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THE FABRICATION OF PRESENCE: AN ICONOPHOTOLOGICAL READING OF THE BOYS

A FABRICAÇÃO DA PRESENÇA: UMA LEITURA ICONOFOTOLÓGICA DE THE BOYS

LA FABRICACIÓN DE LA PRESENCIA: UNA LECTURA ICONOFOTOLÓGICA DE THE BOYS

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ABSTRACT

This essay proposes an iconophotological reading of the series The Boys (2019-2025) and its comic book source material (Ennis & Robertson, 2006-2012). The analysis investigates how the series constructs, through images, a reflection on power, violence, political messianism, self-deification, and the contemporary reorganization of the sacred. Starting from the distinction between denotation and connotation, it is demonstrated that extreme violence functions as an operation of imagetic[2] denaturalization, exposing what political, religious, and media discourses seek to conceal. Through the Brandão Scale, the metaphorical ascent of Homelander as a messianic figure, his progressive self-deification, and the substitution of the transcendent by the image of power are analyzed. The allegorical construction of fascism and Nazism in the series is also examined, with special attention to the character Stormfront, interpreted as a figure of the imagetic survival of totalitarian ideologies. Finally, through the categories of margin, paramundo, and enigma, it is argued that the series surpasses conventional political criticism and becomes a reflection on the contemporary condition of images, revealing that its true object is not the fabrication of lies but the fabrication of presence.

Keywords: Iconophotology. Logotic Image. Brandão Scale. *The Boys*. Homelander. Stormfront. Fascism. Paramundo.

RESUMO

Este ensaio propõe uma leitura iconofotológica da série *The Boys* (2019-2025) e de sua obra de origem em quadrinhos (Ennis & Robertson, 2006-2012). A análise investiga como a série constrói, por meio de imagens, uma reflexão sobre poder, violência, messianismo político, autodivinização e a reorganização contemporânea do sagrado. A partir da distinção entre denotação e conotação, demonstra-se que a violência extrema funciona como uma operação de desnaturalização imagética[2], expondo aquilo que os discursos políticos, religiosos e midiáticos buscam ocultar. Por meio da Escala Brandão, analisam-se a ascensão metafórica do Capitão Pátria como figura messiânica, sua progressiva autodivinização e a substituição do transcendente pela imagem do poder. Examina-se também a construção alegórica do fascismo e do nazismo na série, com atenção especial à personagem Stormfront, interpretada como figura da sobrevivência imagética das ideologias totalitárias. Por fim, por meio das categorias de margem, paramundo e enigma, argumenta-se que a série supera a

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[2] Throughout this essay, the adjective **imagetic** designates phenomena pertaining to the formation, circulation, operation, and experience of images within social and symbolic life.

crítica política convencional e se torna uma reflexão sobre a condição contemporânea das imagens, revelando que seu verdadeiro objeto não é a fabricação de mentiras, mas a fabricação da presença.

Palavras-chave: Iconofotologia. Imagem Logótica. Escala Brandão. *The Boys.* Capitão Pátria. Stormfront. Fascismo. Paramundo.

RESUMEN
Este ensayo propone una lectura iconofotológica de la serie *The Boys* (2019-2025) y de su obra de origen en cómic (Ennis & Robertson, 2006-2012). El análisis investiga cómo la serie construye, por medio de imágenes, una reflexión sobre el poder, la violencia, el mesianismo político, la autodivinización y la reorganización contemporánea de lo sagrado. A partir de la distinción entre denotación y connotación, se demuestra que la violencia extrema funciona como una operación de desnaturalización imagética[2], exponiendo aquello que los discursos políticos, religiosos y mediáticos buscan ocultar. Por medio de la Escala Brandão, se analizan el ascenso metafórico de Patriota como figura mesiánica, su progresiva autodivinización y la sustitución de lo trascendente por la imagen del poder. Se examina también la construcción alegórica del fascismo y del nazismo en la serie, con especial atención al personaje de Stormfront, interpretado como figura de la supervivencia imagética de las ideologías totalitarias. Por último, por medio de las categorías de margen, paramundo y enigma, se argumenta que la serie supera la crítica política convencional y se convierte en una reflexión sobre la condición contemporánea de las imágenes, revelando que su verdadero objeto no es la fabricación de mentiras, sino la fabricación de la presencia.

Palabras clave: Iconofotología. Imagen Logótica. Escala Brandão. *The Boys*. Patriota. Stormfront. Fascismo. Paramundo.

1 INTRODUCTION

Since its premiere in 2019, The Boys has established itself as one of the most provocative audiovisual narratives in contemporary culture. Adapted from the comic book series of the same name by Garth Ennis and Darick Robertson (2006), the series presents a universe in which superheroes are not altruistic figures destined to protect humanity but rather corporate celebrities subject to the logic of the market, propaganda, and power struggles. Under the administration of the powerful Vought International, heroes become media products whose image is worth more than their actions.

At first glance, the series can be understood as a satire of late capitalism, the entertainment industry, and the growing spectacularization of politics. However, a closer look reveals that its reach extends beyond these dimensions. Throughout its seasons, The Boys offers a complex reflection on the relationship between image, truth, power, and belief, exposing the mechanisms by which public figures are transformed into objects of collective veneration.

The development of the character Homelander is particularly significant in this process. Initially presented as America's greatest hero, he gradually transcends the status of a celebrity, a political leader, and even a messianic figure. In the final seasons, his trajectory culminates in an explicit form of self-deification, marked by the substitution of traditional Christian iconography with his own image and the institutionalization of practices to verify followers' fidelity to the new object of worship.

The series is not limited, however, to the representation of an authoritarian leader; it also seeks to show how entire communities can reorganize their perceptions, affects, and beliefs around certain images. In this sense, The Boys speaks not only of individuals but of modes of visibility. Its true object is the social fabrication of presence.

This problem becomes even more relevant when placed in dialogue with contemporary phenomena. The growth of charismatic leadership, political radicalization, the centrality of social networks, and the transformation of public figures into quasi-providential references reveal the persistence of symbolic mechanisms that transcend ideological and national borders. The series transforms these issues into narrative material, allowing for a concentrated observation of processes that also operate in the social world.

This essay proposes an Iconophotological reading of this dynamic, investigating the modes of presence and the meaning of images, from their material forms to emerging modes of visuality. Particular attention will be given to the concept of the logotic image, understood

as an image that carries a discursive structure capable of organizing complex relationships among denotation, connotation, metaphor, and allegory.

The analysis will also mobilize the Brandão Scale. This model describes the ascending movements of metaphor and the descending movements of allegory, helping us understand how certain images expand to occupy central positions within the symbolic organization of entire communities. Using this theoretical framework, we will examine the extreme violence in the comics and the series; the construction of Homelander's messianic figure and his self-deification; the imagetic survival of Nazism through the character Stormfront; and the forms of resistance represented by Starlight, Hughie Campbell, and Billy Butcher.

The central hypothesis of this study is that The Boys is not merely a critique of the far right, fascism, or contemporary populism. Its most profound contribution is revealing the mechanisms by which images cease to function as mere representations and become presences that organize reality. The central problem of the series is not the fabrication of lies (fake news) but the fabrication of presence.

1.1 THE COMIC BOOK ORIGIN: VIOLENCE AS TRUTH

To understand the imagetic construction of The Boys, it is necessary to recognize that the television series is not an autonomous work but an adaptation of the comic book series created by Garth Ennis and Darick Robertson, originally published between 2006 and 2012. Although they share characters, themes, and fundamental narrative structures, the comics and the series differ significantly in tone, language, and intensity.

The comics are marked by a level of violence, cynicism, and provocation that far exceeds that of the audiovisual adaptation. Brutal deaths, explicit mutilations, abuse of power, moral corruption, and physical degradation recur, often without the aesthetic filters that usually soften the reception of violence in products aimed at the general public. This characteristic has led many readers and critics to classify the work as excessive or even gratuitous.

An iconophotological reading, however, shows that this violence does not merely serve a spectacular function. It operates as a mechanism of denaturalization: instead of hiding the consequences of power, it exposes them; instead of preserving the heroic image of superhumans, it dismantles it. Violence does not appear as an exception to the system; it appears as its logical consequence.

From this perspective, the violence in the comics approaches what Iconophotology

identifies as a resistant denotation. The reader does not initially encounter a sophisticated interpretation of the scene but instead finds a mutilated body, a victim, and an act of cruelty. Before any justifying narrative can take hold, violence appears as a visible fact.

This operation is particularly important because it directly challenges the traditional logic of superheroes. In much popular culture, heroism serves as a device for symbolically neutralizing violence. The hero destroys, but the destruction rarely remains visible. The hero kills, but death tends to disappear beneath moral justifications. The hero exercises power, but its consequences often remain invisible.

Ennis and Robertson refuse this neutralization. The comics expose precisely what heroic discourses usually conceal: the crushed body, the anonymous victim, the devastation produced by power, and the fragility of those who confront it. Violence thus becomes an act of revelation.

It is not a matter of asking whether superheroes are good or bad, but of asking what happens when beings endowed with extraordinary capacities act in a world shaped by the same structures of corruption, ambition, and vanity found in common human experience. The comics offer a radical answer: superpowers do not eliminate violence; they amplify it.

From an iconophotological perspective, this amplification has a decisive effect. Violence ceases to function as a secondary element of the narrative and becomes an organizing nucleus of perception. The reader is continually confronted with what traditional mechanisms of heroic representation seek to hide. In this sense, the violence of the comics operates as imagetic truth.

This expression should not be understood in a moral or metaphysical sense. It is a visual truth. What becomes visible is the materiality of the consequences of power. Violence serves as a force that resists idealization, a characteristic that profoundly distinguishes the comics from their television adaptation.

The series produced by Amazon preserves much of the original work's brutality but reinscribes it within a far more complex audiovisual environment. Music, editing, framing, special effects, and emotional construction strategies continually contest the meaning of the images. Violence remains present, but it no longer appears as immediately as before.

Thus, the adaptation shifts part of the viewer's attention toward the mechanisms of interpreting violence. On several occasions, the narrative simultaneously shows the violent act and the efforts to justify, hide, or resignify it. It is precisely at this point that one of the essay's central questions emerges: if, in the comics, violence frequently appears as resistant

denotation, then in the series it becomes a battlefield between denotation and connotation. Violence remains visible, but it becomes disputed by different narratives. Murder can be presented as an accident; persecution can be presented as protection; the elimination of an adversary can be presented as necessity.

Vought plays a fundamental role in this process. More than a corporation, it functions as a machine of imagetic production. Its function is not only to administer heroes but also to administer meanings, because the company understands that contemporary power depends less on what happens than on how events are presented to the public.

