

"David Simmons' excellent collection of essays on the whole series takes all of it seriously, from inception to termination, and first-rank television scholars shed new light on its meteoric rise and fall."

—David Lavery, coauthor, *Saving the World: A Guide to Heroes*

"These insightful essays unlock the mysteries behind the success and failure of this show by considering its place within the changing nature of television. Engaging, authoritative and rigorously researched, this book is a must-read."

—Stacey Abbott, author of *Celluloid Vampires*  
and editor of *The Cult TV Book*

**P**remiering in September 2006, the weekly NBC television series *Heroes* was an immediate hit, lasting four seasons. A group of interrelated characters discover they have superhuman powers; each episode explores how they use their powers for good or evil. This book of essays examines the series' content, marketing and reception.

The show fuses "cult" and mainstream elements of television, combining so-called lowbrow elements (comic books and superheroes) with a high-quality television form while prizing such factors as moral ambiguity and depth of characterization. The book explores what this blending process suggests about the current state of genre television — and the medium as a whole.

**David Simmons** has written and published extensively on popular entertainment, covering subjects ranging from animated series to sword-and-sandal movies. He is a lecturer in film and television studies at the University of Northampton in the UK.



McFarland

ISBN 978-0-7864-5936-0

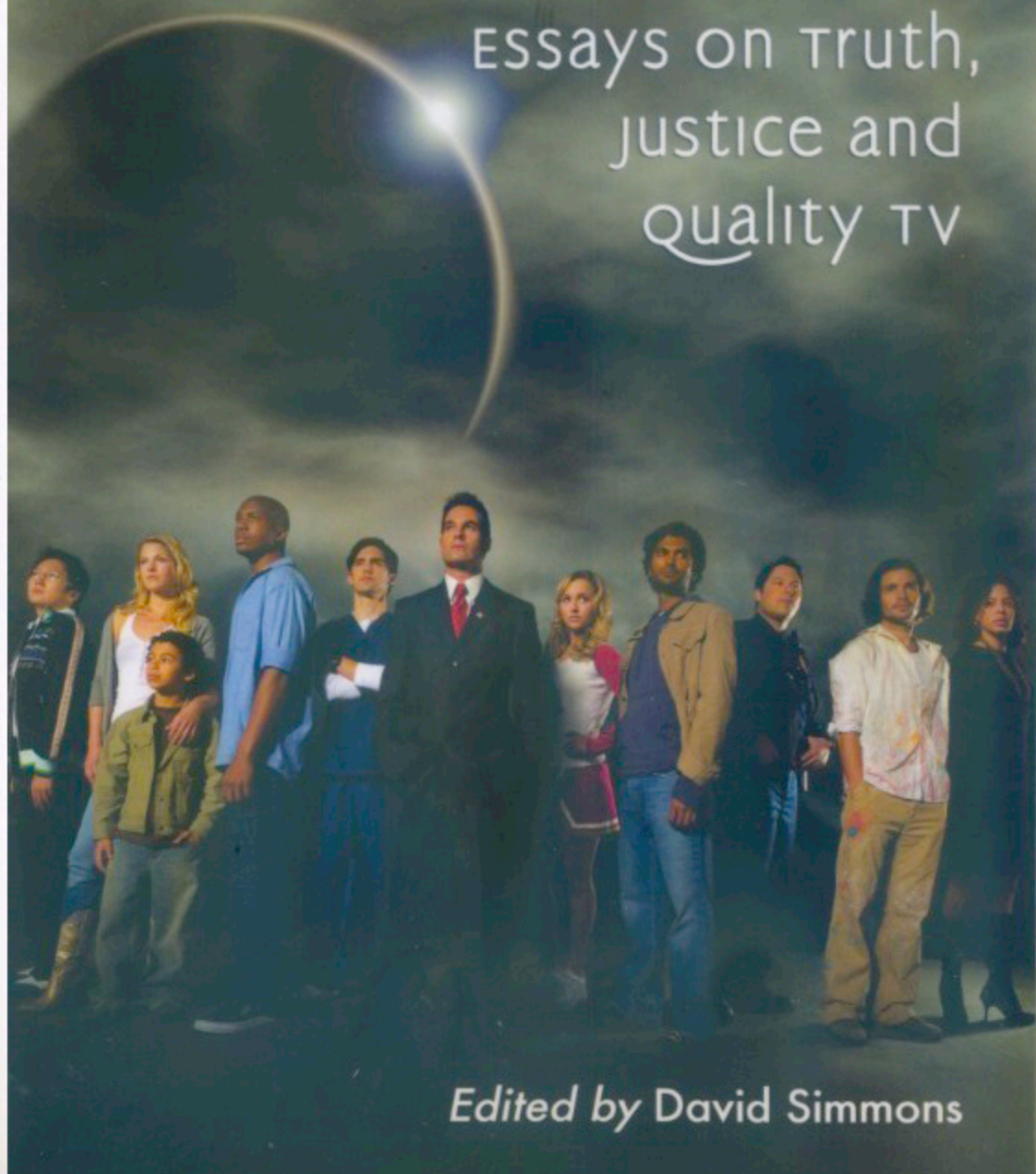


9 780786 459360

Front cover: *Heroes*  
cast, Season 1, 2006  
(NBC/Photofest)

# INVESTIGATING HEROES

Essays on truth,  
justice and  
quality TV



Edited by David Simmons



- Banks, Iain M., *Consider Phlebas*. London: Macmillan, 1987.
- Booker, M Keith. *Science Fiction Television*. Westport, CT: Praeger, 2004.
- The Corinthian Hotel and Casino*. 9 Jan 2011, www.corinthianlasvegas.com.
- Dozois, Gardner, and Jonathan Strahan. "Introduction." *The New Space Opera*, edited by Gardner Dozois and Jonathan Strahan. 1–5. New York: Eos, 2007.
- Gernsback, Hugo. "A New Sort of Magazine." *Amazing Stories: The Magazine of Scientific Fiction* 1.1 (April 1926): 3. Reprinted in *Forrest J Ackerman's World of Science Fiction*, edited by Forrest J Ackerman. 31. Los Angeles: General Publishing Group, 1997.
- Gunning, Tom. "The Cinema of Attractions: Early Film, Its Spectator and the Avant-Garde." In *Early Cinema: Space, Frame, Narrative*, edited by Thomas Elsaesser with Adam Barker. 56–62. London: British Film Institute, 1990.
