrays a group of juvenile delinquents who are thrown together to do mandated community service. From the start, the general tone of the show is marked by strong language, the criminal tendencies of the protagonists and their clear disregard for authorities, as well as drug abuse and strong sexual content. The main characters are united by their status as social outcasts and young offenders, even though they are extremely different from one another in character. The combination of their highly conflicting personalities installs a network of complex relationships. Dialogs are therefore bound to be explosive, provocative and often highly amusing in nature. What eventually binds this diverse group of adolescents is the fact that they get caught in an electrical storm, in which they all accidentally obtain supernatural powers.

The daily routine of community service offers a sense of regularity in the lives of the main characters. Moreover, this orderliness is mirrored by the repetitive narrative structure of the series: each week, the order is disrupted and needs to be restored by the group. As it turns out, the Misfits[3] are not the only people affected by the storm. Other members of the community also develop superpowers, and, even though there are plotlines that take entire seasons to unfold, each individual episode focuses on one specific super-powered evil-doer from the outside, against which the protagonists have to defend themselves. Hence, the series follows a certain "Freak of the Week" (n.pag.) formula, as Owen calls it, which defines the structure of every episode.

The following paper focuses on two predominant forms of transgression as presented in *Misfits*. The first part[4] concentrates on the genre of superhero tales

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[2] This paper is based on the analysis of the first three seasons only. The fourth season aired during the time of writing, which will briefly be commented on at the end of the article. The fifth season aired while the book was in the editing process.

[3] When referring to the main characters of the show as a group (Nathan, Kelly, Simon, Alisha, Curtis, and in season 3: Rudy), the show's titular grouping "Misfits" is used in this paper, as opposed to the term "ASBO Five", which is a denomination used by the media in episode 6, season 2 of the show. Moreover, the term "Misfits" will be put in italics in reference to the series and used in standard format when referring to the characters.

[4] The first part of this paper is based on the original presentation by Lars Schmeink, whereas the second part is based on the presentation by Dana Frei. For the purpose of this publication, we have aligned our arguments in order to avoid unnecessary repetition and therefore present our analyses together.

and delineates the characteristics traditionally assigned to superheroes, such as their mission or inevitable duality of identities, in contrast to the traits as depicted in the contemporary superhero narrative of the series. In this part, we argue that *Misfits* adapts the superhero narrative of the ordinary individual imbued with extraordinary powers to the social realities of the 21st century. The recognizable transgression of the superhero genre from the perspective of a current social context is thereby illuminated. In the second part of this paper, our argument builds on the insight that the traditional superheroic mission, as well as sense of identity have been radically re-interpreted in the contemporary superhero narrative. The focus here lies on analyzing the morality of the protagonists' actions by reflecting upon their personalities' connection to the superpowers given to them naturally (i.e. via storm) as well as unnaturally (i.e. as a purchased good). In doing so, we aim to uncover underlying values, which initially seem rejected in sum.

Transgressions of Genre

Liquid Modernity and 21st Century Living

Angela Ndalianis describes hero myths on the one hand as universally and continuously present in "cultural memory" and a part of "human socialization" (3) since the beginning of time. On the other hand, she argues that these myths are protean, "dynamic beings who shift and metamorphose to accommodate themselves to specific eras and historic-cultural contexts" (3f.). As the terminology reveals, similarities of superhero narratives with ancient mythology are often argued to reflect the continuous need for myths to "give order and narrative structure to the way humans contemplate the world around them" (10). However, the reality of this world has shifted radically over the course of 75 years since Superman's first appearance, and with these shifts the superheroes' "status as symbolic facilitators and embodiments of civilizing processes" (8) has been called into question.

When examining the superhero genre of the 21st century, we propose to start with a short look at the social and political realities that define this century. According to sociologist Zygmunt Bauman, we live in a world defined by "liquid modernity": A world in which our ordinary systems of stability, such as family, religion and class organization, no longer exist or have been completely liquefied. Nothing, Bauman argues, is fixed or stable anymore:

> "Everything or almost everything in this world of ours keeps changing: fashions we follow and the objects of our attention [. . .], things we dream of and things we fear, things we desire and things we loathe, reasons to be hopeful and reasons to be apprehensive. And the conditions around us, conditions in which we make our living [. . .]." (*44 Letters* 1)

Bauman even claims that life in a liquid modern world is "the combined experience of *insecurity* (of position, entitlements and livelihood), of *uncertainty* (as to their continuation and future stability) and of *unsafety* (of one's body, one's self and their extensions: possessions, neighborhood, community)" (*Liquid Modernity* 160f., emphasis in original).

In addition, Ulrich Beck says, we are living in a "risk society," in which potential risks become decreasingly natural and increasingly manufactured, and in which the individual is faced with "*industrialized, decision-produced incalculabilities and threats*" (22, emphasis in original) that go far beyond one's capacity of coping, as these threats are mostly global, imperceptible, irreversible. Further, we live in an extreme insecurity of social position, which is reflected in our constant change of wants and needs, and caused by the negation of all existing value systems and institutional factors of stability. Individuality becomes key in our lives, communality is neglected and even frowned upon as a limitation to our individual self-fulfillment. In such a society, the superhero with his "metaphoric malleability" (Coogan 15) to represent a society's hopes and dreams – even the best version of itself – might look quite different from the most prototypical of superheroes, Siegel's Superman, the valiant knight in skin-tight shining armor, "the champion of the oppressed [. . .] sworn to devote his existence to helping those in need" (Siegel and Shuster 1).

"You lot? Superheroes?" – Misfits and the Question of Genre

Misfits can certainly be seen as such a reflection of the social changes of the 21st century described by Bauman and Beck. Nevertheless, the question remains if *Misfits* is indeed an example of a superhero narrative. In order to answer this question, it might help to consult a definition of the term "superhero" and to examine how this relates to questions of genre distinction. Leaving aside considerations of specific media (i.e. comics)[5] as more or less prototypical of the genre, we propose using Peter Coogan's definition from *Superhero: The Secret Origin of a Genre*:[6]

"A heroic character with a selfless, pro-social *mission*; with *superpowers* – extraordinary abilities, advanced technology, or highly developed physical, mental, or mystical skills; who has a *superhero identity* embodied in a codename and iconic costume, which typically express his biography, character, powers, or origin (transformation from ordinary person to superhero); and who is generically distinct, i.e. can be distinguished from char-

[5] Most scholars argue that superhero narrative is prototypically found in the comic, but has been branching out into other media: Fingeroth argues, that the superhero genre suffers from a "continual and historical exploitation [. . .] across a variety of media" (27), whereas Ndalianis speaks of a "superhero comic book aesthetic" 4) in other media.