The passage from the comics to the series makes this transformation particularly visible. In the comics, violence frequently appears as a rupture, imposing itself on the reader in its immediate materiality and forcing the reader to confront the consequences of power directly. In the television adaptation, although violence remains central, it becomes an object of symbolic dispute: the spectator finds not only the wounded body but also the set of narratives, justifications, and framings intended to explain, normalize, or even legitimize this wound. If in the comics violence tends to assert itself as an exposed truth, in the series it presents itself, at the same time, as event and interpretation, revealing the mechanisms by which power seeks to administer the meaning of what it cannot hide.

This difference does not diminish the adaptation's critical potency; on the contrary, it broadens the field of observation. If the comics reveal violence as a consequence of power, the series also reveals the mechanisms that normalize it. From this perspective, it becomes possible to understand why violence occupies such a central position in The Boys' symbolic economy. It is neither mere aesthetic excess nor a simple shock tactic; it represents the point at which reality insists on remaining visible despite efforts to reinterpret it. Thus, violence is what the image of power constantly seeks to reorganize, and precisely for this reason, it becomes the first great iconophotological battlefield of the narrative.

1.2 EXTREME VIOLENCE AS DENOTATION ANNULLED BY CONNOTATION

Violence occupies a central place in the narrative architecture of The Boys; however, its importance does not stem solely from its frequency or the graphic intensity with which it is depicted. Its relevance lies in how it reveals a persistent conflict between what the image shows and what discourses seek to make it signify.

From an iconophotological perspective, denotation does not correspond to an absolute truth or a neutral description of reality, but constitutes a provisional effect of recognition. It is

what, in a given context, appears immediately visible. Connotation, in turn, corresponds to the movement by which meanings expand, reorganize, and begin to operate beyond this initial identification.

The relationship between them is not static: denotation and connotation coexist in a state of permanent tension. The former tends toward stabilization; the latter toward the multiplication of meanings. It is precisely in this field of forces

that the violence of The Boys acquires its critical potency. That is because the series' universe is organized around a recurring operation: the constant attempt to subject violence to connotation. The acts of brutality committed by the superheroes are rarely presented to the public as what they effectively are. Violence is continuously reinterpreted, framed, and reinscribed within narratives that neutralize its immediate impact.

Figure 1

The Boys (1st edition), 2009



Source: ENNIS, Garth; ROBERTSON, Darick

Denotation presents a destroyed body, an interrupted life, or an act of brutality in its immediate materiality; connotation, in turn, seeks to reinscribe this event in narratives that render it acceptable, recasting it as an accident, a sacrifice, an inevitable error, a patriotic act,

or a manifestation of justice. It is precisely this mechanism that The Boys strives to expose. Instead of hiding violence, the series reveals the violent act and the discourses mobilized to justify it, demonstrating how power operates not only on bodies but also on the meanings attributed to the marks it leaves.

One of the most emblematic examples of this dynamic occurs in the very first episodes of the series, when A-Train runs through Robin's body at high speed, instantly reducing her to fragments in front of Hughie Campbell. The scene has enormous structural importance because it exposes, in its most direct form, the tension between denotation and connotation that runs through the entire narrative. Denotatively, the event is simple: a young woman was killed by a superhero. There is no great battle, cosmic threat, or heroic gesture capable of justifying what happened; there is only a destroyed body. The strength of the scene derives precisely from this brutal simplicity, which confronts the spectator with what heroic discourses usually seek to erase: the absolute vulnerability of the victim before power. However, after the event, the mechanisms of connotation come into action, tasked with reinterpreting the tragedy and reinscribing it in narratives that attenuate, justify, or normalize what violence had made undeniably visible.

From this moment on, the mechanisms responsible for the symbolic reorganization of the event come into play. Vought recasts the death as an accident, lawyers recast the tragedy as an administrative matter, and public opinion is gradually led to reinterpret what occurred. The series thus demonstrates that the dispute is not centered on the fact itself but on its meaning. The body remains destroyed, and violence continues to be inscribed in reality; what changes is the narrative mobilized to frame, explain, and make it socially acceptable.

Thus, throughout the narrative, Vought assumes a role that goes beyond the corporate administration of superheroes, since one of its prerogatives is the systematic production of meaning. The company understands that contemporary power depends less on concealing events than on controlling their interpretation. This characteristic brings the corporation closer to the great historical systems of propaganda, whose function is not to eliminate visible reality but to reorganize its intelligibility continuously. Therefore, whenever a hero kills, attacks, or destroys, Vought enters into action, not to deny what happened but to produce a narrative capable of absorbing the event. Connotation, in this way, functions as a technology for managing violence, since its objective is not to erase denotation but to render it irrelevant.

As the series progresses, it becomes clear that violence is not a deviation from the represented system but its foundation. Superheroes exist because they possess power, and

this power, in the last instance, manifests as the capacity to impose consequences on bodies. Violence is the most concrete expression of this capacity. However, for the system to remain stable, this violence cannot appear in its raw form; it must be symbolically reorganized. At this point, the relationship between violence and image becomes decisive.

The heroic image serves as a mechanism of symbolic compensation, offering the public a morally acceptable interpretation of practices that, when observed in isolation, would be perceived as intolerable. Therefore, violence ceases to be perceived as violence and is instead perceived as protection. No character exemplifies this dynamic more than Homelander.

In the early seasons, his image remains relatively protected by Vought's symbolic production devices, and even his most violent acts remain justified. However, as his authority grows, a significant transformation occurs, and Homelander comes to depend less and less on connotation and traditional justificatory mechanisms. He no longer needs to explain, justify, or hide his acts, because his very presence begins to function as a source of legitimacy.

This transformation marks a decisive turning point in the iconophotological analysis of the series. In the earlier stages, violence still required narratives that made it acceptable to public opinion; later, it came to be accepted precisely because Homelander practiced it. Legitimacy then ceases to derive from the interpretation of the act. It derives its authority from the one who performs it, shifting the meaning of the action to the figure who embodies it.

It is precisely at this point that violence reveals its deepest dimension within the series, constituting what continually resists symbolic reorganization. Thus, no matter how sophisticated the mechanisms of propaganda, marketing, religion, or ideology may be, there always remains a wounded body, a victim, a material consequence; and violence incessantly reminds us of something that escapes narrative, functioning as that which returns. However, with each new attempt to reorganize meaning, the materiality of harm reappears.

From this perspective, violence plays a role similar to the one Iconophotology attributes to the zones of denotation's resistance. It marks the moment when reality insists on remaining visible despite efforts to transform it into something else. For this reason, violence occupies a strategic position in The Boys: it is not only a narrative theme but also the place where the permanent conflict between what the image shows and what power desires it to signify is most clearly observed.

Violence, therefore, is the denotation that connotation incessantly seeks to absorb; and,

since this absorption is never complete, the series finds in it one of its main sources of dramatic and critical tension. By insisting on remaining visible, violence becomes a testimony of itself, refusing erasure and summoning the viewer to the experience of looking.

1.3 DENOTATION AND CONNOTATION: THE BATTLEFIELD OF THE POLITICAL IMAGE

If violence constitutes the first great iconophotological battlefield of The Boys, the dispute between denotation and connotation constitutes its most encompassing organizing principle. The series demonstrates that contemporary power depends not only on the capacity to act upon the world but also on the capacity to organize perception. What is at stake is not only the events but also the way they will be seen, interpreted, and incorporated into collective experience. In Iconophotology, denotation corresponds to the effect of recognition produced by an image, the moment when something appears to the observer as relatively identifiable. Connotation, in turn, designates the movement by which meanings expand beyond this initial identification, incorporating affective, cultural, ideological, and historical elements.

The relationship between them should not be framed as an opposition between objectivity and subjectivity, because denotation and connotation constitute simultaneous dimensions of imagetic experience. Historically, what changes is the relative intensity of each and the mechanisms used to manage their tensions.

One of the series' most important contributions is showing that public reality is not simply perceived but produced: Vought does not create only heroes; it creates events, or, more precisely, socially shared versions of them. This operation updates Guy Debord's (1967) logic of the spectacle, in which the image not only represents reality but also replaces it as the medium of social mediation. Each public appearance, interview, advertising campaign, or institutional pronouncement helps construct a specific mode of visibility in which facts do not disappear but are continuously reorganized. From an iconophotological perspective, this means that contemporary political struggle occurs less around concealing reality than around administering processes of signification. The central problem is not preventing something from being seen but controlling the mode by which it will be seen, interpreted, and incorporated into collective experience.

The series shows that one of the most effective strategies of power is to weaken trust in traditional mechanisms for recognizing reality. When denotation loses stability, connotation significantly expands its field of action, allowing images once considered unequivocal to

become objects of permanent dispute. A video ceases to function as proof, a photograph ceases to operate as testimony, and even an event ceases to be recognized as sufficient evidence of itself. Everything depends on the narrative that accompanies it and the symbolic framings that guide its interpretation. This dynamic brings The Boys closer to various contemporary phenomena, in which the central question is no longer whether something happened but which reading of the event will be socially accepted. Reality thus becomes progressively dependent on the dispute between competing modes of signification.

This process acquires an even more radical dimension when the figure of the leader occupies a central position in the organization of meanings. Traditionally, political leadership seeks to convince followers of certain interpretations of reality; in The Boys, however, a deeper movement is observed. Homelander does not limit himself to interpreting events but seeks to define what should be considered real, and the distinction is decisive. In the first case, authority depends on reality and seeks to adapt to it; in the second, reality progressively depends on the authority that enunciates it. This transformation constitutes one of the central elements of the character's trajectory. As his influence grows, his image ceases to serve solely as an instrument of communication and becomes an organizing principle of collective perception. The problem is no longer determining what happened, but accepting what Homelander claims happened. Authority ceases to dispute interpretations of reality and begins to dispute the very condition of reality, converting its image into a privileged reference for the production of meaning and for the recognition of the shared world.

The series shows that different communities can organize themselves from different relations with the image: some remain linked to **interpretation**; others come to structure themselves around **belief**, and the difference between them is decisive[3]. In the interpretive community, the image remains subject to questioning: it can be discussed, compared, investigated, and confronted with other evidence. In the belief community, however, the image progressively acquires a distinct status, ceasing to be an object of analysis and

[3] In this essay, interpretation is understood as the relationship with the image that preserves its semantic openness, allowing revision, confrontation with other evidence, and a plurality of meanings. Belief, in turn, designates the situation in which the image ceases to be an object of interpretation and becomes its own foundation, pre-organizing the horizon from which events are understood. In epistemological terms, the distinction is similar to that between a scientific system, whose hypotheses remain open to criticism, refutation, and reformulation, and a dogmatic system, in which certain assumptions are accepted as the foundation of the interpretation of reality itself. The difference, therefore, does not lie in the intensity of adherence, but in the place that the image occupies in the production of meaning: in interpretation, it remains open to questioning; in belief, it becomes the organizing principle of the reading of reality.

becoming the foundation of analysis itself[4]. What should be interpreted converts into a criterion of interpretation, and it is precisely this transformation that The Boys accompanies throughout Homelander's ascent. His followers no longer judge the leader by reality; they come to observe reality through the leader. The interpretive movement is inverted: instead of the image being subjected to the world, the world is subjected to the image, reorganizing itself around it as a principle of recognition and meaning production.

