

The Ordinary Hero: Gaze, Recognition, and Everyday Life in *One Punch Man*

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Abstract: *This paper reads One Punch Man as a way of thinking through what heroism looks like once it is placed inside the routines of everyday life. Instead of treating heroism as rare or elevated, the manga consistently situates Saitama in spaces that feel ordinary and even dull: a small apartment, worries about employment, long stretches of paperwork, and days marked by boredom rather than purpose. These details are easy to overlook, but they are central to how the series frames heroic action. They suggest that heroism does not stand outside social life, but is shaped by it. Drawing in part on ideas associated with Erving Goffman and Henri Lefebvre, this analysis argues that an action only becomes “heroic” when it is socially recognised. Saving the world, on its own, is not enough. It has to be seen, named, and repeated within recognisable frameworks. Visibility, therefore, becomes a key issue, though not simply in terms of public admiration. What matters more is the institutional gaze of the Hero Association, which classifies heroes, assigns ranks, and translates action into numbers, profiles, and media value. In this sense, the Association functions less like a moral community and more like a bureaucratic apparatus. From this perspective, Saitama’s persistent anonymity is significant. It points to a disjunction between doing good and being legible as good. Despite his extraordinary power, his actions often fail to register within the systems that confer status and recognition. By dwelling on boredom, obscurity, and the frustration of going unnoticed, One Punch Man complicates the familiar fantasy of the celebrated hero. The series suggests that in late-modern society, virtue increasingly depends not on the act itself, but on whether that act passes through the correct institutional channels and appears in an acceptable frame.*

Keywords: Heroism, recognition, disciplinary gaze, commodification, spectacle.

Introduction

Popular culture has often been a surprisingly revealing place to look for social ideas. Long before certain concerns are formalised in academic journals or policy documents, they tend to surface in stories people actually consume—novels, films, memes, and, more recently, manga. Japanese anime and manga are particularly useful in this respect. They frequently take broad social pressures, such as economic insecurity, changing family expectations, or the demand to constantly perform and compete, and work them into fictional worlds that are exaggerated on the surface but recognisable underneath.

One Punch Man (ONE & Murata, 2009–) is most often read as a light-hearted parody of superhero conventions. That reading is not wrong, but it is incomplete. The humour does not stop at mocking dramatic fight scenes or overblown villains. Running beneath the series is a quieter discomfort about what heroism means once it becomes something organised, evaluated, and distributed by formal systems. The joke, in other words, points beyond itself.

This paper approaches the series through the sociology of everyday life, treating gaze, recognition, and heroism as practical problems rather than abstract ideals. Ideas associated with Goffman's interaction order, Lefebvre's emphasis on the significance of ordinary routines, and Foucault's analysis of discipline and surveillance provide a loose framework rather than a rigid model. Read in this way, *One Punch Man* begins to resemble less a simple spoof and more a kind of social diagnosis. It repeatedly stages a gap between acting ethically and being recognised as ethical within a world structured by rankings, metrics, and visibility.

Saitama can eliminate a major threat in moments and still be mistaken for an irrelevant bystander. The situation is played for comedy, but it is also slightly unsettling. By placing immense power in mundane spaces—apartment buildings, supermarkets, exam halls—the manga suggests that contemporary heroism is not primarily about moral substance. Instead, it hinges on appearing in the correct frame and under the appropriate gaze. What cannot be seen, measured, or circulated struggles to count at all.

One Punch Man

One Punch Man, created by ONE and later reworked in Yusuke Murata's highly detailed remake, occupies an unusual position between superhero

narrative, social satire, and something closer to quiet critique. At the centre of the story is Saitama, a man who acquires overwhelming, almost absurd power through a training routine that sounds intentionally mundane: “100 push-ups, 100 sit-ups, 100 squats, and a 10 km run every day.” The humour, of course, lies in how completely it succeeds. Saitama becomes unbeatable. Every fight ends almost immediately. What might normally be treated as the height of fantasy power instead feels strangely empty. There is no thrill or sense of achievement, only a lingering boredom that the series refuses to smooth over.

Because of this, the manga avoids the familiar shōnen narrative of gradual growth and hard-earned mastery. It begins after mastery has already been achieved and shifts the question toward what follows. Saitama’s difficulties are not shaped by danger so much as by misrecognition. Within the Hero Association’s ranking system, he is consistently placed below heroes who are more visible but far less capable. Civilians overlook him. Cameras fail to catch his involvement. Power, recognition, and moral worth slowly drift apart. Heroism comes to resemble something managed through scores, publicity, and institutional procedures rather than grounded in ethical substance. In this respect, the series feels uncomfortably close to how many contemporary systems function, whether in academic evaluation or online attention economies.

The supporting cast further complicates this picture by presenting different moral orientations toward heroism. Genos, Saitama’s devoted cyborg disciple, represents sincerity and self-sacrifice, yet he remains fixated on spectacle, improvement, and visible progress. Mumen Rider, dramatically underpowered, continues to act anyway, cycling into danger with little more than determination and a helmet. King, by contrast, is celebrated as the “strongest man alive” despite possessing no real strength at all, sustained by rumour, coincidence, and public perception. Together, these figures sketch a small sociology of heroism, where authenticity rubs against performance, intention collides with outcome, and virtue struggles to compete with visibility. Strength alone proves to be an insufficient moral language.