- Hipple, Dave. "The Accidental Apotheosis of Gene Roddenberry, or, 'I Had to Get Some Money from Somewhere.'" *The Influence of Star Trek on Television, Film and Culture*, edited by Lincoln Geraghty. 22–40. Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, 2008.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "Stargate SG-1: Self-Possessed Science Fiction." *Reading Stargate SG-1*, edited by Stan Beeler and Lisa Dickson. 27–47. London: I. B. Tauris, 2006.
- Houston, David. "Creating the Space-Fantasy Universe of *Star Wars*." *Starlog* 7 (Aug 1977): 18–28.
- IAB MIXX Conference & Expo 2.8—Tim Kring*. 9 Jan 2011, www.youtube.com/watch?v=bFa7VKJJ8g0.
- Jenkins, Henry. *Convergence Culture*. New York: New York University Press, 2006.
- Malzberg, Barry N. "The Engines of the Night." In *The Engines of the Night*, edited by Barry N. Malzberg. 174–176. New York: Bluejay Books, 1982.
- Mendlesohn, Farah, and Edward James. *A Short History of Fantasy*. London: Middlesex University Press, 2009.
- Nazzaro, Joe. "Howard Chaykin." *Writing Science Fiction and Fantasy Television*. 36–45. London: Titan: 2002.
- 1930s Flash Gordon Serial Movie Trailer Ad*. 9 Jan 2011, www.youtube.com/watch?v=NVNBBLt00ZY.
- Parrinder, Patrick. "Introduction." In *Learning From Other Worlds: Estrangement, Cognition, and the Politics of Science Fiction and Utopia*, edited by Patrick Parrinder. 1–16. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2001.
- Primatech Paper Company*. 9 Jan 2011. www.primatechpaper.com.
- Scanlon, Paul. "The Force Behind *Star Wars*." *Rolling Stone*. 25 May 1977, www.rollingstone.com/news/story/7330268/the\_force\_behind\_star\_wars (accessed 3 May 2009).
- Shatner, William, with David Fisher. *Up Till Now: The Autobiography*. London: Sidgwick & Jackson, 2008.
- Smith, Edward Elmer. *The Skylark of Space*. Buffalo: Buffalo Book Company, 1946.
- Suvin, Darko. *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction: On the Poetics and History of a Literary Genre*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1979.
- Tim Kring's New Projects*. 9 Jan 2011, www.nbc.com/heroes/video/timkrings-new-projects/1250848.
- Tolkien, J. R. R. "On Fairy-Stories." *Tree and Leaf; Smith of Wootton Major; The Homecoming of Beorhtnoth*. (Lecture given 1938; enlarged for publication 1947; reprinted "with only a few minor alterations.") 11–79. London: Unwin, 1975.
- Visual Effects*. 3 May 2009, www.nbc.com/Heroes/video/clips/visual-effects/137166/.
- Wells, Herbert George. "Preface to *The Scientific Romances*." In *H. G. Wells's Literary Criticism*, edited by Patrick Parrinder and Robert M Philmus. 240–245. Brighton: Harvester, 1980.
- Who We Are*. 9 Jan 2011, http://www.conspiracyforgood.com/about.php.