The proximity between politics and religion becomes particularly visible at this point. At different historical moments, religious communities organized themselves around figures considered bearers of a transcendent truth, whose authority derived less from argument than from belief invested in their word and presence. The Boys demonstrates how similar mechanisms can reappear in seemingly secular contexts. The political figure comes to concentrate functions that were previously distributed among institutions, traditions, systems of knowledge, and instances of social mediation. The leader simultaneously becomes a source of moral orientation, historical interpretation, judgment, and collective hope. In this context, connotation ceases to operate only as an expansion of meanings and begins to reorganize social experience itself, redefining the criteria by which reality is perceived and understood. The world is no longer interpreted from a plurality of references; it comes to be read in light of a single presence, whose authority tends to order and hierarchize all other meanings.

It is in this context that the dispute between denotation and connotation acquires its proper political dimension. The central question no longer lies in determining which images circulate in a society, but in understanding which possess sufficient force to reorganize collective perception. Contemporary politics thus reveals itself as inseparable from the struggle for images, not because they replace reality, but because they actively participate in its social construction.

It is precisely this condition that The Boys exposes with particular clarity by demonstrating that power does not consist only in the capacity to act upon bodies but also in acting upon how these bodies will be perceived, interpreted, and remembered. The dispute between denotation and connotation does not occur on the margins of politics; it constitutes

[4] Similar processes can be observed in various contemporary contexts, in which images, narratives, or symbols cease to function as objects of debate and instead become shared assumptions among certain groups. In these cases, adherence precedes interpretation, and belief comes to organize the reading of facts rather than result from it. The image, therefore, is not an object of analysis, but an ordering principle of reality itself.

one of its fundamental operations. Understanding it means understanding one of the essential conditions for the emergence of messianic figures, totalitarian imaginaries, and the modes of adherence analyzed in the following chapters. Before the savior exists, the image exists; before the cult exists, the reorganization of the gaze exists. It is in this territory, where it is decided what can be seen, recognized, and believed, that some of the most decisive battles of contemporary visibility are fought.

1.4 TROPES: THE ELEMENTARY OPERATION OF MEANING

If denotation and connotation describe the fundamental movements of signification, tropes correspond to the elementary operations by which meaning begins to organize itself. In Iconophotology, tropes should not be understood only as rhetorical figures or stylistic resources. They constitute perceptive and cognitive mechanisms that participate in the very construction of experience.

Before a metaphor is recognized, an allegory unfolds, or a narrative stabilizes, thought already operates through approximations, displacements, condensations, and substitutions. The trope designates precisely this inaugural gesture by which something comes to be perceived as something else.

From this perspective, tropes do not belong exclusively to verbal language, as they manifest themselves equally in images, rituals, political symbols, public gestures, and forms of collective representation. A flag can condense a nation; a monument, a historical memory; a leader, an entire political project. In each case, a tropological operation occurs that reorganizes perception.

This broadening of the concept is fundamental to Iconophotology because images are not limited to illustrating previously established meanings but also participate in their production. The trope constitutes precisely the point of passage between perception and interpretation, between visibility and meaning. Among the various possible tropes, synecdoche occupies a privileged position in the constitution of contemporary political images. Traditionally defined as the substitution of the part for the whole, or the whole for the part, it extends beyond the sphere of language. It becomes a powerful mechanism of imagetic organization. In modern societies, politics often operates through this logic, converting particular individuals, symbols, or events into representations of broader totalities. As Kenneth Burke (1945) notes, synecdoche is not merely a figure of speech but a fundamental operation of political perception.

When the ruler appears as the nation's embodiment, the party comes to represent the people. The movement thus becomes an expression of history, and the collective's complexity condenses into a singular figure. This condensation produces significant effects; by simplifying reality, it reduces complexity and offers the community a concrete image of what would otherwise remain abstract. The problem arises when this condensation ceases to be perceived as a symbolic construction and is treated as an evident reality: the part ceases to represent the whole and comes to replace it.

The emergence of charismatic leadership is frequently associated with this mechanism. In contexts marked by social instability, institutional crisis, or symbolic fragmentation, entire communities tend to concentrate their expectations on figures capable of embodying unity, direction, and stability. The leader becomes, initially, the face of the community, then its voice, and in certain circumstances, its own definition. This process does not necessarily result from conscious manipulation; it also depends on collective desires, symbolic lacks, and needs for identification. The community seeks, in the leader, a visible form of itself, someone capable of condensing into a single image what it perceives as dispersed or threatened. That is a fundamentally synecdochic operation: the individual comes to occupy the place of the collective, the part presents itself as totality, and the singular figure replaces the multiplicity of experiences, interests, and voices that compose the community.

In this context, Bertolt Brecht's observation becomes particularly relevant. In The Life of Galileo, when faced with the statement "Unhappy is the land that has no heroes", Galileo replies: "Unhappy is the land that needs heroes" (BRECHT, 1991, p. 153-154). The force of this formulation lies precisely in the displacement it effects: attention shifts from the heroic figure to the social conditions that make its emergence necessary. The fundamental question is no longer the hero's existence but the collective need for his existence.

From an iconophotological perspective, no heroic image imposes itself on its own, since its efficacy depends on a receptive field capable of welcoming, desiring, and reproducing it. The hero is not only fabricated by mechanisms of power, propaganda, or the media; he is also longed for by communities that project onto his figure expectations of unity, security, orientation, and salvation. The production of the heroic image is, in this way, a simultaneously political and affective process in which the community actively participates in the symbolic construction of what it later recognizes as its savior.

The trajectory of Homelander in The Boys offers a particularly expressive example of this dynamic. In the early seasons, he emerges as Vought's main hero and a privileged symbol

of American superiority, condensing values such as patriotism, security, strength, and stability into his image. Over time, however, this symbolic condensation intensifies, and he ceases to represent qualities attributed to the community, instead presenting himself as its personification. In a later stage, the transformation deepens: he no longer represents the community but comes to define what it should be. A particularly expressive example of the synecdochic operation in the series is the recurring presence of the American flag at Homelander's rallies and public appearances. Denotatively, the flag is a physical object – a rectangle of fabric with stripes and stars; connotatively, however, it condenses much broader meanings: the nation, the community, history, values, unity, and superiority. From an iconophotological perspective, the flag functions as a trope of visual condensation, insofar as a single image (the part) comes to represent a complex and abstract totality (the nation).

The political efficacy of this trope lies in its ability to go unexplained. When Homelander appears before the crowd with the flag in the background, it is unnecessary to state that he represents the United States explicitly; the image already serves that purpose. The flag serves as a connotative operator, preparing the field for the emergence of the messianic figure. The faithful does not need to argue, for he sees the flag and Homelander, and the visual synecdoche progressively brings them together until Homelander not only represents the nation but becomes the nation. It is this visual condensation that prepares the ground for subsequent self-deification: the part (the image of Homelander) absorbs the whole (the nation) and then replaces that which once legitimized it, gradually eroding the distinction between representation and presence.

The synecdochic movement then reaches its extreme limit: the leader not only speaks in the name of the collective, but it becomes the very means by which he recognizes himself. Gradually, the community organizes its identity based on his image, taking it as a reference point for understanding itself. The part absorbs the whole, and the singular figure becomes a principle of unity for a multiplicity that comes to perceive and understand itself through it.

The character Stormfront introduces a complementary dimension to this analysis. Her importance lies not only in explicating the Nazi allegory but also in demonstrating the extraordinary capacity of tropes to survive historical transformations. Everything about her seems to belong to the present: her language, aesthetics, mode of communication, and presence on social networks are entirely contemporary. However, the symbolic structure she mobilizes has much older roots: the character shows that tropes do not disappear with the decline of the historical contexts that gave rise to them; they adapt, changing their support,

language, and appearance, but continue to organize collective perception under new configurations. In this sense, Stormfront reveals that updating the image does not necessarily entail a change in meaning. In many cases, the opposite occurs: the renewal of visible forms is one of the conditions for the permanence and continued efficacy of symbolic structures deeply rooted in the social imaginary.

Figure 2

Stormfront and Homelander



Source: KRIPKE, Eric (Creator). The Boys. Amazon Prime Video, 2019–2025

The analysis of Homelander and Stormfront shows that tropes are not mere discursive ornaments or accessory figures of language, but rather operate as structuring mechanisms of collective experience, previously organizing how individuals and communities perceive, recognize, and attribute meaning to the world around them. The messianic metaphor, the cult of personality, self-deification, the construction of the enemy, and the promises of social regeneration do not arise spontaneously; they depend on prior tropological operations that prepare the ground for their emergence. Before the savior exists, there is the symbolic condensation that concentrates expectations in a single figure. Something similar can be said of the cult, for before it exists, there already exists, in a certain way, the identification that brings the individual closer to the image and leads him to recognize himself in it. Before the political allegory exists, there is the reorganization of the visible that makes certain interpretations more plausible than others.

Tropes thus constitute the elementary ground upon which more complex imagetic

forms are built, functioning as a true symbolic infrastructure of imagetic experience, making possible the processes of signification, adherence, and recognition that will later manifest themselves in metaphors, allegories, political mythologies, and modes of belief.

The trajectory analyzed so far helps us understand the transition to the next stage of Brandão's Scale. While tropes operate through elementary displacements, producing condensations, identifications, and reorganizations of the visible, metaphor introduces a new level of symbolic complexity. Condensation no longer focuses solely on specific attributes and begins to involve entire systems of meaning. The leader no longer represents only certain qualities of the community; he now represents the community's potential for redemption. The figure ceases to condense isolated values and begins to concentrate expectations, affections, and collective horizons of hope. At this point, the analysis enters the field of political messianism.

1.5 MESSIANISM: THE ASCENDING METAPHOR OF THE THIRD DEGREE

On the Brandão Scale, the metaphor is not a single, homogeneous figure but rather organizes into degrees of complexity that correspond to distinct levels of symbolic condensation. At its simplest levels, it approaches specific elements through relatively stable analogies; at its higher levels, however, it structures entire fields of experience.

The third-degree metaphor, for example, precisely represents this stage, for in it the image no longer functions as a simple comparison or expressive resource but as an organizing principle of a symbolic universe. Meaning ceases to circulate between distinct terms and gravitates toward a figure capable of concentrating multiple expectations, affects, and meanings.