The form of the series reinforces these themes. Familiar genre excesses are piled on-world-ending villains, tragic backstories, escalating threats, only to be undercut almost immediately. A monster delivers a dramatic speech and is defeated mid-sentence. This repeated rhythm of buildup and deflation begins to feel deliberate. It comments on the genre’s tendency to inflate stakes endlessly and to package heroes as products that must always escalate. Beneath the humour sits a quieter unease about meaning in a

world saturated with spectacle. When every crisis appears cinematic, it becomes difficult to know where significance actually resides.

Viewed more broadly, *One Punch Man* resonates with recognisable social pressures. Heroes operate like precarious workers: ranked, evaluated, monitored, and always subject to review. Moral life is bureaucratized, and value is rendered measurable. Saitama's central struggle is not the search for a stronger opponent, but the search for a context in which his actions count for something. He wants ordinary things: companionship, acknowledgement, a sense of belonging. The system, however, consistently rewards spectacle over sincerity.

Ultimately, the manga seems less concerned with victory than with the ordinariness of ethical life. It suggests, without much fanfare, that heroism may lie more in persistence than in glory, more in continuing to act than in standing out. Power, for all its drama, turns out to be relatively simple. What remains difficult is living well in a world that constantly demands to be impressed.

Literature Review and Theoretical Framework: Everyday Life, Gaze, and Recognition

Work on everyday life has long challenged the assumption that the ordinary lies outside the reach of theory. Across phenomenology, cultural sociology, and critical theory, scholars have repeatedly returned to the idea that meaning, power, and identity are most firmly anchored in routine rather than in exceptional or dramatic moments. Alfred Schutz's concept of the "natural attitude" (1967) captures how social reality comes to be experienced as self-evident, almost unquestionable, as if it simply exists on its own. From a different direction, Michel de Certeau (1984) draws attention to something more flexible. Ordinary people, he suggests, are not merely shaped by systems imposed upon them. They also improvise within those systems, finding ways to bend rules, take shortcuts, and make do in everyday practice.

Henri Lefebvre's *Critique of Everyday Life* occupies an uneasy position between these perspectives. Lefebvre (1984) resists treating everyday life as a neutral backdrop to more important events. Instead, he argues that it is precisely here that ideology does its most effective work. Through repetition, commodification, and bureaucratic organisation, time, leisure, and desire are reorganised and managed. Everyday life becomes structured

as a resource to be administered. At the same time, Lefebvre refuses to reduce the ordinary to pure domination. He insists that it also contains residues of possibility-moments of play, refusal, and difference that resist full incorporation. The mundane, in this sense, is both deeply regulated and quietly unstable.

This tension between the extraordinary and the banal becomes especially visible in cultural texts that deliberately stage their collision. Scholars of popular culture have drawn on Lefebvre to show how fantasy genres often reveal the saturation of daily life by capitalist rationality (Highmore, 2002; Gardiner, 2010). Similar observations appear in anime and manga studies. Japanese popular culture frequently places cosmic stakes alongside everyday routines, creating what Napier (2005) describes as an oscillation between the epic and the ordinary. *One Punch Man* leans heavily into this pattern. World-ending monsters emerge between grocery trips. City-destroying battles give way to paperwork, rent, and administrative delays. Read through Lefebvre; these moments function as more than visual jokes. They comment on the way modern life absorbs the extraordinary, flattens it, and returns it to routine.

If Lefebvre theorises the structure of everyday life, Erving Goffman offers a way of understanding how it is lived at the level of interaction. In his dramaturgical model (1959), social life unfolds as performance. Individuals appear before audiences, manage impressions, and work to maintain “face.” Interaction is held together through ritualised practices and largely unspoken rules. Later interactionist scholarship shows how these performances help stabilise social hierarchies and expectations (Collins, 2004). What changes in contemporary contexts is not the logic of performance itself, but its scale. The “front stage” no longer ends with physical co-presence. It extends across profiles, feeds, and timelines. Media scholars note how digital platforms intensify self-presentation and self-surveillance, transforming visibility into a form of labour (Marwick & Boyd, 2011; Hogan, 2010). Performance, in this sense, rarely switches off.

Within this body of work, recognition becomes a central concern. Drawing on Hegelian traditions, Axel Honneth (1995) argues that recognition is a basic condition of moral agency and social belonging. To be unseen is not simply unfortunate; it is socially damaging. More recent theorists extend this insight to mediated environments, where recognition is reorganised through metrics such as likes, rankings, views, and follower counts (Couldry, 2012; Van Dijck, 2013). In these contexts, misrecognition often takes algorithmic form, quietly rendering certain kinds of labour invisible.

Sociological research on emotional labour (Hochschild, 1983), care work (Tronto, 1993), and maintenance and repair (Jackson, 2014) shows how socially necessary activities frequently fall outside dominant regimes of value. These dynamics resonate strongly with *One Punch Man*, where ethical action repeatedly fails to translate into symbolic reward.

The concept of the gaze helps connect everyday life to recognition. In *Discipline and Punish* (1977), Foucault describes how modern institutions operate through visibility, classification, and normalisation. The gaze does not merely observe; it produces subjects by making them legible. Later scholars extend this insight to contemporary media and surveillance societies, where power circulates through cameras, screens, and data infrastructures (Lyon, 2018). In visual cultures, being seen is already a form of ranking. Debord's (1967) critique of the society of the spectacle sharpens this argument by showing how images come to displace lived relations, allowing appearance to stand in for substance. Taken together, these frameworks illuminate how heroism, success, and virtue are organised around legibility within institutional and visual regimes.

