

CRIME, HOODED CRUSADERS, AND (PRIVATE) JUSTICE: ARROW AND THE EXONERATION OF VIGILANTISM IN CONTEMPORARY POPULAR MEDIA

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ABSTRACT

As a form of extralegal crimefighting, vigilantism involves relevant questions about crime, justice, and law enforcement, and it is a staple of popular media. In the 1980s, several popular culture products took a critical approach to vigilantism as a part of the deconstruction of the superhero genre, which included a critical reflection on the psychological and political implications of the motivations behind private justice enforcers' behavior. In this context, this paper focuses on the representation of vigilantism within the popular television show *Arrow*, and analyzes how it depicts, rationalizes, and ultimately exonerates vigilantism as a response to criminal activity. The empirical analysis focuses on the various rhetorical strategies used by *Arrow* to justify vigilantism, such as the representation of legal and governmental institutions as corrupt and inefficient, the multiple rationales whereby vigilantism is practiced, and the sanctioning of private crimefighting by institutions. The analysis indicates that the show delivers an apology for the vigilante ethos: *Arrow* mirrors superheroes' dark turn in the 1980s and their reflection of societal fears about crime. However, in the show's worldview, these fears can only be appeased by private vigilantes. By portraying the state as inefficient and/or corrupt, the show boosts ideologies of individualism and anti-government neoliberalism.

KEYWORDS

crime, justice, vigilantism, *Arrow*

CRIME, CRUZADOS ENCAPUZADOS E JUSTIÇA (PRIVADA): ARROW E A EXONERAÇÃO DO VIGILANTISMO NOS MÉDIA POPULARES CONTEMPORÂNEOS

RESUMO

Como uma forma de combate extrajudicial ao crime, o vigilantismo envolve questões relevantes sobre crime, justiça e o cumprimento da lei, tornando-se um elemento básico dos média populares. Na década de 1980, diversos produtos da cultura popular adotaram uma abordagem crítica ao vigilantismo, como parte da desconstrução do gênero de super-herói, que incluiu uma reflexão crítica sobre as implicações psicológicas e políticas das motivações por detrás do

comportamento dos executores da justiça privada. Nesse contexto, este artigo concentra-se na representação do vigilantismo no conhecido programa de televisão *Arrow* (Flecha) e analisa a maneira como ele retrata, racionaliza e, em última análise, exonera o vigilantismo como uma resposta justificável à atividade criminosa. A análise empírica se concentra nas várias estratégias retóricas usadas por *Arrow* para justificar o vigilantismo, como a representação de instituições legais e governamentais como corruptas e ineficientes, as múltiplas razões pelas quais o vigilantismo é praticado e a sanção do combate ao crime privado pelas instituições. Os resultados indicam que o programa oferece uma apologia do éthos do vigilante: *Arrow* herda a virada sombria dos super-heróis na década de 1980 e o reflexo dos medos da sociedade sobre o crime, no entanto, na visão de mundo do programa, esses medos só podem ser aplacados por vigilantes privados. Ao retratar o estado como ineficiente e/ou corrupto, o espetáculo potencializa ideologias do individualismo e do neoliberalismo antigovernamental.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE

crime, justiça, vigilantismo, *Arrow*

1. INTRODUCTION

Vigilantism involves relevant questions about crime, justice, and law enforcement, as it consists of premeditated activity focused on crime control performed by autonomous citizens (Dumsday, 2009). Vigilantism is defined as “the extralegal prevention, investigation, or punishment of offenses” (Bateson, 2021, p. 926), be it crimes or violations of authoritative standards, by citizens that usurp state authority, thus moving in the same direction as the law, but exceeding its scope or severity. Politically, vigilantism is an essentially conservative phenomenon that aims “to suppress, or even eradicate, any threat to the status quo” (Rosenbaum & Sederberg, 1974, p. 559); vigilantes may break “from state-led justice-seeking, but they are not aberrant social actors in the political context of their activities. Rather, they are often self-appointed guardians of a particular social order” (Favarel-Garrigues et al., 2020, p. 191). Moreover, ruling elites can encourage vigilantism as a form of law enforcement and a counterinsurgency strategy (Yonucu, 2018). From the viewpoint of procedure, vigilante activities are grounded in a rugged individualist ethos whereby the pursuit of justice is paramount:

what is required for vigilantism is simply a concern on the part of the vigilante for what he or she sees as justice or the good of society, whether those values pertain to the attempted enforcement of positive law, natural law, societal custom, or all three. (Dumsday, 2009, pp. 55–56)

The theory of vigilantism is based on real-world behavior and policies. In the context of the global neoliberal turn (which took place from the 1970s onwards), a new type of poverty was generated, in which urban neighborhoods of the racialized poor gradually became no-go areas, and social problems were reduced to security issues, justifying increased policing. More specifically, in the United States, Brazil, and other urban contexts,

poor and crime-ridden areas have been mostly left to their own devices to police themselves unless they threaten middle and upper-class citizens (Yonucu, 2018). In addition to ghettoization and exclusionary zoning, rising crime rates (another issue that characterized the 1980s) imply police brutality, vigilantism, and illiberal draconian laws (Katz, 2011). Vigilantism also relates to zoning insofar as the vigilante myth entails the use of controlled violence to create ideal suburbs in a context in which the use of security forces has always played a relevant role in protecting the American upper classes in their estates (Cawelti, 1975). Vigilantism is also linked to the individualization of security, which makes individuals and groups responsible for risk management, implying new technologies of control that operate through the instrumentalization of freedom (Rose, 2004). This is connected to broader trends of neoliberal transfer of responsibilities from the state, such as policing, to individuals and the private sector, which reflects empirically, for example, in statements by British governments in the 1980s and 1990s that the state cannot do everything in the area of security, so citizens must assume responsibility. An individualization that widens social gaps, as not everyone has the means to take responsibility through the choice of a neighborhood or the acquisition of private security (Hache, 2007). Moreover, in the 1980s, Americans participated in increasing numbers in self-defense against crime, with neighborhood-watch committees expanding significantly and 19,000,000 to 20,000,000 Americans being involved in community crime prevention. Not by coincidence, it has been indicated that there was, at times, a fine line between self-defense and vigilantism (Busch, 2001). In this line, the 1980s provided the case of Bernard Goetz, “the subway vigilante”, who became a symbol of the individual taking control and bringing order in the context of a narrative that dovetailed with Ronald Reagan’s anti-government promotion of individualism (Johnson, 2012).

Besides the real-world factors and implications of extralegal crimefighting, vigilantes are also “major figures in popular culture” (Dumsday, 2009, p. 49), a staple of genres such as the Western (Robinson & Wagner, 2022), whose rationale is persistent in popular cinema (Grant, 2020). In addition to the hordes of superhero vigilantes provided by the fictional cinematic universes of Marvel Comics and DC Comics, the contemporary media context is populated by television shows that deal with vigilantism, such as *Dexter* (Showtime, 2006–2013) and *The Boys* (Amazon, 2019–). The relevance of vigilantism in contemporary media has also been enhanced through the concept of digital vigilantism, that is, citizens’ response and retaliation against offenses on digital media platforms (Favarel-Garrigues et al., 2020).

