Biopunk Dystopias

Lars Schmeink

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The human species is at the very dawn of an evolutionary renaissance [...] We evolve. (Chandra Suresh, cited in ‘Activating Evolution,’ entry on Heroeswiki.com)

In his seminal study *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, Joseph Campbell argued that there are recurring universal structures to be found in religion, mythology, and folk traditions, no matter from which culture and time these are taken, culminating in ‘basic truths by which man has lived throughout the millennia of his residence on the planet’ (xiii). One of the most common truths can be found in the figure of the hero, through which societies keep enacting a ‘recurrence of birth’ (Campbell 12), continuously reintroducing new life into the community. Heroes, Campbell argues, reach beyond their current socio-historical limits and bring with them ‘visions, ideas, and inspirations [...] from the primary springs of human life and thought’ (14). Heroes are consequently the catalysts of change and transformation; they represent the utopian impulse of a society in that they are the individuals that unlock a potential, ‘which is hidden within us all’ (Campbell 31) and which allows for human progress. Furthermore, hero myths are not only universal, but also highly adaptive and protean – whereas the structure remains, its representation adheres to social and historical changes. In contemporary culture, one such representation is the figure of the superhero, and scholars have pointed out its strong connection with classic mythological heroes, while arguing that a hero always ‘embodies what we believe is best in ourselves,’ representing the values and morals of a society by becoming the ‘idealized vision we have of ourselves and our society’ (Fingeroth 14, 25; see Reynolds 24). For Angela Ndalianis, the hero emerges ‘in response to social change’:
Heroic action usually has a fundamental link to the welfare of the society from which the hero comes. Heroes and superheroes have never operated in a vacuum. They respond in a dynamic way to various challenges and social needs. [...] Occupying a space outside culture, the super/hero often serves the function of mediator figure that enters a community in crisis with the aim of resolving its conflicts and restoring the status quo. (‘Do We Need’ 3)

In regard to contemporary society, then, one could consequently argue that the changes experienced through liquid modernity, such as the dissolution of stabilizing institutions, the continuous fluidity of identities and alliances, and the centering of global risks as problems to be faced by individual humans (not necessarily superpowered), find a correlation in the depiction of superheroes (see Coogan 193–230; Round). And indeed, to give just one recent example of these trends, one could point towards developments in the Marvel Cinematic Universe, starting with the uneasy, continuously disputed and later dissolved alliance of the Avengers in Joss Whedon’s film The Avengers (US, 2012), the devastating attack and complete destruction of the institutional S.H.I.E.L.D. in Joe and Anthony Russo’s Captain America: The Winter Soldier (US, 2014), and the responsibility of single-handedly providing global security thrust on Agent Coulson (Clark Gregg) and his team at the end of the first season of Whedon’s TV series Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D. (US, 2013–).

Similarly, the cultural shift towards biopunk themes should provide superhero narratives with an option to portray the ‘unlocked hidden potential within us’ as resultant from or contiguous with genetic engineering, thus exploring aspects of the posthuman condition. Examples of this shift include the resurgence of the X-Men franchise (about genetically mutated humanity) in seven films so far, the reimagining of Spider-Man’s powers as resulting from a recoding of Peter Parker’s DNA through the spider bite of a transgenic spider instead a vaguely ‘radioactive’ one (Spider-Man, US, 2002, dir. Sam Raimi), or the creation of the Hulk, similarly through genetic experimentation instead of radiation, in Ang Lee’s Hulk (US, 2003).

Most interesting is a tendency in contemporary TV shows to explore the combination of these two trends: the emergence of posthumanity through genetic means and the social changes wrought by liquid modernity. Taking their premise of an evolved humanity bestowed with superhuman abilities from the X-Men comics and accompanying film series,¹

¹ I do not include the film series in my analysis because its themes – as an adaptation of the 1960s comic-book series – are rather centered on the overt
these include NBC’s *Heroes* (creator Tim Kring, US, 2006–10), SyFy’s *Alphas* (creator Zak Penn, US, 2011–12), ABC’s *No Ordinary Family* (creators Greg Berlanti and Jon Harmon Feldman, US, 2010–11), and E4’s *Misfits* (creator Howard Overman, UK, 2009–13). What connects these series is the discussion of a posthuman evolution in the context of its impact on the development of society (or the lack thereof) – to a varying degree, the series interrogate a number of topics connected with (a) the conventions of superhero fiction, (b) the personal consequences of posthuman existence, (c) its dependence on genetic mutation, (d) the role and responsibility of the individual in society, and (e) the political possibility of utopia through posthumanism.

I will concentrate my analysis on NBC’s *Heroes*, as it best highlights all five of these subjects, especially the interrelation between genetic evolution and the possibility of utopia, whereas the other series merely touch upon these themes to varying degrees. *Misfits*, for example, does not explicitly ground its human evolution in genetics but rather employs an ‘electrical storm’ as catalyst for the posthuman change. It provides discussions of superheroism and posthumanity, but relegates the social and political implications, especially their potential to provide a utopian space, to minor storylines and instead concentrates on the everyday concerns of a disaffected youth and the personal and often petty desires of the characters. *No Ordinary Family* is similarly concerned with a more personal scope, focusing on a nuclear family as the vanguard of the genetic change. Utopian potential and social impact of the posthuman are here reduced to a single family unit and rather reflect typical American values – a lack of scope that may have played its part in granting the show only one season on the air. *Alphas*, on the other hand, concentrates almost exclusively on the political dimension, situating the conflict over evolved humans in the realm of governmental agencies, espionage, and terrorism. The show thus largely ignores the superhero genre in favor of a more general action-thriller approach, and the utopian potential is based in two opposing institutional structures. Nonetheless, the above shows might be fruitfully analyzed via a posthumanist reading as well. My concentration on *Heroes* is due to the scope of this chapter, the confluence of all of the co-existence with and conflict about the social integration of posthumans as an allegory for racial inequality. Also, the X-Men, as creations of the Silver Age of Comics, are much more representative of classic superheroes (costumes, mission, identities) than is the case with the characters of the discussed TV shows. Of course, the X-Men can be understood to be part of the biopunk cultural formation, to interrogate posthuman existence, and to confront liquid modern realities – but such a consideration would warrant a separate analysis altogether.
abovementioned topics, and, not least, the show’s somewhat contested popularity (averaging 14 million viewers during the first season, which later dropped to 4 million in the fourth season; generating a strong fan base that got NBC to reboot the franchise in 2015 as the miniseries Heroes Reborn, which got cancelled once more due to unsteady ratings) and critical reception, garnering nominations for Golden Globe, Emmy, and TCA awards. Lastly, Heroes was the first show to introduce the concepts, on a mainstream network no less, with all other series following after Heroes was cancelled (or in the case of Misfits, in its last season).