Political messianism is one of the most evident manifestations of this process, for in it the image ceases to function merely as a privileged representation and assumes a providential role. From this moment on, the leader no longer appears only as an interpreter of the community or its representative, but presents himself as the one capable of leading it to salvation.

In its most elementary form, political leadership presupposes representation; the ruler speaks in the name of a community, administers collective interests, and performs functions defined by relatively stable institutional structures. Messianism profoundly alters this logic by displacing the center of the political relationship: the leader ceases to be seen only as a representative and comes to be understood as a solution. No longer is only administrative

competence or governing ability expected of him; redemption is expected.

The messianic figure emerges when a community invests in a person, expecting that person to transcend the ordinary limits of political action and to restore order, correct historical injustices, defeat enemies, reconstruct a lost greatness, and lead the collectivity to a superior condition. In this context, the metaphor of the savior ceases to be a simple figure of speech and becomes an organizing principle of social experience. The leader no longer appears only as someone who governs or represents; he symbolically occupies the place of the one who promises a reconciled future, becoming a privileged axis of hopes, fears, and collective expectations.

At this point, Brecht's observation becomes precise and returns with full interpretive force. When Galileo states that "unhappy is the land that needs heroes," he shifts attention from the heroic figure to the historical, social, and symbolic conditions that make the figure's emergence necessary. Something similar occurs with political messianism: the ascent of providential figures depends not only on the existence of charismatic individuals but also on the presence of communities disposed to desire their appearance.

The fabrication of the savior presupposes a collective demand for salvation. Economic crises, accelerated cultural transformations, social insecurity, political polarization, and institutional weakening frequently contribute to the formation of this desire, leading the community to concentrate responses that were previously distributed among different institutions, social practices, and forms of authority into a single figure.

The strength of the messianic image derives precisely from the convergence of collective lacks and symbolic condensation. It offers a visible solution to problems perceived as diffuse, transforming the complexity of the social world into a figure capable of embodying, simultaneously, hope, protection, and a promise of the future.

1.6 THE PERSONALIZATION OF CONTEMPORARY POLITICS

The first decades of the 21st century saw a deepening of political personalization[5]. Across national contexts, public figures drew ever greater symbolic attention, progressively

[5] The personalization of politics is not a phenomenon exclusive to the 21st century. Between the 1930s and 1940s, different regimes and political movements made the figure of the leader the main element of collective identification, progressively shifting the centrality of institutions to personified authority. The image construction of leaders such as Adolf Hitler, Benito Mussolini, Francisco Franco, and, in a different context, Getúlio Vargas, demonstrates the historical recurrence of this mechanism of symbolic concentration of authority. The proposed approach refers to the image structure of the phenomenon, and not to the identity between historical contexts or their respective political projects.

shifting political debate from programs to personalities, from institutions to individuals, and from collective projects to images of leadership.

The differences among historical, cultural, and ideological contexts are evident and should not be ignored; however, from an iconophotological perspective, a broader phenomenon is noteworthy: the growing centrality of the individual figure as an organizer of the collective imaginary. Politics gravitates around the image; the image, in turn, gravitates around the leader; and the leader concentrates expectations, affects, and hopes that were previously distributed across multiple social instances.

This transformation profoundly alters the symbolic economy of public life by reinforcing the tendency to interpret complex processes through individual figures. Thus, particularly favorable conditions are created for the emergence of third-degree messianic metaphors, in which leadership ceases to be perceived solely as a political function and comes to occupy the privileged horizon for understanding, orientation, and collective expectation.

The growing centrality of individual figures in contemporary politics shows that the mechanisms described so far extend beyond the fictional universe of The Boys. Although the series does not depict specific characters or governments, various political phenomena observable in the first decades of the 21st century reveal dynamics of symbolic concentration similar to those in the series.

In different national contexts, leaders came to occupy an increasingly central role in shaping the political imaginary. The historical, ideological, and institutional particularities of each case are evident and should not be ignored. However, from an iconophotological perspective, a common process is worth noting: the progressive substitution of debate centered on programs, institutions, and collective projects with forms of identification centered on the leader's figure.

In the United States, Donald Trump's trajectory demonstrated the capacity of a political personality to serve as an organizing center for highly mobilized interpretive communities. For many of his supporters, the evaluation of events increasingly depended on their relationship to the leader. Instead of interpreting Trump through reality, significant segments of the electorate came to interpret reality through Trump.

A similar phenomenon could be observed in Brazil during the rise of Jair Bolsonaro. Beyond simple party leadership, his image became a focal point for expectations of moral restoration, the fight against corruption, the recovery of authority, and the confrontation with political adversaries portrayed as existential threats to the national community. At various

moments, his supporters perceived criticisms of the leader as attacks on the very community he claimed to represent. The case of Nayib Bukele presents distinct characteristics. His popularity is associated with the fight against gangs and the reduction in violent crime rates. However, his iconophotological relevance derives not only from these results but also from the growing identification of the ruler's image with the very idea of national security, producing a symbolic condensation in which the figure of the leader tends to function as a visible guarantor of social order.

The case of Benjamin Netanyahu, Prime Minister of Israel between 1996 and 1999 and again since 2009, presents a distinct yet equally revealing dynamic. His longevity in power stems not only from political alliances or electoral results but also from his ability to condense, in his image, a set of symbolic functions that go beyond mere governmental administration. Netanyahu has increasingly become the central figure in national security, resistance to international isolation, and the affirmation of Zionist identity. In times of crisis, his image is mobilized as a guarantee of continuity and stability. However, strong political polarization in Israel causes his image to function differently across interpretive communities: for his supporters, he is the guardian of the nation; for his opponents, a symbol of division. This dual operation reveals that the political image acts not only as a center of symbolic condensation but also as a point of conflict between rival interpretations of reality – a phenomenon that The Boys explores in a radical way through the figure of Homelander.

The differences among these examples are profound and preclude any simplistic equation. All of them, however, reveal a common phenomenon: the growing centrality of the individual image in organizing contemporary political experience. The iconophotological question is not to determine whether these leaders are equivalent, but to understand how their images come to function as centers of symbolic condensation capable of reorganizing collective perceptions, social expectations, and forms of political belonging.

In all these cases, a progressive displacement from institutional authority to imagetic authority is observed. Trust ceases to center primarily on parties, parliaments, courts, or government programs and gravitates toward the visible figure of the leader. From an iconophotological perspective, this is a process of symbolic condensation in which the individual image acquires a growing capacity to organize collective perception.

It is precisely in this context that Brecht's observation regains its full relevance. When Galileo states that "unhappy is the land that needs heroes," attention shifts from the heroic figure to the conditions that make such a figure necessary. The personalization of politics

does not begin with the leader but with the community that comes to desire a figure capable of condensing its expectations of order, protection, belonging, and salvation. The hero, the providential leader, and the messianic figure do not arise solely from the will to power; they also arise from the collective demand for orientation in contexts perceived as unstable or threatening. From an iconophotological perspective, no providential image sustains itself by intrinsic force alone. Its efficacy depends on the existence of a community disposed to welcome it, reproduce it, and recognize in it a response to its own anxieties.

It is precisely this process that The Boys radicalizes and pushes to the limit. The series does not reproduce any specific leader; it allegorizes a broader tendency in contemporary political culture, especially in the context of the far right: the passage from representation to personalization, from personalization to messianism, and, at its extreme, from messianism to self-deification. This key is essential to understanding Homelander's trajectory, a character who, in exemplary fashion, concentrates the symbolic mechanisms analyzed so far.

From the early seasons, his image is constructed as a point of convergence for multiple symbolic values, condensing references to military force, patriotism, national protection, public security, and the idea of American superiority. Each crisis reinforces his centrality, each threat amplifies his importance, and each conflict contributes to the concentration of new functions in his image. The narrative carefully traces this progression: initially, he appears as a hero; then, he becomes a guardian; finally, he approaches savior status.

The most significant aspect of this process lies not only in the propaganda strategies developed by Vought but also in the growing disposition among his followers to recognize him as a providential figure. The ascent of messianism depends on both the production of the image and the existence of a community disposed to welcome it. The savior is not only fabricated; he is desired. The image responds to a pre-existing collective expectation and strengthens itself by offering a visible form to diffuse longings for protection, order, belonging, and redemption.

The third-degree metaphor, therefore, produces a decisive transformation in the organization of meaning: the leader ceases to be interpreted in relation to reality, and reality itself comes to be interpreted in relation to him. This inversion profoundly alters the dynamics of signification, for events are no longer evaluated by criteria relatively independent of the providential figure; rather, their relevance is measured by the relationship they bear to him.

The messianic image thus becomes an organizing center of collective experience, around which other meanings gravitate. The crisis confirms its necessity, the threat reinforces

its importance, victory legitimizes its authority, and even failure can be reinterpreted as evidence of its mission or as a necessary stage in a broader design. At this stage, the metaphor surpasses its initial status as a figure of speech. It becomes a horizon of intelligibility, offering the principle by which the community interprets the world, organizes its expectations, and attributes meaning to events.

However, this symbolic expansion has limits. The messianic metaphor, even in its most intense forms, still presupposes a difference between the leader and what he represents. Even if perceived as a savior, the leader remains tied to a superior instance of legitimation: he saves in the name of something, leads toward something, and claims a truth that transcends him.

The messianic logic depends precisely on this distance, for its authority derives from the capacity to present itself as a mediator between the community and a principle considered superior. However, what happens when this difference disappears? What occurs when the leader ceases to point to an exterior instance and comes to claim for himself the very condition of truth? It is at this point that the metaphor reaches its saturation. The providential figure no longer refers to anything beyond itself; it becomes the source of the legitimacy it previously claimed to represent. The analogy weakens, representation reveals its limits, and the image progressively approaches the condition of presence. The leader no longer appears as an interpreter of truth but as its incarnation.

At this threshold, the passage from messianic metaphor to self-deification begins, a movement that carries the analysis beyond the field of representation. The third-degree metaphor marks one of the highest points in the ascending movement described by the Brandão Scale. In it, the figure of the leader ceases to function as a simple representative of a collectivity and becomes an organizing principle of an entire symbolic universe.

There is, however, a limit to this metaphorical expansion. When the providential figure ceases to refer to any external reality and presents itself as the ultimate source of truth and legitimacy, the metaphor collapses. A new mode of signification then emerges.

This mode can no longer be adequately described in metaphorical terms. The analogy that sustained the messianic figure progressively dissolves, for the leader ceases to be perceived as a savior, ceases to act as an envoy of a superior instance, and abandons the pretense of speaking in the name of something that transcends him. Mediation disappears, and in its place emerges a figure that claims for itself the very condition of the absolute. The leader no longer represents truth, justice, or salvation; he comes to present himself as

their source.