Visual sociology provides further tools for analysing these processes. Harper (2012) and Pink (2013) emphasise that images are not passive reflections of social life but active participants in shaping perception and interaction. Rose (2016) argues that visual materials must be analysed in relation to their composition, circulation, and discursive context. Anime and manga scholarship echoes these concerns, highlighting the ideological work performed by visual form itself. Framing, exaggeration, rhythm, and affect all carry meaning (Lamarre, 2009). Manga's sequential structure is particularly well suited to staging time, boredom, and repetition, allowing readers to experience the texture of everyday life alongside moments of spectacle.

Recent work in anime and manga studies increasingly engages sociological questions. Azuma (2009) interprets otaku culture through the logic of database consumption, where meaning fragments and recombines. Steinberg (2012) traces how media-mix economies integrate narrative worlds into everyday commodities. Both approaches foreground the circulation of popular texts within economies of attention. What remains less common, however, is sustained dialogue between these insights and classical sociological theory. *One Punch Man* offers a productive site for such synthesis precisely because it makes recognition, ranking, and visibility explicit narrative concerns.

Bringing these literatures together allows heroism to be understood not as a moral essence, but as a social product. It emerges at the intersection of performance, institutional structure, and gaze, mediated by regimes of recognition (Honneth, 1995). *One Punch Man* dramatises this convergence by showing how extraordinary power becomes ordinary, how ethical action is overshadowed by spectacle, and how misrecognition solidifies into a condition of subjectivity. In this way, the series operates as a form of cultural theory, anticipating contemporary anxieties around visibility, worth, and exhaustion.

Situating the analysis within these intersecting traditions allows the article to contribute to several fields. It extends the sociology of everyday life into anime studies by showing how popular visual texts theorise routine, boredom, and bureaucracy. It advances visual sociology by treating manga panels as sites where power and recognition are visually organised. Finally, it contributes to cultural sociology by reframing heroism as an effect of mediated recognition rather than an expression of ethical essence. The following methodological section outlines how these theoretical commitments guide the close reading of *One Punch Man*.

Methodology: Reading Manga as a Sociological Text

This project approaches manga not as a decorative add-on to “real” sociological inquiry, but as a form of sociological work in its own right. *One Punch Man* is not treated as a straightforward reflection of Japanese society, nor as a transparent expression of authorial intention. Instead, the series is read as a cultural site in which social meanings are actively produced, arranged, and contested. This position draws on work in cultural sociology and visual sociology, both of which emphasise that popular media do not merely mirror social life but participate in shaping it (Harper, 2012; Rose, 2016). Consistent with the paper’s broader argument, the methodological focus is on tracing how heroism becomes meaningful through processes of recognition, misrecognition, and repetition within ordinary settings and institutionalised forms of seeing.

The analysis combines close textual reading with sustained attention to visual form. Following interpretive traditions in sociology and anthropology, individual scenes are examined for the ways they encode norms, hierarchies, and moral expectations (Geertz, 1973). Particular attention is paid to moments in which routine collides with the extraordinary: grocery shopping after city-levelling battles, bureaucratic assessments following acts of

rescue, or casual conversation unfolding amid destruction. These moments operate as small-scale sociological laboratories, where questions of recognition, legitimacy, and worth are worked out in practice. Dialogue, interactional disruptions, and ritualised performances—such as hero rankings, entrance procedures, and public announcements—are read through Goffman's framework of interaction order and impression management (Goffman, 1959). This makes it possible to follow how heroism is enacted, evaluated, and stabilised through everyday interaction.

Visual sociology extends this approach by treating manga panels themselves as structured regimes of seeing. Manga organises time and attention through framing, scale, repetition, and sudden shifts in style. The analysis, therefore, lingers on compositional elements, including the contrast between hyper-detailed spectacle and Saitama's blank or careless facial expressions, the sterile geometry of bureaucratic interiors, and the recurring rhythm between intensity and flatness. These features are treated as sociological data rather than as purely aesthetic devices (Harper, 2012; Pink, 2013). Saitama's frequent reduction to a simplified or comical visual form at climactic moments is read as a visual commentary on misrecognition and anti-spectacle. By contrast, the exaggerated stylisation of weaker heroes highlights how value is inflated through appearance. In this way, the visual grammar of the series enacts the central claim that heroism is mediated by the gaze and remains contingent on visibility (Foucault, 1977; Debord, 1967).

The corpus is selected theoretically rather than exhaustively. Chapters and episodes are chosen because they foreground routine, evaluation, and public visibility, which are central to the argument. The analysis unfolds in three stages. First, scenes are descriptively coded for recurring motifs such as visibility and invisibility, performance, evaluation, boredom, and routine. Second, these motifs are interpreted through Lefebvre's critique of everyday life (Lefebvre, 1984), Goffman's dramaturgical approach (Goffman, 1959), Foucault's account of the gaze (Foucault, 1977), and theories of recognition (Honneth, 1995). Third, visual features are brought into dialogue with narrative analysis to show how meaning emerges through the interaction of image and text.

This methodological approach does not aim to produce empirical generalisations about audiences or national contexts. Instead, it offers a form of analytic generalisation. The analysis demonstrates how a cultural text articulates social logics characteristic of late-modern life, including quantification, bureaucratisation, and attention economies (Couldry, 2012; Van Dijck, 2013). By placing *One Punch Man* in sustained dialogue with

classical sociological theory, the project treats manga as a partner in sociological thinking rather than as an illustrative example. Visual narratives, in this sense, do not simply depict society; they actively theorise it. *One Punch Man* thus becomes a site where everyday life, gaze, and heroism are conceptually reworked, aligning the methodological approach with the paper's central claims.