Heroes has been praised in its first season for its serious depiction of the superhero trope and an adult-oriented concentration on drama instead of adolescent comic-book action (see Porter, Lavery, and Robson; Simmons; Short), and I will concentrate on this season mainly. The show was later criticized for having failed to keep up this emphasis on drama, as well as sacrificing the mature representation of characters and their private struggles to action-thriller tropes and narrative spectacle. In her chapter on the show (135–68), Sue Short provides a thorough analysis of the factors contributing to the economic and critical failure of Heroes as a ‘cult telefantasy series’ (the title of her book) but nonetheless stresses the merits of the character-driven first season.

The series deals with a group of ordinary people that suddenly ‘awaken’ to find themselves capable of superhuman feats. Especially in its first season, it highlights their struggle to cope with the situation, the sheer impossibility of integrating their abilities into ordinary lives, and the choice of using these abilities for the benefit of society or for personal gain. In terms of structure, the series provides self-contained story arcs in each season that emphasize an interconnectedness of the characters’ lives, as well as in terms of politics and global events, thus stressing a direct influence on the scope of individual actions for the greater utopian/dystopian realization of the future.

This format was supposed to ‘avoid perceived problems’ that audiences had with the several-season-spanning and elaborate storyline of Heroes’ direct inspiration Lost (creators Jeffrey Lieber, J.J. Abrams, and Damon Lindelof, US, 2004–10), as Short argues. Wanting to circumvent frustration, Kring pushed to have Heroes deliver storylines with ‘a faster pace and the action divided into mini-arcs’ (Short 142), without resorting to the monster-of-the-week formula of shows such as The X-Files (creator Chris Carter, US, 1993–2002). This approach created different problems, though, mainly in regard to continuity, when characters were radically rewritten against the grain of their perceived personality for new storylines, and in terms of redundancy, ‘with each story arc presenting a disaster that must be averted [...] calamities that are always foiled
in the final moments’ (Short 143). Instead of monster-of-the-week, the series promoted a catastrophe-of-the-season cookie-cutter formula that felt as repetitive and uninspired.

What *Heroes* provided in its first season and what was lost over the course of the show was its commitment to individual and ordinary lives thrown into unusual circumstances. Providing a strong and large ensemble cast with the potential to keep the storylines varied and fresh, the scope and budget to fully develop characters and motivations, and that certain twist of science-fictionality that made the show’s premise mysterious, *Heroes* had all the ingredients that made *Lost* a success.

But Kring wanted the show to avoid certain ‘pitfalls’ of *Lost*: ‘not to posit an ending’ and promising that ‘something is going to happen every week’ (Short 139, 142). The choices made to accomplish this were to concentrate strongly on the comic-book origin of the series, to provide more action and a faster pace – all in the name of ‘surprising viewers with continuous twists’ (Short 163). In consequence, the writers paid less attention to characterization, continuity, and plausibility and instead focused on comic-book spectacle. But missing coherent and credible world building, the series failed to draw younger and geek audiences as viewers for a sustained period of time.

A contrasting yet enlightening example in terms of audience success of comic universes is the already mentioned Marvel Cinematic Universe, in which both approaches to audiences are quite successfully combined. On the one hand, massively budgeted films such as *The Avengers* draw young and geek audiences with their visual spectacle, insider references, and fast-paced action. On the other hand, the mature characterizations and complex thematic issues of series such as *Daredevil* (creator Drew Goddard, US, 2015–) and *Jessica Jones* (creator Melissa Rosenberg, US, 2015–) provide intense drama for adult audiences. What connects the two and strongly diverges from the approach of *Heroes* is the fact that the MCU became a great success only after Marvel started its rigorous efforts to create a unified and coherent diegetic world – without the canonical supervision and close integration of each part of the MCU, the immense success would not be possible. This is where *Heroes* failed: World building became arbitrary in the series and audience identification with ‘sloppy and inconsistent’ characters started to fail: ‘If a character can go anywhere, do anything, who really cares what they eventually do?’ (Delucci, cited in Short 164).

Nonetheless, in its best form *Heroes* connects superhero fiction and mature TV drama to create an effective screen onto which the individual struggle with posthuman liquid modern realities is projected. The utopian impulse of progress towards a better society thus creates the goal towards
which the characters strive. The decisions of individuals take center stage in *Heroes*’ depiction of liquid modernity as they determine the future – be it eutopian or dystopian. As Richard Reynolds has argued, the superhero narrative is an ideal vehicle for this kind of modern mythologizing of social and political structures and ‘a significant tension can be adduced between superheroes (assisting [the utopian] process) and villains (thwarting the Utopia builders [...]’ (24).

*Heroes* presents the stories of ordinary people that discover they are so-called evolved humans, or Specials,\(^2\) with superpower-like abilities that let them fly, travel through time, walk through matter, or become invisible. The show is composed of four seasons on television with 77 episodes, but the diegetic universe presented is also continued in additional graphic novels (173 issues), the alternate-reality game *Heroes Evolutions* (engaging players through websites, blogs, iStory volumes, and other telecommunication channels, e.g. voicemail, SMS, and emails; for a discussion of the interactive media, see Hassapopoulou), and the reboot miniseries *Heroes Reborn* (one season with 13 episodes).