Figure 3

Substitution of traditional Christian iconography (the Risen Christ) by the figure of Homelander (arms open in clear analogy to the image of Jesus)



Source: KRIPKE, Eric (Creator). The Boys. Amazon Prime Video, 2019-2025

At this point, The Boys' narrative transcends the limits of political messianism. It enters the territory of self-deification, where the central question is no longer what the image represents but what it intends to be.

The fifth season offers the most explicit visual manifestation of this transformation. The substitution of traditional Christian iconography (the Risen Christ) with the figure of Homelander (with arms open in a clear analogy to the image of Jesus) not only inaugurates the process of self-deification but also proclaims it publicly. The symbolic transformation had already been prepared throughout the previous seasons by the progressive concentration of salvific, moral, and political functions in his figure. When Christ is replaced by Homelander, the operation no longer seeks to persuade or gradually build adherence but rather to declare the installation of a new symbolic order. What previously presented itself as a messianic metaphor now becomes an ontological affirmation: the superhero ceases to occupy the place of the envoy and assumes the place of divinity itself. The image no longer announces a future

transformation nor points to a promise yet to be realized; it makes visible a transformation considered consummated.

The iconophotological significance of this operation goes beyond the simple substitution of one religious figure for another, because what changes is the very center of the community's symbolic gravity. The space previously organized around transcendence reorganizes itself around the leader's presence. The faithful are no longer led beyond the image toward a superior reality it represents; the image itself becomes the final destination of religious experience. In this sense, the iconographic substitution functions as a true enthronement. The new object of worship is installed in the place previously reserved for the sacred, and the image ceases to represent a superior authority and instead claims absolute authority. Mediation disappears, and what remains is presence, now invested with attributes once belonging to the divine domain.

The choice of sculpture as a privileged form of this enthronement is not accidental. Unlike painting or photography, sculpture occupies physical space alongside the observer and possesses volume, mass, dimension, and material presence; its relationship with the spectator is not only visual but also spatial. This characteristic confers upon sculpture a singular role in the iconophotological economy of self-deification, for its three-dimensionality reduces the symbolic distance between image and reality.

The represented figure no longer seems merely portrayed; it seems present. When Homelander occupies, in sculptural terms, the place previously reserved for the image of Christ, a profound shift in the mode of perception occurs. The question is no longer what the image represents but what it makes appear. From the perspective of Iconophotology, the sculpture approaches what can be called imagetic presence. The image ceases to function primarily as a sign of an external reality and instead presents itself as a sufficient reality in its own right. The gaze is no longer led beyond the image; it is held by it. It is precisely at this point that the image begins to approach the paramundo, as the representative function progressively weakens and gives way to presence. The faithful no longer contemplate an image that refers to the divine; they contemplate an image that claims the very divine condition for itself.

Once the new object of worship is enthroned, the narrative leads the community to the next step: the public verification of adherence. The proof of faith presented in the fifth season is not merely a mechanism of political or psychological control; it represents the institutionalization of self-deification.

Followers are now compelled to recognize Homelander's divine status explicitly. Adherence no longer takes the form of political affinity, personal admiration, or ideological identification but instead manifests as a profession of faith. The most significant aspect of this process lies not only in the demand for belief but also in the way violence is incorporated into the ritual. Those who refuse to recognize the new divinity are eliminated; doubt ceases to be dissent and becomes heresy.

In the earlier stages of the narrative, violence still required justification. It had to be reinterpreted as protection, security, order, or justice. Self-deification profoundly alters this dynamic: violence no longer requires external legitimation, for the very source of legitimacy coincides with the one who exercises it. The faithful no longer ask whether a given act was correct or incorrect; they seek to understand the meaning of the will of the one who performed it.

Moral judgment is thus progressively replaced by the interpretation of absolute authority; violence ceases to function solely as an instrument of power and acquires a sacramental dimension. Its function is no longer limited to eliminating opponents but also to symbolically purifying the community and reaffirming the new order of meaning. The execution of dissidents thus becomes a ritual that confirms the religious order instituted by self-deification, making visible the definitive passage from representation to presence, from belief to cult, and from authority to the absolute.

However, Homelander's self-deification and the iconographic substitution of Christ by his sculpture behind the pulpit would not have the same efficacy without the action of figures capable of translating this transformation to the community of the faithful: the pastors. In The Boys, these are not secondary characters nor mere narrative ornaments; they perform a decisive iconophotological function: they are the operators of connotation who reorganize the meanings of violence, authority, and reality itself.

Initially, these religious leaders appear as mediators between traditional religious language and the universe of superheroes. Their function seems to be to provide an interpretive key that helps the faithful understand Homelander's power within familiar categories. They preach that the hero is "sent by God," that his strength is a divine blessing, and that his authority must be recognized as an expression of a superior design. At this stage, the pastor still operates as an interpreter: he explains power in light of religion, subordinating the visible to a transcendent instance.

As the narrative progresses, however, this dynamic undergoes a decisive inversion.

The pastor ceases to interpret power in light of religion and instead interprets religion in light of power. The source of truth shifts: previously, the pastor spoke in God's name about Homelander; now he speaks in Homelander's name about God. The symbolic hierarchy is inverted. The pastor ceases to mediate between the community and the transcendent and becomes a mediator between the community and Homelander's presence. From an iconophotological perspective, this transformation is crucial. The pastor becomes an operator of connotation, specialized in managing the tension between denotation and connotation. When Homelander kills, the pastor reframes violence as "purification"; when he lies, the pastor reinterprets falsehood as "superior truth"; when he demands absolute adherence, the pastor reframes submission as an "act of faith." His function is not to deny denotation – the wounded body, the murder, the lie – but to produce a connotation that renders this denotation irrelevant or even desirable. He does not hide violence; he resignifies it.

Thus, as connotative operators, responsible for reorganizing what denotation could make problematic, they transform violence into justice, persecution into protection, and the elimination of the adversary into purification. Religious discourse thus becomes a mechanism for managing meaning.

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However, as the narrative progresses, this dynamic undergoes a profound inversion: their role transforms; they cease to interpret power in the light of religion and begin to interpret religion in the light of power. This change radically alters its function, as the pastor no longer acts as a mediator between the community and God, but between the community and Homelander. Religious authority ceases to possess autonomy and becomes dependent on its proximity to the new center of power.

This process culminates in the proof of faith presented in the fifth season. The pastor not only blesses the new object of worship but also leads the faithful to the private room, where Homelander is presented as God, chosen by Christ himself. After the announcement, they verify whether the faith is genuine; otherwise, they carry out Homelander's order:

execute those who were not convinced. At this moment, the pastor ceases to be merely an operator of connotation and becomes an agent of death. The religious discourse that once served to interpret power now serves to eliminate those who resist the official interpretation.

The iconophotological importance of this figure, therefore, lies in making visible the process of the naturalization of violence. Pastors do not act only as conscious propagandists of power but also as agents who reorganize collective perception so that the elimination of the other is perceived as an act of faith. The faithful who hesitate before Homelander are not only political adversaries; they are heretics. Moreover, the pastor who authorizes his execution is not an executioner; in short, he is a priest who purifies the community.

This analysis allows us to understand why The Boys is not limited to criticizing media manipulation or the cult of personality. The series exposes something deeper: the transformation of religious authority into an instrument of absolute domination. The pastors, who should be guardians of transcendence, become administrators of presence. Their function is no longer to point beyond the image but to ensure that the image is not contested. By embracing power, they are devoured by it, and, in being devoured, they become agents of death.

Self-deification, therefore, produces a decisive transformation in the relationship between image and community; for, as we have seen in the earlier stages of the narrative, Homelander's followers still participated in an interpretive process. Their acts were discussed, their decisions justified, and their authority sustained by narratives intended to explain and legitimize their actions. With self-deification, however, interpretation becomes progressively secondary. The central element is no longer understanding but adherence. The image ceases to solicit analysis or persuasion and demands recognition. The question no longer consists in determining whether Homelander is right or wrong, but in accepting that he himself has become the measure from which right and wrong will be defined.

This transformation marks the passage from a community organized by interpretation to one organized by belief. Truth ceases to be an object of search, debate, or investigation and instead presents itself as a personified presence. Authority no longer derives from the capacity to convince but from the status attributed to the figure at the center of collective experience. At this stage, adherence does not occur because truth has been demonstrated and recognized; it has already been incorporated into the image that concentrates the community's belief.

1.7 THE LIMIT OF METAPHOR AND THE BIRTH OF ENIGMA

Self-deification marks the saturation point of the ascending metaphor. The providential figure ceases to refer to something exterior to itself and becomes an

absolute center of symbolic experience. Analogy disappears because there is no longer any distance between the represented and the representative, between the source of legitimacy and the one who embodies it. The image seeks to coincide with itself, and at this point, one of the most important categories of Iconophotology emerges: the enigma.

The enigma does not correspond to a problem awaiting solution nor to a passing obscurity of interpretation. Rather, it designates the frontier at which interpretation itself finds its limits, arising when the image ceases to function primarily as a sign and appears as presence. Homelander's self-deification approaches this condition.

For his followers, he no longer represents a truth: he is the truth. He no longer points to a superior reality but occupies its place. The fundamental question then ceases to be "what does this image mean?" and becomes another: how did this image manage to occupy the place of what previously transcended it? That question can no longer be answered by metaphor, allegory, or representation alone. It demands a deeper investigation into the relations among religion, power, and the displacement of the sacred.

Homelander's self-deification is not merely an individual transformation or an extreme manifestation of political narcissism; it represents a broader reorganization of religious experience. What is at stake is not simply the elevation of a human figure to divine status, but the transfer of functions traditionally attributed to transcendence to an immanent and visible presence.

The fifth season of The Boys makes this operation explicit; however, the condition for this possibility was established throughout the narrative. The series progressively traces the substitution of a theological structure centered on God with one centered on power: the sacred does not disappear; it changes place.

From an iconophotological perspective, this transformation is of enormous relevance, as it demonstrates that the crisis of transcendence need not lead to the disappearance of religious forms. In many cases, it merely redistributes their symbolic functions. The need for worship remains, as does the need for orientation and salvation; what changes is the object onto which these needs are projected.

In its traditional configuration, religious space organizes itself around an instance that transcends the visible world. The image functions as a mediator, pointing to something that

surpasses it; even when highly venerated, it does not constitute the final destination of religious experience, for its function is to lead the gaze beyond itself.

When Homelander occupies the place previously reserved for the divine, mediation ceases to operate according to the logic of *εἰκών* (eikón – the gaze leads to), whose function is to refer to a transcendent referent. His image is closer to *εἴδωλον* (eídōlon – the gaze is retained in): it no longer leads to a superior reality, because the presence it should represent is perceived as fully realized in the leader's own visible figure[6].