Gaze, Visibility, and the Social Production of Heroism

In *One Punch Man*, heroism does not appear as a fixed moral quality residing within particular individuals. It functions instead as a status that has to be produced, circulated, and sustained through visibility. Across the series, a persistent gap opens between what characters actually do and how those actions are recognised by others. What comes to count as "heroic" depends less on ethical substance than on whether deeds are seen, narrated, and remembered appropriately. This dynamic aligns closely with sociological accounts of the gaze as a structuring force in modern life. From Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical model to Foucault's (1977) analysis of surveillance, visibility emerges not as neutral observation but as a technology of power that sorts, ranks, and normalises subjects. *One Punch Man* gives this abstract logic narrative form by placing its most powerful character outside the circuits of spectacle through which heroism typically becomes legible.

Goffman's understanding of social life as performance is particularly useful for making sense of this arrangement. Identities, he argues, are sustained before audiences through recognisable scripts, symbols, and settings (Goffman, 1959). Heroism in *One Punch Man* operates in much the same way. Costumes, poses, dramatic entrances, and extended monologues are not simply stylistic flourishes. They are part of the work of being recognised as heroic. Genos's metallic body, scorched landscapes, and solemn declarations fit neatly within the expected visual grammar of heroism. King's imposing frame and ominous presence convey strength even in the absence of actual power. These figures are immediately readable as heroes because they conform to what might be called the aesthetic contract of heroism.

Saitama, by contrast, consistently violates this contract. His bald head, flat expressions, and casual posture disrupt the dramaturgical codes of the heroic stage. He arrives late, leaves early, and ends battles before they can be shaped into satisfying narratives. As a result, his actions often pass unnoticed or are attributed to someone else. Early story arcs repeatedly show crowds

thanking the wrong hero or accusing Saitama of wrongdoing. The issue here is not a lack of witnesses, but a failure of framing. The gaze struggles to process Saitama because he does not match the visual schema through which heroism is expected to appear.

Misrecognition thus reveals heroism as an optical regime. The gaze does not simply register events; it organises them through expectation. Berger's observation that "the way we see things is affected by what we know or what we believe" (1972: 8) captures this dynamic well. In *One Punch Man*, shared beliefs about how heroes should look, how they should struggle, and how long battles should last shape perception itself. A monster defeated in a single punch feels anticlimactic and even suspicious. Without spectacle, belief wavers. Saitama's power becomes socially implausible.

Foucault's (1977) account of visibility sharpens what is at stake. Modern power, he argues, operates by rendering subjects visible, comparable, and measurable. To be seen is to be placed within a field of knowledge. In *One Punch Man*, the public gaze converges with the institutional gaze of the Hero Association to produce heroes as legible entities. They are named, ranked, profiled, and broadcast. Visibility becomes a condition of existence. Those who cannot be situated within this classificatory grid linger in a kind of social unreality.

Saitama occupies precisely this position. He is visible as a physical presence but invisible as a hero. The gaze slides past him and settles instead on figures who better satisfy expectations of spectacle. This pattern echoes Foucault's insight that regimes of observation distribute visibility unevenly, rendering some subjects hyper-visible while others are systematically overlooked. What is striking in this case is that invisibility does not signal deviance or failure. It marks ethical authenticity. Saitama acts without calibrating his behaviour to the audience's response. His indifference to recognition quietly unsettles the economy of visibility that sustains heroism.

The series repeatedly returns to scenes in which crowds respond less to outcomes than to appearances. After moments of large-scale destruction, citizens gather to judge heroes, distributing praise or blame based on rumour, partial information, and mediated accounts. Public opinion shifts rapidly. Admiration gives way to suspicion with little provocation. This volatility feels familiar. Scholars of media culture note that value in late modernity is increasingly tied to circulation rather than substance (Couldry, 2012). What matters is not simply happening, but what is seen to happen.

One Punch Man pushes this logic to an extreme through the figure of King, whose reputation rests entirely on misattribution. His heroism is pure visibility, detached from action. King embodies what Debord (1967/1994) describes as the spectacle, a social relation mediated by images. He is heroic because he appears heroic. Saitama, by contrast, does not appear heroic and therefore is not recognised as such. The contrast exposes heroism as a semiotic category, governed by signs rather than by ethics.

This regime of visibility produces a paradox. As heroism becomes increasingly tied to appearance, it drifts further from moral content. Characters internalise the gaze, adjusting their behaviour in anticipation of being seen. Lower-ranked heroes chase attention, cultivate images, and measure their worth through rankings. The gaze becomes disciplinary. Much like Foucault's panoptic model, the possibility of observation shapes conducts in advance (Foucault, 1977). Responding to suffering becomes secondary to maintaining legibility within a competitive field.

Saitama's refusal to fully participate in this system can be read as a form of everyday resistance. He does not curate an image or seek narrative centrality. His most disruptive quality is not his strength, but his lack of interest in being seen. In Goffman's (1959) terms, he withdraws from the front stage of heroism and retreats into the back stage of ordinary life: shopping, cleaning, and eating inexpensive meals. This withdrawal exposes the continuous performative labour required of those who wish to remain visible.

At the same time, Saitama is not immune to the effects of misrecognition. Despite his apparent indifference, moments of frustration surface. Being blamed for destruction or dismissed by onlookers carries emotional weight. Here, Honneth's (1995) theory of recognition becomes difficult to ignore. Recognition is not merely symbolic; it is a condition of social existence. To remain unseen is to be partially excluded from the moral community. Saitama's isolation points to the quiet violence of a system in which ethical action must pass through spectacle to become socially real.