[6] Other definitions do not provide as much precision and/or unique criteria (cf. Fingeroth 16f.; Reynolds 12f.), thus Coogan's definition seems preferable.

acters of related genres (fantasy, science fiction, detective, etc.) by a preponderance of generic conventions. Often superheroes have dual identities, the ordinary one of which is usually a closely guarded secret." (30, emphasis mine)

Coogan identifies three elements as prototypical of the superhero narrative – "mission, powers, and identity, or MPI" (39) – which apply to the main character(s) of genre texts. As a qualifier, he adds that due to the non-exclusive nature of genre, these elements might also be found in adjacent text types and that superhero narratives need to be separated from these by looking at "concatenation of other conventions" (43) within the text, found for example in paratext, setting and intertextual reference (cf. 47f.).

In the case of *Misfits*, E4 marketing and PR have clearly positioned the series as belonging to the superhero genre by paratextual markers such as titling their press release "*Misfits* – Who Wants a Superhero with an ASBO?" and sub-heading the accompanying online comic with "ASBOS to Super Heroes" (n.pag.). In addition, the show itself comments directly on the characters as being superheroes and continuously references the genre via intertextual commentary. A definitive positioning within genre discourse, while at the same time ironically subverting it, can be found at the end of the first episode. The series shows the Misfits on the roof of the community center discussing their newly-won powers:

Curtis: Is this it? Are we meant to be like this forever?

Simon: What if we are meant to be ... like ... superheroes?

Nathan: You lot? Superheroes? ... No offence, but in what kind of fucked-up world would that be allowed to happen?

Alisha: I did not sign up for that?

Nathan: Superheroes? I love this guy ... you prick!

Kelly: What if there is loads of people like us, all over town?

Nathan: No, that kind of thing only happens in America. This will fade away. I am telling you, by this time next week, it will be back to the same old boring shit.[7]

During this scene the camera is tracking the conversation in a series of medium shots, followed by a long shot from behind that reveals the Misfits as a group and establishes an ensemble – similar to the group images of comic superheroes such as the X-Men, the Justice League or the Avengers.[8] The irony of the scene lies

7 *Misfits*, Season 1, Episode 1. In the following, all references to the show will be shortened to the format S01E01.

8 For an example of the ensemble imagery see the website for Joss Whedon's *The Avengers* (2012). Also, the musical cues of the scene with its dramatic string arrangements bear strong generic resemblance to the scores of superhero films such as *The Avengers*.

in the juxtaposition of Nathan's commentary, that superheroes like the Misfits do not conform to genre conventions. At the same time, the show makes explicit its meta-fictionality by referencing viewer expectations through Nathan. The specific cultural reference of superhero narratives as a form of an American utopia or fantastic imagination is mocked by the following fly-over tracking shot, which directs the viewer's attention from the roof-top towards the world in which such characters actually could become superheroes: the working class ghetto of Thamesmead in South East London in a classic 1970s social development estate.

Both the show's metafictionality and intertextual reference to the genre are repeatedly highlighted over the course of the series, mostly to add irony to the characters' superhero status. To give just a few examples: When Curtis attempts to break up with his girlfriend Sam, he tries dozens of different approaches but never succeeds until he quotes a line from *Spider-Man*, which Sam finds tacky and immature enough to leave (S01E05). The melodramatic movie line becomes the only thing that works because Curtis' life itself has become theatrical. At the end of S03E01, the Misfits again find themselves on the rooftop of the community center, discussing their superhero status and its relevance to their lives. At one point, the new member of the ensemble, Rudy, asks: "Are we doing catchphrases?" and argues that they will need them "for when the shit goes down" because it seems unlikely that they would be spending the next weeks "ambling about picking up litter," thus revealing a metafictional understanding of the shows' mechanics and the nature of superhero narrative in general.

"We are lazy and incompetent – leave it to the police!" – A Superhero's Mission

Having established *Misfits* as part of the superhero genre, the stature and pride of these heroes' of being anti-social delinquents and self-absorbed adolescents may seem shocking. They are not quite prototypical of superheroes who, according to Coogan's definition, need a mission, something that guides their behavior and justifies their actions:

> "The superhero's mission is pro-social and selfless, which means that his fight against evil must fit in with the existing, professed mores of society and must not be intended to benefit or further himself. The mission convention is essential to the superhero genre because someone who does not act selflessly to aid others in times of need is not heroic." (31)

These parameters of the mission, even though they do not always apply neatly, as Coogan concedes, help differentiate between superheroes and supervillains, the latter of which pursue their own interests "at the legal, economic, or moral expense of others" (ibid.). Fingeroth, in a similar argument, points out that the most

obvious defining aspects of a superhero are "some sort of strength of character (though it may be buried), some system of [...] positive values, and a determination to, no matter what, *protect* those values" (17, emphasis in original). What differentiates him from the supervillain, who shares those same characteristics, is that the superhero "represents the values of the society that produces him," doing the right thing – and "more importantly, *he knows what the right thing is*" (ibid., emphasis in original). The superhero stands for ethics a society will recognize as superior to the practical considerations of any applied justice system.

It is exactly in this context that *Misfits*, in a general sense, manages to show that establishing a value system might be problematic in our liquid modern world. For one, the Misfits have all been placed under an "Anti-Social Behaviour Order (ASBO)", a civil order that allows institutions of governmental authority to sanction anti-social acts, that is, behavior "in a manner that caused or was likely to cause harassment, alarm or distress to one or more persons" ("Anti-Social Behaviour Orders" n.pag.). ASBOs are under heavy critique in the UK, their numbers having escalated and their intentional uses having been thwarted (cf. "Memorandum" n.pag.). Especially because breaching the conditions of an ASBO is a criminal offense (punishable with up to 5 years in prison), the National Association of Probation Officers (Napo) has estimated that "around 50% of those who are subject of an ASBO eventually end up in jail," even though "the original offence was not itself imprisonable" (ibid.). As Christian Lenz points out, ASBOs are generally aimed at youths? deviating from normed social interaction: drinking, sexual conduct, vandalism, and harassment. The order is supposed to mark the deviance and re-establish institutional control over the anti-social subject (cf. Lenz, n.pag.).