This shift profoundly alters the symbolic economy of the community: transcendence is replaced by presence, the invisible gives way to the visible, and the future promise is replaced by the immediate manifestation of power. The faithful no longer await a salvation that will come; they contemplate a salvation that affirms its presence.

One of The Boys' most important contributions is to show that power can assume functions traditionally associated with the sacred. Homelander's physical force, invulnerability, capacity to destroy adversaries, and apparent superiority over other human beings create an ontological separation. He ceases to be perceived as a simple individual and becomes an exception; therefore, the community reorganizes its religious experience around this exceptionality. As Mircea Eliade (1992) notes, the manifestation of the sacred – the hierophany – operates through an ontological rupture that separates the sacred object from the profane world. In Homelander, this rupture is produced by the very visibility of absolute force.

The operation need not depend on complex doctrines or elaborate theological systems; it is born of the very visibility of power. Power becomes evidence, which then becomes an object of veneration and, in turn, worship. In this sense, the series suggests that contemporary sacrality can emerge less from transcendence than from the extreme concentration of capacities and attributes. The miracle is thus replaced by potency, revelation by force, and divinity by visible superiority.

Perhaps the most profound consequence of this theological displacement is the progressive disappearance of mediation. Religious traditions usually organize themselves through mediating instances – scriptures, rituals, institutions, communities, and interpretive

[6] The distinction between eikón (εἰκών) and eídōlon (εἴδωλον) plays an important role in the philosophical and patristic tradition of the image. While the eikón refers to its prototype, maintaining a referential relationship with a reality that transcends it, the eídōlon tends to enclose within itself the meaning and presence, becoming the object of its own adherence. The distinction is used here only as a hermeneutical key to understand the passage from the image that refers to the transcendent to the image that claims for itself the very presence of the sacred in the trajectory of Homelander.

practices – that establish the relationship between the faithful and transcendence. Self-deification tends to weaken or even eliminate these intermediary instances: if the leader is the very source of truth, interpretation becomes secondary; if he is the very measure of justice, tradition becomes dispensable.

Thus, if the leader is the very manifestation of the sacred, mediation loses its reason to exist. The result is the constitution of a direct relationship between presence and community. The image no longer refers to another reality, does not lead beyond itself, nor points to a transcendent horizon, for it presents itself as a sufficient reality. This sufficiency constitutes one of the most evident signs of the passage from representation to presence. It reveals the point at which the image ceases to function primarily as a mediation and claims the condition of foundation.

The reorganization of the sacred around power, in turn, prepares the ground for a new stage of analysis. Up to this point, we have followed the metaphor's ascending movement, observing the progressive condensation of meaning in the figure of Homelander, his transformation into a savior, and his subsequent self-deification. However, political experience is not organized solely by symbolic condensations; it also depends on narratives, collective paths, identity constructions, enemy figures, promises of regeneration, and mechanisms of exclusion.

At this point, the analysis must shift from metaphor to allegory. While messianism helps explain the rise of the providential figure, allegory helps explain how political regimes structured around it are narratively organized. The question will no longer be merely who occupies the center of the symbolic experience, but how entire communities organize their perceptions, fears, hopes, and actions around narratives of crisis, purification, and collective salvation. It is precisely in this territory that the logics of fascism, the construction of the enemy, and the processes of exclusion examined below become visible.

1.8 FASCISM: THE DESCENDING ALLEGORY OF THE SECOND DEGREE

If the ascending metaphor helps us understand the progressive concentration of meanings in the figure of the leader, the descending allegory helps us understand the inverse movement: the expansion of these meanings into a narrative that can reorganize collective experience.

Thus, while metaphor condenses, allegory unfolds; while metaphor brings distinct elements together under a single figure, allegory develops paths, articulates events, and

produces sequences of meaning. Metaphor creates centers of symbolic gravity; allegory organizes interpretive trajectories.

On the Brandão Scale, fascism finds its privileged expression in this second movement. It is not a matter of understanding it only as a political system or a historical category, but, above all, as a specific form of imagistic organization. Fascism, as analyzed by Robert O. Paxton (2004), operates through narratives that structure affects, perceptions, and collective expectations according to a relatively stable sequence of symbolic elements: crisis, threat, enemy, savior, purification, and regeneration. The force of this allegory does not reside in each element in isolation, but in the articulation established among them, and it is precisely this articulation that The Boys exposes in a particularly sophisticated manner.

Unlike a metaphor, which can operate in a single image, allegory requires temporal development, as its meaning emerges from the relationships among moments along a narrative path. Fascism depends on this logic because no community spontaneously accepts the extreme concentration of power.

For this to occur, a narrative must be constructed that justifies this concentration and presents it as an inevitable response to an emergency. This narrative usually begins with a crisis. The community is led to perceive itself as threatened, and economic instability, social insecurity, cultural transformations, or political conflicts are interpreted as signs of decay. The crisis then ceases to be perceived as a specific event and becomes an atmosphere. The community learns to experience the world as a space of permanent deterioration, so that instability ceases to be a circumstantial episode and becomes a continuous condition of collective experience.

From an iconophotological perspective, crisis functions as a reorganization of the visible. It is not only about highlighting existing problems but also about reorganizing collective perception so that everything confirms the threat's existence. The image of crisis becomes progressively more important than the crisis itself, for it is that which organizes how reality will be perceived. Once the narrative of crisis is established, it becomes necessary to identify its cause. At this moment, the enemy figure emerges, playing a decisive role in the fascist allegory by providing a face for collective anxiety and transforming complex problems into identifiable figures. Thus, the crisis ceases to be diffuse and begins to have its responsible parties. The enemy can assume different forms – social groups, minorities, foreigners, institutions, journalists, political adversaries, or any other element capable of concentrating negative projections – but its function remains relatively constant. It exists not only to threaten

but to explain. Its presence offers the community a simple narrative for phenomena that would otherwise remain complex and difficult to understand.

The enemy, from an iconophotological perspective, constitutes a negative condensation: dispersed fears, diffuse insecurities, and collective frustrations converge in a single image. The community learns to interpret the world through it. Reality thus ceases to be observed directly and is filtered by the symbolic presence of the enemy.

Its fabrication lays the groundwork for the emergence of the solution, and at this point, the providential figure assumes a central position in the fascist allegory. The leader appears as the one who understands the crisis, identifies its responsible parties, and offers the path for collective regeneration. His function no longer consists only in governing or administering divergent interests, but in restoring a lost order. The community ceases to expect administrative competence and comes to desire redemption.

This allegorical logic is particularly evident in the fourth-season scene in which Homelander addresses his followers after the death of a political opponent. The scene is not merely a murder; it is the narrative construction of purification. The denotation is a man speaking before a crowd. The connotation, organized by Homelander's discourse, recasts the murder as a necessity: "They want to destroy our America. I only did what had to be done." The crisis is enunciated, the enemy is named, violence is justified, and regeneration is promised. The community responds with acclamation, not with questioning. The fascist allegory, here, is not only described; it is performed before the spectator.

The force of this scene lies in its need for no explanation. The spectator sees, simultaneously, the violent act and the discourse that justifies it. The second-degree allegory operates in sequence: the crisis is spoken, the enemy is identified, violence is committed, and purification is celebrated. The community that claims does not interpret; it adheres to the narrative offered to it. Fascism, in the series, is not an abstract theme; it is a visible operation of reorganization of meaning.

In The Boys, Homelander occupies precisely this position because his authority derives not only from his physical force or media visibility but also from his capacity to present himself as a response to all forms of instability. Each threat reinforces his necessity, each conflict amplifies his legitimacy, and each enemy confirms his importance. The fascist allegory finds its narrative center in him, for it is from his figure that the other elements acquire coherence and direction.

Every narrative of regeneration presupposes a process of purification, for if there is a

threatened community, there must also be a mechanism capable of restoring its integrity. The logic of purification is simple: what produces the crisis must be removed. The community is presented as a healthy organism; the enemy, as contamination. Exclusion becomes cure, and violence becomes necessity. It is at this point that the fascist allegory reveals its most dangerous dimension. The elimination of the other ceases to be perceived as aggression and presents itself as protection. Likewise, persecution ceases to seem like injustice and is interpreted as a moral responsibility in the face of a threat considered existential for the community. From an iconophotological perspective, this transformation depends entirely on the reorganization of images. The problem is not only what happens to bodies but how these bodies come to be perceived, for no process of exclusion begins with the body; it begins with the image. Before being eliminated, the enemy is imagined; before being persecuted, he is represented; before being excluded, he is visually separated from the community[7].

The proof of faith in the fifth season marks the moment when the fascist allegory institutionalizes itself. The crisis no longer needs to be articulated; it is implicit in the very existence of the heretic. The enemy no longer needs to be identified; he reveals himself in hesitation. Thus, purification no longer needs to be justified, for it becomes ritual. The execution of the unconvinced is not only an act of violence; it is the materialization of fascist logic in its purest form: the community purifies itself by eliminating those who refuse the official narrative. The second-degree allegory, which previously operated through narrative sequence, now operates through institutionalized exclusion. Fascism, in The Boys, does not end in the conquest of power; it consummates itself in the elimination of doubt.

[7] The conflict in the Gaza Strip particularly illustrates the mechanism described in this essay. The recurring representation of segments of the Palestinian population as a permanent threat or as lives devoid of moral value contributes to the naturalization of extreme violence and the expansion of its public acceptability, at least by a significant portion of the State of Israel. Therefore, we start from the understanding that the violence exercised by the Netanyahu government against the Palestinian population constitutes a genocidal process whose possibility depends, first and foremost, on the imagistic production of otherness. Before physical destruction, it becomes necessary to symbolically construct an enemy whose exclusion comes to be perceived as a moral imperative and a condition for the survival of the community. From this perspective, the iconophotological hypothesis is confirmed, according to which no process of collective extermination begins with bodies: it begins with images that redefine who can or cannot be recognized as fully human. Thus, physical elimination does not constitute the beginning of exclusion, but its final stage: before the bodies are affected, a transformation occurs in the images through which these subjects are perceived, recognized, and inscribed in their moral horizon. Something similar, paradoxically, to what happened to the Jewish people under Nazism.

1.9 NAZISM: THE FIRST-DEGREE ALLEGORY

If fascism operates on the Brandão Scale as a second-degree descending allegory, Nazism approaches a first-degree allegory. The difference is fundamental. While the fascist allegory organizes itself through relatively open narratives, in which crisis, enemy, purification, and regeneration unfold progressively, the Nazi allegory presents a much more rigid and immediately recognizable codification. Its symbols, discourses, and images tend toward transparency.