## Super Style: Notes for a Stylistic Analysis

Sérgio Dias Branco

In "Superheros for Sale," David Bordwell looks briefly at the exaggerated visual style of some films based on superhero comic books such as *Watchmen* (2009) or clearly influenced by this type of comic like *The Matrix* (1999). *Watchmen* was released six months after the publication of Bordwell's text (and postscript) and therefore he does not mention it as an example, but it fits in well with his arguments. In these films, motion is altered, perspective is distorted, some shots are extremely low- or high-angled. Bordwell focuses on recent examples and argues against zeitgeist readings of the increasing amount of superhero films after the 9/11 attacks (17–22). Instead, he favors a palimpsestic understanding of their style, disclosing visible traces of other art forms and contending that the images contained in these movies are evocative of "[c]omic book panels, those graphically dynamic compositions that keep us turning the pages. In fact, we call such effects 'cartoonish'" (Bordwell 50).

Taking *Heroes* (2006–2010), the popular drama series about a group of ordinary human beings with superhuman abilities, as a case study allows us to expand on these ideas. This chapter aims at contributing to a stylistic analysis of the series without attempting to examine every major stylistic feature of the series in detail. Instead, the scope of this essay is limited to the scrutiny of the links between the imagery of the show and that of films and comic books. Scrutinizing these links is also a way to exemplify the kind of work on television fiction that can issue from the analysis of the style of particular series. Such an approach is not so much interested in the communicational facet of television as in the representational, expressive, formal, and experiential aspects of televisual art works (Carroll 1999). At the same time, this chapter, which will concentrate on salient visual elements of the show, demonstrates the faults of an essentialist view of television aesthetics, contributing instead to a historically contingent understanding of the nature of television.



That is to say, television is seen as a form which is not ontologically different from cinema, but which has a particular history of technical and aesthetic development—a history that is not determined by an essence, but that is rather the product of multiple factors (like technological advancements such as non-linear, digital editing systems) and numerous influences (from cinema and comics, for example). The visual style of *Heroes* is exemplary from this point of view because it can be considered as “impure,” amassing elements from various art forms and rejecting a purist approach to television as a creative practice. It is this “impurity” that makes the series an illustrative example of how television fiction series, as televisual works, integrate diverse references (cf. Bazin, “In Defense of Mixed Cinema,” 53–75).

The first section of this chapter defines the contemporary technological and stylistic context of *Heroes*. The series epitomizes aspects of this context in a limpid and explicit manner, namely in the connections it establishes between television and cinema. The second section concentrates on how the aesthetics of comics have influenced the visual style of the show. The result of this influence is at times an overt disregard for prevalent filmmaking practices.