For the Misfits, the ASBO is ironically marked as both justified and linked to a more specific institutional blindness: both Kelly and Simon have acted out violently (assault and arson respectively), justifying the order, but would have clearly benefitted from more socially integrative measures such as psychological treatment instead of driving them deeper into anti-social patterns. Professional runner Curtis is made an example of for minor possession of illegal drugs, his sentence only reflecting the institutional need to name and shame the sports star as perpetrator. All of the Misfits display an anti-social behavior typical of youth deviancy, but over the course of the series, this is explained as psychological insecurity due to neglect, as mistakes of impulsive action, or simply as defense mechanisms. Their anti-social behavior is merely a reflection of the anti-social, anti-communal life that surrounds them. That the group is not inherently criminal is even pointed out by Nathan when Kelly is held hostage and the others need to buy her freedom. The Misfits use their powers to steal money from a security transport and Nathan realizes that they could have done so many times before: "A bunch of young offenders develop superpowers and not one of us thinks of using them to commit

crime. Shame on us." (S02E04). Incidentally, they never return to this kind of thinking, and when Simon needs money later on in the series, he borrows it from Seth instead of repeating the robbery.

In terms of the superhero's mission of service and protection towards his community, the ASBO thus ironically underscores the general values and expectations of society, which has never lived up to its own standards. In the series' pilot, the probation worker states the purpose of the ASBO in a speech that is oddly reminiscent of a superhero's mission:

> "This is it. This is your chance to do something positive, to give something back. You can help people. You can really make a difference to people's lives. That is what community service is all about. There are people out there who think you are scum. You have an opportunity to show them they're wrong." (S01E01)

Nathan's dead-pan answer perfectly expresses the insecurity of values present in society and general attitude towards social norms that the series showcases: "But what if they are right?" Clearly this lost generation does not value community but rather thinks of themselves and their own situation. When confronted with a delusional gangster killing another young offender, the group discusses what "doing the right thing" means. Nathan, in complete agreement with the social stigma that the ASBO has placed on him, defers the heroic action to the authorities: "We are lazy and incompetent. Leave it to the police." (S02E04) The group itself, their own physical integrity and social stability, becomes the communal order to be preserved. Interestingly then, the Misfits actually "do the right thing" in most episodes, and restore that communal order (even beyond their group). Even though Simon tries to establish a motivation for the Misfits, the group's mission does not go beyond securing their own existence. As such, one could compare them with a character like the Hulk, who, Coogan argues, "fights primarily for self-preservation but inadvertently does good" (41).

The inadvertent good that comes from fighting supervillains, another "one of the significant markers of the superhero genre" (ibid. 61) is similarly complicated in *Misfits* though. Typically, a given episode's simple "villain" threatens an individual or the group as a whole and forces them to react: a girl from Simon's past wants his affection and starts taking over the identities of the other Misfits in order to cause mayhem (S02E01); an overprotective father kills everyone that gets too close to his daughter (S02E05). Interestingly, most of these conflicts are of a personal nature revolving around the impact of dysfunctional social institutions such as community, family, love relations, employment and living environment on the individual: the Misfits are superheroes who fight the insecurity, uncertainty and unsafety of living in a liquid modern world.

In the season finales, however, larger-scale "supervillains" emerge to threaten the community beyond the Misfits group. In the last episode of season one, a girl named Rachel uses her power of persuasion to start a chastity organization similar to the American "True Love Waits" and to radically alter the values and norms of today's society. The organization, "Virtue," speedily turns into a reactionary group, forcing formerly unpopular behavior standards onto a helpless youth. The proclaimed chastity, piety and conformity of "Virtue" are representative of a time in which institutions such as religion, family and community stood against the precariousness of our reality. By oppressing the former loose and raucous youth of the estate, by enforcing a conservative, white middle-class dress as a uniform and violent brainwashing any opposition, Rachel and her organization force lost values (as they were common in the 1950s) onto our liquid modern age. Juxtaposing these outdated morals with today's urge towards instant gratification, ever-changing offerings of sexual partners and entertainments, the series equates these values with fascist ideology. In a sermon-like speech, Nathan takes the role of the savior of the sinful and spokesman of liquid modern non-morality and non-existence of fixed social values:

> "She's got you thinking, this is how you are supposed to be. But it is not. We're young! We're supposed to drink too much, we're supposed to have bad attitudes and shag each other's brains out. We are designed to party! [...] If you could just see yourselves. It breaks my heart. You're wearing cardigans. We had it all, we fucked up bigger and better than any generation that came before us. We were so beautiful. We're screw-ups. I am a screw-up. And I plan to be a screw-up until my late twenties, maybe even early thirties." (S01E06)

Nathan then struggles with Rachel and they both fall to their deaths, ending season one with him discovering his superpower of immortality – in the grave, after having been buried. His resurrection from the dead then turns him into a superhero, his mission statement: embracing liquid modernity to the fullest. His mission of saving everyone's hedonistic individuality is a bitter commentary on society's status quo, placing value solely in pleasure and individual gratification. Ironically, though, he does act like a superhero in not abandoning his friends and community (as hedonistic and self-centered as they might be) to the fascist regime, and in sacrificing his life for others.

"We don't need to be caught up in all this bullshit!" – Unwanted Superpowers

In the finale season two, a frustrated priest – again a symbol of the lost values and broken moorings of community and religion – turns into a supervillain by buying superpowers and using them to appear as the second coming of Christ,

calling himself Jesus. He starts by walking on water and stripping a robber of a gun via telekinesis, but soon he abuses his powers by extorting money and having the same criminal rob and kill for his own purposes. He continues to buy more powers, becoming power-hungry both literally and figuratively. Similar to Rachel, Jesus represents religion with its moral values of a bygone era being corrupted in our contemporary world. The institutional stability provided by religion is shown as broken, corrupt, and concerned with self-interest and instant gratification.

An additionally interesting point about this episode is that it explicitly comments on another prototypical element of the superhero narrative: superpowers. Coogan argues that superpowers determine the superhero, in that his power "amplifies the abilities" (32) of other heroes – where a hero might be strong, Superman is superstrong, an exaggeration of human abilities beyond proportion. The superhero possesses "skills and abilities normal humans do not" (Fingeroth 17), and the "extraordinary nature of the superhero will be contrasted with the ordinariness of his surroundings" (Reynolds 16), so as to showcase these skills. Ordinary beings are needed so that the sense of wonder the superhero evokes is not blunted by there only being extraordinary characters.

In the mentioned episode (S02E07), two aspects are important for the analysis: First, the Misfits at one point lose their powers and return to being ordinary people, thus contrasting strongly with the remaining supervillain and, more to the point, with the superhero characters they were before. And second, a character is introduced into the series (becoming a recurring character in season three) who can absorb superpowers and store them, thus generating an economy of powers and the option to add or subtract elements from the superhero status.

In a self-reflexive moment, triggered by Alisha's discontent with her inability to be intimate with her boyfriend due to her power of sexual frenzy, the Misfits discuss the advantages and disadvantages of having a power. The offer made by the power dealer Seth to buy their powers and restore their lives to normal is a strong temptation for the young group.