Racial purity, biological superiority, the cult of force, the exclusion of the different, and regeneration through elimination constitute a relatively stable symbolic system whose historical identification has become widely shared. In The Boys, the character Stormfront plays a decisive role by making visible what had remained only partially hidden in the narrative. She does not introduce a new logic but reveals the genealogy of an already existing one. Her presence demonstrates that the power structure represented by Vought was not born solely of corporate capitalism or media spectacularization, but also has deeper roots in the totalitarian imaginaries of the 20th century.

One of the most sophisticated aspects of the character's construction lies in her initial appearance. Stormfront does not emerge before the public as a figure associated with National Socialism; on the contrary. Her aesthetic is contemporary, as are her language and relationship with social networks. She dominates the cultural codes of the present. She presents herself as an irreverent figure, close to the public, able to use humor, spontaneity, and digital communication to establish affective bonds with large audiences.

Figure 4

Stormfront's Marriage (Klara Risinger, later Clara Vought)



Source: KRIPKE, Eric (Creator). The Boys. Amazon Prime Video, 2019–2025

This narrative choice is of enormous importance because it suggests that Nazism does not reappear as historical repetition but as an image-based update. The series indicates that certain ideological structures survive precisely because they learn to shed their original appearances; therefore, Stormfront's symbolic efficacy is intrinsically linked to its capacity to appear young.

As the narrative progresses, however, this contemporary appearance gives way to a deeper genealogy. It is revealed that Stormfront has a direct link to Vought's founding experiments and to the historical origins of the ideology that sustains her worldview. The character ceases to be merely a digital influencer and becomes a historical survivor. Her defense of biological superiority, her belief in superior and inferior human groups, and her adherence to eugenicist principles make the Nazi code explicit. The allegory no longer requires complex interpretation and becomes practically transparent. Stormfront functions as a revelation, making visible what had remained latent.

One of the most significant aspects of the character lies in the tension between appearance and temporality. Although Stormfront presents herself as a young woman, perfectly integrated into the cultural codes of the 21st century, Stormfront has existed for over a century. Her history spans generations, connecting her directly to the origins of the ideological project she represents. This characteristic goes beyond her narrative function and acquires its own symbolic value.

Figure 5

Stormfront as a digital influencer



Source: KRIPKE, Eric (Creator). The Boys. Amazon Prime Video, 2019–2025

From an iconophotological perspective, Stormfront's permanent youth functions as a visual metaphor for the historical persistence of ideologies. Her body seems new, but her ideas are old; her appearance suggests renewal, while her symbolic structure remains essentially the same. The character demonstrates that certain forms of thought do not disappear with the historical defeat of the regimes that produced them. They adapt, reorganize, and reappear in new visual configurations. Stormfront's youth does not symbolize rupture but permanence. Her body challenges time just as ideology seeks to challenge oblivion. She thus embodies one of the series' central lessons: ideological images survive by learning to appear contemporary.

The survival of an ideology depends not only on the preservation of its contents but also on the adaptation of its means of circulation. In this respect, Stormfront represents one of the most sophisticated constructions in the entire series. She does not seek to reproduce the aesthetics of past totalitarian regimes. Her strategy consists precisely in abandoning them to occupy the communicational spaces of the present.

The character uses social networks, masters the logic of short-form videos, understands the mechanisms of digital engagement, and transforms herself into a political influencer. From this perspective, she establishes a significant continuity with the propaganda logic developed by authoritarian regimes in the 20th century. The objective is no longer only to transmit messages but to organize imagetic environments capable of shaping collective perceptions. Radio, cinema, and grand public spectacles performed this function in other

historical moments; in the universe of The Boys, digital platforms, live broadcasts, viral videos, and virtual communities assume a similar role. The supports change, but the dispute over the imaginary remains. The iconophotological relevance of this transformation lies in the fact that ideologies survive less through the repetition of their original symbols than through their capacity to inhabit new modes of visibility. Stormfront does not represent only historical Nazism; it represents its capacity for updating.

1.10 IMAGES OF RESISTANCE: BUTCHER, HUGHIE, AND STARLIGHT

Up to this point, the analysis has focused primarily on the mechanisms of power fabrication. The ascent of Homelander, the imagetic survival embodied by Stormfront, the reorganization of the sacred, and the construction of fascist and Nazi allegories have helped us understand how certain images can organize entire communities around modes of adherence. However, The Boys is not only a narrative about the constitution of power; it is also about the difficulties of resisting it.

This resistance does not arise abstractly, nor is it founded exclusively on ideological principles; it is born from biographical trajectories marked by absences, losses, manipulations, and traumas. In this respect, the series distances itself from traditional superhero narratives, in which relatively stable moral values usually define characters.

Figure 6
Stormfront (Klara Vought) at a nazi event with Goebbels



Source**:** KRIPKE, Eric (Creator). The Boys. Amazon Prime Video, 2019–2025

In The Boys, individuals' choices are profoundly conditioned by their formative experiences. The political and religious images analyzed throughout this essay do not act upon abstract subjects but upon concrete people, bearers of memories, affects, and wounds. Adherence to power has a history; resistance does too.

Homelander's trajectory is the most extreme example of this logic. His childhood is marked not only by the absence of a conventional family but also by the absence of the very experience of love. Raised in a laboratory, subjected to constant observation, and treated from birth as a scientific experiment, he was never perceived as a son but as a product. His existence was organized around utility, control, and permanent observation. Those who surrounded him did not seek to love him but to study him.

This condition produces a fundamental wound that follows the character throughout the narrative. Homelander's speeches, public appearances, and even his acts of violence reveal an almost desperate need for recognition. Homelander does not only seek to govern or dominate; he seeks to be loved. However, because he has never experienced human love in its most elementary form, he progressively comes to confuse love with adoration. The need for affection becomes a need for veneration, and the need for recognition becomes a need for cult.

His self-deification finds one of its deepest roots in this process. Homelander does not desire to become god only because he possesses power; he desires to become one because he believes that only a divinity could receive the absolute love denied him throughout his life. The tragedy of the character lies in this paradox: the boy, transformed into a guinea pig, desperately seeks what he never received, yet does so through fear, submission, and violence. The more he seeks to be loved, the more he becomes incapable of loving.

Billy Butcher occupies an almost opposite position. His formation is marked by domestic violence and the figure of an abusive father who turns force into everyday language. From an early age, Butcher learns to perceive the world as a space of permanent conflict. Aggression does not arise in his experience as an exception but as a norm. There is, however, one experience capable of temporarily interrupting this cycle: his relationship with Becca.

She is the only truly humanizing experience in his trajectory. By her side, Butcher discovers something he had never fully known: welcome, trust, and belonging. For the first time, violence ceases to be the organizing center of his existence. Becca's loss thus carries a much deeper dimension than the simple loss of a companion; it represents the destruction

of the only concrete possibility of breaking with the destiny that his childhood seemed to impose upon him.

When his wife disappears from his life, Butcher not only loses the woman he loved but also the possibility of becoming someone different from what the past had produced. His obsession with Homelander stems from this rupture. The fight against the leader of the Seven becomes a desperate attempt to give meaning to the loss that defined him. Therefore, his resistance is simultaneously heroic and tragic: he fights against the monster that destroyed his life, yet continually risks becoming like it. At various moments in the series, the frontier between resistance and the reproduction of violence becomes dangerously tenuous, revealing that facing power does not always free those who fight it from its deepest logic.

Figure 7
Butcher Protecting Ryan from His Father, Homelander



Source: KRIPKE, Eric (Creator). The Boys. Amazon Prime Video, 2019–2025

Hughie Campbell presents a distinct configuration. His history is marked by maternal absence. Abandoned by his mother at a young age and raised by an affectionate, although overly protective, father, Hughie develops a cautious relationship with the world. Unlike Butcher, his first reaction to tragedy is not aggression but a question. Robin's death does not immediately transform him into a combatant but into an observer. Before reacting, he seeks to understand, reconstruct the facts, and find meaning in what occurred.

From an iconophotological perspective, Hughie becomes the figure of interpretation. While Homelander demands adherence, Butcher confronts, and Hughie insists on understanding. His resistance stems from doubt. His strength lies not in violence but in refusing to accept what is presented to him as truth passively. In a narrative dominated by images that demand submission, he embodies the persistence of the critical gaze. His trajectory suggests that understanding can be a form of resistance as important as fighting.

The trajectory of Annie January, Starlight, is perhaps the most complex of all. Raised by a profoundly controlling mother, she grew up with a childhood organized around a carefully planned project of success. Religion plays a central role in this process, but not necessarily as an authentic spiritual experience. Annie appears subordinated to expectations of recognition, visibility, and public ascent, having been prepared to play a previously defined role.

Thus, even before becoming Starlight, she was already a project constructed by others; therefore, her entry into the Seven does not mark only the beginning of a career; it represents the culmination of an identity carefully molded by external expectations. The character's great transformation consists precisely in breaking this imposed identity. Upon discovering the mechanisms of manipulation within Vought, Starlight initiates a simultaneous political and personal liberation. Her resistance is not only institutional; it is existential: she fights to recover the right to define herself.

This dimension becomes even more evident in later seasons, when Annie ceases to be a mere denouncer and becomes a symbolic figure of the opposition. As Homelander consolidates his self-deification, Starlight assumes an inverse role. She becomes a point of convergence for those who reject the new imagetic order. Around her figure, a community of resistance is organized to preserve the autonomy of interpretation in the face of demands for absolute adherence. The persecution of her followers, defamation campaigns, assassinations, and other forms of intimidation presented in the narrative demonstrate that resistance also produces its own images of belonging. Starlight ceases to be merely a corporate heroine and increasingly becomes a counter-messianic figure. Unlike Homelander, however, her leadership is not based on the promise of submission to an absolute truth but on the defense of freedom of conscience and the subject's autonomy. Annie does not offer her followers a new form of cult; she offers the possibility of recovering the capacity to judge.

Observed together, these trajectories reveal a fundamental aspect of the series. Homelander, Butcher, Hughie, and Starlight are characters shaped by different experiences

of absence: absence of love, protection, presence, and authenticity. The difference does not lie in the existence of these wounds, but in the responses each character offers to them. Homelander seeks to fill his lack by becoming absolute. Butcher tries to overcome it by destroying what he considers the origin of evil. Hughie seeks to understand it by interpreting and reconstructing its meaning. Starlight seeks to transform it into testimony, solidarity, and the reconstruction of authentic bonds.

Resistance, therefore, is not born solely from ideological convictions or abstract political positions; it also emerges from how individuals process their own wounds. The Boys suggests that the great political, religious, and imagistic disputes of our time are equally about how we respond to our deepest absences. The same lacks that can lead to the cult of personality, submission, and self-deification can also fuel criticism, solidarity, and resistance. It is precisely at this crossroads that the destinies of its characters are defined and, ultimately, those of the communities they represent.