The manga thus holds two models of heroism in tension. One is optical and performative, grounded in visible struggle, narrated triumph, and institutional validation. The other, embodied by Saitama, is ethical and ordinary, defined by necessary action undertaken without regard for the audience. One depends on the gaze. The other persists despite it.

This tension destabilises the very idea of the heroic. Heroism no longer appears as a stable identity, but as an unstable effect of perception. Who

counts as a hero depends on where the gaze settles and how it frames what it sees. In this respect, *One Punch Man* resonates with sociological critiques of meritocracy, which show how success is often justified retrospectively through narratives of visibility rather than being grounded in actual contribution (Bourdieu, 1990). The series makes this process explicit by severing action from acclaim.

Ultimately, *One Punch Man* invites a reconsideration of visibility itself. If heroism depends on being seen, what forms of goodness remain uncounted? What ethical labour disappears because it lacks spectacle? By centring a protagonist who repeatedly saves the world without recognition, the manga exposes the moral thinness of a culture that equates value with visibility. It suggests that in a society organised around images, the most unsettling form of heroism may be to act without being seen.

In doing so, the series quietly reclaims everyday life as a site of ethical possibility. Saitama's heroism does not reside in his punches but in his persistence. He continues to intervene despite boredom, misrecognition, and a lingering sense of emptiness. Against a regime that turns morality into performance, *One Punch Man* proposes a counter-ethic: goodness does not need to be legible to be real. The gaze may manufacture heroes, but it does not exhaust heroism.

Bureaucracy and the Hero Association: Rationalising Moral Action

If the gaze turns heroism into spectacle, the Hero Association fixes it in place through bureaucracy. In *One Punch Man*, the Association resembles a familiar modern institution. It classifies, ranks, evaluates, compensates, and disciplines anyone who wishes to act heroically. What may begin as a simple ethical impulse—the desire to protect someone in danger—is quickly reorganised into a career path governed by exams, points, and formal hierarchies. The shift is recognisable. Weber would have described it as rationalisation: the gradual replacement of value-oriented action with rule-bound, calculable procedure (Weber, 1978). Through the Hero Association, the manga shows how moral action is translated into administrative work.

Weber's account of bureaucracy emphasises its technical strengths: precision, predictability, continuity, and calculability (Weber, 1978). All of these features are present. Heroes are sorted into Classes C, B, A, and S. Salaries are standardised. Promotion follows protocol. Failure carries

consequences. Even apocalyptic threats are routed through reporting chains and response procedures. Crisis management becomes routine labour. The end of the world, somewhat absurdly, is something that can be processed.

On paper, the system promises fairness. Anyone may take the hero exam, and merit is meant to rise accordingly. Yet *One Punch Man* lingers on the paradox at the centre of rationalisation. The more heroism is systematised, the more its ethical core slips out of view. The Association cannot register intention, care, or urgency. It can only measure what is visible, countable, and narratable. Moral action matters only to the extent that it fits bureaucratic categories.

Saitama's movement through the ranking system exposes this mismatch. Despite his limitless power, he enters at the lowest level, Class C. The exam cannot account for him because it privileges endurance trials, written knowledge, and recognisable performance cues. What exceeds measurement appears as error or irrelevance. Weber warned that bureaucracy operates *sine ira et studio*, without passion or value judgment (Weber, 1978, p. 975). The Hero Association exemplifies this logic. It does not ask why lives are saved. It asks how often, how visibly, and with what documented result.

Within this framework, heroism becomes a form of labour. Heroes are paid, deployed, and evaluated much like employees. The language of vocation quietly gives way to the language of productivity. This echoes broader shifts in modern societies, where professions once grounded in moral commitment-teaching, medicine, scholarship-are increasingly governed by audits, rankings, and performance indicators (Power, 1997). What counts is no longer intrinsic worth, but measurable output.

The consequences are frequently absurd. Saitama rescues entire cities, yet his rank barely changes because his interventions occur outside official channels or are eclipsed by heroes who perform better for public attention. At the same time, less effective figures maintain higher status through visibility and narrative prominence. Bureaucracy, in this sense, does not simply reflect the optical regime. It formalises it. What is seen becomes what is recorded.

Foucault's account of disciplinary power helps clarify this process. Modern institutions, he argues, normalise behaviour by establishing standards, comparing individuals, and producing hierarchies (Foucault, 1977). The Hero Association does precisely this. Rankings create a competitive field in which heroes internalise evaluative norms. They monitor themselves, calculate

risk, and orient action toward advancement. Saving lives is no longer separate from climbing the ladder.

Motivation shifts accordingly. Lower-ranked heroes fixate on points, reputation, and visibility. Some hesitate to intervene beyond their assigned zones. Others guard territory or cultivate public images. Moral urgency is filtered through institutional calculation. The question quietly shifts from “Who needs help?” to “Will this count?” In Weber’s terms, value-rational action is displaced by instrumental rationality (Weber, 1978).

Mumen Rider offers a stark contrast. He lacks power but persists out of conviction. He rides toward danger knowing he will lose, simply because someone must try. Within the bureaucratic order, however, his heroism is safely contained. He remains low-ranked, praised as inspirational yet structurally marginal. His ethics are acknowledged but never allowed to reorganise the system. The Association absorbs him as affect-proof that “anyone can be a hero”-without letting his commitment disrupt its logic.