In this context, the television series *Arrow* (The CW, 2012–2020) offers a particularly interesting representation of vigilantism that relies on its comic-book source: DC Comics’ archer superhero Oliver Queen, aka Green Arrow. Robinson and Wagner (2022) point out that The CW shows “have dared to define a new kind of superhero formula, one that opens up new themes on television regarding difficult issues with the intersection of justice, legitimacy, and accountability” (p. 172), on which *Arrow*, as the flagship of The CW’s “Arrowverse”, proposes enticing debates. This paper focuses on the scope and limits of

contemporary vigilantism representations and reflects on how *Arrow* depicts, rationalizes, and ultimately exonerates vigilante behavior as a justifiable response to criminal activity.

2. VIGILANTISM IN CONTEMPORARY POPULAR CULTURE: THE CASE OF ARROW

2.1. CRIMEFIGHTERS, SUPERHEROES, AND THE DECONSTRUCTION OF VIGILANTISM

The fictional portrayal of vigilantism is an ingredient in American popular culture — and thus global culture — that has perennially fascinated audiences. So much so that it constitutes a genre in itself whose origins date back to narratives about frontiersmen able to overcome both the natives and the wilderness thanks to their capacity for violence (Hoppenstand, 1992). Interestingly enough, among the frontiersman's descendants is the superhero (Coogan, 2006), a figure that has overflowed the comics medium where it was born to enjoy virtual ubiquity in the panorama of contemporary audiovisual media. Nye (1970) described the pioneering Superman as “the supernaturally endowed hero who was judge, jury, and executioner” (p. 238). In fact, superheroes are so impregnated with vigilantism in general (Robinson & Wagner, 2022) that vigilante justice has been considered “the genre's core principle” (Klock, 2008, p. 38), as most superheroes are private individuals who decide that they can act as judge and jury against crime.

Personal revenge is prominent among the wide variety of reasons that can motivate fictional vigilantism, as in the classic case of Batman, within the superhero genre, and most of the numerous antiheroes that emerged during the golden age of vigilante films in the 1970s and 1980s. In the same context debuted the quintessential vigilante of the Marvel superhero universe, The Punisher, that has thrived to this day in comic books, movies, and television series. Indeed, vigilantism has also been an enduring theme in American television (Fitzgerald, 2013), to the extent that it has not been limited to crime shows designed for adult audiences but has manifested itself in examples of supposedly family-friendly entertainment, such as *Knight Rider* (NBC, 1982–1986) and *The A-Team* (NBC, 1983–1987). By contrast, also in the 1980s, other popular culture products took a critical approach to the phenomenon of vigilantism as a part of the deconstruction of the superhero genre. In this regard, a highly influential work is Alan Moore and artist Dave Gibbons' *Watchmen* (DC Comics, 1986–1987), a rationalist de-mythification of superheroes that depicts them as individuals motivated by sexual violence, erectile dysfunction, megalomania, or craving for publicity. In particular, Moore establishes a parallelism between vigilantes and serial killers through the unhinged Rorschach, an extreme form of vigilante partly inspired by David Berkowitz, aka Son of Sam (Berlatsky, 2012). Thus, *Watchmen* is not only a step forward in depicting vigilante violence but also a critical reflection on the psychological and political implications of the acts carried out by private justice enforcers. In this respect, *Watchmen* stands as a turning point in the genre's evolution, as it shows that “superheroes acting as vigilantes should be terrifying, not

emboldening, and justifies efforts to put them under the state’s authority” (Spanakos, 2009, p. 35). Among subsequent additions to the vast corpus of superhero narratives, some have taken an even more starkly de-mythifying and openly hostile approach to the genre, such as Pat Mills and Kevin O’Neill’s *Marshal Law* (Epic/Dark Horse, 1987–) and Garth Ennis and Darick Robertson’s *The Boys* (DC/Dynamite, 2006–), which depict “superheroes” as not just undesirable but downright depraved.

2.2. GREEN ARROW: FROM COMICS TO TELEVISION

Green Arrow, the Emerald Archer, first appeared in *More Fun Comics* #73 (November 1941) as a Batman clone in the form of a modern Robin Hood. Probably, the two defining characteristics of Robin Hood are his bowmanship and his struggle against a corrupt ruling class. However, for some decades, only the legendary archer’s dexterity was an ingredient of Green Arrow’s adventures. In fact, during that time, he conformed to the pattern of the millionaire playboy by day, masked vigilante by night, in common with Batman, who had inherited it from a long tradition of pulp and dime novel characters. This is the so-called archetype of the “hidden master of the city”, which goes back at least as far as Eugène Sue’s *Les Mystères de Paris* (The Mysteries of Paris, 1842–1843):

Sue created, through his Paris, the archetypal version of the city in need of a hidden master, and created, in the character of [Rodolphe von] Gerolstein, the hidden urban ruler, the one true king-but in disguise-of the city. (...) His function is to provide an effective de facto ruler to a city whose de jure ruler(s) are hapless or helpless or corrupt. (Nevins, 2017, p. 104)

Thus it is an archetype directly related to vigilantism and updated in the *Arrow* television series. Back to the comic books, it was not until the early 1970s that writer Denny O’Neil (1983) reinvented the character as a “hot-tempered anarchist” in a series of stories co-starring Green Lantern, where the two heroes “dealt with slumlords, racism, environmental pollution, sexism, and the legal justice system” (Lopes, 2009, p. 68). However, not even the most left-wing of the vigilantes up to that time could escape the rightward shift that superhero comics underwent in the 1980s: Mike Grell’s influential miniseries *Green Arrow: The Longbow Hunters* (1987) depicts an Emerald Archer with little respect for criminals’ rights, setting the course for the character over the next decade. In the early 2000s, the progressive version of Green Arrow would return thanks to a new comic-book series by Kevin Smith, thus recovering a canon that remains in later stories, such as the Andy Diggle-penned 2007 miniseries *Green Arrow Year One*.