Nikki: What has any one of us really achieved with our powers?

Nathan: You mean apart from saving all our lives?

Alisha: We would not need saving if it wasn't for the powers. We don't need to be caught up in all this bullshit. (S02E07)

The discussion turns on the question of choice, of being charged with a "selfless mission" and of the fate that comes along with it. Within the course of the season, most of the characters express practical day-to-day problems with their powers. Kelly becomes afraid of any social interaction because of her telepathy and the constant tirade of lies that surround her. She falls in love with a gorilla-turned-

man because his thoughts are honest and reflect his actions (S02E05), but he gets shot and dies. Curtis is frustrated because his power does not allow him to turn back time at will, and his girlfriend Nikki, similarly complains about her power of teleportation: it shifts her at the most inappropriate moments, i.e. when she is experiencing an orgasm (S02E07). The Misfits, wishing for normal life without "this bullshit," consequently turn to the power dealer Seth and sell their powers, becoming ordinary again. Simon, who still believes that their powers are connected to a mission, confronts them and explains the danger of giving up their power in an intertextual reference that draws upon the self-doubt convention of superhero comics and films:

Alisha: What are you doing here?

Simon: I wanted to know what he was doing with the powers. Why are you here?

Kelly: Twenty-fucking-grand!

Simon: You sold your powers?

Kelly: Yeah, mate!

Simon: You shouldn't be doing this. We were given them for a reason.

Nikki: And what reason is that?

Curtis: I give you twenty-thousand reasons for getting rid of them.

Simon: It is like in *Superman 2*, when Superman gives up his powers so that he can be with Lois Lane.

Kelly: And?

Simon: General Zod took over the world!

Curtis: That is totally relevant, except there ain't no General Zod and that's twenty-thousand pounds. Later… (S02E07)

In liquid modernity, the ordinary is without security, without safety. Values are corrupted and life itself is a precarious adventure that could go wrong with any decision. No institution exists that is willing or able to step in and save you. Hence, when Fake-Jesus sends out his robber to bring more money, that criminal decides to rob the bar where Curtis works and the Misfits hang out. In the ensuing struggle, a stray bullet hits Nikki. Her unnecessary death drives home the point of a precarious reality and the purpose of the superpowers for the group. Nathan could have acted as a human shield, Nikki could have teleported out of the way and Curtis could have just rewound time to undo the robbery. But ordinary as they are, the Misfits are unable to intervene. They feel the pressure of normality, being confronted with ordinary life and its consequence of a meaningless death. In a heroic decision to accept their mission – as unclear and unstated as it still is – they decide to act against the supervillain and get back their powers at all costs. They

confront him, steal his money and in a nice plot twist make him kill himself with his own powers.

At the end, they are then confronted with an even more problematic choice. Since their old powers have died with Fake-Jesus, they now get to choose new powers. With the introduction of Seth, the power dealer, the series again calls upon a superhero genre convention while subverting the original element into a liquid modern revision.[9] The ensemble, defined by their characteristic superpowers, now undergoes a radical change in that the dynamic of the group shifts. Instead of adhering to the convention of a "linkage between biography or personality and powers" (Coogan 256, note 16) as in the first two seasons, the third season of *Misfits* uses superpowers as yet another commodity that can be traded, sold, bought, stolen or extorted. The moral implications of this break with convention will be discussed in the second part of this paper in more detail; it is worth mentioning at this point, however, that the ideology representative of such a shift is obviously closely related to liquid modernity.

"Why do I have to be the Invisible Cunt?" – Secret Identity, Silly Names and Costumes

Third and last on Coogan's list of prototypical elements is the superhero identity. In his argument, this "identity element comprises the codename and the costume, with the secret identity being a customary counterpart to the codename," both of which usually "firmly externalize either their alter ego's inner character or biography" (32). In Coogan's view, the costume and name of a superhero function as iconic markers of their identity, in their stripped-down simplicity amplifying the meaning that the superhero itself transports. Furthermore, "the mask", as Fingeroth argues, "is recognized as bestower of power as well as disguiser of identity" (51).

In *Misfits* this conception is subverted and deconstructed on several levels. Most obviously in the sense that the protagonists have no codenames, a point which they comment on, again foregrounding a metafictional knowledge of the genre and its conventions:

Nathan: Think about it, we could have really cool superhero names: Captain Invincible. Mister Backwards.

Curtis: I sound retarded.

Nathan: The Invisible Cunt.

Simon: Why do I have to be the Invisible Cunt?

[9] There are superhero comics that explore the question of "different powers" for known superheroes, most famously the "What if the Fantastic Four Had Different Super-Powers?" issue of *What If* (cf. Coogan, 255f., note 16).

Nathan: Because you just are, man, get over it. What is the point of us all having superpowers if we can't use them. Make obscene amounts of money and shag lots of drunk, impressionable girls. It is clearly what God intended for us, and I for one will not let him down. (S02E06)

In this scene, Nathan picks up on the idea that codenames refer to inner character or biography, and that they represent a superhero's personality. In his own charming way he thus bestows names on the male Misfits. Simon, the shy guy who never gets noticed and who suddenly manifests the power to turn invisible, thus obtains the codename "The Invisible Cunt." Taking Curtis' reaction as an indication, the show here mocks the "foppish alter egos" (Coogan 32) that superheroes tend to project with their codenames.

Whenever the show does allow codenames, they seem either ironic or somewhat ridiculous and non-befitting a superhero. When in S02E06 the group is found out because of a superpower media frenzy, one character is named "Monsieur Grand Fromage" because of his ability to manipulate dairy products – "the shittiest power ever", as Kelly so aptly puts it – whereas the Misfits are referred to as the "ASBO Five". As discussed above, ASBO and superheroism are already ironically juxtaposed in regards to the selfless, communal mission. In addition, the group here does not get individual names, as would be befitting superheroes and mark them as extraordinary individuals. The group name rather functions, as does the ASBO itself, to lower the visibility of the deviant behavior and to eliminate all individuality.

Moreover, just as the group name functions to undermine the superhero identity, their costume is equally un-heroic. The community service overall on the one hand fulfills Reynold's claim that a "costume functions as a uniform, binding together all super-beings and costumed characters in contrast to the non-costumed ordinary world" (26) but only by deliberately denying the individual identity and reducing the heroes to non-persons. It is precisely their anonymity and status as pariahs that mark their identity. As Lenz notices, there is, of course, a slight adjustment to the costume that does set apart each individual from the others, as each character wears the overall differently, by accessorizing it or by simply negating the uniformity of fabric and cut (i.e. Curtis wears only the bottom half, knotting the top; Alisha uses a belt to enhance her figure). Nonetheless, the costume does not yield power to the Misfits. Masks and superhero costumes are used for different reasons: for protection, intimidation of enemies, as a source of power, a symbol for immortality, or to avert danger from loved ones by hiding behind a second identity (cf. Fingeroth 47-61) – the first and original identity thus becoming secret. For most of the show, the group ironically adheres to this concept of a secret identity in the sense that their anti-social manner, reflected in their ASBO

and thus their overall non-costumes, actually keeps them under everyone's radar as individuals – even in their "real" identities.