This containment reveals the moral limits of bureaucracy. Effort can be recognised, but only in ways that preserve hierarchy. As Arendt (1958) suggests, institutions stabilise action by converting it into work-predictable, durable, and administrable. Ethical action, by contrast, is contingent. It responds to necessity as it arises. By routing heroism through procedures, the Association domesticates its unpredictability.

The bureaucratisation of heroism also produces alienation. Heroes become estranged from the meaning of their actions, which are reframed as tasks rather than responses to suffering. Saitama experiences this acutely. His power drains the struggle of drama. Bureaucracy drains it of meaning. Victories dissolve into paperwork and indifference. The world is saved, yet nothing seems to register.

Weber anticipated this condition in his image of the iron cage, a world of efficiency emptied of ultimate purpose (Weber, 2004). Saitama lives within that cage. He has mastered the world, yet the world offers no resonance in return. His boredom is not merely personal; it is structural. In a fully rationalised system, even heroism becomes routine.

The Association’s logic also resembles contemporary audit cultures. As Power (1997) argues, auditing produces rituals of verification that substitute indicators for substance. Trust gives way to metrics. In *One Punch Man*, rank functions in exactly this way. It stands in for heroism itself. Citizens and heroes alike treat it as reality, even when it contradicts lived experience.

The ethical costs are visible. When value is equated with position, those outside the upper tiers become expendable. Entire neighbourhoods are neglected. Some heroes prioritise reputation over protection. Rationalisation creates zones of acceptable loss. What cannot be efficiently defended becomes disposable.

At the same time, the manga does not present bureaucracy as pure villainy. The Association emerges from real necessity. Monsters exist. Coordination saves lives. The problem is not the organisation itself, but its colonisation of meaning. Bureaucracy becomes pathological when it claims to exhaust the moral field, when saving lives ceases to be an end and becomes merely a metric.

Saitama's marginal position is therefore significant. He operates at the edges of the system, using its resources without internalising its logic. He joins the Association not to advance, but to gain minimal access. He does not plan for rank. His interventions follow immediacy rather than protocol. In this sense, he resembles what de Certeau (1984) calls a tactic: acting within structures without fully submitting to their rationality.

Through Saitama, *One Punch Man* offers a restrained critique of modern institutions. They are necessary, yet they cannot supply meaning. They coordinate action but cannot explain why action matters. Once heroism is bureaucratized, it risks becoming hollow. The Association can manage crises, but it cannot answer the question that lingers for Saitama: what is the point?

By pressing this question, the series situates heroism within the broader condition of late modernity. Systems expand. Metrics proliferate. Work multiplies. Purpose becomes harder to locate. The crisis of heroism mirrors the crisis of vocation in rationalised societies. What once felt like a calling becomes a job. What once carried meaning becomes routine.

Seen in this light, Saitama's boredom is not failure. It is a diagnosis. It names the cost of a world in which even saving humanity can feel empty. Against this condition, *One Punch Man* sketches an alternative ethic: to act because action is required, not because it will be counted. Heroism, stripped of rank and spectacle, becomes an everyday refusal to allow systems to exhaust meaning.

Misrecognition, Alienation, and the Ordinary Hero

At the centre of *One Punch Man* is a small but persistent discomfort that never fully disappears. Saitama saves the world repeatedly, and almost no one notices. The joke works, but it does not resolve itself. What initially appears as comedy slowly becomes sociologically unsettling. The series treats heroism as a problem of recognition, showing that moral action becomes socially real only when others acknowledge it. Through Saitama's repeated misrecognition, the manga returns again and again to a familiar form of alienation, one rooted in a culture where value circulates through visibility, rank, and narrative coherence. The figure of the "ordinary hero" is not a contradiction of power so much as a lens through which the fragility of meaning in modern social life is exposed.

Axel Honneth's theory of recognition helps clarify this fragility. For Honneth (1995), recognition is not optional or decorative. It is constitutive of personhood. Individuals require acknowledgement to develop self-respect and a sense of belonging. Misrecognition, whether through neglect, distortion, or erasure, therefore constitutes a moral injury. Saitama's situation fits this description in uncomfortable ways. He acts ethically, often at high personal cost, yet his actions fail to register within the dominant symbolic economy. The cities he saves do not know his name. His heroism exists, but it does so in a kind of social vacuum.

The series returns to this vacuum with notable regularity. Crowds cheer the wrong heroes. Media narratives pass over Saitama entirely. Fellow heroes dismiss him as a fraud or an amateur who happens to be lucky. These scenes are humorous, but they also function diagnostically. They reveal that recognition is not distributed neutrally. It follows expectation. Saitama is not seen because he does not resemble what a hero is supposed to look like. His body lacks grandeur. His emotional responses rarely convey urgency. Without the appropriate signs, his actions resist being named.

Honneth distinguishes between three spheres of recognition: love, rights, and social esteem (1995). Saitama's injury appears most clearly in the third. He is not deprived of legal standing, nor is he entirely cut off from others. What he lacks is esteem for his contribution to the common good. His actions generate no durable value within the social order. Over time, this absence erodes meaning. When Saitama wonders aloud what it means to be a hero, he is not engaging in abstract reflection. He is articulating the experience of someone whose actions no longer resonate socially.