According to *Arrow* showrunner Greg Berlanti, one of the reasons he chose Green Arrow to develop the series was precisely because this character is “a crusader for social justice, which you kind of knew in the DNA of the show” (The Paley Center for Media, 2013, 00:01:48). On that basis, the *Arrow* story begins with the return to Starling City — renamed Star City in Season 4, in honor of superhero billionaire Ray Palmer, aka The

Atom — of former spoiled rich boy Oliver Queen, presumed dead since the wreck of his yacht 5 years earlier. In reality, Oliver has spent that time surviving in conditions of such extreme violence and hardship that he has transformed himself into a formidable fighter with a penchant for archery. Once settled in, the young man secretly dedicates his talent for violence to a private crusade to bring justice and protect his city from crime and corruption, under a disguise for which he becomes known as the Hood, then the Arrow, and finally the Green Arrow. Oliver's mission does not remain solitary for long as he is soon joined by allies, who also adopt a dual identity: bodyguard and ex-soldier John Diggle (Spartan), hacker Felicity Smoak (Overwatch), reformed small-time criminal Roy Harper (Arsenal), former assassin Sara Lance (Canary), Oliver's sister Thea (Speedy), and former girlfriend, Laurel Lance (Black Canary). Subsequent additions to the so-called Team Arrow include tech expert Curtis Holt (Mr. Terrific), the only survivor of a terrorist attack Rory Regan (Ragman), street vigilante Rene Ramirez (Wild Dog), and ex-cops Dinah Drake (Black Canary II) and Quentin Lance.

Season 1 of the show is politically left-wing, with the hooded hero hunting and punishing the villainous plutocrats that aim to destroy a crime-ridden neighborhood. Season 2 focuses more on personal relationships, the addition of characters drawn from the DC Universe, and Oliver's double life as CEO of Queen Consolidated and as the vigilante now known as the Arrow; his main antagonists are super-mercenary Slade Wilson and murderous politician Sebastian Blood. Season 3 begins with the Starling City Police Department (SCPD) recognizing Arrow's efforts to lower urban crime rates. However, throughout the episodes, the city becomes a veritable hotbed of violent individuals and groups, including new vigilantes, villains, and a sect of assassins. In Season 4, Oliver adopts the moniker "Green Arrow" in an attempt to reinvent himself as a unifying symbol of hope for the despondent population of a city mired in general misrule. Season 5 focuses on Oliver's political activity as mayor while moonlighting as the Green Arrow and fighting new criminal menaces such as Tobias Church and Prometheus. In Season 6, Green Arrow fights genius hacktivist turned criminal mastermind Cayden James and drug kingpin Ricardo "The Dragon" Diaz; also, Diggle takes on the mantle of Green Arrow for a few episodes, and several family-related storylines are addressed; by the end of the season, the FBI arrests Oliver. Season 7 deals with Oliver's stay in jail, his later joining of SCPD, and the birth of Oliver and Felicity's daughter, Mia, as well as the appearance of a new Green Arrow, Emiko Queen, Oliver's illegitimate half-sister; plus a storyline set in the future involving Oliver and Felicity's children becoming part of a new generation of heroes. Finally, Season 8 focuses on Oliver's new cosmic mission and leans much more toward the supernatural and science fiction.

2.3. LITERATURE REVIEW AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The academic literature on *Arrow* points out that the early seasons of the show capture the spirit of Green Arrow's ideological canon, thus offering an uncommon example

of a superhero narrative framed by left-wing sensibilities, social issues, and a critical view of some economic realities (Pineda & Jiménez-Varea, 2017). In the same vein, it has been noted that The CW decided to “politically charge” the narratives of the Arrowverse, with *Arrow* itself being the most explicit in its depiction of “a fragmented society, leading to unequal urban development, insecurity and ghettoization” (Joseph, 2018, p. 42). As for the relationship between vigilantism and the law, it has been indicated that the behavior of Arrow’s characters violates some basic tenets of liberal political theory, such as the government’s monopoly on violence and constitutional rights and liberties (Robinson & Wagner, 2022). Thus, there is an interesting paradox in that *Arrow* — as his model, Batman — manages to seduce the leading representatives of law enforcement within his fictional city toward his own brand of extralegal justice (Marazi, 2015).

There is, however, a research gap regarding *Arrow*’s addressing of the motivations behind crimefighting and justice-seeking. In a context where some popular comics have brought to light the violent nature of vigilantes, and because vigilantism implies that “worthy ends can justify transgressive means” (Bateson, 2021, p. 932), superhero narratives should display motivations and rationales worthy enough to justify vigilantes’ extralegal and criminal behavior. Hence our first research question (RQ):

RQ1. What rationales are offered by Arrow in order to justify extralegal crimefighting?

Vigilantism, as organized violence by private citizens, takes place in open opposition to the state (Dumsday, 2009). Therefore, in popular fiction, vigilantism is performed against the backdrop of the law and, more specifically, against the background of the inefficiency of public institutions and government (Grant, 2020), which works as an additional justification for extralegal violence. Moreover, it must be taken into account that the state may support or tolerate vigilante practices (Favarel-Garrigues et al., 2020). All this suggests a second RQ:

RQ2. How does Arrow depict the role of the state pertaining to vigilantism and crimefighting?

3. EMPIRICAL STUDY

3.1. MATERIAL AND METHODS

This paper takes a qualitative approach to the study of the fictional representation of vigilantism in the series *Arrow* in order to answer the previous research questions. The observation process is based on the assumption that commercial audiovisual narratives are typically structured on question-answer networks that function as engines of both thematic and plot developments, operating from a micro level to a macro level that can span from narrative beats to entire seasons or even the series’ whole run. This is a widely supported notion, both from professional practice (Landau, 2022) and from narrative theory, where it is worth noting the erotetic model proposed by the philosopher of art Noël Carroll

(2010, 2019). The erotetic model (from the Greek “pertaining to questioning”) attempts to explain several aspects related to typical mass-market audiovisual narratives: how they capture the audience’s attention; how viewers are able to follow their development; how such narratives can come to be perceived as a whole; and how they generate a sense of closure. Such narratives are driven by question-and-answer structures that arouse the viewer’s curiosity and make him or her interested in following the plot to find the corresponding answer at some point in the story. These question-answer pairs exist in different orders of magnitude — both regarding the temporal distance between the first and the second and their relevance — within the narrative. To understand this in the case of the series at hand, *Arrow*, we can speak of a question that dominates the entire series from the beginning of the first season to the end of the last: “who is Oliver Queen?” (Howe, 2017, p. 105), thus explicitly formulated by the executive producers themselves. The series finale offers the ultimate answer by balancing the protagonist character’s transformations from lethal vigilante to savior hero. In a lower order, each season proposes a question that runs through all the episodes that compose it until it is answered in some way at the end of that season, always reflected in the protagonist’s evolution in his quest for justice. There are also question-answer structures at the episodic level that are posed and answered within the same episode, again mainly in relation to justice and crime fighting, which are the basic concerns of Team Arrow. Continuing this zoom-in, erotetic structures are also found at increasingly micro-plot levels, from sequences to scenes and even what the screenwriters call narrative beats.