### 1. *The Abilities of Television*

John Ellis claims that the use of new digital technology to manipulate and create images sets cinema and television apart. He sketches the opposition this way: “Cinema uses the new potential to make ever more realistic, yet impossible, images. Television uses it to make constantly changing collages of images. In doing so, television has discovered a means of enhancing its particular social aesthetic” (Ellis 107). This is a deterministic way of thinking about media, which sees every new instance as a confirmation of the intrinsic features of a medium. Ellis is right when he highlights the use of digital technology in segments of television news programs such as weather forecast simulations and contrasts it with the use of special visual effects to create lifelike dinosaurs in *Jurassic Park* (1993). Yet his conclusions lack nuance, when he asserts that “[d]igital image manipulation allows television to combine images; it allows cinema to continue to present a spectacle of reality” (Ellis 107). To counter this sweeping generalization, we need only to recall that some series employ digital visual effects in ways that are similar to their use in *Jurassic Park*. *Heroes* is one of these series.

The show is a product of the technological changes in the production of television fiction over the past thirty years. John Thornton Caldwell points

out six devices that have been paramount to this change: one, the *video-assist*, a video camera mounted alongside the camera that allows technicians and artists to adjust the shot based on the information gathered from a monitor; two, *motion control* equipment like mountings and robotic or motorized contrivances that produce smooth, controlled camera movements; three, *electronic nonlinear editing*, which allows random access to the footage; four, *digital effects* that broaden the range of imaging possibilities; five, *Tabular* or *T-grain film stocks*, with flatter crystals in the emulsion that make them expose more easily to dim light, increasing resolution and decreasing granularity; and six, the *Rank-Cintel equipments* for transcribing film into video tapes and data formats in high-definition (*Televisuality* 78). It is worth enumerating and detailing these technologies to make clear how they can be seen at work in *Heroes*, a series shot with care and precision, containing dynamic and fluent camera movements, crosscutting between multiple story lines, abounding with digital imagery, displaying high photographic resolution, and released on high-definition. The machinery and equipment that Caldwell lists has been developed and used both in cinema and television production, a fact that by itself goes against any arguments that the two are essentially different because they are technologically different. For Caldwell, these innovations are the historical roots of the stylistic exhibitionism that governed the television of the 1980s and '90s and that he has termed *televisuality*. According to him, televisuality oscillates between two modes: the videographic and the cinematic. The former involves electronic images, captured or created, simply processed or complexly manipulated, and it has been more associated with television.

The cinematic refers, obviously, to a film look in television. Exhibitionist television in the 1980s meant more than shooting on film, however, since many nondescript shows have been shot on film since the early 1950s. Rather, cinematic values brought to television spectacle, high-production values, and feature-style cinematography [Caldwell, *Televisuality* 12].

The cinematic therefore seems to be less technical and more stylistic than the videographic—and therefore more vague, since cinema allows many looks and styles that do not fit in with Caldwell's definition. There is a more rigorous way to approach the connection between television and other media. If we brush presuppositions aside and look closely at works like *Heroes*, it becomes clear that the relationship between television and cinema is often one of mutual contamination. This becomes clear when we realize how television has used the aforementioned technologies to produce programs that forgo live broadcast. An essentialist approach would lead us to declare that by opting for this path television loses its essential, defining feature: the possibility of transmit-