As mentioned above, the structure of the show is unique in its deference to its comic origin, in that it is told in volumes, each of which completes a storyline in either one full or one half-season. In each volume, the Specials face an impending disaster that might destroy the world and needs to be averted. In volume one, ‘Genesis’ (season 1),\(^3\) the Specials struggle with their abilities and changing status, while a nuclear explosion threatens to destroy New York and needs to be stopped. This volume also introduces a clandestine organization, called the Company, which captures Specials and evaluates their threat level, trying to track and control them. In volume two, ‘Generations’ (S02), a Special plans to release a deadly virus into the world, wanting to wipe the earth clean from humanity. This volume also explores the history and heritage of the parent generation of Specials that founded the Company. In volume three, ‘Villains’ (first half of S03), two opposing groups (split apart from the Company) start a conflict over the creation and use of a formula that can artificially produce Specials – one group wants to destroy the formula; the other wants to use it and market it for profit. In volume four, ‘Fugitives’ (second half of S03), Specials are being hunted\(^2\) during the show, the characters are referred to as ‘them,’ ‘evolved humans,’ and later ‘Specials.’ The latter term seems to reflect the show’s constant concern with characters wanting to be recognized as special and extraordinary. I will adapt the use of ‘Special’ for any character with a superpower in *Heroes* – both evolved and created Specials.

\(^3\) In the following I will shorten references of season and episode to ‘S#’ and ‘E#,’ e.g. ‘S01E01.’
and imprisoned by a branch of the US government, which perceives them as a terrorist threat. The struggle for human rights and freedom and the abuse of power are negotiated in this volume. In volume five, ‘Redemption’ (S04), a Special gathers others of his kind around him in a sanctuary, but secretly plans to use them to enhance his ability. His plan is to reveal Specials to the world and assert their superiority over ‘normal’ humans.

The graphic novels and Evolutions, which were released online parallel to the show, enhance the character development of the existing Specials, add new storylines, and deliver background on evolved humanity, the Company, and neglected characters. In contrast to other shows, Heroes makes extensive use of transmedia storytelling, thus challenging regular TV viewers by excluding certain information from the TV show and providing specific background or history of events online only (see Hassapopoulou). Consequently, I will incorporate information from the graphic novels and other transmedia outlets in my analysis where and when necessary. At the time of writing, the reboot miniseries was still being filmed, and thus it will not figure into the analysis.

Before discussing the show’s use of alternate timelines and possible futures as a means of exploring the utopian dimension of posthumanity, I would first like to concentrate on its specific construction of the posthuman and its connection to the superhero genre.

### 6.1 Superheroes, Posthumanism, and the Ordinary

The figure of the superhero has undergone many changes over the course of the twentieth century, the last of which – caused by postmodern ideas of deconstruction – brought with it a ‘fissure of immense proportions’ that not only shattered existing comic-book stereotypes, but also complicated moral definitions indefinitely, so that superheroes no longer purely worked as ‘symbolic facilitators and embodiments of civilizing processes’ (Ndalianis, ‘Comic’ 8), but became complex, flawed, and ambiguous. With the emergence of liquid (or post) modern realities, superheroes needed to adapt – their role was thus masterfully ‘scrutinized, deconstructed, reconstructed, and ridiculed’ (Ndalianis, ‘Comic’ 8) by new generations of comic-book artists, allowing for a renewed interest in superhero fiction that explored ‘a more complex psychological approach’ to the genre and that specifically addressed ‘a more adult, serious readership’ (Coogan 1).

The comic trend was then picked up and transported into other media by an increased interest from Hollywood, making the twenty-first
century rife with superhero narratives, as discussed above, on both big and small screens alike. David Bordwell argues that many different factors have come together to allow this rise of the superhero genre in the last ten to fifteen years: shifting production needs and new technologies (CGI, IMAX, 3D), the marketing tie-ins of large franchises (as discussed with the MCU), a tendency towards exaggeration, especially in visual representation of story and character, and an overall creative belief in “dark” themes, which “carry more prestige than light ones,” nurturing a serious tone as legitimizing action-based cinema (32).

Tim Kring’s *Heroes* arguably set out to engage some of those aspects as it hybridized comic aesthetics with personal drama to create a more adult-oriented TV show that elevates ordinary people to the status of superhero, realizing a potential for quality TV in ‘a mild-mannered person who reveals something extraordinary you never saw coming’ (Kring, cited in Kushner). As Kring discusses in an interview with *Wired*’s David Kushner, his superheroes are built from ‘personal struggles and predicaments and assigned special abilities to suit,’ and when they ‘develop their powers, they don’t strap on spandex and capes – they grapple with these strange developments like believable human beings.’ In this, *Heroes* both reveals a connection with classic superhero comics and at the same time challenges and deconstructs some of the prototypical conventions of superheroes.

According to Peter Coogan, there are three conventions that make up a typical superhero: ‘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’ (30, emphasis added). Interestingly, *Heroes* shifts the correlation of biography or origin from a hero’s identity (name/costume) to their superpowers. In providing not so much origin stories for unique individuals but one singular origin story of genetic evolution, the show foregrounds the superhero’s identity as the main issue of the series. It does so by ignoring the iconic representation of the hero’s special status and abilities, externalized in the superhero’s costume, symbol, and name, and instead collapses their superpower and discussions of their heroic mission into the category of ordinary life, which would have traditionally been the secret identity. As Ben Strickland argues, ‘The *Heroes* characters have no need for costumes because they act as themselves. Their mission to save or destroy the world does not require that they hide, only that they discover who they are and what they can do’ (96). There are two marked exceptions to this denial of superhero identity: (1) Gabriel Gray (Zachary Quinto)
uses the alias ‘Sylar’ to mark his departure from his ordinary life as a watchmaker and the decision to kill in order to be ‘special,’ thus establishing him as the series’ ultimate villain. The name ‘Sylar’ becomes an iconic representation of his fragmenting self (see Hilton). And (2) Monica Dawson (Dana Davis) takes on the persona of ‘St. Joan,’ a hooded avenger from one of Micah Sander’s (Noah Gray-Cabey) comic books. When she does, she fails to live up to the comic heroine, gets into trouble, and is kidnapped (S02E10) – highlighting the problems and consequences of becoming a superhero.