For our article, we have assumed as a theoretical presupposition the validity of Carroll’s (2010, 2019) erotetic model in that *Arrow* is a typical mass-market audiovisual narrative driven by question-answer structures at different levels. Likewise, we have worked from the intuition, confirmed by subsequent systematic observation, that to a large extent, such questions and answers have to do, both thematically and plot-wise, with crime, the inability of public authorities to fight it, and the justification of vigilantism. In that sense, we have considered that *Arrow* develops a complex discourse on these issues taking as its axis the evolution of the main character, and we have approached it through a qualitative text analysis aimed at locating how this question-driven narrative presents statements on our topic. For its observation, we have operationalized this topic, concretizing and breaking it down into four main situations:

- crime as the milieu for vigilantism;
- justification(s) for vigilantism;
- state’s inability to fight crime;
- institutional sanctioning of vigilantism.

This analytical construct has been applied to a corpus consisting of the universe of units that make up the series *Arrow*, that is, the eight seasons totaling 170 episodes that The CW originally aired between 2012 and 2020, which have been accessed for this study through the on-demand platform Netflix. The authors viewed and analyzed the

series between December 2021 and March 2022. Methodologically, although the authors were acquainted with the series since 2013, the fact that the whole show was viewed and analyzed in a limited period makes our study transversal. Moreover, the study typology can be regarded as a case study based on purposive sampling, a non-probability form of sampling where units of analysis are chosen with a purpose in mind and on the grounds of previous knowledge. Purposive (or judgmental) sampling relates to the case-study method because it aims to select information-rich cases to perform an in-depth study (Patton, 1990). In our case, the authors' previous knowledge of vigilantism, popular culture, and *Arrow* implied that the latter was an optimal choice to fulfill the research aims and offer an information-rich case regarding vigilantes and their actions. As to observation and analysis implementation, notes were taken having in mind the abovementioned four narrative situations that relate to the erotetic model's specifics, as well as any statements by the characters on vigilantes and/or vigilantism; characters' actions regarding crime; and typologies of crimes and criminals, as depicted in the series. The observation results were collected in tables using qualitative summaries and critical comments. For reporting in this article, the most illustrative ones have been selected in the ad hoc approach typical of discourse analysis. The mass of empirical information obtained was later filtered and thematically ordered, as the following paragraphs indicate.

3.2. ANALYSIS

3.2.1. CRIME AS THE MILIEU FOR VIGILANTISM

The background for private crimefighting in urban vigilante narratives typically consists of a city where delinquency and violence are out of control. In this line, *Arrow* is fueled by a continuous succession of criminal threats that torment Star City and the vigilantes themselves. From the beginning, the series portrays a decaying city plagued with illegal activities, crimes, and felonies that are ubiquitous throughout the show. Besides all the white-collar crime and fraud revealed in Season 1, throughout the series, we find murder, kidnapping, aggression, robbery, taking of hostages, battery, drug dealing, torture, human trafficking, weaponized diseases, mass shootings, home invasions, jailbreak, illegal detentions, attacks with ballistic missiles, extortion, cyberattacks, homicide, weapons trafficking, prisoner abuse, genocide, bioterrorist attacks, terrorism... As Diggle/Spartan helpfully summarizes: "this is Starling City. You never have to look far to find someone engaged in illegal activity" (Season 2, Episode 2).

Arrow also presents a wide diversity of criminal characters: mobsters, drug dealers, thieves, assassins, underground casino runners, Chinese triads, serial killers, gang-bangers, bombers, criminals for hire, black marketeers, racketeers, arms dealers, shooters, hacker organizations, superhuman beings, mercenaries, former black operatives, superpowered vigilantes, crime syndicates and organizations, arsonists, evil scientists,

sponsors of terrorism, criminal CEOs, terrorist organizations, secret societies, money launderers... To this must be added main antagonists, such as billionaire sociopath Malcolm Merlyn (Season 1), super-villains Slade Wilson (Season 2) and Damien Dahrk (Season 4), the League of Assassins (Season 3), serial killer Prometheus (Season 5), and crimelords Tobias Church (Season 5) and the Dragon (Season 6).

Thus, the story set in *Arrow* is a crime-ridden scenario where a wide variety of criminal actors operate, providing the context for the crimefighter's crusade. Since the first season, the Hood repeatedly tells wrongdoers: "you have failed this city", a motto consistent with the narrative scheme of vigilantism, whereby an individual or group privately and extralegally enforce justice, preventing crime or punishing evildoers. In fact, *Arrow* addresses vigilante justice from the very first scene: "I am returning. Not the boy who was shipwrecked, but the man who will bring justice to those who have poisoned my city" (Oliver's voiceover, Season 1, Episode 1). To fulfill that mission, Oliver and his allies hide behind dual identities — a staple of the superhero genre — and establish Team Arrow as a permanent taskforce against all kinds of threats. Such an effort, however, also needs strong motivations and reasons, leading us to rationalize vigilante crimefighting.

3.2.2. JUSTIFICATION(S) FOR VIGILANTISM

The rationales behind vigilantism involve the cultural, economic, and institutional factors that shape this phenomenon (Bateson, 2021). Originally, the *raison d'être* of Oliver's vigilante behavior was grounded in a mixture of political ideology and personal reasons. Although the concept of vigilantism tends to be historically right-leaning, Season 1 depicts a left-wing sensibility whereby the hooded vigilante fights the "CEOs and crooked entrepreneurs" (Diggle, Season 1, Episode 6) that hide behind street crime. Such an anti-wealthy crusade, as well as the saving-the-city rationale, were inspired by personal reasons: according to Oliver, he became a vigilante because, before sacrificing his life for him, his father asked him to right his wrongs (Season 7, Episode 4). However, Oliver has expressed additional rationales to justify extralegal activities throughout the series, especially the argument that only the vigilantes can save the city (e.g., Season 5, Episode 1). His allies also adopt this justification, for instance, Diggle: "there are a lot of people in this city who need saving" (Season 5, Episode 18); likewise, Oliver's son William tells his sister that the vigilantes are not "the criminals you think they are, Mia. I remember them being heroes back then. They only want to save the city!". On the other hand, in Season 2, Episode 9, Oliver reveals he keeps acting as a vigilante to honor his mentors and later hallucinates that Slade Wilson tells him that his crusade is to atone for his sins. Additional reasons pertain to Oliver's beloved ones: "we fight to protect the people that we love" (Season 6, Episode 8). Thus, the number of different reasons one single character can adduce to explain vigilante behavior is quite ample.