ting images of events at their time of occurrence. Indeed, theorists such as Umberto Eco have identified the live broadcast as the most characteristic and unique aspect of television (107). Eco also connects live transmissions with improvisation (109) and therefore with the openness of life — live television can be said to organize the chance of life into “a cluster of possibilities” (116). His words take for granted that live television is somehow planned, but never scripted. Yet live episodes from scripted series demonstrate that this assumption is false — “Ambush” (4:1), from the medical drama *ER* (1994–2009), and the entire second season of the sitcom *Roc* (1991–1994) are just two examples. To sum up, considering the totality of the televisual output, it is more accurate to acknowledge that televisual works have changed and diversified, within a specific system of production and means of distribution. High-definition television broadcasts have been steadily increasing since the mid-nineties — exactly when Caldwell published his book on televisuality. Today, television series are released on high-resolution formats like DVD and Blu-ray. The sharpness of their images and sounds and those of their cinema counterparts are basically indistinguishable. Even so, we must avoid seeing this change and diversification as a radical, unexpected alteration. In later writings, Caldwell calls attention to the fact that media mixing is not determined by the technological shift to the digital, but is symptomatic of more fundamental logics present throughout television history. The use of digital technologies confirms the importance of the aesthetic influences of other art forms and media in the creative process of television. These technologies “merely served to accelerate and legitimate these well-practiced industrial strategies” (Caldwell, “Convergence Television,” 68).

*Heroes* exemplifies the technical sophistication and aesthetic intricacy of present-day television fiction series. The post-production visual effects give an arresting visual form to the dazzling abilities of the characters — when Nathan Petrelli (Adrian Pasdar) self-propels himself in order to fly away at high speed or when Hiro Nakamura (Masi Oka) freezes his surroundings, suspending the march of time. Technological sophistication lures the television spectator with the promise of something amazing and fresh — just like superhero movies. Promotional materials like trailers and previews displayed the choice to use visual effects to impress, especially in the first seasons. At the same time, the episode “Company Man” (1:17) is an expressive display of the stylistic elaboration of the series. It employs black and white and deep-focus cinematography in the flashbacks of Noah Bennet’s (Jack Coleman) personal history within the Company, cramming the screen with objects to visualize the grimness and messiness of his personal drama. It also uses low-angle framing, for example, after Matt Parkman (Greg Grunberg) shoots Claire Bennet

(Hayden Panettiere), to emphasize the position of the other characters towering over her lying body in the foreground. Images like these rely on a consciousness about the significance of *mise en scène* and framing that appears to be inherited from the history of cinema.

## 2. The Powers of Comics

The serial nature of *Heroes* is especially relevant when discussing its relation to comics. The first film adaptations of comic books were serials like *Adventures of Captain Marvel* (1941). Yet, for reasons that range from changes in production to alterations in exhibition, films have forgone this structure for less planned, non-periodical franchise releases like *Spider-Man* (2002, 2004, 2007). In contrast, *Heroes* is divided into volumes and then subdivided into chapters, just like a graphic novel. This division is in some way independent from the usual season-episode structure of television series — the first and second seasons correspond to the first and second volumes (*Genesis* and *Generations*), but the third season comprises the third and fourth volumes (*Villains* and *Fugitives*), and the fourth season returns to the former structure with just the fifth and last volume (*Redemption*).

Moreover, the show makes the connections with comic books visually evident. Comics are key narrative elements — Issac Mendez’s (Santiago Cabrera) drawings, paintings, and the comic series *9th Wonders!* that features prominently in “Don’t Look Back” (1:2) provide information about future events because they record his precognitive visions. They are also an aesthetic inspiration — the typeface used in captions and credits imitates traditional hand-rendered comic book letters, as in the beginning of “Lizards” (2:2) where “Chapter Two” is roundly inscribed inside a glass and the name of the episode over the egg at the bottom of the glass. However, there are subtler stylistic influences throughout the show.

Comics were established as a mass art form in the late 19th and early 20th century, a time when film itself was just starting. Both comic strips and comic books consist of sequences of panels. In this sequential form, we are invited to read the dialogue or narration, to follow the drawings or scan the page, and we comprehend the story being told and the significance of the verbal and visual details by inference. David Carrier explains, “Comics are like realist novels: a few odd transitions are possible only because we are accustomed to reading the body of the text as straightforward narrative. What we often infer from transitions are causal connections” (51, 53). In general, each page contains multiple drawings that lack real movement and, consequently,



the potential visual continuity of motion pictures. For a comic to work narratively it has to allow the reader to comprehend the “causal connections” between *discontinuous images* that Carrier mentions. The principles of image composition and linkage that comics need to follow to ensure narrative continuity are therefore loose — as long as they avoid “such large gaps as to make the action seem jumpy” (Carrier 53).