Where Superman and Thor are aliens with godlike powers, Batman is rich beyond imagination (thus allowing him to buy all his gadgets), and Spider-Man, the Hulk, and the Fantastic Four had singular accidents that could not be repeated but that triggered their powers – facilitating their uniqueness and extraordinary origin – the characters of Heroes discover their powers to be the result of specific genes that are dormant and get activated (S01) or that can be introduced via an artificial formula (S03; see Round 58). The Specials are superheroes in the sense that they ‘possess skills and abilities normal humans do not’ (Fingeroth 17); nonetheless, their extraordinary ability does not elevate them above the ordinariness of their surroundings (see Reynolds 16). Rather, Heroes emphasizes that heroism grows out of that ordinariness and is allegorically connected to it:

As we got to know each hero we realized their powers compensate for specific lacks in their lives. A self-effacing cop becomes the ultimate crime fighter when he acquires the ability to hear people’s thoughts; a high-school student who discovers she is adopted also realizes she is virtually indestructible; and a male nurse, dismissed as a low-achiever by his family, discovers his natural empathy is the most important power imaginable. (Short 147)

In Heroes, the extraordinary ability manifests due to a combination of specific genes, similar to the ‘X-gene mutation’ of the X-Men comics (but in Heroes as a naturally occurring evolution, not of alien origin⁴). In the first season, Chandra Suresh (Erick Avari) develops a mathematical algorithm ‘using human genomes and DNA migration patterns’ (S01E01) alongside the genetic data from the Human Genome Project in order to identify Specials among the normal population. Later, his son Mohinder Suresh (Sendhil Ramamurthy) discovers the genetic marker, ‘four simple

⁴ The alien origin of the X-gene mutation is part of the Celestials storyline in Eternals #1–12 (1976–77).
genes, they answer everything’ (S01E18), and begins work not only on identifying Specials but on deliberately controlling the activation of the ability. Unfortunately, in an inconsistency in writing in season 3, he argues that the abilities are an evolutionary stress mechanism produced in the adrenal glands as an exaggeration of the ‘flight or fight’ response: ‘My father had it all wrong. For years he had been working on a formula, trying to isolate the gene for these abilities [...] These abilities don’t originate in the blood, they’re produced from adrenaline’ (S03E01). He discovers that there is a formula to artificially induce the abilities in the DNA of those not born with it and that it has been used before by the Company, a clandestine organization founded to control the potential threat of Specials (S03E03–E05). Important to note here, ignoring the inconsistency of the scientific location of the abilities in the script writing, is thus that the potential to become posthuman is already naturally a part of the human since at least ancient Egypt (Heroes webcomic #71, ‘The History of a Secret’) and thus simply represents an evolutionary step, not something ‘against the laws of nature’ (S03E01).

This distinction is important, as it stresses that Specials are ordinary people in that their ability is simply a part of them, neither curse nor blessing but a genotype. In terms of viewer accessibility, the posthuman evolutionary explanation for these abilities is relevant, as it allows viewers to identify with the personal struggles of the characters: ‘The person across from you on the bus could be one. Your teacher could be one. You could be one’ (Fingeroth 107). As Danny Fingeroth further explains, the status as special, yet ordinary, addresses viewers’ needs: ‘We want to both stand out and blend in. We want to be accepted by the group [...] yet still be appreciated for the unique and wonderful individuals that we (hope) we are’ (98). No superhero identity (name, costume, origin story) is necessary to act heroically.

This is especially important, as the series makes explicit that, ‘during times of world crisis, more people with special abilities find their powers “switched on” [...] They seem more likely to become activated when the world needs more heroes, although not everyone with a special power wants to help save the world’ (Porter, Tarnished Heroes 152). This is in concert with Kring’s vision that contemporary society is in dire need of heroes: ‘I was noticing how agitated most people are about the world in general, the big issues that are really hard to fix’ (cited in Kushner). The insecurities of liquid modernity, of a world spinning out of control, seem to be resonating with Kring, who says that he sees the show as a utopian form, a ‘wish fulfillment, that somebody is going to rise up among us ... and actually be able to do something about it’ (cited in Porter, Lavery, and Robson 3).
Kring’s analysis of contemporary anxieties about ‘the big issues’ and our wish for ‘somebody’ to do something about the situation thus underscores the assessment of liquid modern society as individualized, as discussed by Zygmunt Bauman, Ulrich Beck, and Elisabeth Beck-Gernsheim (see the discussion of individualization in chapter 5). The ‘widespread belief that things are out of control in the post-Cold War empires of worldwide capitalism and equally widespread expectations of impending global disaster, whether ecological or socio-political or both’ (Aichele), are acknowledged in the series, but responsibility for solving these issues is assigned to individuals, not to global or national institutions. If anything, in the series, (quasi-)governmental institutions, such as the Department of Homeland Security branch ‘Building 26’ or the Company, fail consistently at solving global issues, and much of the utopian tension of Heroes derives from the avoidance of possible futures generated by attempted global solutions, as I will show below. At the heart of the series is thus the belief that ‘one person can tip the balance to instigate a society-changing course of action’ (‘Redemption’ 15), as Lynette Porter writes. She also points out, ‘That belief, however, doesn’t mean that one person always can control the outcome of his or her action or must work for the greater good’ (‘Redemption’ 15). Kring similarly argues that individuals might be able to change things, while retaining a notion of global linkage:

There’s a message of ‘interconnectivity’ that’s really powerful in the world right now. This idea that we’re all somehow connected for some greater purpose. The idea that there could be people among us, or even ourselves, who could do something about current issues, I think, is a huge part of why the audience is connecting to this show. (Cited in Short 150–51)

The connection between individuals is thus at the heart of the show, but it is not always based in mutual understanding and openness, but sometimes established through persecution. Specials constantly feel the threat of social ostracizing and even political persecution; the show overtly comments on racism, sexism, and othering, similar to the X-Men comics: ‘the isolation of mutants and their alienation from “normal” society [...] can be read as a parable of the alienation of any minority’ (Reynolds 79). Indeed, many Specials do not easily accept their powers: Many wish to hide them (e.g. Claire, Nathan, Tracy) out of fear, whereas others would like to be ‘cured’ and return to a normal life (e.g. Ted, Maya, Jeremy). In presenting Specials as other, Torsten Caeners argues, the series discusses US ideological concepts such as the melting pot
or the frontier mythology: ‘In this context, the idea(l)s of liberty and equality also become pertinent. Furthermore, the series [...] presents the audience with questions about the frontier of human existence and of whether or not the series’ “heroes” represent a new species, another step in human evolution, or an abomination’ (132).

In its rhetorical and linguistic marking, the series exemplifies this othering. As has been mentioned, the show uses the term ‘Special’ for people with ‘abilities,’ which on the one hand shifts the register from superhero comics to more everyday terminology (see Round 61), but on the other hand connotes a dual meaning. ‘Special’ in the sense of ‘precious’ or ‘extraordinary’ also holds the euphemistic medical or psychological evaluation as ‘other’ and in need of different treatment – mentally or physically disabled children are referred to as being ‘special.’ This is further stressed by scientific objectification in the show: ‘By medicalizing, even pathologizing abilities and those who have them, a “scientific” approach supports the notion that abilities are a disease that can, perhaps must, be “cured” or eradicated’ (Jowett 120). Mohinder articulates the ‘us’/‘them’ dichotomy, in a dystopian future timeline, when he refers to having abilities as a ‘condition’: ‘It is hardcoded in their DNA. It is like they are a separate species’ (S01E20).

In contrast, the series’ appeal stems from its sentiment that both cause and effect of contemporary problems are global, interconnected, and egalitarian, affecting all life on earth (see Chan 144) – in this the show demonstrates a belief in the Anthropocene (as discussed in chapter 3). Heroes’ global outlook shows in the (not always successful) attempt ‘to eschew essentialist conceptions of the world and politically reactionary articulations of gendered, sexual, racial, cultural, and national identities’ (Chan 149). Evolved humanity is diverse and transgresses the boundaries of white, young, male, and privileged subjectivity – in that, it lends itself to a critical posthumanist reading, even though the more radical breaks with privileged positions occur in the graphic novels, not the TV show. Specials include several generations (and thus age groups), male and female characters, and members of all nationalities, including major parts in the TV show for people of color: Hiro Nakamura from Japan, Mohinder Suresh from India, René ‘The Haitian’ (Jimmy Jean-Louis) from Haiti, and Maya Herrera (Dania Ramirez) from the Dominican Republic. The show similarly addresses issues of class, featuring characters from working class, such as Niki Sanders (Ali Larter), D.L. Hawkins (Leonard Roberts), and Monica Dawson, to upper class, as represented by the Petrelli family. The show even focuses on the transgression of possible perceived boundaries in that Peter Petrelli (Milo Ventimiglia), born into the elite New York family, chooses a career
as hospice nurse and later paramedic. Further, as Bronwen Calvert notes, *Heroes* takes great pains to undermine the traditional image of the hero as ‘able-bodied,’ in that the show’s ‘external representation of these “different” and “special” bodies […] allows, and even encourages, the destabilization, subversion and disruption of conventional notions of “the hero” and of the “heroic” body, so that we see the collapse of the classic “wimp/ warrior … duality”’ (19). In all their diversity, the show portrays Specials not as ideal representations of US society, but as a realistic intersection of many different and global societies: ‘This narrative stresses the everyman hero, and shows us bodies which may possess special abilities, but are not particularly tall or muscled, which occasionally are small, or even slightly overweight’ (Calvert 25).

What connects the characters of *Heroes* is thus not their similar background or even just their special abilities; what connects them are the challenges of life, the small intricacies of integrating their ability with normalcy, of facing everyday challenges of job, family, economic burden, and life decisions. In addition, these individuals are tasked with not only sorting out their own lives, but – as Kring has said – tackling the big issues as well. They all feel that something has to change and the manifestation of their ability compels them to act: ‘Heroism becomes a genetic imperative of the few, who can then wield their power as they see fit’ (Porter, Lavery, and Robson 6). The shift towards a posthuman future brings with it a utopian potential – it opens up the possibility to change the status quo and effect change, even a radical break with what has been, as George Aichele points out in a Judeo-Christian apocalyptic reading of the series: ‘*Heroes* points toward the death of humanity […] The posthuman being will be either a god or a monster – or both at once, as *Heroes* tells us.’

The show is very strongly humanist in its outlook, though: It is a ‘hymn to humanity’s potential’ (Short 164), positing that Specials are human and not a ‘different species.’ In connecting all human life, the grand gesture of the show suggests, all obstacles can be overcome:

> We are all connected. Joined together by an invisible thread, infinite in its potential and fragile in its design. Yet while connected, we are also merely individuals. Empty vessels to be filled with infinite possibilities. An assortment of thoughts, beliefs. A collection of disjointed memories and experiences. […] Therein lies the great quest of our lives. To find. To connect. To hold on. […] Capable of repairing our fragile world, and creating a universe of infinite possibilities. (S03E25)
6.2 The Utopian Potential and the Dystopian Future

These infinite possibilities – the potential for ‘our’ future to become either eutopian or dystopian or anything in between – are central to the series. So much so that its most symbolic image is the show’s logo of a solar eclipse, a cosmic event that inserts a marked anomaly into the lives of the characters. The image itself, as Mary Alice Monroe notes, is ambiguous, leaving the viewer hesitant ‘whether that bit of sun is the final glow about to be swallowed by the black or the first light beginning to emerge as darkness ends,’ opening up an interim space that needs to be negotiated and in which ‘all futures are possible’ (152).