In S02E06, this status quo is upset, however. The Misfits are found out and superpowers go public. When faced with their identity being revealed and their invisible making costumes being stripped from them, the group turns to Simon to find out what will happen next and he paints the grim picture of genre convention:

Simon: They'll treat us like freaks. They'll lock us up in a secret military facility and conduct experiments on us.

Nathan: Hey, no one's experimenting on me. I'm not a monkey.

Kelly: What we gonna do?

Simon: We have to go into hiding. We assume new identities. We break off all connection with our family and friends. We wear disguises and only go out after dark.

Curtis: I am not loving the sound of that?

Nathan: Yeah, do you expect me never to see my mom again? Who's gonna do my washing, huh? Ah, you have not thought this through.

Simon's solution to the problem is adopting a conventional superhero secret and dual identity, which is then ridiculed in a gesture of adolescent ignorance by Nathan. For the group, with the sole exception of Simon, the solution lies in becoming media stars, profiteering on the attention and letting a manager take over their lives. All their misdeeds – which have increased considerably over the course of the series, by mistake or accident – are glossed over by their newly found popularity. The manager aptly spins the group's deviance into an asset: "I would say that these people you may or may not have killed were evil, you were protecting society. You are not murderers, you are heroes. Superheroes. Rich, famous superheroes." (S02E06)

But again, as with the loss of superpowers, the loss of secrecy turns out to be a disaster that kills the whole group, which can only be reversed by Curtis travelling back in time. The disaster does not strike against the superheroes' sense of family and security, however, as the enemy does not attack their loved ones. Rather, it is the media hype, the attention span of society, always looking for that bigger spectacle, that better deal, that causes another superpowered being to retaliate, as he realizes that he cannot compete as a hero and needs to turn to being villainous. His "Big Cheese" ability to manipulate dairy-products only makes headlines as long as no one else with a better, more interesting power is around. With the ASBO Five along, his power is not worth the attention. Media frenzy starts to move towards people with powers from the "A-list", as Nathan calls it – people like the young woman Daisy. "She can heal people. Any illness, any disease. She plans to heal the world. She is like a pretty modern day Mother Theresa with

a superpower. She is going to make a fortune" (S02E06), the manager reckons, and thus perfectly showcases liquid modernity's economy of attention. The shows ironic commentary on this self-less superheroic mission of world-healing is that Daisy suffocates on a latte macchiato, while at the same time impaling herself on her Mother Theresa humanitarian award. When asked why he killed the others, "Grand Fromage" says: "Because the only time people like me ever get noticed, is when we kill a shitload of people. They will talk about this for years. They will talk about me. Monsieur Grand Fromage." (S02E06) The series satirically comments upon contemporary media saturation in this instance, as well as on the fact that not even superheroes are exempt from the constant sway of audience attention and public opinion changes. Ordinary people become extraordinary superheroes who in term become ordinary media entertainment, which is then replaced by something more extraordinary like a supervillain and so on. Stability of values and categories is completely dissolved.

Last but not least, the show's only "real" superhero, a man in a mask, with a codename, a sense of self-less mission and superpowers needs to be addressed. In terms of Coogan's definition and within the concept of the show, this character functions as the prototype, the classical superhero character, who is contrasted to the rest of the Misfits. At the end of the first season, a guy in a hoodie rescues Nathan from the Virtue-mob with perfect timing for the escape (S01E06). Later on in the series, the savior returns, disguised by a black paintball mask, and helps the group over and over again, displaying clairvoyance as well as great acrobatic skills. He is mockingly named "The Guy in the Mask" in the series,[10] and his mannerisms (the mask, saving people etc.) are made fun off several times by the characters. It is specifically the use of superhero conventions that is repeatedly commented upon. When "The Guy in the Mask" rescues Peter, a comic book fan, he easily identifies him as a superhero by genre conventions: "You are a superhero. I know you can't tell me who you are. That's why you have a secret identity, right?" (S03E03)

When the show finally reveals his identity as Simon's future self who travelled back in time to rescue Alisha from death, the secret identity convention becomes more poignant as (present) Simon now really has another secret (future) identity. Future Simon needs to remain secret as knowledge about his presence would alter

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[10] Interestingly, fans of the series as well as the official E4 website do not pick up on the in-text nomination but rather refer to the character as "Superhoodie" ("Superhoodie" n.pag.), thus drawing the connection not with the black paintball mask but with the hooded sweatshirt he is wearing. This, of course, ironically undercuts public perception of youth in hoodies as hooligans or threats and bestows a positive image on youth in such a garment. In both cases though, the name-personality connection is non-existent and the name is simply a statement of "maskedness."

the time line, radically changing his present self's development and thus risking the chance that he will later not become "The Guy in the Mask". This is metafictionally commented upon by the series in S03E03. Peter, the comic book fan, has the power to draw comics, which then become reality. When he meets "The Guy in the Mask" and later recognizes Simon, he makes him become his friend. During that episode, Peter forces Simon to choose between the superhero's mission and his individual fulfillment, at which point Simon (and thus "The Guy in the Mask") realizes the limitations of his own belief in superhero conventions. He confronts Peter and for the first time negates his own statement from the shows very first episode: "I am not a superhero. They are a fantasy. Your fantasy, not mine." In the end, though, by drawing a sacrificial death for himself and a change of heart for Simon, Peter ensures that Simon will become "The Guy in the Mask": "You did it. You saved her. A superhero has to be prepared to die for what he believes in." (S03E03). The series here openly calls into question the conventions of superheroism, especially its mission of selflessness. Even the most convinced superhero of the series is not selfless by choice but rather because the convention (as enacted through the comic book fan) needs him to be.

To sum up, the superhero narrative functions as a representation of and adaptation to the societies out of which it is born. *Misfits* shows us that rigid value systems do not exist anymore; that a moral code is fluid and adaptable; that powers can shift, reverse or even be bought and sold in order to adapt to new situations; that superhero identities become complicated by media attention; and that the low-profile non-costume of uniformity turns out to be much more efficient than any high exposition costume of alter ego reflection.