Filmmaking rules are stricter or at least, as a rule, more strictly followed. In “The Butterfly Effect” (3:2), a conversation between Angela Petrelli (Cristine Rose) and Elle Bishop (Kristen Bell) is filmed and edited using shots and reverse shots from just one side of the axis of action, the imaginary line that passes through the actresses. This basic rule of filmmaking preserves spatial continuity on screen. Nevertheless, *Heroes* often disregards the 180° system and disobeys this rule, sometimes within a scene that has previously abided by it. Later in the conversation, Angela turns to the sedated Sylar (Zachary Quinto), faces the camera, and dispenses with Elle’s services, seen in profile in the background. This planimetric composition is followed by a close-up of Elle and then by another one of Angela in profile. Crossing the line of action introduces inconsistencies in the relative positions within the frame. The moment is not too disorienting only because Angela and Elle are immobile — Angela with her hands joined over the stomach and Elle with her arms crossed over the ribs. Their lack of movement enables us to make sense of their relative positions in the room more easily, even if not immediately. The perspective changes 90° and then 180° in geometrical fashion, emphasizing the contrast between Angela’s and Elle’s perpendicular eye-lines. The spatial discontinuity between images suggests the estrangement of the characters.

This sequencing of images as connected yet independent brings to mind the aesthetics of comics. Consider “The Crossroads,” written by Joe Kelly and drawn by Michael Gaydos, the 53rd chapter of the short web comic that develops further the narrative and characters of *Heroes*. It opens with a page containing a series of five long horizontal frames. Four of these pictures depict a dialogue between the Haitian and the geneticist Mohinder Suresh whose rendering contains two jumps across the axis of action; between the first and the second images and between the second and the third. The position of the characters within the room is unclear, but despite it, links are easily established between the images based on their sequential composition and narrative content. Of course, any expectation that a comic book would comply with the 180° rule is unfounded. Readers are used to the visual discontinuity of comic books. The same cannot be said about television viewers and series. Nevertheless, unexpectedly, *Heroes* explores this possibility from time to time, as the scene from “The Butterfly Effect” demonstrates with clarity.

There may be other possible factors that explain the unusual framing and editing choices of *Heroes*. Maybe they are not really choices — that is, maybe the filmmaking is unsystematic, perhaps even careless. Therefore, when the series does not follow conventional rules like eye-line matches, which rely on the directionality of a character’s look to match it with what the character is looking at in the next shot, perhaps it is not deliberate. Yet the series has provided ample evidence that this is not the case. From the very first scene, its images seem to have been created to become memorable as well as carefully composed to produce a haunting effect: Peter Petrelli (Milo Ventimiglia) dropping from a high city rooftop is shown in a bird’s-eye shot that foreshortens the height of the building, flattening the perspective to visually express the absence of danger and hint at his ability to fly. The careful composition of many of the shots in the show is sustained rather than sporadic. The *mise en scène* of *Heroes* repeatedly looks to emulate the same graphic autonomy that we see in the drawings of many comics — and the creators of the show try to achieve the same astonishing effect that comic book drawings, through their concision and precision, often seek and achieve.

Nevertheless, comics and television series are not identical forms. As Robert C. Harvey points out, “Cartooning is not the same as filmmaking” (173–191). He argues that the narrative in moving pictures is measured in time, whereas in comics it is measured in space (Harvey 176). Certainly, the fact that pictures move makes the duration of this motion a key factor in the depiction of actions. Yet, as we have seen, visual framing is equally important for making an action comprehensible and an image more expressive. Harvey notes that another difference is that films are usually audio-visual whereas comics are only visual, which means that the latter have to convey the narrative information by purely visual means. In fact, television series are also audio-visual works. However, it is not to belittle the use of sound in *Heroes* — think, for instance, of the contribution that Mohinder’s (Sendhil Ramamurthy) voice-over narration makes to set overarching themes and a solemn tone — to argue that its images are even more emphatic in expressing meaning. This emphasis seems tied to the aesthetic influence of comics on the series.