This experience recalls Marx's account of alienation. In capitalist modernity, Marx argues, workers become estranged from the products of their labour, from the activity of labour itself, from others, and from their own sense of self (Marx, 1844/1978). Saitama's victories vanish into anonymity. He does not possess the meaning of what he does. It is claimed by others or dissolved into spectacle. His labour-saving humanity produces no lasting relation. Each triumph leaves him unchanged, unrecognised, and increasingly detached.

Alienation here is not primarily a matter of exploitation in the economic sense. It is better understood as symbolic dispossession. Saitama's power eliminates struggle, but it also eliminates narrative payoff. There is no arc, no culmination, no recognition that endures. Time flattens into repetition. A monster appears. A monster falls. Lefebvre's description of everyday life under modernity as cyclical and monotonous feels particularly apt in this context (Lefebvre, 1991). Heroism becomes routine. Transcendence hardens into habit.

This condition is not merely psychological. It is structural. The world of *One Punch Man* is saturated with institutions of visibility: rankings, broadcasts, reputations, and public opinion. Recognition is mediated through scores and images. Individuals are known by class and reputation rather than by what they actually do. Ethical substance recedes behind appearance. In this environment, Saitama's alienation points beyond his own experience. It signals a broader cultural shift in which value migrates from action to visibility.

The parallel with contemporary evaluation regimes is difficult to ignore. In academic, artistic, and digital contexts, worth is increasingly tracked through metrics such as citations, followers, and impressions. As scholars of audit culture note, indicators begin to replace judgment itself (Power, 1997). What cannot be measured gradually disappears. *One Punch Man* turns this process into an allegory. Saitama's goodness has no metric. As a result, it barely exists socially.

The contrast with King sharpens the point. King is celebrated despite doing nothing. His reputation precedes him. His presence alone generates awe. King embodies recognition without substance. Saitama embodies substance without recognition. Together, they form a revealing pair. One is hyper-visible. The other is structurally unseen. The series seems to ask whether recognition has drifted free from reality altogether.

And yet, Saitama continues to act. This persistence matters. He does not withdraw into resentment or demand acknowledgement. He saves people because someone has to. In doing so, he gestures toward an ethic that does not rely on recognition for its justification. His heroism is grounded not in esteem but in necessity. This recalls Arendt's understanding of action as fragile and unpredictable (Arendt, 1958). Action appears before others, but its meaning is never guaranteed. Saitama acts anyway.

In this sense, he embodies what might be described as a post-recognitive ethic. He does not deny the pain of being unseen, but he refuses to let that pain determine his conduct. His heroism offers no promise of reward, no narrative closure, no redemption arc. It is neither tragic nor triumphant. It is ordinary.

That ordinariness carries political weight. It unsettles the heroic exceptionalism that dominates popular culture. Rather than treating goodness as rare and spectacular, *One Punch Man* situates it within routine. Heroism becomes a practice rather than an identity. One is not a hero because one is seen. One is a hero because one responds.

This shift resonates with de Certeau's account of everyday practices. For de Certeau (1984), resistance often appears not in grand gestures but in small, tactical refusals of dominant logics. Saitama's persistence operates in this way. He exists within the system without fully internalising its criteria of worth. He joins the Hero Association, but he does not orient his life around rank. He participates in social life while remaining oddly detached from its narrative demands.

Through Saitama, the manga offers a critique of modern subjectivity. In economies of recognition, individuals learn to perform themselves. They curate identities, seek affirmation, and equate visibility with existence. The fear of being unseen becomes existential. Saitama confronts that fear directly. He is unseen, and yet he acts.

This confrontation unsettles the moral imagination. If goodness can exist without recognition, then recognition cannot be the foundation of value. It becomes contingent rather than absolute. The series quietly reframes the ethical question. Not "Will this be seen?" but "Is this needed?" In doing so, it echoes Weber's insistence that vocation lies in responsibility rather than reward (Weber, 2004). One acts because one must.

At the same time, the manga does not romanticise this stance. Saitama remains bored, lonely, and detached. Misrecognition leaves its mark.

Recognition matters. Being unseen hurts. What the series resists is the idea that this hurt renders action meaningless. Saitama's life is not fulfilled, but it is not empty. It is marked by a stubborn integrity.

The "ordinary hero" that emerges is a figure of ethical minimalism. He does not seek greatness or narrate himself. He responds. In a culture saturated with spectacle, this restraint is quietly radical. It suggests that some of the most significant moral acts leave no trace.

In this way, *One Punch Man* reframes alienation itself. Rather than presenting it only as loss, the series reveals its critical potential. Distance from recognition loosens the compulsion to perform. Saitama is not trapped on what Goffman would call the front stage of identity (Goffman, 1959). He inhabits a backstage of ethical immediacy. Alienation becomes, paradoxically, a space of autonomy.

The manga thus makes a tentative, almost hesitant utopian gesture. It imagines a subject who continues to act without narrative guarantees in a world obsessed with metrics and images. The ordinary hero does not dismantle systems of visibility. He simply refuses to let them define him.

In a society governed by rankings and screens, *One Punch Man* asks a deceptively simple question: what if goodness did not need to be seen? Saitama's answer is not theoretical. It is lived, day after day, in the quiet repetition of saving others without applause. His heroism lies not in power, but in endurance—the endurance to act when nothing promises to matter.

Goodness Without Witness: Interpreting the Ordinary Hero in Contemporary Life

To bring the argument closer to everyday experience, it is worth noting that the logic shaping *One Punch Man* is not confined to fantasy. The regimes of gaze, bureaucracy, and recognition traced in the earlier sections closely resemble the algorithmic cultures that organise much of contemporary social life. The Hero Association's point systems, rankings, and thresholds of visibility echo the economies of attention that govern platforms such as Instagram, YouTube, or TikTok. In these environments, recognition depends less on substance than on timing, engagement metrics, aesthetic consistency, and algorithmic favour.