Dealing with Misfitting Powers

As mentioned before, the third season of *Misfits* introduces a number of storylines that deal with the effects of an altered set of preconditions which is caused by the introduction of a new character: the power dealer and initially cold-blooded businessman Seth. As a result of the new possibilities he offers to the characters, this season differs from the first two in that it is marked by a variety of transgressions and boundary crossings, which are implicitly portrayed as going too far – arguably, as a result of the abuse of an 'unnaturally' obtained power. The aim of this section is to analyze the dissolving of moral and social boundaries in the aftermath of the introduction of this power dealer as depicted in selected storylines of *Misfits'* third season, and to discuss in particular the values and ideologies latently reflected and debated within them.

Personality Extensions and the Process of Maturation

Initially, the powers distributed to the various characters in the electrical storm at the very beginning of the series display a clear connection to the respective personalities of their bearers. The show thus clearly adheres to the conventional linkage of either biography or personality and the adopted powers, as described above (cf Coogan 256, note 16). They seem, in fact, to reflect, amplify or adapt to certain traits of the person they append to. In short, they function as a hyperbolic reflection of who their bearers are. For instance, there is Alisha who is portrayed as highly sexual and no stranger to the idea of taking advantage of her natural powers of seduction. After the storm and due to her newly acquired superpower, she can no longer touch a man without causing arousal, and even raging lust. Then, there is Kelly, who has been stereotyped as a simple-minded, lower class 'chav' by people all her life, due to her accent and style. In the past, she had repeatedly reacted insecurely and aggressively to people's untenable judgments. Kelly now has the ability to hear exactly what people think of her: she has obtained the power to read minds. Moreover, there is shy and introverted Simon, who has always felt isolated and invisible to most of society, and especially the opposite sex. He suddenly obtains the ability to literally turn invisible. Even newly introduced characters who join the Misfits at a later point in the story display a clear connection between their powers and personalities or biographical backgrounds: Rudy, for example, who is clearly torn between a number of contradictory personality facets, obtains the ability to literally split his multiple personality into two separate and independently acting characters.

Based on these and other similar connections between an acquired superpower and a respective character with a given personal history, we view the powers gained in the storm as a form of personality extension and their allocation as purposely aimed. This circumstance adds a sense of 'naturalness' to the possession of a given power – the power belongs to a character and appends to him or her, as if drawn by a natural attraction. We would suggest, even, that they hold up a mirror to the characters' personalities, and especially their weaknesses, and thereby have a function of teaching them a lesson about themselves. When the characters thus have to learn to deal with their powers, as well as to control them, they are simultaneously forced to come to terms with who they really are.

Reckless and cocky as he is as a person, Nathan, for example, is given the power of immortality, a power that emphasizes his natural hubris. Whilst now rendered incapable of being too reckless to lose his own life, he has to learn regard for other people's wellbeing and save lives by turning his recklessness into bravery and his egomania into at least a certain amount of empathy. The same applies to Curtis, the athlete, who has ruined his career with one idiotic mistake,

been struggling with the consequences of his actions, and become so driven by remorse and regret, that he receives the ability to turn back time. Despite his power, however, he still has to come to terms with the consequences of his own actions and accept the past. Curtis is doing community service and has been banned from athletics because he was caught buying drugs. His girlfriend Sam who was also involved in this event was sent to prison as a punishment for her actions. As Sam had been sent to prison mainly because she took the blame for Curtis, he is in debt to her. When she is finally released after six months in jail, Curtis is confronted with what he had done to her. As she nevertheless wishes to be reunited with her lover in S01E04, he is faced with the harsh reality of not having waited for her and being in a new relationship with Alisha instead. Ridden with guilt, he decides to prevent the drug bust from happening in the first place. A number of failed attempts to undo these harmful events and actions, however, painfully teach him the lesson that he cannot simply avoid taking responsibility by using his power, but can only make things right for those he has hurt by accepting the blame and reacting to the consequences of his choices accordingly.

The stories told in *Misfits* are enriched by the addition of supernatural powers to a very human plot. They are, however, much more about the difficulties of being a teenager than about the fantastic elements of the storylines: The protagonists are 'misfits' not mainly because they have powers – even though they initially believe to be the only ones that do. Also, they are not 'misfits' mainly because they are delinquents – although that, of course, amplifies their 'misfit-ness' as well. Mostly, however, they are 'misfits' in the sense that adolescents could generally be seen to be. The teen-age of the protagonists symbolizes the transition from childhood into adulthood, and the development of maturing into fit members of a society. They have not finished their maturation yet, and the lessons they are supposed to learn from their powers are merely a hyperbolic version of the challenges posed to any juvenile, trying to develop a full personality and come to terms with the traits given to them by nature.

In this sense, *Misfits* matches the general tendency of teen drama to feature coming-of-age storylines. Moreover, as Ross and Stein argue, television formats which focus on teen characters and/or are aimed at a teen audience offer "a crucial space for the negotiation of political, social and cultural issues [. . .] television featuring the lives and experiences of teens not only touch on coming of age issues, but also on questions of self, identity, gender, race, and community" (1). Hence, the series can also be seen as a platform, based on which norms, values and possible forms of identity as reached within a maturation process, can be negotiated – a trait that is also associated with the superhero genre.

Thus reading the series as a form of coming-of-age drama, the protagonists are not so much super-heroes, but mostly super-teens. *Misfits* tells the story of how

a group of juveniles forcedly convene every day, dressed in their orange jump-suits (in subversion of the usual fancy superhero attire as discussed above), and *re*actively (instead of *pro*actively) fight against all threats directly coming at them in their secluded world of community service (instead of saving the world with a sense of duty that stereotypically defines the superhero[11]). Nevertheless, the flawed and immature natures of the Misfits can also be aligned with the tragic heroes of classic tales. As Neuhaus and Wallenborn argue, the dramatic hero in such narratives is traditionally equipped with a fatal flaw, the so-called 'hamartia', which he has to overcome within the process of his heroic journey and for which he is commonly severely punished (233). The maturation process of the young protagonists in *Misfits* can thus also be read as a hyperbolic version of the necessary learning process of a classic hero who is equipped with both remarkable and superhuman powers as well as tragically human flaws.