### 3. The Skills of Heroes

This brief stylistic analysis of *Heroes*, which has highlighted its manifest visual connections with cinema and comics, shows how this kind of examination can be a productive approach for the study of the aesthetic properties of series. The excessive, emphatic style of *Heroes* is a product of technical



developments, media convergence, and aesthetic influences. The individuality of the show lies in the way it combines these aspects to tell a story that is reminiscent of the adventures of *The X-Men*, a group of mutants who also have to negotiate and defend their individuality in a world that is predominantly human. The series is exemplary of trends in contemporary television because, much like its characters, it defies purist and essentialist categorizations, embedding the themes of difference and miscegenation within its style.

A moment in "Shadowboxing" (4:9) exemplifies this process. Peter Petrelli uses his mimicked healing power to save a critical patient in the emergency room. He puts his open left hand on the patient's chest and the burning wounds of his left arm gradually disappear as if they are being rubbed out. The show could have presented the peeling off of layers of damaged skin to reveal healthy skin beneath them, thus preserving the whole healing process as a sheer corporeal event. Instead, the wounds are made vivid and almost tangible — the damage of the skin is severe and the white burn ointment over the raw flesh is visible — and then are turned into pure visual elements, graphic components of the image that may be erased as though they have been drawn. The skillful style of the series gives prominence to the ability of television series to develop patterns from episode to episode, like those concerning the use of visual effects, and also to the integration of powerful aesthetic influences, like those that come from comic books.

The singularity of the style of *Heroes* lies in the combination of these two aspects: the serial development and the aesthetic fusion. This *serial hybridization* relies on regular installments that may be compared to issues of a comic series. This is therefore a distinct process from the one displayed in single composite works like *Dick Tracy* (1990), with its limited and bright color palette, and *Hulk* (2003), with its insistent and conspicuous multiple frames, that make explicit their visual connection with comics. There are strings of comic book film adaptations that are consistent in their style, like the succession of *Batman* films directed by Christopher Nolan. Yet they lack the regularity of television series and the extensive creative planning that supports it. In *Heroes*, every volume and chapter title is announced in a comic book typeface, but the visual style of the series goes beyond the direct use of components that are usual in comics. The series opts for a subtler approach that results in impressive graphic compositions and elements, which transfigure the space and concreteness of the scenes.

#### WORKS CITED

Bazin, André. *What Is Cinema? Vol. 1*. Trans. Hugh Gray. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2005.

- Bordwell, David. "Superheros for Sale." *Observations on Film Art*. 16 August 2008. <http://www.davidbordwell.net/blog/?p=2713> (accessed 3 March 2011).
- Caldwell, John. "Convergence Television: Aggregating Form and Repurposing Content in the Culture of Conglomeration." *Television After TV: Essays on a Medium in Transition*, edited by Lynn Spigel and Jan Olsson. 41–74. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004.
- . *Televisuality: Style, Crisis, and Authority in American Television*. Piscataway, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1995.
- Carrier, David. *The Aesthetics of Comics*. University Park, PA: Penn State University Press, 2001.
- Carroll, Noël. *Philosophy of Art: A Contemporary Introduction*. London: Routledge, 1999.
- Eco, Umberto. *The Open Work* [1976]. Trans. Anna Cancogni. Intr. David Robey. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989.
- Ellis, John. "Speed, Film and Television: Media Moving Apart." *Big Picture, Small Screen: The Relations Between Film and Television*, edited by John Hill and Martin McLoone. 107–117. Luton: University of Luton Press, 1996.
- Harvey, Robert C. *The Art of the Comic Book: An Aesthetic History*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1996.
- Kelly, Joe, and Michael Gaydos. *Heroes: "The Crossroads."* NBC.com, 2 October 2007. [http://www.nbc.com/heroes/novels/novels\\_display.shtml?novel=53](http://www.nbc.com/heroes/novels/novels_display.shtml?novel=53) (accessed 3 March 2011).<sup>36</sup>