Other rationalizations of vigilantism are political. For instance, the mayor of Starling City reflects: "wasn't our country founded on a brand of vigilantism (...)? The

revolutionaries at the Boston Tea Party were certainly choosing justice over law” (Season 2, Episode 1). Also, Laurel wields her social ideals to justify her own vigilante behavior because she considers it a way of helping people (Season 3, Episode 14). Vigilantism is also justified a posteriori based on its practical effects: “the people you care about are not suffering because of you. Their life, my life is better because you decided to become the Green Arrow”, says Felicity (Season 5, Episode 21). Other arguments are more abstract, including the notion of doing what is right (Season 2, Episode 2) or even essentialist: “I have to do this no matter what. I have to be true to who I am”, says Curtis Holt (Season 5, Episode 9). Rationales also include self-psychology: “being the Green Arrow is what makes you feel complete (...), when you put that hood on, it enables you to become the best version of yourself”, says Thea to explain why Oliver continues to be the Emerald Archer (Season 6, Episode 16). Keeping family safe is also a reason behind crimefighting (Season 2, Episode 17), as voiced by Wild Dog when he says that he became a vigilante so that her daughter would not be attacked or offered drugs in the streets (Season 7, Episode 4). Other reasons behind vigilante action are less altruistic and veer toward selfishness, such as the personal satisfaction, empowerment, and enjoyment some characters express: “when you’re out there doing it, it’s different. It feels... amazing, empowering... Almost a little inspiring”, says Holt (Season 5, Episode 9).

Notwithstanding the ample variety of justifications, the crucial point is that these rationales cover the fact that vigilantes feel entitled to fight crime above the law, as exemplified by the reasons why Drake and others form a new vigilante group (known as New Team Arrow, and also as the Outsiders): “this city needs us. And we know that, and we’re not shirking that responsibility” (Season 6, Episode 10), thus articulating that vigilantes are self-appointed “heroes” who decide that people need them.

3.2.3. STATE’S INABILITY TO FIGHT CRIME

The role and representation of the state and the legal order are crucial in vigilante narratives because vigilantism can only happen against the background of the law: “no state-established legal order, no vigilantism” (Bateson, 2021, p. 927). In the realm of vigilante fiction, governmental and police forces are commonly portrayed as inefficient and/or corrupt to justify extralegal justice.

Arrow is no exception to this rule, quite the contrary, as negative representations of law and government are ubiquitous. Overall, its first season embodies a populist desire to make a corrupt elite pay for their misdeeds in the context of an ineffective political and legal system. As a public competitor of vigilantes at crimefighting, the depiction of police is particularly pejorative. In this regard, a key theme of the show is that the SCPD’s bureaucracy and procedures hinder their efficiency in law enforcement. In Season 2, Episode 2, an angry Harper complains: “the cops rarely venture that deep into the Glades, so I guess that leaves only me!”; and Felicity says ironically to Oliver that she loves to “live in a city where the police are more interested in catching you

than the drug-stealing mobsters. Our tax dollars at work”. According to Felicity, the city has “plenty of candidates willing to compensate for our ineffectual-slash-corrupt police department” (Season 5, Episode 1). The SCPD protocols are flawed, and they are doing things “the wrong way”, according to Oliver; their information-gathering process seems outdated too (Season 7, Episode 15).

Moreover, there is plenty of corruption in the SCPD: Season 5 explicitly states that half the SCPD are corrupt (Season 5, Episode 15), while crimelord Tobias Church describes Star City as “a city where cops are afraid, or on our payroll” (Season 5, Episode 5). This state of things is also projected to the future; in a flash forward, Wild Dog’s vigilante daughter says: “the SCPD are a joke. They’d love to watch Star City go up in flames” (Season 7, Episode 8). Nevertheless, it must be noted that the police’s shortcomings relate to the crumbling and chronic underfunding of the state, which is an underlying theme in *Arrow*. In Season 4, Episode 4, Lance says that his budget has been cut, and he justifies working with supervillain Damien Dahrk: “he said he had resources, he had people, money (...) and we needed the help”. Later, Oliver says that increasing the funds of the police is one of his priorities as he is running for mayor (Season 4, Episode 7).

Not only the police but also politicians, prison guards, government officials and agencies, military officers, and mayors are frequently depicted as corrupt, evil, and/or inefficient. In Season 2, one of the main villains, Sebastian Blood, is a local alderman who becomes the city’s mayor (Season 2, Episode 21). Amanda Waller, leader of the research military group ARGUS, is a cold-blooded, ruthless killer (Season 2, Episode 16). In Season 4, Ruvé Adams — super-criminal Damien Dahrk’s wife — becomes the new mayor; in Season 5, district attorney Adrian Chase is revealed as serial killer Prometheus (Season 5, Episode 15). During Oliver’s stay in prison, some guards participate in bets regarding prisoners’ fights; other guards are at the service of Brick, an inmate and old foe of Oliver’s (Season 7, Episode 3). The worst thing is that corruption in the public sector does not seem to have any remedy, as Oliver’s son reveals that the future Star City “is a terrible place. It’s run by gangs, the cops are corrupt, politicians too” (Season 8, Episode 4). To this evidence, we could add a corrupt zoning commissioner (Season 1, Episode 19), an assistant district attorney who causes a hostage situation (Season 2, Episode 17), a United States military officer intent on releasing a deadly virus (Season 3), and a rogue United States Army unit (Season 5, Episode 2). Even the courts join the list of inefficient authorities. Regarding the victims of businessman James Holder, Oliver states: “the courts say you don’t owe your victims anything. I disagree” (Season 1, Episode 3). The problem of the courts goes beyond bleeding-heart liberalism: “I got a lot of friends at the courthouse”, says crimelord Ricardo Diaz (Season 6, Episode 20). Pertaining to the legal justice system, *Arrow* also voices a classical argument of vigilante narratives: the fact that criminals slip through the cracks of the system. Hence, we are told that a doctor performed illegal experiments and torture, but all the charges “were dropped on technicalities” (Season 7, Episode 9); in the case of Diaz, condemned to life

imprisonment twice, the state Supreme Court “overturned his convictions due to technicalities” (Season 6, Episode 6).

Precisely, the highlight of state corruption is the Diaz storyline in Season 6. According to Diggle, Diaz has “members of Star City’s entire governmental infrastructure either bought or compromised” (Season 6, Episode 20). The new police captain is on his payroll, along with Councilman Kullens and other city officials (Season 6, Episode 13; Season 6, Episode 18). Diaz himself describes Star City as a utopia for criminal organization Quadrant: “Star City is open for business. We have the police, the ports, the whole city... We got it wired. Now, you wanna run merchandise, you wanna move product, launder money, anything... Star City is the place” (Season 6, Episode 19). This storyline even contains a sequence that sums up perfectly the corruption of public law enforcement: a lot of police officers, commanded by Diaz, chasing a hooded vigilante (Season 6, Episode 18).

In light of governmental corruption and inefficiency, it should come as no surprise that vigilante forces fight crime in a much more efficient manner. For example, when vigilantism stops in the city after Oliver’s imprisonment, a young citizen encourages Wild Dog to resume his crimefighting activity because “there’s no more heroes to keep us safe (...) my family just got robbed last week. And the cops don’t care about us in the Glades. So it’s on us to protect ourselves” (Season 7, Episode 1). The vigilantes’ superior efficiency is grounded in their skills: simply put, they are much better than the police at preventing and punishing crime. For instance, in a public rally where a bomb has been planted, the vigilantes are the ones who find the detonator and catch the bomber, not the cops *at* the rally (Season 2, Episode 10). Actually, this asymmetry regarding crimefighting dexterity is another argument in support of vigilantism, as when Oliver justifies action on the basis of police inefficiency (Season 4, Episode 3).