Freaks of the Week and the Failure to Grow

As argued, the powers given to the characters in the series can be seen as personality extensions in all cases, i.e. also in the cases of the so-called Freaks-of-the-Week against which the protagonists have to defend themselves. These antagonists are individuals who have also been given a power amplifying a character trait, a weakness, an experience or fear. What differentiates them from the protagonists, however, is that they do not manage to overcome or learn from these extremely emphasized negative traits and are thus bound to fail. Lucy, for instance, a highly insecure girl who has always wished to be someone else, is turned into a shape-shifter by the storm (S02E01). As she is jealous of Simon's new circle of friends and feels rejected by him, she begins to turn them against one another by adopting their form and seemingly forcing them to do unacceptable things to each other. She ends up getting killed. Brian, the afore-mentioned master of lactokinesis who abuses his power to take revenge on those who have deprived him of his long-craved and finally received (media) attention does not manage to survive either, as he proves incapable of finding any sense of self-worth that is independent of the view of others (S02E06). Another character, who has been entrapped in a computer game reality since the storm, refuses to listen to reason and insists on remaining in his escapist version of the world. He never gives in to the pleads of his begging victims, maintaining the world-view that all characters he meets

[11] According to Barbara Kain, there is a widespread tendency to depict a new form of anti-heroes who are not in the least interested in saving the world in (pseudo-) superhero comics, films and parodies of the genre. *Misfits* certainly fits neatly into that trend as well: "Die Tendenz neigt zu realistisch dargestellten, im Alltagstrott gefangenen und an ihrer Existenz zweifelnden, ambivalenten Problemcharakteren, sogenannten Antihelden – zumindest was das männliche Heldengeschlecht betrifft – sowie zu amüsanten und verspielten Superhelden-Parodien" (8).

are automatically enemies who must be destroyed for points in the game. Hence, he does not return to humanity, refuses to learn empathy and therefore cannot survive (S02E04). Moreover, the tattoo artist who can manipulate the emotional attachments of people is eventually punished for forcing Kelly to love him, as a punishment for his refusal to recognize that true affection has got to come freely and love has got to be earned (S02E03).

Based on a number of examples like these, we would like to argue that the Freaks-of-the-Week that attack the protagonists in every episode are always characters who have failed to turn their powers, as well as their natural personality traits, into tools of strength and a base for personal growth. Hence, they have failed to mature and their fatal flaw eventually destroys them. Nevertheless, the consequences of this kind of failure do not only exist for the weekly attackers in the show, but also for the protagonists. They too are punished when they try to take advantage of their power. When Alisha starts using her power to sexually seduce any man she desires, for example, she nearly initiates her own rape (S01E03) and when Curtis attempts to undo the past, he ends up killing half of his friends (S01E04). Hence, the supernatural gifts given to the individuals in *Misfits* can help them overcome their fears and insecurities by making them go through a typical hero's journey and learning process, thus initiating and accelerating the maturation process of a teenager, as well as teaching them as super-powered beings about the responsibility of a superhero as mentioned in the Spider-Man edict: with great power comes great responsibility.[12] Alternatively, the characters can choose to abuse their newly given powers in order to take revenge on others, satisfy their personal desires or simply provide them with an easy way out, i.e. to ignore the weaknesses they have. In case of the latter, the character gives in to sin and is therefore punished for his or her failure.

Disruption of Order and the Abuse of Power

The first two seasons of *Misfits* are marked by the refusal of characters to grow as a person, i.e. to mature and to learn something from their 'naturally' given character flaws that are expanded into superpowers. Their refusal usually leads to horrific consequences. In the third season, this general code is mostly continued, but it is taken one step further. A supernatural dealer is introduced to the show, who exhibits the ability to take and give powers by touching someone. All of the sudden – in a scene that has been discussed in detail above – the characters are thus given the opportunity to change their fates and dispose of the sometimes paralyzing personality extension that is their power. As this new character opens

[12] According to Simone Ofenloch, this credo can be seen as motto of all classical superhero conceptions (17).

up a trading business, they are suddenly given the option to purchase, dispose of, abuse or steal powers not originally meant for them. Hence, the afore-mentioned punishable abuse already begins with the possession of the power.

The third season of *Misfits* thus alters the turn of events and features a number of storylines that deal specifically with the effects of this precondition. Interestingly, the person responsible for this change is called Seth. He is thus given the name of the Egyptian god of Chaos, and chaos is indeed what he spurs. Seth himself initiates a series of catastrophic events when his greed for money and power lead him to selling a number of very dangerous abilities to a disillusioned vicar pretending to be Jesus (S02E07). He does not care that Elliott uses Alisha's former power to rape women. He does not even ask what good the power of sexual seduction could do to a religious leader when he sells Alisha's power to Elliott. He simply does not care, thus refusing to take responsibility for his actions and violating Spider-Man's credo once again.

As a general tendency, the largest scale horrific events in the series seem to occur when some kind of moral, physical or social boundary is crossed. When powers are taken and used that do not truly belong to a personality, i.e. when they are bought for one's own benefit, things go wrong. That is especially the case when these powers are chosen for selfish reasons. Because of Seth, the distribution of powers is no longer controlled by nature or an outside force, such as any form of godly creature. It has become an object of capitalism and human culture instead. Naturally given powers are sold like commodities, these former personality extensions thus become marketable and their bearers thereby corruptible.

Curtis, for example, buys the power to switch his gender back and forth (S03E02). Even though he never had any real interest in this power in the first place – it had simply been the only one left to buy – he soon recognizes its potential, as his newly acquired female alter ego provides him with a second chance to return to athletics. Moreover, he increasingly takes advantage of his female body for pleasure. When he thus begins to abuse his power for the purpose of an intensified form of masturbation, to alternate between male and female orgasms, he accidentally self-inseminates and eventually has to dispose of his power again, in order to avoid either pregnancy or abortion. The power can thus be seen as refusing to be abused for self-gratification or any other selfish motifs without consequence. Instead of dealing with that, however, Curtis chooses to avoid the problem by simply giving up his female side, and trading his gender-switching power for the horrific new power of bringing back the dead. This power is then abused as well by someone it does not belong to, in order to resurrect a former girlfriend. Seth asks Curtis to bring back to life a woman whom he himself was responsible for killing. He does not do so for her sake, however. He neither wants to get together with her again, nor does he simply wish to give her a new life. Instead, he

merely wishes to relinquish his own personal sense of guilt. Once again, this truly selfish motivation is punished, as resurrecting the dead eventually turns them into cannibalistic zombies (S03E07). This episode is a clear reminder of the idea of hubris: It is not a human's place to play God by deciding over life and death.

Even in the Nazi-episode (S03E04) where a 75-year old Jew purchases the power to travel back in time in order to kill Hitler, everything goes wrong. Of course, trying to avoid the Holocaust seems like a very noble and altruistic plan at first glance. After all, it would not simply benefit one person, but potentially all of society. It would eradicate one of the most horrific genocides in the history of the world. Nevertheless, we would like to argue that his real motivation is not purely altruistic either, but really quite personal in nature. As he himself states in his motivational letter, he has to do this in order to dispose of his feeling of guilt for never having done anything against the Nazis when he was younger. He does not want to die knowing that he did nothing. If he had had purely altruistic motives, he could have bought the power and given it to someone strong and young who could have potentially killed Hitler. Instead, this physically fragile old man confronts Hitler on his own, and risks not only failure, but also the loss of this precious power and humanity's single chance to ever alter the past. When he thus attacks Hitler, he is not only overpowered with ease, but Hitler even comes into possession of the old man's mobile phone. With this future technology now in the wrong hands, the world transforms, and we are presented with an alternate reality, in which the Nazis are still in power.