Within such spaces, individuals learn to present themselves strategically. Identities are curated so that they remain watchable and measurable. Much

like lower-ranked heroes chasing promotion, users adjust tone, posture, content style, and even emotional expression in order to remain legible to both audiences and platforms. What appears spontaneous is often the result of careful self-monitoring, repetition, and calibration. Visibility becomes work.

This parallel reinforces the earlier claim that heroism in *One Punch Man* is not an intrinsic moral quality but an effect of recognition. As the discussion of the gaze suggests, recognition is structured by visual regimes that privilege legibility over substance. The contemporary subject occupies a comparable condition. Social existence increasingly depends on being seen, tracked, and circulated. Identity becomes performance. Value becomes attention. Action is shaped in advance by how it is expected to land.

Lefebvre's critique of everyday life helps explain why this condition often feels exhausting rather than empowering. Productivity dashboards, student ranking systems, publication metrics, and gig-economy ratings translate ordinary activities into trackable outputs. Teachers become numbers. Drivers become stars. Academics become citation counts. The process closely mirrors the Hero Association's reduction of moral action to performance indicators. As the earlier analysis of bureaucracy suggests, rationalisation does more than organise activity. It quietly displaces meaning. Ethical labour is reframed as administrable work.

Against this backdrop, Saitama's invisibility takes on a sharper sociological significance. It echoes the status of unrecognised labour in contemporary societies, such as caregiving, maintenance, and emotional support. These forms of work sustain social life but remain structurally unseen because they do not register within dominant evaluative systems. Saitama saves cities that quickly forget him, much as caregivers sustain lives that rarely count as measurable output. His misrecognition is not exceptional. It is, in many respects, ordinary.

Read in this way, Saitama becomes an allegorical figure for ethical life under conditions of metric saturation. He embodies action detached from spectacle, a form of goodness that persists without any assurance of recognition. As the earlier sections argue, *One Punch Man* reveals how fragile moral meaning becomes in worlds governed by gaze and bureaucracy. At the same time, it gestures toward another possibility. Action need not be anchored in visibility. It can still be grounded in necessity.

The figure of the "ordinary hero," then, is defined less by transcendence than by continuity. He acts without narrative payoff, without institutional

reward, and without public affirmation. Set against cultures that equate value with appearance, *One Punch Man* offers a quiet but unsettling proposition: ethical life does not require an audience. Goodness can endure, even when no one is watching.

Conclusion

The argument developed here approaches *One Punch Man* less as a parody of superhero conventions and more as a form of social theory in its own right. Rather than celebrating heroic exceptionalism, the manga situates moral action in the unglamorous textures of everyday life: boredom, repetition, bureaucratic oversight, and public misrecognition. Through Saitama, the series returns to a distinctly modern paradox. Goodness has not disappeared, but its meaning has become fragile, increasingly dependent on whether it registers within regimes of visibility and institutional evaluation.

Drawing on Goffman, Lefebvre, Foucault, Weber, and theories of recognition, the analysis has shown that heroism in *One Punch Man* is not discovered as an inner essence but produced through social processes. The gaze renders heroism visible through spectacle. The Hero Association stabilises it through rankings, metrics, and procedural norms. Recognition then confers or withholds social reality. Within this arrangement, Saitama's overwhelming power is almost beside the point. His actions resist narration. They fail to conform to the visual and bureaucratic grammars through which worth is usually established. The result is misrecognition and a particular form of alienation, not because heroism has lost its ethical force, but because its meaning has drifted away from action and toward appearance.

At the same time, the series does more than simply diagnose this condition. It also experiments with an alternative way of imagining heroism. By sustaining a protagonist who continues to act without recognition, *One Punch Man* gestures toward an ethic that exists beyond spectacle. Saitama persists without acclaim, narrative payoff, or institutional validation. His heroism is ordinary in a literal sense. It is repetitive, undramatic, and often emotionally flat. It unfolds within everyday life rather than above it. In this respect, the series echoes Lefebvre's insistence that the everyday is not only a site of alienation but also a space in which different forms of life can quietly emerge.

This reworking of heroism speaks directly to contemporary conditions. In societies organised around algorithmic visibility, audit cultures, and metric-

driven evaluation, value increasingly depends on legibility. Individuals learn to perform for platforms, institutions, and publics. Forms of labour that resist quantification-care, maintenance, ethical restraint-remain structurally overlooked. *One Punch Man* exaggerates these dynamics, but only slightly. It shows how easily moral action can disappear when it lacks spectacle. Saitama's invisibility thus becomes an allegory for unrecognised goodness in late modern life.

Against this backdrop, the figure of the "ordinary hero" offers a modest counter-ethic. He does not dismantle systems of gaze or bureaucracy, nor does he escape alienation altogether. Instead, he lives within these conditions while refusing to let them fully exhaust meaning. He acts because action is necessary, not because it promises recognition. In doing so, the series unsettles the assumption that significance must always arrive from outside.

By relocating heroism within routine, misrecognition, and quiet endurance, *One Punch Man* reshapes what it means to be heroic in a disenchanted world. It suggests that one of the most demanding ethical acts may be to continue doing good when nothing guarantees that it will be returned as meaning. In a culture governed by images and metrics, the manga holds open a simple but unsettling possibility: goodness does not require an audience.

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