3.2.4. THE INSTITUTIONAL SANCTIONING OF VIGILANTISM

Arrow goes beyond the typical portrayal of the state as inefficient and/or corrupt in the vigilante genre. The show commits to the basic ideological tenets of superhero action so strongly that it extends the rationalization and support for extralegal justice beyond the vigilantes’ motivations. In this regard, a key sanctioning device is a sympathy with which specific public officials and institutions address vigilantism, if not directly engage in it. The state may sometimes legalize

behaviors that were previously illegal. This is a particularly common reaction when a vigilante is viewed as heroic and enjoys a good deal of popular support, even though his or her actions went beyond what the law authorized at the time. (Bateson, 2021, p. 938)

That is precisely the reaction that presides over *Arrow*’s narrative. Thus, Lance’s daughter Laurel, an assistant district attorney, follows a narrative path from being taught a law-abiding philosophy to trusting the vigilante to become fully pro-vigilantism: “this

city needs the Arrow”, she says (Season 2, Episode 21). In Season 2, Episode 20, a doctor thanks and assists the Arrow for helping the hospital in the past. A journalist states on television that the drop in criminality indicates that the hooded vigilante “had been a positive force in this city” and describes the Hood’s actions not as vigilantism but as “the actions of a hero” (Season 1, Episode 10). Later, journalist Susan Williams tells Oliver that she will keep his secret because what he does is good for the city (Season 5, Episode 15). As to public opinion, the show veers toward public support for vigilantism: in a community meeting with the SCPD, people seem to be overwhelmingly in favor of vigilantism — as a man says, “things were better off with the vigilantes” (Season 7, Episode 4).

Moreover, the sanctioning of vigilantism also comes from the family side. The vigilantes’ relatives are also very keen and understanding about their beloveds’ nocturnal habits: for instance, Moira Queen gives Oliver a hint that she knows he is the Arrow and adds that she “could not be more proud” (Season 2, Episode 20). After watching Oliver in action, his son admiringly accepts his vigilante job: “the city needs you, and... and I get that now” (Season 6, Episode 11). Wild Dog’s daughter finds out her father is a vigilante and, like William, does not see a problem in that: “dad, this is my home. And I want you to fight for it” (Season 6, Episode 20).

However, the most powerful sanctioning of vigilantism in *Arrow* comes from the institutions that should, theoretically, chase and arrest vigilantes: the government and the police. It has been pointed out that state agents, such as police officers, mayors, or soldiers, can assist, tolerate, and authorize the activities of vigilantes or even carry out vigilantism themselves (Bateson, 2021); in the show, Policeman Quentin Lance is key regarding such assistance. In Season 1, Episode 20, Lance states that the vigilante “doesn’t have to answer to anyone but himself... that’s a very dangerous power to give to any one man”; however, by the end of Season 1, the law-abiding policeman acknowledges that the archer has been helpful on some cases, and starts to value the protection of people that the Hood aims for. As Lance asks, “what are laws, rules if they didn’t protect people? (...) I am willing to sacrifice catching [the Hood] if it means saving people’s lives”; as a result of this pro-vigilante attitude, he is suspended (Season 1, Episode 23). In Season 2, Episode 19, he has achieved an empathic understanding of the Arrow. As he tells his daughter, Laurel: “you imagine what it’s like to be him? What he has to live with day in day out?”. By Season 4, the former scourge of vigilantism can be seen, very naturally, in the vigilantes’ headquarters, where he is being protected (Season 4, Episode 14). Later, Lance ends up working in Team Arrow’s headquarters, coordinating with police officers to help Oliver (Season 5, Episode 1).

Lance is not the only policeman supporting vigilantism. For example, Felicity tells her cop boyfriend that she works for Green Arrow, and he answers that, although she is a criminal, she is doing it for a good cause: “you’re helping save the city” (Season 5, Episode 6). The city’s anti-crime unit does not arrest Green Arrow and his team when it can; on the contrary, the unit’s captain says to the hooded archer, “happy to help” after the vigilantes have fought a group of criminals (Season 5, Episode 14). What is more, the show also presents police officers who moonlight as vigilantes, the most relevant being

Dinah Drake, who works for the SCPD but also acts as a masked crimefighter (Season 5, Episode 14), thus setting an example that is in line with the fact that “police officers moonlighting as superheroes are a staple of comic books” (Dumsday, 2009, p. 52).

The case of Drake as a vigilante cop leads us to another indicator of the institutional sanctioning of vigilantism: the progressive integration of private crimefighters in the political and legal structure of the city. After being elected mayor, Oliver keeps moonlighting as Green Arrow and reveals that being in the city hall provides him with information to act as a vigilante: “it’s a means to an end” (Season 5, Episode 1). Under Oliver’s mayoralty, the city dedicates a statue to the memory of Laurel Lance’s masked identity, the Black Canary (Season 5, Episode 1), which can be interpreted as the official sanctioning of vigilante activity. Additionally, Team Arrow’s member Ramirez is appointed as deputy mayor’s assistant, hence arriving at the paradox of Star City’s hall being populated with people that engage in, or collaborate with, extralegal activities (Season 5, Episode 13); Quentin Lance and Thea Queen also work for Mayor Oliver Queen, in a clear example of nepotism. Later, there is a turning point when Oliver starts working for the police. Mayor Pollard wants him booked in violation of anti-vigilante law, but he is not above the law anymore; as Drake explains, Oliver “is officially working for the SCPD. He’s no longer a vigilante” (Season 7, Episode 8). By the end of Season 7, Episode 15, Pollard has been forced to create a vigilante task force, hence legalizing vigilantism: Team Arrow is still sanctioned by SCPD, but at the same time, they are “operating as our own unit, out of the bunker, in our suits”. What is more, Pollard is going to repeal the anti-vigilante law. Now, Green Arrow and his allies live in the best of all possible worlds: they can keep operating as private crimefighters, and they are simultaneously sanctioned by the local government. Notwithstanding this, the show later acknowledges that the SCPD-vigilantes partnership would be untenable, so the partnership ends (Season 7, Episode 21) in an uncommon glint of realism.

4. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Arrow is not just a fictional depiction of vigilante action; the show delivers a huge apology for the vigilante ethos when it comes to attitudes towards crime and justice. This apology is framed in the background of a crime-ridden city where delinquency and violence are out of control and where the Glades neighborhood reflects ghettoization and exclusionary zoning policies. In this regard, *Arrow* may be interpreted as taking in superheroes’ dark turn in the 1980s and their reflection of “societal fears about out-of-control crime” (Muir, 2008, p. 7). In the *Arrow* worldview, however, these fears can only be appeased by vigilantes. The show depicts vigilantism as something to be admired, given the number of characters who join Oliver Queen’s crusade or are inspired by him. The show also highlights the beneficial effects of vigilantism; for example, crime statistics skyrocket in Star City when the vigilantes hang up their masks (Season 7, Episode 12). In this sense, *Arrow* is in line with the tradition of vigilante stories that laud individuals who

take the law into their hands (Grant, 2020) and offers elucidative insights into the approval of extralegal crimefighting within superhero culture. That is a remarkable attitude because even authors such as Dumsday (2009), who thinks that there are conditions under which vigilantism may be permissible, acknowledge that law enforcement is the role of government. Hence vigilantes should take it up only as a temporary measure and handle it as a last resort. The enthusiasm, even extremism, with which *Arrow's* showrunners approach vigilantism goes much further than this and implies that private crimefighting must be continuous and enduring.

The depiction of extralegal activities is reinforced by the portrayal of the state as inefficient and/or corrupt. Although the show sometimes represents the police and the military favorably (e.g., Season 2, Episode 23; Season 7, Episode 19), themes of government inefficiency and corruption structure the narrative. In this regard, a central message of *Arrow* is that state institutions cannot be entirely trusted, hence proposing private justice as a solution for public institutions' incompetence and crookedness. Additionally, such a message — which enjoys a very wide audience, as the show has been followed by over 2.000.000 viewers (Hennon, 2014) — has broader ideological and political connotations and is in line with the fact that vigilantism has been regarded as a critique of the law and the State (Bateson, 2021). *Arrow's* overall political message relates to “the causal processes linking weak formal institutions and vigilantism” (Bateson, 2021, p. 937) and may be connected to neoliberalism's anti-government stance and the boosting of individual empowerment, and public policies characterized by deregulation, liberalization, and privatization (Fawcett, 2015; Steger & Roy, 2010). And it is precisely the neoliberal dismantling of the state which frames one of the rhetorical devices whereby *Arrow* exonerates vigilantism: if government forces are unable to stop crime, then private citizens should do it, hence relating to policies such as the individualization of security. In the 1980s, many superheroes were reimagined as harsh super-conservative vigilantes, including Grell's Green Arrow (Johnson, 2012); the *Arrow* series somehow reflects this ideological turn.

In this regard, the show's discourse on crime may be interpreted as an ideological metaphor for the superiority of private protection over public law enforcement — an interpretation that may be applied to much of the superhero genre (Bainbridge, 2007). Nevertheless, the trend toward militarization and a strong police force are not absent from *Arrow*: as mentioned above, the chronic underfunding of the state underlies the series, and Oliver singled out increased police funding as a political priority. It should also be noted that there is a strong military/police streak in Team Arrow: Diggle and Ramirez are former soldiers, Queen received paramilitary training, and Drake is a police-woman. In the context of the genre, it must be noted that the popular fictional vigilante The Punisher is an ex-soldier that carries out a one-man war on crime. As to police reinforcing, it should be remembered that the vigilantes consider themselves parapolice operatives — as mayor, Queen tells a police officer that “the Green Arrow, and his team, are auxiliary law enforcement” (Season 5, Episode 14) — and Team Arrow is finally

sanctioned by the SCPD, and enabled to operate as their own unit. One might conclude, therefore, that *Arrow* offers relevant hints about the paramilitary and/or parapolice nature of vigilantism — in this context, the real-world concept of “privatized militarism”, which, not coincidentally, is reflected in diverse forms of vigilantism (Cock, 2005, p. 803), may shed light on certain aspects of *Arrow*.

Arrow illustrates the notion that discrediting the justice system and its defenders leads to a culture of vigilantism and privatized power (Caldeira & Holston, 1999). This culture implies, among other consequences, an escalation of violence as a result of vigilante action — a theme that *Arrow* both addresses and evades. After a massacre at city hall, Queen says that his mission “has always been to save this city, and my first instinct has almost always been to use violence”; “it’s a violent world, and sometimes it only responds to violence, but we cannot dismiss the idea that we are just feeding into a vicious cycle” (Season 5, Episode 13). In Season 5, Episode 16, for instance, the Queen’s killing of Ra’s Al Ghul makes master warrior Talia Al Ghul (Ra’s Al Ghul’s daughter) turn against the Green Arrow and ally with serial killer Prometheus. Hence, vigilante violence causes more violence and more killing. However, this vicious cycle is diluted in the overall narrative of the series, as the vigilantes cannot help but use force to bring justice. Actually, Brian Garfield already addressed the notion that vigilantism fuels violence in his seminal vigilante novel *Death Wish*, where he said that vigilantism “is an attractive fantasy, but it only makes things worse in reality” (Garfield, as cited in Grant, 2020, p. 64). To sum up, this notion has relevant, potential socio-political implications because, by supporting vigilantism, citizens ultimately contribute to the propagation of violence (Caldeira & Holston, 1999).

As a post-*Watchmen* cultural artifact, *Arrow* is aware of the shortcomings and problems inherent to vigilantism, such as the escalation of violence, the toll it takes on its practitioners, or the fact that private crimefighters are criminals. However, these negative aspects are very secondary compared to the enthusiasm with which *Arrow* sanctions, justifies, and exonerates vigilantism as a necessary form of stopping crime. Thus, the arguments offered by such an influential magnum opus as *Watchmen* against vigilante violence and psychology are completely overlooked in superhero shows such as *Arrow*, which, although existing in a genre that could not be the same after Alan Moore’s work, have not grasped all its implications. This relates to how *Arrow* ties into the vigilante/superhero genre and academic issues around vigilantism. In this regard, The CW show reflects the origins of superheroes as masked avengers that worked outside the law, did not trust state agents, and resorted to extralegal violence — a narrative which can also be found in the broader context of popular literature, pulps, and movies (Culberson, 1990). The pattern of a hero placed in a situation where some form of violence or criminality is a moral necessity is a basic archetype of American literature (Cawelti, 1975). In this context, Oliver’s deeds partially relate to the concept of vengeance-based entertainment, exemplified by fictional vigilantes like The Punisher (Worcester, 2012).

Moreover, and thanks to its narrative development, *Arrow* reflects the fact that superheroes have sometimes been morphed into state agents (Johnson, 2012). As to academic issues around vigilantism, *Arrow* connects with the concept of the angry hero or antihero — which can be traced back to Achilles (Livesay, 2007) — and with a historical trend — which dates back to the Old West and the myth of American pioneer culture — of community leaders taking matters into their own hands when the government was not sufficiently established (Culberson, 1990). Conceptually, the show also reflects the idea that vigilantism incorporates extralegalism and the enforcement of dominant social values (Culberson, 1990) and provides an illustrative example of the “myth of the vigilante”, which dwells on societal weaknesses and corruption of society, with the vigilante him/herself becoming the law (Cawelti, 1975).