The eclipse represents a moment of pause, in which categories and boundaries are transgressed – when day becomes night, when light becomes dark. As such, it is a strong visual image for an altered perception of the world, a perspective outside of the usual range. For Steven Peacock, the eclipse comments on the show’s political and social struggle to come to terms with the events of 9/11 – the image ‘gravely reflecting on the dark days of a new world order – a world “changed forever”’ (143).

The eclipse features twice in the diegesis of the show, once in S01E01, when the characters seem to ‘awaken’ to their posthuman potential, realizing their status as Specials. And once more in S03E10–E11, when a similar eclipse temporarily removes the characters’ abilities, rendering the Specials non-special and thus initiating a moment of revelation in regard to the personal consequences of having abilities. In both cases, the eclipse is a catalyst for Specials to make a choice, to act, and to choose a path for their lives that might lead to alternate futures: The eclipse represents utopian possibility.

Furthermore, the show highlights the utopian potential of becoming posthuman as a way to deal with the big issues, most importantly by channeling the liquid modern realities of an economically, ecologically, and politically globalized world into plotlines centering on ‘anxieties concerning time: the longing to correct mistakes of the past, the panic of living in a hypersensitive present, and the fear of the premediated future’ (Ames 111). In this, Heroes emphasizes history as a product of human progress and the importance of individuals that shape it through their decisions and interventions, a notion deeply entrenched in humanist exceptionalism. Nonetheless, the show, in revealing a posthuman ability to travel through space and time and to change both past and future, simultaneously undermines notions of a linear teleology, instead allowing for progress to be disrupted or reverted,
opening up multiple historical and narrative paths and suggesting that people can switch between them or even (at least if they are heroes) redirect them. Events in the future can change the past, even to the paradoxical extent that that particular future never happens. Heroes suggests that this multiplicity of pasts and futures is both our peril and our salvation. (Aicheel)

In Heroes, the shapes of our past, present, and future become fluid and malleable. The utopian potential of posthumanity consequently lies not in its ability to continue onwards with human progress, but in its ability to change every aspect of past, present, and future in order to form either a eutopian or a dystopian reality. Posthuman subjectivity thus ‘may have the power to destroy humanity’ (Porter, ‘Redemption’ 14) or to redeem it – the challenge lies in the moral consequences of these actions and in controlling the ability to achieve the wished-for result.

The show emphasizes these aspects of posthuman utopian potential in presenting a series of possible future scenarios and the attempts to either bring them about or thwart their becoming reality. Three major ‘possible futures’ timelines are portrayed in the series: the ‘explosion future,’ the ‘outbreak future,’ and the ‘exposed future’ (terms taken from fan discussion on Heroeswiki.com). In all three scenarios, posthuman abilities (such as time travel or clairvoyance) allow the characters reliable glimpses into a dystopian future, which then prompt the plot in the present: A conflict ensues between two parties, each trying to manipulate events in order to bring about the desired changes in the timeline, either to allow the future to become reality or to stop it from coming to pass. In the following, I will analyze the ‘explosion future’ as an example of how the show enacts these possible scenarios and in them negotiates the utopian potential for change in the present.

In season 1, Hiro Nakamura (equipped with the ability of ‘space-time manipulation’) accidentally travels five weeks into the future and witnesses a nuclear explosion in the center of Manhattan (S01E02). It is later revealed that the explosion is caused by a Special losing control of the ‘induced radioactivity’ ability, but it remains unclear until the last episode of season 1 who the ‘exploding man’ (S01E23) is. It also turns out that the events leading to the nuclear explosion are part of a larger plan of one faction of the Company that wants to facilitate change in the world. Crime boss Daniel Linderman (Malcolm McDowell) reveals to politician Nathan Petrelli (Adrian Pasdar) the origin of the Company and its intentions:
When my day of judgment comes, Nathan, I will be remembered as a humanitarian. I care about the world, I just want to save it, heal it [...] I was a lot younger than you when I discovered my power. And there were others too, like me, who discovered theirs. We were all confused. And we found each other. Together, we tried to make a difference to the world. And for a while, we did. It was beautiful. And then some of my … friends … they lost their way. They used their powers for personal gain. And all the good that we'd done was – well, it amounted to nothing. And I learned that healing one person at a time was just not enough. We needed something – something to pull it down on course, something big. (S01E19)

He goes on to explain that he wants the explosion in New York to occur, and that in fact, he has planned it meticulously. In his reasoning, killing ‘.07 percent’ of the world’s population in order to facilitate a ‘brighter future. Peace, prosperity’ is easily justified:

This tragedy will be a catalyst for good … for change. Out of the ashes, humanity will find a common goal. A united sense of hope couched in a united sense of fear. And it is your destiny, Nathan, to be the leader who uses this event to rally a city, a nation, a world. Now you look deep into your heart. You’ll know I’m right. (S01E19)

As Ben Strickland argues, Linderman’s motivation is justified in that the world really is in trouble and things need to change: ‘Dismayed with the condition of man, he is trying to create a utopia [...] The troubling thing is that he is right. He has a point. People are not living as well as they could and [...] Linderman wonders how to make it right’ (99). Two episodes later, Nathan is still questioning the Company’s wisdom in creating a utopia through planned destruction when his own mother, Angela Petrelli (Christine Rose), reveals her participation in the plan and compares it to Truman ending the Second World War and ringing in an era of relative peace and prosperity (for the US):