The third season of *Misfits* is marked by a vast number of transgressions and boundary crossings, which are implicitly portrayed as going too far. As opposed to the first two seasons, where things tended to go wrong as the result of a selfish abuse of power, the third season takes 'going wrong' even further when the abilities that are abused are 'unnaturally' obtained powers to begin with. Suitably, Seth eventually pays for his carelessness in selling any power to anyone as well, when he is forced to rob people of their power and give them to the Nazis in the episode just described. In the course of this episode (S03E04), Seth is eventually taught a lesson about the necessity of a sense of morality and responsibility for the powers he holds. Unfortunately, this lesson is rendered temporarily ineffective by the end of the episode, as Kelly remains the only one who remembers the alternate Nazi reality. Nevertheless, the relationship between Kelly and Seth begins to form within this storyline and eventually leads to their relationship, which then leads to Seth finally learning his lesson in the zombie episode S03E07 described above.

Morality and its Christian Legacy

At first sight, the overall tone of the series *Misfits* seems rather 'immoral' in many ways. It perfectly fits into what Perry recognizes as a trend in superhero comic

books and film to focus on "deliberately amoral and decadent characters" (171). The protagonists in this case are delinquents with countless character flaws. According to Oropeza, however, the flawed nature of contemporary heroes simplifies identification even in narratives in which superheroes are still presented as nobler, better versions of the self: "we also see the flaws in heroes, which make them humans rather than gods, creatures instead of Creator" (269). Hence, the non-Christ-like hero figure of modern superhero narratives such as *Misfits*, i.e. characters who may not automatically be selflessly willing to sacrifice themselves to save humanity, but arrive at doing so nonetheless, are much more suitable to a predominantly secularized audience. In addition to the flawed heroes, *Misfits* features a vast amount of drug abuse, coarse language, vulgarity, unprotected promiscuity and, last but not least, numerous cases of homicide, which – despite the fact that fiction has a tendency to differentiate clearly in its evaluation between "evil violence" and "violence against evil" (cf Gutmann 113) – is still in clear violation of legal as well as religious guidelines.

Nevertheless, certain core values are implicitly promoted by the show, as we would like to argue, and there is a deep-seated sense of morality transported through the effects caused by the supernatural abilities. The powers given to individuals are the dice dealt to them by nature, fate or possibly even a higher power. Despite the fact that the existence of God is literally ruled out in S03E08 by the highly disappointed, formerly Christian ghost of Rachel – the leader of the Virtue movement who was killed in S01E06 – the presence of implicit religious themes is easily uncovered. In fact, there is a general sense of morality in *Misfits*, which seems to be formed by Christianity's cultural legacy. This is only true to a highly selective extent, though, as the commandment not to kill is clearly ignored, for example. Also, the characters repeatedly commit blasphemy and ridicule Christian values in the show, as seen in the analysis of the first and second seasons' finales above. Nevertheless, the notion of the 'doctrine of original sin' seems to lie at the core of the value system as presented in the depicted world. As Perry defines it, original sin "names the bias toward evil conduct that infects all human beings [. . . ,] accounts for the widespread structures and acts of moral evil [. . . and] does not absolve anyone of responsibility" (182). Consequently, sins such as envy, wrath, greed, pride and even lust are punished severely in *Misfits* whenever they are taken too far. The consequences then can only be reversed or avoided by regard and compassion for others, maturity of personality and selfless courage. This circumstance additionally mirrors the earlier argument that the show is really about youth and the difficulties posed by coming of age.

Outlook on Season Four

During the writing process of this article, E4 aired the fourth season of *Misfits*, shifting several aspects of the show's dynamics and almost completely exchanging the main cast. While there has been too little time to fully analyze this new season and to engage it with as much depth as the other three seasons, we feel that it still warrants mentioning within the scope of a short outlook. During season four, three new characters, Finn, Jess and Abbey, are introduced in order to replace the vacancies left by Simon, Alisha and Kelly (who remains in Africa to clear landmines, aided by her superpower of "rocket science", we are told). By mid-season, Curtis, the last remaining original Misfit, is killed, leaving Rudy the only character to promote a certain form of narrative continuity. Especially in regards to realizing an overarching plot for the whole show (or even just the fourth season), this break proves to be impossible to overcome.

More interesting, from the point of view of this article at least, is that with Simon gone and thus no one acting as superhero expert and moral compass of the group, the show's thematic and ideological emphasis shifts completely. Whereas the superhero narrative was emphasized continuously via metafictional commentary and intertextual reference in the first three seasons, in season four it almost completely fades from the show. Without Simon making certain problems of super-heroism explicit and connecting the events to a greater meta-narrative, the show comes close to ignoring the superpowers given to the characters. Even though Jess, Finn and Abbey have superpowers, the plot no longer features these powers as prominently as before. Instead, the series focuses on the teenage drama aspect, on coming-of-age plots and stereotypical problems of adolescence such as working out one's relationship with parents (in all patch-worked forms) and potential partners. The natural order of superpowers (Seth leaves for Africa after using his power one last time in S04E02) is present throughout the season. Nevertheless, the powers now simply function as exotic motivational devices instead of the origin of the dilemmas that are faced by the group. What this means for both the question of *Misfits* representing changes in our society via its subversion of traditional superhero narratives as well as the question of superpowers reflecting moral challenges posed to teenagers as a means to imagine the transition of adolescents becoming adult members of society, remains to be analyzed in full at a later point.

Conclusion

Misfits begins with a group of young offenders paying back their debt to society and by accident becoming superheroes of sorts. From the start, the show presents

its heroes as problematic, unconventional and "misfitting" in today's society, and their community service as a meaningless and futile attempt to engender conformity. By subverting the traditional superhero conventions of mission, power and identity, the show plays on the changes in society itself. Ironically, however, the plot of the show actually is focused on the rehabilitation of these delinquents. *Misfits* is all about the turn of self-centered individuals into morally acceptable members of society, as well as the difficulties of transitioning from youth into adulthood. Slowly but surely, the protagonists learn to deal with the traits that make them misfits. And it is only their potential for personal growth that eventually turns their superpowers into an actual source of strength.

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