Figure 8

Annie and Hughie's First Meeting



Source: KRIPKE, Eric (Creator). The Boys. Amazon Prime Video, 2019–2025

Margin, paramundo**, and enigma: the limits of interpretation** Throughout this essay, we have examined how images organize political, religious, and social experience. We have observed the tension between denotation and connotation, the operation of tropes, the formation of messianic metaphors, the development of fascist and Nazi allegories, the

process of Homelander's self-deification, and the forms of resistance represented by Butcher, Hughie, and Starlight. In all these cases, we remain within the domain of signification, meaning that images can be interpreted, analyzed, and related to broader symbolic systems. Even when disputed, meaning remains within the field of the interpretable.

Iconophotology, however, recognizes border regions of imagetic experience in which the question is no longer only what the image means. The problem becomes understanding what occurs when signification itself reveals its limits. It is in this context that the categories of margin, paramundo, and enigma emerge.

Margins do not signify the absence of meaning or interpretive chaos; they designate zones where meaning persists but loses the stability required for closure in a single reading. Meaning does not disappear; it becomes unstable. From an iconophotological perspective, the margin is the space where interpretation begins to encounter its limits; the observer perceives that something continues to demand understanding, yet the traditional instruments of analysis prove progressively insufficient to stabilize what is seen. The margin does not mark the end of meaning but its retraction. The image continues to signify, although its meaning no longer appears fully fixable.

Contemporary experience offers numerous examples of this process. Distinct groups observe the same images and produce radically different interpretations. Political discourse, photographs, videos, or historical events no longer necessarily guarantee interpretive consensus. Communities cease to share a common visible reality and come to share only the circulation of the same images. This condition becomes particularly evident in digital environments marked by polarization, fragmentation, and a permanent competition between narratives. The image remains; interpretation fragments. It is precisely in this situation that the margin begins to expand.

Throughout the early seasons of The Boys, Homelander remains relatively open to interpretation. His acts can be judged, his decisions can be discussed, and his image remains subject to competing evaluations. However, as his authority grows, a significant transformation occurs. The community ceases to discuss his acts and begins to discuss his authority; subsequently, even that discussion ends, for his mere presence becomes sufficient.

This change has enormous iconophotological relevance, because interpretation does not disappear abruptly but retracts. Each new manifestation of the leader requires less explanation, just as each new demonstration of power requires less justification. The

community comes to accept what it previously sought to understand. The interpretive space progressively narrows, and it is precisely in this narrowing that the margin emerges.

The category of paramundo designates an even more radical condition. In it, the image no longer operates primarily as a representation of something exterior to itself but appears as a presence. The difference is decisive: representation refers to another reality; presence claims sufficiency. Representation points beyond itself; presence retains the gaze within itself. From this perspective, paramundo does not correspond to a parallel universe or a fantastic dimension but constitutes a specific mode of relation to the image. In this mode, mediation weakens; the image ceases to function as a bridge and becomes a destination. It is precisely this transformation that Homelander's trajectory makes visible.

When his figure occupies the place previously reserved for the transcendent, the question is no longer what it represents but what it makes appear. The leader ceases to point to a truth and instead presents himself as the truth itself.

This transformation helps us understand one of the central theses developed throughout this essay: The Boys does not describe only the fabrication of lies or propaganda. The narrative describes something deeper: the fabrication of presence. The power of the image does not derive exclusively from its capacity to hide reality but from its capacity to occupy reality's place. Homelander's self-deification, for example, constitutes the maximum expression of this process. He no longer seeks to convince; he seeks to appear. He no longer seeks only rational adherence; he seeks ontological recognition. The faithful are not invited to believe in an interpretation but to accept a presence.

All interpretation presupposes distance, which means that the observer must remain sufficiently distant from the object under analysis to compare and judge it. Absolute presence tends to destroy this distance. The community ceases to interpret and begins to participate, causing reflection to give way to adherence. Questioning gives way to recognition, and criticism becomes progressively difficult because the object of criticism no longer appears as an object but as a foundation.

This transformation helps explain why the resistance embodied by Hughie and Starlight is so decisive in the narrative. Both seek to preserve precisely what absolute presence threatens to eliminate: interpretive distance. They insist on looking, remembering, and asking. In other words, they insist on keeping the possibility of interpretation open.

The enigma marks the extreme point of this path. In the iconophotological tradition, it does not correspond to a hidden secret or a problem awaiting solution; it designates an

experience before which interpretation recognizes its own limits. The enigmatic image is not the one that hides a definitive meaning, but the one whose presence exceeds any attempt at interpretive exhaustion. From this perspective, Homelander's self-deification approaches the enigmatic condition not because its logic is incomprehensible, but because it reveals a limit of signification itself. The question is no longer "what does this image mean?" but rather "how did this image manage to occupy the place of what should only represent?" The enigma shifts attention from content to the very condition of possibility of the image.

At this point, The Boys transcends the limits of political satire and social criticism. The series becomes an investigation of the contemporary condition of images. Its fundamental question is not only about manipulation, propaganda, fascism, Nazism, or messianism. All these dimensions remain important, but they function as manifestations of a deeper problem: the problem of presence. The series suggests that the greatest power of contemporary images does not consist in hiding the world, but in presenting themselves as the world. The fabrication of presence precisely captures this process. When the image ceases to refer to something exterior and comes to claim for itself the condition of sufficient reality, we enter the territory of margins, paramundo, and enigma. It is in this territory that interpretation finds its frontier, and it is precisely at this frontier that Iconophotology finds one of its most decisive objects.

2 FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

Throughout this essay, we have sought to demonstrate that The Boys transcends mere political satire, criticism of superhero culture, and simple denunciation of contemporary propaganda mechanisms. Although these dimensions are present in the narrative, its most profound contribution lies in exposing the processes by which images organize collective experience, structure communities of belief, produce forms of adherence, and, at their most extreme, become presences capable of occupying the place of reality itself.

We began with the comic book origins of the work to show that the violence conceived by Garth Ennis and Darick Robertson is not merely a shock tactic or entertainment strategy. In the comics, violence often functions as resistant denotation, exposing what heroic discourses seek to conceal. The television adaptation amplifies this by making visible the ongoing dispute between denotation and connotation, revealing the mechanisms by which violence is reinterpreted, administered, and incorporated into narratives that legitimize power. From this iconophotological distinction, we examined how contemporary political images organize modes of visibility, demonstrating that the power struggle is inseparable from the

struggle for interpretation. What is at stake are not only events but the modes by which these events will be perceived, narrated, and incorporated into collective experience.

The analysis of tropes helped us understand the elementary operations that sustain this dynamic. The symbolic condensations associated with the figure of the leader showed that modern political experience remains deeply dependent on imagistic mechanisms that transform individuals into visible representatives of entire communities. In this context, Brecht's observation proved particularly enlightening. When he states that "unhappy is the land that needs heroes," the playwright shifts attention from the heroic figure to the historical and symbolic conditions that make its existence necessary. The fabrication of the savior presupposes a community disposed to desire him. Furthermore, the hero is not produced only by power; he is equally solicited by hope, insecurity, fear, and the need for orientation, artificially created or not.

This finding helped us understand Homelander's ascent as a third-degree messianic metaphor. His trajectory demonstrates how an image can progressively concentrate functions previously distributed among institutions, values, and traditions. The hero transforms into a guardian, then into a savior, approaching the condition of the absolute. The fifth season marks the moment when this logic reaches its limit, for Homelander's self-deification does not represent only a radicalization of political messianism but its overcoming. The metaphor ceases to refer to a superior instance and comes to claim for itself the very condition of truth. The substitution of Homelander's figure for Christian iconography, the institutionalization of proof of faith, and the elimination of dissidents make visible the passage from representation to presence. The analysis of the character Stormfront revealed a complementary dimension of this process. Her apparent youth and extraordinary longevity show that ideologies do not survive merely by the repetition of their historical forms, but by their capacity to update their images and adapt their means of circulation. The character demonstrates that the past does not disappear; it reorganizes itself, learns new languages, adopts new supports, and reappears in new forms. The relationship among her, propaganda mechanisms, and contemporary digital environments made the persistence of certain imagetic structures visible over time. Platforms change, technological devices transform, and modes of visibility reorganize, yet certain symbolic operations continue to produce similar effects on collective perception.

The concentration camps depicted in the narrative deepen this reflection by showing that no policy of exclusion begins with physical confinement. Before the walls, there is the

image; before segregation, classification; and before elimination, the visual construction of the enemy. The series shows that spaces of exclusion are the architectural materialization of prior imagetic operations, revealing that processes of reorganizing perception frequently precede political violence.

In counterpoint to images of absolute power, the analysis of Butcher, Hughie Campbell, and Starlight reveals different forms of resistance. Butcher embodies the counter-image that continually risks reproducing the very logic he fights; Hughie, in turn, represents the persistence of interpretation in the face of the seduction of absolute presence; and Starlight becomes the symbolic nucleus of a community organized around testimony, memory, and denunciation.

The persecution suffered by this community in the final seasons shows that regimes founded on absolute adherence do not only combat individuals. They also combat the possibility of an alternative interpretation of reality. The struggle against Starlight's followers is simultaneously a struggle against memory, against testimony, and against the very capacity to see otherwise.

It was precisely this problem that led to the categories of margin, paramundo, and enigma. In these border regions of imagetic experience, the question is no longer only what an image means. The problem becomes understanding what it makes appear, because the image progressively ceases to function as a representation and comes to claim the condition of presence. It is at this point that The Boys reaches its most unsettling dimension.

The series does not describe only the fabrication of a collective lie nor only the formation of a political cult. Its true object is the process by which certain images cease to refer to something exterior and come to occupy the place of what they should only represent. The substitution of Christ by Homelander constitutes the maximum expression of this phenomenon, and the problem here is no longer only religious, political, or ideological; it is iconophotological. The image abandons its mediating function and presents itself as sufficient reality. Interpretation weakens, adherence becomes sufficient, and meaning gives way to presence.

From this perspective, The Boys offers a reflection particularly relevant to the contemporary world. The decisive question is not only which images we produce but also which images we allow to organize our collective experiences. History shows that no society is immune to the emergence of providential figures, totalitarian imaginaries, or communities founded on exclusion. Perhaps it is precisely for this reason that Brecht's warning remains

so current. The problem lies not only in heroes, leaders, or ideologies but in the conditions that make their appearance necessary. Iconophotology shows that the danger lies not only in what images hide but, above all, in what they manage to replace. The most powerful images are not those that hide reality. They are those that manage to occupy their place.

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