A lot of people put time and care into making this a reality. Myself included [...] Important men make impossible decisions. President Truman dropped two atomic bombs on Japan to end World War II. Killed thousands to save millions [...] That is your one weakness, Nathan – you have no faith. So how could you possibly believe this bomb could actually heal the world if you have no faith in the idea of destiny? Your destiny, Nathan, is to set the course of
history after this unspeakable act has occurred. The people will look back on what you do as the freshman congressman from New York, and they will thank you – for your strength, for your conviction, for your faith. (S01E21)

It is important to note that in contrast to Linderman’s and Angela’s claims, the series does not mark the ‘explosion future’ as eutopian; instead the Company and its prospective future are set up as dystopian. On the one hand, the serial format and long story arcs highlight the gradual disclosure of the clandestine, secretive powers of the Company, working to manipulate Specials for its own purposes. Each episode reveals the interconnectedness of the characters and the machinations of the Company in trying to manipulate the events to produce the desired outcome. As the events unfold, the characters seem to be caught in a web and fighting against the odds. But even more importantly than marking the Company as ‘villain,’ the series first and foremost establishes the ‘explosion future’ as dystopian by visual means. Apart from Hiro, who has witnessed the explosion, the future developing from that event is experienced only through the prophetic paintings of artist Isaac Mendez (Santiago Cabrera; artworks created by artist Tim Sale for the show). Isaac’s art is drawn in expressive comic style, vividly colorful (e.g. a menacing red for the explosion) or darkly oppressing, drastic in its exaggeration of outlines. The images of the explosion and the aftermath of a devastated New York strongly reference the 9/11 attacks and thus evoke feelings of terror and suffering.

The mission of the characters to stop this dystopian future is thus – for roughly twenty episodes – presented as a continued struggle against the specter of another terrorist attack (allegorizing the attacks of 9/11). The message is clear: Ordinary people are given the power to fight against a possible terrorist act and their decisions and actions will determine the shape of the future. As Monroe argues, ‘since 9/11, we are perhaps collectively foreseeing a terrible future and shuddering at the view’ (162), and Heroes reminds its viewers that their own actions can prevent such a future.

In S01E05, the ‘explosion future’ version of Hiro, a dark, brooding, and dangerous-looking sword fighter, announces to Peter that in order to save the world, he has to save the cheerleader. When Hiro and his friend Ando Masahashi (James Kyson Lee) jump five years into the future (S01E20), they notice that saving the cheerleader has not led to the desired outcome and the world is indeed not saved (yet). The efforts of the show’s heroes during the last 15 episodes have thus not come to fruition, and before the finale the dystopian vision of the future
is presented more overtly to motivate stronger heroic actions. In the allegorical episode ‘Five Years Gone,’ *Heroes* portrays a ‘distorted image of ourselves’ (Monroe 162) in the wake of 9/11. As the episode premiered five years after the 9/11 attacks and fictionally deals with events five years after the nuclear explosion, ‘the kaleidoscope turns into a mirror’ (Monroe 162) and the show reveals the absurdity of political action (by governmental institutions) against a perceived terrorist threat.

In this dystopian vision of the future, villain Sylar has killed Nathan Petrelli, the leader destined to unite humanity in hope, and is now impersonating him. Sylar (as Nathan) becomes President of the United States and enacts draconian measures against all evolved humans, enforced by the Department of Homeland Security: ‘We have outlawed their breeding. We have confined their movement. We police them, we track them, their attacks continue. Their population is increasing exponentially’ (S01E20). In keeping with Tim Kring’s argument from before, the show here seems to suggest that the ‘explosion future’ is indeed dystopian in that more ‘big issues’ arise and none are resolved. Instead of creating prosperity, the ‘explosion future’ has only increased inequality and suffering, thus creating a stronger natural ‘need’ for more evolved humans to solve those issues.

In this future, the former ‘good guys’ Hiro and Peter, like many other Specials, become terrorists fighting against the government and its solution to these issues. The episode portrays them as clichéd dystopian foils to their cheerful present counterparts – the heroes become jaded and cynical; they have lost hope, fight out of despair, not out of a utopian belief. Their change is represented visually in their dark clothing, Peter’s massive facial scar, and Hiro’s markedly controlled and less boyish hairstyle (goatee and slick ponytail instead of ruffled mop), acoustically in their dark, husky voices, and in terms of actions in their reliance on violence to solve conflicts instead of persuasion and compassion.

The darker, dystopian future has an impact on the characters, in terms of their situations in life, their visual style, their actions, and their motivations. Peter’s friendly, positive outlook on life, for example, has changed as radically as his appearance: He hides from the world, associates with the crime world that used to be Linderman’s (Las Vegas, strip clubs), and refuses to participate in helping persecuted Specials. He feels guilt and remorse about New York but has lost all hope to alleviate the situation. In depicting the changing motivations and alliances in the future scenario, the show emphasizes that the roles of heroes and villains are, in fact, situational. Decisions and actions can affect characters so strongly that they switch sides – the consequences and outcomes of events are never quite foreseeable and everyone can change.
The driven scientist Mohinder, for example, is at first excited about evolved humanity, seeing it as ‘a new gateway to evolution,’ ‘the threshold to true human potential’ (S01E01), and wants to help Specials in realizing their power. The catastrophic explosion changes his motivations and he becomes part of the governmental effort to create a scientific ‘solution’ to the ‘problem’ – providing risk assessments and trying to find a cure for the evolved genes. After five years of research he has to admit failure in terms of ‘curing evolution,’ prompting the President (Nathan/Sylar) to enact a secondary protocol, a ‘potential solution’ proposed by Mohinder after the destruction of New York, when originally confronted with the potential of Specials’ powers: ‘extinction’ (S01E20). Nathan/Sylar announces a cure and orders mandatory vaccinations that will kill evolved humanity, already preparing to blame the deed on the somewhat daft Mohinder, once more using political manipulation in order to bring about a eutopian future: ‘I’ll say you made a mistake. A fatal error. At first, the world will mourn. They’ll be united in grief. And then they’ll just be united’ (S01E20). In a speech at ‘ground zero’ in New York – openly mirroring the imagery of 9/11 memorial ceremonies and the rhetoric of justification for the war on terror – Nathan/Sylar declares utopia to have come into existence:

We’ve won battles the world over. Not only against those that would do us harm, but against poverty, reclaiming the environment […] Our hope has always been that a great peace is on the horizon, that one day wounds would be healed and salvation could be found. I’m here to tell you that that day is today. I’m proud to announce that we have developed a treatment, a method to reverse the genetic code […] Cities and families can be reunited. And we can finally live without fear. We’ve been vigilant. We have been uncomprising – and our efforts have paid off. The nightmare is over. The world is saved. (S01E20)

The show, especially in ‘Five Years Gone,’ openly flaunts the manipulation of events to favor a specific political outcome. Utopian possibility is invoked time and again as institutional structures and organizations try to control and shape reality: ‘The show thus presents science, politics and the family as social institutions designed to regulate citizens, either through benign protection or total social control – one person’s utopia is another’s dystopia’ (Jowett 120). But what it also reveals is the impossibility of institutionally managing the outcome, of securing a certain utopian ideal through hegemonic structures. By forming loose and shifting alliances based on perceived consequences and an
inherent morality of the choices given, individual characters become prominent players in the events. The cooperative effort of individuals – lacking the proper tools and abilities to address the issues alone – makes it possible that one person’s actions might change the world, while fostering what Slavoj Žižek refers to as the ‘emerging emancipatory subjectivity’ of a new, diverse, and radically different form of ‘communist culture’ (Living xii).

In liquid modernity, safety, security, and stability have become elusive as former institutional ‘agencies of collective purposive action […] are clearly inadequate’ (Bauman, Liquid Modernity viii) to deal with globalized risks and constant changes. The solving of problems (of even the big issues) is undeniably the burden of the individual, suffering any and all of the consequences involved – and sharing in this burden usually does not ‘sum up into a “common cause” […] The sole advantage the company of other sufferers may bring is to reassure each one that fighting the troubles alone is what all the others do daily – so reinvigorating the flagging resolve to go on doing just that: fighting alone’ (Bauman, Individualized Society 48). At the beginning of Heroes, Specials do just that – they fight alone – but by gradually and successively revealing the interconnectedness, the show affirms its eutopian ideal, that people can become extraordinary and work together for the common good. A hymn to humanity’s potential was posited, creating a saga in which the ability to fly or heal are only as important as the ends they serve. Villains may epitomize the worst of humanity, yet our heroes shone a beacon of hope[.]. (Short 164)

In this, the show reveals a utopianism that is concurrent with Bauman’s, in that it posits a change towards a new form of social space in which the individualization of society (each of ‘us’ is ‘special’) is embraced, as it cannot be undone, while at the same time generating a strong incentive for ‘co-operation and solidarity’ (Liquid Modernity 90) (in order to bring together a group of disparate heroes to address the big issues): ‘Although their powers make them “special” (this is often reiterated), they are not unique. Because their powers are not unlimited, the heroes often must work together, combining different abilities to overcome obstacles’ (Aichele). For Žižek, this ‘alternative community of freaks’ thus forms a ‘new collective’ (in a Marxist sense), based exactly on their status as outcasts, due to their posthuman ability as much as their unwillingness or inability to fit into liquid modern society: ‘Each of these handicapped, misfit individuals is incapable of functioning on his or her own, but together they add up to a complete being’ (Žižek, Living
Their subjectivity remains intact – each member is necessary and valuable especially for his or her ‘freakish and “individualistic” [...] peculiarities’ (Žižek, Living 377). Their posthuman status is the necessary condition for them to form a new collective outside of existent society. Preventing the explosion and foiling the Company’s plans can, in the end, only be accomplished with continuous and combined efforts of those outcasts. The refusal of any one individual to participate could have led to the dystopian future (see Monroe 159). Creating a eutopian future is thus a never-ending process of continually making the right choices. Importantly, the collective of posthumans in Heroes is presented as making those choices not just for its own benefit, but ‘on the basis of a moral duty to guide and protect Homo Sapiens’ (Žižek, Living 377).

What the show emphasizes is that in liquid modern times, when problems and big issues are relegated to the shoulders of the individual, every decision becomes part of a larger network of interconnected moments that define the shape of our future. Being confronted with the posthuman condition thus elevates humanity to a global force itself – as expressed in the Anthropocene. The show naturalizes this phenomenon on the level of the individual (literally creating superpowered humans) and stresses the global reach of single-handed actions and decisions: ‘All these supernatural powers materially and psychically elevate Marshall McLuhan’s conception of the global village to a whole new level, hyperbolically heightening human connections’ (Chan 148). As Professor Charles Xavier (Patrick Stewart) aptly puts it in X-Men: The Last Stand (dir. Brett Ratner, US, 2006): ‘When an individual acquires great power, the use or misuse of that power is everything. Will it be used for the greater good? Or will it be used for personal or for destructive ends?’ In Heroes (as in the X-Men film series), the moral decision of acting for the ‘greater good’ is stressed as the superhero’s mission; how a Special (or mutant) uses their power is what determines them becoming a hero or a villain, and it is also what, in the end, determines the path to utopia. As David Simmons argues, Heroes is thus a superhero narrative of its time, complicating concepts of stability and security, but at the same time emphasizing the need for individual acts of heroism: ‘This more psychologically realistic reading of the superhero speaks to a contemporary era in which notions of heroism are being questioned yet remain relevant, at least on an ideological level’ (2). How individuals deal with the ethical consequences of posthumanity is thus central in determining the utopian dimension of the future.