Superhero vigilantism conflicts with the fundamental tenets of liberalism: the monopoly on violence granted to the government is violated by vigilantes, who, irrespective of the degree of the virtuousness of their motives, are guided just by their own individual judgment (Robinson & Wagner, 2022). *Arrow* emphasizes the virtuousness of the motives that explain the behavior of Green Arrow and his teammates, but that rhetoric does not make their behavior less illegitimate. Most of these rationales — helping society, protecting people, saving the city, righting wrongs, developing your true self, and so on — are socially and ethically acceptable and have nothing to do with the dubious motivations behind vigilantism that were brought to light by *Watchmen* and other rationalist critiques of the superhero genre. Besides avoiding the most unpleasant side of the genre, *Arrow* displays an array of motivations that are sometimes contradictory. For instance, Season 7, Episode 16 presents Felicity telling her daughter in the future: “your father and I promised each other that we would keep fighting for the city to make the city better for you, and for our family”; however, later Felicity contradicts herself: “being a hero, Mia, means choosing other people’s safety above your own, including your family”. These contradictions result from the show’s compulsion to justify vigilantism without addressing the fact that some reasons — and the vigilantes’ criminal actions — end up running counter to others. Vigilantism “does not fit well within traditional models of justice in society. Superheroes carry that thematic contradiction with them wherever they go” (Robinson & Wagner, 2022, p. 172); the rationales offered to explain the privatization of justice are just a part of the uneasiness that surrounds the relationship between vigilantism and society. In this context, the relationship between vigilantes, the law, and society may be better discussed by introducing the concept of “zemiology”, which is the study of social harms (Tombs, 2018). Zemiology enables scholars to move beyond the criminological canon, and articulate a diversity of harms, hence laying outside conventional discourses on crime and the confines of criminal law. Consequently, zemiology focuses on social injuries caused by states, organizations, and individuals (Boukli & Kotzé, 2018). In the context of a show such as *Arrow*, zemiology is useful to analyze the

appeal of vigilantism because vigilantes may be perceived as a force that reduces social harms (which are plenty throughout the series), even though their practice is illegal. Thus, the vigilantes' response to crime would relate not to the legal-illegal poles but to the pragmatism with which social harms are addressed and the way justice is served — interestingly, zemiology attempts to reiterate priorities for *social* justice (Boukli & Kotzé, 2018). Another link between the social harms approach and vigilantism may be found in the zemiological idea that the criminal justice system is ineffective (Hillyard & Tombs, 2004), which is one of the rationales behind *Arrow*.

The contradictions of the phenomenon we are studying are also apparent in the way social institutions and the government support and sanction private crimefighting. The series exhibits a pattern whereby institutions may initially be misled about the vigilantes' actions, but in the end, the crimefighters are acknowledged as heroes. Even the police tolerate — if not cheer — vigilantism in *Arrow*. This relates to the notion that there is a “gray zone of interaction between vigilantes and the state” (Bateson, 2021, p. 928), and *Arrow* dwells in such a zone. Thus, it should not come as a surprise that vigilantism is sanctioned and/or practiced by a lot of officials and representatives of the state. This is nothing new in vigilante fiction, where examples abound, such as Commissioner Gordon routinely turning on the Bat-signal to summon Batman's help; or the New York City Police Department letting vigilante gunslinger Paul Kersey go free to continue acting in another city at the end of both versions of *Death Wish* (Michael Winner, 1974; Eli Roth, 2018); but *Arrow* takes it to the extreme.

The CW's show thus reflects a situation where government supports vigilantism, and the vigilantes are not “willingly accountable to the state”. Vigilante actions are autonomous, not in the sense of lacking permission from the state, but regarding a lack of accountability: vigilantes “do not care what the state thinks of those actions” (Dumsday, 2009, pp. 53–54). Consequently, Team Arrow does not face its responsibility for violating the law on a regular basis, and its actions are unaccountable on a final analysis. However, there is a serious ethical problem when self-proclaimed “heroes” behave as if they are above the law and, what is more, aim to get away with it. This problem is not seriously addressed by *Arrow*, whose showrunners are conveying the idea that whatever vigilantes do — be it good or bad, legal or illegal — is justified because they are “saving the city”. In this regard, *Arrow* shows that the depiction of crime, violence, and justice in superhero fiction can be interpreted as a reflection of deep political and social questions related to the relationship between the individual and the democratic state, between the private and the public, thereby transcending the realm of mere escapism. According to showrunner Andrew Kreisberg: “as our TV partner, Greg Berlanti, puts it, at his core, Oliver is an optimist. He believes in people” (Hennon, 2014). However, he does not seem to believe that people, or their government representatives, can democratically manage their own business when it comes to societal menaces: following the superhero/vigilante ideology,

the show states that people must be cared for by private crimefighting supermen that take responsibility and justice in their own hands — not by coincidence, Green Arrow has been included among the characters where “the superiority of the costumed hero as an arbiter of right and wrong, possessed of superior judgment and extralegal powers to punish evildoers and protect the hapless common man, was generally taken for granted” (Lukin, 1997, p. 133).

Power and arbitrariness are directly related to Oliver Queen’s status as a prominent economic and political institution in Star City and, from a wider theoretical viewpoint, to the superhero archetype of the billionaire-turned-vigilante. *Arrow* shows how the vigilantes see the city as their playground; however, this sense of ownership must be contextualized in the power positions that Queen enjoys, be it as a company CEO in Season 2, fully involved in the financial and business worlds (Pineda & Jiménez-Varea, 2017) or as mayor in Season 5. This institutional prominence mirrors other examples of the billionaire-turned-vigilante archetype, such as industrialist Tony Stark (aka Iron Man), who at one point was appointed Secretary of Defense to the U.S. President (Wolf-Meyer, 2006); privileged social positions that may explain why some private crimefighters regard cities as their property — in this respect, Batman would be the genre’s true template, as Gotham City is economically owned by the caped vigilante’s alter ego. Indeed, the powers of billionaire superheroes Green Arrow, Iron Man, and Batman are moored to their corporate presence (Marazi, 2015). In this context, psychological features of vigilantism may be connected to institutional factors since the crimefighters’ extraordinary agency and power relate to the aforementioned personal satisfaction experienced by some vigilantes, thus making the city an enjoyable playground for them — as indicated by the sense of coolness expressed by Thea Queen in Season 4, Episode 1.

Future research should first consider that vigilantism in popular media is a multifaceted phenomenon that presents many other aspects to approach, such as its degree of lethality, effectiveness, or self-reflection on its practice. Likewise, there is a large and rapidly growing volume of narrative where the figure of the vigilante occupies a central place — including the other series of the Arrowverse — and therefore constitutes potentially rich material for further analysis.

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